

What is God's name in the Bible?

An article by Leong Kahang (2019 revised edition)

The Bible (the Old Testament) was written in Hebrew, the language of the Jewish people. For the Jews the Bible refers to their Hebrew Scripture in the first place. In the Bible the sacred name of God is יהוה. It appears more than 6,800 times, being the highest occurrence among all the names and titles of God. By comparison, such important word as "*Elohim*" (God) has only 2,600 occurrences. יהוה is composed of four Hebrew consonants (Hebrew is written from right to left). Its English transliteration is YHWH (or YHVH). In many Scripture-related books and articles YHWH represents the name of God.

Meaning of the name YHWH

The Bible opens with the words:

In the beginning, God (*Elohim*) created the heaven and the earth... And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, "Light!" and there was light.

From this we infer that *Elohim* is used to refer to God as the Creator of the Universe, the Almighty whose power has no limit, God the Most High. As for the name YHWH, it first appears in chapter 2 of Genesis. Gen 2:7 says,

Then the LORD God (YHWH *Elohim*) formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. (NASB)

Compared to the word *Elohim*, the construction "YHWH *Elohim*" highlights the fact that the Creator's name is YHWH, and that He is very close to all His creation. For man (Hebrew: *Adam*), God drew so near as to breathe into his nostrils.

In the account of Exodus chapter 3 God came to Moses in the burning bush and Moses asked God what His name was. Moses said in verse 14,

Now they may say to me, “What is His name?” What shall I say to them?
God replied, “*Ehyeh asher ehyeh*.”

(*Ehyeh asher ehyeh* means I am who I am ¹ or I will be who I will be ².)

This is intriguing. What does God’s reply mean? In verse 14 God did not seem to be answering Moses’ question. Only in the next verse God went on to reveal His name. God said (verse 15),

...YHWH, 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.

Why did God say “*Ehyeh asher ehyeh*” before He said that His name was YHWH? What does the name YHWH mean? In light of the Exodus 3 account, it is obvious that the clue is in the phrase “*Ehyeh asher ehyeh*”.

Ehyeh is a verb, the imperfect form of *hayah*. The ancient Hebrews thought of actions only in terms of incomplete or complete. Actions that are considered incomplete are expressed by the Hebrew imperfect. It loosely corresponds to the present tense and the future tense in English. Actions that are considered complete (whether past, present or future) are denoted by the Hebrew perfect. Thus it has the potential to be translated into English either with the past tense, or the present tense or even the future tense.

Depending on the context *hayah* can mean: “be”, “happen, come about”, “become”, “exist”. Accordingly, as the imperfect of *hayah*, *ehyeh* can mean: “am” or “will be”, “happen” or “will happen”, “become” or “will become”, “exist” or “will exist”. On account of the Hebrew imperfect, *Ehyeh asher ehyeh* embodies both a present and future element. On this basis, not a few English translations have rendered the phrase as “I am who I am” ¹ or “I will be who I will be” ².

Why then does the Chinese Union Bible render the phrase as “the Eternal One” (我是自有永有的, 那自有的) ? The reason is: in this instance the translation is not strictly based on syntax and semantics, but is interpretive paraphrase. And the

¹ Cf. New American Standard Bible, New King James Bible, New Revised Standard Version, New International Version etc.

² Complete Jewish Bible.

rationale is traceable. The only person who can say that he is who he is and he will be who he will be is God the Eternal One.

The above are representative Christian translations, they reflect semantic, syntactic and interpretive considerations of the translators. Nevertheless, in terms of bringing out the overtones of *Ehyeh asher ehyeh* as is nuanced by the context of Exodus 3, these seem inadequate. Here, traditional Jewish Bible translations are noteworthy.

A Targum is an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible. Targumim (plural) frequently expand translation with paraphrases and explanations in order to make it easy to understand. For instance, the so-called Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (its correct title is originally Targum Yerusalmi) is a paraphrase of the Pentateuch from the land of Israel. It explains Exo 3:14 as follows.

And the Lord said to Mosheh, “He who spoke, and the world was; who spoke, and all things were. He said, This you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I AM HE WHO IS AND WHO WILL BE has sent me to you.’ ”

Note the manner in which Pseudo-Jonathan paraphrases Exo 3:14. YHWH, who with His limitless power created all things, is sovereign over all; He proved Himself to be so in the past and will be so in the future; Israel shall be saved if she trusts in Him.

Rashi is considered the greatest Jewish scholar in Europe in medieval times. His commentary on the Hebrew Scripture, especially the Pentateuch, is accepted as authoritative by all Jewish communities. Commenting on Exo 3:14 Rashi wrote:

“*Ehyeh asher ehyeh* — I will be with them in this sorrow, I Who I will be with them in the subjection they will suffer at the hands of other kingdoms.” (*Berakhot 9b*) Whereupon Moses said to Him, “Lord of the Universe! Why should I mention to them other sorrows? They have enough with this sorrow!” God replied to him, “You have spoken rightly. Thus you shall say, ‘*Ehyeh* I AM — without the addition of *asher ehyeh* which has reference to future sorrows — has sent me to you.’ ”

For Rashi, *Ehyeh asher ehyeh* means “I will be with them in this present sorrow and I will be with them in future sorrows.”

We can see that both Rashi and the translator of Pseudo-Jonathan opined that there were overtones to YHWH's response to Moses. Not only did they thoroughly consider syntax and semantics of the text, they were also mindful of the predicament of the Israelites as slaves in Egypt. In other words, they (especially Rashi) complied with the basic principle of exegesis that the meanings of words must be understood in their context. (cf. Exo 3:7) This is precisely where Christian translations fall short.

However, while there is value in all the viewpoints quoted above, Moses' question was about God's name. Why did God not answer him directly? Why did He have to mention "*Ehyeh asher ehyeh*" which was not a name? The author of this article posits that, God wanted Moses to know He was ineffable. No word could fully describe Him; no name could comprehensively represent Him (v14). Yet, in order that mankind might establish a rapport with Him, the name YHWH was revealed (v15). On this point the Bible resonates with Laozi³.

In summary, the name YHWH means that the Creator who is transcendent is also immanent; God is with us in all our joys and sorrows.

Pronunciation of YHWH

What is the pronunciation of YHWH? Is "Jehovah" the correct pronunciation?

Prior to the exile of the ten tribes of Israel in the 8th century BCE and that of Judah in the 6th century BCE, the ancient Israelites knew how the name was pronounced. During the Babylonian exile, however, the spoken use of the name gradually ceased among the people out of fear of misuse, though knowledge of the pronunciation was preserved in rabbinical schools. By the 2nd century CE, in Rabbinic Judaism, use of the name was strictly prohibited, and YHWH became known as the "Ineffable Name". For scripture reading and prayer, YHWH must be pronounced as *Adonai* (meaning "my Lord") . In other circumstances, when a Jew wanted to refer to YHWH in the third person, the term *HaShem* ("the Name") was used instead.

³ The first chapter of *Lao Tzu* (otherwise known as *Tao Te Ching*) says, "The *Tao* that can be told is not the eternal *Tao*. The name that can be named is not the eternal name."

It was not so before the exile. The priests understood the liturgical importance of addressing God with the name, the Israelites must have known how it was pronounced also. Consider the following two passages. Firstly, Exodus chapter 33 and 34, where Moses asked God to show him His ways and His glory. God replied that no man could see His face in this life (33:20), but promised to show him how He managed the Universe by goodness and wisdom. (33:13, 19) The next day God appeared to Moses, and Himself, pronounced His very name twice, saying:

YHWH, YHWH, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. (34:6 NRSV)

Again consider Numbers chapter 6 where God gave specific instructions that the priests should bless the people always by invoking the sacred name:

Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, "Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them,
YHWH bless you, and keep you;
YHWH make His face shine on you, and be gracious to you;
YHWH lift up His countenance on you, and give you peace.
So they shall put My name on the sons of Israel, and I will bless them.
(Num 6:23-27 NRSV)

YHWH must have been a household name at the time.

In ancient Israel the word "*Hallelujah*" ("j" in Old English is pronounced "y") is commonly used in the Psalms. It is a compound word which is made up of "*Hallelu*" and "*Yah*", where "*Hallelu*" means "You shall praise", thus "*Hallelujah*" means "You shall praise Yah".

Evidently Yah is the contracted form of YHWH. On its own this contracted form appears 41 times in the Psalms in the Hebrew Bible, such as Psa 150:1, 6; 68:19 etc. It is also found in Exo 15:2; Isa 12:2 and 26:4. Isa 26:4 says,

Trust in YHWH forever, for Yah YHWH is an everlasting rock.

Unfortunately this unique expression "Yah YHWH" of the original text is not preserved in many translations including the Chinese Union Bible.

There was also a practice of attaching “Yah” to the end of proper names, a practice which continued during the Babylonian exile and even after. For example, Isaiah, *Yeshayahu* in Hebrew, is formed by combining *Yesha* and *Yahu*, and it means Yah is salvation. Zephaniah is *Tzpanyah* in Hebrew, from *Tzfan* and *Yah*, it means Yah conceals. Zechariah, *Zechareyah* in Hebrew, means Yah remembers. For a modern example, the name of the current Prime Minister of Israel *Netanyahu* means Yah gives, being a compound of *Netan* (gift) and *Yahu*. Based on the above, we can be certain that the first syllable of YHWH is Yah.

As for the second syllable, most scholars infer⁴ that it should be pronounced “ve” or “we”, so that YHWH is pronounced “Yave” or “Yawe”.

How experts came to this conclusion was based on a statement by one Theodoret. Theodoret lived in the Syrian city of Cyrus in the 5th century CE, being bishop of the Syrian Orthodox Church in Cyrus. Commenting on the pronunciation of YHWH he wrote,

The Samaritans addressed it as *IABE*⁵.

Theodoret quoted the Samaritans as maintaining that the sacred name should be pronounced “*IABE*”. Technically the religion of the Samaritans is a branch of Judaism, despite the fact that mainstream Rabbinic Judaism on the one hand, and Samaritan Judaism on the other, consider each other as unorthodox. In the author’s view, Theodoret quoted the Samaritans because he had deemed their pronunciation reliable. And this is because Samaritan Judaism had always developed on its own, free from any influence of Rabbinic Judaism; thus the proper pronunciation had been preserved.

According to Samaritan tradition, therefore, יהוה (YHWH) is pronounced “*IABE*”. The first syllable “IA”, pronounced “ya”, apparently corresponds to YAH. Note “IA” has had “H” omitted. This is because in יהוה, both occurrences of the alphabet ה (“H”) is silent, that is, not pronounced, and as such can be omitted in transliteration.

As for the second syllable “BE”, how does it become “ve” (or “we”)?

⁴ But this is by inference. To date, the pronunciation of the second syllable remains a subject of debate.

⁵ Theodoret of Cyrus, *Quaestiones in Exodum*.

In the author's view, there are two reasons. Firstly, accordingly to modern Hebrew pronunciation, the second syllable of the name יהוה begins with the letter ו (named Vav), and Vav is pronounced "v"; thus it can be inferred that "BE" should be pronounced "ve". Secondly, in certain languages the letter B is actually pronounced "v". For instance, in modern Greek, native speakers call the Greek letter B "Vita" and pronounce it as "v". In contradistinction to non-Greek people who by convention call it Beta and pronounce it as "b".

Likewise, according to modern Hebrew pronunciation, the 2nd Hebrew alphabet ב , though named Beth, is pronounced "v"; only when a dot is added in the centre, as in בּ , is it pronounced "b". This explains why Theodoret wrote "IABE" instead of "IAVE", when presumably he meant "Yave" (YHVH).

So much for pronouncing YHWH as "Yave" (or "Yahveh" where "h" is silent). But why is W pronounced as "v"? And what about "Yahweh"? Why is there a distinction? Which is right?

As transliteration of יהוה, YHWH originates from continental Europe, and later comes to us via the English-speaking world. The fact is, the first non-Jewish Hebrew scholars were Europeans, notably German. The celebrated Wilhelm Gesenius (1786-1842) is the best example. Gesenius opined that God's name was pronounced as *Yahweh* (or *Yave*, "h" is silent) and transliterated יהוה as YHWH. Though readers should bear in mind that in German W is pronounced "v" not "w".

In this light, Waw and Vav are one and the same in sound. There is no distinction between YHWH and YHVH in sound. Only in time did "Yave" slowly become "Yawei" in the English-speaking world; and the letter ו (Vav or Waw) was pronounced "w" (as in English) instead of "v".

Is it correct to translate YHWH as Jehovah?

The translation of YHWH as "Jehovah" originates with the Authorised Version of the Bible (aka King James Version) in 17th century England. Is "Jehovah" the correct translation?

As mentioned above, by the 2nd century CE, invoking the sacred name was strictly prohibited in Rabbinic Judaism. In liturgy and scripture reading, YHWH was pronounced as *Adonai* (my Lord). By the 7-10th century, Masoretes scribe-

scholars added vowel notation to יהוה in order to cue readers to say *Adonai*. Thus יהוה appeared as יהוה where the added vowel pointings represent the vowels “a-o-a” of the word *Adonai*.

The problem began when it was supposed that by virtue of the added vowel notation YHVH somehow became “YeHoVaH”. Vowel pointings are not part of God’s name. The sacred name is not Jehovah. For the Jew, no proper name as “*Jehovah*” ever existed, let alone taking it as the pronunciation of God’s sacred name. The Authorised Version’s rendering of YHWH as “Jehovah” is baseless. The Chinese Union Bible was wrong in following the Authorised Version’s footsteps. In fact, today few modern English Bible translations would render YHWH as Jehovah. Almost all English versions, following the Jewish tradition of addressing God as *Adonai*, render YHWH as “the LORD”.

YHWH is pronounced “Yahveh” or “Yahweh”

It is right to show reverence for God’s sacred name. However, to ban invocation of the name is uncalled for. The third Commandment says that “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God”, it does not say that we shall not call upon the name. And how can we call upon God’s name when we do not know how it is pronounced?

In summary, according to the majority of scholars, יהוה (YHWH) is pronounced *Yahveh* or *Yahweh* (where “w” is “v” and “h” is silent). In Chinese an approximation would be 雅伟 or 雅威 (Ya Wei).

O what blessed name of the only true God!
The Most High, whom no word can describe.
He is with us, and will be with us, in all our joys and sorrows.

“Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your holy name.”⁶

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⁶ Words of Jesus, from the Lord’s Prayer in the New Testament.