

Re-thinking the Trinity Project

# *Hebrews* and Orthodox Trinitarianism: Jesus in the Book of *Hebrews*

Paper #1

by

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## Introduction

The purpose of this and the following series of four more papers is to examine whether the New Testament book of *Hebrews* teaches or implicitly assumes the orthodox Christian view that God is a tri-unity of persons, that is, a single divine essence existing eternally as three eternally distinct persons. The Trinity *per se* is not the focus in these papers; for it is quite clear, I think, that that doctrine itself cannot be found in the book of *Hebrews*. The controversy, rather, will be with respect to the nature of Jesus. Who is this Jesus that the arguments of the book of *Hebrews* describe? Are his being, his nature, his identity, and his role of such a nature that the doctrine of the Trinity is required to make sense of them? Orthodox bible scholars, naturally enough, believe so. They hold that the claims made about Jesus in the book of *Hebrews* are fully compatible with and ultimately entail the doctrine of the Trinity. My contention is that this is decidedly not the case. Nothing in the book of *Hebrews* suggests that Jesus is anything other than a human being, brought into existence by God at the virgin birth and appointed by God (before the creation of the world) to fulfill the role of the promised Son of God, the *messiah*.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, I will argue that some of the arguments in the book of *Hebrews* make no sense if the doctrine of the Trinity is assumed. So, on the contrary, the book of *Hebrews*, rightly understood, is antithetical to the doctrine of the Trinity. Therefore, so far as the book of *Hebrews* is concerned, it makes no sense to embrace orthodox Trinitarian doctrine.

There are fundamentally four different portions of *Hebrews* that are typically taken as support for the doctrine of the Trinity:

- (1) It is alleged that the argument of *Hebrews* 1:1–2:4 explicitly identifies Jesus with God (*Yahweh*)—especially in *Hebrews* 1:10. It should be inferred from this that Paul understands Jesus to be wholly and completely identical with God in every possible sense. Jesus just IS *Yahweh* himself. Only orthodox Trinitarian doctrine can adequately account for this complete identification of Jesus with *Yahweh*. Therefore, *Hebrews* 1:1–2:4 “teaches” the doctrine of the Trinity.
- (2) It is alleged that *Hebrews* 2:5–18 makes reference to the voluntary condescension of the eternal second person of the Trinity to lower himself and become a human

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<sup>1</sup> For Paul, *messiah* and Son of God are synonymous. However, Paul’s Jewish contemporaries may not have acknowledged them as synonyms. The first part of *Hebrews* concerns itself with the status of the “Son of God,” without mentioning the *messiah* by name. In agreement with Paul, I will treat these titles as synonymous when I use them. Consequently, I may not always be representing the views of Paul’s readers in exactly the terms that they would have used.

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being. Only the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity can adequately account for how God can condescend to become a human being while yet remaining fully God. Therefore, *Hebrews* 2:5–18 “teaches” the doctrine of the Trinity.

- (3) It is alleged that the argument of *Hebrews* 7:1–18 identifies Jesus with Melchizedek, the king to whom Abraham paid tithes. Such an identity makes sense only if Jesus existed before he was born in Bethlehem. Hence, Jesus pre-existed—that is, he had ongoing personal existence before the man Jesus of Nazareth came into being. Only the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity can adequately account for the pre-existence of Jesus. Therefore, *Hebrews* 7:1–18 “teaches” the doctrine of the Trinity.
- (4) It is supposed that, indirectly, the argument of *Hebrews* 7:23–10:25 (roughly) supports the doctrine of the Trinity by presenting an understanding of atonement through the death of Jesus that depends upon Jesus being God. As a consequence, *Hebrews* teaches that atonement depends upon the death of a man who was also God. Only the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity can adequately account for how Jesus’ death was an effective propitiation for sins, for only it can account for how Jesus was a man who was also God. Therefore, the teaching on the atonement in *Hebrews* 7:23–10:25 “teaches” the doctrine of the Trinity in the sense that its account of the atonement presupposes the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity.

I will address each of the above portions of *Hebrews* in separate papers. The purpose of this first, introductory paper is to understand the purpose of the book of *Hebrews* in general and to understand the nature of its content and arguments. This paper, therefore, will lay the groundwork for understanding each of the passages that I shall address in the four following papers in the series.

## Background to Book of *Hebrews*

### What is the Book of *Hebrews*?

Over the course of several years, Paul has devoted himself to proclaiming the “gospel.” Paul’s gospel is the truth that Jesus is the promised *messiah* and that, through him, the blessing of Abraham can be attained, not only by Jews, but also by Gentiles. A number of Paul’s Jewish contemporaries have believed this gospel. They have believed that Jesus is the *messiah*. Having so believed, these Jewish believers have joined with like-minded people and lived within sub-communities of Jesus’ followers. In all probability, these communities are typically mixed communities, made up of Gentiles as well as Jews. In some cases, they may be exclusively Jewish sub-communities—smaller groups of Jesus followers existing within the larger Jewish communities into which they were born. In any event, these Jewish believers have met with harsh, unjust persecution at

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the hands of the unbelieving Jewish communities that surround them.<sup>2</sup> They have been made social outcasts. They have been unjustly imprisoned. They have had their property stolen, unjustly seized. They have been made to suffer a number of indignities as the community chose to make an example of them publicly. (See *Hebrews* 10:32–34.) At the beginning, they suffered this persecution with joy, believing that inheriting the blessing of Abraham was worth the abuse and tribulation. But the persecution has not relented, and they are growing weary of it. As they grow weary, it is becoming increasingly unclear to some of them whether the pay off will be worth it. Some are beginning to renounce their previous belief in Jesus, wanting to quietly reintegrate into the traditional Jewish community, leaving their troublesome belief in Jesus behind.

Somehow, word has made it to Paul—who is probably imprisoned in Rome (see *Hebrews* 13:22–24)—that the pressure from the unbelieving Jewish community is causing many ostensible followers of Jesus among the Jews to abandon their belief and to return to their traditional practice of keeping the Mosaic Covenant. Believing in Jesus has shown itself to be socially disadvantageous. Living like a traditional Jew is, conversely, quite socially beneficial. Many are beginning to opt for the social advantage of Judaism and abandoning the ultimate reward that comes through belief in Jesus. Paul responds to this phenomenon with real concern. These Jewish believers are turning from that which is of ultimate and eternal value and trading it in for the temporary relief of escaping persecution. The book of *Hebrews* is the concrete manifestation of Paul's concern over this reported phenomenon. It is Paul's direct response to these Jewish believers' abandonment of their belief as a result of persecution.

*Hebrews* is not so much a letter, as it is a circular that Paul writes in response to this phenomenon. It is addressed to Jews throughout the Roman Empire who are being tempted to abandon their commitment to follow Jesus in order to relieve the pressure of persecution. It is a plea for these believers to stay the course, to not give up. It is an exhortation to persist in their believing, no matter how uncomfortable their lives may become because of that belief. As such, *Hebrews* is not a letter in any standard or typical sense. It is not addressed to any particular individual or group of individuals. It is addressed to anyone and everyone who belongs to this class of people. It is addressed to any persecuted Jewish believer who, as a consequence, is being tempted to reconsider his commitment to Jesus. Paul's intention, no doubt, was to write a piece that would be circulated among all the sub-communities of believers who were facing hardship and suffering for their belief.

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 1-B for a discussion of various issues related to the fact and nature of this persecution that these Jewish believers faced.

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## What is the Nature of the Content of *Hebrews*?

### Primary content: exhortation

As one might expect, given its purpose, the primary focus of the book of *Hebrews* is exhortation, not theological or doctrinal disputation. Out of thirteen chapters, fewer than half of them (arguably, five and a half) are devoted to arguing for a particular theological perspective. The remainder of the book, the majority of it, issues an impassioned appeal to his readers to stay the course, to persist in their belief in Jesus. On the one hand, *Hebrews* attempts to persuade its readers that the reward for staying the course is well worth whatever grief it brings. And on the other hand, it attempts to persuade its readers that the penalty for not staying the course is too serious and grave to risk. Those who persist in believing the truth about Jesus, Paul argues, are judged to be *dikaios* (pardoned) in the eyes of God and, consequently, will be granted the ultimate blessing of Abraham, Life in the age to come. Those who do not persist in this belief, he argues, will meet with condemnation in the age to come.

Paul wants to persuade his readers to adopt his perspective, appealing to them in many different ways and from many different angles. Therefore, a thorough understanding of the primary message of *Hebrews* would devote itself to a thorough understanding of the case Paul makes for persevering in their belief that Jesus is the promised *messiah*. I will not develop his case for this in this paper.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this paper is to focus on Paul's understanding of the *messiah* as found in *Hebrews*. Consequently, I will focus on the secondary, theological portions of *Hebrews* and not on the primary, hortative portions. The fact nevertheless is this: the heart of what the book of *Hebrews* is all about is found in the variety of arguments and appeals that Paul makes as he attempts to encourage his readers to persevere in their commitment to the truth that Jesus is the *messiah*. To fully and adequately understand the book of *Hebrews*, therefore, one would have to focus on the majority, hortative portion of the book. But my purpose here is not to understand the book of *Hebrews*. It is to understand whether *Hebrews* supports the orthodox doctrine of the incarnation. For that, we must focus on the minority, theological portions of the book.<sup>4</sup>

### Secondary content: theological argument

Since the primary purpose of the book is exhortation, theological argument plays a secondary role. But while its role is secondary within Paul's purpose, it is nonetheless central to the argument of *Hebrews*. This will need some explanation. We need to dig deeper into the background of *Hebrews* to understand this.

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<sup>3</sup> For a synopsis of the primary, hortative portions of the book, see Appendix 1-A. Appendix 1-A is a brief synopsis of the ENTIRE book of *Hebrews* and includes a synopsis of the primary, hortative portions of the book.

<sup>4</sup> See note 3 above.

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To understand the role of theology in the argument of *Hebrews*, we need to better understand its background. To better understand its background, we need to have a deeper understanding of the relationship between theology and spirituality—that is, of the relationship between a person's doctrinal belief and his relationship to God.

Throughout the New Testament one confronts a very important theme: what a person believes is ultimately determined by the condition of his heart. The person who, in his natural rebellion against God, is resistant to and hardened against God will not be open to the truth from and about God. Only the person whose heart has been softened, opened up to God, will be open and receptive to the truth about God. This relationship between the condition of one's heart and one's openness to the truth extends to the truth about God's *messiah* as well. The person whose heart is hard will not be open to the truth about God's *messiah* and about the purposes that God sent him to fulfill. Only the person whose heart is open toward God will be receptive to the truth about God's *messiah*. Therefore, given that Jesus is, in fact, the *messiah*, the one whose heart is right in relation to God will be ready to believe that Jesus is the *messiah*; the one whose heart is not right in relation to God will be resistant to such belief.

There is a related theme in the New Testament. As one increasingly hardens one's heart against God, the deepening hardness of heart manifests itself in an ever-greater inability to understand. Most notably, it manifests itself in an ever-greater inability to understand and embrace the truth about Jesus. This is primarily why the apostles maintain that, typically, the one who believes the truth about Jesus—notably, that Jesus is the *messiah*—is the one who will be *dikaios* before (pardoned by) God. This is not because believing the truth about Jesus is inherently worthy-making. It is not because believing in Jesus *per se* has any inherent cash value with God. Rather, it is because believing the truth about Jesus, in the typical case, manifests a good and sound heart that is open and receptive to God and his truth. A human being receives the merciful gift of *dikaiosis* (pardon) from God, not because of his belief *per se*, but because of the condition of heart—the inward orientation toward God—that is reflected in that belief. The important thing for our purposes is this: there is a more or less direct correspondence between the degree to which one has rebelliously hardened his heart against God and the depth to which he has an understanding of the truth about Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> A failure to understand the truth is only correlated with hardness of heart if the cause of the failure is a moral-spiritual condition, an orientation of the heart, and not an intellectual error. Intellectual error is not damnable; only spiritually motivated suppression of truth is damnable. So, not every failure to believe what is true is reflective of an evil suppression of the truth. Some truths are more likely to be suppressed by human evil than others. It is the suppression of essential, core truths about God and his purposes that reflect evil in a person's heart. Failure to grasp peripheral truths about God is not as likely to indicate an evil heart condition. As a result, assuming orthodox Trinitarianism is a true and accurate conception of God, if a person fails to embrace orthodoxy at this point, does that mean he has a damnably hard heart? No, I do not believe so. It is not a core, essential truth of the gospel. Alternatively, assuming the view of Jesus that I am presenting in this paper is a true and accurate conception of God and his Son, if a person fails to accept my view, is that because he has a damnably unbelieving heart? Again, no, I don't think so. As important as it is to know who our Lord is, a mistaken understanding of the details concerning him is not, in and of itself, a

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There is yet one more important New Testament theme that we need to understand if we are to understand the background to *Hebrews*: human existence contains circumstances that "test" the condition of an individual's heart orientation to God. These circumstances (typically called "tribulations") are often referred to as "trials" or "tests." Most people are accustomed to thinking of them as trials or tests of one's "faith." They are that. But, more accurately and more importantly, they are tests of one's heart condition. Life finds us out. Life circumstances expose the true, inner condition of our inner being. They reveal the true orientation of our heart with respect to the creator. The "child of God" is one who has made it his purpose to love, serve, and know his creator. It is one thing to do this when I am comfortable and enjoying my existence. It is another thing to persist in doing this when all around me leads to sorrow, pain, and grief. Tribulation sorts people out. Those who truly want to serve God—those who have a deep, inner commitment to define their lives by obedience to the will of the creator—will persist in that purpose even when life's circumstances turn bad. The one who, in his deep inwardness,<sup>6</sup> is not truly and finally committed to such a purpose will NOT persist in it when life gets hard. He is only a fair-weather servant of his creator; and a fair-weather servant of the creator is not truly a servant at all.

As we saw above, when hardship (tribulation) comes along, the one who is inwardly oriented "toward" God will manifest this orientation by remaining open and receptive to the truth from and about God. The one who is inwardly oriented "against" God, on the other hand, will manifest this orientation by becoming closed, resistant to, and hardened against this truth. Now, resistance to God's truth typically manifests itself in a kind of stupor in relation to it. Human rebellion is purposefully self-obfuscating when it comes to understanding the things of God. The rebel against God does not want the truth to be true. So he does not use his intelligence to seek a clear and accurate understanding of it. Rather, he uses his intelligence to obfuscate and to render the truth obscure to himself.<sup>7</sup> If

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damnable error. God does not require flawless comprehension; he wants an open and receptive heart. Many will give him the latter without arriving at the former.

<sup>6</sup> "Inwardness" is not a part of the typical Christian's conceptual vocabulary. It would take us too far afield to thoroughly explore this concept here. Briefly, by "inwardness" I mean a person's self-defining individual commitments that are ultimately expressed in what a person chooses and in how a person acts. This concept attempts to capture how one is, in the deepest (most inward) part of his freely chosen commitments, oriented in relation to God. Is his orientation to serve and obey God? Or is his orientation to resist God and God's purposes? "Inwardness" is that set of passions, beliefs, perceptions, and commitments—present within the hidden, inner being of a person—that define who he is because they are the engines that drive how he thinks and what he does. This concept of "inwardness" (and the correlated New Testament concept of "heart") is ultimately a very important concept—essential, if one wants to understand the New Testament's teaching with regard to authentic spirituality. Jesus has this concept explicitly in view in Luke 11:39, for example, when he says, "Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the platter; but inside of you, you are full of robbery and wickedness." No Christian thinker has examined this concept more extensively than Soren Kierkegaard. He employs a variety of words and concepts to refer to it, including his famous "subjectivity."

<sup>7</sup> The rebel against God utilizes his intelligence and creativity to throw dust in his own eyes. He obscures his own vision so that he truly and sincerely cannot see what is true. He convinces himself that

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he can convince himself that the truth is unknowable and out of reach— or if he can convince himself that the truth is not so clearly known that he can responsibly commit to it—then he cannot be faulted when he fails to embrace it. The net effect is a sort of dullness, a slowness, an obtuseness toward the truths of God. What ought to be clear appears genuinely unclear and unconvincing to him, for he has rendered it so.

So, what tends to happen? When the “people of God” undergo “trials and tribulations,” those who truly belong to God remain sharp, perceptive, understanding, and believing with respect to the things of God. Those who do NOT truly belong to God— however much they may have outwardly appeared to do so prior to their tribulations— become dull and slow with respect to the things of God. They are no longer able to understand and believe what is, as a matter of fact, true about God and his purposes. They are no longer able to accept as plausible what is, in fact, actually true. So, as the heat and pressure of tribulation increases, those with a false heart become increasingly resistant to the truth and increasingly unable to comprehend it. Those with a true heart persist in believing the truth and manifest a persistent clarity of understanding.

All three of the above New Testament themes come together in the book of *Hebrews*. Paul wants his readers to understand the following:

- (1) Whether or not a person persists in his belief that Jesus is the *messiah* will reveal the true, inner condition of his heart. It will reveal his true orientation with respect to his creator.<sup>8</sup>
- (2) To the extent that his readers are growing more unable to understand that Jesus is the *messiah*, to that extent they are showing themselves to have hearts hardened against God and resistant to the truth about him.<sup>9</sup>
- (3) The persecution that his readers are undergoing is a “test” of their inward heart-orientation. Accordingly, if the persecution results in their abandoning their belief in Jesus, it will show that they do not belong to God. It will show that they are not among those who will receive mercy and a blessing from God. On the other hand, if in the midst of their persecution they persist in their belief that Jesus is the *messiah*, it can only be because they genuinely belong to the people of God and stand to receive the ultimate blessing from God.<sup>10</sup>

But the unbelief that is emerging amongst Paul’s readers is somewhat puzzling. How does one un-believe what one has already believed? Paul’s readers are Jews who have

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what is, in fact, evidence is no evidence at all; and that what is, in fact, no obstacle to belief is an insurmountable obstacle to belief. The unbelieving rebel has also convinced himself that his perspective is the intelligent, rational, and intellectually respectable one. He assures himself that he is being intellectually responsible in his unbelief while believers are being gullible and irresponsible in their belief.

<sup>8</sup> See *Hebrews* 4:12–13.

<sup>9</sup> See *Hebrews* 5:11–6:8.

<sup>10</sup> Paul does not speak extensively of trials and tribulations in so many terms, but it is implicit in his whole argument. With regard to this point, note *Hebrews* 3:7–4:11 and 10:26–39.

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already faced the obstacle of believing that Jesus—an unremarkable man from Galilee who managed to get himself crucified by the Romans—was the promised *messiah*.<sup>11</sup> Presumably, they have already overcome that obstacle, embracing the belief that Jesus was the *messiah*. Now, having previously committed themselves to such a belief, some of Paul's readers are now questioning this very belief. They are being tempted to reject the claim that Jesus was the *messiah*. How are we to make sense of such a phenomenon? How are we to understand the situation where a person is tempted to reject as false what he has already concluded is true?

There is nothing problematic about such a phenomenon when it involves gaining new and additional data. People are constantly changing their minds in the face of new evidence. Certainly one might reject something he once thought true when new or additional data needs to be taken into account. But that is not the situation with Paul's readers. They have not received new or additional evidence. The facts at hand have not changed. Rather, faced with exactly the same data, Paul's readers are beginning to reject as false what they once believed to be true. They are changing their minds about Jesus being the *messiah*, and they have no new and different facts to work from. It is this phenomenon we need to understand. What is inducing Paul's readers to want to reject a doctrine that they had heretofore embraced?

We have already seen part of the answer. Paul's concern is that the persecution they have been experiencing is hardening them. Or, more accurately, the persecution is finding them out. It is exposing the fact that their hearts have been basically hardened against God all along. However much they may have outwardly appeared to be believing and obedient, they have, in fact, been unbelieving and disobedient. It took the pressure of persecution to flush them out and expose them as unbelievers. That much is plausible enough. But that is to understand the phenomenon from the standpoint of spiritual orientation. What about from the standpoint of human rationality? How does something seem rational one minute and NOT rational the next, when none of the data under consideration has changed one whit? It is one thing to refuse to believe what is rational and true because one is in rebellion against God. It is another thing to find irrational and implausible what had previously been accepted as utterly rational. How are we to understand that?

Speaking generally, belief in Jesus (or belief in anything, for that matter) can be granted quite apart from complete understanding. One may believe that he has an adequate rational foundation for believing something, even though, in the background, lay a number of potential objections that remain unanswered. I would assume that this was exactly the situation with Paul's readers. They had, in fact, come to the conclusion

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<sup>11</sup> Certainly the signs and miracles that Jesus performed made him rather remarkable in one sense. But some of his contemporaries found him "unremarkable" in spite of them. He was "unremarkable" with respect to the sort of person he was. He *did* remarkable things; but so did the prophets. *Doing* remarkable things did not qualify a person as the Son of God. They expected the Son of God to be an appropriately striking and remarkable man with regard to the sort of being he was. In that regard, Jesus was a rather ordinary villager from Nazareth, not the sort of remarkable person they expected the *messiah* to be.

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that Jesus was the *messiah*. They were sufficiently convinced to start down the path of discipleship. But, on what basis had they been convinced? Whatever the basis, it was not on the basis of a complete and coherent grasp of God's purposes. They did not understand clearly all that God had purposed to do in and through his *messiah*. As a result, they could not plainly see that Jesus exactly fit the bill. Somehow they had believed that Jesus was the one, but not from a complete and coherent comprehension. Rather, they believed in spite of their having an incomplete and inadequate understanding.

It is impossible to say for sure, but it is highly probable that the reports of Jesus' resurrection were important. They may very well have played a decisive role in their initial decision to believe. Based on the fact that Jesus had been raised from the dead, these Jews were willing to commit to the proposition that Jesus was the *messiah*. And they committed their lives to him, even in the face of objections that their own minds might raise. It was an eminently rational decision, but it was an incomplete decision. They knew that, rationally speaking, they had a good reason to believe that Jesus was the *messiah*; but it was not on the basis of a complete and comprehensive understanding of how and why Jesus uniquely fulfilled God's purposes for the *messiah*. As a consequence, they were not in a position to make sense of how and why the *messiah* was a poor and unremarkable man from Galilee who got crucified by the Romans. They had no satisfactory answer to this question. They believed in Jesus in the face of NOT really understanding, not because they did understand.

At first blush, it may seem irrational to believe something that you don't fully understand. But actually this is not unusual. If the basis upon which we believe something seems sufficiently compelling, we are typically willing to live with our unanswered questions. In all likelihood, the resurrection of Jesus seemed adequately compelling to them. Accordingly, they were willing to live with their unanswered questions about why he died and why he was such an ordinary man. They could wait for answers, for the alternative was to ignore the significance of the resurrection altogether.

They could wait for answers, that is, so long as discipleship was clearly worth it. But if the value of discipleship became questionable, the questions were there to rise again. Their questions, lurking unanswered in their minds, could readily surface as objections. That is what appears to be happening in the background to *Hebrews*. To some of the persecuted Jewish believers it was becoming less and less clear that believing in Jesus was worth it.<sup>12</sup> What had it got them? Where had it taken them? Social ostracism,

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<sup>12</sup> There are important parallels here between how the traditional Jewish persecutors of Jesus-believers coerced them into abandoning belief in Jesus and how traditional orthodox Trinitarians have, throughout history, used similar—if not more extreme—forms of coercion to eliminate any alternative theological viewpoints. Any understanding of God and Jesus that departed from Trinitarian orthodoxy was branded as heresy and any "heretic" was subjected to harsh treatment, if not, indeed, death. (This makes the "consensus" of the church through the centuries much less impressive than orthodox Christians make it out to be.) Coercion is more "civilized" today, but it is still the standard tactic of Trinitarians. If you raise an objection to orthodox Trinitarian doctrine, the Christian community does not enter into dialogue with you,

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vulnerability to unjust treatment, imprisonment, public humiliation—all sorts of negative consequences. At first, they had accepted the persecution gracefully and joyfully. But as time wore on, they grew weary of the grief and sorrow. And in their weariness, the question of whether they were really willing to believe was being tested. Life was testing the resolve of their heart. Did they want to know and obey God? Did they want it enough to suffer for it? Or, in the end, was it more important for the suffering to end?

Some of these Jews were deciding that putting an end to their suffering was what was most important. It was more important to them than being rightly related to God's *messiah*. And the more they wanted the suffering to end, the more their never-resolved questions began to surface: "Was Jesus really the *messiah* after all? He had, in fact, been a rather ordinary human being. He was not a very kingly and majestic person. He did not accomplish what I would have expected the *messiah* to accomplish. In the end, he simply died at the hands of the Romans. Perhaps it makes more sense to reject the veracity of the reports of his resurrection than to reject my own expectations of the *messiah*. Perhaps I never should have believed in him in the first place."

These, of course, are all legitimate concerns. They involve valid questions that need to be answered. They are issues that every believer should ultimately resolve. But, in the minds of some of Paul's readers, they were becoming more than unresolved problems to work on; they were becoming a convenient excuse to stop believing altogether. They were becoming a basis for rejecting Jesus' claim to be the *messiah* and, therefore, a way to escape the pressure of persecution.

It is these unresolved problems—these excuses some were using to discontinue discipleship—that Paul sets out to address in the theological arguments of *Hebrews*. He does not necessarily expect to change the minds of Jews who are abandoning their faith. A person who is rejecting Jesus—as *Hebrews* itself suggests—is doing so out of rebellion against and hostility toward God, not for lack of answers. So answers will probably not sway him. But the questions need to be answered anyway. Other Jews, who are not about to forsake Jesus, are in the same state of incomplete understanding. They lack answers as well; and their belief needs to be fortified by supplying them with answers. They need to be given a complete and coherent understanding of Jesus' role as the *messiah* so that their understanding might stand as a firm foundation for their belief.

#### THE THEOLOGICAL CONTENT OF *HEBREWS*

What then are these theological or doctrinal issues that lay in the background to *Hebrews*? What were the problems that persecution-hardened Jews could advance as reasons for abandoning their belief in Jesus? In other words, what were the issues that Paul seeks to address in the book of *Hebrews*? There were two fundamental issues:

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it ostracizes you. After offering you what ultimately is a cursory, pseudo-rational argument for the Trinity from alleged biblical "evidence," if you remain unconvinced, they will brand you a heretic, shun you, and warn others away from you on the grounds that you are spiritually "dangerous." All of this parallels very closely the way the unbelieving Jews in Paul's day were dealing with the Jesus-believers in their midst.

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- (1) Could an ordinary, mortal human being be the *messiah*?<sup>13</sup>
  - (2) On what basis will a person receive mercy from God and be granted the blessing of Abraham? Will it be through the Mosaic Covenant? Or, will it be through belief in Jesus?

We will address these two issues in reverse order.

*Basis for divine mercy?*

The question of what serves as the basis for divine mercy—obedience to the Covenant or belief in Jesus—is not an issue that is unique to *Hebrews*. Most of the New Testament books address this issue in one way or another. But it would be a mistake to think that we find in *Hebrews* a rehashing of the same arguments that are made in *Romans*, *Galatians*, *Philippians*, *Colossians*, or other books that discuss this issue. The approach in *Hebrews* is different. It will be helpful to understand this difference.

In most of the New Testament books that explore the basis of divine mercy, the controversy in the background is this: Will God grant mercy and blessing to an individual merely because he has believed the truth about Jesus? Or, is it equally important for him to keep the requirements of the Mosaic Covenant? And, related to this question was the controversial and hotly debated question of whether Gentiles could receive the blessing of eternal Life without living like Jews. The way Paul usually responds to these questions typically centers on the issue of whether Law-keeping can and does make an individual fit for (or deserving of) divine mercy.

The controversy being addressed in *Hebrews* is a different one: Can an ordinary man who was crucified by the enemies of God be the promised *messiah*? The way Paul responds to this question centers on explaining how the death of the *messiah* was absolutely central to God's purposes. True, God had promised that the *messiah* would reign victoriously as king over the eternal Kingdom of God. But he had also purposed for the *messiah* to function as the ultimate high priest for mankind. And these two roles were connected. The *messiah* would qualify himself to rule as king by obediently fulfilling his God-given responsibility as high priest—specifically, by offering his own life as the ultimate propitiatory offering for mankind, that is, by dying.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The proof that this is the primary issue in the minds of Paul's readers ultimately rests on the fact that it allows one to make the best sense of the argument of the book taken as a whole. Rightly understood, the opening part of *Hebrews* (chapters 1–2) is clearly focused on demonstrating that the full humanity of Jesus is necessary to God's purposes. In the remainder of the book, Paul's arguments shift to demonstrating how necessary Jesus' death is to God's purposes. (And this, *ipso facto*, demonstrates the necessity of Jesus' humanity.) Throughout the rest of the book, Jesus' crucifixion is never too far in the background, but the following are quite clearly meant to explain the importance of Jesus' death in the purposes of God: *Hebrews* 2:9–18, 5:7–10, 9:11–10:39, 12:1–24, and 13:10–14, 20.

<sup>14</sup> A "propitiatory offering" is an offering made to God in an attempt to induce him to grant mercy. Hence, the offering of a propitiatory offering is nothing other than a formal, ritualistic means of appealing to God for mercy. When a priest makes the offering, he is doing it on behalf of the "worshipper." Jesus, as my high priest, made a propitiatory offering whereby he issued an appeal to God to be merciful to me.

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If, in the end, a person is to receive mercy from God, it will be purely and only on the basis of Jesus' death. God predestined Jesus to function as the ultimately true high priest. Only he is qualified—by divine appointment—to go before God and appeal to him for mercy on behalf of others. Furthermore, only Jesus has laid the groundwork for such an appeal, making the only effective propitiatory offering to God when he willingly went to the cross and offered up his own life. Furthermore, the dramatically God-like love that Jesus manifest by being willing to go to his death in his capacity as high priest made him particularly "beloved" in the eyes of God. Through his remarkable obedience, Jesus earned the right to be heard by God. Consequently, every one of us can know that, should he choose to be an advocate for me, God will listen to Jesus and grant me the mercy that Jesus requests on my behalf. Given this understanding of God's purposes, Jesus' death clearly did not disqualify him from being the *messiah*. It made him eminently qualified.

A major portion of Paul's argument in *Hebrews* runs along the lines described above. It explains Jesus' death as the basis of divine mercy. Ultimately, in *Hebrews* as in all of his writings, Paul is insisting that it is through belief [faith] in Jesus that one will receive divine mercy. But the controversy that gives rise to his discussion in *Hebrews* is significantly different from the controversy that gave rise to his arguments in the rest of his writings. In *Hebrews*, the controversy is whether the crucified Jesus can possibly be the *messiah*. Virtually everywhere else, the controversy is whether one can be saved merely through belief in Jesus alone—whether one who does not live like a Jew, one who does not keep ALL the requirements of the Mosaic Covenant, can possibly be saved. Accordingly, Paul's discussion in *Hebrews* centers on a different issue. It centers on whether the animal sacrifices offered by Levitical priests in accordance with the Mosaic Covenant can effectively secure mercy at the final judgment.<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere, Paul's arguments center on whether a person, through his keeping the Mosaic Covenant, can render himself worthy or fit for divine mercy at the final judgment. In one sense, the fundamental issue is the same throughout—namely, what is the basis for divine mercy?

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<sup>15</sup> Mercy will be mine because of the effective advocacy of Jesus on my behalf. It will be mine because of the effective appeal for mercy by my high priest, Jesus. It will come as a result of the effective propitiation made on my behalf by Jesus offering up *his own blood* as a propitiatory offering. It is not, therefore, from obedience to the Mosaic Covenant with all its propitiatory offerings consisting of the blood of sacrificial animals. The Mosaic Covenant cannot secure God's mercy for us. Only Jesus, our true high priest, can do that. But—and this is absolutely critical to the argument of *Hebrews*—Jesus can only do that *because he died for us*. Consequently, it only stands to reason that the crucified Jesus is not thereby disqualified from being the *messiah*. To the contrary, it is his crucifixion that fully qualifies him to be the *messiah*. If he had not died, he could not validly be the *messiah*. It was the appointed role of the *messiah* to be "a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek." As such, he was appointed to die. He would function, not only as our high priest, but also as the propitiatory offering offered up by the high priest. So, far from being a mark against Jesus being the *messiah*—as popular Jewish sentiment would have it—his death was an absolutely necessary precondition of his being the *messiah*.

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But Paul takes a distinctive approach in *Hebrews*, because the controversy in view there is significantly different from what is in view in the other books of the New Testament.<sup>16</sup>

*Nature of the Messiah?*

Even when the issue in view in *Hebrews* is the basis for divine mercy, another issue is visible in the background. It is this other issue that directs the theological arguments in the book of *Hebrews*. Namely, it is the issue of what we should expect to be the nature of the *messiah*.

The *messiah*, the promised son of David who was to come—would he be an ordinary descendent of David, a mere human being? Could a mere human being successfully bring to pass all that the prophets had predicted with respect to the *messiah*? Or, would he have to be some sort of extraordinary being, some sort of superman? And, if so, how and in what way could he be a son of David?

The Jews before Jesus had already wrestled with such questions. It would be a mistake, I think, to speak in terms of how the Jews had answered them. For it would appear that there were divergent views among them. Different Jews had different expectations for who the *messiah* would be. Further, they had different pictures of what to expect from the *messiah*. Be that as it may, it would appear that a very common assumption was that, whatever the *messiah* was to be, he would NOT be a typical, ordinary human being. He had to be something strikingly and notably super-ordinary. That is why Jesus' claim to be the Son of God (the *messiah*) presented a problem to so many Jews: he, being merely a man, made himself out to be the *messiah*, the human embodiment of the rule of God himself.<sup>17</sup>

It is this very set of problems that is beginning to resurface and present itself as an available excuse to stop believing to the inwardly unbelieving Jews in the background to *Hebrews*:

*"Jesus performed astounding miracles, certainly. But so did some of the prophets. That did not make them the messiah. When all is said and done, Jesus was a typical,*

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<sup>16</sup> It can appear that Paul's position is the same in all of his writings: one is saved by Jesus and not by the Mosaic Covenant. But articulating it this way conceals how importantly different is Paul's approach in the book of *Hebrews*. In *Hebrews*, the argument is that Jesus' blood "perfects" or "cleanses" the "conscience" of the worshipper in a way that the blood of animal sacrifices never could. See *Hebrews* 9:6–10:25. It is because of Jesus' death and his role as our advocate and high priest that a worshipper will receive mercy from God. Nothing else can secure God's mercy. Accordingly, when all is said and done, no one can receive the merciful blessing of Life through the Mosaic Covenant and its provisions. It is only through Jesus that any human being will ever be granted Life. So, it is not obedience to the Covenant that leads to life; it is belief in Jesus pure and simple. While this could be summarized as—we are saved by Jesus, not by the Mosaic Covenant—such a summary means something quite different from what the same summary of the argument of *Romans* or *Galatians* might mean. In those books, Paul is concerned with different underlying issues and, therefore, constructs significantly different arguments to arrive at fundamentally the same conclusion.

<sup>17</sup> See John 10:33 in the context of 10:22–39.

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ordinary human being—a mere man. He was so ordinary that he died.<sup>18</sup> Jesus was crucified and died. He was just like any mere mortal. Given that he was a mere man, it is not plausible that he was the unique, promised messiah. The messiah, when he comes, will be an extraordinary and dramatically different sort of person. Jesus was not that. Jesus must not have been the messiah. Furthermore, Jesus did not accomplish what was predicted of the messiah. Jesus came into this world, taught and performed the signs of a prophet, was arrested by the authorities, and was crucified by the Romans. According to the prophets, the messiah will judge and destroy the enemies of God. But Jesus was judged by and destroyed by the enemies of God. Granted, we were once compelled by the reports of his resurrection. But those reports must be false; for Jesus could not have been the messiah. The enemies of God were victorious over him; he was not victorious over them.”

Within *Hebrews*, Paul is intent on making the theological case that Jesus is qualified to be embraced as the *messiah* promised in the scriptures. To do so, Paul makes these four points in answer to the objections of the Jewish apostates:

- (1) According to the prophetic predictions in the Scriptures, we should have expected a *messiah* who was an ordinary human being.
- (2) According to the prophetic predictions in the Scriptures, we should have expected a *messiah* who would come and die.
- (3) According to the prophetic predictions in the Scriptures, the death of the *messiah* for the sins of mankind is so central to God’s purposes that his death is not rightly seen as a defeat. It must be seen as a sort of service done on behalf of mankind. Accordingly, a man who was crucified at the hands of the Romans is not thereby disqualified from being the *messiah*.
- (4) Many of the prophetic predictions in the Scriptures concerning the *messiah* were not fulfilled by Jesus. That much is indeed true. But, while Jesus may not yet have fulfilled all that was promised concerning the *messiah*, we must remember that Jesus was raised from the dead. He ascended to the right hand of God, and he still lives on to do what was predicted of him. The fact that he has not yet done all that the *messiah* was destined to do does not disqualify Jesus from being the *messiah*.

It is these four points that determine and shape the nature, tenor, and content of the argumentative, theological portions of *Hebrews*.

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<sup>18</sup> That fact that Jesus died is a critical part of Paul’s readers’ objection to Jesus’ messiahship. It is true that Jesus’ death was cancelled out by his resurrection. But, nevertheless, the fact that he died in the first place was completely contrary to their fundamental picture of who the *messiah* was to be. Much of the argument of *Hebrews* can be helpfully construed as an argument for why it is appropriate and understandable that God sent his *messiah* to die—that is, for why Jesus’ death is no counter-indication of Jesus’ messiahship.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have tried to explain the background to the book of *Hebrews* and to elucidate its exact nature and purpose. In the series of four papers that follow, I will attempt to understand those specific portions of Paul's argument in *Hebrews* that have been deemed relevant to the issue of the Trinity. I will do so in light of the nature, purpose, and content of the book as articulated in this paper. The question in view is this: do any of Paul's assertions in any of these various portions of Paul's argument in *Hebrews* entail or, in any way, support the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity?