

# YAH: A NAME OF GOD

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In the Bible, God has a personal name. It was revealed to Moses at the time when he delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt (Ex. 3:15; 6:2-9). According to Exodus 6:3, even Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did not know God by that name. On this passage, Josephus wrote, "God declared to him [Moses] His holy name, which had never been discovered to man before, and concerning which it is not lawful for me to speak" (*Antiquities of the Jews* II.12.4). In Hebrew it has four consonants: Y-H-V-H. The original vowels are now unknown. The form Yahveh or Yahweh is a conjectural scholarly reconstruction, but no complete certainty attaches to it.

"Jehovah" derives from a Christian misunderstanding and mispronunciation of the name. In 1971, it disappeared from *The New American Standard Bible*, which had used it uniformly for nearly 7000 occurrences in the earlier *American Standard Bible* of 1901. The translators changed their stance after learning to their embarrassment that they had made a serious mistake. *The Jewish Encyclopedia* calls this hybrid form "a philological impossibility".<sup>1</sup> Even Milton's *Paradise Lost* is marred by it. In Book VII, lines 601-603, where he relates the angels' celebration in Heaven of the creation of the world, Milton writes:

Creation and the six days acts they sung:  
Great are thy works, *Jehovah*, infinite  
Thy power.

Earlier on, in the fourteenth century, Dante's *Divine Comedy* avoided this mistake by simply using the letter *I* for *yod*, the first letter of *the Shem ha-Meforash*, to represent God's name. In *Paradiso* XXVI, lines 134-136, where Dante meets Adam through John, Adam says:

*I* was the name on earth of the Sovereign Good,  
whose joyous rays envelop and surround me.  
Later *El* became His name . . .

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Yet *I* is clearly not the complete Hebrew personal name of God, and how many readers would understand what Adam says without an explanation from someone who knows Hebrew?

The four-letter Name of God, *Y-H-V-H*, also called the Tetragrammaton, was unknown to millions of Christians for many centuries. Jerome's Latin Vulgate did not transliterate it, and this was the Bible of Western Christians for over a millennium. Even the (Catholic) Douay version in English, which appeared in 1610 and was used until 1964, did not transliterate *Y-H-V-H*, since the Douay version was based on the Vulgate. The Septuagint, used universally in early Christianity and by the Greek Orthodox Church today, likewise does not transcribe it. The translation of the Hebrew Scriptures made by Aquila, the disciple of Akiva in the second century, used Paleo-Hebrew script for every instance of the Tetragrammaton (see "Aquila" in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*), but Christians did not generally use it because he translated the *almah* of Isaiah 7:14 as *neanis* (young woman), not *parthenos* (virgin). Protestant translators who, beginning with Tyndale in 1530, thought they were revealing a great secret to Christians by employing the notorious hybrid form mentioned above, made use of it only a few times, so that it was easily overlooked. The *Authorized King James Bible* of 1611, for example, uses it only seven times. Thus, ignorance of God's sacred Hebrew personal name has been long-standing and widespread – but there is good news.

There is a short form of this name. It occurs for the first time in the Song of Moses (Ex. 15:2) as *Yah*. It appears soon after in Exodus 17:16, but major English translations generally obscure this fact by not transliterating it. Twenty-four times it appears conjoined in the liturgical *Halelu-Yah* doxology in Psalms; eighteen times it stands alone, and once it is conjoined with a preposition in Psalm 68:5. In Isaiah it occurs together with the long form as *Yah Y-H-V-H* in 12:2 and 26:4, and twice on its own in the Psalm of Hezekiah (Isa. 38:11). It stands in the same verse as *Y-H-V-H* in Exodus 17:16. This is a difficult verse in Hebrew and, following the conjectural emendation proposed in *The New Jerusalem Bible*, it may be translated along with verse 15 as follows: *Moses then built an altar and named it Y-H-V-H-Nissi [Y-H-V-H-My-Banner]. He said, Hand upon the banner of Yah, Y-H-V-H will be at war with Amalek generation after generation.*<sup>2</sup> Psalm 89:9 also includes *Y-H-V-H* and *Yah* in the same verse: *O Y-H-V-H, God of hosts, who is mighty like You,*

*O Yah?* In Song of Songs 8:6, love is defined as *a flame of Yah* [*shalhevetyah*]. It thus has a wide distribution in the Hebrew Scriptures, being used in the Torah, the Prophets (*Nevi'im*) and the Writings (*Ketuvim*).

This fact is obscured because major English translations avoid transliterating *Yah*. *The New American Bible Revised Edition* does not transliterate it. *The New Jerusalem Bible*, which is distinguished for uniformly transliterating *Y-H-V-H* as "Yahweh" in the Hebrew canon, transliterates *Yah* only once (in Ex. 15:2). *The New American Standard Bible* and *The New Revised Standard Version*, among the major Protestant translations, do not transliterate it at all. However, it occurs four times in *The New King James Version* – once in Psalm 68:4 (= 68:5 Masoretic Text) as *YAH*, and three times in Isaiah (12:2; 26:4; and 38:11, the second occurrence in this verse being translated as "the LORD"). *Tanakh-The Holy Scriptures* (NJPSV) transliterates it in Isaiah 12:2; 26:4; 38:11.

This name of God occurs frequently at the end of personal names such as Elijah (Eliyyah) and, among the Latter Prophets, in Isaiah (Yeshayah), Jeremiah (Yirmeyah), Obadiah (Ovadyah), Zephaniah (Tzefanyah), and Zechariah (Zekharyah). The names of Uzziah and Hezekiah are also well-known from the prophecies of Isaiah. Many more examples can be discovered in the genealogies of I Chronicles 1-9, the lists of Jews who returned from the Babylonian captivity in Ezra 2 and of those who were found to have married foreign wives in Ezra 10, as well as in Nehemiah 10-12 and other biblical passages. As in the case of *Halelu-Yah*, the Divine Name is obscured by the Hallelujah/Alleluiah spelling (j or i instead of y) and by its being combined with other Hebrew words.

In addition to being knowable and known, this short name of God is *pronounceable with absolute certainty*. Although John McKenzie, in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, claims that the pronunciation of the four-letter Hebrew name of God has been recovered in recent times,<sup>3</sup> this is only a scholarly consensus since the time of H. Ewald and William Gesenius in the nineteenth century. As Rabbi Gunther Plaut points out, "How the name was originally pronounced is no longer certain."<sup>4</sup> There is unanimous agreement among Jews, on the other hand, that the single vowel of the short form of the Tetragrammaton is *kamatz*.

Articulating *Yah* is permissible. While Jews are forbidden by the Oral Law to pronounce the Tetragrammaton (TB *Kiddushin* 71a, *Pesahim* 50a; cf. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* ii.12.4), no such prohibition is specified for *Yah*, although observant Jews customarily pronounce it only in prayer and study. They also refrain from writing it. Instead of using *yod-hé* (10-5) to represent fifteen, they substitute *tet-vav* (9-6) because *yod-hé* are the consonants spelling *Yah*; and instead of *yod-vav* (10-6) to represent sixteen, they use *tet-zayin* (9-7) because *yod-vav* is, like *yod-hé*, a theophoric designation (see *Joel=Yo-El*). Roman Catholics were recently forbidden by the Vatican to use the name "Yahweh" in prayers and liturgical hymns. Its use by Catholic scholars currently engaged in dialogues with Jews would obviously be disallowed.<sup>5</sup> Earlier, the official *Nova Vulgata Bibliorum Sacrorum* published in 1979 used the form "Iahveh" for the Tetragrammaton, but later editions replaced "Iahveh" with *Dominus* (Latin for "Lord"), as Jerome had done. The wide use of *Yah* in the Hebrew Scriptures argues at least for its recognition, and certainly for its transliteration, in those instances where it stands alone.

*Yah* is also *popular*. In Jewish liturgy, it occurs in the Song of the Sea (Ex. 15:2), which forms part of the Jewish daily morning service. It figures in the *Hallel* (Psalms 113-118) recited on Pilgrim Festivals, Hanukkah, Rosh Hodesh (the New Moon), during the Passover *Seder*; and in "the Great *Hallel*" (Psalm 136) recited on Sabbath and festival mornings. *Yah Ribbon Alam* ("God, Master of the Universe"), written in Aramaic by the sixteenth-century poet Yisrael Najara, is one of the most popular Jewish table hymns (*zemirot*). It concludes with a prayer that *Yah* may redeem Israel and restore Jerusalem, "the city of beauty." Among the Sephardim, *Yah Shimkha* ("Yah is Your Name") is sung during morning service on the second day of Rosh Ha-Shanah (the New Year). Attributed to Yehudah Halevi, this poem's verses form an acrostic spelling YHDH (*Yehudah*).

In Christian worship, especially among Protestants, "Hallelujah!" is often spoken and sung with enthusiasm (even ecstatically) by people with no knowledge of Hebrew. It is not widely recognized that *Halelu* is a plural imperative ("Praise ye" in older English) and *jah*, as it appears conjoined to *Halelu*, is *Yah*. In Hebrew, the two words are occasionally separated by a *makkef* (hyphen), indicating that they are read as a unit with the accent on the last syllable. Gentiles place the accent incorrectly on the third syllable. A

famous example of this mistake occurs in the "Hallelujah" chorus of Handel's *Messiah*, where the accent falls not only on the third syllable, but even on the second.

Finally, *Yah* is kosher. Although, due to unfamiliarity and lack of general recognition, it seems to be an irreverent form of the full Hebrew personal name of God, the facts listed above indicate that it is in fact religiously correct. Even Moses used it. And while the Song of Sea proclaims, *Y-H-V-H is His name!* (Ex. 15:3), the line above it runs, *Yah is my strength and might; He has become my salvation* (Ex. 15:2a). Isaiah uses this line from the Song of the Sea in his prophecies, modifying it by adding *Y-H-V-H* next to *Yah*, further showing their equivalent status: *For Yah Y-H-V-H is my strength and might, and He has been my salvation* (Isa. 12:2b). The NJPSV translates this line thus: *'For Yah the LORD is my strength and might, and He has been my deliverance.'* Isaiah uses *Yah Y-H-V-H* again in 26:4, additional proof that *Yah* is as acceptable and proper as *Y-H-V-H*. Moreover, as we have seen, Psalms contains over forty instances of *Yah*, and many Hebrew names also have *Yah* as a component.

Thus, while the longer form of God's personal Hebrew name is clearly shown by the number of its occurrences to be the preferable one, the shorter form is knowable and known, pronounceable with absolute certainty, permissible, popular, and kosher. The Jewish sages (TB *Kiddushin* 71a) quoted the verse, *This is My name forever, and this is My memorial to all generations* (Ex. 3:15), as their support for concealing the pronunciation of *Y-H-V-H*, in direct contradiction to what the plain meaning of Scripture seems to intend, pointing out that *le-olam* ("forever") is written defectively (without the *vav* for the vowel "o") and can be read as *le-allem* ("to conceal"). Yet there is an alternative form of the Hebrew personal name of God which has not been concealed by the Sages and which is not unknown. What is this name? *Yah is His name* (Ps. 68:5).

#### NOTES

1. See "Names of God" articles in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. VIII (1906), p. 8, and *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), 7:680-681.
2. Joseph H. Hertz, former Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, in *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (London: Soncino Press, 1960), says on page 281: "The text is difficult and can also be translat-

ed, 'The LORD hath [sic] sworn , the LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation' (Onkelos, Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Luzzatto, RV Text)."

3. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, Roland Murphy, eds. *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (New Jersey: Prentis Hall, 1966) p. 1286.

4. W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 2005) p. 394.

5. This directive means that *The New Jerusalem Bible* (1985), which uses the form "Yahweh" for its nearly 7,000 occurrences in the Tanakh, may not be used in Catholic liturgy. A new version, entitled *The Bible in Its Traditions*, will soon replace it and Jewish scholars have been invited to contribute. The use of "Yahweh" will be discontinued.



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