

III. THE NAMES AND DESIGNATIONS OF GOD

6. אֱלֹהִים: GOD, THE GOD, (THE) GODS. GOD'S RELATEDNESS

1. GOD is called in Hebrew אֱלֹהִים but אֱלֹהִים means not only God, it means also a God, the God, Gods and the Gods.²⁹ Whoever sets about showing how and why this is possible uncovers one of the many theological difficulties which are encountered in the Old Testament.

2. אֱלֹהִים is plural in form and can also be plural in meaning. "Thou shalt have none other gods אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים before me", Ex. 20: 3. These "other gods" are mentioned 63 times (Deut. 18, Jer. 18. 1 and 2 Kings 11). "But where are thy gods that thou hast made thee? Let them arise, if they can save thee in the time of thy trouble; for according to the number of thy cities are thy gods, O Judah" (Jer. 2: 28, 11: 13). "Other gods of the gods of the people which are round about you", Deut. 6: 14, Judg. 2: 12. "The Lord your God, he is God of gods", Deut. 10: 17, Ps. 136: 2. There can be no doubt that אֱלֹהִים means gods and that (originally) both in form and in context it is plural.

3. We find also that the word can retain its plural form and impose the plural on those parts of the sentence that are grammatically related to it, and can yet be singular in meaning. "God caused me to wander" is what Abraham is saying, but if it were not that this is so certainly his meaning, it could also be translated "Gods caused me to wander". In Deut. 5: 26, 1 Sam. 17: 26, Jer. 10: 10, 23: 36 the reading is "living gods", the sense is "the living God". "The Lord, for he is (singular) an holy God" Josh. 24: 19; but the text says אֱלֹהִים קְדוּשִׁים. The same grammatical phenomenon appears in 1 Sam. 2: 25, 2 Sam. 7: 23, Ps. 58: 11, Gen. 35: 7, 1 Sam. 4: 8. These plurals with singular meaning, and for some reason there are only eleven of them out of a possible 2,000 or so, constitute a real philological enigma. They cannot be a later introduction, since the singular usage is in firm and obvious agreement with later theological thinking. Are they then the last remains of a lost

mode of expression? This is certainly a more reasonable explanation than that which says it is a linguistic whim.

4. As a rule and in the overwhelming majority of cases אֱלֹהִים means a God, the God or God. Which of the three it happens to be depends on the context, but always the singular is meant, as the grammar confirms in the sentence where it occurs: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth", Gen. 1: 1. Here the meaning is simply God, the one and only, a proper name like "God" in English. Sometimes the article is there³⁰ הָאֱלֹהִים "the Lord, he is God, there is none else beside him", Deut. 4: 35, "Am I (a) God?" 2 Kings 5: 7, "the everlasting God, the Lord", Isa. 40: 28, "This holy God", 1 Sam. 6: 20, "Call upon thy God, if so be that (the) God will think upon us that we perish not", Jonah 1: 6. Here "thy God" is equivalent to the God whom thou dost worship and "(the) God" is equivalent to the God concerned.

5. When one arranges these various meanings of אֱלֹהִים in logical order one makes the following (logical) series: 1. אֱלֹהִים means (the) divine beings, deities, gods. 2. When worshippers (whether an individual or a group) know only one deity or direct their attention to only one of the several they know or worship, it means the deity, the God or a God. 3. Where only one deity is recognized it means simply God. All three meanings occur in the Old Testament and they contribute to the problem of revelation (§§ 34-40). But before we turn to deal with that another task confronts us. God figures in the Old Testament mostly in connexion with his worshippers. God is somebody's God. We must first make a survey of this relatedness.

6. God's Relatedness.

a) *The God of a people.* Jahweh is the God of Israel, Ex. 5: 1; that is to say, of the people of Israel.³¹ This expression occurs frequently, but the expression "the God of the Israelites" or the other "the God of the house of Israel" never does. One finds of course the term "the God of Jacob", 2 Sam. 23: 1, Isa. 2: 3, Ps. 20: 1, 75: 9, 81: 1, 146: 5, etc. The God of Israel is the common domestic term, so to speak, the God of Jacob the more solemn term used only on certain occasions: both stand for the God of the people of Israel just as one speaks of the gods of Egypt, Ex. 12: 12, of the Amorites, Josh. 24: 15, of Aram, of Moab, of the Ammonities, of the Philistines, Judg. 10: 6, of the children of Seir, 2 Chron. 25: 14, of Edom, 2 Chron.

25: 20. For all nations have their gods, Deut. 12: 2, 13: 8; every nation made gods of their own, 2 Kings 17: 29. They are most easily distinguished by the addition of the name of the worshippers. The Philistines in Ashdod speak of "our god Dagon", 1 Sam. 5: 7; there shall be no one left in Moab that burneth incense to "his god", Jer. 48: 35; the Israelites in Egypt tell Pharaoh of their God, "the God of the Hebrews", Ex. 3: 18, and "the Lord, the God of the Hebrews", Ex. 9: 1. God is called after His people, for no people is without its God.

b) *The God of a land.* Other gods in the Old Testament are called "strange gods", "gods of a foreign land", Gen. 35: 2, 4, Deut. 31: 16, Jer. 5: 19, Dan. 11: 39. "Like as ye have forsaken me and served strange gods (gods of a foreign land) in your land", Jer. 5: 19. Thus the Assyrians call Jahweh the God of the land, 2 Kings 17: 26, 27 in the same way as they speak of the god of the land of Samaria and of all the gods of the countries, 2 Kings 18: 34, 35. *The God of the Old Testament however is not called the God of a land.* Once He is called "God in Israel", 1 Kings 18: 36, but clearly the idea is "among the people", not "in the land of Israel", since at the beginning of the same sentence He is referred to as the God of the patriarchs. On the other hand the land of Israel bears the name "the inheritance of the Lord" from which to be expelled means for David the hated worship of other gods; and this expression is very important. But though the land may be called after Jahweh, Jahweh is not called after the land.

c) *The God of a place.* Where a city has power over the region round about it, the god is called after the city: the god of Ekron, 2 Kings 1: 2; the god of Hamath, of Arpad and Sepha, 2 Kings 18: 34; of Sidon, Judg. 10: 6, and of Damascus, 2 Chron. 28: 23. Similarly Jahweh is the God of Jerusalem, 2 Chron. 32: 19, but this is the expression used by the Assyrians and it is not an acceptable expression. The text says "They spake of the God of Jerusalem, as of the gods of the peoples of the earth, which are the work of men's hands".

The God of the Old Testament is recognized even by the sort of name one does not use for Him.

d) *The God of individuals.* When a god is the god of a nation, each person belonging to that nation is conscious of his or her relationship to this god, and can speak of him in purely personal terms as "my" god; or, if the person should choose to link himself with the other members of the nation, as "our God",

“thy god”, “your god”, etc. That is the standard usage above all of the Psalms and it requires no comment. But are there individuals mentioned by name as having God as their god? Can one say for example: the God of Noah, of Gad, of Simeon, of Baruch? The fact is that this mode of expression does occur, but within certain particular limits. God is the God of Abraham, Gen. 26: 24; of Abraham and Isaac, Gen. 28: 13, 32: 10; of Israel, Gen. 33: 20; of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Ex. 3: 6; of Abraham, Isaac and Israel! 1 Kings 18: 36; of Elijah, 2 Kings 2: 14; of David, 2 Kings 20: 5; of Hezekiah, 2 Chron. 32: 17. Elisha the prophet speaks of the God of Elijah his master. Isaiah calls him the God of David before David’s successor, and in a legend the King of Assyria calls Him the God of Hezekiah. One should also mention that Moses speaks of the “God of my father”, Ex. 18: 4 (it is not clear who is meant; is it his ancestor Jacob=Israel?)

Nisroch is called the god of Sennacherib, 2 Kings 19: 37, and we hear of the god of Nahor³² alongside the God of Abraham, Gen. 31: 53. Similarly we read of the gods of the Kings of Aram, 2 Chron. 28: 23, but these are all foreign gods to whose names are appended the name of their respective worshippers in order to identify them more clearly. To-day one would quite naturally speak of the God of Moses, Moses being the “founder” of Old Testament religion. *It is very significant that the Old Testament does not do this.* On the contrary, with the few exceptions we have noted no name is attached to God other than that of the patriarchs. He is not even the God of a prophet, even of Isaiah or Amos or the like. He is the God of the patriarchs to whom He appeared before the nation was in being, to whom He revealed Himself, and it is the patriarchs who are meant when He is called, as He often is, the God of your fathers.³³

e) *The God of the whole world.* Jahweh is the God of the heaven and the earth, Gen. 24: 3; heaven and earth is an expression for the whole world. That is also the meaning of the phrases the God of all flesh, Jer. 32: 27; the God of the spirits of all flesh, Num. 27: 16, and the God of all the kingdoms of the earth, Isa. 37: 16. Only the extent of the concept’s reference varies: not the concept itself.

f) *God Absolute.* The implication of the phrase “God of the whole world” is again expressed quite simply in the innumerable instances of the word God by itself; God who has no

additional name, no limiting relatedness to persons, no attribute whatsoever by which one would have to distinguish Him from others of His class, since there is none like Him. In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth, Gen. 1: 1. "I am God and there is none else; I am God and there is none like me", Isa. 46: 9.

7. יהוה

The form יהוה is comparatively rare; it occurs forty times in Job (3: 4—40: 2)³⁴ and fifteen times elsewhere.³⁵ In Ps. 18: 31 the reading יהוה occurs instead of יהוה, the reading in the same text in 2 Sam. 22: 32, and Prov. 30: 5 has it instead of Jahweh in the same text in Ps. 18: 30. Apart from its linguistic difficulty this name has no other noteworthy feature.

8. JAHWEH

1. The true Old Testament divine name, to which all the others are secondary, is Jahweh. The word brings with it, however, a host of problems. What does it mean? What is the extent of its usage? What is its origin? What is its particular theological significance?—and there are as many difficulties as there are questions.

When one asks the philological question about the meaning of the name Jahweh it is important to recognize first of all—and this holds for all divine names in the Old Testament—that this philological question is not directly a theological question; indeed it is very indirectly that. The meaning of the majority of divine names was a dark mystery to their respective worshippers and a matter of indifference. The important thing theologically in the matter of a divine name is not what its essential and original meaning is, but only what realm of ideas and confession and revelation the worshippers associate with their god's name. In fact, the history of religion can supply a whole series of instances where there is a great divergence between the significance of the god for the worshipper and the significance of the god's name for the linguist. The gods too have their history and their divinity has its changes of form, and even in those cases where originally the name of the god accurately and clearly describes his nature, the name can fall into utter insignificance. Yet the nature of the god can develop and even grow into something quite different. Philological theology is faulty theology. Such discrepancy between the significance of the name and that of the nature of the god is,

however, always a phenomenon with a historical reason. Only gods whose nature and significance have undergone a change forsake their name's original context, and this naturally always constitutes a theological problem, admittedly of a secondary order but not unimportant. This is exactly what happened in the case of Jahweh.

2. *Currency, Form and Meaning of the Name Jahweh*

a) More than 6,700 times God is called Jahweh in the Old Testament. It is lacking only in Ecclesiastes and Esther. The number is seen in its true proportions, however, when one compares it with the number of instances of the name אלהים which in its three meanings God, a god, Gods, appears only 2,500 times. In addition it has to be remembered that the divine name Jahweh is disguised in a great number of proper names like Nethaniah, Nethaniahu (=Jahwegiver), Johanan, Jehohanan (=Jahweh is the gracious one), Joab, Joah (=Jahweh is he who is a Father or a Brother). The number of these proper names compounded with Jahweh, all of which are intended as a conscious confession of Jahweh, reaches far into the hundreds.

b) It is indisputable³⁶ that Jahweh is the correct pronunciation and that the form Jehovah, though well established in all modern languages, is a quite foolish monstrosity. The word Jahweh is formed from the root יהוה with the consonantal prefix ך; it is therefore a normal substantive. This too is indisputable. Jahweh again is not both designation and name as Baal and Adon are. Baal can mean a possessor and Adon can mean a lord or master as well as being divine names. But Jahweh is only a name. All names, or certainly the vast majority, are originally not sounds only; they are intelligible sounds. The Semites had always known that Baal meant possessor, for they used it in that way as well as for the name of a god. There is not the slightest trace, however, of the word Jahweh being a term for something. Jahweh occurs only as a name. "I am Jahweh", Ex. 6: 2. There God introduces Himself. He continues "By my name Jahweh I was not known to them (the patriarchs)", Ex. 6: 3. Jahweh is a name and nothing else. And to confirm it there is the fact that one finds the most varied selection of appendages to the name: "Jahweh the God of Israel, Jahweh our God, Jahweh Sabaoth", etc., but never Jahweh with a genitive.³⁷ Jahweh is nothing but a name.

c) What is the meaning of the name Jahweh? There are scores of names in the Old Testament whose meaning was at once evident to the person who spoke Hebrew and remained so. "And it came to pass . . . that she called his name Benoni (the son of my sorrow)", Gen. 35: 18, but his father called him Benjamin ("the son of the right hand" or of fortune). "Call me not Naomi (the pleasant one) call me Mara (the bitter one), for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me", **הַמֶּר**, Ruth 1: 20. Jahweh occurs more than 6,700 times and on only one solitary occasion is there any attempt made to give the name an intelligible meaning. Moses wants to know by what name he should call God when he comes to the children of Israel and speaks to them of the God of their fathers and they ask him "What is his name?" Then he is to answer **אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה**, "I am that I am," and **אֶהְיֶה**, "I am hath sent me unto you" (Ex. 3: 13-14). Anyone who is familiar with the Old Testament knows that there are in it countless other names with popular and inexact interpretations where verification is impossible and an approximation which makes good sense must suffice. Perhaps the name Jahweh belongs to this category.

In the first place it is striking that the name Jahweh is explained in two ways, not in one; for "I am that I am" and "I am" are not the same thing. And then what do the explanations mean? Is "I am" equivalent to the Ultimate Reality? Is "I am that I am" equivalent to the Unchangeable One, the Eternal One (the explanation Judaism has adopted) or to "who I am my works will demonstrate", or to the Unnameable One? All these interpretations are possible: none proves itself more probable than another: each wears an air of philosophy that is foreign to the Old Testament and whichever is the right interpretation it occurs only once, for the Old Testament never repeats this "I am that I am" or "I am". The interpretation of Jahweh remains therefore solitary and singular, and no one ventures to work on it further.³⁸

d) What does Jahweh mean? The attempts that have been made to answer this question without reference to Ex. 3: 13-14 are legion. One has only to work through the semitic roots that have the three consonants *h w h* with their possible usages and one may arrive at any of the following equally probable solutions:—"the Falling One" (the holy meteorite), or "the Felling One" (by lightning, therefore a storm god), or "the

Blowing One" (the wind-and-weather God), or many another. But however much these suggestions may deserve notice linguistically, they are of little consequence theologically, for none of them can be decisively accepted instead of the others and none of them leads to the Jahweh of the Old Testament. It is possible, however, with strict adherence to rules of philology and by comparison with other clear and well known Hebraic formations to derive the name from the root *hwḥ*. Its meaning is then Existence, Being, Life, or—since such abstracts were distasteful to the Hebrews—the Existing One, the Living One.* In that case the explanation found in Ex. 3: 13 is on the right track.

3. *Origin of Jahweh*

a) The question of Jahweh's origin is partly a question for theology, partly a question for the history of religion. Where does the name Jahweh come from? Why is God called by the name Jahweh and not by another name? If the name had a meaning, if it meant "the Real One, the Only One, the Eternal One" or something of that sort and this meaning fulfilled the purpose of differentiating God unmistakably from all others, so that God was revealed a God by the mere name, then the theological situation would be different. But this is not so. The Old Testament knows Jahweh only as a name, which in itself says absolutely nothing about God, and from which no conclusions can ever be drawn about the nature of God, simply because the name as a mere name affords no information whatsoever. The question then arises: why this name? and where did it come from? Everything that exists, even though its content cannot be explained, at least has a history.

b) In Ex. 6: 2-3 we find a statement of historical character: "I am Jahweh, and I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac and unto Jacob as El Shaddai, but by my name Jahweh I was not known to them". Gen. 17: 1 expresses the same idea: "Jahweh appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am El Shaddai". What we have here is progressive revelation. At the first and preparatory stage, God makes Himself known to Abraham, from whom stems not only Israel but also Ishmael, as El Shaddai. At the second and final stage where Moses plays the chief rôle, Moses, who through the Exodus founded the people of the Old Covenant, the same God makes Himself known as Jahweh; and this name remains for all time.

* See Koehler, *Die Welt des Orients*, 1950, 404 f.