

## God's Name, "I AM"

At the burning bush in the desert God told Moses that His name is "I am who I am", and to tell the Israelites in Egypt, that "I am" had sent Moses to them. This was the name by which God wanted to be known and worshipped in Israel. When God speaks about Himself, He calls Himself "I am." The name is related to the verb "to be." When the Israelites spoke about Him, they called Him, "He is", or "He will be" or "He causes existence." Even when the Hebrews put the vowels in their inspired consonantal text, they regularly wrote YHWH without vowels. Partly out of care not to take God's name in vain, and partly by way of a positive taboo, later Hebrews regarded this name as too holy to be pronounced. They substituted another name of God, "Adonay" when they read the name in the text of the Old Testament. Because some people have been ignorant of this, they have inserted the vowels of "Adonay" (indistinct, o, and a) into the consonants YHWH, and mistakenly arrived at "Jehovah" as a name. We are left with the curious fact that the certain pronunciation of the Hebrew word YHWH as been lost, even though it is the most intimate and personal name of God in the Old Testament. Probably its original pronunciation was "Yahweh."

This positive taboo worked in another way. Though Hebrews used the letters of the alphabet as numbers, they avoided using the expected letters for 15 and 16, as ten plus five and ten plus six, and used the letters for 9 and 6 and 9 and 7 instead. For the combinations, YH and YW were short forms of God's name. However, the Hebrew positive taboo was not absolute, and it is amazing how many Hebrew names contained short forms of the Lord's name. Many began with YO or YEHO or ended with YAH.

The Greek original of the New Testament never used the Hebrew name YHWH, but followed the example of the Greek translation of the Old Testament called the "Septuagint", which had regularly translated YHWH by the Greek word *kyrios* without a definite article. Almost all English versions of the Old Testament also translate YHWH as "The LORD", using all capitals or small capitals for it.

Much biblical scholarship of the Old Testament has gone sadly astray by assuming that the writings ascribed to Moses were late and poorly edited compilations made a thousand years after Moses. Their hypothesis is based partly on different names for God in the alleged sources. Their ascription of sources is often inconsistent. For example, when Abraham named the place where he almost sacrificed Isaac "The LORD Will Provide" the scholars have to admit that YHWH occurs in which they say is not a Yahwist source. Their theory of names is based partly on a misunderstanding of a passage in Exodus 6. They understand it to mean that God had never revealed His name as YHWH before the time of Moses. A better understanding of Exodus 6:3 is that God had not previously made a full revelation of His character as YHWH.

The point is that, when Hebrews spoke about God's creative almighty power, their appropriate name for Him was "*Elohim*", "God." However, in contexts where His relationship of grace to His chosen people in faithfulness to His covenants were under consideration, the appropriate name was YHWH. The title "LORD" expressed His character. He is the faithful God, who desires the full trust of His people. This understanding gives point to the use of "LORD God" in Genesis 2-3. We see the connection between the name "the LORD" and His gracious qualities in Exodus 34: "Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood with Moses there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. And the LORD passed in front of him, and proclaimed: "The LORD, the LORD, the merciful and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in unfailing mercy and truth, who preserves mercy for thousands, and forgives wrongdoing, rebellion, and sin" (v.5-6). This distinction helps us understand better why it is the regular practice in the New Testament to refer to the Father as "God", and regularly to use the name "the Lord" for Jesus Christ. It helps us appreciate why the Nicene Creed, which calls the Father "one God", calls Jesus Christ "one Lord." The most basic confession of Jesus Christ, found in a series of passages in the New Testament, is "Jesus Christ is Lord."

In the Gospel according to John Jesus uses "I AM" for Himself. For example, He said, "If you do not believe that I am (He), you will die in your sins;" (Joh 8:24) and "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am (He)" (Joh 8:28). The implied claim that He is the "I am" of Exodus chapter three was not lost on the Jews. After Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I tell you, before Abraham came into being, I AM", the Jews took up stones to cast at Him as a blasphemer, who deserved to die for saying wicked things about God.

Though He had always been "the Lord of glory" from all eternity with the Father, Jesus Christ has also been given the name "Lord" as a human being. For whatever is said in the Scriptures to have been given to Him in time is said about Him according to His human nature. The same is true of statements in the Scriptures about Jesus becoming something, made something, or appointed as something. On the day of Pentecost Peter said, "Therefore all the people of Israel should know for certain that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified,

Lord and Christ.” Paul was talking about the incarnate Jesus Christ when he wrote, in Philippians: “That is why God also has very highly exalted Him, and given Him the name that is above every other name, that at the name of Jesus everyone in heaven and on earth and under the earth may kneel, and that everyone may confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

At times “I am” seems on the surface to be simply “It is I” (Mt 14:27), or “I am the one you mean” (the Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews, Mt 24:5; Joh 18:5; Joh 18:37). Sometimes it looks like a regular first-person statement: “Where two or three have come together by name, there I am among them” (Mt 18:20) and “Surely I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Mt 28:20). However, even in these passages it is difficult to ignore an allusion to “I am” of Exodus 3: 14. In addition, in the Gospel according to John, Jesus affixes predicates to “I am” statements: “He who is called Christ” (Joh 4:26); “the Bread of life” (Joh 6:35); “the Light of the world” (Joh 8: 12); “the Door of the sheep” (Joh 10:7), “the good Shepherd” (Joh 10:11); “the Resurrection and the Life” (Joh 11:25); “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (Joh 14:6); and “the true Vine.” The Revelation of St John has more: “I am” “the First and the Last and the One Who Lives; and I died, and, behold, I am alive for ever and ever” (Rv 1:17); “the One who searches minds and hearts” (Rv 2:23); “the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End” (Rv 22:13), and “the Root and the Offspring of David, the Bright Morning Star” (Rv 22:16)

Not only does the name “Lord” indicate Jesus’ close, gracious relationship with His people, but the fact that Jesus is fully divine also means that His fulfilment of the Law in the place of sinful people, His redemption from sin, and His victory over the devil are fully effective and valid. No mere human being could have done that. His fully divine nature means that the blood that He shed in sacrifice for us is different from other human blood. Because His human flesh is “the very own flesh of the Word of God the Father” as Cyril of Alexandria pointed out, those who partake of the holy flesh and precious blood of Christ, the Saviour, do not receive it as ordinary flesh, God forbid! His flesh is life giving. Though He died as other human beings do, His death was different, not only in degree as far as the suffering went, but also in kind. The crucifixion of “the Lord of glory” (1 Cor 2) means that the cost has been paid in full for God’s verdict of acquittal over sinners, whose place Jesus Christ took. This is important. Every sinner should be confident of God’s promise of eternal life because the great cost of His salvation has been paid. God the Son, the “I am”, has made the vicarious sacrifice in His own person for all sinners. As Martin Luther wrote in the *Small Catechism*, “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, Son of the Father from eternity, and true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord. At great cost He has saved and redeemed me, a lost and condemned person. He has freed me from sin, death, and the power of the devil, not with silver or gold, but with His holy and precious blood, and His innocent suffering and death.”