The Name
by Kevin Geoffrey

“And it will come about that whoever calls
on the name of יהוה will be delivered...” JOEL 2:32, NAS

As the interest in restoring the Jewish roots of our faith persists in gaining momentum, much fervor and zeal continues to characterize the study of even the most minute details of Scripture. One such area of popular interest—and by no means a small detail—is the use and pronunciation of what is commonly referred to as “The Sacred Name.” Many are more than satisfied to refer to the Name verbally as HaShem or ADONAI, or in writing as LORD (L-rd), YHVH, or יהוה without attempts to transliterate or encourage its utterance. Others, however, advocate—often militantly so—for the requirement of its pronunciation. This article is primarily intended to give a perspective on such practice.

What Is the “Sacred Name”?

“The Sacred Name” is a term used to refer to the widely accepted “personal name” of God: יהוה or YHVH. It is the most prolific name for God, found in Scripture over 6800 times.

In no less than three places, the Torah warns us how to regard the name of יהוה. In Exodus 20:7 (and its parallel passage in Deuteronomy 5:11), the “third commandment” is often rendered as follows:

“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)

The JPS Tanakh renders the same verse:

“You shall not swear falsely by the name of the LORD your God; for the LORD will not clear one who swears falsely by His name.”

The word “in vain” or “falsely” translates the Hebrew שָׁו, shav which means emptiness, nothingness, vanity. Thus, the person guilty of rendering the Name null and void is to receive punishment. Leviticus 24:15-16 helps to clarify this command.

“You shall speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘Anyone who blasphemes his God shall bear his guilt; if he also pronounces the name LORD, he shall be put to death. The whole community shall stone him; stranger or citizen, if he has thus pronounced the Name, he shall be put to death.’” (NAS)

The word “blaspheme” is the Hebrew זֵכַר, nakan which means to pierce or bore. In tandem with the instructions given in verse 15 about “if anyone curses his God,” the idea of blaspheming the Name seems to be something akin to doing violence to it—essentially abusing it, such that it is rendered ineffective or useless.

Given the seriousness of mishandling the Name and the penalty of death associated with it, this eventually gave rise to a practice within the Judaisms to greatly limit its use—the practice of avoiding the literal speaking of the Name. This is reflected in the JPS translation of the above passage:

“And to the Israelite people speak thus: ‘Anyone who blasphemes his God shall bear his guilt; if he also pronounces the name LORD, he shall be put to death. The whole community shall stone him; stranger or citizen, if he has thus pronounced the Name, he shall be put to death.’” (emphases mine)

Historical Avoidance of Pronouncing the Name

The Encyclopaedia Judaica concisely tells us,

At least until the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E. this name was regularly pronounced with its proper vowels, as is clear from the Lachish Letters, written shortly before that date. But at least by the third century B.C.E. the pronunciation of the name YHWH was avoided, and Adonai, “the Lord,” was substituted for it, as evidenced by the use of the Greek word Κύριος, “Lord,” for YHWH in the Septuagint...
During the Middle Ages, Jewish Scribes—the Masoretes—embedded this avoidance of pronouncing the Name into the development of the Hebrew vowel-pointing system. This system of dots and lines in and around the Hebrew letters was designed to preserve the ability to speak the Hebrew language by indicating vowel sounds, much the same way that the phonetic spelling of words in our modern dictionaries accurately depict how English words are to be pronounced. However, when it came to the Sacred Name, the Masoretes deliberately “pointed” הוהי as הוהי using the vowel points for אדונai. While not actually changing the Hebrew word itself, this device was employed to remind any reader to speak the name “Adonai” in place of הוהי in keeping with the tradition.

But does the avoidance and disuse of the Name mean that its pronunciation is lost to antiquity? One contributing author in the Encyclopaedia Judaica says no.

The true pronunciation of the name YHWH was never lost. Several early Greek writers of the Christian Church testify that the name was pronounced “Yahweh.”

On the other hand, many authorities assert that the pronunciation is indeed gone. One representative position is:

After the destruction of the Second Temple there remained no trace of knowledge as to the pronunciation of the Name...

The pronunciation of forms of הוהי were preserved for us in the Masoretic text. For instance, יה, Yah occurs 49 times in the Tanakh, indicating a likely pronunciation of the first two letters of הוהי. Also, there are a plethora of proper names containing a form of the Name, as in the last three letters of יושב, Y’sha’yahu (Isaiah), giving a possible pronunciation (“yahu”) for all but the fourth letter of the Name. The same three letters also occur in sequence, but with different vowel pointing, at the beginning of יהושע, Y’hoshua (Joshua), yielding the pronunciation “y’ho” or “yeho.”

So, while “Yahweh” remains the scholarly transliteration (and apparent pronunciation) of choice, there is no way to know for sure, as there is a great lack of verifiable data.

Is Speaking the Name a Biblical Command?

The hot debate over the exact (or approximate) pronunciation of the Name is centered on the idea that Scripture commands us to speak (or do our best to speak) the Name. Such an understanding comes from passages that refer to “calling upon” or “proclaiming” the Name of הוהי.

In reality, however, the idea of calling upon the Name, proclaiming the Name, or praising and blessing the Name does not translate into an explicit command to pronounce the Name—that is, to speak it audibly. Rather, it has to do with making known the person and works of ADONAI; proclaiming His character and His fame; promoting His great reputation. We see this in Deuteronomy 32:3, “For I proclaim the name of הוהי; Ascribe greatness to our God!” where proclaiming the Name is parallel to ascribing greatness to God. Proclaiming or calling upon the Name of ADONAI means to rely upon or declare His attributes.

While many champions for audibly pronouncing the Name will concede to this understanding, the prevailing perception is that it fails to address the rudimentary concept of the purpose and use of having a name at all. Hence, it seems incomplete to say that proclaiming or calling upon the name does not contain the element of pronunciation. Indeed, as the thinking goes, there are a multitude of Torah commands that we do not know exactly how to do—why should saying the Name be any different? Shouldn’t we simply do the best we can to speak the Name of הוהי? Yet, as important as the Sacred Name is to God’s redeemed, it was apparently not so vitally important in the lives of some key Biblical characters that the pronunciation of the Name overshadowed the importance of the relationship between the Creator and the created.

For instance, in one of the most dramatic passages of Scripture, ADONAI says to Moses,

“I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name הוהי...” [Then] הוהי came down in a cloud; He stood with [Moses] there, and proclaimed the name הוהי. הוהי passed before him and proclaimed: “יהוה! יהוה! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet He does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children’s children, upon the third and fourth generations.” Moses hastened to bow low to the ground in homage... (Exodus 33:19, 34:5—8) JPS
ADONAI audibly spoke His Name ידוע no less than three times while Moses stood in His presence. Moses then immediately responded to the proclamation of the Name of ידוע with worship in reverent fear. When Moses next spoke to ADONAI in one of the most profound, intimate moments of His life, He would surely have been within the spirit of the moment to address the Creator according to His Name, now so clearly spoken in Moses’ ears. Yet, in the very next verse, Moses speaks to the Creator and says,

> “If now I have found favor in your sight, אדונai (Adonai), I pray, let אדונai (Adonai) go along in our midst...”
>

Exodus 34:9

In the presence of the Creator, having audibly heard the Creator Himself pronounce His Name mere seconds before, Moses responds not by calling Him ה' ou ה', but אדונai. 9

Consider also the Master Yeshua’s practice of not speaking the Name and instead using substitutions, also known as “circumlocutions.” For example, 29 times in Matthew, Yeshua is reported as using the circumlocution “Heaven,” as we see in Matthew 4:17, “From that time Yeshua began to preach and say, ‘Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.’”

Perhaps more importantly, when Yeshua would directly address ADONAI in prayer, He would speak the name, “Father,” and even the most intimate term of all, “Abba.” Yeshua teaches His disciples to pray by addressing the Creator, “…Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,” 10 and in His hour of desperate need, the Son calls out to His “Abba! Father! All things are possible for you; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will.” 11

Given the examples of Moses and Yeshua alone, we can state with confidence that neither salvation, nor relationship, nor the ability to fulfill ADONAI’s commands are in any way jeopardized by not pronouncing ידוע. On the contrary, Yeshua may very well have taught us the fullness of revelation in approaching ADONAI by calling Him “Father.”

Is ישוע Really His Personal Name?

The debate on this topic is over the importance of ישוע over any other “name” of God found in the Scriptures. But is ישוע really His personal name—in other words, His only name? What do we do with passages like Exodus 34:14, which says, “you shall not worship any other god, for ישוע, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God...”?

Yeshua Himself alludes to perhaps the most famous passage regarding the Name when he teaches about His own divine, eternal nature and His oneness with ADONAI.

> Yeshua said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, אני (I AM).” (John 8:58)
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This is the exact Greek phrase that the Septuagint (LXX) uses to translate ישוע, eh’yeh in Exodus 3.

Then Moses said to אדונאי (elohiyim, God), “Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, ‘The אלוהים (elohiyim, God) of your fathers has sent me to you.’ Now they may say to me, ‘What is His name?’ What shall I say to them?” אדונאי (elohiyim, God) said to Moses, “אלהי אבraham (eh’yeh ‘asher eh’yeh, I AM WHO I AM)”; and He said, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘噎הה (eh’yeh, I AM) has sent me to you.’” אדונאי (elohim, God), furthermore, said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘יהוה (YHVH), the אלהים (elohiyim, God) of your fathers, the אלהים (elohiyim, God) of Abraham, the אלהים (elohiyim, God) of Isaac, and the אלהים (elohiyim, God) of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is My name_enum, forever, and this is My רן (zeker, memorial-name) to all generations. (Exodus 3:1-15, NAS)

In response to Moses’ question, “What is His name?” ADONAI replies, “אלהי אבraham אדונאי (eh’yeh ‘asher eh’yeh, I AM WHO I AM).” The narrative breaks, and then ADONAI goes on to add “יהוה (YHVH), the God of your fathers,” etc. Verse fifteen, however, is curious. ADONAI says “This is My name forever, and this is My רן (zeker, memorial-name) to all generations,” yet in the previous verses, He only refers to ידוע (eh’yeh ‘asher eh’yeh) as His Name. In this passage, He does not say that ישוע is His Name.

I would like to submit that there is a parallelism here. His “name forever” may very well be referring to ישוע (eh’yeh ‘asher eh’yeh), which speaks of His self-existence or self-sufficiency, 12 while His רן (zeker)—the
way we are to remember Him and know His character—is wrapped up in covenant relationship, that is, as יהוה, the covenant-making God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

This is not a purely original way of understanding this passage. The Jewish Encyclopedia states,

The oldest exegetes, such as Onkelos and the Targumim of Jerusalem and pseudo-Jonathan regard "Ehyeh" and "Ehyeh asher Ehyeh" as the name of the Divinity...13

But even if “this is My name” is not referring to יהוה, ehyeh, this passage would indicate that ADONAI’s name is not simply limited to יהוה, but שד״א, אֲדֹנָי, and爱情. The point is this: while יהוה is the name most frequently used in the Scriptures for the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we cannot state unequivocally and categorically that it, and it alone, is the Name of God.

He is יהוה, (Yah), הָיָה (YHVH), אדונai (Adonai) our אֱלֹהִים (elohiyym, God); He is אֱלֹהִי (elveh shaddai, God Almighty). He is אב (av, Father). He is beyond labeling, and beyond containing, yet through His Son, ישוע, Yeshua, we know Him and call Him אבב (abba, Daddy). What else is left to say, but ברוך השם—bless the Name!

1 Whittaker’s Revised BDB Lexicon, p. 996. For comparison, the NIV renders the word, “misuse.”
2 Ibid. p. 666
4 As a result, English translators of the Masoretic texts who were ignorant of this Jewish tradition thus rendered the name, Jehovah—a hybrid of the letters in the Name and the vowel pointings of Adonai, in addition to pronouncing “Y” as “J”. Today, some of our English translations simply use the word LORD in capital letters to distinguish it from יהוה, Adonai, also often rendered “Lord” in English.
7 Some have suggested that this was a deliberate mispointing of Joshua on the part of the Masoretes to further obscure the pronunciation of the Name. This conjecture, however, does not make sense, since the Masoretic pointing of יהוה or any name ending in יהוה is not in dispute, thus raising the question, why would the Masoretes allegedly alter a version of the Name in one place and not in another? Such a practice would call into question the credibility of the entire vowel-pointing system.
8 Often accompanying the debate over the pronunciation of the Name is the pronunciation of Yeshua’s name. The name ישוע, Yeshua, a contraction of the name ישוע בן יוחנן, Y’hoshua (Joshua), preceded the Messiah’s birth by hundreds of years and appears in passages from 1&2Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, translated as “Jeshua,” i.e. Ezra 5:2. According to Matthew 1:21, He was named “Yeshua” because he himself would save his people from their sins. (Contrast with Y’hoshua, meaning “Yah saves.”) “Yeshua” is also the masculine form of the Hebrew word for “salvation” (ישועה, y’shuah), which we see in such passages as Psalms 118:14: “The LORD (יהוה, Yah) is my strength and song, And He has become my salvation (ישועה, y’shuah).” The idea is that Yeshua’s name must contain the Father’s name, making His name “Yahshua” or some other variant, comes from a distortion of John 5:43 where Yeshua says, “I am come in My Father’s name” (cf. 10:25). If we take Yeshua’s statement to mean that His own name must contain the Father’s name, then following this same logic, we ourselves cannot do anything ‘in the Father’s name’ unless our own personal name contains the syllable ‘Yah.’ Coming in the Father’s name means simply to come in the Father’s power and authority, which Yeshua clearly did (see Matthew 28:18).
9 Some may object to this explanation of Exodus 34:9 based on a belief that the Masoretes deliberately altered the Hebrew text in 134 different places—Exodus 34:9 being one of them—citing The Companion Bible, Appendix 32, Kregel Publications. However, the writers of The Companion Bible and others have misunderstood the Masoretic notes on this subject. While there are about 17 or 18 “corrections of the scribes” (listed in Mechilta on Exodus 15:7 and Midrash Tanchuma on Exodus 15:7), the 134 entries in question are the times listed by the Masoretes when the word יהוה, Adonai is considered to be equivalent to יהוה according to their tradition—not deliberately changed and substituted for it.
10 Matthew 6:9 (NAS)
11 Mark 14:36 (NAS)