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EXODUS 3:13 – 15



# GOD'S NAME

God's statement "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex 3:14) is essentially in answer to the question, "What is your name?" God's initial answer seems evasive. He is hinting at the real answer, though, since the Hebrew words for "I am" sound a bit like "Yahweh," the name finally revealed in Ex 3:15 ("the LORD"). Two aspects of how divine names were utilized in ancient Egypt may relate to this revelation of God's name.

First, ancient Egyptians believed in a close relationship between the name of a deity and the deity itself—i.e., the name of a god could reveal part of the essential nature of that god. In Egyptian texts that refer to different but important names for the same deity, the names are often associated with particular actions or characteristics, and the words used tend to sound similar to the names with which they are associated. One can say there is wordplay between the action or characteristic and the name.

For example, one text says, "You are complete [km] and great [wr] in your name of Bitter Lake [Km wr] . . . See you are great and round [šn] in (your name of) Ocean [Šn wr]." One can discern a similar wordplay at work in Ex 3:14. The action God refers to is that of being or existing. The wordplay consists in that the statement "I AM" comes from the Hebrew consonants *h-y-h*, while the name in Ex 3:15 contains the consonants *y-h-w-h*. Both words come from the same verbal root, and the linguistic connection would be immediately clear to an ancient listener or reader. It is not that God's name is actually "I am" but that "Yahweh" reveals something about the essence of who God is—an essence that relates to the concept of being and to the idea of one who brings others into being.

A second aspect of divine names in Egypt may be relevant. Deities sometimes had secret names, and special power was granted to those who knew them. Certain Egyptian magical texts (e.g., the Harris Magical Papyrus) give instructions on how to use the words of a god and thereby wield a degree of that god's power.

It would have been unusual in the ancient Near East for a deity quickly and easily to reveal his name (e.g., Ge 32:29); this may be part of the reason for the delayed answer here in Ex 3. Nevertheless, Yahweh's name is not meant to be kept secret, and it is vitally important for Moses to have this knowledge. He is to speak Yahweh's words (6:29), wield his power (7:17) and function like Yahweh to both his brother Aaron (4:16) and to Pharaoh (7:1).

To this day, no one knows for sure how to pronounce the name of God—at least not as the ancient Israelites would have pronounced it. There are four consonants in the name—sometimes called the Tetragrammaton ("four-letter word"): *y-h-w-h*. The vowels are the tricky part. Hebrew is generally written without vowels. In the second half of the first millennium AD, some Jewish scribes began adding small marks to Biblical manuscripts in order to indicate how the vowel sounds of each word should

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neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.<sup>v</sup>

<sup>11</sup>The LORD said to him, "Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind?<sup>w</sup> Is it not I, the LORD? <sup>12</sup>Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say."<sup>x</sup>

**4:10** <sup>v</sup>Ex 6:12; Jer 1:6  
**4:11** <sup>w</sup>Ps 94:9; Mt 11:5  
**4:12** <sup>x</sup>Isa 50:4; Jer 1:9; Mt 10:19-20; Mk 13:11; Lk 12:12; 21:14-15  
**4:14** <sup>y</sup>ver 27  
**4:15** <sup>z</sup>Nu 23:5, 12, 16

<sup>13</sup>But Moses said, "Pardon your servant, Lord. Please send someone else."

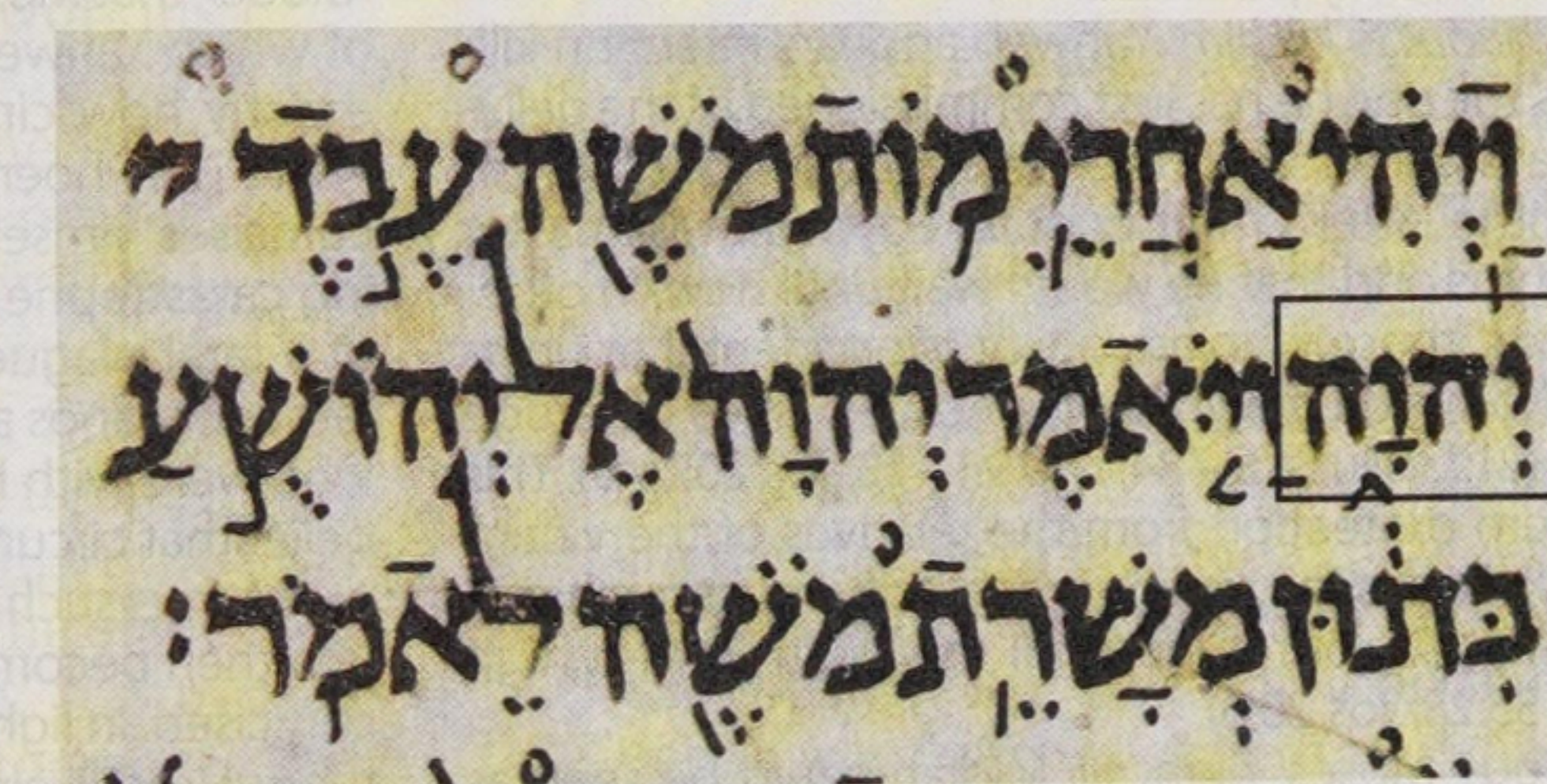
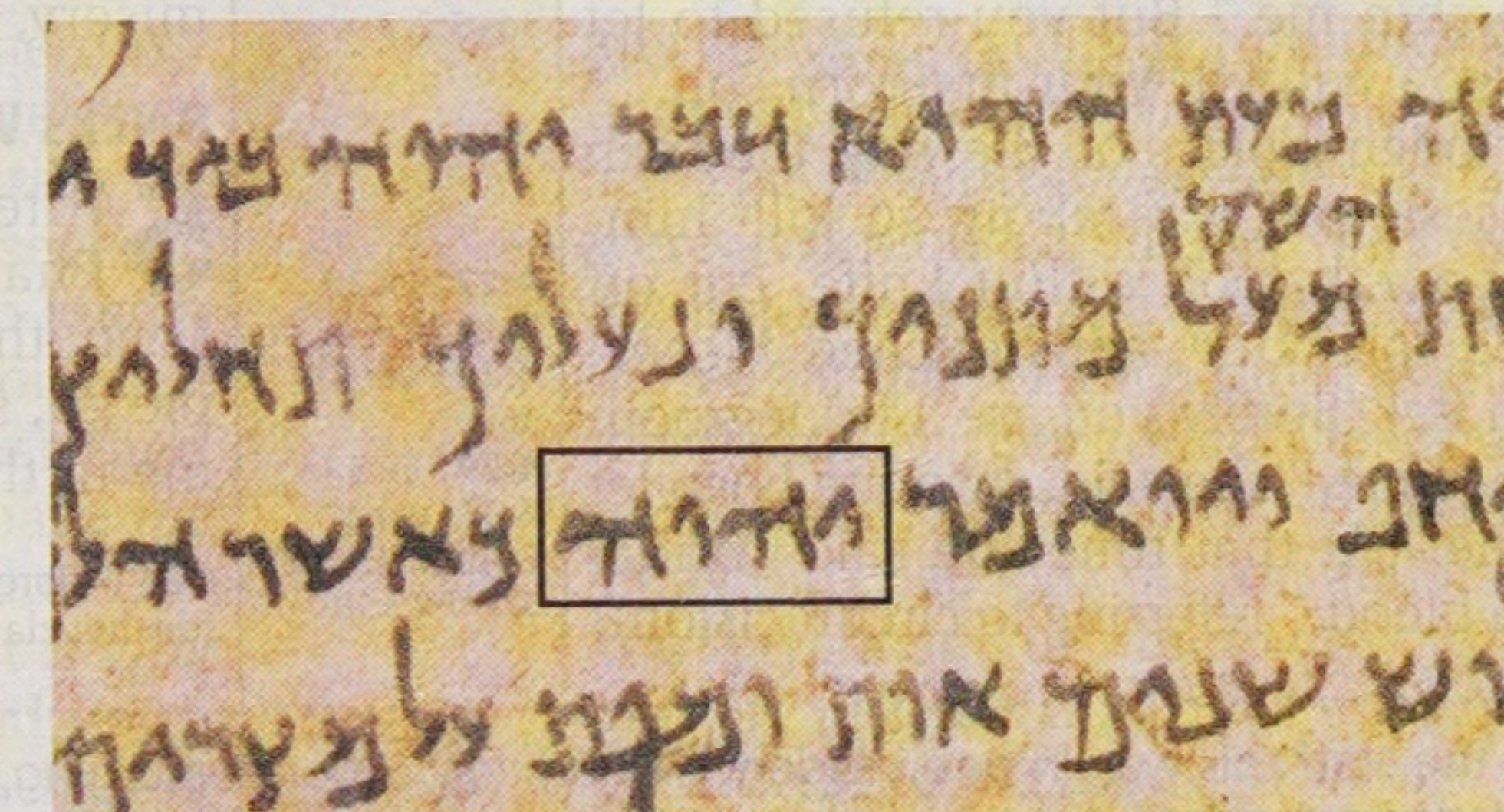
<sup>14</sup>Then the LORD's anger burned against Moses and he said, "What about your brother, Aaron the Levite? I know he can speak well. He is already on his way to meet<sup>y</sup> you, and he will be glad to see you.

<sup>15</sup>You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth;<sup>z</sup> I will help both of you speak

be pronounced. They treated the name of God, however, differently from other words. It had long been customary in Jewish tradition *not* to pronounce the name Yahweh. Instead of saying "Yahweh," people would often say "Adonay," which means "my Lord" (and has led to "the LORD" as the traditional rendering of Yahweh in the English Bible). In order to remind readers to say "Adonay" instead of "Yahweh," the scribes added the marks for the vowel sounds of *Adonay* to the consonants for Yahweh in their manuscripts. Pronouncing the consonants of *yhwh* with the vowels of *adonay* produces the well-known "Jehovah," which is certainly *not* the right pronunciation.

What, then, were the original vowels in God's name? Ultimately, we do not know. During the period of the divided kingdom, the name may have been pronounced something like "Yau," with the "au" forming a diphthong rather than two separate syllables. Evidence from classical Hebrew (found in both Biblical and non-Biblical texts) and certain Greek renderings of the name, however, have led scholars generally to believe that "Yahweh" was the way in which the name eventually came to be pronounced.

More significant is the *meaning* of the name Yahweh. For this there has been a wide range of suggestions: "Truly He!"; "My One"; "He Who Is"; "He Who Brings into Being"; "He Who Storms." One of the best suggestions is that the name is a shortened form of a longer name, Yahweh Sabaoth (often rendered in English as "the LORD of Hosts" or "the LORD Almighty"; see, e.g., 2Sa 6:2). The word "Yahweh" itself is most likely a verb. Many other shortened names from the ancient Near East are verb forms, which is exactly what Yahweh appears to be. It comes from the Hebrew verb meaning "to be." But if the first vowel really is an *a*-vowel, then the verb likely has a causative sense: "to cause to be." Thus, a fairly literal translation of Yahweh Sabaoth would be "He Who Causes the Hosts (of Heaven) to Be." In general, then, the name refers to the One who creates or brings into being. ♦



The Tetragrammaton in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls and in a modern scroll, with the vowel sounds of Adonay added.

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and will teach you what to do. <sup>16</sup>He will speak to the people for you, and it will be as if he were your mouth<sup>a</sup> and as if you were God to him. <sup>17</sup>But take this staff<sup>b</sup> in your hand so you can perform the signs<sup>c</sup> with it."

**4:17** *this staff.* It becomes the symbol of God's presence and power. Moses never uses it in connection with incan-

**4:16** <sup>a</sup>Ex 7:1-2  
**4:17** <sup>b</sup>ver 2  
<sup>c</sup>Ex 7:9-21

### Moses Returns to Egypt

<sup>18</sup>Then Moses went back to Jethro his father-in-law and said to him, "Let me return to my own people in Egypt to see if any of them are still alive."

Jethro said, "Go, and I wish you well."

tations, and so it is distinguished from an instrument of magic. Magic is employed to manipulate deity; Moses