

Article of the Month
March, 2017

Who's Who?

The Bible, of course, is the holy book of both Christianity and Judaism. Conscientious Christians utilize both the “Old Testament” (Hebrew) and the “New Testament” (Greek) writings. Judaism utilizes only the Old Testament Hebrew writings. But among the various adherents to these major religions, the concepts of the identities of God, or of Jesus, or of Messiah vary strikingly. Yet we all use terms like “Lord” with a casualness which suggests we think that others know what we mean. The purpose of this month’s article is to see how various terms need clarifications for the purposes of communication and understanding.

In the Hebrew Scriptures we have one supreme God and a number of other created beings who are called “gods.” Angels are called gods; even men who have power and recognition are called gods. Some of these SHARE the same words as references to them. Thus “el” and “elohim” can refer both to THE God as well as to other mighty beings, including men. Other names like “El Shaddai” (the Almighty), and Yahweh (or Jehovah) refer exclusively to the One God. Looking at these terms will help us to make distinctions.

“El” and “Elohim”

Since various translators translate the words under consideration in various ways, we will use the King James Bible for ease of reference.

“El” simply means “mighty one.” It is sometimes a reference to God Himself. “Elohim” is either a PLURAL form of “el,” or sometimes an INTENSIFIED version of “el” — as in what is sometimes called “the editorial we,” or “the royal we.” The easiest way to explain “elohim” as being used either as a plural or in the singular is the way in English we use the word “sheep.” It is sometimes a singular sheep; it is sometimes a flock of sheep.

One text which uses “Jehovah,” “el,” and “elohim” is Psalm 95:3:

“The LORD (Jehovah) is a great God (el) and a great King above all gods (elohim).”

“Elohim” is translated “angels” in Psalm 8:5:

“Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels (elohim) and hast crowned him with glory and honor.”

“Angels” is substantiated as the correct translation of “elohim” in this Psalm when the Apostle Paul quotes it in Hebrews 2:7 & 9 and uses the Greek word “angelos.”

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When the Old Testament refers to the gods of the heathen, the word “elohim” is used 196 times — quite properly since these “gods” were *mighty* or influential to their devotees. The word “elohim” has various modifications. Among them are “el,” “eloah,” and “elah.” They are collectively used over 2500 times. Their BASIC meaning is always “mighty.”

“El” is used as a modifier meaning “great,” “power,” “strong,” etc. Examples include Psalm 36:6 (“great [el] mountains”) and Genesis 31:29 (“It is in the power [el] of my hand.”) So we see that “el” need not even refer to a living being.

“Yahweh” (Jehovah) and “El Shaddai”

In the King James, the name “Jehovah” is so translated only four times (Exodus 6:3; Psalm 83:18; Isaiah 12:2; and Isaiah 26:4). But it exists in the manuscripts MANY more times. It is translated “God” 298 times and “LORD” over 5000 times! Thus it is far from being uncommon in the Bible! It is important to note that “Jehovah” is a made-up word by the KJV translators based on the Hebrew sacred name YHWH (Yahweh). The KJV translators wanted a way to Anglicize the name for common usage.

It might be helpful to note that in the KJV and in a number of other translations, when “Yahweh” [Jehovah] is translated “LORD,” it is ALWAYS with all of the letters capitalized. The name is EXCLUSIVE to THE God — to what Christians would call “Our Father.”

“El Shaddai,” on the other hand, is translated ONLY “Almighty.” It also refers exclusively to THE God. Its Hebrew roots suggest the word includes the thought of “The Nourisher” — i.e., God uses His Almighty powers to *nourish* His creation. **By contrast**, (in Isaiah 9:6) Jesus (Messiah) is prophesied as a “mighty” [**not** “almighty”] god. The word mighty in this Isaiah text contains the thought of valiant, champion, chief, or powerful. “God” in this verse is “el.”

“Yahweh” (Jehovah) is a form of the Hebrew word “Becoming.” It is a word which MUST end with “ing” because God is not static. He is always becomING. When God chose a name for Himself, He chose this one because no other name could contain the meaning of who He is. In Exodus 6, when He tells Moses His name, He reveals by it that “I am becoming what I am becoming” accurately portrays Who He is. In other words, He will always be ahead of His creation, and we will learn eternally about Him because He will be forever new, but never changing the attributes by which we know Him. When Moses reported the name to the Jews, of course, he reported it not in the first person singular, but in the third person singular: “He is becoming what He is becoming.” This tells us much about our eternal God. Thus God, Himself, supplied the name by which He chooses to be known.

Adonai and Adon

These two words are also used extensively in Scripture. “Adonai” is a title properly rendered “Lord” but once rendered “God.” “Adon” is rendered “Sir,” “Master,” and “Lord.” The Jews, when referring to THE God, usually use the word Adonai.

New Testament “Lord” and “God”

In the New Testament (Greek) writings, the words “God” (theos) and “Lord” (kurios) are used in such a way as to be indistinguishable in their references except by their contextual uses. They might refer to God Himself, to Jesus, to the devil, to false gods, or even to men. How confusing! We will not go into the exhausting details of this here. Suffice it to say that the use of the Greek words by themselves proves nothing! “God” (theos) simply means “mighty” as did “el” and “elohim” in the Old Testament. “Lord” (kurios) is a title of respect.

The Point of the Matter

When we who are religiously inclined use some of the above terms, we may find that we may be ambiguous to some whose religious understandings differ from our own. Christians often refer to “Our Lord” when speaking of Jesus. But to a Jew, this would have no meaning and will probably be seen by Jews as a reference to trinitarian beliefs of some Christians which the Jews flatly (and rightly) reject. “Our Lord” to a Jew is probably seen as a reference to God, not to Jesus. Prophetically, of course, David calls Messiah “Lord.” When speaking to a Jew, references to our Lord Jesus should best be to “Messiah.”

Involved in this whole confusion is the Scripturally untenable concept of trinity. But, for the sake of communication among trinitarian versus non-trinitarian Christians, and for the sake of communication between Christians and Jews, it would be best to refer to Our Father as “God.” It would be best (among Christians) to refer to Jesus as Jesus or as “Our Lord.” It would be best to refer to God as “Our Father.” “THE Father” is often used in trinitarian exchanges and might best be avoided unless between acknowledged trinitarians. “Our Father” is not a comfortable term for God among Jews.

We are not trying to control speech patterns among us. But it is likely that we all would like to be understood clearly. Realizing how differing references can confuse that understanding is an important step. While we may not convert others, we can, at least, attempt to be understood.

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