

## **It is your Privilege to know your CREATOR**

### **“Jehovah” or “Yahweh”?**

“MONGREL,” “hybrid,” “monstrous.” What would cause Biblical Hebrew scholars to use such emphatic terms? At issue is whether “Jehovah” is a proper English pronunciation of God’s name. For over one hundred years, this controversy has raged. Today, most scholars seem to favor the two-syllable “Yahweh.” But is the pronunciation “Jehovah” really so “monstrous”?

### **At the Root of the Controversy**

According to the Bible, God himself revealed his name to humankind. (Exodus 3:15) Scriptural evidence shows that God’s ancient servants freely used that name. (Genesis 12:8; Ruth 2:4) God’s name was known by other nations as well. (Joshua 2:9) This was especially true after the Jews who had returned from exile in Babylon came into contact with peoples of many nations. (Psalm 96:2-10; Isaiah 12:4; Malachi 1:11) *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* says: “There is considerable evidence that in the postexilic period many foreigners were attracted to the religion of the Jews.” However, by the first century C.E., a superstition about God’s name had developed. Eventually, not only did the Jewish nation stop using God’s name openly but some even forbade pronouncing it at all. Its correct pronunciation was thus lost—or was it?

### **What Is in a Name?**

In the Hebrew language, God’s name is written יהוה. These four letters, which are read from right to left, are commonly called the Tetragrammaton. Many names of people and places mentioned in the Bible contain an abbreviated form of the divine name. Is it possible that these proper names can provide some clues as to how God’s name was pronounced?

According to George Buchanan, professor emeritus at Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, D.C., U.S.A., the answer is yes. Professor Buchanan explains: “In ancient times, parents often named their children after their deities. That means that they would have pronounced their children’s names the way the deity’s name was pronounced. The Tetragrammaton was used in people’s names, and they always used the middle vowel.” Consider a few examples of proper names found in the Bible that include a shortened form of God’s name. Jonathan, which appears as *Yoh-na-than’* or *Yehoh-na-than’* in the Hebrew Bible, means “Yaho or Yahowah has given,” says Professor Buchanan. The prophet Elijah’s name is *’E-li-yah’* or *’E-li-ya’hu* in Hebrew. According to Professor Buchanan, the name

means: “My God is Yahoo or Yahoo-wah.” Similarly, the Hebrew name for Jehoshaphat is *Yehoh-sha-phet*, meaning “Yahoo has judged.”

A two-syllable pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton as “Yahweh” would not allow for the o vowel sound to exist as part of God’s name. But in the dozens of Biblical names that incorporate the divine name, this middle vowel sound appears in both the original and the shortened forms, as in Jehonathan and Jonathan. Thus, Professor Buchanan says regarding the divine name: “In no case is the vowel oo or oh omitted. The word was sometimes abbreviated as ‘Ya,’ but never as ‘Ya-weh.’ . . . When the Tetragrammaton was pronounced in one syllable it was ‘Yah’ or ‘Yo.’ When it was pronounced in three syllables it would have been ‘Yahowah’ or ‘Yahoowah.’ If it was ever abbreviated to two syllables it would have been ‘Yahoo.’” —*Biblical Archaeology Review*.

These comments help us understand the statement made by 19th-century Hebrew scholar Gesenius in his *Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures*: “Those who consider that יהוה [Ye-ho-wah] was the actual pronunciation [of God’s name] are not altogether without ground on which to defend their opinion. In this way can the abbreviated syllables יהו [Ye-ho] and יו [Yo], with which many proper names begin, be more satisfactorily explained.”

Nevertheless, in the introduction to his recent translation of *The Five Books of Moses*, Everett Fox points out: “Both old and new attempts to recover the ‘correct’ pronunciation of the Hebrew name [of God] have not succeeded; neither the sometimes-heard ‘Jehovah’ nor the standard scholarly ‘Yahweh’ can be conclusively proven.”

No doubt the scholarly debate will continue. Jews stopped pronouncing the name of the true God before the Masoretes developed the system of vowel pointing. Thus, there is no definitive way to prove which vowels accompanied the consonants YHWH (יהוה). Yet, the very names of Biblical figures—the correct pronunciation of which was never lost—provide a tangible clue to the ancient pronunciation of God’s name. On this account, at least some scholars agree that the pronunciation “Jehovah” is not so “monstrous” after all.

“**Jehovah**” has been the most popular pronunciation of God’s name