



*A Ministry of the
Church of God (Seventh Day)*

The Sacred Name of God

וְהָיָה לְהַשְׁמִיךְ אֶל אֲסֶתֶר אֵל
אֵל בַּיַּת הַמֶּלֶךְ מִכָּל הַיְהוּדִים
וְהָיָה לְהַשְׁמִיךְ אֶת רוּחַ וְהַצֶּלֶת
מִמְּקוֹם אֵל וְאֵת וּבֵית אָבִיךָ
לְעֵת כְּזוֹת הַהִנֵּעַת לְמַלְכוּת
הַשָּׁמַיִם אֶל הַיָּדָבָר לְךָ כְּנוֹ
נִמְצָאִים בְּשׁוֹשׁ הַשָּׁמַיִם עָלַי וְ
שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים לֵימֵינוּ גַם אֵל
בְּכֵן אָבּוֹא אֶל הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר לֹא
בָדַדְתִּי אֲבֹדְתִי וְיַעֲבֹר מִי כִי וְיַעֲשֶׂה כִּי
נָהָה עָלָיו אֲסֶתֶר וְיִהְיֶה בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי

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A study of names in Scripture is both instructive and inspiring. Bible names have meanings that are apparent in the biblical languages but not in English. In Bible times, a name was much more than a means of distinguishing one person from another. Back then, most people understood the significance of a name. They believed it identified something special about the person. They considered that a name represented a person's nature, circumstances, and/or character.

For example, the name *Nabal* means "fool"; Nabal, the man, was a fool (1 Samuel 25:25). *Abram* means "father," but God changed His name to Abraham, meaning "the father of a multitude" (Genesis 17:5), in keeping with God's promise to make his descendants like the stars of heaven (15:5). Moses was named for his rescue from the Nile River: "She named him Moses ["drawn out"], saying, 'I drew him out of the water'" (Exodus 2:10). Jacob's name, which means "deceiver," was changed to *Israel* "because you have struggled with God and humans and have overcome" (Genesis 27:36a; 32:28).

God's name

In the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, God's name appears as *YHWH*. These four consonants are referred to as the *tetragrammaton*, and may have been pronounced "Yahweh." The Jews did not pronounce YHWH because they considered it too sacred and did not want to run the risk of profaning it. Whenever they read the Scriptures and came to YHWH, they would substitute

Adonai, meaning “Lord,” or *Elohim*, meaning “God,” depending on the context.

The Septuagint, a pre-Christian Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, translated *YHWH* as *kurios*, meaning “LORD.” Most versions of the English Bible render *YHWH* as “LORD” (all capital letters) to distinguish it as the personal name of God. They render the Hebrew word *adonai* or the Greek word *kurios* as “Lord” (first letter capitalized). They translate *Elohim* as *theos* in Greek.

Some English versions of the Bible use *Jehovah* (a sixteenth century transliteration error that combined the consonants of *YHWH* with the vowels of *Adonai*) instead of “LORD.”

Sacred names

Some followers of God and Jesus Christ teach that reference to God should be made by His Hebrew name, *Yahweh*, or an equivalent. This practice is known as using sacred names or “holy names,” based on texts like “I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols” (Isaiah 42:8). Most sacred names users refer to God as *Elohim*, to the Lord as *Yahweh* or *Adonai*, to Jesus as *Yahshua* or *Yeshua*, and to Christ as *Messiah*.

The importance attached to this teaching varies. Some insist that salvation comes only from calling on the Hebrew names (i.e., sacred names) of Deity and avoiding use of incorrect names or titles they consider pagan. They believe that referring to God as “Lord” or “God” is idolatrous, and that one can call upon God properly only by articulating His name in Hebrew. Others who are

less dogmatic about the teaching simply prefer speaking of or to God the Father and Jesus Christ by their Hebrew names and titles, without attaching salvific merit to the practice.

Some sacred names advocates have erroneously taught that the name *Jesus* derives from the Greek god Zeus. On the contrary, *Jesus* is derived from the Greek name for *Joshua* (Hebrew: *Yeshua*, the shortened form of *Yehoshua*) and means “the Lord saves” (Matthew 1:21).

Our objective here is to examine the sacred names teaching from Scripture. Does the argument for exclusive use of Hebrew names for Deity, both Father and Son, enjoy biblical support?

Yahweh

The Hebrew name *Yahweh* is the most common Old Testament reference to God, appearing there more than 6,800 times. Though not the exclusive name for God the Father, it still may be considered as His primary personal name. The Bible gives no definition for *Yahweh God*, but His attributes are displayed throughout its pages: spirit, eternity, immutability, wisdom, holiness, justice, loving kindness, goodness, and truth. Each of these attributes adds to the full meaning of YHWH.

Yahweh is derived from two tenses of the Hebrew verb *havah* — “to be,” meaning simply but profoundly “One who is what He is.” God explained to Moses that His name means “I AM WHO I AM” (Exodus 3:14). Here at the burning bush, God revealed Himself by name, instructing Moses to inform Israel

who had commissioned him to lead them out of Egyptian slavery. The name *Yahweh*, then, speaks of the Divine Being who is absolutely self-existent, the one who in Himself possesses essential life and permanent existence.

God's name *Yahweh* is rich in meaning. This becomes clear in God's revelation of Himself as He passed in front of Moses and proclaimed: "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished" (34:6, 7a). The true significance of this glorious display of Deity is not merely in the use of *Yahweh* as a spoken or written name, but more in what that name stands for: God's character.

The psalmist speaks of the importance of knowing the virtuous character of God: "Those who know your name will trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you" (Psalm 9:10). David does not say here that those who call upon God as *Yahweh* will thereby trust in Him. He means that those who know what His name represents — compassion, patience, love, forgiveness — will put their trust in Him. He illustrates this in the following texts:

But you, O Lord [Adonai], are a compassionate and gracious God [Elohim], slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness (Psalm 86:15).

Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits . . . The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. . . . he does not treat

us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us (103:2, 8, 10-12).

It is the gracious nature of God, not His name alone, that instills faith and is worthy of our trust. This truth is borne out by 1 John 4:19: "We love him [God] because he first loved us" (KJV). It is the loving, merciful character of the Lord, and not His name, that motivates men and women to commit their lives in obedience and service to Him.

Names reflect experiences

Scripture reveals that the God of creation and flood, of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and of Moses, was known and addressed by more than one name or title. In the first chapter of Genesis, He is referred to by the title *God*, or *Elohim*. In the next chapter, the name LORD, or Yahweh, appears several times, and always in tandem with God: He is the LORD God — Yahweh our Elohim (2:4-9, 15-21). In Genesis 17:1, 2, the LORD God appeared to Abraham and introduced Himself anew as Almighty God, or El Shaddai. Throughout the Bible's first book, then, the patriarchs of Israel "call upon the name of the LORD" (4:26) in its various forms as the God who called them and blessed them according to His promise (12:7, 8; 27:27-29; 28:20-22; 35:11).

Further, Scripture consistently teaches that it is more important to trust in the per-

son of God, as revealed in His Word, than to insist He be called *Yahweh* or any other of His names and titles. This can be seen in Exodus 3:13-15, where Moses was told to identify the source of his instructions to the Israelites as the “I AM” — a form of *Yahweh* — the LORD God of their forefathers: “This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (v. 14b).

Some have seen a textual problem with Exodus 3:13-15 and Exodus 6:2, 3, where God told Moses, “I am the LORD [Yahweh]. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty [El-Shaddai], but *by my name the LORD [Yahweh] I did not make myself known to them*” — when, in fact, the name *Yahweh* was used early and often in Genesis, as we have seen. The explanation to this puzzle is in the manner God identified Himself to the patriarchs, and the way they experienced Him. They experienced Him as the God of might and power — *El-Shaddai* — rather than as the covenant name of *Yahweh*. God revealed the fullest meaning of His covenant name, not to the patriarchs but to Israel in her Exodus experience. Moses and the nation of Israel observed and experienced the powerful demonstrations of “I AM” (*Yahweh*) in ways the patriarchs never did: delivering them from Egyptian slavery to the Promised Land. Since God had not fully revealed Himself as *Yahweh* in all that the name represented, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob could not be expected to call upon Him by that name. Instead, they “called on the name of the LORD” (Genesis 12:8) by the name most familiar to them: *El-Shaddai*, or God Almighty.

Seen in this way, we understand that learning the name *Yahweh* is insufficient of itself. We are free to call upon Him by the name or title inspired by our understanding of and experience with Him, as the patriarchs did. It is more important to know and trust the unchanging character of the God associated with His name than it is to trust in any so-called sacred name. The revelation of God's person and our whole-souled acceptance of Him far exceed the importance of knowing and pronouncing His Hebrew name.

New Testament lessons

One of the great promises of the gospel, ratified by the blood of Jesus, is the greater revelation of Yahweh. Jeremiah 31:34 predicted that, under the new covenant, God would become known universally: "No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. . . ." Later, Hebrews 8:7-13 quotes Jeremiah's prophecy as being fulfilled in Christ.

Jesus Christ made the Father known! The Father was mostly unknown until He was revealed by His Son (see Matthew 11:27; Luke 10:22). Jesus' prayer for His disciples gave testimony that Jesus had revealed the Father: "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. . . . I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world" (John 17:3, 6).

We also note here that Jesus revealed

God as Father, not as Yahweh, Elohim, or Adonai. Jesus always referred to God as Father: "I and the Father are one" (10:30). One way Jesus made the Father known was in the model prayer He taught His disciples: "Our Father in heaven" (Matthew 6:9).

In Gethsemane, Jesus prayed to the Father, calling Him "Abba, Father" (Mark 14:36). Paul informed us that we have become the adopted children of God by the indwelling Holy Spirit, so we, too, may call upon Him as "Abba, Father" (Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6). We are freed from the spirit of fear so that we may call upon God in familiar terms, just as we might call our earthly father "Daddy." *Abba* is a familiar Aramaic word for *father*. It was used by Jesus and is now recommended to believers as a form of personal address to our heavenly Father, indicating our familial intimacy in Christ.

In spite of our privilege to approach God in familiar terms, we are instructed, "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God . . ." (Exodus 20:7). Jesus taught us to revere God: "hallowed be your name . . ." (Matthew 6:9).

Universal appeal of the gospel

The Day of Pentecost, reported in Acts 2, introduced a dramatic change in the believer's relationship with God. Through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the Father and Son make their dwelling with believers (John 14:23). The glorious manifestation of the Spirit on Pentecost attracted the attention of a diverse international crowd gathered in Jerusalem for that day. Verse 11 tells how the

appeal of the gospel became universal: “We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”

As the apostles miraculously communicated the gospel of Christ in the vernacular of people from many nations, the Word of God was freed from its exclusive ties to Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, or any particular language. Now it is unnecessary to approach God by a particular name that may be unknown or meaningless to the worshipper. God is accessible to believers of all tribes and tongues as a loving Father. Such accessibility transcends language!

Confirmation of God’s intent to save people of all nationalities and languages, within their native contexts, is observed in Peter’s experience with the Roman centurion, Cornelius. Through a vision, God instructed Peter to abandon his prejudice against Gentiles and stop calling them “unclean” (Acts 10:1—11:18). Later, Peter recalled his experience with Cornelius:

“Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are” (Acts 15:7-11).

What stands out in Peter's argument is that salvation is universally available by faith, not by the works of knowing an ethnic appellation. People are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus, not by a discipline of calling upon God by His Hebrew names. Thank God for faith and a Father who saves by His grace — not by our learning Hebrew!

Facts of history and the Bible

Historic evidence precludes first century Christians using Hebrew names exclusively for Deity. It is commonly agreed that Aramaic was the language of Palestine in Jesus' day. Aramaic is considered a sister language to Hebrew. Those who spoke Aramaic could not follow the Hebrew Scriptures when they were read in synagogues. Therefore, synagogues appointed *turgems* (i.e., "translators"), who paraphrased Hebrew into Aramaic as it was read.

Consider the way Jesus called upon the Father from His cross. Mark reports Jesus' cry in Aramaic with its translation: "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*" (which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (15:34). But Matthew records the same, using the Hebrew word for *God*: "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" (27:46). Our point here is that using the Aramaic *Eloi* ("My God") is no less sacred to the Holy Spirit than using the Hebrew *Eli*.

The common language of apostolic times was Greek. As Christianity spread to Greek-speaking Jews and then to the Gentile world, the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament, was the Bible used for

preaching the gospel. It may have been a Roman world, but Greek was the prevailing language of the day. The Greek references to Deity were *theos* for God and *kurios* for Lord. Most quotations from the Old Testament that appear in the New are from its Greek translation and not from the Hebrew text. Therefore, the Greek references to Deity were commonly used by the early Christians, as reflected in the New Testament Greek manuscripts from which our English Bibles were translated. We see no evidence of a preference or insistence on sacred names here.

In the present gospel age, the importance of a single nation and language has been replaced by God's desire to be worshipped in Spirit and truth by all tribes and in all tongues. In Jesus' day, Jerusalem and the temple were the center of worship. But now true worship happens wherever believers are and whatever their language happens to be! Hebrew, Palestinian Aramaic, and Greek have all given way to the languages of today. Jesus said:

"Believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain [Samaria] nor in Jerusalem. . . . Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks" (John 4:21, 23).

The essential elements of worship are a true faith in God and personal commitment to obey Him through following Jesus Christ. Saving faith is no longer language based or site based. God is not a respecter of per-

sons; all believers stand on level ground before Him, regardless of their nationality, social standing, gender, or language. Paul reinforced these teachings when he wrote, "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26-28).

The universality of the gospel is wonderfully proclaimed in one of John the Revelator's visions: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you [Jesus Christ] were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God . . ." (Revelation 5:9, 10).

Throughout the book of Revelation, languages and tongues are references to the diverse people who obey and worship God (7:9, 10) or who rebel against Him and stand condemned (13:7, 8; 17:1, 15). Clearly, the true worship of God transcends ethnicity and any specific language.

Like the Pentecost event, the book of Revelation demonstrates the appeal of the gospel to all people, regardless of their language. Thus, the love, mercy, forgiveness, and patience of God have become known to people of all languages and nations, whether they call upon Him by His Hebrew name or not. People are inspired to call upon the Lord in repentance and for forgiveness, for help and in thanksgiving, for the same rea-

sons the patriarchs did. They know the love and graciousness of the God of their salvation. It is His person and character, not His name, that matter.

Conclusion

The Old Testament contains many names and titles for the Deity based on human experience of His revealed character, *Yahweh* being the most personal and frequently used. Understanding that *Yahweh* is concealed in our Bibles as "LORD," and why, is important for Bible students, and using this Hebrew name is well and fine.

But the teaching and practice of *restricting* references to Deity (Father and Son) to Hebrew names and titles *exclusively* is unwarranted from Scripture. The New Testament writers gave no sign of such a restriction as they wrote in Greek or spoke in Aramaic, and neither the Father nor Son ever rebuked anyone for failing to use, or for mispronouncing, His Hebrew name. On the contrary, many of His faithful and trusted servants did not know Him by His name *Yahweh*. But they, as we, know the matchless Character that name represents.

Today we have come to know God through His last and best revelation: Jesus Christ, His Son, who perfectly mirrors His Father: "The Son is the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15); "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being . . ." (Hebrews 1:3). "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father," Jesus said (John 14:9). We receive the salvation of the Lord, not because we call upon

Him by one particular name or another, but because we believe and follow Him through the life, love, mercy, and ministry of Christ. We are drawn to Him because He loved us and saved us by His grace while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8).

Appendix: Names and Languages

Why is the name *Jesus* (Ἰησοῦς in Greek, transliterated *Iesous*; pronounced /ee-ee-SOOS/) a viable substitute for the Hebrew name *Yeshua* (or *Yahshua* or *Yahoshua*, etc.)? Because names change form and pronunciation as they pass from one language to another. This is true of many names. *Charles* in English is *Carlos* in Spanish; *Joseph* is *José*. The Spanish name *Guillermo* looks and sounds much different from its English counterpart, *William*.

Even biblical names have gone through their own transformation. *Petros* in Greek became *Peter* in English and *Pedro* in Spanish. *Paulos* became *Paul* or *Pablo*. Coming from the Hebrew, *Miryam* became *Mariam* in Greek and *Mary* and *Maria* in English and Spanish.

Even names of prophets have variations. Why is the Hebrew *Eliyahu* written as *Elijah* in the Old Testament in English but as *Elias* in the New? Because certain grammar rules and pronunciation limitations change the form of a name from one language to another — from Hebrew to Greek, in this instance. In many cases, men's names in Greek end in *as* (ας).

Consider these names:

Mattityahu (Hebrew) is *Maththaios* in Greek and *Matthew* in English.

Ya'akov is *Iakobos* in Greek, but *James* in English and *Jacobo* in Spanish.

Bar-Talmai is *Bartholomaios* in Greek and *Bartholomew* in English.

Yochanan is *Ioannis* and then *John*.

Bar-Nabba is *Barnabas* in Greek, *Barnabas* in English, and *Bernabé* in Spanish.

We can discover the English version of the name of these two men in the book of Acts (5:1; 9:10) by looking at the Hebrew and Greek forms of their shared name: *Hanan-yah*/*Ανανίας* (hint: the Greek letter ν – “nee” – is an *n* in English and ζ is an *s*).

Arming ourselves with this basic information, we can confidently say that *Iesous* (i.e., *Jesus*) is an appropriate rendition of the Hebrew *Yeshua*. Pronouncing first the Greek form — with the *iota* and *eta* spoken as a diphthong (*ee-ee* or *yee* — */yee-SOOS/*) and then the Hebrew form *Yeshua*, we find that the pronunciations are somewhat similar — probably accommodating the Greek tongue to the Hebrew name. The writers of the Septuagint attest to the use of the Greek form of Jesus’ name as they use it in their Greek translation of the Old Testament. It’s a good idea to look up the names of *Joshua* son of Nun and *Jeshua* the high priest in this pre-Christian era Greek book.



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