

Seek Yahweh: The Tetragrammaton In the First Century

by Rev. John Cortright

Scholars often refer to the four letter name of God, YHWH, as the Tetragrammaton. It is commonly believed that the name of God, which appears over 6,000 times in ancient Hebrew manuscripts, was no longer in use during the first century. Rather, with the translation of the Greek Old Testament known as the Septuagint, the name of God was replaced with the Greek word *kurios*. It is believed that Jews had stopped using the name and instead used the word *adonay* when speaking the name of God. The Encyclopedia Britannica explains: "After the Exile (6th century bc), and especially from the 3rd century bc on, Jews ceased to use the name Yahweh..."¹ While this may be a commonly accepted belief about the Tetragrammaton, textual evidence suggests a different truth.

Before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest known complete Old Testament manuscripts were Greek, dating from the fourth century AD. Two renowned complete Greek Bibles are the Codex Sinaiticus and the Codex Vaticanus. In both of these famous codices, written after the time of Constantine, the name of God does not exist. Rather, in all uses, the name is replaced with the Greek surrogate *kurios*. While these are the oldest "complete" versions of the Greek Old Testament, they are not the oldest manuscripts that have been found. Some partial Old Testament Greek manuscripts and fragments exist from the second and third century AD as well. In these

documents, as with the fourth century codices, the name of God is not present, but rather, the Greek surrogate *kurios* had replaced the name.

It is also noteworthy to mention that there are no extant New Testament manuscripts from the first century. The oldest known New Testament manuscript is a fragment of the Gospel of John in Greek, dated at the earliest to 125AD. There are later second and third century New Testament manuscripts that have been found. As with the Old Testament Greek manuscripts, the Tetragrammaton, the four letter name of God, cannot be found in any of these surviving New Testament manuscripts.

However, extant Old Testament manuscripts dating from the first century and earlier tell a different story. In fact, in all extant manuscripts and fragments of Old Testament writings from the first century or earlier, the Tetragrammaton or some form of it was being used. Textual evidence suggests that the use of the Greek word *kurios* did not begin replacing the name until the second century. In first century Old Testament manuscripts that have been discovered, the name of God is written in three different ways: in Herodian Hebrew script of that era, a more ancient Paleo Hebrew script (see examples below), or in some instances, rendered in Greek by the letters IAO.

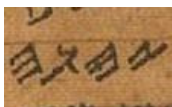
In all of the Hebrew Old Testament manuscripts discovered in the caves around the Dead Sea, the Hebrew name of God is present, written in the Herodian Hebrew script as יהוה. These manuscripts date between 100BC and 70 AD. In some instances, the

main body of text is written in the Herodian Hebrew script, but the name of God is written in the more ancient Paleo Hebrew. There were also a few Greek Old Testament fragments found among the Dead Sea scrolls. One such manuscript is from the book of Habakkuk. In this beautiful text, dated at the turn of the Common Era, the words are all in Greek; except when it comes to the Tetragrammaton. The name of God is not written in Greek, but rather it is in Paleo Hebrew (see example below). From cave four, manuscript 4Q120, is a fragment of Leviticus 4:17. In this Greek manuscript dated to 1BC, the name of God is written as a Greek rendering of IAO. In his book, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, author Geza Vermes writes, "The Tetragram (the divine name YHWH) is rendered semi-phonetically as *lao*, and is not replaced, as was customary later, by the Greek *Kurios* (Lord)."²

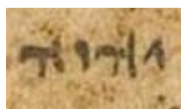
The Dead Sea Scrolls are not the only first century manuscripts discovered. In the deserts of Egypt from the Oxyrhynchus collection, a few first century Old Testament manuscript fragments were uncovered. One such manuscript is a Greek text from the book of Job, dated to around 50AD. And as with the Habakkuk scroll found at Qumran, in this first century Greek Old Testament, the name of God is not replaced with the Greek word *kurios*, but rather, the name of God appears, in Paleo Hebrew Script (see below).

Scholars and paleographers are aware that manuscripts from the first century and earlier do not use a surrogate *kurios* for the name of God. This practice does not show up until codices of the second century. What

does this mean for Bible students interested in a study of God's name? The evidence suggests that Old Testament Scriptures used by Jesus and the disciples most likely contained the name of God. In Luke chapter four when Jesus went to the synagogue in Nazareth and read from the scroll of Isaiah, the Tetragrammaton could have been present. When Philip met the eunuch from Alexandria in Acts 8 and he was reading from the scroll of Isaiah, this manuscript most likely contained the name of God. Also when Paul reasoned with the Bereans "out of the scripture" in Acts chapter 17, these disciples very likely had a rendering of YHWH, either in Paleo Hebrew script, or in a Greek rendering, semi-phonetically as *IAO*. All of these New Testament records took place before 70AD, and there is no textual evidence that the Greek word *kurios* (translated into English as "Lord"), was being used as a replacement for the Tetragrammaton until the second century AD.



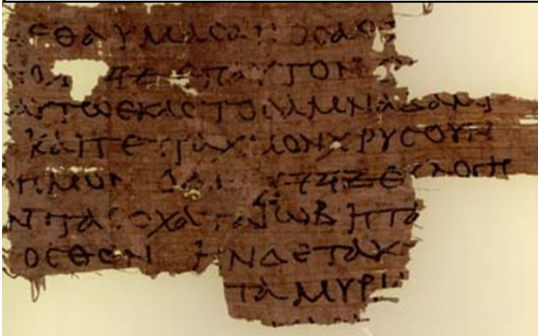
The name of God, YHWH, in Herodian Hebrew script from first century era



The name of God, YHWH, in Paleo Hebrew script



Habakkuk scroll from Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem, Israel. The scroll is written in Greek. The Tetragrammaton is written in Paleo Hebrew script. Scroll is dated to turn of century-1AD.



Job scroll from Oxyrhynchus collection- Egyptian desert. The scroll is written in Greek. The Tetragrammaton is written in Paleo Hebrew script. Scroll is dated to 50AD.

¹ Encyclopedia Britannica Online, Downloaded on 11/18/2011 from website at URL

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/651183/Yahweh>

² Vermes, G. (2004). *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*. London, England: Penguin Books Ltd., Pg 472.