

# The Name

by Kevin Geoffrey

“And it will come about that whoever calls  
on the name of יהוה will be delivered...” JOEL 2:32, NAS

As the interest in restoring the Jewish roots of our faith persists in gaining momentum, much fervor and zeal continues to characterize the study of even the most minute details of Scripture. One such area of popular interest—and by no means a small detail—is the use and pronunciation of what is commonly referred to as “The Sacred Name.” Many are more than satisfied to refer to the Name verbally as HaShem or ADONAI, or in writing as LORD (L-rd), YHVH, or יהוה without attempts to transliterate or encourage its utterance. Others, however, advocate—often militantly so—for the requirement of its pronunciation. This article is primarily intended to give a perspective on such practice.

## What Is the “Sacred Name”?

“The Sacred Name” is a term used to refer to the widely accepted “personal name” of God: יהוה or YHVH. It is the most prolific name for God, found in Scripture over 6800 times.

In no less than three places, the Torah warns us how to regard the name of יהוה. In Exodus 20:7 (and its parallel passage in Deuteronomy 5:11), the “third commandment” is often rendered as follows:

“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.” (NAS)

The JPS Tanakh renders the same verse:

“You shall not swear falsely by the name of the LORD your God; for the LORD will not clear one who swears falsely by His name.”

The word “[in] vain” or “falsely” translates the Hebrew שָׁוְיָ, *shav* which means *emptiness, nothingness, vanity*.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the person guilty of rendering the Name null and void is to receive punishment. Leviticus 24:15-16 helps to clarify this command.

“You shall speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘If anyone curses his God, then he will bear his sin. Moreover, the one who blasphemes the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death; all the congregation shall certainly stone him. The alien as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death.’” (NAS)

The word “blaspheme” is the Hebrew נָקַב, *nakav* which means to pierce or bore.<sup>2</sup> In tandem with the instructions given in verse 15 about “if anyone curses his God,” the idea of blaspheming the Name seems to be something akin to doing violence to it—essentially abusing it, such that it is rendered ineffective or useless.

Given the seriousness of mishandling the Name and the penalty of death associated with it, this eventually gave rise to a practice within the Judaisms to greatly limit its use—the practice of avoiding the literal speaking of the Name. This is reflected in the JPS translation of the above passage:

“And to the Israelite people speak thus: ‘Anyone who blasphemes his God shall bear his guilt; if he also *pronounces* the name LORD, he shall be put to death. The whole community shall stone him; stranger or citizen, if he has thus *pronounced* the Name, he shall be put to death.’” (emphases mine)

## Historical Avoidance of Pronouncing the Name

The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* concisely tells us,

At least until the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E. this name was regularly pronounced with its proper vowels, as is clear from the Lachish Letters, written shortly before that date. But at least by the third century B.C.E. the pronunciation of the name YHWH was avoided, and Adonai, “the Lord,” was substituted for it, as evidenced by the use of the Greek word *Kyrios*, “Lord,” for YHWH in the Septuagint...<sup>3</sup>

During the Middle Ages, Jewish Scribes—the Masoretes—embedded this avoidance of pronouncing the Name into the development of the Hebrew vowel-pointing system. This system of dots and lines in and around the Hebrew letters was designed to preserve the ability to speak the Hebrew language by indicating vowel sounds, much the same way that the phonetic spelling of words in our modern dictionaries accurately depict how English words are to be pronounced. However, when it came to the Sacred Name, the Masoretes deliberately “pointed” יהוה as יהוה—using the vowel points for אֲדֹנָי, *Adonai*.<sup>4</sup> While not actually changing the Hebrew word itself, this device was employed to remind any reader to speak the name “Adonai” in place of יהוה in keeping with the tradition.

But does the avoidance and disuse of the Name mean that its pronunciation is lost to antiquity? One contributing author in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* says no.

The true pronunciation of the name YHWH was never lost. Several early Greek writers of the Christian Church testify that the name was pronounced “Yahweh.”<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, many authorities assert that the pronunciation is indeed gone. One representative position is:

After the destruction of the Second Temple there remained no trace of knowledge as to the pronunciation of the Name...<sup>6</sup>

The pronunciation of forms of יהוה were preserved for us in the Masoretic text. For instance, יה, *Yah* occurs 49 times in the *Tanakh*, indicating a likely pronunciation of the first two letters of יהוה. Also, there are a plethora of proper names containing a form of the Name, as in the last three letters of ישעיהו, *Y'sha'yahu* (Isaiah), giving a possible pronunciation (“yahu”) for all but the fourth letter of the Name. The same three letters also occur in sequence, but with different vowel pointing, at the beginning of יהושוע, *Y'hoshua* (Joshua),<sup>7</sup> yielding the pronunciation “y'ho” or “yeho.”<sup>8</sup>

So, while “Yahweh” remains the scholarly transliteration (and apparent pronunciation) of choice, there is no way to know *for sure*, as there is a great lack of verifiable data.

## Is Speaking the Name a Biblical Command?

The hot debate over the exact (or approximate) pronunciation of the Name is centered on the idea that Scripture commands us to speak (or do our best to speak) the Name. Such an understanding comes from passages that refer to “calling upon” or “proclaiming” the Name of יהוה.

In reality, however, the idea of calling upon the Name, proclaiming the Name, or praising and blessing the Name does not translate into an explicit command to pronounce the Name—that is, to speak it audibly. Rather, it has to do with making known the person and works of ADONAI; proclaiming His character and His fame; promoting His great reputation. We see this in Deuteronomy 32:3, “For I proclaim the name of יהוה; Ascribe greatness to our God!” where proclaiming the Name is parallel to ascribing greatness to God. Proclaiming or calling upon the Name of ADONAI means to rely upon or declare His attributes.

While many champions for audibly pronouncing the Name will concede to this understanding, the pervading perception is that it fails to address the rudimentary concept of the purpose and use of having a name at all. Hence, it seems incomplete to say that proclaiming or calling upon the name does not contain the element of pronunciation. Indeed, as the thinking goes, there are a multitude of Torah commands that we do not know *exactly* how to do—why should saying the Name be any different? Shouldn't we simply do the best we can to speak the Name of יהוה? Yet, as important as the Sacred Name is to God's redeemed, it was apparently not so vitally important in the lives of some key Biblical characters that the pronunciation of the Name overshadowed the importance of the relationship between the Creator and the created.

For instance, in one of the most dramatic passages of Scripture, ADONAI says to Moses,

“I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name יהוה...” [Then] יהוה came down in a cloud; He stood with [Moses] there, and proclaimed the name יהוה. יהוה passed before him and proclaimed: “יהוה! יהוה! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet He does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations.” Moses hastened to bow low to the ground in homage... (Exodus 33:19, 34:5—8) JPS

ADONAI audibly spoke His Name יהוה no less than three times while Moses stood in His presence. Moses then immediately responded to the proclamation of the Name of יהוה with worship in reverent fear. When Moses next spoke to ADONAI in one of the most profound, intimate moments of His life, He would surely have been within the spirit of the moment to address the Creator according to His Name, now so clearly spoken in Moses' ears. Yet, in the very next verse, Moses speaks to the Creator and says,

אִסְנָא מְצָאתִי חַן בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֲדֹנָי וְלִדְוָנָא אֲדֹנָי בְּקִרְבֵּנוּ כִּי עִם־קִשְׁת־עַרְךָ הוּא וְסִלַּחְתָּ לְעוֹנֵינוּ וְלִחַטָּאתֵנוּ וּנְחַלְתָּנוּ

“If now I have found favor in your sight, אֲדֹנָי (Adonai), I pray, let אֲדֹנָי (Adonai) go along in our midst...”

Exodus 34:9

In the presence of the Creator, having audibly heard the Creator Himself pronounce His Name mere seconds before, Moses responds not by calling Him יהוה, but אֲדֹנָי, *Adonai*.<sup>9</sup>

Consider also the Master Yeshua's practice of not speaking the Name and instead using substitutions, also known as “circumlocutions.” For example, 29 times in Matthew, Yeshua is reported as using the circumlocution “Heaven,” as we see in Matthew 4:17, “From that time Yeshua began to preach and say, ‘Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.’”

Perhaps more importantly, when Yeshua would directly address ADONAI in prayer, He would speak the name, “Father,” and even the most intimate term of all, “Abba.” Yeshua teaches His disciples to pray by addressing the Creator, “...Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,”<sup>10</sup> and in His hour of desperate need, the Son calls out to His “Abba! Father! All things are possible for you; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will.”<sup>11</sup>

Given the examples of Moses and Yeshua alone, we can state with confidence that neither salvation, nor relationship, nor the ability to fulfill ADONAI's commands are in any way jeopardized by not pronouncing יהוה. On the contrary, Yeshua may very well have taught us the fullness of revelation in approaching ADONAI by calling Him “Father.”

## Is יהוה Really His Personal Name?

The debate on this topic is over the importance of יהוה over any other “name” of God found in the Scriptures. But is יהוה really His personal name—in other words, His *only* name? What do we do with passages like Exodus 34:14, which says, “you shall not worship any other god, for יהוה, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God....”?

Yeshua Himself alludes to perhaps the most famous passage regarding the Name when he teaches about His own divine, eternal nature and His oneness with ADONAI.

Yeshua said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, ἐγὼ εἰμι (I AM).” (John 8:58)

This is the exact Greek phrase that the Septuagint (LXX) uses to translate אֶהְיֶה, *eh'yeh* in Exodus 3.

Then Moses said to אֱלֹהִים (*'elohiym*, God), “Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, ‘The אֱלֹהִים (*'elohiym*, 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? אֱלֹהִים (*'elohiym*, God) said to Moses, “אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה (*eh'yeh 'asher eh'yeh*, I AM WHO I AM);” and He said, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘אֶהְיֶה (*eh'yeh*, I AM) has sent me to you.’” אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*, God), furthermore, said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘יהוה (YHVH), the אֱלֹהִים (*'elohiym*, God) of your fathers, the אֱלֹהִים (*'elohiym*, God) of Abraham, the אֱלֹהִים (*'elohiym*, God) of Isaac, and the אֱלֹהִים (*'elohiym*, God) of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is My name (שֵׁם, *shem*) forever, and this is My זִכָּר (*zecher*, memorial-name) to all generations. (Exodus 3:13-15, NAS)

In response to Moses' question, “What is His name?” ADONAI replies, “אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה (*eh'yeh 'asher eh'yeh*, I AM WHO I AM).” The narrative breaks, and then ADONAI goes on to add “יהוה (YHVH), the God of your fathers,” etc. Verse fifteen, however, is curious. ADONAI says “This is My name forever, and this is My זִכָּר (*zecher*, memorial-name) to all generations,” yet in the previous verses, He only refers to אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה (*eh'yeh 'asher eh'yeh*) as His Name. In this passage, He does not say that יהוה is His Name.

I would like to submit that there is a parallelism here. His “name forever” may very well be referring to אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה (*eh'yeh 'asher eh'yeh*), which speaks of his self-existence or self-sufficiency,<sup>12</sup> while His זִכָּר (*zecher*)—the

way we are to *remember* Him and *know* His character—is wrapped up in covenant relationship, that is, as יהוה, the covenant-making God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

This is not a purely original way of understanding this passage. The *Jewish Encyclopedia* states,

The oldest exegetes, such as Onkelos and the Targummim of Jerusalem and pseudo-Jonathan regard “Ehyeh” and “Ehyeh asher Ehyeh” as the name of the Divinity....<sup>13</sup>

But even if “this is My name” is not referring to אֱהְיֶה, *ehyeh*, this passage would indicate that ADONAI’s name is not simply limited to יהוה, but יהוה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתֵינוּ אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב. The point is this: while יהוה is the name most frequently used in the Scriptures for the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we cannot state unequivocally and categorically that it, and it alone, is the Name of God.

He is יְהוָה, (Yah), יהוה (YHWH), אֲדֹנָי (Adonai) our אֱלֹהִים (*’elohiym*, God); He is אֱהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֱהְיֶה (*eh’yeh ’asher eh’yeh*), He is אֵל שַׁדַּי (*el shaddai*, God Almighty), He is אָב (*av*, Father). He is beyond labeling, and beyond containing, yet through His Son, יֵשׁוּעַ, *Yeshua*, we know Him and call Him אָבָא (*abba*, Daddy). What else is left to say, but בְּרוּךְ הַשֵּׁם, *baruch hashem*—bless the Name!

<sup>1</sup> Whittaker’s Revised BDB Lexicon, p. 996. For comparison, the NIV renders the word, “misuse.”

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 666

<sup>3</sup> Louis F. Hartman, “YHWH,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica – CD-ROM Edition Version 1.0* (Keter Publishing House Ltd., 1997): God, Names of.

<sup>4</sup> As a result, English translators of the Masoretic texts who were ignorant of this Jewish tradition thus rendered the name, *Jehovah*—a hybrid of the letters in the Name and the vowel pointings of Adonai, in addition to pronouncing “Y” as “J”. Today, some of our English translations simply use the word LORD in capital letters to distinguish it from אֲדֹנָי, *Adonai*, also often rendered “Lord” in English.

<sup>5</sup> Louis F. Hartman, “YHWH,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica – CD-ROM Edition Version 1.0* (Keter Publishing House Ltd., 1997): God, Names of.

<sup>6</sup> Executive Committee of the Editorial Board, J.F. McLaughlin, Judah David, “Names of God,” *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, p. 163.

<sup>7</sup> Some have suggested that this was a deliberate mispointing of *Joshua* on the part of the Masoretes to further obscure the pronunciation of the Name. This conjecture, however, does not make sense, since the Masoretic pointing of יהוה or any name ending in יהוה is not in dispute, thus raising the question, why would the Masoretes allegedly alter a version of the Name in one place and not in another? Such a practice would call into question the credibility of the entire vowel-pointing system.

<sup>8</sup> Often accompanying the debate over the pronunciation of the Name is the pronunciation of Yeshua’s name. The name יֵשׁוּעַ, *Yeshua*, a contraction of the name יהושוע, *Y’hoshua* (Joshua), preceded the Messiah’s birth by hundreds of years and appears in passages from 1&2Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, translated as “Jeshua,” i.e. Ezra 5:2. According to Matthew 1:21, He was named “Yeshua” because *he himself* would save his people from their sins. (Contrast with Y’hoshua, meaning “Yah saves.”) “Yeshua” is also the masculine form of the Hebrew word for “salvation” (יְשׁוּעָה, *y’shuah*), which we see in such passages as Psalms 118:14: לַיְהוָה לִישׁוּעָה—“The LORD (יהוה, Yah) is my strength and song, And He has become my salvation (יְשׁוּעָה, *y’shuah*).” The idea that Yeshua’s name must *contain* the Father’s name, making His name “Yahshua” or some other variant, comes from a distortion of John 5:43 where Yeshua says, “I am come in My Father’s name” (cf. 10:25). If we take Yeshua’s statement to mean that His own name must contain the Father’s name, then following this same logic, we ourselves cannot do anything ‘in the Father’s name’ unless our own personal name contains the syllable ‘Yah.’ Coming in the Father’s name means simply to come in the Father’s power and authority, which Yeshua clearly did (see Matthew 28:18).

<sup>9</sup> Some may object to this explanation of Exodus 34:9 based on a belief that the Masoretes deliberately altered the Hebrew text in 134 different places—Exodus 34:9 being one of them—citing *The Companion Bible*, Appendix 32, Kregel Publications. However, the writers of *The Companion Bible* and others have misunderstood the Masoretic notes on this subject. While there are about 17 or 18 “corrections of the scribes” (listed in Mechilta on Exodus 15:7 and Midrash Tanchuma on Exodus 15:7), the 134 entries in question are the times listed by the Masoretes when the word אֲדֹנָי, *Adonai* is considered to be equivalent to יהוה **according to their tradition**—not deliberately changed and substituted for it.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 6:9 (NAS)

<sup>11</sup> Mark 14:36 (NAS)

<sup>12</sup> Executive Committee of the Editorial Board, J.F. McLaughlin, Judah David, “Names of God,” *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, p. 160-161.

<sup>13</sup> Crafword Howell Toy, Ludwig Blau, “Tetragrammaton,” *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, p. 119.