

CHRISTOLOGY IN HEBREWS 1:5–14: THE THREE STAGES OF CHRIST'S EXISTENCE

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Abstract: *George B. Caird argues for the exegetical method that the quotation of Psalm 8 in Heb 2:6–8 should control the argument in Hebrews 1. The implication is that one cannot find the literal preexistence of Christ in 1:1–14. Likewise, L. D. Hurst interprets Hebrews 1 in light of the humanity of Christ in Hebrews 2. Hurst's conclusion about the Son in Hebrews 1 is not about a uniquely privileged, divine being who became a man, but a human figure who attains to an exalted status. In this article I set forth the exegetical method that 1:5–14 and the rest of the book of Hebrews is to be understood in light of 1:1–4, instead of reading chapter 1 with the background of humanity of Jesus in chapter 2. This essay will make evident that the author of Hebrews presents the three stages of Christ's existence in 1:1–4 (i.e. preexistence, incarnation, exaltation), and elaborates them further in 1:5–14. I will also argue that the description of Christ's preexistence in 1:5–14 is not metaphorical but literal.*

Key Words: *Christology; preexistence of Christ; incarnation; exaltation; wisdom; firstborn; Son; angels; world*

George Caird, in his article “The Exegetical Method of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” argues that the quotation of Psalm 8 in Heb 2:6–8 should control the argument in the preceding chapter (i.e. Hebrews 1).¹ The application of his exegetical method is reflected in some of his writings on the interpretation of Hebrews 1. For example, he argues that the message of what God has spoken in his Son clearly echoes the portrait of the personified Wisdom in Wis 7:26.² Caird suggests that the preexistent Wisdom is closely related to the idea of God's eternal purpose in Hebrews 1.³ He further goes on to assert that “the author of Hebrews has no place in his thinking for preexistence as an ontological concept. His essentially human Jesus attains to perfection, to preeminence, and even to eternity.”⁴ Likewise, L. D. Hurst, following the exegetical method of Caird, interprets Hebrews 1 in light of chapter 2. He argues that since the theme of Psalm 8 in Hebrews 2 is God's plan for the destiny of mankind, and the superior status of Christ to the angels in Hebrews 2 is rooted in his fulfillment of a psalm concerning mankind, the entire chapter of He-

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¹ George B. Caird, “Exegetical Method of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *CJT* 5 (1959): 49.

² G. B. Caird, *NT Theology* (Oxford/New York: Clarendon/Oxford University Press, 1994), 334.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ G. B. Caird, “Son by Appointment,” in *The NT Age: Essays in Honor of Bo Reicke* (ed. William C. Weinrich; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), 1:81.

brews 1 is related to the theme of mankind's destiny.⁵ For this reason, Hurst's conclusion of the Son in Heb 1:1–14 is not about a uniquely privileged, divine being who became a man but a human figure who attains to an exalted status.⁶ According to the exegetical method of Caird and Hurst, there is no room for the idea of Jesus having been the literal preexistent Son before his incarnation in their interpretation of Hebrews 1.

However, a careful study of Hebrews 1 reveals that the author of Hebrews considered Jesus as the preexistent Son, not in a metaphorical but in a literal sense, before the stage of incarnation. In this article I intend to argue for the literal preexistence of Christ in Heb 1:5–14. To accomplish this purpose, I will also discuss other aspects of Christ's existence. The Son's three stages of existence, which are first introduced in the exordium (1:1–4), are elaborated more fully in 1:5–14, and further developed in other parts of Hebrews.⁷ Here in 1:5–14 the author intertwines another cycle of Christ's existence in the following order: exaltation (v. 5), incarnation (v. 6), preexistence (vv. 7–12), and exaltation (vv. 13–14).⁸

I. EXALTATION (1:5)

In verse 5, the author elaborates the aspects of Christ's exaltation by employing two OT quotations: Ps 2:7 and 2 Sam 7:14 (cf. 1 Chr 17:14). This verse introduces the question, "For to which of the angels did he ever say, 'you are my Son; today I have begotten you?'" This OT quotation is taken from Ps 2:7, in which the psalmist depicts the rebellion of the nations against God and his anointed. In the LXX, the plural form of the Hebrew word בְּנֵי ("sons") is at times translated as "angels" (ἄγγελοι), thus rendering the Hebrew phrase for "the sons of God" as "the angels of God" (e.g. Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7). But the singular form of Hebrew word בֶּן ("a son") is never rendered as "an angel" (ἄγγελος) in the LXX. Neither the phrase for "an angel of God" nor "an angel of the Lord" in the Hebrew Bible is ever translated as "a son of God" in the LXX. The author of Hebrews also reflects this understanding in 1:5 with the use of the singular form τίνι ("to which"). The rhetorical question "to which of the angels (τίνι ... τῶν ἀγγέλων) did he ever say ...?" expects a negative answer; certainly, God never spoke to any *one* of the angels in the OT as he spoke to his Son in Ps 2:7.⁹ Moreover, this negative answer is reinforced by the second quotation (2 Sam 7:14 [cf. 1 Chr 17:14]), which is also connected to the same verb εἶπεν ("he said") by the adverb πάλιν ("again"). Both

⁵ L. D. Hurst, "The Christology of Hebrews 1 and 2," in *The Glory of Christ in the NT: Studies in Christology in Memory of George Bradford Caird* (ed. L. D. Hurst and N. T. Wright; Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 155–57.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁷ For the relationship of Heb 1:1–4 to 1:5–14, and to the rest of Hebrews, see Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 90.

⁸ According to Victor (Sung Yul) Rhee, these three stages of Christ's existence are introduced in 1:1–4, and repeated in an inverted order in 1:5–14 ("The Role of Chiasm for Understanding Christology in Hebrews 1:1–14," *JBL* 131 [2012]: 341–62).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 360. For a similar line of argument see also Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 111.

of the quotations answer the question, “to which of the angels did he ever say ...?” Again, the implication is that God has not at any time addressed any *one* of the angels in sonship terms as he did his Son in Ps 2:7.¹⁰

An important issue to consider in verse 5 is the meaning of the expression “Today, I have begotten (γενένηκα) you.” In what sense is the Son begotten? Another related question is, “When was the Son begotten?”¹¹ An examination of the word γεννάω (“beget”) in the LXX and NT shows that the Father’s begetting the Son in verse 5 is a metaphorical expression for the exaltation of Christ. In the LXX, the term γεννάω is used to refer primarily to giving birth to someone, but its non-literal usages are not lacking. The original context of Ps 2:7 shows that the expression “I have begotten you” is used metaphorically to indicate the renewal of the relationship between God and the Davidic king on the day of coronation (i.e. the king becoming God’s son).¹² In Prov 8:25, wisdom is said to have been begotten by God. In Isa 1:2, the word γεννάω refers to God’s giving birth to the nation of Israel (i.e. the people of Israel). In the NT, likewise, the word is at times used in a metaphorical sense. For example, in the Gospel of John, the verb is used in a spiritual sense to refer to the spiritual birth (1:13; 3:3, 5, 6, 7, 8). In 1 Cor 4:15, Paul speaks of giving birth to the Corinthian believers through the gospel. It is evident that in Heb 1:5 the author also uses the term γεννάω in a metaphorical way and applies it to Christ’s exaltation. The Father’s begetting of the Son does not refer to the begetting of the divine Son in eternity past but signifies the completion and acceptance of Christ’s redemption for humankind.¹³ The idea of the exaltation of Christ in verse 5 is further supported by the author’s use of the word “today.” Since the conjunction “for” (γάρ) in this verse is an indication of a further explanation of the Son’s exaltation mentioned in verses 3d–4, it is logical to consider that the expression has a reference to the exaltation of Christ. In summary, the expression of “God’s giving birth to the Son today” in 1:5 is the author’s way of highlighting the enthronement of Christ at the exaltation without minimizing the aspect of his being the Son in his preexistent stage.

II. INCARNATION (1:6)

After expounding on Christ’s exaltation (1:5), the author moves back to the incarnate stage of the Son (1:6). This verse introduces another OT quotation, the source of which is not clearly known. It is possible that the author is quoting Ps 97:7 (96:7 LXX).¹⁴ Or he may have in mind Deut 32:43 (LXX), which he quotes by

¹⁰ Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 111.

¹¹ Ellingworth lists six different views: (1) eternal generation of the Son; (2) birth of Jesus; (3) incarnation of Jesus; (4) baptism of Jesus; (5) resurrection; (6) exaltation (*Epistle to the Hebrews*, 113).

¹² Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50* (WBC 19; Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 67.

¹³ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 55.

¹⁴ The MT reads, “Worship him, all you gods” (יִשְׁתַּחֲוֹתוּ לְיְהוָה וְלֹאֵלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים); the LXX reads, “Let all his angels worship him” (προσκυνήσατε αὐτῷ πάντες οἱ ἄγγελοι αὐτοῦ).

replacing “sons of God” with “angels of God.”¹⁵ Heb 1:6 is one of the most debated passages in the NT. The discussion revolves around the time of God’s bringing the firstborn into the world. Did the event take place at the incarnation of Christ, or in his exaltation, or will it occur in his parousia? I consider that the time of God’s bringing the firstborn was at the incarnation for the following reasons.

First, the adverb “again” (πάλιν) in verse 6 should be considered a formula of introduction for the OT quotations. Braun asserts that πάλιν in this verse does not introduce the new quotation, but functions as a modifier of the verb which follows. He considers that πάλιν is related to the verb εισαγάγη (“he brings”) because the adverb looks back to the first coming of the Son with the phrase “into the world” (εἰς τὴν οἰκουμένην). Thus he translates verse 6 in a temporal sense as “when he introduces again his firstborn into the world.” The inference is that it has a reference to the parousia (i.e. the second coming of Christ [9:26, 28]). He also maintains that the use of πάλιν in 4:7 is similar to that of 1:6 (i.e. it modifies ὀρίζει [“he fixes”]).¹⁶

However, a word study of πάλιν in Hebrews suggests that the “parousia view” is less likely to be what the author has in mind in verse 6. The adverb πάλιν occurs ten times in Hebrews (1:5, 6; 2:13 [twice]), 4:5, 7; 5:12; 6:1, 6; 10:30). A careful examination of the context in which this word occurs in Hebrews indicates that πάλιν (“again”) has a temporal idea in all the occurrences because of its lexical meaning (i.e. πάλιν modifies the implied εἶπεν from 1:5a, εισαγάγη or λέγει [1:6], the implied λέγων from 2:12, the implied εἶρηκεν from 4:4, ὀρίζει or λέγων [4:7], ἔχετε [5:12], καταβαλλόμενοι [6:1], ἀνακαινίζειν [6:6], the implied εἰπόντα from 10:30a). But the study also shows that, within the frame of the temporal sense, it has an additional function of serving as a technical term for the introduction of the OT quotations (1:5; 2:13 [2x]; 4:5; 10:30). When πάλιν is used as a formula for quotations, it always modifies the variations of the verb λέγω. In addition, the controlling verb of introducing the quotation in 1:5–14 is λέγω (“say”; v. 5: εἶπεν, v. 7: λέγει, v. 8: λέγει [implied], v. 13: εἶρηκεν). These observations make it more plausible to consider that πάλιν in 1:6 is related not to εισαγάγη but to λέγει. The same inference can be made of 4:7; πάλιν may modify not ὀρίζει but λέγων. Thus it may be concluded that πάλιν in 1:6 and 4:7 also functions as a formula for introducing the OT quotations. This finding makes the parousia view less plausible and leads to the consideration of other two options for the interpretation of verse 6 (i.e. incarnation and exaltation views).

Second, the concept of the “firstborn” (πρωτότοκος) points to the incarnation of Christ. Ellingworth argues that God’s bringing the firstborn in verse 6 was at the time of exaltation. According to him, just as, in Col 1:18 and Rev 1:5, Christ’s

¹⁵ The LXX reads, προσκυνήσάτωσαν αὐτῷ πάντες υἱοὶ θεοῦ. This part of the verse is absent in the MT. For the discussion of this OT quotation see Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 105–9; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 118–19; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (rev. ed.; NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 56–57; Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 36; New York: Doubleday, 2001), 193.

¹⁶ Herbert Braun, *An die Hebräer* (HNT 14; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1984), 36.

supremacy was expressed by the phrase “firstborn from the dead,” the author of Hebrews also confirms with this term his conviction about Christ’s superiority in his exaltation. Thus, his interpretation of the “firstborn” in verse 6 is that God has brought Christ from the dead into the glory of the heavenly assembly at the time of his exaltation.¹⁷

However, a scrutiny of the context in which *πρωτότοκος* occurs in the NT shows that the author of Hebrews uses the term in 1:6 in a different way than others do. It is to be noted that outside Hebrews the word is always followed by a modifier when it is used as a title for Christ (e.g. “the firstborn among many brethren” [Rom 8:29]; “the firstborn of all creation” [Col 1:15]; “the firstborn from the dead” [Col 3:18]; “the firstborn of the dead” [Rev 1:5]). These qualifiers suggest that *πρωτότοκος* has a reference to the exaltation of Christ. However, the use of term in Heb 1:6 is without a modifier.¹⁸ The plural form of *πρωτότοκος* is also used in 12:23 to refer to believers, but there the author uses it with a modifier (i.e. “the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven”). Hence, the use of the word without a qualifier in 1:6 suggests that the author may not have the resurrection or the exaltation of Christ in mind. It appears that the term corresponds to the earlier use of the “Son” without a modifier (1:2), which speaks of the incarnation of Christ.¹⁹ For this reason the absolute use of *πρωτότοκος* in 1:6 implies that the author may have had in mind the preexistent Son, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, who has made known to us God’s full revelation in his incarnation.²⁰ The title of the Son as the “firstborn” may refer to the eternal divine sonship of Christ.²¹ If this reasoning is correct, then the time of God’s bringing the Son is more likely to have been in the earthly life of Jesus.

Third, an examination of the phrase “into the world” (*εἰς τὴν οἰκουμένην*) further solidifies the incarnation view. The proponents of the exaltation view tend to interpret *οἰκουμένην* in 1:6 as the heavenly world.²² For example, Lane observes that the immediate context of verse 6 speaks of the progression of the activities of the Son: the sacrificial death of the Son, followed by his exaltation (vv. 3b–4).²³ For this reason he maintains that God’s bringing the Son “into the world” in verse 6 refers to Christ’s entrance into the heavenly world. Likewise, Caneday also argues that understanding the introductory formula of 1:6 as referring to the incarnation of the preexistent Son would bring about anticlimax and reversal of the sequence begun in 1:5, which speaks of the Son’s exaltation. He believes that anticlimax would be

¹⁷ Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 118. For exaltation view see also Koester, *Hebrews*, 192; William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* (WBC 47A; Dallas: Word, 1991), 26–27.

¹⁸ For a similar observation, see Weiss, *Der Brief an die Hebräer*, 162–63.

¹⁹ Wilhelm Michaelis, “*πρωτότοκος*,” TDNT 6:880.

²⁰ Barnabas Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews* (NT Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1991), 4.

²¹ Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 57.

²² See Koester, *Hebrews*, 192; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 118; Kenneth L. Schenck, “A Celebration of the Enthroned Son: The Catena of Hebrews 1,” *JBL* 120 (2001): 469–85.

²³ Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 27.

avoided if the referent of *οἰκουμένη* is understood as referring to the Son's enthronement at the time of exaltation.²⁴ Apparently, both Lane and Caneday understand *οἰκουμένη* as a heavenly place in a metaphorical sense.

However, a careful analysis of 1:1–4 reveals that the author sets forth, not just the idea of exaltation only, but weaves together the three stages of Christ's existence (i.e. preexistence, incarnation, exaltation).²⁵ In light of the author's thought pattern in the exordium, it is not surprising to see that he moves from exaltation in verse 5 to incarnation in verse 6. This method of interweaving Christ's existence continues to the rest of 1:5–14, as I will demonstrate in the ensuing sections. In addition, a comprehensive word study of *οἰκουμένη* in both the LXX and the NT suggests that the use of the term in 1:6 is less likely to be the heavenly world in a metaphorical sense. In the LXX, the word has three basic meanings: (1) the inhabited places on earth (e.g. Exod 16:35; Prov 8:31; Isa 10:14; 10:23; 13:5; 23:17); (2) the world created by God (e.g. 2 Sam 22:16; Ps 17:16; 18:5; 23:1; Prov 8:26; Isa 14:17; Jer 10:12; Dan 3:45); and (3) people in the world (Ps 9:9; 97:9). The study confirms that in the LXX the term does not have reference to the inhabited place in heaven in a metaphorical sense.²⁶ In the NT, *οἰκουμένη* occurs fifteen times (Matt 24:14; Luke 2:1; 4:5; 21:26; Acts 11:28; 17:6; 17:31; 19:27; 24:5; Rom 10:18; Rev 3:10; 12:9; 16:14). The examination of the term in the context reveals that it has reference to the inhabited world on earth.²⁷

Caneday argues that the reference to the *οἰκουμένη* in verse 6 is to be interpreted in light of the use of the same term in 2:5 (*τὴν οἰκουμένην τὴν μέλλουσαν* ["the world which is coming"]). He considers that the use of the feminine relative clause *περὶ ἧς λαλοῦμεν* ("concerning which we are speaking") in 2:5 goes all the way back to *οἰκουμένη* in 1:6, as well as modifying the same word in the immediate context. This enables him to understand *οἰκουμένη* in both passages as the heavenly world into which God led the Son at the time of his exaltation.²⁸

In response to Caneday, an exhaustive study of the way the author of Hebrews uses relative pronouns shows that the antecedents are almost always in same verse, or in one or two verses previous (e.g. *ὅς* in 1:3 goes back to *ἐν υἱῷ* in 1:2; *ὅς* in 5:7 to *ὁ Χριστός* in 5:5; *πρὸς ὃν* in 11:8 to *Ἀβραάμ* in 11:7).²⁹ The observation of this pattern suggests that, with the phrase *περὶ ἧς λαλοῦμεν* in 2:5, the author is more likely to have the immediate antecedent in mind (*τὴν οἰκουμένην τὴν*

²⁴ Ardel B. Caneday, "The Eschatological World Already Subjected to the Son: the *οἰκουμένη* of Hebrews 1:6 and the Son's Enthronement," in *A Cloud of Witnesses: The Theology of Hebrews in its Ancient Contexts* (ed. Richard Bauckham et al.; LNTS 387; London: T&T Clark, 2008), 33.

²⁵ This weaving pattern is due to the chiasmic design of the author of Hebrews in Heb 1:1–14 (Rhee, "Role of Chiasm for Understanding Christology in Hebrews 1:1–14," 342).

²⁶ The word *οἰκουμένη* occurs 54 times in the LXX. This conclusion is the result of having examined the word in the context.

²⁷ It appears that Acts 17:31 is the only exception. In this verse *οἰκουμένη* has reference to the people in the world.

²⁸ Caneday, "Eschatological World Already Subjected to the Son," 34–35.

²⁹ This finding is the result of examining all the forms of the relative pronouns in Hebrews (75 occurrences in 20 different forms according to a morphological search using BibleWorks 9).

μέλλουσαν [“the world which is coming”]), not τὴν οἰκουμένην in 1:6. In addition, the context in which οἰκουμένη is used suggests that it probably does not have the same meaning in both passages (1:6; 2:5). One may observe that οἰκουμένη in 1:6 has an absolute sense (i.e. without a modifier), but in 2:5 it is used with a qualifier μέλλουσαν (i.e. the world which is coming). The above word study has already revealed that οἰκουμένη has a primary meaning of “the inhabited world on earth” in both the LXX and the NT periods. Henceforth, it is more likely that in 1:6 the author had in mind not the heavenly world, but the earthly one with the absence of a modifier. However, in 2:5 the participle μέλλουσαν is added to indicate that the author has a different οἰκουμένη in view (i.e. the world to come with the second advent of Christ on earth). In summary, the expressions in 1:6, “again” (πάλιν), “firstborn” (πρωτότοκον), and “into the world” (εἰς τὴν οἰκουμένην), point out that the time of God’s bringing the firstborn into the world was most likely to have been, not at the exaltation, but in the earthly life of Christ (i.e. incarnation).

III. PREEXISTENCE (1:7–12)

After having described the incarnation of Christ in terms of God’s bringing the Son into the world (1:6), the author moves further back to the preexistent stage of Christ (1:7–12). The aspects of Christ’s preexistence can be observed from the author’s use of two OT quotations.

1. *Ps 45:6–7 (44:7–8 LXX)*. To begin with, the author employs *Ps 45:6–7 (44:7–8 LXX)* in verses 8–9 to demonstrate the superiority of the Son over the angels in his attributes. An important question to ask is: what stage of Christ’s existence does the author have in view in these verses? Opinions are divided among scholars regarding this matter. Schenck, for example, interprets 1:8–9 in terms of the enthronement of Christ at the exaltation. He argues that the purpose of the quotation is not to show Christ’s role as the creator, but to make a contrast between the lasting quality of the Son’s office and the transitory role of the angels.³⁰ Although Schenck acknowledges that these verses undoubtedly express the preexistence of Christ, he cautions that “one should not draw particular conclusions from them concerning the exact nature of that existence.”³¹ His implication is that Christ’s preexistence in these verses is not literal, but metaphorical (i.e. Christ is an embodiment of wisdom in the mind of God). According to Schenck, there is no real preexistent stage of the Son. He asserts that Christ became the Son (or, was enthroned as the Son) only at the exaltation,³² and will continue as God’s wisdom which founded the heavens and earth.³³ In this context, he argues that the idea of

³⁰ Kenneth Schenck, “Keeping His Appointment: Creation and Enthronement in Hebrews,” *JSNT* 66 (1997): 113.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 91.

³³ *Ibid.*, 113. For those who do not hold the literal preexistence of Christ see also James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A NT Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 55–56; Lindars, *Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*, 29–35; Hurst, “Christology of Hebrews 1 and 2,” 160.

“anointing” and “the exaltation of a king” in Ps 45:6–7 is the language of enthronement, which the author applies to Christ.³⁴ For Schenck, there are only two aspects of Christ’s real existence: incarnation and exaltation.

There are also scholars who interpret 1:8–9 as referring to the exaltation of Christ without minimizing his literal preexistence. For example, Lane understands that the expression in 1:2 (“through whom he made the world”) refers to Christ’s creative activity as the preexistent Son; “since Jesus was the one through whom God created the world, he must be the pre-existent Son of God.”³⁵ But when it comes to the interpretation of 1:8–9, he sees these verses as pointing to the exaltation. He argues that the author’s quotation of Ps 45:6–7 (44:7–8 LXX) is an implicit reminder of 2 Samuel 7, in which the establishment of an eternal throne is prophesied. From this inference, he concludes that verses 8–9 have the same idea of enthronement as in verse 3c in the *exordium* (i.e. “he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high”).³⁶ However, I am of the opinion that the main focus of verses 8–9 pertains to the literal preexistence of Christ. The reason why these verses seem to refer to the exaltation of Christ is due to the eternal nature of the Son, and the author’s way of juxtaposing the three aspects of the Son’s existence in 1:1–4 and 5–14. The literal preexistent aspect of Christ may be demonstrated as follows.

First, the preexistent nature of Christ is expressed by the way God (i.e. the Father) addresses the Son.³⁷ Moffatt translates $\delta\ \theta\rho\acute{o}\nu\omicron\varsigma\ \sigma\upsilon\ \delta\ \theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ in verse 8 as “God is Thy throne” by taking $\delta\ \theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ as the subject.³⁸ Grammatically speaking, it is possible to take $\delta\ \theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ either as the subject (“God is your throne”) or the predicate nominative (“Your throne is God”). But the context of verses 7–9 suggests that Moffatt’s rendering is less likely to be what the author had in mind. The $\mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu\ \dots\ \delta\acute{\epsilon}$ construction in verse 7 and verse 8 shows a contrast between the angels and the Son. On the one hand, the angels are mutable in nature (i.e. they can be changed into winds and a flame of fire [v. 7]). But, on the other hand, the Son is immutable (i.e. he has an eternal quality [vv. 8–9]). Translating verse 8 as “your throne is God” (or “God is your throne”) loses the adversative force of $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$, which may lead to the understanding that both the angels and the Son are under the reign of God.³⁹ Moreover, the author’s way of quoting Ps 44:7 (LXX) suggests that “your throne” ($\delta\ \theta\rho\acute{o}\nu\omicron\varsigma\ \sigma\upsilon$) is to be taken as the subject. In quoting Ps 44:7 (LXX) the author adds $\kappa\alpha\iota$ after $\alpha\iota\acute{\omega}\nu\omicron\varsigma$ and the article before the first $\acute{\rho}\acute{\alpha}\beta\delta\omicron\varsigma$ and before $\epsilon\upsilon\theta\acute{\upsilon}\tau\eta\tau\omicron\varsigma$, but omits the article in the second $\acute{\rho}\acute{\alpha}\beta\delta\omicron\varsigma$ (v. 8b). There is no change in quoting Ps 44:8 (LXX) in verse 9. The difference can be illustrated as follows:

³⁴ Schenck, “Celebration of the Enthroned Son,” 474.

³⁵ Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 12.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 29. See also Koester, *Hebrews*, 104–5. While recognizing that the emphasis of 1:8–9 is the exaltation, he also affirms the preexistence of Christ.

³⁷ Note: the subject “God the Father” is implied in the context.

³⁸ James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1924), 11. Although he translates $\delta\ \theta\rho\acute{o}\nu\omicron\varsigma\ \sigma\upsilon\ \delta\ \theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ in this way, he also sees the validity of understanding $\delta\ \theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ as nominative for vocative (i.e. “Thy throne, O God”; p. 12). See also B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Macmillan, 1889), 25.

³⁹ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 59.

Ps 44:7 (LXX): *ράβδος εὐθύτητος ἡ ράβδος τῆς βασιλείας σου.*

Heb 1:8b: *καὶ ἡ ράβδος τῆς εὐθύτητος ράβδος τῆς βασιλείας σου.*

The transposition of the article has the effect of inverting the subject and the predicate nominative. While Ps 44:7 (LXX) is rendered, “The scepter of your kingdom is the scepter of uprightness,” Hebrews 1:8b reads, “The scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom.” The purpose of the change appears to be to create a parallelism between *ὁ θρόνος* (v. 8a) and *ἡ ράβδος*, thus indicating that verse 8b belongs to verse 8a, not to verse 9.⁴⁰ According to this parallelism, since the *ἡ ράβδος τῆς εὐθύτητος* (“the scepter of uprightness”) in verse 8b functions as the subject, it would make more sense to take *ὁ θρόνος* in verse 8a as the subject, rendering it as “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.” This type of usage of the nominative in place of vocative is also evident in addressing the Son as *ὁ θεός* by God (the Father) in verse 9b (“God, your God has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your companions”).⁴¹ The significance of these verses is that Christ is regarded as the preexistent Son by the author of Hebrews.

Second, the expression “forever and ever” (*εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα τοῦ αἰῶνος*) in verse 8 is a further support for the preexistence of Christ. This expression occurs only once here in the NT. In the LXX the exact phrase is at times used to refer to the eternal nature of God (Ps 9:37 [10:16 NRSV]; 110:3 [111:3 NRSV]) or truth (1 Esdr 4:38). Apparently, the author has the same idea (i.e. eternity of Christ) in mind with the quotation of Ps 45:6 (44:7 LXX) in verse 8. It is true that the phrase does not exclude the exaltation of Christ, but the emphasis falls more on the preexistent stage of Christ. Bauckham rightly points out that the attribute of God’s eternity is most often used to make a distinction between God and all creation.⁴² Apparently, the author applies this criterion to Jesus in this verse to show that he is God. As the preexistent divine Son, Christ’s rule is from all eternity, unlike the transitory angels.⁴³

Thirdly, the phrase “the one who loves righteousness and hates lawlessness” (v. 9a) has to do with the eternal attributes of Christ as the preexistent Son. Ellingworth considers that this expression may have a reference to Christ’s conduct during his earthly life because of the author’s use of the aorists “you loved” (*ἠγάπησας*) and “you hated” (*ἐμίσησας*).⁴⁴ In response to this assertion, one needs to observe the way the author uses different tenses interchangeably in 1:5–14 (*εἶπεν* [aorist] in v. 5; *λέγει* [present] in vv. 6–7, implied in v. 8; *εἶρηκεν* [perfect] in v. 13). The inter-

⁴⁰ Murray J. Harris, “The Translation and Significance of *ὁ θεός* in Hebrews 1:8–9,” *TynBul* 36 (1985): 135.

⁴¹ On the contrary, Westcott take the *ὁ θεός* as a vocative. See Westcott, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 27.

⁴² Richard Bauckham, “Monotheism and Christology in Hebrews 1,” in *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism* (ed. Loren T. Stuckenbruck and Wendy North; JSNTSup 263; London: T&T Clark, 2004), 168.

⁴³ Attridge, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 59. See also John P. Meier, “Symmetry and Theology in the OT Citations of Heb 1:5–14,” *Bib* 66 (1985): 515.

⁴⁴ Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 124. See also Westcott, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 26–27; Attridge, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 59; Hughes, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 65.

changeable use of the tenses in 1:5–14 suggests that it is not necessary to confine the time of Christ’s act of loving righteousness and hating lawlessness to the time of his incarnation. Rather, it would be more natural to interpret verse 9a as Christ’s character as the eternal ruler because it is a continuation of the thought in verse 8. If we understand that verse 8 speaks of the Son’s eternal throne, then it would be logical to consider that the Son’s character of “loving justice and hating lawlessness” is related to the idea of “the eternity of the throne of the Son.” The expression in verse 9a implies the preexistence of Christ.

2. *Ps 102:25–27 (101:26–28 LXX)*. Next, the author introduces another quotation from *Ps 102:25–27 (101:26–28 LXX)* in 1:10–12 to elaborate further the eternal quality of the Son in his preexistent stage. This is evident from the conjunction *καί* at the beginning of verse 10, which suggests that what follows in verses 10–12 is a continuation of the Son’s eternal aspect mentioned in verses 8–9. Hurst, in arguing against the literal preexistence view, considers the possibility that Wisdom of Solomon 7–9 could be the missing key that can explain the inclusion of *Ps 102:25–27 (101:26–28 LXX)* in *Heb 1:10–12*. For example, he contends that the expressions “you may reign forever” (*εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα βασιλεύσητε*) in *Wis 6:21* and “the king asking for the wisdom, which is the vehicle of creation” in *Wis 9:1–4* are not far removed from the more elaborate propositions of *Heb 1:10–12*. For this reason he considers that God’s address in this catena is to a human (royal) being who is possessed by the divine, creative wisdom. From this observation he concludes that the author’s main interest in 1:10–12 is not a preexistent divine being who becomes a man, but a human figure (king) who attains to an exalted status.⁴⁵ Thus Hurst understands that the author of *Hebrews* had no regard for the preexistence of Christ in these verses.

However, the idea of creation in verse 10 clearly indicates that it pertains to the eternity of Christ, which also includes the preexistent stage of Christ. The comparison between *Heb 1:10* and *Ps 101:26 (LXX)* shows that the author of *Hebrews* intentionally places the pronoun *σύ* (“you”) before *κατ’ ἀρχάς* (“from the beginning”), which may be illustrated as follows:

Ps 101:26 (LXX): κατ’ ἀρχάς σύ κύριε τὴν γῆν ἐθεμελίωσας ...

Heb 1:10: καί, σύ κατ’ ἀρχάς, κύριε, τὴν γῆν ἐθεμελίωσας ...

The purpose seems to be to connect this quotation to the previous one by placing it closer to *σου* (“your”) in verse 9.⁴⁶ The implication is clear: he wants to continue with the discussion of the preexistence of the Son in the ensuing quotation in verses 10–12. This enables one to see the connection between “Lord” (*κύριε*) in verse 10 and “God” (*ὁ θεός*) in verse 9. Apparently, the author must have understood both terms as synonymous with, or complementary to, each other.⁴⁷ The statement “You, Lord, in the beginning, laid the foundation of the earth, and

⁴⁵ Hurst, “Christology of *Hebrews* 1 and 2,” 160–63.

⁴⁶ Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 30–31.

⁴⁷ Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 126.

the heavens are the works of your hands (v. 10)” is a reminiscence of God’s act of creation. It goes back to Gen 1:1 (ἐν ἀρχῇ) and Prov 8:22–23 (ἀρχὴν; ἐν ἀρχῇ), and refers to the primordial time before the creation of the heavens and the earth.⁴⁸ Here in this verse Christ is portrayed as the Creator in his preexistent state.

Moreover, the aspect of Christ’s eternity is further developed by the contrast of his permanent nature with the mutability of the creation (vv. 11–12). In these verses the author employs different tenses in describing the creation (ἔθεμελίωσας [“you laid the foundation”; v. 10]; εἰσιν [“they are”; v. 10]; ἀπολοῦνται [“they will perish”; v. 11]; παλαιωθήσονται [“they will become old”; v. 11]; ἔλιξεις [“you will roll up”; v. 12]; ἀλλαγήσονται [“they will be changed”; v. 12]; εἶ [“you are”; v. 12]). The interchangeable use of different tenses suggests that the entire history of the creation is in view.⁴⁹ The point of the comparison between the Son and the creation is to emphasize the eternity and immutability of the Son. As the Creator of the universe, the Son shared the Father’s eternity in his preexistent stage.⁵⁰ In summary, an analysis of 1:7–12 shows that, unlike Hurst’s assertion that Christ is merely the embodiment of the creative wisdom of God, the entire passage speaks of the unchangeable nature of the Son in a literal sense, which includes his preexistent stage.

IV. EXALTATION (1:13–14)

Finally, the author completes the second cycle of Christ’s existence by returning to the theme of the exaltation of Christ (vv. 13–14), which he began in verse 5. It may be recalled from the discussion of exaltation in verse 5 that the quotations of Ps 2:7 and 1 Sam 7:14 were introduced with the question “For to which of the angels did he ever say?” Likewise, the author quotes Ps 110:1 (109:1 LXX) in verses 13–14 with a similar question to conclude the argument for the superiority of the Son to the angels: “But to which of the angels has he ever said, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet?’” This rhetorical question expects a negative answer; “Surely, God has never said to the angels to sit at his right hand, as he did to his Son.” The obvious implication is that God has appointed his exalted Son at his right hand.⁵¹ In addition, the author also quotes Ps 110:4 (“You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek”) in 5:6; 7:15–17, 21 and alludes to it in various parts of the epistle (5:10; 6:20; 7:3, 8, 11, 24–25, 28) to show that this exalted Son is also the high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

The idea of the Son’s exaltation is further highlighted in verse 14 by the comparison of the Son’s role with that of the angels. In response to the question in verse 13, the author gives the answer in the form of another rhetorical question in verse 14 (“Are they not all ministering spirits sent out for service on account of

⁴⁸ Bauckham, “Monotheism and Christology in Hebrews 1,” 181.

⁴⁹ Meier, “Symmetry and Theology in the OT Citations of Heb 1:5–14,” 518.

⁵⁰ Ellingsworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 129.

⁵¹ Ps 110:1 is also alluded to in various parts of Hebrews (1:3; 8:1; 10:12–13; 12:2).

those who will inherit salvation?”). The word “not” (οὐχί) expects a positive answer (i.e. “Yes, indeed, they are the ministering spirits for those who will inherit salvation”). The expression “ministering spirits” (λειτουργικά πνεύματα) in verse 14 is another way of describing the function of the angels as “winds” (πνεύματα) and “flame of fire” (πυρὸς φλόγα) in verse 7.

Schenck understands that the angels mentioned in verse 14 are the ministering spirits sent out for God’s people in the old covenant. He asserts, “Christ’s accomplishment of salvation brings to an end this defining role for the angels in relation to God’s people.”⁵² According to Schenck, the angels’ role of being the ministering spirits in the old covenant is terminated with the coming of Christ, the inaugurator of the new covenant. However, a careful examination of the immediate context suggests that the author has in mind the angels’ role in the new covenant period. It has already been demonstrated that verse 13 refers to the exaltation of the Son, which suggests that the time frame of the angels’ service in verse 14 is in the new covenant period. Moreover, the present tense εἰσὶν in verse 14 (“Are they not all ministering spirits?”) is an indication that the phrase “those who will inherit salvation” does not refer to OT saints but believers in the new covenant. Furthermore, the use of μέλλω in verse 14 suggests that the author’s use of “salvation” refers to the eschatological salvation that believers will inherit with the second coming of Christ.⁵³ The idea of future salvation is expressed elsewhere in Hebrews as “the world which will come” (τὴν οἰκουμένην τὴν μέλλουσαν [2:5]), “age to come” (μέλλοντος αἰῶνος [6:5]), and “the city which will come” (πόλιν ... τὴν μέλλουσαν [13:14]). The author’s implication in verse 14 is that the angels have the role of being ministering spirits for believers in the new covenant period until those believers inherit the final salvation. In summary, the main focus of verses 13–14 is to demonstrate the superiority of Christ to the angels in his role as the exalted Son. Whereas the function of the angels is to serve the believers who will inherit salvation, Christ’s role as the enthroned Son is to rule over all things (v. 14).

V. CONCLUSION

In Heb 1:1–14, the author has intricately woven together the three stages of Christ’s existence to emphasize the superiority of the Son over the angels as the spokesperson of God’s final revelation for humanity. In the *exordium* (1:1–4), these ideas were arranged with the order of exaltation (1:2b), preexistence (1:2c–3b), incarnation (1:3c), and exaltation (1:3d–4). In 1:5–14, the same thoughts are repeated in a slightly different manner. The author intentionally switches the order of preexistence and incarnation in this passage. Thus the arrangement is as follows: exaltation (v. 5), incarnation (v. 6), preexistence (vv. 7–12), and exaltation (vv. 13–14). This literary device of interweaving the three stages of Christ’s existence is important for the author because it is the basis for developing the teaching on the high priesthood of Christ in the book of Hebrews. For this reason he introduces

⁵² Schenck, “Celebration of the Enthroned Son,” 480.

⁵³ Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 133.

these theological concepts in 1:1–4, reiterates them in 1:5–14, and elaborates them further in different parts of Hebrews.

Hurst calls for the exegetical method of reading Hebrews 1 in light of the humanity of Jesus in chapter 2 by asking the question, “Has the author been allowed to speak for himself?”⁵⁴ He asserts that this method of interpretation will lead to the author’s intended understanding of the human Jesus as the bearer of the divine wisdom without any reference to the real preexistence of Christ. In this essay I have attempted to make a careful exegesis of Heb 1:5–14 by allowing the author to speak for himself. Contrary to the assertion of Hurst and Caird, the present investigation clearly shows that the author of Hebrews had the literal (or real) preexistence of Christ in mind in Heb 1:5–14. The idea of Christ’s literal preexistence is important to him because it is the basis for other aspects of Christ’s existence (i.e. incarnation and exaltation). Therefore, my appeal to the readers of Hebrews is to understand Heb 1:5–14 and the rest of the book in light of the *exordium* in Heb 1:1–4, instead of reading chapter 1 with the background of chapter 2, as Caird and Hurst have suggested. This proposed method of exegesis will result in a more accurate understanding of Christology in Hebrews. For the author of Hebrews, Christ’s existence is always in three stages: preexistence, incarnation, and exaltation.

⁵⁴ Hurst, “Christology of Hebrews 1 and 2,” 155.