

What data do we have about how Jesus saw YHWH of the OT?

One/Critical: We MUST start with statements by Jesus explicitly mentioning the God of the Hebrew bible – which will be clearest in His quotations from the OT, but not limited to them. All other passages must be interpreted with these explicit statements in mind.

Although it is not really a problem, one initial reality we face is that the main Hebrew term/name for the OT deity (“YHWH”) was no longer used in religious discourse by the time of Jesus:

“[In the 2nd Temple Period, 516BC – 70AD] The divine name YHWH was still given special honor by not being pronounced and, often, by being written in paleo-Hebrew script in some Qumran manuscripts. In non-Hebrew manuscripts it was often translated as “**Lord**” (***kurios*** in Greek) and in Hebrew manuscripts (e.g., the Qumran scrolls) God was usually called ***El*** or ***Elohim***.” ¹

“[T]he word “Yhwh” is found to occur 5,989 times in the Bible. There is no instance of it, however, in Canticles, Ecclesiastes, or Esther; and in Daniel it occurs 7 times (in chapter 9)—a fact which in itself shows the late date of these books, whose authors lived at a period when the use of the Tetragrammaton was already avoided, its utterance having become restricted both in the reading of the Bible and **still more in colloquial** speech. **For it was substituted **Adonai****.”²

¹ Jacob Neusner, Alan J. Avery-Peck, and William Scott Green, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Judaism*; ² Isidore Singer, ed., *The Jewish Encyclopedia*;

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Reality Check: Did the Jews of Jesus' day and area of ministry actually use the word 'YHWH' when referring to the God of the OT/exodus/Law or to "God" in general?

Although it is not really a problem, one initial reality we face is that the main Hebrew term/name for the OT deity ("YHWH") was no longer used in religious discourse by the time of Jesus ([continued](#)):

"In the course of the Second Temple period the Tetragrammaton came to be regarded as charged with metaphysical potency and therefore ceased to be pronounced. It was replaced in speech by *'adonai*, "Lord," rendered into Greek *Kyrios*. Often the vowels of *'adonai* would later accompany YHVH in written texts This gave rise to the mistaken form Jehovah. The original pronunciation was eventually lost; modern attempts at recovery are conjectural."³

As the need for a Greek version of the Hebrew OT grew, translators used *kyrios* for the main two names for God (YHWH, Adonai):

"In the LXX *kyrios* occurs over 9,000 times In the **overwhelming majority of cases** (some 6156), however, *kyrios* replaces the Heb. proper name of God, **the tetragrammaton YHWH**. The LXX thus strengthened the tendency to avoid the utterance of the name of God, and finally to avoid its use altogether. "⁴

³ Nahum M. Sarna, Exodus (*The JPS Torah Commentary*; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society); ⁴H. Bietenhard, "Κύριος," ed. Lothar Coenen, Erich Beyreuther, and Hans Bietenhard, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 511ff.

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	1	2	3	4	5
Original Hebrew	יהוה	יהוה	אלהים	אדני	אל עליון
(transliterated)	YHWH	YHWH	EL(OHIM)	ADONAI	EL ELYON
Eng. Gloss	(none)	(none)	God/gods	Lord	Most High
Hebrew transitional substitution	ADONAI		Translation		
Greek	κύριος	κύριος	θεός	κύριος	ὑψιστος
(transliterated)	Kyrios	Kyrios	Theos	Kyrios	Hupsistos
Eng. Gloss	Lord	Lord	God	Lord	Most High

The name YHWH was never translated or transliterated*—unlike the other titles for God. Column 1 above shows how **KYRIOS** became the Greek term to refer to YHWH via Jewish substitution of ADONAI for YHWH in discourse. LXX translators (Column 2) – probably on the basis of the tradition of Column 1—went straight to **Kyrios**. In Column 3, translators had to select singular or plural of **THEOS** based on context, since the Hebrew Elohim was used both for God (singular) or gods (plural). [*There are a couple of mss and incantations that try this, IAO being the main form.]

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And this pattern of substitution formed the basis for its use in the NT

*"God as the kyrios. In accordance with the usage of the Hellenistic synagogues God is frequently called **kyrios**, especially in the numerous quotations from the OT in which **kyrios** stands for **Yahweh**, corresponding to the custom of pronouncing the title **kyrios** instead of the tetragrammaton in public reading."*⁵

What this means is that NOBODY in Jesus' day and in the areas that He travelled, USED the Hebrew word YHWH – out of respect for the name.

When they spoke of the YHWH of the Hebrew Bible, they mostly used **kyrios** (Eng. "Lord"), **theos** (Eng. "God"), some combination of the two ("the Lord our God"), or some other OT title/variant (e.g. Most High, Lord of Heaven and Earth).

⁵H. Bietenhard, "Κύριος," ed. Lothar Coenen, Erich Beyreuther, and Hans Bietenhard, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 513.

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And so -- '**credibility check**' here -- **If a teacher says** something like this:

"Always remember, Jesus NOT ONCE referred to our Father as 'Yahweh' or 'Jehovah'."

And then claims that this silence shows that Jesus rejected YHWH and did not consider YHWH to be His Father, then we should immediately recognize that that teacher has a **fundamental misunderstanding** of most NT references to God, including the scores of references to YHWH made by Jesus and others.



OF COURSE Jesus didn't use the tetragrammaton – He was a good Jew! Nobody used it, or the weird/mistaken form "Jehovah", created in the middle ages! But not because they all 'rejected YHWH' – LOL! When they referred to the OT deity, they mostly used *kyrios*—as Jesus did!

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What this means is that the only CERTAIN way to know that Jesus was referring to the Hebrew deity known as “YHWH” would be if He referred to the deity of a SPECIFIC passage in the Hebrew Bible that used the term “YHWH”.

Hebrew Bible
passage by or about
YHWH

He could use any method of referring, from more obvious terms like THEOS (god) or KURIOS (lord) to the simpler choices like “He who said” or the “One who did”.

“OT Passage by or
about Kyrios, Theos,
etc.”



Regardless of how direct the wording is, if the agent/deity in the passage is the one Jesus is talking about, and if the Hebrew passage identifies that deity with “YHWH”, then Jesus is communicating something about the OT agent IN THAT PASSAGE.

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REMEMBER: We are starting from a distinctly Christian position. We must be clear that our sources in the Gospels and other books of the NT are trustworthy, as promised by Father.

First/Most Importantly, we trust in the ministry of the Holy Spirit (1) to have preserved the gospel narratives about Jesus' words/actions and (2) to have enlightened the gospel authors to interpret His life and words correctly for us:

"These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." [John 14.25-26]

Secondly--although not a main source of data for us in this examination--would be the post-Ascension teachings of Jesus' followers and future emissaries*. These would look like 'new things' that Jesus did not teach during His earthly ministry (just like the material in John looks like 'new' from the perspective of the Synoptic gospels), but they were promised by Him and come from the Father:

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. [John 16.12-15]

* Jesus: "Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town" [Matthew 23:34]

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This CRITICAL category of data includes (in order of priority):



- PRIMARY: Passages where He quotes or refers to explicit YHWH-connected texts from the Hebrew Bible (using terms with LORD or GOD or titles/circumlocutions --e.g. “Most High”, “Power”-- in them.)
- SECONDARY: Any use of the NT term ‘Father’ in relation to any event, agent, or teaching in the Hebrew Bible.
- TERTIARY: Passages using the terms “Lord” (=YHWH), or “God” or circumlocution (e.g. “Most High”, “Power”), without a specific OT verse reference, but which would be most likely understood by the hearers as referring to the most ‘visible’ OT Deity.

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The Gospels have a huge number of OT citations, quotes, allusions, etc.

- Matthew has 114 in 1,071 verses.
- Mark has 61 in 678 verses.
- Luke has 73 in 1,151 verses.
- John has 27 in 879 verses.

Within these, are phrases that are cited/sourced from the Hebrew bible, in the words of Jesus. In the Synoptic gospels:

- Matthew has 50, of which 16 are unique to him.
- Mark has 22, of which only 1 phrase is unique to Mark.
- Luke has 26, of which only 4 are unique to Luke.

John is written later than the others and assumes the reader knows their contents (e.g. imprisonment of John the Baptist), so there is very little overlap **VERBALLY** with them and much more verbiage by Jesus (plenty of thematic overlap though).

- Of the approximate 27 references, 14 are almost literal quotations.
- 8 of these are from the mouth of Jesus and the others are from John or others.
- There is only 1 obvious overlap – verbally– with the Synoptics.

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We focus first on **Matthew**: Jesus in Matthew uses phrases that are cited/sourced from the Hebrew bible in 38+ passages.

- 25+ of these are introduced by introductory formulae: “*it is written*” (7x); “*read*” (7x); “*heard (and/or) said*” (6x) ; “*commanded*” or response to a question (4x); “(x) *prophesied/said*” (3x); or implied clearly by context (1x)
- In some cases, a quote from the Law might come from either of two parallel passages (e.g. Exodus or Deuteronomy; Leviticus or Deuteronomy).
- Allowing for that, Jesus quotes – as authoritative – from the following books:
 - All the books of Moses (Genesis – Deuteronomy)
 - The book of Psalms (8, 110, 118)
 - The prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Zechariah, Malachi
 - Some of the texts are repeated in different contexts

We will survey many of these – a few in detail – and **note any parallels with the other gospels**, and especially any differences in wording between them—often an important clue to the interpretation.