

A NAG HAMMADI CONTRIBUTION TO THE DISCUSSION ABOUT THE PRONUNCIATION OF THE TETRAGRAMMATON

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It has almost become a scholarly axiom to assume that the name of the Israelite God, the so-called Tetragrammaton (יהוה), was originally pronounced *yahwê*.¹ Taking into account the fact that the sacredness of the Tetragrammaton² had prevented its public utterance among the Jews in the first centuries of the CE, and the knowledge of its right pronunciation had begun to deteriorate and had altogether vanished in the Middle Ages,³ the great degree of certainty the assumption enjoys is rather surprising. Nonetheless, there are good reasons for

¹ This is also assumed by Prof. Tapani Harviainen (cf. Tapani Harviainen and Raija Sollamo, *Heprean tekstikirja ja sanasto* [Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1987], 8) to whom this article is dedicated with the gratitude of a pupil and a colleague.

² Whether the Tetragrammaton יהוה was the most original form of the name of the Israelite God (so, e.g., Ludwig Köhler and Walter Baumgartner, *Hebräisches und aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament* [3. ed.; Leiden: Brill, 1974], 2:377–378) or whether it is an expanded form of the more original יהו (so G. R. Driver, “The Original Form of the Name ‘Yahweh’: Evidence and Conclusions,” *ZAW* 46 [1928]:7–25; Martin Rose, *Jahwe: Zum Streit um den alttestamentlichen Gottesnamen* [Theologische Studien 122; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1978], 16–30), which developed only as a result of the Josianic reform, is not important for the argument of the present article. I am only interested in the question about the pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton in the period just before and after the beginning of the CE. Nevertheless, it is not my purpose to prove that there was only one generally accepted form of the divine name of the Israelite God around the beginning of the CE. On the contrary, some Nag Hammadi texts, some references in the writings of the early Christian theologians, some Aramaic texts from the Jewish military colony in the Egyptian Elephantine, and some Christian magical texts seem to suggest otherwise (see n. 15).

³ As Rose (*Jahwe*, 7–12) has indicated both some Early Church theologians (e.g., Origenes, Jerome, and Theodoret of Cyrus) and some Jewish rabbies (cf. *b. Sotah* 38a; *b. Qiddushin* 71a; for a German translation of the texts, see *Der babylonische Talmud* [trans. Lazarus Goldschmidt; 3. ed.; Königstein: Jüdischer Verlag, 1981], 6:129; 6:753) refer to the fact that the Jews did not actually utter the divine name in the first centuries of the CE. If it was pronounced it was articulated in an unrecognizable manner.

this scholarly consensus, which this article also tries to corroborate, whereas other possible suggestions to pronounce the divine name of the Israelite God, such as *yahwô*,⁴ *yahwâ*,⁵ or the traditional *y^hhōwâ*,⁶ are thus considered less likely alternatives. Consequently, the purpose of the article is to give additional strength to the contention that the most likely pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton is *yahwê* by presenting and discussing the relevant evidence of an early Christian Coptic text, the *Apocryphon of John*,⁷ which appears in three versions in the Nag Hammadi Library⁸ and in one version in a collection of Coptic texts called *Codex Berolinensis* (BG).⁹

THE FIGURE OF YAVE IN THE APOCRYPHON OF JOHN

The *Apocryphon of John*, a so-called Sethian gnostic¹⁰ Christian writing composed before the last quarter of the second century,¹¹ contains, among other things, a mythological account of the origin of the world. According to it, the process of

⁴ This pronunciation is proposed by Wilhelm Vischer, "Eher Jahwo als Jahwe," *TZ* 16 (1960): 259–267.

⁵ This pronunciation has recently been suggested by Josef Tropper, "Der Gottesname *Yahwa," *VT* 51 (2001): 81–106.

⁶ As frequently pointed out, the pronunciation *y^hhōwâ* is due to a mistaken combination of the consonants of the Tetragrammaton with the vowel signs of its post-exilic substitute *ʾdōnāy*; see, e.g., Ernst Jenni, "יהוה *yhw* Yahweh," in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann; trans. Mark E. Biddle; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997), 2: 522. This pronunciation was dominant from the fourteenth century to the first part of the nineteenth century; cf. Otto Eissfeldt, "Jahwe-Name und Zauberwesen: Ein Beitrag zur Frage 'Religion und Magie'," in *Kleine Schriften* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1962), 1:167.

⁷ For a critical edition and an English translation of the text, see Michael Waldstein and Frederik Wisse, *The Apocryphon of John: Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices II,1; III,1; and IV,1 with BG 8502,2* (Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 33; Leiden: Brill, 1995). In the present article, the references to the text are made in such a way that the Roman number or the letters BG refers to the version used in each case and the first number to the page of the codex and the second number to the line of the page.

⁸ For a general presentation of the Nag Hammadi Library, see Birger Pearson, "Nag Hammadi Codices," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ed. David Noel Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:984–993.

⁹ The versions of the second and fourth codex of the Nag Hammadi Library (II,1 and IV,1) are generally regarded to represent the so-called longer text and the versions of the third codex and *Codex Berolinensis* (III,1 and BG) the shorter text.

¹⁰ For Sethian Gnosticism, which represents the classical version of Gnostic thinking, see Hans-Martin Schenke, "The Phenomenon and Significance of Gnostic Sethianism," in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism II: Sethian Gnosticism* (ed. Bentley Layton; SHR 41; Leiden: Brill, 1981), 588–616.

¹¹ The fact that Irenaeus in *Adversus haereses* 1.29 refers to the teachings of certain gnostics which presuppose the existence of the *Apocryphon of John* speaks for this dating.

cosmic creation starts when the lowest aeon of the divine realm, Sophia, in her desire to bring forth a being resembling herself causes the actual imperfect creator, the lion-faced and serpent-like Yaldabaoth, to be born (II,1 9.25–10.9). Being ignorant of the divine realm and desiring to create his own world, Yaldabaoth sets out to produce his own aeons, powers, angels, and finally human beings.

In creating the first human being Yaldabaoth accidentally blows the light-power, which he had received from Sophia, into Adam. Realizing that Adam, by gaining the light-power of Sophia, has become superior to Yaldabaoth and his powers, Yaldabaoth throws him to the lowest place of the cosmos, i.e., to the earth (II,1 19.15–20.9). The Father of the divine realm, for his part, commences a rescue operation and sends his Epinoia to help Adam (II,1 20.9–21.16). When Yaldabaoth perceives that Adam has got a divine helper he tries to catch her but only seizes an image of the heavenly Epinoia, Eve, whom he rapes (II,1 23.35–24.16). As a result of this Eve bears two sons: Eloim (ΕΛΘΙΜ) and Yave (ΙΑΥΕ). Yave, the righteous one, is made the ruler of fire and wind, and Eloim, the unrighteous one, becomes the ruler of water and earth (II,1 24.19–24).¹² In order to lessen the confusion of a reader who is more familiar with the narrative of Gen 4, the author of the *Apocryphon of John* still adds an explanatory comment according to which Yaldabaoth also called his two sons Cain and Abel (II,1 24.24–25).

Although it is clearly Yaldabaoth who plays the part of the Israelite (Creator) God in the mythological narrative of the *Apocryphon of John*,¹³ it is equally clear that the names of the two sons of Yaldabaoth are formed according to the most common names of the Israelite God in the Hebrew Bible. The combination of ΕΛΘΙΜ with ΙΑΥΕ makes this obvious. The fact that they are given the authority to rule over the four basic elements of the universe according to the dominant contemporary conception – fire, wind, water, and earth – also suggests that their names are consciously shaped according to the names of a creator figure.

The fact that ΕΛΘΙΜ and ΙΑΥΕ do not stand for the Creator per se but are to be regarded as his minor assistants can be explained as an expression of polemical tendency which tries to relegate the Israelite God to a position as low as possible in the hierarchy of divinities. Besides, the *Apocryphon of John* is not unique in this respect. Another Nag Hammadi tractate, *On the Origin of the World*,¹⁴ knows

¹² In the BG and III,1 version it is Eloim who is the righteous one and rules over fire and wind, and Yave (III,1: ΕΙΑΥΑΙ) is the unrighteous one and rules over water and earth (BG 62.12–18; III,1 31.12–19).

¹³ This is bolstered by the fact that twice in the text Yaldabaoth introduces himself by using the famous self-assertion of the Israelite God: “I am a jealous God and there is no other God beside me” (II,1 13.8–9; cf. 11.20–21). Clearly, Yaldabaoth is presented as a caricature of the Israelite God.

¹⁴ For a critical edition and an English translation of the text, see Bentley Layton et al. (ed. and trans.), “On the Origin of the World,” in *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2–7 together with XIII, 2**,

a similar tradition. In its mythological account of the cosmic creation, Yaldabaoth creates, without any help, three sons for himself and the sons are called ΙΑΩ, ΕΛΘΔΙ, and ΔCΤΔΦΔΙΟC. The two first names are unequivocal variants of the names of the Israelite God, comparable with ΙΔΥΕ and ΕΛΩΙΜ.¹⁵

THE GREEK PARALLELS OF THE NAME ΙΔΥΕ

The *Apocryphon of John* does not offer a completely unique form of the name of the Israelite God. The Coptic text has parallels in the writings of some Greek Christian authors.¹⁶ In his fifth book of *Stromata*, Clement of Alexandria refers to some passages of the Hebrew Bible which present riddles. Among these, Clement includes a text that speaks about “the secret four-letter name, which was affixed to those who alone had access to the innermost sanctuary; the name is called ἰαουε, which means the ‘One who is and who will be’. Among Greeks, too, the name God contains four letters” (5.6.34.5).¹⁷ The fact that Clement emphasizes that there are four letters in the Greek version of the name shows that the diphthong ου is regarded by him as one letter with which the Hebrew waw is transcribed.¹⁸

Epiphanius, a fourth-century haeresiologist, provides a further example of the similar pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton. In *Panarion* he enumerates various divine names of the Israelite God (*Pan.* 40.5.8–10). One of them is ἰαβέ. Since the third letter β can be seen as a valid means to transcribe the Hebrew waw, Epiphanius’ ἰαβέ is clearly tantamount to Clement’s ἰαουε and thus bolsters the

Brit. Lib. Or.4926(1), and P.Oxy. I, 654, 655 (ed. Bentley Layton; vol. 2; NHS 21; Leiden: Brill, 1989), 11–134.

- 15 Some Early Church theologians use the Greek ἰαώ (Theodoret of Cyrus) and the Latin Iahou (Jerome) as a name of the Israelite God (for references, see Rose, *Jahwe*, 6–11), and the Aramaic ܝܗܘܐ was employed for the same purpose by members of the Jewish military colony in Elephantine (see Rose, *Jahwe*, 16–22). ΙΑΩ also appears in Coptic Christian magical papyri as a name of God the Father (see e.g., Marvin Meyer and Richard Smith, eds., *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994], 31, 43, 143, 177).
- 16 Some of the examples are taken from Rose (*Jahwe*, 6–16), others, such as Georgius Monichus and Photius, were found on the basis of a search in the TLG database.
- 17 The text to which Clement most likely alludes is Ex 28:36; 39:30, although the idea of the distinct innermost sanctuary actually refers to the Solomonic temple, not to the Tabernacle.
- 18 As Rose (*Jahwe*, 11–12) has pointed out, another Alexandrian theologian, Origen, is probably also aware of a similar pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton. When he explicitly speaks about the Tetragrammaton he uses the Greek equivalent ἰαή, which is most likely “a graecized form of Ya(hw)ê, where the h is dropped as everywhere in these Greek transcriptions, and where the intervocalic waw has disappeared as in most Greek dialects,” as G. J. Thierry (“The Pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton,” in *Oudtestamentische Studiën: Deel 5* [ed. P. A. H. de Boer; Leiden: Brill, 1948], 34) has cogently put it.

observation that the Tetragrammaton was pronounced *yahwê*. The same is true with other Greek writers as well.

In his *Quaestiones in Octateuchum* (15),¹⁹ the fifth century Greek Christian author, Theodoret of Cyrus (393–c. 460 A.D.), states that the Jews called their God 'Ιά, while the Samaritans used the name 'Ιαβέ. The Samaritan version known by Theodoret has clearly preserved a variant of the name which corresponds to the pronunciation presented by the writer of the *Apocryphon of John*, Clement of Alexandria, and Epiphanius. In addition to Theodoret, the ninth century Greek authors, Georgius Monachus (*Chronicon* 29.22–30.1)²⁰ and Photius (*Epistulae* 162.121–123),²¹ are aware of the tradition according to which the divine name of God was pronounced by the Samaritans *yahwê*. That the lexicographer Photius furthermore emphasizes that the name 'Ιαβέ is written 'Ιώθ ἄλφ οὐαύθ ἦθ, no doubt shows that he has the Tetragrammaton in mind. There are also some Greek magical papyri which employ the Hebrew divine name 'Ιαβε or 'Ιαβε Ζεβουθ (= Yahweh Sabaoth) while speaking of God.²² Thus these non-Christian papyri have also preserved the original reading of the Tetragrammaton.

CONCLUSION

The arguments that the divine, ineffable name of the Israelite God, the Tetragrammaton, was originally pronounced *yahwê* usually rest on the fact that some Christian Greek authors, who unlike their Jewish colleagues have not hesitated to write or to transcribe the name, and therefore, have revealed its right pronunciation. The present article not only shares that opinion, but even increases the evidence by introducing some new Greek texts revealing the same tendency. It also shows that a Coptic Nag Hammadi text, the *Apocryphon of John*, follows the same pronunciation tradition and refers to a creator figure ΙΔΥΕ, whose name stems from the Tetragrammaton, although this figure is not the Creator God himself but only his assistant.²³

¹⁹ PG 80:244.

²⁰ For the Greek text, see *Georgii Monachi Chronicon* (ed. Carolus de Boor; 2 vols.; Bibliotheca scriptorum graecorum et romanorum teubneriana; Leipzig: Teubner, 1904), 1:29–30.

²¹ For the Greek text, see *Photius, Epistulae et Amphilochia, Vol. II: Epistularum pars altera* (ed. B. Laourdas and L. G. Westerink; Bibliotheca scriptorum graecorum et romanorum teubneriana; Leipzig: Teubner, 1984), 20.

²² E.g., *Papyri graecae magicae* 3.449; 4.1186, 1798, 1995; 7.419 (for the Greek texts, see Karl Preisendanz, ed., *Papyri graecae magicae* [Stuttgart: Teubner, 1974]).

²³ At the same time the article also questions Rose's thesis (*Jahwe*, 15–16, 42–43) according to which the "gnostic-syncretistic" circles exclusively used the three-letter name יהו' Ιαώ' ΙΔΩ since they were interested in its ancient and somewhat secret character. Both the *Apocryphon of John* and the magical papyri undermine the validity of this assumption.

The Coptic version of the Tetragrammaton has an interesting additional feature which discloses something about the original language of the text. Unlike Greek, Coptic has a letter – or even letters if various Coptic dialects are taken into account – corresponding to the h-sound in its alphabet. Therefore, the third letter of the Hebrew Tetragrammaton could in principle have been transferred into a Coptic version of the name and thus the name could have been written ΙΑΖΟΥΕ. Since this is not the case it is very likely – as it has been assumed on the basis of other observations – that the Coptic text of the *Apocryphon of John* is a translation from a Greek original. This means that the original version of the *Apocryphon of John* contained a variant of the Tetragrammaton which was probably identical with that of Clement of Alexandria, i.e., Ἰαουε.²⁴

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²⁴ I thank my colleagues, Ismo Dunderberg and Martti Nissinen, who read the article and made many valuable comments which greatly contributed to its final shape. My thanks are also due to Gary Denning who once again painstakingly bore the responsibility of revising my English.

²⁵ In its footnotes and bibliography the present article follows the rules of *The SBL Handbook of Style for Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999).

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