

# Sacred Name Onlyism

## BLOGCAST

J.K. McKee

**In encountering various materials and teachings that carry labels like “Messianic” or “Hebrew Roots,” have you seen the proper name of God, YHWH/YHVH, used quite affluently? Has it even been implied that various scribes and religious authorities have purposefully hidden the Divine Name? What is Sacred Name Onlyism?**

Anyone who encounters the Hebrew Scriptures will see that our Creator has a proper name composed of the four Hebrew letters *yud, hey, vav, hey*, often represented by the English consonants YHVH or YHWH. They compose what is theologically designated as the Tetragrammaton, a term meaning “a word of four letters.”

In almost all major English Bible translations of the Tanach or Old Testament, the Tetragrammaton has been rendered as “the LORD” in SMALL CAPITAL LETTERS. Some Jewish Bibles use the term “HASHEM” meaning “the Name.” Messianic Versions may use ADONAI, Hebrew for “Lord.” Customarily in Bible translation, proper names are always transliterated, meaning that their sounds are communicated as closely as possible from one language into another, but titles are always translated. Yet in the case of the Divine Name YHWH, most English Bibles have rendered it as a title, respecting ancient Jewish protocols going back to the Second Temple period.

No honest Christian or Jewish examiner will disagree with those who strongly point out that our Creator indeed has a name. He first revealed His name to Moses in Exodus 3:13-15:

“Then Moses said to God, ‘Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, “The 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?’ God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM’; and He said, ‘Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, “I AM has sent me to you.”’ God, furthermore, said to Moses, ‘Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, “The LORD [YHWH], the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.” This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations’” (NASU).

The proper name of our Creator was revealed to Moses as he was preparing to go back to Egypt with His help to free the Israelites in slavery. He needed a name to distinguish YHWH from the pagan gods of the Egyptians. The *Jewish Study Bible* comments that while the name “YHVH is [often] represented by the word LORD...it is connected to the verb *h-y-h* [*hayah*], ‘be’ or ‘become,’ most likely in a causative sense, ‘he who causes to be.’”<sup>1</sup> Another possible meaning of YHWH is simply “Eternal One,” or perhaps even “Transcendent.” While there is no uniform agreement on how the name YHWH is to be pronounced, a broad consensus of Hebrew and Semitic scholars posit that it was either Yahweh or Yahveh or something close.

Most English Bibles today use the title “the LORD” in place of YHWH, following Second Temple Jewish protocols. The Jewish Sages who returned from Babylonian exile did not wish God’s name to be brought to shame, as misusing God’s name was believed to have been one of the significant reasons that caused the exile. Substitutions were used for the Divine Name, such as *Adonai*, meaning “(my) Lord,” or *HaShem*, meaning “the Name.” Whenever YHWH would appear in a Biblical text, *Adonai* or *HaShem* would likely be pronounced instead. And, it is important to note that both of these titles appear independently in the Scriptures to refer to God.

Most Jews who returned from captivity in Babylon considered it blasphemous to speak the Divine Name. The Talmud states how the “sages say, ‘On account of using the ineffable Name, one is subject to the death penalty, but as for euphemisms, one is subject to the admonition [not to do so, but not to the death penalty if he does so]’” (b.*Sanhedrin* 56a).<sup>2</sup> Post-exilic Judaism has historically maintained that if a person were to curse using the name YHWH in a sentence, he was to be given the death penalty. If it were just a curse with a title used in place of the Divine Name, then it was not worthy of death. This is one of the reasons why the proper name of God was not spoken by the First Century C.E. The intention was to disallow instances where pagan individuals would curse using the Divine Name.

Some think that the Third Commandment of Exodus 20:7 and Deuteronomy 5:11 is violated by those who refuse to use or speak the name YHWH, and by rendering YHWH with a title such as “LORD” or “HASHEM” in English Bible translations. Is the Third Commandment broken when people do not speak the name YHWH?

---

<sup>1</sup> Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2142.

<sup>2</sup> *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*.

Jeffrey H. Tigay, in *The Jewish Study Bible*, identifying that the Creator indeed has a name, reflects on the tradition of why Jewish people over the centuries have avoided saying it. He remarks, “*The LORD* is actually a translation of ‘adonai’ (lit. ‘my Lord’) because that is what Jews now pronounce whenever the consonants YHWH appear. YHWH was probably originally pronounced ‘Yahweh,’ but in Second Temple times, as an expression of reverence, Jews began to avoid uttering it, substituting ‘adonai’ and other surrogates.”<sup>3</sup> The *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* mirrors these remarks, adding, “When the high priest addressed God in the Temple’s Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, he uttered this name. When the priests blessed the people in the Temple, they used this name. By the third century B.C.E., God’s name had become so hallowed that it could not be pronounced outside of worship, and the term *adonai* (my lord) was regularly substituted.”<sup>4</sup>

While certainly recognizing that our Creator has a name, YHWH, both the Jewish and Christian traditions have avoided its pronunciation due to its extreme holiness. The rendering of YHWH as “the LORD” is identified in the preface to most major English Bible translations. In scholastic circles, however, it is not uncommon to see forms such as YHWH or Yahweh used to refer to God, as Jewish and Christian theologians do plainly recognize that our Creator has a name. But, in Second Temple Judaism the name of God was not spoken aloud. As Messianic Believers, we must recognize that this was the same Second Temple Judaism in which Yeshua the Messiah lived, and from which the early Messianic community arose. Today’s Messianic Jewish congregations—no different than mainline Jewish synagogues—do not use the Divine Name YHWH during their worship services, in deference to Second Temple precedents. However, it is not unlikely that the name YHWH might be spoken as either Yahweh or Yahveh, in piecemeal, during some kind of a closed Bible study discussion.

The Sacred Name Only movement, while raising the awareness of the proper name of our Creator, tends to purposefully interject a great deal of confusion into the Body of Messiah. A Sacred Name Only ideology is not at all concerned with how avid verbalization of the Divine Name YHWH in the public assembly can wreak unspeakable damage to Jewish evangelism, greatly offending Jewish non-Believers—and confuse many evangelical Protestants interested in Messianic things for that same matter. A Sacred Name Only ideology broadly promotes the idea that if you do not use the Divine Name YHWH in your regular speech, then our Creator will not be capable of hearing your prayers. Those who adhere to a Sacred Name Only ideology tend to be very contentious, and will not hesitate to bring confusion and derision into a Messianic congregation where Hebrew titles such as Adonai or HaShem are used. Yet, it is quite ironic that Sacred Name Only proponents tend to be internally divided among themselves, as they do not often agree on how the Divine Name YHWH/YHVH is to be pronounced. Standard forms proposed by scholars, such as Yahweh or Yahveh, now have to compete with other renderings, such as Yehovah or Yahuah.

While it is important for us to be aware of how our Creator has a proper name, appearing in the Hebrew Scriptures, a Sacred Name Only ideology is most probably going to bring great damage to your Messianic congregation or fellowship.

---

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey H. Tigay, “Exodus,” in *The Jewish Study Bible*, 112.

<sup>4</sup> “God, names of,” in Jacob Neusner and William Scott Green, eds., *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 259.