Names and Knowledge. Introduction

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Introduction

In his 1969 study about *The Romans and their Gods*, Robert Ogilvie writes that "gods, like dogs, will answer only to their names".[1] The scholar expresses the idea that choosing the correct name is essential for the efficacy of the ritual.[2] However, unlike dogs, West-Semitic and Greek gods are characterised by their polyonymy,[3] which is at the core of the MAP project: there is not only one, but several correct ways of addressing them. An example thereof is Yahweh, the god of the Hebrew Bible. He is both the god of Israel, who has a special relationship with the group named Israel, and the god of all humankind, in fact, the whole world. Consequently, Yahweh received different names in different contexts across the biblical texts. They testify to the numerous meanings, functions and understandings of Yahweh during the first millennium BCE to the point of saturating the signifying space.

Such polyonymy even made it possible to decree a prohibition against pronouncing the name of Yahweh in vain (Exod. 20:7; Deut. 5:11), which remains in force in Jewish tradition to this day. In most manuscripts of the Septuagint, for instance, the Tetragram ("Yahweh") was replaced by the Greek word *kurios*, "Lord".[4] As a consequence of the prohibition, the pronunciation of the name "Yahweh" was eventually forgotten. In the eyes of the people of Israel, Yahweh never ceased to answer even though he was no longer called by the name which he had revealed to Moses (Exod. 3:13–15 and 6:2–3). Nevertheless, Robert Ogilvie's statement raises an important question: if addressing the gods by a name which is correct is so important, how are these correct names known to humans?

1 Tradition and Innovation

Most of the time, the correctness of a name is validated by tradition. If the name has been used for generations and there is no sign that it displeases the gods or that they are unresponsive, then it can be considered "correct". New names can be created using past and shared onomastic knowledge – for instance, when onomastic attributes used for other deities or by foreign cities are used for the first time in a specific sanctuary. But many innovations originate in a learned environment. As Martin Leuenberger shows in his chapter, the word Elohim, that means "gods" in the plural,

1 Ogilvie 1969, 24.
2 Cf. part 1, "Ritual names", in this volume.
3 Bonnet 2019.
4 Cf. Angelini in this volume.

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became the concept of "God", both the god Yahweh and the divine in general – even though the situation varied between the kingdom of Judah, in the south, around Jerusalem, and the northern kingdom called the kingdom of Israel, linked to the Phoenician and Assyrian worlds. Such a monotheistic innovation occurred in the aftermath of the military defeats against the Babylonian empire, when the royal and priestly elites tried to construct the image of a god Yahweh who had not abandoned his people. In the case studied by Jonathan Ben-Dov, the theological innovation lies not in the creation of a new onomastic sequence, but in the possible re-semantisation of an old one in a new context. Because of the multivalence of the word "spirit", the theonym "Lord of the spirits" can emphasise the different faces of the divine, especially in the strong cosmological context of the *Book of Parables* (1Enoch 37–71) where "spirits" in particular can be understood as "winds". In these examples and elsewhere, the authority of priests and other religious specialists can often be thought to guarantee the correctness or pertinence of a name. But sometimes, a name receives its validation from an even higher authority: that of the gods themselves.

2 Revealed and Non-Revealed Names

As Martin Leuenberger reminds us in his chapter, the revelation of his names by Yahweh himself obeys different strategies according to place, time and human agency, in particular cultic issues, even if only one of these names is considered his "authentic" name. Unlike the Herodotean conception according to which knowledge of divine names is transmitted from people to people,[5] knowledge of the name "Yahweh" is a privilege restricted to the people of Israel.

The idea that a "true" name can only be revealed by the gods themselves to a selected person or community can also be found in the ritual transmitted by a late-antique papyrus from Egypt and studied by Florian Audureau and Thomas Galoppin. Here, a highly-learned ritual is described that allows the ritual specialist to obtain the "authentic" name of the god "who governs all things". Knowledge of the name of the god is described as an initiation – the expert performing the ritual is "initiated into [the] name" of the god. This name, like the god himself, "encompasses everything", as reflected in particular by the multiple "voices" and languages that compose the name – not only human languages such as Hebrew and Egyptian, but also ape or falcon languages. The name has a phonetic form, linked to a narrative, but also an iconographical form; it can also be ingested. Thus, it is much more than a simple sequence of sounds; acquiring the name of the god implies acquiring a power, which can be used to perform different rituals and put to various uses. The ritual described in the papyrus probably draws on older Egyptian traditions. Some gods, such as Osiris and

5 Hdt. 2.49–52. Cf. Palamidis' paper.

Horus, are sometimes called "He whose name is hidden" (*ỉmn rn.f*),[6] and a 19th-dynasty-papyrus (*P. Turin* 1993) narrates Isis' quest to discover the secret name of Ra, who describes himself as the one "whose name the gods do not know". In this text, Ra says that "my father and mother told me my name. I have hidden it in my body from my children so as to prevent the power of a male or female magician from coming into existence against me".[7]

In the Greek world, in some mystery cults like the cult of Despoina in Lykosoura,[8] knowledge of the name is shared among the initiated but is kept secret from outsiders. However, as Alaya Palamidis' chapter suggests, the Platonic idea according to which the "true" names of the gods are inaccessible to humans is not reflected in non-philosophical sources. Representations of the divine are shaped by Homeric and Hesiodic poetry, where the "theonyms" used by the Greeks are the same as the "theonyms" used by the gods themselves. Greek sources indicate that some names were revealed by the gods themselves, in particular through oracles, but that other names were human creations, some more "appropriate" than others. In Greek sanctuaries, however, there is no difference in use between divine names dictated by an oracle and names for which a human origin was claimed.

The names of the gods which were considered divine revelations could be thought to provide insights into the nature of the divine. In his 1888 book, theologian Andrew Jukes studied "the various names under which it has pleased God to reveal Himself to man", including not only the "revealed" names Yahweh (or Jehovah) and El-Shadday (cf. Exod. 3:13–15 and 6:2–3; Gen. 17:1), but also the names Elohim, El Elyon, Adonay and Yahweh Sabaoth.[9] Long before Jukes or the MAP project, the peoples of the ancient Mediterranean and beyond had already understood the importance of studying the names of the gods. In the Greek world, different philosophical schools attributed different origins to these names. Socrates, in Plato's *Cratylus*, suggested that they were created by wise name-givers in a distant past, while the Stoics considered names an imitation of the things named, and therefore naturally correct.[10] In both cases, the names of the gods were seen to stem from a higher authority, and since they were thought to contain a condensed narrative about the gods, they were seen as a privileged way of knowing the divine, as shown by Francesco Padovani in his chapter.

6 Gabolde 2013, 27–28.

7 Translated by Ritner 2003.

8 Paus. 8.37.9.

9 Jukes 1888, 6.

10 Cf. Padovani 2018, 35–38 with previous bibliography.

3 Divine Names and Etymology

In Antiquity, etymological inquiries are possible because numerous deities bear names which can no longer be understood. Of course, it is perfectly possible to worship a deity whose name is obscure. A 2nd-century-CE dedication from Puteoli to the "Goddess M(istress) Dasyr(ia)", *deae d(ominae) Dasyr(iae)*, and another dedication from the 2nd–3rd century from Macedonia addressed to "the goddess Diasuria", Διασύρῳ θεᾷ – that is, in both cases, to the "Goddess 'Syrian Goddess'" –, suggest that the dedicants were not aware of the meaning of the goddess' name.[11] Other contemporary sources indicate that the Syrian origin of the goddess was still well-understood by most.[12] But in Olympia, Pausanias sees an altar dedicated to Artemis Kokkoka and writes that "for what reason they surname Artemis 'Kokkoka', it is not possible for [him] to get taught".[13] Here, the author implies that he could not find anyone, not even among his local guides, who could understand the meaning of the goddess' epithet.[14]

Often, the loss of the original meaning takes place in a multicultural context. This is the case with the name "Yahweh", the origin of which is still a matter of debate. As suggested by Martin Leuenberger, it possibly comes from the Old Arabic verb "to blow" and alludes to Yahweh's origin as a local storm-god. However, the etymology of the name is most certainly unknown to the Hebrew-speaking authors of Exod. 3:14, according to whom it means "I am". In some cases, the etymology can seem obvious yet still be rejected for various reasons. For instance, according to the grammarian Apollodorus of Athens, Aphrodite's name Kupris, used by Homer, does not refer to the island of Cyprus, as usually thought, since Homer never used onomastic elements of toponymic origin to name the gods. Instead, according to Apollodorus, the name's original form was *kuoporis*, "the one who brings about the act of conceiving".[15]

As the examples of the name of Yahweh and Kupris suggest, even if etymology is not a prerequisite for cult, it is widely used because it allows new discourses to be developed about the divine. Different etymologies can be proposed for the same name according to the context and the peculiar purposes of each literary genre. For instance, in his chapter, Francesco Padovani focusses on a group of epithets attributed to Apollo. In a Stoic context, an allegorical explanation links Apollo's epithet Lukios to light (*e.g.* through the word **luke*), thus highlighting Apollo's connections with the Sun; on the contrary, in the *Iliad* and in the tragics, for narrative reasons, the epithet or its variants Lukegenes and Lukeios are associated with the region of Lycia or with wolves (*lukos*).

11 *CIL* X, 1554 = *ILS* 4279 (Puteoli); *I.Ano Maked.* 102 = *SEG* 34, 684 = *DB MAP* S#15798 (Macedonia).
12 On the Syrian Goddess, cf. Andrade 2022.
13 Paus. 5.15.7.
14 As noted by Parker 2017, 32.
15 *BNJ* 244 F 353; cf. Filoni 2022.

Such etymological inquiries should not be seen as mere intellectual exercises. As Francesco Padovani shows, they are also thought to please the gods. According to the Babylonian epic *Enūma eliš,* the etymological explanation of the fifty names of Marduk, supposed to be passed on from generation to generation, allows the god's supremacy to be established.[16] Occasionally, etymology can even influence cult practices. In another section of this volume, François Quantin refers to dedications from Bouthrotos addressed to Pan and Pasa. Here, the name of the god Pan is linked to the adjective *pas* (feminine *pasa,* neutral *pan*), an etymology that can already be found in the so-called *Homeric hymn to Pan* and in Plato.[17] Thus, a new divine couple emerges, with Pasa as a feminine counterpart of Pan.

This section highlights the interplay between divine and human agency when it comes to naming the gods, and especially stresses the role of religious experts and people of knowledge in the creation and interpretation of divine names.

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16 Myerston 2013.

17 *h.Pan.* 47; Plato, *Cratylus* 408b-c. See Quantin, p. 421–422.