

Lost in translation: God's name

יהוה

κύριος

Dominus

the LORD

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by Nico Daams

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the LORD¹

¹ The word LORD, when spelled with capital letters, stands for the divine name, YHWH ... (ESV)

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Introduction

In different cultures, people give names to their children for a wide variety of reasons. In many cultures it is common to be named after someone. In my case I was named after an uncle who was named after his grandfather. In other cultures it is the *literal* meaning of the name that plays an important role. In the Old Testament we see many examples of this, and in the first section of this essay we will look at some of these.

But whatever the reason was for naming a child, once the child starts growing up the name takes on a different meaning. No longer will people think of the original, *literal* meaning, but they will use the name mainly as a label to *identify* that child.

We see this shift of focus from the original, *literal* meaning of a name to a name that simply serves as *identification* also happening with business names. Examples are: *7-Eleven* stores were originally given this name because they were open between 7 and 11 o'clock; they are now open 24 hours, 7 days a week, and a better name would be *24-Seven* stores if the literal meaning of the name was still important. Likewise, *Motel 6* started off with that name because they charged 6 dollars per night, now a night's stay is a multiple of that amount.

So, when we use a name, we no longer think of the original *literal* meaning of that name, but we simply use it in order to *identify* someone or something. It does not mean the literal meaning is no longer relevant, but the focus of the name has moved from *meaning* to *identity*.

In the second section of this essay we will look at these two levels of meaning of the name of God, and why this name is treated so very differently from other names in the Bible.

1. Names in the Bible

There are almost 3,000 names in the Bible. In translations, these names are usually *transliterated* rather than *translated*. When a name is *transliterated* it uses the closest corresponding letters of a different alphabet or language. When we look at names like David and Paul we see a close reflection of their original Hebrew and Greek names. When a name is *translated* on the other hand, we will learn what the name means. The norm is for names to be transliterated. This is true even if those names have important literal meanings. The name *Samuel* is not translated with *Heard of God*. That meaning was important at the time of his birth as a testimony to God's answer to Hannah's prayers for a child. But in subsequent chapters the name Samuel simply serves to identify the prophet known by that name, the last of the judges, and so the *transliterated* name Samuel is used.

We see the same happening with the names of the sons of Jacob. Although many of us would have known the literal meaning of Samuel's name, how many of us know the literal meaning of Levi or Simeon? At the time these children were born, the meaning of these names was important, but when the narrative continues, it is the story of their lives and sometimes of their descendants that defines these names. The first thing most of us think about when we hear the name Levi is that his descendants are the tribe that was chosen by God to be the ones serving Him in the temple. So, the primary function of names in the Bible, as it is in our own world, is to identify one person from another.

Many of the Biblical names occur only a few times and most of these names are transliterated just as is done with the names that occur more frequently. In a few cases however, the literal meaning of the name is significant and the name does *not* occur later on in the Scriptures. Some translators have opted in such cases to *translate* the name rather than to *transliterate* it. For example: In

Genesis 16:14 the translators of the TEV chose to *translate* rather than to *transliterate* the name Beer Lahai Roi:

¹³ Hagar asked herself, “Have I really seen God and lived to tell about it?” So she called the Lord who had spoken to her “A God who Sees”. ¹⁴ That is why people call the well between Kadesh and Bered “*The Well of the Living One who Sees Me*”. (Italics mine)

The phrase “*that is why*” in verse 14 indicates there is a reason why the well was given that particular name. For audiences not familiar with Hebrew, the reason in this verse would be lost unless the name of the well is either translated as was done in the TEV, or explained in a footnote as was done in the NIV:

¹³ She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: “You are the God who sees me,” for she said, “I have now seen the One who sees me.” ¹⁴ That is why the well was called *Beer Lahai Roi*;^a it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered.

The following footnote explains the *That is why*:

^a 16:14 *Beer Lahai Roi means well of the Living One who sees me.*

The NLT provides the reader with both the transliterated name and the translation:

So that well was named Beer-lahai-roi (which means “well of the Living One who sees me”).

From these examples, we see that it is common practice for translators to transliterate Biblical names, but *only when the meaning of the name is deemed to be relevant for the understanding of the text* will some translators translate a name rather than transliterate it.

It is therefore puzzling that the most frequently used name in the Old Testament, *YHWH*, the name of God, is represented by the *translation* of *another* Hebrew word, as is done in most translations

of the Bible in European languages, rather than *transliterate* the Name itself as was done with almost every other name in the Bible. In the next section we will look at the historical reasons behind this seemingly incongruous circumstance.

2. What happened to God's name?

Have you ever wondered what sort of a name *the Lord* is in sentences like:

The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name. (The song of Moses and Miriam, Exodus 15:3, NIV)

So what has happened to the actual name of God?

In the Hebrew Bible the name of God is visibly represented with the four Hebrew consonants YHWH, in Hebrew script: יהוה. This name, commonly referred to as the Tetragrammaton (which means "four letters" in Greek), occurs almost 7000 times. However, sometime after the Babylonian captivity, the Jewish readers of the Scriptures stopped saying God's name out loud out of respect for His name and to avoid using it in vain, a custom which continues until now. The on-line Jewish Encyclopedia states:

At least as early as the third century B.C. the name seems to have been regarded by the Jews as a "nomen ineffabile," on the basis of a somewhat extreme interpretation of Ex. xx. 7 and Lev. xxiv. 11 (see Philo, "De Vita Mosis," iii. 519, 529).²

Consequently we are no longer exactly sure how they pronounced the Name. The vowel markings in later editions of the Hebrew Bible were taken from the Hebrew word *ʿadonai* which means *Lord*. In this way the Jewish readers from the time of Ezra onwards were reminded to substitute the Name YHWH with *ʿadonai*. It is

² The Jewish Encyclopedia (<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/11305-names-of-god>)

interesting to note that by *not* pronouncing the name *YHWH* the Jewish readers in fact confirm that they consider *YHWH* to be the name of God.

When Jewish translators translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, the so-called Septuagint, they started to use *kurios*, the Greek word for '*adonai*'. This resulted in *kurios* carrying two different meanings: *YHWH*, as a *translation* of the name *YHWH*, and the literal meaning of *kurios*: *lord, master*. In order to make this distinction clear, the translators and copyists of the Septuagint used different Hebrew writing systems for the Name than the one they used for the rest of the text. Scholars studying the oldest manuscripts of the Septuagint have described this technique in various ways, mostly agreeing with each other. Larry Hurtado in his article "The Origin of the Nomina Sacra: A Proposal." (pp 660-662) sums it up like this:

It is well known that by the first century devout Jews were very particular about the oral and written treatment of the divine name, *YHWH*. In extant pre-Christian Jewish biblical manuscripts, the divine name is characteristically written in special ways intended to distinguish it from the surrounding text. Emmanuel Tov notes that the tetragrammaton is accorded special treatment in a variety of ways in the Qumran Hebrew material: sometimes represented by four or five dots, sometimes preceded by a colon, and sometimes represented in paleo-Hebrew characters.³

John William Wevers in his study "*The Rendering of the Tetragram in the Psalter and Pentateuch: A Comparative Study*"⁴ found that the Septuagint translators made a distinction between *kurios preceded by an article*, the so-called *articular Kurios*, and *kurios*

3 Hurtado, L. W. "The Origin of the Nomina Sacra: A Proposal." *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 117, no. 4, 1998, pp. 655–673. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3266633.

4 Wevers, John William, "The rendering of the Tetragram in the Psalter and Pentateuch : a comparative study." *The Old Greek Psalter*, 2001, pp. 21-35.

without an article, the so-called the *anarthrous Kurios*. The *articular Kurios* was used to indicate that it referred to a person who is *lord and master*, while the *anarthrous Kurios* was used to indicate the word *Kurios* referred to God's name *YHWH*. A good example is found in the Septuagint text of Genesis 39:3 where the *articular Kurios* is followed by the *anarthrous Kurios*:

ἤδρι δὲ ὁ κύριος αὐτοῦ ὅτι κύριος μετ' αὐτοῦ
saw and the lord his that Lord with him
And his **master** saw that **the LORD** was with him (ESV)

By leaving out the article before the second *kurios* the translators of the Septuagint maintained the difference between God's name *YHWH* and the Hebrew word for lord, master, 'adonai, without actually using God's name. Jewish readers of the Septuagint could read this translation without breaking their rule not to pronounce the name of God, while at the same time being able to recognise the Name because of the absence of the article.

In his online article "YHWH in the Septuagint",⁵ Hurtado refers to this study by Wevers, whose ... particular focus is on the Psalter, but he prefaces that analysis with a helpfully detailed survey of data from the Pentateuch (book by book), confirming that *YHWH* is overwhelmingly rendered by forms of *kurios* without the article ("anarthrous" forms). In contrast, forms of the word with the article ("articular") are preferred to translate references to other figures who hold a lordly position in the narratives.

Hurtado then goes on to state:

This clear dominance of the anarthrous *kyrios* as Greek equivalent of *YHWH* ... suggests strongly that it had become a widely-used oral substitute for *YHWH* among Greek-speaking

⁵ <https://larryhurtado.wordpress.com/2014/08/22/yhwh-in-the-septuagint/>

Jews. I.e., the anarthrous *kyrios* served as virtually a proper name for God, a reverential substitute for YHWH.

There are implications for exegesis of the NT that are not sufficiently registered by exegetes and commentaries. One would need to test things writing-by-writing in the NT, but it is a good hypothesis to test that there is often a distinction in connotation between the anarthrous and articular forms of *kyrios*. ...

But conducting such an analysis through other NT writings is a project I'll leave for the future (or for some industrious young scholar!).

Fortunately this analysis has been done by Richard Brown and Christopher Samuel in 2003. In their article "The meanings of *κύριος* in the New Testament"⁶ Brown states:

In the New Testament (NT) the three most common messianic titles for Jesus are *ho christos* "the Christ", *ho kurios* "the Lord", and *ho kurios êmôn* "our Lord". The most common terms of reference for God the Father are *ho theos* "the God", *ho patêr* "Father", and *kurios* "Lord". This latter is used as the divine name, corresponding to YHWH in the Old Testament (OT). (*Italics mine*).

In other words, the presence or the absence of an article before *kurios* makes a clear distinction between *kurios* (God, YHWH) and *ho kurios* (Jesus) in the NT. When the NT was later translated into Latin, a language that does not have articles, the distinction between *kurios* with an article and *kurios* without an article was lost, and the Latin word *dominus* carried both meanings. When the Bible was subsequently translated into western European languages, the equivalent of *the Lord* became the norm in most languages. No distinction was made between *Lord* and *the Lord* due

⁶ Brown, Richard, and Samuel, Christopher J. "The meanings of *κύριος* in the New Testament" [draft of 30 November 2003]

to the fact that European grammars demand an article before the word *Lord*. The fact that one of those nouns actually represented a name was thereby lost. Brown writes about the consequences of this lack of transparency in the article mentioned above:

Unfortunately, most English translations of the New Testament have made no distinction between ‘Lord’ as a messianic title and ‘Lord’ as a substitute for the divine name, even though the Greek text makes a distinction in 96% of the instances. This has introduced considerable ambiguity into the text.⁷

In discussions about this topic I have heard people use the argument “since we don’t know how to pronounce God’s name, we should use *the LORD* instead.” Because the name YHWH has no vowels, there has been considerable debate about what the original pronunciation might have been. The American Standard Version (ASV) of 1901 transliterated YHWH as *Jehovah*, following in the footsteps of the King James Bible which used *Jehovah* in a very limited number of places. Many Hebrew scholars suggest that *Yahwe* would be the closer approximation on how the Jews used to pronounce God’s name, although some prefer *Yahovah*.

But is it really a valid argument to not use and pronounce God’s name just because we are not exactly sure how to pronounce it? We do pronounce all other names in the Bible differently from the way they were pronounced by their contemporaries. For example, Adam called his wife Chavvah but in English we call her Eve. Because of linguistic differences between languages, translators through the ages have chosen names that could be pronounced by the people they were translating for. For example, although we do know that Jesus’ name was pronounced Yeshua in Hebrew, Yehsous in Greek, yet English speakers pronounce it as Jesus. Polynesian

⁷ Brown, Richard, and Samuel, Christopher J. “The meanings of κυριος in the New Testament” [draft of 30 November 2003]

languages in the Pacific typically do not have the j-sound, and the syllables in these languages never end in a consonant, and so the name Jesus becomes Sisū in Tongan and Iesu in Samoan.

So, the decision on *how to pronounce* the name YHWH in a particular language is in my opinion insignificant compared to the decision on how to represent the Name in our Bibles. That decision should be decided on the basis of the *sacredness* of God's name. If the name is too sacred to be pronounced then it is legitimate to substitute it with some other name or even a noun like Lord. In this context it is interesting to note the emergence of the so-called *nomina sacra*, or holy names, in early Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. Larry Hurtado states in his article on the *nomina sacra*⁸:

... it seems likely that Jewish reverence for the divine name, and particularly the Jewish practice of marking off the divine name reverentially in written forms, probably provides us with the key element in the religious background that early Christians adapted in accordance with their own religious convictions and expressed in the *nomina sacra*. The four earliest *nomina sacra* (ed. Jesus, Christ, God and Lord) represent Christian reverence of God and Christ expressed in the special way these key terms were written in Christian texts.

Although Christians marked these sacred names in specific ways, they did not follow the Jewish custom of not *pronouncing* them. And eventually, when the Greek text was translated into the various European languages, these sacred names and titles were treated no differently from other names and titles, with the sole exception of the divine name YHWH. If we believe that we should treat the name YHWH more reverently than the name Jesus, then we are right in choosing an alternative for that name. However, if

⁸ Hurtado, L. W. "The Origin of the Nomina Sacra: A Proposal." *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 117, no. 4, 1998, pp. 662-663.

we accept the divinity of Christ, then there does not seem to be any valid reason to treat the name YHWH any different from the name Jesus.

The reason for not using the name of God in the Old Testament is usually explained in the preface of English Bibles, such as the following paragraph from the preface to the NIV Study Bible Revised August 1983:

In regard to the divine name *YHWH*, commonly referred to as the Tetragrammaton, the translators adopted the device used in most English versions of rendering that name as “*LORD*” in capital letters to distinguish it from *Adonai*, another Hebrew word rendered “*Lord*”, for which small letters are used.

The result is that we, who do not read the Scriptures in the original languages, no longer see the name, except maybe in a footnote in Exodus 3. If we are careful readers and know what to look for, we can see the difference between the divine name *LORD*, with capital letters, and the word *Lord*, without capitals, but it is a very small difference. Moreover, when the Scriptures are read out loud, the listeners cannot hear the difference between *LORD* and *Lord*.

Some notable exceptions of Bible translations that are using a *transliteration* of *YHWH* rather than a *translation* of *Lord*, are the Jerusalem Bible, the New Jerusalem Bible, and, to a lesser extent the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB) and the 2nd Edition of the New Living Translation (NLT). In the introduction to the NLT we read:

We have generally rendered the tetragrammaton (YHWH) consistently as “the *LORD*”, utilizing a form with small capitals that is common among English translations. ... In a few cases we have utilized the transliteration, *Yahweh*, when the personal character of the name is being invoked in contrast to another divine name or the name of some other god (for example Exod. 3:15; 6:2-3)

Altogether the NLT has *Yahweh* 10 times in the text, often with a footnote explaining why they used *Yahweh*. Three of the ten times the name *Yahweh* occurs with a modifier, such as in Genesis 22:4

Abraham named the place *Yahweh-Yireh* (which means “the LORD will provide”). To this day, people still use that name as a proverb: “On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.”

The Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB) went a step further and transliterated God’s name 484 times. In response to a query by a critic of why they did not use the name in all cases where it occurred, Ray Clendenen, one of the editors of this Bible, gave the following explanation when and why they transliterated the name, and why they used *the LORD* everywhere else⁹:

We use it as the rendering of YHWH (which the Hebrew Bible editors first rendered as Adonai, “Lord”) whenever God’s “name” is being given (either explicitly, using the word “name,” or implicitly), when He is being identified (“I am *Yahweh*”), when He is being contrasted to other gods such as Baal, in certain repeated phrases such as “*Yahweh* the God of your fathers,” or when YHWH has been rendered by *Yahweh* in the immediate context. ... our objective is to introduce to the contemporary church what is the most likely pronunciation of the divine name YHWH in the Hebrew Bible. We did not render the majority of occurrences of YHWH as *Yahweh* because our goal is not only to be accurate but to use an English style that is most familiar to people. Since most Christians today probably do not commonly speak of “*Yahweh*,” but rather of “the Lord,” we felt it would be insensitive to use *Yahweh* for YHWH in every case and would make the Bible seem too uncomfortable for most people.

⁹ E. Ray Clendenen, as quoted in A. Roy King, *New Translation of Holman Bible Increases Use of Yahweh in Its Text*, 23 Nov. 2010

The revision of the Holman Christian Standard Bible, the Christian Standard Bible, no longer features God's name Yahweh except in a few footnotes.

3. YHWH the God of Israel

We will now look at the occasion when God's name *YHWH* was first officially introduced in the Bible, and the different levels of meaning of the Name.

In the third chapter of Exodus, Moses has an encounter with God at the burning bush, where God tells him to go back to Egypt to lead the people of Israel out of that country and into their own. Moses can see a number of problems with that assignment, both from the side of the king of Egypt and from the people of Israel themselves. In order to make sure he knows what to say when he will be challenged by what authority he is telling the people of Israel to leave Egypt, Moses asks God what his name is.

God answers (NLT 2nd Edition, bold face mine):

God replied to Moses, "**I AM WHO I AM.** Say this to the people of Israel: **I AM** has sent me to you." God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel: **Yahweh**, the God of your ancestors—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you. **This is my eternal name, my name to remember for all generations.**" (Exodus 3.14,15)

The English Standard Version (ESV) has rendered these verses as follows:

God said to Moses, "I am who I am." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I am has sent me to you.'"

God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'The *LORD*, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name

for ever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.

A footnote at verse 15 explains the link between the Name *I Am* *who I Am* in verse 14 and the Name *LORD* in verse 15 as follows:

The word *LORD*, when spelled with capital letters, stands for the divine name, *YHWH*, which is here connected with the verb *hayah*, “to be” in verse 14.

In short, God identifies himself with the name “**I Am**”. Since this name is in the 1st person of the Hebrew verb “to be”, **only God can use this name**. The name *YHWH*, however, is the 3rd person form of that same verb, so it is the name that can and should be used by everybody else.

As mentioned earlier, although names often have significant meaning when first introduced, in the on-going narrative of life names begin to serve mainly as a way of identifying a person. It is no different with the name of God.

In Exodus 5, just a few chapters after Moses has heard God pronounce his Name and learned its meaning, we read how the Name is being used in the following encounter between Moses and Pharaoh:

¹ Later, Moses and Aaron went in and said to Pharaoh, “This is what **Yahweh, the God of Israel**, says: Let My people go, so that they may hold a festival for Me in the wilderness.”

² But Pharaoh responded, “**Who is Yahweh** that I should obey Him by letting Israel go? **I do not know anything about Yahweh**, and besides, I will not let Israel go.”

³ Then they answered, “The **God of the Hebrews** has met with us. Please let us go on a three-day trip into the wilderness so that we may sacrifice to **Yahweh our God**, or else He may strike us with plague or sword.” (HCSB, bold face mine)

In these verses, the name Yahweh functions solely to *identify* the God of Israel. When Pharaoh asks in whose authority Moses and Aaron are making their audacious request, they reply that they are speaking on behalf of **Yahweh the God of Israel**.

YHWH, the name of God, occurs about 6800 times in the Hebrew Bible. In many verses it simply identifies YHWH as the agent of an action, such “And YHWH said...”. But in about 10% of all the occurrences, the name YHWH is found in phrases like “YHWH your God”, “YHWH our God”, “YHWH the God of Israel”, “YHWH their God”, “YHWH the God of Abraham” etc.

We can say therefore that the Name YHWH *identifies* Him as **the God of Israel**; in other words, **YHWH is the name of the God of the covenant**.

In conclusion: The *literal* meaning of the word YHWH is expressed in Exodus 3:14.

But the name YHWH came to be seen by the people of Israel as *the name that identified their God*. They would have known the original, literal, meaning of the name, but they would primarily associate the name with *the God of Israel, the God of their forefathers who brought them out of Egypt*.

In the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18:20-24 we find a good example where the name Yahweh, the God of Israel, is used in stark contrast to the pagan god Baal.

So Ahab summoned all the Israelites and gathered the prophets at Mount Carmel. Then Elijah approached all the people and said, “How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If **Yahweh** is God, follow Him. But if **Baal**, follow him.” But the people didn’t answer him a word.

Then Elijah said to the people, “I am the only remaining prophet of **the LORD**, but **Baal**’s prophets are 450 men. Let two bulls be given to us. They are to choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and place it on the wood but not light the fire. I will

prepare the other bull and place it on the wood but not light the fire. Then you call on **the name of your god**, and I will call on **the name of Yahweh**. The God who answers with fire, He is God.” (HCSB, bold face mine)

The story unfolds and the people recognize the superiority of *YHWH* over Baal in verses 38 and 39:

Then **Yahweh’s** fire fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and it licked up the water that was in the trench. When all the people saw it, they fell facedown and said, “**Yahweh**, He is God! **Yahweh**, He is God!” (HCSB, bold face mine)

4. Four results of the lost Name

4.1 The loss of God’s identity

In the previous section we saw that the name *YHWH* has two levels of meaning:

The *literal* meaning of the name *YHWH* can be expressed by one of the many possible ways of translating the 3rd person of the Hebrew verb “to be” as **The One who Is**.

But when the readers of the Hebrew Bible see the name *YHWH*, they think of him as **the name of the God of Israel**. Instead of pronouncing his name, they may call him *Hashem*: “the Name”, or ‘*Adonai*: “the Lord” or ‘*Elohim*: “God”, depending on the context. But, whatever the pronunciation, it is still clear that they refer to the name of God.

However, neither of these two meanings will be obvious to readers of many modern translations where the name of God has been substituted by a translation of the title “the Lord”. It is true that many of us through teaching and the use of footnotes or other

study helps have discovered that when LORD is spelled with small capitals it stands for the name YHWH. But for many others the name has been obscured by the tradition of substituting the name by a title. This loss of the identifying Name of God is most clearly seen in those passages where His name stands in stark contrast to the names of the pagan gods of the nations surrounding Israel. For example contrast the translations of 1 Kings 11:4,5 in the NIV and the HCSB (bold face mine):

As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted **to the LORD his God**, as the heart of David his father had been. He followed **Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians**, and **Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites**. So Solomon did evil in the eyes of **the LORD**; he did not follow **the LORD** completely, as David his father had done. (NIV)

and:

When Solomon was old, his wives seduced him to follow other gods. He was not fully devoted to **Yahweh his God**, as his father David had been. Solomon followed **Ashtoreth, the goddess of the Sidonians**, and **Milcom, the detestable idol of the Ammonites**. Solomon did what was evil in **the LORD's** sight, and unlike his father David, he did not completely follow **Yahweh**.

Contrast also the following two renderings of Exodus 6:2,3:

God also said to Moses, "I am **the LORD**. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name **the LORD** I did not make myself known to them. (NIV)

and:

And God said to Moses, "I am **Yahweh—'the LORD.'** I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as El-Shaddai—'God Almighty'—but I did not reveal my name, **Yahweh**, to them. (NLT, 2nd Edition)

In Exodus 3:15^b God told Moses:

This is my eternal name, my name to remember for all generations. (NLT, 2nd Edition)

But how can we remember His name if it is represented by the translation of the title *Lord*?!

4.2 The distinctive meanings of compound names of God are lost

The name *YHWH* often occurs with the descriptive titles '*adonai*' and '*Elohim*'.

'*Adonai*' is the Hebrew word that occurs 771 times in the Old Testament, and has the meaning of "lord and master".

'*Elohim*' is the Hebrew word for "God" or "gods". It can have both singular and plural meaning. '*Elohim*' is the God of Genesis 1, the creator of heaven and earth.

When one of these two titles is joined to the God's name, the meaning of the compound name can simply be the sum-total of the two words. So in the name-title combination *YHWH 'Elohim* we can expect at least some of the meaning of both words to be reflected in the translations: *YHWH*: the name of the covenant God of Israel, and '*Elohim*': the God who created the universe.

The title-name combination '*Adonai YHWH*' should contain the meaning of '*Adonai*': Lord and master, and *YHWH*: the name of the covenant God of Israel.

When *YHWH* has been translated as *LORD*, translators are faced with a problem translating the *Adonai YHWH* combination. In the preface to the New American Standard Bible (NASB) of 1997, the problem is stated as follows:

... the divine name ... has been consistently translated *LORD*. The only exception to this translation of *YHWH* is when it occurs in immediate proximity to the word *Lord*, that is, *Adonai*. In that case it is regularly translated *GOD* in order to avoid confusion.

The confusion they refer to is that the compound title-Name would result in *Lord LORD*. However a different and more serious confusion is the result of translating YHWH sometimes as LORD and sometimes as GOD. The distinction between YHWH *‘Elohim* and *‘Adonai YHWH* is now only a difference in capitalisation: *LORD God* versus *Lord GOD*. Very few people would guess from these two renderings that the first one has a strong focus on *Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel*, while the second one focuses on *the lordship* of Yahweh. Many other major English translations (KJV, ESV, and HCSB) have opted for the same solution as can be seen in the chart below. Dutch translations traditionally such as the *Herziene Statenvertaling* (HSV) stayed with the more literal translation of YHWH *‘Elohim* and *‘Adonai YHWH*, resulting in a clear distinction between *HEERE God* and *Heere HEERE*, but ending up with the somewhat unnatural Dutch combination of *Heere HEERE* (*Lord LORD*). In the new Dutch translation of 2004 (*De Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling*, NBV) both YHWH *‘Elohim* and *‘Adonai YHWH* became *God, de HEER*, but in the revision (NBVR) the distinction between these two compound names will become *God de HEER* versus *de HEER God*.¹⁰

It should be clear that all these inconsistencies and confusing name-title combinations can easily be resolved by simply *transliterating* YHWH rather than by *translating the title Lord*.

See the chart below we can see how different versions of the Bible have tried to represent these title-name combinations:

¹⁰ www.bijbelgenootschap.nl/revisie-nieuwe-bijbelvertaling-waarom-en-hoe/

Hebrew	YHWH	YHWH 'Elohim	'Adonai YHWH
ESV, KJV, NASB	LORD	Lord God	Lord God
NIV, TEV	LORD	Lord God	Sovereign LORD
NLT, 2nd Edition	LORD; Yahweh (10 times)	Lord God	Sovereign LORD
HCSB	LORD; Yahweh (484 times)	Lord God	Lord God
HSV	HEERE	HEERE God	Heere HEERE
NBV, 2004	HEER	God, de Heer	God, de HEER
NBVR	HEER	God, de HEER	de HEER God

The Kapingamarangi translation team decided to use *Dimaadua* in most cases where the Hebrew has *YHWH*, but *Yihowah* in those places where the Name was in focus and also where the Name was used in combination with a title. The word *Dimaadua* is commonly used in church services to address God in prayer and it has strong reverential connotations. The name *Yihowah* was chosen as it occurred already in a number of their hymns.¹¹

YHWH	YHWH 'Elohim	'Adonai YHWH
Dimaadua; Yihowah (496 times)	Yihowah-God	Tagi go Yihowah

¹¹ Daams, N. "The Name of God in the Kapingamarangi Language." *The Bible Translator*, vol. 59 no. 4, 2008, pp. 179-185.

4.3 The link between the name YHWH of the Old Testament and the name Jesus in the New Testament has been lost.

When the angel Gabriel announced the birth of Jesus to Joseph, he said,

“Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, **and you are to give him the name Jesus**, because he will save his people from their sins.” (NIV, Matthew 1:20,21, bold face mine)

The NIV translation provides the following footnote to explain the *because* in verse 21:

Jesus is the Greek form of *Joshua*,
which means *the Lord saves*.

However, **Jo** is the part of *Joshua* that means *LORD*; it is the same abbreviated form of the Tetragrammaton that we find in hallelujah. So the footnote would more correctly have read:

Jesus is the Greek form of *Joshua*,
which means *YHWH saves*.

Another link between *Jesus* and *YHWH* is seen in the following Old Testament verse (Isaiah 40:3) being quoted in all four Gospels:

Listen! It's the voice of someone shouting,
“Clear the way through the wilderness for **the LORD**!
Make a straight highway through the wasteland for our God!
(NLT, 2nd Ed., bold face mine)

In the New Testament this quote clearly finds its fulfilment when John the Baptist was crying out in the wilderness, preparing the way for Jesus. In John 1:23 it has:

John replied in the words of the prophet Isaiah:

“I am a voice shouting in the wilderness,
‘Clear the way for the **LORD**’s coming!’” (NLT, 2nd Ed. bold face mine)

The translators of the NLT took the bold step by putting LORD in small caps, alerting the readers to the link between the OT quote where it does not have ‘*Adonai*, but *YHWH*.

In most translations however we use the word *LORD* in the OT and *Lord* in the NT, and so most readers will not see this link between the Lord in the NT and the LORD in the Isaiah.

We find another example of the link between the Old Testament name of God and the New Testament word *Lord* in 1 Peter 2:2,3

Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk,
so that by it you may grow up in your salvation,
now that you have tasted that **the Lord** is good. (NIV, bold face mine)

This quote comes from Psalm 34:8 where the Hebrew text does not have the word ‘*adonai*’ but the name *YHWH*. The context in 1 Peter and the *articular Kurios* make it quite clear that Peter is referring to *the Lord* Jesus while he quotes a verse that has *YHWH in the OT*; so, again, the link between *YHWH* in the OT and *Jesus* in the NT is clear in the Greek text but has been lost in most translations.

Jesus himself makes the clearest link between himself and the God who met with Moses at the burning bush in no uncertain terms when he refers to himself as the *I am* in John 8: 58

Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, before Abraham was even born, **I AM!**” (NLT, 2nd Ed. bold face mine)

For Jesus referring to himself as the *I AM*, must have been even worse than uttering God’s name *YHWH*, since *I Am* was the same name that God used when he told Moses what his name was. Only God can refer to himself by this name, and this was clearly not lost on the Jews, of whom we read in the next verse (John 8:59):

At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds. (NIV)

4.4 The word Lord has lost some of its meaning

By using the word *Lord* both for the name of God, and also for the title *lord and master*, we have not just lost the name of God, we have potentially diluted the meaning of the word *Lord*. I realise that the word LORD in the Old Testament is spelled with small caps when it means *YHWH*, and that it is spelled without those small caps – Lord – when it means “master”, but how many of us notice this fine distinction when we read the Bible? We certainly don’t hear this distinction when we hear the Bible being read to us. In the New Testament in most English Bibles with the exception of the NLT even this distinction is no longer there to help readers distinguish between the two very different meanings of Lord. As a result of this, the word “Lord” has become a polite, honorific way to talk about God or when we pray to Him. When we say “Dear Lord...” we mean “Dear God...” When we say “He is my Lord”, we mean, I hope, “He is my Lord and master.” In many places where the intended meaning clearly is “lord and master”, the “master” part of the meaning has all but disappeared, because the word *Lord* has simply become this polite way of talking about God. Which is quite convenient, since this “lord and master” part is one of the aspects of the Kingdom that has little attraction to us individualistic, self-centred 21st century Christians. We come from a tradition where it is good to pull yourself up by our own bootstraps, to stand on our own feet, and to be no man’s slave, so the notion to allow someone else to be your lord and master does not exactly appeal to us. Although I grew up in a church where the Gospel was preached faithfully, it wasn’t until I was 25 years old that the penny finally dropped: Since I call him “Lord”, maybe I ought to make myself available to him, and let Him be the lord of my life! Could it be that

the fuzzy way in which we talk about the Lord, had kept me in the dark for so long?

5. Conclusion

In the **Introduction** we saw that names have two levels of meanings. The literal meaning tells us what the name means. But mostly names are simply used to identify a person or a place or a business.

In the section ***Names in the Bible*** we saw that translators normally *transliterate* Biblical names. Only when the meaning of the name is deemed to be relevant for the understanding of the text will some translators *translate* a name rather than transliterate it. A surprising exception is made for one of the most frequently used names in the OT, *YHWH*, the name of God, as most Bible translators of European languages, rather than transliterating this name, have opted to replace it with a translation of '*Adonai*', the Hebrew word for *Lord*.

In the section ***What happened to God's name?*** we saw how most European translations have followed a trend started by the people of Israel to not pronounce His name, and the custom of substituting the Name began and people started reading the Hebrew word for Lord whenever they saw the Name in their Hebrew Scriptures. When the OT was translated into Greek, this tradition was followed, and the Greek word *kurios* (=lord) was used. However in most cases where there was no article preceding the word *kurios*, it was clear to the readers that it was representing the name YHWH. If it was preceded by an article, then it was clear to the readers that the normal sense of the word was intended. In the Latin translation there were no articles to make this fine distinction, and when the Bible was translated into most European languages the word for *Lord* was always preceded by an article, thereby obscuring the distinction between the two meanings of *Lord*.

In the section ***YHWH the God of Israel*** we saw that the name YHWH served to identify YHWH as *the God of Israel*. The people of Israel would have known the original, literal, meaning of the name, but would primarily associate the name with *the God of Israel, the God of their forefathers who brought them out of Egypt*.

In the section ***Four results of the lost Name***, I listed four areas:

1. The loss of God's identifying name.

This is in direct conflict with God's command: *This is my eternal name, my name to remember for all generations.* (NLT, 2nd Edition).

2. The distinctive meanings of compound names of God are lost.

I wrote:

In some translations (KJV, ESCV, HCSB) the distinction between YHWH 'Elohim and 'Adonai YHWH is only a difference in capitalisation: *LORD God* versus *Lord GOD*. Very few people would guess from these two renderings that the first one has a strong focus on *the covenant God of Israel*, while the second one focuses on *the lordship* of YHWH.

3. The link between the YHWH of the Old Testament and the name Jesus in the New Testament has been lost.

God's name YHWH is represented in most English translations by *the LORD* in the OT. When OT verses with God's name in it are quoted in the NT, His name has simply become *the Lord*. In verses like, *The Lord said to my Lord*, the distinction that existed quite clearly in the original Hebrew text between *the name of God* and *my lord and master* has been all but lost, with the notable exception of the NLT which has rendered *the LORD* in the OT also as *the LORD* in the NT in a number of OT quotes to distinguish the name of God from the title *the Lord*.

4. The word Lord has lost some of its meaning.

I wrote:

By using the word *Lord* both for the name of God *YHWH*, and also for the title *lord and master*, ... we have potentially diluted the meaning of the word *Lord*. ... As a result of this, the word “Lord” has become a polite, honorific way to talk about God or when we pray to Him.

Against these four negative results stands one lonely positive argument: we have always done it this way, and we are used to it. On the website of the CSB Translation Oversight Committee, this argument is listed as number three out of the four reasons why they moved away from using of Yahweh in the Holman Christian Bible¹²:

Consistent feedback from readers showed that the unfamiliarity of “Yahweh” was an obstacle to reading the HCSB. For example, many reported that they felt “Yahweh” was an innovation, and they misunderstood the intent behind using the formal name of God. A translation that values accuracy and readability was thereby limited by a translation choice that did not provide clarity to the reader.

The other three reasons are:

1. The HCSB was inconsistent by rendering *YHWH* as “Yahweh” in only 656 of 6,000+ occurrences of *YHWH*; 2. Full consistency in rendering *YHWH* as “Yahweh” would overwhelm the reader. 3. When quoting Old Testament texts that include an occurrence of *YHWH*, the New Testament renders *YHWH* with the word *kurios*, which is a title (Lord) rather than a personal name.

Noel Osborn in his article “The Name: When does it make a difference?”¹³ argues that at least in some contexts the Name of God should be transliterated rather than be represented by the

¹² <https://csbible.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Translation-Decisions-QA.pdf>

¹³ Osborn, Noel D. “The Name: When does it make a difference?” 1992. *The Bible Translator*, Vol.43 No. 4 pp. 415-422

translation of Lord or by a translation of the meaning of the Name. He writes:

In a somewhat arbitrary manner, I have been "searching the scriptures" in an effort to identify the various contexts where the use of the name, as a name, must be recognized in order to appreciate the intended meaning. ... In other words, these are places where departing from the "widely accepted practice" in translation will likely make a significant difference in how the passage will be understood by the average reader and hearer.

He lists three categories of places where he feels the Name should be transliterated with the top category requiring the transliteration of YHWH plus a brief footnote. He lists the following categories:

1. Where the meaning of the name is explained (Exo 3.14-15)
2. Specific references to what God's name really is (Psa 83.18)
3. Where Israel's God is distinguished from other gods (Exo 5.2)
4. Where YHWH is distinguished from other names for God (Exo 6.3)
5. Invoking the name for a special purpose, such as in blessing or cursing (2 Kgs 2.24; 5.11) for binding an oath or covenant (Gen 31.49-50)

A number of translation teams have taken a similar view namely that at least in *some* contexts the Name of God *must* be transliterated. They differ in the number of places and the kind of contexts where this should happen, but at least God's Name in those translations has not been lost

It is my hope that a better informed Christian public will be more open to read Bible translations that do not shy away from showing the transliterated name of God at least in those places where the context clearly demands it.

