

READING THE DIVINE NAME

Something should be said concerning the way our English Bibles refer to the Divine Name.¹ Most English versions that are used by the majority of churches today (NASB, RSV, NRSV, NIV, ESV, NEB, and others) refer to God's personal name as "LORD." Explanations can be found in the introductions or prefaces to all these versions. But it is still confusing to most English readers as to why this is done.

The personal name of God was revealed to Moses (Exod 3:14; 6:2-8) before the exodus events. When Moses hesitated to assume the leadership position to which God called him, fearing the people would not receive him, God said to him: "This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Exod 3:14b). Just before this statement God had said to Moses: "I AM WHO I AM" (Exod 3:14a). These statements are really a "play-on-God's-name." God finally said to Moses: "Say to the Israelites, 'Yahweh, 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, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation" (Exod 3:15). How do we get *Yahweh* for God's personal name? It is the pronunciation of the four consonants of the Hebrew: יהוה (*yhwah*, called the *tetragrammaton*, "four letters"). Most scholars agree that this *unpointed* (nonvoweled) word should be pronounced "Yahweh."² Perhaps it is the causative form (Hiphil) of the verb "to be" (הָיָה, *hāyāh*), meaning, "He causes to be." The "imperfect" form (יְהִי, *yih'yeh*, "he is") plays on the word, יְהִי־יְהִי, (*'eh'yeh*, "I AM"). (This is significant for the great "I am" passages in the Gospel of John!) While we are not certain as to the meaning of God's personal name, the use of the name in Exodus 3 and 6 gives us enough context to suggest that God's name could mean: "I am," "I am who I am," "I will be who I will be," or "I cause to be." Technically if the name is causative in form, it should be translated as "he causes to be" and pronounced "Yahweh." To be sure, God's personal name is connected to the "is" verb of the Hebrew language.

No wonder the name that included all of this was so frequently on the lips of the people of Israel. But over the years the Hebrews became "superstitious" with the name in the sense that they began to use a *substitute* name in place of *Yahweh*. This was an attempt not to misuse God's name (Exod 20:7), whether in magic or worship or any other way. The substitute name used was אֲדֹנָי (*ādōnāy*), meaning "my Lord."³ So, every place where God's personal name appeared in the Hebrew text, the conscientious Hebrew would read/say "my Lord" (popularly spelled and pronounced *Adonai*). When the Masoretes (Hebrew scholars of the text) developed the symbols for vowels to help pronounce the Hebrew text more accurately (c. 500–600 A.D.), the vowels of *Adonai* were placed with the four letters of God's personal name. Hence, the Masoretic Text (in its printed form) presented God's personal name this way: יהוה. These vowel markings look slightly different from the vowels on the word *Adonai*, (אֲדֹנָי) for the following reasons. First, the vowel underneath the *aleph* (א) changes to a simple *schwā* underneath the *yodh* (י). Secondly, the *hōlem* (וּ), a dot above and to the left of the consonant letter, was not needed since the *wāw* (ו) could stand for the same long *ō* sound. Finally, underneath that same symbol, the *wāw*, was placed the *qāmeṣ* (וּ). Therefore, every time a reader of the Masoretic Text read the Divine Name, instead of pronouncing the "true name," he or she simply used the vowels as a reminder to say the substitute name, *Adonai*, "my Lord," thus, supposedly, avoiding the *misuse* of God's personal name! But that is not all.

Many years later, "Petrus Galatinus, confessor to Pope Leo X, who in 1518 A.D. transliterated the four Hebrew letters with the Latin letters *jwhh* together with the vowels of *Adonai*," produced "the artificial form 'Jehovah.'"⁴ In effect, he was using one symbol, the *waw* (ו), as both a consonant and a vowel at the same time, which is illegitimate in any language. Even later, this hybrid name for God became popularized by its use in the American Standard Version of 1901, having been used in Germany (the country from which spawned "Jehovah's Witnesses"!). Knowing that this "hybrid" form of God's name was inaccurate, to say the least, subsequent English translations began using a translation of the substitute name and placed it in small caps (LORD). Perhaps this was done so as not to appear presumptuous about the accurate way to pronounce God's personal and revealed name. But this is taking our piety a little too far.

First of all, God has never said that we should not pronounce his name. In fact, he encourages it! Secondly, the Jewish approach of using a substitute name did not and does not absolve one from *misusing* God's name — it has been misused in this whole process! Thirdly, scholars are 99% certain that *Yahweh* was the original and accurate pronunciation of the Divine Name. Finally, there is no good reason for English versions today to continue this practice. Therefore, I encourage my students to say "Yahweh" when they come across the word "LORD" in the English Bible. In this commentary I have deliberately mixed the two practices together in order to help readers gradually move in the direction of my students in the classroom. You will find the commentary using "Yahweh" and "LORD" in the same context. I still encourage you, the reader, to say "Yahweh" every time you see "LORD." This makes for more accurate reading, avoids confusing references (cp. Ps 110:1), and dispels the *superstitious* use of the Divine Name. A good example of the use of "Yahweh" can be found in the Jerusalem Bible as well as its revised form, the New Jerusalem Bible. It is a French Catholic translation from the original texts, and that version was then translated into good English, using "Yahweh" for God's personal name. May I encourage you to do the same.

¹See Tesh/Zorn, *Psalms*, vol. 1, pp. 42-45, particularly fn. 50, for my comments.

²See the article on יהוה (*YHWH*) by Freedman, O'Connor, and Ringgren in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. by G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. by David E. Green, Volume V (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 500-521.

³We must recognize that another substitute name was used early on which was *Elohim* for *Yahweh* in the Elohist Psalter (Psalms 42-83). However, eventually *Adonai* was used wherever the Hebrew text had the *tetragrammaton* (the 4 consonants of the Divine Name).

⁴See Henry O. Thompson's article on "Yahweh" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, volume 6, ed. by David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 1011. See pp. 1011-1012 for the entire article.

