Riches To Be Found in the Names of God

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Have you ever wondered why, in the Bible, double titles are sometimes used to identify God (such as "Oh, Lord God")? Doesn't it seem like needless repetition, like saying, "Oh, God God," or "Oh, Lord Lord"? Well, it isn't needless repetition; like everything else in the Bible, it has a significant meaning and a purpose. Since Creation, God has identified Himself by a number of names, and always for a purpose: the names reveal precious aspects of His nature and the way He relates to us.

The three basic names by which God identifies Himself are: 1) "God," 2) "Lord," and 3) "GOD" or "LORD." This third basic name, which seems to be two names, is expressed in these two ways in English, but in only one way in Hebrew. The key to recognizing the names is capitalization: "God" has one mean-ing; "Lord" has another; and "GOD" or "LORD" has still another. This third name can be either "GOD" or "LORD," but is recognized by being in all capital letters. NOTE: this (and all that follows) is true of the King James Version; unfortunately, many of the modern translations do not differentiate, thus confusing or losing the meanings. To follow this teaching, I recommend that you use the King James Version.

We will deal with these names separately; for now, let's begin with "God,"
the first of the three names to appear in the Bible.

"God" appears first in the very first verse of the Bible, Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." When you see "God" with a capital "G," as you do here, the Hebrew word is Elohim (when you see "god" or "gods" with a lower case "g" it refers to false gods). Elohim means "the strong and faithful one, the covenant-keeping God." One fascinating aspect of this name is that it is a plu-ral: Hebrew words ending in "im" are always plural. Thus, Elohim gives us our first glimpse in Scripture of the triune nature of God, the Holy Trinity. Notice how this helps our understanding of verse 26, in which God says, "Let us make man, in our image…."

RICHES FOUND IN THE NAMES OF GOD, PART II

In the last issue we began a series on the names of God, each of which reveals some characteristic of His nature. There are many such names by which God reveals Himself; but what we are considering in this series are the three basic names. Remember that the key to recognizing these three names is capitaliza-tion. Remember also that many of the modern versions of the Bible do not differentiate these three names, losing their individual meanings for the reader; I recommend that you use the King James Version (or the New King James Version). Last issue we saw that when "God" appears (as in Gen. 1:1), the Hebrew word is Elohim, meaning the strong and faithful one who keeps covenants.

The second of God's three basic names is "Lord." When "Lord" appears with the letter "L"
capitalized, the Hebrew word is "Adonai," and it means "Master," in every sense of the word. Adonai denotes the relationship between a slave and his owner; the master requires complete obedience of the slave, but he also has total responsibility to provide for the slave. In Gen. 15:2, Abraham is complaining to Adonai, saying, in effect, "Lord, you are supposed to provide for me in every way, yet I am old and you have given me no children. What's wrong here?" One very significant place where this name of God appears is in Ps. 110:1, where David refers to the coming Messiah as his Lord ("my Adonai"). It was this verse that Jesus later used to confound the Pharisees, showing them that the Christ would be divine - not a merely human conqueror, or political leader, as they believed and taught (Matt. 22:41-46). In Ps. 110:1, the Bible makes it clear that, although the Messiah would be the Son of David (David's human ancestor), He would be David's Lord, superior in every way.
In the next issue, we will deal with the third, and most important, name of God.

RICHES FOUND IN THE NAMES OF GOD, PART III

In the past two issues we have learned some things about two of the three primary names of God. In this issue, we will examine the third, final, and most important, of the three names; it is YHWH. In the English Bible, this third name can

be recognized because it is written in all capitals (i.e., "LORD" or "GOD"- not "Lord" or "God"). Again, I recommend that you use the King James Version (or the New King James), for most modern versions do not differentiate these names; thus they cannot be recognized.

At the outset, we have a problem with this name, for only God knows how to spell it. Really! Allow me to explain. The Hebrew language, in which the Old Testament was originally written, had no vowels (such as our a,e,i,o, and u); the vowel sounds were spoken, but were not written. There were, in its alphabet, only consonants. In time, the rabbis became so fearful of breaking the Third Commandment (which forbids the taking of God's name "in vain") that they decided that this name, the most sacred name of God, must not be spoken at all. If they never spoke it at all, they reasoned, they couldn't speak it in vain. Thus, it continued to be written, with only its four consonants, but never spoken. After about 120 years, when the very last person who had heard the name spoken, died, the sound of the name was forever lost. In the early middle ages, vowels (pointings) were added to written Hebrew, as it exists today. But the scribes had a problem: they had no idea what the name sounded like, so they had no way to know which vowels they should put into YHWH. Thus today there are two theories: some believe it should be Yahweh; others insist that it must be Yehowah (anglicized, this one becomes Jehovah). So, this most important of the three names may be Yahweh, and it also may be Yehowah (Jehovah). Only God knows, literally, which spelling is the correct one.

Now, with this awkward problem of its pronunciation understood, here is the thing about the name that matters: its meaning. This most-important name of God means the self-existent one, the effect without a cause, the one who has always existed and whose existence depends upon no other person or force. This name expresses the uniqueness of God; as He has written, there is none other but Him. All the names of God express something of His nature; this name expresses the most fundamental, important, aspect of His nature: His unique, eternal, self-existence. When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush (Ex. 3), He identified Himself to Moses as "I AM THAT I AM" (in other words, God was saying "I exist, simply because I exist"). He then identified Himself in a simpler form, telling Moses to say to Pharaoh and the children of Israel that "I AM" had sent him. Now we can better understand the mind-boggling words of Jesus when He declared His divinity

to the Jewish disciples saying, "Before Abraham was, I am" (John. 8:58). Those Jews immediately understood that He was declaring Himself to be the great I AM, the eternal, self-existent YHWH. And, of course, that is exactly Who He is, existing eternally in the mystery of the Trinity. Although they had believed that Jesus was the Messiah, these Jews were so offended at His words that they took up stones to kill Him (what ultimately became of these mutinous disciples is not recorded).

This name occurs in the Third Commandment (Ex. 20:7), the verse that led to our dilemma about the sound and spelling of the name: "Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain…." Here, God identifies Himself fundamentally as YHWH, the unique, supreme, Person of the Universe; plus, He reminds us here that He is also Elohim, the creator, and the strong and faithful covenant keeper.

In Genesis 17:1,2 God appears to Abram as YHWH ('LORD"); yet, He changes Abram's name to Abraham, and enters into covenant with him as Elohim ("God"), the covenant keeper. The name, we see, matches and reveals the function. In Psalm 31:14, David cries out, "O LORD (YHWH)," and reminds Him that he is trusting in Him completely, as the strong and faithful covenant keeper: "Thou art my God (Elohim)." In Isaiah 65:13, we find YHWH as "GOD." In this passage, there is the declaration to those who have rebelled against God that they will suffer want (hungry, thirsty and ashamed), but the faithful servants of God will be filled with food and drink and will be protected: "Therefore, thus saith the Adonai [the absolute master who protects and provides for his servants] YHWH [the unique, all-powerful, King of the Universe] my servants shall eat…"

This third, and most fundamental name of God is often combined with another descriptive term to express some more specific aspect of His nature. Examples include YHWH Shalom (the LORD our peace), YHWH Rohi (the LORD our Shepherd), and YHWH Jireh (the LORD who sees our need and provides).

And so, these are the three basic names of God, each revealing a part of His nature; and the several modifiers combined with the third name add still more to our understanding of God's nature. Knowing these basic names and their meanings, and studying a Bible (such as the King James) which identifies them, will make the Scriptures much richer with meaning, and will add to our understanding of our God (Elohim), our Lord (Adonai), and our LORD/GOD (Yahweh, or Yehowah

THE NAMES OF GOD: A SUMMARY

In the last three issues, I have presented a brief series of articles on the three primary names of God, as revealed in the Old Testament. Some of you have requested a summary article putting the three parts together. The following is my attempt to do so.

God has used various names for Himself in the Bible, and as is true of all Hebrew names, each has a meaning. There are three basic names of God in the Old Testament, and they can be recognized as follows.

(1) When "God" appears (as in the very first verse of the Bible, Gen 1:1) the Hebrew name is "Elohim." Thus it reads, "In the beginning, Elohim created the heaven and the earth." The meaning of Elohim is "the strong and faithful one Who keeps covenant." Since Hebrew words ending in "im" are plural, this word suggests the triune nature of God; and in verse 26 God says, "Let us make man in our image…," again providing a glimpse into the mystery of the holy Trinity. So, when you read "God" in the Old Testament, the actual name is "Elohim," the strong, faithful, covenant-keeper.

(2) When "Lord" appears, the actual Hebrew name is "Adonai," which means "Master" or "Lord," in the sense of one who owns a slave. The slave owes complete obedience to his master; at the same time, the master must provide for the slave's every need. Abram (later Abraham) understood this when he complained to the Lord (Adonai) in Gen. 15:1-3, saying in effect, "Adonai, I am yours, and you are my master. Since you are to provide me with everything, when are you going to give me a child?" God, of course, did provide him with a miracle son, Isaac.

(3) The third name is the primary, most-important name of God; the Hebrew name is "YHWH," (or "JHVH") called by scholars "the tetragrammaton." In our English Bible, this name is recognized by being always in all-capital letters, as GOD or LORD. In this case, the Hebrew name involves a problem: no one really knows how to spell it, for no one but God knows the sound of it. This vexing problem occurred because the rabbis, some time before the Christian era, became so afraid of breaking the 3rd

Commandment (taking the name of God in vain) that they decided the only way to be certain of never taking His name "in vain" was never again to speak it at all. About 120 years later, when the very last person on Earth who had heard the name spoken died, the knowledge of its pronunciation, thus its spelling, was forever lost. Now, the Hebrew language was originally written only in consonants; there were no vowel sounds (as in our "a,e,i,o,u"), referred to in Hebrew as "pointings." When these were added to Hebrew in the early Middle Ages, the scribes had a problem: no one knew what vowels (pointings) to place in this name, for no one knew what it sounded like. Today, there are two basic opinions concerning the actual name: some add "A" and "E," and get "Yahweh"; others prefer to add "E", "O" and "A" and get "Yehowah," or "Jehova." Modern linguistic studies point to "Yahweh" as probably correct. (For whatever it may be worth, I prefer "Yahweh.")

Now, however we spell the name, the most important thing about it is its meaning! "Elohim" and "Adonai" can be used to designate other beings, heavenly creatures, or even pagan gods; but not this third name. Never! This is the unique name of the unique GOD of the Universe. The name means, "the self-existent one, the effect without a cause, the One who exists simply because He exists. Synonymous with YHWH is "I AM" (note the all-caps), of Moses' encounter with the burning bush (Ex 3:14). Moses is told to say to Pharaoh that "I AM" had sent him; this identification means, "I exist simply because I exist."

This last and most important name of God is often combined with a second, descriptive word to express a specific aspect of His nature. Examples are YHWH Shalom, ("LORD our Peace"); YHWH Rohi ("LORD our Shepherd"); and YHWH Jireh ("LORD who sees our need").

Now, knowing this, passages of Scripture will take on added, richer meaning for you as you read. Since most modern versions do not differentiate among these names, and don't capitalize YHWH as LORD or GOD, the distinctions are lost and the meaning of such passages diluted. I recommend that you use the King James Version (or the New KJV) for clarification and full meaning.