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In The Name of God

Confusion sometimes arises among Christians as to how we ought to address God. Indeed some feel it is imperative that we use the Hebrew form of the name, almost a matter of our salvation being at stake. Should we always use the Hebrew names? Or ought Christians to simply call God "Father"?

by James McBride

It must first be understood as of paramount importance that our salvation does not hang on our shaping our lips in a specific manner to pronounce a word. No act of any human whether by word or deed can earn salvation. It is a gift - freely given by a loving God through the awesome sacrifice of our Savior, the Anointed One, known to us as Jesus Christ.

But could there be other reasons for addressing God only in a form of Hebrew?

The Language of Canaan

The Hebrew language (in the Old Testament called "the language of Canaan"), of course, is like any other - over time it evolved in its letter form, in its spelling, syntax, punctuation etc. And it had its dialects (Judges 11:5-6). There is nothing "sacred" about Hebrew. The reason that writings which span three thousand years appear "all of a piece" to us is that they were updated around a thousand years ago. This has happened with our King James Version of 1611. It has been updated by publishers as the language changed. So care is needed in our interpretation of the Biblical text. How Hebrew is now pronounced is a product of the Middle Ages - a thousand years after the Biblical (OT) period.

God at first revealed Himself to His people - all of whom spoke what we term the Hebrew language, or a variant. That revelation included a number of names descriptive of His nature. His power is revealed in the first-used word for God - *El/Elohim* - translated by the Jews in the *LXX* and by the writers of the New Testament as *theos*. Other examples are *Yhvh-Jireh*, *Yhvh-Sabaoth*, *Yhvh-Rapha* etc. But He is also known by a large number of other names. A name, in biblical usage, "correctly describes the person, place or object and indicates the essential character of that to which the name is given".

These names have no significance to those who do not understand the language in which they were spoken. They are mere sounds, not magical, and have to be translated.

And when understood - by translation - they add to our comprehension of God's majesty and power and love.

Four Letters

The most significant name of God is YHVH - the so-called "tetragrammaton" (a Greek word). The exact pronunciation of YHVH is not now known, the vowels of the word Adonai, lord or master, being inserted by Jews for clarity. However, in the *Passover Papyrus* (5th century BC) the vowels are supplied as *YAHU* - similar in sound to the *LXX IO* (Exodus 3:14).

Its meaning was revealed in these verses by God Himself: "I am that I am". That is, JHVH is the one who "is, was, and is to come" (*see* Revelation 1:8, John 8:58). He is the self-existing one. Thus when we read the name (it appears 6823 times in the Scriptures) we could call God "the Eternal" - as does the French language Bible or the Moffatt version. This is an apt English translation, and comprehensible to the English language speaker. In this form it imparts the essential understanding God wanted us to have about His nature.

It was in the early Hellenistic period, following the translation into Greek, that the Jews began to follow the Gentile mystical practice of attributing to God an "unutterable name of the divine essence". By the early Middle Ages they evolved a system for standardizing the text. The Jews, to avoid any possibility of going contrary to Leviticus 24:16, had a superstitious regard for the name of God, both in speaking and writing. Indeed there is evidence that the "sacred name" had occult significance in Judaism.

A couple of centuries before Jesus was born the Jews translated YHVH as *Kurios* (= Lord, or having power, *see* the *LXX* version). No scruples at that time about using a translation of the name of God into Greek. The New Testament writers continued this, calling God, and Jesus, *Lord, Kurios*.

In The Name Of God

Note also that most quotations in the New Testament from the Old are from the *LXX* version. It was the text commonly used by Christians for the first three centuries. For all its imperfections, God chose the Greek language to preserve His new covenant witness. In the first century it held a comparable position in the world as does English today. Jews, from the fourth century BC on through the time of the NT writings, were immersed in the vernacular Greek language and its culture.

It has been suggested that there was some great conspiracy by the Greek Christians to supplant the Hebrew names of God by one related to a pagan God. This is supposition and without evidence. If this indeed were the case, there's *no* part of the Greek text which we can trust! While not impossible it is extremely improbable. For the NT text was, almost before the ink was dry, copied hundreds of times - no chance to recall them to expunge the Hebrew names of God and substitute pagan titles! They were in fact read out, dictated, in Greek.

The many appendages to YHVH (e.g. Yhvh-jireh) add to our understanding of God's nature, but *only when translated into the language of the hearer*. They help us focus on the many revealed aspects of the character of God.

Simply using the Hebrew form has no significance for those who do not understand the Hebrew language. To comprehend the meaning of God's names needs translation. There is no virtue in using the Hebrew form - unless Hebrew is your native language! Otherwise - blind incomprehension. There is nothing magical or virtuous about using the correct pronunciation - which is not anyway known for certain!

“Jesus”

Much the same applies to the name *Jesus*, the name given by God to the Messiah before his birth (Matthew 1:21). There is no logical reason to view this as a “sacred name”. It was common to many of the race - but in the Hebrew form *Joshua*, meaning God the Savior. This meaning is so much associated with “Jesus” that anyone with Bible interest knows the meaning. And until his resurrection our Savior was human - “the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5).

The use of *Jesus* for *Joshua* was common long before the birth of our Savior - e.g. in the Greek *LXX* translation. The form was identical (*lesous*) to that of the New Testament text, both for Jesus Christ and for others named there with the same name.

Another name applied to Jesus Christ is “Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14, Matthew 1:23). The meaning is lost on the non-Hebrew speaker, but when translated is a vital clue to the nature of Jesus: “God with us”. Perfectly understandable in Hebrew but not in any other language. Matthew was not averse to translating this “sacred name” into Greek. The New Testament writers did not elsewhere use the term.

In sum, then, there is no compulsion to use the Hebrew forms of God's name. It merely serves to hide the meaning to the non-Hebrew speaker. Like other “works” it will not enhance or hinder our salvation. But we can learn much about the character of God through a study of the many given names.

A Family Relationship

Jesus gave us the example of addressing God simply as “Father”. And the New Testament usually called Jesus “Lord”. He is also referred to as “Savior,” or “Jesus Christ” - which is Gk for *Savior the Anointed One*. The English *Saviour* (French *Sauveur*) is a derivative of the Gk *soter*. It is a simple matter of convention that we usually refer to him as “Jesus” or “Jesus Christ”. It is helpful at times to remind ourselves of the meaning of these names. But it is in no way essential.

When Messiah returns He will “turn to the people a pure language” - even Hebrew has its imperfections! All the accretions that have surrounded His name will be authentically removed by divine fiat. Men - including those who claim to be Christian - have attached to God a variety of practices that provoke Him to jealousy (Ezekiel 43:6-10). In Christianity, a host of heathen customs have been included - such as Christmas, Easter, All Saints Day etc. None reflect the worship God requires.

As believers in the true faith of the Bible, we are to rejoice in a close family relationship with the One who has begotten us as His children, and forgiven our sin through His Son. As such we need only - in company with Jesus himself and the apostles - address Him as *Father* (e.g. Matthew 6:5-14).

The occasions on which we need to use the Hebrew forms of God's names are limited to scholarship and Bible exposition of those names.

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