Old Testament Introduction
Chapter 27, The Name

***Introduction***

The usual idea is that the Name of God is never to be spoken. We will explore that idea with the view that the Name of God is never to be spoken in vain. Thus the Kethib, יהוה, is marked so that it will ordinarily be read as Adonai, or Lord, which is the Qere (what is to be read aloud), rather than Yahweh as it would normally sound as written. Still, this is not some idle Israelite superstition, it is a custom designed to guard against the flagrant abuse of God’s sacred Name, so that it not be put to common use. God’s Name is not to be used unless necessary, and then only with honor and respect. So we see the Qere, Adonai, not as a prohibition; rather it is a protection. That which is sacred must never be reduced to common use. Here is why we believe such a thing.

***Exodus 3:1-15, KJV paraphrase***

Now while Moses kept the flock of Jethro his father in law, the priest of Midian, he led the flock to the backside of the desert, coming to the mountain of God, Horeb. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire from the middle of a bush; when he looked, behold, the bush burned with fire, yet the bush was not consumed. Moses thought, “I will now turn aside to see this great sight: Why is the bush not burned?” So when the Lord saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the middle of the bush, saying, “Moses, Moses.” He replied, “Here I am.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

He said, “Do not come nearer until you take off your shoes from your feet: for the place where you stand is holy ground. I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look at God. The Lord continued,

“I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt. I have heard their cry caused by their taskmasters: for I know their sorrows. I have come down to deliver them from the hand of the Egyptians; to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land; to a land flowing with milk and honey; to the place of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. So, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come to me; I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Thus, I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring forth my people, the children of Israel, from Egypt.”

Then Moses answered God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel from Egypt?”

He responded, “Certainly I will be with you; this shall be a token to you that I have sent you: when you have brought forth the people from Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.”

Moses answered God again, “Behold, when I come to the children of Israel, and I shall say to them, ‘The God of your fathers hath sent me to you;’ and they shall say to me, ‘What is His Name?’ what shall I say to them?”[[2]](#endnote-2)

God responded to Moses, “I Am That I Am:” He said, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘I Am has sent me to you.’ ” Moreover, God said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘the Lord 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 this is My Memorial for all generations.’ ”

***The Name***

Much to-do is made over the origination of this unspeakable Name and its first revelation.

First of all, we are not sure that this is the first revelation of the unspeakable Name: nothing in the text declares that with certainty. This is, as much as all else, the unspeakable Name: it is not to be blazed about in every common context; it is sacred, it is holy, it is reserved for special use. That it is the unspeakable Name, does not make it the unheard Name, or the unknown Name, or the unrecognizable Name, or the that’s-never-been-used-before Name. It is set apart for special occasions: which does not necessarily make this the first such occasion in the history of mankind.[[3]](#endnote-3)

More importantly, it makes no sense whatsoever in this context, to have possession of the official unspeakable Name, if it has no meaning or resonance with the hearers, for purposes of introduction. The very purpose of being granted permission to use the unspeakable Name is to validate the message; this is futile if the hearers cannot recognize the unspeakable Name for what it is.

This is the Hebrew equivalent of a king giving his seal ring to the ambassador who acts in his authority and honor: it has no value if it is not recognized by the king’s subjects and is not supported by the king’s power and all his armies. It bluntly proclaims that defiance of the message, as it is about to be declared, is an invitation to police action or war.

Thus Moses is not asking to know the unspeakable Name, as much as he is asking for authority to use the unspeakable Name. Moses immediately realizes the significance of the unspeakable Name and bows before His authority. Moses is now assured that this is the real deal, and he is now authorized to speak the unspeakable Name: he is not being appointed to speak merely for himself, but for Yahweh.

This is an “AHA!” moment, a “WOW!” event for both Moses and Israel. This is the real “Wakeup Call.” This is the “Call to Arms.” This is the trumpet blast. It is the single most important event in life. It is imperative that we respond to it when it happens. A second call may never come. We may never get a second chance to respond. This is the Old Testament equivalent of Paul’s, “Now is the day of salvation (2 Corinthians 6:2).”

***The Documentary Hypothesis***

Of all the inane outcomes that may be imagined from this passage, the most absurd is that it should be used as the instrument to slice and dice the Scripture into various source documents: J (950 BC), E (850 BC), D (600 BC), P (500 BC), and the like. Persistence in following this line of logic is without rationale.

***Conclusion***

It is highly unlikely that this is the first occurrence and use of unspeakable Name in history. It is probably not the first time Moses has heard the Name. Moses asks permission to introduce God officially by Name, and he expects that Name to grab the attention of every Israelite, and shake everyone to awestruck attention. The unspeakable Name introduces the proclamation of the message. Everyone expects powerful miracles to follow. We do well to give it earnest heed.

[[4]](#endnote-4)

1. Ironic words indicating the role that Moses is about to play. Much of Scripture cannot be understood until it is viewed from the perspective of pageantry. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. This is the next logical question: for, as we shall see, once the instruction to go is given, the very next step is to receive the seal of affirmation: usually the king’s seal ring, cylinder seal, or an article imprinted with either of these. No legate ventures forth without the signed and officially stamped documents of authority. God’s seal of authority is His unspeakable Name. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. It is bad enough when expressions like, G-- d--- it, escape our lips. It is beyond our wildest imagination that Yahweh or Jesus should ever be used in such an expression. As it now is, Jesus! is exclaimed far too gratuitously. The Qere safeguard is duly warranted. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
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