

# DID THE PATRIARCHS KNOW GOD'S NAME?

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## 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.

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*

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*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?

Rabbinic literature recognized this difficulty and Rashi's commentary on Exodus 6:3 provides the classic explanation, *It is not written here, "but My Name YHWH I did not make known (hoda'ti) to them," but rather, "I did not become known (noda'ti)." [I.e.,] I was not recognized by them with My attribute of keeping faith, by dint of which My name is called YHWH, [which means that I am] faithful to verify My words, for I made promises to them, but I did not fulfill [them while they were alive]*. This interpretation relies on associating the name "YHWH" with the concept of *keeping the faith*, an idea not necessarily apparent in the text itself and not really relevant for establishing the nature of God's relationship with any person.

#### 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'* [*to know*] is sometimes used to describe an intimate relationship, particularly when what is known is a person or God. These intimate relationships are either between two persons or between a person and God. With person-person relationships, *yada'* means "engaging in sex", with person-God relationships, it means "being intimate face-to-face", i.e., the person's seeing God's face, which is known to be fatal to the person. 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.

At least one member of the JBQ editorial committee argues that this interpretation of the verse, although without any mention of a shift in punctuation, is found in *Midrash Chadash*,<sup>6</sup> a medieval Yemenite midrash. There the question is raised, *how can the verse state that God did not reveal himself as YHVH to Abraham if that in fact took place explicitly in Gen. 15:7*. The answer given is, *I did not reveal Myself to them as I did to you, mouth to mouth*.

This interpretation seems to be the general approach also of Ibn Ezra, who explains that *I did not become known to them* means that God was not known to them in the same way he was known to Moses, which entailed a closer relationship. Ramban also explains *I did not become known to them* as referring to only Moses's attaining the level of a face-to-face relationship with God.

None of these sources talk of punctuating the verse differently, but they all understand that the verse is referring not to knowledge of the fact of God's

name per se, but to a close relationship that only Moses attained. This understanding of the verse becomes explicit when punctuated in the manner suggested.

#### 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.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank Bob Chodos for his comments on the *davar Torah* from which this paper was derived. They thank Yael David, Amit Levi, and Victoria Sakhnini for their help in understanding the Hebrew in rabbinical commentaries. They thank Yukun (Yoni) Shi for leaving his copy of *the Ramban* in Berry’s basement. Finally, they thank the *JBQ* editorial staff for the modifications that they suggested and for the insight embodied in Note 1.

For a version of this paper with details omitted in the interest of brevity, see [https://cs.uwaterloo.ca/~dberry/FTP\\_SITE/tech.reports/DidPatriarchsKnowGod\\_sName.pdf](https://cs.uwaterloo.ca/~dberry/FTP_SITE/tech.reports/DidPatriarchsKnowGod_sName.pdf).

#### 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 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

