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Associate Professor of Divinity
Beeson Divinity School

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Associate Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies
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Charles Quarles
Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary
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of New Testament Studies
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary
BIBLICAL THEOLOGY FOR
CHRISTIAN PROCLAMATION

COMMENTARY ON
HEBREWS
Biblical Theology for
Christian Proclamation

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General Editors’ Preface

In recent years biblical theology has seen a remarkable resurgence. Whereas, in 1970, Brevard Childs wrote *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, the quest for the Bible’s own theology has witnessed increasing vitality since Childs prematurely decried the demise of the movement. Nowhere has this been truer than in evangelical circles. It could be argued that evangelicals, with their commitment to biblical inerrancy and inspiration, are perfectly positioned to explore the Bible’s unified message. At the same time, as D. A. Carson has aptly noted, perhaps the greatest challenge faced by biblical theologians is how to handle the Bible’s manifest diversity and how to navigate the tension between its unity and diversity in a way that does justice to both.¹

What is biblical theology? And how is biblical theology different from related disciplines such as systematic theology? These two exceedingly important questions must be answered by anyone who would make a significant contribution to the discipline. Regarding the first question, the most basic answer might assert that biblical theology, in essence, is *the theology of the Bible*, that is, the theology expressed by the respective writers of the various biblical books *on their own terms* and *in their own historical contexts*. Biblical theology is the attempt to understand and embrace the *interpretive perspective of the biblical authors*. What is more, biblical theology is the theology of the *entire* Bible, an exercise in *whole-Bible theology*. For this reason biblical theology is not just a modern academic discipline; its roots are found already in the use of earlier Old


Biblical theology thus involves a close study of the use of the Old Testament in the Old Testament (that is, the use of, say, Deuteronomy by Jeremiah, or of the Pentateuch by Isaiah). Biblical theology also entails the investigation of the use of the Old Testament in the New, both in terms of individual passages and in terms of larger christological or soteriological themes. Biblical theology may proceed book by book, trace central themes in Scripture, or seek to place the contributions of individual biblical writers within the framework of the Bible’s larger overarching metanarrative, that is, the Bible’s developing story from Genesis through Revelation at whose core is salvation or redemptive history, the account of God’s dealings with humanity and his people Israel and the church from creation to new creation.

In this quest for the Bible’s own theology, we will be helped by the inquiries of those who have gone before us in the history of the church. While we can profitably study the efforts of interpreters over the entire sweep of the history of biblical interpretation since patristic times, we can also benefit from the labors of scholars since J. P. Gabler, whose programmatic inaugural address at the University of Altdorf, Germany, in 1787 marks the inception of the discipline in modern times. Gabler’s address bore the title “On the Correct Distinction Between Dogmatic and Biblical Theology and the Right Definition of Their Goals.” While few (if any) within evangelicalism would fully identify with Gabler’s program, the proper distinction between dogmatic and biblical theology (that is, between biblical and systematic theology) continues to be an important issue to be adjudicated by practitioners of both disciplines, and especially biblical theology. We have already defined biblical theology as whole-Bible theology, describing the theology of the various biblical books on their own terms and in their own historical contexts. Systematic theology, by contrast, is more topically oriented and focused on contemporary contextualization. While there are different ways in which the relationship between biblical and systematic theology can be construed, maintaining a proper distinction

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2 The original Latin title was Oratio de iusto discrimine theologiae biblicae et dogmaticae regundisque recte utriusque finibus.
between the two disciplines arguably continues to be vital if both are to achieve their objectives.

The present set of volumes constitutes an ambitious project, seeking to explore the theology of the Bible in considerable depth, spanning both Testaments. Authors come from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives, though all affirm the inerrancy and inspiration of Scripture. United in their high view of Scripture, and in their belief in the underlying unity of Scripture, which is ultimately grounded in the unity of God himself, each author explores the contribution of a given book or group of books to the theology of Scripture as a whole. While conceived as stand-alone volumes, each volume thus also makes a contribution to the larger whole. All volumes provide a discussion of introductory matters, including the historical setting and the literary structure of a given book of Scripture. Also included is an exegetical treatment of all the relevant passages in succinct commentary-style format. The biblical theology approach of the series will also inform and play a role in the commentary proper. The commentator permits a discussion between the commentary proper and the biblical theology it reflects by a series of cross-references.

The major contribution of each volume, however, is a thorough discussion of the most important themes of the biblical book in relation to the canon as a whole. This format allows each contributor to ground biblical theology, as is proper, in an appropriate appraisal of the relevant historical and literary features of a particular book in Scripture while at the same time focusing on its major theological contribution to the entire Christian canon in the context of the larger salvation-historical metanarrative of Scripture. Within this overall format, there will be room for each individual contributor to explore the major themes of his particular corpus in the way he sees most appropriate for the material under consideration. For some books of the Bible, it may be best to have these theological themes set out in advance of the exegetical commentary. For other books, it may be better to explain the theological themes after the commentary. Consequently, each contributor has the freedom to order these sections as best suits the biblical material under consideration, so that the discussion of biblical-theological themes may precede or follow the exegetical commentary. Moreover, contributors have some flexibility regarding format within these sections, as they consider their
own biblical books and decide how best to help readers understand the text.

This format, in itself, would already be a valuable contribution to biblical theology. But other series try to accomplish a survey of the Bible’s theology as well. What distinguishes the present series is its orientation toward Christian proclamation. This is the Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation commentary series! As a result, the ultimate purpose of this set of volumes is not exclusively, or even primarily, academic. Rather, we seek to relate biblical theology to our own lives and to the life of the church. Our desire is to equip those in Christian ministry who are called by God to preach and teach the precious truths of Scripture to their congregations, both in North America and in a global context.

We hope and pray that the 40 volumes of this series, once completed, will bear witness to the unity in diversity of the canon of Scripture as they probe the individual contributions of each of its 66 books. The authors and editors are united in their desire that in so doing the series will magnify the name of Christ and bring glory to the triune God who revealed himself in Scripture so that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved—to the glory of God the Father and his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, under the illumination of the Holy Spirit, and for the good of his church. To God alone be the glory: soli Deo gloria.
EXPOSITION

Hebrews 1:1–4

Outline

I. Prologue: Definitive and Final Revelation in the Son (1:1–4)
II. Don’t Abandon the Son Since He Is Greater than Angels (1:5–2:18)

Scripture

1Long ago God spoke to the fathers by the prophets at different times and in different ways. 2In these last days, He has spoken to us by His Son. God has appointed Him heir of all things and made the universe through Him. 3The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact expression of His nature, sustaining all things by His powerful word. After making purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. 4So He became higher in rank than the angels, just as the name He inherited is superior to theirs.

Context

The opening of Hebrews is elegant and eloquent, demonstrating the literary artistry of the author. The introduction gives no evidence that the writing is an epistle, for the author doesn’t introduce himself, the recipients aren’t identified, and there isn’t a greeting. The opening suggests a literary work, something like a literary essay on the significance of Jesus Christ. We know from the conclusion of the work, however, that Hebrews has epistolary features, and thus
the book should not be classified as a literary essay. Still, the artistry and beauty that characterize the entire letter are evident from the opening. The author invites the reader via the elevated style of the letter to reflect on and apply his theology.

The main point of the first four verses is that God has spoken finally and definitively in his Son. The author beautifully contrasts the past era in which God spoke to the ancestors and prophets with the last days in which God spoke to us in his Son. A table should illustrate the contrast in the first two verses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Long ago</th>
<th>In these last days</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>God spoke to the fathers</td>
<td>He has spoken to us by His Son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>by the prophets</td>
<td>by His Son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at different times and in different ways</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Verses 2–4 focus on the identity of the Son and what he has done. Here we have a chiasm.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A He has spoken to us by His Son</th>
<th>D¹ He is the exact expression of His nature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B God has appointed Him heir of all things</td>
<td>C¹ sustaining all things by His powerful word</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C He made the universe through Him</td>
<td>B¹ After making purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D The Son is the radiance of God’s glory</td>
<td>A¹ He became higher in rank than the angels, just as the name He inherited is superior to theirs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The main point of the chiasm is found under A and A¹: the Son is superior to angels since he is the Son. Indeed, he is the heir and ruler of the universe since he is the Creator of the universe and shares God’s nature.

**Exegesis**

**1:1**

God is a speaking God, and he has spoken to the prophets in a variety of ways and modes in the OT. The first verse is marked by alliteration in the Greek, with five different words beginning with “p”:
“at different times” (πολυμερῶς); “in different ways” (πολυτρόπως); “long ago” (πάλαι) “fathers” (πατράσιν); and “prophets” (προφήταις). From the outset the literary skill and the deft style of the author are apparent so that the reader sees a master craftsman at work. The diversity of revelation in the former era is featured. God spoke “at different times” and “in different ways.” OT revelation was transmitted through narrative, hymns, proverbs, poetry, parables, and love songs, through wisdom and apocalyptic literature. God communicated with his people for hundreds of years, speaking to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to Moses and Joshua, Samuel and Saul, David and the kings of Judah and Israel, and to the prophets, and to the people who returned from exile.

One of the major themes in Hebrews emerges: “God spoke to the fathers.” The one true God is a speaking God, one who communicates with his people and reveals his will and his ways to them. The “fathers” can’t be limited to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob but include and encompass all those addressed in OT revelation. Similar to the word “prophets” should not be restricted to books that are labeled as “prophetic” in our English Bibles. The writer identifies the entire OT as prophetic. Finally, the revelation given in the past is described as occurring “long ago” (πάλαι). The author is not emphasizing primarily that the revelation occurred in the distant past. His main point, given the remainder of the book, is that OT revelation belonged to a previous era. A new day has arisen, a new covenant has arrived, and the old is no longer in force. The “first” covenant is “old” (παλαιόμενον) and hence obsolete (8:13). The words of the previous era are authoritative as the word of God, but they must be interpreted in light of the fulfillment realized in Jesus Christ.

1:2

The God who spoke in the past still speaks, but “in these last days” he has spoken finally and definitively in his Son. This Son is the Davidic heir promised in the Scriptures, and he is also the agent of all creation. He is the Davidic heir and more since as Creator he shares God’s nature.


2 Ibid., 38–39. The word ἐν in the phrase “in the prophets” (literally) is instrumental and is rightly translated by the HCSB as “by the prophets” (cf. Attridge, Hebrews, 38n41).
The last days (Gen 49:1; Num 24:14; Isa 2:2; Jer 23:20; 25:19; Dan 10:14; Hos 3:5; Mic 4:1) represent the days in which God’s saving promises are fulfilled, and they have now commenced with the coming of the Son. Believers no longer live in the days when they await the fulfillment of what God has promised. They live in the eschaton; “the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor 10:11). It is inconceivable that the readers would embrace the old era with its sacrifices and rituals now that the new has come in Jesus Christ.

God has spoken in his Son. If we look at the table introducing this section, we see that the one phrase with no corresponding phrase is “at different times and in different ways.” Still the author expects the readers to fill in the gap. The revelation in the former era was diverse and partial, but the revelation in the Son is unitary and definitive. The final revelation has come in the last days for God has spoken his last and best word. No further word is to be expected, for the last word focuses on the life, death, and resurrection of the Son. As 9:26 says of Jesus, “But now He has appeared one time, at the end of the ages, for the removal of sin by the sacrifice of Himself.” Believers await the return of the Son (9:28), but they don’t expect a further word from God. No more clarification is needed. The significance of what the Son accomplished has been revealed once for all, and hence the readers must pay attention (2:1) to this revelation.

The author also emphasizes that God has spoken “by his Son.” In the OT Israel is the Lord’s son, his firstborn (Exod 4:22). And the Davidic king is also identified as God’s son (2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7). The author implies that Jesus is the true Israel and the true king. But the subsequent verses indicate that sonship transcends these categories, for Jesus is also the unique and eternal Son of God, one who shares the nature of God. Indeed, the following verses indicate why the readers must pay heed to the word spoken in the Son, for the Son is far greater than angels. He is the exalted and reigning Son, the one who rules the universe.

The reference to the Son begins the chiasm represented in the second table above, and it matches 1:4, which emphasizes that Jesus as the Son is greater than the angels because he has inherited a more excellent name. The author desires the readers to see the majesty of

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Jesus as the Son so they understand that he is supreme over angels and any other entity in the universe.

Jesus as the Son was appointed (ἔθηκεν) by God as “heir of all things.” In the OT, inheritance language is typically used with reference to the land of Canaan, which was promised to Israel as an inheritance (cf. Deut 4:38; 12:9; Josh 11:23). But the Son is the heir of “all things,” which echoes the promise given to the Davidic king in Ps 2:8: “Ask of Me, and I will make the nations Your inheritance and the ends of the earth Your possession.” The Son is the heir because he is the Davidic king, the fulfillment of the covenant promise made to David that he would never lack a man to sit on the throne. The Son as heir matches in the chiasm his sitting down “at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (1:3). The Son’s heirship is tied to his kingship, to his rule over all, and hence it commences with his exaltation to God’s right hand.

Jesus’ rule as the Son demonstrates that he is the Messiah, the Davidic king, the one through whom God’s promises to Israel are fulfilled. As the son of David, he is a human being, but he is more than a human being, for “God made the universe through him” (see §2.1). The phrase “the universe” (τοὺς αἰῶνας) is most often temporal, but here it designates the world God has made (cf. Wis 13:9), and the author features the Son as the agent of creation (cf. John 1:3; 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:16). The author likely draws here upon wisdom traditions, for we see in the OT that the Lord created the world in wisdom (Prov 3:19; 8:22–31; Ps 104:24; Jer 10:12; cf. Wis 7:22; 9:2). The Son is greater than wisdom, however, for wisdom is a personification, but the Son existed as a person before the world was formed. We can easily fail to see how astonishing this statement is.

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4 The word τίθημι means “appoint” in other contexts as well (1 Thess 5:9; 1 Tim 2:7; 2 Tim 1:11; 1 Pet 2:8).
6 Amy L. B. Peeler says that God chose to include the Son in creating, but this notion sounds a bit adoptionistic, as if the Son isn’t equally God. Peeler actually strongly emphasizes the Son’s deity elsewhere in her work (You Are My Son: The Family of God in the Epistle to the Hebrews, LNTS 486 [New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014], 16).
Hebrews 1:3

The one who was put to death in Jerusalem on a cross a few decades earlier is now praised as the one who created the world!8

1:3

Verse 3 unpacks further the nature and supremacy of the Son. First, the author speaks ontologically about the Son, maintaining that he fully shares the divine nature and identity. Second, the Son’s role in sustaining the cosmos is affirmed. Third, and most crucial for his argument, the Son’s reign at God’s right hand is featured. The Son reigns and rules as the one who has accomplished full cleansing for sin.

The first two clauses in verse 3 focus on the nature of the Son,9 showing that the Christology here is not merely functional but also ontological.10 The Son is the King and the Creator because of who he is because he shares the nature of God. Similarly, the author grounds Christ’s atoning work as high priest in who he is. Sometimes scholars focus on functional Christology and minimize ontology, but Hebrews makes ontology the basis for function so that Christ saves because of who he is.

The author begins by claiming that Christ “is the radiance of God’s glory” (see §2.1). The word “radiance” (ἀπαύγασμα) could mean “reflection,” so that the Son mirrors God’s glory.11 Or it could be defined as “radiance” or “outshining” to emphasize the manifestation of God’s glory.12 The use of the term in Wis 7:26 doesn’t settle the issue,13 for the same interpretive issues arise there. It is difficult to determine which meaning is correct, though the active radiance

8 So L. Johnson, Hebrews, 68.
9 Some scholars detect dependence on a hymn here (see Attridge, Hebrews, 41–42).
13 Rightly Attridge, Hebrews, 42.
seems slightly more likely.\textsuperscript{14} In either case God’s glory is revealed in the Son, and it really doesn’t matter much which we choose, for as Johnson says, “Reflection becomes radiance, and radiance is what is reflected.”\textsuperscript{15}

The Son is also “the exact impression of his nature.” The word translated “exact impression” (χαρακτήρ) is used of the impression or mark made by coins.\textsuperscript{16} Here it denotes the idea that the Son represents the nature (ὑπόστασις) and character of the one true God.\textsuperscript{17} He reveals who God is, and thus he must share the divine identity. The Son cannot represent God to human beings unless he shares in the being, nature, and essence of God. The Son of God reveals the reality of the one true God.

Hebrews is not alone in the sentiments expressed in the previous two phrases. John’s Gospel emphasizes that God speaks to human beings in Jesus Christ. He is the “Word” of God (John 1:1) through whom the world was created (John 1:3). John directly tells us in John 1:1 that the “Word was God” (1:1). God is invisible and in that sense inaccessible, but Jesus Christ explains to human beings who God is (John 1:18). In the same way Jesus instructs Philip that the one who has seen him has also seen the Father (John 14:9). Paul in Colossians celebrates and affirms the truth that Christ is “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15), and in Philippians he says Christ “was in the form of God” (2:6 ESV).

After affirming the Son’s ontological divinity, Hebrews returns to the Son’s role in the created world. He is not only the one through whom the world was made but also sustains the universe “by His powerful word.” The thought is similar to Col. 1:17, “And by him

\textsuperscript{14} Ellingworth slightly prefers “radiance” (Paul Ellingworth, The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text, NIGTC [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993], 98–99). See also O’Brien, Hebrews, 69–70; Gareth Lee Cockerill, The Epistle to the Hebrews, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 94. The Son’s radiance is eternal and should not be limited to the time following his exaltation (rightly Cockerill, Hebrews, 95).

\textsuperscript{15} L. Johnson, Hebrews, 69. Barnard says the main point here is “the unique unity of the Son with the Divine glory” (Jody A. Barnard, The Mysticism of Hebrews: Exploring the Role of Jewish Apocalyptic Mysticism in the Epistle to the Hebrews, WUNT 2/331 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012], 151).


\textsuperscript{17} See H. Koester, “ὑπόστασις,” TDNT 8:572–89.
all things hold together.”\(^{18}\) Not only did the created world come into being through the Son; it also continues, “And is upheld because of the Son. The created world does not run by “laws of nature,” so that the Son’s continued superintendence is dispensed with. The author of Hebrews does not embrace a deistic notion of creation. The universe is sustained by the personal and powerful word of the Son, so that the created world is dependent on his will for its functioning and preservation. Implied in the expression is that the universe will reach its intended goal and purpose.\(^{19}\)

The author reprises the idea that the Son reigns over all, presaging one of the major themes of the book in doing so. The Son’s rule commences “after making purification of sins.” The word for “purification” (καθαρισμός) is cultic (cf. Exod 29:36; 30:10; Lev 14:32; 15:13; 1 Chr 23:28), anticipating the discussion on the efficacy of Levitical sacrifices in chs. 7–10 (see also Heb 9:14, 22–23; 10:2). The Son’s once-for-all sacrifice cleanses the sins of those who believe in him. Hence, those who are “purified” (κεκαθαρισμένους) “no longer have any consciousness of sins” (10:2). They are free from the stain of guilt that defiled them. Since atonement has been accomplished, the Son has now “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” The allusion as noted above is to Psalm 110 in the letter, a psalm that pervades the entire letter and plays a fundamental role in the author’s argument.

The allusion, as noted above, is to Ps 110:1, where David’s Lord sits down at God’s right hand (see also 1:13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2).\(^{20}\) The right hand signifies power (Exod 15:6, 12), protection (Pss 16:8; 73:23; Isa 41:10), and triumph (Pss 20:6; 21:8). Indeed, it signifies that Jesus shares the same identity as God, as Bauckham argues. The “potent imagery of sitting on the cosmic throne has only one attested significance: it indicates his participation in the unique sovereignty of God.”

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\(^{18}\) Against Peeler, the reference here is not to the Father’s powerful word (You Are My Son, 18).

\(^{19}\) O’Brien, Hebrews, 56.

of God over the world.”21 Here the author emphasizes the forgiveness of sins, for the Son is seated at God’s right hand since his work is finished. And he reigns at God’s right hand as the Lord of the universe and as the Davidic Messiah. The exaltation of Christ is a common theme in the NT (see Phil 2:9–11; Col 1:15–18; Eph 1:21; 1 Pet 3:22), and thus we see Hebrews shares the worldview of the NT generally in presenting Christ as the exalted and reigning king over the universe.

1:4

Verse 4 is tied closely to 1:3. The Son who is seated at God’s right hand and rules the world as the Davidic Messiah and Lord has become greater than angels. Israel was called as God’s son to rule the world for God (Exod 4:22–23). David and his heirs had a special calling as God’s son and the king to mediate God’s rule to the world (2 Sam 7:14; Pss 2:7–12; 72:1–20). The kingly role of both Israel and David is fulfilled in Jesus as the one who rules over all. Clearly the author is not suggesting that he has become greater than angels as the eternal Son of God. His argument, anticipating chapter 2 as well, is that the Son has become greater than the angels as the God-Man. The author introduces here one of his favorite words: “better” (κρείττων).22 Believers in Christ have a “better hope” (7:19), a “better covenant” (7:22; 8:6), “better sacrifices” (9:23), a “better possession” (10:34), a “better resurrection” (11:35), and “better” blood than Abel’s (12:24). The one who shares God’s nature and manifests his glory has purified believers of sins and now reigns at God’s right hand. In other words his reign commenced at a certain point in history. He began to rule at his resurrection and exaltation.

The author introduces angels here, which play a major role in the ensuing argument (1:5–2:16). Why does the author emphasize Jesus’ superiority to angels? Were the Hebrews assigning a particular significance to angels?23 If we examine the letter as a whole, and what the author says in the next chapter, we discover the most

22 My translation.
23 Cf. F. F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Hebrews, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 9. It is unlikely that the readers were tempted to identify Jesus as an
The angels were the mediators of the Mosaic law (2:2; cf. Acts 7:53; Gal 3:19). In stressing the Son’s superiority to the angels, the author features Jesus’ supremacy over the Mosaic law and the Sinai covenant. Hence, the reference to the angels ties into one of the central themes of the letter. The readers should not transfer their allegiance to the law mediated by angels. Such a gambit should be rejected, for they would be opting for what is inferior since the Son rules over angels as one who has “inherited” a name better than theirs. God promised to make Abraham’s name great (Gen 12:2), and the same promise is given to David (2 Sam 7:9). And this covenant promise, first given to Abraham and then channeled through David, finds its final fulfillment in Jesus Christ. The word “inherited” (κεκληρονόμηκεν) reaches back to “heir of all things” (1:2). Such an inheritance has been gained through his suffering and death, signifying again the rule of the Son at his resurrection.

The more excellent name is typically understood to be Son. But others argue that the name here is probably Yahweh, the name of God revealed to Israel. Joslin, in particular, makes a powerful argument supporting a reference to Yahweh. First, the term “name” elsewhere in Hebrews almost certainly refers to Yahweh (2:12; 6:10; 13:5). Hence, the presumption is that the same name is in view here as well. Second, Joslin says that the term “Son” is not a name but
Hebrews 1:4

a title or a description of Jesus (1:2, 5, 8; 2:6; 3:6; 4:14; 5:5, 8; 6:6; 7:3, 28; 10:29). The word “name” echoes the name of God that plays a central role in biblical tradition (cf. Exod 3:13–15), for God’s name signifies his character and in revealing his name God reveals himself. The superiority of Jesus’ name in a context where his exaltation and divine identity are communicated points to his deity.

It is difficult to decide between Son and Yahweh here, though I prefer the former for the following reasons. First, the word “Son” occurs four times in the chapter (1:2, 5 [twice], 8), so that the reader naturally thinks of the word “Son.” Second, in the chiasm of verses 2–4 presented in the table above the term “Son” (v. 2) matches the inheriting a more excellent name (v. 4). Third, the word “name” refers to the Lord elsewhere in the letter, but all these references are to the Father rather than to the Son, so the parallel isn’t as close as claimed. Fourth, verse 5 supports and grounds verse 4 with the word “for” (γὰρ), and the verse twice calls attention to Jesus’ sonship, suggesting that Son is the name that makes Jesus greater than angels. Fifth, the author speaks of Jesus inheriting the name. It is difficult to see how Jesus could inherit the name of Yahweh. Such a state of affairs would suggest that there was a period when Jesus wasn’t divine and that he inherited such deity at some point. But doesn’t the same objection apply to the word Son? No, for in using the word Son, the author would be referring to Jesus’ exaltation and rule as God and man, and such a rule only commenced at his resurrection.28

Bridge

Jesus is the culmination of God’s revelation. The OT Scriptures point to him and are fulfilled in him. We see in the introduction of Hebrews that Jesus is the prophet, priest, and king. He is the

28 Perhaps there is also an echo of 2 Samuel 7 where “name” (7:9, 13, 23, 26) and God’s greatness (7:21, 26; cf. Heb 1:3) point to the “honor conferred by God on the Messiah as the Davidic heir at the establishment of his throne and in association with God himself” (so George H. Guthrie, “Hebrews,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007], 925). See also his discussion on p. 924. Guthrie maintains that the title here is “name,” which could fit with the view stated above (George Guthrie, *Hebrews*, NIVAC [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998], 50), though it seems to me that “Son” is the more natural reading.
prophet, for God’s final word is spoken by him and in him. He is the priest by whom final cleansing of sins is accomplished. He is the king who reigns at God’s right hand. The last days have arrived in Jesus and the final word has been spoken, and hence there will be no further revelation until Jesus’ return. The great revelatory events have taken place in Jesus’ ministry, death, resurrection, and exaltation. Believers do not need any other word from God for their lives. They are to put their faith in what God has revealed in and through Jesus the Christ.

**Hebrews 1:5–14**

Outline

I. Prologue: Definitive and Final Revelation in the Son (1:1–4)

II. Don’t Abandon the Son Since He Is Greater than Angels (1:5–2:18)

A. The Son’s Nature and Reign Show He Is Greater than Angels (1:5–14)

B. Warning: Don’t Drift Away (2:1–4)

C. The Coming World Subjected to the Son (2:5–18)

Scripture

5 For to which of the angels did He ever say, You are My Son; today I have become Your Father, or again, I will be His Father, and He will be My Son? 6 When He again brings His firstborn into the world, He says, And all God’s angels must worship Him.

7 And about the angels He says: He makes His angels winds, and His servants a fiery flame, 8 but to the Son: Your throne, God, is forever and ever, and the scepter of Your kingdom is a scepter of justice. 9 You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; this is why God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of joy rather than Your companions. 10 And: In the beginning, Lord, You established the earth, and the heavens are the works of Your hands; 11 they will perish, but You remain. They will all wear out like clothing; 12 You will roll them up like a cloak, and they will

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29 In saying God’s final word is spoken in and by Jesus, I am including the entirety of the NT canonical witness to Jesus as the Son.
When considering some of the themes in Hebrews at the beginning of the commentary, they were investigated in terms of structures of thought in the letter, such as promise and fulfillment, the already-but-not-yet eschatology of the letter, the role of typology, and the role of spatial or vertical thought in the letter. By considering some of the themes in the letter through these lenses, we saw how some major themes fit into the fundamental structures of the book. But it is also important to consider the central theological themes of the letter in their own right, and that task is pursued here.

§1 God in Hebrews

It is easy to overlook God in Hebrews, though he is one of the central characters in the epistle. One reason for this is the centrality of Christ in the letter. We rightly focus on Christ, and fixing our attention on him may lead us to neglect the role of God in the letter.¹ If we attend to the letter closely, God strides throughout the book. Several themes stand out when considering God in Hebrews. The writer often teaches that God is the Creator of the world (1:2; 2:10; 3:4; 4:3–4; 9:26; 11:3).² He created the world through the agency of his Son, Jesus Christ (1:2); and as Creator of the world, he is clearly the sovereign ruler over it. God’s creative power and sovereignty are


evident, for all things exist because of him and through him (2:10). God’s role as Creator is also featured in chapter 4, for after completing his work of creation, he rested (4:3–4, 10). God’s rest doesn’t mean he was inactive or inert subsequent to creation. Instead, it signifies that God’s initial act of creation was completed. We also see that God is described as the builder of the universe (3:4), which is another way of saying he made all things (cf. Isa 40:28; 43:7; 45:7, 9; Wis 9:2; 11:24; 13:4).

The verse that has provoked the most interest relative to creation is 11:3. The author draws on Genesis in claiming that the world was created by God’s word (cf. Gen 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26). Most of the discussion has centered on whether the verse teaches creation ex nihilo. One of the most promising suggestions is that the invisible thing by which the world is created is the word of God. The problem with such a view, however, is that the invisible things (ἐκ φανερωμένων) are plural, and hence this doesn’t fit well with a reference to the word of God. Alternatively it has been suggested that the invisible things refers to the chaos of Gen 1:2, but chaos isn’t invisible, so that doesn’t work well either. It is difficult to be certain, but it seems creation out of nothing is the best option for interpreting the verse. In any case Hebrews celebrates God’s creation of the world, and as Creator he is the sovereign Ruler and King of the universe.

God’s rule over the world is assumed elsewhere in the letter. The angels belong to God; they are his messengers (1:6, 13), and their tasks are appointed by God (1:7). God sovereignly decided that the world would not be subjected to angels but to human beings (2:5, 7, 9). Similarly redemption and forgiveness were not offered to angels but limited to human beings (2:16). God, if he so desired, could have chosen to save angels as well, but he restricted his saving intentions to human beings and did not rescue fallen angels. Even the word “angels” points to their subordinate role, for they carry out the will of God as his envoys and messengers. In the same way, high priests don’t serve at their own initiative but are appointed by God (5:1, 4; 8:3; cf. 7:1). God by his own authority and in accord with his own good pleasure instituted the new covenant and declared the old covenant to be obsolete (8:8–13; 10:15–18). The Lord granted signs and wonders and distributions of the Spirit to attest to the

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3 See the commentary on 11:3 here.
truthfulness of his revelation in Jesus Christ (2:4), signifying the superiority of the covenant established in Jesus Christ. The sovereignty and rule of God permeate the letter, showing that it is one of the fundamental pillars of the author’s thought.

We find eighteen places in the letter that refer to the promises of God (4:1; 6:12–13, 15, 17; 7:6, 28; 8:6; 9:15; 10:23, 36; 11:9, 11, 13, 17, 33, 39; 12:26). Such promises indicate that God has a plan for the world that features the grace of God in Jesus Christ. God planned to bless the world through Abraham, fulfilling that plan through Jesus Christ. The promises reveal God’s generosity toward human beings, showing his grace and love and mercy even for those who have rebelled against him. Hence, Jesus by God’s grace experienced death for all so that human beings would triumph over death (2:9, 14–15). Human beings are encouraged to seek God in order to receive grace from him (4:16), for God’s grace strengthens people to do the will of God (13:9, 25). They should not forsake the grace of God (10:29; 12:15) but hold on to it until the end (12:28).

Another feature of the promise should be noted. God’s promise and oath cannot be changed (6:17–18; 7:21), and thus human beings can bank on what God has declared will happen. Similarly, God’s promise also points to his character, for by definition what he promises will certainly come to pass. There is no uncertainty about God’s promise, for God cannot lie (6:18). Lying is contrary to his character as God, for he is always faithful (11:11).

God’s promises and grace point to another truth. God is able to fulfill what he promises. He rules over the world and is able to put into effect what he pledges. The sovereignty and greatness of God form the backdrop for the fulfillment of his gracious promises. God is majestic and great and is worthy of honor and glory because of his majestic greatness (1:3; 8:1). He sits on his throne, ruling over all (4:16; 8:1; 12:2). His sovereignty is evident in the creation of the world, for the Creator is surely also the ruler over all he has made (1:2; 11:3). Since God is the sovereign Ruler, everything in it exists for his glory and his praise (13:15, 21); and nothing can happen, even spiritual growth, apart from his permission (6:3). Indeed, God’s name and glory are of fundamental importance, for Jesus came “to proclaim” God’s name to all (2:12), and God’s name represents his character and being. Similarly believers are called to praise God and to live for the sake of his name (6:10; 13:15). The glory of God, i.e.,
the praise of his name, is to be the animating principle of all those who live upon the earth.

Nothing can hinder God’s promises, for he can strengthen those who are barren or impotent so that they can conceive children (11:11), and he is able to raise the dead if he wishes (11:19).Believers should be full of confidence, for they serve the “living God” (3:12; 9:14; 10:31; 12:22). He is not an inactive God but carries out his promises and his threats. In the new covenant God fulfills his promise by writing the law on the heart of his people (8:8–10; 9:20) so that he equips and strengthens them to do his will (13:21). Similarly the children of God or the brothers and sisters of Jesus are given to Jesus by God (2:13). In other words they become part of Jesus’ family by God’s grace, by his transforming their hearts. So too, the people of God (2:17; 4:9; 8:10; 11:25), God’s household (3:6; 10:21), belong to God. They are his people and he is their God (8:10), which is another way of saying they are his covenant people. Along the same lines peace is not something human beings achieve through hard work but is a gift of God (13:20). God, in fulfillment of his promise to Abraham to bring universal blessing to the world, has prepared a city for his people (11:10, 13–16; 12:22; 13:14).

God’s activity in the world is displayed by his voice and his word.⁴ He is not absent from the world but vitally involved in it. Hebrews emphasizes repeatedly that God speaks, that he declares his will and purposes in the world. He spoke through the prophets of old and has spoken finally and definitively in his Son (1:1–2). As Griffiths observes, God speaks in his Son in an unexpected way, for he speaks especially through the identity and work of the Son.⁵ Hence, as the writer unfolds the Melchizedekian priesthood of Christ and the significance of his atoning work, God is speaking through these words to the readers!

In citing the OT, the author doesn’t say the Scriptures “were written” but introduces OT citations by saying that God “speaks” through the Scriptures (1:5–8, 13; 5:5–6; 8:5, 8; 11:18; cf. 4:8).⁶ The

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⁵ Ibid., 36–42.
⁶ For an excellent essay on the theology of the Scriptures in Hebrews, see Ken Schenk, “God Has Spoken: Hebrews’ Theology of the Scriptures,” in The Epistle to
emphasis on speaking fits with the sermonic character of Hebrews, communicating the contemporary significance of what God says. God’s word is “living and active” so that what is said actually comes to pass (cf. also 6:5). For instance, his voice will shake both the earth and heavens (12:26), and hence human beings should pay heed to his voice (3:7, 15; 4:7). God’s word comes to the readers through the letter, through the sermon or “message of exhortation” (13:22) read to the recipients. The writer hopes the word he delivers to them will be the means God uses to keep them from apostasy. God speaks to them through his warnings (12:25) and as he exposit the high priestly work of Jesus Christ. Interestingly, God’s word is also delivered through leaders who proclaim his will and ways to the readers (13:7, 17).

God is not impersonal or distant, but human beings are summoned to enjoy a relationship with him: to know him (8:11). The goal of life is seeing him (12:14), which means nothing is more delightful than enjoying him. Human beings should make it their aim to please God (11:5–6; 13:16), to gain his approval (11:2, 4–5, 39), to do his will (10:7, 9, 36; 12:9; 13:21; cf. 10:6, 8), and to have a good conscience before him (13:18) since he is the Lord. Believers are to draw near to God (7:19; 10:22) and come to him, for they will find help at the “throne of grace” (4:16). He forgives those who rely on Jesus as their great high priest (8:12; 10:22). God helps human beings and will never leave or forsake those who depend on him (13:5–6). Human beings direct their prayers to God, which shows that he cares about them and that he has the power to answer their petitions (5:7; 13:18–19). Blessing comes from God (6:7, 14; 12:14), and hence human beings must believe he exists and that it is worthwhile to seek him (11:6), for God calls on us to trust in him, to put our faith in him (3:12, 19; 4:1; 6:1; 10:39; 11:1–40). Those who believe in Jesus and trust in God are his children or sons (2:10, 13–14; 12:5, 7–8). God is their Father (2:11), showing his love for them by disciplining them so they are holy (12:4–11).

No one can deceive or manipulate God, for nothing is hidden from him (4:13). He knows everything that is done on earth. God is
invisible and can’t be manipulated by human beings (11:27). God is just and doesn’t tolerate sin (6:10). He is not impassive toward evil but is provoked and angry at those who sin (3:1, 10, 17; 4:3). His anger leads to action with the result that he punishes those who practice evil. Everyone is accountable to God, and so leaders must give an account to God for their ministry (13:17). Those who give themselves over to sexual sin and adultery will be judged by God (13:4). God is “the Judge of all” (12:23). Those who turn away from the salvation in Jesus will not escape his just punishment (2:3; 12:25). They will face his judgment, fury, and vengeance (10:29–30). It is indeed “terrifying . . . to fall into the hands of living God” (10:31) since God “is a consuming fire” (12:29). Thus human beings must worship him “with reverence and awe” (12:28).

The author doesn’t unpack the significance of the relationship of God to Jesus as his Son in any detail, but he often refers to Jesus as the Son (1:8, 13; 3:6; 4:14; 6:6; 7:3; 10:29), suggesting the Father’s ultimate authority and love for Jesus, for Jesus is designated as the Son and God is his Father (1:5; 2:11; 5:5). As the Son, Jesus obeyed the Father during his ministry (5:8) and was perfected by God through his sufferings (2:10). God appointed the Son as his heir (1:2; cf. 3:2) and high priest (5:6, 10, 7:17, 28), anointing him as the Son who rules the world (1:9). The Son radiates the glory of God, representing his nature to the world (1:3). Because of his obedience, the Son was raised from the dead by the Father (13:20).

Peeler nicely summarizes what Hebrews teaches about God as Father:

In Hebrews, God is the Father of Jesus and in this relationship utilizes suffering to perfect and exaltation to honor. In precisely the same ways, God is the Father of the members of the congregation themselves, disciplining them so that they might be perfect as he leads them to share his glorious presence. God’s status as Jesus’ Father reveals the very character of God. He is powerful, intimately involved with his children, and generous. He is one who calls, one who listens, one who rewards, and one who disciplines. He allows suffering and labors for salvation. His abode is one of joy. He is capable of pain, anger, and compassion.
God’s standing as Jesus’ Father makes his status as Father of humanity a reality.⁹

§2 Jesus Christ

Jesus Christ plays a central role in Hebrews, for the fundamental issue is whether the readers will remain faithful to Jesus Christ and his sacrifice or will turn to OT sacrifices to secure atonement for their sins. The author makes an elegant and passionate case for staying true to Jesus Christ. His argument has many facets, but here and in the next section the identity of the Christ is sketched in. There is no claim here that divinity and humanity represent all the author teaches about Jesus, for Jesus is described as the Messiah, the high priest, the Son of God, and the Lord. On the other hand the divinity and humanity of Jesus are clearly central and major themes for the writer. Along with the discussions on Jesus’ priestly work and sacrifice, they help us chart out what the author communicates about Jesus Christ in the letter.

It is also helpful to consider another perspective in considering the author’s perspective on Jesus Christ. Small has studied how Jesus is characterized in the letter if one uses rhetorical topoi of Greco-Roman literature.¹⁰ Small argues that by using narrative

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⁹ Amy L. B. Peeler, “The Ethos of God in Hebrews,” PRSt 37 (2010): 50. Peeler also says: “By analyzing the Father’s relationship with the Son, several things about the character of God emerge. First, it is clear that he is a powerful Father. He is the God to whom the priests direct their service, the Creator and controller of all things, who will remain to see the end of all things being subjected to his Son. Second, he has chosen to be in relationship with another, a relationship of intimacy, naming Jesus as his Son. Third, in this relationship he has chosen to involve his Son in his reign and to share his glory. Fourth, he appoints the Son to his vocation as heir and high priest. In so doing, God is portrayed as a Father who listens to His children. Yet God’s attendance to their prayers does not mean that he delivers them. Instead, God allows his children to suffer so that they might be perfected and be able to fulfill his plan for them. God’s fatherly ethos with his firstborn Son is powerful, relational, generous, appointing, attentive, and perfecting. In many ways, this fatherly relationship will be similar with humanity; for, although, he is the firstborn, Christ, too is a Son” (45). For further elaboration of Peeler’s understanding of familial teaching in Hebrews, see Amy Peeler, You Are My Son: The Family of God in the Epistle to the Hebrews, LNTS 486 (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014).