

The Kyrios Question

by Frank Selch

A brief article to clarify the use of the Greek term *kyrios* in the New Testament and its English equivalent Lord

The word Greek *kyrios* is frequently assumed and widely taught – to be the equivalent of the Hebrew Tetragrammaton, YHWH, the sacred name/title of God. However, are you aware that the term, which generally renders *kyrios* in English as LORD in the Christian Old Testament and as Lord [in lower case, but capital L] in the New Testament also translates into the word master as well?

Throughout the entire Septuagint the term *kyrios* is applied as a title to the Creator, to kings, High Priests, rulers and other figures of authority alike. Yet, this multiple application of *kyrios* is hidden from Christians who have been led to believe that *kyrios* applies only to God and so when it is used by the NT writers in relation to Yeshua/Jesus the same rule is in force.

What we have before us is a very complex and delicate issue, because the way the term ‘*kyrios*’ is translated is a highly subjective process. What makes it particularly problematic is the fact that this selectiveness is indiscernible from the vernacular versions of the Bible. In order to uncover this translation issue, the reader needs to be able to consult the Hebrew and/or Greek texts, which is generally impossible, or at the very least, difficult for most Christians even with the aid of a concordance.

As I said above, *Kyrios* is used also to translate the word ‘master’, which is liberally applied to persons in power or of superior position and also occurs frequently in the plural (*kyrioi*) — one of which is even rendered as ‘archers’ (Gen. 49:23 [AV] — in Hebrew בַּעֲלֵי הַצִּיָּים ‘*masters of the arrow*’ – ditto in Greek, viz. *κύριοι το ξενμάτων*). In the narrative about Lot, the messengers at Sodom are addressed by him in the Greek text in the plural as *kyrioi* [masters] and Lot even bows down to them (Gen.19:2). However, in the Masoretic text Lot only speaks to one of the messengers. In Gen. 39:5 it is written that ‘*the LORD (kyrios) blessed the house of the Egyptian on account of Joseph*’, but in vv. 7,8,16 & 19 Potiphar is also referred to as *kyrios*.¹ And, Joseph himself is eventually addressed as *kyrios* by his servants and his own brothers (Gen.42:10; 44:7 et al). In the book of Samuel (2 Sam 12:8-11) we can find the term *kyrios* used in the space of three verses once for master and the second time for YHWH. A similar thing also occurs in Isaiah 26:13 where the author at first addresses YHWH and then another *kyrie* (sg. – it is plural in the MT), which is rendered as master(s) in some versions, but as Lord(s) in others. In Psalm 123:2 one comes across a particular interesting usage of the term, viz.

‘Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their masters [kyrioi], as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress [kyrias], so our eyes look to the LORD [kyrion]our God...’ NKJV.

¹ A similar principle also applies to the word Torah, which the Greeks translated as *nomos* and the English, etc. as *law*. Although Torah essentially means instruction, direction and guidance, there is no adequate terminology that would provide us with the full and true meaning in one simple expression. The essence of Torah is a matter of the heart— embedded in absolute justice. The use of the word *kyrios* is akin to the application of *nomos* (law) in the NT. However, whereas the translators differentiate in the use of *kyrios* in the OT, the same rules, or practices do not appear operative in the NT with either *nomos* or *kyrios*.

Here we have three grammatical forms in use describing three different personages, i.e. masc. plural (masters), fem. sing. (mistress) and masc. sing. YHWH (LORD). To recap, a grammatical form of the noun *kyrios* occurs more than 120 times in the Septuagint version of the Tenakh² alone from whence it is alternatively rendered ‘master’ and ‘lord’, although not referring to God. For example, in Gen.24:7-18 the same word *kyrios* is used for YHWH, master and lord in the space of 11 verse. In Gen.23:6,11,15 Abraham uses the word in addressing the Hittite tribesmen when he purchased the plot of land for Sarah’s burial. It also appears many times in plural form sometimes virtually alongside the identical word that is used for YHWH.

New Testament usage

The term *kyrios* translates about sixty times into ‘master’ in singular and plural form, e.g. Matth. 6:24; 10:24,25; 18:32; Mark 13:35; Luke 12:36,37,42,43; 16:3,5,8,13(pl); John 13:16; 15:15,20; Acts 16:16,17 [pl. and referring to producer/managers of a magic-show];19:16; Rom.14:4; Ephes.6:5,9 (pl.); Gal.4:1; Col.3:22; 4:1 et al.

All these [not exhaustive] examples from the New Testament, as well as earlier ones from the Christian OT [also non-exhaustive], show that the term *kyrios* cannot be indiscriminately equated with the Tetragrammaton YHWH. Without a knowledge of Greek and Hebrew the deception is virtually impossible to discern!

For this reason it is difficult therefore for me NOT to ask, why do we have errors of such nature in the Christian Bible— considered by up to 2 billion people to be the most important book in the world — when we are able to send spaceships to the extremes of our Solar System?³ However, the error comes to light when the Hebrew, Greek and vernacular versions of the Scriptures are placed side by side. The problem is exacerbated when we consider that these ambiguities only arise through the Septuagint where the Tetragrammaton makes its first appearance. If the Hebrew could be translated correctly the issue discussed here would dissolve into nothing.

However!

There is no adequate translation for the Tetragrammaton.

The Tetragrammaton a Unique Term

A careful study of this issue brings to light that the Tetragrammaton is an incredibly unique term for which no equal can be found anywhere. Is that by chance, or did God fully intend to provide the ancient Hebrews with a name for Himself and for all times that is

- a) unlike any other, and
- b) protected from abuse and misuse for all times?

Men have tried to do the Tetragrammaton justice in translation, but without success— irrespective of their sincerity. For that reason the Hebrews substituted the Divine Name with the simple term *HaShem* long ago, to safeguard that very sanctity. Although Jewish translations of the Tenakh into English generally followed the KJV convention using LORD, but it has not found such broad

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³ I absolutely marvel that the human race spares no efforts for the sake of the economy or science, but cannot see any value in investing in eternal issues in order to clear up any possible confusion that may exist in the Scriptures!

acceptance into general usage among Jewish people as in the Gentile world. That rendering and ‘over-usage’ in the Christian world eventually led to an excessive familiarity in recent times through the use of the term Yahweh and its application to Yeshua/Jesus; thus tacitly ascribing to him the status of deity and Creator. The consequence is that it has become a firm doctrine of Christianity, for the vast majority of Christians and Messianics, that Jesus IS God and the God of the Jews is dead and gone!⁴ However, even a casual reading of the Gospels reveals that whenever Jesus was addressed as Lord, the actual meaning would have been master, teacher— not YHWH. It is plainly inconceivable and improbable that anyone in the time of Jesus would have used the sacred Name on a human being. Furthermore, over several centuries the term *Jehovah* embedded itself in Christianity, especially among certain Evangelical groups. One denomination even chose to identify itself as his witnesses only to cause the sacred name to be blasphemed by many outside the sect.

God is the Master of the human race, nevertheless the term Master is equally unfitting for Him because He is someone no human being can ever hope to emulate in full. The Eternal One also said, ‘*My glory I will not give to another...*’ (Isa.42:8; 48:11), which makes the Greek *kyrios* an unfitting title for the Sovereign of the Universe because it is a title that can be applied to virtually anyone as the Bible has demonstrated. The term YHWH, on the other hand is unique, it is absolutely holy, because it belongs to ONE alone and He alone is the *Ehye Asher Ehyeh* (Exod. 3:14) Who defined Himself as YHWH for all eternity. Only once, in the entire Tenakh, do we find this unique self-description, whereas the Greek ‘*ego eimi*’ – I Am, is found multiple times throughout the Septuagint. For this reason the verse may not be used to justify the comment in John 8:58 to mean that Yeshua is identifying himself with YHWH. In any case, as I have shown earlier, it is impossible to translate that title adequately into Greek or any other language for that matter! I venture to say that none of the titles that God set apart for Himself were ever intended to be translated into vernacular tongues. Once they are, they lose their intrinsic and absolute holiness that is reserved for the Only ONE Who alone IS ONE!

Clarity... not confusion!

If we have a document that confuses the identity of the Eternal One with other beings, or lowers the sanctity of the Name through indiscriminate usage, such a document needs to be seriously questioned and brought under careful re-examination of its veracity and fitness to serve as a guide intended to lead [spiritually] gullible humans to their eternal home.

In summary I want to say that, although the Septuagint (LXX) may have had some usefulness as a translation in its earliest days to keep the Hebrew faith alive in the Diaspora among the Greek-speaking Jews of Egypt and other parts of the Greek and Roman Empire, etc. it cannot EVER have the same significance. The Septuagint may be a special translation since it was the first ever, but that is all it can ever be.⁵ If we ascribe special inspiration to the Greek text, where will it stop? Strictly

⁴ Whenever I questioned this doctrine in the past I ended up at the receiving end of much verbal abuse including the threat of hell. Those who do not subscribe to a Trinitarian doctrine or the full deity of Jesus, nevertheless may still reject National Israel, the Torah and the Seventh Day Sabbath

⁵ Not strictly true – Aramaic was the first Targum in the days of Ezra. The LXX gained an initial significance through the spread of the Greek language and the popularity of Greek culture in Egypt and eventually through the rise of Christianity; especially in Greek speaking parts of the Eastern Roman Empire.

speaking, if a Greek translation is divinely inspired, and English Versions are not, then it is only the Greek people who are in possession of the only divinely inspired text of God's Word.

However, there is a component missing from that equation!

The Bible teaches that it was the Hebrews, the ancestors of the Jewish people to whom God gave the Covenants, the Promises, the Ordinances, the Commandments, the Precepts and the Testimony [of the Exodus and Mount Sinai]— not the Greeks!

Loss of the Tetragrammaton in the Septuagint

Biblical scholars hold the view that Septuagint study⁶ does give some credence to the possibility that the Divine Name actually appeared in its original texts. Dr Sidney Jellicoe concluded that Kahle is right in holding that LXX [i.e. *Septuagint*] texts, written by Jews for Jews, retained the Divine Name in Hebrew Letters (palaeo-Hebrew or Aramaic) or in the Greek-letters imitative form ΙΙΙΙΙ, and that its replacement by *Κύριος* was in fact a Christian innovation. Jellicoe draws together evidence from a great many scholars (B. J. Roberts, Baudissin, Kahle and C.H. Roberts) and various segments of the Septuagint to draw the conclusions that: a) the absence of "Adonai" from the text suggests that the insertion of the term 'Kyrios' was a later practice, b) in the Septuagint 'Kyrios', or in English 'LORD' is used to substitute the Name YHWH, and c) the Tetragrammaton appeared in the original text, but Christian copyists removed it. There is therefore a strong possibility that the Sacred Name was once integrated within the Greek text, but eventually disappeared.

Meyer suggests as one possibility that "as modern Hebrew letters were introduced, the next step was to follow modern Jews and insert 'Kyrios', i.e. Lord. This would prove that this innovation was of a late date (sic.)" Unquote!

Early Christian Bible scholars and translators, such as Eusebius and Jerome (translator of the Latin Vulgate) used the Hexapla. Both of these men attest to the importance of the Sacred Name and that the most reliable manuscripts actually contained the Tetragrammaton in Hebrew letters.

Later translations into European languages, which descended from the Septuagint tended to follow the Greek however and used each language's word for "lord": Latin "Dominus", German "der Herr", English "the Lord", French "le Seigneur", etc.

In conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to the fact that any reader of the NT who cares about truth has to struggle to discern how the term 'Lord' is applied. There are many quotations from the T^enakh that are erroneously applied to Yeshua; e.g. Rom.10:13, viz. "*...for whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.*" This is clearly from the prophet Joel 2:32, so how is that to be understood? Is Paul saying here that Yeshua is YHWH, because that is the meaning of the Joel passage? But then, if that is not what Paul intended, the quotation is out of context! If Paul did not equate Yeshua with YHWH, then the entire passage in Romans develops a degree of complexity few ordinary mortals are quipped to resolve! But if he did make that equation, Paul should not refer to himself as a Pharisee and Orthodox Jew; his theology is no longer Jewish!

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tetragrammaton#cite_ref-3

The evidence presented here shows that giving pre-eminence to the Septuagint in early [as well as later] Christianity has produced grave distortions to significant portions of the Biblical text. This in turn had a powerful influence on the Christian doctrines that have been handed down to us—especially concerning the deity of Jesus. I believe that it is high time to set this right.

It is not my place to question what motivated the men responsible, but it is my place to say today at the beginning of the twenty-first century enough is enough. We owe it to those who will come after us to deliver to them a document that is true to what the Almighty entrusted to the ancient Hebrews thousands of years ago for the good of all humanity!

How long shall we persist with such double-think and speak? What worth is truth?