

The Name and the Form

*“Jehovah” or “Yahweh”? On the Divine Name, Its Pronunciation, and the
Reverence It Is Owed*

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I. A Question of the Name

Of all the things that distinguish Jehovah's Witnesses, none is more visible than the name they carry. It is in the name of their organization, on the cover of their literature, in the first sentence of every conversation at the door: *Jehovah*. For the Watchtower, the use of this name is no small matter; it is very nearly the badge of true religion, the thing that sets them apart from a "Christendom" they say has hidden God's name behind the title "Lord."

And on one point they are entirely right, and a Catholic should say so plainly at the outset: God has a personal name, that name is revealed in Scripture some seven thousand times, and it is a real loss when translations quietly replace it with a title. The instinct to honor God's name is a good instinct. The question this essay takes up is narrower, and it is a question the Watchtower's own scholars have answered in a way that sits awkwardly with their practice: is "Jehovah" actually the name — or is it a later, hybrid *form* of the name, and not the most accurate one at that? And if it is, what follows for the claim that using this particular form is the mark of the true faith?¹

II. Four Letters and No Vowels

Begin with what everyone agrees on. God's name in the Hebrew Scriptures is written with four consonants — יהוה, read right to left, transliterated YHWH and called the *Tetragrammaton*, "the four letters." Those four letters are certain. What is *not* certain is how they were pronounced, and for a simple reason: ancient Hebrew was written without vowels. A Hebrew reader supplied the vowels from knowledge of the living language, the way an English reader can fill in "bld" as "build" or "bold" from context. The consonants were on the page; the vowels were in the mouth.²

The name first comes to full prominence at the burning bush. Moses asks God what he should say when the people ask God's name, and God answers, "I am who I am ... Say this to the people of Israel, 'I am has sent me to you'" (Ex. 3:14). Then he gives the name itself, YHWH — which is, grammatically, a form of the Hebrew verb "to be": "He is"—or, by an older scholarly conjecture, "He causes to be." Already this tells us something about the vowels. The name God speaks in the first person as "I am" (*'ehyeh*) is the same name spoken of him in the third person as "He is" — and the sound of that belongs to the family of *Yah-weh*, not of "Jehovah."³

III. Where “Jehovah” Came From

How, then, did “Jehovah” arise? The answer is one of the more interesting accidents in the history of language, and — importantly — it is not disputed between Catholics and the Watchtower; both tell the same story.

After the exile, the Jewish people came to regard the divine name as too holy to pronounce. When they read the Scriptures aloud and came to YHWH, they did not say it; they said *Adonai*, “my Lord,” instead (or sometimes *Elohim*, “God”). This was an act of reverence, not of forgetting. Centuries later, when Jewish scholars called the Masoretes finally added vowel signs to the consonantal text — around the sixth to tenth centuries A.D. — they faced a delicacy: the consonants YHWH were sacred and could not be altered, but the reader was supposed to say *Adonai*. Their solution was elegant: they wrote the consonants of the Name with the *vowels* of *Adonai*, as a standing cue to the reader’s eye: “don’t say these consonants — say *Adonai*.” The vowels on the page were never meant to be combined with the consonants beneath them.⁴

But that is exactly the mistake that produced “Jehovah.” Centuries later still, Christian readers of Hebrew who did not understand the device did the one thing the device was designed to prevent: they read the consonants of the Name together with the vowels of *Adonai*. Yod-Heh-Waw-Heh, vocalized with the borrowed *a-o-a*, yields “Yehowah,” which in Latin and then English became “Jehovah.” It is, quite literally, the consonants of one word wearing the vowels of another — a form that, as the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* puts it, is a “false form of the divine name Yahweh,” and which the translators of the Revised Standard Version judged “does not accurately represent any form of the Name ever used in Hebrew.” No ancient Israelite ever called God “Jehovah,” because the form did not yet exist.⁵

IV. Why Scholars Say “Yahweh”

If “Jehovah” is a hybrid, what was the original? Here certainty is not possible — the living pronunciation was lost precisely because the name stopped being said — but the evidence converges with remarkable consistency on “Yahweh.”

Three lines of evidence point the same way. First, the grammar: the name is built on the verb “to be,” and its first-person form at the burning bush, *’ehyeh* (“I am”), fixes the vowel pattern in the *yah-weh* family. Second, the abbreviations and names: the short form of the divine name is *Yah* — preserved in “Hallelu-*jah*” (“Praise *Yah*”), which survives even in the Greek of Revelation — and in the hundreds of Hebrew names that end in *-yah* or *-yahu* (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Elijah). Third, the ancient witnesses: Greek-speaking Church Fathers who still heard the name transcribed it *Iaoue* (Clement of Alexandria) and *Iabe*

(Theodoret) — again, the sound of “Yahweh,” not “Jehovah.” Modern Catholic Bibles such as the Jerusalem Bible accordingly print “Yahweh.”⁶

The same grammar answers the Watchtower’s account of the name’s meaning, “He Causes to Become.” That reading requires a causative form of the verb that biblical Hebrew nowhere attests for “to be”—and it is not how God glosses His own name. At the bush He says *’ehyeh ’asher ’ehyeh*, “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex. 3:14): not a maker of becomings but the One who simply *is*. That is the meaning the Septuagint translators heard, the meaning Jesus took up in “before Abraham was, I AM” (John 8:58), and the meaning the Church has taught since: the name does not describe one activity of God among others; it names the One whose very nature is to exist.⁷

V. The Watchtower’s Own Admission

Now comes the point that ought to give a thoughtful Witness pause. On all of this, the Watchtower does not actually disagree. Its own reference works concede the case.

The Society’s *Insight on the Scriptures* states that “Hebrew scholars generally favor ‘Yahweh’ as the most likely pronunciation,” and that “‘Jehovah’ is the best known English pronunciation of the divine name, although ‘Yahweh’ is favored by most Hebrew scholars.” Its brochure on the divine name admits that “many translators favor the pronunciation Yahweh,” and explains that it nonetheless keeps “Jehovah” — not because it is correct, but “because of people’s familiarity with it for centuries.” “Jehovah,” it says frankly, “has a currency and familiarity that Yahweh does not have.”⁸

Read that defense carefully, because it concedes everything that matters. The Watchtower does not claim that “Jehovah” is the authentic pronunciation; it claims that it is the *familiar* one. And that is a perfectly reasonable ground on which a translator might choose a traditional spelling — the Jesuit Paul Joüon kept “Jéhovah” for just that reason, and a Catholic need not object to anyone using the form as a familiar convention. But it is a strange ground on which to build the identity of the one true religion. If “Jehovah” is retained because it is familiar rather than because it is right, then the form cannot also be the divinely required badge of true worship that the Watchtower’s practice makes it. One cannot say in the reference book, “the scholars are probably correct that it is really Yahweh,” and say at the door, “you must call him Jehovah.”

VI. What the Name Means

Step back from the spelling to the substance, for the meaning of the name is where its real treasure lies, and on this Catholics and Witnesses can largely agree. The name built on the verb “to be” declares that God simply *is* — that he is the One who exists of himself, underived, the source of all being. “I am who I am.” When the Church confesses God as

ipsum esse subsistens, “subsistent being itself,” she is unfolding what the burning bush already declared: that God is not *a* being among beings but Being itself, the ground of everything that is.

And the name is not only metaphysical; it is covenantal. The God who *is* is the God who is reliably, faithfully *there* — “I will be what I will be,” present to his people across every generation. To honor the name is to trust the One who bears it: the God who exists necessarily and keeps covenant freely. A Catholic who prays “hallowed be thy name” is asking that this God — by whatever form of the Name human lips can manage — be held holy in all the earth.¹

VII. The Reverence the Name Is Owed

Here we reach the deepest difference, and it is not a difference about spelling at all. It is a difference about *reverence*. The Watchtower tells the story of the Jews ceasing to pronounce the Name as a sad tale of “superstition” that “hid” God’s name. But the Jewish practice was not superstition; it was awe. To guard the Name from casual use, to surround it with reverent silence and the reverent substitute “Lord,” was a way of taking the third commandment with utter seriousness — you shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.⁹

And this reverence is not a Catholic novelty; it is the practice the inspired Scriptures themselves hand on. When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek before Christ, the translators rendered the Name *Kyrios*, “Lord.” And in 2008 the Catholic Church, far from inventing something new, deliberately *returned* to this ancient reverence: the Congregation for Divine Worship directed that in the liturgy the Tetragrammaton should not be pronounced or sung, but rendered “Lord,” following the usage of the Septuagint, the apostles, and the whole Christian tradition. The Church does not despise the Name by speaking it carefully. She honors it the way the name of a king is honored, not by shouting it in the street, but by the reverence of those who know whose name it is.

VIII. The Name the Apostles Wrote

Which brings us to the fact that ought to weigh most heavily of all, and which the Watchtower’s practice cannot easily absorb. The inspired authors of the New Testament — writing under the same Holy Spirit who had given the Name at the bush — did not write “Jehovah.” They did not write “Yahweh” either. Where they quote the most sacred “YHWH” texts of the Old Testament, they write *Kyrios*, “Lord.” Not one of the thousands of surviving Greek manuscripts of the New Testament contains the Tetragrammaton in any form.¹⁰

The New World Translation's appendix has armed the reader with a reply: the Name was in the originals, and superstitious copyists removed it. Weigh what that theory asks you to believe. A change of that size, made across every book and every copying line, would leave a seam—manuscripts reading one way while others read the other, as happens at every genuinely disputed verse. There is no seam: no manuscript, no fragment, no variant, no Father quoting a New Testament verse with the Name in it. The scholar whose work the Society borrows for the theory wrote that the use made of it “goes beyond the evidence,” and the one modern scholar who praises the translation calls the insertion a “conjectural emendation” unsupported by a single Greek manuscript. A restoration with nothing to restore from is not a restoration; it is a revision.

This is a remarkable thing for a movement that makes the name “Jehovah” the center of its identity. The apostles knew the Name; Jesus said he had “made known” the Father's name (John 17:26). Yet under inspiration they handed it on as “Lord,” and the New Testament's characteristic name for God is not the Tetragrammaton at all, but *Father*. When the disciples ask to be taught to pray, Jesus does not give them the four letters to vocalize; he says, “Pray then like this: *Our Father* who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name” (Matt. 6:9). The name is hallowed, and it is hallowed in the mouth of a child saying “Father.” To insist that salvation hangs on pronouncing a 16th-century hybrid is to require of Christians what the apostles themselves did not do.¹¹

IX. Straining at a Vowel

The Watchtower has a reply ready, and it is worth meeting honestly. Those who fuss about “Yahweh” versus “Jehovah,” it says, and then go right on calling God merely “Lord” or “God,” “strain out the gnat but gulp down the camel” (Matt. 23:24). They make much of an exact pronunciation and then never use the name at all.

There is a real point here, and it should be granted. A merely pedantic quarrel about vowels, carried on by people who never actually worship the One named, would indeed be straining at a gnat. If the choice were between a cold “Yahweh” and a loving “Lord,” the love would matter more than the vowels. But notice that the Catholic position is not the pedant's. The Catholic does not say “never use the name”; she says, with the apostles, that the name may be reverently rendered “Lord,” and she knows *why*: because that is what the inspired authors did. The deeper irony is that the gnat-and-camel charge lands more naturally the other way. To take a hybrid *form* of the Name, coined by accident in the Middle Ages, and make *that exact form* the test of whether one belongs to the true religion — that is to strain at a vowel-point while letting the weightier matters go: the reverence the Name commands, the Lord the Name reveals, and the Father to whom the Son gives us access.¹²

X. Conclusion: Honoring the Name Rightly

Let us be fair, and let us be clear. The Watchtower is right that God has a name, that the name matters, and that it is a poverty to lose it altogether behind a bare title. A Catholic can say “Yahweh” with reverence, can rejoice that the Jerusalem Bible prints it, and can honor the truth that the God of Israel is not an anonymous force but a Person who has spoken his name to us.

But the Watchtower is mistaken in two ways that matter. It has absolutized a particular *form* of the Name — “Jehovah” — that its own scholars admit is probably not the original, retaining it (by its own statement) for familiarity’s sake, while making it the boundary marker of true worship. And it has mistaken the reverent rendering “Lord,” practiced by the Septuagint, the apostles, and the Church, for a suppression of the Name — when it is in truth the very reverence the Name demands. The result is a strange inversion: a movement that prizes God’s name above all else insists on the one form of it no ancient believer ever used, and faults the apostolic Church for doing exactly what the apostles did.¹³

The name God gave at the bush is holy — “I AM WHO I AM.” The most faithful way to honor it is not to win an argument about its vowels, but to know and love and reverence the One who bears it: the God who *is*, who keeps covenant, who in the fullness of time made his name known not in four letters but in a Son — “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). To hallow *that* Name, by whatever reverent form our lips can frame, is to honor the Name rightly.

Endnotes

1. That God has a personal name, and that it matters, is not in dispute. The Tetragrammaton appears some 7,000 times; God declares, “I am the LORD [YHWH], that is my name” (Isa. 42:8); and the Psalms repeatedly call on God’s people to “give thanks” to him and “call upon his name” (Ps. 105:1; Isa. 12:4). The Catholic Church affirms the holiness of the Name: see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§203–209, on God revealing his name and its meaning “I AM.”
2. The divine name is written with four Hebrew consonants, יהוה (read right to left), transliterated YHWH and called the Tetragrammaton (Greek *tetra*, “four,” + *gramma*, “letter”). It appears in the Hebrew Scriptures roughly 6,800–7,000 times. Ancient Hebrew was written without vowels, so the four consonants are certain while the original vowels are not.
3. Exodus 3:13–15. When Moses asks God’s name, God answers *’ehyeh ’asher ’ehyeh*, “I am who I am” (or “I will be what I will be”), and then gives the name YHWH — grammatically a form of the Hebrew verb “to be” in the third person, “He is” (or, by an older scholarly conjecture, “He causes to be”). The link between *’ehyeh* (“I am”) and YHWH (“He is”) is itself an argument that the original vocalization belongs to the *yah-weh* family, not to “Jehovah.”
4. After the Babylonian exile, and increasingly in the Second Temple period, Jews ceased to pronounce the Name aloud out of reverence, substituting *’Adonai* (“my Lord”) or *’Elohim* (“God”). When the Masoretes (c. 6th–10th centuries A.D.) added vowel points to the consonantal text, they pointed YHWH with the vowels of *’Adonai* — a written reminder to the reader to say “Adonai,” a device grammarians call *qere perpetuum*. The vowels on the page were never meant to be read together with the consonants of the Name.
5. Reading the consonants YHWH together with the borrowed vowels of *’Adonai* yields the hybrid “Yehowah,” Latinized as “Jehovah.” The form arose among Christian readers who did not understand the *qere* device; it appears in Latin manuscripts from roughly the 13th century and enters English through Tyndale (“Iehouah,” 1530). The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* states it bluntly: “JEHOVAH, false form of the divine name Yahweh” (vol. 7, p. 863). The Revised Standard Version translators concur: “the word ‘Jehovah’ does not accurately represent any form of the Name ever used in Hebrew,” and “it is almost if not quite certain that the Name was originally pronounced ‘Yahweh.’”
6. The reconstruction “Yahweh” rests on converging evidence: (1) the verbal link to *’ehyeh* in Exodus 3:14; (2) the abbreviated form *Yah* (as in *Hallelu-Yah*, “Praise Yah”; Ps. 68:4;

Rev. 19:1–6) and theophoric name-endings such as *-yahu* / *-yah* (Isaiah = *Yesha‘-yahu*); and (3) early Greek transcriptions by the Church Fathers — Clement of Alexandria writes *Iaoué* and Theodoret *Iabe*. The Watchtower’s own *Insight on the Scriptures* concedes that “Hebrew scholars generally favor ‘Yahweh’ as the most likely pronunciation.”

7. *Insight on the Scriptures*, under “Jehovah,” derives the name from a causative form of the verb “to become.” The standard lexicon attests *hayah*, “to be” (some 3,500 occurrences), in the simple (qal) and passive (niphal) stems only, and its rare archaic byform *hawah* (six occurrences) in the simple stem only—no causative (hiphil) of either occurs in the Hebrew Bible. See Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, s.vv. *hayah*, *hawah*. Some twentieth-century scholars conjectured a prehistoric causative behind the name; even on that view it is a scholarly reconstruction from names outside the Bible, not a form the Hebrew text attests.

8. The Watchtower’s stated reason for retaining “Jehovah” is not accuracy but familiarity. Its brochure *The Divine Name That Will Endure Forever* grants that “many translators favor the pronunciation Yahweh” and that “Jehovah” is kept “because of people’s familiarity with it for centuries” — it “has a currency and familiarity that Yahweh does not have.” *Insight on the Scriptures* likewise: “‘Jehovah’ is the best known English pronunciation of the divine name, although ‘Yahweh’ is favored by most Hebrew scholars.” On the Watchtower’s own account, then, “Jehovah” is defended as familiar, not as correct.

9. The reverence that surrounds the Name is ancient and shared. The Jewish practice of saying “Adonai” for YHWH was not a loss of the name but an act of reverence for it; the Septuagint and the New Testament authors followed it, writing *Kyrios* (“Lord”). In 2008 the Congregation for Divine Worship, with the approval of Pope Benedict XVI, directed that in Catholic liturgy the Tetragrammaton is not to be pronounced or sung but rendered with an equivalent of *Adonai*/“Lord” (Letter to the Bishops’ Conferences on “The Name of God,” June 29, 2008) — a deliberate return to the reverential usage of the apostles themselves.

10. Crucially, the inspired authors of the New Testament did not write YHWH, nor any form of it — not “Yahweh,” and certainly not “Jehovah.” Where they quote even the most sacred Old Testament “YHWH” texts, they write the Greek *Kyrios*, “Lord.” No surviving Greek manuscript of the New Testament contains the Tetragrammaton. The Watchtower’s insertion of “Jehovah” 237 times into its New Testament is therefore an addition the inspired text does not warrant — a matter treated more fully on the New World Translation page of this site.

11. John 17:6, 26; Matthew 6:9. The New Testament’s characteristic revelation of God is as *Father*. When Jesus is asked to teach his disciples to pray, he does not give them the

Tetragrammaton to recite but says, “Pray then like this: *Our Father* who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name” (Matt. 6:9). The name is hallowed — held holy — precisely in the intimacy of “Father,” a name revealed fully only in the Son (John 1:18; 14:9).

12. The Watchtower charges that those who insist on “Yahweh” yet ordinarily say “Lord” or “God” “strain out the gnat but gulp down the camel” (Matt. 23:24). The charge has a point worth conceding: a merely fastidious quarrel about pronunciation, divorced from worship, would indeed be a strained thing. But the Catholic position is not fastidiousness; it is the reverence of the apostles, who knew the Name and yet, under inspiration, rendered it *Kyrios*. The deeper inversion runs the other way: to make a 16th-century hybrid *form* the badge of true worship is to strain at a vowel-point while neglecting the weightier matter — the One the Name names.

13. On the revelation, meaning, and holiness of the divine name, see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§203–213 (“God reveals his name”), §§2142–2167 (the second commandment and reverence for the Name), and §2807–2815 (“Hallowed be thy name”). The Catholic tradition both honors the name and guards it — which is the very disposition the name itself invites.

For Further Reading

Letter on “The Name of God”, Congregation for Divine Worship. Free online at https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20080629_nome-di-dio_en.html.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§203–213, 2142–2167. Free online at <https://usccb.cld.bz/Catechism-of-the-Catholic-Church2>.

The Catholic Encyclopedia: “Jehovah (Yahweh)”, on the Tetragrammaton and its pronunciation. Free online at <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08329a.htm>.

Tetragrammaton, overview of the name, the qere device, and scholarship.

The Tetragrammaton and the Christian Greek Scriptures, by Lynn Lundquist—the 237 insertions examined; full text free at the site. Free online at <https://www.tetragrammaton.org/>.

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God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” — Exodus 3:14

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,*

world without end. Amen.

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of the Catholic faith, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and the scholarly tradition on the Hebrew text and the divine name. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense aligns with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.