

Cultural Theology and Missiology

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Part I: Can an indigenous man who does not have the Bible or has not heard the Gospel know and have a relationship with the God of the Bible?

Part II: Is it scriptural to use an indigenous name of God from an indigenous religion and has there been good, long-lasting fruit in church history from using an indigenous name for God?

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People may ask, “Why is it important to use an indigenous name for the Creator God?” There are three major reasons:

1. It is a gift from God for a people to pray to Him in their native tongue, their “Heart Language.”
2. It shows that God is the creator of their people; He is not a foreign God.
3. It shows God’s love for a people because He spoke to them and cared for them and not only Western peoples.

Native Names of God Recorded in the Bible

Exodus 6:2-3 says, “*And God spake unto Moses, and said unto him, I am the Lord: And I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the name of God Almighty, but by my name JEHOVAH was I not known to them.*” This seems like a very simple statement in the English but in the original Hebrew, it is much deeper: “*And Elohim (plural of El) spake unto Moses, and said unto him, I am YAWEH: and I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the name of El Shaddai, but by my name YAWEH was I not known to them.*”

The name “El” was not just a generic name for God like the word “God” or the word “Kami.” Any good Bible dictionary or commentary will inform you that “El” was a personal name for the Creator God. The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* says “*The name 'El' is a very ancient Semitic term. It is also the most*

widely distributed name among Semitic-speaking peoples for the deity, occurring in some form in every Semitic language except Ethiopic. . . the term *El* was used in reference to **a personal god and not merely as a generic term** in the ancient Semitic world"i (emphasis – the author's). The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, revised edition says, "Among the Semitic peoples of Syria and Canaan in the patriarchal period, 'El was the preeminent god, head of the pantheon, who presided as king over the divine assembly in the farthest north. He was called "creator of the earth" and "creator of creatures" in Canaanite literature of the period, being represented as wise and kind, the ideal king. It seems very likely that this Canaanite tradition represents the cultural background against which the patriarchs identified as 'El the God who called them and gave them His promises and His covenant."ii

Let's look at this scripture again and break it down further. It begins by saying, "And **Elohim** spake unto Moses," **Elohim**, the plural form of *El*, is the word that is used in Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning **Elohim** created the heaven and the earth." This scripture shows a knowledge that *El* is a plurality. We now know that Genesis 1:1 is referring to the Trinity. Next God says, "I am **YAWEH**." This name was the Special Revelation of God given to Israel through Moses. Then God says, "and I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the name of **El Shaddai**." The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, revised edition says of the name, *El Shaddai*, "The antiquity of the title, however, seems likely to defeat all attempts to uncover its etymology. It has been derived from various roots that suggest that it means "sufficient," "lord," "rain-god," or "mountain-god."iii It was one of the names for *El* as was "**El Elyon**" meaning *El Almighty*. Finally, God says, "but by my name **YAWEH** was I not known to them." This statement confirms this Special Revelation of God's name, **Yaweh**, to Israel.

If you are one who ascribes to the "JEDP" theory, the "P" document indicates the following development for the name of God:

1. From Adam through Noah to Abraham, God was called "**Elohim**."
2. From Abraham to Moses, He was called "**El Shaddai**."
3. Beginning with Moses' experience of Ex. 6:3, He was known as **Yahweh** (Jehovah).iv

Let's look at the meeting between Melchizedek, the Canaanite King of Salem (Jerusalem) and Abraham in Genesis 14:18-20. "And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God. And he blessed him, and said, Blessed be Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth: And blessed be the most high God, which hath delivered thine

i Harris, et al., *Theological Wordbook*, vol. I, p. 42

ii International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, revised edition, Copyright © 1979 by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

iii International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, revised edition, Copyright © 1979 by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

iv Harper's Bible Dictionary, pg. 154, 161

*enemies into thy hand. And he gave him tithes of all.” Now let’s look at these same scriptures using the Hebrew for the names of God, “And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of **El Elyon**. And he blessed him, and said, Blessed be Abram of **El Elyon**, possessor of heaven and earth: And blessed be **El Elyon**, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand. And he gave him tithes of all.”*

The Canaanite King Melchizedek blessed Abraham in the name of, and attributed Abraham’s victory to his Canaanite God, **El Elyon** (El Almighty). Abraham did not reject the attributing of his victory to the Canaanite high God but instead gave Melchizedek the first recorded tithe.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, revised edition says “*It (the name of El Elyon) first occurs in Gen 14:18-21 in the encounter between Abram and Melchizedek king of (Jeru)Salem. Since Melchizedek was a ‘priest of ‘El ‘Elyon’ and blessed Abram by that god, many scholars believe that ‘Elyon was the deity worshiped at the Jerusalem cultic center in pre-Israelite times. Melchizedek called him ‘maker [or possessor] of heaven and earth,’ which Fisher, on the basis of Akkadian and Ugaritic comparisons, has interpreted as ‘parent of all gods in heaven and earth.’ This exalted status fits well with the occurrence of the title in the very ancient Israelite poem in Deut 32:8, in which ‘Elyon has preeminence over all the nations on earth.’*”

In subsequent Israelite tradition the title was entirely appropriated and assimilated by Yahweh. Thus Abram in Gen 14:22 spoke of ‘Yahweh, El Elyon.’ It also says, “The word ‘El’ was also used as a proper noun to refer to the supreme god of the Canaanite pantheon, as is known from Ugaritic texts (14th cent. B.C.) that extol him as ‘father of men’ and ‘god of gods.’ The name is commonly compounded with other descriptive titles in OT patriarchal narratives (mid-second millennium B.C.). Of course the OT tradition treated all these as name of the one God, the God of Israel (‘El, the God of Israel,’ as He is actually called in Gen 33:20).” and that “In the post patriarchal literature the name ‘El’ is clearly interchangeable with Yahweh.”^v

In the Book of Job, the names for God that are used are El, Eloah, Elohim, and El Shaddai. This places the Job account at around the time of Abraham.

As we have seen earlier, God confirmed to Moses that He was the same creator God as the Canaanite El. We also find this confirmation in the name of the prophet, Elijah, which means “**El** is **Jah**” or “**El** is **Yaweh** (Jehovah).” **El** and his various names were incorporated into the Hebrew language as it was being formed (Hebrew was formed some time after 1400 B.C.^{vi}). It is also found in the

v International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, revised edition, Copyright © 1979 by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

vi Gribetz, The Timetables of Jewish History, p. 8

Hebrew names for God: ***El Roi*** (El who sees me), ***El Olam*** (El Everlasting), ***El Gibbor***, (Mighty El), and ***El Hana'eman*** (faithful El), among many others. It can also be found in names like ***Michael*** (Who is like El?), ***Gabriel*** (Man of El), ***Daniel*** (My Judge is El), ***Kadmiel*** (El is the Ancient One), and ***Israel*** (Wrestler with El). The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, revised edition says, "'El' was also frequently used to form personal names (theophorous names), e.g., *Eliezer*, 'God is help' (Gen 15:2). In some cases it was an alternative to the use of 'Yahweh' (Ja-, Je-, Jeho-, Jo-) in names, e.g., *Elnathan* = Jonathan, 'God/Yahweh has given.'"^{vii}

You might be thinking, it is fine to use El as a name for the Creator God but the indigenous name for the Creator God in my country has been very corrupted so we cannot use that name.

The knowledge of El also experienced much corruption. One text describes El copulating with two women in order to procreate the gods Shamar and Shalem and then a series of other gods.^{viii} Nelson says, "*The main goddess by whom El fathered children was Asherah. She and El were the parents of more than 70 other deities.*"^{ix} And Albright says that El worship included human sacrifice.^x Because the knowledge of El was corrupted, should we now throw words like Elohim, El Shaddai, Daniel, Michael and Israel out of the Bible? Should we throw YHWH (Yahweh, Jehovah) out of the Bible because He said himself that He was El? Should we throw YHWH out of the Bible because, at one time, YHWH worship was corrupted to the point that the Hebrews worshipped Yahweh, Baal, Tammuz, Ashtoreth, Molech and other gods at the same time? (2 Kings 17:16-17, 1 Kings 11:5-7, Ezekiel 8:14) The Hebrews, at one time, worshipped a pantheon of gods in the very temple of YHWH. (2 Kings 23:4) Should we throw YHWH out of the Bible because, at Mizpah, the temples of Asherah and Yahweh were erected side by side? Or because, in the Jewish Elephantine community in Egypt, the Canaanite goddesses, *Anat-Yahu* (or *Anat-Bethel*), *Ashim-Bethel* and *Haram-Bethel* were assigned to Yahweh as consorts?^{xi}

Should we not preach about Jesus because the Crusaders went into the Middle East in the name of Jesus, massacred women and children, threw their heads over the walls of cities and even ate children?^{xii} Or do we need to point to the Bible where this is not really the nature of Jesus and show them his true nature?

It is obvious that we cannot throw out the names of El, Yahweh, or Jesus from the Bible because of corruption but as Israel did under King Josiah, we must

vii International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, revised edition Copyright © 1979 by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

viii De Vaux, *The Early History of Israel*, p. 281

ix Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Copyright © 1986, Thomas Nelson Publishers

x W.R. Albright, ARI; Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan, pp. 234-244

xi James, *Myth and Ritual in the Ancient Near East*, p. 127

xii <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/1096jews-mainz.html>

<http://www.crusades-encyclopedia.com/cannibalism.html>

clean the false concepts and renew the concepts of the true nature of God. (2 Kings 22:8 – 23:25)

How does indigenous knowledge of God go astray? There is a battle in the spirit realm for the minds, hearts, and souls of men. While God is constantly reaching out to man, Satan is also constantly trying to corrupt his communications and steal his worship. There are many ways in which the name of God can be corrupted and the worship of the Creator God in indigenous religions turned into the worship of other Gods. Some of the major ways are:

1. People like the Karen (described in Part I) lost communication with the Creator God and began worshipping the “nats” because they needed immediate help with a child’s sickness or other immediate problem.
2. People begin to worship their ancestors as Gods. The Assyrians worshipped their national deity named, **Assur**. **Assur** supplanted the original trinity of Gods. **Assur** was a “**deified patriarch**.”^{xiii} Genesis 10:22 NIV says “*The sons of Shem* (One of Moses’ three sons and ancestor of the Hebrew people): *Elam, **Asshur**, Arphaxad, Lud and Aram.*” **Asshur** then, is much like the deified ancestor **Amaterasu** in Japan and **Pele** in Hawai’i. In the book “After the Flood” is recorded six pre-Christian contact genealogies of the Northern Europeans.^{xiv} Three begin with Noe or Noa (Noah) and go on to Scaef (Japheth)^{xv}. The other three begin with Scaef or a similar name. It is interesting that, eighteen generations after Noah is an ancestor named **Woden**. **Woden** or **Odin**, is known as the king of the Norse gods. Woden or Odin is, therefore, a European deified ancestor.
3. People forget about God and so begin to worship other Gods, corrupting the original communication from God. This was the case of Israel (2 Kings 17:16-17, 1 Kings 11:5-7, Ezekiel 8:14, 2 Kings 23:4). Like the Japanese “Amenominakanushi” and the Polynesian “Io”, Yaweh was nearly forgotten and hidden until King Josiah found His books, brought Him back, and restored His original religion (2 Kings 22:8 – 23:25).
4. The names of God or the different aspects of his nature become different Gods. Some historians believe that this is what happened to El. He became worshipped in different places where he did special acts as the God of that place, like Bethel (House of El) or El Shaddai (Mountain El).

New Testament Usage of Indigenous Names of God

^{xiii} Harper’s Bible Dictionary, pg. 48

^{xiv} After the Flood, pgs. 83-106

^{xv} Ibid. pgs. 92-95

It is interesting that when the angel **Gabriel** came to Joseph in Matthew 1:20-23, Gabriel told Joseph that his son would be called Jesus (actually Yeshua or Joshua), meaning "God (Ya or Yaweh) Saves," because he would save his people. But then Gabriel also said he would be called **Emmanuel**, meaning "God (El) is With Us." Thus again confirming that **Yaweh** and **El** were the same God and validating not only the Special Revelation of God in the name **Yaweh** to Israel, but also the General Revelation of God given to all peoples in the name **El** that would both be fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

John 1:1, says, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*" This passage is talking about Jesus, the living Word of God. The Greek word used for "Word" is "**Logos**." Jesus is called the "**Logos**." The Encyclopedia Britannica says that, "*In Greek philosophy and theology, the logos was the divine reason implicit in the cosmos, ordering it and giving it form and meaning.*"^{xvi} To the Greeks, the logos was more like the Star Wars "Force" or the Japanese "Ki" (Japanese life force) than a personal God.

Acts 14:15b, Paul says to the crowd at Lystra that wanted to worship him for healing a crippled man, "*We also are men of like passions with you, and preach unto you that ye should turn from these vanities unto the living God, which made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein.*" Again this seems to be a simple statement, however, in the original Greek; Paul uses the Greek name for their high god, "**Theos**," when he says "*the living God*." The Encyclopedia Britannica states, "*No matter how polytheistic a cult may have been, it left a place for the god shared by all peoples. Theos, "God" (the Greek high God, not Zeus and not merely 'a god'), is in Homer.*"^{xvii} Homer is the most famous Greek poet and the writer of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Again, this was not just the name of any god like the words "god" or "kami," this was a personal name for God. Three other great philosophers of Greece, Xenophanes, Plato and Aristotle, also used Theos as the personal name for the Supreme God in their writings.^{xviii}

In Acts 17: 23, Paul uses the "Unknown God" to preach the Gospel to the Athenians. This was just one god among hundreds on Mars Hill. However, this God was not just any unknown god; he was a personal god to the Athenians. He had shown mercy and grace to them and saved them from a plague even though they did not know his name.^{xix}

Paul was the apostle called by God to the Gentiles, should we not follow his example? 1 Cor. 10:27-11:1

xvi *Encyclopedia Britannica CD*

xvii *Encyclopedia Britannica CD*

xviii *Eternity In Their Hearts*, pp. 18 & 193

Encyclopedia Britannica, 15th ed., vol. 13, p. 951 and vol. 14, p. 538

xix *Eternity In Their Hearts*, pg. 9-23

Barnes' Notes, Electronic Database, BibleSoft, Inc.

The Use of Indigenous Names of God in Church History

As mentioned in Section I:

The Gedeo people of south-central Ethiopia call the Creator, Magano. The good long term fruits are mentioned in Section I.

The Mbaka people of Central Africa call the Creator God, “Koro.”

The Karen live in northern Thailand and Myanmar. They called the Creator, “Y`wa.” The Karen became nearly 100% Christian. Even today, nearly 200 years later, it is estimated that 80-90% of the Karen are Christian.

The Hawaiians call their Creator God, `lo or `la. Like El and Yaweh, he also had many titles like: *'lo-matua* (`lo the parent of all things), *'lo-matua-kore*, (`lo had no parents, he was nothing but himself), *'lo-te-wananga* (`lo, the source of all knowledge), *'lo-te-waiora* (`lo, the source and giver of life), *'lo-mata-wai* (`lo, the God of love) and *`laonalaninuiamamau* (`lo of the great and distant heavens).^{xx} There is a revival in the Hawaiian community and using the native name for God has been an important part of it. A worship song from our CD, “Na Kahu – Aloha Ke Akua” that uses the name `lo for the creator has become a very popular song in the Hawaiian community. The fruits over the last 16 years has been very good.

Although there are many examples from around the world, probably the best example is that of the Korean people. When the first Catholic missionaries came to Korea, the Korean people listened to the missionaries speak about the character of Jehovah and told the missionaries about their god, *Hananim*. Although this vague god, Hananim, sounded much like Jehovah, these Catholic missionaries made it clear that Jehovah was not Hananim and used other names for God when translating scripture into Korean. There was no excitement among the Korean people about this “new, foreign god.” However, when Protestant missionaries came into Korea nearly a century later, they decided, after studying the nature of Hananim, that there was no name they should use in Korea for Jehovah other than Hananim. This was a very unusual decision because the Protestants usually did what the Catholics had done earlier.

The Protestant missionaries began preaching that Hananim sent his son to bring the Korean people back to himself. “*Our god sent his son for us?*” This caused great excitement among the Korean people. One of the Korean traditions even said that Hananim had a son who desired to dwell among men! Great crowds

^{xx} Buck, *The Coming of the Maori*, pp. 443-444

collected as the news spread from village to village. “*Come and hear these people who know so much about our God and his son!*”

The Protestant churches began to explode in growth, quickly overtaking the Catholic churches which had been there decades before. The Catholics later held a conference to discuss what they were doing wrong. They concluded that their mistake was not using the name of Hananim! They began to use another form of the name Hananim and also began to grow rapidly.^{xxi}

Have the fruits of using the *indigenous* names of Jehovah been good and lasting? Yes, they have. Korea has become one of the most Christian nations on earth. The largest churches in the world are in Korea and the Korean people have become one of the greatest senders of missionaries in the world.

These are just a few of the examples of using indigenous names of the Creator God. Using the indigenous name for the Creator God is a normal practice for Wycliffe and other missionaries who go to unreached people groups and translate the Bible in their language. **It is a common and accepted practice.** Many indigenous names for God are being used in Bibles around the world.

xxi Richardson, *Eternity In Their Hearts*, pgs. 59-63