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JUST WHO IS THIS YHWH?

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Let's go back , say, about 3,000 years. It is a nice sunny day in the desert of Sinai -it's always a fine sunny day in the desert - Moses goes to the top of Mt. Sinai, or Mt. Horeb as it was known in those days, and gets the tablets - no he is not sick - but those tablets will help all people both sick and well from this day on.

Who did he get them from, and that's where we came in - in our orders we know Him by over 20 names and the Bible dictionary lists 18, but more of these later.

What does the spelling mean and why no vowels? The Jews were simply economizing on parchment. In the Hebrew language there were no vowels written, just consonants. Hence David is DVD, also the letters Y and J were interchangeable, so the name of God could be expressed as YHWH or JHVH
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The King James Bible put in the vowels E, O & A so we got JEHOVAH and more recent scholarship favours the alternative YAHWEH. It is not a question of Biblical accuracy, but a debate among scholars as to how a word in a foreign language was pronounced 3,500 years ago. But let us go back to the second millennium BC, that's about 4,000 years ago, and start with the patriarchs historical figures, a part of the migration of semi-nomadic clans which brought a new population to Palestine in the early centuries of the second millennium BC. These were clans who settled where they could find land and organized themselves into city states with a feudal pattern. But we must not rest here, we must ask after their place in the history of religion, specifically Israel's religion. It is here indeed that our principal interest in them lies. Except for this they would concern us no more than do other semi-nomads who roamed the world long ago. The Bible, of course regards Moses as the one who consolidated Israel's religion - as indeed he did. But it really begins with Abraham. Indeed that history of redemption which is the Bible's central theme in both Testaments is begun with him. We are told that Abraham left Haran at the bidding of his God, having been promised land and prosperity in the place that would be shown to him (Genesis, Chapter 12). This promise, repeatedly renewed, was given also to Isaac and to Jacob, and reaffirmed to Moses and it began to find fulfillment in the giving of the promised land. Viewed thus, Abraham stands as the ultimate ancestor of Israel's faith. To deduce the nature of the patriarchal religion from the Genesis narrative is not easy. According to one school of thought the God of the patriarchs was none other than YAHWAH. Not only did He call Abraham from Haran (Genesis) but he had been worshipped by man since the very dawn of time (Ch. 4:26). But elsewhere (Ex. 2) it is explicitly stated that although it was really YAHWEH who had appeared to the patriarchs, He had not been known to them by that name. The other strands of the narrative therefore studiously avoid mention of YAHWEH until they come to Moses and speak of the patriarchal deity simply as ELOHIM.

Now theologically speaking there is really no contradiction in this. All the patriarchal narratives were written from the point of view of YAHWEH theology by men who were worshippers of YAHWEH, whether they used the name or not, they had no doubts that the God of the patriarchs was actually YAHWEH, God of Israel.

YAHWISM began with Moses as the Bible explicitly states (Exodus 6) and as all the evidence agrees. Whatever the origins the use of the name YAWWEH in worship, no trace of it before Moses has yet been found. Anderson: in the "Living World of the Old Testament" makes the following point:

"The story of Moses' encounter with the God of the Fathers and the burning bush is one of the masterpieces of the Old Testament. In the Old Testament fire is frequently a symbol for the MANIFESTATION of God. At first Moses, like most of us wondered how a bush could burn without being consumed. But the focus of attention quickly shifts from the bush to the God who speaks. The way God is described as speaking is clear evidence that the oppression of the Hebrew slavery in Egypt lay heavily on Moses' heart. It must be remembered that Moses had run away from Egypt after, in an outburst of anger he had killed a slave driver. When God speaks to Moses, it is a declaration of what He plans to do. According to the Mosaic faith God is not aloof from the scene of human travail and oppression. He takes part in human affairs to work out His purpose. He makes Himself known by His deeds."

One of Moses' protests was that, if he were to go to the Hebrews in Egypt and tell them of this experience at Sinai, he would need authority. What better evidence than to know God's name?

At this point we come to one of the most cryptic passages in the Old Testament. According to the narrative, God answered Moses "I am who I am" or "I will be what I will be". He was instructed to tell the people "I AM" has sent me unto you. In the next verse Moses was to tell the people that YHWH the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had sent him.

The name YHWH has had an interesting history. As we have said, in the Old Testament the Hebrew language was written only with consonants. On the basis of the Greek texts, it is now believed that the original pronunciation of the name was YAHWEH, but because of its holy character,
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the name was withdrawn from speech during the period of the exile, as it was felt that the use of the name of God was breaking the third commandment "Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord thy God in vain", so substitute words were used.

The Inter-Varsity Fellowship dictionary, the major product of the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research, has studied the Name of God as follows:
GOD - the derivation of the English word is uncertain. For the Christian concept of God, the Bible is our only textbook. In its pages we have the self-revelation of God.

Hebrew words for God - EL - ELOHIM - YAHWEH (JEHOVAH).

EL derives from a root indicating strength or might when applied to the Deity, it is frequently coupled with some such epithet as Almighty, for example EL-SHADAI, God Almighty or All Sufficient.

In considering the various name titles of God in the Old Testament, the above three are of basic importance.

EL-ELYON, the most high God, was the title of God as worshipped by Melchizedek. In Genesis we read how Abraham met with Melchizedek, the priest of EL ELYON. The

words YAHWEH-ELOHIM are combined in Genesis although Elohim alone is used in the conversation between Eve and the serpent.

Many times the name of God was joined with other words such as EL-ELOHE-ISRAEL - Jacob reaching Shechem, bought a piece of land, erected an altar and called it EL ELOHE ISRAEL In this manner he commemorates the recent encounter with the angel at the place he had called PENIEL - "the face of God" (Genesis 32). He thus receives Israel as his new name.

In Genesis 22 when the angel of the Lord had pointed to a ram as a substitute for Isaac, Abraham named the place YAHWEH JIREH, "The Lord provides". Moses, after the defeat of the Amalekites also erected an altar calling it YAHWEH NISSI "The Lord is my banner" as did Gideon as recorded in Judges. In Samuel, David used the term YAHWEH SABBATH "Lord of Hosts" the DIVINE TITLE as worshipped at SHILOH. It is a common title used by the prophets 88 times in Jeremiah, and is used to show YAHWEH as, at all times, the Saviour and Protector of His people. To go on would be tedious, but these are just a few examples which we can find encouraging 2,500 years later. Whatever its origin it had a new meaning at the time of Exodus. The Israelites knew and worshipped God as the One who had heard their cry of oppression, who had graciously intervened on their behalf and Who had led them towards a future full of promise. In itself the word YAHWEH can only be a name, but as interpreted by Moses, it had just one meaning I AM YAHWEH who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. To worship YAHWEH was to remember that revealing event, to accept its demands and to live in its promise.

However scholars of the last century sought to identify several strands within the narrative of Genesis and Exodus. The New Bible Handbook by Rev. Manley, M.A., Fellow Christ's College Cambridge, points out that many of these have been discredited with more recent archaeological discoveries. These have supported the unity of the authority and virtually all conservative scholars would see the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, as substantially the word of Moses. For the Hebrew people the names showed the character of God and each had a special meaning.

Until the last century all our knowledge of the ancient world either came from the Bible or was derived from the writings of historians such as Josephus or Herodotus or from the literary traditions of Greece, India and other nations.

But in recent years archaeological research has thrown a flood of light upon the early history of mankind. Great monuments had long borne their silent witness when early in the 19th century the deciphering of the Egyptian hieroglyphics opened up a new area. Layard's excavation in Mesopotamia came soon after and then the discovery of the key to the Babylonian cuneiform writing, until at last the

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way was open to the recovery and translation of the manifold records of the past.

The Egyptian hieroglyphics, originally pictures, stand each for a word or syllable, are mostly found engraved upon stone or other hard material. The Babylonian cuneiform writing is also made up of symbols each representing a single syllable. These consist of groups of wedge shaped (cuneiform) lines, variously arrayed and chiefly occur on tablets of clay. The ancient scribe would choose a clod of clay from the Euphrates or the Nile, reduce it to the size required, smooth it to a flat surface and while it was still moist, stab it with a metal stylus having a wedged shaped end, so impressing the characters on the clay. This was then hardened in the sun or baked in an oven when it acquired a

durability which has preserved it through thousands of years.

Thousands of these tablets dug up out of sand, together with the inscription on monuments, rocks, or the walls of buildings now tell us the story of the past, sometimes a legend or poetry and sometimes in contemporary records of accurately dated history. Among the tablets have been found commercial receipts and contracts, official instructions, official correspondence, catalogues, law books, and all other things for which writing is used for civilized people." Digging up the Past", Sir Leonard Wooley calls it in his book and has become a scientific process.

Some "TEL" or mound of ancient ruins is selected, shafts are sunk, probings made and surface rubbish removed. Then the treasures that lie below are gradually revealed.

These mounds, marking the sites of ancient cities, are often of considerable height owing to the eastern habit, when a city had fallen into decay, of building afresh upon its ruins. In excavating at Jericho for example ruins were found near the surface belonging to the Byzantine period, below them those of the city built by Heil the Bethelite as recorded in 1st Kings.

Excavation in Ur has laid bare whole streets of the time of Abraham, with two storied houses. Some of them showing a considerable degree of comfort and refinement. There are temples also, and tablets have been found containing hymns that once were sung in them.

Literary achievement is proved by the existence of libraries and dictionaries, mathematical tables and even a copy book for learners. One famous monument of which a cast can be seen in the British Museum contains Hammurabi's Law Code which includes many precepts parallel to the Mosaic Law. Abraham therefore, in his youth found himself a citizen of no mean city; the world was already old in his day. In Abraham's city Ur and in his day, writing was commonly practiced. Genealogies were carefully kept on inscribed tablets long before Abraham's day and probably constitute the oldest elements of the Bible (Professor Sir Leonard Wooley).

Many records and much correspondence of that period have been found both in Babylonian cuneiform and in the ancient Hebrew Script.

Dr. E. Robertson, Professor of Semetic languages in Manchester University has argued that the whole Pentateuch existed in writing in or before the days of Samuel.

It is perhaps worth noting in passing that scholars of the early 19th century questioned the reliability of the Bible on the grounds that Moses could not have written the Pentateuch since writing was not invented in those days. As we have seen from the above data recent scholarship has discredited their efforts and we would be wise to not only accept the sacred page as reliable but its wisdom to heart.

Excavation in and around Jerusalem has verified and illustrated what the books of Samuel and Kings tell of the building work of David and Solomon. Mt. Ophel to the southeast of the temple area, has been shown to be the site of the "City of David" and the gutter or shaft by which Joab obtained access to

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the city has been opened out. The upper parts of the Jebusite stone bastion, Millo, and David's tower as recorded in Samuel have been uncovered and many

parts of David's building and repairs identified as recorded in 1 Kings.

The temple of Solomon, Zerubbabel and Herod have long since disappeared but the undoubted site of the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite on which stood the altar of burnt offering can still be seen under the "Dome of the Rock", miscalled the "Mosque of Omar".

A thrill passes through the Christian visitor as he beholds the place and paces over the temple area, built up around the ridge of the hill on the huge foundation stones laid by Solomon some of which can still be seen.

The discussion in this paper so far is merely an historical lecture unless we can all learn something from it. It does not help us in our daily living unless we go on to know HIM as the One who provides for His people. Perhaps Wesley in one of his hymns sums it up best by writing:

God or all power and truth and grace,
Who shall from age to age endure,
Whose Word, when heaven and earth shall pass
Remains and stands for evermore.

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