

Old and New Testament Names for God

Here are explanations of frequent or more significant names for God in the Old Testament. As you read these, get to know your Lord better so that you may call on His name with all confidence.

Two Hebrew words are typically translated as “name”: (1) *shem*, which may come from a root meaning “mark” or “brand,” and (2) *zeker*, “remembrance,” “memorial” (Exo. 3:15). For the Israelites, a name held who or what a person was (cf 1Sam. 25:25). Naming someone expressed ownership or relationship. A name equaled one’s reputation (see Exo. 20:7).

Almighty. Hebrew *shaddai*. Not well understood. The tradition of translating it as “almighty” comes from the LXX. It often appears in passages about blessing and fruitfulness (e.g., Gen.) as well as in passages about God’s power to destroy or judge (e.g., Job). God identified Himself to Abram by this name (Gen. 17:1; cf Exo. 6:3).

angel of the LORD. Hebrew *mal’ak yahweh*, “messenger of Yahweh.” Used 63 times. Generally, an angel is a created being who speaks for the Lord. But in many OT settings, “the angel of the LORD” and “the LORD” are used interchangeably (e.g., Gen. 16:7–13; 21:17–20; 22:11–12, 15–18; 31:11–13; Exo. 3:2–6). This signals an appearance of God’s Son before His incarnation (cf John 1:1).

Anointed. (*Messiah*) Hebrew *mashiach*, a chosen person, distinguished by anointing with oil (see note, 1Sam 10:1). Prophets and even Cyrus, king of Persia, were titled this way (1Chr. 16:22; Isa. 45:1). However, the title is most commonly used of kings Saul and David in 1Sam. and 2Sam. Before Saul and David were chosen as kings, Hannah prayed that the Lord would rule the earth through “His anointed” (1Sam 2:10), a prophecy about the Savior from David’s line (Psa. 2:2; 45:7; Isa. 61:1; Dan. 9:25–26). See “Christ.”

Father. Moses anticipates such a title (Deut. 32:6), but it appears only later (Psa. 68:5; 89:26; Isa. 63:16; 64:8; Jer. 3:4, 19; Mal. 2:10).

glory of the LORD. A theophany of God’s presence, especially the pillars of cloud and fire (see Exo. 13:21) and a human appearance in Ezekiel’s visions (see note, Ezek. 1:28). Also, “glory of the God of Israel” (Ezek.) and “Glory of Israel” (1Sam 15:29).

God. Translated from three Hebrew terms. (1) *’elohim* appears c 2,550 times. It is the first and most commonly used word for God in the OT (cf Gen. 1:1). References to the true God always take singular verbs, even though *’elohim* is a plural noun. This grammar may signal God’s unique majesty and trinitarian character. See note, Gen. 1:26. The Hebrew term is occasionally used of men, such as judges (Exo. 4:16; Psa. 82:6). This may signal that Israelites understood *’elohim* to describe God’s authority. (2) *’el* appears c 400 times, an ancient word for God appearing in every Semitic language except Ethiopic. It is esp. common in Job, appearing there more often than the other terms for God. See note, Josh. 3:10. (3) *’eloah* appears c 400 times. It is similar in spelling to the common Aram word for God. (Some have regarded *’eloah* as a singular form of Hebrew *’elohim*, but this is not proven.) The term appears frequently in older poetry (cf Deut. 32:15, 17; Job uses it 41 times). Uses of *’eloah* outside of Job associate the name with God’s ability to defend His people.

God of heaven. Most commonly used at the time of exile.

God of hosts. The term “host” (Hbr *tsaba*; plural noun *tseba’oth*) refers to military service, the ranks and divisions of troops (Jgs. 4:2; 2Chr. 26:11–15). Though the hosts of the Lord are often angels (1Kgs. 22:19), they include His people Israel (Num. 1:52; 1Sam. 17:45; Isa. 24:23), the Levites (Num. 4; 8:24–25), the “ministering women” (Exo. 38:8; 1Sam. 2:22) and, notably, all of creation, which God set in order and continues to rule (Gen. 2:1; Isa. 37:16; Jer. 10:11–16; Amos 4:13; 5:8; 9:5–6; Zech. 14:16).

God of Israel. Common title emphasizing God’s covenant bond with Abraham’s descendants through the chosen seed, Jacob (Gen. 32:28; 35:10). See *Holy One of Israel*.

Holy One of Israel. Used 26 times in Isa. and only a few times elsewhere. Holiness includes all attributes of perfection that distinguish God from His creatures. Yet, He condescended to enter a covenant relationship with Israel, His chosen servant for salvation. When Israel fell into sin, they had to fear God’s holy wrath. See *God of Israel* and *Spirit*.

King. Hebrew *melech*. David had wanted to build God a “house” (temple), but God refused. Instead, God promised to build David a “house” (a dynasty or kingdom) that would last forever, ruled by a descendant much greater than David himself (2Sam. 7:13; see David’s response in Psa. 110). God’s reign becomes focused on this coming King, the Anointed One (Messiah, Christ). Daniel sees this promised King in a vision several centuries later. The Spirit reveals to Daniel critical information about the kingdom of God

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and its ruler, a human being (“one like a son of man”) who judges with divine authority (Dan. 7:13–14). This King will rule over a Kingdom comprised of Gentiles as well as Israelites, individuals from all over the world brought together in faith. (Jesus draws His favorite self-designation, “Son of Man,” from this passage, quoting it on trial before Caiaphas in Mark 14:62.)

living God. Emphasizes that God is the source of life, as later evidenced in Christ’s resurrection. Bede: “He calls Him the ‘living’ God by way of distinction from the false gods which heathendom in its various delusions made to itself to worship, either of dead men, or—greater folly still—of insensate matter;” Josh. 3:10; Mat. 16:16.

Lord. Hebrew *’adonai*, used c 340 times. Plural form is used for God; singular forms (e.g., Hebrew *’adon*) may also be used for God (cf Exo. 34:23). On substituting this term for “Yahweh,” see next entry.

LORD. God’s personal name (see notes, Exo. 3:14–15), presented in the ESV text as “LORD” in capital letters. It is a translation of the Hebrew words *yahweh* and *yah*. *Yahweh* is used more than 6,820 times and is the most common referent for God in the Bible. Though God instructs His people to call on Him using His personal name (Exo. 3:15; Psa. 105:1), and doing so is presented as a sign of faith (Psa. 116:13; Zeph. 3:9; Zech. 13:9), traditions of not saying “Yahweh” arose in Jewish circles during the intertestamental period. Apparently, people feared to speak this name because they feared breaking the Second Commandment (Exo. 20:7). Jewish writers used the euphemism “the Lord” (Hebrew *’adonai*) in place of God’s personal name. Early Christians picked up this practice. *Yah* is an abbreviated form of *Yahweh*, appearing sometimes by itself but most often as a syllable in other names and terms (e.g., *Jeremiah*, *Halleluiah*).

LORD God. Hebrew *yahweh ’elohim* (see entries above). Generally, OT authors use one or the other term, but 385 times they are used in combination (“Yahweh God,” or perhaps “the God Yahweh”). Ezek. uses this combination the most (217 times). In Gen. 2–3, this combination is used 20 times and a few times thereafter (cf Gen. 15:2).

LORD of hosts. See *God of hosts*.

Mighty One. Hebrew *’abbir*, from Semitic root meaning “be strong.” Appears only in poetic passages (cf Gen. 49:24).

Most High. Hebrew *’elyon*. Used four times in Gen. 14:17–22 and c 40 times elsewhere (often in Psa. and Dn). God is so far above us we cannot begin to comprehend Him.

Redeemer. Hebrew *go’el*. In Job 19:25, comparable to “arbiter” of 9:33 and “witness” of 16:18–22. The Redeemer is God. Job appeals to God against God (16:19–21). In light of the fuller biblical revelation, we know that Christ, the God-man, fulfills the description of the Redeemer. In support of this view that Job appeals to God Himself are the following: (1) Job consistently recognizes God as the ultimate arbiter in all matters of justice; (2) Job knows that nothing can deliver a person from the wrath of God’s Law other than God Himself; (3) the Lord Himself confirms all of this in chs 40–41; (4) in Job’s final plea (ch 31), he puts his legal case solely into the hands of God. As Christians, we know this appeal is to Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, who as a person is distinct from the other two persons of the Godhead.

Rock. Hebrew *tsur*. Appears five times in the Song of Moses (Deut. 32:4, 15, 18, 30, 31); common in Psa.

Spirit. Hebrew *ruach*; lit, “breath, wind.” Describes the life force in or from a being. The Spirit of God the Lord is titled the “Holy Spirit” (Psa. 51:11; Isa. 63:10–11). He is an agent of creation (Gen. 1:2; Job 26:13), providence (Job 33:4; Psa. 104:30), new birth/life (Ezek. 11:19; 36:26–27), inspiration and anointing for service (Num. 11). In other words, God’s Spirit does God’s works and has God’s attributes. These OT descriptions anticipate the NT revelation of the Trinity (see notes, Isa. 11:2–4; 48:16).

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The New Testament includes a variety of names for the persons of the Holy Trinity.

Abba. Aram “father” comparable with English “papa” or “dad.” Expresses the deep, loving relationship Jesus had with the Father and which believers now share. See *Father*.

Christ. Greek *christos*, “Anointed One,” who would deliver and rule God’s people. See “*Anointed*.”

Christ Jesus. Used c 80 times in the NT, always by the apostle Paul. On its meaning, see *Jesus Christ*.

Father. Although this name for God was known and used in the OT, Jesus used it with greater frequency and intimacy. He taught His disciples to pray to God most personally by calling Him “Father” (Matt. 6:9; Luke 11:2). The early Christians viewed the Church as a family.

firstborn. Greek *prototokos*; not simply the child born first but also a position of preeminence as the inheritor of the family’s power and wealth. Signifies the preeminence of the exalted Lord Jesus and His relationship to the heavenly Father (see Col 1:15, 18)

God. Greek *theos*. Used to describe the true God but also pagan deities.

Holy Spirit. See *Spirit*.

Jesus. From Hebrew *yehoshu‘ah*, “Yahweh is salvation.” See note, Josh. 1:1. English spelling derives from the shorter Greek spelling of the name. An angel gave the name to Joseph (Matt. 1:21) to use with Mary’s firstborn Son, called “Jesus of Nazareth” because Jesus was a common name at the time (e.g., Acts 13:6).

Jesus Christ. Used c 140 times in the NT, this name/title functions as a confession: “Jesus is the Christ.” For the significance of this confession, see *Christ*.

Jesus is Lord. An early Christian confession; a clear testimony to Jesus’ divine nature (see *Lord*). See Phil. 2:9.

Lord. Greek *kyrios*; used thousands of times in the LXX to translate God’s personal name, Yahweh. “Lord” is sometimes used to refer to a master or person of authority (Matt. 6:24; see note, Luke 5:5). However, by this title, the NT writers commonly describe Jesus as the one true God (see notes, 1Cor. 8:6; 12:3; Phil. 2:11).

Savior. Rooted in the OT. In the Book of Judges, the people who filled the role called “judge” actually functioned much more as “saviors” or “deliverers.” God used them to deliver His people from enemies of all sorts. Jesus saves God’s people too from sin, death, and the power of the devil.

Son of David. Messianic title, drawn from 2Sam. 7:13–14.

Son of God. Used c 40 times in the NT. Emphasizes the fact that Jesus, a true man, is also eternally the true Son of God. See *Father*.

Son of Man. Favorite self-designation of Jesus, used c 80 times in the Gospels but almost never in the rest of the NT. Its meaning varies somewhat depending on the context. Indicates that though Jesus is fully man, He is much more. As a messianic title, it combines the ideas of a servant who will suffer and die for all people (Isa. 53; Matt. 20:28) and the exalted Son of Man, whose reign is everlasting (Dan. 7:13–14; Matt. 24:30).

Spirit. Greek *pneuma*. Often means the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity, but is also used for an angelic being or the nonphysical aspect of a human being.

The New Testament also includes numerous descriptive titles for persons of the Trinity, such as “Lamb of God,” which describes Jesus’ sacrifice for the sins of the world. Lists of such titles will vary depending on the translation.