The Hebrew Alphabet as a Divine Name with Respect to Psalm 119
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Very few people would deny that we live in a "technological age" and thereby also in a "technological world". In fact, the adjectives "technological" or "technical" are among the few that provide an incisive description of our age and our world in one go. If this is the case, our age and our world as a whole having fallen under the spell of technology, one may ask where we are and how we act under this ubiquitous spell, "we" meaning scholars, students, professors from the humanities, including many of us from theology and religious studies. After Sr. Helen's introduction, and also having confidence in your judgement,I do not think I have to put in extra effort arguing that the dominant technological mindset of our age has a grave and increasing, perhaps threatening influence on university education in general and our field of the humanities in particular. Given this obvious influence, perhaps threat, let us now put aside the question as to whether technology has changed the whole of our world for the worse or for the better, and only consider what the nature of the tension is between technology and the humanities, between technology and theology. Some of you might see the influence of technology on us in terms of an impact on us *from outside*, in terms of a power *alien to us;* some of you might think that, whatever the impact of this outside power is, the very essence of what we do is completely different from it and left more or less intact. No matter what high-tech flamboyance and *Wissenschaftsbetrieb* the contemporary Academia has, – the information upload and download in our brains, the impact factor of our "products", the relentless production and networking, often coupled with maniacal self-advertising (I have an acquaintance of mine on LinkedIn who has "new skills" every fortnight, he and the system say "new skills", and they keep notifying me about these "new skills") – so, no matter in what high-tech environment we work, some of you might be confident that we, scholars, still cultivate our little garden. Clearly, there is something like a "blind faith" – there must be something like a "blind faith" – about studying and teaching art, literature, ancient languages, history, philosophy, theology today; and however unspirited sometimes our efforts may be, we cultivate our small garden of traditions and inspirations, in spite of everything. So, many of you might hold on to the faith that this garden of ours is entirely different, and this technological age *does* need us, without being aware of that. Indeed, what else can our attitude possibly be than this: "the world needs us"?

I wish and I believe you are right, and there is something in our vocation that makes it stand out in the contemporary age of technology, something that gives us the potential to bestow a gift upon this age. Let me, however, draw your attention for a moment to what I have just outlined about the supposed influence of technology *on us*, coming from *outside* to *inside*. I am sure it will come as no surprise to you at this point if I make a reference to Martin Heidegger's idea that the modern technological world can plausibly be traced back to Greek philosophy. In his understanding, philosophers are the ultimate originators of what seems to affect us so deeply today "from outside", appearing as an alien power; and Greek philosophy being the origin, Heidegger makes clear that the classical theism of Christianity is greatly complicit in the comprehensive technological worldview of our age. Highly relevant as it is, I think you are fortunate enough that it is not me who has to explore Heidegger's philosophy of technology today, but Prof. Pattison, who has kindly accepted our invitation to delve into the subject. Although Heidegger established a powerful *philosophical* paradigm for our age of technology that, in a sense, puts the blame on the "humanities" themselves (if you allow me this blatant anachronism in the context of ancient

Greece), and we are going to hear more about that, let me first touch upon another paradigm, a *cultural* paradigm.

This paradigm draws on a cultural development which is older than, and in its own way perhaps as important as, Greek philosophy. The cultural development I am talking about started in the Eastern Mediterranean, in the second millennium BC, and, in the course of thousands of years, conquered most of the languages and cultures of the world, investing and transforming them with a phonetic alphabet. As a matter of fact, phonetic (or "phonographic") writing is not the only possible kind of script, other writing systems like pictographic or ideographic scripts are also viable, as the history of writing shows. Nevertheless, pictography and ideography comprise, in some ways – in inverted commas – "more direct" signs than phonetic writing does; phonetic writing wields a specific kind of *analytic* abstraction that is unknown in pictographic and ideographic systems, except that there is a possible gradual transition from them to phonetic writing. Needless to say, there is no such thing as "true writing", no such thing as "true depiction" in terms of any "full adequacy". Let us take an easy and illuminating example, like that of the sun. All of us can imagine a pictogram of the sun, a very simple drawing, a schematic image. Indeed, how easy this is for us! Still, it is mind-boggling to consider how many thousands of years of biological and cultural evolution were needed until human beings were capable of such symbolic abstraction, "depicting" the sun, the heavenly body dazzling in the sky. For the mere act of depicting something, and the mere act of making sense of a depiction, are highly developed and complicated acts, and what depicts something like the sun is entirely separate and strikingly different from what dazzles us and warms us from the sky. In all its power of representation, the image is pretty far from being the thing itself. So, it is clear that any kind of depiction, and any kind of pictogram, already involves a high degree of abstraction and sophistication on the part of human beings. And even more abstraction and sophistication is required to render this schematic image of the sun as an ideogram that depicts a concept, an idea, like a sun deity, or something else, at another level of abstraction, like "warmth" or "brightness". At the same time, however abstract and sophisticated such a sign is, it is easy to recognise that a writing system, a script, consisting of such signs, may require thousands of them in order to achieve any nuanced communication or representation of the world. No doubt, pictographic and ideographic scripts (like Egyptian hieroglyphs or Chinese script) already imply what we can call the *techné* of writing, writing as *techné*, in the ancient Greek sense of "craft" or "craftsmanship". They demand a very great deal of scribal skill and reading skill, several years of hard work, which drastically reduces their efficiency. When it comes to efficiency, these scripts are no match for phonetic writing with phonetic alphabets. This efficiency is especially striking with respect to what makes phonetic writing even more artificial, much more distant and "contrived", than other scripts. The written form of the English word "sun" consists of three letters, corresponding to three sounds – three phonemes – in the spoken form. It is evident that the letters "s", "u" and "n" have nothing to do with the spoken word "sun" beyond sheer convention. In their utterly strange and artificial way, these three letters are certainly able to *refer to* the heavenly body we call sun, but they are very far from depicting it. Instead, what they really *depict*, by the force of conventional correspondences, is the *articulation* of the spoken word "sun", reducing its richness of sound into three abstract phonemes. Still, however true it is that the written word "sun" implies even more mediation, distance and artifice than the pictogram or the ideogram of the sun, it exemplifies an extremely efficient method, given the fact that, in any language of the earth, the full number of words – hundreds of thousands or millions of words – is reducible to twenty, thirty or forty phonemes and letters. Historically, various alphabetic scripts developed (Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Arabic, et cetera), but theoretically, with some adjustments, any phonetic alphabet would be capable of rendering the languages of the world – as far as their abstract phonetic articulations are concerned. What we have here is

the miracle of a very limited set of quite simple signs mediating, representing, articulating the whole world, inasmuch as spoken language can mediate, represent and articulate the whole world. Accordingly, phonetic writing (and reading) with a phonetic alphabet is not just a *techné* of writing (and reading), in a sense similar to a pictographic or ideographic *techné*, but also a *techné* of language, in a sense different from "craft" or "craftsmanship", in a sense that is already akin to the modern use of the word "technics" or "technology". This kinship or affinity is reflected in all the characteristics we can discern in alphabetic technology: analytic abstraction, reduction to basics, efficiency, speed, uniformity, and, above all, what can be termed an "interiorisation" of the alphabet with all these characteristics, its remarkable ability to go, as it were, under our skin, making itself quasi invisible to us, writers and readers, who write and read words, forgetting about letters. In fact, in agreement with the ideas of various cultural theorists like Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, Eric A. Havelock, it may be claimed that the development, expansion and abiding force of the phonetic alphabet may underlie a *cultural* paradigm of the modern technological world, the alphabet being a crucial, if insufficient, factor in the emergence of this world.

   If this is the case, the alphabet having a kind of affinity with the modern use of the word "technology", then technology, this power seemingly alien to the humanities and theology, predates, conditions and perhaps suffuses all Western literature starting from the Greek and Latin Classics, and all the Holy Scriptures of the great monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Consequently, the alphabet offers an opportunity to raise the question of technology *within* the humanities, *within* theology, and *within* the Holy Scriptures. As a matter of fact, raising the question in such a setting, there will be still a very long way to go, because, for all the insight it can give, how much subtlety can the alphabet yield for facing contemporary technological issues like the new media, biotechnology, or artificial intelligence? Yet, as a first step, valuable insights about alphabetic technology are worth searching for. In what follows I propose a brief interpretation of an acrostic, an alphabetic poem, from the Hebrew Scriptures. There are quite a few alphabetic poems in the Hebrew Scriptures, but Psalm 119 stands out among them as the longest, most curious, and most revealing. From a literary point of view, it is certainly curious and revealing how a technological principle becomes poetic here, and how a poem brings technology into play. However, from a systematic-theological point of view, what makes the reading of such a poem especially relevant, is, I believe, the notion of the divine name, which draws our attention through the lines of this poem or any alphabetic acrostic or, in fact, any alphabetic text. To put it more precisely, I suggest *the idea of the alphabet as a divine name*. And, in reading Psalm 119, my proposition is that *this psalm fulfils, and also brings to the fore, and, at the same time, exposes and goes beyond the Hebrew alphabet as divine name.* Now, I am well aware that the joint invocation of the question of technology and the notion of divine names raises the stakes at this seminar, and a theology of technology goes over necessary, but shaky ground, when enquiring into divine names. To make this ground less shaky, I am sure we will be given careful and excellent guidance from Prof. Soskice, one of whose fields of specialisation is the theology of divine names. In the meantime, I am to enter this ground on my own with the only hope that my mistakes, if inevitable, will be meaningful, and that I can bequeath what is wrong and what is meaningful into the able hands of all of you here, especially Dr. Laštovičková and Ms. Šmejdová, who have kindly agreed to respond to my talk.

What is most striking in Psalm 119, apart from its alphabetic form, is the psalmist's total devotion to the Torah, the Law of Moses. Any thoughtful reading of the psalm will entertain the idea that form and devotion correlate here. What appears as a "double celebration", the celebration of the Torah and that of the alphabet, must have some bearing on one

another. What seems to make the psalm a "celebration" of the alphabet? It is an acrostic, which means here that each initial letter in each and every line contributes to a coherent whole that is the sequence of all the initials. This is how the twenty-two strophes of the psalm are dedicated to the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, each strophe having eight lines that start with the same initial letter. And what seems to make the psalm a "celebration" of the Torah? Well, it has an extraordinary fixation on the idea of the Torah, which takes possession of the psalm in a unique way, making use of eight revolving synonyms. The way the idea of the Torah totally rules over the text is the twenty-two strophes incessantly repeating these eight synonyms that are "law", "word", "testimonies", "precepts", "statutes", "commandments", "judgements", and "ordinances". It is amazing to realise that the psalmist, as it were, substitutes this fixation, these numerous synonyms, for any real reading of the Torah; we read nothing about what is actually *in* the Torah, nothing about creation and salvation history, nothing about how the Torah was revealed and given. These things never come up in twenty-two times eight verses, that is, one hundred and seventy-six verses. The Torah is supposed to be the Law of God from the hands of Moses, but these hundred-seventy-six verses have nothing to say about Moses! If the peculiarities of the psalm are such, it is not difficult to see how its "two celebrations" may correlate: it "celebrates" the Hebrew alphabet in order, at the same time, to "celebrate" the very letter of the Torah, that is, the alphabetic fabric of the Torah. And this close proximity between the idea of the Torah and the idea of the alphabet suggestively prompts us to contemplate the Hebrew alphabet as a possible divine name.

The concept of the Hebrew alphabet or any alphabet as a divine name has, as far as I know, never surfaced in the Judeo-Christian tradition *explicitly* (except at one point, which I am going to discuss later), yet there certainly is an inner tendency towards it in the tradition. The earliest example of Jewish Kabbalah, the book entitled *Sefer Yetzirah,* distinguish between thirty-two paths of God's creation of the world, twenty-two of which are the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. This understanding of the alphabet suggests that the twenty-two letters are closer to God than creation itself. A similar direction is discernible in Mediaeval Jewish Mysticism, which embraces a similar closeness, professing the Torah's pre-existence with God before all creation, and, in a similar vein, affirming that the Torah is all formed by divine names, indeed, it is, as a whole, a single divine name. Thinking over ideas like this one, one might wonder, what concept would be more plausible than the alphabet as a single name, unfolding into the entirety of the Torah, with special regard to another Mediaeval Jewish idea that the possible binary combinations of the twenty-two letters were the first emanations from God? What is more, an alphabetic principle emerges as God's name in Christian thinkers of the Renaissance like Nicolaus Cusanus. By a great, yet meaningful philological mistake, Cusanus set about interpreting the Tetragrammaton, the four-letter Name (יהוה), the holiest Name of God in Judaism, as a unity of all vocality, that is, a unity of all vowels. How did Cusanus arrive at such an idea? Erroneously, he conceived of the Tetragrammaton as "Jehovah", which, in more or less agreement with the Mediaeval Latin spelling, can be taken as "Ieoua", comprising all the Latin vowels "i", "e", "o", "u", and "a". Although this is an obvious mistake, and only works in Latin, the idea is intriguing: all words, or, in Cusanus's terminology, all names are concretisations (*terminationes*) of the divine Name, since all names include vowels. And, if you think about it, you will realise that it is an alphabetic principle that operates in such a divine Name, and we are only a short step from the alphabet as divine Name. Cusanus's text (*Sermo XLVIII*) suggests an intriguing example: this alphabetic divine Name relates to all names like the invisible light to all the colours: we cannot see the light when we see the colours, but we can see them only through the medium of the light.

At this stage, you might be wondering what on earth such obscure speculations from Renaissance Occultism and Jewish Esotericism can prove, and what point this fellow wants to make. "This is very nice, very arcane", you might say, " but we know and confess that God's revelation favours living images like Adam, the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets, and, above all, the living Jesus Christ, who is God's word and image above all – indeed, isn't it these meaningful lives and deeds and words, from Adam to Christ, that are primarily meant to disclose God? Isn't it so that, reading Scripture, we seek to enact a similar kind of living meaningfulness? Is the alphabet not rather secondary, exterior, meaningless? What are you suggesting, then? Shall we give God a merely functional, empty, technological name?"

I do agree that reading Scripture is meant to generate what we can call a "living meaningfulness", as if conversing with Christ and the prophets, but I am also pointing at Psalm 119, arguing for what can be termed the "adjacent operation of alphabetic technology", an operation adjacent to meaningfulness, but not quite overlapping with it. Just consider the curious interplay that the psalm induces between the alphabet and the Tetragrammaton, which appears in it quite a few times. In its alphabetic organisation, the psalm raises a heightened awareness of the alphabetic structures of every word in it, which is particularly so as regards the Tetragrammaton, highlighting the four silent letters and reinforcing their tendency towards ineffable silence and strange remoteness. By the same token, how ineffable, silent, strange, and remote the alphabet is, viewed as a separate set of all letters! However, what the alphabet and the Tetragrammaton share is not quite meaninglessness, but something like the air of exclusivity: the Tetragrammaton is exclusive, associated with God's holy transcendence, *whereas* the alphabet as a name is exclusive precisely because of the *idea of totality* it conveys. And the concept of the alphabet as God's name of totality is very well grounded in the biblical tradition, in the Apocalypse of John, where it is revealed that "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end", that is, the totality of history. The One who is called "the Alpha and the Omega" is all the letters in-between, just as the One who is called "the beginning and the end" is all the history in-between. What is more, the idea of totality discloses how far the alphabet as the name of God strays into the waters of metaphysics. After all, does it not have the same structure as the divine name *esse*, being? The same emptiness of meaning and the same inclusion of everything? Isn't it particularly telling that a supreme technological name corresponds to *the* supreme metaphysical name?

But you might find that these names, the Hebrew alphabet, the Greek alphabet, the name *esse*, and even the Tetragrammaton are either too remote, or too contrived. You may correctly point out that such names are secondary to and derivative of other, more positive, more affirmative, more foundational names of God that are metaphors like "lord", "shepherd", "lamb", "father", "king", rock", "shield" and so on. And you might ask with every justification: "Would any Christian parents begin to teach their children, would any catechists start instructing their catechumens, with the alphabet as divine name? Wouldn't they start with positive and simple metaphors and come up with the contrivances of names like the alphabet much later?"

This is undeniably so. Still, let me argue that the alphabet is a necessary and all-important name of God, by turning to Psalm 119 again and showing what can be termed an "alphabetic sensibility" or "alphabetic devotion". What I described above as a "double celebration", the celebration of the Torah and that of the alphabet will certainly emerge, with a closer look at the psalmist's diction, as a total devotion. This total devotion comes about, in my opinion, by an artificially acquired sensibility, that is, the sense of totality

induced by the alphabet. How is such a claim to be understood? It is alphabetic technology that underlies a profound equivalence between the Torah and the heart, between what is "settled in heaven forever" (v. 89) and what the psalmist ever so often recites as בכל–לב "(with) the whole heart" (see v. 2, 10, 34, 58, 69, 145). Indeed, between the totality of the Torah and the "totality of the heart". These equivalent totalities stand out against the background of a hostile world, that is, all the enemies who do not keep the Torah and persecute the psalmist and those few who keep the Torah. The whole world is a damned nothingness, everything crumbles, in exchange for another "everything", another totality, the Torah, that is "all precepts" of God "concerning all things" (v. 128) and is "settled in heaven for ever" (v. 89). And such an alphabetic sensibility of a divine totality claims and possesses "the whole heart" – obsessively, pervasively, totally. (And how could this be otherwise if the recitation of alphabetic writing quasi effaces what is written and intensifies what one says and hears, writing being in total service of the voice of spoken language, filling "the whole heart" with an artificially intensified voice?)

If the implications of alphabetic technology can be such, you have every reason to object to the promotion of the alphabet as a technological name of God. The truth is, however, that the moment the alphabet comes to be *exposed* as a divine name (the way it is exposed in Psalm 119), the spell of technology is broken, and we go beyond the alphabet's functionality; in fact, the alphabet as God's name goes beyond alphabetic functionality. To demonstrate this, there are two possible ways that I can conceive of: the way of "graphism" and the way of hermeneutics. By the term "graphism", I mean the intrigue and power of writing as image, its material reality, the way it is "drawn". In the case of phonetic writing, graphism releases the visual-material reality of writing from its confines, from its full submission to the phonemes of spoken language. Let me give you an example. I have been keeping on my desk an image of the Hebrew alphabet for several years; I have always been fascinated with its sheer graphic beauty, with the calligraphic way it is designed. I have considered this graphic image a kind of window to the divine, something mysteriously close to God, but I realise only now, being engaged in this paper, that my image goes beyond the *function* of the Hebrew alphabet, that it brings about an *exposure* of alphabetic technology. And it does so in the same fashion as Psalm 119 which, breaking anyone's interiorisation of the Hebrew alphabet – breaking the spell of its invisibility – can release the breathtaking visual power of Hebrew writing. This is the way of graphism. The other way, the way of hermeneutics, seeks to integrate alphabetic technology as "adjacent operation". Clearly, poems like Psalm 119 heighten the awareness of the alphabetic structure of their entire texts, opening up a network of connections between their words, based on similarities in their alphabetic sequences. Indeed, words can create an alphabetic network not only within a poem, but also within an entire language, featuring connections whose intensities depend on how many letters the connected words share. It is evident that what I call an alphabetic operation, forming such a virtual network, is fully technological, but the way the network comes to be active and operative will be strongly influenced by the need for understanding and meaningfulness. In other words, the network's operation is adjacent to the acts of meaningful reading. Let me take a simple example. What I have said about Psalm 119 makes clear that the high recurrence of the word כל ('whole', 'entire', 'total') in it must have a crucial significance. As far as this word's alphabetic operation is concerned, there are several other words that share with it the letters כ and ל (like כבל 'chain' or אכל 'food'), while not offering any insight into the psalm's message. However, there is one of them, הלך ('go, walk', with *kaph sofit*), which gives a twist to the sense of totality suggested by the word כל. To "go the way", to "walk the way", especially the way of the Torah, is another recurring image in the psalm. Is it possible, therefore, that the alphabetic and technological sensibility of totality does not have the final

6

word in reading Psalm 119 and reading the Torah? Is it possible that there is another kind of "wholeness", marked by "going a way", "walking along a path", the ways and paths of understanding? Is it possible that an adjacent operation of the alphabet as divine name can be integrated with these ways and paths? Without giving a thoroughgoing answer to these questions, let me emphasise that hermeneutical practice seems to be one of our best alternatives in a "technological age", and it can possibly co-operate with an alphabet that is a technological and necessary name of God.