

3.

YHWH

(an essay)

In this essay we will seek to discover the very essence of the Bible – whose very name means the Book – and so the significance of God’s NAME: YHWH. For what is a book but words? And what are words but spirit? And this Word (YHWH) is the pure expression of the Spirit, of God – it is the NAME of God, the Word itself.

Let me begin by saying that all is by words, and all comes from God. God is the origin; God is the source of all.

The Bible tells us that in the beginning God breathed the breath of life into the nostrils of man, and so he became “a living soul” (Gn.2:7). The breath is the life of the soul, and our words are its expression; breathing in and breathing out, we find the source of the words we speak. And the words I speak of are not only the audible words we use when conversing with one another, but, more importantly, the words we speak inside... for these, our thoughts, come from deeper in our souls.

You have no doubt heard the expression, “You are what you eat.” This is certainly true of the body: the food we eat becomes our flesh. (And so should we not eat the flesh of Christ?) But as for the soul, it is equally true that *you are what you speak*, for a man is judged by his words.

Yes, all is by words, all occurs as a result of the words we speak. Even the most astounding action performed by man has its source in words, for actions spring from words – we act according to our thoughts.

And this is why there is no greater power than the power of prayer – sincere, true words, spoken in the Spirit of God may indeed move mountains. This is why Jesus says, “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you” (Lk.17:6). Speak in truth and it shall be done.

Let us now speak of the Spirit. The Word. God. The source of all life... And of His NAME: YHWH.

Jesus tells us that God is Spirit, and the Spirit is like the wind. He says that the words He speaks are Spirit and life – but what does He mean? (See Jn.3:8, 4:24, & 6:63.)

Some may recognize this Word – YHWH – as being similar to the Name ‘Yahweh’, one name for God. But Yahweh is a much later version of the NAME, with vowels arbitrarily added in. The original form of the NAME is this Word, YHWH. It is called the tetragrammaton. There are other derivations and names for God – like Jehovah and Adonai, or Lord – but this is the original NAME.

This NAME was revealed to Moses at the burning bush when God called him to lead the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery. God gave the NAME to Moses that he might know God and be confident in speaking to the Israelites, and that they might know who sent him. This NAME is a lasting gift for all generations (surpassed only by the coming of Christ – the Word become flesh).

This NAME is translated in the Bible as “I AM WHO (I) AM,” simply as “I AM,” or as “I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE,” and it is said to be related to the Hebrew verb “hayah,” which means “to be”. These interpretations are very enlightening about the nature of God. They tell us, simply, that God Is, God exists; He is life and the Creator and Master of life – able to do and be what He will.

These definitions lead us to an understanding of the nature of God as Life itself: but still, I wonder when I look at this NAME – what is its significance? I asked this question of the Spirit in 1986 after reading that archeologists had unearthed a priest’s vestment (circa 500 B.C.) with these four letters on the front and the Aaronic blessing on the back.

I had read that no one was certain of the significance of this Word. All scholars could say was that either it could not be pronounced or should not be pronounced... but they were not sure. Going on this alone, and with the simplicity of a child, I thought, in the Spirit, to pronounce it – as it is, without the added vowels.

What I found, miraculously, was a word whose pronunciation is silence itself. A word that leads to no words. It defies pronunciation, and yet has a pronunciation – its pronunciation is silence... living, breathing silence!

It is a word of pure breath, for it allows air – air that is of the wind, that is of the spirit – to pass through us without any human interference, without any movement of tongue or lips or vocal cords... And so I found that it is the Word of words, the Tongue of tongues, the Spirit, the Breath that is in all words, in all languages – it is the silence from which all words come.

And I thought of that ancient priest standing in a field, looking at the dome of clouds overhead, listening to the wind in the trees – and just breathing, just being – one with nature and with God, no words or thoughts to trouble him... the purity of the Spirit filling him.

In speaking the NAME, you will find that the “Y” opens the throat and poises the mouth for speech, but the “H” immediately leaves it open – allowing the spirit, the breath, to enter in purely and fill the mind with light. (This is breathing in the pure Spirit of God.)

Then, with the “W” the lips move toward one another, as if to ask a question – but are left open by the final “H”. (And so we breathe out and offer our lives to God, released from all question, doubt, and fear.)

And we are left in utter awe and wonder – with mouth agape and tongue quite still – as a smiling child before the Father and His inexpressible beauty, majesty, and love.

(It is important to note that at the same time God gives us His NAME, He lets us know that we cannot put our finger on Him; we, as His creation, as His clay pots, cannot in human ways, with a human tongue, name God – for God is beyond our words: God simply Is.)

Now, let us found this understanding in the Word of God.

First, let us look at 1Kings 19:9-18. In this passage, Elijah listens for the Lord on Mount Horeb and finds Him not in the strong wind that rends the mountain in two, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire – but in a “still small voice.” (And after hearing this voice, Elijah rises, and God commissions him to anoint two kings and a prophet.)

Next, let us discuss two pairs of related readings, taken from the Old and New Testaments:

First, in Genesis (1:1,2) we read, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep.” Nothing had taken shape yet, but the Bible tells us that “the Spirit [or wind] of God was moving over the face of the waters.” So, all that was in the beginning was this Spirit, this wind, this breath of God.

And then, what happens? – God speaks. “God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (1:3). And so all things come into being by the Word of God. So nothing becomes something by the Word of God, the origin of life.

Related to this passage is the beginning of the Gospel of John, which reads, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Again, the Word is the origin. The Spirit gives life. God is the Spirit, the Word.

John goes on to tell us that Jesus is the Word, is God, made flesh. He is the Word become Man; He is the Son of God the Father – the light of the world. And so the revelation given Moses is fulfilled in Jesus, as Spirit becomes flesh.

As for the other pair of relevant readings: to emphasize again the importance of breath and its relation to God, I remind you that Genesis tells us that God breathed the breath of life into man's nostrils, and so he became a living being. This is the first birth.

Then I draw your attention to a passage directly related to this one – that which speaks of the second birth. And what is it to be born again, to be born from above, to be, as Jesus told Nicodemus, like the wind of which no one knows “whence it comes or whither it goes” (Jn.3:8)? We see a clear parallel to the first birth in John 20, when the risen Christ commissions the apostles: He breathes on them, first saying, “Peace be with you,” then, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (19, 22). And so the Church is born of the Spirit (even as it is in its fullness at Pentecost, when the wind of the Spirit shakes the house in which the apostles pray, and comes upon them in tongues of living flame).

In closing, I would like to say that I believe the understanding of the NAME of God as the silent Word may have been lost due to the impatience and weariness of the people. I believe that the NAME warranted a silent pause whenever it appeared in the Scriptures being read aloud in the assembly and that people's ears and hearts grew dull to this pure silence, and so words more understandable and pronounceable – more human – were added in its place.

I pray we are not the same as they. I pray that we will find the great life in the silence of God, in His holy NAME – not tediousness or emptiness. And so I greatly encourage you to pray to God to find the still point of the turning world, to find His silence, His silent Word from which all comes and which holds all life. Give yourselves over to His wonder and awe. Be still and listen for His voice, which speaks in all words and is at the heart of all sound. Speak His NAME.

Peace be with you.

an epilogue

I have learned recently that the NAME came to be pronounced only by the high priest in the holy of holies, where the Ark of the Covenant was kept and which only he was allowed to enter, and only once a year. Perhaps, then, the NAME fell into disuse after the Ark was lost at the time of the Babylonian exile.

Also, two substantial notes regarding this practice and any proscriptions against speaking the NAME. First, it was part of the command given to Moses when the NAME was revealed to him, “This is my NAME for ever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations” (Ex.3:15). How could we then forget it so? Second, the tabernacle housing the Blessed Sacrament, the fulfillment of the Ark of the Covenant, has indeed taken the place of the holy of holies; it is the place where God is now present to us – and it is now present in every Catholic Church throughout the world. And not only may anyone enter into that presence at any time, but any Catholic in a state of grace may receive that presence of God into his own body by reception of Holy Communion, even every day. How much more should His NAME be remembered now that the Word has become flesh and dwells among us? Let us remember His NAME.