The Genealogy of Shem According to Oskar Goldberg

ABSTRACT

Through the ages, the Hebrew Torah has generated innumerable interpretations which could be grouped into theological, mystical and magical, not to mention explanations given in scientific research. The fundamental question, however, namely concerning the source of its marvellous character – is still open to multidimensional research perspectives and awaits possible answers. My lecture concentrates upon the hermeneutics of the Book of Genesis 10: 21–32 (the genealogy of Shem) proposed in 1908 by Jewish scholar Oskar Goldberg in his book: Die fünf Bücher Mosis – ein Zahlengebäude, Berlin. Bearing Goldberg’s discovery in mind, I will discuss some of its consequences.

KEY WORDS

semiotics, philosophy of language, Jewish mysticism, Oskar Goldberg

The issue of logical, ontological, and epistemological functions of the ‘name’ has been the subject of a number of philosophical analyses.¹ The subject of the present article is significantly less extensive being limited to an indication

¹ E.g.: S. Kripke, Nazywanie a konieczność, tłum. B. Chwedeńczuk, Warszawa 1988, p. 50–51. In Kripke’s analytical approach, the name is correspondent with a „rigid designator” facilitating determination of „identity across possible words”. An extended, in its character Neo-Platonic philosophy of the name is provided by A.F. Losiev’s work, see: T. Obolevitch, Aleksego Łosiewa filozofia imienia, [in]: J. Uglik, E. Tacho-Godi, L. Kiejzik, Aleksy Łosiew czyli rzecz o tytanizmie XX wieku, Warszawa 2012, p. 441–451.
of a certain aspect of symbolism of the name in the reconstruction of the Old Hebrew vision of the world performed by Oskar Goldberg. However, before we proceed to analyse the concept of the name of God and its presence in the genealogy of Shem, let us briefly examine the subject of the name from a linguistic point of view.

According to common opinion, a proper name, *nomen proprium*, is:

Semantically defined class of nouns that unequivocally identifies objects and states of affairs within a given context. By designating an object or a state of affairs in a given statement, proper nouns replace deictic, or pointing, gestures such that direct reference to that object or state of affairs is made.

From a general point of view, the names of humans and gods are special cases of proper nouns being the focus of a sub-discipline of linguistics – onomastics. Anthroponymy and theonymy make use of proper nouns as identifiers of personal or personalised objects or processes.

The prominent function of proper nouns—especially personal names—is particularly obvious in different magico-religious systems, where they are the building elements of their ritual, organisational, and doctrinal dimensions. For example, in Hebrew and Jewish traditions, man is imagined as a name-giving being:

So from the soil Yahweh God fashioned all the wild animals and all the birds of heaven. These he brought to the man to see what he would call them; each one was to bear the name the man would give it. The man gave names to all the cattle, all the birds of heaven and all the wild animals. (Gen 2: 19)

Also, God is the owner of the name, the Tetragrammaton (YHWH): “I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of Egypt, where you lived as slaves.”

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(Ex 20, 2) and the angelomorphic divine being representing Esau may try to avoid giving away his name in order not to be subjugated to human will as in the famous episode with Jacob on the Jabbok stream:

After he had taken them across the stream, he sent all his possessions over too. And Jacob was left alone. Then someone wrestled with him until daybreak who, seeing that he could not master him, struck him on the hip socket, and Jacob's hip was dislocated as he wrestled with him. He said, 'Let me go, for day is breaking. Jacob replied, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.' The other said, 'What is your name?' 'Jacob,' he replied. He said, 'No longer are you to be called Jacob, but Israel since you have shown your strength against God and men and have prevailed.' Then Jacob asked, 'Please tell me your name.' He replied, 'Why do you ask my name?' With that, he blessed him there. Jacob named the place Peniel, 'Because I have seen God face to face,' he said, 'and have survived.' (Gen 32: 25–31)

Pronouncing the divine name was surrounded by the strictest taboo and it is allowed only in the ritual context, once a year, ten times during the Day of Atonement, only by the High Priest (Tosefta Yoma 2). According to Rachel Elior, the text of Tosefta constitutes the first testimony clearly attesting the existence of such a practice. Its full use was limited only to the shrine and the temple: “In the sanctuary one says the Name as it is written, but in provinces with a euphemism.” (Sotah 7: 6)

Based on the aforementioned, it comes as no surprise that different streams of Jewish mysticism have been focused on the issue of the name of God. They speculated on its ontological dimensions and were involved in theurgical and magical applications (shimushei ha-torah) of its infinite potential. Ezra ben Salomon, one of the colleagues of rabbi Nakhmanides from his school in Gerona, writes in the XI-century: “The five books of the Torah are the Name of the Sacred Being. Blessed be the Lord.”

A multidimensional development of the same idea is to be found in the first theoretical study of the sefirot concept presented in the work entitled „Sha’arei orah” written by Joseph Gikatilla (124 –1325), a disciple of Abraham Abulafia:
It is within the parameters of our historical covenant, however, that those who want their needs fulfilled by employing the holy Names should try with all their strength to comprehend the meaning of each Name of God as they are recorded in the Torah, names such as EHYE, YAH, YHVH, ADoNaY, EL, ELOH, ELoHIM, ShaDaY, TZVAOT. One should be aware that all the names mentioned in the Torah are the keys for anything the person needs in the world. When one contemplates these Names one will understand that all of the Torah and the Commandments are dependent upon them. Then when he knows the purpose of every Name, he will realise the greatness of “He who spoke and thus the world came into being.”

He will be fearful before Him and he will cleave to Him through his blessed Names. Then he will be close to God and his petitions will be accepted, as it is written: “I will keep him safe, for he knows my Name. When he calls on Me, I will answer him.” The verse does not promise safety by merely mentioning His name, but by knowing His Name. It is the knowing that is most significant. […] Know that all the Holy Names in the Torah are intrinsically tied to the Tetragrammaton, which is YHWH. If you would contend, however, that the Name EHYE is the ultimate source, realise that the Tetragrammaton is like the trunk of the tree [from which the branches grow] and the Name EHYE is like the root from which grow the other roots. It is the trunk of the tree that nurtures the branches which are the other Names of God, and each one of these branches bears a different fruit. Know too that all the words in the Torah are connected to the one of the unerasable Divine names just as the other cognomens [for the different Names of God] are intrinsically tied to a specific Name. For instance, Cognomens for the ineffable Tetragrammaton are NORA (awesome), NOSEH AVoN (remover of sin) and OVeR al PeSHA (ignorer of sin). The Cognomens for EL are GaDOL (great), RaCHUM (merciful) and CHaNuN (pardoning). The Cognomens for EloHIM are ADIR (mighty), SHoFeT (judge), DaYYaN (judge). Just as EL, ELoHIM and the Tetragrammaton have Cognomens, their Cognomens also have Cognomens until one finds that all the words of the Torah are intrinsically woven into the tapestry of God’s Cognomens which are tied to God’s Names which, in turn, are tied to the ineffable Tetragrammaton, YHVH, to which all the Torah’s words are inextricably linked.

The radical distinctness of Jewish mystical hermeneutics of the Torah, visible in the quoted text, and compared against the classical rabbinic exegesis and scientific philological, historical and critical analyses, has become the subject of much review. Trail-blazing and now enjoying the status of a classical study, Gershom Scholem professes that the basic relevant presumption of the kabbalist view was that:

[...] of the Name of God as the metaphysical origin of all language, and the conception of language as the explanation – by dismantling – of this name, such as it appears principally in the documents relating to Revelation, but also in all language in general. The language of God which is crystallised in the Name of God and, in the last analysis, in the one single name itself, which is its centre, is the basis of all spoken language, in which it is reflected and symbolically manifest.

The diligent reader of the literary corpus of Jewish mysticism cannot help feeling to ask: What could be the gravitational pull directing kabbalists to adopt this kind of attitude and approach toward their holy text as reflecting the name of God? One of the possible answers can be given by devoting attention to the formal construction of the holy text of the Torah. This was undertaken by a forgotten Jewish-German researcher Oskar Goldberg (1885 Berlin‒1952 Nice) in his small book: Die fünf Bücher Mosis – ein Zahlengebäude.
One of the subjects he analyses is the number structure of the so called “Genealogy of Shem” in Genesis 10: 21 – 31, the list of the descendants of the patriarch Shem, one of the sons of Noah. Of utmost importance in the context of our research is the fact that the name of the patriarch – Shem – means ‘name’ and the noun *shem* – ‘name’ in the Hebrew and Jewish tradition is usually associated with the Tetragrammaton (YHWH). Therefore, the question arises as to what the presumed relationship between these words is. Before we briefly sum up Goldberg’s discovery, let us first look at the relevant verses in Hebrew and English:15

21 And unto Shem, the father of all the children of Eber, the elder brother of Japheth, to him also were children born.

22 And the sons of Shem: Elam, and Asshur, and Arpachshad, and Lud, and Aram.

23 And the sons of Aram: Uz, and Hul, and Gether, and Mash.

24 And Arpachshad begot Shelah; and Shelah begot Eber.

25 And unto Eber were born two sons; the name of the one was Peleg; for in his days was the earth divided; and his brother’s name was Joktan.

26 And Joktan begot Almodad, and Sheleph, and Hazarmaveth, and Jerah;

27 and Hadoram, and Uzal, and Diklah;

28 and Obal, and Abimael, and Sheba;

29 and Ophir, and Havilah, and Jobab; all these were the sons of Joktan.

30 And their dwelling was from Mesha, as thou goest toward Sephar, unto the mountain of the east.

31 These are the sons of Shem, after their families, after their tongues, in their lands, after their nations.

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Approaching this text, Goldberg takes into consideration its different dimensions and parameters such as: the number of sons, the number of words, the number of verses and gematria, a hermeneutic method based on the number-letter correspondences characteristic of the Hebrew language, dating back to at least the early Tannaic period and midrashic literature. The following table shows the basic form (mispar gadol) of assigning numerical values to Hebrew letters according to gematria:¹⁶

VALUES TABLE

The Mispar gadol (see below) values are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decimal</th>
<th>Hebrew</th>
<th>Glyph</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Aleph</td>
<td>א</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Bet</td>
<td>ב</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Gimel</td>
<td>ג</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Daled</td>
<td>ד</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>He</td>
<td>ה</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Vav</td>
<td>ו</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Zayin</td>
<td>ז</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Heth</td>
<td>ח</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Teth</td>
<td>ט</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decimal</th>
<th>Hebrew</th>
<th>Glyph</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Yud</td>
<td>י</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Kaph</td>
<td>ק</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Lamed</td>
<td>ל</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Mem</td>
<td>מ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Nun</td>
<td>נ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>Samech</td>
<td>ס</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70</td>
<td>Ayin</td>
<td>ע</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80</td>
<td>Pe</td>
<td>פ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90</td>
<td>Tsadhe</td>
<td>צ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the equivalences reflected in the table, the numerical value of the Tetragrammaton – the Name YHWH, which is 26\(^{17}\) – provides the fundamental data of Hebrew mystical exegesis.

\[
\begin{align*}
Y &= 1 \\
H &= 5 \\
V &= 6 \\
H &= 5 \\
\hline
\text{YHVH} &= 26
\end{align*}
\]

Goldberg first analyses the number of the descendants of Shem:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shem</th>
<th>has 5 sons:</th>
<th>Elam, Asshur, Arpachshad, Lud, Aram</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aram</td>
<td>has 4 sons:</td>
<td>Uz, Hul, Gether, Mash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arpachshad</td>
<td>has 1 son:</td>
<td>Shelah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelah</td>
<td>has 1 son:</td>
<td>Eber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eber</td>
<td>has 2 sons:</td>
<td>Peleg, Joktan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joktan</td>
<td>has 13 sons:</td>
<td>Almodad, Sheleph, Hazarmaveth, Jerah, Hadoram, Uzal, Diklah, Abimael, Sheba, Ophir, Havilah, Jobab</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[
\text{Sum} = 26 \text{ sons}
\]

As results, the number of sons in general equals the number of the Tetragrammaton – 26. In the next step, Goldberg proceeds to analyse the number of words and the number of the letters:

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\(^{17}\) All tables are provided by: O. Goldberg, *Die fünf Bücher Mosis – ein Zahlengebäude. Die Feststellung einer einheitlich durchgeführten Zahlenschrift*, Berlin 1908, p. 4–9. They have been adapted for the purposes of the present study by Maciej Nabiałek.
As results, the number of words equals $104 = 4 \times 26$ and the number of letters equals $390 = 15 \times 26$.

Goldberg also notes that the prevailing character of the number 26 emphasizes the fact that the names of the sons are distinctly divided into two groups composed of $13 + 13$:

- Shem has 5 sons
- Aram has 4 sons
- Arpachshad has 1 son
- Szela’ch has 1 son

- Ewer has 2 sons
- Joktan has 13 sons

In the next step Goldberg proceeds to calculate the gematria according to the basic form (mispar gadol), mentioned in the table above, of the names of descendants of Shem:
Once again the principle of the number 26 occurs twice as:
\[ 3558 = 138 \times 26 \]
\[ 2756 = 106 \times 26 \]
So, having looked at the entirety of Goldberg’s reasoning, we can summarise it as follows:

**Recapitulation:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descendants of Shem</th>
<th>Number of words</th>
<th>Number of letters</th>
<th>Gematria value of first 13 names</th>
<th>Gematria value of second 13 names</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>= 26</td>
<td>= 4 \times 26</td>
<td>= 15 \times 26</td>
<td>= 138 \times 26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In conclusion, we see that in its different numerical dimensions the entire section in Genesis 10: 21–31, the description of Shem’s descendants as descendants of the man called ‘Name’, is thoroughly structured by the number of the Name YHWH – 26

Y = 10
H = 5
V = 6
H = 5

YHVH = 26
The question remains as to where the structure – discovered by Goldberg – comes from. To answer it, we should be equipped with precise statistical evaluation of the data stemming from mathematical linguistics applied to Semitic languages. As, for the time being, we have not been equipped therewith, there are two possible answers. Either the structure is of divine inspiration, supporting its transcendental character, or it results from the conscious or unconscious activity of the human brain. In the second case, we should not neglect the obvious fact that even the most complicated crossword has its own author. Perhaps creating and deciphering this kind of sacred ‘sudoku’ was an important part in educating ancient soferim\textsuperscript{18} or even a part of their initiation into the mysterious profession of composing and transmitting the holy text centred upon the personage of Mosheh, who, according to the anagram structure of his name, is also the Name – ha-Shem.\textsuperscript{19}

REFERENCES


\textsuperscript{18} The legitimacy of this supposition is indirectly attested by the key analyses performed by illustrious Dutch Biblical scholar Casper Labuschagne. Rediscovering the Bible Codes, Numerical Secrets of the Bible, North Richland Hills 2000 with an overview of Goldberg’s research, p. 75–104.

\textsuperscript{19} The intentional character and tenor of this anagrammatical recombination are obvious in light of the systemic reconstruction of the Old Hebrew ritual: O. Goldberg, Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer, Wiesbaden 2005.