

The Names of God: An Overview

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Introduction

Names play a significant role in one's life. They have different functions and significance in different contexts and belief systems. While some hold that a name has no meaning or significance at all, others assert that a name is extremely important and has a bearing on one's outcome in life. This latter group even tie superstitious connotations on naming, who names and at what part of the calendar year one is named. They further teach that names have a connection to astrological stars and will thus be influenced in their daily interactions with nature. But is that what we are to understand about names? What does God have to say about this matter in His word?

In this paper, we seek to explore how we as believers are to understand this important matter, its significance and implications. We shall explore the names of God and then draw principles there from. God has many names given to Him as well as others which He has ordained and claimed to be His own. This shows that God places a great premium on names because they have certain implications. This also explains, in part, why God warns any one from using His name in vain (Exodus 20:1-3). A name therefore is to be treated with utmost caution. What then are the Names of God or the given ones? We explore these in ensuing sections.

Names and Naming: Preliminary thoughts

According to the Bible, God has three predominant or primary names found all over the Bible (Towns n.d). He also has other given names derived from His nature. We may ask, what is in a name? Why should we make such a big issue of this matter, before delving into the actual names of God? Well, a name denotes something. It is meant to give character and meaning to something or someone. A proper name therefore is supposed to be meaningful and should approximate to the nature and character of that particular person. At other times, a name could be passed on from generation to generation so that a particular individual can either be venerated or remembered. In that case, it is a badge of honour for the recipient of the name, if the original owner was heroic. Further, it

may be a wish of the “namers” that the person so named will approximate or take up a similar trait or character of the person they so venerate or remember. Still others hold that a name may give direction or have prophetic implications on the person that receives that name. If their name is good and uplifting, chances are that the name owner’s character will take on that direction. Yet another importance of names is that it serves as reminder of some significant event that happened at the birth of some one. For instance, if there was suffering in child birth, a famine or even a flood, the name given carries that connotation. People have different reasons and justifications why they place such emphasis on the name. In the Hebrew tradition as well, names were significant and could not be easily glossed over. Then there is the issue of who names the child! Different traditions have been held with some claiming that the biological parents have the honour. Others tenaciously hold that it should be Father to the child alone who should name the child while some customs or tradition emphasise the need for the extended family to have the final say, not the parents. In the Hebrew tradition, often it was the biological parents that had this honour and duty. In the case of Jesus, however, His name came from Heaven through the Angel, given His mission in the world. Very well then, let us proceed to the names of God as given in the Bible:

The Names of God Explored

For this 'Divine names' study, I am deeply indebted to Elmer Towns' book My Fathers' Names; what a lovely and helpful book! The volume opens up a whole new world of thought, thinking and reflection. One of the effects it evokes in ones' soul is just how rich God's names are. For a more detailed treatment of this subject, delve into Dr Towns' works, pretty outstanding! Back to our topic, another effect is to trigger a desire to study or know the original languages, especially Biblical Hebrew. This affords one to walk with and see how the Hebrews perceived or interpreted the world around them.

That said, it is fitting to state that God is styled as “Father” denoting His fatherhood in several senses. The Hebrew word “Pater” is an intimate word for “father” and refers to God as:

1. Father of creation
2. The Father by redemption in Christ (refers to the saints' mystical union with God) and
3. As belonging to the divine family of God.

More than that, God has Titles and specific names used in different parts of scripture:

4. *Elohim*: This is the first name referred to God in Genesis 1:1 and denotes a “Strong creator”. God is said to create the world with the power of His word, without any pre-existing material (*ex nihillo*). He just speaks and things are so.

5. *Yahweh* or *Jehovah*: sometimes translated “LORD” in the English versions of the Bible (Genesis 2:4). This name carries a connotation of God being the self-existent one, with no beginning or end. He is who He is and cannot be fully comprehended. In Exodus 3:14, He calls Himself “I AM” or “I will be what I will be”. Certainly, who can understand or explain this God? It is from the name “*Jehovah*” that we derive His moral attributes such as omnipresence, omnipotence, omniscience etc. It is worth noting that this is the most frequently used name of God in the Old Testament, appearing over 6,800 times. Because the name was so sacred, the Hebrews would not pronounce it and in the process lost the name. It has no vowels and what we have as “Yahweh” or “Jehovah” is simply an approximation. When God’s name was to be mentioned, all activity would cease. So reverent were the Hebrews of God’s name, unlike what obtains today.

6. *Adonai*: This is another name used of God and denotes the Headship of God (Genesis 15:2). It carries the idea of a Master-slave relationship where God is the Master and Humans the slaves (Deuteronomy 10:17). God is in total control and demands our absolute loyalty and utmost respect or reverence.

Lesser Known Names of God

God has other names that are attributed to Him in the Bible. Different passages use different names, although this may not be apparent in the English Bible. Below, we list some of these equally important names but to some extent lesser known or used:

EI Elyon- Most High God derived from the name “Elohim” as the “strong creator” (Genesis 14:19)

EI Sheddai-God almighty (Genesis 17:1-2).

EI Olam-The everlasting God, secret and mysterious name of God.

EI Gibbor-Mighty God, who will support us in battle.

The Compound given Names of God (Jehovah EI and Jehovah Elohim)

Jehovah Nissi- The LORD our banner (Exodus 17:15).

Jehovah Rophe-Healer (Exodus 15:26).

Jehovah Tsidkenu-Righteousness (Jeremiah 23:6).

Jehovah Jireh-Provider (Genesis 22:14).

Jehovah Shalom-Peace (Judge 6:24).

Jehovah Shammah-The Lord is there (Ezekiel 48:35).

Jehovah Roi-Shepherd, caring (Psalm 23).

Jehovah Melek-The throne name of God; □

Jehovah Sabaoth-The Lord of Hosts, the militant name of God.

Jehovah Mekaddishkem- The LORD who sanctifies.

There are other compound names of God relating to *El*, *Elohim* and *Elohe* such as *Elohim Bashamayim*-God in Heaven (Joshua 2:11), *El Simchath Gili*-God my exceeding joy (Psalm 43:4), *Elohim Tsebaoth*-God of Hosts (Psalm 80:7) among many. All these names and titles have special meaning and significance which the saint needs to take cognisance of. This changes the entire perspective to life.

Implications and Lessons Drawn from this 'Name Study'

1. We need to be careful with our naming.
2. Names have or ought to have a meaning.
3. We need to avoid animistic tendencies towards naming.
4. The naming conventions or practices must not violate scripture.
5. Different cultures or contexts have varied conventions and these ought to be respected as long as they are biblically sound.
6. There is need to be careful how God's name is used, never abused or taken in vain.
7. Modern Christians seem to have lost the Reverence attached to God's name.
8. In the Bible, different names or Titles are used for God including the compound.
9. Often, these are descriptive.

10. We can know God better through His names. As mentioned earlier, His names give descriptive insight into His nature.
11. Primarily, three names are attributed to God namely: *Yahweh*, *Adonai* or *Elohim*. These are Hebrew names used right across scripture.
12. Ignorance can be deadly leading to the loss of reference due to God.
13. Some zealous brethren have changed their birth names upon learning about the significance of a/in a name. This may not be necessary unless the name offends/stumbles others. One is otherwise at liberty to change but for good not superstitious reasons. A name changing trend once rocked Zambian Christianity years ago. It's unclear if this practice is still rife today.
14. Christians need to be on guard against possible re-bondage by superstitious men of the cloth taking advantage of the fear inflicted. Men of the collar, though respected, should not exploit the hapless ignorant congregants. The congregants' given names must never be the leash they use to abuse people. This caution would resonate with those in animist or pantheistic contexts.
15. In the New Testament, Pater or Father is dominant for God.

Conclusion

We have briefly surveyed the Names landscape as relates to God. One of the points highlighted is that God is particular about His names and Titles. He cannot share His glory with any. Hence the saint must be especially careful how they use the names and titles of God. Further, the saint should be meticulous how or who they name. Names are significant and may have an effect, though difficult to practically substantiate without tipping over into animistic superstition. It is none the less good caution to watch what names we use or give to our progeny. It matters also who names the children and when.

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