

THE NAMES OF GOD

Part 2

In Hebrew thought, a person's name was inextricably bound up with his/her existence, personality, and reputation. This dynamic is also true for God. One of the remarkable features of the Hebrew Bible is the frequency with which one finds compound names for God. These come in two forms, the “*El*” compounds and the “*Yahweh*” compounds. Already, we have seen such a combination in ‘*El Shaddai*, but there are many others. Generally, these compound names highlight various attributes of God, and often enough, they arise in the context of his interactions with people who see God's divine character in his mighty acts in history.

THE “*EL*” COMPOUNDS

‘*El ‘Elyon*

The compound *El Elyon* is a superlative meaning “God Most High” (Ge. 14:18-19). It appears in the narrative of Abram's interaction with Melchizedek after his rescue of his kidnapped family members. Melchizedek, the priest-king of Jerusalem, served ‘*El ‘Elyon* and blessed Abram by this name. Thereafter, the name ‘*Elyon* (= Most High) appears by itself without the addition of ‘*El* (Dt. 32:8; 2 Sa. 22:14; Ps. 9:2, etc.). One fascinating combination is in Ps. 91:1, where the names ‘*Elyon*, ‘*El Shaddai*, and *Yahweh* appear in a single expression of trust in God.

‘*El ‘Olam*

‘*El ‘Olam*, meaning “God Eternal,” was first invoked by Abraham at Beersheba when establishing a treaty with Abimelech concerning water rights (Ge. 21:33). While this compound is not found elsewhere, the term ‘*olam* as an attribute of God is found at various times. Phrases “*from ‘olam to ‘olam you are ‘El*” (= from forever to forever you are God” (Ps. 90:2) lies behind the liturgical expression “world without end,” frequently found in the Book of Common Prayer. The term ‘*olam* is also attached to divine attributes, such as, God's mercy (Is. 54:8), his love (Ps. 136), his glory (Ps. 104:31), and his faithfulness (Ps. 117:2).

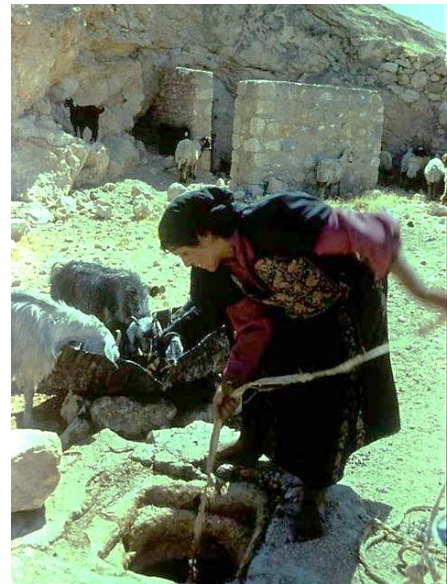
‘*El Ro'i*

Appearing only in Ge. 16:13, this compound identifies God as the protector of Hagar when she found sustenance at Beer-lahai-roi. It means “God of seeing” or “God who sees me.”

‘*El Bethel*

God identified himself by this name when Jacob built an altar at Bethel (Ge. 31:13; 35:7). It means “God of the House of God,” recalling Jacob's dream of a ladder reaching into heaven, a place that Jacob named “house of God” (Ge.28:19).

Other ‘*El Compounds*



The covenant over water rights would have been especially important in a high desert climate. Here, a similar well (this one near Bethlehem) could be sealed with a heavy stone. Flocks are water by drawing water and pouring it into a trough of skin.

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Several other 'El compounds are scattered throughout the Hebrew Bible, including, 'El Gibbor (= Mighty God, Is. 9:6), 'El Da'ot (= God of Knowledge, 1 Sa. 2:3), 'El Qanni' (= Jealous God, cf. Ex. 20:5), and 'El 'Elohe-Israel (= God, the God of Israel, Ge. 33:20).

THE "YAHWEH" COMPOUNDS

With the revelation of Yahweh's personal name and common usage after the exodus, other Yahweh compounds appear, combining the name Yahweh with additional descriptive terms illuminating God's attributes or roles. As with the 'El compounds, these divine names often arise out of specific encounters between humans and God.

Yahweh Yir'eh

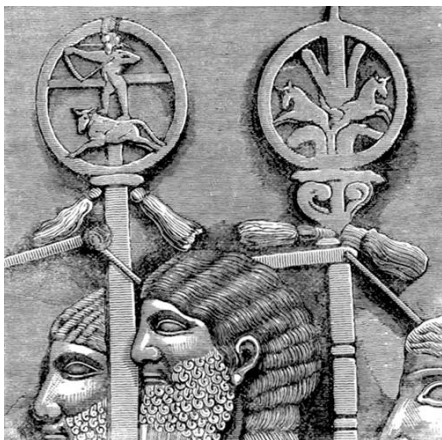
The Genesis narratives offered a Yahweh compound based upon an Elohim compound. In the story of the binding of Isaac, Abraham says to Isaac, "God will provide ('Elohim yir'eh) a lamb" (Ge. 22:8). Later in the story (Ge. 22:14), this statement is recast as a Yahweh compound name, *Yahweh yir'eh* (= the LORD will see or provide).¹

Yahweh Roph'eka

When the bitter water at the Marah oasis was sweetened (Ex. 15:26), God declared himself to be *Yahweh Roph'eka* (= the LORD who heals you). He declared that if the people would keep covenant, none of the diseases of Egypt would strike them.

Yahweh Nissiy

After the victory over a desert attacker named Amalek, in which Moses, with the assistance of Aaron and Hur, held up his staff during the entire battle, Moses built an altar to commemorate the event. He named it *Yahweh Nissiy* or "Yahweh [is] My Banner" (Ex. 17:15). A banner is an emblem attached to a pole and used in military action. No one, however, knows what these banners looked like for ancient Israel.



While we do not know what Israelite banners may have been like, we do have imagery of Assyrian standards.

Yahweh Shalom

When Gideon was called by the Angel of the LORD to rescue the Israelites from Midianite invaders, he built an altar, naming it *Yahweh Shalom*, which means, "Yahweh is peace," (Jg. 6:24).

Yahweh Ro'iy

In the most famous of all psalms, David, who grew up herding his father's sheep near Bethlehem, begins the poem by naming God as *Yahweh Ro'iy*, which means, "Yahweh [is] my Shepherd" (Ps. 23:1). The remainder of the psalm is an extended metaphor describing the divine Shepherd, guiding,

¹ It may be noted that the Hebrew verb here is the common expression "to see," but it is used idiomatically to indicate selection or choice. Thus, to say that God would "see" a lamb meant that he would select or provide a lamb. The final sentence in 22:14 may be rendered either, "On the mountain of Yahweh it will be provided," or "On the mountain of Yahweh it will be seen (or made clear)." It is not unlikely that both meanings are intended in a double entendre, for not only did God provide a lamb, he also provided understanding when Abraham was on the verge of slaying his son.

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providing, and protecting his sheep.

Yahweh Tsabaoth Goelenu

In the midst of his prediction concerning the fall of Babylon, Isaiah offers an aside to the faithful in Israel as a contrast to the downfall of Babylon, the city of arrogance and extravagance. In this aside, he names God as *Goelenu Yahweh Tsabaoth*, which means “Our Redeemer [is] Yahweh Tsabaoth” (Is. 47:4).



Ezekiel's vision of the divine glory that abandoned Solomon's temple took the form of a chariot throne surrounded by four living creatures. This water color by William Blake (1757-1837), the English poet and artist, attempts to capture this vision of the divine chariot throne.

Yahweh Tsidkenu

Yahweh's messianic word to Jeremiah of a righteous king to be born in David's family was accompanied by the declaration, “This is the name by which he will be called: *Yahweh Tsidkenu*,” meaning, “The LORD our Righteousness” (Je. 23:6).

Yahweh Shammah

Near the beginning of his ministry, Ezekiel saw in a vision that Yahweh was abandoning the temple built by Solomon, because the Israelites had flagrantly desecrated it (Eze. 10:4, 18-19; 11:22-25; cf. 1:1, 28b; 3:22-23; 8:3-4; 10:15). The closing several chapters in his book describe a new temple, now cleansed of all its impurities (Eze. Chapters 40-48). The final verse in his book ends with the compound name *Yahweh Shammah*, which means, “The LORD is there” (Eze. 48:35).

Other Yahweh Compounds

A number of other Yahweh compounds are to be found, including *Yahweh Mekaddishkem* (= I, Yahweh, sanctify you, Ex. 31:13), *Yahweh 'Oriy wyish'iy* (= Yahweh is my light and salvation, Ps. 27:1), and *Yahweh l'or 'olam* (= Yahweh [is] your eternal light). Such compounds sometimes take the form of an assumed “to be” verb, which is also common in biblical Hebrew.

NEW TESTAMENT NAMES

Names for God in the Greek New Testament are derived either from the LXX or coined as unique expressions.

God

The most common name for God in the New Testament is the Greek word *Theos* (θεός), which appears hundreds of times. This usage derives from the LXX and translates the Hebrew *'Elohim* or *'El*. Generally, it is used of God as he is in the Old Testament, though on occasion it can refer directly to Christ (Jn. 1:1, 18; 20:28; Ro. 9:5; Tit. 2:13). It is also used to refer to pagan deities (Ac.

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28:6; 1 Co. 8:5).

Lord

Both the Old Testament names *Yahweh* and *Adon* are rendered by the Greek word *Kyrios*. On most occasions, this name is used for Christ Jesus, either as a title of respect during his earthly life (Mt. 8:8; Lk. 9:59; 10:40, etc.) or as an exalted title due to his resurrection from the dead (Ac. 2:36; Ro. 10:9; Phil. 2:11, etc.). Ultimately, all creatures in the entire universe will acknowledge Jesus as Lord (Phil. 2:11).

Almighty

In the LXX, the name *Pantokrator* is used to translate *Yahweh Tsabaoth*. It appears some ten times in the Greek New Testament, nine of them in the Book of Revelation and is usually translated into English as “Almighty” (2 Co. 6:18; Rv. 1:8; 16:7).

Savior

The name *Soter* (= Savior) is widely attested in the Greco-Roman world as a designation for deities, and indeed, for the Caesar himself. In the New Testament, it is used for God, and it serves as a counter-cultural term in that it is now Christ Jesus who is the Savior, not the Caesar or any other deity (Lk. 1:47; 1 Ti. 1:1; Tit. 1:3, etc.).

Abba/Father

Two words in the Greek New Testament, *Abba* and *Pater*, are used to refer to God as Father. *Abba* is an Aramaic loanword, probably taken from the speech of children. It approximates the English “Papa.” Though appearing only three times (Mk. 14:36; Ro. 8:15; Ga. 4:6), it first was used by Jesus’ to address God in prayer, and later, was used by the early Christians to address God as well. In all three New Testament appearances, it is accompanied by the Greek term *Pater* (= Father), and it seems to have become a fixed liturgical expression within early Christianity. It is significant that Paul uses this term in his letters to non-Jewish recipients as though it was a commonly understood name for God within the Christian community. In the literature of Judaism, this way of addressing God does not appear, so it seems that Jesus coined this relational name, and the early church followed suite.

The term Father (*pater*) for God is widely used in the New Testament, both by Christ (Mt. 5:16, 45, 48; 6:1, etc.) and the apostles (Ro. 1:7; 1 Co. 8:6; 2 Co. 11:31, etc.). As used by Jesus, it is frequently personalized as “my Father” (Mt. 7:21; Jn. 10:29; 15:8, etc.). Among the Christians, it is used as a direct address to God in prayer (Ep. 1:17; 3:14; Col. 3:17).

King

The name *Basileus* (= King), while it is commonly used of earthly potentates (Ac. 25:13; 2 Co. 11:32; 1 Pe. 2:17), is also used of God (1 Ti. 1:17; 1 Ti. 6:15; Rv. 15:3) as well as for Christ (Rv. 19:16).

Sovereign Lord

The term *despotes* (= lord, master) commonly denotes a slave owner (1 Ti. 6:1; Tit. 2:9, etc.), but it also refers to God and is translated as “Lord” or “Sovereign Lord” or “Master” in English Versions (Lk. 2:29; Ac. 4:24; Rv. 6:10).