

Confusing the Two Lords

In the editorial of the Winter, 1992, issue of this journal we urged a reconsideration of traditional Christology in the light of the all-important oracle provided by Psalm 110:1. This verse is precious to New Testament writers, who quote it or allude to it more than any other text of the Hebrew Scriptures. The importance of Psalm 110:1 lies in its simple description of two divine Persons, *Yahweh* and David's "Lord," the latter designated as the one destined to remain at the Father's right hand until he comes as conquering Messiah to subdue his enemies. The scheme thus revealed is the framework of the entire New Testament outlook on the present session of Jesus in heaven and his expected return to establish the Messianic Kingdom of prophecy in a renewed earth.

Yahweh and David's "Lord" are clearly two persons, in the modern psychological sense of that term. There is no possible route from the psalm to the complex definition of "person" which created in Nicene theology so many intractable problems. The Messianic Christology of Psalm 110:1 places the Messiah in a subordinate, yet highly exalted position relative to *Yahweh* who remains a distinct person in a class of His own. There is no question of compromising the unrestricted monotheism of the Hebrew Bible. The one God of Israel commands the Messiah to wait until the time comes for His final vindication. As *Yahweh's* agent the Messiah is David's *adon* or lord. The form of the word as it appears in the Hebrew of Psalm 110:1 is *adoni* ("my Lord"). It is a striking fact that the Lord God is nowhere addressed as *adoni*. This title is reserved for kings, prophets, human superiors in general, and angels.

Under the strain of having to ascribe coequality and coeternity to the Messiah, some commentators have shown a curious tendency to declare, against the facts of the Hebrew text, that in Psalm 110:1 *Yahweh* speaks to *adonai*. The latter title is, of course, an alternative for the divine name and is used exclusively of *Yahweh*. Now if David's oracle had indeed stated that *Yahweh* spoke to *adonai*, there would be a basis for the development of belief in a godhead of more than one person. The text as it stands, however, provides no support for the deity of the Messiah in a Trinitarian sense.

Examples of an unconscious reading of Trinitarian theology into

Psalm 110:1 are found in commentators of the present and the last centuries. A.R. Fausset, writing in 1866, comments on Psalm 110:1, "Jehovah said to *Adonai* or 'my Lord' . . . Jehovah, in verse one represents God the Father, and *Adonai*, God the Son."¹ But this is to create a potential Trinitarianism which is not in the text, since the Messiah is called *adoni* not *adonai*. Reginald Fuller states that "in the Hebrew [of Psalm 110:1] the first 'Lord' is the tetragrammaton, the second [the king] is *adhonai*."² Fuller goes on to say that *adonai* may be used of an earthly ruler. But examples are not cited. In a subsequent chapter he reads the Hebrew correctly and says that the second "lord" of our text is (1) *adhoni*.³ The confusion of *adonai* with *adoni* is compounded when Fuller questions whether the New Testament church would have conceded to Jesus a title which was reserved for deity.⁴ But *adoni* was not a title for deity. It referred to the king, and supremely to the Messiah, as God's legal agent.

V.A. Spence Little misreads the Hebrew of Psalm 110:1 explaining the verse: "The Lord [Jehovah] saith unto My Lord (*Adonai*), Sit thou at My right hand." He argues for the deity of the Messiah when he states that Jesus "definitely implied that this divine Name, *Adonai*, indicated Himself (Matt. 22:43-45)."⁵ The argument is based, however, on an inaccurate reporting of the Hebrew text.

John Stott defends Chalcedonian Christology when he maintains that because early Christians addressed Jesus as *kurios* they meant that he was God, since *kurios* was the LXX translation of the divine name.⁶ However, this is to overlook the fact that *kurios* was also the translation of Psalm 110:1's *adoni* which was not a title for deity. *Kurios*, as used of Jesus, could most appropriately designate the Lord *Messiah* as distinct from the Lord God (see Luke 2:11; Rom. 16:18; Col. 3:24).

The celebrated *Smith's Dictionary of the Bible* shows how pervasive is this fundamental confusion of the two Lords. The dictionary makes the claim that Peter's use of the title "Lord" for Jesus in Acts 2:36 establishes his deity: "After the Ascension the Apostles labored to bring the Jew to the knowledge that Jesus was not only the Christ, but was also a Divine person, even the Lord Jehovah." Psalm 110:1 is then quoted as proof of

¹*A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical*, by R. Jamieson, A.R. Fausset and D. Brown, Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1866, 346, 347.

²*The Foundations of New Testament Christology*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965, 68.

³*Ibid.*, 185.

⁴*Ibid.*, 198.

⁵*The Deity of Jesus Christ*, London: The Covenant Publishing Co. Ltd., 1956, 58.

⁶*The Authentic Jesus*, revised ed., Marshall Pickering, 1992, 27.

this amazing assertion: “St. Peter, after the outpouring of the Holy Ghost on the Day of Pentecost by Christ, says, ‘Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord [*kurion*, Jehovah] and Christ.’ ”⁷

It is only in a footnote that a later editor corrects the obvious flaw in the argument: “In ascribing to St. Peter the remarkable proposition that ‘God hath *made* Jesus Jehovah,’ the writer of this article appears to have overlooked the fact that *kurion* (‘Lord’) in Acts 2:36 refers to *to kurio mou* (‘my Lord’) in verse 34, quoted from Psalm 110:1, where the Hebrew correspondent is not Jehovah but *adon*, the common word for ‘lord’ or ‘master.’ ”⁸

The recovery of the Old Testament as the basis of Apostolic Christianity will put an end to the age-old desire of commentators to find in the text of Scripture cherished beliefs dating from the post-biblical Councils. The misreading of Psalm 110:1 as support for the deity of Jesus is the symptom of a widespread confusion over the identity of the two Lords. It is a mistake to claim that Jesus is Jehovah when in fact he is the Messiah appointed to that supreme office by Jehovah. The *Smith’s Bible Dictionary* footnote deserves to become a headline summoning us to belief in Jesus as the Messiah, not God.

Anthony Buzzard

⁷Reprinted by Baker Book House, 1971, 3090.

⁸*Ibid.*