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## DID THE PATRIARCHS KNOW GOD’S NAME?

DANIEL M. BERRY, SANDRA VAN EDEN

### THE STANDARD UNDERSTANDING AND ASSOCIATED PROBLEMS

Exodus 6:3 says *va'eira el avraham el yitzchak v'el ya'aqov b'el shadai ushmi YHWH lo noda'ti lahem*. The standard punctuation puts an etnachta, which functions as a semi-colon, after the word *shadai*, and a zaqef qatan symbol, which functions as a comma, after the word *YHWH*. Thus, the standard understanding, captured by an English translation, is *I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai; but by my name “YHWH”, I did not become known to them*.

There are several problems with this standard understanding of the verse. First, it is simply not true that God did not become known to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob by his name “YHWH”. In Genesis 15:7, God explicitly tells Abraham *I am YHWH who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans*. In Genesis 28:13, God tells Jacob *I am YHWH the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac*. There are many passages in Genesis in which a patriarch uses the name “YHWH” to describe or to address God, for example, Abram or Abraham in Genesis 12:8, 13:4, 14:22, and 22:14; Isaac in Genesis 26:22 and 26:25; and Jacob in Genesis 27:20, 28:16, 32:10, and 49:18.<sup>1</sup>

Also other figures seem to know God as “YHWH”, for example, Abraham’s servant in Genesis 24:27 and 24:40, Leah in Genesis 29:33, and even Bethuel and Laban, who did not have any particular interaction with God, in Genesis 24:50. These uses of the name “YHWH” indicate that knowledge of the name was fairly widespread.

That *but by my name “YHWH”, I did not become known to them* is not true is called “the difficulty with the standard understanding” or just “the difficulty” in the rest of the paper.

*Daniel Berry is a professor of Computer Science and Software Engineering at the University of Waterloo and is also a lay leader at Waterloo's Temple Shalom. Sandra van Eden is a narrative therapist working in New Zealand government schools and is also a lay leader at Auckland's Beth Shalom.*

Even more importantly, if the standard understanding of the verse were intended, then the text of Exodus 6:3 in Hebrew would have been written differently, with the preposition *bet* (*with* or *by*) in *ushmi*: *va'eira el-avraham, el-yitzchak, v'el-ya'aqov b'el shadai; u'b'shmi YHWH, lo noda'ti lahem*. One could argue that the use of prepositions is not complete in the Hebrew of the Torah. However, the verse contains an explicit use of the same preposition *bet*, specifically in *b'el shadai*. If this preposition were intended but was explicitly omitted in *ushmi*, then why would this intended preposition explicitly be used in another place in the same verse?

#### A NEW UNDERSTANDING

There is another way to read the verse according to the standard vocalization, but with different punctuation, changing the zaqef qatan, a comma, after the phrase *ushmi YHWH* into an etnachta, a semi-colon, making the words *lo noda'ti lahem* a separate clause.<sup>2</sup> The translation would thus be, *I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shadai; and my name is "YHWH"; I did not become known to them*. Accepting this reading of the verse requires finding a meaning of the verb *yada'* (*to know*) for which *I did not become known to them* is indisputably true.

In the Bible, the verb *yada'* has several different meanings, determined by the natures of its knower and knowee. In the following, a sentient is either God or a person.

- When the knower is sentient and the knowee is a concept, then the sentient knows, i.e., understands, the concept, as in *rashi yode'a et hatanakh* (*Rashi knows the Bible*).
- When both the knower and the knowee are sentient, then the sentients are engaging in an intimate, face-to-face relationship, such as what happened *in privacy* between Joseph and his brothers when they met, with tears and hugging, for the first time in the years since the brothers sold Joseph into slavery: *b'hitvada' yosef el-echav* (*while Joseph made himself known to his brothers*). Here, *hitvada'* is a form of *yada'*.
  - When both sentients are people, the knower is a man, and the knowee is a woman, then the intimate relationship is sex.<sup>3</sup>
  - When one sentient is God and the other is a person, then the intimate re-

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lationship is the person's seeing God's face, which is known to be fatal to the person, as explained in Exodus 33:20 – 23.

Thus, the clause *I did not become known to them* is complete, and *become known* does not require an adverbial phrase explaining how *I did not become known to them*.

Berry and van Eden<sup>4</sup> argue that Deuteronomy 34:10, *And there never arose again in Israel a prophet like Moses whom YHWH knew (y'da'u) face to face*, means that God did know Moses in this intimate sense, showing Moses his face, in order to allow Moses to fulfill God's command in Deuteronomy 32:50 to Moses to die on the mountain. Could this meaning of *yada'* be the one intended in *I did not become known to them*? This meaning makes *I did not become known to them* a complete sentence, because with this meaning, *become known* does not require an adverbial phrase explaining how *I did not become known to them*. In addition, Deuteronomy 34:10 makes it clear that by the time of Moses's death, God has known *only* Moses face to face. Therefore, with this meaning of *yada'*, *I did not become known to them [the patriarchs]* is certainly true at the time of Exodus 6:3.<sup>5</sup>

In saying *I did not become known to them*, God is saying that even though he revealed Himself as *El Shadai* and revealed His name to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, His appearance to them did not rise to the level of becoming known in the very intimate sense and showing His face. God is zeroing in on the exact position, on the spectrum of acquaintance, of His interaction with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: It includes *appearing* and being told His name, but it is not so strong as to include *intimate knowing*. God is saying that so far, no person has *intimately known* me, not even Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Later, when God has to refuse Moses's request to see His face, Moses will know that he is not being deprived of a privilege bestowed on the patriarchs.

#### RELATED COMMENTARY

Rabbinic commentary, including that by Rashi, that by Ibn Ezra, that by Ramban,<sup>6</sup> and Midrash Chadash,<sup>7</sup> has recognized the difficulty and has struggled to deal with it.

Some, including Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Ramban, and Midrash Chadash, try to deal with the difficulty by changing *noda'ti* to or interpreting it as a different word.

- Rashi first suggests that the standard understanding of *noda'ti* is really that of *hoda'ti* (*I did not make known*), which is not written. Then, he interprets *noda'ti* as meaning *being recognized by my attribute of truthfulness*, an idea not readily apparent in the text itself and not really relevant for establishing the strength of God's relationship with any person.
- Ibn Ezra explains that *lo noda'ti lahem* means *I did not become known to them like I have become known to you*. Thus, for Ibn Ezra, *yada'* describes a relationship that goes beyond that of God with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but is no closer than what God and Moses have already experienced until the event of Exodus 6:3, i.e., during the burning bush episode, but not yet during the delivery of the tablets of the law. However, the strength of the relationship between God and Abraham during their negotiation over the impending capital punishment for Sodom and Gomorrah is at least as strong as that between God and Moses at the burning bush. So also *I did not become known to them like I have become known to you* is not true.
- Ramban repeats and then goes beyond Rashi's argument in suggesting that instead of *ushmi YHWH*, *lo noda'ti lahem*, it would be more fitting to have *ushmi YHWH*, *lo hoda'ti* (*I did not make myself known*) *lahem* or *ushmi YHWH lo noda'* (*was not known*) *lahem*. However, these more fitting wordings are not any less untrue than the original.
- Ramban also suggests that maybe God made himself known or appeared to the Fathers as *El Shaddai* and therefore did not make himself known or apparent to them by his name *YHWH* (by replacing *ushmi* with *u'b'shmi*; and by replacing *va'era'* with *va'ivada'*, or *noda'ti* with *nore'ti*). However, as documented in the second paragraph of the first section of this paper, there are numerous instances of the Fathers addressing God by His name *YHWH*.
- Midrash Chadash recognizes that it cannot be true that God did not reveal (using the verb *nigleiti*) himself as *YHWH* to Abraham because that revelation did take place in Genesis 15:7. It offers that God was saying *I did not reveal Myself to them as I did to you, mouth to mouth*. This interpretation is understanding *yada'* as meaning *l'galot ... peh el peh* (*to reveal mouth to mouth*), and nothing more. Note also that by use of *as I did to you*, whatever *yada'* means, God has already caused it to happen to Moses. If so, then *l'galot ... peh el peh* means speaking directly with, as happened at the burn-

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ing bush. However, even this kind of *yada'* happened before, e.g., when God spoke directly with Abraham, e.g., over the impending punishment for Sodom and Gomorrah. So, so this interpretation of *yada'* is not likely to be the intended one in *lo noda'ti*.

Nevertheless, in each relevant case, God *had* made Himself known to at least Abraham in the alternative way, and the difficulty remains.

More than one of the commentaries, by Rashi and Ramban, suggested separating the verse into two sentences, the first ending with *ushmi YHWH*, and the second being *lo noda'ti lahem*. Each such commentary came close to discovering the conclusion of this paper, but in the end did not. In particular, no commentary observed that *noda'ti* is describing a very intimate relationship that to date, had not yet happened.

- Rashi's interpretation recognizes that God is not saying *By my name H', I did not become known to them* but simply that *I did not become known to them*, with no further qualification. However, as mentioned, this interpretation takes *noda'ti'* as meaning *being recognized by my attribute of truthfulness*.
- Ramban, in his elaboration of Rashi's commentary suggests that **Perhaps, according to his [Rashi's] opinion, [Scripture] is saying, "but My name is HASHEM, and I was not known to them [ushmi H', v'lo noda'ti lahem]," that is to say, "I was not known to them by [this Name] [lo noda'ti lahem bo]."**<sup>5</sup>
- Thus, he did separate *ushmi YHWH* from *lo noda'ti lahem*, but by adding *bo* (*by it*) to the end of *lo noda'ti lahem*, he rejoined them.
- That Ibn Ezra did not take *noda'ti* as describing a very intimate relationship is apparent from his commentary on Deuteronomy 34:10. This commentary says in effect to see his commentary on Deuteronomy 5:4, which says *face to face i.e., without an intermediary. When someone's voice can be heard directly, it is called "face to face", even if his face cannot be seen.*
- That Ramban did not take *noda'ti* as describing a very intimate relationship is apparent from his commentary on Deuteronomy 34:10. This commentary explains *v'lo kam navi' 'od b'yisrael k'moshe asher y'da'u YHWH panim el panim* with

**[Scripture] is saying that *Never again has there arisen in Israel***

***a prophet like Moses whom God so elevated as to communicate with him face to face. ... And likewise, the verse *What is a man that You “know” him? (Psalms 144:3)* means: What is man that You do him the honor of putting Your mind on him, ... similar in concept to the verse: *What is man that You exalt him? (Job 7:17)*.***<sup>5</sup>

Thus, no commentary fully escapes the difficulty, because no commentary identifies that *noda'ti* means the strong intimate face-to-face relationship. The interpretation offered by this paper avoids the difficulty and requires no changes in wording, no additional words, and no new meanings for *noda'ti*.

#### CONCLUSION

A careful reading and altered punctuation of Exodus 6:3, along with the understanding of the verb *yada'* used to describe God's relation with a person as meaning *God knows the person intimately face to face*, i.e., *the person is seeing God's face*, eliminates the difficulty of the standard understanding of Exodus 6:3 and provides a clear rationale for God to have said what Exodus 6:3 has Him saying.

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#### NOTES

1. One member of the *JBQ* editorial committee suggests that perhaps “*YHWH*” was not considered a name of God in the same sense in which one gives names to objects or people. According to Maimonides (Guide, part 1, chapter 61), *the sacred name of YHWH conveyed the meaning of absolute existence. The majesty of the name and the great dread of using it are connected to the fact that it denotes God Himself. YHWH is the proper name of God, all of the others are derived from His attributes.* Thus, “*YHWH*” is not a verbal pointer indicating the deity but is a super sensible event if experienced by a human being. When Abraham (Genesis 15:17) or Jacob (Genesis 18:12) “hear” God saying *I am YHWH...*, we have no conception whatsoever what they experienced. When, in other places in the Torah, the third person narrator is using the term “*YHWH*”, nothing is implied as

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to whether the characters within the story knew that name. When Moses asks God *If the Israelites ask, what is His name what shall I tell them?* (Exodus 8:13), the answer he receives is one of the great challenges of Jewish theology. As a consequence, this *JBQ* editor believes that Ibn Ezra and Ramban were justified in reading the text as *by my name of YHWH I did not become known to them* as saying that they had no intimate knowledge of God.

2. Altering punctuation lies behind many exegetical interpretations. See numerous examples in Simcha Kogut, *Correlations Between Biblical Accentuation and Traditional Jewish Exegesis* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1996).

3. The English *Daniel knows Joseph*, in the sense of Daniel's being acquainted with Joseph, is expressed in Hebrew as *Daniel makir et Yosef*, using a verb with the root *nakar*.

4. D. M. Berry and S. van Eden, "How Did Moses Die?", *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 46:2, pp. 104—108, 2018.

5. If the authors of this paper had not written the paper cited in Note 4, they probably would not have thought of this meaning as being applicable here.

6. Art Scroll Series, *Ramban — Nachmanides / Commentary on the Torah, Volume 3: Shemos / Exodus Part 1 & Volume 7: Devarim / Deuteronomy* (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 2006).

7. *Midrash Chadash* 210b, Menahem Kasher, *Torah Shleima* (Jerusalem: Torah Sheleimah Institute, 1992), item 24, p. 5, vol. 9.