

The Name “Jehovah”

- from Hebrew into English

The name יהוה

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From Hebrew into English

There is some debate about some of the details given below, but the main points are generally agreed upon.

Hebrew is יהוה (reading from right to left)
HWHY

These four letters are sometimes called the Tetragrammaton (meaning, “word of four letters”). In English lettering this is YHWH (reading from left to right). The importance of treating the name of God with respect may be seen in Exodus 20:7, and especially Leviticus 24:16, both written around 1500 B.C. as part of the Law given to Moses. Here the name is not to be taken in vain, nor blasphemed.

The Sacred Name

This name of God was considered to be so sacred that, eventually around 200 B.C., Jewish religious leaders decided that people should avoid pronouncing it altogether. So, when reading the Scriptures out aloud, the reader would see the word יהוה (YHWH), but would say out loud the name Adonai,¹ which means “Lord” or “my Lord”. This was seen as a respectful substitute, which meant that the sacred name יהוה was not in danger of being taken in vain.

To illustrate that the name יהוה should be pronounced Adonai, the vowels were taken from Adonai and placed in between the Hebrew letters of יהוה, so that readers would know it was really the name of YHWH being referred to in that particular passage. In English lettering, the underlined vowels from adonai (a o a) were placed in between the letters YHWH to give the hybrid YaHoWaH. It’s a bit like taking vowels from the word Australia, and placing them in between the consonants of New Zealand. The result is a new word - nauwzaliand - which, when read, doesn’t make a lot of sense, but retains something of both originals.

Why the Hebrew word YHWH (יהוה) appears as LORD in English Bibles

Some early editions of the Septuagint (LXX), written in Greek, retained the Hebrew lettering יהוה in amongst the Greek text, and was often mistakenly pronounced PIPI

¹ in certain places יהוה was replaced with Elohim, if Adonai was nearby in the text.

by Greek readers thinking they were reading the Greek letters ΙΙΙΙΙ. The Greek word Kurios, meaning “Lord” was a good translation of the Hebrew word Adonai, and gradually replaced it in later editions of the Septuagint. Therefore, in most editions of the Septuagint available today, the name Kurios appears as the translation for יהוה.

This practise carried over into the next major Western translation, the Latin Vulgate, where the name Dominus (and variants) was used. This translation was commonly in use for over 1000 years. Thus, in turn, English translators of the Bible retained the practise of translating יהוה as “Lord”, and began to use the semi-capitalised letters to indicate that LORD was a translation of the name יהוה. Almost every English translation today utilizes this print style.

The pronunciation “Jehovah”

Pronunciation of the word “Jehovah” as is often used by English speakers today was completely unheard of until about the year 1500 A.D., and there is no printed record of the word Jehovah with that spelling before 1520.

It is likely that the Jews of Old Testament days would have pronounced the name something like “Yahweh”. Even some Jehovah’s Witnesses publications suggest that “Yahweh” is a more accurate pronunciation.

The progression from יהוה to the name Jehovah goes something like this:

- יהוה had the vowels of adonai placed into it, so that readers would see the word יהוה but speak the word Adonai out loud. In English lettering, this would look like YaHoWaH. Due to a quirk of Hebrew grammar (the first consonant ך is not a guttural letter), the vowel “a” shouldn’t follow the letter “Y” in this instance. So this became YeHoWaH.
- Early theologians, writers and many of the Church Fathers, or at least those who wrote in Latin, wrote the word as IHVH (the “V” being pronounced like our “W”).
- Eventually, as English was being written more and more, English writers and commentators began to use the word Iehovah.
- The capital “I” on proper names had a tail added to look like our “J” - a popular feature in Dutch printing 1400’s-1500’s - but was still pronounced as “I” with a short “i” sound. This sort of practise may be seen in the first edition of the King James Bible in 1611, where names such as Jesus, Joshua, Judges, James and Joel, etc are printed as Iesus, Ioshua, Iudges, Iames, Ioel, etc. Gradually the J developed a sound of its own (as in the word “jump”), and English speakers have regularly pronounced the name as “Jehovah” ever since.

Some people feel it is quite wrong to pronounce יהוה as “Jehovah”, but it seems acceptable as an anglicised pronunciation of the name that probably sounded more like “Yahweh” to begin with.