

Re-thinking the Trinity Project

Hebrews and Orthodox Trinitarianism: Jesus as Son of God

Paper #2

by

J. A. “Jack” Crabtree

Introduction

I argued in “*Hebrews* and Orthodox Trinitarianism: Jesus in the Book of *Hebrews*” (Paper #1) that there are fundamentally four different portions of the book of *Hebrews* that are (or could be) construed to offer support for the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. In this paper I will consider the first of those portions, *Hebrews* 1:1–2:4. Logically and rhetorically, this portion should be analyzed as the very first part in the argument of the book. Consequently, I will refer to this portion as “Part One” or as “Part One of the book of *Hebrews*.”

There are six specific assertions within Part One that could be (and are) cited as evidence for the Trinity. I will consider all six of them. The one that some Trinitarians find most compelling is *Hebrews* 1:10. There, they argue, Jesus is explicitly identified with God (*Yahweh*). From such an identification of Jesus with *Yahweh* they infer that Paul understands Jesus to be wholly and completely identical with God in every possible sense. Additionally, they believe that only the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity can adequately account for the whole and complete identification of the man Jesus with God.

The issue here, as in all biblical interpretation, is what Paul, the author, intended. And a determination of his intent cannot be made apart from understanding the fundamental, overall argument that Paul is making. What is his point? Why is he making this point? To whom is he making this point? Why is this point relevant to his readers? What reasons is Paul giving for his conclusions?

Understanding the answers to all of these questions is critical to understanding the meaning of any single assertion within the argument. This is where we must begin. We must gain a thorough understanding of how Part One of the book of *Hebrews* contributes to Paul’s response to the issues that are on the forefront of his mind. And to understand that, of course, we must understand what those issues are.

I will begin by examining the nature and purpose of Part One in light of the nature and purpose of *Hebrews* as a whole. I maintain that Part One serves a dual purpose. I will suggest that, on the one hand, Paul is constructing a powerful exhortation directed at his readers; on the other hand, he is establishing a very important and relevant doctrinal point. I will then go on to develop a thorough understanding of this doctrinal point within its historical context. Then I will argue that a thorough understanding of this doctrinal point and the argument that Paul makes to defend it presents a serious problem for orthodox Trinitarianism. It is highly unlikely that Paul would have made the argument he does (in Part One of *Hebrews*) if he were a proponent of orthodox Trinitarianism.

Accordingly, in the light of Part One, it appears unlikely that Paul is an orthodox Trinitarian. Finally, I end the paper by critically examining each of the six assertions within Part One that can be and are cited as evidence for the doctrine of the Trinity.

The Nature and Purpose of Part One of *Hebrews*

I argued in the first paper that the book of *Hebrews* is primarily a series of exhortations, but that it is, secondarily, an argument in defense of certain critical theological points. For the most part, the various sections of the book of *Hebrews* are divided between these two purposes. But, in some passages, Paul is seeking to accomplish both purposes at the same time. Primarily, he is constructing an exhortation; but, secondarily and simultaneously, he is making a case for a specific doctrinal point. Part One is one of those passages with a dual purpose.

In Part One, Paul is formulating a powerful appeal to his readers to persist in giving heed to the teaching and claims of Jesus, on the one hand; but, at the same time, he is making an argument from the scriptures that Jesus is more important and of greater standing than any *angelos*.¹ The two purposes are intertwined. He formulates his exhortation in terms of his doctrinal point: *because* Jesus is greater and more exalted than any *angelos*, it is imperative that we give heed to what Jesus came to say. So, while Part One is primarily an exhortation to pay attention to what Jesus taught, it makes a particularly critical doctrinal point in the course of building the basis for this exhortation: namely, that the ordinary human being, Jesus, is more important than any and every *angelos*.

That much is clear. But why does Paul begin the book of *Hebrews* by comparing the relevant importance of Jesus to an *angelos*? To understand that, we must examine the historical background to Paul's writing at greater depth. There is something of a theological dispute or controversy in the background. We cannot understand the relevance of Paul's point unless we understand the nature of this doctrinal controversy.

Understanding the Historical Background to the Doctrinal Dispute

To understand Part One, we must first understand the lack of any clear consensus on how to describe the events and individuals surrounding the coming of the Kingdom of God. In particular, in the first century, there was no clear consensus on the nature and role of the various actors in the relevant events (of the Son of God, of the *messiah*, etc.). It is not helpful or meaningful to ask what the Jews in Jesus' day believed or expected with regard to the *messiah*, for there was not simply one uniform belief, nor just one set of expectations among the Jews. There were divergent views. Different segments of

¹ Throughout this paper I will transliterate *angelos* rather than translate it into "angel" unless I am maintaining that *angelos* means "angel". By "angel" I mean that being that is more than human but less than God and is employed by God to minister to men and give messages to them. As I will argue in this paper, *angelos* does not necessarily have to denote an "angel." Therefore, I will not translate *angelos* as angel unless I am convinced that it means "angel" in a specific use of it.

Jewish culture had different beliefs, different expectations. The evidence is not clear and complete enough to develop a thorough outline of each of the various views. But it does seem clear enough that there were different views and that these views were mutually incompatible.²

As a consequence, it is quite likely that a person's decision whether to believe that Jesus was the Son of God, the *messiah*, was bound up together with choosing between the competing disparate views. In order to believe that Jesus was the Son of God, one had to reject one or more interpretations of who the Son of God was expected to be. So long as he was immovably committed to a particular interpretation, a person could never come to believe that Jesus was the Son of God, if the facts about Jesus did not match his preferred interpretation of the nature and role of the Son of God. Belief in Jesus, therefore, required that a person be able and willing to revise his picture and adjust his expectations.

While likely no one would be able to reconstruct a complete analysis of the various different first-century views with respect to the Son of God, we can identify some of the primary issues that distinguished them. Was the *messiah* the same individual as the Son of God? Was there but one anointed, one *messiah*? Which individual was the son of David? Which was the Son of God? Which was the *messiah*? What other individuals would play a role in the coming of the Kingdom of God? Elijah? Jeremiah? Some new prophet? Some angel? In the time of Jesus, there was no clear consensus about how to answer these questions.

Most important for our purposes is this question: exactly what sort of being was the Son of God supposed to be? If he was the son of David, then the question is answered. He would be an ordinary human being. But what if the Son of God was a different individual? Then, perhaps, he was supposed to be some other sort of being? From the book of *Hebrews*, it is clear what Paul thinks: the *messiah* was to be the same individual as the Son of God; and he was to be a human son of David. But apparently this perspective was not universally held among first-century Jews. However, it is noteworthy that Paul writes as if his readers will grant him the identity of the Son of God with the *messiah* with the promised son of David. Paul's arguments depend upon it. But while Paul's readers may ostensibly be committed to such a perspective, given the variety of views abroad in the larger culture, they may very well have not accepted such an

² At least, this is what the present state of my knowledge of the evidence would seem to suggest to me. And the present state of my knowledge is not adequate to complete the task of outlining the various different views. I claim no expertise in the matter, but, from the evidence I am aware of, it would seem quite evident that there was no uniformity of perspective among the Jews of the first century. Nor do I think that one can expect to find internal coherence within any particular first-century viewpoint with regard to the events surrounding the coming of the Kingdom. For example, whoever and whatever they expected the *messiah* to be, one should not necessarily expect their view to make sense and be internally coherent. Interestingly, modern day Trinitarian orthodoxy is quite similar in that regard. If you ask ten different Trinitarians to spell out the specific, detailed implications of their Trinitarian doctrine of the incarnation, you would probably get ten different sets of answers. And each set of answers would likely involve internal contradictions and philosophically implausible perspectives.

identification in their life prior to becoming a disciple of Jesus. It is some prior belief about the Son of God to which they are being tempted to return.

As we explored in the last paper, some of Paul's first-century Jewish contemporaries had believed in Jesus, based, most likely, on the persuasive force and significance of his reported resurrection. But to what extent had they fully adjusted their beliefs and expectations with regard to the Son's nature and role? Had they developed a complete and coherent understanding of his pre-ordained role? Had they developed a coherent picture of how and why an ordinary human being could be the Son of God? Any Jew who—on the basis of Jesus' reported resurrection—had believed that he was the Son of God, but who had not completely revised his understanding of who the Son of God was supposed to be, could very well be living with a dissonance in his belief system. To the extent that the Jewish believer had not come to a full understanding of how Jesus' humanity was entirely compatible with his being the Son of God, his belief in Jesus would be vulnerable. Only the believer who confidently understood that, according to the Scriptures, it was predestined for an ordinary human being to function as the Son of God, only one such as this had a belief that was firmly grounded and unshakeable. Only he would not be shaken from his belief by the fact of Jesus' ordinary humanity. In other words, the Jew who had adjusted his messianic expectations to conform to what Scriptures actually taught—namely, that the Son of God would be a mere man—only he was on solid ground.

Some of the Jews to whom Paul is writing *Hebrews* had not successfully revised their expectations. They may have "shelved" their unfulfilled expectations for a while. They may have chosen to accept and tolerate the tension in their worldview and, in spite of the internal contradictions, believe that Jesus was the Son of God anyway. (After all, he had been raised from the dead!) These Jews believed without really understanding how and why Jesus could be simultaneously an ordinary son of David and the exalted Son of God. Such a tension was manageable so long as belief in Jesus was worth it to them. But as persecution set in and belief in Jesus continued to cost them dearly, the incoherence of their belief system began to loom larger and larger. It began to seem less and less plausible to believe that the ordinary human Jesus really could be the promised Son of God.

A sufficiently attentive analysis of the argument of *Hebrews* makes one thing quite evident: whatever Paul's readers expected the Son of God to be, they did not expect him to be an ordinary human being, an ordinary son of David. What then did they expect the Son of God to be? To answer this question we must reconstruct the background to *Hebrews* on the basis of evidence within the book itself. What answer follows from a reasonable reconstruction of the background?

Reconstruction of the Background to the Doctrinal Dispute

The most important datum within the argument of *Hebrews* is the fact that here, in Part One, Paul is intent on establishing the superiority of Jesus to any and every *angelos*. Why? Why is it so important for Paul to prove that Jesus is more exalted than every

angelos? Is it not because he must counteract an expectation that the Son of God was supposed to be some sort of *angelos*? Whatever his wavering Jewish readers expected (before they came to believe in Jesus), it involved a belief that, in connection with the coming Kingdom of God, God would send some sort of *angelos* to serve as his "Son." The human Jesus did not fit that picture; he was decidedly not an *angelos*. In spite of this, his readers had previously confessed Jesus as the Son of God anyway (on the testimony of the apostles to the compelling reality of his resurrection). But now this unresolved tension in their understanding is beginning to resurface. It is beginning to emerge as an obstacle to their continuing in belief—how could Jesus be the Son of God if he was not an *angelos*? That this is likely the issue being addressed in Part One seems quite evident. What is less evident is what Paul means by the word '*angelos*.' We must now turn to that.

THE MEANING OF '*ANGELOS*'

Typically, bible students are inclined to think of *angelos* as denoting one of two things: (1) a messenger, or (2) an angel. Certainly, Paul's argument in the first part of *Hebrews* is not that Jesus was superior to any and every MESSENGER. For it is difficult to see how that could be a response to any actual controversy. Who could object to the claim that Jesus was the Son of God on the grounds that he wasn't as exalted as a MESSENGER? Given the typical understanding of '*angelos*,' that leaves just one option for how to understand what Paul is arguing: Jesus was superior to any and every ANGEL. In that event, the objection that Paul would be addressing is this: Jesus could not be the Son of God because, being a human being, he was not as exalted as an angel. On the assumption that his readers had expected the Son of God to have the exalted status of an angel, Jesus' mere humanity presents a problem for his being the Son of God.

To interpret '*angelos*' as angel is certainly a possible reading of Part One of *Hebrews*. And, with respect to the purpose of this paper to examine the doctrine of the Trinity, it ultimately doesn't matter what '*angelos*' means here in Part One. But, I think it unlikely that '*angelos*' means angel in Part One. Why would one expect the *messiah* to be an angel?

For reasons that I outline in Appendix 2-A, I think '*angelos*' is sometimes used to mean a revelation of *Yahweh* himself. It can denote a sort of theophany.³ When God manifests himself in some kind of visible representation, '*angelos*' is the word that would be used to describe his appearance. So, when *Yahweh* appears to Moses at the burning bush, the appearance-of-*Yahweh*-as-a-burning-bush is referred to as the "*angelos* of *Yahweh*." The cloud by day, fire by night pillar that led Israel through the wilderness is named the "*angelos* of *Yahweh*," and yet the text makes it clear that that same pillar is *Yahweh* himself leading Israel. In my exegetical notes on Part One of *Hebrews*, I argue

³ See Appendix 2-A for a fuller discussion of the meaning of *angelos* and for a more complete defense of this interpretation.

that, fundamentally, this is what *angelos* means throughout Part One.⁴ This, then, is the issue that lies in the background of Paul's argument: Can Jesus be the Son of God when he is a mere human being and not a theophanic manifestation of *Yahweh* himself?

Apparently, the Jews to whom Paul is writing had originally expected the Son of God to be a theophany. The Son of God would be *Yahweh* himself appearing to Israel in some sort of visible form and playing a spectacular role in bringing about the Kingdom of God. In all likelihood, this included the belief that *Yahweh* would appear in the form of a human being (as he had to Abraham, for example). So, the Son of God was expected to be a theophanic representation of *Yahweh* himself in the form of a human being. This is a very plausible reconstruction of Paul's readers' expectations.⁵

But that is not what Jesus was.⁶ Jesus did not speak as *Yahweh*. Jesus never identified himself as *Yahweh*. He always referred to *Yahweh* as his Father. Jesus did not go around speaking like *Yahweh* in the first person. "Back in the day, when I was appearing to Moses...." "In the beginning, when I created the heavens and the earth...." "When I made my covenant with Moses, I instructed you to...." There is never the least little hint of Jesus speaking as the person of *Yahweh* himself (e.g., as the burning bush did to Moses). When *Yahweh* appeared to Abraham as a man, he spoke as *Yahweh*. Abraham negotiated and bargained with the "man" who appeared to him as if he were bargaining and negotiating with *Yahweh* himself. But no one ever interacts with and addresses Jesus as if he were interacting with and addressing *Yahweh* himself. And neither does Jesus ever encourage anyone to do so. To the contrary, Jesus always distinguishes himself from *Yahweh*, his Father. He, Jesus, only does what he sees his Father doing. He does not act on his own initiative; he only does what his Father instructs him to do. There can be no question about it. None of Jesus' followers ever concluded that they were confronted with

⁴ See my separate exegetical notes on Part One. To be more exact, technically speaking Paul is making a sort of play on words with '*angelos*.' The fundamental meaning of '*angelos*' is messenger. By extension, it is used to describe the self-revelation of *Yahweh* by means of some sort of theophanic manifestation. But, as such, a theophanic manifestation of *Yahweh* is, in the final analysis, just a messenger of *Yahweh* himself. Accordingly, sometimes Paul uses '*angelos*' to denote a theophany. But when he uses '*angelos*' in this way, he clearly means to remind the reader that a theophany is merely functioning as a messenger. In some of his assertions in Part One, Paul uses '*angelos*' to denote a messenger, generically. But when he does so, he clearly means his readers to be aware of the controversy at hand—Was the Son of God supposed to be a theophany?—and to keep in mind that every theophany is ultimately just a messenger.

⁵ It is commonplace to suggest that the Jews in Paul's day had a problem embracing the deity of Jesus. It was his divine nature that was the stumbling-block for them. This is anachronistic. Granted, MODERN Jews typically object to Jesus being called God in any significant sense. But if my reconstruction of the background here is right, the Jews of Paul's day had no problem with this. They expected the *messiah* be God in some sense. Their problem was in believing that the all-too-ordinary Jesus was that *messiah* who represented God.

⁶ Jesus was not a theophany in the sense in which I am using the term. Neither was Jesus an incarnation of God in the traditional sense. Rather he was the iconization of God, a human being who functioned as the human embodiment of God's individual personhood and God's sovereign rule. For a fuller discussion of the difference between a theophany, an incarnation, and an iconization, see Appendix 2-B.

a theophany of God himself. They never made such a claim. And they never encouraged others to believe such a thing. Jesus was always presented as the man from Nazareth (a man with a distinct identity from God, his Father) whom they believed to be the appointed Son of God.

So, since Jesus was decidedly not a theophany, then—as measured by the original expectations and understanding of Paul’s Jewish readers—how could he be the Son of God? The Son of God was SUPPOSED TO BE a theophany. To the extent that he was not a theophany, he did not meet their expectations for who the Son of God would be. So, how could they continue believing that he was, in fact, the Son of God? It never had altogether made sense. And now that persecution had left them less willing to believe it of Jesus, they seemed to have a perfectly valid reason to reject it.

The Critical Point of Part One

The Jews who are abandoning their belief in Jesus are doing so on the alleged theological grounds that Jesus could not have been qualified to be the Son of God, because—contrary to what they believed the Son of God was supposed to be—Jesus was not a theophany of God himself. Rather, he was just a man. So the critical point that Paul seeks to establish in Part One of *Hebrews* is this: insofar as Jesus was the Son of God, he had a name and a status that surpassed by far any name or status given to any theophany of God. The name and status of “Son” was something he shared with other mere human beings—that is, with his forefather, King David, and with all the Davidic kings that came after David. Insofar as he was the Son, David himself had a more exalted status than any theophany. Their humble order of being as humans did not disqualify any of the Davidic kings from bearing the highest possible status and owning the most exalted name.

So, while with regard to the nature of his being, Jesus truly was an ordinary human being, yet his ordinary humanness did not disqualify him from being the Son of God and, therefore, more important than any theophany. It was with respect to an ordinary human being—to a descendent of David—that the promises had been spoken concerning the Son of God. All that God promised the Son of God he had promised to an ordinary human being. It was an ordinary human being who would be a “Son” to God. It was an ordinary human being who would rule with the very authority of God. It was an ordinary human being who would be the very image and representation of God to mankind. It was an ordinary human being who would rule in righteousness over the eternal Kingdom of God. Accordingly, the fact that Jesus was an ordinary human being did not disqualify him from being the Son of God; it did not disqualify him from being the heir of everything that God had promised. On the contrary, ordinary humanity was an essential and necessary prerequisite to his actually being qualified to be this Son.

Understanding the Argument of Part One

Having established the doctrinal point that Paul is seeking to make and having reconstructed the background, we are now in a position to understand the argument itself. I will not explain every detail of Paul’s argument here in this paper. I will leave that to

my exegetical notes. For my purposes here, I will explain Paul's argument by offering a loose paraphrase of it. Below is a loose paraphrase of each of the four paragraphs of Part One of *Hebrews* followed by a concise statement of the point of the paragraph. Preceding each paragraph is the New American Standard version's translation of that same paragraph:

First paragraph:

- Heb. 1:1 God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways,
Heb. 1:2 in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.
Heb. 1:3 And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,
Heb. 1:4 having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they.

In these last days, God has spoken to us through Jesus, the one appointed to be His Son; and God has confirmed the validity of Jesus' teaching through the effectiveness of Jesus' word to perform miraculous signs. When Jesus, this one who had been appointed to be His Son, had died to "purify" human sin, he ascended to his seat at the right hand of God, having qualified for and having inherited his status as the Son. Now this status as Son is a status that is as much greater than the status of any *angelos* as the name 'Son' is greater than the name 'angelos.'

(1:1-4)

Point of paragraph #1: The message brought to us by Jesus is a message delivered to us by the Son himself, a prophet of much greater importance and status than any *angelos*.

Second paragraph:

- Heb. 1:5 For to which of the angels did He ever say, "YOU ARE MY SON, TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU"? And again, "I WILL BE A FATHER TO HIM AND HE SHALL BE A SON TO ME"?
Heb. 1:6 And when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says, "AND LET ALL THE ANGELS OF GOD WORSHIP HIM."

Now no *angelos*—no theophany—has ever been appointed to be the Son; no *angelos*—no theophany—has ever been promised that status. As a matter of fact, as we see from Psalm 2, it is a human being—*a son of David*—who is declared to be the Son. And Psalm 2 is simply reiterating what was promised by God to David in 2 Samuel 7. The original promise to David was that his seed, human offspring of David, would be granted the status of being his Son. So, to the extent that being the Son is a more exalted status than that granted to any *angelos* (theophany), to that extent these Scriptures are promising to a human being a status that is superior to that granted to any *angelos* (theophany). Additionally, Psalm 97 describes an occasion where one of the Davidic kings is assuming authority over his realm. In that context, we read of a command for "all the

angeloi of God" to worship that King. This command in Psalm 97 is, therefore, explicit scriptural evidence of the superiority of the human Son, the "firstborn," to any *angelos*. For this evidence that the promised Davidic King possesses the highest position in all of God's creation.

(1:5-6)

Point of paragraph #2: The highest, most exalted status of being the Son was granted to a human being, not to an *angelos*.

Third paragraph:

- Heb. 1:7 And of the angels He says, "WHO MAKES HIS ANGELS WINDS, AND HIS MINISTERS A FLAME OF FIRE."
Heb. 1:8 But of the Son He says, "YOUR THRONE, O GOD, IS FOREVER AND EVER, AND THE RIGHTEOUS SCEPTER IS THE SCEPTER OF HIS KINGDOM."
Heb. 1:9 "YOU HAVE LOVED RIGHTEOUSNESS AND HATED LAWLESSNESS; THEREFORE GOD, YOUR GOD, HAS ANOINTED YOU WITH THE OIL OF GLADNESS ABOVE YOUR COMPANIONS."
Heb. 1:10 And, "YOU, LORD, IN THE BEGINNING LAID THE FOUNDATION OF THE EARTH, AND THE HEAVENS ARE THE WORKS OF YOUR HANDS;
Heb. 1:11 THEY WILL PERISH, BUT YOU REMAIN; AND THEY ALL WILL BECOME OLD LIKE A GARMENT,
Heb. 1:12 AND LIKE A MANTLE YOU WILL ROLL THEM UP; LIKE A GARMENT THEY WILL ALSO BE CHANGED. BUT YOU ARE THE SAME, AND YOUR YEARS WILL NOT COME TO AN END."
Heb. 1:13 But to which of the angels has He ever said, "SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND, UNTIL I MAKE YOUR ENEMIES A FOOTSTOOL FOR YOUR FEET"?
Heb. 1:14 Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?

Furthermore, the explicit perspective of the Scriptures with regard to *angeloi* is that they are merely messengers of God; they share the same role as wind and fire. But, by way of contrast, Psalm 45 predicts, speaking with regard to the Son, that *Yahweh* will grant him authority to rule in his place, with the very righteous rule of *Yahweh* himself, over an everlasting kingdom. Now Psalm 102 says of *Yahweh* that his existence will never end. The created order itself will come to an end; but God will never come to an end. He will remain forever and will ever be faithful to himself. Therefore, the God who promised an eternal kingdom to the Son (Psalm 45) will always be present to bring this kingdom about and make this promise a reality (Psalm 102). Consequently, the promise of a kingdom to the Son is an unfailing promise. Now then, to which of the *angeloi* has God ever said, "Sit at my right hand, until I make you enemies a footstool for your feet" (as he did to the Son in Psalm 110)? Aren't *ta angeloi* (theophanies) nothing other than manifestations of the divine spirit that are offered in religious service to God? Are they not simply sent by God to serve those of us human beings who are about to inherit salvation? Clearly, therefore, no *angelos* is as exalted and important as the Son.

(1:7-14)

Point of paragraph #3: The role and destiny of the Son is indeed of greater status than that of any *angelos*.

Fourth paragraph:

- Heb. 2:1 For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it.
Heb. 2:2 For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty,
Heb. 2:3 how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard,
Heb. 2:4 God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.

For this reason—since the Son is more exalted than any *angelos*—it is vital that we pay close attention to and give heed to what the Son came and taught us. We must not drift away from believing it. Why? Because if what God said through *angeloi* was inviolable, such that every act of unbelief and disobedience to it was justly punished, how could we expect to escape just punishment if we refuse to believe and obey the gospel of salvation that was proclaimed through the vastly more exalted Son? After this gospel of salvation was revealed through the Son, our lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard it from him directly. The apostles' testimony was validated by God himself as he confirmed its veracity through the miraculously sign that accompanied their proclamation of the gospel of Jesus.

(2:1–4)

Point of paragraph #4: Since Jesus, being the Son, has been granted such an exalted status and authority, we disregard his message, the gospel, at our peril.

Summary of Argument

As one could discover by studying the above paraphrase, I understand the argument of Part One to boil down, quite simply, to the following:

The culmination of God's revelation to mankind has been delivered to us by Jesus, the Son himself. As the Son, Jesus is a prophet of much greater importance and status than any mere messenger (any mere angelos), including any theophanic manifestation. [1:1–4]

The exalted status and authority promised to the Son is a status and authority promised to an ordinary human being, not to any theophany (angelos). [1:5–6]

The scriptural evidence makes it clear that the status and authority granted to the Son is vastly greater than the status and authority granted to any theophany (angelos). [1:7–14]

Implicit inference from the argument above: Therefore, Jesus' humanity does not disqualify him from being the exalted and authoritative Son; it is an essential prerequisite to his being the Son.

Since Jesus, as the Son, has been promised such an exalted status and authority—and therefore is of vastly greater importance than any other messenger (angelos) of God—we would be foolish to disregard the message that has been delivered to us by Jesus. [2:1–4]

Implicit implication of the above: It would be foolish to disregard Jesus' message on the ground that he was "just a human being"; for it is to "just a human being" that rule over the Kingdom of God has been promised.

The primary, hortative purpose of Part One is clear: Paul wants his readers to give heed to the gospel message proclaimed by Jesus and to persist in believing it. He does not want Jesus' humanity to be used as an excuse to disregard it. The secondary, doctrinal purpose of this part is more implicit, and less overt: Paul wants his readers to understand that, according to the scriptural evidence, the fact that Jesus was a human being does not disqualify him from being the Son of God, the *messiah*. On the contrary, it is a prerequisite for such a role. Accordingly, Jesus' humanity does not give Paul's readers a valid theological basis for rejecting Jesus' claim to be the Son of God. Paul is seeking to accomplish both of these purposes concurrently in Part One of the book of *Hebrews*.

The Problem for Orthodox Trinitarianism

Before we get to the alleged evidence for the Trinity in Part One of *Hebrews*, I want to point out the difficulty that the conclusions we have reached so far create for orthodox Trinitarianism. If the argument of Part One is as I have described, it seems impossible that Paul believes and espouses orthodox Trinitarianism. Let me explain.

What if we put ourselves in Paul's shoes? Imagine being called upon to respond to a person who is abandoning his belief in Jesus. And imagine that he is doing so on the grounds that, upon further reflection, he didn't think that Jesus could qualify as the Son of God because Jesus was just a human being. Now imagine you are someone who is committed to the truth of orthodox Trinitarianism when you respond to this. What would you say? Would you not say something along these lines? –

What do you mean Jesus cannot be the Son of God because he was "just a man"? Jesus was not "just a man." Jesus was much more than a man. Jesus was the human incarnation of the second person of the eternal Godhead. He possessed within his own person the very essence of eternal deity. The very person of God himself was present within Jesus. Therefore, the reason you offer for abandoning your belief in Jesus is simply false. Jesus was not a mere man. He was the God-man. He was the incarnation of the eternal, divine Son of God.

One could not expect an orthodox Trinitarian to respond to this challenge in any way appreciably different from this.

But now contrast this with the way that Paul actually responds to just this challenge:

What do you mean Jesus cannot be the Son of God because he was "just a man"? Have you not paid attention to what the Scriptures actually say? According to the predictions in the Scriptures, it is to be expected that the Son of God will be "just a man." It is a human being, and only to a human being, that the status of Son of God (and all that at that would entail) was promised. No other being, no other creature, has been promised so exalted a status as the human offspring of David. It is this coming offspring of David that, according to the Scriptures, will rule as God himself over the eternal Kingdom of God. Accordingly, the fact that Jesus was merely a human being in no way disqualifies him from being the Son of God. On the contrary, being a mere human being is a prerequisite to his being the Son of God.

Notice that in no respect does Paul challenge the premise of the objection to Jesus' Sonship. He does not deny that Jesus is merely a human being. Paul fully and enthusiastically embraces that premise. What he challenges is what the objector infers from this fact. The objector uses it as a refutation of Jesus' Sonship, as a disqualification.

Paul denies that it is such. Jesus' humanity is no disqualification for his being the Son, the *messiah*.

Why does Paul construct his argument as he does? Why does he not challenge the initial premise? Why does he actually accept the objector's premise? Paul's approach in Part One would seem to suggest that he is not entering the debate as a committed orthodox Trinitarian.

The problem for the Trinitarian is worse still. The central force of Paul's argument seems to utterly depend on his denying the very point that the Trinitarian would eagerly want to make: that Jesus is more than a human being. And the Trinitarian would be eager to reject the very point that Paul makes the center of his argument: that Jesus was an ordinary human being. Notice that in comparing the status of Jesus to an *angelos*, the Trinitarian would inevitably want to argue that Jesus is as much greater than an *angelos* as he has inherited a greater name than him—namely, "God"! Jesus is greater than any *angelos* because God is greater than any *angelos* and Jesus is God. But this is most emphatically NOT Paul's argument! Instead, Paul argues: Jesus is as much greater than any *angelos* as he has inherited a greater name than him—namely, "Son"! Jesus is greater than an *angelos* because he is the Son of God, and while the Son of God is just a mere man, nonetheless he has been promised the highest status of any being in God's cosmos, higher than anything promised to any *angelos*.

These observations present a significant challenge to orthodox Trinitarianism. Any and every committed orthodox Trinitarian would have immediately objected to the premise of Paul's readers' objection: Jesus is NOT a mere human being!! But not only does Paul not challenge it, he exploits it to prove Jesus' Sonship. From Paul's perspective, it is BECAUSE Jesus is a mere human being that it is POSSIBLE for him to be the Son of God. So, why does Paul seem to take exactly the opposite perspective from the orthodox Trinitarian? The orthodox Trinitarian wants to accept the fact that ordinary humanity and Sonship are incompatible. Paul rejects this incompatibility. I believe Paul approaches Part One so differently from what we would expect from an orthodox Trinitarian for one very simple reason: he is not an orthodox Trinitarian. He has a fundamentally different understanding of the nature of Jesus as the Son of God.

In any case, the burden of proof lies on the orthodox Trinitarian to show otherwise. The orthodox Trinitarian must show how orthodox Trinitarian doctrine is compatible with and coherent with the fundamental essence of Paul's argument in Part One of *Hebrews*. This is not an easy challenge. It is, I believe, an insurmountable obstacle to establishing that orthodox Trinitarian doctrine is the theology of the book of *Hebrews*. It is more reasonable to accept that the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity receives no support from the book of *Hebrews*. And that is so, I believe, because the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is neither a biblical, nor an apostolic doctrine.

Evidence for the Trinity in Part One

I now turn to the various proof-texts that have been (or might be) used by Trinitarians to support their belief in the Trinity from Part One of *Hebrews*. I will explain the argument that is made to "prove" the Trinity from each proof-text and then critique the argument.

PROOF-TEXT #1: JESUS WAS AN AGENT OF CREATION

Argument from proof-text

Hebrews 1: 2, in making some descriptive remarks related to the importance of the Son, reads (in the NASV), "through whom also He made the world." It would appear, from this translation, that Jesus is being described as some sort of intermediate or collaborating agent in God's creation of the created universe. The question arises, "How could that be?" How can Jesus exist before the creation of everything that has been created, such that he can be an agent in that creation? If no one other than God can have existence before the creation of the universe, then it must be the case that Jesus is God. Otherwise, how could he exist prior to the creation of the world in such a way that he could be an agent in the creation of the world?

Response to Argument

In response, the first thing to note is the tendentious and misleading nature of the English translation of this clause. Quite clearly, I think, the translator is interpreting this statement through the lens of orthodox Trinitarian doctrines and assumptions. The Greek word that the NASV translates "world" in this clause is not, as one might expect, the Greek word *kosmos*. Rather, it is *aiones*, "ages." Literally, it says, "*dia* [through] whom, in fact, he made the ages." Paul's statement is talking about God's creation of history, not his creation of the stars, sun, solar system, etc. Paul is talking about how Jesus is the one *dia* [through] whom God created all of human history, not about how Jesus was an agent in the creation of all created things.

Indeed, Paul is not talking about Jesus being an "agent" at all. It is very traditional to translate *dia* in this and similar contexts as "through." And traditional interpretation interprets this "through" as indicating agency. So, if we go with the traditional interpretation of *dia* (while we reject the traditional reading of *aiones* as "world"), then the clause would read "through whom, in fact, he made the ages." But this is a highly unlikely reading, for it fails to contribute to Paul's purpose in this paragraph. More specifically, it fails to contribute to what is likely the purpose for this very assertion. Paul's purpose is to highlight the exalted and important destiny and inheritance of this man, Jesus. (Note the assertion just preceding this one: "he [Jesus] is the one whom he [God] appointed heir of all things.") Paul's purpose is not to explain Jesus' role in bringing history (or the created order) into being. Nor is it to explain how history or the created order came to be. His purpose is to explain the superior status and authority that belongs to Jesus as his destiny by virtue of the title "Son" that has been granted to him. So, it is highly unlikely that *dia* should be translated "through" in the sense of agency.

Paul's point seems to be that Jesus is the omega point, the endpoint of history. All of history is aimed at and is resolving itself toward a purpose that is embodied in Jesus, the Son. Jesus, therefore, is the *raison d'être* of the storyline of history. He is the reason that there is any history at all. Jesus is the one that supplies history with its meaning and significance. The way Paul chose to express this is this: "Jesus, in fact, is the one *dia* whom God made the ages."⁷ How to aptly translate this *dia* is unimportant once we understand what Paul is intending to say. For the sake of convenience, I will translate it like this: "he [Jesus], in fact, is the one with a view to whom he [God] made the ages."

Having understood it accurately, this statement ceases to be any sort of evidence of Jesus' pre-existent deity. It is a statement about the status, role, and authority that has been promised to the human Jesus as his destiny in his capacity as the Son of God. It says nothing, one way or the other, about his pre-existence. Neither does it say anything about his ontological nature. Paul simply assumes that we know that the Jesus he is describing is the human being from Nazareth. It is the human Jesus who is the one "with a view to whom God made the ages." This human being who was brought into being to be the Son of God and to rule forever as the human embodiment of God's very own rule—he is the one who has always been in view as the ultimate point for anything that transpires in history. It is all being made and caused for him. It is all happening in order to ultimately bring glory to this man. It is *dia* this human being, Jesus, that all things that happen happen.

Hebrews 1:2, therefore, is not a proof of (nor is it supportive of) the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. Rather, it is evidence of the exalted status and destiny of the Son of God, the promised offspring of David in whom God promised to embody his sovereign reign. In and of itself, this conclusion does not rule out the possibility that Paul is writing from the standpoint of orthodox Trinitarianism. The orthodox Trinitarian could argue that Paul simultaneously believes that Jesus is the promised offspring of David in whom God promised to embody his sovereign reign and, at the same time, the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. To determine whether this is in fact what Paul has in mind will take further discussion. In order to have the requisite background from which to respond to the other Trinitarian proof-texts found in the opening paragraph of *Hebrews*, we will need to discuss the meaning of the title "Son" as Paul means it in the opening paragraph. That, in turn, will directly rule out *Hebrews* 1:2 as making room for orthodox Trinitarianism. So, in the following excursus, we will look at the opening paragraph of *Hebrews*, in general, focusing on the meaning of the title "Son" in that first paragraph.

EXCURSUS: MEANING OF "SON" IN PARAGRAPH ONE OF *HEBREWS*

In order to have a convenient way to refer to the various parts of the opening paragraph of the book of *Hebrews*, I have analyzed it into discrete parts below. I list the Greek text of paragraph one divided into discrete portions accompanied by a wooden

⁷ See my paper "Orthodox Trinitarianism and the Meaning of *Dia*" for a defense of the validity of this sort of understanding of the meaning and significance of *dia* in this sort of construction.

rendering of it into English. Following the analysis, I offer my own translation of the paragraph:

Hebrews / Paragraph #1

- (1a) **πολυμερως και πολυτροπως παλαιαι**
many-portion-edly and many-ways-edly in times gone by
- (1b) **ο θεος λαλησας τοις πατρσιν εν τοις προφηταις**
God, having spoken to the fathers by the prophets
- (1c) **επι εσχατου των ημερων τουτων**
upon the last of these days
- (1d) **ελαλησεν ημιν εν υιο**
he has spoken to us in the Son
- (1e) **οσν εσηκην κληρονομον παντων**
whom he appointed heir of all things
- (1f) **διου και εποιησεν τουσ αιωνας**
through whom, in fact, he made the ages
- (1g) **οσς ων αοπαυγασμα θυς δοξης και χαρακτηρ θυς**
υποστασεως αυτου
who is being the light-breaking-forth of glory and the stamp of his *hupostasis*
- (1h) **φερων τε τα παντα τω ρηματι θυς δυναμει**
αυτου δια αυτου
and *phero*-ing all things by the *rhema* of his *dunamis* through him
- (2a) **καταρτισμον των αμαρτιων ποιησας**
having made purification of sins
- (2b) **εκαθισεν εν δεξια θυς μεγαλυσυνης εν υψηλοις**
he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high
- (2c) **τοσουτων κρειττων γενομενος των αγγελων οσως**
διαφορωτερον παρ αυτουσ κληρονομηκεν ονομα
having become better than the *angeloι* by so much as he has inherited a name more excellent than they

My Translation of Paragraph #1

*In past times, in many portions and in many ways, God, having spoken to the fathers through the prophets, has in the last of these days spoken to us through the Son—he is the one whom he appointed heir of all things; he, in fact, is the one with a view to whom he made the ages; he exists as the Glory's shining forth into the darkness and as the stamp of his particular personal identity—and he supported everything (the Son said) by the divinely authoritative word (spoken) through him. 2•When he had accomplished the cleansing for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much greater than the *angeloι* as the name he had inherited was more distinguished than theirs.*

When it comes to understanding this opening paragraph of *Hebrews*, one faces many different interpretive decisions. How one answers any one of these many questions will limit the options for how he answers the others. So, it is a puzzle. One needs to discover just the right combination of interpretive decisions that finally makes sense of everything in the paragraph as a whole, within its larger context.

As it happens, the fundamental interpretive question in this paragraph coincides with the fundamental doctrinal question that concerns us in this paper: who exactly is the "Son" referred to in the very first assertion—specifically, when Paul says, "God...has in the last of these days spoken to us through the Son." Who exactly is "the Son"?

It seems to me that, given the various proposals throughout the history of Christian doctrine, there are three possible answers to this question: (i) the "Son" could be the eternally distinct second person of the eternal, triune godhead, (ii) the "Son" could be the eternally distinct second person of the eternal, triune godhead insofar as he has incarnated himself as a human being, being mysteriously united with and identified with a human person, or (iii) the "Son" could be the unique descendent of David who will fulfill all the promises made to David about a descendent who would arise and would be the embodiment of God's own sovereign rule over his creation.

We could present these same three options, more simply, this way: the "Son" could be (i) the second person of the Trinity, (ii) the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, or (iii) the promised human King (son of David) who was predestined to rule as God's proxy over the Kingdom of God. We need to decide which of these three options Paul has in view when he uses the term "Son" in the opening paragraph of *Hebrews*.

If we were to consider only the evidence of the Old Testament writings and the concept "Son of God" that we find there, then option (iii) is clearly how we must understand Paul. There is no second person of the Trinity identified as "the Son" in the Old Testament. Neither is there an incarnation of the second person of the Trinity identified as "the Son." But Christian orthodoxy insists that it has discovered the ultimate truth about God's true nature in its doctrine of the Trinity, and Christian orthodoxy maintains that—in spite of the fact that there is no biblical evidence for it in the Old Testament—the term 'Son' denotes the second person of the Trinity. So, rather than reject Christian orthodoxy out of hand, let's take seriously the possibility that by 'the Son' Paul intends to denote the second person of the Trinity, whether in his state as an eternal person of the divine being (option i above) or in his state as incarnated in a human person (option ii above). This is without a shred of scriptural evidence from the Old Testament—which should be a significant problem for both of these options. But in this paper, since it is the very issue being debated, I will not reject either of these options unless they cannot be maintained from the evidence of *Hebrews* itself.

So, even though there is nothing within prior revelation to suggest that 'Son of God' means anything other than option (iii), we will limit ourselves to arguing from the evidence of the opening paragraph itself. Does it seem likely, then, that in this opening paragraph Paul intended to refer to the second person of the Trinity in one way or another?

To illustrate how inter-related all the interpretive questions are, consider the following example:

What does (1f) mean? What does Paul intend in that assertion? It reads: δῑ οῡ καῑ ε̄ποῑησεν̄ τοῡσ̄ αῑωνας̄. Rendered partially in English it reads, "**dia [through] whom, in fact, he made the ages [aionas].**"⁸ It is clear enough that Paul intends to say that God (the one who has spoken to us through his Son in these last days) made the ages [aionas] *dia* [through] his Son. But there are several interpretive questions that need to be answered before we understand this assertion. What does Paul mean by the *aionas*? Specifically, what exactly did he make when he made these *aiones*? And what does it mean that God made them *dia* [through] the Son? And finally, why is this significant to the larger point that Paul is making? How we answer each of these questions will differ, depending upon which of the above options for 'Son' we understand Paul to be meaning.

If by 'the Son' Paul means option (i)—the eternal second person of the Trinity—then it is entirely possible that (1f) is a reference to the initial creation of the created cosmos. In that case, (1f) could be saying that God made the world, the created order, *dia* [through] the Son.⁹ So, under option (i) it is possible that the assertion that God initially created the world *dia* the Son could mean that the Son acted as some sort of intermediate agent in the creation of created reality. This is possible under the first option for who we understand the Son to be—option (i). But this would not be possible under option (iii). If by 'the Son' Paul means option (iii)—the human son of David that God has created to embody his own rule—then clearly (1f) cannot be affirming an intermediate role in the initial creation of the world. The human son of David did not exist prior to created reality such that he could have any sort of role in its creation. So, clearly, what options are available to us for how we are to understand *dia* in (1f) is entirely dependent upon who we understand the Son to be.

Many New Testament grammarians—resistant to any sort of challenge to their orthodox Trinitarianism—would likely dispute this. But the fact remains that this

⁸ A typical English translation renders *aiones* as "world." It is difficult to know why this is so. As already discussed, *aiones* means "ages." In this statement, Paul is referring to the authoring and creating of history, not the creation of the physical, material objects that compose the cosmos. But we will not eliminate the traditional readings out of hand in this discussion.

⁹ But see note 7 above. It is likely that the typical English translation has this interpretation of Paul's statement in mind, namely, that it is a reference to the initial creation of the created order. Accordingly, this typical interpretation of (1f) would cite it as a proof-text for the standard orthodox view that the second person of the eternal triune godhead was the intermediate agent of creation. The first person of the Trinity is the ultimate creator, the ultimate agent of creation; but the second person of the Trinity is the intermediate agent of creation. Statements like this one in *Hebrews* are cited as biblical evidence for such a doctrine. It is difficult to know how they reconcile this with the creation account in Genesis. What do they think Paul would be thinking? How can one read Genesis 1 and think that there is any room for intermediate agency? If the creation came to be by God "speaking" it into existence, then what role remained for an intermediate agent? It would seem that the description "God said, 'Let there be X' and there was X" is about as immediate as you can get. There is no room for an intermediary. Nonetheless, typical orthodox interpretation has tended to overlook this problem altogether and declare that Paul is asserting an intermediary role for the Son in the creation of the cosmos.

preposition *dia*, in the sort of syntactic construction we find here [*dia* followed by an object in the genitive case], can be used to indicate other things besides agency. In particular, it can be used to indicate some sort of reference point. It can indicate a someone or a something in the light of which something else is asserted to be true. Or, more specifically, it can indicate the *raison d'être* of something—that is, the very reason for the existence of something. Either of these could be the meaning of *dia* in (1f). Paul could be saying that it is *with reference to* the Son and his role that the ages (*aiones*) were created. Or, more specifically, he could be saying that the very reason that the ages (*aiones*) were created at all was *by reason of* the Son and what God wanted to accomplish in relation to him.¹⁰ Either of these would make perfectly good sense in this context. Indeed, they make more sense than intermediate agency. Paul's purpose here is to give evidence of the exalted status of the Son. The Son clearly has an exalted status if he is the one in light of whom everything that exists derives its meaning. But what would it prove were the Son to have served as an intermediate agent in creation? Would that make him an exalted person? The fact that the ground had an intermediate role in the creation of Adam does not mean that the ground has an exalted status. Intermediate agency in the event of creation would not obviously and necessarily exalt the Son. But the fact that everything that exists and everything that happens does so *for* the Son, that clearly and obviously does point to an exalted status. Given Paul's purpose in this opening paragraph, then, it is more likely that Paul is claiming of the Son that he is the *raison d'être* of the ages or the reference point for their meaning and significance than it is for him to be claiming of the Son that he is the intermediate agent of creation.

But the main point here is this: every assertion in the opening paragraph of *Hebrews* will be construed somewhat differently depending upon who exactly we understand the Son to be. It may be dramatically different or only subtly different; but our interpretation of any one of the assertions in the paragraph will differ in relation to what conception of Son we think Paul has in view.

Potentially, this puts us in a position to determine Paul's intent in the paragraph. We should be able to discern which concept of Son Paul has in view. If, in order to accord with the concept of Son that we assume Paul has in mind, we would have to construe an assertion in a way that seems highly unlikely or improbable, then it follows that it is unlikely or improbable that Paul has that concept of Son in view. So, for example, if by assuming that 'the Son' means the second person of the Trinity an assertion in this paragraph must be construed in a way that is not likely for Paul to have meant, then it is not very likely that Paul intended us to understand 'the Son' to mean the second person of the Trinity. Alternatively, if, on the assumption that 'the Son' means the human son of David, an assertion must be understood in a way that is not likely what Paul intended,

¹⁰ In more typical English idiom, we would probably use the preposition "for" to express either of these options. "For whom, in fact, he made the ages." = "For the Son, God made the ages." See my paper "Orthodox Trinitarianism and the Meaning of *Dia*" for a more thorough defense of the validity of this sort of understanding of the meaning and significance of *dia* in this sort of construction.

then it is not reasonable to conclude that Paul intended us to understand 'the Son' to mean the human son of David in this paragraph.

The above would seem to supply us with a promising strategy for determining who is in view in this paragraph. We simply need to look at each separate assertion in the paragraph and, given how it would have to be interpreted in the light of each respective option for the meaning of 'the Son', determine whether such an assertion could possibly be valid. The meaning of 'the Son' that would allow for every assertion in the paragraph to be a valid and meaningful claim would likely be the meaning of 'the Son' that Paul intended.

There is a complicating factor however. The complication stems from how orthodox doctrine treats the second option for 'the Son'—that is, for the Son as the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. We must explore this.

What can be asserted with respect to the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity? If the eternal second person of the Trinity was an agent in the original creation of the world, can that role be attributed to Jesus, the incarnation of that second person of the Trinity? To answer "yes" is arguably problematic. The eternally existent person of the triune godhead has a different history than the person of Jesus who is the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. It would make more sense to keep their histories and their identities cleanly separate, attributing only that which is true of Jesus to Jesus, and attributing only that which is true of the eternal, pre-existent second person of the Trinity to the second person of the Trinity. Hence, it would make the most sense to say of Jesus that he had no role to play in the creation of the world, even if it is completely true that the second person of the Trinity who has incarnated himself in Jesus did have such a role.

However, this is not how orthodox Trinitarians have tended to look at it. As a general rule, they are prepared to predicate of Jesus anything that is true of the second person of the Trinity. So, if the second person of the Trinity was involved in the creation of the world, then Jesus was involved in the creation of the world. If the second person of the Trinity is ontologically of divine essence, then Jesus is ontologically of divine essence. If the second person of the Trinity is omniscient and omnipresent, then Jesus is omniscient and omnipresent.¹¹ In principle, orthodox Trinitarians are prepared to affirm the converse as well. Anything that happened to his incarnation in Jesus can be predicated of the second person of the Trinity. So, if Jesus was mocked, the second person of the Trinity was mocked. If Jesus wept, the second person of the Trinity wept. If Jesus died, the second person of the Trinity died.¹²

¹¹ Of course orthodox Trinitarianism finesses this. Jesus is omniscient, they say, but Jesus does not necessarily employ or utilize his omniscience. Hence, Jesus can be omniscient at the same time that he does not know something. How? He has the potential to know everything—he is omniscient in his divine nature. But, he may not actually know something to the extent that he chooses not to exercise his potential to know.

¹² This too is finessed. Strictly speaking the divine nature of Jesus did not die. Hence, the second person of the Trinity *per se* did not die. But, insofar as he was united with Jesus' human nature when Jesus died on the cross, to that extent God, the second person of the Trinity, submitted to death. But Trinitarian

This makes our task of determining who the Son is in the opening of *Hebrews* much more difficult. It is not a simple matter of determining between option (1) and option (iii), determining whether every assertion can be made with respect to an eternally divine person of the triune godhead or, alternatively, with respect to a human son of David. Option (ii) allows for both. If it can only be said of a human son of David, then orthodox Trinitarians will say that option (ii) is still possible—for it is being said of the *human* incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. If it can only be said of the second person of the Trinity in his eternal deity, then again, orthodox Trinitarians will say that option (ii) is still possible—for it is being said of the second person of the Trinity in his state of incarnation. So, the only way to rule out option (ii) is if an assertion is made in this opening paragraph that is not likely when it is made, specifically, with respect to a human incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. But option (ii) will accommodate a wide range of assertions. Any assertion X about the human Jesus can usually be accommodated. The Trinitarian will say, "In his human nature, X is indeed true of the incarnate second person of the Trinity." Likewise, any assertion Y about the divine second person of the Trinity can usually be accommodated. The Trinitarian will say, "In his divine nature, Y is indeed true." So, it would be quite unusual and fortuitous to find an assertion that cannot be adequately accounted for by this sort of strategy.

Nevertheless, I think we have such an assertion in this paragraph. Consider assertion (2c):

tosou/tw kreitōterōn geno/menōs twn aγγελων ὡς ἠν ὁ ἰησοῦς διὰ τὸ ἔλαττον παρὰ αὐτῶν ἐκλήθη ὄνομα

=having become better than the angeloi by so much as he has inherited a name more excellent than they.

This assertion is made with reference to Jesus. Paul is saying that, upon Jesus' ascension to the "right hand of the Majesty on high," Jesus became better (more exalted) than any and every *angelos*. And further, he became better than any and every *angelos* precisely because he was inheriting a better "name" than they. This is a problematic assertion for option (ii) in particular and for orthodox Trinitarians in general. Paul is clearly implying that, before his ascension, Jesus did not yet possess a status that was superior to any and every *angelos*. Or, at the very least, he is asserting that, before the ascension, it was not yet manifest that Jesus' status was more exalted than any and every *angelos*. Is it at all plausible that Paul would make such an assertion if he believed what the orthodox Trinitarian believes about Jesus?

If Paul believed that the Jesus who was born in Bethlehem was the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity; and further, if Paul believed that the designation "Son" directly described Jesus as such, then why would Paul assert that it was upon his ascension to "the right hand of the Majesty on high"—after having died for the sins of mankind and having been resurrected—that Jesus came to have a more exalted status than any *angelos*? If he is an orthodox Trinitarian, then clearly he believes that the Jesus

discussion is conflicted about this strategy when it comes to Jesus' death. Different people will tend in different directions.

born in Bethlehem was *already* more exalted than any and every *angelos*. How could he not be? He is the incarnation of God himself, an incarnation of the eternal Logos, an incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. Is he not therefore superior to any and every *angelos* by virtue of that fact alone? Why would someone who believed that Jesus was greater than the *angeloi* by virtue of his bare existence alone make the assertion that Paul does in (2c)? Assertion (2c) quite clearly suggests that Jesus' status relative to the *angeloi* changed in some significant sense at his ascension to the right hand of God. How could his status change if Jesus has been as exalted as God himself from the very moment of his inception?¹³

But assertion (2c) is exactly what we would expect if Paul were describing the human son of David. The human son of David was born at Bethlehem with a promised destiny. He was the one who would fulfill all the promises that God had made in his covenant with David. But was he already fulfilling those promises at the moment of his birth? No, of course not. He was just a baby at the beginning. As the adult Jesus began to teach publicly, was he then the Son of God that God had promised David's offspring would be? Arguably, he was not. Granted, he was appointed to become that Son of God. That was in truth his promised destiny. But, arguably, he was not that promised Son yet. Or, to put it another way, he was the Son of God in potential; but he was not yet the Son of God in actuality. Jesus had to qualify for the role of Son of God, for the position of human king over the eternal Kingdom of God. It was his destiny to do so. And, in the end, he would indeed qualify for it. God in his sovereign purpose would see to it that he did so. So, in that sense, Jesus was already Son of God and could legitimately be said to be the Son of God. But in another important sense, he was not yet Son of God. He would be fully and *actually* qualified to be the Son of God only on the condition that he obey the assignment that his Father had given him—namely, that he die for the sins of the world. Jesus' resurrection and subsequent ascension were the evidence that the Father considered Jesus to have met this condition. The resurrection and ascension were the divine indication that

¹³ The usual strategy adopted by Trinitarians to deal with this problem is to conceive of the incarnation as a kind of condescension. The exalted second person of the Trinity lowers himself in order to become a human being in Jesus. Hence, during the time of his condescension he is not more exalted than the *angeloi*. Then, at his ascension, he is granted his exalted status once again, the one he gave up when he chose to become incarnate in Jesus. This response assumes that the ascended Jesus sheds his humanity and ceases to be a human being after his ascension. That is clearly not the position of the apostles in the New Testament. Nowhere does the New Testament ever teach that Jesus was only a human being for a short time, only provisionally. Rather, the New Testament perspective everywhere is that Jesus, the human being, is and will be for all eternity the human being who rules over God's creation as God's proxy. Note the argument that Paul makes in *Hebrews*. His argument is not that Jesus was temporarily lower than the *angeloi* due to his having condescended to be a human for a short while, but having ascended and shed his humanness, he is now greater than the *angeloi*. On the contrary, Paul's argument is that Jesus—the full-blooded, ordinary human being—is greater than any and every *angelos* precisely because he is the Son of God in and because of that ordinary humanness. In other words, it is simply not biblical to conceive of the coming of Jesus as a human being as some kind of divine condescension. Jesus does not represent the condescension of God; Jesus is the coming into existence of an exalted man. Jesus is not God lowering himself to become a human being; Jesus is a human being having been made to be God.

Jesus was now qualified to serve as the Son of God, as king over the eternal Kingdom of God. On this view, therefore, it makes all the sense in the world that Paul would point to Jesus' ascension as the point at which Jesus "became" more important than any and every *angelos*. Before his ascension, Jesus was the one destined to receive a status greater than any *angelos*. After the ascension, Jesus had become qualified for the role that was of greater status than that of any *angelos*.

The Trinitarian might object that all this could still be true for option (ii). He might suggest that—in complete accord with what I have just described above—it is true that Jesus had to qualify to be the Son *insofar as his human nature is concerned*; but it is not true insofar as his divine nature is concerned.¹⁴ But we must consider this more carefully. Is it likely that this is what Paul is saying?

Consider Paul's purpose in this paragraph. His purpose is to establish that Jesus, being the Son of God, is more exalted than any *angelos*. Now let's suppose that Paul believes that the Son of God is, by definition, the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. And let us suppose, in concord with Trinitarian assumptions, that Paul can predicate of Jesus anything that is true of the second person of the Trinity, or he can predicate of Jesus anything that is true of Jesus in his humanity. So, Paul could predicate of Jesus that he is greater than any *angelos* simply and directly on the grounds that, in his divine nature, he is the second person of the Trinity. Or, he could predicate of Jesus that he is greater than any *angelos* on the grounds that, in his human nature, he qualified himself, through his death on the cross, to inherit all that God promised David's offspring. To argue for Jesus' exalted status on the first basis—his essential deity as God incarnate—is clear, simple, straightforward, incontrovertible, and compelling. To argue for Jesus' exalted status on the second basis—his having attained a status promised to the offspring of David, namely, that of being the human person who would embody the divine rule—is less obvious, more complex, more subtle, and more problematic. Why, then, would Paul choose to make the second, more subtle, and more problematic argument when he could easily, and legitimately, have made the first argument? Would an orthodox Trinitarian today fail to make the first argument—declaring the exalted status of Jesus on the basis of his divine nature? Then why did Paul fail to do so? I would maintain that it is because the first argument was not available to Paul. Paul did not believe in the incarnation in the sense in which Trinitarian orthodoxy does. Paul did not believe that Jesus was the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. Paul did not believe that anything that can

¹⁴ This strategy is the one typically adopted by orthodox Trinitarians when they confront evidence of Jesus' humanity. They simply accept the evidence as being applicable to his "human nature" while not being applicable to his "divine nature." This is, of course, problematic. Is it or is it not true of the individual person of Jesus? By dividing up his human and divine natures, they give themselves permission to predicate contradictory things of the same person, Jesus. Then, if someone objects that this renders Jesus divided, not an identifiably singular person, they assert that the divided, mutually incompatible divine and human natures of Jesus are inexplicably and mysteriously united in one unified person through the magic of the hypostatic union. It is questionable whether this is an acceptable resolution. Much that is nonsense can be offered in the name of mystery. But, for the sake of this paper, I will accept the Trinitarian's premise that something can be true of Jesus' human nature that is not true of his divine nature and *vice versa*.

be predicated of God can be predicated of Jesus. That very idea would have been completely incomprehensible to Paul. God was God. Jesus was the human son of David. As the human son of David, Jesus had a supremely exalted destiny. He was destined to be the Son of God, the locus of God's own authority over all of his creation—indeed, the very human embodiment of the person and identity of *Yahweh* himself. But, to think that a being who, in terms of his ontology, is created, contingent, and human could simultaneously be a being who is ontologically uncreated, non-contingent, and divine—that very idea would have been incomprehensible to Paul.

What the discussion above shows, I would maintain, is how highly unlikely it is that Paul's concept of the Son is to be understood along the lines of option (ii). For Paul, 'the Son' does not mean the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. All things considered, assertion (2c) makes it highly probable that we must understand 'the Son' in the opening paragraph of *Hebrews* in the sense of option (iii) and not in the sense of either option (i) or option (ii). Hence, by 'Son', the opening paragraph of *Hebrews* denotes the utterly human offspring of David who has the uniquely exalted destiny of being the iconization of *Yahweh* himself and the embodiment of *Yahweh*'s rule over the whole of creation. As a consequence, from the very first sentence of the opening paragraph, we can see that the Son who is in view is the promised human offspring of David—the one predestined to be king over the eternal Kingdom of God.¹⁵ We must, therefore, interpret every assertion in the opening paragraph in light of the fact that this is what Paul means by 'the Son' and that this is whom the paragraph is describing.

End of Excursus

Now we can return to our understanding of *Hebrews* 1:2. In the discussion prior to the Excursus we concluded that the assertion "*dia* whom also he made the ages" is not intended to suggest that Jesus was some sort of agent in the initial creation of the cosmos. On the contrary, it is intended to suggest that Jesus, the human offspring of King David, is the person with respect to whom the entirety of cosmic history has its meaning and significance. Everything that is and everything that has occurred is for him and about him. Jesus—mere human that he is—is the centerpiece of all of created reality. No being under God himself is more exalted than him.

But, before the *Excursus*, we asked whether this doesn't still leave room for orthodox Trinitarianism. Could Paul not be speaking in *Hebrews* 1:2 of Jesus the God-man, the incarnation of the second person of the eternal godhead? In the *Excursus*, we have shown that this is not the concept of Son that Paul has in mind in the opening paragraph. Rather, Paul is using 'the Son' to denote the utterly human offspring of David who has the uniquely exalted destiny of being the iconization of *Yahweh* himself and to embody *Yahweh*'s rule over the whole of creation. Hence, *Hebrews* 1:2 is describing Jesus, the

¹⁵Note that it is the humanity of Jesus that creates the very problem that Paul is seeking to address. How can a human being be the Son, the *messiah*? Isn't the role of the Son a much too exalted role for any mere human being to fill? Paul's answer is "no." God always intended a mere human being to fill that role. The book of *Hebrews* is written to give a full and extended defense of Paul's answer to this question.

very human son of David. It is the human being Jesus who is the one with a view to whom all of history is authored by God; and, by implication, the human Jesus is the one with reference to whom all of history receives its meaning and significance.

PROOF-TEXT #2: JESUS IS EXACTLY LIKE GOD

Argument from proof-text

Hebrews 1:3, in making a third descriptive remark related to the importance and role of the Son, reads (in the NASV), "And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature." If we make clear the identity of the antecedents of each pronoun, it reads: "And Jesus is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of God's nature." It would appear, from this translation, that Jesus is being described as somehow a being who reflects and represents the glory and nature of God himself. How can that be? How can Jesus, a human being, reflect and represent the glory and nature of God himself? Surely, given what a human being is, no human being could represent the glory and nature of God himself unless, in some sense, he was God himself. Hence, only if he assumes that Jesus is God could Paul describe him as the "radiance of His glory" and as the "exact representation of His nature." Or, so the Trinitarian argues.

Response to Argument

If Jesus is the "radiance of God's glory," wouldn't that mean that he is not God himself? He is the radiance of God, or more accurately, the radiance of some attribute of God. But if he is the "radiance" of God, then he is not exactly and completely identical to God. God is one being. Jesus is the "radiance" of him, or of something about him—the radiance of his glory. The same can be said for the "exact representation of God's nature." If he is an "exact representation" of his nature, then it would seem to follow that he is not identical to God. He is the "representation" of who God is, not God himself. Logically, it is a stretch to see this as a proof of Jesus' deity.

Nevertheless, many construe it to be such. None of this seems to trouble orthodox Trinitarians. Somehow, they see in both of these clauses a reflection of their orthodox Trinitarian doctrine. Being the "radiance of his glory" just means, to them, that—because he contains within his person the very essence of God—the human being Jesus can radiate the glory of the God he contains within himself. Similarly, being the "exact representation of God's nature" means, to them, that the human being Jesus is the exact representation of who God is, precisely because he is the incarnation of the very essence of God himself. I do not insist that these phrases *cannot* mean something roughly like what the orthodox Trinitarian suggests. But the issue in interpretation is never what an assertion *can* mean; it is always an issue of what, in fact, it was intended to mean.

As we saw in the *Excursus* above, when Paul identifies Jesus as the "Son," he is identifying him as the human offspring of David who will fulfill all the promises God made to David. He is the human being who will rule as God's proxy over the eternal

kingdom of God. This is the person who is being described in 1:3 [assertion (1g)] as the "radiance" of the glory and as the "stamp of his *hupostasis*."

(1g) οὐρανὸν ἀπαύλασμα τοῦ δόξης καὶ χαρακτὴρ τοῦ ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ

= *who is being the light-breaking-forth of glory and the stamp of his hupostasis*

The typical English translation of *Hebrews* 1:3 [assertion (1g)] assumes that it is describing the Son of God in the sense of option (ii) discussed in the *Excursus*. Namely, that by 'the Son of God' Paul is denoting the incarnation of the divine being. The typical English translation would certainly appear to interpret the assertion at (1g) as describing the Son as the incarnation of God. The typical translation would have us understand Paul to be saying that, because Jesus is the incarnation of the divine essence, he "radiates" his glory and he "exactly represents" his divine nature to us. For the purposes of this paper, I will not defend my alternative interpretation of this statement.¹⁶ But one thing should be clear. Paul is not describing the incarnation of God as the "radiance of his glory" and the "exact representation of his divine nature." Rather, as we argued in the *Excursus*, he is describing Jesus as a human being. In his humanity, Jesus is the "light-breaking-forth of glory" and the "stamp of his [God's] *hupostasis*."

What does Paul mean? Paul is describing the human Jesus as a return of the glory of God into the midst of his people (as sudden, as dramatic, and as spectacular as the dawning of the light at daybreak when it dispels the darkness of night).¹⁷ And, then, he is describing the human Jesus as the *charakter* of God's *hupostasis*.¹⁸ What does this mean? It means that Jesus is the image that is created when the personal identity of *Yahweh* himself is stamped onto the being of a human person. If this is right, notice that neither assertion asserts the deity of Jesus. Rather, it asserts that the humanity of Jesus is some sort of special and unique representation of God.

To sum it up, while the language of this assertion could be construed to assume and reflect the orthodox Trinitarian's concept of the Son of God as an incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, it is not reasonable to think that that is what Paul intends. I argued in the *Excursus* that, in this paragraph, Paul intends to be describing Jesus as the human son of David who has been appointed to be the embodiment of *Yahweh* and his

¹⁶ For a more complete defense of my interpretation, see my commentary on *Hebrews*, chapter 1.

¹⁷ I call it a "return" because God's glory had dwelt in the midst of his people once before. When he led his people out of Egypt, he dwelt among them as a pillar of fire/smoke. The glory of *Yahweh* rested over the Holy of Holies once the tabernacle was built. The glory of God had never again been with his people since it had departed from Israel. But now, with the coming of this man Jesus, once again the "Glory" suddenly and dramatically reappeared in the midst of his people. Or, at least, it will have reappeared when this man Jesus has actualized all the authority that has been granted to him.

¹⁸ In Greek, *charakter* is the word that is used to describe the impress and image that is left behind when a stone or metal stamp is dipped in ink and stamped onto a surface. The Greek word *hupostasis* is capable of many and varied meanings. Its basic meaning is the thing that ultimately underlies something else. In my view, it denotes the underlying personal identity of *Yahweh* himself. That is, the *hupostasis* of God is the underlying individual person that *Yahweh* is.

rule, to be the promised king of God's eternal Kingdom. Paul does not assume orthodox Trinitarianism as he writes this paragraph. His concept of the Son does not entail it. Therefore, nowhere in the paragraph does he mean to explain and convey the orthodox doctrines of the incarnation and the triune godhead.

Rather, Paul's point in this paragraph is to underline the exalted status and authority that belongs to the human Jesus, the Son. Just like all the kings in the line of David before him, Jesus has inherited an office and a name that has magnificent promises attached to it. The Davidic king who fulfills all those promises will be a truly remarkable and unique person. He will be a human being who represents God himself and his sovereign rule over creation. He will represent *Yahweh* to the whole of creation, to mankind, and to the nation of Israel. In the form of a human being, when that person ascends to his throne, the very glory of God's own rule will find a locus in that human person. This is what Paul means when he describes Jesus as being "the radiance of His [God's] glory." [NASV] The man Jesus is to be the concrete, tangible locus of the sovereign rule of the transcendent creator God. The glory that innately belongs to the transcendent creator as our sovereign is the glory that breaks forth into reality in the form of Jesus sitting on his throne. Furthermore, Paul says, he will be the *charakter* [the stamp, the image] of God's *hupostasis* [of God's underlying identity as an individual person].

Clearly, therefore, *Hebrews* 1:3 does not prove, nor even support, the orthodox Trinitarian doctrines of the incarnation and the triune godhead. *Hebrews* 1:3 is meant to describe the utterly human Jesus in his role and capacity as the promised Son of God.

PROOF-TEXT #3: JESUS IS THE POWER THAT SUSTAINS THE CREATED ORDER

Argument from proof-text

Hebrews 1:3, in yet another assertion [assertion (1h)], reads (in the NASV), "and upholds all things by the word of his power." It would appear, from this translation, that Paul is describing Jesus as the one who upholds in existence everything that exists. That is, it would appear that Paul is saying that nothing could continue to exist if Jesus did not uphold it in existence. But how could that role and function be attributed to a mere human being? Surely it could not. Therefore, Jesus must be more than an ordinary human being. Indeed, Jesus must be God himself. For who, but God, can uphold every existing thing in its existence as a thing?

Response to Argument

The argument for Jesus' deity from this proof-text relies completely on the typical English translation. The question must be asked whether our typical English translations rightly represent what Paul actually intends here. I would argue that they do not. It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a detailed defense of my interpretation and

translation. I can only outline how my interpretation and translation differs from the more typical one¹⁹.

Here is the assertion we are examining:

(1h) **fe=rwn te ta paζnta tw rJh/mati thvβ dunaζmewβ aujtou dia aujtou**
and phero-ing all things by the rhema of his dunamis through him

And here are some remarks about how my understanding of this assertion differs from the typical interpretation:

(a) I, with the majority of Greek manuscripts, accept the “through him” to be a part of the original Greek text. The typical translation excludes the “through him.”

(b) The NASV translation interprets assertion (1h) as if it said something about what the Son does. It describes an aspect of the Son’s role. I reject this as inaccurate. The subject of this assertion is God, not the Son. It is God who is “*phero-ing* all things by the *rhema* of his *dunamis* through him.”

(c) The typical interpretation takes the “all things” to mean all the things that exist in created reality. I don’t think so. The “all things” in view in assertion (1h) are all the things that are included in what God “spoke to us through the Son” in assertions (1b–1d).

(d) The typical interpretation—the one that makes this a proof-text for Jesus’ deity—takes the verb *phero* to describe here the activity of supporting the created order in its existence. I reject this as unlikely. Rather, what Paul is suggesting is that God—the one who “in the last of these days” has “spoken to us through the Son”—was, at the same time, upholding (*phero-ing*) all that he spoke through the Son “by the *rhema* of his *dunamis* through him.” What Paul means is that God supplied evidentiary support for the authenticity and divine origin of what he spoke through the Son. He “upheld” (*phero*) all that the Son said in the sense that he offered authenticating miraculous signs alongside Jesus’ teaching and proclamation. The miraculous signs upheld (*phero*), gave evidence of (evidentiary support for), the divine origin of Jesus’ instruction and gave evidentiary support for his claim to have the authority to speak for God.

(e) The NASV translates *dunamis* as “power.” I believe it is interpreting *dunamis* to describe the innate ability of God (that is, his “power”) to uphold the created order in existence. Arguably, such a feat would require a great deal of divine, supernatural power. But I would understand *dunamis* somewhat differently. It is true, I think, that what is in view is God’s *dunamis* over created reality. But it is not so much divine power, as divine authority, that is being described. God, as God, has the innate *authority* to shape created reality however he will. The created order obeys the will and command of God, its

¹⁹ I will take the NASV translation as representative of the more typical interpretation. For a detailed explanation and defense of my interpretation, see my commentary on *Hebrews* 1.

creator. Accordingly, whatever God commands of nature, nature does. Whatever God commands created reality to do, it does. This is the divine *dunamis* that is being displayed when a miraculous sign occurs. If God commands there to be light and there is light, it is because God has the *dunamis* to make such a command and see such a result from his command.

(f) I am not sure how the typical interpretation understands the noun *rhema*. It translates *rhema* as "word"—as in the "word of His power." In my understanding of assertion (1h), *rhema* means an utterance. So, the "*rhema* of his *dunamis*" means the utterance of his authority. The "his" refers to God, the creator. So the phrase means the "utterance [*rhema*] of the creator's authority." And what exactly does that mean? It means the utterance that carries with it the authority of the Creator. I think the sort of utterance that Paul has in view is by Jesus, not by God. (That is the significance of the "through him" included in the original text. The utterance [the *rhema*] was uttered "through him [Jesus].") But while it is Jesus who makes the utterance, it is the authority [*dunamis*] of God that is demonstrated and displayed by that utterance. Here is what Paul had in mind, I think. When we see Jesus and his disciples in danger from strong winds and waves on the Sea of Galilee, and Jesus addresses the winds and waves and says, "Peace, be still!" what happens? Nature obeys the command that Jesus uttered. Jesus' utterance, his *rhema*, bore the marks of God's authority [*dunamis*] over nature, over created reality. And why is that significant? Because Jesus' disciples were thereby given evidence that Jesus had the authority to speak for God. If he were granted the authority to utter a command and have nature obey him, then he also had the authority to utter God's message to mankind. By stilling the wind and waves in connection with the command uttered by Jesus, God was offering evidentiary support for [he was *phero*-ing] the things that Jesus taught as he "spoke" for God.

If my interpretation of assertion (1h) is right, then clearly assertion (1h) offers no support for the deity of Jesus. According to my interpretation, it is God, not Jesus, who is "upholding all things." And furthermore, he is not upholding all things in existence; rather, he is upholding all that Jesus, the Son, said on behalf of God by supplying evidentiary support for Jesus' authority to speak for God. This interpretation clearly assumes a significant distinction between Jesus and God; it does nothing to identify Jesus as God. It speaks to Jesus' being credentialed by God; it does nothing to assert that Jesus is God.

Even if my interpretation of assertion (1h) is not correct, we still cannot accept the typical, traditional interpretation. The typical interpretation assumes a traditional Trinitarian concept of the Son. Jesus, because he is the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, can uphold in existence all things that exist. But as we saw in the *Excursus* above, Paul does not assume that Jesus is the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. Rather, Paul assumes that, as the Son, Jesus is the utterly human offspring of David. Accordingly, whatever assertion (1h) means—even if it can rightly be interpreted as an assertion that has Jesus as its subject—it must assert something that plausibly can be asserted of an utterly human Son. The typical interpretation asserts something that

cannot possibly be claimed of an offspring of David. Hence, it cannot be what Paul intended; for Paul clearly intended to make an assertion with respect to Jesus as a human offspring of David. This is what we demonstrated by our argument in the *Excursus*.

PROOF-TEXT #4: JESUS IS THE OBJECT OF WORSHIP

Argument from proof-text

In all of the following proof-texts, we go beyond the opening paragraph. The next possible proof-text of Jesus' deity is in *Hebrews* 1:6. There, Paul seems to assume that Psalm 89 is a Psalm that describes some truths about Jesus. Among other things, the Psalm states—apparently with respect to Jesus—“Let all the *angeloi* of God worship him.” This is what Paul quotes in *Hebrews* 1:6. But God alone is worthy of worship. Consequently, if Psalm 89 asserts that Jesus is to be worshipped, then he must be God, for the Scriptures would never command worship of anyone other than God himself.

Response to Argument

Let us set aside, for the moment, whether Psalm 89 is speaking with respect to Jesus. Assuming that it is, the argument from the proof-text simply assumes that worship can be given only to God. In a sense, of course, that is true. There is a kind of honor and respect that God uniquely demands. God and only God should be honored and respected as God. But, having said that, the word in *Hebrews* 1:6 that is translated “worship” is the Greek word *proskuneo*. This word in Greek (*proskuneo*) means to bow very low or to fall to the ground and prostrate oneself before another. It is not an action that is only performed in relation to God. It is a show of profound respect, usually offered to someone of superior social status. But it is an action that is performed with regard to anyone to whom one desires to show profound respect.²⁰ So, it is simply false to argue that if worship (*proskuneo*) is commanded of Jesus, Jesus must be God. What follows from the command to worship Jesus is the fact that he is worthy of profound respect, not the fact of his deity.

Another problem with arguing for Jesus' deity from this text is the assumption that Psalm 89 is speaking with respect to Jesus. It is not. The Psalm is written with regard to the king, the Davidic king, as he assumes his sovereign reign over the nation. Paul's point is not the Psalm 89 gives us insight into who Jesus is. His point is that it gives us insight into who the “Son” is, insight into how important a title and status he has. The Son is so important that, upon the occasion of his assuming his reign, even the *angeloi* are instructed to honor him by bowing to him. But this fact would be no less true of David, Solomon, Rehoboam, or any other king in the line of David as it is of Jesus. Therefore, the call to the *angeloi* to “worship” the Son does not prove the deity of Jesus any more than it proves the deity of David or Solomon. There is much more that needs to be said to

²⁰ See for example Matthew 18:26 where a servant “worships” his king, and also Rev. 3:9 where Jesus says that he will make the false Jews of the synagogue of Satan “worship” the members of the church in Philadelphia.

fully explicate how Paul is making his argument from Psalm 89, but this is sufficient to show the failure of *Hebrews* 1:6 as a proof-text for Jesus' deity.²¹

PROOF-TEXT #5: JESUS IS CALLED GOD

Argument from proof-text

In *Hebrews* 1:8, once again, Paul quotes a Psalm (Psalm 45) that he assumes is addressing Jesus as the Son. In its address to Jesus, it addresses him explicitly as "God." The first line that Paul quotes runs, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever...." This is an assertion made to and about Jesus. Clearly, then, Psalm 45 is explicitly calling Jesus God; for it addresses him explicitly by that title.

Response to Argument

The first and most important problem with this argument for Jesus' deity is that it assumes, once again, that Psalm 45 is speaking with respect to Jesus. It is not. Once again, Psalm 45 is written with regard to the king, the king in the line of David. It is probably written to honor him on the occasion of his wedding. Hence, it is describing him and his significance as the one who has inherited the title and promises attached to the Son of God. So, it is not a Psalm that describes Jesus directly and exclusively. It is a Psalm that describes the Davidic king who reigns in his capacity as Son of God. Since Jesus is the son of David, heir to David's throne, it ultimately applies to him as well. But it also, in some measure, applies to all the other sons of David before him. Granted, because he is the unique Son of God, Psalm 45 will be true of Jesus in a way that it was never true of any previous Davidic king. But what is actually true of Jesus was always nominally true of every Davidic king before him. All the Davidic kings of Israel were bearers of the promise that God made to David. They all inherited the name and title, "Son of God." They were all, in name, the locus of God's authority and sovereign rule. It is just that, until Jesus, none of them were ever that in actuality. Only in Jesus will we actually see a fulfillment of what was promised to David. But Psalm 45 does not have Jesus directly in view. It is written with some other Davidic king in view. Nevertheless, it does not hesitate to address this other Davidic king as "God." Why? Because that earlier Davidic king was the incarnation of an eternally divine person? No, certainly not. Rather, it is because the promise made to David is that God would establish a relationship with his offspring wherein they would embody the reign and authority of God himself. For all intents and purposes, they would be God in human form. That is the very meaning and significance of the title "Son of God." Therefore, since the king in the line of David was

²¹ For a fuller, more detailed explication of Psalm 89 and how Paul is employing it to make his argument in *Hebrews* 1, see the accompanying commentary on *Hebrews* 1.

the Son of God, it was entirely appropriate to address him as "God." Why? Because that is what the title meant. To be the "Son of God" is to be that human proxy who represented God himself to the people. He is the man who just was "God" to the nation. While many kings before Jesus bore the title and status of "God," only Jesus actually fulfills that role. Jesus, uniquely, is the man who just is "God" in actuality. All the other kings were "God" in name only. Jesus is "God" in fact and in reality. But not because he has a divine nature. Rather, he is "God" in his humanity. He is the human "image of the invisible God." That is what the Psalmist would have understood himself to be claiming with respect to the Davidic kings of old. And that's what Paul understands himself to be claiming with respect to Jesus.

Therefore, the use of the title "God" with respect to the Son does not prove the deity of Jesus any more than it proves the deity of any other Davidic king of Israel. Once again, there is more that needs to be said to fully explicate how Paul is making his argument from Psalm 45, but this is sufficient to show the failure of *Hebrews* 1:8 as a proof-text for Jesus' deity.²²

PROOF-TEXT #6: JESUS IS IDENTIFIED WITH YAHWEH

Argument from proof-text

In *Hebrews* 1:10, Paul again quotes a Psalm (Psalm 102) that he assumes is addressing Jesus. In that address to Jesus, it addresses him explicitly as "*Kurios* [Lord]." However, the Greek word *kurios* is often, in the Old Testament, a translation of the Hebrew name of God, *Yahweh*. The Hebrew text of Psalm 102 has the Hebrew name of God, *Yahweh*, where the line that Paul quotes addresses Jesus as "*Kurios* [Lord]." If we assume that Paul is basing his argument on the Hebrew text of Psalm 102, then it follows that Paul understands Psalm 102 to directly and explicitly call Jesus—the one who is in view and is being addressed in the Psalm—by the name *Yahweh*. Hence, *Hebrews* 1:10 makes it clear that Paul believes Jesus can be identified with *Yahweh*. Jesus just is God!

Response to Argument

Once again, the problem with this argument for Jesus' deity is that it assumes that Psalm 102 is speaking with respect to Jesus. It is not. The reason Psalm 102 addresses *Yahweh* under that name is because it is written to and about *Yahweh*. If one were to read Psalm 102—without being aware of *Hebrews* 1 and without being privy to any debates with regard to the nature of Jesus—it would never occur to him that Psalm 102 had anyone other than *Yahweh* in mind. Never in a million years would one conclude that Psalm 102 was written with Jesus in mind.

The reason anyone thinks that Psalm 102 is written with regard to Jesus is that they have decided that *Hebrews* 1:10 requires us to conclude that Paul thinks it is speaking of

²² For a fuller, more detailed explication of Psalm 45 and how Paul is employing it to make his argument in *Hebrews* 1, see the accompanying commentary on *Hebrews* 1.

Jesus. But that is false. Paul does not quote Psalm 102 because he thinks it tells us of Jesus. Paul is quoting it for quite a different reason. Let us examine this.

Hebrews 1:10 occurs in the middle of the third paragraph. Earlier in the paper, we summarized the argument of this third paragraph like this:

Third paragraph:

- Heb. 1:7 And of the angels He says, "WHO MAKES HIS ANGELS WINDS, AND HIS MINISTERS A FLAME OF FIRE."
Heb. 1:8 But of the Son He says, "YOUR THRONE, O GOD, IS FOREVER AND EVER, AND THE RIGHTEOUS SCEPTER IS THE SCEPTER OF HIS KINGDOM."
Heb. 1:9 "YOU HAVE LOVED RIGHTEOUSNESS AND HATED LAWLESSNESS; THEREFORE GOD, YOUR GOD, HAS ANOINTED YOU WITH THE OIL OF GLADNESS ABOVE YOUR COMPANIONS."
Heb. 1:10 And, "YOU, LORD, IN THE BEGINNING LAID THE FOUNDATION OF THE EARTH, AND THE HEAVENS ARE THE WORKS OF YOUR HANDS;
Heb. 1:11 THEY WILL PERISH, BUT YOU REMAIN; AND THEY ALL WILL BECOME OLD LIKE A GARMENT,
Heb. 1:12 AND LIKE A MANTLE YOU WILL ROLL THEM UP; LIKE A GARMENT THEY WILL ALSO BE CHANGED. BUT YOU ARE THE SAME, AND YOUR YEARS WILL NOT COME TO AN END."
Heb. 1:13 But to which of the angels has He ever said, "SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND, UNTIL I MAKE YOUR ENEMIES A FOOTSTOOL FOR YOUR FEET"?
Heb. 1:14 Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?

Summary of argument:

Furthermore, the explicit perspective of the Scriptures with regard to *angeloi* is that they are merely messengers of God; they share the same role as wind and fire. But, by way of contrast, Psalm 45 predicts, with regard to the Son, that *Yahweh* will grant him authority or rule in his place, with the very righteous rule of *Yahweh* himself, over an everlasting kingdom. Now Psalm 102 says of *Yahweh* that his existence will never end. The created order itself will come to an end; but God will never come to an end. He will remain forever; and will ever be faithful to himself. Therefore, the God who promised an eternal kingdom to the Son (Psalm 45) will always be present to bring this kingdom about and make this promise a reality (Psalm 102). Consequently, the promise of a kingdom to the Son is an unfulfilling promise. Now then, to which of the *angeloi* has God ever said, "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet" (as he did to the Son in Psalm 110)? Aren't *angeloi* (theophanies) nothing other than manifestations of the divine spirit that are offering religious service to God? Are they not simply sent by God to serve those of us human beings who are about to inherit salvation? Clearly, therefore, no *angelos* is as exalted and important as the Son.

(1:7-14)

Point of third paragraph #3: The role and destiny of the Son is indeed of greater status than that of any *angelos*.

Let us consider Paul's use of Psalm 110, then, in the light of this summary of his argument. Notice, first, that his quotations from the Psalms are intended to serve as

premises in an argument. He never actually articulates his premises as such. He leaves it to the reader to recognize the point he is making from the Psalm. But Paul builds a logical argument from the premises that he expects his readers to derive from the citations. So, what exactly is the logical structure of Paul's argument in the third paragraph?

Structure of the logical argument

Premise 1: Being a messenger of God, the role of an *angelos* is no higher in status than that served by wind and fire. [Premise derived from Psalm 97:7]

Premise 2: The role of the Son is to rule as a proxy for *Yahweh*, ruling with the righteous rule of *Yahweh* himself over an everlasting kingdom. [Premise derived from Psalm 45:6–7]

Premise 3: *Yahweh*, the one who promised an everlasting kingdom to the Son, will never come to an end. He will remain forever, ever faithful to himself. [Premise derived from Psalm 102:25–27]

Implicit conclusion 1:
The promise of an everlasting kingdom to the Son is an unailing promise, for *Yahweh*—the one who promised it—will be forever there to bring it to pass. [Derived from premises 2 and 3]

Premise 4: No *angelos* has ever been promised an everlasting kingdom, as has been promised to the Son (as, for example, in Psalm 110:1). [Premise asserted *via* a rhetorical question]

Premise 5: An *angelos* is a simple servant of God sent by God to perform a role beneficial to those who will inherit salvation. [Premise asserted *via* a rhetorical question]

Implicit conclusion 2: The role and destiny of the Son is indeed of greater status than that of any *angelos*. [Derived from implicit conclusion 1, premise 4, and premise 5]

Implications of the logical argument

Having identified the structure of Paul's argument in this third paragraph, it is now clear what role Psalm 102 plays in his argument. Psalm 102 establishes one of the premises of Paul's argument—namely, that *Yahweh*, the one who promised an everlasting kingdom to the Son, will never come to an end; He (*Yahweh*) will remain forever, ever faithful to himself. But notice that this premise is about *Yahweh*; it is not about Jesus. Therefore, the reason Psalm 102 refers to *Yahweh* is because *Yahweh* is the one being addressed and described in the Psalm. Nothing in the Psalm addresses or describes Jesus. Therefore, it is a completely fallacious inference to think that Paul quotes Psalm 102 because he believes it addresses and describes Jesus. Psalm 102 addresses *Yahweh* because it is addressing *Yahweh*, not because it is addressing Jesus and calling him *Yahweh*. Paul understands this completely. He is citing Psalm 102 (in *Hebrews* 1:10–12) to say something important about *Yahweh*. Consequently, when we have an

accurate understanding of *Hebrews* 1:10, we can see that it fails as a proof-text for the deity of Jesus.

Conclusion

I conclude by summarizing the points we established in this paper. First, we saw that Paul's purpose in Part One of *Hebrews* is two-fold. On the one hand, it is an exhortation to his readers to give heed to the gospel proclaimed by Jesus. Jesus is the most important of all of God's messengers or prophets. If God does not tolerate a person's disregarding the message of a messenger sent by God (an *angelos*), then certainly he will not tolerate a person's disregarding the message conveyed by his Son, the *messiah*. But on the other hand, Part One is intended to establish an important element of the truth about God's purposes. Specifically, Paul intends to establish that it is perfectly and entirely consistent with the prophetic predictions of the scriptures that the exalted Son of God, the *messiah*, be an ordinary human offspring of David. Contrary to contemporary expectations, the *messiah* need not be some sort of theophany (an *angelos*), an actual manifestation of God himself, in order to fulfill the role of the Son of God. A merely human son of David is exactly whom God had appointed from before the beginning of the Ages to be his Son, the *messiah*, destined to rule over the eternal Kingdom of God.

In the light of the purpose of Part One and the argument that Paul constructs there, Part One of *Hebrews* is very awkward for traditional orthodox Trinitarianism. The theological objection that Paul is responding to is that Jesus cannot be the Son of God, for he is a mere man. If Paul were an orthodox Trinitarian, there is an easy answer ready at hand for him: Jesus was not a mere man; he was the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. Jesus was God incarnate!! But that is decidedly NOT how Paul answers the objection. Paul assumes the premise of the objection—that Jesus was a mere man. He then goes on to argue that Jesus' utter humanness does not disqualify him from being the exalted Son of God; for a human descendent of David is precisely whom God had intended to appoint as Son from before the creation of the ages. Paul does not construct the argument that Trinitarianism would necessarily construct. Paul does construct an argument that no Trinitarian could possibly construct. The implication of this: Paul is not a Trinitarian!!

Finally, we examined the six assertions in Part One that are typically taken to be proof-texts for the deity of Jesus in the sense that Trinitarians propose. We found that all six of them fail to prove Jesus' deity in that sense.

(1) *Hebrews* 1:2 does not assert that Jesus pre-existed and functioned as an agent in the creation of the world. Rather, it asserts that Jesus is the human being whom God purposed to be the centerpiece of all of created reality. He is the one for whom and about whom everything was brought into existence.

(2) *Hebrews* 1:3—"he is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of God's nature"—does not assert the ontological identity of Jesus with God. It is not suggesting that Jesus contains the being of God within himself. Rather, it asserts that the

particular human identity of Jesus was given to him to be some sort of special and unique representation of God (*Yahweh*) himself. No other created being in created reality represents God in the way that Jesus does. Only he embodies fully the character, identity, and authority of *Yahweh* himself. No other created being is God in the way that Jesus is. Yet, Jesus does not contain the ontological stuff of God. Ontologically, he is a human being. But he is that human being who has been stamped with the very personhood of *Yahweh* himself.

(3) *Hebrews* 1:3—"and [he] upholds all things by the word of his power"—does not assert that the second person of the Trinity incarnated in Jesus is the one who holds all of created reality together by his divine power. Indeed, the clause is not even referring to Jesus. It is referring to God himself. It is saying that God, who in these last days has spoken to us through his Son, also simultaneously offered evidence of Jesus' authority to speak on behalf of God when he performed supernatural signs in connection with the commands that Jesus uttered.

(4) *Hebrews* 1:6 does not prove the deity of Jesus when it quotes the exhortation in Psalm 89 for all the *angeli* of God to worship the Son (the firstborn). The "worship" that one being offers another is not always that of a creature to the creator. Any being may potentially be called upon to "worship" (prostrate oneself before) another who is superior to him in rank or status. In the case of Psalm 89, the superiority of the firstborn to the *angeli* of God stems from his status as the Son, the one appointed to rule as king over the eternal Kingdom of God, not from his status as the second person of the Trinity.

(5) When *Hebrews* 1:8 quotes Psalm 45, addressing the king as "God," it does not mean to suggest that Jesus contains the divine essence. Psalm 45 does not even have Jesus directly in view. Psalm 45 is addressing the son of David who is ruling as the Son of God. The title applies to Solomon just as surely as it does to Jesus. Accordingly, it does not attribute deity to the Son; rather, it attributes to him the authority of God. It suggests that he might as well be God himself in terms of how completely he has been invested with the rule and authority of the creator. When the Son sits on his throne, it is as if *Yahweh* were sitting on the throne.

(6) *Hebrews* 1:10 does not intend to refer to Jesus as God (=Lord = *Yahweh*). *Hebrews* 1:10 is quoting Psalm 102 and is construing it to mean exactly what it straightforwardly asserts about *Yahweh* himself—namely, that *Yahweh* is eternal, more eternal than the created order itself. Paul does not for one instant think that Psalm 102 is asserting that Jesus is eternal. The Psalm is not about Jesus; it is about *Yahweh* and his promises. When Paul quotes Psalm 102, he intends it to serve as the premise of a larger and more involved argument. God has appointed his Son (Jesus) to serve as king of the eternal kingdom of God. God is eternal (a la Psalm 102), so there can be no doubt about God's ability to keep his promise to his Son. So, nothing in *Hebrews* 1:10 suggests that Jesus is anything more than a human offspring of David.

To sum it up then, Part One of *Hebrews* is a very problematic passage for the doctrine of the Trinity as embraced by orthodox Trinitarianism. The nature of the argument of the passage makes it HIGHLY unlikely that Paul believes what the orthodox Trinitarian

believes about God. Furthermore, none of the assertions in Part One that are sometimes cited as support for orthodox Trinitarian doctrine can stand up to scrutiny. None of them mean what the orthodox Trinitarian apologist asserts that they mean.