

## Why Hebrews Was Written (Part Eight): Hebrews 1

by John W. Ritenbaugh

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The epistle of Hebrews begins in this manner:

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they. (Hebrews 1:1-4)

This opening paragraph broaches the core of the entire epistle. Because the first chapter is jam-packed with technicalities that will need focused attention in due time, we will take a mere overview of it in this article. At this point, we need to move the story forward, and an overview will help us do so. The remarkable amount of material here is reminiscent of what is written in John 21:25: “And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”

Names and titles identify people, objects, and even political, religious, or cultural movements within societies. Historical names and titles tend to identify those personalities who lived at the forefront of significant human occurrences of the past. They appear in our histories because people desired to know and understand their activities for their own edification.

God’s early dealings with Abram are an example. In Genesis 11:26, God begins the history of their relationship. Before God speaks directly with Abram, we find that his father’s name was Terah. God also provides us with Abram’s birthplace, Ur of the Chaldees, and his lineage beginning with Shem, son of Noah.

As time passes, God also informs the reader that Abram married Sarai, who was then barren. He leaves the length of time within this first contact unspecified, but God eventually speaks to Abram in Ur and commands him to depart. However, by the time Abram and Sarai leave Ur for Canaan, the elderly Terah seems to have decided to move with them, and he leads the group from Ur to Haran, a city far to the north. In Haran, Terah seemingly abruptly dies at age 205, leaving Abram, Sarai, Lot, and the unnumbered remainder of Abram’s party to continue to Canaan without him.

While Abram and Sarai were in Ur, God never appeared to them. He did no more than speak to them. Not until Genesis 12:7 does the Bible first mention God appearing to him, and by then, they had arrived in Canaan.

Also, at some time after their arrival in Canaan, the term “the Hebrew” is added to Abram’s identity (Genesis 14:13). Perhaps this was done to distinguish him from other Abrams whom God did not want confused with the biblical Abram. Maybe He did it to help future readers make a positive identification. We have always accepted that the term “Hebrew” identified a person as being a descendant of Eber. However, scholars claim that this is not the only usage of the term’s root, saying

that “Hebrew” was used anciently to distinguish a person who had “crossed over.” This usage implies an individual with no long-term community roots, a wanderer. A Hebrew, then, was a traveler into an area who had crossed a border, a mountain range, or a river, or even one who changed loyalties into, say, a new religious belief.

The beginning of the epistle to the Hebrews contains a compact form of a similar procedure of identification. God inspired the human author to immediately focus on the central Personality of the entire letter—Jesus Christ—identifying Him by titles and by His associations with a magnificent series of mindboggling accomplishments and bestowed honors. By the time the brief, four-verse opening paragraph is concluded, God has already set a strong foundation for convincing those skeptical about Jesus’ qualifications that, yes, He is qualified to be High Priest under the New Covenant to assist the elect children whom God is calling into His Family.

### **A Boxing Match?**

During the first century, a number of very vocal Jews were hesitant about accepting Jesus Christ as High Priest under the New Covenant. The conference recorded in Acts 15, held to resolve their doubts, gives evidence of this group’s existence. However, in terms of a boxing metaphor, God, through the human author, led with a knockout punch in Hebrews’ first chapter. Reading the powerful and true statements about Christ from God’s own Word, laid out with devastating logic, a convert could find nothing to contradict.

Is there any other person besides Jesus, be he angel or human, whom God names as His only begotten Son? Is there anyone else whom God names as His Son who will inherit all things? Through whom the entire creation came into being? Who has given life itself to all creatures including humans?

God does not stop there. He continues His direct attack. Did God appoint any other person besides the One who became Jesus of Nazareth as “the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person”? Does anyone else also uphold all things in creation by the very word of His power?

Did anyone but His only begotten Son purge us of our sins by sacrificing His perfectly lived life in an extremely painful death? Did anyone else rise from the dead and ascend to heaven to be seated at the Father’s right hand, filling the second-highest position of power and authority in the entire universe?

All these questions challenge the skeptics to justify their reasons for rejecting Him as High Priest. Is there any room for even an angel, a creation of Jesus and thus on a lower plane than He, to be considered? And that is only the beginning of the questions that surely arose.

### **Just a Start**

What God establishes at the very beginning of this magnificent epistle did not directly answer a few of the Jews’ central doubts. What really perturbed the doubters was that Jesus of Nazareth appeared to be just another human, and He obviously died as all humans die. These facts, based on sight, not faith, did not meet their expectations.

The Jews’ expectations about the appearance of the Messiah were built—and twisted from time to time—over a 1,400-year, on-and-off knowledge of God. Frankly, in terms of time, it was far more often “off” than “on.” God did not praise even one king of the ten northern Israelite tribes for leading

a period of righteous rule over them. The tribes in the southern kingdom, Judah, occasionally had a David, Hezekiah, or Josiah rise to the point of God giving such praise. However, this kingdom eventually fell, and God judged that its conduct had been worse than that of the Kingdom of Israel!

Jesus was born among these people of Judah, and to them He preached the gospel of the Kingdom of God. The Jews had had an especially long period of free access to the prophets God sent through the centuries, so they had had access to the Scriptures as they came into existence through the prophets. Hebrews 1:1 declares that God ensured that this witness occurred: “God . . . at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets.” The Israelites were never totally without access to God’s guidance. Their problem was they did not believe deeply enough what He said to allow them to use it to bring Him glory. Like many modern Americans, they mostly did their own thing.

They were not totally wrong on everything, but they were in error enough that they could not come to correct conclusions to give them an accurate picture. For example, some Jews understood enough of the Promised Seed prophecy (Genesis 3:14-15) to know that it would be fulfilled by a great leader among the Israelites. They also knew He would be “the Anointed” and the “Messiah” and lead Israel to material greatness among the nations.

That scenario does not even begin to scratch the fullness of the Promised Seed’s accomplishments, let alone that all nations will benefit both spiritually and materially from His greatness. They had only the slightest inkling that His appearance and subsequent accomplishments would bring salvation to the Gentile world too.

So, they had difficulty with the concept that Jesus of Nazareth was both God and man at the same time—even with the idea that He could be divine while in the flesh. They had trouble connecting their understanding of the Promised Messiah with Jesus’ public ministry of both words and healings of mind and body, with His sacrificial death, and with the spiritual gifts He gives to heal the elect’s minds and spirit, even though a spiritual mind can see that the prophecy in Genesis 3 contains hints of them. To some Jews, influenced by Judaism, these elements were a leap beyond their abilities to grasp.

### **The Middle Wall Begins to Dissolve**

When Christ’s three-and-a-half years of ministry concluded and the church began, virtually everyone called and converted was a Jew. It was not that Jesus did not preach to Gentiles. He preached to the Gentile Samaritans as early as John 4, and His message attracted them, but none were converted during His ministry. Gentiles grasped some level of the truth, but not until God sent Peter to the home of Cornelius, a Roman soldier, and he and his family were converted and baptized into the Family of God, did the middle wall of division separating the Israelites—most specifically the Jews—and the Gentiles began to dissolve, little by little, within the church, the Israel of God.

The biblical record does not suggest in any way that the Gentiles called into God’s church had any more difficulty being converted to Jesus Christ than Jews. The Jerusalem Conference resolved much of the “Gentile problem” challenging the Jews, and the church began moving to correct any remaining issues tied to this dispute.

Three things assisted the Jews through this issue:

1. The apostles' and others' consistent, truthful teaching from the Old Testament in Sabbath services and Bible studies.
2. The called Gentiles quick understanding of the truth, at least partly a result of their not having to overcome false, Jewish teachings.
3. The gradual writing of gospels, letters, and other material by the apostles, especially those that became part of what is now the New Testament.

### God Presents a Challenge

God challenges the reader in Hebrews 1:5: "For to which of the angels did He ever say: 'You are My Son, today I have begotten You'? And again: 'I will be to Him a Father, and He shall be to Me a Son.'?"

Note again that the central issue in the epistle is that Jesus Christ is the lone Subject of the author's theme from which he never deviates throughout his argument. This issue of angels may have surfaced in some people's mind because the Old Testament calls them "sons of God" in Job 1:6 and 2:1. In addition, the nation of Israel is called God's son in Exodus 4:22, and Solomon receives that title in II Samuel 7:14.

However, God gives none of these entities the exalted status of His begotten Son, as the entire epistle refers to Jesus Christ. One will search in vain through the Scriptures for God addressing any angel in this privileged manner. It appears not even once.

The quotation in Hebrews 1:5 derives from Psalm 2:6-9:

Yet I have set My King on My holy hill of Zion. I will declare the decree: The Lord has said to Me, "You are My Son, today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession."

God may have said this here because He desired to establish the relationship between Them as a father-and-son one, like the human relationship, to be revealed later when Jesus was born in the flesh.

Hebrews 1:6 carries this challenge another step. To affirm Christ's greatness, the Father charges angels with this directive: "Let all the angels of God worship Him." This order clearly reinforces that the Son is also God. If any of the angels had chosen to worship any other personage but the Creator God, it would have amounted to idolatry. To Jews, this command confirms that the Son is high above any angel that they may have chosen to be the high priest within the New Covenant. Jesus is clearly superior in every way to all angels.

Another somewhat unique Greek term appears in this context: *protokos*. It is not unique to the Bible nor to humanity in general, but it is exceptional in that it is used in absolute terms in relation to Christ. *Protokos* means "firstborn." Scripture uses it in connection to Jesus being the firstborn of several siblings (e.g., Matthew 1:25); in reference to the church as God's firstborn (Hebrews 12:23); in reference to Jesus' place as the source of, and supreme over, all creation (Colossians 1:15); and in regard to His preeminent place in the process of redemption (Colossians 1:18; Revelation 1:5). It is a rare term in secular Greek, mostly used in its literal sense, but it can be a title that grants a citizen social significance within a community.

Here, though, it seems to signify that the Son (note the title) has the same status with God the Father that a firstborn human son has with his father—He is the Heir. In Jesus' case, His status, partially due to this firstborn factor, reaches even to His exultation and enthronement as Sovereign over the universe.

### **Spirits and Flames of Fire**

The author writes in Hebrews 1:7, “And of the angels He says: Who makes His angels spirits and His ministers a flame of fire.” This statement puzzles us because it is a figurative expression capable of a couple of interpretations. It is a near-quotation of Psalm 104:4, “Who makes His angels spirits, His ministers a flame of fire,” which does nothing to help our understanding. It may help to recall that angels can rightly be understood as messengers. The verse can thus be translated into a more understandable statement, that God “makes winds His messengers, flames of fire His servants.” The *New International Version* and other modern Bibles render it similarly.

Most expositors resolve the issue in this manner. They believe that, since the chapter's purpose is to expound and glorify Jesus as immeasurably superior to angels, the “messengers” and “servants” should both be identified as angels, not different kinds of created things. Therefore, they are both angelic creations though pictured as little more than elemental spirits that do their Creator's bidding. The Son, however, remains exceedingly higher and greater than they, for He is the One who created them and sends them on their errands.

This solution to verse 7 fits hand-in-glove with verse 8, which presents Jesus as possessing a throne and a kingdom: “But to the Son, He says: Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your kingdom.” Compared to the Son's throne, kingdom, and status as Creator, the angels are doing relatively minor work, being sent by the Son to do various chores. Jesus continues to be exalted, and the angels, though honored for faithfulness, are shown in subservient positions.

Verse 9 carries the exultant praise yet further: “You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness more than Your companions.” Not only is righteousness the norm where He reigns, but He loves it, while at the same time hating sin. In terms of character, Christ is undivided. The Father then addresses His Son directly as God, stating that, because He has done this, He receives a superior anointing, marking Him as worthy of higher praise than others.

### **Jesus Is Truly Eternal**

The author writes in Hebrews 1:10-12, quoting from Psalm 102:25-27:

And: “You, Lord, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You remain; and they will all grow old like a garment; like a cloak You will fold them up, and they will be changed. But You are the same, and Your years will not fail.”

In Psalm 102, these words apply simply to the eternity of God, but here they are applied directly to Christ without qualification. By God's Spirit in us, He has also made us understand that Jesus was

the God of the Old Testament. As far as we know, not many Jews grasped this reality, but the passage presupposes this fact. The writer of Hebrews uses it as another opportunity to exalt Jesus Christ above angels. Unlike them, He lives eternally.

The author's mention of clothing helps as it addresses the subject of created things in contrast to the eternal God who created all physical things. The quotation's mention of clothing that will be rolled up and disposed of illustrates an eternal truth. All of the physical creation is slowly but constantly wearing down. It is absolutely, relentlessly perishing. From this, we extract a fundamental truth of life: Jesus Christ, the Creator God, began the universe, and He will end it. A new heaven and a new earth will be established (Revelation 21:1), but through it all, He remains the same (Hebrews 13:8).

The author continues in Hebrews 1:13: "But to which of the angels has He ever said, Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool?" This verse derives from Psalm 110:1, a psalm considered Messianic even by Jewish scholars. We can think of this quotation as a reverberation of verse 4, in that we need to consider it in the same way as what is written there of the eternal God, Jesus Christ: ". . . having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they."

The interesting phrase here is "having become." But how can the eternal, constant God—eternally superior—change or "become so much better"? Of course, the Son was always eternally superior to the angels. That, however, is not what is in play here. The writer refers to what the Son did in becoming human and putting away the sins of men. Because He had paid the penalty for sins, He could sit down on God's throne in the place of the highest honor, and from this standpoint, He is deemed greater than any angel. No angel has ever come close to achieving that magnificent triumph.

Regarding angels, Hebrews 1:14 asks rhetorically, "Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?" This conclusion to the chapter makes a definitive statement about angels as compared to Jesus Christ. They have a place of dignity and honor in the Kingdom of God, but they are servants. The term "all" applies to every one of the angels without distinction. Despite their uncommon excellence in many areas, they are set aside to serve, especially the saved among mankind.

Earlier, we briefly touched on what some Jewish scholars understood about the Promised Seed prophecy in Genesis 3:14-15. The Promised Seed arrived on earth by being born as Jesus of Nazareth. He has become our Savior, Teacher, Elder Brother, and now our King. Isaiah 11:1-5, 10-12 says this of Him:

There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots. The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord. His delight is in the fear of the Lord, and He shall not judge by the sight of His eyes, nor decide by the hearing of His ears; but with righteousness He shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; He shall strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with breath of His lips He shall slay the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of His loins, and faithfulness the belt of His waist. . . .

And in that day there shall be a Root of Jesse, who shall stand as a banner to the people; for the Gentiles shall seek Him, and His resting place shall be glorious.

It shall come to pass in that day that the Lord shall set His hand again the second time to recover the remnant of His people who are left, from Assyria and Egypt, from Pathros and Cush, from Elam and Shiner, from Hamath and the islands of the sea. He will set up a banner for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.

The kingship of the Promised Seed, the Messiah, will not be limited to those converted but will rule over all nations on earth.

### **A Technicality Regarding Jesus**

Before concluding these comments on Hebrews 1, we need to consider a technicality about Jesus found in John 1. This first chapter of John introduces Jesus Christ to mankind, but especially to those who are being called. Jesus, God's only begotten Son, was dispatched directly from heaven to be His personal witness before humanity to reveal both the Father and the Son and Their purpose. The Father sent His Son, His Heir, to be a living example of Their love toward all people. His elect need to know Him and cultivate a close relationship with Him as He is the most important element in our lives.

The apostle John writes in John 1:1-5:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of Men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

He immediately introduces Jesus as the literal Creator of the universe and therefore mankind's (and all other life-forms') Creator and Life-giver. All by itself, this stunning revelation must have amazed the apostles, considering they had walked with Him for three-and-a-half years.

We, too, need to reflect deeply on its profound meaning to us. The apostles enjoyed a package of elements we lack. They could literally hear His voice as He taught, see Him with their own eyes, and reach out their hands and touch Him. He directly taught the apostles, and they saw His behaviors as He carried out His responsibilities. In the beginning, they did not know His divinity as an absolute certainty but learned as they continued to follow Him. By the time of His crucifixion, that knowledge had burned into their minds as a conviction.

The apostle John focused on Jesus' oneness with the Father more frequently than the other apostles. His gospel thus provides a fuller and more exact description of Jesus' identity. In John 10:30, Jesus says, "I and My Father are one." John 8:56-58 adds:

Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad. Then the Jews said to Him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM."

During His ministry, Jesus plainly stated who He was several times, but for most, it was too much to accept. Especially in John 8, there is more to what Jesus said than what English-speakers may think.

Judging by the Jews' reactions, some apparently grasped the meaning of His statement to a much fuller extent than most Americans do, despite its predominantly Christian culture. They picked up stones to throw at Him, thinking Him blasphemous (John 8:59)!

Notice John 1:14, 18:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.

In both verses, the Greek term translated as “only begotten” is *monogenes*. Only John uses this adjective to describe Jesus, and he uses it five times. Its most common usage in Greek is as a term of endearment, though that is not all it adds to Jesus' standing before humanity. The way John uses it also specifically indicates a *human* family relationship.

It also carries the sense of “only,” intensifying the sense of endearment with the idea of singleness or uniqueness. Thus, the sense of “only” becomes an important addition. There are no others like Him, and Scripture adds that there never has been. He is unique even in respect to all other usages of “son of God” in the Bible. He stands alone. Our Savior has no competition.

At this point, we need to grasp a simple, Greek grammatical rule that most English-speakers are not normally exposed to. In Greek, *ho* is the equivalent of the English definite article “the.” However, the apostle John does not place *ho* before “only begotten” in verse 14, nor before “Father” in verse 18 (though most English translations supply it anyway). Its absence is legitimate in Greek usage, as it intensifies the descriptive power of the term “only begotten”—and thus what John is attempting to explain. It amplifies its power.

By writing it in this manner, John specifically signifies that Jesus is the single, sole, exclusive, only representative and—this is important—character (image) of the Being, the Father, who sent Him. This lays additional, greater glory upon the characteristics revealed about Jesus in context.

The apostle's object was to demonstrate and emphasize as best he could through mere words the height of the level of glory he and his fellow apostles witnessed in their three-and-a-half-year relationship with Jesus. With words, He severs Jesus of Nazareth, son of Joseph and Mary, from all other set-apart sons of God in the Scriptures, as well as from any kind of earthly, human, generational relationship.

Essentially, he is stating that Jesus' relationship with the Father was unoriginated. All human relationships are originated and continue through the pairing of a father and a mother. Jesus' relationship with the Father was not so. There is nothing we humans could conceive of as a sexual act by the Father that produced Jesus.

This reality should have a major impact on how we understand Their unity. Recall that Jesus says in John 10:30, “I and My Father are one.” Therefore, everything the Father is in character Jesus is also, even though Jesus is a separate personality from the Father. Just as the Father has always existed, so has the Son. The apostle John used this grammatical rule five times, so we would get the point. Jesus was and is every bit as much God as the Father.



Thus, the term “begotten” as used regarding Jesus does not apply in the same way it does for humans. Nevertheless, John used it to establish the concept of a family relationship so we could understand our relationship to God, as Father and child, more clearly.

### **The Son Is Unoriginated**

The apostle writes in John 1:1-3:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.

Most readers quickly grasp who the Word is. Since the Word, the pre-incarnate Jesus, was at the beginning with the One identified as God, whom we know as the Father, the passage implies that there was never a time that Jesus and the Father existed apart from each other. Therefore, Jesus, called the Word and later the Son, is unoriginated.

It may be easiest for a human to understand this concept by realizing that Father and Son are each the same age. Neither is “older” than the other. They are both eternal Beings without beginning or origin or any kind of birth.

John adds another sign of their relationship in verse 3. They both existed before anything else was created, granted life, and given purpose for which to live. This also suggests that the Son is unoriginated: There was *nothing* before Him to be His source. Verse 3 is especially a glorification of the Word’s powers, which should alert us that the New Covenant in which we are involved is exceedingly more important to God’s purpose than the one He proposed through Moses.

We can summarize John’s first paragraph in this way: “In the beginning” (verse 1) links with Genesis 1:1 and refers to the beginning of creation, not the beginning of God-life. The verse confirms that the Son is a distinct personality from the Father. Citing Their companionship, verse 2 unequivocally assigns full and equal Deity to the Son as the other God-Being possessed.

Verse 3 emphasizes the Word as Creator. It is helpful to grasp that “all things were made through Him” means *everything*: all heavenly bodies, animals, vegetables, minerals, laws, forces, and energies that operate within the creation to support life. Not the slightest thing was made without His involvement. It also confirms that these two Beings work together in perfect harmony, and neither is inferior as God to the other. In this creation and its functions, the Word had the lead. The passage gives no hint of competition between Them.

Verses 4-5 are an expansion on Christ’s creative efforts. John is ensuring that we understand it was Christ’s responsibility to be the source, fountain, origin, and cause of life. From Him all life flows. When we add Hebrews 1:3—“upholding all things by the word of His power”—to this, we can confidently say that He keeps all alive and in order to this day.

What a powerful Savior the Father has blessed us with!