

YHWH vs Jehovah The Proper Pronunciation of the Divine Name

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Usually when one is talking about the name of God the common assumption is that Yahweh is the Hebrew name and Jehovah is English translation of that Hebrew name. The name Jehovah has appeared in bibles, songs, and in countless sermons. It has gained popularity among not only English speakers but people from around the world. However, many scholars prefer Yahweh to Jehovah. Is this difference significant? Most people would say no; however, one group, the Jehovah's Witnesses, make the following argument that one should pronounce the name Jehovah over Yahweh:

Nevertheless, many prefer the pronunciation Jehovah. Why? Because it has a currency and familiarity that Yahweh does not have. Would it not, though, be better to use the form that might be closer to the original pronunciation? Not really, for that is not the custom with Bible names.¹

The basic force of this statement is even though Yahweh may be closer to the Hebrew, Jehovah is an easier pronunciation than Yahweh, is more common, and therefore should be preferred. And many of those reading this statement might think, "fair enough, Jehovah it is." The problem is that Jehovah is not a legitimate translation of the divine name. When looking up the divine name in the Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament one finds the following entry for the divine name.

2) Jehovah, wrong pronunciation, improperly mixing K and Q, generally used since ca. 1500; first reference in 1381 (Eissfeldt, KL. Schr. 1:167).²

What does this mean, "wrong pronunciation?" And what is "mixing the K and Q?"

The Pronunciation of the Name of God.

If one is fortunate enough to read Hebrew, when coming to the name of God he will see

יהוה; commonly known as the tetragrammaton and transliterated as YHWH.

According to most traditions the pronunciation of יהוה; has been lost; when reading the divine name Jews simply said hashem יהוה, which meant "the name:"

¹ God's Name it's Meaning and Pronunciation
:http://www.watchtower.org/library/na/index.htm?article=diagram_02.htm 2004.

² Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament, Study Edition*. trans. M.E.J. Richardson, vol 1. (Leiden:Brill. 2001), 394 – 395.

The correct pronunciation of the name was lost from Jewish tradition some time during the Middle Ages; late in the period of the Second Temple the name had come to be regarded as unspeakably holy and therefore unsuitable for use in public reading, although it continued to be used publicly.³

This presents a problem: if the pronunciation of the name is lost, where on earth did the name Jehovah and Yahweh come from?

When revisiting the lexicon, above⁴, it reads that Jehovah was an improper “mixing of the K and Q,” and it is here where one discovers where Jehovah actually came from.

The K’tiv-Q’re

The first issue is what are the K and Q?. These letters normally refer to what is known as the Ketiv/Qere. Basically, the K’tiv is what is written down in the actual Hebrew text. The Qere is what is said or pronounced. Why should there be a difference? Kittel explains.

There are places in the Biblical text where there is a scribal error, or variant traditions, which the Masoretes wished to preserve. In these cases, the desired pronunciation is noted in the margin or footnote.⁵

The Masoretes were Jewish scribes who produced the manuscripts most Bibles use as the basis of the Old Testament. These manuscripts have proven to be very accurate, as confirmed by comparison to earlier, non-Masoretic texts, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Masoretes were meticulous in their scribal practice, copying exactly what appeared in their exemplars. According to Kittel, since the Masoretes did not want to change the actual text of the scriptures, whenever they felt that something was not quite right with the copying of the text, they simply made notes in the margin indicating what to pronounce.

Emanuel Tov says the following...

In a large number of instances – ranging from 848 to 1566 in different traditions – the Mp notes that one should disregard the written form of the text (in the Aramaic language of the Masorah: ketib, “what is written”) and read instead a different word or words (in Aramaic : qere or qeri, “ what is read”).⁶

³ Freedman O’Conner יהוה in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed G.Johannes Botterweck & Helmer Ringgren, trans. David Green. Vol 5. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980),500.

⁴ From here on referred to as H.A.L.O.T.

⁵ Bonnie Pedrotti Kittel & Vicki Hoffer & Rebecca Abts Wright, *Biblical Hebrew, A Text and Workbook*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 366.

⁶ Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* 2nd revised edition. (Minneapolis, Fortress Press), 59.

Here is an example of the ketive/qere found in the bible.

Psalm 100:3, the Ketiv reads:

Psalm 100:3

דָּעוּ כִּי־יְהוָה הוּא אֱלֹהִים הוּא־עָשָׂנוּ (וְלֹא) אֲנַחְנוּ
עָמְדוּ וְצִאֵן מִרְעֵיתוֹ:

de`u ki YHWH hu' `elohim hu' `asanu velo' anhenu

What is written here is "and he made us, and not we ourselves. (NASB) Notice the וְלֹא is a sign of negation. It has an aleph (א) at the end of it.

But if you read the NIV it reads "and he who made us, and we are his:"

Why the difference? The NIV followed the qere. וְלֹא (velo), there is no aleph. (א) So instead of negation 'not ourselves.' it is 'to him.'

Another example is found in 1 Kings 19:4

וַיָּבֹא וַיֵּשֶׁב תַּחַת רֹתֵם (אָחַת)

vayavo' vayashev tahat rotem 'ahat. Ahat (אָחַת) is what is written in the text, the problem is that it has a femine ending, but masculine vowels, the q're tells us to read ahad [אָחַד] instead of ahah.

So in the above examples it is clear that the qere replaces the ketiv The two are not ever mixed. That was the purpose of the qere: it was used in order to *correct* what the k'tiv had in the actual text. This fact becomes important to this topic of the divine name and how the name "Jehovah" came to be.

The Development of Jehovah

According to the Watchtower:

When it came to God's name, instead of putting the proper vowel signs around it, in most cases they put other vowel signs to remind the reader that he should say 'Adho-nai'. From this came the spelling Iehouah, and, eventually, Jehovah became

the accepted pronunciation of the divine name in English. This retains the essential elements of God's name from the Hebrew original.⁷

Here the Watchtower makes the statement that the vowels that were added by the Masoretes were used as a reminder to say Adonai אֲדֹנָי and from this came the accepted pronunciation of Jehovah. But when looking at H.A.L.O.T, it says Jehovah is not acceptable. And says that it is an improper mix of the K'tiv/Q're. Tov gives more detail to how the ketiv/qere works in relation to the divine name.

The “constant Qere” (Qere Perpetuum) is not indicated explicitly with a Masoretic note, but in these cases the Ketib is vocalized with the vowels of the Qere. Thus Mk יהוה, YHWH is vocalized as יהוה on the basis of its Qere

אֲדֹנָי. Adonai (or, when appearing next to ADONAI, as Elohim on the basis of elohim).⁸

In other words, what is written [k'tiv] is YHWH יהוה, what was pronounced [q're] was Adonai. אֲדֹנָי The vowels from Adonai were there for pronunciation. This is what H.A.L.O.T is pointing too, the result being a hybrid mixing of Y-A-H-O-V-A-H, which leads to Jehovah.

One may wonder at this point why the “A” in “Yahovah” became an “E” in “Jehovah?”

Recall that Tov mentions that when the K'tiv/Q're of YHWH follows the word ADONAI, the vowels under the divine name changed. For example, in Judges 16:28 we see YHWH pointed with the vowels from ELOHIM אֲדֹנָי יְהוָה. Why? So that the reader would not say repeat “Adonai, Adonai.” To remind the reader to pronounce “God,” the vowels of Elohim were placed under YHWH so that the reader would say “Lord God.” But again, the vowels were only placed there for pronunciation, not to spell it. Actually, the vowels found in BHS under the divine name cannot be pronounced at all; they are strictly there to remind the reader to say Adonai: אֲדֹנָי.

The impossible form yehowah (Eng. “Jehovah”) came into being when Renaissance Christians either failed to recognize or chose to ignore the Masoretic convention. The Masoretes did not, however, supply the precise vowel points required for their pronunciation, which would have yielded the form yahowah; this form would have violated the very taboo they sought to observe if the first syllable had contained an a vowel.⁹

⁷ http://www.watchtower.org/library/na/index.htm?article=article_07.htm

⁸ Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 59.

⁹ Freedman O'Conner, יהוה, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 501.

Another explanation of how the ‘a’ became an ‘e’ lies the word adonai itself. It is evident that adonai begins with a guttural. (א) In Hebrew, gutturals generally don’t take the shewa (ְ) but rather the composite shewa (ֶ). If this is the case, then in keeping with the pointing of the guttural, the patah (אָ) that is under the alef (א) of adonai is left off and only the shewa is left. That would mean that when a reader came to the divine name and saw the shewa, that shewa was meant to signal the beginning of Adonai.

The error that was made was to transliterate the shewa as a short ‘e’ instead of realizing that it was meant to signal the pronunciation of adonai which has a composite patah.

The pronunciation Jehovah was unknown until 1520, when it was introduced by Galatinu; but it was contested by Le Mercier, J. Drusius, and L. Capellus as against grammatical and historical propriety.¹⁰

Other Defenses for the Name Jehovah

Many who advocate the name Jehovah have turned to the works of Gerard Gertoux, who argues that the vowel points were not that of Adonai but rather Shema, which is the Aramaic word for “the name.” He says the following...

The word Yahowah has never been used in any Bibles. The (fanciful) grammatical pattern which involves a change *a* to *e* has never existed. In actual fact, before 1100 CE, the Tetragram has been pointed with only the two vowels *e*, *a* of the Aramaic word *Shema* which means "The Name". The vowel *o* appeared, after 1100 CE, owing to the influence of the reading of the word Adonay.¹¹

However, it should be noted that there are places in the bible where the vowel letters of YHWH do not follow the vowels shema. The first of which, as mentioned above, is Judges 16:28. This verse alone is a proof that the vowels were only meant to pronounce the name, and never became part of its actual spelling. Another instance is found in Gen 9:26 יהוה, there is a holem (ֶ) that appears over the vav (it looks like a little dot, if you have a Hebrew Old Testament), which would signal the pronunciation adonai, not “ha-shem.” It is worth noting that not all manuscripts point the divine name the same way. Normally the BHS carries the two vowels ‘e’ and ‘a’, however other manuscripts such as the Jewish bible have the same rendering as is noted in Gen 9:26. It

¹⁰ Francis Brown, *The New Brown, Driver, Briggs, Genesis Hebrew & Aramaic English Lexicon*, (Indiana : Associated Publishers and Authors, Inc 1980), 218.

¹¹ Gerald Gertoux. *Did the name Jehovah come from a wrong reading which mixed together the consonants of the Tetragram with the vowels of the word Adonay*
<http://gertoux.online.fr/divinename/faq/A05.htm>

may have been that the masoretic accent named the reviv , which look just like the holam, was understood by the scribes instead.

Secondly, there are a number of words in Hebrew that have carried the exact same pattern as the Aramaic shema. So even though the sequence is the same, this does not mean “Yehovah” was the desired pronunciation of the divine name.

Gertoux further argues as follows:

.... Hebrew names were widely vocalized by the three letters Y, W, H as the manuscripts of Qumran widely confirm. The letter Y was read I (or E), the letter W: U (or O), and the letter H: A at the end of words. For example, YH was read IA, YHWDH was read IHUDA (Juda). If there was no vowel letter in a name the vowel a was often inserted; thus YSHQ was read: ISaHAQ (Isaac). Etc the name YHWH was therefore read IHUA (Ihoua). For the H, which was almost inaudible, to be better heard a mute e could be added, thus the name YHWDH read literally I-H-U-D-A then became I-eH-U-D-A, the exact equivalent of the Hebrew name Yehuda. This slight improvement gives the name YHWH the pronunciation I-eH-U-A (Iehoua), the equivalent of YeHoWah in Masoretic pronunciation. This coincidence is remarkable; even providential for those who believe that God watched over his Name (obviously without the copyists knowing !)¹²

There are several problems with this argument. First, what Gertoux suggests that YHWH can be compared to vowels. But, there is no evidence of a beginning yod (י) was ever used as a vowel. When one looks at Hebrew names that begin with yod, it is evident that these are consonants. Such as the name Isaac, in Hebrew would be Yitzhak. יִצְחָק. In English the “i” in Isaac comes from the hireq, יְ (the little dot under the yod) not from the yod. The yod is acting as a consonant. And this goes for any word that begins with a yod, not just names: Yirusalem, Yuhuda, etc.

Second, one has a hard time trying to jump from IeHUA to YeHoWah, because, according to Gertoux, the vav (ו) is either the ‘o’ or the ‘u’ in YeHoWah. The problem is that in YeHoWah the vav is acting as both the ‘o’ and the ‘vav’. In order for there to be an oW there has to be a holam followed by a vav, which would look something like וְה. The dot figure on top of the “H” would be the ‘o’ and the vav would be the ‘W’. The vav by itself does not do double duty.

Third, it seems that the beginning syllable of YHWH is more like a Yah, than a Yeh. Some have noted that in Hebrew, names when the divine name is compounded with them; the prefixes are always Ye. For example, the name Joshua in Hebrew reads yeshoshua’ (יְהוֹשֻׁעַ). Here, the divine name is a prefix meaning “YHWH saves.”

¹² Gerald Gertoux. *The Name of God YeHoWaH which is pronounced as written IehoUAh*
<http://gertoux.online.fr/divinename/index.htm>.

On the other hand, Hebrew names that carry the divine name in the *suffix* are always Yah, such as in Jeremiah (יְרֵמְיָהוּ). This name in the Hebrew is Yirmeyahu. Nethaniah נְתַנְיָהוּ in Hebrew is Netaneyah. Thus, the use of the divine name as a prefix or suffix cannot prove one way or the other how the first syllable was pronounced.

However, there *is* compelling evidence from the Bible itself that the first syllable was pronounced Yah. The Hebrew bible contains a shortened version of the Name, and that shortened version is YAH יָהּ. For instance Psalm 77:12 seem to actually say the first half of the divine name.

Ps 77:12

אֶזְכֹּר מַעֲלָלֵי־יָהּ

as:ccor ma' lley –yah. I will remember the deeds of Yah.

Here, it is clear that Yah is a name, and it is referring to the Lord.

Psalm 115:17

לֹא הַמֵּתִים יְהַלְלוּ־יָהּ

Lo' hammetiym y'hallu – yah. The dead do not praise Yah.

The next verse reads.

Psalm 115:18

וַאֲנַחְנוּ נִבְרַךְ יָהּ

Va'anahnu n'brek yah. But we will praise Yah.

Psalm 150:6

כָּל הַנְּשָׁמָה תְהַלֵּל יָהּ הַלְלוּ־יָהּ:

kol hann:shama t:hallel yah hallu yah. Let everything that has breath praise the YAH

Isaiah 38:11

אָמַרְתִּי לֹא־אֶרְאֶה יָהּ בְּאֶרֶץ הַחַיִּים

'amar:tiy lo' 'er:eh Yah, Yah b:eretz hahyyim. I say, I have not seen Yah, for Yah in the land of the living.

Exodus 17:16

וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי־יָדָהּ עַל־כַּסֵּי יָהּ

va'omer kiy-yad `al kes yah. And he said for the hand went up the seat of Yah.

Conclusion

Jehovah is has been popular for quite some time, and it is not the goal of this paper to make people stop saying it, However, it is good to know the background of things often taken for granted, or worse, actually taught by some. The Watchtower places an extreme emphasis on the divine name and in making sure believers pronounce it in their prayers and praises. However, as the above has illustrated, “Jehovah” is not a proper English translation the original name of YHWH.

Notes

¹ God's Name it's Meaning and Pronunciation

:http://www.watchtower.org/library/na/index.htm?article=diagram_02.htm 2004.

²Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament, Study Edition*. trans. M.E.J. Richardson, vol 1. (Leiden:Brill. 2001), 394 – 395.

³. Freedman O'Conner יהוה in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed G.Johannes Botterweck & Helmer Ringgren, trans. David Green. Vol 5.(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980),500.

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⁵ Bonnie Pedrotti Kittel & Vicki Hoffer & Rebecca Abts Wright, *Biblical Hebrew, A Text and Workbook*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 366.

⁶.Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible, 2nd revised edition*. (Minneapolis, Fortress Press), 59.

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⁸. Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 59.

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¹⁰. Francis Brown, *The New Brown, Driver, Briggs, Genesis Hebrew & Aramaic English Lexicon*, (Indiana: Associated Publishers and Authors, Inc 1980), 218.

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