

The Meaning of Yahweh

The name Yahweh is best known from the famous “I AM” interaction with Moses (Ex. 3) and references the fact that God has always existed and will always exist. Though this is true, it is also a very basic understanding of the meaning of Yahweh. In the ancient world, names communicated something about a person’s character, so a name carried much meaning with it. God in His infinite sovereignty chose to reveal Himself in the name Yahweh. Consequently, one should expect this name to communicate a lot about the character of Yahweh.

The Meaning and Significance

In Ex. 3:13-14, Moses asks God, “Whom should I say has sent me?” and God responds by saying, “I AM that I AM... You must say this to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” However, it could be awkward for Moses to go to the Israelites and Pharaoh and say, “I am has sent me.” So, in Ex. 3:15 God revises this phrase and changes it to the third person by saying, “Tell them that ‘He is’ has sent you.”

The word “He is” comes from the Hebrew root word *haya*, which means, “to be.” It is the third person form of this word, “He is,” that becomes the name Yahweh.

The significance of the name Yahweh is that it is confirming God’s existence but most importantly His presence. In the context of Exodus 3, God is talking about His presence with Moses and subsequently with Israel. For in Ex. 3:12 Moses says, “Who am I, that I should go?” to which God responds by saying, “Surely I will be with you.” The point is not that He eternally existed (although this is implied) but that He is present with His people.

In light of the above, Ex. 3:14-15 could be paraphrased as, “Call Me ‘I am with you’ (I am the ever present helper) because I am indeed the ever present helper. And this is what you should say to the Israelites, ‘He is the ever present helper’ – the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob – has sent me to you.”¹

God wants to have a relationship with His people, and so He is giving them permission to call Him by a personal name rather than by His formal name. It is like giving someone permission to call you Bill when your name is William.

This does not mean that every time this name appears in the First Testament that it carries all of this theology with it. Sometimes it is used as just His name and is used in a reverential way.

The Origin of Name Yahweh

Ex. 6:3 states, “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as God Almighty (El Shaddai), but by my name ‘the LORD’ (Yahweh) I was not known to them.”

The times that the name Yahweh appears, it does not appear in isolation, rather it appears along with another name of God. It is not until Exodus that the name “Yahweh” appears in isolation. The statement in Ex. 6:3 can be understood in one of two different ways.

¹ See Chisholm, Robert B. *Knowing God Through the Old Testament*. Audio Class. Dallas Theological Seminary, 2004.

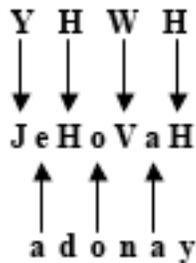
The first understanding is that Moses, being the author of both Genesis and Exodus, may have inserted the name “Yahweh” alongside the other names of God in Genesis so that his readers would know that the God of Genesis and Exodus are not different gods; rather, He is the same God with different names.

The second understanding is that the patriarchs of Genesis may have known the name of Yahweh, but they did not know the meaning of the name and how it related to the character of God. Ex. 6:3 is not talking about the name Yahweh but rather the character behind the name. Thus, they may have called Him Yahweh, but they related to Him as Elohim or El Shaddai.

Yahweh Is Not Jehovah

During the intertestamental period of Israel, around 500 BC, the Jews became very concerned with not blaspheming the name of the Lord. So rather than saying the name Yahweh, they would say Elohim instead, which is the Hebrew word for god. However, this did not solve the problem of what to do when one came across the name Yahweh during the reading of the Scriptures.

The Jews decided that when they came to the name “YHWH” they would say the Hebrew word *adonay*, which means “Lord.” To remind the reader to say “adonay,” and to maintain the presence of the word “YHWH,” they assigned the vowels of “adonay” into the consonants of “YHWH.” However, it was never intended that this form be read aloud.



During the Middle Ages scholars began to read the consonants of “YHWH” with the vowels of “adonay,” which resulted in the word “Jehovah,” an artificial word bearing no relation to the name of the God of Israel in biblical times. Because the Germans were the first to make this transfer it was written Jehovah instead of Yehowah since j’s and w’s are pronounced as y’s and v’s.

“It is quite certain, however, that the ancient Israelites never used this term for their God; formally it is like a genetic hybrid, as artificial as the words ‘eledile’ and ‘crocophant.’”²

² Mettinger, Tryggve N. D. *In Search of God The Meaning and Message of the Everlasting Names*. Translated by Frederick H. Cryer. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987, p. 16.