

GOD'S NAME "YAHWEH" ALL BUT FORGOTTEN

God has a name. But you'd never guess it from reading most English translations of the Jewish scriptures. In that respect the God of the Hebrew people was not unlike the gods of other ancient nations.

The gods of the Egyptians were called Nut, Geb and Re, among others. The pantheon of Mesopotamian gods and goddesses included Anu and Enlil, as well as Marduk and Ishtar. The Canaanites worshiped Baal and his wife Anat.

Most of the deities honored by the ancients had distinctive names. The people of Israel, too, knew the name of their God. His name was "Yahweh," which, however, is almost always rendered as "LORD" in most popular English translations.

Why God's name Yahweh is so little known by Bible readers today—that's another story.

The place to start is Exodus 3:13-15. It's part of a conversation Moses has with God, who speaks to him from a burning bush. God wants to send Moses back to Egypt to rescue his people from slavery. But Moses demurs. One of the objections he throws back is the fact that he doesn't know God's name.

So God tries to allay Moses' scruples by announcing his name. "Tell the people of Israel that Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has sent you."

Having imparted that piece of news, God tries to make it stick. "Yahweh is my name forever," he insists, "and that's how I want to be remembered by each succeeding generation."

But over the centuries the name of Yahweh has become obscured if not actually forgotten.

Part of the reason is that people were reluctant to misuse such a special name. One of the Ten Commandments, for example, warns us not to misuse God's name. And the best way you can make sure you never use Yahweh's name in vain is never to pronounce it at all!

So later Jewish readers scrupulously avoided pronouncing it whenever they found it written in their scriptures. Whenever they got to the word "Yahweh," they would substitute the word "Adonai," which means "Lord."

If you've followed this so far, the next twist in the story won't be too difficult. You have to

understand that the Hebrew language is written in all consonants, no vowels. Later Jewish scribes developed a series of dots and slashes which stood for vowel signs and could be noted under the consonants.

Thus God's name Yahweh would appear as four consonant in the Hebrew Bible—YHWH, or JHVH. But instead of putting the vowel marks for "Yahweh" under the four letters of the divine name, the scribes would put the vowels for "Adonai."

That little trick was to remind those who read the scriptures to pronounce "Lord" in place of God's name.

More centuries passed, and the purpose of that unusual vowel-and-consonant combination was forgotten, at least by most Christian scholars.

As a result they read the consonants JHVH with the vowels for Adonai and produced the word "Jehovah." That's why you can still find the name Jehovah in many English Bibles.

But mostly you'll find "LORD," written with all uppercase letters.

When the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek and later into Latin, the name "Yahweh" was always represented by the word for "Lord," "Kyrios" and "Dominus" respectively.

And that custom has been retained by the majority of modern English translations. The only clue that it refers to the four-letter divine name is that it is written like this: "LORD," in all uppercase letters. Not like this: "Lord," in the usual fashion.

So now you know why you can scarcely find God's name "Yahweh" in your Bible, and why they keep printing "the LORD" in all capital letters. But who gives a rip?

The upshot of all this is to suggest something about God's personality. The God of the Bible is not the abstract, impersonal divine principle that some would like to make him (or it) out to be.

The God of the Hebrew scriptures has a down-to-earth personality. He has a name. He can be distinguished from all other pretenders to the title.

He likes to be called "Yahweh," which sounds suspiciously like the Hebrew word

which means “to be” or “to exist” or “to become.”

This Yahweh is who he is, thank you, and he’ll do what he wants to do. He’ll call his own shots and keep on rescuing his people as he jolly well pleases.

That’s an insight too precious to ignore. It makes reading this God’s story a lot more interesting. Because what we’ve got here is not merely the working out of some divine principle. What we’ve got is a God with some personality. His name is Yahweh. [FILE 7]