

SHOULD WE USE THE NAME JEHOVAH?

by Dr. James E. Smith, Florida Christian College

The name *Jehovah* does not occur a single time in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. No biblical writer ever used the name *Jehovah* in prayer or song. Though the name *Jehovah* appears seven times in the King James Version and several thousand times in the American Standard Version there is a question as to whether anybody prior to the sixteenth century A.D. had ever heard this strange-sounding and unbiblical name. Doubtlessly every biblical character from Adam to John would stare in astonishment and incomprehension should they be told that the covenant name of God is *Jehovah*.

But how did the name *Jehovah* come into use? How did this non-existent name come to be part of our popular translation of Scripture. It is a complicated story, especially for those who are not trained in the Hebrew language.

I

HOW THE NAME OF GOD GOT LOST

The Hebrew Alphabet consists of twenty-two consonants. Vowels were originally not put into writing. Vowels are, of course, essential to the pronunciation of any word in any language. If you don't believe this, just try to pronounce some combination of consonants without inserting a vowel sound. The divine name was originally written in Hebrew without vowels. It was spelled with four letters equivalent in English to J (or Y), H, V (or W) and H. These four letters, JHVH, are called the *Tetragrammaton* (the four-letter name). But how does one pronounce JHVH? Is it *Jahavah* or *Juhovaha* or possibly *Jihivah*? Actually there are many possible ways of pronouncing JHVH in English. But which way is right? If we are going to refer to God by this personal name, shouldn't we try to be absolutely sure that we are using the right name?

The correct pronunciation of JHVH was handed down from father to son. But somewhere along the line people got the idea that this name of God was too sacred to utter in everyday worship. During the intertestamental period the name was only pronounced in the temple once each year by the high priest on the Day of Atonement. It was never uttered, so far as we know, outside the temple area.

But how did the people avoid pronouncing the divine name when they read the Scriptures orally in their worship services? After all, the name JHVH appears some 6,800 times in the Old Testament. The pious Jews had an answer. They substituted the word '*Adonay* (Lord), or in a few passages '*Elohim* (God), in place of the divine name JHVH.

Now, since the true pronunciation of JHVH was restricted to the temple service of the Day of Atonement, what do you suppose happened when the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70? Within a short period of time the true pronunciation of JHVH was lost forever!

But someone will say, was it not only the vowels that got lost? Yes that is true. But words and names consist of consonants **plus** vowels. Without either the one or the other no word or name can exist. Thus when the vowels of the divine name were lost, in a very real sense the

divine name itself was lost. All we have left in our Hebrew Bibles are the consonants JHVH. They stand, like bones of a skeleton, the only surviving testimony to the living name that once reverberated in the temple precincts.

II THE CREATION OF THE NAME JEHOVAH

About A.D. 500 Jewish leaders saw that it would be necessary to indicate the vowel sounds of the Old Testament if the true pronunciation of Hebrew was to be preserved. These scholars were called Masoretes. The Old Testament text that we study today consists of the ancient consonants and the relatively new vowel signs. It is called the Masoretic text. We all owe a great debt of gratitude to these sages of the Middle Ages.

Two principles guided the Masoretes in their work. First, they never altered or changed the consonants of the inspired Hebrew text that had been handed down to them. Second, they aimed to reflect accurately the pronunciation of Hebrew words that was current in their own day. But what vowels were these scribes going to put with the letters JHVH? They did not *know* how this name was pronounced in antiquity. Besides, in the synagogues of A.D. 500 the word '*Adonay* or '*Elohim* was always substituted for JHVH.

The Masoretes hit upon a brilliant solution to their problem. They left the consonantal text as it was (JHVH) but added to these four consonants the vowels of the word '*Adonay* or '*Elohim*. Thus, whenever the reader saw in his Hebrew Bible the consonants JHVH with the vowels of the substitute word, he was reminded that he should read the substitute word. To this day all Jews and most Christians follow the practice of substituting '*Adonay* or '*Elohim* for JHVH when the Old Testament is read from the Hebrew text. But where does the name Jehovah come in?

In about the sixteenth century A.D. Christian theologians were at a loss to know what to do with the *Tetragrammaton*. Some of them, either through ignorance or by deliberate design, adopted the practice of combining the consonants JHVH with the vowels of the substitute word '*Adonay*. This resulted in the creation of the name *Jehovah*. [The first vowel "a" of '*Adonay* appears in the word *Jehovah* as an "e" because of certain Hebrew rules about guttural and non-guttural letters and the vowels that they may take.] Here then is the true origin of the name *Jehovah*. It is the result of an unholy wedding between the consonants of one word and the vowels of an totally different word.

Perhaps an illustration at this point will help. Suppose there were some taboo on pronouncing the name *Cincinnati*. Suppose that every time that name occurred we were required to substitute instead the name *Queen City*. Now suppose that to keep us from ever pronouncing the name *Cincinnati* we removed its vowels. This would leave us with CNCNNT. But, to remind ourselves that we should always say *Queen City* every time we see the letters CNCNNT, we combine the consonants CNCNNT with the vowels of *Queen City*. This would give us the ridiculous combination *Cuncenenity*. *Jehovah* is like *Cuncenenity*. It is a nonsense name that has absolutely no meaning at all.

III

BUT WHAT IS THE NAME OF GOD?

What vowels originally belonged to the letters JHVH? This is but another way of asking, What is the name of God that is used so frequently in the Old Testament Scriptures? Most scholars feel that JHVH, or more accurately, YHVH is the imperfect tense, third masculine singular of the root HVH. If this is true, the correct pronunciation of the divine name probably is *Yahveh* or perhaps *Yahaveh*. But the truth of the matter is that the vocalization of JHVH or YHVH is **unknown**. A quick glance at the article dealing with the names of God in the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* indicates what widespread differences exist among competent linguists with regard to the etymological significance of the *Tetragrammaton*.

Some may lament the fact of our ignorance with regard to the covenant name of God. How much more personal and intimate would be our relationship to God if we could address him by his name. But pious Jews never regarded their spiritual life impoverished because of the absence of the divine name. The early Christians never attempted to address God by his personal name even though many of them knew what it was. Would their spiritual life have been any richer or more meaningful had they employed it? Why is not *Lord* or *God* sufficient for us as it was for them? What could be more intimate or personal than to address our Creator by the name *Father* even as our Master taught us to do? In the New Testament we have wonderful models for devotion, prayer and song. We need not regard our ignorance of the divine name as such a catastrophic loss. I really question whether the name JHVH has any specific significance for Christians anyway. If it does, why don't the New Testament writers employ it and explain it?

IV AND SO WHAT ABOUT TODAY?

So today we are faced with a problem, the solution of which is not easy. There are three alternatives open to translators of the Old Testament.

1. It is possible to combine the vowels of '*Adonay*' and JHVH and form the nonsense word *Jehovah*. This course has been followed by the American Standard Version (1901), seven times in the King James Version (1611), and by the *New World Translation* of Jehovah Witnesses. The only possible argument that can be offered in favor of this approach is that it calls attention to the fact that the personal name for God is being used. Against this approach the following points can be raised.

a. It is unnatural and unscholarly to combine the vowels of the substitute word (the so called *qeri*) and the consonants of the written word (the so-called *ktiv*).

b. It is inconsistent to always combine the vowels of '*Adonay*' with JHVH when in fact numerous times the vowels of '*Elohim*' are actually used in the text. If the translators were consistent, the name in these passages should be *Jehovih*.

c. It is misleading to imply by usage that *Jehovah* is the name of God when in fact *Jehovah* is a nonsense name.

2. A second course of action is to guess at what the divine name might have been and render the *Tetragrammaton* as *Yahveh* or *Yahaveh* or some such thing. This course was followed by the translators of the *New Jerusalem Bible* and Rotherham in his *Emphasized Bible*. While more acceptable than the first solution, this procedure too should be followed. The reconstruction of the original name of God is a purely linguistic matter and one must turn to linguists for opinions on the matter. Authorities can be lined up in favor of numerous possible renditions of the name. In view of the uncertainty involved it seems best to avoid in popular translations, public worship or prayer any one of the hypotheses of the linguists.

3. The solution that has been most adequate through the years is the one adopted by the LXX (ancient Greek Old Testament), the New Testament, King James Version, the Revised Standard Version, and a majority of English translations. That solution is to follow the Jewish custom of substituting LORD or GOD wherever the *Tetragrammaton* appears.

By writing the words LORD/GOD in all capital letters the translators accomplish everything that the *Jehovah* people and the *Yahveh* people accomplish. They indicate to the general reader that the personal name of God is being used. The inadequacies of this approach are overruled by the fact that this is our only way out of a delicate and difficult problem.

CONCLUSION

What shall we say then? Shall we continue to use the non-name Jehovah in our prayers, songs, sermons and writings? Let those who would follow the leading of the sixteenth century theologians do so. But let them do so in private. There are many who become upset when they hear their Creator referred to by a nonsense name.

APPENDIX I

EXODUS 6:3 IN MODERN TRANSLATIONS

1. *The Holy Scriptures*, Jewish Publishing Society, 1955. In Exodus 6:3 the actual Hebrew letters are printed. Elsewhere the *Tetragrammaton* is rendered by LORD. (When *LORD* occurs alongside of *Lord*, the translators generally render the *Tetragrammaton* as GOD.)
2. *The Illustrated Jerusalem Bible*, Jerusalem Bible Publishing Company, 1955. Uses THE LORD throughout.
3. *New World Translation*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1961. Always uses *Jehovah*. Even the Greek word *kurios* in the New Testament is rendered *Jehovah* when the translators believe that it refers to God the Father, but not when it is used of Christ.
4. *The Holy Bible*, Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, 1952. This Catholic translation uses LORD throughout.
5. *The Old Testament*, James Moffatt, Translates *the Eternal* throughout.
6. *The Old Testament, An American Translation*, J.N.P. Smith, 1927. In Exodus 6:3 uses *Yahweh (the LORD)*. Elsewhere uses *the LORD*.
7. *The Berkeley Version*, 1959. In Exodus 6:3 uses *Jehovah*. Elsewhere uses *the LORD*.
8. *The American Standard Version*, 1901. Uses *Jehovah* throughout.
9. *The King James Version*, 1611-1711. Uses *Jehovah* in Exodus and six other passages. Elsewhere uses *the LORD*.
10. *The Revised Standard Version* uses *LORD* throughout.
11. *The New American Standard Bible (1960)*: *LORD* throughout.
12. *New International Version (1973)*: *LORD* throughout.
13. *The Emphasized Bible*, J.B. Rotherham, Standard publishing Company, 1897 Uses *Yahweh* throughout.

In the introduction to Rotherham's Bible there is a fine treatment of the whole problem of the *Tetragrammaton*. In one paragraph he explains why he did not choose to render it by *Jehovah*. There could be no finer statement of the position that I have advocated in this paper. I quote him at length.

“Why not in the form *Jehovah*?” Is it not euphonious? It is, without question. Is it not widely used? It is, and may still be freely employed to assist through a period of transition. But is it not hallowed and endeared by many a beautiful hymn and many a pious memory? Without

doubt; and therefore it is with reluctance that it is here declined. But why was it not accepted? There it is - - familiar, acceptable, ready for adoption. The reason is, that it is too heavily burdened with merited critical condemnation as modern, as a compromise, as a “mongrel” word “hybrid,” “fantastic,” “monstrous.” The facts have only to be known to justify this verdict, and to vindicate the propriety of not employing it in a new and independent translation. What are the facts? And first as to age. The pronunciation *Jehovah* was unknown until 1520, when it was introduced by Gatatinus; but was contested by Le Mercier, J. Drusius, and L. Copellus, as against grammatical and historical propriety. (Oxford Gesenius, p. 218). Next, as to formation. Erroneously written and pronounced *Jehovah*, which is merely a combination of the sacred *Tetragrammaton* and the vowels in the Hebrew word for Lord substituted by the Jews for JHVH, because they shrank from pronouncing the Name, owing to an old misconception of the two passages, Exodus 20:7 and Leviticus 24:16. to give the name JHVH the vowels of the word Lord (Hebrew *Adonai*) and pronounce it *Jehovah*, is about as hybrid a combination as it would be to spell the name *Germany* with the vowels in the name *Portugal* - - - viz., *GORMUNA*. The monstrous combination *Jehovah* is not older than about 1520 A.D. (P. Haupt, *The Polychrome Bible, The Book of Psalms*, pp. 163, 164). From this we may gather that the Jewish scribes are not responsible for the *hybrid* combination. They intentionally wrote alien vowels - - - - *Not* for combination with the sacred consonants, but for the purpose of cautioning the Jewish reader to enunciate a totally different word viz., some other familiar name of the Most High.”

The Emphasized Bible, pp. 24, 25