

Psalm 110:1 and the Status of the Second Lord – Trinitarian Arguments Challenged

By Jaco van Zyl

In recent years much attention has been given to Christological studies ranging from the historical identity of Jesus to the later post-biblical developments of this central figure in Christianity. The voices in this search have indeed been diverse. Published works on the historical Jesus – who he was and what he taught – have received attention likened to the notorious development of 19th century Higher Criticism. Many of these “discoveries” on the identity of Christ have proven to be edifying for the Christian believer in that much of what is taught in Scripture and from the pulpit have been confirmed by historical investigation. A consequence of these much-published findings has been a renewed search even on the part of the average Church goer to seek this historical figure and integrate him into their perception of reality and worship. This search, however, is not free from challenges. From, not only the modern “discoveries” of the historical Jesus, but also an unbiased study of canonical and non-canonical scripture, brought to light is a picture significantly different from the one traditionally presented to be the “orthodox” character of the Lord Jesus, as came to be adopted by the traditional Church and her confessions.

One such challenge to the “Orthodox” understanding of Christ the most-oft quoted OT text in the NT, that is Psalm 110:1 (109:1, LXX):

“The Lord said to ***my Lord***, Sit thou on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool.”

ειπεν ο κυριος τω κυριω μου καθου εκ δεξιων μου εως αν θω τους εχθρους σου ποποδιον των ποδων σου

This Psalm forms the epicentre of the Kingdom hope and apocalyptic expectations of every Christian. It is no surprise then, that this text is so often quoted and alluded to in the NT. From the above text it is clear that one Lord

or *ho kurios* speaks to someone else also called *kurios*. The potential confusion in this regard (two referents both called “Lord”) is obvious and requires some examination. Precisely so, since the language of this psalm introduces us to two individuals, while the appellation, *kurios*, a title mostly used when referring to Yahweh, is applied to both these individuals.

Since the word *kurios* has a wide semantic range, including “master,” “[Sovereign] Lord,” “lord,” etc, and the importance of considering the whole range of meanings, even the occurrence of the titles in this text, has been well attested to, it will not be further explored here.

The greatest scholarly consensus is echoed by the NET Bible commentary on the verse, where it says,

“In this royal psalm the psalmist announces God’s oracle to the Davidic king. The first part of the oracle appears in v. 1, the second in v. 4. In vv. 2-3 the psalmist addresses the king, while in vv. 5-7 he appears to address God. *My lord*. In the psalm’s original context the speaker is an unidentified prophetic voice in the royal court. In the course of time the psalm is applied to each successive king in the dynasty and ultimately to the ideal Davidic king. NT references to the psalm understand David to be speaking about his “lord,” the Messiah. (See [Matt 22:43-45](#); [Mark 12:36-37](#); [Luke 20:42-44](#); [Acts 2:34-35](#)). The Lord’s invitation to the Davidic king to *sit down* at his *right hand* reflects the king’s position as the Lord’s vice-regent. *NET Bible Commentary, Ps. 110:1*”

Central to this understanding of who the Lord(s) is/are comes from the distinction made between the two “Lords” as evidenced in the Hebrew of the Masoretic Text – a distinction not so clearly seen in the Greek of the LXX:

Here the distinction between YHWH and Adoni is evident. In line with the Hebrew tradition of the time, the Name, YHWH, was probably not pronounced, instead the title, Adonai was uttered. Before considering the significance in the difference between Adonai and Adoni, let’s see how the distinction is drawn Hebrew:

Adonai: אֲדֹנָי

Adoni: אֲדֹנִי

“Hebrew *Adonai* exclusively denotes the God of Israel. It is attested about 450 times in the OT...*Adoni* [is] addressed to human beings (Gen. 44:7, Num. 32:25, II Kings 2:19 [etc.]). We have to assume that the word *adonai* received its special form to distinguish it from the secular use of *adon* [i.e., *adoni*]. The reason why [God is addressed] as *adonai*, [with long vowel] instead of the normal *adon*, *adoni* or *adonai* [with short vowel] may have been to distinguish Yahweh from other gods and from human lords” (*Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, p. 531).

“The lengthening of the ā on *Adonai* [the Lord God] may be traced to the concern of the Masoretes to mark the word as sacred by a small external sign” (*Theological Dictionary of the OT*, “Adon,” p. 63 and *Theological Dictionary of the NT*, III, 1060ff. n.109).

“The form ‘to my lord,’ *l’adoni*, is never used in the OT as a divine reference...the generally accepted fact that the masoretic pointing distinguishes divine references (*adonai*) from human references (*adoni*)” (Wigram, *The Englishman’s Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance of the OT*, p. 22) (Herbert Bateman, “Psalm 110:1 and the NT,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Oct.-Dec., 1992, p. 438).

This distinction in form and meaning has been a source of both triumph and embarrassment. This is the most powerful and popular text used by Unitarian apologists, especially since prominent Trinitarian scholars have admitted to its significance – one tied closely to the distinction between the two referents.

The discomfort around this text is seen, for instance, in the following comments by Trinitarian apologist, Sam Shamoun, echoing the sentiments of another apologist, Dr. James White. After quoting Psalm 16:2[15:2, LXX] and 35:23[34:23, LXX] he says,

This now leaves the unitarians in the horns of a dilemma. They will either have to admit that *Adonai* can be rendered as *kyrious mou*, which means that their argument concerning the Greek of Psalm 110:1 flounders and is without merit since it doesn’t establish their contention that the Hebrew originally read

Adoni. Or they will have to acknowledge that the Masoretes were mistaken since Psalms 16:2 and 35:23 should have been *Adoni*, not *Adonai*. But then this would prove that the Hebrew Bible does use *Adoni* for Yahweh, thereby refuting the unitarian assertion that *Adoni* is never used for the true God! (http://www.answering-islam.org/authors/shamoun/binity_shema2.html)

What their argument amounts to is this: no vowel pointings were present in the Christian and pre-Christian Hebrew text. ADNY in the Hebrew could be Adonai or Adoni. In fact, since Ps. 16:2 and 35:23 both have Adonai translated “my Lord” in the LXX, the ADNY could just as well have come from Adonai, not the royal, non-divine Adoni, which would, as can be seen from their rebuttal, have rendered the recipient of the oracle non-divine. Their conclusion? The first referent is Adonai or Yahweh, as well as the recipient of the oracle is Adonai.

First of all, there’s no valid, objective reason to question the Masoretic vowel pointing of the text (unless, of course, if you need to defend a non-biblical doctrine). Furthermore, if we only had the Greek, we probably could reason like this, with some difficulty, since, except for the two occurrences noted above, *kurios mou* was always the Greek for Adoni, not Adonai; but we don’t have only the Greek. We have several LXX fragments from pre-Christian and Christian times which look surprisingly different from the LXXs of later periods. We also have the paraphrases or Targums, which shed invaluable light on the ancient understanding of the text. We also have the NT and the various contexts this text is used in.

But let’s pull the Trinitarian argument apart somewhat and see where White et al. fall short. It will come as no surprise that their argument is indeed marginal and desperate – even from among their own ranks.

- ***The first crack in the Trinitarian argument is one from logic:***

First premise: Some texts have Adonai translated as “my Lord” in the LXX.

Second premise: Psalm 110:1 has the translated “my Lord” in its text

Conclusion: Psalm 110:1 has Adonai in its original rendering

To those familiar with formal logic, the fallacy will be evident: fallacy of Undistributed Middle term. Simply put, meaning that the predicates in both the major and minor premises (“my Lord” translation) does not exhaust all the occurrences of this translation and would therefore not necessitate its occurrence also in Ps. 110:1 as if it did. A more non-dogmatic and accurate conclusion would be that Psalm 110:1 *could* have Adonai in its original rendering. But again, this should also be said with much caution as the argument for such a conclusion is not nearly as simplistic. So, their first error is a logical one.

- ***Hermeneutically: Ps. 16:2 and 35:23 truly parallels for 110:1?***

"I said to the Lord, ***Thou art my Lord (kyrios mou)***; for thou has no need of my goodness." 15:2 LXX

"Awake, *O Lord (kyrie)*, and attend to my judgment, *even to my cause, my God and my Lord (ho theos mou kai ho kyrios mou)*." Psalm 34:23 LXX

At a superficial glance, merely taking these psalms at word-level and ignoring the textual environment above world-level, we could also, like the mentioned authors, arrive at the rather reductionistic conclusion. True, in the MT we have Adonai, not Adoni, occurring in these texts. The LXX has *ho kurios mou* as its translation of ADNY. Apart from the possibility of reading ADNY as Adoni instead of Adonai and translating it accordingly, reading these psalms and allowing the text as a whole to impart meaning, we find that, apart from the similarities in expression (*ho kurios mou*), the supposed parallel to 110:1 disappears when we note that the one addressed in Psalms 16:2 and 35:23 as “my Lord” is a single referent. The only speakers in these psalms are Yahweh and David. In Psalm 110:1, however, David speaks about Yahweh and *another* Lord giving us the “my Lord” appellation addressing someone *other* than Yahweh. There is thus no parallel in this regard, and a false analogy is thus drawn.

- ***What do the LXX fragments and the Qumran Psalms Scroll tell us?***

The earliest fragments of the LXX, dating from before the Christian era well into the Christian era are fragments containing the Tetragram. Consider, for examples, the following four Greek OT fragments:

- 1) *P. Fouad 266b (Göttingen 848), which has been dated from the third to the first centuries BCE.*
- 2) *The Scroll of the Minor Prophets (8HevXIIGr [Göttingen 943] Hand A and B), which is dated to between 50 BC and 50 CE.*
- 3) *A fragment of Leviticus from Qumran cave 4 (4QLXXLevb [Göttingen 802]) that is dated to around the first century BCE. It contains the form law where the Hebrew text uses the Tetragram.*
- 4) *The final Greek OT fragment that falls within our timeline and that preserves a divine-name-containing text is P. Oxy 3522, which is dated to the early part of the first century CE. It contains Job 42:11-12 and it also uses an archaic Hebrew form of the divine name in the midst of a Greek text.*

The only LXX fragments having the Tetragram replaced date from the late second century.

The Qumran Psalms Scroll, dated between 30 and 50 CE also contains the 110th psalm. (Show picture and acknowledgment) As can be seen here, the Tetragram is written in distinct Paleo-Hebrew characters. In the Qumran Psalms Scroll the distinction between YHWH and ADNY is thus clearly made in the 110th psalm.

Taken parallel to each other – the LXX with, say, the Qumran Scroll of Psalms – we can assume with high probability that the earlier LXX copies probably retained the Tetragram in the case of the first referent while giving an equivalent rendering to the second referent. What about the Hebrew text? It has ADNY in the place of the second referent – not the Tetragram. From the oldest and best mss then, we see a distinction between the first referent, Yahweh, and the second “Lord.”

- ***What do the Targums reveal?***

The clearest evidence as to the second referent's non-divine, yet royal status, comes from the Paraphrases or Targums. Here is how some of them render the Psalm:

The LORD said in his decree to make *me* lord of all Israel, but he said to me, "Wait still for Saul of the tribe of Benjamin to die, for one reign must not encroach on another; and afterwards I will make your enemies a prop for your feet."

ANOTHER TARGUM: The LORD spoke by his decree to give *me* the dominion in exchange for sitting in study of Torah. "Wait at my right hand until I make your enemies a prop for your feet."

ANOTHER TARGUM: The LORD said in his decree to appoint *me* ruler over Israel, but the LORD said to me, "Wait for Saul of the tribe of Benjamin to pass away from the world; and afterwards you will inherit the kingship, and I will make your enemies a prop for your feet."

In this oracle, reference to a recipient's non-divine, royal status cannot be brought into question here. The LORD, Yahweh, is speaking to a royal recipient of His oracle. This royal status is ultimately applied to the antitypical Davidic King, namely the Messiah.

Before going over to the NT evidence, I'd like to make something clear: Trinitarians allow a distinction between the different "Persons" of the "Godhead." In other words, in the Trinitarian godhead, the Father is different from the Son is different from the Spirit. This distinction in "Persons" is indeed allowed. What is not allowed, however, is the distinction or difference between "God" and the "Persons" of the "Godhead." In other words, when I read the OT, and I find a text that says, "Thus saith Yahweh," Yahweh refers to all three, Father, Son and Holy Ghost. There is therefore, according to classical post-biblical Trinitarianism, no difference between God and the Son or God and the Father or God and the Spirit. All are fully God, one and the same Yahweh, with no difference between the "Person" and "God."

- ***Now keep that in mind as we go over to the NT evidence:***

Read with me 1 Corinthians 15:21, 23, 24, 27, 28

For since through a man there is death, through a man also, there is a resurrection of the dead. (Anselm has trouble here) But each one in his own rank: Christ a First-fruit; afterwards, those who are Christ's at his appearing. Then, the end, when he (Christ) shall give up the Kingdom to the God and Father; when he (Christ) shall have abrogated all government and all authority and power. For he (God) has subjected all things under his (Jesus') feet. But when he says that all things are subjected it is manifest that He (God) is excepted, who has subjected all things to him (Jesus). And when he shall have subdued all things to him then the son himself will be subject to Him (God) who subdued all things to him, that God may be all in all.

Hebrews 10:12, 13

But he, having offered an enduring sacrifice on behalf of sins, sat down at the right hand of God; henceforth waiting till his enemies may be placed underneath his feet.

Here Psalm 110:1 is used clearly marking a distinction between, not Father and Son (as Trinitarianism equivocatingly accept), but God – Yahweh – and Jesus, the Son. Thus, a distinction is drawn between Yahweh and someone else, Jesus (a distinction not recognized or tolerated by Trinitarianism). This is NOT presented to us in Trinitarian terms (distinction between Father and Son), but in Monotheistic terms (between Yahweh God and Jesus) – something Trinitarianism cannot afford.

- ***Finally, theologically***

It is an axiom to reversibly or interchangeably refer to Yahweh as Adonai. Yahweh is Adonai, Adonai is Yahweh. This is a given. There is no Adonai besides Yahweh:

Isa 45:5 I [am] the LORD, (Adonai/Yahweh) and [there is] none else, [there is] no God beside me.

Isa 45:6 That they may know from the rising of the sun, and from the west, that [there is] none beside me. I [am] the LORD, (Adonai/Yahweh) and [there is] none else.

Isa 45:18 For thus saith the LORD that created the heavens; God himself that formed the earth and made it; he hath established it, he created it not in vain,

he formed it to be inhabited: I [am] the LORD; (Adonai/Yahweh) and [there is] none else.

But here in Ps. 110:1, Trinitarians like James White argue that Yahweh (Adonai), speaks to someone else who is also Adonai. However they want to look at it, this is troublesome even to the Trinitarian theology: If Yahweh is 3-in-1 God, speaking to another Adonai could have one add between 1 and 3 to the existing 3, leaving us with between 4 and 6 Persons in one God. If, however, adding the second Adonai to the first does give Trinitarians 3 Persons in one God, then Yahweh is 2, and after all not 3 Persons, is He (or should I say *they*)?

Conclusion:

However we look at it, having one Adonai Yahweh speak to another Adonai in the exact same sentence would have one add to the already existing Adonai. One does end up with at least 2 Adonai's something horrifying to the inspired Jew of ancient times, even the Jewish translators of the LXX who were undoubtedly non-Trinitarian. The Biblical monotheistic model is simple and free from sophistry and requires no anachronistic superimpositions of later theological developments onto the biblical text. The one who received the promised kingship, lordship and authority was, according to 1 Corinthians 15:21, a man, Adam's equivalent. He received it as the royal type of Messiah – David, even Solomon – was understood to receive it. This, according to Acts 3:13, was bestowed upon him by the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – Adonai Yahweh – who made him (Jesus) both Lord and Christ. While during all this time and even after his final hand-over to Adonai Elohim, the highly exalted Lord Jesus would still have Yahweh as God over him, according to 2 Corinthians 1:4. So that Adonai Yahweh, be and remain the most High, the Almighty even of Christ, until all eternity!