

Yahweh, our Saviour God

יהוה

God's covenant name 'Yahweh'
An extended note on its likely meaning

by Vernon G. Wilkins

The Cow in Apple Time

Something inspires the only cow of late
To make no more of a wall than an open gate,
And think no more of wall-builders than fools.
Her face is flecked with pomace and she drools
A cider syrup. Having tasted fruit,
She scorns a pasture withering to the root.
She runs from tree to tree where lie and sweeten
The windfalls spiked with stubble and worm-eaten.
She leaves them bitten when she has to fly.
She bellows on a knoll against the sky.
Her udder shrivels and the milk goes dry.

Robert Frost, 1920

ALMIGHTY and most merciful Father; We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep.
(as the cow, poor girl, had strayed from her pasture)

DEARLY beloved brethren, the Scripture moveth us, in sundry places,
to acknowledge and confess our manifold sins and wickedness; and that we should
not dissemble nor cloak them before the face of Almighty God our heavenly Father;
but confess them with an humble, lowly, penitent, and obedient heart; to the end
that we may obtain forgiveness of the same, by his infinite goodness and mercy.

Book of Common Prayer, 1662

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ABSTRACT: 'Yahweh', the covenant name of God in the OT, perhaps doesn't so much connote God's eternal self-existence (the prevailing view), but rather connotes, as this paper argues, the great biblical theme of salvation, the very heart of the character of God himself.

Yahweh is no ordinary Hebrew word, for it's the unique covenant *name* of the Hebrew God, and is actually attested outside the Bible – it appears as the name of the God of the Hebrews on the famous Moabite stone (also known as the Mesha stele, now in the Louvre, found in the mid-19th century at Dhiban, Jordan, high on the plains of Moab east of the Dead Sea, recording from King Mesha's perspective the events of 2 Kings 3).

The Issue with the Name Yahweh

Come with me to Psalm 116, with its striking 16 occurrences of the name *Yahweh (LORD)*. Striking also are the three occurrences of the words *call on the name of the LORD*, four if we count v.1-2, *LORD ... call on him*.

Psalm 116 ¹ I love the *LORD*, because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy. ² Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will *call on him* as long as I live. ³ The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish. ⁴ Then I *called on the name of the LORD*: "O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul!" ⁵ Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; our God is merciful. ⁶ The LORD preserves the simple; when I was brought low, he saved me. ⁷ Return, O my soul, to your rest; for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you. ⁸ For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling; ⁹ I will walk before the LORD in the land of the living.

¹⁰ I believed, even when I spoke, "I am greatly afflicted"; ¹¹ I said in my alarm, "All mankind are liars." ¹² What shall I render to the LORD for all his benefits to me? ¹³ I will lift up the cup of salvation and *call on the name of the LORD*, ¹⁴ I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people. ¹⁵ Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints. ¹⁶ O LORD, I am your servant; I am your servant, the son of your maidservant. You have loosed my bonds. ¹⁷ I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving and *call on the name of the LORD*. ¹⁸ I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people, ¹⁹ in the courts of the house of the LORD, in your midst, O Jerusalem. Praise the LORD!

The psalm is one of praise to God by a man who has been in anguish, but who has been rescued by Yahweh. Indeed, the psalm is replete with rescue language: *he has heard ... my pleas for mercy; deliver; (g)racious; merciful; preserves; saved; rest; delivered; salvation; loosed my bonds*. Could it be (and this I shall argue) that the meaning of the name *Yahweh* is wrapped up in God's nature as Saviour? In this paper I explore this question, and come, provisionally, to a positive conclusion, though I do concede that this isn't the usual understanding. I'm pretty much convinced, though, and hope to present a persuasive case here without excessively ruffling the feathers of the traditional understanding (not all of which I shall abandon).

What I plan to do in this paper is to explore the name *Yahweh* as used in the Bible – not all its uses, of course, as there are far too many. I shall consider certain instances where there is some indication in the text of what the name signifies, either by emphasis, by implication, or by a closely adjacent and significant statement about the character of God. The issue, very briefly, is whether, as is commonly suggested, the name 'Yahweh' is *etymologically* related to the Hebrew for 'I am' (I'm not convinced, at least by the arguments used, and I don't think it's relevant anyway, as I shall try and show); and whether, consequently, the name 'Yahweh' is to do with God's eternal self-existence, as is very frequently claimed. I don't accept this at all, because I believe it's western philosophy which doesn't fit the Hebrew mindset, and I don't think it's what the divine "I am" is all about, as I shall also seek to show. Rather, I believe, the name 'Yahweh' is all about what "I am" properly means, considered very differently and from a Hebrew perspective, and this is what I hope to show.

We shall visit Exodus shortly. But before we leave Psalm 116, let's consider briefly the expression, 'call on the name of ...' We shall discuss below the Hebrew tendency to invest a name with a great deal of meaning – i.e., a name isn't just a label, but often entails a description of the character or purpose of the thing or person named, as when the apostles surnamed a certain Joseph 'Barnabas'. Given this, it follows that to 'call on' the name of a person is not just to utter the name by way of personal address, but rather is to appeal to that person to act in accordance with the meaning of their name, with that aspect of their character. So if I'm right that the name 'Yahweh' connotes God's covenant mercy and redemption, then to 'call on the name of the LORD' is to appeal to God to be merciful, to save, to rescue, to deliver. And this is exactly what we find in Psalm 116.

For the record, the usual Hebrew words designating God in the OT are:

El, אֱלֹהִים = ordinary Hebrew word for 'god' (any god), but sometimes used for God himself, and usually written 'God' in the English OT translations.

Elohim, אֱלֹהִים
= the plural of El, 'gods', but very frequently used for God himself, again written 'God' in the OT, despite it being plural; in this case it may simply be a literary device known as a 'majestic plural', denoting something or (as here) someone of considerable greatness.

Adonai, אֲדֹנָי
= ordinary Hebrew word for 'lord' (any lord, whose authority others are subject to), but often used, quite appropriately, of God himself, in which case it's written as 'Lord' in the English OT.

Yahweh, יְהוָה
= the covenant name of God, as discussed in this paper, written 'LORD' – all capitals – in the English OT.

Sometimes these words are used in composite form, such as:

El Elyon = God most High

El Shaddai = God Almighty

Yahweh Elohim Tsabaoth = LORD God of Hosts

Yahweh Yireh = The LORD my Provider

(Jehovah Jireh in one or two modern Christian songs)

The name Yahweh, or rather its shortened form Yah, is implicit in names such as:

Joshua = 'Yah' + 'Saviour' (the Greek/Latin equivalent is 'Jesus')

Elijah = 'Yah(weh) is my God'

The more usual suggestion for the meaning of 'Yahweh'

This name for God, Yahweh, is used nearly 6000 times in the Hebrew/Aramaic Old Testament, so it's certainly significant. In English versions, from KJV onwards, it's usually rendered by the word 'LORD' or 'LORD' printed with capital letters (not to be confused with the less common word 'Lord' printed thus, which translates the Hebrew, 'Adonai'). In the old *American Standard Version* (ASV) it was rendered 'Jehovah', for reasons I shall explain shortly. This word had been used a handful of times in the KJV (Isaiah 12:2, 26:4, where a double Yahweh was rendered LORD Jehovah; Psalm 83:18, 'thou, whose name alone is Jehovah'; Exodus 6:3, 'my name Jehovah'; Psalm 68:4, 'his name Jah', translating the shortened 'Yah'). The *Jerusalem Bible* went against the trend with 'Yahweh' instead of LORD or Jehovah.

The word we are concerned with appears in the Hebrew manuscripts simply as the four Hebrew letters whose Latin equivalents are YHWH in that order (יהוה in Hebrew, sometimes dubbed the *Tetragrammaton* – which is a Greek word!) But the original 'vowels' are not known with any certainty, it is said, and neither is the original pronunciation (although its appearance on the Mesha Stele makes one wonder if the spoken name was heard and known amongst the Moabites). The reason for this is generally supposed to be the extreme reverence paid to this most holy name of God as the ancient Hebrews conceived it to be, to the effect that they would not pronounce it (only the High Priest, it is said, on the Day of Atonement). Indeed, they wouldn't write it in full with its vowels either. In public scripture reading the word was read as 'Adonai'.

The modern word 'Yahweh' is a best guess at an authentic pronunciation, though it isn't certain, and some think that it should be 'Jehovah', or 'Yehowah'. It's more commonly believed, though, that this latter word 'Jehovah' arose – first used in print in the fifteenth century Bishops' Bible – because the wrong vowels, the vowels of the Hebrew 'Adonai' to be precise, were added deliberately (by the Jewish custodians of the text, the Masoretes) so that it wouldn't be pronounced correctly, even accidentally, thus preserving respect for the holy name as it was held to be. Some buffs think that the four letters YHWH were not pronounced as consonants at all, but as long vowels, following a comment by the Jewish historian Josephus, so that YHWH, on this view, sounded something like *ee-ah-oh-ah*. In this paper I shall write the name as Yahweh rather than the alternatives, but I have no view on how it should really be pronounced. It's possible that the Masoretes (or even Josephus) knew the original authentic pronunciation, but if so they wouldn't reveal it. All this is very confusing, and not the point of this paper, save for possible interest value. What is noteworthy is that the word and especially its supposed original pronunciation has aroused intense interest and heated debate for many centuries.

But much less often debated, perhaps because it's less controversial, is the question of what the word Yahweh means or signifies. It is said most commonly that 'Yahweh' is simply the sacred covenant name for God, deriving from its use by God himself when speaking to the Israelites in the famous burning bush passage (see below). I have no wish to challenge this view. But what I wish to give due and prominent notice to is that throughout the narrative there are strong indications of redemption, as well as of the covenant, and as well as the covenant name, Yahweh, being revealed at this point. As for the deeper issue lying behind the likely meaning of 'Yahweh', and as for the real intention lying behind this paper, I write a comment at the end. So as we read through the passage, we note the salvation motif throughout (highlighted in the text below), and the obvious intention of the passage to reveal this covenant name of God, and also the binding promise (covenant) that this entails (also highlighted):

Exodus 3:1-20 ¹ Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb {Sinai}, the mountain of God {an interesting diversion here is to note that this last sentence would seem to locate Mt Sinai in NW Saudi Arabia! Make of that what you will! Here lies another great controversy!}. ² And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. ³ And Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned." ⁴ When the LORD {Yahweh} saw that he turned aside to see, God {Elohim} called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵ Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ And he said, {note here and below, the reference to the patriarchs, and remember that God had made an everlasting covenant with Abraham} "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

⁷ Then the LORD {Yahweh} said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, ⁸ and I have come down to deliver them {note the salvation language, here and throughout} out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹ And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also {or: I have indeed} seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰ Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt."

¹¹ But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" ¹² He {God} said, "But I will be {or "I am", 'ehyeh, אֶהְיֶה} with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you {The Hebrew is plural} shall serve God on this mountain." ¹³ Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?', what shall I say to them?" ¹⁴ God said to Moses, "I AM {ehyeh} WHO I AM {ehyeh}" {Or I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE}. And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM {ehyeh} has sent me to you.'" ¹⁵ God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'The LORD {Yahweh}, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.

¹⁶ Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, 'The LORD {Yahweh}, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, "I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt,"¹⁷ and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.'" ¹⁸ The elders of Israel will listen to you. Then you and the elders are to go to the king of Egypt and say to him, 'The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us. Let us take a three-day journey into the desert to offer sacrifices to the LORD our God.' ¹⁹ But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless a mighty hand compels him. ²⁰ So I will stretch out my hand and strike the Egyptians with all the wonders that I will perform among them. After that, he will let you go."

Clearly the God who made his everlasting covenant with Abraham (to bring blessing to the whole world through his descendants) is likewise covenanting himself here to redeem his dreadfully oppressed people – and indeed, his promise to bring the people to *a land flowing with milk and honey* must be regarded as one aspect of God's fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant. So given that God here reveals his name in the context of this binding promise, it must mean, as always understood, that the name 'Yahweh' reflects this covenant nature of God. Most treatments of this issue make this claim, and it's clearly correct.

But what isn't so often stressed is that the covenant, as portrayed in Exodus, is one of rescue or salvation, and that the rescue of God's people from their oppression in Egypt is indeed an act of God's mercy and grace, and is symbolic of his intention to bring forgiveness, ultimately through Christ, to the world. And that the redemption isn't just to be conceived in terms of the Exodus of Israel from Egypt, but also in forgiveness terms, is seen very early on, as we shall see. Interestingly, a recent search which I made of discussions about the meaning of 'Yahweh' revealed just one mention of forgiveness being inherent in the name – and that was in the Roman Catholic catechism. Just one. Of course, if the wonder of God's mercy and forgiveness is not ruling a Bible reader's heart and mind and life then perhaps it's no wonder that the salvation theme is missed so frequently. Most treatments content themselves with asserting simply that 'Yahweh is the covenant name of God', or similar, without reference to grace, mercy, salvation or forgiveness. But given that God gives his name in the context of his imminent rescue of his people from slavery in Egypt, it's far more likely that 'Yahweh' denotes also and especially his redemptive mercy, I suggest.

Much less convincing are the many attempts one sees to relate the name Yahweh *etymologically* to the Hebrew word for 'I am', 'ehyeh, אֶהְיֶה, used four times in the burning bush passage. I don't deny the possibility, but I find the attempts to justify the theory to be strained, and in any case miss the point of Yahweh's "I am"s, as I shall show shortly. Those who lack a better idea for the meaning of the name (because they miss the salvation context), and who thus attempt to make the etymological connection, often then conclude, employing a western mindset in a manner impossible for the ancient near east, that 'Yahweh' conveys the idea of God's eternal existence – especially his existence in himself, independent of anything outside himself, a philosophical doctrine known to the (western) buffs as God's 'aseity'. To relate the name 'Yahweh' to God's (eternal) existence is, in my opinion, off the point, and I shall dwell on this at length next. Even more strained are attempts to relate 'Yahweh', or the shortened form 'Yah', etymologically to an ancient Mesopotamian or Ugaritic god called Ea.

Exodus 3 – God’s “I AM”s – Yahweh the God of Covenant Mercy

To proceed I shall consider for a moment the fourfold occurrence in the burning bush narrative of the Hebrew *'ehyeh*, meaning ‘I am’. We won’t need to keep reminding ourselves, though, that the Hebrew word is *'ehyeh*, because that’s only relevant for the idea that ‘Yahweh’ and *'ehyeh* are related etymologically, and as said I’m not going in that direction, and for very important reasons. One thing that is worth noting is the presence of the verb ‘to be’ in this expression, ‘I am’. In Hebrew as in many other languages (e.g., Arabic, though not English), this verb is very often omitted as being superfluous – it is considered to be implied. Where it is used, in cases where it strictly speaking needn’t be there at all, we will frequently deduce an intention of emphasis – and here is certainly an example. All four of God’s “I am”s in this passage are decidedly emphatic.

The key, I believe, to understanding such a simple expression, “I am”, is to do so from a Hebrew perspective – not Hebrew the language, but Hebrew the people, and their mindset. The Hebrews were not ‘is’ people, so much as ‘does’ people. The ‘is’-ness of a thing, or of a person, is not the point of chief interest, but rather the ‘does’-ness (if I may be permitted to coin these terms) of that thing or person. What a person is like, their character, how they conduct themselves, what they do; these things are what concerns the observer, or anyone relating to the person in question. So the bald statement, “I am”, would not suggest to an ancient near-easterner some metaphysical property to do simply with the speaker’s existence – that’s not how the Hebrew mindset operated. ‘Active’ understandings of a word are much more important and indicative than ‘passive’ ones. So on reading or hearing, “I am”, one looks for a context in which to understand what the speaker is like (their character), or what they are going to do (their conduct).

In the Exodus 3 passage, this is clear throughout. Let’s look first at the initial occurrence, in v.12, *“I will be with you”*. *I will be* in Hebrew is the same as *I am* – there is no future tense in Hebrew, and either translation is valid as long as it fits the context. Indeed, often both will be valid, because what a person is like (present tense) is how they are going to act (future tense) – at least if they are self-consistent, as God certainly is. This “I am”/“I will be” is certainly not an existential or ontological statement (to use terms beloved of the philosophical and theological buffs) about the speaker’s self-being; rather, it’s a statement of what God is going to do. He is going to be ‘with’ Moses.

This ‘with’ is worthy of note too. Many Hebrew words are invested with far more meaning than is usually understood in western usage, and the extra ‘content’ to the meaning of words is generally to make them active, ‘doing’ words rather than passive, ‘mere existence’ words – just as we have concluded with the verb ‘to be’. Another example would be the term, ‘near to’: in Psalm 145:18, *The LORD is near to those who call on him*, ‘near to’ means far more than just ‘in physical proximity to’, needless to say – indeed, with respect to God’s presence it can’t mean physical proximity at all. It means much more, that God is near to them to help, to sustain, to equip them, and so on. Other examples would be words such as: peace, name, see, remember, hear, watch, answer, wait, call upon, with, keep, reveal, near and many, many others. All have active connotations to do with people’s character, conduct and relationships.

Thus ‘peace’ is far more than the absence of conflict to the Hebrew mind, and far more than a state of feeling peaceful – it might not be the latter at all; rather, it’s a thoroughly healthy, active, wholesome, dynamic relationship of well-being between two parties. Likewise the ‘name’ of a person (or of a place, or of a thing) is often much more than simply a tag by which the person or thing is known – it will very frequently convey something of what the

person is like, or what they stand for or what they do or connote (this will be very relevant to much of this paper). And to 'see' something or someone is far more than just to eyeball it; when Job said, "I have made a covenant with my eyes; how then could I gaze", he meant, "I will not lust". 'Remember' means much more than a simple mental recollection. And so on.

The instance we are interested in is the word 'with'. When God says, "I will be *with*" Moses, or equivalently, "I *am with*" Moses, he means not mere passive, physical proximity, but active assistance. "I am with you" is not an existential statement, it's a promise of help: *I am acting for you and protecting you*. We have a similar idiomatic usage of this in our own language and culture, where '*I am with you*' means, quite often, '*I'm on your side; I'm backing you*'. The Bible has several such examples, including "*I am with you*" – God to Joshua (Joshua 1:5,9,17), and "*I am with you*" (Jesus to his disciples in Matthew 28:20). All this is fairly obvious, of course, but it's worth noting here, and even more in the other three of the four "I am"s – because so many commentators insist on going off in the direction of 'eternal existence', which is, as we have seen, a speculative guess based on doubtful philology, and off the point.

The other "I am"s are in v.14. '*I am who I am*' (perhaps, better, '*I am that I am*') translates a Hebrew clause which could equally be translated '*I will be what I will be*', because as we have said there is no future tense in Hebrew – whether the present or future tense should be used in the translation is determined only by the context. Given that the context is the predicament of the Israelites (slavery in Egypt) and God's covenant promise to rescue (redeem) his people, being made here in Exodus 3, the preferred translation could perhaps be '*I will be what I will be*' (ESV and NIV footnotes mention this possibility), or, to make it even more explicit, '*What I am (that is, merciful), I will be*'. Or, to multiply possibilities to strengthen and explicate the idea even more, '*I will be for you what I will be for you*'; or '*What I am, namely merciful, I will be for you*'; or '*I will be for you what you need me to be for you – namely, merciful*'; or to amplify the idea, '*I will be your merciful redeemer, your Saviour; that's what you need me to be for you, and that's what I will be.*')

In any event, we must remember as we saw above that in the culture of the ancient near east 'things' (nouns) and 'states of being' were construed as dynamically and as actively as possible, as verbs if you like, rather than passively and statically (in Hebrew nouns derive from root verbs). Thus here, if the name 'Yahweh' as I am suggesting is indeed related to the statement "*I am*", then this latter should not be construed as simply a statement about Yahweh's 'existential state of being', eternal or otherwise, but as a statement about his purpose in being committed in covenant love and mercy to, and on behalf of, his people. In other words, the expression "*I am*" should not, in the Hebrew mindset, be taken as a statement about the speaker's *being* so much as a covenant promise about his *purpose* and *commitment* and *activity* towards the end-goal of Israel's redemption. Thus, in my view, it's virtually certain that the clause, "*I am*", and the name Yahweh are both related to God's covenant love and mercy, grace and forgiveness. In other words, 'Yahweh' means Saviour or Redeemer. To this end it doesn't matter too much whether the great self-testimony of God, '*I am who I am*' or '*I will be what I will be*', is meant to be taken as present or future – they amount to the same thing; God is saying, "*I am, and I will remain, true to my covenantal promise to you to be absolutely for you, committed to you in my love and mercy*".

The final "I am" accords with this, of course. "*I AM has sent me to you*" can only mean, "*Your God, Yahweh, the one who has committed himself to you in covenant mercy, has sent me to you, the Israelites, to redeem you*". "*This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations*" can only be read, "*I am your God and my name is Yahweh, meaning the merciful one who has covenanted with you to rescue you from slavery*;

this is my promise; I will deliver you; and for ever after you shall remember me for having kept my word to you." And how will Yahweh stay true to the promise he has made? By his 'mighty hand' (v.19) – God is powerful to do what he has said he will do; he will not disappoint.

The identification of the name 'Yahweh' with God's "I am" is strengthened by the clear parallel between the quotations at the end of v.14 and in v.15: "I AM has sent me to you" is equivalent to "The LORD ... has sent me to you"; but we have concluded that we must read the "I am" in terms of God's covenant promise. In the ancient world, when attention is drawn to the meaning of a name, it's important for us that we allow the name not only to *denote* the person as a convenient label, but also to *connote* their character as a description of how they conduct themselves. This is much less important and certainly much less common in the modern world. Thus, for instance, my name, Vernon, means 'a small grove of alder trees' in Old French, but this is of very little interest to anyone (except me), even when we drive through yet another small village in France called Vernon (there are many). My western family and friends are not thinking of alder trees when they call me by name. But in the ancient near east, names and their meanings were of paramount interest.

Exodus 6 – Yahweh the God of Covenant Mercy again

We now have a look at the following related text in Exodus 6, which not only clearly indicates that 'Yahweh' is God's covenant name ('*my name the LORD*', v.3, paralleling Exodus 3:15, '*This is my name*'), but also shows how inextricably tied up this name is with God's redemptive mercy ('*I have remembered my covenant ... I will redeem you*')

Exodus 6:1-8 ¹ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Now *you will see what I will do to Pharaoh: because of my mighty hand he will let them go; because of my mighty hand he will drive them out of his country.*" ² God also said to Moses, "**I am the LORD** {Yahweh}. ³ I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, {Hebrew *El-Shaddai*} but by **my name the LORD** I did not make myself known to them. ⁴ I also {or: indeed, or: yes indeed, or: just so} *established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, where they lived as aliens.* ⁵ Moreover, *I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered my covenant.* ⁶ Therefore, say to the Israelites: '**I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.** ⁷ I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that **I am the LORD** your God, who *brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.* ⁸ And *I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the LORD.*'"

Note again the purpose and activity and commitment of God towards his people throughout this passage. Just as in Exodus 3, so here there are strong indications of God's commitment to his covenant, of God's promise of redemption, and of God's power to save, all highlighted in the passage above. The four-fold proclamation of God, "*I am the LORD*", which (significantly) begin and end and intersperse his second speech to Moses, must surely, then, find its meaning precisely in God's covenant mercy and purpose to redeem.

The enigmatic "*by my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them*" at the end of v.3 has caused much debate, because a look back at the account of God's dealings with

Abra(ha)m in Genesis shows not only that the name Yahweh was being used back then, even on the lips of Abram and not just by the narrator (e.g. Genesis 15:2, *Abram said, "O Lord Yahweh ..."*, not rendered "Lord LORD" but "Lord Jehovah", ASV; "Lord GOD", AV/ESV/NASB; "Sovereign LORD", NIV), but also the concept of God as a covenant God is fulsomely there too – e.g. Genesis 15:4, *the word of the LORD came to him*; also the renowned 15:6, *he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness*; 15:7, *"I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur ... to give you this land to possess"*; 15:8, *"O Lord GOD"*; 15:18, *the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring I give this land"*, and throughout Genesis 17; even the exodus from Egypt is anticipated (Genesis 15:13-14, *the LORD said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they* {the 'offspring', the people of Israel} *shall come out with great possessions."*)

So what did God mean in saying his name was not known then? Well, for one thing, although there is a note of judgement in Genesis 15:14, there is no clear note of mercy and redemption (not there, not yet). Indeed, the word 'mercy' is virtually absent from Genesis – it's not until Exodus that we clearly see God as a God of redemptive mercy (there are hints in Genesis, of course; Genesis 3:15 is often held to be the earliest anticipation of the cross of Christ and the theme of redemption, although elsewhere I argue for Genesis 1). The exodus is eventually seen and portrayed as a rescue from slavery, an act of redemption, the acting out of God's 'chesed' (חֶסֶד, the Hebrew word for God's covenant love and faithfulness). It's in these early chapters of the book of Exodus that we first see this being clearly spelt out. Further, it must be observed that although in Genesis 15:6 Abram *believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness*, so that Abraham knew of and trusted God for the fulfilment of his (God's) promises, yet it was not Abraham who experienced the fulfilment. And we remember that in the Hebrew mindset to know someone by name means more than just to know simply cognitively the details of his being – it means to *experience* the reality of that person and all he stands for personally; to know implies relationship. Indeed, the very name itself of a person is more than just an identifying tag as we have already seen – a person's name in the Hebrew culture encapsulated the very character of that person, and was held to sum up the essence of his nature (and thus his purposes, his commitments and his activities). We must keep recalling that the Hebrews were not interested in mere 'being' in and of itself as an end in itself; a person's name, his being, his nature, his character are all related to what he does and how he conducts himself and acts.

Thus it can be concluded, not unreasonably, that Abraham wasn't given to 'know' God by his name Yahweh, in the sense of experiencing for himself God's redemptive promises, as we have just been considering – rather, it was Abraham's heirs (first the children of Israel, but ultimately those who will be in Christ) to know God in full experience as the God of redemptive mercy. An alternative understanding of the enigma is afforded by the suggestion of an alternative translation of the words, making it the rhetorical question, *did I not let myself be known to them?* But this alternative doesn't seem to have commended itself very much to the scholars, and isn't necessary if we give the term 'to know' its full value, as we have shown.

Exodus 33 – Yahweh the God of Covenant Mercy yet again

This note of redemptive mercy and covenant love that we have identified as being the essential content of the meaning of God's name, Yahweh, is captured further in other

passages that give some sort of slant on the meaning of the name. Here is one example from the end of Exodus 33, which explicitly declares God's name to be Yahweh (v.19), and there follows another from the beginning of the following chapter. Note especially 33:18-19, where not only is the proclamation of the name of God related to his mercy and grace, but also this answers Moses' request to see God's glory. How is Moses to see God's glory? Answer: by seeing something of the character of God in his mercy and grace (the latter rendered by the word 'favour' here). It also, and identically, answers Moses' original request to God to *show me now your ways* (v.13, i.e., not just what you are in your being, but what you are in your nature and commitment to us, the objects of your love).

Exodus 33:12-19 ¹² *Moses said to the LORD {Yahweh}, "See, you say to me, 'Bring up this people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you {Moses} by name, and you have also found favour {the word חַן is Hebrew for 'grace'} in my sight.'* ¹³ *Now therefore, if I have found favour in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favour in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people."* ¹⁴ *And he said, "My presence will go with you {cf. 3:12, "I will be with you"}, and I will give you rest {a salvation word – cf. Psalm 116:7}."* ¹⁵ *And he said to him, "If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here.* ¹⁶ *For how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?"* ¹⁷ *And the LORD said to Moses, "This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name."* ¹⁸ *Moses said, "Please show me your glory."* ¹⁹ *And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you **my name 'The LORD'** {Yahweh}. And I will be gracious {cognate with 'favour'} to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy."*

The note of grace and mercy, and thus of redemption, and related to the name 'Yahweh', is unmissable in this passage, with the word 'favour', i.e. 'grace' (noteworthily), appearing five times, and 'gracious' and 'mercy' twice each. Note in passing that hitherto God has known Moses by name (i.e., personally; if the name 'Moses' derives from Egyptian, then it probably means 'son', which is significant, coming as it does from God); but now Moses is to know God by name – in other words, God is going to make provision for Moses to know him personally – and how is that to be? Answer: by God's covenant love (Hebrew: *chesed*, see below) and grace and mercy, that's how! No wonder that we are concluding that Yahweh, the covenant name of God, is wrapped up with his redemptive mercy!

Exodus 34 – Yahweh the God of Covenant Mercy once more

Exodus 34:5-9 even more emphatically and closely relates the name 'Yahweh' to God's mercy, grace, faithfulness and covenant love (steadfast love, *חֶסֶד*, or '*chesed*', twice in v.6 and v.7 {the 'ch' in this word is a single Hebrew consonant, a sort of guttural 'h', which westerners can't pronounce well, but is approximately the 'ch' of the Scottish 'loch'.}) This latter word, '*chesed*', is much celebrated as the Bible's word for God's covenant love, though it's recognised as being hard to translate adequately – it's different from and expresses more than the ordinary word for love; ESV always has 'steadfast love'; AV/ASV have 'kindness' or 'lovingkindness', sometimes one or two other options; NIV has many translation options; some have suggested 'covenant loyalty' might be a better rendering, but this too is unsatisfactory, as it lacks a note of mercy. '*chesed*' is used in the Hebrew OT a great deal, especially in the psalms, to denote that very

particular love that God has for his people, and connotes his commitment to his covenant of mercy and grace. We even have here, in Exodus 34:7,9, an early note of the concept of forgiveness and pardon for sin that will find its final fulfilment in Christ.

Exodus 34:5-9 ⁵ *The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed **the name of the LORD**.* ⁶ *The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “**The LORD, the LORD**, a God *merciful and gracious*, slow to anger, and abounding in *steadfast love* {תְּדָבָר, *chesed*} and *faithfulness*, ⁷ keeping *steadfast love* {*chesed*} for thousands, *forgiving* iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.” ⁸ And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and *worshipped*. ⁹ And he said, “If now I have found *favour* {*grace*, רַחֲמִים} in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and *pardon* our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.”*

Isaiah, the Psalms and Summary

Note also in this final Exodus passage the repeated ‘the LORD’ in v.6b, which is striking and almost unique – ‘Yahweh’ appears twice consecutively. The double ‘Yahweh’ appears only here in the Bible, and at Isaiah 12:2 and 26:4, though in these two texts it’s ‘Yah Yahweh’ in the Hebrew. It’s instructive to note that in these two Isaiah texts, unsurprisingly, salvation is a strong theme, together with the human trust evoked by such a faithful God. So here we have two texts (and two more follow) where some emphasis is given to the covenant name of God, and where we find a decidedly redemption emphasis too:

Isaiah 12:2 ² *Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. **The LORD, the LORD**, is my strength and my song; he has become *my salvation*.*

Isaiah 26:1-4 ¹ *In that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah: We have a strong city; God makes *salvation* its walls and ramparts. ² Open the gates that the righteous nation may enter, the nation that keeps faith. ³ You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you. ⁴ Trust in the LORD for ever, for **the LORD, the LORD**, is the Rock eternal. {‘rock’ is a symbol of refuge and safety in Hebrew, and thus has a salvation flavour}*

Compare:

Isaiah 42:6-8 ⁶ *“I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, ⁷ to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. ⁸ I am the LORD; that is my name”.*

Isaiah 43:11-14 ¹¹ *“I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no saviour. ¹² I declared and saved and proclaimed, when there was no strange god among you; and you are my witnesses,” declares the LORD, “and I am God. ¹³ Also henceforth I am he; there is none who can deliver from my hand; I work, and who can turn it back?” ¹⁴ Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.*

What we have been seeking to do is to examine a few Bible texts where the name ‘Yahweh’ is not only used, but emphasised in some sense that provides a clue about the meaning or

importance of this name – and we are finding consistently that there is a closely adjacent redemption motif. Continuing the trawl through the entire OT would take for ever, but here are a few other chosen texts from the psalms:

Psalm 96:2 Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day

Psalm 3 – a salvation psalm, has 6 x ‘LORD’ in 8 verses!

Psalm 6 – exactly likewise

Psalm 25 – a salvation psalm, with many x ‘LORD’, including: ¹¹ For your name’s sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great.

Psalm 118 – a salvation psalm, many x ‘LORD’: ¹⁴ The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.

Psalm 18 ³⁰ This God—his way is perfect; the word of the LORD proves true; he is a shield for all those who take refuge in him. ³¹ For who is God, but the LORD? And who is a rock, except our God? ... ⁴⁶ The LORD lives, and blessed be my rock, and exalted be the God of my salvation ... ⁴⁸ who delivered me from my enemies; yes, you exalted me above those who rose against me; you rescued me from the man of violence. ⁴⁹ For this I will praise you, O LORD, among the nations, and sing to your name. ⁵⁰ Great salvation he brings to his king, and shows steadfast love to his anointed, to David and his offspring forever.

Psalm 20 ¹ May the LORD answer you in the day of trouble! May the name of the God of Jacob protect you! ² May he send you help from the sanctuary and give you support from Zion! ³ May he remember all your offerings and regard with favour your burnt sacrifices! ⁴ May he grant you your heart’s desire and fulfil all your plans! ⁵ May we shout for joy over your salvation, and in the name of our God set up our banners! May the LORD fulfil all your petitions! ⁶ Now I know that the LORD saves his anointed; he will answer him from his holy heaven with the saving might of his right hand. ⁷ Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God. ⁸ They collapse and fall, but we rise and stand upright. ⁹ O LORD, save the king! May he answer us when we call.

It would be reductionist, of course, to go to excess and claim that the name ‘Yahweh’ only ever connotes salvation. It is, after all, God’s name, his covenant name, used nearly 6,000 times, and it’s not surprising that other aspects of God’s character are frequently in mind. For instance, it’s not hard to find reference to Yahweh the creator as well as Yahweh the redeemer. Most especially, God’s power and strength are often referred to. But this latter isn’t surprising, because God’s power in the Bible is not just his power in creation, but is precisely God’s power to save, in redemption, or (it amounts to the same thing) his power to defeat his enemies in judgement. One small datum of interest is that in the OT the word ‘horn’ is often noted as symbolising God’s strength, but less often noted that it also symbolises his salvation, as in the saving power of the ‘horns of the altar’.

The Real Issue

What is surprising is that mention of God’s redemption, his salvation, his mercy and grace, is so frequently missed in discussions about the meaning of Yahweh’s name. But then, perhaps it’s not so surprising in a western world such as ours, where in an easy-going, unpersecuted church the doctrines of sin, and of redemption, have gradually been weakened over passing years. Earlier on I suggested there might be an underlying concern that has driven this paper.

Indeed there is, and I speak from a personal viewpoint. Over the several decades that I have been a committed Christian there has been, I believe, a steady decline in the emphasis on God's salvation, as seen at least in terms of forgiveness for sin, even amongst evangelicals. Alongside this, and correspondingly, there has been a steady eroding of the acknowledged reality of sin as the real problem of mankind. The replacement of these things by some aspect or other of human boasting has been of very great concern. The contemporary rise of the personality 'me'-cult, where man is made great, even within the evangelical wing of the church, is a great disappointment. Additionally, creation motifs have largely displaced salvation motifs in some circles. To discover, as we have done in this paper, that the old chestnut concerning the meaning of 'Yahweh', re-examined, delivers an answer that proclaims our *Saviour* is a very acceptable tonic. It wasn't just this, in fact, that initiated the thesis of this paper, but rather a concern that so many commentators were regurgitating the very western idea of 'Yahweh' having principally an ontological referent – two recent books I recently read did exactly this – both written by evangelicals. But if this paper does something to refocus the reader's mind on the Saviour-hood of Yahweh, it will have served its purpose.

In a second paper I shall examine how this is reflected in the NT, and shall come to some surprising conclusions about the meaning of 'Christ', 'King' and 'Lord' as applied to Jesus. In particular I shall assess the "I am" sayings of Jesus Christ, and unsurprisingly shall conclude that these make very deliberate reference to God's "I am"s in Exodus. I shall also visit (with considerable concern) the new emphasis on creation issues displacing salvation (at least to some extent), and will conclude this is by no means justified, contrary to the protestations of many who want to see the idea of 'new creation', replaced by 'renewed creation'.

To summarise, we conclude that the unique covenant name 'Yahweh' is far less to do with God's mere existence, and far more to do with his '*chesed*' or covenant mercy, grace, steadfast love and faithfulness. Or to put it another way, Yahweh means 'Saviour God'. And if, as I have argued, Yahweh means 'Saviour God'; and if, as I shall argue, 'Christ' means Saviour King (i.e., the promised new Davidic Saviour King – and not just 'King' with its mere sense only of 'rule', as many argue or just state these days); and if 'Jesus' means 'Yahweh the Saviour', as it does indeed; and if 'Lord' applied to Jesus Christ doesn't simply connote his divine authority-to-be-submitted-to, as many argue, but connotes rather Yahweh himself in his essential saving character; then the old and much used appellation *Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* means no less than:

Our Saviour God and Saviour, Saviour God the Saviour, Saviour King!

I flinch not at this designation, and nor, I hope, do you, good reader – not for nothing does the Hebrew mindset like repeating things that are crucially important!

—ooOoo—

The Cow in Apple Time

Something inspires the only cow of late
To make no more of a wall than an open gate,
And think no more of wall-builders than fools.
Her face is flecked with pomace and she drools
 A cider syrup. Having tasted fruit,
She scorns a pasture withering to the root.
She runs from tree to tree where lie and sweeten
The windfalls spiked with stubble and worm-eaten.
She leaves them bitten when she has to fly.
 She bellows on a knoll against the sky.
Her udder shrivels and the milk goes dry.

Robert Frost, 1920

Apology

Apologies for this panel and its verbiage – the site it was downloaded from requires it, I'm afraid, for usual safeguarding reasons.

Disclaimer

This paper is entirely the work of the creator/author. If at any stage I have expressed any idea in a way closely similar to the way anyone else has expressed a similar idea, then this is entirely coincidental and unknown to me at time of writing.

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