

YHWH

A Series on the Names of God: Part 1

Of all the names of God, none are more significant than YHWH (pronounced Yahweh). Because there is no “w” sound in Hebrew, YHWH is also rendered YHVH (Yahveh). These four English letters are the transliteration of the four Hebrew letters that compose God’s name, and these four Hebrew consonants are known as the “Tetragrammaton” (“the four letters”).

While God describes Himself with a term for God (‘elōhîm), He reveals to Moses His memorial name YHWH which is translated into English as “Lord” (Ex 3:13-15).

Then Moses said to God (‘elōhîm), “Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, ‘The God (‘elōhîm) of your fathers has sent me to you.’ Now they may say to me, ‘What is His name?’ What shall I say to them?” God (‘elōhîm) said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM”; and He said, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God (‘elōhîm), furthermore, said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘The Lord (**Yĕhovah**), the God (‘elōhîm) of your fathers, the God (‘elōhîm) of Abraham, the God (‘elōhîm) of Isaac, and the God (‘elōhîm) of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations.” (Ex 3:13-15)

Why does the transliteration appear as “Yĕhovah” instead of “YHWH” or “YHVH”?

Motivated by their understanding of the Third Commandment (Ex 20:7; Lev 24:16) and the implication that the name was too holy, the Jews established the practice of not pronouncing name of God as early as 300 B.C. In Jewish writings today, this practice continues and YHVH is represented by “G-d.”

When transcribing copies of the Tanakh (Old Testament), the Massorete practice involved two people: a reader and a scribe. As a solution when encountering the “Unutterable Name,” the Hebrew term “‘aḏōnai” (my Lord) was pronounced. Over time when vowel points were introduced, the vowels of “‘aḏōnai” were added to YHVH which produced “Yĕhovah.” Early English translations translated “Yĕhovah” into “Jehovah,” because early English spelled a “y” sound with the letter “j.”

Because of the Jewish prohibition of pronouncing YHWH or YHVH, the true pronunciation of God’s name has been lost. Scholars believe “Yahveh” to be the closest approximate pronunciation of the original.

Depending on what manuscripts were used for translation, YHWH is found in some 5788 instances in the New American Standard Bible version and upwards to 6500 instances in the King James Version.

Names have a special significance in Semitic culture, because they have a connection to the individual and are seen as representing the nature of a person. In anticipation of the nation of Israel’s dissatisfaction with the introduction of “the God of your fathers,” Moses asks God for His personal name:

Then Moses said to God, “Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you.’ Now they may say to me, ‘What is His name?’ What shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “**I AM WHO I AM**”; and He said, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘**I AM** has sent me to you.’” (Ex 3:13-14)

Hebrew language scholars indicate that grammatical construction of the phrase “I AM WHO I AM” makes the connection between the name YHWH and God’s essence Himself. The phrase can be understood as “I AM HE WHO EXISTS.”

Up until now, the nation of Israel has been enslaved and oppressed (Gen 15:13-14; Ex 2:23-15), and “I AM HE WHO EXISTS” portends the Exodus. The divine act of the Exodus and the miracles surrounding it demonstrates the reality of God; Yahweh is the God whom Israel must recognize as really existing.

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While Yahweh resides in heaven, He chose a place on earth where His name will dwell (Deut 12:5-14; 14:23-25; 2 Sam 7:13; 1 King 8:10-11). In worship, the name YHWH is virtually synonymous with His presence.

You shall make an altar of earth for Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause My name to be remembered, I will come to you and bless you. (Ex 20:24)

By invoking the name of Yahweh over Jerusalem (Ps 119:13-14; Jer 25:29), over the Temple (1 Kings 9:3; Jer 7:10), and over the Ark (Ex 25:22; 2 Sam 6:2), those places and items are consecrated; the association with His name Yahweh is the basis of sanctity (making them holy).

The Bible records Believers invoking the name of Yahweh to bless and for protection and help.

Then the Lord (**Yĕhovah**) spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying, 'Thus you shall bless the sons of Israel. You shall say to them:

The Lord (**Yĕhovah**) bless you, and keep you;

The Lord (**Yĕhovah**) make His face shine on you,

And be gracious to you;

The Lord (**Yĕhovah**) lift up His countenance on you,

And give you peace.'

So they shall invoke My name on the sons of Israel, and I then will bless them." (Num 6:22-27)

The name of the Lord (**Yĕhovah**) is a strong tower;

The righteous runs into it and is safe. (Prov 18:10)

These examples show that the name of Yahweh assumes a powerful and independent existence of Its own. It can be said that the mere name of Yahweh occupies a place that graven images and statues serve in pagan religions.

In using His memorial name for the preamble of the Ten Commandments, YHWH takes on an additional meaning of the Covenant God.

I am the Lord (**Yĕhovah**) your God ('elōhîm), who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (Ex 20:2)

Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the ordinances which I am speaking today in your hearing, that you may learn them and observe them carefully. The Lord (**Yĕhovah**) our God ('elōhîm) made a covenant with us at Horeb. The Lord (**Yĕhovah**) did not make this covenant with our fathers, but with us, with all those of us alive here today. (Deut 5:1-3; Jer 34:13)

Because of His covenant with Abraham, the name of Yaweh is a gift of revelation to the nation of Israel.

Pour out Your wrath upon the nations which do not know You,
And upon the kingdoms which do not call upon Your name. (Ps 79:6)

And as part of the Mosaic Covenant, Israel has the task of hallowing the name YHWH; misuse of the name is forbidden (Ex 20:7). Included in this is a warning for those who invoke the name when prophesying falsely.

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But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.' You may say in your heart, 'How will we know the word which the Lord (**Yĕhovah**) has not spoken?' When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord (**Yĕhovah**), if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the Lord (**Yĕhovah**) has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him. (Deut 18:20-22)

References:

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2. Brown C, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, (1979).
3. Youngblood RF, ed., *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, (1995).