

KYRIOS (KIHR ih ahs) “Lord or master”

### Background

**God as Lord *Jehovah*** (or *Yahweh*; Hebrew *YHWH*, “self-existent”) is the name of God most frequently used in the Hebrew Scriptures. ‘**LORD**’ commonly represents it in the English translations. The Jews meticulously avoided every mention of it and substituted in its stead another word, *Adonai*. They substituted the vowels in *Adonai* for those of *Yahweh* that produced the term *Jehovah*.

The importance of the name cannot be overstated. Exodus 3:14 furnishes a clue to the meaning of the word. When Moses received his commission to be the deliverer of Israel, God, who appeared in the burning bush, communicated to him the name to give as the credentials of his mission: “God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM’ [Heb. *ehyeh asher ehyeh*]; and He said, ‘Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, “I AM has sent me to you”’. In both names, *ehyeh* and *YHWH*, the root idea is that of uncreated existence. When it is said that God’s name is ‘I am’, simple being is not all that is affirmed. He *is* in a sense in which no other being is. He is, and the cause of His being is in Himself. He is because He is.

The notice in Exod. 6:3, “By My name, LORD, I did not make Myself known to them”, does not imply that the patriarchs were completely ignorant of the existence or the use of the name. It simply means that previous to their deliverance from Egyptian bondage they had no experiential knowledge of such redemption. Under Moses they were to experience deliverance and have the redemptive power of God made real to them and the redemptive name of God entrusted to them. Previously, as shepherds in Palestine, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had known God as El Shaddai (“the Almighty,” Gen. 17:1), proving His power, but not in this kind of redemptive relationship. This name affirms God’s lordship over His people (Exod. 34:23), as well as His power over the whole creation (Josh. 3:13). By this name God avows His superiority over all other gods (Deut. 10:17).

*Adonai* is another important designation for God as Lord in the OT. It derives from the Hebrew word *Adon*, an early word denoting ownership, hence, absolute control. *Adon* is not properly a divine title as it is used of humans in some places. It is applied to God as the owner and governor of the whole earth (Ps. 114:7). It is sometimes used as a term of respect (like our “sir”) but with a pronoun attached (“my lord”). It often occurs in the plural. *Adonai* is, in the emphatic form, “the Lord.” Many regard this title as the plural of *Adon*.

“Lord” or “Master” (Gk. *kurios*, “supreme”) signifies the one to whom a person or thing belongs, the master, the one having disposition of men or property, such as the “owner of the vineyard” (Matt. 20:8 HCSB; 21:40; Mark 12:9; Luke 20:15); the “Lord of the harvest” (Matt. 9:38 HCSB; Luke 10:2); the “master of the house” (Mark 13:35 HCSB); “Lord of the Sabbath” (Matt. 12:8 HCSB; Mark 2:28; Luke 6:5), who has the power to determine what is suitable to the Sabbath, and to release Himself and others from its obligation. This title is given to God, the ruler of the universe, both with the definite article *ho kurios* (Matt. 1:22; 5:33; Mark 5:19; Acts 7:33; 2 Tim. 1:16, 18) and without the article (Matt. 21:9; 27:10; Mark 13:20; Luke 2:9, 23, 26; Heb. 7:21).

**Jesus as Lord *Kurios*** is the word normally employed in the NT to speak of Jesus as Lord. The word, however, has a wide range of reference, being used of God (Acts 2:34), of Jesus (Luke

10:1), of humans (Acts 16:19), and of angels (Acts 10:4). When characters in the Gospels speak of Jesus as Lord, they often mean no more than “sir.” At other times the designation *kurios* expresses a full confession of faith, as in Thomas’s declaration, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28 HCSB). “The Lord” came to be used as a simple yet profound designation of Christ in Luke and Acts. “The Lord Jesus” was used frequently in Acts as well (4:33) to speak of faith in Christ as Lord (16:31) and to identify baptism as being in the name of the Lord Jesus (8:16; 19:5). The phrase “Jesus is Lord” evidently was the earliest Christian confession of faith. In Acts 2:36 Peter declared that God had made Jesus both Lord and Christ.

ACTS 2:36 “Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.”

Paul often used a fuller phrase to speak of Jesus’ lordship, “the Lord Jesus Christ.” It is significant that he used this in conjunction with the mention of God the Father and the Holy Spirit (1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Cor. 13:14). At other times Paul used the simpler formulas “the Lord Jesus” (2 Thess. 1:7) or “our Lord Jesus” (1 Thess. 3:13). In contrast to the many false gods and lords of pagans, there is for Christians one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 8:5–6). Paul was certainly familiar with the early confession “Jesus is Lord” because he averred in 1 Cor. 12:3 that “no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (HCSB). The word is used often in connection with the hope of Christ’s second coming (Phil. 3:20; 4:5; 1 Cor. 16:22; Rev. 22:20).

In Revelation the title “Lord” has another connotation. The emperors demanded to be called “lord,” and one emperor, Domitian, even issued a decree that began: “Our lord and god commands.” John declared that such titles were blasphemous, and that Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords, is the only emperor whom Christians can recognize (Rev. 19:16).

Second Peter 2:1 and Jude 4 speak of Jesus as *despotes*, “Master”. It carries a more emphatic stress on the sovereignty of Jesus as Lord. Interestingly the same word is used to address God in Luke 2:29 and Acts 4:24. Revelation 6:10 also uses this term to address Jesus as the one who will avenge the blood of the martyrs.

To an early Christian accustomed to reading the OT, the word “Lord,” when used of Jesus, would suggest His identification with the God of the OT. Contrary to some scholars who believe that the title was borrowed from pagan cults, the evidence of Acts, Corinthians, and Revelation shows that it belongs to the very earliest stratum of Christian confession. The crucified, resurrected Jesus is the Lord who will give back to the Father the judged and redeemed world (1 Cor. 15:28), and He is the eternal Lord over all humanity (Rom. 14:9).

**Lord.** Rendering of the Greek *kurios*. In Israel both piety and fear (of transgressing, Ex 20:7) inhibited the correct pronunciation of the sacred consonants of the divine name (probably Yahweh). Instead, the vowel sounds of *’ēlōhîm* (“God”) or *’ādōnāy* (“Lord,” from *’ādōn*, ruler, lord, master) were combined with  $\text{YHWH}$ . This combination is usually translated in most American bibles as “LORD”. When *’ādōnāy* itself is used of God, “Lord” is printed. The resulting frequent

reminder of God's rule and authority rests ultimately upon his creation and ownership of all things and people (Ps 24:1, 2); but as the following verses (7–10) recall, a military application is evident in "the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel" (1 Sm 17:45; 2 Sm 6:2—the ark being a battle symbol). In other contexts God's total supremacy over nature is emphasized by the title: over earthquake, wind, fire (1 Kgs 19:10–14), stars (Is 40:26), beasts and monsters (Jb 40; 41, note "the Lord"), and primeval chaos (Pss 74:12–14 "King"; 89:8–10 "Lord God of hosts").

The later prophets greatly extended Israel's faith in God as Lord or King of history, directing the affairs of men and nations (1 Kgs 19:15–18; Am 9:7; Is 10:5–9), and as Lord of universal morality (Am 1:3–2:16; Ez 25–32). But especially is God the Lord (Lawgiver and Judge) of Israel; his expressed will represents civil and religious constitution, and demands absolute obedience (Ex 20:2, introducing the commandments). The divine sovereignty was, however, Israel's comfort under oppression and hope for the future, when a triumphant Day of the Lord would right its wrongs, punish its oppressors, and restore its glory (Is 2:2–4, 11–12; 34:8; Ez 30:1–5; Jl 2:31–3:1).

In the Septuagint, the regular expression for "Lord or master" in the Greek language was *kurios* and *Kyrios*. The title is attributed to Jesus himself in John 13:13, 14; in John 20:28 Jesus accepts the title "My Lord and my God!"

In the first Christian sermon Jesus' lordship is made central to salvation (Acts 2:21, 36). It appears that the public confession of Jesus as Lord was the approved focus and expression of Christian faith, and the basis of church membership, in the apostolic church (Acts 16:31; Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 12:3; Phil 2:11). Thus it could become more a formal statement than a sincere expression of belief; hence the warnings in Matthew 7:21 and Luke 6:46.

From the first, such a confession was fraught with meaning. In common usage "lord" reflected the slave system, and implied the absolute power exercised by the master over the purchased slave. So Paul unhesitatingly expounds the moral implications of Christian redemption (1 Cor 6:19, 20; 7:22, 23). To Jewish minds the title had messianic overtones of kingship and authority (Lk 20:41–44), offending both Jews and Romans. Politically, "Lord" was a title claimed by Caesar; it is significant that the emphatic, insistent form of it, "King of kings and Lord of lords," belongs to the age of Domitian and of the demand for Caesar worship (Rv 17:14; 19:16).

Among Greek-speaking Jews of the dispersion, familiar with the Septuagint, as among Gentiles, for whom "Lord" was the customary title for the many gods of polytheism, the application to Jesus of the epithet belonging to godhead was blasphemous, especially when associated with "Son of God," prayer, praise, total devotion, and hope (Phil 2:9–11; 1 Cor 8:5, 6; 1 Thes 4:14–17). On every level, therefore, the adoring tribute given to Jesus was loaded not only with spiritual meaning but with positive and imminent danger.

