

Hebrew Names of God

The Sacred Name YHVH



The Unutterable Name

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The Name as Revealed in the Tanakh

In the *Tanakh*, YHVH is the personal name of God and his most frequent designation, occurring over 6,800 times. This is the Ineffable Name or Unutterable Name of the God of Israel. Because it is composed from the four Hebrew letters **Yod**, **Hey**, **Vav**, and **Hey**, it is also referred to as the "Tetragrammaton," which simply means "the four letters."

When God commissioned Moses to be Israel's liberator from the bondage of Pharaoh's Egypt, he asked for God's Name in order to validate his God-given role to the children of Israel (see Exodus 3:14). God simply answered Moses, "*ehyeh-asher-ehyeh*"

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל-מֹשֶׁה אֲהִיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֲהִיָּה

The phrase *ehyeh asher ehyeh* (rendered as "I am who I am" in the KJV) derives from the Qal imperfect first person form of the verb *havah*: "I will be," and therefore indicates a connection between the Name YHVH and being itself. YHVH is the Source of all being and has being inherent in Himself (i.e., He is necessary Being). Everything else is contingent being that derives existence from Him. The name YHVH also bespeaks the utter transcendence of God. In Himself, God is beyond all "predications" or attributes of language: He is the Source and Foundation of all possibility of utterance and thus is beyond all definite descriptions.

This special Name of God (YHVH) was moreover combined with "The God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" to be God's Name forever, "my memorial unto all generations" (see Exodus 3:15-16).

In the traditional Jewish view, YHVH is the Name expressing the mercy and condescension of Almighty God:

"The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to those, You want to know my name? I am called according to my actions. When I judge the creatures I am Elohim, and when I have mercy with My world, I am named YHWH" (*Exodus Rabbah* 3:6).

Elohim is the Name given for God as the Creator of the universe (Gen 1:1-2:4a) and implies strength, power, and justice. YHVH, on the other hand, expresses the idea of God's closeness to humans. For example, YHVH "breathed into his (Adam's) nostrils the breath of life" (Genesis 2:7).

The Phonetics of the Name

The Third Commandment (Exodus 20:7) states, "Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain." In Hebrew:

לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת־שֵׁם־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׁוּן

Jehovah?

On account of this, the Masoretes ensured that the Name of the LORD would not be taken in vain by substituting the vowel marks for *Adonai* and putting them under the letters ה-ו-ה-י in the running text (this is called *Qere* [what is to be read] as opposed to *Ketiv* [what is to be written]). The Hebrew text, then, contains the *Ketiv* but uses the vowels of the *Qere* אֲדֹנָי and this has led to the obviously incorrect pronunciation of the Name as "*Jehovah*" (in older English, "J" had a "y" sound).

Yahweh?

It was later speculated that perhaps the Masoretes *reversed* the vowels for *Adonai* when applied to the letters ה-ו-ה-י in the running text, so some attempted to "correct" the pronunciation by pronouncing the Name as "Yahoveh" or "Yahveh." This, too, is incorrect (though the construct form "*Yah*" probably is part of the original pronunciation (e.g., see Psalm 68:4; Isaiah 26:4)). Note that Yahweh is most likely also an incorrect transliteration, since there is no "w" sound in Hebrew.

Hashem: The Name

Since ancient Hebrew did not use any vowel markings, the actual pronunciation of the sacred Name is simply not known. In ancient Temple times, only the Kohen Gadol (high priest) would utter the Name during Yom Kippur [Yoma 39b].

The Jewish tradition is to not pronounce the sacred Name at all, but to substitute the word *Adonai* ("my Lord") in its place. Thus, when reading Torah, you do not attempt to vocalize the Name, but say *Adonai* instead. When not reading Torah or the Siddur, most observant Jews refer to the sacred Name simply as *Hashem* or "the Name" (Lev. 24:16).

In Hebrew the sacred Name is called *Shem HaMeforash*, "the ineffable Name." Attempts to provide an exposition of the Name have come to be known as *Shelosh Esreh Middot*, or the Thirteen Attributes of God and are usually based on exegesis of Exodus 34:6-7 (mystical speculation about the Name is found in Kabbalistic literature).

Gnosticism and the Name

There are some people who, despite the educated uncertainty of careful scholarship and Jewish tradition, pretend to "truly" understand the phonetics of the Sacred Name and offer to "restore it" to those of us willing to be initiated into their secret knowledge. For example, there are some who want to use a "w" for the Vav in the Name, and then permutate the nikkudot to find a favored reading. This is a dubious practice, however, since even our English idea of "w" is laden with cultural biases, and no practicable equivalence can reasonably be made. Language, in other words, is about *meaning*, not about technique.

Frankly, I consider the search for a conjuration of the Sacred Name to be a form of gnostic occultism, symptomatic of people who elevate spiritual technique and "abracadabra" above the shared meaning of

the "Presence of God." Moreover, such conjuration is a sign of unbelief, since once you understand the *meaning* of the Name, the words you use to express it are incidental. Perhaps this explains why we have such a plethora of various Names and Titles of God given in the Tanakh. Like poets, the sacred writers sought for various words to express the Reality that stands behind the glyphs. But once you get ahold of the Reality (or rather, the Reality gets ahold *of you*), the words you use to express your awe will always be limited and seem inadequate.

The Morphology of the Name

The earliest forms of the sacred Name appear in proto-Hebrew script (a script that is closely related to ancient Phoenician script). In the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS), instances of this morphology can be seen in the same running text as the classical Hebrew (*ketav Ashurit*) script:

𐤀𐤁𐤂𐤃 — *Phoenician*
𐤀𐤁𐤂𐤃 — *Proto-Hebrew*

This earlier form of the Name was used until Ezra the scribe converted the ancient script to Aramaic morphology (*ketav meruba*), which is now the form used in Torah scrolls:

יהוה — *Classical Hebrew*

YHVH and YHVH Constructs

Though we do not know how to pronounce the sacred Name, we can be confident that the letters יהוה derive from the Hebrew verb "to be" (*hayah*) and indicate God's utter transcendence as the Source and Ground of all being.

For each name in the list below, I provide the following information:

1. The Hebrew text for the name
2. The most common English transliteration (*in italics*)
3. A definition for the name, references to the Tanakh, and frequency information
4. Additional comments, if applicable.

YHVH

יהוה

YHVH. [The basic form. Ketiv: unutterable; Qere: *A-do-nai*]

The personal Name of Adonai, the transcendent Source and Ground of all being whatsoever. This Name appears 5,200+ times in the Tanakh (rendered in the KJV as the LORD [all caps]). The Jewish sages note that the four letters of the Name are used to form the phrase יהיה הוה יהיה, *hayah hoveh yi'yeh*, "He was, He is, He will be."

In those contexts where the actual title "Lord" (Adonai) also occurs, YHVH is translated as "GOD," (all caps):

אֲדֹנָי יְהוָה

KJV Note: YHVH is transliterated as "Jehovah" in four passages where the name is particularly stressed (Exo 6:3; Psa 83:18 [H 19]; Isa 12:2; Isa 26:4] and in three passages to form transliterated constructs (e.g., Jehovahjireh (Gen 22:14; cc Exo 17:15; Jud 6:24)).

Siddur Note: Often in the Siddur (and other Jewish religious literature apart from the Scriptures) the Sacred Name is not written as Y-H-V-H, but rather in an abbreviated manner:

יְיָ

This is a convention in many Hebrew prayerbooks and dikdukim (grammars) to avoid casually **writing or reading the Sacred Name**.

Note: The sacred Name for God was uttered aloud only 10 times once per year (during Yom Kippur) by the *Kohen Gadol*. When the people heard the Name, they prostrated themselves in deep reverence (Yoma 39b).

HaShem

הַשֵּׁם

Hashem.

The Name (Lev. 24:16).

This term is often used to refer to the Sacred Name when studying the Scriptures and considering the Sacred Name of YHVH. This is often abbreviated simple as 'ה'.

I AM THAT I AM

אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה

Ehyeh asher Ehyeh

(eh-YEH a-sheh eh-YEH) I AM THAT I AM. (Exodus 3:14; cp. John 8:58).

The LORD God

יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים

Adonai Elohim.

The LORD God (Gen. 2:4). This Name shows that the Source and Ground of all being is also the personal God and Creator of the entire universe.

The LORD my God

יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי

Adonai Elohai.

The LORD my God (Psalm 13:3).

The LORD our Father

יְהוָה אֲבִינוּ

Adonai Avinu.

The LORD our Father (Isa. 64:8).

The LORD Most High God

יְהוָה אֵל עֲלִיוֹן

Adonai El Elyon.

The LORD Most High God (Gen. 14:22; Psalm 7:17; Psalm 47:2).

The LORD God of Israel

יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

Adonai Elohei Yisrael.

The LORD God of Israel. Identifies YHVH as the God of Israel in contrast to the false gods of the nations (Isa. 17:6).

The LORD who sees

יְהוָה יִרְאֶה

Adonai Yir'eh.

The LORD who sees; Gen. 22:14; Adonai sees all and knows our needs intimately (rendered in the KJV as Jehovahjireh). Sometimes transliterated as "Jehovah Jirah" or "Jehovah Jireh."

The LORD your Sanctifier

יְהוָה מְקַדְּשְׁכֶם

Adonai Mekaddishkem.

"The Lord your Sanctifier." Portrays the Lord as our means of sanctification or as the one who sets believers apart for His purposes (Ex. 31:13).

The LORD my Miracle

יְהוָה נֹסִי

Adonai Nissi.

The LORD my Miracle, or The LORD my Banner; (Ex. 17:15) (rendered in the KJV as the Jehovahnissi).

The LORD our Maker

יְהוָה עֲשֵׂנוּ

Adonai Osenu.

The LORD our Maker (Ps. 95:6).

The LORD our Righteousness

יְהוָה צְדִקְנוּ

Adonai Tzidkenu (or Tsidkeinu).

The LORD our Righteousness (Jer. 23:6, 33:16).

The LORD of hosts

יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת

Adonai Tseva'ot.

The LORD of armies (or hosts).

Tsava means army.

References: Exo 12:41; 1 Sam. 1:11; 4:4; 15:2; 17:45; 2 Sam. 6:2, 18; 7:8, 26f; 1 Ki. 18:15; 2 Ki. 3:14; 1 Chr. 17:7, 24; Ps. 24:10; 46:8, 12; 48:9; 59:6; 69:7; 80:5, 20; 84:2, 4, 9, 13; 89:9; Isa. 1:9, 24; 3:1, 15; 5:7, etc.; Amos 4:13; 5:14ff, 27; 6:8; Mic. 4:4; Nah. 2:14; 3:5; Hab. 2:13; Zeph. 2:9f; Hag. 1:2, 5, 7, 9, 14; 2:4, 6ff, 11, 23; Zech. 1:3f, 6, 12, 14, etc.; Mal. 1:4, 6, 8ff, 13f; 2:2, 4, 7f, 12, 16; 3:1, 5, 7, 10ff, 14, 17, 19, 21.

The LORD my Shepherd

יְהוָה לֵעִי

Adonai Ro'i. (ro-ee)

The LORD my Shepherd (Ps. 23:1, Ez. 34:2).

The LORD who heals you

יְהוָה לְפָאֵךְ

Adonai Roph'ekha.

The LORD who heals you; The LORD your healer; (Ex. 15:26). Sometimes mistakenly named the LORD our Healer.

The LORD of peace

יְהוָה שְׁלוֹם

Adonai Shalom.

The LORD of Peace (Judges 6:24) (rendered in the KJV as Jehovahshalom).

The LORD your God

יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

Adonai Eloheikhem.

"The LORD your [pl.] God" (Lev. 19:3).

The LORD my Rock and Redeemer

יְהוָה צוּרִי וְגֹאֲלִי

Adonai Tsurī v'goali.

"The LORD my Rock and my Redeemer" (Psalm 19:14[5h]).

The LORD God of David

יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי דָוִד

Adonai Elohei David.

"The LORD God of David" (Isaiah 38:5).

The LORD my Rock

יְהוָה סִלְעִי

Adonai Sal'i.

The LORD my Rock (or Hiding Place, as in the crag of a cliff) (Psalm 18:2).

The Angel of the LORD

מַלְאֲכַי יְהוָה

Malakh Adonai

This mysterious Angel was treated as YHVH Himself, exercising divine prerogatives and receiving worship (see Genesis 16:7, 9, 11; Exodus 3:2-6; Judges 13:21-22).

References: Genesis 16:7, 9ff; 22:11, 15; Numbers 22:22ff, 31f, 34f; Judges 2:1, 4; 5:23; 6:11f, 21f; 13:3, 13, 15ff, 20f; 1 Kings 19:7; 2 Kings 1:15; 19:35; 1 Chronicles 21:16, 30; Psalm 34:8; Isaiah 37:36; Haggai 1:13; Zechariah 1:11f; 3:1, 6; Malachi 2:7.

Note: The Aramaic *Targum of Onkelos* (Genesis 16:13) identifies the Angel of the Lord with the *Shekhinah*, the concrete manifestation of the presence of God.

Shem Hameforash

יהוה

"Shem Hameforasb"

The sacred Name for God was spoken only 10 times once per year (during Yom Kippur) by the Kohen Gadol. When the people heard the Name, they prostrated themselves in deep reverence (*Yoma 39b*).

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