

THE NAMES OF GOD

Out of reverence for the holiness of the divine name—*Yahweh*—the ancient Jewish people did not pronounce it; they only wrote it as the *Tetragrammaton* as it is commonly called. This very ancient tradition extends even to this day among modern Jews. *Tetragrammaton* is a compound word that comes from the Greek words “tetra” and “gramma” which mean “four” and “letter.” The name of God is referred to as the *Tetragrammaton* because the name itself, as revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14, in its written form, consists of *four letters*—Y-H-W-H. Ancient Hebrew did not have vowels.

Since the divine name was not pronounced, but only written, and the vowels between the four consonants were never written at all, the ancient Jewish people would eventually lose the original pronunciation of God’s name. Indeed, it would become simply impossible to know the original pronunciation of YHWH. But this was not considered to be a problem among the Jewish people. This only accentuated in the minds of the God’s people the absolute holiness and mystery of God and God’s holy name. The Hebrew word *Adonai* (“my Lord”) was often used in place of the *Tetragrammaton* and later, the Greek word *Kurios* (“Lord”). It would not be until ca. the 13th century AD that the debate over how to pronounce the *Tetragrammaton* would become a controversy and, indeed, it has continued as such even to modern times. Common pronunciations of God’s name, such as *Yaweh*, or *Jehovah*, came from taking vowels from other names for God, such as *Elohim* or *Adonai*, and filling in the holes, so to speak. The modern consensus among scholars is that *Yahweh* is the closest to the original pronunciation.

Jehovah’s Witnesses will often make the claim that one definitive sign among others that proves they are the true people of God is the fact that *they alone* use the divine name as it is revealed in Scripture. They claim that name to be *Jehovah*. Jewish scholars object to this notion saying 1. We really do not know the original pronunciation of the *Tetragrammaton* and 2. *Jehovah* can certainly be eliminated as a candidate for the original pronunciation because, for one, the “J” sound at the beginning of the word comes from a *German* translation of God’s name over *two thousand years after* God revealed his name to Moses. It would be anachronistic to attempt to claim this was the original pronunciation. The JW will often respond by claiming it is unjust *not* to use the personal name of God just because we don’t know the exact ancient pronunciation of it. They often ask the question, “If we don’t know the exact pronunciation of God’s name, would it not follow that we wouldn’t know the pronunciation of Jesus—was it Yeshua or Yehoshua, etc.—Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.? Should we stop using their names also, as we do not know the exact pronunciation of their names either? Moreover, the name of God as it is revealed to Moses—*Jehovah*—is used *well over 7,000 times in the Bible!* It is simply wrong for us to refuse to use it! If it is good enough for Scripture, it is good enough for me!”

THE JEWISH ANSWER

The truth is as we said before: the Jewish people simply do not know how to pronounce God’s name revealed in Exodus 3:14. And, it is out of their great reverence for God that

they do not want to even pronounce, much less *mispronounce*, the divine name. Many scholars believe it was during or shortly after the Babylonian captivity of the sixth century BC that the Jews adopted the strict prohibition against pronouncing the divine name. It was during their captivity that the Jews lost the use of Hebrew adopting the Aramaic of their Chaldean captors. In Leviticus 24:16, the Hebrew Old Testament says, "Whoever blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be put to death." In Aramaic—a cognate or sister language of Hebrew—the word for "blaspheme" in Hebrew meant "to pronounce." Thus, this verse came to be understood to mean, "Anyone who *pronounces* the name of the Lord (YHWH) shall be put to death." Thus, as I said above, in Hebrew, *Adonai* came to be used for God's name, while in Greek, *kurios*.

As Christians we ought to respect this history. After all, especially when we are speaking of the ancient Jews, these were God's people and "unto them were committed the oracles of God" as Romans 3:2 says. Thus, Christians are compelled by our own *New Covenant* to respect the authority given to the Jewish people by God before the advent of Christ. However, we also must acknowledge that the Jews rejected their Messiah, Yeshua. It was the Jewish Messiah himself who gave the authority the Jewish people once possessed to the Church according to the revelation we have been given in the New Testament (cf. Matt. 21:43-45, Luke 22:29-32, Matt. 16:18-19, 18:15-18, etc.).

THE CATHOLIC ANSWER

So the question is: where are we today with regard to the pronunciation of and the nature of God's name? In the New Covenant Church, we are not limited to an Old Covenant understanding of God's name. While we respect what has gone before us, we have a New Covenant where God has revealed himself to mankind in a new and profound way and in the process he has revealed to us *a new name* for God. This new name does not abrogate any of the other names of God, but it does mark the revelation of God to humanity in a way beyond man's natural ability to comprehend. In what is commonly known as Christ's great high priestly prayer, on the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus prayed, in John 17:1-26:

"*Father*, the hour has come; glorify thy Son that the Son may glorify thee, (2) since thou hast given him power over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom thou hast given him. (3) And this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent... (5) and now, *Father*, glorify thou me in thy own presence with the glory which I had with thee before the world was made. (6) I have *manifested thy name* to the men whom thou gavest me out of the world; thine they were, and thou gavest them to me, and they have kept thy word... (11) And now I am no more in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to thee. *Holy Father*, keep them in thy name, which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. (12) While I was with them, *I kept them in thy name*, which thou hast given me... (26) *I made known to them thy name, and I will make it known*, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them."

In this text and others in the New Testament we have revealed a deeper penetration into the Divine Nature about which the Jews could have never dreamed. God's *name* is revealed to us as "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" through Jesus Christ in Matthew 28:19:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...

Even though "Father," "Son" and "Holy Spirit" are each *names* (see CCC 691, 2779, 2812), we do not baptize in the "names..." but "in the *name* of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" indicating that there is only one God—*one name*—yet three distinct persons—*three names*. Most important for our point here: Jesus gave us the "Our Father" and revealed the name of God as "Father" many times and in many ways (cf. Mark 14:36). In John's Gospel, in particular, as cited above, John 17:6 makes clear that Christ "manifested" or "revealed" the Father's name as *Father*. This means Jesus revealed God's name as it had not been known before. It was in and through Jesus that we came to see God, the Father, not simply to be *like a father* by analogy. God was already understood as such in the Old Testament (see Deut. 32:6; Mal. 2:10; Ex. 4:22, etc.). But his *name* is Father. *Names*, in Hebrew culture reveal something of the character of the one named. Here, God was revealed to be *the Eternal Father* within the divine relations subsisting within the divine essence. As such, Jesus revealed himself to be the *Eternal Son* as well (see. John 5:17-18, Col. 1:15-16, etc.). Jesus is *the only begotten Son* revealing that he has the same nature as his Father (cf. John 3:16; 5:17-18).

The Holy Spirit was revealed to be a person as well who is almighty God, completing the three persons of the Blessed Trinity (cf. John 14:26, 16:13, I Cor. 2:10-11, Hebrews 10:15, etc.). Thus, God's name is revealed to us in a deeper and more profound way. That is why we call him "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" as Jesus says. And this is why we can call God by his new Covenant name specifically revealed by Jesus Christ in John 17—*Father*.

While we understand the Jewish insistence on not pronouncing the Divine name, and we certainly respect the reasons given for this that truly express most profoundly the deep devotion to God the Jews possess in their tradition, we believe we can pronounce God's name and we do every time we call God by his new Covenant name as revealed by Jesus himself—*Father*.

But now to get back to the specific point of the name of *Yahweh*: The question is asked: "Why don't we use the name as it is revealed in Exodus 3:14? We don't know the names of Jeremiah and Isaiah and Jesus either, do we?"

For the Jews, Isaiah, and Jeremiah were great prophets. But they were not God. So there would be immeasurably less respect given to them. If you mispronounced their names it would not be considered a sacrilege as in the case of almighty God. And as far as Jesus' name is concerned, the Jews do not accept Jesus as the Son of God, so the point is moot.

For Christians, again, we do not have a prohibition against pronouncing the name of God. YHWH is one of the names of God, so we can and do use it. And when it comes to the name of Christ, I would add here that we do have the Greek that is revealed to us by God when it comes to the name of Christ the Lord. We call him “Jesus,” which comes directly from the inspired Greek text of the New Testament. We Christians do not have any problem with using Jesus’ Hebrew name, “Yeshua,” either, but the entire world knows him from his Greek name revealed in the New Testament which is *Yesous*, or in English “Jesus.”

GOD’S NEW NAME IS NOT NEW!

In response to the idea that it would be wrong not to use the name of God that is used “over 7,000 times in the Bible,” we Catholics would point out that the Jehovah’s Witnesses exaggerate the actual number of times YHWH is used. This stems from the “New World Translation” of Scripture used by JW’s. It often translates words like “Adonai,” in the Old Testament, and “kurios,” in the New Testament as *Jehovah*. This is not the best translation and sometimes fails to distinguish nuances that are being revealed to us about God in the process. However, we do agree that YHWH is used over 6,000 times in the Old Testament. That is not surprising because that is one of God’s names. Indeed, it is the central and most important of God’s names revealed in the Old Testament. So obviously, there is nothing wrong with using it. However, in the New Covenant, we rarely see YHWH used. In fact, strictly speaking, it is *never* used because it is Hebrew and the New Testament is written in Greek. However, we can say its Greek form was used by Jesus Christ. But he only used it with reference to *himself*. In Greek, the Hebrew YHWH (which means “I am”) is “ego eimi.” The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, which is quoted about 250 out of the 300 times the Old Testament is quoted in the New, reveals God’s name as “Ego Eimi” in Exodus 3:14. It is very significant that Jesus used this very name for himself in John 8:24, 28, 58 and 18:6. Not only did Jesus reveal his divinity, or the fact that he *is* YHWH manifested in the flesh, but the Jews listening seemed to know this was what he was saying! In John 8:59, for example, the Jews picked up stones to kill Jesus for blasphemy! This is a very interesting fact to point out to JW’s who deny the divinity of Christ!

Moreover, we should point out again that the New Covenant uses a new name for God never heard before in ancient Israel. And this revelation is just as profound for Christians as the *Tetragrammaton* was and is for Jews! As we said before, the name of *Father* is used for God, as the CCC 240 says—“in an unheard-of sense.” Analogous to the way the name YHWH—*I AM*—revealed to us much about the nature of God, i.e., he is absolutely simple, pure being, one omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient. He simply is. The name of *Father* revealed a mystery about God’s inner life that was hidden from the foundation of the world! In and through Jesus Christ and the revelation of God as *Father*, we learn that God is *Father* in the eternal relations of the godhead. And concurrently, Jesus reveals himself to be the *Eternal Son* in relation to his *Eternal Father*. Hence, he possesses the same divine nature as does his Father. He is God!

NAME OR NAMES OF GOD?

Among Jehovah's witnesses, there is a common misconception that Exodus 3:14 reveals God's name in a sense that precludes the possibility of God having other names. But the truth is: God has revealed himself to us with other names besides *YHWH* or even *Father*. And we see this in both the Old and the New Covenants. For example, God is revealed as Adonai (Lord, Is. 3:14, 10:24), as El Shaddai (Almighty God, Exodus 6:3, Ezekiel 10:5, Numbers 24:16), El (Divinity Gen. 33:20) and with multiple variations of *YAHWEH* such as *YAHWEH-RAPHA* ("God your healer," Exodus 15:26), and *YAHWEH-TSEDEK* ("God is our righteousness", Jeremiah 23:6). Further, he reveals himself as El-Elyon (God most high, Gen. 14:22, Deut. 32:8-9), El-Olam (Gen. 21:33, Psalm 75:10, "Everlasting God"), Abir ("Mighty One," Gen. 49:24, Is. 49:26; Ps 132:2,5), Pahad ("Fearful One," Gen. 31:42, 53; I Samuel 11:7), and Elohim ("God" in a plural of majesty, Job 1:6, 2:1, 38:7). When it comes to Christ we see similarly that he was given the name Jesus ("God saves"), but he is also named "Immanuel" ("God with us" Isaiah 7:14), "wonderful," "counselor," "the mighty God" and "everlasting father" (Isaiah 9:6). Each of these names reveal something about the God-man Jesus Christ, just as the various names of God in the Old and New Testaments reveal something more about God's nature. Most importantly, Jesus is referred to as the "only-begotten" Son of God, which name reveals to us his divinity. When he refers to himself as such this would have been tantamount to him calling himself God in the first century! Just as my son is just as human as I am—he has the same nature that I do—Jesus has the same nature as his Father—he is just as much God as the Father is! Indeed, Jesus' claim to be the Son of God is precisely the reason why the Jews wanted to kill him! They knew that what he was saying when he called himself the Son of God and when he claimed God to be his Father (see Mark 14:61-62; Matt. 26:63-64; John 5:17-18).

CONCLUSION:

Talking with Jehovah's Witnesses about the name of God, the assumption is often made that Catholics do not use the name of *Yahweh* because we do not know the original pronunciation of the divine name. That is simply not true. It is true that *the Jewish people* do not attempt to pronounce God's name. And, as we said, this practice extends back well over 2,000 years. But Catholics are not bound by Jewish practice in this matter. *Yahweh* is one of God's names and so it can be used. But we have to make distinctions here. We do not believe the Jews are *wrong* for not pronouncing God's name. We respect the Jews today, and most especially before the time of Christ, because Israel and the High Priesthood was the oracle of God on earth. Even Jesus commanded his disciples to obey the official teachings of the Pharisees and Scribes who "sit on the chair of Moses" (those who have official authority delegated from the High Priest) according to Matt. 23:1-2. Jesus did not condemn the official teachings of the Old Covenant people of God, he condemned the false traditions that some of the Pharisees were teaching on their own authority or "traditions of men" as Matt. 15:7-9 called them.

The Jews were not contradicting Scripture in showing reverence for God's name by not pronouncing it. As I said above, this practice had been observed in Israel for centuries before the advent of Christ, and yet, Jesus never condemned them for it. In fact, there is

no evidence in the New Testament that Jesus ever called God *Yahweh* in the New Testament. The name Jesus revealed to us in John 17, is the name he himself used when he spoke to God. In Mark 14:36, Jesus addressed God as "Abba, Father." Indeed, many Scripture scholars believe St. Mark left the original Aramaic word, "Abba" when recounting that sacred moment in the Garden of Gethsamane when Christ once again revealed the Father's covenant name, so that we would know the very name that Jesus called God. That name is *Father*.