ATTRIBUTIVE NOMENCLATURE: THE HOLY NAMES IN THE TANAKH

In English, we just sort of have the word/name “God” and that’s about it. The Hebrew names of the Divinity in the Tanakh, however, frequently follow the pattern of god-naming in the ancient world: names often assign or address particular attributes, qualities, powers, or manifestations of Divinity. The following list reflects some of the most frequently-used, or particularly revealing, approaches to naming a god that basically renders itself un-nameable. Make note (in your English translation) of when a particular address is used—what’s the context, why that address?

Elohim אֱלֹהִים “God,” “God” (actually plural form but used singularly, effectively gender-neutral or all-inclusive)

In Hebrew, “El” basically indicates godhood, and is reflected in many other names of both people and places:

- Bethel = Beth-El = “House-of-God”
- Israel = Y’shara-El = “Wrestled/Struggled-with-God,” also common Hebrew for “ewe”
- Rachel = rach-El = “Purity-(comes)-from-God,” also common Hebrew for “ewe”
- Emmanuel = Y’mannu-El = “With-Us-God”

[No, not the same as the definite article el in Spanish, but related to Arabic al.]

YHWH יהוה “Lord”—The “I AM” of the burning bush (Ex3:14-15); known in Biblical Studies and Kabbalic mysticism as the “Tetragrammaton” (“Four-Letter-Name”); when transliterated in Latin, becomes “Yahweh” and then into “Jehovah.”

YHWH Elohim אלהים יהוה “YHWH-God”—sometime doubled reference to the Divinity, perhaps indicating an older archaic form of address or conflation of two addresses from two different original textual sources

Adonai אדונai “Lord”—title frequently used to replace YHWH when written to keep from speaking the Holy Name, but also a title unto itself

[Ha-Shem חֶשֶׁם “The Name”—reference used beyond Adonai to definitely prevent ever speaking the Holy Name]

El-Elyon אל-אלון “Most High”—Indicates superiority over any other nations’ gods (echo of monolatric or henotheistic times?)

YHWH Elohe Yisrael יהוה אלהי ישראל “YHWH-God of Israel”—the especial identification as not only The-Only, but also definitively of the tribes of Israel. (In this case, a massively-layered reference, given what “Israel” itself means, q.v. above)

YHWH Yireh יהוה ירה “Lord of Provision”—protector and provider for the tribes of Israel, witness, who trials and tests.

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1 Adapted from Archaeological Study Bible (Zondervan), Old Testament Today, Commentary on the Torah (Friedman), and The Five Books of Moses (Fox).