

## The Significance of God's Personal Name 'YAHWEH'

Before delving into the significance of God's personal name, let me point out that the transliteration of the original Hebrew word for God's name is **YHWH** – known as the Tetragrammaton. Because there are no vowels, there is some debate as to how it should be pronounced in English. The main transliterations into English are: Jehovah; and Yahweh. I prefer 'Yahweh' for two reasons. Firstly it appears to be closer to YHWH; and secondly, I don't want people to make the presumption that I am linked to Jehovah's Witnesses. Enough said!

### ➤ **So why am I highlighting God's name 'Yahweh', and what does it mean?**

'**Yahweh**' is God's personal name and has very special significance. But for what appears to be rather poor reasoning, most Bible translations use '**LORD**' in capitals, in place of God's personal name '**Yahweh**'. The problem with this is that '**LORD**', as important as it is, is an **impersonal** title. It fails to communicate **the significance of God's personal name**, and therefore does not help Bible readers to understand important aspects of God's character.

When we read the word '**LORD**' in the Bible – whether in capitals or not – it implies **God's majesty and His position of authority as the ruler of all things** – which is absolutely true and relevant. **But 'Yahweh'** – a rendering of the original Hebrew word for 'YHWH' – means much more than that, and there are Scriptures in which God clearly shows us that His personal name is of great importance.

ISBE makes this comment: *'Characteristic of the Old Testament is its insistence on the possible knowledge of God as a person; and Yahweh is His name as a person. It is illogical, certainly, that the later Hebrews should have shrunk from its pronunciation, in view of the appropriateness of the name and of the Old Testament insistence on the personality of God, who as a person has this name. The American Standard Revised Version quite correctly adopts the transliteration "Yahweh" to emphasize its significance and purpose as a personal name of God revealed.'*

Because of all the above, I have highlighted in bold the name **Yahweh** wherever it replaces LORD in capitals in the scriptures quoted in this article.

As we continue, let me suggest, as I often do, that you submit your heart and mind to the Holy Spirit, and ask Him to give you a clearer understanding of the significance of God's personal name 'Yahweh'.

## a. The importance of God's name 'Yahweh'.

➤ **1. It must be noted that 'Yahweh' appears over 6,800 times in the OT,** including compound names of Yahweh which convey different attributes of God (Refer to chapter 1 section f. in the booklet 'What an Awesome God We Have, Part One') By including His name 'Yahweh' in the Bible so many times, surely God is emphasising its importance.

➤ **2. God chose Yahweh as His personal name by which He related specifically to His chosen; covenant people.**

The first indication of this was when Yahweh appeared to Abram, and called him to be the father of a great nation.

***Gen 12:1-3** Now **Yahweh** said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup> And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."*

So Abram; his wife Sarai; and his nephew Lot, departed from Haran and went to the land of Canaan where Abram called on the name of Yahweh.

***Gen 12:7-8** Then **Yahweh** appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to **Yahweh**, who had appeared to him. <sup>8</sup> From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to **Yahweh** and called upon the name of **Yahweh**.*

But a deeper significance of God's name was not known until His revelation to Moses, as we will now see.

➤ **3. Yahweh emphasises the real significance of His name to Moses**

The first time God revealed the significance of His name, was at the 'burning bush'. Moses' curiosity was aroused by a burning bush which wasn't actually being consumed. When he approached the scene, God spoke to Moses, telling him that He was going to send him to Egypt to rescue God's people from captivity. After expressing his reluctance, Moses questioned the Lord:

***Exod 3:13-15** (NIV) Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?"*

*<sup>14</sup> God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"*

<sup>15</sup> *God also said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, 'Yahweh, the God of your fathers--the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob--has sent Me to you.' "This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation".*

In response to Moses question, God's initial response was: *"I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"*

This statement was an introduction by God to convey His personal name 'Yahweh' as seen in v.15. Following the declaration of His personal Name is the strong emphasis Yahweh placed on the importance of that name:

***"This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation". (Exod 3:15)***

'Yahweh' is His name forever – not just back in the time of Moses or His chosen people Israel – but forever. His name is still **Yahweh**. And it is the name which He is to be **called throughout all generations**.

This is an emphatic statement by God, and it should grab our attention. And regardless of the fact that Bible translators have seemingly ignored the importance of the Name, we should absorb its significance, and familiarise ourselves with the use of it, especially as we read the Word of God.

➤ **4. The significance of His name is also emphasised in other Scriptures:**

***Exod 6:2-3*** *God spoke to Moses and said to him, "I am Yahweh. <sup>3</sup> I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them.*

Abraham his family knew that 'Yahweh' was God's name (see *Gen 12:7-8* on p.7). But what the above verse is indicating that they didn't know the real significance of His name 'Yahweh'. The Hebrew word for 'know' has an experiential sense, as it does in many other places in the Bible. The personal experiential knowledge of God is absolutely critical for us. This has been addressed in the booklet 'The Most Important Thing in Life: Knowing God', and will again in the third topic in the booklet series – 'God's Purposes for Humanity'.

***Exod 34:5-7*** *Yahweh descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of Yahweh. <sup>6</sup> Yahweh passed before him and proclaimed, "Yahweh, Yahweh, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, <sup>7</sup> keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty...*

**Psa 135:13** Your name, O **Yahweh**, endures forever, your renown, O **Yahweh**, throughout all ages.

**Isa 42:8** I am **Yahweh**; **that is my name**; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols.

**Ezek 36:22-23** “Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord **Yahweh**: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of **my holy name**, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came.

<sup>23</sup> And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am **Yahweh**, declares the Lord **Yahweh**, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.

**Hos 12:5** **Yahweh**, the God of hosts, **Yahweh** is his memorial name.

Read also: **Exodus 33:19; Psa 83:18; Psa 113; Isa 52:5-6; Jer 16:21; Ezek 20:14;**

Clearly, throughout these Scriptures, Yahweh is highlighting the **importance** of His name. But He is also giving to His people **the right and the responsibility to call Him by His personal name rather than by a formal name, or a title**. This gives us a clear indication that **Yahweh wants to have a personal relationship with His chosen people, rather than simply being a 'Lord' who rules over them**.

In the Bible, names generally have important significance. They might be saying something about the person’s character, or about the reason why God chose them to fulfil a special task. For God, His names are always significant, and mostly convey important aspects of God’s character; or the out-working of His authority or power – either in the heavens, or for His people.

## **b. The meaning of God’s name ‘Yahweh’**

The introductory explanations below present us with explanations from an academic point of view. Generally I prefer to avoid such approaches in these booklets, because my focus is on what Yahweh reveals about Himself through His Word and by His Spirit. However, it is to some degree unavoidable in this case because of the difficulty of explaining the meaning of God’s personal name.

In consideration of the transliterations from the original Hebrew of both **‘I AM’** and **‘Yahweh’** as found in some of the well-known Bible commentaries and dictionaries, we find the following definitions:

### ➤ **I AM**

Hebrew H1961: ‘Hâyâh’ In general meaning: to exist – that is – be or become, or come to pass.

Bible commentators often define ‘Hâyâh’ to mean ‘**I Am who I Am**’, and also use the third person form: ‘**He is who He is**’, or ‘**He will be who He will be**’.

It should be noted that the ‘Hâyâh’ also appears in **Exodus 3:12**, where Yahweh said to Moses: ‘...I will be with you...’ The sense here is that He will always be present with His people; whereas ‘I Am’ – the expression of who He is – speaks of His self-existence.

### ➤ **Yahweh**

Hebrew H3068: ‘YHWH’ From H1961 (above); Self-existent or eternal.

We see here the connection between the two words in the above definitions – ‘YHWH’ is actually derived from ‘I AM’, and they both include the idea of existence.

Generally these definitions, coupled with an understanding gained from the contextual use of ‘Yahweh’, give us a clearer understanding of the meaning of ‘**Yahweh**’. Following is a summary of widely accepted explanations:

➤ **Yahweh is the self-existing and eternal God. He is who He is; incomparable; always sufficient; inexhaustible; and without need to justify Himself in the face of any other being. He is the unchanging God who will always be present with His covenant people. He is not dependent on anyone else, because He is Sovereign; and He does whatever is right according to His nature.**

Other insights from Bible scholars which expand the explanation of Yahweh’s name are as follows:

### ➤ **The name ‘Yahweh’ points to His covenant faithfulness:**

**Exod 6:3-8** *I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name **Yahweh** I did not make myself known to them. <sup>4</sup> I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners. <sup>5</sup> Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the people of Israel whom the Egyptians hold as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant. <sup>6</sup> Say therefore to the people of Israel, ‘I am **Yahweh**, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. <sup>7</sup> I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am **Yahweh** your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. <sup>8</sup> I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am **Yahweh**.’*

➤ **His name reveals His sovereignty and glory**

***Psa 83:18** ...that they may know that you alone, whose name is **Yahweh**, are the Most High over all the earth.*

***Isa 60:1-3** Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of **Yahweh** has risen upon you.<sup>2</sup> For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but **Yahweh** will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you.  
<sup>3</sup> And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.*

➤ **Yahweh is the everlasting; ever present; all powerful God**

***Isa 40:28** Have you not known? Have you not heard? **Yahweh** is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.*

I trust that so far you have come to a greater appreciation of the significance of God's personal name 'Yahweh'. The purpose of the next three sections is to expand our understanding of the significance of 'Yahweh', from the time of His revelation to Moses, and through Israel's journey towards the Promised Land.

### **c. Yahweh's impressive, yet restricted revelation to Moses**

One would expect that because of the emphasis Yahweh has placed on the importance of His name, He would reveal more about Himself when He addressed Moses at the burning bush. But, obviously God had reasons for doing it the way He did. I believe some of these reasons are:

- **Firstly**, the essential thing Yahweh wanted His people to recognise was His self-existence; His powerful presence with His people; and His dominant supremacy as the God of their fathers.
- **Secondly**, rather than just verbally explaining all His capabilities, He was about to grab people's attention with an up-front, visible display of His almighty power, and His control over all things – the environment, creatures, and people.
- **Thirdly**, His purpose was to progressively reveal Himself to His people in various ways, with the pinnacle being through His Son Jesus Christ.

### **d. Yahweh's powerful revelations to His people Israel**

Moses, along with Aaron, went off to Egypt to carry out God's call to set His people free from captivity and slavery. The story is pretty well known – how Pharaoh refused to listen to Moses, and how God began to send plagues upon the Egyptians in order to show His almighty power. He did this by turning Aaron's rod into a snake; by changing the Nile River into blood; by inflicting plagues of

various creatures; by killing the Egyptian's livestock; by plaguing them with boils and hail; and by sending complete darkness over Egypt for three days.

Each time, Pharaoh hardened his heart and refused to release the Israelites. So finally God sent the most serious plague by killing all the firstborn sons of the Egyptians. This was the turning point for Pharaoh, and he let the people go.

Throughout the plagues that God sent upon the Egyptians, the Israelites would have been openly aware of the almighty power of Yahweh to do whatever He saw fit to do. **But wait, there's more.** God had planned to show Israel and the Egyptians another extraordinarily impressive display of His power to control anything He wanted to – the Red Sea crossing, and the destruction of the Egyptian army which was now set on destroying the Israelites.

Rather than including a restricted number of verses about the Red Sea story, I am suggesting that you read the whole story in your own Bible – even if you know it well. Please read from **Exodus 13:17 through to ch. 15:21.**

I would like to suggest – if you agree with the explanations about the importance of God's personal name 'Yahweh' – that **as you read your own Bible, try to form the mental habit of reading 'Yahweh' wherever 'LORD' appears in capitals. It will take some time, but I have found that it works if you stick to it.**

➤ **Also, more importantly, as you read, place your focus on Yahweh and the amazingly powerful things He was doing, and the authoritative way He spoke to the people. Try to imagine yourself in the situation in the particular context of the Scriptures you are reading.**

For us now, as we read the Red Sea saga, there should surely be a 'wow' factor. But unfortunately, it seems we have become so familiar with the story that it doesn't have the impact that it should. But what is even more strange is the fact that within a relatively short space of time after the Red Sea, the Israelites were complaining to Moses about their lack of food and water.

Surely – one would think – they would still be stunned by Yahweh's powerful presence with them, and the miraculous things they had seen Him doing. Surely they would be more humble when requesting food and water! But no – *'...the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?"'* (**Exo 15:24**). Such complaints were an ongoing issue, even though God continued to display His sovereign power by providing for all their needs; by protecting them; and by giving them victory over other nations who attacked them.

### **e. Yahweh's visible presence with Israel**

Soon after leaving Egypt, Yahweh's presence was clearly visible as He went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud by day to guide them on the way, and a pillar of fire by night to give them light.

*Exod 13:21-22 And Yahweh went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. <sup>22</sup> The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.*

From this we also learn that God was leading them in the direction that He had established. The people would have had no idea where they were going, as they had been in Egypt for 430 years.

Exactly three months after the Israelites had left Egypt, they camped in front of Mount Sinai, and Moses went up the mountain and met with God.

➤ **Please read through Exodus chs 19 & 20 in your Bible, following the same suggestions in bold type made on p.12; and please keep the following things in mind as you do:**

1. Yahweh was about to give the Israelites something special and of huge significance – the Ten Commandments. The people were directed to consecrate themselves, and to keep clear of the Mountain because of the terrifying scenario that was about to occur.

2. The main purpose of reading through these Scriptures is to add more to our appreciation of **the greatness; the sovereignty; and the limits of approachability to Yahweh at that time.**

3. When God had finished giving His Commandments to Moses, their response was one of fear – as we would expect. But take note of Moses inspired response to the peoples fear in **ch20:18-26.**

➤ **In the book of Deuteronomy, as Israel was preparing to enter the Promised Land, Moses recapped their journey up to that point, and presented some challenging questions to the Israelites as a part of their preparation to go and possess the Promised Land. Read Deuteronomy 4:32-40**

As it should have been with the Israelites, surely these passages are a strong reminder and encouragement for us to recognise the awesomeness of Yahweh, and to grow in our fear of Him, as Yahweh Himself requires of us.