

God reveals himself through many words in the Old Testament, such as El Shaddai and El Elyon, but one stands out clearly as his proper name: four letters from the Hebrew alphabet,

h w h y

(YHWH), almost certainly pronounced as Yahweh or Yahvhe, never as Jehovah. This name was always seen as very sacred and powerful and therefore never to be used lightly.<sup>1</sup>

No one ever dared to name a child God or Yahweh -- the very thought was the height of blasphemy -- but throughout biblical history, godly people gave their children names that reflected God's attributes and ownership. For example, Elisha, which contracts two words, El (meaning God) and yeshua (meaning salvation or deliverance), means "God is salvation."

Many times people incorporated God's proper name, Yahweh, as part of the name. Elijah is comprised of El (God), with the first person singular suffix, i (my), and Yahweh (contracted to Yah): "My God is Yahweh."

Joshua is formed by contracting Yahweh with yeshua: "Yahweh is salvation," an appropriate name for a deliverer, such as the son of Nun. Before the Babylonian captivity, Joshua's name in Hebrew was pronounced Yehoshua (Yeh HO [as in no] shoo ah); afterwards it was written Yashua (Ya [as in day] SHOO ah). In Greek and Latin it is (pronounced YA [as in day] soos ), written Iesus in Latin.

It is not surprising that Joshua was a popular name for Hebrew boys (cf. e.g. the high priest of Zechariah 3), nor was it unusual when the angel instructed Joseph to name his wife's son Joshua (Matthew 1:21).<sup>2</sup> In the course of time, English translators rendered it Jesus in order to distinguish our Lord from his Old Testament kin.

That is why when Jesus said such things as "I have come in my Father's name," (John 5:43) he does not mean that the Father and he had the same name. Yahweh is God's proper name. As such, it is the name of the Father and as well as of the Son and also of the Holy Spirit. Jesus, or Joshua, is the name of the Son of God, once he is incarnate and becomes a human being; it is not the name of the pre-existent Son of God, the Second Person in the Godhead. God, the Son, without ceasing to be God, became a real human being and took the name Joshua, or Jesus. Jesus Christ is that name coupled with the title of the Hebrew kings, Messiah, Anointed one, or Christ. In Hebrew it is Yashua Hamashiach; in Latin and Greek it is Iesus Christus.

Therefore, when our Lord Jesus Christ commanded the apostles to baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, he did not mean that they were to baptize in Jesus' name in a literal sense, having to pronounce those words at the time of baptism.

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<sup>1</sup> Before the time of Jesus, pious Jews were so afraid of taking God's name in vain that they would pronounce the word Adonai (the Hebrew word for Master or Lord) or Elohim (plural form of El and the primary word for God, when referring to the God of Israel), whenever they came across YHWH in the Hebrew text. (This tradition grew in time and came to include saying the word, God; it is still exhibited: pious Jews write G-d for God. It also helps us understand Matthew's use of substitutes for the word God, for example using the phrase, kingdom of heaven, instead of kingdom of God, in his gospel.)

Hebrew is a Semitic language, originally written from right to left and using only consonants in its alphabet. While it was a living, spoken language, ordinary readers understood which vowel sounds to supply when reading the Hebrew consonantal text. In the course of time, it became largely unspoken except for religious functions, and the Rabbis became concerned that people would forget the proper pronunciation. They were faced with a dilemma: they believed that the Hebrew letters were divinely given, down to the smallest letter, the yodh, and the smallest mark of deviation, the tittle, so they could not change the text without altering God's own word, a terrible sin. Instead they devised a method of placing different marks above and below the Hebrew letters to indicate which vowel sounds should be used.

This method of pointing the Hebrew text had other uses as well. The Massorets, the rabbis who helped to preserve and standardize the Hebrew Bible centuries after Christ, placed the vowel-points for Adonai or Elohim, above and below the four letters YHWH (sometimes called the Tetragrammaton). They did this so that Hebrew readers would never pronounce God's proper name but would substitute one of these two words instead. The mistake of trying to pronounce YHWH with these vowel-points resulted in the non-Hebrew word, Jehovah. In all likelihood, the four letters should be pronounced Yahweh or Yahvhe.

<sup>2</sup> Jesus was a common Jewish name: "1. The Greek form of a list of Old Testament characters who in pre-exilic Hebrew are called Yehoshua . . . Joshua the son of Nun is Yehoshua in Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1 Kings 16:34, 1 Chronicles 7:27 and the Hebrew of Sirach 46:1, but Yashua in Nehemiah 8:17. The high priest Joshua, the son of Josedech, who returned with Zerubbabel from exile, is always called Yehoshua in Haggai and Zechariah and always Yashua in Ezra and Nehemiah. Yehoshua is the name of two men in 1 Samuel 6:14, 18; 2 Kings 23:8, while 2 Chronicles 31:15 calls a Levite under Hezekiah, Yashua, and this form of the name is also found in post-exilic priestly and Levitical families and in the references to their return from exile under Zerubbabel and Joshua. The full form (Yehoshua) thus prevails up to *circa* 500, and after that (up to 1 Chronicles 7:27 and Sirach 46:1) the shorter (Yashua).

"2. Up to the beginning of the 2nd century a.d. the name Yashua or Iesus was very common among the Jews. Among the 72 translators of the LXX (The LXX is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, called the Septuagint, because there were seventy LXX rabbis involved. It became the Bible of Hellenistic Judaism, because they no longer understood Hebrew well. It was done a bit over a century before Christ.) according to the *Epistle of Aristeas* (48, 49), three bear the name of Iesus. Josephus mentions some 20 of the name, including ten contemporaries of Jesus. The ossuary inscriptions (An ossuary is a container or receptacle, such as an urn or a vault, for holding the bones of the dead. The Jews preserved the bones of their ancestors in their cemeteries and put stone markers above them with inscriptions. In other words, these are gravestones that have the name Jesus on them, indicating that various people who had the name Jesus were buried there.) from the vicinity of Jerusalem (at the beginning of the 2nd cent. a.d. at the very latest) yield us Yashua . . . Many others bear the name as well as Jesus. Thus we find a pre-exilic Barabbas in the genealogy in Luke 3:29. In Matthew 27:16 Barabbas is also called Iesus Barabbas. In Acts 13:6 the sorcerer in Cyprus is called Bar Iesus, and in Col. 4:11 the helper of Paul is called Iesus also called Justus." [Werner Foerster, "Iesus" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, 1977), Vol. III, pp. 284, 285 (I have expanded his abbreviations for clarity and transliterated his Hebrew and Greek into Roman letters.)]