

**What is the *real* meaning of  
Matthew 6:9?**

*Should we call God “Jehovah”?*

**by**

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## **Should we call God “Jehovah”?**

Bible translations referred to:

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**Should we call God “Jehovah”?**

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## Should we call God “Jehovah”?

### Introduction

A visitor to this website has written presenting claims that he had received from Jehovah’s Witnesses that:

- a) God’s name is “Jehovah”
- b) we must use the word “Jehovah” in order to address Him.

The claims are lengthy and the Jehovah’s Witness writer who is quoted states that they provide “irrefutable evidence” that the Jehovah’s Witnesses are right. The writer purports to demonstrate “conclusively” that the Hebrew word יהוה, which is usually transliterated as YHWH, cannot have been pronounced “Yahweh”, but must have been pronounced “Jehovah”.

This goes against the consensus of leading academic opinion, including that of Jewish religious leaders and academics who are thoroughly familiar with the Hebrew text of the Jewish Scriptures (what Christians call “The Old Testament”).

The Jehovah’s Witness writer quotes random sentences and phrases from a wide range of websites, without clearly documenting his sources. His claims contain a lot of pseudo-scholarship and a mixture of allegations that are just plain historically and linguistically false, along with others that are in any case irrelevant, as they are non sequiturs, i.e., the conclusions drawn do not follow from the statements made.

The writing merely provides further examples of the Jehovah’s Witness technique of intellectual intimidation, to which I refer in my review of BeDuhn’s book<sup>1</sup> and also in my article on John 8:58<sup>2</sup>. In the latter article I state, “This is a technique frequently used by the Jehovah’s Witnesses: deliberately writing abstruse “explanations” that are intended to be incomprehensible to the target audience. This is nothing less than *intellectual intimidation*. ... But the “explanation” will fulfil its purpose: that of persuading the Jehovah’s Witness reader or the person that they are seeking to convert, without being understood by him or her.” (See page 7 of that article for further information.)

The aim in the examples that have been forwarded to me by the visitor to this website seems to be to overwhelm the readers or listeners with a mass of information (some of it inaccurate, some of it irrelevant, some of it both inaccurate and irrelevant), so that they give in under this deluge of “facts” and “pseudo-facts”, and either accept the argument made or at least acquiesce and stop objecting to it, which is in fact what many Jehovah’s Witnesses themselves do.

As regards the correct use – or even the correct pronunciation – of one of the Hebrew words used for God in the Old Testament, I am of course not a Hebrew expert, and so I rely on experts in this area. Indeed, as will be clear in my other articles on this website, I seek to avoid presenting personal opinions, and thus constantly refer readers to the most authoritative sources available, even in my own personal areas of expertise, which include Koiné Greek and the Greek text of the New Testament (and of the Old Testament in the Septuagint translation).

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<sup>1</sup> Here: <http://livingwater-spain.com/beduhn.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Here: [http://livingwater-spain.com/John8\\_58.pdf](http://livingwater-spain.com/John8_58.pdf)

## Should we call God “Jehovah”?

### 1. The Biblical example of how we should address God

Before we get to the *form* of the name, it is necessary to make a few other points:

1. Jesus is not recorded a single time ever using the name “Jehovah”, nor even “Yahweh”.
2. He addressed God as “Father” and as “Abba” (Mark 14:36). Max Lucado has written<sup>3</sup>:

Of all his names, *Father* is God’s favorite. We know he loves this name most because this is the one he used most. While on earth, Jesus called God “Father” over two hundred times. In his first recorded words Jesus explained, “Didn’t you know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49). In his final triumphant prayer he proclaims, “Father, I give you my life” (Luke 23:46). In the Gospel of John alone, Jesus repeats this name 156 times. God loves to be called Father. After all, didn’t Jesus teach us to begin our prayer with the phrase, “Our Abba”?

Abba was an everyday word. It was a homely family-word. The equivalent would be Poppa, Daddy or Dad. It is right for you to call God your Creator, indeed He is. You speak truth when you call Him your Master, indeed he is. It is appropriate for you to call Him your King, Lord and Sovereign God. But if you want to touch his heart, call him by the name he loves to hear. Call Him *Abba*. Call him your *Father*.

3. When Jesus was asked by His disciples to teach them to pray, the model that he gave them started with “Our Father in heaven” (Matt 6:9). In Luke’s gospel, we read, “He said to them, “When you pray, say: " 'Father, ...' ”” (Luke 11:2, NIV 1984).
4. The early church likewise prayed addressing God as “Abba, Father” (Romans 8:15).
5. Galatians 4:6 even tells us that “Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.'” (Gal. 4:6 NIV, 2011)
6. With thousands of Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, many of them going back to the early centuries of Christianity, there is not a single one that records the name “Jehovah” (nor even “Yahweh”) a single time – whether with the original Hebrew letters or transliterated into Greek letters.
7. Concerning Jewish practice from the pre-Christian era up to the present day, Dobson states<sup>4</sup>:

“Note that the name of God, יהוה , came to be considered too holy to be read aloud. It became the custom to say אֲדֹנָי [“adonai”] (Lord) wherever the text had יהוה. When vowel points were added to the text, the pointing of יהוה indicated that אֲדֹנָי [“adonai”, Lord] should be read. In printed texts you will usually find יהוה written as יהוָה (Exod. 6:3 WTT) [with a vowel point for ō (a long “o”) above the third letter] or as יהוֹה [without the vowel point].

It is now the practice of many people to read הַשֵּׁם (“the name”) for יהוה.”

8. The Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, which was made over a period of years in the 3rd century B.C., also does not have “Jehovah” (nor “Yahweh”) a single time – neither with the original Hebrew letters nor transliterated into Greek letters – this in spite of the fact that the translators of the Septuagint did indeed use a considerable number of other Hebrew words, transliterated into Greek letters.

<sup>3</sup> See [https://maxlucado.com/gods-favorite-name-father/?utm\\_source=ChristianCinema.com+Newsletter&utm\\_campaign=8532d18001-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2017\\_04\\_20&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_06c63b7d62-8532d18001-87221434&mc\\_cid=8532d18001&mc\\_eid=47ef74dec9](https://maxlucado.com/gods-favorite-name-father/?utm_source=ChristianCinema.com+Newsletter&utm_campaign=8532d18001-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_04_20&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_06c63b7d62-8532d18001-87221434&mc_cid=8532d18001&mc_eid=47ef74dec9)

<sup>4</sup> Dobson, John H., “Learn Biblical Hebrew”, 2nd edition, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2005, pp 20-21.

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9. Every time that the Hebrew text has the letters יהוה [“YHWH”], the Septuagint translators used the Greek word κυριος [“kurios”], which means “Lord”. This is the Greek translation of the Hebrew “Adonai”.<sup>5</sup>
10. The fact that the translators of the Septuagint, *who were Jews*, translated “Adonai” (which is what the Jewish readers said out loud whenever the text had יהוה ) to the Greek shows that what was important was not the word, but its *meaning*.
11. The Jehovah’s Witnesses say that we must call God “Jehovah”. In fact, this goes against all of the examples and teaching of the New Testament, so much so that even the JW apologist Jason BeDuhn admits that the organisation is in error here (see chapter 16 of my review of his book, on this website).

Thus, whether we should call God “Jehovah” or “Yahweh”, or even something else, is a non-issue for the New Testament and for the first Christians, and should be a non-issue for Christian believers today.

However, given the aggressive promotion of their claims by the Jehovah’s Witnesses, a brief response here is merited. Readers will find more detailed information in other sources, but should be aware of the risky nature of internet searches on this word, which will reveal huge swathes of Jehovah’s Witness propaganda, sometimes by people who seek to hide their Jehovah’s Witness identity. This can extend to changing the content of Wikipedia articles, in spite of the best efforts of that organisation to detect this and correct it. I encourage independent research, but not all claims can be taken at face value, in this area more than in many others.

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<sup>5</sup> Rahlfs-Hanhart “Septuaginta”, © Stuttgart, 2006: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft

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### 2. The form of this Hebrew name for God

The Jehovah’s Witness argument is the following<sup>6</sup>:

1. We must call God by the right name.
2. We recognise (when a well-informed interlocutor insists) that “Jehovah” is not how the Israelites pronounced it, but we’re English/North American/Spanish/etc. and can’t pronounce the Hebrew word.
3. We will therefore call Him “Jehovah”.

They seem to be blithely unaware that their third point contradicts their first point, i.e., they are contradicting themselves. In any case, anyone can pronounce the word “Yahweh”, so their second point isn’t valid, either.

The form “Jehovah” was unknown until the 16th century (A.D.!), when an Italian friar who was unaware of Jewish practice in reading יהוה (YHWH) as “Adonai” read the consonants of the original word along with the vowels for “Adonai”, which had been added more than 1,000 years later by the Masoretes to remind readers to say “Adonai”, and came up with the new, hitherto non-existent word “Jehovah”. Brown, Driver and Briggs clarify this in their “Hebrew and English Lexicon”<sup>7</sup>:

The pronunciation <i>Jehovah</i> was unknown until 1520, when it was introduced by Galatinus <sup>8</sup> ; but it was contested by Le Mercier, J. Drusius, and L. Capellus, as against grammatical and historical propriety.
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### 3. The use of a special name for God

At a time when each people group (and sometimes even each town) had its own “gods”, Moses asked God what name he should give for the God that had sent him, and in this context God gave him the name יהוה [YHWH], which means approximately “the one who is”. Although this word is used in the Old Testament Scriptures, out of reverence and a fear of “taking the Lord’s name in vain”, it was very soon (already during Old Testament times) not used by the Israelites, who in any case considered it adequate to refer to the one true God by phrases such as “the living God”, to contrast Him from the dead “gods” of the nations around them. This particular phrase is used repeatedly in the Hebrew Scriptures, starting in Deuteronomy 5:26 and going all the way through to Hosea and Daniel, passing via use in the historical books, the Psalms and the major prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah. Many other phrases were also used to contrast “the true God” from the false “gods” of other nations.

Thus, when speaking and praying, the Israelites did not use the word “Yahweh”, nor do the Jews in the 21st century. (Nor, of course, did they use the non-word “Jehovah” in the past, nor do they use it in the present.)

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<sup>6</sup> As presented to me on the doorstep by two Jehovah’s Witnesses in April 2017, but also on numerous previous occasions and in their publications.

<sup>7</sup> As reproduced electronically in the computer program Bibleworks 10

<sup>8</sup> Pietro Colonna Galatino (1460 – 1540) was also known as Petrus Galatinus (a Latinised form of his name), according to Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pietro\\_Colonna\\_Galatino](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pietro_Colonna_Galatino) consulted on 8.5.17.



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### 4. How the Jehovah’s Witnesses justify their claim that God must be called by a special name

Like many mistaken Jehovah’s Witness doctrines, this one seems to have started with a misunderstanding of *one verse* of Scripture. The verse in question is Matthew 6:9, and the phrase in question would have been well-known to most Americans at the time (in the 1930s), even if they didn’t know the Biblical source, because it is to be found in the famous “Lord’s Prayer”, which most Americans would have memorised at school or in a church of any denomination: “Hallowed be thy name” (KJV).

The new doctrine was introduced, and imposed, by the second President of the “International Bible Students Association” and the Watch Tower organization, Joseph Franklin Rutherford. On 26th July 1931 Rutherford declared that God had to be called by His name, and that the name in question was “Jehovah”. Henceforth, he decreed, the members of the “International Bible Students Association” were to be known as “**Jehovah’s** Witnesses” and their first priority was to go out and tell people that they had to call God “Jehovah”.<sup>9</sup>

The word “Jehovah” was not unknown to people, as this false version of God’s name created by Galatinus had entered the English language and had even entered the Authorised (King James) Version of the Bible. The Jehovah’s Witnesses claim that its presence there is “irrefutable proof” that the name is correct and that this is what God must be called. However, the presence of this made-up word in the English translation of 1611 constitutes absolutely no “proof” at all, since the word was a recent invention based on a misunderstanding. Rutherford was presumably unaware of this linguistic blunder by Galatinus, which arose from the friar’s lack of knowledge of the history and culture of the Jews in the pre-Christian era.

In fact, regardless of the correct pronunciation of יהוה [YHWH], Rutherford had misunderstood the meaning of Matthew 6:9, apparently being ignorant of the historical context. For the people of Israel, names frequently had a meaning, and were meant to indicate something fundamental about the person who bore the name. Hence, in the most famous cases, Abram’s name was changed to “Abraham” and Jacob’s name was changed to “Israel”. To honour a person’s name *was to honour the person*. It was not to honour *a word*.

To use a person’s name was to appeal to their character and to their authority, just as, to the present day, in English we have the phrase “open up in the name of the law”. *No-one says, “So what’s the law’s name, then?”*

Jesus commissioned his disciples with the famous words “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 238:19, NIV, 1984).

Here is a snippet from my recent conversation on this verse with the two visiting Jehovah’s Witnesses:

Me: “What is the name of the Father?”

Them: “Jehovah.”

Me: “What is the name of the Son?”

Them: “Jesus.”

Me: “What is the name of the Holy Spirit?”

Them: “There isn’t a Holy Spirit.”

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<sup>9</sup> Amongst many other sources, the information is to be seen in Reed, David A, “Answering Jehovah’s Witnesses Subject by Subject”, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1996, Seventh printing: March 2005, p. 144.

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They then tried to divert me into a discussion of the trinity, in order to avoid looking at what Jesus meant when he said these words.

So what did he mean? The verse doesn't say that there isn't a Holy Spirit. On the contrary, it says that there is, and that He is somehow on a par with the Father and the Son<sup>10</sup>. My question “What is his name?” serves to demonstrate that here Jesus isn't speaking about names but about the character and authority of God. It is also significant that he says “in the name (singular) of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”, not “in the names (plural)”. So his instruction is clearly referring to the authority and character of God and so could be interpreted “baptising them with the authority of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit”. This verse has profound implications about the status and nature of Jesus himself and likewise concerning the Holy Spirit, but now is not the time to explore that further.

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<sup>10</sup> The article on the Holy Spirit that is to be found on this website looks at this issue in more detail. It can be seen here: <http://livingwater-spain.com/jwhs.pdf>

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### 5. A Conspiracy Theory

Subsequent to Rutherford’s imposition of his new doctrine about “Jehovah” onto the “International Bible Students” organisation, the Jehovah’s Witnesses have developed the claim further, inventing a history for it and seeking to justify their insistence on the need to use this particular word. They claim that the word “Jehovah” appeared 237 times in the original manuscripts of the New Testament, but that it was deleted by “enemies of Jehovah”, so, in their “New World Translation” of the Bible, they have put this word back. The story, as proclaimed on doorsteps by members of the organisation is:

“They have stolen God’s name and we have restored it.”

It is not clear who “they” are, but the *thousands* of scribes who made hand-written copies of the New Testament manuscripts must have *all* been complicit in this “theft”, as there are thousands of manuscript copies of the Greek New Testament. *Yet not a single one of them contains the word “Jehovah”, not even a single time* – nor indeed do any of these manuscripts contain any other version of YHWH, whether in Greek or in Hebrew.

Thus, if this “conspiracy” ever took place, it was incredibly successful. We must bear in mind that as soon as Biblical manuscripts were written, they were copied and distributed to different cities, countries and even continents, wherever there were Christian believers and wherever preachers of Christianity had gone. Ancient copies of the Greek New Testament have been found throughout Palestine, Syria, Turkey, Greece, Italy, other European countries, the islands of the Mediterranean, north Africa and even in a municipal rubbish dump in southern Egypt.

Prior to 325 AD, there was no centralised authority or control structure in Christianity, and even if someone, somewhere had wished to organise the deletion of the word “Jehovah” from the New Testament, *no one had the authority to impose such an order*, and given the vast number of copies that existed and the fact that these copies *had already been distributed* throughout the whole of the known world of the time, *no-one would have been able to implement a programme of destroying all copies of the New Testament* containing the word “Jehovah” and replacing such copies with doctored manuscripts from which the word “Jehovah” had been deleted.

Yet this is what Jehovah’s Witnesses want us to believe happened – all without leaving a single trace of this massive operation and without missing a single manuscript.

It is indeed justified to state that any such claim is “incredible”. In other words, it is frankly *unbelievable*. It cannot rationally be sustained. It not only lacks *any* historical support, it actually *goes against all the historical evidence*, which is overwhelming. Such evidence is not limited (as someone might imagine) to a tiny number of manuscripts, since *many thousands* of manuscript copies of the Greek New Testament were produced, going back to the earliest times. We also have hundreds of contemporary “secular” manuscripts by both Christians and non-Christians who wrote about Christianity, and in all this mass of documentation there is not a single reference to a campaign to eradicate the name “Jehovah” from the New Testament. The fact is, the word did not need to be eradicated, because it wasn’t there in the first place.

This core Jehovah’s Witness doctrine is thus shown up for what it is: a huge hoax that has taken in thousands of people, a *conspiracy theory par excellence* that has deceived the followers of this organisation.

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### 6. “If the facts don’t fit the theory, change the theory.”

This should be the basic principal of all scientific and historical research. Researchers in any area of study may have an *expectation* as to what their research is going to uncover. They may even set out with the *intention* of proving a theory that they have developed or espoused. However, if the evidence that they uncover proves their theory false, researchers who are honest and have integrity will modify their theory to reflect the facts – or even abandon the theory completely. This has been called “going where the evidence leads”.

However, perhaps sarcastically, one researcher<sup>11</sup> wrote:

“If the facts don’t fit the theory, change the facts!”

Such a step, if uncovered, would destroy the credibility and probably the whole career of any research scientist or historian who tried to apply it, and indeed this has proved to be the case a number of times in recent years. Reports speak of falsified research results by manufacturers of margarine and of cigarettes and blatant doctoring of documents and deliberate mistranslation of texts by a writer who claimed to be a historian.

#### **The Case of David Irving**

In 1996, the writer David Irving initiated a libel case against Penguin Books Ltd. The case was heard at the High Court in London and in his verdict, which found against Irving and in favour of Penguin Books and its author<sup>12</sup>, the judge, Mr Justice Charles Gray, concluded, “Irving has for his own ideological reasons persistently and deliberately misrepresented and manipulated historical evidence.”<sup>13</sup> According to the BBC<sup>14</sup>, one of the witnesses for the defence, Professor Richard J. Evans, historian and Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University, stated in court that Irving had “deliberately distorted and wilfully mistranslated documents, consciously used discredited testimony and falsified historical statistics. (...) Irving has fallen so far short of the standards of scholarship customary amongst historians that he does not deserve to be called a historian at all.”<sup>15</sup>

The Jehovah’s Witness version of the Bible, “The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures”, is the supreme example of applying the principle that “if the facts don’t fit the theory, *change the facts*”. The leaders of the organisation, who develop and promulgate the doctrines and official teaching of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, know that the facts do not support their conspiracy theory that a person or persons unknown deleted all occurrences of their word “Jehovah” from all Greek manuscripts of the New Testament.

Having found that *not a single manuscript of the New Testament contains the word “Jehovah”*, the leaders of the organisation *added* this word 237 times in their version of the New Testament. By *fabricating the evidence* in this way, they have succeeded in convincing their followers that their doctrine about the use of the word “Jehovah” is correct. However, this also explains why, worldwide, *not a single specialist in the Greek texts of the New Testament has been persuaded by their claims*.

<sup>11</sup> Alleged by some sources to be Albert Einstein, although this claim appears to be unsubstantiated. See [https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Talk:Albert\\_Einstein](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Talk:Albert_Einstein) Consulted on 5.6.17.

<sup>12</sup> The American academic and historian, Deborah Lipstadt

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irving\\_v\\_Penguin\\_Books\\_Ltd](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irving_v_Penguin_Books_Ltd) Consulted on 18th June 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David\\_Irving](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Irving) Consulted on 19th June 2017

<sup>15</sup> The following reference for this is given in the above article: Walker, Andrew (20 February 2006). "UK | Profile: David Irving". BBC News. Retrieved 2 September 2011. Note reference: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David\\_Irving#cite\\_note-Walker-110](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Irving#cite_note-Walker-110) Consulted on 19th June 2017

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The Jehovah’s Witnesses deal with this rejection by experts in two ways:

1. They claim that *all* such specialists have been “deceived by the devil”. However, this totally fails to address the factual evidence that exists in the form of thousands of manuscripts that can be openly consulted and many of which have been digitised and are now available free-of-charge on-line.
2. They quote from “experts” who they claim do support them. However, investigation reveals that the people quoted from either were not experts in the field in question or had been blatantly misquoted. For detailed examples of this, see on this website the article “The Experts Quoted by the Jehovah’s Witnesses”.<sup>16</sup>

### Other evidence?

The Jehovah’s Witnesses also quote from editions of New Testament books that do have the Hebrew letters יהוה [YHWH]. They refer to these as “J-manuscripts”. However, these turn out to be translations – into Hebrew! – of certain New Testament books (principally, the gospel of Matthew), made in the 19th century by Christian missionaries to Jews who decided that using the letters YHWH would be a good way to refer to God in books designed to impress Jews. Such documents do not of course constitute any sort of evidence at all of the content of the original *Greek* text of the New Testament and they are thus in fact *totally irrelevant* in any research into the Greek text. This “evidence” is therefore completely worthless, as even the JW apologist Jason BeDuhn admits.<sup>17</sup>

As my review of BeDuhn’s book states, “it becomes clear that the [Jehovah’s Witness] argument is illogical: how can translators justify using a *Hebrew* word in their translation into English, just because other translators used a Hebrew word in their translation *into Hebrew*? This is even more unjustifiable when we remember that “Jehovah” is in any case a mistranslation of the original Hebrew word to which the NWT translators refer.”<sup>18</sup>

However, just as in the case of David Irving against Penguin Books, it has been conclusively demonstrated that the leaders of the organisation have “deliberately distorted and wilfully mistranslated documents, consciously used discredited testimony and falsified historical statistics.” Like Irving, they have “fallen so far short of the standards of scholarship customary amongst historians that [they do] not deserve to be called ... historian[s] at all.”

If the facts don’t fit the theory, the honest scientist, historian or even theologian will change the theory to take account of the facts. The leaders of the Jehovah’s Witnesses have instead decided to *change the facts* to make them fit their doctrines. By doing this, they have deceived the members of their own organisation.

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<sup>16</sup> Available here: <http://livingwater-spain.com/experts.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> See my review of BeDuhn’s book “Truth in Translation”, here: <http://livingwater-spain.com/beduhn.pdf> , especially chapter 16 of the review.

<sup>18</sup> <http://livingwater-spain.com/beduhn.pdf> , p. 71, accessed on 18.6.17.

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### 7. The use and meaning of the word “ὄνομα” at the time of Christ

The Greek word ὄνομα [“ὄνομα”], often translated as “name” in English, carries the Hebrew meanings of “character”, “personality” and “authority” to such an extent that “name” is sometimes not the best way of translating it.

A clear case in point is Matthew 10:41-42. In the Greek, this says (skip to the English below it if necessary):

ὁ δεχόμενος προφήτην εἰς ὄνομα προφήτου μισθὸν προφήτου λήμψεται, καὶ ὁ δεχόμενος δίκαιον εἰς ὄνομα δικαίου μισθὸν δικαίου λήμψεται.<sup>42</sup> καὶ ὅς ἂν ποτίσῃ ἓνα τῶν μικρῶν τούτων ποτήριον ψυχροῦ μόνον εἰς ὄνομα μαθητοῦ, ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, οὐ μὴ ἀπολέσῃ τὸν μισθὸν αὐτοῦ.<sup>19</sup>

The NIV 2011 renders this as follows:

Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward.<sup>42</sup> And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.'

But if we look at the phrases “as a prophet”, “as a righteous person” and “who is my disciple”, we find that the Greek says:

Greek	Pronunciation	Translation using the word “name”	NIV 2011
εἰς ὄνομα προφήτου	eis ὄνομα profētou	in the <b>name</b> of a prophet	“as a prophet”
εἰς ὄνομα δικαίου	eis ὄνομα dikaiou	in the <b>name</b> of a righteous person	“as a righteous person”
εἰς ὄνομα μαθητοῦ	eis ὄνομα mathētou	in the <b>name</b> of a disciple	“who is my disciple”

Today’s English Version makes this even clearer:

<sup>41</sup> Whoever welcomes God's messenger **because he is** God's messenger, will share in his reward. And whoever welcomes a good man **because he is** good, will share in his reward.  
<sup>42</sup> You can be sure that whoever gives even a drink of cold water to one of the least of these my followers **because he is** my follower, will certainly receive a reward."

Thus,

- “Having the name” of a prophet does not mean that the person is called “Elijah”, or “Isaiah”, or the name of any other prophet, but merely that they are acting *with the authority* of a prophet given to them by God.
- “Having the name” of a righteous person does not mean that the person is called “Just” or “Righteous”, or any other religious or legal word that might imply being righteous. It just means that they have and display the *characteristics* of being a righteous person.
- “Having the name” of a disciple does not mean that the person has the name of one of the Disciples of Jesus. He (or she!) does not need to be called “Matthew”, “Peter”, “John” or the name of any other disciple of Jesus. It just means that *what they are, their nature*, is a disciple, i.e., a follower of Jesus.

<sup>19</sup> It would be excessive to give a phonetic transcription of the whole of these two verses. A pronunciation guide for the key phrases is given below.

## Should we call God “Jehovah”?

Even the editors of the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ “New World Translation” seem to have understood this (or picked it up from another translation), since they render εἰς ὄνομα [eis **ónoma**] all three times with the words “*because he is*”.

Likewise, in Acts 1:15 the word ὄνομα [“ónoma”] is used with the meaning “people”. The text states:

ἦν τε ὄχλος **ονομάτων** ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ ὡσεὶ ἑκατὸν εἴκοσι·  
[ēn te óchlos **onomátōn** epì to auto hōsei hekaton eikosi]<sup>20</sup>

If **ónomatos** could only be translated “name”, the meaning of this phrase would be:

“the crowd of **names** in the same place was approximately one hundred and twenty”.

However, this clearly would not be an accurate translation of the word “ónoma”. It is not possible to have “a crowd of **names**”; crowds consist, by definition, of **people**. The NIV 2011 correctly translates this as “**a group** numbering about a hundred and twenty”. Similarly, the NRSV has “together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty **persons**”. The NWT here also has “persons” for the word “ónomatos”: “the crowd of **persons** was all together about one hundred and twenty”.

Thus it is clear that it is wrong to insist, as the Jehovah’s Witnesses do when they refer to Matthew 6:9, that “ónoma” can only mean a literal name. In Acts 1:15 they accept this. In Matthew 6:9 they deny it.

To take another example from the New Testament, in Revelation 3:4 the text reads:

ἀλλ’ ἔχεις ὀλίγα **ὀνόματα** ἐν Σάρδεσιν ἃ οὐκ ἐμόλυναν τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτῶν, καὶ περιπατήσουσιν μετ’ ἐμοῦ ἐν λευκοῖς, ὅτι ἄξιοί εἰσιν.  
[all’ echeis oligá **ónómata** en Sárdesin ha ouk emólunan ta himátia autōn, kai peripatēsousin met emou en leukois, hoti áxioi eisin”.

If **ónómata**<sup>21</sup> could only be translated “name”, the meaning of this sentence would be:

“But you have a few **names** in Sardis that have not polluted their garments, and they will walk with me in white, because they are worthy.”

Could “names” possibly wear garments, whether polluted or white? Could “names” possibly walk with Jesus? Of course not! The Greek word “ónoma” means far more than a literal “name”; Jesus refers here explicitly to the *character* of these particular people in Sardis. The NIV (2011) translates this verse, correctly, as:

“Yet you have a few **people** in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.”

The NRSV is almost identical.

On this occasion, the NWT (editions from 1950 to 2012) misses the meaning of “ónoma” that it had accepted in Acts 1:15 and so it translates this verse:

“Nevertheless, you do have a few **names** in Sardis that did not defile their outer garments, and they shall walk with me in white ones, because they are worthy.”

<sup>20</sup> Here, “onomátōn” is the genitive plural form of the word “ónoma”.

<sup>21</sup> “ónómata” is the accusative plural form of the word “ónoma”.

## Should we call God “Jehovah”?

This is clearly unsatisfactory, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses seem to have recognised this, as their 2013 revision of the NWT reads:

“Nevertheless, you do have a few **individuals** in Sardis who did not defile their garments, and they will walk with me in white ones, because they are worthy.”

While this corrects their earlier mistranslation of ὄνομα [“ónoma”], it still retains the odd phrase “in white ones”, which does not clearly communicate what it is referring to.

### 8. What the leading Greek reference works state

#### Bauer

For a number of years now, the main authority on Koiné (New Testament) Greek has been and still is the third English edition of the Greek lexicon by Walter Bauer, revised and edited by Frederick William Danker.<sup>22</sup>

Its exhaustive entry on ὄνομα [“ónoma”] covers more than six columns spread over four pages (711-714). Here it is appropriate to quote only the definitions, without reproducing the sources and examples:

**1 proper name of an entity, name 2 a person 3 the classification under which one belongs, noted by a name or category, title, category 4 recognition accorded a person on the basis of performance, (well-known) name, reputation, fame 5 name in terms of office held, office**

#### Brill

The recently-published major reference work, “The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek”<sup>23</sup> gives the following definitions of ὄνομα [“ónoma”]:

ὄνομα, -ατος, τό **A name, of pers. or thing (Hom. only of pers) ... B extens. name, renown, reputation ... C name, word ... D gramm. word, term ... E ... person** ἢ ὄχλος  
ὀνομάτων there was a crowd of people NT Acts 1.15

The use of ellipsis (here, “...”) in this extract should not be viewed with suspicion; it eliminates a large number of detailed references to usage by writers of the time and does not change the meaning of the entry. Readers desirous of seeing the full entry are encouraged to consult the original (p. 1463).

From both of these supremely-respected authorities on Koiné and Ancient Greek, we see that as well as meaning “name”, the word ὄνομα [“ónoma”] can mean:

- renown
- reputation
- fame
- recognition (in the sense of acknowledgment, appreciation, respect or gratitude for who someone – in this case, God – is)
- person

<sup>22</sup> “A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature” (BDAG) 3rd edition, © 2000 by The University of Chicago.

<sup>23</sup> Italian edition by Franco Montanari, Torino, Italy: Loescher Editore, 1995, 2nd edition, 2004, 3rd edition, 2013. English edition (quoted from here): edited by Madeleine Goh & Chad Schroeder under the auspices of the Center for Hellenic Studies, Harvard University (Advisory Editors: Gregory Nagy & Leonard Muellner), Leiden, The Netherlands and Boston, USA: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2015



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### 9. A Good Name

Indeed, even in modern English, when we say that a person or a company has “a good name”, we do not mean that we like the sound of the word that is their name, but that they have a **good reputation**.

This usage goes back all the way to Old Testament times and so was familiar to the Jews of Jesus’ day and was part of the way that they thought and spoke. Thus, for example, in the Old Testament book of Proverbs we read in chapter 22 verse 1, “A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.” (NIV, 2011)

This verse follows the standard Hebrew poetic convention, in which the second half of the verse repeats or expands the idea of the first half of the saying. The following table makes this clear:

	<i>Subject</i>	<i>core statement</i>	<i>comparison</i>
<i>First half</i>	A good name	is more desirable	than great riches
<i>Second half</i>	to be esteemed	is better	than silver or gold

We can see clearly that the structure of the two halves of the saying is identical and each of the components in the second half gives an equivalent way of stating what is in the first half. Thus we see that “a good name” is understood to mean “to be esteemed”.

This verse was translated into the Septuagint Greek text that was so well-known to the Jews of Jesus’ day and indeed to Jesus himself, who frequently quoted from the Septuagint. In it, “a good name” is rendered (correctly) in the Greek as ὄνομα καλὸν [ὄνομα kalón].

So, when Jesus tells us to pray to God saying “Hallowed be Thy name” – using exactly the same Greek word –, the meaning is, “May **Your reputation** be honoured”, “May **You** be honoured and respected”, “May **You** be **esteemed** and **recognised** for Who You are”. It definitely does not mean “We must call You “Jehovah””, and no proper exegesis can derive this message from that phrase.

In his great prayer to the Father, recorded in John 17, Jesus prays for his disciples, saying:

“Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name — the name you gave me — so that they may be one as we are one.” (John 17:11, NIV)

The Jehovah’s Witnesses would not claim that, in their terminology, “Jehovah God” gave the name “Jehovah” to Jesus, but this would have to be the meaning, if they are right when they claim that the word “name” means using the word “Jehovah”. However, it is clear that this interpretation of theirs cannot be right. As shown above, the Jewish and Christian concept of “name” in relation to God is all about His authority, His personality, His reputation, His honour, His glory and the esteem in which He is held. Thus this verse tells us that the Father gave to Jesus the honour that was due to God alone. (See John 5:23.)

So “hallowing God’s name” clearly does not mean calling him “Jehovah” (or even “Yahweh”!). It means recognising His authority, honouring Him for who He is, i.e., that He is Lord, Creator and Master. These and other similar words are used to describe Him in both the New Testament and the Old. In concrete terms, in our response we must take seriously what He says and do our best to put it into practice in our lives. It means putting our faith in Him and living lives that do give honour to Him (not just to a word!). The Bible is full of verses that spell this out, and it does not seem necessary to quote from them here.

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### 10. “There is no other name”

In the very early days of the church, Peter declared to the Jewish leaders, “there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12, NIV, 2011) Is the name that he is referring to “Jehovah” (or even Yahweh)? No. If we go back just two verses, we will find the answer: “it is by the name of **Jesus Christ of Nazareth**.”(Acts 4:10, NIV011) In fact, Christ Himself told His followers that they were to meet “in my name” (Matthew 18:12, NIV) – not “in the name of Jehovah” or “in a Kingdom Hall of Jehovah’s Witnesses.”<sup>24</sup>

Unsurprisingly, when, shortly thereafter, Philip preached in Samaria, his message was of “the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of **Jesus Christ**” (Acts 8:12 NIV). Indeed, the passage goes on to report that those who believed were “baptised in the name of the **Lord Jesus**.” (Acts 8:12 NIV) In fact, a search of the word “name” in the New Testament indicates that it most frequently refers to Jesus Christ, and that it never refers to the word “Jehovah” (nor even to the word Yahweh).

Philippians 2:10 takes Isaiah 45:23, a verse attributed to God, and applies it to Jesus: “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow” (NIV). This unequivocally states that Jesus is the name that is important, and thus clearly, the name is not “Jehovah” (nor even “Yahweh”).<sup>25</sup>

Jesus himself said, “that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. Whoever does not honour the Son does not honour the Father, who sent him.” (John 5:23, NIV) The New Testament believers did this, and we read, “the name of the **Lord Jesus** was held in high honour.” (Acts 19:17, NIV) Those believers and writers of the New Testament at no time preached or wrote that people should call God “Jehovah”.

### 11. Conclusion

So we have seen that:

1. The model given by Jesus and the early church in the New Testament is to address God as “Father”.
2. The form of the Hebrew name for God has never been “Jehovah”; it is almost universally accepted (outside of the organisation of the Jehovah’s Witnesses!) that the pronunciation was “Yahweh”. In any case, it could not have been “Jehovah”.
3. Throughout most of Old Testament times and throughout the whole of New Testament times, no Jews called God “Jehovah”, nor even “Yahweh”.
4. The decision of the second JW president, Rutherford, to call God “Jehovah” was based on a double misunderstanding:
  - a) a misunderstanding of the pronunciation of the word YHWH;
  - b) a misunderstanding of the meaning of the word “name” in Hebrew and New Testament Christian culture.
5. Having started from a wrong understanding, Rutherford reached a wrong conclusion: he taught that Jesus was telling people to use a particular word. He failed to see that this prayer is not about a word, but that people would recognise God for Who He is and honour and esteem Him accordingly.
6. The conspiracy theory invented and promoted by the Jehovah’s Witnesses – that all the manuscripts of the New Testament were changed by deleting the word “Jehovah” – goes against all historical evidence.

<sup>24</sup> “Kingdom Hall” is just one of a considerable number of key Jehovah’s Witness phrases, titles and words for which there is no justification or support in Scripture, whether in the New Testament or in the Old. (Other examples would include terms such as “Governing Body” and “theocracy”.)

<sup>25</sup> This also has fundamental implications as regards who Jesus is, a theme outside the scope of the present article.

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7. Scientists, historians and theologians who have integrity will modify their theories, if necessary, to take account of the facts that they discover. However, the Jehovah’s Witnesses have decided to *change the facts*, to make them fit their doctrine.
8. For Jews and early Christians, God had to be **honoured** above everything else. *This* was how God’s “name”, His **reputation**, His **esteem**, was hallowed.
9. **Jesus** had to be – and was in fact – honoured *just as much as the Father*.
10. The name that should be on the lips of Christians is **Jesus**, not “Jehovah”. **“There is no other name.”** (Acts 4:12)

I told the Jehovah’s Witnesses who visited me recently, “God won’t be angry with you for calling Him “Jehovah” – but to do so is to miss the whole point: honouring God isn’t about the use of a special word (especially the *wrong* word!), but about faith and a life-style that is pleasing to Him.”