**SIL Global**
**Language and Culture Archives**

*Journal of Translation*
ISSN 1558-7282 (online)
https://siljot.org

# Translating YHWH

Nicolaas Daams

*Journal of Translation* 1 (1), 2005: 47–55.
https://doi.org/10.54395/JOT-MM6YT

**License**

©2005, SIL Global

Made available under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0

More resources available at:
https://sil.org/resources/language-culture-archives

# Translating *YHWH*

**Nico Daams**

*Nico Daams served as Translation Advisor in Solomon Islands for the Rennellese New Testament translation, which was published in 1996. Since then he has consulted in a related language, Kapingamarangi of Micronesia. The NT was published in 2000 and a major Old Testament portion is slated for release in 2004.*

**Abstract**

The article is best seen as a follow-up article in a series of articles about this topic that have previously appeared in *The Bible Translator* (1992) and in *NOT* (1997). The article explores the meaning of YHWH in various contexts, and what the implications of this analysis are for Bible translators. It concludes that there are only two legitimate options for representing YHWH, and it provides translators with a clear set of criteria that will help the translator to determine which one of these two representations should be used.

## 1. Introduction

When we began the translation of the Old Testament in the Kapingamarangi language, I knew that one of the hardest questions to resolve would be the translation or transliteration of *YHWH*, the name of God. Since the Kapingamarangi translation committee would be responsible for the final decision, I knew that they would need to be educated on the possibilities and problems so that their decision would be well founded. To prepare for this, I read what has been written on the subject, mostly in *Notes on Translation (NOT)* and *The Bible Translator (TBT),* and I asked advice from colleagues with a better knowledge of Hebrew. I also made an extensive study of the context in which *YHHW* occurs in the Old Testament. This article is the result of my study.

A good summary of the history of the problem is in an *NOT* article "Translating the Tetragrammaton YHWH" (1997) by Katy Barnwell, an excerpt of which follows (from p. 24):

> In many English translations of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) the form "LORD," written in small capitals, is used to represent the four Hebrew letters YHWH. This is a proper name, the personal name of God, not a title or a general noun.
>
> How did the term LORD come to be used to represent the personal name of God? It seems clear that, until about the time of the prophet Ezra, the Israelites pronounced the name of God (YHWH) freely. But sometime after the time of Ezra, they came to feel that the name YHWH was so holy that it should not be pronounced. So, whenever YHWH was written in the text, they read it aloud as *ʾaḏonay* which means "(my) lord/master."
>
> Much later, Masoretic scribes added vowels to the text to preserve the pronunciation of the words. (Originally Hebrew was written with consonant symbols only.) But when the scribes added vowels to the word YHWH, they added the vowels of *ʾaḏonay* ("lord") to remind people to pronounce the title as *ʾaḏonay* instead of saying the personal name, Yahweh.

When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek (the Septuagint), YHWH was represented by the Greek word κυριος, meaning lord, still respecting the fact that the name itself was considered too holy to be pronounced.

In the same article, Dr. Barnwell states as a general principle for the translation of *YHWH* that "If there is a trade language Bible version that is prestigious and widely used, you will probably want to follow what that translation has done" (p. 25).

Six options for the translation of *YHWH* are listed by Kees F. de Blois in his 1992 *TBT* article "How to Translate the Name" (here reworded and reordered):

(1) Translate the meaning of *YHWH.*

(2) Translate the title *Lord.*

(3) Translate *YHWH* and *ʾelohim* ('God') the same way.

(4) Use a name from the target culture.

(5) Transliterate *YHWH* using a language-friendly variant of either *Yahweh* or *Jehovah.*

(6) Use a combination of the above options.

These options will be discussed in section 2.2.

In this article I restrict myself to the problem associated with the representation of God's name, *YHWH,* and combinations of that name with *ʾelohim* ('God') and *ʾaḏonay* ('Lord'). The translation of *ʾelohim* itself is not in view here, although its co-occurrence with *YHWH* and the complementary way in which these terms are frequently used mean that we must also look at the context in which these words occur together.

The translation of the name of God often seems to be predetermined by tradition. Ever since the Septuagint used *kurios* to translate *YHWH,* most translations have followed this approach. For example, the committee translating the Bible for the first time into Dutch (Synod of Dort in 1621) used the argument that tradition forced them to settle for *Here* (the Dutch equivalent of LORD). The translators of the Dutch translation currently in progress do the same, in spite of strong criticism that *Here* carries unnecessary male-domination notions (see Project Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling 2001:25).

In this article I will analyze the context in which *YHWH* occurs and from this analysis draw conclusions as to how *YHWH* should be translated. But since we do not translate in a vacuum, translators need to take into account the opinion of the target audience (an opinion often shaped by other translations). The ultimate rendering of *YHWH* will reflect both the results of contextual study and the general principle of following the trade language Bible. Such a rendering should be not only good, but also acceptable.

## 2. *YHWH*

### 2.1 What does *YHWH* mean?

The meaning of *YHWH,* a name derived from the verb 'to be', is something like 'He is' or 'He will be' (see the *NIV Study Bible* note on Exod. 3:15). This meaning is in focus in only a few verses, as in the following:

> God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.' " God also said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, 'YHWH, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation…." (Exod. 3:14–15, NIV, with *YHWH* substituted for *LORD*)

In these two verses the Hebrew words for *I AM WHO I AM* and for *YHWH* are clearly related to each other, the former being the way God talks about himself in the first person, and the latter being the third person variant to be used by the Hebrew people. This verse is the only place in the Old Testament where a clear reference is made to the actual meaning of the word *YHWH*—in all other places the focus is on the *identity* of *YHWH*. Let us then look at the wider context of the Old Testament to determine the identity of *YHWH*.

In a 1992 *TBT* article Noel D. Osborn examines the biblical text in Exodus for clues to the meaning of *YHWH*. He says, "My studies in the book of Exodus have made me sensitive to a number of references where understanding YHWH as a name makes a great deal of difference to our understanding of the passage" (p. 415). He also says, "As a name, it is the **person** so named who is primarily referred to, not the meaning the name may convey. The quality the name may intentionally represent is of secondary importance" (p. 416).

In the same issue of *TBT,* Donald J. Slager (1992:424) quotes U. Cassuto:

> the Old Testament uses *Yahweh* when it is speaking of the Israelite concept of God and of God's working in the history of Israel, while it uses *Elohim* when it intends to refer to the abstract idea of the deity, of the universal God, and of the creator of the world. It uses *Yahweh* when the characteristics of the deity are clear and concrete, and *Elohim* when they are more abstract and obscure. *Yahweh* suggests that God is personal

> and that he stands in direct relationship with people and nature, while *Elohim* indicates the transcendent nature of God.

It will be helpful here to think of the way in which we look at names in everyday life. When our first son was born, my wife and I named him Samuel, for the same reason that Hannah called her son by that name: we were thankful that God had heard our prayer. Yet when I think about my son I seldom think about the actual meaning of his name. I think of who he is, what he means to me, or what he is doing. Other people will know him in a more restricted way, for example, as Samuel who used to sell cheese in the supermarket or as Samuel their classmate. Thus, depending on our perspective, or in the case of literature depending on the context, we make a descriptive definition of a person. This is not to say that the meaning of the name is not important, but only in certain contexts will the meaning be in focus and need to be represented in the text.

The name *YHWH* is never treated as a common noun and so we do not find phrases such as 'our *YHWH*' or 'the *YHWH* of Israel'. *YHWH* most often occurs by itself, but is also often identified by a descriptive phrase, as in '*YHWH,* the God of Israel'. On the other hand, *ʾelohim* frequently functions as a common noun in phrases such as 'our God' or 'the God of Israel'. In a number of Old Testament books (e.g., Leviticus, Joshua, Joel, and Amos) the word *ʾelohim* does not occur by itself at all, but only in a descriptive phrase of some sort. In other books, though it occurs by itself occasionally, the large majority of its occurrences are in a descriptive phrase. The Book of Genesis stands out in its use of *ʾelohim*: Of the 226 occurrences of *ʾelohim* in Genesis only 57 occur in a descriptive phrase. Where other books have '*YHWH* said' Genesis has '*ʾelohim* said'. In fact, '*YHWH* said' occurs 291 times[1] in the Old Testament, while '*ʾelohim* said' occurs only 38 times, 31 of which are in Genesis and Exodus, *before* God declares his name to Moses. That leaves seven occurrences of '*ʾelohim* said' subsequent to Exod. 3:14, where we would have expected '*YHWH* said' (Exod. 13:17, Num. 22:12, 1 Kings 3:5 and 11, 1 Chron. 28:3, 2 Chron. 1:11, and Jonah 4:9). For the most part, *YHWH* was used when God is seen in reference to his people, and *ʾelohim* was used when God is seen in relation to the surrounding nations.

For the people of Israel in the Old Testament, YHWH was their God. This is the primary meaning of the term *YHWH.* When we look at the phrases in which *YHWH* is described, such as '*YHWH* the God of Israel' and '*YHWH* your God', we find that more than 11 percent (786) of the 6,959 occurrences of *YHWH* are modified by such descriptive phrases. In these descriptive phrases 'God' is the nuclear or central meaningful component, while the other, more peripheral elements of meaning serve to relate *YHWH* and 'God' in a meaningful way.

Based on Exod. 3:15 we could define *YHWH* as follows: *YHWH* is the name of the God of Israel. Although from phrases such as *YHWH Sebaʾot* and '*YHWH* the God of heaven' we know that YHWH is more than the God of the people of Israel, in the context of Israel among the nations he is primarily seen as the God of Israel.[2]

## 2.2 Six options for translating *YHWH*

### 2.2.1 Option 1: Translate the meaning of *YHWH*

While the meaning of the name *YHWH* is something like 'he is', this meaning is not in focus in most of its occurrences. It is in focus only in Exod. 3:14–15 and possibly in Hosea 1:9. It seems, then, that to translate it with this meaning (e.g., as 'The Eternal One') would be to direct the focus away from its real

---

[1] '*YHWH* said' occurs 290 times. Additionally, in 1 Chron. 11:2, it occurs with a modifying phrase, '*YHWH* your God said'.

[2] The phrase '*YHWH* the God of heaven' occurs five times only, two of the occurrences being in identical passages where Cyrus charges the people of his empire to support the building of the temple in Jerusalem (2 Chron. 36:23 and Ezra 1:2). Of the others, two are in the passage where Abraham charges his servant to find a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24:3 and 7), and the fifth is in the passage where Jonah reveals to the sailors that he worships "the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land" (Jonah 1:9). All of these instances were written or spoken in a pagan context. A simple reference to YHWH as the God of the Hebrews would not have had the required impact.

signification in the minds of the Hebrew people.[3] Even if we wrote it with capital letters, it would still not sound like a name.

### 2.2.2 Option 2: Translate the title 'Lord'

Since the total meaning conveyed by *YHWH* is '*YHWH* the name of the God of Israel', it would be inaccurate and misleading to render it as a title such as 'Lord'. Not only would the name itself be lost, but a new meaning with connotations of lordship would be introduced. This is never part of the complete meaning of *YHWH.*

Most English Bibles use this option though as the result of long tradition. An attempt is made to distinguish it from the Hebrew word *ʾaḏonay*, which actually means 'lord', by writing the latter with lowercase letters *(Lord)*, while writing the name *YHWH* with small caps *(LORD).* The reader is supposed to realize that *LORD* represents the name of God, while *Lord* represents *ʾaḏonay*. I don't think this method of distinguishing between two different words would be acceptable anywhere else in translation.

Another problem associated with rendering *YHWH* as 'Lord' will be pointed out in section 4.2.

### 2.2.3 Option 3: Translate *YHWH* and *ʾēlohim* 'God' in the same way

The nuclear, or main, meaning component of the phrase *'YHWH* the name of the God of Israel' is 'God'. The associated components of meaning are '*YHWH*', 'name', and 'Israel'. Thus wherever in the biblical text none of the associated meanings are in focus and *YHWH* is used simply as a term of reference to God, translating it as 'God' will cause very little, if any, loss of meaning. Nor will it introduce wrong components of meaning. The following are verses in which the same word used for translating *ʾelohim* would suffice for *YHWH*:

> Gen. 6:6–7a **God** was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So **he** said…
>
> Gen. 6:8 But Noah found favor in **God**'s eyes.
>
> Exod. 4:2 Then **God** said to him, "What is that in your hand?"…

On the other hand, in sentences where one or more of the associated components of meaning are clearly relevant, translating *YHWH* as 'God' would not be justified, since we would have lost the associated components of meaning. This is especially true in the many verses where *YHWH* is used together with a descriptive phrase that includes 'God'. The following example illustrates this point:

> Micah 4:5 All the nations may walk in the name of their gods; we will walk in the name of **Yahweh our God** for ever and ever.

In other words, we cannot use the word for 'God' to render *YHWH* in its every occurrence without serious loss. We would not only lose the name, but also the fine distinction in usage between *YHWH* and *ʾēlohim* 'God' in those places where *YHWH* occurs in the context of the Hebrew people and *ʾelohim* in the context of pagan people. Still another problem associated with rendering *YHWH* as 'God' will be discussed in section 3.2.

### 2.2.4 Option 4: Use a name from the local culture

Since *YHWH* is the name by which the Hebrew people knew their God, it seems unacceptable to use the name of a local god, no matter how grand he or she may be. *YHWH* is the name of the God of the Hebrews, and another name would inevitably have other connotations. Even though it may seem desirable from a

---

[3] For a more thorough argumentation, see the three reasons of Osborne (1992:416) for not translating the meaning of the name: (1) "[T]here are only a few instances in the Hebrew Bible where the name is used in a context that clearly intends to explain or bring out the meaning of the verb *hayah*." (2) "[T]he associated meaning of this special name … far outweighed any meaning it may have suggested because of its form or derivation…." (3) "[A] personal name, simply because it is a name, should seldom be translated."

missiological point of view to use the name of the local creator-god so that people can more readily identify with the God of the Bible, there is a distinct danger that the name of the local creator-god will carry connotations that are incompatible with the name of *YHWH.* While it is true that *YHWH* is not just the God of the people of Israel, but also *YHWH* Sabaʾot ('LORD of Hosts') and '*YHWH* the God of heaven' with much in common with creator-gods in other cultures, yet ancient Israel's main perception of *YHWH* was that it was the name of *their* God.

### 2.2.5 Option 5. Transliterate *YHWH*, using a language-friendly variant of either *Yahweh* or *Jehovah*

In view of the problems of options 1–4, it seems that the best way to render *YHWH* would be to transliterate it. There are three categories in which this is especially appropriate: (1) where the name is in focus, (2) where *YHWH* is joined to *ʾelohim* or *ʾaḏonay*, and (3) where *YHWH* is in a descriptive phrase (e.g., '*YHWH* the God of Israel').

Where the meaning of the name is in special focus, as in Exod. 3:14–15 (see sec. 2.1), it would be good to transliterate *YHWH* and add a footnote explaining the meaning of the word, as we would probably do with other names in the Bible when the meaning of the name is in focus. In the following examples the meaning of the name *YHWH* is not in focus, but the name itself is in focus:

> Exod. 6:3 I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name **Yahweh** I did not make myself known to them.
>
> Ps. 83:18 Let them know that you, whose name is **Yahweh**—that you alone are the Most High over all the earth.'
>
> Exod. 5:2 Pharaoh said, "Who is **Yahweh**, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know **Yahweh** and I will not let Israel go."
>
> Exod. 6:3 I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name **Yahweh** I did not make myself known to them.
>
> Isa. 47:4 Our Redeemer—**Yahweh Sabaʾot** is his name—is the Holy One of Israel.

For examples of category 2, in which *YHWH* is joined to *ʾelohim* or *ʾaḏonay* see sections 3, 4, and 5.

The third category, *YHWH* in descriptive phrases, would present a problem if in the phrase '*YHWH* the God of Israel' we were to translate *YHWH* as 'God'. That would give us 'God, the God of Israel'. The phrase clearly demands a *name* before the descriptive phrase. In this context a transliteration solves the problem as the following example illustrates:

> Judg. 8:33–34 No sooner had Gideon died than the Israelites again prostituted themselves to the Baals. They set up Baal-Berith as their god and did not remember **Yahweh their God**, who had rescued them from the hands of all their enemies on every side.

The only objection to transliterating *YHWH* would be the sensitivities of the target audience, which would ultimately affect the acceptability of the translation. In many instances people of minority languages have grown used to a Bible that have a translation of the word 'Lord'. To replace that with *Yahweh* may prove to be unacceptable. This was found to be the case when we discussed the translation of *YHWH* with the Kapingamarangi translation committee. Up until recently Kapingamarangi people read the Bible either in English or in Pohnpeian. The Pohnpeian Bible translators had used the TEV as their source text and therefore have the Pohnpeian word *Kaun* 'Lord' for *YHWH.* There was considerable support for following that tradition. Others, who were familiar with the accusation by the Jehovah's Witnesses that Protestants had hidden the name of God, would like to see the name *Yahweh* or *Yihowah* in the Kapingamarangi translation. Still others wanted to use *Dimaadua,* an honorific term for God. Now, after presenting to them the substance of this article, the translation committee has accepted, with complete consensus, that we will use *Yihowah* in those places where God's name is in focus. Although scholars consider *Yahweh* to be more accurate than *Jehovah*, the Kapingamarangi translation committee was constrained in their decision by the

use of *Jiowa* as the name of God in a number of their hymns. By choosing *Yihowah,* we combine the actual consonants of the Tetragrammaton with the vowels of the name used in their hymns.

### 2.2.6 Option 6: Use a combination of the above options

There would be no problem in applying Barnwell's principle, "If there is a trade language Bible version that is prestigious and widely used, you will probably want to follow what that version has used" (1997:25), as long as the more prestigious version has some variant of *Yahweh.* But if it uses the name of a local god or a translation of 'Lord', then we have a problem. These options are just not legitimate. Some would recommend doing what we know to be the right thing and then teaching the target audience why their translation is different from the one they will compare it with. In some places that might work, but in other places it will not work.

In the Kapingamarangi Old Testament we have opted for a combination of option 5 (*Yihowah,* a transliteration of *YHWH*) and option 3 (*Dimaadua,* an honorific for 'God').[4] We transliterate *YHWH* when one of the three categories mentioned in section 2.2.5 applies:

(1) Where the name is in focus.

(2) Where *YHWH* is joined to *ʾelohim* or *ʾaḏonay*.

(3) Where *YHWH* is in a descriptive phrase such as '*YHWH* the God of Israel'.[5]

In all other contexts we use *Dimaadua*. In languages where no honorific name for God exists, the common translation of *ʾelohim* 'God' can often be used instead.

The following two examples illustrate this two-pronged approach to the translation of the Tetragrammaton. Each one features the name *YHWH* as both a simple term of reference to God and a term that includes one or more of the associated meanings '*YHWH'*, 'name', and/or 'Israel':

> Exod. 15:3 *YHWH* **(God)** is a warrior; *YHWH* **(Yahweh)** is his name.
>
> 2 Kings 19:15 And Hezekiah prayed to *YHWH* **(God**): "O *YHWH* **(Yahweh)**, God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth."

## 3. *YHWH ʾelohim* 'Yahweh God'

### 3.1 What does *YHWH ʾelohim* mean?

The phrase *YHWH ʾelohim* occurs about forty times in the Old Testament, and half of these are in Genesis 2 and 3. The majority of the remaining occurrences are in the historical books and, looking at the context in which they occur, we see some striking similarities. Many occur in prayers by David or Solomon in relation to the establishment of the sanctuary, the place where God will dwell among his people. A typical example is found in 1 Chron. 22:1 and 19, where David gives instructions to all the leaders of Israel to help his son Solomon:

> Now devote your heart and soul to seeking *YHWH* your God. Begin to build the sanctuary of **YHWH** *ʾelohim*, so that you may bring the ark of the covenant of *YHWH* and the sacred articles belonging to God into the temple that will be built for the Name of *YHWH.* (1 Chron. 22:19)

---

[4] *Dimaadua* is a rather peculiar word in that the (prefixed) article *di* is singular, while the noun *maadua* means 'parents', seen as a single unit with the exclusive meaning of 'God'. This is not unlike the Hebrew word for 'God', *ʾelohim*, which is also in the plural yet refers to the unitary God.

[5] This category is only for languages which do not have another word for 'God'. If another word, such as an honorific, exists, the honorific or other option can be used in these phrases since there will not be the doubling of words.

Another occurrence of *YHWH ʾelohim* is in David's prayer in 2 Sam. 7:25 and 1 Chron.17:16–17 after the prophet Nathan told him that God did not want him to build a sanctuary. We also find this phrase used in the charge by David to Solomon in 1 Chron. 28:20:

> Be strong and courageous, and do the work. Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the **YHWH** *ʾelohim*, my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you until all the work for the service of the temple of the YHWH is finished.

It seems to me that the phrase *YHWH ʾelohim* often is used in relationship to God's dwelling with his people. This throws a new light on the problem of the switch of reference from *ʾelohim* in the creation story in Genesis 1 to *YHWH ʾelohim* in the story of Adam and Eve in the garden. Could it be that by using the phrase *YHWH ʾelohim* the author draws attention to the fact that *ʾelohim,* the God who has completed the creation of the world, now dwells with his people? But even here in this sanctuary, there is a switching back and forth between *ʾelohim* and *YHWH*. Donald J. Slager (1992:424) discusses the different references to God in the early chapters of Genesis as follows:

> In Genesis 2.4–3.24 the narrator refers to God twenty times using both *Yahweh* and *Elohim*, but when the snake and the woman speak, they use only *Elohim* (Gen 3.1-5). The narrator uses the personal name *Yahweh* which speaks of God's covenant relationship with his people, followed by the generic name *Elohim* which refers to the God of creation. The double name speaks to identify *Yahweh* as the Creator God mentioned earlier in chapter 1. As God becomes involved intimately with mankind, initiating his redemptive covenant (Gen 3.15…), the name *Yahweh* is appropriate. When the snake and the woman speak, they only see God as the Creator who seeks to restrict them.

The final occurrence of the phrase *YHWH ʾelohim* in the Old Testament is in Jonah 4:6. Here *YHWH ʾelohim* provides for the vine to grow up over Jonah. Earlier on (1:19) it was *YHWH* who provided a great fish to be a dwelling place for Jonah, but it is hardly the place where *YHWH* dwells. Jonah expresses the contrast between the insides of the fish with the place where *YHWH* dwells in his prayer in 2:4: 'I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.' When God provides a vine to grow up over Jonah, the narrator uses the phrase *YHWH ʾelohim* as the agent, thereby creating the image of *YHWH* the God who dwells with his people Israel being right there with Jonah. But Jonah cannot live in the presence of *YHWH*. His heart yearns for the death of these heathen people (4:2), while *YHWH* wants to extend his mercy to them (4:11). So the little paradise cannot continue, and it is *ʾelohim* the Creator God who sends the worm and the wind, and we return to a world where *YHWH ʾelohim* does not, according to the record, live with his people any longer. At least not until Emmanuel comes to earth.

### 3.2 Translating *YHWH ʾelohim*

Based on the above analysis, it would seem that the translation of *YHWH ʾelohim* ought to include the name *YHWH*, so that the associated meaning of that name ('the God of Israel') not be lost in translation.

But if we decide to translate *YHWH* in this phrase with the same word as *ʾelohim,* we would end up with the awkward phrase 'God God'. TEV and NIV commonly translate this phrase as 'the LORD God', which adds a component of meaning ('lordship') and removes the Name and the underlying connotation of the close relationship between *YHWH* and the people of Israel.

It would seem, then, that *YHWH* in the phrase *YHWH ʾelohim* needs to be transliterated, rather than translated as 'Lord' or 'God', as the following examples illustrate:

> Genesis 3:1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals **Yahweh God** had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"
>
> Jonah 4:6 Then **Yahweh God** made a plant grow up over Jonah to give him some shade, so that he would be more comfortable. Jonah was extremely pleased with the plant.

## 4. *ʾaḏonay YHWH* 'Lord *YHWH*'

### 4.1 What does *ʾaḏonay YHWH* mean?

The phrase *ʾaḏonay YHWH* occurs more than 280 times in the Old Testament. The word *ʾaḏonay* derives from *ʾaḏon*, meaning 'Lord'. The most common form is *ʾaḏonay* 'my Lord. Although we are mainly interested here in the word *ʾaḏonay* in combination with *YHWH*, we should note that it also occurs by itself (e.g., in Gen. 18:27), and much of what we say here about the meaning of *ʾaḏonay* applies in those occurrences as well.

The phrase *ʾaḏonay YHWH* is observed in two distinct groups in the Old Testament. The first group covers the majority of its occurrences (264) and is found in the Prophets, mostly in Ezekiel (217), where it tends to occur in more or less fixed formulae. At the beginning of a discourse the formula is 'This is what *ʾaḏonay YHWH* says…'; at the end of a discourse the formula is '…declares *ʾaḏonay YHWH*.'

The second group is much smaller but more interesting. In this group the context shows us the use of *ʾaḏonay YHWH* more clearly. The phrase is first used by Abram in Gen. 15:2 after YHWH tells him in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward," to which Abram replies, "O *ʾaḏonay YHWH,* what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" *YHWH* then gives him a promise, "I am *YHWH*, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it," and Abram replies, "O *ʾaḏonay YHWH,* how can I know that I will gain possession of it?"

David uses the same expression in his response to Nathan's revelation in 2 Sam. 7:8–17, "*YHWH* declares to you that *YHWH* himself will establish a house for you…. Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever…." To this David responds:

> Who am I, O *ʾaḏonay* **YHWH**, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far? And as if this were not enough in your sight, O *ʾaḏonay* **YHWH**, you have also spoken about the future of the house of your servant. Is this your usual way of dealing with man, O *ʾaḏonay* **YHWH**? What more can David say to you? For you know your servant, O *ʾaḏonay* **YHWH**." (2 Sam. 7:18–20)

David repeats the phrase in vv. 22, 28, and 29, humbling himself again and again before his Lord, referring to himself (ten times!) as 'your servant'.

In quite a few other places we find that men approaching their Lord, the God of Israel, actually throw themselves on the ground before him (e.g., in Deut. 9:25–26 and Josh. 7:6–7) as an expression of devotion. So, we can say that it is the *lordship* of *YHWH* that is clearly in focus in the phrase *ʾaḏonay YHWH*.

This casts an interesting light on the Book of Ezekiel, where this phrase occurs more than in any other Old Testament book. The *NIV Study Bible*'s introduction to Ezekiel says, "[N]owhere in the Bible are God's initiative and control expressed more clearly and pervasively than in the book of Ezekiel. From the first chapter … to the last phrase of Ezekiel's vision ("the LORD is there") the book sounds and echoes God's sovereignty" (1995:1219). Another indication of the lordship of God in Ezekiel is God's addressing Ezekiel as 'son of man' (better rendered 'mortal man' as in the TEV).

### 4.2 Translating *ʾaḏonay YHWH*

If *YHWH* in the phrase *ʾaḏonay YHWH* were to be translated as 'LORD', it would result in the clumsy phrase 'the Lord LORD'. This has actually been done in the Dutch translation of 1951 with *Here HERE*.

In TEV and NIV the phrase *ʾaḏonay YHWH* is usually translated as "Sovereign LORD." Another solution might be to do what the rabbis did when reading this phrase: they read *ʾelohim* for *YHWH* (instead of *ʾaḏonay* as they would normally do). However, this means a shift in meaning from 'Lord *YHWH*' to 'Lord God'. Every pagan could call his god 'Lord god', but only the Hebrews could call their God 'Lord *YHWH*'! Therefore, it seems to me that a transliteration of *YHWH* in this phrase is the best way to distinguish 'Lord', 'God', and '*YHWH*', as in the following:

> Gen. 15:2 But Abram said, "O **Lord Yahweh**, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?"

Jer. 44:26 But hear the word of Yahweh, all Jews living in Egypt: "I swear by my great name," says Yahweh, "that no one from Judah living anywhere in Egypt will ever again invoke my name or swear, 'As surely as the **Lord Yahweh** lives.' "

Ezek. 20:3 "Son of man**,** speak to the elders of Israel and say to them, 'This is what the **Lord Yahweh** says: Have you come to inquire of me? As surely as I live, I will not let you inquire of me, declares the **Lord Yahweh**.' "

## 5. *YHWH ʾāḏonay* 'YHWH Lord'

### 5.1 What does *YHWH ʾāḏonay* mean?

The reversal of the more frequent *ʾaḏonay YHWH* occurs only five times: four times in the Psalms and once in Habakkuk in a poetic section. There does not seem to be any difference in meaning between *YHWH ʾaḏonay* and *ʾaḏonay YHWH*. *YHWH ʾaḏonay* is probably a marked, poetic form of *ʾaḏonay YHWH* that emphasizes *YHWH* by appending the descriptive phrase 'my Lord' to it.

### 5.2 Translating *YHWH ʾāḏonay*

> In TEV and NIV the phrase *YHWH ʾaḏonay* is usually translated as 'Sovereign Lord', the same as for *ʾaḏonay YHWH.* The Dutch translation of 1951 has *HERE Here* for *YHWH ʾaḏonay* the reverse of *Here HERE* for *ʾaḏonay YHWH.* The fine distinction in capitalization will probably go unnoticed by most readers, and definitely by all hearers of the Word.

Based on my analysis here, it could be translated as 'Yahweh my Lord' or, in the case of Ps. 68:20 and 21, 'Yahweh, our Lord'. In Ps. 109:21 is an example: 'But you, O **Yahweh my Lord,** deal well with me for your name's sake'. Restoring the name 'Yahweh' seems particularly appropriate in this verse because of the reference to God's name in the same sentence. Note that in TEV the reference to God's name is completely lost: "But my Sovereign LORD, help me as you have promised…"

## 6. Conclusion

Names have meaning, just as words do. But a name is primarily used to refer to a person, and so it is the identity of a particular person that we think of when we hear or see a name. When the Hebrew people saw the name *YHWH* they saw it as a reference to their God. In some contexts certain connotations of *YHWH* are essential to the meaning of the text, while in other contexts only the central meaning, 'God', is in focus. In the former contexts *YHWH* should be transliterated, but elsewhere the word for 'God' could be substituted without any loss of meaning. I have identified three categories where we should transliterate *YHWH*:

(1) Where the name is in focus

(2) Where *YHWH* is joined to *ʾelohim* or *ʾaḏonay*

(3) Where *YHWH* is in a descriptive phrase (e.g., *YHWH* the God of Israel)

## References

Barnwell, Katy. 1997. Translating the Tetragrammaton YHWH. *Notes on Translation* 11(4): 24–27.

de Blois, Kees F. 1992. Translating the names of God. *The Bible Translator* 43(4): 406–414.

"Names of God" Study Group. 1992. How to translate the Name. *The Bible Translator* 43(4): 403–405.

*The NIV Study Bible.* 1995. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Osborn, Noel D. 1992. The Name: When does it make a difference? *The Bible Translator* 43(4): 415–422

Project Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling. 2001. De weergave van de Godsnaam. Haarlem: Netherlands Bible Society.

Slager, Donald J. 1992. The use of divine names in Genesis. *The Bible Translator* 43(4): 423–429.