

## HOW TO TRANSLATE THE NAME

[Statement by the "Names of God" Study Group  
 UBS Triennial Translation Workshop  
 Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, 8-21 May 1991]

### Introduction

The translation of biblical divine names, especially the tetragrammaton *YHWH*, is such a complex matter that it is impossible to make universally applicable recommendations.

The difficulties include the following:

1. In a small number of key passages, notably Exodus 3.14-15, the meaning of *YHWH* is stated, though scholars differ about its exact interpretation. In the vast majority of occurrences, however, *YHWH* functions as a name referring to God, not as a title having meaning.
2. Choice of a name or names for God raises in acute form the whole problem of the introduction of Christianity into a previously non-Christian culture. For example, the translation of *YHWH* by the name of a divinity from another religion might imply characteristics alien to the Bible, thus obscuring communication of the biblical message.
3. Receptor cultures and languages differ according to whether they have one standard name for God, many such names, or no name at all.
4. Receptor languages also differ according to whether names normally have meaning, or function purely for purposes of identification.
5. Many translations are made in languages which already have a widely accepted equivalent for *YHWH*, and this tradition may have to be respected.
6. Often Protestants and Roman Catholics have different traditions.
7. Often a language has a name for God, but not a class-word.

### Options

1. Transliterate
  - a. The normal practice when transliterating Old Testament names is to remain as close as possible to the Hebrew. In the case of the divine name, the preferred form would be *Yahweh*, adapted as necessary to the phonology of the receptor language. Scholars generally believe that the original pronunciation is best represented by "Yahweh".
  - b. The form "Jehovah" should normally be avoided, but in some areas where it has been traditionally used it may not be possible to make a change.
  - c. Where the intended readership includes a significant number of Jews, consultation with Jewish leaders is advisable before adopting this option. In some cases it may be appropriate to include in a preface advice on how Jews might pronounce the name when reading the translation aloud.
2. Translate as "Lord"

This widespread tradition, represented by a large number of current translations, has its origin in the Septuagint's use of *kurios* for *YHWH*. This is not strictly a translation, but rather follows the Jewish tradition of substituting *Adonai* for the divine name.

- a. This raises the question of whether *YHWH* and *Adonai* should be distinguished in translation. In some languages, it may be possible to use two different words, both meaning "Lord".
  - b. In many translations the terms are distinguished typographically, for example as "LORD" (or "LORD") and "Lord". The disadvantage of this approach is that the two forms cannot be distinguished orally.
  - c. If translators feel that there will be no semantic difference between their equivalent of "LORD" and "Lord", they may decide that this distinction need not be preserved.
3. Translate the meaning of *YHWH*
- a. Especially in languages in which names have meaning, it may be appropriate to create or adopt a name which suggests the meaning of *YHWH*.
  - b. In cases where such a name cannot readily be found, another possibility is to use instead a title approximating to the presumed meaning of *YHWH*, for example, "the Eternal One" or "the Ever-Present One".
4. Use a name from the culture
- a. In some languages it may be acceptable to use a word having appropriate meaning/connotations and which is already recognized as a name of God.
  - b. Where a recognized name for God exists, translators could consider using this name to translate *YHWH*, and a more general class-word to translate *Elohim*.
5. Translate *YHWH* and *Elohim* in the same way
- In the canonical text, *YHWH* always functions as a name rather than a title, and *Elohim* often functions in the same way. In languages which have a single name for God, translators may therefore choose to use this name to translate both *YHWH* and *Elohim*. However, in many cases this option will conflict with established tradition.
6. Use a combination of the above options
- It has been suggested that it is not always necessary to follow only one of the above options. For example, though *YHWH* could be translated as "Lord" or "LORD" in most passages, it could be transliterated in key passages where the fact that *YHWH* is a name is in focus.

#### **Arguments related to translating *YHWH***

1. When trying to decide how *YHWH* should be handled in a translation, the first possibility usually considered is to transliterate. Many would argue that this is the right option, for various reasons:
  - a. *YHWH* is a personal name, and should be treated as such in the translation.

- b. Personal names should not usually be translated.
- c. Only very rarely in the Old Testament does the apparent meaning of *YHWH* seem to be in focus.
- d. To the people of Israel, it seems that the connotations of the name far outweighed any etymological meaning it may have had.
- e. If not transliterated, the connection with the root *YH* used in many other names is lost.

Some would also feel that one other argument is of considerable importance:

- f. Exodus 6.3 implies that it is important for everyone to use the actual name *YHWH*.
2. However there are others who feel that transliteration is not the right solution, and that it is important to find some other way of handling *YHWH*. There are exegetical, theological, and anthropological (receptor language oriented) reasons which seem important from this perspective:
    - a. The significance of the revelation in Exodus 3 is not a set of consonant and vowels, but rather an aspect of the nature of God, so our translation must be meaningful.
    - b. The meaning of *YHWH* is an important component of the name, so it should be given meaning in a translation.
    - c. The Septuagint translated *YHWH* as "Lord," setting an example we should follow.
    - d. Using *YHWH* in the Old Testament prevents readers from recognizing the connection with references to "the Lord" in the New Testament.
    - e. It is often suggested that we should translate the canonical text rather than the earlier stages of this text. By the time that the text reached the canonical stage, *YHWH*, though written, was already read as *Adonai*.
    - f. Jewish communities today still avoid pronouncing the name, and we should respect their feelings and not transliterate.
    - g. If we introduce a name like *Yahweh*, it may carry the wrong implications for readers in many languages, suggesting that "Yahweh" is a foreign God, or a new and unknown God, different from the God they already know, or just one more God among many.

There is also another point which concerns translators in a few languages:

- h. A transliteration of *Yahweh* may sound too much like another word in the language.
3. Translators who are convinced by the arguments listed under 2 above must then decide which of the various approaches (listed in **Options 2, 3, 4 and 5**) they will follow. There are certain considerations that might lead them to prefer one of these options over others:
    - a. Points (c), (d) and (e), listed under 2 above are arguments for using a word meaning "Lord" (**Option 2**).

- b. However, in almost all translations which use “Lord” for *YHWH*, it is not possible to distinguish this from cases where “Lord” translates *Adonai*, especially when hearing the Bible being read. This has led some translators to consider other options.
  - c. In some languages, it is expected that names will have meaning. This may lead translators to consider **Options 3** or **4**.
  - d. However if a name from the traditional culture is used, there are potential problems that must be carefully considered:
    - (1) There may be a danger of syncretism.
    - (2) The fact that a name is recognized to be from traditional culture may undermine the historical context of the Bible, in which *YHWH* is first revealed to the people of Israel.
    - (3) Praise names may be used only in poetry, not in prose.
4. Under certain circumstances it may seem good to combine the options, as mentioned **Option 6**.
- a. Some may feel that the arguments in favor of a transliteration are especially persuasive in cases where the biblical context draws special attention to the fact that *YHWH* is a name, but that in other contexts a more familiar translation is better.
  - b. Some may feel that a transliteration may be good for scholarly purposes, but that using an unknown name is not appropriate when the translation is being used for other purposes, such as in liturgy or in evangelism.

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## **TRANSLATING THE NAMES OF GOD: Trygve Mettinger’s analyses applied to Bible translation**

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Recently I read Trygve Mettinger’s study on the names of God entitled *In Search of God*, which I found not only fascinating, but also extremely relevant for Bible translators. I am not the right person to judge the validity and acceptability of every aspect of his scholarly approach. Others can and will do that and may have already done so. However I would like to use his analyses and study these from the perspective of the Bible translator, with a focus on how to apply the concepts in the context of the translator’s own language and culture.

The focus of this article is on the “tetragrammaton” *YHWH*. I will start with Mettinger’s summary of his own analysis of the tetragrammaton, and follow that with my observations regarding translation-related issues. After that we will be looking at the name “LORD of Hosts” and names or titles which have the form *’El* with some other term.