

HaShem — The Name

השם

by Paul Sumner

In the Hebrew Bible God's personal name is the most often used noun. It occurs over 6,800 times. In Hebrew texts it is spelled only with consonants: Y-H-V-H, and it is called the "Four-Letter" name or **Tetragrammaton** in Greek.

Rabbinic Judaism refers to it as "haShem" – literally, "The Name" (the "ha" is the attached prefix article "the"). In biblical times "YHVH" was spoken with accompanying vowel sounds. But sometime prior to the first century that pronunciation was gradually suppressed out of reverence. Based on linguistic evidence, historians have reconstructed how it was probably pronounced.

(For the difference between "YHVH" and "YHWH," see "Background Details" below.)

In the Bible, some people's names contained a form of God's Name (Joshua, Isaiah, Hosea). The Greek Jewish name "Jesus" is also linked in Hebrew to the Tetragrammaton, a fact that opens insights into passages in the New Testament.

[On this website, I use modern **Israeli (Sefardic) Hebrew** transliteration because I believe Hebrew is and should be treated as a living language, not as Semitic bones studied only by scholars. See [Transliteration](#) for specifics.]

In the ancient world of the Bible, names had meaning. Some names depicted the wish of parents (or of God) for a child to fulfill a certain destiny. Or a name could describe a child's hoped-for character. Or if in later life he did not live up to his character name, he might be renamed. Sometimes God renamed people. We have Abram/Abraham, Jacob/Israel, Jedidiah/Solomon.

God's Name

God's personal name – YHVH – can be defined etymologically or grammatically. Hebrew linguists believe **yvh** is a form of the verb **havah**, meaning "to be or become."

Specifically, many linguists say **yvh** is a Qal imperfect third masculine singular. Following normal Hebrew grammar patterns, the vowels "a" and "e" would be added to these consonants, giving us the word "YaHVeH." This pronunciation is supported by early biblical texts in Greek that spell the name "Iaoue" (Ya-oo-eh) and "Iabe" (Yabe; there is no "v" sound in Greek). [The spelling "Yahweh" is discussed below.]

YHVH — יהוה

What does "Yahveh" mean?

YaHVeH — יהוה

As he revealed it to Moses, God's full name is actually **Ehyeh asher Ehyeh** — "I will be what I will be." **Ehyeh** is the Qal imperfect *first person* form of the verb **hawah**: "I will be."

God says to Moses: "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, '**Ehyeh — I will be**' has sent me to you" (Exodus 3:14-15). **Ehyeh** by itself is God's shortened name *when he speaks of himself in the first person*:

ehyeh asher ehyeh — אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה

In contrast, when people refer to God in the *third person*, he taught them to say "**Yahveh — He will be**" (not "I will be"). [Insights from Gerald H. Wilson, [Psalms Volume 1](#) (Zondervan, 2002), p. 210.]

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Background Details

(1) In most academic publications, Bible commentaries, and a few Christian Bible versions the Name is spelled **Yahweh**.

Hebrew linguists believe the third consonant was originally pronounced "w" (the letter is named "waw"). In later Hebrew its pronunciation was changed to "v" and the letter called "vav." Today in most western Jewish communities and in Israel "vav" is the accepted sound. [[Encyclopædia Judaica](#), Vol. 1, p. 90 and Vol. 8, cols. 79, 85-86]

On this website, I prefer the Modern Hebrew and Jewish spellings and pronunciations. Hence, I use **YHVH** and occasionally "Yahveh."

(2) It is customary in most translations of the Bible into English to substitute a "euphemism" — "**the Lord**" (small capital letters) — whenever "YHVH" appears in the Hebrew text. This custom (used by both Jews and Christians) follows Jewish traditions dating back before the time of Yeshua. The original purpose was to protect the Name from common or irreverent use when the Bible was read aloud in a synagogue or when God's name was spoken.

The **Mishnah** (dated to AD/CE 200) begins to use the term "Ha-Shem" or "haShem" (literally, The Name) as a euphemism for "YHVH" (Mishnah: Yoma 3:8; 4:2; 6:2; Sanhedrin 7:5, 8; Babylonian Talmud: Sanhedrin 56b).

הַשֵּׁם

Today in synagogues during Scripture readings the word **Adonai** (Heb, my great Lord) is spoken in place of "YHVH." But in conversation or in written

documents, Orthodox Jews substitute "HaShem" to provide further protection of the Name.

(We use euphemisms all the time. We don't call our parents "Daniel" or "Miriam" — we address them as "Father/Dad/Daddy" or "Mother/Mum/Mommy." Respectful honor is observed (or should be) with others outside our families. How much more for our Creator?)

At the time of Yeshua, the term "**Heaven**" was also used as a euphemism for God's Name or for God himself. In the New Testament we find "the Kingdom of Heaven" as a synonym for "the Kingdom of God" (esp. in Matthew). The prodigal son confesses that he "sinned against Heaven" (Luke 15:18). Yeshua asks the Torah scribes whether the work of John the Immerser was "from Heaven or from men" (Luke 20:4). And during prayer, Yeshua lifted up his eyes "to Heaven" (to the One who occupied it) (John 17:1).

For examples of the Name printed in ancient Hebrew texts see [The Name at Qumran](#).

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(3) The English name **Jehovah** was coined by Roman Catholics sometime in the Middle Ages. It is based on a misunderstanding of Masoretic Hebrew texts where the vowels a-o-ai (from the word "Adonai") were printed with the consonants Y-H-V-H to remind a reader to say the word "Adonai" and not attempt to pronounce the sacred name. The first syllable "Je-" in Jehovah is explained thus: in the Middle Ages, "J" was said as "Y" (as in German). The first vowel (sheva) in Adonai is pronounced "a," but as a short "e" with the consonant "Y."

יהוה

"Jehovah" is used seven times in the 1611 King James Version (e.g., Gen 22:14; Exod 6:3; 17:15; Judg 6:24; Ps 83:18; Isa 12:2; 26:4) and is found in many older hymns. But it is not an authentic pronunciation of God's name. Most modern Bibles have notes on this in their introductions.

For a good discussion of the Jehovah/Yahweh question see "God, Names of" in [Encyclopædia Judaica](#), vol. 7, col. 680, and "God, Names of" in [International Standard Bible Encyclopedia](#) (rev. ed., 1982), 2:504-09, esp. 506-07.

For an overview of Rabbinic traditions about the Name see Ephraim Urbach, "The Power of the Divine Name" (chap. 7) in [The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs](#) (Harvard Univ. Press, 1987), 124-34.

For an older, detailed history of the English word "Jehovah" see George F. Moore's two articles "Notes on the Name YHVH" in [American Journal of Theology](#) 12 (1908): 34-52 and "Notes on the Name YHVH" in [American Journal of Semitic Languages & Literatures](#) 25 (1909): 312-18.

Grammatical analysis, however, doesn't lift the veil much on the mystery of the Creator's name. Yet for the One who forbids all static images of himself, the idea that he *will be* or *become* what he wants to be — that he is more like wind and fire than frozen images in stone or gold — the vagueness of his Name is appropriate. A technical definition remains intriguing.

His "person" is another matter.

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Grammar or Person

God's name is not a magic amulet that must be pronounced correctly in order to conjure him or to persuade him to hear one's prayers. His name conveys his **character**, the **essence** of his person. It says something about who he is. When God explains his name to Moses on Mount Sinai, he doesn't expound on Hebrew grammar but reveals character:

YHVH passed by in front of him and proclaimed:

YHVH, YHVH — a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in unchanging love and faithfulness, who guards unchanging love for thousands, who forgives iniquity, rebellion, and sin; yet who will not leave the guilty unpunished. (Exod 34:6-7, my translation)

God's self-revealed name is here woven into the covenant which he made with Israel.

YHVH—He will be . . . always himself, always righteous, always holy, always loyal to those who keep his covenant. "This is my name forever, and this is my memorial to all generations" (Exod 3:15). The Name is always linked to what he is doing for his people within their covenant relationship. "YHVH" could be called God's Covenant Name, for he is the "Guardian of Covenant Love" (notzer hesed) (Exod 36:7).

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A Giveable Name

Throughout the Scriptures, God puts his personal name on certain **places**, **objects** or **persons**.

This act implied several things: ownership, adoption, even marriage. It meant that that place or person would (should) demonstrate God's character, or would be a living demonstration of a particular principle that God wanted other human

beings to observe.

When the "Blessing of Aaron" (Numbers 6:24-26) is spoken over the people, the divine word follows: "So they shall invoke [lit. put] my Name on the children of Israel" (v. 27). [See the Hebrew text and transcription of [Aaron's Blessing](#).]

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In time there is a narrowing of focus. God begins to put his name on one specific **town** on one specific **hill** on one specific **building**.

In this city which I have chosen, and the temple of which I said, "My Name shall be there." (2 Kings 23:27)

YHVH said, "My Name shall be in Jerusalem forever." (2 Chron 33:4)
YHVH has chosen Zion. (Psalm 132:13)

[David] shall build a house for my Name. (2 Sam 7:13)

There is even deeper meaning to come.

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Much more important than geography and architecture are the **occupants** of Jerusalem on Mount Zion. God speaks of "**my people who are called by my name**" (2 Chron 7:14). He doesn't say, "My shops and houses, streets and great temple which are called by my name."

In the book of Jeremiah, God gives his name both to the future son of **David (the Messiah)** and to **Jerusalem**, the occupants. King and people share a common identity:

I shall raise up for David a righteous Branch. . . ;
this is the name by which **he** will be called:
YHVH Tzidkeinu ["the LORD our righteousness"]. (Jer 23:5, 6)

In those days Judah shall be saved,
and Jerusalem shall dwell in safety;
and this is the name by which **she** will be called:
YHVH Tzidkeinu. (Jer 33:16)

יהוה צדקנו
YHVH
Tzidkeinu

Messiah ben David and Jerusalem are both supposed to wear a single family mantle – the very one worn by and given by God himself.

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People With the Name

Further illustrating this principle, we find the Tetragrammaton embedded in names of several men and some women.

As a **pre element**, it is abbreviated **Yeho-**:

Yehoyaqim (Jehoiakim) (YHVH raises up)

Yehonatan (Jonathan) (YHVH has given)

Yehoram (Jehoram) (YHVH is raised on high)

Yehoshafat (Jehoshaphat) (YHVH has judged)

Yeho- יהו-

Yo- יו-

-yah יה-

-yahu יהו-

The pre-element can be abbreviated as **Ye-** or **Yo-**:

Yehu (Jehu) (Yeho+hu: YHVH is he)

Yo'el (Jo-El) (YHVH is God)

Yokheved (Jochebed) (YHVH's glory)

As an **after element**, it appears as **-yah** or **-yahu**:

Yediyah (Jedidiah=Solomon) (loved by Yah)

Elijah or Eliyahu (Elijah) (My God is Yah)

Yirmeyah or Yirmeyahu (Jeremiah) (raised up by Yah)

Ovadyah (Obadiah) (servant of Yah)

Zecharyah (Zechariah) (remembered by Yah)

The Name appears in the famous **Halleluyah** (Hallelujah). The word is literally a command in Hebrew: Hallelu-Yah: "All of you praise Yah, the Lord." [In some documents it appears as "Alleluiah." The ending **-iah** comes from the Greek Septuagint Bible and is pronounced "-yah."]

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The Name of Deliverance

The Name also appears in names in combination with the Hebrew verb **yasha**, meaning to help, deliver, rescue or save. Here are two significant examples.

ישע

1) **Joshua**, Moses' lieutenant and successor, was originally not named Joshua. Numbers 13:16 records: "Moses called **Hoshea** the son of Nun, **Joshua**."

Grammatically, "Hoshea" seems to mean "Help! Save!" [Hifil, infinitive absolute, command form of *yasha*]. In contrast, "Joshua" in Hebrew is "Yehoshua" and means "YHVH, the LORD, helps or saves."

The name change focused attention on the Source of help. Through Yehoshua, YHVH would rescue his people. (In the Apocrypha, teachers recognized the symbolism of his name: "Joshua . . . according to his name was made great for the saving of the elect of God"; Sirach 46:1).

Throughout the early books of the Hebrew Bible, Joshua's name is spelled **Yehoshua**. After the Babylonian Exile, the name underwent a shortening, apparently to remove the holy name element (Yeho-) so pagans wouldn't profane it. Thus in the post-exile book Nehemiah, Joshua is called "**Yeshua** the son of Nun" (Neh 8:17).

Hoshea הוֹשֵׁעַ
 Yehoshua יְהוֹשֻׁעַ
 Yeshua יֵשׁוּעַ

Here is the progression: Hoshea son of Nun > Yehoshua son of Nun > Yeshua son of Nun.

Even the abbreviated form "Yeshua" retains the original meaning: "the LORD will save." In the Greek Bible (the Septuagint, LXX), Yehoshua and Yeshua are both represented by one name: **Yesous**. This is also the name used later in the Greek New Testament for both Joshua (Acts 7:45; Heb 4:8) and Jesus.

Thus Jesus' Jewish Greek name represents the Hebrew "Yehoshua" and "Yeshua."

Yesous - Ἰησοῦς

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Clarifications on the name "Yeshua"

- Some modern writers say the name Yeshua means "salvation." But it actually means "the LORD saves." The Hebrew word for salvation is spelled with the final "h": **yeshuah**.
- Some splinter groups spell his name **Yahshua** or **Yahushua**. This has no biblical basis and is incorrect. The Masoretic vowel tzeirei used in the name "Yeshua" in the Hebrew Bible (Eng. Jeshua) and the Greek vowel eta in the Septuagint prove that the ancient pronunciation of the first syllable was "Yay-" not "Yah-."
- The spelling **Y'shua** (with an apostrophe representing a "sheva") is not valid, because it ignores the vowel tzeirei under the yod. The names "Yehoshuah" and "Yeshayah" do have the sheva under the yod, but in the Masoretic text of the Bible the name "Yeshua" has a tzeirei not a sheva — so in the modern Hebrew NTs by Salkinson, Delitzsch, Israel Bible Society). See Ezra 2:2 and Neh 7:7, etc.

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2) The prophet **Isaiah**'s Hebrew name occurs in two forms in the Bible: **Yeshayahu** and **Yeshayah** (shortened). Like Joshua's name ("Yehoshua") this name has the same two elements: *yasha* (to save) and *Yah(u)*. But the order is reversed. Yesha-yahu means "salvation or deliverance (from) the LORD." And just like Joshua's new name form, Isaiah's name locates the Source of deliverance: God himself.

Careful readers of Isaiah will note that the theme **yeshuah** (salvation) runs throughout the book. In later times other men wore the names Yeshayahu (1 Chron 25:3, 15; 26:25) and Yeshayah (1 Chron 3:21; Ezra 8:7, 19; Neh 11:7).

Yeshayahu יֵשַׁעְיָהוּ
Yeshayah יֵשַׁעְיָה
(Grk) Hesaias Ἡσαίας

This suggests either admiration for the prophet Isaiah or perhaps a revival of the biblical theme that only in God would Israel's deliverance appear.

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Yeshua of Nazareth: The Man of the Name

This pattern of naming individuals in order to exemplify the principle that the God of Israel will deliver his people is very powerful.

Over the centuries Israel expected God to live up to his Name and keep his covenant, as he had defined it to Moses on Mount Sinai at the founding of the nation: Loyal Covenant Guardian (Exod 34:6-8). When they were in Babylon in exile they especially called upon him to rescue them. They believed in his name, what it stood for.

I don't think it's an accident of history or a fascinating coincidence that the name of the man from

Nazareth – Yeshua – whom many believed to be the Messiah, would also wear the symbolic name "the LORD will save."

Yeshua - יֵשׁוּעַ

His name fit the moment and his character. This biblical Hebrew background is, I believe, important for understanding how first century Jews might have perceived Yeshua and his mission.

The Name that God once "explained" to Moses in Exodus 34, then demonstrated to Israel throughout their history, is the same name this Nazarean also "characterized" with his whole life. He embodied the essence of the Name. He demonstrated God's character, will and purpose to deliver his people. He both came in his Father's name and revealed it. Hebrew-speaking Jews would hear a rich echo when they heard the name "Yeshua" spoken. [[*Note](#)]

For more on the name "Yeshua" see [Shem Yeshua Mashiach](#).

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Hearing the Name in the N.T.

Scattered throughout the NT is evidence that its Jewish writers and teachers were aware of this linguistic and theological link. Let's substitute Hebrew names for those in Greek, then listen.

She will bear a son; and you shall call his **Name Yeshua**, for it is he who will **save** [Heb. yasha] his people from their sins. (said by an angel; Matthew 1:21)

There is **salvation** [Heb. yeshuah] in no one else; for there is no other **Name** under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be **saved** [Heb. yasha]. (Acts 4:12)

God highly exalted him, and bestowed on him **the Name** which is above every name, that at the name of **Yehoshua** every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that **Yeshua** Messiah is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11)

I have come in my Father's **Name** . . . [Father] I have manifested Your **Name** to those whom you have given to me." (John 5:43; 17:6)

The name "Jesus" may for most English speakers have lost its ancient associations. Yet its potent theological effluence from the Hebrew Scriptures remains a living reality to those who go down to deeper streams.

***Note:** In Medieval English, the name Jesus was not pronounced "Jeezus." Back then, as in Latin, the English "J" was spoken as "Y" and the vowels "e" and "u" were both long. Thus, the name was pronounced **Yaysoos**, which is how it is said in Latin and NT Greek. [[Return to text](#)]