

THE DIVINE NAME YAHWEH SABAOTH ("LORD OF HOSTS") IN THE BIBLICAL LITERATURE – PROBLEMATIZATIONS AND DIVERGENCES

Abstract

This study analyses the interpretations and debates in the literature on the divine name Yahweh Sabaoth ("Lord of Hosts") in the Hebrew Bible. The author presents three main methodological approaches scholars use to understand the meaning and origin of this name: semantic analysis, syntactic analysis, and historical/contextual analysis. The semantic analysis focuses on the possible meanings of the term *sabaoth*, leading to various interpretations such as "Lord of the armies of Israel," "Lord of the angelic armies," or "Lord of all creation." The syntactic analysis examines the grammatical relationship between Yahweh and *Sabaoth*, proposing understandings such as "Yahweh the (all)mighty" or "He who creates the hosts." The historical/contextual approach considers the historical and cultural circumstances of using the name, suggesting connections to the Canaanite tradition or the Temple in Jerusalem. The study highlights the complexity and diversity of interpretations, emphasizing two main perspectives: the Yahweh Sabaoth as the warrior God of Israel and as the Almighty God, the "heavenly King" who rules history. These investigations reflect efforts to understand divine revelation in the context of the Old Testament and its reception by the Israelite people.



Keywords

Yahweh Sabaoth, Theology, Biblical Exegesis, Divine Names, Hermeneutics

Introduction

In the Hebrew Bible, the God of Israel is often referred to as יהוה צבאות (Yahweh *šəḇā'ōt*). The proper name *Yahwe* is joined to the term *šəḇā'ōt*, a plural of the noun *šāḇā'*, meaning "host" or "army." This juxtaposition of terms, i.e., this compound divine name, has generated numerous problematizations in twentieth-century literature [1]. Biblical scholars concerned with the subject have proposed various hypotheses and opinions on its origin and meaning, but without reaching a consensus (Ross 1967: 76). The questions that have arisen are: what is the significance of the divine name *Yahweh Sabaoth*? What attribute or quality of divinity is emphasized through it? Has its primary meaning been preserved over time, or has it undergone an evolution? What is its origin – is it a construct that originated in the tradition of the chosen people, or was it taken from the Canaanite tradition? The answers given are often incompatible and essentially contradictory [2].

Methodologically, biblical scholars have first identified the Old Testament passages in which *Yahweh Sabaoth* [3] appears, and then various analysis methods are applied to determine its meaning. In particular, three research methods can be distinguished: semantic, syntactic, and historical/contextual. The study aims to expose the results by using each method separately. Such an analysis shows how the divine name *Yahweh Sabaoth* has been received in the literature, how differently it can be interpreted, and how difficult it can be to make it explicit.

Both the Hebrew language, through the polysemy of the term *šāḇā'*, and the historical and spatial context in which the chosen people, who defended their monotheistic faith surrounded by polytheistic peoples, were devolved, have opened up the possibility of different answers (Mettinger 2005, 154-5). Consequently, one cannot speak of a unanimously accepted interpretation. Nevertheless, the analysis of the opinions launched by different biblical scholars is helpful because it presents a long process of trying to fathom the meaning of the divine name *Yahweh Sabaoth*, establish its significance, and arrive at the meaning that the Hagiographers themselves had in mind when they referred to God by naming him thus.

Semantic analysis

The most common approach is to analyze what the term *šəḇā'ōt* means in the Old Testament, in texts where it is not used in the divine name. It has been thought that establishing the meaning of this term can determine the meaning of the divine name *Ya-*

hweh Sabaoth. Scholars have agreed that *šəḫā'ōt* is the plural of the noun *šāḫā'*, a term whose root is found in most Semitic languages with the meaning of "host" or "army." (Zobel 2003, 218) In the Old Testament, the term is used to denote either the army/people prepared to fight a battle (Gn 21:22.23; Nm 1:3; 2:4; 2 Sam 3:23), or the host of angels around the divine throne (1 Kgs 22:19; 2 Chron 18:18; Ps 103:19-20), or the host of stars (2 Kgs 17:16; 2 Chron 3:5; Jr 8:2), and rarely to express the sense of the totality of creation (Gn 2:1) (Ringreen 2003, 212-4). What kind of "hosts" are envisaged in the divine *Yahweh Sabaoth*? Since different meanings can be considered, *Yahweh Sabaoth* has been interpreted according to the variant emphasized by each exegete.

In the mid-twentieth century, Benjamin N. Wambaq published his doctoral dissertation concerned with the philological, historical, and exegetical analysis of the divine name *Yahweh Sabaoth* (Wambaq 1947). [4] In the first chapter of his work, he shows how this divine name has been interpreted in various studies published up to the realization of his research. B. Wambaq systematizes the different opinions into six directions of interpretation. For the various biblical scholars who have analyzed it, *Yahweh Sabaoth* has been understood as 1) "Lord of the armies of Israel" [5]; 2) "Lord of the stars" [6] or 3) "Lord of the angelic armies" [7]; 4) "Lord over the forces of nature" [8]; 5) "Lord over the forces of darkness" [9]; 6) "Lord of all creation" [10]. All these views have been launched from the meaning that the term *šəḫā'ōt* may have in the various OT contexts in which it is used.

Of the six directions of interpretation analyzed by B. Wambaq, three have received greater prominence. Many biblical scholars have taken *šəḫā'ōt* to refer to the hosts/army of Israel and have interpreted the divine name as "Lord of the armies of Israel". This interpretation has led to the idea that *Yahweh Sabaoth*, the God of war, engages in his chosen people's battles and ensures victory (Eichrodt 1967, 192). The use of the divine name *Yahweh Sabaoth* in the context of Israel's struggle with the Philistines (1 Sam 4:1-7) and the explanation David gives in 1 Sam 17:45 [11] led to the formulation of this view [12]. However, Gerhard von Rad points out that *Yahweh Sabaoth* is very rarely put in connection with earthly hosts; this divine name is used most frequently in prophetic literature, and most cases do not involve events of a military character (von Rad 1975, 19).

Other biblical scholars point out that *šəḫā'ōt* refers to angelic powers, so *Yahweh Sabaoth* is understood as "Lord of the angelic hosts." Yahweh is pictured as a king surrounded by angels who are part of the so-called "divine council" or

“kingly council.” *Yahweh Sabaoth* is the “King of glory” (Ps 24:10), who has prepared his seat/throne in heaven (Ps 103:19). He is shown before the prophet Isaiah seated on a high throne, surrounded and honored by seraphim (Is 6:1-3). The image of the kingly council is described in 1 Sam 22:19-23 (cf. also 2 Chron 18:18-22), in which the prophet Micaiah, son of Imlah, speaks of a vision in which he sees Yahweh surrounded on the right and the left by angelic hosts. Yahweh consults with the angels (“one said one thing and another another”). Finally, one of the angels offers to fulfill the mission of persuading King Ahab to go to war against Syria, saying that he will inspire the court prophets to advise the king. These texts, corroborated, led to the understanding of *Yahweh Sabaoth* as a “heavenly king” who rules not only over the heavenly hosts but also the earthly (Kaiser 1983, 126-7). Biblical scholars have had difficulty with the fact that the Old Testament uses the singular form *šāḇā’* to refer to the angelic host; no passage uses the plural *šāḇā’ōt* (“hosts”) (Mettinger 2005, 155).

A more general, inclusive perspective speaks of *šāḇā’ōt* to be translated as “totality” and understood concerning all elements of creation. *Yahweh Sabaoth* is the Almighty God who rules over His creation [13]. The hosts of Yahweh are the armed forces of the Chosen People, the angelic powers, the forces of nature, and by extension all the elements of creation, and the name *Yahweh of Hosts* indicates Who exactly rules over them (Driver 1897, 232). The interpretation is based mainly on texts from prophetic literature. The Seraphim of the prophet Isaiah’s inaugural vision praised *Yahweh Sabaoth*, saying that “all the earth is full of His glory” (Is 6:3). The prophet Isaiah encourages Jerusalem by telling them not to be afraid, for “your man is your Maker, and His name: *The Lord of Hosts* and your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel: *the God of all the earth* is his name” (Is 54:5). The interpretation has often been considered too general, or too broad, but given the contexts in which *Yahweh Sabaoth* appears, one can speak of evolution in its meaning. For this reason, B. Wambacq concludes in his Ph.D. thesis that, in the beginning, this name was used to designate Yahwe, who defends his people by his vigorous intervention; later, in the period when the question of the difference between Yahwe and idols was raised, the name presented the God of Israel in his capacity as creator of the world; in the time of the monarchy, *Yahweh Sabaoth* becomes the defender of his people, whom he had brought out of the land of Egypt, to whom he had offered the promised land and pledged himself to pronounce over it from Mount Zion – in this period he is presented in a royal posture, having around him servants of a spiritual nature; in the times when

the people experienced hardships of a political nature, *Yahweh Sabaoth* was received as the God of the phenomena of nature, the one who manifests his power through the various elements of creation, for B. Wambacq, *Yahweh Sabaoth* is the all-powerful God (fr. *le Dieu tout-puissant*), who is involved in the history of Israel (Wambacq 1947, 272-83).

Syntactic analysis

In addition to semantic issues, biblical scholars have also been concerned with syntactical issues. The emphasis has been on the grammatical relationship between the two terms that make up the divine name. Yahweh is considered a proper name. In Hebrew, proper names themselves say something about the person designated. They usually do not have an attribute next to them, emphasizing an explanatory qualification. Therefore, most scholars have considered that in the case of *Yahweh Sabaoth*, we are dealing with a proper name followed by a genitival substantival attribute: "Yahweh of hosts" (Tsevat 1965: 55). Some scholars, however, have interpreted the term *šəḇā'ōt* in an adjectival sense. This interpretative direction was launched by William R. Arnold, who, in 1907, pointed out that *šəḇā'ōt* is indefinite and should be understood as an adjectival attribute. He considers that *šəḇā'ōt* refers to neither earthly nor heavenly hosts nor to astral elements. When used within the divine name, the term does not point to something separate from Yahweh but emphasizes a quality of divinity. Consequently, it is wrong to translate *Yahwe Sabaoth* as "Yahwe of the hosts" (heavenly or earthly). The name should be translated as "Yahwe the Warrior Yahwe" (eng. *Yahwe Militant*) – the name presents Yahwe in the hypostasis of a deity who masters the art of battle. W. Arnold points out that this is the primary meaning of the name, which can be seen in its early usage (1 Sam 15:2; Ps 24:8,10; Is 14:4; Jr 46:10). Although the meaning of the name has evolved in the prophetic books, the basic idea has remained the same: *Yahweh Sabaoth* emphasizes Yahweh's lordship over the "hosts" of angels, astrals, demons, all the forces of the universe, and implicitly that Yahweh is a military deity (Arnold 1917, 142-8). Otto Eissfeldt takes this kind of approach and argues that *šəḇā'ōt* could be understood, also in an adjectival manner, as a plural of intensity or as an intensive abstract plural, emphasizing the quality of "power", "might", "force", which refers to God's omnipotence (Eissfeldt 1915, 128-50). He translates *šəḇā'ōt* as "strong, mighty" (germ. *mächtig*) and together with the

divine name *Yahwe*, as “Yahwe the (all)mighty” (germ. Jahve der Mächtiger). This interpretation was later accepted and supported by many biblical scholars.

Matitiahu Tsevat points out that *Yahweh Sabaoth*, grammatically judged, is a proper noun followed by an appositive, in which case it should be understood as “Yahweh (is) the Hosts” (Tsevat 1965: 59-8). He notes that as King Joash addressed the prophet Elisha, “Father, father, the *charioteer of Israel* and *horseman of Israel!*” (2 Kgs 13:14), so too the people could address God as “the hosts” (Tsevat 1965: 55). The term, referring to military might, is an expression of faith in Yahweh, “the mighty in battle”, “the divine warrior” (Is 15:3; Is 42:13; Ps 24:8).

A different approach is proposed by William Foxwell Albright (1957, 16) and Frank Moore Cross (1973, 70), who argue that the divine name should be interpreted as a verb followed by a noun. They insist on the verbal form in the hyphen of the divine name *Yahweh*, according to which the translation of this name would be “He who brings into being” or “Giver of existence” [14], *Yahwe Sabaoth* is interpreted as “He who brings the hosts into being” (Albright 1957, 16) or “He who creates the (heavenly) hosts” (Cross 1973, 65-72). However, the interpretation is considered to be subjective (Zobel 2003, 219).

Historical/contextual analysis

Other specialists concerned with the subject have shown that beyond solving semantic or grammatical problems, a historical/contextual analysis is needed, an analysis that considers the historical circumstances in which the divine name was used. According to this line of reasoning, one who wishes to say something about the meaning and origin of the divine name must first consider the different historical contexts and the different types of writing in which it was used. Victor Maag sees *Yahweh Sabaoth* as a novel element of Israelite faith, generated by the encounter between Judaic monotheism and Canaanite polytheism. The name begins to be used at the sanctuary of Shiloh towards the end of the period of the Judges when the Promised Land had not yet fully come under Israelite rule. During this period, the Chosen People integrate certain elements specific to the Canaanite tradition into their faith to emphasize the uniqueness of God. V. Maag argues that the *šəḇā'ōt* is a designation for the Canaanite natural mythical powers which, over time, lost their independent status and became subordinate to Yahwe. Therefore, the Israelites used the

name to emphasize the omnipotence of the one God concerning the Canaanite deities (Mettinger 2005, 64).

J.P. Ross analyzes the passages in 1 Sam and Psalms in which *Yahweh Sabaoth* is used. He is concerned with the texts that he considers the earliest and sets out to observe whether speaking about the divine name of God's being lord over the army of Israel is possible. He observes that the passages under study refer to a royal hypostasis of the divinity; therefore, the name has no military connotation. Consequently, he considers that there is no relation between *Yahweh Sabaoth* and the noun *šāḇā'* (army). The name comes from a root whose meaning has been lost. It is possible that a tradition developed in Canaan named the deity, thus emphasizing his kingship. The fact that the divine name appears in the Israelite literature of the conquest period prompts him to assume that it was taken from Canaan. J. P. Ross supposes that the name of the Canaanite deity was Baal *Sabaoth*, who had an altar in Shiloh. The Israelites took over this altar, and in it was placed the ark of Yahweh, and the term *šāḇā' ḏī* began to be used concerning the name *Yahweh*. From that period, *Yahweh Sabaoth* became the name that portrays God in his capacity as King/Emperor (Ross 1967, 76-92).

Tryggve Mettinger, in the studies he devotes to the subject (Mettinger 2005, 62-91; Mettinger 1983, 19-37) emphasizes the relationship between *Yahweh Sabaoth* and the Temple in Jerusalem [15]. He emphasizes how this divine name appears in the prophetic books and insists that by using the name *Yahweh Sabaoth*, the Hagiographers spoke of God as the "King" enthroned in the Temple, who rules and determines the destiny of the whole world. In the volume *Dethronement of Sabaoth*, they emphasize that, due to the destruction of the Temple during the Babylonian Exile, the divine name *Yahweh Sabaoth* was no longer used, only to reappear in the post-exilic prophetic writings (Mettinger 2005, 15).

Conclusions

In the face of these numerous and often conflicting interpretations, Gerhard von Rad wondered whether attempts to elucidate the meaning of *Yahweh Sabaoth* are based on the false assumption that this cultic divine name can be explained strictly rationally (von Rad 1975, 19). The three types of analysis to which biblical scholars have resorted to unravel what *Yahweh Sabaoth* stands for speak of the attempt to understand how God revealed himself to the chosen people and, consistent with this, how the Israelites received the message of revelation. Research shows that *Yahweh Sabaoth* is of

particular importance for Old Testament theology. The interpretations clarify specific issues, some of which are subjective, others more limited. Looking at the research as a whole, two ideas stand out: first, the idea that *Yahweh Sabaoth* is seen as the God of the hosts of Israel and understood as a warrior God – this idea emerges particularly in studies concerned with the early period in which this divine name is used; the second idea – noticeable especially in studies emphasizing the prophetic writings – that *Yahweh Sabaoth* is God Almighty, the “heavenly King” surrounded by angelic hosts, who is actively involved in the history of the chosen people and the history of salvation.

Notes

[1] The divine name *Yahweh Sabaoth* has been taken up by scholars as a research topic as interest in biblical studies grew in expounding biblical teaching about God systematically. Thus, against the background of the development of Old Testament Biblical Theology as a distinct discipline, numerous scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries included this research topic in their concerns because, in general, the divine names contained in Holy Scripture can contribute to a more precise exposition of how God revealed Himself to mankind. The divine names have been understood as landmarks on the way to the knowledge of God, which gradually appeared in the course of salvation history, each divine name in its way showing something of the Personal God concerning the world and man. In contrast, the theology of divine names also speaks of God as the “Nameless One” or above every name, showing that all the names given to God are nothing more than accommodations of the revealed message to the capacity of the human mind to comprehend. These aspects were first emphasized in the patristic literature, in which St. Dionysius the Areopagite’s treatise *On Divine Names* is particularly relevant. Subsequently, in the scholarly literature, numerous monographs or extended chapters have been written in Old Testament Theology treatises dealing with the issue of divine names, works in which the name *Yahweh Sabaoth* is also analyzed (see, e.g., Jukes 1986; Anderson 1999, 48-56; Eichrodt 1967, 178-94; Jacob 1955, 33-51; Gerhard von Rad 1975, 179-87; Preuss 1991, 139-46; Zimmerly 1978, 17-21; Dyrness 1977, 44-7). In the Romanian milieu, the theme of divine names in general and of the divine name *Yahweh Sabaoth* in particular has been treated in volumes such as Ioan Chirilă (2003, 87-113), Athanase Negoită (2004, 7-22), Mihai Vladimirescu and Mihai Ciurea (2006) and Cristian Prilipceanu (2016).

[2] Tryggve Mettinger notes that perusing the literature reveals a state of uncertainty and hesitancy in providing concrete answers as to the origin and meaning of the divine name *Yahweh Sabaoth* (Mettinger 1982, 108-38; cf. Schmitt 1972, 145-59).

[3] The divine name Yahwe appears alongside the noun *šəḇā'ōt* in the following expressions: Yahwe *šəḇā'ōt* (240 times); Adōnāy Yahwe *šəḇā'ōt* (15 times); Yahwe Elōhē *šəḇā'ōt* (14 times); *hā'ādōn* Yahwe *šəḇā'ōt* (5 times); Yahwe Elōhim *šəḇā'ōt* (4 times); Elōhim *šəḇā'ōt*; Adōnāy Yahwe Elōhē *haššebā'ōt*; Yahwe Elōhē *šəḇā'ōt* Adōnāy. In total, the number of occurrences is 285 times, as follows: in the book of the prophet Jeremiah, it occurs 82 times; in the book of the prophet Isaiah 62 times; in the book of the prophet Zechariah 53 times; in the book of the prophet Malachi 24 times, in Psalms 15 times; in the book of the prophet Haggai 14 times; in the book of the prophet Amos 9 times; in 2 Kings 6 times; in 1 Kings 5 times; in 3 Kings 3 times; in 1 Paralipomena 3 times; in 4 Kings 2 times; also 2 times in the books of the prophets Nahum and Zephaniah and only once in the books of the prophets Hosea, Micah and Avacum (Zobel 2003, 216-8).

[4] The author states in the introduction that the doctoral thesis was defended on November 23, 1938, in the presence of Pope Pius XI (1922-1939) and that its delayed publication was due to events that had occurred in the meantime (most probably referring to the outbreak of the Second World War).

[5] The term *šəḇā'ōt* is correlated with the meaning of "earthly hosts." According to this interpretation, the able-bodied men of Israel are part of Yahweh's host, and Yahweh, as the leader of the hosts, is actively involved in the wars that the chosen people wage. The main sources B. Wambacq are Vuilleumier (1877: 287-306); Kautzsch (1886: 17-21); König (1923, 151) (see Wambacq 1947, 4-16).

[6] According to this understanding, the Lord's "hosts" are heavenly angels/heavenly lights, who are subject to their Creator, fulfilling the purpose for which they were created (cf. Gn 1:14-18; Dt 4:19; 17:19; 2 Kgs 17:16). Departing from the reason of the lights, Yahweh Sabaoth is presented as God who rules over all creation. But in the passages where the noun *šəḇā'* is used as applied to the heavenly bodies, the chosen people are strictly asked to remember that God created the "host of heaven" (sun, moon, stars) and not to idolize it. Heinrich Ewald supported the interpretation but was not accepted by other exegetes (Ewald 1871, 339-40; Wambacq 1947, 17-20).

[7] Proponents of this interpretation have pointed out that *šəḇā'ōt* does not refer to the hosts of Israel, but to the angelic hosts (Jos 5:14-15; Ps 79:2,5,8,15,20; Is 6:3-5). Consequently, the divine name Yahweh Sabaoth speaks of the Lord of the heavenly hosts, the One who is served by "myriads of myriads" (Dn 7:10). Otto Borchert argues this interpretation and is received in other scholarly studies. Hermann Shultz shows that the meaning of the divine name evolved, at first being applied to the hosts of Israel and later to the heavenly hosts (Shultz 1898, 139-41; Wambacq 1947, 21-8).

[8] This interpretation shows that the divine name Yahweh Sabaoth emphasizes divine omnipotence, manifested in supremacy over the forces of nature. Vincent's (1937, 63-5) is among the most relevant studies (see Wambacq 1947, 29-35).

[9] B. Wambacq points out that the interpretation of Yahweh Sabaoth as "Lord of the forces of darkness" or "God who rules over demons" has not had many supporters. The interpretation has been proposed and supported, among others, by Friederich Schwally, but it does not correctly find its basis in the Old Testament. Referring to the model of certain mythologies (such as Germanic or Indian), Schwally speaks of "war spirits" who may be involved in battles, just as Joshua encountered the "captain of the host of the Lord" (Jos 5:14), so too other peoples may have such spiritual leaders who, being opposed to Israel, are considered to be spirits of darkness. These spirits of war eventually become subject to Yahweh. B. Wambacq analyzes the work Friederich Schwally (1901, 4-6) (see Wambacq 1947, 36-7).

[10] The interpretation that B. Wambacq also argues in his thesis is that, for the prophets, the divine name Yahweh Sabaoth has a universal meaning. While in the historical books, one may speak of a different meaning, in the case of the prophetic literature, the divine epithet *šəḇā'ōtī* is used to emphasize divine omnipotence, to designate Yahweh as the Lord over all creation. Other sources that B. Wambacq brings up are Alexander Kirkpatrick (1892, 98-9) and Samuel R. Driver (1897, 231-2) (see Wambacq 1947, 39-42).

[11] In the context of the battle against Goliath, David says to the Philistine soldier, "You come against me with sword and spear and shield, but I come against you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of hosts of Israel, whom you have blasphemed" (1 Sam 17:45). The text has been regarded as the only one in which a further explanation of the divine name Yahweh Sabaoth is offered (Zobel 2003, 218).

[12] Moreover, the conception of Yahweh as a warrior in other Old Testament texts also supports God. The Hagiographers portray the God of Israel as "mighty in battle" (Josh 15:3), "the mighty and mighty, the mighty in war" (Ps 23:8); he shows the Israelites that "Yahweh will fight for you" (Josh 14:14). But is this the proper meaning of Yahweh's name Sabaoth or is it merely a secondary meaning? Biblical scholars have shown that understanding God as the "God of war" is secondary to understanding God as the "God of Israel." God is presented as the ruler of the people whom he has chosen; he is seen as the King of Israel and of all creation (1 Sam 12:12; Ps 5:2; 46:3). As King, he has armies under him, but these armies do not pursue a worldly purpose of territorial conquest, but serve the plan of salvation, the telos to which God desires his creation to attain (Kišš 1975, 101-2).

[13] By often translating the divine name Yahweh Sabaoth by *Κύριος Παντοκράτωρ*, the Septuagint emphasizes this quality of God as the Lord over all creation (Dodd 1954, 19; Talshir 1987, 57-75).

[14] Biblical scholars generally agree that the divine name Yahweh comes from the root of the verb *hāyāh* ("to be"), but some consider it to be finite (*qal*) – "He is," "He will be," and others causal (*hifil*) – "He brings to life," "He who brings into being". William Foxwell Albright and Frank Moore Cross insist on the second option to explicate the divine name Yahweh Sabaoth (Prilipceanu 2006, 121-50).

[15] The theme is also developed theologically by Rainer Albertz, who shows that the divine name Yahweh Sabaoth and the notion Yahweh Melek ("Yahweh King") are closely connected with the Temple in Jerusalem (Albertz 1992, 132-8).

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