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By Ricky Stephen

Genesis 1; Exodus 3

YOU KEEP USING THAT WORD...

“Certainly [God]...is the most burdened of human words.”¹

The word 'God' does some heavy lifting. Depending on who is using it, it can mean vastly different things.

Often in conversations, people start talking about God. But as they talk, we may find ourselves thinking ‘you keep using that word, I do not think that it means what you think it means.’

Through our series 'The Name' we will be exploring the various names and titles given to God throughout Scripture. We are doing this to remind ourselves:

We do not get to define the word 'God'. He defines it for us.

ELOHIM: A GOD LIKE NO OTHER

The Bible is a book defining God. While it gives good advice for life, this is its primary aim. We need it to define the word 'God' because we exist in a world with nearly limitless definitions to this word which lead to death rather than life.

The first chapter of the Bible gives us the correction we need. Genesis 1 is not merely interested in explaining creation; it is interested in defining the Creator. Four primary defining attributes of 'God' rise to the top in Genesis 1:

I. GOD IS ONE

Genesis begins:

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."
- Genesis 1:1

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The Hebrew word translated “God” here is *Elohim*. Though grammatically plural, it refers to the one true God.²

The most repeated confession in Judaism is the Shema:

“Hear, O Israel: *The Lord our God, the Lord is one.*”
– Deuteronomy 6:4

The emphasis is not merely numerical. As theologian Alan Hirsch writes:

*“...in the Hebraic perspective, monotheism [believing God is one] is not so much a statement about God as eternal being in essential oneness...but rather an existential claim that there is only one God and he is Lord of every aspect of life...”*³

Because God is one, all of life has one source, one purpose, and one Lord. Reality is not governed by competing powers or conflicting gods.⁴ The universe is coherent because its Creator is one.

This means faith cannot be compartmentalized. God is Lord over every part of existence.

God is One. Sovereign overall, and therefore all of life finds its source and purpose in Him.

II. GOD IS MIGHTY

A repeated phrase structures Genesis 1:

“*And God said...*”⁵

Each act of speech creates reality.

“*And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.*”

Ancient creation stories often portrayed gods struggling against rival gods or chaotic forces. Genesis presents something radically different.

God simply speaks and it happens.

No rival. No contest. No equal.

Even the sun, moon, and stars—objects often worshipped in the ancient world—are described merely as lights placed in the heavens by God (Genesis 1:14-15).

God is not part of creation. He is not one force among many. He stands above creation as its Maker and Sustainer.

God is mighty and there are none mighty like Him.

III. GOD IS LIVING

A popular modern view sees God as an impersonal force or universal consciousness.

Genesis presents something very different.

This God speaks. This God evaluates. This God acts. Again and again Genesis says:

“And God saw that it was good.”⁶

The Bible regularly refers to God as “the Living God,” distinguishing Him from idols that cannot see, hear, speak, or act.

Humanity is created in His image (Genesis 1:26-27). Because God is living and personal, His image-bearers are living and personal as well.

The story of Scripture consistently portrays God as active and involved. He seeks humanity after the fall, calls Abraham, wrestles with Jacob, and guides His people.

He is the Living God—dynamic, active, and involved with His creation.

IV. GOD IS GOOD

Throughout Genesis 1, God repeatedly declares creation good.

God's goodness is moral, but it is also creative and beautiful. The world is not a cosmic accident but a masterpiece.

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Creation culminates with the seventh day:

“By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing...” – Genesis 2:2

Jewish tradition reads the text differently:

“On the seventh day God finished the work He had been doing...”

Meaning God created on the seventh day. What did He create?

Rest.⁷

The Sabbath became a weekly reminder that creation is good and that humanity is invited to delight in God's world.

As Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote:

*“There is a song in the wind, a joy in the trees... Eternity utters a day.”*⁸

God does not merely command work; He commands rest. He invites His people to enjoy His goodness and delight in His creation.

God is good and wants His people to delight in His good world with Him.

YAHWEH: THE NAME IN THE FLAMES

There is a trend of religious language returning to public dialogue. In our enthusiasm, we can sometimes uncritically accept someone as a trusted Christian source just for saying the word ‘God’.

But scripture warns against empty or distorted invocation:

“You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.” – Exodus 20:7

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This commandment is about more than words. It's about the meaning we fill God's name with, and the way it comes to shape our lives. Taking God's name in vain is making the sound of God's name but not living into the shape of it.

Being a Christian is not just believing in 'God'. Being a Christian is not just a moral and political stance. Being a Christian has everything to do with who we let give shape and substance to the name of God. Anything else is use in vain.

The Exodus is all about who gets to define God's name. Moses stands before the burning bush and asks the question beneath all questions:

"Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?"

The response is not a definition, but a declaration:

"I AM WHO I AM... 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

"Say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers... has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation."

- Exodus 3:13-15

The name given is both revealed and withheld. It resists being reduced into control or explanation. As Christopher Wright observes:

*"In asking, 'what is His name?' [Moses] may have been effectively asking, 'What can he do?' To which [God] effectively answers, 'Watch and see.'"*⁹

From this emerges the divine name Yahweh,¹⁰ the personal covenant name used thousands of times throughout Israel's Scriptures. Whenever English translations render LORD in small capitals, this is the name beneath it.

It is *the* name God gives Himself, but in a way, it is not a name. It is an invitation into the mystery of God's unfolding acts in history. It is a constant reminder to be humble.

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While it is mysterious, it also becomes the covenant name. It is used as a reminder of the God who saved the Israelites from slavery, wrestled with Jacob, and blessed Abraham.

The bush which burns but is not burned up stands in our minds as a reminder of the mystery which enshrouds the Lord, and His willingness to light up the dark and reveal portions of this mystery to us.

When we look at this shrub, we can sometimes see through it to another tree.

YESHUA: YAHWEH SAVES

If God is the most burdened word in human history, there is one man who takes the burden upon himself. Not by speaking from a burning bush, but by hanging on a Roman cross.

His name is Yeshua.

This is the Aramaic form of Jesus' name, and it means: *Yahweh saves*.

Moses once asked to see God's glory. The reply was stark: no one can see it and live. God is both near and ungraspable, revealing himself yet remaining beyond human capacity to contain.

Yet the Gospel of John opens with a bold claim:

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory... full of grace and truth."

"No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known." - John 1:14, 18

In Greek, literally, who is Himself God and 'in the bosom of the Father'. Jesus is God's heart walking around out of His chest. He is the glory of God in leather sandals.

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The prologue opens with this truth, but the first person to grasp its reality is Thomas. He demands for evidence of Jesus' resurrection. Jesus appears and says to Him:

"Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

²⁸ Thomas said to him, **"My Lord and my God!"**

- John 20:27-28

The 'Lord' spoken by Thomas here is 'Kurios' in Greek. This is the term used to translate the name 'Yahweh', as Jews believed it too holy to be spoken.

Thomas is saying:

"My Yahweh and my Elohim."

Being a Christian isn't just believing in 'God'. Being Christian is not just a moral or political stance.

It's being one who bows before the risen Christ and says:

"My Lord and my God."

APPENDIX: HOT TIMES AT HERESY HIGH

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For those of you who wish to dazzle your friends with theological knowledge and insight, here is a list of the 'isms' which Genesis 1 is challenging.

Polytheism: the belief in many gods governing different aspects of the universe, usually in some form of conflict.

Animism: the belief in spirits which embedded aspects of the natural world—for example, the spirit of the river—which often need to be placated in order to gain favourable conditions.

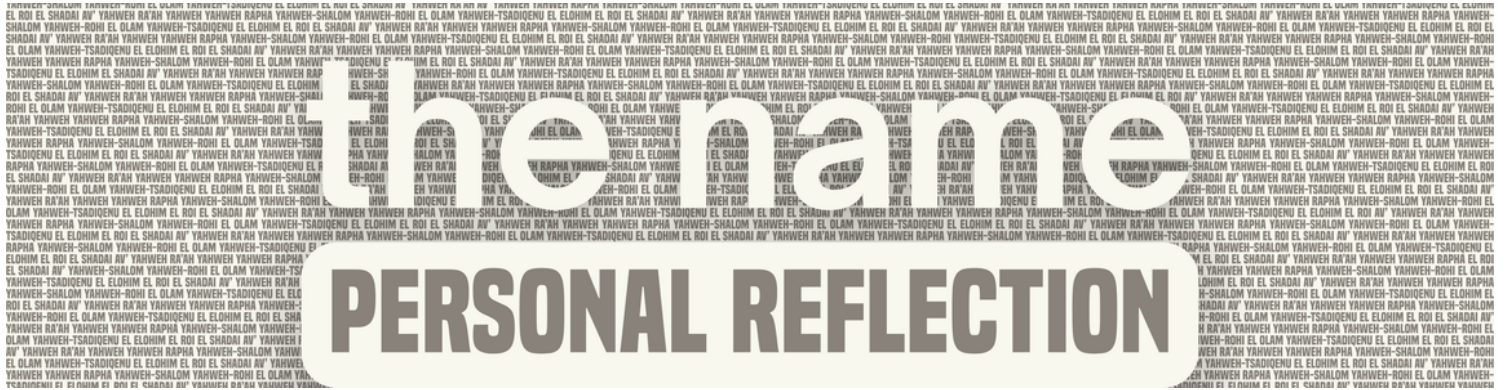
Henotheism: the belief in many gods but one supreme god ruling over the lesser deities. A common form of religion in the Ancient Near East, especially in Canaan.

Paganism: the blending of polytheism, animism, and usually forms of ritual and sacrifice, a non-unified religious ecosystem.

Pantheism: the belief that the sum of the creation is itself 'God'. Usually emphasizing how we are all individual parts of the single divine essence.

Impersonalism: The belief that 'God' is not personal, but rather a force or essence pervading all things.

the name



Personal Reflection

Questions to Consider:

- When you think of God's attributes, what language do you use? How might focusing on the Biblical terms be a corrective?
- What might incorporating the name 'Yahweh' into your life achieve?
- How do you discern whether someone speaking about 'God' is on target or not?

A Prayer Practice:

As you consider what you'd like to pray about, think about what name or title for God might most suit your prayer. As you say the name or title, spend time reflecting on the passages in Scripture or personal experiences you have confirming this title.

For example:

"Living God, you have been present and involved in my life through..."

Writing the prayer down can be helpful.

REFLECTION

¹ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, pg 123.

² Often called a ‘plural of majesty’ or ‘honorific plural’. The singular version, ‘El’, may also be avoided as it was the proper name of a Canaanite deity as well as the word for a single supreme being.

The other evidence to support that Elohim is not to be translated 'gods' is the way almost all the verbs paired with Elohim throughout Scripture are in the singular. For example, the Bible doesn't say 'Elohim create' it says 'Elohim creates'.

³ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, pg. 89

⁴ See the appendix ‘Hot Times at Heresy High’ for the ‘isms’ being undone by Genesis 1.

⁵ Genesis 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 29

⁶ Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31

⁷ See Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*, pg 22ff.

⁸ Heschel, *Sabbath*, pg. 67.

⁹ Chris J.H. Wright, *The Story of God Commentary: Exodus*, 115.

¹⁰ Based in a vocalization of the title 'I AM' in Exodus 3:14.