

Spelling the Sacred Name: V or W?

What are the four letters that make up the Tetragrammaton or Sacred Name—YHVH or YHWH? Here's the answer from Hebrew scholars, linguists, lexicographers, and historians.

OUR HEAVENLY FATHER REVEALED Himself to us in the Hebrew Scriptures. But what exactly is His Name? The more knowledgeable say that in English it should be to Yahweh, some claim Yahvah, and others Yahveh. Bear in mind that the Old Testament was first written in Hebrew, using the Hebrew alphabet. It is through this ancient language, then, that we find the true Name of the Creator.

We have the advantage of the preservation of the Old Testament in the Hebrew. The Hebrew copies of the Scriptures were meticulously made through the years; the scribes carefully counting each letter and word to ensure accuracy.

The Almighty revealed to us His personal, memorial Name in Exodus 3:15, which is preserved in the Hebrew as יהוה (read from right to left). Known as the Tetragrammaton, meaning “four letters,” His Name is represented by our English **YHWH**, or as some believe, **YHVH**.

Names Remained Unchanged

Whenever mankind was spoken to from the heavens, it was to those who understood Hebrew. Conversations between humans and celestial beings recorded for us in the New Testament were to those who spoke Hebrew, such as the annunciation to Miriam, or to Paul on the Damascus road. There is reason to believe that Hebrew was spoken by Adam and Eve and is the heavenly language, which survived the confusion of tongues at Babel.

In order for English-speaking peoples to pronounce correctly the Heavenly Father's name, it is necessary to bring the phonetic sounds from the Hebrew language into the English. Bringing the exact sounds across to another language is known as “transliteration.” Names are transliterated, not translated. Translation means to bring across the meaning of the word or phrase.

Proper nouns of persons and places are seldom translated, but are transliterated and sound the same the world over. One can listen to a foreign newscast and note the names like “Bush,” “Saddam,” “Yeltsin,” “Kohl,” “Moscow,” “Washington,” and “London” are easily discernible. Proper nouns simply do not change from language to language, but remain the same, allowing for ethnic accents. Our Bible has many names transliterated from the Hebrew, such as Adam, Reuben, Ruth, Esther, and Daniel. Yet the most important Name of all—Yahweh—was purposely, wrongfully changed!

Equivalent Letter Necessary

If a foreign language uses an alphabet of Latin letters like English, French, Spanish, or German; the transliteration is much easier. If, however, the language uses another alphabet such as found in Russian, Sanskrit, Chinese, Japanese or Hebrew, then we must employ letters from our English alphabet to express the same sound.

Therefore, to go from Hebrew to English it is necessary to seek the equivalent letter that best expresses or approximates a given sound. Linguists have already done that for us, and we can readily ascertain from many available charts the correct Hebrew letters of the Tetragrammaton and then “transliterate” these into English.

Bible scholars agree that the personal Name of the Mighty One of Israel is best-expressed in Hebrew today as “יהוה”. The letters are written and read from right to left as they are in most Semitic languages. The Tetragrammaton is most often represented in English as **YHWH**.

The question before us is, what is the exact English equivalent of the Hebrew Tetragrammaton (yothe, he, waw, he), יהוה ?

When the J Was an I

At one time the letter j was used to represent the Hebrew yothe (י), much like the letter i. In fact, the upper case letter I was given a tail about 500 years ago and became the J, known as the “cursive J.” This can be found in most good dictionaries and encyclopedias.

At first the letter j was pronounced as an I (in police) or y (in story) and could faithfully represent the sound of the Hebrew yothe (י). We cannot accurately use the j today because through French influence it has evolved into the sound of g (as in age) for English readers. There is no letter j or j sound in Hebrew or in the sacred Name. (“Jehovah” is erroneous. Write for our ministudy, **Is His Name Jehovah or Yahweh?**)

Scholars use either the y or i in place of the Hebrew yothe, as both give the “ee” sound of i as in machine. The letter j still retains the y sound in “Hallelu**JAH**.”

Yahweh or Yahveh (vah)?

So what is the proper pronunciation of the Hebrew ו (waw) in Yahweh’s Name? A few think the waw should have the pronunciation of the v; that the letter should be called “vav,” which would make the sacred Name “Yahveh” or Yahvah.” They point to Bibles lacking modern scholarship that show the Name in one of these forms.

It is true that a few Bibles indeed spell the sacred Name in English with a v. Centuries ago this might have been proper, as the v, like a few other English letters, had variant pronunciations and had not become as fixed as today. The early Bible was published using either the letter u or the v to represent the Hebrew letter ו (waw). The letter u and v were often used interchangeably because of their equivalency. In the original 1611 version of the Bible the u and v are not differentiated.

It was not until the dictionary was published that a decided difference was made between the v and u. Later the w was added (“double u”). The u, v, and w occur together in our alphabet, making the 21st, 22nd, 23rd letters of the English alphabet, respectively. This fact is more than coincidence. It shows the relationship a common derivation (just as the J follows the I, to which it is related).

‘Waw; Considered a Vowel

Biblical Hebrew is a soft Hebrew known also as Sephardic or Temple Hebrew. Biblical Hebrew pronounces the ו (the W in YHWH) as waw, or as u or w. **Bagster’s Helps to Bible Study** reads on page 238, “The ו, ה, י, and י are called vowel letters, as having been originally used to represent vowels, and they still frequently serve as vowels in combination with the points...Of these a represented the sound a; w o and u; y e and i; and h a, e and o final, but not i and u.”

In his book **How the Hebrew Language Grew** (p. 28), author Edward Horowitz points out that there are three Hebrew letters which when spoken hastily, rapidly, or excitedly are slurred or dropped because they were weak and apparently unimportant. The interesting point is these letters are all used to make the sacred Name: the yothe = י; he = ה; and waw = ו.

It is the waw (ו) upon which we wish to concentrate as it is central to the correct and proper pronunciation of the Name. Author Horowitz shows a number of words in the English in which the equivalent (w) is often silent, such as “answer, sword, law, two, write, etc.” He emphasizes that anciently; it was not a “vee” sound.

“...the sound of ו a long time ago wasn’t “vav” at all but “w” and “w” is weak...The Yemenite Jews of Arabia who retain an ancient, correct, and pure pronunciation of Hebrew still pronounce the ו as “w” –as does Arabic, the close sister language of Hebrew,” pp. 29-30.

The Berlitz Hebrew Self-Teacher on page 73 reveals: “The Hebrew alphabet forms its vowels by a system of ‘dots’ under the consonants, as we have seen in the introduction. But in current Hebrew writing ‘dots’ are seldom used. Therefore...we shall drop the ‘dots’ from this lesson on. There are, however, four letters which can be used as vowels. װ and ן may have the vowel sound of ah or eh, ן that of oo or oh, and of ee or eh.”

Mark and Rogers’ **A Beginners Handbook To Biblical Hebrew** on page 7 reads: “Originally Hebrew had no written vowels; the following consonants, however, were often used to indicate long vowels: ן, ו, װ, ן.”

The yothe = ן, he = װ, and waw = ו, which are used in Yahweh’s Name are understood as being consonants which can be merged into vowels. Vowel sounds are spoken with the mouth open.

A Simple Approach to Old Testament Hebrew by EKS Pub. Co. states on page 9: “...The Hebrew letter waw ו can function as a consonant or a vowel. When the waw is a consonant it sounds like w, as in water, and usually has a vowel sign under it...When the waw functions as a vowel it has the sound of o as in row. With a dot above it, the waw sounds like o as in row: ן. With a dot in its center, the waw sounds like oo as in pool ו. Note: This dot in the center of waw is not a dagesh. Usually the waw is not both a vowel and a consonant at the same time. When a waw functions as a vowel, sounded o or oo, it does not have the sound of w as in water. The ן, like waw, can be both vowel and consonant.”

Fagnani and Davidson’s **Hebrew Primer and Grammar** states on page 10: “The four letters ן, ו, װ, ן may lose their consonantal force and be merged into vowels.”

Sephardic vs. Ashkenazic Hebrew

In explaining the Hebrew language, Menahem Mansoor in **Biblical Hebrew** points out on page 33: “There are, generally speaking, two main pronunciations: the Ashkenazi, or German, originated by Central and Eastern European Jews and carried to all countries to which those Jews have emigrated (Western Europe, America, etc.): and the Sephardi, or Spanish, used by the Jews of Spanish or Portuguese stock in Europe and America and also by Jews from Oriental countries. In all universities and throughout Israel, the Sephardi pronunciation has been adopted, since it is generally believed that this is the pronunciation nearest to the original...”

A response to a query about the proper pronunciation of waw/ vav, EKS Publishing responded, “In modern Hebrew it is pronounced **VAV**. Since our materials are geared for a predominantly Jewish audience, we give this pronunciation in our wall charts and most other publications. However, in Biblical times the letter was pronounced **WAW**. Because our book, **A Simple Approach to O.T. Hebrew**, is written for a Christian audience, we have given this Biblical Hebrew pronunciation for WAW and for a few other letters.”

Other sources relate that since the turn of the century the Jews returning to Palestine have been mostly from Eastern Europe. Thus, the heavy influence of Ashkenazic or Germanic pronunciation of vav instead of the Sephardic or biblical waw has become dominant in present-

day Judaism, and is referred to as “Modern-Sephardic.” However, the Temple or Biblical Hebrew demands waw as the ancient and more correct pronunciation.

A number of Hebrew grammars for English students state that the Hebrew װ (waw) is one of the weak letters, which often takes on the force of a vowel, along with the other letters of Yahweh’s Name. Here Yahweh has taken the lesser letters of the Hebrew alphabet and made them into the strongest in the universe by employing them in His Name!

V Once Equivalent to U and W

History reveals that the pronunciation was Yahweh. Clement of Alexandria transliterated the name into Greek in the form Iaoue. Theodoret used Iabe. According to the **New Bible Dictionary** (p. 478), the Greek b represented the v. The early writers and translators obviously used the letter v for the Tetragrammaton in English because it was then used as an equivalent for the Hebrew waw (w) and was considered a vowel.

The prestigious **Oxford English Dictionary** notes the following on “V”: “The 22nd letter of the modern English and the 20th of the ancient Roman alphabet, was in the latter an adoption of the early Greek vowel-symbol V, now also represented by U and Y (q.v.), but in Latin was employed also with the value of the Greek digamma (viz.w), to which it corresponds etymologically.” **Webster’s New World Dictionary** concurs that the digamma had the sound of the English w. (“V”, p. 1565)

By the time the Hebrew Tetragrammaton was transliterated into English as **YHVH**, the “v” had either the sound of “v” as in victory, or, more often, sounded as a “u.” There was no “w” or “u” in early English. Both these letters were latecomers to the alphabet, developing from the v, even though the sound was more like the “oo” in moon.

In Latin, Julius is spelled “Jvlivs,” the “v” pronounced like a “u.” In Anglo-Saxon the Germanic tongues, the Latin v was understood to mean uu or u, and so we get the w, made up of double v’s (double u’s”). Even today the German v is pronounced like a w: Volkswagen = ”Wolkvagen.”

The “u” and “v” were also used interchangeably in English. Take the word “upon.” It was often spelled “vpon.” There was no hard-and fast-rule to guide the proper spelling in English when to use a “v” or “u.” It was only when the growing vocabulary made necessary the need for a dictionary that a determination was made on a word’s precise spelling and pronunciation. Thus a word would consistently be found in the same place in the alphabetized dictionaries such as “unto” under “u” and “vigil” under “v.”

At the time the venerated **King James Bible** was written, the “v” and “u” were being used interchangeably. The “w” came upon the scene a bit later. Almost any encyclopedia or dictionary will show that there was little differentiation made in early writings.

Four Sacred Vowels

Josephus tell us that the High Priest wore a miter or hat as a part of his habit, and the miter was inscribed with FOUR VOWELS (YHWH) (**Wars**, 5:5:7 {235}). (The “v” is the erroneous “Yahveh” or “Yahvah” is consonantal and not a vowel sound.)

About the ninth century B.C.E., Hebrew writing began to use certain letters for vowel sounds. The fact that the four letters of the Tetragrammaton are four vowels further substantiates the correct pronunciation, Yahweh!

Many people have the false notion that the Hebrew alphabet consists only of consonants. They fail to realize that the vowels were understood and inserted when read. Remember, the entire Old

Testament is written in Hebrew and without vowels between consonants. Yet it is read from Genesis 1:1 to Malachi 4:6 and understood without vowels!

Even today people familiar with the Hebrew language can easily read it in the consonantal text alone. A modern Hebrew newspaper is printed without vowel points, and those readers for whom it is intended can read it without difficulty.

Every language uses vowels in order to be spoken, as vowels are the sounds uttered with the mouth open.

The Old Testament of the Bible was written in Hebrew and some few parts in Aramaic. A growing number of scholars are realizing that the greater part of the New Testament, or even all of it, was written in Hebrew. (Send for our free ministudy, **Was the New Testament Originally Greek?**)

It is obvious, therefore, that our best source of the proper pronunciation of the sacred Name is to be found in the Hebrew texts, as this is where the true Name Yahweh, יהוה, was originally given.

In Summary

From the ancient Hebrew we have learned that the waw in the Tetragrammaton is a vowel sound pronounced as a u. Only later was the vee sound applied to the waw (becoming vav) popularized by European Jews known as Ashkenazi.

The V itself developed from the Greek upsilon with a U or OO sound. In Latin the V took on the sound of the Greek digamma (W) and denoted the w sound in Old English. Only in Middle English do we start seeing the V taking on the consonant sound of “vee.” Therefore, to pronounce the Creator’s Name properly, using the proper vowel form, we must call on “Yahweh,” His majestic Name!

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