

## **The Biblical Unitarian Podcast - by Dustin Smith, PhD**

### **Episode 405--“Chapter Preview: ‘The Only True God’”**

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## **Introduction**

If you aren't subscribed, do me a favor and hit that subscribe button. It goes a long way to getting the podcast in front of as many people as possible so that we can get the message out about the only true God and Jesus Christ, the son of God.

## **I. 2 - THE ONLY TRUE GOD**

Theology is the study of God, whom Jesus Christ defined as “the only true God” (John 17:3). Since God is the Creator, redeemer, and sustainer of all that exists, the doctrine that seeks to define, understand, and know him better is the self-evident place to begin any systematic treatment of theology. All life comes from God, which naturally makes him the source. Of equal importance is Paul’s insistence that the Christian life should be oriented towards bringing glory to God, whom Paul repeatedly defined as the Father alone (Phil 2:11). As such, the only true God is both the beginning and also the goal of all theological reflection.

This chapter will initiate our in-depth exploration of theology by examining the most prominent designations of the one and only true God. First, we will explore the personal name of the only true God, which is the most common way that the biblical authors who wrote the Old Testament scriptures referred to Israel’s God. Second, we will examine the Hebrew designation Adonai, a noteworthy Hebrew title that characterizes God as the supreme Lord. Third, we will turn our attention to the common noun elohim, the basic Hebrew designation that translates to “God.” Fourth, we will look closely at the Greek equivalent of elohim, the noun theos, in order to determine how the early Christians defined the person of Israel’s Creator. Lastly, we will focus on the familiar designation “Father” that the authors of both testaments employed to illustrate the true God. Once we have laid the necessary groundwork by adequately defining these key designations for the only true God, we will be on a more reliable footing to continue our study of theology with further explorations of his identity, oneness, attributes, and relationship with his creation.

## **II. The Name Yahweh**

- A. The God of Israel has a personal name. English editions of the Bible, out of reverence and respect for God, replace the personal name of God with the designation LORD. What lies behind these capitalized letters are four Hebrew consonants: yod, he, vav, and he. These four letters are known as the Tetragrammaton (which means “the four letters”). Some readers prefer to say the name of God instead of saying “LORD,” and Hebrew specialists and grammarians have good reasons for thinking that the pronunciation of the tetragrammaton is Yahweh. Yahweh, the personal name for the God of Israel, appears over 6,800 times in the Old Testament, making it the most frequent way the biblical authors referred to the Creator of heaven and earth. Many modern readers find it beneficial to say “Yahweh” when they see the Tetragrammaton (LORD) printed in the Old Testament.
- B. The pronunciation of the name of God as “Yahweh” can be made with a measure of confidence due to several strands of evidence. The first half of this name

(“Yah”) is a frequently used shorthand for God, a fact that English Bibles often indicate in the footnotes in order to avoid confusion. The most memorable occurrence of Yah appears in the Psalms, where it serves as the object of the verb “to praise,” Hallelu-Yah (Pss 135:21; 146:1; 147:1). The Early Church continued to use this Hebrew phrase, maintaining it even in the Greek text of the Book of Revelation, where it appears four times (Rev 19:1, 3, 4, 6). Furthermore, “Yah” is a common ending in theophoric Hebrew names, that is, names that refer to the individual's God, such as Josiah (“Yosiyah”) and Zechariah (“Zechariyah”).

- C. Three of the Church Fathers, important Christian writers living in the few centuries following the completion of the New Testament documents, provide significant assistance in verifying the pronunciation of the name of Israel's God. Clement of Alexandria, writing in Greek around the year AD 180, recounts how he overheard the name of God pronounced: “Further, the mystic name of the four letters which was affixed to those alone to whom the inner sanctuary was accessible, is called ‘Iaoue.’” This rendering in Greek closely resembles the pronunciation “Yahweh,” especially when each letter is pronounced individually. Epiphanius of Salamis, who lived in the fourth century AD, relates the pronunciation of the divine name in Greek as “Iabe.” Similarly, Theodoret of Cyrus recounts how the Samaritans of his time in the fifth century articulated the Tetragrammaton as “Iabe.” When we consider that the Greek beta has a “v” sound, the name bears a remarkable resemblance to the Hebrew pronunciation “Yahweh.” When we consider all this evidence, we can be reasonably confident that the personal name of the God of Israel, the only true God, is none other than Yahweh.

### **III. The Title Adonai**

- A. During the time of Jesus and his earliest followers, pious Jews did not utter the personal name of God out of respect and reverence. When they read the Hebrew text and came across the Tetragrammaton, they would substitute a different word instead: Adonai. This exalted title means “my Lord” or simply “Lord” (not to be confused with the Tetragrammaton in all caps, LORD). The noun Adonai appears 449 times in the Hebrew Bible, with almost every occurrence referring to the God of Israel. Consider this example from 2 Samuel 7:22: “For this reason, You are great, O Adonai Yahweh, for there is none like You, and there is no God besides You.” The title Adonai suggests the incomparable status that Yahweh, the God of Israel, naturally possesses. A similar passage can be observed in Psalm 16:2: “I said to Yahweh, ‘You are my Lord (Adonai); I have no good besides You.’” In both passages, Adonai is clearly another designation that refers to Yahweh, the only true God. The Hebrew grammar of the noun Adonai indicates that the title is

what linguists refer to as a “plural of majesty,” or an intensive Hebrew plural. The plural of majesty occurs when a plural word is used honorifically for a single person. In the case of Adonai, its form is the result of adding the first-person suffix (“my”) onto the majestically plural noun adonim. As we can observe in the passages above, Adonai clearly refers to a single person, to Yahweh himself, a fact that is easily verifiable by noticing the singular pronouns.

#### IV.

#### V. **The Noun Elohim**

- A. The next noteworthy designation, *elohim*, is one of the most frequently appearing nouns in the Old Testament, appearing over 2,750 times, and it translates into the noun “God.” Sometimes, the Hebrew text describes Yahweh with *elohim* in a way that suggests that it functions as a title, indicated by the definite article “the” (i.e., “the God”). More often than not, the noun *elohim* serves as a casual reference for Yahweh, referring to him simply as “God.” In essence, the noun “God” acts as a proper name for Yahweh himself. Consider the following examples:

#### VI.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Gen 1:1)

1. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. (Gen 1:3)
  2. Then Yahweh said to Moses, “Go to Pharaoh and speak to him, ‘Thus says Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews, “Let My people go, that they may serve me.”’” (Exod 9:1)
  3. Arise, O Yahweh; save me, O my God! (Ps 3:7)
  4. “I am a Hebrew,” he replied. “I worship Yahweh, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” (Jonah 1:9)
- B. Without a doubt, *elohim* is the most prominent designation for Yahweh in the Old Testament.
- C. In the past, interpreters have pointed out that *elohim* is grammatically plural in form, being the plural of the Hebrew noun *eloah*, which is also translated as “God.” Readers used to speculate about whether the grammatically plural *elohim* hinted or suggested that God is actually more than one person. More recently, however, these speculations have been abandoned by scholars due to several convincing reasons. First, it is now widely acknowledged that *elohim*, like Adonai, is a plural of majesty, an intensive Hebrew plural. This means that *elohim* is plural in form but singular in meaning. Second, the standard practice of the authors of the Old Testament was to govern *elohim* with singular verbs and singular adjectives, demonstrating that these ancient authors clearly understood *elohim* to refer to a single person when used to describe the God of Israel. The following examples illustrate the care with which the biblical authors handled portrayals of the single personhood of Yahweh as *elohim*:
1. Know therefore today, and take it to your heart, that Yahweh, He is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other. (Deut 4:39)

2. Do not fear, for I am with you. Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you. Surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand. (Isa 41:10)
  3. You will live in the land that I gave to your forefathers; so you will be My people, and I will be your God. (Ezek 36:28)
- D. Since the biblical authors intentionally portrayed the God of Israel with the plurally majestic noun *elohim* over 2,000 times, we can safely conclude that this reflects a deeply felt conviction that Yahweh is the most outstanding, most excellent, and only true God.

## VII.

### VIII. The Noun *Theos*

- A. Following the conquest of Alexander the Great, which ushered in the Hellenistic period in the fourth century BC, the Jewish people required a version of the Scriptures in the common language of the time. Beginning in the mid-third century BC, Jewish scribes began translating the Hebrew Bible into Greek (a translation known as the Septuagint), which enabled Greek-speaking Jews to access the Scriptures in their own language. As such, the Hebrew noun for God (*elohim*) was translated into its Greek equivalent, *theos*, the noun from which we get the word *theology*, the study of God. By the first century AD, Greek was the dominant language in the Eastern Mediterranean and in much of the Western Roman Empire. As such, all twenty-seven New Testament documents were originally written in the Greek language. When the New Testament authors referred to the only true God, they naturally employed the Greek noun *theos* approximately 1,300 times. This frequency makes *theos* the most common designation that the writers of the New Testament used to illustrate the only true God.
- B. On several occasions, we find *theos* paired with the definite article in Greek, which translates into “the God.” Consider the following evidence from the New Testament:
1. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His child Jesus (Acts 3:13)
  2. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort (2 Cor 1:3)
  3. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. (2 Cor 11:31)
  4. Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely (1 Thes 5:23)
- C. As we can observe, “the God” is regularly characterized by singular references and pronouns. Furthermore, he is defined as the Father and as the God of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Noteworthy is the detail that this God is the God of our Lord Jesus. Yes, the Early Church believed that Jesus has a God.

## IX. The True God as Father

- A. The final designation for the only true God to discuss in this chapter is that God is the Father, and his people are his children. The fatherhood of God is expressed in several Old Testament passages:
1. Do you thus repay Yahweh, you foolish and senseless people? Is not He your father, who created you, who made you and established you? (Deut 32:6)
  2. You, O Yahweh, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is Your name. (Isa 63:16)
  3. But now, O Yahweh, You are our Father, we are the clay and You our potter; and all of us are the work of Your hand. (Isa 64:8)
  4. Then I said, "How I would set you among My sons and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful inheritance of the nations!" And I said, "You shall call Me, My Father, and not turn away from following Me." (Jer 3:19)
  5. Do we not all have one Father? Has not one God created us? (Mal 2:10)
- B. The God of Israel's role as a father is indicative of him being the Creator and maker of all things. Additionally, it firmly sets him in an intimate relationship with his covenant people, who are identified as his children. When we reach the New Testament, these emphases on the Father's role as Creator and covenant God, who is in relationship with his sons and daughters, continue to appear. Observe how the true God is illustrated as the Father alone:
1. "Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name.'" (Matt 6:9)
  2. Yet for us there is one God the Father, from whom are all things, and we for him (1 Cor 8:6)
  3. "And I will be a Father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to Me," says the Lord Almighty. (2 Cor 6:18)
- C. The New Testament authors did not see fit to reproduce the personal name of the only true God, Yahweh, in Greek (with the lone exceptions being the four references to Hallelujah in Revelation 19). Instead, the writers used "Father" as the most common title for God in the New Testament. Even Jesus Christ was remembered as describing God as the Father more than any other title (Matt 6:1; John 14:28; 20:17). When Jesus prayed to the Father, he addressed him as the only true God: "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God" (John 17:3).
- D. For the Jewish Christians, understanding God as the Father would be recognizable from the inherited teachings of Judaism and the familiar portrayals within the Hebrew Scriptures. But what about Gentiles who converted to

becoming Christ-followers? How did they come to speak of and identify the God of their newfound monotheistic faith? When we examine the preaching of Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, an answer becomes readily available. To become a believer in Christ, pagans needed to abandon their polytheism and embrace Jewish monotheism, which included the understanding that the only true God is the Father. We may easily observe how Paul taught the identity of God to his Gentile converts:

1. For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, “Abba! Father!” (Rom 8:15)
  2. So that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 15:6)
  3. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Gal 1:3)
- E. We may gather some additional data from the opening chapter of Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians. Paul reminds his readers of their conversion experience in which they “turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven” (1 Thes 1:9–10). The Thessalonian Christians served the true God, and they waited for the true God’s son, Jesus, to return. If the living and true God has a son, then the true God must be the Father of that son. In this way, we can confirm that Paul summoned his Gentile converts to abandon their idols and to serve the Father as the one and only true God.
- F. While Jesus and Paul are surely the most influential teachers of the Early Church’s theology, they were not alone in defining the only true God as the Father. The portrayal of God as the Father alone is the consistent witness of the rest of the authors of the New Testament. For example:
1. It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? (Heb 12:7)
  2. Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. (James 1:17)
  3. If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one’s work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay (1 Pet 1:17)
  4. See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God (1 John 3:1)
  5. Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father’s Son, in truth and love. (2 John 1:3)
  6. And [Jesus] has made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father—to him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. (Rev 1:6)

## X. Conclusion

- A. To summarize, the study of theology involves the examination of God, the rightful and self-evident subject of theological reflection. The authors of the biblical texts portrayed the only true God with several vital titles and designations. We first examined God's personal and proper name, Yahweh, which is designated in our English versions of the Old Testament as LORD. Then, we drew attention to the exalted title describing the God of Israel, Adonai. This title, commonly rendered as "my Lord," served as a substitute designation when pious readers wanted to avoid pronouncing the divine name "Yahweh" out of respect and reverence for him. We also examined the common Hebrew noun referring to God, elohim. We noted its plural form while also giving attention to its singular meaning when referencing the God of Israel. Then we examined the Greek noun for God, theos. This common New Testament noun, often emphasized with the definite article ("the God"), defined the object of early Christian monotheistic faith. Lastly, we explored the familial title of "Father," which was the customary way the Early Church referred to the only true God. Emphasizing God's role as the Creator, the maker of the covenant relationship with his people, and his relationship with the son, Jesus Christ, the understanding that the true God was the Father alone was firmly entrenched among the earliest Christians.

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