



Names of God in the Hebrew Bible

By Robert L. Foster, PhD

The book of Genesis begins with the majestic line, “In the beginning God.” And it is this God that propels the creation narrative forward to its climactic declaration of all that was made as ‘very good.’ God speaks. God makes. God sees. God names. God finishes. God rests.

When the reader turns to the second creation story, the one focused on Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:4b-25), she encounters another character, the LORD God. The LORD God forms Adam from *adamah* (dust). The LORD God plants the Garden in the East. The LORD God commands Adam to eat of any tree but the one in the middle of the Garden. The LORD God fashions Eve of the rib in Adam’s side.

What should the reader make of this change in the name of the lead character of the story? This change represents a significant variation in the presentation of the name of God in the Hebrew Bible. The first chapter of Genesis uses a general word for God—*elohim*—that might apply to any of the gods of the ancient Near East. The narrative in chapter two uses what we might call the proper name of the God of *Israel*, *YHWH*, translated in English Bibles as “LORD,” in all capital letters.

Often referred to as the **tetragrammaton**, a Greek word meaning “four letters,” these four Hebrew letters—Yod, He, Waw, He (YHWH)—are a form of the Hebrew verb “to be.” It is possible to translate this word into English as “I Am Who I Am” or “I Will Be Who I Will Be.” This name is the one the God of Israel uses to reveal himself to Moses in the famous scene at the burning bush:

‘Moses said to God, “Look, when I go to the children of Israel and I say to them, “The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ then what is the name which I should speak to them?” And God said to Moses, “I Will Be Who I Will Be.’ And so you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘I Will Be’ sent me to you.”’ (Exodus 3:13-14)

At some point in time the divine name (YHWH) came to be held in such high esteem that in public readings in the synagogue the readers refused to pronounce it. As a sign of the ultimate sacredness of God’s name—so holy that it could not even be pronounced—the **Masoretes** added vowel signs to the consonants YHWH, which then changed the meaning of the word to *adonai*, which means “Lord.” This was a name for God that could be spoken (and is the one most frequently used in modern Jewish ritual.) The Greek translators followed this same tradition in their translation by using the word *Kyrios* (“Lord”), as did the Latin Vulgate’s *Dominus* (“Lord”).

Modern English translations consistently use the word LORD in all caps to indicate that the word in the text is the Divine Name YHWH. The fact that texts move freely between God (*elohim*) and LORD (YHWH or *adonai*) indicate that these are somewhat interchangeable. But, then again, certain sections of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, like Genesis 2, persist in using “LORD.” The consistent use of LORD (YHWH) impresses on the reader that the god in question is in fact the one who covenanted with the people of Israel. The actions, commands, or promises of the text come from the LORD who, in spite of a claim to independence (“I Will Be Who I Will Be”), freely chose to shape and participate in the life of the people of Israel.

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Glossary

Masoretes – A group of Jewish scholars from the 6th to the 9th century CE devoted to the copy and preservation of the Hebrew Bible. They developed a system of markings for pronunciation of the text.

Tetragrammaton – A Greek word meaning “four letters” used to refer to the four consonants of the Divine Name, Y-H-W-H.

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