

The Significance of Divine Names

The use of Divine Names has been pointed out as evidence of multiple authorship of the Pentateuch.

In Genesis 1, the Hebrew term *Elohim* was used to name God. In contrast, Genesis 2 used the Hebrew term *Yahweh* for LORD God. Destructive critics believe that an editor used one source for Genesis 1 and a different source for Genesis 2, because each had a different term for God and each account had a different literary style.

The Problems for Source Criticism

1. The assumption that the manuscript used for source criticism was without error.

Proponents of the Documentary Hypothesis used the Masoretic Hebrew text of the Old Testament for their source criticism.

When examining the divine names, Elohim and Yahweh, the Masoretic Hebrew text (MT) differed from the Greek Old Testament (LXX or Septuagint) in 180 instances and in a variety of different passages within the Pentateuch. The scribes of the MT were known to remove the sacred name of Yahweh, and indeed the LXX used the term Yahweh more extensively. This called into question the accuracy of the MT's textual transmission of divine names, and scholars held the earlier dated LXX in higher regard than the later dated MT in reliability. Because of this, using the MT causes significant problems for critics who use divine names as the basis to determine sources.

2. The assumption that the terms Yahweh and Elohim were equivalent names for God.

Based on the verb "to be," the Hebrew word YHWH means "He is," and only in Exodus 3:14 is His full name YHWH revealed ("I am who I am"). Ancient Hebrew literary tradition had various terms and rules for their use when naming God, which described specific aspects and characteristics of God. In English language Bibles, Yahweh is translated as "LORD" because Judaism does not pronounce the sacred name of YHWH.

Yahweh (LORD) is the covenant name of God and is used exclusively of the God of the Hebrews. It is used to reflect the context of His intimate and ethical character and personal covenantal relationship with man. Because Genesis 2 is more specific with the details of man, his original state, his home, and his helper, Yahweh is used.

Elohim is the plural form of El, which by itself is a generic term for god. While a plural form of El, Elohim is usually translated in the singular form and alludes to Supreme Being, transcendent, and above the world. It is used when God is referred to as Creator of the world, Lord of the universe, omniscient, and omnipresent. Because Genesis 1 is devoted to the Creation account, Elohim is used.

As another illustration of the use of divine names, consider Deuteronomy 5:9, "...for I, the LORD (Yahweh) your God (Elohim), am a jealous God (El),..."

3. The misunderstanding of Hebrew grammatical context.

Understanding Hebrew grammatical nuances also explains another confusion with divine names, which has been used as evidence demonstrating another source. In Exodus 6:3, God reveals his name to Moses, Yahweh, and mentions that the Patriarchs knew him by another name; however, critics point out that this is a contradiction, because the Patriarchs in Genesis used Yahweh's name (i.e. Genesis 4:26; 22:14; 28:21).

There are two interpretations of Exodus 6:3:

1. The confusion stems from the preposition, *beth*, found in front of the term *Yahweh* in Exodus 6:3. This preposition is known as the *beth essentiae*, which emphasizes the character and nature of the name Yahweh; thus, the phrase "by the name" in Exodus 6:3 is better translated as "in the character of Yahweh."

In this view, Exodus 6:3 would be read as, "I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob *in the character of* Elohim, but *in the character of* Yahweh I did not make myself known to them."

While the Patriarchs knew of Yahweh, they knew Him as the covenant God; the God who protects and blesses. It was not until the deliverance and exodus of the nation of Israel from Egypt that God was seen as a savior and redeemer; the Patriarchs did not know God in this context.

The evidence for this interpretation was the Targum of Psuedo-Jonathan which suggested that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob knew God as Elohim and by the name Yahweh as well; however, the latter was only a word to them without the experience of the Shekinah glory that usually was associated with that name. Medieval Jewish commentators also took the view that the Patriarchs did not understand the meaning of the *character* behind the *name*. (1)

2. In this second interpretation, the confusion stems from a misreading of Hebrew syntax. Because of Exodus 6:4, Exodus 6:3 should be taken in a positive, not negative sense. Thus Exodus 6:3 becomes a rhetorical question.

In this view, Exodus 6:3 would be read as, "and I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as Elohim. My name is LORD. Did I not make myself known to them?"

In Exodus 6:3 "my name Yahweh" cannot be the direct object of the verb "made known," because it is reflexive in meaning. It is also unusual for a Hebrew sentence to have a subordinate phrase precede the negative Hebrew word *Ló* (not) because when used, *Ló* (not) would normally be the first word of a Hebrew sentence. (2)

The terms *Elohim* and *Yahweh* are not interchangeable or equivalent, and they convey subtly different aspects of God. Their use is intentional and provide a context to the passage. Because of the aforementioned significant issues, Divine Names are no longer considered a reliable basis for identifying hypothetical sources in the manner of the Documentary Hypothesis.

References:

1. Kaiser, W, *The Old Testament Documents: Are They Reliable & Relevant*, Chicago, IL: Inter-Varsity Press (1984), p.140.
2. *ibid*.