

**The Meaning of the Divine Name
as Illustrated in Exodus**

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The Theology of the Book of Exodus

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How does the book of Exodus illustrate for Israel the meaning of the divine name? Setting the parameters as broadly as possible, the question is effectively asking what the theology of the book of Exodus is. The whole of the book illustrates the meaning of the name.

The way to proceed is to first look at the two texts central to the revelation of the name: Exodus 3:13–15 and 6:2–5. From there, the book of Exodus will be looked at in its two ‘halves’, looking at the content of chs 1–18 and 19–40, and also at some particular texts along the way.

1. Exodus 3:13–15 and 6:2–5

1.1 Exodus 6:2–5

There has been much written on the revelation of the Divine name as presented in Exodus 3:13–15 and 6:2–5. This is not the place to go into detail on the controversy surrounding these verses, though some commentary must be made.

The latter reference has caused particular concern. Exodus 6:3 reads thus:

וַאֲרָא אֶל-אַבְרָהָם אֶל-יִצְחָק וְאֶל-יַקֹּב בְּאֵל שְׁדַי וְשֵׁמִי יְהוָה לֹא נִדְעָתִי לָהֶם:

The problem is seen immediately. The ‘blunt claim’ is that the patriarchs did not know the name Yahweh.¹ Abraham, Isaac and Jacob only knew Him by the title ‘El Shaddai’. Exodus 6:3 is apparently saying that the revelation of the name of Yahweh to Moses is a new revelation, unprecedented in Israelite history. However, Genesis presents abundant evidence of the use of the name Yahweh, not only by the pen of the narrator, but also from the mouth of Yahweh and other protagonists, and in personal and place names.²

¹ Christopher R. Seitz, ‘The Call of Moses and the “Revelation” of the Divine Name: Source-Critical Logic and Its Legacy’, *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, eds Christopher R. Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999) 145.

² The name Yahweh appears 165 times in Genesis. It is used by the narrator 114 times (69% of the uses). This does not lead to the conclusion, however, that the name was known to the redactor

What is the solution to this dilemma? The Wellhausian scheme is well known, that Exodus 6:3 draws on one source behind Genesis in which the name Yahweh was not known to the Patriarchs. The Priestly writer is thought to be responsible for Exodus 6:3.³

The alternative view says that the meaning of the name was not known as fully as it came to be known in the Mosaic era of redemption.⁴ In the Patriarchal period, God was understood primarily according to the meaning of the name, El Shaddai, a word that has been variously argued to be derived from words for mountain⁵, breast⁶ or field⁷ (Sarna concludes that its meaning cannot be known⁸). In any case, in the Mosaic period, the name Yahweh came to dominate.

and not to the characters of whom he was writing. The opposite conclusion can be reached, for no less than 50% of the narrator's usage is in Genesis 1–13, and as the story becomes more personal, this narratorial usage declines and the characters are increasingly represented using the name. Overall, the name is used in 66% of the chapters of Genesis (33 out of 50 chapters), and in 36% when only counting the 'non-narratorial' uses (18 chapters).

³ John I. Durham, *Exodus* (Waco: Word Books, 1987) 73; Childs, 111; Bruce C. Birch, 'Divine Character and the Formation of Moral Community in the Book of Exodus', *The Bible in Ethics: The Second Sheffield Colloquium*, eds John W. Rogerson, Margaret Davies and M. Daniel Carroll R. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 127.

⁴ Brevard S. Childs, *Exodus: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1974), 112; John J. Davis, *Moses and the gods of Egypt; Studies in the Book of Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971) 78; Oswald Thompson Allis, *The Five Books of Moses: A Reexamination of the Modern Theory That the Pentateuch Is a Late Compilation from Diverse and Conflicting Sources by Authors and Editors Whose Identity Is Completely Unknown* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1943), 26; Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus = Shemot: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991) 31, referring to Isa. 52.6 and Jer. 16.21; W. H. Gispen, *Bible Student's Commentary—Exodus*, trans. E. Maas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 72.

⁵ William Foxwell Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity: Monotheism and the Historical Process* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957), 246.

⁶ Ee Kon Kim, 'Who Is Yahweh? Based on a Contextual Reading of Exodus 3:14', *Asia Journal of Theology*, Vol. 3 (1989) 113; David Biale, 'The God with Breasts: El Shaddai in the Bible', *History of Religions*, Vol. 21 (1982) 240–256; Frank Moore Cross Jr., 'Yahweh and the God of the Patriarchs', *Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 55 (1962) 246, argues for the meaning 'the mountain one' (not that he rules out that the substantive could be taken as 'the god Shaddai', pp. 233–235), although he notes that the primitive meaning is 'breast'. He sees significance in the mention of the blessings of heaven, the deep, the breasts and the womb in Gen. 49:25–26.

⁷ Walter R. Wifall, 'El Shaddai or El of the Fields', *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, Vol. 1 (1980) 24–32.

⁸ Sarna, *Exodus = Shemot*, 269.

There is a third—and new—explanation of Exodus 6:3.⁹ There are a handful of references in Genesis that say that the Lord ‘appeared’ (אָרָאָה, Gen. 12:7; 17:1; 18:1; 26:2, 24; 35:9; 48:3). Of these, only four passages have the statement that God appeared and then speak of God revealing His name (combining the two halves of Ex. 6:3, so that the first half means, ‘I appeared to the patriarchs and made myself known to them by declaring my name El Shaddai). These passages are 17:1; 26:24; 35:9 (the revelation of the name comes in 35:11); and 48:3 (which is a reference back to the events of chapter 35. Jacob says, אֱלֹהֵי שְׁרָאָה אֱלֹהֵי). Seitz writes that it is ‘[i]ntriguing’ that Genesis 17:1 has the same terms as Exodus 6:3¹⁰, but it is far more than that—it is the key to the problem. The name of El Shaddai (אֱלֹהֵי שְׁרָאָה) is revealed to Abraham (Abram), Elohim (strictly, ‘the God of your father, Abraham’) to Isaac, and El Shaddai to Jacob. The name Yahweh was not unknown to the Patriarchs, but at the pivotal moments of revelation, the name/title El Shaddai was used.

This gives the first insight into the meaning of the Divine name. Considering that the events and revelation of Exodus build upon the preceding relationship of the Lord to the Patriarchs (Ex. 2:24; 4:5; 33:1), it is reasonable to assume that the name Yahweh does not signify something entirely new in the Exodus narrative, but that some particular attribute of the Lord is coming to the fore that had not been so emphasised in the past. Looking to the contents of the book of Exodus, this new emphasis must be related to the redemption from Egypt and the codification of the Suzerain’s requirements of His people.

⁹ In a fuller discussion, the ‘question’ view of Thomas Scott, *The Holy Bible: Containing the Old and New Testaments, According to the Authorised Version* (London: L.B. Seeley and Sons, 1832), 202, and Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset and David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments* (Hartford: S.S. Scranton, 1871) 292, would need assessment, as would the Kenite hypothesis, in which Moses allegedly learnt the name Yahweh from his father-in-law in Midian. Also, the well-stated, though not necessarily new, opinion of Moberly would need further discussion. R. W. L. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament: Patriarchal Narratives and Mosaic Yahwism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) 32–33.

¹⁰ Seitz, ‘The Call of Moses’, 156.

1.2 Exodus 3:13–15

Exodus 3:1–15 has often been considered to be the JE version of the call of Moses.¹¹ Without focussing on the intricacies of the passage¹², in response to Moses' questions (v. 11, v. 13) the Lord's name is explicated in vv. 13–15¹³, in particular in the expression of v. 14, אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה. Assuming that this indicates more than the inscrutability of the Lord, it could be taken in the present, ('I am', the being view), the future ('I will be') or as a causative ('I cause to be').¹⁴ Kim prefers the latter two positions over the first.¹⁵ Albrektson has argued for retaining the 'traditional' interpretation, taking it as an idem per idem construction with the meaning 'I am who I am'¹⁶ overagainst the 'new' translation which has, 'I am the one who is'. However, it should be said that the translation of Schild has much to commend it.¹⁷ Roland de Vaux argues against the causative position of Albright, and deduces the following meaning from the imperfect verb: 'Yahweh is the only real 'Existing One'.'¹⁸

¹¹ Albrecht Alt, 'The God of the Fathers', *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion*, trans. R. A. Wilson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966 [1929]), 11–13; Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1962) 58; Werner H. Schmidt, *Exodus* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag des Erziehungsverein, 1988) 106–110; George A. F. Knight, *Theology as Narration: A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1976) 16; Durham, *Exodus*, 31.

¹² Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament*, 13–21, deals more fully with some of the difficulties that the passage presents. Cf. Edward Joseph Young, 'The Call of Moses', *Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol. 29 (1967); Edward Joseph Young, 'The Call of Moses (Part II)', *Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol. 30 (1967) 1–23; Cornelis G den Hertog, 'The Prophetic Dimension of the Divine Name: On Exodus 3:14a and Its Context', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (2002) [Online], argues against the source-critical understanding of the text.

¹³ The 'only explicit explanation of the divine name in the Bible', according to Roland de Vaux, 'The Revelation of the Divine Name YHWH', *Proclamation and Presence: Old Testament Essays in Honour of Gwynne Henton Davies*, eds John I. Durham and J. Roy Porter (London: SCM Press, 1970) 63. See Dennis J. McCarthy, 'Exod 3:14: History, Philology and Theology', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 40 (1978), 311–322, and especially 313–316, for a range of suggestions on the philology of the word; Cross Jr., 'The God of the Patriarchs', 225–259; David Noel Freedman, 'The Name of the God of Moses', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 79 (1960), 151–156; Young, 'The Call of Moses (II)', 16, who believes the Tetragrammaton should be understood as a Hiphal rather than a Qal imperfect; Solomon D. Goitein, 'YHWH the Passionate: The Monotheistic Meaning and Origin of the Name YHWH', *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 6 (1956) 1–9, prefers to emphasis Exod. 34:14, which he believes indicates that the name means 'jealous' ('the One who loves passionately and helps those that worship Him, while, at the same time, demanding exclusive devotion to Himself' p. 9), and was drawn from an Arabic root.

¹⁴ J. Philip Hyatt, 'Yahweh as "the God of My Father"', *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 5 (1955) 136, holds to a causative view, though his interest is more to find the background of the cult of

Although one cannot help but wonder if the expression is deliberately vague so as to include many ideas¹⁹, the common position is that of ‘being’. However, most immediately qualify this. ‘This means that he is transcendent and remains a mystery for man [humanity]. But he is active in the history of his people Israel, and thus people must recognize him as its only God and its only saviour.’²⁰ Mowinckel emphasises the present tense of the verb, ‘is’, but adds that it is not only about abstract being, but means ‘to be active, to express oneself in active being’.²¹ Baker puts it that

Yahweh amongst Moses’ ancestors. On the Hiphal form of the name, see William Foxwell Albright, *Yahweh and the gods of Canaan: A Historical Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths* (London: Athlone Press, 1968), 168–172; Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973) 68–71.

¹⁵ Kim, ‘Who Is Yahweh?’ 111.

¹⁶ Bertil Albrektson, ‘On the Syntax of יהוה רשע היה in Exodus 3:14’, *Words and Meanings: Essays Presented to David Winton Thomas*, eds Peter R. Ackroyd and B. Lindars (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968) 15–28.

¹⁷ ‘Je suis celui qui est’, according to Edouard Reuss, who anticipated Schild by 75 years. E. Schild, ‘On Exodus 3:14 — “I Am That I Am”’, *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 4 (1954) 296–302. Schild makes much of the grammatical parallel with 1 Chron. 21:17 and the rules governing the use of the relative clause. He could also have adduced the LXX in his support, since it comes close to his position: Ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ὢν. He is correct that his ‘existential’ view rules out the possibility of the statement indicating identity. What he does not say is that those who hold to the usual ‘I am who I am’ view, generally understand this existentially anyway.

¹⁸ de Vaux, ‘The Divine Name’, 63–64, 74–75. He also mentions in passing, 56, an older etymology that relates Yahweh to the Egyptian word for ‘moon’.

¹⁹ Hertog, ‘The Divine Name’, [Online], pushes the limits of the verb היה, writing, ‘A translation that renders the open nature of the statement should be preferred. Possible translations include: “I am there as I am there” or, more markedly, “I am present as I am present.”’ Cf. William Johnstone, *Exodus* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990) 102, refers to the multiple ambiguities of the name, in ‘stem, conjugation, person, tense and the identity of its subject and predicate’, and says that this ambiguity may be fundamental to its meaning.

²⁰ de Vaux, ‘The Divine Name’, 75.

²¹ Sigmund Olaf Plytt Mowinckel, ‘The Name of the God of Moses’, *Hebrew Union College Annual*, Vol. 32 (1961) 127. It is right to be wary of introducing later philosophical concerns into the text. McCarthy, ‘Exod 3:14’, 317, observes that it should not be said that the ‘being’ view introduces Greek ideas into the Hebrew text, but, nevertheless, the Hebrew text is ‘pre-metaphysical’. Young in particular is concerned about the modern theological emphasis on the dynamic, and defends the ontological meaning of the text, noting that the verb hā-yāh generally expresses pure existence (citing Gen. 1:2, 19:26). Young, ‘The Call of Moses (II)’, 19–21. However, both McCarthy and Young make the same embracive conclusion, that the text speaks of the God who is, and therefore of the God who acts.

Moses ‘became possessed by the *immediacy* of God. All that really matters is not that God is the God of the past, or of the future—He is ‘I Am’—the God who is *Now*.’²²

As with El Shaddai, the theological significance of the name emerges more clearly when its use is examined contextually, and conforms to that which has just been concluded from the statement in Exodus 3:14. The meaning is, especially considering the use of the name overagainst El Shaddai in Exodus, that Yahweh is the One who saves (i.e. the God who not only is, but acts). Kim writes that Yahweh is ‘a historical God who acts within the process of history and responds faithfully to the outcries of the afflicted.’²³ Gispén states it well when he writes, ‘...the patriarchs experienced more of God’s omnipotence than of His constancy throughout the centuries with regard to Israel...’²⁴ Yet again, Rashbam says that El Shaddai refers to the promise-making God, but Yahweh is the Lord’s ‘true name’²⁵ and indicates that the Lord is the one who can ‘fulfil my promises.’²⁶

It is still possible to raise objections to this position. Moberly is concerned that this view creates a division between the name of God and the meaning of the name of God. He calls such a division ‘peculiar’, ‘incredible’ and ‘curious’, since it would mean that the name of Yahweh had been vocalized for centuries, but never

²² John Baker, ‘Moses and the Burning Bush’, *The Expository Times*, Vol. 76 (1965) 308. Baker puts this in the context that Moses previously believed that the presence of God was only ever destructive, but now he has come to live ‘dangerously...in the constant presence of the living God’.

²³ Kim, ‘Who Is Yahweh?’ 109. Kim, 112–113, speaks of the ‘compassion’ of Yahweh, since He is also El Shaddai, the ‘maternal breasts’. Cf. Walter Brueggemann, ‘The Rhetoric of Hurt and Hope: Ethics Odd and Crucial’, *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 77, ‘Israel understood that its voiced hurt was definitional for the character of Yahweh’; Birch, ‘Divine Character’, 122.

²⁴ Gispén, Exodus, 72.

²⁵ Samuel ben Meir, *Rashbam's Commentary on Exodus: An Annotated Translation*, trans. Martin I. Lockshin (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997) 60.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

understood.²⁷ That particular objection is easily overcome, for as has been explained, Exodus presents development, not novelty.

Similarly, it is easy to say that El was also the Sustainer and Saviour of the Patriarchs, and therefore the supposed distinction between El Shaddai and Yahweh in Exodus is invalid. However, with the Exodus comes a heightened revelation of those characteristics. It is worth remembering that even the revelation of God as Yahweh in the Exodus is a hidden revelation. Kim writes, ‘Yahweh is the very God who conceals himself...’²⁸ The theophanic presence throughout Exodus both reveals Yahweh and yet keeps Him hidden. The point is, then, that all is relative. There is heightened revelation of the character of Yahweh in Exodus, but this is not full revelation, and neither is it discontinuous with the revelation of Patriarchal times.

There is much more that could be said on these pivotal verses. A discussion has not even been made as to the meaning of ‘know’ in 6:3²⁹, or on what Moses meant by asking ‘What is His name?’ (3:13). However, it will probably be more profitable to turn now to give broad consideration to the contents of the two halves of Exodus.

2. Chapters 1–18

God is Suzerain, or King. This embraces various dimensions of the theology of the book of Exodus, including the interrelated concepts of God as Warrior, Redeemer and Law-Giver (Covenant-Maker). God, as King, acts to save His people by warring against His enemies, and subsequently establishes the means by which His people will continue to receive His protection. This embraces the predominant awareness of El Shaddai in the Patriarchal period, with its focus on God’s sovereignty and the promise

²⁷ Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament*, 65–66, cf. 58.

²⁸ Kim, ‘Who Is Yahweh?’ 108. Cf. Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *God at Sinai: Covenant and Theophany in the Bible and Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 29, ‘In the very act of revealing himself, God conceals himself...and he uses accompanying phenomena (thick cloud) to do so’, which is because of the barrier of sin that ruins the ‘easy intimacy’ between God and humans (p. 179).

²⁹ Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, 1st English ed., trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press Hebrew University, [1951] 1967) 76–77; Roger N. Whybray, *The Making of the Pentateuch: A Methodological Study* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987) 68; Mowinckel, ‘The God of Moses’, 125–126.

of the covenant, but the presentation of God as Redeemer and Warrior comes in fulfilment of the old promise, and the revelation of His Law comes with greater clarity than before (the revelation-historical progression involves comparison, not mutual exclusion).

The first ‘half’ of the book of Exodus (chs 1–18) takes up especially the first aspect of God’s kingship: Yahweh as Warrior, protecting His people (Redeemer) and defeating His enemies. Yahweh is not only sovereign, able to create and sustain the world, and direct the course of human affairs, and He does not simply act with a general benevolence towards the whole of humankind. In the Exodus, He enters into the suffering of His people in a way that He had never done before. He dramatically acts against the enemies of the children of Israel, and redeems them to Himself in a most surprising way.

The structure of chapters 1–18 reveals this. The structure is based around the idea of movement to Sinai, which theme is overtly introduced in Exodus 3:12. There are, then, ten sections, in which Moses and Israel are shown in relationship to their proximity to the mountain.

Movement 1, into Egypt, 1:1–7

Movement 2, in Egypt, 1:8 – 2:10

Movement 3, towards the mountain (Moses in Midian), 2:11–22

Movement 4, Israel still in Egypt, 2:23–25

Movement 5, into Egypt (Moses returns to Egypt, via the mountain), 3:1 – 4:18

Movement 6, out of Egypt, 5:1 – 13:16

Movement 7, through the Red Sea, 13:17 – 15:21

Movement 8, through Shur to Elim, 15:22–27

Movement 9, through Sin to Canaan, 16:1–36

Movement 10, at Rephidim, 17:1–27

[Movement 11, at the mountain, Exodus 19:1-2]

Some of the precise points of division can be debated, but the above structure captures the broad movement of chapters 1–18. The Lord’s concern is to enter Egypt, claim His people and fight for them, and to bring them out to worship Him at Mt Sinai.

The nature of the Lord is seen in the means used to accomplish this movement. First, the children of Israel appear to be firmly caught in slavery. The Lord appears unable to save them. This, though, is the deliberate work of the Lord. The continuing oppression of Israel is due to the Lord hardening Pharaoh’s heart (Exod. 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8, 17).³⁰ This is a mysterious sovereignty, which allows even the suffering of His people. As Moses asks, ‘why have you mistreated this people?’ (Ex. 5:22).

Secondly, the answer to the question is not to say that the Lord has not brought affliction upon Israel, but to see that it is because the Lord is intent upon bringing attention to His powerful mercy. The Lord is the one who keeps the covenant with the fathers (*chesed*), but who wants the radical nature of that faithfulness to be known. He does not, then, simply bring Israel out of Egypt. He does it against impossible odds. He subverts ma’at and the gods in the plagues (Ex. 12:12). He humbles Pharaoh, who cannot even keep his own son alive, let alone take care of the nation. He throws horse and rider into the Sea: Israel may well leave Egypt in military array (12:41, כָּל־צְבָאוֹת יְהוָה), but they are, caught by the Red Sea, no match for the Egyptian

³⁰ Jonathan Master, ‘Exodus 32 as an Argument for Traditional Theism’, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (2002), soundly makes the case that the God of Exodus is portrayed as having such sovereign attributes as omniscience and immutability. This is overagainst the perspective of process theology, as asserted by Terence E. Fretheim, ‘Suffering God and Sovereign God in Exodus: A Collision of Images’, *Horizons in Biblical Theology*, Vol. 11 (1989) 31–56; Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). Cf. Thomas B. Dozeman, *God at War: A Study of Power in the Exodus Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), argues that there is development in the Pentateuch from the God who exercises power unilaterally to relationally (but see the reservations of Patrick D. Miller, Review of *God at War: Power in the Exodus Tradition*, by Thomas B. Dozeman, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 119, No. 1 (2000) 114).

army. Yahweh was known as Saviour in Genesis (Gen. 50:20), but such extreme action had not been seen by the Patriarchs.

Thirdly, the movement to Sinai comes through redemption (לְפָדוּת, Ex. 6:6; 15:13). At the pivotal moment in the story, this redemption is made through blood (Ex. 12:7, 13, 22–23. Cf. blood again has a pivotal place to play in Ex. 24:6, 8). It is this alone that makes the distinction between Egyptians and Israelites on the night of the Passover. Even though there is the vague impression that the judgement that night was a return on the infanticide of 1:16, the Lord would have killed the firstborn of the Israelites, too, if it was not for the blood over the door. It appears that the Lord considers all people worthy of death, Egyptians and Israelites alike.

Yahweh's issue with the Egyptians is not racial, then, and His sovereign decision to judge or bestow mercy is not unrelated to the actions of humankind. The God who is what He is, is not random or capricious in His interactions with people. Rather, although it is not developed, there seems to be a concept of the need for the expiation of sin and/or the appeasing of God. Later in the book, blood is overtly linked to atonement (Ex. 30:10). Such thoughts always are inextricably linked to sacrifice, and are implicit in the record of Patriarchal religion, but now the concept stands out more starkly and dramatically than ever before. Yahweh is a demanding God, but one who can be appeased (and who insists upon being so appeased, veritably pleading with the people through Moses and Aaron in Exodus 12). God's *chesed* is thus safeguarded from being whimsical, and instead, a deeply accessible and gracious side to His person is exposed.

3. Chapters 19–40

In the second 'half' of the book, the focus is especially on Yahweh as Covenant-Maker or Law-Giver (which is not to say that the first half of the book has not been concerned with the claims of Yahweh over His people). This is something akin to the role the king and the gods in other ancient Near Eastern cultures, although the extent to which Yahweh's law is portrayed as revelatory and takes up matters of spirituality and morality is unparalleled, except for perhaps in the Egyptian

understanding of Ma'at (see the so-called 'Negative Confession(s) of Ma'at, ch. 125 of the Book of the Dead).³¹

Chapters 19–40 are in fact structured around the idea of covenant-making. There is the motif of the ascent into and descent from and of the presence of Yahweh, which reveals the following sections:

Episode 1, The Intention of the Covenant, 19:1–8a

Episode 2, The Preparations for the Covenant, 19:8b–15

Episode 3, The Mediator of the Covenant, 19:16 – 20:21a

Episode 4, The Making of the Covenant, 20:21b – 24:8

Episode 5, The Fellowship of the Covenant, 24:9–11

Episode 6, The Weakness of the Covenant, 24:12 – 32:29

Episode 7, The Suspension of the Covenant, 32:30 – 33:6

Episode 8, The Imitating of the Covenant, 33:7–11

Episode 9, The Enacting of the Covenant, 33:12 – 40:16

Episode 10, The Completion of the Covenant, 40:17–38

³¹ A matter that will be pursued in the author's Ph.D. studies at the University of Melbourne. Cf. J. P. M. van der Ploeg, 'Studies in Hebrew Law', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 13 (1951) 296–297, states, '...the idea of wholly revealed law was rather peculiar to Israel'. The comparison is often made to Hammurabi. Hammurabi certainly says 'Marduk commissioned me to guide the people aright', but as to the authorship of the Code, 'I established law...I decreed...I wrote...I enacted...' It is 'my law', he says, and it is concerned with only social concerns: 'the welfare of the people', as it is put. Hammurabi is the main character, not the gods. Quotes are from Theophile J. Meek, 'The Code of Hammurabi', *The Context of Scripture: Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World*, ed. William W. Hallo, Vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2000) 3 vols 163–180. Cf. Adele Berlin, 'Numinous *Nomos*: On the Relationship between Narrative and Law', *"A Wise and Discerning Mind": Essays in Honor of Burke O. Long* (Providence, Rhode Island: Brown Judaic Studies, 2000) 27–28, draws on the work of Victor Hurowitz, *Inu Anum Šīrum: Literary Structures in the Non-Juridical Sections of Codex Hammurabi* (Philadelphia: Occasional Publications of the Samuel Noah Kramer Fund, 1994), to emphasise that the Code is a royal inscription memorializing Hammurabi.

This is not the place to justify each of these divisions, but several observations about the nature and intentions of Yahweh can be seen from this. First, He is the God who institutes Law. Yahweh demands loyalty from His people. The exclusivity that is demanded is expressed well in the first three commands of the Decalogue. The book of Exodus does not make it clear whether Yahweh is the only God in existence, but He is certainly the only God for Israel. Just as in a Hittite treaty (and plain common sense), it is not appropriate to serve two masters. The Lord claims the position of being Israel's only Suzerain, and demands their sole allegiance. He is a jealous God: jealous for the sole attention of His people.

The third Word explicates the nature of the relationship, in language typical of a Suzerainty-Vassal treaty. The command speaks of 'taking' the name of the Lord. 'Take' is not a word that is normally used of speech (although there are some references in Numbers to an oracle or prophecy being taken up). Rather, it means, 'bear, carry.' The Israelites are 'bearers' of the name of the Lord, meaning that they belong to Him. They are Yahwists (cf. Jer. 14:9, 'we are called by your name').

According to Numbers 6:27, in the Aaronic blessing, the priest is said to 'put' the name of the Lord on the people. This might be a claim to sovereignty over them. In the Armana Letters—EA No. 287—the Pharaoh is said to have 'set his name in the land of Jerusalem for ever; so he cannot abandon the lands of Jerusalem!'³² This is speaking of Egyptian suzerainty over the City. The suzerain sets or puts his name, whilst the vassal is called upon to obey, to carry or bear the sovereignty of the suzerain. The third command is thus saying that Israel is to fulfil its covenant responsibilities. To fail in this would make the original commitment to Him "vain" or pointless (*shav*, emptiness, nothingness, vanity), and they would be hypocrites.

Secondly, this Law is the means of maintaining a right relationship with Him. He has already constituted the children of Israel as a nation of priests, special to Himself

³² See James Bennett Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958) 272. Cf. Jared C. Hood, Review of Commentary on Deuteronomy, by A. Harman, *Reformed Theological Review*, Vol. 61 (2002) 165.

(19:4–6), and from that basis He proceeds to deliver the Law. The Law, then, is not itself the means of entering into relationship with Him.

Consider Exodus. 20:2 in its setting in vv. 2–17. The instructions of the Decalogue can only be understood in the light of the preceding action of God in saving Israel from Egypt. The Law is to be kept, by implication, not so as to enter into relationship with Yahweh, but out of thankfulness to Yahweh for what He has done. This highlights the benevolence that He has towards His people.

It should be noted, also, that this is in accord with the motivations to obedience found in Hittite treaties especially, in which a history of benevolence inspires obedience, as opposed to Mesopotamian treaties, which emphasised fear of the gods' retribution as the main motivation.³³ Yahweh, then, is not a God who primarily chooses to wield power aggressively or coercively.

Thirdly, Yahweh's overall desire is to descend the mountain to be present in the camp with Israel. The whole of Exodus is moving to this point. The Law itself is subservient to this end. Exodus 24:9-11 is the briefest episode of covenant-making, but it poignantly portrays what it is that Yahweh wants: fellowship with His people. The elders, representing the nation, eat and drink in the presence of the God of Israel. This is a foretaste of the final episode of covenant making.

Fourthly, Yahweh is holy. This is seen in a number of ways, but in the structure above, it is seen in the preparations that are made for the reception of the covenant. The unapproachable holiness of Yahweh is stressed (19:12–13, 21–22, noting especially Moses' confusion in v. 23, since the distance that is to be maintained between the Lord and Israel is raised twice). There are others statements in this regard throughout Exodus. The Lord is 'majestic in holiness' (15:11). The place where Moses first meets Yahweh is 'holy ground' (3:5). The inner room of the tent is the most holy place (26:33).

³³ See Noel Weeks, *Admonition and Curse: The Ancient Near Eastern Treaty/Covenant Form as a Problem in Inter-Cultural Relationships* (London: T & T Clark, 2004) 175.

Fifthly, all the preceding points make explicable the interaction that Moses has with the Lord in the penultimate revelatory act in 33:12 – 40:16 (the enacting rather than the re-enacting of the Covenant). In this episode, Moses requests to see the Lord's glory (33:17). In the first place, the text explains by use of a metaphor that the request is granted (in the language of seeing the back of the Lord). Chapter 34, though, removes the metaphor (the link between the metaphor and the reality is confirmed by the use of 'passed by' in both 33:22 and 34:6), and the Lord's glory is 'seen' in the proclamation of the Yahweh's name to Moses. In language reminiscent of both 3:14 and 20:4–6, the Lord reveals His dynamic character, saying He is 'a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness', who forgives iniquity but does not clear the guilty (34:5–7). His *chesed* or covenant faithfulness has been spoken of before (15:13, 20:6), but, set against the backdrop of the molten calf/bull incident, it is His inclination to forgive that stands out with new force. Indeed, although forgiveness was implicit in the Passover event, at one stage it seemed that the Lord had declared that He was incapable of forgiveness (23:21).³⁴

Having revealed and demonstrated these Divine characteristics, the Lord then completes the covenant with Israel (34:10, 27–28). By this sequence of events, it is evidenced that the revelation of the Law is the revelation of the nature of the Yahweh. The significance of the name Yahweh is not only unpacked in the statement of 34:5–7, but this itself is a summary of what is to be understood from the stone tablets about to be given. Israel is only able to be in covenant with Yahweh because of His gracious nature, and the Law gives expression to both His *chesed* and His standards of holiness. The law itself is the revelation of the glorious person of the Lord.³⁵

³⁴ This is the explanation for the molten calf incident in the episodes of covenant making. In the overall scheme of covenant making, it is not an aberration. Instead, it demonstrates the true nature of Yahweh and His Law. It exhibits that paradoxical mix, or unresolved tension, between the justice and grace of God.

³⁵ This is to go one step further than Rachel M. Billings, 'The Problem of the Divine Presence: Source-Critical Suggestions for the Analysis of Exodus Xxxiii 12-23', *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 54, No. 4, 444, who speaks of the simultaneous theophany and its deanthropomorphic explanation (a simultaneity which results from the use of difference sources). The narrative should, instead, be read as a whole, so that the revelation of the Law is the 'theophany'.

4. Conclusion

How, then, does the book of Exodus illustrate the nature of the Divine name? Through various explicit statements, Yahweh is accorded characteristics such as sovereignty, perpetuity, love, faithfulness, sympathy, mercy, justice, anger and jealousy. Furthermore, throughout the entire narrative, Yahweh is seen to demonstrate those characteristics. He acts as the Warrior King, fighting for His people, redeeming them for Himself. He acts as Suzerain and Law-giver, bringing His chosen people into relationship with Himself, imposing His will upon them and giving them treaty stipulations. He acts as a benevolent King, sometimes punishing those who rebel against His rule, or otherwise granting forgiveness, as He sees fit.

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