

General Comments on Hebrews

Authorship and Audience

Most are probably aware of the fact that the authorship and intended audience of the book of Hebrews has been debated almost from the time it was written. I am not going to spend much time on this issue. To summarize, the book is different from the other known letters by the apostle Paul. Since it is different, people like to point out the differences and insist this means it wasn't Paul who wrote it.

An exhaustive discussion over the matter of authorship and intended audience is available in a book by Moses Stuart, entitled [A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews](#), fourth edition published 1854, wherein he states:

The task of examining the principal opinions which have been advanced in respect to the original destination of the epistle to the Hebrews, is tedious and appalling; but it has become absolutely necessary to every one, who makes any just pretensions to acquaintance with the literary history of this epistle. I shall be as brief as the nature of the discussion, and justice to the arguments of others, will permit; and I shall examine only those opinions which the authors of them have endeavored to support by arguments, omitting a particular discussion of those which have been thrown out as mere conjecture. (page 8)

The author then spends 54 pages on the subject of "original destination of the epistle to the Hebrews" and given the available evidence states it was likely to Palestinian Hebrews. The author spends 157 pages discussing authorship and concludes:

The conclusion, then, to be deduced, from the preceding examination, seems to be, that the arguments drawn from the style and diction of the epistle to the Hebrews, are not to be relied on as deciding the question against the Pauline origin of it. No case of this nature can be determined by *assertion*. Allegations made for such a purpose, if found to be contradicted by *facts*, are not to determine the manner in which the question before us is to be decided.

One other thing may be said with truth, which has an important bearing on this question. If the *internal* evidence is altogether insufficient to decide the point at

issue in the negative, the *external* is equally so. Indeed, the *historical* evidence against the Pauline origin of our epistle is, as we have seen, so little, so vague, and for the most part so indirect, that we may well say, "the objections have never been of an *historical* nature, but of a *conjectural* one." They have arisen more from taste and feeling, than from tradition or testimony.

On the whole, I must acquiesce in the opinion of Origen, which I repeat as the general voice of antiquity; IT IS NOT WITHOUT REASON THE ANCIENTS HAVE HANDED DOWN TO US, THAT THIS EPISLTE IS PAUL'S. Nor should I differ materially from those who, with Eusebius, can say, *fourteen epistles are clearly and certainly Paul's*. I consider, however, the form of the proposition, as stated by Origen, to be the most becoming, in regard to a point so controverted, and to contain, for substance, all which it is necessary or expedient for us to assert to believe.

I defer to this conclusion, given the exhaustive nature of the review, and the entire lack of new compelling evidence by those who argue against Pauline authorship. Whether that puts one in the minority of popular opinion or not should be irrelevant.

The most important question with respect to this matter is, "Why wouldn't Paul identify himself as the author?" That is answered easily enough with his open hostility to Judaizers within the ecclesia, clearly manifested through several of his letters (e.g., Galatians). As Paul is writing to Hebrews, Jewish converts to the Gospel, he wants the message to be the point of focus, not the messenger. He does not want the subject of the letter being dismissed out of hand. He doesn't want his reputation being a distraction. Paul also has to be honest about his personal history of persecuting Christians prior to his conversion, which is referenced explicitly in 11:32-36. Judaizers could simply say, "This was you who did that" as an *ad hominem* attack.

Proof Texts

The book of Hebrews employs a considerable number of proof texts as it makes its case. We, as Western readers some two thousand years after the authoring of this text, are at a significant disadvantage when it comes to understanding the implicit meanings of these proof texts. The more discussion made in conjunction with the proof text, the better we can understand its use and intended application.

Most of the proof texts employed in the book of Hebrews have a considerable amount of discussion surrounding them, so it is relatively easy to discern the intended application. However, in the case of ch. 1, the author presents a series of conclusions and then fires off proof texts with very little discussion. The result is the reader must attempt to follow the line of reasoning without much background to follow. It is a matter of speculation to us now as to how the Jews contemporary to Paul viewed these proof texts and what the generally accepted implications of those proof texts were.

Below, in my comments on ch. 1, I construct a chain of logic that seems to fit, but what is missing is how the intended audience would have viewed these proof texts. We can make certain assumptions, but they are still assumptions.

I mention this in an effort to convey the difficulty commentators have in dealing with such proof texts.

Chapter Summary and General Overview

The overall purpose of the text is to persuade Jewish Christians to let go of the physical Law of Moses and focus on the spiritual and eternal nature of Jesus Christ in their religious worship.

The text alternates between theological exposition and parenthetical warnings and exhortations, as follows:

Ch. 1-4 Jesus is above all and exalted above the angels (ch. 1), even though he was briefly humbled as a mortal man who suffered for His people (ch. 2), to be a mediator like Moses (ch. 3) so that He might know how to sympathize with us in our sin (ch. 4).

Warning: Pay much closer attention, lest we drift away and are judged by all we have learned and seen (2:1-4)

Warning: Don't be like your fathers in the wilderness who did not enter into the Lord's rest (3:12-4:16)

Ch. 5-7 Jesus is the perfect High Priest, above Melchizedek

Warning: The return to the Law of Moses is a return to dead works and puts you in danger of being cursed by the Law of Moses, but the Lord has sworn by Himself to keep the promise to Abraham, so you still have hope in Christ (5:11-6:20).

Ch. 8 Jesus is the ascendant High Priest of the New and Everlasting Covenant, predicted by Jeremiah. This chapter is the pivot point in the book, where verses 1-6 summarize chapters 3-7 and verses 7-13 summarize chapters 9-10.

Ch. 9-10 The Law of Moses is replaced by the New Covenant of Christ's sacrifice. Jesus Christ's sacrifice is final and eternal. No more sacrifices are needed. The Law of Sacrifice is over.

Warning: If we reject Jesus' final sacrifice for sins, then we put ourselves in jeopardy of the punishment for our own sins. We must not shrink back into destruction, we must move forward with faith towards the preservation of our soul (10:19-39).

Ch. 11 All of the Patriarchs had faith, with particular emphasis on those who preceded Moses.

Ch. 12 Focus on Christ. You need to be corrected with the Lord's correction, as God's sons are to be corrected. You have been summoned to the heavenly Mount Zion, not to Mount Sinai like you fathers were.

Warning: Do not refuse to listen to this warning, or when the Lord shakes both heaven and earth, you will fall with all earthly things (12:25-29).

Ch. 13 Support the ecclesia, and the Lord will support you. Be spiritual in Christ, not physical in the Law of Moses. Offer up the sacrifices that please God.

Comments on Hebrews 1

The first chapter of Hebrews starts with the presentation of various proof texts for a Messiah, the anointed one of God. In particular, the proof texts seek to show the Messiah would be the Son of God as well as ultimately exalted in heaven. The text is not at all interested in establishing that Jesus is the Messiah, as the target audience has already accepted as much. The intent is to show the Messiah, Jesus Christ, had divine attributes and is exalted despite his humanity.

The common Jewish notion was, and still is at present, the messiah is to be a physical deliverer who reunites Israel like the ancient David did and restores political, social, and economic power. Even the apostles and disciples themselves saw Jesus in this light until after his resurrection (cf. Luke 24:21).

Thus, the intent of this chapter is to mitigate the prevailing notions concerning the nature of Messiah, and instead get the Jewish Christians thinking about the spiritual aspects and mission of messiah.

Underlying the arguments of this chapter is the assumption that humans are below the angels with respect to power and glory and so on, something nobody religious would question, cf. Ps. 8:5. But, if this is the case, then how is it the messiah can be exalted above angels if he is merely a mortal man? The argument is that the scriptures place the Messiah, the Son of God, as above the angels, so there must be some divine attribute to him. The Scriptures have three levels of glory or power in descending order: God, angels, men. If the Messiah is above men, and above angles, then he must be the Lord.

Verses 1-4 are the argument, with the subsequent proof texts in v. 5-14 supporting the argued points. The points made and the supporting proof texts are arranged as a synthetical parallelism, as follows:

A - 1 God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets,

B - 2 Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things,

C - by whom also he made the worlds;

D - 3 Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high;

E - 4 Being made so much better than the angels, as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they. 5 For unto which of the angels said he at any time,

F - Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee?

F - And again, I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son?

E - 6 And again, when he bringeth in the firstbegotten into the world, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him. 7 And of the angels he saith, Who maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire.

D - 8 But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom. 9 Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity; therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows.

C - 10 And, Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands: 11 They shall perish; but thou remainest; and they all shall wax old as doth a garment; 12 And as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed: but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail.

B - 13 But to which of the angels said he at any time, Sit on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool?

A - 14 Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?

v2 "by whom he also made the worlds", the idea that the ante-mortal Jesus participated in the Creation is one that is suggested elsewhere in the NT, cf. Col. 1:16.

v3 "the express image of his person", a poor translation in the KJV. A better translation would be "the exact representation of his nature" (New American Standard). The KJV reads as though Jesus looks superficially like the Father. That is not the intent of the Greek "hupostasis" which is translated to "person" in the KJV. Rather, the intent is to say that the Son is spiritually just like the Father, unlike typical mortals.

v4 "obtained a more excellent name", being the Son of the Father, he receives the Father's inheritance by family name.

v5 "Thou art my Son, this day I have begotten thee", a quotation of Ps. 2:7. Psalm 2 is blatantly messianic and suggests plainly that the messiah is begotten, and therefore Son, of God. Naturally, one could argue the begetting referred to is one of

being figuratively "born again" as when mortals chose to worship God with a spiritual life. However, the subsequent arguments presented mitigate such a rebuttal as they argue for a literally incarnate Lord, and therefore a literal begetting.

"I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son", this is a quotation of 2 Sam. 7:14, and again is blatantly messianic. It is a quotation of the Lord speaking to David in reference to him having a son who will construct the Lord's Temple. This was ultimately fulfilled by David's son Solomon. While both David and Solomon were of less than ideal character, they both served as types of messiah. In this case Solomon in specific is chosen as a result of his sonship of David. See Ps. 72 for an idealized Solomon being held up as a type of messiah.

v6-7 The IV/JST clarifies the obscure KJV, as follows:

<u>KJV</u> And again, when he bringeth in the firstbegotten into the world, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him.	<u>IV</u> And again, when he bringeth in the first begotten into the world, he saith And let all the angels of God worship him, who maketh his ministers as a flame of fire.
And of the angels he saith, Who maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire.	And of the angels he saith, Angels are ministering spirits.

My impression is the IV/JST equates the "ministers" and the "angels" as "ministering spirits" who are "as a flame of fire". The implication being "the angels of God worship him" and that he makes dictates to them, thus he is exalted above them.

v6 "when he bringeth in the firstbegotten into the world", the title of first-born is employed in a blatantly messianic context in Ps. 89:27.

"And let all the angels of God worship him", this quotation is problematic. Some consider it a paraphrase of the last line of Ps. 97:7. Others consider it to be a quotation of the Septuagint version of Deut. 32:24. Or, it may be from the last line of Neh. 9:6. Still others do not consider it a quotation of preceding, but rather a direct quotation of God.

For the sake of discussion, let us assume it is a quotation of the Septuagint version of Deut. 32:43. The KJV on Deut. 32:43 is apparently based upon the Masorah, which differs from the Septuagint. And, the Qumran, the Dead Sea Scrolls,

version of the same verse differs from both the Septuagint and the Masorah. Here are the three versions, all using the Jewish Publication Society (JPS) Torah Commentary on Deuteronomy (Jeffrey H. Tigay, 1996, pages 314-315) translations:

Masorah

O nations, acclaim his people!
For He'll avenge the blood of His servants,
Wreak vengeance on His foes,
And cleanse the land of His people.

Qumran

O heavens, rejoice with Him,
Bow to Him, all divinities
For He'll avenge the blood of His sons,
and wreak vengeance on His foes,
Requite those who reject Him,
And will cleanse His people's land.

Septuagint

O heavens, rejoice with Him.
Bow to Him, all sons of the divine
O nations, rejoice with His people
And let all the angels of the divine
strengthen themselves in Him.
For He'll avenge the blood of His sons,
and wreak vengeance on His foes,
Requite those who reject Him,
And will cleanse His people's land.

The context of Deut. 32 is not overtly messianic. The preceding text tells of the Lord vindicating the faithful while destroying the wicked. The "Him" in this verse would be the Lord according to context. And, there is nothing in the surrounding text of Deut. 32 even suggesting the begetting of the firstborn as the text preceding the apparent quotation states. It doesn't seem likely to me that this was the intended proof text. And the same is the case with Neh. 9:6 as there is no messianic or begetting theme.

The next possibility is Ps. 97:7. The JPS translation of Ps. 97:1-9 reads as follows:

1 The Lord is king!
Let the earth exult,
 the many islands rejoice!
2 Dense clouds are around Him,
 righteousness and justice are the base of His throne.

3 Fire is His vanguard,
 burning His foes on every side.
 4 His lightnings light up the world;
 the earth is convulsed at the sight;
 5 mountains melt like wax at the Lord's presence,
 at the presence of the Lord of all the earth.
 6 The heavens proclaim His righteousness
 and all peoples see His glory.
 7 All who worship images,
 who vaunt their idols,
 are dismayed;
 all divine beings bow down to Him.
 8 Zion, hearing it, rejoices,
 the towns of Judah exult,
 because of Your judgments, O Lord.
 9 For You, Lord, are supreme over all the earth;
 You are exalted high above all divine beings.

As is the case with the Deut. 32 passage, the text is making reference to the Lord, and is not overtly messianic. However, verse 6 of the psalm could be read in the light of the argument of Hebr. 1:1-4, namely that the Father has manifested His glory to all people on the earth through the Son. Then, verses 7-8 of the psalm would be implicitly messianic, with the "divine beings" bowing down to and Zion rejoicing over the messiah. However, there still is not any reference to the begetting of the firstborn.

The Ps. 97:7 proof text fits better than does that of Deut. 32:43, but neither of them really satisfies the criteria the quotation apparently suggests, namely the begetting and birth of the firstborn. For this reason it would not surprise me if the quotation is from some passage of Scripture not available to us at present.

v7 "Who maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire", a quotation of Ps. 104:4. This quotation is dependent upon the preceding supposition in v. 6 that the angels worship the first begotten of the Father. The intent of the quotation is to establish that angels are ministering spirits. And, if they worship the first begotten of the Father, then they are ministering spirits to the Son. The Son is therefore higher up the authority ladder than angels. The implied syllogism is:

Angels worship the first begotten of the Father,
 Angels are ministering spirits,

 Angels minister to the first begotten of the Father.

This is the more excellent inheritance the Son has received, in that he is above the angels, as is stated in v. 4.

v8-9 quotes Ps. 45:6-7, which is blatantly messianic. The point of the quotation is the righteousness of this idealized anointed one, righteousness that grants him a divine throne. It is plain from history that all of the kings of Israel anointed by the hand of a prophet started out good, but ended up being corrupted (e.g., Saul, David, Solomon). However, in this psalm we have an anointed character who loves righteousness and hates wickedness, who inherits a divine throne, God's throne. Here must be a messiah with divine attributes, as no mere mortal has ever been able to withstand such a calling.

v10-12 quotes Ps. 102:25-27, which is making reference to the Lord's acts of Creation, but in the larger context of contrasting the weak condition of man with the transcendent nature of God. Here is the JPS translation of Ps. 102:24-29:

24 He drained my strength in mid-course,
He shortened my days.
25 I say, "O my God, do not take me away
in the midst of my days,
You whose years go on for generations on end.
26 Of old You established the earth;
the heavens are the work of Your hands.
27 They shall perish, but You shall endure;
they shall all wear out like a garment;
You change them like clothing and they pass away.
28 But You are the same, and Your years never end.
29 May the children of Your servants dwell securely
and their offspring endure in Your presence."

The passage bears the same meaning as does Isa. 40:27-31, the JPS translation of which follows:

27 Why do you say, O Jacob,
Why declare, O Israel,
"My way is hid from the Lord,
My cause is ignored by my God"?
28 Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The Lord is God from of old,
Creator of the earth from end to end,
He never grows faint or weary,
His wisdom cannot be fathomed.
29 He gives strength to the weary,
Fresh vigor to the spent.
30 Youths may grow faint and weary,

And young men stumble and fall;
31 But they who trust in the Lord shall renew their strength
As eagles grow new plumes:
They shall run and not grow weary,
They shall march and not grow faint.

The quoted psalm is not overtly messianic, thus the argument is dependent upon the preceding one in v. 8-9. There, the messiah is characterized as loving righteousness and being upon God's divine throne. All of the preceding anointed kings of Israel have failed to maintain their righteousness and have fallen short, being weak, just like the men characterized in the quoted psalm and the passage from Isaiah. Thus, if this idealized messiah is unfailingly righteous, unlike typical men, then this messiah is divine. And, if this messiah is divine, then he must be the incarnation of the Lord of the OT, and then he must have performed the Creation as well.

The author is probably implicitly appealing to the plural pronoun appearing in Gen. 1:26 when it states "let us make man in our image, after our likeness". There was more than just one individual involved in the Creation. The argument submits that both the Father and the Son were involved, hence the plurality.

The quotation of this psalm and the parallel subject in the Isaiah passage above also shed light on why the Creator became messiah. Verse 29 of the psalm indicates that while Creation is transient, the Lord is eternal and will grant eternity to the children of His servant. The connection between the transient Creation and the Eternal Creation is the Lord. He grants it and becomes the means by which man may achieve eternity. As no mortal man can achieve such a thing because of their weakness, an ideal divine mortal must accomplish the task. Hence His condescension.

v13 "Sit on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool?", quotes Ps. 110:1. This psalm is one that is blatantly messianic and was previously used as a proof text, cf. Luke 20:41-44, Acts 2:34. The argument is that only the "lord" of David, which David is the paramount type of messiah, whom the Lord was speaking to in this psalm, will be exalted on the right hand of God. No angels were ever granted such a thing, thus angels are below this "lord" of David.

v14 serves as the poetical counter to v. 1 per the subject of 2:1-2, also cp. Acts 7:53, Gal. 3:19.

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