In the opening verses of Mark there is a significant quotation from the Old Testament. Mark says that it is from Isaiah, and the most important part of the quotation is from Isaiah, though it begins with phrases that seem to be from Exodus and Malachi.

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”

(Mark 1.2-3 NRSV)

There are at least three characters in this quotation, all of whom we meet in the first line: “I,” “my messenger,” and “you.” It seems clear that Mark intends the quotation to be understood in such a way that “I” is God, “you” is Jesus, and “my messenger” is John the Baptist. In the key part of the quotation, then, which comes from Isa 40.3, “the voice” clearly refers to John and “the Lord” is Jesus. John carries out his own work of preparing the Lord’s way by crying out to everyone else to prepare the way.

In Isa 40, “the Lord” is clearly God himself. Not only is this clear from the context, but the Hebrew text has YHWH, and “the way of YHWH/the Lord” is used in parallel with “a highway for our God” in both Hebrew and the Septuagint (LXX). It seems highly significant, then, that Mark (and Matthew and Luke; John also uses the first line of the parallelism) has felt free to apply this passage to Jesus, altering the second parallel line so that instead of referring to the highway/path “of our God” it refers to “his” paths. Since in both Old Testament and New Testament the two lines clearly refer to the same person, the change to a pronoun in the New Testament does not change the meaning of the original.

Jesus is Lord

This is just one of many places in the New Testament where an OT passage using the Tetragrammaton (YHWH) is applied to Jesus. Many translators may
not realize how important this fact is for our work. Let me try to spell out the
significance of what the NT writers have done.

Jesus is frequently called “Lord” in the New Testament. The Greek word
kurios can of course mean simply “sir,” and in many places (especially in the
Gospels, such as Luke 9.61; John 4.11; 5.7; 8.11; 9.36; 20.15) it seems clear that
this is the intended sense, even though Jesus is the one addressed. However, in
many other places in the New Testament, kurios when applied to Jesus clearly
means much more than “sir.” Jesus was referred to and addressed by the same
term used for God in the Old Testament. As early Christian theology was being
developed, it is in many ways a startling fact that Christian thinkers felt that it
was not just acceptable but completely appropriate to apply to Jesus a title that
was primarily associated with God. The importance of this point is underlined by
the fact that the NT writers felt no qualms about applying kurios passages from
the Old Testament to Jesus. Not only did they use the same term for Jesus that
was used for God, but they actually took passages of scripture that used this term
to refer to God and applied them to Jesus.

Some people may want to object at this point, in words such as these: “Wait!
While it is true that LXX uses kurios, it is important to remember that the original
Hebrew is very frequently YHWH. The change from Hebrew to Greek at this
point has quite likely confused the issue in some way so that we may well be
overstating the case to say that ‘the NT writers felt no qualms about applying
kurios passages to Jesus.’”

In order to evaluate whether or not this is a valid objection, we need to
first try to understand what the Tetragrammaton meant to users of the Hebrew
scriptures at the time that the New Testament was being written. Can we assume
that the NT writers used kurios in these passages only because that was what they
found in LXX, without realizing the theological significance of what they were
doing? Or is it conceivable that the NT writers consciously intended to apply to
Jesus passages that they knew full well referred to YHWH?

It seems to be impossible to know all of the facts necessary to answer this
question exhaustively. But it is at least possible to state the general scholarly
opinion on the subject at this time. First, it is widely believed that readers of the
Hebrew text had for some time felt that it was inappropriate to pronounce the
Tetragrammaton. When reading the text, if they came to the Tetragrammaton, they
would replace it with ‘Adonai “Lord.”

Although only a small percentage of the LXX manuscripts in use at the time
have survived, it is clear that a variety of techniques were in use to represent the
Tetragrammaton. These included writing the Tetragrammaton in Hebrew letters
in an otherwise Greek text, replacing it with some Greek substitute, or even
leaving a blank space in the text. Substitutes included kurios, the Greek letters
ΠΠΠΠ (PIPI—because they look quite similar to the Hebrew for YHWH), ΙΑΩ
(IAΩ), and ZZ (see Pietersma 1984). But readers of LXX, whatever they saw in
the text, would read the Greek text using the word kurios in just the places where
the Hebrew text was read using the word ’Adonai.
This suggests that the readers of the Jewish scriptures understood that the Tetragrammaton should be replaced with a word meaning “Lord,” whether in Hebrew or in Greek. If that is true, then it was not (just) because of LXX that NT writers used *kurios* when quoting from the Old Testament. If they were quoting from LXX, they would certainly use *kurios*. But even if they happened to be using the Hebrew text (as they apparently did at times, whether actually referring to a manuscript or quoting from memory), whenever they came to the Tetragrammaton they would have read 'Adonai. When translating the passage into Greek, they would have naturally rendered 'Adonai as *kurios*. There is therefore no basis for arguing that NT writers used *kurios* because they were in some way misled by their reliance on LXX. *Kurios* would be the natural term to use even if they were quoting directly from the Hebrew and translating into Greek as they did so. Furthermore, even when referring to some manuscripts of LXX, they would have been reminded every time they saw it that the word they were writing as *kurios* was actually the Tetragrammaton.

The use of the expression “Lord” (even if it was not written as such, but only read in that way) in the Old Testament thus ties the two testaments together and makes clear what the NT writers were doing when they quoted from the Old Testament. Some, if not all of the NT writers knew that the original Hebrew had the Tetragrammaton in these places, and they felt that they were faithfully quoting when they wrote it as *kurios* in their Greek texts. And in a number of cases they applied these passages to Jesus.

In the light of all of this, it is wrong to suggest that the early Christian writers were in any way misled by LXX. It seems highly likely that they knew what they were doing and were consciously applying quotes referring to *YHWH* to Jesus. This is an extremely important point for theologians and translators to consider. It means that in the development of early Christian theology, the Jewish point of view which required the replacement of *YHWH* by 'Adonai can no longer be looked at as just an unfortunate curiosity of Jewish tradition. On the contrary, it was precisely this requirement which led to the Tetragrammaton being read as “Lord” both in the Hebrew and in the Greek. Early Christians called Jesus “Lord,” and frequently applied OT passages referring to *YHWH*/Lord to Jesus. It seems clear that the use of this common term is a key factor in the identification of Jesus with God by the early Christians.

To put the point somewhat more precisely, it seems very likely that readers of the Hebrew knew that the scriptures had these two ways of referring to God (in addition, of course, to a variety of other terms and titles). Sometimes the letters *YHWH* were written, sometimes 'DNY ('Adonai). They were different when written, but it was understood that they were to be read in the same way and that they had the same reference. In any case, whichever expression was found in the original Hebrew, *kurios* was felt to be the appropriate way to express the concept in Greek.

If this is a true picture of the way *YHWH* was understood at the time that the Hebrew scriptures became the first Christian “Bible,” then it becomes the basis for a strong argument that *YHWH* in the Old Testament and the more significant references to “Lord” in the New Testament should be translated in the same way.
In recent years we have often stressed the importance for translators of being aware of how we are handling “key terms” and also the importance of translating in a way that maintains intertextuality. These principles add more strength to the force of the argument. Translators therefore need to think very carefully before making a decision which will sever this important tie between the two testaments, namely by deciding to translate *YHWH* in the Old Testament in a way that is different from the way *kurios* is translated in the New Testament.

**The state of the discussion up to 1992**

In a 1990 article in *The Bible Translator*, Paul Ellingworth surveyed reasons given in various English, French, and German Bibles for using “Lord” (or its equivalent) in passages where Hebrew has the Tetragrammaton. Even though most of these were study Bibles, he found that they gave highly questionable explanations for using “Lord,” such as simply stating that they were following tradition. The Revised Standard Version’s preface stated that “the use of any proper name for the one and only God, as though there were other gods from whom He had to be distinguished, was discontinued in Judaism before the Christian era and is entirely inappropriate for the universal faith of the Christian Church” (quoted in Ellingworth 1990, 347).

As a result of his survey, Ellingworth found no good translational reason to use “Lord” to translate the Tetragrammaton. On the contrary, he suggested that the “mystery of God’s nature is not to be identified even with the Tetragrammaton itself, much less with the ancient Jewish reluctance to pronounce it, which in any case is totally irrelevant to a non-Hebrew-speaking non-Jew, whose linguistic and/or religious tradition knows no such reticence.” In view of this, he concluded that the “simplest solution is a transliteration such as ‘Yahweh.’” The only justification he could find for a translator to use “Lord” was in a situation where “the force of tradition is still too strong” for any better solution (350).

About the same time that Ellingworth’s article was published, UBS translation personnel held a seminar discussing the question of how the Tetragrammaton should be handled in translation. The early discussions in this seminar made it very clear that there was no hope for consensus. There were those who felt strongly that “Lord” was the right solution and there were those who felt equally strongly that the use of “Lord” was wrong. The only solution possible in those circumstances was to produce a document which listed the various solutions and the arguments in their favor, but which essentially left the final decision up to the translation team. This “multiple choice” non-solution was published in *The Bible Translator* (United Bible Societies 1992 = UBS 1992). Before that time Bible Society translations usually used “Lord” for the Tetragrammaton. But since this article was published there have been a number of UBS translation projects which have used “Yahweh” or something similar to replace the Tetragrammaton in the Old Testament. There have also been other more individual solutions, using local divine names (for example, in Chichewa, “Great God of the Bow,” described in Wendland 1992).
Opening the issue again

The main point of the present article is to suggest that there are important issues related to this question which were not considered in Ellingworth 1990 and UBS 1992, although they had, to some extent, been raised much earlier in a largely neglected Bible Society publication (Rosin 1956). The “ancient Jewish reluctance to pronounce” the Tetragrammaton, far from being “totally irrelevant” to us today, as Ellingworth suggested, is a basic and important aspect of the relationship between the Old Testament and the New. As we have seen, if modern translators do not translate the Tetragrammaton as “Lord,” they sever the link between many OT passages and the important NT passages which quote them. But more than that, they change an important aspect of the scriptures used by those who wrote the New Testament and by the early Christian church. In these scriptures, both Old and New, the same term was found applied to God and to Christ. This is a basic aspect of many kurios passages in the New Testament, where Christ himself is called kurios or where it is quite ambiguous whether the reference is intended to be to God or to Christ. In short, the word “Lord” (as kurios in Greek or as a combination of 'Adonai in Hebrew and kurios in Greek) is an essential intertextual link between the two testaments of the Christian Bible.

It is important to stress that this intertextual link is by no means limited to direct quotations in the New Testament. For example, Hurtado refers to the expression “to call upon the name of Jesus the Lord” (variations of this are found in Acts 9.14, 21; 22.16; 1 Cor 1.2; and Rom 10.9-14): “The phrase is apparently derived originally from Old Testament passages that refer to calling ‘upon the [name of the] Lord’ (Yahweh, e.g., Gen. 12:8; 13:4; 21:33; 26:25; Pss. 99:6 [LXX 98.6]; 105:1 [LXX 104.1]; Joel 2:32 [3.5 in MT and LXX])” (1998, 108-109).

Even if this is all that could be said on the subject, it is more than enough to require translators to rethink the question of how the Tetragrammaton should be handled in their translations. However, it is not all that there is to say.

Further implications

As the issue has been expressed so far, it might be said that because Jesus was regularly referred to as “Lord,” there was a perhaps natural tendency for the early Christians to read OT passages which talked about the “Lord” as possibly referring to Jesus. NT writers were certainly aware that the OT passages referred to God, but because of their understanding of who Jesus was, they did not feel that they were misusing the OT quotes when they used them to refer to Jesus. But modern readers might feel that these writers of the NT books had perhaps not fully considered the implications of what they were doing.

However, there are a number of NT passages which suggest that the NT writers were very much aware of the implications of what they were doing, and that they had in fact come to conclusions that even today are not fully appreciated by many readers of the New Testament.

One of the clearest of these important NT passages is Phil 2.6-11. In this well-known passage, following the report of Jesus’ self-emptying and humiliation, Paul says (vv 9-11) that “God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is
above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend . . . and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (NRSV).

What is “the name that is above every name” that according to v 9 God gave to Jesus? There has been a growing consensus among NT scholars that this is none other than God’s own name, expressed in the Tetragrammaton. It is first pointed out that there seem to be allusions here to key passages in Isaiah. In Isa 42.8 God says “I am \textit{YHWH}, that is my name; my glory I give to no other.” In Isa 45.21-23, God says “Was it not I, the LORD [\textit{YHWH}]? There is no other god besides me. . . . Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth. For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn . . . a word that shall not return: ‘To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.’” Verses 9-11 in Philippians, then, specifically refer to some of the most monotheistic passages in the Old Testament, yet they say that God himself has given the Name (\textit{YHWH}) to Jesus, so that everyone on earth will bow and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (= \textit{YHWH}). In Isa 42.8 God says “my glory I give to no other.” Philippians 9.11 says that even though everyone recognizes that God has given Jesus Christ the most excellent name, yet all of this honor given to Jesus is ultimately “to the glory of God the Father.”

Martin says that “In the light of verse 11, the supreme name is that of ‘Lord.’ . . . In view of its special connection with the name of God in the Old Testament, the giving of the name in this context declares that Jesus Christ is installed in the place which properly belongs to God himself as Lord of all creation” (1987, 109). Many other commentaries could be quoted in support of this understanding.

Another point about these verses in Philippians that many commentaries also agree about is that these verses do not present a shocking new idea of Paul’s. On the contrary, the words seem to be a poetic statement based on a widely accepted understanding of Christ. Many suggest that Paul has quoted a Christian hymn in this passage. Hurtado, for example, says that this is “a passage commonly thought to derive from the liturgical practices of the earliest Christian decades” (1999, 78). If this is correct, it would be strong evidence that it represented an understanding that was generally accepted by Christians at the time Paul used it. But even if the whole passage was written by Paul at the same time as he wrote the rest of the letter, he nevertheless presents the ideas in a way that suggests that he is reminding the readers of things that they know, rather than presenting a new and startling idea.

The Gospel of John has a perspective very similar to the perspective just discussed from Philippians. However, it is less relevant to the main point of this article, because in John, rather than using \textit{kurios} as a replacement of the Name, the Name itself is applied to Jesus. In Deut 32.39 and again in various passages from Isaiah (41.4; 43.10, 25; 46.4; 48.12; 51.12; and 52.6) the divine name is expressed in Hebrew as ‘\textit{ani hu}’ or ‘\textit{anokhi hu}, both of which become \textit{eg\textendash o eimi} “I am” in LXX.

In John 17.4, Jesus prays to the Father, saying that he has finished the work that the Father gave him to do. In 17.6 and again in 17.26, Jesus seems to be
elaborating on this work that he has been given when he says, “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me.” When did Jesus make the Father’s name known? To the extent that this refers to teaching his disciples about his Father’s nature, plan, and will, such an expression could of course cover much of Jesus’ teaching. But there are certain times when Jesus does seem to refer to himself by using a strong *ego eimi* which reflects the Hebrew reference to the Name.

One of these times is in his discussion with the Jews in ch 8. In 8.58, Jesus says to them, “Before Abraham was, I am (*ego eimi*).” As Talbert says, “The pre-existent one is God (1:1-2) who, therefore, can reveal God. . . . The Jews interpret Jesus’ claim as blasphemy and attempt to stone him” (1992, 158). Talbert calls attention to Lev 24.16, where anyone who “utters the name” (REB) is to be put to death.

Later, when people come to arrest him in the garden (John 18.1-8), Jesus asks them, “Who are you looking for?” They reply, “Jesus of Nazareth,” and Jesus responds by saying “Ego eimi.” Although in a primary sense this can be taken as an answer to their question, “I am he,” more is implied here (this is stressed in the text by repeating the words three times). When they heard him, “they drew back and fell to the ground.” As Talbert says, the “falling down is a normal accompaniment of a theophany (e.g., Dan 10:9, Acts 9:4, 22:7, 26:14, Rev 1:17). This would argue that *ego eimi* here functions also as it does in 8:58, as the name of God” (1992, 233). There are several other *ego eimi* passages in John which are probably also cases of Jesus using the divine name and thereby making God’s name known (4.26; 6.20; 8.24; 13.19).

As in the Philippians passage, which says that God gave the most excellent name to Jesus, John also states clearly that God gave his name to Jesus. There is much in John 17 that is reminiscent of the Philippians passage, but 17.11 (and 12) is particularly important in this context: “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”

Once it is accepted that in NT times it was not unusual to consciously identify Jesus with the *YHWH* of the Old Testament, it is quite possible to find other passages where this identification may be intended. Beale, discussing the “name” of Rev 19.12, says that the “expression could refer to the tetragrammaton . . . since the name is written on Christ’s head or on his diadems, just as the name Yahweh was written on a gold plate on the high priest’s forehead.” He then goes on to say, “Perhaps this is the way to understand Christ’s ‘new name’ in 3:12, which, if not equated with ‘the name of my God,’ is so closely linked to it that it also has divine overtones” (1999, 954).

Similarly, it is possible that Mark intends the two cases where Jesus says “I am” to be understood as uses of the divine name. The first, 6.50, is parallel to John 6.20. And in response to the second (14.62), the high priest tears his clothes and says to the others at the trial that “You have heard his blasphemy” (14.63-64; see Boring 1999).

Much has been written on the interesting theological issues raised by these passages, but the important point for us is this: All of this is evidence that there
was an understanding among the early Christians that Jesus could appropriately be identified with \textit{YHWH}, and that it was in fact the will of God the Father that Jesus should be known by that name.

As we have seen earlier, even if this last point is not understood or not accepted, there are still very good reasons why \textit{YHWH} in the Old Testament should be translated in the same way as “Lord” in the New Testament. However, if we accept the evidence of some NT passages that early Christians believed that God had actually given the divine name to Jesus, then the reasons for translating \textit{YHWH} as “Lord” become even stronger. That is, if many of the early Christians understood that by calling Jesus “Lord” they were identifying him with the \textit{YHWH} of the Hebrew scriptures, then there are excellent reasons for modern translations of the scriptures to maintain the unity of terminology that the early Christians experienced in their own scriptures and writings.

In Exod 3.15, when the name \textit{YHWH} is revealed to Moses, God says, “This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations” (NRSV). There are many Christians even today who read passages like this and feel that they are somehow going against the will of God if they no longer call God by the revealed name \textit{YHWH}. Perhaps this kind of thinking has influenced some of the translators who prefer to use a term like “Yahweh” in their OT translations. These people are no doubt aware of the fact that Jews came to feel that the Name should not be pronounced. But this is felt to be (in Ellingworth’s words, quoted above) “totally irrelevant to a non-Hebrew-speaking non-Jew.” However, if we follow the points discussed in this paper, it becomes clear that this issue was faced long ago by the first Christians. Their answer to it was something like this: God’s eternal name is as glorious as ever. But God himself has declared that this is the name by which Jesus should be known. However, rather than pronouncing this name in the particular way that it was originally pronounced in Hebrew, this name is to be represented in our own languages as “Lord.” Whenever Christians declare that “Jesus is Lord,” they are of course declaring that they have accepted Jesus as the Lord of their own lives. But they are also witnessing to the fact that God himself has made Jesus the Lord of creation, and God himself has declared that by calling Jesus “Lord” we are confessing that Jesus bears the eternal divine name.

It may be worth making one final comment, although this is an extra issue, and not part of the main point of this article. It has been the tradition in many languages (including English) to use capital letters in the Old Testament whenever the word “Lord” translates the Tetragrammaton. Whatever the motivation for this may be, there is a sense in which this is very appropriate. When the early Christians read one of the books of the Hebrew scriptures, they would see the Tetragrammaton, but they would read \textit{Adonai}, the same word that they would read if \textit{Adonai} itself were written in the text. So today, people reading our translations may see either “LORD” or “Lord.” They see two different items, but they read them in the same way. For those who are interested, it is a convenient way to alert them to the places in the Old Testament where the name \textit{YHWH} is found, while at the same time ensuring that the name is pronounced as “Lord.” In a sense, their reading experience is the same as that of readers of the Hebrew scriptures. The only problem is that few readers today will feel the charge of
power that we assume was felt by many early readers of the Name. To provide that sort of experience, we should perhaps write the Name with letters of fire that blaze but do not consume the page.

Works cited


