

Systematic Theology for the Local Church

#23—Theology Proper—Part II¹

The Theology of the Names of God

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For studies in theology proper: If you have the book, you should read Bruce Ware's *Their God Is Too Small*. The table entitled "Topics and Readings for Theology Proper" includes Reymond's book and the two books of charts by Wayne House and links readings with the study topics. You can read for the topics in upcoming studies. Line 2 is appropriate for today's study. The next study will be an introduction to Openness of God Theology, and pages 10 and 21 in *Charts for Open Theism and Orthodoxy* will help for that study.

What's in a name? A lot.

Before we study the names of God in Scripture we have to allow ourselves to be transported to another time and another place. In our culture names mean very little and are not usually associated with a person's life. But it wasn't this way at all in Israel in Old Testament times. Parents often gave names because they associated the child with an important event or hoped that the child would grow to have the features of the name.

Let me tell you a story about myself that very few people know. It's the story of how I got my name. When it came time for me to be born and my father took my mother to the hospital in Morristown, New Jersey, they still had not settled on a name. That was long before the time of ultrasound and the ability to predict the birth of a boy or a girl. They had a girl's name but not one for a boy. In the hospital room was a stack of magazines. One of them was about Hollywood movie stars. It had an article about an actor named Paul Stuart or Paul Stewart. So they said that would be a good name for a boy. And so it happened. My middle name is Stuart. I cannot find anything on the Internet about any Paul Stuart but I can find a Paul Stewart who was living at the time. So maybe I got this man's name and my parents changed the spelling.

Now this is about as far as you can get from giving a child a name that has significance. I was named after some movie star. I've heard of boys being named John Wayne something, because the parents idolized John Wayne. I'm glad it had nothing to do with who Paul Stuart or Paul Stewart was. Of course, I could have been named John Wayne, or Erroll Flynn or even Ronald Reagan.

But in Old Testament times names were often given for good reasons. So after God heard her prayer we have Hannah naming her son Samuel, which sounds like the Hebrew phrase 'heard by God.' Even Pharoah's daughter did purposeful naming, giving the name 'Moses' to the baby she found, saying "I drew him out of the water." The name sounds like the Hebrew word for 'draw out.'

God himself assigned names to infants, with explanations as to why he did so. An angelic messenger from God told Joseph that he give his son the name 'Jesus,' with the explanation that he would "save his people from their sins." And, of course, God predicted the name Immanuel for Jesus, although it was a title and not a name that anyone used, as far as we know. God told Abraham to change his name from Abram ('exalted father') to Abraham, ('father of a multitude'). The fact that when God did this when Abraham still didn't have an heir after waiting 24 years undoubtedly led to a lot of mocking from people who doubted God's promise to him. But God wanted the new name because he wanted to strengthen God's faith in the promise of an heir.

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In this ancient world that we have to enter into, where names are connected with who people are, we find that the God of the universe taught Israel about himself through his names. We get an idea of the significance of names associated with God when we read that even the word name as associated with God is connected with his essence and is practically a synonym for ‘God.’ So we have Dt. 12:1: “Then to the place the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name—there you are to bring everything I command you: your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, and all the choice possessions you have vowed to the Lord.” This passage refers to God’s desire for the Israelites to worship in a central place when they entered the promised land, as opposed to having altars around the land as the Canaanites did. While there would be no one specific location (the tabernacle moved around), it is clear that the name of God did not dwell in a place. Instead, ‘name’ represented God’s presence.

Similarly, in Ps. 138 David shows the value God places on his name:

¹I will praise you, O LORD, with all my heart;
before the “gods” I will sing your praise.
²I will bow down toward your holy temple
and will praise your name
for your love and your faithfulness,
for you have exalted above all things
your name and your word.

It is significant that God did not completely allow his people to make up names for him: he revealed many of the names he wanted to be known by, and they teach us what he is like.²

In the New Testament we find the same value placed on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. His name stands for who he is and represents him:

- Jn. 1:12: Salvation comes through his name—“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God”
- Mt. 18:20: Believers gather in his name to decide on discipline— “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”
- Jn. 14:13-14: We are to pray in his name—“And I will do whatever you ask in my name”

We will consider some of the specific names of God found in Scripture, along with their theological significance.

Old Testament base names with their compounds

El, Eloah and Elohim

El is a generic Hebrew word for deity, denoting strength. *Elohim* is apparently a plural of *el* and is used of false gods and the true God. Gen. 1:1; Isa. 54:5. *Eloah* is from a verb denoting fear or reverence and means ‘revered one.’

1. El Elohe Israel—A name of God appearing in Gen. 33:20; can mean ‘God, the God of Israel’ or ‘the God of Israel is Mighty.’
2. El Elyon—A name of God translated ‘Most High’ or ‘God Most High’; Gen 14:18. It stresses God’s strength, sovereignty and supremacy.

² See J. Hampton Keathley, III, “The Names of God,” available at http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=220

3. El Gibbor—A name of God translated ‘Mighty God’; Isa. 9:6. God is powerful.
4. El Roi—A name of God appearing in Gen. 16:13 and translated ‘the God who sees me.’ This suggests God’s omniscience.
5. El Olam—A name of God translated ‘Eternal God’ or ‘Everlasting God’; Gen. 21:33. This clearly teaches God’s eternity.
6. El Shaddai—A name of God translated ‘God Almighty’ or ‘Almighty God’; Gen. 17:1. This shows God’s power.

Yahweh (YHWH), Jehovah and Adonai

The word Yhwh, apparently pronounced *Yahweh* and usually written YHWH, is the personal name of the God of Israel. It is called in biblical studies the Tetragrammaton (‘four letter’) and *nomen sacrum* (‘sacred name’—considered by many Jews as too sacred to pronounce).

At the burning bush, when Moses asks what name he should report to the Israelites, God reveals himself to Moses saying “I AM WHO I AM” in the NIV, and then says (using part of the phrase as a name) “This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” Three times the word *ehyeh* occurs. It appears to be a form of the verb denoting existence (i.e. ‘to be’). If so, God is saying something about his existence, apparently that he exists uniquely—he is self-existent. Some scholars hold that this word is from the same verb as YHWH, suggesting that YHWH refers to existence, also. This connection is supported by the fact that in v. 15 God tells Moses that he should say that ‘the LORD’ (Yahweh) was sending him, i.e. *ehyeh* = *Yahweh*.

Adon (plural *adonai*) is a Hebrew word translated ‘lord’ or ‘master’ and is used of God (Gen. 15:2) and human beings. The word Jehovah is not found in the Old Testament and actually comes from the early middle ages and the work of rabbinic scholars in editing the Old Testament text. It consists approximately of the consonants of YHWH, and the vowels of *adonai*; Ex. 34:6. Where translations have ‘Jehovah,’ they are representing YHWH. In Ps. 110:1 YHWH refers to God and Adon refers to David’s master, interpreted in the NT as a reference to the first and second persons of the Trinity.

1. Jehovah Elohim—A name of God, combining the personal (Yahweh/Jehovah) and the generic (Elohim) names for God; Ex. 34:6.
2. Jehovah-Jireh—A name of God combining the personal name and a word suggesting God’s knowledge of the human situation that leads to provision, e.g. ‘the Lord provides’; Gen. 22:14; Ex. 34:6. This points to God’s grace.
3. Yahweh Maccaddeshcem—A name of God combining the personal name and a word for sanctification, hence ‘the Lord your Sanctifier.’ This stresses God’s role as our means of sanctification; Ex. 31:13.
4. Jehovah-Nissi—A name of God combining the personal name and ‘my banner’; hence ‘the Lord my banner; teaches that God is the object of trust and source of provision; Ex. 17:15; Ex. 34:6.
5. Jehovah-Rapha—A name of God combining the personal name and a word referring to healing; hence ‘the Lord who heals’; Ex. 15:26; Ex. 34:6. This shows that God is merciful.
6. Jehovah-Sabaoth—A name of God combining the personal name and a word meaning ‘hosts’ (= armies); expresses God’s power; translated ‘Lord of Hosts’ or ‘the Lord Almighty’; 1 Sam. 1:3; Ex. 34:6.
7. Jehovah-Shalom—A name of God combining the personal name and the word for peace; hence ‘the Lord is peace’; Judg. 6:24; Ex. 34:6. This points to the Cross, where God provided for peace between sinners and himself.
8. Jehovah-Shammah—A name of God combining the personal name and word describing location; hence ‘the Lord is there’; emphasizes the presence of Jehovah in the midst of Israel during the kingdom; Ezek. 48:35; Ex. 34:6. *Immanuel* (‘God with us’) is similar in concept. Behind this name is God’s omnipresence.

9. Jehovah-Tsidkenu—A of God combining the personal name and a word meaning ‘our righteousness’; hence ‘the Lord our righteousness’; Jer. 23:6; Ex. 34:6. Again, this points to the provisions of the Cross.
10. Jehovah Elohim Israel—A double compound name of God, ‘The Lord, the God of Israel’; stresses that the personal God of Israel is the true God. Jdges. 5; Isa. 17:6.
11. Adonai Jehovah—A name of God translated in the AV and NASB as ‘Lord God’ and in the NIV as ‘Sovereign Lord’; Gen. 15:2.

Ancient of Days—This is a descriptive term and name for God, especially the Father, as in Dan. 7: 9, denoting eternity.

New Testament names

Theos

Theos is the word that the Greeks used for any god. It is the main term used in the NT for the true God. It is used of the Lord Jesus Christ in Jn. 1:1, 18; 20:28 and other places.

Kurios

Kurios is the word that the Greeks used for ‘lord’ or ‘master.’ It is frequently used in the NT as the equivalent of Jehovah/YHWH in the OT: “That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Rom. 10:9)

Summary of theological information in the names of God

Here are just some of the theological features associated with God that we glean from these names (remember that there are other names) or their appearance with other names (as in Ps. 110):

God . . .

Is self-existent
Is sovereign
Is powerful
Is omniscient
Is eternal
Is gracious

Sanctifies
Provides for his people
Provides peace
Merciful
Is omnipresent
Provides righteousness

Study questions

1. Review the arguments for the existence of God by studying sections 15 and 16 in House's *Charts of Theology and Doctrine*. Be able to talk through each of the arguments that were presented in Study #22.
 2. What does the fact that we cannot define God have to do with what he is like?
 3. Be able to describe the relationship between the words Adonai, YHWH and Jehovah.
 4. How do translations distinguish between translations of *YHWH* and *Adon/Adonai*?
 5. Romans 10:9 is used by Lordship Salvationists as a support for their view that one must receive Jesus as Lord and Savior. Knowing that *Lord* in the NT usually recalls the use of *Adonai* in the OT and that the passage draws from Dt. 30, what does the confession of Rom. 10:9 mean in context?
3. What is the significance for this study of the following verses:

Gen. 12:8

Ex. 33:19

Lev. 22:2, 32

Ex. 20:7

Deut. 18:5

Jdges. 13:18.

Gen. 21:33

Acts 4:18; 5:41; 10:43; 19:17

Phil. 2:9-11 (What is the 'name' of v. 9? What is the confession of v. 11?)

Running compilation of key definitions

1. Systematic theology: The organized presentation of all that the Bible teaches about God and His works.
2. Exegesis: The actual practice of studying or interpreting a document or other message to determine its meaning.
3. Context: Context in a document or utterance is the surroundings of a portion of a word, a word, or a group of words.
4. Bibliology: The doctrinal study of the nature of the Bible.
5. Biblical authority: The quality inherent in Scripture by virtue of which human beings are completely answerable to its content.
6. Revelation: The information about Himself given by God to human beings.
7. General revelation: God's disclosure of Himself, available directly to everyone, given through means other than dreams, visions, direct words and Christ Himself.
8. Special revelation: The disclosure of information from God that is not available directly to all human beings.
9. Inspiration: A term applied to the Bible denoting that it is the product of God's creative activity, figuratively breathed out from Him (2 Tim. 3:16); applies to the process of recording Scripture, not specifically to the people involved; actually, *expiration* would be a better term to reflect the concept of 2 Tim. 3:16; the result is *inerrancy*.
10. Textual criticism: The science and art of attempting to discover the original text of a literary work for which the original document does not exist. It is especially important for biblical studies, and the foundational endeavor to all subsequent investigation of the Scriptures.
11. Canon: Transliterated from a Greek Word meaning "standard"; as used of the Bible, it refers to books authenticated as possessing divine origin and therefore authoritative; the Jewish canon consists of thirty-nine books, the Protestant of sixty-six and the Catholic of eighty (including apocryphal books).
12. Inerrancy is a term applied to the Bible, although not specifically found in it; it denotes that the Bible, as originally written, possessed no humanly induced deviations from the message God intended to be recorded and that it is true in every respect; 2 Tim. 3:16; 1 Cor. 2:13; 1 Pet. 2:19.
13. Infallibility: Although some assert that this term has a different meaning from inerrancy, the two terms are, for purposes of biblical study, synonymous; the Bible is infallible because inerrant, and inerrant because infallible.
14. Illumination is the teaching ministry of the Spirit of God that imparts understanding of the message of Scripture to the believer; not to be confused with inspiration, which in the Bible is used of the work of God in giving Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16); 1 Jn. 2:20; Jn. 16:13.
15. Theology proper is the study of the nature of God.