

Chapter 3 – The Plural Form of the Term “Adonai”

In the previous chapter we saw that the concept “Elohim” does not necessarily express plurality, even though it is written in plural form, since the verbs that follow are always written in singular form when “Elohim” refers to the Almighty.

Something similar can be seen with the Hebrew word “Adonai”, which is a conjunction of the plural form of the word “Adon” – “Adonim” – and the suffix “ai”, meaning “my”.

“Adon” means:

- lord, master, owner, chief, husband
- king, governor, ruler

Here we will mention five different forms of the word “Adon”:

“Adon” – (singular) lord

“Adoni” – (singular) my lord

“Adonim” – (plural) lords

“Adonei” – (plural) lords of...

“Adonai” – (plural) my lords/my Lord

If we don’t count the plural form “Adonai”, the word “Adon” is used several hundred times in the Scriptures and is nearly always referring to people, but also sometimes to angels and even the Almighty.

Now we will look a little closer at some of the passages where this word is found:

The word “Adon” can refer to a husband.

The singular form of the word “Adon” occurs for the first time in Genesis 18:12 where we can read the following,

*“Sarah laughed within herself, saying, ‘After I have grown old will I have pleasure, my **lord** (“Adon”) being old also?’”(HNV)*

Here we see that the word “Adon” is used by a wife who is speaking of her husband respectfully.

In 1 Peter 3:5-6 there is a quote from this text in Genesis where it is written,

*“For this is how the holy women before, who hoped in God, also adorned themselves, being in subjection to their own husbands: as Sarah obeyed Avraham, calling him **lord** (Greek “Kurios”), whose children you now are, if you do well, and are not put in fear by any terror.”(HNV)*

In this text, the Hebrew word “Adon” has been translated to the Greek word “Kurion” and then to the English word “lord”. The word “Kurion” is a form of the word “Kurios” which means “Lord”, “governor”, “ruler”, “owner”. (We will speak more later about the translation of the Greek word “Kurios”.)

In Judges 19:26 we find yet another example of the word “Adon” meaning “husband”,

*“Then came the woman in the dawning of the day, and fell down at the door of the man’s house where her **lord** (“Adon”) was, until it was light.”(HNV)*

The word “Adon” can refer to a slave owner.

In Genesis 24:14b we see that Avraham’s servant speaks of his owner this way,

*“Thereby will I know that you have shown kindness to my **master** (“Adon”).”(HNV)*

In Exodus 21:5, it is written,

*“But if the servant shall plainly say, ‘I love my **master** (“Adon”), my wife, and my children. I will not go out free;’”(HNV)*

In these two passages, we see that the word “Adon” can refer to a slave owner.

The word “Adon” can refer to a priest.

In 1 Samuel 1:15a and 26 we can read about how the prophet Shmuel’s mother Channa addressed the priest Eli,

*“Hannah answered, No, my **lord** (“Adon”), I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit... She said, Oh, my **lord** (“Adon”), as your soul lives, my **lord** (“Adon”), I am the woman who stood by you here, praying to the LORD (YHWH).”(HNV)*

The word “Adon” can refer to a king.

In 1 Samuel 16:16 the word “Adon” is used about Israel’s king, as it is written,

*“Let our **lord** (“Adon”) now command your servants who are before you, to seek out a man who is a skillful player on the harp: and it shall happen, when the evil spirit from God is on you, that he shall play with his hand, and you shall be well.”(HNV)*

It is the same in 1 Samuel 24:8, where it is written,

*“David also arose afterward, and went out of the cave, and cried after Sha'ul, saying, My **lord** (“Adon”) the king. When Sha'ul looked behind him, David bowed with his face to the earth, and did obeisance.”(HNV)*

The word “Adon” can refer to any respected man.

Avraham was called “Adon” by Efron, one of the inhabitants of the promised land, as it is written in Genesis 23:10-11,

*“Now `Efron was sitting in the midst of the children of Het. `Efron the Hittite answered Avraham in the hearing of the children of Het, even of all who went in at the gate of his city, saying, ‘No, my **lord** (“Adon”), hear me. I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. In the presence of the children of my people I give it to you. Bury your dead.”(HNV)*

Rivkah (Rebecka) addressed Avraham’s servant Eliezer with the title “Adon”, as it is written in Genesis 24:17-18,

*“The servant ran to meet her, and said, ‘Please give me a drink, a little water from your pitcher.’ She said, ‘Drink, my **lord** (“Adon”).’ She hurried, and let down her pitcher on her hand, and gave him drink.”(HNV)*

Rachel said “Adon” to her father, as it is written in Genesis 31:35a,

*“She said to her father, ‘Don’t let my **lord** (“Adon”) be angry that I can’t rise up before you; for the manner of women is on me.’”(HNV)*

Yaakov used the word “Adon” when he spoke to his twin brother Esav as he met him on his way home from Lavan, as it is written in Genesis 32:3-5,

*“Ya`akov sent messengers in front of him to Esav, his brother, to the land of Se`ir, the field of Edom. He commanded them, saying, ‘This is what you shall tell my **lord** (“Adon”), Esav: “This is what your servant, Ya`akov, says. I have lived as a foreigner with Lavan, and stayed until now. I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, men-servants, and maid-servants. I have sent to tell my **lord** (“Adon”), that I may find favor in your sight.””(HNV)*

In modern Israeli society the polite address “Adon” or “Adoni” is used when speaking to a man who is a stranger.

The word “Adon” can refer to a heavenly messenger.

In Joshua 5:14, it is written,

“He said, No; but as prince of the host of the LORD (YHWH) am I now come. Yehoshua fell on his face to the earth, and did worship, and said to him, What

says my **lord** (“Adon”) to his servant?”(HNV)

In Judges 6:12-13, it is written,

*“The angel of the LORD (YHWH) appeared to him, and said to him, the LORD is with you, you mighty man of valor. Gid`on said to him, Oh, my **lord** (“Adon”), if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? and where are all his wondrous works which our fathers told us of, saying, Did not the LORD bring us up from Mitzrayim? but now the LORD has cast us off, and delivered us into the hand of Midyan.”(HNV)*

In Daniel 10:17-19, it is written,

*“For how can the servant of this my **lord** (“Adon”) talk with this my **lord** (“Adon”)? for as for me, immediately there remained no strength in me, neither was there breath left in me. Then there touched me again one like the appearance of a man, and he strengthened me. He said, ‘Greatly beloved man, don’t be afraid: shalom be to you, be strong, yes, be strong.’ When he spoke to me, I was strengthened, and said, ‘Let my **lord** (“Adon”) speak; for you have strengthened me.’”(HNV)*

In these three passages we see how the word “Adon” is used when addressing heavenly messengers. The word is used in singular form with the possessive suffix in first person singular, i.e. “Adoni”, “my lord”. The word is also used in plural when addressing angels as we can see in Genesis 19:1-2 and 18 where it is written,

*“The two angels came to Sodom at evening. Lot sat in the gate of Sodom. Lot saw them, and rose up to meet them. He bowed himself with his face to the earth, and he said, ‘See now, my **lords** (“Adonai”), please turn aside into your servant’s house, stay all night, wash your feet, and you will rise up early, and go on your way.’ They said, ‘No, but we will stay in the street all night.’... Lot said to them, ‘Oh, not so, my **lord** (“Adonai” literally “my lords”).’”(HNV)*

In this text the word “Adon” is used in its plural form with the possessive suffix in first person singular, “Adonai”. As we said earlier “Adonai” literally means “my lords”, and we see how the literal meaning of this word is used in addressing these heavenly messengers. These two are the only places in the Scriptures where the word “Adonai” is used about anyone other than the Eternal.

The word “Adon” can refer to the Almighty.

The plural form “Adonai” is usually used about the Almighty. Still there are some places where the singular form “Adon” is also used as a reference to the Almighty, as it is written in Exodus 23:17 and 34:23,

*“Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the **Lord** (“Adon”)*

YHWH.”(HNV revised)

Also in Joshua 3:11,

*“Behold, the ark of the covenant of the **Lord** (“Adon”) of all the earth passes over before you into the Yarden.”*(HNV)

The Plural Form of the Word “Adon”

As we said earlier, the plural form of the word “Adon” is “Adonim” and means “lords”. This word is used in the Scriptures about both angels and people.

We have already seen in Genesis 19:1-2 that the plural form “Adonai” is used about angels.

In Deuteronomy 10:17, is it written,

*“For the **LORD** your God, he is God of gods, and **Lord** (“Adonei”) of **lords** (“Adonim”), the great God, the mighty, and the awesome, who doesn’t regard persons, nor takes reward.”*(HNV)

In Psalm 136:3, it is written,

*“Give thanks to the **Lord** (“Adonei”)¹¹ of **lords** (“Adonim”); for his loving kindness endures forever:”*(HNV)

In these texts we see that the Almighty is called the “Adonim” of the “Adonim”. This could mean that he is lord over both men and angels.

Now we will look at a couple of texts where the form “Adonim” is only used about people.

In Isaiah 26:13, it is written,

*“The **LORD** our God, other **lords** (“Adonim”) besides you have had dominion over us; but by you only will we make mention of your name.”*(HNV)

In 1 Kings 22:17, it is written,

*“He said, I saw all Yisra’el scattered on the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd: and the **LORD** said, These have no **master** (“Adonim”); let them return every man to his house in shalom.”*(HNV)

¹¹ The word “Adonei” is a contraction (expressing possession), in Hebrew “smichut”, of “Adonim”.

Here we see that the word “Adonim” is referring to human rulers and not to angels.

The plural form “Adonim” can refer to one single man.

In the passage in 1 Kings we saw that the plural form “Adonim” is used about one single king. We can see something similar in Isaiah 19:4, where it is written,

*“I will give over the Mitzrim into the hand of a **cruel** (singular) **lord** (“Adonim” plural); and a fierce king shall rule over them, says the **Lord** (“Adon” singular), the **LORD** (YHWH) of Hosts.”(HNV)*

Interestingly enough we see here that the word “Adonim” in plural is written together with the word “cruel” in singular. Here the same thing is happening with the plural form of the word “Adon” that we saw with the word “Elohim” in the previous chapter. So, once again we see that it is not necessarily a question of more than one person when the word is written in plural form.

In the prophet’s writings it is talking about a king in Mitzrayim (Egypt). Instead of writing the singular form “Adon”, the Scriptures use the plural form “Adonim” about this one single person. If the adjective “cruel” would also have been written in plural form, it could be interpreted as referring to several lords, but in this case we see that it is not referring to more than one person.

When the Word “Adonai” is Referring to the Almighty

As we said earlier, the plural form of the word “Adon” is “Adonim”. When the word “Adonim” takes on a possessive suffix in first person singular we get the word “Adonai” which literally means “my lords”. We also said that the word “Adonai” is nearly always used as a reference to the Almighty.

In passing we can mention that in Jewish circles, ever since 300 BCE (before Christian era), the consecrated Name of the Almighty has always been replaced during reading of the Bible with the name “Adonai”. When the name “YHWH” is read it is not pronounced, but rather “Adonai” is said.

According to Strong’s concordance, the word “Adonai” occurs approximately 430 times in the Tanach (OT). There are however, several verses in the Tanach where the scribes have replaced the Name “YHWH” with “Adonai” in the text itself. By doing this they have corrupted the Word of the Eternal and through them the word is fulfilled that was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah when he said in 8:8,

“How do you say, We are wise, and the law of the LORD is with us? But, behold, the false pen of the Scribes has worked falsely.”(HNV)