

The Name of the LORD

By Shari Freeland

The name of God is used over 6800 times in the Old Testament. However, in most Bibles, this usually appears as LORD (using all capital letters). In a few cases, when the Hebrew word for Lord is used with the name, it is represented as Lord GOD, where the word, GOD, in capital letters stands for the name. In the Hebrew, the letters for this name are יהוה, read from right to left. The letters are ך = yod, ה = Hey, ן = Vav, ה = Hey.

Historical Use of the Name

This substitution of LORD for the name of God goes back as far as the Septuagint, where the name was substituted with the word, KURIOS, which is Greek for the word, Lord. The Septuagint is the ancient translation of the Hebrew text of the scriptures into Greek, between the 3rd to 1st centuries BCE in Alexandria. Several books of the New Testament quote the Septuagint version of scripture, which differs in a few areas from the Hebrew version.

Jeremiah records the loss of the pronunciation of the name: “Nevertheless hear the word of יהוה, all Judah who are living in the land of Egypt, ‘Behold, I have sworn by My great name,’ says יהוה, ‘never shall My name be invoked again by the mouth of any man of Judah in all the land of Egypt, saying, “As the Lord יהוה lives,” Jeremiah 44:26. Being in Egypt is a picture of being in exile. The nation of Israel had split into the northern kingdom, called Ephraim or Israel, and the southern kingdom, called Judah. By this time, the northern kingdom had already gone into exile. It was Judah’s turn to be removed from the land, as well as lose the pronunciation of the name.

Some people try to explain that the name was not used by common people in order to prevent the misuse of the name, using the name in vain, letting others have access to the power in the name, etc. Some say that the name was only pronounced by the high priest in the holy of holies once a year, during the service for the Day of Atonement. However, the book of Ruth records the name being used in casual conversation:

Now behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem and said to the reapers, “May יהוה be with you.” And they said to him, “May יהוה bless you.” Ruth 2:4

While Adam and Eve and their children were in exile from the garden, the name was revealed to them in Genesis 4:26 “To Seth, to him also a son was born; and he called his name Enosh. Then men began to call upon the name of יהוה.” Genesis 4:26

After this point, we have record of our ancestors using the name: Noah’s father (Gen. 5:29), Noah (Gen. 9:26), Abraham (Gen. 14:22, Gen. 15:2), Sarah (Gen. 16:2), Abraham’s servant (Gen. 24:12), Laban and Bethuel (Gen. 24:50), Isaac (Gen. 26:22,

27:20), Jacob (Gen. 28:16), Leah (Gen. 29:32), Rachel (Gen. 30:24). On Jacob's deathbed, he prophesies over his sons using the name of the Lord (Gen. 49:18).

However, once we get to Exodus chapter 3, Israel has become captives of Egypt, and they no longer know the name of the Lord. "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?" Exodus 3:13.

The response: 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." God, furthermore, said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'יהוה', the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations." v. 14,15.

The Breath of God

Today, we are in the same condition as the Israelites in Egypt. We know the letters of the name, but we don't know how to pronounce it. The yod is recorded by biblical scholars to be pronounced as a 'y' sound, unless it is behaving like a vowel 'ee' sound. Around the 1600's, it began being transliterated as a 'j' sound, as in the difference between Yoseph and Joseph. The hey letter is the 'h' consonant sound or the 'ah' sound. The vav letter is thought to have been originally a 'w' sound, but is modernly pronounced 'v', unless it behaves like a vowel 'long u' or 'long o'. To complicate things more, there are no official vowels in the Hebrew letters. As an example, take the letters 'tn', which in English could be tan, ton, tune, tin, etc.

We do have some help from the Masoretic copy of the Hebrew scriptures, copied by the Masoretes between the seventh and tenth centuries CE. The Masoretes developed a system of noting the vowels with little dots and lines above, below, or next to the letters. Using the consonantal sounds and the vowel marks, scholars have come up with Yahweh, Jehovah, Yahuah, Y'hoah, Yehovah, and the list goes on.

In the majority of the pronunciation speculations, these letters are given consonant sounds, and additional vowels are supplied. My friend, Rebecca, who has spent nearly two decades living in Israel, and so knows the language well, commented on the pronunciation of the name:

"The Name is composed of the 3 semivowels H, W and Y--"semi-vowel" both vowel and consonant (in an alphabet that strictly divides the categories), the 3 structurally most important letters in the alphabet, for a name we can't fathom or pronounce."

So, it is entirely possible that the name is pronounced using most or all vowel sounds, creating a breathy sound, similar to the sound of wind. The Hebrew word for Spirit, Ruach, also means wind and breath.

Meaning of the Name

Strong's lists the meaning of the name as "self-existent". The letters of the name, yod, hey, and vav, can be arranged to spell "who was (hey, yod, hey)", "who is (hey vav hey)" "and who will be (vav, yod, hey, yod, hey)." (see Artscroll footnote page 94) Compare this to Revelations 1:8 "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." See also Rev. 1:4 and 4:8.

The Artscroll Siddur says that the Name represents the attribute of Mercy, and the label, Elohim (typically translated as God when talking about the Creator) represents Judgment. This is a good segue to another reader's comments.

The Exodus 6:3 "Contradiction"

My friend, Frank, raised an issue about a seeming contradiction in scripture. I showed previously that scripture records the Patriarchs as speaking the Name in their conversation. However, Exodus 6:3 says "and I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty [El Shaddai], but by My name, LORD [יהוה], I did not make Myself known to them."

Tony Robinson has an excellent study on this very topic, which I encourage everyone to take the time to read: http://restorationoftorah.org/WeeklyParsha/MBMVa_eira.pdf . In a nutshell, he shows that "I did not make Myself known" isn't that they didn't previously know his name, but that they didn't experience the attribute of this particular name until then. As an example, I am known by most to be a structural engineer. However, most of you have not experientially known me as that since I have not done any work on your homes. Most of you don't really even know what a structural engineer does or what I am capable of doing. If you have ever needed an engineer, however, you would have a much deeper understanding of what one does.

In the spirit of experientially knowing more about יהוה, Frank concludes, "Along with what Tony has shown, I would also look at 1 Cor 13:9-12 and consider that this could also be included as part of growing, knowing and becoming more intimate with Messiah as He progressively reveals the Father to us."

Perhaps it will be the two witnesses in Revelations 11 that reveal the name to God's people once more. "Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is His name or His son's name? Surely you know!" Proverbs 30:4(b)

Scripture verses are quoted in the NASB translation.

Artscroll Siddur: The Schottenstein Edition, Siddur for the Sabbath and Festivals with an Interlinear Translation, Ashkenaz, Rabbinical Council of America (RCA).

Septuagint and Masoretic histories from Wikipedia.

If you are interested in learning Biblical Hebrew, I recommend the following sources:

The First Hebrew Primer (book and audio CDs) by EKS Publishing;

Introduction to Biblical Hebrew by Thomas O. Lambdin

AtHomeWithHebrew computer program from <http://www.hebrewresources.com/>