

Who is this Deity named Yahweh?

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Introduction

The Psalmist David proclaimed, “*O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!*” (Ps. 8:1). Certainly the Lord’s name is excellent, but what is this excellent name? Some state dogmatically that the Hebrew *tetragrammaton* JHVH² (יהוה) was originally pronounced “*Yahwe*.”³ Others say that it should be rendered ‘*Iabe* or ‘*Iao* or *Jaho*.⁴ Orthodox Jews substitute the word *Ha-Shem* (“The Name”) into their commentaries to avoid taking the name of the Lord in vain. The Masoretic Hebrew Text behind the Authorized Version renders the vocalization of the *tetragrammaton* as *Jehovah* (יהוה). This has been the accepted pronunciation of JHVH for at least the last four hundred years in the Western world. Scripture, translations, commentaries, prayer books, theological works, hymns and Christians at large have utilized this standardized pronunciation *Jehovah*. Yet recently in scholarly circles the notion has been advanced that the pronunciation *Jehovah* should be replaced with *Yahweh*. Is it important that believers know the correct vocalization of the Lord’s special Old Testament name? How will believers “*sing praise to the name of the LORD*” (Ps. 7:17), if they do not know how to pronounce it?

The History of the Pronunciation of JHVH

The traditional history for the pronunciation of the name for JHVH assumes that the original correct pronunciation was lost, if ever given. Some have claimed that God never inspired a pointed, vocalized original Hebrew text.⁵ Others, building upon this initial view, have

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²In Hebrew the *yodh* (*jot*) may be transliterated as an English “y” or “j.” Also the *vau* (*waw*) may be transliterated “w” or “v.” For the purposes of this essay the *yodh* will be transliterated as a “j” and the *vau* will be transliterated as a “v” and hence the *tetragrammaton* will be designated JHVH rather than YHWH.

³J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publ. House, 1962), p. 147.

⁴Gustave F. Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publ. House, n.d.), pp. 92-93.

⁵“No system of writing is ever so perfect as to be able to reproduce the sounds of a language in all their various shades, and the *writing of the Semites* has one striking fundamental defect, viz., that only the consonants (which indeed form the substance of the language) are written as real letters, whilst of the vowels only the longer are indicated by

posited that the Lord gave an oral tradition of vocalization for the unpointed consonantal text, but the vocalized pronunciation was lost. For instance, Oehler stated, "The Jews maintain that the knowledge of the true pronunciation of the name has been entirely lost since the destruction of the temple."⁶ Josephus affirmed that the name was originally given to Moses (cf. Ex. 3:14 ff.) and that he, Josephus, was not permitted to enunciate it.⁷ Maimonides (AD 1135-1204) averred that the sacred name was pronounced at blessings and by the high priest on the Day of Atonement during the early years of the Second Temple, but later was exchanged for 'adonai after the death of Simon the Just (3rd century BC).⁸

The alleged loss of the proper pronunciation of JHVH occurred because of one of several reasons, according to this common historical account. 1) The Jews developed a superstitious fear of taking the Lord's name in vain according to the warning of Ex. 20:7, and consequently stopped pronouncing it.⁹ 2) These same Jews further interpreted Lev. 24:16 to read "and he that nameth (Hebrew: blasphemeth) the name of the LORD, he shall surely be put to death."¹⁰ Consequently, according to this history, during the silent years until the coming of Christ, Jews refused to pronounce the sacred name. This refusal among the Jews continued until time of the Masoretes (c. AD 6th - 10th century),¹¹ who, having supposedly invented vowel pointing for the traditional Hebrew text, substituted the vowels of 'adonai (אָדוֹנָי) for the vocalization of JHVH, producing the popular, but "linguistically impossible," Jehovah. Based on the practice of the LXX to render JHVH by *ho kurios* ("the Lord"), the pre-Christian Jews and ultimately the Masoretes placed the *shewa* of the *hateph pathach* under the *yodh* (יְ),

certain representative consonants. It was only later that special small marks (points or strokes below or above the consonants) were invented to represent to the eye all the vowel-sounds," E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, editors, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1910), p. 5.

⁶Oehler, p. 92.

⁷"Whereupon God declared to him his holy name, which had never been discovered to men before; concerning which it is not lawful for me to say any more," William Whiston, trans., *The New Complete Works of Josephus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publ., 1999), p. 102.

⁸Oehler, p. 92.

⁹John M'Clintock and James Strong, "Jehovah," *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, vol. IV (NY: Harper and Brothers, Publ., 1883), p. 809.

¹⁰This curious and un-biblical interpretation shows up in the LXX, although there is no reason to assume that the pre-Christian Jewry derived it from this faulty translation.

¹¹Jews in Tiberias passed on the standardized *Masorah* or the details of the Hebrew text tradition, which in turn was the preserved Hebrew OT consonants and vowels. These Jews were called Masoretes, although "who they were, and when or where their work was accomplished are points involved in some uncertainty," M'Clintock and Strong, "Masorah, Masoreth or Massoreth," *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, vol., V (NY: Harper and Brothers, Publ., 1883), pp. 860-861.

the *cholem* above the *vau* (ו), and the *kamets* beneath the *vau* (ו).¹² The Reformation theologians continued the practice of using the *qeri* vowels of the Masoretic text for the *kethiv* consonants JHVH (the so-called *qeri perpetuum*), popularizing the artificially “hybrid” name Jehovah.¹³ To augment the veracity of this history, advocates appealed to the laws of philology, showing that the prefix and suffix forms for proper names based on JHVH (i.e., *Yeho* [Jehoshaphat], *Yah* [Shephatiah]) demand Yahweh (יהוה) as the proper pronunciation.¹⁴ The German rationalist Heinrich Ewald (1803-1875) was the first to popularize the form *Jahve*, followed by the eminent E. W. Hengstenberg (1802-1869) promoting *Jahveh*.¹⁵

In summary then, the best that critical scholars can derive from history for the discovery of the pronunciation for the sacred *tetragrammaton* JHVH is as follows. If God ever revealed the proper vocalization of His OT name JHVH, the apostate Jews, from the Babylonian captivity onward, lost this pronunciation. Believers therefore have not known the true name of the Lord for about 2,600 years. However, with the help of the *LXX*, the laws of philology, and the scholarship of liberal German rationalism, the “true” vocalization Yahweh has been recovered. Should believers be thankful that critical scholarship has restored the proper vocalization of the name of JHVH that God chose not to preserve? Is it true that Christians may now know that the proper pronunciation of the OT name of the Deity they serve is Yahweh?

The Biblical Position on the Name of JHVH

It should be evident to those who believe God has promised to preserve His Words perfect, and this preservation is in the Masoretic Hebrew text and the Received Greek text, that this history contradicts Scriptural promises and is therefore un-biblical and consequently contrived. The Lord has promised to preserve all of His inspired, canonical Words through His ordained institutions for all generations subsequent to the inscripturation of these Words. Therefore, He has preserved His OT Words, consonants and vowels, jots and tittles, including the inspired vocalization of His name, the *tetragrammaton*. Since the Lord God has preserved the proper pronunciation of JHVH, schol-

¹²M’Clintock and Strong state that the prevalence of this practice occurred may be “inferred” from the similar pointing, but no historical documentation is forthcoming, vol. IV, p. 809.

¹³Madeleine S. Miller and J. Lane Miller, “God,” *Harper’s Bible Dictionary* (NY: Harper and Brothers, Publ., 1952), p. 230.

¹⁴“Jehovah,” *Illustrated Davis Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Royal Publishers, 1973), p. 378.

¹⁵M’Clintock and Strong, vol. IV, p. 810.

ars have no need to restore their vocalization of it, and, as history, philology, and critical scholarship have demonstrated, they are incapable of restoring authoritatively¹⁶ the pronunciation of JHVH.

The Scriptural Promises of Plenary Verbal Preservation

The Bible is replete with the teaching that God will perfectly preserve His Words. This teaching then constitutes the doctrine of the verbal, plenary preservation of the Words of God. Several passages from the OT Scripture promise the preservation of the Words of the Lord forever. Although one reference is sufficient to establish the doctrinal truth of the preservation of the Words of the Lord, a selective few additionally clinch the clear Biblical position. The Psalter gives these references for this doctrine: Pss. 12:6-7; 119:111, 160, *et al.* In addition, Prov. 22:20-21 and Isa. 40:6 make the same claim for perfect Words preservation.

In the NT, the Lord Jesus Christ claimed the perfectly intact Hebrew OT Words (Mt. 4:4), the preservation of the consonants and vowels of Hebrew Words (Mt. 5:18), and the perfect preservation of all of His canonical words including the NT Words (Mt. 24:35). The Scriptures also teach the respective agencies which God promised to use for His preservation process. For the OT Scriptures, His agency was the Jewish nation (Rom. 3:2) and for the NT Scriptures, He promised to use the pillar and ground of the truth--the NT churches (I Tim. 3:15). In fact, bound up in the great Commission is the requirement of the churches to observe or guard His canonical Words (Mt. 28:19-20). The Lord's people, in their respective agencies, have the sole responsibility to preserve for their generation and following the Words of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Deficiency of History, Philology and Critical Scholarship

In rejecting the preserved Words of Scripture, including the inspired vowel pointing for JHVH, critical scholars are left with several non-authoritative means to attempt to discern the "correct" vocalization of the Lord's *tetragrammaton*. These means are historical documentation, comparative philology, and rationalism.

History

Bible history indicates that believers and unbelievers did not have

¹⁶The only ultimate authority the enemy has is the Scripture (cf. Mt. 4:6), and the rejection of this final authority leads to confusion and destruction (cf. I Cor. 14:33; Ps. 1:6).

“the dread of uttering The Name” of the Lord. From the first writer of Scripture to the last, OT saints pronounced the name of Jehovah. The first writer of the OT canon, Job, referred to “*the hand of the LORD*” in the affairs of man (Job 12:9). Moses, upon writing Genesis, initially referred to the LORD God as creator of the earth and the heavens in Gen. 2:4. Later, Moses began to express the name of Jehovah to the Lord and to others (Ex. 4:1; 5:1). About a thousand years later Nehemiah expressed the LORD’s name in his prayer (Neh. 1:5) as did Ezra in his preaching (Neh. 8:9). The last book of the *Tanak* records the name of Jehovah (II Chron. 36:23) as well as the last book of the prophets (Mal. 4:5). Furthermore, unbelieving Gentiles mentioned the vocalized *tetragrammaton* in their conversations without fear of punishment by death. Ranging from Pharaoh to Rahab to Cyrus, these *goyim* pronounced Jehovah’s name without dread and suffered no ill affects (cf. Ex. 9:27; Josh. 2:9; Ezra 1:2). This survey of the period of Biblical history (22nd to 5th century BC) indicates that no saint or sinner, Jew or Gentile, from beginning to end, ever expressed dread to pronounce the *tetragrammaton* or suffered death as its consequence.

The history of this “dread” must have commenced during the silent years (the four centuries before Christ’s first advent) while Judaism continued to apostatize. The testimony of unbelieving Jews, such as Josephus or Maimonides, and fallible patristics such as Origen, Eusebius, and Theodoret, suggesting that the vocalization was lost among all the Jewry for sacred reasons must be debunked. These non-authoritative historians have passed on their surmising of the traditions of apostates. Maimonides’ speculation that the vowels for ‘*adonai*’ were substituted for the *tetragrammaton* is just that--non-authoritative speculation. There is no historical documentation for this popular but fanciful conjecture.

That this conjecture is strengthened by the supposed existence of a pre-Christian *LXX* which translated the *tetragrammaton* with *ho kurios* and approved of the ‘*adonai*’ pointing for JHVH is based on unproved assumptions. There is no credible history for the origin of the *LXX*,¹⁷ and the Bible does not teach that Christ and the Apostles ever used the *LXX*¹⁸ or had need to use it. If there was a pre-Christian *LXX*

¹⁷Aristeas’ letter about the desire Ptolemy II had in securing a Greek translation of the OT for his library is replete with fanciful legends about the origin of the Pentateuch. Seventy two (or was it the seventy?) Jewish elders translated the Law in seventy-two days. The letter has “extravagances” and is in part “unhistorical.” H. Thatcher, “Septuagint,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, Vol. IV (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1939), p. 2724.

¹⁸The Lord Jesus did not quote verbatim from the *LXX* or from the Hebrew text in Lk. 4:18-19. Luke recorded His inspired synagogue “targum” (i.e., paraphrase) on Isa. 61:1-2.

it is not extant except in the hybrid form of three different “LXX” translations in Origen’s *Hexapla*.¹⁹ The Lord Jesus Christ declared that the Hebrew text was perfectly intact in His day (Mt. 4:4),²⁰ the jots and titles were preserved (Mt. 5:18), and the three-fold *Tanak* division of the Hebrew OT was in use (cf. Lk. 11:50-51; 24:44). Neither He nor His disciples attempted to evangelize Gentiles with the Greek OT Scriptures. They used the Hebrew OT with the Jews and their inspired Greek statements and messages, as recorded in the canonical Scriptures, with the Gentiles (cf. Mt. 15:21 ff.; Acts 2:42, etc.).²¹ The best that history can demonstrate is that some Jews, apparently apostates, had a dread for pronouncing the Lord’s name and may have justified re-pointing JHVH with the use of a Greek translation. This history however, is inadequate for overturning the pointing of JHVH as it is preserved in the Masoretic text.

Philology

Philology is the study of words, and is foundational to the study of grammar, which includes linguistic phenomena and their origin. Modern philology is based on evolutionary principles, including the evolution of the Hebrew language and the need for the practice of textual criticism²² since God allegedly did not preserve His words. However, the preserved OT words must constitute the basis for Hebrew grammar as divine revelation, since scientific and comparative linguistics are not authoritative and therefore fallible. For example, M’Clintock and Strong argue that JHVH comes from the *hayah* (= *hawah*) “to be” verb and consequently the middle radical may not take the *cholem*, thus ruling out the Jehovah pronunciation.²³ However, this is an effort to make the science of linguistics authoritative over divine revelation and ignores the fact that the *tetragrammaton* is the unique revealed name of God (cf. Ex. 6:3).²⁴

Furthermore, the aforementioned authors insisted that the Greeks would have pronounced JHVH as *Jao*, treating the two *He* consonants

¹⁹Thatcher, pp. 2726-2727.

²⁰He used the perfect tense verb “*it is written*” (*gegraptai*) denoting that the OT Scripture had been and still was written.

²¹Since the Ethiopian treasurer was coming to Jerusalem to worship, he no doubt was bilingual, knowing how to speak and read Hebrew, as he apparently was reading from the Hebrew text of Isa. 53:7-8 (Acts 8:27-39).

²²“Advance in grammar is therefore closely dependent on progress in textual criticism,” Kautzsch and Cowley, p. 22.

²³M’Clintock and Strong, vol. IV, p. 810.

²⁴Even Payne admits, “As to the meaning of Yahweh, etymological speculation is rather fruitless,” p. 147.

as silent letters, placing an *alpha* after the *iota* and substituting the *omicron* for the *vau*. Gehman favored extra-biblical sources as well, stating, "There was also in the coastal Plain and in part of Galilee a dialect pronunciation *Yeu* from *Yehu*, a form derived by dissimulation from Phoenician *Yohu* from *Yahu*. The *Yahweh* pronunciation is also favored by Greek transcriptions: *Iabe*, *laoue*, *laouai*, *Iae*."²⁵ In this case, looking to extra-biblical grammatical guidance is an attempt to make comparative linguistics authoritative over the preserved vowel pointing the received Hebrew text.

In the classic passage for the presentation of the special name of JHVH, the LORD punned on the *hayah* verb with His name (Ex. 3:13-15). The Lord God gave His name as a denominative with the *jodh* prefixed and special, unique pointing. As the NT confirms, He did not give Moses the *Qal* imperfect of *hayah*, which would be *Yihyeh* ("he shall be").²⁶ In Jn. 8:58, the Lord Jesus Christ declared, "*before Abraham was, I am*" (*ego eimi*), emphasizing His interpretation of the unique Hebrew pointing for Jehovah. Philology which rejects the divine preservation of Hebrew pointing, words and grammar, must instead rely upon evolutionary linguistic schemes and extra-biblical comparisons for the vocalization of JHVH is deficient. It produces the non-biblical and therefore non-authoritative vocalization *Yahweh* and must be rejected by Christians.

Rationalism

The Scripture is clear about its own authority and sufficiency. The Apostle Paul stated, "*All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works*" (II Timothy 3:16-17). The Lord God does not need man to recover what He allegedly chose not to preserve, because He has indeed preserved all canonical revelation He gave man. The doctrine of verbal plenary inspiration demands the doctrine of verbal plenary preservation and the Bible teaches both doctrines. Man's only responsibility is to receive by faith God's written revelation and then guard it for his respective generation. It is ludicrous then, for critical scholarship to attempt to restore and reconstruct the text of the divinely written revelation, including the vowel points for the *tetra-*

²⁵Henry S. Gehman, ed., "Jehovah," *The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), p. 453.

²⁶J. Davis incorrectly speculates, "*Yahweh* is an archaic form. It probably represents the *Qal* imperfect of the verb *hawah*, later *hayah*, to be or become," *The Illustrated Davis Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 378.

grammaton. As rationalistic scholarship looks to historical documentation and philological techniques to determine the “true” name of the Lord in the OT, it falls short because of its initial rejection of the doctrines of inspiration and preservation. The best that rationalistic scholarship can produce is the suggested speculation, confirmed by liberal Bible scholarship, for the vocalization of the *tetragrammaton*. Unregenerate Jews, catholic patristics, and liberal scholars have all agreed that the best pointing for the *tetragrammaton* should be something like Yahweh, and not Jehovah.²⁷ However, this rationalistic approach for vocalizing the name of the LORD is Biblically deficient and spiritually unsatisfactory for the Bible believer.

Rationalists have rejected the teaching of the preserved vocalization for JHVH because they have rejected the teaching that the preserved OT Scriptures have been preserved through the Masoretic text. For instance, E. Wurthwein reasoned that the main criterion for discovering the OT text must be the history of the transmission of the text. However, he did not look to biblical history that gives theological grounding for the transmission of the text, but instead considered religious history. He maintained that three text types representing the OT text emerged at Qumran, namely the Samaritan Pentateuch, the *LXX* and the Masoretic text. How this could be, however, he could not answer reasonably. Wurthwein cited F. M. Cross, who stated, “The ground is not yet sure, and many missteps will be taken before sure results can be hoped for.”²⁸ Although others suggest a pre-sixth century AD “Masoretic” text, they do not look to Scripture for this “faith” position as expressed by the Lord Jesus Christ (Mt. 4:4). For instance, B. J. Roberts affirmed the “likely existence of a pre-Masoretic ‘Masoretic’ text.”²⁹ The student of the Bible knows that there *was* a pre-Masoretic Hebrew text and a pre-Textus Receptus Greek text based on the promises of God, and not on the skills of the Masoretes or Erasmus. These “pre” texts are the preserved texts of the Hebrew OT and the Greek NT.

The Name Jehovah in the OT

The preserved vocalization of JHVH is Jehovah as represented by the Masoretic Hebrew text. The Authorized Version (1611) and the

²⁷ “[A]t the present day, most scholars agree that this pointing is not the original and genuine one (i.e., Jehovah), but that these vowels are derived from those of...*Adonai*,” M’Clintock and Strong, p. 809.

²⁸ Ernst Wurthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1981), p. 16.

²⁹ B. J. Roberts, *Biblical Journal of Religious Literature* 42 (1959), p. 144.

American Standard Version (1901) translate the *tetragrammaton* as LORD and the Hebrew name ‘*adonay* as Lord, differentiating the two Hebrew words. The AV transliterates JHVH in Ex. 6:3, Psalm 83:18, Isa. 12:2 and 26:4 as JEHOVAH, with the last two references reading literally *Jah Jehovah*. David’s reference to Jah is transliterated JAH in Ps. 68:4. The writers of Scripture coupled both Jehovah and Jah with ‘*elohim* (God) in various places throughout the OT (cf. Gen. 2:4 and Ps. 68:18, respectively). The translators of the AV have given English-speaking people a consistent presentation and biblical understanding of the vocalized *tetragrammaton* Jehovah.

Conclusion

Do Christians worship and serve a God named Yahweh? If God has not preserved His words including the vowel pointing of the *tetragrammaton*, and critical scholars have restored His name through historical documentation, philology, and rationalism, then the answer is in the affirmative. However, since none of the aforementioned is Scripturally valid or authoritative, then believers do not know how to pronounce the name of the Lord unless they receive by faith the preserved vocalization found in the Masoretic Hebrew text. Christians do not know or worship a god named Yahweh, but instead believers do know and worship the God Jehovah. Believers have the assurance that “*His name shall endure forever*” (Ps. 72:17), which name is “*the LORD God*” (v. 18).³⁰

³⁰Of course, during the Millennium, saints with “*a pure language*” (i.e. Hebrew), and the inspired and preserved vocalized OT Scriptures, including the *tetragrammaton*, will call upon the name of the LORD--*JEHOVAH* (Zeph. 3:9).