

What Is the Savior's Name?

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According to one teaching, it is only proper to use Hebrew names when referring to God – instead of the English or Greek names. Is this a correct understanding? This article examines the question from the standpoint of the Hebrew and Greek Texts.

Must we speak of the Creator only as *Elohim* – using Hebrew? Should we say only *Yahweh* instead of “God”? Must we use the Hebrew *Yehoshua* instead of Jesus when speaking of the Savior?

And is “Messiah” the only permissible term rather than “Christ”? Is it a sin to use the names “Jesus Christ” and to designate the Church as the “Church of God”?

To most of us these may sound like ridiculous questions. Nevertheless, it is *important* to know the answers – especially since over the years a few people have been persuaded to walk out of Christ's fellowship over this issue!

Is God's Name “Jehovah”?

Despite the fact that the Hebrew text of the Old Testament is loaded with many divine names, titles and epithets, the major argument for some reason has centered around the word which many English translations have rendered “LORD.” So let us begin with this word – the Tetragrammaton *YHWH*.

Those who argue for the use of the name “Jehovah” are using an improper form of the original Hebrew name. This name Jehovah is a spurious form which, as pronounced in English, has little resemblance to the Hebrew original.

Actually, when the form arose in the Middle Ages, the *j* was pronounced as an English *y*. Thus, it would have sounded like Yehovah, not Jehovah.

But even that transcription into English is incorrect. Notice why.

The Old Testament text as it was preserved for many centuries consisted only of consonants, though semi-consonants were used to indicate certain long vowels. The exact pronunciation – with the correct vowel sounds – was preserved only by oral usage. The vowel sounds were not written down until about the sixth or seventh century A.D. At that time, Jewish textual scholars known as *Masoretes* (hence *Masoretic* text) devised symbols to represent the vowels. They added these symbols (vowel points) to the consonantal text of the old Testament.

It was only at this time – centuries after both the Old and New Testaments had been completed – that the then current pronunciation as orally preserved was finally written down.

But the Tetragrammaton, the Hebrew name *YHWH*, had long before ceased to be pronounced by the Jews as too sacred to be uttered. Whenever reciting orally, they always substituted the word *Adonai* (“Lord”) or occasionally *Elohim* wherever *YHWH* appears in the text. This practice had begun long before the time of Herod.

Later, in the sixth or seventh century, wherever the Masoretes found the word *YHWH*, they inserted the vowel points of *Adonai* or *Elohim* (not the original vowels of *YHWH*) to give the synagogue reader the clue to use the acceptable word. It was from the consonants *YHWH* plus the vowel points of *Adonai* that the impossible form “Jehovah” was later created by Catholics only partially knowledgeable of the Hebrew language and text.

The Form YAHWEH

Hebrew scholars are quick to admit the exact vowel sounds and pronunciation of *YHWH* are not absolutely certain. Most feel that “Yahweh” (pronounced Yahweh, with the second syllable like the whe – in “where”) is a close approximation. But this reconstruction is partly based on transliterations into the Greek several centuries after the writing of the New Testament by the church fathers.

This Jewish custom of substituting one word for the other was already practiced, for example, by the Essene sect at Qumran, who left us the Dead Sea Scrolls. For several technical reasons which we need not discuss here, it is quite certain the Qumran sect did not pronounce *YHWH*, this already as early as the beginning of the second century B.C.

If the correct pronunciation were known at all in New Testament times, it has not survived in writing. Some scholars disagree with the pronunciation *Yahweh*. Some believe the name was *Yaho* or *Yahwo* or *Yahu*. There is simply no way to be absolutely sure how it was pronounced when *YHWH* introduced this name to Moses.

And, of course, vowel pronunciation is always subject to great change through the centuries and from region to region. Even if Ezra and later generations pronounced this name *Yahweh*, how had Moses pronounced it? After all, *that* would have been the only correct way – *if* exact pronunciation is what matters.

Also consider this factor. Today’s Jews in various parts of the world have traditions of pronunciation for Hebrew vowels and even consonants – and hence words – different from one another even in the same generation, just as English speakers from various parts of the world do with English words. Were there no differences in Hebrew dialects in Bible times between the Nile and the Euphrates? Linguistic records such as Judges 12:6 show there were!

If the exact pronunciation were all important, what about those today whose native tongue or dialect is different and can't form the sounds of Yahweh correctly? Are they all without hope? What about the person today who says Yahvah instead of Yahweh?

Did Abraham Know the Name *YHWH*?

Any who continue to insist it is required to designate the Creator – the Lawgiver – as *YHWH*, regardless of how he might think it should be pronounced, must explain the statement in Exodus 6:2-3: “And *Elohim* spoke to Moses and said to him, ‘I am *YHWH*. And I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as El Shaddai [God Almighty]. But by my name *YHWH* I was not known to them” (all Bible quotes used in this reprint are translated directly from the Hebrew and Greek).

Did *Elohim* mean what he said? – that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob did not even know the name *YHWH*? Or must we try to explain away this passage by saying (as some do) that Abraham actually used the name *YHWH* but just didn't understand it? On the contrary, these two verses strongly indicate the name *YHWH* was simply not revealed as the name before the time of Moses.

Supporting evidence for the statement of these verses is found in an examination of the theophoric names of people who lived before Moses – names, that is, bearing some form of divine name within them. Our modern society seldom uses such names except for names actually taken from the Bible. But Hebrew society was different. So we find many names in the Bible with an *El* or *Yah* or *Yahu* (short for *YHWH*) in them. For example, in Job 32:2; “Elihu son of Barachel” which means in Hebrew, “He-is-*El*, son of El-blesses.”

Very early in the Bible we run across names with *El* in them. Genesis 5:12 mentions Mahalalel whose name means “praise of *El*.” Genesis 10:28 lists Abimael – “a father is *El*.” Jacob changed the name of Luz to Bethel (“house of *El*” – Genesis 28:19) and later had his own name changed to Israel (“he perseveres with *El*”).

Similarly, we find the divine name Shaddai (which first appears in Genesis 17:1) in the name Zurishaddai (“my rock is *Shaddai*”), a man who lived before the Exodus.

But No *YHWH*

Yet we find no human names with *YHWH* (including *Yah* or *Yahu* or any shortened form of the name) until after the time of Moses! A careful examination of all the biblical names before the time of Moses reveals no trace of the name *YHWH*.

Some have claimed the name of Moses' mother, Jochebed (Exodus 6:20), contains a form of *YHWH*. But this seems unlikely. Says the highly respected Hebrew scholar Martin Noth: “It is very doubtful that it [the name Jochebed] is a combination with יהוה.” (*Die Israelitischen*

Personennamen im Rahmen der Gemeinsemitischen Namengebung, page 111, translation from the German, ours).

Archaeologists once thought names with a form of *YHWH* in them could be detected in cuneiform tablets in the Akkadian language of Babylon and Assyria or in the areas before the time of Exodus 6. But many of these names have been shown to be misinterpreted. Biblical scholar Roland de Vaux, after examining several possibilities, concludes that “we have as yet no conclusive proof of this” (“The Revelation of the Divine Name YHWH,” *Proclamation and Presence*, page 56.)

Commenting on this aspect, Professor Noth continues: “So the name יהוה is in any event unproved outside of and independent from Israel... The name of God first arose in, or better said, with Israel and therefore goes back to the actions of Moses” (ibid). Of course, since the name was revealed to Moses, then it occurred neither outside Israel nor in Israel before his time.

Some may ask why the name *YHWH* is used in the text all through Genesis if it were not known before Moses. It’s simple. The book of Genesis was composed after the time of the patriarchs. By then the name *YHWH* was known and the writer or editors simply inserted the name into the text.

YHWH Names After Moses

The first few chapters of 1 Chronicles contain genealogical lists that begin with Adam. A study of them indicates that beginning with the time of Moses or shortly after, many of these names include a form of *YHWH* (though none before).

The first such name to appear is Joshua. Joshua the son of Nun was born before the events of Exodus 6. But his original name was Hoshea (Numbers 13:8-NKJV), which means “salvation” and was only later changed to Joshua (Numbers 14:30), which means “*Yahu* is salvation.”

Genesis 22:14 seems to say that Abraham named a place “YHWH will see.” Notice, however, the unusual wording of the rest of the verse: “as it is said *today*, In the mountain of the Lord it shall be seen.” The peculiar wording implies that the name “*YHWH* will see” was the name known at the time of writing (in the time of Moses or afterward), not necessarily the exact one given by Abraham. Whatever he actually called the mount, the mountain’s name was similar to the words of a common saying of the later time when *YHWH* had become recognized as a revealed name.

Furthermore, other geographical names back up the argument already discussed. In Genesis 28:13, 16 we find that “YHWH” appeared to Jacob in a dream. He was so agitated that he set up a pillar and gave the place a name. But what did he call it? “Beth-YHWH”? No! He called it “Beth-El” (“House of God”). Similarly when he set up an altar in Genesis 33:20, he did not call

it “YHWH the God of Israel” but “God, the God of Israel” (*El Elohe Israel*). In Genesis 32:30-31 he gave the name “face of God” (*El*) to the place where he wrestled with God.

Outside of these misunderstood examples we find no hint of names with *YHWH* before the time of Moses. But we find them beginning in his very lifetime. If *YHWH* were at all known, why was it not used just as were *El* and other divine names? Simply because it was not yet revealed!

This means that such men as Abel and the other preachers of righteousness before the Flood, as well as Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph – righteous people for more than two and an half millennia – never so much as heard this name that some today emphatically assure us is absolutely necessary for salvation!

The Many Names of God

A careful study of the Bible reveals that God has a multitude of meaningful names and titles but yields absolutely no prohibition against translating them into another language.

Nowhere in the Bible are we told that only the Hebrew form is permissible. On the contrary, we are given positive examples of these names being translated into other languages.

Many do not realize that a number of chapters in the Old Testament are written in Aramaic rather than Hebrew. Aramaic was not the language Moses spoke. The Aramaic sections are Daniel 2:4 through 7:28 and Ezra 4:8 through 6:18 and 7:12-26. Nowhere in these Aramaic sections do we find *YHWH*, or any Hebrew names for the deity. Instead we find the Aramaic form *Elah*.

Similarly, we find no Hebrew names in the New Testament. Instead we find the Greek terms *theos* “God” and *kurios* “Lord.” Furthermore, the New Testament uses *kurios* in quotations from the Old Testament where *YHWH* stands in the Hebrew!

In Matthew alone we find the following examples: Matthew 3:3, quoting Isaiah 40:3; Matthew 4:7, quoting Deuteronomy 6:16; Matthew 21:9, quoting Psalm 118:26; Matthew 21:42, quoting Psalm 118:23; Matthew 22:37, quoting Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:44, quoting Psalm 110:1; and Matthew 23:39, quoting Psalm 118:26. Notice that five of these seven quotes are cited by the Savior himself.

New Testament Corrupted?

Of course, some would rather throw out God than their false theory about “sacred names.” So they theorize that the New Testament has been corrupted. For example, the preface to the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ translation of the New Testament makes the following statement: “The evidence is, therefore, that the original text of the Christian Greek Scriptures has been tampered with” (page 18).

But what they claim would have required no less than one of the most thorough and complete editing jobs in all history! For not a single Greek New Testament manuscript shows any

evidence for the use of “original” Hebrew *YHWH* supposedly put there by the authors for their Greek readers. Someone would have had to have superhuman powers to garner every single Greek manuscript – scattered around the entire Mediterranean basin – and to carefully expunge *YHWH* from all New Testament manuscripts and substitute the Greek *kurios*.

Besides Greek names, we also find the Aramaic form *Mar* (“Lord”) in the New Testament in the salutation “maranatha” (1 Corinthians 16:22), meaning “our Lord, come.” The apostle Paul certainly spoke Hebrew (Acts 21:40), but he was under no illusions that only Hebrew names for God were acceptable. Not only did he use Greek terms in his letters, but even a common greeting in Aramaic widespread in the early Church.

“Jesus” and “Joshua”

Some will not use the name “Jesus.” They use only the form “Joshua” or *Yehoshua*. Again, we point to the very apostles who wrote the New Testament, most of whom had been with the Savior in the flesh. They saw no wrong in using the Greek for *Iesous*, which we spell “Jesus” instead of the Hebrew *Yehoshua*.

The form *Iesous* is used in Hebrews 4:8 in reference to the Joshua of the time of Moses.

Any name common to various peoples is spelled and pronounced differently from language to language. In English we say John, a German says *Johann*, a Greek *Ioannes*, a Frenchman *Jean* and a Scotsman *Ian*. We speak of the apostle James whereas he is called *Iakobos* (Jacob) in the New Testament.

When Jesus spoke Greek to someone – and being from Galilee, he could speak Greek – he used the Greek form of his name. He inspired his servants to use that same form in the New Testament. He didn’t say that *YHWH* is the only name by which we must be saved – nor Hebrew *Yehoshua*. Instead, the apostle Peter uses the Greek form *Iesous* in Acts 4:10-12 and goes on to state that whoever calls on the name of *Kurios* (he uses no article “the”) will be saved. Why shouldn’t we then use the English forms “Jesus” and “Lord”?

Meaning of YHWH

Each of the many divine names and titles describes some aspect of God’s nature. The Bible does not emphasize a pronunciation – a particular combination of laryngeal vibrations modulated by the mouth, or the shape of the tongue, teeth and lips around a stream of air. It deals with our understanding the meaning of the divine names and titles that we may grow to be like our Savior Jesus Christ.

Since we cannot be absolutely sure of the vowels in *YHWH*, we cannot be positive about its exact grammatical form. But scholars generally feel it is some form of the verb “to be.” Some suggest “He causes to be,” others “He exists,” etc. But perhaps no better interpretation can be found than the Greek statement of Revelation 1:8, referring to Jesus Christ: “I am the Alpha and

the Omega [in English we would say the A and the Z], says the Lord God, the One who is being, who was being, and who is coming, the Almighty.”

He is the Almighty, the Eternal, the Self-Existent One, the One who has life inherent – yesterday, today and tomorrow, the Beginning and the End.

Other titles are frequently used along with YHWH.

These include:

- *Nissi*, “YHWH my standard” (Exodus 17:15)
- *Rophekha*, “YHWH your healer” (Exodus 15:26)
- *Shalom*, “YHWH of peace” (Judges 6:24)
- *Tsidqenu*, “our righteous YHWH”
- *Tsebhaoth*, “YHWH of armies”
- *Elyon*, “YHWH most high.”

Elohim and Other Names

El is perhaps the most primary form used to express the attribution of the divine all-ruling Creator. It is a root common to most of the Semitic languages, found in Babylonian and Ugaritic literature and appearing in Arabic as *Allah*.

Eloah seems to be a variant from of *El* though the singular is used only infrequently in the Old Testament. However, the plural is one of the most frequently used words in the Bible.

Elohim is the second most-used word (after *YHWH*) for the Divinity in the Old Testament. Although originally the plural form of *Eloah*, it had already come to be used with a singular idea by the time the first part of the Bible was written down. So we find in Genesis 1:1 that *Elohim* creates, not *Elohim* create.

Just as we can use the term *god* or *gods* to refer to idols or pagan concepts, so *Elohim* is used to refer to other gods, usually in the plural but sometimes in the singular only (Judges 11:24). This usage of ancient Israel shows it is perfectly all right to use our native English word *god* to apply to those who are not gods, who don't really exist, as well as to use it when referring to the true God.

Shaddai has already been mentioned in connection with Exodus 6 and in certain names. It is generally believed by Hebrew scholars to mean something like “Almighty.”

Adonai was the name most often read by later Jews instead of *YHWH*. But this word also occurs many times in its own right in the Hebrew text. It means “Lord” or “Master.”

The New Testament Greek also contains various names and epithets. A study of these would be helpful to understanding God better. Yet even if we studied the entire Bible from beginning to

end, we would not exhaust God's name. For one thing, God will give new names to those who receive eternal life in the resurrection (Revelation 2:17).

In addition, Christ will write his own new name on them at that time, according to Revelation 3:12.

If it's new, then we don't know it, do we? So we can be absolutely sure Christ has at least one name we do not know, because Revelation 19:12 tell us this plainly.

What's in a Name?

God's names tell us about him. But God is not a name. Nor should we worship his name. We worship *God*, not the sound of a name – unlike those who make a fetish – an idol – out of one of God's many names.

God's names and titles help us to see some of his character. His names are only symbols of what he is. We respect his names because they represent him. But God reveals himself primarily through his Word. Only a tiny fraction of that Word concerns his name as such.

Christ said he came to reveal the name of the Father (John 1:18; 17:6, 26). Yet we would search in vain for any discussion of its pronunciation or a requirement to use only Hebrew.

What then is meant by these verses?

What Christ revealed is the way. He revealed the way of life, which is the way of the nature of God. That nature is the origin of his names – expressed by whatever different words in whatever language. God's names summarize what he is like and as we respond to God's calling and grace, we come to think and act more like him – to truly know him.

“But this is eternal life, that they might know you the only true God and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ” (John 17:3).

Christians don't get to know God by concentrating on Hebrew characters or their English translations.