

Naming God: The divine name has become a household God

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [April 8, 2008](#) issue

One of our family hobbies is to tackle new languages at the dinner table or on trips or in odd moments before bed. I can't say we've made great strides, but we have ventured far enough to decipher Old English *fupark* and cry *hwæt!* as needed, write our names in Egyptian hieroglyphs and order *pastizzi* in Maltese. Recently we've been dipping our toes into Hebrew—which is why anyone who visits us these days will find the Hebrew alphabet plastered all over the house.

A huge poster on the kitchen wall catches my eye when I'm busy at the stove, drawing my attention to the long leftward march of the Hebrew consonants, vanguard of all alphabets, foot soldiers of written language. I haven't gotten very far yet—about as far as the illiterate Hasid who, knowing only the first ten letters, offered them to God to make his own prayer. I'm entirely innocent of vowel points. Still, I can't miss the four consonants that spell God's revealed name, for they are plainly enough in view.

Which brings me to my point. Perhaps you've seen the Tetragrammaton *yhwh* transliterated with the vowels spelled out; perhaps you've heard it spoken in a classroom or sung in a congregational hymn. I've encountered this practice many times, and it always makes me cringe. It's difficult to understand why it should be necessary to violate the age-old veto against pronouncing God's name, one of the most cherished principles of Jewish tradition.

Granted that God bestows his name lavishly throughout the Hebrew Bible, revealing it not only to Moses in Exodus 3, but also to Adam and Eve in Genesis and throughout the "J" portions of the Pentateuch. Granted that invocation of the divine name, spoken aloud by the priest on behalf of the people, was a central act of the Jerusalem Temple liturgy. Granted that the Mishnah (Berakhot 9:5) records a command to greet one's fellow with the divine name. Granted that scholars are fairly confident about how *yhwh* would have sounded when spoken by the priest in the

Temple: not “Jehovah” surely, for that vocalization was the result of importing the vowels from Adonai (Lord). Granted, too, that there’s a certain logic to spelling out the Tetragrammaton if you are a biblical historian tracing the emergence of Israelite monolatry from Canaanite cults. Nonetheless, the veto against voicing the divine name has developed within Jewish tradition and culture to such a depth of conviction and spiritual gravity that these considerations amount to very little.

It’s in our power to remove an offense that stands in the way of Jewish-Christian understanding; we need only resort to the traditional and beautiful series of substitute expressions: the Hebrew *Adonai*, the Greek *Kyrios* of the Septuagint and the New Testament, the English *Lord*; or devocalize the Tetragrammaton in writing (yhwh). Happily, in recent years an increasing number of non-Jewish biblical scholars have opted to observe this standard. With time, I hope, it will be embraced by academic style sheets and common consent.

But there are deeper reasons and deeper difficulties to face. It’s a common trait of the world’s religions to regard the divine name as powerful and ineffable, to voice it only under carefully regulated conditions and to shield it from desecration. There are ancient Egyptian gods who look like amalgams of human, crocodile, hippopotamus; yet they carry the ankh, they promise salvation, and therefore their names are too holy to speak. Such an attitude is fundamental to worship. The modern tendency, however, is to fancy that our worship is more rational, more spiritual, more interior than that of our ancestors; that we live under a new dispensation in which the divine name, once a fearsome thing, has become a household word; or that the substitute expressions, *Adonai*, *Kyrios*, *Lord*, savor too strongly of kingship and transcendence. “Down with Kyriarchy!” a divinity school friend used to say. But that way lies Marcionism, the heresy that splits the Old Testament from the New.

Jehovah, at least, is too far off the mark to offend, and has the dignity of belonging to a great literary tradition, to the English of Tyndale, Milton, Blake, Byron, Tennyson. The vocalized yhwh, on the other hand, has no literary ancestry. Why should we wish to call God by a name whose voiced expression is an academic reconstruction and whose roots are so shallow in our culture? It seems to me that in an age when words are cheap, when fresh experiences of the sacred are always on offer, when the popular drift is to favor immanence and dislike transcendence, when we are tempted to pride ourselves on superiority to our ancestors, we have good reason to reclaim the veto—not only out of courtesy, but also for our own spiritual health.

Moreover, to express the astonishing gift of intimacy with God, Christians have another name to employ: the personal name of Jesus, the incarnate I AM, on whom the divine name in all its glory rests.