

AMEN AS RESPONSE AND INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

Amen (“Thus it is”, “So be it!”) is a common religious exclamation, usually left untranslated. That it expresses affirmation is evident from its context. The root is *aleph-mem-nun*, to be firm, faithful, trustworthy and credible. This root was known at an early period: its derivatives are found in Genesis, e.g. 18:13 (*umnam*, in truth), 42:20 (*veye’am’nu*, and be verified) and 45:26 (*he’emin*, believe). *Amen* as such does not appear in the Bible prior to two legal passages, Numbers 5:22, where it is doubled (*Amen Amen*), and Deuteronomy 27:15-26, where it comes twelve times. It is used in I Kings 1:36, Jeremiah 28:6, Nehemiah 5:13, 8:6 (twice), I Chronicles 16:36 (= Psalm 106:48) and Psalms 41:14, 72:19, 82:53 and 106:48.¹

All monotheistic faiths use it as a prayer response, including Islam, though *Amen* is not in the Koran. The origins of *Amen* are uncertain, though the root is known in several Semitic languages. Samson Raphael Hirsch in his commentary to Genesis 15:6 links *Amen* with a later word which means to be an artist. He explains *Amen* as giving shape and form to a statement.

There is a theory that it is linked with an Egyptian deity, Amun/ Amen-Ra, but this may be mere coincidence.²

The Talmud records a folk etymology for *Amen*. When one prays alone with no-one else to respond to his pre-*Shema* benediction, he says the three words *E-l Melekh Ne’eman*, God, Faithful King, the initials of which yield the word *Amen* (TB *Shabbat* 119b, *Sanhedrin* 111a). However, *Amen* is always used in the Bible as a response, not an introductory statement as in this context. As a Hebrew word, probably the most we can say is that it must have long been in common use whilst not recorded in scriptural texts.

GRAMMAR OF AMEN

Amen – using the two vowels *kamatz* and *tzere* – seems to be regarded as a confirmatory adjective. Strictly speaking, it is a stative verb like *kasher* - “it is right”, *zaken* - “it is old”, *kaved* – “it is heavy”, etc. Stative verbs have

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more than one Hebrew form³ but typically indicate a state of being or quality and are translated as participles using the verb “to be”. Unlike active verbs which normally have a direct object (“he eats bread”), stative verbs are intransitive (“he is hungry”). Some verbs can be both active and stative. *Aleph-mem-nun* has an active sense in Esther 2:7: *vayehi omen et Hadassah, and he reared (was foster-father to) Hadassah*. In Isaiah 65:16 *amen* is a noun (*Elo’hei amen, God of Truth*), but it could have an adjectival sense meaning *faithful* (or *true*) *God* (cf. *Isa. 49:7*). Stative verbs with the *kamatz-tzere* form are a regular occurrence in the Pentateuch. Of those mentioned above *zaken* is common in Genesis (e.g. 19:4) as is *kaved* (12:10). *Kasher* is not, and actually occurs only once in this form in Tanakh in Esther 8:5. Thus a grammatical form like *amen* is fully to be expected in biblical vocabulary even though the *Encyclopedia Judaica* concludes (in somewhat less than helpful fashion) that *Amen* is an “indeclinable interjection”.⁴

FROM PENTATEUCH TO THE SYNAGOGUE

As we have seen, Numbers 5:22 and Deuteronomy 27:15-26 assume that *Amen* is a known, accepted term that confirms that a law is binding.

Numbers 5:22 is part of a struggle to establish marital fidelity. If a woman were suspected of adultery she was told how she would be tested and she would acquiesce by means of a doubled *Amen*. The Mishnaic sages (Sotah 2:5) attach a separate meaning to each *Amen*. The woman says, “*Amen* to the curse, *Amen* to the oath; *Amen* – I have not been unfaithful with this man, *Amen* – I have not been unfaithful with any other; *Amen* – I have never been unfaithful, *Amen* – I never will be unfaithful”.

Deuteronomy 27:15-26 employs *Amen* in a comparable situation in which there was suspicion but no proof of wrongdoing – for example, a behind-the-scenes shifting of another’s landmark. The Levites proclaim twelve offences against communal propriety and the people confirm its terms: *all the people shall say Amen* (verse 15 etc.).

The two *Amen* passages in the Pentateuch share the same context – how to deal with a situation in which there is a lack of actionable evidence. When there is adequate evidence the case can be dealt with – to use rabbinic terminology – by “the courts of man”. Otherwise it is a moral issue for

resolution by “the heavenly court”; but the possible verdict is submitted for the parties’ acquiescence in advance.

Later, in Psalms, the spiritual and sacral associations of *Amen* function to praise God in the concluding doxology of four of the five sections of the Book (Psalms 41:14, 72:19, 89:53 and 106:48) though not at the end of the final Psalm (chapter 150), where the climax (verse 6) is a call to all mankind, not just Israel, to praise God.

Based on this usage *Amen* was used as a response to the priestly benediction (Num. 6:22-27), but not in the Temple where the response was *Barukh shem kevodo le’olam, Blessed be His glorious name for ever* (Psalm 72:19).⁵

With the development of the synagogue, *Amen* was used much more often than before. It was the response to the *Kaddish* (doxology) and communal and personal benedictions. Louis Ginzberg distinguished between a *desiderative* (“*May it be so!*”) and a *responsive Amen* (“*It is so!*”); the context suggests which *Amen* is meant.⁶ The rabbinic codes (*Shulhan Arukh Oraḥ Hayyim* 124) say similarly, “The blessing just uttered is true and I believe in it, and in addition, may it be God’s will that it be actualized before our eyes”.

Amen was more evident than before, as the constantly used response to benedictions and prayers, though it was not to be doubled as this might imply two heavenly powers.⁷ However, in Britain in the late 19th century a doubled *Amen* based on Psalm 72:19 was attached to the memorial prayer composed for festival use by the incumbent chief rabbi.⁸

To differentiate between normative and dissentient views, the sages formulated rules about when and how to say *Amen*. They warn against adding *Amen* to a benediction uttered by a heretic or sectarian (including a Samaritan) or saying it too soon or too late. The rabbis have three specific warnings about *Amen* (TB *Berachot* 47a) – not to make it *hatufah* (“snatched, hurried”), *ketufah* (“curtailed, cut short”) or *yetomah* (“orphaned, detached”). There is a range of statements which generally begin, “He who answers ‘*Amen*’...” Each promises a fulsome reward – long life, forgiveness of sins, entry to Gan Eden (TB *Berachot* 47a, *Shabbat* 119b).

OPENING A SENTENCE WITH AMEN

So far we have seen *Amen* used only as a response. However, in the Bible we have examples of *Amen* beginning a statement as well. I Kings opens with David's proclamation of Solomon as his successor, who is to be acclaimed with the cry, *Long live King Solomon* (1:34) and to occupy David's throne (1:35). Right after this, Benaiah the son of Jehoiada answers David and says, *Amen: so says the Lord, God of my lord the king* (1:36). Although *Amen* here begins a sentence it is not introducing a new thought but responding to David, approving what was said previously.

The Book of Jeremiah has the wording in 28:6, *Amen! May the Lord do so! May the Lord fulfill what you (Hananiah) have prophesied and bring back from Babylon to this place the vessels of the House of the Lord and all the exiles*. Here too, although beginning a statement, Jeremiah is actually merely affirming, in a sarcastic manner, the preceding words of Hananiah's false prophecy, despite the narrator's interruption.

Although superficially the validity of the initial *Amen* seems to be supported by texts in Kings and Jeremiah, upon examination we must conclude that despite appearances the two passages are not using an initial *Amen* at all, but rather utilizing the regular function of *Amen* as found elsewhere in the Bible as a response.

AMEN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The biblical and talmudic *Amen* was a response to the antecedent words, as against the initial *Amen* of the Gospels where it opens a new statement, announcing that what follows is (claimed to be) true. This second approach is used by Jesus roughly half of the approximately 120 times *Amen* comes in the New Testament. Translators frequently render it "Verily" or "Truly".

For example, *Amen* (Truly) *I tell you: so long as heaven and earth endure, not a letter, not a stroke, will disappear from the Law until all that must happen has happened* (Matthew 5:18), and *John 3:3: Amen, Amen* (Truly, truly) *I tell you: unless a man has been born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.*⁹

We can surmise that Jesus' initial *Amen* was used in order to give special weight to particular teachings as more significant than others. Presumably Jesus' intention was to draw attention to a theological announcement, as if to say "Hark!" Delitzsch, however, conjectures that Jesus was not employing

the Hebrew *Amen* at all but an Aramaic word with a similar root that meant to say or tell.¹⁰ Ginzberg rejects this notion, arguing that *amina* (“I say”) is really hypothetical (“*I might have said...*”) whilst the context shows Jesus speaking out of certainty, revealing something about himself as well as his teaching, expecting his audience to accept his words because he was the one who said them.¹¹

Hyman Goldin has a revolutionary (but possibly questionable) theory. He denies that Jesus actually used an initial Amen.¹² Based on the testimony of a purported expert (actually a figment of Goldin’s imagination), Dr. Yehuda Leb Bensew (= Ben-Ze’ev?), he says, “The writers of the Gospels, unfamiliar with the Hebrew language, erroneously use the commonly known *Amen* for *amnam*.” It is true that *omnam*, “indeed”, can validly begin a phrase, but it is only found three times in the Tanakh (II Kings 19:17, Isaiah 37:18 and Ruth 3:12) apart from six times in Job (9:2, 12:2, 19:4-5, 34:12 and 36:4). Was there some reason to mimic the stylistic phenomena of Job? Unless we can answer this question the problem of the initial *Amen* remains.

Later writers (e.g. Paul: Rom. 1:25, Gal. 6:18, etc.) seem to revert to the Jewish usage of the final *Amen*, though Judaism would reject the depiction of Jesus as “*The Amen*” (Rev. 3:14), which could have been based on the apparent noun in Isaiah 65:16, or the assertion (II Cor. 1:20) that *Through him is our Amen*. In time it became customary in Christianity to conclude every prayer and sermon with *Amen*, a usage adopted by Anglo-Jewish preachers in the 19th century.

CONCLUSION

Biblical Judaism used *Amen* as a response, never as an introduction. It did not agree with the change of syntax found in the New Testament. Post-Temple Judaism placed new emphasis on *Amen* as a liturgical response and broadened it from a technical prayer word into an endorsement of orthodoxy. Together with other derivatives of the *aleph-mem-nun* root, it became an expression of theological credibility, belief and faith, and assent to a proposition.

NOTES

1. See also Tobit 8:8.

2. Amun is the chief deity of the Egyptian empire. There are several versions of the name.
3. Some stative verbs are *kamatz-holam*, e.g. *katon, gadol, yakhol*.
4. *Encyclopedia Judaica (EJ)*, vol. 2, s.v. *Amen*.
5. See Mishnah *Sotah* 7:3 and the discussion on TB *Sotah* 40b, Tosafot there and TB *Taanit* 16b.
6. *Jewish Encyclopedia (JE)*, vol. 1, s.v. *Amen*.
7. G.F. Moore, *History of Religions* (Edinburgh, 1950), vol. 1, pp. 357-405.
8. The prayer says, *May our souls be bound up in the bond of life with the souls of our parents and of the righteous who are ever with thee. Amen and Amen*.
9. *Amen* is used in this way also in Matthew 5:26: 6:2 and Luke 4:24.
10. *EJ*, *loc. cit.* Franz and Friedrich Delitzsch were father-and-son Christian Hebraists.
11. *JE*, *loc. cit.*
12. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (JPSA, 1962)
13. Hyman Goldin, *The Case of the Nazarene Reopened* (NY: Exposition, 1948), p. 502.



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