

# The Theology of Isaiah #1

The book of Isaiah is one of the most comprehensive books of the Bible in revealing who God is, who we are, what he expects of us, his relationship with the nations, how he works in redeeming a people to himself, and even what will take place in the distant future. In fact, if the only book we had was Isaiah, our knowledge of God could be quite remarkable.

## Existence of God

God's existence is not a matter of proof in the Bible, but simply stated (Gen. 1:1 - "In the beginning God ..."), and so in Isaiah, his existence is not even in question – He speaks, reproves, promises, and in all respects shows himself to be not just one who exists, but one who actively participates in creation, the nation of Israel, and in all nations, whether they acknowledge him or not.

But as we shall see, his name alone speaks to his existence. Yahweh – "He who is, who exists".

## Names of God

There are several names of God in the book of Isaiah, and they exist in many combinations.

### God

The Hebrew words for God are the short word El, and Elohim. El is often combined with other words to make names, like Bethel ("house of God"), or Samuel.

Elohim is a plural word meaning "gods" when applied to false gods, or angels, or even human magistrates. In those cases it is not capitalized. But all through the OT it is used of the one true God, and is translated simply as "God".

Dan. 11:36 is interesting because it uses both words together. An evil king (the Antichrist) will speak against "the God of gods" (El elohim).

Why is Elohim plural when applying to the one and only God? It is used as a "plural of majesty", but in the light of the rest of the Bible, we can take it also as a hint at the triune nature of God. He is one God, but he exists eternally in three "persons" or manifestations, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If you can properly understand this, and not twist it to mean three distinct Gods (which would be polytheism), the plural form "Elohim" is perfectly appropriate.

### Lord

The Hebrew word is Adonai, a longer version of "adon", meaning lord. It often refers to a human lord, much as we would say "Yes, my lord", mister, or your honor. But when used as a proper name for God, the first letter is capitalized. Someone would address David as "lord", but for God it would be "Lord".

### LORD

The Hebrew word is YHWH, usually written and pronounced as Yahweh or Yahveh, which is a 3<sup>rd</sup> person form of the word "ehyeh". At the burning bush, Moses asked who he should say sent him, and God answered in Exodus 3:14, "And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you." The phrase I AM THAT I AM in Hebrew is "ehyeh asher ehyeh". Since ehyeh means "I am", most scholars consider yahweh or something similar to mean "he is" – that is, the one who exists, the one who is, the self-existent one.

You may sometimes see a reference to YHWH, called the tetragrammaton. This is because traditional Hebrew (and modern Hebrew) did not use explicit vowels, only consonants (although certain letters can sometimes function as vowels). So his name in the Hebrew text was simply those four letters – yod-he-vav-he.

You may wonder what is the difference between Yahweh and Yahveh. Classical Hebrew used a "w" pronunciation for the letter "waw", but modern Hebrew calls the letter "vav" and pronounces it as a "v". Many students of Biblical Hebrew use the modern pronunciation, especially since Hebrew has been revived as the national language of Israel.

Yahveh also exists in a shortened form as Yah, most commonly in the word Hallelujah (Hallelu = “praise ye” + Yah), but occasionally left untranslated – Ps. 68:4 – “Sing unto God, sing praises to his name: extol him that rideth upon the heavens by his name JAH, and rejoice before him.” (Hebrew has no “J” sound, but English translations for some reason often use a J – Joshua, Jerualem, Jonathan, Joash, etc. The usage of J is probably a leftover from Latin.

Isa. 12:2 is an interesting verse because it uses Elohim and Yahveh in both long and abbreviated forms –

“Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid: for the LORD JEHOVAH is my strength and my song: he also is become my salvation.” (KJV)

“God” is the word Elohim, and “the LORD JEHOVAH” is really “Yah Yahveh”. “Jehovah” is an unfortunate and inaccurate choice by the KJV translators. The KJV uses “Jehovah” 7 times, and I am not sure why in those cases only.

One of the most obvious distinctions between Adonai and Yahveh is in Ps. 110:1, , as it is quoted by Jesus in a confrontation with the Pharisees – “The LORD [*Yahveh*] said unto my Lord [*adonai*], Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool.” Notice that the same word is used in English for both, but the one for Yahveh is in all capital letters, and the one for adonai uses lower case letters. This is standard practice for the KJV and many translations. So “LORD” is YHWH, “Lord” is Adonai when referring to God, and “lord” is adonai when referring to a man.

While El, Elohim, Adonai, and Yahveh are individual names, they are combined or modified in Isaiah as The God of Jacob (or Israel), the LORD God, The LORD our God, The LORD of hosts, The Lord God of hosts, The LORD God of Israel, etc. They are also used together, as in 1:24 – “Therefore saith the Lord [*adon*], the LORD [*Yahweh*] of hosts, the mighty One of Israel...”, or 24:15 – “Wherefore glorify ye the LORD in the fires, even the name of the LORD God of Israel in the isles of the sea”. “The LORD God of” is “Yahveh Elohey” (Elohim is “God”, Elohey is “God of”).

An obvious question though, is why the translations use “LORD” when the word is actually Yahveh. This invites confusion with the word Lord (Adonai), since in English the only difference is whether or not it is in all caps.

Jews have long believed that the name YHWH is too holy to be pronounced in normal conversation or even in scripture readings, and so substitute the word Adonai in reading. In fact, even the Greek translation or the Hebrew scriptures, made several hundred years BC, used the Greek word for Lord as a substitute for YHWH. Eventually the Hebrew language fell out of everyday use and was only used for Biblical studies and readings. There was a fear that the proper pronunciation of the language would be lost, and so a group of Jewish scholars (the Masoretes) added many small marks that would indicate not only vowels, but punctuation and stress, and perhaps even musical intonation. So the Hebrew text today, with all the little marks (“pointing”) is called the Masoretic text. A problem came up though, when translating YHWH. They, and all public readers of scripture, knew that you weren’t supposed to pronounce the written word (as Yahweh), but to use the substitute pronunciation (Adonai). They could have left the word unpointed, but they chose to add the vowels of Adonai to YHWH. The result looks “sort of” like Yehowah or Jehovah, but they didn’t want people through ignorance or carelessness to actually pronounce it that way, so they put no vowels on the first H, and two vowels on the W, something so unusual as to be unpronounceable to anyone who knows Hebrew. The pronunciation Yah-howah is even worse.

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This is “YHWH”: יהוה (no vowels, and Hebrew is written from right to left)

This is “Adonai”: אֲדֹנָי. The dash and colon under the rightmost letter is a composite shewa, a half-vowel pronounced sort of like the e in enough or the a in about. It looks like this because the letter above it is one of the guttural letters. Under regular letters it would just look like a little colon. The dot above the second letter from the right is a “cholem”, pronounced like the o in “hole”, and the little T-shaped mark under the next letter is a “qamets”, pronounced like the a in father.

This is the combination of the two: יהוה. The composite shewa lost the little dash because the letter above it is not a guttural, but is pronounced similarly. Notice that the next letter (second from left) has no vowel marks above or below it, but the third letter has two vowels, the dot above and the “little T” below. In this form it is almost, but purposely not, pronounceable.

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So in summary, “Jehovah” is not a real word in Hebrew at all - it is a misinformed way to pronounce a hybrid word: the consonants of YHWH with the vowels of Adonai. In Hebrew, words and names mean things. Even the names of the letters of their alphabet (“aleph-bet”) have meanings. For example, the Hebrew letter ayin means “eye”. So it is significant that “Jehovah” has no meaning of its own. Yahveh or Yahweh basically means “he who is”, or “the One who exists”, Adonai means “Lord”, but Jehovah is not a real Hebrew word, and has no literal meaning.

It is interesting that YHWH in the psalms can also be pronounced today as “Hashem” (the Name), instead of Adonai. If there is an objection to pronouncing and translating YHWH, then perhaps this would have been preferable so there is no confusion as to whether Adonai is used as itself, or as a substitute for YHWH.

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