

# Exegetical Brief: Exodus 6:2-4

*John C. Jeske*

God also said to Moses, "I am *Yahweh*."

I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as *El Shaddai*, but by my name *Yahweh* I did not make myself known to them.

I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan."

These verses have long posed a problem for Bible students who uphold the unity of the Pentateuch. They seem to say that the patriarchs knew God only as the Almighty (*El Shaddai*), not as *Yahweh*, the covenant God (the LORD). But that contradicts the clear meaning of Genesis 12:1-7; 25:21f; and 28:12-16, which show that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all knew and worshiped *Yahweh*.

The scholars who partition the Pentateuch into a number of separate documents claim to find support for their view in the Exodus text. According to this view, the Elohist (E) and the Priestly (P) traditions avoided using the name *Yahweh* in the book of Genesis. Beginning with the Mosaic period, however, God gave his people a new religious perspective. In his comment on this passage, Martin Noth speaks of the name *Yahweh* as a new name representing a new revelation, a name unknown to the patriarchs, a name first made known to Moses.

Bible-believing OT scholars have usually explained the Exodus text by focusing on the verb translated "I did not make myself known." The original reads *לֹא נִדְעָתִי* (Niphal perfect of the verb *יָדַע*, to "know"). The primary meaning of the Niphal conjugation is reflexive; its secondary meaning is passive.

KJV translates the verb as a passive (by my name JEHOVAH I was not known to them). That translation supports the contention of the documentarians. The NIV takes the verb as a reflexive ("by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them"). Those who hold a high view of the Pentateuch see in that reflexive verb God's announcement that he was now about to give his people a fuller revelation of himself than the patriarchs had received. According to this interpretation, what God was saying to Moses was this: "In my dealings with the patriarchs I did not reveal myself as fully as covenant God as I am now about to do in rescuing my people from Egyptian slavery." And that may be the sense of the passage.

Reading the NIV footnote to Exodus 6:3 recently, however, I recalled a conversation of twenty years ago which points to an alternative. During the time the NIV translation was being prepared, I asked Dr. William Martin, veteran Semitic scholar from England and another NIV translator, about this Exodus text. Dr. Martin remarked, "I believe we might have an unmarked interrogative in this passage." When pressed for an explanation, he replied, "In the following verse (v. 4) we have a *gam* [the Hebrew word for "even"]. Read God's two statements as declarative sentences, and you have a *non sequitur*:

'By my name *Yahweh* I did not make myself known to them.'

'I even made a covenant with them.'"

To illustrate, he continued, "Imagine a father making these two statements about his attitude toward his child:

'I do not love my child.'

'I would even risk my life to save my child.'

The only way those two statements make sense is if the first is a question. When speaking those two sentences, a father would indicate by his inflection that the first is an interrogative, and the hearer would pick that up immediately. The person reading the two sentences, however, unable to hear the inflection of the speaker's voice, is restricted to the printed text. He can sense the interrogative only from the word 'even' in the second sentence."

If Dr. Martin's surmise is correct, then what God was saying to Moses in Exodus 6:3 was:

"I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as *El Shaddai*, and [Hebrew *waw*] by my name *Yahweh* did I not let myself be known to them? Why, I even made a covenant with them."

The final review group of NIV editors voted to place Dr. Martin's suggestion into a footnote. Since the clearly intended meaning of God's word to Moses is more immediately apparent if the statement is read as a question than as a declarative statement, it may well be that the footnote deserves to be in the text, and vice versa.