



The Names of God in the Bible

“In the ancient world generally, a name was not merely a convenient collocation of sounds by which a person, place, or thing could be identified; rather, a name expressed something of the very essence of that which was being named. Hence, to know the name was to know something of the fundamental traits, nature, or destiny of that to which the name belonged.”

Karla G. Bohmbach, Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible, 944

What’s in a Name?

Do you know what your name means? Most names have a backstory or a deeper meaning behind them. This is especially true of names in the Bible, which were often shorter phrases that captured that person’s inner character (or what the parents hoped the child would grow up to be). To know a person’s name was to know the person’s true identity.

God has many names in the Bible, but they all point us to the one true God. Studying his names allows us to know him better and relate with him in healthier and more faithful ways. When we stop to consider who God is at his core, it helps us understand the kind of relationship he desires to have with his children.

A study like this can turn into more and more information, but we need to always remind ourselves that the goal of our relationship with Christ is transformation. I am praying that this study helps us understand who God is so we can interact with him the way he always intended.

So let’s dive right into our study of the names of God in the Bible!

The Three Most Common Names for God:

1. **Yahweh** (YHWH, Jehovah) — 6,500 times. God’s *personal* name first revealed to Moses in the burning bush. First used in Genesis 2:4 (*if that seems out of order, remember that God revealed the name to Moses, who later wrote Genesis. Moses used this personal name for God as he told the story of his ancestors*).
2. **Elohim** — 2,000 times. A somewhat generic word for “gods” that was also used by other cultures for their own deities. First used in Genesis 1:1.
3. **Adonai** — About 434 times. A word that means lord, master, or owner. First used in Genesis 15:2.

Other Names of God in the Bible:

On a few occasions, the Bible takes one of God's three common names (Yahweh, Elohim, or Adonai) and adds an additional description to reveal something new about God. Generally this happens after someone has an extraordinary experience where they discover more about the heart of God and how he loves us.

One example would be Abraham calling God "*Jehovah-Jireh*" after God intervened to stop him from sacrificing his son Isaac, and instead provided an alternative sacrifice so Isaac could be spared (Genesis 22:12-14). Jehovah-Jireh means *The Lord (Yahweh) Provides*, which makes perfect sense in the context of the story.

Metaphors and Human Imagery:

In addition to names, the Bible uses a wide variety of metaphors and images from everyday life to describe God and the way he interacts with us. Here is a small sample:

- A **shepherd** who guides us (Psalm 23:1)
- A **king** who leads us (Psalm 5:2)
- A **warrior** who fights for us (Exodus 15:3)
- A **father** who loves us (Psalm 103:13)
- A **mother** who nourishes us (Isaiah 66:12-13)
- A **rock** we can depend on (Deut. 32:4)
- A **light** to show us the way (Psalm 27:1)
- A **refuge** to give us sanctuary (Psalm 9:9)
- A **shield** to protect us from danger (Genesis 15:1)

Metaphors and analogies are helpful tools to convey information quickly. But when the Bible uses human imagery to describe a God who exists outside of time and space, there are certain limitations. These metaphors tell us *something* about God, but not *everything*. And they certainly have their limits. God is a rock, but every rock I've encountered just sits there passively and doesn't have any thoughts or speech. God is a rock, but he's *more* than a rock. In that way, human images are a helpful tool to describe God, but they're far from perfect.



Name #1: Elohim (Power)

The first name of God we encounter in the Bible comes in **Genesis 1:1**. In the beginning, Elohim created the heavens and the earth. Elohim is the only name for God used throughout the entire creation account. The next name for God (YHWH) occurs in Genesis 2:4. So what does this first name reveal about God? Let's find out!

Elohim is Our Powerful Creator

First impressions are lasting impressions. When you meet someone for the first time, that initial encounter can really set the tone for the relationship moving forward.

So what kind of first impression does God make on us? Since Elohim is the exclusive name for God throughout the creation account, one of the strongest associations we have with that name is God's creative power.

God (Elohim) spoke the universe into existence. Before God and without God, there was nothing. But God created something out of nothing when he began speaking the words, "Let there be light..."

In his book on the names of God, Dr. Tony Evans explains that one definition for Elohim is "strong one." God's strength is on display through his unique ability to create things simply by speaking them into existence.

Artists, engineers and inventors can take raw materials that God has created and form them into something new, but that is not an action of creation *per se*—it is an act of shaping or rearranging the things God has already created.

God alone has the power to create. So the first thing that the Bible invites us to understand about God is that he alone has the power of creation.

"The Strong One doesn't need raw material with which to work. He doesn't need logic or tangible solutions in order to accomplish His goal. All He needs is Himself, and all you need is faith in His name that He can do all that He purposes to do."

Tony Evans, *The Power of God's Names* (p. 33).



Elohim is Plural

In Hebrew (the language of the Old Testament), “El” is the singular word for “god,” and Elohim is the plural form (gods). Even though God is one, the Bible uses the plural form Elohim to describe him. Something that would probably bother English teachers is that throughout the Bible, the *plural* Elohim is given *singular* adjectives and verbs.

For an example from the Bible, let’s consider these lines from Genesis 1:26-27: “Let **us (plural)** make mankind in our image... So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God **he (singular)** created them.”

The very grammar of the Bible shows us that God is both many and one at the same time, a theological concept called the Trinity that isn’t fully revealed until the New Testament (which refers to God as Father, Son and Spirit—e.g. **Matthew 28:19**).

Elohim Brings Order to the Chaos

Another noteworthy aspect of Elohim’s nature is his desire to transform chaos into order. Genesis 1 shows us how God changes a “formless and empty” world into a world teeming with light and life. By the end of the chapter, that dark, chaotic world was something that God looked down upon and called “very good.” That process of transformation began with the simple words, “Let there be light.”

Today, Elohim is still hard at work transforming our chaos into peace and order by shining his light upon us. Except now, we experience that light through his son Jesus Christ—the light of the world. As it says in **John 1:4**, “In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.”

Elohim: The Big Ideas

Elohim is the first name of God found in the Bible. It is associated with God’s creative power, his three-in-one nature, and his desire to bring order to our chaos.

“So before God shows us His gentleness, His fatherhood, or His grace, God introduces Himself to us as Elohim, the great and powerful. He wants to establish right from the start that He is the all-knowing, all-powerful, ever-present one.”

Tony Evans, *The Power of God's Names* (p. 34).



Name #2: YHWH (Presence)

The most common name for God in the Bible is his personal name, YHWH. Modern spellings of this name include Yahweh and Jehovah (more on that later). Although this name is used over 6,500 times in the Old Testament, we're not actually sure how it was originally pronounced. There's two reasons for that: first, the original manuscripts of the Old Testament don't contain any vowels, and second, the Jewish people stopped saying this name out loud for fear of accidentally taking the Lord's name in vain.

Can I Buy a Vowel? Unfortunately, No...

You'll notice that YHWH is spelled without vowels, and there's a good reason for that. If you were to look at an ancient Biblical manuscript of the Old Testament (like the Dead Sea Scrolls), all you would see are consonants from the Hebrew alphabet. The vowel sounds—which were added later in order to help facilitate oral reading—are typically placed *underneath* the Hebrew consonants. What's sometimes rather surprising to English speakers is that Hebrew vowels aren't really letters at all; they're more like small dots or lines that indicate which vowel sounds to make. This is all very different than the way English works!

God's personal name in the Old Testament consists of four Hebrew consonants: You, Heh, Waw and Heh, or YHWH using English letters. The missing vowels make it impossible to know for sure how this name was originally pronounced. Usually there was enough of an oral tradition of how a word was pronounced and preserved throughout history to know the pronunciation, but not with YHWH.

Taking the Lord's Name in Vain

Originally, the name YHWH was spoken out loud any time Jewish readers came to it in the Scriptures without any second thoughts. But as time went on, the people came to believe that mispronouncing the personal name of the Lord—even *unintentionally*—was tantamount to taking the Lord's name in vain. As such, they stopped pronouncing YHWH altogether, and began substituting a more generic term for God (Elohim, "The Name," or Adonai, which comes next in our series) anytime they came to YHWH in the Bible. With that substitution, the proper pronunciation was lost to history.

Without the vowels or an oral history to guide us, we're just not sure how to pronounce YHWH. It would somewhat like seeing **B-R-N** and needing to guess how to pronounce it **Is it Brain? Bryan? Boron? Baron? Byron?** Without the vowels you really wouldn't be able to tell.

The History of "Yahweh" and "Jehovah"

So if we don't know how to pronounce YHWH, why do we use the name Yahweh? The explanation is actually pretty interesting. The third major name for God in the Bible is Adonai (which means Lord). If you take the vowels from Adonai (a-o-a) and insert them in-between the consonants of YHWH, you get YaHoWaH. When Hebrew is passed through Latin, the Y turns into a J and the W turns into a V, giving us JaHoVaH. From there, it is further anglicized into Jehovah or Yahweh.

Finding YHWH In Your Bible

Most Bible translations do not print YHWH or Yahweh. Instead, they typically translate this name as "the LORD" (notice the capital letters). Since there are multiple words for "Lord" in the Bible, some of which apply to humans (i.e. masters) instead of God himself, Bible translators

needed something to differentiate between YHWH (“the LORD”) and the more common word for “lord.”

YHWH Is the Personal God.

God first reveals his personal name to Moses during the burning bush scene in Exodus 3. Moses is apprehensive about delivering his message to Pharaoh (let my people go!), and needs to know the name of the God who was sending him. God’s response is to reveal his personal, divine name YHWH. This name is likely derived from the Hebrew verb “to be,” and brings to mind the idea of eternal, unchanging existence. Perhaps we can hear God saying, “*I am who I am, I will be who I will be, and nothing will change that!*”

Moses would go on to write much of the first five books of the Old Testament. After hearing God’s personal name, he included it in earlier parts of Israel’s story to indicate that this same God was *personally* involved in the lives of his people all along, even if he hadn’t revealed his personal name to the Patriarchs of Israel.

If Elohim brings to mind God’s creative power, YHWH brings to mind his personal interactions. And that’s precisely what we see the first time YHWH is used (Genesis 2:4). In Genesis 2, God creates the first man and woman. He is directly, intimately involved in the story. He is not a distant God who does everything from afar, or a generic deity who made the world and then left it to its own devices. Instead, he is here, with us, intervening our lives in undeniable ways.

Consider the ways YHWH takes direct action in **Gen. 2:**

- Made the heavens and earth (2:4)
- Formed the man (2:7)
- Planted a garden (2:8)
- Made all kinds of trees grow (2:9)
- Took the man and put him in the Garden (2:15)
- Commanded the man (2:16)
- Made a helper for Adam (2:18)
- Formed the beasts / birds (2:19)
- Caused Adam to fall asleep (2:21)
- Created Eve (2:22)

If **Elohim** is about God’s power, then **YHWH** is about God’s presence. Tony Evans writes about the significance of keeping both of these concepts in mind as we reflect on the nature of God:

“If Elohim is God’s creative and powerful name, Jehovah is God’s personal name. It’s the self-revealing name God gave when Moses asked, “What

is [Your] name?” When we study the name Elohim, we study the God who is the Creator, and we can talk about His power, presence, and prowess. When we talk about Jehovah, we’re talking about His person, His character. Elohim is the side of God who created the heavens and the earth. Jehovah is the side of God who relates to His creation personally. A person can believe in Elohim without knowing Jehovah. In fact, plenty of people believe in God (Elohim) but don’t know the God in whom they believe (Jehovah). Jehovah is the God who personally reveals Himself to us, often through the trials and struggles we face.”

Tony Evans, *The Power of God's Names* (p. 45).

Name #3: Adonai (Authority)

The third major name for God (used around 400 times in the Old Testament) is Adonai, the plural form of the Hebrew word for lord or master. This word has to do with dominion, authority, and ownership. A person’s Adon (singular) is the one they submit to as the final authority in their life.

Masters, for their part, are not to use and abuse those entrusted to their care. On the contrary, they have a responsibility to care for their subjects the way that a kind and benevolent ruler would care for their people. While some human lords might be tempted to use their power for their own selfish gain, God is different. He is our compassionate King and Lord who genuinely cares for us.

“God, in His role of Adonai, fulfills all the responsibilities of ownership. He provides, protects, guards, leads, cares for...and much more.”

Tony Evans, *The Power of God's Names* (p. 58)

It All Belongs to God

Throughout the Bible, we see that *everything* belongs to the Lord (**Psalm 50:10, 97:5**). God is the creator and master of everything and everyone, which means he is our ultimate source of authority, power, and protection. There is nothing we have that we possess apart from God, just as there is no authority on earth apart from the authority God has established (Romans 13:1).

The Big Three: What Does it All Mean?

God is **Elohim**, a powerful creator who speaks worlds into existence.

God is **YHWH**, a personal God who is directly invested in our everyday lives.

God is **Adonai**, our master and owner who compassionately cares for us.

Let's reflect for a moment on how to bring all these concepts together.

- If we reject God as Elohim, then he is a personal God and authority figure who is nevertheless *powerless* to help us.
- If we reject God as YHWH, he is powerful and mighty but cold, *distant* or unconcerned.
- And if we reject God as Adonai, we expect him to be powerful and personal while *rejecting his authority* over us.

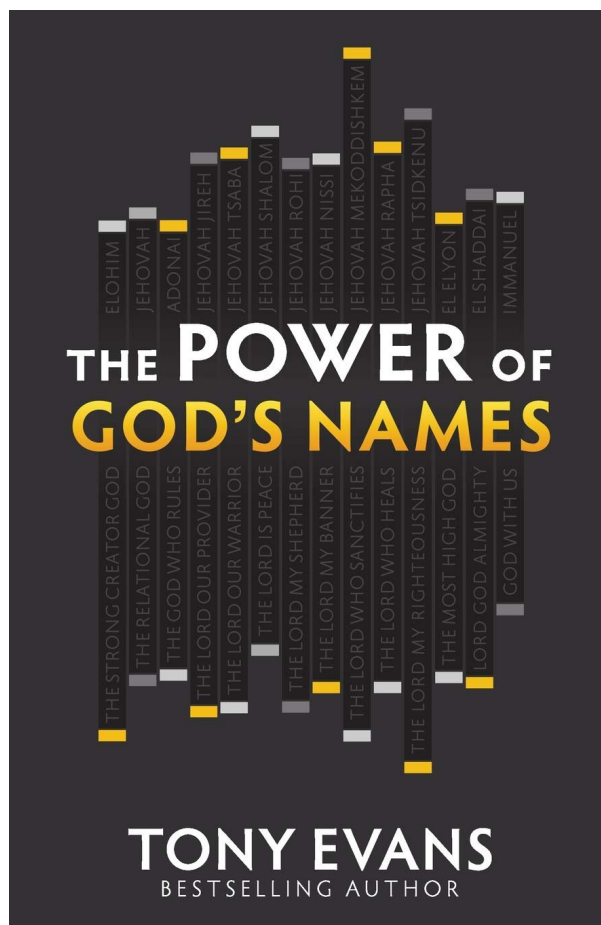
You can see a fatal flaw in each of these scenarios, because in each case we deny an essential part of God's character.

If we want to experience the power (**Elohim**) and presence (**YHWH**) of God, we need to acknowledge him as our master (**Adonai**). We shouldn't expect God to work miracles (**Elohim**) in our lives if we reject a personal relationship (**YHWH**) with him or deny his authority over us (**Adonai**).

Instead, we need to recognize that God's essential nature includes power, presence, and authority—and live our lives in Christ accordingly.

Looking Ahead:

In each subsequent session, we'll explore one of the other important names of God that we find in Scripture. Many of these names take Elohim, YHWH or Adonai and add on a description based on the events that just transpired. Our study will involve looking at the meaning of the name and unpacking the story in which it is introduced.



Book Recommendation:

The Power of God's Names by Tony Evans

4.9 Stars out of 5 from 1,100+ Amazon Customers

Synopsis:

In his exciting new book, bestselling author Dr. Tony Evans shows that it's through the names of God that the nature of God is revealed to us. Who is God in His fullness? How has He expressed His riches and righteousness? How can you trust His goodness? As you get to know the names of God and understand their meaning, God's character will become real to you in life-changing ways. By studying and understanding the characteristics of God as revealed through His names, you will be better equipped to face hardship and victory, loss and provision, and all of the challenges life throws at you.

About the Author:

Dr. Tony Evans is founder and senior pastor of the 9500-member Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship in Dallas, founder and president of The Urban Alternative, former chaplain of the NFL's Dallas Cowboys, and present chaplain of the NBA's Dallas Mavericks. His radio broadcast, The Alternative with Dr. Tony Evans, can be heard on nearly 1000 US outlets daily and in more than 130 countries.

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