

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

¹ Gerard Gertoux, on page 140, references Muroaka' *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” (אֲדֹנָי –Genesis 19:2), for “my lord” (אֲדֹנָי –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 | אֲדֹנָי | “my lords” |
| Genesis 18:31 | אֲדֹנָי | “Adonai” |
| Genesis 23:6 | אֲדֹנָי | “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: יהוה־ *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 יהוה־ *Jehovah* (this rarer spelling of YHVH also exhibits
Elohim’s Chateph Segol – see footnote 4 below)

Genesis 1:2 אֱלֹהִים *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/ktiv* 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/ktiv* systems could not have yet evolved. Since, the *qere/ktiv* 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 (יהוה).

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 | יהוה |
| my lords | Jehovah |
| (with <i>Jehovah’s</i> qamets) | (with <i>Elohim’s</i> 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).⁴ 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.

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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 (יהוה); twice, as in Genesis 15:2, 8 (יהוה); thirty-one times, as in I Kings 2:26 (יהוה) and 271 times, as in Ezekiel 24:24 (יהוה).

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