

“The Lord Said to my Lord”:  
a survey of Trinitarian throne conversations in the New Testament  
and their influence on early Christology

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There is a peculiar juxtaposition between New Testament books that focus on the historical ministry of Jesus Christ and their appropriation of Ancient Israelite Scripture. In the gospels and Hebrews, biblical citations are heard through the Holy Spirit as “throne” conversations between the Father and the Son. These readings are invited by the ambiguity in Psalm 110, when the Lord speaks to the Lord, and they invite the orthodox insistence that Jesus is uniquely the God-man. This paper will review two instances in Mark (1:2-3; 12:35-37) and one in Hebrews (10:5-10), and then summarize their contribution to a tensive Christology that probably began with the historical Jesus.

### Mark 12:35-37

The *Davidssonfrage* climaxes five conflict anecdotes in which religious authorities interrogate Jesus in the temple:<sup>1</sup>

And answering, Jesus, while teaching in the temple, was saying: “How do the scribes say, ‘the Christ is the son of David’? David himself said in the Holy Spirit: *The Lord said to my Lord: Sit at my right (hand) until I place your enemies under your feet.* [Ps 110 (OG 109):1] David himself calls him *Lord*, and so how is he his son?” And the great crowd was hearing him gladly.<sup>2</sup> (Mark 12:35-37)

In a climactic turn, Jesus questions their authority while suggesting his own supreme position.<sup>3</sup> After continually responding to others, the disguised son of God asks a question.

The anecdote is chiasmic:

- A And answering Jesus, while teaching in the temple, was saying:
- B “How do the scribes say, ‘the Christ is the son of David’?”

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<sup>1</sup> There is an *inclusio* with Mark 11:27-33. Between the units are debates over paying tribute (12:13-17), the resurrection (12:18-27), and the great commandment (12:28-35). We find the same five-part structure with a polemical theme towards the beginning of the gospel (2:1—3:6). In that section, Jesus expresses his divine authority by forgiving a man’s sins (2:5). Taken together, the scribes, expert interpreters of Scripture, provide the first (2:6) and last opposition (12:35). See Dean B. Deppe, *The Theological Intentions of Mark’s Literary Devices* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 177.

<sup>2</sup> Mark uses the same language for **the great crowd hearing Jesus gladly** (*hēdeōs, ἡδέως*) as he did with Herod and John the Baptist (Mark 6:20). It may imply a positive yet insufficient response.

<sup>3</sup> Deppe, *Theological Intentions*, 177.

C David himself said in the Holy Spirit:

D *The Lord said to my Lord: Sit at my right (hand) until I place your enemies under your feet.*

C' David himself calls him *Lord*,

B' and so how is he his son?"

A' And the great crowd was hearing him gladly.

The intentional structure foregrounds the citation from Psalm 110, which is nearly identical to the Old Greek as we have it:

εἶπεν ὁ κύριος τῷ κυρίῳ μου κάθου ἐκ δεξιῶν μου ἕως ἂν θῶ τοὺς ἐχθρούς σου  
ὑποπόδιον τῶν ποδῶν σου. (OG)

εἶπεν κύριος τῷ κυρίῳ μου· κάθου ἐκ δεξιῶν μου ἕως ἂν θῶ τοὺς ἐχθρούς σου ὑποκάτω  
τῶν ποδῶν σου (Mark)

The Masoretic text has two different names: YHWH (יהוה) addresses the author's *Adonai* or "Lord" (אֲדֹנָי), but the Greek translator(s) adopted the circumlocution of κύριος for יהוה we find in the Septuagint: "The Lord (κύριος) said to my Lord (κύριος). The translation is ambiguous in a monotheistic context.

Psalm 110 has two parts: vv. 1-3 and vv. 4-7, assigning the roles of king and priest respectively to a mysterious figure.<sup>4</sup> YHWH (the Lord) speaks at the beginning of both subunits; the rest is commentary.<sup>5</sup> Seated on a throne, YHWH addresses David's Lord: "*Sit at my right (hand) until I place your enemies under your feet.*" In the second part, YHWH addresses Melchizedek:

Σὺ εἶ ἱερεὺς εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα κατὰ τὴν τάξιν Μελχισεδεκ.

"You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." (v. 4)

The second "Lord," according to the psalm, is Melchizedek, who is mentioned only twice in the Old Testament. The king-priest appears to bless Abram after rescuing Lot and then disappears (Gen 14:18-20) until David calls him Lord (Ps 110:4). However, the mysterious figure invited elaboration in Jewish tradition. The Dead Sea Scrolls<sup>6</sup> depict Melchizedek as a heavenly savior, a judge who will condemn his demonic counterpart, Belial, and "will proclaim" to the captives "liberty, forgiving them of all their sins." He is identified as the archangel Michael, but is also

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, *Psalms*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 479.

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Psalms*, The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 184.

<sup>6</sup> Specifically, thirteen fragments from Cave 11, which are dated to the first-century BC (Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* [London: Penguin, 1997], 500).

called *Elohim* or *El*, divine names.<sup>7</sup> James Waddell notes, “the Melchizedek figure has an authority or role that is somewhere between the divine figure and all the other angels,”<sup>8</sup> an ambiguity that presumably came from the opening of Psalm 110.<sup>9</sup>

Jesus cites the psalm again when threatening Caiaphas:

The high priest again questioned him. And he says to him: “Are you the Christ, the son of the Blessed?” Now Jesus said: “I am. And you all will see *the son of man, who is sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.*” [Ps 110:1; Dan 7:13] But the high priest, tearing his garments, says: “What else do we need for a witness? You heard the blasphemy! (14:61-64).

The question betrays a knowledge of this final debate, as if word got back to Caiaphas: by distancing himself from Davidic ancestry, a merely human category, Jesus relates himself to God.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, he claims to be “the son of the Blessed,” a circumlocution for God. The *gezerah sheva* (a common way of bringing two Scriptures together through a common word of theme) with Daniel’s son of man, a mysterious figure given the divine authority to judge, resembles the Melchizedek of the Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>11</sup> It is therefore likely that Jesus internalized both locutions from Psalm 110, which informed what may be called his “supermessianic” identity.<sup>12</sup>

Jesus simultaneously exploits and resolves the ambiguous locution. On the one hand, the verse can be heard as God speaking God, “the Lord said to my Lord,” which complicates a simplistic monotheism. On the other, Jesus clarifies the context by assigning three roles to the

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<sup>7</sup> See 11Q13 in Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 429, 500-502. The author(s) correlates Scriptures from the Law, Prophets, and Psalms. Melchizedek is linked to Daniel’s vision of a “prince” (9:25) and presumably the son of man, who is given judgment.

<sup>8</sup> James A. Waddell, *The Messiah: A Comparative Study of the Enochic Son of Man and the Pauline Kyrios* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 157.

<sup>9</sup> Gard Granerød notes, “11Q13 is a text belonging to the history of reception of Psalm 110” (*Abraham and Melchizedek: Scribal Activity of Second Temple Times in Genesis 14 and Psalm 110* [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010], 209).

<sup>10</sup> Mark L. Strauss notes, “The implication for Mark’s readers is that Jesus’ identity exceeds Jewish expectations concerning the messianic ‘son of David’” (*The Davidic Messiah in Luke-Acts: The Promise and Its Fulfillment in Lukan Christology*, JSNTS 110 [1995], 71). Jan Dochhorn concludes “Mark 12:35-37 formulates a Christology claiming the position of God for Christ viz Jesus” (“Man and the Son of Man in Mark 2:27-28: An Exegesis of Mark 2:23-28 Focusing on the Christological Discourse in Mark 2:27-28 with an Epilogue Concerning Pauline Parallels,” *Mark and Paul: Comparative Essays Part II: For and Against Pauline Influence on Mark*, ed. Eve-Marie Becker, Troels Engberg-Pederson, and Mogens Müller [Göttingen: De Gruyter, 2014], 147-168, 159). See also Theodore W. Jennings, *Transforming Atonement: a political theology of the cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 34.

<sup>11</sup> In the context of Torah, Susan A. Handelman defines the exegetical strategy as finding an “analogy between two laws based on identical expressions in the Biblical text”: *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1982), 57. Rabbinic literature attributes the practice to Hillel from the generation before Jesus. For other examples in Mark, see 11:17 and 14:27. Mixed citations are common in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The extant targum reads: “The voice of one who cries: ‘Prepare a way in the wilderness before the people of the Lord, tread down paths in the desert before the congregation of our God’”: *The Targum of Isaiah* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949), 130.

<sup>12</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 270. The unit “presents a Supra-Davidic Jesus” (Matthew V. Novenson, *The Grammar of Messianism: An Ancient Jewish Political Idiom and Its Users* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017], 86).

verse: the Father speaks, the Son hears, and the Holy Spirit allows David to hear leading to the composition of the psalm. Assigning dramatic characters to ambiguous speeches in the Old Testament has been called “prosopological exegesis,” although it may be fair to claim that Jesus simply heard Scripture this way.<sup>13</sup>

Jesus also appropriates the significance of the setting, as Andrea Spatafora: “The temple constituted the boundary between the heavenly and the earthly worlds, the entrance to heaven. Whoever entered the temple in Jerusalem was already in the heavenly world.”<sup>14</sup> As we noted, the temple was patterned after the tabernacle (a sacred tent), which had an altar in front of the Holy of Holies, a small room that housed the ark of the covenant. The ark, a gold-covered wooden chest, had a lid that was covered by two Cherubim, who, in turn, held up God’s throne (or chariot).<sup>15</sup> Their images were also embroidered into a veil that restricted access to the Holy of Holies. God spoke to Moses “from between the Cherubim” (Num 7:89). Psalm 110 describes the Lord—that is, God the Father—inviting the Lord Jesus, God’s Son, to sit—that is, share his glory and authority—until his enemies, like Caiaphas, are brought into submission.

It is difficult to overstate the Christological significance of this anecdote. First, this way of reading Scripture probably goes back to the historical Jesus as remembered by Peter, the primary source behind Mark’s gospel. On the one hand, Jesus pushes against contemporary messianism that looked for a descendant of David. On the other, the early church embraced Jesus as “the son of David.”<sup>16</sup> Scholars refer to this as the criterion of double dissimilarity. Nevertheless, his exegesis of Psalm 110 fits well in a first century Palestinian context. Second, the anecdote introduces a unique, tensive juxtaposition for Christological development, as M. Eugene Boring explains:

Adopting the pattern established by Mark, the Gospels combine two prior modes of thinking and speaking about the Christ event. On the one hand, Jesus is presented as a human being who suffers and dies a truly human death at the hands of his oppressors. In this, he is like Socrates. On the other hand, Jesus is also presented as a divine being, the Son of God filled with miraculous power, able to overcome all the human problems,

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<sup>13</sup> The adjective is derived from *prosōpon* (πρόσωπον) “person.” Matthew W. Bates describes it as “person-centered” reading strategy (*The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and Spirit in New Testament & Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015], 5. Carl Andresen uses the term “prosographic”: “Zur Entstehung und Geschichte des trinitarischen Personbegriffes,” *ZNW* (1961): 1-39; Marie-Josèphe Roneau prefers “prosopological.” She offers the most comprehensive discussion to date: *Les commentateurs patristiques du Psautier (III<sup>e</sup>-V<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, 2 vols., *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 219, 220 (Rome: Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1982, 1985) 1:19, 2:35-97, 323-364. Prosopology asks three questions: Who is speaking, to whom is he speaking, and what is he speaking about? (Ellen Scully, *Physicalist Soteriology in Hilary of Poitiers* [Leiden: Brill, 2015], 60.

<sup>14</sup> *From The “Temple of God” to God as The Temple: A Biblical and Theological Study of the Temple in the Book of Revelation* (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1997), 34.

<sup>15</sup> 1 Kgs 6:22-29; 2 Kgs 19:15; Ezek 10:1-2; 2 Chr 28:18.

<sup>16</sup> So Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*, 270. For more discussion, see Benjamin Sargent, *David Being a Prophet* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2014), 97-126. We even find some of this identification in Mark! The Pharisees take issue with his disciples plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath, but Jesus appeals to David’s precedent of eating the Bread of the presence. Bartimaeus even calls him “son of David” without any denial from Jesus (10:47, 48).

including death. This is in contrast to Socrates, who works no miracles, just as it is in contrast to Apollonius of Tyana, who works miracles but is not a truly human being . . . A distinctive characteristic of the Gospel genre is that it juxtaposes these two modes of christological confession, uniting the vulnerable human Jesus and the powerful Son of God in one tensive narrative.<sup>17</sup>

Mark offers his own example at the beginning of his gospel.

## Mark 1:2-6

The gospel begins with the Father commissioning the Baptist to prepare the Son's ministry. Mark backs this momentous event through a florilegium or collection of Ancient Israelite Scripture:

As it stands written in [Isaiah, the prophet]<sup>18</sup>: “*Look: I am sending my messenger before your face [Exod 23:20] who will prepare your way,*” [Mal 3:1] *a voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the Lord’s way, make his paths straight,’*” [Isa 40:3] John came baptizing *in the wilderness* and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.<sup>19</sup> (Mark 1:2-4)

The form, which seems to have originated in the first century before Christ, perhaps from preaching in the synagogue, is a kind of biblical theology. God’s oracles are gathered together according to topic, suggesting a canonical awareness and the belief that God, the ultimate author of Scripture, continues to speak through the written word.<sup>20</sup> The citations from the prophets were joined according to *gezerah sheva*, sharing the substantive “way” (ὁδός) and synonymous verbs meaning “prepare.” However, the Malachi citation differs from the extant Hebrew and Greek texts:

הִנְנִי שֹׁלֵחַ מַלְאָכִי וּפְנֵה-דַרְדָּרָה לְפָנַי, Behold, I am sending my messenger, and he will prepare (the) way before me.

ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ ἐξαποστέλλω τὸν ἄγγελόν μου καὶ ἐπιβλέψεται ὁδὸν πρὸ προσώπου μου, Behold, I am sending out my messenger and he will survey (the) way before my face.

Mark’s version switches to the second person, allowing interpersonal communication:

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<sup>17</sup> *An Introduction to The New Testament: History, Literature, Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 511.

<sup>18</sup> Codex Alexandrinus and later Byzantine manuscripts read “in the Prophets,” perhaps as a corrective to the mixed citation. This is one of Bede’s options, although he is aware of the variant (C.A. Mark 1), and it makes its way into the King James Version.

<sup>19</sup> This is the only place where Mark cites Scripture; otherwise, it is characters in the narrative. The Latin evokes “the gathering of flowers.” We find similar exegesis in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Of particular significance is 4Q174, which also cites from Psalm 2 and 2 Samuel 7. We find the expression “[in the] last days” (co1.2). But the fragment is more like a *pesher* commentary, lacking *dramatis personae*.

<sup>20</sup> It is significant that New Testament florilegia do not include citations outside of what came to be called the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible). Other florilegia in the New Testament are Rom 3:10-18 and Heb 1:5-14.

ἰδοὺ ἀποστέλλω τὸν ἄγγελόν μου πρὸ προσώπου σου, ὃς κατασκευάσει τὴν ὁδὸν σου,  
Behold, I am sending my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way.

In context, the antecedent of the first person pronoun “I” is God the Father; the second person, the Son, who is the Lord.<sup>21</sup> Although Jesus might have heard this commission shortly before his baptism, the most natural context for the announcement is God’s throne room. If so, Mark juxtaposes the historical ministry of Jesus with two Trinitarian throne conversations (presumably in this case, the Spirit allows the prophets to hear): the first leads to the incarnation; the second, the ascension.

### Hebrews 10:5-7

Hebrews is a sermon or “word of exhortation” (λόγος παρακλήσεως) on Psalm 110, which is cited or alluded to throughout (see 1:3, 13; 5:6; 7:17, 21; 8:2; 10:13).<sup>22</sup> Melchizedek is presented as a type of Jesus (5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:1, 10, 11, 15, 17). The author also reads florilegia and isolated Scriptures as a conversation within the Godhead: the Father addressing the Son (1:5, 13; 5:5-6; 7:17, 21), the Son responding the Father (2:12-13; 10:5-7), and the Spirit serving as witness (3:7-11; 15-17; see 8:8-12).<sup>23</sup> Like Mark, he juxtaposes the historical ministry of Jesus, with an emphasis on his faithful perseverance, with the Incarnation and Ascension. Concerning, the former, Jesus speaks through Psalm 40:

So when he<sup>24</sup> comes into the world, he says: *Sacrifice and offering you<sup>25</sup> did not desire, but you prepared a body for me.*<sup>26</sup> [6] *Whole burnt offerings and [sacrifices] for sins you did not desire. [7] Then I said: “Look—in the roll of a scroll it has been written of me, I have come to do your will, O God.”* [Ps 40:7-9]. (10:5-7)<sup>27</sup>

The Son thanks the Father for giving him a body, which he then gives back to the Father in sacrificial obedience. As Psalm 110 presents, the Father responds to the faithfulness of the Son

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<sup>21</sup> For the identification of God as the speaker, see Christian Blumenthal, *Gott im Markusevangelium: Wort und Gegenwart Gottes bei Markus*, Biblisch-Theologische Studien 144 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2014). Johannes Schreiber makes the link and offers essentially the same interpretation, except that he wrongly attributes the hermeneutic to a Gnostic redeemer myth in line with Rudolf Bultmann: “Die Christologie des Markusevangeliums,” *ZTK* 58 (1961): 154 – 183; *Die Markuspassion. Eine redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung*, BZNW 68 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1993), 240-50. For more discussion, see Simon J. Gathercole, *The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 12-13. See also Robert A. Guelich, “‘The Beginning of the Gospel’ Mark 1:1-15,” *BR* 27 (1982): 5-15, 6.

<sup>22</sup> George W. Buchanan, *To the Hebrews*, Anchor Bible 36, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), xix, xxii. See also Jared Compton, *Psalm 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, Library of New Testament Studies (London; New Delhi; New York; Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2015), 5-6; Richard Johnson, *Going Outside the Camp: The Sociological Function of the Levitical Critique in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 20.

<sup>23</sup> The Father also commands angels (1:6) who respond to the Son (1:8-12).

<sup>24</sup> Christ is the antecedent (9:24, 28).

<sup>25</sup> The antecedent is the Father.

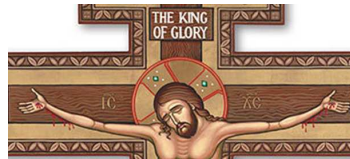
<sup>26</sup> Compare with MT: “ears you have dug [opened] for me.”

<sup>27</sup> Matthew W. Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and Spirit in New Testament & Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1.

by raising him from the dead and inviting him to sit at this right hand, to share his glory and authority until he brings every enemy of Jesus under his feet.

## Christology

These throne conversations, and those that fall outside this paper's scope, make at least two contributions to orthodox Christology through juxtaposition. Rachele Gilmour notes, "Two elements in spatial or temporal contiguity will inevitably influence how each is perceived by the audience."<sup>28</sup> Jesus and the New Testament writers juxtapose his earthly ministry with the heavenly throne room, so that around every event in the gospels—from the rejections in Galilee to the emotional breakdown in Gethsemane to the crucifixion at Golgotha—is the coming from and returning to the Father's throne. The *inclusio* of the Incarnation and Ascension infuses a hidden glory amidst suffering, a theme that fascinated Paul and others. The Byzantine Crucifixion icon subtly presents this tension: it does not read *INBI* ("Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews"), a derogatory sign by the Roman executioners, but ὁ βασιλεὺς τῆς δόξης, "The King of Glory."<sup>29</sup>



Jesus also makes a juxtaposition between himself, the Father, and the Holy Spirit, which "led to the consolidation of 'person' language to express the three-in-one mystery."<sup>30</sup> God is not talking to himself, but God is talking to God. The God-man, Jesus Christ, God's Son, speaks and the church responded with the language of hypostatic union at the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451):

So, following the saintly fathers, we all with one voice teach the confession of one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ: the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man, of a rational soul and a body; consubstantial with the Father as regards his divinity, and the same consubstantial with us as regards his humanity; like us in all respects except for sin; begotten before the ages from the Father as regards his divinity, and in the last days the same for us and for our salvation from

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<sup>28</sup> *Juxtaposition and the Elisha Cycle* (London; New Delhi; New York; Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2014), 3. She notes that juxtaposition is a common way to convey meaning in Scripture, and interacts with extensive scholarship.

<sup>29</sup> Andreas Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), 26. Ellen M. Ross notes, "in general medieval images of the suffering Jesus attended to both his humanity and his divinity" (*The Grief of God: Images of the Suffering Jesus in Late Medieval England* [New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997], 46).

<sup>30</sup> Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity*, 7. However, he may fall into an either / or fallacy: "what emerges is not a philosophically defined Godhead internally differentiated by procession or subordination, such as is portrayed by scholarly models dependent on the late patristic era, but rather a Father, Son, and Spirit who are characterized by relentless affection and concern for one another" (7). He does not reject the patristic reflection, speaking of emphasis, but the New Testament texts *do* emphasize the subordination of the Son to the Father. See also Michael Slusser, "The Exegetical Roots of Trinitarian Theology," *Theological Studies* 49 (1988): 461-476.

Mary, the virgin God-bearer, as regards his humanity; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten, acknowledged in two natures which undergo no confusion, no change, no division, no separation; at no point was the difference between the natures taken away through the union, but rather the property of both natures is preserved and comes together into a single person and a single subsistent being; he is not parted or divided into two persons, but is one and the same only-begotten Son, God, Word, Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, vol. 1 (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 86.