

# The Sacred Name Controversy –

# The Tetragrammaton

## – What was the original pronunciation?

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***How should this word be pronounced?***

***You would think that, by now, the experts would know. But they do not. All they have is thoughtful guesses, and little more.***

***Yet the pronunciation of that word is the basis of the Sacred Name teaching. They declare that everyone must pronounce that word exactly right—or be eternally lost.***

***Here is why we do not know the original pronunciation of that word.***

There are several names of God in the Old Testament ('Elohim, 'El, 'El-Shaddai, YHWH, 'Adon, 'Adonai, 'Elyon, 'El-sur, etc.)

***But we are not sure of the pronunciation of any of those names—nor of any other words in the Old Testament, for reasons to be explained shortly.***

As discussed in detail in the present writer's 76-page book, *The Sacred Name*, the fact is that the Jews were well on their way toward forgetting the pronunciation of their native tongue by the time of Nehemiah. Ezra, a very scholarly man (PK 608-609, Ezra 7:10), could still read and verbally pronounce the Hebrew language. But, when he read from the Hebrew

Bible to the people, he had to translate what he read into Aramaic, so they could understand what he read! (Nehemiah 8:8). By that date, 445 B.C. (13 years after the governorship of Nehemiah began), spoken Hebrew was rapidly disappearing among the Jewish people. They were switching over to the international commercial language of the time, which was Aramaic.

Hundreds of years passed, and then came the time of Christ, when the western civilized world spoke Greek, and the Jews spoke Aramaic. However, for purposes of national pride, they called it "Hebrew." Yet Hebrew scholars will tell you it was not Hebrew, but Aramaic (a sister language which had an entirely different pronunciation.) When the Jews read from the Old Testament scrolls, they pronounced the words in Aramaic.

**Hundreds of more years passed, and the Massorites, a small group of scholarly Jews, tried to reconstruct the pronunciation of the original Hebrew. But by that time, over a thousand years had passed since any Jews had actually spoken Hebrew!** They did not really develop a workable system of vowel pointing (written Hebrew vocalization) until about the year A.D. 900. —That was 1,345 years after Ezra read in the book and translated it to the people!

How was any modern language spoken in the year A.D. 650? None of us really know, for that was 1,345 years ago (from the date of this writ-

ing). But that is the length of time from Ezra's reading to the time of the Massorites' perfected vowel pointing (445 B.C. to A.D. 900).

**From our time to Ezra's time is 2,440 years! This is how long the pronunciation of ancient Hebrew has been lost!**

It was not until halfway through the Dark Ages that Moses' ben Asher's system of Hebrew vowel guesswork was completed!

**To add to the confusion, there was one certain word which the Jews had not pronounced for centuries before the time of Ezra and Nehemiah! That word was YHWH, one of the several names of the God of heaven. (We will call it YHWH, but cannot be certain if even those consonants are correctly pronounced).** Instead of pronouncing that word, the Jews mixed its consonents with the vowels of a different name of Deity: 'Adonai. —In the process, they probably lost the sounding of the original vowels in the centuries that passed. **If you never spoke a certain word to anyone or to yourself, and did not write down anywhere how it was to be pronounced—rather quickly you and all your descendants would have no idea how it sounded.**

By now, you may think all this is becoming confusing. It is. —Especially when some individuals today pretend that they know the correct pronunciation of that four-consonant word, to which we arbitrarily apply the letters, YHWH. Indeed, the

only solid thing we know about this word is that it had four consonants. (Yet, in ancient Hebrew, some “consonants” were hardly sounded!). Little else is known. **We do not know if those consonants were sounded in an equivalent manner as our sounding of those consonants today.**

Because the word has four letters, it is called the “**Tetragrammaton**,” the four radical (four character) word. We will primarily refer to it by that name—because we do not know exactly how to write or speak the word anymore than anyone else does.

But there is also another name for this word which cannot be pronounced: the “*Ineffable Name*.” That is, the unspeakable name. That is a good description of it. The Jewish rabbis were convinced that this name, YHWH, must never be spoken by the human tongue. In view of that, most people, in the centuries since then, have done a good job not pronouncing it. The exception has been the Sacred Name advocates, who are determined that everybody pronounce the name which the ancients said not to pronounce!

**In our book, *Sacred Name*, you will find a detailed study on this subject. But we will here only give our attention to possible clues of the sounding of this mysterious word from antiquity:**

How was the Tetragrammaton pronounced in ancient times? The four consonants in the word are *yodh*, *he*, *waw* (or *Vav*), and *he*. For this discussion, we will initially assume the Hebrew characters are represented by these four consonants: Y, H, W, and H. But even of that we can have no certainty.

1 - **One possible pronunciation is “*Jehovah*.”** This is the combination of ‘*Adonai* (“Lord”) vowels with the possible four consonants, which we spoke of earlier. However, Hebrew grammarians believe that it is a forced combination, which

does not agree with Hebrew vocalization.

2 - **Another possible pronunciation is “*Yahweh*.”** Sacred Name advocates generally lean toward this sounding, yet among them are those who intensely disagree with the others, and suggest alternate pronunciations.

3 - **Another possible pronunciation is “*Ya-oo-ai*.”** This sounding is based on one of the variant ways that Clement of Alexandria (c. A.D. 205) spelled the Tetragrammaton in the Greek (*Iaooa*: iota-alpha-omicron-alpha-iota).

4 - **Yet another possible pronunciation is “*Yahowah*.”** Read this Hebrew poem in Hebrew (Exodus 15:1,3,6,11,17 and 18), and, assuming our pronunciation of all the Hebrew words is correct (?), you will find that “*Yahowah*” sounds better than “*Yahweh*.”

5 - **Another possibility is “*Ya-oh-oo-ay-eh*.”** This name appears among the Greek magical papyri for the Hebrew name of God (*Iaoooue*: iota-alpha-omega-omicron-epsilon-eta-epsilon). Note that this name also does not omit the central vowel, which “*Yehweh*” does.

6 - **Then there is “*Ya-oh*.”** This is the sounding of the Tetragrammaton, found in a Dead Sea Scroll of Leviticus (*4QLXX Lev*). The spelling here is *Iao* (iota-alpha-omega). Because the second syllable is a vowel, “*Ya-oh*” could not possibly be sounded as “*Yah-weh*.” Clement of Alexandria also used this as one of three variant pronunciations of the Tetragrammaton, if that means anything. Keep in mind that both the Essenes and Clement lived many centuries after Hebrew stopped being pronounced.

7 - **Yet another possibility is “*Ya-hoh*.”** An ancient Aramaic papyri, from before the time of Christ, sounded the Tetragrammaton as “*Ya-ho*” as one of two variant possibilities.

8 - **Still another possibility is “*Ya-hoo*.”** This is the other of the

two variant pronunciations of this fifth-century B.C. papyri. Because of its antiquity, the two variants in this papyri should be considered with respect, even though they disagree with all the other possibilities. But then all the other possibilities disagree among themselves also!

By now, do you feel a little confused?

9 - **Yet another possibility is “*Ya-oo-eh*.”** This is a third sounding of the Tetragrammaton by Clement of Alexandria.

10-11 - **Scholars tell us two other variant possibilities are the two-syllable forms: “*Ya*,” and “*Yo*.”** These are also important.

Of course, we will never know the exact pronunciation of any ancient Hebrew word, since that language never had any written vowels until the Massorites guesstimated them into the text about 1,350 years after the spoken language had been nearly forgotten.

**Do not underestimate this fact. Having the written language was not enough! Men had to know how to speak it! Yet the speaking of it had been totally discontinued for over a thousand years!** Instead, for all those long centuries, the Jews either spoke Aramaic (a sister language which was pronounced differently) or foreign languages. When, near the end of the first millennium of the Christian Era, the Massorites tried to recover the pronunciation, they were trying to put life again into a truly dead language. Modern Jews have had a similar problem, trying to return to the use of Hebrew. But their problem was less than that which the Massorites encountered—who had essentially nothing upon which to base their hunches as to how the ancient language was pronounced. At least, modern Jews had the Massorite pointing (vowel insertions) to work with. But the Massorites had no earlier vowel hunches to go on; they had noth-

ing.

**Keep in mind that, according to experts in phonetics, there are 63 consonantal sounds, and 28 vowel sounds. Each nation or cultural group will only use a few of them. How ancient Hebrews pronounced even the consonants in, what we call, YHWH—is totally unknown.**

In view of all this, why is it that some men are determined to tell the rest of us that we will be lost if we speak about, and pray to, our God by any other name than “Yahweh”?

The “sacred name” theory just does not agree with common sense, much less historical and linguistic facts.

Yes, we quite well agree that the name of God is sacred (read the third commandment, Exodus 20:7), but He is not going to burn us in hellfire if we speak to and about Him in our own language! There are over 2,000 languages and dialects on our planet, and are all those people to be lost, if they do not say “Yahweh”?

The “sacredness” of the name is His character, His power, His majesty, and His love. That “sacredness” is His awesome law and our need to obey it. That “sacredness” is the requirement that we, as His people, not misrepresent Him.

It is not the pronouncing of a word we have no idea how to pronounce.

*You might think that we are finished with our listing of possible pronunciations of YHWH, but there are more:*

**12 - The “V” variant of “Yahweh.”** For as long into the past as we can determine, the “W” (“wha”) sound has often interchanged, replaced, or been supplemented by the “V” (“vuha”) sound. One example of this is the third consonant in the Tetragrammaton, the Hebrew *Vav*. But that letter is also called the *Waw*. In our own time, you will find both the pronunciation, “Yahweh,”

and its variant, “Yahveh.”

**13 - The “V” variant of “Yahovah.”** This variant also applies to “Yahowah,” which would be “Yahovah.”

**14-16 - The “J” variants of “Yahweh.”** Another variation down through the years, concerns the “Y” (“yhu”) sound and the “J” (“jhu”) sound. As with the “W” and “V,” both are sounded in nearly the same way in the mouth, and therefore frequently cross over. This means that “Yahweh” could also in ancient times have been sounded as “Jahweh” or “Jahveh.”

**17-27 - The “J” variants of ten possible pronunciations.** The same principle could apply to “Ya-oo-ai” (which would be “Ja-oo-ai”), “Yahowah” (“Jahowah” or “Jahovah”), “Ya-oh-oo-ay-eh” (Ja-oh-oo-ay-eh), “Ya-oh” (Ja-oh), “Ya-hoh” (Ja-hoh), “Ya-hoo” (Ja-hoo), “Ya-oo-eh” (Ja-oo-eh), “Yah” (Jah), and “Yo” (Jo).

We are here dealing with ancient ways of pronouncing words. How can we know what it is? We know little about how ancient living languages, such as English, were spoken. —**But how could we possibly have any certainty regarding a language which was dead for over a thousand years! There would be no line of parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents to tell us. From 445 B.C. to c. A.D. 900, Hebrew was not spoken by anyone on the planet.**

Throughout this study, we are assuming that the consonants we have today match the consonants we think were used in ancient spoken Hebrew. What we think to have been an ancient “B” sound, may have been a “D” or “T,” and so on. This possibility applies to all the Hebrew consonants, including the ones used in the divine names.

**Frankly, if the God of heaven felt that pronouncing a certain word was that important, He would not have permitted Hebrew to die out, so that we no longer**

**know how it was anciently pronounced.**

**Next we turn our attention to the Yahweh pronunciation of YHWH.** This is the pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton which is preferred by Sacred Name advocates. We have already observed that there are a couple dozen other possible pronunciations of the Tetragrammaton, but, for those who demand more information on that one pronounced form, “Yahweh,” here it is:

**The favored pronunciation, “Yahweh,” is based on a theory devised by Clement of Alexandria.**

Those who have read the present writer’s historical studies on the change of the Sabbath to Sunday, would fear to use anything that came from Clement. He was the one who first theorized that the “Lord’s day,” in Revelation 1:10, must be the Mithric Sun Day, because Jesus is the Platonic God of Light.

Born about A.D. 160 and writing about 205, Clement studied so deeply into Greek philosophy and mysticism, that he imagined logical relationships which just were not there. A master of Platonic thought and Gnostic literature, **Clement decided that the Tetragrammaton was actually a form of the verb “to be.” Now, this may sound like a nice idea, but that does not prove that it is so.**

Sometimes etymology is all right, and sometimes it is not. “Etymology” is the art of taking a word apart and examining the different parts, and speculating as to its meaning from the separate parts. For example, “insect” should be obvious enough: “In” means “within” and “sect” means a religious group. According to that fallacious reasoning, the word, “insect” comes from a group of religious people gathered together in a certain place.

(During his three years at our Seminary in Washington D.C., Dr. Loasby told a class, the present writer was in, of a student who de-

cided that the petroleum company, "Esso," [later changed to "Exxon"] came from "*within* (the petroleum rock)." "Eso," in the Greek, does indeed mean "within" or "inside." The student had used etymology to figure it out. The idea was ridiculous, since "Esso" stands for S and O, and resulted from an earlier, federally ordered, monopoly breakup of giant Standard Oil into a host of smaller firms.)

Well, that is the principle reasoning used to determine that the Tetragrammaton derives from the verb "to be," and therefore should be pronounced "*Yahweh*." Clement argued that the Tetragrammaton had the same consonants as the verb "to be,"—but when it came to pronouncing the word, he did not use the exact pronunciation of any form of the Hebrew word, "to be."

By this time, I am sure you must be very confused. Well, efforts to prove that the Tetragrammaton should be pronounced as "*Yahweh*" are indeed confusing. All we are doing here is exposing the confusion for what it is!

**How can weak, frail human beings be so certain they are right as to the pronunciation of ancient names,—and then demand that all others must yield to their suppositions—or burn in hellfire? Is not this a little egotistical?**

According to the Third Commandment (Exodus 20:7), we should always speak God's name with reverence, no matter what language we address Him in.

"I saw that God's holy name should be used with reverence and awe. The words God Almighty are coupled together and used by some in prayer in a careless, thoughtless manner, which is displeasing to Him. Such have no realizing sense of God or the truth, or they would not speak so irreverently of the great and dreadful God, who is soon to judge them in the last day. Said the angel, 'Couple them not together; for fearful is His name.' Those who realize the greatness and majesty of God, will take His name on their lips with holy awe. He dwelleth in light unapproachable; no

man can see Him and live. I saw that these things will have to be understood and corrected before the church can prosper."—*Early Writings*, 122.

According to *Mount of Blessing*, pages 105-106, and Matthew 6:9, the sweetest and most endearing name by which we can address Him is "*our Father*." **Neither a living Christian experience, nor salvation in Christ is a complicated matter. One does not have to study ancient languages in order to possess either.** All that is required is coming to Jesus, accepting Him as your Saviour, studying His Written Word, and obeying it.

Forget not the story of *Nehushtan*,—something which became too sacred. This was the brazen serpent, representing Christ, in the wilderness.

In later centuries, King Hezekiah had to destroy it with fire in order to get rid of this object, representing God, which—instead of God—was being worshiped! (2 Kings 18:4). Yet, originally, it represented Christ at Calvary.

Today, there are men who worship a word which represents God.

**Just as men can change an object into a god to be venerated, so they can do it with a lost word. That which should be venerated is God Himself, His character, and His majesty. We should fear to displease Him, and strive with all our heart to be like Him. It is not the speaking of a word which counts, but being like God, having a character which He can accept.**

**Just as God let Nehushtan be destroyed, He let the pronunciation of YHWH be lost—so we would not worship that.**

While preparing an in-depth 1,300-page study against evolution, I repeatedly came across logical and mathematical abstractions which were used to support evolutionary theory.

A black hole is a mathematical extreme, which has no reality in the

physical world. A Big Bang is another abstraction, based on carrying physics and mathematics to an infinite point.

The Sacred Name theory is also a logical abstraction. **The pronunciation of a certain word, lost to mankind over 2,400 years ago,—is said to be the key to salvation of humankind today. No one living can possibly restore to us the sounding of that word, yet we are told that, unless we say it properly and exclusively, we are in Babylon and will burn in hellfire.**

**That, my friend, is foolishness.**

— Vance Ferrell

"In order to strengthen our confidence in God, Christ teaches us to address Him by a new name, a name entwined with the dearest associations of the human heart. He gives us the privilege of calling the infinite God our Father. This name, spoken to Him and of Him, is a sign of our love and trust toward Him, and a pledge of His regard and relationship to us. Spoken when asking His favor or blessing, it is as music in His ears. That we might not think it presumption to call Him by this name, He has repeated it again and again. He desires us to become familiar with the appellation."—*Christ's Object Lessons*, 141-142.

"Then press your petition to the Father in the name of Jesus. God will honor that name."—*Christ's Object Lessons*, 148.

"Man must overcome as Christ overcame. And then, through the victory that it is his privilege to gain by the all-powerful name of Jesus, he may become an heir of God and joint heir with Jesus Christ."—4 *Testimonies*, 33.

"The miracles wrought by Paul in the name of Jesus created great excitement among the Ephesians. And certain Jewish exorcists, believing that the sacred name acted as a charm, determined to cast out evil spirits by the same means . . . Their discomfiture . . . furnished unmistakable proof of the sacredness of the name of Jesus."—*Signs*, February 18, 1886.

"One of the first sounds that should attract their [the infants'] attention is the name of Jesus."—*Review*, February 19, 1895.

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