The Unutterable Name

By Kornelis H. Miskotte

The Old Testament has many names for that which we call God, and also for him whom Israel calls God. Some of them are alike and some of them are different. But beyond these the God of Israel has a special name, and this is the name that is always meant when the intention is to speak of the Other, of the 'Name' in the sense of revelation, disclosure, the sphere of power, the order of blessing, guidance. Actually, the possibility of our understanding the meaning of the Old Testament as a whole depends on whether we understand what is at issue here. But not only this, for the relevance of the Old Testament (in particular) in our situation is also dependent on this. Our discussion in the last section took us to some extent away from the world which was sketched in the first part. We were concerned with a theoretical and technical summary of the Old Testament data, presented, as it were, more in the form of an instruction or briefing of the troops; the interpreter and witness received, as it were, some intellectual instruction. Thus for the moment it may appear that we are nevertheless out to establish what is the timeless, usable content of the Old Testament and forget the current questions.

Now that we come back to the 'Name,' we may recall from the first part how much critical power we there ascribed to this concept, namely, [120] the critical power it has over against religion, but also over against nihilism. The latter is in part implicit in the critique of religion and in part it goes beyond it in an important effect which is peculiar to it. We found that what is meant by the 'Name' actually takes us to a realm beyond all religion and apparently makes even the 'Name' itself a cipher of nihilism. Constantin Brunner declared that when Jesus said 'Father,' this was a veiled rejection of the religion of the disciples and a hidden profession of 'atheistic' salvation. Naturally this raised a storm of indignation among the religious liberals. We too believe that Brunner's assertion is untenable, but that it comes closer to the mystery of this giving of a new name to God than does the interpretation which regards the name 'Father' as the apex of general religious experience.

But in our opinion it is much more true to say of YHWH that he constitutes a radical crisis for all religion, or, to put it in another way, that his self-disclosure includes the abolition of religion. Where religion has never flourished, there we also do not find any of the flaming autumn colours of atheistic defiance. And conversely, where this defiant pride appears, whether it be demonic or calm, aggressive or sad, there we stand on the soil of a religion. YHWH cuts the ground from under the one as well as the other; but today it is as if the human spirit must first be tortured, keelhauled, as it were, by nihilism if it is to take seriously the Name of the unknown God.

1. YHWH is not an originally Israelite name. Only a few scholars adhere to an Israelite origin. In a certain sense, the question of the provenance (as well as the pronunciation) of the Name is intellectually irrelevant. But in our connection of thought the non-Israelite (Kenite or Ugaritic) origin is more welcome. This God wills to be the only God, because *in* the world he distinguishes himself *from* the world. This would be in accord with a general religious origin of the Name. Also the 'newness' of the Name (according to Exod. 3: 13ff.) and, on the other hand, the effort of the Yahwist to project the Name back to the beginning of mankind may point to this paradox: *in* the world as one Name that is distinguished from the world through a new meaning which was [121] supposed to have been its original meaning; for the Yahwist is concerned about the continuity of meaning, not the identity of the sound.

2. YHWH is an anonymous name. When the people of Israel ask, 'What is his name?' (Exod. 3: 13) or what is his nature? the answer is given in the form of a verb: 'I am,' or 'I will be,' or 'I

will be present [with you],' or more precisely, 'I will be what I will be' (cf. Exod. 33: 19). The primary meaning is that the God of Israel withdraws himself from all conjuration; he cannot be conjured up with this nameless name and be made subservient to an ulterior purpose. But more specifically (and this concerns us directly), Israel is referred to the *action* that proceeds from YHWH, to what he undertakes to do, the long journey he takes with Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land and from there into the exile and the Diaspora, the 'days' and the 'deeds' which are the days and the deeds of God.

Hence the translation 'the Eternal' is internally impossible (even though it too could be called an anonymous name); in the struggle with religion and nihilism everything depends upon our freeing ourselves from ontological misunderstandings. We can only allude to this here, but anybody who reads the Old Testament knows that no antecedent concept of 'being' and no subsequent reflection upon the 'being' of God plays any part in it. When in everyday life and even in the cult the full Name was not uttered, this was probably, if one prefers to say so, because of a 'magical' fear. But fear of what? Not of the being of God, but of the presence of God, and not of the presence in itself and as such, but rather of his presence in his activity, in which he reserves the freedom to act as he wills, the freedom of election and rejection, of judgment and grace, which can sometimes mean glory for others and misery for oneself. This is the sense in which he is nameless: I will be what I will be. Therefore the translation of the Name as 'the Eternal' is altogether misleading. But, says Rosenzweig, this idea of ' "the Eternal" can also be informed with genuine forces of the human soul. After all, for us mortals the word of longing, the last word in our "Song of the Earth" [Mahler], is eternal. Our hearts know no desire beyond this. . . . The God of the Bible also stills this longing, but not by fulfilling it or promising it fulfilment, but rather by actually stilling [122] it, by silencing it. For the man who experiences and hopes for God's presence in this aeon the yearning for his own eternity in this aeon passes away.'

3. YHWH is nevertheless a proper name—not only because it stands in correlation with a people which also bears a proper name, but rather because everything depends upon his concretely distinguishing himself from all others in the world of gods and proving himself to be the 'one' God. If the 'Name' has taken on the full significance of 'revelation,' the principal reason for this is that this Name YHWH is *more* than the godhead, because it has become *less* than the godhead. The whole conception of 'revelation' simply cannot be maintained if 'one' God is not acknowledged and recognized as the Godhead. If we 'start with' a primary experience of the 'godhead,' and then within the realm of this general experience proceed to bring out the particular, secondary features of 'our' God by putting in our own shadings, this results in a denial of all 'revelation.' In dealing with the Old Testament the procedure will have to move in precisely the opposite direction—for many different reasons, but also on account of the fatality of nihilism which is latent in the development of the 'idea of God,' a development we must constantly keep in view.

Just as we never come to an encounter with Jesus by starting with the 'Christ-spirit,' so we never find a determinative, central, monarchic place for YHWH as long as we start with a general concept of the 'godhead.' The Name, the revelation, is concentrated in a proper name. It is also the bolt that bars the way to the theoretical kind of 'monotheism.'

The proper name presents us with, or offers us, the decision whether we shall recognize this One as 'our' God and thus as the God of the beginning, the cosmos, and the consummation. 'Know that YHWH is the Godhead' (Ps. 100: 3).

4. YHWH is an untranslatable name and an incomprehensible concept. But it must be 'translated' by means of a risky identification, and it is comprehended through a risky self-estrangement or self-depreciation. On its way to the nations, to the heathen, Israel

appropriated their words (e.g., Elohim or El Elyon). By this appropriation, heathenism was on the one hand honoured and on the other degraded, [123] in so far as all names for God perform a service but none is adequate. The meaning of these names of God is taken entirely from the open secret of the Name, YHWH. In missionary activity, especially the translation of the Bible, a perennially immediate and urgent problem is how to employ the divine names in the 'primitive' or the 'higher' religions in order to use them as accompanying expressions of the Name.

In Helmut Rosin's book we find a very clear discussion of this subject, and we regard these insights as important, indeed, we attach decisive significance to them. Though it may appear that all this is of little concern to us in Europe and to those on the fringes of church and synagogue, nevertheless closer examination will show that it affects in a very essential way the work of proclamation in the church and in the world. On the other hand, we are not much helped by the acceptance of the 'irrational,' the thought that God (in the general sense) is perhaps not dead after all, or by the call for reintegration, by the 'Christianity' that will bring about improvement, by the myth of Europe or the ethos of humanity, by the Christian man who sets out to think in terms of positive social welfare and to overcome his individualism (or even his middle-class mental attitudes). All this seems to have more relevance to human need; it seems to be more easily understood and more practicable. Talk about whether 'YHWH is God' seems so remote from our real situation, so alien to our urgent concerns. It therefore requires some courage to maintain the thesis that the problem of nihilism will only be taken with full seriousness in the church when these questions again become central and are brought into contact with, for example, the questioning thought of Heidegger.

This comes strongly to the fore in Rosin's study. He maintains that the identifying copula in the phrase 'YHWH is God' is 'irreversible.' It is not as if God bears the name YHWH along with other names. And the fact is that such a transposition occurs nowhere in the Old Testament. The identification 'YHWH is God,' however, is a self-translating statement that empowers us to paraphrase the Name with general religious concepts. Not that these can take the place of the Name; the danger is that they do this nevertheless; and we may say [124] that when this does happen, faith degenerates into religion, religion becomes idealism, and idealism becomes an insight into our self-projection, and from then on nihilism is practically inescapable.

The right accent, 'The *Lord* is God,' although it actually includes (by means of the copula) an element of self-estrangement and self-depreciation, safeguards the 'translation' from having this destructive effect. 'The name Yahweh determines the content of the word *elohim*. It fills this word with its truth and its light. The general name *elohim* can then finally play an independent role, as we see in the second part of the Book of Jonah; the general name then acts as a proper name and can even fulfil all the functions of the Name.' But the prerequisite of this is the content which is expressed in the name YHWH, both as an anonymous name and as a proper name (as the expression of the fact that he can be known only in his acts), so that the whole of the testimony gives shape and substance to the Name and imparts the character of faith to the response to the testimony, to the calling upon the Name, the worship, the obedience. But faith, groundless, incidental, and fragmentary in its nature, is awakened not only by the accent 'the *Lord* is God' but also by the risky identification with the projections of religion.

Therefore, says Rosin, the name of God itself must remain untranslated in all languages; but this missionary equation of the Name with the godhead contributes its part to the awakening of faith. In translating one should not search for different words for the godhead, with which YHWH is equated, and for the gods of the nations. This would deprive the hearer, the religious thinker, of the necessity of freely recognizing YHWH, of making a decision and

believing. 'A translation which employs different terms according to whether the term *elohim* designates God, gods, or idols prevents the necessary confrontation between these ideas; such a translation, having already made the choice between YHWH and the other gods, deprives the reader of the possibility of making this choice himself in the faith which the text imposes upon him.' [125]

Here we have come in our thinking to the heart of the matter. The meaning and purpose of the Old Testament is this: to verify with all the means of language the confession 'YHWH is the Godhead' is 'irreversible.' From the time of the Apologists the church, and from the time of Philo and later of Maimonides the synagogue, have been pursuing the path of reversibility. The idea of God, we have heard modern theologians (of all stripes) saying, is the dominant idea of religion. Reflection upon it is philosophical in character; it may take various courses depending upon the controlling philosophy, but the conclusion is always that belief in a primal mystery 'is born of the temper of mind and the thought-content of the present.' It was thought that the question of essence must precede the question of truth, and the next step is to steep oneself in the question of the 'development of the idea of God.' One then encounters the numinous and the effort is made to give it an ethical content besides its demonic content, a rational orientation along with its irrational element. It then becomes necessary to delve into the symbols of language and to discriminate among them; one disputes over the question whether an 'absolute personality' is conceivable. Then, indeed, it becomes clear that a theology or philosophy of religion which is based upon our needs will in the course of its development always encounter Feuerbach, who will promptly brand it as disguised anthropology. The appeal to the age and influence of Christianity as a proof of the superior value of the gospel soon became a sword that cut both ways. Christianity as the true religion of conscience or of love or as the source of the purest kind of prayer—how arbitrary all such assertions sound within a historical or philosophical framework!

Then at a certain point something had to be said about the 'real,' the 'highest'; something had to be said very straightforwardly, about God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the church—either by way of a gradual transition, in the sense that this 'real' is to be regarded as the stage of final maturity in the human development of religion, the sum and substance which had always been the goal of religious thinking—or by making a 'leap,' more or less abrupt, and speaking boldly about the one faith, the one truth, the one salvation.

This is a path which not only does not lead us to the goal but actually leads us farther away from it. That is to say, it is intended to lead us to [126] 'religious' certainty, and it actually lands us in the midst of the ambivalence which is peculiar to all religion. If we ask where the difficulty is, various answers are possible. The most essential and fundamental one, as I believe, is that the interpreter and witness in preaching and instruction has failed to recognize the structure of the Scripture (and especially of the Old Testament) for what it is, namely, the pointer to a totally different kind of thinking about a totally Other, an indication of that which goes on resounding in this world when the gods and the godhead are silent. It is regrettable that many theologians have persisted so long in the attempt to start with an 'idea of God' or a 'concept of God,' especially when it was their concern to restore order and direction in the chaotic intellectual life of their contemporaries. Nobleness of purpose must not make us forget how futile—and how dangerous—this way of approaching these things must be in our situation.

The Name is 'intolerant' in that he turns to us freely and creatively and desires, in free, creative wills to be our apriori and thus the disclosure of the life and the truth—or if he is not this, then he can be nothing except a fresh, and perhaps the most searing, confirmation of the silence of the gods. Therefore, when in our reflection upon the proclamation the question constantly arises, 'Instruction—but in what?' it can be a liberation for us to know, as we have

heard above, that it is not in divine truths or in religious needs or in the boundary experiences of humanity, but rather in the deeds of Him whose anonymous proper name calls, forms, breaks into, and fulfils human life in history. It is this revelation and presence which the Scriptures bring into a unity. Where this becomes a reality, 'all these things shall be yours as well': the splendour of divine truth, the assuagement of the heart's dismay, the justification of man beyond the boundary experiences of humanity, freedom, and prayer.

We conclude this section with a quotation from Karl Jaspers. We present it with respect and hesitation, but nevertheless as a contrast to the Name (and of the response to the Name, which is prayer). With all his scepticism and reserve, all his refusal to acknowledge that 'transcendence' has being and effect, he is nevertheless one of the few philosophers who have seriously concerned themselves with prayer, and this is what he says: 'Prayer is an importunity which irrupts in secret, which man may dare in the depth of solitude and distress.' I [127] do not know whether the prayer of Asaph or Job can be described in this way—but even if prayer may sometimes have been this for them, they could not possibly have assented to Jasper's thesis: 'The one God exists only as I think him.' Alas, no 'importunity' can help where the silence of the gods prevails anyhow.

Source: Kornelis H. Miskotte, *When the Gods Are Silent* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 119-127.