

# Yahweh, our Saviour God

יהוה

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

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## **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*

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.

ALMIGHTY and most merciful Father;  
We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep.  
We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.  
*(as the stricken cow of Frost's poem had strayed from her pasture)*

*Church of England Book of Common Prayer, 1662*

# Yahweh, our Saviour God

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

‘Yahweh’ is no ordinary Hebrew word, for it’s the unique covenant *name* of the Hebrew God, and is actually attested outside the Bible – for example, 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-19<sup>th</sup> century at Dhiban, Jordan, on the renowned ‘King’s Highway’<sup>1</sup> high on the plains of Moab east of the Dead Sea, recording the events of 2 Kings 3 from the Moabite King Mesha’s perspective.<sup>2</sup>

## 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 four references to calling ‘*on the name of the LORD*’.

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

<sup>10</sup> I believed, even when I spoke, ‘I am greatly afflicted’; <sup>11</sup> I said in my alarm, ‘All mankind are liars.’ <sup>12</sup> What shall I render to the LORD for all his benefits to me? <sup>13</sup> I will lift up the cup of salvation and *call on the name of the LORD*, <sup>14</sup> I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people. <sup>15</sup> Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints. <sup>16</sup> O LORD, I am your servant; I am your servant, the son of your maidservant. You have loosed my bonds. <sup>17</sup> I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving and *call on the name of the LORD*. <sup>18</sup> I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people, <sup>19</sup> in the courts of the house of the LORD, in your midst, O Jerusalem. Praise the LORD!<sup>3</sup>

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; gracious; 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 character as Saviour? In this paper I explore this question, and come, provisionally, to a positive conclusion – yes, the name ‘Yahweh’ in itself, by the way it is used in Scripture, does essentially signify the ‘saviour God’ of mercy and compassion, though I do concede that this isn’t the usual understanding. I myself am convinced,

<sup>1</sup> The King’s Highway, mentioned in Numbers 20:17; 21:22, is still known as such (or as The Kings Way) today, running north-south through the ancient land of Moab in present-day Jordan.

<sup>2</sup> But there are other attestations to the name *Yahweh* as well, found subsequently, from the world of near-eastern archaeology outside Scripture.

<sup>3</sup> All Bible quotations are from the ESV unless otherwise stated.

though, and hope to present a persuasive case here without excessively ruffling the feathers of the traditional understanding.

What I plan to do in this paper is to explore the name ‘*Yahweh*’ as used in the Bible – not all its occurrences, of course, as there are thousands of them. 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 contextually 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’; and whether, consequently, the name ‘*Yahweh*’ connotes God’s eternal self-existence, as is very frequently claimed (the prevailing view). It *might* have an etymological connection, of course, although I doubt whether scholarship will ever recover the true etymology of the word. Even if it were recoverable, I don’t accept at all that this would entail a western philosophical notion of ‘(eternal) self-existence’, because I don’t believe this reflects the Hebrew mind-set, and I don’t think it’s what the divine ‘*I am*’ is all about, as I shall also seek to show. Of course, it’s true that God is eternally self-existent; but this concept would have been of no interest to the Hebrews, and the name ‘*Yahweh*’ cannot therefore denote this self-evident but otherwise uninteresting idea. Rather, I believe, the name ‘*Yahweh*’ is all about what ‘*I am*’ properly *means*, or *connotes*, considered non-philosophically but rather from a Hebrew perspective. I hope to demonstrate all this in what follows.

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 is often emblematic of the character or purpose of the thing or person named, as, for example, when the apostles gave a certain Joseph the surname ‘Barnabas’. This ‘Son of Encouragement’ was ‘Barnabas by name and Barnabas by nature’. 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 that the name connotes. 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.

### יהוה, ‘*Yahweh*’, God’s name

This name for God, ‘*Yahweh*’ as it is usually transliterated, is used well over 6,000 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 in the OT, which translates the Hebrew, ‘*Adonai*’). In the old *American Standard Version* (ASV) the word was rendered ‘*Jehovah*’, for reasons I shall explain shortly. ‘*Jehovah*’ 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*’, transliterating 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 English language equivalents are YHWH in that order (יהוה in Hebrew,<sup>4</sup> 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 Hebrews

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<sup>4</sup> It’s strange that the covenant name of the God of the Hebrews employs four so-called ‘weak’ letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

of the intertestamental period, and subsequently,<sup>5</sup> conceived it (and now still conceive 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 own vowels either. In public Scripture-reading the word was read as *'Adonai*.

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

*'Elah*,<sup>6</sup> אֱלֹהִים, or *'El*, אֵל

= the ordinary Hebrew word for 'god' (any god), but sometimes used for God himself, and usually written 'God' in the English OT translations (cf. Arabic *'ilah*; the name of God in Islam, Allah, الله, is *'ilah* with a definite article).

*'Elohim*, אֱלֹהִים

= the plural of *'Elah*, 'gods', but very frequently used for (the singular) God himself, again written 'God' in the OT, despite it being a plural word; 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

= the 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. Indeed, *'Adonai* is used very significantly of God in scriptures such as Isaiah 6:1, *'In the year King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord ['Adonai, not Yahweh]'*.

*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 Yir'eh* = The LORD will provide

(*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 *lēsous/Jesus*, Hebrew *Yehoshua*, Aramaic *Yeshua*, Arabic *Yasua*)<sup>7</sup>

Elijah = 'my God is *Yah(weh)*'

The modern word *'Yahweh*' is a best guess at an authentic pronunciation and spelling, although this is by no means certain, and some think that it should be *'Yahveh*', *'Yahu*', *'Yehowah*', or *'Jehovah*'. It's more commonly believed, though, that this latter word *'Jehovah*' arose – first used in print in the sixteenth 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)<sup>8</sup> so that it wouldn't be pronounced correctly, even accidentally, thus preserving respect for the holy name as it

<sup>5</sup> Though not earlier, it is thought. Before, in Old Testament times, the Hebrews seem to have cherished the name *Yahweh*, and used it freely, without the later restraint.

<sup>6</sup> The close-quote mark, ', in transliterated Hebrew here is the (arguably) silent, first letter of the Hebrew 'alphabet', aleph, א. Likewise it commences other Hebrew words above and below such as *'ehyeh*, *'Adonai*, and *'El*, etc.

<sup>7</sup> The open-quote mark, ', here is another Semitic guttural consonant (*ayin* in Hebrew, *ain* in Arabic), unpronounceable by most westerners, who can't do throat sounds like Middle-Easterners can.

<sup>8</sup> The Masoretes, or 'custodians' of Scripture, were groups of Hebrew scholars of the last four decades of the first millennium CE, who were responsible for preserving the authentic canonical Hebrew text, and for assigning its vowel 'pointing' and 'cantillation' (accent) diacritical marks.

was held to be.<sup>9</sup> On encountering the word YHWH with the vowels of *'Adonai*, the reader would be reminded to say *'Adonai* instead. Some experts 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 settled view on how it should really be pronounced or written. 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. Suffice it to say that the word and especially its supposed original pronunciation has aroused intense interest for, and heated debate by, some for many centuries.

### יהוה, *'Yahweh'*, God's covenant name

But much less often debated (perhaps because the prevailing 'ontological' view – concerning who God *is*, his *being*, his *existence* – is so commonly accepted that it is simply assumed), 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 (Exodus 3, then Exodus 6 shortly afterwards; see below). I have no wish to challenge this view – *'Yahweh'* is indeed God's covenant name. But what I wish to give due and prominent notice to is that throughout the narrative there are strong indications of redemption, as being at the heart of the covenant, and as well as the covenant name, *'Yahweh'*, being revealed (*'make known'*, Exodus 6:3) 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 that this covenant entails (also highlighted):

Exodus 3:1-20 <sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> And Moses said, 'I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned.' <sup>4</sup> 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.' <sup>5</sup> Then he said, 'Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' <sup>6</sup> And he said, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.'<sup>11</sup> And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

<sup>7</sup> 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, <sup>8</sup> and **I have come down to deliver them**<sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> Thus *Yahweh* is written יהוה in the Hebrew text.

<sup>10</sup> An interesting diversion here is to note that this last sentence would seem to locate Mt Sinai in NW Saudi Arabia! Therein lies another great controversy!

<sup>11</sup> Note the reference to the patriarchs, and remember that God had made an everlasting covenant with Abraham.

<sup>12</sup> Note the salvation language, here and throughout.

<sup>10</sup> Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that **you may bring my people**, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.’

<sup>11</sup> But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?’ <sup>12</sup> He [God] said, ‘But **I will be** [or: ‘I am’, ‘ehyeh] **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<sup>13</sup> shall serve God on this mountain.’ <sup>13</sup> 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?’ <sup>14</sup> 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.”’ <sup>15</sup> 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**.

<sup>16</sup> 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, <sup>17</sup> 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.”’ <sup>18</sup> 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.’ <sup>19</sup> But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless **a mighty hand** compels him. <sup>20</sup> 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 (making a binding promise to bring blessing to all nations through Abraham’s seed) is accordingly 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 an early earnest 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 is generally acknowledged, 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 redemption 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 emblematic 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 [but far from exhaustive) search which I made of discussions about the meaning of ‘Yahweh’ revealed just one mention that forgiveness might be 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’ connotes also (and especially) his redemptive mercy, I suggest.

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<sup>13</sup> The Hebrew is plural.

## The prevailing view of the meaning of ‘Yahweh’

Much less convincing are the many attempts one encounters to relate the name ‘Yahweh’ *etymologically* to the Hebrew word for ‘I am’, ‘ehyeh’, used four times in the burning bush passage. I don’t deny the possibility, but I find the various attempts made to justify the theory to be strained, and in any case miss the point of Yahweh’s four ‘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 mind-set 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 (western) scholars as God’s ‘aseity’. To relate the name ‘Yahweh’ to God’s (eternal) self-existence is, in my opinion, off the point.

The pursuit of a philosophical, ontological explanation for the divine name may stem from Philo of Alexandria<sup>14</sup> and his exposition of the Greek Septuagint<sup>15</sup> translation of Exodus 3. The LXX renders Exodus 3:14a, ‘I am who I am’ (Hebrew: ‘ehyeh ... ‘ehyeh), as ‘*egō eimi ho ōn*’ (Ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν = ‘I am the being one’), and 14b, ‘I am’ (Hebrew: ‘ehyeh, without the personal pronoun), as ‘*ho ōn*’ (Ὁ ὢν = ‘the being one [sent me]’). It was Philo meditating upon this ‘*O ōn*’ that started the philosophical trend for seeing ontology, not character, in Yahweh’s ‘I am’ in this verse. Even more strained are attempts by some 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 – the Hebrew perspective

To proceed, I shall consider for a moment the fourfold occurrence in the burning bush narrative of the Hebrew word ‘ehyeh, meaning ‘I am’. Its occurrence here is what prompts the yet-unproven suggestion of many commentators that the name ‘Yahweh’ is related to the word ‘ehyeh etymologically. Whether or not it is, I don’t think it’s relevant here, because the suggestion diverts us from what is more important, namely what God’s ‘I am’ connotes in this passage. In Hebrew as in many other languages (e.g. Arabic, sometimes NT Greek, though not English), the verb ‘to be’ is very often omitted as being superfluous – it is considered to be implied.<sup>16</sup> Where it *is* used, in cases where it strictly speaking needn’t be there at all in Hebrew, 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. Another example, which we shall come to, is in Jesus’ several ‘I am’s in John’s gospel.

The key, I believe, to understanding such a simple expression, ‘I am’, is to do so from a Hebrew perspective – not ‘Hebrew’ the language as such, but ‘Hebrew’ the people, and their mind-set (and thus, consequently, their language, reflecting their mind-set). The Hebrews were not philosophical ‘is’ people, so much as practical, down-to-earth ‘does’ people. The ‘is’-ness of a thing, or of a person, is not the point of chief interest (*contra* much Greek philosophy), 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, their will, their purpose in life, their life-drivenness; these things are what concerns anyone relating to the person in question. So the bald statement, ‘I am’, would not suggest to an ancient near-easterner some metaphysical property denoting simply the speaker’s existence – that’s not how the Hebrew mind-set operated. So on reading or hearing, ‘I am’, one looks

<sup>14</sup> Philo of Alexandria, c.20BCE-c.50CE, was a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher who exegeted the Pentateuch from a Greek philosophical and allegorical standpoint.

<sup>15</sup> The Septuagint translation of the Old Testament into Greek, or the LXX, was commenced most likely in the third century BCE, supposedly by 70 or 72 Hebrew scholars, and was probably for the most part carried out in Alexandria. It was in Philo’s Alexandria that it first became accepted as an authentic rendering in Greek of the Old Testament.

<sup>16</sup> Such a ‘circumstantial statement’ of fact, where the copula verb ‘to be’ is omitted in Hebrew (or Arabic), is known grammatically as a nominal sentence – i.e., nouns only, no verbs.

for a context in which to understand what the speaker is like (their character), or what they are going to do, consequent upon their character (their conduct). So the name of a person is bound up with what they are known for – their reputation. Indeed, the Hebrew word for ‘name’, *shēm*, can often be translated ‘reputation’ or the like (as in a modern western expression such as ‘he blackened his name’). Barnabas’ reputation was such that it might be said of him, ‘He was encouragement personified’.

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 separate 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 western philosophers and many theologians) 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, acting *for* Moses and his people.

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 ‘conduct/character’ 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 until the incarnation of our saviour. It means much more: that God is ‘near’ to them, or committed to them, to help, to sustain, to equip, to strengthen them, and so on. Other examples would be words such as: peace, name, see, remember, hear, watch, answer, wait, call upon, keep, reveal, near and many, many others. All have active connotations to do with people’s character, conduct, reputation and relationships.

Thus, e.g., ‘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 is very relevant to much of this paper). And to ‘see’ something or someone is far more than just to eyeball it or them; when Job said, *‘I have made a covenant with my eyes; how then could I gaze’* (Job 31:1), he meant, ‘I will not lust’. ‘Hear’ means far more than a mere physiological auditory phenomenon. ‘Know’ means more than mere knowledge of a fact. These last three verbs have this full meaning in Exodus 3:7, *‘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 ...’*. Likewise, ‘remember’ means much more than a simple mental recollection, as in Exodus 2:24, *‘And God heard their groaning, and God **remembered** his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob’*; or, Genesis 8:1, *‘God remembered Noah’*. And so on.

### **Exodus 3 – God’s ‘I am’s – Yahweh, the God of Covenant Mercy**

The instance we are currently interested in is the word ‘with’. When God says, *‘I will be with’* Moses, he means not mere passive, physical proximity, but active assistance. *‘I will be with you’* is not an existential statement, it’s a promise of help and a guarantee of favour: ‘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; I’m for you; I’ll stand by 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 so in respect of 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*’ (v.14a, or ‘*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 separate 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 – see Exodus 3:7-9) 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 [i.e.: merciful], I will be*’. Or, to multiply possibilities to strengthen and explicate the idea even more, ‘*I will be for you what you need me to be for you – namely, merciful*’; or, amplifying the idea even more, ‘*I will be your merciful redeemer, your Saviour; that’s what you need me to be for you right now, and that’s what I will be, because that is my character*’).

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 generally 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 mind-set, 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 (and ultimately all nations’) 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*’.

Although it is my belief that this understanding of God’s name and of the ‘*I am*’s is clearly correct exegetically, the question as to whether the Israelites would have understood it as clearly, at least at this point, is another matter altogether. We modern readers have access to the entire corpus of God’s Word, and in particular the whole of Exodus, and even more particularly Exodus 33 and 34 which I consider later. It should be concluded that what is clearly evident to us from a ‘whole Bible’ perspective, may have been only gradually discernible to the ancients as God’s revelation to them progressed. But by the end of the Exodus narrative, I believe, Moses certainly knew that ‘*Yahweh*’ connoted God’s mercy and redemptive purposes.

The final ‘*I am*’, v.14b, accords with this, of course. The enigmatic ‘*I AM has sent me to you*’ can only mean, ‘*Your Saviour God, Yahweh, the one who has committed himself to you in covenant mercy, has sent me to you, the Israelites, to redeem you*’.<sup>17</sup> ‘*This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations*’ can only be read, understood in context, as ‘*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 forever 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.

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<sup>17</sup> Given that Moses is, in biblical theology, a type of Christ, it is all the more poignant that we can see Jesus himself as declaring, ‘*I AM has sent me to you*’, to be your ‘Emmanuel’, ‘God with us’. Jesus is effectively saying, ‘Your Saviour God, *Yahweh*, the one who has committed himself to you in covenant mercy, has sent me to you, to redeem you’.

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 [Yahweh] ... 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 to 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 often of pertinent connotative interest.

### Exodus 6 – ‘Yahweh’, the God of Covenant Mercy, again

We’ll 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 <sup>1</sup> 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.’ <sup>2</sup> God also said to Moses, ‘**I am the LORD [Yahweh]**.’ <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> Moreover, **I have heard** the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and **I have remembered my covenant**. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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 here 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’, emphasised above, 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 [‘Adonai] Yahweh ...’),<sup>18</sup> 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’ [‘Adonai Yahweh again]; 15:18, ‘the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this

<sup>18</sup> Interestingly this is rendered not ‘Lord LORD’ but ‘Lord Jehovah’, ASV; ‘LORD God’, KJV; ‘Lord GOD’, ESV/NASB; ‘Sovereign LORD’, NIV.

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 *‘hesed’*<sup>19</sup> (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 mind-set, to know someone by name means more than just to know what the name is, or simply cognitively to be aware 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 existence, 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, or even of understanding yet the full extent of God’s merciful character or of his future redemptive purposes – rather, it was Abraham’s heirs (first the children of Israel, led out of slavery by Moses, but ultimately those who will be in Christ) to know God in full experience as the God of redemptive mercy. What was it that Abraham himself knew and believed? It was the reality of God’s promise that through him, Abraham, God would bless the world. But as to *how* God would do it, through an act of redemptive mercy, it would be for Moses, not Abraham, to experience and thus ‘know’. Abraham ‘knew’ God’s promise; Moses ‘knew’ God’s mercy.

An alternative understanding of the enigma is afforded by the suggestion of an alternative translation of the words in Exodus 6:3, making it the rhetorical question, *‘Did I not let myself be known to them?’*. If this suggestion is valid, it implies the answer *‘Yes, Yahweh did’*. This reverses the usual understanding, and solves the enigma. But this alternative doesn’t seem to have commended itself very much to the scholars, and it isn’t necessary for us to resort to this suggestion if we solve the enigma by giving the term ‘to know’ its full value, as we have shown.<sup>20</sup>

### **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

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<sup>19</sup> The ‘h’ in this word, as also in *hēn* below, is a Hebrew consonant, one of their two ‘h’ letters, a breathy ‘h’ which is heavily aspirated.

<sup>20</sup> I am aware that various other suggestions or speculations have been made to explain this enigma of Abraham ‘knowing’ yet ‘not knowing’ God’s name, but we cannot detain ourselves on a survey of them here.

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 in ESV, NIV and others, but some versions do render it *grace*, e.g. KJV). 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 character and commitment to us, the objects of your love).

Exodus 33:12-19 <sup>12</sup> 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 *hēn* is Hebrew for 'grace'] in my sight.' <sup>13</sup> 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.' <sup>14</sup> And he said, 'My presence will go with you [cf. 3:12, 'I will be with you'], and I will give you **rest**.' <sup>21</sup> <sup>15</sup> And he said to him, 'If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. <sup>16</sup> 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?'

<sup>17</sup> And the LORD said to Moses, 'This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found **favour** [grace, *hēn*] in my sight, and I know you by name.' <sup>18</sup> Moses said, 'Please show me your glory.' <sup>19</sup> And he [God] 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** to whom I will be **gracious**, and will show **mercy** on whom I will show **mercy**.' <sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> 'But,' he said, 'You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.' <sup>21</sup> And the LORD said, 'Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, <sup>22</sup> and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. <sup>23</sup> Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.'

The note of grace and mercy, and thus of redemption, being the essence of the name 'Yahweh', is unmissable in this passage, with the word 'favour', i.e. 'grace' (noteworthy), appearing five times, and verbal forms of 'grace' and 'mercy' twice each. Further, God's name is to be 'proclaimed'; 'shouted forth', we might say, or 'meaningfully and emphatically declared'. This is a revelatory moment that Moses is to experience.

Note, in passing, that hitherto God has known Moses by name (i.e., personally);<sup>23</sup> but now Moses is to know God by name – in other words, God is going to make provision for Moses to know him personally, for who and what he, God, is, namely, the God of redemptive mercy – and how is that to be? Answer: by God's covenant love (Hebrew: *hesed*, see below) and grace and mercy, that's how! No wonder we are concluding that 'Yahweh', the covenant name of God, is wrapped up with his redemptive mercy!

The final verses of this passage, concerning Moses not being allowed to behold God's face are intriguing. What does it mean, in the Hebrew mind-set, to see someone's face (and why can't Moses see God's face, here and now)? Again, we look for a deeper meaning than just having a mere look at the person for recognition's or interest's sake. A person gives away much of their character by their comportment in the company of others – body language speaks volumes. To behold God's face is

<sup>21</sup> 'Rest' is a salvation word – cf. Psalm 116:7.

<sup>22</sup> 'Gracious' and 'mercy' here are verbal forms of the words 'grace/favour' [*hēn*] and 'mercy' [*rahām*].

<sup>23</sup> If the name 'Moses' derives from Egyptian, as it may do, then it possibly means 'son', which would be significant, coming as it does from God.

certainly to see him fully for what he is and to experience it in person; in short, it is to behold God's glory. But what do we mean by God's glory? God's glory is all his magnificence as perceived by (here) Moses, and in particular (here) this focusses on God's mercy (v.19). Hundreds of years later, was not God's great act of redemptive mercy, the cross of Christ, the occasion when his glory was supremely revealed? God's glory is what Moses has asked to see, in v.18. But right now he is denied this privilege. He will see God's *'goodness pass before'* him (v.19), but he will not see God's face. Why? I wonder if the clue to this enigma is that there is not (yet) a priesthood, and sin still needs dealing with (see the Exodus 34 passage below). We shall return to this shortly when examining Numbers 6:22-27.

### 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, *'hesed'*, twice in v.6 and v.7). This latter word, *'hesed'*, 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 not synonymous with, and usually 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 perhaps unsatisfactory, as it lacks a note of mercy. *'hesed'* is used in the Hebrew OT a great deal, especially in the psalms, to denote the 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.

Note the doubling, for strong emphasis, of the divine name 'Yahweh', which, again, sounds forth (*'proclaimed'*). As in the reference in the previous chapter, that it's the *name* of Yahweh that is proclaimed implies we are concerned with its *meaning*, and thus with God's *reputation* throughout the rest of history; and its meaning here is clearly wrapped up in mercy and grace, forgiveness and covenant love.

Exodus 34:5-9 <sup>5</sup> *The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD.* <sup>6</sup> *The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD [Yahweh, Yahweh], a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love [hesed] and faithfulness,* <sup>7</sup> *keeping steadfast love [hesed] 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.'* <sup>8</sup> *And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshipped.* <sup>9</sup> *And he said, 'If now I have found favour [grace, hēn] 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.'*

### Numbers 6

Before we leave the Pentateuch (though we could usefully stay there considerably longer), we visit the following striking passage.

Numbers 6:22-27 <sup>22</sup> *The LORD spoke to Moses, saying,*  
<sup>23</sup> *'Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them,*  
<sup>24</sup> *The LORD bless you and keep you;*  
<sup>25</sup> *the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;*  
<sup>26</sup> *the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.*

<sup>27</sup> 'So shall they **put my name upon the people of Israel**, and I will bless them.'

The Exodus has happened, and God's people are in the desert. God's great act of redemption of his people from slavery in Egypt has been enacted by his extraordinary intervention, miraculously and against all human odds (Exodus 6:6, 'I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment'). It's not possible to overestimate the importance of this event in Israel's history. Exodus motifs run right through the Old Testament; whole psalms are written about it (e.g. 105, 106). Elijah's flight to Horeb may (but only may – many disagree) represent a quest by Elijah for a new Exodus and a new Moses, given much exodus language and allusions in the narrative. But in the final analysis, and particularly viewed in the light of the gospel, the Exodus was (and was always meant to be) emblematic of a rescue far greater – the rescue from sin by the cross of Christ. After the Exodus, Israel was still sinful (Exodus 34:9, 'stiff-necked'). We saw back in Exodus 33 and 34 that God speaks there of the need for mercy and forgiveness at the personal level.

By the time we come to Numbers 6 there is a priesthood and a sacrificial system, and through it there is provision for forgiveness for repentant people. So now, with confessed sin forgiven, and the appointed sacrifices made, the priests are able through their ministry to bless the people with this extraordinary blessing. Before, Moses was not allowed to see God's face; now the full light of God's countenance can shine upon the people.

It is the privilege of forgiven people that they can behold God's face. This notion applies in human life too: when there is guilt and shame we cannot look a person in the face. But God's people, repentant, and forgiven, now can. This blessing is for those who, by humbling themselves and throwing themselves upon God's mercy, have their personal relationship with their creator God restored; they are in 'peace' (v.26). Of course, here, in the Old Testament era, before Christ and the gospel, the means of forgiveness was the temporary expedient of the sacrificial system. Generations would pass before this finds its fulfilment in Christ. But it was real then, just as it is supremely real now.

Now, it's v.27 that concerns the very name of *Yahweh*, and makes a contribution to our understanding of its meaning. The blessed, forgiven people who can gaze with wonder into the full light of the face of God, and behold his countenance, are those upon whom 'the LORD' puts his name – '*Yahweh*', the merciful one – thereby essentially declaring to them, 'On you I have had compassion; I have forgiven you'.

## Isaiah

In the Exodus 34 passage the repeated '*the LORD*' in v.6b 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 evinced in 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 <sup>2</sup> Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid. **The LORD GOD [Yah Yahweh]**, is my strength and my song; he has become **my salvation**.

Isaiah 26:1-4 <sup>1</sup> In that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah: We have a strong city; [Yahweh] sets up salvation as walls and bulwarks. <sup>2</sup> Open the gates, that the righteous nation that keeps faith may enter in. <sup>3</sup> You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you. <sup>4</sup> Trust in the LORD for ever, for the **LORD GOD [Yah, Yahweh]** is an everlasting rock.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> 'Rock' is a symbol of refuge and safety in Hebrew, and thus it, too, has a salvation flavour.

Compare:

Isaiah 42:6-8 <sup>6</sup> **'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, <sup>7</sup> to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. <sup>8</sup> **I am the LORD; that is my name**'.

Isaiah 43:11-14 <sup>11</sup> **'I, I am the LORD**, and besides me there is no **saviour**. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> Also henceforth I am he; there is none who can deliver from my hand; I work, and who can turn it back?' <sup>14</sup> Thus says **the LORD, your Redeemer**, the Holy One of Israel.

## Jeremiah 23

Another passage with a decidedly redemptive theme, and where the meaning of the name 'Yahweh' is inherent, is from a second major prophet, Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 23 the false pastors of God's people have failed and are under God's judgement. But new, faithful shepherds are promised. Indeed, the coming of one particular new pastor is prophesied, a new righteous Davidic king, and his name, Jesus, will be inextricably linked to the Saviour name of Yahweh.

Jeremiah 23:1-6 <sup>1</sup> *'Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!'* declares the LORD. ... *'You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the LORD. <sup>3</sup> Then I will gather the remnant of my flock ... <sup>4</sup> I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the LORD.*

<sup>5</sup> *'Behold, the days are coming', declares the LORD, 'when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. <sup>6</sup> In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the **name by which he will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."***

We, now, in the gospel age, know him of whom the prophet Jeremiah ultimately speaks – the one who fulfilled this and all prophecies, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; the one who said, *'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep'* (John 10:11), in a passage where Jesus himself condemns the false shepherds of his own time, as Jeremiah had done. *'The LORD is our righteousness'* (Jeremiah 23:6b) is, of course, a most fitting name for our Lord Jesus Christ, the one of whom it is written, *'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God'* (2 Corinthians 5:21). We shall come to the 'I am' sayings of Jesus shortly.

## Ezekiel 20

Ezekiel 20:5-10 is another passage pertinent to our thesis, together with the verses following through to the end of Yahweh's speech in v.44. It is noteworthy for a number of constant refrains: *'Thus says the Lord GOD [Adonai Yahweh]'; 'make myself known'; 'I am the LORD'; or 'I am the LORD your God [Yahweh 'Elohim]'; 'bring/led them out of the land of Egypt'; 'for the sake of my name'.*

Ezekiel 20:5-10 <sup>5</sup> ... **Thus says the Lord God**: *On the day when I chose Israel, I swore to the offspring of the house of Jacob, **making myself known to them** in the land of Egypt; I swore to them, saying, **I am the LORD your God**. <sup>6</sup> On that day I swore to them that **I would bring***

**them out** of the land of Egypt into a land that I had searched out for them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most glorious of all lands. <sup>7</sup> And I said to them, Cast away the detestable things your eyes feast on, every one of you, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt; **I am the LORD your God**. <sup>8</sup> But they rebelled against me and were not willing to listen to me. None of them cast away the detestable things their eyes feasted on, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt.

Then I said I would pour out my wrath upon them and spend my anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt. <sup>9</sup> But I acted **for the sake of my name**, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations among whom they lived, in whose sight I made myself known to them in **bringing them out** of the land of Egypt. <sup>10</sup> So **I led them out** of the land of Egypt ...

That God's name, 'Yahweh', is intricately tied up in his rescue mission for Israel, delivering them from bondage in Egypt, is perfectly clear. Of course, the expression *for the sake of my name* must mean here *for the sake of my reputation*. Nonetheless, that God's mercy and compassion towards Israel has driven his saving act of redemption is manifestly evident.

The Old Testament Scholar Dr Austin Surls observes that the syntax of v.9 is odd and merits comment.<sup>25</sup> He notes that 2 x 'them' in v.9c must be Israel, for it is they to whom God made himself known, and they whom he rescued. Consequently, it is also Israel who is referenced by the 'in whose sight'. Thus, Surls argues that the whole of the final clause of v.9 ('in whose sight ... land of Egypt') is best understood as referring back to God's name in v.9a. This is masked by the usual translations such as ESV's above. Arguably, therefore, a better rendering would be:

*So I acted for the sake of my **name**  
so that it would not be profaned  
in the sight of the nations  
in whose midst they were [living],  
that which [i.e.: the **name** by which] I made myself known  
to them in their sight  
to bring them out of the land of Egypt.*

Thus understood, the indented three lines, repeated twice later in the passage, are a parenthesis, albeit a significant one, giving a reason why God's rescued people should (but didn't) live up to *Yahweh's* name, and thus his character, subsequently. The other four lines read perfectly as a stand-together unit, and unmistakably link the name 'Yahweh' with God's saving deliverance.

## The Psalms and Proverbs

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.*

<sup>25</sup> I am indebted to my friend and former colleague, the OT scholar Dr Austin Surls, for drawing my attention to this odd syntax. This paragraph on Ezekiel 20 was added in 2019 after Dr Surls and I discovered our mutual interest in the meaning of the name 'Yahweh'. See Austin Surls, *Making Sense of the Divine Name in Exodus: from etymology to literary onomastics* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 104-5. This is a riveting and readable but densely theological work for which some knowledge of Hebrew is vital.



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: <sup>11</sup> *For your name’s sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great.*

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

Psalm 18 <sup>30</sup> *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. <sup>31</sup> For who is God, but the LORD? And who is a rock, except our God? ... <sup>46</sup> The LORD lives, and blessed be my rock, and exalted be the God of my salvation ... <sup>48</sup> who delivered me from my enemies; yes, you exalted me above those who rose against me; you rescued me from the man of violence. <sup>49</sup> For this I will praise you, O LORD, among the nations, and sing to your name. <sup>50</sup> Great salvation he brings to his king, and shows steadfast love to his anointed, to David and his offspring forever.*

Psalm 20 <sup>1</sup> *May the LORD answer you in the day of trouble! May **the name of the God of Jacob** protect you! <sup>2</sup> May he send you help from the sanctuary and give you support from Zion! <sup>3</sup> May he remember all your offerings and regard with favour your burnt sacrifices! <sup>4</sup> May he grant you your heart’s desire and fulfil all your plans! <sup>5</sup> 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! <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust **in the name of the LORD our God**. <sup>8</sup> They collapse and fall, but we rise and stand upright. <sup>9</sup> **O LORD, save** the king! May he answer us when we call.*

To which we can add:

Proverbs 18:10 *The **name of the LORD is a strong tower**; the righteous man runs into it and is safe [or: saved].<sup>26</sup>*

## John’s Gospel

The saying of Jesus, ‘*I am the good shepherd*’, noted above, brings us to the important subject of the ‘*I am*’ sayings of Jesus Christ, prominent in John’s gospel. All of them in one way or another reflect OT descriptions of God himself. The seven such sayings as usually enumerated are:

‘*I am the bread of life*’ (John 6:35,48),  
‘*I am the light of the world*’ (John 8:12),  
‘*I am the door*’ (John 10:7,9),  
‘*I am the good shepherd*’ (John 10:11,14),  
‘*I am the resurrection and the life*’ (John 11:25),  
‘*I am the way, the truth and the life*’ (John 14:6), and  
‘*I am the true vine*’ (John 15:1).

All of them have an emphatic ‘*I am*’, unusually using the actual first person singular personal pronoun as well as the inflected verb in the Greek text: *egō eimi, ἐγὼ εἶμι, ‘I am’*. It is difficult to resist the supposition that a claim to a divine title is inherent in this repeated expression, reflecting the divine name of *Yahweh* as denoted in the Exodus passages studied above, particularly Exodus 3.

However, given the multiple occurrences in John’s gospel of this significant emphatic ‘*I am*’ (ἐγὼ εἶμι in Greek), in chapter 8 in particular as we shall see below, it is worth exploring a little more this question:

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<sup>26</sup> The last word syntactically is a passive perfect (completed action) verb, rather than an adjective as such.

Is Exodus 3 the appropriate Old Testament antecedent for this emphatic clause? In the LXX, *ἐγώ εἰμι* certainly occurs at Exodus 3:14 as we saw above, and also in Exodus 3:6.

	<b>LXX</b>	<b>ESV</b>
Exodus 3:6	<i>ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ θεὸς ...</i>	<i>I am the God of your father ...</i>
Exodus 3:14	<i>ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν</i> <i>I am the being one</i>	<i>I am who I am</i>

NB, the copula verb ‘to be’ has a complement in the Greek LXX rendering of these verses.

Certainly several scholars do believe that Jesus’ ‘*I am*’s, especially 8:58, ‘... *before Abraham was, I am*’, were intended to evoke these Exodus verses, with the implication of divine title, and therefore that Jesus’ use of the formulation was intended to be heard as a claim to divinity.

However,<sup>27</sup> there are reasons to believe that Jesus’ ‘*I am*’ claims, in particular the threefold *ἐγώ εἰμι* in John 8:24,28,58, are intended to evoke the same expression in the declaration by *Yahweh* in Deuteronomy 32:39, “*ἴδετε ἴδετε ὅτι ἐγώ εἰμι, καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν θεὸς πλὴν ἐμοῦ*” (‘*See now that I, even I, am [he], and there is no god beside me*’).<sup>28</sup> To this Deuteronomy verse can be added four occurrences of the same ‘*ἐγώ εἰμι*’, accurately rendering the Hebrew *אֲנִי הוּא* (*I [am] he*), in Isaiah 40-55,<sup>29</sup> e.g. Isaiah 41:4, ‘*I, the LORD, ... I am he*’, ‘*ἐγὼ θεὸς ... ἐγώ εἰμι*’.

	<b>LXX/NT</b>	<b>ESV</b>	<b>Hebrew</b>
Deuteronomy 32:39 <i>See now that I, even I, am he</i>	<i>ἐγώ εἰμι</i> n.c.	<i>I am he</i>	<i>I [am] he</i> n.v.
Isaiah 41-48 (x4) <i>I am he (x4)</i>	<i>ἐγώ εἰμι</i> n.c.	<i>I am he</i>	<i>I [am] he</i> n.v.
John 8:24 <i>unless you believe that I am he</i>	<i>ἐγώ εἰμι</i> n.c.	<i>I am he</i>	
John 8:28 <i>you will know that I am he</i>	<i>ἐγώ εἰμι</i> n.c.	<i>I am he</i>	
John 8:58 <i>before Abraham was, I am</i>	<i>ἐγώ εἰμι</i> n.c.	<i>I am</i>	
	n.c. = no complement		n.v. = no verb ‘to be’

The purpose of the above table is to note that in all the John 8 verses, as also in the Isaiah and Deuteronomy verses, the copula verb ‘to be’ is devoid of an explicit complement, although in all but the last, John 8:58, the personal pronoun ‘he’ is not unreasonably implied. But in the Exodus 3 verses above, the LXX has an explicit complement which is not the personal pronoun ‘he’.

John chapter 8 is replete with such ‘*I am*’ claims, commencing with the ‘*I am [ἐγώ εἰμι] the light of the world*’ saying in v.12. After this we find *ἐγώ εἰμι* in 8:18 (regarding Jesus’ relationship to his divine father in heaven, concluding with v.19c, ‘*If you knew me, you would know my Father also*’); also twice in v.23 (concerning his divine heavenly home, ‘*I am from above*’); but in these occurrences of *ἐγώ εἰμι* the complement to the verb ‘to be’ is present (e.g., ‘light’, ‘from above’). The same is true of the other renowned ‘*I am*’ sayings of John’s Gospel mentioned above.

<sup>27</sup> I am indebted again to the OT scholar, Dr Austin Surls, for this insight. I updated this section of this study in 2019, after Dr Surls and I duly compared notes. See Austin Surls, *Making Sense of the Divine Name in Exodus*, 178-180.

<sup>28</sup> The Hebrew expression in Deuteronomy 32:39 is ‘*I, I [am] he*’. Although the Hebrew lacks, but implies, the copula verb ‘to be’, whereas the Greek, *ἐγώ εἰμι*, lacks, but implies, the ‘he’ complement (‘*I am [he]*’), it is certain that the LXX expression was, and remains, the appropriate rendering of the Hebrew into Greek.

<sup>29</sup> The four verses are Isaiah 41:4; 43:10; 46:4; 48:12.

Significantly, in the three verses in John 8 mentioned above, namely v.24,28,58,<sup>30</sup> the emphatic *ἐγὼ εἶμι* syntactically lacks the complement, but implies the complement 'he', and should be understood as 'I am he' (except that ESV not unreasonably has 'I am' alone in v.58 – see shortly below). The first of the three verses is v.24, 'unless you believe that I am [he]<sup>31</sup> [*ἐγὼ εἶμι*] you will die in your sins'. We next see the 'I am' formulation in John 8:28, 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am [he] [*ἐγὼ εἶμι*]'. This formulation does bear an uncanny resemblance to God's use of the divine name in Exodus 3:14, 'I am who I am ... I am has sent me to you'.<sup>32</sup> However, it does seem that Deuteronomy 32:39 and the four Isaiah verses do have a more definite claim to be the likely antecedents of the three John 8 verses, or at least of the first two, on account of 'I am he' being arguably the best rendering of *ἐγὼ εἶμι* in the John 8 verses and likewise in the Deuteronomy 32 and Isaiah LXX verses, and also on account of *ἐγὼ εἶμι* standing absolute without a complement<sup>33</sup> in all three John 8 verses and in all five Deuteronomy and Isaiah LXX verses; the same can't be said of the *ἐγὼ εἶμι* in Exodus 3:6,14, where it can't reasonably be rendered 'I am he'. In the LXX, *ἐγὼ εἶμι* is given a complement ('ὁ ὢν') in 3:6, and in 3:14 'εἶμι' is not present. So the Exodus verses don't accord a syntactical match with the John 8 verses, but the Deuteronomy and Isaiah verses do. If Jesus' 'I am' sayings do indeed evoke the Deuteronomy and Isaiah verses, or, alternatively or additionally, the Exodus 3 verses, then Jesus' claim to divinity is, one way or the other, absolutely clear.

The two verses, 8:24,28, both clearly concern the salvation which Christ's cross will bring. Let us recall that our principal thesis in this paper is that the 'I am' name of God, 'Yahweh', connotes God's merciful, redeeming character. We see it clearly throughout John 8, and indeed in all the myriad 'I am' sayings in John's gospel. These clear divine claims on the lips of Jesus evoke several other OT themes, such as the vine, the shepherd, the light of the world, which themselves are divine characteristics of God in the OT.

But this set of 'I am's in John 8 culminates in a saying even more emphatic and crystal clear as a divine claim. This is the remarkable v.58, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am [*ἐγὼ εἶμι*]. If we are tempted to doubt the divine claim, reading on to the next verse settles the matter: Jesus' hateful opponents clearly understand him to be blaspheming, i.e., to be claiming to be divine. The point of this study in John's gospel, and in John 8 in particular, is that the merciful character of *Yahweh* is fulfilled, fully and finally, in God's Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Not only is the divinity of Jesus Christ implied in the verses we have studied, but God's redeeming character is seen to be inherent in the redemption that Christ's cross brings.

### Jesus Christ's Title, 'the Lord'

More can be said about the title we give to our Lord. The apostle Peter in his sermon on the first Christian day of Pentecost clearly declared the superiority of Jesus Christ (over David, as Jesus himself had done in all three synoptic gospels, catching out his opponents, who couldn't accommodate the idea that David calls the messiah 'Lord'), by quoting the Davidic Psalm 110:1, 'The Lord said to my Lord ...' (Acts 2:34). In Psalm 110 this is: 'The LORD [*Yahweh*] says to my Lord', where 'my Lord' is understood

<sup>30</sup> There are four further occurrences of *ἐγὼ εἶμι* in other chapters of John's gospel, not yet mentioned, at 13:19, 'that ... you may believe that I am [he]'; 18:5, 'Jesus said to them, "I am [he]"', and likewise 18:6,8. ESV's 'he' is implied in these verses, and rightly rendered thus by ESV. A yet further verse, John 6:20, has *ἐγὼ εἶμι*, properly rendered 'it is I' in ESV, but here the *ἐγὼ* is not the subject of the copular verb, but its complement; the subject is indeed 'I', but this is supplied by the inflected verb.

<sup>31</sup> The [he] indicates that the word 'he' is not present separately in the Greek text; it reads simply: 'unless you believe that I am [*ἐγὼ εἶμι*] you will ...'. Likewise in 8:28,58.

<sup>32</sup> The 'I am' sayings of Jesus where *ἐγὼ εἶμι* does bear a complement (e.g., 'I am the light ...') might also be seen to evoke Exodus 6:2,6,7,8, four x 'I [am] the LORD' (where in these four instances the 'I' is present and thus emphatic, just as in the John 8 verses, although the 'am' is absent in the text, albeit implied). However, the LXX doesn't have *ἐγὼ εἶμι*, but just *ἐγὼ*.

<sup>33</sup> By 'standing absolute without a complement' is meant that the form is not 'I am X', where the noun (or adjective) X is the so-called complement of 'I', and 'am' is the connecting copula; but, rather, the form is just 'I am' without any complement.

by all parties to be, prophetically, the coming messiah. Peter clearly identifies this messiah with the crucified and risen Jesus, and said of him, *'know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified'* (Acts 2:36). Peter instructed the many hearers, who were *'cut to the heart'* and asking *'what shall we do?'* (v.37), *'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins'* (v.38). This is the heart of the gospel, and we can't do justice to its magnificence here. Suffice it to observe that the forgiveness a Christian has in Christ is the ultimate fulfilment and entailment of the merciful character of *Yahweh* revealed to the Israelites through Moses in the Exodus passages we were studying earlier above.

Incidentally, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX), translates both *Yahweh* and *'Adonai* by the Greek word *kurios*, = 'Lord', the same word as is used for Jesus in the New Testament. Thus a disciple of Christ in the New Testament, or indeed any subsequent Hebrew Christian of the first century, hearing or reading of his master/saviour being called his *'kurios'*, couldn't fail to relate this back to both of those Hebrew words, *Yahweh* and *'Adonai*, and would thus have unmistakably seen the identification of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, with the merciful saviour God of the Old Testament as revealed to Moses in Exodus. Indeed, although when *'kurios'* is used of Jesus in the New Testament it could often refer back to either (or both) of *'Adonai* and *Yahweh*, there are instances when it can only refer to *Yahweh*, on account of it being there part of an Old Testament quotation. One example will suffice, but there are others. Matthew 3:3 records the preaching of John the Baptist, referring to the one who will come after him, namely Jesus of Nazareth: *'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight'*. This is a direct quotation from Isaiah 40:3, where *'the Lord'* in Matthew is *'the LORD'* in Isaiah, i.e. *Yahweh*, and here in Matthew unmistakably references Jesus himself.

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 well over 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 point of interest is that in the OT the word 'horn' is often noted as symbolising God's strength, but it is less often noted that it also symbolises his salvation, as in the saving power of the *'horns of the altar'*,<sup>34</sup> and supremely in Zechariah's prophecy regarding the soon-to-be-born Jesus of Nazareth, *'he has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David'* (Luke 1:69).<sup>35</sup>

## 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 mine, where in an easy-going, laid-back, unpersecuted church where seemingly the craving to be entertained often seems to trump the craving for forgiveness, the doctrines of sin, and of redemption, have gradually been weakened and eroded over the 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

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<sup>34</sup> See, e.g., 1 Kings 1:50-51.

<sup>35</sup> Luke 1:69, alluding to 2 Samuel 22:3 and Psalm 18:2, both of which connect 'horn', 'salvation' and the 'stronghold' of the 'rock' of 'refuge'.

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 oneself 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 Christian circles. To discover, as we have done in this paper, that the old chestnut concerning the meaning of 'Yahweh', on re-examination, delivers an answer that proclaims our *Saviour*, is a very acceptable tonic. It wasn't this alone, in fact, that initiated the thesis of this paper, but also 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 Robert Frost's 1920 poem, *The Cow in Apple Time*, the cow has strayed from the bounds set her and eaten of 'forbidden fruit'. It was so tempting and tasty, but now she bellows her belly-ache to the skies. A perfect picture of Adam and Eve – perhaps Frost deliberately chose the apple because of its long association with the fruit eaten in the garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve strayed themselves across the boundary God had set. That *malum* is Latin for both apple and evil (albeit pronounced not quite the same) seems to be the origin of this (unbiblical) identification in medieval or even earlier times. My plea is that we today, groaning in sin ourselves like the cow, but professing faith in Christ our Saviour, might renew our commitment 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'*, as the Church of England 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* bids us; and consequently pray, mindful that we are praying to *Yahweh*, our Saviour God, *'ALMIGHTY and most merciful Father; we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep; we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts ... But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us miserable offenders; spare thou them, O God, which confess their faults, restore thou them that are penitent, according to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord.'*

We have examined the meaning of the name 'Yahweh' in Scripture, and found hard-to-deny evidence that God's great covenantal name connotes his mercy, his grace, his forgiveness. We have concluded that it's how the name is used in Scripture that yields its meaning, rather than its etymology. 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 '*hesed*' or covenant mercy, grace, steadfast love, loyalty and faithfulness. Or to put it another way, 'Yahweh' means 'Saviour God'. If we were to do a similar exercise in the New Testament, and examine our saviour's designations, 'Lord', 'King' and 'Christ', we would find a very similar result. We shall conclude that 'Christ', the 'anointed one', 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 that 'Jesus' means 'Yahweh the Saviour', as it does indeed; and that 'Lord' applied to Jesus Christ doesn't simply and only connote his divine authority-to-be-submitted-to, as many argue, but connotes *Yahweh* himself in his essential saving character. Indeed, we have seen above that the New Testament undeniably equates Jesus of Nazareth with *Yahweh* of the Old Testament – a sure claim to the divinity of Christ.

And if 'Yahweh' means 'Saviour God', and if '*the Lord*' applied to Jesus connotes exactly the same, as I have argued, then the old and much used appellation *Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* means no less than:

Our Saviour God our Saviour, our Saviour God our Saviour, our Saviour King!

I flinch not at this tautological designation, and nor, I hope, do you, good reader – not for nothing does the Hebrew mind-set like repeating things that are crucially important! And there is nothing more crucially important than the saviour-ness of our Saviour.

—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*

**Acknowledgement**

This paper has survived peer review so far, particularly by my friend and former colleague, the OT scholar Dr Austin Surls. Nonetheless, the views expressed in this paper are those of me, the author, and I and I alone accept responsibility for them – particularly for anything inexact or unclear, any obvious omissions, faulty logic and other follies and defects.

**Latest Version**

This is version dated 16 December 2019 (the previous was 4 December 2010). The significant additions in this version are the Ezekiel 20 section, and the paragraphs relating the John 8 '*I am*'s to the LXX '*I am*'s in Deuteronomy and Isaiah.

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