



The Name of God

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Imię Boga

STRESZCZENIE

Podstawowym wydarzeniem w tradycji wiary biblijnego Izraela jest objawienie szczególnego, osobistego imienia Boga: *'ehyeh – yhw̄h* (Exod 3:13-15). Ma to miejsce w Egipcie w kontekście zagrożenia życia potomków Abrahama, Izaaka i Jakuba. Objawione w takich okolicznościach imię Boga ma być gwarancją i rękojmą zbawienia. W tym sensie osobiste imię Boga Izraela jest osią całej biblijnej historii zbawienia nadającej jej jedność i ciągłość w czasie. Objawione osobiste imię Boga Izraela jest znakiem jedności i jedyności zarówno Tego, Który objawia się przez nie, jak również tych, którzy jednoczą się w tym imieniu. Fundamentalną cechą imienia Boga jest to, że jest On Bogiem *dla nas*.

Słowa klucze: Imię Boga, Izrael, Przymierze, historia zbawienia, bycie dla

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1. The form and theological meaning of the name of God¹

The name of Israel's God is revealed in Exod 3:13-15 in dual linguistic form. The first and basic form in this regard is the verb form *'ehyeh*. The following noun form *yhw̄h* is understood in this text as a derivative of the verb form. What is remarkable here is that the name of God is expressed in the first place not in the form of a noun or an adjective, but in the form of a sentence, *'ehyeh* "I am". The verbal predicate "I am" has no inbred mean-

¹ David Noel Freedman, "The Name of the God of Moses", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 79, No. 2 (1960): 151-156; Raymond Abba, "The Divine Name Yahweh", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 80, No. 4: 320-28; Bertil Albrektson, "On the Syntax of *'hyh 'sr 'hyh* in Exodus 3:14", in: *Words and Meanings*, Peter R. Ackroyd and Barnabas Lindars eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 15-28.

ing here, it does not mean who the subject is in itself, but it does have a relational meaning, who the subject is in relation to the addressee, who he “is for”. In this event, fundamental for the entire biblical history of salvation, the God of Israel defines himself, defines his identity not relating in to himself, but relating to someone else – to man. Therefore, God does not reveal who he is in himself, who he is “ad intra”. This still remains his mystery, but he reveals who he is in relation to man, who he is “ad extra”. The revealed identity of the God of Israel can be expressed as: “I am who I am for you.” According to Exod 3 the name *'ehyeh – yhw*h “I am for” – “Being for” is to be for Israel a sign of the unity and uniqueness of its God among other gods.

2. God's name as the axis of the entire biblical history of salvation²

The revelation of the name of God of the Old Covenant comes to fullness in the New Covenant. The New Covenant, however, is not only a continuation and fulfillment of what the revelation of the name of the God of Israel has been in the faith tradition of the Old Covenant. In the New Covenant, something more takes place in this respect, something qualitatively new: the one and only name of God of Israel “I am for” – “Being for” reveals its triune unity as “I am for” – “Being for” of the Father, of the Son and of the Spirit. On the one hand, in Jesus the Messiah, the hitherto revelation of the relational identity of God “ad extra”, of being for man, is fully revealed, on the other hand, the relational identity of God “ad intra” is revealed. In the New Covenant, the revelation of God's name is achieved by the fact that God's being for “ad extra” and God's being for “ad intra” become one and the same in the history of salvation: God's saving “being for” man is “being for” of God as he is in himself, as God-Father, and God-Son and God-Spirit.

We will now present a brief outline of the biblical history of salvation in the light of God's revealed name, in the light of its saving unity and multifacetedness. Selected texts from the Old Covenant do not constitute a comprehensive and exhaustive illustration of this topic, but are understood as important impulses for further theological reflection.

2.1. The Name of God – BEING FOR saving life (Exod 3:13-15)³

Historically, the biblical literary tradition associates the revelation of God's name with the calling of Moses. Due to the identification of YHWH

² Friedrich V. Reiterer, „שׁוּב“, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, VIII (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1995), 122-174.

³ Guillaume Lapesqueux, *L'exposition du nom divin dans le livre de l'Exode. Étude exégétique d'Ex 3,1-4,18; 6,2-7,7; 33-34*. *Forschungen zum Alten Testament* 2.102 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019).

with the God of the fathers, emphasized by Ex 3:15, it is also substantively justified when the literary tradition J introduces the name of YHWH in Gen 4:26. Most attempts to explain the God's name YHWH etymologically and semasiologically rightly derive it from the Hebrew verb *hayah* (= to be), although there is no consensus on the more precise form of the verb. The self-determination of God takes place in the form of a paronomasia of the relative sentence: "I am who I am." This sentence does not mean "absolute esse in se subsistens". Rather, it accentuates and emphasizes the name of YHWH as the reality of God opposed to the unreality of idols (= "not to be"), his current presence, effectiveness and power to act. In other words, in the name of YHWH, Israel is promised God's presence for his people, his faithful support to his people, and his powerful work for his people. Consequently, with the name YHWH, Israel is given a new understanding of God. The revelation of God's name becomes the starting point for the further course of salvation history, the basis for the Israel's faith in general. As far as the frequency of use (more than 6,000 times) in the Old Covenant, this name exceeds all other names of God.

Looking at the position of Israel and the task of Moses, it was more important and necessary thanks to (or through or due to) of YHWH to receive the guarantee of God's help and liberating action than to gain insight into God's essence. Liberation from Egypt is the solid basis for the special existence of the Old Covenant People of God.

2.2. The Name of God – BEING FOR protecting life (Exod 20:2-17)⁴

The commandment concerning the name of God Exod 20:7 = Deut 5:11) does not deal with a specific type of offense against the name of God, but is a summary of the entire first part of the Decalogue, Exod 20:3-7 on the prohibition of worshiping other gods. Exod 20:7a = Deut 5:11a is not another commandment of the Decalogue, but the second regulation of the prohibition of worshiping other gods. Exod 20:7a = Deut. 5:11a forbids Israel to give up its bond with YHWH, his God, in favour of the gods, who are described as non-existent. As a direct object of giving up, *'et šem yhw h 'eloheka*, "the name of YHWH your God" is mentioned. This means the status of YHWH as the true God who is there, as the only God of Israel in contrast to the non-existent gods, *šaw*. In the preamble (Exod 20:2 = Deut 5:6) a special aspect of this status, which is essential for a covenant relationship, is emphasized: YHWH, the God of Israel, reveals himself there as the one who saved Is-

⁴ W. E. Staples, „The Third Commandment,“ *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58, No. 4 (1939): 325-329; Josef Schreiner, *Die zehn Gebote im Leben des Gottesvolkes* (München: Kösel, 1988), passim; Timo Veijola, „Das dritte Gebot (Namenverbot) im Lichte einer ägyptischen Parallele,“ *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 103, No. 1 (1991): 1-17.

rael. The status of YHWH as God of Israel is to be understood throughout the document (Exod 20:2-17; Deut 5:6-21) as the status of the protector, the overlord in a covenant relationship. Exod 20:7a = Deut 5:11a follows on from this statement in the preamble, Exod 20:2 = Deut. 5:6. There are also correspondences to the sentences in between (Exod 20:4-6 / Deut 5:8-10). The reasoning Exod 20:7b = Deut. 5:11b following the implementation regulation Exod 20:7a = Deut 5:11b serves as motivation.

Everywhere in the Old Covenant where the designation *šem yhw* “the name YHWH” is used, it is not the mere name that is meant, as we can easily understand today, but the status of YHWH, his validity, his existence with regard to the world and people. Also in Exod 20:7 = Deut 5:11 it is not about the disregard of the pure form of the name “YHWH”, for example by using it criminally, but about the disregard of YHWH himself, in his validity as God, Savior and Protector of Israel by worshiping what is nothing as God, Savior and Protector of Israel. The name of YHWH theologically takes the place where the cult image is found in other cults. YHWH in his validity, *šem yhw*, “the name YHWH” is thus opposed to nullity, *šaw*. This understanding of the statement is confirmed by the cases in the Old Covenant in which the disregard of the name of YHWH is spoken of with *šem yhw* as a direct object. The disregard does not consist in using the name form YHWH criminally, but in committing offenses that are directed against YHWH himself, against his name. In these cases the term *šem* denotes YHWH himself in its validity. So when in this context the disregard of his name is spoken of, it is the disregard of YHWH himself.

When YHWH’s protégé Israel gives this status of YHWH, the status of the only true God that exists and protects Israel, to non-existent gods, Israel enters into a covenant with them. Such an act means betrayal of YHWH, a unilateral revocation of the covenant, and necessarily entails the reaction of the betrayed protector: the protégé is no longer protected by him, but punished. Such a punishment is announced in the justification for this implementing regulation (Exod 20:7b = Deut 5:11b): YHWH will not declare the worshiper of gods innocent, he will not allow such an offense to go unpunished.

2.3. The Name of God – BEING FOR restoring life (Exod 34:4-7)⁵

This text gives an interpretation of the name YHWH (cf. the beginning of the “self-hymn” in Exod 34:6). This draws the link to that other section of the Elohist historical work in which, at the beginning of the

⁵ Ruth Scoralick, *Gottes Güte und Gottes Zorn. Die Gottesprädikationen in Exodus 34,6f. und ihre intertextuellen Beziehungen zum Zwölfprophetenbuch*. Herders Biblische Studien 33 (Freiburg: Herder, 2002).

Exodus, Yahweh explains his name: YHWH means “he-is-there, he-is-for” (Exod 3:14). YHWH as “he-is-there, he-is-for” is, as comparative linguistics shows, a name of thanks according to the laws of name formation, whereby the one who utters it happily confesses: He (namely: “my God”) proves to be my helper, he proves in me that he really is God. The name of the God of Israel is therefore a response to an act that this God has worked on his people. He is an answer to the being of this God, who is not static-self-restful-self-sufficient, but always by itself – that is his divinity – is actively related to man and the world. This is its uniqueness and it is not comparable to anything else. In Exod 3:14 he therefore only defines himself through himself: “I prove myself to be who I prove myself”: as the one who goes to work, he is incomparably effective. If this definition in Exod 3:14 places the main emphasis on the formal structure of YHWH’s being effective and close, this text tries to break down the content of YHWH’s being effective: YHWH is effective in his goodness, but also in his judgment. The God of the Bible is not an „it” but a „you”. YHWH is not a “deity” or a “godly being”, but he has a name YHWH. Anyone who is allowed to say “God” is speaking to a you. God is a you, this means: he is the God of human children who hear and – hears them. That a God is a you, that He is a person, means that not only can he be addressed from a human point of view, but that He also listens. If He did not hear, addressing Him would be an illusion that an “enlightened” and sincere person should not get involved in. He hears and listens, that means: that he himself is affected in his own reality by the address addressed to him; that we not only call Him “you”, like approaching a you – because we may not have a better access or approach in our language than this – but that He really is a you.

YHWH is *'el raḥum w^hannun*. “the compassionate and gracious God”. This first predication, which with the word *'el* = God still retains the echo of the Canaanite king of the gods El, is one of the deepest statements about Yahweh’s I. In it the turning of YHWH towards people is expressed. It is essential to YHWH’s God-being that he seeks fellowship with people. His ego is always related to people. Indeed, its relation to humans is like the intimate bond between a mother and her child; This means the word *raḥum* = compassionate, which is related to *reḥem* = womb. Yes, the compassionate bond between YHWH and man is stronger than it can be between a mother and her child: “Can a woman forget her child that she does not sympathize with the son of her body? Even if they forget – I will not forget you” (Isa 49:15). The infinite distance that separates God and man does not change anything in this intimate bond. For YHWH is *raḥum* at the same time, i.e. it is part of his nature that he is benevolent and generous, just as a good king does not use his position against his subjects to exploit or enslave them, but to give

them gifts and make them happy. The noun *ḥen* “favor, benevolence”, which belongs to *raḥum*, roughly expresses what the Latin word *gratia* contains.

The anthropomorphism with which YHWH’s I is described here increases even further in the next formulation: YHWH is *’erek ’appayim*, he is “long in his anger”. His benevolence is so great that it drives him to put off his anger for a long time, longer than the situation would actually lead to expect. In this sense, his long-suffering implies tremendous patience, benevolent waiting and the postponement of his punitive intervening. The reason for this long-suffering is finally given in the last nominal predication Exod 34:6: Yahweh is rich in *ḥesed* and *’emet*, i.e. great in kindness towards people – solidarity and loyalty – firmness. In the combination of both nouns, the main accent is *ḥesed*: *’emet* modified *ḥesed* “grace, goodness, love, community will” on the side of reliability. The phrase wants the moment of fidelity, which persists even in situations where the relationship between God and people is exposed to a severe stress test, explicitly hold on to. YHWH’s comprehensive goodness is therefore even the basic structure of the cosmos: “Love (*ḥesed*) and faithfulness (*’emet*) meet together; righteousness (*ṣedeq*) and peace (*šalom*) kiss each other. Faithfulness (*’emet*) springs forth from the earth, and righteousness (*ṣedeq*) looks down from heaven.” (Ps 85:11-12).

**2.4. The Name of God – BEING FOR of the one sacrificing oneself
(Isa 52:13-53:9)⁶**

The literary-critical analysis has shown that Isa 52:13-53:12 as the “song of the suffering servant of God” is closely related to Isa 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9. These four “God’s servant songs” form, as self-contained units, a cycle that originally was joined together; they are probably only separated from each other secondarily and inserted into their current context. It is significant for us that all four texts deal with the suffering of the “servant” in a constant increase in the difficulties to be endured: In the first “song” YHWH himself points out that the person and mission of his servant, although their ultimate success is guaranteed, will be challenged and endangered from the start (42:4: “... he does not go out and does not collapse.” The second “song” then reports on the complaint of the “servant” that his work is unsuccessful and his life is therefore without sense (49:4: “I have tried in vain, wasted all my strength for nothing or a breath.” The third “song” becomes even clearer, in which the “servant” again speaks of the persecution and humiliation that happened to him (50:6: “He was reviled, beaten, spat at.”) In the fourth and last “song” this escalation of suffering

⁶ Bernd Janowski, Peter Stuhlmacher (eds.), *Der leidende Gottesknecht*. Forschungen zum Alten Testament 14 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991).

reaches its culmination and climax: the life and work of the “servant”, which has always been shaped by suffering, fails completely and ends in the bitter and shameful death of a criminal.

God’s suffering representative. If you take a closer look at the Deutero-Isaiah context of the God’s servant songs, it becomes clear that the “servant” not only suffers on behalf of people, but that he is also God’s representative at the same time – especially as a sufferer. He is, also as such a Second Moses and related to Jeremiah, not only in solidarity with Israel, its people, but at the same time also in solidarity with YHWH, his God, who himself suffers from Israel. In the songs of the Servant of God, to a certain extent, what is said elsewhere by Deutero-Isaiah about God is transferred to the “servant”. For Israel was not only the “servant,” but YHWH himself, in that it was “a burden” for him, “burdensome with his sins and iniquities”. In the „servant” thus, as it were, Yahweh himself suffers; through him he causes what he claims for himself alone: the redemption of guilt and, connected with it, the effect of redemption and the bringing about of salvation. This aspect also deserves attention, because something similar can be found in the New Testament, whose soteriology, despite its Christocentrism, remains essentially theocentric and theocratic: God himself works by acting on Jesus and in Jesus, salvation through him, the crucified servant and glorified Lord.

Affirmed suffering. Suffering – suffering for and through Israel and, inseparably, suffering for and through Yahweh – has always been part of the prophetic mission. In the case of the servant of God, however, something fundamental has changed in this regard: From the complaint of the mediator, who is ostracized and persecuted for his mission, the affirmative assumption of suffering as such arises for the first time (53:7.10a.12b). Suffering is no longer merely a passively endured state of being surrendered, but an active surrender: the “servant” surrenders himself to God and man at the same time by confronting suffering and voluntarily accepting it. Because his surrender – surrender (*paradidonai*) is a key word of the New Testament Passion Kerygma – is surrender in a double sense: surrender to human beings and surrender to God and as such a sacrifice. The “servant” gave up his life, surrendering himself to man, in death, surrendering himself to God at the same time, as a guilt offering (53:10a.12b).

2.5. The Name of God – BEING FOR OF THE RESURRECTED ONE (Isa 53:10-12)

The term “to rise” or “to be raised” is missing here, but the matter itself is clear: YHWH is rehabilitating his “servant”. As he himself promised

⁷ Jan Alberto Soggin, „Tod und Auferstehung des leidenden Gottesknechtes Jesaja 53,8-10”, *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 87, No. 3 (1975): 346-355.

before (49:3-6), he stands by his “servant”, whose trust (50:7ff) is now to be rewarded in an undreamt-of way beyond death. For the rehabilitation happens when YHWH leads the “exalted” from abysmal “hardship” (53: 11a) and shame, from the “grave” and the underworld (cf. 52:13!) to a new and more comprehensive life. It is a life full of happiness and joy (expressed biblically in 53:11a: “he will see light and be satisfied”; (cf., among others, Isa 9:1; Ps 97:11 as well as Ps 17:15; 91:16), life in abundance, which will be fruitful insofar as it can also be passed on to others: “He will see offspring (literally: seed)” and in this way become the progenitor of a new generation (53:10b; cf. Isa 9:6 the messianic title “Eternal Father” and, from the risen Jesus, among others 1Cor 15:45ff; Heb 2:10.13). In this way – and only in this way – will the all-encompassing plan of salvation – YHWH’s “plan”, i.e. his “will” and “pleasure” – of which the preceding “songs” speak – succeed and achieve its goal (53:10b; cf. 52:13).

3. Conclusion – towards the New Covenant

Our reflexion on the Name of God in the Old Testament we want to conclude by giving some hint to the New Testament because the same basic idea is present here and there, namely the being of God for us.

The name of God YHWH means in the New Covenant the Father of Jesus Christ, the Father of Jesus the Messiah. Anyone who is allowed to say “God” as a Christian is speaking in the Holy Spirit to the Father of Jesus. Between the Torah and the Gospel there is an arc of the revelation of God’s name. God first reveals his name through Moses (Exod 3:14-15) in the unity and oneness of his “I am for”, in order to finally reveal through Jesus the Messiah his “I am for” in the triune unity of the Father, of the Son and of the Spirit (Matt 28:20).

That is why God meets people in a unique way in a way that no person can meet another one: He meets as the “Father” with the unconditional, unrestricted claim of the Creator. He encounters as the “Son”, that is (think of the Incarnation and the Cross of Jesus Christ): He encounters in a solidarity, in a “Being for” that cannot be achieved through any solidarity of one person with another person. And He meets as the “Holy Spirit”, that is: He can grasp a person inwardly, inspire and liberate, in a way that no person can do with another person.

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SUMMARY

The fundamental event in the faith tradition of biblical Israel is the revelation of God's specific, personal name: 'ehyeh – yhwh (Exod 3:13-15). It occurs in the context of the existence of the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in Egypt being endangered. Revealed in such circumstances, the personal name of the God of Israel is to be a guarantee and pledge of salvation. In this sense, the personal name of the God of Israel is the axis of the entire biblical history of salvation; it is what makes it coherent and continuing over time. The revealed personal name of the God of Israel is a sign of the unity and uniqueness of both: the one who reveals himself through it and those who unite in this name. The fundamental characteristic of the name of God is that He is God *for us*.

Key words: Name of God, Israel, Covenant, Salvation History, Being for

