

# **The Name of God: Why “Lord” Replaced YHWH and What It Means for Christians Today**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Have you ever wondered why your Bible says “*LORD*” in all capital letters instead of showing God's actual name? That’s not just a translation choice—it’s a story that stretches across thousands of years, different languages, and deep theology.

In the Bible, God tells Moses His name at the burning bush: “*I AM WHO I AM.*” From that moment on, the Hebrew name YHWH appears more than 6,000 times in the Old Testament. But most people have never seen it, spoken it, or even known it was there. Instead, translations often use “*LORD*” to stand in for the original name.

This paper explores how God’s name was treated by ancient Jews, how it was handled in Greek and Latin, and how the New Testament authors used it in ways that reveal something amazing: Jesus was given the very name of God.

By looking at Scripture and history, we’ll see how even the way God’s name was translated helped prepare the world to recognize who Jesus really is.

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## **WHAT DID GOD TELL MOSES AT THE BURNING BUSH?**

In Exodus 3, Moses meets God through a burning bush, and God calls him to rescue Israel from slavery in Egypt. But Moses asks, “*What is your name? What should I tell them?*” God responds with something mysterious and powerful:

*“I AM WHO I AM.”* (Hebrew: Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh)

*“Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”* (Exodus 3:14)

Right after that, God gives Moses another name—YHWH—which shows up more than 6,800 times in the Old Testament. It’s made of four Hebrew letters:

Yod-Heh-Waw-Heh (יהוה)

This name is connected to the Hebrew verb *“to be,”* showing that God is eternal, unchanging, and completely independent. He simply is.

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## **WHY DON’T WE SAY GOD’S NAME?**

As time went on, Jewish people became very careful with how they treated the name YHWH. Because of the commandment not to *“take the name of the LORD in vain,”* many stopped saying the name aloud at all. Instead, when reading Scripture, they would say Adonai, which means *“Lord.”*

This habit grew into a tradition. Even today, most Jews avoid saying or writing the name YHWH and will often say HaShem, which means *“The Name.”*

So, when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek in the centuries before Jesus (the version known as the Septuagint), the translators followed the Jewish tradition. Instead of writing a Greek version of YHWH, they simply used the word κύριος (*Kyrios*), which means *“Lord.”*

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## **WHAT HAPPENED WHEN THE BIBLE WAS WRITTEN IN GREEK?**

This choice to use *“Lord”* instead of YHWH wasn’t just a translation shortcut—it became one of the most important steps in preparing the way for Jesus.

The writers of the New Testament quoted the Greek Old Testament. So when they quoted passages that originally used the name YHWH, they quoted them using Kurios (κύριος)—the same word they used to describe Jesus.

That means when Paul or Peter says, “*Jesus is Lord (Kurios)*,” they’re not just giving Him a title—they’re connecting Him directly to the God of Israel.

**For example:**

*“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”*

*(Romans 10:13, quoting Joel 2:32)*

In the original Hebrew, “*Lord*” in Joel 2:32 is YHWH.

But Paul says that calling on the name of Jesus is calling on the name of the Lord.

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## **WHY DO SOME GROUPS SAY “JEHOVAH”?**

If the Bible originally had YHWH, and scholars think the name was probably pronounced something like Yahweh, then where did the name Jehovah come from? It’s actually a mix-up that happened in the Middle Ages.

Jewish scribes, out of reverence, wrote the consonants YHWH but added the vowel marks of “*Adonai*” to remind readers not to say the divine name but to say “*Lord*” instead. Later Christian scholars misunderstood this, and around the 13th century, they combined those vowels with the consonants of YHWH, ending up with YeHoWaH. This Latinized into Jehovah (since “*J*” was pronounced as “*Y*” in older English).

Although we now know that Jehovah isn’t the original pronunciation, it became a familiar term in Christian Bibles and songs.

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## WHAT ABOUT JEHOVAH’S WITNESSES AND MORMONS?

Two major religious groups today use “*Jehovah*” in very different ways:

### Jehovah’s Witnesses

- Jehovah’s Witnesses believe “*Jehovah*” is the only proper name of God and should be used instead of “*God*” or “*Lord*.”
- Their translation of the Bible—the New World Translation—restores “*Jehovah*” in many places where other Bibles say “*LORD*.”
- However, scholars (and Jewish tradition) recognize that “*Jehovah*” is a later invention and not the original pronunciation.

### Latter-day Saints (Mormons)

- In LDS theology, Jehovah and Elohim are seen as two different beings, not just different names for the same God:
  - Elohim refers to God the Father.
  - Jehovah refers to Jesus Christ before His birth.
  - This view is unique to Mormonism and not found in either Jewish or traditional Christian beliefs.
- In the Bible, Elohim is not a personal name—it’s a category word. It refers to any spiritual being that lives in the heavenly or unseen realm. This includes:
  - YHWH (the God of Israel) – “In the beginning, God [Elohim] created the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1:1)
  - Angels – “You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings [Elohim].” (Psalm 8:5, see Hebrew; many English Bibles say "angels")

- Demons – “They sacrificed to demons that were not God—to gods (Elohim) they had never known.” (Deuteronomy 32:17)
  - The spirits of the dead – “Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?” ... “I see a god (Elohim) coming up out of the earth.” (1 Samuel 28:13–14, referring to Samuel)
  - The gods of the nations – “For all the gods (Elohim) of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens.” (Psalm 96:5; also see Psalm 82:1, “God stands in the divine council; in the midst of the gods (Elohim) he holds judgment.”) YHWH (the God of Israel)
  - Only YHWH is described in the Bible as the one Elohim who is eternal, uncreated, and all-powerful—all others are created and lesser.
- So, while both Jehovah’s Witnesses and Latter-day Saints use the word “*Jehovah*,” they each attach different meanings to it—and both depart from the Bible’s original teaching about God’s name and identity.

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## CONCLUSION: THE NAME ABOVE EVERY NAME

When God told Moses, “*I AM WHO I AM*,” He wasn’t just giving a name—He was revealing His nature. The name YHWH points to a God who is eternal, unchanging, and present with His people. Even though the exact pronunciation was lost over time, the meaning and message behind the name have never faded.

God’s name was treated with such reverence that it was never spoken aloud. But that same name was quietly carried into the Greek word “*Lord*” (κύριος)—a title that later became the most important confession in Christianity: “*Jesus is Lord*.”

The New Testament writers didn't invent this connection. They inherited it. And by using "*Lord*" for both YHWH and Jesus, they were declaring something radical: Jesus is not just God's servant—He shares God's very identity.

Whether we say Yahweh, Jehovah, or Lord, what matters most is who we're talking about. The God who revealed Himself to Moses is the same God who revealed Himself in Christ. And through Jesus, we can call on the name of the Lord and be saved.

## **APPENDIX: JEHOVAH AMONG THE RESTORATIONISTS — LATTER-DAY SAINTS AND JEHOVAH’S WITNESSES**

### **1. Jehovah’s Witnesses (Watch Tower Society)**

#### **Use of “*Jehovah*”:**

- Jehovah is the name of God the Father alone.
- Jesus is not Jehovah; he is the created being Michael the Archangel who became human.
- The New World Translation inserts “*Jehovah*” into the NT over 200 times — even where no manuscript has YHWH, based on theological reasoning.
- For JW’s, “*Jehovah*” is the one true God, and Jesus is His Son, subordinate in being and function.

#### **Do they debate pronunciation?**

- They acknowledge “*Jehovah*” is likely not the original pronunciation, but they insist it is the most recognizable and widely accepted rendering of the divine name in English.
- For them, using some name is more important than being exact.

### **2. Latter-day Saints (Mormons)**

#### **Use of “*Jehovah*”:**

- Jehovah is the personal name of Jesus Christ in his premortal existence.
- God the Father is called Elohim, treated as a distinct divine being.
- Jesus as Jehovah is the God of the Old Testament, appearing to Moses, giving the Law, etc.
- This usage is deeply embedded in LDS temple liturgy and theology.

#### **Do they debate pronunciation?**

- LDS scholars generally recognize “*Yahweh*” as more accurate.
- However, the use of “*Jehovah*” is retained for consistency with LDS revelation and tradition.
- No widespread internal controversy — the name is doctrinally assigned rather than historically reconstructed.

### 3. Comparison Table:

| Aspect                       | Jehovah's Witnesses   | Latter-day Saints (LDS)   |
|------------------------------|---|---|
| Jehovah =                    | God the Father  | Jesus Christ  |
| View of Jesus                | Created being (Michael the Archangel)                                     | Uncreated Son of God, spirit child of Elohim  |
| View of Elohim               | Rarely used; not a proper name  | Name of God the Father  |
| Trinity                      | Denied (strict monotheism)  | Denied (three separate gods in one Godhead)   |
| Pronunciation of YHWH        | " <i>Jehovah</i> " used publicly; admits it is not original               | " <i>Jehovah</i> " used liturgically; " <i>Yahweh</i> " acknowledged in scholarship   |
| Substitution of Name in Text | Inserts " <i>Jehovah</i> " into OT and NT (even where not in manuscripts) | Retains " <i>Jehovah</i> " in interpretation and liturgy, not in translated scripture |

### 4. Theological Reflection

The divergent uses of Jehovah in these two systems reveal how redefining the divine name can result in radically different theologies:

- For JW: **Jesus cannot be Jehovah**, so they redefine Him as the greatest created being.
- For LDS: **Jesus must be Jehovah**, so they redefine the Father as **Elohim**, a separate being.

Both systems break from the biblical and Jewish tradition, in which YHWH is the personal name of the one true God and is never applied to more than one being.

The early church's bold move was not to divide YHWH's name among divine beings, but to identify Jesus within the singular identity of YHWH — a claim that maintains monotheism while affirming Jesus as truly divine.



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