

“Jehovah” as a Name of God

Issue: Where do we get the word "Jehovah"? Is "Jehovah" an acceptable pronunciation of the name of God?

Response: The origins of the word "Jehovah" go back to Exodus 3:14 when God reveals his name to Moses: "I Am Who Am." The Hebrew "YHWH" (also called the tetragrammaton) is generally accepted as representing this Name of God (cf. Ex. 3:14; Jn. 8:58), and "Jehovah" is an attempt at translating the Name of God. While a common pronunciation, "Jehovah" is a misnomer that developed out of an improper understanding of the Hebraic texts.

Discussion: Originally, written Hebrew had no vowels. The Jews who read the Scriptures knew what words the consonants represented. Additionally, the Jews regarded the Name of God as holy, and in post-biblical times they ceased to pronounce it. Instead, they substituted the word *Adonai* ("my Lord"). Thus the true pronunciation of "YHWH" was not handed down through the generations. In writing, the Masoretes eventually pointed the consonants of the word "YHWH" with the vowels of the word *Adonai* in order to prompt the usage of *Adonai*.¹ No one knows for certain how YHWH was pronounced.

The pronunciation "Jehovah" rests on an erroneous understanding of the writing system of the Masoretes that resulted in the

combination of the vowels of *Adonai* and the consonants "YHWH." Scholars trace the actual word "Jehovah" and its spelling to anywhere between the 1100s and the 1500s AD. The *Anchor Bible Dictionary* states:

The misreading of the text to form the word "Jehovah" is usually traced to Petrus Galatinus, confessor to Pope Leo X, who in 1518 AD transliterated the four Hebrew letters with the Latin letters JHWH together with the vowels of Adonai, producing the artificial form "Jehovah." (This confused usage may, however, have begun as early as 1100 AD). ("Yahweh," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6, 1011)

While not denying the possibility of Petrus Galatinus's role in promoting the use of "Jehovah," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* traces its origins further back:

Drusius [a sixteenth-century professor of ancient languages]. . . represents Peter Galatinus as the inventor of the word Jehovah, and Fagius as its propagator in the world of scholars and commentators. But the writers of the sixteenth century, Catholic and Protestant (e.g. Cajetan and Théodore de Bèze), are perfectly familiar with the word. Galatinus himself . . . represents the form as known and received in his time. Besides, Drusius . . . discovered it in Porchetus, a theologian of the fourteenth century. ("Jehovah

[Yahweh]," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 8)

Scholars disagree as to who coined "Jehovah," but they agree that it is a human construct (i.e., not an authentic pronunciation of "YHWH"). And though "Jehovah" is a common pronunciation, it is not as accurate as "Yahweh." *The Catholic Encyclopedia* states:

The Samaritan pronunciation *Jabe* probably approaches the real sound of the Divine name closest . . . Inserting the vowels of *Jabe* into the original Hebrew consonant text, we obtain the form *Jahveh* (Yahweh), which has been generally accepted by modern scholars as the true pronunciation of the Divine name. It is not merely closely connected with the pronunciation of the ancient synagogue by means of the Samaritan tradition, but it also allows the legitimate derivation of all the abbreviations of the sacred name in the Old Testament. ("Jehovah [Yahweh]," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 8)

These "legitimate derivations" include the phrase *hallelu-yah* ("Praise YHWH") found in the Psalms. Further, the shortened form ("Yah") of the divine name occurs several times in the Masoretic texts and is actually vocalized as such by the Masoretes.

Because it is the closest known pronunciation, the Church renders "YHWH" as "Yahweh." "Jehovah" is not found in

Church documents and thus is not formally part of the language of the Church.

Today, the word "Jehovah" is commonly associated with the Jehovah's Witnesses. History shows, however, that they were not the first to call God "Jehovah." In fact, one reason that the pronunciation "Jehovah" is so popular today is that the King James Bible translated YHWH as "Jehovah." The word "Jehovah" is also found in hymns and used in the American Standard Version of the Bible.

1 cf. "Jehovah," *Our Sunday Visitor's Catholic Encyclopedia*, Revised Edition. To "point" is to mark (a consonant) with a vowel point. Pointing serves to indicate a special phonetic value or distinguish words that are otherwise graphically identical. In this case, it serves to prompt a particular pronunciation.

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