

# **“God’s Sacred Name in the Bible”**

*Was the word for “God” written in Hebrew letters  
in the ancient Greek manuscripts  
of the Jewish Scriptures?*

*An analysis by Dr Trevor R Allin  
of claims made in an article in “Watchtower” magazine*

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# “God’s Sacred Name in the Bible”

## About the Author

Dr Trevor R Allin graduated from the University of Leeds with a 1st Class Honours degree in Phonetics, French, Spanish and Philosophy and History of Religion. Following studies in linguistics, he undertook original research on a South American indigenous language, for which purpose he lived within the indigenous community and studied the language with native speakers over a period of more than a year. The University of St Andrews subsequently awarded him Ph.D. for his thesis “A Grammar of Resígaro”.

For many years he taught a range of languages up to “Advanced” level standard in state schools in England and in Germany, and in state-recognised schools in Scotland and Spain. He also worked full time over a period of many years supporting and inspecting qualified Modern Language teachers and giving them professional development training. Teaching and examination materials written by him for French, German and Spanish at a wide range of levels, up to and including “A” Level, have been published by mainstream U.K. educational publishers and examination boards, for whom he has written and marked examination question papers.

He is also the published translator of books from Spanish and German into English and is the author of the Spanish edition of the leading textbook on New Testament Greek, Jeremy Duff’s “The Elements of New Testament Greek”.<sup>1</sup> He has taught New Testament (Koiné) Greek to Spanish-speaking adult students in Spain and has delivered lectures in various places in Spain on the important early Greek manuscript of the Bible, Codex Sinaiticus.

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<sup>1</sup> Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005

## “God’s Sacred Name in the Bible”

### Introduction

The Jehovah’s Witnesses’ “Watchtower” magazine number 6 of 2017<sup>2</sup> contains an article entitled “The Bible—Why So Many?”. In fact, the article does not focus on answering the question in the title, which appears to refer to the existence of different Bible translations. Instead, in a section entitled “God’s Sacred Name in the Bible” it seeks to justify the use of the word “Jehovah” in the Jehovah’s Witness version of the Bible, which they call “The New World Translation”.

About 250 years before the time of Christ, Jewish scholars in Alexandria had translated into Greek the Jewish Scriptures, which had been principally written in Hebrew, with a few pages in Aramaic. This translation is known as the Septuagint (which is generally abbreviated in references by using the Latin numeral seventy, LXX).

The “Watchtower” article states that “a *Septuagint* manuscript fragment from Jesus’ day” contains what the Jehovah’s Witnesses call “the divine name”, written in Hebrew letters, in between the Greek words of the rest of the text.<sup>3</sup> This singular “a fragment” is changed to a plural “some fragments” in another part of the same article. It is not possible to know which is the correct version. Is there “a fragment” (singular) or are there “some fragments” (plural)?

The Jehovah’s Witnesses consider this manuscript important, since they claim that it provides “proof” that their use of the word “Jehovah” is sanctioned by God and supported by this ancient Biblical manuscript.

If the apparent existence of this word in *Hebrew* letters in a Greek text is so important to them, one might wonder why it does not lead them to conclude that they, too, should write this same word in *Hebrew letters* in their version of the Bible. Even if this manuscript is authentic, it can hardly be used to justify their use of the mistaken English form “Jehovah” in their English version of the Bible.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, the authors of this “Watchtower” article do not tell us the dimensions of this ancient fragment, whether it is written on papyrus, parchment or vellum, the Biblical passage that it contains, the name, letter or number that has been assigned to it, nor where it was probably written, when or where it was found<sup>5</sup>, the names of the experts who have examined it, where the results of their analysis were published, where it is now located, if it can be consulted there, or if it has been made available on-line for researchers to consult. Nor do they tell us if it forms part of a larger manuscript.

This makes independent research on the fragment well-nigh impossible. However, palaeographical analysis of the fragment that the Jehovah’s Witnesses reproduce is most revealing, as we shall see in this brief analysis.

The “Watchtower” article then makes the following statement:

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<sup>2</sup> p. 12. This article is also available on the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ website, here:

<https://www.jw.org/en/publications/magazines/watchtower-no6-2017-november/bible-versions-translations/> Consulted on 26.1.18.

<sup>3</sup> Op. cit., p.13.

<sup>4</sup> On the origins of the corrupted English form “Jehovah”, derived in error from the original Hebrew letters יהוה, YHWH, which were almost certainly pronounced “Yahweh”, see the article “What is the real meaning of Matthew 6:9? Should we call God “Jehovah?””, here: <http://livingwater-spain.com/yhwh.pdf>, especially p. 8 of the revision current on 27.1.18 (Chapter 2. “The form of this Hebrew name for God”).

<sup>5</sup> The article says, “In the mid-20th century”. This vague reference does not permit the document to be identified.

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“It seems that later, copyists removed the divine name and substituted Ky’ri·os<sup>6</sup>—the Greek word for “Lord”—in its place. The New World Translation restores the divine name to its rightful places in the Scriptures.”

This statement in their magazine contains two standard claims made by the Jehovah’s Witnesses:

- 1) that a person or persons unknown “*removed* the divine name” from all manuscripts;<sup>7</sup>
- 2) that the *New World Translation* “*restores* the divine name to its rightful places in the Scriptures”.

However, there is no historical evidence to substantiate the accuracy of these claims. On the contrary, the abundant evidence that does exist indicates that the claim that “later copyists removed the divine name” is totally without historical foundation.

Indeed, the writers of this article in “Watchtower” magazine clearly recognise that there is no clear evidence to substantiate their claim, so they say “it *seems* that later, copyists removed the divine name.” [emphasis added] This is another way of saying, “we have no evidence to support this claim, but *it may be* that later copyists removed the divine name.” It would have been more transparent if the authors had written, “It seems to us in the Jehovah’s Witness organisation that this is the case, but, world-wide, all the experts in ancient Biblical manuscripts, whether Jews, Christians or people of no declared religious affiliation or belief, disagree with us.”

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<sup>6</sup> It is not clear why the Jehovah’s Witnesses have made this non-standard transcription of the Greek word κυριος [pronounced “kurios”], which means “Lord”. Of course, the capital letter, added symbols and non-standard spacing may serve to impress the uninitiated, a technique that the organisation regularly employs. This is sometimes referred to as “intellectual intimidation”. See here: [http://livingwater-spain.com/John8\\_58.pdf](http://livingwater-spain.com/John8_58.pdf), page 7 of the revision consulted on 27.1.18 and here: <http://livingwater-spain.com/beduhn.pdf>, page 56 of the revision consulted on 27.1.18.

<sup>7</sup> This claim is examined in more detail in the article “What is the real meaning of Matthew 6:9? Should we call God “Jehovah”?” on this website, here: <http://livingwater-spain.com/yhwh.pdf>, especially in section 5, “A Conspiracy Theory”, which starts on page 11 of the version consulted on 28.1.18.

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### The evidence from thousands of manuscripts

In this article the Jehovah’s Witnesses show “a fragment” of just ***one*** manuscript. According to the Wikipedia article “Septuagint manuscripts”, “There are currently over 2,000 classified manuscripts of the Septuagint.”<sup>8</sup> If more than one Greek manuscript of the Jewish Scriptures had been found containing the Hebrew letters for Yahweh<sup>9</sup>, we can be certain that the Jehovah’s Witnesses would have told us. However, what they refer to is fragments of just ***one*** manuscript, the name of which they do not give to us.

Thus, in round numbers, the manuscript evidence is more than 2,000 to one against Hebrew letters for God’s name normally being used in the Septuagint. In other words, the manuscript referred to in the “Watchtower” article represents less than 0.05% of surviving ancient manuscripts of the Septuagint. This is not even a tenth of one per cent of Septuagint manuscripts; it is half of that: one twentieth of one per cent!

The “Watchtower” article claims, “It seems that later, copyists removed the divine name and substituted Ky’ri·os—the Greek word for “Lord”—in its place”. But the evidence of thousands of manuscripts actually points overwhelmingly in the opposite direction. It indicates that the normal practice of copyists was to use the Greek word κυριος [pronounced “kurios”], but that just one copyist – if that! (see below) – decided to introduce Hebrew letters to one copy.

In fact, when we examine the fragment that this “Watchtower” magazine reproduces, even this seems unlikely.

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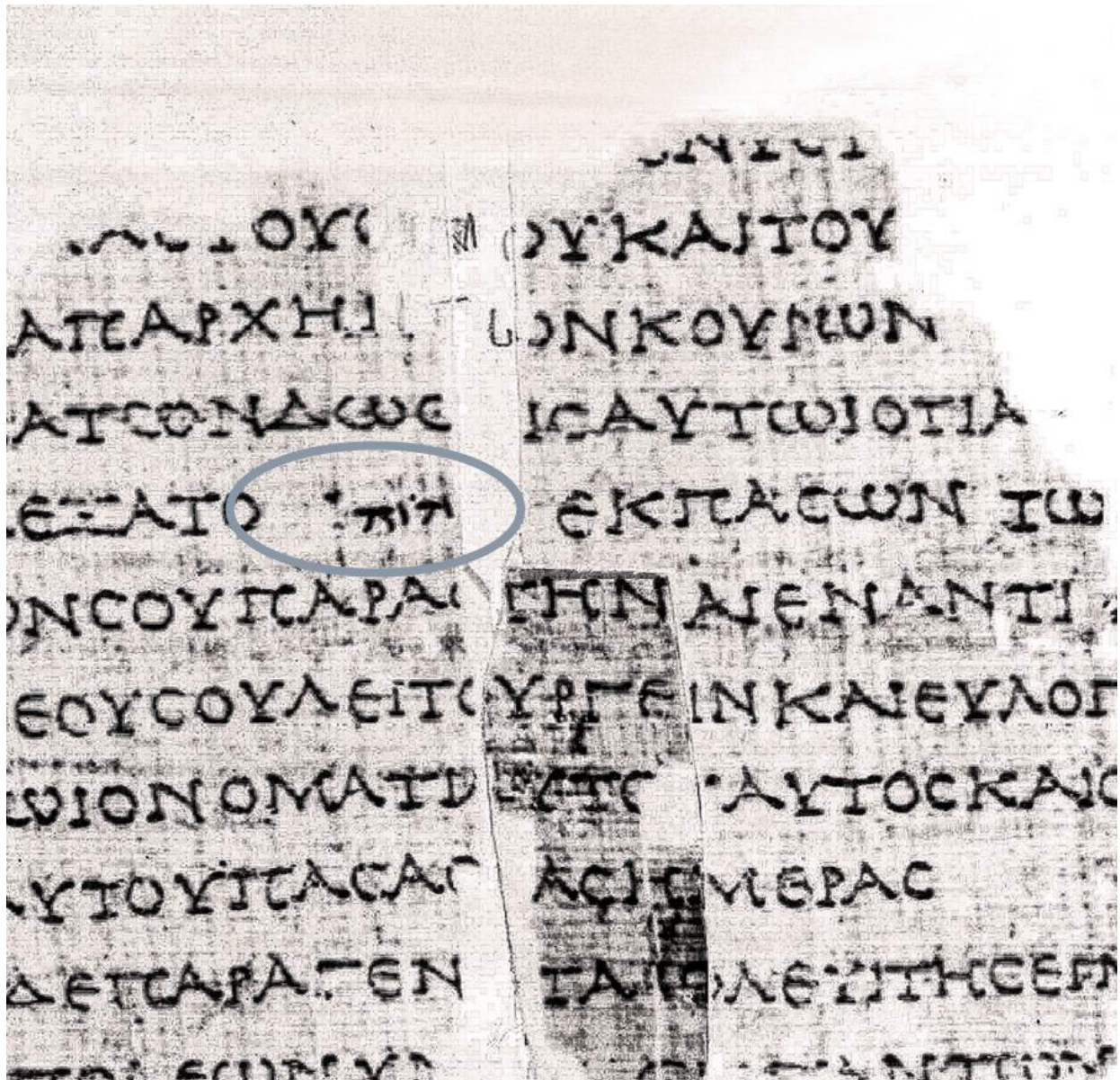
<sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Septuagint\\_manuscripts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Septuagint_manuscripts) Consulted on 26.1.18. This articles gives its source for this figure as: „Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen. "[Herzlich willkommen auf den Seiten des Göttinger Septuaginta-Unternehmens!](http://www.adw-goe.de)" (in German). adw-goe.de. Retrieved 2013-09-17.”

<sup>9</sup> The Hebrew letters for this word, יהוה, are usually transliterated as YHWH.



The manuscript fragment

The following is the manuscript fragment that is reproduced in the “Watchtower” article. They have added a pale blue oval shape to highlight the letters that are in Hebrew characters.



This illustration is in monochrome even though it is reproduced in a full-colour magazine and also on the Jehovah’s Witness website, which is in colour apart from this illustration, and even though the highlighting that has been added is in colour. The copy of the “Watchtower” magazine that I have shows a very faint pink background for this document. This may be a printing error or perhaps it is a well-meaning attempt to simulate colour, added by someone who had never seen an actual ancient Biblical manuscript, since this does not correspond to the actual colour of any known ancient manuscript. On my computer, the image on the Jehovah’s Witness website reproduces in black and white with no obvious colour background. The fact that the document was photographed in black and white leads us to believe that this photograph that “Watchtower” magazine reproduces is probably more than forty years old. Most relevant evidence can be seen in it, but a newer photograph, in colour, could make other details more easily visible, for instance, by enabling us to see the colour of the ink used for the writing of the Greek text, and the colour of the ink used for the one word in Hebrew characters.

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Unfortunately, at some point in the past the page appears to have become separated into two parts, with a vertical break down the middle of the fragment. It then appears to have been somewhat inexpertly joined with some sort of transparent tape which, over time, has discoloured the text and the support material beneath it.

It is not immediately obvious which Biblical passage is reproduced in this fragment. The most commonly-used modern printed edition of the Septuagint text<sup>10</sup> runs to more than a thousand pages and with no complete lines of text in this fragment, even those scholars with a detailed knowledge of the Septuagint text are likely to require some time to identify the source here. It is to be regretted that the authors of this article have chosen to omit most of the relevant information concerning this document, even though they consider it so crucial and decisive in substantiating their claims.

In spite of this, I see that this fragment is from Deuteronomy chapter 18, and part of verses 4-6. In the box below, I reproduce my transcription of the Greek text, in modern, lower-case Greek letters, with spaces between the words and the addition of accents, breathings and modern verse numbers. Where letters or words are missing from the above photograph, I add the presumed missing characters within square brackets, based on the standard Septuagint text of the Rahlfs-Hanhart edition. In part of just one line, the text of this manuscript and the Rahlfs-Hanhart edition diverge. This is indicated in a footnote.

<p>[First words of verse 4 not reproduced in the “Watchtower” photograph] [Text impossible to reconstitute] τοῦ οἴνου σου καὶ τοῦ ἐλαίου σου τὴν ἀπαρχὴν [τῶν] κούρων [τῶν] [προβ]άτων σου δώ[σε]ις αὐτῷ<sup>5</sup> ὅτι α[ὐτὸν] ἐξελ[έ]ξατο ὁ κύριος σου<sup>11</sup> ἐκ πασῶ[ν] τῶν [φυλ]ῶν σου παρεστάναι ἔναντι [κυρίου] [τοῦ] θεοῦ σου λειτουργεῖν καὶ εὐλογ[εῖν] ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι [αὐτοῦ] αὐτὸς καὶ οἱ υἱοὶ αὐτοῦ πάσας [τ]ὰς ἡμέρας<sup>12</sup> <sup>6</sup> [ἐὰν] δὲ παραγένηται ὁ Λευίτης ἐκ μι[α]ς τῶν πόλεων [ὑμῶν] ἐκ πάντων [τῶν] υἰῶν [Rest of v 6 not reproduced in the “Watchtower” photograph]</p>
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Below I give the translations from the New English Translation of the Septuagint (“NETS”)<sup>13</sup> and the New International Version, 2011 revision (“NIV”)<sup>14</sup>.

<p>NETS <sup>4</sup> [And the first fruits of your grain and] your wine and your oil and the first of the fleeces of your sheep you shall give him. <sup>5</sup> For your Lord has chosen him out of all your tribes, to stand before the Lord your God to minister and to bless in his name, he and his sons all the days. <sup>6</sup> Now if a Levite<sup>15</sup> departs (from one of your cities, from all the sons...)</p>	<p>NIV <sup>4</sup> You are to give them the firstfruits of your corn, new wine and olive oil, and the first wool from the shearing of your sheep, <sup>5</sup> for the LORD your God has chosen them and their descendants out of all your tribes to stand and minister in the LORD's name always. <sup>6</sup> If a Levite moves from one of your towns anywhere in Israel where he is living ...</p>
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<sup>10</sup> Rahlfs-Hanhart “Septuaginta”, © Stuttgart, 2006: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft

<sup>11</sup> Here Rahlfs-Hanhart has: κύριος ὁ θεός σου

<sup>12</sup> For this line, Rahlfs-Hanhart has αὐτοῦ ἐν τοῖς υἱοῖς Ἰσραὴλ

<sup>13</sup> “A New English Translation of the Septuagint” (“NETS”), © 2007 by the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies, Inc. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Used by permission of Oxford University Press. All rights reserved.

<sup>14</sup> “The Bible: New International Version” © NIV Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by the International Bible Society

<sup>15</sup> NETS spelling for “Levite”

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We shall return to this text subsequently.

### What can we learn from the palaeographical analysis of this fragment?

Examination of this manuscript fragment indicates that the Greek text is written in an excellent “hand” (to use the term employed by palaeographers), with clearly formed Greek letters of uniform height and spacing, clearly positioned on the straight line that would have been marked with an indentation on the support material. It was not the intention of scribes that these indentations should be obvious to readers, and usually the papyrus or vellum “recovered” over time, so that these lines were no longer visible to readers. The use of “serifs” for letters such as the “I”, the “T” and the “N” add to the evidence that this manuscript was produced by a professional scribe. The Greek letters in the fragment can be easily read.<sup>16</sup>

The letters are formed with a writing instrument with a fine point.

However, when we examine the Hebrew letters, we observe that the writing instrument used was not the same one that was used for the Greek text. It produces letters in which the strokes are significantly wider than the strokes that form the letters of the Greek text.

In addition to this, when we examine the “hand” in which the Hebrew letters are written, we see that it is not the same as the one that produced the Greek text: the Hebrew letters were written by a different person. We note that they do not have the same height as the Greek letters: they are much smaller, in spite of the fact that it was normal to write Hebrew letters in the same sizes as Greek letters (in other documents, naturally).

Furthermore, the Hebrew letters are not written on that indented line that provided the base for the rest of the text. This may be an indication that they were written a long time later, possibly years later, so that the indentations that had previously served as guide lines had recovered and were no longer visible.

Nor are the Hebrew letters written with the same skill as that which is visible in the Greek text. Most Hebrew letters normally fit within an imaginary square shape that sits flat on the scribed guide line, with a few letters being smaller than the full square. Here, however, the Hebrew text is crooked: the letters are not upright and the base line for the word tilts down from its beginning on the right to its end on the left<sup>17</sup>, with the letters going down at an awkward angle below the base line for the original, Greek text.

At the time when the Septuagint was produced, text was written entirely in capital letters and without spaces between the words (both for Greek and Latin, and many other languages), and this continued to be the case over many centuries, at least into the 5th century AD. Indeed, in this fragment we observe that there are no spaces between the Greek words. However, there is a large gap to the left of the Hebrew letters. This may indicate that the scribe who produced this manuscript did not know Hebrew, so he left a gap so that someone else could write in the Hebrew letters later.

However, since the scribe is clearly a professional copyist who shows a high level of skill and would have been working for a Jewish client (assuming the date ascribed to this manuscript by the

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<sup>16</sup> Readers desirous of more information on Greek palaeography are referred to Maunde Thompson, Sir Edward, “An Introduction to Greek and Latin Palaeography”, Oxford, at the Clarendon Press, 1912, recently reprinted (no date).

<sup>17</sup> Hebrew is written from right to left.



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“Watchtower” article), it seems highly unlikely that he or she<sup>18</sup> would not have had the skill to copy the three Hebrew characters used in this word<sup>19</sup> – especially if this Hebrew word was normally used, even in Greek manuscripts, as the Jehovah’s Witnesses claim.

In fact, the space available at this point in the text seems just right for the letters of the *Greek* words ὁ κύριος σου [“ho kurios sou”], “your Lord”. (Remember that this would be written without spaces between the words.) We note that the Septuagint texts consulted by the translators of NETS did indeed have the Greek for “your Lord”. This leads to two possible conclusions:

- 1) Either the Greek words were originally here, and they have been erased by a person who subsequently acquired this manuscript and who decided to insert the Hebrew letters in the place previously occupied by the original Greek words in the text – even though he or she clearly lacked the skill of the original scribe. Over many centuries, it was not uncommon for people who acquired ancient manuscripts to erase the whole of the original text and re-use the parchment for a quite different text.<sup>20</sup> Thus, erasing just one short phrase would not have been difficult, nor even an innovation of any sort.
- 2) Or, if we accept the Jehovah’s Witness claim that from the start the text contained just *one* word in Hebrew, then we must conclude that the original highly-skilled, scribe, who was probably Jewish, had *no knowledge* of the Hebrew letters that would be inserted nor how much space would be required for them, and so he left space for the word to be added later by a different scribe, but in his ignorance of the length of the Hebrew word, he in fact left far too much space.

This indicates to us that the use of Hebrew letters in Greek manuscripts was at least *extremely rare*, and that probably they were *never used* in other manuscripts, since this professional scribe who earned his or her living producing high-quality copies of Jewish religious texts had *no idea* how much space would be required for this one word, a word which, according to the Jehovah’s Witnesses, would be *the one word* that he or she *would* know.

For the purposes of evaluating this Jehovah’s Witness article, it does not matter which of these two possible causes applies with this particular manuscript, since in either case it is clear that the Hebrew letters were not written by the original scribe, and may indeed have been inserted centuries later.

In either case, it is additionally clear that the Greek text from which the original scribe was working also did not contain the word Yahweh in Hebrew characters. Otherwise, a professional scribe with the level of skill demonstrated in this document would at least have left a space of the correct size – or indeed would almost certainly have copied out the Hebrew characters him- or herself.

However, when we examine the text more carefully, we notice that in the gap between the word [ἐξελε]ξεατο [“exelexato”, “he has chosen”] and the Hebrew word there is an almost triangular mark at the top of the space, apparently pointing down, and a shape that is almost a dot beneath it, at the base point for the original text. These marks look like the top and the bottom of the two diagonal lines that formed the end of the letter “K”, inadequately erased by the person who inserted the Hebrew letters – a very clear indication that here the text originally had the Greek word κύριος [“kurios”], “Lord”. . In fact, above some of those Hebrew letters we also see faint marks that look like the remnants of other Greek letters. These marks are not part of any Hebrew script.

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<sup>18</sup> Evidence from the time indicates that some scriptoria employed some female scribes. However, in contrast with the Greek text, this Hebrew word does not appear to have been written by a professional scribe.

<sup>19</sup> One character is used twice in the word.

<sup>20</sup> Such a re-used document is known as a “palimpsest”.

## Conclusion

Thus, the manuscript evidence leads unavoidably to the conclusion that this manuscript fragment, which the Jehovah’s Witnesses view as crucial to support their claims, actually does the opposite: *it demonstrates that the Hebrew letters for “Yahweh” were **not normally used in Greek manuscripts of the Septuagint***. On the contrary, it indicates that they were probably **never used** in Greek manuscripts of the Jewish sacred texts, since it appears that this skilled, professional scribe had never seen a Greek manuscript of the Jewish Scriptures that contained the Hebrew characters for “YHWH”.

The “Watchtower” article states that “The New World Translation restores the divine name to its rightful places in the Scriptures.” In fact, worldwide, this Jehovah’s Witness version of the Bible has not found acceptance by any Jewish or Christian group. This will not surprise us when we see that they appeal to this manuscript fragment to provide support for their practice of *adding* the word “Jehovah” hundreds of times in their version of the Bible. However, the evidence of this very manuscript does in fact indicate that what they do in their Bible is not to “*restore... the divine name to its rightful places in the Scriptures*” but to *insert* a mistaken English version of the Hebrew word “Yahweh” into texts that never originally contained it.

Here, as with many of their teachings, the Jehovah’s Witnesses have started with their *beliefs* and gone out to find anything that might be claimed to support these doctrines, rather than starting from what the Biblical texts *actually* say – including the ancient manuscripts. In contrast with the Jehovah’s Witness approach, unprejudiced researchers modify what they had previously believed, if necessary, to reflect the data that are demonstrated by an unbiased analysis of the texts.

This particular text fragment reveals that, far from incorporating a Hebrew word – in Hebrew characters, moreover! – into their Greek translation of the sacred Hebrew religious texts, the translators took the *meaning* of that word (like all the other words in the original) and translated that meaning into a *Greek* word with an equivalent meaning, κύριος [“kurios”]. The English equivalent of this word is “Lord”, which is therefore an appropriate translation.

However, in their desire to justify their preconceived teachings and their version of the Bible, the Jehovah’s Witnesses read into this manuscript (and others) “information” that is not there. They then withhold the key information that would enable independent experts to examine this text fragment. Inevitably, scholars in the field do not take their claims seriously.

In spite of these tactics, the evidence that is *easily visible* in the very document that the Jehovah’s Witnesses appeal to, in their attempt to demonstrate that their claims are true, actually *does the opposite*: it shows that their claims are totally erroneous and lacking in any foundation in ancient Biblical manuscripts, ***even in this one***.