

Critique of the Sacred Name Movement

Over the past few decades, the Sacred Name Movement has grown increasingly popular amongst Torah-observant believers. In their zeal to return to a literal (as opposed to rabbinic) interpretation of Torah, many walk right into the arms of this movement, which claims to do just that. Unfortunately, however, this movement threatens to be a burgeoning cult¹. The more extreme advocates are, beyond doubt, heretics, claiming that one must adhere to this interpretation for salvation. Even the underlying doctrine that motivates the use of the “Sacred Name” is highly concerning. Determining these motives and errors is critical for those believers who seek to follow Torah in the manner that Yeshua would have done.

Before proceeding with study, it must be made explicit that some of these believers do show a very genuine desire to follow the Truth and heed Scripture in a literal manner (a noble commitment). In embracing some of the arguments of this movement, their objectives are not somehow evil or dishonest. Driven, candid brothers may be misunderstanding the logic of this movement and unaware of its dangers. This paper seeks to elucidate the pitfalls of the Sacred Name Movement within the boundaries of the Word with only brief and adscititious forays into historical documents and alterations of them.

The Sacred Name Movement is the belief that there an intrinsic holiness in the Tetragrammaton, that it is the only true Name of Elohim, and that it is incorporated into the Name of the Messiah. They state that it is obligatory to call upon HaShem by the Tetragrammaton as a matter of truth. Due to the importance they assert the sequence “Yod-Hey-Vav-Hey” possesses, they believe that it must be reflected in Yeshua’s Name. Advocates of the Sacred Name Movement (hereon abbreviated SNM) will then use either “Yahshua” or “Yahushua” to refer to Yeshua. The processes by which they derive these beliefs will now be examined on the basis of Scripture.

Underpinning the SNM is the notion that the Tetragrammaton is the only true Name and that it is of paramount importance to use and properly pronounce it². Below is a compendious list of Scriptures, which they use to form this belief:

Exodus 3:15: “יהוה Elohim of your fathers, the Elohim of Avraham, the Elohim of Yitzchak, and the Elohim of Ya‘akov has sent me to you.’ This is My Name forever, and this is My remembrance to all generations.”

Leviticus 20:3 “.... I shall cut him off from the midst of his people, because he has given of his offspring to Molekh, so as to defile My holy place and to profane My Holy Name.”

¹ A cult as defined here is a belief that takes an idea from verses outside of their context and bases their belief centrally around this.

² Extremests will say that it is mandatory for salvation.

Deuteronomy 6:13: “Fear יהוה your Elohim and serve Him, and swear by His Name.”

Deuteronomy 18:5: “For יהוה your Elohim has chosen [Levi] out of all your tribes to stand to serve in the Name of יהוה, him and his sons forever.”

Deuteronomy 28:58-59: “If you do not guard to do all the Words of this Torah that are written in this Book, to fear this esteemed and awesome Name, יהוה your Elohim, then יהוה shall bring upon you and your descendants extraordinary plagues, great and lasting plagues, and grievous and lasting sicknesses.”

Deuteronomy 32:3: “For I proclaim the Name of יהוה...”

Jeremiah 23:24: “... who try to make My people forget My Name by their dreams which everyone relates to his neighbor, as their fathers forgot My Name for Ba‘al.”

Psalms 103:1: “Bless יהוה, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His Holy Name!”

There are many more verses that SNM adherents can quote but the ones above are the most compelling and/or representative. Looking up “name” in a concordance can deliver exhaustive results for those interested in further study. At any rate, the SNM suggests that the Holy Name³ Yod-Hey-Vav-Hey is the only true Name of Elohim that He is to be known and called by.

There are two problems with this proposition. Firstly, the Tetragrammaton is not the only true Name of G-d. Names in Semitic languages (such as Hebrew) describe the individual named or the relationship one has with that individual. As a result of this fact, individuals can have multiple names or change their names throughout their lifetimes as these factors change. The name then represents the individual while possessing no inherent value. Biblical usage of the Hebrew lucidly demonstrates this fact.

In Genesis 12:2, HaShem promises Avram: “And I shall make you a great nation, and bless you and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing!” According to the SNM’s logic, the name “Avram” would have become inherently great. This, however, was not the case for in Genesis 17:5 HaShem renames him “Avraham” yet the blessing on his name remained because “your name” represented the person Avraham who remained the same regardless of his name.

Names are simply titles that describe an object or person’s trait. In Genesis 25:25, Yitzchak and Rivkah’s hairy infant is named Esav (a play on the Hebrew word “hairy”)

³ See verses such as Psalms 103:1

and his descendants are corporately referred to as Edom (Hebrew for “red”). Likewise Ya‘akov (meaning “one who supplants”) is named according to his deceitful wrestling of the birthright from Esav as the latter laments in Genesis 27:36. Later Elohim changes Ya‘akov’s name to “Yisrael” (most likely meaning “one who wrestles with Elohim”) after his prolonged but unsuccessful match with the Angel of HaShem.

There are countless more examples of this type that illustrate names serve only as descriptive titles without inherent value. In Hebrew, this descriptive title becomes representative of the individual. HaShem employs this rule when speaking to Moshe in Deuteronomy 9:14: “Leave Me alone, so that I destroy them and blot out their name from under the heavens, and make of you a nation stronger and greater than they.” Destroying “their name” is equivalent (as the rules of parallelism dictate) with destroying them – their descriptive titles represent them.

Without understanding this, verses like Deuteronomy 12:11 where “His Name” is said to “dwell there” makes no sense. How can a name dwell somewhere unless it represents the individual it describes? Similarly, Deuteronomy 12:14 makes a very unusual statement if this concept is ignored: “[When any man takes a wife] and shall make abusive charges against her and bring an evil name on her and say, ‘I took this woman, and when I came to her I did not find her a virgin’...” In saying, “bring an evil name on her” Moshe employs this linguistic rule of a name being solely a description or even a reputation.

Consider one of the SNM’s difficult verses, Exodus 6:3, which is generally translated: “And I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Ya‘akov, as El Shaddai but by My Name, יהוה, I was not known to them.” This verse poses a substantial amount of evidence against the idea that the Tetragrammaton is the only true Name. After all, if taken literally, this verse would say that the Patriarchs whose faith led to the birth of HaShem’s People did not know the true Name. Judging from the enormity of their blessings, one could conclude that “knowing the one true Name” was not all that important.

To circumvent this issue, SNM translators employed an interesting grammatical trick. See the verse again, this time translated by the Institute for Scriptural Research’s *The Scriptures*: “And I appeared to Avraham, to Yitchak, and to Ya‘akov, as El Shaddai. And by My Name, יהוה, was I not known to them?” They change the second sentence from declarative to rhetorically imperative. No such indication for such a procedure appears in the Hebrew text. In fact, doing this is the same as manipulating the verse “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife” into “Shall you not covet your neighbor’s wife?” – the original Hebrew sentence structure is the same in this verse and the one in Exodus 6:3.

Even this mistranslation can be used to disprove their interpretation via the expedient tool of parallelism. By translating it this way, Sh’mot 6:3 becomes a classic example of Ancient Hebrew poetry, where the information conveyed remains the same yet grammatical devices are used to create a symmetry. For example, the first sentence of

the verse is declarative while the second makes the statement imperative in a rhetorical sense. The active verb “appeared” is switched with the passive verb “known” while the proper nouns “Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya‘akov” are summarized with the third person plural pronoun in the second sentence. Now, note that the same tools are used to equate “El Shaddai” in the first sentence with “My Name יהוה” in the second. By the grammatical structure of the verse, one must conclude that if the Tetragrammaton is especially sacred so is the Name “El Shaddai”. Even if this translation were correct, it would nevertheless be detrimental to the SNM.

This mistranslation is not necessarily the product of intentional deceit on the part of the translators though. It sprouts from what they believe is a solution to an apparent paradox. To see this paradox, turn to Genesis 15:2 where Avraham uses the Tetragrammaton in addressing HaShem. Clearly, they would say, he knew the Name and thus the SNM translation resolves an apparent contradiction by saying that their version of Exodus 6:3 allows for the fact that Avraham knew the Name Yod-Hey-Vav-Hey. This statement though stems from a lack of understanding of the Hebrew use of names as already discussed.

Here is Exodus 6:3 properly translated again: “And I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Ya‘akov, as El Shaddai but by My Name, יהוה, I was not known to them.” This verse cannot be talking in a literal sense about names for the Patriarchs knew the Tetragrammaton, as aforesaid. Perhaps the verse is talking about the nature described by the Names? Avram became known as Avraham and Ya‘akov became known as Yisrael – does the same idea hold true here? Indeed, this proves to be the case.

El Shaddai means, “G-d is my Helper” and, as a Name, describes that aspect of HaShem. In the hostile and ever-warring lands of K’na’an, the Patriarchs had to look to G-d as their Helper. Yes, the Patriarchs knew the Tetragrammaton but, in their situation, they knew HaShem as their Helper, as El Shaddai. But at the burning bush, Elohim’s personal Name, Yod-Hey-Vav-Hey, was to become the identifying title as He was taking Yisrael to be His People in a sort of marriage as the prophets have likened it to. HaShem was telling Moshe that He appeared to the Patriarchs with the promise to bless their descendants yet they did not live to see its fulfillment. Centuries later the time for fulfillment had come and now the Children of Yisrael were to see the fulfillment of that vow and to enter, as nation, into an intimate, personal relationship with the Almighty.

By recognizing that names (including the Tetragrammaton) do not possess any inherent value but are merely descriptors, one can understand an otherwise contradictory verse. As descriptors, names are also representative of the named individual. For this reason, HaShem commands His People: “You do not bring the Name of יהוה your Elohim to naught, for יהוה does not leave the one unpunished who brings His Name to naught.” The Name is to be respected deferentially because of the One whom it represents. Likewise the Tetragrammaton is innately non-holy but is sanctified by the Infinite One it represents.

Yeshua speaks harshly against those who treat physical items as sacred without realizing Who makes them holy in Matthew 23:17: “Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the Dwelling Place that sets the gold apart?” Treating the Tetragrammaton as the only true, holy Name is not biblical. Any Name that is used to describe HaShem is holy and demands respect yet only one Name Yod-Hey-Vav-Hey is His personal Name.

Yeshua Himself exercises this truth. Not once in all of the Gospels does Yeshua use the Tetragrammaton or the commonly used Greek equivalents (as used in the Septuagint). Instead, He calls Elohim by an everyday term “Father”, a name that is made holy by the One whom it describes. By using “Father”, Yeshua describes His relationship with the Father most specifically. Saying Yod-Hey-Vav-Hey in its proper pronunciation would not have described this relationship accurately for it highlighted HaShem’s intimate relationship with His bride Yisrael.

As the Gospel spread from Y’rushalayim and the Galil into the nations circumambient and into the entire world, the Tetragrammaton was not used. The Greek word “θεος” (transliterated: theos) was the most predominant title for HaShem even though it was a generic title for any member of the Greek pantheon. Nevertheless, this title posed the greatest relevance for the Greek-speaking Gentile world and Diaspora. The word’s pagan background seemed to pose no problem for the Divinely-inspired writers of 27 Scriptural books. The use of names as proper descriptions was far more important.

To conclude the first of two sections of this paper: the SNM treads dangerous grounds in treating the Tetragrammaton as a sort of talisman, saying that it is the only true Name that one can call upon. In believing this, they overlook the Hebrew use of names (as demonstrated not only in Hebrew grammar books but in Scripture itself) and reject the concept of names and relationships in favor of an almost superstitious engrossment with the Tetragrammaton. No Name of the Holy One holds precedence over another or boasts of an innate sacredness that must be tapped into if one is to follow “truth”. Names of the Elohim are made holy by the One they describe in different and unique ways. If a Name does this accurately then it is, Biblically, an acceptable Name.

A chapter can now be turned, directing the focus from the Father’s Name to the Name of the Son, Yeshua. Many in the SNM have become engrossed with inserting the Father’s Name into the Name of the Son for fundamental reasons that reach beyond the scope of this article. In this paper, only the actual names these individuals have concocted, such as “Yahushua” and its shortened version “Yahshua”, will be examined. In the process of doing this, this paper will also prove that there is no Scriptural way to derive the true pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton.

To begin, the reader must understand the reasons why the SNM rejects the traditional name of the Messiah, Yeshua, which means “salvation” in Hebrew. This Name (spelt: ישוע) is explained to be *only* an Aramaic derivative of the Hebrew name traditionally rendered Y’hoshua (spelt: יהושוע). Furthermore, they claim that “Yeshua” is

not equivalent to the Hebrew word for “salvation” for the latter includes the letter “ה” at the end (spelt: ישועה), which is not included in the Messiah’s Name. Erroneously, they conclude the two words are different and that the Name “Yeshua” is a meaningless Aramaic adaptation of the true Hebrew Name.

Against this, Tim Hegg of Torah Resource cites (in a private conversation) the use of *matris lectionis*, a grammatical rule found in many Semitic languages (such as Arabic), explaining that the “ה” can be dropped without changing the meaning of the word (or Name). This rule would be employed simply because the word Yeshu’ah (with the letter “ה”) is feminine and the name Yeshua must be masculine. Dropping the mater lectionis “ה”, which makes the word feminine, results in the masculine Hebrew Name “Yeshua”, meaning “salvation” as its literary feminine counterpart does.

Scripture uses this Name on several occasions, in three different Books: II Chronicles, Nehemiah, and Ezra. The first two are written entirely in Hebrew and the names used are Hebrew while the third is written in both Hebrew and Aramaic. Nehemiah 8:17 enforces the interchangeability of these two terms by referring to Moshe’s assistant Y’hoshua as “Yeshua bin-Nun”. The traditional name meaning “יהוה saves” can appropriately be shortened to “salvation”, both names being perfectly suited to the Name of our Savior.

Some may object to this as posing any material evidence due to the fact that both Nehemiah and Ezra were written in an era where Aramaic was the lingua franca of the Middle East. In support of this, the Talmud says that Ezra wrote the Book of Chronicles (though many scholars disagree due to the dissimilarities in writing style). There is a great degree of consensus, however, that this book was written in the fifth century before Yeshua, when Aramaic was the dominant language. The conclusion of SNM proponents is that Yeshua was a common “Aramaicized” version of Y’hoshua (or one of their various pronunciations of that name).

This shortening from “Y’hoshua” to “Yeshua” was not the result of Aramaic influence even though it was contemporaneous to that language’s proliferation. Consider the name “Y’hoshua”: it means “Yod-Hey-Vav-Hey is salvation” (see the diagram below).

יהושוע
יהו - שוע
יהו(ה) - שוע(י)

Notice, however, that the final “ה” of the Tetragrammaton in the name Y’hoshua has been removed to eliminate an unacceptable stutter in the middle of the name. If this name is to be broken into its constituents, the “ה” must be replaced to make the Name. A

similar rule is applied to the second word “salvation”. The word “shua”⁴ actually means calamity⁵! Combining the Tetragrammaton with this word might very well be blasphemous! What happened? In combining the Tetragrammaton with the Hebrew word for salvation, both the final Hey was dropped and the beginning Yod so that the word could actually be pronounced. To break “Y’hoshua” properly into its constituents, one must add two implied letters and come up with “Yod-Hey-Vav-Hey is Yeshua (without the final “Hey” which would make the Name feminine). From here, the Tetragrammaton can be removed and the Name Yeshua be used on its own as a valid Hebrew name.

Many believers (not just followers of the SNM) may ask with some concern why the Name should be removed from Y’hoshua to make Yeshua. This question is a very good one and would require an entirely different paper to fully address it but a glimpse may provide some insight. Scriptures say that Yeshua is both human and Divine – two facts so abstrusely paradoxical that understanding them transcends the finite mind. Humans seem to be able to understand only one of these contrasting natures at a time. The Names “Yeshua” and “Y’hoshua” may emphasize the human and Divine nature of the Messiah respectively without detracting the validity of the other. Both the Names Yeshua and Y’hoshua are absolutely acceptable.

Some may inquire why the former name (Yeshua) is used much more frequently. One reason is founded on a pragmatic basis: two significant figures in Scripture possess the name Y’hoshua while only one significant figure (the other instances are found in genealogies) possesses the name Yeshua. Mix-ups are eliminated this way. Another reason is more Scriptural. Believers look back at Yeshua at servant Messiah described so eloquently in Isaiah 53. The talmidim themselves were quite familiar with the human nature of the Messiah. Calling Him by the Name “Yeshua” was very apt to describing His Nature as they saw it.

When the Messiah returns as the conquering Ruler, His Divinity will be made manifest in an unprecedented way. This aspect of His variegated Nature will overwhelm believers and unbelievers alike and the Name most germane at such a time will doubtless be Y’hoshua, “Yod-Hey-Vav-Hey is Salvation”. To reiterate, neither the Name “Yeshua” or “Y’hoshua” is superior – both describe our amazing Savior!

Assume though that proponents of the SNM could accommodate the evidence of the previous paragraphs and proceed with their argument. Their next step is to determine whether “Y’hoshua” is the correct pronunciation since the vowels of Yod-Hey-Vav do not align with of their rendition of the Tetragrammaton (which is uncertain at best). To do this, they extricate another Yod-Hey-Vav sequence, this time generally found at the end of Hebrew names. Examples include “Yoshiyahu”, “Eliyahu”, etc. “Yahu”, they claim, is the appropriate pronunciation of the three-word version of the Name whereas the sequence “Y’ho” was deliberately misrepresented by the Masorete scribes to avoid pronouncing the Tetragrammaton according to rabbinic tradition. They ‘rectify’ this by

⁴ The name “Y’hoshua” can be separated into “Y’ho” and “shua”.

⁵ See Job 30:24 and 36:19 for example

changing “Y’hoshua” to “Yahushua”. From there some have shortened it to “Yahshua”, citing David’s frequent abbreviation of the Tetragrammaton to “Yah”.

From a purely logical standpoint, this conclusion is absolutely unverifiable. There is no Biblical evidence to suggest that “Yahu” is the correct sequence while “Y’ho” is not. The abbreviation “Yah” that can be found throughout the Psalms may be used as wishful corroboration but it does not take much thought to realize that the alternate sequence “Y’ho” cannot be shortened for the simple reason that the only vowel remaining would be the silent sh’va, which can never happen in Hebrew (leaving the word pronounced “Y-”). Thus only the phrase “Yahu” can be abbreviated and it is done so even in names (for example: “Z’kharyah”, a shortened form of “Z’kharyahu”). One cannot conclude that “Yahu” is the correct sequence on this basis.

In response to this, some members of the SNM have quoted extra-Biblical ancient texts (example: Marusha texts), which indicate “Yahu” was indeed the correct form. No believer should heed such a conclusion if it is based on text outside of Scripture – Truth can only be found in the Word. If conclusions required extra-biblical sources then HaShem did consider them too unimportant to insert into His Word. Thus, “Yahu” cannot be shown to have any precedence over “Y’ho”. All other evidences should be treated with a great deal of suspicion.

Members of the SNM have, however, laid a few accusations against the Masoretic scribes who were instrumentally used by the Holy One to preserve His Word. A defense should be constituted for them and may serve to benefit the reader. It is interesting to note that the Masoretes inserted the vowels onto the Yod-Hey-Vav-Hey in order to refer the readers to the circumlocutions “Adonai” and “Elohim”, as opposed to the censorious, fallacious accusations of the SNM. To disprove this unfounded notion, notice the similarity of “Yahu” (“U” is represented by a cholem) with “Adonai” (“O” is also represented by a cholem). The actual vowel markings denoting “a” differ but according to typical grammatical practice. Similarly, “Y’ho” represents “Elohim” with the sh’va representing the segol in “Elohim” according to grammatical practice. Thus both “Yahu” and “Y’ho” are Masoretic inventions to facilitate the reading process since the proper pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton was unknown. “Yahu” was developed for the ends of names because the sh’va would introduce an improper break that should never occur in Scriptures. “Y’ho”, on the other hand, was elected to fit in the beginning of names. Again, the true pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton cannot be determined from Scriptures!

A lifetime can be spent attempting to disinter the “truth” about the name Yod-Hey-Vav-Hey, how it is properly pronounced, and how or whether it should be incorporated into the Name of the Messiah. The truth remains though – HaShem did not believe it important enough to His People to preserve it as He preserved the rest of His Word. The time spent searching for “one true Name” could be spent serving and praying to HaShem by a Name most relevant to the relationship between the reader and our

Father in heaven. Let us not waste our time hypothesizing about something outside of Scripture when much more pressing issues loom large.

The Adversary would have believers do this though, would have them look for truth outside of Scriptures. And once he has lured believers out of the protection of the Word, there is no end to the deceit that is possible. This sad, sad fact can be observed from the many genuine believers who have succumbed to the sophistry of the Sacred Name Movement and have been led off into countless other deceits and even heresies.

Instead of engaging in countless and divisive debates, let us hold fast to Scriptures and to focus on the pressing matters as Shaul warns in Titus 3:8 – there is no shortage of them!

“Trustworthy is the Word, and in this regard I wish you to strongly affirm,
That those who have believed in Elohim should keep their minds
On maintaining good works. This is good and profitable to men.
But keep away from foolish questions and genealogies,
And strife and quarrels about the Torah,
For they are unprofitable and useless.”

Frequently Asked Questions

- 1) Aramaic texts such as the Peshitta seem to support the SNM point that Yeshua is Aramaic by using the Name “Yeshua” while translating other Hebrew names such as Ya‘akov into Yaqub. Is it realistic to assume that Yeshua is an exception?

While it is true that certain Hebrew names are translated into Aramaic, such as Yitzchak into Aeskhaq, Ya‘akov into Yaqub, Hizkiyahu into Khizaqea, etc, many Hebrew names are perfectly preserved, such as Y‘hudah, Salmon, Asa, Yoram, etc⁶. Interestingly enough, the Hebrew name Y’hoshafat was translated into the Aramaic version “Yahoshapat”, which introduces the SNM’s favorite theophoric element (Yaho/Yahu) as Aramaic (not Hebrew). One can therefore conclude that the presence of the name “Yeshua” in the Peshitta provides no evidence that it is Aramaic and not Hebrew.

⁶ See <http://www.peshitta.org/> for an interlinear English and Aramaic version of the Peshitta texts, where more similarities and dissimilarities can be found.

- 2) David frequently uses “Yah” in the Psalms. If it is introduced as a theophoric element in the name Yahshua can this be used as a legitimate title for the Messiah?

No, the name Yahshua is a complete impossibility for several reasons. One of which is due to the fact that a “ה” is used with a sh’va in the middle of a word without a vowel. This forms both a forbidden glottal stop⁷ (a silent “ה” can only be found at the end of a word, never in the middle of one) and uses an extraneous zero morph⁸ (a zero morph with no use because of the unheard of glottal stop) – both of which never occur in the Hebrew language. For this reason, the name “Yahshua” is virtually unused in Israel where believers fluently speak and understand Hebrew. Furthermore, the pseudo-name Yahshua runs into blasphemous consequences. See the diagrams below:

1.
יהושוע
יהו - שוע
יהו(ה) - (י)שוע

2.
יהשוע
יה - (י?)שוע

In the first diagram, the Biblical name Y’hoshua is shown to separate into its two constituents. In this process, the two mater lectionis that were collapsed so that the two words could combine into the name are re-ascribed. Yod-Hey-Vav-Hey reappears. Turn to the second diagram. The process successfully used in the first diagram cannot be performed on the pseudo-name Yahshua because the “ה” forms a glottal stop and thus is no longer a mater lectionis. Because there is no evidence for a “י” like there was in Y’hoshua because of the mater lectionis “ה”, it cannot be added to the second word and thus the name must remain with the meaning “Yah of *or* in calamity” (which is spelt without a “י”), instead of “salvation” (which is spelt with a “י”).

All evidence demonstrates that Yahshua cannot form a single word but rather must remain two distinct words, the meaning of which has blasphemous potential. Thus this pseudo-name should definitely not be used as a title for the Messiah.

⁷ A glottal stop can be represented as a hyphen in the expression “uh-oh!”.

⁸ A zero morph is an “imaginary” vowel between the letters ‘k’ and ‘s’ in the letter ‘x’ for example.