



The NAMES OF GOD, A Bible Study – For the Alabama Legislative Staff

Special Session Edition

Last summer and fall we studied the attributes of God to better appreciate how different He is from us, yet we discovered He shares some of His attributes with us. (If interested in reviewing, Bible Studies are posted at: <https://capitolcom.org/bible-studies/alabama/>). Our study now will follow the special revelation of God’s names as He designated it to unfold in Scripture—and which reveal additional information about Himself. We will start with Hebrew and conclude with Greek forms.

1. ELOHIM — אֱלֹהִים “Mighty One”

If a Hebrew speaker were to say “God” generally or as a descriptor more than a proper name, that would be the Hebrew word “El”. The first appearance of this usage is in the very first verse of the Bible: Genesis 1:1—

“In the beginning, God (Elohim) created the heavens and the earth.”

Interestingly, the Hebrew word here for God is not simply “El” but “Elohim”, which is the plural form. This signals us from the very beginning that the Creator God is a Triune One, revealed later as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (see Matthew 3:16-17, Ephesians 5:18, 20). It is used 2,247 times in the English Standard Version of the Bible and speaks to His great might and creativity.

When Moses first encountered God in the form of a burning bush in Exodus 3, “Elohim” appears 21 times in that chapter alone. Moses asks God what His name is and the response introduces our second name:

“God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers...has sent me to you.’”

Basically, *Elohim* tells Moses to say, “*Jehovah*, the *Elohim* of your fathers sends me.” This introduction impresses on Moses that God exists only because of Himself. Everyone else in the universe has an origin, as created beings, but God is independent of any other entity. Mind boggling, isn’t it?

Biblical Examples: Daniel, “God is Judge”; Ezekiel, “God will Strengthen”; and Israel, “Struggles with God”

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2. JEHOVAH (YWHW) – יהוה “The Self Existing One”

While El (and Elohim) could be used to describe other “gods” in Hebrew, Jehovah is a name which only the one true God holds (see Psalm 83:18). This Name carries such a devotion among the scribes that they contracted it to the four consonants only, YWHW—called the *Tetragrammaton*—and avoided saying the name, Jehovah (or in Hebrew, *Yahweh*). Because of the missing vowels, the actual pronunciation is unknown. The third of the Ten Commandments shows God’s high regard for this Name:

“You shall not take the name of the LORD (YWHW) your God (Elohim) in vain, for the LORD (YWHW) will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain. Exodus 20:7, God speaking to Moses

As we consider this concept of self-existence, we need to first appreciate the context in which God has revealed this about Himself: He is commissioning Moses to be the deliverer of His people out of Egyptian bondage, during which God will judge the pantheistic “gods” of ancient Egypt.

The thing that made the Hebrews “His people” is the covenant God made with Abraham in Genesis 12, way before Jacob’s twelve sons and families arrive in Egypt under Jacob’s son, Joseph. So, appreciate the flow of how God reveals this covenantal name: It appears as early as Genesis 2:4 as “YWHW Elohim” (The LORD God), in the account of the creation of man and woman—as He establishes the creation covenant with them. Recall this narrative was given to Moses on Mount Sinai by God (Exodus 24:4). As noted, when God uses YHWH in the story of Abraham’s call (Genesis 12:1, designated in all-capitals in our English Bibles: “the LORD”) the patriarchs were familiar with this distinctive name. But as theologian Joel Beeke points out, Moses’ question in Exodus uses a particular form that asks not just what God’s Name is, but for an explanation. The LORD’s answer is actually two-fold, derived from how the LORD answered Moses in Exodus 3:12 and 14: In verse 12, He is the God who is with Moses; in verse 14, He is the “I AM WHO I AM”. In the former, He communicates a covenantal faithfulness; in the latter, His sovereign lordship.*

By the time of Jesus, this command had spawned all kinds of ways to maintain the holiness of the Name by avoiding saying it, so when Jesus Himself used this term in John 8:58, the Jews picked up stones! They did not miss what He was communicating (that He was divine) when He said,

“Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” John 8:58

YWHW (the LORD) appears 5,525 times in the ESV Bible.

Having now introduced the two most commonly used names in the Bible for God, the names that follow in our study will refer to one of these forms to reveal other aspects of God’s nature.

Biblical Examples: Hezekiah, “Jehovah is My Strength”; Jeremiah, “Jehovah Will Lift Up”; Yeshua (Jesus), “Jehovah Saves”

* Beeke, Joel R. and Paul M. Smalley, “Reformed Systematic Theology, Vol 1: Revelation and God”, Crossway, 2019, page 551.

Questions? Please feel free to contact me if I can be any assistance in helping your understanding of God’s Word!

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