

The Tetragrammaton: יהוה

The Sacred Four-Letter Name of God

The Tetragrammaton—from Greek tetra ('four') and gramma ('letter')—refers to the four Hebrew consonants יהוה (yod-he-vav-he) that constitute God's most sacred, intimate, and frequently used name in Scripture. This name appears approximately 6,828 times in the Hebrew Bible, far exceeding all other divine designations combined. Yet its precise pronunciation was lost centuries ago when Jewish reverence for God's holiness led to the practice of substituting Adonai ('Lord') whenever the name appeared in public reading.

The Hebrew Letters and Original Pronunciation

The four consonants comprising the Tetragrammaton are יהוה, transliterated as YHWH or JHVH. From right to left in Hebrew: yod (י), he (ה), vav (ו), he (ה). Ancient Hebrew was written without vowels; readers supplied vowel sounds from context and oral tradition.

Exodus 3:13-15

And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them? And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.

Etymology and Theological Meaning

The Tetragrammaton derives from the Hebrew verb הָיָה (hayah), meaning 'to be,' 'to exist,' 'to become.' God's self-revelation at the burning bush—"I AM THAT I AM"—employs the first-person imperfect form of this verb.

Exodus 6:2-8

And God spake unto Moses, and said unto him, I am the LORD: and I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the name of God Almighty, but by my name JEHOVAH was I not known to them.

Psalm 90:2

Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.

Jewish Reverence and the Practice of Substitution

The Tetragrammaton's sacredness in Jewish tradition stems from the third commandment. By the intertestamental period, YHWH was pronounced only by priests during temple service.

Exodus 20:7

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.

Psalm 111:9

He sent redemption unto his people: he hath commanded his covenant for ever: holy and reverend is his name.

Christ and the Tetragrammaton

The New Testament reveals a stunning identification: Jesus Christ claims the prerogatives, honors, and identity associated with YHWH.

John 8:56-59

Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad. Then said the Jews unto him, Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham? Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am.

Philippians 2:9-11

Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow.

Revelation 1:8

I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty.

Conclusion

The Tetragrammaton stands at the center of biblical revelation—the name by which the eternal, self-existent, unchangeable God revealed Himself to Israel, redeemed His people from bondage, established covenant relationship, and ultimately became incarnate in Jesus Christ.

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