

Speaker Urges ‘Balance’ in Use of ‘Sacred Names’

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By Dixon Cartwright

HAWKINS, Texas—Church of God members of the “Hebrew roots” persuasion—those interested in “Hebraic studies”—can go too far in their use of the “sacred names.” So said a Church of God lecturer on what he calls a balanced approach to the use of the Hebrew names for God and Jesus.



YAHWEH AND YESHUA—Herb Solinsky makes a point during his presentation about sacred names on Sept. 9, 2001, in Hawkins, Texas.. [Photo by Dixon Cartwright

Herb Solinsky of Carrollton, Texas, former Worldwide Church of God member who grew up in a Jewish family in New York City, spoke to a gathering of a Sabbath-observing fellowship in Hawkins, Texas, on Dec. 8, 2001.

Many groups and individuals with backgrounds in the Worldwide Church of God have adopted certain Jewish customs and perspectives in their worship services and in some cases in their daily lives. For example, some Hebrew-roots-oriented Church of God members refer to Jesus as Yeshua or Yehoshua or Yahshua and God as Yahweh or Yahveh or HaShem or other Hebrew or Aramaic variations.

Some members of this fellowship, for example, observe Hanukkah and Purim. A few wear traditional Orthodox Jewish head coverings and observe a seder rather than a traditional WCG-style Passover service.

Mr. Solinsky, a self-employed computer programmer and systems analyst, was invited to explain his “balanced” approach to the Hebrew names for God and Jesus.

Mr. Solinsky, who himself likes to refer to the Savior as Yeshua, also sometimes lectures on what he sees as the deficiencies of the Jewish calendar and its "postponements," but on this day in Hawkins he spoke only of the names for the Creator and the Messiah.

In trouble at school

Early in his address Mr. Solinsky talked about something that happened to him when he was a youngster attending "Hebrew school" in New York. He inadvertently read and pronounced in class "the name": the tetragrammaton, the four Hebrew letters YHWH, usually pronounced Yahweh or Yahveh, that the Bible frequently uses as a name for God.

That young Herb Solinsky would dare to pronounce the name upset the rabbi who was instructing the class.

"I committed the sin of saying the four-letter name, the tetragrammaton," he told the audience of 60 or so in Hawkins, "so I had to stay after class and write 500 times I wouldn't say that anymore."

Mr. Solinsky related that incident to illustrate his view that Orthodox Jews hold to an unbalanced approach to God's name in that they will not venture to say it. Rather, they will use euphemisms such as Adonai, sometimes translated "Lord" in English Bible versions. Or they will substitute HaShem, a Hebrew phrase that literally means "the name."

The Orthodox Jewish approach, he said, is just as out of balance as the opposite extreme of using only Hebrew variations of the name to the exclusion of translations in Greek, English or other languages.

Students of the Bible do well to keep in mind, said Mr. Solinsky, that the word *name* in the Bible, in both Hebrew and Greek, means more than its counterpart in English.

"In English a name is a label," he said. "Very rarely does it do anything further than serve as an identifying label in English. But we're going to see that it isn't that way in the Hebrew language or in the Greek."

In other words, God's name in the Bible is not simply an "identification label," he said. "It can refer to character, authority, characteristics and fame. We have to be alert to double meanings and even triple meanings [of words referring to God's 'name'], and we must not jump to fast conclusions."

No words can sum up all the meanings inherent in whatever the Scripture means when it refers to God's name, he said. Therefore, followers of God must be careful not to adopt a mystical, even superstitious, approach to mere identification labels for God or the Messiah, be they Yahveh, Jehovah, Yeshua, Yahoshua or Yahweh.

Sacred-names folks

The individuals and groups that are "more extreme" in their use of the names for God and the Messiah, said Mr. Solinsky, are the "sacred-names folks."

Some sacred-names people not only make it a practice to say only Yeshua (or a variation thereof) and Yahweh (or a variation thereof); they also eschew the use of the English words *God* and *Jesus* and even certain other words such as *holy* because they believe such words are of pagan rather than biblical origin.

"I've been examining Internet sites about this and have read a manuscript of over 100 pages on the use of *God* in which the person was trying to show that sacred-names people should not say it," he said.

One reason certain sacred-names people will not say *God* is that it is similar to *Gad*, said Mr. Solinsky, and *Gad* was the name of a pagan deity in Phoenicia.

But *Gad* was also the name of one of the 12 tribes of Israel. The precise pronunciation of a word, and even its spelling in a certain language, does not render it inherently pagan or something to avoid saying, he said.

As proof that it's all right to say *Gad* in the proper context, Mr. Solinsky cited Isaiah 65:11, in which the Bible refers to the pagan god, and Revelation 7, where John prophesied that the names of the 12 tribes—including *Gad's*—will appear on the 12 gates of the New Jerusalem.

Seven points important to the sacred-names movement

Mr. Solinsky projected on a screen behind his lectern a list of seven points that he said various members of sacred-names groups use to make their case.

- Sacred-names adherents say it's possible to know and use the exact pronunciation of "YHWH"—the tetragrammaton—even in the face of evidence that the pronunciation was lost.

"Scholars disagree with this statement," said Mr. Solinsky. "However, just because we don't know exactly how it was pronounced doesn't mean we cannot or should not approximate it."

One problem with knowing how to pronounce YHWH, said Mr. Solinsky, is that it consists of four consonants, yet it cannot be vocalized without at least two vowels.

- During Jesus' earthly ministry, His name was pronounced Yahshua.

But "there is no scholarly justification for saying Yahshua," said Mr. Solinsky. That pronunciation is a variation of the Hebrew, yet Jesus and His friends, His first followers and family spoke Aramaic, not Hebrew. The variation of Jesus' name used by many Church of God Hebrew-roots people—Yeshua—is not Hebrew but is an approximation of the Aramaic pronunciation, Mr. Solinsky said.

Variations such as Yeshua, Yahshua, Yahoshua, Jesus and even Joshua are all approximations used by speakers and writers of various languages. No one knows precisely how Mary referred to her son, said Mr. Solinsky, although he thinks Yeshua is close to the way she and Joseph referred to their firstborn child.

■ Some sacred-names people believe it is sinful to use a transliteration of the Savior's name and that His followers must pronounce it "very close" to the way it was originally spoken. Otherwise it is a "false name" for the Messiah.

This point, said Mr. Solinsky, "is actually refuted by the Old Testament because Nehemiah 8:17 has a transliteration into Aramaic: Yeshua, from Ha-ho-shua Jah Ya-ho-shua. Yeshua is Aramaic; Yahoshua is Hebrew."

Since the Bible, in many places, transliterates names of God in various ways, the Scriptures themselves show it is not wrong to transliterate the "identification label" that refers to God and the Messiah, he said.

■ Sacred-names adherents say that in scriptures containing *shem* or *onoma* (Hebrew and Greek for "name," respectively), these two words, both usually translated "name" in English, always refer to the tetragrammaton (YHWH) or to the Savior.

"But 'O Most High' in Psalm 92:1 is not the tetragrammaton," said Mr. Solinsky, yet that Psalm defines "name" appropriately as "O Most High."

"This shows how scriptures properly refer to God's name," he said. Praising God's "name" in Psalm 92 means "to sing praises to His authority and character, to sing praises to who He is, which is identified by His authority and character. There are other places that sing praises to 'Your name Yahweh,' but this verse shows that 'name' means more than just the identification label."

■ It is sinful, say some sacred-names believers, to substitute a title for the tetragrammaton where it occurs in the Bible. For example, it is a sin to substitute "the LORD" or "the Eternal."

"Yet the Old Testament substitutes Elohim for Yahweh in a number of places," said Mr. Solinsky. "If the Old Testament does it, it can't be a sin."

■ Some say it is a sin to use any word that is sometimes applied to pagan gods.

"Well, the problem with that," said Mr. Solinsky, "is that the Old Testament sometimes applies Elohim to pagan deities."

■ Some say it is sinful to use any word in some English Bible translations in reference to the Creator if that word can be shown to be similar to or historically used as the label of a pagan god.

"This point is in effect an invention," Mr. Solinsky said, "but it's an invention that comes from two verses, Exodus 23:13 and Joshua 23:7."

Exodus 23:13 says to "make no mention of the name of other gods, nor let it be heard from your mouth."

Joshua 23:7 says, "You shall not make mention of the name of their gods, nor cause anyone to swear by them; you shall not serve them nor bow down to them."

The Bible cannot mean in those two verses that it is a sin ever to mention the name of a pagan god, said Mr. Solinsky, because the Bible itself does that, and it quotes godly people who do that.

"In order to read the Hebrew Scriptures," he said, "you don't have a choice" but to pronounce certain pagan names.

Rather, the two verses mean simply that godly people should not worship false deities.

Between the two extremes

This point is an "invention" of "extreme" sacred-names proponents, Mr. Solinsky said. "I'm proposing the middle of the road. I'm proposing a road on which it's fine to say it in the Hebrew, even though from the Jewish viewpoint we should not say the names, and I'm saying the other extreme is just as incorrect: that we should never say anything but the Hebrew names."

When the Scriptures refer to God's name, they convey the meaning of all that is God, said Mr. Solinsky. They are not talking about what Mr. Solinsky repeatedly referred to as the "identification label," the exact spelling and pronunciation of any particular word.

He cited Jesus' use of various names for the apostle Peter. Sometimes He called him Simon bar-Jonah, sometimes Cephas, or Kephaz, sometimes Petros.

"Cephas is the Aramaic word for stone," he said. "In Matthew 16:18, word play is being made between Petros and Petra, word play showing the use of Greek in the name, even though we originally used the Aramaic *kephas*."

"The fact is, the Messiah was translating, translating, translating the word *kephas* into the Greek word *petros*, yet He obviously considers them to be the same name."

In other words, said Mr. Solinsky, Jesus showed "there is nothing wrong" with translating the meaning of a name from one language, in this case Aramaic, into another language, in this case Greek.

Jesus is not Zeus

Mr. Solinsky also referred to the argument by some sacred-names proponents that the English word *Jesus* derives from the name of the Greek God Zeus and that the letter *J* in English is itself derived from paganism and should not appear in names for the Messiah.

"*Hayseus*, from the Septuagint Greek, has nothing to do with the Greek God Zeus," he said. "This is a transliteration. The Bible itself uses many transliterations."

And the letter *J* came into use because of "spelling changes" in societies and ethnic groups. "The English didn't realize the German *J* should have sounded like a *Y*, so they said *J*."

The various names for the Savior "all mean 'Yahweh is salvation,'" said Mr. Solinsky. "That's the meaning. But, as languages change and societies move from place to place, the exact sounds and spellings change."

"I do not think it is a sin to say Jesus," he said. "I kind of like to pronounce it as I think Yeshua's mother pronounced it, but I sometimes say the other."

Mr. Solinsky uses different variations of the names for God and Jesus when he talks to different people and groups, he said.

Jesus didn't say Yahweh

After a break for lunch, Mr. Solinsky answered questions from several of his listeners, including one about whether Jesus pronounced the tetragrammaton during His earthly ministry.

"That's an interesting subject," he said. "One of the ways in which to judge that is by seeing the reaction of His audience, since His audience was in a society where they did not pronounce the tetragrammaton, where they considered it a taboo subject."

Since the religious authorities in Jesus' time would have loudly complained had Jesus pronounced a variation of YHWH, Mr. Solinsky concludes that He did not use it.

This does not prove it is improper to use names for God, said Mr. Solinsky, especially since the Bible itself uses them. It simply shows Jesus tailored His speech to His audience.

But Jesus *must* have said Yahweh

A woman in the audience commented that she thinks it "very important to know the name," and that surely Jesus must have used it in the first century.

But, replied Mr. Solinsky, "that was simply something that the Jews didn't do in the first century. The fact that they didn't do it is attested to by Philo. You find the same thing with Josephus and even in the Dead Sea Scrolls."

The same questioner cited Psalm 68:4, which says to sing praises to God's name. Therefore, she commented, "I think believers really need to know the name."

Mr. Solinsky agreed that Jews should not forbid use of God's names and that "the Jews' reasons for avoiding it are not appropriate."

Forbidding the use of a name for God is "somewhat deceitful," he said. "It's one thing to say that it's not a sinful thing to make a substitute, but it's another to give an invalid reason to insist that it's a sin to use it."

The same lady from the audience said names of human beings can properly be translated, such as William to Wilhelm, but "not with God."

The point of the incident involving the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 18, when he commanded the Baal worshipers to make up their minds whether the "LORD is God," was to acknowledge God's name, she said.

"You've got to know who He is," she continued, "as opposed to all these others, and I think one of the most horrible things that Christianity has done is to bring this Jesus to the world who is not the Jesus or the Yeshua who existed. When you say the name Jesus, you have a totally different connotation because He is not that Jewish Hebrew Word of the Lord who became flesh. So I think there is a great deal of validity in knowing the name."

Mr. Solinsky replied that many people believe in obeying God, that they should keep the Ten Commandments, yet their obedience is not a function of how they pronounce the name of the Savior.

"While it is true that the standard, vast majority of people who include themselves as part of Christianity do not keep the Sabbath, do not keep the holy days, are willing to eat pork and do these various things, those people do say, quote, *Jesus*, unquote, in reference to our Savior."

On the other hand, he said, some who do keep the Sabbath and the feast days and avoid unclean meats do call the Savior Jesus.

"Therefore," he said, "one cannot differentiate God followers on the basis of how they refer to the Savior. It's not the one and only thing that separates the sheep from the goats, so to speak."

Mr. Solinsky says he prefers to say Yeshua, "but it's not a means-of-salvation issue. It's only because I believe His mother called Him Yeshua."

Mr. Solinsky's wife, Carol, spoke up from the audience.

"The New Testament also says there would be another Yeshua," she said, "and it didn't say His name was going to be different. In other words, there will be another Yeshua whom we are not to follow."

Whether people say Yeshua or Jesus, said Mrs. Solinsky, has nothing to do with whether those people really know and acknowledge the Savior and Messiah.

Emotional topic

"I think it's important not to let emotions cause us to run in a certain direction," said Mr. Solinsky. "This whole issue is more emotionally packed than any other issue of divisiveness that I've ever seen. It is much more emotionally charged than the subject of speaking in tongues or baptism by immersion or sprinkling."

A man in the audience commented that God has healed many people who have prayed to Him in the name of "Jesus."

"That's just the way they talk," he said.

Mr. Solinsky agreed that he knows of many proponents of sacred names whose prayers for healing have been answered, and he knows of many who pray in the English name of Jesus whose prayers have been answered.

"If one attempts to use the sacred names as a barometer or thermometer to try to measure answered prayer, I would have to say in my own experience I don't see a difference. Yes, there are miracles in both cases, and, yes, there is a lack of miracles sometimes in both cases."

Mr. Solinsky said some adherents to the "sacred names" have "built fences around themselves." He sees the enforced, exclusive use of the Hebrew or Aramaic names for God and Jesus as promoting "exclusiveness."

"This is just wrong," he said.

Knowing the name

The woman who had first commented from the audience countered that part of "working out your own salvation with fear and trembling" for her has been "knowing the name."

"That name has not been taught in the Churches of God," she said. For her, the use of the Father's and Son's names in Hebrew (or Aramaic) has been "exciting."

Mr. Solinsky quoted from Jeremiah 23, where the prophet urged people to worship Yahweh. Yet in the same context false prophets pronounced the same name, Yahweh.

The false prophets, though "preaching falsely," said Mr. Solinsky, "were still using the tetragrammaton, according to verse 17."

Yet verse 27 of the same chapter says that "those false prophets were making people forget" God's name.

If the false prophets were using God's correct name, then what does verse 27 mean when it says they were making people forget God's name?

The obvious conclusion, said Mr. Solinsky, is that "God's name" meant much more than simply the identification label.

"Forgetting one's name does not necessarily mean not using the tetragrammaton," he said.

Breathing in God

Another woman in the audience asked Mr. Solinsky about which name one should call on for salvation.

"If you're saying we can use any name, then what name?" she asked. "What is that name we call upon for salvation?"

Also, she said, "when I learned the name, it took me many years to really understand the significance of that name. I started listening to Jews talk of that name, and I received lots of fulfillment out of that because I've learned that when you pronounce that name," when "you take in that breath with that name, you're actually breathing in God, the heavenly Father.

"So when you say the name you don't say it lightly. When you say that name you really breathe that into your soul, into your being. You are taking in the heavenly Father every time you say that name."

That concept, of taking God into one's soul by pronouncing His name, "came from Jews," she said.

Mr. Solinsky replied: "The name Immanuel [a name for the Savior] means 'God with us,' and in that sense He is in us already.

"When you ask me the question what name brings salvation, when I hear that question, I say to myself: What is being asked of me in terms of what the word *name* means?"

If one doesn't understand the *shem* and *onoma*, the meanings inherent in the Hebrew and Greek words that mean *name*, "then you cannot rationally and coherently discuss the whole subject because of the multiplicity of the concept that *name* means."

When one asks "What name should one call on for salvation?," one is really asking "What character am I dependent on?" said Mr. Solinsky.

"I think of all these qualities [of God] . . . we are saved by His character, because His character is salvation. His character is the forgiveness that wipes me clean by the name. His character is His name.

"I don't even think of it as a pronunciation label, even though that is in the Scripture. A good name, a good character, is worth more than gold or silver. His character in us, and our response to that character brings forth salvation."

The name in the garden

A man in the audience who had not spoken before commented that the exact name of God was lost because there was no way to know the language Adam had spoken in the Garden of Eden.

"Is there any way that we can know exactly how to pronounce the name of God as it was from the beginning?" he asked Mr. Solinsky.

No, Mr. Solinsky replied.

Taking the name apart

A woman in the audience who had not spoken previously asked Mr. Solinsky if he had ever "taken the word [*Yahweh*] apart as far as the individual letters, since Hebrew is a pictorial language and each letter has a meaning all its own and a picture that goes along with it."

"I've read half a dozen papers that were published in theological journals on the meaning of the name," he replied, "and scholars disagree with one another on the question of what the name means."

Some, he said, think the tetragrammaton includes elements of the verb "to be" and that therefore Yahweh refers to someone who transcends time.

Other experts find meanings in the name that touch on togetherness and power.

But Mr. Solinsky thinks it more likely that *Yahweh* refers to God's character. The "sacred name," therefore, does not even primarily refer to specific letters or pronunciation; it refers to the attributes of God rather than to an "identification label."

"I don't try to look at each letter individually," he said.

Chronicles substitutes 'the God'

A man from the audience compared passages in 1 Chronicles and 1 Samuel. In Samuel appears the tetragrammaton, but in Chronicles passages that are almost identical differ only in that "the God" is substituted for "Yahweh."

Does that show that God's people in ancient Israel were apostatizing; that is, forgetting the proper name?

Mr. Solinsky acknowledged that the tetragrammaton is used less and less over time in the chronology of the Old Testament.

"So isn't that a watering down in the use of the name?" the man asked.

"There is certainly speculation about why it would be that there was a decrease in the percentage of the use of the tetragrammaton," said Mr. Solinsky. "That's a question that's hard to answer because we don't have a commentary about this; all we can do is look at it and wonder why it's that way.

"But every word of God is God-breathed," whether in Samuel or Chronicles, he said.

Spelling 'G-d'

This writer for *The Journal*, from the audience, asked Mr. Solinsky why certain Jewish and Hebrew-roots writers leave the "o" out of God and write it "G-d."

"Orthodox Judaism has developed its own culture of how to do what they do," said Mr. Solinsky. "Whenever you put a capital letter at the beginning of a term, that makes it a proper name. So, when we spell God with a capital G, it becomes a proper name."

Therefore, goes the Orthodox reasoning, one respects God's name not only by not pronouncing it but by not writing out an English word that is commonly substituted for it in English.

Mr. Solinsky called this phenomenon "cultural transference of a type." It is, he said, an example of "a misguided respect" for an "identification label."

How close can we get?

Another man in the audience, one who had not spoken previously, asked Mr. Solinsky: "Then would you say, basically, that the name of Yahweh and the name of Yeshua are as close as we can know or understand to the correct pronunciation of His name and His Son's name?"

Mr. Solinsky replied that he tries not to offend people.

"When I'm among Jews and speak with them, I avoid using the tetragrammaton, because that would be offensive. In that sense I'm like Paul. When I speak before sacred-names people, I don't use anything but the sacred names." But "I think the name is more expansive than an identification label."

The wife of the same man asked from the audience: "Do you look for opportunities, though, to bring in the names? For me, it [the use of the name] seemed to open up the Scriptures even more."

"Everything depends on the audience," said Mr. Solinsky. "My favorite subject overall is the subject of pointing out how the prophecies of the Old Testament point to Yeshua. That is my No. 1 teaching overall. That teaching boosts faith, because, if you see how people preserve the writing, it shows the miraculousness of the writer . . .

"If I speak 90 percent of the time about the name, that's just not going to do it . . . You have to have a sense of balance . . .

"The most important thing is that Yeshua is the promised Messiah of the Old Testament."

A roomful of atheists

The man who had last spoken from the audience asked another question: "Please don't take this wrong, Herb, but I've got to understand this before I leave today. Let's say you're in a room full of atheists and you're not worrying about offending anybody. May I ask what names you would use?"

Mr. Solinsky replied that the names of the Savior would not even come up in such a gathering. Atheists, those who believe God does not exist, would rather ask pointed questions such as "Why did God let Johnny die?"

"But," persisted the questioner, "if they did ask you what was His name what would you say?"

"I would say that in general Yahweh is the personal name that's used in the Old Testament, but I honestly think that an atheist isn't going to ask me that question . . . That would be a twig technicality to them. Chances are it would never come up."

"So," continued the questioner, "there is no preference one way or the other; that's what you're saying?"

Mr. Solinsky said he would "not go out of [his] way" to emphasize the desirability of one variation of the spelling or pronunciation over another.

"The gospel is not the tetragrammaton," said Mr. Solinsky. "It just isn't. Preaching the gospel has to do with the Messiah and who He is, and [the name] is a secondary thing."

Another man from the audience agreed with Mr. Solinsky: "If a person does not recognize the authority of God or His power, what is His name going to matter to you to begin with?"

Taking the name in vain

Mr. Solinsky said that before he closed his presentation he wanted to make note of the Third Commandment because of its relevance to the discussion. He quoted it: "You shall not take the name of Yahweh your Elohim in vain" (Exodus 20:7).

Sacred-names proponents, said Mr. Solinsky, "will explain the Third Commandment as taking His name to nothingness if you never use it. They would say you're violating the Third Commandment if you are not using it a lot. If you substitute something else for it, then you're denying His name, therefore you're violating the Third Commandment."

Then he quoted Proverbs 30:7-9 to show that the writer of that passage equated "denying" God and "profaning" His name with "violating His character."

"When you violate His character, you deny His authority, which is His name."

Therefore the violation of the Third Commandment involves "the totality of what the whole name involves: character and authority rather than focusing narrowly on an identification label."

Mr. Solinsky also quoted Hebrews 6:10: "For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister."

"This verse," he said, "shows that love toward His name is ministering to the saints. When you help someone out in their need, then you're showing love toward His name, according to the way Scripture understands the use of the word *name*."

People who "focus so narrowly on just the identification label" are in danger of "losing it," he said, of "being exclusive," of "shunning"—and "that's not what's right."

Praying in the Savior's name

A man in the audience asked Mr. Solinsky what the Bible means when it says to pray in the Savior's name.

"In that phrase it means we pray in His authority," Mr. Solinsky said. For example, "He gave us authority to pray for the sick."

So, continued the man, how should one pronounce the Savior's name in prayers?

"I think you should do what you're comfortable with," said Mr. Solinsky. "If you're comfortable saying Yeshua, fine. One person I know in Dallas is more comfortable saying Yahoshua. If someone is more comfortable with Jesus, that's a transliteration, and in our language that is the equivalent of Yehoshua and Yeshua."

A woman from the audience commented that God had healed her of cancer 16 years ago, and her healing came "in the name of Jesus."

"So I know it's not the name but in the character of who He is," she said.