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ON THE NAME YAHWEH

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MR. Albright's two interesting and learned papers on the *Tetragrammaton*¹ have shown me that the views of Prof. A. van Hoonacker, of Louvain, on this subject are not as widely known as I venture to think they deserve to be. They are to be found in his Schweich Lectures (*Une Communauté Judéo-Araméenne à Éléphantine*, London, 1915, pp. 67—73), but I shall attempt to describe the theory in my own words.

The essential point of van Hoonacker's theory is a frank recognition that to derive יהוה from יהו, or from יהי, is contrary to the regular phonetic laws of Hebrew. But the God of Israel is a very peculiar Deity and the origin of His Name may have been correspondingly peculiar.

Let us begin by recapitulating a few very familiar facts, in order to formulate the problem. (1) The name of the God of Israel really was יהוה in pre-exilic times. This is proved by the occurrence of the name on the Moabite Stone, though it should be remembered that A. E. Cowley has proposed an ingenious reading of the passage according to which the letters are only a form of the substantive verb. But be that as it may, it is surely difficult to suppose that *all* the instances of the name יהוה in the older literature are the result of textual revision: if the Tetragrammaton were invented for the first time in the days of Josiah or Zedekiah or Zerubbabel, would not the fact of the invention have left some trace on surviving literature? David, then, and Deborah, as well as Jeremiah

¹ *JBL*, XLIII, pp. 370 ff.; XLIV, pp. 158 ff.

and Ezekiel, really did call their God יהוה, however they may have pronounced it.

But (2) there are difficulties. No proper name is found except with the shorter forms יה and יהו. The Israelite community of Elephantine write יה (once יהוה), never יהוה. At a later period, when the actual naming of Divine names was avoided by the Jews, the true pronunciation was actually forgotten. There must be something non-natural, artificial, in the Name, so Dr. van Hoonacker holds, for this to have come about.

(3) The name as it stands does not satisfy the discovered rules of philology. It is too archaic. "If we regard *Yahwéh* as an imperfect verb, it is most naturally to be derived from *hwy* (as still in Aramaic), later *hayah*, 'to be.' The preservation of an archaic form with *waw* in proper names is illustrated also by *Hawwah*, 'Eve'" (Albright, p. 374). Certainly the writer of Genesis thought that *Hawwah* was connected with the verb 'to live,' but it is not quite certain that he is historically right, and one great Semitic scholar has connected 'Eve' with *hewya*, 'serpent.' But at least it is true that יה and 'to be' look as if they might have something to do with one another, and יהוה is still more like some form of 'to be.'

(4) On the assumption that "that is not first which is spiritual but that which is natural, and afterwards that which is spiritual," what were the original characteristics of יהוה, from which the name was derived? As we all know, the answer is not easy. 'Yahweh' is associated with the thunder-storm, with a bull, with war, but not in such a way that we feel that any of these things is the essential, the natural object or idea which was deified. 'Yahweh' remains obstinately political, nationalistic, Israelite.

With these considerations in our mind let us turn back to the tradition, to Exodus 3. Here we find what is really a very surprising story. Moses meets in the desert the God of his ancestors, who promises to deliver Israel from Pharaoh; but Moses does not know His name, the name of his ancestors' God! Nor do the Israelites in Egypt know His name (v. 13). God answers Moses by an enigmatic saying that (as the story

stands) does have something to do with the verb 'to be,' and goes on to speak of Himself as אֲנִי .

This is the old familiar tale; what does it mean? Neither I nor Dr. van Hoonacker are concerned to 'rationalize' an old national saga after the manner of the 18th century and say that Moses 'invented' the Tetragrammaton, but I do think that as a matter of actual fact Moses was the first to use it. I think it very likely that the real, historical Moses spent some time in exile in the Desert, that he came back with new ideas, and I think they took this form:— all the tribes of the Israelites one nation, and this new unity symbolized and embodied in a new Name for a God who shall be the God of them all, without distinction of tribes or families. No doubt he, Moses, felt himself inspired: the New Name had been revealed to him. It was something like that of the old God *Yaho* (or *Yeho*), but not quite the same—and by its very form it meant that certainly this God would be with Moses and with Israel (Exod. 3 12).

It seems to me that this view resolves all the difficulties. It assumes indeed the historicity of Moses, and that under his leadership the Israelite tribes, or a majority of them, did leave the borders of Egypt in search of a new home, but it leaves other details of the Exodus undetermined. So much would, I imagine, be conceded by most modern historians as possible. What is to me the most attractive part of the theory is that it explains the essentially political, social, characteristics of Yahweh-worship. All through the pre-exilic period the struggle is between national religion and nature-religion, Yahweh on the one hand and the Baalim on the other. Yahweh stands for patriotism, for social justice, the Baalim for good harvests and the immemorial agricultural festivals. On this theory the opposition is no accident, for from the very beginning of the time when men "called upon the Name of Yahweh" (as distinct from *Yaho*) that worship had meant political loyalty, not nature-magic.

Further, a new-formed name like Yahweh, brought into use by a great and thoughtful leader, might very well have had from the first a somewhat philosophical and noble significance.

"He who makes to be" may have been what Moses considered the full Name to mean: he may have regarded 'Yaho' (or however it was pronounced) as a degraded corruption of the true syllables. Once we regard the Tetragrammaton as artificial, as a new coinage brought in by a single leader, the rules of philology do not rigorously apply. "C'est par une modification, une adaptation du nom Jahou préexistant, qu'une forme nouvelle fut forgée en vue de faire exprimer au nom divin l'idée *d'être*. La forme *Jahvèh* n'est pas le résultat d'une conjugaison régulière ou naturelle du verbe יהוה, elle est le résultat d'une transformation de *Jahou* sur le modèle de *Jihjèh*; ainsi s'explique-t-on la présence de la voyelle *a* dans la préformante et du *v* (*w*) à la place du *j* radical" (Hoonacker, p. 71).