

History of the Tetragrammaton

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The question of the historical development of the name YHWH is quite simple. It was the name God gave himself according to Exodus 3.

The textual tradition is solid and there aren't any textual variants to the name of God. It has always been written using the four letters Yod, He, Vav, He (YHVH). In English the "V" and the "W" represent the same Hebrew letter.

Tetragrammaton. The technical term for the four lettered Hebrew name of God יהוה (i.e. YHWH or JHVH). Owing to its sacred character, from c.300 BC the Jews tended to avoid uttering it when reading the Scriptures, and substituted 'Adonai' (i.e. the Hebrew word for 'Lord'), whence the rendering Κύριος of the *Septuagint, Dominus of the *Vulgate, and 'the LORD' in most English Bibles. When *vowel points were put into Hebrew MSS those of 'Adonai' were inserted into the letters of the Tetragrammaton, and since the 16th cent. the bastard word 'Jehovah', obtained by fusing the vowels of the one word with the consonants of the other, has become established.

The original pronunciation is now commonly thought to have been 'Yahweh' or 'Jahveh' and both these forms (but nowadays esp. the former) are frequently found in scholarly works. The name is undoubtedly very ancient and was certainly in use by c.850 BC, as it occurs on the *Moabite Stone. Some scholars have held that its original form was 'Yah' (cf. Exod. 15:2 [RV margin] and Ps. 68:4). The traditional explanation of the meaning of the name as connected with the verb 'to be' is given in Exod. 3:14 f. (cf. 6:2 f.). (F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. rev. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1604-05)

Moabite Stone (c.850 BC). An inscription in Moabite (a dialect very closely related to Hebrew) discovered in 1868 by F. Klein at Dîbân, E. of the Dead Sea (the biblical Dibon, Num. 21:30, etc.; the Moabite capital), and commemorating the successes gained by Mesha, King of Moab, against *Israel. The text, which has several points of contact with the Bible (particularly 2 Kgs. 3:4–27, which gives an account of the same events from the Hebrew side), indicates a close kinship between the Moabite religion of Chemosh and the contemporary conception of *Yahweh in Israel. The stone was broken up by the local Bedouin during its removal; but a squeeze had already been taken and this, together with many fragments of the stone, is preserved in the Louvre at *Paris.

Crit. edn. of the text by J. C. L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, 1 (Oxford, 1971), pp. 71–83, with Eng. tr., and comm. Eng. tr. and comm. also by E. Ullendorff in D. W. Thomas (ed.), *Documents from Old Testament Times* (1858), pp. 195–9, with bibl. A. Dearman, *Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab* (Atlanta, Ga.

[1989]). (F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. rev. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1104.)

The Name of God (→ III, 92 ff.).

In Scripture reading in synagogue worship the tetragrammaton was read as Adonai, but in the schools הַשֵּׁם [hashem] was used in quotations from Scripture. Sometimes this is also used for Elohim, cf. Meg., 4, 3 with Ber., 7, 3. In reading the Law the Samaritans put אֲשֵׁם [sheme] for the tetragrammaton.

The tetragrammaton יהוה is the name par excellence. More specifically the tetragrammaton is הַמְּיוּחָד שֵׁם [shem hameyuched] “God’s own name,” or הַמְּפֹרָשׁ שֵׁם [shem hamforesh] “the separated, special name peculiar to God,” His proper name as distinct from designations, the name which is generally kept secret and uttered only on special occasions....The use of אֲשֵׁם for the tetragrammaton occurs already in Lv. 24:11, 16.

In S. Nu., 39 on 6:23 the matter is discussed by R. Josia and R. Jonathan. Both agree with the Mishnah and attest that the tetragrammaton was pronounced in temple worship. Acc. to the Tannaitic tradition (Abba Shaul) he who pronounces the name will lose his portion in the hereafter. The sharp commands of the Rabbis against uttering the name led in time to a forgetting of the original pronunciation of the tetragrammaton. Mishnah attests to the use of hashem to sub for the tetragrammaton. (vol. 5, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-), 268-69.)

In the Dead Sea Scrolls, the community of the Essenes chose to change the script they wrote the Tetragrammaton in as a way to show it was sacred. They would write that one word in ancient Hebrew script rather than the script they were currently using.

YAHWEH [yā'wə, yā'wā]. † The covenant name of the God of Israel. According to the biblical account, it is the name by which God identified himself to Moses in the encounter at the burning bush (Exod. 3:14). See I AM WHO I AM.

Because of the utmost sanctity ascribed to the name, Jews from postexilic times on have declined to pronounce it in public reading, and only the consonants were written (YHWH; the Dead Sea Scrolls use the archaic, “paleo-Hebrew” script). Although the original pronunciation was thus eventually lost, inscriptional evidence favors yāhwē or yāhwē. The name is represented in the MT by the consonants with the vowel pointing for אֲדֹנָי “Lord.” From this derived ca. the sixteenth century the form “Jehovah” (yehōwāh). In modern usage pious Jews often substitute the expression haš-šēm “the Name.”

Bibliography. D. N. Freedman and M. P. O'Connor, “YHWH,” TDOT 5 (1986): 500–521. (Allen C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 1074-75.)

The Reasons for Reticence in Relation to the Name.

- a. The nature of God is thus compressed in the name of God.
- b. ...in the story of the cursing of God in Lv. 24:11 they substituted the cursing of the name, or the Greek translators of Ex. 4:24 LXX, who wrote ἄγγελος κυρίου [angelos kurios = angel of the Lord] for Yahweh. To be sure, the sense of distance was strongly developed in Yahweh religion from the very first, and was even one of its basic elements, cf. Ex. 3:6, where Moses is afraid to look on God, and esp. Is. 8:13: “He it is who makes you afraid, and he who terrifies you.” (vol. 3, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-), 1069-71.)

The vowels were added to the Tetragrammaton at the same time as the whole text received vowel pointing.

The Masoretes were the scholars who took up the task of creating a vowel system to be added to the consonantal text. Starting in 700 AD, The Masoretes chose to add the vowels for the Hebrew word, Adonai, to the Tetragrammaton as a way to alert the reader or prevent the reader from reading the Tetragrammaton precisely.

Masoretic [mäś'ə rēt'îk] TEXT. † The standard text of the Hebrew Bible and the basis of printed Hebrew Old Testaments (abbreviated MT).

Main |dea: consonants first, then vowels of Adonai.

So when a cantor or reader of the Hebrew text would encounter the Tetragrammaton in the text, the reader would pronounce the word Adonai instead of trying to pronounce the Tetragrammaton. This vocalization was used for synagogue readings but when reading the text in Talmudic schools, the term HaShem, which is the Hebrew word meaning the Name, was used.

However, for those who did not understand this mixing of the vowels and consonants tried to pronounce the name, they would come up with the word, Jehovah. So Jehovah is truly a bastard form of the name of God.

The Samaritans used shema (not the word for ‘hear’) but the Aramaic word for the Name.

In the post-Old Testament period, pronunciation of the divine Name was avoided. The term Heaven became a substitute (cf. 1 Macc. 3:18–19, NEB, and in the Apocrypha). But the inspired writings do not share any avoidance of the divine Name, since in the revealed Name the living God discloses his nature and individuality.

Hebrew texts were originally written with consonants only, with some long vowels indicated by the use of the consonants aleph, he, waw, and yodh. The consonantal text was relatively fixed ca. A.D. 100. As Hebrew had ceased to be the language of

everyday life for Jews, efforts were *made to retain the traditional vocalizations of the words of the biblical text by the use of signs added to the consonantal text.

Eventually three systems of vocalization developed: the Babylonian and Palestinian, which place the vowel points above the consonants, and the Tiberian, which places most of the vowel points below the consonants. The Tiberian system as it was finally established in the tenth-century school of ben Asher is represented in printed Hebrew Bibles. The two most recent editions published by the United Bible Societies, *Biblia Hebraica* (BHK) and *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS), are based on the Leningrad Codex (written out in 1008), but have textual notes drawing on other manuscripts and the versions. Bibliography. E. Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: 1979). (Allen C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 699.)

The Qumran materials support the readings in the standard Hebrew text, the so-called Masoretic text. Some of these manuscripts are very small and in a poor state of preservation. One interesting feature is that the name Yahweh—the so-called Tetragrammaton—is written in ancient Hebrew script. This has the effect of emphasizing the holy name and making it stand out on the pages which are written in the Aramaic script. (James E. Smith, *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms*, Old Testament Survey Series (Joplin, MO: College Press Pub. Co., 1996).)

A Brief History of Hebrew Vowels

2.1 During the original phase, Hebrew was written without any vowels indicated in the script. The letters קדצ could have meant “righteousness,” “his righteousness,” “they are righteous,” etc.

» This phase was before King David, ca. 1,400 B.C. to 1,000 B.C.

2.2 During the middle phase, several letters of the alphabet came to be used to indicate certain vowels. The letters קדקו could have meant “his righteousness” or “they are righteous,” but not “righteousness.” We will refer to these letters used to indicate vowels as *vowel letters*.

» This phase was after King David, ca. 1,000 B.C. to 300 B.C.

2.3 During the final phase, “points” were added to the text to eliminate all ambiguity. The word קדקו׃ could only have meant “they are righteous.” We will refer to these points as *vowel signs*.

» This phase was ca. A.D. 700 to A.D. 1000

» The scholars responsible for adding the vowel signs to the text are called “Masoretes.”

» The text of the Bible produced by the Masoretes is called the “Masoretic Text,” abbreviated MT. (Mark David Futato, *Beginning Biblical Hebrew* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 7.)

Were they the vowels of Adonai?

Yes as well as others. Adonai was used for synagogue readings but the term HaShem (the Name) was used in Talmudic schools and the Samaritans used shema (not the word for ‘hear’ but Aramaic for the Name).

The covenant name for the God of Israel in the Old Testament is Yahweh. This name was so sacred that by the second century B.C. the Jews refused to pronounce it. (Orthodox Jews will not pronounce this sacred name even today.) When the ancient Jewish scholar came across the name Yahweh he would pronounce it “Adonai,” which means “my Lord.”

The Hebrew at that time had no vowels. The system of vowel points had not yet been invented, and therefore Yahweh was written YHVH, which is called the Tetragrammaton (the Four Letter Word). No one really knows how it was pronounced. When the Masoretic scholars added to the consonantal word YHVH the vowels from the word Adonai, the name turned out to be “YaHoVaH.” However, this is a hybrid word. Therefore, Jehovah has been dropped from many modern translations in favor of “Yahweh.” (Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc., 1996).)

In the intertestamental period the name YAHWEH was no longer pronounced aloud in the synagogues. The name was replaced orally (although not in writing) by ADONAI. Yet the Old Testament texts themselves not infrequently carry the conjunctive YAHWEH-ADONAI. When the medieval Masoretes later added vowel points to the consonantal text YHWH, they combined the Tetragrammaton with the vowel points of ADONAI. The curious end result was “Jehovah” (used by the American Standard Version). The Jerusalem Bible regularly uses YAHWEH. The English translation of the Old Testament issued by the Jewish Publication Society of America in 1917, and especially adapted for use in Hebrew synagogues and schools, retained I AM for the name of God in Exodus 3:14. Except in Exodus 6:3, where YHWH was retained (with the footnote: “the ineffable name, read Adonai, which means, the Lord”), it elsewhere translated YAHWEH by LORD.

But the use of ADONAI for God carries over in the New Testament identification of Jesus Christ as LORD. The Septuagint commonly used the Greek word KURIOS (LORD) to render the Hebrew ADONAI and—as Vincent Taylor notes—“what is more important, it is the usual substitute for the personal name ‘Yahweh’ ” (The Names of

Jesus, p. 39). Taylor pointedly remarks: “The first Christians read the Old Testament with new eyes, and as soon as Jesus was confessed as ‘the Lord,’ many ancient passages which spoke of the Lord must have been applied to Him. Septuagint usage is not, therefore, a factor which can be ignored in stimulating the use of the title” (p. 51). (Carl F. H. Henry, vol. 2, *God, Revelation, and Authority* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), 224.)