

From the *Shema* to the *Homoousios*:

The Jewish Roots and New Testament Origins of the Nicene Creed

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The Nicene Creed is one of several important confessional documents produced in the early church.¹ To be more precise, we should distinguish between two versions: the Creed of Nicaea, produced at the First Council of Nicaea in 325, and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, produced at the First Council of Constantinople in 381. We shall use the term *Nicene Creed* in reference to the 325 version unless stated otherwise. The thesis of this paper is that both versions of the Creed are thoroughly rooted in the Jewish religious soil of the Old Testament and that they originate from credal or confessional elements of the New Testament.

The Problem: Is the Nicene Creed a Hellenistic Deviation from Biblical Faith?

Critics of the Nicene Creed routinely characterize it as a Hellenized distortion of the Christian faith. According to Hans Küng, the doctrine of the Trinity is “Greek speculation, which was far removed from its biblical basis.”² Even N. T. Wright has complained about the fourth-century church “trying to make theological bricks without the biblical straw.”³ Antitrinitarian religions are thus able to find respected scholarly support for their outright rejection of the Creed and of the doctrine of the Trinity it articulates. Jeffrey Holland, an apostle in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (better known as the Mormons), put it this way:

So we are very comfortable, frankly, in letting it be known that we do not hold a fourth- or fifth-century, pagan-influenced view of the Godhead, and neither did those first

¹ Three notable collections of creeds are available for English readers. Two of these cover most or all of church history: Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, 3 vols., 6th ed., revised by David S. Schaff (New York: Harper & Row, 1931; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985); Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, eds., *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, 3 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003). The third covers only early Christianity: Wolfram Kinzig, ed. and trans., *Faith in Formulae: A Collection of Early Christian Creeds and Creed-related Texts*, trans. by Wolfram Kinzig with the assistance of Christopher M. Hays, 4 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Kinzig’s work is a technical, text-critical and historical reference work of special interest to scholars.

² Hans Küng, *Islam: Past, Present and Future*, trans. John Bowden (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), 506.

³ N. T. Wright, “Historical Paul and ‘Systematic Theology’: To Start a Discussion,” in *Interpreting Paul: Essays on the Apostle and His Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 99 (89–106). The essay appeared earlier in *Biblical Theology: Past, Present, and Future*, edited by Carey Walsh and Mark W. Elliott (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 147–64.

Christian Saints who were eyewitnesses of the living Christ. We are New Testament—not Nicene—Christians.⁴

Advocates of other antitrinitarian religions, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses⁵ and Unitarians,⁶ have made similar statements.

To the contrary, the Nicene Creed is rooted in Jewish theology and culture and is constructed from what Wright called “biblical straw,” especially proto-creedal New Testament texts. Thus, “Nicene” Christians *are* New Testament Christians.

Creeds Are Not Hellenistic

Liberal Protestants since at least Edwin Hatch have contrasted the “ethical” orientation of the Sermon on the Mount with the “dogmatic” or “metaphysical” orientation of the Nicene Creed. According to Hatch, the shift was not merely the acceptance of the specific doctrinal ideas of the Creed but the very formulation of a creed. “The change in the centre of gravity from conduct to belief is coincident with the transference of Christianity from a Semitic to a Greek soil. The presumption is that it was the result of Greek influence.”⁷

Hatch’s presumption, despite hundreds of pages devoted to confirming it, turns out to have a fatal difficulty: Greeks didn’t do anything like creeds. In the first half of the twentieth century, Oxford professor of Greek Gilbert Murray noted that we have no “knowledge of anything that we may call typically a religious creed or an authorized code of morals, in any age from Hesiod to M. Aurelius.”⁸ The closest thing to a creed he could find in the Greco-Roman culture was a fourth-century pagan text by the Neoplatonic philosopher Sallustius (now usually called Salustius). Murray characterized this work as “an authoritative statement of doctrine, something between a creed and a catechism.”⁹ Entitled *On the Gods and the World*, it was known to Murray from a book published in 1881 that includes the Greek and Latin texts.¹⁰ Reading through the text, it is clearly much more like a catechism and really nothing like a creed. In any case, this text was written in the 360s, about forty years or so *after* the Nicene Creed in 325. Moreover, as Murray explains, Sallustius wrote it to support Emperor Julian’s attempt to restore pagan religion and philosophy to the Empire against the ascendancy of Christianity.¹¹

Murray’s assessment of the lack of anything like creeds in Greco-Roman civilization has been reiterated by classics scholars ever since. Not only did the Greeks lack creeds, they lacked anything like a Bible or even normative beliefs. Frederick C. Grant observed, “Greek religion

⁴ Jeffrey R. Holland, “Knowing the Godhead,” *Ensign*, Jan. 2016.

⁵ “When and How Did the Trinity Doctrine Develop?” *Watchtower*, Aug. 1, 1992.

⁶ Anthony F. Buzzard and Charles F. Hunting, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Christianity’s Self-Inflicted Wound* (Lanham, MD: International Scholars Publications, 1998), 177.

⁷ Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages upon the Christian Church*, Hibbert Lectures 1888, ed. A. M. Fairbairn, 6th ed. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1897), 2.

⁸ Gilbert Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, 3rd ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday—Anchor Books, 1955), 171 (originally *Four Stages of Greek Religion*, 1912).

⁹ Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, 166.

¹⁰ F. W. A. Mullach, ed., *Fragmenta Philosophorum Graecorum*, vol. 3 (Paris, 1879), 30–50. Murray gives an English translation in an appendix in *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, 191–212.

¹¹ Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, 171–75.

itself never produced anything like a Bible—though in later centuries Homer was often viewed as inspired—nor did it produce a church or a creed or a system of dogma or a body of eschatological beliefs, either cosmic or terrestrial.”¹² According to John Ferguson, “The Greeks and Romans never thought in credal terms. Religion was a matter of actions and right relationships, not beliefs. . . . The Romans did not call the Christians to affirm belief in the divinity of the emperor, but to offer a pinch of incense to his Genius.”¹³ Other scholars have noted that “the Greeks in general considered what one believed to be of much less importance than what one did”¹⁴ and that, “Together with the absence of a Holy Book went the absence of a creed and, consequently, of heresy.”¹⁵

Ironically, then, the very elements of Nicene Christianity that Hatch and many others since him have attributed to pagan Greek influence—emphases on books and beliefs (supposedly even over conduct), formulating creeds to express normative doctrine, censuring contrary positions as heresy—were not facets of Greek culture at all. They must have arisen from some other source. What might that source be?

Monotheism and the Creedal Imperative

Where there are many gods and many disparate philosophies about the world, there can be no unifying creed. It is in the three great monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—that creeds emerged and have played notable and regulative roles. In fact, all three religions make affirmations of monotheism the primary element of their principal creeds or confessions:

“The LORD our God, the LORD is one. . .” (Deut. 6:4–5, the *Shema*).

“We believe in one God. . .” (the Nicene Creed and other early Christian creeds).

“There is no god but Allah. . .” (the *Shahadah*, the creed of Islam).

The earliest of these credal statements, of course, is the *Shema*, known by that Hebrew word that begins Deuteronomy 6:4, “*Hear*, O Israel. . .” In the later, broader sense, the *Shema* included three Old Testament passages: Deuteronomy 6:4–9; 11:13–21; Numbers 15:37–41.

¹² Frederick C. Grant, *Roman Hellenism and the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1962), 13.

¹³ John Ferguson, *Greek and Roman Religion, Man’s Religious Quest, Units 14–15* (Milton Keynes, UK: The Open University Press, 1977), 40. See also Susan Deacy, “‘Famous Athens, Divine Polis’: The Religious System at Athens,” in *A Companion to Greek Religion*, ed. by Daniel Ogden, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World: Ancient History (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 221 (221–35).

¹⁴ Vincent J. Rosivach, *The System of Public Sacrifice in Fourth-Century Athens*, *American Classical Studies* 34 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 1.

¹⁵ Jan N. Bremmer, *Greek Religion, With Addenda; Greece & Rome: New Surveys in the Classics* 24; For the Classical Association (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 6, cf. 8.

Jacob Neusner, the architect of modern academic Jewish studies, repeatedly referred to the *Shema* as “the creed.”¹⁶

Various extant Jewish texts from the last two centuries (at least) of the Second Temple period attest to a widespread confessional role specifically for Deuteronomy 6:4–5 during the time of Jesus and the apostles. The earliest such text, the Nash Papyrus (probably second century BC), containing the Ten Commandments followed by Deuteronomy 6:4–5, was folded in a way that suggests it was placed in a *mezuzah* (a parchment case attached to a doorpost) or a *tefillah* (a phylactery, a small scripture box worn on the arm or head). Among the Dead Sea Scrolls were *mezuzōt* and *tefillin* containing, in several instances, the same text from Deuteronomy. In the early third century AD, the Mishnah opens with a discussion of rabbinical debates about the rules governing the twice-daily recitation of the *Shema*, indicating that these debates went back at least as far as Shammai and Hillel, both of whom died during Jesus’ lifetime.¹⁷

The ancient Jewish practice of reciting the Ten Commandments along with the *Shema*, attested in the Nash Papyrus and elsewhere, reflects the close relationship between those two texts in Deuteronomy (5:6–21; 6:4–5). Indeed, as the Mishnah itself indicates, Deuteronomy 6:4–5 should surely be understood as a restatement of the First Commandment (translating both literally):

“I [am] YHWH your God. . . . You shall have no other gods before me” (Deut. 5:6–7).

“YHWH our God, YHWH [is] one. You shall love YHWH your God. . . .” (Deut. 6:4–5).

The translation and interpretation of Deuteronomy 6:4b is a matter of considerable controversy due to the lack of any verb (lit., “YHWH our-God YHWH one”). The Septuagint translates it with a verb for “is” at the very end, κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν κύριος εἷς ἐστίν, which in English would be either “The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (LES) or “The LORD our God is one LORD” (Brenton, NETS). These are also two of the four main options for translating the Hebrew text into English (using “the LORD” for the Hebrew *YHWH*):

1. “The LORD our God is one LORD” (KJV, cf. ASV).
2. “The LORD is our God, the LORD is one” (NASB, NET).
3. “The LORD is our God, the LORD alone” (NABRE, NLT, NJPS, NRSVue).
4. “The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (CJB, ESV, CSB, NIV, NKJV, cf. LEB).

As a rendering of the Hebrew, we can probably eliminate the first option, which would mean taking the Hebrew text to say “one YHWH,” a highly unlikely meaning, since attribute

¹⁶ Jacob Neusner, *The Halakhah: An Encyclopedia of the Law of Judaism*, Brill Reference Library of Ancient Judaism (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 1:47, 48.

¹⁷ See (among the numerous studies that might be mentioned) Judah David Eisenstein, “Shema,” in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, edited by Isidore Singer (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1901–1906), 11:266–67; Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus*, trans. John Bowden, Christoph Burchard, and John Reumann (London: SCM Press, 1967), 68–69; Richard Bauckham, “The Shema and 1 Corinthians 8:6 Again,” in *One God, One People, One Future: Essays in Honour of N. T. Wright*, ed. John Anthony Dunne and Eric Lewellen (London: SPCK, 2018), 86–110. Bauckham responds to recent arguments against the confessional function and twice-daily recitation of the *Shema* during the late Second Temple period.

adjectives are not normally used with proper names.¹⁸ The expressions “Yahweh our/your/his/my God” occur over 400 times in Deuteronomy and over 700 times in the Hebrew OT, and of those (besides Deut. 6:4) only in two places at most is “God” construed predicatively (“The LORD is our God,” 2 Chron. 13:10; “the LORD is my God,” Zech. 13:9, where “is” might be omitted).¹⁹ Usage, then, makes the second and third options seem extremely unlikely though not quite impossible.²⁰ The fourth option, “The LORD our God, the LORD is one,” thus seems the most likely,²¹ and it happens to fit the Septuagint translation as well (as in the LES).

The meaning of “one” (*echad*) in the *Shema* is also controversial. Probably most exegetes understand *echad* in Deuteronomy 6:4 to mean that Yahweh alone is Israel’s God, without necessarily expressing or even implying that Yahweh is the only God. Such is also the point in the First Commandment, which emphasizes that as Israel’s deliverer from bondage in Egypt Yahweh is the only God they should worship (Exod. 20:2–3; Deut. 5:6–7). It is plausible, then, to interpret “one” (*echad*) in the *Shema* to convey the sense “alone,” even if such is not the usual denotation of the word. That is, we might translate Deuteronomy 6:4, “The LORD our God, the LORD alone.” On this basis, many most exegetes deny that the *Shema* teaches that the Lord is literally the only God that exists.

However, within the larger teaching of Deuteronomy, Yahweh’s exclusive honor as Israel’s God is grounded not only on his exceptional acts on Israel’s behalf but more fundamentally on his identity as the Creator and Lord of all things. There is no god in heaven or on earth that could do the sorts of miracles Yahweh had done (Deut. 3:24). Never “since the day that God created man on the earth” had anything like those miracles ever occurred, for any other people or nation (4:32–34). Yahweh did those things so that Israel would know that he “is God; there is no other beside him” (4:35). Indeed, “the LORD, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other” (4:39 NASB). References to the “gods” of other nations repeatedly deprecate them as impotent, mere “gods of wood and stone” that lack any ability to help people (4:28; 28:36, 64). To the extent that there were supernatural powers behind such so-

¹⁸ J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, Apollos OT Commentary 5 (Leicester: Apollos; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 141.

¹⁹ *YHWH Elohehu* occurs elsewhere 22 times in Deuteronomy and 97 times in the OT; *YHWH Eloheyka* occurs 444 times in the OT including 382 in Deuteronomy; *YHWH Elohayw* occurs 28 times and *YHWH Elohay* 38 times.

²⁰ Cf. Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB 5 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 337 (who does not mention 2 Chron. 13:10). See further Judah Kraut, “Deciphering the Shema: Staircase Parallelism and the Syntax of Deuteronomy 6:4,” *VT* 61 (2011): 585. See the criticisms in Daniel I. Block, “How Many Is God? An Investigation into the Meaning of Deuteronomy 6:4–5,” *JETS* 47.2 (2004): 193–212. Block’s main argument on this issue is that most of the texts using “YHWH our/your God” occur in verbal clauses whereas Deuteronomy 6:4 is verbless. However, the First Commandment, which is clearly parallel, has a similarly verbless clause (“I [am] YHWH your God,” Exod. 20:2; Deut. 5:6; and see also Exod. 20:5; Deut. 5:9); this clause occurs forty more times throughout the OT, especially in Leviticus. The predicative use of “God” (*elohim*) is usually preceded by “he” (Heb. *hû*), Deut. 7:9; Josh. 2:11; 1 Kings 8:60; 18:39; Ps. 100:3, though see Josh. 22:34.

²¹ This exegesis agrees with Kraut’s argument (“Deciphering the Shema”) that the statement uses staircase parallelism (AB/BC), so that the resulting *meaning* is “The LORD our God is one.”

called gods, they were in actuality “demons that were no gods” (32:17). All such gods were summoned to bow down before Yahweh (32:43).²²

As it is presented in the Old Testament, the history of Israel between the Conquest and the Babylonian Exile is one of almost constant involvement in Canaanite idolatrous religion by the people and all too often by their kings. Devotion to the gods of the nations was denounced by such prophets as Elijah, Elisha, Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. Following the Exile, the Jews returned to their land as a remnant devoted to the Lord YHWH as the only God. As Weinfeld comments, “It is true that during the Exile the monotheistic consciousness sharpened and came to full expression . . . but this does not mean that the concept of monotheism was created then.”²³

In the first century AD, Jews expressed the meaning of Deuteronomy 6:4 and the closely related First Commandment in explicitly monotheistic terms. We see this in both Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 BC–AD 40), who wrote during Jesus’ lifetime, and Josephus (ca. AD 37–100), who wrote toward the end of the New Testament era. Philo stated:

Let us, therefore, fix deeply in ourselves this first commandment as the most sacred of all commandments, to think that there is but one God, the most highest, and to honour him alone; and let not the polytheistical doctrine ever even touch the ears of any man who is accustomed to seek for the truth, with purity and sincerity of heart.²⁴

Referring to the first of the Ten Commandments, Josephus stated, “The first word teaches us that God is one and that He only must be worshipped.”²⁵

Although the English word *monotheism* is of modern origin and is used in differing ways, it can hardly be disputed that the word properly means the belief in one God. The Greek word *μόνος* means “only” and *θεός*, of course, means “God,” so that monotheism means the belief that there is only one God. The Old Testament (referring here specifically to the Greek Septuagint) and the New Testament explicitly affirm monotheism using both *μόνος*, “only,” and *εἷς*, “one”:

“You are **God alone** of all the kingdoms of the earth. . . . You, O LORD, are **God alone**” (2 Kings 19:15, 19 = Isa. 37:16, 20).

“You **alone are God**” (Ps. 86:10).

“Has not **one God** created us?” (Mal. 2:10).

“. . . the glory that comes from **the only God**” (John 5:44).

“**God is one**” (Rom. 3:30; Gal. 3:20; James 2:19; cf. 1 Cor. 8:4).

“To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, **the only God**, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen” (1 Tim. 1:17; cf. John 17:3; Rom. 16:27; Jude 25).

²² See further Robert M. Bowman Jr. and J. Ed Komoszewski, *The Incarnate Christ and His Critics: A Biblical Defense* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2024), 397–404, which also discusses texts often cited to show a plurality of gods in the OT (esp. Deut. 32:8–9, 43; Ps. 82:1, 6).

²³ Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11*, 349.

²⁴ Philo of Alexandria, *Decalogue* 64–65, in *The Works of Philo, Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C. D. Yonge, new updated ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 524. See also *On the Creation* 170, 171; *Special Laws* 1.30 (*Works*, 24, 536).

²⁵ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 3.91.5, in *Josephus, IV: Jewish Antiquities, Books I–IV*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray, LCL (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930), 360–61. See also *Ant.* 4.180, 200–1 (*Josephus, IV*, 76–77, 563, 571–73).

The very first words of the Nicene Creed, “We believe in one God,” thus originate from the Bible and reflect the Jewish confession of the *Shema*, which both Jews and Christians in the first century understood to mean that indeed only one God exists.

One Maker

The confession of one God in both Judaism and Christianity was grounded in God’s role as the Creator or Maker of all things. The Bible begins by affirming that “God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1; cf. 2:1, 4). That the LORD is the God who “made heaven and earth” is affirmed in the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:11) and repeated frequently in Scripture.²⁶ Hezekiah acknowledged YHWH as “God alone” because he had “made heaven and earth” (2 Kings 19:15; Isa. 37:16; cf. Neh. 9:6). As Mark Scarlata observes, “The phrase ‘maker of heaven and earth’ is almost a creed-like statement in the Hebrew Bible that defines the nature of the God of Israel.”²⁷

The biblical writings use a variety of expressions to refer to the product of God’s creative work. As we have just seen, “heaven and earth” or “the heavens and the earth” is a common way of referring to the totality of existence distinct from God the Creator. The New Testament uses the term κόσμος in a variety of contexts, including “the sum total of everything here and now, the world” (BDAG 561), which God created or made (Acts 17:24; Rom. 1:20; cf. Eph. 1:4). The opening passage in the creation narrative concludes that “God saw everything that he had made” (Gen. 1:31). The expression used for “everything” here in the Septuagint, τὰ πάντα, “all things,” frequently refers to the totality, the whole world, which God alone made (e.g., Neh. 9:6; Acts 17:25; Rom. 11:36; Rev. 4:11).²⁸ Both the Old and New Testaments, then, teach that one God alone created all things.²⁹

Similarly, first-century Jewish writers insisted that one God alone created the whole universe. Philo argued that angels should not be worshiped because they are created, “since the Father of them all is one, the Creator of the universe.” According to Philo, Moses taught “that there is one God, the creator and maker of the universe.”³⁰ Likewise, Josephus stated that Abraham was “the first boldly to declare that God, the creator of the universe, is one.”³¹ We see here that the confession of one God in the *Shema* was understood in first-century Jewish thought as an acknowledgment of God as the sole Creator of absolutely everything—other than God.

²⁶ Exod. 31:17; 2 Chron. 2:12; Pss. 115:15; 121:2; 124:8; 134:3; Rev. 14:17; see also Ps. 89:11; 102:25; Prov. 3:19; Isa. 42:5; 45:12, 18; 44:24; 48:13; 51:13, 16; Jer. 32:17; Zech. 12:1; Rev. 10:6; cf. Jer. 10:11.

²⁷ Mark W. Scarlata, “Believing in One God: The Nicene Creed and the Shema,” in *Engaging Nicene Trinitarianism: Historical Analysis, Theological Exploration, and Contemporary Relevance*, edited by Matthias Grebe, Nadine Hamilton, and Christian Schlenker (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2025), 239.

²⁸ See also Eccl. 3:11; 11:5; Job 8:3 LXX; Jer. 10:16; 51:19 [28:19 LXX]; Eph. 3:9; Heb. 2:10.

²⁹ See further Robert M. Bowman Jr. and J. Ed Komoszewski, *The Incarnate Christ and His Critics: A Biblical Defense* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2024), 602–7.

³⁰ Philo of Alexandria, *Decalogue* 64; *Special Laws* 1.30; in *Works*, trans. Yonge, 523, 536.

³¹ *Ant.* 1.155, in *Josephus, IV*, 76–77.

This distinction between the Creator and creation is fundamental to the Nicene Creed: “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible.” The description of God as “Almighty” and as the one who made “all things” alludes especially to the Book of Revelation, the only book of the New Testament to use the term παντοκράτωρ (which it does eight times): “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty [παντοκράτωρ]. . . . for you created all things [τὰ πάντα]” (Rev. 4:8, 11).³²

Paradoxically, while the New Testament and the later Nicene Creed both stoutly affirm one God as the Maker of all things, they also both affirm that the Lord Jesus Christ was the uncreated agent of creation.

All things came to be through him [πάντα δι’ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο]. (John 1:3a)

The world came to be through him [δι’ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο]. (John 1:10)

One Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things [δι’ οὗ τὰ πάντα]. (1 Cor. 8:6)

All things [τὰ πάντα] were created through him [δι’ αὐτοῦ] and for him. (Col. 1:16)

A Son . . . through whom [δι’ οὗ] also he made the ages. (Heb. 1:2)

Through whom all things came into being [δι’ οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο]

(Nicene Creed, both versions)

The Nicene Creed’s language expressing Christ’s role in creation derives from the New Testament texts, with allusions especially to John 1:3a, 1 Corinthians 8:6, and Colossians 1:16. The line in the Creed alludes especially to John 1:3a, substituting the relative pronoun οὗ, “whom” (as used in 1 Cor. 8:6 and Heb. 1:2), for αὐτοῦ, “him.” An allusion to Colossians 1:16 is confirmed by the Creed’s statements that God is the Maker “of all things visible and invisible” (πάντων ὁρατῶν τε καὶ ἀοράτων) and that all things came into being through the Son, “both the things in heaven and the things on earth” (τά τε ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ καὶ τὰ ἐν τῇ γῆ). These statements recall Paul’s affirmations that in the Son were created “all things in the heavens and on the earth, the visible and the invisible” (τὰ πάντα ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς τὰ ὁρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα). These New Testament texts place the preexistent Son on the Creator side of the line between Creator and creation and attribute the work of creation to him without displacing or diminishing the role of God the Father.³³ The Nicene Creed follows suit, using language dependent on the New Testament.

One God, the Father; One Lord, Jesus Christ

The Nicene Creed’s acknowledgment that all things came into being through Christ comes within a larger confession of faith in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

“We believe in one God, the Father. . . .
And in one Lord, Jesus Christ”

³² The word παντοκράτωρ occurs 183 times in the Septuagint, notably in Zechariah (55 times) and Malachi (25 times), usually in the expression “Lord Almighty” in place of “YHWH of hosts.”

³³ Bowman and Komoszewski, *Incarnate Christ and His Critics*, 227–35, 257–63, 607–23.

This dual confession, which provides the framework for most of the Creed, derives directly from the apostle Paul’s statement of Christian faith in 1 Corinthians 8:6 (translating literally):

“For us one God, the Father. . . .
And one Lord, Jesus Christ”³⁴

Statements conjoining references to “God the Father” (or “God our Father”) and “the [or “our”] Lord Jesus Christ” occur 16 times in Paul’s epistles and nowhere else in the New Testament (though cf. 1 Peter 1:3 with Rom. 15:6; 2 Cor. 1:3; Eph. 1:3), making this feature of the Creed recognizably and distinctively Pauline. The use of the word “one” (εἷς) proves beyond any reasonable doubt that the Creed alludes here quite specifically to 1 Corinthians 8:6, the only biblical text using either of the two expressions “one God, the Father” and “one Lord, Jesus Christ.” Even the pronoun ἡμῶν (“for us”) in 1 Corinthians 8:6 is echoed in the Creed’s first-person plural opening, “We believe” (Πιστεύομεν). In contrast to the many gods and many lords in which others believe (1 Cor. 8:5), “for us,” Paul says, there is one God, one Lord. “For us” functions here to indicate what we confess, affirm, recognize, or believe. We have already seen that the Creed alludes to 1 Corinthians 8:6 in its statement “through whom all things came into being.”

The exegesis of 1 Corinthians 8:6 is complicated somewhat by its terseness. In fact, the text here uses no verbs at all; a literal translation would run as follows:

For us one God, the Father,
from whom all things and we for him,
and one Lord, Jesus Christ,
through whom all things and we through him.

This terse wording is the form of a confession, an expression of religious devotion. Anders Eriksson explains, “We find the style typical for religious confessions: relative clauses, relative pronouns for Him who is praised, a deliberate concern for brevity in the verbless clauses, appositions, and predications of the divinity.”³⁵ As we noted earlier, the opening affirmation of the *Shema* in Deuteronomy 6:4 (in Hebrew) is also a statement in two verbless clauses, “The LORD our God, the LORD one.” The similarity isn’t merely grammatical: the first and third clauses of 1 Corinthians 8:6 appropriate the words of Deuteronomy 6:4b:

“The Lord our God, the Lord one” (Deut. 6:4b)
“For us one God . . . one Lord” (1 Cor. 8:6)

³⁴ Nearly all modern English versions place commas after “God” and “Lord,” understanding both expressions as appositional. The KJV and NKJV have a comma following “God” but not “Lord,” and the CEB has commas in neither place. The appositional interpretation of both expressions is clearly correct due to the use of the word “one,” even though elsewhere “God the Father” and “Lord Jesus Christ” are used as compound names.

³⁵ Anders Eriksson, *Traditions as Rhetorical Proof: Pauline Argumentation in 1 Corinthians*, ConBNT 29 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1998), 120 (see 120–23).

Paul uses the same four words, “Lord,” “God,” “one,” and “our/us” (two different grammatical forms of the same pronoun) as in Deuteronomy 6:4b. That the statement in 1 Corinthians 8:6 is appropriating the words of Deuteronomy 6:4b is confirmed by 1 Corinthians 8:3, where Paul tells his readers that what really matters is that a person “loves God,” the imperative that immediately follows in Deuteronomy 6:5. Yet Paul does not quote the *Shema* but appropriates this key Jewish text in a Christian confession of both the Father and Jesus Christ. The confession of “one God” is applied specifically to “the Father,” while the confession of “one Lord” is applied to “Jesus Christ.” The result is that Jesus Christ is included within the confession of the one proper object of religious devotion, “the Lord our God.”³⁶

Scholars disagree about the origin of this statement in 1 Corinthians 8:6. It might have been a pre-Pauline confession that he was quoting in his epistle; it might have been a Pauline confession he had previously taught to the Corinthians; or it might have been something Paul composed when dictating the epistle, worded in a creedal fashion in the tradition of Deuteronomy 6:4.³⁷ In any case, the result was eminently useful in a creedal context such as the Nicene Creed. Hans Boersma rightly concludes: “Seeing as it continues the trajectory from the *Shema* via the Pauline confession of 1 Corinthians 8:6, Nicaea obviously desired to be biblical; the Nicene Creed does not impose an alien, nontheological metaphysic onto the Scriptures.”³⁸

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

Another important source of the Creed’s framework is Matthew 28:19. Note the following parallels:

Table 1. Matthew 28:19 as the Framework for the Nicene Creed	
Matthew 28:19	Nicene Creed (325)
Baptizing them	We believe
<i>In</i> [εἰς] the name of <i>the Father</i>	<i>In</i> [εἰς] one God, <i>the Father</i>
And of <i>the Son</i>	<i>And in</i> [εἰς] one Lord, Jesus Christ, <i>the Son</i> of God
<i>And of the Holy Spirit</i>	<i>And in</i> [εἰς] <i>the Holy Spirit</i>

The Creed’s opening words, “We believe,” followed by “in [*eis*] God the Father,” “in [*eis*] one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” and “in [*eis*] the Holy Spirit,” allude to the

³⁶ See Bowman and Komoszewski, *Incarnate Christ and His Critics*, 496–500. Earlier studies advancing this reading of 1 Corinthians 8:6 were done by such scholars as N. T. Wright, Larry Hurtado, and Richard Bauckham.

³⁷ “Does it come from a song that was sung in Corinth, or from a baptismal creed or did Paul formulate it in ‘hymnic prose’ just for the occasion? We have a number of similar Christian and Jewish ‘heis—theos—formulas’. Their ultimate origin is the Sh[’]ma‘-prayer of Judaism. The Pauline formula is, however, notable in that the confession to Christ is made strictly parallel to the confession to God, and beyond that is integrated into it. The binary formula is the first step on the way to the doctrine of the Trinity.” Martin Hengel, *Studies in Early Christology* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 280.

³⁸ Hans Boersma, *Five Things Theologians Wish Biblical Scholars Knew* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 48.

confession of faith expressed in the Great Commission command to make disciples and “baptize them in [*eis*] the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” Thus, the tripartite structure of the Creed is built on the tripartite baptismal confession expressed in Matthew 28:19.

Since Frederick Conybeare at the beginning of the twentieth century, some scholars have argued that the baptismal words of Matthew 28:19 were neither authentic words of Jesus nor even authentic words of the Gospel of Matthew.³⁹ Two reasons are commonly given for denying the text’s authenticity in Matthew.

First, no Greek manuscript prior to the Council of Nicaea contains the triadic wording. That is true, but the fact is that we have no extant pre-Nicene Greek manuscripts of Matthew containing Matthew 28:19 at all, due to the fact that the text comes at the end of the Gospel, and papyrus scrolls were often damaged at the beginning and end. *All* of the extant Greek NT manuscripts that have Matthew 28:19 have the traditional wording. Manuscripts from the fourth and fifth centuries assigned to three different textual families, classes, or scribal traditions all contain the triadic wording. We also have extant manuscripts from the fourth century for Coptic and Latin versions (stemming from pre-Nicene textual traditions) that contain Matthew 28:19 and have the triadic wording.

Second, the fourth century theologian Eusebius of Caesarea frequently quotes Matthew 28:19 without the triadic wording. That is factually correct, but in those quotations—or better allusions—Eusebius also typically omits any reference to baptism at all. In some places he includes the words “in my name” but attaches them to making disciples, again without mentioning baptism. In other such references he does not even include the words “in my name.”⁴⁰ Eusebius quite clearly quoted or paraphrased biblical texts in different, even loose ways to suit his purpose, and quoted Matthew 28:19 with and without the triadic wording even after Nicaea. In short, the debatable and weak evidence from Eusebius simply cannot overturn the uniform witness of the Greek and versional manuscript evidence.⁴¹ Moreover, Christian writings from the late first century and beyond attest to the practice of baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁴² The evidence for the authenticity of the triadic wording is so strong that Benedict Green, after showing that the evidence from Eusebius was not determinative, could only suggest the phrase may have been added extremely early, perhaps by someone “contemporary” with the Gospel’s author.⁴³

³⁹ Frederick C. Conybeare, “The Eusebian Form of the Text Matth 28,19,” *ZNW* 2 (1901): 275–88.

⁴⁰ E.g., Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 1.3, 4, 6; 3.6, 7; 9.11.

⁴¹ George R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 1962), 81–82, and many others.

⁴² *Didache* 7; Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 61.3; Ignatius, *To the Philadelphians* 9 (long version); Tertullian, *On Baptism* 13; *Against Praxeas* 26.

⁴³ H. Benedict Green, “Matthew 28:19, Eusebius, and the *Lex Orandi*,” in *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, ed. Rowan Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 124–41. For an earlier study that thoroughly refuted the claim that the expression was added later to the Gospel, see Benjamin Jerome Hubbard, *The Matthean Redaction of a Primitive Apostolic Commissioning: An Exegesis of Matthew 28:16-20*, SBL Dissertation Series 19 (Missoula, MT: Society of Biblical Literature, 1974), 151–75.

Triadic references to the three divine persons occur numerous times in the New Testament, at least 85 times if not more.⁴⁴ Matthew 28:19, though, is one of just two New Testament texts using the precise titles *Father*, *Son*, and *Holy Spirit* (the other being Luke 10:21–22; cf. John 3:34–35; Gal. 4:6). Other noteworthy examples of triadic references to the three persons appear throughout the New Testament canon (Mark 1:8–12; John 14:26; Acts 2:33; Rom. 8:26–34; 1 Cor. 12:4–6; 2 Cor. 13:14; Gal. 4:4–6; Eph. 4:4–6; Heb. 2:3–4; 1 Peter 1:2; Rev. 1:4–6). Given the profusion of references to the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit throughout the New Testament, one may legitimately describe the entire corpus as “triadic” in its theology. The facts here are so clear that critics of the doctrine of the Trinity are reduced to complaining that none of the triadic statements explicitly call the three persons “God” or affirm their divine unity and equality.⁴⁵

The problem with this objection is that it is an appeal to silence that carps at what the New Testament does not say instead of addressing squarely what it *does* say.⁴⁶ In Matthew 28:19 the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are jointly the object of confession in the initiatory rite of the Christian religion. Imagine being told to baptize disciples in the name of God, the archangel Gabriel, and power, and you get an idea of how absurd the argument from silence is here. Paul closes an epistle with a benediction alluding to the priestly benediction in Numbers 6:24–26, calling on the Lord Jesus Christ, God, and the Holy Spirit to continue bestowing spiritual blessings on the saints (2 Cor. 13:14). Both 1 Peter (1:2) and Revelation (1:4–6) invoke the three persons (referenced in Revelation in distinctive, apocalyptic language) in their salutations, praying that their readers would receive “grace and peace” from those divine persons. These examples all come in “liturgical” settings in which the Son and the Holy Spirit are being approached alongside God the Father for salvation and blessings. In the context of ancient Jewish monotheism, in which God alone is the source of all spiritual goods, these New Testament triadic texts reflect a theologically revolutionary understanding of God. They present an expanded conception of the one Creator, the one Lord God, that includes the Son and the Holy Spirit without falling into tritheism.

The use of Matthew 28:19 in the framework of the Creed attests to its purpose as a confessional document serving a religious, even liturgical purpose. The Creed is not a philosophical treatise but a pastoral text.

⁴⁴ For a survey, see Robert M. Bowman Jr., “Triadic New Testament Passages and the Doctrine of the Trinity,” *Journal of Trinitarian Studies and Apologetics* 1 (Jan. 2013): 7–54.

⁴⁵ “Any Christian theologian who does not just speculate uncritically on the basis of the Hellenistic development of doctrine in the fourth and fifth centuries but who follows Protestant and Catholic theologians in thinking in the light of the New Testament will notice that, while there are many triadic formulae in the New Testament, there is not a word about the ‘unity’ of these three extremely different entities, that is, a unity on the same divine level.” Küng, *Islam: Past, Present and Future*, 509. See also *Reasoning from the Scriptures* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1985), 414–15; Anthony F. Buzzard and Charles F. Hunting, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Christianity’s Self-Inflicted Wound* (Lanham, MD: International Scholars, 1998), 333.

⁴⁶ On this fallacy, see Robert M. Bowman Jr., “Anti-Trinitarian Argumentation: A Critical Examination,” *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* 21.1 (Spring 2024): 71–83.

One other triadic New Testament text should be mentioned. In Ephesians 4:4–6, Paul presents a triad of Spirit, Son, and Father embedded in a statement of the unity of the Christian faith:

“One body and **one Spirit**, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling;
one Lord, one faith, one baptism,
one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.”

Of all the Pauline epistles, Ephesians has the richest patterns of implicit Trinitarianism,⁴⁷ with nine triadic passages including the long opening reflection on the redemptive work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:3–14).

If we had only Ephesians 4:4–6 we might be forgiven for not seeing a triadic pattern in this passage, since the text has seven occurrences of the word “one.” However, four exegetical considerations prove that this text does exhibit a triadic pattern within the sevenfold statement of Christian unity. (1) This passage repeats, in the same order, the triad from an earlier Pauline passage, 1 Corinthians 12:4–6 (Spirit, Lord, God), with the word “one” modifying each name instead of the word “same.” (2) Both passages in context introduce the subject of spiritual gifts (cf. 1 Cor. 12–14 with Eph. 4:1–16, especially 4:7–11). This thematic connection makes the recurrence of the three names Spirit, Lord, and God all the more likely to be significant. (3) Both passages end with a statement about God that repeats different forms of the word for “all” (two in 1 Cor. 12:6; three in Eph. 4:6). (4) The structure of the sevenfold statement actually places the three names at specific junctures in that statement. The affirmations of “one Spirit” and “one Lord” are interrupted by a whole clause “just as also you were called in one hope of your calling” (instead of simply “one hope”), and “one God and Father of all” comes at the climax with the threefold flourish “who is over all and through all and in all.” The result is that the passage actually has three sets of three,⁴⁸ as follows:

- A. (1) one body and (2) one Spirit . . . (3) one hope. . .
- B. (1) one Lord, (2) one faith, (3) one baptism,
- C. one God and Father of all who is (1) over all and (2) through all and (3) in all.”

This analysis supports the conclusion that “one Spirit,” “one Lord,” and “one God and Father of all” are references to deity, as distinguished from the other four terms in the sevenfold statement. Further underscoring this point is the fact that just as in such Pauline passages as 1 Corinthians 8:6 (“one God, the Father . . . one Lord, Jesus Christ”) and 1 Corinthians 12:4–6 (“same Spirit . . . same Lord . . . same God”), Ephesians 4:4–6 alludes to the *Shema* with its words “one Lord . . . one God.” It is not the bare words but the confessional, theological context that makes the allusion really unmistakable; no pious Jew in Paul’s day could have missed it.

Commentators disagree about whether Paul is quoting creedal material and if so to what extent he has adapted it here. Frank Thielman sums up the evidence for a creedal source: “The

⁴⁷ See Robert Letham, “Ternary Patterns in Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 13 (2002): 57–69; Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 106–110.

⁴⁸ Similarly, John Muddiman, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, BNTC (London: Continuum, 2001), 181; cf. Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 513–21.

theological importance of these subjects, that they number seven (a significant number in Judaism and early Christianity), the skillful repetition of the three genders for “one” in 4:5, the lack of any main verb, and the lack of any conjunction linking 4:4–6 to the previous paragraph—these features have led many interpreters to see an early Christian creedal formulation here, either in its entirety . . . or in part.”⁴⁹ Thielman notes that most likely Paul has added the clause “just as also you were called in one hope of your calling” (4:4b) and perhaps other elements as well. If so, Paul would be responsible for the sevenfold use of “one.” In any case, the passage is confessional or creedal in tone and subject matter, and it lends itself to such use.

Table 2. Ephesians 4:4–6 and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed	
Ephesians 4:4–6 (different order)	Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed
One faith	We believe
One God and Father of all	One God, the Father
One Lord	One Lord, Jesus Christ
One Spirit	The Holy Spirit
One body	One holy catholic and apostolic church
One baptism	One baptism
One hope	we look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come

The conclusion of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (381), which expands the Creed of Nicaea, richly echoes the Ephesians passage. In addition to confessing one God, one Lord, and one Holy Spirit, this version of the Creed affirms “one holy catholic and apostolic church,” a description of what Paul calls “one body”; “one baptism,” just as in Ephesians; and finally that “we look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come,” comparable to Paul’s “one hope.” Taking into consideration the Creed’s opening word “we believe,” all seven affirmations using “one” in Ephesians 4 are echoed in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. Frederick Grant rightly commented, “Thus the so-called Nicene Creed expanded the Pauline formula: “One body and one Spirit, . . . one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph. IV. 4f).”⁵⁰

The Nicene Narrative

Critics of the Nicene Creed sometimes fault it for supposedly moving away from the “simple” faith of early Christianity to a speculative, theory-based religion. Yet the Creed, at its heart, is a narrative about what God has done for us, and specifically a narrative in which Jesus is the central figure. Moreover, this narrative core of the Creed was actually *expanded* in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.

Two New Testament passages stand out as sources of the narrative in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. The first is Acts 2:14–39, which Luke presents as the first Christian sermon, delivered by Simon Peter on the day of Pentecost. This passage mentions the three divine persons, using the same titles found in the Creed (God = Father; Jesus = Lord, Christ; the Holy Spirit), not in a systematic doctrinal statement, but in the course of a narrative in which

⁴⁹ Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 255.

⁵⁰ Grant, *Roman Hellenism and the New Testament*, 56.

Peter tells the Jews gathered in Jerusalem about Jesus' crucifixion, death, resurrection, and exaltation to heaven at God's right hand.

A few points may be noted briefly. Peter's quotations from Joel and the Psalms are summed up in the Creed with the words "in accordance with the Scriptures." Peter's general reference to "lawless men," left vague because Pilate was still the Roman governor in Jerusalem, is made more concrete in the Creed, "under Pontius Pilate," a safe reference three centuries later. The Creed's statement about Christ coming again in judgment expresses the same idea as Peter's quotation of Psalm 110:1, "until I make your enemies your footstool." Peter's sermon ends with an invitation to receive "the remission of your sins," a promise reiterated toward the end of the Creed.

Table 3. Acts 2:14-39 and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed	
Acts 2	Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed
God . . . the Father (v. 33)	I believe in one God, the Father
Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. . . God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus (vv. 21, 36)	And in one Lord, Jesus Christ
Crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men [i.e., Pilate and his men] (v. 23)	He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried
This Jesus God raised up (v. 32)	And the third day he rose again
This is what was uttered through the prophet Joel. . . . For David says concerning him (vv. 16, 25)	In accordance with the Scriptures
exalted at the right hand of God (v. 33)	And ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father
until I make your enemies your footstool (v. 35)	From there he shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead
the Holy Spirit (vv. 33, 38)	And in the Holy Spirit
the remission of your sins (v. 38)	Baptism for the remission of sins

The second New Testament passage underlying the Nicene narrative is Paul's recitation of the primary facts of the gospel: "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3b-4). Paul's words "for our sins" are echoed in the Creed's words "for us" (as well as in its reference to "the remission of sins"). Paul's words "was buried" are directly repeated in the Creed, as is his statement that Christ rose from the dead "the third day." Finally, his statement that Christ's death and resurrection both took place "in accordance with the Scriptures" is again echoed in the Creed, which uses the same Greek phrase *κατὰ τὰς γραφὰς*.

Paul's recitation of the gospel facts is widely recognized as a credal or confessional statement that predated his own Christian faith. Paul says that the Corinthians "received" what he had "handed on" to them after he had "received" it (1 Cor. 15:1, 3 NRSV), language suggesting that this statement was received orally from others (cf. Gal. 1:9-14; 2 Thess. 3:6). It is written in a very stylized form ("that Christ died . . . that he was buried . . . that he was raised . . . that he was seen"), which doesn't by itself prove that it not Paul's, but supports that assessment. The brief passage uses four expressions that do not occur elsewhere in Paul's epistles—"in

accordance with the Scriptures,” “buried,” “the third day,” and “the twelve”—confirming that he is repeating a confession that he “received” from others.⁵¹

Begotten, Not Made

The main purpose of the Creed of Nicaea was to enunciate a divine Christology that excluded the errors of Arianism, a fourth-century heresy that placed the Son on the creation side of the line between Creator and creation. We have already seen that the Creed rejected that claim by affirming, in words derived from the New Testament, that all things came to be through the Son. The Creed elaborates on the uncreated nature of the preexistent Son in detail:

. . . the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father; God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father. . .⁵²

The New Testament uses the title *Son of God* for Jesus 43 times, notably nine times in the Gospel of John and seven times in 1 John.⁵³ The rest of the Creed’s description of the Son comes from a combination of Johannine and non-Johannine motifs. At this point, though, some difficulties with the Creed’s use of some biblical terminology need to be addressed.

The Creed describes the Son of God as “begotten from the Father” (γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς). The verb used here, a form of γεννάω, occurs in Psalm 2:7 LXX, “You are my Son; today I have begotten [γεγέννηκά] you.” John uses the verb (without any allusion to Psalm 2:7) for the new life that Christians receive as God’s children through faith in Christ (John 1:13; 3:3–8; 1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18).⁵⁴ Psalm 2:7 is quoted and applied to Christ by Paul in Acts (13:33), twice in Hebrews (1:5; 5:5), and in some manuscripts of Luke 3:22.⁵⁵

The question properly arises as to whether the New Testament use of Psalm 2:7 supports the Creed’s statement that the eternal Son was “begotten” by the Father. In its original context,

⁵¹ See (for example) Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 223–35.

⁵² Kinzig, ed., *Faith in Formulae*, 1:290.

⁵³ The title occurs 17 times in the Synoptics, once in Acts, eight times in the non-Johannine epistles, and once in Revelation.

⁵⁴ There is some dispute over John 1:13, which in early patristic quotations said “who was born,” referring to the Virgin Birth, rather than “who were born” (as in the Greek manuscripts of John). The two views are discussed in essays by Jordan Daniel May (who defends the Virgin Birth interpretation) and Michael C. McKeever (who denies it) in *But These Are Written...: Essays on Johannine Literature in Honor of Professor Benny C. Aker*, edited by Craig S. Keener, Jeremy S. Crenshaw, and Jordan Daniel May (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 59–63, 121–38.

⁵⁵ For a defense of this reading, see Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament*, updated and with a new Afterword (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 73–79. For a critique, see Tommy Wasserman, “Misquoting Manuscripts? The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture Revisited,” in *The Making of Christianity: Conflicts, Contacts, and Constructions: Essays in Honor of Bengt Holmberg*, edited by Magnus Zetterholm and Samuel Byrskog, ConBNT 47 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 325–50, esp. 334–37.

Psalm 2:7 is affirming the special relationship of the Davidic king to God, and the New Testament interprets the text to look forward to the coming of the Messiah, the ultimate Son of God. “Today I have begotten you” appears to refer figuratively to the installation of the Davidic king on the throne in Jerusalem as foreshadowing the exaltation of Jesus following his resurrection (Acts 13:32–33; Heb. 5:5). The book of Hebrews opens by speaking of God’s “Son” as a preexistent, divine person (Heb. 1:2–3) and as the human, exalted Messiah (1:5), in effect merging these two ways of understanding the Son. As the eternal, divine Son who became human and was exalted as the Messianic King, Jesus is indeed superior to the angels, as Hebrews 1 insists (1:4–5a, 6–7, 13–14). His appointment as “the heir of all things” (1:2) is grounded in his eternal relation as the divine Son to the Father and realized or fulfilled through his exaltation at the right hand of God on the heavenly throne following his death and resurrection (1:3b–5, 13). This means, though, that “begotten” in Psalm 2:7 and its quotations in the New Testament does not express the Son being “begotten of the Father” before creation.⁵⁶

The Creed says next that the Son of God is “only begotten” (μονογενῆ), using an adjective applied to Christ in the New Testament only in the writings of John (1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9). The meaning of the Greek word μονογενής traditionally has been translated “only begotten,” as in the KJV, and it was understood in this way by all parties in the fourth century. The word’s proper translation has been a matter of debate since the RSV was published in 1946. For more than half a century after the RSV, most scholars understood the word to mean “unique,” “one of a kind,” or “only.” In a series of papers and publications, Charles Lee Irons has recently argued for the traditional translation “only begotten,” and he might be right.⁵⁷ It is also possible to argue that μονογενής expresses sonship but not explicitly begetting.

However one translates it, a case can be made that the word μονογενής means, as the Creed says next, “that is, from the substance of the Father” (ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς). Here the Creed alludes fairly clearly to John 1:14, which says that the Logos “became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father [μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός], full of grace and truth” (ESV). It is true that John does not speak of God’s “substance” (οὐσία), a word never used in the Septuagint or the New Testament in that sense. Rather, John speaks of the Logos as bearing glory that included the fullness of grace and truth. However, in a passage that has already affirmed the eternity of the Logos and called him “God” (*theos*, John 1:1), John’s characterization of the Logos as having glory “as of the only Son from the Father” certainly indicates an *essential* likeness. Note that the words “his glory” indicate that it is properly the glory of the Logos himself. The Logos thus shares fully in the essential nature of God and in his incarnation manifested the divine glory with the fullness of grace and truth.

The dynamic relation expressed in John 1:14 by the words “from the Father” further show that the Logos, who is here being characterized as God’s Son, derives his glory—and therefore his divine nature—from the Father. We have in John 1:1–18, then, a clear biblical basis

⁵⁶ See further D. A. Carson, “John 5:26: *Crux Interpretum* for Eternal Generation,” in *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, ed. Fred Sanders and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 90–92. For a recent attempt to make the case for eternal generation from Hebrews 1:5, see the long footnote in Scott R. Swain, *The Trinity: An Introduction*, Short Studies in Systematic Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 42 n. 5.

⁵⁷ Charles Lee Irons, “A Lexical Defense of the Johannine ‘Only Begotten,’” in *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, ed. Sanders and Swain, 98–116. For a judicious review of the question in the same volume, see Carson, “John 5:26: *Crux Interpretum* for Eternal Generation,” 87–90.

for the doctrine of the eternal, divine Sonship of Christ. The expansion of this line in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, “begotten of the Father *before all ages*,” safeguards the eternality and uncreated nature of the Logos-Son that is already implicit in John and in the Creed of Nicaea.

The Creed continues by affirming that the Son is “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God.” That he is “God from God” means that the Logos-Son is truly God and yet distinct from and in some way dependent on the Father, all of which is clearly taught in the Johannine Prologue (esp. John 1:1–2, 14, 18). The phrase “Light from Light” alludes to John 1:14, where the glory of the Son comes from the Father, and the frequent references in the Prologue to the Logos as “the Light” (1:4–5, 7–9). The phrase has also been traditionally associated with the description of the Son in Hebrews 1:3 as “the radiance of his [God’s] glory.” The phrase “true God from true God” reflects the Johannine references to both the Father and the Son as “the true God” (John 17:3; 1 John 5:20).⁵⁸

All of these descriptions of Jesus Christ the Son of God support the contention of the Creed that Christ was “begotten, not made.” The argument of the Nicene Creed here is firmly biblical. The Son is an eternal divine person who was God by nature in the beginning, before creation, and is himself the uncreated agent through whom all things came to be (John 1:1–3, 10; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2–3). If “through him also were made all things” (Heb. 1:2b, lit. trans.), then the Son is indeed “not made.”

We pause here to take stock of the biblical basis of the Nicene Creed. We have found significant use made in the Creed (in both versions) of the following New Testament passages:

- Matthew 28:19
- John 1:1–18
- Acts 2:14–39
- 1 Corinthians 8:6
- 1 Corinthians 15:3–4
- Ephesians 4:4–6

Several of these texts either quote confessional material or were formulated for confessional or creedal purposes. Key elements of the Creed derive from Matthew, Luke, John, and Paul. Thus, the Creed is highly representative of the whole New Testament canon.

Consubstantial (*Homoousion*) with the Father

The Nicene Creed is a rich statement of belief in response to a then-current theological controversy in which both sides claimed the biblical high ground. In this context, the Creed exhibits remarkable restraint in its being formulated using almost entirely biblical language drawn from New Testament texts of signal importance in Christology. Some people might be surprised to learn that we do not find such terms as *Trinity* or *persons* (let alone the expression *three persons*) in the Creed.

Critics of the Creed, rather than addressing its richly biblical material or even acknowledging the obvious intent of its authors to adhere to New Testament Christology, have fixated on one word as the “smoking gun” of its supposed basis in pagan, Hellenistic philosophy.

⁵⁸ On 1 John 5:20 as a reference to the Son Jesus Christ as “the true God and eternal life,” see Bowman and Komoszewski, *Incarnate Christ and His Critics*, 437–42.

That word, of course, is ὁμοούσιον (the accusative form of ὁμοούσιος), used in the description of Christ as “consubstantial with the Father” (ὁμοούσιον τῷ πατρὶ).

As is well known, the word ὁμοούσιος does not occur in the Bible. The *Patristic Greek Lexicon* defines the word as meaning “of the same substance or stuff.”⁵⁹ The Creed thus affirms that the Son shares the same substance with the Father. English uses the word *consubstantial* to express the same idea.

Although the word is not found in the Bible, the idea that it expresses in the context of the Creed is biblical. One does not need to search far to discern the basis for the idea. We have already seen that several lines of the Creed immediately preceding the word contain several allusions to or echoes of the Johannine Prologue. In one of these allusions, the Creed describes the Son as “from the substance of the Father,” recalling John’s description of Christ’s “glory as of the only Son from the Father” (John 1:14). The Greek word translated “substance” here is οὐσία, from which ὁμοούσιος is formed by joining it with ὁμός, meaning “same.” In this context, then, the Creed’s use of ὁμοούσιος simply reinforces the meaning of what has just been said about the Son being the Son “from the substance of the Father.” It is a way of emphasizing that the Son is not of a different substance—that is, a different essence or nature—than the Father, but shares fully in the *same* divine essence as the Father.

The use of this extrabiblical term—which admittedly had a checkered history prior to Nicaea—was risky. On the other hand, merely repeating biblical phrases would also have been risky, as it might have opened the door to doctrines that also used those phrases but understood them in a different way. R. C. P. Hanson explained the dilemma that led to the church using such terms as οὐσία and ὁμοούσιος:

The theologians of the Christian Church were slowly driven to a realization that the deepest questions which face Christianity cannot be answered in purely biblical language, because the questions are about the meaning of biblical language itself. In the course of this search the Church was impelled reluctantly to form dogma. It was the first great and authentic example of the development of doctrine.⁶⁰

The theological impetus for this move is actually very well known. The Arian position was that Christ was a second God subordinate to God the Father and that Christ was not eternal or uncreated. Arianism thus fatally compromised the truth of the *Shema*—that God is one. Augustine explained this point a century after the Council of Nicaea: “You call the Son God, you call him Lord, but in such a way that you have two gods and two lords in opposition to the scripture that cries out, *Hear, O Israel, the Lord is your God, the Lord is one.*”⁶¹

⁵⁹ G. W. H. Lampe, ed., “Ὁμοούσιος,” in *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 958.

⁶⁰ R. C. P. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318–381* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), xxi.

⁶¹ Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus the Arian* 15.1, in *Arianism and Other Heresies*, Introduction, Translation, and Notes by Roland J. Teske, S.J., edited by John E. Rotelle, Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the Twentieth Century I/18 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1995), 288.

Table 4. The Biblical Origins of the Nicene Creed	
Nicene Creed	Biblical Origins
We believe in one God, the Father	Deut. 6:4; 1 Cor. 8:6; Matt. 28:19; Eph. 4:5, 6; Acts 2:33
The Almighty	Rev. 4:8, 11
<i>Maker of heaven and earth,</i>	Exod. 20:11; Acts 17:24–25; Rom. 1:20
of all things both visible and invisible	Col. 1:16
And in one Lord Jesus Christ	Deut. 6:4; 1 Cor. 8:6; Matt. 28:19; Eph. 4:5; Acts 2:21, 36
the Son of God, the <i>only-begotten,</i>	John 1:14; 3:16, 18
begotten from the Father <i>before all the ages,</i>	[cf. John 1:1, 2; also Heb. 1:2]
<u>that is, from the substance of the Father,</u>	Cf. John 1:14; Phil. 2:6
<u>God from God,</u>	John 1:1b, 1c
Light from Light, true God from true God	John 1:4–5, 7–9; John 17:3; 1 John 5:20
begotten, not made	John 1:3, 14
consubstantial (<i>ὁμοούσιον</i>) with the Father;	Cf. John 1:14; see also Phil. 2:6
through whom all things came to be	John 1:3, 10; 1 Cor. 8:6b; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2
<u>both things in heaven and things on earth;</u>	Col. 1:16
who for us humans and for our salvation	1 Cor. 15:3; Rom. 5:8; Eph. 5:2; Titus 2:14
came down <i>from the heavens,</i>	John 6:31–58; 16:27–28
and became incarnate	John 1:14
from the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary,	Matt. 1:18–20; Luke 1:35
and was made [<i>became</i>] human	Phil. 2:6–7; cf. John 1:14
<i>was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate,</i>	Acts 2:23; Phil. 2:8
suffered, <i>and was buried;</i>	1 Cor. 15:3–4
and rose the third day,	Acts 2:32; 1 Cor. 15:4; 1 Peter 3:21
<i>according to the Scriptures,</i>	Cf. Acts 2:16, 25; 1 Cor. 15:4
and ascended into the heavens;	Acts 2:33–34 (cf. 1:9–11); Eph. 4:8–10; 1 Peter 3:22a
<i>and sits at the right hand of the Father;</i>	Acts 2:33; 1 Peter 3:22b
and will come again <i>with glory</i>	Matt. 16:27; Mark 8:38; 2 Thess. 1:7–10
to judge the living and the dead;	Acts 2:35; 10:42; 2 Tim. 4:1
<i>of whose kingdom there will be no end.</i>	Luke 1:33; 2 Peter 1:11; Rev. 11:15
And in the Holy Spirit,	Matt. 28:19; Eph. 4:4; Acts 2:33, 38
<i>The Lord and life-giver,</i>	2 Cor. 3:16–18; John 6:63; 2 Cor. 3:6
<i>Who proceeds from the Father,</i>	John 15:26
<i>Worshipped and glorified with the Father and the Son,</i>	Cf. John 4:21–24; Phil. 3:3; contrast Matt. 12:21–22; Heb. 10:29
<i>Who spoke through the prophets;</i>	Acts 1:16; 28:25; 2 Peter 1:21; cf. Acts 2:18
<i>In one holy, catholic, and apostolic church.</i>	Eph. 4:4; Rom. 12:4–5; 1 Cor. 12:12–14; Col. 3:15
<i>We confess one baptism for the remission of sins.</i>	Acts 2:38; Eph. 4:5
<i>We look forward to the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the age to come. Amen.</i>	Eph. 4:4; Mark 10:30; 1 Cor. 15:12–13, 21, 42

Underlined: Only in Creed of Nicaea (325). Italics: Added in Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (381). Bold: Major passages: Deut. 6:4; Matt. 28:19; John 1:1–18; Acts 2:14–39; 1 Cor. 8:6; 15:3–4; Col. 1:16; Phil. 2:5–8; Eph. 4:4–6.

We have, then, come full circle. The initial creedal statement at the root of such New Testament confessional texts as 1 Corinthians 8:6 and Ephesians 4:4–6 was the Jewish confession of the *Shema*. Fidelity to its foundational affirmation of monotheism guided the early church to understand the revelation of Jesus Christ as God the Son incarnate in a way that led to the formulation seen in the Nicene Creed. Once that Creed had been hammered out, theologians committed to its teaching defended it by returning time and again to Scripture, including the *Shema* itself. The Nicene Creed, formulated by Greek-speaking Christians and using Greek terminology—sparingly—to express biblical theology, never lost its Jewish moorings. A century ago Edwyn Bevan refuted the still common claim that the Creed represented the triumph of Greek philosophy over Hebraic piety:

Beneath all the Greek philosophical trappings Christianity was something profoundly different—remained essentially Hebraic. It believed in a Purpose of God for the world, a movement of the world-process from God's initial mighty act of creation to the ultimate cosmic [*sic*] triumph of the kingdom of God. The chief Christian creed did indeed come to embody a technical term of Greek philosophy, but for the most part it is a statement of certain things done at a particular moment of human history. That belief in the transcendent importance of particular historical events is Hebraic, not Greek. There is no greater mistake than to say that the Christian creeds show that Christianity had lost its original Hebrew character and become a Greek mystery-religion. Neither Greek mythology nor Greek philosophy nor Greek mystery-religions had a hope for the world.⁶²

⁶² Edwyn Bevan, *Later Greek Religion*, Library of Greek Thought (London: J. M. Dent & Sons; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1927), xxvi.