

The Origin of the “Divine Name”

Ronald Dean Rezendes Th.D.

The name “Jehovah” has been inserted in the New Testament by the Watchtower New World Bible Translation Committee in verses where the text is believed to refer to the Father. They have taken the liberty to do this *despite* the fact that it blatantly goes against the thousands of Greek manuscripts of the New Testament that we have—some which date from the second century. (The New Testament always uses the word “Lord” [Greek: *kurios*] and “God” [Greek: *theos*], never “Jehovah”—even in quotations from the Old Testament.)

Often a Jehovah’s Witness will point to the importance of using God’s correct name, Jehovah. He or she will typically open the *New World Translation* and cite such passages as Romans 10: 13: “Everyone who calls on the name of Jehovah will be saved” and Ezekiel 39: 6: “People will have to know that I am Jehovah.”

The Jehovah’s witnesses believe that because they are the only group that refers to God by His “true” name, Jehovah, they are the only true followers of God. Indeed, all other so-called Christian denominations are part of a false, satanically inspired, and spurious Christendom.

Sometimes I am asked, “Where did the name Jehovah come from?” Many Bible students realize this name is not found in the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts from which English translations of the Bible are derived. This is not to deny that the Jehovah’s Witness point to some manuscripts that contain the name *Jehovah* (a few copies of the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament—use “Jehovah”). But such manuscripts are not held to be reliable. The majority of the manuscripts know nothing of this name. (The Old Testament contains the name “Yahweh”—or, more literally, *YHWH* [the original Hebrew had only consonants].) This being so, then, where did the name Jehovah come from?

To answer this question, we must recognize that the ancient Jews had a superstitious dread of pronouncing the name YHWH. They felt that if they uttered this name, they might violate the Third Commandment (Exodus 20:7). So, to avoid the possibility of breaking this commandment, the Jews for centuries substituted the name “Adonai” (Lord) or some other name in its place whenever they came across it in public readings of Scripture.

Eventually, the Hebrew scribe decided to insert the vowels from Adonai (a-o-a) within the consonants YHWH. The result was Yahowah, or Jehovah. So, the word Jehovah is derived from a consonant-vowel combination from the words *YHWH* and Adonai. Watchtower literature acknowledges this fact (*Reasoning from the Scriptures* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1989), p.195).

The point that needs to be made here is that Jehovah is not actually a biblical term. It is a man-made term.

What About “Jehovah” In Legitimate Translations?

There are other Bible translations besides the *New World Translation* (that is, legitimate translations) that have used the name Jehovah—either consistently, as in the *American Standard Version* (1901), or in isolated instances. An example of a version that uses Jehovah only in isolated instances (just four times) is the *King James Version* (see Exodus 6: 3; Psalm 83:18; Isaiah 12: 2; 26: 4). The *New English Bible* also uses Jehovah in Exodus 3: 15 and 6: 3. Jehovah’s Witnesses often impressed people by pointing to such verses where the name Jehovah is used in these translations. It gives the appearance that the Jehovah’s Witnesses are right in saying that God’s only true name is Jehovah.

Before proceeding any further, I must make an important point. Though there is no biblical justification for the term Jehovah, it is important to recognize that scholars are not precisely clear as to the correct way to pronounce the Hebrew word *YHWH*. Though most modern scholars believe Yahweh is the correct rendering (as I do), we really cannot criticize the Jehovah’s Witnesses for using the term Jehovah where the Hebrew consonants YHWH appear in the Old Testament (though they can be criticized and proven wrong regarding the insertion of this name in the New Testament). After all, some evangelical Christians and some legitimate Bible translations (in the Old Testament) use the term Jehovah as well.

Reasoning from the Scriptures

Two of the more common passages cited by Jehovah’s Witnesses to support their view of the divine name are Exodus 3:15 and Matthew 6: 9. But there are many other lesser passages they may bring up while interacting with them.

As we examine these two passages in detail, keep in mind that they are representative of a larger group. The Scriptural arguments I will suggest in refuting the Watchtower interpretation of these passages can be adapted for use with the other passages as well.

Exodus 3: 15—*Jehovah*: God’s Name Forever?

The Watchtower teaching. Exodus 3: 15 tells us that after Moses asked God what His name was, God said: “This is what you are to say to the sons of Israel, ‘Jehovah the God of your forefathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name to time indefinite, and this is the memorial of me to generation after generation “(NWT).

The Jehovah’s witnesses teach that this verse constitutes a command to refer to God as Jehovah forever and ever. One Watchtower publication tells us:

To this very generation in the twentieth century, to our own generation

since A.D. 1914, the name of the eternal God is JEHOVAH. To all eternity this is his holy name, and, as the memorial of him, it is the name by which we are to remember him to all eternity. It is his unchangeable name. From the beginning of man's existence to Moses' day it had not changed; and from Moses back there in 1514 B.E.C. till today that name has not changed. So after all these thousands of years of time it is fitting for us to use that name in a worthy way, "*Let Your Name Be Sanctified*" (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1961), p. 88.

As noted earlier, the Watchtower Society teaches that since the Jehovah's Witnesses are the only ones who consistently call God by his name, they alone are the true followers of God. All others are outside of Jehovah's kingdom.

The Biblical Teaching. In responding to the Watchtower interpretation of Exodus 3:15, one must challenge the claim that only the name Jehovah applies uniquely to the true God of Scripture. God is identified in other ways in Scripture besides the name Jehovah. One example of this is the expression "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"—an expression that occurs many times in Scripture. This shows that though God *is* known by the name Jehovah (or, more properly, Yahweh); He is not known *only* by the name Jehovah (or Yahweh). He is known by other names as well. Hence, Exodus 3: 15 can not be taken to mean that Jehovah is the only name by which God can be addressed.

Question:

Since God is often identified as "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"—without any mention of the name Jehovah—doesn't this mean that the name Jehovah is not the only way that God can be addressed?

In keeping with this, it is noteworthy that in the New Testament times, Jesus never addressed the father as Jehovah. If the Jehovah's Witnesses are correct that God must always be called by the name Jehovah, then Jesus was way out of line. (Note that the New World Translation sometimes puts "Jehovah" in Jesus' mouth in the New Testament, but the translators do so in direct violation of the thousands of Greek manuscripts that we have.)

Consider the Lord's Prayer. Jesus did not begin this prayer with the words, "*Jehovah God*, who art in heaven." Rather, He said, "*Our Father*, who art in heaven" (Matthew 6: 9 NASB, emphasis added). Jesus began other prayers this way as well (Matthew 11: 25; 26: 39-42; Mark 14: 36; Luke 10: 21; 22: 42; 23: 34). It is not surprising that Jesus taught His followers to pray this way. Indeed, in view of the fact that we are God's children, we are uniquely privileged to come before the Father and call out to Him, "Abba Father!" (Romans 8: 15; Galatians 4: 6). The fact that we can address God as Father proves that we are not to dogmatically interpret Exodus 3: 15 as meaning that Jehovah is the only expression by which God can be addressed.

Question:

Since Jesus never addressed the father as Jehovah, and since He taught that we can address God as Father, doesn't this mean that the name Jehovah is not the only expression by which God can be addressed?

Along the same lines, we must reiterate that according to the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, the name Jehovah does not occur a single time in the New Testament. This is highly significant, for if Jehovah was to be the sole name for God in all generations, then the word would certainly occur in the New Testament. But it does not occur there anywhere, despite the fact that the Watchtower's *New World Translation* deceitfully inserts the term throughout the New Testament in verses thought to refer exclusively to the Father.

Now, having said all this, let us briefly look at Exodus 3:15 to find out what this verse really means. The name Yahweh (remember, Jehovah is not really the correct form here) is connected with the Hebrew verb "to be." We first learn of this name in Exodus 3, where Moses asked God by what name He should be called. God replied to him, "I AM WHO I AM.... Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you'" (verse 14 NASB).

The phrase "I AM" is not the word Yahweh. However, "I AM" (in verse 14) and Yahweh (in verse 15) are both derivatives of the *same* verb, "to be." The name "I AM WHO I AM" that God revealed to Moses in verse 14 is intended as a full expression of His eternal nature, and is then shortened to Yahweh in verse 15. The names have the same root meaning and can be considered essentially interchangeable.

Before proceeding further, it is crucial to keep in mind that in the ancient world a name was not a mere label as it is today. A name was considered as equivalent to whomever or whatever bore it. Knowing a person's name amounted to knowing his essence and being.

A survey of Scripture shows that the *name* and *being* of God often occurs together in the form of a *parallelism* (a literary form indicating a close parallel relationship). The Psalms illustrate this for us (emphasis added): "Therefore I will praise *you* among the nation's, O LORD; I will sing praises to *your name*" (Psalm 18: 49); "Sing to *God*, sing praise to *his name*, extol *him* who rides on the clouds—*his name* is the LORD—rejoice before him"(Psalm 68: 4);" Remember how the enemy has mocked *you*, O LORD, how foolish people have reviled *your name*" (Psalm 74: 18); "I will praise *you*, O LORD *my God*, with all my heart; I will glorify *your name* forever," (Psalm 86: 12). Clearly, Scripture portrays God and His name as being inseparable. To no one is to know the other.

Now, most scholars today agree that the name Yahweh conveys the idea of eternal self-existence. Yahweh never came into being at a point in time, for He has always existed. He was never born. He will never die. He does not grow older, for He is beyond the realm of time. To know Yahweh is to know the eternal one. Scholars have also noted that the name communicates that God

is absolutely supreme and is in control of everything. Hence, the name Yahweh reveals God as eternal Lord and supreme Ruler of the universe.

So, when God told Moses that “this is My name forever, and this is my memorial-name to all generations” (Exodus 3: 15), He was telling Moses not only His name but that He would manifest Himself (through all generations) in the nature expressed by that name (that is, His eternal self-existence and sovereign Lordship). And He would do this so that all generations would both know Him and revere Him as He really is.

In Exodus 3: 15, then, the focus is not limited to a mere eternal name of God, but—more importantly—deals with the fact that people of all generations would come to understand who God is in His true nature and being. God would testify to all generations that in His nature He is eternally self-existent and the sovereign Lord of the universe. This is in contrast to false gods who are not self-existent (they don’t really exist at all) and are not sovereign over anything (1 Kings 18: 36). God is completely unique as the self-existent and sovereign Ruler of the universe, and this uniqueness was to be made know to all generations by the term Yahweh.

To recap: 1) God *is* known by the name Jehovah (Yahweh), but He is not known *only* by the name Jehovah (Yahweh); 2) God is identified in other ways in Scripture *besides* the name Jehovah; 3) Jesus never referred to God as Jehovah, but rather called Him “Father”; 4) believers are uniquely privileged to call God “Father”; 5) the word Jehovah never occurs in the New Testament (according to *all* the Greek manuscripts); and 6) in Exodus 3: 15 the focus is not limited to a mere name of God, but—more importantly—deals with the fact that people of all generations would come to understand who God is in His true nature and being.

In view of the above, the claim that God must always be referred to by the name Jehovah (or Yahweh) does not coincide with the Scriptural evidence. Though it is most certainly right to call God “Yahweh,” is also right to address Him in other ways as both the Old and New Testaments testify.

Matthew 6: 9—“Sanctifying God’s Name”

The Watchtower Teaching. In Matthew 6: 9 we are told: “You must pray, this way” ‘Our Father in the heavens, let your name be sanctified’” (NWT). The only way God’s name can be sanctified, Jehovah’s Witnesses tell us, is by calling Him by His *true* name, “Jehovah,” and by treating that name as holy “*Let God Be True*” (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1952), p. 28. Indeed, in order for our prayers to be heard, we must address God by this name. To call God by any other name is to dishonor Him “*Let Your Name Be Sanctified.*”

As noted earlier the Watchtower view that superstitious Jewish scribes removed the sacred name Jehovah from the Bible. In keeping with this, Jehovah’s witnesses also tell us that most Bible translations today deceive people because they all omit Jehovah as God’s name. In 1961 the Watchtower

Bible and Tract Society published a book entitled after Matthew 6: 9 "*Let Your Name Be Sanctified*"—in which we read:

The translating of the Book [the Bible] into more languages or dialects continues on, that the Book may reach more and more people whose eternal life is in danger. But from many of these translations we cannot learn the name of our Creator, because another word or a title has been used instead of his name. By such translations the name has not been respected, honored, or held sacred; it has, in fact, been hidden from readers who need to know the name for their own salvation "*Ibid.* p.12," insert added.

How can we know this "name" that will yield our salvation? This same Watchtower book tells us:

If we have our own eternal interest at heart, we will be anxious to acquaint ourselves with God, to know him as he is and not as Christendom has misrepresented him. This acquaintance we can obtain by reading and studying the Book of his name, the Holy Bible, and by intimately associating ourselves with his approved visible organization, the "people for his name," the remnant of his anointed witnesses, the "faithful and discreet slave" class "*Ibid.* pp.374-75."

The Biblical Teaching. Is a true, as the Watchtower Society claims that superstitious Jewish scribes removed the sacred name Jehovah from the Bible? This is preposterous! There is not a shred of evidence to support this claim. (I have asked and never received from a Jehovah's Witness any hard evidence for this assertion). Indeed, the claim is especially absurd in view of the fact that the Watchtower Society elsewhere argues for the profound accuracy of both the Old and New Testament manuscripts. For example, in the Watchtower book *Reasoning from the Scriptures*, Sir Frederick Kenyon's book *The Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri* is quoted approvingly. This book shows the textual reliability of both the Old and New Testament "*Reasoning from the Scriptures*" p.64.

Question:

How can the Watchtower Society argue for the profound accuracy of the Old and New Testament manuscripts and at the same time say that the name *Jehovah* was stripped from these manuscripts by superstitious Jewish scribes?

The Watchtower's insertion of the name Jehovah in the New Testament (against all manuscript evidence) is just another attempt on the part of the Jehovah's Witnesses to cloud the truth—that is, that the name the New Testament consistently uplifts is Jesus, not Jehovah. May I suggest that there are a number of questions one can ask and an interested Witness in order to demonstrate that the New Testament consistently uplifts Jesus, not Jehovah?

1. In whose name should we meet together (Matthew 18: 20; 1 Corinthians 5: 4)?
2. Demons are subject to whose name (Luke 10: 17; Acts 16: 18)?
3. Repentance and forgiveness should be preached in whose name (Luke 24: 47)?
4. In whose name are you to believe and receive the forgiveness of sins (John 1: 12; 3: 16; Acts 10: 43; 1 John 3: 23; 5: 13)?
5. By whose name, and *no other*, do we obtain salvation (Acts 4: 12)?
6. Whose name should be invoked as we bring our petitions to God in prayer (John 14: 13:14; 15: 16; 16: 23, 24)?
7. In whose name is the Holy Spirit sent (John 14: 26)?
8. Whose name and authority was invoked by the disciples in healing the sick and lame (Acts 3: 16; 4: 7-10, 30)?
9. Whose name did Paul tell us to call upon (1 Corinthians 1: 2)?
10. Whose name is above every name (Ephesians 1: 21; Philippians 2: 9-11)?

The answer to each of the above questions is obviously *Jesus Christ* and should serve to get the attention of the fair-minded Jehovah's Witness. The above Scripture references should be more than adequate to demonstrate the name by which true followers of God should be identified.

It should be pointed out that the above reference to Philippians 2: 9-11—where we are told that Christ was given a name above every name “that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow... in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” —is taken from an Old Testament passage about Yahweh. Indeed, Paul—an Old Testament scholar *par excellence*—is alluding to Isaiah 45: 22-24: “I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear.” Paul was drawing on his vast knowledge of the Old Testament to make the point that what is true of Yahweh is also true of Christ, the Lord of all humankind.

In Acts 1: 8, Jesus affirmed to the disciples: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and *you will be my witnesses* in Jerusalem, and all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (emphasis added). We are called to the witnesses of *Jesus Christ*, not a Jehovah!

Question:

According to Acts 1: 8 of whom are we to be witnesses?

With your exclusive emphasis on Jehovah, can you honestly say that you are being obedient to Acts 1:8?

Now, If Jesus is the name by which true followers of God are to be identified, then what is meant in Matthew 6:9, where Jesus said: You must pray, then, this way: ‘Our Father in the heavens, *let your name be sanctified*’(NWT, emphasis added)? First, noticed that Jesus never calls God

“Jehovah” in this verse (or anywhere else, for that matter). This in itself refutes the Watchtower position.

Matthew 6: 9 is better it is translated, “pray, then, in this way: ‘Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.’” Now, keep in mind what was said earlier about how the ancients viewed one’s *name*. A name among the ancients was considered as equivalent to whomever or whatever bore it. Knowing a person’s name amounted to knowing his essence and being. Thus God’s name refers to God as He has revealed Himself to humankind. God’s name is a reflection of *who He is*. What we see in Matthew 6: 9 involve not just honoring God’s name, but especially honoring the *Person* that the name represents.

With this understanding, it is significant that the word “hallowed” be understood. In the Greek text it means “to hold in reverence,” “to treat as holy, “to esteem, prize, and adore.” We know that God is already holy, so this is not a prayer for God or His name to become holy, but rather that He and His name be treated as holy and revered by His people (cf. Exodus 20: 8; Leviticus 19: 2, 32; Ezekiel 36: 23; 1 Peter 1: 15). We hallow God’s name not by outwardly calling Him “Jehovah” (a word that is nowhere—*I repeat nowhere!* in the context) but by ordering our thoughts and conduct so that we do not dishonor Him in any way.

The contrast to “hallow” is “to profane”—which means “to treat indifferently,” “to neglect,” “to treat lightly.” This is the way pagans have treated God throughout history. Unlike such pagans, God’s children—by their thoughts and conduct—are to treat Him with great reverence.