INTERPRETATION IN HEBREWS CONTRASTED TO

THE ALLEGORICAL METHOD OF PHILO

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Historical backgrounds are important because they <u>illuminate</u> scripture. In addition, they often <u>confirm</u> the biblical record and occasionally may even help <u>prove</u> its trustworthiness in regard to things that can be tested. Consequently, we tend to view historical backgrounds favorably as a valuable resource. This presentation, however, stresses another observation. Like all sources of information, historical background, misused, can harm rather than help biblical studies. In the wrong hands, it can be invoked in ways that detract from hermeneutical and apologetic concerns.

Two related presuppositions often cause scholars and professional theologians to misconnect or equivocate biblical and extra-biblical phenomena: (a) frequently their antisupernatural bias prompts them to develop (b) an evolutionary, naturalistic explanation for Christian origins. If historical backgrounds can be woven into a developmental scheme, supernatural explanation becomes gratuitous; the truthfulness of the faith is compromised; and Christ's claim on human allegiance is nullified.

Our concern in this brief presentation is to make a distinction between the use of the Old Testament found in the Book of Hebrews and that found in the writings of Philo of Alexandria (30 B.C.-A.D. 45). Commentators often try to parallel the two. Drawing on the earlier work of an Alexandrian Jewish philosopher named Aristobulus (fl. 160 B.C.), Philo used allegory to find in Holy Writ the concepts of Greek thought, thereby uniting Greek philosophy and Jewish revelation. Having claimed that the Hebrew writer employs Philo's allegorizing practices, scholars proceed to integrate other items with this claim to make the case more plausible. (1) Apollos is proposed as the author of Hebrews because he was an eloquent man from Alexandria (Acts **19**:1), Philo's native city. (2) The earliest and strongest attestation to the apostolicity of Hebrews comes out of the catechetical school in that same city during the second and third centuries. (3) *"Those of/from Italy"* who send salutations (οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰτάλιας, *hoi apo tēs Italias*; **13**:24) were "away from" Italy—in Alexandria perhaps (?). (4) The Septuagint was the Bible of the Hebrew writer and presumably his audience as well. He consistently uses it throughout his "word of exhortation" (**13**:22) and even bases arguments on its distinctive wording (Psalm **40**:6-8 in Hebrews **10**:5-14) and contents (Deuteronomy **32**:43 in Hebrews **1**:6). The Septuagint significantly differs in these places from at least the standardized Hebrew text of the Masoretes as well as other forms of the Old Testament text that have come down to us. The Septuagint translation was made in Alexandria. Since the allegorical method is artificial, New Testament writers' use of it on Old Testament revelation would be artificial, their inspiration would become suspect, and the implied apologetic from prediction-fulfillment would be undercut. Trying to equate the hermeneutics of Hebrews and Philo represents a significant dysfunctional use of biblical backgrounds.

Historically the use of allegory became important in the early church by working its way into early Christian writings like *The Shepherd of Hermas* and *The Epistle of Barnabas* and into the theologizing of many Christian leaders including Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Lactantius, Hilary, Origen, Jerome, Augustine, and a host of others all the way

down into the Middle Ages. Indeed, a person wonders how Christianity fared as well as it did, given the apparent weakness of church leaders as judged from their lack of facility in exegesis. Even as the Stoics had used allegory to harmonize Homer with their own later views and Philo had used it to read Greek philosophy into Old Testament revelation, so also Christians tried to use allegory to solve the problem of covenant distinctions: they spiritualized the Old Covenant in terms of the New. Gnostic heretics used it to bend biblical teaching in the direction of their philosophical speculations. Allegorizing continued to be a plague in biblical interpretation even into the time of the Reformation. Today there appears to be a revival of allegory, particularly among some Pentecostals, who use it as a supposed basis for claiming to offer special insight, further revelation, or predictive prophecy, all of which are thereby put beyond hermeneutical investigation and correction because they do not depend on hermeneutical method to start with. A negative influence so long-lasting and all-pervasive as allegorizing has been must certainly be distinguished from the manner in which scripture itself demonstrates how to rightly divide the word of revealed truth.

We illustrate the contrast between Philo and Hebrews, first by making some general observations and then by offering a test case from the first chapter of the book. (1) The Hebrew writer did his work from the vantage point of fulfilled prediction. Consequently, he was in a position to make more precise correlations between the Messianic age and prophecies about it than if he had not witnessed the fulfillment of predictions he adduces. Such circumstances differ from reading unfulfilled prophecies and exegetically deriving such specific ideas from them or from taking historical narratives and allegorically assigning cryptic spiritual messages to them. The accomplished Messianic anticipations show that the ideas are true which Hebrews presents in connection with Genesis, Psalms, 2 Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos. The later historical fulfillments had greater exactness than the earlier predictive utterances had clarity, a pattern naturally characteristic of fulfillment in comparison to prediction. It only remains for us to work out the connection if it is not immediately obvious in given instances.

(2) The Hebrew writer makes his observations from the explicit contents of the Old Testament Psalms and prophets and from earlier historical events to which they allude. He deals with the text in a historico-grammatical sense rather than at some supposed allegorical, analogical, or spiritual level that could not be obtained by means of the Old Testament verbal communication itself.

(3) The Hebrew writer sometimes makes his observations by necessary inference from the express contents of Old Testament scripture—mixed, of course, with explicit statements and experienced fulfillment. Psalm **100**:4 plus Genesis **14**:18-20 is a prime example. Its prediction about a new **priesthood** implies change of priesthood, which implies a change of the law at least about priesthood qualifications, which further implies that the Levitical priesthood was deficient and the new one better. He reasons similarly from statements in Psalm **40**:6-8 about dissatisfaction with Mosaic **sacrifices**, concluding that they were ineffective, hence temporary, and in turn replaced by what they at best only foreshadowed as the permanent and final answer to the sin problem. By implication the **temple** in which temporary priests offered ineffective sacrifices could itself be only a passing feature of the divine economy. The same thing happens with the **covenant** itself as per Jeremiah **31**:31-34. A new covenant must mean a different covenant as well as a different kind of covenant. The first one must be annulled and replaced by the second because two covenants cannot govern the same constituency simultaneously. The second covenant differs in kind, better in quality, and effective for the forgiveness of sin (**31**:34); its personal sacrifice is effective for removing a person's self-

consciousness about his sinfulness (Psalm **40**:6-8), and the Melchizedekian priest is a better mediator between sinful people and a holy God (Psalm **110**:4).

(4) The Hebrew writer makes his observations also <u>from cues within the texts themselves</u> that certain comparisons are appropriate. The parallels are not made allegorically via the resourcefulness of the Hebrew writer or even his inspiration, but on the basis of the fact that the texts themselves <u>say</u> parallels exist. The wilderness wanderings correlate with Christian life and hope as based on Psalm **95**. Melchizedek and Messiah correlate as based on Psalm **110**:4 + Genesis **14**:18-20. Isaiah's children and the Messiah's brothers are comparable in being humans *vs.* angels, because Isaiah's children *"were for signs and wonders"* in the Emmanuel chapters of Isaiah (Isaiah **8**:18). Coupled with express content, necessary inference, and observed fulfillment, these cues within the texts yield legitimate commentary in the hands of the Hebrew writer. In fact, every major point he makes is based on an Old Testament text.

Now to deal with one case for illustrative purposes. The first instance where Hebrews does something surprising with the Old Testament occurs almost immediately in chapter 1. In verse 5b the author cites 2 Samuel **7**:14 as a reference to the Son of God despite the fact that the original setting recounts God's promise to David that his seed would build the temple that he himself had wanted to build—an aspiration fulfilled by David's son Solomon. The first three chapters of Hebrews emphasize the superiority of the "<u>Son</u> of God" (**1**:2, <u>4</u>, 5, 8; **3**:3-<u>6</u>; **4**:14) over angels as <u>ministers</u> (1-2; **1**:7, 14) and over Moses as <u>servant</u> (**3**; 3:5). The introduction to Hebrews centers on the word *Son* (**1**:1-4). Immediately after this opening sentence, the writer couples Psalm **2**:7 (*"You are my Son"*) with 2 Samuel **7**:14 (*"I will be his Father and he will be my son"*) and other texts (Deuteronomy **32**:43 Septuagint [LXX]; Psalm **95**:6-7; **102**:25-27; **110**:1) to show that the Messianic Son is superior to angels (Deuteronomy **32**:43 Septuagint [LXX]; Psalm **104**:4). He does not explain how these references relate respectively to the Son or to angels, nor does he show how they contribute to his argument that the Son is superior to the angels. He either leaves that for the reader to figure out or he assumes it as common ground with his original audience. It remains for us to work out the connections that verify the relevance of his citations and the exegetical validity of his argument.

Even though an initial reading of that original context in 2 Samuel might lead a person to suppose it was referring to Solomon (cp. 1 Chronicles **17**:13; **22**:10), upon closer examination anyone can see that there is more to it than that. 2 Samuel **7**:13-14a must refer to Solomon, of course, because Solomon himself understood it that way (1 Kings **6**:11-13; **8**:17-21). The context cannot refer just to Messiah because God promises to discipline "him" if he sins (**7**:14b). But it must refer to more than Solomon since it is an (1) <u>eternal</u> seed that contrasts with that of Saul (2 Samuel **7**:15-16). God will discipline "him" rather than take away his loving kindness from "him" as he had done earlier with Saul. Consequently, in 2 Samuel **7** "seed" envisions the Davidic dynasty; it does not refer just to Solomon—or Messiah, for that matter.

One background observation is important: by the nature of the case there can be only one universal eternal kingdom. A universal eternal kingdom is prophesied in Daniel **2**:35 (universal) + 44 (eternal) and in Psalm **89**:27 + 4, 36. Therefore the <u>universal eternal</u> kingdom of Psalm **2** (the first quotation in Hebrews 1) and the eternal kingdom of Psalm **110** (the last quotation in Hebrews 1) must refer to the same thing as the <u>eternal</u> kingdom of 2 Samuel **7**:16 (as well as Psalm **89**; Isaiah **9**:6-7, *etc.*). Furthermore, the Daniel **2** prediction describes the universal eternal kingdom as made "without hands" (Daniel **2**:34, 45), which means "from/by God" (cp. **8**:25). This unique Old Testament expression in Daniel together with its context is probably in the Hebrew writer's mind, because he uses this relatively rare terminology

elsewhere in his own book (**9**:11, 24; cp. Mark **14**:58; Acts **7**:48; **17**:24; 2 Corinthians **5**:1; Ephesians **2**:11; Colossians **2**:11). If Psalms and Daniel **2** are Messianic, then 2 Samuel **7** must have Messianic connections as well.

(2) Seed is a collective term for the whole Davidic dynasty as a series, rather than an individual reference to Solomon. All the third person singulars in 2 Samuel **7** are grammatical consequents of the antecedent word seed in **7**:12. *He*, *his*, and *him* are grammatically third-person singulars referring back to the collective noun seed (זֶרַע, *zera'*, mas), rather than to "he," as in Solomon. Substituting the word *seed* for each of the third-person pronouns after **7**:12 clarifies the broader force of the original Hebrew, a nuance lost in translation by the requirements of English pronoun idiom. In confirmation of these observations, Psalm **89**:29-30ff., which parallels 2 Samuel **7**, interprets "seed" as descendants. The successive descendants of David in turn fill the slot called "seed," Messiah being the son *par excellence*. The "seed" in the person of Solomon did build the first temple (**7**:13); the Seed in the person of Messiah built the last temple "without hands" (John **2**:13-22; cp. Matthew **26**:61 = Mark **14**:58; Matthew **27**:40 = Mark **15**:29; Acts **6**:13-14; note also **24**:12; **25**:8?). The writer's approach so far is exegetical; the meaning derives from the Old Testament text by normal principles of interpretation. The approach takes 2 Samuel **7**:14 as a class prediction rather than as an allegory, double-reference prophecy, type-antitype, accommodation, or the like. 2 Samuel **7** does include Messiah in its purview.

It remains to be shown how that text relates to an argument for the superiority of the Son over angels. If "son" in 2 Samuel refers to the Davidic dynasty, comprised virtually entirely of mere mortals, the reader of Hebrews might still question the relevance of this evidence to the claim that the title *son* correlates with Messiah's superiority over "angels." Solomon would also be superior to angels in that case. Some interpreters have in fact entertained the idea that eventually human beings will rise to a status higher than that of angels: *"Don't you know that we will judge angels?"* Paul says (1 Corinthians **6**:3). Angels are *"ministering spirits sent to serve the heirs of salvation"* (Hebrews **1**:14). Mankind was *"made a little-*[while? βραχύ, *brachy*] *lower than the angels"* (Psalm **8**:5 + Hebrews **2**:7). Nevertheless, Peter comments that angels are more powerful than humans (2 Peter **2**:11); so the proposal about their future inferiority to mankind is moot if not doubtful.

Another approach seems preferable even though it is more complex and subtle. The primary basis for arguing the superiority of the Son over angels really lies in Psalm **2**:7, the immediately preceding citation in Hebrews **1**. 2 Samuel **7**:14, where the theocratic king line is called *son of God*, is then added in confirmation, reducing the need for the second citation to serve as primary evidence. The crux of the issue, however, is that the theocratic king could be called "son of God" by virtue of the descendant Son, not the other way around. Jesus was not son of God because of a lineage that led down from David, the son of God; rather, David could be called "son of God" because his lineage led up to Messiah, the Son of God. David and his lineage got their title metonymically from Messiah, not *vice versa*. According to the flesh, Messiah did descend from David, but by natural rank he was David's Lord (Psalm **110**:4 + Matthew **22**:41-45).

The descriptive title *son* lies most basically in Messiah, whose designation is applied by extension to his dynastic predecessors. For this reason as well as others, Old Testament scriptures could speak of the monarch of Israel as the *son of God* without ascribing deity to him or in any way saying something inappropriate (note John **5**:18; **10**:30-33; **19**:7). The actual rank of Messiah over angels is indicated by (a) the actions of angels toward him: worship

(Deuteronomy **32**:34/Hebrews **1**:6); by (b) direct statements about his eternal rank above others (Hebrews **1**:7-9 < Psalm **95**:6-7; Hebrews **1**:13 < Psalm **110**:1); and by (c) the different activities assigned to each: the Son's creating (Hebrews **1**:10-12 < Psalm **102**: 25-27) *vs.* the angels' ministering (Hebrews **1**:7 < Psalm **94**:4).

Our conviction is that exegetical legitimacy can be demonstrated for the several cases in Hebrews where the validity of the writer's method of interpretation may escape us at first, not because it is artificial, but because it is profound.[2]

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[1]A classic review of this material appears in Frederic W. Farrar's Bampton Lectures for 1885 published under the title *History of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, [1886] 1961), pp. 111-242 particularly.

[2]Other cases include (a) Deuteronomy **32**:34 Septuagint (LXX) (cp. Psalm **97**:78) in connection with angels worshiping Messiah (Hebrews **1**:6); (b) Psalm **102**:25-27 as a reference to the Son (Hebrews **1**:10-12); (c) Isaiah **8**:17-18 in connection with the "flesh-and-bloodness" of Messiah's fellows (Hebrews **2**:13); (d) Psalm **110**:4 + Genesis **14**:18-20 as a basis for making parallels between Melchizedek and Messiah; (e) the structure of the tabernacle compared with the atoning work of Messiah (Exodus **25**:40 in Hebrews **8**:5 + **9**:1-28ff.); (f) Psalm **40**:6-8 as a basis for the Messiah as superior sacrifice.