Diachronic Diversity in Classical Biblical Hebrew

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1. THE ONOMASTICON WITH AND WITHOUT *YAHU* NAMES

Biblical scholars through the years have pointed to patterns of diachronic significance in the selection of personal names. A preliminary observation was made by Wellhausen in his *Prolegomena*, in line with his argument for a late date for the Priestly source. Commenting on several personal names in the book of Numbers, he noted (1885, 390, ch.IX.III.2):

> The study of the history of language is still at a very elementary stage in Hebrew. In that which pertains to the lexicographer it would do well to include in its scope the proper names of the Old Testament; when it would probably appear that not only *Parnach* (Numbers xxxiv. 25) but also composite names such as *Peda-zur, Peda-el, Nathana-el, Pag'i-el, Eli-asaph*, point less to the Mosaic than to the Persian period, and have their analogies in the Chronicles.[1]

More recently, expanding on work by Meek (1936, 32; 1939), Hoffmeier (2005, 223–25) observes a noticeable concentration of

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[1] The Hebrew forms of the names (and their references) are פַּרְנָךְ (Num. 34.25), פְּדָה צוּר/פְּדָה־צוּר/פְּדָהצוּר (Num. 1.10; 2.20; 7.54, 59; 10.23), פְּדָהאֵל (Num. 34.28), נְתַנְאֵל (Num. 1.8; 2.5; 7.18, 23; 10.15), פַּגְעִיאֵל (Num. 1.13; 2.27; 7.72, 77; 10.26), and אֱלְיָסָף (Num. 1.14; 2.14; 3.24; 7.42, 47; 10.20) (cf. Black and Menzies's English translation, where *Phag'i-el* of the original German edition is mistakenly given as *Pazi-el*). Since all these names appear in Numbers alone, the evidentiary support for Wellhausen's claim that they point to the Persian period is rather flimsy. Crucially, it is not based on evidence that holds up to the strictures of accepted modern procedures (see above, Introduction, §1.0).

Egyptian names in the Pentateuch, especially among Levites (see also Friedman 2017, 32–34, and the bibliography that he cites). Moving eastward, Noth (1968, 18) noted that the use of names with *-ṣūr-* and *-ammi-* in Numbers is paralleled in the Bronze Age Mari letters, which predate the late 19th century BCE.[2] See also the more recent and broader discussion of Rahkonen (2019) on the strong correlation between personal names in the Pentateuch and the 2nd-millennium BCE Northwest Semitic onomasticon, both of which differ palpably from the Iron Age II Hebrew onomasticon, as seen in biblical and extrabiblical sources alike.

1.0. Yahwistic Names in Biblical Hebrew and Beyond

Returning to the Graf-Wellhausen Documentary Hypothesis, one of the most conspicuous differences between the sources that purportedly comprise the Pentateuch involves designations of the Israelite deity. While the Yahwist uses *Yhwh* throughout his narrative sections, that name goes unused in the work of the Elohist until Exod. 3.13–15 and in the Priestly source until Exod. 6.2–3. Rounding out the picture, Deuteronomy employs *Yhwh*.

Mainstream critical scholarship interprets this diversity as inconsistency among the Pentateuch's sources concerning the timing of the Tetragrammaton's revelation. Yet, this should not overshadow significant points of agreement among the reputed sources. Beyond concurring on the specific name *Yhwh*, of primary significance for purposes of the present chapter is the fact that the sources jointly reflect a Hebrew onomasticon generally

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[2] I am grateful to James Bejon for this citation.

devoid of Yahwistic names. This is remarkable given the ubiquity of such theophoric names in biblical and extrabiblical sources reflecting the period of the monarchy and later. Whatever the process of the Torah's literary development, whenever it began and finished, and however one is to interpret, literarily and historically, its complicated depiction of the name's explicit or implicit revelation, the sources are unanimous that knowledge of the name *Yhwh* had little effect on the pre-monarchic Hebrew onomasticon. Indeed, the Pentateuch includes just two names with any form of the Tetragrammaton, in both cases a prefix: יְהוֹשֻׁעַ 'Joshua' and יוֹכֶבֶד 'Jochebed' (see Hornkohl 2014a, 86, fn. 35). This dearth of *yahu* names also holds true for the books of Joshua, Judges, and Samuel. In sum, from the perspective of Yahwistic names, the onomastic tradition of the Torah, along with that of other biblical books depicting the pre- and early monarchic period (including Ruth), differs dramatically from the onomasticon of the monarchic period and beyond in terms of the presence or absence of *yahu* names.

2.0. Diachronic Trends

The anthroponymic trend with clearest diachronic import in BH involves the distinction between long and short forms of theophoric names with suffixes based on the Tetragrammaton. Iron Age inscriptions are matched by CBH texts in showing preference for the long form יָהוּ-, while post-exilic extrabiblical Hebrew and Aramaic, as well as LBH and BA, show strong partiality for the

abbreviated form יָה-.[3] Hornkohl (2014a, 87) provides the following table of names ending in long יָהוּ- or short יָה- in the standard Tiberian biblical tradition.

Table 1: Masoretic biblical distribution of personal names ending in long and short forms of the theophoric suffix based on *Yhwh*

Book	long (%)	short (%)	Book	long (%)	short (%)
Judges	2 (100)	---	Zephaniah	1 (20)	4 (80)
Samuel	4 (33.3)	8 (66.7)	Zechariah	1 (7.1)	13 (92.9)
Kings	248 (76.3)	77 (23.7)	Malachi	---	1 (100)
(1 Kings	102 [85.7]	17 [14.3])	Proverbs	---	1 (100)
(2 Kings	146 [70.9]	60 [29.1])	Esther	---	1 (100)
Isaiah	62 (96.9)	1 (3.1)	Daniel	---	9 (100)
Jeremiah	241 (74.4)	83 (25.6)	Ezra	1 (1.3)	77 (98.7)
Ezekiel	4 (66.7)	2 (33.3)	Nehemiah	---	185 (100)
Hosea	---	2 (100)	Chronicles	275 (57.6)	202 (42.4)
Amos	---	4 (100)	(1 Chronicles	85 [33.5]	169 [66.5])
Obadiah	---	1 (100)	(2 Chronicles	190 [85.2]	33 [14.8])
Micah	---	1 (100)	Total	839 (55.5)	672 (44.5)

In line with what has already been said (§1.0), the biblical distribution of names bearing long and short theophoric suffixes based on *Yhwh* begins with the book of Judges, excluding entirely the Torah, as well as Joshua. To be sure, according to the figures, the book of Samuel also exhibits relatively limited use of the relevant names (just 12 total: 4 long, 8 short). Names ending in a form of the relevant suffix accumulate appreciably only in

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[3] The two biblical corpora that buck these trends are the CBH books of the Twelve (Hosea, Amos, Obadiah, Micah, Zephaniah), on the one hand, and LBH Chronicles, on the other; for details, see Hornkohl (2014a, 88–89). On the predominantly (but not exclusively) northern use of names ending in יו- -*yaw*, with elision of the *heh*, see Hornkohl (2014a, 85 and n. 33) and the references there.

Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, the Twelve, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles.

The situation of names with one of the corresponding theophoric prefixes, -יְהוֹ or -יוֹ, is somewhat more complex. This is due partially to a smaller pool of tokens, to lower frequency of forms, and to the exceptional preponderance of certain names in particular texts. For example, the names יְהוֹשֻׁעַ 'Joshua' in the Hexateuch and יוֹנָתָן/יְהוֹנָתָן 'Jonathan' in Samuel skew the data in the relevant books, where beyond these names, *Yhwh*-based anthroponyms are rare. For purposes of the present discussion, the most pertinent point is the aforementioned rarity of names prefixed by -יְהוֹ or -יוֹ in the Pentateuch compared to most of the rest of the Hebrew Bible.

Beyond the Pentateuch, as already stated, those books depicting the pre-monarchic period, i.e., Joshua and Judges, also display a dearth of *Yhwh*-based names, as does Samuel, focusing on the early monarchy. Literature focusing on the divided monarchy shows a dramatic uptick in use of *Yhwh*-based names. In the case of the pre-exilic books, the preference is for the long ending -יָהוּ, whereas post-exilic books show a strong predilection for the short -יָה form of the suffix. Crucially, the Masoretic biblical evidence is confirmed by non-Masoretic biblical sources and, more importantly, by extrabiblical material, both early and late. This latter material is of immense importance, because, unlike the biblical evidence, it was not subject to secondary changes in the course of scribal transmission. Thus, Iron Age epigraphy shows overwhelming dominance of the long -יהו suffix, whereas

in Persian and Hellenistic inscriptions, NBDSS texts, 1QIsaᵃ, and RH, short יה- forms are the norm.

3.0. Interpreting the Data

The question is how to interpret the infrequency of theophoric names based on *Yhwh* in biblical texts that appear to reflect pre-monarchic naming practices, especially the Pentateuch. An argument based on the absence of these names is, by definition, an argument from silence. But is the silence historically meaningful?

According to what is perhaps the most straightforward interpretation of the evidence, the preserved anthroponymic usage patterns may be considered representative of different historical chronolects. Thus, working backwards, the LBH and late extrabiblical dominance of יְה- names reflects onomastic practices from the Restoration period, i.e., post-450 BCE, on; the books depicting the period of the divided monarchy reflect naming traditions of the period spanning approximately 900–450 BCE; and material recounting pre-monarchic events preserves onomastic conventions redolent of a time before 900 BCE.

The foregoing scheme raises numerous issues, apparently flying in the face of mainstream source critical and linguistic theories alike.

3.1. Source Criticism

In terms of compositional development, many scholars remain convinced of Wellhausen's exilic or post-exilic dating of the P source. As was shown in the quote from Wellhausen at the beginning of this chapter, however, he largely excluded linguistic

evidence and argumentation, which has subsequently been ex-
ploited to challenge his view (Rendsburg 1980; Hurvitz 1974a;
1982; 1988; 2000).

    Moreover, the significance of the apparent affinity he saw
between a short list of compound names in Numbers and similar
names in Chronicles pales in comparison to the significance of
the onomastic disparity between the Torah, almost completely
devoid of Yahwistic names, and those books dated securely to the
exilic and post-exilic period on the basis of their language, which
show regular use of such names. Whenever the P source may
have been composed, from the perspective of Yahwistic names,
its onomastic tradition can hardly be said to be that of exilic or
post-exilic times.

    Pre-empting the farfetched contention that the Torah's on-
omasticon was artificially fashioned, so as to avoid mention of
Yahwistic names, one may point to the inconvenient presence of
the two *yahu* names that do appear there. According to P, Moses's
mother goes by the Yahwistic name יוֹכֶבֶד 'Jochebed' (Exod. 6.20)
in the same chapter in which the name *Yhwh* is revealed (Exod.
6.2). Unless she is thought to have undergone an undisclosed
name change, P's narrative implies that she bore her Yahwistic
name prior to the revelation of the Tetragrammaton.[4] Had there
been a conscious effort to expunge all Yahwistic names from the
Torah, it is surely strange that this case should have been left as
is.

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[4] See Segal (1967, 4). The classification of the passage as belonging to
P is according to Friedman (1989, 250).

Perhaps somewhat less problematic is the distribution of the name יְהוֹשֻׁעַ 'Joshua', as the relevant personage is not mentioned until after the Tetragrammaton has been revealed according to all sources and since use of the alternant name הוֹשֵׁעַ 'Hosea' (Num. 13.8, 16; Deut. 32.44) can be interpreted as evidence of Yahwistic renaming. At any rate, use of יְהוֹשֻׁעַ 'Joshua' is as prevalent in E as it is in P, the latter also employing הוֹשֵׁעַ 'Hosea'.[5]

3.2. Chronolects and Linguistic Periodisation

Turning to diachronic linguistics, scholars who deal with ancient Hebrew diachrony are generally content to distinguish between pre-exilic CBH and post-exilic LBH. Though pre-classical ABH is variously acknowledged in some biblical poetry (Mandell 2013) and TBH is recognised by some scholars as a viable chronolect linking CBH and LBH (Hornkohl 2014a, 14–15, fn. 39; 2016a), few attempt to divide CBH into monarchic and pre-monarchic sub-strata. However, this is precisely where a straightforward reading of the onomastic data seems to lead.

To be clear, the issue here is not, strictly speaking, the date of the Pentateuch's compilation, redaction, or even, necessarily, composition, but rather the historical depth of its linguistic traditions and the degree to which the historical representativeness of their naming patterns was kept intact as they were transmitted

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[5] יְהוֹשֻׁעַ: E—Exod. 17.9, 10, 13, 14; 24.13; 32.17; 33.11; Num. 11.28; Deut. 31.14, 14, 23; P—Num. 13.16; 14.6, 30, 38; 26.65; 27.18, 22; 32.12, 28; 34.17; Deut. 34.9; Dtr₁—Deut. 1.38; 3.21, 28; 31.3, 7. הוֹשֵׁעַ: P—Num. 13.8, 16; Dtr₂—Deut. 32.44.

orally, written down, and retransmitted.[6] It would seem that the Torah (along with the rest of biblical literature depicting pre- and early monarchic historiography) reflects naming traditions that differ from those of the rest of CBH and of LBH. This is presumably because the *Yhwh*-based patterns shown by extrabiblical inscriptions to be popular from the 8th century BCE on had not yet become entrenched in earlier centuries, and that the books of the Pentateuch (and Joshua, Judges, and Samuel) preserve such earlier anthroponymic traditions.

Even if the language of the Pentateuch saw significant historical development, it should not be particularly surprising that its onomastic tradition should prove especially resistant to change. According to Anderson (2007, 92–93), "Names tend to institutionalize…. Institutionalized naming traditions in general tend to be or become very conservative, whatever the original source of the names." No matter the exact compositional process that produced the Torah and other biblical material reflecting pre-monarchic historiography, their onomastic tradition seems characteristic of a historical reality different from that of CBH material depicting the monarchic period and of LBH and late extrabiblical sources.

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[6] For differential treatment of diachronically significant detail among ancient writers, see Steiner (2005, 240–43) on Josephus's treatment of names with gutturals and Hornkohl (2014a, 85) on Ben Sira's treatment of *-yahu* suffixed names.

3.3. The Absence of Extrabiblical Pre-monarchic Hebrew Sources

Despite the plausibility, perhaps even probability, of the arguments advanced, evidence sufficient for their verification remains tantalisingly lacking. This is due to gaps in chronologically contemporary extrabiblical evidence.

The characteristic use of pre-exilic monarchic יהו- and post-exilic יה- is firmly corroborated by extrabiblical sources in Hebrew and Aramaic, and even farther afield in Akkadian (Abraham 2024, esp. 149–51), but for the apparent pre-monarchic onomasticon of Genesis–Samuel, no such direct extrabiblical Hebrew corroboration is available. True, the aforementioned study by Rahkonen (2019) shows similarity between names in the Pentateuch and those used more broadly in 2nd-millennium BCE Mesopotamia. For Akkadian specifically, Abraham (2024, 139) says explicitly that "[t]here are no… attestations of Yahwistic names in Babylonian records from pre-exilic times" beyond a single possible case from the late 7th century BCE. This concords with Hess's (1993) findings on Amarna personal names and with Van Soldt's (2016) on Ugaritic theophoric names, which lists include no Yahwistic forms. While consistent with the general absence of Yahwistic names in Genesis–Samuel, this evidence is mainly negative and circumstantial—a resounding silence in contemporary sources in related languages. More direct extrabiblical onomastic evidence, in the form of Hebrew (or Canaanite) inscriptions from the pre-monarchic period, remains a desideratum, in the absence of which we are left with a narrative that fits the facts, but remains without extrabiblical corroboration.

Even so, the likelihood that the Torah's onomasticon (and that of other biblical material containing pre-monarchic traditions) reliably portrays pre-monarchic anthroponymic patterns may be strengthened if the onomasticon proves to be just one of several features distinguishing pre-monarchic CBH from monarchic CBH, as the rest of this book seeks to substantiate.