

# Discipleship Training Ministries, Inc.

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## THE TETRAGRAMMATON – YHWH

By Dan Trygg

**Originally Hebrew was written only in a consonantal script. Vowels were not represented by written symbols**, but were included according to regular principles of pronunciation. These vocalizations were not expressed in written form for several hundred years into the Christian era, when Massoretic scribes devised a system of “points” to represent vowels to ensure that correct pronunciation would not be lost.

### What is the Tetragrammaton?

**The Tetragrammaton (literally, ‘four letters’) refers to the consonants that comprise the covenantal name of God.** The name Yahweh, or Jehovah, was originally recorded by the letters that correspond to our English **YHWH**. This is by far the most important name of God, one could even say the most significant foundational revelation about Himself that He has given to human beings. In Hebrew, this is inescapably apparent. Unfortunately, in English it remains one of the all time most overlooked or best-kept secrets in the history of theology.

### Biblical Names For God

There are **three primary names for God** commonly used throughout the OT. These are:

**El**, Elah, or Elohim (Gen. 1:1) - meaning “God”, “god”, or literally, “the strong one”. This is the generic term for God.

**Yahweh** (Gen. 2:4) - literally, “He is” or “He will be”. This is the covenant name for God.

**Adōn** (Gen. 15:2) - meaning “Lord”, “lord”, “Master”, master”.

One of the ways to communicate new truth about God was to use these basic names in **compound forms** with each other or with different words:

El Elyon -- God Most High (Gen. 14:18).

El Shaddai -- God Almighty or All Sufficient (Gen. 17:1).

El Olam -- God of Eternity, Eternal or Everlasting God (Gen. 21:33).

Yahweh Elohim -- Yahweh God, or He is God (Gen. 2:4)

Adonai Yahweh - Lord Yahweh, or He is Lord (Gen 15:2).

### What makes Yahweh so different?

**The first and most obvious feature of the word is its *incredible frequency*.** It occurs more than *any other* Hebrew word in the OT! It is found **6,823 times** from Genesis through Malachi. This is well over a thousand times more frequent than the next most common Hebrew word, kol, meaning ‘all, every, or any’, which occurs 5,427 times. The word Elohim occurs 2,588 times, considerably less than half as often. What other word would, by sheer repetition alone, clamor for your attention as you read the Hebrew text?

This does not include all of the many names that are constructed from a form of Yahweh in conjunction with another word. There are numerous instances where “Yah” acts as a prefix, e.g., Joshua,

Jehoshaphat, as well as numerous occasions where it serves as a suffix, e.g., Hallelujah, Isaiah.

**Secondly, God specifically chose it to be His permanent title or memorial name forever.**

Furthermore, He stated that it is the name by which He is to be remembered from generation to generation (Ex. 3:15,16).

**Thirdly, God specifically stated that the content of this name was a pivotal part of His self-revelation process** (Ex. 6:2-7; 33:18-34:9).

**Fourth, it was in the name Yahweh that God established His covenant with Israel** (Ex. 6:2-8; 19:1-8). This becomes the focal point of the remainder of OT history, i.e., the fulfillment of the covenant.

**Fifth, God has so highly esteemed this name that one of the ten commandments specifically prohibits any misuse or empty use of it** by Israel (Ex. 20:7). In addition, to *not* revere this “glorious and awesome name -- Yahweh your God” will bring the curses of God’s wrath to the offender and his family (Dt. 28:58ff.). To disregard God’s chosen name is at least as serious as other forms of willful disobedience.

## What does the name Yahweh mean?

Let’s look at Exodus 3:10-15 -- The call of Moses.

Vs. 12 -- “I will be (‘ehayah) with you...”

Vs. 14 -- “I am (‘ehayah) Who (‘asher) I am (‘ehayah)  
You shall say... I am (‘ehayah) has sent me to you...”

Vs. 15 -- You shall say...Yahweh the God of your fathers...has sent me to you. This is My name forever and this is My title from generation to generation.

The Hebrew word *hayah* means “I am” or “I will be” (the form of the word is the same in Hebrew). The word “Yahweh” is comprised of the same root combined with the third person singular ending. **This would be translated as “He is”, or “He will be”.** In the context, what God is communicating to the Israelites is that He is the same God who worked on behalf of their fathers. He has not changed, and now He will work on their behalf. As Ex. 6:1-8 states, their forefathers knew Him experientially as El Shaddai, God Almighty, but they did not know Him experientially as Yahweh. Now He has come to show the Israelites that **He is indeed the unchanging God** their fathers knew. Furthermore, He has come to fulfill His word of promise that He made with Abraham. Now they will see His faithfulness. **He is Yahweh, the unchanging, covenant-keeping God.**

Why is this so important? Look at the following areas that God specifically has communicated to us concerning Himself using this name:

<b>Yahweh</b> (Ex. 3:10-15; 6:1-8)	He is! He will be! -- Cf. Jn. 8:58.
<b>Yahweh Elohim</b> (Gen. 2:4)	He is God! -- Cf. Rom. 9:5; Mt. 1:22,23; Jn. 1:1.
<b>Yahweh Yireh</b> (Gen. 22:14)	He will see (to it); He will provide! -- Cf. Rev. 5:8-10.
<b>Yahweh Rapha</b> (Ex. 15:26)	He is healer! -- Cf. Gal. 3:10-14; I Pet. 2:24.
<b>Yahweh Nissi</b> (Ex. 17:15)	He is our banner, i.e., He will fight for us; He is our rallying point, our standard! -- Cf. Col. 2:13-15.
<b>Yahweh Shalom</b> (Judg. 6:24)	He is our peace! -- Cf. Isa. 9:6,7; Eph. 2:14.
<b>Yahweh Sabaoth</b> (I Sam. 1:3)	He is (commander) of hosts! -- Cf. Rev. 19:11-16.
<b>Yahweh Ra’ah</b> (Psa. 23:1)	He is my shepherd! -- Cf. Jn. 10:11; Heb. 13:20; I Pet. 2:25.
<b>Yahweh Tsidkenu</b> (Jer. 23:6)	He is our righteousness! -- Cf. I Cor. 1:30.
<b>Yahweh Shammah</b> (Ezk. 48:35)	He is present! -- Cf. Mt. 28:18-20; Rev. 21.

**The most important connection with the name Yahweh for Christians is in the name Jesus.** Jesus is the Anglicized form of the Hebrew-Aramaic name Y’shua, meaning “Yahweh saves” or “He is salvation”.

Thus Jesus was truly the embodiment of Yahweh's promised salvation. Not only was He Immanuel, He was Y'shua! Now we can understand why in Mt. 28:19 it says we are to baptize disciples into the Name (singular) of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit! Now we see why there is no other name given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12)! It is the only name! It is the covenant keeper, Yahweh, incarnated to become the Passover Lamb!

## **The Near Disappearance of the Name.**

After the close of the OT, **superstitious Jews began to avoid saying the name Yahweh, for fear they may unwittingly take His name in vain.** Over time, it became the common practice of synagogue readers to substitute the word Adonai (Lord) whenever they would come to the Tetragrammaton in the Hebrew text. This practice was, in turn, reflected in the translation of the Hebrew text into Greek. This translation, known as the Septuagint (LXX), removed the name Yahweh entirely from the text and substituted the word "Lord" (Gk., Kurios) in its place. This Greek translation became the most common Bible of the early church. The practice of substituting "Lord" for the Tetragrammaton has been followed by most translations ever since.

## **What About "Jehovah"?**

The name Yahweh had so much fallen into disuse that virtually no one was sure how it was actually to be pronounced. The name Jehovah came from a later editorial misunderstanding. **Because the Hebrew practice was to substitute Adonai for Yahweh in the oral reading of the text, the Massoretic scribes who devised the vowel pointing system inserted the vowels from Adonai into the Tetragrammaton.** Instead of the YHWH of unpointed Hebrew texts, they had the 'a', 'o', and 'a' of Adonai inserted between the letters, i.e., **Y(a)H(o)W(a)H**. The intention was that the reader would recognize the weird vowel points, and would remember to say "Lord", instead of accidentally reading "the Name". Later scholars who desired to recover the correct pronunciation were confused by this, and they mistakenly took what they found in the Massoretic text directly through a transliteration process into German, Jahovah. The Hebrew "Y" sound is represented by a "J" in German, and they transliterated the Hebrew waw as a "V". Later English scholars, using German reference tools, gave birth to a *new* name, Jehovah, pronouncing the "J" as we do in English. The name, Jehovah, is not in the original languages of either Old or New Testaments. (Likewise the Germans transliterated the "Y" sound of the NT Greek name "Y'esous" with a "J", which also was carried into English as "Jesus".)

## **The Overcoming Kurios Connection**

**God has a wonderful way of overcoming all attempts to interfere with His revealed truth.** This systematic replacement of God's name has been used by Him to actually further buttress His communication. Not only have His original intentions conveyed by the Hebrew been uncovered through archaeology and language study, but an additional line of communication has been established along the way. **Replacing Yahweh with the Greek word Kurios in the Septuagint translation meant that Kurios (Lord) became by far the most common way of referring to God, ...even more than Yahweh had been.** Thus, if anyone would doubt whether the early Christians really believed that Jesus was God, one only had to examine how they used the word Kurios in reference to Him. **From a background steeped in Septuagint Greek usage of this word, to consistently employ it in reference to Jesus could only mean one thing: They thought Jesus was God!** An examination of Romans 10:1-13 in light of this causes it to explode with new significance. Also, the tie between Isa. 45:20-25 and Phil. 2:6-11 becomes even more beautiful and powerful in light of this word usage. Although something was lost by the disuse of the Name, even the substitute, more generic, words were transformed into powerful terms of significance, because they came to be used of Him, our Great and Awesome God, Creator and Savior of the world.