

The Names of “God” in Biblical Hebrew

Notes of Clarification

Dialectical Differences

There are different ways of pronouncing some of these names even in biblical times because of different dialects of Hebrew.

- That is, Abraham might have said אֱלֹהִים [Elohim] (God, gods, sons of god, spiritual beings), or יהוה [Yahweh] (Jehovah, Adonai, HaShem, the LORD) differently than Moses, David, Amos, or Jesus.

Judges 12:5-6 (context—Tribal conflict between Gilead and Ephraim)

“Gilead captured the fords of the Jordan from Ephraim, and whenever a fugitive of Ephraim said, “Let me cross over,” the men of Gilead said to him, “Are you an Ephraimite?” When he said, “No,”⁶ they said to him, “Please say Shibboleth,” and if he said, “Sibboleth”—because he could not pronounce it correctly—they grabbed him and executed him at the fords of Jordan.”

The name in Hebrew includes a person’s character, sovereignty, and reputation (or lack thereof).

1 Kings 4:31

“He [Solomon] was wiser than all the men: Ethan the Ezrahite; Heman, Calcol, and Darda the children of Mahol; and he was very well known [lit. ‘his name was in all the surroundings’].”

Rather than merely referring to an identity, it carries title, purpose, and character along with it. A modern-day equivalent is from that song by Bon Jovi, ‘You Give Love a Bad Name’, which means to slander love, mistreating it and associating all kinds of bad things with it. Similarly, to have a bad name in Hebrew thought means to have terrible character, lack of status, etc.

FOR FURTHER STUDY: Genesis 3:20, 11:4, 11:9, 12:2, Numbers 6:27, Deuteronomy 10:20, 22:14, 25:10

Exodus 20:7

*“You shall not misuse **the name** of Yahweh your God, because Yahweh will not leave unpunished anyone who misuses his name.”*

This does not mean mispronouncing, speaking, or writing the name of God, which was the mentality of many Jews and is the mentality many Christians today—we will explore this a little bit later as well. For now, this means that we should not misuse, misrepresent, and exploit God's **authority, reputation, and character**.

*Final note—Saying God's name is a **blessing**, not a command.*

Why Should I use God's Names?

Clarification

Just saying "God" as I have been thus far, is actually unclear since many 'gods' exist in culture today. [Ex. I live in Bakersfield, and I could never simply walk up to my barista and say, "God loves you" —they wouldn't know if I'm talking about one of the 330,000,000 Hindu gods, the New Age god that is merely an impersonal positive energy, or the God of the Bible]. When we use the God of Israel's name, we can be much clearer as to who we are referring to. That is, we're not just talking about any god, we're talking about the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the Israelites, Jesus, and Christians—the God who made the skies and the ground. [Cf. One's own name can be confusing because many others are called the same thing]

Powerful Prayer

As stated before, the God of Israel's name carries his divine authority, his purposes, his story (as read in the Bible), his actions, and his identity. So, we can be sure to act with confidence because we—and the spiritual powers that eavesdrop on our prayers—can hear that we are invoking the power and authority of the God of Israel. Not Buddha, not Zeus, not Ba'al, but the God of the Bible, the creator of the skies and the ground.

Spiritual Formation

"We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. So, what comes to mind when we think about God is the most important thing about us." (A.W. Tozer)

My idea of God impacts my life more than anything else. As we discovered earlier, his character and identity are tied to his name—the name in Hebrew contains a person's character, sovereignty, and reputation.

As an example, if I view God as a vending machine that's just supposed to give me what I want when I give him something, I'm going to view life under that guise. If I view God as an angry, vengeful being, my view of life will follow accordingly. But if I view God as loving, holy,

beautiful, and good, how I perceive everything that happens to me and through me will first pass through that filter.

A Note on Substitutions—Jehovah, Adonai, HaShem, LORD, and G-d

Primary Names

El or Eloah [אל, אֱלֹהִים]

*“Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
Maker of heaven and earth.
²⁰And blessed be God Most High
who delivered your enemies into your hand.” (Genesis 14:19-20)*

Here, the Priest Melchizedek calls God [El] ‘Most High’. He exists over all creation as creator, sustainer, and redeemer. Furthermore, there is an inclusion here of God’s might over evil—he possesses the power to overcome those that rise against his goodness or his people. This can give us comfort in difficult circumstances—knowing that even though I face a wall, even though I might experience a dark night of the soul, I can persevere **through it** because I know that God is more powerful than my circumstance, and desires blessing for my life, whether material, or spiritual.

Thus, we can use the Hebrew word “El” in prayer times to invoke our trust in God’s omnipotence—his all-powerful nature, which can lead to peace in the midst of the storm.

Elohim [אלהים]

‘Elohim’ is the plural form of the Hebrew word ‘El’. It is used more often than ‘El’ and ‘Eloah’ (‘Elohim’ — 2500 times; ‘El’ — 417 times; ‘Eloah’ — 58 times). This word has a broad range of meaning when translated. It can be used to refer to rulers on earth, spiritual beings (both for Yahweh and against him) and is used most often in reference to Yahweh.

There is some debate as to why Hebrew people use a plural noun to refer to their God. The two main views are that it is either (1) a reference to Trinitarian Theology, or (2) to the magnitude of God’s existence. The right answer could be either, or both. In either case, we should understand God as the only thing that breaks all of our preconceived notions, all our categories, and everything we think we understand about the world. He exists outside of our understanding. As Isaiah says,

*“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
and your ways are not my ways” (Isaiah 55:7-9).*

Yahweh, Yah [יהוה]

“Yahweh, Yahweh, God, who is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding with loyal love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping loyal love to the thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and he does not leave utterly unpunished, punishing the guilt of fathers on sons and on sons of sons on third and fourth generations.” (Exodus 34:6-7)

1) Yahweh is present (cf. Exodus 3:1-15)

Yahweh connects his name, which literally means, “I will be” to the promise to Moses that he will be present with the Israelites as they stand up to Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

*“Yahweh is near to all who call on him,
to all who call on him in truth.” (Psalm 145:18)*

2) Yahweh is love

The verse we read above demonstrates that God is loving and just, though it is important to note that the comparison is that he loves and extends mercy to “thousands” [lit. thousands of generations], while punishing only the “third and fourth generations”.

God’s desire for all humankind is to experience and enjoy the beauty and goodness of his vitality and glory.

3) Yahweh is powerful

*“Yahweh, your right hand is glorious in power;
Yahweh, your right hand destroyed the enemy.” (Exodus 15:6)*