The Biblical Text and the Personal Name for God YHVH

Danny Sherman LosNavegantes.Net

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Exodus 3:15 affirms to us that the personal name for God in Hebrew is YHVH.

> God, furthermore, said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'The Lord (YHVH), 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.

It is prohibited to use this personal name for God in any irreverent way (Exodus 20:7). Leviticus 24:10-16 gives an example of someone who misused this name and was sentenced to death.

This personal name for God is sometimes referred to as *The Name* (*HaShem* - v.11). It refers to the personal name **YHVH** (v. 16). The account in Leviticus 24 certainly put fear into the people of Israel to be careful about how they used this personal name for God! That is why it is normal for Jewish people today to use the term *HaShem* (The Name) instead of **YHVH**.

There is a phenomenon in the Old Testament in Hebrew called Kethib-Qere. Kethib is what is written in the Biblical text and Qere is a note in the margin that indicates how the word should be read (The Masorah of Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia by Kelley, Mynatt and Crawford).

There is a special use of Kethib-Qere called perpetual Qere. J. Weingreen explains in A Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew, p. 23 about this:

> The divine name was considered to be too sacred to pronounce it. That is why the consonants of the name were written as Kethibh, but the name was read as Qere using the word Adonai (Lord). The consonants of the biblical name were combined with the vowels of Adonai when it was read.
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> This practice produced an impossible grammatical term in Hebrew, Yehovah. Since this name occurred often in the Hebrew text, the Qere

was not included in the margin. The reader simply understood that the Qere should be substituted for the Kethib. That is why it is called perpetual Qere.

Weingreen explains that in the scroll of Isaiah of Qumran (the Dead Sea Scrolls), the Qere form of the divine name is included in the biblical text above the Kethib form of the word. This clearly indicates that the replacement of YHVH with Adonai was an early practice, probably even before the introduction of vowels in the Hebrew text.

Israel Yeivin, in his Introduction to the Tiberian Masorah, p. 59, adds the following:

> In the case of some words, the traditional spoken form of a word always differs from the written form. The most important example of this is the Tetragrammaton, **YHVH**. It uses the vowels of Adonai, or the vowels of Elohim. The Talmud (Pesahim 50a) makes the following comment: "I am not read as I am written. I am written with yod he (from **YHVH**), but I am pronounced as alef dalet (from *Adonai*)."

Thomas O. Lambdin makes the following observation in his Introduction to Biblical Hebrew, p. 52-53.

> YHVH is the name for God. Because of superstitious and pious reasons it was read as *Adonai*. It is not possible to know for certain when this practice began, but it was probably before the Christian Era. The Masoretes (Jews who dedicated their life to make new copies of the Old Testament) applied the vowels of Adonai to the consonants of **YHVH**, forming the word *Yehovah*. This obviously was passed into English as *Jehovah* in modern times.

Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar, p. 66, explains that **YHVH** normally uses the vowels of *Adonai* (shewa, o, a), but when **YHVH** and Adonai occur together **YHVH** uses the vowels from Elohim. This is obviously to avoid the redundancy of saying *Adonai Adonai*.

The New Brown-Driver-Brigg-Gesenius Hebrew-English Lexicon, makes the following observation about the name **YHVH**:

> *Yahweh* is the proper name for the God of Israel… the pronunciation of *Jehovah* did not exist until the year 1520, when it was introduced by Galatinus. Several objected to this because it violated basic

grammatical principles and it did not take into account the historical record. The transliteration of Theodoret and Epiphanies for this name was "*iabe*," and there are abbreviated forms of the name like **Yah**. All of this favors that the name **YHVH** should be read as *Yahveh*.

The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament makes the following observation:

> The Tetragrammaton, **YHVH**, the ***LORD***, o *Yahveh*, is the personal name for God and is used with frequency in the biblical text, and occurs a total of 5,321 times (TDNT, III, p. 1067).

> …In the post Old Testament period, to show reverence for God, the inexpressible name **Yahveh** was substituted in the reading (but not in the written text) for the word ***Adonai*** (my owner, my Lord). When the scholarly Jews began to insert vowels into the Hebrew text, they placed the vowels for ***Adonai*** between the consonants of **YHVH**. That produced a written form that is grammatically impossible in Hebrew: *Yehovah*.

This was put into English as ***Jehovah***. It is a simple transliteration error because the translators did not know about the vowel substitutions.

Page Kelley, in Biblical Hebrew: An Introductory Grammar, p. 32, adds:

> The curious act of using a transliterated form of **YHVH** in the Hebrew text did not happen until the time of the Protestant Reformation. *Yehovah* became ***Jehovah*** because there was no "y" in German.

The Dictionary of New Testament Theology, edited by Colin Brown, makes the following clarification:

> The word ***Jehovah*** was introduced to us because of a misunderstanding. The translators did not understand that the God-fearing Jews wanted to avoid pronouncing the divine name. The Jews read the name as ***Adonai***. In the Masoretic text the scribes combined the vowels of ***Adonai*** with the consonants of **YHVH** in order to help everyone remember that they should pronounce the name as ***Adonai***, instead of the actual divine name. This produced the name *Yehovah* in the biblical text. The LXX (the translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek) reflects this careful treatment of the divine name by translating it as **Kyrios** (Lord). Modern Bibles in English

reflect this by substituting **YHVH** with **LORD** in capital letters. In the same way, the Latin translation uses ***Dominus*** (Lord). The name ***Jehovah*** is a malformation of the Hebrew name. It was a transliteration of a word that never actually existed in Hebrew. In the 16th century Galatinus translated it as ***Iehoua***. In 1530 Tyndale used ***Iehouah*** in his translation of Exodus 6:3 (even though Wycliffe preferred ***Adonai*** in his translation). That is how ***Jehovah*** became the normal translation in English of **YHVH**.

The Diccionario Bíblico Mundo Hispano says that "The LXX followed this custom of using the Greek term **Kyrios**, ***Lord***, to take the place of the divine name. This is very interesting since the New Testament refers to Jesus as **Kyrios**. The creation of the word ***Jehovah*** is a direct result of inserting the vowels of ***Adonai*** in the consonants of **YHVH**."