

# What's the Use of Naming God?

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Document Status: Journal Article

Lutheran Theological Journal 26 (1992): 27-34

The greatest gift which God gave to the people of Israel was his holy name. In this one gift he included all the other gifts which he ever offered to his people. When God gave his name to the Israelites, he gave of himself to them, for by his name they had access to him personally (Eichrodt: 207). They could approach him and address him; they could gain his attention and communicate with him. In his name they could represent him and speak for him as he himself determined. In short, since they had been given his name, they had him as their God.

In this essay I would like to examine the ritual function and use of the holy name in Old Testament worship. It is dedicated to Erich Renner, my learned and esteemed colleague. This is but a small token of gratitude to him for all I owe him as a teacher and a friend.

## 1. The Name *YHWH* as a Proper Name

There are many different designations for God in the Old Testament (Mettinger 1988). Each of these has its own origin and use. But among all these 'names', one name stands out by itself, the name *YHWH* (Freedman and O'Connor). This name was so sacrosanct that the Masoretic Text indicates that, when it was read out aloud, it had to be replaced by *Adonay* which means *my Lord*.

To understand why this name was distinguished from all other names for 'Lord' in the Old Testament we need to determine the nature and function of these names, for they are not all equivalent to each other, nor do they all function in the same way. Broadly speaking, these names fall into four categories.

First, there is the common noun in Hebrew for all deities, and supernatural beings. That name is *Elōhim*. Since this is a plural form, it may be translated either as god or gods. As far as the Old Testament is concerned, *YHWH* is the one and only God. Hence, the term *Elōhim* may be rightly used to designate him. When this is done, a definite article is often added to avoid any notion of polytheism. This term is commonly used to speak of the general activity of God in the world and not just in Israel.

Secondly, we find a large range of titles for God. Strictly speaking, they are not proper names but may be used to address God. Generally, they function metaphorically and are used to designate the status and function of God. Hence *YHWH* is called 'king' or 'the Lord of the whole earth' or 'the Holy One of Israel'. Titles such as 'Redeemer' or 'Maker of heaven and earth' show how he functions as a deity. But none of these are proper names.

Thirdly, the writers of the Old Testament re-employ what were once the proper names of pagan deities polemically and apologetically to refer to the claims of *YHWH* in a polytheistic environment. The name *El*, which was once used as the name for the head of the Canaanite pantheon, was therefore used for *YHWH*. It is often used as a compound name in such combinations as *E/ Shaddai* and *El Elyōn*. But as time passed, *El* was no longer regarded as a proper name, and began to be used as a common noun, while its compounds were used liturgically as ancient honorific appellations.

Lastly, the name *YHWH* was held to be God's proper name (Jenson: 5). While there is a rather playful attempt in Exodus 3:13,14 to explore its meaning by suggesting that it may derive from the verb *hāyāh*, its importance did not lie in its purported meaning but in its function as the proper name for Israel's God. Like all proper names, it designated a unique

personal being. In fact, it functioned very much like our Christian names. Since we are identified by and with our names, we are acknowledged and engaged by them. The name *YHWH* does not then function metaphorically as a general designation for the deity, but is to be used as his proper name by Israel in its dealings with him. It is powerful and holy and surrounded by taboo just because it is God's proper name.

## 2. The Gift of the Divine Name

The Israelites did not give the name *YHWH* to their God to distinguish him from all other deities. Rather, God introduced himself to them by this name, and gave it to them to identify and address him (van der Woude: cols 949-51). The stories which deal with his introduction of himself to them are in the book of Exodus.

The first of these comes as part of the call of Moses in Exodus 3:13-15. God had introduced himself to Moses rather generally as 'the God of his ancestors' in Exodus 3:6. After receiving the commission from God to deliver the Israelites from Egypt and the promise that they would serve God by offering sacrifices at Mount Horeb after their deliverance from Egypt, Moses asked God for his name in Exodus 3:13. In response, God gave Moses the name *YHWH*. By way of explanation, he added a couplet couched in legal terminology:

*This is my name in perpetuity  
and this is my remembrance from generation to generation.*

After receiving the name Moses was told to use it to proclaim deliverance to the Israelites (Exod 3:16) and to demand their release by Pharaoh for sacrificial worship (Exod 3:18).

It is all too easy to get side-tracked from the main thread of the narrative by the riddle of the name as posed by God to Moses and as was to be posed by Moses to the Israelites in Exodus 3:14. The main concern in this story is not to explain the meaning of the holy name in some abstract way; it is to tell how and why the name was given by God to Moses. The anticipated request of the Israelites for God's name in Exodus 3:13 is not theoretical and speculative, but rather practical and liturgical in its intent. Since God had promised to heed their cry for deliverance (Exod 3:7-9), and since they were to meet with him after their deliverance by presenting sacrifices to him at Mount Horeb (Exod 3:12,18), they needed to know his name, so that they could invoke him both in Egypt and later at Horeb. That name was described as his remembrance (*zikri*); it was his mode of address, the way that they were to remember him as they petitioned him for help and proclaimed his presence with them in their worship (Eising: 76). With this name they then had access to him and his power. And that's why it was given to them by God himself.

The second story which deals with the revelation of the divine name by God to Israel is found in Exodus 6:2-8. The setting for this speech is the concentration camps in Egypt. The initial efforts of Moses and Aaron to secure the release of their people had proved to be counterproductive. Consequently, Moses complained to *YHWH* that the use of the holy name had not obtained their release. In response to this, the Lord presented himself directly to Moses with the remarkable words of self-introduction (Zimmerli: 1-28): 'I am *YHWH* (Exod 6:2; cf 6:29). After explaining that he had previously revealed himself to the patriarchs as *El Shaddai*, he assured Moses that he would grant the promised land to the Israelites, and then commissioned Moses to present him to them by the same formula of self-introduction. He was therefore to speak to the people as if he were God himself.

On the face of it this speech seems to add little or nothing to what has already been given in Exodus 3:13-15. Yet something very important is added. This is the first time that a God introduces himself by name to Moses. In doing so, he commissions Moses to act as his mouthpiece to introduce him to the people by relaying his words to his people. When Moses does this, *YHWH* makes himself known by name to his people and acts to fulfil his promises to them. The holy name is first given by God to Moses (Exod 6:2). Moses then passes it on to the people (Exod 6:6). It is therefore received to be handed down in history by the divinely instituted process of tradition.

The holy name *YHWH* is God's proper name. God gave it to Moses for petition and proclamation. By introducing himself to Moses, God commissioned Moses to use the same formula to introduce him to the people and to announce their deliverance. After Moses, the priests used the same formula for divine self-introduction to proclaim him and his message to

the people of Israel (Zimmerli: 7-13). So the name which was given by God through Moses was received by the Israelites in each successive generation as his gift to them.

### 3. The Connection between the Holy Name and the Divine Presence

The pagan gods made themselves available to their people through their idols in the temples dedicated to them. By means of these idols, they were present with their people (Stamm and Andrew: 82). Those who stood before the idol and looked at it, stood in the presence of that god and saw him face to face. Idols then were a means of grace for pagan people, by which their deities revealed their power and glory.

From the very beginning of their history the Israelites were forbidden to enthrone an idol in their holy of holies and to prostrate themselves before any representation of *YHWH* (Exod 20:4-6). Yet it did not follow from this that God was less present with his people than any pagan God. It did not mean that he was inaccessible and unavailable to them. Rather, by virtue of his covenanted presence with them he was far closer to them than any pagan deity (Exod 33:16; Deut 4:7). This was so because he had given them his proper name for use in their worship. In fact, von Rad (183) rightly claims that the holy name took 'the place which in other cults was occupied by the cultic image'. Since God had given them his name, they could approach him in their worship and petition him like a king at his palace. The name, then, gave them access to his presence.

This replacement of the idol by the holy name in Israelite worship led to the formulation of some rather curious expressions in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic traditions (Mettinger 1982, 38-66). The pagans believed that their gods chose particular sites for their temples, where they 'put' their idols, so that they could 'dwell' there (cf 2 Chron 33:7). By contrast, the Israelites believed that *YHWH* had chosen to 'put' his name first in the tabernacle and then in the temple (Deut 12:5,21; 14:24; 1 Kgs 9:3; 11:36; 14:21; 2 Kgs 21:4,7; 2 Chron 6:20), so that he could 'dwell' there (Deut 12:5) as his name 'dwelt' there (Deut 12:11; 14:23; 16:2,6,11; 26:2). So, instead of building a temple for an idol, Solomon built a temple for the name of *YHWH* (2 Sam 7:13; 1 Kgs 3:2; 5:17,19; 8:17-20,44,48). The name 'was' at the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kgs 8:16,29; 2 Kgs 23:27; 2 Chron 6:6; 7:16; 33:4). By his name he was present with his ears to hear prayer, with his eyes to receive his people, and with his heart to respond to their needs (1 Kgs 8:29; 2 Chron 7:16). By his name his presence was given.

God's name could not be divorced from the worship which he himself had instituted. It was given to them for their worship. The Israelites could not use that name anyhow and anywhere but only how and where he had commanded (Exod 20:7). They could offer sacrifices only where he had revealed himself to them by name (Exod 20:24). When they invoked him there by name he would come to them there and bless them (van der Woude: col 951). At such chosen places, God would meet with his people through the performance of the daily burnt offerings (Exod 29:38-46). The holy name was thus given to Israel for use in its worship.

The theological connection between the use of the holy name and the gift of the divine presence in worship is explored most fully in Exodus 32-34 (Niles: 123-66; Moberly). This section, which deals with the episode of the golden calves at Mt Sinai, comes between the Lord's directives to Moses on the building of the tabernacle as his place of residence with them in Exodus 25-31, and the implementation of these directives in Exodus 35-40. The common theme in this section is the discussion on the mode of God's presence with his people in the tabernacle. After the Lord had rejected the golden calves as vehicles for his presence and had withdrawn himself in wrath from his people to spare them from destruction (Exod 32:34; 33:1-5), Moses interceded with him and secured the promise of his on-going presence with them (Exod 33:12-17). But that was not yet enough for Moses, because he needed to know how the Lord would manifest his presence in the tabernacle, and whether it would be in wrath or grace. And so Moses asked him to reveal his 'glory', his personality, his manifest and accessible presence (33:18).

The Lord's response occurs in two stages. In Exodus 33:19-23 he tells Moses how he will appear to him the next morning on Mt Sinai. Then, in Exodus 34:5-9, we have the account of his appearance to Moses on Sinai. This theophany occurred in a remarkable way. The Lord did not reveal his glory to Moses visually by showing him his face, as Moses seems to have expected, but rather audibly by the solemn proclamation of his name to him. The uniqueness

of this event is evident from the unparalleled use of the idiom 'to call on the name of *YHWH*' for God's activity. Normally, this idiom was used to describe what the Israelites did in their worship. They 'called on' the holy name in proclamation (Gen 4:26; 12:8; 13:4; 21:33; 26:25; Ps 79:6; Zeph 3:9) or petition (1 Kgs 18:24-26; 2 Kgs 5:11; Ps 116:4; Isa 64:6; 65:1; Joel 3:5; Zech 13:9) or praise (Ps 75:2; 80:19; 105:1; 116:13,17; Isa 12:4). Yet in Exodus 33:19 and 34:5,6 God 'called on' his own name. He invoked his own name and preached himself to Moses. He did not merely proclaim his name; he paraded his goodness before Moses for his appraisal by proclaiming his utter graciousness and sheer compassion to him. God's glory then consisted of his goodness and grace and compassion, and these were all revealed to his people in his holy name.

This episode is a foundational event which sets a divine precedent for Israel's worship. Since the Lord had 'proclaimed' his name to them as the means by which he reveals his glory and grants them access to his compassion and grace, they may 'invoke' that name for these purposes in their worship. The Lord had made his glorious presence available to his people in his name. They then could gain access to his presence and receive grace and help from him by proclaiming that name and using it to petition him, as encouraged by his own description of his character and characteristic mode of behaviour to them in Exodus 34:6,7.

And this is exactly what Moses did in response to this divine proclamation of the holy name. He secured the Lord's pledge of his gracious presence with his rebellious, sinful people by using the holy name in a final act of intercession for them (Exod. 34:9). So, when the glory of the Lord filled the newly-consecrated tabernacle (Exod 40:34-38), Moses and the people knew that the Lord would be present with them to pardon them, receive their petitions, and remain committed to them as his people.

God, then, made himself and his grace available to his people by giving them his holy name. That name revealed his glorious presence. By that name they had access to his presence and grace in their performance of the public sacrificial ritual. Since they had been given the Lord's name, they could petition him according to his character and his many promises to them. Apart from the holy name, they could only revert to idolatry, and so incur his wrath.

#### **4. The Use of the Holy Name in Worship**

The Lord had given his holy name to be used in worship. That was its proper context. It follows from this that the holy name could be used in various ways as part of the sacrificial ritual performed at the temple in Jerusalem. It was used most generally to invoke the Lord's presence. Hence, Tournay (101,102) asserts:

The invocation of the name of *YHWH* actualises the presence of God who, while remaining invisible, stays close to those who are God's own . . . the people who bear the divine name.

Yet we must go further. The divine name did not merely manifest the Lord's presence but also gave access to his grace. Through the use of the holy name in various rites, the Israelites gained God's acceptance of them as well as certain favours from him.

Practically speaking, the holy name was used ritually in a number of ways within the sacrificial ritual at the temple. This is evident from the Psalter which shows how variously the name was used by the Israelites. In each instance, however, it is clear that the holy name was not used merely to give information about God but was used effectually in various kinds of performative utterances. Since space is limited, I shall restrict discussion to three cases.

First, the divine name was used by the Levitical choir to announce the Lord's presence and to proclaim his grace to the assembled congregation and the whole world in their songs of praise (Kleinig). These songs were sung during the presentation of the public burnt offering which occurred each morning and evening (1 Chron 16:4-41; 23:30,31; 2 Chron 8:12-14; 23:18; 29:25-30). They were sung then because the Lord himself met with his people at the altar (Exod 29:42-44). The songs proclaimed the Lord's presence and his grace to the people and so assured them that he would grant their petitions, since he had accepted them and their burnt offering. So through the proclamation of the holy name in sacred song the glory of the Lord, normally veiled in a cloud within the inaccessible reaches of the temple, was revealed verbally to the congregation (2 Chron 5:11-14).

Secondly, the divine name was used by the whole congregation and all its members to present their petitions to the Lord during the presentation of the burnt offering. While the burnt offering was the way by which the Lord came to his people to bless them (Exod 20:24), it was also the way by which the people approached their heavenly king in his earthly palace, and used his name to secure his help (2 Chron 7:12-16). The full range of petitions is given by Solomon's intercession at the dedication of the temple in 1 Kings 8:22-53 and 2 Chronicles 6:12-42, which is Israel's divinely-sanctioned Magna Carta on the privileges of petitionary prayer. Through the use of the holy name, the Israelites could gain privileged access to the Lord's heavenly presence even here on earth and could be sure of gaining favourable treatment from him.

Thirdly, the priests who 'ministered' in or with the Lord's name (Deut 18:5,7) were commissioned to bless the people by using that name in the Aaronic benediction (Num 6:22-27; cf Deut 10:8; 21:5; 1 Chron 23:13). From the people's point of view this was the climax of the sacrificial ritual. It was the only spoken part of the ritual which had been instituted by the Lord himself. Its pronouncement was reserved for the high priest or his deputy. From the story of the inauguration of sacrificial worship at the tabernacle in Leviticus 9 we can ascertain when this occurred and why. The sacrificial ritual was to be performed so that the Lord would appear to his people (Lev 9:4,6). That happened during the pronouncement of the benediction by Moses and Aaron after the preparation of the sacrifices for the burnt offering (Lev 9:23). The story implies that the glory of the Lord, which was initially revealed visibly in the descent of fire upon the altar, would thereafter be revealed verbally through the pronouncement of the benediction as the daily burnt offering was burnt on the altar. When the priest set the Lord's name upon the people by speaking the benediction over them, the Lord came to his people and blessed them (Num 6:27). The benediction was therefore a performative utterance. Its power lay in its divine institution and its use of the holy name within the sacrificial ritual. Through it the Lord's presence and blessing was conveyed to his people.

The holy name was basically reserved for ritual use in Israel's worship. It was hallowed by being used properly in worship. Its profanation was one of the worst crimes that anybody could ever commit against the Lord.

## 5. Conclusion

The name *YHWH* was a proper name. It had been given by the Lord himself to his people for use in their worship of him. By it he gave them access to himself and his favour at the temple in Jerusalem. Through its use in praise the Levitical choir announced the Lord's presence and grace to the congregation. Through its use in petition the Israelites asked him for help individually and corporately. Through its use in benediction the priests conveyed the blessings of his presence to them. In each of these cases the holy name was used ritually as the key to the divine presence. Through it the Israelites came into personal contact with the Lord and received the benefits of intimacy with him.

I would argue that the naming of God functions similarly in the New Testament. There we have the final revelation of God's triune name (Matt 28:19; cf John 17:6). That name is a proper name (Jenson, 7-18). By its use in worship we have access to the divine Father through Jesus the Son in the Holy Spirit (Eph 2:18). Through it we do not merely have fellowship with God in a limited way here on earth, but share in the divine fellowship of the Father with the Son in the heavenly sanctuary (John 17:24-26; Heb 10:19-22). The triune name as confessed in the ecumenical creeds is therefore the basis for all true worship of God, for by it the gracious presence of the living God is given to us. It is our most precious gift from him.

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