

Re-thinking the Trinity Project

***Hebrews* and Orthodox Trinitarianism: An Examination of *Angelos* in Part One**

Appendix #2–A

by

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Part One of the book of *Hebrews* focuses on establishing the superiority of the Son of God to any and every *angelos*. Consequently, if we are to understand and appreciate Paul’s argument in Part One, it is critical that we determine what ‘*angelos*’ means.

There are two commonly accepted meanings for the word *angelos*:

- (1) A messenger, and
- (2) an angel.

These two meanings are listed in any standard lexicon of New Testament Greek. The underlying meaning of *angelos* is to denote the one who is the bearer of an *angelia* (where an *angelia* is a message, some news, a command, or a proclamation of some sort). An angel derives its name from the fact that it is a being sent by God to deliver an *angelia* from God. So the title *angelos* can be applied to any human messenger—regardless of who sent the messenger— or it can denote a special, super-human being whom God employs as a messenger. That latter is what we, in English, refer to as an “angel.”

As for the first meaning above, consider the following examples:

- In Matthew 11:10, John the Baptist is described as the messenger (*angelos*) who was to precede the *messiah*.
- In Luke 7:24, human messengers sent by John the Baptist are called *angeloi*.
- In Luke 9:52, human messengers sent by Jesus are called *angeloi*.
- In Galatians 4:14, Paul describes himself as having been received as a messenger (*angelos*) from God.
- In James 2:25, the men sent by Moses as spies to Jericho and who were protected by Rahab are described as *angeloi*.

As for the second meaning above, there are, in all likelihood, numerous examples in the New Testament. But Luke 1:19 and 1:26 clearly, explicitly, and unambiguously refer to an *angelos* who is a supernatural being who has his own existence, identity, and name—Gabriel. So, clearly, *angelos* can refer to a being whom we typically label an “angel” in English.

Bible translations and interpreters typically take *angelos* in Part One of *Hebrews* in this second sense. The assumption is that Paul is establishing the superiority of Jesus, as the Son of God, to the angels. If “Son of God” means the second person of the Trinity (as many of these interpreters assume) then why does Paul even need to argue the point?

Would it not be obvious that the second person of the Trinity is superior to any angel? Is he who is eternally God not NECESSARILY superior to any created angel—to any CREATURE employed by him (God) as his messenger? Indeed, this seems to be convincing evidence that the title “Son” in Part One of *Hebrews* does not mean the second person of the Trinity. The fact that Paul makes a concerted effort to argue the superiority of the Son makes sense only if “Son of God” is a *messianic* title rather than a description of his eternal deity. The point that Paul is arguing is this: the ordinary human being whom God promised to establish as his “Son” is superior to any *angelos* in spite of the seeming humbleness of his humanity.

What is Paul’s point? Why would this be an issue? Some Bible scholars have argued that the Jews’ expectation for the Son of God at the time of Jesus was that the Son of God would be a quasi-angelic being, not an ordinary human being.¹ If they are right, that would certainly explain what is at issue. Paul wants his readers to recognize that, even though Jesus was an ordinary human being and not a quasi-angelic being, he was the Son of God nonetheless. In order to argue that point, he must argue that a human Son of God is a more exalted figure than any angel, regardless of how ontologically superior angels may be to humans.

But there is a difficulty with this understanding. When scholars point to evidence that the Jews expected the “Son of God” to be quasi-angelic, it is not clear that those same Jews identified the Son of God with the son of David, the *messiah*. While it is natural for us—as it was for Paul—to recognize that the Son of God, the son of David, and the *messiah* were one and the same individual, it was not so clear to the first century Jews. It would seem that, in the first century, there were many different pictures of what was to transpire when the Kingdom of God came. Some, if not all, of those pictures involved different individuals playing different roles. So, they did not necessarily consider the Son of God as one and the same individual as the son of David. They did not necessarily equate the Son of God with the *messiah*. In all likelihood, there existed a number of very complex constructions of various players fulfilling various roles in the events leading up to the coming of the Kingdom.² Consequently, it is easy to see how a first-century Jew might expect the Son of God to be a quasi-angelic being at the same time that they expected the son of David (and perhaps the *messiah*) to simply be a human descendent of David.³

But, as I already suggested above, this is not Paul’s view. Nor does it seem to be the view he has in view as he constructs his argument in Part One of *Hebrews*. There is not the slightest hint that Paul needs to persuade his readers that the Son of God is identical

¹ Undoubtedly, this interpretation is based on prophecies along the lines of the vision of the “son of man” in Daniel 7. The vision there gives a very exalted image of the *messianic* figure, a vision that could be interpreted to predict a being far too exalted to be an ordinary human being.

² Not unlike the numerous disparate scenarios of the end times that exist among Christians today.

³ I am not aware of any texts that clearly portray the Son of God as a supernatural, quasi-angelic being while also simultaneously portraying this being as the son of David.

to the *messiah* who is identical to the son of David. Rather, his argument assumes this sequence of identities. He quotes a Psalm that is about the *messiah*, the anointed King, in order to prove a point about the Son of God.⁴ And Paul cites scriptural assertions that he interprets as describing something about the Son which clearly have in view the promised son of David whom God has destined to be anointed king over the Kingdom of God. In other words, they have the *messiah* in view.⁵ If Paul’s readers were not willing to grant that the Son of God was the *messiah*, who was the son of David, then his argument in Part One would fail to be compelling. Indeed, if one does not grant the identity of the *messiah* and the Son of God, Paul’s argument is indeed very confusing.

So, if Paul’s readers grant that the Son of God is the *messiah*, the son of David, how are we to understand the problem that he is addressing, or the question that he is seeking to answer? We know from elsewhere in the book of *Hebrews* that the issue is whether its readers will persist in their “confession” that Jesus is the *messiah*. Why wouldn’t they? What is their problem? Why might they be inclined NOT to persist in that confession? The most likely answer is that Paul’s readers have been inclined to expect the *messiah*, the Son of God, to be something greater and more extraordinary than just an ORDINARY human descendent of David. And, in view of how Paul constructs his argument, it is reasonable to conclude that these Jews expected the Son of God, the *messiah*, to be an “*angelos*.” But Jesus was not something greater and more extraordinary than just an ordinary human descendent of David. As a consequence, Paul’s readers faced a real challenge. How could they confess Jesus as the *messiah*, the Son of God, when he was a mere man? They are in the midst of persecution. They are finding it less and less desirable to confess Jesus as the *messiah*. Under these circumstances, the problematic nature of their confession is becoming increasingly an obstacle to belief. It presents them with what appears to be a valid and respectable reason to abandon their belief in Jesus.

However, this alleged problem with confessing Jesus as the *messiah* hinges on the accuracy of their expectation. So far as the scriptures are concerned, was the *messiah* to be an *angelos*, or was he to be an ordinary human descendent of David? This is the argument that Paul constructs in Part One. Quoting a number of different passages from the scriptures, Paul argues that—all along—it was within an ordinary human descendent of David that God was promising to embody his authority and sovereign rule over all creation. These promises were not being made to some *angelos*; they were being made to a human offspring of David. As a consequence, Jesus’ status as an ordinary human being did not in any way disqualify him from being the *messiah*. Or, to put it another way, the fact that Jesus was not an *angelos* did not disqualify him from being the *messiah*. For all along, the scriptures were promising to a mere human being a status and role that was greater and more exalted than that given to any *angelos*.

⁴ In Hebrews 1:6, Paul quotes Psalm 97, which is about the enthronement of the anointed king ruling for Yahweh. Paul takes this Psalm to be evidence of the exalted status of the Son. And notice that in Hebrews 1:8–9, Paul claims that Psalm 45 is about the Son, yet the title “Son” never explicitly occurs in Psalm 45.

⁵ See Hebrews 1: 5 where Paul cites Psalm 2 and 2 Samuel 7:14.

This certainly appears to be Paul’s argument and the issue that lies in the background. But can we make sense of such a background? Specifically, can we plausibly maintain that these Jews expected the *messiah* to be an *angelos*? How so? And what exactly would that mean?

In the two meanings of *angelos* that we have discussed so far, it is difficult to make sense of such an expectation. Is it plausible to think that these Jews expected the *messiah* to be an angel? Alternatively, is it plausible to think that these Jews expected the *messiah* to be a messenger? On both alternatives, it is difficult to see how. Nothing in the scriptures would offer any encouragement at all for seeing the *messiah* as an angel. And surely it would make no sense at all for the Jews to think that the *messiah* was supposed to be just a messenger. The question arises, then, whether there might not be a third meaning of the word *angelos* that will allow us to understand how these Jews might have identified the *messiah* with an *angelos* in this third sense.

Upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that there is a third distinctive use of the word *angelos*⁶:

(3) A theophany⁷, that is, a visible manifestation in some form in which God appears to and confronts a creature within his creation.

Perhaps the best example of this is the burning bush on Mt. Sinai. The Greek translation of the Hebrew text describing the account in Exodus identifies the visible flame in the bush as “the *angelos* of Yahweh.” How are we to understand this assertion? Is the “the *angelos* of Yahweh” the “angel of Yahweh”? That is, is the flame an angel sent by God to appear to Moses? That is how some interpreters seem to construe it. But notice how odd such a reading of the account is. When one follows the whole conversation between the burning bush and Moses, it becomes quite apparent that it is a conversation between Yahweh himself and Moses. It is not a conversation between Moses and an angelic intermediary; it is a conversation between Moses and God. Moses is speaking directly to and with Yahweh. And Yahweh is speaking directly to Moses. Grammatically, Yahweh refers to himself in the first person, not in the third person. The burning bush says, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac,

⁶ I am not suggesting that the three meanings of *angelos* that I am discussing in this paper are the only uses of *angelos* in the New Testament. Certainly, they are not. I am only concerned to understand the role of *angelos* in the meaning of *Hebrews*, Part One. Another important use of *angelos* (when it occurs in the plural) is to denote divine revelations, or perhaps, the written record of divine revelations. This is the meaning in 1 Corinthians 11:10, and it is arguably the meaning in Colossians 2:18. Romans 8:38 may very well denote the content of divine messages or divine revelations. Perhaps it is because divine revelations are “messengers” from God to man. Again, this is not an exhaustive treatment of all the meanings of *angelos*.

⁷ For a fuller explanation of what I mean by “theophany,” see Appendix 2–B. It is entirely apt that *angelos* would be used to denote a theophany. A theophany is a medium that God used on certain occasions to communicate the message he wished to communicate to certain people. Hence, his theophany was his “messenger,” his *angelos*.

and the God of Jacob.⁸ The flame in the bush does NOT say, “I have been sent by the God of your fathers to give you this message.” So, this Exodus 3 account is explicitly describing an encounter between Moses and Yahweh, not an encounter between Moses and an angel. And yet Exodus 3 also clearly and explicitly identifies the flame in the bush as the “*angelos* of Yahweh.” Either the Exodus 3 account is hopelessly contradictory and incoherent, or ‘*angelos*’ does not mean angel. This contradiction is resolved if *angelos* can mean something that can be identified with God (Yahweh) himself. What makes the most sense is that an *angelos* of Yahweh is an APPEARANCE or VISIBLE MANIFESTATION of Yahweh. An *angelos* is when and where Yahweh assumes a visible form within which he appears to and interacts with a human being. Consequently, the burning bush is an *angelos* of Yahweh. Obviously Yahweh is not literally and actually a burning bush. The burning bush is not Yahweh himself. But it is an *angelos* of Yahweh, an appearance of Yahweh. In other words, an *angelos* of God is a theophany.⁹

God appeared to people in the Old Testament in a variety of ways. Sometimes he appeared to people in the form of a human being. In Genesis, a “man” appears to Abraham, dines with him, predicts the birth of Isaac, and then negotiates with Abraham about sparing Sodom if there are enough righteous people in it. As a careful reading shows, that encounter is a direct encounter between Abraham and Yahweh. The “man” is Yahweh. Yahweh has appeared to Abraham in the form of another human being. There is no actual human being encountering Abraham. Rather, Yahweh is the one encountering him; but he has assumed the visible form of a human being to do so.¹⁰ This does not mean that Yahweh is literally and actually a man in that event, any more than Yahweh is literally and actually a burning bush in his encounter with Moses.

Then again, it is likely that the “man” that Isaac wrestled with was also a theophanic manifestation of Yahweh. Hence, we seem to have clear examples of Yahweh assuming the form of a human being in order to encounter his human creatures.

Under this third meaning of the word *angelos*, we can offer a plausible account of what Paul’s readers might have expected of the *messiah*. Specifically, they may very well

⁸ And note that the text says explicitly that it was God calling to Moses from the bush. See Exodus 3:4. Also 3:6 says that Moses was afraid to “look at God,” referring to the burning bush.

⁹ Other examples of the *angelos* of Yahweh (“angel of the Lord”) being used to denote a theophany are the following: Genesis 16:7–11 (Yahweh, the angel of the Lord, speaks to Hagar); Genesis 22:11–15 (Yahweh, the angel of the Lord, speaks to Abraham); the pillar of smoke and pillar of fire that led Israel on their journey through the wilderness was the *angelos* of Yahweh (cf. Exodus 14:19, 23:20, 23:23, 32:4, 33:2); and probably the *angelos* of Yahweh that blocked the way of Balaam’s donkey was a theophany.

¹⁰ Note that in Genesis 18:16, Abraham was walking with the man (actually with three men—probably the theophany of Yahweh and two angels). Then, in 18:17 we have Yahweh musing about whether he will tell Abraham what he is about to do. The subsequent conversation is clearly between Yahweh and Abraham, but the account is only coherent if Yahweh is the man (who came to Abraham, accompanied by two other men) who has just dined with Abraham. Hence, the most coherent reading of Genesis 18 involves an encounter between Abraham and a theophany of Yahweh where the theophanic form Yahweh assumed was the form of a human being.

have expected the *messiah* to be a theophany.¹¹ The *messiah*, the Son of God, would be Yahweh himself having assumed the form of a human being. He would not be a human being in actuality, but he would come into history and interact with mankind in the appearance of a human being.

How and why would Paul’s readers have formed such expectations? Very simply, because it was unimaginable to them that an ordinary human being could plausibly fulfill all the predictions that had been prophesied with respect to the *messiah*. Indeed, the *messiah* was the one who would come and rule as God, on behalf of God, with all the authority and righteousness of God himself. Who better to do that than God himself—more specifically, than a theophanic manifestation of God himself?

There is one significant problem with this interpretation. How could Paul’s readers expect that a theophanic manifestation of God could also be the son of David? It is not obvious that these two beliefs are compatible. It would seem that, if the *messiah* is a son of David, he cannot be a theophany. At the same time, if the *messiah* is a theophany, then he cannot be an ordinary human son of David. This is indeed a significant problem for this interpretation. Yet, it is not unanswerable. There are at least two possible ways that the theophanic and Davidic conceptions of the *messiah* could co-exist:

(1) It is plausible that Paul’s Jewish readers had concluded that the prophetic predictions about the role and authority of a son of David were not intended by God to designate a literal offspring of David. The *messiah* would be a “son of David” in some sort of metaphorical sense, not literally.

(2) It is plausible that Paul’s Jewish readers had developed a doctrine of some sort of adoptionism. That is, they had developed a theological belief that a literal descendent of David would be “adopted” by God as the one through whom he would manifest himself. This son of David would, in some inexplicable sense, be transformed into a theophany of God himself. In that way, he would, on the one hand, truly be a son of David. But yet, having been made into a theophany, he would have ceased to be an ordinary human being. Consequently, there is no incompatibility.

Ultimately, we do not have enough information to determine which, if either, of these two options captures the actual beliefs and expectations of Paul’s readers. But, either of the two above options is plausible. Consequently, in the absence of a better, more likely

¹¹ See Appendix 2–B for an explanation of what would be the implications of the Son of God being a theophany. For one thing, a theophany would speak as Yahweh himself in the first person. Clearly, Jesus did not do that. Hence, he was not a theophany. It should be apparent from the discussion in Appendix 2–B that if Jesus were a theophany, he would not be fully a human being. He would only be God appearing in the form of a human being. Note that the orthodox view of the incarnation is closer to viewing Jesus as a theophany than it is to viewing him as a true incarnation (or iconization). On the orthodox view (as most Trinitarians tend to actually understand their own doctrine), Jesus is, as a matter of fact, God. But he has appeared to us as a man. A biblical understanding of the incarnation requires us to understand Jesus to be, as a matter of fact, an actual human being. But he IS, as a matter of fact, in some meaningful sense God as well.

understanding of Part One, it is reasonable to conclude at least this much: Paul's readers were expecting the *messiah* to be a theophany (an *angelos*)—the coming of Yahweh himself in the appearance of a human being—and, therefore, they had a difficult time believing that the merely and actually human Jesus was the *messiah*. This interpretation of Hebrews assumes that the word "*angelos*" denotes a theophany in Part One of Hebrews.¹²

¹² See my commentary on Hebrews Part One for an explanation of each and every assertion about *angelos* in Paul's arguments there.