

What's in a Name?

Why does God's name matter so much? Even a cursory reading of Scripture reveals a wide array of passages that refer to God's *name* when we would expect mention of God himself instead. So, for example, what does it mean to pray for his "name's sake," as Psalm 106 puts it? Why not simply say "for the sake of Yahweh"? One can easily imagine how this developed. At some point early within Judaism—and undoubtedly because of the third commandment, forbidding the flippant use of God's name—Jews ceased to speak the name of God aloud altogether, instead saying *Adonai*, my Lord. (Many orthodox Jews today will not even use this word unless speaking of God in a worshipful setting, replacing it with *adoshem*—mere gibberish—when in the secular arena.)

This squeamishness worked its way into the written word as well. As biblical Hebrew contains only consonants, when later scribes encountered the Name, YHWH, they would insert the vowel points for the word *Adonai*, so that scholars are unsure of the exact reading of these consonants. Yahweh is the best guess. In fact, the name Jehovah springs from the attempt to read this strange blending of YHWH and *Adonai* when translated into Latin. A tortured history, to be sure. In any case, the whole notion of the name likely arises for this reason. Pious Jews today still will not speak God's name, preferring instead to call him *ha-Shem*—simply, the Name. It seems that when we pray for the sake of his name, somehow we are praying for the sake of God himself, for the whole sum of his attributes that constitute his glorious nature—as the Word of God itself makes clear in a number of places.

Scripture makes much of the time when God finally reveals his name to Moses. And indeed both stories discussed in the first chapter illuminate the importance of the name, especially as it relates to God's character.

The Burning Bush

In order to understand fully the significance of the name, we must return to the moment when God revealed his name, YHWH, to Moses. As Moses tends to the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, he reaches Horeb, called the mountain of God, and notices a bush in flames but that did not burn up. His curiosity piqued, he approaches the bush. God calls to him from within the bush, tells him to remove his sandals while on this holy ground, and reveals himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Of course, it is important for us to remember that God reveals himself in this dramatic way because he needs a leader, an intercessor, for his people. He is not simply showing himself to Moses; he is showing himself to Moses *so that* Moses can lead his people out of slavery and into the Promised Land. He tells Moses, “I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey. . . . So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt” (Exodus 3:8, 10). He reveals himself because he has a purpose for his people, and he needs a servant through whom he can accomplish that purpose. Moses is that servant. The call of the intercessor and the revelation of the divine name seem inextricably linked.

The trouble is that Moses is a reluctant servant. He doubts God. His first question has to do with his own identity. He asks the understandable question, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (verse 11). He recognizes that as an intercessor, he is hopelessly inadequate in himself—an important truth for us to remember today. God implicitly acknowledges Moses’ inadequacy by answering this question with the simple promise, “I will be with you” (verse 12)—literally “I AM with you,” already hinting at the divine name. In effect he says, “It does not matter who you are. What matters is that I will go with you and am with you now.” But still Moses wavers.



He presses God: “If who I am does not matter, then who are *you* exactly?” He couches this question in a hypothetical situation. Suppose he goes to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. They recognize immediately that Moses is nothing special. “No worries,” Moses says, “God is going with us.” Then what happens if they ask him God’s name? Now, this question has more to it than what it seems at first glance. This question seeks not simply a name—as if the Israelites did not know who the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was—but a character, a reputation. Who exactly is this God that their forefathers served? After all, Israel is in an entirely new situation. This God had never yet faced a superpower like Egypt. Does he have what it takes to deliver his people?

God does not condemn Moses for his doubt. Instead he overcomes that doubt by the slow and steady revelation of his character. He begins by answering Moses’ question directly: “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites. ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (verse 14). Who is God? God is God. He is who he is. (And he is—he really does exist.) The beauty of this name is that it does not limit God. Were God to reveal himself by any other name, we would soon distort him or place him in our neat theological boxes. If he were simply Father, we would carry into our understanding of God all our human misconceptions of fatherhood. If he were no more than Lord, we might soon see him as unapproachable, a despot. If he were Savior only, we could easily remake him as weak, impotent, so forgiving as to be little more than a cosmic doormat for sinners. But he is all these things—Father, Lord, Savior—and more. He is God. He is who he is.

This limitless, unbounded, active Being reveals himself as Yahweh, a Hebrew word that sounds very similar to “I AM.” He sends his intercessor Moses to the Israelites with a message:

“Say to the Israelites, ‘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, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation. Go, assemble the elders of Israel and say to them, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—appeared to me and said: I have watched over you and have seen what has been

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done to you in Egypt. And I have promised to bring you up out of your misery in Egypt into the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites—a land flowing with milk and honey.” (Verses 15-17)

This self-contained, incomprehensible Being makes two key points here. First, he wishes to be known as Yahweh—the God who is always being himself—from generation to generation. Forever. This name matters. Second, as his identity is beyond our understanding, he will reveal himself by his actions. Already he tells us that Yahweh is the sort of God who will rescue his people.

Indeed, much of the book of Exodus helps us understand who God is precisely. In the signs and wonders he performs in Egypt, he displays his mighty power. In the death of the firstborn and the destruction of Egypt’s army, he reveals his justice, righteousness, and wrath. In delivering his people out of bondage in Egypt, we glimpse his love, mercy, and faithfulness to his people—a glimpse only, for we must wait for the cross to see it more perfectly. When Moses stretched out his hands to part the Red Sea, did the shadow of the cross fall upon the scene? Surely it did. In giving his people the Law, does he not teach them his holiness, his goodness, his moral perfection? Even the description of the Tabernacle—for many of us little more than an agonizing stretch in our Bible-reading plans—discloses God’s royalty, his holiness, and his willingness to dwell among his people. But perhaps he divulges his character most transparently in Exodus just after the incident with the golden calf.

After the Golden Calf

In Exodus 32, Moses pleads with God to spare the sinful nation. He successfully intercedes for the people, securing their forgiveness. Nevertheless, God’s anger persists—which takes us into chapter 33. He will not destroy them, but neither will he accompany them any longer: “But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way” (verse 3). Understanding well Israel’s proclivity for sin, he knows he will be back in the same boat before long—and what if this time there is no one like Moses to pray for the people? We can appreciate God’s reticence.

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But Moses remains unconvinced. He presses God for a commitment: “If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all other people on the face of the earth?” (verses 15-16). At first glance we might think this a manipulative attempt to get God to demonstrate his love for Israel, something like a spurned wife coercing her husband into a lavish, expensive show of his affection. The focus seems to be on Israel’s special place, after all. What has happened to Moses’ concern for God’s glory?

A glance ahead to Deuteronomy 4:5-8 indicates that even here Moses is thinking primarily of God’s honor among the nations:

See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?

God’s special attention to Israel—his giving of the Law, his presence among his people—has an unmistakably evangelistic thrust about it. The nations will see what Israel has and wonder at the sort of God who favors them. So when Moses pleads for God’s Presence to accompany them, he does so knowing that the nations are watching Israel. He desires that God’s glory would grow in the eyes of a watching world.

God concurs: “I will do the very thing you have asked” (Exodus 33:17). At this point we expect Moses to fall on his knees in grateful worship, then rise up and lead his people into the Promised Land. But instead he makes a bold, surprising request: “Now show me your glory” (verse 18). Show me your glory! Has the faithful mediator Moses turned egotistical before our very eyes? Before we condemn him

too strongly, let us remember that the overarching theme of this whole passage (Exodus 32-34) is the intercession of Moses. Somehow or other this request must also be tied to his work of prayer.

And so it is. God's glory, the glory of his name, takes center stage once more. The Lord grants Moses' request, but in order to reveal his glory, he must proclaim his name and his character. And the LORD said, "I will cause all my *goodness* to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my *name*, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (verse 19, emphasis added). When God manifests his glory, the focus is not on the physical appearance but the merciful, compassionate character of Yahweh. Moses had prayed for his name's sake, and now we begin to appreciate what that name is. Notice that even the description of God's character given here even sounds a bit like the divine name given in Exodus 3.

"I am who I am."

"I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy."

"I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion."

In each case the tautological structure stresses the freedom of the self-existing God in making himself known. His name, his freedom, his glory, his character: all meet and intertwine here.

God grants Moses' request then, but with an important condition: Moses must not see God's face. Ironically, even the faithful mediator Moses could not experience the unmediated presence of God. The undimmed glory of God's purity, holiness, compassion, love, power would overwhelm him. He would certainly perish. In a strange paradox, God says that he will shield Moses with his hand until he has passed by. Moses can then look upon his back.

Interestingly, before this blessed encounter occurs, the Lord has Moses prepare two tablets, like those he destroyed in chapter 32, before he comes up the mountain. God reinstates his covenant before Moses sees his glory. Even here intercession remains the focus. Moses' intercession has been successful.



Israel experiences absolute restoration, the renewal of the covenant. In context we see that this short story is not about Moses, not about seeing God's glory primarily. It is tied to the larger story of Moses pleading for the people and the redemption of Israel. Moses intercedes for the sake of God's name, and his intercession is successful precisely because the name represents a God of infinite love, mercy, and righteousness.

The LORD, the LORD, Gracious and Compassionate

The interruption over, we hold our collective breath as readers, waiting to see God's glory—even only as captured by the written word. In an act of breathtaking condescension, the Lord comes down to Moses.

As he passes him by, he proclaims his name, Yahweh:

And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation." (34:6-7)

What is in a name? In Yahweh's case, the whole majestic wonder of his perfect character. He is a compassionate and gracious to God. He is slow to become angry. His grace and compassion lead him to form covenants with sinful humanity. When Scripture says he abounds in "love," the Hebrew term used is *hesed*, one of the most important concepts in the Old Testament. *Hesed* means more than simple love. It refers to Yahweh's loyalty to the covenant he made with Israel, even in the face of wickedness and rebellion. God's own analogy will help explain this for us. This is the love of Hosea for Gomer—sinful, wayward, adulterate Gomer—when he remained faithful to his marriage covenant with her even after she breaks it repeatedly and dramatically.

God not only abounds in this loving covenant loyalty, but in faithfulness too. He has never failed them, and he never will. In fact, he maintains his *hesed* to thousands, forgiving wickedness, rebellion,

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and sin. The Hebrew more literally reads “*bearing* wickedness, rebellion, and sin,” even at this early moment hinting at Christ’s eventual bearing of all humanity’s sin on his shoulders. Of course, this does not mean God leaves sin unpunished. To do so would make him less than God. Eventually his justice prevails, even if it comes a few generations down the road. We must remember that God is glorified equally in the salvation of the faithful and the destruction of the unrepentant—a point we are all too easily wont to forget.

This is the name God proclaims to Moses. His glory is unparalleled, his love unfathomable, his righteousness unequalled. Indeed, so central to the Jewish understanding of God’s character is this proclamation that it is repeated six more times in the Old Testament.

A Lesson Well Learned

Unsurprisingly, the next place in the Old Testament we read this description of God’s character comes in Numbers 14:17-19, precisely at the point where Moses intercedes once more for Israel. To review briefly, the Israelites have come to the cusp of the Promised Land. Right at the moment when they should triumphantly march into their inheritance, they doubt God and complain that he brought them out of Egypt. Only Joshua and Caleb remain faithful among the spies. The Lord prepares to destroy Israel once more, but once more Moses effectively intercedes—fearing especially what the Egyptians and Canaanites will say about God if he should destroy his people now.

That takes us through verse 16. Notice, though, that Moses’ prayer has not yet concluded. He continues his intercession in verses 17-19, striking a slightly different tune:

Now may the Lord’s strength be displayed, just as you have declared: “The LORD is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.” *In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now.* (Emphasis added)

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If Moses is going to pray for his name's sake, then he must first understand what exactly the name means. Who is this God known as Yahweh? After Sinai, after the golden calf, he learned his lesson well. He saw God's glory—the glory of his character. And now he prays according to the character. This is who you are, God. This is what your name reveals. Be what you are.

Should it come as any surprise that the Lord hears his prayer? "The LORD replied, 'I have forgiven them, as you asked'" (verse 20).