

How Could *Yahveh* (יהוה) Have Become *Yəhō-* (יהו) in Theophoric Names?

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It is often claimed that the best argument in support of the pronunciation *Yəhōvâ* for the Tetragrammaton (that is, יהוה) is the manner in which the various theophoric names are pointed and pronounced in the biblical text. This is essentially the argument that I heard again today in one of the groups that I follow on Facebook. Here is the basic expression of the claim as it appeared earlier today (Sept 5, 2021):

Several months ago I found a February 1st 1999 issue of the Watchtower addressing the pronunciation of God's name. In it they mention that the name Jehovah isn't so monstrous of a word as many, but not all scholars would have you to believe.

They reason that a two-syllable pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton as "Yahweh" [*sic*, *Yahveh*] would not allow for the "o" vowel sound to exist as part of God's name[.]

If we turn this into a syllogism, we might get something like the following:

- P1 Since the theophoric names all contain the vowel *ô* (that is, *ḥolam-vav*), the proper pronunciation of יהוה must also contain *ô*.
- P2 The pronunciation *Yahveh* does not contain *ô*.
- C Therefore, *Yahveh* cannot be the proper pronunciation of יהוה.

It is clear that P2 is true; *Yahveh* does not have *ô* in it. The conclusion clearly follows properly from these premises. Alternatively, given that *Yəhōvâ* does have *ô*, it must be reasoned that it is at least a *possible* pronunciation of the name—if P1 is true. My argument is that P1 is *not* true and that the argument, although technically valid, is unsound (because of the truth value of its first premise).

It's easy to prove that P1 is false, given that we have almost as many theophoric names that disprove it as that prove it. For example, just as we have *Yəhōnātān* (יהונתן) and *Yəhō'āb* (יהואב), we have *Nəṭanyābū* (נתניאל) and *'Ābīyābū* (אביאל). These are the same names with an inversion of the placement of the theophoric element. The one says YHVH-gave while the other says gave-YHVH; one YHVH-father, and the other father-YHVH. The first two have the theophoric element ending in the vowel *ô* (ו) and the others with *û* (ו). It is clearly not the case that all theophoric names have the vowel *ô*, else why does those with the theophoric element at the end display the vowel *û*? Also, how can this vowel be explained by recourse to *Yəhōvâ*?

Before going further, I'll need to explain a couple of things about the Hebrew language for those who might be less familiar with it. One regards how use of *v* and *w* in transliteration, and the other touches on the concept of *segolate* structures and consonant clusters in Hebrew.

First, let us be clear that *vav* in the Tetragrammaton, when given the pronunciation *Yəḥōvâ*, does not represent the sound *ô*. It represents the consonant *v*—and that only. The name is broken down as *ʔ Yə | ḥ bō | ḥvâ*. The *vav* is not doubled (וּ), and even if it were, it is impossible to have a vowel sound (*ô*) followed immediately by another whole vowel (*â*). Between two such vowels would need to stand an *alef* (א). As written, the *vav* is not the same as the *vav* in the theophoric names. This must be pointed out to those who think that *Yəḥōvâ* (יהוה) and *Yəḥōnātān* (יהוהנא) begin exactly the same in their first three letters. In the theophoric names, the *vav* is a vowel letter (*mater lectionis* = *ʔem qərîʔâ* [יהוהא]), but in the pronunciation *Yəḥōvâ* the *vav* is a consonant. The *o* is represented only by the *ḥolam* dot (◌◌) above the *heb* (ה). It only appears by convention over the *vav* in the same way that in the word *vayyôʾmer*, the *ḥolam* appears slightly over the *alef* rather than over the *yod* (ויאמר). It's a convention of writing. It doesn't mean that the *vav*, which is holding a vowel of its own (וּ), is itself a vowel. That's quite impossible. The point is that the *Yəḥô* (יה) of the theophoric names is not wholly the same as the *Yəḥō* (יה) of the proposed pronunciation *Yəḥōvâ*. In transliteration, the presence of *vav* is marked by the circumflex accent over the *o* (as *ô*) and its absence is marked by a simple macron (as *ō*). To be identical, we would expect *Yəḥōvâ* (יהוה) – that is, *ʔ Yə | ḥ bō | ḥvâ*, which appears nowhere. This itself undermines the major premise of the argument, but it is not a main part of my counterargument.

The major thrust of my position is that both forms *Yăḥû* (יה) and *Yəḥô* (יה) can be best extrapolated from *Yəḥveh* (יהוה) or something similar to it. This is based on the plethora of *segolate* forms in the language and what happens specifically to *segolates* that end with a consonantal *vav*. But first, a word about transliteration and how it is relevant to this question.

The letter *vav* has traditionally been transliterated with the letter *w* rather than *v*. It has been the longstanding Jewish practice in almost all communities of the world to pronounce it as a *v*, so that *Ḥavvâ* (חַוָּה), the name of the first woman from the Genesis story, is pronounced as *Chavah*, not as *Chawah*. There are a few communities of Jews from Arab countries in which *vav* is pronounced as a *w*, but we can probably conclude that this is under influence of the Arabic language, which has only the *w* and no *v* sound (the letter called *waw* [و]). Even in the majority of Arabic Jewish communities, the pronunciation was *v*, which indicates that it has had this pronunciation for a very long time—since at least the period of the Second Temple. There are three reasons that *vav* is translated with *w* by most grammars: (1) The modern scholastic study of Hebrew had its beginning in Germany, where *w* sounds like *v*. (2) It is generally agreed that the ancient pronunciation of *vav* was like the English *w* (before the Babylonian Exile or earlier). (3) The same transliteration system is basically used across Semitic languages, and the other languages in this family probably had the *w* sound rather than the *v* sound.

The explanation for how *Yəḥveh* could have become *Yăḥû* and *Yəḥô* is based on how consonantal *w* became vocalic *û* and *ô* under different circumstances. Specifically, when *vav* wound up sitting on its own without a vowel, it vocalized as unstressed *û*, and when it was found as unstressed *aw*,

the combination frequently lengthened to *ô*. The latter is readily visible in Hebrew as it exists in the Bible. We'll look at a couple of examples of this with internal *vav* in *segolate* nouns, but first let's talk about what a *segolate* pattern is.

Hebrew does all it can to avoid consonant clusters. This is a principle in trying to understand what happens with the vocalization of Hebrew words. We see it in verb forms. For example, the *qal* imperfect second-personal masculine singular is *tiqtôl*, which originally became plural by adding *û* (→ *tiqtôlû*) but underwent a shift in accentuation that resulted in the loss of the thematic vowel (*tiqtôlû* → *tiqtôlú* → *tiqtəlú*). The imperative is formed from this by removing the tense preformative (*ti-*) and using what is left. Once we remove this preformative, *tiqtəlú* becomes *qəṭəlú* with two back-to-back vocal *shevas*, which is functionally a consonant cluster. Hebrew cannot have this, so it turns one of the *shevas* into a *ḥirik* to break the cluster. In Hebrew letters:

←	←	←	←	←
תְּקַטְלוּ	תְּקַטְלוּ	תְּקַטְלוּ	תְּקַטְלוּ	תְּקַטְלוּ
<i>qitəlú/qitlú</i>	<i>qəṭəlú</i>	<i>tiqtəlú</i>	<i>tiqtólú</i>	<i>tiqtôl</i>
impv	impv	2mp	2mp	2ms
resolved	initial	real	pausal	real

Nothing demonstrates Hebrew's aversion to consonant clusters more than what happens in *segolate* nouns (and other forms that happen to wind up in the same situation consonantly). By basic definition, a *segolate* noun is one that contained a single vowel as part of the word. Most Hebrew nouns contained two—like *dābār* (דָּבָר) “word” and *gannāb* (גַּנָּב) “thief.” Now, before the written tradition, Hebrew had a case system like other Semitic languages. Arabic still displays it in the written form the Qur'ān, in which *'al-kālbū* (الْكَلْبُ) means “the dog” in the nominative, while *'al-kālba* (الْكَلْبَ) means “the dog” in the accusative. The difference is between the suffixed *u* for nominative and *a* for accusative. There is also a genitive case, marked with *i*—as in *'al-kālbi* (الْكَلْبِ) “of the dog.” In modern Arabic dialects all over the world, the case endings have now been dropped. All forms of “the dog” are now uniformly spoken as *'al-kalb* unless one is reciting from the Qur'ān.

The same happened with the Hebrew language, but at a much earlier date. We presume historical forms in Hebrew based on comparative Semitics. We can be nearly certain that at one point Hebrew had the same case endings. For example, “dog” in Hebrew would have been like in Arabic, *kālbū* (we can presume *qəṭlū*, representing the case endings with short vowels). This didn't have any effect on words with two vowels. *Dabāru* (דַּבְּרוּ) simply dropped the vowel of the case and was left complete as *dabār* (דָּבָר), which later underwent the consonant softening and vowel lengthening to what we have today: *dābār* (דָּבָר). Those nouns that contained only one internal vowel caused a problem for Hebrew, which doesn't manage well with consonant clusters, as I

¹ The resultant *sheva* in this situation is medial. It may be transliterated (*qitəlú*) or not (*qitlú*), depending on the preference of the author.

stated. Therefore, *káľbu* (כָּלְבּוּ) became *kalb* (כַּלְבּוּ), which was uncomfortable for Hebrew speakers. To break up the consonant cluster, they inserted the vowel *segol* between the second and third radicals (if one of those radicals was a guttural, it often caused a coloration of the vowel so that it appears today as *pataḥ* rather than as *segol*).

The end result was that *kalb* (כַּלְבּוּ) was broken apart as *káleḅ* (כְּלֶבּוּ)—the inserted syllable was not stressed and the *bet* now had a vowel before it (so it is soft). In pause, the first vowel lengthened to *káleḅ* (כְּלֶבּוּ) and outside of pause it assimilated into the sound of the *segol* as *kéleḅ* (כֶּלְבּוּ). This happened all over the language. When the case endings were lost, Hebrew words went through major morphological and phonological changes. Some of these single-vowel nouns had previously contained the vowel *a* (like *káľbu* [כָּלְבּוּ] “dog”); others contained the vowel *i* (like *síp̄ru* [סִפְּרָה] → *séḫ̄per* [סֵפֶר] “book”); still others contained the vowel *u* (like *qúḏšu* [קִדְּשׁוּ] → *qóḏeš* [קֹדֶשׁ] “holiness”).

This is evident to anyone who reads any of the major Hebrew grammars. It is discussed extensively in Gesenius §84a and Joüon-Muraoka §88 C. Those who are interested can dig as deep as they like in the grammars for overarching examples of how this phenomenon plays out in the Hebrew language. What interests me specifically is what happens when we have *yod* or *vav* in a *segolate* construction, since this is precisely what I believe happened with the divine name and its development. Looking at it as a *segolate* name solves all of the questions about how the vocalizations are related to one another.

In a *segolate* construction, we can find the weak consonants either in second or third position. If *yod* comes in second position in the root, the *segolate* normally takes *ḥirik* instead of *segol*. Examples are *záyit* (זַיִת) “olive,” *báyit* (בַּיִת) “house,” and *’áyil* (אֵיִל) “ram.” These nouns tend to take their plurals with *ê*, as in *zêṭîm* (זַיִתִּים) “olives” and *’êlîm* (אֵילִים) “rams.” *Báyit* is an exception, having a so-called “broken” plural (a plural that is based on a different root than the singular) as the highly irregular *bāttîm* (בַּתִּים). If *yod* appears as the third radical, the first syllable generally reduces and the last becomes a full vowel. Thus, we get *kəlí* (כְּלִי) “vessel,” *pərí* (פְּרִי) “fruit,” *bəḳí* (בְּכִי) “crying,” and *šəbí* (שְׁבִי) “captivity.” These particular *segolates* show two interesting features: (1) in pause, the stress returns to the first syllable and a *segol* is inserted (cf. *péří* [פְּרִי], *béḳî* [בְּכִי] for examples); and (2) the full strength of the first syllable returns in the plural (cf. *kəlîm* [כְּלִים] “vessels” and *pəřôt* [פְּרִוֹת] “fruits”). Again, these are great things to think about, but I mention them only to show that *segolates* containing the weak consonants go through some interesting phonological changes in their various forms. What I want to get to, however, is how *vav* behaves in these two positions—as the second and third radical in a *segolate* construction—since we do have other examples of this happening within the language of the Tanach.

First, let us consider a few words in which the *vav* appears as the second radical. It is better to think of *vav* as a *w* sound at this point in the language. It was a semiconsonant. I’ll represent it as *w* in this paragraph. Relevant words from this group are *máwet* (מָוֶת) “death” and *táwek* (תָּוֶךְ) “middle.” The first was originally *máwtu* (מָוֹת). When the case ending dropped, the *vav* adopted

a *segol* like the rest of the *segolate* nouns, and the *a* vowel maintained its accent and lengthened (*mawt* → *máwet*). This was the case as long as the word stress remained on its original syllable (*áw* → *áwe*). However, when the accent shifted, the diphthong resolved as a long *ô*. This is how *máwet* (מָוֶת) “death” becomes *môṭ* (מוֹת) “death of,” just like *táwek* is almost exclusively found as *ṭawēk* “in the middle of.”

First Principle: *When unstressed, the diphthong aw (או) resolves as a long vowel ô (ו).*

This is the first hint of what is happening with the Tetragrammaton, and it’s important to grasp the principle. I will demonstrate its importance to this argument once I’ve covered what happens when *vav* falls at the end of a word with no vowel before it.

There are a few words in the Hebrew language that have *vav* as third radical and ended up with a consonant cluster after the loss of the case endings. This will demonstrate the second principle that must be grasped before dealing with the Tetragrammaton.

Of course, feminine nouns don’t have anything unusual happen to them because of the addition of the *â* suffix. Thus, words like *ervâ* (עֲרֻוָּה) “nakedness,” *šalvâ* (שָׁלוֹחַ) “rest,” and *ga’ávâ* (גִּאּוּבָה) “pride” would have fit into this category (since they have *vav* in the third root position), but the use of the feminine ending itself breaks the consonant cluster.

The words we need to consider are *šáḥû* (שָׁחַו) “swimming” and *bóḥû* (בָּחַו) “waste.” Originally, these words held case endings like all other nouns. Thus, “swimming” would have been *šáḥwu* (שָׁחַוּ) and “waste” would have been *bóhwû* (בָּחַוּ).² The loss of case endings created the situation in which the *vav* was left alone on the end of the word. *Šáḥwu* became *šáḥw* and *bóhwu* became *bóhw*. The simple solution was to simply keep the accent where it was (lengthening the original vowel) and to break up the syllables so that the *w* by itself became a vowel (*û* unstressed) and the consonant that had previously closed the syllable was released to open the next.

šáḥ-wu → *šáḥ-w* → *śá-ḥ-w* → *śá-ḥû* “swimming”
bóh-wu → *bóh-w* → *bó-h-w* → *bó-ḥû* “waste”

Second Principle: *When it maintains its original word stress, waw falling by itself at the end of a word causes a redistribution of the syllables that result in lengthening of the stressed syllable and in switching the semi-consonant w into a full unstressed vowel û.*

This is not limited to nouns. In fact, we have a great example of a verb in which this exact thing happens very visually. The verb *hištahăwâ* (הִשְׁתַּחֲוָּה) “he bowed down” displays some forms that

² This form is completely theoretical. It would presume either a *u* or *o* in the first syllable, but it should be short. It’s hard to represent this in the Tiberian vocalization system, with its rules about long and short vowels in accented and unaccented syllables. We don’t have much choice, since *ו* is also used for the long vowel *ā* (*kamas*). We have to hold in mind that this *ו* represents a short vowel.

confuse beginning Hebrew students. The imperfect seems to be perfectly regular, given that it is a full form, and it becomes *yīštāḥāwēb* (יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה) “he will bow down.” This is perfectly predictable. Also, the plural is reasonable as *yīštāḥāwû* (יִשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ) “they will bow down.” From there, we easily derive the narrative past, *vayyīštāḥāwû* (וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ) “and they bowed down.” What happens in the singular, however, defies explanation unless you take into account what happens when a *vav* becomes abandoned at the end of a word—as we see in the *segolate* nouns. Let’s consider what happens generally in the narrative past, which is built essentially on the jussive form.

It is normal for the narrative past (traditionally, “vav-consecutive imperfect”) to use shorter forms of verbs in the third-person masculine singular when the final root letter is *heb*. It simply drops it and we end up with a *segolate* construction. Take these as examples:

- yībnēb* (יִבְנֶה) “he will build”
 → *yībn-* (יִבְנֶ-) (loss of final *heb*)
 → *yīben* (יִבְנֵ) “let him build” (jussive—resolution of cluster)
 → *vayyīben* (וַיִּבְנֵ) “he built” (narrative past)
- ya‘āšēb* (יַעֲשֶׂה) “he will do”
 → *yá‘ś* (יַעֲשֵׂ) (loss of final *heb*)
 → *yá‘ás* (יַעֲשֵׂ) “let him do” (jussive—resolution of cluster)
 → *vayyá‘ás* (וַיַּעֲשֵׂ) “he did” (narrative past)

The first shift in each of these results in a consonant cluster that is identical to a *segolate* construction. For example, *yībn* (יִבְנֶ) is identical to *sīḫr* (סִיחָר) “book,” and *yá‘ś* (יַעֲשֵׂ) is identical to *ná‘r* (נַעַר) “lad,” and each of them cries out for resolution by the addition of a vowel to break up the consonant cluster.

Now, let’s look at what happens to the forms of “bow down.”

- yīštāḥāwēb* (יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה) “he will bow down”
 → *yīštāḥw* (יִשְׁתַּחֲוּ) (loss of final *heb*)
 → *yīštāḥû* (יִשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ) “let him bow down” (jussive—resolution of cluster)
 → *vayyīštāḥû* (וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ) “he bowed down” (narrative past)

When we consider the Tetragrammaton as attached to the various theophoric names, we find it in two positions: (1) at the front of the name, in which the accent falls later in the word; or, (2) at the end of the name, in which the accent falls on the syllable that contains the *a* vowel. Let us consider what would happen if the Tetragrammaton were a *segolate* noun and see how it answers all the questions about the vocalization as it stands.

For this to work, the name doesn’t have to be Yahweh. It could be *Yáhwa* (יָהְוָה), *Yáhwi* (יָהְוִי), and *Yáhwu* (יָהְוּי). We can assume that the original form had case endings just like all other nouns in Hebrew. It is highly likely that Yahweh is a later form intended to compensate for loss of the

final syllable. I cannot say at this point; however, treating the name as a *segolate* accounts for all of the forms, and I tend to think that Yahweh is a better reconstruction than others. Let's consider what would happen if the name were originally *Yáhwu* (יָהוּ) that lost its case endings.

Just as happens with *śáḥwu*, we see *Yáhwu* ending up with a *w* in the final position. For each of these, I assume another step in the phonological change that would take unstressed post-tonic *aw* first appearing and then resolving as *û*. This would assume that *śáḥwu* became *śáḥaw* before becoming *śáḥû*, which is a good assumption.

- Yáhwu* (יָהוּ) (hypothetical original form)
- *Yáhw* (יָהוּ) (loss of case ending—creation of consonant cluster)
- *Yáhaw* (יָהוּ) (resolution of cluster [*segolate*])
- *Yáḥû* (יָהוּ) (unstressed diphthong *aw* resolves as *û*)

This is what happens when the name falls at the end of a word. The original word stress is retained and the final *vav* resolves as an unstressed *û* (exactly like in *śáḥû* and *yīštáḥû*).

- Yáhwu* (יָהוּ) (hypothetical original form)
- *Yáhw* (יָהוּ) (loss of case ending—creation of consonant cluster)
- *Yáhaw* (יָהוּ) (resolution of cluster [*segolate*])
- *Yəḥô-* (יָהוּ) (pretonic *aw* resolves as *ô*; pretonic *a* reduces to *ə*)

Whether we assume *Yahweh* or *Yahwuh* or *Yahwah*, the theophoric names are much more easily explained with what we know about the Hebrew language if the Tetragrammaton is treated as a *segolate* construction. All of the forms can be readily explained in this way by regular Hebrew phonological changes.

It is quite impossible, however, to explain why an original *Yəḥōvâ* (יְהוֹוֵה) could ever result in either *Yāh* (יָה) with a full long vowel or *Yāḥû* (יָהוּ), the regular end form of theophoric names and an independent form that is found all over the Ancient Near East. How can *Yəḥōvâ* explain either *Yāh* or *Yāḥû*? I'll await an explanation. Until then, I'm confident that *Yəḥōvâ* is absolutely not the right pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton.

— Jason Hare
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