

Where did Israel's God come from?¹

Alan Millard †
The University of Liverpool

Abstract: According to Exodus 3, God revealed himself as YHWH to Moses. Biblical poems refer to him active in Sinai and Midian, Hebrew graffiti connect him with the south, and Egyptian inscriptions list a place similarly named there. Was YHWH a local deity whom the Israelites adopted? The case is made for the name existing among Israelites earlier.

Keywords: YHWH, Midian, Asherah, Aten

Introduction

When Moses fled from Egypt, he found refuge in Midian and married a daughter of a priest there. Out in the wilderness, near Mount Horeb, where he was caring for his father-in-law's sheep, God spoke to him from a burning bush, calling him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. After identifying himself as the God of the Israelites' ancestors, he told Moses his name, YHWH (Yahweh), explaining it later (Exod 3; 6:2, 3). When Moses had led the people from Egypt, crossed the Red Sea and marched with difficulty through the desert, he brought them to Mount Sinai. There his father-in-law, 'the priest of Midian', met him and hailed Yahweh as the greatest God in the light of Israel's saving experiences. Then the nation-making event took place, the covenant between God and Israel, with God's awesome presence on the mountain. The Israelites moved on to the Desert of Paran and further to Kadesh in the Desert of Sin and to Mount Hor at the border of Edom (Num 10:12; 13:26; 20). After other stages, the troop reached the plains of Moab and the Jordan River.

For 150 years scholars have studied and analysed the narratives in the Book of Exodus and reached many, often contradictory, conclusions, ranging from those who treat the text as an historical account of Israel's early history to those who consider them to be entirely fictional propaganda for the Jewish faith from Persian or later times. Reading Exodus in the context of the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1500–1100 BC), which it seems to imply, reveals many details that fit the period well (Millard 2000; Hoffmeier 2016; 2023). They allow its contents to be accepted as reliable reports, irrespective of the date when the book was composed. (Its language is certainly later than the Late Bronze Age.) It is in that context, this essay explores the origin of Israel's God.

Poetic Reminiscences

In addition to the prose narratives in the Pentateuch, Hebrew poems celebrated events of the Israelites' journey, among them some are often considered as the oldest examples of the Hebrew language.

¹ This paper was edited after the passing away of Alan Millard. It has been left untouched apart from formatting and eliminating the most obvious typos.

Deuteronomy 33:2

“The Lord came from Sinai and dawned from Seir upon us; he shone forth from Mount Paran.
He came from the ten thousands of holy ones with flaming fire at his right hand.”

Judges 5:4–5

“When you, Lord, went out from Seir,
when you marched from the land of Edom,
the earth trembled, the heavens poured,
the clouds poured down water.
The mountains quaked before the Lord,
the One of Sinai, before the Lord, the God of Israel.”

Habakkuk 3:3, 7

“God came from Teman,
the Holy One from Mount Paran.
His glory covered the heavens
and his praise filled the earth.
...
I saw the tents of Cushan in distress,
the dwellings of Midian in anguish.”

Psalm 68:7–8, 17

“When you, God, went out before your people,
when you marched through the wilderness,
the earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain,
before God, the One of Sinai,
before God, the God of Israel.
...
With mighty chariotry, twice ten thousand,

thousands upon thousands;

the Lord came from Sinai into his sanctuary.”

Midian as the Home of God?

Was the area of Midian and Mount Sinai the home of God? For many commentators the Exodus accounts of Moses in Midian and the events at Mount Sinai seem to point to an origin in that area. It was the place where he commissioned Moses, and the phrases “The Lord came from Sinai” and “the One of Sinai” seem to indicate he belonged there. Therefore, it is suggested, the Midianites may have already worshipped the Lord, leading the Israelites to adopt him as their patron. Jethro, some have speculated, may even have been a priest of that deity.

The location of Midian has been debated. Some biblical texts imply it lay in Transjordan and northern Arabia leading ancient and modern interpreters to seek Mount Sinai east of the gulf of Aqaba. However, no Midianite ‘homeland’, shrine or town is named; the Midianites appear as tribespeople active in various places appearing and disappearing. Their situation could be analogous to the Nabateans in the first century and later, who were at home in Jordan and east of the Gulf of Aqaba but roamed in Sinai with their flocks or travelled with merchandise, leading to the area being counted as part of Arabia. It is a mistake to suppose there were clear frontiers; nomadic, or semi-nomadic tribes did not have impenetrable wall type boundaries! (Beitzel 2019).²

Another argument is based on the role of the Kenites, a tribe at home in the Sinai region (Num 24:21, 22) but who gave help to Israelites in the Promised Land (Judg 1:16; 4:11, Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite). They appear to have been devotees of the same God. However, it is not evident that they knew of him before they met the Israelites. Since the biblical narratives indicate that news about the Exodus from Egypt spread among the people of the area (see Rahab’s declaration in Josh 2:8–11), the Kenites may have become recent adherents.³

Further support for the Midianite origin of God is claimed from extra-biblical sources. Closest to the biblical are the inscriptions found at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, a fortified hill-top station on the road from Gaza to Aqaba. On plastered walls, on stone vessels and on pottery people had written or incised words and sentences in Hebrew and Phoenician early in the eighth century BC. Among them some invoke the name of YHWH of Samaria and of YHWH of Teman. Coupled with the divine name is Asherathah, often understood as ‘his Asherah’ (*‘asherāthoh*), to be the goddess Asherah, so God’s consort. It is rather, in my opinion, following André Lemaire, a word for shrine or temple as found in Phoenician and Akkadian (Lemaire 2007). These writings attest some worship of Israel’s God, although they do not clearly imply the presence of a shrine at the site. After all, once one person has written a graffito on a wall or standing objects, others are likely to follow, whatever the circum-

² Notice the recent discovery of the name *mdyn* in an early first millennium BC Taymanite graffito (Robin and al-Ghabbân 2017).

³ The arguments for these positions were set out clearly by Blenkinsopp (2008). They, with others mentioned here, have been carefully and critically analysed by Lewis (2020).

stance may be! The reference to Teman, ‘the south’, aligns with the biblical poetic passage in Habakkuk 3 already cited, while Samaria may stand as its polar opposite, a northern site. However, it is possible each recalls some triumph for Israel which was attributed to divine aid, such as the relief of Samaria from Syrian sieges (1 Kgs 20; 2 Kgs 6, 7). Unless Teman is related to Joram’s expedition when the king of Edom supported Israel against Moab (2 Kgs 3), we would have to suppose there was another occasion not recorded in the Bible, or else the Exodus story is in view.

Egyptian References

Yet another line of argument arises from the identification of a place name inscribed on a pillar in the temple Amenophis III (ca. 1390–1352 BC) had built at Soleb in the Sudan. The name is written *ya-h-wá* (Yahwz) and stands beside three other unidentified place names. A century later, Ramesses II (ca. 1279–1213 BC) reproduced the list at his temple at ‘Amarah West where *ya-h-wá* stands fifth in a group of six placed in Shasu land. About a century later still, Ramesses III (ca. 1184–1153 BC) copied the list at Medinet Habu, writing the name *yi-ha*. The term stands as a place name in the phrase ‘land of Shasu of Y.’ or ‘Shasu of Seir’ (Adrom and Müller 2017; Cooper 2020: 216–20; 500–1; 516–18). Shasu in Egyptian denotes semi-nomadic shepherds whom the Egyptians met as hostile groups at home east of the Jordan, extending north into Syria. The conjunction with Seir apparently restricts the range, for Seir, of course, is Edom, so the place Yahwz should be sought there. To date, no site has been located either for it or for the adjacent names in the list which remain otherwise unknown. The similarity of the place name to the name of Israel’s God, YHWH, leads to the simple and widely asserted deduction that the Hebrew divine name might be derived from the place name. An analogy is claimed in the name Ashur, which serves for the first capital of Assyria, the name of its patron god and of the country, although even in this case there is uncertainty over which came first, the name of the god or of the place.

In his recent extensive examination of the Shasu names in the Egyptian texts, Dan Fleming has concluded that they do not represent places but peoples, groups of the Shasu and, since in the twelfth century BC papyrus Harris the land of the Shasu is placed in Mount Seir, that is where the ‘Yhwz Shasu-land’ should be sought. Fleming argues strongly for the identification of the divine name YHWH with the Egyptian reported Shasu name Yhwz which he maintains was derived from a human personal name, not from a place name (Fleming 2021).

Very many scholars have accepted the connection between the divine name and the Egyptian *ya-h-wá* since Bernhardt Grdseloff made it in 1947. Yet there is need for caution! Exactly how the Egyptian writing is to be read is disputed; the common reading is *ya-h-wá*, but Kenneth A. Kitchen preferred *ya-hi-wa*, dismissing any relationship with the Hebrew divine name (1979: 217; 1996: 75; 1999: 128–29). There may be nothing more here than unrelated homonymy. Just as we can hardly allow that there is anything other than homonymy between the names of the Sumero-Babylonian moon god Sîn and the place name Mount Sinai or the Babylonian god Nabû and Mount Nebo in Jordan. Would anyone claim there was a Babylonian presence in those areas long before the Neo-

Babylonian period?⁴ The Egyptian writing presents *ya-h-wá* purely as a toponym, without any determinative for deity or town or group of people, so every other interpretation remains hypothetical. The proximity of the name in date (Late Bronze Age) and location (Sinai Peninsula, Transjordan) to the Hebrew accounts may simply be a coincidence!

The Significance of the Poetic Passages

If some of the Hebrew poetic passages do come from very early in Israelite history, as many argue, their witness might be treated as more valuable than the witness of the prose texts. Did they intend to explain that the Israelites first met the Lord in the wilderness? Do the acclamations, ‘The Lord came from Sinai ... went out from Seir’, affirm his origin, his abode, or do they, rather, signal the victorious stages of advance by the people he had led from Egypt and chosen to conquer the Promised Land? Since it was at Sinai that he revealed himself most fully to the Israelites and it was during their trek through the wilderness that they experienced his power, ‘the One of Sinai’ would be an appropriate title for him.

The case for a Midianite or Kenite origin of Israel’s God rests on a series of uncertainties, attractive in some ways, but inadequate as foundations for the answer to so significant a question. The recourse to emendation, making Jethro ‘priest of Midian’ into a priest of YHWH from Midian teaching his faith to the Israelites, reveals the weakness! (Millard 2014: 118, 119).

Yahweh’s Revelation

Inevitably, we turn to God’s declaration to Moses, “I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as El-Shaddai, but by my name YHWH I did not make myself known to them” (Exod 6:3). The direct contradiction to the Patriarchal narratives, which use the name, and earlier passages in Genesis (notably Gen 4:26) has caused debate and various solutions for centuries. Most commentators accept the contradiction as a result of the mixture of assumed sources in the Pentateuch (‘J’, ‘E’, and ‘P’) and offer reasons for its acceptance (see Moberly 1992). That still supposes the compilers of Genesis-Exodus were content to leave their readers and hearers with a major discrepancy: people began to call on the name of the Lord at the start of human history according to Gen 4:26, yet his name was not known until the time of Moses. Is that acceptable? (We should admit that modern minds may take exception to such a feature more readily than ancient ones.) I lean to the interpretation of Exod 6:3 as explaining or revealing the significance of the divine name which was long known among the Israelites as no more than a divine name. (Niehaus 1995: 188 cites Garrett 1991: 20, 21, ‘I made myself known to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as El Shaddai. And my name is Yahweh; did I not make myself known to them?’).⁵

⁴ For other homonyms, compare the regional name Aram, the personal name Arame (a king of Arpad) and Aramish, the god of Qarnaim (see Younger 2016: 38, 459, 563).

⁵ The name would be an archaic verbal form, the prefix conjugation of HWY, ‘to be,’ *yahwī* becoming *yahwē*, prior to the operation of the Barth-Ginsberg law which would produce *yihweh*. For the early phonetic form the personal name *yabni-il* in an El Amarna Letter and tablets from Ugarit may be compared, see Hess (1993: 78, 97). The final *h* then marks the reduced $-\bar{y} > \bar{e} > e$, as in Hebrew *yigliy* > *yiglē* > *yigleh*.)

An Egyptian Analogy

An analogy with the history of the sun disk in Egypt, the Aten, seems to be attractive today as it was thirty years ago (Millard 1993). The Aten was an ancient concept among the Egyptians, although the distinction between ‘the sun’ and ‘the sun god’ is not easily made, as Alan Gardiner observed when commenting on the line in the Tale of Sinuhe (19th century BC) which tells of a dead pharaoh becoming ‘united with the disk’ (1961: 217). Only in the 14th century BC, under Amenophis III (ca. 1390–1352 BC), did the Aten become more frequently mentioned, reaching its peak under his son, Amenophis IV (ca. 1353–1336 BC) who changed his name to Akhenaten and abolished all other deities. The revolution was ended shortly after Akhenaten’s death and what influence it had on Israelite religion, if any, lies outside this discussion (see Hoffmeier 2015). Ancient Israelites may have been aware of the divine name YHWH but not used it until he revealed his power and made them his people. Only from the Exodus onwards does it become an element in personal names, the earliest being Moses’s mother, Jochebed. So far as I am aware, the Aten was not an element in Egyptian personal names before Akhenaten’s time.

At the Burning Bush God told Moses the meaning of the name handed down from earliest times, which would now be most relevant to the Israelites, the One who is.

Bibliography

- Adrom, Faried and Matthias Müller. 2017. "The Tetragrammaton in Egyptian Sources - Facts and Fiction". In *The Origins of Yahwism*, edited by Jürgen van Oorschot and Markus Wítte, 93–113. BZAW 484. Berlin: de Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110448221-005>.
- Beitzel, Barry J. 2019. "The Meaning of 'Arabia' in Classical Literature and the New Testament". In *Lexham Geographic Commentary on Acts through Revelation*, edited by Barry J. Beitzel, 520–36. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.
- Blenkinsopp, Joseph. 2008. "The Midianite-Kenite Hypothesis Revisited and the Origins of Judah". *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 33: 131–153. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089208099253>.
- Cooper, Julian. 2020. *Toponymy on the Periphery: Placenames of the Eastern Desert, Red Sea, and South Sinai in Egyptian Documents from the Early Dynastic until the End of the New Kingdom*. Probleme der Ägyptologie 39. Leiden: Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004422216>.
- Fleming, Daniel E. 2021. *Yahweh before Israel Glimpses of History in a Divine Name*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/9781108875479>.
- Gardiner, Alan H. 1961. *Egypt of the Pharaohs*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Garrett, Duane. 1991. *Rethinking Genesis. The Sources and Authorship of the First Book of the Pentateuch*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Grdseloff, Bernhardt. 1947. "Édôm, d'après les sources égyptiennes." *Revue de l'histoire juive en Égypte* 1: 69–99.
- Hess, Richard S. 1993. *Amarna Personal Names*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.
- Hoffmeier, James K. 2015. *Akhenaten and the Origins of Monotheism*. New York: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199792085.001.0001>.
- . 2016. "Egyptian Religious Influences on the Early Hebrews". In *Did I not bring Israel out of Egypt? Biblical, archaeological, and Egyptological perspectives on the Exodus Narratives*, edited by James K. Hoffmeier, Alan R. Millard, and Gary A. Rendsburg, 3–35. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns. <https://doi.org/10.5325/j.ctv1bxgxt.5>.
- . 2023. "Further Reflections on Egyptian Influences on the Early Hebrews—Priestly Matters". In *Linguistic and Philological Studies of the Hebrew Bible and its Manuscripts*, edited by Vincent D. Beiler and Aaron D. Rubin, 167–95. *Studia Semitica Neerlandica* 75. Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004544840_013.
- Kitchen, Kenneth A. 1979. *Ramesside Inscriptions*, vol. II. Oxford: Blackwell.
- . 1996. *Ramesside Inscriptions: Translated & Annotated. Translations*, vol. II. Ramesses II, Royal Inscriptions. Oxford: Blackwell.
- . 1999. *Ramesside Inscriptions: Translated & Annotated. Notes and Comments*, vol. II. Ramesses II, Royal Inscriptions, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lemaire, André. 2007. *The Birth of Monotheism. The Rise and Disappearance of Yahwism*, edited and translated by André Lemaire and Jack Meinhardt. Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society.
- Lewis, Theodore J. 2020. *The Origin and Character of God: Ancient Israelite Religion Through the Lens of Divinity*. New York: Oxford University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190072544.001.0001>.

- Millard, Alan R. 1993. "Abraham, Akhenaten, Moses and Monotheism". In *He Swore an Oath: Biblical Themes from Genesis 12–50*, edited by Richard S. Hess, Philip E. Satterthwaite, and Gordon J. Wenham, 119–29. Cambridge: Tyndale House.
- . 2000. "How reliable is Exodus?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 26 (4): 51–57.
- . 2014. "The Hebrew Divine Name in Cuneiform and Hebrew Texts". In *Bible et Proche-Orient. Mélanges André Lemaire*, edited by Josette Elayi and Jean-Marie Durand, 113–25. Transeuphratène 45. Paris: Gabalda.
- Moberly, R. Walter L. 1992. *The Old Testament of the Old Testament*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Niehaus, Jeffery J. 1995. *God at Sinai. Covenant and Theophany in the Bible and the Ancient Near East*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Robin, Christian, and Alî al-Ghabbân. 2017. "Une première mention de Madyan dans un texte épigraphique d'Arabie". *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 161 (1): 363–396. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3406/crai.2017.96407>.
- Younger, K. Lawson. 2016. *A Political History of the Aramaeans*, Atlanta: SBL Press.