

The Name of God

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Early in the Book of Exodus, we are told how the Israelites were groaning in their enslavement to the Egyptians, and how their cry for help reached up to God. God then remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and decided to come down to his people in order to bring them up to the Land that he had promised them, Exod 2:23-24; 3:7-8. For this undertaking, God needed the leadership of Moses, who must go to Pharaoh to ask that Pharaoh let God's people go, Exod 3:10.

Moses expresses to God his doubt about his ability to accomplish this. In response, God tells him: "I will be with you," Exod 3:11-12. In the language in which this text was written, Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, "I will be with you" is *ehyeh 'immak*. This exact expression is found in several other passages where God promises to accompany someone in a difficult task: Isaac in Gen 26:3, in a time of famine; Jacob, when he must flee from his angry relative Laban, in Gen 31:3; Joshua, who must lead the conquest of the Promised Land, in Deut 31:23, repeated in Josh 1:5; 3:7; Gideon, who must fight Israel's enemies, in Judg 6:16. But how is this assurance of divine protection linked with God's name?

Going back to the Book of Exodus and to Moses' conversation with God, we see that Moses anticipates that the Israelites will want to know more about this God who is commissioning Moses for the dangerous task of getting his people out of Egypt: specifically, the people will want to know God's name, Exod 3:13. God's response in the next verse is usually translated "I am who I am," which is not necessarily wrong. But in Hebrew, the text says *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, which could be translated "I am the one who will be [i.e., with you]." Most biblical scholars agree that however we translate it, God does not really provide a real name: God just gives an elusive answer to Moses' question, since for the ancient Semites (such as the Hebrews), knowing someone's name gave power and dominion over what he named, as happens with Adam in Gen 2:19-20. But perhaps this passage, Exod 3:14, indicates much more than simply that God's name is elusive, and cannot be grasped.

¹ Article published by *The Florida Catholic*, Orlando Edition (and perhaps others), March 20, 2003, page A21.

We have a clue about God's name in a passage from an early Israelite prophet, Hosea. At that time —the eighth century before Christ— the northern kingdom of Israel, in which Hosea lived, was notorious for its idolatry. God's relation to his people was conceived of as a marriage; faithfulness was required. Israel was anything but faithful. So, as is often the case with the prophets, God's message to them was not only to be announced, but also to be lived. Dramatically, God tells Hosea to marry a woman as unfaithful to him as was Israel to God, and to have children with her, children who are to be given symbolic names, such as "Not-to-be-pitied" and "Not-my-people," Hos 1:2-6. In regards to this child, God says: "Name him 'Not-my-people', because they (the Israelites) are 'Not-my-people', and I am 'Not-*ehyeh*' to them," Hos 2:9. Israel was "God's people," and he was *ehyeh* to them, until this falling out. It is a bit like an angry wife telling her husband "don't you 'darling' me!"

Now most of us have always heard that God's Hebrew name is "Yahweh," and this is how it appears in many translations of the Bible, although there is no absolute certainty as to how this word was pronounced (or even fully spelled). The Jews revered God's name in this form so much that they stopped pronouncing it (except on the most solemn occasion, on Yom Kippur, see Sir 50:20). Most scholars agree that "Yahweh" is a little-understood form of the Hebrew verb "to be." *ehyeh*, on the contrary, is a well-understood form of this same Hebrew verb "to be." We have the two names side by side in Exod 3:14-15. In verse 14, God adds: "Thus shall you tell the Israelites, *ehyeh* has sent me to you." In verse 15, God "yet again" says to Moses: "Thus shall you tell the Israelites, *yahweh* the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob has sent me to you. This is my name forever, and this is my invocation (i.e., this is how I am to be called) for all generations."

In conclusion, we have here two forms of God's name. One of them, Yahweh, is unutterable and incomprehensible, while the other is a common form of the verb "to be," and it is usually found as part of an expression, a divine promise that *God will be with us* in our life and in our hardship. God's name is not really a name by which we can control God, but rather is God's promise to be with us. Another way of saying this in Hebrew is *immanu-el*, "With-us (is) God" (Isa 7:14; Matt 1:23; cf. Matt 18:20; 28:20).