



Ancient people worshiped a plethora of deities. The Greeks, for instance, identified over 400. Amidst the host of deities, all ancient nations acknowledged a single, usually supreme “Creator-god” in the pantheon. For the Greeks it was *Zeus*. For the Assyrians it was *An*, from whom all other deities descended. For the Babylonians it was *Anu*. For the Egyptians the sungod *Re*. And for the Canaanites *El*. In contrast to the polytheism of Greece, Assyria, and Canaan, the Old Testament’s one Creator intended ancient Israel to stand alone as the one nation that preserved an accurate knowledge of him.¹

Unlike deities of contemporary cultures, Israel’s God required no pantheon to accompany him.² Israel’s God, YHWH, was a single being whose name and theology distinguished him from gods of contemporary nations³ (Isa 42:8; Ps 147:19). Surprisingly, modern Old Testament translations such as the King James Version have obscured this distinction by rendering God’s name as “the Lord.” The Hebrew Scriptures never attribute this title to God and, in fact, indicate that the Creator viewed this name quite disparagingly.⁴ The word *lord* is actually an ancient name for a Phoenician-Canaanite deity called *Baal*.⁵ Similarly, *Bel* was the Babylonian word for ‘lord,’ while the god *Marduk* was its Assyrian counterpart.⁶

The ancient Israelites developed a habit of associating the name of their God with pagan deities. One 8th century inscription excavated at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud paraphrases Ps 97:5, Isa 55:12, Nah 1:5 and uses the name Baal to refer to YHWH.

When God shines forth . . . [Y]HW[H]. . . The mountains will melt, the hills will crash . . . The Holy One over the gods . . . Prepare (yourself) [to] bless Baal on a day of war . . . to the name of El on a day of [w]ar.⁷

Throughout Israel’s ancient history, her people conflated YHWH with other deities. John Day observes,

Prior to the discovery of the Ugaritic texts . . . it was sometimes supposed that ‘the Baals’ referred to quite distinct Canaanite deities, each Baal having its separate local identity. The Ugaritic texts revealed, however, that Baal, ‘the lord,’ was the epithet (though becoming a personal name) of one great cosmic deity, Hadad, so that the local Baals were, in fact, simply local manifestations of this particular deity.⁸

Israel’s prophets wrote volumes against the *lies* found in the theology associated with the *lords* of Canaan’s Baal or Babylon’s Bel. The prophet Hosea foretold of a day when a righteous people would no longer call God after the names of Baal, saying,

And it shall be at that day, says YHWH, that you shall call me Ishi; and shall *call ME no more Baali*. For I will take away the names of Baalim out of her mouth, and they shall no more be remembered by their name. (Hos 2:16–17)

Since *Baali* means *my lord*, God is saying that one day humanity will no longer call or look to him as an arbitrary lording master⁹ but will instead see him as *Ishi*, a loving husband.¹⁰

The Creator intended for his name to distinguish his reputation from the “lords” of other nations. When God’s messenger talked with Moses from the burning bush, Moses asked the name of the God who was sending him to Egypt.

And Moses said to God, Behold, when I come to the Children of Israel, and shall say to them, The God of your fathers has sent me to you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say to them? And God said to Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shall you say to the Children of Israel, I AM has sent me to you. And God said moreover to Moses, Thus shall you say to the Children of Israel, YHWH 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, and this is my memorial to all generations. (Exod 3:13–15)

The Creator tells us that his name is “I AM.” This command to recognize his name as a memorial to all generations is so important that the Creator included it as the third commandment of the Ten Commandments, forbidding humanity to use it in vain (Exod 20:7).¹¹

The Hebrew word for “I AM” is *Ehyeh*, from the root *hayah*.¹² It means ‘to be’ or ‘to exist.’¹³ This is the same word used in Gen 1:2, where Scripture states that the “earth *was* or existed without form.” The concept found in this text embodies the ideology of a self-existent being: a God who simply “is” or simply “exists.” The word YHWH derives from the root word *hyh* or *hayah*. Since ancient Hebrew did not employ vowels, it is written in consonants.¹⁴

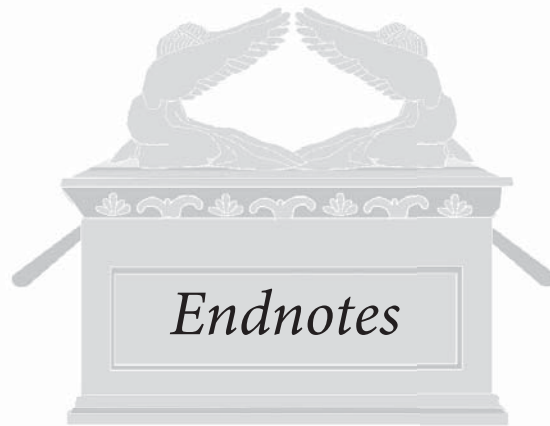
The Creator’s name may be more a scientific description of himself than a theological one. Renown theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking in *A Brief History of Time* provides a

description of an infinite universe that very closely parallels the Creator's description of himself. When describing the conditions of our universe, Hawking observes:

The boundary condition of the universe is that it has no boundary. The universe would be completely self-contained and not affected by anything outside itself. It would neither be created nor destroyed. It would just BE.¹⁵

In other words, the universe simply *exists* or *is* in the same timeless manner that the Creator simply is: YHWH Exists.

The Creator told Moses his name should be a memorial for all generations. If we are to distinguish Israel's God from the customs and theology of other nations, we should begin by recognizing YHWH (alternatively, Yahweh or Yehovah) as the name of the God who gave ancient Israel her Scriptures. Hosea prophesied of a time when all other names for Israel's God would cease, perhaps this is the dawning of that day!



SEEK AND YOU SHALL FIND

1. James Dobson, *Bringing Up Boys* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2001) 199; emphasis is Dr. Dobson's.
2. See also Matt 6:33; John 8:32; and 1 Cor 5:8.
3. Ps 146:8; Isa 42:18; 29:18; 35:5; and Matt 15:14.
4. 2 Cor 13:5; 2 Pet 2:1; and 1 John 4:1.
5. Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed* (New York: Free Press, 2001) 275–95; Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2001) 108–16; J. D. Levenson, “Who Inserted the Book of the Torah,” *HTR* 68 (1977) 203–33; R. D. Nelson, *The Double Redaction of the Deuteronomistic History*, JSOTSup 18; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981); S. L. McKenzie, *The Chronicler's Use of the Deuteronomistic History* (HSM 33; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1983); and John Van Seters, *In Search of History: Historiography in the Ancient World and Origins of Biblical History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983).
6. Ps 71:22; Eph 4:14; John 4:23; 8:23; 17:17; 2 Tim 2:15; 2 Cor 13:5; 2 Pet 2:1; 1 Jn 4:1; Josh 24:14; 1 Sam 12:24; Ps 51:6; 25:10; 33:4; 40:11; 60:4; 85:10–13; 89:14; 96:13; 98:3; 100:5; 145:18; Isa 26:2; 65:16; and Jer 5:1; 33:6.

ON GOD'S NAME

1. Deut 4:7–8; 2 Sam 7:23–24; Ps 119:142, 151; 73:1; 147:19–20; Isa 26:2; and Zech 8:3.
2. Exod 20:3; 10:7; 23:33; Deut 7:16; 8:19; 11:16; 30:17; Judgs 2:3; 8:27; 1 Kgs 9:6; 2 Chr 7:9; Ps 97:7; 106:36; Jer 13:10; 25:6; Deut 6:4; 32:39; Isa 43:10, 15; 44:24; 46:5.
3. The word “nation” is a modern term. In Hebrew, this idea is termed *goy* or *gôyim*. These Hebrew terms, however, have modern connotations that are alien to the Scriptural text. The most important being that modern Judaism terms any non-Jew a *goy*; when in fact the Scriptural text applies the term to any group of people, even Israelites (Gen 12:2; 18:18; 21:18; 35:11; 46:3; Exod 19:6; 32:10; 33:13; Lev 18:26; Deut 4:6, 34; 9:14; 26:5; 32:28; 1 Chr 17:21; Ps 33:12; 83:4; Isa 26:2, 15; 51:4; Jer 31:36; 48:2; Ezek 37:22). In order to avoid confusion for the reader, I will use the word ‘nation’ to express the ancient concept of *goy* or *gôyim*.
4. Exod 23:13; Zech 13:2; and *JFB*, 768.

5. *UBD*, 413, plural—*Baalim* (*SEC* 1168; *BDB*, 127).
6. *GDSAM*, 128; and Kurt G. Jung, “Baal,” *ISBE* (vol. 1) 377–78.
7. Ze’ev Meshel, *Kuntillet ‘Ajrud (Horvat Teman): An Iron Age II Religious Site on the Judah-Sinai Border* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2012) 109; see also Hershel Shanks, “The Persisting Uncertainties of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud,” *BAR* 38/6 (2013) 29–37, 76.
8. John Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002) 68; emphasis added.
9. See also Exod 23:13; Zech 13:2; and Isa 52:5–6.
10. *SEC* 376; *BDB* 35; and *TWOT* (vol. 1) 38–39. *Baalim* is the plural form of the word *Baal* or *Bali*.
11. See also Ezek 39:25.
12. *SEC* 3068–69; *BDB*, 217–18; *TWOT* (vol. 1) 210–12.
13. *SEC* 1961; *BDB*, 226; Day, *Gods and Goddesses of Canaan*, 14, 20. For other discussions on the name, see William F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994) 168–72.
14. Robert J. Wyatt, “Names of God,” *ISBE* (vol. 2) 507.
15. Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988) 141. See also Day, *Gods and Goddesses of Canaan*, 14, 20.