

## THE NAMES OF GOD IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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The panorama of names in the New Testament is not nearly as extensive as that of the Old Testament, nor is there as much preoccupation with other gods. Already the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, had failed to develop an equivalent for the four letter name YHWH which expressed God's personal name; so the distinction between the class name and the personal name of God is entirely absent in the New Testament. Furthermore, the Greek language did not use plural noun forms to express singular emphatic meanings as the Hebrew did.

### Ho theos, "God, god"

Like Hebrew *el, elohim*, the Greek *theos* is a class noun, but it also has several important differences: (a) it has both a masculine (*theos*) and a feminine (*thea*) form, and (b) it is much less personal and more philosophical in its function. Here now follows a listing of contexts in which *theos* appears:

1. *Referring to the one supreme God.* In this context it frequently is preceded, but need not be, by the definite article. (The English quotation is not always a reliable guide as to the presence or absence of the definite article.) Examples are: "God is able to raise up children to Abraham" (Mt 3.9); "God made them male and female" (Mk 10.6); "you are the God who made the sky, and the earth, and the sea" (Acts 4.24); "even as there are many gods, but to us there is one God" (1 Cor 8.5).

2. *Referring to individual deities other than God.* Examples are "the star of your God Remphan" (Acts 7.43); "to the unknown god" (Acts 17.23).

3. *Gods in polytheistic settings:* "make for us gods who will go before us" (Acts 7.40); "for even if some are called gods . . . even as there are many gods" (1 Cor 8.5); "not knowing God, you served as slaves those not by nature being gods" (Gal 4.8).

4. *People as divine beings:* "the voice of a god, and not of a man" (Acts 12.22); "the gods having become men, are come down to us" (Acts 14.11); "it is written in your law, 'I said, you are gods'" (Jn 10.34-35 quoted from Ps 52.6).

5. *Of things or principles that become exceedingly important to people:* "whose god is the belly" (Phil 3.19); "whom the god of this age has blinded" (2 Cor 4.4). This last reference is seen by many as referring not merely to a worldly principle, but to the devil himself.

6. *Of idols as not being God:* "saying that they are not gods, which are made by hands" (Acts 19.26); "you served as slaves those not by nature being gods" (Gal 4.8).

7. *Of female deities:* "the great goddess Artemis" (Acts 19.27); "nor blaspheming your goddess" (Acts 19.37).

8. *Of Christ as God.* Here exegetes differ sharply on whether or not *theos*, when used of Jesus, should be taken literally. See Jn 1.1, Jn 20.28, 1 Jn 5.20, Rom 9.5, Tit 2.13, Heb 1. 8-9.

When we study Old Testament quotations in the New Testament, we usually find that *el/elohim* has been rendered with *theos*, for example "Immanuel—

which translated means 'God is with us' (Mt 1.23 from Is 7.14); "it is written in your law, 'I said, you are gods'" (Jn 10.34 from Ps 82.6); "there is no fear of God" (Rom 3.18 from Ps 36.1).

However, we also find that the name *yhwh* has also been rendered by the word *theos*: "in the last days, God says, I will pour . . ." (Acts 2.17 from Jl 2.27-29); "the glory of God appeared to our father Abraham" (Acts 7.2 from Gen 12.1); "God gave them a spirit of slumber" (Rom 11.7 from Is 29.9-10); "I and the children whom God gave me" (Heb 2.13 from Is 8.18).

### Kurios

*Ho kurios* basically means "master" or "owner". It can be used for the owner of possessions (Gal 4.1), the master of a house (Mk 13.35), the lord of the harvest (Mt 9.38), the master of slaves or servants (Mt 13.27), husband of the wife (1 Pet 3.6), father of the son (Mt 21.30), a person in high position addressed as *sir* (Mat 27.63), and, in Greek religious usage, any and all deities (A & G Lexicon, page 460). From the above list of functions we can readily see that it equates very closely with Hebrew *adonai*. The following quotations from the Old Testament occurring in the New Testament illustrate how Hebrew *adonai* has been rendered by Greek *kurios*: "Sarah obeyed Abraham calling him lord (*adonai*)" (1 Pet 3.6 from Gen 18.12); "the Lord (*yhwh*) said to my Lord (*adonai*)" (Acts 2.34 from Ps 110.1).

As the last quotation already indicates, *kurios* is used to translate other Old Testament words besides *adonai*; and in addition, there are several usages that are unique to the New Testament. We note some of these in the next few paragraphs.

*Yhwh* as *kurios*. In the Old Testament discussion we have already shown how the Hebrews replaced *yhwh* with *adonai* when they read the Scriptures orally. Later editions of the Septuagint followed this usage slavishly and so rendered the name *yhwh* with *kurios* in almost all its occurrences. This now meant that the New Testament no longer maintained the distinction between *yhwh* and *adonai*, but translated both of them with *kurios*. We can illustrate this with the following quotations from the Old Testament found in the New: "the Lord has commanded us, 'I have set you for a light . . .'" (Acts 13.47 from Is 49.6); "praise the Lord all nations" (Rom 15.11 from Ps 117.1); "blessed is the man to whom the Lord will in no way charge sin" (Rom 4.8 from Ps 32.2); "I foresaw the Lord before me" (Acts 2.25 from Ps 16.8); "everyone who shall call upon the name of the Lord" (Acts 2.21 from Joel 2.32).

*Elohim* rendered as *kurios*. As already mentioned, the New Testament sometimes renders *elohim* not as "God", but as "Lord", as in "the word of the Lord remains forever" (1 Pet 1.25 from Is 40.8); "as I live, says the Lord, that every knee . . ." (Rom 14.11 from Isa 45.23); "the spirit of the Lord is upon me" (Lk 4.18 from Is 61.1). In terms of Greek language usage, we find that God, and in fact all the gods, are regularly referred to as *kurios* "lord". Recent research has shown that it was customary usage in many languages of the Mediterranean area to refer to their deities by the title *kurios* "lord". This practice is also followed in the New Testament, "you shall not swear falsely, but shall give your oaths to the Lord" (Mt 5.33); "walking blameless in all the

commandments . . . of the Lord” (Lk 1.6); “the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Christ” (Acts 4.26); “the true tabernacle which the Lord pitched” (Heb 8.2). Even lesser gods are spoken of as *kurioi*, “many gods and many lords” (1 Cor 8.5). This latter usage is well documented in many non-biblical sources. There are also a number of interesting phrase-expressions that use *kurios* to speak of God, for instance, angel of the Lord (Mt 1.20), name of the Lord (Jas 5.10), spirit of the Lord (Acts 5.9), word of the Lord (Acts 8.25), and so on.

*Jesus as Lord.* There are only very few instances, except in direct address where it really means *sir*, in which Jesus is called *kurios* before his resurrection, such as “say, the Lord has need of it” (Mk 11.3); “they took away the Lord out of the tomb” (Jn 20.2); “then when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard” (Jn 4.1). However, after the resurrection, *kurios* “Lord” became one of the favorite forms of reference for Jesus. It occurred either with or without his proper name. Some examples are: “men who have been with us all the time the Lord Jesus came and went . . .” (Acts 1.21); “that the Lord Jesus in the night in which he was betrayed” (1 Cor 11.23); “hearing of your faith in the Lord Jesus (Eph 1.15); “James, the brother of the Lord” (Gal 1.19); “the Lord himself will descend from heaven” (1 Th 4.16).

The title *kurios* occurs also with the composite names Jesus Christ and Christ Jesus: “on behalf of the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 15.26); “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 15.6); “our Lord Jesus Christ” (Jude 4); “the knowledge of Christ Jesus, my Lord” (Phil 3.8); “eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 6.23); “purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Eph 3.11).

As we have already said, the New Testament deals with Hebrew *adonai* and *yhwh* in the same way and renders them both as “Lord”. Furthermore, since the Greek does not distinguish between the generic Hebrew name *elohim* and the personal name *yhwh* when it speaks of God, it leaves a potential ambiguity in passages quoted from the Old Testament. However, in the New Testament itself, the practice of using *kurios* to refer to both God and Jesus creates an actual ambiguity in many passages. One often does not know whether certain statements refer to God or to Jesus, for instance “being built up . . . in the fear of the Lord” (Acts 9.31); “each as the Lord has called, so let him walk” (1 Cor 7.17); “the Lord be with you” (2 Th 3.16).

### The avoidance of God’s name in the New Testament

In the Old Testament section we have discussed the Hebrews’ avoidance of their God’s personal name *yhwh*. This taboo continued to grow until in New Testament times it was often extended even to the Greek generic name for God *theos*. The gospel according to Matthew shows the most persistent pattern of avoidance of the divine name in its almost exclusive use of “Kingdom of heaven” for what all the other gospel writers call “Kingdom of God”. (See Mt 3.2, 3.17, 4.17, and so on.) Other examples of the replacement of God’s name by “heaven” are: “I have sinned against heaven” (Lk 15.18); “the baptism of John, was it out of heaven or out of men?” (Mk 11.30); “seeking from Him a sign from heaven” (Lk 11.16); “unless it is given him from Heaven” (Jn 3.27).

There are other expressions which may be either praise names or the means of avoiding God's name. Among them are:

*The Most High*: "he will be called Son of the Most High" (Lk 1.32); "the Most High dwells not in Temples made by hand" (Acts 7.47).

*The Highest*: "you shall be sons of the Highest" (Lk 6.35); "the power of the Highest shall overshadow you" (Lk 1.35).

*The Majesty on High*: "sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on High" (Heb 1.3).

*Majesty in Heaven*: "the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven" (Heb 8.1).

*The Blessed*: "are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" (Mk 14.61).

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## TRANSLATING THE DIVINE NAME YHWH IN SHONA

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### The Name YHWH in Hebrew

Many important articles have been written in journals, commentaries and Bible Dictionaries about the name *Yahweh*. The following is a brief summary of those findings which are important for our purposes:

(i) Among the Hebrew names for God, the name *El* or *Elohim* is used as both a common noun and as a name. As a common noun it is usually translated by the general term god, and as a name by the form God. The name *Yahweh*, however, is used only as a personal name. There is only one God with this name, and he is the God of Israel. Two other names for God in the Hebrew scriptures are *Shaddai* "God of the Mountain" usually translated as Almighty God, and *Sabaot* "God of the Armies" usually translated as Lord of Hosts. There are of course other names for God in Hebrew too, which are usually translated as The Holy One, The Most High, and so on.

(ii) The name *Yahweh* is derived from the Hebrew verb "to be" which is *hayah*. The meaning of this name is not one hundred percent certain, but it has been interpreted by Hebrew scholars as meaning "He who exists", "He who is present", "He who will be", or even "He who causes to be". These interpretations are all closely linked to the interpretation of Exodus 3.14. In the Hebrew text of this verse it is impossible to be certain of the tenses and aspect intended. It can be read as in the present tense, in which case the translation is "I AM WHO I AM . . . tell them I AM has sent you". It can be read as being in the future tense, in which case the translation is "I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE". It can be read as a combination of both of the above, and then rendered as "I AM WHAT I WILL BE". Or it can be read as the causative form and interpreted as "I CAUSE TO BE WHATEVER COMES INTO BEING". An