

The Name Theology of Israelite Religion

o. Introduction

Students of the Old Testament are familiar with the variety of terms, titles, and expressions used by biblical writers to refer to the God of Israel. The Name Theology is one such literary-theological strategy. In simplest terms, the Name Theology refers to the propensity of certain biblical writers to refer to Yahweh as *ha-Shem* (“the Name”) and to describe Israel’s sanctuary (Tabernacle or Temple) as the place where God chooses to put his Name with the central formulaic expression *l’šakkēn šēmô šām* and similar phrases (*lašum šēmô šām*, *lihyôt šēmô šām*). The Name Theology concerns other textual items, but as we shall see, these two focal points are central to the history of the discussion.

The aim of this paper is to survey the biblical-theological understandings of the Name Theology put forth by scholars over the last two hundred years. From the 19th century until roughly the last quarter of the 20th century, one articulation of the Name Theology held sway with only slight points of contention between scholars. This predominant articulation of the Name Theology required the late authorship of Deuteronomy and the idea that Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic Historian sought to correct the primitive, naïve theology of the Torah’s J and E writers. The last quarter of the 20th century to the present day witnessed contributions from scholars that produced important modifications to the predominant view. The paper will conclude with a few thoughts of my own as to how a full understanding of the Name Theology must move beyond the narrow focus points that orient most of the scholarly discussion.

1.0. The Name Theology: Overview of Scholarship

1.1. The Older, Predominant Perspective

The traditional approach to the Name Theology among critical scholars is intimately tied to the Deuteronomistic History (DH). The DH is defined by the critical mainstream as the literary-historical work of a single historian that encompasses the books of Deuteronomy through 2 Kings. This historical work is considered to reflect a specific theological perspective (“Deuteronomic theology”) and a singular purpose. This singular writer / editor is referred to as the Deuteronomistic Historian (Dtr). This viewpoint derives primarily from the work of Martin Noth, prior to whose time the DH was presumed to be the result of an editorial hand who assembled a number of independent units within the books of Deuteronomy—2 Kings. Subsequent scholars of the DH proposed that the DH underwent two redactions: one in the days of Josiah (Dtr¹) and the second in the early period of the exile (Dtr²). In both redactions the content of DH was presumably updated in response to specific historical conditions.

It is in Deuteronomy and the rest of the DH where the formulaic expression *l'šakkēn š' mō šām* is found. The predominant understanding as to how this phrase should be translated was "to cause his name to dwell." While similar phrases use a different verb lemma besides *škn* (root meaning: "to dwell") this particular lemma received primacy of place in discussions of the Name Theology since it seems to suggest the Name is some sort of entity that is made to inhabit a location or structure. This presumption moved scholars to conclude that the DH indicated a paradigm shift in Israel's theology of the divine presence. The predominant understanding of the Name Theology was considered to describe an abandonment of the anthropomorphic portrayals of the immanent God in J and E in favor of a more abstract, demythologized, transcendent Yahweh. The older theology had Yahweh himself dwelling in the midst of Israel, whereas the newer theology has some sort of extension or hypostasis or alter ego of Yahweh dwelling in the temple sanctuary. Yahweh's own presence was presumably removed from the sanctuary in favor of something that was basically Him, but not the original Him.

While critical scholars congratulate the Dtr for moving Israelite theology in the direction of modernity, correcting as he did the superstitious idea of Yahweh's immanent presence in Israel, the Name Theology itself was still considered primitive by later standards of religious thought—including those of the later books of the Hebrew Bible where Yahweh was truly transcendent, existing without a temple at all. The Dtr's Name Theology still falls quite short of the modern, enlightened dismissal of a personal, immanent supernatural. This intellectual shortfall is judged on the basis of the presumption by these scholars that when the Dtr used *ha-Shem* to speak of the divine sanctuary presence, he was still the victim of the primitive idea that the name of a thing had consubstantial existence with the thing named. The modern critic deems such thinking as "pre-logical" or "pre-abstract." This "consubstantial existence" of Yahweh and the Name might reflect a greater appreciation for transcendence (i.e., the Name was perceived as more distant than the older J and E theology of Yahweh's direct presence), but it had a long way to go before being considered on par with the modern, enlightened mind.

This perspective gained broad acceptance through the 19th century in part because it reflected wider academic opinion about the evolutionary development of the human religious mind, and in part because it was in concert with the framework for the evolution of Israelite religion developed by Julius Wellhausen during that period. Wellhausen's work on parsing the sources of the Pentateuch contributed to his proposal that Israelite religion underwent three transitions: simple to complex, immanent to transcendent, and pre-logical to abstract. For Wellhausen, Deuteronomy (D) was the lynchpin of his system, and the Name Theology was an important component to arguing for these transitions. In a nutshell, J and E promoted the earliest stage of an immanent, anthropomorphic deity appearing at various cult sites. Deuteronomy (and so, the DH) provided a corrective: one deity hypostatically present at one site. Eventually, the P writer conceived of a fully sovereign, transcendent deity.

By the mid-20th century these ideas about the Name Theology were well entrenched in Old Testament studies with only slight variation among scholars. One point of divergence was disagreement over the precise circumstance that explained the rise of the Name Theology. Most opted for the late 19th century explanation, that Dtr was correcting the more primitive theology of J and E. The classic formulation and publishing apex of this view was likely Gerhard von Rad's *Studies in Deuteronomy* (1947). Von Rad was

joined by G. E. Wright (1944), W. Eichrodt (1933-1961), R. E. Clements (1965), Moshe Weinfeld (1972)¹ and Tryggve Mettinger (1982).² Other scholars, while agreeing that the Name Theology was a step toward transcendence, came to believe that Dtr did not actually have a deliberate agenda to correct the older theology. Rather, the Name Theology arose independently in Israelite religion. This new theology of transcendence was then incorporated into biblical texts (including the DH). Dean McBride's unpublished Harvard dissertation (1969) and Samuel Terrien's book, *The Elusive Presence* (1978) represent this perspective.

By way of summary, the predominant view of the Name Theology that remained basically unchallenged through most of the 20th century made several key contentions:

1. The Dtr and his DH sought to correct a primitive theology of divine presence in the J and E (and for some, P) sources of the Torah. This meant that the theology of Deuteronomy and other Old Testament books was at odds with the bulk of the Torah.
2. The Name Theology represented an advance in religious thought. Anthropomorphic immanence characterizes primitive religious belief, whereas transcendence is more modern and enlightened.
3. The Name was conceived as a hypostatic entity (a look-alike or clone in our parlance) of Yahweh, but something less than Yahweh Himself. The Name and Yahweh had a "consubstantial" existence, and this existence allowed Yahweh to maintain a distant relationship with Israel.
4. The formulaic expression *l'šakkēn š'ê mō šām* compelled the above points since the "cause to dwell" verbiage suggested hypostasis.

1.2. Challenges and Modifications in the Last Fifty Years

The first noteworthy departure in the study of the Name Theology appeared just after the midpoint of the 20th century. In 1967 Roland de Vaux undertook an investigation of the important phrase *l'šakkēn š'ê mō šām*. Departing from the heretofore customary focus on the phrase's meaning in some religious evolutionary arc, de Vaux sought to find the meaning of the phrase via etymology and comparative Semitic linguistics. De Vaux discovered the presence of the idiom in the el-Amarna texts. Though he deliberately limited his data pool to a handful of instances from el-Amarna, de Vaux succeeded in demonstrating two points: (1) that the phrase was idiomatic and communicated the idea of ownership; and (2) the idiom should not be translated "cause his name to dwell" but "put or place his name." Two examples from the el-Amarna texts are illustrative:

¹ See Richter, 35. Weinfeld held that P was before D due to the former's "corporeality in theophany."

² Mettinger also associates throne and cherubim with JE and offers exact dates for the transition.

EA 287: 58-63

May the king, my lord, know (that) I am unable to send a caravan to the king, my lord. For your information! **60–63** As the king has placed his name in Jerusalem forever, he cannot abandon it—the land of Jerusalem.³

EA 288: 1-7

Say [t]o the king, my lord, [my Su]n: [M]essage of ‘Abdi-Ḥeba, your servant. I fall at the feet of the king, my lord, 7 times and 7 times. **5–10** Behold, the king, my lord, has placed his name at the rising of the sun and at the setting of the sun. . . .⁴

De Vaux’s contribution was a radical departure from the consensus. His proposed translation and its meaning showed that the rendering “cause his name to dwell” could not stand up to a cross-linguistic approach (even one so limited) and that it biased the interpreter toward hypostasis. He concluded the Name Theology did not denote any corrective transformation of Israelite religion in terms of how the divine presence was perceived or understood.

Two years later S. Dean McBride’s Harvard dissertation attempted to detect all the instances of the idiomatic DH phrase in wider ancient Near Eastern literature. The result was a confirmation of de Vaux’s point that the idiom should be translated “to place his name.” Nevertheless, McBride retained the idea of hypostasis for the Name since he presupposed that ancient Near Eastern religions generally held to the primitive idea of a Name hypostasis. McBride’s linguistic work would later be revisited by Sandra Richter, who drew a different conclusion in this regard, while affirming the validity of the translation argument put forth by McBride and de Vaux.

The very idea of a Name hypostasis was challenged by several subsequent scholarly contributions. Some of these scholars drew attention to problems with the idea that the wider ancient Near East used words cognate to *shem* to express a Name hypostasis. In the time that remains, I want to focus on these contributions specific to Deuteronomy.

Recall that the predominant view of the Name Theology posited that the Dtr utilized the word *shem* to create the impression that Yahweh was a remote, transcendent deity who opted to interact with humanity in the sanctuary by means of a hypostasis, thereby correcting the primitive Israelite belief of J and E that Yahweh Himself was immanent in Israel. For the Dtr, the presence in the temple was therefore not Yahweh himself (who dwelled in the heavens, not on earth), but something that closely approximated Yahweh.

³William L. Moran, *The Amarna Letters* (Translation of: Tell el-Amarna tablets; English-language ed.; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), EA 287:60-63.

⁴William L. Moran, *The Amarna Letters*; EA 288:5-10.

In 1971, Gordon J. Wenham argued that this Yahweh-Name disjunction or antithesis made little sense in light of the fact that Israelite cultic observances associated with the Name idiom in Deuteronomy occur *liphnê YHWH*—in God’s very presence.⁵ The distinction between a transcendent Yahweh and an immanent Name was therefore a false dichotomy. The Name was not a hypostasis of Yahweh—some “near form” of Yahweh—but was another way to refer to Yahweh Himself.

Ian Wilson’s Cambridge doctoral dissertation struck another blow to this false dichotomy. Published in 1995 under the title, *Out of the Midst of the Fire: Divine Presence in Deuteronomy*, Wilson challenged the predominantly-held view that Deuteronomy (and hence the DH) emphasized Yahweh’s transcendence to the exclusion of His immanence on earth—that Yahweh was not present Himself in the sanctuary, but only his hypostatic Name.⁶ Specifically, Wilson compared parallel passages between Deuteronomy and the books of Exodus and Numbers and demonstrated that Deuteronomy does not denigrate or excise references to the earthly, immanent presence of Yahweh. Further, his work showed that in Deut 12-26 (what scholars refer to as the “old legal core” of the book), “not only is the localized presence of Yahweh at the central sanctuary regularly articulated as the Israelites are commanded to perform their worship *liphnê YHWH*, but these same chapters are replete with the Name formulae.”⁷ Deuteronomy neither alters nor eliminates the presence of Yahweh from earthly contact with Israel.

The most recent scholarly contribution to the Name theology is that of Sandra Richter. Her 2001 Harvard dissertation was published by de Gruyter in 2002 under the title, *The Deuteronomistic History and the Name Theology*. Richter identifies and rejects several “streams of misinterpretation” with respect to the Name Theology. First, there is the “unconscious survival of 19th century evolutionary presuppositions in Deuteronomistic studies ... [which is] acutely evident in the immanence-to-transcendence scheme of the Name Theology,”⁸ a false dichotomy that, as we have seen, has been forcefully challenged. The second stream is “the mistranslation and misinterpretation of the Deuteronomic idiom,” the traditional rendering of which as “Yahweh will choose to cause his name to dwell” represents a mistranslation deriving from “the failure to recognize the Akkadian heritage of both the verb *škn* and the idiom as a whole.”⁹ Third, there is the notion of a wider ancient Near Eastern concept of *shem* that was fostered by flawed linguistic scholarship. In this last regard, Richter compares the research in defense of this idea to James Barr’s famous semantic fallacy, “totality transfer.” By this she means “the practice of blending together numerous, distinct Egyptian, Mesopotamian, NW Semitic and biblical name- and naming-idioms in order to discover a quintessential concept which informs them all.”¹⁰ Fourth, Richter objects to the method evident in nearly all scholarly treatments of the Name Theology—the assumption that the Dtr was aiming to address a specific theological issue. This

⁵ Gordon J. Wenham, “Deuteronomy and the Central Sanctuary,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 22 (1971): 103-18.

⁶ Ian Wilson, *Out of the Midst of the Fire: Divine Presence in Deuteronomy* (SBL Dissertation Series 151; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995).

⁷ Richter, 42-43.

⁸ Richter, 43.

⁹ Richter, 44.

¹⁰ Richter, 44-45.

approach, she charges, resulted in a failure to take the DH idiom and its synonymous phrases in their own individual context, instead superimposing the presumed theological agenda of Dtr upon those occurrences.

Richter's research in opposition to these "streams of misinterpretation" leads to her conclusion that there really is no Name Theology in the Hebrew Bible. What she means in this regard is that the DH formulaic expression *l'šakkēn š'mô šām* and similar phrases have nothing to do with making a statement about how Yahweh's divine presence is to be understood in the DH. Instead, she analyzed these idiomatic phrases as "closed syntactical units" which can be linked to cognate languages and literature only as units. Her conclusion is as follows:

I have concluded that Deuteronomy's *l'šakkēn š'mô šām* is the bH rendering of the Akk idiom *šuma šakānu*, "to place the name," which itself emerges from the royal monumental literary typology of Mesopotamia and has to do with the installation of inscribed monuments. . . . This was the idiom of conquering kings, celebrated heroes, and formidable overlords. By utilizing this idiom the biblical author reminds his audience that YHWH, not Israel, had taken the land, and therefore *the place* was his, not theirs. . . . Israel's ongoing tenure in *the place* is dependent upon their recognition that *the place* is, in truth, the possession of their conquering king.¹¹

In other words, the idiomatic DH phrases were designed to telegraph the idea that when it came to the land, Yahweh was the landlord; the Israelites were the tenants—tenants that could be removed at Yahweh's discretion.

By way of summary then, current research into the Name Theology and the DH phrasing has resulted in several positions that depart from the older predominant view:

1. Based on comparative linguistic data, the idiomatic DH phrase *l'šakkēn š'mô šām* ought to be translated "to place, put his name," thus preventing a bias toward a hypostatic reading.
2. Contrary to the predominant view (still held by some), Deuteronomy does not cast Yahweh as transcendent and remote, replacing him on earth with the Name. Research into the phrase *liphnê YHWH* and comparison with Exodus and Numbers shows the Name was conceived of as Yahweh Himself whose presence was on earth among His people.
3. The idiomatic phrase formulae used by the Dtr speak of Yahweh's ownership of the land—and so, the sanctuary—not any particular theology of the divine presence.

2.0 The Name Theology: A Necessary Addendum

My own personal perspective is that the work of Richter and the other recent scholars referenced here have provided valuable critiques of the older Name Theology. The observations and modifications to the older predominant perspective are, in my view, sound. However, there is more to a Name Theology

¹¹ Richter, 245-247.

in Israelite religion than the idiomatic phrases in the DH. While we do well to reject the notion of hypostasis when that word is used to describe the idea of a lesser form of Yahweh as a vehicle to denying Yahweh's immanence, other passages utilize the word *shem* in such a way as to localize the divine presence on earth among God's people.

While I agree with the conclusions of Richter and these other scholars, and reject the false dichotomy regarding transcendence and immanence in the older view, some things have been overlooked that indeed do contribute to our understanding of Israel's experience of the divine presence. Understanding *shem*, the Name, not as a hypostasis but as Yahweh's true presence alerts us to an under-appreciated strategy of Old Testament writers to convey the conception of a Godhead—a conception that included Yahweh in human form. Israelite Godhead thinking was part of my own University of Wisconsin dissertation.

Toward making this point I offer several passages for consideration:

Psalm 20

¹ May the LORD answer you in the day of trouble!

May the Name of the God of Jacob protect you!

This passage clearly juxtaposes the divine name, Yahweh, with the Name. Unlike the phrases in the DH, ownership is not in view. Neither is the psalmist hoping that four consonants would deliver his people. Rather, the Name is Yahweh, and Yahweh is the Name. The Name is a circumlocution for Yahweh.

2 Samuel 6

¹ David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. ² And David arose and went with all the people who were with him from Baale-judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called the Name, the Name of the LORD of hosts¹² who sits enthroned on the cherubim.

This passage, absent the sorts of obscuration common to English translations at the underlined point, so tightly identifies the ark with Name that the ark itself could be referred to as the Name. The reason is not surprising: the ark was associated with the very presence of Yahweh, enthroned upon the cherubim lid of the ark. Again, the Name is Yahweh, not a lesser hypostatic form.

Isaiah 30

²⁷ Behold, the name of the LORD comes from afar,
burning with his anger, and in thick rising smoke;
his lips are full of fury,

and his tongue is like a devouring fire;
²⁸ his breath is like an overflowing stream
that reaches up to the neck;
to sift the nations with the sieve of destruction,

¹² Many English translations obscure the Hebrew text here (אֲשֶׁר־נִקְרָא שֵׁם יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת) and render something like “which is called by the name of the LORD of hosts” (ESV).

and to place on the jaws of the peoples a bridle that leads astray.

The Name is here personified in anthropomorphic terms.

Exodus 23

²⁰ "Behold, I send **an angel** before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. ²¹ Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for **my name is in him**. ²² "But if you carefully obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries.

This passage informs us that this particular angel—identified in Judg 2:1-3 as the Angel of the Lord—is unique in that the Name dwells in him. The Angel is indwelt by the Name, and so the Angel is Yahweh in human form. While this passage does not specifically cast the Angel as embodied, other passages do. For example, Jer 1 exchanges Yahweh with the Angel of Yahweh. Jer 1:9 describes the Angel who is Yahweh with the language of embodiment, as the Angel extends his hand and touches Jeremiah's mouth.

Exodus 23:20-22 has the Angel, who is the visible Name, leading Israel through the wilderness and into the promised land. When juxtaposed with Deut 4:37 (cp. Exod 33:14) we see that the Torah identifies the visible Name with the very presence of Yahweh.

Deuteronomy 4

³⁵ To you it was shown, that you might know that the LORD is God; there is no other besides him.

³⁶ Out of heaven he let you hear his voice, that he might discipline you. And on earth he let you see his great fire, and you heard his words out of the midst of the fire. ³⁷ And because he loved your fathers and chose their offspring after them and brought you out of Egypt **with his own presence**, by his great power...

This is consistent with the more recent approach to the Name Theology, but goes beyond the formulaic expressions to strategies for conveying God's presence with Israel. In fact, the Torah's description of who led Israel into the land blends the divine presence, the Name, the Angel, and Yahweh Himself.

Who brought the Israelites through the wilderness and into the land?

1. Yahweh – Exod 20:2; Lev 11:45; 25:38; Deut 5:6; 20:1; cp. Psa 81:10; Amos 2:10
2. The Angel of Yahweh – Exod 23:20-23; cp. Judg 2:1-3
3. Yahweh's Presence (*panîm*) – Deut 4:37; Exod 33:14; cp. Isa 63:9

The Angel of Yahweh is closely identified with Yahweh and yet distinguished throughout the Old Testament. Genesis 48:15-16 goes so far as to fuse the characters in Jacob's blessing of Joseph's children, where a singular verb is used to invoke both figures. The two figures appear together in Judges 6, the call of Gideon (note esp. vv. 21-23, where the Angel leaves but Yahweh is still speaking). The Angel is identified with Yahweh because the Angel has the Name within him, which Name is Yahweh. Passages like these must be considered part of the Israelite Name Theology, not merely the expressions found in the DH.