

The Year of the Lord

The Name of the Lord

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In days gone by, one's name often reflected one's occupation. The surnames Baker, Butler, Cook, and Miller, are obvious examples. Nowadays, of course, such names have for the most part become divorced from their origins. But in the Bible, each name has its real significance, not as an arbitrary label, nor as a sign of biological lineage, but as a description of a particular spiritual quality. This is how names are used throughout scripture: to represent and describe spiritual qualities and callings. For instance, Moses means "drawn out." Just as Moses was drawn out of the Nile when he was an infant, he would go on to "draw out" the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. The name Adam (ha-adam) comes from the word for ground (ha-da-mah), from which he was made. Zechariah means "God remembers."

There are indeed many names for God, the Holy One, the Divine, across time, cultures and religions. But what are these names, and what do they mean? What can they tell us about the nature of God that would make a difference in our lives? This article will focus on the names of God as they appear in the Bible, the foundational document of Christianity. And, as a short article on a big topic, I can only offer a few clues for those eager to follow the trail.

We begin with the Hebrew Scriptures, right at Genesis 1:1, where God is called *Elohim*. This is actually a plural

noun derived from "el," which means strength or might. *Elohim* is the creator God; the one who creates the heavens and the earth, including human beings in God's image. Here *Elohim* is not so much a name as a title, like boss or master; the supreme authority (cf.

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Tillich: *The Ultimate Ground of Being*). The word *Elohim* is a somewhat generic term for God and had been in use among the other nations long before Abraham was called out of his home.

But soon after, in Genesis 2:4, it is the Lord as *Yahweh* who creates Adam and Eve, and begins a unique relationship with humanity. More than a supreme authority, we have a slightly more personal notion of God in *Yahweh*: though still invisible and incorporeal, here is a speaking God, a supreme being. Just as quickly the familiar phrase "the Lord your God" (*Yahweh Eloheka*) becomes frequent throughout the whole Bible.

In Exodus 3:13–15, the significance of this name is made blazingly clear to Moses at the burning bush. But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am." He said further,

Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall

say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my memorial for all generations."

Derived from the Hebrew verb "to be," *Yahweh* is translated as "I am that I am," or "I will be what I will be."¹

Here we see that God's name very much corresponds to his "occupation," his work. The Creator God is revealed as *Yahweh*, "the Lord"—not just the distant source of all that is, but existence itself. In the Lord we begin to have a more personal encounter with the Divine—a God who speaks and listens, sees and hears, who walks with us on our journey through history. The Lord is the God of the Covenant.²

In general, I tend to see these two primary names of God in creative tension, *Elohim* as abstract, universal, distant, impersonal, transcendent—beyond experience, and *Yahweh* (the Lord) as concrete, particular, historically situated, personal, imminent; within experience. The classic motif used to describe the relationship between these two aspects of God, these two ways that we experience the unity

¹ The name of God used most often in the Hebrew Bible is the Tetragrammaton (YHWH Hebrew: יהוה). Jews traditionally do not pronounce it, and instead refer to God as HaShem, literally "the Name." In prayer, the Tetragrammaton is substituted with the pronunciation Adonai, meaning "My Lord."

² In the Word of the Old Testament, the Lord is called by a variety of names: Yahweh, the Lord Yahweh, Yahweh Zebaoth, Lord, Yahweh God, God, in the plural and singular, the God of Israel, the Holy One of Israel, the King of Israel, Creator, Savior, Redeemer, Schaddai, Rock, and so on. However, by all these names are meant not many, but one; for the Lord is thus variously named according to his Divine attributes. *Apocalypse Explained*, n. 852

of the Lord our God, is that of father and son.

In the Christian Scriptures these distinctions are retained, merely moving from Hebrew to Greek. *Elohim* (God) becomes *Theos*, and *Yahweh* (Lord) becomes *Kurios*. The Lord your God becomes *kurios theos*. So far, so good. But what about Jesus? Is “Jesus Christ” a new name for God? Yes and no.

NO: He begins as *Yeshua*, a common name in Jewish culture. We know it as Joshua, meaning “God saves.” But along the way, he acquires a new identity. Well into his ministry, he asks Peter, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter answers, “You are the Christ, the son of the living God!” Christ, from the Greek *christos*, meaning “the anointed

one.” To be anointed with oil indicated a special status: set apart or “holy.” Something was happening.

YES: Perhaps we can say that, rather than Jesus Christ being a new name for God, “the Lord” (*Yahweh*) becomes a new name for Jesus, after his glorification, his attainment of unity with the Father (*Elohim*). According to Swedenborg, the name of Jesus Christ contains within it reference to Divine Love and Wisdom itself. As Divine Love, the Lord heals and forgives, he saves and frees, he protects and nurtures. As Divine Truth, the Lord teaches and enlightens, he knows and understands, he discerns and judges.

The story of the Bible, the story of Jesus, and the story of our lives, can be seen as one of a gradual convergence

and unity of these two “names” of God, these twin qualities of *Elohim* and *Yahweh*, Creator and Redeemer. In Jesus, the universal and the particular, the transcendent and the imminent are united, made one. The God beyond all space and time becomes the Lord in every space and time, incarnated and historically existent. The visible God in whom is the invisible God. ☩

Blessed be the name of the Lord
(Psalm 113:2).

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