"HE IS WHO HE IS"

By CYRUS H. GORDON

It is a pleasure to dedicate this note to Joshua Finkel, whom I have long considered an outstanding Semitist of deep erudition and extraordinary originality. But more than that, he has always been a true friend. I wish him many more years of health and productive scholarship.

Archaeological discoveries have raised biblical scholarship to a new level by supplying great quantities of collateral evidence. To investigate any given part of Scripture, we should give priority to the discoveries that are as close as possible in time and place to the biblical narrative in question. For the Mosaic period, "Late Egyptian" sources may be expected to provide the most valid kinds of external evidence.

In Exodus 3:14 Moses is told to go back to Egypt and identify his Divine Authority as אהי־ה אשר אהי־ה which is usually translated "I am that I am." Whatever the correct nuance of the translation should be, it cannot be separated from the divine epithet *pl nty wn-w-f* "The One Who Is Who He Is" in the Late Egyptian Story of Wenamon.[1] This obvious parallel has as far as I know not hitherto been pointed out. It is thus omitted in John Wilson's annotated translation of Wenamon, *apud* James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament,* 2nd ed., Princeton University Press, 1955, pp. 25-29.

The biblical account raises a grammatical problem. אהי־ה אשר אהי־ה is apparently in the first person ("I"), even though it explains the

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1. The hieroglyphic transcription is in A. H. Gardiner, *Late-Egyptian Stories,* Brussels, 1932, p. 69, line 13.

Tetragrammaton which is apparently[2] in the third person ("He"). This discrepancy may be more apparent than real, for initial א can interchange with initial י so that אהיה might be the equivalent of יהוה or the Tetragrammaton. This phonetic phenomenon is well attested but needs to be illustrated so that more Semitists may be able to apply it in passages that await clarification:

In Ugaritic, *aṣḥ* (with initial א) does not mean "I shout" in text 67:II:21 but "he shouts" which is elsewhere written *yṣḥ* (with initial י).

In duplicate passages, with no change in meaning, the same word is written *aḥd* and *yḥd* in Ugaritic (*Ugaritic Textbook* §19.126).

The Ugaritic verb "to give" is *ytn* with initial י; but note the initial א in *itnn* = Hebrew אתנן "gift."

In Psalm 68:19 לקחת מתנות באדם "Thou has taken gifts from their hand" with ב "from" (as occasionally in Hebrew; see *Ugaritic Textbook* §10.1) and with אד for יד (as also in Ugaritic; see *Ugaritic Textbook* §7.68). Note Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms* I (1966), pp. 70, 88 f.; and *Psalms* II (1968), p. 143 (in The Anchor Bible series, Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y.).

We conclude that when Moses reported in Egypt that אהיה אשר אהיה had sent him, there was no necessary discrepancy with the third person understood to be inherent in the Tetragrammaton. Moreover "He Is Who He Is" would be quite intelligible in Egypt where the great deity bore the epithet *pl nty wn-w-f* "The One Who Is Who He Is."

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2. That the Tetragrammaton came to be taken as a verbal from 3 m. sg., does not prove it was originally verbal. Genesis 4:26 reflects a tradition that the Tetragrammaton is of remote pre-Hebraic antiquity.