

Digital Resources

Theology

The Names of God

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Text

A. The Names of God in General

Scripture gives several names for God, yet it also speaks of *the name* of God as a single reality. For example: "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain" (Ex. 20:7); "How excellent is thy name in all the earth" (Ps. 8:1); "As is thy name, O God, so is thy praise" (Ps. 48:10); "His name is great in Israel" (Ps. 76:2); and "The name of Jehovah is a strong tower; the righteous runneth into it and is safe" (Prov. 18:10). In these cases, "the name" represents God's whole self-manifestation in relation to His people, or simply God Himself. In biblical thought, a name was not merely a label, but an expression of the nature of the one named.

In the broadest sense, then, God's name is His self-revelation. It

does not describe Him as He is in the hidden depths of His divine being, but as He makes Himself known, especially in relation to humanity. The one general name of God is expressed in many names, each reflecting the many-sided fullness of His being. Because God has revealed His name—*nomen editum*, “the name given forth” or “the revealed name”—we may rightly use various names for Him—*nomina indita*, “names bestowed” or “names applied.” These names are not human inventions but divine revelations, though they are expressed in human language and drawn from earthly relationships. They are therefore anthropomorphic, showing God’s gracious condescension to human understanding.

God’s names present a difficulty for human thought. God is the *Incomprehensible One*, infinitely above all that is temporal; yet in His names He stoops to what is finite and speaks in terms we can understand. These names are not products of human speculation, nor do they imply direct insight into God’s hidden essence. They are given by God Himself and therefore contain, in measure, a true revelation of His being.

This is possible because creation itself was meant to reveal God. Since the incomprehensible God makes Himself known through His creatures, human beings can speak of Him in creaturely terms. If all anthropomorphic naming were rejected as merely limiting God, then creation would conceal rather than reveal Him, and humanity would be left in hopeless agnosticism.

On this broader understanding, the names of God include not only the titles by which He is addressed as a personal being, but also His attributes and the personal names of the Trinity. Bavinck distinguishes three categories: *nomina propria*, “proper names”; *nomina essentialia*, “essential names” or attributes; and *nomina personalia*, “personal names,” such as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This chapter focuses on the first category: the proper names of God.

B. Old Testament Names and Their Meaning

1. ‘El, ‘Elohim, and ‘Elyon. ‘El is the simplest Old Testament name for God and suggests primacy, lordship, strength, or might. ‘Elohim, probably from the same root or from a word meaning “to

fear," presents God as mighty and awe-inspiring. *'Elyon*, from a root meaning "to go up" or "to be exalted," designates Him as the Most High. These names are not strictly *nomina propria*, "proper names," since they can also be used of idols, men, and rulers; yet when applied to Israel's God they emphasise His fullness of power and exalted majesty.

2. 'Adonai. *'Adonai* means "Lord" or "Ruler." It presents God as the almighty Master to whom all things are subject and to whom humanity stands as servant. In earlier Israelite usage it was a common way to address God, though it was later largely replaced by *Yahweh*. The names considered so far stress God's transcendence; those that follow show this exalted God entering into covenant relation with His creatures.

3. Shaddai and 'El-Shaddai. *Shaddai* emphasises God's all-sufficient power. Unlike *'Elohim*, which especially relates to creation and nature, this name presents God as ruling nature for the purposes of grace. It highlights His greatness, not as terror, but as blessing and comfort. It is the name by which God appeared to Abraham, the father of the faithful (Ex. 6:2).

4. Yahweh and Yahweh Tsebaoth. *Yahweh* is God's most sacred and distinctive name, revealing Him as the God of grace and covenant faithfulness. Connected in Exodus 3:13-14 with the verb "to be," it expresses not merely God's unchangeable being but especially His unchanging relation to His people. It is His proper name *par excellence*, "above all others," and is used only of Israel's God.

Yahweh Tsebaoth, commonly rendered "Lord of hosts," most likely refers to the angelic hosts surrounding God's throne. The name presents God as the King of glory, ruling heaven and earth for the good of His people and receiving glory from all His creatures.

C. New Testament Names and Their Interpretation

1. Theos. *Theos* is the common New Testament equivalent for *'El*, *'Elohim*, and *'Elyon*, and it expresses essential deity. *'Elyon* is rendered *Hupsistos Theos*, "Most High God," while *Shaddai* and *'El-Shaddai* are rendered *Pantokrator* and *Theos Pantokrator*, "Almighty" and "God Almighty." More often, *Theos* appears with

possessive language such as “my,” “your,” “our,” and “your plural,” showing that in Christ God is the God of all His children, both collectively and individually.

2. Kurios. The New Testament sometimes explains *Yahweh* through titles such as “the Alpha and the Omega,” “who is and who was and who is to come,” “the beginning and the end,” and “the first and the last.” More commonly, following the Septuagint, it uses *Kurios*, “Lord,” from a term associated with power. This name does not carry exactly the same meaning as *Yahweh*, but it presents God as the mighty Lord, Possessor, and Ruler with rightful authority. It is also applied to Christ.

3. Pater. *Pater*, “Father,” was not introduced for the first time in the New Testament. The Old Testament already uses Father language for God’s relation to Israel, and the New Testament can use it in the general sense of creator or originator. More commonly, however, it expresses either the relation of the first Person of the Trinity to Christ, the Son of God, or God’s gracious relation to believers as His spiritual children.

Louis Berkhof was born in the Netherlands in 1873, where his family was part of the Christian Reformed Church. In 1881, his family immigrated to Grand Rapids, in the United States. Berkhof studied at Calvin College, Calvin Seminary, and then at Princeton Seminary. From 1906 to 1944, Berkhof was professor of theology at Calvin Theological Seminary. He wrote extensively on Reformed theology. Louis Berkhof died in 1957.

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