

GOD'S BIBLICAL NAME "YAHWEH" AND WHAT IT MEANS

Timothy Lin, Ph.D.

Titles and names in the Scriptures are meaningful, and knowing them is often the first step to knowing the individual. Through his name, we know that Esau, the older son of Isaac was physically hairy (Gen. 25:25). Jacob, who took the heel of his brother at his birth, was a supplanter (25:26). Samuel means "heard of El," and was God's answer to his mother's prayer (1 Sam. 1:20). These names, though given at birth or on the eighth day after birth, often proved to be true epithets of the characteristics of the persons named. Esau, as a man of the field, was interested in hunting. Jacob led a casuistic life, that is, one based on the philosophy that the end justifies the means, until his total commitment to God at Bethel. Samuel was the man of God all his life, and God always answered his prayers. Nabal (fool), the husband of Abigail who later became David's wife, lived and died a fool (1 Sam. 25:25). John, which is the combination of "Yahweh" and "grace," was surely the last grace of God to Israel. Jesus, that is a combination of "Yahweh" and "causing to be free," came not only to forgive our sins but also to deliver us out of our sin-bondage. He says, "If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed" (John 8:36). Thus a name in Scripture often portrays the person. In light of this, let us now consider the true name of God.

God's name is first mentioned in Genesis 2:4, "in the day that the LORD [Yahweh] God [Elohim] made the earth and the heavens." Here Elohim revealed Himself to be Yahweh. This divine name is translated as "the LORD" throughout the Authorized Version (except Gen. 22:14; Ex. 6:3; 17:15; Judg. 6:24; Ps. 83:18; Is. 12:2; 26:4), and as "Jehovah" throughout the Revised Version. Both of them are improper translations, and their history is an interesting story.

God revealed His name to Moses written with four Hebrew consonants (YHWH, called the Tetragrammaton). Gradually this divine name became regarded as too sacred to be uttered, lest the speaker take the name of God in vain (Ex. 20:7). Thus after the Exile (6th century BC) the four letters which probably were originally pronounced as Yahweh were replaced vocally in the synagogue worship by the Hebrew word Adonai ("the Lord"). The first Hebrew text was composed solely of consonants without vowels, with the pronunciation of the words being passed on from generation to generation orally, as the Chinese people do even today. From about the 6th to the 10th century AD, the Masoretes (Jewish scholars who worked to reproduce and preserve the original text of the Hebrew Bible) adopted a set of gradually developed vowel signs to vocalize each word in the biblical text. Since the real pronunciation of God's name YHWH had been lost because the Jews refrained from vocalizing it out of respect for its sacred nature, the Masoretes followed oral tradition and wrote YHWH with the vowel signs for Adonai. Thus, in the text the original YHWH became YeHoWaH, to indicate that this name should be read as Adonai, as it is still read today by all orthodox Jews. The translators of the Authorized Version usually adopted the traditional reading and translated it "the LORD"; while the Revised Version improperly adopted the artificial name Jehovah. Thus it is plain that the vowels from Adonai combined with the consonants YHWH came from

tradition and have nothing to do with the original and actual pronunciation of God's name.

Not only should God's name be pronounced accurately but also it is important to know its precise pronunciation because His very nature is revealed in this name. God is too great and wonderful for any man to name Him. People might single out any one of His characteristics, attributes, or manifestations, and name Him as such; but only God knew what name would reveal Himself best. The pronunciation and meaning of this name may be ascertained from Exodus chapter three. When God called Moses to deliver the Israelites from Egypt, Moses asked God saying, "They shall say to me, What is His name? what shall I say unto them? And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and He said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you" (Ex. 3:13-14). Here, God named Himself "I AM," which is of course in the first person, since God Himself was speaking. "I AM" is *ehyeh* in Hebrew. Its third person, singular, masculine is *yihyeh*, of which the North Palestinian form of *hawah*, which was an archaic form of *hayah* (to be), could be YAHWEH, which means "HE IS." Hence, the preferred meaning of Yahweh is simply "HE IS." The difference between "I AM" and "HE IS" is that the former is viewed from God's own standpoint and the latter from man's standpoint. (Actually, God's proper name is Yahweh, and other so-called names are really titles [Ex. 3:15]. Common usage, however, has applied the term "name" both to God's name and to His titles. As a general rule, I will follow that common practice.)

"HE IS" has been interpreted in quite a few ways. Some interpret it as "The One Who Exists," but the idea of God's existence was never a question among the Hebrews. All of them believed in God, although some of them might have believed in numerous gods. Furthermore, such an idea would be ineffective for Moses to use in approaching the Israelites who were in deep affliction. Others take it as the causative form (hiphil stem) and paraphrase it as "The one who caused all things or brought all things into existence." This idea would not have impressed the Israelites, for what comfort and encouragement would it be to show an enslaved people that God was the first cause of the universe? Besides, this idea would limit God's greatness. He is much more than just the first cause. What then does "HE IS" mean? "HE IS" simply means "He is . . ." God did not name Himself "Power," "Wisdom," or any other noun, since one noun would exclude the other. He named Himself "HE IS . . .," an unlimited and unsearchable name bearing all the necessities of His people. If they needed redemption, "HE IS Redemption"; if peace, "HE IS the Prince of Peace"; if help, "HE IS the Counselor." If they were sick, "HE IS the Healer"; if poor, "HE IS the Supporter"; if in trouble, "HE IS the Deliverer."

The children of Israel were enslaved by a powerful nation, laboring under the whips of their taskmasters. They were forced to cast their babies into the Nile, and their lives were miserable and desperate. They cried for deliverance, but where could they look for deliverance? They had no weapons. They were not trained for war. Even if there had been a nation that could invade and overcome Egypt, there would have been very little probability for such a nation to set those valuable slaves free. The Israelites had probably pondered the possibility of deliverance hundreds or even thousands of times until the faintest ray of hope was extinguished. Now, Moses came and proclaimed that he had been sent by "HE IS;" that was exactly what they needed to hear. They needed a name by

which all their problems would be solved and all their questions would be answered. And here it was. If they would say, “We are too weak,” the answer of this name would be HE IS your strength; “We are too poor,” HE IS your wealth; “We are too ignorant,” HE IS your wisdom; “We are not trained for war,” HE IS God Almighty. What name could be more comforting and encouraging to those faint-hearted people? No wonder when they heard “HE IS” had visited them, “they bowed their heads and worshipped” (Ex. 4:31).

No other words in the entire vocabulary of language could be better used by God to name Himself than “I AM” or “HE IS.” It is a heavenly blank check. No matter how much one needs, God has reserved more than enough in His eternal bank. David knew well the significance of this name, for he said, “HE IS [O LORD] my strength, HE IS [the LORD] my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower” (Ps. 18:1-2). Indeed, HE IS the Conferrer of all our benefits! Needs of individuals and nations may vary, but whatever the need, the age, or the circumstances may be, HE IS all that is needed and is always available to meet the need. As it is written, “Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” The titles of God may reveal certain aspects of Him, but HE IS is applicable to all circumstances and all times, as God says, “This is my name for ever, and this is my memorial unto all generations” (Ex. 3:15). May all those who come to Him “believe that HE IS, and that HE IS a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him” (Heb. 11:6, emphasis added). Thus when God said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites that ‘I AM WHO I AM’ has sent you,” He was telling us “that I AM all that you need Me to be as the occasion arises, that is who I AM.”

Taken by permission from *Genesis: A Biblical Theology*, 36-39. © 1997 Biblical Studies Ministries International, Inc. All rights reserved.

For permission to copy, see our Reprint Policy at www.bsmi.org. Direct your questions or comments to us at bsmi.org.