

In search of...

Truth & Right

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Understanding the Tetragrammaton

In the religious world there is much confusion about the Tetragrammaton (a Greek term meaning "the four letters"), referring to the name of God in the Old Testament, designated with the consonants YHWH. There are some religious organizations that place great emphasis on this name, and there is also generally much confusion over how it is to be pronounced. The former issue we will explore later; let us now examine from all available evidence the latter question: how is YHWH to be pronounced?

It would be good to first examine the source of the problem: why is there confusion over how to pronounce YHWH? The Hebrew language in its original form was written without vowel pointings; after all, one wrote down what one heard and he could fill in the vowels when speaking. This is true of all western written languages before the Greeks developed an alphabet that included vowels. The entire Old Testament text, therefore, was originally not vocalized. As time progressed, naturally, there were difficulties maintaining proper pronunciation: to solve the problem at first, three consonants were given a new role as vowel letters to indicate vowel types (called *matres lectiones*, "mothers of reading"), and in the latter half of the first millennium CE, when Hebrew waned in Jewish culture, the group of Jews responsible for maintaining and

handing down the text of the Hebrew Old Testament, the Masoretes, developed a system of vowel pointings used even today. Generally, the Masoretic pointing is accurate; it has been confirmed by transliterated names of people and places and also in other ancient documents. We must remember, however, that at the time of Christ the vowel letters were used haphazardly but otherwise vowels had to be supplied by the reader. This difficulty is compounded by the Jewish traditions regarding the Tetragrammaton. Early in Israelite history few if any had difficulties in saying the name of God-- YHWH-- as evidenced in direct speech in narratives (cf. Ruth 2:4). As time wore on, however, traditions developed regarding the third commandment-- to not take the name of YHWH in vain (Exodus 20:8)-- that meant that no one at any time save the High Priest on the Day of Atonement should utter the Tetragrammaton. As long as the Temple stood there were some who would utter the Tetragrammaton on occasion, and even after its demise there is evidence that some Jews did remember the pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton. In all of our Hebrew texts with vowel pointings, however, there are none that in any way retain the true vocalization of the Tetragrammaton; therefore, all evidence regarding how YHWH is to be pronounced

must come from other sources. Let us now look at the evidence for its pronunciation.

As we shall see, the evidence we have points to the pronunciation of YHWH as "Yahweh."

1. Derivation of "YHWH."

It is important to first understand how YHWH is derived. Its first attested use is by God in His speaking with Moses in Exodus 3:14: "And God said unto Moses, 'I AM THAT I AM:'" and he said, "Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, 'I AM hath sent me unto you.'"" In Hebrew, God calls Himself "'ehyeh asher 'ehyeh," and charges Moses to tell Israel that 'ehyeh sent him to them. If we analyze "'ehyeh," we see that it is a first person common singular imperfect form of the verb "hayah," to be. This form was turned from a first person to a third person (from "I am" to "he is"), and we have a change of glides: w/y are often interchanged in Hebrew, and the form we see later is YHWH, which, if translated, would be closest to "He is," or "He will be." A non-altered third person masculine singular form of "hayah" would be "yihyeh."

2. The Divine Particle in Names and Translation.

The first half of the Tetragrammaton-- YH-- was often used in names and even as shorthand for the name of God. Its shorthand form is used in Exodus 15:2 and it is "Yah" there, and this very form was transliterated into the Syriac Peshitta of Exodus 15:2. We also find this same phenomenon in names-- Elijah (Eliyahu; the "u" ending provides more credence that the final half is pronounced "weh"), Jeremiah (Yirmeyahu), and Hezekiah (Hizikiyahu or Hizikiyah, and corresponding evidence from Assyrian cuneiform). Since Hebrew tends to accent words on their ultimate or penultimate syllables, these examples with the divine particle at the end of the names gives us the best evidence to show that the first half of the Tetragrammaton was pronounced "Yah."

3. Early Christian Witnesses.

We have three accounts from the "church fathers" of the first few centuries of Christianity regarding the pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton.

Clement of Alexandria, around 180 CE, relates the following: "Further, the mystic name of the four letters which was affixed to those alone to whom the adytum was accessible, is called 'Iaoue,' which is interpreted, 'Who is and shall be.' The name of God, too, among the Greeks contains four letters [Greek theos, where "th" is represented with theta-- ed.], " (Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata*, V. 6). Theodoret and Epiphanius, both later, establish that they heard the name as "Iabe." From this information we confirm that the Tetragrammaton was pronounced "Yahweh," since we must recognize the phonological differences between Greek and Hebrew: Greek has no consonantal "y" and recognizes the letter as the vowel "i" (as "Yeshua" becomes "Iesous"); Greek has no "h" save rough breathings at the beginnings of some words and does not account for the letter; Greek has neither "w" nor "v," and it is very likely that a Greek listener (as were Theodoret and Epiphanius) would hear a "b" when a Jew said "v" (since in Hebrew b and v are separated by spirantization of the former only), and hearing "w" would sound like "ou."

From this evidence, therefore, we can conclude that the Tetragrammaton was most probably pronounced as "Yahweh."

It will be asked by many, however, regarding the word "Jehovah," the common translation (and supposed transliteration) of the Tetragrammaton in English Bibles. This form can be traced back to about 1489, and introduced popularly in 1520 by one Galatinus, a "confessor" of Pope Leo X (cf. Brown-Driver-Briggs *Hebrew Lexicon*, p. 218). Its derivation is explainable as the mistake of a Christian reader of the Hebrew Bible who did not understand its pointing. Let us explain a bit about the pointing of the Hebrew Bible. When the Masoretes pointed the Hebrew text of the Old Testament in the latter half of the first millennium, they recognized that there were many probable errors in the text. Since they held the text in high esteem, however, they would never alter any of the text itself, but instead favored a system called the *ketib/qere* system (*ketib*, meaning "written," and *qere*,

meaning "said"). When there was a word of some difficulty in the text, the consonants would remain unaltered, but there would be a note in the margin in Aramaic explaining what word should be read in synagogue. The vowel pointing in the text itself, however, would be the vocalization of what should be read (the "qere") and NOT what was written (the "ketiv"). A knowledgeable Hebrew reader would look at the word and recognize that the vowel pointing was not consistent with the written word and would therefore look for the "qere" in the margin to read. This is precisely what happened with the Tetragrammaton, but as opposed to having a marginal note with the proper consonants listed it was considered a "perpetual ketiv/qere," meaning that whenever one saw the consonants YHWH as the Tetragrammaton one would recognize that it was a "ketiv" and that the "qere" should be one of the various other designations for God-- Elohim, Adonai, Ha-Shem ("the name"), etc. Depending on the text, YHWH would appear with the vowel pointings for one of the other designations. Our medieval friends came to one such Hebrew manuscript and simply transliterated what he saw: the consonants YHWH with the vocalization for Adonai: a o a, and we have "Yahoah." Adapt the term to fit German reckoning, and we have "Jehovah."

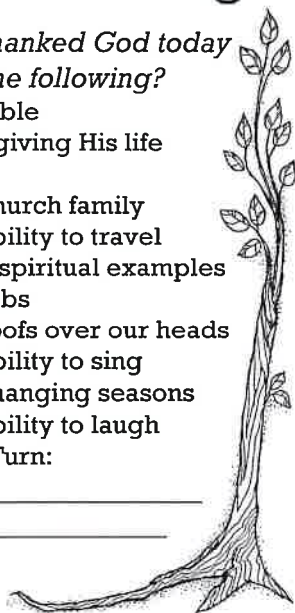
"Jehovah," then, is a medieval misunderstanding of the Hebrew text and should not be understood as the proper pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton. Its constant use in Bible versions (starting with one use in the KJV and becoming the translation of choice for YHWH in the ASV) secures its place in the English language and it will probably always be used to describe the LORD, the God of Heaven. While it is inaccurate it is not a "sinful" designation, but as those who strive to rightly divide the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15), we ought to recognize and understand that YHWH was never pronounced as Jehovah but more likely as Yahweh. Let us therefore recognize that if we are to pronounce the Tetragrammaton YHWH accurately, we should use "Yahweh" and not "Jehovah."

Ethan R. Longhenry

dear God,
thanks for this
beautiful life
and forgive me if
i dont love it
enough.

*Have you thanked God today
for any of the following?*

- The Bible
- Jesus giving His life for us
- Our church family
- The ability to travel
- Good spiritual examples
- Our jobs
- The roofs over our heads
- The ability to sing
- The changing seasons
- The ability to laugh
- Your Turn:



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Christian Q&A

Nancy Morris has been a member at the Wellsburg church of Christ for many years.

What is your favorite hymn that we sing? Why?

Nancy: "Angry Words" & "Just As I Am."

What advice would you give someone who is new to the Church?

Nancy: Be faithful, and get to know people!

What is your favorite part of attending the Wellsburg church of Christ?

Nancy: The fellowship & kindness of fellow Christians.

What inspired you to be baptized?

Nancy: Because it is a command and I had not been baptized the right way prior.

What individual from the Bible do you most look up to? Why?

Nancy: Paul

What is your favorite memory from the time you have attended the Wellsburg church of Christ?

Nancy: The kindness that everyone has shown to me, especially Chuck & Vickie and Ed & Marie, bringing me to church services all the time.

How do you show others that you are a believer in Jesus Christ?

Nancy: I would hope that it's by the way I live!

What do you want others to know about your religion?

Nancy: Just that God is real, I guess.

What is your favorite Bible verse? Why?

Nancy: Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me."

What makes you a strong believer in your faith?

Nancy: Knowing that I need Christ in my life, always.

What is an effective way that you spread God's Word? Why is this effective?

Nancy: By attending faithfully & sending out the bulletins.

