

“If Jehovah Isn’t the Real Name of God, What Is?”

When the Bible was translated, the interpreter translated the name of God as “Jehovah.” My main question is, What was the original name of God? Because I read that his name was translated wrong, and that his real name is YAOHU. Is this true?

Thank you for writing. I will try to explain this to you with the following information:

God is referred to in the Bible by many names, but the primary three are:

Elohim

Translation: “God,” as in Genesis 1:1: “in the beginning God created...”

Yahweh

Translation: “Lord,” as in Psalm 23:1: “The Lord is my Shepherd...”

Adonai

Translation: “Ruler, Master, Lord,” as in Psalm 35:23: “my God (Elohim) and my Lord (Adonai).”

We need to understand the rendering of these three names of God as we find them in our Bibles today, whether in English, Spanish, and all other modern translations. But we must first understand some things about the development of the Hebrew language.

First of all, ancient Hebrew was distinctive, in that there were two traditions which were involved in the handing down of the Hebrew text as we know it today. One was written (Kethiv), and the other was oral, spoken (Qere).

Up until the Tenth Century A.D., all Hebrew written texts in existence and available (for study, worship) had one distinguishing feature: the text consisted of consonants only. In other words, there were no vowels! But since there was also an oral tradition, the Jews who spoke Hebrew knew what the vowels were and just supplied them as they read the text.

Examples in English: McDnlds=McDonalds; prkwy=parkway; frwy=freeway.

Around 906 A.D., a group of Hebrew scholars at Tiberias (on the Sea of Galilee) known as the Massoretes developed a system of little "dots" and "dashes" representing all of the vowel sounds. These were superimposed upon the written Hebrew text at that time. The Massoretes were concerned that the Hebrew language would be lost, as fewer and fewer people knew and spoke it. So these scholars took steps to make sure that all future generations of Jews would be able to speak the language accurately since they would now have a written record of the ancient vowel sounds. All of our modern Hebrew translations are based upon the work of the Massoretes.

Now let's look back at our three names of God.

The term *Elohim* has always meant "God," but is not germane to our discussion of your question.

The issue of *Jehovah* is derived from the other two primary names of God.

The term *Yahweh* is always translated by the word "Lord." But we must understand that every time a Rabbi or any Jew was reading any portion of the Old Testament and came upon this written word "YHWH", he orally said "Adonai," not "Yahweh." The reason for this is that the Jews considered the written term YHWH so sacred that it should never be spoken or expressed with the lips.

That is the reason why, when they were reading (speaking) and

came to "YHWH," they always substituted "Adonai" and spoke it instead. This has been practiced by the Jews back to Jesus' time, and long before.

Now, where does "Jehovah" come from? Well, what were the Massoretes to do when they were adding their vowel-system to the written Hebrew text and they came upon the word, "YHWH?" Since no Jew had ever heard or known the true pronunciation of this most sacred of names for the Hebrew God, they put there the identical vowel-pointings which are rendered for Adonai!

In reality, the Jews were just doing what they had always done: they spoke "Adonai" every time they read "YHWH" in the text.

The vowel sounds in Adonai are "OH" and "AH." Thus, "Yahweh" becomes "YHO VAH" (rendered in English as "Jehovah").

Most scholars have concluded that the term "YHWH" is actually based upon the "to be" verb in Hebrew, "HYH" (HAYAH). The future tense of this verb is YHWH (Yahweh). They refer back to the passage in Exodus where God is actually asked His name. Moses says, "Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I shall 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?" And 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.'"

I hope this answers your question. You can see from this explanation that the issue was not that someone translated it wrong. It was done with reverent intention. I hope this answers your question adequately.

Jimmy Williams, Founder
Probe Ministries

This e-mail also came in with a similar question:

This message is in reference to using the word "Jehovah" to mean the God of the Bible. I assume you know that it is YHWH with the vowel points for "Adonai" added. This was to remind the Torah reader to say "Adonai" instead of YHWH, which was (and is) considered sacred to the Jews. I do not see how one can use a hybrid of two names for God and still be correct. If someone were to call me "Jasen" with different vowels inserted, I probably would not respond. I understand God is an omniscient, compassionate God that knows our shortcomings and misunderstandings, but if we can do it right, shouldn't we?

Your questions about the relationship of YHWH, Adonai, and Jehovah have to do with the tradition of the Jews and their reverence for the name of Yahweh, which comes from Exodus 3:13 when Moses asked God to tell him what he should say when Pharaoh and the Egyptians inquired as to who had sent him (Moses) on his mission of deliverance. Remember, the Lord told Moses to take his shoes off because he was on "holy ground."

God's answer was, "I AM THAT I AM." Actually, the word YHWH is a form of the "to be" verb in Hebrew, "eyeheyeh." It ties into the idea in the New Testament where Jesus said to the Pharisees, "Before Abraham was (existed), I AM (that is, I continually exist)" (John 8:58-59). The Hebrew translation is "underived existence."

Unger's Bible Dictionary says that "this custom which had its origin in reverence, and has almost degenerated into a superstition, was founded upon an erroneous rendering of Lev. 24:16, from which it was inferred that the mere utterance of the name constituted a capital offense. According to Jewish tradition, it was pronounced but once a year by the high priest on the Day of Atonement when he entered the Holy of Holies; but on this point there is some doubt." (p. 565).

This reverence carried over into the Jewish thinking about the awe, fear, and reverence to which God was entitled. The Jews scrupulously avoided every mention of it. The true

pronunciation of it was known to the Hebrews, but has been entirely lost. They continued to write YHWH in the text, but when pronouncing the text always substituted another name for God, usually Adonai.

You are right in your explanation that the Jews used the vowel pointing of Adonai to YHWH, from which we get the English word, "Jehovah," hence the form Yehowah and name Yehvh. There is a strong possibility that the name Jehovah was anciently pronounced as Yahweh, like Iabe of the Samaritans. But I must remind you that the entire vowel pointing system did not come into use until the 10th century A.D. This was designed by the Massoretes located at Tiberius on the Sea of Galilee, and their desire was to weld together two traditions of the Old Testament text at that time: the KETHIV (written text) and the QERE (spoken, oral tradition).

Let me explain it this way. Until the tenth century A.D., the written Hebrew text contained only consonants. The reason for this is that those who spoke Hebrew knew what the vowels were. The Pharisees of Jesus' day knew the Old Testament by heart, from Genesis to Malachi. This had nothing to do with literacy or education. This is the oral tradition. Even today many Muslims can quote the entire Koran by memory. Since the Jews had this oral tradition, they knew the Scriptures and they knew what the vowel sounds were.

Let me give you an example: Read these modified English words: blvd=boulevard; pkwy=parkway; McDnlds=McDonalds, and so on.

What the Massoretes did was to devise a vowel pointing system which was superimposed over the written, consonantal text. The reason for doing this was to bring these two traditions together and stabilize the text for perpetuity so that the language would not be lost. Amazingly, this same Hebrew is now in operation in Israel. And when you see modern Hebrew written, the vowels are again omitted as in ancient times, because Jews who read and speak Hebrew know what vowels are to

be supplied.

My point with all this is that long before the vowel pointings (which seem to be hanging you up) were created, the Jews were *already* referring to YHWH as “Adonai.” This goes way back in the Jewish tradition, even before the time of Christ. The Qumran community (Dead Sea Scrolls) also had this practice.

In summary, the action of substituting Adonai for YHWH had little to do with the vowel pointing you mention, and everything to do with an ancient practice of the Jews (in respect or perhaps superstition) not to utter the sound of the “ineffable Tetragrammaton” (YHWH cf. *Websters Dictionary*). The practice is not, in reality, a “hybrid” of the two names, as you suggest, but rather a substitution of the one for the other. Your analysis of the vowel pointing is accurate as a means of reminding/warning the reader not to utter “YHWH” after the 10th century A.D. , but we have no knowledge or of any such indicator provided in the written Hebrew text giving such a warning prior to the Massoretic tradition.

I hope this answers your question.

Sincerely in Christ,

Jimmy Williams, Founder
Probe Ministries

Published June 2003

See Also *Probe Answers Our Email*:

- [“Is It Wrong to Speak of God as Jehovah?”](#)
- [“Jehovah Is the Only Name of God!”](#)
- [“Why Did the Jews Not Say God’s Name Aloud When He Never Said Not To?”](#)