

Is the Epitaph Acronym ע"ה an Abbreviation of עבד השם or עליו השלום?

Acronyms and Their Expansion in Jewish Law Texts¹

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One who directs all of one's energies and aims and all of one's efforts to the Blessed Lord, and even in his worldly dealings intends to serve God, such a person is called a Servant² of God, as in "Abraham, my Servant," "David, my Servant," "the Servants of the Prophets," for they are like the servant to a master. (Commentary of Radak to Joshua 1:1)

Introduction

One of the more common terms of reverence that one finds in modern Jewish culture for a recently deceased person is עליו השלום, which is commonly abbreviated as the acronym³ ע"ה and which means "peace be with (or, literally, on) him" or, more loosely, "rest in peace." This paper notes that there is abundant evidence to suggest that the reference ע"ה started as the appellation עבד השם, "Servant of God," rather than as the term עליו השלום, "peace be on him" or "rest in peace," and was limited in its use during the talmudic period to a small group of Biblical figures, each of whom was listed in midrash as a Servant of God. All other figures, even great individuals such as Elijah, were referred to by the appellation ז"ל, which stood for זכרונו לברכה, "may his memory be for blessing," or זכור לטוב, "may his memory be for good."

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The usage of ע"ה, as limited to designated Biblical figures, remained in effect for a considerable period of time. It was also used in the time of Rabbi Yosef Karo, as reflected by the usage of the terms ע"ה and ז"ל found in his classical commentary on the *Tur* (the *Beit Yosef*), and in his *Shulhan Arukh*. Only in post-medieval Jewish literature does one commonly find the term ע"ה used for figures other than those explicitly referred to as Servants of God, and only in that time period does the acronym ע"ה expand to עליו השלום. By now, one is hard-pressed to find people who agree that the midrashic acronym מע"ה actually expands to the very logical phrase “משה עבד השם,” a term by which Moses is regularly called in midrash.⁴

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- ¹ My thanks to my erudite Emory colleagues, Dr. Michael Berger, Dr. David Blumenthal, Dr. Benjamin Hary, and Dr. Devin Stewart, for their assistance, and particularly for the insights found in the section entitled “Origins”; Dr. Haym Soloveitchik of Yeshiva University helped in my formulation of the thoughts found in the paragraph accompanying note 31. The initial insights for this article were developed while on leave in conversation with my carpool companions, Dr. Moshe Bernstein of Yeshiva College and Rabbi Jeremy Weider of Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary.
- ² Throughout this paper we have chosen to translate “עבד השם” as “Servant of God” rather than, say, “Slave of God,” to emphasize the autonomy of the choice to be fully dedicated to God, and thus the laudatory nature of that voluntary devotion. A servant chooses how hard to work for the master; a slave, whose defining characteristic is the absence of the ability to choose, is not expected to perform beyond a bare minimum.
- ³ Technically, ע"ה is not an acronym, but an initialism. As noted in *Acronyms, Initialisms & Abbreviations Dictionary*, 26th edition (1999, Gale Publishers; Mary Rose Bonk, ed.), on page ix, “an acronym is composed of the initial letters of parts of a compound term. It is usually read or spoken as a single word, rather than by letter. Examples include RADAR (Radio Detection and Ranging) and LASER (Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation).” In modern Hebrew, examples of acronyms are דו"ה (דין והשבון) and י"ש (יין שרף). In rabbinic Hebrew, חתונה נעשה נבילה) ח"נ, (שליה ציבור) ש"צ, (שלמה יצחקי רבינו) רש"י are examples. “An initialism is also composed of the initial letters or parts of a compound term, but is generally verbalized letter by letter, rather than as a single ‘word.’ Examples include PO (Post Office) and RPM (Revolutions Per Minute).” In modern Hebrew, examples of

This paper is divided into four parts, besides this Introduction. The next section explains the use in midrash of the term “Servant of God,” and discusses which Biblical figures were given this appellation, and why. The second section correlates the usage of the appellation “Servant of God” with the acronym epitaph ע"ה, and notes that the two terms directly coincide. This forces one to conclude that in the early rabbinic period ע"ה was an acronym for “Servant of God.” The third section demonstrates that the term עליו השלום has its origins in Judeo-Arabic, and spread from the Jewish society in Arab lands into the general Jewish lexicon. Also, that among oriental Jews, the usage of עליו השלום was not common until the twelfth century and even later in European Jewish writings. There is a brief conclusion.

The Midrashic Use of the Term עבד השם⁵

The appellation עבד השם is used repeatedly in midrash in reference to a small group of Biblical individuals who are either called Servant in the Bible, refer to themselves as Servants of God, or are otherwise referred to as Servants in reference to their work with the Divine. There is quite a list of such individuals, with different midrashim advancing slightly different lists.

There are no fewer than eight different midrashic accounts of who is to be called a Servant of God, and which prooftexts are to be

initialism are ע"י (על ידי) and ה"א (היל אויר). In rabbinic Hebrew, initialisms are very common. Examples include א"כ (אלא אם כן), ח"מ (חושן משפט), and ר"ת (רבינו תם). “An abbreviation is a shortened form of a word or words that does not follow the formation of either of the above. Examples include Apr. (April), Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy), Bcstg. (Broadcasting), and Dr. (Doctor).” In modern Hebrew, examples of an abbreviation are רפ' (רופא/ה) and פר' (פרופסר). In rabbinic Hebrew, examples of abbreviations are פל' (פלוגי) and תוס' (תוספות).

⁴ See note 13 for examples.

⁵ The question of when the term השם and its shortened form ה' started to be used as a coded reference to God is difficult to answer precisely, although it is quite clear that by the rabbinic period the term השם is being used as a reference to God. See, for example, *Mishnah Yoma* 3:8, 4:2, 6:2, and many other places. Indeed, such a use is found even in the Bible itself, in Deuteronomy 28:58.

adduced to support such a title. The most important and nearly complete version is in the *Sifrei Devarim, Pesikta* 27, which lists seventeen individuals and the category “Early Prophets” as Servants of God in some form. The full text of that section of the midrash is:

To Direct Your Servant: There are those individuals who called themselves Servants [of God] and God called them Servants; there are those individuals who called themselves Servants and God did not call them Servants; and there are those individuals who did not call themselves Servants, and God called them Servants. [1] **Abraham** called himself Servant, as it states, “do pass by Your Servant”; and God called Abraham Servant, as it states, “on behalf of Abraham, My Servant.” [2] **Jacob** called himself Servant, as it states, “I am less because of all the righteousness and truth that You did for Your Servant”; and God called Jacob Servant, as it states, “and now, My Servant Jacob.” [3] **Moses** called himself Servant, as it states, “to direct Your Servant”; and God called him Servant, as it states, “Moses, My Servant, has died.” [4] **David** called himself Servant, as it states, “I am Your Servant, son of Your Servant”; and God called him Servant, as it states, “on behalf of David, My Servant.” [5] **Isaiah** called himself Servant, as it states, “He formed me in the womb to serve Him”; and God called him Servant, as it states, “My Servant Isaiah.” [6] **Samuel** called himself Servant, as it states, “speak, God, for Your Servant is listening,” but God did not call him Servant. [7] **Samson** called himself Servant, as it states, “you have given them in the hands of Your Servant,” but God did not call him Servant. [8] **Solomon** called himself Servant, as it states, “You have given Your Servant a heart to listen,” but God did not call him servant; rather, God connected him to David, his father, stating, “because of David, My Servant.” [9] **Job** did not call himself Servant, but God called him Servant, as it states, “to My Servant Job.” [10] **Joshua** did not call himself Servant, but God called him Servant, as it states, “Joshua the son of Nun, the Servant of God, died.” [11] **Caleb** did not call himself Servant, but God called him Servant, as it states, “My Servant Caleb.” [12] **Eliakim** did not call himself Servant, but God called him Servant, as it states, “to My Servant Eliakim.” [13] **Zerubbabel** did not call himself Servant, but God called him Servant, as it

states “Zerubbabel ben Shealtiel, My Servant.” [14] **Daniel** did not call himself Servant, but God called him Servant, as it states “Daniel, Servant of God.” [15] **Hananiah**, [16] **Misrael**, and [17] **Azariah** did not call themselves Servants, but God called them Servants, as it states, “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, Servants of God.” [18] **Early Prophets** did not call themselves Servants, but God called them Servants, as it states, “He revealed His secrets to His Servants.”⁶

Avot de-Rabbi Nathan (nusah 2), chapter 43, contains a listing of many fewer names of individuals as Servants of God, and adds a number of categories of Servant of God. That text states in relevant part:

[19] **Jewish People** are called Servants, as it states, “to Me are the Jewish People as Servants.” [20] **Messiah** is called Servant, as it states, “This [the Messiah] is My Servant.” [21] **Angels** are called Servants, as it states, “in His Servants He does not trust, and His angels are to be rebuked.”

Avot de-Rabbi Nathan adds one person to this list as well:

[22] **Nebuchadnezzar** is called Servant, and it did not fit him well, as it states, “Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, My Servant.”

In addition, sometimes in this recounting the verses brought as proof-text are different from the *Sifrei* version for various individuals, such as Abraham or Jacob.

Midrash Tehillim (Psalms) 18:4 (Buber edition) also contains a smaller list than the *Sifrei*, and adds one name. This text states in relevant part:

⁶ *Yalkut Shimoni Va'ethanan* 814, *Yalkut Shimoni Yehoshua* 4, and *Midrash Tannaim Devarim* 3:24 are identical to the *Sifrei* in content. The location in the Bible of the verses cited can be found on the chart starting on page 122.

[23] **Isaac** did not call himself Servant and God called him Servant, as it states, “recall Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Your Servants.”

Isaac is also referred to as a Servant of God in *Midrash Tanna'im Devarim* 34:5.

The chart below summarizes which individuals are referred to as Servants of God, by whom, the Biblical reference, and the midrashic source.

Individuals Referred to as Servants of God

Person	Called by God or the Text a Servant	Called Self Servant of God	Midrashic Source
Abraham	Yes: Genesis 26:24	Yes: Genesis 18:3	<i>Sifrei Devarim, Pesikta 27</i>
Jacob	Yes: Isaiah 41:8	Yes: Genesis 32:11	<i>Sifrei Devarim, Pesikta 27</i>
Moses	Yes: Numbers 12:7	Yes: Deuteronomy 3:24	<i>Sifrei Devarim, Pesikta 27</i>
David	Yes: 2 Kings 19:34	Yes: Psalms 116:16	<i>Sifrei Devarim, Pesikta 27</i>
Isaiah	Yes: Isaiah 49:29	Yes: Isaiah 49:5	<i>Sifrei Devarim, Pesikta 27</i>
Samuel	No	Yes: 1 Samuel 3:10	<i>Sifrei Devarim, Pesikta 27</i>
Samson	No	Yes: Judges 15:18	<i>Sifrei Devarim, Pesikta 27</i>
Solomon	No	Yes: 1 Kings 3:9	<i>Sifrei Devarim, Pesikta 27</i>
Job	Yes: Job 2:3	No	<i>Sifrei Devarim, Pesikta 27</i>
Joshua	Yes: Joshua 24:29	No	<i>Sifrei Devarim, Pesikta 27</i>
Caleb	Yes: Numbers 14:24	No	<i>Sifrei Devarim, Pesikta 27</i>
Eliakim	Yes: Isaiah 22:2	No	<i>Sifrei Devarim, Pesikta 27</i>
Zerubbabel	Yes: Haggai 2:23	No	<i>Sifrei Devarim, Pesikta 27</i>
Daniel	Yes: Daniel 6:21	No	<i>Sifrei Devarim, Pesikta 27</i>
Hananiah	Yes: Daniel 3:26	No	<i>Sifrei Devarim, Pesikta 27</i>
Mishael	Yes: Daniel 3:26	No	<i>Sifrei Devarim, Pesikta 27</i>
Azariah	Yes: Daniel 3:26	No	<i>Sifrei Devarim, Pesikta 27</i>

Person	Called by God or the Text a Servant	Called Self Servant of God	Midrashic Source
Nebuchadnezzar	Yes: Jeremiah 25:9	No	<i>Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, Nusah 2, chapter 43</i>
Isaac	Yes: Exodus 32:13	No	<i>Midrash Tehillim 18:4</i>

Special Categories of Servants of God

Category	Called by God a Servant	Self-Described as Servant of God	Source
Early Prophets	Yes: Amos 3:7	No	<i>Sifrei Devarim, Pesikta 27</i>
Jewish People	Yes: Leviticus 28:55	No	<i>Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, nusah 2, chapter 43</i>
Messiah	Yes: Isaiah 42:1	No	<i>Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, nusah 2, chapter 43</i>
Angels	Yes: Job 4:14	No	<i>Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, nusah 2, chapter 43</i>

Thus, nineteen different individuals and four categories are called Servant in some form or another at various times in the midrashim. One can well understand why the *Sifrei* might have excluded the five people or categories added by the other sources. The Jewish People, the Messiah, and the angels are not specific people, and thus were not listed. In the case of Nebuchadnezzar, the term does not refer to his pious status but to the fact that his task, the destruction of the First Temple, was the work of God; thus he is a “worker” of God, and the term does not denote holiness or closeness to God. So, too, Isaac was not on the main list found in *Sifrei* because the cited proof-text involved a quotation of something Moses said to God, rather than the direct words of God. Each of the individuals mentioned in the *Sifrei* is directly called Servant by God.

Analysis of Patterns of Usage of ע"ה

A survey of both the acronym ע"ה, and even the occasionally “spelled out” version of it, עליו השלום, in modern typesets of midrash, indicates that ע"ה is used exclusively in reference to individuals whose name is found on the list of individuals referred to as Servants of God.

For example, every use of the term עליו השלום in *midrash aggadah* or *midrash halakhab*⁷ refers to a person who is on the list of people called Servants of God (to wit: Abraham, Solomon, David, and Moses only). So too, the four uses of the term ע"ה,⁸ in the commonly reprinted editions of the Mishnah with seventy-three commentaries based on the text of Mishnah first published in 1614 - 17, are all used in reference to Abraham, a servant of God.⁹ So too, the ten uses of the term ע"ה in the minor tractates¹⁰ are all to individuals who are referred to as Servants of God (to wit: Moses, Abraham, and David). Consider that even within all of *midrash aggadah* and *midrash halakhab*¹¹ one finds not a single person referred to as ע"ה who is not on the list of people referred to as Servant of God.¹² This use of the term ע"ה as an appellation limited to people who are called Servants of God is consistent throughout well over 175 references in *midrash aggadah* and *midrash halakhab*, i.e., the only people who are given the appellation ע"ה in midrash are those mentioned in the four specific midrashim which list all who are Servants of God. No one else is given the appellation.¹³

⁷ In the Bar Ilan *Judaic Library* CD, version 6.0.

⁸ *Avot* 3:11, 5:3, and *Kiddushin* 4:14.

⁹ The value of this observation is diminished when one looks at the critical editions of the Mishnah, all of which simply delete the ע"ה acronym completely (as does the Vilna edition of 1897, the standard *shas*).

¹⁰ Checked on the database of the Bar Ilan *Judaic Library* CD, version 6.0.

¹¹ Done through both a Bar-Ilan search and a *Judaica Classics* search, which includes the full text of almost every midrash from the rabbinic era.

¹² This rule does not work for Eisenstein's *Oẓar Midrashim*, which, as is well known, was a very late and not fully accurate compilation of the texts. *Oẓar Midrashim* includes a handful of references to others as ע"ה. Besides the standard recounting, *Oẓar Midrashim* adds Elisha, Aaron, Jeremiah, Joseph, and Miriam. In addition, the angel Metatron is referred to by the appellation "Servant of God," consistent with the listing of angels as Servants of God. (Perhaps one could speculate that *Oẓar Midrashim* is entitling these individuals ע"ה because they fall under the category of Early Prophets.)

¹³ Indeed, many times throughout midrash one finds David, Moses, Abraham, and others on the Servants of God list explicitly referred to as a Servant of God (for example, see *Sifrei* on Numbers, *Naso* 46, or

The use of ע"ה stands in sharp contrast to the continuous usage of the appellation ז"ל for Elijah, who certainly was a great person in the Bible. Yet, he is not on the list of people referred to as Servants of God, and thus cannot be given the appellation ע"ה, and must be given a different appellation, which is ז"ל. Indeed, there is not a single reference to Elijah with the appellation ע"ה in midrash, and not a single reference to Moses with the term ז"ל. The term ז"ל is limited exclusively to individuals who are not on the Servants of God list. Neither Aaron (Moses' brother), nor Jeremiah the Prophet, are ever referred to by the appellation ע"ה in the hundreds of references to them. The reason for this is explained by this paper: they cannot be, as they are not on the authorized list of Servants of God, and thus cannot have the acronym ע"ה placed by their name. Joshua, the student of Moses, is on the authorized Servants of God list, and is never—ever—referred to as ז"ל, and is sometimes referred to as ע"ה, which must, thus, stand for עבד השם.¹⁴

Midrash Tanhuma, Re'eb 4), whereas never does one find the phrase עליו השלום (spelled out, and not as an acronym) used in reference to anyone. All the versions that explicitly spell out עליו השלום are relatively recent versions, such as the classical Mishnah with seventy-three commentaries.

¹⁴ As a general matter, even the appellation ז"ל is used only for Elijah, and I suspect that the acronym actually stands for זכור לטוב, and not זכרונו לברכה. Perhaps this relates to the rabbinic view that Elijah never dies. This is consistent with the use of the term found in *Mishnah Sotah* 9:15; *Soferim* 24:6; *Kala Rabbati* 5:2; and *Berakhot* 3a, each of which uses the term זכור לטוב. There is only one other person to whom the term זכור לטוב is used; this is Harbonah (Esther 7:9), who is referred to as זכור לטוב in *Yerushalmi Megillah* 3:7 (page 27a), although one suspects that this reference is not an epitaph acronym, but in contrast to Haman's status. To the extent that there is a rabbinic phrase זכרונו לברכה, it is logical that it should be זצ"ל, זכר צדיק לברכה, which parallels the use of this phrase in Proverbs (*Mishlei*) 10:7, which is parallel in *Mishnah Yoma* 2:8, *Yoma* 3:1, *Soferim* 14:7, *Tosefta Ta'anit* 3:8, and in many usages in *Yoma* 37a-38b. However, the term זכרונו לברכה is sometimes clearly used as an epitaph as a grave inscription; see Klaus Beyer, *Die Aramaischen Texte vom Toten Meer*, page 391 (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck, 1984) and Pieter W. van der Horst, *Ancient Jewish Epitaphs: An Introductory Survey of a Millennium of*

The evidence that the epitaph ז"ל was commonly used, and that ע"ה was not (except for the nineteen specified Biblical individuals listed above), and even then it certainly did not stand for עליו השלום in talmudic and pre-talmudic times, is fully consistent with the historical data found through the study of actual inscriptions found in Jewish cemeteries in talmudic and pre-talmudic times. For example, in the classical study of Jewish epitaphs of this era, Pieter W. van der Horst's excellent work, *Ancient Jewish Epitaphs: An Introductory Survey of a Millennium of Jewish Funerary Epigraphy (300 BCE–700 CE)*, it is noted that the term ז"ל or זצ"ל or the verse זכר צדיק לברכה (and זכור לטוב) is routinely found on Jewish tombstones, in Hebrew forms, Greek forms, and Aramaic forms.¹⁵ עליו השלום and its Aramaic or Greek cognates are never found and are simply not mentioned anywhere in the work, which reviews dozens of sample epitaphs.¹⁶ One can surmise from that evidence, taken from memorial markers erected during the 1,000 years of rabbinics that this paper is addressing, and the seminal time when midrash was written down, that ע"ה was not used for people buried at that time. This is consistent with the thesis of this paper, which observes that ע"ה would only be used in reference to specific delimited Biblical personalities, and no one else, and then stood for עבד השם.¹⁷

Jewish Funerary Epigraphy (300 BCE–700 CE), (Kampen, the Netherlands: Kok Pharos Pub. House, 1991) pp. 37, 38.

¹⁵ Van der Horst, *Ancient Jewish Epitaphs*, pp. 37, 38.

¹⁶ Professor van der Horst of the School of Theology in Utrecht, the Netherlands, confirmed this in an email to me, which states, in relevant part: "I never came across the expression *alav ha-shalom* in epitaphs, nor its acronym."

¹⁷ This is by no means the only case where acronyms have been misunderstood in rabbinic texts. For an excellent essay on this topic see Reuven Margalio, *Mehkarim be-Darkei ha-Talmud ve-Hedotav* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1967), pp. 21-31, which notes a number of instances where acronyms were incorrectly expanded by typesetters and others. Margalio points out in the next essay in that volume (entitled *Ayn Medakdekim be-Yayin Nesech*) that there are even circumstances where acronyms are misunderstood as words.

For a broader survey of this issue generally, see Meir Halpern, *Ha-Notrikin, ha-Simanim, ve-ha-Kenyim* (Jerusalem, 1929). This work is a dictionary of all abbreviations, acronyms, and mnemonics in the

Origins of the Phrase עליו השלום

Having established that the origin of the phrase עליו השלום is not from the rabbinic or pre-rabbinic period, this paper would like to speculate as to where it did originate. It is clear that the origins of this phrase are not from those communities where Jewish-Christian interaction was great, as the term used in that community was מנוחתו כבוד and occasionally ינוח בשלום, which (while it has a Biblical origin or echo)¹⁸ very closely corresponds to the common Latin phrases “*requiescat in pacem*” or “*pax vobiscum*.” One finds very early uses of that phrase¹⁹ and the acronym מ"כ²⁰ as an epitaph to refer to great deceased individuals in early medieval Jewish writings in Christian Europe. The use of the phrase עליו השלום comes much later to that community. Indeed, the invocation of עליו השלום in any form is lacking in early Jewish sources from Christian Europe.²¹ For example, there certainly are a considerable number of medieval authorities who consistently use the term identically to the way the midrash did, i.e., only individuals on the Servants of God list were given the appellation ע"ה; all others, be they greater or lesser, are given the appellation ז"ל or the occasional זצ"ל. Rabbi Shlomo Yizhaki and his school (Rashi and *Tosafot*) are all absolutely consistent as are all Franco-German Jewish writers until the fourteenth century. ע"ה is used only as a reference to individuals who are Servants of God as listed in midrash. Every other individual, whether a great Biblical

rabbinic literature, and opens with a lengthy introduction to the history of this topic. The entry for ע"ה (on page 195) contains many possible expansions of the abbreviation of the acronym, but not the phrase עבד השם. So too, the entry for the abbreviation מרע"ה (p. 171) expands this only to משה רבינו עליו השלום with no mention of the phrase עבד השם; the same is true for אאע"ה (p. 3), דהע"ה (p. 63), and שהע"ה (p. 242).

¹⁸ See, e.g., Isaiah 57:2. “*Pacem*” can mean “dignity” which could mean כבוד.

¹⁹ See Responsa of Rashi 137 as well as many other references.

²⁰ See, for example, *Sefer ha-Yasbar*, Responsa 53.

²¹ While there is some logic to linking the word שלום with the peace that comes from death, a case can be made that such a concept does not appear in the rabbinic Jewish sources. This matter requires further analysis, and is beyond the scope of this paper.

figure such as Elijah, a talmudic sage such as Rabbi Judah, or a scholar such as R. Hai Gaon, is given the appellation ז"ל. It is only in the era of R. Meir of Rothenburg and onward²² that one finds Jewish medieval authorities in Christian Europe using עליו השלום in reference to recently deceased individuals.

Such is, however, not the case for the Jews or Jewish writings in Islamic lands. The use of the phrase עליו השלום and the Judeo-Arabic corresponding phrase עליה אלסלאם is common in the Judeo-Arabic writings of Maimonides²³ and is common even in earlier writings by such figures as Saadiah Gaon²⁴ and generally the responsa of the *geonim* two centuries earlier.²⁵ The Judeo-Arabic language had its own acronym for this phrase, ע"ס, which was used for many Biblical figures other than those on the Servant of God list. Jewish usage of the phrase עליו השלום and its Judeo-Arabic cognate עליה אלסלאם can be traced as far back as we have rabbinic material in Judeo-Arabic, which is to the late ninth or early tenth century. It is quite clear that the phrase עליה אלסלאם is not of Jewish origins at all, and it can be found in various writings in the Koran and its secondary literature as a general epitaph reference.²⁶

²² See, for example, Responsa of Maharam me-Rothenburg 4:611 or Rabbenu Asher (Rosh) 43:7, although many other responsa could be cited.

²³ See *Moreh Nevukhim* 2:22 and 2:17. Such can also be found in the writings of Maimonides' father's teacher, Ri Migash, Responsa 202, as well as in the responsa of Rabbi Avraham son of Maimonides, Responsa 29, 39, 82, and many others. In the standard (Warsaw) edition of Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, the appellation עליו השלום is explicitly spelled out with regard to Moses, although it is deleted in the critical editions of the same (see Frankel's edition). The same is also true with regard to the use of עליו השלום in Maimonides' commentary on the Mishnah of *Sanhedrin* (Chapter *Helek*) where they are deleted in the critical editions of Kapach.

²⁴ See Saadiah Gaon, *Commentary on Genesis*, introduction on p. 23 (Moshe Zucker, editor), *Emunot ve-Deot*, p. 13 (Yosef Kapach, editor), commentary on Job, p. 98 (Kapach, editor), as well as many other places.

²⁵ See, for example, *Teshuvot Geonim, Sha'arei Zedek* 3:305:11.

²⁶ See the Koran, Surah 19, verse 15; Surah 37, verses 109, 120, 130, and 181; Surah 21, verse 69. Dr. Devin Stewart of Emory's Middle Eastern

The Jewish community in Islamic lands, I would speculate, incorporated the Arabic term עליה אלסלאם into Judeo-Arabic from Arabic, and it was from there eventually translated into the cognate Hebrew phrase עליו השלום, and from there incorporated into the general Jewish vocabulary. Although the type of study of pre-medieval philology and etymology needed to prove such a migration is far beyond my ability, a survey of various responsa and talmudic commentaries²⁷ does seem to support such a theory, as the earliest recorded references to עליו השלום are in the Jewish works from Arab lands (such as Saadiah, Maimonides, and Abraham son of Maimonides). The next geographical area and the next era where עליו השלום can be found in is in the Provençal writings of the twelfth century, such as *Responsa of the Sages of Provence* and the collected writings of Menahem ben Meir ha-Meiri, where one routinely encounters ע"ה used as an epitaph for recently deceased individuals in European Jewish writings.²⁸ עליו השלום spread from there into Islamic Spain, and Franco-German Jewry, and from there into Eastern Europe and the responsa of many authorities such as Shmuel di-Medina (*Maharashdam*), R. Shlomo Luria (*She'elot u-Teshuvot Maharsha*), Joseph Kolon (*Maharik*), and others, as well as popular parlance. Only from there does it spread world-wide as a general epitaph for great dead people generally, having now completely lost even the remnant of the term עבד השם in the epitaph acronym ע"ה.

Studies Department noted in electronic conversation with me that Ibn Hisham's *sirah* (biography of the Prophet Muhammad) uses the term *alayhi es-salaam* throughout the text in reference to Biblical individuals and, while there is a slight possibility that these phrases could have been added in by later editors of this work, he believes this to be unlikely. Dr. Devin Stewart suspects that one can date the phrase back to Ibn Hisham (d. 833 C.E.) and probably even back to Ibn Ishaq (d. 767 C.E.), whose work Ibn Hisham essentially edited to make his own work. See *al-Sirah al-Nabawiyyah*, 4 vols., ed. Umar Abd al-Salaam Tadmuri (Beirut: Dar al-kitaab al-'arabi, 1998), vol. 1, p. 18 in reference to Adam (Ibn Hisham) and vol. 1, p. 23 in reference to Ishmael and Abraham (Ibn Ishaq).

²⁷ On the Bar-Ilan and Judaica Classics CD-Rom.

²⁸ See, for example, the introduction of the Meiri to his commentary on the Talmud, which uses the acronym ע"ה for many recently deceased individuals.

It is worth noting that Maimonides is quite careful never to use the term when writing in Hebrew (only in Judeo-Arabic), as, I suspect, he is aware of the fact that עליו השלום is not a rabbinic phrase, and does not belong in his Hebrew works, which, as he tells us repeatedly, are written in mishnaic Hebrew. The same care can be shown in the writings of Jacob ben Asher in the *Tur*, Joseph Karo in *Beit Yosef*, and others, each of whom is careful to use the acronym ע"ה only for Biblical figures on the midrashic Servant of God list. It is only by the end of the sixteenth century that the term עליו השלום is fully incorporated into the Jewish vocabulary, and then becomes an indigenous Hebrew epigraph for Jews throughout the world. Within 200 years, עבד השם has disappeared.²⁹

The thrust of this paper is that the midrashic epitaph acronym ע"ה has its origins in the midrashic term עבד השם, and no other appellation. Given the complete lack of rabbinic manuscripts

²⁹ For a similar example of this phenomenon, one can point to the acronym ס"נ which in the time of the *rishonim* stood for ספק פקוה נפש, which was translated as “a possible danger to life.” By the middle of the sixteenth century, ס"נ stands for סכנת פקוה נפש, a “clear (rather than possible) danger to life.” Obviously, there are literally “life and death” differences between these two different ways to expand this abbreviation in normative Jewish law. The common text of the *Shulhan Arukh* (1896, Romm) expands the acronym ס"נ to stand for סכנת נפשות, and thus in *Orah Hayyim* 328:5 limits when one can desecrate the Sabbath for a person with a certain type of injury to cases of clear danger. *Mishnah Berurah* and *Arukh ha-Shulhan* both note that this is wrong; the reason why it is wrong is because ס"נ does not stand for סכנת נפשות but for ספק נפשות. Once again, in this example too, Joseph Karo in *Beit Yosef* expands the abbreviation in the same manner as the *rishonim* to mean ספק נפשות, and not סכנת נפשות. The typesetters of the *Shulhan Arukh* did not correctly understand the abbreviation in later editions, and mis-expanded it.

Dr. Norman Lamm of Yeshiva University, in a letter to this writer, notes another example of this in *Pesahim* 8a-b, which states: והתניא האומר סלע זו לצדקה בשביל שיחיה בני או שאהיה בן העולם הבא הרי זה צדיק גמור, which can be explained, but only with difficulty. He notes that the manuscripts have the last four words as ה"ז צ"ג, which more logically should mean הרי זה צדיק גמור, which is more consistent with Rabbenu Hananel's commentary on the parallel passage in *Rosh Hashanah* 4a.

dating anywhere near the rabbinic era,³⁰ medieval manuscripts cannot shed any light on this topic, other than to confirm that עליו השלום was not used during the medieval era at all, which is already known. Various medieval manuscripts do contain the acronym ע"ה, although all of the manuscript usage is after 1400, and is limited to people referred to as עבדי השם in the midrash.³¹ However, one cannot find any manuscripts that contain the term עליו השלום from earlier than the very very late medieval period, and this has been confirmed through a close examination of the manuscripts.³² On the other hand, the tombstone evidence,³³ which actually does date from the rabbinic period when the midrash and Mishnah were composed, provides very clear evidence concerning the absence of the phrase עליו השלום from the Jewish lexicon until well into the medieval period.³⁴ In fact, this observation only compounds the problem, because it will then turn out, as the conclusion to this article notes, that there are two independent expansions of the acronym epitaph ע"ה; one is עבד השם from the early rabbinic period, and other is עליו השלום from the Judeo-Arabic.

³⁰ The earliest manuscripts that we have (other than fragments from the Cairo *genizah*) date from the fifteenth century (for *Shemot Rabbah*). Most other manuscripts are from the early sixteenth century.

³¹ For example, the 1415 ms. of *Midrash Tehillim*, Psalm 119, uses the phrase אמר שלמה ע"ה for אשע"ה and the *Ish Shalom* edition of *Seder Elyabab Rabbah* on page 141 records אברהם אבינו ע"ה, but that is missing from the Vatican ms. 31 edition of the same (dating from 1073). Similarly, the 1563 Mantua edition of *Sifrei* and the 1520 Constantinople editions have the phrase אמר שלמה ע"ה. However, none of this is particularly valuable given the lateness of the various manuscripts.

³² I or a research assistant have systematically gone through many of the early manuscripts of midrash located in the JTS library, and have yet to find any case of עליו השלום in any manuscript dated earlier than 1400. Dr. Haym Soloveitchik of Yeshiva University confirmed in conversation that he could not recall seeing such usage in medieval manuscripts, as has Dr. Ted Fram of Ben Gurion.

³³ Cited in the text accompanying note 15.

³⁴ This paper agrees that by the medieval period the term עבד השם had also faded from the Jewish lexicon. I suspect that the phrase עבד השם will not be found in medieval manuscripts.

Conclusion

The tendency to read the present social and textual norms into the past is overwhelmingly tempting, and it is particularly so in a religious society that insists that the way it is now is the way it has always been. Acronyms are particularly prone to this type of error, in that common acronyms are almost never expanded in ancient talmudic texts itself; thus acronyms are easily mis-expanded when an ancient text is re-typeset as it is the modern editor, and not the writer of the text, who must assign acronyms their proper meaning.³⁵ This is even more so when modern texts use the same acronym to denote a different combination of words than ancient texts or when the proper meaning of an acronym changes from era to era. Such seems to be the case with the acronym ע"ה.

In sum: In the era of the Talmud, Mishnah, and pre-Mishnah, a very strong case can be made for the fact that ע"ה stood for עבד השם (Servant of God) and was a unique term used for those nineteen individuals on the authorized list of Servants of God. Thus, the acronym מרע"ה in the midrashim refers to משה רבינו עבד השם, a term that appears any number of times in the rabbinic literature and is an appellation for Moses, echoing God's eulogy for him. However, by the medieval period, perhaps in an attempt to incorporate the common Judeo-Arabic phrase עליה אלסלאם as a proper appellation for great dead people into the Jewish literature, the phrase עליו השלום was created, and was retrospectively read into the old abbreviation ע"ה. Nonetheless, the classical acronym ע"ה in the midrashim most likely refers to the term עבד השם. Thus, there are two independent expansions of the acronym epitaph ע"ה; one is עבד השם from the early rabbinic period, and other is עליו השלום from the Judeo-Arabic. ❧

³⁵ This is even more so true currently when publishers view the elimination of abbreviations and acronyms to be a selling point for inducing one to purchase a new edition of an old work. Thus, one finds new editions of ancient texts sold with the advertisement "all acronyms expanded."