

Psalm 110:1

The LORD says to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet” (NIV)

Trinitarian commentators frequently argue that “my Lord” in this verse is the Hebrew word *adonai*, another name for God, and is therefore proof of the divinity of the Messiah. But not only is this not a valid argument, this verse is actually one of the great proofs of the complete humanity of the promised Messiah. The Hebrew word translated “my lord” is *adoni* (pronounced “Adon nee”¹) in the standard Hebrew texts. This word is always used in Scripture to describe human masters and lords, but *never* God. Unfortunately, most Hebrew concordances and lexicons give only root words, not the word that actually occurs in the Hebrew text. This is one reason why biblical research done by people using only tools such as a *Strong’s Concordance* will often be limited.² While this usually does not affect the interpretation of the text, sometimes it makes a great deal of difference, such as in Psalm 110:1. *Focus on the Kingdom* reports:

The Bible in Psalm 110:1 actually gives the Messiah the title that *never describes God*. The word is *adoni* and in all of its 195 occurrences in the Old Testament it means a superior who is human (or occasionally angelic), created and not God. So Psalm 110:1 presents the clearest evidence that the Messiah is not God, but a supremely exalted man.³

The difference between *adon* (the root word), *adoni* (“lord,” always used of men or angels) and *adonai* (which is used of God and sometimes written *adonay*) is critical to the understanding of Psalm 110:1. The Hebrew Lexicon by Brown, Driver and Briggs (*BDB*), considered by many to be the best available, makes the distinction between these words. Note how in *BDB* the word *adoni* refers to “lords” that are not God, while another word, *adonai*, refers to God: ⁴

(1) Reference to **men**: *my lord, my master*: (*adoni*)

(a) *master*: Ex. 21:5 (Covenant code) Gen. 24:12+, 44:5 (J, 20t.), 1 Sam. 30:13 and 15; 2 Kings 5:3, 20 and 22; 6:15;

(b) *husband*: Gen. 18:12 (J);

(c) *prophet*: 1 Kings 18:7 and 13; 2 Kings 2:19; 4:16 and 28; 6:5; 8:5;

(d) *prince*: Gen. 42:10 (E), Gen. 23:6,11 and 15 (P), Gen 43:20; 44:18+ ; 47:18, + (J, 12t.); Judges. 4:18;

(e) *king*: 1 Sam. 22:12+ (S&K 75t.);

(f) *father*: Gen. 31:5 (E);

(g) *Moses*: Ex. 32:22; Num. 11:28; 12:11; 32:26 and 27 (J); Num. 36:2 (2x) (P);

(h) *priest*: 1 Sam. 1:15 and 26 (2x);

(i) *theophanic angel* [an angel representing God]: Josh. 5:14; Judges. 6:13;

(j) *captain*: 2 Sam. 11:11;

(k) general recognition of superiority: Gen. 24:18; 32:5+; 33:8+; 44:7+ (J 13t.), Ruth 2:13; 1 Sam. 25:24+ (15t.).

(2) Reference to God: [*adonai*]. Notice that when the word refers to God, it changes from when it refers to men. The vowel under the “n” (the second letter from the left) has changed.⁵

In the above definition, *adoni* and *adonai* have the same root, *adon*, which is the word listed in the concordances and most lexicons. However, the exact words used are different. *Adoni*, the word used in Psalm 110:1, is never used of God. It is always used of a human or angelic superior. The fact that the Hebrew text uses the word *adoni* of the Messiah in Psalm 110 is very strong proof that he is not God. If the Messiah was to be God, then the word *adonai* would have been used. This distinction between *adoni* (a lord) and *adonai* (the Lord, God) holds even when God shows up in human form. In Genesis 18:3, Abraham addresses God who was “disguised” as a human, but the text uses *adonai*.

Scholars recognize that there is a distinction between the words *adoni* and *adonai*, and that these distinctions are important. The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* notes:

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*.⁶

There are several uses of *adonai* that refer to angels or men, giving them an elevated status, but not indicating that the speaker believed they were God. This is in keeping with the language as a whole. Studies of words like *Elohim* show that it is also occasionally used of humans who have elevated status. Examples of *adonai* referring to humans include Genesis 19:18 and 24:9, 39:2. In contrast to *adonai* being used occasionally of men, there is no time when *adoni* is used of God. Men may be elevated, but God is never lowered.

The following 148 verses contain 166 uses of the word (*adoni*)⁷ and every one of them either refers to a human lord or an angel. None refers to God: Gen. 23:6, 11,15; 24:12(2x), 14, 18, 27(3x), 35, 36, 37, 39, 42, 44, 48(2x), 49, 65; 31:35; 33:8, 13, 14(2x), 15; 39:8; 42:10; 43:20; 44:5, 7, 18(2x), 19, 20, 22, 24; 47:18(2x), 25; Exod. 21:5; 32:22; Num. 11:28; 12:11; 32:25, 27; 36:2; Josh. 5:14; 10:1, 3; Judg. 1:5, 6, 7; 4:18; 6:13; Ruth 2:13; 1 Sam. 1:15, 26(2x); 22:12; 24:8; 25:24, 25(2x), 26(2x), 27, 28, 29, 31, 41; 26:17,

18,19; 29:8; 30:13, 15; 2 Sam. 1:10; 3:21; 9:11; 11:11; 13:32, 33; 14:9, 12, 15, 17(2x), 18,19(2x), 22; 15:15, 21(2x); 16:4, 9; 18:31, 32; 19:19(2x), 20, 26, 27, 30, 35, 37; 24:3, 21, 22; 1 Kings 1:13, 17, 18, 20(2x), 21,24, 27(2x), 31, 36, 37(2x); 2:38; 3:17, 26; 18:7, 10; 20:4; 2 Kings 2:19; 4:16, 28; 5:3, 18, 20, 22; 6:5, 12, 15, 26; 8:5, 12; 10:9; 18:23, 24, 27; 1 Chron. 21:3(2x), 23; 2 Chron. 2:14, 15; Isa. 36:8, 9, 12; Jer. 37:20; 38:9; Dan. 1:10; 10:16, 17(2x), 19; 12:8; Zech. 1:9; 4:4, 5, 13; 6:4.

The following 24 uses can be found under [l'adoni], "to my Lord." While we in English separate the preposition from the noun or verb following, in Hebrew the preposition is attached directly to the word. Gen. 24:3,54,56; 32:5,6,19; 44:9,16,33; 1 Sam. 24:7; 25:27,28,30,31; 2 Sam. 4:8; 19:29; 1 Kings 1:2; 18:13; 20:9; 1 Chron. 21:3; Ps. 110:1. All these refer to human lords, not God.

The following 6 references can be found under [v'adoni]: Gen. 18:12; Num. 36:2; 2 Sam. 11:11; 14:20; 19:28; 24:3.

The following reference can be found under [m_adoni]: Gen. 47:18.

Students of Hebrew know that the original text was written in an "unpointed" form, *i.e.*, without the dots, dashes and marks that are now the written vowels. Thus some scholars may point out that since the vowel points of the Hebrew text were added later, the rabbis could have been mistaken. It should be pointed out, however, that the two Hebrew words, *adonai* and *adoni*, even though written the same in unpointed text, sound different when pronounced. This is not unusual in a language. "Read" and "read" are spelled the same, but one can be pronounced "red," as in "I read the book yesterday," while the other is pronounced "reed," as in "Please read the book to me." The correct way to place the vowels in the text would have been preserved in the oral tradition of the Jews. Thus when the text was finally written with the vowels it would have been written as it was always pronounced.

Further evidence that the Jews always thought that the word in Psalm 110:1 referred to a human Messiah and not God come to earth is given in the Greek text, both in the Septuagint and in quotations in the New Testament. It is important to remember that the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, was made about 250 BC, long before the Trinitarian debates started. Yet the Septuagint translation is clearly supportive of Psalm 110:1 referring to a human lord, not God. It translates *adoni* as *ho kurios mou*.

The translators of the LXX [the Septuagint] in the 3rd century BC attest to a careful distinction between the forms of *adon* used for divine and human reference by translating *adoni* as *ho kurios mou*, "my lord."⁸

When Psalm 110:1 is quoted in the New Testament the same truth about the human lordship of the Messiah is preserved:

The New Testament, when it quotes Psalm 110:1, renders *l'adoni* as “to my lord” (*to kurio mou*). But it renders *adonai* ([Psalm 110] v. 5 and very often elsewhere) as “the Lord” (*kurios*). This proves that the difference between *adonai* and *adoni* was recognized and reported in Greek long before the Masoretic vowel points fixed the ancient, oral tradition permanently in writing.⁹

It is interesting that scholars have often not paid close attention to the text of Psalm 110 or the places it is quoted in the New Testament, and have stated that it shows that Christ must have been God. The well-known Smith’s Bible Dictionary contains an article on “Son of God,” written by Ezra Abbot. He writes:

Accordingly we find that, after the Ascension, the Apostles labored to bring the Jews to acknowledge that Jesus was not only the *Christ*, but was *also* a *Divine* Person, even the *Lord* Jehovah. Thus, for example, St. Peter...[Abbot goes on to say how Peter said that God had made Jesus “both Lord and Christ.”]¹⁰

We believe Abbot’s conclusion is faulty because he did not pay attention to the exact wording of the Hebrew text. Even scholars who contributed to Smith’s Dictionary of the Bible apparently agree, because there is a footnote after the above quotation that corrects it. The footnote states:

In ascribing to St. Peter the remarkable proposition that “God hath made Jesus JEHOVAH,” the writer of the article appears to have overlooked the fact that *kurion* (“Lord”) in Acts 2:36 refers to *to kurio mou* (“my Lord”) in verse 34, quoted from Ps 110:1, where the Hebrew correspondent is not Jehovah but *adon*, the common word for “lord” or “master.” St. Peter’s meaning here may be illustrated by his language elsewhere; see Acts 5:31 [where Peter calls Jesus a “prince,” *etc.*].¹¹

The footnote is quite correct, for the word in Psalm 110 is the word for a “lord” or “master” and not God. Thus Psalm 110:1 gives us very clear evidence that the expected Messiah of God was not going to be God himself, but a created being. The Jews listening to Peter on the Day of Pentecost would clearly see the correlation in Peter’s teaching that Jesus was a “man approved of God” (v. 22 - *KJV*), and a created being, the “my lord” of Psalm 110:1 which Peter quoted just shortly thereafter (v. 34). The use of *adoni* in the first verse of Psalm 110:1 makes it very clear that the Jews were not expecting their Messiah to be God, but were expecting a human “lord.”

Endnotes

1. Adonai is pronounced “Adon eye,” because the “ai” sounds like “eye.” Adoni is pronounced “Adon nee” because the final “i” is pronounced like a long “e.”

2. People wanting to study this for themselves will need to be able to work with the Hebrew text itself and not just the root words. A good source for this is the Bible study computer program, Bibleworks 5.0 resold by CES.

3. (Anthony Buzzard, ed., *Focus on the Kingdom*, Atlanta Bible College, Morrow, GA, March 2000), p. 3, Emphasis his. We found 198 uses of adoni, but in a personal conversation with Mr. Buzzard he stated that his figure of 195 could understate the situation slightly since it was not the result of an exacting study.
4. Hebrew reads from right to left, so the first letter of the word looks like a glorified “X.”
5. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver and Charles Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, reprint 1996), p. 11 (Adon, “Lord”). We have changed the punctuation and reference abbreviations to make it consistent with the abbreviations we use for ease of reading. The letters in parenthesis mark their belief as to the exact writer or redactor of that portion of Scripture, something we do not agree with theologically.
6. Geoffrey Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1979), “Lord.”
7. WTT or BHS Hebrew Old Testament, edited by K. Elliger and W. Rudolph of Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart, fourth corrected edition, copyright © 1966, 1977, 1983, 1990 by the German Bible Society.
8. Anthony Buzzard and Charles Hunting, *The Trinity, Christianity’s Self-inflicted Wound* (Atlanta Bible College and Restoration Fellowship, Morrow, GA, 1994), p. 28.
9. Anthony Buzzard, *Focus on the Kingdom*, “Who is Jesus? God or Unique Man?” (Atlanta Bible College, Morrow, GA, 1998), p. 8.
10. H. B. Hackett, *Dr. William Smith’s Dictionary of the Bible*, “Son of God” (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, reprint 1981), vol. 4, p. 3090.
11. *Ibid.* Vol. 4, p. 3090.

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