My God is Yahweh

Names are important in Western culture. Parents choose names for their children after much thought and discussion.   For the rest of a person's life, he is identified by the name he was given before birth. But the significance of names in our day cannot compare with the significance of names in biblical times. Ancient peoples understood that a name expressed the essence or identity of a person. According to Proverbs 22:1, "A good name is more desirable than great riches." In the biblical world, a good name meant more than even a good reputation, because it identified the character of the person carrying it.

NAMES AND NAMING

There are three aspects to names and naming: (1) a name identifies the character of the named; (2) to name someone means the namer knows or understands the named; and (3) to name someone means the namer has authority over the named.

Identity

In the ancient Near East, a person's name identified something about the person's character or his circumstances (e.g., birth or family). Isaac's name, "he laughs" described the response of Sarah, his mother, when God told her she would give birth even though she was elderly. Moses' name from the Hebrew "to draw out" was given to him after he was pulled from the Nile River. The angel told Mary to name her baby Jesus (actually Yeshua, a shortened form of Yehoshua or Joshua), from the Hebrew "to save" or "savior" because "he will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21).

Knowledge

To name someone or something implies that the namer understands enough about the named and its circumstances to describe it and make use of it. Adam named the creatures of the earth. This meant he understood each one clearly enough to describe its character and function. (In Adam's case, he also was able to determine that none of them was an appropriate mate for him Gen. 2:19-20.) Our word 'classify' comes close to the activity of naming. So, when God tells us "I know you by name" (Ex. 33:17), it means more than that he recognizes us individually. Rather, it indicates that he understands completely who and what we are. This brings us to the final aspect of the naming process.

Authority

To name someone or something also implies that the namer has authority over the named. God changed Abram's name to Abraham (Gen. 17:5) because God had authority over him. Pharaoh could rename Joseph for the same reason (Gen. 41:45). This aspect of the naming process proved significant for the Hebrews when it came to their knowing and using God's name.

GOD'S NAME

To use God's name meant one understood something of his essential character and being, that one could identify and understand (know) him. But God is the sovereign Creator of the universe. God existed before anyone or anything. Who among his creatures truly understood who he was? And who had authority over him? Only God can understand his being enough to name himself, and he alone has the authority to do it.

It was Moses who finally had the courage to ask God to give himself a name. In the Book of Exodus, 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?" (Ex. 3:13). God answered Moses by revealing his name to him.

Meaning

The name God gave himself has caused much confusion and discussion. Both its meaning and its pronunciation are not entirely clear. The Hebrew letters for the name are YHWH (vowels were pronounced but not written in ancient Hebrew), and they appear more than 6,800 times in the Hebrew Bible alone. Most scholars believe YHWH is related to a root word meaning "to be present" or "to exist" and probably meant either "He creates or causes" or simply "I am (that I am)," meaning that God did not depend on anyone or anything for his existence. (Note Moses' first question to God and his response in Ex. 3:11:12: God identified Moses as the one who depends on God. This passage would support the idea that God's name identified his independence of any outside being. That makes God the ultimate source of everything that was, is, and will be.) This identification of God meant that His name could be used only of him and for him, because nothing else could possibly measure up to such a description.

Sacredness

The Israelites were afraid to use God's name because they might use it in ways that he had not revealed. Instead, they called him "Lord" (Hebrew: *Adonai*), "God" (Hebrew: *Elohim*), "The Name" (Hebrew: *Ha-Shem*), or by some other title. After they returned from the Babylonian Captivity (ca. 500 BC) , they refused to use God's name at all, out of respect and fear for what it represented the holy God's self-description. The people simply said Adonai whenever the sacred name was intended.

Transliteration

By the Middle Ages, few Jewish people could read Hebrew because it was no longer their native language. The dispersion after the destruction of the second temple in AD 70 and the Bar-Kochba Revolt in AD 135 scattered the Israelites around the known world. Soon they spoke only the language of the lands of their dispersion, and Hebrew was relegated to religious matters. To help the people read Hebrew, the scribes of the period (called Masoretes) introduced a system of vowel marks to identify the sounds that had always been spoken but never written. These marks were placed below (occasionally above or

between) the consonants of the text. Now even those not fluent in Hebrew could pronounce the words.

When the scribes came to the sacred name of God (YHWH), they did not want their readers to pronounce it because it was so holy. Instead of using the original vowel sounds (which were never written), they placed the vowel points from Adonai ("Lord") to indicate that the reader should say Adonai instead of YHWH. The vowels a-o-a were placed above and below YHWH. Later, the first a was changed to e, probably to prevent the reader from accidentally saying Ya (the first syllable of the sacred name). Unfortunately, Christian translators were unfamiliar with the Jewish people's respect for God's name. So to them, YHWH, with its e-o-a vowels, looked like Ye (Latin:Ja) Ho WaH, or Jehovah," though that pronunciation was never used in Bible times. When we Christians use this name, we reveal our ignorance of our Jewish roots.

Most scholars believe God's name was pronounced, Yahweh." Modern translations use "LORD" in all capital letters to identify it. This obscures the practice the Israelites had of using part of God's name (Yahweh) in their children's names. Any biblical name ending with -iah or -jah includes part of God's name, for example, Hezekiah, Elijah, Azariah, and Isaiah. Names beginning with Jeho- or Jo- also use a syllable from God's name for example, Jehu, Jonathan, Joel, and Jehoshaphat.

WHAT GOD'S NAME MEANS TO US TODAY

Certainly, God understands that modern Christians use Jehovah because they believe it is the name God gave himself. Many other believers use Yahweh because it is closer to the Hebrew original. The main point is to recognize that only God is able to understand and describe himself. We are dependent upon his revelation of his nature to understand him. Therefore, we must use his name carefully. Using it to refer to things other than God such as when we swear is, in effect, to claim authority over God. That was Adam and Eve's sin and what caused them, and their descendants, to be exiled from the Garden of Eden.

The biblical characters whose names included reference to God, and whose very identities pointed to God, should be our role models. What they did with their names, we must do with our lives. Every aspect of our characters our very identities must speak of the living God so that the world may know that he alone is God.

Praise God that he revealed his name to us and granted us the privilege of using it for his glory!