



# The Sacred Name of YHWH

The fourth of the Ten Commandments, as found in Exodus 20:7, is, “*You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.*” (NAS) We do not treat the name of God lightly, and therefore consider it sacred and holy. But what exactly is this *name* of God? What are some of the ways in which we can fulfill this command—to treat the Name with the respect and reverence that it is due?

The name of God that appears most often in the Scriptures is יהוה, often referred to as the *tetragrammaton* (meaning, four-letter name) or the Sacred Name. This is commonly accepted as God’s “personal” name, though some Scriptural data indicates that this may not be a particularly accurate label. In English, יהוה is usually written as YHWH or YHVH, representing the four Hebrew letters in the Name, י (yud), ה (heh), ו (vav/waw), ה (heh).

Among scholars, the commonly accepted pronunciation of the Sacred Name is “Yahweh;” however, there is no universal agreement or—more importantly—no conclusive biblical proof that this is correct. Over the centuries, the Jewish scribes who were responsible for preserving the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures (which we rely upon today every time we read our Old Testaments) purposely obscured the pronunciation of the Name—a practice that came about in part because of the literal observance of the fourth commandment. In fact, it can be extremely offensive or unsettling for a Jewish person to hear the Name of יהוה spoken—or rather, *attempted* to be spoken.

In ancient Judaism, a tradition developed in which the pronunciation of the Sacred Name was forbidden except under the most holy of circumstances. The usual practice, then, would be to substitute another name for the Sacred Name as a show of reverence. For instance, the name אֲדֹנָי (Adonai), a biblical title or description often ascribed to God, was spoken in place of יהוה when the Scriptures were being read in the Synagogue. In order to remind the reader of this, the Jewish scribes adopted the practice of adding the vowel points (the little dots and dashes around the Hebrew letters which represent vowel sounds) from אֲדֹנָי (Adonai) to יהוה such that the Sacred Name was written as יְהוָה. This was a practical way of setting apart the Name of God as holy.

Interestingly enough, when the Scriptures were first translated into English a mere 400 or so years ago, the translators

were unaware of this Jewish practice. When they encountered יהוה in the Scriptures, they came up with the pronunciation “Yehovah” or “Jehovah”—an entirely *non-existent* word never intended by the Hebrew scribes. In all our preserved Hebrew texts today, the Sacred Name still appears as יהוה—it’s true pronunciation lost to antiquity. In many modern English Bibles, it is represented as “LORD” in capital letters, so as to distinguish it from all other names or titles in Scripture.

The practice of substituting another name for יהוה is not only a common practice in Judaism, but it is also Biblical. In fact, our Master Yeshua Himself actually models this for us. In no less than 29 times according to Matthew, Yeshua used the substitution “Heaven” as seen, for example, in Matthew 4:17, “*From that time Yeshua began to preach and say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’*”

In our modern English vernacular, the word “God” is commonly used in reference to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Since the true vowel sounds of the Sacred Name are unknown, some have continued the practice of neither writing nor speaking the Name by carrying it over into the writing of the English word as well. When the name “G-d” appears without the vowel “o” in modern writings, it is not an attempt to blot out or make void the Sacred Name, but rather a contemporary show of reverence and respect through the indication that it is no longer pronounceable, nor is it to be used lightly or casually. When referring to God, either in our speech or in our writing, we would do well to be sensitive to these Jewish practices if we hope to avoid being unnecessarily offensive to Jewish People who practice, uphold or are at least aware of these traditions.

Within the Scriptures, we find other Hebrew words which may be used reverently as references to the Holy One. In addition to אֲדֹנָי (Adonai), we often see the word אֱלֹהִים (Elohim), which is usually translated in our English Bibles as “God.” In cultural Judaism, the name הַשֵּׁם (HaShem), which literally means, “The Name,” is also a common term.

But perhaps it was Yeshua who taught us best how to speak the Name of God. Through the salvation of the Son, we can come confidently before our Father; and as He calls us into His presence as little children, we may respond by calling out, “אָבָא, *Abba* (Daddy)!”




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**Pronunciation Key:** a = “ah”; e = “eh”; i = “ee”; o = “oh”; u = “oo”; ch = guttural sound in back of throat as in “bach” or “loch”, not “ch” as in “much” or “charity”

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