

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 28

The Temple of *Yhwh*

(ה ו ג ד)

Last week, we started the Hebrew alphabet. We had the first four letters:

ד ג ב א

Reading right to left, we have “*aleph*” (the ox); “*beyt*” (the house); “*gimel*” (the camel), and “*daleth*” (the door). We discussed that while the *aleph* became our “A” we have in our alphabet today, it did not always have an “A” sound. The *beyt* sounded like “B,” the *gimel* sounded like “g” (as in “get”), and the *daleth* like “d.”

We used those letters to consider several Hebrew phrases built around the Hebrew word *beyt* (בֵּית), which means “house,” just like the first letter in the word! We added *beyt* to the Hebrew *ab* (אב), which means “father,” while discussing the Hebrew cultural “house of the Father” and the insight it brings to Scripture. Then, we ended our first Hebrew lesson with *beyt* added to David (דָּוִד) and a study on the Biblical idea of the House of David.

We could have chosen a whole other group of Biblical words with “house” in them. These are words many already know! To place these words, we need to understand that while the Hebrew word for house is pronounced like the English spelling “*beyt*,” by the time the word gets into our Bibles in English, it is spelled a bit differently. It is spelled as “*beth*,” because the “e” sometimes the Hebrew form uses an “e” sound, and the “th” is close to the simple Hebrew “t” sound. When we English readers see “*beth*” in the Bible, we pronounce it like the English name “*Beth*” rather than the Hebrew pronunciation, even though the Hebrew would be pronounced differently.

Knowing this, we can quickly assemble some more “house” words: The Hebrew “*El*” means “God” so Bethel means “house of God” (*beth*+*El*). The Hebrew *lechem* means “bread,” so the Hebrew Bethlehem (or “Bethlehem”) means “house of bread.” There are many other towns that began with “*beth*” as they grew up out of a house associated with one thing or another.

We now move on from the first four letters and consider the next four letters in the Hebrew alphabet.

www.Biblical-literacy.com



Our next Hebrew letter is *hey*. The letter looks like the *daleth* with an extra leg that does not quite meet up!

Scholars are not united in opinions on how this letter developed and what it meant. My favorite opinion is that it comes from the old pictogram for a foreman at a worksite. The pictogram originally looked like a person with raised hands. It is easy to see how someone associated the sound of “Hey” with a foreman’s shout at a worksite!

The *hey* sounds like the letter “h.” Not surprisingly, it ultimately becomes “h” in our alphabet!



The next Hebrew letter is the *vav*. This letter is sometimes called a *waw* because of the German pronunciation of “w” as “v.” In English, though, we call the letter a *vav* because it is pronounced as a “v,” and the English “w” does not carry the German “V” sound!

The letter looks like a walking stick, and that is not far from its original meaning. The word *vav* means a tent peg or a hook.



This next Hebrew letter is called a *zayin*. It looks very similar to the *vav*, but it is different. A close examination shows that the *zayin* has a hat or top that goes completely over the down-stroke. The *vav* only overshadows the down-stroke on the left.

The *zayin* was originally a picture of a weapon. It still looks a bit like a sword, with the top stroke being the hilt and the down-stroke the blade. As such, however, it is missing a handle! My friend Rob McCray thinks it looks like an axe.

The *zayin* is pronounced like a “Z” in English.



The last letter in this lesson is really hard to pronounce for Americans. It is even harder to write the sound of the letter. My best effort is *cheyt*. The “ch” sound is

not like “chariot.” It is found deep in the throat and sounds like you are clearing your throat! It is a “guttural” or gruff-sounding noise. Some say it sounds like the “ch” in “Bach,” although even that is not quite gruff enough!

The letter looks much like the softer sounding “hey” letter except the left down-stroke marries up to the *daleth* letter rather than coming up short like the *hey*.

Some scholars think the letter came from the pictogram for a courtyard. If so, we can safely assume the courtyard was rectangular rather than round!

With these eight letters, we are now ready to resume our study of the monarchy period in Israel’s history. We shift from David to his son Solomon. Solomon had a brief family struggle to assume the throne David left for him, but once he began ruling in Jerusalem, he quickly set himself to building projects!

בֵּית-יְהוָה (*BEYT YAHWEH*) “HOUSE OF YHWH”

In 1 Kings 6:1, we read that Solomon began building the temple in the fourth year of his reign:

...in the fourth year of Solomon’s reign over Israel... he began to build the house of the LORD.

Based on the Hebrew letters and words we have learned so far, it is not surprising to find out that the word for the “house” here is “*beyt*.” Solomon began building the *beyt* of the LORD.

LORD is written in upper case letters because it is a specific translation of a Hebrew word that does not mean “Lord” in any normal sense. The Hebrew word is made up of four letters, three of which we learned this week:

יהוה

These letters (read right to left) are *yodh* (which is on our agenda for learning next week), *hey*, *vav*, and *hey*. The *yodh* sounds like a “y” and so we have the sounds/letters of Yhvh. Do you recognize it? We typically see it written as “Yhwh.” This is because that *vav* letter is often written as a German “w,” yet it is properly pronounced as the English “v.” Even though we read and now often call the word “Yahweh,” it is more properly pronounced as “Yahveh.”

Solomon started construction on the temple as *beyt Yhvw*, the house of the LORD. This phrase is used over and over in reference to the temple, not simply by

Solomon but by others in the Old Testament as well. The phrase is best understood if we study *Yhvh* a bit more carefully.

These four letters carry special meaning in the Old Testament. For centuries and for countless people, they form the most holy word in human speech. The word is so holy that many people refuse to say it out loud.

When I was studying Hebrew under a rather devout Jew, he taught us that when we reached the word *Yhwh*, we were not to try and say it. Rather, we were to say “*ha-shem*” instead. *Ha-shem* is the Hebrew word that means “the name.” This was one of two principal ways that practicing Jews today find acceptable as a substitute for the name that must not be named!

What is it about these four letters that merits such reverence? The key is found in the Old Testament. In Exodus, the word surfaces with an explanation in the account of Moses before the burning bush. God identified himself to Moses as the God of his father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob (Ex. 3:6). In each of these phrases, the Hebrew word for “God” is the Hebrew “*Elohim*.” That word means “God” when speaking of the Lord God, but it could also mean lower case “gods.” It does not speak only of the one true God.

Moses then asks God how he should answer if the people of Israel should ask the “name” of the God that sent Moses. God answered in Ex. 3:14-15.

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

Without detailing in this lesson, the forms used and translated as “I AM” in the ESV,¹ we limit our focus to God’s statement, “The LORD, the God of your fathers....” Here, we have the word *Yhwh*.

From this point, the name *Yhwh* takes center stage in the Exodus and among the Israelites. In Exodus 6:2-3, God speaks to Moses again emphasizing the new nature of this revelation to the Israelites:

¹ The Hebrew words translated “I AM” are variant forms of *Yhwh* (*'hyh*). Scholars for centuries have debated over exactly how this form should be vocalized and understood. Most scholars accept it as “I AM,” the present tense of the verb “to be,” if such were to exist in Hebrew. Some scholars see it as a future, “I WILL BE.” A few scholars also consider it “causative” which means it would carry the meaning, “I CAUSE TO BE.”

God spoke to Moses and said to him, "I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD [*Yhwh*] I did not make myself known to them.

If we go back to Genesis 17:1, for example, we see that when God revealed himself to Abram, he did so as "God Almighty" (*El Shaddai* in Hebrew), not as *Yhwh*. It is an interesting note that prior to this time, Israelite names did not reflect the name of *Yhwh*, but after this, name after name included "*Yhwh*" in some form as a tribute.² Jo-shua, for example, begins with the abbreviation "Jo" reflective of the "name" of God (similarly the names Jo-tham, Jo-el, Jo-nathan, *etc.*) Many names also reflect an abbreviation of *Yhwh* in their ending (for example Eli-jah).

From the exodus forward, *Yhwh* was not simply a label for God, but was his most holy name. When God passed before Moses, Exodus significantly notes that God not only allowed Moses to see the trail of his glory, but *Yhwh* also spoke aloud his name:

And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you *my name 'The LORD'* (Ex. 33:19).

This forms the basis for observant Jews to read "the name" in place of *Yhwh* when reading the Bible today. This practice of substituting something as an alternative for *Yhwh* predates the New Testament.

When did the Jews quit pronouncing God's name? We are uncertain. Certainly sometime before the time of Christ, it was treated with a special reverence that stopped the common writing of it as well as using it in common speech. Beyond that, scholars are hesitant to try and give specifics.

We get some insight to this from the Dead Sea Scrolls. These materials discovered in the caves around Qumran and the Dead Sea in the mid-20th century opened a great door of light into the practices of Jews during the inter-testamental times when they were written.

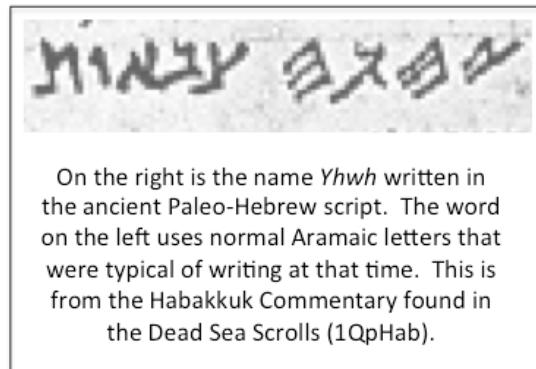
In the Dead Sea Scrolls, we find writings of Scripture as well as other significant writings of very devout Jews living in the first few centuries before Christ. In this time between the Old and New Testament, we see the Holy Name of God already treated differently from the rest of Scripture in some, but not all of the texts. In the Habakkuk Commentary, for example, where *Yhwh* should be in the text, the writers did not write it in the Aramaic script we are learning (which was the written script for the rest of the scroll). Instead, they used the Hebrew letters we

² Some point to Jochabed, the mother of Moses as holding a form of God's name. Most scholars readily explain why her name is not using the divine name in any way, but there is still debate on this issue.

call “Paleo-Hebrew.” It is the likely Hebrew script used early in Hebrew writing, much closer to Moses’ day than to the centuries before Christ.

Another scroll that records certain rules of community behavior for this group who lived in the Qumran area used four dots in place of the holy name of God,

While we are uncertain exactly when the name was no longer in use, many scholars do agree on the reason for disuse. Most believe that people were careful to avoid possible blasphemy through an improper usage of the name. In Leviticus, the story is recounted of a woman’s son who “blasphemed the Name, and cursed.” The Israelites followed God’s instructions and stoned the man:



Whoever blasphemes the name of the LORD [*Yhwh*] shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall stone him. The sojourner as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death (Lev. 24:16).

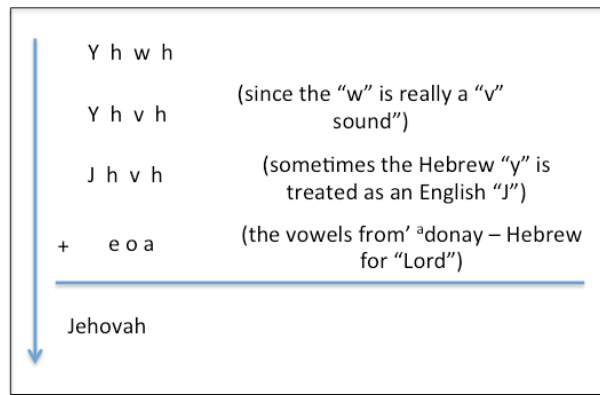
Because it was not readily pronounced, scholars are not even certain how to say it properly. Most of our Hebrew is pronounced because Jewish scholars in the first centuries after Christ began adding markings to indicate the vowel sounds and other necessary vocal inflections to allow the Hebrew words to be said properly (We remind our readers that Hebrew did not have written vowels in the sense that we think of vowels in our languages today).

When writing these vowel sounds, however, the Jewish scribes did not add vowel sounds to *Yhwh*, for that name was not to be said anyway! Over time, more modern scholars have attempted to add some vowel sounds, but the early additions were not meant to accurately convey the actual pronunciation of the word.

Most scholars over time used the vowel sounds for another Hebrew word for God, ^a*donay*. This word means “Lord,” but not only in a “God” sense. It means “Lord” also in a lower case “master” sense. This was another word that observant Jews would say in place of *Yhwh* when reading the Scriptures once the name had become too sacred to pronounce. This is the origin of the English construction “Jehovah.”

The vowels for ^a*donay* (“^a” becomes an “e”, o and a) were then applied to *Yhwh*. Because the Hebrew “y” can also be an English “J,” this is how the name “Jehovah” was invented. J, from the Hebrew “Y,” “e” as an added vowel sound from ^a*donay* (the sound of the ’A vowel), “h” for the Hebrew *hey*, “o” from

^adonay, “v” for the vav, “a” from ^adonay, and the final “h” from the final hey. In other words, the English name of Jehovah has great history in English Bibles, but no real basis as the actual Hebrew pronunciation of God’s name.³



Starting from the top we see the progression from the Hebrew name for God (Yhwh) to the English name “Jehovah.”

Adding “a” and “e” to Yhwh to make “Yahweh” is the current best guess of scholars on how to say what they suppose was the pronunciation of the name of God, but even that is not 100 percent certain.

More efforts are given to trying to understand the meaning of the name rather than its pronunciation. Even in that, though, scholars struggle and fail to find consensus. Scholars cannot even agree on how the word Yahweh is formed in Hebrew. The difficulties in arriving at a definitive understanding of the name’s meaning, its origin beyond Sinai (if any), and even its function in the Old Testament lead scholars to almost innumerable theories.

Notwithstanding, there are several areas of general agreement about the name that stand out. For one, scholars generally agree that the name of God is a verb form, rather than a noun. That itself makes the name of God stand out from other names given to gods in that time of history. Rather than being a noun of statement about size, ability, or status, God’s name is one of action—a verb. God insists on his name being a verb, as he is a God known by his deeds, and not simply by a title.

In this sense, when God would pronounce his name, it was connected with action and with those aspects of his character that were action driven. Earlier when referencing God’s glory passing before Moses, the pronouncing of God’s name is keyed to his actions:

And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.' *And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy* (Ex. 33:19).

Similarly in the next chapter, when God makes the new set of tablets with the Ten Commandments, he again proclaims his own name and associates it with action:

³ See, Parke-Taylor, Geoffrey, *Yahweh: The Divine Name in the Bible*, (Wilfred Laurier University Press 1975), at 9.

The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness (Ex. 34:5-6).

Even in the first revealing of the name to Moses in Exodus 3, it comes in the context of God as an acting God. God says, "I have seen... I have heard... I know..." It is then that God acts to bring his people out of bondage. *Yhwh* is an active God; *Yhwh* is a verb!

A second stand out point centers on scholastic agreement about the large lack of agreement from scholars on the full and precise meaning of the name. Even though *Yhwh* is used 6,828 times in the Old Testament, the inability to tie it down fully prompted Tryggve Mettinger to write,

God remains the hidden God. The God who in the Old Testament has contacts with mortals remains, nevertheless, always God, and in sacredness God will remain unfathomable. The Old Testament knows of only one response to the divine self-revelation: the worship and fear of the Lord. Anyone seeking contact with God must be prepared to respect God's incognito.⁴

While Mettinger makes a solid point on not knowing God fully, we do know God as he has revealed himself to us, both in his actions (verb-speak) and in the life of Christ (more on that later!). We can know God to the extent he reveals himself, but we must never foolishly believe he is revealed fully to a human! Even Moses, who heard his name, could not behold his full glory. As Parke-Davis wrote,

To know God is not to dispel the mystery which belongs to deity. God is known, but not fully known.⁵

בֵּית-יְהוָה (BEYT YAHWEH) THE CALL OF GOD'S NAME OVER THE TEMPLE

There is an unusual passage that records a statement by Solomon in dedication of the *beyt Yhwh*, the House of God. In 1 Kings 8:43 the ESV reads,

Likewise, when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel...comes and prays toward this house, hear in heaven your dwelling place and do

⁴ Mettinger, Tryggve, *In Search of God* (Fortress 1988) at 11.

⁵ Parke-Davis at 11.

according to all for which the foreigner calls to you, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and *that they may know that this house that I have built is called by your name.*

Solomon wants all aware that the house he built (the temple) is “called by God’s name.” Now as translated, this passage seems to imply that *Yhwh* is to be a label for the temple. But Swedish Old Testament scholar Tryggve Mettinger makes an interesting analysis over this passage.

Mettinger points out the Jewish legal tradition of pronouncing a new owner’s name over a property as part of the transfer of that property.

When we buy or sell property, normally the transaction in question is the object of binding written documentation. By contrast, we find instead that in ancient Israel the proclamation of the name of the new owner played an important role. For example, when a field changed hands there was a proclamation of the name in the presence of witnesses: the money changed hands and the name of the new owner was called out over the field in question, thereby completing the transaction in process.⁶

Mettinger uses this to explain a number of Old Testament passages where the translations are hard to make smooth otherwise. With this juridical language recognized, he then gives a very literal translation of the 1 Kings 8:43 passage in a way that makes good sense:

...that they may know that your name has been called over this house which I have built.

As the holy name of *Yhwh* was called out over the *beyt* built by Solomon, the *beyt* was to be understood by all as the *beyt Yhwh*, the house of the LORD.

As the house was called by God’s name, it was not only a sign of ownership, but also a promise of protection. The key, of course, was God maintaining the house as a place for his name, something that did not happen when the people turned to idolatry and disobedience.

**בֵּית-יְהוָה (BEYT YAHWEH)
JOHN 8 UNDERSTOOD IN LIGHT OF THE TEMPLE**

⁶ Mettinger, at 10.

John 8 begins to take on deeper significance, as we understand the tradition and practices of the Jews at the time of Christ. The story unfolds in an echo of Solomon’s dedication of the *beyt Yhwh*. Solomon dedicated the temple at the Feast of Booths (I Kings 8:2). John 7, which sets up John 8, happens during the same feast (“Now the Jews’ Feast of Booths was at hand” Jn 7:2).

Mettinger goes through the ancient rabbinical writings (the Mishna) in an effort to reconstruct the activities of the Feast of Booths as practiced in Jesus’ day. Mettinger then draws the direct parallel to the stories of Jesus related in John 7-9⁷:

The Jewish Festival of Booths

John 7-9

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Daily during the festival, the Water-libation ceremony took place. Water was drawn out of the Pool of Siloam and poured out at the altar. 2. A celebration of lights where participants danced with torches in their hands at the time where the golden candlesticks were lit. 3. The proclamation of the name. For this, there was a march around the altar with the proclamation that used an altered name of God praying for him to save the people. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. On the last day of the festival Jesus proclaims, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink” (Jn 7:37) with the assurance living waters would flow. 2. Jesus says, “I am the light of the world” (“Jn 8:12). 3. Repeatedly Jesus proclaims “I AM” (Jn 8: 24, 28, 58). |
|--|--|

The story seems very clear in John 8, that Jesus repeatedly made the claim and the pronouncement of the Most Holy Name of God. Consider:

- “I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins” (Jn. 8:24).

⁷ Mettinger at 46ff.

- So Jesus said to them, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me" (Jn 8:28).

When pressed at the end of John 8, we read the clearest indicator of all:

- Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." So the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am" (Jn 8:56-58).

The reaction of the Jews is what you would expect when one pronounced the Holy Name of God, especially if one was taking on the mantle of wearing that name,

So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple (Jn 8:59).

It seems hardly coincidental that when they sought to stone Jesus for saying *Yhwh*, John makes a point of Jesus escaping by hiding in the temple! Jesus hid in the *beyt Yhwh*, the House of Yahweh!

It is not surprising then to read that as Jesus prayed what scholars call the High Priestly Prayer, he plainly states to the Lord,

I have manifested ***your name*** to the people whom you gave me out of the world (Jn 17:6).

Again, Jesus echoes this in his closing of the prayer:

I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them (Jn. 17:26).

Jesus not only said the name of God, Jesus lived the name of God. Jesus was God as the ultimate verb. He was God manifest and acting upon earth.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. "*I am.*" (Ex. 3:14-15).

God as a verb—do we think of him that way? Is God simply one who exists or do we see him active and at work in our lives? When we face the difficulties in life, do we do so with worry or by seeking our active God's help in prayer? Let us make a conscious decision to seek God's actions in our lives. Let us be his hands for his use in his actions in the world!

2. *“God has bestowed on him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth.”* (Ph. 2:9).

Jesus *is* the name above all names. Paul constantly wrote of the “Lord Jesus” using the Greek equivalent from the Septuagint to designate Jesus as the very name of God incarnate. God places this name above all names on the resurrected Christ and all knees bow. This passage is reminiscent of the one time each Day of Atonement when the High Priest would come out into the worshipping area of the temple. Rabbinic sources tell us that the priest would this one time each year proclaim and pronounce the name of God. And once he did so, everyone hearing it immediately bowed his or her knee to the ground. It is this that will cause not simply those worshipping in the temple to bow, but everyone above, on or below earth will bow to the Lordship of Jesus, *Yhwh* of God. This was the New Testament Church’s confession: “Jesus is Lord” (*Yhwh*)! Let us join that confession and bow our knee now!

3. *“Your name has been called over this house”* (1 Kings 8:43).

As God’s name is called over the property, his ownership is made known. James seems to echo this idea in James 2:7 when he references those who “blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called.” God’s name, holy, of uncertain pronunciation, but the name that stands for his actions, is *our God*. We belong to him. He protects us and loves us as his own. Let us consciously hand over to God the rights that go with his name called over us. Let us seek to do his will and love his purposes and plans as our God whose name has been called out over us.

WANT MORE?

Let’s work on our Hebrew! Here are the homework chores:

1. Each day (preferably twice a day) between now and next Sunday say aloud the first eight letters of the Hebrew alphabet ten times! “Aleph, Beyt, Gimel, Daleth, Hey, Vav, Zayin, Cheyt.” Now, nine more!
2. Let’s practice writing the block letters so that we remember what they look like. Several times this week, write (or doodle) the letters. The block form of the letters is given on the next page with room to write them.
3. Many of you emailed me last week. Some with questions on the letters, and others filling me in on how the homework was going. I always read these and love to get them. So if you fell a need or desire to srop me an

email on this (or any thing else), please do so at wantmore@Biblical-Literacy.com.

