

## PAPER #6

# The Identity of Jesus in Hebrews 1

In this paper, I will discuss the argument of Hebrews 1:1–2:8a. To do so, I must discuss briefly the nature of the larger argument that Paul makes in the book of Hebrews overall. (I will assume that the author of Hebrews is Paul. I have never seen any convincing reason to reject the tradition of Pauline authorship. But none of my arguments hinge on this assumption.) My focus will be on whether Hebrews 1:1–2:8a paints a picture of Jesus that requires the doctrine of the Trinity.

My primary interest will be the interpretation of Hebrews 1:1–4. However, this paper will not deal with every exegetical issue in that paragraph. For a detailed exegetical commentary see the appendices: Appendix G for interpretive notes on 1:1–3a of the English translation, and Appendix H for notes on 1:1–4 of the Greek text. ***I strongly recommend a prior or concurrent reading of one or both appendices.***

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The text below is excerpted from *Paul's Letter to the Hebrews: The Reconstructed and Formatted Greek Text* reconstructed and formatted by J.A. Crabtree (digital file version 1.0.a-ip, dated September, 2007). Note that there are some significant differences in punctuation between this reconstruction and most modern editions of the New Testament Greek text.

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πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως πάλαι ὁ θεὸς λαλήσας τοῖς πατράσιν ἐν τοῖς προφήταις, ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων ἐλάλησεν ἡμῖν ἐν υἱῷ - ὃν ἔθηκεν κληρονόμον πάντων, δι' οὗ καὶ ἐποίησεν τοὺς αἰῶνας, ὃς ὢν ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης καὶ χαρακτὴρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ - φέρων τε τὰ πάντα τῷ ῥήματι τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ δι' ἑαυτοῦ. 2·καθαρισμὸν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ποιησάμενος ἐκάθισεν ἐν δεξιᾷ τῆς μεγαλωσύνης ἐν ὑψηλοῖς, τοσοῦτῳ κρείττων γενόμενος τῶν ἀγγέλων ὅσῳ διαφορώτερον παρ' αὐτοὺς κεκληρονόμηκεν ὄνομα.

[1:1–4]

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The translation below is excerpted from *Paul's Letter to the Hebrews: An English Translation* translated by J.A. Crabtree (digital file version 1.0.a-ip, dated September, 2007).

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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 all that was said by the divinely authoritative command uttered 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 angels as the name he had inherited was more distinguished than theirs.

[1:1–4]

## Background to the Treatise to the Hebrews

The letter to the Hebrews is not, strictly speaking, a letter. That might help explain why the language of the letter seems so different from the rest of Paul’s letters. Instead of an “off the top” dictation to an amanuensis, it is a carefully planned treatise—not written in the language of spoken dictation, but in the language of philosophical disputation. It is not the familiar language of Paul in his letters. But that provides no compelling reason to question the tradition that Paul is the author.

*Hebrews*, then, is a treatise written by Paul to a group of Jews who, having confessed their belief that Jesus is the Messiah, are beginning to rethink that confession. Facing hardship and persecution due to that confession, they are beginning to forsake their association with the community of Jesus followers, and to return to their ancestral Jewish religion. The primary point of the treatise can be divided into two elements: (1) to warn them of the mistake they will be making if they abandon their belief in Jesus—a mistake having grave eternal consequences; and (2) to persuade them, through an extended theological and exegetical argument, that their underlying, re-emerging objection to Jesus’ Messiahship is unfounded and invalid. To be specific, the intellectual objection that is beginning to impact these erstwhile believers is that Jesus could not possibly have been the Messiah, for he was *merely a human being*.

To understand their objection, we need to understand the cultural background. At the time Jesus was born, messianic expectations ran high. After years of waiting, the Jews had developed some fairly grandiose images of who and what the Messiah would be. Fundamentally, the Jews of the time believed that the Messiah would come as a super-human, quasi-angelic being. He would not be an ordinary human being. In order to fulfill all the prophecies made about the Coming One, he would need to be larger than life.

This, of course, is why Jesus faced the obstacle he did in persuading people to believe his claim to be the Messiah. He performed some pretty spectacular miracles, but was met with, “Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary, and his brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And his sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this man come by all these things?” (Matt 13:55–56) At one point in the gospel accounts, this obstacle to accepting Jesus as the Messiah becomes explicit. In the midst of a lively exchange, Jesus was almost stoned to death due to his bold, “blasphemous” assertion that he was the Messiah:

The Jews answered him, “For a good work we do not stone you, but for blasphemy; indeed because you, being a man, make yourself out as God.” Jesus answered them, “Has it not been written in your Torah, ‘I said, “you are gods”’? If he called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken), do you say of him, whom the Father

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sanctified and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God?'" ... Therefore they were seeking again to seize him, and he eluded their grasp. (excerpted from John 10:31–39).

The issue here was that he was an ordinary human being. Given their cultural expectations, this disqualified him from being the Messiah.

What's even worse, he was an ordinary human being who was humiliated and shamed by being executed by the Romans. Definitely, given their cultural expectations, this disqualified him from being the Messiah.

Originally, the readers to whom this treatise to the Hebrews is addressed got past the fact that Jesus was a mere man. Like others who had come to believe, his miracles and resurrection seemed to set him apart enough to make it believable that he was the Messiah. But then the persecution came. But this first generation of Jews who became followers of Jesus were persecuted mercilessly. Paul is famous for his official expeditions to root out belief in Jesus by executing any followers of Jesus that he could find. We know from *James* as well as *Hebrews* itself that these early Jewish Christians were thrown into prison, deprived of their just wages, beaten, and socially ostracized for no other reason than that they confessed Jesus to be the Messiah. Some of them were growing weary of the grief and sorrow. They had believed in Jesus for salvation; but all it had got them was persecution and suffering. It cost them too much. They were being sorely tempted to capitulate. If giving up their confession that Jesus is the Messiah is all it would take to get Jewish society off their backs and no longer against them, then maybe it would be worth it to stop believing. Many are beginning to think so. They are just giving up.

It is apparent that Paul thinks this weariness in the face of hardship is the root problem. Their problem is not fundamentally intellectual; it is fundamentally moral and spiritual. (This is endemic to our sinful humanity and to the nature of knowledge and belief itself. If for some reason I do not want to believe the truth, I will correspondingly develop intellectual problems with that truth. Paul thinks that that is what is happening to these Jews to whom he is writing. Intellectual problems with Jesus' Messiahship have emerged as they have grown less interested in enduring persecution.) If they can abandon the promises of the gospel for a little comfort and safety in this world, then they betray the fact that they do not really belong to God. They never have really believed. In view of this possibility, Paul simply warns his readers: if you reject Jesus, you are rejecting everything of eternal value, and you are showing yourself to be among those who will receive wrath at the end of time.

While Paul thinks that the moral and spiritual problem is the root issue, he nevertheless takes their intellectual problem seriously. The largest portion of this treatise to the Hebrews is an extended argument to this effect: Jesus' ordinary humanity is not a mark

against his being the Messiah; it is a mark in favor of his being the Messiah. Furthermore, Jesus’ humiliation and death on the cross is not a mark against his being the Messiah; it is a mark in favor of his being the Messiah. His whole extended argument—when he is not reiterating his warning or exhorting them to wait for the eternal promises— is offered to prove one or both of these two points.

### Argument of Hebrews from 1:1 to 2:8a

The passage we will concentrate on, Hebrews 1:1–1:4, is the very opening paragraph of the whole treatise. It is, more particularly, the introduction to the first argument of that treatise. To better understand what it means and what its purpose is, we need to understand the opening argument it introduces. I turn my attention to that.

The climax and core argument of the opening section of Hebrews is in 2:2–3. He writes, “For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty, how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” (NASV) There are two components of this statement: a climactic exhortation and an argument. On the one hand, he exhorts his readers to give due heed to the gospel message proclaimed by Jesus, lest they pass it by and fail to continue in their belief. On the other hand, he makes a simple argument from the lesser to the greater: If God considers some revelation that he conveys to us through a lesser important agent (an angel) to be worthy of complete acceptance and obedience, then how much more certainly does God consider a revelation that he conveys to us through a MORE important agent (the Son) to be worthy of complete acceptance and obedience?

To create the basis from which he can make this core argument, Paul has asserted (or established) all of the following points in chapter 1 of *Hebrews*: (i) God, in these latter days, has revealed his final and complete word to us (the gospel) through the Son [1:1]; (ii) God confirmed the veracity of Jesus’ teaching through the supernatural signs that accompanied Jesus’ teaching [1:3, and see 2:4]; and (iii) the Son is a vastly more important creature than any angel, human though he is [1:4–14].

These points, then, become the basis for the climax in 2:1–4. There we have a climactic exhortation, the summing up of Paul’s core argument, and a brief reminder to his readers of the epistemological basis upon which they can know that the claims about Jesus are true—namely, the supernatural signs performed by the apostles who reported what Jesus said and did. His opening argument concludes with a final point in 2:5-8. It is simply a reiteration of the point, along with a final Scriptural proof, that Jesus—the one who brought us the gospel—is greater than the angels, even though he is merely a human.

## Traditional Evidence for a Trinitarian View of Jesus

I turn my focus now to the primary point of this paper. Does the picture of Jesus that is offered to us in Heb. 1:1–2:8a require that we infer the doctrine of the Trinity?

There are six distinct statements in Hebrews 1 and 2 that a Trinitarian might argue offer some level of support for the doctrine of the Trinity. Below I list the six by citing the statement (as it occurs in the NASV) preceded by a formulation of what it asserts, as a Trinitarian might understand it:

**Statement #1: God has granted his most important revelation to mankind through the eternal, pre-existent “Son”** > “God...in these last days has spoken to us in his Son.” (NASV, 1:1–2a)

**Statement #2: God made the world through the eternal, pre-existent “Son”** > “through whom also He made the world” (NASV, 1:2c)

**Statement #3: Because Jesus possesses the very nature of God within his person, he is the radiance of God’s glory** > “And He is the radiance of His glory” (NASV, 1:3a)

**Statement #4: Because Jesus possesses the very nature of God within his person, he is the exact representation of God’s divine nature** > “and the exact representation of His nature” (NASV, 1:3b)

**Statement #5: Jesus, insofar as he is the eternal, pre-existent Son, upholds the entire created order in existence through the power of his word** > “and upholds all things by the word of His power” (NASV, 1:3c)

**Statement #6: The Son humbled himself and became inferior to angels for the brief time of his incarnation; but ultimately—since he was the eternal, pre-existent Son—he returned to his original state of exaltation above the angels** > “YOU HAVE MADE HIM FOR A LITTLE WHILE LOWER THAN THE ANGELS” (NASV, 2:7a)

If Statements 1, 2, 5, and 6 are legitimately understood to be ascribing divine attributes to an eternal, pre-existent Son, then it follows that there is another person or being—besides God, the Father—with the attributes of God. Since the Scripture cannot be advocating polytheism, the doctrine of the Trinity seems the only reasonable way to account for this. Furthermore, if Statements 3 and 4 are legitimately understood to be explicitly stating that Jesus possesses a divine nature—and in this context that divine nature is connected to his being the eternal, pre-existent Son—then it follows that

Orthodox Trinitarianism is correct in its doctrine of Jesus. Jesus is the incarnation of the Son, who is a distinct person of the godhead.

## Initial Critique of This Evidence for the Trinity

As an initial response to the above evidence, notice the significant equivocation that is involved in reading Hebrews 1–2 the way a traditional Trinitarian wants to read it. Significantly different persons are serving as the subjects of the above assertions. The subject of some of the assertions is the pre-existent divine person who ultimately incarnates himself as Jesus [Son<sub>pre-existent</sub>]. The subject of the other assertions is the human being, Jesus, who is the incarnation of that pre-existent divine person [Son<sub>incarnate</sub>]. These two beings have different attributes. It cannot be said of the Son<sub>pre-existent</sub> that he hungered, slept, stubbed his toe, or died. It cannot be said of the Son<sub>incarnate</sub> that he knows all things and has all power. It seems reasonable, therefore, to determine which of these beings is the subject of the various assertions in Heb. 1:1–4. The traditional view understands Paul to be equivocating. In Statements 2, 5, and 6, the Son<sub>pre-existent</sub> is the one about whom the assertion is being made. In Statements 1, 3, and 4, the Son<sub>incarnate</sub> is the one about whom the assertion is being made.

Statement #1: God spoke to mankind through the Son<sub>incarnate</sub>.

Statement #2: God made the world through the Son<sub>pre-existent</sub>.

Statement #3: The Son<sub>incarnate</sub> possesses the very nature of God within his person and is therefore the radiance of God’s glory.

Statement #4: The Son<sub>incarnate</sub> possesses the very nature of God within his person and is therefore the exact representation of the divine nature.

Statement #5: The Son<sub>pre-existent</sub> upholds all of the created order through the power of his word.

Statement #6: God made the Son<sub>pre-existent</sub> for a little while lower than the angels.

On the surface, this presents a problem for the traditional reading of these statements. One cannot just pick and choose who is being described. Either this opening argument and the first paragraph are describing the Son<sub>pre-existent</sub>, or they are describing the Son<sub>incarnate</sub>. Paul would not go back and forth between them with each new sentence.

Given that we have to decide, there can be little doubt which Son is in view. Paul is describing the Son<sub>incarnate</sub>. It certainly is the Son<sub>incarnate</sub> who is the heir of all things. (The Son<sub>pre-existent</sub> would not have to “inherit” all things; all things are inherently his from all eternity.) It is certainly the Son<sub>incarnate</sub> who—as an incarnation of God—is the “radiance of

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his glory” and is “the exact representation of his nature.” (The Son<sub>pre-existent</sub> is not the exact “representation” of God’s nature; he is by nature God himself—that is, he does not “represent” God; he IS God.) It certainly is the Son<sub>incarnate</sub> who made “purification for sins” before he ascended to the right hand of the Majesty on high. (The Son<sub>pre-existent</sub> did not die on the cross.)

The traditional view would, no doubt, concede this point. They would grant that the whole first paragraph and the entire opening argument are seeking to describe Jesus, the incarnation of the eternal Son of God. But the traditional view would not concede that Paul is equivocating—at least, not in any way that is objectionable. According to the traditional doctrine of the incarnation, Jesus is two natures in one person. According to the logic of this duality in unity (this “hypostatic union”), the attributes of both the Son<sub>incarnate</sub> and the Son<sub>pre-existent</sub> can be attributed to Jesus with equal validity. Hence, it can be said of Jesus that he is omniscient—with respect to his divine nature as the Son<sub>pre-existent</sub>. But it can also be said of Jesus that he bleed and died—with respect to his human nature. So, while the whole chapter is talking about the one person Jesus, it predicates wildly incompatible things of him because of the mysterious nature of the incarnation. Some of the predicates arise from the fact that he just is the Son<sub>pre-existent</sub>, others from the fact that he incarnated as a human being.

This is plausible enough so long as our concerns are theological and not exegetical. But once we begin to focus on exegesis, this traditional approach simply does not work. As we saw, the traditional view agrees that the opening chapters are about the human being Jesus. The issue between a traditional reading and the reading I shall defend is whether the subject of these opening chapters is a human being who is the incarnation of the eternal Son of God, or whether their subject is merely a human being. Is it JESUS<sub>God-incarnate</sub> [Jesus, insofar as he is understood to be the incarnation of God], or JESUS<sub>human</sub> [Jesus, insofar as he is understood to be an ordinary human being]? As we saw above, Paul is seeking to establish a very important point about this “Jesus” in the opening argument. Namely, he is seeking to establish that he is greater than the angels. Here is the exegetical problem: if Paul’s readers understand this Jesus whose greatness is under consideration to be the incarnation of the eternal, pre-existent Son of God—JESUS<sub>God-incarnate</sub>—then why does Paul spend two chapters arguing for his superiority over the angels? Of course he is greater than the angels! He is the incarnation of God himself! He is a person of the triune godhead! From whence could doubt of his superiority over the angels even arise? By virtue of who Paul and his readers can agree that he is—JESUS<sub>God-incarnate</sub>—he is obviously greater than the angels. But if we are talking about a Jesus whom Paul’s readers take to be an ordinary human being—JESUS<sub>human</sub>—then it makes sense that Paul feels compelled to prove his greatness. Surely this mere human being cannot actually be the Messiah. Surely he is, at best, just one of many prophets. It makes sense that Paul would devote nearly two full chapters to arguing that JESUS<sub>human</sub> is greater than any angel.

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Therefore, the rhetorical (argumentative) purpose of the first two chapters of Hebrews requires this conclusion: the Jesus who is being discussed in Heb. 1–2 is JESUS<sub>human</sub>—the Jesus whom Paul’s readers take to be a mere human being. Accordingly, the conclusion of Paul’s opening argument is that this JESUS<sub>human</sub>—while he is merely a human being—is greater than any creature in the created order, greater even than any angel.

Even if we were to grant that Paul is an orthodox Trinitarian who believes that Jesus is the incarnation of the eternal, pre-existent, divine Son, that would not change the fact that it is not, and cannot be, JESUS<sub>God-incarnate</sub> about whom Paul is constructing his argument. That would destroy the whole purpose and significance of this opening argument. Chapters 1 and 2 only make sense if they are establishing the superiority of JESUS<sub>human</sub>.

Granted, Paul asserts as part of his opening argument in Heb. 1–2 that JESUS<sub>human</sub> is JESUS<sub>God-incarnate</sub>. The essential form of the reasoning that lies behind this assertion, I would argue, is this: JESUS<sub>human</sub> is the Son (that is the Messiah, the Christ); the Son (Messiah, Christ) is the very incarnation of God; therefore, JESUS<sub>human</sub> is JESUS<sub>God-incarnate</sub>. While this is true, it is noteworthy that Paul does not argue that Jesus is superior to the angels because Jesus is God incarnate. Rather, he argues that Jesus is superior to the angels because Jesus is the Messiah. Given that Jesus is the Messiah, he is thereby God incarnate. But Paul’s emphasis is on the fact that, as Messiah, Jesus is greater than the angels.

Now the fact that Paul asserts the identity of JESUS<sub>human</sub> and JESUS<sub>God-incarnate</sub> does not alter that fact that it is JESUS<sub>human</sub> and not JESUS<sub>God-incarnate</sub> whose status is being established by Paul’s argument. Accordingly, if a Trinitarian interpreter picks and chooses whether to construe each statement made in Hebrews 1–2 as being about JESUS<sub>human</sub> or JESUS<sub>God-incarnate</sub>, according to whether it fits his Trinitarian theology, he is engaging in something that is exegetically and hermeneutically unwarranted. But he could remedy this by adjusting how he thinks about the 6 assertions above. Conceding that it is JESUS<sub>human</sub> in view, he might read the 6 crucial assertions this way:

Statement #1a: God spoke to mankind through JESUS<sub>human</sub>.

Statement #2a: God made the world through JESUS<sub>human</sub> (= the Son<sub>incarnate</sub>).

Statement #3a: JESUS<sub>human</sub> (= the Son<sub>incarnate</sub>) possesses the very nature of God within his person and is therefore the radiance of God’s glory.

Statement #4a: JESUS<sub>human</sub> (= the Son<sub>incarnate</sub>) possesses the very nature of God within his person and is therefore the exact representation of the divine nature.



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Statement #5a: JESUS<sub>human</sub> (= the Son<sub>incarnate</sub>) upholds all of the created order through the power of his word.

Statement #6a: God made the Son<sub>pre-existent</sub> for a little while lower than the angels. (that is, God made him to be, for a little while, JESUS<sub>human</sub>).

This, he might argue, satisfies sound exegesis and hermeneutics; for all 6 statements have been construed to be about JESUS<sub>human</sub>, as sound exegesis requires. Does this then salvage a traditional approach to Hebrews 1–2, exegetically?

Statements 3 and 4 (and statement 1), I would contend, successfully capture Paul's intent. But statements 2 and 5 are untenable. It makes no sense to state of JESUS<sub>human</sub> that he created the world; nor to say of JESUS<sub>human</sub> that he sustains the universe in existence. The human Jesus did not create, nor does he uphold, the universe. So, the traditional approach is still exegetically deficient. (Statement 6 is exegetically untenable for other reasons that I will discuss below.)

The traditionalist might object that he is reading statements 2 and 5 in just the same way that he is reading statements 3 and 4. All of them, statements 2–5, are basically proposing the same thing, namely, that JESUS<sub>human</sub> just is JESUS<sub>God-incarnate</sub>. What is it to ascribe the role of creator to JESUS<sub>human</sub> if not to declare him JESUS<sub>God-incarnate</sub>? And what is it to ascribe the role of sustaining the universe to JESUS<sub>human</sub> if not to declare him JESUS<sub>God-incarnate</sub>? Now if it is acceptable to take statements 3 and 4 in this way—namely, as declaring JESUS<sub>human</sub> to be JESUS<sub>God-incarnate</sub>—then why would it not be equally acceptable to take statements 2 and 5 in this way?

This objection fails to see that statements 3 and 4 are qualitatively different from statements 2 and 5. To be specific, statements 3 and 4 are tantamount to simple declarations of the fact of the incarnation: Jesus is the radiance of the divine Glory (that is, Jesus is the incarnation of God) [statement 3]; Jesus is the exact representation of the divine nature (that is, Jesus is the incarnation of God) [statement 4]. But statements 2 and 5 do not merely assert the fact of the incarnation; rather, they predicate a divine attribute to Jesus<sub>human</sub>. Statement 2 attributes to the human Jesus the role of being the creator of the world. Statement 5 attributes to the human Jesus the role of sustaining the created order in existence. It is one thing to identify Jesus<sub>human</sub> with JESUS<sub>God-incarnate</sub> and thereby affirm the incarnation. It is quite another thing to predicate a divine attribute to a human being. The former is legitimate and plausible; the latter is not.

We can explain the difference this way: Statements 3 and 4 are the logical equivalents of identity propositions, where the predicate is being said to be identical to the subject. Hence, they are logically equivalent to JESUS<sub>human</sub> is identical to JESUS<sub>God-incarnate</sub>. In these statements, no divine attributes are being predicated of JESUS<sub>human</sub>. To the contrary, the assertion is being made that JESUS<sub>human</sub> is identical to JESUS<sub>God-incarnate</sub> without the

attribution of any specific divine traits to him. But statements 2 and 5 are not identity propositions; they involve attribution. They are attributing specific divine traits to the human Jesus. That is where the traditional approach to these statements runs afoul of sound exegesis. JESUS<sub>human</sub>, who is the subject under consideration, simply CANNOT be said to be the creator and sustainer of the universe. True enough, these things could be attributed to JESUS<sub>God-incarnate</sub>, but we have already established that it is not JESUS<sub>God-incarnate</sub> who is the subject of discussion in Hebrews 1–2.

We have arrived at the following important conclusion: *all of the six statements under consideration need to be construed in such a way that they say something plausible and meaningful about JESUS<sub>human</sub>, that is, about Jesus insofar as he is understood to be an ordinary human being.* We have also seen that the direction the Trinitarian is tempted to go in his interpretation of these six assertions—in order that they might serve as evidence for the Trinity—is not very promising. He cannot succeed making all six assertions say something plausible about JESUS<sub>human</sub> and still have it provide the evidence he wants for the Trinity.

## Critique of the Traditional Evidences for the Trinity

Keeping in mind the conclusion reached above, many of the statements that a Trinitarian might like to construe as evidence for the Trinity are invalid readings of the text, to the extent that they do not read them as meaningful assertions about JESUS<sub>human</sub>. This is quite sufficient to invalidate these as evidence for the Trinity. But there are other reasons for rejecting these readings as well. I will revisit each alleged evidence of the Trinity and make a series of observations that reflect on the exegetical problems with each reading of the text:

**Statement #1: God has granted his most important revelation to mankind through the eternal, pre-existent “Son” > “God...in these last days has spoken to us in his Son.” (NASV, 1:1–2a)**

Observation 1.1 > As we have already seen, this—and everything else in this paragraph—must be construed as a statement about Jesus in his humanity [JESUS<sub>human</sub>], not about the eternal, pre-existent Son. Some theologians would like to read this statement as a statement about the eternal, pre-existent second person of the Trinity, connect it with the Logos in John 1, and then “deduce” that the role of the second person of the Trinity is to be that person of the godhead who communicates and/or reveals the divine being. It is the second person of the godhead who is the Word (Logos); it is the second person in whom the godhead “spoke” to mankind. But all of this is to impose a reading on Heb. 1:1 that has nothing whatsoever to do with the meaning, point, and purpose of the argument of Hebrews 1–2. In the context of the overall argument of Hebrews 1–2, Paul clearly has Jesus in mind as the Son through God has spoken in these

last days. Jesus came into the world to teach us the truth. So, the “Son” in view in Heb. 1:1 is unquestionably JESUS<sub>human</sub>, the human being, Jesus of Nazareth.

**Statement #2: God made the world through the eternal, pre-existent “Son” > “through whom also He made the world” (NASV, 1:2c)**

Observation 2.1 > We have already seen that this fails exegetically. The rhetorical structure and purpose of Hebrews 1–2 require this to be a plausible assertion about JESUS<sub>human</sub>. This is not a plausible assertion. It is simply not plausible to think that Jesus, insofar as he was an ordinary human being, was an agent in the creation of the world.

Observation 2.2 > The Greek word *aionas* in this statement is translated by the NASV as “world.” It is better translated “ages.” The word *aion* occurs 122 times in the New Testament. In almost all of them, the NASV translates it “age.” It translates this word (elsewhere always in the singular, *aion*) as “world” only six times: Matt 13:22, Mark 4:19, Rom 12:2, 2Cor 4:4, 1Tim 6:17, and 2 Tim 4:10. In all six of these occurrences, it would be better translated as “age.” It is not clear to me why the NASV ever translates *aion* as “world.” To the extent that it can be considered a valid translation at all, it is to the extent that “world” denotes the time that we are in when we live in this world. It never denotes the objective created order as such; it is not synonymous with *kosmos*. Therefore, this clause should be translated “*dia* whom also he made the ages,” or, “he, in fact, is the one *dia* whom he made the ages.”

Observation 2.3 > The antecedent of the pronoun “he” is the one who has spoken in these last days through [*en*] his Son—namely, God. Hence, “he” who made the ages is God.

Observation 2.4 > What does Paul mean here when he asserts that God made the ages *dia* his Son? I see no reason to think that Paul means anything significantly different here from what he asserted in Col. 1:16 and 1 Cor. 8:6, and from what John asserted in John 1:10. Namely, Paul is claiming that it was “**with a view to [*dia*] the Son that God made the ages.**” By this he means that everything that has been made to occur down through the ages has been planned in accord with the purposes that God has in view for the Son. [I will not present my arguments here for why I believe this is a justifiable interpretation of *dia*. See the arguments in paper #5, and in appendices C, D, E, and F for a discussion of why I believe this is a valid reading of those other passages and a justifiable understanding of *dia* in general.] In this context, the most important clue we have for discerning the meaning of this assertion is the conclusion we reached earlier: ***all of the statements under consideration in Heb. 1:1–4 need to be construed in such a way that they say something plausible and meaningful about JESUS<sub>human</sub>, that is, about Jesus insofar as his humanity is concerned.*** This rules out reading this assertion as “God made the ages through JESUS<sub>human</sub>.” Jesus, in his humanity, did not make the ages; nor is he, in

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his humanity, an intermediate agent of creation. So whatever “God made the ages *dia* him” means, it must mean something that makes sense as this: God made the ages *dia* JESUS<sub>human</sub>. My proposal satisfies that condition. So, my proposal—that Paul is making exactly the same claim that is made in Col. 1:16, 1 Cor. 8:6, and John 1:10— must be taken seriously. I would contend that this is Paul’s meaning: God made the ages **with a view to** JESUS<sub>human</sub>. Unless there is a compelling reason to think that it is *never* appropriate to construe *dia* as I do here, then this must be what Paul means. There is no better, plausible reading available. On four separate occasions, the New Testament asserts that the cosmos was made *dia* Jesus. In each of them, taking it to affirm that the world was made with Jesus in view makes perfectly good sense in its context. This tends to confirm, in my mind, the legitimacy of this interpretation of these statements.

Observation 2.5 > If the interpretation I am proposing is correct, then the purpose of this assertion is to affirm that all of cosmic history has been planned with the human being, Jesus, the Son, in view. This does not require a pre-incarnational existence of the Son in any form other than as a purpose in the mind of God. Hence, it provides no incontrovertible evidence of the Trinity (nor, indeed, of a pre-existent being entitled the “Son.”) This interpretation does not exclude the Trinity as a possibility certainly. Trinitarian doctrine is compatible with the claim that Paul is making here. But the Trinity is not a necessary deduction from this statement.

**Statement #3: Because Jesus possesses the very nature of God within his person, he is the radiance of God’s glory** > “And He is the radiance of His glory” (NASV, 1:3a)

Observation 3.1 > My translation of this is “he exists as the Glory’s shining forth into the darkness.” “Glory” is an allusion, I think, to the Shekinah glory in the temple and to the glory that God manifest to Israel at Mt. Sinai and during their sojourn in the wilderness. The Shekinah glory ultimately departed from the temple and the manifest physical presence of God among his people was gone. Jesus is the return of that manifest physical presence of God among his people. As John put it in John 1:10, “And the Logos became flesh a *pitched his tent* among us.” Man dwells in darkness. The coming of the Son was the shining of light into that darkness. So, as Paul puts it, the manifest physical presence of God among us shined the light of his glory into the midst of the darkness of human existence. [See my notes in Appendix G and Appendix H.] It is a mistake to be so consumed with whether or not this statement affirms the deity of Jesus (which it clearly does) that one misses the more important point Paul is making. Paul’s point is that, as the incarnation of God, Jesus is the return of the divine Glory to be present among his people. And, as such, it is the shining forth of the glory of God into the darkness of man’s existence to dispel that darkness.

Observation 3.2 > This statement simply cannot discriminate between the two views at issue: Trinitarianism or Transcendent Monotheism. It is certainly possible for Jesus to be

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breaking into our darkness with the light of God's glory because he is the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. But it could also be because he is the incarnation of the "fullness" of the one and only transcendent God himself. The former is what Trinitarianism asserts; the latter is what Transcendent Monotheism asserts. Paul's assertion here is entirely compatible with both the Trinitarian view and the Transcendent Monotheist view and offers no way, by itself, to decide between them.

**Statement #4: Because Jesus possesses the very nature of God within his person, he is the exact representation of God's divine nature** > "and the exact representation of His nature" (NASV, 1:3b)

Observation 4.1 > In my notes in Appendix G and Appendix H, I argue that it is better translated something like "and [he exists as ...] the stamp of his [God's] particular personal identity [*hypostasis*]." That is, Jesus bears in his very being the stamp of the particular identity of Yahweh himself. The metaphor here comes from the fact that a stamp dipped in ink leaves a mark behind that is in the likeness or image of the stamp. The word used for that representative image caused by a stamp is the *charakter*. *Charakter* is the word used in this statement to describe Jesus here. Jesus is the stamped image [*charakter*] of God's *hypostasis*.

Observation 4.2 > See my notes in Appendix G and Appendix H for a more detailed discussion of how I understand *hypostasis*. It is impossible to discern any clear and consistent pattern of usage in the word *hypostasis*. It is used in a wide variety of different ways; and its meaning varies widely from one author to the next. It can be used to make distinctions that overlap with those made by others. Or, it can even be used to make distinctions that contradict distinctions made by other philosophers. In Paul's assertion here in Heb. 1:3, it most likely should be translated something like "particular identity." According to Aristotle, an *eidon* (universal essence; a Platonic "form") combines with *hule* (the bare possibility of existence occurring in a particular time and place [*hule* = pure potentiality = pregnant nothingness]) to form a *particular thing*. Some philosophers (in some instances) call the particular thing so formed a *hypostasis*. [Note this citation from an entry in *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, under the entry for "Form / ὑποστάσις" by G. Harder, p.711: "*hypostasis* can thus mean...the entering into a relationship of matter and quality, without which there can be nothing empirical and no real being. It can also thus mean the actualization of a body ... For the Peripatetics *hypostasis* meant that which gives stability to the concrete, individual thing. It was thus not far removed from *substantia*."] This usage, in my judgment, is related to the sense in which Paul is using *hypostasis* here in this statement under consideration. If a *hypostasis* is a discreet, actual, particular, numerically singular thing, then the *hypostasis* of God is his discreet, actual, particular, numerically singular personal identity. Jesus, then, is the "stamp" of God's particularity as a personal being.

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Note that every human being is created in the image of God. We are like God because we, like God, are persons. But personhood is a genus, a class of things, a universal; and both humans and God belong to that class. But no human being, except Jesus, is the created image of the *hupostasis* of God. Only Jesus has the stamp of Yahweh's particular, individual personhood. All human beings are a likeness of Yahweh; only Jesus just IS Yahweh himself. For a fuller discussion of the nature of Jesus' relationship to God as I am understanding it here, see appendix I.

Observation 4.3 > A traditional interpretation of this statement tends to take *hupostasis* to mean something like "essence"—hence, "Jesus is the exact representation of the divine essence." The assumption is that Jesus is the exact representation of that essence precisely because he contains that very essence in his person. This interpretation cannot be ruled out on the basis of the meaning of the word *hupostasis*. As we saw above, its usage is widely varied.

It might be instructive, however, to note these three significant uses of *hupostasis* in the Septuagint: (i) Psalm 39:5 > "Behold, You have made my days as handbreadths, and my lifetime (*hupostasis* [individual existence?]) is nothing in Your sight; surely every man at his best is a mere breath." (ii) Psalm 89:47 > "Remember what my span of life (*hupostasis* [individual existence?]) is; for what vanity You have created all the sons of men!" (iii) Psalm 139:15 > My frame was not hidden from You which you made in secret, even my *hupostasis* [individual existence?]) which you made in the depths of the earth." These three occurrences provide a clear precedent for *hupostasis* being used to indicate an individual person's existence. These occurrences do not necessarily indicate clearly whether it is the personal *identity*—*vis à vis* the personal *essence*—of the individual that is in view. So, in that regard they do not help us with the point at issue between Trinitarianism and Transcendent Monotheism. But they certainly provide clear evidence of *hupostasis* referring to the of a person in some sense. It is in keeping with its use in the Septuagint, therefore, to understand the assertion here to be "he [Jesus] is the exact representation of his [God's] person."

Observation 4.4 > While the above statement provides nothing definitive for deciding between Trinitarianism and Transcendent Monotheism, it is certainly suggestive. Paul seems to be saying the same thing that he says in Colossians, "Jesus is the image [parallel to *charakter*] of the invisible God." It seems to me that a real tension exists between this sort of statement and Trinitarian doctrine. Is not Trinitarian doctrine seeking to assert that the invisible God (the second person) came down and resided in the human Jesus? It was God himself (the second person) who was present in and embodied in Jesus; not merely an "image" of God. Yet Paul repeatedly uses terms and metaphors that suggest a relationship between God and Jesus that is analogous to the relationship between object [*hupostasis*] and image [*charakter*]. These seem to be in tension. Is Jesus the "image" of God? Or, is Jesus God himself?

Paul's assertion here could readily convey this view: Jesus is God in the sense that the particular person of Yahweh himself is uniquely reflected in the particular person of

Jesus. (This same view seems to be readily compatible with everything Paul asserts about Jesus.) But it seems something of a stretch to see behind this assertion the more metaphysically involved claims of Trinitarian theology.

We can put this same point another way. To do justice to how Paul speaks of Jesus, Jesus must be God in a way that allows us to make both of the following claims at the same time: (i) Jesus is the “image” of God; and (ii) Jesus just **is** God manifest and present to us. If our doctrine satisfies the second claim without satisfying the first claim, then our understanding of who Jesus is differs from Paul’s. I believe Trinitarianism is deficient in this respect. It tends to be so desirous of obliterating the distinction between the object (Yahweh) and the image (Jesus)—out of fear that it would somehow diminish Jesus—that logically it should be reticent to allow Paul to claim that Jesus is the “image” of God. There has to be something wrong with Trinitarian theology if, to be logically consistent, it cannot allow Paul to say the very things he does in fact say.

Transcendent Monotheism, on the other hand, offers a plausible explanation of this dual assertion. Jesus is the “image” of God because he is not God himself, in his transcendence. Rather, he is God “translated” into human form. The distinction between God as he is in his transcendence and his image in the human person Jesus is just as real as the distinction between an object and its image (for example, its shadow). On the other hand, the image of God that Jesus embodies is absolutely unique. Jesus is the unique image of the individual that God (Yahweh) is. Accordingly, Jesus just **IS** God in a way that no other person is or can be. And, it is the individual person that God is that is reflected in the human person of Jesus. Hence, it can legitimately be said, “Jesus **IS** God.”

**Statement #5: Jesus, insofar as he is the eternal, pre-existent Son, upholds all of the created order through the power of his word** > “and upholds all things by the word of His power” (NASV, 1:3c)

Observation 5.1 > Again, we have already seen that this fails exegetically. The rhetorical structure and purpose of Hebrews 1–2 require this to be a plausible assertion about JESUS<sub>human</sub>. This is not a plausible assertion. It is simply not plausible to think that Jesus, insofar as he was an ordinary human being, was the one who maintained in existence the whole of what is.

Observation 5.2 > Note that this statement is best understood as an independent clause, even though the finite verb is not expressed. I understand the participial phrase to be functioning as a finite verb. It is as if this clause contained the verb “to be” in conjunction with the participle. Hence, I interpret this text as if it read: φέρων τε ἔστιν τὰ πάντα τῷ ῥήματι τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ δι’ ἑαυτοῦ. [and he **is** upholding all things by the word of his power].

Observation 5.3 > Furthermore, this participial clause is best understood to be coordinate with the main clause, “God has spoken to us in his Son.” It is not an independent

clause working in parallel with the parenthetical triplet of assertions describing the identity of the Son—specifically, (i) he is heir of all things; (ii) God made the ages for him; and (iii) he is the shining forth of God’s Glory, the exact representation of his person. If Paul had intended this participial phrase to serve the same function as the prior triplet of assertions, I think he would have cast it in the same form as those—as a relative clause. Making it another relative clause would have clearly signaled the fact that it parallels the other three. Since he did not, I am inclined to take the participial clause as working along with the main clause. If this is right, then the “he” who “upholds all things” is not “the Son” (the subject of the triplets), it is “God” (the subject of the primary clause). Note the excursus below for a summary of the analysis of the syntax of paragraph 1 (1:1-4). It is this syntactical analysis that underlies these observations in 5.2 and 5.3.

Observation 5.4 > If “God” is the subject of this participial clause, then what are these “all things” that God upholds? When we understand the main clause to be augmented by this participial clause, we have, “God has spoken to us in his Son, and he upholds all things... .” When the first sentence is rendered this way, it becomes apparent that the “all things” are the “all things” that God has spoken to us in his Son.

Observation 5.5 > The word translated “uphold” is  $\phi\acute{\epsilon}\rho\omega$ . There are two reasonable ways to understand the sense of  $\phi\acute{\epsilon}\rho\omega$  in this assertion. Paul could be using  $\phi\epsilon\rho\omega$  as a synonym for “to speak”—a usage acknowledged by the lexicons. Or, he could be using it in its common sense of “to bear something” or “to support something.” In this case, it would be in a metaphorical sense—specifically, meaning “to give evidential support for the veracity of something.” We use the English word “support” in this way. If I make a claim, I can be asked to provide evidence that *supports* my claim. Although I know of no other instance where  $\phi\acute{\epsilon}\rho\omega$  is used in this way, quite clearly it is a possible and understandable metaphor. Hence, both of the two options above are possible.

(a) Under the first option, the assertion would read like this: “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, and was declaring all things by the word of his power through him.” In this case, “all things” would probably mean something a little more than all the things God said. Perhaps, all the things that he wanted and purposed to say. Or, even all the things that mankind needed to hear. Furthermore, under this reading, the “word of his power” refers to something roughly like “the divinely powerful utterance by which Jesus declared God’s message.” Hence, we could paraphrase this reading: “... God... has in the last of these days spoken to us through the Son, declaring all things to us by the divinely powerful utterance spoken through Jesus.” On this reading, the participial clause does not add anything significant to the main clause. After we have taken the participial clause into account, the assertion still boils down to “in these last days, God has spoken to us in his Son.” Or, at best, “in these last days, God has spoken to us in his Son, and he told us everything we needed to know in a powerful way.”



(b) Under the second option, the assertion would read like this: “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, and he supported all things (he said) by the word of his power through him.” In this case, God would be “supporting” what the Son said in the sense that he would be giving evidential support to it—that is, validating for mankind its divine authority and veracity. Under this reading, the “word of his power” refers to the word of command that God correlated with supernatural events. To be specific, when Jesus spoke a word of command and a blind man supernaturally received sight, this was the “word of power.” It provided the occasion for God to “support” what Jesus said and taught. Furthermore, note that the correct reading of the Greek text has “the word of God *dia* him.” This probably means “the word of God *through* Jesus.” Hence, we could paraphrase this reading: “... God... has in the last of these days spoken to us through the Son, and he supported all things (that he said in Jesus) by his supernaturally powerful word spoken through Jesus.” On this reading, the participial clause adds a significant additional claim to what Paul is saying in the main clause. He is claiming that the signs that accompanied Jesus’ teaching had evidential value in validating Jesus’ claims and teaching. After we have taken the participial clause into account, the assertion then comes to “in these last days, God has spoken to us in his Son and God provided evidential support to the Son’s message through the divinely powerful word of the Son to command miraculous signs.”

Although both readings are possible, I prefer the latter for two reasons:

(i) The first reading, as we have seen, makes the participial clause largely superfluous. It does not add anything of significance to the sentence. Rather, the clause either becomes superfluous flattery of God’s ability—saying that when God spoke in his Son, *he declared things with a powerful utterance*—or, it becomes a dubious assertion. Can it truly be said that Jesus’ teaching was typically “powerful”? Was it not cast in the same kind of utterances that any teacher would make—except that Jesus always uttered the truth? Why describe it as divinely “powerful”? It is hard to see what Paul would be saying by this if the activity being described is Jesus’ proclamation of God’s message. The second reading, on the other hand, construes the participial clause in such a way that makes a significant contribution to the meaning of Paul’s statement.

(ii) It is clear from the immediate context that evidence for claims by and about Jesus is important to Paul. This issue is very much at the forefront of Paul’s mind. In Hebrews 2:4, Paul states explicitly that the supernatural signs that accompanied the apostles’ eyewitness accounts of the teaching and deeds of Jesus give us evidence that forms the basis for trust in the claims of Jesus and in the claims about Jesus. When we combine this fact—namely, that miracles are obviously playing an important role in the opening argument (in 2:4)—with the fact that *δυναμις* (power) is frequently used in the N.T. to denote supernatural signs (miracles), it seems highly likely that Paul intended *dunamis* to denote just such miracles in his phrase “the word of his *δυναμις* (power).”

So, while either reading would make sense, I strongly prefer the latter. It is worth noting, however, that neither reading agrees with the more common, traditional reading—

that Jesus (as God, the Son) is upholding the ongoing existence of all that exists by his “powerful word.”

Observation 5.6 > To summarize my interpretation of this clause: “and he [God] supported [gave a basis upon which to know that it was true and authoritative] all that was said [taught by the Son] by the divinely authoritative command [the “word” divinely powerful to command supernatural events] uttered through him [Jesus].”

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### Excursus: The Syntax of ¶1: Clues to Its Meaning and Purpose

How are we to understand the syntax of 1:1–4? I have tried to indicate my analysis of the syntax in ¶1 in the way I punctuated it in the Greek text at the beginning of this paper. I will try here to elucidate the syntax through a series of observations:

- (1) There are two and only two distinct statement (sentences) in the first paragraph.
- (2) The first sentence is a rather lengthy and involved assertion, for it includes a long series of parenthetical comments in the middle of it.
- (3) The second sentence is relatively simple and straightforward.
- (4) The simple affirmation of the first sentence, reduced to its core meaning, is this:  
*God has spoken to us through the Son and he has supported all that he (the Son) taught by the divinely authoritative command uttered through him (the Son).*
- (5) The simple affirmation of the second sentence—if I translate its highly metaphorical language into more literal terms—comes to this: *After his death and resurrection, Jesus laid claim to the sovereign authority that had been destined to be his. Jesus was the promised “Son.” As such, when he entered into his authority as the “Son,” he became a very important being, significantly more important than any angel. As much as “King” [Son of God] is a more important title than “messenger” [angelos], just so, Jesus is a more important being than any angel.*
- (6) In the middle of the first sentence, there is a list of three claims regarding the Son: (i) the Son was the one whom God appointed to be heir of all things; (2) it was with a view to the Son (roughly, it was “for” the Son) that God has made the whole span of the ages; and (3) the Son is the manifestation of divine glory coming down into the darkness of this world, and he is that, because he is the very stamp of the particular personal identity of God himself.

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(7) The purpose of the above list of three claims regarding the Son is to describe more fully who the Son is. Inherent in the very meaning of the title "Son" is a whole host of assumptions about him, a whole picture of who he is and how he fits into that picture. These three brief assertions are simple pointers. They remind the reader of that larger picture. The purpose of the reminder is to emphasize to the reader how very important the Son is; and, hence, how very important must be the message God sent him to deliver.

(8) Finally, the first sentence also includes an assertion of the following subordinate points: (1) in past times, when God wanted to speak to the fathers of the nation of Israel, he did so through prophets; (2) what he revealed to his prophets was conveyed to them in many different sorts of ways; (3) what he revealed to them came in bits and pieces; they each received a fragment of the whole picture, never the whole picture itself; and (4) we (at the time of Paul) are now in the last of days, and in these days God has revealed his message to us through his "Son." That is, God did not send a mere prophet in these last of days, he sent the Son himself.

With these observations in mind, then, how can we characterize the meaning and purpose of paragraph 1 in the context of the argument in Hebrews 1? Quite simply, Paul is asserting that *God sent the Son, not simply another prophet, to proclaim to us the complete and final message of the gospel itself. Not only did the Son (Jesus) teach and proclaim, but God validated Jesus' teaching and claims through supernatural signs that God performed in connection with Jesus' command. Now this Son is an exalted and important being. He is the very incarnation of God himself. He is the one who will inherit God's own rule over and status within the cosmos. He is that creature with a view to whom everything that happens in the cosmos comes to pass. He is vastly more important than any angel, as their respective names indicate. Angels are merely messengers, the Son is the King, the very embodiment of Yahweh's own rule over his creation. Angels may, ontologically speaking, be higher and more impressive beings than human beings. But, in terms of importance, stature, and role, the human being, Jesus, is the highest and most important being in the cosmos—vastly more important than any angel.*

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**Statement #6: The Son humbled himself and became inferior to angels for the brief time of his incarnation; but ultimately—since he was the eternal, pre-existent Son—he returned to his original state of exaltation above the angels > "YOU HAVE MADE HIM FOR A LITTLE WHILE LOWER THAN THE ANGELS" (NASV, 2:7a)**

Observation 6.1 > The above statement, from Hebrews 2:7a, is a quote from Psalm 8:5. If one consults the Hebrew Masoretic text in Psalm 8:5, the Greek Septuagint text in Psalm 8:5, and the N.T. Greek text citing Psalm 8:5 here in Heb. 2:7a, none of them justify the NASV translation "a little while." Translating it "a little while" does not even make sense in the context of Psalm 8. The whole point of the Psalm is to express

wonderment that God would have regard for a mere human being, a being who is a little lower than the angels (or, in the Hebrew text, perhaps a little lower than the “gods.”) There is no justification for translating it “for a little while.” Psalm 8:5 is saying—with respect to the Son—“You have made him *a little lower* than the angels.” This reading of Hebrews 2:7a (and its quote of Psalm 8) is completely compatible with how I have taken the arguments of Hebrews in general and Hebrews 1:1–4 in particular. Hebrews 2:7, rightly interpreted and translated, says nothing to support the traditional view that Jesus is the second person of the Trinity made “for a little while” lower than the angels.

Observation 6.2 > This translation of Heb. 2:7a in the NASV seems to be clearly influenced by a certain version of Trinitarian theology. It is difficult to explain the translation on any other basis. Some versions of Trinitarianism hold that the Logos (the second person of the Trinity) condescended to become a man, in Jesus. Then, after his ascension, he returned to his exalted status as a person within the triune godhead. While he was a human being, he was, for that “little while,” lower than the angels. But after his ascension, he was no longer lower than the angels, because now he was God again. This problematic view is completely compatible with, if not even suggested by, the NASV translation of Heb. 2:7a. But, as we have seen, there is no warrant for such a translation.

## Objections to my interpretation of Hebrews 1:1–4

One could raise the same objection against my interpretation of Hebrews 1:3 that was raised against my exegesis of John 1:10: that *dia* plus the genitive does not and, indeed, cannot mean “with a view to.” I have addressed that objection adequately in the context of John 1 and the corresponding appendices. See paper #5 (Objections #2 and #6); and see the appendices on *dia*. There are three important objections that remain:

Objection #1: I am not persuaded by your arguments that it is God who is “upholding all things by the word of his power.” I think Paul is describing the Son. This is the last of four descriptions he makes of the Son. And, since it is speaking of the Son, it makes sense to interpret it “he upholds all things in existence by the word of his power.”

Answer 1.1 > To the contrary, it is much less likely that this participial phrase (clause) is intended as the last of four descriptions of the Son. The last two words of 1.1—  $\delta\iota\alpha$   $\acute{\epsilon}\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$  [through him/ himself]—have much manuscript support (even though the UBS text omits them). If “upholding all things by the word of his power” is talking about the Son, and is interpreted as the traditional view typically takes it, then what would the  $\delta\iota\alpha$   $\acute{\epsilon}\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$  [through him/ himself] mean? How are we to understand “and he [the Son] upholds all things in existence by the word of his power *through him*”? (or “*through himself*”? This is a very odd statement if we must take it this way.

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And even if we accept the UBS text's decision to omit *δια ἑαυτου* [through him/himself], consider a reconstruction of the paragraph under this reading (such that it is also in keeping with Trinitarian assumptions):

God has spoken to us in his Son in these last days. The Son is heir of all things. The Son is the one through whom the world was made. The Son has the very nature of God, such that he is the radiance of God's glory and the express image of his divine nature. The Son upholds everything that exists by the word of his power. After dying on the cross for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God on high. He had become as much better than any angel to the same extent that "King" is a better title than "messenger."

As potentially valid as each individual point might be, notice how fragmented, choppy, and inelegant the paragraph is under this reading. In my judgment, this is an important indication that it does not grasp the structure that Paul intended. The interpretation I have proposed is a more coherent and elegant reading of the syntax.

Objection #2: Even by your own interpretation, you describe Jesus, the Son, as "the Glory's shining forth into the darkness" and as "the stamp of his particular personal identity." This seems to be a clear and explicit statement that Jesus is God! Therefore, Paul is giving evidence here that he believes in the Trinity.

Answer 2.1> It is absolutely the case that Paul believes and is stating here that Jesus is God. However, we must keep clearly in mind that both Trinitarianism and Transcendent Monotheism affirm that Jesus is God; that is not at issue between them. What is at issue is in what sense it is true that Jesus is God. What exactly does it imply to say that Jesus is God? There is nothing in what Paul says here that clearly and indubitably requires the distinctive claims of Trinitarianism to be in the background of his statement. Paul could easily be a Transcendent Monotheist and make both of these claims.

Answer 2.2> It is arguable that we have a specific and distinctive indication here that Paul is a Transcendent Monotheist and NOT a Trinitarian. If I am right in how I construe the meaning of Paul's use of *hupostasis*, then Paul is going out of his way to indicate that what is shared by Jesus and Yahweh is a particular personal identity, not some kind of ontological essence or "nature." The problem, of course, is that *hupostasis* is used so variously that it is impossible to be dogmatic about what exactly it does and does not denote.

The Trinitarian could plausibly argue that *hupostasis* denotes the divine essence (or the divine nature) here. But it most certainly does not have to mean "essence." On what basis, then, would one make such a claim (if not from a desire to find a proof text for the Trinity)? And, even if it does mean "essence," in what sense would Jesus and God share the divine "essence"? In any event, this statement by Paul is simply not an incontrovertible evidence for Trinitarian doctrine *vis à vis* Transcendent Monotheism.

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Answer 2.3> The formulation of the Trinity that has gained popular approval down to modern times is this: God is three persons (*hupostases*), but one essence (*ousia*). Clearly, Hebrews 1:3 presents a problem for this formulation of the Trinity. Paul says of the Son here in Heb. 1:3, that “he is the *charakter* [stamp, representation, image] of his [God’s] *hupostasis*.” If we assume Trinitarian theology, how are we to understand this statement in Heb. 1:3? Is Paul saying that the second person (*hupostasis*) of the Trinity (the eternal Son) is the image of the first person (*hupostasis*) of the Trinity (God)? Possibly. But, as we have seen, it is far more likely that Paul is making an assertion here about the human, incarnate Son, not the eternal second person of the Trinity. It is the human Jesus who is “the *charakter* [stamp, representation, image] of his [God’s] *hupostasis*.” But, again— if we restrict ourselves to describing the human Jesus—what would we expect on Trinitarian assumptions? Isn’t Jesus supposed to be the incarnation of the second person (*hupostasis*) of the Trinity? So, Jesus, the Son, just IS the *hupostasis* of the **second** person of the Trinity. So, why does Paul describe him as the *charakter* [stamp, representation, image] of the *hupostasis* of the **first** person of the Trinity [God]? (Or, does Paul mean to indicate the **second** person?) The most reasonable solution, I suppose, is that the human Son, Jesus, is the *hupostasis* of the second person of the Trinity who, in turn, is the *charakter* [stamp, representation, image] of the *hupostasis* of the first person of the Trinity. That is logically possible, certainly. But it is highly doubtful that that is what Paul is intending in Heb. 1:3. How would it possibly serve Paul’s rhetorical purpose in Hebrews 1:1-4 to make such a point? His argument is compelling without including such a complex technicality. Yet, nothing short of such a reading can do justice to both the text and the argument of Hebrews 1, on the one hand, and to the particular doctrinal formulations of Orthodox Trinitarianism on the other hand.

One can avoid this complex interpretation of Heb. 1:3 if he concedes that Paul is using *hupostasis* here in a different sense from the way it is being used in the popular formulation of the Nicene Creed. But, once that is conceded, it must be admitted that Hebrews 1:3 provides no clear evidence of the distinctive doctrines of Trinitarianism. [See Appendix J for a brief evaluation of some of the more important options for how *hupostasis* could be taken in Hebrews 1:3.]

Objection #3: Hebrews 1:8–13 reads, “But of the Son he says, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom. . . .” And, — “You, LORD, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the works of your hands. . . .” Essentially, Paul is citing two different Psalms—Psalm 45 and Psalm 102— and claiming that both of them are being said “of the Son.” By saying that Psalm 102 refers to the Son, notice what Paul is saying about the Son: the Son “laid the foundation of the earth”; the works of the heavens are the works of the Son’s hands; the Son will remain even after the creation has worn out; the Son is eternal, and eternally the same. Since here in 1:10–12 Paul is clearly attributing eternal existence, the role of creator, and, hence, pre-existence (that is, all the divine attributes) to the Son, surely that informs how we should interpret 1:1-4 as well. In both portions of the chapter, Paul is

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simply arguing that Jesus is one and the same as the transcendent God, possessing the divine nature and having all of the transcendent God's attributes.

Answer 3.1> Psalm 102, cited in Heb 1:10–12, is not describing anything about the Son. The subject of the Psalm is Yahweh. This is without question, as even a surface reading of the Psalm will show.

Answer 3.2 > Paul is not claiming anything contrary to the above. The objection interprets this passage as if it read: "Now of the Son, the Scriptures say, 'Your throne, O God, is forever... .' And also, of the Son, the Scriptures say, 'You LORD, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth...'" But this is NOT required by the text at all. It should read instead: "Now of the Son, the Scriptures say, 'Your throne, O God, is forever... .' And the Scriptures also say, 'You LORD, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth...'" Contrary to the assumption of the objection, Paul does not actually claim that the citation from Psalm 102 is referring to the Son.

Answer 3.3> Consider the following argument:

Statement to be proved: Ralph is a wealthy man.

Premise A: Albert has promised to give Ralph his fortune.

Premise B: Albert has never broken a promise in his whole life.

Conclusion C: Therefore, Ralph will be a wealthy man.

Notice that the whole argument is about Ralph. But Premise B is not at all a statement about Ralph; it is about Albert. However, it is a step in an argument that is seeking to prove something about Ralph.

In Hebrews 1, Paul is making a series of claims (or arguments) that are either structured like or are somehow equivalent to this:

(Premise 1) Of the Son the Scriptures say X.

(Premise 2) Of the angels the Scriptures say Y.

(Unstated Premise 3) X is greater than Y.

(Implicit, unstated conclusion 4) Therefore, the Son is greater than the angels.

Hebrews 1:8–14 is one of these arguments. But premise 1 of the larger argument involves a simple three-step sub-argument that is reminiscent of the very first argument outlined above. Paul's sub-argument can be represented like this:

Statement to be proved: The Son will reign for God over his eternal, righteous kingdom.

Premise a: God has anointed the Son to be King over his eternal, righteous Kingdom. [Heb 1:8–9]

Premise b: God is eternal and he is eternally able to guarantee that his promises are fulfilled. [Heb 1:10–12]

Premise c: God has promised to establish the Son's reign over his eternal Kingdom. [Heb 1:13]

Implicit Conclusion d: Therefore, the Son will reign for God over his eternal, righteous kingdom.

Notice that this whole sub-argument is about the Son. But Premise b is not at all a statement about the Son; it is about God, Yahweh. However, it is a step in the sub-argument that is seeking to prove something about the Son.

Now, the larger argument of Heb. 1:8–14 is structured like this:

(Premise i) The Son will reign for God over his eternal, righteous kingdom. [Heb 1:8–13] {*notice that this is what is proved by the sub-argument*}

(Premise ii) The angels are merely ministering spirits. [Heb 1:14]

(Unstated Premise iii) Reigning over God's Kingdom is greater than being a ministering spirit.

(Implicit, unstated conclusion iv) Therefore, the Son is greater than angels.

So, given the structure of the argument from 1:8–14, it is clear that the citation from Psalm 102 in 1:10–12 refers to Yahweh. It forms a step in a larger argument that is seeking to establish something about the Son. However, since 1:10–12 are not asserting anything about the Son, they cannot be used directly to make any claims about the Son. To be specific, contrary to the objection's claim, Paul is NOT attributing eternal existence, the role of creator, and, hence, pre-existence to the Son in Heb. 1:10–12. Those are clearly intended to highlight attributes of Yahweh.

## Conclusions

We looked at six assertions in Hebrews 1–2 that could possibly be construed to offer biblical evidence for the pre-existence of the Son and indirectly, at least, evidence for the Trinity. As we have seen, none of them hold up to scrutiny. At best, some are compatible with belief in the Trinity, but none of them require it, nor even suggest it. Others tend to be more compatible with and suggestive of Transcendent Monotheism than they are with Trinitarianism.



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If the above interpretation of *Hebrews* is correct, then we can draw the following conclusion with regard to God, Jesus, and the relationship between the two:

***God sent the Son himself to deliver to mankind the most important and complete of all the messages that God has ever delivered through his prophets. In accompaniment to the Son’s message, God performed supernatural signs to validate his Son’s identity and his message. The Son is a very important creature: he is the one whom God has appointed heir of all things; he is the one with a view to whom all of cosmic history is made; he is the manifestation of God’s glory because, indeed, he is the very stamp of Yahweh’s own personal identity. The Son is considerably more important than even the angels—he is more important than the angels by as much as the King (the Messiah) is more important than a messenger.***

Further, we could summarize the distinctive elements in the teaching of Hebrews this way:

1. Jesus is the Son, the Messiah.
2. Jesus is all that being “the Son” entails: (a) he is the most important prophetic messenger; (b) he will inherit all things; (c) all things that exist or will ever occur were made to be for him; (d) no creature in the cosmos has a higher status or role than he; (e) he is the very embodiment of God’s glory; and (f) he is the very stamp of God’s particular person—that is, he is God incarnate.

Do these distinctive aspects of John’s teaching tend to support Transcendent Monotheism or Trinitarianism?

1. The claim that Jesus is the Messiah is embraced in common by both Trinitarianism and Transcendent Monotheism. Paul’s teaching in this regard would not lend support for either view over the other.
2. All of these various claims are (or, at least, certainly could be) embraced by both Trinitarianism and Transcendent Monotheism. Paul’s teaching here would not lend support for either view over the other, except to this extent:

Both Transcendent Monotheism and Trinitarianism acknowledge that Jesus is God incarnate. However, there is a significant difference in what they understand that to mean and what they understand the implications to be. Trinitarianism understands Jesus’ being God to imply that Jesus has the very ontological stuff of the transcendent God present within his person. Transcendent Monotheism understands Jesus’ being God to imply that Jesus is a unique human “image” or “representation” of the particular personal identity of the transcendent creator himself. As such, this does not—with regard to ontology—require him to be anything other than human. It is his

individual identity that is God; not his ontological makeup. Accordingly, the language that Paul uses to affirm the incarnation in Hebrews 1:1–4 is more compatible with Transcendent Monotheism than it is with Orthodox Trinitarianism. Paul uses language implying that Jesus is a representation (*charakter*) or image of God’s *hupostasis*. This “image” language is naturally at home in Transcendent Monotheistic theology; it is not so naturally at home in Trinitarian theology. If Jesus, throughout his existence, ontologically IS the *hupostasis* of God, why describe him as a “stamp” of the *hupostasis* of God? (To be a “stamp” of the *hupostasis* is to be the image caused by that *hupostasis*, not the *hupostasis* itself.)

To sum it up, Transcendent Monotheism is completely compatible with everything Paul asserts about God, about Jesus, and about the inter-relationship between the two. Trinitarianism, on the other hand, may—by stretching the language—be compatible with what Paul asserts. But Paul’s language is less natural if he is writing from a Trinitarian view than if he is writing from a Transcendent Monotheistic view. If we were to judge on the basis of the teaching of Hebrews 1 alone, we would have to conclude that Transcendent Monotheism can make a somewhat better claim to being the biblical view than can Trinitarianism.