

Re-thinking the Trinity Project

Hebrews and orthodox Trinitarianism: Jesus as Man Exalted

Paper #3

by

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Introduction

This is the third paper in a series of papers exploring whether orthodox Trinitarianism is supported or refuted by the evidence of the book of *Hebrews*.

In the first paper of this series I explored the background to the book of *Hebrews*, describing the circumstances that gave rise to its being written and the purpose it was intended to serve. In brief, *Hebrews* was written to fortify the belief of Jews who have confessed belief in Jesus. Paul's purpose is to reinforce their commitment to the truth that Jesus (the one who was crucified by the Romans) was the promised *messiah*. Specifically, Paul wants to strengthen their belief that Jesus is the *messiah* in the face of their incomplete understanding of how the death and ordinary humanity of Jesus is compatible with Jesus' being the *messiah*. These Jews have believed in Jesus, but they have unresolved confusion about and how it is possible in the light of the fact that he was an ordinary human being who was crucified by the Romans, the enemies of God.

In my second paper I explored the argument of the very first section of *Hebrews*. In the opening section of the book, Paul's purpose was to show from Old Testament scriptures that the humanity of Jesus is not a mark against his being the *messiah*. Rather, it is a mark in its favor. The *messiah* promised by God was quite clearly to be a human being, a human descendent of King David. Through his prophets, God was not promising a Son of God who would be some sort of superhuman theophany. Rather, he was promising that an ordinary human son of David would be established as the Son of God. An ordinary man would be established in an eternal reign over all of God's creation.

My second paper argued that the first section of *Hebrews*, far from providing evidence in support of orthodox Trinitarian doctrine, creates a significant problem for it. When one exams the nature of the argument in the first section of *Hebrews*, it is implausible to believe that Paul could have advanced it were he an orthodox Trinitarian; an orthodox Trinitarian would have advanced a very different sort of argument than the one that Paul advances. Paul's argument in Part One *concedes* the ordinary humanity of Jesus and argues that he is nevertheless of higher status than any *angelos*. It is altogether unthinkable that an orthodox Trinitarian would have done this. No orthodox Trinitarian would ever *concede* the ordinary humanity of Jesus. Why would he? For, if orthodox Trinitarianism is right, Jesus has a divine nature that is, in its essence, identical to the very being of God himself. So, why is Jesus of higher status than any *angelos*? Because he is one, in essence, with God himself!! Since such an argument is so compelling, so obvious, and so definitive, is it not the argument that Paul would have made, were it available to him? But he did not. Therefore, since he did not advance it, it is highly

unlikely that it was available to him. And why was it not available to him? In all likelihood, because he did not believe what orthodox Trinitarians believe about Jesus being one, in essence, with God himself.

In this third paper, I will discuss the validity of yet another argument or "evidence" for orthodox Trinitarian doctrine that is drawn from the book of *Hebrews*. It is drawn from the very next section of the book—specifically, what I call section 2.1 of *Hebrews*. The argument actually focuses on a statement made in the context of what I call Part 2. In this paper I rehearse the argument for orthodox Trinitarianism that is made on the basis of Part 2 and offer a critique of that argument.

Section 2.1 of *Hebrews*

The larger passage that is of concern in this paper is placed below. This passage is the first subsection of the second section of *Hebrews*. The large numeral on the left indicates which paragraph of *Hebrews* it is (as I analyze the text). Each sentence within the paragraph is indicated by a small numeral placed before the sentence. I will refer to a sentence by indicating the number of the paragraph followed by the number of the sentence within the paragraph. For example, 5.1 would be the first sentence in paragraph 5. I will also include a traditional chapter-verse reference. An indication of the verses contained in each paragraph follows the paragraph in brackets on the right margin. Here, then, is the section of *Hebrews* that we shall be discussing in this paper (with special attention to Part 2 and paragraph 5):

SECTION 2

§2.1

Part 2

5

Now he did not put in subjection to *angeloi* the realm to come, concerning which we are speaking. 2•But a certain someone has testified, saying,

“3•What is man, that you remember him?

4•Even the Son of man, that you are mindful of him?

5•You have made him a little lower than the *angeloi*.

6•You have crowned him with glory and honor.

7•Indeed, you have appointed him over the works of your hands.

8•You have put all things in subjection under his feet.” <*Psalm* 8:4–6>

[2:5–8a]

6

Now in subjecting all things to him, he left nothing that is not subject to him. 2•But now we do not yet see all things subjected to him. 3•But we do see him who was made a little lower than the *angeli*, Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the death he suffered so that, in the grace of God, he might taste death in the place of every person. 4•Now it was fitting for him on account of whom are all things and for the sake of whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to qualify the pioneer of their deliverance through his sufferings.

[2:8a–10]

Part 3

7

Now indeed both he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one [humanity]. 2•For this reason he is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying,

“3•I will proclaim your name to my brothers.

4•In the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.” <Psalm 22:22>

[2:11–12]

8

(Yet again [Isaiah says],

“2•I will put my trust in him.” <Isaiah 8:17a>

3•And again,

“4•Behold, I and the children whom God has given me.” <Isaiah 8:18a>)

[2:13]

9

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise also partook of the same that through death he might render powerless the one who has the power of death—that is, the accuser—and might free those who were slaves to the fear of death all their lives.

[2:14–15]

10

Now assuredly he does not give help to angels, but he gives help to the seed of Abraham. 2•Therefore, he had to be made like his brothers in all things, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

[2:16–17]

11

Now since he himself was tried in that which he has suffered, he is able to come to the aid of those who are tried.

[2:18]

The Basis of the Trinitarian Arguments

The argument advanced by orthodox Trinitarianism from ¶5 is centered in 5.5 [2:7a]. It is important to realize that it is not an argument based on the point that Paul is making in ¶5. Rather, it is an argument based on an assertion made in *Psalm* 8 itself—specifically, in verse 5a. The critical assertion is included in Paul’s quotation of the psalm, in *Hebrews* 5.5 [2:7a]. But this particular assertion, upon which the Trinitarian argument is based, is not critical to the point Paul is making in ¶5. So, as I will show, the argument for the Trinity actually hinges on what *Psalm* 8:5a means, not on what Paul’s argument is in *Hebrews*. Let me explain.

The argument of ¶5 is quite clear and straightforward: *Psalm* 8 describes the establishment of a person identified as “the Son of man” (or, “a son of man”) as the sovereign ruler over all the rest of God’s creation. Paul quotes *Psalm* 8 with respect to this man’s promised destiny, “You have crowned him with glory and honor. Indeed, you have appointed him over the works of your hands. You have put all things in subjection under his feet.” <*Psalm* 8:5b–6> But Paul had prefaced his quotation from *Psalm* 8 with this emphatic claim: “Now he did not put in subjection to *angeloi* (angels?)¹ the realm to come, concerning which we are speaking.” [*Heb.* 5.1 / 2:5] Here is Paul’s point: *Psalm* 8 clearly teaches that God has appointed a *human being* to be the ruler over all of God’s creation. The psalm says, “What is man, that you remember him? Even the Son of man, that you are mindful of him?” <*Psalm* 8:4> Paul quotes this in *Hebrews* 5.3–5.4 //2:6. But, Paul insists, God has never made such a promise with regard to any *angelos*. God’s promise through the prophets is that he has predestined a human being to rule over all of his creation in the eternal Kingdom of God. He has never predestined that an *angelos* will have such a rule, nor any comparable role or status. Therefore—and this is the point of ¶5—the human appointed the Son is greater than any *angelos*.

So, what Paul’s argument in ¶5 establishes is that the “Son” has been promised a role and status that surpasses anything promised to any *angelos*.² But the argument of ¶5 does not hinge on (nor does it establish) the exact ontological nature of this “Son.” It does not matter to Paul’s argument in ¶5 whether the “Son” in view is merely an ordinary son of David or whether he is the human incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. His argument would stand either way. Whatever his exact ontological nature, this “Son” has

¹ How the Greek word “*angelos*” is to be understood and translated was a major issue in my second paper and will be a matter of interpretive judgment in *Psalm* 8 and *Hebrews* ¶5 as well. I will discuss this later in this paper. Due to the controversial nature of the issue, I will typically transliterate *angelos* and leave it untranslated.

² Notice how totally congruent with the argument of Part 1 this point is. Most of Part 1 is devoted to offering proof that the “Son” has a more exalted name than that of “*angelos*.”

been predestined to a role greater than that of any *angelos*. That is all Paul has intended to show by his quotation of *Psalm* 8.

Notice, therefore, that verses 5b–6 (quoted in *Hebrews* 2:7b–8) are the portions of *Psalm* 8 that are directly relevant to Paul’s argument. He makes the assertion, “he [God] did not put in subjection to *angeloi* the realm to come.” [*Heb.* 5.1 // 2:5] Then he proceeds to prove this assertion by quoting *Psalm* 8, where—speaking of the Son—it says, “You have crowned him with glory and honor. Indeed, you have appointed him over the works of your hands. You have put all things in subjection under his feet.” [*Heb.* 5.6–5.8 // 2:7b–8 from *Psalm* 8:5b–6] Paul includes *Psalm* 8:4–5a (quoted in *Hebrews* 2:6–7a) in order to establish the antecedent of the “you” in verses *Psalm* 8:5b–6 [*Heb.* 2:7b–8 // 5.6–5.8]. *Psalm* 8:4–5a make it clear that the antecedent of the following “you” is “man”, or even “the Son of man.” But these verses do not bear the weight of Paul’s evidence. It is *Psalm* 8:5b–6 [*Heb.* 2:7b–8 // 5.6–5.8] that show what Paul wants to show: the Son of man has been appointed over the works of God’s hands.

Why is this important? Because there is nothing in the intended argument of *Hebrews* ¶5 which establishes the orthodox Trinitarian doctrine of the incarnation. Paul’s argument stands no matter what the ontological nature of the “Son” of *Psalm* 8. So, why would a Trinitarian look for support for his doctrine of the incarnation in *Hebrews* 2 [*Hebrews* ¶5]? Because of the assertion in 8:5a (quoted in *Hebrews* 2:7a): “You have made him a little [while] lower than the *angeloi* [God/angels].” But, as I noted above, 8:5a did not play any role in Paul’s intended argument in ¶5. So, the Trinitarians argument is not based on the argument of *Hebrews*, it is actually based on an assertion in *Psalm* 8. Whether Paul’s quotation from *Psalm* 8 supports the Orthodox doctrine of the incarnation (and hence the Trinity) hinges on what *Psalm* 8 means, not on the argument of *Hebrews* ¶5. So, after all is said and done, this paper must explore the meaning of *Psalm* 8, not the meaning of *Hebrews*, chapter 2.

I will begin by exploring the nature of the arguments that an orthodox Trinitarian might make on the basis of *Psalm* 8:5a as that is quoted in *Hebrews* 2: 7a.

***Psalm* 8, English Translation**

I begin by presenting an English translation of *Psalm* 8.

***Psalm* 8**

(verse number in English translations) // (verse number in Masoretic text and in LXX)

(8:0) // (8:1)

To the music director. On the Gittith. A Psalm of David.

(8:1) // (8:2)

***Yahweh, our Lord, how wondrously mighty is your name in all the earth!
For your magnificence is exalted above the heavens.***

(8:2) // (8:3)

***Out of the mouth of infants—even mere nursing infants—you have established
strength against {because of} your enemies in order to bring your opponent and enemy to
an end.***

(8:3) // (8:4)

***When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers—the moon and the stars
which you have put in place,***

(8:4) // (8:5)

***What is this man that you take thought of him? Even the Son of man that you would
care about him?***

(8:5) // (8:6)

***You have made him a little lower than God [angeloi=angels?]. You have crowned him
with glory and honor.***

(8:6) // (8:7)

***You have set him to rule over the works of your hands. You have made all things to be
in subjection under his feet—***

(8:7) // (8:8)

all sheep and oxen (and also the wild beasts on the land),

(8:8) // (8:9)

***the birds of the sky and the fish of the sea (whatever passes through the paths of the
seas).***

(8:9) // (8:10)

Yahweh, our Lord, how wondrously mighty is your name in all the earth!

Arguments for Orthodox Doctrines from *Psalm 8:5a*

There are two somewhat different arguments that an orthodox Trinitarian might make from *Psalm 8* in support of his doctrines of the incarnation and the Trinity:

Orthodox Argument #1 from *Psalm 8* and *Hebrews* ¶5

The first possible argument begins with an initial understanding of *Psalm 8* as a description of mankind in general. The psalm, so it would seem, is a meditation on how wonderful it is that God has granted such a high degree of glory and honor to mankind. Under this way of construing the psalm, we could paraphrase its address to God this way:

“What is a human being that you have thought to grant him such a privileged position? With respect to the nature of his being, you have made mankind to be a little bit inferior to angels.³ But nonetheless you have crowned mankind with glory and honor. For, indeed, it is mankind that you have appointed to rule over the works of your hands. You have put all things in subjection under his feet.”<*Psalm 8:4-6*>

This interpretation further assumes that this meditation is based on a theme in the opening of Genesis:

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness; and let them **rule over** the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them; and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and **subdue** it; and **rule over** the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’”<Genesis 1:26-28, emphasis mine>

So the assumption is that Paul (in *Hebrews 2*) takes *Psalm 8* to be meditating on the teaching of Genesis 1. Namely, Paul understands David (the Psalmist) to be meditating on what an amazing thing it is that God has appointed mankind—of all his creatures—to rule over the rest of creation. So, David asks, “What is humankind that you (God) would think to appoint him as ruler over all of your creation? You made mankind inferior to angels, yet you appointed him to a superior status and role. How amazing is that?”

But if we leave it here, an important question is left unanswered. If *Psalm 8* is only speaking about mankind as such, then why does Paul quote it in ¶5 of *Hebrews* to assert something about Jesus in particular? Clearly, the point of *Hebrews* ¶5 is to prove the exalted status of Jesus. As the argument proceeds into ¶6, it implies that the man Jesus has earned his exalted status through his death on the cross. What does *Psalm 8* have to do with the exalted role earned by Jesus through his death on the cross? How does *Psalm 8* demonstrate the particular role and unique significance of Jesus if its concern is with the significance of mankind in general?

³ Even though our English translations say “God,” the Trinitarian could argue that “angels” is the original reading of Psalm 8:5a as reflected in the LXX reading of 8:5a as *angeloi*.

One possible answer to this question is that Jesus is the *archetypal* human. Granted, *Psalms* 8 is making a claim about mankind as such. But because Jesus is the archetypal human being, it follows that *Psalms* 8 finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus in particular. Perhaps mankind does, in a sense, rule over the rest of the created order. But the real and ultimate expression of mankind's rule over the rest of the created order will be found in the final rule of Jesus, the archetypal man. So, while *Psalms* 8 directly and straightforwardly gives expression to the exalted role of mankind in general, the psalm also recognizes that mankind's exalted role is dependent on an even more fundamental reality—the exalted role of a particular man, Jesus. God speaks of the exalted role of man in the light of the predestined exaltation of Jesus. The destiny of the *archetypal* man, Jesus, can be said to be the destiny of mankind itself.⁴

Viewed this way, Paul understands *Psalms* 8 to contain more than a simple meditation on Genesis 1. It also contains some particular assertions about the origin and destiny of the archetypal man, Jesus. Paul does not see *Psalms* 8 as a soliloquy on the significance of humankind in general. He sees it as a meditation on the status of humankind as it finds its expression in the exaltation of the man Jesus.

Accordingly, it is because Jesus is God having taken on a human nature that David writes in 8:5a, with regard to Jesus, "You have made him a little lower than the angels (*angeli*)."⁵ In other words, with respect to his human nature, Jesus can be said to have been made inferior to the angels. And yet, as the incarnation of God himself, Jesus is destined to reign with divine authority over the whole of creation. So, David can also say of him, "You have crowned him with glory and honor. Indeed, you have appointed him over the works of your hands. You have put all things in subjection under his feet."⁶

Therefore, on this reading of *Psalms* 8, David's point comes to this: In the particular man, Jesus, God has purposed to exalt humanity by exalting the man Jesus to a place of sovereign authority over all of creation; for in that day Jesus will be God in HUMAN form ruling over everything. It is not God's purpose to assume the form of an angel and rule over the cosmos. He has chosen to rule in human form. Wonder of wonders! Why would God choose lowly humanity to be the form in which he embodies his rule? Why has he chosen to exalt humankind in the person of Jesus?

This understanding of *Psalms* 8 requires an adjustment in one's understanding of Genesis. It would seem that the exalted status of mankind mentioned in Genesis does not primarily and directly refer to the exalted role of every human individual. Rather, it is

⁴ To propose that Jesus is the archetypal man and that Jesus' reign over creation is mankind's reign over creation certainly appear to be *ad hoc* assumptions. These are never explicitly stated or taught, neither in the immediate argument of Hebrews 2, nor anywhere else in the New Testament.

primarily intended to refer to the exalted destiny of the God-man, Jesus—the archetypal human being whom God will exalt as King of his Kingdom.

To summarize the whole chain of reasoning: from before the foundation of the world, God has purposed to enter into human form and reign eternally, as a man, over the whole of his creation. When the Genesis account asserts that man's role is to "subdue" creation and to "rule over" it, it does so because it knows that a coming God-man has been predestined for just such a role and destiny. It does not assert this because every individual human being is created for such a role. Mankind finds its exalted status in Jesus, the man who is the incarnation of God himself, not in the intrinsic significance of created humanity itself. When David meditates on the exalted role of mankind in *Psalms* 8, therefore, he is actually focused on the exalted role of the coming God-man in particular.

But this understanding of *Psalms* 8, especially 8:5a, can only make sense if one presupposes the orthodox doctrine of the incarnation: namely, by assuming a condescension of the second person of the Trinity to become man in Jesus followed by Jesus' eventual exaltation to a position of sovereign rule over the creation, in the form of the God-man he had become. In this sense, therefore, *Psalms* 8:5a (and *Heb.* 2:7) provide evidence for the validity of the orthodox doctrine of the incarnation and for the doctrine of the Trinity that that incarnation doctrine presupposes.

Orthodox Argument #2 from *Psalms* 8 and *Hebrews* ¶5

The second possible argument begins with an initial understanding of *Psalms* 8 as a description of the exalted destiny of Jesus in particular. Unlike the understanding of *Psalms* 8 that underlies argument #1 above, it is not a meditation on the high degree of glory and honor given to mankind. It is a meditation on the exalted status of the man Jesus in particular. Under this way of construing the psalm, we could paraphrase its address to God this way:

"What is this particular human being that you have thought to grant him such a privileged position? With respect to the nature of his being, you have made him, for a little while, to be an inferior being to angels. But nonetheless you have crowned him with glory and honor. For, indeed, it is this special man that you have appointed to rule over the works of your hands. You have put all things in subjection under his feet." <*Psalms* 8:4–6>

The argument assumes that this is how Paul understands *Psalms* 8 when he quotes it in *Hebrews* 2. If one understands *Psalms* 8 this way, then the argument for Jesus' pre-existent deity (and hence for the orthodox doctrines of the incarnation and the Trinity) is quite simple and straightforward. How are we to make sense out of David's claim that Jesus was made "for a little while" inferior to the angels? Does that not imply that he had existed earlier in a state where he was not inferior to the angels? And does it not also

imply that he will once again someday exist in a state of exaltation where he is superior to the angels? If so, the question arises, "What understanding of the nature of Jesus allows for these particular facts? What must Jesus be that he can, at one point in time, exist in a state of superiority to the angels, and then be made to exist for a little while in a state of inferiority to the angels, and then, finally, to exist again as superior to angels?"

The argument for orthodox Trinitarianism amounts to this: its doctrines can explain these very facts. Its doctrine of the incarnation would predict exactly this sequence. Before Jesus condescended to become a human being, he existed as God himself, a "person" within the eternally triune Godhead. But when he humbled himself and became a human being, he actually condescended to become a being who was inferior to the angels. But even in this state of condescension, Jesus was a more significant and important being than any angel, for he was predestined to be given the most highly exalted place of all. Then, when Jesus' work in the form of a humble human being was finished, he once again returned to his exalted state as a "person" within the triune Godhead. Never again will he exist in a state inferior to the angels.

Is it not clear, therefore, that this is the exact scenario David had in mind when he penned *Psalm 8:5a*? Is it not clear that when David writes, "You have made him a little lower than the angels (*angeloi*)," he intends to describe the condescension of the second person of the Trinity to exist as a human being? Therefore, Paul's understanding of *Psalm 8*—as he is quoting it in *Hebrews* ¶5—is evidence that the scenario described by the orthodox Trinitarian view of the incarnation is the right one. In other words, the doctrine of the Trinity and its corresponding doctrine of the incarnation must be assumed to be true in order to understand *Psalm 8* the way Paul understands it and employs it in ¶5.

Evaluating These Arguments: Analyzing *Psalm 8*

The Elements of *Psalm 8* That Are Incontrovertible

Some of the elements of *Psalm 8* are beyond controversy. I will begin by outlining what we can know with certainty about the meaning of *Psalm 8*:

- (1) *Psalm 8* is clearly a meditation on the kindness that God has shown to someone that he calls "man" or "the son of man."
 - (2) *Psalm 8* is clearly a meditation on the kindness of God that comes to that someone he calls "man" or "the son of man" in the form of his being granting an exalted role and status. In other words, God has been kind to this someone by predestining him to a place of exaltation.
 - (3) The exalted role and status that God is going to grant to this someone amounts to his being granted some sort of reign or dominion over the rest of God's creation.
-

(4) The exaltation of this "man" or "son of man" constitutes a sort of ironic reversal. That is, the one who was low was (or, will be) exalted to a high place.

But while these four things are incontrovertible, there are a number of other issues within *Psalms* 8 that need to be resolved before one can presume to know what *Psalms* 8 is saying. I turn now to a discussion of these key issues.

The Key Interpretive Issues in the Interpretation of *Psalms* 8

What Is the Basis of David's Meditation?

Before one can rightly understand what *Psalms* 8 is saying and teaching, one must be rightly oriented toward what it is. Clearly it is a meditation on the kindness of God insofar as God has exalted the one identified as the "son of man." But what is the basis of this meditation. What is David responding to? There are two possible options: (i) David could have remembered the "dominion" that God granted to human beings over the animals as recorded in Genesis 1. He could be responding to the memory of that as he meditates on what a marvelous thing that is. Or, (ii) David could be remembering and reflecting on the promise that God made to him through the prophet Nathan—namely, the promise that God would establish his (David's) throne forever as the reign in which Yahweh would embody his very own reign. So, in other words, it could be a meditation on and response of awe-filled delight to the "dominion mandate" in Genesis 1; or it could be a meditation on the Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel 7:8–17. We will not get anywhere toward understanding *Psalms* 8 until we have determined which of these it is.

It is not immediately obvious which judgment we should make. Except for three facts, it would be possible to take *Psalms* 8 either way, with equal likelihood of being right. However, there are three facts that steer us to the conclusion that *Psalms* 8 is a meditation on the Davidic Covenant:

(1) The least compelling of the three facts is captured by the following: In *Psalms* 8, David is responding to some noteworthy kindness of God with an expression of significant awe, wonder, delight, and gratitude. Which kindness of God is more likely to elicit this degree of awe and gratitude: (a) the kindness of making human beings the apex of God's creation such that they have dominion over all the rest of creation (or, at least, over all the rest of the animals), or (b) the kindness of making the humble, ordinary David the one in whom God intends to embody his own divine rule for all eternity. The sort of tender humility that *Psalms* 8 expresses seems more personal than (a) would allow. David is not humbled and grateful over what God has done for human beings. David is humbled and grateful over what God has done for him, in particular. At least, that is the emotional tenor of the psalm as it strikes me.

If that is right, then there is a striking parallel between *Psalms* 8, on the one hand, and 2 Samuel 7:18–29 and 1 Chronicles 17:16–27, on the other hand. It seems highly likely that

“What is man that you take thought of him? Even the son of man that you would care about him?” in *Psalms* 8 is directly parallel to

“Who am I, O Lord Yahweh, and what is my house, that you have brought me this far?”

in 2 Samuel 7:18 and to

“Who am I, O Yahweh God, and what is my house that you have brought me this far? ... What more can David say to you concerning the honor bestowed on your servant?”

in 1 Chronicles 17:16–18. Just as 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles record David’s humble and grateful response to the promise of the Davidic Covenant, it seems likely that *Psalms* 8 is just that as well. If so, then *Psalms* 8 could be paraphrased, “What is this man [David] that you would take thought for him? Even the Son [of God] taken from mankind that you would care about him?” In this case, “man” and “Son of man” are in synonymous parallelism with each other; they mutually define and describe one another. The man in view is the one whom God promised would be his Son, the man within whom God would embody his divine rule over creation.

The nature of the surprise and wonder that David gives expression to in *Psalms* 8 renders it significantly more likely that he is meditating on the Davidic Covenant than that he is meditating on the dominion mandate in Genesis 1.

(2) Verse 2 is, I think, the Achilles heel to any interpretation of *Psalms* 8 that wants to make it a meditation on the “dominion mandate” of Genesis 1. Verse 2 reads, “***Out of the mouth of infants—even mere nursing infants—you have established strength against because of your enemies in order to bring your opponent and enemy to an end.***” If verse 2 were omitted, if it were not included as a part of David’s meditation, then it would be very plausible to take *Psalms* 8 as a meditation on the dominion mandate. But with verse 2 included, it is quite difficult to see how that could be the case. To see this, we need to discuss what verse 2 means.

What is the point of the assertion in verse 2? What is it doing here? A key to understanding it is the fact that it immediately follows verse 1: “***Yahweh, our Lord, how wondrously mighty is your name in all the earth! For your magnificence is exalted above the heavens.***” The most likely judgment concerning the purpose of this verse is that it is intended to answer the question “why do you say so?” in relation to verse 1. That is, Yahweh, your name is mighty, your magnificence is exalted. Why do I say that? Because “you have established strength against your enemies in order to bring your opponent and enemy to an end.” It is the fact that Yahweh has “established strength against his enemies” that serves as the basis for David’s prior assertion that Yahweh is “wondrously mighty” and that his “magnificence is exalted” higher than the heavens.

Notice that the assertion made in verse 2 would be completely irrelevant and incongruous if *Psalm 8* were a meditation on the dominion mandate. Interpreted as a meditation on the dominion mandate in Genesis 1, *Psalm 8* would be a simple, straightforward meditation on the exalted status of mankind *vis à vis* all the rest of creation. Nothing in Genesis 1 suggests that God has given mankind victory over the enemies of God. So, what place would a claim about granting man victory over God's enemies have in a meditation on Genesis 1? But it would certainly be appropriate in a meditation on the Davidic Covenant. Being granted victory over the enemies of God is implicit in everything that the Son of God is. The content of that promised rule is explained in various places in the Old Testament. It undoubtedly includes the fact that, when the Son's rule is ultimately established, he will defeat all the enemies of God. Hence, to state that fact at the outset of this psalm would be very apt if the psalm is a meditation on God's promise to David in the Davidic Covenant. God has established strength to defeat the enemies of God; and he has done so in a human being (in one who is less than ontologically impressive—indeed, in a mere nursing infant). "How can I wrap my mind around that?" David is asking in wonderment.

So, verse 2 is unexpected, irrelevant, and incongruous within a meditation on the dominion mandate of Genesis 1. But it is perfectly relevant and utterly appropriate as the opening of a meditation on the Davidic Covenant. Accordingly, verse 2 clearly steers us toward seeing *Psalm 8* as a meditation on the Davidic Covenant, and not on the dominion mandate in Genesis 1.

(3) The fact that in *Hebrews 2:6–8* Paul quotes *Psalm 8* as an argument for the superiority of the Son over any and every *angelos* makes it highly likely that Paul understands *Psalm 8* to be a meditation on the Davidic Covenant.

Throughout chapter 1 of *Hebrews*, Paul has been arguing that the "Son" is a more exalted person than any angelos by just as much as his "name" [Son] is more exalted than the name "*angelos*." In other words, to be called "Son"—which is the equivalent to being called "the human being in whom God will embody and realize his divine rule of the whole of creation"—makes one more exalted than being called "messenger" [*angelos*]. As Paul develops his argument in *Hebrews 1*, it becomes obvious what concept of "Son" he is employing in the argument. The "Son" is the one who will fulfill all that God promised to David in the Davidic Covenant. The "Son" is the one who will reign as King forever over all creation.

Part 2 (¶5) follows immediately after this argument concerning the exalted status of the "Son" of the Davidic Covenant. Part 2 begins—in ¶5—by reiterating the superiority of this "Son" to the *angeli*. He quotes David in *Psalm 8* describing the authority and reign that has been promised to this Son—namely, a rule where God has "made all things to be in subjection under his feet." <*Psalm 8:6*> Then—in ¶6—Paul describes how this promise to the Son applies to Jesus:

“Now in subjecting all things to him [this “Son”], he left nothing that is not subject to him [this “Son”]. But now we do not yet see all things subjected to him [this “Son”]. But we do see him who was made a little lower than the *angeloi*, **Jesus**, crowned with glory and honor because of the death he suffered so that, in the grace of God, he might taste death in the place of every person. Now it was fitting for him on account of whom are all things and for the sake of whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to qualify the pioneer of their deliverance through his sufferings.”

Specifically, Paul says that we do not yet see the ultimate fulfillment of all that God promised with regard to his “Son”—we do not yet see all things made subject to him. But, while we do not yet see that ultimate fulfillment of God’s promise, we do see the beginning of its fulfillment—we see the man Jesus having been exalted to a position where he is qualified to rule over God’s creation. The man Jesus was “crowned with glory and honor” because he was obedient to the will of his Father when he willingly died for the sins of mankind on the cross. The man Jesus became qualified to be the promised “Son” through the sufferings that he experienced on our behalf.

It is quite evident that this is Paul’s argument. It is impossible to see how Paul could make anything close to the sort of argument he is making in *Hebrews*, Part 2 if he is interpreting *Psalms* 8 as a meditation on the dominion mandate in Genesis 1. How would the fact that mankind is the apex of God’s creation provide any evidence whatsoever that the particular man Jesus is destined to rule over all of God’s creation as its eternal king?

So, Paul employs *Psalms* 8 as prophetic support for his contention that the ordinary human being, Jesus—insofar as he has been appointed to be the eternal king over God’s creation, the promised “Son”—is greater than any *angeloi*, even though he is a mere human being. The fact that he employs *Psalms* 8 in this argument makes it impossible that Paul sees *Psalms* 8 as a meditation on the exalted status of humankind as it is described in Genesis 1.⁵ Paul’s argument in *Hebrews* can only make sense if he is interpreting *Psalms* 8 as a reflection on God’s promises to the “Son” as defined in the Davidic Covenant.

In the light of the three considerations discussed above, it becomes clear that *Psalms* 8 is a meditation by David on the promises of the Davidic Covenant. Only on that interpretation of *Psalms* 8 can we account for (i) the tone of personal humility and

⁵ Positing that Jesus is the archetypal man would not solve this problem. Even if Jesus is the archetypal man, the dominion of this man, as the true fulfillment of the dominion of mankind described in Genesis 1, is not the same as the reign of the Son promised in the Davidic Covenant: (a) Genesis 1 describes mankind’s dominion in this present age and this present creation; the Davidic Covenant describes the reign of the Son of God in the eternal age to come, in the world to come (note Hebrews 2:5), and (b) Genesis 1 describes mankind’s dominion over the animals; the Davidic Covenant describes the reign of the Son over “all things” (note Hebrews 2:8).

gratitude in the psalm, (ii) the presence of verse 2 in the psalm, and (iii) the use Paul makes of *Psalms* 8 in *Hebrews* 2:5–8.

Who Does David Have in View in *Psalms* 8?

It is clear that David, in *Psalms* 8, has in mind a great kindness that God has shown to the “Son of Man.” It is equally clear now that this “Son of Man” is the “Son of God” whom God had promised to bring into the world as the King over all God’s creation—the one of whom God said in the Davidic Covenant, “I will be a Father to him, and he will be a Son to me.” But who is this “Son of Man”? To whom does the title belong? Is David reflecting in wonder on what an exalted status God had granted to him (David)? Or, is David reflecting in wonder on what an exalted status God had promised to give to Jesus, the future son of David?

The orthodox Trinitarian interpretation of *Psalms* 8:5a cannot even get off the ground if it is a statement that describes David himself. It must be a description of the particular man, Jesus. For, if the fact that he has been “made a little lower than the *angeli*” necessarily demonstrates that this “Son of Man” is the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, then—surely—it can only describe Jesus for the orthodox Trinitarian. Otherwise, if it describes David also, then David too would be shown to be an incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. And no orthodox Trinitarian is inclined to believe that. So, if 8:5a is meant by David to be a description of David himself, then the argument for the incarnation from *Psalms* 8:5a is undermined. No such argument can stand unless *Psalms* 8 is directly and exclusively focused on the particular man Jesus.

For reasons that I will not explore here, a full exploration of the messianic psalms would demonstrate that such psalms do not focus directly and particularly on Jesus. They focus on the whole line of Davidic Kings. Each and every Davidic King has been granted the title and status of being God’s “Son.” David, Solomon, Rehoboam, ... on down the line—each and every one of them is the “Son of God” in his turn. Whoever is sitting on the throne of David, he is sitting on the throne that God has promised will endure forever. Furthermore, he is sitting on the throne that God said would endure as the locus of his divine sovereignty. God had promised that he would reign over his creation in and through the reign of the Davidic King; and he would do that forever. Accordingly, as David meditates on the fact that the title “Son” has been granted to a lowly human being, he is meditating on the fact that the title “Son” has been granted to someone as lowly as himself. He is the recipient of the title “Son.” And it makes him gape in amazement at God’s promises and purposes.⁶

⁶ One might object, “If David is thinking of himself, wouldn’t David say, ‘Who am I, that you take thought of me? And who am I that you would care for me?’ before he would say, ‘Who is this man that you take thought of him? Even the Son of man that you would care for him?’” Not necessarily. It is very much within the patterns of speech and communication that a person might sometimes feel the need to refer to

The objection could be raised, "But in *Hebrews* 2:5–8, Paul applies *Psalms* 8 to Jesus. How can Paul legitimately apply it to Jesus if the psalm is more directly a psalm that concerns David?" In applying *Psalms* 8 to Jesus, Paul employs the same line of reasoning that everyone in the New Testament employs when he reads a messianic psalm as a description of Jesus' role. Namely, he understands Jesus to be the ultimate and true fulfillment of a status and role that had only nominally belonged to every Davidic King before Jesus.

David was the "Son of God" in name; but he was the Son of God in name only. David never did truly realize and actualize the relationship to God that that title described. Solomon and all the Davidic Kings after him were each, in turn, the "Son." But each of them was the "Son of God" only in the sense that, along with the title, they bore the promise that God would actualize such a concept. One day, God would take a son of David and make him the specific, particular person in whom God would actually embody his rule. When that man came, the title would no longer be an empty placeholder for God's promise; it would be the actual fulfillment of all that God had promised. Jesus was that man. He was the particular son of David who would cease to merely be a carrier of the promise of an exalted status and role for David's seed; he would be the one who would fulfill the title and role forever.

So, when the New Testament writer quotes a psalm in which David is meditating on the Davidic Covenant and the promise is made regarding the "Son", he recognizes that it is a promise that belongs to Jesus. David would not have known that. All David knew is that it was a promise given to him and his descendants. The promises belonged to him, personally, in one sense. But even David realized (eventually) that it would take a unique and particular individual among his descendants to really realize and actualize all that God has promised him. The New Testament authors are simply saying that Jesus is that unique and particular son of David that David never knew. All that was promised to David will be realized in and by Jesus. Accordingly, anything David ever says about the promises God made to him in relation to his role as "Son" is truer of Jesus than it ever

himself in the third person. (Note that Jesus frequently does so in the gospel accounts. He refers to himself as "the Son of man" at times when he clearly and unmistakably means "me.") In this particular case, by referring to himself in the third person, it becomes very easy for David to create the poetic parallelism between "this man" and the "Son of man" in verse 4. The latter—which is a title that defines his status—then contributes to the reason for David's wonderment in a very succinct way: Who is this man (that I am) that you take thought of me? Who is the Son of man (that you have granted me the privilege to be) that you would care for him?" If David had said simply, "Who am I that you take thought of me? Who am I that you would care for me?" then the statement would give the reader no clue with regard to what it is that David finds so wondrous and marvelous about God's mercy and love. But as it is, the reason for David's wonder is clear: he finds it amazing that God would grant the status and title of "Son" to him, David, an ordinary, lowly human being.

could have been of David. So, the fact that Paul quotes *Psalms* 8 in his description of the destiny of Jesus in *Hebrews* 2 does not prove that *Psalms* 8 has Jesus directly and exclusively in mind. Quite the contrary, it is David's meditation on what it means that the title "Son" has been granted to him. But whatever it means to David, it means all that and more to Jesus. That is what Paul understands when he uses *Psalms* 8 to better understand who Jesus is.

If one accepts this conclusion, then there is nothing more to be said about the Trinitarian argument from 8:5a. It does not stand; for no one can reasonably argue that David is describing himself as the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. But, having said that, I will proceed through the rest of this paper as if the person in view in 8:5a is an open question. Let us assume that it remains a possibility that 8:5a could indeed be describing Jesus uniquely.

What Does "You Have Made Him a Little Lower Than the *Angelo*?" Mean?

TRANSLATING VERSE 5A

The statement contained in *Psalms* 8:5a is the crux of the Trinitarian argument. Now that we are rightly oriented to what is happening in *Psalms* 8, we should be in a position to determine what this statement means. But before we can decide what verse 5a means, we will have to explore some critical textual and translation problems that exist in relation to verse 5a.

Psalms 8:5a clearly involves a translation difficulty. In the English translation of this verse in *Psalms* 8, it is translated, "You have made him a little lower than God." But in *Hebrews* 2:7a—Paul's quotation of *Psalms* 8:5a—English translations have something along the lines of "You have made him a little lower than the angels," or, in some cases "You have made him for a little while lower than the angels." Virtually all English translations of *Hebrews* 2:7a read "angels" rather than "God." So which is it? Is the assertion that the Son of Man has been made a little lower than God, or a little lower than the angels?

The confusion comes from the way the Septuagint translates *Psalms* 8 into Greek. The Septuagint reads, "You have made him a little lower *par' angelous*. But the Hebrew Masoretic text of *Psalms* 8 reads, "You have made him a little lower *meelohim*." In other words, the LXX says that this Son of man is a little lower than the *angeloi* (typically translated "angels"), while the MT says that he is a little lower than *elohim* (typically translated "God"). How should we understand the apparent difference between the Greek translations of the psalm as it occurs in the LXX and in the book of *Hebrews* and the Hebrew text itself?

We saw the key to this puzzle in the second paper of this series. In that paper I explored the meaning of the term *angelos*. I showed there that it has a wider field of

meaning than we are typically led to believe. Specifically, we saw that while it can mean “angel” in the standard sense of that term, it can also mean “a manifestation of God himself in some visible form,” that is, a theophany. For example, when God appeared as a burning bush to Moses, he was an *angelos* (a visible manifestation) of Yahweh. I argued in Paper #2 that that is the sense of *angelos* that is being employed by Paul throughout the entire opening argument of the book of *Hebrews*. Paul’s point in Part 1 of *Hebrews* is NOT that his promised Son—*human* son of David though he is—is more exalted than the ANGELS (as most English translations would have us believe). Rather, his point there is that his promised Son is more exalted than any theophanic manifestation of God himself. Though he is but a human being, the Son is more important than the burning bush. He is more important than the Shekinah glory. He is more important than the pillar of fire that led Israel in the wilderness. He is more exalted than the man who appeared to Abraham when Yahweh made himself manifest to Abraham and promised that Sarah would have a son. The humanity of the Son of God does not make him inferior in status to any of God’s visible appearances or manifestations.

So, in *Hebrews* 2:5 when Paul affirms that God did not subject the world to come “to *angeloi*,” he is not referring to angels. He is referring to appearances or manifestations of God himself. In other words, his claim is that God did not subject the world to come to some visible appearance or manifestation of himself—he did not promise to subject the world to come to one of his theophanies.

Once we notice this, the apparent conflict between the Greek translation of *Psalms* 8 and the Hebrew text itself begins to resolve. The Greek translators of the LXX do not have our expectations with regard to the field of meaning of *angelos*. They know the range of meaning that the word has. Accordingly, it is not problematic for the Greek translators of the LXX to use the Greek word *angeloi* to translate the Hebrew word *elohim*. Why? Because they know that *angeloi* can, in a certain sense, denote God himself. Specifically, the *angeloi* are the various and sundry visible manifestations of Yahweh himself. Hence, any particular *angelos* (theophanic manifestation) has the identity of Yahweh (God) himself. With respect to divine identity, there is no difference between God and his *angelos*. The *angelos* of Yahweh (the “Angel of the Lord”) just is one and the same person as God himself. The only difference is this: an *angelos* is a created, visible manifestation of God, while Yahweh, as he is in himself, is the transcendent, invisible God.

The BEING of the *angelos* is distinct from the utterly transcendent being of God himself. Whatever the being of the *angelos*, it is visible and manifest. The being of God—in and of himself—is invisible and intangible. This, I think, explains why the LXX translators of *Psalms* 8:5a chose to translate *elohim* as *angeloi* rather than *theos* (the standard Greek word for God). It is clearly unthinkable that David (or Jesus), the Son of man in *Psalms* 8, is even on the same plane of existence as the transcendent creator in and of himself. Can the Son of man be “a little lower” than God (*elohim*) if we are speaking

with reference to the transcendent creator in his transcendent being? No, of course not! That would make no sense. There must always be a huge gap between the transcendent creator and anything in his creation. But can we compare the status of the Son of man to those concrete, visible representations of the transcendent creator that God has brought into being at various times in history—that is, to his *angeloi*? Certainly. That becomes a meaningful comparison. To say that the human creature whom God has appointed as the Son is a “little lower” than those created manifestations of himself that he has brought into history at various times and places is tantamount to saying that this Son is a “little lower” than God himself. For what are these *angeloi*? Nothing other than visible representations of God himself.

Therefore, the only difference between the Greek translation and the Hebrew text is this: The Greek text says, in effect, “You have made him a little lower than the transcendent God, Yahweh, who has represented himself in visible form at various times in history.” The Hebrew text says, “You have made him a little lower than the transcendent God, Yahweh.” The LXX translation renders the psalm in a way that is particularly apt to Paul’s point in the opening arguments of *Hebrews*. For the issue at hand is whether the Messiah wasn’t supposed to be an *angelos*—that is, a theophanic manifestation of Yahweh, himself. Paul’s contention is that the Messiah was, in fact, supposed to be a human son of David and that, as such, he has a more exalted status and importance than any theophanic manifestation of Yahweh. Given that this is the issue, a translation of *Psalms* 8 that compares the Son of man to theophanic manifestations of God is directly to the point.

On the other hand, translated this way, it presents an immediate problem: why would Paul quote a psalm saying that the Son is “a little lower” than the theophanic manifestations (*angeloi*) of God in order to offer evidence that the Son is “more exalted” than the theophanic manifestations (*angeloi*) of God? Understanding that *angeloi* is being used to translate *elohim* in *Psalms* 8 also helps us solve this puzzle within the argument of *Hebrews*. Throughout Part 1, and then at the beginning of Part 2, Paul has been insisting that the human Son is more exalted than the *angeloi*. Here, in Part 2, he cites *Psalms* 8 as evidence for his point: “You have made him A LITTLE LOWER than the *angeloi*.” Here is the puzzle: how does a statement that the Son has been made a little lower than the *angeloi* prove that the Son is more exalted than the *angeloi*? In other words, how can the declaration that the human Son is LOWER than the *angeloi* prove that he is HIGHER than the *angeloi*? This sounds utterly contradictory on the face of it.⁷ But it is not. We must

⁷ Some English translations translate *Psalms* 8 (in its Greek translation in *Hebrews*) as “You have made him a little while lower than the angels.” This is highly interpretive. There is no word for “while” in either the Hebrew text or the Greek translations. Undoubtedly it is the seeming contradiction in Paul’s argument that gives rise to this addition of the word “while” in these translations. By making the Son’s being lower than the *angeloi* merely temporary (for a “little while”), then it is not necessarily in contradiction to his

remember that “*angeloi*” in the declaration of *Psalm 8* translates *elohim* (God). *Psalm 8* is using “*angeloi*” to denote the identity of who the Son is a “little lower” than—namely, God. But clearly the Son is not as exalted as God himself! In a sense, he is exalted to the level of God himself (he is seated at the right hand of God); but certainly God himself is more important and exalted than the Son is.

Paul’s argument in *Hebrews*—Part 1 and into Part 2—is not intended to suggest that the human Son is more exalted than God. Paul never meant to suggest that the Son is more exalted than the *angeloi* in that sense—in the sense that the *angeloi* just are *elohim* (God) himself. Rather, Paul’s argument is that the human Son—as one visible manifestation of God—is more exalted than any of the theophanies of God, those other visible manifestations of God. Every *angelos* is a visible manifestation of God of some sort. The Son is intended to be a visible manifestation (embodiment) of God as well. But are all these visible manifestations of God on a par with one another? Are they all equally important? Are they all equally exalted in status? No, they are not. The various *angeloi* (theophanies) of God are simply temporary manifestations of God for a particular time and place. None of them has any lasting or enduring significance. None of them has been appointed a lasting role or standing in God’s purposes. But not so with the Son. The human person in whom God chose to embody his sovereign authority and personal identity is the most important manifestation of God in all of cosmic history. This Son is the very focus of all that God has done and shall do. He is that representation (image) of God that will endure to the end of time. This Son will have an eternal role and an eternal standing in God’s purposes. In that sense, therefore, no mere *angelos* (no mere theophanic manifestation) even comes close to being as important or significant as the Son.

We can see, then, that Paul has not contradicted himself at all in his argument in the opening of *Hebrews*. *Psalm 8* proves his point exactly: *Psalm 8* declares that the Son of man has been granted an eternal status that makes him a little lower than the God who is manifest in his *angeloi* (God himself). Yet, to what *angelos* (to what other temporary, visible manifestation of God) has God ever promised such an eternal status? The “Son” is the one who, as a distinct person, has been made the locus of God’s sovereign rule. What *angelos* (what visible manifestation of God) has ever, as a distinct person, been made to be the locus of God’s sovereign rule? Are not these *angeloi* (visible manifestations of God) simply ways by which God delivers his messages to mankind? An *angelos* (a

being more exalted than all the *angeloi*. The translation also presupposes orthodox Trinitarianism. There is nothing in *Psalm 8* that would lead one to think that David’s point is that the Son has been made “for a little while” lower than angels (or God). His point seems to be about the Son’s permanent and enduring status, not about some temporary status. But if you accept the Orthodox account of the incarnation, then to describe the Son as “for a little while” lower than the angels is virtually necessary. Certainly, the second person of the Trinity cannot be said to be permanently and eternally “lower” than God or than angels. See the *Excursus* below for more on this.

visible manifestation of God) has the identity of God; it speaks as God. But no *angelos* (visible manifestation of God) maps the person and identity of God onto its own distinct personhood; and no *angelos* is the very embodiment of God's divine authority in a distinct person. Hence, Paul can argue in *Hebrews*, Part 1 and Part 2—WITHOUT CONTRADICTION—that the Son is more exalted than any *angelos* (=visible manifestation of God) precisely because, though he is a mere human being, God has exalted him to a state of being a little lower than the *angeloi* (=God).

So, I believe I have reconciled the Hebrew text of *Psalms* 8 with the LXX translation of *Psalms* 8 and Paul's quote of *Psalms* 8 in the book of *Hebrews*. But our concern here is with what *Psalms* 8:5 means. It is the meaning of verse 5a within *Psalms* 8 itself that serves as the basis for the Trinitarian's argument. We must understand what verse 5a means. In the light of the proposal I have just made and for the purposes of my examination of *Psalms* 8, I will treat 8:5a as the assertion, "You have made him a little lower than God." As we will see, nothing in the Trinitarian argument hinges on which translation we accept—whether "a little lower than God," or "a little lower than the angels."

UNDERSTANDING VERSE 5A: WHAT ARE THE OPTIONS?

There are two important options for how we are to understand verse 5a. On the one hand, "you have made him a little lower than God" could be understood as a DEMOTION of the Son. [Option #1] Or, on the other hand, "you have made him a little lower than God" could be construed as an EXALTATION of the Son. [Option #2] Is David expressing grateful wonder that God has taken the Son, an ordinary human being, and exalted him to a status where he exists just below (but nearly on a par with) God himself [the second option]? Or, is David expressing grateful wonder that God himself condescended and became less than the eternally divine when he chose to incarnate himself as the Son of man [the first option]?⁸

The argument in support of Trinitarian doctrine from *Psalms* 8:5a is utterly dependent upon Option #1 being the right way to read *Psalms* 8. Only if 8:5a is a statement of the Son's being and status being diminished, only if it is a statement of the lowering of who the Son is from a previously higher state of being—only then does *Psalms* 8:5a become an explicit affirmation of the Trinitarian's doctrine of the incarnation.⁹ Therefore, we must

⁸ Reading 8:5a in accord with Option #1 would be even more plausible if 8:5a read "a little lower than the angels" rather than "a little lower than God." However, Option #1 is still possible with the reading that we judged above to be preferable—namely, "a little lower than God."

⁹ It is ultimately my contention that this reading of 8:5a—that is, Option #1—is the result of reading *Psalms* 8:5a with the orthodox Trinitarian picture of the incarnation already firmly in place as the lenses through which one is reading the *Psalms*. Nothing within the *Psalms* itself—I will argue—would ever lead one to "discover" the Orthodox doctrine of the incarnation in it if one was not already familiar with and convinced of the doctrine in the first place. That is fundamentally the thesis of this paper. Finding evidence

determine which of these two options—the “condescension reading” [Option #1] or the “exaltation reading” [Option #2]—is more likely to be the correct interpretation.

(This first option for 8:5a can only make sense if *Psalms* 8:5a is about Jesus in particular. Jesus is the one who, according to Trinitarian doctrine, was the second person of the Trinity and condescended to become “a little lower than God (angels).” David was not the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. Neither was any other son of David. Only Jesus—as understood by Trinitarian doctrine—could possibly fit the description entailed by reading 8:5a according to Option #1. However, I argued earlier in this paper that the evidence points to *Psalms* 8 being directly and primarily about David and his descendants in general, not uniquely and particularly about Jesus. Therefore, the evidence we have already considered points to reading 8:5a according to Option #1 as unlikely. However, for the sake of argument, I will assume that this first option for reading 8:5a is a live option and I will examine whether it makes sense independently of any judgment about who is the focus of the psalm.)

In order to determine whether Option #1 or Option #2 is the right reading of 8:5a (and to do so on different grounds than we have examined thus far) it is necessary to analyze the core of the psalm (*Psalms* 8:3–8) and discover its intrinsic structure.

WHAT IS THE STRUCTURE OF *PSALM* 8:3–8?

There are two importantly different ways to analyze the structure of *Psalms* 8:3–8. I will analyze this core portion of *Psalms* 8 into three distinct elements and then examine the relationship that these three elements have to one another. I suggest that there are two viable options for analyzing the elements of this part of the psalm and their relationship to one another:

Structure of Psalm 8, Option A:

- ELEMENT (X):** O God, when I think about how marvelous the rest of your creation is, how is it that you have had any thought to this humble, lowly human creature whom you have appointed as your Son? [8:3–4]
- ELEMENT (Y_A):** You have temporarily diminished him and made him inferior to God (or, angels). [8:5a]
- ELEMENT (Z):** You have crowned him with glory and honor. You have destined him to be the eternal ruler over all the rest of your creation. (The rest of the core

of the incarnation and/or Trinity in Psalm 8 is simply a matter of reading into Psalm 8 what one already believes. In no sense is it a matter of finding evidence for the incarnation from a plausible reading of the Psalm. Without a belief in the Trinity and the incarnation, one would never conceive of Option #1 as a live option for reading 8:5a.

portion of the psalm simply expands on this point, emphasizing the extent of this Son's rule.) **[8:5b-8]**

This is the structure of the core of *Psalm 8* as Option #1 interprets it. Option #1 understands Element (Y_A) to describe a diminution or diminishing of the Son, not an exaltation of the Son. The alternative reading of the psalm sees the second element—Element (Y_B)—as describing an exaltation of the Son, not a diminution of him. Hence,

Structure of Psalm 8, Option B:

ELEMENT (X): O God, when I think about how marvelous the rest of your creation is, how is it that you have had any thought to this humble, lowly human creature whom you have appointed as your Son? **[8:3-4]**

ELEMENT (Y_B): You have exalted him to a position that is only slightly inferior to that of God himself. **[8:5a]**

ELEMENT (Z): You have crowned him with glory and honor. You have destined him to be the eternal ruler over all the rest of your creation. (The rest of the core portion of the psalm simply expands on this point, emphasizing the extent of this Son's rule.) **[8:5b-8]**

Our choice between Option #1 and Option #2 for our interpretation of *Psalm 8:5a*, therefore, hinges on our choosing between these two alternative structures. Our choice between these two structures, in turn, hinges on what we decide Element (Y) is contributing to the point of the psalm.

In Structure-Option B, Element (Y_B) is in parallel with Element (Z). In other words, Element (Y_B) and Element (Z) are accomplishing the same thing: namely, they are describing the amazing blessing that God has bestowed on this man whom David has described as the "Son." Element (Y_B) gives an initial description of this blessing, asserting that the Son was exalted to a position only slightly inferior to God. Then, Element (Z) expands further on this blessing, describing in exactly what sense and in what way he was made only slightly inferior to God—namely, by granting him the honor and glory that comes from being the embodiment of God's sovereign rule over his whole creation.

In Structure-Option B, then, Element (Y_B) followed by Element (Z)—taken together—provide the reason for the wonderment and amazement expressed in the question contained in Element (X). What is David amazed at? He is amazed that God would care enough for a lowly human being that he would exalt him to a place of honor just below God himself.

In Structure-Option A, on the other hand, Element (Y_A) would be intended as an ironic contrast with Element (Z). God, you made the Son to exist {perhaps temporarily} in a

humble state. You diminished him and made him to be lower than God {or, angels} [Element (Y_A)]. Nevertheless, this same Son, you crowned with glory and honor and set to rule over all of your creation [Element (Z)]. The {perhaps temporary} "lowness" described in Element (Y_A) is put in contrast with the exalted status affirmed in Element (Z). This is ironic. The Son whom God made "low" is the same Son whom God has also "exalted." How then do Elements (Y_A) and (Z) relate to Element (X)? Therein lies the problem with Structure-Option A. We will discuss this problem below.

WHAT DOES VERSE 5A MEAN?

In order to determine what *Psalms* 8:5a means, we need to decide between the two options for the structure of *Psalms* 8:3–8 described above. Is it more likely that David constructed *Psalms* 8 to be understood in the way that Structure-Option A describes? Or, is it more likely that he constructed it as Structure-Option B describes?

Structure-Option B is a very plausible reading of David's psalm. It understands the psalm to be simple, direct, and straightforward in the manner in which it makes its point. No significant objection can be raised against reading the psalm this way.¹⁰ But the same thing cannot be said for Structure-Option A. Two important objections can be raised against the likelihood that *Psalms* 8 is structured as described by Structure-Option A:

Objection to Structure-Option A/Objection #1 >

Under Structure-Option A, the purpose of Element (Y_A) is, allegedly, to create contrast with Element (Z)? But this is problematic. Why would Element (Y_A) be necessary for that purpose? If that is its purpose, is it not then superfluous? An ironic contrast between Element (X) and Element (Z) already exists. It is a lowly "man," the "Son of man," a mere human being— Element (X)— whom God has crowned with glory and honor etc.— Element (Z). The contrast between the Son's humbleness and his exaltation clearly exists already—without any contribution from Element (Y_A). So, it is not clear why Element (Y_A) would be necessary at all, if its purpose is to contrast with Element (Z).

Objection to Structure-Option A/Objection #2 >

Furthermore, if we construe Element (Y_A) in the way that Structure-Option A construes it, it disrupts the flow of the psalm. Element (X) introduces the "lowness" of the Son of man. Element (Z) declares that the destiny of the Son is his exaltation to eternal King. What does Element (Y_A) do in transitioning from Element (X) to Element (Z)? It once again emphasizes the "lowness" of the Son. And why? Apparently in order to clarify that his "lowness" was neither inherent nor absolute (nor perhaps, permanent). It was a condition that was not inherent to who he was and only partially defined him

¹⁰ Except that the Psalm read in this way offers no support for the orthodox Trinitarian doctrine of the incarnation.

(temporarily?). Understood in this way, then, it is an awkward and annoyingly unnecessary intrusion into an otherwise simple contrast. Is that what David intended? Or, did David intend 8:5a to be a point that is absolutely essential to what he wants to say?

Everything in the psalm suggests that David had a very simple and direct purpose: to wonder in amazement at the fact that God would grant to a mere, lowly human being the status as the Son of God—as he who was the embodiment of the sovereign reign of God. The simple, straightforward flow of the psalm is movement from a statement of wonder regarding the care and attention God has shown the merely human “Son of man” to a description of the exaltation of this “Son of man” that gives rise to that wonder.

Structure-Option B reflects that simple, straightforward flow quite readily: Element (X) is the statement of wonder regarding the care and attention of God toward the lowly human “Son.” Element (Y_B) in conjunction with Element (Z) is a description of the exaltation of the “Son” that gives rise to that wonder.

Structure-Option A, on the other hand, includes a huge disruption of that simple, straightforward flow: Element (X) is the statement of wonder regarding the care and attention of God toward the lowly human “Son.” Element (Z) is a description of the exaltation of the “Son” that gives rise to that wonder. Element (Y_A) intervenes to make a clumsy and complicated disclaimer that, while the “Son” is indeed lowly and humble, he is not intrinsically lowly and humble—he is actually quite exalted in his essential nature—by God made him lowly and humble in some other respect for a purpose.

Perhaps I can summarize and clarify the two above objections in a more accessible way. The technical points raised above are more easily understood if I paraphrase how each of these two Structure-Options interpret the psalm:

Structure-Option A: O!, God, what is this man that you would care for him enough to privilege him? What is this Son, taken from mankind, that you would honor him? (Now, I realize that he isn't strictly speaking a man, exactly. Before he was made a lowly man, he had the exalted status of God himself. But you made him low, lower than the God that he was {lower even than the angels?}.) But, humble though he was made to be—at least in part—you have crowned him with glory and honor and made him the embodiment of your own sovereign rule over all of creation.

Structure-Option B: O!, God, what is this man that you would care for him enough to privilege him? What is this Son, taken from mankind, that you would honor him? You have honored him by raising him up to a status that is barely inferior to the status of God himself. You have honored him by crowning him with glory and honor and by making him the embodiment of your own sovereign rule over the whole creation.

In the above paraphrases, it is quite readily seen what a clumsy disruption Element (Y_A) is in Structure-Option A. Structure-Option A is a plausible reading of *Psalms* 8, therefore, only if one can honestly believe that David felt it important enough to issue a

disclaimer with respect to the status of the Son that he was willing to completely interrupt the natural flow of his psalm in order to make it.

There is nothing about the psalm itself that provides any indication that such a disclaimer is essential. The only thing that could possibly make such a disclaimer essential is this: a desire that the reader not misunderstand the true nature and status of Jesus—specifically, that he was the condescension of the eternal second person of the Trinity to assume a human nature and thereby become the incarnation of God. Was David an orthodox Trinitarian? And, if so, did David believe it was absolutely essential that we knew and understood the divine nature of the Son's true essence? If so, then perhaps it is plausible to accept the disruptive disclaimer of Element (Υ_A) as absolutely mandatory. David has just expressed wonder that God would have such care and regard for the lowly human being that he has named his "Son. Left alone, one might think that the "Son" that he is speaking of is just an ordinary human being. Accordingly, if David were an orthodox Trinitarian who believed that it was absolutely essential for one to acknowledge the divine essence of the Son, then he might feel compelled to interrupt his point to make exactly this disclaimer.

But here is the question: Is David an orthodox Trinitarian? Is it plausible to think that David has the doctrinal sensibilities of an orthodox Trinitarian? Or, is reading his psalm as if he has such sensibilities strictly a matter of reading into David's psalm something that David never intended by it?

There is absolutely no evidence that David is an orthodox Trinitarian. And certainly there is no evidence anywhere that David shares the orthodox Trinitarian's sensibilities about how crucial the doctrine of the Son's essential deity is. There is no good reason to read the psalm as if David were making an Orthodox disclaimer about the incarnation being a merely provisional {and temporary?} condescension of God. Therefore, reading *Psalms* 8 according to Structure-Option B is clearly the most reasonable interpretation of *Psalms* 8.¹¹

CONCLUSION: WHAT DOES VERSE 5A MEAN?

We are now in a position to articulate what David meant in *Psalms* 8:5a when he wrote, "You have made him a little lower than God." As we saw earlier in the paper, David is reflecting in wonder at the incredible blessing that God has bestowed upon him. A blessing that God has not only bestowed upon him, personally, but has also bestowed on David's descendents. God has promised that David and his descendents will be granted a reign, as kings over Israel, wherein God will locate and embody his own divine reign over Israel and the entire creation. David and his descendents—whoever inherits the title

¹¹ See Appendix 3-A for a convenient summary of three interpretive paradigms representing the various ways one might interpret *Psalms* 8.

“Son of man”— will be the human embodiment of God’s sovereign reign over everything. In other words, whoever is named the “Son” will be, for all practical purposes, God himself ruling on the throne. The only creature with a more exalted status than the Son is the eternal and self-existent creator God, himself, in all his transcendence. It is this very fact that David is articulating when he writes, with respect to the one named “Son of man”, “You have made him a little lower than God.” In other words, this statement—verse 5a—is a statement of how a human being has been exalted to just barely below God himself.

Now the orthodox Christian will object that David and his sons were never exalted to just barely below God himself. Surely Jesus is the only man who fits this description. Indeed, that is right. No one other than Jesus literally, actually, and substantially fits the description of being just below God in status and authority. But while that is true, one must not forget that David and his sons after him were heirs of the promise of such a status. They did inherit the title Son of God, even if they did not inherit the actual state itself. In name, David was no less the “Son of man” than Jesus was. In title, David was exalted to a place just below God no less than Jesus was. But only Jesus—the unique Son of God—ever became qualified to actually rule from that exalted place. Only Jesus is actually the Son—actually “a little lower than God.”

Excursus

There is another issue in the meaning of 8:5a that we have, for the most part, ignored. Some English translations of *Hebrews* 2:7 translate the quote from *Psalms* 8:5a this way: “You have made him **for a little while** lower than the angels.” Others translate it this way: “You have made him **a little** lower than the angels.” Both translations are, ostensibly, translations of the Greek word *brachu*. Clearly, in the argument above, I have sided with those translations that translate *brachu* as “a little,” and not with those that translate it “for a little while.” But I want to make some further remarks with regard to this issue.

What difference does it make? Depending upon how we translate *brachu*, David’s assertion in 8:5a is either (i) that the Son of man has been made “for a little while” lower than the *angeloi* (God? or angels?), or (ii) that the Son of man has been made “a little” lower than the *angeloi* (God? or angels?). We have already seen how a commitment to orthodox Trinitarianism has influenced the translation and interpretation of this statement on the part of some translators (especially in *Hebrews* 2). It is important to notice the tensions that are created between the biblical teaching on the Son of God and this assertion.

The biblical teaching is quite clearly that a human son of David will rule forever as the king over God’s creation. In other words, it is decidedly a human being who will rule over the eternal kingdom of God. Granted, this human king is God as well—the very embodiment of the authority, power, character, and personal identity of Yahweh. But he

is most certainly a human being; for it is to the most decidedly human David that God made this promise and prediction.

Now, as we saw earlier, both Transcendent Monotheism and orthodox Trinitarianism hold that Jesus is a man who is God. In that respect they do not differ. The difference between them is in the manner in which Jesus is God. The orthodox Trinitarian holds that the human Jesus is an incarnation of the second person of an eternally triune godhead whereby the second person of the Trinity exists within Jesus in the form of a divine essence. The Transcendent Monotheist holds that Jesus is a human being who was created by God to be an "image" of the invisible God. Both acknowledge that Jesus was a human being. Both acknowledge that Jesus was (and is) God. The difference lies in exactly how and in what sense Jesus is God.

The translation of *Hebrews 2:7a* as "You have made him for a little while lower than the *angeloi*" is a translation that is very friendly to orthodox Trinitarianism. It suggests one of the following (depending upon whether *angeloi* is understood to mean "angels" or "God"): (1) The Son existed formerly in a state where he was not lower than the angels, he was then made to be lower than the angels temporarily, and he will one day return to his former existence as above the angels. (2) The Son existed formerly in a state where he was not lower than God, he was then made to be lower than God temporarily, and he will one day return to his former existence as equal with God. Either of these readings is friendly toward orthodox Trinitarianism; but they both exist in tension with biblical teaching.

It is quite clearly the impulse of orthodox Trinitarianism (especially at the level of popular understanding) to think of the incarnation of the Son of God in Jesus to be a temporary condescension of the Son rather than a permanent and eternal state that he assumes. To translate the statement from *Psalms 8:5a* as "you made him for a little while lower than the *angeloi*" is quite compatible with this natural impulse of orthodox Trinitarianism. It clearly means to suggest that the Son's humble humanity is temporary rather than permanent. But as we saw above, this violates the clear biblical data. The unmistakable promise of God is that a human being (a son of David) will rule forever.

In the light of this problem, the orthodox Trinitarian—if he is to interpret *Psalms 8* in the light of ALL the biblical data—must resist this natural impulse of orthodox Trinitarianism to picture the incarnation as a temporary demotion of the Son. He must reject his preferred picture of Jesus. In other words, he must not read *brachu* as "for a little while lower." How then will he read *Psalms 8:5a*? How would the orthodox Trinitarian understand 8:5a if he must read it as "You have made him a little lower than the *angeloi*"?

Such a reading suggests one of the following to an orthodox Trinitarian (depending upon whether *angeloi* is understood to mean "angels" or "God"): (1) The Son existed formerly in a state where he was not lower than the angels, he was then made to take on a

form that was permanently ontologically inferior to the angels, and he will, in that human form, reign forever as the King of God's kingdom. (2) The Son existed formerly in a state where he was not lower than God, he was then made to take on a form that was permanently ontologically inferior to God, and he will, in that human form, reign forever as the King of God's kingdom.

While it can be argued that this is certainly compatible with the promise God made to David, it creates a problem for the orthodox Trinitarian interpretation of this assertion. If "you have made him a little lower than the *angeli*" describes the condescension of the eternal Son of God (the second person of the Trinity) to become human, then what does his exaltation consist of—for example, in *Psalms* 8:5b ff. On this interpretation of 8:5a, the pre-existent Son is incarnated as a human being for the rest of eternity. So, where, when, and in what sense was he (or will he be) exalted?

If the condescension was ontological, is it not reasonable to expect his exaltation to be similarly ontological? In other words, if the second person of the Trinity became ontologically "lower" when he incarnated as a human being, then is it not natural to understand his exaltation as his becoming ontologically exalted? There is a confusingly muddled incoherence within any interpretation that interprets Element (Y) as an ontological condescension while interpreting Element (Z) as being an elevation in status, without being an ontological elevation. But this is exactly what Structure-Option A does. It takes Element (X) followed by Element (Y_A) to be a description of the humble status of the Son that had resulted from the ontological condescension of the second person of the Trinity. But, then, it does one of two things with Element (Z):

(i) It interprets Element (Z) to describe a resumption of the same exalted ontological status that he had as the pre-existent divine person before the incarnation.

This preserves a coherence and balance between 8:3–5a and 8:5b ff., but it violates the teaching of the rest of the Bible—notably, the promise to David that his son (in the form of a human being) would rule the Kingdom of God forever.

(ii) It interprets Element (Z) to describe an elevation and exaltation in the incarnate Son's status and role.

This is utterly consistent with the teaching of the Bible, most notably with the Davidic Covenant; but it falls into the confusing incoherence I described above. It is a rather complicated muddle to read Element (Y_A) as an ontological condescension while one reads Element (Z) as a mere exaltation in status. The natural flow and balance required in the sentence is to have Element (Y) and Element (Z) answer to each other—either ontological condescension being resolved by ontological exaltation; or a diminution of status being resolved by an exaltation of status. But to read it as an ontological condescension being resolved by an exaltation of status doesn't really work. For how can an exaltation of status really and actually resolve an ontological demotion? In other

words, no matter how high and exalted as a king the incarnate Son might be destined to be, how does it bring real and true resolution to the fact that he has been permanently and eternally demoted to exist as human? No matter how important his kingly role, how does his kingly role compensate the pre-existent Son for his having been made ontologically inferior to what he had been originally? How does eternal Kingship compensate him for his being stripped of his divine existence as the second person of the triune godhead?

It does no good to object that, in the mystery of the incarnation, he never was stripped of his divine existence as the second person of the triune godhead. For, while that might be good creedal theology, it cannot be employed as a counter to the above objection; for the fact that he was stripped of his glory as the second person of the Trinity is the very thing that this interpretation posits in its reading of Element (Y). If the incarnation was in no sense a condescension or lessening of his ontological state (as creedal orthodoxy might want to maintain), then what is Element (Y_A) asserting (in accord with the interpretation of *Psalm* 8 that follows Structure-Option A)? As we saw above, Structure-Option A requires Element (Y_A) to be a condescension that exists in ironic contrast to the exaltation in Element (Z). Or, even more straightforwardly, what else can “you made him a little lower than the *angeli* mean,” if it does not describe a condescension, a lowering?

It is important to note: none of these problems—none of this confusion, none of this incoherence—exists under Structure-Option B and the interpretation that follows from it.

Conclusion: How Does The Trinitarian Argument Fare?

Finally, I have shown that the Trinitarian’s attempt to find evidence in *Hebrews* 2 that Paul shares his doctrines of the incarnation and Trinity fails. I will summarize my argument:

(1) The Trinitarian’s argument for his doctrine of the incarnation hinges on the assertion in *Hebrews* 2:7a, which is only a part of Paul’s quotation of *Psalm* 8:4–6. The particular assertion in 2:7a (*Psalm* 8:5a) makes no essential contribution to the actual argument of *Hebrews* 2:5–8. Hence, the Trinitarian is not really making an argument from *Hebrews* at all; he is making an argument based on an assertion in *Psalm* 8:5a. His argument hinges on whether he has rightly understood *Psalm* 8, in general, and *Psalm* 8:5a, in particular.

(2) Everything in *Psalm* 8 (and Paul’s use of it in *Hebrews* 2) suggests that it is rightly understood as a meditation on the Davidic Covenant as a promise that God has made to David and his descendents after him.

(3) Everything in *Psalm* 8 suggests that David—in his meditation on the blessing that God has given him—understands the Davidic Covenant to be a promise from God that he (David) and his completely human descendents after him have been appointed to a

position, and given a title, wherein the sovereign rule of God over creation has been located in him (David, or whatever son of David has inherited the position and title).

(4) Therefore, everything in *Psalms* 8 describes the exalted role that God has promised to a thoroughly and utterly human son of David. Nothing in the psalm suggests that this human son of David was anything other than a human son of David, ontologically speaking. In other words, nothing in *Psalms* 8 suggests (and it most certainly does not require) that the "Son of man" mentioned in 8:4b is, in actuality, more than an ordinary human—for example, an incarnation of the second person of the eternal triune godhead. Indeed, when one attempts to read into the psalm the assumption that the "Son of man" is something more than an ordinary human, it creates various interpretive difficulties— incoherence, internal contradiction, other than straightforward rendering of the wording, selective disregard of some assertions, etc.

(5) Therefore, there is nothing in *Psalms* 8 that can prove—let alone suggest—the orthodox Trinitarian doctrine of the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. And, therefore, there is nothing in the psalm that can prove—let alone suggest—the doctrine of the Trinity itself. In other words, the suggestion by some Trinitarians that the assertion from *Psalms* 8:5a quoted in *Hebrews* 2:7a proves that Paul believed in the orthodox Trinitarian doctrine of the Trinity is a completely invalid suggestion. ***Hebrews 2:7a fails as evidence for the Trinity!***

Finally, then, when we interpret *Psalms* 8 in the way that I have suggested is most likely correct, note how appropriate and effective it is in establishing the point that Paul is trying to make in *Hebrews*. Paul's whole point to his readers is that the ordinary humanity of Jesus does not disqualify him from being the promised messiah. *Psalms* 8 is David's meditation on the fact that—in the promise of the Davidic Covenant—God has chosen an ordinary human being to exalt to the role of *messiah*. One could not find a better and more direct validation of Paul's point than this psalm; for it states explicitly what Paul is seeking to convince his readers of in *Hebrews*.