

Sacred or profane? What's in a divine name?

An Orthodox rabbi said to a pastor visiting Israel that God speaks Hebrew.

“Isn't He able to understand any language?” asked the pastor.

“Yes,” the rabbi replied, “He can understand any language, but Hebrew is His native tongue. Therefore, the Jew prays only in Hebrew.”

I can understand a *religious* Jew making such a comment; recently, however, some Christians have begun to wonder if God could really hear them if they do not address Him in Hebrew. For example, an author¹ claims that a large number of words used today in different English Bible translations have their origin in pagan worship and therefore, must be replaced with Hebrew words. Words such as *Lord, atonement, Jesus, and God*, it is claimed, have to be stricken from the lexicon of English-speaking Christian, because of their “profanity.”

Though a number of people hold, to one degree or another, these extremist views, all share one common denominator known as “The Sacred Name,” and the gist of the argument is that the name of God is YAHWEH. But they take it one big step further—you cannot be saved if you do not use this name. A group called Qodesh la Yahweh, headed by R. Clover, published a four-volume study called *The Sacred Name* in 1989. The major thrust of this publication was to convince Christians that God must be called YAHWEH, and nothing else; more so, your own salvation depends on it.

How do we answer such claims?

What is His name?

If you have ever had a discussion with a Jehovah's Witness, the first question you are likely to hear is this: “Do you know that God's name is Jehovah?” The followers of the Sacred Name theory would argue back: “No, His name should be pronounced as YAHVEH.” They would even go further and assert that the name of “Jesus” is incorrect and should be pronounced as YAHOSHUA.²

The answer to all these questions, of course, must come from the Bible. For starters, the issue of God's name occurs for the first time in Exodus 3; the story of Moses' encounter with God, who appeared to him from the burning bush. Both Jehovah's Witnesses and the followers of the Sacred Name theory would refer to [Exodus 3:15](#) as their most important proof text. We need, however, to start two verses earlier, in verse 13, to understand what is going on. Verse 13 states: “Moses said to God, ‘When I come to the Israelites and say to them, “The God of your fathers has sent me to you,” and they ask me, “What is His name?” what shall I say to them?’ ” God starts answering to Moses in verse 14, not in verse 15. “God said to Moses, ‘Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh.’ ” The Lord continued: “Thus shall you say to the Israelites, ‘Ehyeh sent me to you’ ” ([Exod. 3:14](#), JPS).

This Jewish translation is chosen in order to demonstrate how the traditional English rendering of this phrase “I am that I am” appears transliterated from the original Hebrew. In verse 14, God first calls Himself Ehyeh, not YAHWEH. This important point all but destroys the main argument of the Sacred Name, which asserts that God has a proper sacred name, YAHWEH.

God first calls Himself Ehyeh. What does this mysterious word, Ehyeh, mean?

First, Ehyeh is not a proper name but an imperfect form of the verb to be (Hebrew root HYH). A biblical Hebrew verb does not have a tense (at least as tenses are understood in English) but has what are called perfect or imperfect

aspects. The imperfect aspect denotes an unfinished action. In other words, the Hebrew verb to be (HYH) in the imperfect would mean a state of being that is not complete; that has no end. Thus, the Hebrew Ehyeh has much wider connotations than the English I AM. It encompasses the English idea of *was, is, and will be*—a concept clearly greater than simple “am” of the name “I AM.”

This is exactly what John the revelator wrote. “‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty” (Rev. 1:8, NRSV). That was is how John translated the Hebrew phrase *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh* into the Greek language, whose verb tenses have similar precise structure as in English.

This is the JPS translation of [Exodus 3:15](#):

And God said further to Moses, “Thus shall you speak to the Israelites: The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you: This shall be My name forever, This My appellation for all eternity.

Here the well-known four letters appear: YHWH ‘LWHY ‘BWTYKM, translated, “Yahweh, God of their fathers.” YHWH appears to be an acronym for the longer name, a *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*, used first in verse 14 and whose correct translation we just saw that gave the idea of the One who *was, is, and will be*.

Hebrew grammarians understand that the words YHWH and HYH (pronounced as Ehyeh) have the same root HYH, which means “to be.” In Hebrew letters, *Yud* and *Waw* in writing look very similar and can be grammatically interchangeable. The prefix (*Alef*, spelled with an “E” in *Ehyeh*) marks the first person; the prefix Y (*yud*) marks third person (the Y in YHWH). The divine name YHWH is derived from the Hebrew verb to be third person imperfect, which is written as YHYH, and this is definitely not the same as the first person imperfect of *to be*, which is *Ehyeh*.

Is it important to pronounce His name?

King David wrote in the psalm that “those who *know your name* will trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you” (Ps. 9:10). What does knowing the name imply? Jehovah’s Witnesses insist that calling God by His name is essential for salvation.

Abraham and Jesus did not think so. In Genesis 1 the author says that YHWH appeared to Abraham. When Abraham saw “three men,” he said “Adonai,” which in English is translated as “My Lord.”³ There is no single text in the Gospel where Jesus pronounced the name YHWH. More so, when He taught His disciples to pray, He clearly said “our Father.” On the numerous occasions, we see the description of Him praying, and He was always consistent in how He addresses God—and never as YHWH.

Jesus’ example is very important. In most cultures, when a child calls a parent by their first name, it is considered as a sign of serious disrespect. Of course, we know our Father’s name, but would we call him by this name? If God is our Father, should we not use the example of His Son for our prayers?

In the Near Eastern culture the wife would never call her husband by his first name. When Abigail came to David to apologize for her husband’s conduct, she called him “my master” (1 Sam. 25). Bathsheba addressed her husband, David, in the same manner (1 Kings 1). This type of relations and addressing existed in the ancient Near East because the man was perceived as a woman’s guardian and guarantor in the legal and moral aspects of life. The culture of the family relations and legal system differs today, but did the New Testament change our reverent posture with regards to our relations with God?

Ellen White believed that God’s name has to be treated with the greatest respect.

To hallow the name of the Lord requires that the words in which we speak of the Supreme Being be uttered with reverence. "Holy and reverend is His name." Psalm 111:9. We are never in any manner to treat lightly the titles or appellations of the Deity. In prayer we enter the audience chamber of the Most High; and we should come before Him with holy awe. The angels veil their faces in His presence. The cherubim and the bright and holy seraphim approach His throne with solemn reverence. How much more should we, finite, sinful beings, come in a reverent manner before the Lord, our Maker!⁴

For any religious Jew who understands and appreciates Hebrew, pronouncing the name YHWH signifies grave disrespect to Almighty God. For that reason, the Masoretes, who vocalized consonantal text of the Hebrew Bible, intentionally placed under the consonants YHWH vowels from the word *Adonai* (my Lord). This was a traditional Jewish reading of the Divine Name based on [Genesis 18:2](#).

Medieval Christian scholars were not aware of this Jewish way of writing. They read the word YHWH, together with its mnemonic vowel points, and pronounced it as *Jehovah*. This pronunciation, though incorrect, has remained traditional for many Christian churches. Nobody knows the exact vocalization of the four consonants, which constitute the name of God. The pronunciation *Yahweh* presents a conventional agreement between modern scholars today.

The tradition of the reading of *Adonai* (my Lord) existed at least since the time of the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. The rabbis who wrote this translation used the Greek word KURIOS (the Lord) to translate YHWH tetragrammaton into Greek. The New Testament writers did the same. They had no problem quoting the Psalms and prophetic texts of the Old Testament from the Greek translation. The word KURIOS appears in those quotations numerous times, even though the word YHWH never appears in any New Testament book. Therefore, translators of the Bible into the European languages, seeing these examples of early Bible translations, felt comfortable to translate the name of God into the vernacular languages in order that the people would understand it.

If the name of God is so important, then why does it not appear in the New Testament? Proponents of the Sacred Name theory believe that this missing name is part of a conspiracy theory in which the church intentionally hid the true name of God from the people. According to the theory, the New Testament had originally been written in Hebrew language, but the church intentionally hid its original text. That most of New Testament writers were Jewish and their mother tongue was Palestinian Aramaic is true. (Luke, who was the only non-Jewish New Testament writer, authored his Gospel and the book of Acts in Greek.) There is no space in this article for the discussion about the origin and language of the New Testament; however, for the sake of argument, suppose that some of the New Testament books may have been originally written in Aramaic. Both books of Luke were definitely written in Greek. All Old Testament quotations, which in the original Hebrew contained the tetragrammaton YHWH, Luke records in the Greek as the word KURIOS. Thus, the Lord, who inspired Luke, did not seem to have any problem with having His name translated into Greek, contrary to the claims that use of any name other than YAHWEH is profane and leads the user to perdition.

In the same way, there is no problem in translating the name of God into other languages. Every Hebrew name in the Bible is translatable because it indicated the character of the individual.

Conclusion

The argument insisting that our salvation depends on the Hebrew pronunciation of the name of God is reminiscent of the medieval alchemists who wanted to obtain gold by doing chemical manipulations. In the same way, the alchemists failed because they did not know the fundamental laws of the structure of matter; the Sacred Name theologians have little understanding of Hebrew grammar and biblical textology, which explains why their arguments are full of flaws, inconsistencies, and inaccuracies.

Of course, we must treat the name of our Lord with respect. But salvation is based on our acceptance of Christ's righteousness for us, "the righteousness of God" Himself ([Rom. 3:21 NASB](#)), *not* on the name we use to refer to this God.

1 The author of www.israelitenation.org.

2 The Hebrew transliteration of His name is YESHUA. It is not a proper name. It is a regular Hebrew noun, which means salvation. Grammatical construction proposed by the followers of the Sacred Name does not exist in Hebrew. Greeks pronounce the name *YESHUA* as *Jesus* (*Yesus*). The reason for this is simple. Greek language does not have the sound *sh*. Therefore any Hebrew word, which contains the letter *shin*, would be recorded in the Greek alphabet using Greek letter sigma. Phonetic problems always occur between the languages. Korean language does not have the sound *r*, while Hawaiian lacks a number of sounds, which are present in the English language. Apostles understood the differences between Hebrew and Greek phonology and had no problem with Luke writing the name *Jesus* in his Gospel and the book of Acts.

3 It is important to notice that the word *Adonai* is used in the plural the same way as the word *Elohim*. This indicates the plurality of God. In spite of the fact that both of these nouns are grammatically plural, they occur together with verbs, which are used only in the singular. For example, in the phrase *God said*, the noun *God* (*Elohim*) is grammatically in the plural, but the verb *said* is singular. This makes the word *Elohim* unique in its sense because in such syntax, it has never referred to any pagan deity. Therefore, the first words of the Bible say, "In the beginning Elohim (not YHWH) created (in the singular) heaven and earth." If Moses, definitely moved by the Holy Spirit, wrote *Elohim* in the first words of the Bible, it means that he wasn't afraid of the possible confusion. Therefore, Jewish and Christian commentators believe that *Elohim* is another name for God.

4 Ellen White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn, 1896), 106.