

NAMING THE NAME

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The Hebrew alphabet consists only of consonants—thusly God’s Hebrew name is spelled *YHWH*. It is called the *Tetragrammaton* (Greek for ‘four letters’). It was not until the second half of the first century that a system of dots and lines placed below and above the letters was developed to represent vowels. These appear in printed Bibles. In synagogues the Bible is still read from scrolls without vowels.

In printed texts the Tetragrammaton most commonly occurs with vowel points which violates Hebrew phonetics—this is a reminder to substitute *Adonay* meang ‘LORD’ for *YHWH*. Jews do not pronounce the Name but say instead *Adonay* or *Hashem* ‘the Name’.

The Greek New Testament honors the prohibition on pronouncing YHWH. *Kurios* substitutes for YHWH in all Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. In NT quotes of Psalm 110:1 both *YHWH* and יהוה *adon* ‘lord’ are rendered as *kurios* ‘lord’ (there is no distinction between capital and lower case letters in the early texts):

Psalm 110:1	Matthew 22:44; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42; Acts 2:34
‘The saying of YHWH to my lord’	‘The Lord said to my lord’

Latin translations of both Old and New Testaments use *Dominus* ‘lord’.

It is said that certain rabbis know the pronunciation of the name, and it may be possible for scholars to figure it out. But is it important for us to pronounce it? If whoever was responsible for the Greek text of the New Testament did not think so, why should Christians think otherwise? Moffat translated with “the Eternal” as do several Jewish translations. French versions use “l’Eternel”. My preference is to respect the sensibility of the Jews (as did the Greek NT and the KJV). [Michael Marlowe](#) says it well:

Why did the Jews avoid saying the Name? Many have described this as a kind of superstitious taboo, but the custom probably sprung from a proper and salutary instinct of reverence. In all times and places, people have used titles rather than names when speaking of persons in authority. Every child knows better than to call his father by his name. Another consideration is that, during the Exile, the Jews had to live among Gentiles who might speak disrespectfully about the Holy One of Israel, and it would have been especially hard for the Jews to tolerate such blasphemy if the very Name of God were used. So it would be best if the Gentiles did not even know it. Another problem was the opposite tendency of some to invoke the Name presumptuously in magical spells, as if they could control God by uttering his name. We know that this was very commonly done with the names of deities in ancient times. There was also an entirely legitimate concern to keep

people from violating the commandment against “taking the name of the Lord in vain” in oaths and curses. The prohibition of speaking the Name would have served all these good purposes.

What about the Aramaic portions of Ezra and Daniel? There I count 86 references to the Deity all in Aramaic. Not once does the Tetragrammaton appear. Nowhere in Scripture is God ever proclaimed to the Gentiles using his Hebrew name.

What's in a Name?

What's the most important aspect of a name? Is it the sound—the pronunciation? Or is it the reputation implied by that name? I should think the latter, as when God said to Moses (Ex 3:15), “Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, the LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath sent me unto you: this *is* my name for ever, and this *is* my memorial unto all generations.” Here the word “LORD” in the KJV represents the Hebrew name YHWH. But I would suggest that the most important point here is what that name represents, which is that God is the God of the patriarchs and will be faithful to the promises made to them.

Thus the Third Commandment in Exodus and in Deuteronomy:¹

- Exodus 20:7[6]—“Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.”
- Deuteronomy 5:11[10]—“Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain: for the LORD will not hold *him* guiltless that taketh his name in vain.”

Can one take the name of YHWH in vain without pronouncing it? I should think so. Whether or not one actually pronounces the name, if one makes reference to God in an oath that he breaks, or if one blasphemes the God of Israel by whatever name, or in some way defames God's reputation by his own conduct—that, I should think, is taking God's name in vain.

The name and reputation of God has been proclaimed in the entire world through the distribution of Bibles and in the spread of Christianity. The result has been both positive and negative. Many, on the negative side, have chosen to reject that God, to impugn his reputation, to curse his name. Has hiding the pronunciation of that name been beneficial in that regard? Likely so. At least they don't use his Hebrew name.

¹ Hebrew for Exodus 20:7[6] & Deuteronomy 5:11[10]:
Thou shalt not take the name of YHWH thy God in vain,
for YHWH will not leave him unpunished
who taketh his name in vain.

Close to 10 chapters in the Tanakh appear in Aramaic (Daniel 2:4b-7:28; Ezra 4:8-6:18 & 7:12-26; Laban's version of a place-name in Gen 31:47; and a statement in Jer 10:11). And so in some 250 verses in Aramaic, do we have any example of the Tetragrammaton? We do not.

Instead we have the Aramaic generic word for God in the absolute and construct ('the God of heaven'; 'the God of Israel'; 'the God of Jerusalem'; 'the God of gods'; etc.). Israel's God is called 'the living God'; א 'the Lord of heaven'; 'the Lord of kings'; the King of heaven'; 'the Ancient of days'; 'the Most High'; ('God Most High'. The temple is repeatedly referred to as 'the house of God'. There are references to the name of God ('the name of God' - Dan 2:20; 'according to the name of my god' - Dan 4:5; 'in the name of the God of Israel' - Ezra 5:1) but no actual pronunciation of that name.

I count 86 references to the Deity in these Aramaic verses all with no mention of the Tetragrammaton. Artaxerxes' letter in regard to building the temple in Jerusalem is found in Ezra 7:12-26. The Persian king—though sympathetic to Judah—nevertheless does not use the Tetragrammaton. Yet in the two Hebrew verses that envelop the letter, Ezra does use God's Hebrew name.

- Ezra 7:11 Now this *is* the copy of the letter that the king Artaxerxes gave unto Ezra the priest, the scribe, *even* a scribe of the words of the commandments of the LORD [YHWH], and of his statutes to Israel.
- Ezra 7:27 Blessed *be* the LORD God of our fathers, which hath put *such a thing* as this in the king's heart, to beautify the house of the LORD [YHWH] which *is* in Jerusalem...