

Yahweh and Moses

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The name “Yahweh” might be a good indicator for the “Scientific Historical” existence of Moses [By scientific history I mean the historical data without the metaphysics].

Yahweh is a “sentence name” and this is really rare. We might find a full name (the first name and the surname) that represents a sentence, but it is very rare for the ‘first name’ to be a sentence.

We need here to differentiate between compound names and sentence names: Ismael is as compound name that consists of two words: ‘Isma’ and ‘El’, which means The hearing of El. The Semitic people are famous with the compound-names, for example In Arabic we have Abdullah (Abd-Allah) which means ‘The Servant of Allah’, Nasrallah (Nasr-Allah) which means ‘The victory of Allah’. In Carthage: Hannibal (Hanno-Bae’l), which probably means ‘The happiness of Bae’l’, Hasdrubal (Hasdru-Ba’el) which probably means ‘The support of Bae’l’.

However, these are not true sentence-names, but just a compound of two words. For all the names I know in Arabic, the only name I am aware of that is a sentence-first-name was the nick name for a famous ancient poet (Ta-ab-bata-Shar-ran).

So, my argument here is that “sentence names” are very rare (at least in the middle east), therefore, it is really surprising that the sacred name for the God of the Israelites is a sentence-name. The famous English translation for this name is “I am who I am”, which is a long translation, and we could shorten this translation to: “I-is-I. It should be noted that there are different interpretations and translations for this name, but they all agree that this name is a “sentence name” and is the main issue in this article.

So, for the Israelites tribe (which includes the Jews and the Samaritans) to have a total consensus for this name to be the sacred name of their only God, then this consensus could be explained by assuming that this name was enforced by a charismatic and authoritarian leader of the tribe.

Let us clarify the process of analysis here: we captured here an anomaly. Anomalies don’t normally happen gradually (otherwise they are not anomalies), but highly likely, they appear suddenly and abruptly. The anomaly here is about the structural name of God for the Israelites, and my argument here is that this name couldn’t have been adopted gradually, but it seems that it appeared suddenly, which does indicate an enforcement from a well-recognized leader of this tribe.

From the oral tradition and written accounts of the Israelites (Jews and Samaritans), the name Yahweh has been firmly linked with Moses, and there are no viable alternatives for the origin of this name. This would increase the probability of the existence of a well-recognized authoritarian leader for the Israelites tribe by the name “Moses”.

Now ... the origin story for the name “Yahweh” is mentioned in the Torah. However, there is an “understanding contradiction” in the story which we could suggest a reconciliation for it:

In Exodus 3:14, Moses ask God about his name:

Exodus 3 :14 Moses said to God, Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them? 15 God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you (NIV).

But we have a contradiction here: Moses and the Israelites know the name “El” for their God (which is pronounced as “Eel”).

El was the name of the supreme God of the Semitic people, and the only God for the Israelites. The Israelites used this name of God in many of their names: Ismael (Isma-El), Israel (Isra-El), Samuel (Samu-El), Abdiel (Abd-El), Gabriel (Gabri-El), Michael (Micha-El). “El” has been transformed through the generations to “Elohim” for the Jews, and to “Allah” for the Arabs.

So, the Israelites had a known name for God. Therefore, how could Moses ask for the name of God!!

Notice that this is not a “textual contradiction”, but an “understanding contradiction”: Our understanding and interpretation to the historical accounts does not fit with our understanding and interpretation for the story in Exodus 3:14.

We could suggest the following possible reconciliation: we can suppose that the name El (which is pronounced “Eel”) did have a funny meaning in the Egyptian language at that time, therefore, the Israelites were reluctant to use this name in public. So, the request of Moses for the name of God was a subtle and diplomatic referencing to this issue.

However, God gave Moses a name that probably was funnier to the Egyptians than their meaning of “El”. In this name (i.e. Yahweh) there is probably a hidden message for Moses: How the meaning of the name of God in a foreign language going to be an important issue if this God gave Moses a stick that can change at well to a giant scary snake!

The previous argument was to find a possible metaphysical reconciliation through the same metaphysical source (in this case: the Torah). So, let us put the metaphysics aside and return back to the scientific historical analysis:

The name “Yahweh” does not fit with the Semitic naming of gods, and there are no similar precedencies for this name. So, we could conclude that this name appeared suddenly and became the sacred name of God for the whole tribe. This could properly be understood if we assumed that this name was enforced by a highly authoritarian leader.

Now ... the accounts related to the origin of the name “Yahweh” and the existence of the leader “Moses” are based on the Torah which is derived from the Jewish oral tradition (according to the scientific-historical-perspective).

But this is not very accurate: the origin of the name “Yahweh” and the existence of the leader “Moses” has two distinctive oral traditions:

The Israelites have split into two camps about 900BC: the Jews and the Samaritans. Actually, the first confirmed and undisputed archeological evidence for the Israelites belong to the Samaritans and their King Ahab which he is mentioned in an Assyrian Stele dated about 850BC.

These two camps (the Jews and the Samaritans) hated and fought each other for centuries, but they both have shared stories that don't contradict with Science or Normality: the mere existence of King David and his son Solomon doesn't contradict with Normality, and both were supposedly before about 50 years before the split. The mere existence of a leader of the Israelite tribe with the name Moses doesn't contradict with Normality and this man was supposedly about 200 years before the split.

So, the accounts in Exodus 3:14 does contradict with Science and Normality, therefore, we cannot accept it from the “scientific historical perspective”. However, the conclusions about the existence of “Moses” and the sudden adoption of the name Yahweh don't contradict with Science or Normality, and both conclusions have two distinct oral traditions: the Jewish oral tradition and the Samaritan oral traditions. This would give these two conclusions a higher level of credibility.

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Revision Notes:

This article has been published in Bart Ehrman blog (Platinum Post), and there have been some interesting discussions regarding it, and it might be useful to summarize the main points:

1# There have been discussions about the right translation of Yahweh. However, many literature have translated Yahweh as “I am who I am”, but there are many other translations. However, we can agree that the name Yahweh is a sentence name, and this article is based on this particular issue. In another words: the article here doesn't depend on the translation of Yahweh, but it depends on the fact that Yahweh is a sentence name.

2# There is an inscription discovered from the time of Amenhotep III about 1350BC, which talk about the “Shasu of YHWH”. The Shasu are Semitic people that probably

were the Bedouin in Arabia. This inscription has been regarded by some Scholars as an evidence for the existence of YHWH before Moses.

However, if I am reading a text saying “the Arabs of X”, “The Jews of Y”, and “the Canaanite of Z”, then the first thing that comes to my mind is that X,Y,Z are names of places and not names of Gods.

The Context in the text doesn’t suggest that this is a name of God. Furthermore, the Old Egyptian, Hebrew, and Canaanite scripts don’t contain any vowels, they are all consonant letters. To my understanding, “God” in old Hebrew was written as ALH and pronounced as Elloh, while “curse” is written as ALH and pronounced as Olloh. Therefore, the word “ALH” is understood from the “context”.

Therefore, YHWH in the Egyptian text doesn’t necessarily pronounced as Yahweh. This would increase the probability for the “more reasonable conclusion” that the name here is for a place.

Now ... if Scholars managed to produce some old Egyptian inscriptions with the structure “People of X” and it is clear from the context that X is a name of a god, then this would “increase” the probability that “YHWH” in “Shasu of YHWH” is a name of a god. But without this, then it is highly reasonable to conclude that “YHWH” here is a name of a place, and not a God.

The first undisputed mention of Yahweh is in the “Mesha Stele” about 840BC. And it would be very surprising to assume that Yahweh was originated 500 years before that date in Arabia without any mention of it in any of the surrounding cultures, and then the Israelites (and only the Israelites) took this name for themselves. This would be very strange assumption.

It has been argued that there are some disputes about the translation of the Egyptian inscription. Some regarded it as “the land of the Shasu of YHWH”, and others regarded it as “YHWH in the land of the Shasu”. But still, YHWH here could easily be the name of a place or the name of a tribe.

Nonetheless, the general view about the inscription is “Shasu of YHWH”, and I truly think that it is highly-likely a name of a place.

3# There was an objection that the Israelites were never in Egypt. However, I did write an article proposing that the general accounts of Moses in the Jewish bible could easily fit with the history of Egypt between RamsesIII and RamsesVI.

The article: “A proposed suggestion that Ramesses VI (died 1136 BC) is the pharaoh of the exodus, and Ramesses III (died 1155 BC) is the pharaoh of the oppression”, which is at number #55 in the library site

4# There was another objection that the name “Israel” is mentioned in the Merneptah Stele. However, I did discuss this matter in the previous article, and I did include the

pictures of the inscribed name in this Stele, and it is unlikely that the name in this inscription is “Israel”.

A summary:

The inscribed name is represented by the following pictographs: Two reed-flowers, bolt, two slashes, mouth, one reed-flower, eagle, mouth, stick.

The stick here is just a space filler.

The Egyptian hieroglyphs does have an alphabet which is represented by 26 pictographs, were each pictograph represents a single sound. However, the hieroglyphs do have thousands of pictographs that represent two or three sounds together.

Fortunately, the inscribed name is represented by the alphabet, and the alphabet is available in the internet (just check google). Therefore, the pictographs in this name can be deciphered to its sounds.

The name is: Y.S/Z.Y.R.E.A.R. [the bolt can represent two sounds: S or Z].

It should be noted that the hieroglyph script doesn't include vowels. So, E & A here are not vowels but specific sounds.

Israel without vowels is ISREL. Yisrael (the original name of the Israelite people) without vowels is YSREL. So, it is very hard to render the Egyptian name to ISREL or YSREL.

It should be noted here that there are disputes about this matter between many Egyptologists.