# Hebrews 1:8

But about the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom. (*NIV*)

**1**. The English language makes a clear distinction between "God" and "god." Thus, in English Bibles, the heavenly Father is called "God," while lesser divinities, people with God's authority on earth and important people such as kings, are also called "god" (2 Cor. 4:4; John 10:34 and 35; Acts 12:22). The Hebrew and Aramaic languages cannot make the distinction between "God" and "god." Since Hebrew and Aramaic have only capital letters, every use is "GOD." Furthermore, although the Greek language has both upper case and lower case letters as English does, the early Greek manuscripts did not blend them. It was the style of writing at the time of the New Testament to make manuscripts in all capital letters, so the Greek manuscripts were, like the Hebrew text, all upper case script. Scholars call these manuscripts "uncials," and that style was popular until the early ninth century or so when a smaller script was developed for books.[1]

Since all texts were in upper case script, if we translated Genesis 1:1 and 2 as it appeared in the Hebrew manuscripts, it would read:

> IN THE BEGINNING GOD CREATED THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH NOW THE EARTH WAS FORMLESS AND EMPTY DARKNESS WAS OVER THE SURFACE OF THE DEEP AND THE SPIRIT OF GOD WAS HOVERING OVER THE WATERS.

Actually, Bible students should be aware that in both the early Hebrew and Greek manuscripts there were no spaces between the words, no punctuation marks, no chapters and no verses. The original texts of both the Old and New Testament were capital letters all run together, and it looked like this:

> INTHEBEGINNINGGODCREATEDTHEHEAVENSANDTHEEARTHNOWT HEEARTHWASFORMLESSANDEMPTYDARKNESSWASOVERTHESURF ACEOFTHEDEEPANDTHESPIRITOFGODWASHOVERINGOVERTHEWA- TERS

Of course, the entire Bible was hand-printed exactly the same way, with every letter in upper case and no spaces between any words. As you can imagine, that made reading very difficult, and so it was common to read aloud, even when reading to yourself, to make it easier. That is why Philip the Evangelist could hear the Ethiopian eunuch reading the scroll of Isaiah (Acts 8:30). Such a text was hard to read and practically impossible to teach from. Imagine not being able to say, "Turn to Chapter 5, verse 15." Therefore, divisions in the text began to appear quite early. However, because scribes lived far apart and hand-copied manuscripts, the divisions in the various manuscripts were not uniform. The first standardized divisions between verses came into being around 900 AD., and the modern chapter divisions were made in the 1200s.

It should now be very clear that there was just no way to distinguish between "God" and "god" in the early texts, and so it must always be determined from the context whether or not the word "GOD" is referring to the Father or to some lesser being. Although it was usual that the presence of the definite article in the Greek text alerted the reader that the "GOD" being referred to was the Father, this was not always the case (see the note on John 10:33). For example, in 2 Corinthians 4:4, the word "*theos*" has the definite article, but the verse is referring to the Devil. Context is always the final judge of whether *theos* should be translated "God" or "god."

**2**. The Semitic languages, and both the Latin and Greek spoken by the early Christians, used the word "God" with a broader meaning than we do today. "God" was a descriptive title applied to a range of authorities, including great people, rulers and people acting with God's authority. In John 10:33, when the Jews challenged Jesus and said he was claiming to be "a god" (mistranslated in most versions as "God"; see our note on that verse), he answered them by asking them if they had read in the Old Testament that people to whom the Word of God came were called "GODS" (and we use all caps here because the earliest texts did. It is hard to escape the modern notion that "God" refers to the True God and "gods" referred to lesser deities).

Any study of the words for "God" in both Hebrew and Greek will show that they were applied to *people* as well as to God. This is strange to English-speaking people because we use "God" in reference only to the true God, but both Hebrew and Greek used "God" of God, great men, other gods, angels and divine beings. It is the context that determines whether "God" or a great person is being referred to. This is actually a cause of occasional disagreement between translators, and they sometimes argue about whether "GOD" refers to God, the Father, or to a powerful person or representative of God. One example of this occurs in Exodus 21:6, which instructs a master whose servant wishes to serve him for life to bring the servant "to *Elohim*." The *KJV*, the *NIV* and many others believe that the owner of the servant is supposed to bring the servant before the local authorities, and so they translate *Elohim* as "judges" (see also Ex. 22:8 and 9 for more examples). Other translators felt that the master was required to bring the servant to God, so they translated *Elohim* as "God."(e.g., *NRSV*) Thus, the verse will read, "God" or "judges," depending on the translation.

Hebrews 1:8 is like other verses in that just because the word "*theos*" ("GOD") is used does not mean that it refers to the Father. It could easily be referring to "god" in the biblical sense that great men are called "god." The *Septuagint* uses the word *theos* for God, but also for men in places like Psalm 82 where men represent God. The context must be the determining factor in deciding what "GOD" refers to. In this case, in Hebrews that we are studying, the context is clear. Throughout the entire context from Hebrews 1:1, Christ is seen to be lesser than God the Father. Therefore, the use of "*theos*" here should be translated "god."

**3**. The context must determine whether Christ is being referred to as the Supreme Being or just a man with great authority, so it must be read carefully. In this case, however, one need not read far to find that Christ, called "God," himself has a "God." The very next

verse, Hebrews 1:9, says, "therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions." Thus, Christ cannot be the supreme God, because the supreme God does not have a God. Furthermore, Christ's God "set" him above others and "anointed" him. This makes it abundantly clear that the use of *theos* here in Hebrews is not referring to Christ being the supreme God, but rather a man with great authority under another God. Andrews Norton writes:

> Here the context proves that the word "God" does not denote the Supreme Being, but is used in an inferior sense. This is admitted by some of the most respectable Trinitarian critics. Thus, the Rev. Dr. Mayer remarks: "Here the Son is addressed by the title *God*: but the context shows that it is an official title which designates him as a king: he has a kingdom, a throne and a scepter; and in verse 9 he is compared with other kings, who are called his fellows; but God can have no fellows. As the Son, therefore, he is classed with the kings of the earth, and his superiority over them consists in this, that he is anointed with the oil of gladness above them; inasmuch as their thrones are temporary, but his shall be everlasting."[2]

**4**. The verse is a quotation from Psalm 45:6,7. The Jews read this verse for centuries and, knowing the flexibility of the word "God," never concluded that the Messiah would somehow be part of a Triune God.

**5**. We must note that the verse in the Greek text can also be translated as, "Thy throne is God." However, because the verse is a reference from the Old Testament, and because we believe that God, the Father, is calling His Christ a "god" (*i.e.,* one with divine authority), there is no need to translate the verse other than, "Thy throne, O god, is forever."

> Broughton and Southgate, pp. 196 and 197
> Buzzard, pp. 35
> Dana, pp. 205 and 206
> Farley, pp. 71 and 72
> Morgridge, pp. 110 and 111
> Norton, pp. 301 and 302
> Snedeker, pp. 459-463

**Endnotes:**

**1.** Bruce Metzger, The Text of the New Testament, Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration (Oxford University Press, NY, 1992), pp. 8-10.

**2.** Andrews Norton, Statement of Reasons, p. 301.