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“Nomina nuda tenemus?”

The Notion of “Name” in Ancient Levant and the Hebrew Bible*

This article argues the case for a renewed understanding of the notion of “name,” *šēm* in Northwest Semitic, especially in reference to gods. In actual fact, this notion has yet to be aligned with the material and the particularly visual turn that has so interested biblical studies over the last decades. For this purpose, two preliminary objectives are put forth: (1) to rid the so-called biblical Name Theology of its nominalist and aniconic tendencies and (2) to read it in light of some occurrences attested by Semitic epigraphy in the Levant. This way, the notion of “name” emerges as the way in which Semitic languages (thus not only the Bible) refer to a god in the most synthetic and holistic way, not only on an abstract and intellectual level but mobilising all the senses.

Keywords: Divine Names; Name Theology; Semitic Epigraphy; Iconographic Exegesis of the Bible; Levantine Religions

“What’s in a Name?” Divine Names between Multiplicity and Unity

Much ink has been spilled on the topic of divine names,¹ especially in the three monotheisms.² In particular, a considerable amount of attention has

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1 This expression should not be confused with the mystic tradition often linked to Negative Theology especially developed by Dionysius the Areopagite and shaped by Neoplatonic notions. For this tradition, see F. Porzia, “Noms de dieux et théologie négative au Levant dans l’Antiquité,” *Revue d’Histoire des Religions* 237/2 (2020): 211–237; O. Boulnois and B. Tambrun (ed.), *Les Noms divins* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2016). In this contribution, a divine name means “simply” a name given to a god and/or revealed by a god.

2 See, for instance, M. Byrne, *The Names of God in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: A Basis for Interfaith Dialogue* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

been dedicated to the different names attributed to God in the Hebrew Bible, establishing lists of divine names or providing them with updated etymologies.³ Biblical scholars often struggled with the fact that the first god regarded as unique could respond to so many names, epithets, titles, etc., all elements that seemed to fit into more of a polytheistic *milieu* rather than the “cradle of monotheism.” As a consequence, biblical divine polyonymy was often understood in diachronic and evolutionary terms. The “Documentary Hypothesis,” distinguishing between the Jahwist and the Elohist document, is an excellent example.

Instead of diving into a sea of divine polyonymy,⁴ this contribution deals directly with the notion of name when it concerns the divine world, with a special focus on how later philosophical and theological traditions affected our way of conceptualising it. Against the evolutionary scheme (from multiplicity to unity), the increasing role of synchronic exegesis and the appreciation of refined literary features in the Hebrew Bible point out that divine polyonymy never ceased to exist. This conclusion is also corroborated by evidence from the varied periphrases and circumlocutions used to refer to God both in later – Hellenistic but also rabbinic – texts, in ordinary modern Hebrew expressions, and in contemporary Judaism. The expression *hašēm*

3 See, for instance, S. S. Cohon, “The Name of God: A Study in Rabbinic Theology,” *HUCA* 23/1 (1950–1951): 579–604; A. Manaranche, *Des noms pour Dieu* (Paris: Fayard, 1980), 17–64; T. N. D. Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth: Studies in the Shem and Kabod Theologies* (ConBOT 18; Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1982); idem, *In Search of God: The Meaning and Message of the Everlasting Names* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988); H. Niehr, *Der höchste Gott: Alttestamentlicher JHWH-Glaube im Kontext syrisch-kanaanäischer Religion des 1. Jahrtausends v. Chr.* (BZAW 190; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990); M. Rose, “Names of God in the OT,” *ABD* 4:1000–1011; K. van der Toorn et al. (ed.), *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1995); Z. Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallaxic Approaches* (New York: Continuum, 2001); M. S. Smith, *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); S. L. Allen, *The Splintered Divine: A Study of Ištar, Baal, and Yahweh Divine Names and Divine Multiplicity in the Ancient Near East* (SANE 5; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015); T. C. Römer, *The Invention of God* (trans. R. Geuss; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); A. M. Wilson-Wright, “The Helpful God: A Reevaluation of the Etymology and Character of (ʿ)el šadday,” *VT* 69 (2019): 149–166.

4 This is indeed the purpose of the MAP project, based in Toulouse (France) and directed by Corinne Bonnet; see F. Porzia, “Je serai qui je serai” (Exode 3,14) Portrait d’une divinité qui serait sans nom et sans image”, in *Noms de dieux ! Portraits onomastiques de dieux antiques* (ed. C. Bonnet; Toulouse: Anacharsis, 2021), 257–280. Regarding the project, see C. Bonnet, “Cartographier les mondes divins à partir des épithètes: Prémisses et ambitions d’un projet de recherche européen (ERC Advanced Grant),” *RSF* 45 (2107): 49–63, and the site (<https://map-polytheisms.huma-num.fr/?lang=en>; accessed on September 28, 2022).

("the name") stands out among these ways to refer to God without pronouncing his name. Such an expression replaces the *tetragrammaton* or any other reference to the biblical God, but, at the same time, condenses all other possible divine names. Moreover, reducing the virtually infinite variety of divine names into the empty shell of *hašēm*, "the name of the name" as E. Levinas defined it,⁵ does not constitute a theological impoverishment, nor does it mean to restrict theology to a merely linguistic level.

The Biblical Name Theology and the Rediscovery of Materiality in Ancient Israel

Biblical studies still take advantage of the material turn which began with the pioneering studies of O. Keel and C. Uehlinger at the end of the '80s,⁶ or later by the iconographic exegesis of the Bible and, in general, the study of the connection between image and text.⁷ In terms of this material turn, which could also be regarded as a visual or iconographic turn, theology has suffered a significant delay. This is not only due to the fact that theology deals mainly with texts, but also because of a well-established idea that words are superior to images and that words and revelation fit into the domain of Judaism, and later that of Christianity, whereas "idols" belong to the domain of polytheistic religions. Actually, theology nourished the argument of a radical difference between Levantine religions and biblical religion for centuries. One of the best examples of this is the so-called "Name Theology," which is still a relevant category in Biblical exegesis and in the study of Israelite religion.⁸

5 E. Levinas, *L'au-delà du verset: lectures et discours talmudiques* (Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1982), 150.

6 See, for instance, O. Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (trans. T.J. Hallet; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1997); O. Keel and C. Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (trans. T.H. Trapp; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998).

7 To quote just a few: I.J. de Hulster and J.M. Lemon (ed.), *Image, Text, Exegesis: Iconographic Interpretation and the Hebrew Bible* (LHBOTS 588; London: Bloomsbury, 2014); I.J. de Hulster et al. (ed.), *Iconographic Exegesis of the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: An Introduction to Its Method and Practice* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015); R.P. Bonfiglio, *Reading Images, Seeing Texts: Towards a Visual Hermeneutics for Biblical Studies* (OBO 280; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016).

8 For the state of the art and bibliography, see S. L. Richter, *The Deuteronomistic History and the Name Theology: l'šakkēn š'c'mô šām in the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (BZAW 318; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002), 1–36. As an update, see. M. Byrne, "The Importance of Divine Designations in Old Testament Theology," *ITQ* 74 (2009):

G. von Rad in his *Deuteronomium Studien* (1947) regarded the Name Theology as the main evolutionary development in Israelite religion, its pivotal contribution to humanity, thus the essential distinction between Israelites and non-Israelites.⁹ He wrote:

The Deuteronomic theologoumenon of the name of Jahweh clearly holds a polemic element, or, to put it better, is a theological corrective. It is not Jahweh himself who is present at the shrine, but only his name as the guarantee of his will to save; to it and it only Israel has to hold fast as the sufficient form in which Jahweh reveals himself. Deuteronomy is replacing the old crude idea of Jahweh's presence and dwelling at the shrine by a theologically sublimated idea.¹⁰

Truth be told, von Rad was not an isolated voice. A few years earlier, W. Eichrodt, in his *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (1933–1939), already wrote that the Deuteronomistic school “preserved the reality of the divine presence at the holy place by substituting for the heathen conception of God's personal dwelling that of the dwelling of his Name.”¹¹

According to these scholars, the Name Theology is a purely Israelite concept, concurring to the mainstream criticism of the idols that can be found throughout the Hebrew Bible. However, the Name Theology is not the only attempt to clarify divine presence on earth. Beyond the Name Theology typical of the Deuteronomic tradition, scholars also recognised the *Kabod* Theology in the Priestly tradition. The two theologies were not understood to be in open conflict. It is important to bear in mind that, at this stage in the research, both the Deuteronomistic Name Theology and the Priestly *Kabod* Theology were regarded as attempts to adapt God's presence, in the temple and among his people, after the crisis of the sixth century and the destruction of the temple. In particular, the *Kabod* Theology seemed older than the Name Theology.¹² The former was considered to be linked to the Ark narratives and to the YHWH *Šebaot* traditions, that is, traditions

334–349; M. Hundley, “To Be or Not to Be: A Reexamination of Name Language in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History,” *VT* 59 (2009): 533–555; J.H. Tigay, “‘To Place His Name There’: Deuteronomy's Concept of God Placing His Name in the Temple,” in *Now It Happened in Those Days: Studies in Biblical, Assyrian, and Other Ancient Near Eastern Historiography Presented to Mordechai Cogan on His 75th Birthday* (Vol. 1; ed. A. Baruchi-Unna *et al.*; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2017), 17–26.

9 G. von Rad, *Studies in Deuteronomy* (trans. D. Stalker; London: SCM Press, 1953), 37–44.

10 Von Rad, *Studies*, 38–39.

11 W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Vol. 1; trans. J.A. Baker; London: SCM Press, 1975), 106.

12 “We can indeed follow the broad stream of Deuteronomic tradition in the exilic and post-exilic age much more clearly than that which issues ostensibly for the Priestly Document. Deuteronomy is the beginning of a completely new epoch in Israel. In every

dependent on some kind of cultic object or paraphernalia and to divine theophanies as well. On the contrary, the Name Theology was seen as a later development, which liberated God from any kind of material referent on earth. Beyond chronology, it was supposed to trace a theological development of divine presence on earth, characterised by a switch from immanence to transcendence. It was, in this sense, the theological correction *par excellence*.

Following von Rad, T.N.D. Mettinger repeatedly acknowledged that the terminology connected to the Name Theology can already be seen in the Hebrew Bible before the exile.¹³ However, he considered the exilic and post-exilic Name Theology a "full-blown" version of pre-existing formulas, and thus, strictly speaking, a theology.¹⁴ In Mettinger's view, only the "Copernican revolution of the Israelite cult,"¹⁵ which started with Josias but culminated in the Exile period, allowed the Name Theology to be established. The distinction between God and his name was a way to avoid describing God in the temple, like an enthroned king in his palace and, on the contrary, affirmed his transcendence and impassibility in spite of what happens to the terrestrial temple and all its equipment and furniture. Once again, the development was exquisitely theological:

Here we touch upon an important distinction between the Priestly and the Deuteronomistic traditions; in the former, *kabod* stands for God himself, while in the latter there is ultimately a difference between God's being in heaven and the presence of his Name in the Temple. The concept of God advocated by the Deuteronomistic theology is strikingly abstract.¹⁶

Overall, twentieth-century scholarship indicated that, without the sixth century crisis, that is to say, without the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, no Name Theology would have been possible. While the pre-exilic traditions, such as J, E, and JE, related the existence of a cult object, such as the Ark in the Jerusalem temple, the traditions developed from the exilic period progressively dematerialised God's involvement in the temple by giving new emphasis to already common notions such as his "glory" and his "name."

The Name Theology has become, therefore, a sort of chronological marker for exilic and post-exilic texts. This is true also in recent research,

respect, therefore, Deuteronomy is to be designated as the middle point of the Old Testament traditions" (von Rad, *Studies*, 37).

13 Mettinger, *Dethronement*, 56, 60, 78.

14 Mettinger, *Dethronement*, 60.

15 Mettinger, *Dethronement*, 67.

16 Mettinger, *Dethronement*, 124.

if we consider, for example, T. C. Römer's analysis of Deuteronomy 12.¹⁷ In his seminal work, T. C. Römer reassessed the Deuteronomistic production, identifying a two-hundred-year history, from the Assyrian period to the Persian period (7th to 5th centuries BCE) – which was formed in three phases: first in the kingdom of Judah, then in the Babylonian exile, and finally in the province of Yehud.

Concerning Deut 12, Römer identified three layers, each one corresponding to a different ideology, thus obtaining three different composition contexts. As in archaeological stratigraphic unities, the chronological order is from the most recent to the most ancient: Deut 12:2–7; 12,8–12; 12,13–18(19). In his analysis of the middle strata, and in particular that of verse 11, Römer argued that the exilic edition introduces the motif of the divine name dwelling in the temple, emphasising that “Yawheh does not dwell in the temple but in the sky (cf. also Deut 26:15 and 1 Kgs 8). Although he may have his name dwell there, the divine presence no longer depends on the temple itself.”¹⁸ Clearly, Römer considered this change to be a new form of divine presence in the temple after the fall of Jerusalem in 587/6 and the destruction of its temple. As Mettinger already said, “the ancient conceptions of the divine presence are made obsolete by the idea of the ‘Name’ in the Temple.”¹⁹

Although reassessing previous dating of the Deuteronomistic production, the notion of *šēm* is accepted as the consequence of the destruction of the temple and thus the Name Theology becomes a marker for chronology. While the stratigraphy and the proposed dating may be correct, the use of the Name Theology as a dating marker is problematic. Said use presumes that, before the exile, a Name Theology was not possible since there was a cultic object – be it a statue, the Ark, or some other sort of cult object. In any case, the name is understood to be an alternative to the cult object, or a replacement for it.

Römer openly admitted that his understanding of Deut 12 is based on S. L. Richter's interpretation of the biblical expression *lešakkēn šemô šām*. This scholar argued a double thesis: (1) that the formula *lešakkēn šemô šām* is a loan adaptation from Akkadian *šuma šakānu*, “to place the name,” which itself emerges from the royal monumental literary typology of Mesopotamia and has to do with the installation of inscribed monuments; and (2) that the

17 T. C. Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History: A Sociological, Historical and Literary Introduction* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 56–65.

18 Römer, *Deuteronomistic History*, 62.

19 Mettinger, *Dethronement*, 49.

scholarly idea of a Name Theology in the Deuteronomistic work is based on misunderstanding.

According to Richter, by exploiting this idiom, the biblical author transferred the Akkadian royal ideology to YHWH. In doing so, he reminded his audience that YHWH, not Israel, had taken the land, and therefore the place was his, not hers. In her criticism of the Name theology, Richter recognised that the expression "to put the name" in the Bible should be interpreted as a whole, as an idiomatic formula, instead of focussing only on the element *šēm*.²⁰ Grounded on J. Barr's criticism towards "inner lexicography" and "illegitimate totality transfers," Richter censured the study of the history of concepts and advocates arguing, on the contrary, the need for contextual analysis.²¹

Although this perspective is certainly correct, it does not exclude the fact that the same word and thus the same concept can be used in given idiomatic expressions but also elsewhere and randomly. The fact that an expression such as "it never rains but it pours" has a meaning in itself does not imply that the verb "to pour," for instance, means something different from its use in other idiomatic expressions, such as "to pour cold water on something," or in general uses of this verb – "May I pour you another cup of tea?"

Although correctly rejecting the two-step evolution or, better still, the revolution from immanence to transcendence, Richter introduced another kind of development: from artefact to name, pure signs engraved on stone, a simple signature of ownership. This latter development is no more neutral than the former. Moreover, both these views regard the name as the ensemble of graphic signs necessary to write it or as the ensemble of sounds necessary to pronounce it. Beyond its sensitive dimension, be it written or oral, the name is essentially understood as a word, and thus as a cognitive element. In doing so, Richter and her followers advocate a flat, one-dimensional meaning for the notion of *šēm*, which brings me back to my title.

"Stat rosa pristina nomine. Nomina nuda tenemus" is the last sentence of Umberto Eco's masterpiece *The Name of the Rose* (1980): "Yesterday's rose endures in its name; we hold empty names." This obviously refers to the topic which preoccupied intellectuals all across Europe in the Middle Ages, which is the *quaestio de universalibus*. Without entering into this philosophical problem, it is sufficient here to recall one of its possible solutions, "nominalism." According to this view, proprieties, or universals, are nothing

²⁰ Richter, *Deuteronomistic History*, 207.

²¹ Richter, *Deuteronomistic History*, 37–38.

more than names or, in the most radical position of Roscellinus, *flauts vocis*, that is, “emission of sound.”

In this context, names are reduced to mere linguistic elements, written or oral, without any real referent: to put it simply, all that one can conceive depends on language and its rules. This seems to have direct consequences on the development of the Name Theology as previously drafted. For instance, by interpreting a name as just an inscription, is Richter not continuing to refer to the conceptual reduction that is closer to nominalism than to the biblical world and its broader context?²²

A radically different approach to the Name Theology was proposed, for instance, by T. Staubli.²³ Analysing the Egyptian tradition of standards, which bear the name and/or the image of a god, he recognised the origin of the biblical Name Theology in this practice. In this way, he advocated not only a textual genesis for the Name Theology, but also a visual genesis, dating back to the eighteenth dynasty (1550–1292 BCE). Accordingly, the notion of name and the notion of image are suggested as correlative, rejecting the current nominalist approach to *šēm*.

In all truthfulness, the first scholars who developed the Name Theology recognised some materiality in the notion of *šēm*, by dating this theology back to a period where the Jerusalem temple was fully standing and working. As von Rad wrote: “The idea of the name as the characteristic form in which Jahweh reveals himself is not in itself anything new [...]. But what is decidedly new is the assumption of a *constant and almost material presence* of the name at the shrine.”²⁴

The radicalisation toward the nominalist way of understanding *šēm* seems to date to more recent scholarship, which identified the Name Theology with the destruction of the earthly institution representing God. In other words, the Name Theology ceased to be a generic theology of the deuteronomistic school, pre-dating the exile, and became the ghost, the shadow, the emptiness and the destruction of the First Temple left behind from the exile onwards.

In doing so, the current form of the Name Theology lost the (almost) material character that, despite all his problems, von Rad had highlighted. When he talked about the name as a hypostasis, for instance, he talked about

22 Interestingly, S. L. Richter herself qualified the rising of the Name Theology as a “nominal realism” (*Deuteronomistic History*, 14–22).

23 T. Staubli, “‘Den Namen setzen.’ Namens- und Göttinnenstandarten in der Südlevante während der 18. ägyptischen Dynastie,” in *Iconography and Biblical Studies* (ed. I. J. de Hulster and R. Schmitt; AOAT 361; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2009), 93–112.

24 Von Rad, *Studies*, 38 (my emphasis).

something material, concrete, as the very definition of a hypostasis is. On the contrary, thinking about the Name Theology today, one risks considering it immaterial and abstract, the name being a replacement of the cult object, engraved letters, etc. This is precisely the nominalist way of considering names as *flatus vocis*, "emission of sound," nothing more distant from the Biblical world.

However, Richter failed to propose an alternative theological view, her analysis focussed only on the idiomatic formula and neglected to respond to the need to consider all of the possible uses attested in the Hebrew Bible. The conclusion that the *šēm* formula "can be proven to have nothing to do with a reinterpretation of the mode of divine presence at the cult site"²⁵ is, therefore, limited to the occurrences of the formula as such, both in Northwest Semitic dialects and Akkadian. However, we are aware of many other attestations of the notion of *šēm* connected to gods outside of the idiomatic formula. By using the word *šēm* outside of this formula, therefore, ancient authors may have been hinting at something else, as I argue in the next paragraph.²⁶

The Name Theology in Context: a Levantine Perspective

It is true that, in most cases, the notion of name is linked with verbs such as "to write" and its antonym "to erase." By inscribing a name, humans intended to assure the named being, be it human or divine, ownership and eternity. In this context, curses against those who erased the king's name from funerary monuments are quite recurrent in the Levant.²⁷ However, a close reading of Levantine inscriptions suggests that *šēm* has a deeper semantic field. Therefore, the following collection of passages, coupling epigraphy and the Hebrew Bible, far from being exhaustive, aims to extend the notion of *šēm* brought back to its Levantine context.²⁸

The first context of usage is clearly ritual. If we consider some funerary Aramaic documents, the pairing of "name" and "statue" is recurrent.

²⁵ Richter, *Deuteronomistic History*, 216.

²⁶ The question of *šēm*, or similar forms, as a divine name and its occurrences in anthroponomy is not addressed here (see B. Becking, "Shem," *DDD*: 763–764). For a comprehensive analysis of *šēm*, see F. Reiterer *et al.*, "šēm," *TDOT* 15:128–176.

²⁷ See, for instance, *KAI* 1.

²⁸ For convenience, the biblical vocalisation is maintained here, despite the local variations.

15–16 Whosoever from my sons should grasp the [scep]ter and sit on my throne and maintain power and do sacrifice to this Hadad *and remember the name of Hadad* (*wyzkr šm hdd*)

17 let him then say: “[May] the [spi]rit of Panamuwa [eat] with thee, and may the spirit of Panamuwa dri[nk] with thee.” Let him keep *remembering the spirit of Panamuwa* (*yzkr nps pnmw*) with

18 [Had]ad (*KAI 214*, lines 15–18).²⁹

Besides the Akkadian *kispum* ritual, where the role of descendants is to be *zākir šumi*, the one who invokes his father’s name, the parallel expressions “to remember the name” and “to remember the spirit” are relevant. Both of them attempt to make present something which is not present (like the god) or is no longer present (like the dead king).

In terms of vocabulary, whereas in Akkadian the verb *zakāru* specifically means “to declare,” “to invoke,” in the Levantine dialects and in Aramaic its basic meaning is “to remember.” In this area, the expression “to remember/ invoke the name” becomes the standard way to invoke gods: rather than calling upon them, like in the Greek terminology (ὀνομάζω, καλέω, etc.), Semitic languages use the verb *zkr/dkr*.³⁰ Incidentally, when one remembers someone, one remembers much more than the name.

Moreover, not only should humans remember gods’ names, but gods should also remember humans’ names. In this context, divine remembrance is obtained by placing a physical reminder of the worshipper in the sanctuary in front of the deity, where possible, in the form of a statue, or in the form of an inscription containing the name that represents the worshipper. The name may therefore be understood to be a synonym of the statue, if there is a statue, or a metonym for it, when there is no statue but just an inscription. In this regard, it should not be forgotten that, at the site of Gerçin, where the statue of Hadad bearing the inscription was found, archaeologists discovered three other fragmentary statues, one of them presumably representing Panamuwa I.

Here, the inner connection between names and figurative objects is clear, as stated in the Egyptian standards studied by Staubli. In actual fact, these objects bear only the name, only an iconography, or both combined. The three possibilities have the same value and effectiveness and thus are interchangeable.

29 Modified translation from H. Niehr, “Religion,” in *The Arameans in Ancient Syria* (ed. idem; HdO 106; Leiden: Brill, 2014), 127–203, here 186.

30 A. K. de Hemmer Gudme, “A Lingering Memory: Materiality and Divine Remembrance in Aramaic Dedicatory Inscriptions,” *ARAM* 29/1 (2017): 89–104.

Name and statue seem, therefore, to be correlative and may lead one to wonder whether the expression "to set the name of someone somewhere"³¹ means to place a statue, to engrave a name in an honorary inscription or both, that is, to place a statue bearing an inscription, as it is often the case.

The connection between name and object is found in the famous biblical passage of the **יד ושם**:

Do not let the eunuch say, "I am just a dry tree." For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name (**יד ושם**) better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name (**שם עולם**) that shall not be cut off (Isa 56:3b–5).

Besides the euphemistic use of **יד** for the male sex, which is particularly fitting here, **יד** also indicates the signpost, thus the object, the monument. As usual, to have a name means both to have an element of glory, such as for the builders of the *Migdal Babel* (Gen 11:4), but also a descentance.³² The whole passage plays with polysemy: God provides his eunuchs with an eternal name by replacing their penis (**יד**) and offspring (**שם**) with a monument (**יד**) and a name (**שם**) in his temple.

Despite nominalist interpretations, the expression **יד ושם** indicates that the inscription and its support, with its eventual iconography, form a unity: "The name and the material form of the monument are fused."³³

The identity between name and its bearer is also evident. One of the clearest examples is the double inscription in Luwian and Phoenician from Karatepe, dating to 720 BCE. Although the main use of the word *šēm*, and its correspondent in Luwian *alaman-*, is attested in cases of misappropriation of a monument, the parallel text engraved on the portal lion from the North gate and the bull socle of the statue reads in Phoenician:

'ps / šm 'ztdw ykn l'lm km šm / šmš wyrḥ

only / the name of Azatiwada [Personal Name] may last for ever like the name / of the sun and the moon! (*KAI* 26 A IV, l. 1–3)

³¹ See, for instance, the inscription of Hama 4, in J.D. Hawkins, *Inscriptions of the Iron Age*, Vol. 1 of Corpus of Hieroglyphic Luwian Inscriptions (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000), 403–406.

³² It should be noted, however, that in many cases "name" and "descentance" (**זרע** / **שארית**) are differentiated, cf. 1 Sam 24:22; 2 Sam 14:7; Isa 66:22, etc.

³³ I. J. de Hulster, "A Monument and a Name': Isaiah 56 and the Aniconic Image," in *Iconographic Exegesis of the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: An Introduction to Its Method and Practice* (ed. idem et al.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 181–196, here 184.

Here, it is clear that the name of the sun and the moon *are* the sun and the moon. The name is the thing; it doesn't just represent it or stand for it. Similar expressions are found in the Psalms, this time referring to the king:

יִרְאוּךָ עַם שָׁמֶשׁ וּלְפָנֵי יְרַח דּוֹר דּוֹרִים
יְהִי שְׁמוֹ לְעוֹלָם לְפָנֵי שָׁמֶשׁ

May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations. [...]

May his name endure forever, his fame continue as long as the sun (Ps 72:5,17).

Another couple of texts that can be read in parallel, the first a Hebrew inscription on plaster from Kuntillet 'Ajrud:

Prepare (yourself) [to] bless Ba'al (*b'l*) on a day of war [...] to the Name of El (*šm 'l*) on a day of wa[r].³⁴

The Lord (יהוה) answer you in the day of trouble!

The name of the God of Jacob (שם אלהי יעקב) protect you! (Ps 20:1)

In all of these texts, especially the biblical ones, the limits of our translations are flagrant, replacing *šēm* with many different words. However, these passages bear witness to the link between the name and the cult statue in the ritual, where the statue has a name and, by its name, it is activated in the ritual performance. On a more general level, the name can be understood to be a metonym of the reality to which the name refers or a by-form, responding to the need for *variatio* especially in poetry, as required by the *parallelismus membrorum*.

The name, however, is not the only way to assure someone's presence, *a fortiori* a divine one. In the Phoenician Eshmunazor's sarcophagus from the fifth century BCE, the king tells of the construction of a temple for the Ba'al of Sidon and one for *štrt šm b'l*, "Astarte name of Ba'al" (KAI 14, l. 18). A parallel in the Ugaritic story of Keret has long been recognised, where the expression *ttrt šm b'l* is used in the context of a curse:

"May Horon smash, O son,
May Horon smash your head,
Athtart, Baal's name, your crown!" (KTU 1.16 VI 54–57)³⁵

34 Z. Meshel (ed.), *Kuntillet 'Ajrud (Ḥorvat Teman): An Iron Age II Religious Site on the Judah-Sinai Border* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2012), 110.

35 The same expression is probably also seen in 1.2 I 8; For the translation, see M. S. Smith, *Introduction with Text, Translation and Commentary of KTU 1.1–1.2*, Vol. 1 of The Ugaritic Baal Cycle (VTSup 55; Leiden: Brill, 1994), 265 and 277. Another occurrence is attested in some graffiti from Abydos, cf. C. Bonnet, *Astarté: dossier documentaire et perspectives historiques* (Collezione di Studi Fenici 37; Rome: Centro Nazionale delle Ricerche, 1996), 65 and 141.

Furthermore, at the Tophet of Carthage (from the fifth to the second century BCE), the following dedicatory formula is attested thousands of times:³⁶

lrbt lnt pn b'l wl'dn lb'l ḥmn

To the lady Tinnit face of Ba'al and to the lord Ba'al Ḥamon

The way that the divine couples are constructed in these last passages are comparable. In both cases, the goddess is linked (subordinated?) to Ba'al, by one of his attributes, in one case his name, in the other his face.³⁷ Moreover, the expressions enlighten each other: one may surmise that "name" and "face" fulfil the same function, Astarte and Tinnit represent the male deity, they serve as an interface.

Beyond the semantic shift between "name" and "face," the latter seems also to be semantically related to "image." Between the first century BCE and the first CE, an altar erected by the mason Abdeshmun bears a dedication to "our lord and to the image of Ba'al (*sml b'l*)" (KAI 12, l. 3–4). As stated by P. Xella, the expression *sml b'l* immediately recalls the epithets *šm b'l* and *pn b'l*.³⁸ Consequentially, the *sml b'l* is often interpreted as another name for the Lady of Byblos.³⁹ The fortune of the epithets concerning the face or the image lead to Greek forms such as *Phanebalos* or *Salambo*, the latter of which has also been found in other Semitic languages.⁴⁰ Besides these conjectures, constructions such as "name of DN," "face of DN" or "image

36 M. G. Amadasi Guzzo and J. Á. Zamora López, "The Epigraphy of the Tophet," in *The Tophet in the Phoenician Mediterranean* (ed. P. Xella; SEL 29–30; Verona: Essedue, 2013), 159–192.

37 It would be interesting to engage in a reflection on divine genders, such as the one outlined by E. Bloch-Smith, "Acculturating Gender Roles: Goddess Images as Conveyors of Culture in Ancient Israel," in *Image, Text, Exegesis: Iconographic Interpretation and the Hebrew Bible* (ed. I. J. de Hulster and J. M. Lemon; LHBOTS 588; London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 1–18.

38 P. Xella, "Pantheon e culto a Biblo. Aspetti e problemi," in *Biblo: Una città e la sua cultura* (ed. E. Acquaro et al.; Roma: Centro Nazionale delle Ricerche, 1994), 195–214, here 206. See also H. B. Huffmon, "Name," *DDD*:610–612 and C. R. Krahmalkov, "The Byblian Phoenician Inscription of 'bd'šmn: A Critical Note on Byblian Grammar," *JSS* 38/1 (1993): 25–32.

39 The existence of gods called *šlm* and *'šym*, and thus etymologically linked to the notions of "image" and "name" is seen in an Aramaic inscription from Taymā', an oasis in the North-Western region of the Arabic peninsula, dated between the end of the fifth and the beginning of the fourth century BCE (KAI 228). For some analysis elements, see M. Maraqtan, "The Aramaic Pantheon of Taymā'," *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 7 (1996): 17–31.

40 C. Robin, "À propos de *šdmb'l*: deux femmes de Gaza nommées *šlmbw* chez les Minéens d'Arabie du Sud," *Annuaire 1975 / 1976, École pratique des Hautes Études, IVe section, Sc. hist. et phil.* (1975): 184–190, here 189.

of DN” deserve attention and may belong to the same semantic net for describing “the cultically available presence [of a deity] in the temple.”⁴¹

Similar patterns are attested in the Hebrew Bible, with one significant difference. Since YHWH’s name or face cannot be shared with other gods, they are applied to his angel (מלאך):⁴²

Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, *for my name is in him* (כי שמי בקרבו). But if you carefully obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries (Exod 23:20–22).

For he said, surely they are my people, children that will not lie: so he was their Saviour. In all their affliction he was afflicted, and *the angel of his presence* (literally, “of his face,” מלאך פניו) saved them: in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he bore them and carried them all the days of old. But they rebelled and grieved his holy spirit; so he turned himself against them as an enemy, and he fought against them (Isa 63:8–9).⁴³

The fact that the angel bears God’s name or God’s face means that the angel acts as an interface between God and his people. Although the expression in Isaiah is discussed,⁴⁴ the expression מלאך פניו makes sense, especially when paralleled with the previous passage and other passages where God’s face is acting alone (cf. Deut 4:37; Exod 33:14). In this regard, considering the fortune of the Name Theology and the *Kabod* Theology, one wonders why a Face Theology never came about. Moreover, in the main passage in the Hebrew Bible referring to God’s face, Penuel, the intimate connection between name and face is once again attested:

Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face (פנים אל פנים), and yet my life is preserved” (Gen 32:29–30).

Here, the face seems even more important than the name – why should one ask God’s name when he can see his face? – but, at the same time, both the name and the face provide an answer to the same question: who are you? A third way to answer this question is given in the parallel passage of Exod 3, where Moses, who talks with God “mouth to mouth” (Num 12:8) surpasses Jacob, who saw God “face to face.” It is the famous revelation of the *tetra-*

41 P.K. McCarter, “Aspects of the Religion of the Israelite Monarchy: Biblical and Epigraphic Data,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (ed. P.D. Miller et al.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 137–155, here 147.

42 The notion of angel is not unknown in the Levant, see *KAI* 19 and *TSSI* III, 32.

43 For this passage, the NKJV version is preferred.

44 See, for instance, C. H. von Heijne, *The Messenger of the Lord in Early Jewish Interpretations of Genesis* (BZAW 412; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 107–108.

grammaton where, once again, instead of providing a name, God commits himself to not abandoning Israel, his people:

But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name (מה שמו)?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am (אהיה אשר אהיה)." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am (אהיה) has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever (זה שמי לעלם), and this my title for all generations (זוה זכרי לדר דר)" (Exod 3:13–15).

Compared to these theological heights, the reason why a Face Theology never developed is that such a theology would be too anthropomorphic and not sophisticated enough for theologians' tastes. However, the divine face plays a significant role in the Hebrew Bible.⁴⁵ From a historical-critical perspective, God's face and the related expression יהוה לפני יהוה may originally refer to physical descriptions of a cult (possibly anthropomorphic) image.⁴⁶ Such a use, however, did not disappear when aniconism became the official choice of Israelite cult; the expression continued to exist as a metaphor. This phenomenon is quite ordinary: words have their own history and their meaning or, better still, their meanings vary according to this history and not in a linear way. Given this fluidity, it would be rash to use expressions relating to God's face as a textual fossil serving as unequivocal chronological markers. The same can be said of the Name Theology.

Of course, the data presented here must be interpreted with caution because they are elusive and scattered according to geography, chronology, or context. Nevertheless, the general picture conveyed is that the performative or magic power of the notion of "name" should not be overestimated in this period, where the name often acts as a literary device. On the contrary, it seems clear that the name is one of the possible interfaces available to a being to allow them to interact with the world, and that, as an interface, the name mobilises a large set of notions, descriptive and physical features comprised, in order to express someone's presence.

⁴⁵ H.-P. Müller, "Face," *DDD*: 607–613.

⁴⁶ H. Niehr, "In Search of YHWH's Cult Statue in the First Temple," in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and Ancient Near East* (ed. K. van der Toorn; CBET 21; Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 73–96.

The “Name” as Synthetic Notion

The concept of “name” in ancient Semitic might be regarded as a “thick concept.” Over the last decades, especially in the field of moral philosophy, this expression has been used for specific evaluative concepts that are also substantially descriptive. In contrast, thin concepts, although clearly evaluative, are thought not to have much or any descriptive conceptual content.⁴⁷ The name is unequivocally related to a descriptive reality, the ensemble of graphic signs necessary to write it and the ensemble of sounds necessary to pronounce it, but at the same time its meaning is much more extensive than that and is particularly loaded. To put it simply, the semantic field of the word *šēm* is as large as the entity to which it refers. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that when *šēm* is referring to God, its semantic potential increases exponentially. To this already dense notion, further nuances are added, such as the prominence of words on images, or even a conflict between the two notions, and the emphasis on the conceptual value of words to the detriment of their materiality. The Name Theology, as well as its criticisms, suffer as a consequence of these supplementary but unnecessary loads.

Even the most recent contributions,⁴⁸ although highly valuable for their comparative approaches, nonetheless perpetuate a nominalist understanding of the name, fundamentally alien to our sources.

By considering the name as a replacement, a metonym, or a hypostasis one exploits only a part of its semantic potential. The semantic connections we observed, linking the notions of “name,” “face,” “image,” or “presence” *tout court* witness how deep they are embedded and, therefore, how much arbitrary is to separate one from the other. As a consequence, for Biblical studies, the name is neither the ghost of the First Temple’s cult, nor an empty shell; it is the way in which Semitic languages can refer to a being in the most synthetic and holistic way, irrespective of aniconism. This is the case, for instance, with the Palmyrene praise formula, mostly seen between the second and third centuries CE, “He whose name is blessed forever” (*bryk šmh l’lm*),⁴⁹ which does not refer to aniconic gods.⁵⁰ An even clearer case where the widespread use of the notion of name (*šuma*) has nothing to do with ani-

47 S. Kirchin (ed.), *Thick Concepts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

48 See no. 15.

49 A. Kubiak, “The Gods without Names? Palmyra, Hatra, Edessa,” *ARAM* 28 (2016): 327–338; eadem, *Des dédicaces sans théonyme de Palmyre. Béni (soit) son nom pour l’éternité* (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 197; Leiden: Brill, 2021).

50 For a possible iconography of the Palmyrene god see, I. Kaoukabani, “Un nouveau cippe de Palmyre,” *Syria* 76 (1999): 252–253.

conism can be found in Mesopotamian texts. Therefore, each context adapts particular aspects of a name but, as such, the name can be regarded as a synthetic notion. This is true before and after the sixth century BCE, in Judea as well as outside: the Name Theology should not be considered a peculiar feature of the ancient Israelites but rather as a common and shared way of dealing with reality and describing it in the ancient Levant and beyond.

Already, J. Assmann, while enumerating the three major forms of divine presence or manifestation in Egyptian religion – “shapes” (*iru*), “transformations” (*kheperu*), and “names” (*renu*) – recognised that “the three dimensions complement each other.”⁵¹ In particular, he noticed that “language [...] serves as the ‘cement’ that binds the three dimensions and integrates the human, the social, the political, and the cosmic spheres into a single coherent system of cultural semantics.”⁵² The name, therefore, given its linguistic dimension, is what ensures the concatenation between the different elements and allows them to form a unity.

Considering the relational feature of names, they can hardly be regarded as pure sounds or letters. Thus, the border between names and cultic elements, all too often regarded as mere objects or artefacts, becomes porous. This porosity has recently been fully considered in the field of Mesopotamian religion, where a broad definition of “what is a god” is proposed, encompassing a large spectrum of possibilities.⁵³ For instance, B. Pongratz-Leisten defined deity in the polytheistic systems of ancient Mesopotamia as entities that could act with intention and which were responsible for maintaining the cosmic order. Such a system not only includes the major (anthropomorphic) gods but also all kinds of cultic paraphernalia, statues, symbols, and celestial bodies: in defining a god, “agency is what counts.”⁵⁴

In conclusion, the habit of coping with names and divine epithets, from a Levantine perspective, as purely linguistic and literary elements turns out to be an approach which is too abstract. On the contrary, the proposal to broaden the semantic spectrum for the word שם has other famous examples in Hebrew: דבר, which means “thing,” “word” but also “action,” “fact”; נפש,

51 J. Assmann, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 21.

52 Assmann, *God and Gods*, 19.

53 B. N. Porter (ed.), *What is a God? Anthropomorphic and Non-Anthropomorphic Aspects of Deity in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Transactions of the Casco Bay Assyriological Institute 2; Winona Lake: Casco Bay Assyriological Institute, 2009); B. Pongratz-Leisten and K. Sonik, “Between Cognition and Culture: Theorizing the Materiality of Divine Agency in Cross-Cultural Perspective,” in *The Materiality of Divine Agency* (ed. B. Pongratz-Leisten and K. Sonik; SANER 8; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015), 3–69.

54 Allen, *Splintered Divine*, 35.

which means “spirit” but also “person,” etc. In this system, there is no difference between having something and being something, given the lack of a dualistic conception opposing materiality and immateriality. This is possibly backed by the two options for asking someone’s name: what is your name (מה שמך, Gen 32:28; see also Exod 3:13 and Prov 30:4) or who is your name (מי שמך, Judg 13:17).

Extending to a Levantine perspective, the understanding of a name as an embodied presence seems to be closer to the *emic* understanding, much better than the nominalist approach: the name contains, resumes, and condensates all of a being’s potentialities and mobilises all human senses. Through the name, all aspects of a particular god are organically recalled and remembered. Hence, even if all that we can hold of a rose is the pure name, to quote Shakespeare, at least, with that name, its sweet smell is returned to us, too.

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other word would smell as sweet”
(Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II, ii, 43–44)

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