

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

intensity of personal affection which we now revere, will become a folly. Convince yourselves that there is no law of God, and the law of human virtue will become suddenly questionable and hazy. Once assure yourselves that a holy character is not the end of life, and you will waver more and more as to what kind of life it is that should be the end of character. Secularism is strong and respectable only while it borrows its moral standard from the Gospels, even though it declines to acknowledge the assumptions on which the Gospels found it. Let this moral stem be only separated from its root, and half the moral virtues would seem first questionable and then absurd. Why should we value human constancy if there is no eternal constancy to adore, and the law of all human emotion is change? Why should we be reverent if the origin of all our life is in the earth below, and not in the God above? Why should we be courageous, calm, and trustful, if there be no Divine shield over us, and no Divine goal to which we can attain? Why should we be lowly in heart if there is no Being higher than ourselves? If secularism is justified, it disposes not only of the received religion but of the received morality as well. And yet it founds all its claims on the increased emphasis which it would give to our morality at the expense of our religion.

R. H. HUTTON.

THE TETRAGRAMMATON.

EXODUS iii. 14.

It has often been observed that the great epochs in the history of the chosen and priestly race were marked, if not ushered in, by the introduction of a new name for God, a new verbal sign, or symbol, expressing some significant and momentous aspect of the Divine character. To the world's grey fathers, the men before the flood, He was mainly

known as *El*, "the Strong One," or even as *Elohim*, "the Strong Ones." To the Hebrew patriarchs He made Himself known as *El-Shaddai*, "God Almighty," or even, with a tender lingering accent of affection, as "the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." But now that, for the ultimate and greater good of the world at large, He is about to raise their descendants from an idolatrous horde of slaves into a free, strong, and united nation, a race of exceptional privileges and exceptional gifts, He unveils a new and appropriate aspect of his character in the new Name which He discloses to Moses, in order that Moses, in his turn, may disclose it to the people. Slowly, but surely, this new Name, this new conception of God won its way to the very heart of the Hebrew race, transforming their own personal names even, changing Hoshea into Jehoshua for instance; giving form to their very Scriptures, hence the Elohistic and Jehovistic controversy; and gathering round it a more awful reverence as the years went by, until, at last, it was held a sin to pronounce it, nay, until the true pronunciation of this sacred Tetragrammaton, or four-lettered Name, was irrecoverably lost. We pronounce it *Jehovah*; but all the vowel sounds of that pronunciation are known to be wrong; and whether we ought to say *Jah*, *Jahve*, or *Iabe*, etc., is still, and is long likely to be, a moot point with scholars and divines.

But though, and perhaps because, this Name is so expressive and significant, though it was "given" with so much pomp and circumstance, though it was obviously intended to usher in a new era and to be at once the keenest incentive and an unflinching support to the Hebrew slaves in their bitter Egyptian bondage and in their struggle for enfranchisement and escape, most readers of the Bible have, I suppose, but a faint and hazy conception of what it signifies and conveys; and would be hard put to it for a reply were they asked to explain what there was in it to inspire an enslaved and

degraded race with faith, courage, hope, and to set it on striking a blow for freedom. I doubt whether most students and scholars are better off. For if, bent on discovering what there was in this sacred Name to work so great a miracle, we betake ourselves to books, even to the most learned and approved commentaries, we shall find they have but little help to give. Disquisitions on the derivation and pronunciation of the word may, indeed, be found here and there; but the point of main and profoundest interest, viz. the contents and inspiration of the Tetragrammaton, has, so far as my reading goes, been strangely overlooked. I know of no book, no essay, no discourse even, in which the moral and impelling force of the Name is discussed; in which any serious attempt is made to bring out the significance with which all admit it to be fraught; or to shew what there was in it to move the Hebrew bondsmen to rebel against the tyranny they had borne so long or to inspire and sustain them in the struggle. Probably it is the very gravity and difficulty of the theme which has held wise and good men back from any attempt to master and expound it. Possibly it is impossible to form any clear, as it is certainly impossible to form any adequate, conception of the Name which of old wrought wonders in Israel, and which has long since enshrined itself in the heart of the whole civilized world. At the same time it is terribly disappointing and disheartening to hear so much of the infinite significance and momentous importance of the Name; and yet when we ask "What did it signify then?" or "What gave it so strange and marvellous a force?" to be put off with a few general remarks, or at best with a disquisition on the verbal origin or the verbal qualities of the word. As, moreover, we must attach *some* conceptions to any word, or name, in constant use, it is obviously important that our conception of this most sacred and significant Name should be as little inadequate as we can make it; and that we should do our best to get at least

some glimpse, if more be not allowed us, of the power and influence ascribed to it, of the way in which it told on the enterprise to which first Moses, and then Israel, were summoned by God. Such glimpses and hints are not beyond our reach if we approach this Name, as Moses approached the bush from which it first sounded forth, with reverent, thoughtful, and inquiring hearts. Only we shall need to remember that we are dealing with a word which carries infinity in it and eternity, and must not hope therefore to sound its depths; we must remember that we have to approach it without the usual aids and guides, and cannot hope therefore to do more than gather up a few suggestions which may help to define our thoughts, and then serve perhaps to lead others into a larger and fuller apprehension of a word so familiar and yet so strange.

1. Now the very first thought that looks out upon us as we ask what this sacred Tetragrammaton means and implies, is, *the unity* of God. Whatever else and more the Ruler and Friend of Israel meant by calling Himself "I AM," He evidently meant that the God who ruled the universe was *one*, and not many.

In the morning of the world, and when the great primitive tradition was beginning to die out of the minds of men, it was not unnatural that they should deify every province and aspect of nature, that they should see a divinity (god or goddess) in every exhibition of more than human power, and in every revelation of more than mortal beauty. Nor, to an early and childlike piety, was it unnatural to infer that, since every tribe or race of men had separate and sometimes opposed interests, every race, every clan, if not every conspicuous family, had its tutelary deity, some divine patron, to espouse its cause and to assert its interests. As yet, the children of Israel had hardly questioned this common and prevalent superstition. Their own familiar name for God (*Elohim*), indeed, was itself a plural noun, and spoke of

“Strong Ones” who might, or might not, be presided over by an almighty Lord. Nor had they scrupled to apply this name to the gods of the heathen, or even to men who commanded their reverence and awe, or to the grander or more lovely features of the physical world. Nay, in “the house of bondage,” they had even stooped to worship the innumerable gods of Egypt, the celestial patrons of their detested oppressors and lords.

The hour had struck in which they were to be saved from their idolatry, and saved in the noblest way. The “*I am*” of God was equivalent to “*I alone am; I only have life in Myself: all power, in heaven and on earth, is derived from Me.*” This of itself was a wonderful, a most necessary and stimulating, revelation to men who were beginning to feel that the life of a people ran out beyond itself and blended with the life and fate of other races. Of what avail could *their* God be to them unless He was also the God of the Egyptian race, of the races that held the wilderness through which they had to pass, and of the races now inhabiting the goodly land which they were to possess? unless He could break the power of Egypt, control the tribes of the desert, and subdue before them the fierce and hostile clans who had seized on the land once promised to their fathers and now promised to them?

Such a God *Jehovah*, the Only One, now proclaimed Himself to be. In his new name there lay a claim to solitary, unshared, universal, power and dominion. And the words and acts which accompanied and followed this claim at once illustrated and confirmed it; for they shewed Him to be a God just as bent on making the Egyptians do right by their slaves as on delivering the Hebrews from their bondage, willing to wait, willing to teach, willing to work marvels, if thus the Egyptians might be led to adopt his pure and kindly will; but also able to break their wills and force them to let his people go, if they obstinately re-

fused to do justice and to shew mercy and to walk humbly with Him.

And who does not see what an incentive to action, to courage, to hope there lay in this revelation of God, as the sole Ruler of the world and of men, to as many of the Hebrews as were able to receive it, these receptive and wiser Hebrews being of course the leaders and guides of their fellows? What had they to fear from Pharaoh, or from his gods and magicians, what had they to fear in the pathless wilderness even, or in the Promised Land, if their God was the ruler of all lands and all races, if there was none in heaven or on earth who could dispute his authority or withstand his will?

2. Another conception suggested by this new Divine Name is the *self-subsistence* of God. Even when they worshipped and served gods many and lords many, men had not wholly lost their sense of the Divine unity. Lost to their practical lives, lost altogether perhaps to the vast majority of the race, it still lived in the thoughts and speculations of the wise. While worshipping and seeking to propitiate a whole hierarchy of divinities, they dimly conceived of an inevitable Necessity, or of a dark inscrutable Fate, to which gods and men were alike compelled to bow. Even this dark and formless conception was not without its value so long as men worshipped many lords, since it bore emphatic, though a perverted, testimony to the great truth that the whole universe is governed by one will, by one law, a truth capable of penetrating, and which we know did reach the more apprehensive minds of the time, through the idolatrous superstitions which enshrouded it.

But now that the unity of God was revealed, now that sentence was pronounced, though not as yet executed, on the whole pantheon of divinities, this dark shadow also disappeared before the incoming light, the steadfast and growing lustre of this new Divine Name. Men were taught,

what indeed it took them long to learn, that behind the throne of Him who *is*, is *always*, and *alone* is, there lurked no dark fate, no inexorable necessity, to which even He Himself had to submit. They were taught that his benign and gracious will, which will is the salvation of all men from every form of wrong and from all the miseries it breeds, is the only necessity, the only fate; that there is absolutely nothing behind, or beyond, or above Him; that those who fear Him have nothing else to fear. And this, again, could not fail to be an immense consolation, a very fountain of inspiration and strength, to men who were trembling under the despotism of their earthly rulers, and who feared that they had no helper even in heaven itself.

3. A third suggestion of this new Name, and probably its chief and ruling suggestion, is *the eternity* of God. For this name "I Am" means "I am He who *is*"; or, more fully, "I am He who *was*, and *is*, and *is to come*." Jehovah is He who always *is*, whose rule had no beginning and will have no end; He who at any conceivable point, whether in the line of time or in the circle of eternity, can say "I *am*." Hence, in the French Bible the word is translated instead of transferred; and where we read the Hebrew word "Jehovah," they consistently read "the Eternal."

Now in *this* suggestion of the new Divine Name there was, when once it was duly weighed, an immense significance, a most stimulating incentive to the Hebrew slaves. He who could name himself Jehovah was not, and could not be, the mere representative of a celestial dynasty which, seated for a while upon the throne of heaven, might die or pass away, like that of Osiris, or that of Saturn, Chronos, or Zeus, fleeing before the onset of more youthful and vigorous deities, or trembling under the assault of mutinous giants, or compelled to admit to their ranks and share their power with the spirits of gifted and heroic men, or even starving through the base neglect of the base multitude so soon as the multitude had

grown weary of heaping sacrifices on their altars. Such accidents and vicissitudes did befall the heathen deities on the shewing of their own priests and votaries. But *Jehovah* sat high above all the accidents of time and fortune. He *was*: always had been, always would be, though the heavens should fall or the earth be burned up, though the changeful hearts of men should turn away from Him and their hands should bring Him no gifts. In heaven, on earth, there was none to compare, none to vie with Him, and never would be. His throne would never be vacant, his purposes never broken off. And hence none who put their trust in Him could possibly fail in any enterprise to which they were summoned by Him, however great it might be, however perilous it might seem. Neither Moses nor Israel need fear that his eye would grow heavy that it could not see, or his arm be shortened that it could not save. What wonder, then, if the new Name, if this new thought of God, shone like a light and burned like a fire in the hearts of the leaders of Israel, guiding and impelling them to the most lofty and heroic endeavours?

4. The eternity of God implies his *unchangeableness*,—a most precious, consolatory, and propelling thought both to the Israelites and to us. Had God been simply a Strong One to them, or even a Company of Strong Ones, they might well have feared to commit themselves to Him, and to the enterprise to which He summoned them. For strength is not an absolute security against change, change of purpose, of aim, of will. The gods of the heathen were believed to be mighty; but none the less they were also believed to change their aspect and intention, to frown on those on whom they had once smiled, to smite and destroy those on whom they had bestowed their favour, to fight against causes they had formerly espoused. To the Hebrews therefore, who were called to risk their very existence at the bidding of a God whom *they* hardly knew, though their “fathers”

had known and trusted Him, what comfort and inspiration would there be in the words, "I am Jehovah; I change not"!

And we, *we* change, if He does not; and often, when we change our attitude towards Him, when we fail in the service and the loyalty we owe to Him, we suspect that He too has changed, that He no longer cares for us, that He will no longer save us. Hence we also need to learn and lay to heart the meaning of his Name; to learn that his purpose for us does not change, even when his attitude changes that it may correspond with ours; that his love does not alter where it alteration finds; that the calling and gifts of God are without any afterthrob of repentance; that his purpose standeth fast because He cannot deny Himself; and that the very punishments which wait on our sins are proofs that He will save us despite our sins, since they are designed to bring us back to Him. All of which is implied in the name *Jehovah*; for He who can say "*I am*," to whom there is no before and after, who sees the end in the beginning and from the beginning: what room or scope is there for change in Him? In answer to all our doubts whether He is, or is a Rewarder of them that trust in Him, a Saviour of all who seek Him, (whether these doubts spring from an intellect which strives to comprehend the incomprehensible, or whether they are bred by our painful experience of a providence which seems adverse to us,) He simply replies, "*I am*." Behind all our changes of creed, all the various forms in which we conceive and misconceive Him, there stands this gracious and Divine Reality, the "*I Am*" whom we can never adequately conceive, and who remains untouched by our poor thoughts of Him. In revealing Himself to us by this most sacred and significant Name, it is as though He said: "Let men think of Me as they will, *I am*. Let them doubt and deny Me as they will, *I am*; and they will find Me out in time, and learn to put

their trust in Me, and let Me save them from their errors and sins and fears."

5. And so we reach still another suggestion of this Divine Name, viz. *the mystery* of God. Even when He reveals Himself to us, He hides Himself from us, answering us out of the darkness, if not out of the tempest. Even when He attempts to define Himself in words that we can grasp, He can but say "I am *that which I am*"; so much is there in Him which our finite powers cannot comprehend. Dean Stanley indeed affirms, a little rhetorically, that the giving of this Name was "the rending asunder of the veil which overhung the temple of the Egyptian Isis: 'I am that which has been, and is, and which is to be; and my veil no mortal hath drawn aside.'" But, in sober earnest, that veil was *not* drawn aside, much less rent asunder, even when this Name was given. Jehovah simply proclaimed Himself to be "He who was, and who is, and who is to be." And though, in assuming this designation, He suggests enough of Himself, as we have seen, to inspire faith and courage, nevertheless, in telling us only that He is *what He is*, He enfolds Himself in a veil we cannot penetrate, and reminds us that even He Himself cannot tell us *what* He is. When all is said that can be said, all that even He Himself can say, the half has not been told: for how should the finite word express, or the finite intellect comprehend, the Infinite?

When therefore we demand a logical solution of the ultimate mystery of the universe, we demand that which God cannot give, simply because we cannot take it, so long as our reason works under its present limitation and our spirits are entangled in this mortal coil. When we ask to know Him even as also we are known by Him, we ask, moreover, more than it would be good for us to have while our moral nature still needs the very training which only the ventures and enterprises of a reverent and affectionate trust in Him can supply.

To know God is one thing ; to know all about God, all He is and does, all He knows of Himself and of his own methods and ends, is another thing ; although a thing which in our impatience, and for lack of reverence and modesty, we are constantly demanding or attempting. And, happily, we *may* know God, so know as to trust, love, and obey Him, without knowing all that He is, or being able to comprehend the full and final intention of his way with us. We may know Him on precisely the same terms on which we know anything in the universe around us, or of our fellow men. We do know much of the natural world, so much that we never doubt its existence ; so much that we can obey its laws, and use its gifts, and bind its forces to our service, although every single item in the whole range of our knowledge floats unsteadily on a sea of mystery we cannot fathom. And we know much of man, or of some men, although we admit that we do not know even the man we know best, altogether, and as he is in himself. While we confess that in the being and history of our nearest neighbours there are profound mysteries which we shall never solve, we nevertheless know that they *are* ; and there are, at least, some of them whom we can reasonably honour and trust and love. As we know *them*, so also we may know God, know that He *is*, know that He reveals Himself to those who seek Him, know that He is worthy of our reverence, our confidence, our supreme affection. The mystery which shrouds Him from us need not hide Him from us any more than the mysteries of our own being need hide us from ourselves, or our incapacity to comprehend all that is in man need hinder us from committing ourselves to those who have shewn themselves to be worthy of our confidence and love.¹

The mystery of man, so far from disproving his existence,

¹ In this paragraph I have ventured to quote from myself. See "Commentary on Job," page 526 *et seq.*

or rendering us doubtful of it, only proves the greatness of man and the limitation of our own powers. Why then should the mystery of God repel us, or make us doubt whether *He* is who alone can say "I am," in the full meaning of the words? Why should it not prove *his* greatness to us, and impel us to confess that, if *He is*, He must be too great for us to comprehend?

6. In the words, "Say I AM *hath sent me* unto you," we have an indication of *the kindness and pity* of God. That He should have been touched to the very heart by the affliction of the Hebrew bondsmen was much; that He should have sent any man to save them from their affliction and bondage was more. But that He should have sent *Moses* to them, a man of the most heroic mould; a man of such superb and splendid beauty that the tradition of his godlike face and person lived for two thousand years after he was dead, and is as much insisted on in the New Testament as in the Old;¹ a man who was familiarly known as "the son of Pharaoh's daughter," and who had mastered all the secret wisdom of the very home of wisdom; a man in whom the keen insight of faith rose to inspiration, and who ever walked as seeing *Him* that is invisible: what mercy, what grace, was here! That *this* man, despising the treasures of Egypt and not fearing the wrath of the king, should come to them, and come with a commission from Jehovah, the sole, self-subsistent, eternal, unchangeable Lord of heaven and earth, whose ways are past finding out; and that he should come to redeem them from bondage, to guide them through the pathless wilderness, to train them into a wise, united, and holy nation, to settle them in a land flowing with milk and honey: was not this of itself a revelation of the Divine love and pity which might well rouse and animate their hearts for the noble but perilous enterprise to which they were called?

¹ See Acts vii. 20, and Heb. xi. 23.

As they thought of it and talked of it, must not their hearts have burned within them? And as *we* think of it, ought not our hearts to burn within us? Ought we not to lift them up, aflame with love and courage and gratitude, to that just God and Saviour who has taken pity on us; who has sent One greater than Moses to redeem us from *our* bondage, to guide us along the troubled and difficult path of life, and to bring us, when once He has trained us for glory, honour, and immortality, to a better country, even a heavenly, to a city whose builder and maker is God, to a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens? All *our* thoughts of God, start where they may, fly with what wing they will, centre in Christ Jesus, in whom abides all the fulness of God humanly, and in whom we are made one with God and with each other.

It is not enough for us, therefore, to learn what there was in the new Name by which God revealed Himself to Israel, to lift them to the height of their great enterprise; although I trust we have, in some measure, entered into its moral significance and impelling force. The one satisfactory result of our meditation can be only this; that, even though the great I AM should still be wrapt in clouds we cannot penetrate, we turn with heartfelt love and praise to the Divine Man, in whom as in a glass we may behold all the glory of the Lord; that, loving and serving Him with all our hearts, we may be changed into his image by his Spirit that dwelleth in us.

S. Cox.
