

HOW SCHOLARS INVENTED THE YAHWEH PRONUNCIATION

By Bryn Hendrickson

Readers of this publication know that this ministry is an advocate for the proper and respectful use of the biblically revealed name of our Heavenly Father. In the Hebrew language of the Old Testament this name (which appears nearly 7,000 times) is written with the four letters Yode (י) Hey(ה) Vav(ו) Hay(ה). And since Hebrew is written and read from right to left the name is written like this — יהוה.

This name is also referred to as the “Tetragrammaton” which is Greek meaning “the word of four letters.”

In Jewish history a tradition developed that the name was too holy to be pronounced. Because of this tradition many have been led to believe that the pronunciation of the name has been lost to the annals of history.

Because of the belief that the pronunciation of the name had been lost, scholars have sought to rediscover how this name might have been originally pronounced. In the course of the last hundred or so years much has been written on the subject. In fact, if one goes to almost any mainstream Bible dictionary or encyclopedia it would appear that the scholarly world has indeed decided that the correct pronunciation of the name is Yahweh.

As detailed in the article, *Why Yehovah?* this author holds that the most likely pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton is in fact, “Yehovah.”

Many sincere and dedicated Believers disagree with this opinion and we will not be reviewing the reasons for this conclusion in this article.

The purpose of this article is to examine the research which supports the idea that the Yahweh pronunciation is really not simply a scholarly guess but rather a complete fabrication. This is

not to imply that the scholars who advocate the Yahweh pronunciation are intentionally creating falsehoods in order to deceive, but rather they have created a pronunciation of this name based on a false premise. And from this false premise (a premise they likewise do not believe to be false) they have created the pronunciation Yahweh.

What is this false premise? The premise is essentially that the Bible is not the inspired word of Yehovah. Many, if not most modern scholars believe that the religion of ancient Israel developed or shall we say evolved over time.

As a result of this theory many scholars believe that not only did the writings of the Old Testament evolve but that the name of Israel’s “God” or Elohim also evolved. Various cases have been made that the name evolved from other Hebrew words. They also claim that its evolution was affected by the languages and religions of the nations which Israel had dealings with.

To understand more about what scholars say regarding the origins of the Yahweh pronunciation we must first take a crash course in the theory of the origins of the Bible known as “The Documentary Hypothesis.” The Documentary Hypothesis is the foundation upon what is generally written about the Yahweh pronunciation is based.

Once we have a foundational understanding of The Documentary Hypothesis in our minds we will then see what well known and mainstream scholars have to say about the evolution of the pronunciation of the name. Then we will be able to see just how scholars came to the Yahweh pronunciation.

What is The Documentary Hypothesis?

For centuries theologians have been puzzled by certain passages in the first five books of the Bi-

ing a new emphasis on various stories that were often repeated with differences. Most notably the two creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2.

From these repeated stories scholars began to separate the Pentateuch into what was believed to be the two major sources that had been edited together. The first source was called the "J" for "Jehovah" because of its dominate use of the Tetragrammaton. The second source was known as "E" for "Elohist" for its dominate use of the Hebrew title *elohim*. After these sources had been identified it was supposed that someone had taken these two sources and woven them together into a whole.

Building on this idea in the eighteenth century a German minister, H.B. Witter, a French doctor, Jean Astruc and a German professor, J.G. Eichhorn independently arrived at the conclusion that the older source had been used by Moses. Moses then added his material creating the second strata of information which he edited together to create a whole. Others later concluded that both versions were source documents that Moses had simply edited together to create the final form. Hence, Moses was not so much the author of the Pentateuch, but rather the editor-in-chief.

Later scholars would conclude that both the "J" and "E" sources had been written after Moses lived and had simply been attributed to Moses.

As theories continued to develop into the beginning of the nineteenth century some scholars began to postulate that instead of two sources there were in fact three. The third would become known as "P" for the "Priestly" source, which was made up by the portions of the Pentateuch which focused primarily on matters of law and the priesthood.

Later a German named DeWette hypothesized that the book of Deuteronomy was a separate or fourth source known as "D."

The "J," "E" and "P" sources were seen as being intermingled among each other while "D" stood on its own. Later an "R" for redactor (meaning editor) was added to the list of sources for the one who edited all these sources together in an attempt to make them seem like a whole.

It was later in the nineteenth century when these theories really begin to have an impact of our study of the Tetragrammaton.

Working independently and using different methodologies, two scholars Karl Heinrich Graf and Wilhelm Vatke began to try to discover when these sources had been written. Their conclusions are very instructive.

Graf concluded that "J" and "E" represented a very early stage in the development of the religion of Israel. "D" reflected a middle stage and the "P" reflected a later stage. Let us note that scholars, such as Graf do not see these parts of the Bible as revealed knowledge, but rather a reflection of an evolving religion in an already existing nation of Israel.

Vatke concluded that the great majority of the law and much of the narratives contained in the Pentateuch were never a part of the life of Moses. In fact he concluded that the sources which became the first five books of the Old Testament were not even written until near the end of the Biblical period. In other words not until after Israel had returned from captivity.

The final step in the development of the modern Documentary Hypothesis comes from the German Julius Wellhausen who in the 1870's created a synthesis of previous ideas creating for all practical purposes modern Documentary Hypothesis. As Friedman points out, though Wellhausen was not the first to discuss multiple authors, it is however his ideas which modern scholars either agree or disagree with.

Working primarily from Graf and Vatke's theories, Wellhausen concluded that the "J" source could be dated to roughly 850 B.C. and that "E" could be dated to 750 B.C. and that these sources were later edited together circa 650 B.C.

He then theorized that the "D" source was written at the time of Josiah circa 640-609 B.C.

Finally, Wellhausen concluded that the "P" source found interwoven within the "J" and "E" sources had been added by Ezra. And finally around 200 B.C. all these sources were finally edited together to form the Pentateuch as we know it today.

Wellhausen's ideas were first introduced to the English speaking world by William Robertson Smith, editor of the famous *Encyclopedia Britannica* and later by Samuel S. Driver and Charles A. Briggs of the *Brown-Driver and Briggs Lexicon* fame.

What is important to understand about all this

ble. They were puzzled because according to tradition and more importantly the testimony of certain New Testament passages¹, the first five books of the Bible were said to have been written by Moses. But, that being said how could Moses have written about his own death (Deuteronomy 34:5). Also, how could Moses have written that, "Since **then** there has not arisen a prophet like Moses. . ." in the past tense (Deuteronomy 34:10). Similar to this in Numbers 12:3 we read that Moses was more humble than any man on the face of the earth, which does seem like an odd statement for the most humble person to write about himself.

To account for these odd passages some theologians over the years have logically suggested that it might have been more than just Moses who wrote portions of the Pentateuch. From these observations eventually developed what would later become known as "The Documentary Hypothesis."

In the 1997 introduction to his book *Who Wrote the Bible?*, Richard Elliot Friedman tells us that the development of the Documentary Hypothesis developed in three basic steps over the course of six hundred or so years.

The first stage began with an eleventh century Jewish court physician in Muslim Spain named Isaac ibn Yashush. Yashush noted that Genesis 36 contained a list of Edomite kings who lived long after the life of Moses. Yashush concluded that this passage was simply written after Moses. This view was met with criticism at the time and did not receive much wide range acceptance.

One critic of Yashush was a twelfth century Spanish rabbi by the name of Abraham ibn Ezra. While he was critical of Yashush he also suggested that several biblical passages appeared to have not been written by Moses, primarily he made note of a passage that referred to Moses in the third person, which to him seemed odd.

Later a fourteenth century scholar in Damascus named Bonifils also concluded that there were some passages that simply could not have been written by Moses.

The fifteenth century bishop of Avila, Tostatus also started to ask questions about how much of the Pentateuch had been written by Moses, notably the end of the book of Deuteronomy which contained the account of Moses' death. While

many assumed that this last passage in Deuteronomy was simply added by Joshua, in the sixteenth century a man named Carlstadt commented that since the writing style of the last chapter matched so well the style of the entire book of Deuteronomy, some began to wonder just what had been written by Moses and what had not. This leads to Friedman's second stage.

In the sixteenth century a Flemish Catholic, Andreas van Maes, and two Jesuits, Benedict Pereria and Jacques Bonfrere proposed that the majority of the text had been written by Moses. But that later editors added or changed certain names and places to their more current names so the readers would understand better.

The third stage brings us up to the seventeenth century and British philosopher, Thomas Hobbes who concluded that Moses did not write a majority of the Pentateuch. He made note that certain phrases "like to this day" suggested that these passages were written at a later date.

A few years later French Calvinist, Isaac de la Peyrere wrote explicitly that Moses did not author the first five books of the Bible.

About the same time a philosopher from Holland named Spinoza reasoned from the same evidence above that the books read more like they were written by someone who lived long after Moses and who had had the opportunity to have seen other prophets and thus had been able to make such a comparison so as to be able to write, "Since **then** there has not arisen a prophet like Moses . . ." (Deuteronomy 34:10).

Not long after Spinoza a French theologian named Richard Simon wrote that the core of the first five books were indeed Mosaic, but that there had been some additions. And, that these additions had been done by scribes who collected, arranged and elaborated upon the old texts.

Though Simon's intent was to uphold that the majority of the Pentateuch had been written by Moses, Friedman says that Simon's idea that the Pentateuch had been assembled from old sources was an important step on the way to the development of the Documentary Hypothesis.

The idea that the stories of the Pentateuch had been edited together led to other scholars plac-

1) See Mark 7:10; 12:19, 26; Luke 20:28; 24:27,44; John 1:45; 5:45-46; 7:22 and Acts 15:21

talk about the modern Documentary Hypothesis is that the theory takes the writing of the Pentateuch completely out of the hands of Moses. It places the earliest possible beginning of its writing at least 400 years after the latest date of the Exodus and life of Moses which is estimated to have taken place between 1400 B.C. and 1200 B.C.

Wellhausen's ideas are important to our study of the Tetragrammaton because as Friedman puts it:

"At present, however, there is hardly a biblical scholar in the world actively working on the problem [the origins of the Bible] who would claim that the five books of Moses were written by Moses—or by any one person. . . The hypothesis itself continues to be the starting point of research, no serious student of the Bible can fail to study it, and no other explanation of the evidence has come close to challenging it." (*Who Wrote the Bible* pg. 28).

In other words when we read of a scholar talking about the name developing or originating from this or that, they are doing it from a Documentary Hypothesis frame of mind.

Also keep in mind that Wellhausen's dates are among the oldest for the "J" and "E" sources. Many modern adherents of the Document Hypothesis place these sources even later in the history of Israel.

It is not this article's aim to suggest that all modern scholarship is bad or that we should throw out our Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias. However, as we review the following scholarly sources, we must keep in mind that the underlying thought process is that the Bible is *not* inspired and that it evolved. Also, as the Bible evolved the religion of Israel evolved too, as did Israel's deity as well as that deity's name.

Many have relied on a variety of scholarly sources to prove that the pronunciation Yahweh is correct, but too many have never asked why these sources believe as they do. When we dig deeper and examine why these sources have come to their conclusions we see that the ideas used to defend the Yahweh pronunciation are built on the premise that the Bible is not the inspired word of Yehovah.

It is not the intent to suggest that those who quote sources which claim that Yahweh is the correct

pronunciation are trying to be dishonest or intentionally deceptive. The point is that they simply have not delved deeply enough into the research they are quoting to see the underlying thinking which has led so many scholars to conclude that Yahweh is the correct pronunciation. Many dictionaries and encyclopedias don't even give reasons for why they believe Yahweh is the correct pronunciation. Most are simply relying on the work of other scholars and trusting their research.

The Basic Defense of The Yahweh Pronunciation.

The case used to support the Yahweh pronunciation is based on two basic premises.

The first is that its pronunciation can be derived from its use in connection with the burning bush passage of Exodus 3:14 which is traditionally translated as:

"And God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' And He said, 'Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, "I AM has sent me to you.'"

It is argued by the Yahweh pronunciation advocates that the Hebrew, translated here as "I am" should be translated as "I cause to be." As such, these scholars reason that the correct pronunciation of the name is based on it being related to a "causative" form of "hayah," hence it should be translated as "I cause to be" instead of the traditional "I am."² From this it is claimed that the pronunciation of the name is governed by rules applied to Hebrew verbs and *not* Hebrew names.

The second line of reasoning comes from writings found among ruins of the Synchronistic Jewish community of Elephantine Egypt where the name is spelled as YHW and pronounced as Yahu. From this and using rules governing verbs it has been reasoned that Yahweh is derived from the name Yahu.

With these ideas in mind let's look at what some scholars have to say about the Yahweh pronunciation. After which we will be able to see just how weak the Yahweh argument is.

The Anchor Bible Dictionary, edited by David Noel Freedman, has this to say about the pronunciation Yahweh:

"The Meaning of the name is unknown.

2. For a more detailed examination of how the Hebrew of Exodus 3:14 should be correctly translated see chapter three — *Didn't He Say His name was "I AM?"*

Arguments favoring particular meanings have been for the most part grammatical. The name has long been thought to be a form of the verb "haway," an older form of the Hebrew verb "hayah," "to be." The reconstruction form Yahweh is parsed as either a third-person Qal imperfect of this verb or as the corresponding form of the causative stem." (pg 1011)

This is an interesting comment; if the meaning is not known why then suppose the pronunciation is based on the verb in Exodus 3:14?

Note the following also from *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*:

". . . The date and origin of the name has been debated. . . (pg. 1011)

"In terms of biblical narrative, some suggest that Moses derived the name Yahweh from the Egyptians, while others think Yahweh was a Midianite deity worshipped by the Kenite clan (pg. 1012).

Note that these scholars do not believe the name was revealed but that it was created or derived.

In the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* David Noel Freedman wrote:

"The form Yahweh is now accepted almost universally. The structure and etymology of the name have been much discussed. While no consensus exists, the name is generally thought to be a verbal form derived from the root hwy and hyh." (pg. 500)

Note again we see that the name is derived, not revealed from on high, but derived by men.

In the 1957 edition of his book *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, William Foxwell Albright has the following to say about the name.

"In particular it is now becoming evident that all recent attempts to explain the name Yahwe[h] in various adventurous directions are fallacious. The name (which occurs as a place name or tribal name in a list of settlements in southern or eastern Palestine from the thirteenth century B.C.) can only be derived from the verbal stem HWY "to fall, become, come into existence." (pg. 15)

Note carefully Albright's claim here that the name Yahweh can only be derived from the ver-

bal stem HWY.

Albright continues:

"There is absolute unanimity in our sources about the name given his God by Moses."

Notice in Albright's thinking Jehovah did not reveal His name to Moses; it was Moses who gave Him the name. This manner of thinking is pervasive among scholars who seek to justify the Yahweh pronunciation.

Albright continues:

"It has often been maintained in the past thirty years that Yahu is more original than Yahweh, but all the epigraphic and linguistic facts are utterly opposed to this paradoxical view. . ."

Albright continues:

"Many different meanings have been attributed to Yahweh by scholars who recognize its relative antiquity, but only one yields any suitable sense: He causes to be. . . Linguistically the form Yahweh can only be causative, and to judge from many analogies in Babylonia, Egypt and Canaan, it is an abbreviation of a longer name or litanic formula. . ."

Notice how Albright, with his evolutionary approach to the name, argues that we can look to the development of the names of pagan deities as examples as we seek to understand how the name Yahweh came into being.

Note carefully this next passage from Albright:

"The enigmatic formula in Exodus 3:14, which in biblical Hebrew means "I am that I am," If transposed into the form in the third person required by the causative Yahweh, can only become Yahweh asher yihweh (later yihyeh), "He causes to be what Comes into Existence." (pp. 258-261)

This passage is key to putting the nail in the coffin of the Yahweh pronunciation.

Albright states that in biblical Hebrew the passage is correctly translated as, "I am that I am."³ Then he says that "If transposed into the

3. Once again please see chapter three — *Didn't He Say His name was "I AM?"* for a deeper study of the actual meaning of the Hebrew of Exodus 3:14

form in the third person required by the causative Yahweh.”

Notice Albright is telling us that the pronunciation Yahweh is dependent on it being causative. He then tells us that the very passage that links any verb to the name is in fact *not* causative. He then tells us that if we transpose, or in other words if we change the actual language of the Bible to fit the desired pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton as Yahweh, then scholars are able to make all their theories about the name fit the Biblical texts.

However, if we simply follow the actual biblical Hebrew we see that if the Yahweh pronunciation can only be derived from the causative stem then the proof of the Yahweh pronunciation vanishes since the Hebrew of Exodus 3:14 is not causative.

While we are looking at Albright's writings let's turn to the *Journal of Biblical Literature* Vol. 43, 1924. In an article titled *Contributions to Biblical Archaeology and Philology* Albright tells us that:

“The suggestion that Yahweh is causative of hayah, “to be,” was apparently first made by Le Clerc (Clericus) in 1700” (pg. 375).

How interesting. If the pronunciation Yahweh is dependent on it being derived from the causative of hayah which is not known in Biblical Hebrew and if the idea that the name had a causative origin was first introduced in 1700, how can we think that Yahweh is the original and correct pronunciation? Zeal for ones personal doctrine must at some point give way to facts.

Another source on the weak foundation upon which the pronunciation Yahweh is based we again turn to the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 68, 1949.

In an article by Julian Obermann titled *The Divine name YHWH in the Light of Recent Discoveries* we read:

“The weakness of the modern postulation just outlined has been in the understanding of the word YHWH as a finite verb, an imperfect either of the simple or of the causative stem. As an imperfect, we realize, it would of necessity be one of the third person. In this case, however, the solemn formula ʾānī yahwê⁴ occurring with great frequency throughout the Old Testament, would present us with the enigma of a third

person imperfect having as its subject or agent a first person pronoun — a construction that is plainly impossible. . . (pg. 302)

What is amazing about these quotes is that even though these scholars can see that their theories are rife with problems they still cling to the Yahweh pronunciation.

As we approach the end of this study let's look at an often quoted source which supports the Yahweh pronunciation followed by how another scholar answers the first scholars claims.

In the *Queries and Comments* section of the September/October 1994 issue of *Biblical Archeology Review*, Professor Anson F. Rainey of Tel Aviv University in Tel Aviv, Israel writes the following in a letter titled *How was Yahweh pronounced?*

“Yahweh is from a verbal root of *hwy*, ‘to be.’ This root usually shows up in Hebrew as *hwy*. It is a verbal root developed from the third person pronoun, *huwa/*hiya. The grammatical form of Yahweh is the third person masculine singular of a prefix conjugation. The ya- is the third person masculine singular prefix. . .

“The final syllable of Yahweh, -éh is normal for the imperfect indicative form (present-future or past continuous). A form like yahweh developed from *yahwiyu. This development of iyu to -éh is thoroughly demonstrated from the VERBAL system in general. The form yahweh seems to be from the causative stem (hif'il), and apparently means ‘He causes to become/be.’

“The theophoric component on so many personal names in Judah (i.e., yāhû, in such names as Hizqîyāhû [Hezekiah]) is the normal shortened form of a verb like yahweh. For example, the verb “to do obeisance” in the imperfect is yištahaweh, while the shortened form (for preterit or jussive) is yištāhû. In other words yištāhû is to yištahaweh as yāhû is to yahweh. This is not hocus-pocus. Any layman can readily comprehend the equation.”

It is questionable that any layman can actually understand this so let's take note of an important point.

4) Meaning “I am Yehovah” (Gen. 15:7) as ʾānī-ʾēl šad-day means “I am El Shadday” (Gen. 17:1)

Professor Rainey claims that Yah or Yahu⁵ is a shortened form of Yahweh, but we find the names Yah and YHWH used together in Scripture as in Isaiah 12:2 and 26:4, therefore it is improbable that Yah is a shortened form of YHWH in the way Rob is short for Robert or John for Jonathan. “Yah” (although technically made up of the same first two letters of the Tetragrammaton yode (י) and hey (ה)) is in fact a separate name from the Tetragrammaton. Yah is what we could refer to as The Almighty’s “praise name” (Psalms 68:4) while YHWH is His great memorial name (Exodus 3:15).

Regarding the theory that the pronunciation of the name is derived from the verb “ehyeh aser ehyeh,” Professor Rainey is answered by another writer. In the March/April 1995 *Queries and Comments* section of *Biblical Archeology Review*, George Wesley Buchanan, Professor Emeritus, Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, D.C. wrote a response to Professor Rainey called *The Tetragrammaton*. Regarding the etymology of the name from a verb form Buchanan had this to say:

“By this logic Clement⁶ argued that the Tetragrammaton had the same consonants as the verb ‘to be,’ so it meant that one who caused things to be, but he [Clement] did not pronounce the word according to any form of that verb. His conjecture was homiletically thought-provoking, but not scientifically or historically correct. The verb “to be” would deserve the extensive comparative analysis it has given only if it could be shown from the Scriptures to be related to the Tetragrammaton, but that is not the case. Reams of paper and gallons of ink have been expended over the years justifying a pronunciation Westerners deduced on the basis of Clement’s conjecture. It may all be irrelevant to the subject. There are

other places and ways to look for the correct pronunciation. These are found in the Scriptures and associated texts.”

Based on Buchanan’s testimony, if the pronunciation of the name is not derived from the verb forms in the Hebrew language how can we know how it is pronounced? As Buchanan says one needs to turn to the Scriptures to find the answer. In the article *Why Yehovah?* we take Buchanan advice as we examine the linguistic case which leads us to the conclusion that the Tetragrammaton is in fact pronounced Yehovah.

For even deeper study the reader is encouraged to track down a copy of the book *The Name of God Y.eH.oW.aH, Which is pronounced as it is written I_Eh_oU_Ah: Its Story* by Gerard Gertoux. This isn’t a cheap book, but the information in it is invaluable to your study of this subject. If the price is too steep buy a copy with friends or with your fellowship and share it. Go to your library and borrow it. However you can get a copy do so and read it.

Final Thoughts

The use of our heavenly Father’s biblically revealed name and its proper pronunciation is surely an emotional subject for many, but if we can stand back and simply analyze the facts of the matter we can see that the subject is not all that hard to understand.

It is hoped that this article can be of help to those who wish to study this subject further.

5) Yahu is only found as an alternate ending of names ending in Yah. For instance of the roughly 150 occurrences of the name Jeremiah approximately 120 are spelled with the Yahu ending.

6) Clement of Alexandria is referred to earlier in a part of Rainey’s letter not quoted in this article.