

What's In A Name?

The LORD

Jehovah

Yahweh

Here is something most people have never considered. Ancient Hebrew was written with consonants only — no vowels. So the divine name was always written as four consonants: **YHWH**, a combination known as the *Tetragrammaton*, from the Greek for "four letters."

A Tradition of Reverence

Jewish tradition, rooted in an interpretation of [Leviticus 24:16](#) and deepened after the Babylonian exile, held this name too sacred to speak aloud. The reasoning was not superstition — it was profound reverence. If the name were spoken carelessly, routinely, or by unworthy lips, it might be taken in vain in the most literal sense. So a practice developed: whenever a reader encountered YHWH in the text, they would substitute the word **Adonai** — meaning "Lord" — rather than attempt to pronounce the holy name.

The Masoretes and the Hybrid Word

Between approximately **600 and 1000 AD**, a group of Jewish scribal scholars known as the **Masoretes** undertook the monumental task of standardizing and preserving the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. Their masterwork, the **Leningrad Codex (1008 AD)**, remains the oldest complete Hebrew Bible manuscript and is still the basis for most modern Old Testament translations.

The Masoretes developed an ingenious vowel-pointing system — small marks written above and below the consonants — to preserve correct pronunciation for future readers. But when they came to YHWH, they did something deliberate: they placed the vowel points of **Adonai** beneath the consonants of YHWH. This was not carelessness — it was a built-in reminder. *Do not say what you see. Say Adonai instead.*

How the Word "Jehovah" Was Born

Medieval Christian scholars, working centuries later, inherited the Masoretic text but not the full understanding of its scribal traditions. Encountering YHWH with *Adonai*'s vowel points beneath it, they read the combination at face value and produced the hybrid word: **Jehovah** — blending the consonants of one word with the vowels of another. It was, in effect, an accident of transmission.

The word **first appeared in print in English around 1530**, when the great Bible translator **William Tyndale** used it in his landmark English New Testament and Pentateuch. Tyndale was not inventing something reckless — he was simply working with the scholarly tools available to him. But the name, once in print, took on a life of its own.

Why It Stuck

Two developments in the 19th and early 20th centuries cemented "Jehovah" in the English-speaking Protestant world:

- **Strong's Exhaustive Concordance (1890)** — James Strong's enormously influential reference tool became a staple in churches and seminaries across America. Strong used "Jehovah" consistently, embedding it in a generation of Bible students.
- **The American Standard Version (1901)** — The ASV was the first major English Bible to replace "LORD" with "Jehovah" throughout the Old Testament — over 6,800 times. For many readers, this felt like a restoration of the true name. The ASV became widely beloved, and "Jehovah" came with it.

The name persisted not because of scholarly consensus, but because of **tradition, familiarity, and the enormous reach of these two resources.**

What Was the Original Pronunciation?

Most Hebrew scholars today believe the original pronunciation was closer to **Yahweh**. This conclusion is supported by several independent lines of evidence:

- **Ancient Hebrew names** — Many personal names in the Old Testament were compounded with a short form of the divine name: *Elijah* (Eli-Yahu), *Isaiah* (Yesha-Yahu), *Jeremiah* (Yermi-Yahu). The *Yah* or *Yahu* ending is a shortened form of the divine name, and it consistently points toward a *Yahweh* pronunciation.
- **Hallelu-Yah** — This familiar word, found across languages and cultures, means literally "*Praise Yah*" — a direct, unambiguous fragment of the name preserved in worship.
- **Early Church writers** — Several Greek-speaking Church fathers, including **Clement of Alexandria** (c. 150-215 AD) and **Origen** (c. 184-253 AD), attempted to transliterate the divine name into Greek characters. Their attempts consistently render something closer to *Yahweh* or *Iaouê* than to *Jehovah*.
- **The Samaritan oral tradition** — The Samaritans, who preserved their own version of the Torah and did not follow the same taboo on pronouncing the name, maintained an oral tradition of pronunciation that also points toward *Yahweh*.

Why Does It Matter?

This is not merely a linguistic footnote. The name YHWH appears **over 6,800 times** in the Old Testament. It is the most personal name of the divine — chosen not as a title or a description, but as an identity. Many translations, following the Masoretic substitution tradition, render it simply as the LORD (in small capitals), which effectively buries the name entirely.

Recovering the name *Yahweh* — and understanding *who* bears that name — is part of recovering a relationship, not just correcting a transliteration.

Drafted in collaboration with Claude (AI), with all theological positions, Scripture selections, and final wording reviewed and approved by [Sid Nash](#) — Desiring to live by every word that comes from the mouth of Jehovah ([Deut8:3](#); [Matt4:4](#)). Version date: 08/26/2026 Latest version: <https://sidnash.org/docs/WhatsInAName.html>
