



Divine Disclosure

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Many theories have been offered to explain the Torah's use of multiple names for God.¹ Medieval kabbalists understood the names to be expressing different aspects in the manifold nature of the Divine.² Early modern biblical scholars took the same phenomenon as evidence of the composite nature of the Torah.³ In Parashat Va'Era, the Torah itself addresses the issue, and suggests that the critical question may not be what God's name is, but who's asking.

The *parashah* begins in the middle of a conversation between God and Moshe. Moshe has just returned from an unsuccessful first confrontation with Pharaoh, one that resulted in an increase in already impossible labor demands. Exasperated, Moshe complains to God that Pharaoh's decrees have only gotten worse "since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name (לְדַבֵּר בְּשִׁמְךָ)." The mention of God's "name" seems to prompt a direct response:

¹ In this essay, I use the word "God" in English, to refer to the broad concept of a singular deity, and will transliterate (and italicize) all the Hebrew names for God the way they are pronounced, to maintain the distinctions that are the subject of the essay. Even the word *Elohim*, which we sometimes translate simply as "God," also functions as a particular name of God in the Torah, so I will leave it transliterated as well. The exception will be the general Hebrew word for "the God of" (אֱלֹהֵי), which I will translate.

² See R. Yosef Gikatilia, *Sha'arei Orah* (13th century, Spain).

³ See Jean Astruc, "Conjectures sur les mémoires originaux, dont il paraît que Moïse s'est servi pour composer le livre de la Genèse" ("Conjectures on the original accounts of which it appears Moses availed himself in composing the Book of Genesis") (1753, France).



שמות ו:ב-ג

וַיִּדְבֹר אֱלֹקִים אֶל מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי ה' וְאַרְאֶה אֶל אֲבֹרָהֶם אֶל יִצְחָק וְאֶל יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶל-שְׁדֵי וְשְׁמִי ה' לֹא נִדְעָתִי לָהֶם:

Exodus 6:2-3

Elohim spoke to Moshe and said to him, “I am Adonai (YHVH). I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzhak, and to Ya’akov as El Shaddai, but by My name, Adonai, I was not known to them.”⁴

These words, taken alone, present us with what appears to be a moment of tremendous significance in the Torah’s narrative. God is revealing a new name to Moshe, one that even the great fathers of Genesis never knew. What’s more—as the reader of the Torah can probably identify—this is the most important of God’s names, the one that will be used more than any other in the Torah, and will eventually become the standard form of address in Jewish prayer. Finally—here in Exodus, through Moshe—we have been given the Tetragrammaton, the famous four-letter Name of God, traditionally pronounced Adonai.

But there is a major problem with this understanding: this name has already been used hundreds of times in the Torah before this. It appears in the second chapter of Genesis, and is then used throughout all the stories of the early families of the earth.⁵ The Torah quotes characters themselves using the name Adonai.⁶ There is even explicit mention, in the last line of chapter four of Genesis, of some general awakening to the Name:

⁴ I am translating this according to the understanding of Ibn Ezra, who reads the previous ב to extend to שְׁמִי.

⁵ Some have tried to account for this discrepancy by imagining that the author of the Torah—by tradition: Moshe—knew this to be God’s true name and simply used it when describing God in Genesis. The characters of Genesis themselves might not have known or used the Name. This theory is presented—and then dismissed—by Ibn Ezra in the name of a Karaite scholar.

⁶ Havah is the first to use the name, when she says, “קָנִיתִי אִישׁ אֶת ה' - I have acquired a man with Adonai” (Genesis 4:1).



בראשית ד:כו

וְלִשְׁתָּ גַם הוּא יֵלֵד בֶּן וַיִּקְרָא אֶת שְׁמוֹ אֶנוֹשׁ אֲזַי הוּחַל לְקַרֵּא בְּשֵׁם ה':

Genesis 4:26

Shet also had a son, and he called him Enosh. It was then that calling out in the name Adonai began.

There is some debate over how to understand what is meant by “calling out in the name Adonai,”⁷ but it seems clear that whatever they were doing, these people knew and used the Name, Adonai.⁸

All of this, however, so far takes place before Avraham arrives on the scene. So perhaps we can understand the name-reveal in our *parashah* to mean that it was Avraham’s family, in particular, who knew God by the name El Shaddai—and not Adonai. Perhaps some tradition from the days before the Flood had been lost, and was only now being recovered by Moshe.

Yet when we turn to look at Avraham’s story, we find that not only does the name Adonai appear throughout, and not only does Avraham use it himself, we even find a moment when God communicates the Name to Avraham directly:

בראשית טו:ז

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם ה' אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאוּרֻכַּיִם לְתֵת לְךָ אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת לְרִשְׁתָּהּ:

⁷ The Ibn Ezra tells us that the verse means that this is when people began to pray, while Rashi says that these people would use the Name of God in idolatrous ways, calling people and idols by God’s name.

⁸ A few chapters later, Noah is the first to use this Name in a blessing, when he says: “בָּרוּךְ ה' אֱלֹהֵי שֵׁם - Blessed is Adonai, the God of Shem” (Genesis 9:26). There is a subtle pun in this phrasing, since the name שֵׁם (Shem) actually means, “name.” So the phrase can be read, “Blessed is Adonai, the God of Name”—as if to say, this is **the** God with **the** name, the one that has become known to humanity.



Genesis 15:7

And God says to [Avraham, in a vision], “I am Adonai, who took you out of Ur Kasdim to give you this land to inherit.”

“I am Adonai.” This is precisely the same self-disclosure that Moshe receives in our *parashah*. We appear to have arrived at a direct contradiction to our *parashah*’s eponymous phrasing, “I appeared (*va’era*) to Avraham, to Yitzhak, and to Ya’akov as El Shaddai, **but by My name, Adonai, I was not known to them.**” God certainly was known to Avraham as Adonai—and later to Yitzhak and Ya’akov as well.⁹

How, then, do we understand Moshe’s grand moment of divine disclosure? What new knowledge has God given to Moshe, if not this name? The classical commentators generally conclude that what Moshe must have received over and above his ancestors was not an awareness of the name itself, but some deeper understanding of what the name represents.¹⁰

When would Moshe have gained this unique insight?

⁹ Later in Genesis there will be yet another instance of God declaring this name, again in a vision, this time to Ya’akov: “וַהֲגִיד ה' נֶצֶב עָלָיו וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹרָהִם אֲבִיךָ וְאֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה שֹׁכֵב עָלֶיהָ לְךָ אֶתְנֶנָּה וְלִזְרַעְךָ - And behold, Adonai was standing above him and said, ‘I am Adonai, the God of your father Avraham, and God of Yitzhak. The ground you are lying on, I will give to you and your offspring’ (Genesis 28:13). Avraham knew the name, Ya’akov knew the name, and lest we leave Yitzhak out, he, too, “וַיִּקְרָא בְשֵׁם ה' - called out in the name Adonai” (Genesis 26:25).

¹⁰ Rashi says that Adonai is the God Who fulfills promises (נֹאמֵן לֵאמֹת דְּבָרֵי), and Moshe is about to witness the fulfillment of promises made to earlier generations. According to the Ibn Ezra, Adonai indicates God’s ability to change the laws of nature (לְשִׁנוֹת תּוֹלְדוֹת עוֹלָם) in the form of the great miracles of the Exodus, the likes of which were never seen by Avraham, Yitzhak, and Ya’akov. The Ramban identifies El Shaddai with God’s attribute of strict justice, and the name Adonai with God’s attribute of mercy (בְּמִדַּת הַרְחָמִים), the God who responds to suffering.

For two wonderful discussions of the *parshanut* on this verse, see Nehama Leibowitz, “Revelation: Patriarchal and Mosaic,” in *New Studies in Shemot*, Vaera 2, p. 132, and Elchanan Samet, “Two Promises: One Fulfilled, One Not Yet Fulfilled,” *Parashat Va’era*, *Studies in the Weekly Parashah*, Second Series, p. 237.



We began with Moshe talking to God about “speaking in Your name.” An earlier scene in Moshe’s story shows that he had a marked interest in the subject of God’s Name from the start. Moshe, after all, is the only character in the Torah who has actually asked what he should call God. In his conversation at the burning bush, he says:

שמות ג:יג

...הִנֵּה אֲנִי בָּא אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתִּי לָהֶם אֵלֶיךָ שְׁלַחְנִי אֲלֵיכֶם וְאָמְרוּ לִי מַה שְּׁמוֹ מָה אֶמַּר אֲלֵהֶם:

Exodus 3:13

“When I come to the Children of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors sent me to you,’ and they say, ‘**What is God’s name?**’ what will I say to them?”

Moshe is aware of the importance of a name as a form of verification. He seems to be asking for some name that the Children of Israel will recognize as authentic, passed down from generation to generation. But the answer God gives him is not a name that has appeared before:

שמות ג:יד

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיךָ אֵל מֹשֶׁה אֶ-הָיָה אֲשֶׁר אֶ-הָיָה וַיֹּאמֶר כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶ-הָיָה שְׁלַחְנִי אֲלֵיכֶם:

Exodus 3:14

And Elohim said to Moshe, “**Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh**,” and said, “That is what you will say to the Children of Israel: ‘**Ehyeh** sent me to you.’”

This is a strange answer to the question, “What is Your name?”; Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh literally means “I will be what I will be.” Stranger still is that God then tells Moshe he can shorten the name to simply Ehyeh: “I will be.” It looks more like a statement than a name.



Many explanations have been given for this unusual name. But one basic thing we can say about it is that it is a form of the verb, “to be.” That is significant when we consider that the four-letter name of God that we pronounce Adonai also appears to be built on forms of the same verb. It looks like a combination of the past (היה), present (הוה), and future (יהיה) tenses: was, is, will be.¹¹ So the meaning of the Name might be something like, “The God who was, is, and will be”—the Eternal One.

We may have suspected that was the hidden meaning of the Tetragrammaton, but it was never explicit. Now Moshe has another name of God that acts as a kind of elaboration on the theme—and now in the first-person—as if to say, “I am the God Who always was and always will be. So I will continue to be. You will continue to experience Me as existing in every new moment.” This name serves as an explanation for the primary name of God we have been using all along.

God continues in the next verse and makes that connection explicit for us:

שמות ג:טו

וַיֹּאמֶר עוֹד אֱלֹקִים אֶל מֹשֶׁה כֹּה תֹאמַר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֱלֹקֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם אֱלֹקֵי אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹקֵי יִצְחָק וְאֱלֹקֵי יַעֲקֹב שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם זֶה שְׁמִי לְעֹלָם וְזֶה זִכְרִי לְדֹר דֹּר:

Exodus 3:15

Elohim said further to Moshe, “This is what you will say to the Children of Israel: ‘**Adonai**, the God of your ancestors, the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzhak, and the God of Ya’akov, sent me to you.’ **This is My name forever**, and this is how I am remembered, **from generation to generation.**”

¹¹ See Zohar III:258a, and my essay on Parashat Bereishit, “The Grammar of God,” available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/grammar-god>.



Adonai is the name that God will always have, throughout the generations, precisely because the meaning of Adonai is “the One who will always exist.” The same God Who was the God of Avraham was the God of Yitzhak, and then the God of Ya’akov—and that God is the One Who has appeared to Moshe as Ehyeh: “I will be” with you now just as I was with your ancestors.

When God says to Moshe in our *parashah*, “I am Adonai. I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzhak, and to Ya’akov as El Shaddai, but by My name, Adonai, I was not known to them,” it does not mean that the name Adonai was never spoken to them. That, we have seen, has happened before. But they never inquired into a deeper knowledge of the meaning of that name, and so God never fully explained what it meant.

Moshe is uniquely interested in God’s names,¹² so God gives Moshe deeper insight into the name of God that has been with humanity from the start, but never fully understood until now.

We often think of Moshe’s prophecy as distinct because he had greater power than anyone who had come before him: he saw God clearly while others were unable to fully process the divine encounter. But perhaps Moshe’s greatest gift was his curiosity. Perhaps it was his willingness to inquire, above all, that granted him access to eternal truths.¹³

¹² Moshe, whose own name, משה, is the same letters as השם, “The Name,” and who first appears in the *parashah* and the book of שמות (“Names”).

¹³ Rashi’s comment on the verse we began with beautifully connects the name Adonai to truth: “I was not known to them [by My name Adonai], I was not familiar to them by My attribute of truth, for that is why I am called Adonai—faithful to be true to My words.”

