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HaShem Part 2 - Tetragrammaton

In part 1 of this series, we discussed how the Hebrew word for name, *shem*, really means character or authority. The Biblical emphasis on the name of our Creator is much less about precision in pronunciation, and more about understanding and acknowledging the character and authority behind His name.

As we begin to explore possible pronunciations of His name, we do not want anyone to lose sight of the material covered in part 1. If you have not watched part 1, please do so. ([click here to watch part 1](#))

Every existing theory on the pronunciation of the Creator’s name is an educated guess. Every. Single. One.

No one can declare with any degree of certainty that they know how to pronounce the Creator’s name.

Some educated guesses are better than others, and some, we can even definitively prove to be impossible.

Anyone looking for definitive proof on how to precisely pronounce the name as a product of this teaching series should prepare to be disappointed. Archeologists are still looking for Moses’ tape recorder, and until it is found, any pronunciation is a matter of speculation. We will discuss our educated guess on the matter, and also discuss the pro’s and con’s of other more popular positions. Our opinion is just that, an opinion. We will not elevate our opinion to fact and we will never disagree with anyone stating we could be wrong. Anyone’s position on how to pronounce the name is just that, an opinion, including ours.

The only thing we can say with absolute certainty is that there is no certainty. Those causing discord and contention through their supposed absolute stance on accurate pronunciation are doing so without a solid foundation.

We did not state all of that to be discouraging, but to temper the often out-of-control teachings that exist out there in Internet land that misplace confidence and supposed understanding. That is not to say that studying possible pronunciations of the name is not a fascinating and worthwhile study. If it were not, this series would not exist.

In this series, we will form a conclusion. Our conclusion may be different than yours, and that is ok. We respect the fact that not everyone will agree with our conclusion and the fact remains that we may even change our own conclusion at some point in the future should new evidences be presented.

So, let's begin.

WHAT IS THE TETRAGRAMMATON?

Our Creator's name is often referred to as the tetragrammaton. Tetragrammaton is simply a fancy way of saying "the four letters." Our Creator's name consists of four Hebrew letters.

These particular four letters exist in the Bible nearly 7,000 times, specifically in the Old Testament, or the TANAKH.

THE TETRAGRAMMATON BECAME LORD IN ENGLISH BIBLES

In English Bibles, translators chose to hide the tetragrammaton by replacing it with LORD, usually in all capital letters, distinguishing it from when *adonai* is translated as Lord, with just the "L" being capitalized.

Just as Jews often say HaShem, Adonai, or Elohim in place of the tetragrammaton, English translators have adopted a similar practice with the concept of LORD. As covered in part one, this appears to be due to a misunderstanding of what it means to "profane His name." [So both Jews and English translators may have had similar reasoning to adopt such a practice.](#)

This replacement of the tetragrammaton appears to have occurred in the ancient New Testament manuscripts that we have available today. Verses in the New Testament that are quoting from places in the Old Testament that contain the tetragrammaton replace the tetragrammaton with the Greek word kurios (ku-ree-oss).

It is unlikely that the original manuscripts of the New Testament replaced the tetragrammaton with kurios, as even some copies of the Septuagint from around that time period still contained the tetragrammaton in Hebrew.

Here is the tetragrammaton in modern Hebrew letters.

Here is the tetragrammaton in paleo-Hebrew letters.

As already mentioned, there exists numerous ancient manuscripts that retained the paleo-Hebrew form of the tetragrammaton in the Hebrew and Greek Septuagint texts before it became a practice to hide it.

Here is an example (8HevXII)



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tetragrammaton#/media/File:Lxx_Minorprophets.gif

The four Hebrew letters of the tetragrammaton are *yod – hey – vav – hey*, or *yod – hey – waw – hey*.

With that, we already enter into the first part of the debate that is a vital component in determining how to pronounce the tetragrammaton.

THE VAV VERSES THE WAW

There exist two schools of thought on how to pronounce this Hebrew letter as it relates back to the tetragrammaton.

One form of pronunciation is similar to the English “v” sound, called the *vav*.

The other form of pronunciation is similar to the English “w” sound, called the *waw*.

There exists Hebrew communities today that use the “v” sound, and there exists Hebrew communities today that use the “w” sound for this letter.

Most Hebrew scholars surmise that the rendering of “*vav*” is a more modern form of pronunciation, derived from linguistic influences of other cultures, whereas the rendering of “*waw*” is the more ancient and accurate form of pronunciation.

However, it is not enough to say “*most scholars believe this, or that*” and call it a day. Though that fact alone should at least carry some weight.

It also must be realized that even with the first necessary debate related to the pronunciation of the name (the *vav* vs. the *waw*), neither position can be definitively proved. We have not even entered into the territory of what vowel sounds are present in the tetragrammaton, and we have already entered into

frustrating hair pulling territory. [In case we just lost you there, Hebrew letters, forming written words, do not contain vowels. Vowels, and consequently proper pronunciation, are intended to be simply understood by the reader](#)

So what are we to do?

How can we make sense of this?

We are going to offer an assumption in hopes that it is a fair assumption.

If we desire to understand how to pronounce ancient Hebrew, we should place more value on sources that are more ancient?

Fair assumption?

After examining all of the available evidence in the *vav/waw* debate, we gravitate toward the “w” sound, or *waw* as being more accurate.

If we were forced to declare our level of confidence, we would state that our confidence level of *waw* is about 90%, leaving a 10% margin of error for the *vav*, or “v” sound.

That is a fairly large margin of error.

Each position has evidence, and each position has evidence worth considering. However, after looking at all the available evidence from both sides, eventually a decision has to be made.

Let’s look at the evidence for each position, starting with the “*vav*.”

SOME SUPPORT FOR THE VAV

1) The Geographical Evidence

About 150 years ago, there was a study that involved Hebrew scholars visiting Jews in various locations around the world. This was during a time before the world was interconnected, so there was a more linguistic isolation present in these various Jewish groups than exists today. The goal was to discover where various pronunciations of Hebrew letters were in agreement, and where there were differences.

As also found today, they also found that some groups pronounced the 6th letter of the Hebrew alphabet as a “v” sound or “*vav*” and some pronounced it as a “w” sound or “*waw*”.

It was discovered that all of the Jews that used the “w” sound were from Arabic speaking countries.

Arabic, which is similar to Hebrew in many ways, uses a “w” sound, not a “v” sound.

An interesting outlier was discovered to be the Hebrew speaking communities in Syria, an Arabic speaking country. They spoke the 6th letter as a “v” sound when speaking Hebrew, yet used the “w” sound when speaking Arabic.

In this, it is argued that the Jews of Syria retained the original pronunciation of the “v” sound and were

not influenced by the Arabic “w” sound like other Jews in Arabic countries.

When beginning our exploration into the *waw* versus *vav* debate, we admit we were quite excited about this information. We were like, wow, it is a *vav*. This seems rather conclusive!

But, as we continued to do more research, our excitement faded.

As already mentioned, Arabic shares similarities with Hebrew.

Arabic uses only the *waw*. Modern Hebrew uses the *waw* and the *vav*.

If Arabic and Hebrew are similar, then one language obviously borrowed influence from the other.

So to answer who influenced who, the question becomes this, which language was first, the Hebrew or Arabic?

Our position is that Hebrew came first. For example, Adam and Eve were Hebrew names, using Hebrew letters, with Hebraic meaning.

[It is not until AFTER the tower of Babel in Genesis, and the confusion of languages, that we are presented with names that are foreign or non-Hebrew names. That is an important fact to consider.](#)

Because of this, it seems more likely that ancient Hebrew influenced Arabic, not ancient Arabic influenced modern Hebrew.

Thus, finding where Arabic and Hebrew linguistically agree carries more weight and evidence than observing where they disagree.

A common denominator between the 6th letter of the Hebrew alphabet and Arabic is a *waw*, not a *vav*.

There is more to consider on this point.

100% of European influenced Jews use a *vav*. Jews in Arabic speaking regions might use a *waw* or a *vav*.

But what we just said seems to contradict the Syrian Jew population we just reviewed, who used a *vav* in an Arabic speaking *waw* world about 150 years ago.

How can this be explained?

Could Syrian Jews have been influenced by European Jews?

Actually, that appears to be the case. In the late 1400's Sephardic Jews fled from Spain and many settled in Syria. We also see that Sephardic Jews began to take a leading role in society.

For example, five successive Chief Rabbis of Aleppo were drawn from the Laniado family. With Sephardic leadership comes Sephardic influence. Sephardic Jews use the *vav*, not the *waw*.

So what we find is that it is not too surprising that Jews in Syria 150 years ago used a *vav* instead of a

waw despite the fact that they lived in Syria, an Arabic speaking world that uses a *waw*.

As we continued to research the geographical connections with usages of the *waw* versus the *vav*, it really does appear that European influence, originating from Greek and Latin linguistic influences, was persuasive in the evolution of the *waw* into a *vav* for many Jewish communities. It also appears that the more ancient Jewish communities uninfluenced by European Jewish immigration, retained the *waw*.

At minimum, none of the geographical evidence is definitive in assisting with the *waw* versus *vav* debate, but the logic behind the majority of scholar's that suggest that the *waw* is ancient Hebrew and the *vav* is modern Hebrew appears to be more reasonable.

In fact, most scholars who study the geographic relevance in the pronunciation of Hebrew have concluded that Yemenite Hebrew contains the most ancient phonetic and grammatical features.

Judaeo-Yemenite Studies - Proceedings of the Second International Congress, Ephraim Isaac & Yosef Tobi (ed.), Introduction, Princeton University 1999, p. 15

Do the Yeminite use the *vav* or the *waw*?

The Yeminites use the *waw*.

Does that prove the *waw*?

No

But, if we were going to seek the best evidence we might have to suggest geographical Hebrew linguistic isolation and lack of Arabic or European influences, Yeminite Hebrew appears to have the strongest case.

There does exist more evidence used for a *vav*.

There existed a poet in the 6th century in Israel named Kalir. In one of his poems, he rhymed *levi* with *navi*

He spells *levi* with a *vav* and *navi* he spells with a *vet* or *bet*. [This letter does not always produce a b sound. It is pronounced with a "v" when at the beginning of a syllable, such as in "na-vi."](#)

What makes this poem so compelling to some is that he uses words containing the letter *bet* eight times, and the ninth time he uses a *vav* in the word *Levi*.

The rhyming in this poem would make no sense to have nine "v" sounds and then a "w" sound if *vav* were pronounced as a "w" instead of a "v" (MS Oxford, Bodleian 2714, fol52a)

[This of course would suggest that the *vav* in *Levi* would indeed be a *vav*, not a *waw*, pronounced as a "v" sound and not a "w" sound.](#)

And we completely agree with all of that. When coming across poetic rhymes, we hardly became excited in our effort to solve the *waw* versus *vav* debate.

We already know that some Jews use the *vav* and some Jews use the *waw*. As we stated in our opening assumption for this section, the older the evidence, the more weight it should carry.

This evidence is nearly 1,400 years ago, which is not bad. But we don't know where Kalir originated.

Some speculate he originated from Italy, and if that is the case, we would not be surprised that he used a *vav*.

The problem with these poetic evidences, as there are several, is that on the historical timeline, it is already known that some Jews are using the *vav* and some are using the *waw*. In fact, there also exist poetic evidences for the *waw* in a very similar way that we just presented for the *vav*.

The problem is that it does not solve anything for us.

And that is why we became really excited about the next piece of evidence for the *vav*.

We were presented with two Hebrew words, *gab* and *gav* or *gaw* (because that is the debate of course, *vav* or *waw*)

Gav is references as Strong's #1458

Gab is referenced as Strong's #1354

We were told that these were actually the same Hebrew word, meaning "back."

What this theory suggests is that there is just one word in Hebrew that means "back" but it is spelled two different ways. These two different ways it is spelled, one with a *bet* and one with a *vav*, would suggest that the *vav* is supposed to sound like a *bet*, as a "v" sound! This would be good evidence because a *bet* never sounds like a *waw*, or a "w" sound.

As we reviewed earlier, the Hebrew letter *bet*, as in *gab*, is often pronounced with a soft *v* sound.

And if *gav* is the same word as *gab*, but with a *vav* instead of a *bet*, that would show that in the time when the prophets such as Ezekiel were written that the *vav* made more of a *v* sound, not a *waw* sound.

When we heard that we were like...that's it...this debate is finished. We were over the top excited that a definitive conclusion was reached on this debate when we expected such effort to fall short of that goal.

So, typical to our style, we needed to really test it. We were excited about our new conclusion, we needed to attempt to prove ourselves wrong.

Unfortunately, it was rather easy to do. Our excitement faded rather quickly.

The debate of the *vav* versus the *waw* is only solved if *gav* (or *gaw*) and *gab* with a *bet* are the same word, meaning, they are used interchangeably in similar contexts.

Unfortunately, that does not hold true. They are clearly two different words. They appear to be related words, but each word is used very differently in the TANAKH.

Gav/Gaw (Strong's 1458) can be found in the following verses:

- 1 Kings 14:9
- Nehemiah 9:26
- Ezekiel 23:35

The specific context in which *gab* is used is in the form of rejection, secret opposition, neglecting, or being despised. It is used specifically in such a way to mean the same as “going behind a person’s back”

So, while it does indeed mean *back*, it is only used in a specific context. Most lexicons even extrapolate on this obvious contextual meaning.

***Gab* (Strong's 1354) can be found in the following verses:**

- Leviticus 14:9
- 1 Kings 7:33
- Ezekiel 1:18 16:24 16:31 16:39 43:12
- Psalm 129:3

The English words translated for *gab*, with a bet, are words like eyebrows, vaulted chambers, rims, a bossed shield (which is a round piece in the center of shield), wheels, etc.

Notice the contextual difference between the word *gav* or *gaw* and *gab*?

These are clearly two different words.

Gav or *gaw* means back, as in going behind someone’s back, or perhaps just *back* in some modern contexts. But in Biblical context, it is only used as in “going behind someone’s back.”

Gab with a bet, on the other hand, denotes something to do with a reference of some sort of curvature, like a round shield, vaulted ceilings, wheels, eyebrows, rims, etc.

And yes, it is translated as back. An example is Psalm 129:3...but let’s read it:

Psalm 129:3

The plowers plowed upon my back (*gab*); they made long their furrows.

Did you catch it?

“Back” in this context is true to the contextual usage of *gab*. This is a back in the context of plowing. It is a *curved* or *arched back*, as in a back plowing a field.

We encourage examination of the contextual Biblical usage of *gab* and *gav* or *gaw* in the TANAKH.

These are clearly two different words.

So, in seeking support for the *vav* instead of the *waw*, we were left rather underwhelmed. We were excited about a couple evidences for the *vav* at first, however, after further testing definitive proof for

the *vav* evaded us.

We retain that the *vav* is a possibility, but we see it as the least likely possibility. In our opinion, for whatever that is worth, the *waw* appears to have better evidence. And as we stated from the beginning, the older the evidence, the more weight we give it.

SOME SUPPORT FOR THE WAW

The Aramaic Connection

If you believe that the Hebrew language is the world's first language, then this next point may carry some weight.

Most already know and understand that Aramaic is a linguistic cousin of Hebrew. So if Hebrew came first, the Aramaic obviously came from the Hebrew language.

So does Aramaic use the *waw* or the *vav*?

Aramaic uses the *waw*. In fact, if you ask someone how to say David in Aramaic, they will respond by saying *Dawud*, with a *waw*, not a *vav*.

The common denominator between Hebrew and the related language Aramaic is a *waw*, not a *vav*.

The Septuagint Connection

The Septuagint is [a 2,000+ year old](#) Greek [translation](#) of the TANAKH, or the Old Testament. In the Septuagint, Hebrew names were often transliterated into Greek. To transliterate a name means to take the letters of one language and replace them with approximate corresponding letters in another language, attempting to retain some of the original pronunciation.

For example,) ישראל *Yisra'el*

....becomes Isra'el in English.

They sound similar, but they are still different. You get a sense of what the Hebrew sounds like in English, but it is not exactly how the Hebrew is pronounced.

When comparing Hebrew names that included the letter *vav/waw* with the Greek transliterations, the Greek always uses the vowels *upsilon* or *omega* or a *diphthong* with one of those letters, but always a *vowel* sound, never a *consonant*.

The Hebrew letter *waw* was carried over into Ancient Greek, where it was called the *wau* and had a "w" sound, but this letter was dropped at some point and it seems that the Greek transliterations simply used *vowels* to represent the Hebrew *waw*.

The Josephus Connection

Josephus knew the letters of the tetragrammaton. And it is generally believed that given who Josephus was, he likely knew how to pronounce the tetragrammaton accurately.

Josephus was a first-century Romano-Jewish scholar and historian who was born in Jerusalem. He was born to a father of priestly descent and a mother who claimed royal ancestry.

With that in mind, he provides us an interesting quote:

“A mitre also of fine linen encompassed his head, which was tied by a blue ribbon, about which there was another golden crown, in which was engraven the sacred name [of the Almighty]: it consists of four vowels.”

The War of the Jews, Book 5. 5. 7.

Some have speculated here that Josephus was speaking of the Greek rendering of the tetragrammaton, which looks something like this:

IAUE

In the Greek, that is certainly four vowels, it is four vowels in English as well. But, that is not what Josephus was saying. Josephus was not referring to the Greek transliterated letters of the tetragrammaton as being all vowels.

How do we know that?

Josephus stated the letters that are engraved on the golden crown of the high priest.

The letters that are engraved on the crown of the high priest are Hebrew letters, not Greek letters.

Josephus was saying that the Hebrew tetragrammaton for the name consists of four vowels.

That sounds strange to our ears today, because we have always been told that the tetragrammaton is four consonants and that the vowels are missing and everyone runs around trying to “find” the missing vowels.

That just might not be exactly necessary.

Since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, it was discovered that sometimes the *yod*, *he*, *waw* and sometimes the *aleph*, were used as vowel pointers in ancient Hebrew manuscripts.

That is rather interesting, that each letter of the tetragrammaton was also used as a vowel in ancient Hebrew.

While the Dead Sea Scrolls are rather ancient and compelling, as most manuscripts are over 2,000 years old, the discovery of the Lachish Letters, dated about 600 B.C.E., further validates the *yod*, *he*, and *waw* being used as vowels in ancient Hebrew.

That was over 2,600 years ago.

While the occasional use of a consonant as a vowel can be seen quite early in the inscriptions, at this point in the nature of the language the *aleph* א, *he* ה, *yod* י, and *waw* ו were used as vowels not only occasionally at the ends of words but frequently and even in the middle of words to help the reader understand how to pronounce the words.

For example the Hebrew word for “man” אִישׁ is written with the *yod* in lines 9-10.

Though there were not yet vowels written for every syllable, what this meant for readers of the Bible is that the common spellings in Hebrew at this point included not just the consonants of the words, but in some places there were vowels written also. This made understanding the text and reading out loud easier. This helps us as well when we take Josephus into account.

Treating the tetragrammaton as vowels, as according to Josephus, their vocalization would be like this:

Yod = ee

He = ah

Waw = oo

He = eh

As a final letter, he in a feminine name would receive an “ah” sound, but in a masculine name it is “eh”

In sounding out these four vowels, ee-ah-oo-eh, the first two, ee-ah, are equivalent to the syllable Yah. The last two, oo-eh, are equal to the syllable “weh”.

When all vowels are pronounced together, it sounds like ee-ah-oo-eh, or Yahweh.

The Greek transliteration also resembled this pronunciation as I-A-U-E.

When Josephus wrote that the tetragrammaton was four vowels, linguistically speaking, he is referring to them as being four “breaths.” The idea of the English word vowel is a more modern concept with strict parameters, but a common denominator between the English understanding and what Josephus was communicating is that a vowel does not allow for lips to touch or the tongue to touch the teeth. The sound is simply a breath.

The beauty in this all vowel or all breath name is that it flows with the breath. When a vowel is articulated there is no obstruction in the throat or the mouth. The sound flows smoothly and without hindrance all the way from the diaphragm. Because the name consists of pure vowels, it flows effortlessly with the breath as a spontaneous action.

Speaking it as a breath, the lips and throat never close. The tongue never touches the teeth or the roof of the mouth. It is essentially a sound that floats on the breath using four Hebrew letters, or as Josephus called it, four breaths, or four vowels.

The verb HWH, which the name YHWH is derived from, means “existence” ...man exists, we exist, because of the breath of YHWH.

Treating the pronunciation of the tetragrammaton as four vowels or breaths does not leave room for a *vav*, which forces the speaker to touch the bottom lip to the upper teeth to produce a “v” sound.

What is really interesting about this is that the four breaths may be even found in the TANAKH in metaphorical form.

Remember, the Hebrew word *ruach* literally means *breath*, but is also translated as *wind* or *spirit* as

well.

With that in mind, could verses referring to the four winds (*ruach*), or four breaths, be cleverly referring to the authority and character of His name, the tetragrammaton?

For example:

Ezekiel 37:9

Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath (*ruach*); prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the **four winds (breaths)(*ruach*)**, O breath (*ruach*), and breathe on these slain, that they may live.”

If so, in that instance, we would understand that the “four breaths” as the “*shem*” or name of our Creator literally gives life to those that are dead. It certainly sounds rather fitting.

Another example:

Daniel 7:2

Daniel declared, “I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the **four winds (breaths)(*ruach*)** of heaven were stirring up the great sea.”

There are several other examples as well. The point is this, that even the TANAKH seems to retain the idea of the “four breaths” in reference to the name of our Creator. It doesn’t sound like Josephus was just making things up.

To continue with this thought, allow us to bring up this fascinating point.

Our Creator breathed life into Adam. Most are familiar with the story of the creation of man.

Genesis 2:7

then the Lord (YHWH) God (Elohim) formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.

Our Creator’s name is truly unique and certainly set apart if His name is pronounced as four vowels, or four breaths.

In the Modern Hebrew alphabet the 6th letter is certainly a *vav* and has a “v” sound. But, evidence suggests that in ancient times this letter had a “w” sound and was called the *waw* instead of the *vav*.

In the next part of this series, we will examine some additional evidences on how to possibly pronounce the name.

We pray that this teaching has blessed you, and remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

EMAIL: Info@119ministries.com

FACEBOOK: www.facebook.com/119Ministries

WEBSITE: www.TestEverything.net & www.ExaminaloTodo.net

TWITTER: www.twitter.com/119Ministries#