The Origins of *Adonai* in the Hebrew Scriptures

by Ren Manetti

It is a widely accepted and spoken truism that the vowel points for *Jehovah* in Ben Chayyim’s *Second Rabbinic Bible*, a key source for the King James Version’s English translation, were derived from *Adonai*, the title of supreme lordship reserved for Elohim and Elohim alone. *Jehovah*, thus pointed, was to be read *Adonai* out loud (Metzger 33). Usually, though, the preferred reading in a Masoretic manuscript is given in the margin while the incorrect or sacrilegious reading is given in the text marked with the vowel points of the marginal reading (Ginsburg’s *Introduction* 183). This, though, is not the case with *Adonai* and *Jehovah*, for neither word ever appears in the margin. Hence, beginning with Gesenius a perpetual qere, as for the feminine form of the Hebrew relative pronoun (66) is postulated for *Jehovah*. In other words, to explain the occurrences of the sheva, holem, and qamets vowel points that comprise one of the frequent spellings of *Jehovah* in ancient manuscripts, Gesenius hypothesized that the vowels of *Adonai* were perpetually placed with the consonants of the Tetragrammaton (YHVH) to form *Yehovah* (66 and 300).

More recently, a number of problems with Gesenius’ theory have been pointed out. One significant issue is that in both the Aleppo and Leningrad codices, the Tetragrammaton is most frequently pointed not with sheva, holem, qamets, but with sheva, and qamets only. Hence, postulating a qere for the two syllable Hebrew word shema (the name) makes more sense than postulating a qere for the three-syllable *Adonai*. Hence, some have postulated that the perpetual qere was not for *Adonai*, but for *Shema* (Gertoux 140).¹ In fact, the evidence of the Hebrew text is most readily explained not by *Jehovah* pointed as a perpetual qere for *Adonai*, but by the use of *Adonai* in limited ways as, for a lack of better terminology, a qere for *Jehovah*. Since *Adonai* was to be spoken, it was the qere. However, wherever *Adonai* appeared, *Jehovah* was to be understood as what was written.

*Adonai*, Strong’s number 136, occurs 439 times in the Saint Petersburg Codex (L). It occurs 134 times as a deliberate exchange for *Jehovah* by ancient Hebrew scribes (Ginsburg Massora, volume 4, p. 28).² *Adonai* also occurs 305 times as part of the biblical phrase, “*Adonai* Jehovah.” It occurs just one

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¹ Gerard Gertoux, on page 140, references Muroaka’s *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* p. 73 on the Aramaic *Shema* as the qere in the Hebrew Bible.
² This list is also cross-referenced in E.W. Bullinger’s *Companion Bible*, Appendix 32 and in *The New
additional time in Micah 1:2 (BHS). In the 305 uses in “Adonai Jehovah” another scribal intervention occurs in every instance. A look at the origins of Adonai, as well as the specific scribal irregularities in the 305 uses of Adonai with Jehovah leads to the conclusion that Adonai only exists in the Hebrew Scriptures according to a specific, limited, scribal tradition as an early type of qere, or coded reading, for Jehovah.

**God’s Titles as Lord in the Hebrew Old Testament**

Adonai is a form related to the Hebrew word adon (Strong’s number 113). Of the 335 times adon appears in the Old Testament, it appears 105 times in the plural form. Of these 105 uses of the plural, about 100 are uses of the Hebrew plural intensive, also called the honorific plural. That is, the plural form of lord, adonim, is used when only one lord is intended. Many Hebrew scholars, such as Gesenius, call the use of the plural form for a singular noun the pluralis maestatis. E.W. Bullinger in his *Figures of Speech used in the Bible* discusses a related figure of speech, the heterosis of number in which words are used in the plural in places that grammatically demand a singular use (535). This is done to emphasize great excellence or magnitude. With adonim, as with Elohim, the use of the plural intensive is so frequent it is part of the grammar and idiom of Hebrew itself.

While adon and adonim are each used of God and man, Adonai is used only of God. For instance, although Joseph had concealed his true identity, his brothers understood his position of authority in Egypt. Joseph was the supreme lord and ruler of all of Egypt. Hence, his brothers used the plural intensive, adonim, to describe him. Pharaoh, of course, was above Joseph as lord in Egypt; however, Pharaoh had conferred his complete authority and sovereignty on Joseph. The representative of Pharaoh, then, was also known as adonim, the supreme lord, of Egypt. Likewise, in Gen 39:20, the first occurrence of the plural intensive with lord, adonim, in reference to man is of Potiphar, the Egyptian who bought Joseph as a slave. This intensive use of adon for lord indicates a master who has the power of life or of death over his servant, a master who has legal ownership of his servant.

Linguistically, it is important to note that in Genesis 43:20; 44:5, 7-9, 18 -20 and 22, when Joseph’s brethren speak to him directly, they refer to him as adon, without the plural intensive. They are not addressing him according to his full authority. They address him according to his immediate authority over

*World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*, Appendix 1A. Bullinger’s list is in error in several places.
them. The plural intensive form of lord occurs much less frequently with pronouns involving direct address (my, our). Hence, there are a number of places in which adon, rather than adonim is used of Jehovah God.

God’s people, as a body, address Him as Adonim in Nehemiah 8:10. Likewise, the Psalmist, in Psalm 8:1, on behalf of Israel, addresses Jehovah as Adonim according to His full glory known to all the earth. Additionally, He is “Lord (Adonim) of lords” in both Deuteronomy 10:17 and in Psalm 136:3. However, Jehovah is “Lord (adon) of all the earth” in Joshua 3:11 and 3:13. However, in all of these references to God, not once is He called Adonai.

The Etymological Origin of Adonai

The problem of the root meaning of Adonai is very challenging because, when the first person singular affix is added, the Hebrew spellings for “my lords” (אֲדֹנַי – Genesis 19:2), for “my lord” (אֲדֹנִי – Genesis 23:6), and for “Adonai” is אֲדֹנָי – Genesis 18:31) are identical as to the Hebrew consonants. Only the vowel points added by the Masorites distinguish each of these Hebrew word forms.

| Genesis 19:2 | אֲדֹנַי | “my lords” |
| Genesis 18:31 | אֲדֹנָי | “Adonai” |
| Genesis 23:6 | אֲדֹנִי | “my lord” |

Additionally, once the first person singular suffix is affixed to adonim, the vowel points for the plural form of my lords results in the same pronunciation as Adonai. In other words, in Hebrew my lords and Adonai are homonyms; they are spelled differently but they sound exactly alike. The spelling difference in Adonai is the “t” shaped qamets that appears under the third letter (the nun or N). This difference results only in a different Hebrew diphthong with the yod (the last letter). However, both Hebrew diphthongs, qamets-yod and patach-yod are pronounced in the exact same way. In English a similar phenomenon occurs with the words “weigh” and “way.” Hence, it is most probable that this title for God is related, not to “my lord” but to “my supreme lord.” However, as one looks for scriptural confirmation of this notion of the derivation of
Adonai from the Hebrew of “my supreme lord” such cannot be found. This is because every use of Adonai is tied, not to scripture, but to a scribal tradition. Virtually every occurrence of Adonai in the Old Testament originates from the Sopherim, the ancient Hebrew scribes, and not from the Author of the Hebrew Scriptures. If then, Adonai is a scribal invention, it is ingenious. The listener hears adonai (my supreme lord), but the informed reader, because of the qamets, recognizes the originally written word Jehovah.

Bullinger’s The Companion Bible, Appendix 4, says that Adonai (Strong’s 136) is the product of the Hebrew vowels for Jehovah being associated, via vowel points, with the Hebrew word adon. Dr. Bullinger provides no evidence for what seems, at first blush, to be an offhand remark. Dr. C.D. Ginsburg, however, whose Introduction to the Hebrew Bible Dr. Bullinger mentions in his own Appendices 30, 31, 32 and 33, writes that exactly the opposite occurred. Ginsburg wrote that the vowel points for Adonai were, at times, associated with Jehovah, while at other times, the Hebrew vowel points for Elohim (God) were associated with Jehovah (Introduction 367). For Dr. Ginsburg’s thesis there seems to be significant evidence.

For instance, notice the spelling of Jehovah found in Exodus 4:10. The vowel point under the third letter (the T-like qamets) agrees with the vowel pointing under the third letter of Adonai, (also from the Exodus 4:10: “And Moses said unto JHVH, O my Adonai”).

Exodus 4:10: יְהוָה Jehovah

אֲדֹנָי Adonai

Likewise, the vowel point under the third letter (a chireq: transliterated i, pronounced ee in English) of the unusual spelling of the Jehovah found in Ezekiel 39:25 agrees with the vowel point under the third letter in Elohim as found in Genesis 1:2.

Ezekiel 39:25 יְהוִֹה Jehovah (this rarer spelling of YHVH also exhibits Elohim’s Chateph Segol – see footnote 4 below)

Genesis 1:2 יְלֹהֵי Elohim

This change in the vowel pointing under Jehovah to agree with Elohim occurs throughout the Old
Testament wherever the Hebrew phrase “Adonai Jehovah” is found. Logically, then, as Jehovah plainly draws the chireq from Elohim, surely it draws the qamets from Adonai. But such an explanation may be entirely backwards. What requires further inquiry is that Jehovah is pointed to agree with Elohim only where the Hebrew phrase “Adonai Jehovah” is found. Perhaps Adonai is pointed so that what was originally written would be understood as Jehovah, and Jehovah is pointed to indicate that what was originally written should be understood as Elohim. In fact, every use of this phrase “Adonai Jehovah” in the Aramaic Targums (the Aramaic Old Testament) reads, “Jehovah Elohim.” Hence, there is not one Old Testament use of Adonai that cannot be associated with an intervention of the Sopherim. Hence, a biblical etymological origin for Adonai cannot be established.

The Witness of the Great Isaiah Scroll

Hence, Dr. Bullinger’s notion that the word Adonai is the scribal invention, not Jehovah, deserves further reflection. The Masoretic Hebrew manuscripts list 134 places, where the original Hebrew word Jehovah was altered to read Adonai. The system of marginal notation that involved counting each and every character copied down to the jots and tittles is beyond compare in medieval times (Ginsburg’s Introduction 108-113). Why, then, is there a list of these alterations rather than a qere with marginal notes? It’s because, if the Masoretic lists are correct, or if they were interpreted properly by Ginsburg, there is evidence that traditional or accidental replacements of Jehovah with Adonai are far older than the vowel points of the Masoretic manuscripts themselves. While the St. Petersburg Codex is dated to 916 A.D., the Great Isaiah Scroll (Q -- of the Dead Sea Scrolls), has been variously dated to about 100 B.C (Tov, and Pfann). The Great Isaiah Scroll readings are without vowel points, yet in some places, they include readings of Jehovah in the very places in which Ginsburg’s lists indicated that Adonai had replaced Jehovah (see Isa 6:11 and Isa 7:14). Hence, in some places the process of substitution did not occur until after the first century B.C. On the other hand, there are occurrences of Adonai (without vowel points) exactly where Ginsburg’s list says such a substitution did occur (see Isa 7:20 and Isa 9:17). Hence, if the Masoretic lists are correct, then they refer to substitutions for Jehovah that took place long
before the invention of vowel point notation.³

Did a list of such accidental or deliberate substitutions exist in the temple copies of the Hebrew Scriptures during the first century before Christ? There is no evidence of this one way or the other. However, Q, in combination with the Aramaic Targums, does establish a great antiquity for the use of Adonai for Jehovah. Hence, the Great Isaiah scroll also explains why the variant readings of Adonai or Jehovah are not represented in the same way other qere/ketiv forms are given by the Masorites. The absence of notes in the margin do not mean that the variant readings should be considered a kind of perpetual qere (Qere perpetuum) as, for instance, is the case with the feminine third person pronoun. Instead, because of the great age of these substitutions of Adonai for Jehovah the development the perpetual qere, and qere/ketiv systems could not have yet evolved. Since, the qere/ketiv and perpetual qere rely on vowel points, such a system could not have been contemporaneous with the first instance of intended or unintended substitutions. Hence, such variations could only have been handed down from antiquity by way of a list, a list such as Ginsburg found and referenced. It is also possible that the traditional reverence for divine titles that precluded even the erasure of an error (Tov 387-395) complicated and compounded early errant substitutions so that a list passed down from the Sopherim to the Masorites became absolutely obligatory.

Whether or not the temple editions preserved the original lists about Adonai, the weight of the evidence of the Great Isaiah Scroll, the Hebrew Scriptures themselves, the Masoretic list, and the Aramaic Old Testament is best explained by the theory that when Masorites pointed the Hebrew text, they also attempted to illuminate the understanding of these ancient substitutions. First, they included a list of alterations of the Tetragrammaton that predates the Hebrew vowel points and, secondly, the Masorites pointed each of these substitutions of Adonai with the qamets of Jehovah. Hence, the lists of Ginsburg must match exactly the occurrences of Adonai in the Hebrew Scriptures. For whatever reasons the Sopherim listed these uses of Adonai as substitutions for Jehovah, these were the same reasons the Masorites pointed the third syllable Adonai with the qamets from Jehovah.

³ However, without vowel points and without an accompanying Masoretic list of its own, Q can neither support nor contradict the information obtained by Ginsburg from the Massora. The great Isaiah scroll does not have a textual apparatus that enables it to render a Qere/Ketiv for these uses of Adonai.
Conclusions

Therefore, when all the evidence is weighed, Dr. Bullinger’s seemingly offhand remark in his Appendix 4 is the theory for which the greatest amount of evidence exists. The origin of Adonai is, then, from the use of the vowels of Jehovah with the plural, first person suffix form of adon. Again, the only place in the entire Bible that Adonai, standing alone, was not explicitly introduced by the Sopherim is in the second use in Micah 1:2 and here also, additionally, the Aramaic Targums indicate that Tetragrammaton should be read. Finally, other than Micah 1:2 and the 134 alterations of the ancient scribes, or Sopherim, the only other uses of Adonai in the entire Old Testament are in the phrase, Adonai Jehovah. These readings of Adonai Jehovah are also of extreme antiquity, for they, almost without exception, appear in The Great Isaiah Scroll. However, these readings, too, were made subject to a Masoretic scribal tradition, for wherever “Adonai Jehovah” appears in the Hebrew Scriptures, Jehovah is always pointed with the vowel points associated with Elohim (אֱלֹהִים).

Adonai: 134 uses (Sopherim notes Jehovah should be read)

אֲדֹנָי
my adon (lords)
(with Jehovah’s qamets)

Adonai Jehovah: 293 uses (only with Elohim’s chireq in Jehovah)

אֲדֹנָי יְהוִֹה
my lords Jehovah
(with Jehovah’s qamets) (with Elohim’s chireq)

Adonai 1 use (without a marginal note by the Sopherim)

אֲדֹנָי
adon (my lords)
(with Jehovah’s qamets: read Jehovah in the Aramaic Old Testament)

Conclusion: Adonai, and Adonai Jehovah are vowel point coded. What should be spoken (qere) is My Supreme Adon and My Supreme Adon Elohim. What should be read (ketiv) is Jehovah or Jehovah Elohim.

How odd is the pointing of Jehovah to agree with Elohim? Of the over 6,000 times the Tetragrammaton occurs in the Old Testament, the vowel pointing associated with Elohim occurs only in
the 301 places in which Jehovah follows Adonai and in four additional occurrences where the word order is inverted (Psalm 109:21; 140:7; 141:8; Habakkuk 3:19). Furthermore, in each of these 305 uses of “Adonai Jehovah,” the Aramaic Targums read “Jehovah Elohim.” Although the Targums are inconsistent enough in their paraphrasing of the Old Testament Hebrew that one dare not rely on them, they are consistent enough that one cannot entirely ignore their testimony. Hence, then, it is extraordinarily likely that every use of Adonai was part of a code employed by the ancient scribal community to either safeguard the divine name or to correct the accidental inclusion in the text of the qere, Adonai (supreme lord) for His title, Jehovah.

If such a system did exist, then every use of Adonai in the Bible, except for one, can be tied to either the Ginsburg listing or the coded Adonai Jehovah. It could be argued, therefore, that the Adonai is not of any Divine intent or authority and that the Targum readings should be preferred. Therefore, all uses of Adonai should be read as Jehovah. Additionally, the much ballyhooed theory that the vowel points of Jehovah arise from the vowel points of Adonai must now be dismissed.

Works Cited


<http://cal1.cn.huc.edu/Peshitta.notice.html>.

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4 The Tetragrammaton is actually pointed with the vowels of Elohim in four different ways in L: once, as in Judges 16:28 (יְהוָה); twice, as in Genesis 15:2, 8 (יְהוָה); thirty-one times, as in 1 Kings 2:26 (יְהוָה); and 271 times, as in Ezekiel 24:24 (יְהוָה).


