

3. THE NAME OF GOD

For many centuries in the history of Western Christianity, the liturgical and cultural language par excellence was Latin, so neither the reconstruction of the correct pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton nor its exact translation was a priority.

For Judaism, on the other hand, the question is not only lexical but also has important theological consequences.

It is therefore necessary to adopt a more appropriate attitude in order to give the issue the importance it deserves in the dialogue between religions.

It is often wrongly assumed that the different names of God in the Hebrew Bible can be considered synonymous. We will examine some of them, as well as the Y-H-W-H tetragram, in order to understand their meaning and specificity.

Y-H-W-H

According to Exodus 3:14, Moses asks God how he should respond to the children of Israel who ask Him what His name is, and God replies: *Ehyeh asher ehyeh*, which St Jerome translated as *Ego sum qui sum* and which most have translated into English as *I am that I am*. It is a present tense already found in the Septuagint version, but the original Hebrew has a future tense: *I will be what I will be*, as can be read in Zech 14:9: “In that day the Lord will be Ehad/One, and His name will be one”. The Tetragrammaton comes from a declination to the third person of what is said in Exodus. Y-H-W-H is He who was, is and will be. The Jews do not pronounce the Tetragrammaton. There are no vowels in the Hebrew Bible, so the biblical Tetragrammaton is all consonants and its correct pronunciation is uncertain. Already in pre-Christian times, during the reading of the *Scriptures* and in the liturgy of the Temple in Jerusalem, the name was pronounced *A-donay*, in scrupulous observance of the commandment “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain” (Ex 20:7; Dt 5:11). Only on special occasions, such as the Day of *Kippur*, was it pronounced by the High Priest.

The Masoretes, who worked on the text of the Hebrew Scriptures from the 6th to the 10th century, did not know the original pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton and pronounced it with the vowel signs of the Hebrew words *A-donay* or *Elohim* (see below). Today, in various contexts, Jews use the expression *Ha-Shem* (the Name) to refer to God, in order to avoid pronouncing the divine names.

The Tetragrammaton occurs 5372 times in the Hebrew Scriptures, missing only in the *Song of Songs*, *Esther* and *Qohelet*.

In 1996, a group of eminent biblical scholars and prominent figures from the Jewish and Christian cultural worlds signed an *Appeal for the Name of God*, addressed to

publishers, newspaper and magazine editors, urging them not to vocalise Y-H-W-H.¹⁶ The Magisterium of the Catholic Church has also addressed this issue in a document entitled ‘Letter to Episcopal Conferences on the Name of God’, published in 2008 by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, which states that ‘in liturgical celebrations, hymns and prayers, the name of God should not be used or pronounced in the form of the tetragrammaton Y-H-W-H’.

A-donay

It means ‘My Lord’ and is often associated with *Šewaot: Lord of hosts*, or rather *Lord of the (heavenly) hosts*. It occurs 131 times in the Hebrew Scriptures. As mentioned above, this Name is often substituted for the Tetragrammaton in the reading of the Hebrew text.

Elohim, El

El is the semantic particle for the divine and alone means ‘powerful’. Linguistically, *Elohim* is a *maiestatis* plural form of El and occurs 2523 times in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is missing only in *Obadiah*, the *Song of Songs*, *Esther* and *Lamentations*.

Shadday

This is a Divine Name used mainly in the biblical text in the patriarchal era. *Shadday*, when related to the Hebrew word *El*, means “the mighty one who feeds, satisfies and provides”. However, its etymology is questionable. It occurs 48 times in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Divine Name in Jewish mysticism

In Judaism, every single letter corresponds to a number and the Masters teach that God dwells in each of the letters of the *Torah*. The act of creation is thus explained in the sequence of letters that make up the Teaching (*Torah*) given to Israel, while the words represent only the first and outermost level of reading.

Even before the esotericists’ began to speculate on language, the Name of God occupied a central place in their conceptions.

From the 2nd century AD onwards, the Tetragrammaton, which had become unpronounceable, is sometimes referred to as *Shem ha-meforash*: the term is ambiguous and has contradictory meanings. On the one hand, *meforash* means ‘communicated’, ‘manifested’, ‘explained’, but in this context it can also mean ‘separated’ and ‘hidden’. From the 2nd and 3rd centuries, purely mystical names of God, constructed from sequences of letters taken from certain verses of the Hebrew Scriptures, were also called *Shem ha-meforash*. This use is also attested in Midrashic and Talmudic literature. Thus, divine names of 12, 42 or 72 letters are spoken of.

In the *Qabalah*, the *Torah* is conceived not only as an orderly collection of ritual prescriptions and historical narratives, but also as an uninterrupted series of divine

¹⁶ The appeal has been republished in the new edition of *Vademecum per il lettore della Bibbia*, Morcelliana, Bologna 2017, 242-243.

Names, almost like a single Name of unimaginable power: in the mysterious sound of this Name, the letters transcend the temporary limit of words, and show all their creative power intact. For the *Qabalah*, the four letters that make up the Tetragrammaton contain the representation of all worlds and all levels of reality.

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