

What is the Difference Between “Lord,” “lord” and “LORD”?

By Anthony Buzzard

The following information is vital for clear understanding of Scripture and the all-important issue about who God is and who Jesus is in relation to God. The divine name **YHWH** (probably pronounced Yahweh) is commonly referred to as the tetragrammaton (four-letter word). Bible translators adopted the practice used in most English versions of rendering that name as “LORD” in all capital letters (nearly 7,000 times in our Old Testament). This was to distinguish it from **Adonai**, another Hebrew word rendered “Lord” (capital L and lower-case letters o-r-d). **Adonai** means “Lord God,” “the supreme Lord,” and is a synonym for the divine name **YHVH**. Wherever the two names stand together in the Old Testament as a compound name for God, they can be rendered “Sovereign Lord,” i.e. Lord God, Adonai YHVH (occasionally YHVH Adonai).

The name **YHVH** was introduced, it appears, to Moses, but was not known to Abraham and others living before Moses: “As God the Almighty [El Shaddai] I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but my name, **LORD** (**YHVH**), I did not make known to them” (Exod. 6:3).

For those reading the Greek, the LXX (= Septuagint, translation by Jews from 300 BC of the Hebrew into Greek):

καὶ ὤφθη πρὸς Ἀβραὰμ καὶ Ἰσαακ καὶ Ἰακώβ θεὸς ὢν αὐτῶν καὶ τὸ ὄνομά μου κύριος οὐκ ἐδήλωσα αὐτοῖς “And I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as their God, and my name **LORD** I did not reveal to them.”

Some of our readers will enjoy the Hebrew of the same verse:

וַאֲרָא אֶל־אֲבֹרָהֶם אֶל־יִצְחָק וְאֶל־יַעֲקֹב בְּאֵל
שְׁדֵי וְשִׁמְיִי יְהוָה לֹא נִדְרַעְתִּי לָהֶם:

Now notice the Latin translation, the Vulgate, and observe carefully how Jerome the translator knew about the word Adonai (the supreme Lord) in the 4th century: “Qui apparui Abraham Isaac et Iacob in Deo omnipotente et nomen meum **Adonai** non indicavi eis.”

The essential lesson to be remembered is that the Son of God, Jesus is not **YHVH**! He is **YHVH**’s uniquely fathered, generated Son, brought into existence by miracle in Mary (Luke 1:35; Matt. 1:18, 20: Note, “begotten, fathered in her”). God became the Father of Jesus, the Son at that moment.

Paul summarized, late in his ministry, the essential Christian creed. This verse should be conscientiously memorized by all believers: “There is one mediator **between God** and human beings, **a human**, the Messiah Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). All translations are correct here.

The God of the Hebrew Bible is the same God of the New Testament. He is both the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and also the God and Father of Jesus Christ:

“For there is no **difference between Jew and Gentile**: The same **Lord** is **Lord** of all” (Rom. 10:12).

“God is the God of Jews and Gentiles” (Rom. 3:29).

Now the story becomes very fascinating, as we investigate the Bible as a sort of “crime scene.” The rules of capitalization agreed to by most English translations have been violated in one highly significant verse, Psalm 110:1, more often quoted in the New Testament than any other verse and cited by Jesus to silence all argument (Matt. 22:41-46). We introduce the subject with this title:

What Is in a Vowel Point? The Difference Between God and Man

We want now to introduce you to the all-important word *adoni* (pronounced “adonee”) (not **Adonai**, Lord God, but lord, master). Professor Larry Hurtado, celebrated author of a classic on Christology: “There is no question but that the terms **ADONAI** and *adoni* function differently. The one (**ADONAI**) a reverent way of avoiding pronouncing the word **YHVH** and the other (**ADONI**), the use of the same word [but a different vowel at the end] for non-divine (=non-Deity) figures.”¹

Hard Facts on the Title for Christ (*adoni*, my lord, not **Adonai**, Lord God) in Psalm 110:1

[My explanation for English readers is in square brackets. See further the appendix in our Who is Jesus? booklet, free in various languages at our site restorationfellowship.org]

¹ From personal correspondence, June 24th, 2000.

Here is the truth about Psalm 110:1, the NT's master key text, from the entry "Lord" in *Whittaker Revised Brown Driver Briggs* (standard lexicon of biblical Hebrew used by all scholars). *Strong's Concordance* will not show you this critically important distinction.

[Psalm 110:1: "The LORD (YHVH) says to my lord (adoni)..." pronounced "adonee" = my lord, never a divine title.]

Here we have the biblical usage of the all important title **adoni**. It has these meanings:

1. singular. *lord, master*

With suffix of 1st person singular [**adoni**, my lord, Ps. 110:1, **195 times in OT**]

(1) **ref. to men: my lord, my master**

(a) *master*

(b) *husband*

The Hebrew *adoni* ("my lord") is wrongly capitalized in Psalm 110:1 in many versions but not in RSV, NRSV, NEB, JPS, etc. In other words most translations put a capital L on the second lord in Psalm 110:1. This misleads the reader into believing that the second lord is **Adonai**, the title for the supreme Lord God! In fact the word is **adoni** ("adonee"), a title which in all 195 occurrences never refers to God, but always to a *human* superior, occasionally a created angel.

Jesus the Son is the supreme **human** lord, not God.

This title (*adoni*, my lord) is the Messianic title *par excellence* for Jesus as the lord Messiah (Luke 2:11). Luke also calls Jesus the **Lord's** Messiah (Yahweh's Messiah: Luke 2:26). Elizabeth was visited by Mary, the mother of "my lord" (Luke 1:43). She was not visited by God, but by the lord Messiah (Luke 2:11).

"Our lord David" (1 Kings 1:11, etc.) provides the model for the final David's title, as "our/my lord Jesus Christ" (hundreds of times the proper title for Jesus, the lord Messiah). Jesus is the lord King Messiah. Our/ my lord Jesus Christ.

A professor at Dallas Theological Seminary kindly agreed to change the confusing misinformation in their *Bible Knowledge Commentary* which reported wrongly the second lord of Psalm 110:1 as *Adonai*! The word there is *adoni*.

Paula Frederiksen, Professor of Religious Studies at Boston University, mistakenly and inadvertently reported the second lord of Psalm 110:1 as *Adonai*, and I suggested that the mistake be changed. She graciously wrote, "Thanks so much for pointing out the error in my reference to **Adonai** in Ps. 110:1. I grabbed my Tanach [OT] and you are right — the word is *adoni*, not *adonai*. We all need each other!"

The supreme importance of Psalm 110:1 has been noted by today's leading scholar on Christology, Dr. James Dunn:

"The affirmation of Jesus' lordship is one which we can trace back at least to the earliest days of Christian reflection on Christ's resurrection. One of the Scriptures which quickly became **luminous** for the first believers was evidently Ps. 110:1. The first Christians now knew who 'my lord' was who was thus addressed by the Lord God. It could only be Messiah Jesus. The text was clearly in mind in several Pauline passages."²

Dunn on 1 Corinthians 8:4-6: "In direct opposition to the tolerant pluralism of Hellenism, Paul affirms, 'But for us there is one lord Jesus Christ.' For Paul the risen Christ was simply 'the Lord' and he was personally convinced that eventually his lordship would be acknowledged by all. As 1 Cor. 8:5-6 itself implies this was an expression not so much of intolerance as of belief in the uniqueness of Christ, and a corollary of the equivalent uncompromising **Jewish monotheism**. Jesus is the *one* Lord just as, and indeed because, God is the *one* God" (p. 248).

James Dunn: "Should we then say that Jesus was confessed as GOD from the earliest days in Hellenistic Christianity? That would be to claim too much.

"1. The emergence of a confession of Jesus in terms of divinity was largely facilitated by the emergence of **Ps. 110:1** from very early on (most clearly in Mark 12:36; Acts 2:34; 1 Cor. 15:25; Heb.

² *The Theology of Paul*, Eerdmans, 1998, p. 246.

1:13). ‘The Lord says to my lord...’ Its importance lies here in the double use of *kurios* [lord]. The one is clearly Yahweh, but who is the other? [Note two subjects, two individuals.] Clearly *not* Yahweh, but an exalted being whom the Psalmist calls *kurios* [lord].

“2. Paul calls Jesus *kurios*, but he seems to have marked reservations about actually calling him ‘God.’ (Rom. 9:5 is the only candidate within the main Pauline corpus, and even there the text is unclear.) Similarly he refrains from praying *to* Jesus. More typical of his attitude is that he prays to GOD *through* Jesus (Rom. 1:8; 7:25; 2 Cor. 1:20; Col. 3:17). [Paul does give thanks to Jesus, too (1 Tim. 1:12)]

“3. ‘Jesus is Lord’ is only part of a fuller confession for Paul. For at the same time as he affirms Jesus as ‘Lord,’ he also affirms ‘God is one’ (1 Cor. 8:5-6; Eph. 4:5-6). Here Christianity shows itself as a developed form of Judaism, with its **monotheistic confession as one of the most important parts of its Jewish inheritance**; for in Judaism the most fundamental confession is ‘God is one.’ ‘There is only one God’ (Deut. 6:4). Hence also Rom. 3:30; Gal. 3:20; 1 Tim. 2:5 (cp. James 2:19). Within Palestine and the Jewish mission such an affirmation would have been unnecessary — Jews and Christians shared a belief in God’s oneness [not a Trinity!]. But in the Gentile mission this Jewish presupposition within Christianity would have emerged into prominence, in face of the wider belief in ‘gods many.’ The point for us to note is that *Paul can hail Jesus as Lord not in order to identify him with God, but rather if anything to distinguish him from the One God (cp. particularly 1 Cor. 15:24-28)*. So too Jesus’ Lordship could be expressed in cosmic dimensions without posing too many problems to monotheism, since Wisdom speculations provided a ready and appropriate terminology (particularly 1 Cor. 8:6, Col. 1:15-20; Heb. 1:3ff).”³

Dunn continues:

“So far as we can now tell, Jesus thought of himself as Wisdom’s *messenger* — a self-understanding reflected particularly in Matt. 11:25-27; Luke 7:31-35; 11:49-51. That is to say, there is no evidence that Jesus thought of himself as preexistent Wisdom and nothing in the traditions of Q [source of the gospel information] and Mark which implies that the thought of preexistence was present either to Jesus or Mark. The idea of preexistence first entered by way of implication with *identification* of Christ with *Wisdom herself*...

[In post-biblical times, preexistence *in God’s plan* was turned into a literal preexistence of a second Person in the Godhead, thus violating the creed of Jesus, Mark 12:29, agreed with a fellow Jew.]

“Now here we must recall that within Judaism Wisdom was only a way of speaking about God’s action in creation, revelation and redemption without actually speaking about God. Wisdom, like the name of God, the spirit of God, the logos (word) of God denotes the immanent [present with us humans] activity of God, without detracting from God’s wholly other transcendence. For pre-Christian Judaism Wisdom was neither an inferior heavenly being (one of the heavenly council) nor a divine hypostasis [=person] (as in the **later Trinitarian conception of God**). Such a development would have been (and in the event was) unacceptable to Judaism’s strict monotheism [and to the monotheism of Jesus!]. Wisdom in fact is no more than *personification of God’s immanence*, no more to be regarded as a distinct person within the Godhead than the rabbinic concept or talk of a preexistent Torah.

“The probability then is that Paul in applying Wisdom language to Christ is in effect saying: that which you have hitherto ascribed to Wisdom [or Torah or word], we see most fully expressed and embodied in Christ; that same power and wisdom you recognize to be manifested in God’s creative, revelatory and redemptive purpose, we now see manifested finally and exclusively in Jesus Christ our Lord. [Note in connection with the ‘charismatic’ debate that critics of some ‘charismata’ are rightly unimpressed when they are asked to believe that Jesus Christ is present, when only ‘power’ and not wisdom and revealed Truth are present!]...This is the reason Paul never used the word Jesus alone for the preexistent one. Jesus was not himself preexistent, he was the man that preexistent Wisdom became” (p. 221).

“Paul does not yet understand the risen Christ as the *object* of worship; he is the theme of worship...Even the **title Lord** becomes a way of **distinguishing Jesus from God** rather than identifying

³ *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, SCM Press, 1990, p. 53, emphasis his.

him with God (Rom. 15:6; 1 Cor. 8:6; 15:24-28; 2 Cor. 1:3, 11:31; Eph. 1:3, 17; Phil. 2:11; Col 1:3. Paul was and remained a monotheist” (p. 226). [Jesus and Paul were unitary, not Trinitarian monotheists.]

Professor Biggs: “The Apostles did *not* identify Jesus with Yahweh. Ps. 110:1 prevented this” (Regius Prof. of Ecclesiastical History, Oxford).⁴

“*Echad* means one and not two...The words of the Shema take for granted that Yahweh is unique, the Only God (Ecc. 4:8)” (Prof. A.F. Knight, *Expository Times*).

Did not Jesus command us to accept this creed as the basis of obedient faith? Jesus was not a Trinitarian, so why are you?

“From Justin Martyr to the Council of Nicea, Christians generally built up their interpretations in accord with patterns established in the earlier period. **They went beyond the writings of the NT age**, principally in two respects: in applying the entire psalm to Jesus and in arguing explicitly for his divinity [Deity] on the basis of its first and third verses” (Dr. Hay, formerly prof. at Princeton, *Glory at the Right Hand: Psalm 110 in Early Christian Interpretation*, p. 51). [It was, however, proper to apply the whole psalm to Jesus, as the NT does]

Professor Bateman of Dallas Theological Seminary maintained in an article “Psalm 110:1 in the New Testament” (*Bibliotheca Sacra*, Oct. 1992) that Psalm 110:1 really could not refer to Jesus since (as Bateman thought) Jesus is God and *adoni* (my lord, not Lord) never means God. Bateman says “the form ‘to my lord’ is never used elsewhere in the Old Testament as a divine reference.” He presents a strong case for his position, stating that 94% of the 168 (actually 195) occurrences of the forms of *adoni* apply to earthly lords, with the remaining occurrences being “when Joshua, Gideon, Daniel, and Zechariah addressed an angelic being as ‘my lord.’”⁵

I note this:

The text in Psalm 110:1 is absolutely secure. There are no manuscript variations. *L’adoni* means “to my lord.”

There are **195** samples of *adoni* (my lord). These include “my lord” (162 times), “against my lord” (twice), “and my lord” (6 times), “from my lord” (once) and “to/for my lord” (24 times). Total: 195 times.

L’adoni, “to my lord,” appears 24 times. These are found in Genesis, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 1 Chronicles and Psalms (110:1). *L’adoni* is properly translated in our versions, with a lower-case letter on lord, as:

“to my master Abraham” (*l’adoni*)

“to my lord Esau” (*l’adoni*)

“to our lord” (Joseph) (*l’adoni*)

David says to Saul: “to my lord [*l’adoni*], the LORD’s anointed.”

Abigail says to David: “for my lord [*l’adoni*] who is fighting the LORD’s battles.”

Abigail says, “The LORD shall do for my lord [*l’adoni*] David.”

Abigail says, “The LORD will do well for my lord [*l’adoni*] David.”

Joab says, “May the LORD add to His people a 100 times as many as they are. But my lord king [*adoni*, David], are they not all my lord’s [*adoni*] servants? Why does my lord [*adoni*, David] seek this thing?”

David says, “The LORD said to my lord [*l’adoni*]” (Messiah, Ps. 110:1).

The phrase *l’adoni* (to my lord) is contrasted with the one LORD YHVH/Kurios both in the Hebrew and in the Greek Septuagint translation from the third century BC. Because *l’adoni* is rendered in Greek as *to kurio mou* — to **my** lord — we have the clearest confirmation that the vowel points are entirely accurate in our Masoretic text. (The vowel points were added in the Hebrew from around 600 AD.) In other words both the LXX (Septuagint, Greek version of the OT) and the NT Scripture translate the *l’adoni* of Psalm 110:1 as *to kurio mou*, “to my lord.”

Thus we have testimony from BC times plus the inspired New Testament that the vowel points for *adoni* have not been altered. There is no basis at all for questioning the accuracy of the Bible at this point.

⁴ *International Critical Commentary, 1 Pet.*, 1910, p.99.

⁵ Barry Davis, “Is Psalm 110:1 a Messianic Psalm?” (*Bibliotheca Sacra*, April-June, 2000).

It is utterly impossible that Psalm 110:1 could ever have read “The LORD (Yahweh) said to **Adonai** (the Lord God)”!! *Kurios mou* in Greek corresponds to “**my** lord” and *adoni* is never a title of Deity.

Psalm 110:1 is the master Christological key to the New Testament. The original meaning of “lord” here has been either ignored by commentators (including Dr. Bauckham who thinks that the Shema was split and divided between God and Jesus) **or corrupted in many translations by placing a capital letter on the second lord, which according to the practice of the translations would misleadingly tell you that the word there is Adonai**, which it is not. The NASB (edition of 1996) in its margin at Acts 2:34 misreports the facts of the Hebrew text and says that the Hebrew word for “my lord” was *Adonai*, the Lord God. *Adonai* is the Lord God in all 449 occurrences. The word as we know, in Ps. 110:1 is not in fact *Adonai* but *adoni*, a mere difference between God and man!

I wrote to “the dean” of evangelical scholarship, Dr Howard Marshall:

“Professor Marshall, may I please venture a comment on your interesting discussion of the all-important Christological testimonium from Psalm 110:1. On p. 204 of *Jesus the Savior* you note the crucial difference between *Adonai*, the divine title, and *adoni*, the exclusively human title (195 times). You say that the confusion of the two lords is avoided in the printed versions of the OT which use ‘lord’ both times and print the first lord in caps, LORD for YHVH.

“The problem is that most (not RV, RSV and NRSV) **print the second lord with initial capital Lord**. Now that form of printing, with capital, belongs in every other case to the Hebrew *Adonai*, the substitute divine title. This leaves the reader with the false impression that *Adonai* and not *adoni* is the word in the original. Thus in many commentaries and some books (even commentaries such as the Dallas Seminary commentary) it is confidently asserted that the Messiah is defined in the Psalm as *Adonai*, and that is proof of his Deity. The facts here presented in the Psalm, however, place the Messiah in a superior human, royal Messianic category. It is *in that sense* that the NT recognizes Jesus as Lord (cp. Luke 2:11) and Mary as ‘the mother of my lord’ (Luke 1:43).

“Would it be fair to add that the LXX version shows the difference properly by rendering *l’Adonai* (to the Lord God) as *to kurio* whereas *l’adoni* (to my lord) comes over in the Greek as *to kurio mou*, ‘to my lord’?

“I feel that this Psalm and the careful distinction it displays is only now beginning to get the careful attention it deserves.”

Dr. Marshall replied graciously:

“Dear Anthony, I agree with what you say about Psalm 110:1. The LXX is translating correctly...The use of the Psalm does not identify Jesus as Adonai.” — Dr. Howard Marshall

Psalm 110:1 is the backbone of New Testament revelation about God and His one Messiah, Jesus. It is the New Testament Greek which confirms and endorses the Hebrew text of the Old Testament.

“The oracle of YHVH to *adoni*” (my lord, not Lord!). When translated into Greek in BC times, this came out as the oracle of *Kurios* (YHVH) to my lord (*adoni*). The New Testament follows the Septuagint here and confirms the Hebrew. There is a huge difference in meaning between LORD GOD and *adoni*, my lord. My lord is the Messiah, not God.

It is a worldwide theological disaster to confuse the unique, unmatched position of the God of the Bible, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and of Jesus, and thus of Christians. It would be a calamity to suggest that GOD was speaking to GOD! This would immediately signal two GODS, two YAHWEHS. That is not monotheism and is condemned from one end of Scripture to the other. ✧