

## **The Names of God**

In America we use names to distinguish one person from another. They were given to us at our birth, when very little is known about what we will become. Some people may gain a nickname later in life that may communicate more about a person, but even this is far from the significance of names in the Bible. Names in the Bible have much greater significance than in America.

### **The significance of the names of God in Scripture**

In Scripture, a person's name often did more than identify them, it communicated something more about them. Nebuchadnezzar changed the names of Daniel and his three friends to give them authority in his kingdom. God Himself even changed the names of certain people, such as Abram to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah and Jacob to Israel. Jesus received His name because "He would save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). The names for God in the Old Testament communicated something important about Him.

One observation that shows the importance of God's name is found in the fact that many times God is not referred to by a specific name but by simply the "name." Examples can be found in the Old Testament:

- In the Ten Commandments, the name of the Lord was not to be taken in vain (Exodus 20:7; Deuteronomy 5:11).
- The name of the Lord is given attributes of God, such as holy (1 Chronicles 16:10; Psalm 33:21) and wonderful (Judges 13:18).
- The name of God is commanded to be treated as God Himself (Psalm 103:1; Malachi 3:16).
- To call on the name of the Lord was the same as worshipping God (Genesis 12:8; 13:4; 21:33; 26:25).

In the New Testament we find the name of God used in much the same way. The name Jesus is used in a similar way to the name of God in the Old Testament:

- Salvation is through His name (John 1:12).
- Prayer is to be made in His name (John 14:13-14).
- Church discipline is done in the name of Jesus (Matthew 18:20).
- At the name of Jesus every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Philippians 2:10-11).

The way the New Testament's use of the name of the Lord mirrors the Old Testament provides solid evidence that Jesus is God. The name of the Lord refers to God's whole character.

The significance of God's name can also be seen in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9) "hallowed be Your name." The desire of Jesus is for God's name to be revered. It is sinful to use God's name in a meaningless or dishonoring fashion (Exodus 20:7). God's name, in representing Him, must be honored as He Himself must be honored.

## **The names of God in the Old Testament**

There are many names that are used to refer to God in the Old Testament. These names provide additional revelation for us about God, including His character, His works and His relationship to us based on His character and works. The names that God chose for Himself in the Word of God so that we may know and relate to God.

Note David's declarations about God's name and word in Psalm 138:1-2. God's name declares much about His person, but it is God's Word that reveals God and His name.

We know what God is like, not only by His perfections and works, but also by His names. They tell us many things about God's care and concern for his own. This is one of the fascinating studies of Scripture. The various circumstances that bring forth each of the names of God is important.

There are three primary names of God in the Old Testament:

**Elohim (God):** Elohim is the plural form of EL, meaning "strong one." It is used of false gods, but when used of the true God, it is a plural of majesty and hints of the Trinity. It is especially used of God's sovereignty, creative work, mighty work for Israel and sovereignty. It is used of the Creator of all (Genesis 1:1; Psalm 19:1).

There are many compounds of El, the most significant being El Shaddai, meaning "God Almighty." El Shaddai points to God's role as the sustainer of all and possessing all power. It depicts God as subjecting all to His power. It represents His greatness in love and comfort rather than terror (Genesis 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; Exodus 6:3; Psalm 91:1, 2).

Another compound of El is El Elyon, "Most High God," which stresses God's strength, sovereignty, and supremacy (Genesis 14:19; 31:13; Deuteronomy 10:17; Psalm 9:2; Daniel 7:18, 11:36). Also, El Olam meaning "Everlasting God" emphasizes God's unchangeableness and eternity (Genesis 16:13).

**Yahweh (LORD):** Yahweh (or YHWH) comes from a verb that means "to exist, to be." This, plus its usage, shows that this name stresses God as the independent and self-existent God of revelation and redemption (Genesis 4:3; Exodus 6:3; 3:12). This is God's most sacred name and particularly depicts God's faithfulness to His covenant promises to His people. It therefore is used only of the God of Israel. To blaspheme this name required death (Leviticus 24:16). Yahweh is used more than any other name for God in the Old Testament.

The compounds of Yahweh are designations or titles that reveal additional facts about God's character. They include:

- Yahweh Jireh (Yireh), meaning, "the Lord will provide" and stresses God's provision for His people (Genesis 22:14).
- Yahweh Nissi, meaning, "the Lord is my banner" and stresses that God is our means of victory who fights for His people (Exodus 17:15).
- Yahweh Shalom, meaning, "the Lord is peace" and shows the Lord as the means of our peace and rest (Judges 6:24).

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- Yahweh Sabbaoth, meaning, "the Lord of hosts" which depicts the Lord as a military commander of the armies of heaven (1 Samuel 1:3; 17:45).
- Yahweh Maccaddeshcem, meaning, "the Lord your sanctifier" which shows the Lord as the One who sets His people apart for His purposes (Exodus 31:13).
- Yahweh Ro'i, meaning, "the Lord my shepherd," showing the Lord's care for His people (Psalm 23:1).
- Yahweh Tsidkenu, meaning, "the Lord our righteousness" and portrays the Lord as the means of our righteousness (Jeremiah 23:6).
- Yahweh Shammah, meaning, "the Lord is there" and shows the Lord's personal presence in the millennial kingdom (Ezekiel 48:35).
- Yahweh Elohim Israel, meaning "the Lord, the God of Israel" and depicts the Lord as the true God of Israel in contrast to the false gods of the nations (Judges 5:3; Isaiah 17:6).

**Adonai (Lord):** Like Elohim, Adonai is a plural of majesty. This word points to God as the almighty ruler in charge of all. Man is the servant and subject to Him. In earlier times it was the usual name that the people of Israel used to address God. Later on the name Yahweh largely replaced it.

By the time of Israel's return from exile from Babylon, the name Adonai was substituted due to superstitious fear that Yahweh was a name too holy to pronounce. Around the seventh century A.D. the vowels of Adonai were substituted with the consonants YHWH, producing the artificial name Jehovah.

### **The names of God in the New Testament**

**Theos (God)** is the primary name for God used in the New Testament. This is the name that is used of Christ as God (John 1:1, 18; 20:28; 1 John 5:20; Titus 2:13; Romans 9:5; Hebrews 1:8; 2 Peter 1:1). An intensification of this is Hupsistos Theos (Most High God) occurs nine times in the New Testament, mostly in a way that clearly refers to God the Father.

**Kurios (Lord)** is used to stress God's authority. While it can mean sir (John 4:11), owner (Luke 19:33), master (Colossians 3:22) and it can refer to idols (1 Corinthians 8:5) or husbands (1 Peter 3:6), it is used mostly as the equivalent of Yahweh of the Old Testament. It too is used of Jesus Christ meaning (1) Rabbi or Sir (Matthew 8:6); (2) God or Deity (John 20:28; Acts 2:36; Romans 10:9; Philippians 2:11). When the New Testament quotes the Old Testament where either Yahweh or Adonai was used, Kurios is the Greek word selected for the biblical translation.

**Pantokrator (Almighty)** is used ten times in the New Testament, once in 1 Corinthians 6:18 and the other nine occurrences in the Book of Revelation. In Revelation 1:8 it refers to Jesus Christ, as can be observed when 1:8 is compared with Revelation 22:13-16.

**Despotes (Master)** is used on occasion to refer to God. It carries the idea of ownership: Greek word translated "Master." (Luke 2:29; Acts 4:24; 2 Timothy 2:21; Revelation 6:10) In some places it clearly is a term referring to Christ (2 Peter 2:1; Jude 4).

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**Pater (Father)** expresses the special relationship of the Father to the Son and is also the relation that God holds over all believers as His spiritual children. Father is a concept used infrequently of God in the Old Testament but is used over 240 times in the New Testament. As a name of God, it stresses God's loving care, provision, discipline, and the way we are to address God in prayer (Matthew 6:9; John 15:16; 16:23; Romans 8:15; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Galatians 4:6; Ephesians 2:18; 3:14-15; 1 Thessalonians 3:11; Hebrews 12:5-11; James 1:17). It is uniquely a term used to address God the Father in the New Testament.

Several other words are used to refer specifically to Jesus, such as Christ, Messiah, Savior and words that refer specifically to the Holy Spirit, such as Helper. These names will be covered in the sections that cover Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Today, much of America uses the name of Jesus and God as an expletive. While this of course is the antithesis of honoring God's name (Matthew 6:9), the church does not do much better. How many times do professing Christians treat God's name so lightly that it becomes something like a conjunction that ties our words together. Our ascribing praise to God can become so common as to be meaningless. Since God considers His name to be hallowed, so must we.