

MISCELLANEOUS  
BIBLICAL STUDIES

CHAPTER TWO

WHY THE NAME OF GOD  
WAS INEFFABLE

**Thomas F. McDaniel, Ph.D.**

Professor Emeritus  
Palmer Theological Seminary  
Wynnewood, Pennsylvania

©

2009

All Rights Reserved

## II

### WHY THE NAME OF GOD WAS INEFFABLE

The name “Yahweh” occurs in Genesis over one hundred twenty-five times, from the time of Cain and Abel down to the death of Joseph. It is therefore surprising to read in Exod 6:2–3, “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as *ʿēl šadday* ‘God Almighty,’ but by my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them.” It is all the more surprising because as *ʿēl šadday* ‘God Almighty’ appears only six times in Genesis (compared to twenty-three times in Job and eleven times elsewhere). However, the disparity disappears once

- the disjunctive “but” in Exod 6:3 is read as the conjunctive “and,”
- and the negative particle *loʿ* “not” in Exod 6:3 is read as the emphatic affirmative particle *luʿ* “indeed.”<sup>1</sup>

By simply changing one vowel (an *o* to a *u*) Exod 6:3 can be read as “I appeared . . . as *ʿēl šadday* ‘God Almighty’ and by my name Yahweh I did indeed make myself known.” This reading of Exod 6:3 removes the disparity with Gen 4:26, which states that from the time of Enosh “men began to call upon the name of Yahweh” (אָז הוֹחֵל לְקַרְא בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה).

The holy name יהוה “Yahweh” occurs over 6,000<sup>2</sup> times in the Old Testament, but it does not appear even once in the New Testament. There was a good reason for the shift from the pre-exilic Israelites’ freedom of to say the holy name and the post-exilic Jewish prohibition against ever pronouncing the name “Yahweh” in private or in public—which became so pervasive that the meaning of the name יהוה and its proper pronunciation and derivation were forgotten.<sup>3</sup>

In the Old Testament there are references to Israelites “calling upon the name of Yahweh,” which certainly required

them to say the name. In addition to Gen 4:26 are three texts:

- Psalm 116:13 and 17, וּבְשֵׁם יְהוָה אֶקְרָא “and I will call upon the name of Yahweh.”
- Zeph 3:9, I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of Yahweh (לְקִרְאָ כָּלֵם בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה).

There are far more texts which called for the Israelites “to swear by the name of Yahweh.” The following four texts from Jeremiah and Isaiah are noteworthy:

- Jer 4:2, “And you shall swear (וְנִשְׁבַּעְתָּ), ‘As Yahweh lives!’ (חַי־יְהוָה) in truth, in justice, and in uprightness, then nations shall bless themselves in him, and in him shall they glory.”
- Jer 5:2, “Though they say, ‘As Yahweh lives,’ yet they swear falsely” (וְאִם חַי־יְהוָה יֹאמְרוּ לְכִן לְשָׁקֵר יִשְׁבַּעוּ).
- Jer 12:16–17, “And it shall come to pass, if they diligently learn . . . to swear by my name (לְהִשָּׁבַע בְּשֵׁמִי), ‘As Yahweh lives!’ (חַי־יְהוָה) . . . then they shall be built up in the midst of my people.”
- Isa 48:1, “Hear this, O house of Jacob, . . . who swear by the name of Yahweh” (הַנִּשְׁבָּעִים בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה).

The texts and targums of Deut 6:13 and 10:20 are especially important to note for they demonstrate how the holy name יהוה (YHWH) was generally coded in Aramaic as י״י (YYY) or י״י (YWY)—lest the holy name be profaned in writing or in speech. Even the noun אֱלֹהִים “God” was intentionally misspelled by some as אֱלֹקִים. The MT and

targums of Deut 6:13 and 10:20 read as follows:

אַתִּיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ תִירָא  
וְאֵתוֹ תַעֲבֹד [וְבוֹ תִדְבֹק] וּבְשֵׁמוֹ תִשָּׁבַע:

You shall fear Yahweh your God;  
you shall serve him, [and cleave to him],  
and swear by his name.

**Targum Pseudo-Jonathan**

מִן־קֹדֶם יְיָ אֱלֹקֶיךָ תִהְיוּן דַּחֲלִין  
וּקְדַמוּי תַפְלַחוּן

וּבְשׁוֹם מִימְרֵיהּ בְּקִשׁוּט תּוֹמּוּן:  
Before YYY your God you shall fear,  
and before Him you shall serve,  
and by the name of his word in truth you shall swear.

**Targum Onkelos<sup>4</sup>**

יֵת יוֹי אֱלֹהֶיךָ תִדְחַל וּקְדַמוּהִי תַפְלַח  
וּבְשֵׁמִיהּ תִקְוִים:

YWY your God you shalt fear, and serve before him,  
and by his name you shall swear.

**Peshiṭta**

לְמַרְיָא אֱלֹהֶיךָ דַּחֲל וְלֵה פְלוּחַ וּבְשֵׁמֵהּ יִמִּי

Fear the Lord your God,  
and serve him, and swear by his name.

The bracketed phrase [וְבוֹ תִדְבֹק] in the MT and its bracketed translation, [and cleave to him], is found only in Deut 10:20, but the Septuagint has the phrase translated in both Deut 6:13 and 10:20. It reads as follows:

κύριον τὸν θεόν σου φοβηθήσῃ καὶ αὐτῷ λατρεύσεις  
καὶ πρὸς αὐτὸν κολληθήσῃ καὶ τῷ ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ ὀμῆ

You shalt fear (the) Lord thy God, and him shalt thou serve;  
and you shall cleave to him, and by his name you shall swear.

These nine texts are sufficient evidence for one to conclude that pre-exilic Israelites were free to say “Yahweh” when they called upon him and swore by his name. But post-exilic Jews and New Testament Jews never pronounced the name “Yahweh.” Instead they substituted אֲדֹנָי (ʾădōnay), an honorific plural meaning “my LORD” or they simply said הַשֵּׁם (hasšēm) “the Name.” They did this for a good reason.

The good reason for never saying the holy name is found in the Hebrew text of Lev 24:16a and the various ways the verb נָקַב in this verse was translated into Aramaic and Greek. Before focusing on Lev 24:16 a statement about the verb נָקַב is in order. The Hebrew/Aramaic נָקַב had different meanings. The most widely attested meaning of נָקַב is “to bore, to perforate,” as in 2 Kings 12:10, חָרַב בְּדַלְתוֹ “and he bored a hole in its lid.” The nouns related to this verb are (a) נֶקֶב “hole, incision, perforation,” (b) נִקְבָּה “female, female gender, female sex,” and (c) נִקְבוֹת “female genitalia,” all of which are cited by Jastrow (1903: 930).

The second meaning of נָקַב is “to curse,” as in Prov 11:26, מִיֵּנַע בָּרַקְבָּהוּ לְאִוִּם “the one withholding grain the people curse him.” This נָקַב is a by-form of קָבַב “to curse,” which appears in Num 23:8, מָה אֶקְבֵּב לֹא קָבַב אֵל “how shall I curse (whom) God has not cursed.”<sup>5</sup> The third meaning of נָקַב is “to name, to pronounce, to specify,” as in Gen

30:28, שְׂכָרְךָ נִקְבָּה שְׂכָרְךָ “name your wages” (Jastrow 1903, 930). And the fourth meaning of נִקְבַּ is “to blaspheme,” as in Lev 24:11, וַיִּקְבַּ בְּיַהְוָה הַיִּשְׂרָאֵלִית אֶת הַשֵּׁם וַיִּקְלַל, which was abbreviated in the Vulgate (by omitting the three words of the subject) to just

*cumque blasphemasset nomen et maledixisset*  
when he had blasphemed the name and cursed.

However, the Septuagint translated this as

καὶ ἐπονομάσας ὁ υἱὸς τῆς γυναικὸς  
τῆς Ἰσραηλίτιδος τὸ ὄνομα κατηράσατο  
and the son of the Israelite woman  
named the name and cursed.

This Greek translation reflects the third definition of נִקְבַּ, wherein simply saying the holy name was the same as cursing or blaspheming the name—making it a capital offense.

The fifth meaning of נִקְבַּ is “to scrutinize, to investigate.” This נִקְבַּ is the cognate of the Arabic نَقَبَ (*naqaba*) “he examined, he inquired into” (Lane 1893: 2833°). This meaning, (though not cited on Jastrow) is related to the first definition, above, with the idea being “to *penetrate* the mind” or “to *dig up* the facts,” or “to *bore into* the details.”

With these five meanings of נִקְבַּ in focus one can appreciate the varied translations of Lev 24:16a in Aramaic, Syriac, Greek, and Latin.

#### Masoretic Text

וַיִּקְבַּ שֵׁם־יְהוָה מוֹת יוֹמָת

And he who curses the name of Yahweh  
he shall surely be put to death.

**Targum Pseudo-Jonathan**

ברם מאן דמפרש ומחרף שמא דיי  
אתקטלא יתקטיל

But whoever explains and blasphemes the name of YYY,  
shall surely be put to death.

**Targum Neofiti**

ומן די יפרש שמיה דיי שם יי בגדפין  
מתקטלה יתקטל

And whoever declares his name of YYY,  
the name YYY with blasphemies  
shall surely be put to death.

**Peshitta**

ומן דנפרוש שמה דמריא מתקטלו נתקטל

And whoever explains the name of the Lord  
shall surely be put to death.

**Septuagint**

ὀνομάζων δὲ τὸ ὄνομα κυρίου θανάτῳ θανατούσθω

And he that names the name of (the) Lord,  
let him die the death.

**Vulgate and Douay Rheims**

*et qui blasphemaverit nomen Domini morte moriatur*

And he that blasphemeth the name of the Lord,  
dying let him die.

Jastrow's definitions of the Aramaic פֿרש which appears in the targums include (a) "to separate, to divide, to distinguish" and (b) "to define, to explain, to interpret" (1903: 1242–1243). Payne Smith's definitions of the Syriac פֿרש include

similarly (a) “to set apart” and (2) “to write distinctly, to describe clearly, to explain” (1957:465). Lamsa (1967: 145) translated this Syriac phrase as “and he who blasphemes the name of the Lord,” which is an acceptable translation of the **נִקַּב** in the Hebrew text, but it is not an acceptable translation of the **פִּרְשׁ** in the Syriac text. The name “Pharisee” is derived from this stem, and the Pharisees were distinguished *separatists* and *interpreters* of the Torah, but never *blasphemers*.

The other verb in the Targum of Pseudo-Jonathan, **חִרַּף**, means “to revile, to blaspheme, to shame.” It is a synonym of the Syriac and Aramaic **גִּרַּף**, found in the Targum Neofiti (Jastrow, 1903: 214, 505; Payne Smith 1957: 61).

The fifth definition of **נִקַּב** “to examine, to inquire, to investigate” (cited above on page 5) lies behind those translations of Lev 24:16a which prohibit any and all inquiry into the meaning and etymology of the holy name **יְהוָה**. Here then was the tension in the Torah texts: Israelites were *to call* (**קָרָא**) upon the name of Yahweh, and *to swear* (**שָׁבַע**) by the name of Yahweh. But at the same time, according to Lev 24: 16, they were

- not *to name* (**נִקַּב**) the name,
- not *to pronounce* (**נִקַּב**) the name,
- not *to examine* (**נִקַּב**) the name,
- not *to blaspheme* (**נִקַּב**) the name.

Were anyone to *nāqab* the holy name of Yahweh—by any or all definitions of *nāqab*—they were to be put to death by stoning. To avoid being stoned to death post-exilic Jews did not *pronounce, name* or *explain* the name **יְהוָה**.

**Exod 20:7 and Deut 5:11**

לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת־שֵׁם־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׁוֹא

You shall not take the name of Yahweh your God in vain.

**Lev 19:12**

וְלֹא־תִשָּׁבְעוּ בְשֵׁמִי לְשָׁקֵר וְחָלַלְתָּ אֶת־שֵׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ

And you shall not swear falsely by my name,  
profaning the name of your God.

The third commandment of the Decalogue reinforced the words of Lev 24:16. The uncertainty about the third commandment was the precise meaning of לְשׁוֹא “in vain.” The noun שׁוֹא “vain, empty” in this commandment could be interpreted as referring to any of the following actions:

- נֶאֱיַן “to blaspheme,” which appears in 2 Sam 12:14, “you [David] have really blasphemed Yahweh”; Isa 52:5, “their masters howl in triumph, declares Yahweh, and my name is blasphemed continually”; Ezek 35:12, “I, Yahweh, have heard all the blasphemies which you have uttered against the mountains of Israel”; Neh 9:18 “even when they made for themselves a molten calf . . . and committed great blasphemies”; Neh 9:26, “. . . they killed your prophets . . . and committed great blasphemies”; and Ps 74:10, “Will the enemy blaspheme Your name forever?”
- קָלַל “to curse,” which appears in Exod 22:28, “Do not blaspheme God or curse the ruler of your people” (NIB); Lev 24:15, “Those who blaspheme God will suffer the consequences of their guilt and be punished” (NLT); 1 Sam 3:13 “. . . because his [Eli’s] sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them” (RSV, NRS).

- **נִקְבַּ** “to blaspheme,” which occurs only in Lev 24:10–17, which tells, as noted above, of an Egypto-Israelite young man who blasphemed and cursed the name (**הַשֵּׁם**), and as a result was stoned to death.

Just as these three actions (**נִאָּץ**, **קָלַל**, and **נִקְבַּ**) carried the death penalty, so also anyone guilty of “taking the name of Yahweh in vain” could expect to receive the same punishment. The only sure precaution against ever taking “the name in vain” was never to utter the name.

*Sura 2:224–225* in the *Qurʾan* provides both a commentary and a contrast for the third commandment of the Decalogue. It reads,

Use not Allah’s name for your vain oaths, making them an excuse for refraining from doing good and working righteous and promoting public welfare. . . . Allah will not call you to account for that which is unintentional in your oaths, but he will call you to account for the evil to which you have deliberately assented.

In the Jewish community there was great concern even for any unintentional error in any oath made in Yahweh’s name. As a result, out of fear as well as a statement of piety, the name **יהוה** was never pronounced. When the eyes saw the letters **יהוה** the tongue said either **אֲדֹנָי** “my LORD” or **הַשֵּׁם** “the NAME.”<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

1. The literature on the emphatic **ל** and **לֵא** continues to grow. In addition to references cited by Richardson (1966: 89), note McDaniel (1968) 206–208; Blommerde (1969) 31; Dahood (1975) 341–342); Whitley (1975) 202–204; Hueh-

nergard (1983) 569–593; McDaniel (2000) 11, 20, 156, 181–182, 211; and McDaniel (2003) 95–96, 129–130; 144, 148, 203, 224, 230, 324, and 332. For a quick reference see Cyrus Gordon (1965) 76 and 425.

2. Brown, Driver, and Briggs (1906: 217–218) noted that in the MT the name spelled as יהוה־י occurs 6,518 times and the spelling יהוה־י occurs 305 times.

3. The creative power of God is actually reflected in the name *Yahweh*. Before *Yahweh* became an ineffable name it was pronounced and spelled in a number of different ways. The early church fathers pronounced it as *ᵛIaô* or *ᵛIao* or *Yahô*, all of which point to the holy trigrammaton יהוה used in personal names like *Yehonatan* / *Yônatan* / Jonathan, meaning “Yahweh has given.” In Greek sources it was pronounced as *Iabe* or *Iae* or *Iaoue* or *Iaouai*, all of which reflect the tetragrammaton יהוה and point to its original pronunciation as the verb *yahweh* “he caused to be, he caused to exist.” The last syllable *-yah* of the liturgical phrase *hallelu-yah* “Praise Yahweh!” indicates that the initial syllable of יהוה was *Ya*, not *Yi*. This interpretation that יהוה and יהוה־י are causative forms of the verb—with the meaning “cause to be” rather than the simple form meaning “to be”—has the support of David Freedman (1986: 500, 513) who, in agreement with his mentor William Albright, stated

“*Yahweh* must be causative . . . . The name *yahweh* must therefore be a hiphil [causative]. Although the causative of *hwy* is otherwise unknown in Northwest Semitic . . . , it seems to be attested in the name of the God of Israel.”

Freedman also suggested (1986: 515–516) that the statement “I am who I am,” in Exod 3:14 could be read as a causative meaning “I create whatever I create,” to be interpreted as “I am the creator par excellence.” (Shifting from “I am” to “I create” requires the verb אֱהִיָּה to be read as *ʿahyeh* rather than *ʿehyeh*, with the *a* vowel in the first syllable being needed to make it a causative form.) So as not to profane the holy name of God, the Jewish scribes *deliberately* misspelled the name of Yahweh by combining the consonants יהוה with either the vowels of the substitute title *ʿAdonai* “my Lords” (an honorific plural) or the vowels of *ʿelohîm* “God” (an honorific plural).

4. Targum Neofiti in 6:23 reads:

יֵת אִיקָר שְׂכִינְתָהּ דִּיֵּי אֱלֹהִיכֹן תְּהוּוֹן  
 יֵת יֵי אֵ תְּדַחֲלוֹן מִשְׁתַּבְּעוֹן מִשְׁתַּבְּעִין וּמְקִיֵּימִין:

But in 10:20 Neofiti reads:

מִן־קִדְמָם יֵי אֱלֹהִיכֹן תְּהוּוֹן דְּחַלִּין  
 וּקְדָמוּי תְּהוּוֹן מִצְלִיִין וּבְאוּלְפָן אוּרִיִתָהּ תְּתַבְּקוּן  
 תְּדַבְּקוֹן וּבִשְׁמִיָּהּ קְדִישָׁהּ תְּהוּוֹן מִשְׁתַּבְּעִין וּמְקִיֵּימִין:

5. The by-forms נִקְבַּב and קִבְּב “to curse” are like the by-forms נָהַם “to growl, to groan” and הִמָּם “to make a noise.”

6. *Jehovah* was a hybrid name composed of the consonants JHWH/YHVH and the vowels of אֲדוֹנָי (*ʿadōnay*), the honorific “my Lords” or the vowels of אֱלֹהִים. The *ā-ô-a* vowels of the *ʿadōnay* shifted to *e-ô-a* in the name *Jehovah* because the name begins with a *yod* (י = Y/J) instead of the

*aleph* (א) of אֲדֹנָי (*ʾadōnay*). The first variant spellings of *Jehovah* to appear in Latin and English books and Bibles are as follows:

1278 *Jehova*/*Yohoua* in the book *Pugio fidei Christianae* (*Dagger of Christian Faith*) by the Spanish monk Raymond Martin.

1303 *Yohouah* in the book *Victory Against the Ungodly Hebrews* by Porchetus de Salvaticis, a Genoese Carthusian monk.

1518 *Iehoua* in *De Arcanis Catholicæ Veritatis*, 1518, folio xliii, by Pope Leo X's confessor, Peter Galatin.

1530 *Iehouah* in William Tyndale's Pentateuch.

1611 *Jehovah* in the King James Bible of 1611.

1671 *Jehovah* in the 1671 edition of the King James Bible.