

The Affectation of Using Hebrew Divine Names

Introduction

Some in the churches of God teach that we must use the sacred Hebrew divine names Yahweh for God and Joshua or Yashua or similar for Jesus: even claiming this is salvation critical. They overlook a number of things, in particular that the authors of the NT (New Testament) books did not use these Hebrew names in their Greek manuscripts. Some will challenge this by claiming the NT was not originally written in Greek but in Hebrew. This is clearly not a valid claim for the greatest number of NT books were written in Greek. For example, Paul's epistles to the Greeks in Corinth and Thessalonica, and Luke's gospel and book of Acts addressed to a fellow Greek named Theophilus. John wrote Revelation on the Greek island of Patmos and addressed this to seven churches in Asia minor. Since the NT writers did not use Hebrew divine names; why should we? Those promoting Hebrew divine names also appear not to understand that the English language can not reproduce some Hebrew sounds and therefore it is too difficult for English speakers to say the Hebrew divine names. Besides if we depart from the traditional divine names, such as Jesus, the world will not understand us.

Transliterating Hebrew Names into English

Those aiming to pronounce the biblical divine names in Hebrew need to start with an accurate transliteration from the Hebrew divine name into English: anything less would defeat their purpose. Therefore we need to digress to study the process of transliteration.

Most letters of the Hebrew and Greek alphabets have a counterpart in the English alphabet but some letters have no English equivalent. Transliteration is used to reflect in English the spelling of OT Hebrew and NT Greek proper names. A transliteration is not a translation because no attempt is made to convey the meaning of the Hebrew or Greek proper names but instead the sound and spelling of the Hebrew or Greek name are conveyed using, as far as this is possible, the English alphabet.

However, when a Hebrew name contains a letter for which there is no English counterpart then either a symbol must be used to mark that Hebrew letter in transliterations, or an English letter that is an acceptable approximation may be used, or that letter is omitted from the transliteration.

In this article we need consider the awkward Hebrew letter `ajin. Grammars usually transliterate this letter as `ayin but this article prefers `ajin – provided the “J” is pronounced as the “Y” in “Yes” – because in Hebrew there is no letter equivalent to the English letter “Y”. Since English, and as far as I know all European languages have no counterpart for the Hebrew `ajin and because the `ajin is difficult to pronounce, it is usually treated as a silent consonant and therefore is frequently omitted from transliterations. For example, the `ajin of “Ba`al” is usually omitted giving the transliteration “Baal” (Strong H1168) but which is no longer an accurate transliteration.

Although most grammars insist that `ajin was silent in OT times, this is unlikely because King David must have pronounced the eight initial `ajins of verses 121 - 128 of the acrostic Psalm 119 and because paragraph §6e of the definitive *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* states that `ajin was pronounced as a “*strong rattled guttural*”!

Since `ajin is virtually unpronounceable to native English speakers it is understandable that this letter is omitted from transliterated sacred names but that is contrary to the spirit of saying sacred names correctly and therefore defeats the purpose. It is incomprehensible this does not deter the advocates of Hebrew sacred names.

The History of the Letters “I” and “J”

The English consonant “J” first appeared around 1634 and before then the vowel “I” was used to denote that consonant. For example, the 1611 edition of the KJV Bible still used the vowel “I” as a consonant in proper names such as, Jeremiah, Ioel, Jesus, Iohn, James and Iude, instead of the modern, Jeremiah, Joel, Jesus, John, James and Jude. Therefore originally the vowel “I” served both as a vowel and a consonant in the English alphabet. From about 1634 the distinction between vowel and consonant was emphasized by slightly modifying the shape of the letter “I” to “J” when a consonant. This modified “J” was then placed after the vowel “I” in the English alphabet.

OT Hebrew and NT Greek too had no consonant “J” and these languages too used their equivalent of the letter “I” as the equivalent of the English vowel “I” and as the equivalent of the English consonant “J” but pronouncing that consonant “I” as “Y” in “Yes” rather than the English “J” in “Jam”.

English and French pronounce “J” as “J” in “Jam” rather than the “Y” in “Yes” as do most other languages, including OT Hebrew. Therefore English Hebrew grammars transliterate as “Y” the Hebrew consonant “I” but through this they obscure the etymological connection between the Hebrew consonant “I” and the former English consonant “I” and today's consonant “J”. Therefore in general this article transliterates the Hebrew consonant “I” as “J” but pronounces this as the “Y” in “Yes”. Another reason being that OT Hebrew has no equivalent for the English consonant “Y”.

The OT Hebrew alphabet originally contained only 22 consonants but no vowels. Vowels were added later to the original all-consonantal Hebrew text in the form of small vowel points written below, above and between the consonants to detract as little as possible from the original all-consonantal Hebrew text. The vowel points were intended to preserve the correct Hebrew pronunciation after the Jews were dispersed amongst the nations and stopped speaking Hebrew.

In addition to the vowel points a few of the smaller Hebrew consonants were also placed between consonants to mark vowels. One of these smaller consonant is “jod” – pronounced “yod” – and is often used to denote the long Hebrew vowel “hireq” and which sounds like the “i” of machine. As explained above, this article prefers for etymological reasons the transliteration “jod” rather than the usual “yod” despite the latter reflecting the correct pronunciation.

The NT Greek alphabet too did not contain the consonant “J” and instead used the vowel “iota” and which corresponds to the English vowel “I”. Therefore NT authors, when writing in Greek, represented the name “Jesus” in Greek as the transliteration *Iēsous* (see next section) and whose initial “I” is pronounced similar to the “Y” in “Yes” rather than “J” in “Jam”. The NT Greek alphabet too has no consonant “Y” although English Greek-loan words containing the Greek vowel “upsilon” usually transliterate this vowel in English as “y”, for example, rhythm, dyslexia and dynamic.

When transliterating the divine names we need to be careful that we keep track of both the correct pronunciation and the correct etymological relationships between OT Hebrew or NT Greek letters and their English counterparts.

The Name Jesus

Let us now look at the divine name *Jesus* which results from the two-step transliteration from first Hebrew to Greek and then from Greek to English. The direct transliteration from the full form of the Hebrew Joshua to English is J^howshuwa` (Strong H3091). In this transliteration note especially the symbol ` at the end of the name J^howshuwa` and which, as explained above, denotes the Hebrew guttural consonant `ajin.

The intermediate Greek transliteration from which we derive *Jesus* is *Iēsous* (Strong G2424, where ‘ē’ denotes the Greek long vowel *eta*). The English *Jesus* is really quite close in pronunciation and etymologically to the Greek *Iēsous* and both are very different from the Hebrew J^howshuwa`. Strong’s Concordance gives instead of J^howshuwa` the transliteration Y^howshuwa` but I claim the form J^howshuwa` is etymologically preferable.

Let us next examine the pronunciation of the name J^howshuwa` and in particular the terminal `ajin (‘ayin) denoted by the symbol `. It was explained above that the Hebrew consonant `ajin is a strong rattled guttural. The Dutch language still has a similar sound in its guttural G, which is stronger than the weak guttural “ch” of the Scottish loch. Although English speakers find such gutturals difficult to pronounce, this is no justification for treating this letter as a silent one. Therefore if one aims to pronounce the Hebrew divine name J^howshuwa` then let it be done properly by pronouncing all consonants and all vowels, including the difficult terminal consonant `ajin. The terminal `ajin of J^howshuwa` makes this divine name virtually unpronounceable for native English speakers.

There remains also a question over the correct pronunciation of the vowel ‘u’ in the transliteration J^howshuwa`. It is usually claimed that the Hebrew “u” sounds like the “u” in “put” but English is too irregular in its pronunciation to depend on this. Most European languages pronounce the “u” alike but nothing like the “u” in “put”: for example the French ‘u’ in sur, the Dutch ‘uu’ in vuur (fire) and the German ü in früh (early). There is reason to believe that the “u” in the Greek “pur” (fire) is pronounced as the “u” in French, Dutch and German. Since English speakers find it difficult to pronounce the “u” this way it seems the “u” of J^howshuwa` is another stumbling block in the way of pronouncing correctly the Hebrew name of Jesus.

Case declensions for the Greek Proper Noun Iēsous

Unlike the undeclined English proper noun ‘Jesus’, the Greek proper noun *Iēsous* is declined for grammatical case. For the Nominative case it is *Iēsous* but for the Genitive, Dative and Vocative cases it is *Iēsou* and for the Accusative case *Iēsoun*. This means the Apostles allowed the whims of the Greek language to dictate the actual form of this divine name. So why do the sacred divine name advocates consider “Jesus” unacceptable?

The Name JHVH

The earlier discussion on the Hebrew consonant ‘jod’ should convince the reader that the divine Tetragrammaton (Greek 4 letters) should be *JHVH* or *JHWH* rather than *YHWH* provided we remember to pronounce the initial “J” in *JHVH* as the “Y” in “Yes”.

Exodus 3:14 records how at the Burning Bush the LORD God of Exodus named Himself to Moses as, “*I AM*” or “*The Self-existent One*”. This is usually represented in English Bibles by the all capital form LORD (Strong H3068) and occasionally by the all capital form GOD (Strong H3069).

The vowels that were originally associated with the Tetragrammaton are now lost because first the Hebrew OT text originally recorded only the consonants and second the Jews steadfastly refused to say the sacred name and so not even the vowel sounds of the sacred name have been remembered. It is therefore only a pretence by divine name advocates that they know the name of the God of Exodus because there is no man who knows the name that God gave Moses at the Burning Bush.

Although today the Tetragrammaton carries a set of vowel points, these are not the vowels of the sacred name but of words the Jews read instead of the sacred name: namely, the vowels of the Hebrew noun “Elohim” (Strong H430, meaning God) or the vowels of the Hebrew noun “adonai” (Strong H136, meaning lord). Therefore neither of these two sets of vowels, now associated with the Tetragrammaton, relates to the lost vowels of the sacred name.

To illustrate that it is not possible to establish even the first of JHVH’s lost vowels, let us examine examples of the shortened form of the sacred name found in many OT proper names. These shortened forms, include: “-iah”, “Jo-“ and “Jeho-” and examples of these are: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Joel, Joab and Jehoshaphat. These give the vowels, “a”, “o” and “e” as potential candidates for the first vowel of the sacred name. However, since they all differ we are no nearer to establishing the identity of the first of the lost vowels. It is like this for all the lost vowels and therefore we must conclude that the sacred name of the God of Exodus is indeed lost.

Claims by sacred-name advocates for Jehovah, Yahweh or other variations, will only result in blasphemous false names but I fear this will not stop them because their motivation is not to serve God but to make a name for themselves in the Church of God.

Let Father Be the Sacred Name We Use!

Jesus taught His disciples to pray, “*Our Father which art in heaven...*”. Indeed children should not address their parents by name but should use the title father or mother. It must have been for that reason when Jesus referred to the God of Israel as “*Father*”. Therefore instead of the questionable Yahweh affectation let us rather say, “God the Father”, or the “LORD God”, or simply “God”, or “The Eternal”.

In Conclusion

It makes no sense to adopt the Hebrew version of Jesus’ name because first this can not be transliterated using only English letters, second this can not be pronounced by English speakers and third not even the authors of the NT Greek manuscripts used the Hebrew version of Jesus’ name. It also makes no sense to reinvent the now lost Hebrew name of the God of Exodus who spoke to Moses from the Burning Bush because the vowels of the original divine name have been lost. Therefore the current Hebrew sacred divine names quest is a pretentious affectation that corrupts God’s sacred name. Let God’s children rather address God as our *Father* or *The Eternal*.

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Issue 3.3 of September 6, 2010 is an extensive revision and adds a section on the history of the English consonant “J” and how this relates to the Hebrew and Greek equivalent for the English letter “I”.

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