

What's in a Vowel Point?

The Difference between God and Man in Psalm 110:1

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"The form ADONI ('my lord'), a royal title (1 Sam 29:8), is to be carefully distinguished from the divine title ADONAI ("my Lord") used of Yahweh" (International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, "Lord," p. 157).

"Lord in the OT is used to translate ADONAI when applied to the Divine Being. The [Hebrew] word...has a suffix [with special pointing] presumably for the sake of distinction" (Hastings Dictionary of the Bible, "Lord", Vol. 3, P. 137).

"Adonai and Adoni are variations of pointing to distinguish divine reference from human" (Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, Brown, Driver, Briggs, under adon).

The Two Forms of Adon - Adonai Versus Adoni

Please consider how language works. In English you have no difficulty in recognizing the difference between HE and SHE. One letter S makes a big difference. You recognize also a big difference between god (small g) and God (big g). What about "employer" and "employee"? One letter makes all the difference. In Hebrew the words for he and she contain only a difference in the vowel sound — hoo (he) and hee (she).

Few questions could be of greater importance than knowing who in the Bible is entitled to be called God (capital G).

In Hebrew there is a word for "lord." It is ADON. This word refers 300 times to human lords (superiors) and 30 times to THE Lord, i.e. God Himself.

There are two very special forms of this word ADON. Sometimes the letters -AI are added to the end, giving you the word ADONAI (sometimes written ADONAY). This word is known to the public because it rhymes with El Shaddai in the well-known song. El Shaddai is another name for the One God. ADONAI means "the Supreme Lord" and is reserved for God. The word ADON may also have the letter -I added to it, giving the form ADONI (pronounced Adonee) and is used for human superiors – never for God.

Psalm 110:1 in the New Testament

Now in Psalm 110:1 we have a unique verse. This verse appears in the NT 23 times. (Ps 110:4 is quoted or alluded to another 10 times.) The importance of these verses is shown by the fact that no other verses come near to that number of allusions/quotations in the NT. Many verses are cited once or twice in the NT. But these verses — Ps. 110:1, 4 — are mentioned 33 times! Ps 110:1 is a key to the identity of God and Jesus, and to the coming Kingdom (the heart of the Gospel, Luke 4:43; Acts 8:12, etc.)

Jesus himself quoted Ps. 110:1 (as reported in Matt., Mark and Luke) as the verse which put an end to the counter-arguments of the religious authorities of his day, the Pharisees (see Matt. 22:41-46).

Psalm 110:1 is quoted in the NT as follows:

Jesus: Matt. 22:44; Matt. 26:64; Mark 12:36; Mark 14:62; Mark 16:19; Luke 20:42, 43; Luke 22:69.

Peter: (Luke) Acts 2:33; Acts 2:34-36 (in this verse Peter introduces Christianity to the crowd at Pentecost and tells us that Jesus has been made "Lord" on the basis of Ps 110:1); Acts 5:31; Acts 7:55-56;

Paul: Rom 8:34; I Cor. 15:25; Eph 1:20; Eph 2:6 Col 3:1; Heb 1:3; Heb 1:13 Heb 8:1; Heb. 10:12-13; Heb. 12:2

Peter: I Pet. 3:22;

Jesus: (John) Rev 3:21.

This Psalm covers the whole range of the NT and Jesus is recorded as quoting it no less than 8 times. It is a favorite "proof-text" of the NT Christians.

The Psalm is a special divine oracle. The text reads (Ps 110:1): "The oracle of YAHWEH (LORD) to my lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.'"

The first "lord" is the word YAHWEH which appears in many English versions as LORD (all capitals).

The second lord is ADONI (my lord). We have already noted that the Hebrew word ADON (lord) has a special ending on it when it refers to the One God — ADONAI (449 times in the OT). But when the word has the ending 'I', i.e. ADONI (adonee), it never refers to God but always to a human superior (occasionally an angel). So we know that the Messiah is not ADONAI (God) but the human superior of David, David's lord, Adoni.

This Psalm was believed to be a Messianic oracle both by Jesus and by the rabbis of his day. Jesus knew that he, the Messiah, was David's lord as well as David's son. The Pharisees were not prepared to recognize Jesus as the lord of David, though they knew he was a descendant of David.

The Hebrew language is precise and the rabbis always held the name of the One God in the highest reverence. That is why they reserved the form ADONAI for God alone. (Jews to this day read the word ADONAI when they come to the personal name for God — Yahweh. No one knows exactly how that word is to be pronounced. The Jews gave up saying it about 300 BC.)

The Example of a Similar Case – AVEER Versus ABEER

The OT has little ways of distinguishing words, which have momentous importance in terms of their meaning. Let me give you another example. The word AVEER (=strong or powerful). From the New International Dictionary of OT Theology and Exegesis, Vol. 1, p. 232: "It is widely believed that the reason why the OT has two forms of the adjective AVEER is that the guardians of the text (Massorites) wished to distinguish the use of the word when applied to Yahweh from its use in other contexts...."

When NOT used of the One God, the form has an extra dot inside the 'V' and is then pronounced ABEER.. ABEER (with the dot) always refers to a mighty man, sometimes to the "stout of heart," once to an angel and sometimes to a bull or a mighty steed.

The lack of a dot makes a huge difference. AVEER refers to God. ABEER is a non-divine reference.

So it is with the forms of Lord, ADONAI and ADONI. ADONAI is reserved for the One God alone. No human is addressed as ADONAI. On the other hand ADONI (adonee) is reserved for human superiors. The Messiah is called ADONI, the lord of David, but never ADONAI, the One God.

Now note this interesting fact. The KJV always wrote ADONAI as "Lord" (with initial capital 'L'). It wrote YAHWEH as "LORD" (all capitals). With regard to Adoni, on 194 occasions it wrote ADONI as lord (small l) or master. But on one occasion only it broke its own rule and put a capital on Lord, in Ps. 110:1. But the word is not ADONAI, but ADONI. The RV corrected the error and wrote "lord" (small letters).

Only One is God

Jesus is ADONI the Messiah, not ADONAI, the One God. The One God is one person only. How do we know this (apart from Ps 110:1)? The One God of Hebrew monotheism (the monotheism of Jesus, Mark 12:28ff.) is described by personal pronouns IN THE SINGULAR ("I, me, him, thou, thee, thy, my, his") thousands upon thousands of times.

The One God is distinguished as ADONAI (449 times) from Adoni, a human lord, (195 times). This gives you 644 opportunities to see the difference between God and man, based on the word "lord." The Messiah, Son of God, is designated as Adoni, not Adonai.

Singular personal pronouns always tell you a simple fact. They describe a being who is ONE PERSON, not two or three. God is One Singular and single Person.

"There is One God, the Father" (Paul, I Cor. 8:4, 6). There are two Lords (Ps 110:1) The Father is the One Lord God and Jesus is the Lord MESSIAH, the Son of God (Matt. 16:16). Belief that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God is the whole point of John's Gospel (John 20:31), It is also the whole point of the whole Bible. And Jesus describes the One God, his Father, as "the only true God" (17:3) and "the one who alone is God" (5:44). "The one who alone is God" is another way of saying "the only one who is God." Jesus was talking about the Father. If the Father is "the only one who is God," and Jesus is a different person, Jesus cannot be the One God.

Do we believe with Jesus that the Father is "the only one who is God"? (John 5:44; 17:3)

The Father is called God 1326 times in the NT. The word "God" is used of Jesus twice (for certain). But don't forget that in the world of the first century AD elevated humans were sometimes called "God." This is also true in the Bible. The judges of Israel were called "Gods" (Ps 82:6). Jesus used that verse to demonstrate that he was claiming to be the Son of God, not God Himself (John 10:34-36).

Psalm 2 is a perfect parallel to Psalm 110:1. In that psalm the One God Yahweh speaks to "MY KING/ MY SON. That person, who is as distinct from Yahweh as any son is distinct from his father, is also called "the LORD's Messiah." The Jesus of the Bible is: the Son of the One God, "the Lord Messiah" (Luke 2:11), "the Lord's Messiah" (Luke 2:26). Note that in the NT God is called "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph. 1:3, etc.). That should show one that Jesus and his Father are not coequal. There is One Lord God and one Lord Messiah.

In Scripture Jesus and his Father are separate individuals, working in the closest harmony. The Messiah is the obedient Son of his Father. His Father is the One God (John 17:3).