What Is God's Name:
Adonai, Jehovah, or Yahveh?

"Thus you shall say to the children of Israel,
'YHVH...is my name [*shem*] forever,
and my memorial [*zicharon*] to all generations.'"
(Exodus 3:15)

· Paul Sumner

The Hebrew behind God's name "YHVH" is the so-called Tetragrammaton, the name of four letters: יהוה. It occurs approximately 6,829 times in the Hebrew Bible. [J.R. Kohlenberger III, J.A. Swanson, *The Hebrew English Concordance to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), #3378]

How do we get from "YHVH" to Adonai, Jehovah, Yahveh or Yahweh? Why do Jewish and Christian translators substitute one of these names for "YHVH" in their Bibles and commentaries?

The answer is simple, yet complex.

Jewish Scribes
For over two millennia, Hebrew Bible manuscripts were handwritten and copied using only consonants, no vowels. It's like this:

N TH BGNNNG GD CRTD TH HVNS ND TH RTH
YHVH S MY SHPHRD SHLL NT WNT
BHLD MY SRVNT HV PT MY SPRT PN HM

When cantors chanted the "consonantal" Bible out loud in synagogue, they would pronounce the words using vowels they had memorized for each word of every book.

iN THe BeGiNNiNG GoD CReaTeD THe HeaVeNS aND THe eaRTH
YHVH iS MY SHePHeRD i SHaLL NoT WaNT
BeHoLD MY SeRVaNT i HaVe PuT MY SPiRiT uPoN HiM

Over the centuires, the Jewish scribes decided to incorporate vowel marks with the consonant letters so that the readings were uniform and accurate. This would

protect the Hebrew text from being lost if the trained scribes were ever prevented from passing on their knowledge to trainees. Schools of scribes in Babylon, Jerusalem, and Tiberias emerged to create punctuation systems, accent signs, and eventually cantillation marks (musical notes) for use by cantors. These scribes are the Masoretes.

> [P.D. Wegner, *A Student's Guide to Textual Criticism of the Bible* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 77–78]

Two influential schools of Masoretes arose in the city of Tiberias, on the shore of Kinneret (Lake of Galilee), between AD 780–930. These were the Ben Asher and Ben Naftali families. Their system of marks became authoritative throughout Jewish communities, and are used to this day in handwritten Bible scrolls, mechanically printed Bibles, and all manner of commentaries, prayer books, and other Jewish religious materials.

When the Masoretes came to the Name of God (YHVH), they treated it differently. They did not want anyone, even the cantors, to voice it out loud. In this, they were following a centuries-old tradition of reverencing the Name.

In the early first century, the Jewish philosopher **Philo** [d. 45-50 AD] wrote:

> "At all events, the following law was immediately introduced: 'Whoever curses God shall be guilty of sin, and whoever *names* the name of the Lord shall die.' " (*Life of Moses* II, xxxvii, 203)

In the late first century, the Jewish historian Flavius **Josephus** [37–100 AD] mirrors a similar reticence about the Name.

> "Whereupon God declared to him [Moses] his holy name, which had never been discovered to men before; concerning which it is not lawful for me to say any more." (*Antiquities* 2:12:4 [276])

Nearly a millennium later, the Masoretes still upheld the traditions of religious reticence for honoring God's personal name.

"Jehovah" in Some English Bibles

For many Christians, the name "Jehovah" is familiar, primarily due to the age-long popularity of the King James (Authorized) Version of the Bible. Ironically, this name of God occurs in the KJV only 7 times. Why the translators did not render *YHVH* as "Jehovah" the other 6,822 times where it occurs in the original Hebrew text is a mystery.

• William Tyndale's translation (1525) — Gen 22:14 (*Jehovah-jireh*); Exod 6:3 (*Jehovah*); 17:15 (*Jehovah-nissi*); Judg 6:24 (*Jehovah-shalom*); Ps 83:18 (*Jehovah*); Isa 12:2 (*Lᴏʀᴅ Jehovah*); 26:4 (*Lᴏʀᴅ Jehovah*)

• King James (Authorized) Version (1611) — Gen 22:14 (*Jehovah-jireh*); Exod 6:3 (*Jehovah*); 17:15 (*Jehovah-nissi*); Judg 6:24 (*Jehovah-shalom*); Ps 83:18 (*JEHOVAH*); Isa 12:2 (*Lord JEHOVAH*); 26:4 (*Lord JEHOVAH*)

• Robert *Young's Literal Translation* (1862) — "Jehovah" occurs 5,787 times
• American Standard Version (1901) — "Jehovah" occurs 5,831 times.

[Some data from: www.biblegateway.com]

The Name in Hebrew Bibles

The following examples show how יהוה appears in biblical texts from 125 BC to the late 20th century AD.

Ancient Manuscripts

From the "Great Isaiah Scroll" from the Qumran Dead Sea Scrolls. Dated 125–100 BC. Source: "The Digital Dead Sea Scrolls" (Israel Museum, Jerusalem— http://dss.collections.imj.org.il/.)

From the "Habakkuk Pesher (commentary)" from Qumran. Dated 30–1 BC. Source: *Scrolls From Qumran Cave I* (Jerusalem: Albright Institute of Archaeological Research and The Shrine of the Book, Jerusalem, 1974), p. 80.
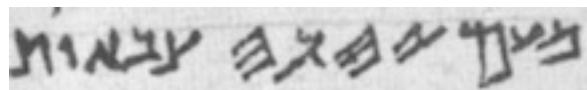

Note that the Name (the middle word) is printed in distinctive Paleo-Hebrew (Proto-Hebrew or Old Hebrew) letters to distinguish it from the other alphabet forms.These three words are from Hab 2:13, here in modern Hebrew script:
↓
מאת יהוה צבאות
Translation: "...from YHVH of hosts."

From a **Septuagint** Greek translation of **Zechariah 9:1-2**. From cave at Nahal Hever (near Qumran). Date: unknown. Source: *Discoveries in the Judæn Desert*, Vol. 8, Plate 19. The third word ("YHVH") is printed in Paleo-Hebrew letters to distinguish it from the Greek words.

↓

OTI TW 𝑚𝑏𝑤 O ϕθΛ
ΘρωΠωΝ ΚΑΙ ΠΑϹ𝑤𝑁
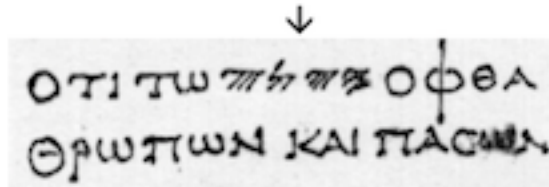
"Tiberian" Masoretic Marks
(Beginning circa AD 900)

1) The Letters of the Tetragrammaton

יהוה
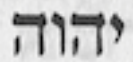
   Reading right to left: י–y   ה–h   ו–v (or w)   ה–h

   Hebrew historians argue whether the third letter ו was pronounced as "v" or "w"; hence we find "YHVH" or "YHWH" in scholarly materials.

Embossing the Name with Diversionary Markings

Embossment #1

In the Medieval era, the Masoretes created ways to prevent someone from pronouncing the central Name of God—YHVH. They appropriated the name *Ado**n**ai*, a plural noun which literally means "our great Lord."

אֲדֹנָי

They took the vowel marks "a" and "o" and "ay" and added them to YHVH.

יְהֹוָה

The last vowel loses its "ay" sound when used without the final letter "yod." Thus, it becomes a simple "ah" sound, though the mark remains visually unchanged. The purpose was based in reverence. When the reader of the Hebrew Bible encountered this hybrid formation, he would say out loud "Adonai."
   Two notes:

   • The "a" vowel mark under the first letter – ֲ – becomes an "eh" sound
      when placed under the letter "y" (yod).

- The familiar spelling "**J**ehovah" misleads most modern speakers of English, for in the Middle Ages, the letter J was pronounced as Y, as in German today. Proper names in modern English Bibles that begin with "J" (Jacob, Jerusalem, Jesus) were *originally* said with Y sound: Yacob, Yerusalem and Yesus.

Without knowing the intention of the Jewish scribes, a student of Hebrew in the Middle Ages would assume this artificial but reverential combination of consonants and vowels should be spoken as "YeHoVaH." Some historians say this spelling first appeared in print around 1520.

Early Masoretic Manuscripts

- **Babylonian** method of pointing (placed above letters). From Aramaic targum (paraphrase) of Hosea 14. Date unknown; ca. 900 AD? Cambridge Codex B-15[1].
Source: E. Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament* (translated E.F. Rhodes; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 155.


Modern Hebrew transcription:
↓

ושובו אל יהוה

Translation: "And return to YHVH."

- **Tiberian** pointing (above, below, within). The Aleppo Codex. Dated: AD 930. Three examples of YHVH. Note that (1) the compound *sheva* — ֱ — was reduced to the simple *sheva* — ְ ; (2) the dot ("o") above the third letter ("v") is included in one scribal hand, but not in the other two; (3) the vertical mark next to the qametz ("a") vowel is a cantillation note.
Source: The Internet Archive [https://archive.org/details/Aleppo_Codex/mode/2up]
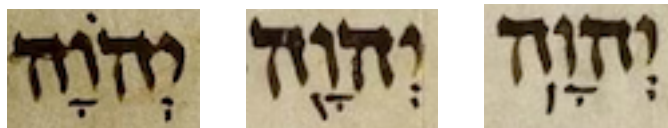
- **Tiberian** pointing (above, below, within). Codex 17 Firkowitsch Collection from Karaite synagogue. Date: AD 930. This uses vowel points above and below the word. The Tiberian method became standard in Jewish Bibles, prayer books,

commentaries, and related literature—to this day. Source: E. Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament* (translated E.F. Rhodes; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 167.

Modern Hebrew:

לַ יהוָֹה אל היכם

The לַ is the consonant "l" with the vowel mark "a" (together meaning "to").
Translation: "To YHVH your God."

• **Tiberian** pointing. Koren *Tanakh* (Jerusalem, 1984). Deuteronomy 6:4, the "Shema." The two enlarged letters [*ayin* and *dalet*] form the Hebrew word *ad*, signifying the verse is a "perpetual witness" to the people of Israel.

Embossment #2

Some 350 times in the Hebrew Bible, the words "YHVH" and "Adonai" occur together.

אֲדֹנָי יֱהוִֹה

Voicing the Masoretic hybrid form of God's Name with his title "Lord" would lead to an awkward spoken phrase: "Adonai Adonai." The scribes solved this dilemma by appropriating the vowel marks from the word "Elohim" [eh...o...i (ee)]—the primary word translated "God."

אֱלֹהִים

They added them to YHVH:

יֱהוִֹה

Thus we find these two words in Masoretic Bibles printed as:

אֲדֹנָי יֱהוִֹה

This pattern directs the Hebrew Bible *reader* to *say*: "Adonai Elohim." An uninformed student of Hebrew might say this combination as "Adonai **Yehovi**."

It occurs in texts such as: Gen 15:2, 8; Deut 3:24; Josh 7:7; Isa 7:7; 61:1; Ps 71:5, 16; 140:7, 8. Of interest, it occurs some 221 times in the book of Ezekiel (2:4; 37:3, 5, 9, 12, 19, 21, etc.).

This artificial combination is rendered in many English Bibles as "Lord GOD" — the small caps on "GOD" are meant to tell the reader that the *actual* Hebrew word is *YHVH*, not *Elohim*. (How many of us read the introduction to our Bibles to notice this disclaimer?)

19th & 20th Century Jewish Bibles

Modern Jewish editions of the Hebrew Bible (aka *Tanakh*) contain both "embossed" renderings of God's Name.

• Isaac Leeser, *The Holy Bible* (1865). Masoretic pointing. The Name appears with two vowel patterns: YHVH and Elohim.

יֱהֹוִה   יְהֹוָה

• Meir Halevi Letteris, *Torah Neviim Ukhtuvim* (1866). Masoretic pointing. The Name appears with two vowel patterns: YHVH and Adonai Elohim.

אֲדֹנָי יֱהֹוִה   יְהֹוָה

• Joseph Magil's *Linear School Bible* (1905). Masoretic pointing in two patterns, and a third modern Orthodox two-consonant abbreviation ("YeYa").

יְיָ   יֱהֹוִה   יְהֹוָה

• Joseph Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (London: Soncino Press, 1963). Masoretic pointing in two patterns: YHVH and Adonai Elohim.

אֲדֹנָי יֱהֹוִה   יְהֹוָה

• *The Book of Psalms* (Tel Aviv: Sinai Publishing, 1971). Masoretic pointing in two patterns.

יֱהֹוִה   יְהֹוָה

• *Biblica Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (German Bible Society, 1983). Masoretic pointing in two patterns. Notice the "o" is not included over the "v."
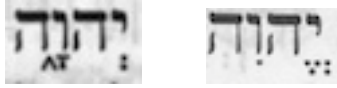
• *Koren* (*Torah Neviim Ukhtuvim)* (Jerusalem, 1984). Masoretic pointing in two patterns. This Israeli edition includes no Masoretic marks with the Name, but it does include the "Yehovi" points.
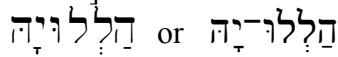

Other Forms of God's Name

Abbreviated forms of God's name occur throughout the Bible.

יָהּ

The most familiar one is "Yah." It occurs 49 times in the Tanakh. It appears in many Bibles in the phrase "Halleluyah," "Hallelujah," or "Halleluiah"—meaning, "praise (all of you) Yah [the LORD].

הַלְלוּ־יָהּ   or   הַלְלוּיָהּ

"Yah" and the form "Yahu" also occurs as the final syllable of certain proper names.

יְשַׁעְיָהוּ—Isaiah—YeshaYahu

יִרְמְיָהוּ and יִרְמְיָה—Jeremiah (both)—YirmeYahu and YirmeYah

נְחֶמְיָה — Nehemiah—NechemYah

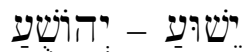The name also appears as the shortened prefix "Yeho–" to some names:
יְהוֹ

Yeho-Shaphat—Jehoshaphat
Yeho-Natan—Jonathan
Yeho-Yaqim—Jehoiakim
Yeho-Ahaz—Jehoahaz

Joshua's *second* name is "Yeho–shuah" (Num 13:16), which was shortened to "Yeshua" in the post-Babylonian Exile era (Neh 8:17, though also "Joshua" in English Bibles).

יֵשׁוּעַ – יְהוֹשֻׁעַ

In the Greek Septuagint, Joshua's two names are both rendered as *Iesous.*

ʼΙησοῦς — Yesous

Greek can't duplicate the original Hebrew "Yeshua," because it doesn't have an "sh" sound and it adds "s" at the end of names ending in a vowel. In the New Testament the Greek behind both "Joshua" and "Jesus" is identical: *Iesous* [Yay-soos].

• God's name can appear as the prefix "Yehu–" [Ye+hu; the LORD is he.]

יֵהוּא—Yehu—Jehu (king of Israel, 1 Kgs 16:1; and four other men)

• The name can appear as the very short prefixes "Ye–" and "Yo–."

יְחִזְקִיָּהוּ—Ye-chizqi-Yahu—Hezekiah (this spelling occurs mostly in 2 Chronicles, e.g, 29:1; it contains two forms of the divine Name: Ye- and –Yahu. "YHVH gives strength").

יְחֶזְקֵאל—Ye-chezqel—Ezekiel (God [El] Strenghens)

יוֹאָב—Yo-Av —Joab (YHVH is father)

יוֹאֵל—Yo-El—Joel (YHVH is El)

יוֹכֶבֶד—Yo-cheved—Jochebed (Moses's mother)

יוֹתָם—Yo-tam—Jotham (son of Gideon)

The Name and Hebrew Grammar

Based on consonant and vowel patterns associated with the Name and citations from ancient literature, several Gentile and Jewish grammarians have concluded the Name should be pronounced *Yahweh* or *Yahveh.*

• *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (ed. by E. Kautsch and A.E. Cowley) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1910), p. 300.

"The divine name יְהֹוָה...has not its original vowels (יַהְוֶה) [Yahveh], but those of אֲדֹנָי [Adonai]."

• Alexander Harkavy*, Students' Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary to the Old Testament* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1914), p. 233.

"יְהֹוָה (prop. יַהְוֶה [Yahveh] ever-being, from הָוָה [havah] with the vowels of אֲדֹנָי [Adonai]."

• F. Brown, S.R. Driver, C.A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* [based lexicon of William Gesenius] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 218.

"The traditional ʾΙαβέ of Theodoret and Epiphanius, the יְהוֹ–, –יָהוּ of compound n.pr. and the contracted form יָה, all favour יַהְוֶה [Yahveh]."

• William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* [based on the work of Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner] (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 130.

"יהוה— ...pronunciation [is] (almost certainly *yahweh)...*"

• J. Weingreen, *A Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 23.

"Another type of deliberate change [by the Masoretes] in reading due, in this case, to reverence, is the Divine Name יַהֲוֶה or יַהְוֶה (Yah[a]weh or Yahweh). The Divine name was considered too scared to be pronounced; so the consonants of this word were written in the text...but the word read...was אֲדֹנָי (meaning 'Lord')."

What Does "YaHVeH" Mean?

In Exodus 3:14 God teaches Israel his *other* name. It's actually the base for *Yahveh*.

Specifically, many linguists say **yhvh** is a *Qal imperfect third masculine singular verb*. Following normal Hebrew grammar patterns, the vowels "a" and "e" would be added to the root consonants, giving us the word **yahveh**.
    When Moses asked for God's name, God said to him, "***Ehyeh asher Ehyeh***—"I will be what I will be" or "I am who I am" (v. 14a). *Ehyeh* is the Qal imperfect **first** person form of the verb **havah**: "I will be."
        ehyeh asher ehyeh — אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה

Havah is the archaic form of the verb *hayah*, which underlines the verb *ehyeh*.
    The central point of this passage is the word play that God uses with

Moses: "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, **'Ehyeh—I will be'** has sent me to you" (Exodus 3:14b). See v. 12: "I will be with you."

Ehyeh by itself is God's shortened name when he speaks *of himself in the first person.*

In contrast, when people refer to God in the **third** person, he taught them to say "**Yahveh—He** will be" (not "I will be").

[Insights from Gerald H. Wilson, <u>Psalms Volume 1</u> (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), p. 210]

So, using two related verbs —*hayah* and *havah*—meaning "to be, exist," God told Moses and all Israel that he who exists and *chooses* to be what he wants to be, will always be to them *faithful* in His covenant promises. This is why and how his "Name" will forever be his Memorial–Name "to all generations" (v. 15b).

"YHVH is God's Descriptive Name"

Another way to reveal to Israel what his name means is to focus on what he *does* in *action*. In the Hebrew world a person's name is a description of who they are in character. Exodus 34:5–7:

> "And יהוה descended in the cloud and stood with him [Moses] as he called upon the name of יהוה. Then יהוה passed by in front of him and proclaimed: ' יהוה יהוה *Elohim*, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast covenant love [Heb. *hesed*] and truth [or faithfulness]; who keeps *hesed* for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin...' "

God then tells them he will not let the "guilty" go unpunished. But the emphasis at the beginning of his profound self-revelation is on his unending willingness to forgive the sins of his people. This is what his name, character, reputation, resident spirit are meant to convey to human beings when they read or hear יהוה.

<p style="text-align:center">Conclusion</p>

The pronunciation of God's holy Name (Exod 3:13–15) is an academic linguistic question. It's similar to asking, What is the correct way to say Jesus's original Hebrew name? We can parse all the details, but they don't tell us much about the real Persons.

With God's Hebrew name YHVH, we saw that the Jewish scribes in part concealed the *sound* of it, using a variety of vowel marks and patterns. They did, however, let other forms stand, though readers not familiar with Hebrew can discern them.

Is his name *Ehyeh, Yahveh, Yehovi, Yah, Yehu, Yo, Adonai*, or *Yahweh?*

Given this variety, perhaps we are meant to think about *who* God is, not how to say his name.

Jesus's Hebrew name is *Yeshua*. From the biblical passages concerning Joshua's name changes, we learn that this form is short for *Yehoshua* or "Yahveh saves."

Not many on earth today pronounce Jesus's name "Yeshua" (though most of his followers in Israel do). People across the globe say his name according to the language customs of their cultures and religious traditions.

Is it necessary to voice his name "correctly"—that is, in its original Hebrew dialect? Or does Jesus/Yeshua, "our merciful and faithful...and great high priest" (Heb 2:17; 4:14), pay attention to our spirits speaking, not our native dialects, when we ask for his help?

Likewise, when Yeshua's Father speaks to us, should we address him as Jehovah, Yahweh, Adonai, Yah, or "God" in our native tongue? Must our prayers focus on proper articulation of sounds that other human beings have defined as "proper"?

What is the Father truly waiting to hear from us?

Paul Sumner / 23 March 2021
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