

# God or Lord?

Acts 19:20

## A Translation Error in the KJV?

By Steve Combs

**A**cts 19:20 is a verse that contains a controversial translation in the KJV. It is a difficult problem. It's surprising that there has not been more said about it. At the mildest, it has been characterized as a difference between the King James Version and the Greek Received Text. It could be far worse, a translation error. The verse reads:

*So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed.*

The problem with this verse is the word "God" and the fact that the Greek text does not use the normal word that is translated "God." The normal Greek word for "God" is θεος or *theos*. The word used in Acts 19:20 is κυριος (Kurios), which is normally translated "Lord." So, according to the Greek text the translation *should be "word of the Lord," rather than "word of God."* On the surface, the only logical conclusion seems to be that the KJV is in error here. The KJV is not an accurate translation, at least not in this verse. There are others who do not agree and defend the translation choice in the KJV.

*It is clear and unmistakable that the KJV has "God" and the Greek Received Text has Kurios (Lord). That is indisputable.* On the surface, it also seems certain that this verse is proof that the King James Version is not inerrant. Some, who say Acts 19:20 is an incorrect translation, will also say that the KJV is an accurate translation. However, the word "accurate" means "inerrant." Therefore, if Acts 19:20 is not correct, the KJV is neither inerrant nor accurate. There have been some who find certain ancient manuscripts and translations which read *theos* or a translation of *theos*, in this verse. However, we accept the Received Text as the preserved word of God in the Greek language. The Received Text has gone through many editions, but no editor was ever led to change Kurios to *theos*. Scrivener edited the Received Text to match the KJV (1881). Not even he would change it. So, we accept the Greek text as being correct.

However, this does not end the argument. There is another side of the coin to examine. The real question is whether the word Kurios *always and only* means "Lord" when applied to God or the Lord Jesus Christ. Put another way, *can Kurios ever correctly be translated "God?"* I would say that most people who read Greek would say no. All of us who have attended Greek elementary school have been taught that THE one and only way to translate Kurios, when it applies to God the Father or the Lord Jesus Christ, is "Lord." Therefore, the *only right way* to translate Acts 19:20 is "the word of the Lord." If Kurios *can be translated "God,"* then the KJV is *accurate* and the translation of Acts 19:20 is not different from the Received Text.

Many of us have done some study in Greek beyond Greek elementary school and we have discovered that Greek words are often far more flexible than we initially learned. Some words carry general meanings that can be translated many ways in different contexts. These

words do not always have a set and certain meaning and translation in all contexts. These words have to be translated according to the context. Doing so is not always easy. One such word is *ekenosen*. The word means “to *make empty*, that is, (figuratively) to *abase, neutralize, falsify*.” The word has a base definition, but it applies differently in a figurative sense according to the context. Modern versions translate this literally (sometimes literal means elementary) in Philippians 2:7, “emptied himself.” The KJV translates it “made himself of no reputation.” The KJV also variously translates the word “made void” and “made of none effect.” These various translations of the same word all carry an element of “emptied,” but the translation must be refined according to the context.

Another example is the Greek word *ginomai*. This word is one of the most flexible words in the New Testament. The basic meaning of the word is “cause to be” and “to become” (Strong’s). Once again this word *must* be translated according to its meaning *in the context*. In the KJV, it is variously translated: it came to pass, made, done, become, forbid, been, arose, being, be fulfilled, be married (Rom. 7:3-4), brought, cometh, doing, grow, had, have, past, preferred, seemed, showed, trembled, waxed, wrought, assembled, divided, finished, and others. Once again, there is an element of “becoming” in each of these (in the context), but the word cannot be translated literally in the contexts. Take, for instance, Romans 7:3-4 where the word is translated “be married.” The verse more literally reads, “So then if, while her husband lives, **she becomes to another man**, she shall be called an adulteress.” The phrase “she becomes to another man” makes no sense in English nor would it be proper to translate it that way. What does she become to the other man? The context is marriage, so the KJV translators correctly chose to translate it “be married.”

How flexible is Kurios? Can it be properly translated “God?” That is the question we will seek to examine in this article. Kurios also has basic meanings which widen its translation possibilities.

## Basic Definitions

First, let’s take a look at the basic definitions of Kurios given in lexicons, such as Strong’s and Thayer. Strong defines it this way: “From *kūros* kuros (*supremacy*); *supreme* in authority, that is, (as noun) *controller*; by implication *Mr.* (as a respectful title).” Thayer’s Greek Definitions expands the meaning a bit: “he to whom a person or thing belongs, about which he has power of deciding; master, lord” and “this title is given to: God, the Messiah.” The *Abbott-Smith* Lexicon says, “having power, authority...lord, master.” The word kurios is at base a word that speaks of authority; sometimes supreme authority. It can be applied to both men and God. The KJV translates it with words like sir, master, owner, lord (applied to men), and Lord (applied to God). Since it is translated in various ways and applies to an individual with great, even supreme, power and authority, perhaps it could be translated “God” in the right context. The vast majority of times this word is used in the New Testament, it is translated “Lord” or a variation of it. Once, in Acts 19:20, it is translated “God.” The word implies someone who is supreme in authority and of great power. It is applied to both God the Father and to Jesus Christ. I believe that it is valid to translate the Greek word Kurios as “God” for the following reasons.

## **#1 The KJV Translators Were in Good Company**

The reading “word of God” in Acts 19:20 is not unique to the King James Version. It has been pointed out that this same translation was typical of the previous English translations. The first English translation from Hebrew and Greek was done by William Tyndale. From 1524 to 1536 (his death) he translated the New Testament and a large part of the Old Testament. After his death up until the King James translators began to translate in 1604, there were several English translations. Producing these versions took a period of about one hundred years. Tyndale’s translation of Acts 19:20 was “word of God.” The same translation was in Matthew’s Bible (1537), The Great Bible (1540), The Bishops Bible (1568), and the Geneva Bible (1587).

Not only do these translations handle Acts 19:20 the same way the KJV does, but the translators of these versions agreed with the forty-seven King James translators. Couple the fact that these men lived over a period of more than one hundred years with the carefulness and knowledge of the KJV translators. In all their scholarship, they believed it proper to translate kurios this way. They translated the word kurios as “lord” hundreds of times and they translated it as “God” only one time. They did not translate kurios as “God” carelessly. They did it deliberately, on purpose. We don’t know what their purpose and reasons were, but we can reasonably assume they had good ones. These things don’t prove that their choice was correct, but it gives a reasonable assurance that it could be. All the other translators made the same translation choice. No doubt it was consistent with the scholarship of the day. There was present among all these men a level of learning in oriental languages and cultures that today’s scholars should envy.

## **#2 The Testimony of Others**

Those who say that there is a translation error in the KJV in Acts 19:20 or who just say there is “difference” are merely voicing their opinions about the matter. Their statement does not make either opinion so. There are other learned individuals who have studied this and other issues regarding the Greek word kurios. One of those is Dr. Jeffrey Khoo, Academic Dean of Far East Bible College in Singapore. Regarding Acts 19:20, he said:

The KJV is not a mistranslation, and does not differ from the TR. The Greek word kurios can be translated in a number of ways depending on the context. It can be rendered "Lord", "master", "Sir", "God", or "owner". (see The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament, 900-1). Acts 19:20 certainly allows for "God" instead of "Lord" since the context is speaking of the Word of God as a whole. If it is rendered as "the word of the Lord" it might be construed as some specific word from Jesus instead of God's Word or the Holy Scriptures in general. In any case, whether it is "the word of God", or "the word of the Lord", both are perfectly acceptable translations of the original.

Another writer states that the term kurios, when applied to Jesus is meant in the highest possible sense, which is God. In his book, *Christian Theology, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, Millard J. Erickson, Seminary Professor, states:

There is a more general argument for the deity of Christ. The New Testament writers ascribe the term κυριος (*kurios*-“Lord”) to Jesus, particularly in his risen and ascended state. While the term can most certainly be used without any high Christological connotations, there are several considerations that argue that the term signifies divinity when it is applied to Jesus. First, in the Septuagint κυριος is the usual translation of the name יהוה (Jehovah) and of the reverential אדוני (Adonai) which was ordinarily substituted for it. Further, several New Testament references to Jesus as “Lord” are quotations of Old Testament texts employing one of the Hebrew names for God (e.g., Acts 2:20-21 and Rom. 10:13 [cf. Joel 2:31-32]; 1 Peter 3:15 [cf. Is. 8:13]). These references make it clear that the apostles meant to give Jesus the title *Lord* in the highest sense. Finally, κυριος is used in the New Testament to designate both God the Father, the sovereign God (e.g., Matt. 1:20; 9:38; 11:25; Acts 17:24; Rev. 4:11), and Jesus (e.g., Luke 2:11; John 20:28; Acts 10:36; 1 Cor. 2:8; Phil. 2:11; James 2:1; Rev. 19:16). William Childs Robinson comments that when Jesus “is addressed as the exalted Lord, he is so identified with God that there is ambiguity in some passages as to whether the Father or the Son is meant (e.g., Acts 1:24; 2:47; 8:39; 9:31; 11:21; 13:10-12; 16:14; 20:19; 21:14; cf. 18:26; Rom. 14:11).” For Jews particularly, the term κυριος suggests that Christ was equal with the Father.

It is clear that one meaning of kurios, when it is applied to Jesus Christ, is “God.” 1 Corinthians 12:3 tells us: “*Wherefore I give you to understand, that no man speaking by the Spirit of God calleth Jesus accursed: and that no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost.*” No one can call Jesus “the Lord” unless it is by the Spirit of God. To call Jesus “the Lord” is to call Jesus “God.” The term “the Lord” obviously means “God.” Therefore, one definition of the Greek term kurios is “God” when it is applied to Jesus or God the Father.

### #3 Kurios is Equivalent to Jehovah

Several writers have equated the term kurios with Jehovah of Old Testament Hebrew. Dr. Erickson made that statement in the quote above. Another such source is *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*, by Dr. Spiros Zodhiates in the New Testament, which says, “*kúrios*; gen. *kuriou*, masc. noun from *kúros* (n.f.), might, power. Lord, master, owner. Also the NT Gr. **equivalent for the OT Hebr. Jehovah.**” (Emphasis is mine.) Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words puts it this way: “*kurios* is the Sept. and NT representative of Heb. Jehovah (‘LORD’ in Eng. versions), see Mat 4:7; Jam 5:11, e.g., of adon, Lord, Mat 22:44, and of Adonay, Lord, Mat 1:22; it also occurs for Elohim, God, 1Pe 1:25.”

This is more significant than it may seem on the surface. The great objection to the idea that kurios equals Jehovah is that the Old Testament translates Jehovah as “LORD” not “God.”

This would be devastating to any argument that kurios can be translated “God,” if Jehovah can only be translated “Lord.” That is, it would be devastating, if it was true. It is not true.

Yes, Jehovah is translated in the Old Testament as “LORD;” but, not always. It is translated that way in hundreds of Old Testament passages. However, it is also translated “God” in several places (e.g., Gen.6:5; Ex. 23:17; Ex. 34:23; 2Sam.12:22). In the formula, “Lord God” the Hebrew is usually “Adon Jehovah” or a variation. Adon is translated “Lord” and Jehovah is translated “God” in Exodus 23:17 and Exodus 34:23. However, in Genesis 6:5 and 2 Samuel 12:22, Jehovah stands alone and is translated “God” in the KJV. “*And **GOD (Jehovah)** saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually*” (Gen. 6:5).

Regarding the name Jehovah, the *The Complete Word Study Dictionary* says this:

*y<sup>e</sup>hōwāh*: A noun meaning God. The word refers to the proper name of the God of Israel, particularly the name by which He revealed Himself to Moses (Exo 6:2-3). The divine name has traditionally not been pronounced, primarily out of respect for its sacredness (cf. Exo 20:7; Deu 28:58). Until the Renaissance, it was written without vowels in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, being rendered as YHWH. However, since that time, the vowels of another word, *ʾāḏōnāy* (H136), have been supplied in hopes of reconstructing the pronunciation. Although the exact derivation of the name is uncertain, most scholars agree that its primary meaning should be understood in the context of God's existence, namely, that He is the "I AM THAT I AM" (Exo 3:14), the One who was, who is, and who always will be (cf. Rev 11:17). Older translations of the Bible and many newer ones employ the practice of rendering the divine name in capital letters, so as to distinguish it from other Hebrew words. It is most often rendered as LORD (Gen 4:1; Deu 6:18; Psa 18:31 [32]; Jer 33:2; Jon 1:9) but also as GOD (Gen 6:5; 2Sa 12:22) or JEHOVAH (Psa 83:18 [19]; Isa 26:4). The frequent appearance of this name in relation to God's redemptive work underscores its tremendous importance (Lev 26:45; Psa 19:14 [15]). Also, it is sometimes compounded with another word to describe the character of the Lord in greater detail (see Gen 22:14; Exo 17:15; Jdg 6:24).

Now we are finally venturing beyond Greek elementary school and boldly stepping into advanced learning. If kurios is the New Testament equivalent to Jehovah (and it absolutely is) and Jehovah in Hebrew is “a noun meaning God” and Jehovah is properly translated “God” in the Old Testament (and it is, although in a minority of places), then the Greek word kurios most certainly can be rendered “God” in English.

There is further evidence of this. The quotes we have been reading above, have also informed us that Kurios is used in the Old Testament Greek version (often called the Septuagint) to translate the Hebrew word Jehovah (LORD, God). What is often used and referred to as the so-called Septuagint is the Old Testament of an ancient manuscript known as Vaticanus. It is called this because it is kept in the Vatican Library. Vaticanus is a corrupt manuscript with many errors, additions, etc. However, that does not negate its significant in this discussion. This manuscript is reputed to have been written in 350 A.D. and the actual date of translation was

probably some years before that. If this is so, the writing of the manuscript took place at a time when New Testament Greek was still in use in everyday life. Greek was a universal trade language of the Roman Empire. The translator of Vaticanus was no stranger to Greek and he certainly knew how the Greeks used their words and he knew how the church used Greek words.

The Greek Old Testament of Vaticanus freely uses the word *kurios*. Jehovah in the Hebrew Old Testament is regularly translated as *kurios* in the Greek Old Testament. However, remember in one of our examples above, Exodus 23:17, “*adon Jehovah*” is used and translated “*Lord God*” in the KJV. In the Greek Old Testament, the words *kurios theos* are used; *kurios for Lord and theos for Jehovah*. Theos is the Greek word for God. In other words, the Greek Old Testament translates Jehovah as theos or God.

Since Jehovah is translated God and Lord and it is the equivalent of *kurios*, then *kurios* also means God and Lord.

#### **#4 Old Testament Quotes in the New Testament**

The New Testament quotes or refers to hundreds of verses from the Old Testament. Hidden within those quotes is the final answer to our question. Unfortunately, there is a lot of confusion and ignorance among Christians as to the nature of these quotes. They are generally dismissed by simply saying that they were quotes from the Septuagint, the Old Testament Greek version, not from the Hebrew Old Testament. If they are viewed this way, Christians may miss a great deal of the power and significance of these quotes. I have majored in calling the Septuagint “so-called” and “the Greek Old Testament,” because there is a lot of disagreement about whether the Septuagint ever existed or not. The Septuagint was supposed to have been translated before Christ, from about 250 BC. to 100 BC. There is no direct evidence that this ever took place. There is manuscript evidence of complete Old Testament translations into Greek after Christ was born, but not before. All of these were written many years after the New Testament was finished; far too late to be used for quotes in the New Testament, but just in time to *copy* quotes *from* the New Testament. So, the Septuagint does not explain the Old Testament quotes in the New Testament. The New Testament quotes the Hebrew Old Testament.

The quotes of the Old Testament in the New Testament come in various types. There are many direct and indirect quotes. By indirect quote, I mean a quote that is merely a paraphrase of the teaching of one or more Old Testament verses or a teaching which appeals to one or more Old Testament passages for confirmation or proof. There are allusions and possible allusions. An allusion is “a passing or casual reference; an incidental mention of something, either directly or by implication” ([dictionary.reference.com](http://dictionary.reference.com)). One example of allusion is Matthew 12:42, “*The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: for she came from the uttermost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and, behold, a greater than Solomon is here.*” The Scripture alluded to is 1 Kings 10:1, “*And when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the LORD, she came to prove him with hard questions.*” Matthew 12:42 is not intended to be a real quote. It is intended to be an application of 1 Kings 10 to the present situation in the Lord’s life. There are many allusions in the New Testament.

Another type of quote is similar to an allusion. It is a teaching which appeals to Old Testament Scripture for support. Of course, we do this all the time in teaching and preaching. We make a statement and then refer to what is written for proof. Many times, we don't quote the actual Scripture, but, rather, we paraphrase it. The Scripture says...then we put it in our own words. The New Testament does something similar. For example, Romans 2:24 says, "*For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you, as it is written.*" Here it says, "as it is written," but you will not find this statement, as it is, anywhere in the Old Testament. Instead, you will find Ezekiel 36:20, "*And when they entered unto the heathen, whither they went, they profaned my holy name, when they said to them, These are the people of the LORD.*" You will also find Isaiah 52:5, "*Now therefore, what have I here, saith the LORD, that my people is taken away for nought? they that rule over them make them to howl, saith the LORD; and my name continually every day is blasphemed.*" This is one of the New Testament equivalents of proof-text teaching.

On the other hand, there are also direct and true quotes from the Hebrew Old Testament. To illustrate, one such quote is in Matthew 1:23, "*Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.*" This verse is quoted from Isaiah 7:14, "*Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.*"

One can readily notice that Matthew 1:23 is not an *exact* quote. There are differences. Matthew 1:23 says "shall be with child" and Isaiah 7:14 says "shall conceive." Matthew 1:23 says "shall bring forth a son" and Isaiah 7:14 says "bear a son." This is typical of many of the Old Testament verses that are quoted in the New Testament. How do we explain this? Well, that's actually quite easy. There are at least two reasons why this happens.

The first reason is that this is not just a quote; it is a Bible translation. Remember, God inspired both Old and New Testaments. He inspired the Old in Hebrew (with a little Aramaic) and the New in Greek. Whenever anyone, even the original author, takes something written in one language and puts it into another language, it is translation. If I write something in English and then write it in German, I have translated my own words. In this case, God has translated his Old Testament Hebrew words into Greek. However, it gets more complicated than that. Men have entered the picture and translated God's words into English. So, you have three languages involved: Hebrew, Greek, and English. The Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek. The Hebrew was translated into English and the Greek was translated into English. Now, we are comparing English with English. Any translation between two languages can cause minor word differences or differences in grammar or differences in word order. However, the meaning remains the same if the job has been done right. So, in Matthew 1:23, we have "with child" instead of "conceive," but the meaning is the same. We also have "bring forth a son" instead of "bear a son," but the meaning is the same.

Second, one of the reasons that these quotes are truly helpful to us is that the author of the original and the translation is God. God is the author of the statements in both the New Testament and the Old Testament. When God inspired the New Testament, He knew the exact meaning and intent in the mind of the author of the Old Testament. Therefore, He was able to reveal truth and meaning He did not reveal the first time or He was able to confirm the truth of the first statement. Herein lies the true significance of Matthew 1:23. You see in Isaiah 7:14,

the Hebrew word for virgin is *'almah*. The word means a virgin or a young woman, unmarried or a newlywed (Brown, Driver-Briggs Hebrew Definitions). In other words, the meaning is uncertain, at least in the minds of many today (although it is hard to see how a newlywed young woman getting pregnant is a sign of any kind). However, when God inspired the New Testament, He used the word *parthenos*. The Greek word can *only* mean virgin (Complete Word Study Dictionary). In other words, the quote and translation of Isaiah 7:14 in Matthew 1:23 confirms the meaning of the Hebrew word *'almah* and proves that the correct translation of *almah* in Isaiah 7:14 is *virgin*.

Now, let's take these principles and apply them to our question about whether *kurios* can be translated "God." The key quote related to this question is found in 1 Peter 1:25, "*But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.*" The quote comes from Isaiah 40:8, "*The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.*" The verse in the New Testament says "the word of the Lord" (*Kurios*). The verse in the Old Testament is "the word of our God" (*elohim*). If one compares all of 1 Peter 1:24-25 with Isaiah 40:6-8, he will find that it falls into the category of exact quote with minor differences. Further, it reveals new understanding of the meaning of words, just as Matthew 1:23 does.

The Hebrew word for God in Isaiah 40:8 is *Elohim*. This is THE primary Hebrew word for God. When it is applied to God, it is always translated "God." It is **never** translated "Lord." Yet, when God translates this word in 1 Peter 1:25, He inspired the word "*kurios*." Make no mistake. This was a deliberate act on the part of God. If we believe in verbal plenary inspiration, we must come to this conclusion. *God deliberately, on purpose, with benevolence aforethought chose by an act of His sovereign will to translate Elohim into Kurios.* This clearly means that *kurios* is not just an equivalent for Jehovah, but *it is also the equivalent of Elohim, God.* If *Elohim* can be translated into *kurios*, then *kurios* can absolutely be translated into *Elohim*. Therefore, "God" can be translated into "Lord" and "Lord" can be translated into "God." So, "*Kurios*" can be translated into "God."

## Conclusion

A deeper understanding of the meaning of "*kurios*" and its connection with Old Testament Hebrew should settle the question. "*Kurios*" means Lord and it means "God." When Jesus is addressed as the "Lord Jesus Christ," the truth of His person and nature are included in the name. It is equal to saying, the "God-Man Anointed One." Remember, "no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost" (1 Cor. 12:3). To call Jesus "the Lord" does not mean that He is our Master only. The many uses of the phrase "the Lord" in both Testaments clearly reveals its meaning as "God." To call Jesus "the Lord" is to call Him "God."

The word "*kurios*" not only means God, it can be translated God. *Kurios* is the equivalent of the Old Testament Jehovah. Jehovah is translated both "LORD" and "God" in the Old Testament. Since *Kurios* is the equivalent of Jehovah, then it too can be translated both Lord and God. That *Kurios* is equal to Jehovah is seen in Luke 20:42, "And David himself saith in the book of Psalms, The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand." In Hebrew (Ps. 110:1) this is "Jehovah said to my Adon." In the Greek New Testament, it is "*Kurios* said to my *kurios*." *Kurios* is used for both Jehovah and Adon. This verse clearly shows that *Kurios* is the



equivalent of Jehovah, as well as Adon. 1 Peter 1:25 is the same type of example as Luke 20:42. It reveals that kurios is also the equivalent of Elohim (God). The Old Testament (Is. 40:8) says, "The word of Elohim." 1 Peter 1 says, "The word of kurios." The connection here is the same as Luke 20:42. It creates an equivalency. Kurios equals Jehovah. Kurios equals Elohim. Kurios equals "Lord" and "God."