

## How Should We Address God?

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Some people today argue that Christians profane the name of the Deity when they employ the terms *Lord*; *God*; and *Jesus* in prayer and speech. They assert that we should use only the Hebrew terms: *Yahweh* (to designate God the Father) and *Yashua* (for Jesus). How unfortunate that such distortions of the facts should become an issue in any Christian congregation! Is there any validity to the claim?

If it is wrong to refer to the Saviour as Jesus, then all the apostolic writers of the New Testament stand indicted. None of them ever use *Yeshûa'* ( or *Yahshûa'* as some choose to spell the name). On the contrary, they preached and wrote in the name of the Lord Jesus (*Kurios Iēsous*) or some variation of that expression (see Acts 16:31; 1 Thess.1:1;Phil. 3:8).

In regard to use of the name *Yahweh*, times change. While some now insist on using this name exclusively, in the past Jews *refused* to pronounce it lest they should thus profane the sacred name! The ancient Hebrew Bible contained only consonants; the reader supplied the correct vowels. It became customary to substitute another word, usually '*Adonai* ("Lord"), whenever the reader came to the name *YHWH* for the Deity. Since the name ceased to be expressed audibly, its correct pronunciation was eventually forgotten.

In the seventh or eighth centuries A.D., when Hebrew appeared to be dying out as a spoken language, Jewish scholars (Masorettes) invented a system of written vowels that they inscribed with the consonantal text. They preserved this curious custom of not pronouncing *YHWH* by adding to its four consonants the vowels from the word '*Adonai*. This improper combination alerted Jewish readers to say '*Adonai* at those points. However, it confused English translators from the twelfth century A.D. onward, who "invented" from this

arrangement the name Jehovah, which continues to be printed in our common Bibles to this day.

Modern scholars conjecture that the name should be pronounced *Yahweh*, but conclusive documentary evidence is still lacking. Is a Christian, therefore, profaning the name of God if he does not at all times use a term for which not only the pronunciation was forgotten but the current vocalization is still an unconfirmed assumption, although fairly certain? The answer seems obvious.

The term *Yahweh* appears to have been derived from the Hebrew verb *to be*, describing God as "the Eternal One," "the Self-existing One," "the One who lives eternally," or possibly "the Self-sufficient One." Is this the only name Christians should use for God? In the Bible the Deity has many names and titles, each one describing a different aspect of His character. No one term can encompass the incomprehensible One. Furthermore, these names and titles are often used interchangeably in Scripture.

Although *Yahweh* is one of the more commonly used names in the Old Testament (appearing more than 6,800 times), even the Deity refers to Himself by other names: for example, *'El Shaddai* ("Almighty God," Gen. 17:1), or simply *'El* or *'Elohîm* ("God," chap. 31:13; Isa. 46:9; Ps. 46:10). The Jewish translators of the Hebrew Bible into Greek (the Septuagint version, third to second centuries B.C.) rendered these terms with the Greek word *Theos*, and the four-letter name *YHWH* with *Kurios*, terms they viewed as suitable equivalents in that language. English translators use the name God for *'Elohîm* and its related forms, and Lord for *YHWH*.

### **Variety of names**

The Israelites used a variety of names for God in their prayers without any fear of divine condemnation. For example, in Psalm 59 David addresses the Deity as *'Elohîm* ("God," verses 1, 5, 9, 10, 13, 17), as *Yahweh* ("Lord," verses 3, 8), and as *Yahweh 'Elohîm* ("Lord

God," verse 5). In the New Testament the apostles follow the custom adopted by the Jewish translators of the Septuagint and use *Kurios* as the equivalent of *Yahweh*. They make no attempt to "correct" the Septuagint by substituting *Yahweh* for the translator's *Kurios*. For example, when Paul cites Psalm 117:1 ("O praise the Lord [*YHWH*], all ye nations") for his Christian friends in Rome, he writes, "Praise the Lord [*Kurios*], all ye Gentiles" (Rom.15:11).

Jesus, our example, did not think it inappropriate to address the Deity by names other than *Yahweh*. His cry on the cross, "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? . . . My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*" (Mark 15:34), was in Aramaic. *Eloi* is a Greek transliteration of the Aramaic '*Elahî*, the equivalent of the Hebrew *Eli* of Psalm 22:1, which His despairing words reflected. The Saviour could have cried, "*Yahweh, Yahweh* "—but He did not.

Jesus commonly referred to God as His Father. For this designation He apparently used the Aramaic word *Abba* ("Father," Mark 14:36). In addition to His own reverent practice, Christ taught His followers for all time how to address God: "*After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father* which art in heaven, Hallowed by thy name" (Matt. 6:9).

On one occasion Jesus cited the prophet Isaiah: "this people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me" (chap. 15:8). Evidently when we approach God, the specific syllable on our lips is not nearly as important as the humble, teachable attitude of our heart.