

# **The Christology of the Letter to the Hebrews**

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The Letter to the Hebrews arguably contains the most Christological information of any New Testament letter. However, a controversy exists among scholars and informed laypersons. Did the writer of this letter intend his audience to understand that Jesus was God incarnate? Or, that he was simply a normal man whom God adopted as His Son because of his exceptional righteousness? Or is neither extreme true to his message? This study aims to investigate and make clear the true Christological teachings of this extraordinary early Christian correspondence.

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# The Christology of the Letter to the Hebrews

## **Authorship, audience and occasion**

No one knows who wrote Hebrews. Even in the days of the so-called Early Church Fathers of the second century AD —Origen, Tertullian, etc.—Christians puzzled over the authorship of this letter. The author's name appears nowhere in the letter, but The King James Version included Paul's name in the title, so Paul's supposed authorship enjoyed a very long run within English-speaking Christianity.

The problem is that the Greek in this letter is very unlike the Greek in Paul's known letters. Where Paul's Greek is said to be rugged and workmanlike, the Greek here is universally acknowledged by scholars to be the finest in the entire NT. So we can't know that Paul wrote this letter.

The intended audience for this letter is much less in doubt. There is wide agreement today among scholars that the original recipients of this letter were Hellenistic Jews, that is to say, Greek-speaking Jews of the Diaspora. First, this is evidently an audience highly conversant with the people, customs, events, and theology of the OT. This one letter contains no fewer than 40 direct quotations from the OT, and most of the letter draws upon OT laws and the experiences of the Hebrew patriarchs as the basis for its arguments.

Second, all the OT quotations are taken from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures. So the original recipients of this letter were almost certainly Jews, and most probably Greek-speaking Jews living outside Palestine.

The date of the letter is uncertain. But the fact that the writer leaves the impression that the Levitical sacrificial system is still functioning suggests a date some time before the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD.

## **The Prologue**

In a letter said to contain the finest Greek in the NT, the opening section of 1:1-3 is said to be the most beautifully-written passage in the entire letter. I'd like to read it in both the New King James and the New Living Translations.

NKJV

“God, who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.”

NLT

“Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. But now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son. God promised everything to the Son as an inheritance, and through the Son he made the universe and everything in it. The Son reflects God’s own glory, and everything about him represents God exactly. He sustains the universe by the mighty power of his command. After he died to cleanse us from the stain of sin, he sat down in the place of honor at the right hand of the majestic God of heaven.”

V. 1-2: “Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. But now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son.”

The letter opens with the fact that the God of the Old Testament usually used prophets as His intermediaries to speak to ancient Israel, but that same God is using a different intermediary to speak to men now—his son, Jesus.

The only conclusion we can reach from this information is that YHVH is not Jesus and Jesus is not YHVH. If YHVH lived incarnate as Jesus, as some teach, this passage would read that YHVH spoke through the prophets to their Hebrew fathers, but in these last days *has spoken to us personally as Jesus*. But that is not what the writer says. He says that YHVH spoke *through* the prophets, and in like manner now speaks *through* his Son.

Thus, at the very beginning of this letter the entire issue of YHVH’s identity and Jesus’ identity has been settled. To the writer of Hebrews, Jesus is not the God of the Old Testament; His Father is.

V. 2 “God promised everything to the Son as an inheritance...”

We will not dwell on this now because we will speak about Jesus’ status as the heir of God later.

V. 2-3 “...through the Son he (God) made the universe and everything in it...He (the Son) sustains the universe by the mighty power of his command.” These phrases seem to suggest that Jesus served as God’s agent of creation and that he upholds the universe. Is this true?

This is obviously a fundamental question in theology, so it is worth taking the time to answer it definitively. But in order to do so we need to seek the entire counsel of God, then we will return to Hebrews. Let’s begin with what is purported to be the oldest work in the OT, the book of Job.

(NKJV throughout)

In Job 9:8, the most righteous man of his generation proclaimed: “He (God) alone spreads out the heavens, and treads on the waves of the sea...” Did God correct Job’s understanding of how he created the earth?

No. Rather, He confirmed it: Answering Job out of the whirlwind, God says: “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding...When I made the clouds its garment...When I fixed My limit for (the darkness), When I said, ‘This far you may come, but no farther’” (Job 38:4-11).

After Israel reached the promised land, when Moses was near the end of his life, he rehearsed all of God’s dealings with Israel, as recorded in Deuteronomy: “...Moses spoke to the children of Israel *according to all that the Lord had given him as commandments*...For ask now concerning the days that are past...since the day that God created man on the earth...Did any people ever hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and live? Or did God ever try to go and take for Himself a nation from the midst of another nation?...To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord Himself is God, there is none other besides Him...Therefore know this day, and consider it in your heart, that the Lord Himself is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other” (Duet. 1:3; 4:32-39)

Note here that Moses begins this long address to Israel with the fact that everything he was telling them came not from him, but from YHVH God Himself, who, he says, is the creator of the world. This one creator God insists, furthermore, that He is the only God anywhere in heaven or on earth, and that there is no other God person.

David, a man after God’s own heart and a faithful devotee of the Law of Moses, prayed in Ps. 8:3: “When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have ordained...” And in Ps. 19:1 he wrote: “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork.” Ps. 95:5 reads: “The sea is His, for He made it; And His hands formed the dry land.”

Note the exclusive use of singular pronouns. Everything here reflects the understanding about the creation that YHVH gave to Moses. Therefore, no creator + agent of creation can be detected in these psalms.

Another righteous king, Hezekiah, prayed to YHVH: “O Lord God of Israel, the One who dwells between the cherubim, You are God, You alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth.’ ” (II Kings 19:15)

Later, YHVH himself told Jeremiah, “I have made the earth, the man and the beast that are on the ground, by My great power and by My outstretched arm, and have given it to whom it seemed proper to Me” (Jer. 27:5).

YHVH said the same kinds of things to Isaiah, repeatedly and with emphasis: “...I am the first and the Last; Besides me there is no God.” “...Is there a God besides Me? Indeed there is no other Rock; I know not one.” “...I am the Lord, who makes all things, who stretches out the heavens all alone, who spreads abroad the earth by Myself” (Isa. 44:6, 8, 24).

YHVH continues in the next chapter: “I am the Lord, and there is no other; There is no God besides Me...I am the Lord, and there is no other; I form the light and create darkness...” “I have made the earth, and created man on it. It was I—My hands that stretched out the heavens, and all their host I have commanded.” “For thus says the Lord, who created the heavens, who is God, who formed the earth and made it, who has established it, who did not create it in vain, who formed it to be inhabited: I am the Lord, and there is no other” (Isa. 45:5-7, 12, 18).

Mind you, this is YHVH Himself speaking. And he says He is the only God that ever was or ever will be, and He was entirely alone when he made everything.

With this understanding in mind, the prophet Malachi asked, “Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us?” (Mal. 2:10). The one Father is the one creator God. We’ve seen the entire OT declare this fact.

Now, some suggest that, for reasons that are unclear, God withheld from the Jews the true understanding of the dual creators, revealing it gradually and progressively through the NT period.

Is this true? Let’s begin with Jesus’ statements concerning the creation: “Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them...Now if God so clothes the grass of the field...” (Mt. 6:26, 30). Who is the creator and sustainer here? Would Jesus’ audience have imagined it was the man standing before them?

Mk. 10:6: But from the beginning of the creation, God ‘made them male and female’...

Mk. 13:19: “For in those days there will be tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of creation which God created until this time...” Obviously Jesus is speaking here in the third person of One other than himself.

Lk. 10:21: “In that hour Jesus rejoiced in the Spirit and said, ‘I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth...’ ” This is a typical Jewish prayer of praise to the creator God. His Father is “Lord” of heaven and earth because it is His, He made it.

Jn. 6:26, 30: “And Jesus took the loaves, and when He had given thanks...” It was customary and expected for observant Jews to offer a specific prayer of thanks to YHVH for bread, and the customary blessing was: “Blessed are you, Adonai our God, king of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth” (Rick Richardson, *Origins of Our Faith*, p. 16). Only one person in view here.

Yes, but how do we know for sure that the God Jesus worshipped was YHVH? In Mt. 4:10, Jesus tells the adversary, “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve.’ ” The “Lord” spoken of in Deut. 6:13, which Jesus quotes here, is YHVH. So Jesus is declaring to Satan—who

would have known better and could have gainsayed had it not been true—that the God Jesus worshipped, the God he called his “Father,” is YHVH.

We see here that in all four gospels, Jesus recognizes YHVH God as the creator and sustainer and gives us not one hint that he may have been involved in any way in the creation. So, by the time of Jesus’ death, the supposed fact of Jesus’ role in the creation must have remained unknown to his followers. Well then, how about after his resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit?

Ac. 4:24: “So when (the apostles) heard (what the High Priest said), they raised their voice to God with one accord and said, ‘Lord, You are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them...For truly against your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed...’ ”

To the apostles, the creator God is not Jesus and there is still no hint that Jesus was in any way involved in making “heaven and earth and the sea and all that is in them.” But this was yet early in the church’s development. Certainly as time went on, God began to reveal it to them?

In Ac. 17: 24, 25, 30, 31 Paul proclaims to the Athenians, who of all people would have been quite comfortable with the idea of a multipersonal God: “God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands, nor is He worshiped with men’s hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things...Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness *by the Man whom He has ordained*. He has given assurance of this to all, by raising Him from the dead.”

God the Father of Jesus still has no company as creator, and Jesus is “the Man whom (God) ordained.” Paul’s audience would have been forgiven for not having the slightest inkling that this man Jesus was in any way involved with the creation.

In like manner, Paul writes to Timothy, not long before his death: “I urge you in the sight of God who gives life to all things, and before Christ Jesus who witnessed the good confession before Pontius Pilate...” (I Tim. 6:13). Just a few years before the end of Paul’s life, the God who gives life to all things and Jesus are two different persons.

The writer to the Hebrews himself distinguishes the creator God from Jesus in 2:10: “And it was only right that God—who made everything and for whom everything was made—should bring his many children into glory. Through the suffering of Jesus...” The creator and Jesus are two different persons. Later, in 11:3, he writes, “By faith we understand that the entire universe was formed at *God’s command*...” To this writer, it is more than clear the manner in which the universe was made, and Jesus is not said to have had anything to do with it.

Finally, in Rev. 4:10, 10:5 and 14:7, the risen Christ gave John visions of one creator God person, and the glorified Jesus, who is revealing these things to John, is nowhere to be found.

So here we have seen both Testaments declare that God, the father of Jesus, is the creator of heaven and earth, and that He created all things by Himself. There is no evidence of a slow evolution of understanding from unitary monotheism to multipersonal theism or any such thing.

So then, what does the writer of Hebrews mean when he says that “by” or “through” Jesus everything was made? Paul says similar things in I Cor. 8:6, Eph. 3:9 and Col. 1:16. Are these hopeless Bible contradictions?

Yes they are, and so this contradiction will remain, unless and until we recognize the historic understanding of the Hebrew people about the *mind and means* by which the one creator God made and sustains the universe. To do that we need to go back again to the OT and work our way forward to the New.

It is not often recognized among laypeople—and even many pastors—that the Hebrews believed and wrote that, in one sense, God was not alone when He created the universe; he was accompanied by His “wisdom.”

Now this wisdom, in the Hebrew sense of meaning, is far more than making shrewd decisions in everyday life. It included a much broader and deeper understanding, of wisdom being the divine intelligence whereby God created the universe.

Proverbs 3:19 and 8:22-31 are the best known of these passages: “The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding He established the heavens” (Prov. 3:19).

“Does not wisdom cry out, and understanding lift up her voice?...The Lord possessed me at the beginning of His way, before His works of old. I have been established from everlasting, from the beginning, before there was ever an earth...When He prepared the heavens, I was there...Then I was beside Him, as a master craftsman; and I was daily His delight, rejoicing always before Him, rejoicing in His inhabited world...” (Prov. 8:1, 22ff).

“Wisdom” here signifies God’s wise ordering of the worlds—the divine intelligence which created the worlds. Despite its colorful personification, it is not intended to be understood as a person actually standing next to God creating everything. If it were that would contradict nearly everything else we read in the OT.

What we are witnessing here is the Hebrew penchant for personalizing concepts in a highly poetic fashion. A literal reading of these passages would yield quite an inaccurate picture, and the Jews understood this. Now, wisdom theology is not only found in these famous passages, but is sprinkled throughout the OT:

Ps. 104:24, 25: “O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom You have made them all. The earth is full of your possessions...living things both small and great.”

Ps. 136:5: “To Him who by wisdom made the heavens, for His mercy endures forever.”

Jer. 10:12: “He has made the earth by His power, He has established the world by His wisdom, and He has stretched out the heavens at His discretion.” (Also Jer. 51:15.)

In the period between the Testaments, wisdom tradition continued directly along these lines in the Jewish writings of the period:

“For she (Wisdom) is an initiate in the knowledge of God, and an associate in his works. If riches are a desirable possession in life, what is richer than wisdom who effects all things? And if understanding is effective, who more than she is fashioner of what exists?” (Wisdom of Solomon, 8:4-6)

“Wisdom, by whose agency the universe was brought to completion...” (Philo, *Quod Deterius Potiori*, 54)

“By your wisdom (you) have formed mankind...Wisdom...was present when you made the world” (Wisdom of Solomon 9:2, 9)

Now, the remarkable development that occurred in the first century is that the NT writers apply God’s creative wisdom to Jesus exclusively. They were convinced that the power and divine intelligence which made all things has now been revealed finally and completely *in Christ Jesus himself*.

Karen Armstrong has well explained this concept and what the NT writers meant by it. “...the divine Wisdom...(and) the ‘Word’ symbolized God’s original plan for creation. When Paul and John spoke about Jesus as though he had some kind of preexistent life, they were not suggesting that he was a second divine ‘person’ in the later Trinitarian sense. They were indicating that Jesus had transcended temporal and individual modes of existence. Because the ‘power’ and ‘wisdom’ that he represented were activities that derived from God, he had in some way expressed ‘what was there from the beginning’ (quoting from John 1). These ideas were comprehensible in a strictly Jewish context, *though later Christians with a Greek background would interpret them differently*” (*A History of God*, p. 89).

Thus, in addition to the well-known prologue to the Gospel of John, we see Paul writing, “But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory” (I Cor. 2:7).

“but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (I Cor. 1:24).



“But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God...” (I Cor. 1:30). Is Paul saying Jesus became for us the ability to make smart decisions? No. He is saying Jesus is the embodiment of that—as he says—“hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages” that the Hebrew scriptures and writings always spoke of.

With this understanding in mind, let’s return to Heb. 1:2. Given the established fact that God the Father alone made the universe, what is the thought being expressed here (and in I Cor. 8:6, Eph. 3:9 and Col. 1:16)?

The line of thought is simply this. If: a) wisdom figuratively identifies the divine mind through which all things were made; and b) Jesus uniquely and ultimately embodies that wisdom, then c) Jesus embodies the divine mind through which all things were made.

V. 3 “The Son reflects God’s own glory, and everything about him represents God exactly.”

There are two key words used here which are found nowhere else in the NT, *apaugasma* and *charakter*. *Apaugasma* is usually translated “radiance,” and can carry the sense of either glory radiating out from within a person, or glory from another source which reflects off of a person, as it would with a mirror. Either way, the essential point here is that in Jesus we witness God’s own glory; he embodies God’s glory in a real and powerful way.

Paul echoes much the same truth in II Cor. 4:4: “For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

The second term used here, *charakter*, sometimes translated “stamp” or “express image” comes from the term for a die stamp such as was used in stamping coinage in ancient times. It signifies the sort of impress that a die makes, or that of a seal stamped in wax.

The thought here is that Jesus replicates God’s nature—his character, if you will—precisely, just as the coin replicates the stamp of the die precisely. For this reason, *charakter* is sometimes translated “exact representation.” If this were written in American vernacular the writer would say Jesus is the “spitting image” of God—a “chip off the old block.” A faithful, detailed reproduction of the character nature of God.

Thus in both *apaugasma* and *charakter* we can hear an echo of Jesus’ words in the Gospel of John, “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn. 14:9). This doesn’t mean Jesus is the Father, of course, but that in Jesus we can see in human terms what God’s character is like.

Far from proving Jesus’ eternal existence, these words suggest instead that he is the offspring of God, a replica of God’s character nature. This is more compatible with the idea that Jesus was created by God, than that he was eternal and uncreated.

Well then, how about the phrase, “He (Jesus) sustains the universe by the power of his command.” “Sustaining,” from the word *pheron*, has no single exact English parallel but often conveys the sense of “carrying along.” The word often denotes someone who brings something along to its appointed course (Mk. 4:8; Jn. 12:24; Ac. 4:37; Heb. 6:1; I Pet. 1:13; Rev. 21:26).

So the writer is really saying that Jesus brings the creation forward toward the fulfillment of God’s divine plan. As the incarnate *logos* of God and wisdom of God, Jesus embodies both the center and sustaining force behind God’s plan for the universe. This is akin to Paul’s teaching that in Christ “all things hold together” (Col. 1:17).

Jesus is the linchpin of history; without him all hope for the reconciliation of God to His creation is lost, and all that God has planned for us and the worlds cannot ever see its fulfillment.

V. 3 “After he died to cleanse us from the stain of sin, he sat down in the place of honor at the right hand of the majestic God of heaven.” With this last passage of the prologue we have completed Jesus’ unparalleled three-fold resume: “He is the prophet through whom God has spoken His final word to men; He is the Priest who has accomplished a perfect work of cleansing for His people’s sins; He is the King who sits enthroned in the place of chief honor alongside the Majesty on High.” (F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 8)

#### **Four Christological themes**

##### **Theme 1: Greater Than the Angels**

The entire section from 1:4 to 2:9 was composed to achieve a single mission: to convince the readers of this letter that Jesus is greater than the angels. All the comparisons and contrasts are between Jesus and the angels. The seven OT passages he quotes are all offered to elucidate, in some way, Jesus’ superiority to angels.

This raises an important question. Does anyone today, in any Christian congregation you know of, need very much convincing that Jesus is greater than angels? It’s a given, is it not?

Why? Because if Jesus is God, as almost all churches teach, then by definition he’s greater than angels. It’s simply not a point of discussion on any level. Some things are so obvious they need not even be mentioned, much less argued at great length, as the writer does here. Given that, is it reasonable to conclude that this congregation understood that Jesus was God?

Well, someone might say, Jesus’ deity is precisely what the writer is going to demonstrate, in verses 8 through 12! Indeed, these passages do apply scriptures about God, or using God’s name, to Jesus. What did the writer mean by these?

Verses 8 and 9 of this first chapter contain a quotation from Ps. 45:6, 7: “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; A scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your kingdom. You

have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; Therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness more than Your companions.”

The writer says this passage is said “to the Son,” and the Son is called “God.” Is this not direct proof that Jesus is indeed God?

To begin to answer this question, we need to examine Psalm 45, which is being quoted here, and understand its original meaning and purpose. First, let’s notice who this psalm is about. The writer says, “I recite my composition *concerning the king*” (v. 1). Thus this is categorized as a “royal psalm;” in this case, one apparently celebrating the marriage between the king and a foreign bride (v. 8-12).

Now in verse 6, the king is called “God,” translated from the well-known Hebrew word *elohim*. Now *elohim* had a broader usage in the OT than we had been led to believe in years past.

It was used for the Supreme God of Israel, of course, but it was also used to refer to Canaanite gods, angels, judges, golden calves, Moses; in short, anyone who is or purports to be in some position of authority or greatness (Ge. 23:5; Ex. 7:1; 21:6; 22:28; 32:4; Jud. 16:23; I Ki. 11:5; Ps. 8:5; 82:6). Jesus himself attests to the ambiguity of *elohim* in John 10:34.

We know that broader sense of *conferred* authority is what the psalmist intends here, because of what he says in verse 7: “Therefore God, *Your God*, has *anointed* You...” The king, then, *has a God*. So the context tells us whether *elohim* in Ps. 45:6 is meant to call the king the eternal God of Israel; obviously it is not. Rather *elohim* denotes the king’s God-given authority.

So then, since the psalmist did not mean to say that his king was the eternal God, how can we be justified in assuming that the writer of Hebrews, when quoting the same psalm, means to say that Jesus is the eternal God?

The real link is the phraseology of this psalm as it relates to Jesus’ exalted state and everlasting dominion over the angels.

Jesus’ throne is “forever and ever,” he says, while the angels are only “ministering spirits.” The Son possesses divine authority, conferred upon him by God himself, and serves as God’s ultimate representative to men, in contrast to the subservient role of the angels.

Defenders of orthodoxy sometimes point out that in the NT whenever the supreme God is identified, the definite article *ho* accompanies the generic Greek word for God/god, *theos*. The text at hand contains this definite article, so, it is argued, this must be saying that Jesus is the supreme God.

This is not necessarily so; while it is true that *ho theos* is used when referring to the eternal God, not every use of *ho theos* refers to God. For instance, in II Cor. 4:4, Paul calls Satan “*ho theos* of this age.” So word choice alone cannot settle the matter all by itself. Fortunately, we are given more information.

In verse 9 we see that, as we have noted, Jesus has a God, and the Bible nowhere teaches that the Eternal has a God; two, that he has been “*anointed*” by God to this exalted royal throne—it was a position *conferred* upon him, not something eternally held.

Taken together, these verses 8 and 9 summarize Jesus’ life story beautifully. Because of his faithfulness and obedience, Jesus has been exalted by God above all other men to a permanent royal position at God’s throne.

I know some may be uncomfortable with the foregoing because I’ve suggested that the writer of Hebrews has appropriated a passage from the OT which was not strictly messianic, and then applied it to Jesus because there were parallels that could be drawn between the two. In our day, taking scriptures out of context in this way is not considered a valid method of argumentation. What are we to say about this?

First, let us be reminded that not only were the writers of the OT inspired by God, the writers of the NT were equally inspired by God. And so it is entirely fitting and expected that God would inspire the NT writers’ understanding of the OT as it applied to the Messiah, the promised Christ.

Second, we need to be careful when reading ancient documents that we don’t require the writers to adhere to the conventions which have developed in the centuries since. *The Interpreter’s Bible* is helpful here: “What will impress the student of the quotations is that our author is not interested in the original meaning or the original context...he assumes a method of scriptural exegesis which is based on the belief that hidden meanings become clear to the reader who has the ‘key.’ The ‘key’ is the sonship of Christ...he reads back into the ancient scriptures intimations and foreshadowings of the truth as he sees it in Christ” (p. 604).

This was a common rabbinic method of the day. For the Jews (both ancient and modern) did not read Scripture only to ascertain what such-and-such a writer meant to say to such-and-such an audience, such as we’re doing today.

Rather, the Jews believed then and still do believe that Scripture was inspired on *several different levels*. Clyde Brown discussed this at length at the Tyler conference—if you haven’t heard that lecture you might be interested in acquiring a tape of it.

They believed that Messiah flowed through the undercurrent of Scripture, and could be detected even in passages which did not, when viewed strictly within their specific contexts, appear to discuss Messiah.

Heb. 1:5b is a perfect example of this. The passage here applied to Jesus is taken from II Samuel 7:14: “I will be to Him a Father, and He shall be to Me a Son.” Now when we go back to II Samuel 7 we notice some interesting details. Here, Nathan is prophesying to David on behalf of God. The entire section reads: “When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. *He will build a house for My name*, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his Father, and he shall be My son. If he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men and with the blows of the sons of men” (v. 12-14).

Obviously, this prophecy is about Solomon. Events here correspond to what Solomon did: building a physical temple, sinning. We know neither of these things applies to Jesus. So in what aspect of this prophecy does the writer of Hebrews see Jesus?

In the fact that God would establish in David’s line a “throne of his kingdom forever.” To this writer, and all the writers of the NT, Messiah is the true and ultimate son of God and the true and ultimate Davidic King. If Solomon may be called God’s “son,” how much more Messiah Jesus? That’s his point, yet we know not every feature of the OT passage from which this is drawn is literally true of Jesus.

We see another example of this in Hebrews 1:10. Here the writer quotes Psalm 102:25-27: “You, Lord, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands...” Now, we have already demonstrated that the Bible everywhere teaches that YHVH alone performed the work of creation.

And we pointed out earlier that the writer of Hebrews himself makes it clear in v. 1 and 2 of this very chapter that the God of the OT, who was understood by his audience to be YHVH the creator, is not Jesus.

So here we are confronted with a choice. We can believe the writer is contradicting both himself and the vast body of clear scriptural teachings that YHVH alone made the worlds, or we can conclude that v. 10-12 is yet another example of the writer seeing something in an OT passage which illuminates Christ in some important sense, even though every detail of the passage does not apply literally to Jesus. But in what sense does he see Christ in Ps. 102?

First, as we’ve noted, the NT teaches that Jesus is the embodiment of God’s creative wisdom, that “hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages” which was “established from everlasting, from the beginning, before there was ever an earth,” in that “The Lord by wisdom founded the earth...” (I Cor. 2:7; Prov. 8:23; 3:19). Thus Christ, the embodiment of creative wisdom, can be truly said to be “in the beginning, (laying) the foundation of the earth” (v. 10).

There is also a profound application to Christ in the rest of the passage: “They will perish, but You remain; and they will all grow old like a garment; like a cloak you will

fold them up, and they will be changed. But You are the same, and Your years will not fail.”

William Lane, in the *Word Biblical Commentary*, offers this insight: “In this context...the accent falls upon the mutability of the created order, including the angels, in contrast to the Son who is exalted above that order. The quotation turns on common images of changableness: clothes grow old and wear out; a cloak is rolled up and put away. But the Son ‘remains.’ The argument in vv 10-12 is thus parallel to that in vv 7-8, where the mutability of the angels is contrasted with the...unchangeable character of the Son” (Vol. 47, p. 31).

*The Interpreters Bible* is also helpful here: “...the Christian revelation is unequivocal. God (and the Son partakes of his nature) is not a victim of time and change. He is their sovereign Lord...We cannot worship a transient process. Something must abide, to which we may cling and by which our way may be guided. That, we seek to worship. For the writer, the Son shared with the Father this transcendence over nature and the unending years belong to him” (p. 607).

Now before we take on the second major Christological theme in Hebrews, I’d like to return for a moment to the idea that Jesus was the incarnation of YHVH, the creator God of the Old Testament.

Now, we saw that in the first two verses of this letter, the writer of Hebrews rules out any possibility of Jesus being YHVH. There’s good reason for this. His Hebrew audience would have been keenly aware that YHVH introduced Himself to Moses in the burning bush, calling Himself “...the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Ex. 3:6). And they knew the apostles’ teaching, which was that “...it is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of all our ancestors, who has brought glory to his servant Jesus...the God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead...” (Ac. 3:13; 5:30, NLT).

But there’s much more to it than even this. What we all need to recognize is that, if Jesus is the God of the Old Testament, not only can the apostles not be believed, the Bible itself cannot be believed. The idea that Jesus is YHVH implodes Scripture—with this idea, the Bible completely collapses upon itself as a source of divine revelation. Here’s why I say this.

The NT affirms the reliability of the Hebrew scriptures for the purposes of divining truth and developing Christian doctrine. In John 10:35, Jesus, speaking of what we call today the Old Testament, declares that “...the Scripture cannot be broken.” And in II Tim. 3:16, Paul writes, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God (literally, ‘God-breathed’), and is profitable for doctrine...”

Furthermore, Peter writes in II Pet. 1:20: “knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation (margin: “origin”), for prophecy came not by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.” And the writer of Hebrews confirms the veracity of the writings of Moses when he writes, “The

message God delivered through angels (that is, the Torah) has always proved true...” (2:2).

Now, these are the NT teachings about the OT, and the OT is overwhelmingly monotheistic, as we’ve seen.

So, those who believe in a multipersonal God must explain this discrepancy by suggesting that God’s revelation about His multipersonal nature was progressive; that is, that it was largely withheld from the ancient Israelites but revealed later—by Paul and John, it is usually said.

Now, progressive revelation *can* be seen in Scripture. Let’s take an easy one: circumcision. Under the Old Covenant, circumcision was a critical marker God established to physically identify His people. But upon the establishment of the New Covenant, physical circumcision was replaced by the spiritual circumcision of the heart, made possible by the receipt of the Holy Spirit. Physical circumcision was therefore no longer necessary.

So then, can we apply this principle of progressive revelation to the nature of God? No, we cannot. Why? Because the circumcision question, as with other aspects of genuine progressive revelation, involved changes in *how God was dealing with men*.

There was a “new covenant” at work now, the apostles began to realize, a new arrangement between God and men *which was foretold by the prophets of the OT*, as the apostles note in the Acts 15 account. So with changes in the covenant came changes in what God expected of his people; but those changes don’t contradict the OT; indeed they were *anticipated* by the OT.

The question of the nature of God, however, differs from this in two critical respects: First, *God doesn’t change*. Unlike the covenants, there is no “Old God” and “New God.” Unlike everything in the physical universe, God simply is: “I am Who I Am,” God told Moses. “I am the Lord, I change not,” He told Malachi. Many other scriptures teach this.

Second, *positive, unequivocal statements about the singularity of God are made throughout the OT*. We’ve read some of them today. Therefore there is no way the NT could establish a multipersonal view of God’s nature without *contradicting Scripture’s already-established witness to the singular nature of the unchangeable God*.

And why can’t we allow the NT to contradict the Old? Because that would, in Jesus’ words, “break Scripture,” and contrary to Paul, render it useless for doctrine.

It would expose the many positive, unequivocal statements declaring the singularity of God in OT Scripture—many spoken by YHVH Himself—as utter fabrications, as conscious deceits—in a word, lies. In case we needed reminding, it is the writer of Hebrews himself who tells us that, “...it is impossible for God to lie...” (6:18).

All this is bad enough, but consider further that Jesus and Paul's teaching concerning the OT is now in question, because they claim a value for it which is simply not true. So now *Jesus and Paul* are suspect, and Peter, too. Yet there's more. If Jesus was the incarnation of YHVH, he could not have been the Messiah, either. Why is that?

Remember that YHVH commanded Moses from the mountain, "*I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me*" (Ex. 20:2, 3). Now, the NT teaches that Jesus kept the Law perfectly, in that he never sinned, which is why he could serve as an unblemished sacrifice for our sins.

So here's the problem: Jesus prayed to and worshiped his "Father," who, according to this theory, was a God person other than YHVH. *Therefore, Jesus himself broke the first commandment by worshipping another God!*

Of course, this is absurd; but when you follow arguments to their logical conclusion and you end up in absurdities, you've just received a valuable clue that you're on the wrong road.

So here we have a theology which renders the OT a fraud, reveals Jesus and Paul deluded concerning its value, turns God into a liar and suggests Jesus is a sinner. And people call us the blasphemers.

## **Theme 2: God's Appointed Heir and Assistant**

In Hebrews in 1:1-4, Jesus is called God's "appointed heir of all things," explaining that "He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than (the angels)."

Now, the writer of Hebrews stresses Jesus' heirship precisely because it helps him make his case that Jesus is superior to angels. If your point of view is that Jesus was a man, his appointment as heir of the entire universe would certainly exalt Jesus in your thinking.

But if you're thinking Jesus was incarnate God, as post-Nicean Christianity has alleged, exactly what would it mean to say that he is an "heir?" Doesn't one "inherit" those things that another creates or owns? The whole concept of inheritance simply doesn't apply if orthodox Christology is true.

Similar questions arise from the writer's conviction that Jesus has "sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (1:3, 13; 8:1). This was Hebrew imagery drawn from the royal courts of a second-in-command being invited to share royal position with the King.

Again, why a mere assistant? If before his incarnation Jesus was eternal, uncreated and co-equal God, by what principle of justice or equity does he end up in an *inferior* position? After all Jesus endured while on earth, he gets rewarded with a demotion? Moreover, the writer says Jesus was *appointed* to these supposedly high positions by God:



“Therefore, God, Your God, has *anointed* you...” (1:9); Jesus was “*crowned* with glory and honor” by God, (2:9); Jesus “was faithful to Him who *appointed* Him...” (3:2); (Christ) “did not glorify himself to become High Priest, but it was He who said to Him, ‘You are my son, *today I have begotten you...called* by God as High Priest...(5:1, 5, 10)”

Jesus needs to receive honor, exaltation and glory *from God*. Why? And why the need to “*receive by inheritance* a name greater than the angels?” He *created* angels, we’re told. And he needs God to grant him an inheritance so he can become greater than them? This is making no sense whatsoever. The orthodox doctrine simply doesn’t fit the picture of Jesus expressed in this letter.

And these are by no means isolated passages. Ac. 2:32, 33, 36; 5:31; Eph. 1:20, 21; Phil. 2:9-11 and I Pet. 3:22 all declare Jesus’ exaltation to God’s throne and, as here, in each case authority is bestowed upon Jesus by God, and Jesus is always pictured *receiving a level of exaltation he hadn’t possessed before*.

The fact that the apostles considered Jesus’ installment as God’s assistant a promotion, and not a demotion, reveals where they thought his starting point was!

Now, defenders of the orthodox doctrine have sought a way out of this difficulty by suggesting that it is only we sinful, proud human beings who are so overly concerned with position and authority. On the God level, there is no such sinful pride, therefore there is no concern with such things.

Though there is no *ontological* requirement for Jesus’ subordination, they say, but through a willing act of humility he submits himself to the Father.

Well, this all sounds very nice, but there are grave difficulties with it. First, if power and position are only carnal human concerns, why does the NT in all these places cite Jesus’ exaltation as if it were a good thing? Why is God always said to be *rewarding* Jesus with it? Shall we conclude from these frequent descriptions of heavenly exaltation that the NT writers are betraying their own carnal obsession with power and authority?

Second, if power and position really are only carnal concerns, should we not conclude that Jesus himself is exhibiting a character deficiency by willingly exercising an exalted position over all creation? If the lower you go the better you prove yourself to be, wouldn’t it have been more admirable if he’d been reduced to, say, a slug or a caterpillar?

Lastly, if accepting a lower position within the so-called “Godhead” is a demonstration of humility, what does that say about the moral fitness of the God person who declined to subordinate himself—the so-called “Father?”

Let’s face it. If subordination within the “Godhead” is a moral achievement, rather than an ontological necessity, *the Father is less morally fit than the Son*. This is the logical end-point of the idea that the Son is subordinate to the Father because he’s so humble. Do we really want to go down this road?

If not, then we must be willing to recognize that the only possible reason for the Son's subordination to the Father is that the Son really is a son, and the Father really is his actual father, having brought him into existence.

As Heb. 2:11 says, "So now Jesus and the ones he makes holy *have the same Father*. That is why Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters" (NLT). This is saying explicitly what the rest of the letter suggests implicitly: Jesus was created by the same Father God who created us.

### **Theme 3: The Thoroughly Human Savior**

"Therefore *in all things* He had to be made like His brethren... For in that He Himself has suffered, *being tempted*, He is able to aid those who are tempted" (Heb. 2: 17, 18). What was the nature of this temptation?

"For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, *yet without sin*...He can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, *since he himself is also beset by weakness*." (Heb. 4:15; 5:2)

Now, the most obvious difficulty, which Trinitarianism and Binitarianism has never been able to resolve, is how could God, who cannot be tempted with sin, be tempted with sin? How is it, if Jesus was truly God incarnate, that any temptation could have occurred at all?

James is very clear: "Let no man say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed" (James 1:13, 14).

The writer of Hebrews is also unmistakable: Jesus was "tempted in all points as we are, *yet without sin*." The "temptation" was the temptation to sin! In short, the writer of Hebrews can be correct. James can be correct. The Nicene Creed can be correct. But all three cannot be correct.

In orthodoxy's defense, some have responded this way: "God, *as God*, cannot be tempted: but Jesus, who is both God and man, *as man* and living in a fallen earth, was tempted."

Now this is an ancient argument, which John Hick has exposed as transparent nonsense. He probes to the very marrow of the issue of Jesus' alleged dual natures and the NT evidence: "How was God incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth if God did not undergo what Jesus underwent?" (*Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued*, p.80).

Hick's challenge reaches to the very core of orthodox Christology and exposes it for what it is: an impossible contradiction. If God cannot be tempted to sin, and Jesus was tempted to sin, then God could not have experienced life as Jesus.

The writer of Hebrews offers yet another provocative picture of Jesus that does not find compatibility with orthodox Christology: “though He was a Son, yet He *learned obedience* by the things which He suffered. And having become *perfected*, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him.” (Heb. 5:8, 9).

Does God need to learn to obey Himself? Does God need perfecting? If Jesus was indeed “God in the flesh,” Godness must lie at the core of his being, or else this claim is devoid of content or meaning. But if Godness did constitute Jesus’ core, this passage is flat wrong, because there would be no moral lessons to learn, no perfection to achieve. Take your pick: the incarnation or the book of Hebrews. You cannot have both.

#### **Theme 4: A Priest of God**

From 6:20 to the end of chapter 10, the writer of Hebrews is preoccupied with one central concern: Jesus’ priesthood. We need not review the whole section here, but we should answer this one fundamental question: what is a priest? What is his purpose and function?

A priest exists to perform one duty: to serve as a mediator between God and men. “Now a high Priest is a man chosen to represent other human beings in their dealings with God” (Heb. 5:1 NLT).

So Jesus, the writer explains, is God’s new and ultimate High Priest, far surpassing the High Priest then offering sacrifices in the temple. That means he is the new mediator between God and men. “You have come to Jesus, the one who mediates the new covenant between God and people” (Heb. 12:24, NLT).

Now, why does God use such mediators? Why a priesthood at all? Because of his holiness and our sinfulness. “You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness...” (Hab. 1:13).

So if God deals with men through mediators, and Jesus is the new mediator, can Jesus be God?

No. In fact, the writer of Hebrews makes it very clear that Jesus’ qualification to be our High Priest lies precisely on the ground of his *human weakness*, and would not have been possible without it: “Therefore, *in all things* He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted” (2:17, 18).

The NLT renders v. 17, “Therefore, it was necessary for Jesus to be *in every respect* like us...” Can incarnate God be truly like us “in every respect?”

This discussion mirrors Paul’s creedal statement to Timothy: “For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus” (I Tim. 2:5).

Note that Paul makes a point of the fact that our mediator is now, even after his glorification and exaltation to God's throne, "*the Man Christ Jesus.*" Why? Because Paul, like the writer of Hebrews, understood that only a man can mediate God's relationship with men.

Now, in identifying Jesus as a High Priest, the writer of Hebrews knows he is running headlong into a difficulty his Jewish audience would have anticipated: The Law of Moses stipulated that priests could only come from the tribe of Levi, while Jesus was born into the tribe of Judah.

He openly admits this in 7:14: "For it is evident that our Lord arose from Judah, of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood."  
To explain, the writer brings cites the example of Melchizedek via a messianic passage in Ps. 110:4.

The basic argument of chapter 7—which I'm sure most of you are familiar with so we won't belabor it—is that since Abraham, the father of the Israelite race, paid tithes—or tribute—to Melchizedek, then Melchizedek must be considered greater than Abraham. And if so, then Melchizedek's priesthood must be greater than any priesthood that may have sprung from the lineage of Abraham—namely the Levitical priesthood.

And as both a king and a priest, Jesus' priesthood is "according to the order of Melchizedek" (5:10) who was also both a king and a priest. Thus, he argues, Jesus' priesthood is not only a legitimate priesthood, it is greater than the Levitical priesthood, in that according to the Law Levites were not allowed to hold royal position.

Now over the years some confusion has occurred because it has been imagined that the writer is suggesting that Melchizedek and Jesus were the same person, the so-called "pre-incarnate Christ."

This error was inspired by 7:3, speaking about Melchizedek. He was "without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the son of God, remains a priest continually." This misunderstanding stems from an ambiguous King James translation. The NLT clarifies things considerably:

*"There is no record of his father or mother or any of his ancestors—no beginning or end to his life. He remains a priest forever, resembling the son of God."*

William Lane, in the *Word Biblical Commentary*, offers this rendering: "His father, mother and line of descent are unknown, and there is no record of his birth or death, but having been made to resemble the Son of God, he remains a priest continuously" (Vol. 47, p. 157)

The argument for Jesus and Melchizedek being the same person was based in the idea that neither of them had a human lineage, but this isn't true. Melchizedek's lineage isn't

listed in the Genesis account, that's true, but this doesn't mean he didn't have one. Indeed, verse 6 of Hebrews 7 implies that he did have one.

In any case Jesus most certainly did have a lineage; it is listed in two gospel accounts, Matthew (following Joseph's line) and Luke (following Mary's). According to the gospels, Jesus was not "without father or mother," and the writer of Hebrews understands this. He himself says that Jesus was descended from the tribe of Judah. So obviously it is not the writer's intent to suggest that Jesus had no human origin.

Well then, what was the purpose of mentioning Melchizedek's unknown lineage? Lane explains: "The silence of Scripture concerning Melchizedek's parents and family line...implies that Melchizedek's priesthood was not established upon the external circumstances of birth and descent. It was based on the call of God..."

And this is what makes Melchizedek "resemble" the son of God. Jesus' tribal ancestry did not qualify him for priesthood, the writer admits, but the election of God did. This is implied by the passage of Psalms from which the writer approaches the Melchizedek subject: "*The Lord has sworn and will not relent, 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek' "*" (Ps. 110:4). In other words, this is something that was decided by God and that's that.

That's the true Melchizedek connection; the writer does not say Melchizedek was the Son of God, but "made *like* the Son of God" (7:3, NKJV). The writer is expressing the fact that, because of his superior priesthood which was not based upon ancestral lineage, and the fact that there was not recorded an end to his life either, Melchizedek was a *type* of Christ, who has now been given immortality—but not Christ himself.

### **Conclusion**

We said at the outset that the letter to the Hebrews has created controversy over the centuries because it contains what at first glance appears to be both the highest and the lowest Christologies in the NT.

On the one hand, here is a Jesus who retains all the power, prerogatives and character nature of God; on the other, here is a man like any other man, beset by temptations to sin and made like his earthly brothers in every way.

Millions who have been indoctrinated in Nicean Christology imagine they find confirmation here of their belief that Jesus was and is eternal God. A much smaller group, known as adoptionists, believe they see confirmation here of their belief that Jesus was not supernaturally conceived at all. Rather, they say, he was conceived and born in the regular way and at some point during his life was adopted by God, as it were, chosen among all the Jews of his time because of his deep spiritual commitment and moral purity.

I don't believe our study has produced justification for either extreme view. Such conclusions are reached only when one has already arrived at them prior to reading the

text! Coming to the text without such presuppositions allows the writer say what he wants to say about Jesus, without adding or taking away.

And the essence of that message is this: *Jesus is better*. He is better than the prophets, he is better than the angels, he is better than the High Priests of the Levitical priesthood, his sacrifice is better than the animal sacrifices offered in the temple, and the new covenant he inaugurated is better than the covenant which preceded it.

His status in the universe is second only to God Himself, and he is the foundation stone upon which God is building the entire world to come. And what kind of world will that be? What else? A better one.