

THE NAMES OF GOD

THE DIVINE NAMES

Part 1

The Israelite religion was monotheistic, giving allegiance to one God only. This is all the more remarkable in that Israel's monotheism arose in a context of ubiquitous polytheism, which saturated the culture of the ancient Near East.¹ The cultural exchange through trade, treaties, and war in western Asia spread the names and characters of the ancient gods of Sumer and Acadia among the Hurrians, Hittites, Amorites, and Canaanites. Religious ideas were exchanged, modified, adapted, and recorded among the various Mesopotamian and Canaanite peoples. Within this world of many gods, the small nation of Hebrew slaves who left Egypt and invaded western Palestine put their faith in only one God whose personal name was Yahweh.

Crucial to the development of the Hebrew faith is the idea of revelation. Hebrew epistemology embraced two sources of truth. One was the common knowledge gained from human experience, instinct, custom, feelings, sense perception, observation, experimentation, and contemplation. The other was special knowledge gained from God's mighty acts in history and the accompanying divine interpretation of these acts through specially chosen spokespersons. The Hebrew Bible is permeated with accounts of how this revealed knowledge from Yahweh about himself was transmitted to key figures, and through them, to the whole Israelite nation. Still, while there was only one God who was the true God, this God had several names by which he was called and described and through which he revealed his character. Some of these names were widely familiar across the ancient Near East. Most, however, were unique to the God of Israel.

God and the gods

'El (אֵל) was the generic name/title for God among Semitic peoples, carrying the root meaning of power or might. In Canaanite religion, 'El was the head of the divine pantheon of gods. For the Israelites, however, 'El is used alternatively with the personal name Yahweh. The names 'elohim or 'elim (= gods) was used by the Canaanites to refer to the divine pantheon itself, but in Israel, the plural name 'Elohim took on the character of a plurality of majesty or intensity and roughly corresponds to our English word "godhead," which is to say, the fullness of deity. What is most important is that when 'Elohim is used to describe the one, true God, it is controlled by a singular verb. 'Elohim is also used alternatively with the name Yahweh, and in some cases (e.g., Ge. 2:4ff.), it is combined in a single expression Yahweh 'Elohim (= LORD God).

SINGULARS AND PLURALS

In Hebrew syntax, verbs drive the sentences and most often appear as the initial word in a sentence. This is important with respect to the plural form 'Elohim, which appears hundreds of times in the Hebrew Bible. On the rare occasions it refers to false gods, it takes a plural verb (e.g., 1 Kg. 19:2; 2 Kg. 19:12, etc.). However, when referring to the one true God of Israel, which is the vast majority of times, it takes a singular verb and singular adjectives.

¹ Atheism was not a philosophical option in the ancient world. The question was not so much, "Is there a God?" but rather, "Who is God?" or "What is his name?"

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Yahweh, the Divine Personal Name

When Moses turned aside to examine the bush that was ablaze but not consumed, he was introduced to the divine name Yahweh (Ex. 3:15). It has become traditional in English Versions of the Old Testament to translate the Hebrew name *Yahweh* as LORD (in all capitals) so as to distinguish it from *Adonai*, the title of respect which also means Lord (upper-and-lower case letters). Yahweh is a personal name; Adonai is not. The name Yahweh is sometimes referred to as the tetragrammaton, because it is composed of four consonants in Hebrew (יהוה or YHWH).

God informed Moses that the patriarchs were not familiar with this name (Ex. 6:2-3). They had known God as *'El Shaddai* (Ge. 17:1; 35:11), but now they were to know him as Yahweh.² Of course, the name Yahweh appears throughout the Genesis accounts.

Many scholars think this may simply be a scribal retrojection of the name that was familiar to the author(s) when the actual documents reached their finished form.³

After the patriarchal period, the name *'El Shaddai* gradually faded out of common usage, and Yahweh became the dominant name for the God of Israel. It is significant that the name Yahweh sounds similar to the expression, "I am who I am."⁴ Because the name Yahweh was revealed to Moses and subsequently to Israel, the

Discovered in 1980 in a tomb dating to the end of the Judean monarchy, this 1" long roll of silver foil, when unrolled, revealed an inscription of the ancient priestly blessing in Nu. 6: "May Yahweh bless you and watch over you. May Yahweh make his face shine upon you and grant you peace."



² The meaning of the compound older name *'El Shaddai* (usually rendered God Almighty in the English Versions) is debated. The name *'El* is clear enough, but the name *Shaddai* is ambiguous. It may be related to the Accadian word for mountain (*sadu*), and if so, may mean "God of the mountain", so B. Anderson, "God, Names of," *IDB* (1962) II.412. Other suggestions, though generally less accepted, are that *Shaddai* is derived from the Semitic word for breast (*shad*), hence, "God the Nourisher," or from the root *shadad* (= to devastate), hence, "God the Destroyer," cf. discussion in M. Pope, *Job [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973), p. 44. A satisfactory solution has yet to be proposed, but the traditional idea of self-sufficiency, which goes back to rabbinical interpretations, is at least adequate. Contextually, the name seems to emphasize the might of God over against the frailty of humans, cf. D. Kidner, *Genesis* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1967), pp. 128-129; V. Hamilton, *TWOT* (1980) II.907.

³ It is possible to interpret Ex. 6:2-3 as simply indicating that a new content to the name Yahweh was revealed, and some scholars take it in this way, even suggesting that a better translation would be, "I appeared to Abraham...[in the character of] *El Shaddai*, but as to [the character and content of] my name Yahweh I did not make myself known," R. Wyatt, "God, Names of," *ISBE* (1982) 2.507. If so, then it was not the name itself which was new, but the significance of the name which was new, cf. R. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), pp. 578-582. However, this solution is not the most natural way to read the text and may unduly strain the grammar, cf. R. Gordon, "Exodus," *IBC* (1979), pp. 151-152.

⁴ The Hebrew expression, "I am who I am," is in the imperfect or uncompleted tense and hence can also be rendered, "I will be what I will be." Phonetically, the name Yahweh in Hebrew sounds similar to and may be derived from the verbal expression, "I am" (*'ehyeh*, as a simple *qal* verb). If so, then the name Yahweh carries the idea, "the One who

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This ivory pomegranate scepter head is perhaps the only surviving relic from Solomon's temple. The artifact surfaced on the antiquities market and was subsequently purchased by the Israel Museum. The incised inscription reads, "Belonging to the Temple of Yahweh, holy to the priests."

name came to be associated with the exodus. From the time of Moses onward, Yahweh was always the one who had heard Israel's cry of oppression and who graciously intervened in the nation's behalf.⁵

There is also a shortened form of Yahweh that appears about 50 times. It is the form *YAH*, and it is found in the construct word *hallelu-YAH*, or "Praise the LORD." The initial occurrence is in the Song of the Sea, "*YAH* is my strength and song..." (Ex. 15:2). Mostly, this shortened form appears in the Psalms (e.g., Ps. 68:5, 19; 77:12; 89:9; 94:7, 12; 102:19; 105:45; 106:1), but occasionally elsewhere (e.g., Is. 12:2; 26:4; 38:11, etc.).

Adonai, the Divine Title

Adon was a title of honor in Semitic languages, and it could be used of either humans or gods. In ordinary speech, it was used as a courtesy to superiors (i.e., "my lord", "sir"), but in Israel, the title was frequently used in apposition to Yahweh (Ex. 23:17; 34:23).⁶ '*Adonai* (= my lords), like *Elohim*, is a plural form using a singular verb. It functioned in much the same way as *Elohim*, as an intensive plurality of majesty with the approximate meaning "my lordship."⁷

Yahweh Tsabaoth

Though absent in the Torah, this name begins to appear in the historical books and psalms and becomes widely used in the prophets. The basic meaning is "LORD of Hosts," presumably referring either to the armies of Israel (cf. 1 Sa. 17:45) or to the angelic hosts

in the heavens (cf. Ps. 103:21; 148:2). As such, Yahweh is extolled as the all-powerful sovereign who oversees all human and superhuman forces.

The Septuagint

When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek in the 3rd century BC, the Jewish translators chose the generic Greek word for God (θεός = God). They also chose to use the same Greek word to translate both the divine names Yahweh and Adon (κύριος = Lord). This would set a precedent for

is," i.e., the absolute and unchangeable One.

⁵ The name Jehovah, which one finds in older English versions (e.g., Ps. 83:18; Is. 12:2; 26:4, KJV), was devised in the 16th century by combining the consonants of the name Yahweh (YHWH) with the vowels of Adonai.

⁶ The Hebrew apposition *Adon Yahweh* is problematic for English translators in that both names are normally rendered by the same English equivalent. A translation such as "Lord LORD" would be awkward, so the NIV translators, for instance, render the compound as "Sovereign LORD." This is better than the KJV rendering of "Lord God," since there is no justification for using the title "God," which implies *El* or *Elohim*.

⁷ The Canaanite equivalent of *Adon* was *Ba'al* (= lord, master).

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ENGLISH VERSION TRANSLATIONS					
	KJV	RSV	NIV	ESV	NJB
El	God	God	God	God	El
Elohim	God	God	God	God	God
Shaddai	Almighty	Almighty	Almighty	Almighty	Shaddai
Yahweh	LORD	LORD	LORD	LORD	Yahweh
Adon	L/lord	L/lord	L/lord	L/lord	L/lord
Adonai	L/lord	L/lord	L/lord/sir	L/lord	L/lord
Tsabaoth	Hosts	Hosts	Almighty	Hosts	Sabaoth

the New Testament. Throughout the New Testament, whenever the Old Testament is quoted, and the original names Yahweh or Adonai appear, the term “Lord” will be the English translation for both. It gives rise to phrases, such as, “the Lord said to my Lord...” (Mt. 22:44). The Hebrew upon which this quotation is based in Ps. 110:1 is, “Yahweh said to Adonay...” Similarly, Jesus’ words, “You shall love the Lord

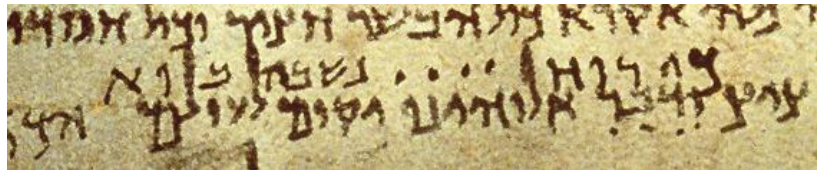
(κύριος) your God (θεός)...” (Mt. 22:37) replicates the passage in Dt. 6:4, “You shall love the LORD (יהוה = Yahweh) your God (אלהים = Elohim).

Descriptive Names

Especially in Hebrew poetry, one finds metaphorical names for God, such as, “Rock” (Dt. 32:4; Is. 17:10; Hab. 1:12, etc.), “Holy One” (Is. 57:15; Ho. 11:9; Je. 15:29, etc.), “King” (Nu. 23:21; Ps. 5:2; Is. 6:5, etc.), “Shepherd” (Ps. 23:1; 80:1), “Spring of Living Water” (Je. 17:13), and “Savior” (Ps. 25:5; Is. 45:15; Mic. 7:7, etc.).

Pronunciation

The pronunciation of the name Yahweh can never be certain. The Hebrew text in the Old Testament is made up of consonants only, and vowels were not added until many centuries after the time of Christ, through there was an oral vocalization that was passed down from generation to generation. Even this oral tradition, however, is not dependable, because the sacred name was considered too holy to be pronounced, based on Ex. 20:7 and Lv. 24:11. Hence, when vowels were eventually added, the vowels used for the name Yahweh were the ones used for Adonai to alert the reader that the sacred name was not to be pronounced. Present attempts to vocalize the name Yahweh derive from early Greek transliterations by Clement of Alexandria (2nd century) and Theodoret (5th century).



In the Isaiah Scroll of the Dead Sea Scrolls (1QIsa^a), the reference to Yahweh in the phrase “prepare the way of YHWH” (Is. 40:3) is not even written out. Instead, the scribe, out of reverence for the divine name, has substituted four dots for the four letters in the tetragrammaton.

The Divine Name and Glory

When Moses requested that God show him his divine glory, Yahweh said, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, Yahweh, in your presence. ...but you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live” (Ex. 33:18-20). The holy name of God is bound up with the holy character of God, and the essential character of God is his goodness. In this moment of revelation, what God gave to Moses was not a visible theophany, but rather, a description of his character—not how God *looks* but how he *is*.