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The Name of the Lord

On two occasions in the Book of Abraham, the Lord reveals to Abraham his true name: Jehovah. The first incident was when Abraham had a “vision of the Almighty,” wherein “the angel of [the Lord’s] presence” rescued him from being sacrificed in Ur of the Chaldees and made early allusions to a future covenant relationship (Abr. 1:15). “And his voice was unto me: Abraham, Abraham, behold, *my name is Jehovah*, and I have heard thee, and have come down to deliver thee, and to take thee away from thy father’s house, and from all thy kinsfolk, into a strange land which thou knowest not of” (Abr. 1:16, emphasis added). It was on this occasion that the Lord informed Abraham, “Behold, I will lead thee by my hand, and I will take thee, to *put upon thee my name*, even the Priesthood of thy father, and my power shall be over thee. As it was with Noah so shall it be with thee; but through thy ministry *my name shall be known* in the earth forever, for I am thy God” (Abr. 1:18–19, emphasis added).

The second occasion when the Lord revealed his true name was when he made a covenant with Abraham. In the preamble to the covenant,¹ the Lord instructed Abraham:

Arise, and take Lot with thee; for I have purposed to take thee away out of Haran, and to make of thee a minister to *bear my name* in a strange land which I will give unto thy seed after thee for an everlasting possession, when they hearken to my voice. For I am the Lord thy God; I dwell in heaven; the earth is my footstool; I stretch my hand over the sea, and it obeys my voice; I cause the wind and the fire to be my chariot; I say to the mountains—Depart hence—and behold, they are taken away by a whirlwind, in an instant, suddenly. *My name is Jehovah*, and I know

1. See “The Abrahamic Covenant,” 121–24 herein.

the end from the beginning; therefore my hand shall be over thee (Abr. 2:6–8, emphasis added).

Among the promises made to Abraham was that his “name [would be made] great among all nations” should he be true to God’s covenant and that “through [his] name” would all the nations of the earth be blessed; “for as many as receive this Gospel shall be called after [Abraham’s] name” (Abr. 2:9–10). Upon hearing the Lord’s true name of Jehovah for a second time, Abraham thereafter “called again upon *the name* of the Lord” in ritual activity (Abr. 2:20, emphasis added), whereas before he had merely called on the Lord (for example, Abr. 1:15; 2:6, 18).

Why is it significant that the Lord twice revealed his true name to Abraham, and why is there a running motif on the importance of names throughout the text?² Reading these passages in an ancient Near Eastern (and especially ancient Egyptian) context helps answer this question. James P. Allen explains,

Names were much more important to the Egyptians than they are in our society. They were thought to be essential parts of their owners. . . . This is why Egyptians who could afford to do so expended a great deal of effort and resources ensuring that their names would continue to survive in their tombs and on their monuments—and conversely, why the names of some individuals were hacked out of their monuments by their enemies after death. Even during life, people could be essentially deprived of existence by banning their names.³

Names were especially important for royalty. Ronald J. Leprohon observes,

Choosing a particular name was an especially symbolic act for an ancient Egyptian ruler, since names were so significant within the culture. After all, the original act of creation by the primeval god himself was inextricably linked to the act of naming the various entities he created. Kings wished their names to “remain” (*mn*) and be “enduring” (*wꜥḥ*), or for posterity to “give thanks to god” (*dwꜥ ntr*) in their name. A king could also make his name “perfect” (*nfr*) through “combat” (*ḥꜥ*), which cemented his reputation as a “brave warrior” (*kn*) in “every country.” And that reputation could then be circulated by a court official

2. Compare Abraham 3:3, 13, where Kolob and other astronomical bodies are named, as well as Abraham 5:20–21, where Adam gives names to the animals.

3. James P. Allen, *Middle Egyptian: An Introduction to the Language and Culture of Hieroglyphs*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 101.

who “established” (*smn*) or “caused to live” (*sʿnh*) his lord’s name. In fact, courtiers were urged to “fight” (*ʿhz*) on behalf of their sovereign’s name.⁴

The importance of names was such that the Egyptian monarch adopted multiple names and titles. According to Leprohon, “since the king was a human being who held a divine office as well as the link between his subjects and the gods, the royal court wished to express the essential features of this unique circumstance. One of the ways it accomplished this was by composing special epithets that the king assumed at his accession, which would serve as a brief statement of his qualities or of his relationship with the divine and the terrestrial world.”⁵

Besides his or her birth name, the monarch adopted four other names that were associated with important deities and announced his or her splendor, divinity, and royal attributes.⁶

Fundamental to the ancient Egyptian mindset was the idea that names were “an intrinsic element and source of power.”⁷ Because “divinities were often said to have secret names guarded from devotees and other deities alike,”⁸ knowing and properly invoking the name of a deity in magical and ritual recitals was therefore crucial in making the performance work. As Egyptologist David Silverman wrote, “To know the name of an individual was to have some control over him or her. . . . The same dynamics surrounded the names of deities. Once the force/power was identified and given a name, prayers and offerings could be made to it; it could be worshipped by name; it could be invoked, implored, even feared and adored. To know the name of a god was to gain some advantage or control over the powers it represented.”⁹

This belief is captured in one ancient Egyptian tale where the sun god Re conceals his true name (even from his daughter, the goddess Isis) to prevent others from magically using it against him. Through clever

4. Ronald J. Leprohon, *The Great Name: Ancient Egyptian Royal Titulary* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 5, citations removed.

5. Leprohon, *Great Name*, 7.

6. Leprohon, *Great Name*, 9–19.

7. Robert K. Ritner, “The Legend of Isis and the Name of Re,” in *The Context of Scripture, Volume I: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr. (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2003), 33.

8. Ritner, “Legend of Isis and the Name of Re,” 33.

9. David P. Silverman, “Divinity and Deities in Ancient Egypt,” in *Religion in Ancient Egypt: Gods, Myths, and Personal Practice*, ed. Byron E. Shafer (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 28.

trickery, Isis learns the true name of her father, Re, and thereafter uses it to cure him from a snakebite.¹⁰

Names held significant religious importance to the ancient Israelites and to other ancient Near Eastern peoples as well.¹¹ “Throughout the Bible, names are full of meaning. . . . For ancient Israel and the ancient Near East as well as for early Judaism and Christianity, the name of a person, place, or thing was somehow connected to and descriptive of its essence and/or personality.”¹² Abraham himself and his wife, Sarai, both received new names when they entered into a covenant with God. “As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee. . . . As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be” (Gen. 17:4–5, 15). In Genesis, the patriarch Jacob received his new name of Israel after wrestling a divine messenger who himself refused to disclose his name (Gen. 32:22–32). In Exodus, Moses received his prophetic commission to rescue the children of Israel from Egyptian bondage only after he received a revelation of the Lord’s true name on the “mountain of God” (Ex. 3:1, 13–15).

The latter episode is especially germane to the revelation of the Lord’s true name to Abraham in the Book of Abraham since in both instances the revelation informed the prophet of deeper truths about the relationship God has with his covenant people. In the book of Exodus,

God reveals the divine name of YHWH [Jehovah] to Moses (Exod. 3:6; 6:2). God acknowledges a special relationship with Moses as the God of his father (Exod. 3:6), who created a covenant with his ancestors (Exod. 6:4). God promises to be with Moses in a unique and intimate way (Exod. 3:12; 7:1), and clarifies that the commission of Moses as liberator is because YHWH also has a special relationship with Israel (Exod. 3:8; 6:7–8). The two commissions [of Moses in Exodus 3:1–4:17 and 6:1–7:7] provide the foundation for the development of Israelite religion in the wilderness.¹³

10. Ritner, “Legend of Isis and the Name of Re,” 33–34; Geraldine Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses, and Traditions of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 69–71.

11. See H. B. Huffmon, “Name,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst, 2nd ed. (Leiden, Neth.: Brill; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 610–12.

12. Russell Fuller, “Names and Namegiving,” in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 545.

13. Thomas B. Dozeman, “Exodus,” in *The Fortress Commentary on the Bible: The Old Testament and Apocrypha*, ed. Gale A. Yee, Hugh R. Page Jr., and Matthew J. M. Coomber (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 147.

Not unlike the Egyptian evidence seen above, by knowing the true name of God through revelation, Moses could, in effect, divine its deeper symbolic meaning and tap into its divine power.¹⁴ Sigmund Mowinckel notes,

In the opinion of the ancient Israelites names were symbolic. . . . Symbolic not only with regard to their actual and literal signification, but also with regard to all the symbolic meanings that might be found in them. . . . To find the deeper, hidden meaning of the names of the gods was one of the tasks of the “theologians” of those days. A man who knows the “real” deeper meaning of the name of a god, really “knows the god” in question. . . . What [Exodus 3] tells us is that this deeper meaning of the name was revealed to Moses by God himself. Moses at once understands that the mysterious words refer to the name of Yahweh [Jehovah], and also that the god who speaks to him from the burning bush and can reveal the hidden meaning of the Name, must certainly be Yahweh himself, and such a revelation is sufficient proof that Yahweh has sent him.¹⁵

To be sure, the Lord did not reveal his true name to Abraham so that the patriarch could manipulate or control him, as it was expected one could do in ancient Egyptian magical practice. Rather, as read in the context of Abraham’s narrative, the Lord disclosed his true name in a sacred, intimate covenant setting for the purpose of blessing the nations of the earth. Nonetheless, the text does indicate that after the Lord’s name was revealed to Abraham, he was able to invoke it in the performance of covenant rituals, thereby making those rituals potent and the covenant binding.¹⁶

Knowing something about the religious, mythical, and symbolic significance of names in the world of the ancient Near East thus helps us

14. Compare Exodus 20:24 and 23:13, where the Lord instructs that invoking his name in ritual contexts will ensure blessings and forbids the names of other gods from being invoked. “On the one hand, invoking the name of Yahweh results in his presence and blessing, but on the other hand, a warning and threat are given against invoking the name of other gods.” John Van Seters, *A Law Book for the Diaspora: Revision in the Study of the Covenant Code* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 62.

15. Sigmund Mowinckel, “The Name of the God of Moses,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 32 (1961): 125–26.

16. On this point, it is also significant that gods were invoked as witnesses in covenant treaties between ancient Near Eastern potentates. So too were Jehovah and the host of heaven invoked as witnesses in biblical texts. Donald L. Magnetti, “Function of the Oath in the Ancient Near Eastern International Treaty,” *American Journal of International Law* 72, no. 4 (October 1978): 815, 818, 821–22, 824–26; David E. Bokovoy, “Invoking the Council as Witnesses in Amos 3:13,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 37–51; and Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy; Studies and Commentary* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 15, 19.

understand why the Lord revealed his name to Abraham in this specific narrative and theological framework. It also provides an ancient context that makes sense of Abraham's account. The Lord revealed his true name to ratify his covenant with Abraham and to make the attending priesthood power efficacious: "Behold, I will lead thee by my hand, and I will take thee, to put upon thee my name, even the Priesthood of thy father, and my power shall be over thee" (Abr. 1:18; compare Abr. 2:9, 11).

Further Reading

Hardison, Amy B. "Theophany on Sinai." In *Ascending the Mountain of the Lord: Temple, Praise, and Worship in the Old Testament*, edited by David Rolph Seely, Jeffrey R. Chadwick, and Matthew J. Grey, 218–31. Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013.

Pike, Dana M. "The Name and Titles of God in the Old Testament." *Religious Educator* 11, no. 1 (2010): 17–31.