

The Use of the Divine Names in Genesis

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ABSTRACT

The different names of God in Genesis have been used by critics to claim that Genesis is a compilation of Hebrew legends. However, once it is recognized that Genesis was compiled by Moses, by transcribing from the tablets on which the patriarchs recorded their family history, this criticism can be countered. Thus Genesis records the different names by which God was known to the patriarchs, names which were superseded by God's revelation of Himself at the founding of the nation of Israel under Moses.

INTRODUCTION

In a recent Letter to the Editor published in **CEN Tech. J.**,¹ following on from Dr Taylor's article on Genesis,² I endeavoured to show that a good case could be made out for the integrity of Genesis as a contemporary document. Dr Taylor had shown that the book of Genesis was made up of several documents produced by the patriarchs themselves. Moses was merely the transcriber or translator of these documents into their present form. If that is the case, then the early chapters of Genesis are perhaps the oldest writings we have. Incidentally, it is never said anywhere that Moses is the author of Genesis, though his authorship of other books in the Pentateuch is plainly stated (see Mark 12:26 and John 5:46). But one big question remains, that is, the occurrence some 162 times of the name Jehovah (YHWH) or Lord in the book of Genesis, including some 40 times on the lips of the speakers in Genesis.

We all know the answer of the Higher Critics to this problem. They simply state that Genesis is a compilation of several legends, distinguished by the different names for God, in Genesis and elsewhere throughout the Pentateuch. This reduces these books to a hotch-potch of myth and legend, with little or no basis in fact. Thus we cannot be sure of even the existence of Abraham, let alone the important events in his life.

EXODUS 6:3

Our starting point must be at Exodus 6:3, where the Lord

declares,

'I am the LORD. I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac and unto Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name Jehovah I did not make myself known to them.'

Not only the Higher Critics, but also conservative scholars have been puzzled by these words. Oswald T. Allis, in some Bible Study notes in **The Life of Faith** for October, 1963, says,

'"By my name Jehovah I was not known to them". The best and simplest explanation of these words is the one indicated by the words we have been considering ". . . and they shall know that I am Jehovah" (Exodus 7:17). That the name Jehovah was known and used long before the time of Moses is clearly indicated (Genesis 4:26) but that the full redemptive significance of the name was not revealed until the Exodus.'

But Exodus 6:3 says plainly that the name Jehovah was not previously known. In the **New Bible Dictionary**, in the article 'God' it is clear that the issue is confused by the necessity of refuting the hypothesis which makes Exodus 6:3 a duplicate by the priestly writer (P) of the account in chapter 3. So the term 'El Shaddai' (God Almighty) is reduced to a simple statement that 'He, YHWH, was such a God (El) as was competent (sadday) to fulfil (the promise)', thus practically emptying of meaning the great term 'El Shaddai'. In the **New Bible Dictionary** (first edition) the comment on Exodus 6:3 begins with the words,

'Contrary to the statements of modern criticism, God is not here announcing a new name by which he is to be called'.

What are we to make of this? In Genesis 17:1 it says, *'The Lord appeared to Abram and said, I am Almighty God, walk thou before me and be perfect.'* It was such an important occasion that God changed his name to Abraham. This fits in with the plain meaning of Exodus 6:3, which says, as we remember, *'I appeared to Abraham (etc.) as God Almighty, but by my name Jehovah I was not known to them'*. We may say then that the name Jehovah was not known to the patriarchs in Genesis.

GENESIS COMPILED BY MOSES

What is the explanation? A solution has been suggested by Air Commodore P. J. Wiseman in his book **New Discoveries in Babylonia about Genesis**. His thesis is that Genesis was composed by the patriarchs themselves, and that the tablets on which they inscribed their family history were among the archives that Moses brought out of Egypt. He goes on to say that when Moses transcribed these tablets for the Hebrews of his day he had to find a name which was acceptable to them and understandable by them. The names which had been used in Genesis, *'Most High God'* and *'Almighty God'* had been debased by Egyptian usage and were no longer acceptable. He says that the Egyptians and Babylonians each had scores of gods,

'and each in his own territory was regarded as "god almighty", as the creator and preserver of all the world and mankind. The Egyptians seemed to see nothing illogical in these scores of gods, each being creator and ruler of the world'.³

The term *'Almighty God'*, having become degraded by Egyptian polytheistic usage, was no longer acceptable, so Moses substituted the new name which had been revealed to him, namely YHWH or Jehovah.

Can this thesis be tested? The conclusion to which I have been drawn, after a study of the use of the names and titles for God in Genesis and the first few chapters of Exodus, is that God was known to the patriarchs as *'El Shaddai'*, God Almighty, and that this name or title was given to Abraham as a special revelation. It therefore must follow that the incidence of the name YHWH in Genesis is due to the hand of Moses the translator.

I think a distinction can be drawn between the simple use of a name for God in Scripture and a declaration or revelation concerning the name. Thus the appearance of the name YHWH in Genesis does not prove that the name was known to the patriarchs. But very grave difficulties concerning the nature of revelation are raised when we are told, as we have been told repeatedly, that the name YHWH was known to the patriarchs, but for them it had no

significance.

YHWH OR YHWH ELOHIM IN GENESIS

The name YHWH, either alone or in combination, occurs 162 times in Genesis. It does not occur at all in Genesis 1:1–2:4, and only once in Genesis 40–50 (Genesis 49:18). There must be some significance in the fact that the name YHWH does not occur at all in the story of Joseph from the time that he had contact with the servants of Pharaoh in prison.

The name YHWH occurs some 34 times in the mouths of the speakers in Genesis. In none of these occurrences does the speaker make any pronouncement concerning the nature of God. In each case where YHWH is used it would be perfectly possible to substitute another term for God without in any way affecting the sense of the passage. Some

Genesis 14:22	<i>'I have lifted up my hands to the LORD, the Most High God, the possessor of heaven and earth</i>
Genesis 21:33	<i>'Abraham . . . called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God.'</i>
Genesis 24:3	<i>'Swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and earth.'</i>
Genesis 28:16	<i>'Surely the LORD is in this place'. This must be read in the light of chapter 48:3, where Jacob says, 'God Almighty appeared to me at Luz.'</i>

Table 1. Cases where YHWH is used in Genesis requiring special mention.

instances require special mention as shown in Table 1.

The significant term in each case is the alternative rendering, *'Most High God'*, *'Everlasting God'*, and so on. We may then ask, how does the name YHWH come to be used here if it was not known to these speakers? The answer surely is that the name is there for the benefit of succeeding generations of Israelites.

Regarding the term *'Almighty'* and *'God Almighty'* in Scripture, P. J. Wiseman has this to say:

'There are some noteworthy facts regarding this word "Shaddai" to which sufficient attention has not been given. In the first place, the full composite title "El Shaddai" as stated in Exodus 6:3 is not used elsewhere than in Genesis, and these uses are on important occasions. (See 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14 and 48:3.) The next impressive fact is that the word "Shaddai" alone is used 42 times, and in almost every instance by persons writing or living outside Palestine, and in contact with Babylonian cuneiform modes of expression'.⁴

The first use of *'El Shaddai'* in Scripture is in Genesis 17:1, which is the occasion of one of the most important revelations made by God to Abraham. There are four other uses of the full title in Genesis. One, in Genesis 35:11, is on the occasion when Jacob's name is changed to Israel: *'I am God Almighty, be fruitful and multiply'*. Another is in

Genesis 48:3, where Jacob refers to God’s appearance to him at Bethel (Luz) in chapter 28:16.

The title ‘*Shaddai*’ is used by Balaam (Numbers 24:4, 16), by Naomi, who had just come from the land of Moab (Ruth 1:20,21), by all the speakers in Job some 31 times, by Isaiah (Isaiah 13:1,6: ‘*The burden of Babylon, . . . it shall come as a destruction from the Almighty*’), and also in Psalms 68:14 and 91:1, and in Ezekiel 1:24 and 10:5, and in Joel 1:15. Almost all of these occurrences have a Gentile origin, and that governs the use of the expression.

REVELATIONS OF GOD IN GENESIS

The revelatory or declaratory statements concerning God in Genesis are shown in Table 2.

Genesis 14:19, 20	<i>‘Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth, and blessed be God Most High.’</i>
Genesis 14:22	<i>‘I have sworn to the LORD God Most High, maker of heaven and earth.’</i>
Genesis 15:1	<i>‘Fear not, Abram, I am your shield.’</i>
Genesis 17:1	<i>‘The LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, I am God Almighty.’</i>
Genesis 21:33	<i>‘And called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God.’</i>
Genesis 22:14	<i>‘So Abraham called the name of that place The LORD will provide.’</i>
Genesis 24:3,7	<i>‘I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and earth.’</i>
Genesis 28:3	<i>‘God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful.</i>
Genesis 28:16	<i>‘Surely the LORD is in this place.’ (This must be read in the light of Jacob’s explanation in Genesis 48:3.)</i>
Genesis 31:13	<i>‘I am the God of Bethel.’</i>
Genesis 31:42	<i>‘If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been on my side</i>
Genesis 31:53	<i>‘The God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us.’</i>
Genesis 35:11	<i>‘I am God Almighty; be fruitful and multiply.’</i>
Genesis 43:14	<i>‘May God Almighty grant you mercy before the man.’</i>
Genesis 46:3	<i>‘I am God (El), the God of your father.’</i>
Genesis 49:25	<i>‘By the God of your father who will help you, by God Almighty who will bless you.’</i>

Table 2. The revelatory or declaratory statements concerning God in Genesis.

In times of crisis, and in moments of high significance, God revealed Himself to the patriarchs or was invoked by them. The titles which were used, which were full of meaning for the patriarchs, were ‘*Most High God*’, ‘*God of heaven*’, ‘*Everlasting God*’, ‘*God of (their) fathers*’ and most important of all, ‘*Almighty God*’ or ‘*El Shaddai*’.

God has many titles, but only one name, LORD (YHWH). But YHWH is never used at all in any covenant dealings between God and the patriarchs. Considering the importance of this name in the subsequent dealings of God

with His people, it seems peculiar that the name was known to the patriarchs but that its significance meant nothing to them.

Genesis 17 is the occasion of a new and important revelation to Abraham, even the promise of a son in his old age, as well as the giving of the rite of circumcision. In this son the promises were to be fulfilled, and this was significant, not only for Abraham, but for all succeeding generations. So important was the occasion that God changed Abram’s name to Abraham. It was then that God first revealed Himself as ‘*El Shaddai, God Almighty*’. It was this God, the Almighty, who would fulfil His promise to give Abraham a son. It was an exalted title, but one in line with the knowledge Abram already had of God as the Most High God.

The book of Exodus begins with an important step forward in the history of revelation, even the calling of the descendants of Abraham to be a people of God. On that momentous occasion God revealed His true name to Moses, and from then on He was known as YHWH, their covenant God. Beginning with Exodus 6:3 the name YHWH took on a significance it never had before, for the simple reason that the name itself and the significant fact that it was the covenant name of God had never been disclosed to mankind before that occasion.

I think it may be agreed that the next and final great intervention of God in human affairs, and the occasion of an important new departure in His dealings with men was also the occasion of the revelation of the human name of His only Son. ‘*You shall call His name Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins*’ (Matthew 1:21).

THE NAME OF GOD IN EXODUS AND BEYOND

The pronouncements concerning the name of God, as shown in Table 3, in the early chapters of Exodus only

serve to strengthen the argument set out earlier.

From this point on the phrase ‘*I am the LORD*’ begins to be used in Scripture. It is never used before Exodus 6:3. But immediately afterwards we have the pronouncement, ‘*I am the LORD, and I will bring you out . . . I will deliver you . . . and I will redeem you . . . I am the LORD*’ Exodus 6:6–8). At the same time the terms ‘*Everlasting God*’, ‘*Most High God*’, and ‘*God of heaven*’ almost cease to be used by the covenant people of YHWH. These terms are almost always used in subsequent ages in a Gentile context or setting.

Exodus 3:6	<i>'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.'</i>
Exodus 3:13–15	<i>'What is his name? What shall I say to them? God said to Moses, I AM WHO I AM . . . I AM has sent me to you. . . . The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob has sent me to you.'</i>
Exodus 6:3	<i>'I am the LORD, I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them.'</i>

Table 3. The pronouncements concerning the name of God in the early chapters of Exodus.

'God of heaven' is used by Cyrus, in Ezra and Nehemiah, in Daniel and in Jonah. 'Most High God' occurs a few times in the Psalms, in Daniel, in Micah 6:6, and significantly in Mark 5:7 and Acts 16:17. These terms were rich in meaning for the patriarchs, but ceased to be used by their descendants from the Exodus onwards. Why? Surely because the people had now been given the covenant name YHWH. The time was not ripe earlier for the name YHWH to be revealed, for from Abraham came Ishmael, and from Isaac came Esau. By the time of Moses however, the separate identity of the people of Israel had been established.

REMAINING QUESTIONS

One or two questions still remain unanswered. Genesis 4:26 says, 'At that time men began to call on the name of the LORD.' This verse is used as a proof-text that YHWH was known in patriarchal times. But this must be evaluated in the light of the other evidence we have adduced. It is impossible that the whole theory should be overthrown by one isolated verse. Surely men began to call on the LORD by the term by which they knew Him.

Another question concerns Jochebed, the mother of Moses, whose name is variously rendered as 'Jah is honour' or 'YHWH is glory'. All that can be said in answer to this at the present stage is that the name Jochebed does not occur in the account of the birth of Moses in Exodus 2, its first occurrence being in Exodus 6:20. And in the second place there are no names found in Genesis which are compounded with YHWH, such as is common subsequently in Israel.

CONCLUSION

I must say that the idea here unfolded of Abraham in his wanderings lifting up his eyes to the 'Almighty God' is one which opens one's eyes to the grandeur and majesty of God as revealed to Abraham. It was a conception which must surely have been very satisfying to Abraham, for it was the 'Most High God, maker of heaven and earth' who would fulfil these promises to make his seed as the

stars of the heaven for multitude. Abraham worshipped no mere family God; he worshipped the Almighty, the God of heaven and earth. It was a magnificent revelation — a fuller one was to come — but this was as much as Abraham could comprehend. At the same time the knowledge of God as the Almighty and as the Most High was carried by Abraham's Gentile descendants to the surrounding nations, bearing witness to them of His eternal power and Godhead.

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