

# **The Sacrificial Christology of Hebrews: a Jewish Christian Contribution to the Modern Debate about the Person of Christ.**

by  
**Timothy J. Winder.**

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## **Acknowledgements.**

The origin of this thesis lies in an unanswered question on the Christology of the Epistle to the Hebrews at the Vacation Term for Biblical Studies summer school in 1991. Prof. B. Lindars' suggestion that I should seek an answer for myself led me into a programme of research of which this thesis is the product.

I have been greatly aided in this research by the library staff of my former college, The College of St. Paul and St. Mary (now the University of Gloucestershire), the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds, the Bodleian Library, Oxford, the University Library, Cambridge and Cheltenham Public Library. In all these institutions staff have been unfailingly helpful in aiding my search for various articles and books, giving me access to both their catalogues and computer resources.

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Finally I must acknowledge the support of my wife Karen, who has made it possible for me to devote the necessary time to this research, by keeping the family finances out of the red; and my daughter Charis who has tolerated my inattention over the last few years.

## Abstract.

The Epistle to the Hebrews has been characterised as being a late and strongly Hellenistic text, which displays a high incarnational Christology very similar to, if not as fully developed as, that expressed in the Fourth Gospel. These scholarly assumptions have resulted in Hebrews remaining peripheral to the modern debate about the person of Christ, an approach which this thesis explores and questions.

Some modern scholars have recognised that the Epistle also contains an important depiction of the historical human Jesus. This has led many scholars to argue that the Epistle contains two conflicting and juxtaposed portraits of Christ - one concerned with the human historic Jesus - the other concerned with Christ the Divine Son of God. This thesis attempts to examine these assumptions and explores the possibility that Hebrews simply juxtaposes different Christological portraits.

Through the exploration of questions of authorship, audience and the background of thought which enables the most assured reading of this enigmatic text, this thesis questions some of these traditional scholarly assumptions. This survey demonstrates how a case can be constructed for an earlier dating of this text, which also recognises its essential 'Jewish' Christian character.

Some modern scholars recognise that Hebrews contains a distinctive portrait of the human historic Jesus. On the basis that modern study has advocated that Christology should be constructed from below, this thesis first considers the historical Jesus which is the central concern of the Epistle's thinking about the person of Christ. Close study of significant textual features demonstrates that Hebrews' Christology displays a pronounced concern to secure Jesus' close solidarity with humanity, a solidarity which is functionally necessary given the Epistle's use of Old Testament concepts of priesthood in order to explore the meaning of Christ's redemptive activity.

Subsequent consideration of the contrasting 'high' Christological elements within the Epistle demonstrates both why these have dominated scholarly discussion, and also, more significantly how they also focus attention on the redemptive activity of Jesus' life. Whereas concepts of Divine Sonship and Priesthood might be expected to establish Christ's exalted status, this study demonstrates how these concepts also stress ideas of humiliation and human

solidarity. This rather unexpected finding is reflected in a marked ambiguity in the language Hebrews chose to use in expressing his teaching, and I maintain here that this is not an unintentional outcome of the Old Testament citations used but the reflection of the author's deliberate theological intentions.

Attention is then focused on a fuller consideration of Hebrews' use of Old Testament concepts and traditions concerning priesthood in constructing its theological and Christological argument. The consideration of these features is divided into two separate but inter-linked studies. The first of these explores concepts of priesthood and sacrifice by consideration of the motifs of human solidarity, the union of priest and victim and ideas concerning a sinless high priest. These discussions include a consideration of Hebrews' use of the idea of 'perfection' and its teaching about the sinlessness of Jesus. It is then shown how these ideas provide a basis for uniting the contrasting portraits of Hebrews' Christology. The second of these studies explores Hebrews' use of the traditions associated with the Old Testament priestly figure of Melchizedek, by means of which the Epistle establishes the superiority of Christ's priesthood and redemptive activity. In establishing this superiority Hebrews demonstrates the redundancy of the Levitical priesthood and cultic traditions. This approach typifies Hebrews' positive attitude towards Old Testament religious traditions, which he believes have been both superseded and fulfilled in the person of Christ. Modern scholarship has characterised this approach as an eschatological approach to the revelation of God.

The concluding chapter of this thesis considers Hebrews' understanding of Christ's work - both in terms of his past redemptive activity and his present heavenly work of representation and intercession. It is maintained that Christ's work, especially his redemptive activity, is the central concern and focus upon which Hebrews' Christological scheme is constructed, a scheme which unifies the human and divine in the historical Jesus. Hebrews' teaching results in a very dynamic depiction of the person of Christ, which suggests that Hebrews contains many valuable insights on which those involved in the modern debate about the person of Christ might draw.

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## **Abbreviations.**

Standard abbreviations for Biblical Texts are used throughout this thesis. Citations from the Old and New Testaments are from the Revised Standard Version except where it is indicated that another translation has been used. The references to the works of Eusebius, Philo of Alexandria and Josephus are from the Loeb Classical Library Editions.

## Introduction.

My purpose in writing this thesis is not simply to explore the Christological pattern of Hebrews' theological scheme but to consider what contribution it has to make to the ongoing and wider debate about the person of Christ. This is a debate which has been largely conducted on the basis of the evidence provided by the Gospel narratives and the Pauline corpus, an approach which has led to some Pauline passages becoming almost the sole focus of conflict between differing and competing Christological schemes. A passage such as Philippians 2:6-11 has therefore become a veritable first world war battleground, scarred with the defences and counter measures advanced by different theological (Christological) schools of thought. Earlier work on British scholars' 'views of the Incarnation' led me to consider whether there was valuable information and traditions outside the Gospels and the Pauline corpus which needed more careful consideration. I was drawn to one document in particular, a document which stood out from the rest of the New Testament texts, a document traditionally described as an epistle, but lacking many of the features expected within such texts, a document which through its use of Jewish traditions of Temple theology is unique within the New Testament canon. The more I read or heard about this text, the stronger became my conviction that here might be a text which had an important contribution to make to the modern debate about the person of Christ, more importantly which offered a contribution which might enable the debate to move beyond the sterile conflicts over a narrow selection of Pauline passages.

I found myself considering why no other scholars had taken such an approach, only to realise that this was not strictly true. As this thesis will demonstrate, there have been other individual scholars who have taken a particular interest in this Epistle and I shall draw on their work. Very few scholars even within this group have, however, been concerned to focus on the Christology of the Epistle, to make that the centre of their approach to this text. One very important exception to this rule is Nairne, who despite the age of his scholarship, cannot be ignored by anyone wishing to engage in a full consideration of Hebrews' Christology.<sup>1</sup> Some might accuse me of overstating this case, however even a cursory consideration of the easily available commentaries on Hebrews will quickly illustrate my point because most commentaries either contain no

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<sup>1</sup> Nairne, A. The Epistle of Priesthood. Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1915.

section on 'the Christology of Hebrews' while those which do, only provide a brief survey of the topic. In addition, within these commentaries those verses which can be viewed as being Christologically significant are often passed over with little or no comment, a clear sign of the lack of interest in this aspect of Hebrews' thought. Why is there such a high level of disinterest in Hebrews' Christology. The answer to this question is partly associated with the wider question of why Hebrews has occupied such a marginal place within the academic study of the New Testament in the modern era.

The Epistle to the Hebrews' marginal place in the New Testament canon can be seen as resulting from two main factors. On the one hand scholars have disdained to engage with this text, because they believed it to be Hellenistic and late, a conclusion reached by many because of its 'high' Christology. Also for Protestant Biblical Scholars during the 19th Century its cultic and priestly tone together with its previous role in shaping liturgical traditions made it forbidden or at least uncomfortable territory. On the other hand the Epistle has lacked and still lacks easy accessibility because of its use of typology and unfamiliar Jewish cultic traditions. This typological character presents problems to the exegete determined to engage with and listen to the author's voice today. The Epistle writer's argument does not easily lend itself to the analytical and scientific study favoured by scholars now; typology with its heavy use of Jewish cultic traditions and multi-layered symbolism, makes clear cut analysis difficult if not impossible at times. These factors work successfully to maintain an exegetical distance between us and the author, a distance which few can convince themselves is worth the time to bridge for an Epistle of a late and marginal nature. It is part of my purpose here to convince these scholars that the expenditure of that time and effort is time well spent.

The results of the last 50 years' exegesis have not made the situation any less problematical. For all the efforts expended by commentators little of an assured nature has been established concerning those basic questions asked on first encountering a text. On questions of authorship, date, original destination, the situation which is being addressed and especially the religious backdrop against which the text is best read, research has not yielded conclusive results. It is not my task to survey exhaustively this critical exercise, a task recently undertaken



by McCullough in two articles<sup>2</sup> and in greater detail by Hurst in his book surveying its background of thought.<sup>3</sup> For our present purpose it is sufficient to note that the fluid nature of these debates does not increase the accessibility of this text. Particularly vital in this respect is the question about which backgrounds of thought are best able to unlock the meanings contained in the text.

Decisions about background of thought have been determinative in shaping understanding of this Epistle.<sup>4</sup> For example many scholars, following Spicq's<sup>5</sup> lead, have read this text against the background of thought represented by the work of Philo of Alexandria and Platonism. This is a conclusion which led them to claim that the author was a 'philonian converted to Christianity', that the epistle was late, Hellenistic and influenced by Platonic dualism.<sup>6</sup> This view was weakened by the work of Barrett,<sup>7</sup> who saw a strong connection between Hebrews and Stephen's speech in Acts 7 and then finally refuted in a lengthy thesis by Williamson in 1970.<sup>8</sup> Yet this view persists and influences scholarly conclusions of instance, Dunn, when attempting to explain the juxtaposition of Hebrews' High Christology of Divine Sonship and the emphasis on an essentially human Jesus, who is adopted by God to become the pioneer of salvation, argues that this odd juxtaposition of Christological themes is due to the synthesis of Platonic and Hebraic world views, which he claims are clearly expressed in Heb.8:1-10:18<sup>9</sup>. Dunn argues this in Christology in the Making, published in 1980, which shows no awareness

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<sup>2</sup> McCullough, J.C. "Hebrews in Recent Scholarship." Parts 1 & 2. Irish Biblical Studies 16 no.2: & no.3:1994. pp 66-86 & 108-120. provides a recent survey of the state of play in relation to all these basic background questions.

<sup>3</sup> Hurst, L.D. The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its Background of Thought. Cambridge, CUP, 1990. This is a very thorough discussion of all the major religious backgrounds modern commentators have used in trying to close the exegetical gap between us and the author of Hebrews. Hurst very usefully highlights the shortcomings of their research and attempts to suggest some possible conclusions.

<sup>4</sup> Peterson, D. Hebrews and Perfection. Cambridge, CUP, 1982. p.48. Peterson recognises that deciding which association of ideas are applicable when interpreting Hebrews' terminology of perfection is often implicitly answered by interpreters who argue for a specific context for the author, such as Philonism or Gnostic thinking.

<sup>5</sup> Spicq, C. L'Épître aux Hébreux, 2 vols. Paris, Gabalda, 1952.

<sup>6</sup> Thompson, J. W. "Conceptual Background and Purpose of the Midrash in Hebrews 7." Novum Testamentum 19. 1977. pp 209-223. is one such example.

<sup>7</sup> Hurst, 1990.p.8

<sup>8</sup> Williamson, R. Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews. Lieden, Brill,1970.

<sup>9</sup> Dunn,1980. pp.51-53.

of the conclusions offered by Williamson a decade earlier. So, we can see how determinative these proposed religious backgrounds can be. Yet without decisions on the background of thought, it becomes difficult to establish a valid exegesis of the text. It will not be surprising therefore that this is an area of major consideration in my first chapter.

What I have written so far may present a very bleak picture where Hebrews' Christology is concerned and it is necessary for me to offer something by way of a corrective. Whilst interest in this aspect of Hebrews' thought has been limited, it has not been totally absent. There has been some interest in the Epistle's portrait of Christ as High Priest<sup>10</sup> by those surveying New Testament Christological concepts, and a few others have used the Epistle in their schemes of early Christological development, but often as a mere 'gap filler'.<sup>11</sup> Yet none of these efforts have really viewed the Epistle as of more than passing interest, a fact reflected by its place in most courses of New Testament study, where it is quickly surveyed together with the Pastorals, or passed over in reverential silence.

### **Restoring the Christological focus.**

Hebrews' strong depiction of the Divine Son in chapter 1, the language of high priesthood, its apparent Hellenistic and late style, have led to a narrowed Christological focus. This narrowed focus has often meant that important Christological themes concerning the human Jesus have been ignored, overlooked, or at least played down. In this thesis I shall attempt to redress the balance by focusing on the Epistle's distinctive portrait of the human Jesus. More importantly I shall attempt to offer some understanding of how these apparently competing portraits of Jesus may be reconciled.

Hebrews' Christological portrait has been commonly viewed within the frame provided by the author's first three verses, when he declares,

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<sup>10</sup> Cullmann, O. The Christology of the New Testament. London, SCM, 1959.(2nd Ed 1963). chapter 4: Jesus the High Priest, being but one example of such an approach, also seen in modified form in J. D. G. Dunn. Christology in the Making: An Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation. London, SCM, 1980.

<sup>11</sup> Knox, J. The Humanity and Divinity of Christ. Cambridge, CUP, 1967 (reprinted 1978). pp.34-50. Knox here ascribes to Hebrews the function of providing the 'missing link' in his evolutionary Christological scheme, a solution which at best seems forced and unconvincing.

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power.

This frame has confirmed scholars' views that the Epistle displays a high Christology, expressed in the distinctive motif of Christ the High Priest. Yet even scholars who emphasise this motif are often willing to recognise a second distinctive theme of Jesus' humanity within the body of the Epistle. So within recent published work we can read a variety of statements such as,

...at the same time there is more adoptionist language in Hebrews than in any other New Testament document, that is language which speaks of Jesus as becoming, or being begotten, or being appointed to his status as the decisive intermediary between God and man.<sup>12</sup>

The real humanity of Jesus is essential for the argument of Hebrews..the original teaching never denied that Jesus was human..it is not possible for Hebrews to remain faithful to the tradition and at the same time to develop an argument which leaves the humanity of Jesus out of account.<sup>13</sup>

Yet in discussion this complex Christological portrait is often reduced to High Priest and Divine Son, with little acknowledgement of this other major element of the human Jesus in the Epistle's portrait of Christ. It is not that scholars are unaware of this 'second' element, they simply do not pursue it.

There have been a few scholars who have actively explored Hebrews' portrait of the human

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<sup>12</sup>Dunn, 1980. p.52. Yet Dunn places his discussion of High Priest, within the section of his work entitled Son of God.

<sup>13</sup>Lindars, B. The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews. Cambridge, CUP, 1991. p.40.

Jesus, one such being Mealand in his 1979 article.<sup>14</sup> In that article he notes that,

Hebrews is the one theological treatise in the New Testament which comes closest to the earliest stratum of the synoptic tradition in its positive emphasis on the humanity of Jesus. Even if there is reserve over the question of sinlessness, there is neither the relative lack of interest in the earthly Jesus which Paul displays, nor the emphasis on superhuman capacities which is to be observed especially in the Fourth Gospel.<sup>15</sup>

The only reservation I have about this analysis of Hebrews' portrait of the human Jesus concerns Jesus' sinlessness, where Mealand follows many commentators in understanding this to function as a control or reserve on Hebrews' understanding of Jesus' humanity.<sup>16</sup> This issue will be an important and ongoing area of discussion throughout this thesis and represents I believe, a central concept of Hebrews' Christological understanding. With the main contention of this analysis, however, I find myself in agreement namely that Hebrews does present a vital and important picture of Jesus of Nazareth, which accords with the disciples' memories of him.

Part of my concern within this thesis is to answer my own concerns about the insights which Hebrews contributes to the ongoing modern debate about the person of Christ. This is an issue which I originally raised with Barnabas Lindars during the VTBS summer conference, shortly before his untimely death. He chose not to answer the question on that occasion, but instead he suggested that I address it myself. This thesis is the result of carrying out that process. As to whether I have satisfactorily achieved my goal or not others will have to judge. In dealing with this matter I have come to question many of the accepted axioms associated with the study of Hebrews and with the wider development of Christology within the early Christian period. I can accept that some will feel unable, or unconvinced by my arguments in respect of these questions, what I would find difficult to accept is the conclusion that Hebrews has no worthwhile contribution to make. I believe the modern debate lacks strength if it ignores this

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<sup>14</sup> Mealand, D.L. "The Christology of the Epistle to the Hebrews." *Modern Churchman*, 22 no. 4.1979. pp. 180-185.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>16</sup> Knox, 1967 (reprinted 1978).pp.44-45 is an example of one scholar who sees the end, 4:15, as functioning to undermine Jesus' humanity, he also notes it is this question of sin that leads to a similar reservation in Pauline texts.

very different yet lively and vital early Christian voice. If we consider the Christological debates of the first five centuries of the Christian era we discover that Hebrews' portrait of Jesus the man was important in the Christological conflicts of that time. The vital role played by Hebrews' human Jesus, in the works of both Christological schools, Antiochene and Alexandrian, has been noted by Young.<sup>17</sup> Equally I believe this enigmatic Epistle has a vital role to play in contemporary debate among scholars as they try to recover the human Jesus.

With all this in mind I propose in my first chapter to establish a possible date for Hebrews and to offer an assessment of its setting within the religious traditions contemporary with it. As we shall see it is difficult to establish the identity of the Epistle's author so I shall follow the precedent set by Lindars in his book<sup>18</sup> and refer to both the text and author by the inclusive term Hebrews. Once I have established these foundations I intend in the second chapter to examine the neglected Christological motif of the Epistle, namely its portrait of the human historical Jesus. This examination will also include the first stage of an enquiry into the question of Jesus sinlessness, which has been viewed by some scholars as functioning as a check on the reality of Jesus' humanity. Having restored some Christological balance by means of these discussions chapter 3 will then explore the Christological motif which has been the usual focus of scholarly attention; the Divine Sonship of Christ. Both chapters 2 and 3 will not only explore the two images of Christ that scholars have identified within the Epistle's thought, but will also examine whether these foundations enable these very different portraits to be reconciled. Chapter 4 examines Hebrews' interest and use of the concepts of priesthood and sacrifice and whether these provide a basis upon which to reconcile the contrasting motifs of the Divine Son and the Human Jesus. This discussion also requires further exploration of the motif of Jesus' 'sinlessness' given its functional relationship within the concept of sacrifice. As any discussion of Hebrews' arguments concerning priesthood would be incomplete if it ignored the extensive use made of the traditions concerning Melchizedek, so chapter 5 will explore this aspect of Hebrews' thinking. Having carried out this extensive survey of Hebrews' Christological scheme the different threads are drawn together in chapter 6 and then utilised to illustrate how Hebrews might make a valuable contribution to the modern scholarly debate about the person of

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<sup>17</sup> Young, F.M. "Christological Ideas in the Greek Commentaries on the Epistle to the Hebrews." Journal of Theological Studies no.20. 1969. pp.150-163.

<sup>18</sup> Lindars, B. The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews. Cambridge, CUP,1991.pp.xi-xii.

Hebrews might make a valuable contribution to the modern scholarly debate about the person of Christ.

In the course of these discussions the contributions of a number of earlier scholars will be considered. Nairne is one scholar whose work despite its age still offers a useful contribution for anyone wishing to discuss the Christology of Hebrews. The usefulness of Nairne's work lies in the simple fact that it deals extensively with Christological themes. It may seem that the structure of my thesis is the product of Nairne's own study, yet this is not the case. Early in my research programme I identified the human portrait as a primary focus and starting point for my exploration. This decision was made before I had read a word of Nairne's argument and arose from my study of Young's article "Christological Ideas in the Greek Commentaries on the Epistle to the Hebrews.",<sup>19</sup> this view was further reinforced by the articles produced by Melbourne and Horing.<sup>20</sup> Later study of Nairne's book strengthened my own instincts and conclusions, whilst providing useful material to express important ideas. Nairne has been a constant companion during my scholarly quest, providing assurance but not direction to my search. Nairne's book whilst providing useful data<sup>21</sup> to support my argument lacked the conclusions my task required. His book does not have an explicit conclusion, ending with an exposition of the Epistle's text. At no point does Nairne explicitly state that he is attempting to contribute to the Christological debate, yet a closer reading of his book suggests that he is offering a contribution. That this contribution is directed towards the debate of his own time with its focus on the quest for the historical Jesus should come as no surprise. The modern debate in contrast is driven by very different concerns which despite the renewed quests for the historical Jesus focus on questions arising from the two natures doctrine expressed in the Chalcedonian formula. In this respect my study goes beyond the implicit conclusions contained in Nairne's study, these whilst supporting my argument are inadequate for my overall purpose.

Another scholarly companion during this study has been Williamson, whose own love of this

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<sup>19</sup> Young, F.M. "Christological Ideas in the Greek Commentaries on the Epistle to the Hebrews." Journal of Theological Studies no.20. 1969. pp.150-163.

<sup>20</sup> Horning, E.B. "Chiasmus, Creedal(sic) Structure and Christology in Heb. 12:1-2." Biblical Research. 23.1978.pp. 37-48. and Melbourne, B.L. "An Examination of the Historical- Jesus motif in the Epistle to the Hebrews." Andrews University Seminary Studies. 26.1988.pp.281-297.

<sup>21</sup> Most of this data requires reinterpretation and up dating given its age.

Epistle awakened my first interest in Hebrews. I have found his extensive body of articles to be useful in a number of my research areas yet in many respects his contribution is incomplete, as ill health forced him to abandon his work on a new commentary on the Epistle. I have found some of his insights useful and have built on them, but it is difficult to assess whether my conclusions are anywhere like those he might himself have reached. I suspect his purpose had a much wider focus than mine which is limited to Christological issues and I am unable to say how far his larger work might have been shaped by Christological ideas.

As my research has progressed I have come to realise how my overall views coincide with the general direction of a certain school of thought which stresses Jesus' humanity, the theme of his human development and focuses on 'the activity of Christ rather than on his nature'.<sup>22</sup> A number of scholars can be loosely identified with this approach including Isaacs, who in her more recent book<sup>23</sup> appears to have moved closer to this viewpoint and Schenck who in his earlier articles provides some strong arguments for this approach, although his latest book has not developed these ideas.<sup>24</sup> Included within this loose grouping is Caird who originally developed a very significant exegesis of the first two chapters of the Epistle, which was then adopted by later scholars such as Hurst. I have made extensive use of Caird's ideas within my study but I have attempted to construct a more extensive Christological scheme on this foundation. Once again Caird is a scholar whose work was left unconcluded.<sup>25</sup> Though I feel sympathy with the broad approach of this 'group' of scholars, I disagree strongly with some their individual views and conclusions. For example I can not agree with Isaacs' post 70 AD dating of the Epistle<sup>26</sup> or Nairne's stress on its Hellenistic character.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Koester, C. R. Hebrews. New York, Doubleday, 2001. pp.294-295.

<sup>23</sup> Isaacs, M.E. Reading Hebrews and James. Macon, Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2002. Isaacs has developed a very distinctive approach which is concerned to interpret the Epistle solely in terms of existing concepts of the Jerusalem Temple cult and its ritual. I have found this refreshing and useful in shaping my thinking in some instances, but feel that this allows her to rule out of court some questions which I feel require greater debate.

<sup>24</sup> Schenck, K. Understanding the Book of Hebrews. London, Westminster John Knox Press, 2003. This change may be explained not by a change of mind, but rather because this latest work is intended for a popular audience.

<sup>25</sup> Caird began work on the New ICC Commentary on Hebrews but died before he completed it, then this was passed onto Williamson, who was also prevented from completing it.

<sup>26</sup> Isaacs, M.E. Sacred Space. Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1992.p.

<sup>27</sup> Nairne, 1915.pp.14-22.

My study has entailed consideration of some areas beyond the scope of my own area of expertise, especially with regard to the Old Testament. For instance the work of Paul concerning Old Testament traditions of Messiahship<sup>28</sup> is one such example. I have tried to assess his ideas critically but I lack the detailed knowledge of Old Testament scholarship to fully test his conclusions. Given that this area is not central to my overall thesis I have utilised what appears to be useful for my purposes, whilst recognising that further, more detailed study, might possibly require some modification to my overall argument although this would, I believe have only minimal impact on my overall hypothesis. Pursuing this issue here would, distract me from my required programme of research. It is to other questions which, whilst not central to our exploration of the Epistle's Christology, provide a foundation upon which we can undertake it and it is to that we must now turn our attention.

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<sup>28</sup> Paul, M. J. "The Order of Melchizedek (Ps 110:4 & Heb.7:3)." Westminster Theological Journal. 49.1987.pp.195-211.



## **Chapter 1 - The Enigmatic Epistle.**

Our Epistle, while it bears the imprint of an original mind, has a very great deal in common with the theology of the other books of the New Testament. Indeed, it may be dated in the early days of the Apostolic Age, for it is firmly based on the kerygma of the primitive church. The kerygma opens with the proclamation of the fulfilment in Jesus of the promises of the Old Testament; and this is particularly marked in our Epistle, where there are some 37 actual and 70 virtual citations from the books of the old covenant.<sup>1</sup>

The Epistle may bear the imprint of an original mind, but whose original mind it was has been the basis of much scholarly debate. It is not only the question of authorship which displays a wide range of hotly disputed conclusions. When it comes to all those basic questions we first ask at our initial encounter with any New Testament text, we discover a wide range of dissenting voices, offering us a welter of competing conclusions. So before we can engage in an exploration of the Christology of Hebrews it is necessary to survey these various competing literary constructions of Hebrews' *Sitz im Leben*. It is therefore to questions of authorship, destination, date of composition, background of thought and relationship to other New Testament documents that we now turn. Then we will consider those aspects of the Epistle which are foundational, the author's use of the Old Testament (the Scriptures for him), the Old Testament cultic traditions so central to his argument and his extensive use of typology. These aspects whilst not central to this study, are important foundations on which any exegetical study of the Epistle must rest.

### **Authorship.**

For a period of some eleven centuries Bibles written and printed in various languages ascribed this work of exhortation to Saint Paul. Then came the period between the Reformation and the rise of critical biblical scholarship, when Paul's authorship was disputed and various alternative authors were sought from within Paul's circle of friends and disciples. Then critical biblical scholarship dismissed Paul altogether, and new Bibles simply said 'The Letter to the Hebrews', and Nairne could write of the quest for the author,

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<sup>1</sup> Montefiore, H.W. The Epistle to the Hebrews. London, A.& C. Black, 1964.p.4.

That search is now given up, and most readers are content to be ignorant of the author's name, while they recognise even more clearly than their predecessors the canonical value of the Epistle. It is no longer looked upon as one of the witnesses to S. Paul's theology, nor yet as representing a theology derived from him... It stands in its own peculiar position between S. Paul and S. John in the development of apostolic theology; not independent, for none of the New Testament books is absolutely independent of the others; yet a particular and primary document.<sup>2</sup>

With the dismissal of Paul we have then to establish how the tradition of Pauline authorship arose in the first place. In addition, we need to consider what other possible candidates there are who might have the original mind so well attested in the text of Hebrews. It is to these two entwined and mutually supporting issues we must now turn.

Our first evidence comes from Eusebius who, in his Ecclesiastical History,<sup>3</sup> records that the tradition of Pauline authorship was held to be true in Alexandria, where he notes Clement of Alexandria (late 2nd Century) openly criticised this view. Eusebius goes on to record that Origen was also known to have rejected Pauline authorship, declaring it to be impossible given the Epistle's literary style. On closer examination Clement's objections were also based on stylistic differences, which he ascribed to his suspicion that the Epistle was originally written in Hebrew and later translated into Greek, a view he might find difficult to sustain in the light of Hebrews 10:5-10, which relies heavily on the Greek text (LXX) of the Psalms for its theological impact.

Origen's exposition was more carefully nuanced and thoughtful, in that he argued for its apostolic credentials and wondered if it would be better ascribed to one of Paul's disciples. He noted that Clement of Rome<sup>4</sup> had suggested that Luke would be a good candidate, given his excellent Greek style and thought that this might be a good working hypothesis as it enabled scholarship and tradition to be reconciled. For Origen the most important point was to establish the Epistle as a reliable early Christian text, a belief expressed by him when he wrote "the

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<sup>2</sup> Nairne, A. The Epistle of Priesthood. Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1913 (2nd edition 1915). pp.1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Eusebius Historia Ecclesiastica. 6.14.4.

<sup>4</sup> Clement of Rome is an important early witness to traditions about the Epistle, given his use of it in his own letters to the church at Corinth.

thoughts of the Epistle are wonderful and not secondary to the acknowledged apostolic writings.”<sup>5</sup> Yet Origen’s balanced and perceptive view did not persist for long, and was soon lost in favour of the persistent ascription of the Epistle to Paul. Interestingly, even the early references from Alexandria to this tradition reject Pauline authorship.

Rome has a long association with the Epistle to the Hebrews, and it is from here that we gain substantial early evidence for the Epistle, including the first extensive use of its text in the first Epistle of Clement. (c.96 A.D.), which he addressed to the Corinthian church. This usage has led some to argue for Clement’s authorship of Hebrews, yet any observant reader will quickly recognise his markedly different style displayed in his letter to the Corinthians. Clement’s use of Hebrews is of great value as his quotations are lengthy and precise. This raises the question: Why did Clement chose to quote from this particular New Testament text. Was it a text that he knew was used widely in the Corinthian church, or because it was an important text in his own church in Rome which was also known to the Corinthians. Scholars have been encouraged to link the Epistle with Rome, by the text itself, which refers to ‘those from Italy’.<sup>6</sup> Clement’s use also confirms another important fact, that he and therefore probably the Roman church did not regard the letter as Pauline. As Nairne observes, “We may be sure that Rome knew the Epistle from the first, and knew that S. Paul had not written it.”<sup>7</sup> That this was the view held in the Roman church is confirmed by the attitude of Jerome and Augustine, both of whom recognise the Epistle as canonical, allow reference to Pauline authorship, but state the Roman church tradition to the contrary.

### **Alternative Authors.**

The quest for an alternative author has quite a long history, and it is not our concern to provide an extensive survey, but rather to sample this quest by looking at some early, Reformation and modern views, with a particular focus on the latter. One of those named as an alternative author in the early Christian period was Barnabas, who was an associate of the first followers of Jesus and a known disciple of Paul. This view was advocated by Tertullian (220 A.D.), and although we are not certain how this tradition arose, it is reasonable to believe that like the ascription to

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<sup>5</sup> Eusebius Historia Ecclesiastica. 6.25.11-13. quoted by Nairne, A. 1915.p.2. Also discussed at some length by Ellingworth, P. The Epistle to the Hebrews (NIGTC). Grand Rapids, Wm B. Eerdmans, 1993.p.5.

<sup>6</sup> Heb.13:24.This encourages some to seek a connection with Rome, though not always as its place of origin, or intended first destination.

<sup>7</sup> Nairne, 1915.p.6.

Luke and Clement, it arose on the basis of the subject matter of the Epistle. Barnabas was known to be a Levite, so he appeared to be a very suitable author for a text focusing on Christ's priesthood, which was expressed in the terminology of the Temple cult. As Lindars notes, Tertullian also believed that Hebrews displayed a style very similar to the Epistle of Barnabas,<sup>8</sup> which he believed strengthens this ascription of authorship.

If we look at Reformation traditions about authorship, we find two major Reformation figures offer their own rival candidates. Calvin who produced his own commentary on the Epistle followed Clement of Rome's suggestion that Luke was the author. Calvin's reasoning was constructed on the same foundations as early exegetes, that the Epistle displayed a very educated and good Greek style, a feature it shared with Luke's named works, Acts and his Gospel. Yet Calvin 'hedges his bets' by also saying Clement of Rome himself is a possible candidate for authorship of the Epistle. Luther, the originator of the Reformation, stated that he doubted the traditional ascription and attributed the Epistle to Apollos. The basis for Luther's view is his belief in the Alexandrian character of the thought contained in the Epistle and this he felt made Apollos a likely candidate. As we shall see this suggestion has found some favour amongst modern commentators.

As modern scholarship moved from simply questioning Pauline authorship to openly rejecting it, scholars have suggested numerous possible authors. However, alongside this there has been a growing trend from Westcott onwards to argue that further speculation is wasted effort, and that we should focus our efforts on studying the special character of the Epistle.<sup>9</sup> Modern arguments concerning authorship have functioned in support of wider reconstructions of Hebrews' setting, and have been especially closely associated with the identification of a particular audience.<sup>10</sup> Decisions about audience have proved to be as determinative with regards

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<sup>8</sup> Lindars, B. The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews. Cambridge, CUP, 1991. p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> Westcott, B.F. The Epistle to the Hebrews. London, MacMillan, 1889 (3rd Ed. 1903). p. lxxix. also Moffatt, J. The Epistle to the Hebrews. Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1979 (1989). p. xxi.; Bruce, F.F. The Epistle to the Hebrews. Grand Rapids, Wm Eerdmans, 1990 (Rev Ed.). p. 20. and Lindars, 1991. pp. 18-19.

<sup>10</sup> The identification of the audience has for some scholars been the basis of their preferred exegetical approach. Manson in The Epistle to the Hebrews, displays his overall concern to link the Epistle with a particular audience and historical setting, and represents an older example of this approach. Whereas DeSilva's in Perseverance in Gratitude. A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews, represents a more recent attempt at a similar type of exegesis. The major difficulty with such approaches is that they require scholars to reconstruct the audience, these reconstructions are derived from the text itself and therefore result in a circular process with all the problems inherent in such exercises. This may explain why such approaches have been less popular in recent scholarship.

to exegesis as decisions about ‘background of thought’, as we shall discover later.

The title ‘to the Hebrews’ does give us one very basic clue about the writer’s intended audience, in that it suggests it would be reasonable to assume it was addressed to Jews, or more particularly Jewish Christians. This is a conclusion to which any but the most casual reading of the text would lead. Some, like Lindars, have argued that we should not rule out of court the possibility that the original recipients were Gentile Christians who had become imbued with the Jewish spiritual traditions before or during their conversion.<sup>11</sup> Such a view represents a variant of the fashionable trend to argue for a Gentile audience, a view which is not pressed now, partly because in the case of a late text this distinction is seen to be rather redundant.<sup>12</sup> The designation ‘to the Hebrews’ is a feature of the oldest manuscript of Pauline Epistles (P46, c. 200 A.D.),<sup>13</sup> though some suspect this might simply result from early deductions made from the content of the text. In modern scholarship this issue of the recipients is seen as consisting of two questions: The first being about the identity of the original recipients and the second about which ‘world of ideas’ best explains the text of the Epistle.

## **Destinations.**

### **i. Rome.**

As we have already noted,<sup>14</sup> the first reliable reference to Hebrews comes from the writings of Clement of Rome, which together with its reference to ‘those from Italy’,<sup>15</sup> provides a connection with this major early Christian centre. Yet this reference does not commit us to any one single understanding of the text’s relationship to Rome. This mention in 13:24 raises questions about how these individuals relate to the first readers. Are the readers members of their own group, community or church and therefore living in Italy. Is our author staying with these individuals who come from Italy. If so, are they sending their greetings home or to friends that they and the author both know in another location. This latter situation, as Lindars notes, is the one advocated by Montefiore who suggests our unnamed Italians are Priscilla and Aquila.<sup>16</sup> This phrase could also reflect that the author is writing in Rome to another early Christian

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<sup>11</sup> Lindars, 1991. p.17.

<sup>12</sup> Manson, W. The Epistle to the Hebrews. London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1951(4th imp.1961).p.18.

<sup>13</sup> DeSilva, D.A. Perseverance in Gratitude. Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000.p.23.

<sup>14</sup> See pp.18-19.

<sup>15</sup> Heb.13:24.

<sup>16</sup> Lindars, 1991.p.17. Though Montefiore was arguing that this other location was not Rome, but Corinth.

community. If this were so, would we not expect the text to read 'those from Rome greet you', and also surely we would expect it reflect the views and concerns of the Roman Church, something the Epistle clearly does not do.<sup>17</sup> This objection is noted by Isaacs, who clearly states the Epistle does not accord with what we know about early Roman Christianity and therefore provides little to commend Rome as its place of origin.<sup>18</sup>

Many commentators have advocated Rome as the intended destination, and therefore Roman Christians as the original audience,<sup>19</sup> Rome seemed a good location, particularly as it was known to have a 'synagogue of the Hebrews'.<sup>20</sup> Also the fact that this Epistle was well known, and obviously used in the church there,<sup>21</sup> provides supporting evidence for this view. The reluctance of the Roman church to include it in the canon was said to be due to the fact that they knew it lacked Pauline authenticity, so failed to meet that criteria of acceptance. This may suggest that such a proposal is an excellent solution to the question of destination - yet it is not free of difficulty because if the Epistle was really addressed to 'Jewish Christians' they could not be the same church presupposed by Paul's Epistle. Is it reasonable to suppose that there were two unconnected early Christian communities in Rome. If Rome were the destination asks Lindars, would we not expect some reference to those two important events in Rome namely Claudius' expulsion of the Jews in 49 A.D. and the persecution of the church after the Great

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<sup>17</sup> Brown, R.E. Antioch and Rome. London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1983. p.147.

<sup>18</sup> Isaacs, M.E. Sacred Space. Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1992.p.37. Isaacs uses this observation to conclude that the notion that the Epistle was sent from Rome is even more unlikely, than Rome being its destination of which she is unconvinced.

<sup>19</sup> We find this view in the works of Attridge, H.W. The Epistle to the Hebrews. Hermeneia. Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1989.pp.9-10.; Bruce, F.F. The Epistle to the Hebrews (revised edition). Grand Rapids, Wm.B. Eerdmans, 1990. (Bruce admits a Roman destination influences his commentary, but also say certainty about destination is unattainable (p.14.); Manson, W. The Epistle to the Hebrews. London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1951 (4th imp. 1961), Manson advocates a Roman destination, but in association with a wider theory of a definite 'universalist' form of early Christianity, associated with Stephen; Rissi, M. "Die Theologie des Hebräerbriefs: Ihre Verankerung in der Situation des Verfassers und seiner Leser." Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament. 44, Tübingen: Mohr, 1987. who identifies the readers as Jewish Christians located in Rome, but separated from the main Roman church.

<sup>20</sup> Acts 18:2 records that at Corinth Paul met a Jew Aquilla and his wife Priscilla who had recently come from Italy, because Claudius had ordered the Jews to leave Rome. Koester concludes that given the large size of the Jewish community in Rome that it is more likely that Claudius only expelled some Jews who caused the disturbance in one or more synagogues. Koester, C.R. Hebrews. New York, Doubleday, 2001.p.51. If Rome had a large Jewish community there must have been at least one synagogue, Lindars suggests that there was at least eleven but he does not support this claim with any evidence. Lindars, 1991.p.18.

<sup>21</sup> See p.16 and p.19.

Fire of 64 A.D..<sup>22</sup> So though Rome may be a possible destination it is not possible to say scholarship has proved it beyond reasonable doubt.

## ii. Alexandria.

It has been widely recognised that Hebrews shares many features with the writings of Philo of Alexandria, a fact which has encouraged many to identify Alexandria as a possible original destination for the Epistle. This view was strongly advocated by Spicq

...who has made a full examination of these similarities, finds in our Epistle ideas and metaphors, the themes and biblical methods, the style, the special vocabulary, the literary forms and the taste of Philo Judaeus.<sup>23</sup>

This identification with Philo's writings and ideas has enjoyed a wide currency, which may partly be because it reinforced the conclusions of 19th Century scholarship about the Epistle's role in the development of early Christianity. These conclusions have emphasised its Hellenistic character, its late date (we shall discuss this in greater detail later) and its setting close to the conclusion of New Testament Christological developments.

However, this view has been challenged by the ongoing study into the background thought of Hebrews, which has advocated a wider range of associated ideas and motifs. One of the most extensive examinations of this apparent association of ideas has been carried out by Williamson in Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews,<sup>24</sup> where he concluded that though Hebrews and Philo both reflect a common Hellenistic culture it is not possible to argue for a direct literary relationship.

This identification with Alexandria was often linked to the case made for Apollos' authorship as he was an important 1st Century Christian described as a native of that city. Apollos' origin was used to explain the supposed connection with Philo and his writings. Alexandria also appears to offer one other requisite for the original destination of the Epistle, namely a well-educated group

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<sup>22</sup> Lindars, 1991.p.18.The Epistle does mention suffering, but not active persecution, and most commentators have seen it as resulting from a breach with the Jewish religious community. Interestingly Paul writing after the first of these events, does not mention it - so is such an expectation of Hebrews unreasonable?

<sup>23</sup> Montefiore, 1964.p.8.

<sup>24</sup> Williamson, R. Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews. Leiden, Brill, 1970.

of Jewish converts. Alexandria was an important centre of culture and education, originally focused on the great Library; it also had a large Jewish population, plus it was an early and important centre of Christianity. So in this view Apollos was inspired to write a treatise on Jesus' High Priesthood influenced by the works of Philo, a treatise he addressed to his own Alexandrian church with its large numbers of well-educated Jewish converts who were tempted to return to their old religious traditions. This view seems very reasonable but it is not without its difficulties. Why if this was the original destination is this the very place where the Epistle is first ascribed to Paul's authorship. More importantly the foundations of this view depend on the perceived background of thought underlying the Epistle, foundations which are not as firm as some modern scholars once believed, as I shall demonstrate later.<sup>25</sup>

### iii Jerusalem.

With Hebrews' obvious interest in the Temple cult, it was almost assured that scholarship would wonder whether this Epistle was originally addressed to an early Christian group closely associated with the Jerusalem Temple, perhaps even a priestly group. Buchanan is one scholar who constructs such a view on the basis of Hebrews 12:22-24, 'You have come to Mount Zion... and to the city of the living God, heavenly Jerusalem...'.<sup>26</sup> A passage which unlike most exegetes he takes literally, as Johnson notes when he concludes that the links Buchanan argues for are tenuous to say the least.<sup>27</sup> Buchanan also argues that Heb.10:34b, 'You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.' provides evidence that members of this group voluntarily gave up their property upon joining the community.<sup>28</sup> For Buchanan this semi-monastic group saw Jesus was an exemplary figure, but not God.<sup>29</sup>

Given the monastic quality of this supposed group, it is not surprising that connections have also been sought with the Essenes or Qumran community,<sup>30</sup> as they seem to provide a suitable

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<sup>25</sup> See pp.34-38.

<sup>26</sup> Buchanan, G.W. To the Hebrews. New York, Double Day, 1972.p.256.He argues that the Epistle was addressed to migrant Jewish Christians resident in Jerusalem, who were awaiting the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham.

<sup>27</sup> Johnson, W.G. "Issues in the Interpretation of Hebrews." Andrews University Seminary Studies 15: pp. 169-188. At.1977.pp.172-3.

<sup>28</sup> Isaacs, 1992 p.38.

<sup>29</sup> Isaacs, 1992,p.24.

<sup>30</sup> Spicq, C. L'Épître aux Hébreux. Paris,1952, pp.226-31.



group who share a number of the theological interests given expression in the Epistle. Isaacs is one scholar who has examined these claims expressed by Longenecker<sup>31</sup> and others, only to reject them.<sup>32</sup> So despite the simplistic appeal of arguing for such an original destination, Jerusalem is not without exegetical difficulties.

#### iv Corinth.

The view that Corinth, with its variety of Christian experience and allegiances, provided the destination which best explains Hebrews was given prominence by Montefiore in his 1964 commentary although it had been advocated earlier by Appel and Lo Bue. According to Montefiore's more recent restatement of this view, Apollos was the person who wrote these words of exhortation to the Corinthian church. This view has most recently been subjected to searching analysis by Hurst in his article, "Apollos, Hebrews and Corinth: Bishop Montefiore's Theory Examined."<sup>33</sup>

Montefiore argues that Apollos wrote this Epistle from Ephesus, in about 52-54 A.D., to the Corinthian church. Apollos wrote rather than actually visiting the community, because he was unwilling to provide any further impetus to a tendency within the Corinthian church to venerate him above Paul.<sup>34</sup> The trouble in Corinth according to this view originated from a group of Jewish trouble makers, who are mentioned in II Cor.11:22, and this is why Heb.13:17 warns them to obey their leaders.<sup>35</sup> It is the 'Jewish' nature of this group which results in the Epistle being addressed 'to the Hebrews', a term Paul uses for the troublemakers in II Cor.11:22.<sup>36</sup> The reference in 13:24 to 'those from Italy'<sup>37</sup> is for Montefiore a clear reference to Aquila and

<sup>31</sup> Longenecker, R. Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period. Grand Rapids, Wm. Eerdmans, 1975. p.160.

<sup>32</sup> Isaacs, 1992. pp.39-40. Isaacs argues that the perceived similarities between Qumran and the Epistle actually mask fundamental differences. She notes that Hebrews argues for an end of Levitical priesthood and cult, whilst Qumran looked for their ultimate purification and reformation. Isaacs would rather see the similarities as reflecting a common Jewish inheritance of ideas

<sup>33</sup> Hurst, L.D. "Apollos, Hebrews and Corinth: Bishop Montefiore's Theory Examined." Scottish Journal of Theology. 38, 1985. pp.505-513.

<sup>34</sup> Montefiore, 1964. pp.12-15, Montefiore reconstructs the movements of Apollos from other New Testament texts up to and including Apollos' first visit to Corinth. Montefiore believes that he had said he would come later, a fact reflected in I Cor.16:12, so the Epistle replaces this second visit. See also Hurst, 1985. p.505.

<sup>35</sup> Montefiore, 1964. p.21. Apollos clearly states in Heb.13:19 that his own conscience is clear, that he has not courted a following, or initiated a different tradition, and will be restored to them all the sooner if they only pay heed to his words.

<sup>36</sup> Montefiore, 1964. pp.15-16.

<sup>37</sup> See also Acts 28:2. 'from Italy' - Aquila and Prisca are the only individuals within the New Testament to which this designation is applied, see Montefiore, 1964. p.254. for details.

Priscilla, who were now in Ephesus and had been prominent residents and members in the Corinthian church.<sup>38</sup> This is only what we would expect and it does avoid the many complications other scenarios entail. Hurst in his critique of Montefiore's reconstruction questions this position, claiming that Montefiore pushes the evidence further than is warranted.<sup>39</sup> Apollos' well known oral ability<sup>40</sup> helps explain why the Epistle displays a style more like a treatise than a letter.<sup>41</sup> We can conclude that Apollos' Epistle was both a success and a failure: a success because no more is heard about an angelic Jesus and the recipients do not lapse back into Judaism; but a failure in that they did not heed his teaching in other areas, concerning resurrection, or eternal judgement for example. Disastrously they heeded it too greatly and twisted it to use against Paul himself. This was a situation which led to Paul's words in I Corinthians chapters 1 - 4 and to him taking issue with them in II Corinthians chapters 10 - 13.<sup>42</sup>

Montefiore goes on to support this view by considering thirteen aspects of the Corinthian correspondence which he believes make best sense when seen against this reconstruction of

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<sup>38</sup> Montefiore, 1964.p.18.

<sup>39</sup> Hurst, 1985.p.509. He observes that in Acts.18:2, Luke actually uses 'Rome' rather than the less precise 'Italy', without this precision he argues that to restrict this reference to Aquila and Priscilla strains the evidence.

<sup>40</sup> Acts.18:25.

<sup>41</sup> Montefiore, 1964.p.15.maintains that this offers a good explanation for the atypical style of this 'Epistle', which commentators have widely debated.

<sup>42</sup> Montefiore, 1964.pp.20-21.

early Christian history.<sup>43</sup> Hurst does not examine these thirteen in detail but is content to note that all but one of these are found I Corinthians 1 - 4, that they are trivial and do not stand up to detailed scrutiny,<sup>44</sup> so he forgoes examining them.

Of course the question which concerns us here is whether such a reconstruction is any more sustainable than any of the other scenarios we have reviewed. Hurst maintains that the candidacy of Apollos for the authorship of Hebrews can not be proved, but the real question he claims is, ‘...can Hebrews be made to fit convincingly into a Corinthian background?’<sup>45</sup> I am not sure his observation concerning Apollos tells us much, as it is clearly impossible to prove any candidate’s case for the authorship of the Epistle conclusively. Yet his concern to assess Hebrews consistency with the Corinthian background is fair, if perhaps expressed in a rather one sided manner. Surely we must also consider whether the text of Hebrews offers a better

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<sup>43</sup> Montefiore, 1964.pp.23-27. Montefiore’s 13 points of contact are:- 1. The use of *εβεβαιώθη*, a term which is unusual in the New Testament, when discussing the gospel being confirmed to them (the readers), Heb.2:3 and 1 Cor.1:6. 2.Paul has to answer the charge that he lacks wisdom and fine words (1 Cor.2:1), is this due to the comparison being made between Apollos’ eloquence in Hebrews and his teaching. 3.Apollos says he offers mature teaching (Heb.5:14 & 6:1), is this what led the Corinthians to believe they were mature and could dispense with Paul’s simple teaching. A charge Paul refutes when he writes ‘we do speak wisdom among the mature.’ (1 Cor.2:6). 4.Both emphasise the need for proper discrimination (Heb.5:13ff and 1 Cor.2:11ff), and further more it is what Paul suggests Apollos’ followers lack. 5. Paul claims to have fed the Corinthians with spiritual ‘milk’ (1 Cor.3:2), which is exactly what Apollos writes that his readers need (Heb.5:12). 6.Both use the image of a field being watered, Apollos to warn his readers of their need for spiritual succour (Heb.4:7f.), which they twist around and believe means that Apollos has given them spiritual rain. Paul agrees they are God’s field, but goes on to say ‘I planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase (1 Cor.3:6). 7. Both talk of the foundation of the Church in Corinth. Apollos does not claim to be the founder, which Paul confirms when he says ‘I laid the foundation’ and ‘another (Apollos?) builds on it’. (1 Cor.3:10). 8. We can view Paul as softening Apollos rigorous condemnation of false teaching, whilst still supporting it (1 Cor.3:13-15). 9.The Corinthians put aside Paul’s teaching, that they are a holy temple, is this because Apollos taught them that the only true tabernacle was in heaven? 10. Apollos stresses faithfulness, illustrated by Jesus and Moses (Heb.3:2-6) amongst others. The Corinthians accuse Paul of being an unfaithful steward, in contrast to Moses, Paul agrees stewards must be faithful (1 Cor.4:1f.), but it is for God, not man, to judge his faithfulness. (1 Cor.4:4). 11. In Hebrews we have a strict exegesis of Biblical texts. The Corinthian rebels are criticised by Paul for going beyond this, and he writes ‘I have applied all this to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond scripture.’ (1 Cor.4:6). This might also mean Paul is recalling them to what had actually been written in Apollos’ letter. 12. The Corinthians in attacking Paul were guilty of neglecting their founder, is this why Apollos never calls them ‘my children’, whilst Paul does (1 Cor.4:14) and why both urge them to follow their father (Heb.13:7 and 1 Cor.4:16). 13. Some members of the church absented themselves from the Eucharist (Heb.10:25), Apollos warns them this will lead to judgement (Heb.10:27), since they profane the blood of the covenant. Paul similarly warns of judgement (1 Cor.9:29) because they desecrate the body and blood (1 Cor.11:27) by which the new covenant is established (1 Cor.11:25). Again here Apollos is more rigorous than Paul (Heb.10:26 and 1 Cor.11:32). As Montefiore himself notes, individually these connections do not seem very significant, but taken together then begin to raise important questions about the relationship between these documents. This is a relationship he strengthens by his advocacy of Apollos’ authorship. I feel this establishes a basis for further exploration, but is beyond the scope of my present study.

<sup>44</sup> Hurst, 1985.p.512.

<sup>45</sup> Hurst, 1985.p.506.

explanation of the Corinthian situation, or allows us to make any better sense of early Christian development.

In order to assess this proposal we must explore whether there is a suitable group of Jewish Christians as Montefiore claims. Montefiore points to Paul's work in the synagogue recorded in Acts.18:4 and to the conversion of Crispus' household in Acts.18:8, Crispus who Acts describes as the ruler of the synagogue. Interestingly inscriptions have been found at Corinth from a synagogue 'of the Hebrews'.<sup>46</sup> Hurst argues that the evidence in Acts is not sufficient to sustain a belief in the existence of a Hebrew Christian wing in the church at Corinth,<sup>47</sup> whilst Montefiore's reconstruction identifies 'the Hebrews' with those addressed in the first four chapters of I Corinthians and the Jewish gnostic intruders of II Cor.10-13, who boast of their own religious inheritance, the unintended result of Apollos' teaching.<sup>48</sup> Hurst questions that these opponents can be understood as a single homogeneous group.<sup>49</sup> He reinforces his view when he notes Kümmel's opinion,

It is clear that the presence and agitation of these people (opponents of 2 Cor.10:13) represents a different state of affairs in the life of the congregation from that discernible in 1 Corinthians. Thus the supposition that Paul struggles here only against the same gnostic opponents as in 1 Corinthians (Bultmann, Schmithals & Dinkler), does not explain the facts of the case... Paul in 2 Corinthians polemizes, to be sure... against a definite Gnostic, Palestinian, Jewish-Christian opposition created by new additional opponents, who forced Paul to defend the 'legitimacy' (Käsemann) of his apostleship throughout the entire epistle.<sup>50</sup>

The unity or otherwise of the Corinthian opponents is a vital issue, because it undermines the existence of an 'Apollos party', which is an important aspect of Montefiore's reconstruction in

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<sup>46</sup> Dunnill, J. Covenant and Sacrifice in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Cambridge, CUP, 1992.pp.28f. notes the existence of synagogues 'of the Hebrews' in Corinth and Rome, see Black, M. The Scrolls and Christian Origins. London, 1961.pp.78f.

<sup>47</sup> Hurst, 1985.p.507. Hurst questions that Paul's converts who are not loyal, those profaning the Eucharist (1 Cor.11:20ff), and the opponents of Paul in II Cor.11:22 are simply the same group. He argues that even Paul distinguishes between the first and third of these opponents.

<sup>48</sup> Acts.19:1 records Apollos visit to Corinth. Hurst views a letter (Hebrews) as an unnecessary complication of the situation in Corinth, given this record of Apollos earlier visit - which would provide sufficient grounds for the development of an 'Apollos party'.

<sup>49</sup> Hurst, 1985.p.507.

<sup>50</sup> Hurst, 1985.pp.507-8. citing Kümmel.

that he believes it provides the negative focus for all these writings. The existence of this 'party' is why Montefiore believes Apollos avoids calling his readers children, instead talking of 'brothers' and 'beloved', in contrast to Paul's usage in 1 Cor.4:14.<sup>51</sup> If there was such a party how could it boast about its wisdom, when this is precisely what the Epistle criticises them for lacking.<sup>52</sup> I am sure that is a question Apollos himself wondered about if Montefiore's view is correct.

A number of features are identified by Hurst which call into question this proposed link between Hebrews and Paul's Corinthian letters. How could Hebrews lead to the problem of 'reigning', which Paul ridicules in chapters 1 - 4 of I Corinthians. This is problem best understood as stemming from the Corinthian belief that the eschatological kingdom had come with all its benefits. It is true that in Hebrews there is a wide use of realised eschatological language, but it is well balanced against statements such as 'we do not yet see all things subject to him'.<sup>53</sup> Similarly Hebrews concern about apostasy<sup>54</sup> is not a problem which the Corinthian Epistles display any evidence of, rather the problem in the Corinthian correspondence is that of a rival 'apostolate'.<sup>55</sup> One could argue that this simply proves that Apollos 'succeeded ... in raising the morale of the Corinthian Christians. No more is heard of the danger of the Jewish Christians among them lapsing into Judaism. Their deviations took another turn.'<sup>56</sup> Equally can Hebrews, with its reference to persecution, which might lead to discouragement and even apostasy, be made to fit with the picture we get in I Cor.4. of comfortable and complacent recipients. Hebrews fails to display any interest in questions of charismatic ministry, an issue which is of central concern in I Corinthians.<sup>57</sup> Though it is interesting to note that this teaching is mostly outside those sections which Montefiore believes most clearly reflect Apollos' earlier communication with the Corinthian church. Hurst's article is less than helpful here when it notes

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<sup>51</sup> Montefiore, 1964.pp.26-27.

<sup>52</sup> Hurst, 1985.pp.509-510.

<sup>53</sup> Heb.2:8.

<sup>54</sup> Bruce, 1990. pp.5-6. Often this problem of apostasy is the overall characterisation commentators apply to the Epistle and its argument.

<sup>55</sup> Hurst, 1985.p.508.

<sup>56</sup> Montefiore, 1964.p.20. This is part of the problem, because it is difficult to conclude what a group who had failed to respond to Apollos' explicit teaching about leadership, might also choose not to notice or ignore. After all for Montefiore that is the reality - a group who are bent on following their own agenda, their own knowledge (gnosis), against apostolic preaching and authority.

<sup>57</sup> Hurst, 1985.p.511. See 1 Cor.12-14 which contains extensive teaching about the gifts of the spirit.

that Montefiore cites 'gifts of the Spirit' as another correspondence,<sup>58</sup> which Hurst does not question, but rather relegates to a shared common New Testament tradition. If the reader is confused as to what Hurst maintains about these 'gifts of the spirit' most astute commentators would not be surprised. He says that Hebrews has no interest in charismatic ministry (equated with 'gifts of the spirit' in Corinthian letters), but two pages later he claims the reference to 'gifts of the Spirit' in Hebrews is merely a reflection of a shared common New Testament tradition. It is difficult to see how both observations can be true at the same time.

Hurst appears to be on even stronger ground when he observes that Hebrews lacks any obvious evidence of an interest in the Eucharist, an opinion recognised by others who observe,

There is little or no evidence in Hebrews of involvement, on the part of the Author or of the community of Christians to which the Epistle was addressed, in Eucharistic faith and practice.<sup>59</sup>

On balance this would seem to be a fair view to hold, though some have argued for a slightly different exegesis of the Epistle. One such is the Roman Catholic scholar Swetnam who states quite categorically, 'In fact the Eucharist emerges as the central point of the Epistle'.<sup>60</sup> This is not a surprising conclusion given that Roman Catholic scholarship has always tended to see a stronger tradition of Eucharistic allusion in the Epistle. Hurst though stands in a valid tradition, which has failed to be convinced by such arguments, and for him that begs the question: How would this Epistle (Hebrews) relate to the Corinthian situation where Eucharistic practice and abuses are major issues.<sup>61</sup> A fair assessment would be that here Hurst is building on more assured foundations, even so there is room for greater discussion than he is willing to acknowledge

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<sup>58</sup> Hurst, 1985.p.513.

<sup>59</sup> Williamson, R. "Eucharist and the Epistle to the Hebrews." Expository Times. 87, 1975.pp.300-312.p.309

<sup>60</sup> Swetnam, J. "Christology and the Eucharist in the Epistle to the Hebrews." Biblica. 70 no.1. 1989.pp.74-95. Swetnam explores the motif of completion, especially in relation to Jesus body and his actual sacrifice. He links this with a consideration of the 'more perfect tent' which when viewed against an oral tradition enable the reader to better understand the various strands of cultic imagery, pointing to a tradition of approach to God's presence, best understood as actually encountered in Eucharistic practice.

<sup>61</sup> Hurst, 1985.p.512.

So we must return to Hurst's original question about whether Hebrews fits this Corinthian background. The discussion above has shown that neither Montefiore's reconstruction nor Hurst's critique of that reconstruction results in a clear cut conclusion. Obviously if Montefiore's reconstruction was that clear it would have enjoyed a wider circulation for much longer. Equally Hurst's critique displays methodological weaknesses, which leave issues open to further interpretation. I believe it is significant that Hurst dismisses the 13 correspondences Montefiore offers and also his quite powerful argument for Apollos' authorship without any discussion. It is equally significant that he chooses to construct his critique from the viewpoint of the Pauline correspondence, asking how well Hebrews fits with this evidence? It could be argued that he is asking the wrong question or is at least beginning from the wrong starting place. This may be why at the conclusion of Hurst's article one is left with that sense of unease, that the argument has been forced and conducted in terms which suit its author rather than addressing his opponent's position.

Like all reconstructions and attempts to identify Hebrews original readers Montefiore's attempt can never become 'the correct one', simply because without a dramatic textual or archaeological find the necessary evidence will never be available to us. Yet Montefiore's attempt is stronger than many such attempts because it is grounded in textual evidence available to us all, a fact which perhaps it shares to a degree with the attempt to link Hebrews with the community of Qumran.<sup>62</sup> So what are the strengths of Montefiore's case?

Montefiore draws his conclusions out of the text of the New Testament, which would appear to be a valid starting place. Like most other questions about this Epistle Apollos' authorship can not be conclusively proved, although Montefiore offers 12 points in support of this view which, as he says, is a little more thorough than Luther's attempt in 1537.<sup>63</sup> Some of these arguments are not especially significant; that he was a Jew, from Alexandria,<sup>64</sup> who witnessed boldly<sup>65</sup> to the gospel in confutation of the Jews,<sup>66</sup> tells us little more than what we might expect for many

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<sup>62</sup> It is possible to argue that his reconstruction is on slightly more solid textual foundations, as it is dealing with complete, extant texts, of which we have numerous copies, which is not the case at Qumran. Though of course this may simply be an accident of history.

<sup>63</sup> Montefiore, 1964.pp.9-11.

<sup>64</sup> Acts.18:24.

<sup>65</sup> Acts.18:26.

<sup>66</sup> Acts.18:28.

early followers of Jesus in the Mediterranean world. More interesting for our purpose is that he is said to be eloquent and ‘mighty in the scriptures’,<sup>67</sup> which implies both the learning and oral ability given expression in the prose of the Epistle, together with the original use made of scriptural quotations and argument in Hebrews. Apollos’ reputation for accurate teaching<sup>68</sup> would accord with what we would expect from our text. What is of even greater interest is the further information that Apollos was instructed in the way of the Lord; given, as I shall demonstrate,<sup>69</sup> the unique and functionally important interest of our author in the historical life of Jesus and his vivid reference to the agony in Gethsemane. It is also worth noting that Apollos is viewed as an equal by Paul in parts of the Corinthian correspondence, for which Montefiore’s reconstruction offers one plausible explanation. Montefiore’s argument advances beyond those of most advocates for Apollos’ authorship, in that he sets it into an actual sequence of historical events. This is probably where his position becomes more tenuous because while his reconstruction is believable it is not without some difficulties, as Hurst demonstrates. Yet it would be surprising if we did not find this to be the case, given the length of historical perspective involved. Montefiore was writing a commentary on Hebrews so it is not surprising that he has not followed through all the issues in detail within the Corinthian texts. It is important to remember that the Corinthian correspondence is not simply two tidy letters<sup>70</sup> as first appears, a fact that does not aid us in untangling an actual sequence of events. It is also interesting that both Hebrews and Corinthians contain material on ‘wilderness wanderings’,<sup>71</sup> although this could be due to common tradition. It is also worthy of note that Clement of Rome chooses to quote Hebrews in his correspondence to the church at Corinth,<sup>72</sup> despite Hebrews different traditions concerning sacrifice. Hurst is right to ask the question: why if the relationship existed did Paul not specifically mention Apollos’ letter in his Corinthian correspondence,<sup>73</sup> given that he did not hesitate to mention the author. Any solution to that difficulty can be no more than idle speculation from which I choose to refrain as it is not central to the concerns of this paper.

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<sup>67</sup> Acts.18:24.

<sup>68</sup> Acts.18:25.

<sup>69</sup> See pp.63-74 and p.71 with reference to the Gethsemane experience.

<sup>70</sup> Montefiore, 1964.p.30.

<sup>71</sup> Montefiore, 1964.p.28.*contra* Hurst,D.L. 1985.pp.152-153.

<sup>72</sup> Montefiore, 1964.p.28f.

<sup>73</sup> Hurst, 1985.p.513



Given Paul's stress on solidarity with Christ as the basis of his Corinthian ethics, it is significant that Christ's solidarity with mankind is important in the soteriological pattern of Hebrews.<sup>74</sup> Is this another straw in the wind, or simply part of that New Testament shared inheritance. In all such questions, like those of authorship and audience, firm conclusions will always allude us. Montefiore's reconstruction is plausible, if not difficulty free, yet I am disinclined to simple agreement with Hurst. Perhaps a more careful and precise scholar might yet convince me that Montefiore is definitely wrong. Until that time the verdict on Montefiore's position must remain 'not guilty', or perhaps 'not proven' would be more accurate, and I remain willing to use this as a working hypothesis. Happily, interesting though this discussion might be, it is not vitally important to the task of exploring Hebrews' Christological traditions.

### **Date of Composition.**

Following on from the discussion above it is obvious that Montefiore's reconstruction includes a belief that Hebrews was a very early Christian text indeed, comparable in many respects to the Pauline textual corpus. Yet if we regard Montefiore's position as plausible but unproven, then we have to admit that the internal evidence of the Epistle does not greatly aid us in arriving at a precise date. We can easily establish a terminal date due to the extensive use made of the Epistle by Clement of Rome,<sup>75</sup> which on the current dating of Clement's writings gives a *terminus post quem* of about 120 A.D.<sup>76</sup> Given that some time must be allowed for the Epistle to circulate, or at least become part of the Roman Church's deposit of writings, the suggestion of 96 A.D. as the real terminal date made by Lindars and Wilson<sup>77</sup> would seem quite reasonable. The one question which has been endlessly discussed in trying to advance beyond a terminal date towards a more precise dating is this documents relationship to an associated event of some importance, the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 A.D..

The main thrust of Hebrews' argument is that the old Levitical cult and priesthood have been superseded by Jesus, High Priest after the order of Melchizedek. In such a setting it seems difficult to suppose that any author would resist the temptation to enhance and conclude his argument by a reference to such a favourable historical event, even if he suspected there might

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<sup>74</sup> See pp.122-124.

<sup>75</sup> I Clement 36:2-5.

<sup>76</sup> Gordon, R.P. Hebrews. Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 2000.p.29.

<sup>77</sup> Lindars, 1991.p19 & Wilson, McL. Hebrews (New Century Bible Commentary). Basingstoke, Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1987.p.5.

be attempts later to restore the Temple. So for many scholars, the date of composition must be pushed back to before the Temple's destruction.<sup>78</sup> Isaacs on the other hand represents an alternative view which argues for a post 70 A.D. date of composition.<sup>79</sup> She partly believes it was the destruction of the Temple which engendered the crisis to which Hebrews is one response. Supporters of this later dating note that Hebrews' discussion of the cult and priesthood is all in terms of Old Testament practice. Some scholars would argue that this reflects either the fact that the author was not a native of Judaea, and so lacked first hand knowledge, or that this use of older traditions reflects a significant theological aspect of his use of wilderness traditions.<sup>80</sup> Though a later dating is an acceptable view to take, I find on balance, that a date prior to the Temple's destruction seems more likely.

Decisions about the date of composition have been heavily influenced by exegetical traditions that have been widely-held to be self-evident. So for example a late date was justified because the Epistle displayed a 'high Christology', contained complex theological argumentation and relied on a large number of Hellenistic ideas. This reflects an evolutionary understanding of Christological development which, though it has been used as a convenient analytical tool, has become, as I shall demonstrate, a bad master.<sup>81</sup> This evolutionary approach has now ceased to be used as an explanation of Christological patterns and become a forceful determinant of exegetical judgments. According to this approach a document with a 'high Christology' and a theologically sophisticated argument must be of a late date. As so often when the discoveries of other disciplines are applied to the task of Biblical exegesis a partial and inaccurate approach is all too evident. This is definitely true when scholars contributing to the 'third quest for the historical Jesus'<sup>82</sup> apply the techniques of modern psychoanalysis to the person of Jesus, yet ignore the first rule of this discipline which is that the subject must be present, this is a difficulty given the scholars' historical location. Equally if we consider evolutionary theory we soon

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<sup>78</sup> Lindars, 1991.p.20. Lindars after a careful consideration of the evidence thinks on balance that the author would not resist this temptation. Lindars notes that an earlier date (pre 70 AD) has been the traditional position, and some scholars have advocated an even earlier date - Wilson & Robinson, J.A.T. see Lindars, 1991 p.19 for details.

<sup>79</sup> Isaacs, 1992.pp.43-44. Isaacs suggests, 'we become more attached to that which we have recently lost.'

<sup>80</sup> Isaacs, 1992.p.67. This is a view developed in Isaacs' exegesis of the Epistle, see also pp.61-66 for more detail of her view.

<sup>81</sup> See pp.50-51.

<sup>82</sup> 'Historical Jesus' in this context, being the attempt to reconstruct a picture of the earthly Jesus, as carried out by scholars of the North American Jesus Seminar, amongst others.

discover that some evolutionary advances are dead ends and there has been no rush to identify those in the Biblical material. In evolutionary theory, evolutionary development is not characterised as a tidy process. It accepts that higher and lower forms may exist side by side, evolve at different speeds in differing environments or in response to one-off significant environmental events. If we apply these insights we must allow that 'high' and 'low' Christologies might co-exist at the same point in history. We must also accept that a particularly gifted and able author might represent what evolutionary theory would describe as a significant environmental stimulus, and so produce a 'higher more developed form', in the language of our discipline, a theologically complex argument. Therefore to use such ideas of development as the sole or even primary determinative of dating is flawed at the very least. If we consider our Epistle we can see a long established tradition of exegesis which sees it as the product of

...a first rate mind, abreast of its subject, who writes with inner authority, combining learning, originality and rigorous logic. An epistle written by such an author would stand on its own merits<sup>83</sup>

So we should not be surprised that such a mind should in comparison with St. Mark have produced from similar raw data a theologically more complex and developed piece of work. Some would further undermine this approach to dating when they question whether the Christological portrait in Hebrews goes beyond that found in Col.1:5-20, which has generally been dated between 65 and 70 A.D.<sup>84</sup>

If we turn our attention to the third strand of this tradition of dating, namely the Hellenistic character of the Epistle, again I would contend that we do not have assured results. This is not the moment to rehearse the arguments concerning this perceived aspect of the Epistle, as I will give it a fuller treatment later in this chapter.<sup>85</sup> I trust at that point a strong enough case will be established to support the view that the use of this feature as a determinative of date would be methodically flawed, if not dishonest.

Interestingly the traditional approach to date, whilst advancing certain features of the text as

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<sup>83</sup> Montefiore, 1964.p.3. Montefiore believes this is why this unascribed Epistle won its canonical authority.

<sup>84</sup> Lindars, 1991.p.21.

<sup>85</sup> See pp.50-60.

determinants, has also quietly ignored other features which might complicate the discussion. The extant text of Hebrews shows no interest in church order, the question of heresy (as opposed to apostasy), or new teachings, which are all elements often used to establish the late date of certain marginal texts in the New Testament canon. Whilst Hebrews' concern with the question of the validity of Jewish teaching, which has now been superseded, could easily be the basis for establishing a convincing case for an early dating. Such a case might be methodically weak but no more so than its traditional alternative.

An early dating is an inseparable part of the Montefiore - Lo Bue hypothesis that Hebrews was addressed to the Corinthian church prior to Paul's Corinthian correspondence. The acceptance of such an early date as 52-54 A.D. depends on acceptance of their wider hypothesis. The hypothesis is plausible, if not proven, and is probably beyond final proof, as is also the date of composition. I contend that the Epistle was composed before the fall of the Temple in 70 A.D., whilst also being willing to entertain the possibility of an even earlier date. The conventional evolutionary scheme of Christological and theological development should not be allowed to preclude *a priori* important questions of exegesis and dating. The question of dating is of little importance to the task of Christological exegesis which is the central concern of this thesis, though it does raise an intriguing possibility that if the Corinth - Apollos hypothesis is sustainable we might have here one of the earliest statements of Christology.<sup>86</sup>

### **Background of Thought.**

The efforts of exegetes to identify the best thought world against which to read the Epistle's text have been closely related to the discussions about authorship, date and audience. Often as we have already noted decisions about backgrounds have had a determinative role to play when the question of original audience has been answered. This was particularly so with the early tradition of Hellenistic, or Platonic character advocated in some earlier commentaries, a tradition of exegesis represented by Spicq's commentary.<sup>87</sup> It is not surprising therefore that this whole area has elicited a number of full scale studies either into possible individual backgrounds<sup>88</sup> or

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<sup>86</sup> Montefiore, 1964.p.28. says if his general hypothesis finds favour then, 'Apollos rather than Paul may have been the early church's pioneer in the realm of Christology.'

<sup>87</sup> Spicq, C. L'Épître aux Hébreux. Paris,1952.

<sup>88</sup> Williamson, R. Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews. Leiden, Brill,1970. Williamson's Ph.D. thesis examined the possible relationship between Hebrews and the Writings of Philo of Alexandria, is an example of one such study. Williamson also offers one other possible 'background' for consideration in his article "The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its Background." Expository Times 87. no.8, 1976. pp.232-237.

into the wider continuum of possible backgrounds suggested by scholars.<sup>89</sup> It is this question of background thought to which we will now turn our attention. This has been viewed as an important basis for any serious study of the Epistle, because it appears to offer clues to resolving other basic questions such as audience and date. More importantly scholars have believed that the identification of background thought might enable more assured readings of the actual text to be undertaken, enabling us to close the hermeneutical gap which exists between us and the original audience.

### **Philo and Platonism.**

One of the earliest backgrounds commentators have utilised has been those traditions of Hellenistic thinking most famously represented in the ancient Mediterranean world by the writings of Philo of Alexandria. This approach, as we have already seen, has led to an early and close identification of the Epistle with the city of Alexandria. The high point of this tradition found clear expression in Spicq's 1952 commentary, which constructed this hypothesis on features of shared vocabulary, ideas and the use of an 'argument from silence' in relation to the figure of Melchizedek in both the Epistle and the works of Philo.<sup>90</sup>

This close identification of Hebrews and the thought world, or even the actual work of Philo, has not been without its critics.<sup>91</sup> The most extensive critique of this tradition of Hellenistic background was that carried out by Williamson in his study of 1970, which considered the features of comparison on a step by step basis.<sup>92</sup> Hurst draws on and then develops Williamson's approach by extending it to those linguistic assumptions which Williamson did not

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<sup>89</sup> Hurst, D.L. The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its Background of Thought. Cambridge, CUP, 1990, is one recent extensive study of the various 'backgrounds' suggested by scholars.

<sup>90</sup> Hurst, 1990.p.7. Hurst notes that Hebrews does not draw on Philo's allegorical methods of exegesis, a fact we must bear in mind.

<sup>91</sup> Examples being, Barrett, C.K. "The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews." in The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology. eds. Daube, D. & Davies, W.D., Cambridge, CUP, 1956, which focused on the central role of eschatology in Hebrews' thought questioned this identification. This tradition was also questioned by Hanson, R.P.C. Allegory and Event. London, SCM, 1959, who wished to focus attention on the view that Hebrews stood closer in thought to the approach characterised by Stephen's speech in Acts chapter 7. Also more recently, Hurst, D.L. 1990.pp.8-9. reviews this critique of the tradition that Hebrews and the writings of Philo display a close literary relationship.

<sup>92</sup> Williamson, R. Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews. Leiden, Brill, 1970.

fully consider in his earlier study.<sup>93</sup> Spicq's plea for the direct dependence of Hebrews on this Philonic tradition must be judged to have failed as the careful consideration of the various texts from Qumran illustrates. These texts show that the ideas expressed in Hebrews and Philo were more widespread and part of the general culture of the ancient Mediterranean world than was once thought. It is true that some Greek ideas did contribute to the author's thinking, but the linguistic similarities between Philo and the Epistle have been overstated as Williamson's study clearly demonstrated. These similarities are better understood as expressing a common cultural inheritance, a Jewish apocalyptic inheritance. Hurst sums up this conclusion when he writes,

Enough indication exists to point to a reasonable conclusion that Hebrews developed certain Old Testament ideas within the Jewish apocalyptic framework, while Philo developed the same themes within a Philonic framework. Both writers, in other words, go back independently to a common Old testament background. The Platonic / Philonic background for Hebrews is therefore "not proven" and as such must give way to an examination of other possible backgrounds.<sup>94</sup>

In my judgement this conclusion is valid. So heeding his advice it is to that task we shall now turn our attention. In carrying out this task I shall deal with the possible backgrounds in an order which roughly reflects their chronological place in the on-going history of commentary on the Epistle.

### **Gnosticism.**

As early as 1922, Scott argued that Hebrews' lack of interest in the material realm ( a feature the Epistle shares with Philo's writings) displays its connection with Gnostic traditions.<sup>95</sup> This approach was further developed by Käsemann, who in 1939 argued that this was the main influence given expression in the Epistle in terms of the myth of the redeemed redeemer.<sup>96</sup> This

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<sup>93</sup> Hurst, 1990.pp.13-21. deals with the extra linguistic assumptions which Williamson did not deal with in his earlier study. Hurst follows this discussion up with an exploration of whether Hellenism and apocalyptic are the best sources on which to draw in coming to a clear understanding of the underlying themes expressed in the text of Hebrews. see pp.21-41.

<sup>94</sup> Hurst, 1990.p.42.

<sup>95</sup> Scott, E.F. The Epistle to the Hebrews. Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1922.

<sup>96</sup> Käsemann, E. The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Letter to the Hebrews. (trans. Harrisville, R.A.) Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1984. (orig. Das Wandernde Gottesvolk, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961.) Käsemann argued that behind Hebrews chapter 7 was the gnostic tradition of Melchizedek as the incarnation of the Urmensch.

tradition of a gnostic 'background' to Hebrews has enjoyed a much wider currency in continental European scholarly circles<sup>97</sup> than it has within the English speaking world. Käsemann detected in the motif of pilgrimage, expressed in Hebrews, the gnostic concern with the pilgrimage of the self from the enslaving world of matter to the heavenly realm of the spirit.<sup>98</sup>

This whole approach has suffered from a number of real difficulties, despite the strong support it has received in scholarly circles. First, Käsemann's hypothesis was constructed on the basis of later sources which can not be shown to prove traditions contemporary with Hebrews. An observation which is given further force in that there is no textual evidence in the first century for a myth of the redeemed redeemer. Second, the existence of a first-century form of Gnosticism has not been conclusively established. Despite scholars' arguing for earlier forms of Gnosticism which arose out of early Christianity, or perhaps even Jewish traditions<sup>99</sup> it is difficult to actually demonstrate this to be the case. If this Gnosticism did not exist, obviously it is impossible to argue that it provided a conceptual background for Hebrews! It is fair, therefore, to conclude that this Gnostic 'background' has not been proven and it is difficult to see how we shall ever be in a position to prove such 'a background', let alone connect it to the text of Hebrews.

### **Samaritanism.**

In 1927 Knox suggested that Hebrews was the product of a 'Samaritan Christian' tradition and displayed the theme of the 'reunion of Israel and Judah in the infant church, which would appeal to such Samaritan Christians. Knox argued Hebrews' interest in viewing Christ as the new Joshua and a priest-king, plus its interest in the Tabernacle and the mention it makes of Samson, are reflective of this Samaritan 'background'.<sup>100</sup> This was an early attempt to find an alternative 'background' behind the Epistle, but it had some weaknesses, especially Hebrews' use of Old Testament books not recognised as scripture in Samaritan circles and its emphasis on a heavenly 'Jerusalem' - hardly a Samaritan focus of interest. So it is not surprising that this

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<sup>97</sup> Grässer, E. *Der Glaube im Hebräerbrief*. Marburg, Elwert, 1965. and Theissen, G. "Untersuchungen zum Hebräerbrief." *Studien zum Neuen Testament 2* Gütersloh, Mohn, 1969. These two major monographs are representative of the wide interest in a possible gnostic background displayed in continental scholarly work.

<sup>98</sup> Lane, W. *Hebrews: Word Biblical Commentary*. Dallas, Word, 1991. p.cix.

<sup>99</sup> Some scholars have argued that Hebrews may have arise out of the same pre-gnostic trajectory, which led to some of the Qumran material, and later Gnostic myths of 'a redeemed redeemer'. Hurst rejects such a nuanced approach, noting that the figure of Melchizedek is characterised in entirely different ways in Qumran texts, to the familiar picture in Hebrews. See Hurst, D.L. 1990.p.74.for a full discussion of this issue.

<sup>100</sup> Knox, E.A. "The Samaritans and the Epistle to the Hebrews." *The Churchman* 22, 1927.pp.184-193.

theory did not attract wide interest and lay dormant for forty-six years until Scobie revived it in 1973 when he argued that Stephen's speech in Acts 7, the Fourth Gospel and Hebrews were all best understood as reflections of Samaritan concerns.<sup>101</sup>

This case for a 'Samaritan background' consists of nine features found in Hebrews which might be argued to provide the evidence for such a background. Some of these features are those identified by Knox: the Epistle's use of Joshua (and the Tabernacle), the emphasis about high-priesthood and especially the mention of Melchizedek, which Scobie links with the fragmentary text of Pseudo-Eupolemus, a text which associates Melchizedek with Mount Gerizim. Scobie's approach also views Hebrews' roll call of faith as reflecting a particularly Samaritan view of salvation of history, an expansion of Knox's ideas about Samson. Scobie's more recent hypothesis also notes Hebrews' use of angels, Moses (the only true prophet for Samaritans), and Hebrews' silence about David, especially the associated messianic conceptions which were an anathema to the Samaritans. Scobie notes that Hebrews reflects a Samaritan exegesis of Exodus 30:1-6 in its placing of the Altar of Incense in the Tabernacle<sup>102</sup> which is not in line with the accepted Jewish understanding of the layout of the Tabernacle. Scobie also notes that Samaritan circles display a strong interest in Platonic philosophical speculation, a feature given expression in Hebrews in terms of 'two worlds' thinking.<sup>103</sup>

These points of contact display a number of weaknesses and require critical scrutiny. For example the use of angels as mediators of the Torah is not a particularly Samaritan idea and in Hebrews (2:6-8) this idea is drawn from Psalm 8, a text totally alien to Samaritan tradition.<sup>104</sup> Though Scobie would ask us to consider whether conversion to Christianity included the requirement to accept a wider range of Old Testament texts. Equally does Hebrews' focus on Moses reflect the well documented Samaritan interest in Moses, given that the figure of Moses depicted in the Epistle is not the super-human figure of Samaritan literature, but more in line

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<sup>101</sup> Scobie, C.H.H. "The Origin and Development of Samaritan Christianity." New Testament Studies 19. 1972-3. pp.390-414.

<sup>102</sup> Heb.9:3f.

<sup>103</sup> Hurst, 1990. pp.76-77. Hurst provides a summary of Scobie's argument and evidence for this 'Samaritan background'.

<sup>104</sup> Hurst, 1990. pp.77-78. Hurst believes that as this can not even be seen as resulting from a common use of Old Testament sources it increases the force of the criticism. He also notes that in Samaritan traditions angels were passive witnesses to the giving of the law not mediators of it.



with the portraits of mainline Judaism.<sup>105</sup> We can dismiss an interest in Platonism because, as we have demonstrated this is not the strong feature of this Epistle which it was once believed to be. After all Philo's work does contain this Platonic feature yet we do not believe he reflects a Samaritan tradition. Hebrews' interest in priesthood which is a definite feature of Samaritan tradition might suggest a conceptual link, yet it is not from that source that Hebrews derives its thinking, which arises out of the exegesis of Psalm 110:4.<sup>106</sup> Generally it is accepted that Hebrews displays little interest in David and the associated messianic concepts, yet it can be argued that this could be explained by reference to factors other than a Samaritan inheritance of ideas.<sup>107</sup> There is no doubt that Hebrews does display a strong interest and particular use of wilderness traditions, and especially of the Tabernacle as 'the expression' of the cultic tradition. I would argue that this is a reflection of Hebrews' own theological interest in the themes of sojourning and pilgrimage towards God's rest and does not therefore require a Samaritan explanation.<sup>108</sup>

There are major features of Hebrews which appear to be in conflict with this background. The major difficulty is Hebrews' use of Zion and Jerusalem when referring to the heavenly city to come, a feature which a Samaritan audience would find very provocative. When we examine the distinctive portrait of Christ and his work provided by the Epistle we can see how it is constructed on traditions expressed in Psalms 8 and 110, Psalms which are combined to express Christological ideas elsewhere in New Testament texts and are therefore reflective of a common early Christian Christological approach. It is difficult to see how Samaritan traditions could be linked to such an approach, given their attitudes to the Psalms.<sup>109</sup> More generally Hebrews' use of at least five main texts, including the Psalms, from outside the Torah (which

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<sup>105</sup> Hurst, 1990.p.78-79. Hurst notes MacDonald's comment that the Samaritan interest in Moses was unmatched in Jewish tradition, but he notes that Moses is depicted as the 'pre-existent light' and the 'Lord of the World' - not the picture we get in our Epistle. In a similar way Hurst simply rejects the idea that Hebrews displays any particular interest in Joshua.

<sup>106</sup> Hurst, 1990.p.80.Hurst argues this is further reinforced in that Melchizedek is not associated with any one location in Hebrews.

<sup>107</sup> Hurst for example argues that Davidic traditions would emphasise ideas of earthly security and power, which would be contrary to the overall thrust of Hebrews argument - which is concerned to question the old securities, and show their temporary nature - see Hurst, 1990.p.79. I am not as certain that Hebrews simply has no interest in Davidic traditions, and would note that such conclusions partly depend on how we interpret two features of the Epistle - the Melchizedek traditions and their use in the Epistle, and the use made of the Psalms.

<sup>108</sup> Hurst, 1990.p.80. Hurst notes the possibility that this may be inherited from the 'Stephen tradition' - as Manson advocated. Scobie of course believes both Hebrews and 'Stephen tradition' (Acts.7) reflect a Samaritan tradition in the church.

<sup>109</sup> Hebrews portrait also differs quite markedly from 'the revealer or restorer' figures of Samaritan thought.

Samaritans viewed as scripture) is a major difficulty with this 'background' as has long been acknowledged.<sup>110</sup> Hebrews also displays no interest in Gentiles, a feature of Samaritan traditions which we might reasonably expect to have been expressed in the Epistle if it has a Samaritan background.

Given the difficulty in establishing a first century Samaritan tradition and dating Samaritan literature the foundations of this argument can not be claimed to be assured. This means that whereas Samaritan traditions may provide us with some useful perspectives to understand Hebrews (perspectives which are more 'Jewish' than Hellenistic), in the end it brings us no nearer to our goal of identifying a 'background' than many other possibilities.<sup>111</sup>

### **The Stephen Tradition.**

This possible 'background' rests on the view that there existed in early Christianity a distinctive approach which could be called the Stephen Tradition, which was given clear expression in his speech in Acts 7.<sup>112</sup> Manson in his 1949 Baird Lecture described this tradition when he wrote, 'it was Stephen who first "grasped and asserted the more-than-Jewish Messianic sense in which the office and significance of Jesus in Religious History were to be understood."' <sup>113</sup> This 'Stephen tradition' would have us view Stephen and the Hellenists in the early Church as the universalists who perceived the Church's mission as being to the wider world, rather than as a mere restoration of Israel which the Jewish Christians of the Jerusalem church were awaiting. Manson claimed the text of Hebrews as an expression of this 'tradition' and believed this was the reason why the Epistle warns its readers of the danger of living in the past and holding on to the old securities of Cult and Temple.<sup>114</sup>

Careful consideration of Stephen's speech and Hebrews enables us to identify a number of themes which are clearly expressed in Hebrews and Stephen's speech as we have it in Acts 7,

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<sup>110</sup> Ellingworth, P. The Epistle to the Hebrews(NIGTC). Grand Rapids, Wm.B. Eerdmans, 1993.p.19. Ellingworth notes that even Knox wrote that this was a weak point in his thesis, together with the prominence given to Jerusalem.

<sup>111</sup> Hurst, 1990.p.82.

<sup>112</sup> Acts 7:2-53. We must be aware that Luke uses this narrative to introduce Paul into his record of the early church. Is Luke also preserving an important early Christian preaching tradition? For a fuller discussion see Hurst, 1990.p.90.

<sup>113</sup> Manson, W. The Epistle to the Hebrews. London, Hodder& Stoughton, 1961 (1951).p.31.

<sup>114</sup> Manson, 1961.pp.31-32. Manson also notes the strong similarities between Hebrews, Stephen and the Fourth Gospel, especially in the language they use to express their thinking, see pp.28-46.

for instance both juxtapose the themes of rest, hearing, the defect of heart and the Holy Spirit.<sup>115</sup> They also display very similar interests in the Temple and the land,<sup>116</sup> both draw on the tradition of angelic mediation of the law, though in differing ways;<sup>117</sup> and significantly both uniquely cite Exodus 25:40 developing it to emphasise the spiritual nature of God.<sup>118</sup> In addition though rather less significantly both emphasise the idea of 'looking to Jesus' - a widespread New Testament theme.<sup>119</sup> Both texts also identify 'the Jews' with those who killed the righteous men of the Old Testament and broke the law in the wilderness - in Stephen's case this leads to his death, not his attitude to the law.<sup>120</sup> In contrast with this view of 'the Jews' both Hebrews and Acts 7 display a strong grasp of the continuity between Jesus' followers and the faithful people of God, expressed through a focus on the role of Israel in God's plan. The use of Exodus 25:40 is probably the most interesting of these points of contact, especially as it adds emphasis to the view that God can not be confined to any earthly institution or location.<sup>121</sup> The use made of the tabernacle highlights a more lasting transcendent reality of which its earthly expression, the temple, is but a provisional expression but not God's final dispensation.<sup>122</sup>

Just because it is possible to identify these possible points of contact, we should also be careful not to neglect the differences between them.<sup>123</sup> Stephen's speech in Acts 7 is a thoroughly polemical rejection of the Jerusalem Temple, depicting it and its sacrifices as inferior to those of

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<sup>115</sup> Hurst, 1990.p.102.

<sup>116</sup> Lane, 1991.p.cxlvii. Lane here notes that Stephen and the Hellenists display serious differences to the traditional Jewish understanding of the cult and settlement in the land. Isaacs, M.E.1992.pp.65-66 As Isaacs notes Hebrews sees Judaism's sacred space (temple, but also the land) has been replaced by Christ

<sup>117</sup> Hurst, 1990.pp.92-97. Both Stephen's speech (Acts 7:38 & 7:53 ) and Hebrews see the law as of divine origin and valid, but that it failed to reach its goal. Scholars have argued that it is not the extent to which the law should be observed, which is at issue in Stephen's speech, but the Temple's role - but have not agreed quite what this meant. Some like Gaston (Gaston, L. No Stone on Another: Studies in the significance of the Fall of Jerusalem in the Synoptic Gospels. Leiden, 1970.pp.154f.) have argued that Stephen is the climax of opposition to the Temple, what Moule calls 'quaker Judaism' opposed to the Temple in principle, see Moule, C.F.D. The Birth of the New Testament. London, 1962,p.14. Others (Manson, W. 1951.p.34.) view Stephen as standing in the long established tradition which affirms that the Temple is not a permanent institution. Interestingly Hurst notes both of these uses are set within the context of disobedience- suggests Manson on the right lines.

<sup>118</sup> Hurst, 1990.p.104.

<sup>119</sup> Heb.12:2 'looking to Jesus' and Acts 7:55-56 'gazing into heaven saw Jesus, the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God'.

<sup>120</sup> Hurst, 1990.p.96. Hurst here develops the view expressed by Stanton that Stephen like Moses is rejected by the remnant of Israel, into the explanation that it was this attack on the hearers which provoked the final violent outcome.

<sup>121</sup> Manson, 1961.p.34. Manson see Acts 7:48-49 draws on Solomon's words in 1 Kings.8:27 to conclude that the Temple was not a permanent institution.

<sup>122</sup> Hurst, 1990.p.97.

<sup>123</sup> Isaacs, 1992.p.66.

the tabernacle, whilst Hebrews argues that the cult has been replaced because its purpose has been fulfilled in the sacrifice of Christ, the perfect victim and priest. If we also bear in mind those themes which find expression in Hebrews but are not expressed in Stephen's speech, especially its interest in priesthood,<sup>124</sup> we may feel that the case for this background, which has received widespread scholarly support, is not quite as straightforward as some have accepted. I can not help wondering whether the general support it has enjoyed is in part because it links our Epistle to an Hellenistic background which suits some scholars preconceived views about its setting in early Christianity. It is true that there are similarities which have long been recognised, but these could simply reflect that both texts drew independently on an older tradition which they developed in their own ways and are not in so direct a relationship as many have argued.

### **Qumran.**

Scholarly study of inter-Testamental Judaism and Christian origins was transformed by the discovery of the Qumran texts. The study of Hebrews was also affected by these finds. One of the first scholars to suggest that the Qumran texts might offer a valuable 'background' to a reading of the Epistle was Y. Yadin in 1958.<sup>125</sup> Yadin suggested that the original audience were Christian converts who had been practising Essenes. Yadin based this view on what he believed to be four significant points of contact between the Qumran corpus and the Epistle. These four major points of contact are an interest in Angels; a belief in two Messiahs, one priestly, one lay (combined in the person of Jesus in Hebrews); the juxtaposition of the revelation in Jesus with the Old Testament prophets and finally the particular use made of pentateuchal quotations in both traditions.<sup>126</sup> As well as these points of contact the discovery at Qumran of the text we call 11QMelchizedek, with its very particular interest in the figure of Melchizedek, opened another possibly fruitful avenue for understanding a major theme in Hebrews. This has led to much discussion about how Melchizedek should be viewed. Does Hebrews follow the Qumranic tradition which views him as a superhuman, heavenly figure (without negating his humanity). One extensive study which has attempted to discuss this possible Qumranic Melchizedek

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<sup>124</sup> Acts 7:40. There is no mention of priesthood beyond this reference to Aaron's role in relation to the golden calf. This would not automatically rule out any connection because after all, Hebrews may have added this to the existing Stephen tradition.

<sup>125</sup> Yadin, Y. "The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Epistle to the Hebrews." *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, IV, 1958, pp.36-53.

<sup>126</sup> Hurst, 1990, pp.43-4. Hurst provides a summary of Yadin's points of contact and argument before subjecting it to critical discussion.

background within a wider discussion of Melchizedek traditions was Horton's 1976 study.<sup>127</sup> Horton when comparing the use of Melchizedek traditions by Josephus, Philo and Qumran suggests that we can see two different streams of tradition.<sup>128</sup> One tradition which finds expression in Philo, Josephus and the text of the Genesis Apocryphon (22:14ff) from Qumran, is built on the two historical Old Testament references to Melchizedek.<sup>129</sup> The second tradition which is expressed in the fragmentary text of 11QMelchizedek, contains three unique ideas: that Melchizedek is a heavenly figure, that he is of eschatological importance and the expression of Elohim's judgement, whilst implying his priestly status although it is not totally clear about this.<sup>130</sup> For Horton, Hebrews definitely gives expression to this first stream of tradition but it is less clear that he expresses the second, though there are some interesting points of contact.<sup>131</sup> This would raise important questions as to the relationship between the Qumran texts and Hebrews which may not go beyond shared traditions which were widespread in the ancient first Century Mediterranean world.

Hurst questions further the close identification with a 'Qumranic background'. He argues that Hebrews and the Qumran texts share some traditions of exegesis with regards to the Old Testament, but that if we look at their overall view of the Old Testament we can detect very different methodical stances. Qumranic exegesis understands the Old Testament as containing a mysterious message for the 'end of time', whilst Hebrews is concerned to identify its original meaning and then develop its message for Christians now.<sup>132</sup> Such a view questions a direct relationship between Qumran and Hebrews suggesting that the best explanation for the points of contact which exist is to accept that these reflect shared background in, and a tradition of exegesis of the Old Testament. Yet despite these similarities arising from shared traditions of Old Testament exegesis they are insufficient to offset the striking differences between Hebrews and

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<sup>127</sup> Horton, F.L. The Melchizedek Tradition: A Critical Examination of the Sources to the Fifth Century AD and in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Cambridge, CUP, 1976. Also discussed at some length by Hurst, D.L. 1990, pp.53-60.

<sup>128</sup> Horton, 1976, p.85.

<sup>129</sup> Gen. 14:18-20. and Ps. 110:4.

<sup>130</sup> Horton, 1976, p.86. Table 3.1 identifies 17 features of the Melchizedek tradition, and notes their occurrences in Old Testament references, and contemporary sources.

<sup>131</sup> Horton, 1976, pp.167-168. Horton claims there is no reason to believe Hebrews related to the speculation about Melchizedek demonstrated in 11QMel. - but can not absolutely rule it out, (p.168). Does see some points of contact in his preparatory discussion. Lane, W.1991, p.cviii. also concludes 'that the differences in the OT text to which an appeal is made and to the conception of the role of Melchizedek in 11QMelch. and Hebrews are so fundamental as to preclude any influence of 11QMel. upon the argument developed in Hebrews...'

<sup>132</sup> Hurst, 1990, pp.61-65.

Qumran.<sup>133</sup>

### **Merkabah Mysticism.**

Williamson's study of Philo<sup>134</sup> delivered the sharpest blow to the traditional view that the background was Philonic Platonism. In a later article he suggests that one possible element in Hebrews 'background' was to be found in Jewish traditions of Merkabah mysticism.<sup>135</sup> For Williamson it is the language of the Epistle and its emphasis on access to the heavenly throne which are important elements in understanding the thought of the Author. He draws attention to this language of direct access, pointing out that in this Epistle atonement is equated with direct approach to God thereby removing the requirement for any physical mediation of a sacramental or cultic kind. So, as Williamson notes, we are told that the believer is able to draw near God's throne 'with confidence',<sup>136</sup> that we have come to 'the heavenly Jerusalem'<sup>137</sup> and can now 'enter the sanctuary'<sup>138</sup> since Christ has opened a way 'through the curtain'.<sup>139</sup> If we take this together with Hebrews 13:15-16 we can see that Christ's work affords every believer direct and immediate access to the heavenly throne. Williamson explores Schenck's suggestion that this language of access indicates Hebrews' background is to be 'sought in a quite definite early form of Jewish Merkabah mysticism.'<sup>140</sup>

The focus of Jewish Merkabah mysticism was its attention to the chariot of God, or chariot of the cherubim which was also identified in Jewish tradition with the throne of God. Williamson suggests five features which mark out this tradition: the mystics' goal is God's pre-existing throne; they are interested in the angelic hierarchy, especially Metatron<sup>141</sup> and Sandalfon; they stress God's transcendent glory<sup>142</sup> sometimes in fire imagery; they emphasise the numinous in

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<sup>133</sup> Lane, 1991.p.cviii.

<sup>134</sup> Williamson, R. Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews. Lieden, Brill,1970.

<sup>135</sup> Williamson, R. "The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its Background." Expository Times 87. no.8, 1976. pp.232-237.

<sup>136</sup> Heb.4:16.

<sup>137</sup> Heb.12:22.

<sup>138</sup> Heb.10:19.

<sup>139</sup> Heb.10:20.

<sup>140</sup> Williamson, 1976.p.233.

<sup>141</sup> Metatron in 3 Enoch is the angelic being who guides Rabbi Ishmael through the heavenly places to the Merkabah. He is described as the lesser YHWH, or as 'the angel of the presence'.

<sup>142</sup> Hagigah 14:16. Here the mystic worshipper addresses God as 'the Lord enthroned in flames'. This language of fire also contains the idea of illumination.

their mystic hymns; and lastly, portray the essential mystical experience as a journey or a quest which involves an ascent to the heavenly realm through the curtain.<sup>143</sup> We can see that there are many parallels in both thought and language when Hebrews is compared with Jewish Merkabah mysticism. So in Hebrews we observe an interest in the throne of God,<sup>144</sup> we find frequent use of fire imagery,<sup>145</sup> we read much about angels and the writer demonstrates that Christ is superior to them since only he can conduct individuals through the curtain into the heavenly promised land.<sup>146</sup>

In Hebrews the Christian, through Christ's work, can enter the heavenly sanctuary following Christ his forerunner or pioneer, just as the mystic enters guided by his heavenly angelic guide. This thinking is reinforced by Hebrews' stress on Christ who offers his sacrificed life on the heavenly altar to act as an atoning power on man's behalf.<sup>147</sup> Williamson notes that in Numbers Rabbah 12:12 we get an interesting mystic image where Metatron is described as offering up the souls of the righteous, to atone for Israel in the days of their exile, in the heavenly Tabernacle which the angels made whilst Israel made their earthly Tabernacle. So as Williamson observes, Metatron is here functioning as a priest and combines the atoning power of martyrdom with the image of priestly service in the heavenly sanctuary.<sup>148</sup> These ideas of Christ offering his righteous sacrifice at the heavenly altar in Hebrews and of Metatron offering the souls of the righteous to atone for Israel's sin in Numbers Rabbah appear to be very close in language and thought.<sup>149</sup> Some scholars have said that Hebrews' view reflects a modified position, a position modified by other Jewish traditions.<sup>150</sup>

The major problem with this possible background relates to the question of dating. Existing traditions of Merkabah mysticism represented by texts such as 3 Enoch, all date to a period later than the New Testament. Yet these traditions are quite highly developed, which may suggest that

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<sup>143</sup> Williamson, 1976.p.233.

<sup>144</sup> Heb.8:1; 1:3,8; and also 12:2.

<sup>145</sup> Heb.12:29, where God is described as 'a consuming fire' and also Heb.10:27, where it says that all that remains for the Apostate is 'a fearful prospect of judgement and the fury of fire'.

<sup>146</sup> Heb.13:13. The theme of pilgrimage to a heavenly promised land is a major theme throughout the whole Epistle.

<sup>147</sup> Williamson, 1976.p.235.

<sup>148</sup> Williamson, 1976.p.234.

<sup>149</sup> Williamson, 1976.p.235.

<sup>150</sup> Lane, 1991.p.cix.

older traditions lie behind a text such as 3 Enoch and some of the rabbis associated with this tradition do come from the 1st and 2nd centuries.<sup>151</sup> Interestingly there are no signs of this mystical tradition in any of the texts we have from Qumran. Williamson himself accepts that Hebrews owes some ideas to other Jewish traditions and that many of the parallel features he considers in his article are derived ultimately from Old Testament passages and themes.<sup>152</sup> The question is whether the similarities are due simply to a shared indebtedness to the Old Testament, or whether the large number of these shared themes make a relationship more likely. Williamson is inclined to the latter view:

It is significant that it is precisely a selection of Old Testament ideas and themes which the Merkabah Mystics elaborated that also plays an important part in Hebrews. It is significant too that no other New Testament writer created the particular kind of theological structuring of terms, images and ideas that is encountered in Hebrews.<sup>153</sup>

Others are unwilling to go this far and feel that perhaps we should focus on a shared form of early apocalyptic thought by which both are shaped, rather than a direct relationship.<sup>154</sup> Personally I feel that the traditions of Merkabah mysticism may offer us a useful tool in understanding the language which our author chooses to use in shaping his argument. Yet I would accept that the actual ideas belonging to this possible background do seem to have been modified by other traditions, not least early Christian claims about Christ's uniqueness.

### **Wider New Testament Traditions.**

It may seem obvious but it is necessary to state that the early ascription of Hebrews to Paul demonstrates that there is a wide range of points of contact between the Epistle and the early Christian kerygma.<sup>155</sup> So here at least we have an assured background against which the Epistle can be read and we can state,

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<sup>151</sup> Lane, 1991.p.cix.Lane notes that Williamson himself recognises this difficulty in his own article p.235. Lane also notes that Hebrews fails to draw upon or use those Old Testament texts which became central to later Merkabah mysticism.

<sup>152</sup> Williamson, 1976.p.235.

<sup>153</sup> Williamson, 1976.p.236.

<sup>154</sup> Hurst, 1990.pp.84-85.and also Lane, 1991.p.cix.

<sup>155</sup> Pfizner, V.C. Hebrews. Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1997.p.37. This ascription may in part result from the association of this text with Paul and his disciples, derived from the reference to Timothy in Heb.13:23.



The basic theology of Hebrews stands in line with the apostolic kerygma so far as it can be deduced from the New Testament writings. Jesus is remembered as a man of recent history, who died for our sins and rose and was glorified. Sitting at the right hand of God, he is reserved in heaven to be the agent of God in the general resurrection and the judgement, still felt to be imminent (10:25,37.). All this accords with the predetermined plan of God, which has been made known in advance through the scriptures.<sup>156</sup>

As we have already noted there is a strong and widely accepted case for connections between Hellenistic Christianity, represented by Stephen's speech in Acts 7 and the Epistle.<sup>157</sup> There are further features of the Epistle's thought which help to establish connections to a wider spectrum of early Christian thought. Even the most superficial reading of the Epistle reveals that it shares the eschatological perspective common to early Christian communities and their texts. So Hebrews perceives Jesus' ministry as the inauguration of the final phase of history,<sup>158</sup> which will include its final consummation and the apocalyptic manifestation of the city God has prepared for his people.<sup>159</sup> The other area of contact which has been explored in some detail is the relationship between Hebrews and the Pauline corpus of writings. Hurst has recently attempted this task by sampling five motifs that permit comparison between Hebrews and Paul. This survey leads him to conclude that Paul was a formative influence behind Hebrews' thinking but that the development of ideas is very much the author's own,<sup>160</sup> so we should think in these terms rather than in terms of a literary connection. One particular motif which is of note is the use both Paul and Hebrews make of Psalm 8 in concert with Psalm 110. In both Psalms the theme of Christ's enthronement as the representative of a glorified humanity is very evident and though this is mentioned in Mt.21:16 and 1 Pet.3:22 it is virtually unexploited in comparison to Hebrews and Paul.<sup>161</sup> It can also be argued that Hebrews echoes the wisdom Christology of John's Gospel<sup>162</sup> which again would connect it to an important stream of early

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<sup>156</sup> Lindars, 1991.p.41.

<sup>157</sup> See pp.42-44.

<sup>158</sup> Heb.1:2a.

<sup>159</sup> Heb.11:10,16; 12:22-24 and 13:14. see Lane, 1991.p.cxi for details.

<sup>160</sup> Lane, 1991.p.cxi-cxii. He provides a very useful and concise summary of Hurst's discussion and his conclusions - see also Hurst, 1990.pp.170-124. Though it might be possible to argue that at times Paul appears to emphasise the discontinuity between the law and gospel, in contrast to Hebrews where the cult is not viewed as a threat, but said to reach fulfilment in Christ. Isaacs advocates this view, see Isaacs, 1992.pp.76-77.

<sup>161</sup> Hurst, 1990.pp.110-113 for the details of this motif. One Pauline text he considers is 1 Cor.15.

<sup>162</sup> Pfitzner, 1997.p.37.

Christian tradition.

Whilst all these features connect Hebrews with the early expressions of the Christian kerygma, we should also recognise that there are motifs which are unique to its witness and separate it from that wider Christian 'background'. Probably the most obvious discontinuity is Hebrews' depiction of the work of Christ in priestly terms, here our author has 'introduced something quite unique in the New Testament.'<sup>163</sup> We may conclude that while it is totally correct to set Hebrews within the context of the early Christian preaching, equally we must not lose sight of its own unique contribution to the traditions about Jesus.

We are now in a position to draw together the various strands of evidence discussed in exploring the background of Hebrews' thought. We have clearly seen a concerted campaign to tie Hebrews into a Hellenistic background. First by closely connecting the Epistle to the Platonic thinking given expression in the writings of Philo and second by associating Hebrews with the Hellenistic Christian tradition of Stephen expressed in Acts.7. The earlier of these attempts has been decisively undermined by the work of more recent scholars, particularly Williamson's study and Hurst's development of it. The Hellenistic Christian background is generally viewed as resting on more assured foundations, yet as I have already argued this is not without difficulties and may reflect a desire to 'Hellenise' this Epistle to secure a pre-conceived dating. A Gnostic 'background' may also be seen as part of this 'Hellenisation' process and as we have seen it has not commanded a high level of scholarly acceptance.

Many of the other suggested backgrounds have directed thinking in the opposite direction and have sought to strengthen or re-establish Hebrews' Jewish credentials. Generally I find these slightly more useful in shaping my appreciation of the Epistle's thought. This may of course be a reflection of my own prejudices. The arguments for a Samaritan 'background' seem to flounder on Hebrews' very distinctive use of Old Testament texts<sup>164</sup> and its positive, strong focus on Mount Zion. Qumran has more to offer as it provides us with early evidence for many of the traditions expressed in Hebrews, however we must continue to make a careful assessment of the evidence and recognise that not all Qumranic ideas find expression in

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<sup>163</sup> Isaacs, 1992.p.66. She notes that 1 Pet.2:5 refers to the church as a royal priesthood, but only in Hebrews this is ascribed to Jesus himself.

<sup>164</sup> See my next section on Hebrews use of the Old Testamen which demonstrates the heavy reliance that Hebrews places on the Psalms which are not valid texts in Samaritan traditions.

Hebrews. In particular the Qumranic traditions concerning Melchizedek are not all applicable to Hebrews 7. The mystic traditions associated with the throne of God may not be proven given the late nature of the textual evidence, yet the language of mysticism offers a useful tool when making sense of Hebrews' phraseology. This mystic language may also further question the apparent Platonic nature of some of Hebrews' language.

Hebrews' 'Jewish' character is further emphasised by three aspects of the Epistle to which we must now turn our attention, the author's use of the Old Testament, his use of typology as an exegetical tool, plus the Epistle's focus and use of Cultic terms. Our consideration of these aspects will add further depth and strength to the case for a Jewish 'background', whilst questioning the traditions which seek to characterise it as Hellenistic.

### **Hebrews use of the Old Testament.**

'In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son...' <sup>165</sup> By beginning like this Hebrews clearly establishes that there are two vital ideas which shape his use of the Old Testament. First that the Old Testament is God's revelation and remains both valid and authoritative for Christians. <sup>166</sup> Second his powerfully Christocentric <sup>167</sup> hermeneutic which views Christ as the fulfilment of Old Testament traditions. These two factors shape his whole approach and it is possible to argue that Hebrews not only uses the Old Testament writings in order to illuminate Christian doctrine, but also uses Christian doctrine in order to illuminate the Old Testament. <sup>168</sup> The other feature of the Epistle's use of the Old Testament which is widely recognised, is that he drew his quotations not directly from the Hebrew text but from the Septuagint. In fact in several places the argument of the Epistle depends on the Septuagint reading which diverges from the Hebrew text. <sup>169</sup> This use of

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<sup>165</sup> Heb. 1:1-2a.

<sup>166</sup> This is reflected in a feature of the quotations identified by Westcott in his commentary, where he notes that quotations are not ascribed to a text, or prophet or original writer, but presented as though God were the speaker, or in two cases Christ himself or two others the Holy Spirit (and even here the words are attributed to God. See Westcott, 1892.p.474.

<sup>167</sup> Sharp, J.R. "Typology and the Message of Hebrews." The East Asia Journal of Theology. vol.4.2. 1986 p.95.

<sup>168</sup> Clements, R.E. "The Use of the Old Testament in Hebrews." Southwestern Journal of Theology. 28. 1985.p.36.

<sup>169</sup> Ellingworth, 1993.p.37. One example of such a text is Heb.1:7 - against the MT which speaks only of wind and fire as instruments of God's sovereign will. See Lane, 1991.pp.28-29 for details.

the Septuagint has enabled scholars to argue for a Hellenistic 'background', but realistically the use of the Greek text of the Old Testament was quite widespread in first Century Judaism and should not be interpreted in so rigid a manner. This desire to 'Hellenise' the Epistle has also led to the assertion that Hebrews makes use of allegorical interpretation, but if comparison is made with the writings of Philo, Hebrews clearly does not display the allegorical exegesis we find in his writings. In Hebrews the earthly characters and institutions are not viewed as earthly forms which correspond to eternal ideas, but rather as partial and temporary manifestations of God's intentions.<sup>170</sup>

A more detailed consideration of Hebrews' Old Testament citations is very instructive and clearly demonstrates its 'Jewishness'. Such a detailed study is not entirely straightforward, as it is not easy to identify the actual number of citations especially, when Old Testament allusions are also borne in mind.

Nowhere in the New Testament is the listing of biblical quotations more difficult than in the Letter to the Hebrews. Not only are we faced with the usual problem of distinguishing between direct quotations, on the one hand, and what may be called allusions, employment of biblical phraseology, or reference to Old Testament history, on the other hand, but we are also confronted in Hebrews with certain passages that are formally quoted again and again in the same discussion (e.g., Ps.95:7-11; 110:1-4) and other passages that are so elusively introduced as to frustrate any confident enumeration.<sup>171</sup>

It is not surprising that commentators have therefore identified differing totals,<sup>172</sup> Ellingworth discusses 35 quotations, whilst Westcott identifies 29 passages and a large number of allusions. Despite being unable to reach agreement on the exact number of citations, commentators all recognise certain important patterns in the citations identified. Scholars have noted that citations from the Psalms represent a high proportion of the total, Ellingworth says 14 out of 35 he identifies, whilst Westcott writes about 11 out of his 29. This is a definite pattern which has an important part to play in understanding the Epistle. Westcott further develops this when he notes

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<sup>170</sup> Lindars, 1991.pp.50-51.

<sup>171</sup> Longenecker, R.N. Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period. Grand Rapids, Wm B. Eerdmans, 1975. p.164.

<sup>172</sup> For the details of two such surveys see, Westcott, 1892.pp.472-474. and Ellingworth, 1993.pp.38-40.

that 23 of the 29 quotations come from the Psalms or Pentateuch, that is from the fundamental law and book of common devotion. There is an absence of detailed illustrations from the histories and the teaching of the prophets. The two remarkable exceptions to that trend being Hebrews' use of 2 Sam.7:14 and Isaiah 8:17f. Otherwise it is quite clear that all the primary passages quoted at length to illustrate the person and work of Christ are taken from the Psalms and there is no direct quote from the prophets utilised in the argument, as Westcott noted.<sup>173</sup> If we were to compare this with Matthew's Gospel, we quickly realise what an unusual use of the Old Testament this represents. Add to these features the fact that out of the 29 citations identified by Westcott, 21 are peculiar to this Epistle and not utilised by any other canonical early Christian text, we begin to perceive the basis for Epistle's distinctive apostolic witness.

If we turn our attention away from the Epistle's choice of Old Testament citations<sup>174</sup> to the exegetical traditions employed in discussion of these texts, we begin to get a full perception of the Jewish character of the Epistle. The Epistle displays the use of a wide range of exegetical traditions which are common in Rabbinic exegesis. It is possible to detect at least nine such traditions which are utilised by Hebrews. The more obvious of these is how Hebrews reinforces his word of exhortation by the citation of a supporting Biblical text,<sup>175</sup> also there is the way in which implications are drawn out of a Biblical text.<sup>176</sup> Some of the other traditions are a little less obvious. The use for example of a chain of citations connected on the basis of recurring expressions, a Rabbinic technique called *hazar* "to string pearls", to indicate the strength of Biblical support for the idea being discussed.<sup>177</sup> There is also the use of typology (which we will shortly examine in more detail)<sup>178</sup> the use of homiletical midrash to make a text contemporary,<sup>179</sup> the use of example lists,<sup>180</sup> the care to dispel any confusion arising from the

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<sup>173</sup> Westcott, 1892.p.473. Also Ellingworth, 1993.p.39. makes a similar observation when he notes that the Psalm citations include those which are expounded at greatest length and appear most significant for the author's argument.

<sup>174</sup> Guilding, A. The Fourth Gospel and Jewish Worship. Oxford, OUP, 1960. The suggestion was made that Hebrews was guided in his choice of texts by the synagogue lectionary. Lindars, 1991.p.52 considers this but concludes it can not be more than conjecture given the lack of hard evidence.

<sup>175</sup> Heb.10:19-39. displays the reinforcement of his exhortation by use of a biblical citation.

<sup>176</sup> Heb.8:8-13 draws out the implications from Jer.31:31-34 which talks about the New Covenant.

<sup>177</sup> Heb.1:5-13 is the perfect example of such a "string of pearls".

<sup>178</sup> See p.55.

<sup>179</sup> Heb.5:10-11; 6:20 and 7:11-25 which represent the midrashic use of Ps.110:4, which is central to the argument of the Epistle and specially its portrait of Christ.

<sup>180</sup> Heb.11. This was actually a Hellenistic practice which was adopted by Judaism, so it may suggest slightly greater Hellenistic influence than at first appears to be the case.

text<sup>181</sup> and also the appeal to the literal sense of a word or phrase.<sup>182</sup> We can also detect the author's use of other early Rabbinic principles of interpretation<sup>183</sup> and especially the 'rules' found in the legal interpretations of the Rabbis. Hillel identified seven such rules, two of which seem to be important for Hebrews exegetical practice.<sup>184</sup> First Hebrews uses *qal wāhōmer*, 'light and heavy', the tradition that what applies in a lesser case, will also apply in the greater case as well.<sup>185</sup> Second the use of *gezêrâ shāwâ*, 'verbal analogy', an exegetical tradition which seeks to clarify the meaning of one text through reference to a second text that shares a common, relevant word.<sup>186</sup>

When all these features of Hebrews' use of the Old Testament are taken into account we begin to see how 'Jewish' a text we are dealing with, a text which it is difficult to believe could speak powerfully to a Hellenistic, Gentile Christian community, though it might speak to a mixed community which enjoyed a wide range of shared traditions. A more thorough exploration of this hypothesis would require us to consider in detail who the intended audience were, a process I am not convinced will progress our study in any significant manner. The majority of discussions and exegesis based on the needs or requirements of the audience decline into circular arguments, where the text provides the evidence to identify the audience, who in turn are then utilised in the interpretation of the text. This type of approach all too easily degenerates into an exercise in isogesis and is often of limited academic worth. I would argue that we are on more assured grounds if we simply work directly with the text itself, viewing it in the light of the evidence provided by contemporary texts and ideas. The audience based approach in this respect is an exegetical mirage which does not deliver the assured results some claim. So whilst I believe the Jewishness of our text may suggest it is directed at a Jewish or perhaps a mixed early Christian community, to press this further is to speculate for no good purpose. So we can conclude that 'the survey of the manner in which the writer of Hebrews makes use of the OT

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<sup>181</sup> Heb.2:8-9. Here the text says everything is subjected to man, but our author comments 'but in fact we do not yet see everything subject to his control. This dispels any confusion arising from the text of Ps.8:4-6 he has used.

<sup>182</sup> Heb.3:13,15.

<sup>183</sup> Lane, 1991. pp.cxx -cxxi.

<sup>184</sup> DeSilva, D.A. Perseverance in Gratitude. A Social-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews. Grand Rapids, Wm B. Eerdmans, 2000. pp.34-35.

<sup>185</sup> Heb.2:2-4 and 9:13-14 are examples of this 'light and heavy' approach.

<sup>186</sup> Heb.4:1-11 where Hebrews attempts to define what 'God's rest' actually signifies in Ps.95:11, he reacts to the words 'rest' and 'works' which remind him of the Creation account, so he goes to Gen.2:2 - to prove God's rest is a primeval creation of God.

(sic) text indicates that he stands in the mainstream of Judaism and Jewish Christianity.<sup>187</sup>

### **Typological Exegesis.**

One of the features of Hebrews' use of the Old Testament which demands a more detailed and thorough consideration is his use of typology. It is this typology together with the symbolism in the Epistle which have contributed to many modern readers' inability to understand its argument and has contributed to its disparagement in certain circles.<sup>188</sup> Lindars says that the modern study of typology assumes the idea that the Old Testament discloses a pattern of God's saving action in history which culminates in Christ. Then the exegete can refer to this fulfilment in Christ in terms of Old Testament type.<sup>189</sup> This is in line with the definition offered by Sharp in his article,<sup>190</sup> a definition originally constructed by Sowers,

Typology ... means the interpretation of earlier events, persons, and institutions in biblical history which become proleptic entities, or "types", anticipating later events, persons, and institutions, which are their antitypes.<sup>191</sup>

Lindars' definition is expressed in more questioning terms and this reflects his overall scepticism about this exegetical approach. He questions whether elements often viewed as typological by commentators really fit this pattern. Lindars cites the example of the theme of promised land in Psalm 95, which is linked to the future 'sabbath rest for the people of God', but questions whether this is really a case of typology, as it is not a simple repetition of the pattern.<sup>192</sup> Lindars would rather interpret these texts in terms of analogy though he does not conclusively dismiss typology. On the other hand, Isaacs wishes to argue that Hebrews' principal exegetical tool is typology, as she says,

The way our author employs typology, moreover, goes far beyond his rare use of the

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<sup>187</sup> Lane, 1991.p.cxxiv.

<sup>188</sup> Sharp, 1986.p.95.

<sup>189</sup> Lindars, 1991.pp.53-54.

<sup>190</sup> Sharp, J.R. "Typology and the Message of Hebrews." *East Asia Journal of Theology*. 4.2.1986.pp.95-103.

<sup>191</sup> Sowers, S.G. *The Hermeneutics of Philo and Hebrews*. Richmond, John Knox, 1965.p.89.

<sup>192</sup> Lindars, 1991.p.54. Lindars also considers the case of Heb.8:8-12, which he says does not reflect typological exegesis as the new covenant is not derived from the Sinai covenant but what is explicitly promised in Jer.31:31-34.

vocabulary of type and antitype. It is his dominant hermeneutical principle, a way of portraying the relationship between Jewish scripture and Christian insight.<sup>193</sup>

Lindars may have a point, and too often commentators have been too quick to resort to typology, but in many important areas of the Epistle's argument, especially where it deals with the person of Christ, typology offers us the best interpretative tool we have.

Examination of the typology identified by various scholars enables us to classify the various types under the general headings of persons, institutions and events. One can further refine this classification by subdividing these categories into 'explicit' and 'implicit' types.<sup>194</sup> Persons who appear as types in Hebrews are utilised in two ways: those who function as a type of Christ, like Moses and more centrally Melchizedek; and those who function as a type of the faithful (or unfaithful) such as Abraham, Noah and Abel (or Esau).<sup>195</sup> If we turn our attention to institutions much of the typology concerning the priesthood is associated with the figure of Melchizedek or viewed in contrast to him. We can argue for a typology associated with the covenant and its sacred space 'the sanctuary of the tabernacle / temple', however Lindars questions this reading of the new Covenant material in Hebrews.<sup>196</sup> Hebrews offer us a large number of events recalled from Israelite history and we can clearly make a case that some of these are used typologically. The strongest case being Hebrews' use of Israel's rebellion in the wilderness which he uses to warn his readers against apostasy, which would result in their failure to enter the promised rest just as the Israelites failed to immediately enter the promised land. As this survey of the typology demonstrates there is an extensive typology of contrast in which the types may be anticipatory but are inferior.<sup>197</sup> It is only in the case of the Melchizedekian high priesthood that

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<sup>193</sup> Isaacs, 1992.p.73.

<sup>194</sup> Sharp, 1986.p.97.

<sup>195</sup> Sharp, 1986.pp.97-98. Moses is a type of Christ because both faithfully fulfil their responsibilities, yet there is a contrast between their relative status as 'servant' or 'Son'. Melchizedek is probably the type of Christ central to the whole argument of the Epistle, as we shall see in the course of our study. Abraham is used as the type for the faithful, a pilgrim and a man of faith, in a similar way Abel and Noah represent individuals who please God by their faithful response to his promises and instructions. Esau meanwhile functions as the type which represents their contrast, the apostate for whom there is no repentance.

<sup>196</sup> Sharp, 1986.p.99. Sharp is quite happy to view this material in the Epistle as representing typology and displays no reservations about its status. I am a little less certain that the case is that straightforward - yet feel that typology is more evident and acceptable as an exegetical tool than Lindars' overall stance may suggest. See n. 180 for Lindars' view.

<sup>197</sup> Isaacs, 1992.p.74.



there is a genuine typology of fulfilment.<sup>198</sup>

This extensive use of typology in Hebrews' exegesis of the Old Testament texts and traditions which he utilises amplifies the 'Jewish' nature of his concerns. Whilst this typological approach graphically displays the incompleteness and ineffectiveness of the Old Covenant, it does not ignore it or lightly dismiss it but utilises it to establish the fulfilment of God's promises in the person of Christ and his 'once for all'<sup>199</sup> sacrifice. It also establishes Hebrews' place in the trajectory of faithful Jewish interpretation of the mighty acts of God in history and witnesses to his background in Jewish Christianity.

### **The Epistle's use of the Cult.**

To the modern reader one of the most obviously striking aspects of Hebrews is his use of the cult and cultic language in expressing its argument. Language which stands out for the modern reader due to its primitive and distasteful nature<sup>200</sup> and only serves to hinder his reading of the text. As Dunnill notes,

Sacrificial categories are often deeply obscure and even repulsive for the modern reader - the emphasis on blood, on priestly action, on the element of the numinous with its wonder and shuddering - yet they are expounded in the text without explanation, laying down as axioms statements that are far from self-evident - for example: 'without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin (9:22).'<sup>201</sup>

Modern readers struggle to understand this aspect of the text and neither the Epistle nor the Old Testament offer a rationale for Israel's sacrificial system. For both it is simply the God given means by which purity is maintained so that the divine may be encountered. The sacrificial system was designed to ensure that both 'the place of meeting' and the Israelites could be

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<sup>198</sup> Isaacs, 1992.p.75.

<sup>199</sup> Heb.10:10.

<sup>200</sup> Lindars, 1991.p132. Lindars notes that this repulsion is not simply a modern phenomenon, but is also a feature in Greek and Roman society - Lindars notes that the value of these sacrifices was questioned by both Jews and Gentiles in the educated classes to which Hebrews' readers belong. (see Lindars, 1991.p.89 and Thompson, J.W. "Hebrews 9 and the Hellenistic Concepts of Sacrifice." *Journal of Biblical Literature*. 98.1979.pp.569ff.)

<sup>201</sup> Dunnill, J. *Covenant and Sacrifice in the Letter to the Hebrews*. Cambridge, CUP, 1992.p.6.

decontaminated and re-sacralized.<sup>202</sup>

In modern scholarship the presence of this sacrificial language has all too often led to differing interpretations following doctrinal lines, with Catholic scholars, for example, seeing 'blood' as a reference to the saving death of Christ or the real presence in the Eucharist, whereas Protestant scholarship has interpreted it as a metaphor for spiritual realities.<sup>203</sup> This second approach has gained support from those scholars who have also viewed Hebrews as an expression of a Hellenistic, Platonic tradition which 'spiritualises' sacrifice. Starting from Hebrews' argument that the blood of animals is not adequate<sup>204</sup> to establish a lasting relationship between God and mankind, or achieve lasting purification of human sin, some scholars have argued that Hebrews follows Hellenistic philosophical traditions which 'spiritualises' sacrificial language.<sup>205</sup> This approach argues that Hebrews' ideas are a legitimate development of the prophetic critique of the cultus, 'I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them...'<sup>206</sup> These scholars develop this approach by pointing to the prophets subsequent call to proper intentions as the beginning of this spiritualization process.

At one level this approach appears to have much to commend it, yet after more detailed consideration it is not constructed on solid exegetical foundations. If we consider the prophets' attacks on the cult we must view them in context, a context in which the Israelites were failing to maintain justice and righteousness while displaying ever increasing cultic zeal. The prophetic rejection of the cult is not therefore a rejection of sacrificial traditions, but part of their demand for their hearers to truly live up to their Covenant promises, to maintain justice and righteousness. The prophets realise that though the cult is designed to address the problem of

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<sup>202</sup> Isaacs, 1992.pp.88-89. Isaacs attempts here to aid understanding by offering a summary of how the sacrificial system worked, and what its function was - by using an analogy between it and Oscar Wilde's fictional creation, the Picture of Dorian Gray suggested by Jacob Milstrom.

<sup>203</sup> Dunnill, 1992.p.7.

<sup>204</sup> Heb.10:4 'it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats, should take away sins.' which alludes to Micah 6:6-7.

<sup>205</sup> Thompson, J.W. "Hebrews 9 and the Hellenistic Concepts of Sacrifice." Journal of Biblical Literature. 98.1979.pp.567-578. Thompson produces a close argued case for such a 'spiritualisation' of cultic language in Hebrews. In doing this he is motivated by a long term agenda to strengthen and establish the 'Hellenistic' character of the Epistle - as a survey of other his articles on the Epistle demonstrates. See Thompson, J.W. "The Conceptual background and Purpose of the Midrash in Hebrews VII." Novum Testamentum. 19.1977.pp.209-223.

<sup>206</sup> Amos 5:21-22a.

human sin, it will not heal an open and disobedient rebellion against the Covenant. So their call, like Hebrews' own, is for their hearers to faithfully live the Covenant and make it real in their everyday lives. Hebrews sees this as what Jeremiah longs for 'The days will come...when I will establish a new covenant...'<sup>207</sup> Hebrews argues that the old sacrificial system could never achieve this, but that Christ who obediently offers his human life as a sacrifice to achieve justice and righteousness for all his fellows can. Christ enables the faithful to write these demands on their hearts, because in solidarity with them he becomes their obedient pioneer who has entered the presence of God for all time and won entry into the 'true tent' so they too can follow. It is that hope which is enshrined in their hearts, which enables them to live up to the demands of God's covenant.

So Hebrews' apparent rejection of the covenant can be seen in a very different light. It is not a rejection or a spiritualization of sacrificial traditions but rather it takes cultic sacrifice and the language of sacrifice seriously, in fact it is this seriousness which leads to many of the contradictions the Epistle displays.<sup>208</sup> Hebrews takes this language seriously because by doing so he believes he can carry his readers onwards to the final fulfilment of all God's promises. So if we are truly to 'read' this Epistle we must participate in this symbolic world, a symbolic world given strength in the narratives of the Old Testament.<sup>209</sup> This may be achieved in a number of different ways, but all of them require that we view the Epistle within an essentially Jewish Christian setting, with ongoing traditions of covenant and cult. Traditions which unite the foundational connection of blood and the exchange of life to cover sins expressed in Leviticus 17:11 and Jewish martyrological traditions, where death becomes a vicarious atonement.<sup>210</sup>

Our survey has demonstrated that despite many explicit and implicit attempts to 'Hellenise' and thereby to strengthen the argument for the late date of the Epistle, it is difficult to imagine any meaningful engagement with the text aside from a serious recognition of its 'Jewish' character.

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<sup>207</sup> Jer.31:31-34 cited in Heb.8:8.

<sup>208</sup> Dunnill, 1992.p.7. Dunnill sees this as one explanation for contradictions like: that between a very high and very low Christology, between the drift of its argument (no Christian priesthood) and the encouragement its symbolism gives to priestly ways of thinking and between the apparent obscurity of its symbolic materials and the immediate power they possess.

<sup>209</sup> Dunnill, 1992.p.8 Dunnill goes on to do this by drawing on sociological models and findings to give new expression to that symbolic world.

<sup>210</sup> DeSilva, 2000.pp.275-278. Jewish martyrological traditions comes to their fullest expression in 4 Maccabees which celebrates the death of the martyrs of the Hellenising crisis (166 BC).

This 'Jewish' character suggests that it may have been addressed to a Jewish Christian community or a mixed community which enjoyed an easy familiarity with the traditions of Jewish exegesis and religious practice. This exactly fits our expectations for an Epistle composed at an early date. We have demonstrated that such an early dating should not be precluded *a priori* by the conventional evolutionary scheme of Christological and theological development.<sup>211</sup> That this may be one of the earliest statements of Jewish Christian Christology<sup>212</sup> encourages us to accept those early ascriptions 'to the Hebrews', ascriptions applied by Christians living in a the Graeco-Roman world where Hellenistic culture was dominant and triumphant. Such a culture had little room for the human Jesus since it was more than satisfied with the concept of Christ the risen Lord. So it is to our Jewish Christian Epistle's witness to the human Jesus that we must turn as we begin our Christological survey.

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<sup>211</sup> See pp.33-35 and pp.50-51.

<sup>212</sup> Montefiore, 1964.p.28. says that if his general hypothesis finds favour then 'Apollos rather than Paul may have been the early church's pioneer in the realm of Christology.'

## **Chapter 2 - The Man Jesus.**

“Hebrews played its part in preventing the memory of Jesus’ humanity from being overwhelmed by theologies of exaltation and pre-existence.” So argues Mealand in an article where he outlines the Christological pattern of the Epistle, in which pre-existence and divinity, as well as Jesus’ earthly humanity are emphasised.<sup>1</sup> He believes that the Epistle never resolves the problems inherent within such a juxtaposition of Christological ideas. One of the tasks of this study will be to explore whether such a negative conclusion about this juxtaposition of Christological ideas is warranted, but first our attention must be directed to the individual elements of Hebrews’ Christology. Mealand rightly recognises the importance Hebrews played in safeguarding the church’s memory of Jesus of Nazareth, the human Jesus found in the synoptic tradition. As Mealand says,

Hebrews is the one theological treatise in the New Testament which comes closest to the earliest stratum of the synoptic tradition in its positive emphasis on the humanity of Jesus. Even if there is reserve over the question of sinlessness, there is neither the relative lack of interest in the earthly Jesus which Paul displays, nor the emphasis on superhuman capacities which is to be observed especially in the Fourth Gospel.<sup>2</sup>

The only reservation I have with this analysis concerns the reference to Jesus’ sinlessness, where Mealand follows many commentators in understanding this to function as a control or reserve on Hebrews’ understanding of Jesus’ humanity.<sup>3</sup> I shall have more to say about this issue later. With the main contention of this analysis I find myself in agreement that Hebrews presents a vital and important picture of Jesus of Nazareth, which accords with the disciples’ memories of him.

If we consider the Christological debates of the first five centuries of the Christian era, we

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<sup>1</sup> Mealand, D.L. “The Christology of the Epistle to the Hebrews.” *Modern Churchman*, 22.1979, pp.180-185.

<sup>2</sup> Mealand, 1979, p.184.

<sup>3</sup> Knox, 1967 (reprinted 1978), pp.44-45 is an example of one scholar who sees the end, 4:15, as functioning to undermine Jesus’ humanity and he also notes that it is this question of sin that leads to a similar reservation in Pauline texts.

discover that Hebrews' portrait of Jesus the man was of considerable importance. The vital role played by Hebrews' human Jesus in the works of both Christological schools, Antiochene and Alexandrian, is noted by Young.<sup>4</sup> If we consider their exegesis of a passage like Heb.2:6-18, which is concerned with Jesus' temptations and suffering, we gain a clear illustration of the differences in Christology and Theology between these two exegetical schools. The Alexandrian approach, illustrated by the work of Cyril of Alexandria, argues that the Logos takes on human nature to produce a true unity in the person of Christ, without initiating any change of divinity. This approach which submerges Christ's humanity under the dominating role and direction of the divine Logos, is expressed in its most extreme form by Apollinarius, in whose thinking the Logos replaces Christ's human soul. In contrast to this approach, the Antiochene commentators stress the idea of development, seen at work in Christ's human achievement of obedience to the divine will by progress through temptation and suffering.<sup>5</sup> Both of these exegetical positions reflect serious attempts to identify Hebrews' intention in stressing the experience of temptation and suffering in the life of the historical Jesus. Equally, both approaches are shaped and determined by differing soteriological patterns. Young claims that Athanasius influenced the soteriology of Cyril of Alexandria's Christology which views the perfect life and sacrifice of the Son of God addressing sin and death, enabling man to be re-endowed with the lost image of God and raised to divinity.<sup>6</sup> The Antiochene exegetes, in contrast, concentrate on the exemplary value of the saviour's own conquest of human weakness, temptation and suffering for their soteriology. Young contends that the reality of salvation depends on Jesus' identification with man in the conflict with suffering, death and the Devil.<sup>7</sup> This work not only displays the importance of Hebrews' portrait of the human Jesus, within the debates which led to the formation of the Chalcedonian statement, but also raises the question of which approach represents the most valid exegesis of the text. Is one, or are both positions producing a valid exegesis of Hebrews' text, or are they guilty of reading their own soteriological preference into the texts? This issue of exegesis or eisogesis will be an ongoing concern as we explore Hebrews' portrait of the human Jesus.

Despite having established that Hebrews' human Jesus was of particular value and importance,

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<sup>4</sup> Young, F.M. "Christological Ideas in the Greek Commentaries on the Epistle to the Hebrews." Journal of Theological Studies, 20.1969.pp.150-163.

<sup>5</sup> Young, 1969.p.155.

<sup>6</sup> Young, 1969.p.153.

<sup>7</sup> Young, 1969.pp.155-156.

why have I chosen to focus on this aspect of the Epistle, given the distinctive and central idea of Priesthood, for which the Epistle is so well known. I would argue that too often our Christologies have been built from 'above', the divine has obscured the man Jesus, rather than the man Jesus revealing the Father to us. For as Pittenger argued, that Jesus is 'a man', a normal human being, was the true and foremost intention of the Church Fathers, and thereby a major characteristic of the Christological works of the Patristic age.<sup>8</sup> So in considering what Hebrews says about the human Jesus, we might find some useful clues in our search for the real Jesus.

If we examine the text of the Epistle, we can divide the references to the historical Jesus into two major types of material. On the one hand we have those passages which actually include the name 'Jesus', of which there are ten in the Epistle. On the other hand there are the passages which clearly refer to Jesus' historical lifetime, where no mention is made of his name.

### **'Jesus' a Christological Title.**

The name 'Jesus' is used 'to designate the central figure of the Gospel story, the historical figure whose work yesterday was God's decisive redemptive act in these last days (1:2).', so argues Filson.<sup>9</sup> This view of how the name 'Jesus' is used and understood within the Epistle has been open to debate, with some scholars arguing that it is not used in an absolute sense. One scholar who questions this view is Schillebeeckx, who believes the view that the name 'Jesus' is used in an absolute sense, "rests on an optimistic delusion."<sup>10</sup> The question which has to be asked is in what sense and to what purpose did Hebrews use the name 'Jesus'. Did 'Jesus' simply mean the person of Jesus, as it would with respect to any other individual's name, or is it more particularly a reference to Jesus in his fleshly, historical self? Is it a delusion to believe that when the author writes 'Jesus' he is directing his recipients' attention to the historical Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth. Does Schillebeeckx's exegesis engender widespread support? Is Filson alone in arguing for an absolute reading of the name 'Jesus'? The answer to

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<sup>8</sup> Pittenger, N. Christology Reconsidered. London, SCM, 1970. p.10.

<sup>9</sup> Filson, F.V. "Yesterday: A Study of Hebrews in the Light of Chapter 13." Studies in Biblical Theology, 2nd series 4. Naperville, 1967. pp.36-37.

<sup>10</sup> Schillebeeckx, E. Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord. New York, Seabury, 1980. p.261 cited by Melbourne, B. L. "An Examination of the Historical- Jesus motif in the Epistle to the Hebrews." Andrews University Seminary Studies. 26.1988.

both is 'No'. Other scholars who have considered Hebrews' intention here, such as Scott in The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its Doctrine and Significance,<sup>11</sup> have concluded that the name 'Jesus' can be read in an absolute sense, and that such a reading does not rest on a delusion or distortion. In order to demonstrate how the name 'Jesus' is used in Hebrews, I will consider the eight strategically placed occurrences of the name 'Jesus', as identified by Melbourne in his article.<sup>12</sup>

#### i. Hebrews 2:9.

In Heb.2:9 the name 'Jesus' occurs within the discussion of the Son's superiority to the angels. In the course of this discussion Hebrews cites Ps.8:4-6, using it to demonstrate that man is lower than the angels, then in verse 9 he applies this to Jesus, of who it is said 'for a little while' he 'was made lower than the angels'. Here surely the use of 'Jesus' is no mere reference to his human name, but designed to focus attention on the human Jesus and his accomplishments for mankind, as Melbourne contends. Melbourne notes that Montefiore regards that the name 'Jesus',

occurs in an emphatic position in the sentence, stressing the humanity of the saviour by its juxtaposition with 'lower than the angels'.<sup>13</sup>

Here, where the name 'Jesus' occurs for the first time in the Epistle, Wilson notes it is in 'an emphatic position, flanked on one side by the reference to him being made lower than the angels, thereby stressing his humanity, and on the other by 'crowned with glory and honour' because he suffered death, which emphasises his work of salvation.<sup>14</sup> So in this first reference

<sup>11</sup> Scott, E.F. The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its Doctrine and Significance. Edinburgh, T.T.Clark, 1923. pp.148-149.

<sup>12</sup> Melbourne, 1988. p.281. He argues that 8 occurrences of 'Jesus' can be regarded as being strategically located within the argument of the Epistle. These are Heb. 2:9; 3:1; 6:20; 7:22; 10:19; 12:2,12; 13:12.

<sup>13</sup> Montefiore, H.W. The Epistle to the Hebrews. London, A. & C. Black Ltd., 1964. p.58.

<sup>14</sup> Wilson, R.McL. Hebrews. (New Century Bible Commentary). Basingstoke, Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1987. p.52. see also Westcott, B.F. The Epistle to the Hebrews. London, MacMillan, 1889 (3rd edition. 1903).p.45. Westcott observes that use of the personal name Jesus always fixes attention on the Lord's humanity and that in every case where the name Jesus occurs (except 13:12) it occupies an emphatic position at the end of the clause. Heb.2:9 τὸν βραχὺ τι παρ' ἀγγέλους ἡλαττωμένον βλέπομεν Ἰησοῦν, Heb.3:1 κατανοήσατε τὸν ἀποστολὸν καὶ ἀρχιερέα τῆς ὁμολογίας ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦν, Heb.6:20. ὅπου πρόδρομος ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν εἰσηλθεν Ἰησοῦς..., Heb.7:22. κρείττονος διαθήκης γέγονεν ἕγγυος Ἰησοῦς. Heb.10:19. ἔχοντες οὖν ἀδελφοί παρρησίαν εἰς τὴν εἴσοδον τῶν ἁγίων ἐν τῷ αἵματι Ἰησοῦ, Heb.12:2. ἀφορῶντες εἰς τὸν τῆς πίστεως ἀρχηγὸν καὶ τελειωτὴν Ἰησοῦν, Heb.12:24. διαθήκης νέας μεσιτῆ Ἰησοῦ, Heb.13:12. Ἰησοῦς...ἐξω τῆς πύλης ἔπαθεν, Heb.13:20. ὁ ἀναγαγὼν ἐκ νεκρῶν...ἐν αἵματι διαθήκης αἰώνιου τὸν κύριον ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦν. See Westcott, 1889.p.33.



both is 'No'. Other scholars who have considered Hebrews' intention here, such as Scott in The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its Doctrine and Significance,<sup>11</sup> have concluded that the name 'Jesus' can be read in an absolute sense, and that such a reading does not rest on a delusion or distortion. In order to demonstrate how the name 'Jesus' is used in Hebrews, I will consider the eight strategically placed occurrences of the name 'Jesus', as identified by Melbourne in his article.<sup>12</sup>

#### i. Hebrews 2:9.

In Heb.2:9 the name 'Jesus' occurs within the discussion of the Son's superiority to the angels. In the course of this discussion Hebrews cites Ps.8:4-6, using it to demonstrate that man is lower than the angels, then in verse 9 he applies this to Jesus, of who it is said 'for a little while' he 'was made lower than the angels'. Here surely the use of 'Jesus' is no mere reference to his human name, but designed to focus attention on the human Jesus and his accomplishments for mankind, as Melbourne contends. Melbourne notes that Montefiore regards that the name 'Jesus',

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<sup>14</sup> Wilson, R.McL. Hebrews. (New Century Bible Commentary). Basingstoke, Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1987. p.52. see also Westcott, B.F. The Epistle to the Hebrews. London, MacMillan, 1889 (3rd edition. 1903).p.45. Westcott observes that use of the personal name Jesus always fixes attention on the Lord's humanity and that in every case where the name Jesus occurs (except 13:12) it occupies an emphatic position at the end of the clause. Heb.2:9 τὸν βραχὺ τι παρ' ἀγγέλους ἡλαττωμένον βλέπομεν Ἰησοῦν, Heb.3:1 κατανοήσατε τὸν ἀποστολὸν καὶ ἀρχιερέα τῆς ὁμολογίας ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦν, Heb.6:20. ὅπου πρόδρομος ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν εἰσῆλθεν Ἰησοῦς..., Heb.7:22. κρείττονος διαθήκης γέγονεν ἕγγυος Ἰησοῦς. Heb.10:19. ἔχοντες οὖν ἀδελφοί παρρησίαν εἰς τὴν εἴσοδον τῶν ἁγίων ἐν τῷ αἵματι Ἰησοῦ, Heb.12:2. ἀφορῶντες εἰς τὸν τῆς πίστεως ἀρχηγὸν καὶ τελειωτὴν Ἰησοῦν, Heb.12:24. διαθήκης νέας μεσσητῆ Ἰησοῦ, Heb.13:12. Ἰησοῦς...ἔξω τῆς πύλης ἔπαθεν, Heb.13:20. ὁ ἀναγαγὼν ἐκ νεκρῶν...ἐν αἵματι διαθήκης αἰωνίου τὸν κύριον ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦν. See Westcott, 1889.p.33.

it would seem valid to claim that Hebrews uses the name 'Jesus', to draw attention to the historical life which leads to God's decisive redemptive act.

ii. Hebrews 3:1.

The use of 'Jesus' here, must be understood in the light of the preceding argument (Heb.2:9-18), in which Jesus is seen as the merciful High Priest on the basis of his humanity and participation in human suffering and temptation. It could be argued that the use of 'Jesus' here is qualified by the idea of the High Priest of God. The use of the name 'Jesus' here, I contend, points back to what qualifies Jesus as High Priest, the experiences of his human life, a view expressed by other commentators.<sup>15</sup> Here again it is valid to understand Hebrews' use of the name 'Jesus' as a shorthand for the human and historical Jesus.

iii. Heb.6:20.

Here the name 'Jesus' is set within the context of the image of Jesus as our forerunner, entering into the heavenly sanctuary, in a passage designed to reassure the readers of God's reliability. Melbourne argues that here, the use of the human name 'Jesus', reminds the readers that the forerunner is one with whom they can identify, for he is a man like them and he represents them to God.<sup>16</sup>

iv. Hebrews 7:22.

Chapter 7 spells out the superiority of the new priesthood in comparison to the Levitical priesthood. This begins with a discussion of Melchizedek and the superiority of his priesthood. It is that priesthood which Christ possesses, and it is a perpetual priesthood, 'The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, "Thou art a priest for ever".', and Jesus is the surety of a better covenant because his priesthood is for ever. As Guthrie notes,

that special significance must be attached to the use of the human name here, since it is as perfect representative of man that he (Jesus) becomes the surety.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Wilson, 1987, pp. 68-69, also Westcott, B.F. The Epistle to the Hebrews. London, MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1889 (3rd edition 1903), pp.73-74, Montefiore, 1964, p.69 & Guthrie, D. The Letter to the Hebrews TNTC. Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983 (reprinted 1986) p.96.

<sup>16</sup> Melbourne, 1988, p.282.

<sup>17</sup> Guthrie, 1983 (reprinted 1986), p.165.

This is not necessarily a simple reference to the historical Jesus at this point, given the context, yet viewed in the light of the use we have seen elsewhere it would be consistent to read this as an allusion to the historical Jesus.

v. Hebrews 10:19.

In this exhortation Hebrews, drawing on his previous section, argues that it is the blood of Jesus that grants believers access to the heavenly sanctuary. Melbourne states that the name 'Jesus' is both emphatic and absolute, and we can deduce from the reference to his blood that this is an obvious allusion to the historical Jesus. It is Jesus' sacrificial death, the historical event of the crucifixion, alluded to by the use of his personal name, that qualifies Jesus for the office of High Priest, and secures his followers access to the sanctuary.<sup>18</sup> This emphasis on Jesus' actual death, I would argue, is amplified further in v.20, where entry to the sanctuary is 'by the new, living way which he has opened for us through the curtain, that is through His flesh.' The end of this verse is full of exegetical difficulties, and this is not the place to rehearse them, but as Wilson notes,<sup>19</sup> the use of 'His flesh', like the 'blood of Jesus' is a clear reference to his life offered up in sacrifice, even if its association with the curtain engenders perplexity. I think it would be difficult, given all that is said above, to sustain the idea that Hebrews did not intend the name 'Jesus' to be read as an absolute reference to his historical life. Hebrews is clear that it is the actual crucifixion, an historical event expressed in terms of the 'blood of Jesus' and 'His flesh' which secures access to the sanctuary.

vi. Heb.12:2.

I do not wish to enter into a detailed consideration of this occurrence of the name 'Jesus' at this point, as I intend to return to this passage at a later stage.<sup>20</sup> I simply would record my agreement with Melbourne in seeing this occurrence at the mid-point of a chiasmus comprising verses.1-2, as a call to focus attention on 'the human person, our Lord in His earthly life'<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Melbourne, 1988.p.284.

<sup>19</sup> Wilson, 1987.pp.187-190.

<sup>20</sup> See p.73 and pp.88-89.

<sup>21</sup> Melbourne, 1988.285.

## vii. Hebrews 12:24.

Here 'Jesus' is spoken of as the mediator of a new covenant, a description which alludes to Jesus' High Priestly function, yet it is his historical name that is held up to inspire the faltering faith of the believers. Other commentators recognise that the name 'Jesus' is at the climax of the comparison between the old and new covenants. For it is Jesus, 'whose sprinkled blood has better things to tell than the blood of Abel.' Jesus' sacrifice is understood here as the assurance of entry into the heavenly sanctuary, it is the means by which the believer has been perfected.<sup>22</sup> Clearly, Hebrews draws attention to the human, historical Jesus 'whose sprinkled blood' reminds the reader of his death on the cross. Yet the question remains, how far is Hebrews' use of the name 'Jesus' at this point shaped by his High Priestly function as mediator of the new covenant. Are we on strong enough ground to argue that it is Jesus' historical experience that enables that mediation alone. I suggest that here we have just that juxtaposition of Christological ideas that has so bedevilled Christological debate throughout the centuries.

## viii. Heb.13:12.

Hebrews here cites a specific historical event, from within the life of the historical Jesus, his death 'outside the gate'. By linking this to the sin offering made 'outside the camp' in the previous verse, Hebrews implies that Jesus of Nazareth died as a sin offering. Clearly there can be little doubt here that Hebrews' intention in using the name 'Jesus' was to make a clear reference to the human, historical Jesus.

What then does the consideration of these eight occurrences of the name 'Jesus' lead us to conclude concerning Hebrews use of 'Jesus'. I believe the evidence suggests that Hebrews used the name 'Jesus' in an absolute sense to refer to the historical Jesus. In two passages (Heb.7:22 and 12:24) it is difficult to establish such a reading with certainty from within the individual passage, but given the pattern of use we have identified, such a reading can be established beyond reasonable doubt. I believe that the last of these passages (Heb.12:24), also raises the question of the juxtaposition of Christological images. I would suggest that we are now in a position to agree with Melbourne that Hebrews' intention in his absolute use of the

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<sup>22</sup> Wilson, 1987.pp.231-232 & Montefiore, 1964.p.232. The latter says 'sprinkled blood' recalls the inaugurating sacrifice of the old covenant and the finished work of Jesus' sacrifice.

name 'Jesus', could very well have been to draw attention to his real humanity.<sup>23</sup> Such a technical use, suggests that the name 'Jesus' often functions as a key to understanding the passage within which it occurs.

Given that we have identified Hebrews' use of the name 'Jesus' as playing an important technical function, we have to ask whether 'Jesus' be viewed as a Christological title. Consideration of recent scholarly surveys of Christological titles and terms clearly demonstrates that no modern scholar has understood the name 'Jesus' to be a Christological title.<sup>24</sup> In all these various works 'Jesus' is used as a name which, whilst identifying an individual historic person does not necessarily equate to the very specific technical use we have observed within our Epistle. Despite this fact can we make a case for understanding 'Jesus' as a Christological title, given what we have demonstrated in this study. Usually Christological titles have been understood to function as interpretative titles<sup>25</sup> which convey a complex theological and Christological understanding of both who Jesus was and what his saving work meant. It is difficult to see how the name 'Jesus' could function in this manner. Whilst Hebrews' particular use of this name may be significant in understanding his theological and Christological scheme, it does little more than direct attention to the importance of Jesus' life story, yet even groups producing explicit Docetic Christologies would say no less, though they would argue for a different interpretation of that important life story. Overall, this would be a very anachronistic approach to take, as it is impossible to demonstrate that Hebrews' viewed 'Jesus' as a Christological title<sup>26</sup> and would therefore represent a major insertion of later theological concerns into the text of the Epistle. We have established that for Hebrews 'Jesus'

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<sup>23</sup> Melbourne, 1988.p.285.

<sup>24</sup> This survey includes the following studies:- Cullmann, O. The Christology of the New Testament. London, SCM, 1959 (2nd edition 1963), Fitzmyer, J..A. Scripture and Christology. London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1986, Gunton, C.E. Yesterday and today: a Study of the Continuities in Christology. London, DLT, 1983, Hengel, M. Studies in Early Christology. Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1995, Macquarrie, J. Jesus Christ in Modern Thought. London, SCM, 1990, McIntyre, J. The Shape of Christology. Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1966 (1998), Moule, C.F. D. The Origin of Christology. Cambridge, CUP, 1977 (reprinted 1980), O'Collins, G. Incarnation. London, Continuum, 2002, Ogden, S.M. The Point of Christology. London, SCM, 1982, Pokorný, P. The Genesis of Christology. Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1987, Schwarz, H. Christology. Grand Rapids, Wm.B. Eerdmans, 1998, and Turner, H.E.W. Jesus the Christ. London, Mowbrays, 1976. In all of these studies 'Jesus' is used to denote a particular individual, and whilst this may direct attention to his life story, it does not usually result in the very marked use we have observed in Hebrews.

<sup>25</sup> Macquarrie, 1990.p.4.

<sup>26</sup> Hebrews does contain a number of different Christological titles such as Son, High Priest and Logos amongst others, which are common conceptual terms used by him and his contemporaries. These titles provide the basis for recent scholarly discussion and debate as our survey demonstrates - the name 'Jesus' has not been viewed in the same way.

fulfils a particular function, but this does not prove that the name 'Jesus' should be viewed as a Christological title.

### **The Historical Jesus Passages and their Pattern.**

The passages where the name 'Jesus' occurs do not embrace all the passages where the writer deals with the historical Jesus. There are some which clearly refer to Jesus' historical lifetime, where no mention is made of his name.<sup>27</sup> It is these historical Jesus passages I now wish to examine in the hope that they may reveal some pattern in Hebrews' use of the traditions concerning the human, historic Jesus.

#### **i.Heb.2:3.**

Hebrews states here that salvation,

was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles...

Obviously Hebrews is referring to Jesus' proclamation of the Gospel during his earthly life, and the witness given by his original followers to his teaching and preaching and finally he refers to the miracles which accompanied Jesus' public ministry. Melbourne argues that the earthly ministry of Jesus is being linked with the portrait of the Son which has been constructed in chapter one.<sup>28</sup> I can accept that this is a valid interpretation of Hebrews' intention here.

#### **ii.Heb.2:9.**

As we have already noted, this is the first occurrence of the name 'Jesus' in the Epistle. Melbourne notes the double parallel here with Heb.1:3-6, here Jesus is 'crowned with glory' after and because he has suffered death, whilst in Heb.1:3-6, the Son takes his seat 'at the right hand of Majesty on high', after having made purification for sins. The use of the human name identifies the historical Jesus as the person involved in these achievements.<sup>29</sup> Again the exalted

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<sup>27</sup> Melbourne, 1988.pp.286-292.in his study of the Historical-Jesus motif in Hebrews, identifies twelve such passages, Heb.2:3; 2:9; 2:14; 2:17; 4:14-16; 5:7-10; 7:14; 7:26-27; 10:5-18; 10:19-25; 12:2 and 13:11-13

<sup>28</sup> Melbourne, 1988.p.287.

<sup>29</sup> Lane, W. Hebrews: Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas, Word, 1991.p.49. Lane says the glory and splendour was a direct result of the death of Jesus.

Son is closely linked with Jesus' humanity and earthly life.

iii. Hebrews 2:14.

Hebrews states that 'The children share in flesh and blood, he (the Son) himself likewise partook of the same nature...' so that he might break the power of death and evil. The intention of this passage is clearly to establish Jesus' solidarity with mankind. Flesh and blood are essential characteristics of human life, so "they bind men together in the solidarities of human existence."<sup>30</sup> Such a clear cut identification of Jesus with mankind is of major significance for Hebrews portrait of Jesus and the nature of his humanity.

iv. Hebrews 2:17.

Hebrews here directly declares 'he had to be made like his brethren in every respect' so that he could function as their High Priest who expiates the people's sins. So Jesus' human life is an essential qualification if he is to fulfil the office of High Priest. We begin to see the functional importance of the human Jesus for any proper understanding of Hebrews' Christological pattern.

v. Heb.3:1.

We are invited to consider 'Jesus', our Apostle and High Priest. Melbourne notes<sup>31</sup> that here we have a unique reference to Jesus as Apostle, an idea which is not applied to Jesus anywhere else in the New Testament and remained unused until Justin Martyr (I Apol.12 and 63)<sup>32</sup> Wilson argues that 'Apostle' here is best understood as meaning a messenger and that these two titles sum up Jesus' role and function, as Apostle he is God's representative to man, as High Priest he is men's representative before God.<sup>33</sup> In this instance we again have a pairing of the human Jesus and the High Priest.

vi. Hebrews 4:14-16.

Here we have a juxtaposition of themes, the historical Jesus with High Priesthood, hence what appears to be the two natures of the Son, and the assertion that believers are called upon to

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<sup>30</sup> Montefiore, 1964.p.65.

<sup>31</sup> Melbourne, 1988.p.289.

<sup>32</sup> Wilson,1987.p.68.

<sup>33</sup> Wilson ,1987.p.69.

confess a unique High Priest, both human and divine.<sup>34</sup> I believe, more importantly this explicit linking of High Priesthood and the earthly Jesus rules out any Docetic Christology in which the humanity is overwhelmed by the exaltation of Christ. The one difficulty with such a view is the phrase 'without sin' attached by Hebrews to Jesus' human experience and temptation. A phrase often understood as functioning to limit Jesus' humanity, an issue to which I shall return later.

vii. Hebrews 5:7-10.

Hebrews makes explicit mention of the historical Jesus' mortal life when it refers to 'the days of his flesh' which is followed by a clear citation of Jesus' night of turmoil in the garden of Gethsemane. As Guthrie says,

He (the Author) seems to want to dispel any idea that Jesus is a mystical non-historical figure by abruptly reminding the readers of what happened '*in the days of his flesh*'. The expression is interesting because it draws attention to the reality of his human life. The writer has already made this clear in chapter 2 (v.14 and 17), but the present reference much more vividly introduces a clear allusion to the historical record of the life of Christ. Indeed this is one of the most vivid examples in the New Testament outside the Gospels.<sup>35</sup>

Hebrews in claiming that Jesus learned obedience and was perfected by his experience of suffering, so that he might bring salvation to others thus pairs the historical Jesus with High Priesthood.<sup>36</sup>

viii. Hebrews 7:14.

Within the context of Hebrews' discussion of priesthood the superiority of Melchizedek's priesthood is asserted against the levitical priesthood vested in Aaron's line. Heb.7:14. records the fact that Jesus, referred to as 'our Lord' was 'descended from Judah', a non-priestly tribe. Hebrews acknowledges here an early strand of tradition concerning the historical Jesus, one that complicates the argument he is developing that Jesus is the superior High Priest and

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<sup>34</sup> Gench, F.T. Hebrews and James. Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1996.p.35. 'His priesthood combines both divine sonship and humanity and it is this that makes his priesthood truly unique.'

<sup>35</sup> Guthrie, 1983 (reprinted 1986).p.129. (his italics).

<sup>36</sup> Melbourne, 1988.p.290.



therefore we can argue for a strong claim to authenticity at this juncture.<sup>37</sup>

ix. Heb.7:26-27.

Hebrews is concerned at this point to rehearse Jesus' qualifications to function as the High Priest who acts as the guarantor of a new, better Covenant. There are five qualities recorded at this point, he is 'holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinner,' and 'exalted above the heavens'. Melbourne in his article argues for an interpretation along these lines, 'holy' a religious qualification, 'blameless' a moral qualification, 'unstained' a cultic qualification, 'separated from sinners' a qualification combining ethical and divine elements, and 'exalted above the heavens' a divine qualification. He goes on to argue that three of these qualifications allude to Jesus' earthly life, one alludes to his High Priestly ministry and was a consequence of his successful earthly life, and the other alludes to his exalted status. Melbourne therefore argues that here once more we discover a pairing of the historical Jesus with the themes of priesthood and exaltation.<sup>38</sup>

x.. Hebrews 10:5-18.

Christ's sacrifice of himself is contrasted with the inadequate animal sacrifices of the old Covenant and cult. Verse 12 again pairs the outcome of Jesus' earthly life with the themes of priesthood and exaltation. Some commentators have argued that this echoes Heb. 1:3 'when he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on High'. The 'sitting down' has been seen as serving an important function, in that a priest stands to offer sacrifice and only sits down once that sacrifice has been completed. As Bruce says "A seated priest is the guarantee of a finished work and an accepted sacrifice."<sup>39</sup> This highlights Christ's exaltation, but at the same time, the idea that 'Christ offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins' reminds the reader that it is Jesus' earthly life, his suffering and death that enable him to function as the superior High Priest.

xi. Heb.10:19-25.

Following on from the argument about sacrifices in the previous section, Hebrews urges his

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<sup>37</sup> Jesus' Davidic descent complicates Hebrews' argument, so his acknowledgement of this tradition about the human Jesus suggests that it enjoyed a wide currency within the early Church, which would suggest it represents an authentic tradition concerning the human Jesus.

<sup>38</sup> Melbourne, 1988.pp.290-291.

<sup>39</sup> Bruce, F.F. The Epistle to the Hebrews (revised). Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans,1990.p.245

readers to approach the heavenly sanctuary confident in the blood of Jesus. With its unambiguous allusion to Jesus' crucifixion, it is clear that it is the achievement of Jesus' earthly life which opens 'a new and living way' into God's presence. Once again Melbourne notes the discussion of humanity, followed by a reference to priesthood.<sup>40</sup>

xii. Heb. 12:2.

Hebrews in this verse links the human Jesus with the exalted Lord when he refers to 'Jesus who...endured the cross' having now taken his seat 'at the right hand of the throne of God.'

xiii. Heb.13:11-13

The human Jesus who 'suffered outside the gate' is said to have consecrated the people, so again priesthood is linked to the human Jesus' historic achievement.

What does the survey of these passages lead us to conclude about Hebrews' intention in using and drawing particular attention to the traditions concerning Jesus of Nazareth? First these passages prove that Hebrews has a definite interest in the life of the earthly Jesus, that it is not for him some interlude in an overall divine narrative, but rather the very foundation upon which Christ's exaltation is constructed. This is clearly illustrated in passages like Heb.2:17; 5:7-10; 7:26-27 and 10:5-18, where the events of Jesus' earthly life qualify him for his unique function as High Priest. This is contrary to Schillebeeckx's claim that,

There is no mention in Hebrews of a special interest in the earthly Jesus that stands out from the rest of the New Testament.<sup>41</sup>

Second Hebrews displays a very definite chronology which emphasises that Jesus' exaltation is subsequent to, I would go as far as to say dependent upon, his sacrifice on the Cross. This chronology can be seen clearly in Heb.1:3-4 and 12:2. Third Hebrews uses the earthly Jesus as the basis for his exhortation of his readers to faith and perseverance. As in Heb.10:19-25, where he urges them to approach confident in the blood of Jesus which assures them entry into the heavenly sanctuary. Fourth in this Epistle Jesus is held up as a model for Christians as

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<sup>40</sup> Melbourne, 1988.p.291.

<sup>41</sup> Schillebeeckx, E. Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord. New York, Seabury, 1980.p.261

Heb.12:2 clearly displays.<sup>42</sup> Lastly I would wish to argue, setting aside ‘yet without sin’<sup>43</sup> for the moment that, with its emphasis on the historical, human Jesus, Hebrews seems to rule out of court a Docetic Christology in which Jesus’ humanity becomes a mere shadow or shallow resemblance of human experience.

### **The Portrait of the Human Jesus.**

It is difficult to dissect an Epistle where the argument is as carefully crafted as it is in Hebrews. Hebrews combines and mixes images in such a subtle, rich manner that any attempt to separate out and unravel the components of its portrait of the human Jesus is bound to be problematic, even when successful. I hope in attempting this dissection, however problematic it is, to identify the various constituent elements of this theologically important portrait of the human Jesus.

#### **i. Jesus’ Origin.**

It is not possible to be certain that Hebrews acknowledges the human traditions concerning Jesus’ birth. Hebrews 1:6 says ‘when he brings the first-born to the world...’, which some identify as a reference to Jesus’ birth.<sup>44</sup> It is even less clear how he envisages Jesus making the transition to this earthly life. In Heb.9:26 it says ‘he appeared’, whilst Heb.10:5 states that he came into the world and that God prepared a body for him.

Yet Jesus is clearly being identified here with the man or son of man of Ps.8:4, who is for a

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<sup>42</sup> Melbourne, 1988.p.293 identifies a four-fold division of the historical-Jesus passages: - Qualification, Heb.2:9; 2:14; 2:17; 5:7-10; 7:14 and 7:26-27, Exhortation, Heb.2:3; 4:14-16; 6:17-20; 7:22; 10:19-25 and 13:11-13, Chronology, Heb.1:3-4 and 10:12, Model for Christians, Heb. 3:1 and 12:2. His division and grouping of the passages is not totally convincing, and having surveyed the historical-Jesus passages, I am not persuaded that it is easy to place individual passages exclusively within one category or another. Many of the passages, especially those in Melbourne’s categories ‘Qualification’ and ‘Exhortation’, display features which are not that easily separated. One could almost argue that his category ‘Qualification’ are those passages in which Jesus’ earthly life qualified him for priesthood-exaltation, but which were not exhortatory. Some of his ‘Exhortatory’ passages displayed the idea of qualification, just as much as his so-called ‘Qualification’ passages, and yet he classifies them with reference to their overall context. Melbourne’s four-fold division is useful, but glosses some of the similarities between passages.

<sup>43</sup> Heb.4:15.

<sup>44</sup> Montefiore, 1964.p. 45. He argues that the quotation ‘Let all God’s angels worship him’ (LXX.Deut.32:43), must originally have been chosen to prove his divine birth, otherwise this is a strange verse to select, as in its context it is God, not the Son, whom the angels are commanded to worship. Other commentators have argued that the Greek is better translated so as to make this a reference to Christ’s second coming, see Westcott, 1892.pp.21-23, Michel, O. *Der Brief an die Hebräer*. Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966 (12th edition).p.113. and Long, T.G. *Hebrews*. Louisville, John Knox Press, 1997.p18. who states that this is one possible interpretation of the text.

while made lower than the angels.<sup>45</sup> This closely identifies Jesus with mankind, a fact evidenced by his use of 'flesh' in Heb.2:14, plus suggesting a theme of humbling similar to that seen in Paul (Phil.2).<sup>46</sup> Hebrews therefore manages to achieve a clear statement of Jesus' humanity, which balances its strong emphasis upon his divinity. Hebrews 7:14 acknowledges the tradition of Davidic descent, when he says that Jesus descended from Judah a non-priestly tribe. It is this Davidic descent which provides a link to Melchizedek, but Hebrews fails to harmonise this idea with Melchizedek's lack of genealogy. I would also maintain that Hebrews' citation of Old Testament texts, and especially his extensive use of the Psalms, might suggest a greater interest in the motif of Davidic descent and kingship than is often acknowledged.<sup>47</sup>

The lack of real information about Jesus' origins beyond an acknowledgement of Davidic descent (which may be no mere acknowledgement),<sup>48</sup> might suggest that Hebrews' portrait of the human Jesus is off to a poor start. Yet Mark's Gospel, which starts with Jesus' baptism and does not contain a detailed exposition of Jesus' origin, has not had its traditions about the historical Jesus rejected as invalid on that basis.

## ii. Suffering and Temptation.

The motifs of suffering and temptation play a prominent part in Hebrews' depiction of the historical Jesus. In Hebrews Jesus' sufferings are repeatedly made the focus of the argument and exhortation. We have seen that in Heb.5:7 there is an allusion to Jesus' experience of desolation in the garden of Gethsemane. Throughout the Epistle the temptations and sufferings of the human Jesus are constantly understood not only as his testing, but the basis upon which he achieves solidarity with mankind. As Hebrews says,

For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Heb.2:6-9.

<sup>46</sup> Mealand, 1979.p.181.

<sup>47</sup> Psalms subject to a prophetic reading were usually concerned with David, or the Davidic Messiah to come. A large number of Psalms open to this way of reading are cited in Hebrews. This may be theologically significant.

<sup>48</sup> I suspect that for Hebrews Davidic descent is an important motif, especially in relation to Melchizedek and kingship ideology. I believe that Horton has too quickly dismissed this aspect of the Melchizedek traditions used by Hebrews. See Horton F.L. The Melchizedek Tradition. London, CUP,1976.pp.34-53.

<sup>49</sup> Heb.2:18

For we have not a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect, has been tempted as we are...<sup>50</sup>

For Hebrews this solidarity with mankind is essential to Christ's work of salvation. Christ can only function effectively as High Priest and a religious mediator if he is a man like other men. Only then can he expiate their sins.<sup>51</sup> Hence we can agree with Cyril of Alexandria who writing about the κενωσις of the Logos, observes that the Logos 'took a body liable to death and suffered so as to destroy death and raise humanity to immortality'.<sup>52</sup> Modern exegetes have also recognised this motif of solidarity at work in what Hebrews records about Jesus' temptation and suffering.<sup>53</sup>

The exegete is faced with two possible interpretations of the presentation of Jesus' temptations and suffering in this Epistle, a fact reflected in Greek commentators' exegesis of a passage such as Heb.2:6-18 as we have seen. Both of these exegetical positions reflect a serious attempt to identify Hebrews' intention in stressing the experience of temptation and suffering in the life of the historical Jesus. Equally both approaches have been shaped and determined by differing soteriological patterns. In one pattern the perfect life and sacrifice of the Son of God is understood as addressing sin and death, thus enabling man to regain the lost image of God and be raised to divinity. The other in contrast, concentrates on the Saviour's exemplary conquest of human weakness, temptation and suffering, making the reality of salvation depend on Jesus' identification with man in the conflict with suffering, death and the Devil.<sup>54</sup>

This leaves us in the classic dilemma of Christological studies, of having to decide whether we lose the human Jesus so that God the Son can save us, or of retaining Jesus the man to be left with nothing more than an exemplar for the moral life. Given the importance of the solidarity motif, and the focus on temptation and suffering, I would contend that Hebrews sees salvation

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<sup>50</sup> Heb.4:15.

<sup>51</sup> Heb.2:17

<sup>52</sup> Young, 1969. p.152.

<sup>53</sup> Pannenberg, W. Jesus - God and Man. London, SCM,1986. p.355. Pannenberg states, "Hebrews emphasises that Jesus was tempted as we are, but remained without sin"

<sup>54</sup> Young, 1969.p. 155-156.

as dependent on the human, historical Jesus' life and achievement. There is no way we can eliminate the human Jesus because Hebrews argues for a radical understanding of the historical Jesus as vital to any valid Christological scheme.

### iii. Learning through Suffering.

'Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.'<sup>55</sup> This clear assertion of the notion of learning through suffering, when applied to Jesus in Hebrews, opens up a radical way of viewing his life. Here we can see Hebrews once more establishing Jesus' identification with mankind; after all the human condition by its very nature is about learning through experience whether positive or negative. What man could honestly reject the idea that his experiences of the world had shaped him. By these means we all learn. It was the Antiochene exegetes who most readily identified with, and took seriously, this aspect of Hebrews' thought. John Chrysostom in his homilies on Hebrews said that Jesus knows not only as God, but has come to know through the experience of temptation.<sup>56</sup> This demonstrates how Antiochene exegetes remained more faithful to Hebrews' intention in respect of 'learning through suffering'. They like the Epistle itself, display a strong grasp of the historical reality that was Jesus. This is not to say that Christ's knowledge gained by experience was more reliable, for as any man knows that does not necessarily follow. For Hebrews the reality of Christ's human experience and conflict, was essential for his victory over evil to be relevant to man.<sup>57</sup> The weakness of the Antiochene approach was that it failed to give an adequate account of the unity of Christ's person. This warns us that Hebrews itself might be open to such a charge. This question of the unity of Christ's person or in the terms mentioned earlier, the juxtaposition of the human Jesus and the Son of God, will form a major element of our discussion in later chapters<sup>58</sup>.

### iv. Perfection and Sinlessness

In Hebrews Jesus' suffering is presented as the indication that he is the faithful, obedient one '...the Apostle and High Priest of our confession. He was faithful to him who appointed

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<sup>55</sup> Heb.5:8.

<sup>56</sup> Chrysostom, J. 'Homilies on Hebrews', Homily V on Heb.2:16-17. The Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers Vol 14. Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, reprinted 1996.p.389.

<sup>57</sup> Heb.5:1-4.

<sup>58</sup> See chapters 3 and 4.

him.<sup>59</sup> It is clear that Jesus' achievement is understood in terms of obedience to the plan or will of God. As we have already seen for Hebrews this obedience was learned in the school of suffering and led to Jesus' perfection, which enable him to win salvation for man.<sup>60</sup> All of these ideas expressed in the text appear to sharpen and focus the attention given to the historical Jesus and his human experience. It becomes clear that Hebrews sees Jesus' achievement in terms of obedience, thereby reversing the disobedience of Adam and mankind to God's will, and so securing salvation.

This motif of perfection, or perfecting through suffering, appears to clash with another statement that Hebrews makes: 'For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.'<sup>61</sup> Those last three words appear to undermine what we have argued here concerning Hebrews' portrait of the human Jesus. The phrase 'only without sin' seems to erode the close identification of Jesus with mankind, the reality of his human experience and how that functions in the soteriological pattern of the Epistle thus leaving us with an historical Jesus, who is reduced to a mere symbol. Do we have here Hebrews' qualification of Jesus' humanity. Is Hebrews drawing back from fully embracing Jesus' humanity. Such an exegesis of this text has been widely argued by commentators down the ages and is a view expressed by Knox,

In Hebrews, one must search harder for any indication of reservation as regards the normality of the humanity. One seems to find it, however, in 4:15... 'only without sin'.<sup>62</sup>

An interpretation such as this clearly undermines any sense we have that Hebrews focuses uniquely on the real historical Jesus in constructing its Christological portrait. If we argue that Hebrews' intention was to stress Jesus' true humanity, then we must face this concept of sinlessness. As Wellbourne recognised, the qualifying phrase *χωρίς ἁμαρτίας* (without sin), contradicts what Hebrews stresses elsewhere; were there is no distinction between Jesus and

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<sup>59</sup> Heb.3:2.

<sup>60</sup> Heb.5:8.

<sup>61</sup> Heb.4:15. The concept of sinlessness is given further expression when Hebrews' claims that Jesus was "holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners." (Heb.7:26) and the one who "offered himself without blemish to God." (Heb.9:14). It is Hebrews' statement that Jesus was 'without sin' which has been widely interpreted as raising questions about the reality of his humanity.

<sup>62</sup> Knox, 1967 (reprinted 1978).p. 44.

other men.<sup>63</sup> This also raises questions about how we should interpret the idea that Jesus was perfected.<sup>64</sup> If Hebrews' intention is to be understood as presenting a truly human Jesus, then we have to be able to argue for a Jesus who shares man's sinful nature. As Pannenberg says, if Jesus was truly man, then he must share the self-centredness of human life. He goes on to argue,

The idea that in incarnation God joined himself not with human nature in its corrupt state, but with humanity purified from all sin contradicts the testimony of the New Testament and early Christian theology.<sup>65</sup>

Numerous questions then arise, questions about whether Jesus sinned and whether the concept of Jesus' sinlessness means that as a man he never sinned. The answer depends in part on the definition one gives of sin, whether sin involves actually carrying out some wrong action or whether it can be defined as an intention to commit some wrong action, which is never embodied in an actual action. Here we are on the edge of a potential minefield of competing definitions and philosophical concepts which has often engaged scholars' attention in their attempts to construct a modern Christology. We draw back from the complications involved and yet shrink even more from the idea of Jesus the sinner. We do not find ourselves attracted to the idea of Jesus the sinner, since it makes his humanity all too real. As Knox asks, "who is ready to refer to Jesus as a sinner. We shrink with a kind of horror from even the suggestion of such a thing."<sup>66</sup> Knox's observation is valid. It is natural for the Christian believer to shrink from the idea of the good man of the Gospel narratives being a sinner. The desire of New Testament writers to counter the implied guilt associated with Jesus' crucifixion reinforces this view.<sup>67</sup> Equally Christians are often revolted by the realities of crucifixion, even to the point of saying 'It was not like that!', yet it does not change the historical reality of Jesus' death on a cross. We must beware, of the temptation to construct a religious image that is to our liking,

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<sup>63</sup> Williamson, R. "Hebrews 4:15 and the sinlessness of Jesus." *Expository Times* 86.1974. p.4. citing Wellbourne.

<sup>64</sup> Heb.5:8.

<sup>65</sup> Pannenberg, 1960 (6th impress. 1985).p. 362.

<sup>66</sup> Knox, 1967 (reprinted 1978). p.45.

<sup>67</sup> It is not only in the Gospels that there is an insistence that there was no crime in Jesus, (Lk.23:4,14,22; John 18:38; 19:4,6; Matt.27:19), other New Testament documents also insist he knew no sin (2 Cor.5:21 and Rom.8:3-4). See Koester, C.R. *Hebrews*. New York, Doubleday, 2001.p.294. for a full discussion of these ideas.



that does not offend our religious sensibilities - a nice comfortable image of the sinless Jesus no longer a real man but simply a docetic Saviour.

Equally we draw back from the complications involved in defining what is meant by 'sin'. It seems unprofitable to get bogged down in a mire of competing philosophical definitions, but it is necessary to attempt to identify Hebrews' own concept of sin. Generally exegetes begin their discussion of this topic from a general understanding of Judaism's teaching. In such discussions sin is seen as universal and a distinction is usually drawn between the principle of sin and sins, that is specific acts in which that principle is embodied and manifested.<sup>68</sup> It was this universal problem of sin and its manifestation in actual sins which the temple cult was designed to address, the expiatory sacrifices were fundamentally designed to deal with the 'impurity' of sin.<sup>69</sup> Hebrews conforms to this basic pattern. The Epistle states quite unambiguously that the purpose of the sacrificial system and the high priest were '...to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people.'<sup>70</sup> This appears to suggest sin can simply be reduced to impurity and this is Hebrews' understanding of it. The Epistle also recognises the distinction between sin and actual sinful acts, a concept which underlies his teaching in Heb.10:26, '...if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgement.' Behind this teaching lies the Torah tradition that unintentional sins, those unavoidable breaches of the covenant rules, resulted in impurity and this was what the cult dealt with. As the Torah states, 'if any one sins unwittingly in any of the things which the Lord has commanded not to be done...'<sup>71</sup> or again 'if the whole congregation of Israel commits a sin unwittingly ... and they do one of the things which the Lord has commanded not to be done and are guilty ...the assembly shall offer a young bull for a sin offering.'<sup>72</sup> So unwitting sins, those actual individual acts of sin, were closely associated with the cult and its concern for purity. Yet

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<sup>68</sup> Westcott, B.F. The Epistle to the Hebrews. London, MacMillan, 1889 (3rd Ed. 1903). p.31.

<sup>69</sup> Dunnill, J. Sacrifice and Covenant in the Letter to the Hebrews. Cambridge, CUP, 1992. pp.91-100. Dunnill considers a number of different sacrifices in these pages, some are to be understood as gift-rites (peace-offerings, holocausts) some as expiatory (sin-offerings and guilt-offerings). He notes interest in the moral aspect of sin is hard to document - but the idea of impurity is fundamental. See in particular pp.93-94.

<sup>70</sup> Heb.7:27. Also stated in Heb.5:3 '...he is bound to offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as those of the people.'

<sup>71</sup> Lev.4:2. This passage then goes on to explore what is required if the sinner is a priest, and details the offering of a young bull without blemish to the Lord.

<sup>72</sup> Lev.4:13-14. This line of thinking is expressed again in Num.15:23-29.

Hebrews speaks about 'if we sin deliberately'.<sup>73</sup> What does he mean by this. The answer is expressed in Numbers 15:30. which reads, 'the person who does anything with a high hand, whether he is native or a sojourner, reviles the Lord, and that person shall be cut off from among his people.' So deliberate sin does not fall within the remit of the cultic sacrifices, for this is not simply a matter of impurity but something more threatening and dangerous.

There is no provision in the Old Testament law of atonement for such a deliberate sin (acting with a high hand).<sup>74</sup> It is this sin which concerns Hebrews, the sin of deliberate disobedience. This rather than small sinful acts leading to impurity is central to his understanding of sin.<sup>75</sup> He gives expression to this in a number of ways. In his negative use of the wilderness traditions in Heb.3:8-19 he characterises deliberate sin as an act of rebellion, of open disobedience to God. This is why the Israelites are prevented from entry into the promised land for forty years. He warns his readers that their deliberate disobedience might prevent them from entry into God's rest in a similar fashion. Hebrews also expresses this in his negative use of Esau<sup>76</sup> and in his warnings against apostasy.<sup>77</sup> Behind all these features it is possible to contend there lies a perceived process of sin, a process which sees individuals progressing from unbelief to disobedience and then to sin.<sup>78</sup>

It is clear from this discussion that Hebrews is working with a very definite concept of sin. Whilst he recognises all those small actions we might call sins, acts which cause impurity which the cultic sacrifices address, his true focus is on deliberate acts of disobedience. We can therefore conclude that sin 'for our author means conscious and deliberate disobedience, and in this sense he can truthfully say that Jesus was tempted, yet without sin.'<sup>79</sup> After all the important aspect of Jesus' historic life is that he endures obediently to the end to become our

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<sup>73</sup> Heb.10:26a.

<sup>74</sup> When I say that the Old Testament law makes no provision for this, what I mean is that the cult has no provision to address and restore an individual in this situation. The law's provision is expressed in Deut.13:8-9. where anyone proven on adequate testimony to have committed a deliberate breach of the covenant was liable to the death penalty. For the details see Bruce, F.F. The Epistle to the Hebrews. Grand Rapids, Wm B. Eerdmans, 1990 (Rev. Ed.).p262.

<sup>75</sup> Pfitzner, V.C. Hebrews. Nashville, Abingdon, 1997.p.79.

<sup>76</sup> Heb.12:16-17. Esau is the type for the disobedient man who is rejected by God.

<sup>77</sup> Heb.10:32-39. and Heb.2:1-3.

<sup>78</sup> Westcott, 1889.p.31.

<sup>79</sup> Montefiore, 1964.p.92.

pioneer.<sup>80</sup> This survey of Hebrews' concept of sin may offer us a valuable starting point as we consider Jesus' supposed sinlessness and suggests we are right to resist the comfortable image of a sinless Jesus.

If we turn our back on the temptation to make Jesus a sinless man, can we argue for a consistent and valid reading of the text of Hebrews. Is there an exegesis which enables us to resolve the apparent contradictions in Hebrews' portrait of the human Jesus, described as being tested and tempted like us, but without sin. I think that there is such an exegesis which is true to Hebrews' original intention, an exegesis which was strongly and effectively advocated by Williamson, in 'Hebrews 4:15 and the Sinlessness of Jesus'.<sup>81</sup> I would maintain that this approach allows us to complete the radical portrait of the human Jesus which is part of Hebrews' undervalued and unique contribution to New Testament Christology.

Williamson advances an alternative exegesis of Hebrews 4:15, where Jesus' sinlessness is not a perpetual quality, but an achievement gained by the human Jesus after struggle,<sup>82</sup> in which it is not inconceivable that he actually sinned. Williamson believes this is truer to Hebrews' original intention. The idea of Jesus' sinlessness in this reading of the text becomes a description of Jesus' condition as High Priest.<sup>83</sup> If the 'yet without sin' of Heb.4:15, is to be read in this way, it does raise the question: At what point did Jesus achieve sinlessness. In answering that question, we need to also consider the wider issue whether such a reading of this text be sustained.

The idea that Jesus struggles with sin is definitely a feature of the Epistle for as we have already noted in Heb.2:10 it is argued that Jesus was made perfect through suffering, while in Heb.5:8, he is said to have 'learned obedience' through what he suffered. Learning through the experience of suffering and of being perfected seem in contradiction to 'yet without sin' as understood in traditional exegesis. Only if Jesus is without sin from the start is it difficult to understand how he is 'made perfect'. If the stress is on Jesus learning obedience, on his

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<sup>80</sup> Pfitzner, 1997.p.43.

<sup>81</sup> Williamson, 1974. pp.4-8. A clear and well argued article, which offers some valuable if radical thinking.

<sup>82</sup> Peterson, D. Hebrews and Perfection. Cambridge, CUP, 1982. p.49 Peterson says I will argue that the perfecting of Christ is a process - given its context.

<sup>83</sup> Peterson, 1982.p.32. In Lk.13:32 he links the perfecting of Christ with the perfecting of his work. It can be seen to express the completeness of Jesus' relationship with God - this idea may play a part here in Hebrews as well.

becoming something that he was not, then logically it follows that 'yet without sin' refers to what he achieves, the end of a process, not a permanent condition or status. What then is the moment that we should identify as completing this process. Williamson suggests, his sacrificial death (Heb.10:1), as the moment in which Jesus becomes sinless. As he says, Hebrews itself argues that Jesus' sacrifice was a bodily sacrifice of obedience to the will of God (10:10). Sanctification for Hebrews is effected by that sacrifice 'through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all'. This Williamson argues implies that Jesus' death can be viewed , and is being viewed by Hebrews as the climax to the life of learned obedience.<sup>84</sup> Williamson sums up his case at this point when he writes,

If learning obedience involved a struggle against temptation and sin, it is logical to conclude that Jesus achieved sinlessness as his life of growing obedience to the will of God was consummated on the cross.<sup>85</sup>

In Heb.5:9-10 Jesus was the Son but still had to learn obedience through the experience of suffering so he is 'made perfect'<sup>86</sup> and then God designates him 'a high priest after the order of Melchizedek'. This Williamson interprets as showing that at the moment of death Jesus becomes High Priest and his own sufficient victim. This understanding of the Epistle meets the problems and inconsistencies raised by the traditional exegesis of Jesus' sinlessness. It can be argued that Heb.7:27 suggests an interpretation of Heb.1:3 which understands that Jesus made an offering for his and the peoples sins, before he was exalted to God's right hand. As Williamson points out such an exegesis does not fit the traditional view that 'Jesus was sinless before his crucifixion.'<sup>87</sup> I think it is clear that Williamson has presented a clearly argued, and convincing case for an alternative reading of Heb.4:15.

Williamson further reinforces this exegesis by considering its implications for atonement theory. As he says, the failure of exegetes to comprehend Hebrews' intention in using 'yet

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<sup>84</sup> Williamson, 1974.p.5.

<sup>85</sup> Williamson, 1974.pp.5-6.

<sup>86</sup> Peterson, 1982.Chapter 2 . In his study he brings out how the various linguistic uses suggest that this did not have a cultic or moral meaning, but rather meant the completion of a task, bringing something to fulfilment, especially in relation to God's divine plan. This suggests our exegesis is on the right lines.

<sup>87</sup> Williamson, 1974.p.6. citing Buchanan G.W.

without sin' has obscured a view of atonement which is more relevant to man's needs.<sup>88</sup> If we accept that Jesus only became sinless the High Priest after a life of real human temptation and striving then, Williamson says, Hebrews portrait of the historical Jesus answers Gregory of Nazianzen's observation, "What God has not assumed, that he has not redeemed."<sup>89</sup> As Williamson says, 'If Jesus' life is to have any relevance, because it is a life which embodies sin's defeat within itself, then the defeat of sin must have been within a life wholly like that of other men.'<sup>90</sup> For Williamson then the alternative exegesis of 'yet without sin' ensures that Hebrews' portrait of the human Jesus who identifies himself with mankind in their battle to overcome sin remains intact.

This reading of the text is of course open to question, as is the understanding of atonement Williamson espouses. As he himself notes Knox asks a vital question when he says "How, we must ask ourselves, could he (*Jesus*) have saved if he had stood in need of being saved?...How could he have been the means of freeing us from sin if he himself had not been free from it?"<sup>91</sup> Williamson argues that we should reverse this question, 'How could Jesus have saved man (sinners), if he had not shared fully in the human condition, as Hebrews insists that he did?'<sup>92</sup> Surely this has been the problem with our Christologies, these have too often evaded the real meaning of Jesus' humanity. As Pittenger said of the Patristic age - and it could be said of ours too,

In my judgement a fundamental difficulty with the Christology of the Patristic age is that while in word it asserted the reality of the humanity of Jesus Christ, *in fact* it did not take that humanity with sufficient seriousness. Excepting for those like the Ebionites and like such condemned "heretical" theologians as Paul of Samosata, the tendency of Christological thinking in the mainstream of what was believed to be "orthodox" was far more heavily weighted on the side of the divinity than of the humanity in Jesus. This was not, of course, true of the Antiochene school, but the influence of that school did not really have the effect that one might wish it to have had; and "orthodox" Christology, even when the excesses of

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<sup>88</sup> Williamson, 1974.p.7.

<sup>89</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus. Epistolae 101.The Nicene & Post Nicene Fathers vol 7. Edinburgh, T & T Clark, reprinted 1980. p.440

<sup>90</sup> Williamson, 1974.p.7.

<sup>91</sup> Knox, 1967 (reprinted 1978).p.46.. my italics.

<sup>92</sup> Williamson, 1974.p.7.

Alexandrine teaching were somewhat restrained at Chalcedon in A.D. 451, has tended toward an impersonal humanity, which is, I believe, no genuine humanity at all.<sup>93</sup>

This is the value of Hebrews' portrait of the human Jesus; it does take humanity very seriously, it avoids an impersonal humanity and establishes Jesus' true humanity which is the bedrock of his saving work.

As I shall demonstrate in chapter 4 Hebrews' concept of Jesus' sinlessness is closely associated with the Epistles' arguments concerning priesthood. The issue of sinlessness must therefore be left unresolved as to continue this discussion here would take us far beyond the scope of the present chapter. The resolution of this issue must await my detailed discussion of priesthood in chapter 4.

#### v. The Death of Jesus.

Obviously, the death of Jesus, the last event of his historical life, is the significant event for Hebrews and the central focus of his argument concerning Jesus' life understood in terms of sacrifice. It also functions as the climax of the human life, acting as a bridge between the life of obedient suffering and the subsequent entry of the exalted High Priest into the sanctuary.<sup>94</sup> In Hebrews Jesus is described as the pioneer, ἀρχηγός, and also said to be our forerunner, προδρομος,

For it became him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the author of their salvation perfect through sufferings.<sup>95</sup>

...Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.<sup>96</sup>

Both of these ideas are used and understood in connection with his death. Though this event is the conclusion of Jesus' life and, as I have already argued, important in the correct exegesis of

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<sup>93</sup> Pittenger, 1958.p.89

<sup>94</sup> Mealand, 1979.p.182. based on his exegesis of Heb.9:12 and 24f.

<sup>95</sup> Heb.2:10. RV.in Greek ἀρχηγός, pioneer is here translated 'author'.

<sup>96</sup> Heb.6:20.

Heb.4:15, nevertheless a portrait of the human Jesus is not the best place to say very much beyond these basic observations. After all for Hebrews, Jesus' death is understood in terms of sacrifice and therefore closely associated with the concept of priesthood which is beyond the scope of this chapter.

Hebrews' portrait of the human Jesus takes seriously his humanity which, given a correct reading of Hebrews' intention in Heb.4:15, displays no tendency to qualify that humanity in any respect. In fact the use of Jesus' solidarity with mankind and the importance of his temptation and suffering, in shaping and perfecting him for his exalted function as High Priest, only serve to underline Hebrews' intention to focus his readers' attention on the human Jesus who died as a full sufficient sacrifice once for all on the Cross. It is this stress on the human Jesus which makes Hebrews such a 'modern' Christological work. Even if his use of the concepts of priesthood, cult and sacrifice makes it alien to our world, its interest and focus on the man Jesus connect it to one of the major motors of modern Christological debate.

The construction of this portrait still leaves questions requiring answers. What was Hebrews' purpose in stressing the human Jesus. We know that it was used in the debates of later centuries to ensure that the memory of Jesus of Nazareth was not overwhelmed by the triumphant exalted Christ. This is not an adequate explanation of Hebrews' original purpose in stressing the human Jesus which was not to address the questions of Cyril of Alexandria or later scholars. Another issue, which still needs addressing, is the juxtaposition of the human Jesus and the Son of God in this Epistle. This raises questions such as: What is Hebrews' portrait of the Son; does Hebrews fall prey to the weakness of the Antiochene school, and fail to do more than simply juxtapose two contrasting Christological images. To these questions we shall return in later chapters.<sup>97</sup>

### **Hebrews' Purpose in Stressing the Human Jesus.**

The question of the writer's probable intention in stressing Jesus' humanity in presenting such a realistic portrait of the human Jesus offers one way of drawing together what we seen in this chapter. It is possible to argue that the historical Jesus passages conform to a fourfold pattern, which Melbourne contends provides clues to Hebrews' purpose in stressing the historical

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<sup>97</sup> See pp.113-117, pp.146-149 and pp.183-185.

Jesus. So what clues do these passages offer concerning this.

In what Melbourne identifies as 'Exhortation passages' the stress is on presenting Jesus as the accessible exalted Lord who by his obedient sacrifice has won access to the heavenly sanctuary, to the presence of God. The reader is encouraged to view Jesus as his forerunner,<sup>98</sup> providing a link and acting as a mediator between him and God. In these passages Jesus' solidarity with mankind enables him to represent them as their High Priest,<sup>99</sup> and his human achievement enables him to assure them access to the heavenly sanctuary.<sup>100</sup> The reader is encouraged to persist in the faith, because of the assurance of salvation that Jesus provides.

Similarly in the 'Model for Christians' passages,<sup>101</sup> Hebrews' purpose is to inspire his readers by holding up Jesus as a model which they are called to trust in and follow, his emphasis on the historical, human Jesus provides his readers with a model to emulate. It is not unusual to use Christ's human struggle and subsequent triumph in this way, for John Chrysostom, drawing on Hebrews, used just these elements of the Epistle to exhort his congregations to emulate Jesus. For him the motifs of Christ as athlete and pioneer concentrates attention on the exemplary nature of his work of salvation.<sup>102</sup> This motif of imitation has been identified as uniquely important to Hebrews as Martin claims.<sup>103</sup> The use by the writer of non-traditional language in his appeal to his readers to imitate Jesus, expressed as 'considering' Jesus, in Heb.3:1; 12:2; 12:3 and 13:3 is clear evidence that this is so<sup>104</sup> As Harvill says this is the "Christians' Jesus fixation",<sup>105</sup> and for Hebrews this is not a Christian option but an essential way of life which calls for trust, but produces more than trust, for in beholding Jesus we are changed.

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<sup>98</sup> Heb.6:20.

<sup>99</sup> Heb.2:17.

<sup>100</sup> Heb.10:19-25.

<sup>101</sup> Melbourne, 1988.p.293. 'Model for Christians' is one of the four categories which Melbourne uses to divide up the historical-Jesus passages in Hebrews.

<sup>102</sup> Chrysostom, J. 'Homilies on Hebrews', Homily XXVIII on Heb.11:37-38. The Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers Vol 14. Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, reprinted 1996.pp.492-493. This is one example of Chrysostom's use of these motifs.

<sup>103</sup> Martin, R.P. New Testament Foundations 2. Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978.p.104. Martin detects good use of this motif within the Epistle.

<sup>104</sup> Melbourne, 1988.p.295.

<sup>105</sup> Harvill, J. "Focus on Jesus." Restoration Quarterly 22.1979.p.129.



If the eyes are steadfastly turned to Him," the believer "cannot fail to ponder the vision and to estimate the power of His work in relation to life" and that "if the leader bears the brunt of the battle the soldier can follow."<sup>106</sup>

This understanding of Hebrews' purpose in stressing the human Jesus is given further weight by scholars who argue that the chiasmus in Heb.12:1-2 is a vital text in understanding Hebrews underlying concerns. This passage can be understood as pivotal in that it provides a bridge between chapters eleven and twelve as well as linking the Christology of Hebrews to its basic paranetic message of exhortation to faithfulness in following Jesus.<sup>107</sup> At the centre of this chiasmus there is the personal historic name of the Son in the midst of a classic Jesus fixation statement.<sup>108</sup> The parallel of believers in the first four lines, with Jesus in the last four lines of the chiasmus can be argued to highlight the motif of imitation as Horning notes in her extensive study of this passage.<sup>109</sup> She goes on to argue that Heb.12:1-2 is, "...a challenge to imitate the faith demonstrated in the single minded life and death of Jesus."<sup>110</sup> If this exegesis is correct, and I have no reason to dispute what is stated above, clearly Hebrews' motive in stressing the human Jesus is to provide encouragement for and engender hope in his original readers. This would seem to provide an adequate motive for all that we have observed. I do not believe that Hebrews was motivated to stress the human Jesus to provide answers to the debates of the 5th century. I would contend that Hebrews driven by his own motives, has preserved an essential truth about Christ, namely that he was truly a man who struggled and was tempted as all men are.

In emphasising the human Jesus, Hebrews provides a model for his readers to emulate and follow, hence the description of the Epistle as a work of exhortation would seem valid. The idea of Jesus as a model is a feature of many Christologies which take seriously the historical human Jesus. Often this has been seen as their weakness, namely that Jesus is reduced simply becomes a good man to be emulated, and that this is the sum total of their salvation, with the result that they are seen as lacking the power and force of some more traditional Christologies.

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<sup>106</sup> Westcott, 1892.p.397

<sup>107</sup> Horning, E. B. "Chiasmus, Creedal Structure and Christology in Heb. 12:1-2." Biblical Research 23: 37-48.1978.p.37.

<sup>108</sup> Melbourne, 1988.p.296.

<sup>109</sup> Horning, 1978.pp.41-42.

<sup>110</sup> Horning, 1978.p.42.

Does Hebrews' Christology with its portrait of the Son and the motif of High Priesthood provide a model with greater depth, force and power. Does Hebrews in achieving this also manage to resolve the juxtaposition of Christological images which have so bedevilled Christology. I believe that our survey of Hebrews' distinctive portrait of the human, historical Jesus indicates that he may have achieved a workable resolution of this problem. The final assessment of this question requires careful consideration of sonship and priesthood, so it is to those areas that we must now turn our attention.

## **Chapter 3 - The Divine Son.**

Hebrews' strong depiction of the Divine Son in chapter 1, its language of high priesthood, plus its apparent Hellenistic and late style, have led to a narrowed Christological focus by some scholars which has often overlooked or at least played down important Christological themes concerning the human Jesus. These are themes which we have demonstrated play a major role in the Christological scheme of the Epistle. However Hebrews' Christological portrait is commonly viewed within the frame provided by the author's first three verses where he declares,

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power.<sup>1</sup>

This is a frame which has confirmed scholars in the view that the Epistle displays a 'high' Christology given expression in the motifs of Divine Sonship and High Priesthood. We have here a Christological portrait which acknowledges that God's self-disclosure found its ultimate expression in Jesus of Nazareth who was the Son of God incarnate.<sup>2</sup> It is these 'high Christological' features of the Epistle which we must now consider before attempting to understand the apparent juxtaposition of Christological portraits that many scholars have posited.<sup>3</sup>

### **Son of God.**

The title 'Son' is applied to Christ thirteen times throughout the argument in the Epistle. This motif is clustered in specific sections of the text, with a large number of references within chapters 1 and 2, plus smaller clusters in chapters 5 and 7.<sup>4</sup> It is not surprising given these numerous references to

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<sup>1</sup> Heb. 1:1-3a.

<sup>2</sup> Lane, W. Hebrews: Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas, Word, 1991.p.cxxxvii.

<sup>3</sup> See p.61.

<sup>4</sup> Parsons, M.C. "Son and High Priest: A Study of the Christology of Hebrews." Evangelical Quarterly. 60.1988.pp.195-215.p.201.The title 'Son' is applied 13 times - Heb. 1:2, 5a, 5b and 8; 2:6; 3:6; 4:14; 5:5 and 8; 6:6; 7:3 and 28; and 10:29. The clustering of this title in chapters 1 and 2 is what one would expect, as this is the frame which leads scholars to emphasise the Epistle's 'high Christology'. The two smaller clusters in chapters 5 and 7 are closely associated with sections which give expression to the Epistle's teaching about priesthood - this fact is not without theological significance as I shall demonstrate.

sonship, especially within the the first two chapters, that scholars have concluded that sonship is 'the fundamental idea of the whole Epistle'.<sup>5</sup> This idea may appear to be fundamental but as a survey of the first two chapters demonstrates it is only part of a richly orchestrated Christological pattern of individual motifs and constructs by which Hebrews expresses his understanding of the person of Christ. These motifs and constructs flow into one another so adroitly that any consideration of the dominant motif invariably involves simultaneous consideration of secondary and tertiary themes.<sup>6</sup> This is what makes it difficult to achieve a clear cut analysis of Hebrews' Christology so our consideration of the secondary themes will be conducted within the framework of the motif of sonship.

'In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son...'<sup>7</sup> In this way Hebrews begins his word of exhortation and clearly establishes ideas which will be fundamental for his argument. First, he clearly expresses the eschatological framework which shapes his thought. In the past God has spoken, revealed himself through various intermediaries, but now in the final age he speaks decisively through the Son. For Hebrews the stress here is on the 'many' prophets - a reality which makes their utterances partial and preliminary, conversely there is only one unique Son 'who being the word is true not merely in his utterances, but also his person.'<sup>8</sup> Second, Hebrews very economically by this means establishes the continuity between the Old Testament and the Gospel, thereby establishing that the Gospel is continuous with the revelation of God throughout history.<sup>9</sup>

If the reader considers this quotation set within the context of verse 1-4, he will become aware that it is the start of a chiasmic construction<sup>10</sup> If we set this out in verse lines it is more clearly seen:-

<sup>5</sup> Walden, H.E. The Christology of the Epistle to the Hebrews. 1944 THD Dissertation the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1944. Also Lane, W. 19 p.cxxxix Who says the dominant motif in the Epistle's Christology is that of Jesus as the Son of God. Isaacs, M.E. Sacred Place. Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1992.p.178. Isaacs argues that for the author of Hebrews, Jesus' primary status is not that of Melchizedekian high priest but son of God. Cullmann, O. The Christology of the New Testament. London, SCM, 1959 (2nd Ed 1963).p.304. Cullmann states that the "Son of God concept dominates the Christology of Hebrews."

<sup>6</sup> Lane, W. 19 pp.cxxxix-cxl. Lane notes that the motifs of sonship, wisdom and priesthood are so skillfully integrated that they can be isolated and examined individually only at the risk of decomposing a brilliantly orchestrated statement.

<sup>7</sup> Heb. 1:1-2a.

<sup>8</sup> Hughes, P.E. "The Christology of Hebrews." Southwestern Journal of Theology. 28.1985.p19.

<sup>9</sup> Lindars, B. The Theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Cambridge, CUP, 1991.p.30.

<sup>10</sup> Ellingworth, P. Commentary on Hebrews (NIGTC). Grand Rapids, Wm B.Eerdmans, 1993.p.95. For Ellingworth the pattern here is - enthronement, action in the universe, relation to God, relation to God, action in the universe, (reason for it), enthronement. See also Lindars, 1991.p.30.

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets;  
 but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son,  
 whom he appointed the heir of all things,  
 through whom also he created the world.  
 He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature,  
 upholding the universe by his word of power.  
 when he had made purification for sins,  
 he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high,  
 having become as much superior to angels  
 as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs.<sup>11</sup>

At the centre of this chiastic construction, and therefore the element to which our attention is drawn, is the statement that the Son ‘reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature’. Here we have a statement which clearly expresses the idea that the Son is the image or icon of God thereby establishing the Son’s authentic deity. Hughes claims that this idea is given better expression in the NIV translation,<sup>12</sup> ‘the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.’<sup>13</sup> We see that the focus here is on the nature or ‘being’ which the Father and Son share, a nature which is according to many scholars only open to only one interpretation;<sup>14</sup> namely that the Son and the Father are one and the same. This Chiastic construction beginning with the phrase ‘In many and various ways God spoke...’<sup>15</sup> reminds us of the prologue to John’s Gospel with its emphasis on the Word who is the image and agent of God’s self-revelation. When this is considered it becomes easy to see why Hebrews came to be viewed as a late Hellenistic text displaying a high incarnational Christology not greatly dissimilar to John’s own Christological

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<sup>11</sup> Heb.1:1-4.

<sup>12</sup> Hughes, 1985.p.20.

<sup>13</sup> Heb.1:3 NIV translation of Greek text. ὅς ὢν ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης καὶ χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ φέρων...

<sup>14</sup> Westcott, B.F. The Epistle to the Hebrews. London, MacMillan, 1889 (3rd Ed.1903). p.425. Westcott observes that the use of being guards against the sonship being by adoption and not a matter of nature. Hughes, 1985.p.20. Hughes expresses a similar idea when he says the ‘Son eternally the image of God.’

<sup>15</sup> Hebrews places great emphasis on ‘God speaking’ as Koester observes “God’s speech...pervades Hebrews from the opening declaration...to the final benediction. Koester, C.R. Hebrews. New York, Doubleday, 2001.p.96. In a very similar manner Lane claims a central theme of Hebrews “is the importance of listening to the voice of God...God (is) the one who intervened in Israel’s history through the spoken word.” Lane, W.L. Hebrews: Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas, Word, 1991.p.cxxvii.

portrait of Christ.

This tradition of exegesis is further reinforced by other observations concerning these first four verses. Such as that of Westcott who believed it was significant that there was an absence of the article in verse 2, 'a' rather than 'the' Son, he claims fixes the readers attention on the nature rather than the personality of the mediator.<sup>16</sup> Many commentators have followed Westcott's lead in this area and would agree with his conclusion that the use of the title 'Son' places the emphasis on the essential nature of the relationship between the Son and the Father.<sup>17</sup> A relationship which demonstrates his divine being for it is the Son who is 'the first born'<sup>18</sup> and Son of God. The Son is also 'the heir of all things'<sup>19</sup> by which our writer draws our attention to the idea of inheritance. The Son inherits all things so as we shall see he also is the surety of our own inheritance. As Hughes notes as the redeemer of all things the Son is the guarantee of our own inheritance.<sup>20</sup>

The last element in the chiasmic construction is that of the Son's superiority to the angels, a feature of Hebrews' argument which recurs later in the chapter and more particularly in chapter 2. This aspect of the Epistle has excited much exegetical interest especially since the discovery of the Qumranic text 11Q Melchizedek concerning Melchizedek. There has been much scholarly discussion about angel Christologies and similar mystic traditions, traditions which for some scholars are given expression in 11Q Melchizedek. Despite all these efforts however this line of thinking represents an exegetical cul-de-sac and offers us no valuable Christological insights which are relevant to Hebrews. More central and pertinent to our purpose is a feature which this last element of our chiasmic construction does demonstrate, that of the Son's superiority to the angels which is one part of a wider ranging feature of Hebrews' argument, namely that as the Son is superior to God's angels so also is he superior to any of the other mediators of God's revelation.

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<sup>16</sup> Westcott, 1883.p.7 Westcott suggests we might better render this phrase *in a Son*. See also Lindars, 1991.p.31. I am not sure that Lindars really uses Westcott's observation in exactly the manner he would himself have used it. Lindars seems to utilise it to provide room for the idea of 'messianic adoption' which is expressed later in the Epistle.

<sup>17</sup> Westcott, 1883.p.425. Cullmann says that "the designation 'Son of God' does make the Father-Son relationship between God and Christ a special and quite unique one' but he counsels that 'we must guard against ascribing to the first Christians - much less to Jesus himself - the intention of using the Son of God designation to say something about the son's identity of substance with the Father.'" Cullmann,1963.p.270.

<sup>18</sup> Heb.1:6. Westcott notes that this shows that the Father is the source from which the son derives all that he has.

<sup>19</sup> Heb.1:2.

<sup>20</sup> Hughes, 1985.pp.19-20.

We have already noted his superiority to the many prophets and in a similar way if we compare Jesus' work to that of 'his biblical predecessors, namely Moses or the high priest' in each case 'his sonship is used to highlight the contrast between their status and his.'<sup>21</sup>

The combination of all these elements constructs a very strong sense of the Epistle's thinking concerning the Son, but what is less clear is exactly what this meant to him or his first readers. Obviously he is wanting to focus his readers attention on the relationship between the Son and God. Hebrews clearly states that God speaks through the Son and that this Son enjoys a unique relationship with God. As we shall see in this chapter it is not quite so clear what that relationship meant in terms of Jesus' status. Traditionally scholars who have believed that the Epistle was late, Hellenistic and contained a high Christology have emphasised how these elements establish Christ's divine nature and status. Others on the other hand have been less convinced by this approach, even if like Cullmann they are willing to recognise that 'Son of God' designation speaks about a special relationship, they are less certain that it originally meant for Hebrews and his readers what it came to mean in later centuries.<sup>22</sup> Before we begin our detailed discussion of the theme of sonship and those secondary themes closely associated with it, it seems prudent to attempt to establish the range of ideas behind the designation 'Son'.

The origin of this designation is generally accepted as arising from concepts found among ancient Near Eastern peoples and in Egypt for example where we find the the belief that kings were begotten by the gods. Religious and political traditions which stemmed from the notion were common throughout these cultures and were particularly clear in the ideology and cult of the Egyptian monarchy.<sup>23</sup> It may well be that it was from these origins that the threefold Old Testament usage of the term 'son of God' developed. In ancient Israelite society the 'son of God' designation was applied in three ways, to the whole people of Israel, to the King and to those who fulfilled a special commission from God (angels, heavenly beings and others).<sup>24</sup> In contrast within the

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<sup>21</sup> Isaacs, M.E. Sacred Place. Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1992.p.178.

<sup>22</sup> Cullmann, 1963.p.270.

<sup>23</sup> Cullmann, 1963.p.271.

<sup>24</sup> The 'son of God' designation is applied to:- the whole people of Israel (see Exod.4:22, Isa.1:2 and 30:1, Jer.3:22.), the King (2 Sam.7:14. and Ps.2:7.) and those commissioned by God, angels (Gen.8:2). Marshall, I.H. The Origins of New Testament Christology. Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press, 1976.pp.112-113. It is important to note that there is no definitive text which applies this designation to the Messiah in the Hebrews scriptures. Those which have been used for this purpose work on the basis of taking a royal attribute and transferring it to the Messiah (this could be claimed to be the case with Hebrews own use of Ps.110.).Cullmann, 1963.pp.272-274.

Hellenistic world the claim to be a 'son of god' usually rested on the display and demonstration of divine or miraculous powers, rather than on any sense of relationship.<sup>25</sup> In the recent past some scholars have claimed that the early Church had ascribed this Hellenistic designation to Jesus despite his own failure to claim this status.<sup>26</sup> The evidence within the Gospel traditions is not as simple as that, because although it is true that Jesus himself does not seem to favour this designation<sup>27</sup> there are references to this designation within the Gospel traditions.<sup>28</sup> Despite the questionable status of this designation in relation to Jesus historic ministry what is certain is that it secured a place within the earliest Christian creedal statements.<sup>29</sup> Could it be that this simply reflect the fact that the events of that first Easter removed the reserve that observant Jews felt about calling a human being 'Son of God' and confirmed for them Jesus' unique status as the embodiment of God's revelation and salvation.<sup>30</sup>

Where does this leave our assessment of the ideas which contributed to Hebrews' own understanding of the designation 'Son of God'. Can we accept Moule's contention that,

The indications are, rather, that the words and practices of Jesus himself, together with the fact of the cross and its sequel, presented the friends of Jesus, from the earliest days, with a highly complex, multivalent set of associations already adhering to the single word 'son'.<sup>31</sup>

I believe that Moule's view offers a reasonable basis for us to continue our exploration and is especially helpful in that it encourages us to consider a wide variety of options. This also suggests

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<sup>25</sup> Cullmann, 1963.p.271. This is very different from the New Testament where the idea of a relationship is highlighted even in the Gospels which record Jesus powerful acts.

<sup>26</sup> Bultmann, R. Theology of the New Testament I. London, SCM, 1952 (1978).p.50.

<sup>27</sup> Pokorný, P. The Genesis of Christology. Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1987.p.55. Pokorný notes concerning the designation 'Son of God' that "We cannot convincingly show it in the life of Jesus."

<sup>28</sup> Brown, R.E. An Introduction to New Testament Christology. London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1994.pp.87-89. Brown notes that John's Gospel ascribes the designation 'Son of God' to Jesus himself yet even in the Synoptic traditions there is some evidence for this designation, in Matt.11:27, Lk.10:22 sayings from the Q tradition, Mk.13:32 and the parable of the vineyard Mk.12:1-12. This evidence leads him to say that these passages make it '...likely that Jesus spoke and thought of himself as "the Son"...' but nevertheless he says '...he never indisputably uses of himself the title "the Son of God."'

<sup>29</sup> Cullmann, 1963.p.290. It is present in Acts.8:36-38, where the Eunuch confesses 'I believe that Jesus is the Son of God.'

<sup>30</sup> Cullmann, 1963.p.290. and also Moule, C.F.D. The Origin of Christology. Cambridge, CUP, 1977 (reprinted 1980). Moule argues that this designation is rooted in the life of Jesus both in the experience of his close relationship to the father and the associations between this designation and that of 'Son of Man.'

<sup>31</sup> Moule, 1980.p.30.



that we are right to assess sonship by careful consideration of the secondary themes associated with it in Hebrews, as this will allow us to explore the widest range of contributing concepts.

Those features in verses 1-4 which we have already discussed appear to confirm what many commentators have advocated that in Hebrews we have a 'high' Christology not far removed from that found in John's prologue and moreover a Christology which they see as belonging to the later stages of the Church's theological development. As we have already seen in the previous chapter Hebrews also displays a very marked and distinctive interest in the human Jesus. So we can now fully understand why various scholars have resorted to the language of juxtaposition in order to understand the relationship between these Christological portraits. Yet to accept this solution at this stage would be premature. We need to move on beyond the chiasmic construction in verses 1-4 of Hebrews first chapter and widen our survey of his portrait of the Son before we draw firm conclusions. We must now consider some of the secondary themes which shape Hebrews' primary theme of sonship.

#### **i. Son as Messiah.**

Ellingworth maintains that the chiasmic construction in Hebrews 1 ends with the theme of enthronement, a theme also identified by Lindars. For Lindars this theme points us to Jesus' role as Messiah.<sup>32</sup> A role which is given further expression in verse 5 which states "Thou art my Son, today I have begotten thee"<sup>33</sup> and is further reinforced by the statement "I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son".<sup>34</sup> Here we have one of the messianic proof texts of the New Testament<sup>35</sup> which would immediately bring to the readers' mind Jesus' status as the Messiah. This passage introduces us to a tension which exists within this sonship material, the language here is an

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<sup>32</sup> Ellingworth, 1993.p.95. and Lindars, 1991.p.31.

<sup>33</sup> Heb.1:5. RSV translation use traditional language to emphasise this is God speaking directly as recorded in Psalm 2:7.

<sup>34</sup> 2 Sam.7:14.and 1 Chron.17:13. This is the central assurance of the Davidic Covenant that David's descendants will reign as God's anointed Kings in Jerusalem for all time - because they will become God's sons. This confirms what we have already observed that often the designation 'Son of God' was an attribute of the King which was transferred to the Messiah.

Ellingworth,1993.pp.114-115. Ellingworth notes that the stress here falls on the second line and especially on its final word 'Son' and if we also accept Ellingworth's view that Hebrews' normal practice is to focus on the first text in any pair and use the second to support it, we can accept that the real interest is directed towards Christ's sonship. It is worth noting that Hebrews' focus is not on God as 'father'. Indeed in the Epistle generally he does not give this title prominence.

<sup>35</sup> Lindars, 1991.p.31. This is also found in Acts 13:33 where Paul makes use of it in describing Jesus' status and role as Messiah, within the context of his preaching.

obvious expression of appointment and adoption.<sup>36</sup> Such themes appear to run contrary to the overall thrust of what we have so far observed about the Epistle's teaching concerning the Son. This citation of Psalm 2:7 is the first of a whole catena of citations drawn mostly from the Psalms. Primarily from Psalms that can be designated 'Royal Psalms', psalms which in their original meaning spoke of the dignities of an ideal Israelite King, an ideal King with an appointed destiny.<sup>37</sup>

It is this motif of the ideal King which is present in Heb.1:8, which cites Psalm 45:6-7, "Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever, The righteous sceptre is the sceptre of thy kingdom. Thou hast loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, thy God, has anointed thee with the oil of gladness beyond thy comrades."<sup>38</sup> We have here therefore a clear expression of the Messianic theme, a little unusual in that the language here appears to refer directly to the Son as God. This unusual use of language might be argued to strengthen the high Christology of sonship we have been discussing. Commentators have not all viewed this use of language in these terms<sup>39</sup> for example Hurst sees Psalm 45:6 as being addressed to an ideal Hebrew King who as such inherits the title 'God' because he represents the deity to the people. In a similar way Christ also inherits the royal title 'God', whilst not threatening monotheism.<sup>40</sup> Likewise Hebrews next citation also appears to strengthen the identification of the Son with God. In this Psalm 102:25-27 God's work in creating the world appears to be transferred to the Son. With its associated overtones of pre-

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<sup>36</sup> Schenck, K. "Keeping His Appointment: Creation and Enthronement in Hebrews." Journal for the Study of the New Testament. 66.1997.pp.91-117.p.91. Schenck is influenced by the work of Caird, (Caird, G.B. "son by Appointment", in Weinrich, W.C. The New Testament Age: Essays in Honour of Bo Reicke. Macon, Mercer University Press, 1984.pp.73-81.), which gives close attention to this appointment theme. See also Saucy, M. "Exaltation Christology in Hebrews: What Kind of Reign." Trinity Journal. 14.1993.pp.41-62.p.47. Saucy notes that, 'the Psalms of enthronement highlight the special relationship the Israelite king enjoyed with Yahweh as his adopted son.'

<sup>37</sup> Hurst, L.D. "The Christology of Hebrews 1 and 2." in Hurst, L.D. and Wright, N.T. (eds).The Glory of Christ in the New Testament Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1987. Chap.2.pp.151 -164.p.157. This destiny was to act as God's agent in ensuring his rule and kingdom in Judah and Jerusalem.

<sup>38</sup> Heb.1:8-9. citing Psalm 45:6-7. The language of this Psalm reflects ancient origins of these ideas where the king was believed to be gotten of the gods. What is not so assured is exactly how these ideas applied to the Israelite Monarchy established in Jerusalem.

<sup>39</sup> Ellingworth questions that this is really the point for the author who he believes is establishing that the Son exercises royal power in contrast to the angels. Exegetical decisions are further complicated by the textual variation suggesting we should read αὐτοῦ for σου at the end of the verse which means its antecedent may be either God or the Son. This gives us two possible readings of this passage - 'Your (the Son's) throne is God (the Father) and the (Son's) sceptre of uprightness is a sceptre of the (Father's) kingdom.' or 'Your throne, O God, is for ever and ever' and 'the sceptre of uprightness is the sceptre of his (the Son's) kingdom.' If we follow the first option then is questionable that our author viewed the Son as God. See Ellingworth, 1993.pp.122-123. for the details, also Koester, 2001.pp.194 and 202-203. who advocates that Christ is seen as God and Bruce, 1990.pp.59-61. who sees this as a reflection the overblown language of the Jerusalem Court which closely associated the King with God.

<sup>40</sup> Hurst, 1987.pp.159-160.

existence this citation moves us away from any concepts of appointment or adoption associated with God's Messiah and suggests the early Christians had no difficulty in transferring to Jesus what had traditionally been said about God himself.<sup>41</sup> This citation may not seem overly important when viewed alone but if we view it in concert with some of the wisdom language elsewhere in these first two chapters it may assume a more significant role. We shall need to bear this in mind at a later stage in our discussion.<sup>42</sup>

Hebrews next citation, Psalm 110:1 'sit at my right hand, till I make thy enemies a stool for thy feet' has been seen as central to Hebrews' whole theology, because not only does he utilise verse 1 here but later he makes extensive use of verse 4 as well.<sup>43</sup> The most apparent observation is that by sitting at God's right hand, for that clearly is who the speaker is, the Son is being shown as enthroned as Messiah and King.<sup>44</sup> This psalm with its strong motif of messianic kingship was a widely used messianic proof text within the early Christian communities. This fact is attested by the sheer number of New Testament citations (5) and allusions (14).<sup>45</sup> We might reasonably ask why this psalm should have received such wide attention in the early Christian movement. The explanation to that question is usually found by reference to Mark 14:62 where the words of Psalm 110:1 are conflated with those of Daniel 7:13 an important Son of Man text.<sup>46</sup> It is this blend of Old Testament ideas which form Jesus' own answer to the high priest's question "Are you the Christ, the Son of the blessed?"<sup>47</sup> Again in Mark 12:36 and parallels, Jesus acknowledges his Davidic descent by means of this psalm. The use of Psalm 110:1 is believed to go back beyond the early Christians to Jesus himself.<sup>48</sup> It is not surprising therefore that it should have enjoyed such a central role in early Christian attempts to express their understanding of and faith in Christ. Hebrews near obsession with this text in his own exploration of the person of Christ seems nowhere near as unusual as it might do, once it is viewed in this light.

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<sup>41</sup> Hurst, 1987.p.160-161. Hurst notes that this transference of ideas and language may reflect a mutual borrowing of terminology which was a marked feature of Davidic traditions within Israel - where 'the king was deity, and the deity king.'

<sup>42</sup> See pp.110-112.

<sup>43</sup> Psalm 110:4 (Heb.5:6) 'Thou art a priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek.' Which Hebrews draws on to develop his own unique concept of Christ the High Priest.

<sup>44</sup> Hughes, 1985.p.21.

<sup>45</sup> Saucy, 1993.p.43.

<sup>46</sup> Mk.14:62 'And Jesus said, "I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven."'

<sup>47</sup> Marshall, I.H. Jesus the Saviour. Downers Grove, Inter-Varsity, 1990.p.206.

<sup>48</sup> Giles, P. "Son of Man in the Epistle to the Hebrews." Expository Times. 85.1975.pp.328-332.p.331.

That Psalm 110:1 was a suitable vehicle to assert Jesus' Lordship for the early Church is clearly understandable, because it enables Jesus' Lordship to be asserted in full, yet at the same time does not compromise the honour of the Father, a feature which would have been important within a monotheistic context.<sup>49</sup> Whilst the psalm ascribes lordship to the messianic king he remains clearly subordinate to the Lordship of Yahweh.<sup>50</sup> This again suggests a slight tension, between the Son as a divine figure totally identified with God, and the Son viewed as an agent of God.

This secondary theme of the Son's Messiahship enables us to flesh out Hebrews' thinking about the Son. As we have seen there are ideas here which strengthen an understanding of sonship as being primarily concerned with establishing the Son's shared nature with the Father. Yet some of the citations employed in developing this secondary theme express conflicting motifs such as appointment or adoption by God and agency on his behalf. These themes expose a tension within Hebrews' discussion of sonship which we cannot ignore if we are to achieve a correct understanding of his Christological stance. One possible resolution of this tension would be to argue that it arises from the original meanings or settings of these texts within Israelite kingship ideology. This would recognise within those traditions an ambivalence at least in language which did not clearly differentiate between the king and the deity and which could be seen as the cause of the apparent tensions in Hebrews' argument, tensions which he ignores because they play no important role within his teaching. This teaching understands Jesus' primary status as Son of God, which it expresses in terms 'largely indebted to a royal, Davidic messianism', based on scriptural passages already 'interpreted in those terms in Jewish and Christian circles.'<sup>51</sup>

## ii. Son as Wisdom.

We have already seen when we considered Hebrews' use of Psalm 102:25-26 how he applies language traditionally associated with God to the Son. This is an example of a process which can be detected in a number of different places but usually it is not so explicitly stated as in this citation of Psalm 102. Normally it is implicit in the phrases used within his argument which allude to traditions associated with divine wisdom,<sup>52</sup> understood as the agent through whom God's creative

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<sup>49</sup> Hurtado, L. One God, One Lord. Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1988(1998 2nd ed.).pp.1-2.

<sup>60</sup> Saucy, 1993.p.44.

<sup>61</sup> Isaacs, 1991.p.178.

<sup>62</sup> Heb.1:2c and 3b are examples of this feature. The language used here is rare, evocative vocabulary and striking formulations that occur elsewhere only in praise of divine wisdom Wisd.7:21-27.

work was achieved. That Hebrews feels he can use these phrases of the Son is an important feature of his Christology.

This dramatic use of rare evocative vocabulary usually associated with divine wisdom, has led commentators to ask whether Heb.1:1-3 incorporates an early Christian hymn. This striking expression of wisdom Christology appears to parallel that in Col.1:15-17.<sup>53</sup> Both of these passages reflect a way of speaking of Christ in wisdom terminology associated with the creation of the world yet, interestingly Hebrews does not actually call Jesus divine wisdom.<sup>54</sup> In using this language our writer is concerned to speak about the Son but in terms of conceptions formed within biblical and hellenistic Jewish traditions which viewed God as relating to his creation through the agency of divine wisdom.<sup>55</sup> The overall effect of this use of wisdom language is to establish and strengthen the close identification between the Son and God. If the Son is viewed as the agent through whom creation is achieved, as this use of wisdom language suggests, then it follows that he pre-exists the process of creation in some manner. Yet Hebrews' use of this language displays a high level of ambiguity. It is not clear whether we are talking about God himself acting as creator and sustainer; or an individual who is the perfect embodiment of God (his perfect agent); or about the 'intermediate' wisdom - logos. It may easily be all three.<sup>56</sup>

This ambiguity of language may be why Hebrews' chose to use this material in his opening passage. This wisdom language allows him to associate the functions of wisdom with the Son and allows functions such as creating, sustaining creation, revealing God's will and winning individuals for God<sup>57</sup> to be assigned to him. The Son in fulfilling these functions is established in the readers' minds as the climax of God's revelatory process, a fact given its highest expression in the Son's exaltation at God's right hand<sup>58</sup> and closely associated with the Son's act of 'purification for sins'.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Dunn, 1980.p.206. Dunn rearranges the lines of Col 1:15-17, so it reads 'in him all things were created, who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; all things hold together in him.'

<sup>54</sup> Lane, 1991.p.cxxxix.

<sup>55</sup> The Hellenistic character of these wisdom ideas enabled scholars to associate Hebrews with the world of Philo and Hellenistic Christianity. There are significant differences as both Dunn, 1980,p.207 and Williamson, R. Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews. Leiden, Brill, 1970.pp.36-41, recognise. This identification therefore can be viewed as no where as assured as it was once believed.

<sup>56</sup> Dunn, 1980.p.208.

<sup>57</sup> Lane, 1991.p.cxxxix.

<sup>58</sup> Bruce, 1990.p.46.

<sup>59</sup> Heb.1:3. This idea directs our attention towards God's redemptive activity on behalf of his people.

The result of this carefully crafted argument, is to focus the readers' attention on the Son's unique role in God's plan. This places 'Jesus at the centre of virtually all aspects of God's activity,' given the '...comprehensive way in which Jesus functions as God's chief agent, *which* is not fully paralleled in the roles assigned to other chief agent figures in the Jewish literature of the early Greco-Roman period.'<sup>60</sup> For Hebrews this means that the Son can in some sense be understood as the earthly receptacle of God's own wisdom.<sup>61</sup> This use of wisdom language by Hebrews to give full expression to this insight leads us to agree with Dunn's conclusion that,

Christ alone so embodies God's wisdom, that is, God's creative, revelatory and redemptive action, that what can be said of Wisdom can be said of Christ without remainder.<sup>62</sup>

### iii. Son as Logos.

In our consideration of Hebrews' use of wisdom language we have ignored the associated connection of such language with a Logos Christology. Does the Epistle draw on or make any use of the concept of the Logos in explaining the significance of Jesus' life. Most commentators who wish to explore Logos Christology look toward the prologue of John's Gospel for the the starting point of their surveys of the concept of the Logos in New Testament teaching. This is definitely true of Dunn's approach in his inquiry into the origins of the doctrine of the incarnation.<sup>63</sup> One scholar who has given more attention to this matter than is usual is Williamson who claimed,

Hebrews not only achieves a clear statement of the humanity of Jesus, but also a comprehensive and thoroughgoing interpretation of the significance of the life of Jesus as the incarnate life, of flesh and blood, of the eternal Logos.<sup>64</sup>

Williamson is not alone in arguing that a Logos Christology is to be found within Hebrews, similar

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<sup>60</sup> Hurtado, 1998.p.21. Italics my insertion into his text.

<sup>61</sup> Hurst, 1987.p.162.

<sup>62</sup> Dunn, 1980.p.209.

<sup>63</sup> Dunn, 1980.pp.213-250. Dunn makes a number of minor references to Hebrews, but does not bother to use the Epistle to establish any details of his overall scheme, for this he relies heavily on John's gospel and consideration of references to pre-existence throughout the New Testament texts. See also Lane, 1991.pp.cxxxix-cxliv, where in his survey of Hebrews' Christology there is not a single reference to the concept of the Logos.

<sup>64</sup> Williamson, R. "The Incarnation of the Logos in Hebrews." *Expository Times*. 95.1983.pp.4-8.p.5

views have also been advocated by Swetnam in his article "Jesus as Logos in Hebrews 4:12-13."<sup>65</sup>

Williamson establishes his argument by clearly setting out what is meant by a 'Logos doctrine', by means of reference to Philo's writings and the text of John's Gospel. He identifies eight features which constitute a 'Logos doctrine'. The Logos always acts as the supreme intermediary between God and mankind (or creation), and the statements which express this fact usually imply the pre-existence of this intermediary. The use of wisdom language is often a very good indication that a writer is thinking in terms of a 'Logos doctrine', and usually results in the Logos (or the one who embodies it) as being ascribed a mediatorial role in creation. The use of the title 'Son' is another important feature and is often associated with use of the word *θεος* when referring to the Logos. In texts which are concerned with a 'Logos doctrine' we can observe a significant clustering of verbs associated with speaking, revealing or making known. These texts also distinguish between the words of God and the Word of God, which in John's Prologue becomes incarnate in real flesh.<sup>66</sup>

Having identified these features we must decide whether Hebrews displays enough of these features to suggest that he was influenced by Logos Christology. The first most apparent observation is that he displays a marked interest, as we have noted, in sonship. As Hebrews says of God's revelation, 'he has spoken to us by a Son ... through whom also he created the world.'<sup>67</sup> Many of these passages also imply the notion of pre-existence, whilst the language of divine wisdom is applied to the Son in his role as mediator in creation and in Heb.1:8 we even see the word *θεος* applied to the Son. Equally the Logos' functions in creation are applied to the Son, the Lord, in Hebrews' use of Psalm 102. Yet Williamson admits that the term 'Logos' is not directly applied to the Son (or High Priest) within the Epistle,<sup>68</sup> and for him there is no equivalent in Hebrews to John's great statement in John 1:14 of the Logos' incarnation.<sup>69</sup> The basic contention of Swetnam's article would question Williamson's view at this point. Swetnam believes that the use of 'logos' in Heb.4:12-13 is better understood in the Johannine sense and more importantly it is

<sup>65</sup> Swetnam, J. "Jesus as Logos in Hebrews 4:12-13." *Biblica*. 62.1981.pp.214-224.

<sup>66</sup> Williamson, 1983.pp.5-6. Williamson uses two standards in deciding what a 'Logos doctrine' is, Philo for the concept of the Logos and John for the concepts of both Logos and incarnation. Incarnation would be unthinkable to Philo.

<sup>67</sup> Heb.1:2.

<sup>68</sup> Williamson, 1983.p.6.

<sup>69</sup> Williamson, 1983.p.7. Williamson does note that there are an abundance of phrases affirming the authentic and unimpaired humanity of the Son of God.

applied directly to Christ himself.<sup>70</sup> He supports his argument by reference to the tradition of exegesis during antiquity and the Middle Ages where 'logos' in Heb.4:12 was viewed as meaning Jesus the Logos.<sup>71</sup> In doing so Swetnam rejects current translations which interpret 'logos' here as a reference to God's word.

Despite these differences Williamson and Swetnam are generally united in their basic belief that 'Logos doctrine' has a role to play in Hebrews' Christological thinking. For Williamson it is not explicitly stated in any actual phrase within the Epistle, but in the general import of the Epistle's teaching. He argues that a strong case exists to view the Christology of Hebrews as involving a view of Jesus' human life as an incarnation of the pre-existent divine Son of God, thought of as his (God's) Logos.<sup>72</sup> A view from which Swetnam does not demur when he claims,

There is a rich development of semitic thought with regards to the 'word' and this background could well yield useful insights for an understanding of the theology of Jesus as Word in Hebrews...<sup>73</sup>

Hebrews may lack an explicit Johannine style statement of the incarnation of the Logos, but in many other respects the thought world of logos Christology is an ever present reality. Hebrews may not talk of the Logos, but he does talk of the Son and what he says about that Son expresses many ideas John would apply to the Logos. This implicit 'logos thinking' is an important feature of Hebrews' Christological portrait which serves to strengthen its high Christological character. Our Epistle may lack John's 'powerful statement of the deity of the Son of God' yet it 'succeeds in retaining a powerful emphasis on the deity of the Son who is God's word with an equally powerful interpretation of the life-history of Jesus as a real, human life within which the word was revealed and the ingredients are found which alone could constitute the sacrifice which makes 'purification for sins.'<sup>74</sup>

#### **iv. Son as Son of Man.**

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<sup>70</sup> Swetnam, 1981.p.217.

<sup>71</sup> Swetnam, 1981.p.214.

<sup>72</sup> Williamson, 1983.p.8.

<sup>73</sup> Swetnam, 1981.p.224.

<sup>74</sup> Williamson, 1983.p.8. Williamson's view implies a juxtaposition of images yet it also leaves scope for the idea that they may function together in some manner, but he fails to resolve these issues in his article.



Hebrews' more effective statement of Jesus' humanity in comparison to John directs our attention to another vital component of Hebrews' discussion of sonship in chapters 1 and 2. This component is given full expression in Hebrews' 'remarkable exposition of Psalm 8, *where* the author argues that the passage about the man / son of man<sup>75</sup> who is made lower than the angels and then crowned with glory and honour has been fulfilled in the case of Jesus, who is crowned because he suffered death.'<sup>76</sup> It is to Jesus that the term son of man from Psalm 8 is being applied. Yet should we view this application as a statement about humanity, or the application of a more focused concept 'Son of Man'. Hooker leaves both possibilities open with her use of man / son of man.

Commentators have reacted to Heb.2:6b in widely differing ways, some having chosen to see here a clear reference to the concept of Son of Man. In Cullmann's view, 'our author applied Ps.8 to Jesus as Son of Man and had precise information about the Son of Man doctrine.'<sup>77</sup> Héring concluded that,

though the Psalmist was thinking of man in general, in our Epistle it is a case of man with a capital M, that is of Christ, regarded in His capacity as "Son of Man" in the technical and theological sense of the Gospels, or of the "heavenly Adam" in the apostle Paul's terminology.<sup>78</sup>

Others have been more guarded in their exegesis of this passage such as Bruce who suggests that

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<sup>75</sup> In Heb.2:6-8 the question is whether *αὐτῷ* repeated twice or in most manuscripts three times refers to mankind or Christ. It is generally agreed that the antecedents for the various forms of *αὐτός* used in verses 6-8 must be either *υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου* (Son of Man) or *ἄνθρωπος* (man) and any disagreement is really limited to verse 8 (as verse 9 is quite clearly applied to Christ). Most commentators have taken the view that verse 8 is about mankind's dignity, because there is no Rabbinic evidence to suggest this Psalm was understood messianically and *υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου* in the Old Testament is generally a synonym for man. Views which wish to see this as a reference to Christ are less explicit and rely on understandings of Psalm 8 produced by some ancient Jewish writers and post New Testament Christians; plus the use made of *υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου* in the Gospels which closely associate it with Jesus, this it is argued would encourage Hebrews to read Psalm 8 in a Christological sense. There remains the possibility that our author may have assimilated the meaning of *υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου* to that of *ἄνθρωπος*. If this is so then perhaps it is safer not to choose between these interpretations after all Hebrews often leaves open more than one meaning for his readers to consider, a view advocated by Koester, 2001.pp.215-216. For a detailed discussion of these issues see Ellingworth, 1992.pp.150-152. and Isaacs,2002.pp.40-41 who advocates that we should not interpret it messianically but focus on it as an expression of solidarity.

<sup>76</sup> Hooker, M.D. *Not Ashamed of the Gospel: New Testament Interpretations of the Death of Christ*. Carlisle, Paternoster, 1994.p.113. Italics my insertion into the text.

<sup>77</sup> Cullmann, 1963.p.188.

<sup>78</sup> Héring, J. *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. London, Epworth, 1970.p.15.

there is probably a tacit identification of the Son of Man in Psalm 8;<sup>79</sup> while other commentators categorically reject the idea that Hebrews uses the term Son of Man, or applies it to Jesus.<sup>80</sup> The Son of Man title is not widely used outside the Gospels; it occurs here in Hebrews 2:6, in Stephen's vision in Acts 7:55-56 and in the Apocalypse. The Son of Man title is present in all the Synoptic traditions and in that underlying the Fourth Gospel. This demonstrates the importance of the title which Jesus used as his own self-designation. Given this background it is difficult to believe that Hebrews and his readers would not have known that Son of Man was Jesus' self-designation. It would therefore be inconceivable that in these circumstances that they would fail to see Psalm 8 as a reference to Jesus as the Son of Man or the Second Adam.<sup>81</sup>

If we accept that here in Psalm 8 we have a clear reference to Son of Man, similar to that within the Gospel traditions, then this 'may be a further indication that in the Epistle to the Hebrews we stand near to a source for the memory of the historical Jesus.'<sup>82</sup> Hebrews 2:6-18 is the basis for a classic statement of Adam Christology in which Christ is the individual in who God's original plan for mankind is finally brought to fulfilment.<sup>83</sup> It is not surprising therefore that Paul refers to Psalm 8 in his exposition of Christ as the Second Adam in 1 Cor.15.<sup>84</sup> This fact would suggest that Hebrews' displays an interest in Son of Man and may indicate that such an interpretation was part of early tradition.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Bruce, 1990.pp.69-75. Bruce also notes with some reservation the work of Zuntz, G. The Text of the Epistles. London, The British Academy, 1953.p.48. who argued that our author had adapted the text of LXX to make the point that God had placed the coming world under the rule not of angels but of the Son of Man.

<sup>80</sup> Moffatt, J. A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews.(ICC). Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1924.p.23. also Montefiore, H.W. Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews. London, A & C Black, 1964. Montefiore says that Jesus is not mentioned here nor do the words refer to him. Yet he does remark that our author may have known Jesus' self-designation as the Son of Man and this may have influenced his choice of this testimonium. This observation rather blunts the force of his earlier observation.

<sup>81</sup> Giles, P. "The Son of Man in the Epistle to the Hebrews." Expository Times. 85.1975.pp. 328-332.p.329.

<sup>82</sup> Giles, 1975.p.330. Giles notes that Heb.2:6-9 is the sole echo in the epistles of the memory of Jesus 'as Son of Man' which suggests Hebrews has retained actual historical information which is not preserved in other epistle traditions.

<sup>83</sup> Dunn, 1980.p.110.

<sup>84</sup> 1 Cor.15:27. Paul here quotes from Psalm 8:6 as part of his exposition of Christ's role as second Adam. It is noteworthy that here again we have a connection between the Corinthian Epistles and our Epistle - if the Montefiore / Lo Bue hypothesis is correct this could reflect literary dependence.

<sup>85</sup> Giles, 1975.p.330.

Hebrews' uses Psalm 8 to give expression to God's programme for humanity,<sup>86</sup> a programme which is not yet completely fulfilled, 'we do not yet see everything in subjection to him',<sup>87</sup> thus demonstrating that this programme has broken down. Yet Hebrews is clear that in Jesus this programme has been fulfilled, 'we see Jesus...crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one.'<sup>88</sup> For Hebrews the divine programme which broke down in Adam, because of his disobedience has been completed in Jesus, owing to his obedience. 'Adam led man to death and not glory; but Jesus by his life, suffering and death became the pioneer opening the way through death'<sup>89</sup> to glory. In achieving this task Jesus' complete oneness with man is vitally important.

Hebrews' insistence on the importance of Jesus' solidarity with mankind may gain greater force if we give serious consideration to the variant reading of Hebrews 2:9 which states 'we see Jesus...crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that *apart from God* he might taste death for everyone.' Scholars are divided as to which version of this text has the best claim to authenticity.<sup>90</sup> Commentators who have viewed this as the authentic text of verse 9 have produced a variety of exegetical explanations of what our author meant by these words. These have included the ideas that Christ died 'apart from his divinity';<sup>91</sup> 'apart from God';<sup>92</sup> or that he died for all except God; or that he died to bring all except God under his power.<sup>93</sup> The first of these

<sup>86</sup> Hurst, 1987.p.153. Hurst says Psalm 8 original meaning was the glory of man in God's original intention and it was not considered to be Messianic in LXX or Rabbinic Judaism. Hebrews though ignores this and views it as a direct prophecy of Jesus - even using Son of Man as a Christological title. Though Hurst questions that we should simply view Son of Man as a simple Christological title.

<sup>87</sup> Heb.2:8b.

<sup>88</sup> Heb.2:9. βλέπομεν Ἰησοῦν διὰ τὸ πάθημα τοῦ θανάτου δόξῃ καὶ τιμῇ ἐστεφανωμένον, ὅπως [χάριτι θεοῦ] ὑπὲρ παντὸς λεύσῃται θανάτου. This represents the best attested reading of this verse within the manuscripts, but a number of manuscripts contain a variant where 'the grace of God', χάριτι θεοῦ is replaced with 'apart from God', χωρὶς θεοῦ.

<sup>89</sup> Dunn, 1980.p.110.

<sup>90</sup> For a detailed discussion of the issues see Westcott, 1892.pp.45-47, 60-62., Ellingworth, 1993.pp.155-157. and Koester, 2001.pp.217-218.

<sup>91</sup> Theodore of Mopsuestia and Ambrose adopt this view, arguing that it was only Jesus' human nature that was subject to death and that his human nature did not. Ellingworth, 1993.p.156.

<sup>92</sup> This view stresses Jesus' suffering and has enjoyed quite widespread support. Dunhill, J. Covenant and Sacrifice in the Letter to the Hebrews. Cambridge, CUP, 1992.p.224. and Elliott, J.K. "When Jesus Was Apart from God: An Examination of Heb.2:9." Expository Times 83.1972.pp.339-341. For further details see Koester, 2001.p.218.

<sup>93</sup> Ebrard, J.H. "The Epistle to the Hebrews." pp.273-624 in Biblical Commentary on the New Testament 6. New York, Sheldon, 1866. Ebrard and others stress that God needed no redemption unlike humanity. I Cor. 15:27 which states that all things except God are made subject to Christ. See Bruce, 1990.p.70. for a fuller discussion of these two interpretations.

possible interpretations can be associated with one of the explanations offered to explain these variant readings, namely the Nestorian controversy. These explanations see 'apart from God' as either a variant added to some manuscripts because it suited the Nestorian viewpoint<sup>94</sup> or being removed because it found disfavour in the light of Gnostic claims that the divine element left Jesus prior to his death.<sup>95</sup> It is the second interpretation that interests us. The thought that Jesus suffers apart from God, works to emphasise the reality of his human experience and situation. This view gains momentum from the observation that *χωρὶς* is one of our author's key words which he uses thirteen times.<sup>96</sup> As Hebrews celebrates Jesus' exaltation, it claims that '...he who is 'crowned with glory and honour' is *also* he who has cut himself off from God and 'tasted death for all'.<sup>97</sup> In achieving this Jesus enters fully into the human condition, sharing in man's separation from God and even enduring a human death 'apart from God'.<sup>98</sup>

This close identification of Jesus with mankind, which is an essential component of Hebrews' exegesis and use of Psalm 8, focus the readers' attention on the representative nature of the Son's work, a representative task which in Hebrews the Son fulfils by an act of obedience and submission to the judgement of God and by voluntary endurance of the consequences of man's sin.<sup>99</sup> It is this sharing in human destiny and sin which provides the basis for the Son's exaltation in Hebrews' teaching. It also leads to Hebrews' ultimate focus in chapters 1 and 2, not upon a pre-existent figure but upon a human being raised to an exalted status.<sup>100</sup> This theme of the exaltation of the Son as the representative of a glorified humanity is further reinforced by Hebrews' use of Psalm 8 in conjunction with Psalm 110, a Psalm concerned with the Son's enthronement.<sup>101</sup> When this pattern is given the due attention it deserves it becomes obvious that Hebrews' interest in Son of Man is not exclusively concerned with a divine-messianic figure which many commentators focus on. Hebrews' interest and focus is more concerned to use Son of Man concepts to direct our

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<sup>94</sup> Westcott, 1892.p.62.

<sup>95</sup> Koester, 2001.p.218.

<sup>96</sup> Hebrews use of *χωρὶς* accounts for 13 of 41 New Testament occurrences (31.7%), compared with 5.2% of the New Testament occurrences of *ἄρις*. Ellingworth, 1993.p156.

<sup>97</sup> Dunhill, 1992.p.225.(my italics).

<sup>98</sup> Dunhill, 1992.p.236. Dunhill links this idea with Heb.9:28 apart from sin, and claims that as Jesus tastes death apart from God on our behalf, he becomes 'without sin'. Dunhill claims that Christ 'is able to stand with God 'apart from sin' and to endure a human death 'apart from God'.

<sup>99</sup> Giles, 1975.p.330. Giles sees Hebrews' use of Psalm 8 as arising out of a concern with the representative ministry of Christ rather than with a concern for Son of Man as a Christological title.

<sup>100</sup> Caird, 1984.pp.73-81.

<sup>101</sup> Hurst, 1987.p.153f.

attention to a very distinctive Adam Christology. A larger Adam Christology which embraces both the earthly and the exalted Son (Jesus).<sup>102</sup> In this larger Adam Christology Hebrews directs our attention to the death of both Jesus and Adam, only to highlight contrasting consequences of those deaths. Adam dies as a consequence of his trespass, his disobedience; whilst Christ dies because of his act of righteousness, his death becomes his ultimate act of obedience.

Can we develop this pattern further. Does this two-stage Adam Christology lead to a three-stage Adam Christology which results in pre-existence.<sup>103</sup> Dunn's reaction to this possibility is negative however it is this question which demands further consideration. In our examination of the primary theme of Sonship and the secondary themes of Messiah, Wisdom, Logos and Son of Man we continually encounter language and ideas closely associated with incarnation and pre-existence. It is this language which now requires our attention.

#### **v. Incarnation and Pre-Existence.**

Incarnation and pre-existence are often closely related concepts within Christological schemes, so in John's prologue for example, the Word which is pre-existent becomes incarnate, 'and the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us'.<sup>104</sup> In practical terms this often results in pre-existence being viewed as at least the first stage in the expression of an incarnational Christology, but this is not necessarily the case.<sup>105</sup> This observation is of particular importance for us, as Hebrews lacks a clear statement of the incarnation equivalent to John 1:14. Hebrews' incarnational thinking is buried much more deeply within his text<sup>106</sup> in phrases which declare Jesus' humanity to be real, perfect<sup>107</sup> and representative,<sup>108</sup> a humanity whose fullness is guarded by Hebrews' use of his human name.<sup>109</sup> In Hebrews it is the achievement of purification for sins which is understood as the primary purpose of the incarnation<sup>110</sup> and this viewpoint is the determinant which shapes all that is

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<sup>102</sup> Dunn, 1980.p.111.

<sup>103</sup> Dunn, 1980.p.113. Dunn suggests that such a three-stage Adam Christology might also connect to ideas of a redeemed redeemer and primal man.

<sup>104</sup> Jn.1:14.

<sup>105</sup> In Docetic Christologies for example contain the concept of pre-existence but fail to take incarnation seriously, or lack that concept in any real sense.

<sup>106</sup> Pryor, J.W. "Hebrews and Incarnational Christology." Reformed Theological Review, 40.1981.pp.44-50.p.50.

<sup>107</sup> Heb.2:14.

<sup>108</sup> Heb.2:9.

<sup>109</sup> Westcott, 1892.p.426.

<sup>110</sup> Hughes, 1985.p.21.

said about the incarnate life. The language of pre-existence can be detected within the Epistle and particularly in the first two chapters, yet the interpretation of this language is nowhere near as clear cut as some commentators have wished to portray it.

The language of pre-existence has led some to conclude that Hebrews is 'one who stresses the eternal pre-existence (and of course post-existence) of Christ more than any other New Testament writer.'<sup>111</sup> Robinson is uncomfortable with his own observation here as his concern is to stress the view that Hebrews works with one presupposition, that Jesus was the man who received a 'call to a unique role as God's Son and personal representative'.<sup>112</sup> Many commentators agree with Robinson's basic observation in respect of chapters 1 and 2 in their own discussions of pre-existence, although one problem is that most modern writers use the term pre-existence with the assumption that it is self explanatory. If any attempt at explanation is made it is usually carried out in terms of a discussion about the origins of the concept, rather than an analysis of meaning.<sup>113</sup> Such an approach is not particularly helpful when we come to consider this aspect of Hebrews' teaching.

The language of pre-existence is mentioned first in the prologue (1:1-4) where the Son is depicted as pre-existing with the Father. This idea is given full expression when Hebrews says that the Son was 'appointed heir of all things, through whom also he created the world,'<sup>114</sup> and further reinforced by the observation 'He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power.'<sup>115</sup> In these verses the language of divine wisdom is alluded to and a clear expression of the concept of pre-existence can be detected. This trait in the prologue is reinforced by further references in the first two chapters for example in Heb.1:6 the Son is called 'the first-born', and again in Heb.1:10 the Son<sup>116</sup> is said to 'found the earth in the

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<sup>111</sup> Robinson, J.A.T. The Human Face of God. London, SCM, 1973.p.157.

<sup>112</sup> Robinson, 1973.p.159.

<sup>113</sup> Hurst, 1987.p.152. See also Parsons, 1988.pp.195-215.p.202. Parsons argues that an understanding of pre-existence should be based on the functions of this category for various writers rather than through efforts to locate the sources of the category.

<sup>114</sup> Heb.1:2.

<sup>115</sup> Heb.1:3. This is at the centre of a chiasmic construction, which thereby provides added emphasis to this theological idea.

<sup>116</sup> Hebrews uses the ambiguous term 'the Lord', which in its original context was a clear reference to God himself, but is easily translated into a reference to the Son - as an agent of God, or as a divine individual.

beginning, and the heavens are the work of thy hands.’<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, in Heb.2:7 the Son (referred to here as the Son of Man) is made ‘for a little while lower than the angels’, then he is ‘crowned with glory and honour’<sup>118</sup> and everything is subject to his authority. In all of these verses the language of pre-existence is strongly expressed alongside the close identification of the Son with God.

Detailed consideration of such passages not only displays an extensive use of pre-existence language, but also a clear concern with the concept of exaltation. So for example in Heb.1:1-4, where the Son’s pre-existence is conveyed in terms of the wisdom myth we can see that ‘in Hebrews what was scriptural proof for the exaltation or resurrection of Jesus becomes an argument for his pre-existence.’<sup>119</sup> This relationship between concepts of pre-existence and exaltation is an important feature in establishing a correct understanding of Hebrews’ viewpoint. We shall need to return to this aspect shortly but before doing so there are a number of other scholarly observations we need to take into account.

Our survey of pre-existence terminology has exposed a very obvious feature, namely that it is closely associated with what can best be described as wisdom Christology. The language of pre-existence is definitely present within the Epistle, yet it is usually expressed in the terms of wisdom Christology.<sup>120</sup> The basis of pre-existence is to be discovered in Hebrews’ tendency to take an attribute of God, namely his creative wisdom, and distinguish it conceptually as a mediating figure<sup>121</sup> equated with the Son. The other important feature we need to take into account is what some scholars call eschatological pre-existence, a term which they use to express the idea of the High Priest (Son) as the presence of the future, which is an important component of pre-existence language in the Epistle. The thinking here being that what is promised by God, what is to come in

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<sup>117</sup> Heb.1:10. This citation of Psalm 102 goes on to conclude that creation will pass away, but the Lord (Son) will always remain - his days will have no end.

<sup>118</sup> Heb.2:7 This is likened by many commentators to Paul’s use of the hymn in Philippians 2:7-9, which speaks of the Son of God humbling himself in his incarnation. See also Parsons, 1988.p202 who detects a Kenotic Christology at work here.

<sup>119</sup> Hammerton-Kelly, R. Pre-Existence, Wisdom and the Son of Man. Cambridge, CUP, 1973.p.241.

<sup>120</sup> Dunn, 1980.p.209.

<sup>121</sup> Lindars, 1991.p.32. Lindars says this process is not unhebraic - a view he supports by reference to the example of the personification of the arm of the Lord (Isa.51:9). Hurtado, 1998. In exploring how Jewish ideas of divine agents form a basis for Christian speculation about the uniqueness of Christ supports this overall thrust Lindars associates this with Hellenistic Christianity and Stephen - I believe this association is not certain.

the fulfilment of his plan, is already pre-existent in heaven.<sup>122</sup> In this way the language of pre-existence is functionally shaped by Christ's exaltation and his continuing intercession for us in heaven. This is not such a strange idea for it is fairly obvious that pre-existence language depends on the eternal presence of the Son in heaven. Yet all too often scholars have failed to recognise that this is where the meaning of pre-existence is derived from. In this view Christ is the eschatological embodiment of God's pre-existent act and power - an act and power which pre-exists with God<sup>123</sup> - but not a pre-existent individual. Such thinking lies behind Hughes' observation that in Hebrews God creates the world through the Son, because the same Son redeems the world and redemption is simply an act of new creation or re-creation.<sup>124</sup> Hughes describes a linear process of creation, incarnation and redemption - yet implicit in what he says is a slightly different process, a process in which Christ's redemption of the world leads Hebrews to recognise his unique human life and also his pre-existent place in the divine plan. This is the functional understanding of pre-existence which belongs to our Epistle's own unique Christology.

If we accept this functional view of the meaning of pre-existence in Hebrews, it becomes obvious why the association between exaltation and pre-existence has been recognised as important. We can also begin to see why some scholars have expressed reservations about the language of pre-existence. Schenck for example observes that Hebrews clearly believes Christ to be pre-existent in some sense, yet the precise nature of Christ's pre-existence within the Epistle is difficult to delineate.<sup>125</sup> Given that this is the case it follows that we should be extremely cautious in our approach to this language of pre-existence.

As we have already noted there is a close resemblance between Hebrews 1 and Col.1:15-17.<sup>126</sup> A resemblance which includes a clear reference to the Son (wisdom is not named as such), in which Jesus is viewed as the one in who God's wisdom / son / word is definitely expressed. This is almost incarnational, as Lindars notes,<sup>127</sup> yet we must beware of imposing an incarnation on

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<sup>122</sup> Hamerton-Kelly, 1973.p.250.

<sup>123</sup> Dunn, 1980.p.209.

<sup>124</sup> Hughes, 1985.p.20. He follows this up with a linear description of the process - pre-existence- incarnation - redemption.

<sup>125</sup> Schenck, 1997.p.92. In his recent book he suggests that the elements which have traditionally been associated with Christ's pre-existence are the completion of the process celebrating Jesus' exaltation. Schenck, K. *Understanding the Book of Hebrews*. Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2003.pp.46-55.

<sup>126</sup> See pp.100-101.

<sup>127</sup> Lindars, 1991.p.33.



Hebrews which he does not state. It is these verses which also express pre-existence most strongly by an extensive use of wisdom Christology and so therefore we can conclude that wisdom Christology, incarnational thinking and the language of pre-existence are all intimately related within the Epistle.

In this wisdom Christology and to a certain extent within the Adam / Son of Man Christology of the Epistle we encounter an ambivalence.

...in both cases, we are confronted not with a particular pre-existent divine person (the Son, Christ), but *a way of speaking about God's interaction with men and things which could use the impersonal imagery of light and stamp/ impression as well as the personification 'Wisdom' - a way of speaking which stressed the direct continuity between God and that which may be seen of God ('the radiance of his glory'), which stressed that the revelation of God bears the impress of God's own nature ('the stamp of his very being'), which stressed the more personal character of God's revelation with man ('Son'), as well as continuity between God's creative, revelatory and redemptive action (1:1-3). The point of course for Hebrews...is that this language can appropriately used of Christ, for it is Christ of whom all these things are pre-eminently true...*<sup>128</sup>

This ambivalence is in fact not only present in the secondary themes of wisdom and son of man, a similar ambivalence or tension can also be detected in the secondary theme of messiah and more importantly within Hebrews' primary theme of sonship. Just as the language of pre-existence is not to be read in an obvious manner we can observe similar tensions in the language used in other secondary and even in Hebrews' primary theme.

So for Hebrews, Christ's sonship has a pre-existent status but in another way it is a sonship to which he is appointed as the one who suffered and was exalted.<sup>129</sup> For most commentators Christ's exaltation is the point at which he is enthroned,<sup>130</sup> only once the Son has made purification for sins does he sit 'down at the right hand of Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels...'.<sup>131</sup> In a similar manner Hebrews has no difficulty in saying that although Christ is the

<sup>128</sup> Dunn, 1980.p.209.(His italics).

<sup>129</sup> Dunn, 1980.p.208.

<sup>130</sup> Attridge, H.W. A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews. Philadelphia, Fortress, 1989.p.54.

<sup>131</sup> Heb.1:3.

Son, he learned obedience.<sup>132</sup> This tension is especially marked in those passages associated with messianic kingship, in which the scriptural passages cited originally referred to the appointment of the Israelite King by Yahweh. We can now conclude that this ambivalence, though it may be present in the original Old Testament meaning of these texts, can not simply be dismissed on these grounds. Such ambivalence is an ongoing theme in Hebrews' own Christological viewpoint not simply some textual quirk inherited from his Old Testament citations.

Tension in Hebrews' use of sonship language and the secondary associated themes is a vitally important feature of the Epistle, a feature which I would argue is not accidental but intentional as part of the author's wider Christological scheme. Is it possible for these tensions to be resolved in some way which enables us to understand better this striking ambiguity in his portrayal of Sonship.

### **Resolving the Tensions in Sonship Language.**

A number of commentators<sup>133</sup> have faced up to these obvious tensions in the language of sonship, and have produced differing solutions to the problem. These resolutions can be categorised in three ways, the proleptic solution, the linguistic solution and finally dual uses of the term 'son'. The proleptic solution sees all references to Christ's sonship prior to his exaltation as regarding him as Son proleptically; that is to say that he is not actually Son at this point but that he is potentially Son.<sup>134</sup> This may offer us a partial resolution of these tensions but is not a complete answer as it is inadequate in explaining Heb.5:8.<sup>135</sup> The linguistic solution presents this tension as reflecting a real contradiction in language use which is partly due to the presence of differing and conflicting Christological traditions. This view is deeply embedded within scholarly accounts which stress the juxtaposition of Christological portraits within the Epistle. It is therefore not appropriate for me to pursue this proposed solution at this point, as this will be answered at the conclusion of this thesis.

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<sup>132</sup> Heb.5:8.

<sup>133</sup> Schenck, 1997.pp.91-117. In this article Schenck attempts to suggest a resolution to this tension. Caird, 1984.pp.73-81. also offers a resolution to this problem along similar lines to Schenck. Dunn, 1980.pp.51-53. Dunn believes this tension can not be resolved and therefore argues for two juxtaposed Christological portraits.

<sup>134</sup> Kasemann, E. The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Letter to the Hebrews. Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1984.p.99. Kasemann speaks of the 'proleptic application of the title Son'.

<sup>135</sup> Schenck, 1997.p.95f. This passage relies on the contrast between one who is 'Son' and the thought of learning obedience through hard experience to make its point. If 'Son' means one who has the potential to be the Son then it loses this force - equally all men have the potential to become sons - a thought which does nothing to enhance the author's argument here.

The third solution appears to be more promising, with its stress on two slightly different uses of the term 'son', one which is appropriate to the earthly Jesus and the other applied to the enthroned Son once he is exalted.<sup>136</sup> If Heb.5:8 represents an obstacle to the proleptic solution, it actually facilitates this third solution. The way Hebrews' uses the 'appointment' language in Chapter 5 is in order 'to relate Christ's appointment as high priest to his enthronement as Son.'<sup>137</sup> We have already noted that outside chapter 1 and 2 there are two significant clusters of sonship language in chapters 5 and 7.<sup>138</sup> Both of these clusters occur within the context of Hebrews' essential expressions of the Christological theme of priesthood. Just as in chapter 1 Christ can only function in his role as Son after his exaltation, so too in chapter 5 he can only function as high priest after his exaltation.<sup>139</sup> As Hebrews quite clearly states, 'Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law.'<sup>140</sup> This may be a simple recognition that Jesus was not lawfully able to offer sacrifices under the Levitical system, a fact clearly stated in Heb.7:13-14 where his membership of the tribe of Judah is stated.<sup>141</sup> It might also be alluding to something more significant, that Christ can not carry out his priestly role (or sonship) until he has offered himself as the perfect sacrificial victim.

We begin to see a possible and significant Christological resolution to this tension of language being established here. If we return our attention to Heb.5:8, where 'Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered,'<sup>142</sup> we can see how the idea of the earthly sonship of Jesus, which all God's people share, and the exalted Sonship of Christ, come together in this theme of suffering. Jesus suffers just as his followers suffer in the world and this provides a basis for their identification with him. It is Hebrews' intention to encourage them identify with Christ to imitate his sufferings.<sup>143</sup> Christ is here a 'son' in both the senses of Hebrews' use, he is the exalted Son who has made the perfect sacrifice through his death (the result of his obedience), and he is a

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<sup>136</sup> Schenck, 1997.p.95.

<sup>137</sup> Schenck, 1997.p.96.

<sup>138</sup> See footnote 4 at the beginning of this chapter.

<sup>139</sup> Schenck, 1997.p.96.

<sup>140</sup> Heb.8:4.

<sup>141</sup> Lane, 1991.p.206. See also p.182 for his detailed discussion of this idea.

<sup>142</sup> Heb.5:8.

<sup>143</sup> Schenck,1997.p.97. Lane, 1991.pp.121-122. Lane like many commentators stresses the unique of Jesus' divine Sonship and his sacrificial action and high priestly act. All ideas I am quite happy to accept. Unfortunately he says little about how all sons share such experiences - though it may be implicit in what he says about Jesus as the priestly representative of man. Bruce, 1990.pp.131-132. Bruce's concern is also mostly with what learning obedience might mean - yet he does acknowledge this link between those who suffer for the Gospel and Jesus' suffering.

son of God who suffers for the Gospel as do all true sons of God. These contrasting sonships represent differing traditions which Hebrews integrates to overcome their contradictions.<sup>144</sup> If this view is correct then the linguistic solution becomes even less satisfactory as we shall see.<sup>145</sup>

We have observed how it is possible to resolve the perceived tensions in the language Hebrews' chooses to use in expressing his understanding of Christ's Sonship. We have also seen how this resolution cannot be achieved without close attention to his teaching about priesthood - his dominant Christological motif according to many scholarly studies. There is though one further contribution to this debate about sonship which we must consider before drawing any conclusions, and this is the important contribution made by Caird,<sup>146</sup> and given further expression in Hurst and Wright's collection of essays.<sup>147</sup>

Caird came to the conclusion that Psalm 8, which he believed was the most misunderstood and yet important of Hebrews' Old Testament citations, provided the Epistle with its overall theme.<sup>148</sup> He believed that Psalm 8 was the controlling element within the whole argument expressed in Hebrews 1 and 2, with its theme of God's destiny for humanity.<sup>149</sup> The themes associated with Divine Sonship might appear to create tensions which it is difficult to reconcile with this view. After all chapter 1 has little to say about man, given its strong use of the language of pre-existence and it could even be said to be the start of a process which would reach completion at Chalcedon.<sup>150</sup> Yet, what if Chapter 1 was read from the viewpoint of the humanity of Jesus - what if its main concern was the historical Jesus. Hebrews speaking of God's revelation says 'in these last days he has spoken through a Son.'<sup>151</sup> last days being a clear reference to Jesus' earthly life, to his work in the historical process. He is then said to be 'appointed heir of all things' so he enters into an inheritance - might this be the inheritance originally promised to man - man's true destiny. Of Jesus

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<sup>144</sup> Schenck, 1997.p.98.

<sup>145</sup> See pp.144-146.

<sup>146</sup>Caird, G.B. "The Exegetical Method of the Epistle to the Hebrews." The Canadian Journal of Theology. 5.1959.pp.44-51. and Caird, 1984.pp.73-81.

<sup>147</sup> Hurst, L.D. and Wright, N.T. (eds).The Glory of Christ in the New Testament Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1987.

<sup>148</sup> Hurst, 1987.p.152.

<sup>149</sup> Schenck, 2003.pp.26-28. Schenck clearly sets out how Psalm 8 functions as Hebrews' statement of God's intention for humanity and then following Caird's lead he utilises this to interpret chapter 1 (see pp.40-55.).

<sup>150</sup> Hurst, 1987.p.155.

<sup>151</sup> Heb.1:2.

then it is said 'when he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high'<sup>152</sup> which is a clear reference to the historical work of Christ. If we consider the citation of Psalm 110 alongside that of Psalm 8, this can also be seen as relating to man's destiny,<sup>153</sup> a theme which is developed and extended within chapter 2.

This contribution, viewed together with Schenck's earlier discussion of the tension in the sonship language, plus the many ambivalent features and tensions in Hebrews primary and secondary themes concerning sonship leads us to a striking conclusion. We began with an exploration of Hebrews' Christology of Divine Sonship which many commentators have contrasted with his portrait of the human, historical Jesus. This is a Christology viewed by many as so 'high' that it requires both a late date and a Hellenistic background for the Epistle. It is a 'high' Christology so remote from the often overlooked portrait of the human Jesus as to demand a disjointed juxtaposition of Christologies in need of rational explanation. Our own survey has exposed both the primary theme of sonship, and the associated themes of messiah, Son of Man, Logos, wisdom, incarnation and pre-existence. These are themes which at first reading confirm earlier views about Hebrews 'High' Christology of Divine Sonship, yet constantly our survey has encountered tensions in the language used by our author - which suggests we should look for alternative solutions.

Once these tensions are subject to serious scrutiny patterns begin to form, which might be accidental, but due to their increasing frequency suggest that they may be Christologically significant. What at first appears to be accidental ambivalence is displayed to be a carefully constructed line of thinking which seeks to stress Jesus' humanity, his representative role, his actual sacrifice and connects closely to his priestly status. Obviously therefore any resolution of this question entails a more detailed study of Hebrews' theme of priesthood - a task best undertaken in the next chapter. More importantly for our study at this point is the question of what we are to conclude about Hebrews' portrait of the Divine Son?

Is it possible to maintain Hebrews' 'high' Christology in the face of the numerous tensions within the language of its expression. Is it still possible to speak of a Divine Pre-Existent Son as has often been the case in the past. The answer to these questions in the end necessitates a very delicate

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<sup>152</sup> Heb.1:3.

<sup>153</sup> Hurst, 1987.p.156.

matter of judgement.<sup>154</sup> That the necessary language and ideas are present in the text of the Epistle has been established, but how those ideas should be interpreted is a more difficult matter. Hebrews does speak of a 'Divine Son' however what he means by that is not so easy to establish. That this term may have more to say about the human Jesus than is usually expected is quite a strong possibility. The distance between our two juxtaposed Christological portraits seems much narrower than many have suspected but is the gap now narrow enough to be bridged by Hebrews' concept of priesthood. What we can agree at the very least is that,

What Christ does depends very clearly on *who* he *is*. He is the Son of God, superior to the angels, greater than Moses, a better high priest than the descendants of Levi. But equally important is his identity with humanity and his obedience to God.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Hurst, 1987.p.162.

<sup>155</sup> Hooker, 1994.p.122.

## **Chapter 4 - Priesthood and Sacrifice.**

The question we must now address arises out of what I have argued in the last two chapters. As I have shown Hebrews provides strong Christological portraits of both Jesus the man, and Jesus the divine Son of God. In this chapter I will now consider Hebrews' use of the concepts of priesthood and sacrifice, and whether this theological thinking provides a basis for uniting the two strong Christological portraits we have already considered.

It is obvious that priesthood has a central role to play in the Christological pattern of the Epistle. However, as Cullmann has observed Ἄρχιερεὺς (high priest) is not the only Christological title in the Epistle, because Jesus is referred to as Lord (Κυριος) and especially Son of God (υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ). Yet Jesus as High Priest stands in the foreground of all our writer's thinking, and the whole Epistle is shaped to deal with him as High Priest.<sup>1</sup> Jesus acting as High Priest is without doubt the chief concept within the Epistle and it is to this theme that the argument of the Epistle returns a number of times.<sup>2</sup> It is this concentration on Jesus as High Priest that sets the Epistle apart from the many other documents of the New Testament, which are more concerned to establish on behalf of Jesus a claim to being God's Messiah, predicted in the Jewish Scriptures. As Cullmann says,

Whilst other Christians sought to prove by the Old Testament, Jesus the Messiah, the writer seeks to show that Jesus fulfils absolutely the high priestly function of the Jews.<sup>3</sup>

We must recognise that this idea was not totally absent from the literature of late Judaism or

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<sup>1</sup> Cullmann, O. The Christology of the New Testament. London, SCM, 1959.(2nd Ed.1963). p.89.

<sup>2</sup> Mealand, D.L. "The Christology of the Epistle to the Hebrews." Modern Churchman. 22.4.1979.p. 183.

<sup>3</sup> Cullmann, 1963 p.89.

elsewhere in the primitive church,<sup>4</sup> but the Epistle's concept of Jesus' work as priestly is original and unique in the New Testament documents.<sup>5</sup>

There is no problem in establishing Hebrews' unique emphasis in using priesthood traditions to explain Christ's work. What is more difficult to establish for our purposes, is whether his argument and unique insights in this respect provide any sort of basis for a fully formed Christology. All too often scholars and commentators have argued that Hebrews merely presents and juxtaposes the two portraits we have already considered.<sup>6</sup> Mealand, in agreement with much scholarly opinion, argues that Hebrews is quite content with the juxtaposition of Jesus' humanity and divine status.<sup>7</sup> Moreover this has been endorsed by Dunn, who not only recognises such a juxtaposition but then goes on to explain it. He recognises all the elements which go to make up the tension, which is set up in the opening chapters, and states that the tension between Jesus' humanity and Divine status are never resolved. He suggests that the most likely resolution of this tension is provided in the recognition that the author is attempting a dynamic synthesis of Jewish eschatology and a Platonic world view.<sup>8</sup> I am unsure in the light of the studies carried out by Williamson and others,<sup>9</sup> that this resolution commands the respect some may wish to accord to it.

Our task then is twofold:; first to explore and clearly express Hebrews' concept of priesthood

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<sup>4</sup> Jewish literature contains some evidence which suggest that there was an expectation for a Priestly Messiah (see Jer.33:14-26 there is an expectation for an ideal future priest, also the Testament of Levi 18 speaks of a priest in whose '...priesthood shall sin come to an end,' and who will '...open the gates of paradise.' At Qumran there is also some evidence for a priestly Messiah 'the Messiah of Aaron' in the Damascus Document 20:1.) In early Christian literature there is the use of Ps.110 with its priestly overtones (see Mk.12:35-37 and 14:61-62.), whilst Jesus' Eucharistic actions at the Last Supper can be viewed as priestly (see Mt.26:26-28, Mk. 14:22-24 and Lk.22:19-20.) and in the Pauline Epistles there are elements which can be viewed in a priestly light (see Rom.3:25 Jesus' blood is our expiation - a sacrificial term, or Eph.2:18 through him (Jesus we have access to the Father - a cultic term.) For a full discussion of this see Schaefer, J.R. "The Relationship between Priestly and Servant Messianism in the Epistle to the Hebrews." Catholic Biblical Quarterly. 30.1968.pp.359-385.

<sup>6</sup> Schaefer, 1968.p.373. Some scholars might dispute this as they detect a priestly motif in Lukan Christology.

<sup>6</sup> These portraits being Hebrews' depiction of the human, historic Jesus (see pp.52-74.) and the Divine Son (see pp.77-100.).

<sup>7</sup> Mealand, 1979. p.183.

<sup>8</sup> Dunn, J.D.G. Christology in the Making: An Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation. London, SCM,1980. pp.257-258.

<sup>9</sup> Williamson, R. .1970.pp. and Hurst, D.L. 1990.pp.7-42. As we have already noted in chapter 2, Williamson's study, which was then extended by Hurst conclusively demonstrates that such a reading of Hebrews can not be sustained, and that to believe Hebrews is heavily influenced by Platonic thinking is no longer sustainable. See pp.26-28.



as applied to Jesus and second, to explore its usefulness in constructing a basis for a fully developed and coherent Christology. In order to achieve both of these objectives it will be necessary to relate some of what is written here to the discussions earlier in this thesis, whilst trying to identify individual strands of the argument in Hebrews which allow us to form an accurate and detailed picture of his thinking.

## **The Concept of Priesthood in Hebrews .**

### **i. Human Solidarity.**

There is no obvious starting place for our exploration of Hebrews' concept of priesthood, but I have chosen to consider the question of the solidarity of the high priest with mankind first. This is partly because such an approach ties my argument into the earlier material already discussed, especially in chapters 3 and 4, but also because I have come to see this facet of Hebrews' argument as fundamental to any correct understanding of his Christology. It is clear from the text of Hebrews that the portrait of Christ as High Priest depends on a close solidarity with mankind that is continually expressed there:

For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness.<sup>10</sup>

and also,

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.<sup>11</sup>

In both of these passages Hebrews' emphasis is on the high priest's solidarity with humanity, which in the wider context is also linked with his call by God to serve as his mediator.

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<sup>10</sup> Heb.5:1-2.

<sup>11</sup> Heb.5:7-10.

Hebrews also states here that Christ is called by God to serve as High Priest, a fact he reinforces by his use of Old Testament quotations. Also as we can see, especially in the second of the above texts, there is a real emphasis upon Jesus' sufferings. We can begin to see therefore that Hebrews' whole priestly Christology is built on a foundation of solidarity with humanity. As Nairne indicates,

On this hope, then, the author builds. he sets forth this earthly life, these days of the flesh, this humiliation, as themselves the sacrament of the divine Christ's ineffable work for men.<sup>12</sup>

I would argue that for Hebrews not only is this idea of Christ's solidarity with mankind foundational, but it is also an absolute necessity if his work is to be brought to completion according to God's plan. Cullmann expresses the same idea when he writes, 'that in order to lead humanity to its completion the High Priest must go through the various stages of an human life.'<sup>13</sup> For Hebrews Christ is the source of salvation named by God and this is directly linked to the fact that, "he learned obedience in the school of suffering and, once perfected..."<sup>14</sup> became that source of salvation. Cullmann develops this idea and gives it clear expression when he remarks,

It is precisely in offering himself and taking the greatest humiliation upon himself that Jesus exercises the most divine function conceivable in Israel, of high priestly mediator..<sup>15</sup>

As I have already argued in my section dealing with the human Jesus,<sup>16</sup> Hebrews presents us with a portrait of Jesus' humanity which is at least as real as that presented in the Gospels or any other early Christian writing. In fact some scholars like Cullmann wish to go further and

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<sup>12</sup> Nairne A. The Epistle of Priesthood. Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1915, (2nd Ed. 1915.) p.67. Schenck, K. Understanding the Book of Hebrews. London, WJK, 2003. pp.26-27. Schenck states that Hebrews by closely associating Christ and humanity is able to demonstrate how Christ fulfils God's promise to humanity contained in Psalm 8, to give humanity glory. Theologically this displays how important Christ's human solidarity is for the whole argument of our Epistle.

<sup>13</sup> Cullmann, 1963. p.93. Also Koester, C.R. Hebrews. New York, Doubleday, 2001. p.106. Koester recognises that this solidarity is important for Hebrews' theology, in that it provides the basis for the integrity of his treatment of atonement, the assurance for Christ's ability to sympathise with the readers, and provides them with an example to be copied.

<sup>14</sup> Heb.5:8.

<sup>15</sup> Cullmann, 1963. p.91.

<sup>16</sup> See p.71.

argue that Hebrews understands the humanity of Jesus in a more comprehensive way than these writings. Cullmann cites Heb.4:15 in support of this view, where Christ is said to be able to sympathize with us ‘because of his likeness to us, he has been tested in every way’. This, argues Cullmann, “follows from the idea that the High Priest not only completely enters into the realm of humanity, but within that realm must participate in everything that is human.”<sup>17</sup>

Of course this solidarity with humanity, which is connected to the idea of suffering, is particularly focused on the central event of Jesus’ life, his crucifixion, which is the test bed for his total obedience to the Father’s will. To pick up Cullmann’s point about Christ’s participation in everything that is human, it follows that this must include the reality of death. So I would agree that,

This death was a real sharing in the grim destiny of human flesh and blood, but therefore it was the opportunity for sympathy, love, companionship, propitiation.<sup>18</sup>

and that the,

Atonement is a singular act that was accomplished through Christ’s death and exaltation.<sup>19</sup>

Nairne sees this to be the argument which underlies chapter 2 of Hebrews and Montefiore agrees with the thrust of this point, when he observes that it was Jesus’ response to his intense sufferings which completed his work of salvation.<sup>20</sup> So it seems that all of this reinforces our earlier observation about the foundational nature of Christ’s solidarity with humanity,<sup>21</sup> to the functioning of Hebrews’ portrait of Christ. His sacrifice can only have meaning and purpose, if he is totally one with humanity in everything that belongs to it.

This line of argument can be developed further when we consider a later passage, namely Heb.9:24 where it is stated that he appears ‘in the presence of God on our behalf’. As Cullmann observes, the necessity of his being man is thus related not only to his unique act of

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<sup>17</sup> Cullmann, 1963.p.94.

<sup>18</sup> Nairne, 1913.p.68.

<sup>19</sup> Koester, 2001.p.122. This highlights the centrality of the cross in Hebrews’ thinking.

<sup>20</sup> Montefiore H.W. The Epistle to the Hebrews. London, A. & C. Black Ltd.,1964.p.61.

<sup>21</sup> See pp73-74. and pp.106-108.

sacrifice, but also to his present intercession for us.<sup>22</sup> Again Christ's solidarity with humanity has a functional necessity within the thinking clearly expressed by Hebrews.

Added to all that I have so far argued is the fact that each time Hebrews turns his attention to Christ's exaltation (his completed work of salvation) it is introduced by a picture of his humiliation, which acts as a means for sympathy and union with humanity.<sup>23</sup> I believe we have here an important and deliberate pattern of thought, which if ignored would damage any proper assessment of the Christology of this Epistle. After all this is not at variance with traditions of primitive Christianity expressed in other New Testament documents. As Cullmann observes, 'New Testament faith is faith in Christ despite the scandal of humanity.'<sup>24</sup>

I maintain that the theme of solidarity with humanity is central to any proper consideration of Hebrews' Christological portrait. Also that whereas the terminology of priesthood usually evokes ideas of majesty, divine glory and exaltation; in Hebrews alone it is closely tied to ideas of humiliation and sacrifice clearly associated with the days of the flesh - Jesus' historical existence. This may partly reflect, as Nairne has argued, that Hebrews expresses his ideas in sacramental terminology. That is to say, for Hebrews, God's sacraments are to be found in man and his history. For him the 'christs'<sup>25</sup> of the Old Testament were sacraments of God's presence in Israel and priesthood was a sacrament of salvation. That all these were brought to perfection in the days of Jesus' flesh is for Hebrews an obvious fact.<sup>26</sup> As I develop my argument we may be more able to assess the validity of this understanding for our reading of our text.

What I have established is that priesthood is not, as has so often been argued in relation to this Epistle, merely a facet of Christ's divine status. Rather I suggest that we have here the foundations of a bridge which might link together some of the conflicting aspects of the two

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<sup>22</sup> Cullmann, 1963.p.102.

<sup>23</sup> Nairne, 1913.p.68.

<sup>24</sup> Cullmann, 1963.p.98.

<sup>25</sup> In the Old Testament three figures are referred to as messiahs (christs) because they are appointed to their office by anointing - these are the King, the Priest and the Prophet, see Marshall, I.H. The Origins of New Testament Christology. Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press, 1976.p.84. and Cullmann, 1959.pp.113-114. All of these hold public religious offices through which God's presence with his people is both established and maintained in various ways. The King for example acts as the agent of God's rule, establishing and maintaining his rule and righteousness.

<sup>26</sup> Nairne, 1913.pp.60-65.

portraits we have already examined and provide the basis for closing the gulf between the human historical Jesus and the divine exalted Son. I would question in the light of these observations, whether we can quite so easily dismiss Hebrews' Christology as a mere juxtaposition of conflicting portraits.

## ii. Both Priest and Victim.

One idea which is unique to Hebrews' concept of priesthood, especially when compared to its Jewish antecedents, is that of the union in one individual of both priesthood and victim. A fact starkly expressed in the words,

He offered up himself<sup>27</sup>

This unique feature does not strike us as forcefully as it probably did the first readers, who were well versed in the terminology and thinking of the Old Testament scriptures. We however view this in the light of Jesus' self-evident sacrifice upon the cross, attested to in the Gospels and other New Testament documents. This action is part of Christian doctrine and we therefore view it in that light, whereas to those schooled in the traditions of the Old Testament it was unusual, if not unthinkable. Within the Old Testament the concept of high priesthood is the notion of a sacrifice brought by, or presented by, a mediator appointed by divine call. It did not contain the idea of the high priest's own self-sacrifice.<sup>28</sup> The Israelites had never envisaged in the old covenant a situation in which the high priest and victim were one and the same individual, unless a few had read between the lines of passages such as Isa.53,<sup>29</sup> a passage to which Heb.9:23. makes direct reference.<sup>30</sup>

Yet it is just such a situation that Hebrews argues for. It has been correctly noted that Heb. 7:25. presents the High Priestly mediation of Jesus, his present work, as resting on the self-sacrificial act of Jesus in the past.<sup>31</sup> There can be no doubt that Hebrews, in common with other New Testament witnesses, argues that Jesus is the victim who offers up himself. Hebrews goes further than those witnesses in explicitly stating that this act of offering is a

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<sup>27</sup> Heb.7:27.

<sup>28</sup> Cullmann, 1959.p.91.

<sup>29</sup> Stewart, R.A. "The Sinless High Priest." New Testament Studies. 14.1967.pp.126-135.p.135.

<sup>30</sup> Heb.9:28. Christ was offered once 'to bear the sins of many'.

<sup>31</sup> Cullmann, 1959.p.102.

priestly act. It is clear that this concept of High Priest is close to that of the *ebed Yahweh*, especially when we remember the voluntary nature of the servant's sacrifice.<sup>32</sup>

The text of Hebrews is saturated with references to this dual figure, Christ the sinless High Priest and Christ the spotless Calvary victim.<sup>33</sup> Now this raises the interesting possibility namely that given this unique double identification as sinless priest and spotless victim, might this not explain some of the conflicting interpretations of the term 'without sin' found within Hebrews?<sup>34</sup> This reflects the demands of Jewish tradition, that the victim offered should be without blemish and spotless,<sup>35</sup> whilst as we shall see, the idea of the sinless high priest is much more elusive. If Christ in some texts is both priest and victim then he has to be spotless and therefore he would be assumed to be sinless. Add to this the confusion between Jesus the man who dies and the risen Lord who has been exalted, and you have a recipe for ambiguity. Given also Hebrews' own lack of precision, his tendency to leave texts open to multiple meanings, it is no wonder that scholars get bogged down in the possibilities open to them. We simply note these possibilities here and will return to them as we draw the argument together.

We observe that Jesus as both priest and victim is seen as the most effective mediator, hence his sacrifice is once for all, and his sacrifice is greater because he offers his own blood.<sup>36</sup> Because his sacrifice is more effective Hebrews argues that it fulfils the Old Testament priesthood and thereby dispenses with it.<sup>37</sup> The priests of the old covenant are required to repeat their sacrifices year after year, but Christ has offered his once for all time. This is why

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<sup>32</sup> Cullmann, 1959.p.91.

<sup>33</sup> Stewart, 1967.p.134.

<sup>34</sup> Koester, 2001.pp.293-294. Koester notes that Jesus' opponents charged that he was a lawbreaker and that later Pagans claimed that his followers revered a criminal and his cross. Given this background he suggests that this is why later Christian traditions and writings insist that there was no crime in him and that this may have influenced the claim that he committed no sin.

<sup>35</sup> Deut.17:1. 'You shall not sacrifice to the Lord your God a bull or sheep that has any defect or serious blemish, for that would be abominable to the Lord your God.' & Lev.22:18f. '...such an offering as is presented to the Lord for a whole offering as as to win acceptance for yourselves, it shall be a male without defect, of cattle, sheep, or goats. You shall not present anything which is defective, because it will not be acceptable on your behalf.'

<sup>36</sup> Heb.9:28.& Heb.9:12.

<sup>37</sup> Isaacs, M.E. Sacred Space. Sheffield, JSOT Press,1992. pp.98-99. Commenting on Heb.9:12-14 Isaacs notes that the Day of Atonement expiatory blood merely purifies the flesh, whilst Christ's blood on the other hand, is more efficacious because it cleanses the interior, the conscience, and 10:22 further develops this point as the 'evil conscience' mentioned there equals guilt, and the cult did not legislate for this at all.

Hebrews says 'it is impossible that the blood of goats and bulls should take away sins.'<sup>38</sup> The purpose of the Old Testament sacrificial system was to gain access to God. Christ has fulfilled this aim decisively for ever and so the sacrificial system is no longer required. As Isaacs notes the Old Testament cult can be judged as inadequate even on its own terms because the cult can not bring the worshippers to perfection, which is the state of ritual purity essential before the human and divine can meet.<sup>39</sup> So the cult has failed to achieve its purpose, yet Christ has achieved it. Hence it follows that the Old Testament priesthood has been disposed of by the action of Christ. We shall return to this argument later,<sup>40</sup> but note its close association to the unique double nature of Jesus as both priest and victim.

Obviously the union in Christ of Priest and Victim has some profound Christological implications, partly because it makes him the most effective mediator with all that signifies, but more importantly because it ties together in a single unity, humiliation and exaltation. The victim is the historical Jesus who dies on the Cross, but that act on the Cross is also the act of priesthood, his act as mediator, which makes him the High Priest par excellence. I find myself in total agreement with Cullmann when he writes,

In the light of the High Priest concept, the atoning death of Jesus demonstrates the true New Testament dialectic between deepest humiliation and highest majesty. That is the great significance of the christological concept of Jesus as High Priest.<sup>41</sup>

Again we discover possible connections between humiliation and exaltation which demand more than a mere juxtaposition of Christological portraits, if we are to do real service to the unique concepts employed in this Epistle.

### **iii. A Sinless High Priest.**

Hebrews explicitly states at a number of points that he understands Christ as High Priest to be sinless. In Heb.4:15 he is '...without sin.', and again in Heb.7:26. he is said to be '...separated from sinners...' and further more he is described as '...exalted above the

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<sup>38</sup> Heb.10:4.

<sup>39</sup> Isaacs, 1992.p.101.

<sup>40</sup> See pp.159-160. and pp.163-165.

<sup>41</sup> Cullmann, 1959.p.91.

heavens.’ Such statements immediately expose the tension that Dunn<sup>42</sup> detected within the Christology of the Epistle. How does this sinless High Priest relate to all our author’s demands for Christ’s solidarity with humanity. As I have already shown when considering the portrait of Jesus the man,<sup>43</sup> our author’s insistence on a real historic humanity appears to be qualified, if not undermined by the verse quoted above, ‘...without sin.’ Is there a tidy solution to this tension, or are we wrong to seek such coherence in Hebrews’ teaching.

Alongside this claim of a sinless High Priest there are a number of passages which concern themselves with the question of perfection. In these Jesus Christ is said to be made perfect by the Father, as in Heb.2:10. ‘For it was fitting that God...make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings.’, 5:9 ‘...and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation...’ and 7.28. ‘...a Son who has been made perfect...’. Hebrews goes on to say, ‘...by a single offering he (Jesus), has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.’<sup>44</sup> So alongside the question of sinlessness, there is a second associated question of what does our author mean when he thinks about perfection. Τελειος (perfect) would seem to play a very important part in Hebrews Christology.<sup>45</sup> So it is vital that we come to a valid interpretation of his use of these terms.

There has been considerable scholarly interest in the terminology of perfection, which demonstrates the wide recognition of its importance in Hebrews’ thinking. The main focus of scholarly concern has been to discern exactly what this language meant for Hebrews and his audience. A number of studies have advanced various understandings of how this language is being used, for example, Peterson’s study has attempted to survey these attempts and classify the various options scholars have adopted.<sup>46</sup> Consideration of these options allows Peterson to identify a range of possible meanings, which can be classified as ethical, formal, cultic, metaphysical and eschatological,<sup>47</sup> and also include the concept that perfection equals

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<sup>42</sup> Dunn, 1980.pp.257-258.

<sup>43</sup> See p.78.

<sup>44</sup> Heb.10:14.

<sup>45</sup> Cullmann, 1959.p.92.

<sup>46</sup> Peterson, D. Hebrews and Perfection: An Examination of the Concept of Perfection in the ‘Epistle to the Hebrews’. Cambridge, CUP, 1982.

<sup>47</sup> Peterson, 1982.pp.2-18. See also Ellingworth, 1993.p.162. who produces a table of possible definitions, ethical, cultic, telic, organic, temporal and human, these closely reflect those also identified by Peterson.



knowledge from God.<sup>48</sup> Peterson assesses these possible definitions by reference to classical literature, the writings of Philo and other New Testament texts. His survey enables him to conclude that meaning can not be determined without close attention being paid to the context within which it is expressed. Peterson demonstrates that ethical and technical cultic usage is less assured than some scholars have maintained. Formal usage is more strongly attested, in this context perfection is tied closely to the idea of bringing something to completion or fulfilment. Whether this completion is seen in ethical, or cultic terms depends on the context within which it is expressed.<sup>49</sup>

The ethical aspect of Hebrews' use of perfection is most strongly expressed within those passages which are applied to the other sons, although what could be described as ethical overtones may be detected even in those passages where Jesus is the subject.<sup>50</sup> Yet, it is not this ethical aspect which is central to Hebrews understanding of perfection,<sup>51</sup> for he displays more interest in ideas of fulfilment and completion. These are concerns which reflect his overall approach to God's revelation, where Jesus decisively concludes that revelation (Heb.1:2). Hoekema explores this understanding of Hebrews use of 'perfection' by consideration of three passages associated with this idea Heb.2:10, 5:8-9 and 7:28.<sup>52</sup> He argues that 2:10 sets out God's purpose in perfecting Christ, while in 5:8-9 the actual process of perfecting is described and in 7:28 we read what the final result of this process was. This suggests that Hebrews views the perfecting of Christ as an actual process of development. This means we need to consider whether in Hebrews' use of perfection the stress is on the process of becoming perfect and sinless, or whether it is a status that has been given. If it is a given status, does

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<sup>48</sup> Peterson, 1982.pp.13-14. Peterson surveys the views of Rigaux, B. "Révélation des mystères et perfection à Qumrân et dans le nouveau Testament." NTS 4.1957-8.pp.237-262. who derived his understanding of perfection from its use at Qumran - where he claimed perfection was essentially a knowledge from God.

<sup>49</sup> Peterson, 1982.pp.46-48.

<sup>50</sup> Ellingworth, 1993.pp.162-163.

<sup>51</sup> Schenck, 2003.p.69. Schenck notes that for humans, the concept of perfection usually includes a moral component, we think in terms of 'the best', but in the case of Christ 'perfection has no moral component'. In writes that this is the case because Christ 'is without sin'. Closer reading of what he writes demonstrates that he means that Christ has obtained glory through his appropriate obedience on earth and his suffering on behalf of his brothers. Perfection implies that Christ has successfully completed the human experience and been exalted to glory. Schenck also notes that the idea of Jesus learning obedience, should not mislead us into thinking that this means he must have been disobedient. Compared to his earlier articles Schenck appears to have modified his approach, though this may reflect his intended audience.

<sup>52</sup> Hoekema, A.A. "The Perfection of Christ in Hebrews." *Calvin Theological Journal*. 9.1974.pp.31-37. See also Peterson, 1982.p.73. who concludes a vocational understanding of the perfecting of Christ is the only interpretation that allows for all the dimensions in the Epistle's presentation.

Jesus possess it always or is he awarded it at some point.

Given the overall argument of the Epistle, we could posit a cultic interpretation for both of these associated ideas, because Jesus' work as High Priest rests partly on his being sinless. This is clearly stated by Hebrews,

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, then through the greater and more perfect tent... taking not the blood of goats and calves, but his own blood thus he entered once and for all into the Holy Place, securing an eternal redemption. For if sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls... sanctifies for the purification of the flesh how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself without blemish to God as a spotless self-oblation, purify our conscience...<sup>53</sup>

This argumentation is in line with the observations already made<sup>54</sup> that the victim in the Jewish cult was expected to be without blemish, to be spotless. What does this mean for our total understanding of Jesus. Can we simply conclude that because of the unique double nature of Christ as priest and victim, the two images are interfering with and distorting each other. Does Hebrews believe that Jesus is already perfect when he offers his life, or is it that in offering his life he seals his perfection. Was Christ the sinless High Priest before he was exalted to the heavens, or is his sinlessness gained in his perfect, obedient offering of himself to the Father's will.

All of these are vital questions which any serious student of the Epistle's Christology must raise and attempt to answer. It is at this point that many scholars tend to become somewhat opaque in what they write, as they feel their way towards answers. It is very easy to read what other scholars have written and to be left with rather confusing messages. Terms such as 'make perfect', 'moral perfection', 'moral maturity', 'completion' and 'temptation' to name but a few, are scattered widely in their writings, yet there is often no clear indication of what precisely is meant by these words.

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<sup>53</sup> Heb.9:11-14.

<sup>54</sup> See p.125.

It is as if one had wandered unknowingly into a First World War minefield which consists of a great variety of mines labelled in many different languages, of which one has only a very basic understanding. What does one make of the labels. Some appear familiar, but are they really what they appear to be. How should they be interpreted. All too often the labels in our theological minefield turn out to be deceptive, or at least further qualified to the point where understanding becomes difficult, if not impossible. In our particular minefield the task is made doubly difficult as the original guide's main concern was not to achieve precision, but rather to stimulate a pilgrimage in the lives of his readers.

Let us look at one scholar by way of illustration. Cullmann in 'The Christology of the New Testament' devotes his fourth chapter to Jesus the High Priest, and, having introduced his topic, spends considerable time exploring the argument of the Epistle to the Hebrews. This demonstrates the thoroughness of his study, as many studies relegate 'High Priestly Christology' to a couple of footnotes and references in their index. As we have already noted Cullmann believes the idea of perfection plays a vital role in Hebrews Christology.<sup>55</sup> He argues that a purely cultic understanding of 'perfection' is too narrow to do justice to the insights and richness of thought contained in Hebrews' Christology.<sup>56</sup> He goes on to argue that any concept of perfection applied to Jesus must include the sense of making morally perfect, which takes place in a really human life. Cullmann seems to be saying that in order to lead humanity to its completion, the High Priest must go through the various stages of a human life. Hebrews he says thinks of 'the passion' as 'completion'. For Hebrews the High Priest must realise the *Τελειωσις* through his whole life, until the final sacrifice of his voluntary death.<sup>57</sup> Elsewhere Cullmann says that this idea of perfection comes very close to ideas concerning the Son of Man, in that the High Priest is to be the mediator between God and man, and the crowning of his work is the realisation of the perfect man.<sup>58</sup>

This seems very straightforward for we seem to have an argument for an interpretation of perfection which would see Jesus slowly being shaped by his sufferings and through his

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<sup>55</sup> Cullmann, 1959.p.92.

<sup>56</sup> Cullmann, 1959.p.92. Koester, 2001.pp.122-125 supports this view in that he discusses this aspect of the Epistle in terms of completion, which totally frees the discussion from cultic traditions.

<sup>57</sup> Cullmann, 1959.p.93.

<sup>58</sup> Cullmann, 1959.p.92.

obedience being brought to the Cross, where that perfection will be achieved and he will be exalted to become the sinless High Priest. The language used and the argument advanced all seems so clear, yet he then writes,

Though he (Jesus) lived under the same condition, he was the one human being without sin.<sup>59</sup>

Having so clearly qualified what he has claimed one is left feeling that some failure of interpretation has taken place. I offer this observation, not because Cullmann is particularly at fault, because in many ways he has at least engaged seriously with the Christology of Hebrews which so many others fail to do, but because it does draw attention to the essential care required if one is to deal successfully with these questions.

This tension between perfection and sinlessness versus solidarity with humanity is of vital Christological significance, as it draws our attention to the focal issue of all Christological models, the tension between the human and divine in the person of Christ. If Hebrews' concept of priesthood is going to serve as a bridge between those two images of Christ, it must contain at least the seed of a possible resolution of that tension.

From where did Hebrews derive his idea of the sinless High Priest. The first observation which has to be made is that the concept of a sinless high priest is not a part of his inherited Jewish tradition. This is why in the Torah there are clear provisions made for the purification of the high priests' sins,<sup>60</sup> such as the regulations for the three-fold atonement of himself, his household and 'the congregation of Israel' in the book of Leviticus.<sup>61</sup> This makes it clear that within Israel high priests were regarded as fallible human beings, despite their divine call, who required purification before approaching God. Of course this is a point used by Hebrews in his own argument in establishing Christ's superior priesthood: Christ does not require a sacrifice for his own sins, unlike the high priests of the old order.<sup>62</sup> If we consider the Wisdom of Ben

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<sup>59</sup> Cullmann, 1959.p.93. (my insertion)

<sup>60</sup> Lev.4:3 quoted by Stewart, 1967.p.126.

<sup>61</sup> Lev.16:6 and 7.

<sup>62</sup> Heb.7:27. 'He does not need, as high priests do, to offer up sacrifices daily, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people: this he did once for all when he offered himself up. Also Heb.9:7 & 9:12.

Sirach, which Stewart refers to as the Apocryphal book next to the Old Testament,<sup>63</sup> here we find that the high priests Aaron and Phinehas are given places of high honour within its praise of famous men.<sup>64</sup> Yet as Stewart notes they are seen as models of human blamelessness, whilst stressing the hereditary nature of their office, but a claim that they are sinless is for this writer unthinkable.<sup>65</sup> If we then turn our attention to The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs we can see similar strands of tradition at work. In The Testament of Levi, Levi is understood as the progenitor of the high priest, hence stressing the hereditary nature of the high priestly office.<sup>66</sup> In the Bodleian Aramaic fragment as Stewart notes, Levi is urged to keep himself free from both ceremonial defilement and actual sin.<sup>67</sup> This of course is a clear recognition that the high priest was open to defilement, both in Levitical terms and ethically.

If we consider the Qumran Scrolls we find that at Qumran the Teacher of Righteousness (the high priest of the community hardly recognised by the rest of Judaism) is not considered to be sinless. He is sometimes seen as blameless and perhaps exceptionally pure of character, a seeker after the pinnacle of holiness obtained by mortal men.<sup>68</sup> So even the Qumran texts which have been closely associated with Hebrews by some scholars<sup>69</sup> does not provided any evidence, however flimsy, for this concept of a sinless High Priest.

Stewart in his study goes on to survey Rabbinic literature and finds that clear provisions are provided for the sinfulness of the high priest. This literature states that the high priest must make personal atonement before making atonement for the people.<sup>70</sup> It records the view that the Holy Spirit departed from Phinehas because of his sin.<sup>71</sup> It contains provisions for a substitute to act on the high priest's behalf should he become accidentally unclean.<sup>72</sup> This

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<sup>63</sup> Stewart uses this phrase to establish the near-canonical status of this text. Yet, he does not clearly state what the basis for that conclusion is - whether it is based on historical qualifications, or the authoritative nature of its teaching. I suspect it may be a combination of both ideas.

<sup>64</sup> Eccles.44-50:

<sup>65</sup> Stewart, 1967.p.126-127.

<sup>66</sup> T.Levi.8:3.

<sup>67</sup> Stewart, 1967.p.128.

<sup>68</sup> Stewart, 1967.p.129.

<sup>69</sup> Yadin, Y. 1955.p.36-55. who first suggested some connection with the Qumran community in the light of the publication of the Qumran scrolls & Buchanan G.W. 1972. In his commentary in the Anchor series he argues that the recipients were a group of ultra orthodox Jews of a Qumran type transported to Jerusalem.

<sup>70</sup> Lev. R.5:6.

<sup>71</sup> Lev. R.31:4.

<sup>72</sup> Num. R.2:26.

demonstrates that the Rabbis recognised the gap between the ideal and reality.<sup>73</sup> So yet again Jewish tradition provides no footing on which our author could have built his unique creation, a sinless High Priest.

This demonstrates that we are right to conclude that Hebrews' concept of a sinless High Priest is nowhere foreshadowed in Jewish tradition as we have it. The sinlessness of Jesus Christ as High Priest, just like the union of priest and victim is a unique feature of this Epistle. This only puts in sharper relief the questions we are concerned with now. What does Hebrews mean by sinlessness. How does he understand it applying to the person of Jesus Christ.

Our present knowledge demonstrates that there is no precedent for a sinless high priest. In Jewish tradition it might have been the cultic ideal, some historic high priests may even have come close to such an ideal in the ethical quality of their lives, but it remained an ideal beyond practical achievement - a fact that all the available evidence only too clearly shows. Evidence which is of little practical use to us as we seek to form a correct understanding of this aspect of Hebrews' thought. All the evidence tells us is that his thought in this, as in many other ways, is without precedent, is unique although we should note that some scholars have argued for this being evidence of a Gnostic background, in which the first Century myth of the redeemed redeemer is at work. Yet surely the Jewish cult itself provides a better basis for understanding Hebrews' use of sinlessness and perfection, as Isaacs has argued.<sup>74</sup> So to proceed further we must return to the consideration of his text.

The text which is the cornerstone of so many commentators' thoughts about Jesus Christ's sinlessness in this Epistle declares,

For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weakness, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Stewart, 1967.pp.130-131.

<sup>74</sup> Isaacs, 1992. p104.

<sup>75</sup> Heb.4:15. Koester, 2001.pp.294-295. Koester states that Jesus' sinlessness has been understood in terms of his nature. He notes that other commentators have believed that this idea was incompatible with the conviction that Jesus was fully human and have wished instead to focus attention on the activity of Christ rather than his nature.

This verse explicitly states that this High Priest has solidarity with humanity, knows man's weakness and has faced the temptations all men face. Also that this High Priest is without sin. What is not so clear is how these two ideas relate to each other, how does he understand them to interact. More importantly for our argument do they interact. If they do not then I am engaged on fruitless exercise and Hebrews offers a Christology that is nothing more than a mere juxtaposition of two conflicting and contradictory portraits of Jesus Christ. Yet as we have already argued there are clues which suggest that such a conclusion is not entirely correct. Yet if we can not come to an interpretation of the High Priest's sinlessness which is not in constant battle with the very clearly delineated portrait of the historic man Jesus, our exegetical task would appear to slip from our grasp.

So what do we observe here. At the very simplest level sinlessness is juxtaposed with the nature of a real man. Nairne, in his dated but very thorough study, notes that what is remarkable is how Hebrews limits our Lord's sinlessness with the lot and even nature of ordinary men.<sup>76</sup> I have no problem with this observation. I see that it may be profitable to see that 'the nature of ordinary men' qualifies the sinlessness, rather than sinlessness qualifying the humanity. In some respects this is a great improvement on the work of many commentators because it has taken a step towards recognition of the strength of the portrait of Jesus the man that this Epistle contains and gives due weight to his solidarity with humanity which is foundational in the Christology which it is expressing.

Cullmann, when faced with this same dilemma notes that Hebrews presupposes the possibility of Jesus sinning precisely by the way he juxtaposes human nature with his (Jesus') sinlessness. For Cullmann this is significant as it shows Jesus' ability to be tempted is even more important in Hebrews than many commentators might suppose. He goes even further when he argues that the claim to sinlessness can only have meaning if we accept a proper emphasis on a susceptibility to temptation.<sup>77</sup> If Jesus was not tempted, or could not have been, the fact that he is sinless means nothing. All of us could be sinless if there was nothing to tempt us! He then goes on to claim that,

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<sup>76</sup> Nairne, 1915.p.125-126. Nairne is suggesting that sinlessness and humanity can be held in at least a creative tension. This idea of a creative tension offers a starting point for a more coherent Christological scheme.

<sup>77</sup> Cullmann, 1959.p.94.

The author of Hebrews really thinks of the common temptations connected with our human weakness, the temptations to which we are exposed simply because we are men. 'In every respect as we are' refers not only to form but also content.<sup>78</sup>

Here we have a scholar who one feels is really attempting to engage with the text of the Epistle, a scholar who has read very clearly the realistic portrait of the human Jesus contained in the text. Cullmann is willing to see that this stress on humanity takes it beyond the temptations we find discussed in the Synoptic Gospels, and claims that this,

...is perhaps the boldest assertion of the completely human character of Jesus in the New Testament.<sup>79</sup>

For Cullmann Jesus' humanity has Christological importance, he is a real man tempted as we are, yet without sin. I believe his observations are very useful in helping us move the argument forward, yet I feel that he is too easily content to rest with the simple addition of 'without sin'. I am disappointed that Cullmann appears to be unaware of an obvious question. At what stage is Jesus considered to be sinless by Hebrews. Cullmann appears to consider that sinlessness simply applies to Jesus per se. Isaacs on the other hand faced with the idea of the perfecting of Jesus, asks how can this be squared with his sinlessness? This question leads her to write,

Was the sinlessness acquired as the final pinnacle of his life or was it a permanent condition throughout? The problem with these questions is that they not only reflect concerns of latter Christian theology, but presuppose an understanding of both perfection and sinlessness not uppermost in our author's thinking.<sup>80</sup>

What I believe we need to consider is that Hebrews may not wish to apply it in this way to Jesus' human life. Could it be that for Hebrews, sinlessness is a quality of Jesus the High Priest?

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<sup>78</sup> Cullmann, 1959.p.95. Also notes that this means that the 'without sin' of Heb.4:15. is a less dogmatic expression of Jesus' sinlessness than other passages 1 Pet.2:22, Heb.9:14 (where the background is the sacrificial lamb without blemish) and 1 Pet.2:22 (where background thought of ebed Yahweh).

<sup>79</sup> Cullmann, 1959.p.95.

<sup>80</sup> Isaacs, 1992.p.103.



Before advancing this argument we must admit, as Isaacs implies, that it may not be possible beyond reasonable doubt, to define exactly how Hebrews applies 'without sin' to Jesus. This may reflect both Hebrews' complex use of semitic imagery and his disregard for precise theological definition. We may be searching for a coherent Christological statement without ambiguities, but I am not certain that we would be justified in applying that purpose to his writing. This is a point of view acknowledged by Bruce when he wrote, "perhaps we do well to remind ourselves that New Testament writers inevitably fail when judged as systematians."<sup>81</sup> That of course does not rule out the fact that we may be able to construct such a coherent statement on the foundations he has laid. Also, as we have already noted,<sup>82</sup> his use of 'without sin' may be coloured by the demands of the cultic ideas he has borrowed from Jewish tradition such as the lamb without blemish.<sup>83</sup> Bearing such observations in mind let us consider the question at what stage is Jesus considered to be sinless by Hebrews.

As was demonstrated in chapter 2, in Hebrews Jesus of Nazareth is not a static figure but an evolving and developing human character. As Cullmann notes, Heb.5:8, 'he learned obedience' presupposes inner human development, a development which he says is also attested to in some strands of the Synoptic tradition.<sup>84</sup> Elsewhere in the text of Hebrews we have evidence for this thinking, for example Heb.2:10, where Jesus is said to be made perfect through suffering. I would argue that this is a vital strand in Hebrews' Christological thought. This idea of development, of learned obedience ties in with and compliments all that he has to say about Jesus' solidarity with humanity. Our experience teaches us that real human beings grow and develop, being slowly shaped by their experiences into the characters that they finally become. More importantly this is a process which only comes to an end when they cease to exist as physical individuals, although of course that may reflect the limitations of our ability 'to observe' rather than ultimate spiritual reality. If we focus on Hebrews' own cultic interest we see 'perfecting' in the light of this analogy as being Jesus' attainment of heaven,

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<sup>81</sup> Bruce, F.F. The Epistle to the Hebrews(revised). Grand Rapids, Wm. B Eerdmans, 1990.p.118. He goes on to say, 'Within the terms in which he chooses to conduct the debate the author of Hebrews is singularly successful, however, and it is in these terms that he should be understood.' This approach I believe fits well with the direction of the case I am advancing.

<sup>82</sup> See p.125 and p.129

<sup>83</sup> Heb.9:14 & 1 Pet.2:22.

<sup>84</sup> Cullmann, 1959.p.97. Who notes, Lk.2:52 'Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favour with God and men.' He also states that Jesus had to learn to carry out the task of the 'ebed Yahweh'.

which equates with the high priests entry into the Holy of Holies. Isaacs argues that being made perfect thereby becomes a process by which this goal is achieved. Hence, as on the Day of Atonement, sacrifice was the essential means of gaining entry into the Holy of Holies, an integral part of the process of entry. So also in Christ as both priest and victim his passion functions as an integral part of the process. Hence Isaacs argues we should view perfecting in Hebrews as a process which Jesus must undergo in order to achieve his goal.<sup>85</sup> A Jesus who develops and is shaped by his experiences has no difficulty in maintaining his solidarity with humanity and it is just such a human Jesus that Hebrews continually demands his readers to accept. This thinking though does not lead Cullmann to consider the possibility that Hebrews may have considered Jesus not to be 'sinless' until he completed his task, which is surprising given his observation that it is more important to guard against Docetism than to worry about this idea of inner development.<sup>86</sup>

I shall argue that there are grounds to believe that Hebrews may have made this distinction even if he allowed it to remain open to differing interpretations. I believe this is something that he would do in order to conform his argument to the Levitical requirements regarding the lamb without blemish, which find expression in Heb.9:14.. I wish to go further and consider that such an approach may both facilitate the interpretation of Hebrews overall argument whilst displaying the real strength of his Christological position. My critics will already be demanding hard evidence to support such a line of interpretation so let us now consider the evidence.

Hebrews stresses the real humanity of Jesus both in his portrait of the human Jesus and in his demand for Jesus' solidarity with humanity. I have demonstrated how the human Jesus is no static conception but a dynamic, developing character in the text of this Epistle.<sup>87</sup> All of these facts are consistent with the views of various commentators and more importantly they provide a coherent and realistic picture of Jesus. They are also in agreement with a wealth of material found in other documents of the New Testament. None of this therefore is grounds for real dispute. What is open to dispute is my belief that Hebrews may have been amenable to the possibility that Jesus was not 'without sin' during this period of his life. As indicated in my

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<sup>85</sup> Isaacs, 1992.p.104. In making this comment Isaacs is particularly thinking of Heb.5:7-10.

<sup>86</sup> Cullmann, 1959.p.97.

<sup>87</sup> See pp.73-74, pp.81-84 and pp.136. for the dynamic character of Jesus.

section on Jesus the Man this has religious implications which we are reluctant to face.<sup>88</sup> I do not propose to address those at this stage because we must first consider the climax of Jesus' human development, his sacrifice on the Cross. This point of climax is crucial for my argument, just as it is for Hebrews in his.

It is obvious, even on the most cursory reading of Hebrews, that Jesus' death on the cross is central to the argument of the Epistle. The whole notion of priestly sacrifice so obviously flows from this fact that without this focus the Epistle would have no teaching to convey. The death on the cross is the climax of Jesus' human life as Nairne recognises,

Hebrews would bid us look for that supreme moment of earthly shame, weakness, failure, and he would hardly be shocked at the suggestion, which has been tentatively made by some people lately, that the moment was reached in the cry, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani." He would not be shocked, for you could never go to far for him in recognising the real manhood of his Lord<sup>89</sup>

According to Hebrews this moment in which Jesus is exposed most starkly as a man, when his mortality is displayed for all to see, is also the moment from which his priestly work flows.

When in his own person he had made purification from sins, he took his seat on high at the right hand of majesty...<sup>90</sup>

But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one. For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> See p.79.

<sup>89</sup> Nairne, 1915.p.72. See also Schenck, 2003.pp.82-84. Schenck notes that Heb.9:27-28 equates Christ's offering with his death, whilst Heb.10:5 and 10 indicates that it was Christ's body which was sacrificed. As Schenck states all these sacrificial metaphors highlight that he was the definitive means of reconciliation with God and his death was the essential element in bringing about this atonement

<sup>90</sup> Heb.1:3b.( Montefiore's translation) which differs little from the RSV translation "when he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high."

<sup>91</sup> Heb.2:9-10.

Therefore he had to be made like to his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted.<sup>92</sup>

...he learned obedience through what he suffered, and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.<sup>93</sup>

In all these passages we see the close associations Hebrews makes between the reality of Jesus' humanity, his solidarity with humanity and his right to act as High Priest. The focus into which all of these associated ideas flow and around which they turn is the climax of his life, his death upon the Cross.

What is beyond dispute is that the cross is the focal point out of which flows Hebrews' unique understanding of Jesus. Many scholars have observed this in their work but what they might more readily dispute is the idea that this is the point at which Hebrews says Jesus is 'without sin'. A few scholars<sup>94</sup> have argued the case for seeing the Cross as the moment when Jesus is perfected, therefore becomes sinless and assumes office as the great High Priest who fulfils God's promises. In such a view Jesus' sinlessness is to be understood as applying to his exalted status as High Priest, a view which gains added weight from Nairne's reading of Heb.7:26., where he notes that the idea of Jesus 'separated from sinners' is immediately joined with the phrase 'made higher than the heavens'.<sup>95</sup> This would suggest that Hebrews' viewed Jesus' sinlessness as belonging to his exalted state, and that we can say he is 'without sin' when we refer to him as our great High Priest.

I believe we can now see that such an interpretation makes good sense of many of the elements that constitute Hebrews' Christological argument. Such an interpretation allows proper space

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<sup>92</sup> Heb.2:17-18.

<sup>93</sup> Heb.5:8-10.

<sup>94</sup> Williamson R. "Hebrews 4:15 and the sinlessness of Jesus." *Expository Times* 86.1974.p.5-7. Who argues that passages such as 10:10 show Jesus' death as the climax of a life of learned obedience. The self-abnegation of his act on the Cross, is the point at which sin and death are totally defeated.

<sup>95</sup> Nairne, 1915.p.132.

for a truly human Jesus on which we have seen Hebrews lays particular stress. It also allows for the strong expression of Jesus' solidarity with humanity which is an indispensable element of Hebrews' argument. It gives scope for a true focus on the central event of all New Testament faith, the fact of the crucifixion. More importantly for our purpose it begins to suggest ways in which the merely juxtaposed portraits identified by many scholars begin to stand together as a coherent unified Christological scheme.

Such an interpretation is not free of exegetical difficulties. One very obvious difficulty arises from Hebrews' use of Jewish cultic traditions in fashioning his argument. As we have already noted, in that cultic tradition the lamb that was offered was required to be without blemish and this is alluded to in Hebrews,

He has no need, like the old high priests, to offer up sacrifices daily, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people...<sup>96</sup>

In this sense then Hebrews is clearly saying that Jesus was a sacrificial victim without blemish, as he offers only one sacrifice, his death upon the Cross, he has not purified his own sins so in this sense he must be 'without sin'. This is what the law demands.<sup>97</sup> This does seem contrary to the line of interpretation we have been following in that it appears to demand that Jesus is 'without sin' before he is offered in sacrifice upon the Cross. It may be that Hebrews has chosen to express himself in 4:15 in this way specifically to leave such an interpretation open. If that is so we are forced to ask if we have pushed the evidence too far, are we guilty of isogesis rather than exegesis. It must be said that Hebrews is quite capable of wanting to say that Jesus is both, 'without sin' once he is exalted as High Priest and 'without sin' as the perfect victim, despite our qualms about the apparent inconsistency. This 'both' 'and' type of thinking has been identified as being quite common among semitic peoples. We of course are much less happy with it.

One possible solution which has been offered is that Jesus' experience in the Garden of

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<sup>96</sup> Heb.7:27.

<sup>97</sup> Deut.17:1 & Lev.22:18-25.

Gethsemane was critical in the process of his perfecting.<sup>98</sup> Such a view involves the argument that here he faces his greatest temptation, the temptation to call on his Father to save him from his impending death, yet in facing this temptation and laying aside his own desire to escape death by accepting the Father's will he moves into a sinless state.<sup>99</sup> Isaacs herself favours such an interpretation of Jesus' Gethsemane experience. She argues that this event should be seen as Jesus displaying an appropriate attitude of reverence to the Father. Jesus' prayer is not an attempt to escape death but the accompaniment to his sacrifice, which means he himself 'was made' perfect (Heb.5:9) and thereby entered heaven. As Isaacs notes loud cries were thought in Hellenistic Judaism to be an appropriate approach to the Deity, so these show the Son's appropriate attitude, an attitude of filial obedience, which is expressed in prayer and the accompanying sacrifice.<sup>100</sup> Partly this reflects the second Adam Christology we find elsewhere in the New Testament. The point being that in not snatching at equality with God, but accepting in obedience the destiny of man, he perfects human nature and restores it. It is in this quality of obedience that Jesus becomes the victim without blemish for our author. This whole concept of obedience is, as we have already seen,<sup>101</sup> an important part in what our author wishes to say about Jesus.

The problems derived from the use of cultic ideas in Hebrews is not the only problem that my line of interpretation faces. A more difficult problem is raised by the religious implications of this view. It would appear to many that we are arguing that Jesus was a sinner like all men. That for many believers would be an unacceptable view and run contrary to deep seated

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<sup>98</sup> Bruce, F.F. *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Revised Ed.) Grand Rapids, Wm.B. Eerdmans, 1990. p128. Bruce writes of Heb.5:7 that 'while Gethsemane provides "the most telling illustration" of our author's words, they have a more general reference to the whole course of our Lord's humiliation and passion.' Bruce believes that Psalm 22 has influenced the language used, whilst Koester, 2001.p.108 argued that Psalm 116 has influenced this text

<sup>99</sup> Omark R.E. 1958.pp.39-51. In this article Omark argues that this is a sign of Jesus' true humanity that he tastes death. More importantly that it is necessary for Jesus to achieve true sonship, that he willingly completes God plan, by offering himself on the Cross. If Jesus had not he would have failed to fulfil the prime qualification of sons of God, namely obedience, and have been disqualified from being the Son.

<sup>100</sup> Isaacs, 1992.p.105-106. sees Ps.116 if not as the source of this, a parallel to its assurance that God will hear the worshipper's prayer.

<sup>101</sup> See p. There is a strong case to be made that sin in Hebrews is not a matter of ethical failings, which the cultic system dealt with adequately, but rather apostasy and disloyalty to the promises of God (Christ). It is exactly this point which the writer illustrates with his use of the wilderness traditions in Heb.3:16-19, where the problem is apostasy and disloyalty.

traditions within the church.<sup>102</sup> When Nairne in commenting on Heb.9:28 writes that,

Even in our Lord there could be no absolute freedom from sin in the days of the flesh. The final victory was not won till the final trial. He was not separated from sin and sinner till He had learned all obedience and was made perfect through the suffering of death.<sup>103</sup>

He would seem simply to confirm such fears that a line of interpretation, such as the one developed here inevitably means, that Jesus is a sinner. Yet that would be to do Nairne a disservice as he is quite clear that he does not see Jesus as progressing from sinful habit to sinlessness, nor does he think that Hebrews is arguing against Church tradition that Jesus was of sinful habit. Rather Hebrews, according to Nairne, sees Jesus' progress not as from disobedience to obedience but rather as a deepening and enriching of obedience. Jesus refuses sinful methods, that is the point of the temptation narratives.<sup>104</sup> Such a view appears to accord well with the language about progress and perfecting expressed in the Epistle itself. Isaacs takes a slightly different approach when she argues that in offering a reinterpretation of the Levitical cult<sup>105</sup> Hebrews focuses exclusively on Christ's passion and shows little interest in what led up to it. Isaacs argues that our exegesis should respect these limits in attempting to read references to Jesus' earthly ministry or to answering questions which were outside our author's purview. For Hebrews the cross is the essential means of Jesus' access to God, which he understands through the analogy of entry into the Holy of Holies. Hebrews does not defend Jesus' innocence, argues Isaacs, because his death was the prerequisite of his entry into heaven and his sinlessness the given in his cultic role as both priest and victim.<sup>106</sup> Isaacs appears to be unwilling to face the question of Jesus' ethical status during the days of his

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<sup>102</sup> Koester, 2001.p.294. Koester notes that Jesus' sinlessness has been understood in terms of his nature, so for example Origin argued that Christ's unique nature meant that his human soul so loved righteousness that it was not vulnerable to change and had no susceptibility to sin.

<sup>103</sup> Nairne, 1915.p.132.

<sup>104</sup> Nairne, 1915.p.72-73.

<sup>105</sup> Isaacs, M.E. Reading Hebrews and James. Macon, Smyth & Helwys, 2002.p.72. Isaacs writes ' It is Israel's sacrificial system rather than any subsequent attempt of Christian apologetics to demonstrate Christ's divinity based upon his moral perfection that we need to look if we would understand his "sinlessness" in Hebrews.'

<sup>106</sup> Isaacs, 1992.p.107.

flesh.<sup>107</sup> She seems to be saying that Hebrews does not provide us with the information we require to draw definite conclusions at this point. I am not totally convinced that Hebrews shows little interest in what led up to the passion given what he says concerning human solidarity, although I would accept that our author does not set out to answer the question; did the human Jesus ever sin?

In both these views, Jesus during his earthly life could be understood not as being 'without sin' in an absolute sense, but more like the various high priests referred to in Jewish tradition as blameless. Such high priests were viewed as blameless by their contemporaries, but were not regarded as different from other men or separated from sinners. This idea accords well with the argument as developed in the Epistle. The difference between Jesus and these blameless high priests of Jewish tradition is that he also goes on to become the victim. In accepting the role of victim and the inevitability of his own death on the cross, Jesus progresses from blameless individual to sinless High Priest. This sense of progression, of two separate acts, sacrifice and entry, are an integral part of Hebrews' presentation of Christ's exaltation in terms of the Levitical cult.<sup>108</sup> I believe that this interpretation represents a strong and consistent reading of Hebrews' text which displays his unique grasp of the Christological issues. We are therefore in a position to agree that,

This is certainly this writers view of the course of our Lord's earthly life; that it was not perfect till the end.<sup>109</sup>

I would maintain then that it is entirely reasonable to argue that Heb.4:15. 'without sin' and the concept of a sacrifice without blemish should be applied not to the totality of the story of Jesus Christ told by Hebrews. Such a reading of the text, where Jesus' sinlessness qualifies his humanity would both damage the depth of our author's Christological insight and

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<sup>107</sup> Isaacs in her recent book (Isaacs, 2002) directs her reader's thinking to the cultic requirements if Jesus' sacrifice is going to ensure his access to God, whilst also stressing his humanity. She does not state what this means in terms of how he behaved during his human life, in one sense she sidesteps these issues very effectively.

<sup>108</sup> Isaacs, 1992.p.108. bases this view on the fact that the entry into the Holy of Holies was not synonymous with the slaughter of the victim, later proceeds former. So in Hebrews these two acts are not fused as they are in the fourth Gospel.

<sup>109</sup> Nairne, 1915.p.70.



undermine the humanity of Jesus which he is so insistent on.<sup>110</sup> For too long scholars have failed to recognise that Jesus is 'without sin' only when he achieves his status as High Priest. In such a reading of the text the Cross gains the focal position which belongs to it; a truly human Jesus is preserved and his sacrifice is seen for what it is, unique and once for all. In such a reading 'without sin' does not qualify Jesus' humanity,<sup>111</sup> but rather, as others have already argued, that humanity qualifies and deepens his sinlessness, makes it all the more real because of the way that this perfection was won. It is in his willing acceptance of God's will (Heb.9:12 & 14.), that Jesus becomes the superior victim (Heb.9:11-14.). It is his filial obedience which makes him the superior sacrifice not that he is without blemish, for all victims are. This according to Isaacs shows that though Hebrews may start with a cultic model, in this instance a sacrificial victim, yet he can break out of its confines when necessary.<sup>112</sup> Therefore we can argue that it is Jesus' obedience, his absolute faith in the Father's will, which brings about his and therefore our vindication. Nairne sums this all up, in some words he quotes from Du Bose's 'High Priesthood and Sacrifice',

I do not know how better to express the truth of the matter than to say, in what seems to me to be the explicit teaching of our Epistle and of the New Testament generally, that our Lord's whole relation to sin on our behalf was identical with our own up to the point of His unique and exceptional personal action with reference to it. Left to our nature and ourselves it overcomes and slays us; through God in Him He overcomes and slew it. He did it not by His own will and power as man, but as man through an absolute dependence upon God. And He made both the omnipotent grace of God upon which he depended and His own absolute dependence upon it, His perfect faith, available for us in our salvation. He re-acts in us the victory over sin and death which was first enacted in Himself.<sup>113</sup>

It is important to note that the sinlessness gained by Jesus is functionally linked to the sinlessness he as High Priest imparts to us his followers.<sup>114</sup> This has important Christological

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<sup>110</sup> Isaacs, 2002.p.72. Isaacs says though Jesus is exalted above humanity he is not divorced from it, hence his sinlessness (Heb.4:15) is clearly designed not to distance him from the rest of us but to affirm his essential qualification to enter into God's presence for us.

<sup>111</sup> Isaacs, 1992.p.113 In agreement with such a view when she writes Jesus' sinlessness unlike that applied to Philo's high priest/ logos does not cut him off from the rest of humanity.

<sup>112</sup> Isaacs, 1992.p.108.

<sup>113</sup> Nairne, 1915.p.126.

<sup>114</sup> Nairne, 1915.p.127.

implications as has long been recognised. In its simplest form it was expressed in the much quoted epigram of Gregory of Nazianzus, 'what God has not assumed, that he has not redeemed.'<sup>115</sup> In this epigram he clearly recognises the vital link between our redemption and that achieved by Jesus, even if he is viewing it as a question of Jesus' true humanity at the time.

What then do I conclude from this lengthy discussion of Jesus' sinlessness which we began in chapter 2 and have developed here. I will first state what sinlessness is not, before setting out what it is within Hebrews' theological scheme as I understand it. I have demonstrated that sinlessness is not primarily concerned with the moral or ethical actions of the human Jesus. These concerns are beyond the scope of Hebrews' purpose in writing, either because his thinking is shaped wholly by the demands of Israel's sacrificial system as Isaacs advocates, or because his thinking is primarily focused on the more devastating sin of apostasy, rather than the minor failings of individuals. Equally sinlessness is not for our writer a statement of Christ's nature, his divine origin or transcendence, nor is it 'a given'. It therefore follows that sinlessness was never intended by our author to limit Jesus' humanity, or to threaten his solidarity with the other sons of God, which is functionally vital to his statement and understanding of God's plan for our redemption. What is not clear is how our author's various statements in this area should be applied exactly, partly because of the cultic metaphors and ideas which overlay his argument, yet despite this reservation we have demonstrated what sinlessness means within the Epistle's thought. Sinlessness is primarily the product of Jesus' life of obedience and loyalty to the plan and promises of God. So it is not surprising that sinlessness is an acquired quality, which can only be fully realised when Jesus' ultimate act of obedience is completed on the Cross. Jesus' sinlessness demonstrates his achievement which becomes the foundation for his exaltation and perfection. Such sinlessness is the destiny, one might say glory of humanity, promised in Psalm 8 as Hebrews itself states.<sup>116</sup> Jesus' obedience and his resulting sinless status are the basis for the new and final act of redemption which is the culmination of salvation history. None of what I have said requires that I dismiss the Church's traditional assertion that Jesus Christ is sinless, the exalted Jesus, the great high

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<sup>115</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus. Epistolae 101. The Nicene & Post Nicene Fathers vol 7. Edinburgh, T & T Clark, reprinted 1980. p. 440.

<sup>116</sup> Heb.2:5-18

priest of our confession<sup>117</sup> is perfect and without sin<sup>118</sup> but that does not mean that the human Jesus was 'sinless' in the same respect and that this language should be applied directly to his life story.

Finally, we need to consider how this view of Hebrews' thinking on sinlessness relates to what he writes in his first chapter about Jesus the Divine Son. This Divine Son has been understood as pre-existing before his descent as the man Jesus. Hebrews itself lends support to such a view when he writes, '...we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels'.<sup>119</sup> Traditionally Jesus the sinless Divine Son was made lower than the angels, made man and died on the Cross, before being exalted by God to act as High Priest. If Jesus becomes 'without sin' only when he is exalted as High Priest, how does that shape Hebrews' thinking about him as Divine Son.

#### **iv A Divine Son.**

Any concept of divinity contains within it the idea of perfection which is usually closely associated with the concepts of eternity and impassativity. It is because of Yahweh's perfection that various intermediaries within the Old Testament narratives are recorded as being unable to look upon him directly, for example when Moses encounters Yahweh in the burning bush,<sup>120</sup> or again within the dark cloud on Mount Sinai<sup>121</sup> he is unable to look directly on God. This is not a feature simply of the narratives about Moses, but a widely repeated concept within other Old Testament narratives.<sup>122</sup> Given this background it would seem reasonable to argue that any idea of Christ's pre-existence as commonly understood would automatically include the idea of his own perfection, or at least his sharing in the perfection of God. Such conclusions would seem to undermine any hypothesis which saw Hebrews as teaching that Christ only became

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<sup>117</sup> Heb.3:1.

<sup>118</sup> Heb.4:15.

<sup>119</sup> Heb.2:9

<sup>120</sup> Exod.3:1-6. This passage concludes with the clear statement 'Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God.'

<sup>121</sup> Exod.20:21. Yahweh is described as being within the dark cloud, to which Moses draws near to speak with him - yet Moses does not enter it. Prior to this steps have been taken to ensure the people do not come close against Yahweh's holiness breaks out against them.

<sup>122</sup> 1 Kings 19:13. Elijah covered his face with his cloak when Yahweh comes to him on Mount Horeb in the gentle breeze. See also Gen.19:26 where Lot's wife looks back at Sodom and Gomorrah and is turned into a pillar of salt, this reflects this concept, as God's wrath was being visited on these two towns and Lot is instructed not to look back.

perfect and sinless once he was exalted as High Priest.

Is a resolution of these conflicting conceptions of Christ possible. Can we conclude finally that the only adequate solution that we can firmly establish is what many scholars have already claimed - a mere juxtaposition of conflicting Christological portraits. I believe that such a resolution is possible without resorting to the idea of juxtaposition. The consideration of Hebrews' portrait of the Divine Son in chapter 3 has already established the necessary foundations for such a resolution. If we turn our attention to the various features considered there it is possible to resolve this apparent conflict of ideas successfully.

One feature expressed throughout all the material associated with sonship surveyed in chapter 3 was the tension, or ambiguity apparent in the language used. That ambiguity took slightly differing forms within the different themes associated with sonship - but it was there in all the themes without exception. In the discussion about sonship and Messiah it found expression within the language of appointment, while within the discussion of Son of Man it was expressed in concepts of representation and solidarity with humanity. Even within the discussion of wisdom language which appears to stress the close identification of the Son with God, there is a level of ambiguity displayed. This is made all more clear when attention is turned to the concept of pre-existence - the very concept which might be expected to establish unambiguously Christ's identity with God and his divine, perfect nature. However this was demonstrated not to be the case in any conclusive sense,<sup>123</sup> even if such ideas were not proven to be impossible. Hebrews' use of language in relation to all the themes associated with Christ's sonship display an ambiguity, more importantly an ambiguity which increasingly appears to have theological significance.

The theological significance of this ambiguity of language can be demonstrated as functioning to focus attention on Jesus' human achievement and his subsequent exaltation. As Schenck observes the 'focus of sonship language centres on the exaltation and session of Christ, although Hebrews does not know a time when Christ is not 'a son' or even when it is not appropriate to refer to him as *the* Son. It is only at God's right hand, however, that Christ is 'enthroned' as the Son and properly takes on the appointment that God has assigned him.'<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> See pp.109-117

<sup>124</sup> Schenck, 1997.p.91.

Similar thinking underlies Hanson's statement that for Hebrews 'the divinity of the Son is manifested by means of his humanity.'<sup>125</sup> In chapter 3 it was demonstrated how the process usually associated with a 'high' Christology of pre-existence, incarnation (including kenosis) and exaltation may be better understood in Hebrews thinking as exaltation, a unique human life from which it results, leading to ideas of God's pre-existent act or plan of redemption. In Hebrews' thinking pre-existence does not have a single clear-cut meaning and can be understood as referring to the pre-existent act of God rather than a pre-existent individual.<sup>126</sup>

In a similar manner the language of appointment makes the reader consider the achievement of Jesus' human life. A human life which is central to the thinking associated with Son of Man and Adam Christology, concepts on which Hebrews draws strongly in his discussion of Christ's sonship. In both of these areas it is the representative function of Jesus' life which is highlighted by Hebrews. This representative function is also a major feature within his use of priesthood as an explanation of Christ's uniqueness. Jesus qualifications for both his roles as high priest and Son of Man, especially in terms of the representative of humanity, depend upon both his humanity as well as his divinity.<sup>127</sup>

Whereas the language of divine sonship might appear to be the major obstacle to any idea that Jesus' sinlessness for Hebrews is only achieved once 'he had made purification for sins'<sup>128</sup> and is exalted as High Priest, it is obvious that this is not so easily proven to be the case. Indeed Hebrews does not exclude such an understanding, which is why many scholars have concluded that his Epistle contains juxtaposed portraits of Christ. Yet he opens up the possibility of a more fruitful Christological scheme, a scheme which is 'a clear example of the holding in balance of a fully human Jesus (with human passion, the experience of obedience, and adoptionist language), and a thoroughly divine and pre-existent Son.'<sup>129</sup> In this scheme Christ's close identity with the Father is drawn out of the reality of his human achievement, within which man's original act of disobedience is reversed by Christ's own self-sacrifice, this enables him to act as High Priest of a new order and covenant, and ensure that man's intended

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<sup>125</sup> Hanson, A.T. Grace and Truth. London, SPCK, 1975.p.37.

<sup>126</sup> Dunn, 1980.p.209. See p.111.

<sup>127</sup> Giles, 1975.p.331.

<sup>128</sup> Heb.1:3.

<sup>129</sup> Pryor, 1981.p.50.

divine destiny is brought into being. “The only conclusion that will make sense of *Hebrews* Christology is that the divine image is actually mediated by the process of ‘learning obedience through what he suffered.’<sup>130</sup>”

This demonstrates that Hebrews’ understanding of priesthood is given full expression in the achievements of Jesus’ human life, a life in which sacrifice and priestly action is so closely combined as to become the singular expression of divine redemptive activity. It is that actual historical life which provides the functional foundation for Christ’s priestly activity, an activity which enables Jesus to become the representative of true humanity, humanity made in the very image of the deity himself. In the person of Jesus man’s original disobedience is reversed by his perfect obedience to the Father given final form by his sacrifice on the cross. His perfect obedience qualifies Jesus for his appointment and enthronement as a Son of God. Jesus’ priestly activity within the world functions for Hebrews as the bridge which unites all his Christological motifs.

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<sup>130</sup> Hanson, 1975.p.37. My italics - Hanson’s original quote reads ‘of the author’s Christology’.

## **Chapter 5 - After the Order of Melchizedek.**

One major element which has not yet been addressed with respect to the concept of priesthood advanced by Hebrews is that of the figure of Melchizedek. This figure has proved to be both a source of fascination and the starting point for a number of Christian heresies.<sup>1</sup> There can be little doubt that the figure of Melchizedek dominates much of our author's writing concerning the question of priesthood. No study which ignored this could claim to have explored fully Hebrews' concept of priesthood. So we must now engage with this enigmatic figure in order to come to a better understanding of why he dominates the Epistle, and what Melchizedek has to add to our developing understanding of Hebrews' concept of priesthood.

Hebrews states very clearly in both Heb.5:6 and 7:17 that the High Priest with whom his Epistle is concerned, and more importantly Jesus as the High Priest belong to the order or rank of Melchizedek. As Hebrews writes, 'Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.'<sup>2</sup> As we have already established, priesthood is the major dominating theme of the Epistle. Section by section as our author develops his argument the title 'High Priest' is repeated, yet not fully explained until he chooses in chapters 7-10 to work out its meaning. Hebrews' argument concerning Melchizedek does not exhaust the topic of priesthood, but it is central to his thinking about Christ our great High Priest. So we must explore this topic with some care, not allowing Melchizedek to dominate totally but recognising the importance of this thinking in the overall pattern of Hebrews' Christology. Therefore,

We must guard against limiting the christology of Hebrews to this figure (Melchizedek), which as the type of Christ was especially to occupy the Christian imagination of the ancient church after there had been much reflection about it already in Judaism.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Horton F.L. The Melchizedek Tradition. London, CUP, 1976.p.2.

<sup>2</sup> Heb.5:6.(and 7:17).RSV which uses traditional language at this point to emphasise its status as scripture to the author and his readers. Can also be rendered 'forever in the succession of Melchizedek.' Heb.7:21 also cites the first half of Ps.110:4 "Thou art a priest forever.." but does not explicitly mention the order of Melchizedek.

<sup>3</sup> Cullmann, 1959.p.90.

To deal successfully with this material is no easy task as Hebrews himself admits, 'About this (Melchizedek) we have much to say, much that is hard to explain...'<sup>4</sup> Like so many aspects of his teaching, Hebrews confronts us with a densely interwoven selection of themes, all with import for his Christology, which presents the commentator with a near impossible task of interpretation if he is not to destroy their inter-linked imagery and thought. In many ways this can be seen as a direct reflection of the semitic thinking which characterises so much of our author's argument. So often it is not a matter of choosing between this or that interpretation, but rather of holding both in a creative tension. The central concern here must be to explore what revelations the Melchizedek material contain in this search for a better understanding of Hebrews' concept of priesthood.

#### **i. 'Melchizedek' the First Priest before God Most High.**

What then can we know about this priest Melchizedek and what do we know about him as an historical figure, if this is what he was? These at first seem straight forward enough questions. What we can say with certainty is that Melchizedek is only mentioned twice in the text of the Old Testament, first in Genesis 14:18-20. and again in Ps.110:4. Both of these are merely passing references within the context of other narratives. In Genesis 14, Melchizedek is merely a priest-king who provides Abram with refreshment, whilst in Ps.110 the King of Jerusalem is declared to possess or be given priesthood 'according to the order of Melchizedek', the exact words that Hebrews himself chooses to use.<sup>5</sup>

Outside these two passing references there is little further direct evidence concerning Melchizedek. Both Philo and Josephus mention him,<sup>6</sup> but they do not provide primary information about him, rather they simply attest to the traditions which had developed by the first century AD. In the same way material from Qumran does no more than this.<sup>7</sup> Yet nothing

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<sup>4</sup> Heb.5:11.

<sup>5</sup> Heb.5:7.

<sup>6</sup> Philo. De Abrahamo. §235 and Josephus The Jewish War. §438, Jewish Antiquities. §§179-181.

<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that Qumranic traditions about Melchizedek offer no unique material for consideration, but rather that in terms of historical information and traditions derived from that information they offer little beyond what we know from Philo and Josephus. It is true there are some slight variations in the Genesis Apocryphon from the text of Gen.14, but Horton demonstrates these are not exegetically significant. See Horton, 1976.pp.61-64. The unique contribution Qumran makes is contained in the fragmentary text of 11QMel., but this does not contain extra historical information, rather it is a treatise on Melchizedek the angelic, or heavenly eschatological being. So in this sense Qumran has little to offer us by way of additional historical information.



in this tradition quite explains the extraordinary use made of him in our Epistle. This is a usage which has led scholars to divide sharply over how Melchizedek should be viewed. For some he is an angelic being, whereas for others he is a man mentioned in the Torah whose story had exegetical advantages for our author. It was a similar division of opinion which led to speculation within the early church, which resulted in heresy and later in a growth of legendary material among both Jews and Christians. In modern scholarship Melchizedek has had extensive and apparently unmerited scholarly attention<sup>8</sup> given the brevity with which he is dealt in scripture. One of the most comprehensive treatments of the traditions about Melchizedek is Horton's critical examination of Melchizedek traditions up to the fifth century.<sup>9</sup>

In chapter 2 of this study Horton carries out a thorough investigation of the Old Testament references about Melchizedek. In some forty pages he examines a number of important questions, some of which we will engage with later in this chapter, before drawing a number of conclusions.<sup>10</sup> The question is raised of whether it is possible on the basis of the Old Testament evidence alone to argue that Melchizedek was the priest-king of Jerusalem. He argues that there is a lack of positive evidence, but does concede that this prevents our disproving this idea conclusively. Horton merely questions whether it is possible to build complex theories of sacral kingship and royal theology on such shifting sand. Noting the problems concerning the dating of both biblical references to Melchizedek, he argues that we can make a strong case for Melchizedek as a local chieftain, who did exist as an historical individual and may have met Abram.<sup>11</sup> The figure of Melchizedek as a divine redeemer he sees as having no foundation in the Old Testament sources themselves, and he ascribes this to a later stage of tradition.

If we accept fully, or even partially, Horton's conclusions concerning the historical Melchizedek, we must ask ourselves why such a figure with two passing references in the Old Testament should excite so much interest and receive such a prominent role in the argument of our author. What element beyond the mere facts of his history gives him the spiritual

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<sup>8</sup> This scholarly interest in Melchizedek has partly been generated by the idea that he might provide some clues to Christ's character and status, a viewpoint we shall consider later in this chapter, see p.147-149.

<sup>9</sup> Horton, 1976. See his introduction in chapter 1 for a fairly comprehensive account of modern scholarship concerning Melchizedek.

<sup>10</sup> Horton, 1976.p.12-53.

<sup>11</sup> Horton,. 1976.p.52.

importance that Hebrews and others have ascribed to him? A clue to answering this puzzle may be found in the writings of Philo and Josephus, where both recognise Melchizedek as the first priest of God Most High.<sup>12</sup> Josephus clearly states that Melchizedek offers priestly service in a time of war and that he was described as the first one to do priestly service before God. Philo follows the same overall viewpoint yet chooses to express it in his own unique terms, when he says in De Abrahamo, that Melchizedek possesses a unique self-taught priesthood, which is his way of stating that Melchizedek was the first individual to do priestly service before God.

From where then do both these Jewish writers, near contemporaries of Hebrews, derive this view that Melchizedek was the first priest? One thing is certain: It is not from the two Old Testament passages which provide the only information that we have regarding Melchizedek. The text of Psalm 110 is silent about the history of Melchizedek, whereas Genesis 14:18-20 merely records his encounter with Abram. Genesis 14 does not state that Melchizedek was the first priest of God Most High, it merely records that he was a priest of God Most High, before going on to detail the offering of bread and wine he presented to Abram before blessing him, and accepting a tithe from him in return. The only extra piece of information provided by this text, is that Melchizedek was King of Salem and this has been open to some considerable debate<sup>13</sup> as we shall see later.

If these texts do not provide us with the fact of Melchizedek being the first priest of God, what does? The reason for Josephus' and Philo's claim is to be found in Genesis 14, but not in the words of the text itself, but in the placing of this narrative in the overall text of the Torah, because by fortuitous circumstance Melchizedek is the first priest to be mentioned. To modern readers this seems of limited significance and may reflect our understanding of how our existing text of Genesis came into being, but for a Jewish exegete of say the first century BC this fact would have been of great importance. As Horton notes, for a Jewish exegete if no other priest is mentioned prior to Melchizedek that meant that he was the first priest of God, because if there had been any earlier priest, the Torah would not have failed to mention him.<sup>14</sup> This is the common understanding upon which the views of Josephus and Philo rest, and is a

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<sup>12</sup> Philo. De Abrahamo. §235. see also Horton, 1976. p.57 and Josephus The Jewish War. §438, Jewish Antiquities. §§179-181. see also Horton, 1976.p.83.

<sup>13</sup> Horton, 1976.p.34-53.

<sup>14</sup> Horton,1976.p.157.

common exegetical tradition which both accept as normative. On the basis of this shared exegetical tradition Hebrews is able to argue that this means certain facts about Melchizedek and his priesthood are true. If Melchizedek is the first priest of God Most High then it follows that his priesthood is the archetype for all priesthood.<sup>15</sup> As we shall see it is partly on this basis that Hebrews argues that the Levitical priesthood is derived from the priesthood belonging to Melchizedek. Hebrews also argues that Melchizedek's priesthood is eternal, at least in the sense of its lasting value as the defining type for all priesthood. It follows that if his priesthood is the archetype for priesthood it must be superior to all other forms of priesthood. Lastly, Melchizedek's priesthood can be seen as a 'natural' priesthood, unlike priesthood which is a mere copy of his original.

It is these factors which enable Nairne to say of Genesis 14 and Melchizedek, that here is provided a priest-king, who is not of Israel, but who is recognised as the founder of all priesthood. A 'priest of God Most High' who in blessing Abram stood on his Godward side. This ancient, abiding and universal priesthood was never superseded by the derived tradition of priesthood which originated in Levi, rather it had gone on side by side with it and finally outlasted it!<sup>16</sup>

Before we can explore Hebrews' use of these ideas in his argument and their place in his unique and distinctive Christology, we must turn our attention to a consideration of the relationship between the Levitical priesthood and that of Melchizedek as presented in the Epistle. This relationship is a facet of Hebrews' argument which is crucial in shaping his Christological thinking and constructing his portrait of Christ, as we shall see.

## **ii. A Superior Priesthood.**

The basic tenet on which the superiority of Melchizedek's priesthood rests is, as we have already noted, its primacy within the Torah narratives. As the first priest of God most high, Melchizedek becomes the archetype for all subsequent priesthoods. Yet Hebrews' argument in this area, as in so many others, is far more complex than this basic fact would suggest. The primacy of Melchizedek's priesthood is simply the starting point of his fully developed

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<sup>15</sup> See pp.56-57.

<sup>16</sup> Nairne, 1915.p.149.

argument for Melchizedekian superiority, which Hebrews essays in chapter 7 of his Epistle. We may find this argument less than satisfactory because it depends quite heavily on thinking which reflects an age quite different from our own.<sup>17</sup> This, however, does not invalidate the conclusions which he draws, rather it simply highlights an issue which has already been considered here,<sup>18</sup> namely that his terminology and thinking are alien to that of our own age.

Hebrews' argument in chapter 7 begins from a close reading of the text of Genesis 14:17-20. where he notes that Abram after being blessed by Melchizedek apportions to him (Melchizedek), a tithe of the spoils of the war he has just fought. In verses 4-10 Hebrews sets out four points which for him demonstrate Melchizedek's superiority. The first of these is the tithes which Abram so happily gifts to him. This spontaneous gift by Abram is seen as an admission by him of his inferiority to Melchizedek. Montefiore in his commentary goes on to explore the contrast expressed in verses 5 and 6. Here it is noted that the Levitical priests are authorised to collect tithes from their fellow Israelites, from within their own kin, as they are all descendants of Abram. Yet Melchizedek receives a tithe from Abram who is not his kin and the Levitical priests are unable to do that.<sup>19</sup> This tithe operates in two ways to prove Melchizedek's superiority over the Levitical priesthood. Melchizedek's superiority is further enhanced by the fact that he is recorded as blessing Abram. As our author observes, "It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior."<sup>20</sup> He then moves rapidly on to say,

Further, in one case it is mortal men who are receiving tithes, in the other case a man who is affirmed to be still alive.<sup>21</sup>

The point Hebrews is making here is that Melchizedek's priesthood is superior to the Levitical

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<sup>17</sup> Hebrews use of Rabbinic traditions of exegesis distance him from our own thinking and approach. His use of 'the silence of the Torah' about Melchizedek's parents being one such example, which whilst "such reasoning may strain contemporary readers...made perfectly good sense sense to..." his audience. (see Long, T.G. *Hebrews*. Louisville, John Knox Press, 1997.p.85.

<sup>18</sup> See p.55 and pp.57-58.

<sup>19</sup> Montefiore, 1964.p.120-121.

<sup>20</sup> Heb.7:7.

<sup>21</sup> Heb.7:8. (Montefiore's translation). The RSV reads "Here tithes are received by mortal men; there by one of whom it is testified that he lives."

because it is eternal. The Levitical priests die as all men die,<sup>22</sup> but Melchizedek is considered to be immortal. This idea of his eternal priesthood is partly inferred from Psalm 110:4 which states 'a priest for ever in the order of Melchizedek', but it is also founded on other elements. This idea of an eternal priesthood is one element in establishing Melchizedek's superiority.<sup>23</sup> Hebrews completes this section of his argument by observing that it could be argued that Levi himself paid tithe to Melchizedek, based on the idea that he was in his (Levi's) ancestor's loins. To our modern ears this seems a strange argument, that Levi because he is descended from Abram, somehow is caught up in his (Abram's) tithe to Melchizedek.<sup>24</sup> Yet in Hebrews' world with its much stronger sense of social solidarity, especially among the Jews, this idea was not so strange. Montefiore notes that there could be a flaw in Hebrews' argument at this point, when he says that Abram was not a priest when he paid tithe and therefore it could be argued his subordination to Melchizedek did not prejudice the priestly prerogatives of Levi and his descendants. Montefiore, however feels that this objection rests on weak grounds, as Abram acted on behalf of all his descendants and that his children are one with him. Montefiore would liken this to Paul's use in the New Testament of the terms 'in Adam' and 'in Christ' (1 Cor.15:22).<sup>25</sup> This tithe given by Levi through Abram therefore becomes another sign of Melchizedek's superiority over the Levitical priesthood.

Hebrews though is not content to rest here, because he pushes his argument further when he writes,

Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron?<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Hence Nairne, 1915 p.142-3 argues that Levitical priesthood relies on physical descent, which might mean that a man is slowly shaped to be a good priest, but could also mean that this succession becomes corrupted and becomes a mere mechanical process without spiritual value. Paul, M. J. "The Order of Melchizedek." *Westminster Theological Journal*, 49.1987.p.203 - argues that in the Old Testament there are clear references to the idea that Aaron's priesthood was connected with eternity Exod.29:9 & 40:15, both speak of 'a perpetual priesthood throughout their generations', yet this does not suggest an eternal priesthood for any individual, rather an eternal line of priests. A subtle but important difference.

<sup>23</sup> We shall return to this eternal priesthood as an element of the superiority of his priesthood at a later stage, see pp.163-164.

<sup>24</sup> Koester, C.R. *Hebrews*. New York, Doubleday, 2001.pp.350-352. Provides a clear survey of the theological thinking behind Hebrews' exegesis.

<sup>25</sup> Montefiore, 1964.p.122.

<sup>26</sup> Heb.7:11.

Clearly for the author it not enough simply to establish the historical Melchizedek's superiority over the Levitical priesthood, but he wishes to use what he has established to some greater purpose. Here in verse 11 he states that purpose quite clearly when he asks the question: Why does the Levitical priesthood fail to achieve perfection? His quite radical answer to his own question is to argue that the Levitical priesthood and the cult associated with it have had their day. Hebrews sets the Levitical priesthood aside, it was once useful but man has now outgrown it. Nairne claims that Hebrews argues this way because he recognises that the Levitical cult and priesthood have no growth in them, they have become purely mechanical actions that can achieve no lasting purpose, as Nairne says 'it is not eternal in character'.<sup>27</sup> Hebrews is quite clearly setting out here a major thrust of his argument, that the Jewish cult and its associated priesthood are to be viewed as a temporary measure introduced by God until his divine purposes could be completely fulfilled, that they are a holding action in salvation history. Hebrews returns to this thought that the Levitical rituals belong to an order of things that was becoming obsolete and are close to passing away, a number of times. In three passages in particular this is quite clearly the case.

For if the first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no desire for a second to take its place. But God finds fault with them, and says, 'Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will conclude a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah... By saying new he has made the first covenant old; and that which is antiquated and aging has nearly disappeared.'<sup>28</sup>

...preparations having thus been made, the priests go continually into the outer tent, performing their ritual duties; but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood which he offers for himself and for the errors of the people. By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary is not yet open as long the outer tent is still standing (which is symbolic for the present age). According to this

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<sup>27</sup> Nairne, 1915.p.143.

<sup>28</sup> Heb.8:7-8 & 13. (Montefiore's translation). The RSV reads "For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion for a second. For he finds fault with them when he says: "the days will come, says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah... In speaking of a new covenant he treats the first as obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away." Montefiore's translation gives a clearer indication of who is finding fault and who desires to replace the old covenant.

arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered which can not perfect the conscience of the worshipper, but deal only with food and drink and various ablutions, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.<sup>29</sup>

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices which are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise would they have not ceased to be offered?<sup>30</sup>

In all of these passages, Hebrews gives clear expression to his recurrent theme that the old cult and priesthood have failed to achieve their objective, purification from sin and therefore access to God. God in offering a new covenant has himself put a seal of redundancy upon the old cultic traditions. These cultic traditions and its associated priesthood are clearly stated by our author in the third of these passages to be but shadows of the true eternal realities. This of course ties in well with his arguments concerning Melchizedek's superiority. If that superiority is derived from and established by his priesthood being the type from which all later Jewish priesthood is derived, then the Levitical priesthood becomes a mere copy of the eternal reality first expressed in Melchizedek. This common theme has been widely recognised by commentators, including Cullmann who maintains that our writer sees the office of high priest as having a transitory and imperfect character and in its insufficiency it points beyond itself.<sup>31</sup>

Hebrews definitely sees Jewish priesthood as pointing beyond itself, in that it points us on to another priesthood greater than itself. Our author alludes to this when he writes,

For every high priest is chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he also is beset with weakness. Because of this he is bound to offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. And one does not take the honour upon himself, but he is called by God, just as Aaron was.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Heb.9:6-10.

<sup>30</sup> Heb.10:1-2.

<sup>31</sup> Cullmann,1963.p.89.

<sup>32</sup> Heb.5:1-4.

Here we can see him describing what he sees as a universal principle in the life of man. It is by this means that man relates to God. For Hebrews Melchizedek represents a special example of priesthood chosen from ancient history. Nairne wonders whether our writer takes this further and see its extension even into the natural world. Is this what lies behind passages like Hebrews 1:2-3 and 2:10?<sup>33</sup> Yet all of this is not being claimed merely to magnify Melchizedek's priesthood and its superiority, for it is not Melchizedek but Jesus Christ who most fully embodies this other priesthood. For it is in the life, death and exaltation of Jesus Christ that this other priesthood is completed. As Melchizedek is viewed as the archetype for the Levitical priesthood, in some way Jesus Christ is the archetype for Melchizedek.

What our author has managed to do is to take the Levitical priesthood and rituals and use them as a starting point for his argument. They provide him with the vocabulary and grammar to express quite different ideas of his own. The Levitical order has nothing to do with Christ's priesthood and their priesthood could never develop into his priesthood no matter how successfully they fulfil the function of priesthood.<sup>34</sup>

It is worth noting at this point that Jesus could never be a Levitical priest because he was a member of the tribe of Judah. This is a fact that Hebrews very readily states,

...the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to a another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.<sup>35</sup>

Hebrews is thereby able to emphasise the distinction between the Levitical priesthood and this other priesthood which is revealed in history, first in Melchizedek, then finally and fully in Jesus Christ. Both Melchizedek and Jesus are tied together by the simple fact that they could not be Levitical priests. Jesus descended from David could not be a priest, he only could be a priest of a priesthood other than that of Aaron, and Melchizedek was a priest and not Aaron's

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<sup>33</sup> Nairne, 1915.p.143.

<sup>34</sup> Nairne, 1915.p.140.

<sup>35</sup> Heb.7:13-14.



son.<sup>36</sup>

The Levitical priesthood was based solely upon physical descent from Levi and Aaron.<sup>37</sup> It is possible to argue that this is also a sign of its inferior nature. The Levitical high priest's task is limited by the death of his predecessor and by his own death. It is only eternal in as much as it passes from generation to generation. Yet Hebrews wishes to speak of another everlasting priesthood to which Christ and Melchizedek belong.<sup>38</sup>

So we can now see clearly why our author is so keen to establish the superiority of Melchizedek's priesthood over the Levitical priesthood of the Old Covenant. In showing up the latter as a mere copy, or shadow, of another eternal and more lasting priesthood, and as having consistently failed in achieving its purpose, he prepares the ground to establish Jesus Christ as the only true High Priest. Hebrews takes the visible institution of the Levitical priesthood and asks his readers to contemplate this. He says to them, "Think of him (Christ) as a priest such as you know priests and then I will make you understand."<sup>39</sup> So, for him and his readers, Jesus is the true mediator and priest who sets aside the Old Testament priesthood but also in a sense fulfils it.

In arguing for Melchizedek's superiority and the redundancy of the Levitical order, Hebrews utilises Melchizedek to achieve a negative purpose. Does he use Melchizedek to establish anything else positive beyond what we have already considered that he is, at least for Hebrews and his contemporaries, the first priest of God most high?

### **iii. Melchizedek the Priest-King.**

In Genesis 14 Melchizedek is clearly designated 'King of Salem' and 'priest of God Most High'. In Israelite traditions this combination seems an impossibility, as kings came from the tribe of Judah whereas members of the Levitical tribe served in the priesthood and only a priest was authorised to enter the Holy of Holies. Hebrews overcomes this division of functions by

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<sup>36</sup> Paul, 1987.p.204.

<sup>37</sup> Nairne, 1915.p.142.

<sup>38</sup> Paul, 1987.p.209. Paul is quite clear that these two deaths represent the boundaries to any individuals service and therefore it was impossible to believe in an eternal high priest under the Levitical order, though the order itself might be considered to have an eternal character - yet even this Hebrews questions.

<sup>39</sup> Nairne, 1915.p.139.

careful use of the psalms, and especially Psalm 110:4 where the Israelite King is hailed as 'priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.'<sup>40</sup>

Psalm 110 can be categorised as a 'royal Psalm' whose original *Sitz in Leben* is usually understood to have been the enthronement ceremony of the Jerusalem King and / or the annual ritual of the great autumn festival. It may have been a Psalm originally addressed to David, or even more likely his son Solomon. A wide range of dates for its composition have been considered, ranging from the 10th Century BC to the time of the Maccabees.<sup>41</sup> More importantly for us, this psalm provides a basis for Hebrews to combine kingship and priestly functions within a single individual. The question which this then raises is: Was Melchizedek's status as Priest-King transferred to succeeding kings of Jerusalem, and especially to David and his successors? Would it be reasonable for us to argue that some combination of royal and priestly functions had always been associated with the Jerusalem Israelite Monarchy? It can be argued that David and his successors are recorded as carrying out various priestly deeds. We can list amongst these, David's relocation of the Ark where the King is depicted wearing a linen Ephod and dancing before the Lord,<sup>42</sup> or his offering of burnt and peace offerings, and blessing of the people in the Lord's name.<sup>43</sup> Again in 2 Samuel 24, David is recorded as building an altar and offering sacrifices.<sup>44</sup> In a similar fashion Solomon blesses the assembly of Israel at the Temple consecration service.<sup>45</sup> Paul notes that Jeremiah 30:21 emphatically expresses the view that the King, just like a high priest, could draw near to God.<sup>46</sup>

All of this evidence suggests that there existed in Jerusalem a tradition which connected priestly functions to the office of King. Yet we must recognise that the sacrifices offered in these accounts are limited to burnt and peace offerings - offerings which could be made by any

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<sup>40</sup> Heb.7:17; Heb.7:21 and 5:6. In these three citations there are either explicit or implicit connections made with the concept of sonship. This may reflect the fact that Jesus himself had used Psalm 110 in his own self designation in Mark 14:26, see p.83.

<sup>41</sup> Paul, M.J. "The Order of Melchizedek (Psalm. 110:4 and Hebrews 7:3)" Westminster Theological Journal. 49.1987.pp.195-211.pp.195-196. As Paul notes dating has often depended on the question of when kingly and priestly functions became separated in Israel. The other peoples in the Ancient Near East did combine these offices - whilst also referring to their kings as 'Son of the Gods'.

<sup>42</sup> 2 Sam.6:14.

<sup>43</sup> 2 Sam.6:17-18.

<sup>44</sup> 2 Sam.24:25.

<sup>45</sup> 1 Kings 8:14,55-56.

<sup>46</sup> Paul, 1987.p.197.

Israelite in the court of the Tabernacle / Temple. Therefore, this does not offer proof that the King entered the Holy Place to burn incense, in fact Uzziah, the one ruler depicted as attempting this was prevented from doing so by Azariah the priest.<sup>47</sup> Even the wearing of the Ephod is open to alternative interpretations.<sup>48</sup> We must also accept that the King might have specific 'priestly' roles to play within certain festivals and celebrations, but this might not mean he was a priest in the generally accepted understanding of that office.

As Paul notes there was, according to the old Wellhausenian view, a kingly priesthood in the time of David, which was eroded during the exile as priestly power increased and they moved to restrict the rights of the priest-king. Such a view would see the Uzziah story in 2 Chronicles as part of this priestly campaign against kingly rights. Yet, as Paul notes, it is just these priestly texts, such as Chronicles, where David's role is most celebrated and his house is at the centre of interest.<sup>49</sup> So Paul concludes that Wellhausen's reconstruction of history is not justified by the facts, and that Israel never had a priest-king, and therefore it was this very fundamental separation of functions which distinguishes Israel from the surrounding nations. So Melchizedek is no more than a distant figure who united both functions and therefore Israel believed both functions would be combined in the Messiah. More importantly for us Psalm 110 with its ideology of dual functions could not address a King of Israel.<sup>50</sup> These conclusions lead Paul to consider the view that it is reasonable to believe the King was able to carry out limited priestly functions only in certain exceptional circumstances. We could then view Psalm 110 as a declaration of the King's priestly function in this limited way.<sup>51</sup> Paul is not happy with such a solution and prefers to see Hebrews' use of Melchizedek an historical priest-king as pointing us towards a similar dual figure in the future, namely the Messiah.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> 2 Chron.26:16-18.

<sup>48</sup> Paul, 1987.p.197. Paul says we must be cautious in viewing this as a 'priestly dress' as Samuel wears it though he is only a Levite (not a priest). He asks, could David have worn it - not to perform priestly functions but as a sign of his devotion to God?

<sup>49</sup> Paul, 1987.p.198.

<sup>50</sup> Paul, 1987.pp.199-200. Paul notes that this last conclusion is a difficult one and says many commentators simply avoid it.

<sup>51</sup> Paul, 1987.p.201. Genesis 14 is set within the context of a war - so Melchizedek can in such a situation bless individuals. Yet Melchizedek also gives the bread and wine whilst receiving a tithe - this does not suggest some sort of 'limited priestly role'.

<sup>52</sup> Paul, 1987.p.202.

This appears to provide a useful and tidy resolution to the difficulties associated with this idea of uniting priesthood and kingship in one individual, ideas which seem to be functionally separated in Jewish tradition. That these functions were united in Melchizedek is not at issue given that he is not an Israelite and therefore his dual functions fall in line with the traditions common in near-eastern monarchies. What is more problematic is whether Hebrews merely used this convenient historical figure, to bring kingship and priesthood together within his exposition of the Church's Messianic beliefs? Alternatively were there underlying and deeply embedded 'priest-king' traditions associated with Jerusalem and Davidic kingship ideology? We lack conclusive evidence to resolve this issue. Yet we should not lose sight of the fact that the Epistle makes extensive use of citations closely associated with the regal traditions first expressed in Jerusalem. Given this fact, there may be grounds to argue that Hebrews has a greater interest in the ideology of Sacral Davidic Kingship than many commentators have recognised. If this were true, his use of Melchizedek would be partly to direct his readers attention back to these ancient traditions. What is more obviously the case is that he does unite the functions of king and priest, and thereby supplies a foundation for constructing a different and alternative order of priesthood to which Christ belongs.

#### **iv. Melchizedek the eternal priest.**

We have already noted within the context of the superiority of Melchizedek's priesthood over the Levitical tradition, the role played by its eternal or enduring nature.<sup>53</sup> The eternal nature of Melchizedek's priesthood rests on the notable omission of a genealogical context for him in Genesis 14. Most characters within the foundation narratives of the Torah are introduced with close attention paid to their genealogical credentials. In the case of Abraham we are given explicit information about his genealogy,<sup>54</sup> and in a similar manner we are formally introduced to Noah and his sons.<sup>55</sup> Surprisingly we come across Melchizedek without any such formal introduction. This may of course be a reflection of his status as a non-Israelite. Yet this lack of genealogy has been seen as more significant than this, as highlighting not only his foreignness but also his eternal character. Because the Torah is silent about his father and mother, he has been perceived as belonging to an eternal order, rather than the historical sequence of time. This is definitely Hebrews' own exegesis of his lack of genealogy, a view which he expresses

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<sup>53</sup> See p.154.

<sup>54</sup> Gen.11:10-27.

<sup>55</sup> Gen.5:21-32.

when he says of Melchizedek that he ‘has become a priest, not according to a legal requirement concerning bodily descent but by the power of an indestructible life.’<sup>56</sup> We have already seen how the Levitical priesthood can only be said to be eternal in that it is passed on from generation to generation. Unlike the Levitical priesthood, the eternal nature of the order of Melchizedek is the eternal priesthood of an individual.<sup>57</sup> Melchizedek’s priesthood is said to continue for ever.<sup>58</sup> Is Hebrews here claiming that Melchizedek is an eternal, perhaps even super-natural figure? Despite evidence from Qumran which demonstrates that such views did exist, I believe such an idea has no real role to play in Hebrews’ argument. His interest is not in Melchizedek as an individual, but in his function as the type for a priesthood which relegates the Levitical order to a secondary role. What is more, Hebrews then relegates Melchizedek to a lesser status when he establishes Jesus, the Son of God, as the true archetype for all priesthood.<sup>59</sup> This may explain why in Hebrews 7:3 Melchizedek is said to resemble the Son of God, in that he continues as priest for ever.

Hebrews’ real interest in Melchizedek and his lack of genealogy is that it enables him to establish certain features which he shares with Christ as being determinative in a proper understanding of priesthood, whilst diminishing the Levitical order. Obviously Christ, unlike Melchizedek, does have a genealogy, yet it is not the right one. In this respect they are both the same.<sup>60</sup> Melchizedek must have belonged to a dynasty of priest-kings, but he wasn’t an Israelite, so he too had the wrong genealogy. Both Melchizedek and Christ were excluded from Levitical priesthood, but they superseded that priesthood through Melchizedek’s inheritance.

#### **v. Melchizedek Priest by Oath.**

Melchizedek’s lack of genealogy exposes both his pagan character and emphasises that his status as priest-king does not rely upon his descent. Obviously, in historical terms this may not be strictly true, but this is what Hebrews chooses to focus his readers’ attention on. Any office, religious or political, is legitimised in one of two ways, either by means of the hereditary principle or by means of appointment. It is obvious that Hebrews does not view

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<sup>56</sup> Heb.7:16. The mention of his lack of genealogy precedes this in the chapter at verse 3.

<sup>57</sup> Paul, 1987.p.203.

<sup>58</sup> Heb.7:3b ‘he continues a priest for ever’.

<sup>59</sup> Bruce, 1990.p160.

<sup>60</sup> Paul, 1987.p.205.

Melchizedek as inheriting his status as priest-king.<sup>61</sup> This only leaves installation by a superior as the possible explanation for his status. For Hebrews Melchizedek is priest-king due to his appointment by a superior authority, an authority named by Genesis 14 as 'God Most High.'<sup>62</sup> This idea of appointment by God is expressed in terms of his sworn oath, "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, 'Thou art a priest of ever'."<sup>63</sup> Once again Hebrews uses this undramatic fact as the basis for diminishing the Levitical priesthood. The Levitical priesthood was inaugurated at God's command 'bring near to you, Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the people of Israel, to serve me as priests...'<sup>64</sup> The appointment of the Levitical priesthood entails extensive ceremonial as set out in the Torah instructions for their consecration,<sup>65</sup> yet there is no mention of an oath.

Lacking an oath, the Levitical priesthood appointed by God's command could also be superseded within the divine plan. Just as Abraham's place in God's plan is assured by God's oath,<sup>66</sup> so the Levitical priesthood's redundancy is also assured by the lack of an oath, whilst Jesus' better priesthood is established by a divine oath.<sup>67</sup> In this manner Hebrews continues to stress the superiority of the Melchizedekian priesthood, yet as it is Jesus who is acclaimed priest after this order of Melchizedek, it is Jesus whose superiority is confirmed. A fact emphasised by Hebrews careful construction of this sentence which places the weight of the argument on the last word 'Jesus'.<sup>68</sup>

Does our survey of Hebrews' use of Melchizedek allow us to identify any significant pattern in this aspect of his thinking about priesthood? In all of the themes surveyed it is clear that Hebrews has utilised the exegetical traditions about Melchizedek to diminish the Levitical priesthood, and establish its temporary nature. Melchizedek provides the type for all priesthood, including the weak copy which is the Levitical order, an order which contains its

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<sup>61</sup> Paul, 1987.p.207. Paul also notes that a heathen who turns to Jewish belief has no legal father according to Jewish law - this might lie behind the tradition about Melchizedek.

<sup>62</sup> Gen.14:18b See also Paul, 1987.p.207. Paul notes that the Tell Amarna letters refer to king 'Abdu-Heba of Jerusalem who is said to have been appointed king by the Pharaoh.

<sup>63</sup> Heb.7:21b.

<sup>64</sup> Exod.28:1.

<sup>65</sup> Exod.28 and 29, Lev.8 and 9.

<sup>66</sup> Gen.22:16f. "By myself I have sworn ..., 'I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants.'"

<sup>67</sup> Heb.7:22.

<sup>68</sup> Bruce, 1990.pp.170-171.

own redundancy within it. Only in Christ will the Melchizedekian order be fully realised - so much so that Christ becomes the true type of Melchizedek himself. Hebrews uses this alternative priestly tradition to establish a number of important characteristics of Christ's priesthood. This priesthood is eternal, is established by divine appointment and combines the offices of king and priest. Even more important it is superior to other Israelite traditions of priesthood and is therefore by implication more effective - a better priesthood. Moreover it is a better priesthood which enables Hebrews to develop Jeremiah's teaching about a new and better covenant in Chapter 8.<sup>69</sup> For Hebrews Melchizedek is the perfect personification of his eschatological approach to the revelation of God, first expressed in various ways and now revealed to us through a Son.

#### **iv. Melchizedek and Christ.**

Whilst it is possible to argue that for Hebrews Melchizedek personifies his eschatological approach to God's revelation, this still does not fully explain why there have been so much modern scholarly writing about this motif. A selection of these writings has been motivated by the belief that the figure of Melchizedek, which Hebrews views in relation to Christ and his priesthood, has important insights to offer about Jesus' character and status. Obviously such an approach is rooted in the relationship clearly expressed within the Epistle's use of typology. Scholars argue that if Melchizedek and his priesthood, according to Hebrews, are the type for Christ and his priesthood then it is reasonable to believe that the former may offer insights into the status and character of the latter.<sup>70</sup> Already within this chapter I have demonstrated that in one sense such an approach does indeed lead to fruitful and useful conclusions. We have seen how the superiority of Jesus' priesthood over the Levitical order, its greater effectiveness as a means of grace and then the combination of messianic offices all rest on this typological approach. What I believe is less obvious is that such an approach can or should be extended to draw conclusions about Jesus' character and status.

Let me demonstrate why I believe this to be the case. Some scholars in recent times have

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<sup>69</sup> Heb.8:8-13.

<sup>70</sup>There is wide scholarly agreement with such a view, which generally understands this as pointing to the nature of Christ's priesthood (see Lane,1991. p.cxliv, Lindars,1991. p.74 or Isaacs M.E. Reading Hebrews and James. Macon, Smyth & Helwys, 2002. pp.94-98), whilst others wish to argue for a much more radical reading which begins from a different understanding of Melchizedek. (de Jonge M. & van der Woude A.S. "11QMelchizedek and the New Testament" New Testament Studies. 12.1966.pp.301-326.

wished to establish Christ's supernatural status through reference to Melchizedek.<sup>71</sup> Such scholars construct their arguments on a double foundation, the reference in Hebrews 7:3 to Melchizedek's lack of genealogy, plus the discovery of a fragmentary text known as 11QMelchizedek from Qumran. These scholars state that Hebrews obviously believed Melchizedek to be an eternal and supernatural figure, and that the foundations for these views are clearly expressed in the traditions also found in 11QMelchizedek. In this Melchizedek tradition, Melchizedek is not simply a historical figure, but a supernatural, angelic and eschatological being associated with the completion of God's eschatological judgement at the end of time. Within this Qumran text Melchizedek is clearly seen as a supernatural being, rather than a historical figure. This line of reasoning argues for the belief that Hebrews' interest in Melchizedek was to establish Christ's divine and supernatural character and his eschatological function as judge.

This approach is difficult to sustain, as the Melchizedek traditions ascribed to 11QMelchizedek can be demonstrated to be atypical within the context Jewish traditions about this Old Testament figure, as Horton has demonstrated.<sup>72</sup> In all the other traditions reviewed by Horton the explicit interest is not in some supernatural angelic being, but the historical Melchizedek. It would therefore be very difficult to establish a sound reason to stress this atypical tradition in Hebrews' exegesis of Melchizedek, whilst ignoring the other widely attested Jewish traditions available. Furthermore, it would be extremely difficult to explain such an interest in a supernatural angelic figure, given Hebrews' clear statement about the inferiority of angels at the beginning of the Epistle. In fact many scholars suggest that much of this material was explicitly included to rule out an angelic Christology.<sup>73</sup> Given the available evidence it is not unreasonable to dismiss recent scholarly attempts to utilise Hebrews' interest in Melchizedek to establish explicitly Christ's supernatural and divine status, yet that does not exclude the possibility that Melchizedek may still provide some clues to Christ's character.

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<sup>71</sup> de Jonge M. & van der Woude A.S. 1966.pp.301-326.This was important in claiming links between the supernatural Melchizedek found in 11QMel. and Hebrews' use of this Old Testament figure.

<sup>72</sup> Horton, 1976.pp.85-86. Horton's conclusions are supported by other scholars, such as Lindars, 1991.p.75 who writes "...there is no direct connection between 11QMelchizedek and Hebrews and Schenck K. Understanding the Book of Hebrews. London, Westminster John Knox Press, 2003.p.77.

<sup>73</sup> See Montefiore,1964. pp.39-42 and Hughes P.E. "The Christology of Hebrews." Southwestern Journal of Theology. 28.1985.pp.19-27.p.21.



The main difficulty with such an approach to the question of Christ's character is that Hebrews provides only a limited picture of Melchizedek, in which the stress is on his role as priest, rather than his individual character. As I have demonstrated this establishes the superiority of Jesus' priesthood over the Levitical order, its greater effectiveness as a means of grace and provides a basis for combining messianic offices, but beyond this it is difficult to establish definite individual character traits. The limited Old Testament references to Melchizedek contain no information about his character and Hebrews does not directly add to this data. It is only by expanding Hebrews' characterisation of the concept of priesthood that we may be fooled into believing that he does provide us with statements about character.

The discussion of character is further complicated because whilst Hebrews uses Melchizedek's priesthood as the type for Christ's priesthood, he also clearly demonstrates that Christ because of his exaltation and sonship is the type for Melchizedek.<sup>74</sup> In historical terms Melchizedek's priesthood is the pattern from which all Old Testament priesthood is copied, and Jesus' priesthood is of Melchizedek's order and therefore superior to the other priesthoods of the Old Testament. Conversely Jesus' priesthood is not derived from Melchizedek, but rather Melchizedek's priesthood is modelled on the divine pattern given fullest expression in Christ's High Priestly saving activity.

Logically this would suggest that Christ might provide clues to Melchizedek's character, rather than he to Christ's. I would argue that whereas it is reasonable to claim that Hebrews' use of the Melchizedek tradition demonstrates his overall eschatological approach to God's revelation,<sup>75</sup> I believe it is highly doubtful that Melchizedek offers us a clear perspective to Christ's character. Quite clearly that character is better attested in Gospel tradition, and in the other ideas associated with the concept of priesthood discussed in this Epistle. Whilst the close association of Melchizedek and Christ in this Epistle may encourage us to feel that we should

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<sup>74</sup> If we accept that the exalted Christ becomes the definitive priest of God Most High by entering into "...the greater and more perfect tent..." (Heb.9:11) and offering "...his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption..." (Heb.9:12). Then it follows that all other priesthoods even Melchizedek's are but copies of his own definitive priesthood. Hence Isaacs, 2002.p.93, claims that Jesus is the model for the superior priesthood, and hence in Heb.7:3 that it is really Jesus not Melchizedek who is the type. Equally Horton, 1976.pp.163-164. states "This priesthood of Melchizedek, however, is but the antitype of the higher priesthood of Christ..." Similar views are also given by Schenck, 2003.pp.77-78.

<sup>75</sup> Lane, 1991.p.cxlii. Lane sees Melchizedek "...not as a type to be fulfilled, but a witness to a higher priesthood...", hence his function is prophetic. In claiming this Lane is arguing for a similar view to the one I have advanced above; he differs only in the terminology he chooses to express it.

find answers here to questions of character, yet the hard evidence demands that we concentrate on questions of office and function which is the true focus of Hebrews' interest in this Melchizedek tradition.

## **Chapter 6 - The Work of Christ.**

Our survey of Hebrews' Christological pattern has demonstrated how strongly it is shaped by his enduring interest in the work of Christ, especially the achievements of his historical human life. Every aspect of Hebrews' Christological thinking displays the influence of this central preoccupation. As we have already seen Hebrews, in common with other apostolic witnesses, gives centrality to the cross, to Jesus' crucifixion and death.<sup>1</sup> For Hebrews this event is clearly seen as the climax of a whole lifetime's achievement. It is upon this serious concern with Jesus' life story that Hebrews' unique Christological stance is founded. Out of this viewpoint develops his primary concern 'to present Jesus as the one who identified himself with his people and who effectively represents them in a ministry of advocacy.'<sup>2</sup> Hebrews adopts and modifies Old Testament traditions of cultic priesthood in order to give full expression to this theological viewpoint. It is not surprising given these foundations that 'in Hebrews the priestly model for Jesus focuses upon his death as the means of access to God, rather than his present heavenly activity.'<sup>3</sup>

Hebrews' primary focus is Jesus' actions which have won redemption for the people of God. He uses the language of sacrifice, cultic priesthood, representative manhood and sonship to give full expression to this work of Christ. Hebrews emphasises certain aspects in explaining Christ's work - his divinity to establish the superiority of the revelation he brings - his human nature and close identification with human beings to enable him to lead other sons to glory and to defeat death through his own experience.<sup>4</sup> Despite this interest in Christ's redemptive action, Hebrews also recognises Christ's present work on behalf of mankind in which 'he always lives to make intercession for them.'<sup>5</sup> Clearly Hebrews' thinking about the work of Christ can be

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<sup>1</sup> See pp.73-74 and p.86

<sup>2</sup> Lane, W. Hebrews: Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas, Word, 1991. p.cxlili.

<sup>3</sup> Isaacs, M.E. "Priesthood and the Epistle to the Hebrews." Heythrop Journal. 38. 1992.p.58. See also, Saucy, M. "Exaltation Christology in Hebrews: what Kind of Reign." Trinity Journal. 14.p.61. Saucy sees that Hebrews exposition of Psalm 110 shows Jesus exaltation to be both the reward for his redemptive actions accomplished at Calvary, yet more importantly as being passive in that he is not actually exercising this authority in this age - yet he is actively interceding for his own.

<sup>4</sup> Colijn, B.B. "'Let us approach': soteriology in the Epistle to the Hebrews." Journal of the Evangelical Theological society. 39.1996.pp.571-586.p.572.

<sup>5</sup> Heb.7:25.

viewed as contained in two related concepts, one concerned with gaining access to God and the other with intercession on behalf of the sons of God.<sup>6</sup> Both conceptions of the work of Christ are expressed within the Epistle, but the redemptive work which ensures access to God has a priority within his theological viewpoint. This priority is clearly expressed when he writes, 'Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.'<sup>7</sup> Brought together here are a number of important motifs within Hebrews Christological scheme. He begins with sonship, but closely associates this with the events of Jesus' actual life, the experiences through which he is perfected - a perfection closely tied to his suffering. His sonship is understood as the product of his actual historical life, a life which demonstrates his total obedience to the Father's will and divine plan. It is this obedience which enables Jesus to become the source of salvation, a salvation he shares with all other sons who obey his call. It is interesting that here where we might expect our writer to say 'believe in' he uses the term 'obey', a fact which underscores the close connection between faith and obedience in this Epistle.<sup>8</sup>

It is this theme of obedience which Hebrews exploits when he draws on Son of Man traditions and the closely associated ideas expressed in Adam Christology. Both of these traditions develop a significant theological contrast between Adam's disobedience and Christ's obedience in their economy of salvation and thereby stress Jesus' representative and redemptive roles in the divine economy of salvation. In all these traditions Jesus' solidarity and close identification with human beings are of central and essential importance. Repeatedly, no matter which Christological theme we examine, the primacy of Jesus human historical life becomes obvious even in those themes such as sonship where this might not be expected to be the case. Equally Christ's ascension, his entrance into the sanctuary, his occupation of the place of honour, his installation as High Priest and even the superiority of his priesthood all follow from his accomplished redemptive work on the Cross.<sup>9</sup> In Hebrews' thinking it is not only from the

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<sup>6</sup> Westcott, B.F. The Epistle to the Hebrews. London, MacMillan, 1889 (3rd Ed.1903). p.229. Westcott identifies both of these aspects - and also speaks about Christ's working in bringing the worship of the people to God. This idea is quite closely related to the concept of intercession on the people's behalf - I am not fully convinced they need to be distinguished quite as clearly as Westcott does.

<sup>7</sup> Heb.5:8-9.

<sup>8</sup> Colijn, 1996.p.574.

<sup>9</sup> MacLeod, D.J. "The Present Work of Christ in Hebrews." Bibliotheca Sacra, 148.1991.pp.184-200.p.184-187.

singular event of the Cross, but from the process of a uniquely obedient human life which reaches its consummation at the Cross that this exaltation is derived. It is Jesus' redemptive work which ensures access to God and through his redemptive activity he becomes the definitive and assured means of access to God. As Scott observes, in Hebrews 'our Lord has built the bridge between man and God at the cost of His death.'<sup>10</sup> We often fail to appreciate the radical freedom of access that Christ's redemptive work represents to Hebrews' first readers. It is only when we realise the difficulty of access under the provisions of the old covenant, where access was limited to the high priest on one day in the year, that we become fully aware of this.<sup>11</sup> It is this radical freedom of access which Hebrews proclaims in the extraordinary invitation 'Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.'<sup>12</sup> The climax of this thinking about the significance of Christ's high-priestly work is expressed in Hebrews 10:19-22.

Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Hebrews teaches that Christ has entered 'into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.'<sup>13</sup> It is this aspect of Christ's work, his present heavenly work, which plays a secondary role in Hebrews' theological scheme. In some respects this has been a neglected area when it comes to the systematic study of Hebrews,<sup>14</sup> though there have been a small number studies which have attempted to consider this aspect of the Epistle.<sup>15</sup> The present work

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<sup>10</sup> Scott, W.M.F. "Priesthood in the New Testament" *Scottish Journal of Theology*. 1957.pp.399-415.p.406.

<sup>11</sup> Colijn, 1996.p.577. Colijn notes that at Mount Sinai only Moses could draw near, later once the Tabernacle was established only the high priest could draw near. Interestingly even Aaron's sons died if they drew near to God inappropriately (Lev.16:1.).

<sup>12</sup> Heb.4:16.

<sup>13</sup> Heb.9:24.

<sup>14</sup> MacLeod, 1991.p.184.

<sup>15</sup> Hughes, P.E. "The Blood of Jesus and his Heavenly Priesthood in Hebrews. Part IV: The Present Work of Christ in Heaven." *Bibliotheca Sacra*. 1974.pp.26-33. This section of Hughes four part study is an example of one such study.

of Christ is characterised as consisting of a number of interrelated activities.<sup>16</sup> There is broad agreement that Christ intercedes on man's behalf, bestows divine blessings on his followers and actively represents them before God. Some scholars also speak about Christ inaugurating a new and living covenant, yet this is probably best understood as part of Christ's past redemptive activity. Equally, it is possible to speak of Christ acting as our mediator, making both our worship acceptable to God and conveying his power to us. Careful exegesis is required as mediation is not simply associated with the present work of Christ, but is the major Christological motif applied to all aspects of Hebrews' portrayal of Christ.

Despite there being a fairly broad agreement that Christ's present heavenly work consists of his intercession and representation of mankind before God, with its associated divine blessings, there is less agreement about exactly what this activity entails. Many exegetes have viewed this activity as being best characterised as a sacrificial activity. Some schools of thought have even argued that Christ's sacrifice was only truly offered once he has entered heaven itself.<sup>17</sup> Such an interpretation of the location of Christ's sacrificial activity hardly fits Hebrews' analogy drawn from Tabernacle ceremonial. In these ceremonial traditions the high priest offers the sacrifice, in order to gain entry into the Holy of Holies. A similar but exegetically more sensitive view which has been advocated by Anglo-Catholic and Roman Catholic scholars who see Christ's intercession as taking the form of a perpetual sacrificial offering. This view is closely linked to a particular doctrine of Eucharistic sacrifice which is being offered by the Church on earth.<sup>18</sup> This understanding of Christ's present heavenly work does not sit happily with Hebrews' stress on the final once-for-all character of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross.<sup>19</sup>

It is difficult to establish with a high degree of certainty what Hebrews himself understood this intercessory activity to consist of, as he only once explicitly mentions it (Heb.7:25.), though it

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<sup>16</sup> MacLeod, 1991.pp.188-200 list six activities - representation, inauguration, intercession, mediation, anticipation and benediction. Whilst Hughes, 1974.pp.26-33 considers three - representation, benediction and intercession.

<sup>17</sup> Hughes, P.E. "The Blood of Jesus and his Heavenly Priesthood in Hebrews. Part II: The High-Priestly Sacrifice of Christ." *Bibliotheca Sacra*. 1973.pp.195-212.p.195. Hughes considers this view which was propounded by the Socinians in the 17th century and was based on their own exegesis of Heb.9:12-14.

<sup>18</sup> Hughes, 1973.part II.p.196. This view does not diminish Christ's historic sacrifice on the Cross - but believes in a perpetual offering as the means of intercession. Hughes provides an extensive survey of these traditions within Roman Catholic and Anglo-Catholic scholarship.

<sup>19</sup> Heb.10:12-14. This passage within its wider context contrasts this single final sacrifice of Christ with the repeated sacrifices of the Levitical priesthood which can not take away sin. It is this singular nature of Christ's sacrifice which provides the basis for its superiority within Hebrews argument.

undoubtedly underlies His appearing 'in the presence of God on our behalf.' (Heb.9:24).<sup>20</sup> That this activity involves a representation of humanity is clearly the case, exactly how Christ our representative intercedes on our behalf is much less apparent. That his own sacrifice on the Cross provides the foundation for his ability to function in God's presence is clearly part of Hebrews' scheme. What Christ's activity is within the heavenly realm in God's presence is more difficult to establish. This is not surprising given Hebrews relative disinterest in Christ's present heavenly work compared to his primary preoccupation with Christ's redemptive activity. It is Hebrews pronounced interest in Christ's redemptive activity that leads us to agree with Colijn's observation that,

Although no book in the New Testament places more emphasis on the once-for-all nature of Christ's sacrifice, Hebrews views salvation as dynamic and relational rather than static and purely judicial. It is not only an event but also a process.<sup>21</sup>

### **Hebrews' Contribution to the Modern Christological Debate?**

Hebrews' Christological scheme demonstrates not only a unique use of Old Testament traditions about priesthood but also a dramatically dynamic understanding of the person of Christ. Modern theologians have often criticised traditional Christologies for being too static,<sup>22</sup> believing these schemes speak too often in terms of 'being' rather than 'divine activity'.<sup>23</sup> As we have clearly established Hebrews' Christological scheme escapes this criticism. With its stress on the redemptive activity of Jesus expressed within his historical human life Hebrews contains a very dynamic Christology - summed up in his conception of 'perfecting'.

Many traditional Christological statements and schemes have placed a major emphasis on Christ's Divinity, his divine sonship, an emphasis which has led them to discuss his life in terms of who he is, rather than what he did. An emphasis on who Christ is, logically leads such schemes into discussions of his status as the Son of God, a status which they understand

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<sup>20</sup> Hughes, 1973.p.211.

<sup>21</sup> Colijn, 1996.p.586.

<sup>22</sup> Mascal, E.L. Whatever Happened to the Human Mind? London, SPCK, 1980. p.29. Mascal a supporter of traditional Christological definitions, notes this criticism often directed at these theological schemes. See also Pittenger, N. Christology Reconsidered. London, SCM, 1970.p.1. Pittenger says his purpose is to develop a Christology which understands Jesus dynamically rather than in static terms.

<sup>23</sup> Pittenger, 1970.p.5.

such schemes into discussions of his status as the Son of God, a status which they understand Christ possessing as of right. It is not surprising therefore that many traditional Christological schemes struggle hard to avoid the charge of docetism given the perceptive framework within which their theological thinking is shaped. Such a perceived framework can restrict the scope for a proper appreciation of the historical life story of Jesus, and in order to counter this methodological weakness often such schemes utilise the concept of emptying, so as to carve out sufficient space to enable a proper appreciation of his life story to take place. Many past commentators have placed Hebrews within this approach to the questions of Christology. As we have already established, there are very good reasons and strong evidence to question such conclusions.

The first chapters of Hebrews may suggest that the focus is on Christ's divine Sonship, his given status as Son - for many commentators it is exactly this material which has encouraged them to categorise the Epistle as containing a 'high' Christology. Yet we have demonstrated that such an approach leaves more questions unanswered than it answers and represents a poor exegesis of the author's approach and intention. As demonstrated in chapter 3, Hebrews displays a real and positive interest in the historical Jesus and his life story, an interest which provides access to reliable historical traditions about Jesus. We have seen that even some scholars who view Hebrews as late and containing a 'high' Christology, have been willing to recognise a second distinctive theme of Jesus' humanity within the body of the Epistle. So as we stated in our introduction<sup>24</sup> a number of scholars recognise the essential role of Jesus' humanity within the Epistle's argument, a fact which is demonstrated by Hebrews wide use of adoptionist language.

One of the major motors which has driven the modern debate about the person of Christ has been the concern to give proper consideration to the human Jesus, sometimes referred to in terms of his manhood. This concern has led to scholars demanding that any valid

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<sup>24</sup> Lindars, B. The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews. Cambridge, CUP, 1991. p.40., Dunn, 1980. p.52. see p.11 for details.



understanding of Christ's person must begin 'from below', with the human historic Jesus.<sup>25</sup> Hebrews' Christology fulfils this requirement fully with its stress on the reality and centrality of Jesus' historic life. The reality of this humanity as we have demonstrated shapes all the major Christological themes within the Epistle. Even more significantly human solidarity is functionally vital for Christ's priestly work of redemption, thus giving Jesus' humanity a central role in the soteriological pattern of the Epistle. Many modern scholars have argued that any valid Christology is determined by its soteriological purpose<sup>26</sup> - Hebrews fulfils the requirements of this test, with its primary focus on the redemptive activity of Jesus' human life.

Those scholars who stress Hebrews 'high' Christology have viewed the strong portrait of the historic Jesus, as an anomaly within the text, and therefore conclude that the text juxtaposes conflicting Christological portraits which the author fails to satisfactorily reconcile. As we have already noted, some scholars develop this line of thinking in more detail and claim this reflects a mixing of earlier Jewish Christian thinking with later Hellenistic ideas, which produces the resulting muddle. There are though much better solutions to this exegetical conundrum, as I have shown.<sup>27</sup>

A more satisfactory approach, I would argue, is to see the historic life as central to Hebrews' intentions and thinking. Placing the historic life at the centre of Hebrews theological scheme is in accord with traditions of Patristic exegesis which recognised both the importance and distinctiveness of Hebrews interest in the human historic Jesus. If we begin from this perception we are required to work much harder at resolving the differences scholars have identified within the text. The advantage of such an approach is that it places Jesus' activity to the fore, it is the historical life which becomes the foundation upon which everything else is constructed. Obviously, the Epistle does not provide us with the range or depth of material

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<sup>25</sup> Pannenberg, W. Jesus - God and Man. London, SCM, 1968 (1985).pp.35-37. See also Turner, H.E.W. Jesus the Christ. London, Mowbrays, 1976.pp.2-3. Turner notes the development of this tradition based on the fact that the first disciples knew Jesus as a man, and Cuppitt, D. Explorations in Theology 6. London, SCM, 1979.pp.65-66. Cuppitt claims that many Jewish scholars recognise the historical Jesus as belonging to their own religious tradition, and feel that the Church has distorted the Gospel traditions turning him into a fantasy figure who reflects Gentile religious longings and political needs. Cuppitt argues from this starting place for the need for us to build our understanding of Jesus from the historical realities of his life.

<sup>26</sup> Turner, 1976.p.6. Turner speaks of 'redemptive control' as the means by which Christologies should be judged - by testing its effect on the doctrine of redemption.

<sup>27</sup> See pp.146-149.

about the actual life which we see expressed in the various Gospel traditions, yet none the less it does provide reliable witness to important historical traditions. Surely, we should not expect an Epistle to provide detailed biographical information, given that it was written for a community which had access to those traditions in other forms - written and oral. This is not unusual and is exactly the situation we find in the Pauline corpus, which has been widely utilised in the modern Christological debate. Once we accept that the historical life is the basis for our author's thinking we can begin to reconstruct his intentions on much surer foundations. We have seen how he did not simply view the historical life as important in some antiquarian fashion, but rather as the basis by which to understand Christ's saving activity. For our author we have established that Jesus' life of obedience which concludes with his obedient death on the cross, is the basis of his ability to bring salvation. His historical reality for our author establishes his connection with those who need salvation and enables him to act as their mediator before God. I would argue that Hebrews' intention was to demonstrate how Jesus through the events of his life perfects his obedience so that he may function as the perfect sacrifice and open the way into God's presence. This aspect of the Epistle has the potential to reshape our Christological discussions and change our perceptions of Christ.

If we accept that Hebrews constructs his Christological scheme on the basis of Jesus' growth and perfection - he like us shares in the journey of life, a journey from this world back to the presence of God. If this is our author's intention, then for him Christ's Sonship cannot simply be a given! No, for him it is something which is won, acquired or in some sense earned. It is Christ's totally, unquestioning obedience (hence the stressing of the Gethsemane event), which enables Jesus to become the Son of God. It is for this reason as we have demonstrated that much of what is said about Christ as Son in the first chapters of the Epistle and elsewhere is expressed in ambiguous language. Whilst Christ become the Son because of what he has obediently achieved equally, on the eternal plane he is the Son - that is to say he was always destined to be the Son, he was part of God's eternal plan for mankind's future. This fact necessarily entails a tension: For how can we speak of a Son who earns or achieves his sonship and yet still believe he was always God's agent in his dealings with the world. I believe that this should not worry us. All our talk about God can only ever be partially true, because we are using the language and experience of our finite world to express the infinite, and therefore at some point it must fail to measure up to the task. Hebrews may have had less problem with this

conceptually, as his semitic thinking accepts that something can be both/ and at the same time - whilst we like to delineate things into separate boxes, clearly defined and exclusive. Perhaps it really is time for us to accept and define a proper language of mystery which does not reduce the world to simple clear cut phenomena all the time, after all that is where many advances in modern science seem to be slowly leading us.

I believe we can now begin to see what Hebrews' dynamic Christology might be able to offer the modern debate. Instead of reading the historical record looking for those events which display Jesus' divinity or humanity, rather we might begin to focus on it in terms of his development, the record of a unique personal journey back to God's loving embrace. This is obviously more appealing to us as it echoes our own experience, our own journey as we strive to enter into God's presence. The danger must be though that if this speaks so clearly to our needs, we must accept that we might have read this back into our text, rather than letting it reveal to us God's will. I believe we have established enough evidence to suggest that this danger has been avoided.

Given its dynamic Christology, one might expect the Epistle to the Hebrews would have played an important role within the modern debate about the person of Christ. That this has not been the case is therefore all the more striking. Why should this have been so. Scholarship has dismissed Hebrews' Christological contribution together with that of John's Gospel because of the perception that it was a late text, heavily contaminated with Hellenistic ideas which represent a corruption of 'true Christianity'.<sup>28</sup> So whilst certain Pauline texts have become veritable battlefields in the modern Christological debate, Hebrews has been relegated to the

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<sup>28</sup> The view that Jesus' original teaching, was in some manner corrupted can be traced back to Harnack who in Das Wesen des Christentums. (E.T., What is Christianity, 1901) described how Jesus message was corrupted and in his History of Dogma, claimed it was caused by the 'hellenisation of Christianity'. See Heron, A.I.C. A Century of Protestant Theology. Guildford, Lutterworth, 1980.p.36. for details. This view also owes a debt to the work of Hegel who saw religious thought as developing in terms of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. (see Heron, 1980.p.39.) Baur applied this hermeneutic to the various strands and theologies of the New Testament and came to see it as a record of the 'conflict between an earlier Petrine theology and a later, Pauline type, which later New Testament documents were attempting to reconcile in a new synthesis.' (see Heron, 1980.p.43.) Despite the fact that this view did not stand up under the close study of later scholarship, an echo of this disputed viewpoint still persists - later texts being viewed as representing corrupted forms of Christian belief and especially where the person of Christ is concerned.

sidelines. There has been some interest in the Epistle's portrait of Christ as High Priest<sup>29</sup> by those surveying New Testament Christological concepts; and a few others have used the Epistle in their schemes of early Christological development, but often as a mere 'gap filler'<sup>30</sup>. Beyond this limited use Hebrews has been largely seen as having little to offer our modern Christological concerns, a view which this study has sought to question.

We have established that Hebrews is not simply to be dismissed as late and Hellenistic with no historical insights to offer. Indeed, the Epistle contains many elements which can only be understood fully when viewed within the context of early Jewish-Christianity. Equally there is sufficient evidence to question the traditional late dating, which rests on evidential foundations which are of no greater significance than those which might suggest an early dating. Our consideration of the human Jesus demonstrates that Hebrews has preserved reliable historical traditions concerning his life and ministry; traditions which are often more explicitly stated here than in the traditions contained within the synoptic Gospels.

Even if the Epistle is a late document produced around 70 AD, this would not exclude the possibility that it has valuable historical insights to offer us. An author writing around 70 AD could easily still have access to first and second hand memories of Jesus which would represent historically valid information. This is why many later texts resort to pseudepigraphal ascription to strengthen their claim to authenticity, interestingly this does not appear to be the approach taken by our author. There is a danger that we are too dismissive of the importance of memory as a reliable source for traditions about the historic Jesus during the early Christian era. What do these traditions tell us about the human Jesus. We have already mentioned Hebrews' dynamic portrait of Jesus, but beyond this I believe we are directed towards viewing the human life in terms of a story of developing obedience. In fact obedience is a central theme alongside the human life story within Hebrews' Christological pattern, which draws the readers attention away from supernatural and metaphysical concerns to focus their attention on Jesus the man.

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<sup>29</sup> Cullmann, O. The Christology of the New Testament. London, SCM, 1959.(2nd Ed 1963). chapter 4: Jesus the High Priest, being but one example of such an approach, also seen in modified form in J. D. G. Dunn. Christology in the Making: An Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation. London, SCM, 1980.

<sup>30</sup> Knox, J. The Humanity and Divinity of Christ. Cambridge, CUP, 1967 (reprinted 1978). pp.34-50. Knox here virtually ascribes to Hebrews the role of 'missing link' in his evolutionary Christological scheme.

Obedience enables Hebrews to focus attention on the achievement of Jesus' life. This Christological approach is not atypically within the New Testament and is close to the approach expressed in the Adamic Christology contained in the Pauline Epistles. Paul also stresses the theme of obedience, contrasting Christ's obedience to Adam's disobedience, whereas Adam in disobedience seizes equality with God, Jesus wins equality with God by obediently offering himself in sacrifice and thereby fulfilling the divine plan for mankind. For Paul, in Adam humanity loses its destiny and is reduced to a subhuman level, whereas Jesus restores man's divine inheritance and becomes the first truly real human being. Hebrews stands within this strong and shared early Christological tradition to which the writings of Paul also bear witness. The concept of obedience also enables us to access earlier messianic traditions expressed in the Suffering Servant material of the book of Isaiah, which deepens our appreciation of the range of Jesus' actions.

Hebrews draws on these obedience traditions to construct a Christological portrait which views Jesus' life as a developing pattern of obedience. As we have already seen for Hebrews sin is not so much a matter of moral failings, which the sacrificial system of the Old Covenant addressed adequately, but apostasy and disloyalty. It is exactly those issues which he concentrates on when referring to Israel's wilderness wanderings, thereby emphasising what he sees to be the true nature of sin - the failure to keep faith with God - in other words disobedience! In contrast Jesus' life is viewed by Hebrews as a life of developing obedience - this is what he really means when he speaks of the Son being perfected. This process of perfecting is brought to completion in Jesus' obedient death on the cross. Once this process is completed Jesus is the true Son of God, man fully united with God, who is able to enter into God's presence and more importantly to lead his fellows into that presence as well.

This approach to the data of Jesus' life offers another way to unravel the puzzle of who he is. There is useful research to be done on the other New Testament traditions about Jesus, using this approach as an interpretative tool. For example, the traditions within Mark's Gospel might be approached in this manner. Such an approach would obviously focus attention on the Temptation of Jesus and his Passion, but less obviously it would offer interesting insights into

the material characterised as belonging the 'Messianic Secret' tradition.<sup>31</sup> We could easily view these traditions as displaying Jesus' obedience, in that he resists and rejects the temptation to seize kingship through demonstrations of power, and dampens down any popular clamour for a political Messiahship. In choosing this less obvious and more difficult course which leads to his own sacrifice on the cross Jesus conforms himself to the divine plan and perfects his obedience to God. It is interesting to note that it is in Mark's passion account that the emphasis is on Jesus' human suffering and sense of dereliction, which he expresses in the words, 'at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Elo-i, Elo-i, la'ma sabach-tha'ni?" which means, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"'<sup>32</sup> By contrast in John's account Jesus displays a more assured sense of the completion of his mission,<sup>33</sup> which reduces his humanity making it feel slightly unnatural. In Mark's account this is definitely not the case as we can see.

If we approach other New Testament traditions in this manner, we may be able to escape the endless round of debates which focus on identifying the divine and human elements within Jesus' life story. Instead we may begin to view the life story more in terms of a developing unified narrative, rather than as a series of disconnected instances of divine actions and human failings, which has often degenerated into a two sons Christology.<sup>34</sup> This approach also avoids the tendency to reduce Jesus' humanity which has often resulted in Docetic portraits of Christ, in fact it tends to direct our attention away from the supernatural elements within the life story.

Christologies which take Jesus' humanity seriously have usually encountered major difficulties in expressing his unique, revelatory finality. Such approaches reduce the divine initiative and in weakening it reduce Jesus to a mere moral model to be imitated by believers. Hebrews exhibits this language of imitation, as he urges his readers to 'run with perseverance the race that is set

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<sup>31</sup> Martin, R.P. Mark Evangelist and Theologian. Exeter, Paternoster, 1979. pp.91-93, Hooker, M.D. The Gospel According to St Mark. London, A & C Black, 1991 (reprinted 1993). pp.66-69. Both of these commentaries provide clear expositions of this important motif.

<sup>32</sup> Mark 15:34.

<sup>33</sup> John 19:30b. Here John has Jesus saying simply 'it is finished', which is a very contrasting view of what the experience of his death meant to Jesus.

<sup>34</sup> McGuckin, J. Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy. New York, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004. pp.151-171. McGuckin demonstrates how the Antiochenes and especially Nestorius produced a Christological scheme "...which was complicated, at times highly obscure, and always obsessively demanding of semantic exactness." It ran counter to the springs of popular imagination, piety and mysticism on which their opponents like Cyril drew. McGuckin argues that Nestorius occupied a position which was difficult to state, but only too easy to misunderstand and equally easy to misrepresent as teaching two Jesus, despite all he said about the unity of the person of Christ.

before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.’<sup>35</sup> Interestingly despite this Hebrews’ Christology has traditionally been categorised as ‘high’, due to its use of the terminology of divine sonship. Does this simply represent a misunderstanding of Hebrews’ theological viewpoint, or does it suggest that Hebrews has successfully overcome this difficulty.

Another way to state this question is to enquire whether Hebrews reduces Jesus merely to a good man, a moral exemplar to be imitated by those who attempt to follow his ethical teachings. As we have already noted morals and ethics are not at the forefront of Hebrews concerns, where the focus is not so much on moral behaviour but on loyalty and obedience to God’s promises. It is loyalty, or rather the lack of loyalty which characterises Hebrews’ interest in the wilderness generation, and again it is loyalty to God’s promises which is his primary concern in the exhortations to his readers. There is little reference to moral or ethical failings, unlike many of Paul’s Epistles, rather the concern is exclusively a question of loyalty and obedience. So it is difficult to develop a case for Jesus being presented as a moral exemplar - it is not his ethics which the readers are called to imitate, but his obedience and loyalty to the promises of God, to his plan for mankind’s future. Obviously it is possible to argue that such a call to imitate Christ, may imply certain ethical behaviour spelt out in the Old Testament covenant traditions, but our author does not explicitly state these as the requirement for either Jesus, or his followers. These ethical requirements and any *failure to maintain them* are rather associated with the Old Cultic order, which is said to adequately deal with such human failings - what it could not adequately address was Israel and man’s apostasy - humanity’s failure to live up to the promises of God. Hebrews is quite clear and explicit that this failure is only answered by Jesus the true High Priest who through his sacrifice wins man access to God and enables humankind to truly fulfil their destiny.

At no point in the Epistle does our writer claim that imitation of Christ will gain his followers access to the true sanctuary, rather he clearly states that this has been done by Christ himself, ‘once and for all’.<sup>36</sup> In this manner Jesus’ uniqueness is clearly asserted, and whilst his followers may become sons, they are not sons by right, or due to their own strivings, but they

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<sup>35</sup> Heb.12:1b-2a.

<sup>36</sup> Heb.7:27 and also Heb.10:12 where Christ is said to have ‘offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins...’

share in Jesus' sonship in so far as they imitate his loyalty to the promises of God. In this respect the language which speaks of Jesus as the pioneer, apostle and perfecter of our hope<sup>37</sup> is of some importance in establishing the uniqueness of Jesus. In a similar manner when the Epistle refers to Jesus as the Son, again his uniqueness is being asserted. It is true that too often in the past this has been understood merely as a statement of Christ's divinity and status, whereas I would argue that a more faithful reading of these texts would emphasise Jesus' obedience, and his established place as God's agent in the salvation of mankind. Which ever approach finds favour, both still allow plenty of scope to use these texts to establish the unique nature of Jesus achievement, which demonstrates he is and remains much more than a merely good man, as far as our author is concerned. The eternal nature of Christ's High Priesthood after the order of Melchizedek also strengthens the case for the unique nature of his redemptive activity which wins man access to the true sanctuary. A uniqueness which is further enhanced when Hebrews claims that Jesus' mediation as High Priest makes all earlier priesthods redundant and obsolescent.

So whilst there is a major strand within the Epistle which calls the readers to model themselves on Jesus and to imitate him, yet it does not require them so much to adopt a particular ethical stance as to display loyalty to the promises of God. For Hebrews the meaning of Jesus' life cannot be reduced to a set of ethical teachings, he is no mere sage or moral teacher,<sup>38</sup> but something far more unique, God's agent in his long term plan for the redemption of humankind. In Jesus, Hebrews clearly believes that God is revealed actively redeeming man and the world so that his plan for his creation may be brought to fulfilment. In rejecting Jesus the sage and ethical teacher, Hebrews closes off many of the approaches modern scholars have adopted when attempting to escape from the debate about humanity and divinity, or in attempting to construct a truly human Jesus. However interesting these ideas may appear to be, Hebrews questions their historical validity - for him Jesus can never be reduced to a system of ethical propositions and demands.

Even if Hebrews avoids reducing Christ to the status of just a 'good man' and manages to

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<sup>37</sup> Heb.12:2 and Heb.3:1.

<sup>38</sup> The idea of Jesus the Sage or Cynic Teacher has been popular in some scholarly circles, for example, Witherington, B. Jesus the Sage The Pilgrimage of Wisdom, Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1994. and Downing, F.G. Christ and the Cynics: Jesus and Other Radicals in First Century Traditions, Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1988.



maintain his unique role as the definite agent of divine activity, the existence of two contrasting Christological portraits within the Epistle suggests that it lacks a unified understanding of Christ. One common response to this situation has been to suggest that Hebrews' Christology merely juxtaposes two incompatible views of Jesus. However, it has been suggested here that Hebrews offers a more unified understanding of the work and person of Christ than this.

We have already demonstrated in the preceding chapters a wide range of evidence to support this contention and there is little to be gained from further detailed discussion, but there is an advantage in surveying our general conclusions. We have established a number of facts which suggest that the Epistle does not simply contain two distinct and disconnected images of Christ. The most obvious concept which links these two images is priesthood, a concept which represents both the major theme and most original contribution of this Epistle. Priesthood is so central to the argument that many scholars have wished to see the whole document as some type of extended exegesis about the concept of priesthood contained in Psalm 110.<sup>39</sup> As we have observed priesthood provides both a functional and soteriological link between the images of the historical and divine Jesus. To simply view these as disconnected concepts or images fails to do justice to the complex theological and Christological argument the author develops. We have seen how for our writer the human Jesus and his life story provide the necessary prerequisite for his effective functioning as High Priest. Equally, we have seen how his obedient sacrifice transforms him from being simply another priest amongst others into the definitive mediator between man and God. We have also observed that the language in which the writer expresses his theological claims, displays a pattern of tension and ambiguity. I believe we have demonstrated that this should not merely be dismissed as evidence of his inability to produce a coherent Christological scheme, but rather as evidence that this tension, very clearly displayed when he discusses Jesus' sonship, offers the basis on which it is possible to produce such a coherent scheme. His ambiguity of language forces his readers to recognise the unique and unexpected nature of the revelation Christ represents. Though I will quite happily agree that Hebrews has not resolved all the difficulties inherent in such a Christological task, I believe strongly that he is more successful than some of the later attempts

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<sup>39</sup> Buchanan, G.W. To the Hebrews. Garden City, Doubleday, 1972. pp.xiv-xxii. Buchanan argues that Hebrews is best understood as an extended midrash of Psalm 110. This view has not found wide acceptance see Lindars, 1991. p26.

such as the ‘two sons Christology’ of some Antiochene exegetes.<sup>40</sup>

Having proved that the idea of a juxtaposition of Christological images represents a failure by scholars to do justice to the depth and originality of the Epistle’s theological insight, we are forced to reconsider our own perceptions of the Christological task. It is in forcing us to review the evidence, as we have already suggested in this chapter, where the Epistle has most to offer the modern debate. It offers us new opportunities and clues to how we might shape a more useful perceptive framework, which will enable us to move beyond the arid discussions of humanity and divinity towards a more dynamic and realistic understanding of the Christ event. Nevertheless the tension observable in the language used suggests that Hebrews may not have overcome all the difficulties inherent in this Christological task.<sup>41</sup>

As well as the detailed observations arising from our study of Hebrews’ Christology which we have already noted there are a number of more general ideas that also contribute to the ongoing debate about the person of Christ. I believe that we have demonstrated that contrary to earlier exegesis it is very difficult to dismiss the Christology of this Epistle as the product of hellenistic thought and cultural expectations. Despite this enduring Hegelian legacy, we have demonstrated that such views simply fly in the face of the available evidence, evidence which displays the very Jewish nature of the theology and thought contained within this Epistle. This evidence leads us to conclude that Christology can not be properly conducted if we divorce it from its Jewish roots. Too often in the past scholars have viewed Christological developments as Hellenistic in character, thereby opening up a gap between the historical life of Jesus the preacher from Nazareth and the Christ of later Christian faith and doctrine. Of course these trends have not simply influenced the interpretation of Hebrews but have also played a major role in the exegesis of the Christology expressed in other New Testament texts. There is no doubt that Christological exploration requires that closer attention is paid to Jewish ideas and traditions, if modern scholarship is to avoid distorting the image of Christ expressed in these texts. This is not to exclude any later developments in Christological traditions, but rather to insist that this solution is not too readily used, before a proper and thorough consideration is

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<sup>40</sup> McGuckin, 2004.pp.240-242. McGuckin notes that Theodoret, Ibas of Edessa and Theodore of Mopsuetia the three most significant theologians of the Antiochene school were publicly excluded from the orthodox canon.

<sup>41</sup> This may also reflect the fact that Hebrews’ approach and use of language is symbolic, sacramental and typological, rather than analytical. Hebrews also displays a tendency which considers alternative motifs, which he does not view in terms of either/ or, but in terms of both/ and.

given to Jewish traditions and sources.

If our study of Hebrews encourages us not to divorce Christology from its Jewish roots, equally it encourages us to recognise that traditions of priesthood, cult and temple may have played a more important role in the development of early Christianity than scholarship once thought. The marginalization of these traditions has partly been the result of historical accident given that modern critical scholarship was first developed in Protestant circles where there was little interest or even downright hostility to such traditions. This accident of history led to an over emphasis on the importance of some Jewish religious traditions: prophecy, Torah, Pharisaism and the synagogue within the development and shaping of early Christianity. Increasingly religious ideas associated with the temple cult and priesthood as being recognised as having valid roles within the formation of Christian belief and tradition by scholars<sup>42</sup>, and even if one does not always agree with the details of their argument it is not so easy to dismiss their overall contention that these traditions have influenced Christianity more than was once recognised. Hebrews with its particular use of these traditions especially highlights this fact, but most New Testament texts also display similar features even if they are not so overtly expressed. If we fail to recognise and take account of those ideas and concepts which arise out of these traditions we fail to do justice to both the theology and Christology of early Christianity.

Another general fact that this study has demonstrated is that the development of Christological traditions has been far more complex than many scholarly schemes have believed. All such schemes have been useful in that they have helped us recognise important motifs and shape our understanding of their use, whilst providing a useful overview. As a first tool in exploring Christology such schemes have yielded worthwhile results and have been useful teaching aids, I admit that it was such schemes which enabled me, like many other students, to begin the process of making sense of the Christological data. Yet even at an early stage I questioned the ease with which some schemes resolved difficulties or gaps in the evidence, Hebrews being one text which was often used to plug such gaps.<sup>43</sup> Now following mature and detailed

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<sup>42</sup> Barker, M. The Great High Priest. Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 2003. Barker is an example of a modern scholar who is concerned to explore the role of Temple theology and liturgy in the formation of early Christianity.

<sup>43</sup> Knox, 1967.pp.34-50.

reflection of Hebrews' Christology I have to question whether such schemes do not hold us back. It is particularly when such schemes become determinative in resolving questions of dating that they are at their most dangerous, especially if they exclude without adequate evidence other possibly valid conclusions. The other aspect of such schemes which requires careful assessment is that they have been widely influenced by the methodology of evolution, which whilst seemingly offering a useful interpretive framework has become a conceptual straight jacket which too readily excludes competing insights without proper discussion of evidence. As in all areas of human exploration there is a strong desire to detect meaningful patterns to aid explanation. Unfortunately though, we also need to test and modify these patterns if we are to avoid distorting reality. Evolutionary Christological schemes have been very helpful in shaping meaningful patterns which have deepened our understanding, but have failed to provide us with the necessary tools to refine their findings. If this is so, then one of the tasks which now requires our attention is to identify such tools so that we may extend our fruitful exploration of these concepts. It is beyond the purpose of this study to develop a full blown account of what these tools might be, but obviously they will relate to some of the issues we have mentioned. They will take proper account of the historical human Jesus, they will be built on Jewish roots, drawing on the complete spread of religious traditions and they will recognise complexity where it is right so to do.

Even if our study enables us to shape such tools, there will remain one issue which will require constant attention and this is what I will characterise as 'the question of levels of reality.' One of the difficulties for the exegete in developing an understanding of Hebrews' Christology is to recognise which statements and ideas relate to our historical experience and which relate to the eternal divine realm, and how they interact. We have seen how decisions about 'levels of reality' with regard to the first two chapters of the Epistle are crucial in identifying whether the writer has managed to do more than juxtapose competing Christological images. If we take this material to be a literal statement of who Christ is before his historic life, it becomes a statement about divine status and Sonship which excludes or at least threatens the reality of his human life story in various areas. On the other hand, if it is a statement of what he has become through his obedient life and of his preordained role in the God's plan, it allows for a much more successful Christological scheme to be identified. The problem, as we have seen, is how do we determine the 'levels of reality' which the author believed his statements belonged to given his

complex and multi layered use of images. Even if we refine our tools in the light of what we have discovered, this problem will remain and continue to demand constant argument and thought. In one sense all our theological and Christological discussions are mere attempts to make sense of the rich interaction between these levels of reality which Christians have always recognised meet in the person of Jesus Christ as in no other individual known to us.

Despite all the difficulties the exegesis of this Epistle entails it offers many unique insights which deserve wider consideration within the ongoing debate concerning the person of Christ. 'The Christology of the New Testament would certainly be impoverished should it be deprived of Hebrews' deep and rich understanding of who Jesus was. The Christology of Hebrews is deserving of more attention and reflection.'<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Parsons, M.C. "Son and High Priest: a Study in the Christology of Hebrews." Evangelical Quarterly, 60.1988.pp.195-215.p.215.

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