



Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic **An Approach to the Jewish Community for Christian Seminarians**

Script 10: God Language: What's in a Name?

Bereshit bara Elohim: These are the opening Hebrew words of the first book of the Torah, *Bereshit*, Genesis. The Torah is the first section of the sacred scripture that Jews refer to as the “*TaNaKh*” and Christians refer to as “the Old Testament.” The English translation may be understood as, “In the beginning, *Elohim* created... The more common translation is, “In the beginning, **God** created...”

In most English translations of the Hebrew Biblical text, specific names of God are often translated merely as “God” instead of transliterating the actual Hebrew word. For example, the names *Elohim*, *El* and *Eloah*, are often all translated as “God.”

Elohim--God. Is there a difference? Isn't “God” the One Eternal Divine Being with many different names? Well, yes and no. There are many different names for God in the *TaNaKh*, still more in classical post-Biblical rabbinic literature, and even more that have developed in Jewish mystical traditions and modern Jewish theology. Is a God with so many different names the same God?

Jewish tradition answers this question with an unequivocal YES. God has at least seventy names, and Jewish theologians often view these different names as references to different Divine attributes such as justice or mercy. For example, *Elohei Tzeva'ot*, God of Hosts, emphasizes God's role as head of the armies of Israel when they did battle with their enemies. *El Shaddai*, God Almighty, is the name by which the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, knew God. Moses asks to know God's name in their encounter at the burning bush and is told in cryptic fashion, *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*, “I Will Be What I Will Be.”

In later rabbinic tradition, *Shekhinah* denotes God's presence on earth, the Divine manifestation among us. This term is viewed as the feminine presence of God, especially in the Jewish mystical tradition called *kabbalah*. Other rabbinic terms for God include:

- *Avinu Malkaynu*, Our Father, Our King, a name that reveals God's qualities of tender parental love on the one hand, and strict sovereign judgment on the other;
- *Tzur Yisra'el*, Rock of Israel, denoting steadfast Divine support of God's people;

- *Adon Olam*, Master of the World, praising God as Creator and Sovereign of the universe;
- *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, the Holy One, Praised be God, a popular phrase to this very day among traditional Jews;
- and the Jewish mystical term *Ein Sof*, the One without End, which stresses the endless, infinite nature of God.

Some of the many names of God raise theological questions. In Hebrew, the word *Elohim* is a plural noun. Jewish theology teaches that the God of the Israelites is a single Divine entity. How can a single Divine being have a plural name? This did not seem to bother early Israelites. However, as Jewish theology developed, the name *Elohim* became somewhat problematic. Over time, Jewish commentators and scholars found different ways to reconcile the presence of a plural god name with a monotheistic god concept, placing special emphasis on singular verbs that accompany the name Elohim. In time, the introduction of other names of God eclipsed the use of *Elohim*, demoting that term to a less prominent status.

The most well-known name of God in Biblical and later Jewish tradition is: ***Yud Hey Vav Hey***. This, the most sacred name in Judaism for the One God, is referred to as “the Tetragrammaton,” meaning “the four letters.” This name of God first appears in the Book of Genesis and subsequently over 6800 times in the *TaNaKh*.

The name *YHVH* was considered to be so holy that it was only pronounced once a year by the High Priest in the Temple in Jerusalem on the afternoon of Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement. After the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE,¹ the tradition of the proper pronunciation of this name was lost. Since then, because the name *YHVH* is considered to be so sacred, this name is not pronounced within the Jewish community. When the *TaNaKh* is read aloud in either Hebrew or English, the word *Adonai*, “my Lord,” is substituted for it.

Among traditional Jews, in order to avoid any possibility of transgressing the prohibition against saying *YHVH*, the term *HaShem* (The Name) is substituted for the word *Adonai* in non-liturgical settings. Many Jews avoid writing one of the Hebrew names for God on non-sacred documents as well as documents that may not be treated as sacred by others. This practice has the effect of creating even greater distance from the original unpronounceable name of God and engendering great reverence for texts that contain one of God’s holy names.

Often, in printed English translations of the *TaNaKh* produced by Jewish publishers, the word “Lord” is substituted for the Hebrew *YHVH* in the English text. Many Christian publishers also follow this practice. In very recent times, some Jewish and secular scholarly publishers have adopted the practice of substituting either the letters *YHVH* in the English translation instead of the word “Lord” or of inserting the Hebrew letters *Yud Hey Vav Hey* into the English text without translation. Some Jews use a single Hebrew letter *hey* with an apostrophe as an abbreviation in order to refrain entirely from writing the letters of any of God’s names in Hebrew.

Christians do not have a prohibition against pronouncing the name *YHVH*. However, since the proper vocalization of this word is not known, several different traditions developed

¹ CE: Common Era, nomenclature used by Jews and many Christians instead of A.D.

over time. In some denominations, Christians pronounce *YHVH* as *Yahweh*. This is based on the Hebrew letters that correspond to *YHVH*. In some languages, there is no “V” sound in the alphabet. In such languages, a W sound usually takes the place of a V. Thus, *Yahweh* instead of *Yaveh*.

Another vocalization of *YHVH* typically found in the Christian world is Jehovah, a name derived by replacing the Y sound with a J and adding the sounds of the Hebrew vowels in the name *Adonai*. A variant of Jehovah is Yehovah. This pronunciation appears in languages that substitute a Y sound for a J sound. While Christians employ these vocalizations and names of God, they are typically not used by Jews.

We close with one more familiar name of God: ***Ya; Halleluya – Praise You Ya (God)***. The term “*Ya*” appears 50 times in the *TaNaKh*, 26 times as a term in its own right, and 24 times as part of the word “halleluyah.” The word “Halleluyah” means “Praise to *Ya*.” Because of the extensive use of the word “halleluyah” in both Jewish and Christian liturgy, *Ya*, rather than *Elohim* or *YHVH*, is arguably the most widely-recognized name of all the names for God in the *TaNaKh*.

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