

The Sacred Name—Is a Christian Required to Use It?

Some people claim that we must speak of God and address Him only by “His Sacred Name.” We examine their arguments and demonstrate their errors.

by Ken Graham

In Acts 4:12 we find the statement by Peter, “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” What name is this by which we must be saved? Are names really that important?

Yes, names are important. The Bible places great significance on names. When someone comes in another person’s name, he or she acts on the authority of that name. Ambassadors to different countries act by the authority of their government. God changed the names of many of the patriarchs in the Old Testament in order to reflect their true nature. Yet He didn’t change their name into another language.

Abram’s name was changed in Hebrew to Abraham, which meant “a father of many nations.” Jacob’s name, which meant “supplanter,” was changed to Israel, meaning “prevailer with God.” But both were changed *within* their native tongue, not into another language.

The Son came in His Father’s name. What is that name? Unless you, too, bear the name of your Heavenly Father, you are not His son and heir. Is it a sin to use the name Jesus Christ or call His people the Church of God? Is the true name of our Heavenly Father the Hebrew tetragrammaton (YHWH)? Must we use YHWH, instead of God, when addressing Him or speaking His name in public?

The language of the New Testament

Just as the Old Testament books were almost all written in Hebrew, the original New Testament books were written in Greek (with the possible exception of Matthew and Hebrews). According to *The Church History of Eusebius*, Book VI, chapter 14: “The Epistle to the Hebrews is the work of Paul, and...it was written to the Hebrews in the Hebrew language; *but...Luke translated it carefully and published it for the Greeks, and hence the same style of expression is found in this epistle and in the Acts.*”

This history explains that Paul, in order to influence the religiously sensitive Jews, wrote his epistle to the Hebrews in the Hebrew tongue. But it was translated by Luke and published for the Greeks in the Greek language. If this is so, then God inspired Luke’s Greek translation to be preserved for us today, for the Hebrew version is lost.

Eusebius also records for us in chapter 25 of Book VI, the following about Matthew’s gospel: “Among the four gospels, which are the only disputable ones in the Church of God under heaven,” he wrote, “the first was published by Matthew, who was once a publican, but afterwards an apostle of Jesus Christ, and it was prepared for the converts from Judaism, and published in the Hebrew language.” We do not know that it was written first in Hebrew, but it is possible.

Jerome tells us, in his *Lives of Illustrious Men*, chapter 3, that Matthew’s Gospel was translated into the Greek language for the whole Church. Again, God inspired the Greek version to be preserved and canonized for us today. According to F.F. Bruce’s *The Books and the Parchments*, the Aramaic version of the Bible that we have today is admittedly a translation from the Greek, despite what some mistakenly claim.

It is simple to prove that the Aramaic is not the original language. Notice Mark 15:34. In English it says, “And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama

sabachthani?’ which is translated, ‘My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?’” Look carefully at the last half of verse 34. It proves that Mark (whose work was probably the first of the four Gospels written) included the final words of Jesus from His own mouth. Jesus’ own words are quoted in Aramaic (which He spoke to His disciples), but Mark translated them into Greek.

If Aramaic were the original language of the New Testament, then there would have been no need to insert the Aramaic words into the text, as the Aramaic-speaking people would have seen the words there and would already have known what they meant! The comment found in the King James Version, “which is, being interpreted,” would not have been necessary! The Aramaic New Testament repeats the Greek words exactly. This is one proof among others that it could not have been the original language of the New Testament.

Aramaic words are quoted and commonly translated into Greek in the New Testament for the Greek-speaking peoples.

In most cases, those Aramaic words are then translated from the Greek in the Aramaic New Testament, not from original Aramaic.

In John 1:41, we find that the Greek-speaking audience was not generally familiar with the meaning of the Hebrew word *Meshiach*, which means “the anointed.” *Messias* is the Greek spelling of the Hebrew word *Meshiach*. Most Greeks were not familiar with that word, so John translates it into the Greek word *Christos*, which means, “the anointed one.”

Names for God other than YHWH

The New Testament contains several names for our Creator. Likewise, the Old Testament contains many names for God.

Some individuals and groups have insisted that the Creator’s only true name is the tetragrammaton YHWH in the Hebrew and that it is the only name we must use in referring to Him. This argument focuses on the English word “LORD” used in the Old Testament for YHWH.

However, the other names for God that occur in the Old Testament and New Testament are not just titles, as is sometimes alleged by these groups. God was also known by another *name* before Exodus 3:15, when He revealed Himself as YHWH to Moses. And it was a *name*, according to the Bible, not a title. Notice Exodus 6:3. God tells Moses that He was not known by the name YHWH to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but by the name El Shaddai or El Shaddee.

Proponents of the “Sacred Name doctrine” do not, for whatever reason, insist that we must use the first name, the covenant name by which He made Himself known to our covenant father Abraham. It is, after all, through Abraham (ultimately through Christ, of course) that our blessings flow. If we are only to address God by YHWH, then apparently Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will not be saved, because the name YHWH had not been revealed to them! They knew God not only as El Shaddai, but also by the name Elohim as is proven in Exodus 3:15, when we look at the verse Hebrew word by Hebrew word.

The name for God in this verse is Elohim throughout (although the word “LORD” in the verse is the Hebrew word *YHWH*).

Aramaic

There are portions of the Old Testament where Aramaic is the original language rather than Hebrew (Daniel 2:4 through 7:28; Ezra 4:8 through 6:18; and 7:12-26). Nowhere in these portions of Aramaic do we find the Hebrew words for the deity, but instead we find the Aramaic form Elah.

Again, in the New Testament we have many passages like Mark 9:38, where John told Jesus of “someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name.” It is likely that the spoken language was Aramaic most of the time. And Jesus does say that they did these miracles in *His* name.

Someone who verbalized the name YHWH at this time would have been arrested, tried and perhaps stoned by order of the Sanhedrin (backed up and supported by the Romans).

How is it possible that God would perform miracles in this (undoubtedly Aramaic) name if He only honors the name YHWH?

Would Christ have allowed such a thing in a name of His, other than YHWH, or would His Father back up and support such a thing if God did not want to be honored and called by any name other than YHWH? This example is repeated numerous times in the New Testament.

The Hebrew language itself

The Old Testament was preserved for centuries and consisted only of consonants, though semi-consonants were used to indicate certain long vowels. The exact pronunciation of the words, with their vowels, was preserved only by oral usage. They were passed down from one generation to the next.

These vowel sounds were not written down until somewhere around the sixth or seventh century A.D. At that time, the Jewish scholars of the day, known as Masoretes, created symbols to represent the vowels that they were using by oral tradition. They added these symbols or points to the text of the Old Testament which had only contained consonants up to that time.

Unfortunately for us, the tetragrammaton YHWH, the name of the Creator, ceased to be pronounced by the Jews as too sacred to be uttered long before the Masoretes.

Whenever the Jews recited the text of the Hebrew Old Testament orally, they substituted the word *Adonai* ("Lord" in English). (The King James Version uses LORD in small caps for YHWH.) Sometimes the Jews recite *Elohim* instead of YHWH too. This practice began long before the time of Herod.

Later on the Masoretes, whenever they encountered the word YHWH, inserted the vowel points for *Adonai* or *Elohim* into the word YHWH. Hence, *the original vowel points for YHWH are not found in the text.*

This gave the synagogue ruler or reader of the text the cue to pronounce either *Adonai* or *Elohim* instead of YHWH. Yet later again, according to the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, the Catholic Church under the influence of Pope Leo X's confessor Peter Galatin, without a complete understanding of the Hebrew language and text, took the consonants YHWH combined with the vowel points of *Adonai* and made up the form *Jehovah*. Apparently, Peter Galatin "was followed in the use of this hybrid form by Fagius.... But it seems that even before Galatin, the name 'Jehovah' had been in common use.... It is found in Raymond Martin's 'Pugio Fidei,' written in 1270 A.D." ("Jehovah," Vol. VII, p. 88).

Most Hebrew scholars today admit that the exact vowel sounds and pronunciation of YHWH are not certain. Even the consonants are uncertain and YHVH or JHVH could be possible. If people tell you that they know how to pronounce it, you should ask the question, how did they make this random decision? Most feel that *Ya-hweh* is a close approximation of the way the word was probably pronounced. But until Christ returns, we will not know precisely how it was pronounced. This *Ya-hweh* is based upon a transliteration into Greek by some early church fathers several centuries after the New Testament was written. Other scholars disagree with this and feel it is pronounced *Yaho*, *Yahwo* or *Yahu*. There is no way to be certain, unless God reveals it. The New Testament does not preserve how it was pronounced either.

Pronunciation lost

The Jews in Jeremiah's time understood the pronunciation of YHWH. But the dreams of their false teachers misled them into believing that YHWH should not be pronounced! Thinking that it was too holy a word to be uttered, they stopped using it. And after the centuries its true pronunciation was lost to us. When Jesus Christ returns, He will restore all things, including this lost knowledge.

If it were essential that we know the exact pronunciation, we would need to know exactly how the Creator pronounced it to Moses when He introduced Himself to him. Even Ezra, who later edited and compiled Moses' writings, would have only had tradition as his source for pronouncing the word Moses wrote. Even today, Jews in different parts of the world have

different pronunciations for the Hebrew vowels and even some consonants. Judges 12:6 indicates that there were variations in dialect at the time in the area between the Nile and the Euphrates.

If YHWH must be used for the Creator, and/or is a requirement for salvation, then Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will not be in the Kingdom. According to Exodus 6:2-3, “And God [*Elohim*] spoke to Moses and said to him: I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty [*El Shaddai*], but by My name LORD [YHWH] I was not known to them.”

The Creator plainly says they didn’t know Him by that name. It appears that the name YHWH was not known before Moses.

If the name YHWH was known in Hebrew society before Moses, we would expect to find personal names of individuals similar to YHWH before Moses’ time, but we do not. Instead, only personal names using *El* or *Shaddai* are found.

Examples are Mahalalel (Genesis 5:12) and Abimael (Genesis 10:28). Other examples are found in Genesis 28:19; 17:1; and Numbers 1:6.

No names using *Yaho*, *Yahwo* or *Yahu* or any derivative of YHWH are found before Moses’ time.

If we study the Bible carefully, we find that the Creator has many names and titles and provides no restriction or command not to translate those names and titles into other languages.

Nowhere in the Bible are we commanded to use only the Hebrew form of His name. In fact, we are given many positive examples of these names and titles being translated into other languages. There are portions of the Old Testament where Aramaic is the original language rather than Hebrew (Daniel 2:4 through 7:28; Ezra 4:8 through 6:18; 7:12-26). Nowhere in these portions of Aramaic do we find the Hebrew words for the deity, but instead we find the Aramaic form *Elah*.

Names for God in language of the day

If we examine the New Testament, we find a similar story. No Hebrew names are to be found.

The Greek terms *Theos* (God) and *Kurios* (Lord) are used. When passages from the Old Testament are quoted in the New Testament, the word *Kurios* is substituted for what would have been YHWH in the Old Testament. An example would be Matthew 3:3, quoted from Isaiah 40:3.

Unfortunately, there are some who present impressive-sounding arguments that the New Testament is corrupted (and therefore unreliable) and that the Old Testament Hebrew name of God (YHWH) has been removed from all 5,000 or so manuscripts of the Greek New Testament (not to mention some 8,000+ manuscripts of the New Testament in Latin). This would have been a greater task than was humanly possible. The editors would have had to gather all of these manuscripts from all over the civilized world and carefully remove all trace of the Hebrew tetragrammaton, substituting the Greek *Kurios*, meaning “Lord,” or *Theos*, meaning “God,” in its place.

Kurios occurs 665 times in the New Testament and *Theos* occurs 1,345 times.

This would have been an editing job for Superman!

Jesus said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away” (Matthew 24:35). If the name YHWH had been used, it would have remained in the texts of the New Testament. Believe me; God’s Word has not been tampered with in this way. If it was in one or a few texts, plenty of other manuscripts would show the correct rendering. Satan would like people to believe that the New Testament has been corrupted, so that he could eventually destroy their faith in everything else God has revealed to them through it.

Although the apostle Paul spoke Hebrew, he didn’t use the Hebrew tetragrammaton YHWH in any of his 14 letters. The apostle Peter uses the Greek form *Yesous Christos* for Jesus Christ in Acts 4:10. *Salvation is only through the name Jesus Christ!* The Hebrew word *Yehoshua* or *Yahshua* is not used here at all. The Holy Spirit inspired these words to be written in Greek, not Hebrew.

God's Word nowhere says that it is wrong for people to read the Bible, which includes His name, in their own language.

Nor is it wrong for them to refer to their Creator in their own language in preaching or prayer. Salvation is not based upon a secret or mysterious word or pronunciation.

It's the understanding of God's name that's important, not a unique pronunciation. YHWH means the Self-Existent One or the Ever-Living One. Some translate it as "the Eternal." We see throughout the New Testament that the power of God's name was evident.

Peter healed a cripple by commanding him in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth to "rise up and walk" (Acts 3:6).

There is authority and power in the name of Jesus Christ. Whether the name is in Greek or English or any other language does not matter. People were healed and demons were cast out in His name.

Jesus Himself spoke Aramaic (and probably Greek; He was a carpenter and the language of business was Greek). I suspect that if He had needed to speak something else, He would have had no difficulty doing so. The apostles were inspired to record His words and His actions in Greek. Christians are baptized into His name and carry on the preaching of the gospel today. They have the Holy Spirit and accomplish His will. All that our Heavenly Father has done in His Church today would not be possible if His people and leaders were failing to pronounce His name correctly in Hebrew and if such was required for respect, salvation and pleasing Him.

Jesus said that He came to reveal the Father to His followers (John 1:18; 17:6, 26). Yet in all that the apostles wrote of Jesus in the New Testament, we find no trace of any reference to the Hebrew word YHWH. Jesus revealed to His disciples the way of life that the Father would have been pleased for them to lead: "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven" (Matthew 7:21).

Is the English word *God* a pagan name?

Some sacred name groups contend that to use the English word *God* is a sin.

The reasoning is that because our ancestors used the word *god* in reference to idols, it should not be used today in reference to our Creator and heavenly Father.

The Hebrew word *Elohim*, which means gods or the God kingdom or the *God family*, is used 240 times to refer to idols and pagan gods in the Old Testament. In two places it is translated "goddess." The Hebrew word *El* is translated once as "idol" and 15 times as "god," referring to a pagan god. The Hebrew word *Eloah* is used five times to refer to heathen gods. Ezra and Nehemiah were inspired to use the Aramaic word *Elah* 16 times to refer to pagan gods of the Aramaic-speaking people.

Considering these things, and using the same logic that the sacred names groups use to say that the word *God* is pagan and sinful to use simply because our ancestors used it to refer to pagan gods, it would also have to be sinful to use any of the above Hebrew or Aramaic names for our Creator. Yet God allowed His prophets in the Old Testament to use the very same words for both Him and pagan idols!

Paul spoke of the fact that people "did not like to retain God in their knowledge" (Romans 1:28) and that they "changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed beasts and creeping things" (verse 23). Biblical history bears this out.

We should also consider that although the Babylonians had a god named Baal-Gad (pronounced "gawd"), this does not mean that our word *God* is derived from this source. The term *God* in ancient Anglo-Saxon comes from the word *goode* or, as it is today in German, *goot*. It seems this term comes from the Hebrew word *Guwd* (pronounced "goode" according to *Strong's*). When Israel went into captivity to the Assyrians, both Israel and the Assyrians used this word in their languages. *Baal-Gad* or *Gad* does not come from the same source as *Guwd* or *goode*. Even though they might appear to be connected, they do not have the same linguistic roots.

Other names

Perhaps the strongest evidence against the sacred name theory in the New Testament is the fact that on the Day of Pentecost, everyone understood the preaching in his own language. So when Peter spoke and used the name of God, everyone heard it in his own language.

The apostle Paul was inspired to translate the Hebrew YHWH into the Greek word *Theos*. The other words for the Creator used in the New Testament are *Logos*, meaning the Word; *Kurios*, meaning Lord; *Christos*, meaning Christ or anointed one; and *Yesous*, meaning Jesus.

But nowhere in any manuscript of the New Testament do the Hebrew words for God appear. Some claim that the Greek word *Yesous*, meaning Jesus, comes from the pagan Greek god Zeus. This is an error. The Greek word *Zeus* and the Roman word *Jove* may instead be ultimately derived from the Hebrew YHWH or JHVH. The Greeks and other pagans did not like to retain God in their knowledge.

They took the names of God and attached them to their idols. Of course, we already know that the ancient Hebrew-speaking peoples also did the same thing by calling their idols El or Ba'al or Ba'el. Some were simply called "the Elohim." The name Jesus or Yesous may very well be derived from YHWH!

It is interesting that the Greeks were very concerned about how their primary god Zeus was addressed. They felt that all 53 names for Zeus had to be mentioned by supplicants when praying to him or he would not respond to their prayers.

Getting the name just right seems to have been very important in paganism.

Jesus prayed that the Father would keep those whom He had given to Jesus in the *Father's* name. The Father's family name was and is *God* in English. In Greek, it is *Theos*. Twelve times in the New Testament the name of the Church is stated to be the Church of God (*Theos*). Jesus called Himself the *Son of God (Theos)* numerous times in the New Testament. Many times He said He came in His Father's name.

Before we accept the theories of some that it is wrong to use anything but the Hebrew word *YHWH*, or that salvation is only possible through the correct use of one name, we need to recognize the overwhelming evidence that is contained in the New Testament to the contrary.

**United Church of God
P.O. Box 541027
Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027
(513) 576-9796 • (513) 576-9795 Fax • www.ucg.org**

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