

# The Historical Depth of the Tiberian Reading Tradition of Biblical Hebrew

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Aaron D. Hornkohl, *The Historical Depth of the Tiberian Reading Tradition of Biblical Hebrew*. Cambridge Semitic Languages and Cultures 17. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0310>

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Semitic Languages and Cultures 17.

ISSN (print): 2632-6906

ISSN (digital): 2632-6914

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80064-980-4

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80064-981-1

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80064-982-8

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0310

Cover image: T-S AS 8.129. A leaf from a Cairo Geniza biblical codex containing Gen. 30.17–20 and showcasing Moshe Mohe's non-standard Tiberian pointing of the standard Tiberian pronunciation of *Issachar* (see within, ch. 4), courtesy of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

# 1. THE TETRAGRAMMATON

The routine spelling יהוה in both biblical and extra-biblical sources implies an originally phonetic realisation along the lines of *\*yahwē*. Additionally, the contraction חיהוה *\*ḥa(y)-yahwē* (< *\*ḥay yahwē*) in Iron Age epigraphy (Arad 21.5; Lachish 3.9; cf. Lachish 6.12; 12.3) presupposes that the form יהוה was realised with an initial consonant identical to that with which חי ends (Suriano 2013, 752).

Whatever the exact ancient pronunciation of the divine name, by the time that the medieval Tiberian Masoretic reading tradition was textualised in the form of vowel points, any phonetic pronunciation had long been eclipsed by alternative realisations:

1. Usually, the phonetic realisation is that of the dedicated plural-of-majesty + 1CS possessive suffix אֲדֹנָי *ʾădōnāy* ‘my Lord’,<sup>1</sup> resulting in such consonant-vowel combinations

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<sup>1</sup> The trifold division of labour of forms of the noun אֲדֹן ‘lord, master’ with 1CS possessive suffixes is itself a result of secondary development. Almost without exception, possessed forms of אֲדֹן are plurals of majesty, whether the referent is human or divine: thus אֲדֹנֶיךָ ‘your (MS) lord/Lord’ (22x), אֲדֹנֶיךָ ‘your (FS) lord/Lord’ (2x), אֲדֹנָיו ‘his lord/Lord’ (42x; *ketiv* אֲדֹנו with no *yod* 1x), אֲדֹנֶיהָ ‘her lord/Lord’, אֲדֹנֵינוּ ‘our lord/Lord’ (11x; אֲדֹנֵינוּ with no *yod* 1x), אֲדֹנֵיכֶם ‘your (MPL) lord/Lord’ (11x), אֲדֹנֵיהֶם ‘their (MPL) lord(s)/Lord’ (11x). This points to a single early 1CS form אֲדֹנִי in the sense of ‘my lord/lords/Lord’. If so, the current Tiberian trichotomy of אֲדֹנִי ‘my (human) lord’, אֲדֹנִי ‘my (divine) Lord’, and אֲדֹנִי ‘my (human) lords’ is secondary, having added a special singular form for human referents and a special pausal-like form for reference to the Israelite

as יהוה (L Gen. 3.14) and יהוה (L Gen. 3.13), both pronounced *ʾădōnāy*.<sup>2</sup>

2. Alternatively, when preceded or followed by the word אֲדֹנָי *ʾădōnāy* ‘my Lord’, the realisation is that of אֱלֹהִים *ʾēlōhīm* ‘god’, e.g., יהוה (L Gen. 15.2) or יהוה (L Deut. 3.24), both pronounced *ʾēlōhīm*.<sup>3</sup>

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deity. Cf. the lone instance of preservation of the non-divine plural אֲדֹנָי *ʾădōnāy* ‘my lords’ (Gen. 19.2). In the Samaritan reading tradition, phonological processes have resulted in the levelling of any distinction between forms of אֲדֹנָי with 1CS suffixes that refer to humans—Tiberian אֲדֹנָי ‘my (human) lord’ and אֲדֹנָי *ʾădōnāy* ‘my lords’ are both realised as אֲדַנִּי *ādanni*. The form אֲדַנִּי in reference to the deity in the Samaritan tradition is generally realised as *ādāni*, i.e., with no gemination. The Samaritan realisation of the tetragrammaton is *šēmā*.

<sup>2</sup> JM (§16f fn. 1) opines that the vocalisation יהוה (lacking *holam*) common in L (as opposed to the rarer יהוה, with *holam*) is based on Aramaic *šmā* ‘the name’, also known from the Targumic reading tradition and similar to the Samaritan. However, beyond the fact that the realisation *ʾēlōhīm* is also often represented by forms lacking an explicit *holam* vowel sign, e.g., יהוה (L Gen. 15.2), certain features in the Masoretic vocalisation (also noted in JM §16f) show that *šmā* cannot have been the Tiberian realisation. For example, the vocalisation of the prepositions -בְּ, -לְ, and -מִ presuppose a following *ā*-vowel, as in *ʾădōnāy*, whereas *šmā* would have required preceding -בְּ, -לְ, and -מִ, respectively.

<sup>3</sup> According to Khan (2013b, 464), the vocalisation of יהוה with simple *shewa* (as opposed to the composite *shewas* in אֲדֹנָי and אֱלֹהִים) “is a vestige of a primitive stage of the development of Tiberian vocalization, in which a *shewa* rather than a *ḥateph* sign was written on the *ʾalef*.” Cf. the vocalisation of יהוה with composite *shewa* in accord with the vocal-

In other words, according to the medieval Tiberian tradition, the written form יהוה is consistently to be read with the consonants and vowels of an alternative divine epithet.<sup>4</sup>

## 1.0. Second Temple Evidence

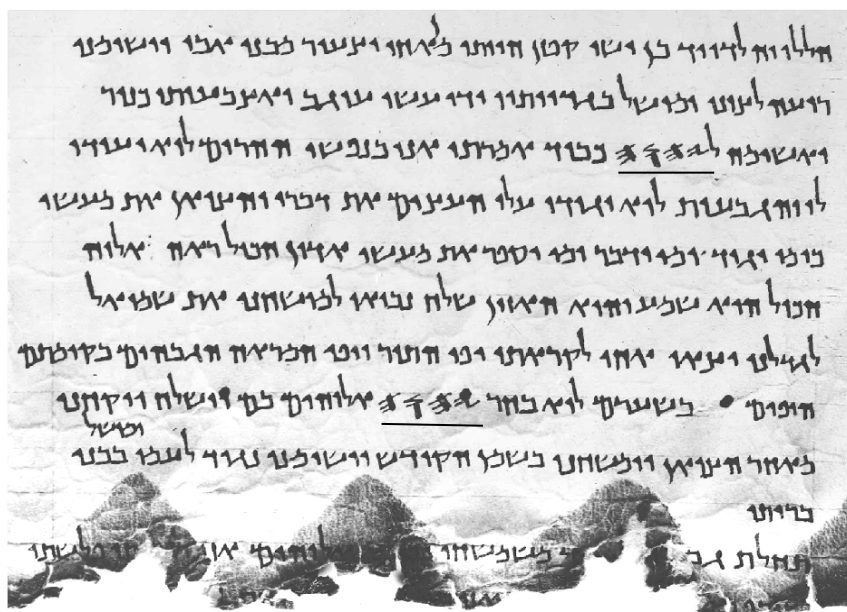
But this medieval convention has far earlier roots. Against the suspicion that substitutive readings for יהוה such as *ʾădōnāy* and *ʾēlōhīm* should be chalked up to rabbinic or medieval hypersensitivity to sacrilege, it should be noted that the practice of reserving special treatment for the divine name was already widespread in the last centuries before the Common Era and may extend more deeply into history. In some DSS Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts, e.g., 11Q5 (= 11QPs<sup>a</sup>); 1QpHab; 4Q243 (= 4QpsDan<sup>a</sup> ar), and in certain some Greek manuscripts, as well, e.g., 8HēvXII gr (Roberts 1951, 173–75; Vasileiadis 2014), the name is distinguished from the surrounding words via the use of old Canaanite script. In some Aramaic DSS, the name is replaced by dots (see, e.g., 4Q196 f18.15). Presumably reflecting special reverence for the name (Yeivin 1980, 59, §103), such strategies had the practical effect of reminding readers to avoid pronouncing it as written. Consider, e.g., יהוה in Ps. 151 as preserved in 11QPs<sup>a</sup> 28.6, 11 (underlined below in lns 3, 8 of Figure 1).

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isation of *ʾădōnāy* in some Babylonian manuscripts (Yeivin 1985, II:912; Khan 2013a, 44).

<sup>4</sup> Readers unfamiliar with the convention of pronouncing יהוה with the vowels of יהוה, inadvertently coined on the basis of the written-reading combination יהוה, the hitherto unknown divine name *yēhōvā*, i.e., ‘Jehovah’.

Figure 1: 11QPs<sup>a</sup> (11Q5) 28.3–14. Image used by permission of the Israel Antiquities Authority



Similarly, as already noted, in the Samaritan and Aramaic reading traditions, God's name was replaced with the Aramaic word שְׁמָא *šmā* 'the name'. In the Greek, Syriac, and Latin versions, it was replaced with words meaning 'Lord'—κύριος,ܠܕܝܢ, and *Dominus*, respectively—an approach commonly perpetuated in modern Bible translations. And in some cases where the Masoretic Bible vocalises יהוה as 'ādōnāy 'my LORD' or 'ēlōhīm 'GOD', a parallel DSS text has the actual consonants of the replacement form, e.g., יהוה (MT Deut. 32.27) || אֲדֹנִי (1Q5 f16–19.9), אֲדֹנִי (MT Isa. 50.5) || אֲדֹנִי אֱלֹהִים (1QIsa<sup>a</sup> 42.6).

## 2.0. Iron Age Epigraphy and the Classical Biblical Hebrew Written Tradition

But at least two questions remain: (1) does the convention of reference to the Israelite deity as אֲדֹנָי ‘my Lord’ predate the Second Temple Period and, if so, by how much? (2) Does the convention of replacing the original pronunciation of יהוה with that of אֲדֹנָי predate the Second Temple Period and, if so, by how much?

On the first question, epigraphic evidence seems clear. In the admittedly meagre corpus of Iron Age Hebrew inscriptions, referents designated by the forms אֲדֹנָי and יהוה are kept rigidly distinct, the former consistently referring to a human and never substituting for the latter. The Aramaic equivalent to אֲדֹנָי, i.e., מֶרָא, does, however occur in the fifth-century documents from Elephantine.

Moreover, אֲדֹנָי appears in reference to the Israelite deity as a minority form throughout the Tiberian consonantal tradition, including in acknowledged CBH texts in the Pentateuch, Former Prophets, and Latter Prophets. Excluding sequences of אֲדֹנָי יהוה and יהוה אֲדֹנָי (where אֲדֹנָי was originally in apposition to *\*yahwe*), MT instances in which אֲדֹנָי refers to the Israelite deity total some 133 cases (against more than 6800 cases of יהוה). In books where אֲדֹנָי occurs, it normally makes up a small minority of references to the Israelite deity. See Table 1. There may be a diachronic factor in the above distribution, as the statistical outliers are the post-exilic compositions of Daniel (where cases of אֲדֹנָי in reference to the Israelite deity outnumber those of יהוה; Daniel also has instances of מֶרָא in reference to the Israelite deity: Dan.

2.47; 5.23) and Lamentations (where אֲדָנִי comes in over a third of the cases).

Table 1: אֲדָנִי for יהוה in the written component of the Tiberian biblical tradition

Instances of אֲדָנִי	Book	Instances of יהוה	% אֲדָנִי	Instances of אֲדָנִי	Book	Instances of יהוה	% אֲדָנִי
11	Dan.	8	57.9	0	Lev.	311	0
14	Lam.	32	30.44	0	Deut.	550	0
2	Neh.	17	10.53	0	Sam.	473	0
47	Ps.	695	6.33	0	Jer.	726	0
23	Isa.	450	4.86	0	Hos.	46	0
4	Amos	81	4.71	0	Joel	33	0
8	Gen.	165	4.62	0	Obad.	7	0
2	Mal.	46	4.17	0	Jon.	26	0
1	Job	32	3.03	0	Nah.	13	0
1	Ezra	37	2.63	0	Hab.	13	0
1	Mic.	40	2.44	0	Zeph.	34	0
6	Exod.	398	1.49	0	Hag.	35	0
5	Ezek.	434	1.14	0	Prov.	87	0
2	Judg.	175	1.13	0	Song	0	0
5	Kgs	534	.93	0	Qoh.	0	0
1	Zech.	133	.75	0	Est.	0	0
1	Josh.	224	0.44	0	Chron.	559	0
1	Num.	396	0.25				

One is inclined to question the authenticity of CBH cases of אֲדָנִי for יהוה. However, when it comes to the fourteen occurrences in the Pentateuch (Gen. 18.3, 27, 30, 31, 32; 19.18; 20.4; Exod. 4.10, 13; 5.22; 15.17; 34.9, 9; Num. 14.17), it is worth noting that the composite Samaritan written-reading tradition agrees with the Tiberian consonantal tradition on thirteen; the exception is Exod. 15.17 where MT מִקְדָּשׁ אֲדָנִי בִּנְנוּ יָדָי (the) sanctuary, O LORD, that your hands established' || SP מִקְדֶּשׁ יְהוָה בִּנְנוּ יָדָי || *maqdaš šēmā kūnēnu yēdāk*, which also in 4Q14 6.41 reads מִקְדֶּשׁ יְהוָה בִּנְנוּ יָדָי.



Beyond the Pentateuch, MT Isaiah's אֲדֹנִי is regularly paralleled by the same in 1QIsa<sup>a</sup>; of the 23 MT instances, 1QIsa<sup>a</sup> reads אֲדֹנִי in seventeen of them (Isa 3.18; 4.4; 6.1, 8; 7.20; 8.7 [erasure of יהוה]; 9.16; 10.12; 11.11; 21.6, 8; 29.13; 30.20; 37.24; 38.14, 16; 49.14). MT אֲדֹנִי is also paralleled by the same in other DSS Isaiah material (MT Isa. 3.17 || 4Q56 3i.12; MT Isa. 21.16 || 4Q55 f10–11i+12–14.35; MT Isa. 38.16 || 1Q8 16.4; MT Isa. 49.14 || 4Q58 4.23) and elsewhere (MT Amos 9.1 || Mur88 8.7; MT Ps. 2.4 || 11Q7 f1–2.3; MT Ps. 35.17 || 4Q83 f6.3; MT 38.16 || 4Q83 f9ii.2; MT Ps. 38.23 || 4Q83 f9ii.5; MT Ps. 54.6 || 4Q83 f11–12.8; MT Ps. 66.18 || 4Q83 f14ii.30; MT Ps. 86.5 || 1Q10 f1.1; MT Ps. 89.50 || 4Q87 f8.1; MT Ps. 89.51 || 4Q87 f8.2; MT Lam. 1.15 || 4Q111 3.6).

On the above evidence, the interchange of אֲדֹנִי and יהוה dates back to at least the late Second Temple Period. The fact that the Tiberian Torah and the SP agree on אֲדֹנִי as nomenclature for the Israelite deity points to a convention that had become rooted before the separation of the proto-Tiberian and proto-Samaritan traditions (see Kartveit 2009; Pummer 2012; Kantor 2020, 108–9 for background).

Regarding the antiquity of the avoidance of the pronunciation of יהוה, unambiguous information is much harder to come by, since it is difficult to reconstruct the pronunciation that originally accompanied the Tiberian consonantal text, before it became wedded to the Tiberian reading tradition. In other words, assuming that the graphic sequence יהוה was originally pronounced along the lines of *\*yahwe*, does the Tiberian written tradition give any hint as to avoidance of this pronunciation in

accord with what is seen in the Tiberian reading tradition and the other Second Temple traditions listed above?

Schniedewind (2004, 32) notes that Chronicles “often replaces the sacred four letter name of God in its source (known from the books of Samuel and Kings) with the more generic *Elohim* (which translates simply as ‘God’)” (see Japhet 2009, 24, fn. 64). Japhet (2009, 24–30) disagrees with this assessment of Chronicles, but makes a similar claim about Qohelet and the Elohist Psalter (on the latter see also Ben-Dov 2010, 81–82, 87–88, 101–4; Suriano 2013, 752). The latter, encompassing Pss 42–83 and showing no signs of LBH, are apparently classical works evincing reticence to overuse of the tetragrammaton.<sup>5</sup> Suriano (2013, 752) sees even earlier avoidance of יהוה in the preference for אלהים in the E source of the Pentateuch, though this is considered a separate issue by Japhet (2009, 29, fn. 85).

### 3.0. Conclusion

Given the extant evidence, it is not entirely clear how long the supposed realisation *\*yahwe* persisted. However, avoidance of the name dates as far back as the composition of CBH texts (the Elohist Psalter, if not the putative E source of the Pentateuch). Further, the pronunciation of the tetragrammaton as *ʾădōnāy* reflected in the medieval Tiberian vocalisation signs clearly preserves pre-medieval sensitivities characteristic of multiple Second Temple biblical traditions, wherein early use of the *pluralis majestatis* epithet אדני ‘my Lord’ for the Israelite deity was

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<sup>5</sup> In the Elohist Psalter the counts of divine epithets are אלהים 245 times, יהוה 45 times, and אדני 23 times.

extended and became standard, even where יהוה was still written. Indeed, the graphic form of name of the Israelite deity יהוה was so identified with pronunciations along the lines of *ʾădōnāy*, that the writing of אדני itself came to be proscribed in Second Temple texts (Japhet 2009, 16–19; cf. 31, fn. 96).

