

God & Lord, Pagan Titles

Why does your ministry use the terms “God” and “Lord” for YHWH, when these are well documented terms used in ancient paganism?

It is notable that many people who use the Divine Name in sectors of the Messianic movement tend to forget that our Father has many titles that are used complimentary *and independently* of the name YHWH. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the most notable titles that are used are *Elohim* (אֱלֹהִים) and *Adonai* (אֲדֹנָי). In the Greek Scriptures, their counterparts are *Theos* (θεός) and *Kurios* (κύριος). These titles in English correspond to “God” and “Lord.”

Sacred Name Only advocates often have a field day in attacking people who use the titles God and Lord. It is often said that these words are of pagan origin and should have no place whatsoever in the vocabulary of a Believer. This claim is made on the basis that God and Lord have also been titles of pagan deities. This claim is made even more so for the Greek titles *Kurios* and *Theos*, which were used in Ancient Greek as titles for the deities of Mount Olympus. However, arguments against *Kurios* and *Theos* significantly lose weight when we see that the Jewish Rabbis who translated the Hebrew Tanach into Greek had no problem using them in reference to the Holy One of Israel. In fact, when the Apostles went into Greek-speaking lands, this is *exactly* what they called the God of Israel.

It is not uncommon at all for many in today’s Messianic movement to perceive the Hebrew language as being the “holy tongue.” This is based on a misunderstanding of Zephaniah 3:9, where the Prophet says “I will give to the peoples purified lips” (NASU) or *safar beruah* (שָׂפָה בְּרוּרָה). To assume that this means that the peoples will be given an ability to speak Hebrew is not an honest assessment of the Book of Zephaniah, as the previous verses tell us exactly what the problem of Ancient Israel has been:

“Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled, the tyrannical city! She heeded no voice, she accepted no instruction. She did not trust in the LORD, she did not draw near to her God. Her princes within her are roaring lions, her judges are wolves at evening; they leave nothing for the morning. Her prophets are reckless, treacherous men; her priests have profaned the sanctuary. They have done violence to the law. The LORD is righteous within her; He will do no injustice. Every morning He brings His justice to light; He does not fail. But the unjust knows no shame. I have cut off nations; their corner towers are in ruins. I have made their streets desolate, with no one passing by; their cities are laid waste, without a man, without an inhabitant. I said, ‘Surely you will revere Me, accept instruction.’ So her dwelling will not be cut off *according to* all that I have appointed concerning her. But they were eager to corrupt all their deeds” (Zephaniah 3:1-7, NASU).

Being given “purified lips” is undoubtedly connected with moving from a state of sinfulness to a state of holiness—from a state of profanity to a state of purity. Zephaniah’s prophecy of “I will make the peoples pure of speech” (NJPS) is akin to the Apostle Paul’s later instruction, “Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such *a word* as is good for edification according to the need *of the moment*, so that it will give grace to those who hear” (Ephesians 4:29, NASU). The “purified lips” pertains to *a manner of speech* by which our Father’s people will be able to serve Him.

While the Hebrew language certainly has great beauty—it is still *a human language* (and in many cases a primitive language, with limited vocabulary, at that). And perhaps most significantly, Hebrew is an Ancient Near Eastern language with relatives such as Aramaic, Akkadian, and Ugaritic. Yet this is not understood by many teachers in today’s Messianic movement, who assume that Hebrew is a holy language and every other language is unholy. Such a misunderstanding can lead to ridiculous conclusions such as,

“The Set-apart Spirit, inspiring all Scripture, would most certainly not have transgressed the Law of Yahuweh by ‘inspiring’ the Messianic Scriptures in a language riddled with the names of Greek deities and freely using the names of these deities in the text, no way!”¹

Here, because common nouns in Greek are also attested to be used as names of Greek deities, the Greek Scriptures are assumed to obviously not be inspired of the Almighty. This has led to a number of people doubting the message of the gospel, and leaving faith in Yeshua the Messiah.

But what happens if we were to apply this logic equally to the Hebrew Scriptures? Terms common to Hebrew are used as the proper names of pagan gods in languages such as Ugaritic—including the terms *El* (אֵל) and *Elohim* (אֱלֹהִים)—which are applied to YHWH in the Tanach. (Consult the author’s article “**The Song of Moses and God’s Mission for His People**,” appearing in the *Messianic Spring Holiday Helper*.) If such a standard as proposed were applied to the whole of Scripture, **neither the Hebrew Tanach nor Greek Messianic Writings could be considered inspired**, as both languages include common vocabulary words used to refer to pagan deities. Are today’s Messianics ready to start reading the Tanach against its Ancient Near Eastern context? This has certainly been a significantly deficient area of our Biblical Studies.

If we are to reject titles such as God and Lord because they might be used to refer to pagan deities, then we must hold the Hebrew titles of *Elohim* and *Adonai* to the exact same standard. Not surprisingly, both of these titles have been used to refer to *pagan deities* every bit as much as the deity YHWH. *TWOT* explains that *El* (אֵל), the singular form of *Elohim*, “is a very ancient Semitic term. It is also the most widely distributed name among Semitic-speaking peoples for the deity, occurring in some form in every Semitic language, except Ethiopic.”² So, if we are to reject God and Lord as titles, we must do the same for *Elohim* because *Elohim* is used to refer to pagan deities, and *El* is used in almost every Semitic language to refer to deities other than YHWH.

But it even goes beyond this. A shortened poetic form of “Yahweh,” *Yah* (יָהּ), which appears in the Hebrew Tanach, was possibly used by pagan societies that pre-dated the Israelites. The *IVPBBC* tells us, “There are a number of possible occurrences of Yahweh or Yah as a deity’s name outside of Israel, though all are debatable.”³ Yet even if true, we certainly do not conclude that YHWH is a pagan name because the pagans may have used derivations of it. Furthermore, in 2 Samuel 5:20, David describes the God of Israel as *Ba’al* (בַּעַל), which was the name of a Canaanite deity! But note that, “In the early years the title Baal seems to have been used for the Lord (Yahweh)” (*NIDB*).⁴ Is this an error on David’s part? We do not believe so.

There is no substantial evidence that makes “God” and “Lord” pagan titles. Otherwise, titles such as the Hebrew *Elohim*, and possibly even the name YHWH itself, would be pagan. Let us be a faith community that can begin to actually read the Bible in its world, and be guided by more facts.

For a further discussion on this and related issues, consult the author’s article “**Sacred Name Concerns**” (appearing in *Introduction to Things Messianic*).

¹ C.J. Koster, *Come Out of Her, My People* (Northriding, South Africa: Institute for Scripture Research, 1998), vi.

² Jack B. Scott, “ēl,” in *TWOT*, 1:42.

³ John H. Walton, and Victor H. Matthews and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 80.

⁴ Steven Barabas, “Baal,” in *NIDB*, 113.