

Yahuweh as the Fuller Ancient Vocalization of YHWH

A Cumulative Argument for Yahuweh as the Earlier /u/-Bearing Form and Yahweh as a Later Contracted Pronunciation

Citation method: numbered bracket citations correspond to the References section.

Abstract

The pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton, YHWH, cannot be recovered with mathematical certainty because the Hebrew Bible preserves the consonants while the public pronunciation of the name was gradually restricted and then replaced in reading by substitute titles. The dominant academic reconstruction, Yahweh, has important support: it fits a plausible verbal analysis, begins with the biblical short form Yah, and is compatible with ancient Iabe-like transcriptions. This article, however, argues that Yahweh may be best understood not as the entire original vocalization, but as an authentic contraction of a fuller, earlier, /u/-bearing form represented here as Yahuweh, approximately Ya-hu-weh. The case is cumulative. Biblical Yah preserves the opening Ya-/Yah-; theophoric suffixes such as -yahu and epigraphic YHW/Yaho preserve a rounded /u/ or /o/ element; prefixed Yeho-/Yo- forms preserve related reduced developments; Iaō-like transcriptions support a Yahu/Yaho-type vocalic tradition; and Iabe-like forms support the later contracted Yahweh-type pronunciation. Yahuweh therefore offers a coherent developmental model: Yahuweh > Yahweh, with the middle rounded vowel reduced or elided through phonetic contraction. This argument does not claim that every syllable of Yahuweh is directly written in one surviving ancient source. Rather, it argues that Yahuweh is the strongest fuller-form hypothesis because it synthesizes more of the available biblical, epigraphic, onomastic, and transliteration evidence than the two-syllable reconstruction alone. [1-19]

1. Thesis and Method

This study argues for the following thesis: Yahuweh, or a closely related /u/-bearing form, was the fuller ancient vocalization behind the written divine name YHWH, and Yahweh represents a legitimate shortened form that emerged through contraction. In this model, Yahweh is not dismissed as false or meaningless. Rather, it is treated as historically valuable evidence for a contracted pronunciation of the same name. The main question is whether the older and fuller form contained a pronounced rounded vowel preserved in Yahu/Yaho and related theophoric forms.

A responsible argument must distinguish between evidence and inference. The consonants YHWH, the short form Yah, the use of Yahu/Yaho in personal names and inscriptions, the Masoretic substitute-reading tradition, and ancient Greek transcriptions are all evidence. The precise reconstruction Yahuweh is an inference from that evidence. The article therefore uses a best-explanation method: the preferred model is the one that accounts for the greatest range of data without forcing the evidence into disconnected categories. [1-5]

The method gives priority to four bodies of evidence: (1) Hebrew grammar and the consonantal text; (2) theophoric names and ancient inscriptions; (3) ancient transcriptions into scripts that record vowels; and (4) the history of Jewish reading traditions that explains why later vocalizations such as Yehovah/Jehovah should not be treated as the original pronunciation. Devotional concern for the name is important, but the argument presented here is intentionally framed in historical, linguistic, and philological terms.

2. The Biblical and Covenantal Importance of the Name

In the Hebrew Bible, a name is not merely a label. It can represent identity, authority, reputation, covenant memory, and revealed character. The name YHWH functions as the personal covenant name of Israel's God, occurring far more frequently than generic titles such as Elohim, 'God,' or Adonai, 'Lord.' Exodus 3:14-15 places YHWH beside the first-person declaration 'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh, commonly translated 'I am who I am' or 'I will be what I will be.' The passage creates a profound verbal and theological association between God's self-identification in the first person and the name by which Israel is to remember Him. [1, 2, 5]

Exodus 3:15 calls the name a memorial from generation to generation, and Exodus 6:2-3 associates the name with the fulfillment of covenant promises. These texts do not automatically reveal the exact vowels of YHWH, but they do explain why the phonetic remnants preserved in Scripture, names, inscriptions, and early transcriptions deserve close attention. If the name was intended to function as a covenant memorial, then recovering the best possible historical pronunciation is a legitimate scholarly and theological pursuit.

At the same time, the biblical theology of the name must be used carefully. Passages that command praise, remembrance, and proclamation of the name show that the name matters; they do not independently prove one vocalization over another. The pronunciation question must still be settled by linguistic evidence. The significance of the name provides the reason for the investigation, while grammar, inscriptions, names, and transcriptions provide the data.

3. The Consonantal Foundation: Y-H-W-H and the Verb of Being

The consonantal foundation of the name is secure: yod-he-waw-he, Y-H-W-H. The name is commonly connected with the Hebrew verb *hayah*, 'to be, become, happen,' and with an older or related Northwest Semitic form represented by H-W-H. This connection explains why Exodus 3:14-15 links the name with 'ehyeh, 'I am' or 'I will be.' The initial yod is compatible with a third-person masculine singular verbal prefix, allowing meanings such as 'He is,' 'He will be,' 'He causes to be,' or 'He brings into being.' [1-5]

The standard academic case for Yahweh often treats the name as a causative verbal form related to the root h-w-h. This is a strong and elegant explanation, but it is not the only issue that must be considered. A reconstructed pronunciation must also account for the rounded vowel repeatedly preserved in Yahu/Yaho and Yeho-/Yo- forms. The Yahuweh thesis argues that the verbal association and the onomastic evidence should not be separated. A fuller Ya-hu-weh model preserves the opening Yah, the rounded middle vowel of Yahu/Yaho, and a final -weh element compatible with the four consonants and the verb-of-being tradition.

The consonant waw is the key point of tension. In Hebrew and related Semitic traditions, waw can represent a consonantal glide /w/ and can also function in writing long /u/ or /o/ vowels. A reconstruction should not simply make waw perform two unrelated roles at the same moment. The Yahuweh thesis is stronger when framed developmentally: the name may have contained a rounded vowel preserved in Yahu/Yaho, while the movement toward the final syllable produced or preserved a /w/ glide in forms like Yahweh. Later contraction could then reduce Ya-hu-weh to Yah-weh. [3, 4]

4. Yah: The Biblical Short Form as the Opening Anchor

The short form Yah is one of the most secure phonetic witnesses to the divine name. It appears in biblical poetry and worship, including Exodus 15:2, Psalm 68:4, Isaiah 12:2, and the liturgical formula *hallelu-yah*, 'praise Yah.' The Masoretic vocalization *Yāh* confirms that a Ya-/Yah- element belonged to ancient divine-name usage. [1, 3]

Yah does not reveal the whole pronunciation of YHWH. It is a short form, not the full form. Nevertheless, it creates an important boundary: any proposed pronunciation that cannot explain Yah as a natural contraction or component is weaker. Yahweh explains Yah as the first syllable of the two-syllable name. Yahuweh also explains

Yah, but it does so within a broader sequence: Yah as the shortest form, Yahu/Yaho as an expanded short form preserving the rounded vowel, and Yahweh as a contracted form of the fuller Yahuweh.

This progression is important. If Yah and Yahu are both ancient, then the evidence does not simply point to a bare Ya- followed by a consonantal /w/. It also points to an early rounded vowel associated with the divine name. The Yahuweh model interprets Yah as an apocopated or highly shortened form of a fuller pronunciation, while Yahu/Yaho preserves more of the internal vocalic structure.

5. Yahu, Yaho, Yeho-, and Yo-: The Strongest Evidence for the Middle Vowel

Theophoric names are among the most important witnesses because they preserve divine-name elements in living pronunciation. Hebrew names contain suffixal forms such as -yahu and -yah and prefixal forms such as Yeho- and Yo-. Examples include 'Eliyyahu, Yirmeyahu, Yeshayahu, Yehonatan, and Yonatan. Because these names were used in ordinary life, their divine-name elements were less likely to be completely lost when the full Tetragrammaton became restricted in public reading. [1, 3, 4, 10, 11]

The suffix -yahu is especially significant. In suffix position, the divine-name element often bears stronger stress and preserves a fuller vocalic shape. The persistent -u ending in names such as Eliyahu and Yirmeyahu demonstrates that a rounded vowel was deeply embedded in Israelite and Judean divine-name usage. This does not by itself prove that the complete name was pronounced Yahuweh, but it does supply the strongest positive evidence for the middle /u/ in the Yahuweh reconstruction.

The prefixal forms Yeho- and Yo- also matter. They show that the rounded vowel did not belong only to suffixes; it also appeared in prefixed divine-name elements, although altered by stress, reduction, and contraction. Biblical Hebrew names often shift vowel quality when an element moves from a stressed suffixal position to an unstressed prefixal position. The relationship among Yahu, Yaho, Yeho-, and Yo- therefore fits a pattern of phonological conditioning rather than random variation. [3, 4]

The fifth-century BCE Aramaic documents from Elephantine add important epigraphic evidence. The Judean community there frequently wrote the divine name in the three-letter form YHW, generally vocalized by scholars as Yahu or Yaho. This shows that an ancient Jewish community used a /u/- or /o/-bearing divine-name form in real worship and communal life. [7-9]

For the Yahuweh thesis, Yahu/Yaho is the central pillar. If the original full name were simply Yahweh and never contained a rounded vowel, the persistence of Yahu/Yaho and Yeho-/Yo- requires additional explanation. Yahuweh explains the evidence by treating the rounded vowel as part of the fuller vocalic tradition, preserved most clearly in theophoric names and YHW inscriptions, then shortened in Yah and contracted in Yahweh.

Form	Typical Context	What It Preserves	Relevance to Yahuweh
Yah	Biblical poetry and hallelu-yah	Opening Ya-/Yah-	Anchors the beginning of the name
Yahu / Yaho	Suffixal names and YHW inscriptions	Rounded /u/ or /o/ element	Supplies the strongest evidence for the middle vowel
Yeho- / Yo-	Prefixal theophoric names	Reduced or conditioned rounded vowel	Shows that the rounded element was productive in names
Yahweh	Iabe-like witnesses and standard reconstruction	Contracted Ya- + -weh structure	Can be understood as a shortened development
Yahuweh	Proposed fuller form	Yah + hu + weh	Integrates the major forms in one model

6. Ancient Transcriptions: Iaō, Iaou(e), Iabe, and the Coexistence of Forms

Ancient transcriptions are valuable because Greek and other scripts could record vowels more explicitly than the consonantal Hebrew text. One of the most important forms is Iaō. The Greek biblical fragment 4Q120 writes Iaō in places corresponding to YHWH. Iaō fits a Yahu/Yahu-type pronunciation and therefore supports the existence of a rounded vowel in a divine-name tradition connected with the written Tetragrammaton. [12, 14]

Clement of Alexandria is often cited in discussions of the name because manuscript and editorial traditions preserve forms that have been read as Iaou or Iaoue. The evidence must be handled carefully because the textual tradition is not simple, and one should not build the entire case for Yahuweh on Clement alone. Nevertheless, Iaou/Iaoue-type forms are important because they align with a vocalic sequence containing i-a-ou, which corresponds well to a Yahu/Yahu-type divine-name tradition and is compatible with a fuller /u/-bearing reconstruction. [13-15]

Theodoret and related patristic witnesses preserve Iabe-like forms, often used in support of Yahweh. This evidence should be taken seriously. Greek lacked an exact equivalent for Hebrew /w/, so beta could be used as an approximation in some contexts. Iabe therefore supports a Yahweh-type pronunciation. The Yahuweh thesis does not deny this evidence. It reinterprets it developmentally: Iabe-like forms witness to the contracted Yahweh stage, while Iaō/Iaou-type forms preserve the rounded vowel associated with the fuller or shorter Yahu/Yahu tradition. [13, 16]

Josephus adds another suggestive witness when he describes the sacred name on the high priestly headpiece as consisting of four vowels or vocalic letters. This statement does not give a full pronunciation, and it should not be overstated as direct proof of Yahuweh. Still, it is compatible with an ancient perception of the name as unusually vocalic or glide-rich, which fits better with a fuller vocalic model than with a purely consonantal reading. [18]

The combined value of these witnesses lies in their plurality. Iaō/Iaou-type forms and Iabe-like forms do not need to be treated as mutually exclusive. If Yahuweh was fuller and Yahweh was contracted, the coexistence of /u/-bearing and /w/-bearing witnesses is exactly the kind of evidence one would expect to find.

7. Masoretic Pointing and the Later Form Yehovah/Jehovah

The Masoretes preserved an extraordinary reading tradition for the Hebrew Bible, but the ordinary pointing of YHWH is not normally treated as the original pronunciation of the name. Rather, the vowel points function within a written-reading system in which the consonants YHWH were read aloud as a substitute title, usually Adonai. In places where Adonai already stood next to YHWH, a different substitute reading could be indicated to avoid repetition. [13, 19]

This explains the later development of Jehovah or Yehovah. The form arose when readers combined the written consonants YHWH with the reminder vowels connected to substitute readings. The resulting form became historically influential in Western Christianity, but mainstream Hebrew scholarship does not normally regard it as the ancient Israelite pronunciation of the name. [13, 19]

The strongest critique of Yehovah is not merely that it is late, but that the Masoretic system itself explains why its vowels shift according to the intended substitute reading. The vowels are not stable independent evidence for the original sound of YHWH; they function as reading cues. Therefore, the debate between Yahweh and Yahuweh should be separated from the later Yehovah/Jehovah tradition. Yahuweh is not constructed from medieval reminder vowels, but from Yah, Yahu/Yahu, Yeho-/Yo-, ancient transcriptions, and the consonantal/verbal structure of YHWH.

8. Yahweh as the Contracted Form of Yahuweh

Yahweh remains the academic baseline because it is compact, grammatically plausible, and supported by Iabe-like transcriptions. It begins with Yah, allows waw to function as /w/, and ends with a final -eh that fits a weak final-he verbal pattern. These are real strengths. [1-5, 13, 16]

The problem is that Yahweh does not transparently preserve the rounded vowel found in Yahu/Yaho and Yeho-/Yo-. If those forms were peripheral or late, the problem would be smaller. But they are ancient, widespread, and deeply embedded in names and inscriptions. A reconstruction of the full name that has no place for this rounded vowel leaves one of the strongest bodies of phonetic evidence outside the full-name form.

The Yahuweh thesis resolves this by treating Yahweh as a contraction: Ya-hu-weh > Yah-weh. The unstressed middle rounded vowel could be reduced or elided in rapid speech or in a later standardized pronunciation, leaving the consonantal /w/ glide and the final -eh. Such contraction is not unusual in frequently used names and liturgical forms. The model also explains why shorter forms coexist: Yah is the shortest contraction, Yahu/Yaho preserves the rounded element, Yeho-/Yo- reflects conditioned prefixal development, and Yahweh preserves the later contracted full-name pronunciation.

This fuller-to-shorter model should be stated as a historical-linguistic thesis, not as an absolute proof. We do not possess a dated series of inscriptions showing every step from Yahuweh to Yahweh. But the model has explanatory power. It accounts for why ancient evidence seems to preserve both a rounded vowel and a /w/-like final movement. It also allows Yahweh to remain authentic while arguing that Yahuweh is more original or more complete.

9. The Positive Scholarly Case for Yahuweh

The positive case for Yahuweh can be summarized in five arguments.

First, Yahuweh preserves the biblical opening Yah. This gives the reconstruction a secure initial anchor rather than beginning from speculative vowels.

Second, Yahuweh preserves the rounded vowel attested in Yahu/Yaho. This is the decisive advantage over the two-syllable Yahweh reconstruction. The rounded vowel is not invented; it is preserved in theophoric names and ancient YHW usage. [7-11]

Third, Yahuweh retains a final -weh element. This allows the reconstruction to remain connected to the four consonants YHWH, to the verbal association with being or causing to be, and to Iabe/Yahweh-type witnesses. In other words, Yahuweh is not merely Yahu with an added ending; it is an attempt to integrate Yahu with the full consonantal form.

Fourth, Yahuweh has scholarly precedent in fuller /u/-bearing reconstructions. Max Reisel argued for forms commonly represented as YeHuah or YaHuah, depending on transcription. His proposal is not identical in every detail to the modern spelling Yahuweh, but it demonstrates that serious academic discussion has considered fuller forms containing /u/. [6]

Fifth, Yahuweh explains the diversity of ancient evidence as a developmental family rather than a set of unrelated fragments. Yah, Yahu/Yaho, Yeho-/Yo-, Iaō/Iaou-type forms, and Yahweh/Iabe-type forms are not forced to compete. They become different witnesses to stages, contractions, or contextual forms of one underlying divine-name tradition.

10. Evaluating Other Vocalizations

Form	Role in the Discussion	Primary Strength	Primary Difficulty
Yahuweh	Proposed fuller ancient form: Ya-hu-weh	Integrates Yah, Yahu/Yaho, Yeho-/Yo-, YHWH, and Yahweh in a developmental model	No single ancient source writes the full form syllable by syllable
Yahweh	Contracted form and standard scholarly reconstruction	Strong grammatical economy; supported by Iabe-like witnesses	Does not transparently preserve the rounded vowel in Yahu/Yaho and Yeho-/Yo-
Yahu / Yaho	Ancient shortened form and divine-name element	Direct evidence for a rounded vowel in divine-name usage	Does not by itself include the final he of YHWH
Yah	Biblical short form	Securely anchors the opening Ya-/Yah-	Does not reveal the full name
Yahueh	Three-syllable form with vocalic waw	Preserves Yah + u + final vowel sequence	Can under-explain the consonantal /w/ element behind Yahweh/Iabe
Yahuah / Yehuwah	Modern sacred-name forms	Attempt to preserve a rounded vowel	Often lack strong support from standard Hebrew morphology and ancient transcriptions
Yehovah / Jehovah	Late form from Masoretic reading cues as commonly understood	Historically influential in Western usage	Not normally treated as the original ancient pronunciation

11. Evidence Ranked by Degree of Confidence

Established or Very Strongly Supported

- The consonantal form transmitted in the Hebrew Bible is YHWH.
- Yah is an ancient biblical short form used in poetry and worship.
- Yahu/Yaho and Yeho-/Yo- are ancient divine-name elements preserved in personal names and inscriptions.
- The Elephantine community used the written divine form YHW.
- The ordinary Masoretic pointing of YHWH functions primarily within a substitute-reading tradition rather than preserving an uncontested original pronunciation.

Strongly Supported Inferences

- The full name began with a Ya-/Yah-like sound.
- The name is historically or theologically connected with a Semitic verb of being, becoming, or bringing into being.
- A rounded /u/ or /o/ vowel belonged to ancient divine-name usage.
- Yahweh is a real and historically significant contracted pronunciation, not merely an arbitrary invention.

Central Thesis: Plausible and Defensible, but Not Directly Demonstrable

- The full name contained a pronounced /u/ element reflected in Yahu/Yaho.
- Yahuweh, or a closely related fuller /u/-bearing form, preceded or coexisted with Yahweh.
- Yahweh developed as a contracted form of the fuller Yahuweh tradition through reduction or elision of the middle rounded vowel.

12. Conclusion

The evidence supports a legitimate scholarly case that Yahuweh, or a closely related /u/-bearing form, represents an older and fuller pronunciation of YHWH. The argument rests on cumulative synthesis rather than on a single decisive inscription. Yah preserves the opening of the name. Yahu/Yaho preserves a rounded vowel in ancient divine-name usage. Yeho-/Yo- show that this rounded element was productive in prefixed theophoric names. Iaō/Iaou-type transcriptions support a Yahu/Yaho-like vocalic tradition. Iabe-like witnesses support the Yahweh-type contracted form. The consonantal YHWH and its association with the verb of being support a final -weh element. [1-19]

On this model, Yahweh is not rejected; it is repositioned. Yahweh is an authentic historical pronunciation, but it is best understood as a shortened form that arose from a fuller vocalic tradition. Yahuweh, approximately Ya-hu-weh, explains why the evidence preserves both the opening Yah and the rounded Yahu/Yaho element while still retaining the final -weh associated with the full four-letter name.

Absolute certainty is not possible because no extant ancient witness unambiguously spells the full name syllable by syllable as Ya-hu-weh. Nevertheless, historical reconstruction often proceeds by weighing converging evidence. In explanatory scope, Yahuweh accounts for more of the surviving vocalic data than treating Yahweh as the sole original form. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that Yahuweh is the most coherent fuller-form hypothesis for the original pronunciation of YHWH, while Yahweh represents the later contracted form through which that name continued to be known in scholarly reconstruction.

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