Typographic Concerns and the Hebrew Nomina Sacra

Mark Shoulson
mark@shoulson.com
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In http://std.dkuug.dk/jtc1/sc2/wg2/docs/n1740/n1740.htm, Proposal to Add the Hebrew Tetragrammaton to ISO/IEC 10646 (Everson, Shoulson 1998), it was proposed that a special codepoint be added to the ISO/IEC 10646 standard to encode the Divine Name in Hebrew, on the grounds that the Name appears to be treated as a “dingbat” with multiple glyph variants in Hebrew typography. The proposal was rejected; but further research has demonstrated that whatever merit or lack thereof the solution proposed had, the situation is even more complex than originally perceived. There are many ways of representing the Name that have been used in Hebrew text (often as a special “dingbat” symbol), several of which cannot be handled by current Unicode characters. Something will have to be done to deal with the facts in evidence.

This preliminary document aims merely to show examples of the many different methods that were used and how so many prevalent ones are not at the moment representable in Unicode. I am only giving a small sample of how often these are used (they show up in many old books), and not really showing how common they were relative to each other or to other methods (three YODs in a triangle is very common). Also, I am avoiding all the various representations that use only regular Unicode characters, such as: ה׳ יי׳ יי יה יי ידוה יהוד ידוד ייי ידו״ד etc. Note that in all cases below that look like יי׳, the “flourish” at the end is not the same as the HEBREW PUNCTUATION GERESH found in other contexts in the same font.

The 20-odd examples brought below do not begin to exhaust the examples to be found even in a single collection of documents. Almost all the scans below come from http://aleph.nli.org.il/nnl/dig/books_all.html, and there are many others there, even though that site is no longer being updated.

In a book dealing with early Hebrew typography¹ we find repeated references to the Tetragrammaton as an entity in its own right, with varying presentations, often unique glyphs. On p. 24, along with illustrations of the special glyphs used for the Tetragrammaton in a particular edition, we are told that:

There are instances, however, when the representation of the Tetragrammaton varies. For example, in Yoma... where the Tetragrammaton appears on the page several times, it is represented in the first two instances as described above [with a special glyph]... In the third instance, however, the Tetragrammaton is represented by three yods. Dimitrovsky observed that since the Tetragrammaton is not often represented on the pages of the Talmud, the printer cast only a limited number of pieces of type to be used to portray it.

These texts must be accommodated somehow. Perhaps the decision on N1740 should be revisited, or other solutions proposed.

From a "Slichot" prayer book, 1475

From "Sefer Nofet Tsufim", 1477

Commentary to Job, 1477

From Psalms with commentary, 1477

From Commentary on Prophets, 1482

From a Machzor, 1485

From Tur 1485

From Targum Okelos, 1487

From Yoreh Deah, 1487

From Mishne Torah, 1491

From Sefer Leshon Limudim, 1506

From Hachibur Hagadol, 1509 (note use of ג instead of ח in spelled-out names following)

All three of these are from the same book, Maamar Katrin, 1510

From the Prague Haggadah, 1527
These three are all on the same page, in the same text-block, in the same font—different sorts for the same character. From a commentary on Torah, 1514 (see last page)

From Machzor, 1557 (title page, two different fonts); (below) Same book, main text. Note different representations in head-words and in text-block.

12. (-) Pentateuch With Targum Onkelos and Rashi. ה for the name of God and נ for Elohim. [Italy?], printer unknown, [1480?]. Folio. S-T.C.109.

From a modern Bibliography. Bibliographies old and new often make mention of how the Name is represented.

From “Sefer Maarachat HaElohut”, 1558

From a Karaite Prayer Book, 1528. The superscript “2” is part of the symbol, used consistently.

From Birkat Hamazon, 1579. Note נ representation in commentary reference word.
From a MS of the Talmud, 1290

From a printed Talmud, c. 1485

From a Talmud, 1489-96

From a Talmud, c. 1485?

From a Talmud, 1521

From a Talmud, 1646-48
A page from the 1514 Torah commentary with Nomina Sacra circled. Note YOD-triangle (+flourish) variant glyph on marked line.