

Judaism - YHWH

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial, you will look at some of the Jewish ideas of the divine and some of the sources of those ideas. Every religion has concepts and ideas related to the transcendent and the sacred world. Most have a name and often many names for their god or gods, or, if not, then a guiding principle or principles of some sort. This lesson covers the Jewish concept of a single god. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

[1. The Name of God](#)

[2. The History](#)

1. The Name of God

YHWH refers to God for the Jewish people. Judaic tradition states that it is blasphemous to say or write the name of God in full. It is therefore sometimes referred to as the **tetragrammaton**. The exact pronunciation is not known for sure and neither is the precise origin of the name.

Yahweh and **Jehovah** are fairly common references and pronunciations used in Christianity. But, Biblical Hebrew does not use vowels, and so it is called the tetragrammaton, which is Greek for “four letters.” Its first use can be dated back to the eighth century before the common era. In prayer, the name **Adonai** is used, which means “master” or “Lord.” Another reference to God is **Hashem**, meaning “the name.”

In Hebrew scriptures, in the book of Exodus, there’s a story about **Moses** and the burning bush where **Moses** encounters God. There, he receives directions to lead the Jews out from captivity and exile in Egypt and back to Canaan, the land promised to **Abraham**, the first Hebrew patriarch. When **Moses** asks His name, he hears the response, “YHWH.” **Moses** then asks what this name means, and he is told, “I am that I am.”

In Hebrew, YHWH contains the root verb “to be,” with a masculine prefix. It sometimes is translated as “I will be” and “I will be what I will be.” It’s generally understood as a single unified, uncreated creator and the source of all life.

Elohim is the other name that is used in this context, and thousands of times in total throughout the Hebrew Bible. The “im” is a plural ending, which serves to provide different descriptions and characteristics of God.



Tetragrammaton

Etymologically “four letters” (from Greek); the correct (non-blasphemous) Hebrew name for the God of the Bible.

Yahweh

The Latin transliteration (YHWH) of the Greek tetragrammaton.

2. The History

The Canaanites, as early as the 12th century before the common era, are believed to have made an agreement with YHWH, the divine warrior, who offered protection to the Canaanites in the land of Canaan if they agreed to worship no other gods but him.

Prior to Abraham’s and the Jewish people’s covenant with YHWH, the ancient Canaanite religion included many gods that had been worshipped throughout the Levant and Mesopotamia.



Map showing ancient Canaan and Mesopotamia

Some of the other gods were known as El, Baal, and Anat, and were part of a large pantheon of gods, many of whom were influenced by neighboring religions in Mesopotamia and Egypt. The name Elohim is thought to be traced back to this god.



Stone engraving of El (1900-1200 BCE) and rubbing of image

These polytheistic traditions were a complement to the Canaanite religion, which is thought to have centered around ancestor worship and family household gods and goddesses. When Moses brought the Jews home to Canaan, he received the Ten Commandments, re-solidifying the call and the covenant with YHWH.

In the modern-day, the ancient Levant includes Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Cyprus, Hittite province and other parts of Southern Turkey, parts of northwestern Iraq, and the Sinai Peninsula.



Map highlighting Levant region



SUMMARY

This lesson looked at **the name of God** in the Jewish tradition. The Hebrew word YHWH is not pronounced aloud in Judaism, so it is sometimes called the tetragrammaton. **The history** of its use dates back as far as the eighth century before the common era when the polytheistic religions of Canaan made an agreement with the single God YHWH to honor and worship Him and no others. This is generally understood as the emergence of the monotheistic, Abrahamic tradition. When Moses

encountered YHWH in the burning bush and when the Jewish people returned to Canaan, there was a further binding of the covenant with YHWH.

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TERMS TO KNOW

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Yahweh

The Latin transliteration (YHWH) of the Greek Tetragrammaton.