

Re-thinking the Trinity Project

***Hebrews* and Orthodox Trinitarianism: Synopsis of Paul's Exhortation to the Hebrews**

Appendix #1–A

by

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Background to book of *Hebrews*

The Jewish contemporaries of Paul who have believed in Jesus have, from the beginning of their identification with Jesus, been persecuted by the unbelieving Jews around them. As a result, some of these believing Jews are growing weary; they are being tempted to abandon their belief in Jesus in order to remove the heat of persecution being directed toward them. Their belief in the gospel is being tested. Are they willing to pay such a heavy price for their belief in Jesus? Some, it would seem, are not. They are forsaking their belief in the gospel of Jesus and are returning to the traditional Jewish way of life in which they had been raised. More specifically, they are returning to a way of life defined by keeping the Mosaic Covenant as traditional Judaism had come to understand that. The book of *Hebrews* is Paul's exhortation to these Jewish believers. It is an exhortation to stay the course and not to abandon their belief in and discipleship to Jesus, not matter what it might cost them.

The pressure of the persecution that these Jewish believers face has caused unresolved intellectual and doctrinal problems to resurface in their lives. Specifically, Paul's readers have always had difficulty reconciling Jesus' messiahship with the ordinariness of his humanity and with the fact of his death by crucifixion. As a result, these two questions are beginning to resurface: (1) How can Jesus be the *messiah* since he was merely an ordinary human being? and (2) How can Jesus be the *messiah* since he was an ordinary mortal who was defeated and crucified by the Romans, the enemies of God? These realities with regard to who Jesus was did not fit their expectations for the *messiah*. As a consequence, because they are being sorely tempted to abandon their belief in Jesus, their unanswered questions are beginning to recommend themselves as respectable reasons to reject the claims about Jesus altogether. So, in order to eliminate them as ways for his readers to rationalize their unbelief, Paul directs his arguments in the book of *Hebrews* toward answering these two questions.

Synopsis of book of *Hebrews*

Paul's approach can be analyzed into essentially two elements: (1) a series of exhortations for his readers to persist in their belief in Jesus; and (2) a set of arguments defending an understanding of the nature and role of the *messiah* that would explain how and why it was appropriate and necessary for (a) the *messiah* to be an ordinary human being, and (b) the *messiah* to die. I begin by analyzing these two distinct elements and by

identifying the portions of the book that are devoted to each. Next I offer a more accessible graphical representation of the outline of *Hebrews* with respect to these two elements.

Analysis of the Elements of the Book of *Hebrews*

Paul responds to his readers, the circumstances they find themselves in, and their questions, objections, and difficulties in two distinct ways:

(1) He warns them of the grave consequences of abandoning belief in Jesus, that is, of departing from their belief that Jesus is the *messiah*.

(A)¹ The first warning occurs right at the outset, in the first section of the opening portion of the book [1:1–2:4]. (This section also makes a contribution to Paul's argument regarding the humanity of Jesus. However, Paul's main purpose in this section is to issue a warning to his readers.) Paul argues that Jesus is the most important being in the whole of created reality; he is more important than any *angelos* God has ever used to convey a message. It is a serious mistake to disregard any message from any *angelos* sent by God. But since Jesus is more important than any other *angelos* God has ever employed, it is clearly a very serious mistake to disregard the good news that God has proclaimed through his Son Jesus.

(B) The last paragraph of the second section of the opening portion of the book [3:1–6] constitutes a brief warning. Because Jesus is the one sent by God to "sanctify" (and, therefore, to define who belongs to) the people of God and to serve as their high priest—having been qualified to function effectively as their high priest by the death that he died—then he is more important even than Moses. Moses was a faithful servant within the household of God; Jesus is the "son" and heir of the household of God. Accordingly, if we want to belong to the household of God—Paul warns—we must keep firmly to our belief that Jesus is the *messiah* sent from God to serve as our high priest.

(C) The third section of the opening portion of the book [3:7–4:16] is an extended exhortation. Paul warns his readers that they must embrace the truth of the gospel and not close their hearts against it. He expounds, at some length, David's warnings to his contemporaries in Psalm 95 and argues that the same warning that David issued to his contemporaries needs to be heeded by Paul's readers as well. Paul's readers are in the same danger as David's—namely, the danger of closing their hearts against the mercy, goodness, and promise of God. To refuse the claim that Jesus is the *messiah* is to do just that. And that would be a damnable mistake.

(D) A later segment of the book, Part 7 [5:11–6:20], is both a warning, on the one hand, and a word of encouragement on the other. He warns them of the hardening effects

¹ Throughout this synopsis, I will identify each of the specific segments of the book from among the seven segments of Exhortation with the capital letters A through G. I will identify each of the specific segments from among the three segments of theological argumentation with the Roman numerals I through III.

that result when one suppresses the truth. But he also expresses confidence that his readers will not do that, that they will not ultimately suppress the truth. He is optimistic that they will heed the warnings he is giving them in this book.

(E) Following the primary argument of the book—the extended argument that Jesus is the true and ultimate high priest—Paul, in Part 13 [10:19–39], once again exhorts his readers to persist in their belief in Jesus. He accompanies it with a severe warning not to shrink back from believing, even though their belief in Jesus has brought them, and will continue to bring them, much hardship. The exhortation includes a comment that he is optimistic with regard to his readers. He is hopeful and optimistic that they are not among those who will shrink back from believing but are, in fact, those who will run the race to the end.

(F) The second section of the central argument of the book, Parts 14–17 [11:1–12:29], is an extended exhortation to persevere in their belief in Jesus, even in the face of the hardship and sorrow that their belief has brought them and will continue to bring them. He begins by showing from the scriptures that it is through authentic belief that one finds favor with God, and that it is by shrinking from such belief that one earns God's disfavor. (Paul offers a litany of examples of various men throughout history who have gained God's favor because of their belief in his promises.) Then, he issues a string of exhortations that all essentially come down to this: you must persevere in believing!

(G) Paul's Concluding Instructions, Part 18 [13:1–13:25], is the final portion of the book. It includes a series of instructions that are all to the same effect: don't let the specific tribulations that you are experiencing distract you from a straightforward pursuit of following and obeying Jesus. Guard your hearts to ensure that you pursue what is right, good, and true in every area of your life.

(2) He offers an extended argument that both Jesus' humanity and his death are completely consistent with what the Scriptures tell us about God's *messiah*. Accordingly, Jesus' ordinary humanity and his humiliating death are not reasons to reject the claim that Jesus is the *messiah*. They are, in fact, reasons for embracing it.

(I)² In the course of issuing a warning to his readers, Paul makes an argument, in the first section of the opening portion of the book [1:1–2:4], that the human "Son of God" is more important and more exalted than any *angelos*. By implication, the human "Son" is the most important being in all of created reality. His argument here makes a significant contribution to the primary contention of the book: the fact of Jesus' ordinary humanity is not a reason to reject the claim that he is the *messiah*, the Son of God. Being an ordinary human being—a son of David—is a prerequisite to his being the *messiah*, not counterevidence. The scriptural statements that Paul cites fill out the concept of the "Son" and more than amply attest to the fact that the human Son, the ordinary human *messiah*, is the most important person in all of God's purposes. His "mere" humanity does not conflict with his having an exalted status in the purposes of God.

² See footnote 1.

(II) In the first, major segment of the second section of the opening portion of the book [2:5–18], Paul argues that Jesus' death is not counterevidence to the belief that he is the *messiah*. In the declared purposes of God, Jesus' death is what qualifies him for his role *messiah*. He will rule eternally as God's proxy precisely because he obeyed the purposes of God by freely going to his death. An essential aspect of the role given to the *messiah* to fulfill was to "bring many sons to glory" by offering up an effective propitiatory offering for them, functioning as their true high priest. He could not function as this high priest who would secure the blessing of Abraham for Abraham's "seed" unless he were himself of the seed of Abraham—that is, he had to be a human being. And the only effective propitiatory offering was his own voluntary submission to suffering and death. Therefore, Jesus is qualified to be the *messiah* only if he was a mere human being who obeyed God's purposes by dying for the sins of mankind. As a consequence, Jesus' humanity and his death are not reasons to reject the claim that Jesus is the *messiah*; they are reasons to embrace the claim.

(III) Parts 8–12 of *Hebrews* [7:1–10:18] is the central argument of the book. It is an extended argument where Paul shows how Jesus fulfills what was predicted of the *messiah* in Psalm 110. Psalm 110 reveals that the promised *messiah* was predestined to serve as our true and ultimate high priest. As such—as a "priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek"—he will function as the mediator of a "new" covenant. Under this "new" covenant, for anyone who believes, this priest "according to the order of Melchizedek" will truly and effectively secure divine mercy—in a way that the Levitical priests offering up animal sacrifices never could. The promised *messiah* was to secure divine mercy by offering himself up as the ultimately effective propitiatory offering. Therefore, Paul argues, Jesus' death on the cross was an essential aspect of the *messiah's* divinely ordained role as our true high priest. Hence, in the light of Psalm 110, Jesus' humanity and his death most assuredly do NOT disqualify him from being the *messiah*. On the contrary, they are essential and necessary conditions of his being the *messiah*. Only by dying as a human being could Jesus be the true and ultimate high priest predicted in Psalm 110.

Table Illustrating My Analysis of the Book of *Hebrews* into Its Elements

Passage	Exhortation	Argument
1:1–2:4 = Part 1	[A] Do not disregard the teaching of Jesus. Jesus is vastly more important than any <i>angelos</i> God has ever sent. God will not tolerate us ignoring the instructions of his <i>angeloi</i> . Certainly he will not tolerate us ignoring the teaching of his Son. One ignores Jesus at his own peril.	[I] Though Jesus, as the Son of God, is an ordinary human being, a son of David, his humanity does not render him unimportant. His title as "Son" renders him very important. The scripture makes clear that the human Son is the most important and exalted person in all of God's purposes.

Passage	Exhortation	Argument
2:5–2:18 = Parts 2–3		[II] Jesus' death is no counterevidence to his being the <i>messiah</i> , because Jesus' messianic role included his being the true high priest who offers the ultimately effective propitiatory offering. Jesus' death is a precondition for his fulfilling this predestined messianic role.
3:1–3:6 = Part 4	[B] Because Jesus was sent to be the true high priest (in relation to whom the people of God are defined), Jesus is more important than even Moses. Moses was merely a servant within the household of God. Jesus is the Son in the household. One must hold fast his belief in the Son if he wants to belong to the household of God.	
3:7–4:16 = Part 5	[C] Paul explains David's exhortation to his readers in Psalm 95 and suggests how the same warning and exhortation applies to the readers of <i>Hebrews</i> : If they want to enter the "Rest," the ultimate blessing of God, they must not harden their hearts against God's purposes (and hence against Jesus).	
5:1–6:20 = Parts 6–7	[D] Paul issues both a warning and a note of encouragement. He warns against the hardening effects of suppressing the truth, and yet he expresses confidence that his readers will heed his warning and will not ultimately suppress the truth.	
7:1–10:18 = Parts 8–12		[III] Paul offers an extended argument that the death of Jesus was necessary to his role and status as <i>messiah</i> ; it is not counterevidence to it. Paul shows that Psalm 110 predicts that the human <i>messiah</i> will serve as the true and ultimate high priest (according to the order of Melchizedek) who will, through his death, be the mediator of a "new" covenant. Accordingly, Jesus' humanity and death do not disqualify him from being the <i>messiah</i> . They are necessary conditions of his being the <i>messiah</i> .

Passage	Exhortation	Argument
10:19–10:39 = Part 13	[E] Paul’s exhorts his readers to persist in believing in this Jesus and to remain confident that, as our true high priest, he has secured divine mercy for us. They are not to shrink back from so believing, even though their belief has brought them much hardship. They must continue to look to Jesus for mercy, for it is only the one who persists in believing in Jesus who will receive the mercy that Jesus, the high priest, requests on his behalf.	
11:1–12:29 = Parts 14–17	[F] Paul exhorts his readers to persevere in their belief in Jesus—even though it has brought them much sorrow—because it is his believing the truth from and with regard to God that makes a person approved by God. Paul cites numerous examples from the Scriptures to illustrate and substantiate this claim. At the same time, failing to believe brings divine disfavor. Paul exhorts his readers to follow the example of Jesus himself: he suffered greatly as he persisted in belief and obedience, but, as a consequence, he has received a great reward.	
13:1–13:25 = Part 18	[G] Paul issues some concluding instructions that are all to the same effect: don’t let the specific tribulations that you are experiencing distract you from a straightforward pursuit of following and obeying Jesus. Guard your hearts so that you pursue what is right, good, and true in every area of your life.	

Supporting Arguments within the Exhortation Segments

Most of the exhortation segments within *Hebrews* are not purely and only hortative. They also include supporting arguments. Specifically, Paul not only encourages his readers to respond to the gospel in a particular way, he also explains why they should so respond.³ In explaining why, he supplies supporting arguments. In the course of making those arguments, Paul introduces beliefs and perspectives that are implicit to his

³ It is one thing to say, “Do X.” It is quite another thing to say, “Do X, because Y.” In the latter case, an “argument” is being made as to why one should “Do X.” One is arguing, “You should do X because it is true that Y.” Or, perhaps, “You should do X because it is true that a, b, c, and therefore d.” Most of the hortatory sections of *Hebrews* contain just this sort of argument.

worldview and theology. He constructs his supporting arguments in reliance upon those assumptions. In the discussion below, I summarize the nature of the supporting argument that accompanies each exhortation in *Hebrews* and I try to abstract from it the additional assumptions⁴ that form the basis for each argument.

[A] In Exhortation A, Paul constructs an argument by conjoining the conclusion of Argument I—namely, the fact that Jesus, being the Son, is the most exalted person in the whole of God's purposes—with what appears to be a sort of axiom for Paul: God deals harshly with those who ignore the messages he has sent through his *angeloi*. Accordingly, Paul argues that his readers can hardly expect to escape judgment if they ignore the message that God has conveyed to them through Jesus, who, as the Son of God, is the most exalted person (the most exalted *angelos*) of all.

• **Additional assumption #1: God punishes a lack of receptivity to any messages he has delivered which concern his promises and/or purposes.**

[B] In Argument II (which immediately precedes Exhortation B), Paul has concluded three important things:

- (i) Jesus' death (suffering)—a death that he died for the benefit of all of mankind—is what qualified him to be exalted to the high position that Psalm 8 describes.
- (ii) It was fitting for God to have Jesus be qualified for this exalted position through his death, for his role as *messiah* included his being the true high priest for the promised children of Abraham as well as the effective propitiatory offering on their behalf. To be their true high priest, he had to share their humanity. To be an effective propitiatory offering for them, he had to die the death that they deserve.
- (iii) The scriptures give evidence of the fact that the Son will be a peer of ordinary human beings.

With these conclusions in mind, Paul urges his readers to continue to believe in Jesus and not to abandon their hope in him. He urges this on the basis of another assumption: the one who will "belong to the household of God" is the one who persists in believing "until the end."

• **Additional assumption #2: Only the one who persists in his embracing the truth about Jesus will belong to God and receive the blessing that he has promised to his children.**

[C] Paul ends the opening portion of the book of *Hebrews* with a segment of exhortation (Exhortation C) that is based on a very subtle and sophisticated application of Psalm 95. In Psalm 95, David is warning his contemporary readers not to "harden their hearts" against God's instruction in the same manner that their forefathers in the time of Moses did. Their forefathers, because they did not "hear God's voice"—that is, because they responded in disobedience and unbelief—were barred from entering into the

⁴ Sometimes Paul explicitly spells out these additional assumptions. Sometimes they are simply implicit in his argument. I am not claiming to have identified each and every additional assumption, but I believe I have explicitly identified the more important ones.

promised land and enjoying rest (*sabbat*) from their enemies there. Accordingly, David is warning his contemporaries not to harden their hearts against God's instruction and, as a consequence, be similarly barred from entering God's rest (*sabbat*). In Exhortation C, Paul suggests to his readers that the same warning that David gave to his contemporaries in Psalm 95 remains a valid warning for them. Paul's readers too should take heed to "hear God's voice" (that is, heed the gospel that Jesus taught and heed the truth about Jesus) lest they be barred from entering God's rest (*sabbat*). Paul then spells out what the rest is that they would be in danger of missing out on. It is the same rest that David was warning his readers not to miss. In Psalm 95, David did not have in mind rest from Israel's enemies in the land, for that had already been achieved when David was writing Psalm 95. Rather, David had something more universal in mind: rest from the enemies of human existence itself—namely, rest from the battle against sin, corruption, and futility, rest from what is the fabric of human existence as it is in this age. So, Paul issues this very same warning to his readers, directly applying the exhortation of Psalm 95 to them. Specifically, he warns them to be diligent to enter the Rest. He wants them to guard their own hearts against sinful unbelief and disobedience. Finally, he exhorts them to persist in believing that Jesus is the Son of God, for, as the Son of God, he is the true high priest and therefore it is in and through him that we will receive mercy and not be condemned.

Three more assumptions emerge during the course of Paul's argument in Exhortation C:

- **Additional assumption #3:** If a person rejects the message or the instruction of God, it is due to his evil, sin, hardness of heart, and disobedience.
- **Additional assumption #4:** If a person believes the message or the instruction of God, it results in his being granted the ultimate blessing—namely, in his "entering the Rest".
- **Additional assumption #5:** How a person responds to God's message inevitably reveals the inner commitments of that person's heart—namely, whether those inner commitments are sinful and disobedient, or righteous and obedient.

[D] As Paul introduces the subject of his primary argument (Argument III)—an argument where he spells out the implications of the assertion in Psalm 110 that the *messiah* is to be a high priest "according to the order of Melchizedek," he opens with a warning (Exhortation D). He warns his readers that they may not be able to understand the exposition of Psalm 110 that he wants to present to them, because they are showing signs that, due to the stupefying effects of disobedient unbelief, they have become dull-witted. He explains that a person who has initially responded positively to the gospel and then has "fallen away" from his belief has shown himself to have a disobedient heart and, accordingly, is destined to be cursed and not blessed. Paul then interjects that he is very optimistic that this is not the case with his readers. He ends by exhorting them to patiently persist in believing what God has promised in connection with Jesus. He demonstrates—from the scriptural account of Abraham—how the *promise* (as distinct from the initial *prediction*) of a blessing to Abraham came at the end of his lifetime of persistence in believing God's promise. The same, Paul contends, will be true for his readers. If they wait patiently in belief, like Abraham, they will qualify themselves to

receive the blessing that God promised. For anyone who persists, the blessing is a steadfast and unshakeable promise from God.

One more assumption emerges during the course of Paul's argument in Exhortation D:

• **Additional assumption #6: An unbelieving heart has an effect on a person's ability to understand and grasp the truth. Unbelief tends to make a person "dull of hearing"—that is, it makes him stupid and unresponsive with respect to God's truth.**

[E] In Exhortation E, Paul encourages his readers to embrace the truth about Jesus as the true high priest, to not waver in that belief, and to be willing to pay the price for such a belief (in the form of persecution). He then warns his readers that God will severely punish anyone who rejects the truth about Jesus when once he has been confronted with it. For, if God punished transgression of the Mosaic Covenant severely, how much more severely will he punish a rejection of the Son and his blood of the New Covenant? You have made a good start in your confession of Jesus as the Son, Paul tells his readers, but now you have to endure—persisting to believe through the hardships and trials you are encountering. God will accept the one who does not shrink back from believing due to hardship; he will not approve of the one who does shrink back from believing.

Two more assumptions emerge in the course of Paul's argument in Exhortation E:

• **Additional assumption #7: Only the one who persists to embrace the truth about Jesus in the face of hardship, trial, and persecution will receive the blessing that God has promised to his children.**

• **Additional assumption #8: The unbelief that condemns a person is an unbelief that derives from a person's "sinning willfully." It is unbelief rooted in rebellion and disobedience, not unbelief rooted in ignorance, that meets with God's wrath.**

[F] Paul advances an argument—based on the evidence of God's dealings with men of old as recorded in the Scriptures—that the people who are *dikaïos* in the eyes of God and who will ultimately receive the blessings that he has promised them are those who believe the promises that God made to them, who believe even when they do not see God's promises fulfilled in their lifetime, and who believe even when their lives turn out to be filled with grief and suffering. Then, stemming from this argument, he exhorts his readers to "run the race" to the end—persisting in their belief in Jesus. He urges them to keep the victorious outcome of Jesus' life in view, so that they do not grow weary or lose heart. (Jesus patiently believed and obeyed—even in the face of great hardship and hostility—and, in the end, was exalted.) Paul follows this up with four miscellaneous supporting exhortations:

- (i) He reminds his readers that hardship is a good and beneficial thing (since it is God's "training" of his children) and exhorts them to "buck up," dig deep, and finish the race, undeterred by the hostility they face.
- (ii) He warns his readers not to follow after a false god, not to be like Esau who sold out his inheritance for a little comfort in the midst of hardship.
- (iii) Explaining that, in Jesus, they are confronted by God in all of his profound mercy (and not by God in all of his terrifying purity and severity), Paul warns his readers not to refuse God's message of mercy: if those who rejected the Mosaic covenant

did not escape judgment, certainly those who reject the New Covenant will not escape judgment.

(iv) Paul instructs his readers that the God who shook Mt. Sinai is going to shake (so as to destroy) everything in the present age. Only the Kingdom of God is something that cannot be shaken; only it is eternal. Accordingly, Paul exhorts his readers to live their lives in service to God out of gratitude for the blessing that he has granted them—life in the unshakable Kingdom of God—as well as out of reverence and awe for the terrifying judgment of those who do not believe.

- **Additional assumption #9:** No believer mentioned in the Scriptures received his ultimate reward in this present existence; he died still hoping in God's promise.
- **Additional assumption #10:** Some believers mentioned in the Scriptures were granted many blessings and a good existence; others were greatly persecuted and live miserable lives.
- **Additional assumption #11:** Jesus is the paradigm example of someone who received a promise from God, believed it in the face of great hostility, and accordingly received it. He is the trailblazer who has actually finished the race ahead of us and has already received his reward.
- **Additional assumption #12:** Hardship and trial are God's way of instructing and training his children.
- **Additional assumption #13:** The inheritance that has been promised to us is an eternal, unshakeable Kingdom.

[G] Paul makes no "arguments" in connection with Exhortation G. Exhortation G is a series of almost purely hortative appeals.⁵

Summary List of all the Additional Assumptions Implicit in the Supporting Arguments to the Exhortations in *Hebrews*

The primary teaching of the book of *Hebrews* concerns Paul's teaching with regard to who Jesus, the *messiah*, is. But that is not all that the book of *Hebrews* teaches. As a way of capturing what else the book of *Hebrews* "teaches" us, it will be helpful to collect in one place all the additional assumptions and beliefs that Paul bases his various arguments on:

- **Additional assumption #1:** God punishes a lack of receptivity to any messages he has delivered which concern his promises and/or purposes.
- **Additional assumption #2:** Only the one who persists in his embracing the truth about Jesus will belong to God and receive the blessing that he has promised to his children.
- **Additional assumption #3:** If a person rejects the message or the instruction of God, it is due to his evil, sin, hardness of heart, and disobedience.

⁵ Hebrews 13:5b-6 is a brief supporting argument, as is Hebrews 13:7. But the first is relatively tangential to the main line of the argument of *Hebrews*, so I do not include it in my synopsis. It is a specific argument about a specific issue of human existence: money. The second is an argument analogous to one he already made in Hebrews 11 and 12.

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- **Additional assumption #4**: If a person believes the message or the instruction of God, it results in his being granted the ultimate blessing—namely, in his “entering the Rest”.
 - **Additional assumption #5**: How a person responds to God's message inevitably reveals the inner commitments of that person's heart—namely, whether those inner commitments are sinful and disobedient, or righteous and obedient.
 - **Additional assumption #6**: An unbelieving heart has an effect on a person's ability to understand and grasp the truth. Unbelief tends to make a person “dull of hearing”—that is, it makes him stupid and unresponsive with respect to God's truth.
 - **Additional assumption #7**: Only the one who persists to embrace the truth about Jesus in the face of hardship, trial, and persecution will receive the blessing that God has promised to his children.
 - **Additional assumption #8**: The unbelief that condemns a person is an unbelief that derives from a person's “sinning willfully.” It is unbelief rooted in rebellion and disobedience, not unbelief rooted in ignorance, that meets with God's wrath.
 - **Additional assumption #9**: No believer mentioned in the Scriptures received his ultimate reward in this present existence; he died still hoping in God's promise.
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 - **Additional assumption #13**: The inheritance that has been promised to us is an eternal, unshakeable Kingdom.