Sameth, Mark. *THE NAME: A History of the Dual-Gendered Hebrew Name for God*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2020.

Reviewed by David J. Zucker, Aurora, Colorado, USA

In the preface to *THE NAME: A History of the Dual-Gendered Hebrew Name for God*, Mark Sameth clearly lays out the purpose of his book. He writes that his thesis is “that the God of the ancient Israelites—the God of Abraham, universally referred to in the masculine today—was originally understood to be a dual-gendered, male-female God.” He goes on to write that the “personal name of God is a cryptogram. The priests of ancient Israel would have read the letters in reverse as *Hu-Hi*, meaning ‘He-She’” (ix). [Reviewer’s note: the word for “he” in Hebrew is pronounced “*hu*,” the “u” sound like the double o in the word moon, balloon, or swoon; the word for “she” in Hebrew is pronounced “*hi*” – the letter “i” being here pronounced as an e-sound, as in the words sweet, meet, greet].

Sameth, a former congregational rabbi was ordained by the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 1998. In the Preface he makes it clear that the book is addressed “with the general reader in mind. No knowledge of or background in religious studies is assumed. Technical matter has been placed in endnotes” (x). Sameth intends this book for a wide audience, Jews, Christians and Muslims, but also “Hindus (who believe in dual-gendered divinity), Buddhists (whose practice involves cultivation of the awareness of indivisibility), and Taoists (whose religion centers on the interplay of so-called female and male energies)... [by reading this book he suggests that these religions] will discover a greater connection between their respective paths and the paths traveled by followers of the three Abrahamic faiths” (xi). The volume is easy to read. Sameth writes in a popularized, non-technical style. This is reflected in the titles of his chapters, 1: The Cradle of Civilization Rocked Both Ways; 2: Out of Egypt; 3: By the Rivers of Babylon; 4: The

Chain of Transmission; 5: The Wandering Secret; 6: Coming Home; and finally, 7: Interpreting THE NAME: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow. The text itself is just over one hundred pages, followed by a short Afterword. This is an extended version of an article Sameth wrote some years ago which was published in the *CCAR Journal/Reform Jewish Quarterly*, “Who Is He? He Is She: The Secret Four-Letter Name of God.” (Summer 2008).

His subject matter is the deity which appears in the Hebrew Bible, generally referred to there with the Hebrew letters *Yud-Hey-Vav-Hey*. Traditionally Jews do not attempt to pronounce this word. Some Jews therefore use as a locution for *Yud-Hey-Vav-Hey* the term *Adonai*, others prefer the word “Eternal” and still other Jews use the term “*HaShem*” that is Hebrew for “The Name,” which of course is the title of this book. Still other substitutes referring to this name take the form of using the letters YHWH or YHVH. Readers of this review may know that for some people *Yud-Hey-Vav-Hey* is spelled as Jehovah or Yahweh (Yahveh). Sameth addresses those traditions in the Introduction to his book.

In the first chapter, The Cradle of Civilization Rocked Both Ways, he explains that in the Ancient Near East the religions of Mesopotamia and Egypt were not only polytheistic but also that some of these gods were dual-gendered. In the second chapter, “Out of Egypt” he suggests that the four-lettered name of God actually began as a three-lettered word, YHW instead of YHWH and was associated with a group of people known as the Shasu (18). Sameth explains that the “original character or profile of YHW (later YHWH) is unknown” (19). He then goes on to deal with how YHW became YHWH (22-24). At this point Sameth puts forward a number of his theories, and correctly uses these kinds of phrases: “Here’s how I think that happened” (23); “I imagine that they did so...” (24); “so it strikes me” (26), and “Do we have proof that the ancient Israelite priests, by adding the letter *heh*, changed the spelling of THE NAME from YHW to YHWH? No, we do not. But we have a tantalizing suggestive story that this is indeed what may have occurred” (25). Sameth’s ideas may be interesting, but there is little “proof” that his suggestions are correct, and

can be verified in terms of academic research. This question of an acceptable “proof” then comes down to the reader acceding to his concepts without any kind of solid evidence.

In chapter three, *By the Rivers of Babylon*, he argues that the priest/scribe Ezra was the first person to “write a Torah scroll” using the “same script scribes use today when scribing a Torah scroll.” He also refers to the tradition that Ezra knew the secret pronunciation of THE NAME (30). The difficulty is that his proof comes from the Talmud, a document redacted circa 500 CE, nearly a thousand years after the time of Ezra. Citing a religious tradition, and one that is a millennium after the fact, is not a very convincing argument.

Chapter four “The Chain of Transmission” follows in a similar vein. Early on in the chapter he writes, “Can we identify historical figures who knew THE NAME? Do we have any evidence of how THE NAME was passed down from one generation to the next? We can, and we do” (42). The evidence that Sameth cites are traditional texts such as the *Babylonian Talmud*, the *Jerusalem Talmud*, and various sources of Midrash. These texts ascribe certain behaviors to various figures such as leading rabbis. That a Talmudic text redacted in the year 500 CE says this or that happened, for example how Rabbi Tarfon (active c. 80-110 CE) heard THE NAME from the priests in Jerusalem in a certain way certainly is a traditional argument; it is not evidence as we understand evidence in common usage.

Chapter five, “The Wandering Secret” covers the period from the mid-ninth to almost the close of the 15th centuries. He traces the history of practitioners of THE NAME and addresses the beginnings of a new school of Jewish mysticism, the Kabbalah. He refers to the mystical work, the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, the Book of Bright Light (53). A few pages on he writes, “So what exactly does the Book of Bright Light reveal about THE NAME? That’s hard to say” (55). Yet then he goes on to explain that what that book teaches is that “we are looking at the letters of THE NAME in the wrong order. The letters of THE NAME need to be rearranged.” Further, he proposes that what the book is

teaching is that “the Book of Bright Light returns to the theme of dual gender” (56). Later in the chapter he deals with the Book of Splendor, *Sefer ha-Zohar*, (71-77). “The Zohar is an audacious reinterpretation of an earlier Jewish mystical tradition, which was itself an interpretation of the ancient notion of a dual-gendered God, prisms by the Zohar through the lens of male-female romantic love.” He explains: “Everything in the Zohar is seen through this erotic hetero-sexual prism” (74). “The Zohar repeatedly teaches ‘All is one, male and female’ and ‘Male and female, a single mystery’” (75).

Chapter six, “Coming Home” covers the close to five centuries from the Jewish expulsion from Spain to the creation of the State of Israel, 1492-1948. “By the sixteenth century, God’s female aspect was, in the Jewish world, a completely open secret” (80). Sameth suggests that the 18th century founder of Hasidism, the Ba’al Shem Tov, “revealed an important piece of missing information regarding THE NAME.” While an earlier teacher explained “that ‘He’ (*Hu*) was one of God’s names... the Ba’al Shem Tov had revealed (based on a line from the Passover Haggadah) that ‘She’ (*Hi*) was also one of God’s names” (85).

Finally, in chapter seven, “Interpreting THE NAME: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow” Sameth does a kind of review of what he has written up to this point. He then explains that regarding God as dual-gendered would enfranchise and empower girls and women (99) and support the gender revolution (100). It would also better the prospects for world peace (102), and help to shape the “New Modernity” (103). The chapter ends with these words, “How exactly this will play out will be determined by individuals and their communities, secular and religious. It will not all happen at once, nor does it need to happen everywhere in the same way. In the religious world, different communities will find different ways to think about and refer to God that honors girls and women, boys and men. We need not have one name for THE NAME. As the Kabbalists of old said: What is important is not the pronunciation but the understanding of THE NAME” (106).

In the Afterword, Sameth draws attention to the writings of Michelangelo Lanci (1779–1867) who was a Vatican librarian. Lanci wrote a work which “revealed his analysis of the tetragrammaton [the four-lettered name of God] and the secret of its dual-gender nature” (108), similar to what Sameth is suggesting. He notes that Lanci’s writings were then rejected by the Vatican. He also deals with several other 19th century authors writing in a similar vein to Lanci.

The work is enhanced by Endnotes, a Bibliography, an Index, and an Index of Quotations from the Hebrew Bible.