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THE JEWISH GOD: A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS
OF THE NAMING OF THE DEITY--CREATION THROUGH BABEL

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The advancements made in the study of all aspects of language by students of language using the analytic tools provided by the brilliant work of Roman Jakobson are in themselves subject matter for many studies, as are those tools. The reader is referred to the various Jakobsonian studies for background in the relatively autonomous, teleological, and semiotic approach to both phonology and semantics which has yielded such abundant fruit over Jakobson's six decades of language research. In this discussion we will apply semiotic and teleological semantic analysis to discourse, specifically to the first eleven chapters of the Pentateuch, the Jewish Torah, or "law". We will be doing biblical exegesis following the concept of reality and existence outlined so clearly not only in Jakobson's prolific writings but also in 2 Nephi 2. We will examine the principles of invariance, opposition, and markedness in terms of the corpus defined by the names used to refer to Deity in the first two sections of the Torah, Genesis I-XI. Our text is the Hebrew Bible according to the Masoretic text, with versification and English translation as normally found therewith. We rely on the original Hebrew because of the inconsistency in rendering the names of Deity into English, even in Jewish translations, and because of the special interest associated with those distinct Hebrew names.

The three principles cited form a network of concepts which can describe immense and complex systems, defining them very simply and exactly. Invariance is just that; it requires that we identify the invariant, unchanging, and unchangeable meanings which exist either in words or in other signs in other semiotic systems. Each use of a word can provide another interpretation, a contextual variation, of its one unique meaning. If words did not have a fixed bundle of information which they carried, communication would be null--without the agreed-upon givens between speaker and hearer, no information could be conveyed, for only the non-identity which is the reality of any situation as compared to any other could be focused in upon. Moreover, there is information only in contrast or opposition--as a blank wall conveys no information, as all perception requires change and difference, meanings only obtain in opposition one to another. And further, mere opposition is not the foundation of linguistic systems, for we find again and again that linguistic oppositions take the form of set versus subset, of universe versus a particular inclusion in that universe, of an unmarked term and a marked term. The unmarked term describes a bipolar continuum, and the marked term defines one pole. In opposition to the marked term, the unmarked term may be used to describe the other pole, yet it always semantically remains capable of defining the universal set of which each pole is a subset. It is extremely significant that a speaker always has a purpose in his choice of terms, and a speaker can deceive, omit, ignore, and overlook not only by the information he chooses to encode, but also by the information he chooses not to encode. A speaker is just as free to reject possible encodings as he is to choose one. The withholding of in-

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formation can be a result of picking a less marked form when the more marked and therefore more specific and accurate form could have been used, and often there is no intent to deceive, though confusion on the hearer's part can arise nevertheless, especially when aspects of the original speech context are lost, as in written documents. We must realize that a speaker's choice is extremely significant, both in what he chooses to say and in what he chooses not to say, and all of that results from the opposition of marked and unmarked invariants in a semantic system.

That the three principles of invariance, opposition, and markedness are of far greater application than just in linguistic study is explained in Lehi's address to his son Jacob. He instructs of invariance saying, "for the Spirit is the same yesterday, today, and forever." (2 Nephi 2:4). He then demonstrates the unmarkedness of life, of eternal life, quite clearly describing salvation and eternal life as the unmarked universal set, and damnation as an included, marked, subset, a negative subset:

And the way is prepared from the fall of man, and salvation is free. And men are instructed sufficiently that they know good from evil. And the law is given unto men. And by the law no flesh is justified; or, by the law men are cut off; and also, by the spiritual law they perish from that which is good and become miserable forever. (2 Nephi 2:4-6)

He therefore defines damnation as a cancellation of the original state of eternal life, and he also, of course, introduces the concept of opposition in mentioning "good from evil", but he then makes this concept absolutely explicit in:

For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so...righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness...neither good nor bad. (2 Nephi 2:11)

Lehi even explicitly describes the universal set nature of the unmarked, adding, "Wherefore, all things must needs be a compound in one." He goes on to show that if this were not so, if the different invariants in life were not in a set/subset, markedness relationship, they would "have been created for a thing of naught; wherefore there would have been no purpose in the end of [their] creation." (verse 12)

Language, a very small subset of life eternal, follows a similar teleology. Linguistic entities, had they no invariant meaning, were they not in markedness relationships and in opposition one to another, would be "things of naught" and would have no purpose in existing, since they would not serve in the meaningful communication of information between human beings. But they are indeed things of substance, and meaning, and significance, whether they be in colloquial chatter, in scientific discourse, or in scripture, and to the latter we now turn.

The Names

We find in the Torah that aside from the many adjectival descriptions of the Deity, such as "the Holy One" and "the Almighty", there are basically two words used to refer to God. One Hebrew root shows up in several forms, of which by far the commonest is the plural noun form אלהים, elohim, 'God'.

This plural form also occurs with the sense of "judges" as in זה麋פ אזולים elohim, 'whom the judges shall condemn' (Exodus XXII, 8).
Although we can often find this plural form as the subject of a third singular verb when referring to the Deity, the interpretation of אֱלֹהִים as "god", "God", "gods", "judge", or "judges" is contextually determined and has been subject of some contention for the dozen centuries that sages have been contemplating the scriptures from a linguistic point of view. It is sufficient for our discussion here to note that the "plural of majesty" is attested in Hebrew with other lexical items, that אֱלֹהִים can be predicated by a singular verb, and that it is a very common name for Deity in the Hebrew scriptures. The second prevalent name for Deity is a noun cognate to the verb root חָי, יָהָא, 'to be, happen', namely the Tetragrammaton, the sacred four letter name of the Deity which was pronounced only by the priests in the temple in Jerusalem. The Tetragrammaton, יהוה, יִתְנָה, 'Jehovah', like אֱלֹהִים, often occurs alone. The two may also occur together as the syntagm יהוה אלהים, Jehovah elohim, which is usually translated as 'the Lord God'.

Naturally the question arises as to what is the difference in intended reference when Deity is named by the Tetragrammaton, by אֱלֹהִים, and by both. Many attempts have been made to answer this question across the millenium during which the text has been studied, and all of them rely in varying degrees on the nature of the contexts in which the various namings are found. This brief discussion cannot review all that has been expounded on this subject, nor would it wish to, for our premise here is quite different, but we can present our thesis in light of the other commentaries.

The "classical documentary hypothesis", which claims four separate and non-surviving sources for the Masoretic text, is quite definitely rejected by modern Jewish scholarship. Hertz summarizes the contextual argument in his rejection of the "documents", which can be "distinguished" by the particular name for the Deity used:

...the alternate, or combined, use of Elohim and Adonay for the Name of God presents no difficulty whatsoever. Their employment varies according to the nature of the context. Thus, in connection with the creation of the Universe at large (Genesis I), the Divine Name employed is Elohim. In God's merciful relations with human beings, however (Gen. II, 4-25), He is spoken of as Adonay, Lord. There is nothing strange or out of the way in such usage... The nature of the context decides what Divine Name is employed...different Divine Names in the Hebrew text do not argue for a diversity of writers, but simply that the Divine name has each time been selected in accordance with the idea to be expressed. David Hoffmann, W.H. Green, and B. Jacob have examined each and every use of these Names throughout Genesis, and have shown the exact appropriateness of each Name to the subject matter in which it occurs.

Sorenson revives the documents sufficiently to attempt integration of the notion of multiple texts with observations on Old Testament passages and references from the brass plates of Laban, available to us only through their English translation in the Book of Mormon. His argument deals mainly with a distinction between a Judahite text, available to us as the Torah and the other books of the Jewish bible, and a Josephite text,
available to us as Laban's plates quoted in the Book or Mormon; in other words, his claim is that two different sources were two different sources, and he clearly and neatly shows the often-ignored importance of his observations for LDS biblical scholarship. He does not, however, directly address the question of multiple sources for either of these two texts, the Judahite and the Josephite originals, and he ignores the premise which Hertz has already suggested. That premise is the basis of this study: the reason we find different names for Deity in the Torah is that the different names mean different things and the people who wrote them wanted to say different things by them. This view, easily and heartily supported by all of Jakobson's writings, has a firm foundation in LDS teachings as well.

All other discussions of "reasons" for the various names for the Deity can be excused here because of the premise that no matter how many sources for the Masoretic text there were, there must be a semantic motivation and justification behind the arrangement of the names for Deity in that text. Unless one is prepared to argue that some scribe(s) sat down with several texts, randomly cut them into strips, and then randomly put together one text from the several, then one must argue that the names appear where they do because it seemed right to some scribe(s) to put them there, whether in original composition or in redaction. As we look at the names in the text, we will keep in mind the most simple possible explanation—different names are used to refer to different people. We will see that this premise can stand in light of the semantic evidence, and that the understanding of the notion of marked/unmarked opposition will clarify the patterning of the names for Deity.

The Text
There is a beautiful structuring to the appearance of the names for Deity in the first chapters of the Torah, which serve as a clear example, yet the structuring continues throughout the scriptures. The first eleven chapters are summarized in synopsis form in Appendix B, in which for each episode the name or names used for the Deity are noted. We see an immediate pattern emerge from the data in that several times a particular sequence is told and then retold. A common pattern is a general telling with סֵיָּם and then a retelling with more details and explanations using the Tetragrammaton, as in Episodes I and II, VII and VIII. There is even a case of a short recap with סֵיָּם again, as with the brief retelling of the creation of Adam (for the third time) in Episode V. A different variation on this theme is found in Episodes IX and X, in which Jehovah is moved and declares to himself that he will never again smite man and the earth as with the flood, and then סֵיָּם proclaims a covenant to this effect to Noah while instructing him how he must live.

We find Hertz' distinction supported by the data, as he claims, for we find סֵיָּם used to describe the omnipotent, universally acting, creating, proclaiming, instructing God, and the Tetragrammaton used to describe the merciful, personal God who interacts with man on a more one-to-one basis. All of this is obvious in the text and well elaborated in the literature, as Hertz cites. And while these observations certainly support our search for invariance and our thesis that the different names mean different things, we must go one step deeper into the semantics of the situation in order to see the roles of opposition and markedness in the structure of the naming used.
There are two areas which need semantic investigation and which go beyond a mere comparison of the name for Deity used and the role the Deity is playing in a particular context. The first deals with those instances in which both names occur, either together in the syntagm or successively in the same passage. We find in the Creation story a gradual progression from the general story of the creation of the world and of all life with התו, through the details of the creation of Adam and Eve and their incident with the serpent, wherein we find the syntagm of Tetragrammaton + התו, to the expulsion and life outside the Garden, all described with the Tetragrammaton alone. It is a progression from an all-powerful, universal God, through a more specific, human-interacting God, to a personal God who receives the supplications of men "who call upon the name of the Lord." We see this general progression with some variations repeated in microcosm after microcosm in the scriptures, with a general trend from the first eleven chapters of Genesis with an overall התו flavor to the stories of the Patriarchs, beginning in Chapter XII, in which we find the Tetragrammaton predominating, often exclusively. In certain contexts we find the two names juxtaposed, and we would expect semantically that in these places the trend is actually shifting from one to the other. Indeed, we find that, as in Episodes II and III, which use the syntagm, and which describe the interface between the general creation with התו and the specific and personal situation of life outside Eden, where we find the Tetragrammaton. In Genesis VII, 16 we read, "And they went in...as התו had commanded him: and [Tetragrammaton] shut him in." Here in one sentence we have a contextual juxtaposition of a command of power and a personally-interacting action, and we find the expected sequence of names used.

The second area to be studied deals with not the description of God as he acts but the terms used by speakers themselves to refer to the Deity. When the serpent and Eve are discussing the tree, they both refer to the absolute commandments of התו. We have already mentioned that men began to "call upon the name of Tetragrammaton" as they tilled and toiled. Lemech speaks of the ground the Lord (Tetragrammaton) cursed. And when התו sends him forth from the ark, Noah builds an altar to the Lord (Tetragrammaton). We find both names in one instance of direct address, though here a cognate word is used instead of התו, when Noah praises the "Lord [Tetragrammaton] God [elohei] of Shem."

While opposition is clear in these examples, it is particularly this last which sheds light on the question of markedness for this pair of names. Examining Noah's usage and, indeed, the usage in Episodes II and III, we see that what we are dealing with is in fact an unmarked, universal term for Deity, namely התו, and a marked, specific term which is used to describe or name the Deity in his personal interaction with man, namely the Tetragrammaton. While the data definitely do support the thesis that the two names are used to refer to two different beings, they do not support the thesis that one is named "Elohim" and the other "Jehovah". Rather, a semantic analysis of the text finds a universal, unmarked term, "Elohim", which is used to refer either to the whole set of all those who can claim the title or, in contextual opposition to a marked term, to him who is not named by that marked term. In other words, the specific name of the Tetragrammaton invariantly names the Deity who is given charge...
of the actual affairs of man on earth, who is rightfully and often called by his title of שֵׁדַי, of "God". This title is used unmarkedly to name Deity in general, and it is used in opposition to the Tetragrammaton to name another Deity. Naturally there are many who would agree with this analysis, claiming the different Deities, rather than being the different Gods of different original oral histories, are different views of the God of Israel in his different roles vis-à-vis man. Yet the LDS claim is also well supported here, and the foundation laid in the analysis of the naming in Creation through Babel actually supports that claim very strongly in some other Old Testament passages which are difficult to explain solely in terms of "roles", e.g., Amos IV, 11:

I have overthrown some of you, as שֵׁדַי overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah...yet have ye not returned unto me, saith [Tetragrammaton].

Implications

The understanding of the nature of unmarked terms can bring great insights into the study of the scriptures, in which reference to Deity was probably so clear when they were originally written that the unmarked terms was often used when a more specific one could have been. As context was lost and/or removed, confusion crept in, which confusion is only partially resolved by a view which treats the unmarked term and the marked term as two mutually exclusive units. When it is understood that the Hebrew word שֵׁדַי is a name or title which subsumes the more specific Hebrew name expressed in the Tetragrammaton, then the structuring begun in Genesis and carried on through the scriptures becomes clear—while any instance of the Tetragrammaton is necessarily a potential instance of שֵׁדַי, the converse is not true, and three concepts can be cued with but two terms: the Tetragrammaton defines the Deity "Jehovah" and his specific role; שֵׁדַי defines the Deity in general, and it also defines the "non-Jehovah" Deity when specifically opposed to the Tetragrammaton, as perhaps in the example cited from Amos above. A similar confusion is caused in the Book of Mormon by the terms "father" and "son" if it is not understood that "father" is an unmarked term, a universal title which does not exclude the range of reference of "son". Such potential for confusion with markedness relationships is not lacking even in modern scriptures, and a fertile ground for a semantic analysis of markedness and naming awaits in the Kirtland Temple dedicatory prayer (Doctrine and Covenants 109).

What we find, then, is that from a totally internal view the Jewish Torah and the structure of the Hebrew names found therein independently support modern LDS claims about the nature of the Deity. It is unnecessary to employ any outside explanation to describe the uses of the names as they vary. With an understanding of the semantics of the situation, of the markedness opposition of words with invariant meanings, we can see and describe the structure found in the Torah, which even after centuries preserves the original distinctions in a bafflingly simple system of basically one unmarked universal term and one marked specific term. While full analysis of even the small corpus we have chosen here is beyond the scope of such a brief discussion, this study has elucidated the situation in the Old Testament and has shed light on possible solutions to some similar problems in other bodies of scripture.
It is clear that strict adherence to the teleological and semiotic principles of linguistic analysis as described by Jakobson and his students can and does enable exact semantic analysis of linguistic systems, and such analysis opens many research avenues to the serious student of scriptural writings. Perhaps nowhere more than in the symbolic, poetic type of writing common in scripture is the need for a strictly semantic approach to meaning felt, and as we increase in our understanding of linguistic systems we can continue to solve apparent paradoxes as we have solved the apparent contradictions in Deity naming with our understanding of אלוהים as an unmarked term of universal application. The preliminary analysis presented here can certainly be elaborated and refined, but it serves as an example of the direction serious semantic study can take.

Notes

1 Especially useful for an overview is Waugh, Roman Jakobson's Science of Language.

2 The Torah is divided into sections, or readings, the text being divided along episodic lines so that in reading one section in synagogue each Sabbath, the entire Torah is read each year. The "episodes" in Appendix B are established merely for the convenience of this analysis.

3 For an introduction to the application of the notions of invariance and the necessity for change for perception, see, e.g., Gibson, Principles of Perceptual Learning and Development.

4 And it probably is not for any other semiotic system either. See Waugh, Marked and Unmarked--A Choice Between Unequals in Semiotic Structure.

5 A negative subset in the sense of a cancellation of the universal set. English out is a negative subset of in, not a minus in, but a cancelled, restricted, or prevented in-relationship; it necessarily presupposes an in-relationship, which is the unmarked of the pair. In concerns a relationship of boundaries, containment, inclusion. Out does not concern the absence of such dimensionalizations, but rather concerns exclusion, destruction of dimensionalizations, i.e., it requires the presence of the dimensionalization and adds the notion of cancellation to it.

6 The frequency counts for the various cognate forms are given in Appendix A. These figures are for the Old Testament; the Torah is the first five books of the Old Testament.

7 As in the first line of the Torah בָּרָא הָאֵלֶּה בֶּן אֲלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמְיָם אֶת אֶרֶץ, 'in-the-beginning he-created Elohim the-heavens and-the-earth' with the third singular verb הוא, 'he created'.

8 See, for example, the Talmudic tract Sanhedrin, Chapter 1. We find even further complication in that.then, elohei, is even interpreted as singular or plural, e.g., in Exodus XII, 12: מִכָּל אֱלֹהֵי מִצְרָיִם, 'against all Elohei of Egypt' in "Against all the gods of Egypt will I execute judgment."
9 And which since the destruction of the Temple has not been pronounced, always being read as "Lord", Adonay. The Tetragrammaton is not pointed with the vowels of the original pronunciation, and the original vowels, though fruitful subject matter for an external reconstruction, should not be considered fair game for a linguist. The simple omission of their pronunciation is a sympathetic respecting of the Jews' most sacred beliefs and parallels the respect a pious Jew would afford the Latter-day Saints should he through academic investigation stumble upon some sacred aspect of the endowment, provided, of course, that he was made aware of its sacred nature. Let all LDS readers hereby consider themselves made aware.

10 J.H. Hertz, Pentateuch and Haftorahs., p. 199.

11 Of course, in some cases the unmarked term is chosen because the more specific information of the marked term is irrelevant—the more general meaning suffices.

12 E.g., Mosiah 15, etc.

13 I am indebted to Gordon C. Thomasson for his making me aware of the parallel between this section and the structure of the Torah, as well as for his many helpful comments and for making Sorenson's work available to me.

Appendix A: The Hebrew Names of God*

1. הָ֣יָה, el, 'god, God'; less than 300 times in entire Old Testament
2. הוהי, elohei, 'god, God'; 58 times, 41 in Job alone
3. סֹ֜הֲמִי, elohim, 'God, etc.'; over 500 times
4. הוהי, JHVH, 'Jehovah' < הוהי, HJH, 'to be, happen', the Tetragrammaton; over 500 times

*Statistical data from Landes

Appendix B: Synopsis Of The Text

Episode I: Creation
Gen. I, 1- II, 3
ELOHIM is the only name used to describe the Deity in the creation of the world up through the creation of the Sabbath and the sanctification of the seventh day.

Episode II: God And Man
Gen. II, 3-III
The creation of man is repeated, with further details, especially about the interaction of God and Adam and of the creation of Eve. In these verses the only name used is the syntagm, JEHovah ELOHIM.

Episode III: The Serpent
Gen. III
The encounter of Eve with the serpent is related. The interaction of Adam and Eve with the Lord and their expulsion from the Garden are described. In all cases the syntagm is used except in the report of the conversation between Eve and the serpent—both of them refer to Deity as ELOHIM.
Episode IV: Life Outside the Garden
Gen. IV
The beginning of life outside the Garden is described; the story of Cain and Abel and the birth of Seth are recounted. Throughout, only the Tetragrammaton is used. The last verse states "...then began men to call upon the name of the Lord." The Hebrew, in which genitive notions are normally expressed by mere juxtaposition, is, interestingly, "...then began men to call upon the name of the Lord." The Hebrew, in which genitive notions are normally expressed by mere juxtaposition, is, interestingly, ligation b'shem JHVH, 'call in-name Jehovah', i.e., "to call upon the name Jehovah" or "to call upon the name of Jehovah."

Episode V: The Generations of Adam
Gen. V
Here the generations of man (or Adam) are given, with a short repetition of the creation of man, using ELOHIM. Enoch is said to walk with ELOHIM. Then Noah is born, and his father Lemech says, "the same shall comfort us concerning our work and toil of our hands, because of the ground which [Tetragrammaton] hath cursed." In the original recounting of this curse, earlier in Genesis, the syntagm is used.

Episode VI: The Growth of Wickedness
Gen. VI,1-8
Wickedness pervades the earth. Twice an opposition is made between ב'נויהוים, b'nei ha'elohim, 'the sons of ELOHIM', and ב'נוהם, b'nos ha'adam, 'the daughters of Adam (man)'. JEHOVAH sees the wickedness of man, is grieved, and says he will destroy the earth, "But Noah found grace in the eyes of [Tetragrammaton]."

Section 2: Noah

Episode VII: Noah and the Ark
Gen. VI,9-22
The generations of Noah are recounted. Noah walks with ELOHIM. The earth is corrupt in the eyes of ELOHIM, and he tells Noah he will destroy it. He gives Noah instructions for building the ark, tells him that he will flood the earth, and covenants with Noah. Noah does all that ELOHIM commands him.

Episode VIII: The Flood
Gen. VII
The general instructions to Noah are repeated and elaborated by JEHOVAH. "And Noah did according unto all that [Tetragrammaton] commanded him." Noah and the animals go into the ark, "as [Elohim] had commanded Noah." The rain falls for forty days and nights. They all go into the ark, as ELOHIM had commanded, and JEHOVAH shuts them in. Everything on earth dies, except those in the ark.

Episode IX: Out of the Ark
Gen. VIII
ELOHIM remembers Noah and makes the waters abate. Noah discovers the dry ground. ELOHIM tells Noah to go forth with the animals out of the ark. Noah goes out and builds an altar unto JEHOVAH, and JEHOVAH smells the sweet savour and says he will never again so smite the earth.

Episode X: Blessing and Covenant of Noah
Gen. IX
ELOHIM blesses Noah and his sons. He makes commandments regarding morality and speaks to Noah, establishing his covenant that there will never
again be a flood or a world-wide destruction. He sets the bow as a token of the covenant. Noah says "blessed be the Lord God of Shem", בָּרָכָה [Tetragrammaton] Elohei Shem, 'blessed JEHOVAH ELOHEI (of) Shem.' And ELOHEI "shall enlarge Japheth."

Episode XI: The Generations of Noah

Gen. X

The generations of Noah are listed, mostly just by name, and a few comments are made about some of his descendants. The only mention of Deity is with regard to Nimrod, who "was a might hunter before [Tetragrammaton]."

Episode XII: Babel and the Generations of Shem

Gen. XI

Men are of one language. They plan to build the tower to heaven. JEHOVAH comes to see the city and the tower, decides to confound their language, and scatters them abroad across all the earth.

References


