

Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews

Chapter 1: The Son of God superior to Angels

(also available on-line at ichthys.com)

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I. Introduction and Background

a. Status Quo in Jerusalem

Having spent a good deal of time on this issue in the introduction, it will suffice here to recall the situation that obtained in the Jerusalem church when Paul penned this letter.

At that time (i.e., of Stephen's martyrdom) a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

Acts 8:1b (cf. Acts 8:3; 9:1-2; 22:24; 1Cor.15:9; Gal.1:13; 1:23; Heb.10:34 Greek)

These events took place sometime late in the year of our Lord's crucifixion and resurrection, 33 A.D.¹ Between that time and the writing of Hebrews the better part of two decades later, the Jerusalem church seems to have been restored in numbers, no doubt from the return of former residents after the persecution mentioned above died down and also on account of the conversion of some new members as would be natural in any fellowship which loves the Lord, just from the growth of families if nothing else.

The apostles and the believers (lit., "brethren") throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.

Acts 11:1 NIV

The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

Acts 15:12 NIV

¹ The epiphany of Jesus Christ to Paul on the road to Damascus happened soon after Stephen's martyrdom (Acts 8:1ff.). Paul then spent three years laser-focused on the Word of God (Gal 1:18), after which he went up to Jerusalem but ended up staying there but a short time, being sent back to Tarsus thereafter (Acts 9:26-30; Gal.1:17). Between this time, ca. 36 A.D., and the Jerusalem council, ca. 47 A.D. (*n.b.*, the "fourteen years" of Gal.2:1 marks the time passed from his conversion), Paul and Barnabas engaged in the so-called "first missionary journey" to Asia minor. Between the council in 47 A.D. and Paul's arrest in 52/53 A.D., are to be placed Paul's other journeys which included a year and a half stay in Corinth (Acts 18:11) and a two year stay in Ephesus (Acts 19:10).

Then the apostles and elders, with *the whole church*, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, men who were leaders among the believers.

Acts 15:22 NIV

(17) When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers and sisters received us warmly. (18) The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. (19) Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. (20) When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: "You see, brother, how *many thousands* of Jews have *believed*, and all of them are zealous for the law."

Acts 21:17-20 NIV

The first passage above relates to a time very soon after the persecution (no more than a year or so later), and we see that there are believers throughout Judea who are still in communion with if not presently and locally part of the Jerusalem church. The second two passages above relate to the "Jerusalem council", as it is sometimes called, the occasion upon which the apostles, elders and Jewish church at Jerusalem wrote to the gentile believers at Antioch to assure them that they did not need to be circumcised or "keep the Law" in order to be saved (asking them only to refrain from pagan practices which were especially offensive to Jewish believers: Acts 15:20; 15:29). This event occurred in ca. 47 A.D., and we can see therefore that already by this time the church had rebounded in terms of numbers. The last passage quoted above relates to Paul's final visit to Jerusalem, just before the riot in the temple which resulted in his arrest and eventual transport to Rome for his first imprisonment. This event dates, as we have seen, to ca. 52/53 A.D., and by this time Paul's unnamed interlocutors are able to describe the assembled church as consisting of "many thousands". For our purposes here, the more important thing to note is that in both cases, allegiance to the Law and specifically to legalism elevated over grace is notable: i.e., the faction demanding circumcision in the first instance only being suppressed by Peter's testimony and James' suggested compromise, and in the second instance prevailing upon Paul to engage in a ritual which had been superseded – to his very great later regret.

While the Jerusalem church recovered from persecution in terms of numbers, spiritually it did not recapture the amazing spiritual momentum evident in the early days following the coming of the Holy Spirit (as evidenced in Acts chapters 1-7). This failure can be seen firstly from the lack of any noticeable spiritual production: the evangelizing of the outlying areas of Judea, Samaria and the gentiles came through individual apostles and also through those who had been scattered in the persecution (Acts 8:4; 11:19; cf. Acts 8:5-40; 10:1-48; 11:19-26). Secondly and even more disturbing is the evidence of legalism and return to the shadows of the Law manifest throughout the book of Hebrews but also in the following passages:

(1) The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. (2) So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him (3) and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them."

Acts 11:1-3 NIV

Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."

Acts 15:1 NIV

And when they heard [Paul's report], they glorified the Lord. And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law; (21) but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. (22) What then? The assembly must certainly meet, for they will hear that you have come. (23) Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow. (24) Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads, and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, but that you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law."

Acts 21:20-24 NKJV

(1) Then after fourteen years [i.e., from his conversion], I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. (2) I went in response to a revelation and, meeting privately with those esteemed as leaders, I presented to them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. I wanted to be sure I was not running and had not been running my race in vain. (3) Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. (4) This matter arose because some false believers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves.

Galatians 2:1-4 NIV

In all of the above passages we see the group most energized to "evangelize" and aggressively press their views are the proponents of adhering to the by then defunct Law. We cannot say that this attitude was endemic among the believers in the church generally, but it does seem evident from the above and particularly from the passage cited directly below that the leadership of the Jerusalem church to this point at least had allowed themselves to be cowed into silence on the matter, a condition which could not have helped but to wield a negative influence on the church at large.

(11) When Cephas (i.e., Peter) came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. (12) For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. (13) The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. (14) When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"

Galatians 2:11-14 NIV

b. Gnosticism

What is Gnosticism? Gnosticism was (and is) a term used for any system of false doctrine which professed the possession of a higher, secret, mysterious "knowledge", the attainment of which gave its owner not only special insight, but also special powers and a special "in" with God and all things divine. As we have seen before, during the first century there was no such thing as a codified religion of Gnosticism.² Rather it was a case of many teachers coming from both pagan and Jewish backgrounds who each peddled their own similar yet distinctive brands of "spirituality through secret knowledge and contact / combat with unseen forces" – analogous to the kaleidoscopic variety of "new age teachings" we find in vogue in our own day. What all these schemes have in common then as now is that they are all absolutely false and absolutely dangerous.

In the time of writing of Hebrews, Gnosticism paraded as a means for "helping God" through combat with unseen evil forces, and said combat sometimes patterned itself after the Law in selective asceticism, it more frequently involving illicit sexual behavior – which of course required the participant to turn scripture on its head. Herein we see all three satanic lies on full display: turning away from the truth to a substitute, alternative "truth", then indulging oneself with no thought of God's authority, then finally justifying oneself by replacing God in one's heart with "another god" who needed help in fighting this fight against Satan. Revelation even calls the enigmatic, shadowy and constantly shifting principles upon which this movement was based "the deep things of Satan" (Rev.2:24) – because they are actually the devil's lies, not in any way hostile to him in fact. Secret knowledge has always been appealing – to the naive. Otherwise there would be no explanation for Scientology – or of Eve's fascination with the idea placed in her head by the devil speaking through the serpent of becoming "like God" (or "gods") through eating of the tree of knowledge. And it is easy for false teachers to claim such knowledge, especially if it is only grudgingly given out and at a high price. The fact of such stinginess and demand for great compensation for its dispersal and great sacrifice in order to be enlightened has historically always seemed to have piqued the interest of many victims (cf. 2Ki.10:5-13).

As should be evident from the previous section, legalism rather than Gnosticism was the bigger problem in the Jerusalem church. However, on the one hand these two false paths, as we have seen, often overlapped in somewhat surprising ways – or perhaps not too surprising inasmuch as every system of lies share a common evil source and a common evil objective.³ Gnosticism had an ascetic as well as a licentious strain (1Tim.1:8), while legalism frequently segues into mysticism (of which Gnosticism was the contemporary manifestation). Leading off his critique of the Jerusalem church with an assault on the worship of angels was a very wise rhetorical strategy on Paul's part: the ex-Pharisees and the more traditional legalists would be far more inclined to agree with and support this anti-Gnostic criticism than they would the direct assault on continuing in the shadows of the Law which would follow. By starting with an attack on angel-worship, and by moving on from there to the other main false system in which the

² See Peter #39: False Teachers, False Teaching, and False Organizations.

³ See Peter #39: False Teachers, False Teaching, and False Organizations.

Jerusalem church had been entrapped, Paul manages to demolish all putative biblical underpinnings of the first heresy and then use the arguments therein deployed as a wedge to begin his systematic deconstruction of the second.

Besides his censure of angel-worship in the first two chapters of Hebrews, legalism and returning to the Law was clearly a larger problem in the Jerusalem church and a much more delicate one to have to defuse: ostensibly, continuing in the same pattern of worship that had existed before the cross was just being "traditional" and no doubt exceptionally comfortable for people raised in those traditions. Demonstrating the fallacy of Gnostic ideas was, intellectually speaking, a much easier lift. Gnosticism had its own special magnetism, however, appealing as it did now to the basic human desire for knowledge, especially if forbidden.

(4) "You will surely not die," the serpent said to the woman. (5) "For God knows that on the day you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God [or "gods"], knowing good and evil." (6) When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and was attractive to the eye, and that the tree was desirable for bestowing insight, she took some of its fruit and ate it, then gave it also to her husband with her and he ate.
Genesis 3:4-6

When we consider that the "secret knowledge" Gnosticism proffered was fortified by opportunities for engaging alternately in promiscuity and severe self-denial in succession as part of its pattern of "worship", we gain some small idea of its contemporary appeal. Not for no reason will antichrist's religion of the Tribulation pursue a similar strategy.

You have not yet resisted to the point of [shedding your] blood in your struggle against sin.
Hebrews 12:4

Pursue peace with everyone, and sanctification ("holiness"), without which no one will see the Lord.
Hebrews 12:14

Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.
Hebrews 13:4 NIV

It is certainly understandable that, after refuting Gnosticism's underpinnings in the first two chapters of Hebrews, Paul would have rightly considered a detailed exposition of its baser teachings an unnecessary distraction, especially since the problem was by this time very well known and had been thoroughly covered by him in his other epistles (see below). So while he does reference the problem and warn in the passages above about its consequences, we are only given occasional hints about it elsewhere in the epistle once Paul has moved on from Gnostic abuse of angelic issues to the larger and equally serious problem of returning to the shadows of the Law. We do know from elsewhere in the New Testament, however, that Gnosticism was a serious stumbling block at this time, and not only for Christians of Jewish origin.

Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit (i.e., Gnosticism), according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world (*ta stoicheia*), and not according to Christ.

Colossians 2:8 NKJV

(20) O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge (literally, *gnosis*) – (21) by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith.

1st Timothy 6:20-21a

(10b) Reckless, self-willed, not fearing to ***blaspheme angelic powers*** (i.e., Gnostic combat with demons), (11) [although] this is a place where even [elect] angels, of much greater strength and power, [will not go, so as to] bring against them (i.e., the demons) a blasphemous judgment before the Lord (i.e., to curse them).

2nd Peter 2:10b-11

(8) In the same way these [false teachers], deluding themselves with false visions, defile their flesh, reject all authority, and ***bring slander against angels*** (i.e., Gnostic "combat" with *aeons*). (9) But [even] the archangel Michael, when he was contending and disputing with the devil over Moses' body, did not dare to pronounce a slanderous judgment against him, but said [instead], "May the Lord rebuke you!" (10) But these men blaspheme about things of which they know nothing! And what they understand by virtue of their sinful natures, by these things they are corrupted.

Jude 1:8-10

"But you do have this [in your favor], [the fact] that you hate the works of the Nicolaitans (i.e., Gnostics and other false teachers of the time), which I also hate."

Revelation 2:6

And to the rest of you in Thyatira, as many as do not hold to this doctrine (i.e., of Nicolaitan Gnosticism), you who have not acknowledged Satan's "deep teachings", as they call them. I am placing upon you no further burden.

Revelation 2:24

The above is just a selection of New Testament passages where Gnosticism is addressed directly or indirectly (more examples: Jn.1:1-14; 1Cor.2:4-5; 3:19; Gal.4:3; 4:9; Eph.4:14; 1Tim.1:3-7; 2Tim.2:16; 4:3-4; Tit.1:14; 2Pet.1:16; 3:10; 3:12; 1Jn.1:1; 4:2-3; 5:6-8). Later on, that is, in the years following Paul's writing of Hebrews, Peter and James both would, as we have seen, write letters to the churches of Asia Minor focused in no small part on this same problem.⁴ The Jerusalem church was certainly not isolated from communication with the rest of the Christian world at that time. Indeed, it was the original hub or mother city of it. This meant that in the beginning of the Church and also at the end of the apostolic era, truth and missionary efforts

⁴ See Peter #39: "False Teachers, False Teaching, and False Organizations: A Preface to 2nd Peter Chapter Two".

flowed out of it to the Mediterranean world beyond (at least in the persons of the apostles and their epistles). But in between, we do find this period wherein negative influences were swimming upstream, so to speak. Naturally, all manner of proselytes had for centuries always come to Jerusalem for the yearly festivals as well as to commune with famous teachers of the Law (Acts 22:3) and we may assume with mystics and Gnostic teachers as well. Such is the case even in our own day. We may thus be sure that whatever was going on elsewhere in the Jewish Mediterranean milieu eventually made its way to Jerusalem as well.

As to that milieu, there is ample evidence from throughout the New Testament of an excess of morbid interest and curiosity about angels and demons among the Jewish communities. How else does one explain the seemingly unprecedented number of demon possessions we find our Lord and His followers having to deal with? Anyone reading the gospels cannot help but be struck by the large number exorcisms which took place throughout our Lord's earthly ministry to the Jewish people, accomplished not only by Himself but also through His commissioning of the twelve (Matt.10:8), and later of the seventy-two (Lk.10:17), a trend which continued under the apostles (Acts 5:16; 8:7; 19:12; cf. Acts 16:16-18).

"And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges."
Matthew 12:27 NKJV

(13) Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, "In the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out." (14) Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this.
Acts 19:13-14 NIV

These two passages are an indication of great interest in the demonic in Jewish communities during the mid-first century. We are justified in extrapolating from this that there must have been in addition to many dabbling in exorcism many more who were engaging in various activities which invited demon contact – and possession. The fact that there were so many biblically documented possessions at this time guarantees as much, because possession requires a certain willingness on the part of the possessed, at least initially. These trends fit hand in glove with the interest in Gnosticism with which Paul had to contend, not only in the case of the book of Hebrews but also with the mixed gentile and Jewish congregations who were beset with the same problem (as can be seen from the epistles of Ephesians and Colossians, books which are well known for the decidedly anti-gnostic content as we have seen [see previous footnote]).

(15) [For by means of the cross, God] has stripped [*demon*] rulers and authorities [of their power] and subjected them to public humiliation, having triumphed over them in [Christ]. (16) So don't let anyone judge you in regard to food or drink, or in the category of festival observances, be it of new moons or Sabbaths. (17) All these things are shadows of what was to come, but the reality has to do with Christ. (18) Let no one gain control over your life, desiring to [enslave you to himself] through a show of false humility and *the adoration of angels*, basing his approach on what he has [allegedly]

seen while puffed up by his own fleshly thoughts, (19) yet not embracing the Head [Christ]. For it is from this Source that the entire body [the Church] is [truly] supplied and instructed through [all] its joints and sinews, and [thus] produces the growth that God has given. (20) If you have died with Christ to these false [pagan] principles [belonging to] this world (*ta stoicheia* of Gnosticism and Jewish mysticism and legalism), why are you letting yourselves be [wrongly] indoctrinated as if your life were of this world? In accordance with the commandments and teaching of [mere] men [these false teachers tell you] (21) "Don't handle! Don't taste! Don't touch!", (22) even though [we know] that all these [are only] things [which] decay with use. (23) Such teachings have a [false] reputation for wisdom, but [only] in concocted religion, [false] humility, and [legalistic] harsh treatment of the body – they have no actual power to neutralize the [sinful] flesh (i.e., the sin nature is not to be controlled by these legalistic approaches).
Colossians 2:15-23

The passage above demonstrates clearly that Gnosticism was a problem in the early churches which were composed of Jews as well as of gentiles. We see also from the above that Gnosticism was not easily disaggregated from the Law, that is, from Pharisaical and mystical schools which wrongly interpreted it. To defeat this twin-threat, Paul reassures the Colossians of their salvation by reminding them: (v.15) that at the cross Jesus Christ has already defeated Satan and his demons; (v.16) that therefore no engagement with the rituals of the Law can be of any effect either in regard to salvation (since Christ's spiritual death on the cross has taken away sin) or in regard to Gnostic demon-combat (since Christ has already defeated them all and held. His "triumph", so to speak, in ascending to heaven and being glorified by the Father); (v.17) that the Law is composed of shadows which looked forward to the coming of Christ and His victory and can therefore be of no benefit in either of these cases (i.e., for salvation or for Gnostic warfare); (v.18) that Gnostic claims to have contact with the unseen, whether angel worship or demon contact, are dangerous in the extreme rather than being any sort of path to spirituality; (v.19) that those who are teaching these lies have completely fallen away from Christ – if they were ever His in the first place; (v.20) that by being saved by grace through faith his readers have been made part of Christ and thus have no need to return to the shadows of the Law and natural principles of the world whose entire value consisted of leading them to Christ in the first place – and that by turning back they risk their status of belonging to Him if they follow these false teachers far enough on the downward path; (v.21-22) that material actions and prohibitions are just that, material and not spiritual – except to the extent that they erode, undermine or even result in the destruction of true spirituality; (23) that even though these teaching, Gnostic and mystic/legalistic (which were often combined in a truly toxic brew) in the end will not make them happy, not resulting in any lasting pleasure or any effective defense against sinfulness – rather they will only separate these believers from Jesus Christ.

This is in a nutshell precisely what Paul is trying to tell the believers in the Jerusalem church as well. But because the problem is more deeply ingrained, it will take him a good deal more time and effort to make his case.

c. Legalism⁵

What is legalism? During the pre-exilic days of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, paganism was the most prominent "Achilles heel" of the Jewish people. After the return from exile, the rebuilding of the temple and the reestablishment of the Jewish nation, disbelief eventually took the opposite tack as the Law began to be used as an instrument for self-justification. The true worship of the Lord contained in the Law began to be perverted into mere lip-service as so-called experts, scribes and Pharisees, began "teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matt.15:9 NKJV). Of course, our Lord was quoting Isaiah (Is.29:13), a fact which demonstrates that legalism was not absent in those earlier times either – anymore than Gnostic tendencies were not also present later (as we have seen above). In fact, legalism and Gnosticism actually have a good deal more in common than is sometimes realized. Both are false systems which purport to biblical knowledge; both claim to be paths to God; and both are of the devil, broadcast by unbelievers for the purpose of masking the truth (Matt.13:19). The treacherousness of legalism is that while it wraps itself in the Bible and biblical commands, it substitutes works as the means of salvation entirely eschewing grace – thus making it impossible for any and all who embrace it to be saved.

"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in."

Matthew 23:13 NKJV

". . . knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.

Galatians 2:16 NKJV

You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.

Galatians 5:4

Examples of legalism in the first century are plentiful in scripture: teaching circumcision as necessary for salvation (Gal.2:12; Tit.1:10); requiring continuation in the festivals of the Law (Jn.9:16; Col.2:16-17); requiring adherence to Pharisaical dietary regimes (Mk.7:19; Gal.2:12). All of these things and more still obtain in legalistic circles today (e.g., tithing, water-baptism, strictures on dress, appearance and inconsequential behavior, various and sundry invented rituals old and new). What all forms of legalism have always had in common, however, is the tendency of those who practice it to assert their will over the freedom and liberty of others, making others "accountable" to whomever is authority so as to have to answer for virtually all decisions made instead of allowing any sort of exercise of free will in matters great or small.

⁵ See also the discussion in BB 6A: Peripatology, section I.2.C.3, "Impediments to Discernment".

And this occurred because of false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our *liberty* which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into *bondage*).
Galatians 2:4 NIV

It is for *freedom* that Christ has set us *free*. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of *slavery*.
Galatians 5:1 NIV

While legalism is more easily identified with asceticism and Gnosticism with licentiousness, both systems of false teaching have at least one foot in the other camp. Gnosticism as we have previously seen offered periods of respite from the one to indulge in the other (with the "holiday" or sacrifice consisting of the opposite of that to which one was most inclined, e.g., fasting and self-denial for the lascivious; feasting and profligacy for the abstemious). In a similar way, legalistic Jewish circles tended to be the very ones who also sought out secret knowledge through the likes of numerology, astrology, Kabbalah, and exorcisms. Just as in Germany in the 1930's as it has often been noticed that Nazis and Communists had more in common with each other than they did with more moderate schisms of left and right, even though technically bitter enemies, so that it was not uncommon for rank and file members to move from one of these extreme groups to the other on a whim, so also in the first century we find those most versed in the Law and its mystical interpretations becoming Gnostic leaders, while pagan Gnostics were in turn attracted to the Law.

(15) [For by means of the cross, God] has stripped [*demon*] rulers and authorities [of their power] and subjected them to public humiliation, having triumphed over them in [Christ]. (16) So don't let anyone judge you in regard to food or drink, or in the category of festival observances, be it of new moons or Sabbaths. (17) All these things are shadows of what was to come, but the reality has to do with Christ. (18) Let no one gain control over your life, desiring to [enslave you to himself] through a show of false humility and *the adoration of angels*, basing his approach on what he has [allegedly] seen while puffed up by his own fleshly thoughts, (19) yet not embracing the Head [Christ]. For it is from this Source that the entire body [the Church] is [truly] supplied and instructed through [all] its joints and sinews, and [thus] produces the growth that God has given. (20) If you have died with Christ to these false [pagan] principles [belonging to] this world (*ta stoicheia* of Gnosticism and Jewish mysticism and legalism), why are you letting yourselves be [wrongly] indoctrinated as if your life were of this world? In accordance with the commandments and teaching of [mere] men [these false teachers tell you] (21) "Don't handle! Don't taste! Don't touch!", (22) even though [we know] that all these [are only] things [which] decay with use. (23) Such teachings have a [false] reputation for wisdom, but [only] in concocted religion, [false] humility, and [legalistic] harsh treatment of the body – they have no actual power to neutralize the [sinful] flesh (i.e., the sin nature is not to be controlled by these legalistic approaches).
Colossians 2:15-23

We have already considered this passage from the standpoint of Gnosticism; and we can also clearly see here the blending of these two heretical trends. Calling attention to Christ's victory of

demonic forces (v.15) refutes Gnostic ideas that we somehow need to engage in what Christ has already accomplished. Refusing to allow oneself to be judged "in regard to food or drink, or in the category of festival observances, be it of new moons or Sabbaths" (v.16) which are merely shadows of the now accomplished cross (v.17) is a categorical rebuke of legalistic behavior. And (v.18-19) in warning the Colossians not to let anyone take control of their lives through the asceticism of false humility (legalism) **and** angel worship and reports of angelic visions (Gnosticism), Paul is castigating both false systems. In verse 20a, Paul's invoking of *ta stoicheia*, the "basic principles" and, specifically, the celestial bodies of the natural world, we see perspicuously the overlap between legalism (festival observances governed by these principles) and Gnosticism (astrological mysticism and the equating of these bodies to angels and/or aeons as helpers or enemies). But such doctrines, whether they be (falsely) related to the Law or (falsely) built upon "knowledge" (*gnosis*) are only "the commandments and teaching of [mere] men". They have no real power to fulfill nor to give victory over fleshly indulgence (vv.21-23), depending upon whether the communicant is engaged in a lascivious or ascetic mode at the moment. Both modes were possible in both heresies – and the same is true today. For this reason, we see Paul segueing from one problem to the other seamlessly, and that fact, in and of itself, tells us that every Christian of his day must have understood something about them both. Involvement in either legalism or Gnosticism of whatever stripe was thus no accident: people did it, even believers did it, because they found it enjoyable, despite the deadly spiritual danger of being involved in either one or both.

But we know that the law is good if one uses it lawfully.
1st Timothy 1:8 NKJV

In terms of the Law of Moses itself, it is a system of God-given truth as is all of the Old Testament. The problem of legalism stems not from the Law itself, therefore, but from its improper interpretation and implementation.

"Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill."
Matthew 5:17 NKJV

The Law and the Prophets, the entire Old Covenant, looked forward to the cross. Because our Lord had not yet come into the world when they were written and given, of necessity this forward-looking view was cloaked in shadows, shadows which would only be dispelled and the details of the truth behind them fully revealed once Christ had come in the flesh, once the victory of the cross and the resurrection which followed were historical realities, once the Holy Spirit had been given and all of the deeper truths of scripture to which the Law pointed fully disclosed and explained.

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone."
Matthew 23:23 NKJV

Here our Lord gives us to see the essence of the incorrect, legalistic approach to handling the Law, namely, overlooking the truly weighty truths which the Law contained and to which it pointed in the future, while focusing instead on things of small importance . . . and getting these wrong as well in terms of their underlying meaning and truth:

(35) Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, (36) "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" (37) Jesus said to him, " 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' (38) This is the first and great commandment. (39) And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' (40) On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Matthew 22:35-40 NKJV

Correctly understood, there is not a single verse in the Old Testament which is not entirely and completely consistent with the New, both the teachings of our Lord in the gospels and those of the apostles in the epistles.

"For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it."

Matthew 13:17 NIV

(10) Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, (11) trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow. (12) It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.

1st Peter 1:10-12 NIV

For those who were walking close to the Lord before the Law was given, the truth was plainly understood and understood well – as the examples of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph show clearly enough. And as the passages above also demonstrate, godly believers of the past were not abusing the Law whose purpose was to convict of sin (Rom.3:20; 7:7) and thus to lead to the only One who could forgive it and provide salvation from it (Gal.3:24; cf. Gal.3:19-20). The abuse and misuse of the Law by some through employing it as a means of salvation itself, the very offense of which the scribes and Pharisees were guilty, is, in essence, completely inverting its God-given purpose.

Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. (22) But Scripture has locked up everything under the control of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.

Galatians 3:21-22 NIV

This substituting of a false standard of laws as the means of salvation is legalism by definition. The particular form which Paul was combating in this epistle was based upon willful misinterpretation of the Law of Moses. But just as we see in "Christian" circles today where the connection to the actual Law of the rules and regulations promulgated to enslave followers of legalism is often a loose one at best, so in Paul's day many legalistic requirements which went far beyond anything Moses was ever given to pen had been added to the burden (Matt.23:4), even as the "weightier matters" of the Law, that is, its true underlying spiritual significance, had been abandoned (Matt.23:23).

(7) "You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: (8) 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. (9) They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.' "

Matthew 15:7-9 NIV

And while the legalistic interpretation of the Sabbath (Lk.13:14), insistence upon water-baptisms (Mk.17:3-4), tithing (Lk.11:42) and the replacement of the essence of the Law with these and other extraneous was problematic then as now (Matt.23:23; Mk.7:5-16), no greater offense can be imagined than the denigration of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ whose person and death for us the Law was designed to teach and represent. This is the key legalistic abuse of which the Jerusalem believers were guilty, namely, putting the Lord they claimed to love to "open shame" by "crucifying Him afresh" in their continuation of the Law's now fulfilled sacrifices which taught a Messiah not yet come and a salvation not yet bought by the blood of Christ.

For Christ is the fulfillment (lit., "end") of the Law, resulting in righteousness for everyone who believes [in Him].

Romans 10:4

The time of God's communicating to His people through shadows of the Law is over; the time of His direct revelation through His Son of all previously hidden mysteries has arrived (Rom.16:25). The cross thus divides history as God has planned it in two.

For all the prophets and the Law prophesied *until John* [the baptist].

Matthew 11:13

(1) God, *from antiquity* having communicated to our fathers in the prophets at many times and in many ways, (2) [*but now*] has in these last days communicated to us in a Son, [the One] whom He has appointed heir of all things, [the One] through whom He created the universe.

Hebrews 1:1-2

It was impossible for the Law to save us (Gal.2:16), since it was impossible for anyone to follow it perfectly (Jas.2:10-11; cf. Gal.6:13). The purpose of the Law was to demonstrate that we are sinners (Gal.3:19; cf. Rom.3:20; 7:7), unable to do for ourselves what only Jesus could do in paying for all of our sins with His spiritual death (Rom.8:3-4), and thus to lead us to Christ, the

only Way of salvation, as a result.

So for us the Law acted as a guardian [whose purpose it was to lead us] to Christ so that we might be justified by faith.

Galatians 3:24

Now that the Law has now been entirely fulfilled by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Matt.5:17-18; Rom.10:4), no further purpose is served by following its purely symbolic strictures. For while, of course, we Christians are responsible not to violate any of the prohibitions against sin contained anywhere in the Bible (Gal.2:17-19), we are not responsible for adhering to the other dictates of the Law of Moses to which we have died (Rom.7:4). For the Law merely foreshadowed the present reality of Jesus Christ and our union with Him as His Body, His Bride, the Church (Gal.2:19; Col.2:20; 3:3; 2Tim.2:11). It is for this reason, for example, that the ten commandments are to be followed, understanding that the fourth commandment, keeping the Sabbath, has been transformed from its prior, ritual observance into a much more powerful reality: the every day, every moment Sabbath of rest in our faith-walk with Jesus Christ (and it is not for no reason that this principle is most perspicuously taught in the book of Hebrews: Heb.4:1-10).

So far we have been talking mainly about the actual Law of Moses as it occurs in scripture, properly understood and interpreted. It should be obvious to everyone that while perhaps those living in Judea at the time of Paul's writing of Hebrews might have had an inkling that following the Law was theoretically possible (which of course it was not as Paul had made very clear in Romans chapters six and seven and throughout the book of Galatians, e.g.), beyond all argument, only a few short years later, with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the cessation of all of the rites related thereto, any following of the Law would have to be partial: none of the sacrifices which foreshadowed our Lord's sacrifice (and from which Paul was strenuously attempting to rescue his brethren with this epistle) were possible any longer. The festivals ceased. Tithing ceased. All that was left were the dietary and related portions of the Law – which were never meant to exist in a vacuum.

Desiring to be teachers of the law, understanding neither what they say nor the things which they affirm.

1st Timothy 1:7 NKJV

Any and all Christians who today wish to "keep the Law" are by definition falling short, even by the standard of a very pedantic and Pharisaical application devoid of spiritual realities – because there are many things contained in the Law of Moses which at present are impossible to fulfill: the laws of inheritance in the land, for example, the necessity of appearing "before the Lord" in Jerusalem three times a year, the requirement of destroying all unbelievers who worship other gods, just to name a few. Legalism today easily passes over these fatal flaws and to make matters worse picks and chooses certain commandments which the group in question deems important (as if the others were not, even though they are equally part of the Word of God). Worse to tell, legalism today misinterprets and misapplies that selective list of commandments it is willing to recognize as valid. And the worst of the worst is the essential falsehood upon which all legalism

is based, namely, the horrible lie that by adhering to some set of "humanly concocted rules" a person will be saved – when in fact reliance upon anything other than on the person and work of Jesus Christ merely confirms condemnation.

This same approach was, in essence, evident in Jerusalem in Paul's day as well. One serious side-effect of embracing law, however defined, as the means of salvation, is the necessity of engaging in the sort of Pharisaical hypocrisy our Lord so vehemently decried (Matt.23:13-36). That is inevitable because the Law's perfect standard makes it crystal clear that every human being is a sinner inasmuch as no one has the ability to refrain from sin for a single day – if sin is rightly defined and understood. For that reason, a person has to embrace the hypocrisy of willfully misinterpreting the Law (or some humanly constructed partial formulation of it) to forbid only those things which said person is personally capable of refraining from (or at least hiding from the view of others).

Because of the above, all brands of legalism tend to be highly judgmental of all others who are not following their particular perversion of the Law – and highly persecutory as well, whenever there exists the opportunity of silencing by any means, including violence, any and all who have the audacity to preach and teach the truth instead. This was certainly Paul's experience.

Brothers and sisters, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted?
In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished.
Galatians 5:11 NIV

Possibly more than anyone else in history, Paul was given to "share the sufferings of Christ" (Rom.8:17; 2Cor.1:5; Phil.1:29-30; 3:10; Col.1:24; 2Tim.2:12; 1Pet.4:12-13; cf. Matt.10:38; 16:24; Mk.8:34; 10:21; 10:38-39; Lk.9:23; 14:27; Acts 5:41; 2Cor.4:10-11; Gal.6:17; 1Thes.1:6; 2Thes.1:4-5; 2Tim.3:12), just as our Lord had warned him he would (Acts 9:16; cf. 1Cor.4:8-13; 2Cor.4:7-12; 6:3-10; 11:16-33; Phil.3:7-11; 2Tim.3:11; *et passim* in Acts and the Pauline Epistles). And, as the passage cited above demonstrates, a great measure of that suffering was meted out to him at the hands of Jewish legalists who opposed the teachings of grace and salvation graciously extended to the gentiles which Paul was given to proclaim (Acts 11:2-3; 15:1ff.; Gal.2:3-5; 5:1-13; 6:12-13; Col.2:16-17; Tit.1:10).

(20) In fact, you even put up with anyone who *enslaves* you or *exploits* you or *takes advantage* of you or *puts on airs* or *slaps you* in the face. (21a) To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that! 2nd Corinthians 11:20-21a NIV

Here we see the other side of legalism. Just as legalism, the adherence to a false standard which in fact distorts and abuses the underlying truth of the Law, stirs up great zeal to oppose by any and all means the teaching of grace (Acts 21:20; Rom.10:2; evident also from Paul's zealous persecution of believers before he was saved: e.g., Acts 8:3; 9:11; 26:9-11; Phil.3:6), so also this very zeal and false assurance is found by many to be quite attractive. Giving oneself over to slavery seems to be to many, for whatever reason, a tempting proposition. How else can we explain the large numbers of individuals who have willfully given themselves over to all manner of cults and religions since the beginning of human history? As with the Corinthians in the

passage quoted above who behaved obstreperously toward Paul who treated them graciously – and so much so that he refused any support from them (1Cor.9:15; 2Cor.11:7-10) – but who were more than willing to be abused by the false teachers of legalism who slipped in after him, intending to subvert grace through teaching circumcision and other strictures of the Law as though salvation were dependent upon such legalistic behavior, when in fact it would have undermined altogether their salvation by grace through faith in Christ (Eph.2:8-9).

You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; ***you have fallen from grace.***

Galatians 5:4 NKJV

In its essence, then, legalism is slavery, slavery to lies masquerading as the truth. That is also what all religion is – as opposed to biblical Christianity which consists of being dedicated to Jesus Christ through faith by the grace of God. Legalism and grace are antithetical. Grace gives freedom to follow Jesus Christ without unnecessary and manmade rules; legalism demands strict obedience to the whims of those who make them up, focusing on appearances (whitewashing) rather than any actual, internal spirituality, and the end of such perverse behavior is death.

(8) But at that time [when you were unbelievers], not knowing God, ***you were slaves*** to those things which are by nature not [truly] gods. (9) But now, having recognized God, or, as it really is, having been recognized by God, how is it that you are turning back to these weak and impoverished false [pagan] principles which you wish ***to serve as slaves*** all over again? (10) You observe days and months and seasons and years. (11) I fear for you, that I may perhaps have spent my labor on you in vain.

Galatians 4:8-11

(21) Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? (22) For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the ***slave*** woman and the other by the ***free*** woman. (23) His son by the ***slave*** woman was born according to the flesh, but his son by the ***free*** woman was born as the result of a divine promise. (24) These things are being taken figuratively: The women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be ***slaves***: This is Hagar. (25) Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in ***slavery*** with her children. (26) But the Jerusalem that is above is ***free***, and she is our mother.

Galatians 4:21-26 NIV

So there can be no compromise. Embracing the Law (or, really, some set of teachings which eclectically make use of the Law to form a rigid system of mandatory behavior) as the means of salvation necessarily results in damnation, because salvation can only come through faith in Jesus Christ by the grace of God. Thus grace and legalism are entirely mutually exclusive, and all claims or impressions to the contrary are manifestly false. Legalism is slavery – to the devil, ultimately. Grace is God's beneficent policy toward all mankind, offering salvation free of charge to anyone who accepts the truth about the person and work of Jesus Christ who died for us and thus paid the entire penalty for our sins.

(14) For He Himself is our peace, for He has made both [Jews and gentiles] one, and has broken down the middle wall of partition, that is, the enmity between us, (15) by discharging *the Law of the commandments and its requirements* in His [own] flesh, so that He might re-create the two into one new Man by making [this] peace, (16) and might reconcile both in one Body to God through His cross, having by means of it abolished the enmity [between God and mankind].

Ephesians 2:14-16

(13) And though you were [spiritually] dead in your transgressions and in the un-circumcised state of your flesh, [God the Father] made you alive together with [Christ], having forgiven you all your transgressions. (14) [God] has erased the charge against us along with its particulars (i.e., revealed by the Law) which opposed our [relationship with Him], and He removed it [as an obstacle] between us by nailing it to the cross.

Colossians 2:13-14

And the Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life *freely*.

Revelation 22:17 NKJV

Having been redeemed from the bondage of sin (Rom.6:6; 6:18; 6:20; 6:22) and from the curse of the Law (Gal.3:13) through the blood of Christ, His spiritual death for us on the cross, we Christians have the right to "stand fast in the freedom with which Christ has made us free" and never again to allow ourselves to be "entangled in the yoke of slavery" (Gal.5:1). But legalism is the reverse of these blessings and proclaims, in effect, through demanding works for salvation in place of grace, that Christ died for nothing (Gal.2:21).

They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved.

2nd Peter 2:19 ESV

Breaking with the Law and moving on to the life of freedom we now have through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ was in many ways a difficult transition for Jewish believers of Paul's day to make. It is not too much to say that the entire apostolic era had this result as its primary objective (as we have seen previously⁶). Even Paul, the great apostle of grace himself, did not make this transition instantly or without turbulence. It took him time – and he was given time – to come to completely embrace grace over law. He did not immediately confront Peter with his hypocrisy in not being willing to break bread with gentile believers at Antioch (Gal.2:11-14); he did not immediately leave off the now replaced practices of circumcision (Acts 16:1-3; cf. Gal.2:3-5) and the water-baptism of John (1Cor.1:13-17); he did not immediately discard the use of vows (Acts 18:18; 21:23; cf. 1Cor.11:2-16); in short, even Paul did not come to realize without a good deal of growth in the truth that any participation in the rituals of the Law constituted a rejection of

⁶ The book of Acts is in many ways devoted to chronicling this transition from Law to grace. See BB 6B: Ecclesiology, section I.B.5.c, "The Nature of the Book of Acts".

grace (Gal.5:4), and that continuation in its blood-sacrifices was, in effect, a renunciation of Jesus' death on our behalf. That he had for a long time a natural diffidence towards those who were apostles before him is understandable (Gal.2:2), and this tendency was to cost him dearly (Acts 21:20-24). But by the time of his writing of the book of Hebrews, Paul's break with the Law, that is, the following of its rituals whose main purpose it was to foreshadow the spiritual death of our Lord (and not the underlying truths it still teaches today: 1Tim.1:8), was complete. He had come to realize through bitter personal experience the consequences of compromise, and in the epistle of Hebrews he does his best to battle might and main in an attempt to rescue those he loved from consequences which could, in the end, be far worse – if they continued to allow tradition, sentimentality and compromise to undermine their faith in a false zeal for a Law which Jesus Christ has now fulfilled, pursuing righteousness and salvation through works rather than through grace (Heb.6:4-6; 10:29).

(2) For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.
(3) For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. (4) For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

Romans 10:2-4 NKJV

The entire Old Testament is important, valuable, an essential part of the Word of God which, when rightly understood, contributes to our spiritual growth (Rom.15:4). The Law is intrinsically good, if one uses it correctly (1Tim.1:8). For the word "law" itself, "Torah", means "teaching" (*torah*, fr. *yarah*, "to teach") – and the essential lesson is Jesus Christ Himself and our absolute need of Him, the One through whom we are justified by grace through faith (Eph.2:8-9), and **not** by the works of the Law.

(1) Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, or stand in the way of sinners, or sit in the seat of mockers, (2) but in the Law (*torah*) of the Lord is his delight, and in His teaching (*torah*) he meditates day and night.

Psalms 1:1-2

(28) For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.
(29) Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, (30) since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. (31) Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, ***we uphold the law.***

Romans 3:28-31 NIV

d. Covenants

(4) "Therefore be careful to observe [the Law]; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' (7) For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the Lord our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him? (8) And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous

judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day?"
Deuteronomy 4:6-8 NKJV

As this passage tells us, a primary purpose of the Law was the evangelizing of the nations by showing that Israel was a holy people set apart by God for service to and worship of Him. With the victory of the cross, with the resurrection of our Lord, and with the coming of the Holy Spirit, that function of evangelizing has expanded from a localized, national "light to the gentiles" (Is.42:6; 49:6-8) to a worldwide endeavor belonging to all believers, empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit.

"Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine."
Exodus 19:5 NKJV

After the coming of the Messiah whom Israel by and large rejected, stumbling over the cross in their desire for a crown (1Pet.2:7-8; cf. Lk.20:17-18; Rom.9:32-33), the entire Church of Jesus Christ now enjoys the privilege of being God's special people.

But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.
1st Peter 2:9 NKJV

Here we see one of the main effects of the transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, from the shadows of the Law to the revelation of the mystery of Jesus Christ (Rom.16:25; Eph.3:8; 5:32; 6:19; Col.1:26-27; 2:2; 4:3; 1Tim.3:16), namely, the inclusion of the gentiles into the Church to share in the promises given to Israel and join in the mission of evangelizing the entire world (Matt.28:18-20).⁷

(3) . . . how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, (4) by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), (5) which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: (6) that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel.
Ephesians 3:3-6 NKJV

Being fellow heirs with Israel under the New Covenant while previously excluded from the Old (Eph.2:12; although salvation has always been available for all and by the same exact means of grace through faith), gentiles now along with Jews provide a worldwide and individual witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, as opposed to the prior local and national one of the kingdom of Israel (e.g., Rom.15:8-9). Appreciating what scripture means by the word "covenant", therefore, is

⁷ See "The Satanic Rebellion: part 5: The Seven Millennial Days of Human History", section II.8.b.iii, "The Mystery of Christ".

critical to understanding this transition from God's localized witness to the truth governed by the Law to His international one governed by the revelation of the mystery of Jesus Christ expounded in the New Testament. For that reason, properly grasping this principle is also of particular importance in order to be able to follow Paul's argument in Hebrews where he so masterfully opposes the New to the Old (e.g., Heb.8:6; 8:8; 8:13; 9:10; 9:15; 10:20; 12:24).

But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.
Romans 7:6 NKJV

He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant – not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.
2nd Corinthians 3:6 NKJV

What is a biblical covenant? The first thing to note is that the English words "covenant" and "testament" are variously employed to translate the exact same words of scripture (*beriyth* in Hebrew; *diatheke* in Greek): biblically speaking, there is thus no difference whatsoever between a covenant and a testament. Secondly, the word "covenant" is applied not only to the Law of Moses but also to other covenants God made before and, of course, since (the new covenant validated by the blood, the spiritual death of Jesus Christ: Matt.26:28; Mk.14:24; Lk.22:20; 1Cor.11:25).⁸

"I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the **covenant** between me and the earth."
Genesis 9:13 NIV

In its most basic meaning, a covenant is an agreement, and in scripture, the most important agreements are the ones made between God and man. As such, since God never proves false to what He has pledged, a covenant is therefore primarily a promise (or collection of promises) from God to man, with the most important of these being the promise, covenant, agreement to save us from sin and death through faith by the grace opened up for us in the cross of Jesus Christ.

Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the **new covenant** in My blood, which is shed for you."
Luke 22:20 NKJV

Thus the essence of the Old and New Covenants, the Old and New Testaments, is God's gift of

⁸ It is common among biblical exegetes to find numerous Old Testament covenants, but from Adam (the promise of the redeemer: Gen.3:15), to Noah (the promise of continued freedom and opportunity to choose for Him: Gen.8:20-9:17), to Abraham (the promise of the Seed: Gen.12:7; 13:15; 17:19-21), to David (the promise of the Son: 2Sam.7:5-16), all these "additional" covenants serve the same purpose as the Old Covenant (otherwise known as the Law of Moses: cf. Ex.24:8), that is, to foreshadow the person and work of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

salvation for all who are willing to receive it through faith by means of the spiritual death of Jesus Christ on our behalf in dying for the sins which otherwise stood in the way of that salvation (e.g., Col.2:13-14). In that regard, the agreement is also a testament in our sense of the word, because, as in the case of a will also, a death is necessary in order for the will or testament to be put into effect.

(15) And for this reason He is the Mediator of *the new covenant* (*diatheke*), by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under *the first covenant* (*diatheke*), that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. (16) For where there is a *testament* (*diatheke*), there must also of necessity be the death of the testator (*diathemenos*). (17) For a *testament* (*diatheke*) is in force after men are dead, since it has no power at all while the testator (*diathemenos*) lives.

Hebrews 9:15-16 NKJV

The principal difference between the Old and New Covenants, between the old and new testaments or agreements, is that the old convicted of sin (Rom.3:20; 7:7; cf. Gal.2:19) and looked forward to the day when the sin problem would be solved by God's great sacrifice of His own dear Son on our behalf, whereas the new provides salvation immediately and not "on credit", so to speak (Rom.3:23-36). Salvation is the ultimate agreement or promise God makes with the human race, namely, to do everything necessary for us to be saved . . . if only we will be willing to accept that salvation through faith and then faithfully follow Him thereafter so as to persevere in that faith "firm until the end" (Heb.3:6; 3:14; 6:11).

For example, Abraham "believed in the Lord" and "it was credited to him as righteousness" (Gen.15:6; cf. Rom.4:3), whereas we believe in Jesus Christ come in the flesh and resurrected after dying for our sins, and are justified as a result, made righteous in Christ through our faith in Him (Rom.3:24; 3:28; 5:1; 5:9; 8:30; 1Cor.6:11; Gal.2:16; 3:24). Salvation is the same before and after the cross, resulting from trusting God to deliver us from sin and death by the means He would (pre-cross) and has (post-cross) provided for us. The only difference is that while Abraham looked forward to a salvation that was not yet fully visible (cf. 1Pet.1:10-12), we look backward to a salvation that has now been fully revealed in the face of Christ, the One who has redeemed us from our sins, once and for all (Heb.7:27; 9:6; 9:28; 10:10).

No covenant is "unconditional" in the sense that no one can lay claim to it without obeying God. On the other hand, all covenants are "unconditional" in the sense that the Word of God cannot be broken for all those who have indeed put their faith in Him and His Son, and maintain that faith, faithfully to the end. Thus we have in the idea of the covenant a formal guarantee of salvation and blessing here and now and in eternity to come, variously described and with various concomitant rewards (the New Covenant being the guarantee of our inheritance as in earthly wills upon the death of the testator; cf. Heb.9:15-16), to those who are the children of God, from Him who is their Father, based upon the sacrifice, coming or completed (i.e., pre or post-cross), of the Savior who is His Son and our Lord.

The idea of the covenant was one to which believers in the ancient world could readily relate. Covenants in general in the ancient Middle East required two parties and a formal blood-sacrifice

for ratification wherein both sides agreed to abide by the terms specified. A biblical covenant is an agreement made by God on mankind's behalf, wherein God undertakes to bless all those who faithfully follow Him. When it comes to the ultimate covenant, both the old one which looked forward and the new one which looks backward to the cross, God's part is twofold: He supplies the blessing (culminating in resurrection and eternal life), and He provides the blood-sacrifice (the gift of His Son, necessary to redeem us from sin so that we may be blessed). Our part is to keep faith with Him (i.e., by accepting Christ and continuing to trust Him, believe Him, obey Him, follow Him: cf. Gen.15:6). God's covenants are thus formalized promises that provide those who have set their hearts on following Him with a strong basis for confident hope, because God has not only promised the eternal life and concomitant blessings we eagerly await, but has irrevocably bound Himself to fulfill them.

(16) For men are accustomed to take oaths on the authority of something greater than they are, and there is absolutely no doubt about the fact that an oath is taken for the purpose of confirmation. (17) Just so God, out of a desire to make it abundantly clear to us, the heirs of His promise [after the pattern of Abraham's faith], that His will in this matter [of salvation and its resultant blessings] is unchangeable, guaranteed it with an oath (Gen.22:16-17), (18) so that through two unchangeable matters wherein it is impossible for God to prove false (i.e., His Word and His oath), we who have escaped [the wrath to come] and taken hold of this hope (i.e., of life eternal, resurrection and eternal reward) offered to us might have a strong basis for encouragement. (19) And this hope [truly] is what "anchors" our lives, so to speak: it is certain; it is solid; it penetrates beyond the [heavenly] veil into the [holy of holies], (20) where our vanguard, Jesus, has entered on our behalf, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. Hebrews 6:16-20

Therefore although part of these covenants' fulfillment is yet future (requiring those who accept God's gracious offer of salvation which is at the heart of both covenants to trust Him while waiting patiently for fulfillment after the pattern of Abraham's faith and patience), fulfillment is absolutely certain for all who embrace the promises and persevere in faith. Both Old and New Covenants are ratified by blood: the Old through the shadow of animal blood, the New through the death of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross (where the reality of His death on our behalf and in our place is symbolized by the phrase "the blood of Christ": Heb.9:16-22).⁹ God promises, formalizes the promises, and pays the most severe price to fulfill the covenants He has established – the price being the sacrifice of His only beloved Son. We benefit from His unconditional and glorious act of grace if we but trust in Jesus and stay faithful to Him. Whether it be present day believers who partake of the communion which proclaims the completed reality of salvation through the blood of Christ ("For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins": Matt.26:28 NKJV), or believers of the past who partook

⁹ It is important to understand that Christ did **not** bleed to death; rather, He exhaled His human spirit once salvation was completed (Jn.19:30-37; cf. Matt.27:50; Mk.15:37; Lk.23:46). The "blood of Christ" is a metaphor sanctified and employed by the Holy Spirit to represent in a very graphic way the great sacrifice our Lord made for us in being judged for all of our sins. See in BB 4A: Christology, section II.4, "The Blood of Christ".

of sacrificial meals "of covenant" that foreshadowed the future reality of salvation (Ex.12:1-12; cf. Gen.31:51-54), our participation "proclaims the death of Jesus until He comes" (1Cor.11:26) and so pledges our continuing faith and faithfulness. The old, shadow covenant(s) (cf. Ezek.16:60 "covenant of youth") and the memorial, "New" covenant (cf. Ezek.16:60 "everlasting covenant") thus both proclaim the salvation to which we are heirs and partakers by the work of God in Jesus Christ through our continuing faith in Him:

(11) But Christ has already arrived [in heaven] as High Priest of the good things to come, [having passed] through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, that is, the one which is not of this creation. (12) Nor was it through the blood of goats and bullocks, but through His own blood (i.e., His spiritual death) that He entered once and for all into the holy of holies, having wrought eternal redemption. (13) For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of the heifer sprinkled upon the unclean render a person holy in respect to bodily cleansing, (14) how much more will the blood of Christ, who offered Himself without defect to God through the eternal Spirit, cleanse our conscience from dead works so that we may serve the living God? (15) And it is for this reason that He is the Mediator of a New Covenant, so that those who have been called might receive their eternal inheritance on the basis of the death He suffered to redeem us from the transgressions [committed] under the first Covenant.
Hebrews 9:11-15 (cf. Heb.12:24)

As mentioned above, the Hebrew word for covenant/testament is *beriyth*, often bearing the sense of treaty, alliance or agreement. Since, unlike treaties or alliances between states and individuals, the old and new "agreements" of the Bible are not being made by two parties which are anything close to being equal, but are instead made by God at His own instigation on Man's behalf, translators have always felt the need to distinguish the Old and New "covenants" from person-to-person or state-to-state agreements. But one of the main points of the *beriyth* is indeed that God has chosen to bind Himself to fulfill all that He has promised – for our benefit, not for His. That is to say, if God has said it once, it is true and it will stand, but for the sake of our encouragement and perseverance, He has undertaken to give us assurances above and beyond anything we could ever deserve or ask for by formally "ratifying" His Word through these agreements, agreements which, because of His absolute integrity, will never be broken by Him (Heb.6:16-20).

A covenant/testament/*beriyth* is, therefore, first and foremost a **promise** from God, and it is for this reason that we find the word *beriyth* closely associated in the New Testament with the concept of God's promises to us (Gal.3:17; Eph.2:12). The best way to understand the idea of the covenant/testament/*beriyth*, therefore, is in terms of God's **ultimate** promise to mankind. For the Old Covenant (really a series of promises, to Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, etc.; cf. Acts 13:23; 13:32-33; 26:6; Rom.4:13; 9:4; Gal.3:16; 3:29; 4:28; Eph.3:6; 2Tim.1:1; Heb.4:1; 6:12; 9:15; 10:36; 11:38-39; 1Jn.2:25) was first and foremost the promise of salvation (and all that it would entail), while the New Covenant is essentially the fulfillment of that ultimate promise (through Christ's incarnation, sacrifice and resurrection: Matt.26:28; Mk.14:24; Lk.22:20; 1Cor.11:25). Hence, the promised Seed of Genesis 3:15, and the Seed promised to Abraham in Genesis 12:7 find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ (Gal.3:16-29). The Old Covenant is thus a

looking forward through the shadows to the New Covenant, the reality of Christ and the fulfillment of all God's promises for salvation and eternal life through Him (1Cor.11:25; 2Cor.1:19-20; 3:6; Heb.9:15):

And we are proclaiming this good news to you, the promise made to our fathers now become a reality. For this promise God has fulfilled for us, His children, by raising Jesus from the dead.
Acts 13:32-33a

For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcision for the sake of God's truth, that is, to confirm the promises (i.e., covenants) made to their ancestors – and also so that the gentiles might glorify God for His mercy (i.e., in providing salvation through Jesus).
Romans 15:8-9b

Our capability comes from God, who has made us capable ministers of a new covenant – not the one of the letter (i.e., the Law), but one of the Spirit. That is because the letter (i.e., the Law) puts us to death, but the Spirit brings us to [eternal] life.
2nd Corinthians 3:6 (cf. Rom 2:29; 8:10; Gal.4:29)

From mankind's point of view, hope is always the central idea behind the promises of God solemnized in covenant form. That God has promised, sworn, and obligated Himself to provide for our salvation (Old Covenant perspective), and that Christ has accomplished and fully ratified all the promises of the Old Testament through His blood (New Covenant perspective), is indescribably encouraging news, good news, that empowers and strengthens our hope that one day we shall indeed be with Him, anchoring us, so to speak, to the heavenly home which is ours by virtue of our faith in Christ (Heb.6:19).

The Old Covenant looked forward to the coming of the promised Messiah, to the redemption of all mankind through His work (Rom.11:27). With the advent of Jesus Christ and His work on the cross now an accomplished fact, the New Covenant that God has made with all mankind includes not only forgiveness, but innumerable blessings besides, prominent among which is the gift of the Holy Spirit (Jn.7:39; cf. Is.59:21). Now that Christ has been resurrected, ascended to heaven and sits at the Father's right hand, we who believe in Him have received the gift of the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts as well, an unfulfilled promise from the Old Covenant perspective, but, like the coming of Christ in the flesh, a reality under the New Covenant (compare Is.44:3 and Joel 2:28 with Acts 2:14-21; Rom.12:5-8; 1Cor.12:1-11; Eph.4:7-13).

Jesus Christ is thus the key to these two phases of history which the two covenants represent. He is the unique Prophet (Deut.18:17-19), the eternal Priest (Ps.110:4) and the promised King (Is.9:6-7). He is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament promises (Rom.15:8; cf. Acts 3:24-26), of the Old Covenant itself (2Cor.3:14; Heb.7:22), and of the Law (Rom.10:4; Heb.7:12). He is the One who has delivered us from the bondage of the Old Covenant and brought us into the freedom of the New Covenant (Gal.4:24f.). He it is who has mediated for us a better covenant than was in force before, a covenant built on better promises (Jer.31:31-34; Heb.8:6; 12:24; cf. Eph.2:12; Heb.9:15-16).

The Mosaic Law did not replace or invalidate any of the other promises or covenants in the Old Testament (e.g., Gal.3:17). Rather it encapsulated them all, so to speak, into the one grand promise of salvation – rightly understood and interpreted. The Law of the Old Covenant could not save us, but it did look forward to the coming of the One who could. The failure of the Jerusalem congregation and many Jews and gentiles ever since has been to overlook that most critical of all truths and attempt to gain salvation through the works of the Law rather than the faith it was meant to inspire, something God never intended, an impossible and blasphemous approach which has always been destined to stumble over Jesus Christ, the Cornerstone of God's plan and discover thereby a Rock of offense (Is.8:14; Rom.9:33; 1Pet.2:8), the end result of which is slavery to sin and death instead of life eternal in Jesus Christ.

(21) Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law? (22) For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. (23) But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, (24) which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar – (25) for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children – (26) but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all. (27) For it is written:

"Rejoice, O barren,
You who do not bear!
Break forth and shout,
You who are not in labor!
For the desolate has many more children
Than she who has a husband."

(28) Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise. (29) But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now. (30) Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman." (31) So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free.

Galatians 4:21-31 NKJV

e. Dispensations

"(12) Since the days of John the baptist until this present time, the Kingdom of God has been under violent attack, and violent men are laying hands upon it (i.e., intensified satanic attack with the incipient change of dispensations). (13) For all the prophets and the Law prophesied *until John* [the baptist] (i.e., the implication being that now "Jesus Christ revealed" is the focus in the new dispensation of the Spirit soon to come)." Matthew 11:12-13 (cf. Mk.1:15; Rom.5:6)

"The Law and the prophets [were dispensing God's truth] *until John*. Since that time the Kingdom of God is being proclaimed ("evangelized", lit., "offered as good news"). Luke 16:16

(4) But when *the fullness of time* came, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, (5) in order that He might redeem those under the Law, in order that we might receive the adoption. (6) And since you are sons, God sent the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying, "Abba, Father!"

Galatians 4:4-6

(7) In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace (8) which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence, (9) having made known to us the *mystery* of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, (10) that in the *dispensation* of the *fullness of the times* He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth – in Him.

Ephesians 1:7-10 NKJV

(4) [God] who wants all men to be saved and come to accept the truth. (5) For as God is One, so there is [only] One Mediator between God and Man, Christ Jesus in His humanity, (6) who gave Himself as a ransom for all [mankind], [having given us His] testimony [to this on the cross] *at the just the right time*.

1st Timothy 2:4-6

As it is, once and for all *at the conjunction of the ages* [Christ] has appeared to remove sin through the sacrifice of Himself.

Hebrews 9:26b

As we have mentioned many times, the birth, life, sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus Christ constitutes the great dividing line in human history: the cross separates all that came before from all that follows.¹⁰ Before the cross, salvation was given "on credit", so to speak (Rom.3:25-26). Because Jesus had not yet come in the flesh and had not yet died for our sins, believers of the past went to paradise below the earth after death. Only after the cross had become a reality, only after Christ had been resurrected, ascended, seated at the Father's right hand and glorified, only then could departed believers appear in God's presence in the third heaven. And only after the great victory of our Lord could the gift of the Holy Spirit be given (Jn.7:39). Thus it is that only on this side of the cross could the Church Age begin, the age of the great, Holy Spirit empowered expansion of Christ's assembly through the gospel, the good news about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ on our behalf. These dramatic events, the most important in all of human history, the rock – the Rock – upon which all divinely constructed history is founded, occasioned many changes, one of the most significant of which for our purposes in this study was "the change of law" Paul describes in Hebrews (Heb.7:12). This was a complete change of "dispensation" or divine administration of the plan of God, a mystery not anticipated before it

¹⁰ Many thanks to my good friend Lynn Murray for first pointing this out to me long ago. The reader is strongly encouraged to read the following before moving forward with this section: in SR 5: The Seven Millennial Days of Human History, section II.5, "The Five Dispensational Divisions of Human History"; and in BB 6B: Ecclesiology, section I.B.5.a, "The Dispensation of the Spirit".

happened, one which shifted the focus of that plan away from Israel under the Mosaic Law and to the entire assembly of the Church throughout the world in the power of the Holy Spirit instead, whereby "all things" were to be incorporated in the One who won that victory upon which the entire plan of God is predicated, the Messiah, our dear Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

(8b) . . . in all wisdom and understanding, (9) [God] has made known to us the *mystery* He has willed according to His own benevolent purpose which He determined in [Christ], (10) for the *administration* (lit., "dispensing": *oikonomia*) of this [present] *fulfillment of the epochs* (i.e., the Church Age wherein the Church is complete): namely the incorporation of all things in Christ, things in heaven, and things on earth . . .
Ephesians 1:8b-10a

What is a dispensation? The word has had a colorful history in evangelicaldom, thanks to its prominence in the famous Scofield Reference Bible and the school of interpretation, "dispensationalism", which gained prominence thereby (and which still maintains a strong grip on most evangelical theology). It should be noted at the outset, therefore, that a biblical dispensation is not precisely the same thing as the categoric theological constructs this school and its offshoots employ (with which the reader may or may not be familiar). In the New Testament, the Greek words having to do with "dispensing" from which "dispensationalism" is derived are the source of our English words "economy" and "economic", and have to do, etymologically and originally, with the Greek word for house, *oikos*. In Greek, an *oikonomos* is a steward or household manager, that is, someone who is responsible for the care of the household and those in it, commonly the one who distributes or "dispenses" all needful supplies, food in particular:

(42) The Lord answered, "Who then is the faithful and wise *manager* (lit., "dispenser", fr. *oikonomos*) whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? (43) It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. (44) Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions."
Luke 12:42-44 NIV

Just as our Lord in the verses which follow the passage above condemns the unjust or lazy steward who fails to be diligent in managing his master's household (Lk.12:45-48), so we see above His praise for a manager who conscientiously provides for the other members of the household by feeding them "at the proper time". In our Lord's analogy, as all Bible readers know, He is speaking not about literal food but about the teaching of the truth of the Word of God which a good pastor-teacher will not fail to provide in a timely way to those under his care that they may continue to grow spiritually through that sustenance. This picture, namely, of those to whom the truth is entrusted assiduously serving it up to those brought to their ministries, is the essence of the biblical concept of dispensations. That is to say, the idea of the dispensation, where it actually occurs in the Bible (as opposed to some theological discourses), always has to do with spiritual food.

The third time [Jesus] said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt

because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "*Feed my sheep.*"
John 21:17 NIV

The question Peter never asked is the one we need to answer here: "How, Lord?" For the key difference between periods of history from the divine point of view has much to do *not* with the truth to be served up to those who desire it – because the truth is the truth from Eden to New Jerusalem, from Genesis to Revelation – but with the *manner* in which it is to be delivered. This, after all, is the starting point with which Paul chooses to begin his letter to the Jerusalem church in his attempt to wean them away from the stale fare of the now-defunct Law to the solid food of the Spirit in the revelation of Jesus Christ now resurrected and revealed (Heb.1:1-2; cf. 1Cor.3:2; Heb.5:12-14).

(1) God, from antiquity having communicated to our fathers in the prophets at many times and in many ways, (2) [*but now*] has in these last days communicated to us in a Son, [the One] whom He has appointed heir of all things, [the One] through whom He created the universe.
Hebrews 1:1-2

The Mosaic Law with its ordinances was, in its essence, a means of communicating God's truth. And the way in which that truth was "dispensed" was unique, consisting not only of the written word to which it was committed but making use of various rituals, regulations, sacrifices and festivals in order to visibly and viscerally portray the truths it contained to a largely pre-literate world. Additionally, much of the truth the Law contains is shrouded in shadows, mysteries not as yet fully explained but necessarily hidden since its purpose was to lead those under it to saving faith in a Savior who would not be revealed in the flesh (and whose sacrifice would not be accomplished) until far into the future.

Before the Law was fulfilled by our Lord's life and sacrifice, it was *the* valid means of communicating God's truth to His people, of "dispensing" everything needful to know for salvation, spiritual growth, progress and production. Once fulfilled, however, it was never in the plan of God for this means of dispensation to be continued forever – not, that is, once Christ, the One whom it foreshadowed, had come in the flesh and fulfilled it; not, that is, once the Holy Spirit had been given to all believers for the very purpose of enlightening us in the truth; not, that is, once the New Testament had been (or, in the case of Hebrews, was very close to being) completed; not, that is, once the glory of God had left the temple ordained by the Law and taken up residence instead in the temple of the Church of Jesus Christ, believers around the world who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit who is God blessed forever (1Cor.3:16-17; 2Cor.6:16; Eph.2:21; 1Pet.2:5); not, that is, once the Levitical priesthood, the ones responsible for teaching the truth under the Law, had been replaced by all believers in Jesus Christ, Jews of every tribe and gentiles alike (1Pet.2:5; 2:9; Rev.1:6); not, that is, once the mysteries of Jesus Christ had been fully revealed through His first advent, sacrifice and resurrection, the ministering of the Spirit, and the inspiration and completion of the New Testament through which these mysteries have now been completely unveiled and fully explained.

(1) Let [every] man evaluate us this way, namely, as servants of Christ and **stewards** (lit., "dispensers", fr. *oikonomos*) of the **mysteries** of God. (2) Now what you are looking for in **stewards**, moreover, is that one be found who is faithful [to the Lord] (i.e., and therefore worthy of one's trust).

1st Corinthians 4:1-2

(1) For this reason (i.e., the building up of the Church into a holy temple: cf. Eph.2:14-22), I, Paul, am Christ's prisoner on behalf of the gentiles. (2) And I assume that you have heard about this **dispensation** of God's grace given to me on your behalf (i.e., his mandate as an apostle to "carry Christ's name to the gentiles": Acts 9:15). (3) For it was through [God's] revelation that this **mystery** [of His calling out of the gentiles] was made known to me as I wrote you briefly before. (4) When you read these things you will be able to understand my spiritual insight into this **mystery** of Christ, (5) which was not made known to mankind in previous generations as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. (6) [And the mystery is this]: that the gentiles are [now] fellow heirs, members of the same body, and equal partakers of the promise [of salvation to Israel] in Christ Jesus through the gospel, [the proclamation of His victory]. (7) It is of this gospel that I have been made a minister by the gift of God's grace given to me through His dynamic power. (8) To me, the least of all His holy ones, this gracious charge has been entrusted: to proclaim to the gentiles the unfathomable wealth that is Christ, (9) and to shed light on this **mystery**, [the calling out of the gentiles] which is now being brought to pass (lit., "the **dispensation**" of it, accomplished through the truth of the gospel), though it was once hidden from the ages in God who created everything. (10) God [did this] so that [His] enigmatically intricate wisdom might be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms through the agency of the Church, (11) according to His plan for the ages (i.e., history) which He has implemented in [the person of] Christ Jesus our Lord.

Ephesians 3:1-11

(25) It is of this [Church] that I, [Paul], have become a minister according to God's mandate given to me for **dispensing** [the truth] to you, in order to bring completeness to God's Plan (lit., "word", Gk. *logos*), (26) that is, [to make known] the **mystery** hidden from ages and from generations [past], but now revealed to His holy ones (i.e., believers). (27) To all such God desired to make known what wealth there is in this glorious **mystery** regarding the gentiles, for it is that Christ – your hope of glory – is in you (i.e., gentiles saved as well as Jews and all indwelt by Jesus Christ).

Colossians 1:25-27

And command them not to pursue myths and endless genealogies, things which provoke controversies rather than the **dispensing** [of] the [truth] of God by faith.

1st Timothy 1:4

For an overseer (i.e., pastor-teacher / elder) must be blameless as God's **steward** (lit., "dispenser", fr. *oikonomos*) [of the truth] . . .

Titus 1:7a

As each one [of us] has received a [particular spiritual] gift, [so let us be] ministering it to each other as good **stewards** (lit., "dispensers", fr. *oikonomos*) of the multifaceted grace of God.

1st Peter 4:10

Though it was always the plan of God (Eph.3:11 above) that, after the resurrection of our Lord and the subsequent gift of the Spirit, the gentiles should begin to stream into Christ's assembly in unprecedented numbers, before the fact this truth was a great mystery (v.9 above; cf. Rom.11:25-27; Col.1:26-27; Eph.3:1-11; 5:25-32), a truth not revealed and an event not begun until after the cross. Apropos of our present study, Paul above makes reference twice to his role in this great expansion of the Church by using the concept of "dispensation" (vv. 2 and 9). In the analogy, Paul is the steward and the Ephesian believers are the household which he is serving, distributing or dispensing the spiritual sustenance, the truth, they need first to become believers, and then to survive and thrive, to grow and to serve Jesus Christ in turn.

The biblical idea of dispensations is thus all about the divine "supply chain", not the supplying of the physical sustenance we all obviously need to continue in this world and without which no one would be able to continue in this life so as to serve Jesus Christ. God has many ways of taking care of our physical needs, from the mundane (i.e., providing us with the job we need to put bread on our tables) to the miraculous (manna to the children of Israel, ravens feeding Elijah, our Lord multiplying the loaves and fish to the five and to the four thousand). Biblical dispensation speaks of God's means for providing our **spiritual** sustenance, and these means have been different at various times throughout the prior course of human history. In the garden of Eden, the Lord spoke directly to Adam and Eve (e.g., Gen.3:8-10), and directly too to various prophets and heads of believing families such as Abraham (e.g., Gen.12:1-3). Israel was a special case wherein, in addition to her many prophets, there was also an entire Law devoted to teaching that people about the Lord and His truth through a variety of rites and rituals and festivals (e.g., Ps.147:19-20), often through prophecy, with the written Word of God being employed by the Lord for the first time beginning with Moses (e.g., Ex.34:1), and continuing with the production of the entire Old Testament over time. But this multi-pronged approach using many different methods to supply/dispense the truth all believers need was dramatically transformed through the coming of the One who is Himself the very Word of God.

(1) God, **from antiquity** having communicated to our fathers in the prophets at **many** times and in **many** ways, (2) [**but now**] has in these last days communicated to us in a **Son**, [the One] whom He has appointed heir of all things, [the One] through whom He created the universe.

Hebrews 1:1-2

Jesus Christ is the Rock upon which the entire plan of God is founded (Ex.17:6; Num.20:8; Deut.32:4-37; 1Sam.2:2; 2Sam.23:3; Ps.18:2; 18:46; 19:14; 118:22; 144:1; Is.8:13-15; 17:10; 28:16; 44:8; 51:1; Dan.2:44-45a; Hab.1:12; Matt.16:18; Rom.9:33; 1Cor.3:11; 10:4; 1Pet.2:4 cf. Matt.7:24-27; Lk.6:47-49). He is that plan, the Logos, the very Word of God (Jn.1:1-5; Col.1:25; Tit.1:3; 1Jn.1:1-3). His life and in particular His victory on the cross and resurrection is the dividing point of human history as God the Father has ordained it (Heb.9:26b; cf. Mk.1:15;

Rom.5:6; Gal.4:4; Eph.1:10; 1Tim.2:6), with the dispensation of the Spirit in the Age of the Church following thereafter and abiding until His return to rule the world at the second advent.

"For all the prophets and the Law prophesied *until John* [the baptist]."
Matthew 11:13

John's ministry of preparation for the Messiah (Matt.3:3; 11:10; Mk.1:2-3; Lk.1:76; 3:4; 7:27) was the culmination of all the prior means and methods used by God to dispense His truth about His plan in Jesus Christ "at many times and in many ways" (Heb.1:1), summed up by our Lord in the verse above with the phrase "the prophets and the Law". After the coming of the Father's Son, the One who fulfills the entire Law and all of its prophecies, the One who fulfills the plan of God at the cross, everything becomes new (Matt.26:28; Mk.14:24; Lk.22:20; 1Cor.11:25; 2Cor.5:7; Gal.6:15; Rev.21:5), while everything old, having been thus fulfilled, is replaced (Matt.5:17; Heb.7:12; 8:13), a truth which may be clearly seen in the replacement of the symbolic, ritual water-baptism of John looking forward to the Messiah, by the powerful reality of the baptism of the Spirit bequeathed to us by our victorious Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

"I baptize you with water (i.e., physically) for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."
Matthew 3:11 NIV

"I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."
Mark 1:8 NIV

John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."
Luke 3:16 NIV

The combination of the unveiling of the mystery of Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of all of the shadows of the Old Testament, and the gift of the Holy Spirit whose indwelling of all believers now empowers us to learn the truth and put it into practice as never before is what makes the Church Age a "dispensation" like no other. The Church Age is a dispensation, a special period of time, wherein God's supplying of the truth is unique and different from everything that has gone before. With the coming of the Spirit and with the completion of the Bible through the Spirit's ministry, the essential sustenance necessary to live our lives for Jesus Christ as He would have us to do, the essential "ammunition" we need to fight the fight our Lord has called us to, is now being supplied by God in a quantity and a quality of which believers of the past could only dream. Not only is the entire written Word now complete and available to all, not only does the New Testament reveal in great relief all of the mysteries about our Lord and His Church only dimly foreshadowed in the past, but through the personal ministry of the Holy Spirit and through the teaching ministries He empowers, we now have the ability to learn and to practice the "whole counsel of God" as never before (Acts 20:27) – and thus to make our lives count for Jesus Christ in myriad wondrous ways, earning fabulous eternal rewards in the bargain.

(1) You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. (2) I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? (3) Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?
Galatians 3:1-3 NIV

Even today, far too many believers are not only not taking advantage of the gift of the Spirit which makes our present dispensation so unique but have also fallen back into one sort of "works of the flesh" or another. This was exactly the situation of the Jerusalem church at the point of Paul's writing of Hebrews. Even though it had been in Jerusalem where the Spirit had first been given (Acts 1:4-5; 2:1-6), and where so many amazing demonstrations of the Spirit's power had been witnessed (e.g., Acts 3:1ff.; 5:1ff.; 5:12-16; 12:7-17; 12:21-23), nevertheless, just as in the case of the Galatians in the quote above, the Jerusalem believers had forgotten what they had been privileged to see and experience and had lapsed back into the by then defunct rituals and works of the Law, quenching the Spirit's power in their lives through embracing the old at the expense of the new (1Thes.5:19; cf. Eph.4:30).

It is certainly true that by time of writing the era of transition from the Age of Israel to the Age of the Church was now very close to being an accomplished fact,¹¹ with the result that fewer overtly miraculous signs were being given as the canon neared its completion along with the ending of the time of the apostles. But that ought to have meant a likewise completed transition in the hearts of the believers in the city where our Lord had ministered, was crucified and raised from the dead, and where the Spirit was first given – *not* a falling back into the ways of the prior dispensation. By doing the latter, the Jerusalem believers were negating the great power of the Holy Spirit meant to assist them to unprecedented spiritual growth and were instead falling back from the earlier gains they had made by essentially denying Jesus Christ through partaking in the old ways which proclaimed a Savior not yet come. Their slavery to tradition was not only vitiating their spiritual growth and causing them to backslide spiritually; it was also a grave offense to the One whose coming and whose victory had made the gift and the dispensation of the Spirit possible.

"The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached."
Luke 16:16 NIV

The church which once professed leadership of the Church militant had become a hindrance to the expansion of said Church through the negative influence it was exerting by looking backwards to the old instead of embracing the good news of the new, precisely the opposite of what was desired by the One whose victory had made the new dispensation of God's truth through the Spirit possible (Jn.7:39), the One who is that very truth.

¹¹ See BB 6B: Ecclesiology, section I.B.5, "The Time of Transition versus the Present Status Quo".

(17) For the Law was given through Moses, but grace and **truth** came through Jesus Christ. (18) No one has ever seen God. God the one and only [Son] – the One who has always been at the Father's side – He has made Him known.
John 1:17-18

"I am the way, **the truth**, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me."
John 14:6

(1) Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ for [the purpose of aiding] the faith of the elect and their acceptance of the truth which accords with godliness, (2) in the hope of eternal life which God who cannot lie promised before time began, (3) and [who] has at just the right time [**now fully**] revealed His Plan (lit., *logos*) through the proclamation [of the gospel] with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior (i.e., the One who is the Logos, the living Word of God).
Titus 1:1-3

Jesus Christ has always been **the** Plan of God, the Word, the Logos. That has been true since "before time began" (v.2 above). But the coming of our Savior, with His victory on the cross, with His resurrection and glorification, and with the gift of the Spirit He was granted to bequeath us thereby, "all things have become new" (Rev.21:5; cf. Matt.26:28; Mk.14:24; Lk.22:20; 1Cor.11:25; 2Cor.5:7; Gal.6:15). Failing to take advantage of that newness in the Spirit was a terrible missed opportunity. Turning back to the old which had been replaced was compromising the Jerusalem church to its core, a failure to "recognize the times" of the new dispensation of Christ's Church which harkened back to a similar failure to recognize the Messiah in an earlier generation.

(41) As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, [Jesus] wept over it (42) and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes. (43) The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. (44) They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize **the time of God's coming to you.**"
Luke 19:41-44 NIV

This prophecy was only a few years from coming to fulfillment when the believers in Jerusalem received this letter. How they would fare, individually and collectively, would have much to do with their response.

f. Christ the Logos

To boil things down to their essentials, the Jerusalem church was failing where believers who are backsliding or stagnating or "feeling dry" or otherwise falling short always fail: they lost their focus on and their commitment to Jesus Christ. While they still gave Him lip-service, in their hearts they had not treasured Him as the One of most importance in their lives, a failure common enough in our own day resulting from many causes and manifesting itself in a variety of negative

ways. For the Jerusalem church, the main cause was the combination of persecution coupled with lukewarmness to the truth, the net effect of which was turning away from the Lord . . . which led them back to the Law and/or turning back to the Law . . . which led away from the Lord. Whichever was the chicken and whichever was the egg, the end result was the same: losing touch with Him who is the Head of the Church (Col.2:18-19), and drifting away from the One who is our very life, Jesus Christ our dear Lord and Savior.

(1) For this reason (i.e., the infinite superiority of Christ, the Logos, over angels, as the God-man who has won the victory of the entire plan of God), it is all the more necessary for us to pay attention to the [teachings] we have heard, lest we *drift away* [off course]. (2) For if the Word (Gr. *logos*; i.e., the Law which is in its essence about the Logos) spoken through angels was confirmed and every violation of it received its appropriate recompense, (3) then how shall we flee the consequences of having neglected our so great salvation? For it is this very [salvation], which, having received its initial expression through the Lord by those who heard [Him] (i.e., in the early days of the Church) has now been confirmed to us [in our the present day] (4) through God [the Father Himself] bearing witness to it through signs and wonders and various [other] demonstrations of His power, and with distributions of the Holy Spirit (i.e., spiritual gifts) according to His will. Hebrews 2:1-4

The "teachings" referred to by Paul immediately above are the ones of which his readers had just been reminded in chapter one, namely, the essential doctrines about the deity and humanity of Jesus Christ and His centrality in the plan of God as being the Word, the Logos, the very Plan of God itself as the One upon whom it is based and in whom alone it is fulfilled (Jn.1:1-14; Heb.1:1-4; 2Pet.3:5-7; 1Jn.1:1-4; Rev.1:2; 19:13).¹²

(15) He (i.e., Jesus Christ; cf. v.13) is the exact image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. (16) Everything in the heavens and on the earth was created by Him, things invisible as well as those visible – whether thrones, authorities, rulers or powers, everything was created through Him and for Him. (17) And He Himself is before everything, and everything subsists in Him (cf. Heb.1:3). Colossians 1:15-17

But for us there is [but] one God, the Father from whom all things [have come into being] (i.e., the Father as architect of creation), and we [now live] for Him, and there is [but] one Lord, Jesus Christ through whom all things [have come into being] (i.e., the Son as agent of creation), and we [now live] through Him. 1st Corinthians 8:6

This backsliding was inevitable in returning to the rituals of the Law since the Law was already fulfilled by Jesus Christ, making all of its prior symbolism null and void and thus rendering any further allegiance to it by believers mere traditional rote, a practice which not only produced

¹² See BB 4B: Soteriology, section I.2, "The Plan of God for the Salvation of Individual Believers".

spiritual decline by its own agency but also left these believers vulnerable to Gnostic appeals as they soon found themselves completely "spiritually dry" through having rejected the Water of the Word and the power of it in the Spirit (Jn.7:38-39). Having lost contact with "the Head" (Col.2:18-19), these believers were floundering spiritually as a result, and had thus left themselves open to cheap substitutes for the truth of which Gnosticism with its eclectic false teachings was the devil's main contemporary ploy. Since both problems, i.e., legalism and Gnosticism, were at their core problems of perverting the precious truths about Jesus Christ into satanic lies, the two often blended seamlessly into one heretical tableau with the one leading to the other.

The true Logos, Jesus Christ, is God as well as man, undiminished deity and true humanity in one perfect person forever since the incarnation. This essential truth was uncompromisingly contrary to the Pharisaical legalism of the day which was hostile to the idea of the Messiah being true God who had taken on human form. It was also uncompromisingly contrary to the Gnostic notion of the Messiah being some sort of super-angel, semi-divinity who was not material. But only the God-man Jesus Christ could ever have redeemed us from our sins. This and many other critical teachings about our Savior had slipped from the hearts of many if not most of the members of this community of erstwhile believers, without a doubt as a result not only of persecution but also as result of a general lackadaisical attitude to the teaching of the truth of scripture and to the teaching of it on the part of those responsible for doing so.

Cease listening to instruction, my son, and you will stray from the words of knowledge.
Proverbs 19:27 NKJV

The above is a good warning for us all to internalize. No matter how far ahead we have progressed, no matter how much we have learned, no matter how close to the Lord we have drawn through the truth (Jas.4:8; cf. Ps.73:28; Jer.30:21; Heb.7:19), if we are not going forward, we will most likely soon be headed backward, and slipping back down the hill we have just climbed is not only easier than going up it; it is also a quicker process – as the Jerusalem believers demonstrate.

Jesus Christ *is* the Plan of God, through which the Father provides judgment, restoration and replacement of all that was lost through Satan's revolt on the basis of the sacrifice of our Lord on the cross.¹³ As the One who carries out the Plan (Greek *logos*), Jesus Christ is Himself the Word (Greek *logos*) of God, the embodiment of the Father's message, the Father's plan, the incarnate Logos, the Living Word of God.

The Word [Jesus Christ] existed at the very beginning, and there was reciprocity (i.e., co-divinity) between ***the Word*** and God [the Father]. And ***the Word*** was God.
John 1:1

¹³ This occurs in three phases: discussed in the Satanic Rebellion series; see especially part 5, section IV, "Things to Come"; see also the synopsis in BB 2B: Eschatology, section 1, "God's Plan for Human History".

What we have seen from the beginning, what we have heard and seen with our eyes, what we have observed and touched with our hands – this is about *the Word* of life, [Jesus Christ].

1st John 1:1 (cf. Jn.1:1-4; 1:14)

And He was clothed in a cloak splattered with blood, and His Name stands [forever]:
"*The Word* of God".

Revelation 19:13

Jesus Christ is the message, the messenger, and the One who implements the message by empowering it at the cross and by administering it throughout human history, doing so in person at the two advents. All divine revelation of the past pointed through shadows to His coming and to the cross; all divine revelation since His resurrection, ascension, session, glorification and sending of the Spirit harkens back to who He is and what He has accomplished for us, even as it looks forward to our blessed hope of His return (Tit.2:13). These truths should be obvious to any Bible-reading believer, and certainly to any believer who is sitting under even passably acceptable Bible teaching. But the Jerusalem believers had lost sight of the centrality of Jesus Christ to the detriment of all they had once believed – and even suffered for (Heb.10:32-35; cf. Heb.11:26; 13:13). Instead of persevering (Heb.10:36-37a), they were in grave danger of falling away completely (Heb.10:37b; cf. Heb.2:1-3; 3:12-19; 4:11-13; 6:4-8; 10:26-31).

Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God.

Hebrews 3:12 NKJV

So it is that Paul begins his epistle anonymously, not with a salutation as was his wont but with a brilliant reprisal of the glories of the Person of Jesus Christ to whom these once faithful and courageous believers had now turned their backs, even Him who is the Head of the Body, the One who saved us to be His and to whom we owe our entire allegiance.

But I want you to realize that *the head* of every man is Christ . . .

1st Corinthians 11:3a NIV

And God placed all things under [Christ's] feet and appointed him to be *head* over everything for the church.

Ephesians 1:22 NIV

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is *the head*, that is, Christ.

Ephesians 4:15 NIV

For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is *the head* of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.

Ephesians 5:23 NIV

And he is *the head* of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.
Colossians 1:18 NIV

And in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is *the head* over every power and authority.
Colossians 2:10 NIV

They have *lost connection* with *the head*, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.
Colossians 2:19 NIV

What the Jerusalem believers had lost, Paul will now go to extraordinary lengths to reestablish, beginning with the basics his readers have willfully put out of their minds, and giving us in the process of his detailed explanation of the proper assessment of the Law (and refutation of Gnosticism by intimation) not only a complete refresher on essential doctrine but also a set of magnificent insights into the victory of Jesus Christ and all of the glories soon to come.

II. Translation of Chapter 1:

(1) God, from antiquity communicated to our fathers in the prophets at many times and in many ways, (2) [*but now*] in these last days He has communicated to us in a Son, [the One] whom He has appointed heir of all things, [the One] through whom He created the universe (i.e., time-space). (3) He is the shining forth of [the Father's] glory, the precise image of His essence, the One who [in His deity] sustains the universe by His mighty Word. When He had accomplished the cleansing of [our] sins [in His humanity], He took His seat at the right hand of the Majesty on high. (4) [And at His session (v.3), Jesus] became [manifestly] superior to the angels to the degree that He received as [a part of] His inheritance a Name so much more glorious than theirs. (5) For to which of the angels did He ever say, "You are my Son. Today I have begotten you (Ps.2:7)"? And again, "I will be a Father to Him, and He will be my Son (2Sam.7:14)"? (6) But when He brings back the Firstborn into the world, He says, "And let all the angels of God worship Him! (Ps.97:7b)". (7) And while about the angels He says, "The One who makes His angels spirits, and His servants flames of fire (Ps.104:4)", (8) yet to the Son [the Father says], "Your throne, O God [i.e., the Messiah], is forever, and the scepter of Your Kingdom is the scepter of integrity. (9) You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness. For this reason God your God has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions (Ps.45:6-7)". (10) And [the Father also says], "From the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth, and the heavens are the works of your hands. (11) They indeed will perish, but you remain. And they will grow old like a garment, (12) and like a cloak you will change them and like they will [thus] be changed like a garment is changed. But you are the same, and your years will not come to an end (Ps.102:25-27)." (13) But to which of the angels has He ever said, "Sit down at my right hand until I make your enemies the footstool of your feet (Ps.110:1)"? (14) Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve on behalf of us who are destined to receive salvation as our inheritance?

III Summary and Paraphrase of Chapter 1:

The Son of God: Jesus Christ is the Father's unique Messenger, the very Son of God, the God-man who has won the victory of the invisible angelic conflict and who is thus superior to angels in every way.

The Son is the Word of God, the Father's Messenger and the Message itself, unique and clearly revealed to us who stand on the threshold of eternity now that He has come into the world, and is thus intrinsically superior to the many methods and manners of God's sharing of the truth in the past. The Son is the Father's true heir, heir to everything in creation. The Son is in fact the Creator of all that is. Jesus Christ is God, and nothing could even continue to exist without Him sustaining this creation through the powerful word of Him who is the Word of God (Col.1:16-17). The Son is the Savior of all mankind, the One who has won the victory in this invisible conflict of angelic rebellion through His own blood, His sacrifice for us on the cross. The Son's work has been proven acceptable, validated by the Father through the Son's resurrection, ascension, and session in glory at the Father's right hand. Despite the false, Gnostic teaching into which some of you have lapsed, can there really be any doubt, then, about the Son's complete superiority to angels?

Consider the scriptures. The Father never called any of the angels His Son as He does Jesus (Ps.2:7), did He? And He never said He was or would become any angel's Father as He explicitly does of the Messiah (2Sam.7:14), did He? In fact, doesn't the Father tell all the angels to worship the Messiah as God when He returns at the second advent (Ps.97:7)? And while the angels are clearly described as servants of God (Ps.104:4), haven't you read in scripture how the Messiah is called God, praised for the perfection of the righteous rule He is going to extend over the entire earth, and lauded for the Father's commissioning of Him to do so (Ps.45-6-7)? And haven't you read in scripture how the Messiah's creation of the world is described, how His eternal rule is contrasted with the temporary nature of this world He Himself has created, and how His own eternal being is confirmed in that very passage (Ps.102:25-27)? Are these things ever said of angels? Did the Father ever tell an angel, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool" (Ps.110:1)? Aren't the angels really His servants? Yes. And sent forth by the Son on our behalf, we believers who are joint heirs of salvation with Jesus Christ through His death on our behalf.

IV. Verse by Verse Commentary

Verse One

God, from antiquity having communicated to our fathers in the prophets at many times
and in many ways . . .
Hebrews 1:1

Here begins one of the most powerful, succinct yet comprehensive descriptions in all of scripture

of our Savior, the God-man Jesus Christ.¹⁴ Paul begins not with a salutation as is his wont but with a brilliant display of alliteration worthy of the best classical poetry. It is difficult to describe the beauty of his words here without pronouncing them aloud in Greek. The repeated combination of P's and R's and L's is masterful (*polymeros kai polytropos palai ho theos lalesas tois patrasiv en tois prophetais*), without at all diminishing the force of the meaning in the words chosen, rather, to the Greek ear, enhancing that meaning. This sort of tour de force at the commencement of a major work or section thereof was very common in the greatest classical authors, a way to grab the attention of the reader without at the same time detracting from the dignity of the presentation (as can happen when modern-day public speakers employ jokes or funny stories for the same purpose) but rather amplifying it. Paul was well-versed in the Classics, quoting, at various points in the Bible, Aratus (Acts 17:28), Menander (1Cor.15:33), and Epimenides (Tit.1:6). No one hearing this verse read in Greek for the first time – and all ancient literature and letters were always read and meant to be read aloud, not silently – could be in any doubt about the great care the author had taken or thus about the importance of what they were hearing and about to hear – a point mostly lost in silently reading an English translation. But the words themselves employed by Paul in this first sentence (which stretches to the end of verse two) and their meaning are even more powerful: the first verse when fully taken in sets the reader up for the stark contrast between the past – to which the Jerusalem church has reverted – and the glorious present reality of the revealed Savior and Messiah Jesus Christ.

God: Paul begins by reminding his readers that God the Father is the One who is in control and who has arranged the dispensations along with their appropriate means of sharing His truth. The Law, the temple, its rituals and everything to do with them came from Him. These things were not arbitrarily invented by human agency and they cannot be wrongly perpetuated against His will. God and God alone is the One who decides. The plan is His and these issues are not items of choice as the devil would like to suggest. The Law and the temple rites were not optional for Israel when they were in force. Similarly, the means by which the truth is now (and was at the time of writing) being distributed were and are the ones upon which the Father had decided in eternity past. God the Father is the authority, the only authority. Satan, the original politician who seduced one third of the angels with similar suggestions to the effect that creatures could decide upon their own ways is ultimately the one behind the wrongful return of the Jerusalem church to the worship of the Law to the detriment of their faith in Jesus Christ. Gnostics and legalists have this in common, namely, the dangerous misimpression that they can worship God the way they choose and that He will be pleased – when in fact we can only do things His way and even be saved (cf. Gen.4:3-7).

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."
John 14:6 NKJV

Recognizing the folly of believing that what the people decide is thus God's will has never been more important, because this is precisely what our present church era is currently doing.

¹⁴ Readers are strongly encouraged to read BB 4A: Christology and BB 4B: Soteriology for the details.

Laodicea, after all, means "what the people say is right". Just as our era is in imminent danger of being spit out of our Lord's mouth for such lukewarmness (Rev.3:16), so the Jerusalem church was on the cusp of having its light entirely extinguished on account of their backsliding and return to the now obsolete rituals of the Law.

(34) "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing! (35) See! Your house is left to you desolate; and assuredly, I say to you, you shall not see Me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!' "

Luke 13:34-35 NKJV

From Antiquity at Many Times and in Many Ways: With these words Paul sums up the Father's communication of the truth in the past in all of prior biblical history as being highly variegated and multifaceted in order to a stark contrast between His previous means of dispensing the truth and the One and only current Messenger of that truth, the Logos Himself, our dear Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Throughout the period of the Old Testament, the promise of a coming Savior was clearly given by God, "at many times and in many ways" through signs and symbols, types and rituals and prophecies, clothed in shadows until the day when the Messiah Himself should come (cf. Gen.3:15; Deut.18:15; Ps.2; 110; Is.9:1-7; 11:1-5; 49:5-7; 52:13-53:12; Dan.7:13-14; Zech.13:1). That happened *in the now distant past* (*palai* being the root of the prefixes for paleography, Paleolithic, paleontology, etc.), but *now* that He who is the only way of salvation had come, had spoken to them the words of truth, had suffered and died for their sins and ours, had been resurrected, ascended and seated in glory to await His return at the Father's perfect time, *now* reversion to the old "many ways" was a not-so-subtle slight to Him who is the *only* Way (Jn.14:6).

And without controversy great is the mystery [now revealed] of godliness:
God [i.e., Jesus Christ] was manifested in the flesh,
Justified in the Spirit,
Seen by angels,
Preached among the Gentiles,
Believed on in the world,
Received up in glory.
1st Timothy 3:16 NKJV

Communicated: In other words, the Father spoke *the Word* to generations of believers past in different ways at different times – but it was always the same Word, the same Logos: salvation through Him who is the very Word of God, Jesus Christ our Savior. What is different now (i.e., since the cross and thus also at the time of Paul's writing to the Jerusalem church), is that instead of looking dimly through shadows in hope of a salvation not yet accomplished (cf. Rom.3:23), we now have the confident assurance of a redemption which has been fulfilled by the blood of Christ, His spiritual death for us on the cross. Therefore not only are the blood rituals of the Law no longer necessary to teach us the truths now fully revealed to us by the actual coming of Jesus Christ and their explanation and explication in the gospels and the epistles of the New Testament

(of which this church had all of the former and many of the latter) but continuing in such rituals also sent entirely the wrong message after the fact – suggesting that the cross was somehow not sufficient to produce our so great salvation since otherwise why would these rites continue to be performed? The Law and the temple and rituals connected with them were definitely part of the "many ways and many times" the Father used *in the past*. But to ascribe to Him the notion that these should be continued once His Son had fulfilled entirely their symbolism with the reality of His spiritual death on the cross – the bedrock and foundation of all things – was inappropriate and dangerous. That part of God the Father's communication of the truth was now over, and had been since the advent of Jesus Christ. And that is why Paul uses the past tense here to describe these other "times and ways" of the Father's previous dispensation of the truth.¹⁵

"Do not assume that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets: I did not come to abolish [it] but *to fulfill* [it].
Matthew 5:17

For Christ is *the fulfillment* (lit., "end") of the Law, resulting in righteousness for everyone who believes [in Him].
Romans 10:4

To Our Fathers: The inhabitants of Jerusalem were, very understandably, proud of their lineage, heritage and traditions. But traditionalism is only valuable to the extent that it preserves and illuminates the truth. To the extent that instead it obscures the truth or, worse to tell, preserves false ways of doing things, to that extent it is to be entirely rejected. This was a hard lesson for the people of Judea to learn and in great part explains why "this generation" (Matt.24:34; Mk.13:30; Lk.21:32), i.e., this type of recalcitrant person, will characterize the Jewish people until Christ's glorious second advent return (Ps.12:7-8; Rom.11:25; cf. Deut.32:5; 32:20; Ps.95:10; Prov.30:11-14; Jer.2:31; 7:29).

(29) "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, (30) and say, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.' (31) Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. (32) Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers' guilt."
Matthew 23:29-32 NKJV

(47) "Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets, and your fathers killed them. (48) In fact, you bear witness that you approve the deeds of your fathers; for they indeed killed them, and you build their tombs."
Luke 11:47-48 NKJV

By stressing "our fathers", Paul no doubt sought to remind his readers of the above so as to not so subtly suggest that a clean break was needed from the traditions of the past which our Lord found

¹⁵ The aorist tense of the participle *lalesas* here possesses, as is most often the case, antecedent action.

wanting above, and which had now been completely obviated and rendered no longer valid by His life and work. Even in the case of those rituals which had once been valid before the first advent, the reality of our Lord's coming had now swept away these shadows which had merely looked forward to it.

In the Prophets: Mentioning the prophets calls their prophecies to mind and intimates that all such prophecies about Jesus Christ and His sacrifice (to which the Law looked forward) have now been completely fulfilled (e.g., Is.53:1ff.; cf. Lk.24:27). And we know for certain from Christ's own words and from later scripture that the Old prophets of renown would not be making the same mistake which the present believers in Jerusalem were making. For they had eagerly *looked forward* to the *fulfillment* of the things they were given to prophecy.

"For assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it."
Matthew 13:17 NKJV

"For I tell you that many prophets and kings have desired to see what you see, and have not seen it, and to hear what you hear, and have not heard it."
Luke 10:24 NKJV

"Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."
John 8:56 NIV

(10) Even as they foretold this salvation that was to come to you, the prophets of old diligently investigated and inquired about this [gift] of grace, (11) being eager to discover the precise time the Spirit of Christ within them was signifying as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories [of salvation, among other things] that would follow [the cross]. (12) For it was revealed to them that in prophesying these things, they were not so much serving themselves as they were you – and these same things have now been proclaimed to you through those who gave you the gospel through the Holy Spirit, sent from heaven – even angels want to look into these things.
1st Peter 1:10-12

By the time this letter was read in Jerusalem, the New Testament was at least half way towards completion, so that these believers could not use the excuse of being entirely dependent upon the Old Testament for their faith and practice – not to mention that they had uniquely been blessed to have the teachings of the apostles to a degree not experienced by any other church. Certainly, the entire Bible is a blessing and all of it is useful "for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2Tim.3:16 NKJV), and the Law in particular is useful – for those who use it properly (1Tim.1:8).

Then He said to them, "Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old."
Matt.13:52 NKJV

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.

Romans 15:4 NIV

But by emphasizing God the Father's prior communication of the truth to the past generations through "the prophets" and contrasting this prior method in the previous dispensation to "the Son" who is **now** the Father's preferred means of dispensing His truth, Paul uses the Word of God in the Spirit like a sharp sword to divide the backward-looking wrong approach of these believers from the forward-looking correct approach to which he is attempting to call them back; there are only two options: to stand with the Word or to go one's own way instead. Any attention to the actual scriptures would demonstrate that Jesus is now the true focus of all we have and do as believers.

And I fell before his feet to worship him. And he said to me, "See that you don't [do that]! I am a fellow servant of you and of your brothers who hold [fast] the testimony about Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony about Jesus is the essence (lit., "spirit") of [all divine] prophecy".

Revelation 19:10

Verse Two

[**But now**] in these last days [the Father] has communicated to us in a Son, [the One] whom He has appointed heir of all things, [the One] through whom He created the universe (i.e., time-space).

Hebrews 1:2

[**Now**]: This is a fair addition to any English translation in order to bring out with emphasis what is obvious from reading this verse in the Greek, namely, the vivid split between the previous situation under the Old Testament and the present regime of the Father's communication to His people at the present time "in a Son". Previously, many prophets and many other media were employed by the Father to lead up to the central event of all human history: the birth, ministry, sacrifice and resurrection of the Son of God. After the cross and our Lord Jesus' rising from the dead, and after the gift of the Holy Spirit, everything has changed. That is in its essence the theme of Hebrews and the basis for everything Paul has to say in this epistle. The dispensation of the Spirit with His anointing/indwelling of all believers, with His gifting and empowering of unique spiritual gifts never before given, and with His (at that time) imminent completion of the canon of the New Testament wherein all of the prior mysteries are fully revealed, is so different from what went before that **now**, "in these last days" turning backwards to the old would not only result in a myopic view of the truth at best but was also extremely spiritually dangerous to overlook the revelations of the new and to fail to take advantage of the Spirit's explication and empowerment of them.

In These Last Days: In contrasting the present day to the previous days gone by, the time of the first advent being the great dividing line (cf. Matt.11:12-13; Mk.1:15; Lk.16:16; Rom.5:6;

Gal.4:4-6; Eph.1:7-10; 1Tim.2:4-6; Heb.9:26), Paul's words here, "these last days", are referring to the present dispensation of the Church Age, the final dispensation before the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. As we have studied previously, the dispensations, that is, the Father's dividing up of human history in terms of how He has chosen to dispense His truth, are as follows:

1. Gentile Patriarchy: from Adam to Abraham (mainly through individual believers)
2. Jewish Patriarchy: from Abraham to Moses (mainly through Jewish patriarchs)
3. The Mosaic Law: from Moses to Christ (mainly through the prophets, the Levites, and the written Word of the Old Testament, the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings)
4. The Church: from Christ's first advent to His Second Advent (initially through apostles and other specially gifted men, then to all believers in the Spirit through the completed canon and the teaching of pastor-teachers from it)
5. The Millennium: from Christ's return to the end of history (unlimited truth available from multiple sources: Is.11:9; Hab.2:14).

The above is not meant to be a complete description of the dispensational differences (which we have covered previously¹⁶), but does give the gist of the main differences in the "many means and ways" the Father has employed to dispense His truth to the world before our Lord's coming. It is important to add first that between the Law and the Church, during our Lord's three and a half year ministry, He who is the living Word of God was the main source of truth for all truly interested in it, for His life, His ministry, and His sacrifice are, as we have noted above, the great dividing line of human history as God has constructed it.

Secondly, while the Church Age began with the giving of many unique spiritual gifts such as apostleship, prophecy and tongues to aid in the expansion of Christ's assembly beyond Israel to the gentile world at large, these were never meant to be permanent, and indeed the Spirit ceased giving these "sign gifts" as soon as the Bible was completed or "perfected" with the completion of the canon (1Cor.13:8-11). From that point forward (ca. 68 A.D.), with the penning of Revelation and the death of the apostle John, the Bible, the universal indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the teaching ministry of prepared, gifted and qualified pastor-teachers are the means that the Father has employed to dispense His truth – the ritual following of the Law no longer being valid.

Thirdly, it should also be noted that the third dispensation, that of Israel under the Law, still has seven years to run (cf. Dan.9:24-27), the time of the Tribulation. This last seven years before our Lord's return will run concurrently with the last seven years of the Church Age, with the result that the last two dispensations prior to Christ's return will join into one on the eve of that return during the Tribulation.¹⁷

¹⁶ For the details, see SR 5: The Seven Millennial Days of Human History, section II.5, "The Five Dispensational Divisions of Human History".

¹⁷ See SR 5: The Seven Millennial Days of Human History, II.9.e, "The Tribulation Overlap".

What concerns us here in our present study is that the situation for the believers in Jerusalem at the time of writing was, in terms of the way the Father is dispensing His truth to the world, mostly the same as what we find today, the only exception being that there were still apostles, such as Paul, with divinely given authority over the entire Church. It is also possible that some other special communication gifts were still being given, but Paul talks about these in the past tense at Hebrews 2:4 in the context of having to remind these believers about the not too distant past. What we can say with authority is that the dispensation of the Law was by this time distantly and definitively over from God's point of view, the fact of the temple still being in place and the rites and rituals of the Law still being carried out – for the moment – notwithstanding. Thus, with the phrase, "in these last days", Paul draws a sharp line of demarcation between the present reality of a new dispensation empowered by the Spirit and the old one of the Law whose true purpose had now been entirely fulfilled by the coming, sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Communicated to Us: The Father is the One with the plan. Therefore all communication about His plan comes from Him. That communication is His Word, the Logos, Jesus Christ.

In [Him, Jesus Christ], we also have an inheritance, having been *ordained* according to *the design* of Him, [the Father], who is *working everything out* according to the desire of His *will* (i.e., the plan of God).

Ephesians 1:11

We, "us" as the object in our context (Heb.1:2), are the recipients of the Father's communication. Jesus Christ, His Son, is the Message and the Messenger. He has always been so. What is different about this present dispensation, the Church Age, is that now we have been given to see the Messiah in the flesh; now we have the reality of the cross, the payment for all of our sins, as an accomplished fact; now we have all of the prior mysteries unveiled with their symbolism looking forward to Jesus and His sacrifice for us completely revealed and explained in the New Testament, the written Word of God, the tangible counterpart of the Him who is Himself the living Word of God (Jn.1:1-5; 1Cor.2:16; 1Jn.1:1-3; Rev.19:13); and now we have the Holy Spirit indwelling us and a host of spiritual gifts given to the entire Church to aid us all in learning and living God's truth to His glory and the pleasure of the One we are here to serve, our dear Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

These are no small or insignificant differences from what obtained in the previous dispensation, the previous regime of the manner in which the Father ordained His truth to be distributed. What had been a nation-focused effort is now international. What had been committed into the hands of a few prophets, priests and Levites is now entrusted to us all collectively as the Body of Christ, with each believer playing an important role in the distribution of the Father's truth, whether directly (by way of evangelists and pastor-teachers and related gifts) or indirectly (through witnessing, through prayer, and through the support of various teaching ministries in multifarious ways corresponding to the gifts we have been severally given), with the Holy Spirit Himself directing the entire process through His distribution of gifts and empowerment of them, with the Son Himself assigning us our individual ministries, and with the Father Himself ordaining the effects of each:

(4) There are different gifts, but the same Spirit; (5) and there are different ministries, but the same Lord (i.e., Jesus Christ); (6) and there are different results, but the same God [the Father] who brings about all results in all cases. (7) And to every [Christian] has been given a manifestation of the Spirit for the good (i.e., the edification of the Church).
1st Corinthians 12:4-7

It is One and the same [Holy] Spirit who empowers all these [gifts], distributing them to each one individually according as He wills.
1st Corinthians 12:11

And to each of us this grace has been given according to the measure of the gift of Christ.
Ephesians 4:7

Important to note in our present context is that the "us" of verse two includes all believers, gentiles as well as Jews, but specifically here also the Jerusalem believers. They too were the recipients of all these wonderful blessings unique to the Church Age. They too had been given gifts – and the responsibility of carrying out the ministries associated with them. But they had not been doing so. They had not been growing spiritually so as to have the ability to do so (Heb.5:12-14; 6:1-8; 10:26-35). Instead, they had turned back to the "weak and beggarly elements" of the Law (Gal.4:9 KJV; cf. Deut.4:19; Gal.4:3; Col.2:16; 2:20; 2Pet.3:10; 3:12) and to its legalistically embellished Pharisaical trappings. Not that they were unique in succumbing to this false approach. As we have seen before and above, legalism and its antinomian counterpart Gnosticism constituted the major twin threat to sound doctrine during the latter days of the apostles. And not that our present Church era of Laodicea is without reproach in this regard either. Tradition has always exerted a strong pull, especially if it is based upon an original foundation that had some semblance of truth (which was certainly the case with the Law and is also the case to varying degrees with present day Christian denominations). Likewise, casting off restraints has also always exerted a certain appeal, especially if such an approach makes the claim of being sanctified, godly, and a genuine representation of the truth (as the charismatics and various cults dressed in Christian clothing most certainly do claim). So while we join with Paul in denouncing all such reversion from the truth, we recognize that our church era of Laodicea is far from perfect and that we dwell amongst a people of unclean lips (Is.6:5).

In [a] Son: It is difficult to express in an English translation what is found here in the Greek. For one thing, there is no definite or indefinite article present, and that is no accident. But "Son" rather than "a Son" or "the Son" does not work in English as it does in Greek, especially when there is a clear expression of agency as is the case here. We can say "through God", or "through Christ", or "through Jesus", but we cannot say "through Son". For another thing, the preposition used to express agency here (*en* with the dative case) is not one of the normal ones used by Greek to do so. In fact, it is instead a typical way of expressing instrumentality, not agency, which is to say the result of the action of a force more so than of a person. The net effect of these two unusual uses coupled together is to make the phrase "in Son" extraordinarily striking in the Greek in a way that no English reader would ever expect (absent an unworkable English translation). Why did Paul write it this way and what precisely does he mean by "in Son"?

This dramatic language is designed to capture the attention of those listening to the letter, meant to be read aloud and listened to rather than silently read which is a great rarity in the ancient world. A Greek listener would process "Son" then as a title – like "God" or "Lord", making it abundantly clear that God's Son is unique – not just "a son" but SON – and, one hopes, reminding those hearing this that they have failed to keep Jesus Christ elevated in their hearts as they should have been doing. Jesus is more than a man, more than a prophet, greater than any angel: He is God in His own right, and, since the incarnation, a true human being as well, the unique Person of the universe who alone possesses both a divine and a human nature. It is possible to know these things as information and yet not to be applying them rigorously. It is possible, through a lack of spiritual forward progress, to allow the force and the majesty of the truths about our Lord Jesus Christ, His unique Person and what He has done for us on the cross, to fade and to dim over time, to be veiled and choked by weeds, so to speak. For while no one can truly and properly appreciate how magnificent He is and how wonderful what He has done for us on this side of heaven, it is definitely possible to under-appreciate Him and His work, and to allow whatever appreciation we did once have cool in the darkness if we turn away from the warmth of the light of the truth of the Word of God.

Happy the man who always retains a godly fear [of the Lord], but one who hardens his heart [against the truth] will fall into evil.
Proverbs 28:14

On the day of His resurrection, our Lord communed with a pair of believers on the road to Emmaus (Lk.24:13-35). He deliberately veiled His appearance so that they were unable to recognize Him, and in the course of their conversation, He "opened the scriptures" to them (Lk.24:32):

(25) Then He Himself said to them "O you ignorant men, and slow to believe all the things which the prophets spoke. (26) Wasn't it necessary for the Christ to suffer these things [first], and [then] come into His glory?" (27) And taking His start with Moses and all of the prophets, He thoroughly explained to them the things [written] about Himself in all the scriptures.
Luke 24:25-27

Then, as they were breaking bread together later, our Lord revealed Himself to them (Lk.24:31). What our Lord did for these two believers on the road to Emmaus, Paul is attempting to do for the Jerusalem church. Rather than being veiled from our eyes, the reality of the Son of God has now been revealed to us in the flesh (Jn.1:14; 1Jn.1:1-2). But like the believers journeying to Emmaus, the Jerusalem church had allowed what they had seen with their own eyes to fade from their hearts. Reminding them of the majesty of the Son of God was a necessary first step to restoring them to fellowship with God the Father in the pursuit of spiritual growth, for Jesus Christ is now the visible and personal focus of the entire plan of God.

What we have seen from the beginning, what we have heard and seen with our eyes, what we have observed and touched with our hands – this is [all] about the Word of life, [Jesus Christ].

1st John 1:1 (cf. Jn.1:1-4; 1:14)

For it is impossible to honor the Father without honoring the Son, so that any and all who think to be acting spiritually by returning to the Law and thereby ignoring the Son's sacrifice (or embracing Gnosticism and considering the Son a mere creature of the Father along with angels) are only deceiving themselves.

While [Peter] was still speaking, behold, a cloud suffused with light enveloped them, and, behold, a voice [issued forth] from the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son with whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him!"
Matthew 17:5 (cf. 2Pet.1:16-21)

(22) "For neither does the Father judge anyone, but he has given all judgment to the Son,
(23) in order that all may honor the Son as they honor the Father."
John 5:22-23a

"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me."
John 14:6b

As the very Word of God Himself, the Father's Messenger and His Message, the Son is intrinsically superior to the many methods and manners of God's sharing of the truth in the past. Failure to appreciate the Father's new way of sharing His truth by means of Him who is the truth, Jesus Christ, is disrespectful to the Son (Heb.6:6; 10:29a) and grievous to the Holy Spirit (Heb.10:29b; cf. Is.63:10; Matt.12:31-32; Lk.12:10; 1Thes.5:19; Eph.4:30).

Appointed Heir of All Things: The subject of inheritance is a very important one in scripture: in the Law, in the New Testament generally (Matt.5:5; 19:29; 25:34; Mk.10:17; Lk.10:25; 18:18; Acts 20:32; Rom.4:13-14; 8:17; 1Cor.6:9-10; 15:50; Gal.3:18; 3:29; 4:1; 4:7; 4:30; 5:21; Eph. 1:11; 1:14; 5:5; Col.3:24; Tit.3:7; Jas.2:5; 1Pet.1:4; 3:9; Rev.21:7; cf. Col.1:12; 1Pet.5:3;), and in the book of Hebrews in particular (Heb.1:2; 1:4; 1:14; 6:12; 6:17; 9:15; 11:7-8; 12:17). Heirship was also very important to the Jewish believers of the Jerusalem church. Many of these believers still had ties to their ancestral lands dating back to Joshua's original allotment following the entrance of Israel into the land of Canaan, while others may have been hoping for the reestablishment of their original inheritances (as certainly should have happened every seventy years during the Jubilee: Lev.25:8-44; 26:34-35; 26:42-43; 27:16-24; Num.36:4). This system of perpetual inheritance was of course found in the Law of Moses and inseparable from it. But we know from the New Testament that all believers are heirs of God, not just those of the physical line of Abraham. And we also know that our true inheritance is not tied to this temporary earth. Our eternal inheritance is in New Jerusalem, not in any earthly one, and it is to that city that we look in hopeful anticipation for the fulfillment of all of the promises God has made to us in Jesus Christ.

The one who wins the victory shall be heir to these things (i.e., the glories of the New Jerusalem), and I will be His God, and He shall be my son.
Revelation 21:7

For it is Jesus Christ who has fulfilled all the requirements of the Law and thus empowered the eternal inheritance for which we long, an inheritance of which the parcels of land in Israel were merely symbols. We understand that Jesus Christ is the One who died and therefore the One through whom and with whom we have become coheirs (Rom.8:17; Eph.3:6; 1Pet.3:7; cf. Heb.11:9), sons of God and fellow heirs of the Son of God because we belong to Him (Gal.3:26; 4:5-7; Eph.1:5; cf. Matt.5:9; 5:45; Lk.20:36; Jn.8:35; Rom.8:14; 1Thes.5:5; Heb.2:10). For all of God the Father's promises are fulfilled through Him alone.

So that [now] having been justified [in this way] by His grace, we might become *heirs* in regard to the *eternal life* for which we *hope*.

Titus 3:7

(3) May the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ be praised, who has in His great mercy caused us to be reborn to a *hope* which lives through Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead, (4) and to an *inheritance* which will never be destroyed, defiled, or dimmed, but which is being guarded in heaven for us, (5) who are ourselves also being kept safe by God's power and by our faith in Him to an ultimate deliverance ready to be unveiled at the end of time.

1st Peter 1:3-5

Our joint heirship with Jesus Christ means that in place of death and the loss of everything, in His inimitable grace God the Father has promised us an eternal inheritance, one bought and paid for by the death of His dear Son our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We enter into that covenant/testament/will – promise of inheritance – through faith (Eph.2:8-9); we believe to become heirs, co-heirs of the One who died to provide us this inheritance and rose again to life that we, having been justified by His death (Rom.3:24; 5:9; 8:30), might be glorified with Him in resurrection also (Tit.3:7), living forever with Him in our new home, New Jerusalem. This is what has been promised. This is what we believe. And this is what we are hoping for – a hope of confident assurance that God will do as He has said. It is that faith which sealed the contract/covenant and which with the help of the Spirit keeps it sealed until the time of its fulfillment (2Cor.1:22; Eph.1:11-14; 4:30; 1Pet.1:4-5).

(39) And through their *faith*, all of them (i.e., the great believers of chapter 11), though they became witnesses [to the world] (lit., "were martyred"), yet they did not receive the *promise* (i.e., resurrection and reward), (40) since God was looking forward for our sakes to something better, so that they might not be made *perfect* (i.e., resurrected and rewarded) without us.

Hebrews 11:39-40

This common set of eternal blessings which will fall to the lot of every believer for all eternity is analogous to the inheritance that all Israelites received upon their entrance into the Land of Promise – or more precisely put, the temporal inheritance is actually an analogy which teaches the enduring eternal one (just as the earthly temple is merely a representation of the true heavenly realities, etc.). Indeed, we find the New Testament replete with this inheritance analogy, indicating just how important it is for us to concentrate our focus on the eternal possessions we

shall enjoy rather than on the ephemeral here and now. As members of the Body of Christ, we are God's heirs and we are Christ's heirs, possessors of an inheritance of eternal life in God's eternal Kingdom whose richness exceeds anything we can presently even imagine. Regardless of how little or how much we have done for Him in this life, all believers will receive a full share in Jesus and the kingdom (Matt.20:1-16).

(16) For the Spirit Himself testifies to our spirit that we are God's children. (17) And if we are God's children, then we are also His *heirs*, even fellow *heirs* of Christ – that is if we have indeed suffered with Him so that we might also be glorified together with Him. Romans 8:16-17

If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and *heirs* according to the *promise*. Galatians 3:29 NIV

(11) [Jesus Christ], in whom we also have an *inheritance*, having been ordained according to the design of Him who is working everything out according to the desire of His will, (12) that we who have previously placed our *hope* in Christ might serve the purpose of generating praise for His glory (in life). (13) In [Christ] you also when you heard the Word of truth, the good news of your salvation, in whom [I say], when you believed, you were *sealed* by the *Spirit of promise*, the Holy [Spirit], (14) who is a pledge of our *inheritance* for redeeming its preservation (i.e., safeguarding our resurrection and reward in every way), to the praise of His glory. Ephesians 1:11-14

I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the *hope* to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious *inheritance* in the saints. Ephesians 1:18 NIV

. giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the *inheritance* of the saints in the kingdom of light. Colossians 1:12 NIV

(23) Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, (24) since you know that you will receive an *inheritance* from the Lord as a *reward*. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Colossians 3:23-24 NIV

Just so God, out of a desire to make it abundantly clear to us, the *heirs* of His *promise* [after the pattern of Abraham's faith], that His will in this matter [of salvation and its resultant blessings] is unchangeable, guaranteed it with an oath (Gen.22:16-17). Hebrews 6:17

And it is for this reason that He is the Mediator of a *New Covenant*, so that those who have been called might receive their *eternal inheritance* on the basis of the death He suffered to redeem us from the transgressions [committed] under the first Covenant.

Hebrews 9:15

Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to *inherit* the kingdom he *promised* those who love him?

James 2:5 NIV

Jesus Christ is the Victor in the invisible conflict precipitated by the devil's rebellion, having won the ultimate victory at the cross (Jn.12:31-32; Col.2:15; Heb.2:14-15; Rev.5:5; cf. Dan.7:14; Matt.28:18-20; Acts 2:36; 10:36; Rom.14:9; 1Cor.15:27; Eph.1:20-22; Phil.2:9-11; Col.1:16-20; Heb.1:2; 2:8; 1Pet.3:22; Rev.11:15; 17:14; 19:16). His victory, His spiritual death on our behalf which ransomed us from the power of the evil one (Matt.20:28; Mk.10:45; 1Tim.2:6; cf. 2Tim.1:10; Heb.2:14), is the basis for His own glorification for successfully completing the Father's mission. Part of that glorification is the receipt of all of the spoils of victory, the gift of the Spirit to which we are blessed now to partake (Jn.7:39), spiritual gifts which enable us to participate in the exploitation of our Lord's victory (Eph.4:8), and specific eternal rewards exemplified by the three victory-crowns: of righteousness (1Cor.9:25-27; 2Tim.4:8), life (Jas.1:12; Rev.2:10) and glory (1Pet.5:4). To the Victor go the spoils (Ps.68:12; 68:18; 82:8; 110:1-7; 111:5 [in Hebrew]; Is.33:23; 53:12; Matt.28:18-20; Lk.11:21-22; 20:16; Jn.16:7; Eph.4:7-10), and as those who have cast our lot with the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, a share of those spoils will be given following the resurrection at the judgment seat of Christ, rewards commensurate with the fight we fight while still here on earth in this first body (Matt.13:23; 19:29; 25:14-30; Mk.4:20; Lk.8:8; 19:11-27).

Jesus Christ is THE Heir, having died for the sins committed under the first testament (Heb.9:15) and making possible thereby the giving of a new testament or will, the contract or basis for our inheritance (Rom.3:25; cf. Rev.21:5). He bought us as His own with His own blood, His spiritual death on the cross (1Pet.1:18-19). Thus it is that *we* are *His* inheritance (Rev.5:9). And by virtue of being His, we share in all that He has as joint heirs with Him. This is our hope: a confident assurance that these promises from God Himself, guaranteed on oath (Heb.6:16-17; 7:20-21; 7:28), will fall to our lot in God's good time when we are resurrected to meet our Lord Jesus at His glorious return. That this promise, this set of promises, will be fulfilled we accept and confirm with our faith (Heb.11:1; 11:6); that hope, that set of things hoped for, will come to pass at precisely the right time, just as our Lord died for us just at the right time in order to make all this possible (Rom.5:6). This is what the New Testament means: an unbreakable contract and will containing a set of promises for life eternal and eternal reward for all who belong to Jesus Christ, one ratified by the blood of the One whose heirs we are and whose inheritance we are in turn (Eph.1:7; Col.1:14; Heb.9:12; 1Pet.1:18-19).

And it is for this reason that He is the Mediator of a *New Covenant*, so that those who have been called might receive their *eternal inheritance* on the basis of the death He suffered to redeem us from the transgressions [committed] under the first Covenant.

Hebrews 9:15

(20) Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of *the everlasting covenant*, (21) make you

complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.
Hebrews 13:20-21 NKJV

Because even though our Lord died to validate us as His heirs, He also took His life back up again to receive us as His Bride, His own eternal inheritance (Matt.9:15; 25:1-13; Mk.2:19; Lk.5:34; Jn.3:29; 1Cor.15:23; 2Cor.11:2-3; Eph.1:22-23; 5:25-27; Rev.19:7-9; 21:2-4; 21:9-27; 22:17).

(17) "Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again.
(18) No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father."
John 10:17-18 NKJV

This part of Hebrews chapter one, verse two, therefore, emphasizes the unique humanity of Jesus Christ. Inheritance is a fundamentally human thing which cannot be divorced from the principle of death, the event that makes the covenant upon which the inheritance is based valid. Uniquely in all of human history, Jesus not only died to provide us with an inheritance beyond any other, eternal life, but as the Son of God and as the Heir (Matt.21:38; Mk.12:7; Lk.20:13-14), He also took His life back up again in turn in order to be the firstborn among many brethren (Rom.8:29), the Head of the Church which is His Body, His Bride, His inheritance (1Cor.11:3; Eph.4:15; Col.1:18; 2:10; 2:19; Rev.21:9).

(16) The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, (17) and if children, then *heirs* – *heirs* of God and *joint heirs* with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together [with Him].
Romans 8:16-17 NKJV

Only as a true human being could Jesus Christ have this relationship with us and we with Him (cf. Heb.2:11-15). Christ's heirship and our status of coheirs with Him thus proves Jesus' ***genuine humanity*** and the uniqueness of it.

(14) Therefore since these children (i.e., of v.13) have a common heritage of flesh and blood, [Christ] too partook of these same [common elements] in a very similar fashion (i.e., not identical only in that He was virgin born and so without sin), in order that through His death He might put an end to the one possessing the power which death (i.e., human mortality as a result of the fall) has bequeathed [to him], that is, the devil, (15) and might reconcile those who were subject to being slaves their whole lives long by their fear of death.
Hebrews 2:14-15

Through whom He Created the Universe: Anyone listening to Paul's discourse – or reading the Bible today – who had/has any doubts about the deity of Jesus Christ should have them completely dispelled by these words: only God could create the universe. In the Trinity, the Father is the Planner, the Spirit the One who empowers the plan, and the Son the One who

executes it – which explains Paul's words here, "**through whom** [the Father]" accomplished creation.

Everything came into being **through Him**, (i.e., "The Word", Jesus Christ), and without Him, nothing has come into being which has in fact come into being.
John 1:3

He was in the world, and the world came into being **through Him**, and [yet] the world did not recognize Him.
John 1:10

But for us there is [but] one God, the Father from whom all things [have come into being] (i.e., the Father as architect of creation), and we [now live] for Him, and there is [but] one Lord, Jesus Christ **through whom** all things [have come into being] (i.e., the Son as agent of creation), and we [now live] through Him.
1st Corinthians 8:6

(15) [Jesus Christ] is the exact image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.
(16) Everything in the heavens and on the earth was created by Him, things invisible as well as those visible – whether thrones, authorities, rulers or powers, everything was created **through Him** and for Him. (17) And He Himself is before everything, and everything subsists in Him.
Colossians 1:15-17

And [He also says of the Son], "From the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth, and the heavens **are the works of your hands**".
Hebrews 1:10

The phrase translated here in verse two as "the universe" is, in the Greek, *tous aionas*, often rendered as "the ages". Herein we see a main difference between the ways Greek and English express things respectively: one cannot have a physical universe without the fourth dimension of time; and one cannot have time without a physical universe in which it passes. English focuses on the latter ("universe" is physical); Greek on the former ("age" is temporal). Both "universe" and "ages" mean and express the same thing: space-time, created by God, who exists outside of space and time, created, that is, as the venue for us, His creatures, in which to exist.

The universe, the ages, space-time, is where the plan of God is playing out according to His foreordaining of every single event which has ever taken place and ever will "until the ages of the ages" arrives (Gal.1:5; Phil.4:20; 1Tim.1:17; 2Tim.4:18; Heb.13:21; 1Pet.4:11; Rev.1:6; 1:18; 4:9; 4:10; 5:13; 5:14; 7:12; 10:6; 11:15; 15:7; 19:3; 20:10; 22:5); that is, until time as we know it, angelic and human history (which includes angelic pre-history complemented and completed by the seven millennial days of human history), has run its course, and eternity (i.e., "the ages of the ages") replaces sequential, foreordained time – history – with the solid-state of blessing which will obtain forever (Rev.21:25; 22:5).

What exactly eternity, a time without time as we know it, will be like for us who belong to Jesus Christ is unknowable at present. It is no doubt not an accident that the Hebrew equivalent of "age" is *'olam*, derived from *'alam*, and meaning "hidden, secret, mysterious, unknown": God's economy of eternity is veiled from us at present just as He has veiled Himself from us at the moment (Ex.33:20; Jn.1:18; 1Tim.6:16; cf. Ps.10:1; Prov.25:2; Is.45:15). There is indeed much that creatures of such great limitation which we human beings are at present cannot yet know (1Cor.2:7; Eph.3:9; cf. Heb.9:26; Jude 1:25), catching only glimpses of the blessed future "through a glass darkly". But all these mysteries will be revealed to us after the resurrection when we will know even as we are known (1Cor.13:12). And in the meantime, we have been given to see the Son, the One for whom and by whom we have been created (Col.1:16).

No one has ever seen God. God the one and only [Son] – the One who has always been at the Father's side – He has made Him known.

John 1:18

The Gnostics alternatively worshiped and fancied themselves as engaging in combat with non-existent *aions* (angels, demigods, etc.; cf. 2Pet.2:10b-12; Jude 1:8-10a). But the true *aiones*, the "ages" of the universe and all that would ever happen herein has been created by God the Father through Jesus Christ – the One who holds all of time-space in His hands: everything has its existence only in Him (Col.1:17). And after the entire plan of God has been accomplished through the agency of Jesus Christ, all things will be made new when God is "all in all" (1Cor.15:58; cf. 1Cor.12:6; Eph.1:23).

(5) [The Father] raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus [positionally], (7) that ***in the ages to come*** He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 2:6-7 NKJV

(1) And [then] (i.e., at the conclusion of the last judgment) I saw a New Heaven and a New Earth [appear]. For the previous heaven and the previous earth had passed away (Rev.20:11), and the sea [now] no longer existed [on this New Earth]. (2) And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, beautified as a bride adorned for her [future] husband. (3) And there was a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is [now] with men. And He has taken up residence with them, and they will be His people, and He Himself will be their God." (4) And He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. And there will no longer be any death, or cries of pain, or grief. For ***the previous things have passed away***. (5a) Then the One sitting upon the Throne said to me, "Behold! ***I am making everything new.***"

Revelation 21:1-5a

Verse Three

He is the shining forth of [the Father's] glory, the precise image of His essence, the One who [in His deity] sustains the universe by His mighty Word. When He had accomplished the cleansing of [our] sins [in His humanity], He took His seat at the right

hand of the Majesty on high.
Hebrews 1:3

He is: Paul's previous treatment in verses one and two looked backward to comprise everything about the Lord Jesus from the creation through the cross and resurrection, in order to set the stage for explaining the present realities of the Church Age – the blessed new realities which the Jerusalem church had been willfully ignoring. Paul begins by explaining what things are now like on this side of the cross following the gift of the Spirit, focusing on the Messiah's present position in heaven and what that means for us who belong to Him and who are still soldiering on here on earth. Since the incarnation, Jesus Christ is now man as well as God, having taken on true humanity in order to save us from our sins (Jn.3:16). But He has always been God, a truth which traditional Judaism denies regarding the Messiah – and apparently one with which the Jerusalem church was also struggling.

(1) The Word [Jesus Christ] existed at the very beginning, and there was reciprocity between the Word and God [the Father]. And the Word was God. (2) This One both existed and enjoyed reciprocity with God from the very beginning. (3) Everything came into being through Him, and without Him, nothing has come into being which has in fact come into being.
John 1:1-3

"For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me."
John 6:38 NKJV

"I and the Father are one."
John 10:30

Before the cross, Jesus Christ was always God, true deity as the Father is God and as the Spirit is God. The classical definition of the Trinity is true and demonstrated throughout scripture: God is three in person, one in essence.¹⁸ The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all God; The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all individual, unique, separate persons in their own right. What this "looks like" outside of time and space apart from and before the creation of this world – something God was not obliged to do but only did out of love for us (Jn.3:16) – is impossible for us, creatures limited by time and space and as yet not even privy to the wonders which will be hidden from us until the resurrection, to know. But we do see what God is like from His actions in this world. And we do see what the Father is like through the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."
John 14:9a NIV

Now that the second person of the Trinity, our dear Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, has with the

¹⁸ See BB 1: Theology, section II, "The Persons of God: the Trinity".

incarnation become a genuine human being – and no less God as a result – we see the shadows of the Law lifted and we gaze without any further veiling on the face of God in Jesus Christ.

(12) Since we have such a confident expectation of success [based on the support from the Spirit's ministry], we speak the truth unreservedly – (13) and not like the previous situation where Moses had to put a veil over his face so that the Israelites could not see that temporary glory fading out; (14) now their hearts became hard, and until today at the reading of the Old Covenant there is still a [similar sort of] veil remaining in place [one which hides the true glory]; and [this "veil" which obscures the truth] is not being taken off because only in Christ is it done away with; (15) so until this present day, whenever Moses is read, this veil [of sorts] lies over their hearts, (16) but whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.

2nd Corinthians 3:12-16

For God who said, "Let light shine forth from the darkness!", is He who has shone forth [His light] into our hearts to illuminate our knowledge of God's glory in the person [lit., "face"] of Jesus Christ.

2nd Corinthians 4:6

Jesus Christ is truly divine, and always has been so (Is.9:6; 40:3; Rom.1:4; Matt.1:23; 22:41-46; 28:19; Lk.1:35; 5:20-21; Jn.1:1-18; 5:18; Rom.9:3-5; Cor.13:14; Phil.2:5-8; Col.1:15-20; 2:9; Tit.2:13; Heb.1:3; 2Pet.1:1; 1Jn.5:20; Rev.22:13; 22:16). Jesus Christ is truly human, and has been since the incarnation (Lk.22:19; 1Cor.10:16-17; Eph.2:14-16; Col.1:21-22; 2:9; Heb.2:14-15; 7:27; 10:5-10; 1Pet.2:24). Thus Jesus Christ is truly unique – the God-man who came into this world to save it, the only One who *could* save it.¹⁹

For God loved the world so much that He gave [up] His only Son, [with the purpose] that everyone who believes in Him should not be lost [forever], but have eternal life [instead].
John 3:16

The Shining Forth of Glory: The word "glory" in scripture is used in various ways to represent the manifestation of the reality behind whatever has the "glory", whether mere human glory or the unapproachable glory of God as we have here. The Greek word for glory Paul uses in verse three is the standard biblical word normally employed: *doxa* (cf. doxology), meaning "reputation" in secular Greek (whereas in Hebrew the common word is *cabhoddh*, meaning literally "heaviness" and stressing weighty significance). Glory and light are often synonymous in scripture (1Tim.6:16; 1Jn.1:5; cf. Dan.2:22; Jas.1:17), and no one has ever seen the blinding light of the Father's brilliant glory with unaided human eyes. But Jesus Christ in His humanity is the One who reveals that glory to us, possessing it in His deity and reflecting the Father's glory in everything the Son is and has done for us and in everything He has told us.

"I have *revealed* you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you

¹⁹ See BB 4A: Christology, section I.2.a, "Christ's taking on of true humanity was necessary in order to provide our salvation".

gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. (7) Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. (8) For I gave them *the words you gave me* and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that *I came from you*, and they believed that *you sent me*."

John 17:6-8 NIV (cf. Jn.3:34; 4:34; 5:23-24; 5:30; 5:36-38; 6:29; 6:38-39; 6:44; 6:57; 7:16; 7:18; 7:28-29; 7:33; 8:16; 8:18; 8:26; 8:29; 8:43; 9:4; 10:36; 11:42; 12:4-45; 12:49; 13:20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5; 17:3; 17:8; 17:18; 17:21; 17:23; 17:25; 20:21)

Jesus Christ has always been God, possessing the refulgent glory of God in His person as He shares the same divine essence with the Father and with the Spirit. In order to carry out the plan of God, however, Jesus Christ came into this world, sent by the Father (as the passage and citations above show very clearly), to do the Father's will, that is, to complete the plan of salvation which plan is the entire basis and purpose of creation. As the One sent, Jesus Christ is the one who manifests the glory of God to the world. Indeed, we can only know about God through the invisible ministry of the Spirit who reveals to us the Logos, the Word of God, through what Jesus did and said.

"All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

Matthew 11:27 NIV

No one has ever seen God. God the one and only [Son] – the One who has always been at the Father's side – He has made Him known.

John 1:18

As the One who shines forth, the One who reflects God's glory for us and to us, our Lord Jesus Christ is the only way to know about the Father or about any truth whatsoever.

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."

John 14:6 NKJV

As the revealed member of the Trinity, the One who has won the victory and is carrying out the plan of God, Jesus Christ is the very "shining forth" of the Father whom no one has ever seen in the full revelation of His glory (Ex.33:20; Jn.1:8; 6:46; 1Tim.6:16; 1Jn.4:12; 4:20; cf. Col.1:15).

And the Word became flesh and tented among us. And we beheld His *glory*, a *glory* like that of a one and only Son from [the] Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14

Through the reflection of the Father's glory and love for us by means of His own life, teaching, and sacrifice on our behalf, Jesus Christ has revealed the Father to us, and is thus the very "shining forth" of that glory, revealing the Father's intrinsic goodness and love for us in sending His one and only dear Son into the world to save it.

In this God's love has been revealed in us, that He sent His only Son into the world that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atonement for our sins.

1st John 4:9

The Precise Image of [God the Father's] Essence: Paul uses this phraseology to express in concrete terms that Jesus, while not being the Father, is God, just as the Father is God. In other words, it was important for him to make both points in a milieu where the Trinity was not so clearly understood by many believers on the one hand, and not accepted by the unbelievers in Jerusalem on the other.²⁰

The word translated "precise image" here is the Greek *charakter*, the source of our English loan-word "character". Coming from the verb *charasso* which, in its technical sense, means to engrave or inscribe, most often images on coins. A "character" in Greek is thus a solid, discernible and essentially unchangeable representation. As such, in dramatic usage, just as coins bore and still bear the images of people, so in drama it referred to stock "characters" whose attributes were notable and fixed, and it is in that same use that we employ "character" and "characterization" in literary contexts today, that is, referring to persons or characters whose attributes are clear and resilient (as those of all the best characters in literature always are). In terms of divine "character", Jesus and the Father are one, and one with the Spirit as well, since all three members of the Trinity have the same divine essence.

Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."

John 14:9a NIV

Paul puts things in these terms, describing our Lord as "the precise image of His essence", because while God in spirit is three persons with one divine essence, since the incarnation Jesus Himself is also a genuine human being, having taken on flesh and blood to save us from our sins (Heb.2:14). For that reason, Paul explains the practical difference between the Son and Father this way: even with His humanity in view, our Lord still manifests a visible, tangible "imprint" of who God is and what He is like in a way that would be impossible for anyone who was not both man and God so as to be able to display the attributes of divinity stamped in His human nature. That humanity of Christ – His human body, His words, and His deeds – is the stamp, the mark, the precise image, the "character" which we *can* see . . . even though we cannot see God with our fleshly eyes, neither the Father, nor the Spirit, nor the deity of Jesus Christ. But we can see – and have seen – our Lord's humanity, and it is from this now visible humanity of Jesus Christ that we do see God, not His eternal glory itself, but the precise image of who He is in Jesus Christ (2Cor.4:6).

²⁰ The word translated "essence" here, *hypostasis*, while used only by Paul and always relating to "confidence" elsewhere (2Cor.9:4; 11:17; Heb.3:14; 11:1), etymologically meant "standing under", and therefore "basis / foundation"; as a result, it was commonly employed to represent the essential being or "essence" of things.

(1) What we have seen from the beginning, what we have *heard and seen with our eyes*, what we have *observed and touched* with our hands – this is about the Word of life, [Jesus Christ]. (2) And this life *appeared*, and we have *seen* [it], and we bear witness [to it], and we proclaim to you the eternal life which was in the presence of the Father and [then] *appeared* to us.

1st John 1:1-2

Just as we have never personally laid eyes upon Julius Caesar but can get an idea of what he looked like from Roman coins which bear his image and speak of his accomplishments, his *charakter*, so also even though we have not as yet seen our heavenly Father face to face, yet we do know a great deal about Him from His precise "imprint" visible in the humanity of His Son. Jesus Christ is God, but He is now also a true human being, and in that humanity He bears the stamp of the Father, manifesting His perfect divine character in everything which our Lord has said to us and done for us.

(15) [Jesus Christ] is the *exact image* of the invisible God, the *firstborn* of all creation.²¹
Colossians 1:15

For in [Jesus Christ] dwells all of the fullness of *deity* in *bodily* form.
Colossians 2:9

The only way Jesus could be both God and God's exact representation was to become human as well as divine, and in doing so, in His humanity He perfectly reflects, represents, shines forth the divinity of the Father who sent Him, along with the grace, mercy and truth of that mission, in a perfectly precise and "exact" way, with not a nanometer of distance between the purpose of the Father and the Son's fulfillment of that purpose.

Sustaining All Things: The means by which our Lord sustains and maintains "all things" is said to be His "mighty word" or "word of power", a fact which demonstrates the omnipotence of Him who is the Logos, the Word of God Himself. This wording also reminds us of the inherent force of God's truth, His Word, by which (the gospel) and by whom (Jesus Christ) we are saved.

"... but the Word of the Lord endures forever." And this is the Word that was preached (lit., "given as the gospel") to you.
1st Peter 1:25 NIV

"All things", in Greek *ta panta* (cf. *pandemic* meaning "affecting *all* the people"), is standard way in Greek literature of expressing the totality of the cosmos or universe (i.e., time and space), and is a virtual synonym of *tous aionas*, "the ages", which we discussed in verse two. In that previous verse we saw that the Father created the universe through Jesus Christ, the One who is

²¹ The word translated "exact image" in Col.1:15 above is the Greek *eikon*; it expresses genuine exactitude as is clear from its use elsewhere in the Hebrews: "For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things (*eikona*) . . ." (Heb.10:1 NKJV).

the Agent of creation as the Father is the Planner and the Spirit the One who empowers. It is an awesome thought to consider as well that creation only continues to exist because of the conscious effort of the One who created it. If our Lord were not sustaining this universe, it would immediately cease to be, because everything only subsists in Him and because of Him. This has been true from the beginning of time, continues to be true today, and was true even while our Lord was hanging on the cross enduring the scorn of His persecutors: they only continued to exist because He continued to sustain them and all other things through His deity (Heb.1:2; 1:10; 2:10; cf. Jn.1:3; 1:10; 1Cor.8:6).

(16) Everything in the heavens and on the earth was created by Him (Jesus Christ), things invisible as well as those visible – whether thrones, authorities, rulers or powers, everything was created through Him and for Him. (17) And He Himself is before everything, and *everything subsists in Him*.

Colossians 1:16-17

Accomplished the Cleansing of our Sins: Having apprised his readers of our Lord Jesus' essential role in creating and sustaining the universe, Paul now likewise reminds them that Jesus is the One who provided salvation for all (Jn.3:16-17; 12:47). While creation and its sustaining is accomplished by Christ's deity, only a true human being could have provided salvation – because only a true human being could bear sin and die for sin. This mission of salvation was successfully accomplished by our Lord before He ascended again to the Father, thereby opening up the door to eternal life for all of us who are willing to put our trust in Him (Matt.7:7-8; Lk.11:9-10; 13:24-25; 1Cor.16:9; 2Cor.2:12; Col.4:3; Rev.3:8; 3:20; cf. Matt.23:13; 25:10).

"I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture."

John 10:9 NKJV

Salvation is the greatest thing in all of history. Salvation, from God's point of view, *is* history – because salvation is the victory which decisively defeats the devil and wins the conflict between him and the forces of darkness begun in eternity past against God and the forces of light, a conflict, moreover, which was inevitable if creatures with the image of God and the free will to choose their eternal destiny were to be created – which is the very purpose of creation. This conflict has now been decisively won by Jesus Christ through His sacrificial giving up of His own life on our behalf, and salvation, the reason for creation, accomplished by the cross.

[For by means of the cross, God] has stripped [demon] rulers and authorities [of their power] and subjected them to public humiliation, having triumphed over them in [Christ].
Colossians 2:15

As the pivotal event in all of universal history, salvation has many aspects which Paul could have brought in here (many of which he will discuss in chapters to come).²² But for good reason the

²² See in particular BB 4A: Christology, section II, "The Saving Work of Jesus Christ", and BB 4B: Soteriology, section III, "What it means to be saved".

Spirit guides him to focus at this moment on the issue of sin and its cleansing by Christ's sacrifice for us. That is because on the one hand, since sin is the problem, the barrier wall of "our sins" which keeps us from being saved absent that barrier's removal by an acceptable sacrifice, "cleansing" is effective shorthand for the entire saving work of Christ on the cross in redeeming us from those sins of ours by paying the penalty for them all, the accomplishment of our salvation often referred to in scripture as "the blood of Christ" (1Cor.10:16; Eph.2:13; Heb.9:14; 1Pet.1:19; cf. Rom 3:25; 1Pet.1:2; Rev.1:5). That blood is not literal blood as we have affirmed many times; rather, "the blood of Christ" is scripture's way of relating the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament which symbolized our Savior's death for us to the actual sacrifice of "the Lamb of God" in being judged in the three hours of darkness on the cross and subjected to the entire penalty for all we have done, namely, His spiritual death on our behalf accomplished *before* He gave up His spirit.²³

(28) *After* [all] this (i.e., His physical suffering and His spiritual death for the sins of the world), when Jesus knew that everything *had now been accomplished* in order for the [prophecy of salvation found in] scripture to be fulfilled, He said, "I am thirsty". (29) Now a jar of wine-vinegar lay there, so they placed a sponge full of the wine-vinegar on a hyssop [stalk] and brought it to His mouth. (30) So when He had taken the wine-vinegar, Jesus said, 'It (i.e., salvation) *has [now] been accomplished!*' (113), and having thrown back His head, He gave up His spirit.
John 19:28-30

And walk in love, just as also Christ loved you and gave Himself up as sacrifice and offering for a sweet [sacrificial] aroma to God.
Ephesians 5:2

(18) For you know that it was not with perishable things [like] silver or gold that you were ransomed from the futile manner of life passed down to you by your ancestors, (19) but [you were redeemed] with precious blood, *like* that of a lamb without spot or blemish, [that is, by the blood] of Christ.
1st Peter 1:18-19

"The Lamb who has been slain is worthy to take the power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing and every created thing in heaven and on the earth and in the sea and everything in them."
Revelation 5:12

On the other hand, the biblical *metaphor* of cleansing sin through ritual sacrifice was exactly the one which Paul's readers needed to be reminded of. That is because they were presently engaged in literal animal sacrifices which involved the shedding of literal blood – but had forgotten that

²³ See in particular BB 4A: Christology, section II.4, "The Blood of Christ", and II.5, "The Spiritual Death of Christ". That our Lord did not bleed to death so that literal blood cannot be what is meant in scripture by "the blood of Christ" is unequivocally demonstrated by John's gospel account (Jn.19:33-35; cf. 1Jn.5:6-8 in the Greek).

their *true* cleansing from sin had nothing to do with those rites which merely symbolized the so great salvation our Lord had now accomplished on their behalf. And by continuing with the shadows, they were denigrating the blessed reality.

For what the Law could not accomplish (i.e., solving the sin problem) because it was weak on account of [its dependence on sinful human] flesh, God [did accomplish]: having sent His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for the purpose of [expiating] sin, [the Father] rendered summary judgment on [all] sin in [Christ's] flesh.
Romans 8:3

He made Him who had no [personal] experience of sinning [to be] sin (i.e., a sin offering) for us, so that we might have (lit., "become") God's righteousness in Him.
2nd Corinthians 5:21

Christ bought us free (i.e., "redeemed" us) from the Law's curse, having become a curse on our behalf. For it is written: "Cursed is everyone [who is] hanged upon a tree" (Deut.21:23).
Galatians 3:13

In whom (i.e., Christ) we possess our ransoming [from sin] (i.e., "redemption") through His blood, the forgiveness of our transgressions according to the riches of His grace.
Ephesians 1:7

In whom (i.e., Christ) we possess our ransoming [from sin] (i.e., "redemption"), the forgiveness of our sins.
Colossians 1:14

(13) And though you were [spiritually] dead in your transgressions and in the un-circumcised state of your flesh, [God the Father] made you alive together with [Christ], having forgiven you all your transgressions. (14) [God] has erased the charge against us along with its particulars (i.e., our sinful nature and personal sins) which opposed our [relationship with Him], and He removed it [as an obstacle] between us by nailing it to the cross.
Colossians 2:13-14

[Jesus Christ] who gave Himself on our behalf to redeem us from all lawlessness (i.e., sin; cf. 1Jn.3:4) and to cleanse for Himself a people [to be His] own unique possession, zealous for good works.
Titus 2:14

[And it is] by [the Father's] will [in this matter] that you have been sanctified, through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all.
Hebrews 10:10

He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, in order that we might die to sins and

live to righteousness. By His wound you are healed.
1st Peter 2:24

And He Himself is the appeasement (i.e., propitiation) [of God] for our sins, and not just for ours, but also for the entire world.
1st John 2:2

In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atonement (lit., "appeasement", i.e., propitiation) [of God's justice] for our sins.
1st John 4:10

Took His Seat at the Right Hand of the Majesty: In the Greek text, "took His seat" is the main verb, while the ideas in the previous part of the verse are expressed by participles (a technique frowned upon in English but ubiquitous and cultivated in Greek). "Being" God and "sustaining" the world are present participle phrases, indicating a timeless and recurring state; "having accomplished" is an aorist participle, indicating here something finished and antecedent to the main verb: the victory of salvation was won *before* our Lord ascended to the Father in resurrection and *before* this session and glorification took place. Jesus has always been God ("being", "sustaining"), but had to become a genuine human being to bear our sins. Having fulfilled that mission for which He came into the world with His first advent ("having accomplished the cleansing of our sin"), Paul now affirms what his readers seem to have forgotten, namely, that the Father Himself has proclaimed Himself satisfied with Christ's work: salvation has been accomplished, the victory won, and the need for shadows now obliterated in the blinding light of the glorification of the Son at the Father's right hand.

The Lord (i.e., the Father) said to My Lord (i.e., Jesus Christ), "Sit down at my right hand, until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet."
Psalm 110:1

(6) And I saw in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, a Lamb standing [there, looking] as if He had been slain, with seven horns and seven eyes (which are the seven spirits of God sent out into the entire earth). (7) And He came and took [the scroll] from the right hand of the One sitting on the throne.
Revelation 5:6-7

As God, Jesus has always been in the Father's presence (Jn.1:1-2). To fulfill the plan of salvation, Jesus came into the world as a human being, sent by the Father to win the victory through which alone we may have eternal life in the cleansing of our sins at the cross (Jn.6:38; 17:6-8; Gal.4:4). As the God-man who has accomplished salvation, Jesus Christ now sits in glory at the Father's right hand. With this command to be seated and receive back His glory, our Lord's mission and victory are validated by the Father: the session and glorification of our Lord by the Father affirm Him as the victorious God-man, the "first born" or foremost of all creation (Heb.1:6; 11:28; 12:23; cf. Rom.8:29; Col.1:15; 1:18; Rev.1:5), having won on the battlefield of this present conflict the right to judge and rule over all (Jn.17:5; cf. Jn.12:28; 13:32; 16:14; 17:1).

(5) You too should have this attitude which Christ Jesus had. (6) Since He already existed in the very form of God, equality with God was [certainly] not something He thought He had to grasp for. (7) Yet in spite of this [co-equal divinity He already possessed], He deprived Himself of His status and took on the form of a slave, [and was] born in the likeness of men. (8) He humbled Himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even [His] death on [the] cross [for us all]. (9) Therefore **God exalted Him to the highest place** and gave Him the Name that is above every name (10) that at the Name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth (11) and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:5-11

(12) But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, **he sat down at the right hand of God**, (13) and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool.

Hebrews 10:12-13 NIV

(1) Since then we too [like the believers of chapter 11] have such a large audience of witnesses surrounding us [both men and angels], let us put off every hindrance – especially whatever sins habitually affect us – and run with endurance the race set before us, (2) turning our gaze unto Jesus, the originator and completer of our faith, who, for the joy set before Him, endured the shame of the cross, treating it with despise, and **took His seat at the right hand of the throne of God**. (3) Keep in mind all the terrible opposition He endured against Himself at the hands of sinful men, so as not to grow sick at heart and give up.

Hebrews 12:1-3

And one of the elders was saying to me, "Don't cry! Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, He has won the victory [so as to be worthy] to open the scroll and to undo its seals."

Revelation 5:5

(9) And they sang a new song, saying, "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain and have purchased with your blood for our God [men] from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, (10) and have made them into a kingdom and priests to our God, and they will rule upon the earth!" (11) And I looked and heard, as it were, the voice of many angels around the throne and [around] the [living] creatures and [around] the [twenty-four] elders, and their number was myriads upon myriads and thousands upon thousands, (12) [and they were] saying in a loud voice, "The Lamb who has been slain is worthy to take the power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing (13) and every created thing in heaven and on the earth and in the sea and everything in them." Then I heard them saying, "To the One who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb [be] the blessing and the honor and the glory and the power for ever and ever!"

Revelation 5:9-13

On High: The location of our Lord's session is the throne room of the heavenly temple in the third heaven (described in the passage above and at Dan.7:9-14; Rev.4:1-11; 6:9; 7:9; 8:3-5; 14:1-3; 15:2-8;16:1; 19:4-5) whence He ascended (Eph.4:8-10; Heb.4:14); and the throne is that of the Father, the shape of which resembles a battle-chariot to symbolize the militant posture of God against the devil's rebellion.²⁴ As we have seen before, at the beginning of creation, God held court on the as yet unsullied earth.²⁵ His self-sequestration in the third heaven is temporary, a withdrawal necessary to prevent immediate, total and final destruction of the offenders – along with the entire universe – since His presence will not abide the rebellious.

The second advent will bring the return of God's rule on earth in the person of the Messiah who will reign for a thousand years, "for He must reign until He has put all his enemies under his feet" (1Cor.15:25 NIV). After that has taken place with the annihilation of those who rebel at the end of the Millennium (Rev.20:7-10), and once the present contaminated heavens and earth are completely incinerated along with every trace of sin and evil, the Father Himself will return to the new earth and make His abode with us once again in the ultimate Eden, the last paradise (Rev.21:3).

Until then, the plan of God is moving inexorably forward and perfectly so, with the words "on high" reminding us that although we cannot see the conflict currently taking place, we certainly do experience it, and we can have confidence that it is being directed towards ultimate victory from the divine headquarters in the third heaven. This perfect plan, as we have seen before, consists of three phases wherein God's enemies are judged, the damage they have done is restored with something better, and they themselves are replaced twofold to the eternal glory of God.²⁶

Phase I: Constitution: Lays the foundation for the eternal victory (the "much" phase).

Judgment I: the Genesis Gap

Restoration I: the Seven Days of Re-creation

Replacement I: the First Adam and the Last Adam

Phase II: Completion: Realizes eternal objectives with victory in time (the "more" phase).

Judgment II: the Tribulation

Restoration II: the Millennium

Replacement II: Christ the King and His Church

Phase III: Consummation: Crowns the victory with surpassing blessing (the "most" phase).

Judgment III: the Final Judgments

Restoration III: the New Heavens and the New Earth

Replacement III: the Advent of the Father

Our Lord's session with the Father in the throne room of heaven "on high" (i.e., the third

²⁴ See Coming Tribulation 2B: The Heavenly Prelude, under "The Throne".

²⁵ See SR 1: Satan's Rebellion and Fall from Grace, section II.6, "The Seven Edens".

²⁶ See BB 2B: Eschatology, section I, "God's Plan for Human History".

heaven²⁷) completes the first phase of the plan of God wherein Satan and his followers are defeated and replaced with others willing to use their free will to accept God's authority in Jesus Christ and have eternal life as a consequence. Phase one laid the ground work of the eternal victory, providing a new Ruler (Jesus Christ) to replace the present ruler of the world (Satan), a new kingdom (the Kingdom of Heaven) to replace the present kingdom of darkness (Col.1:13), and new subjects (believers bought with the blood of Christ) to attend the King in place of the devil's angelic followers (Phil.3:20).

During phase one, these replacements are essentially such in principle only as they await the fulfillment of the two further phases: Christ has been glorified, but has not yet returned to commence His reign; the Kingdom is here in principle (in the persons of believers and the Spirit of Christ: Lk.17:21), but is not yet functioning in practice (cf. Matt.11:12); and the Church is coming rapidly to completion, but has not yet been resurrected.

During phase two, Christ our King will return (the Second Advent), and will lay claim to His Kingdom (Rev.11:15), providing a thousand years of the most wonderful time earth has ever seen (following the seven years of its worst travail), while His Church (His Body of believers called out during the first six days of human history) will be resurrected to share in His millennial rule. Until that time, soon to come, we are here on earth await that blessed hope (Tit.2:13), while our Lord abides above "on high" waiting for that moment at the Tribulation's end when the Father makes His enemies "a footstool for His feet" (Ps.110:1).

(4) And I began to cry much, because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look inside of it. (5) And one of the elders was saying to me, "Don't cry! Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, He has won the victory [so as to be worthy] to open the scroll and to undo its seals (i.e., to commence the Tribulation which ends in the Second Advent)."

Revelation 5:4-5

Verse Four

[And at His session (v.3), Jesus] became [manifestly] superior to the angels to the degree that He received as [a part of] His inheritance a Name so much more glorious than theirs. Hebrews 1:4

Superior to the Angels: Angels are creatures.²⁸ Jesus Christ is God in His deity. Our Lord's taking on of true humanity at the incarnation, while it did result in Him becoming the unique person of the universe, the one and only God-man, did not diminish that deity in any way or to any degree. It is true, however, that, to all appearances, our Lord's deity during the first advent was not visible to the naked eye, veiled as it was at that time with unglorified human flesh.

²⁷ See SR 1: Satan's Rebellion and Fall from Grace, section II.3, "The Three Heavens".

²⁸ For details about their nature, see BB 2A: Angelology, section I, "The Purpose, Creation and Nature of Angels".

He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

Isaiah 53:2 NIV

For any and all who had not heard Jesus' words or seen His miraculous deeds – or had hardened their hearts against the truth – from a purely empirical perspective He appeared "less" than the angels as we human beings all do (Heb.2:6-10). Even during our Lord's post-resurrection appearances, while the reality of His return to life could not be denied, His deity was still not unveiled for the human eye to see (compare, e.g., Matt.28:9-10; 28:16-20; Lk.24:13-53; Jn.20:11-29; 21:1-19 with Acts 9:3-5; 22:6-8; 26:13-15 and Rev.1:10-20). And while a few of those in the Jerusalem church (outside of the apostles) had possibly seen Him during those forty days before He ascended to the Father (Acts 1:3), the vast majority clearly had not – and that was true nearly thirty years earlier than the arrival of this letter. In short, the Jerusalem believers had to accept the critical truth of Christ's divinity just as we all do *by faith*. Scripture leaves us in no doubt about that important point of truth, but these particular believers had been negatively influenced by the traditions associated with the Law (cf. Is.29:13; Matt.15:9; Mk.7:7), which wrongly saw the Messiah not as God become man but merely as a "very special man" somewhat lower than the angels (or even belonging to some lower order of angel from the Gnostic perspective). This was clearly dangerous heresy and absolutely contrary to scripture as our Lord Himself had made crystal clear during His time on earth (Lk.24:25-32; Jn.6:38-58; 7:29; 8:58; 10:30; 14:6; 17:24).

(41) While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, (42) "What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?" "The son of David," they replied. (43) He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says, (44) " 'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet." ' (45) If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?" (46) No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.

Matthew 22:41-46 NIV

But just as lukewarm Christians today who don't know their Bibles well and who have not been trained in the basics of Christian doctrine are often easily "tossed back and forth by the waves and blown here and there by every wind of false teaching" (Eph.4:14), so also these believers had allowed the legalistic and Gnostic milieu in which they lived to unduly separate them from the truth. That is why it was necessary for Paul to make these points so insistently and at such length: while we believers today may have never even been tempted to consider angels as superior to our dear Lord, such was not the case in the Jerusalem church of his day. From the point of view of stringent monotheistic Talmudic legalism, there was strong resistance to seeing the Messiah as anything other than human; from the standpoint of Gnosticism, there was a strong preference for seeing Jesus as one of many *aions* (or some lower order of angel) but not God. As with many syncretic religious ideas, it was certainly possible for weak, immature and uninformed believers to hold both concepts in their minds simultaneously – or at least entertain them as

possible rather than rejecting them as scurrilously dangerous lies.²⁹ That is a very dangerous and eventually untenable spiritual position which verges on apostasy (cf. Heb.2:1-4). Hence the need for Paul to confront this dangerous false teaching head-on.

A Much More Glorious Name: The word "name" is a critically important one in the Bible. In addition to identifying a person or thing, the Hebrew *shem* and the Greek *onoma* often represent the substance and the essence of the person or thing named in a way that the English word does not (cf., e.g., Acts 2:21; 2:38; 3:6; 3:16; 4:7; 4:10; 4:12; 4:17-18; 4:30; 5:28; 5:40-41, etc.). When, for example, our Lord at Matthew 28:19 tells the disciples to be baptizing their converts [through the Holy Spirit] "into the **name**" of the members of the Trinity, He is clearly speaking about our union with Christ – and with God as a whole – which the baptism of the Spirit effects and **not** water-baptism. That is clear from the preposition *eis* which means "into" and represents a fundamental transfer from one place to another. In this example, the placing of the new believer "**into** Christ" (cf. Jn.14:20; 15:1ff.; Rom.16:7; 2Cor.5:17; Eph.2:6; 2:10; Heb.3:14; 1Pet.5:14), is described as "baptizing [said individual] **into the Name**" (i.e., "person/persons") of the Trinity. It is no doubt the fault of misunderstanding the Greek word *onoma*, "name", in that context, mistaking it as a mere verbal formula (rather than describing a fundamental transformation which occurs when being born again/from above), that has caused so many individuals, organizations and theologies to stumble into heresy on this point.³⁰ The "name" of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is in fact the "person" / "persons" the name represents: no one can be actually placed "into" a name, but we have it on good authority throughout scripture that when we believe, the Holy Spirit does indeed "put us **into** Christ" so that we are ever after "in [union with] Christ" (Rom.3:24; 6:11; 6:23; 8:1; 8:2; 8:39; 9:1; 12:5; 14:14; 15:17; 16:2-3; 16:7-13; 16:22; 1Cor.1:2; 1:4-5; 1:30; 3:1; 4:10; 4:15; 4:17; 7:22; 7:39; 9:1-2; 11:11; 15:18-19; 15:22; 15:31; 15:58; 16:19; 16:24; 2Cor.1:19-20; 2:12; 2:14; 2:17; 3:14; 5:17; 5:21; 12:2; 12:19; 13:4; Gal.1:22; 2:4; 2:17; 3:14; 3:26; 3:28; 5:6; 5:10; Eph.1:1; 1:3-4; 1:6-7; 1:10-13; 1:15; 1:20; 2:5-7; 2:10; 2:13; 2:15-16; 2:18; 2:21-22; 3:6; 3:11-12; 3:21; 4:1; 4:17; 4:21; 4:32; 5:8; 6:1; 6:10; 6:21; Phil.1:1; 1:13-14; 1:26; 2:1; 2:19; 2:24; 2:29; 3:1; 3:3; 3:9; 3:14; 4:1-2; 4:7; 4:10; 4:19; 4:21; Col.1:2; 1:4; 1:14; 1:28; 2:3; 2:6-7; 2:10-12; 3:3; 4:7; 4:17; 1Thes.1:1; 2Thes.1:1; 1:12; 3:4; 3:12; 1Tim.1:14; 2Tim.1:9; 2:10; 3:12; 3:15; Philem.1:8; 1:20; 1:23; 1Pet.3:16; 5:10; 5:14; 1Jn.2:5-6; 2:24; 2:27-28; 3:6; 3:17; 3:24; 5:20; Rev.1:9; 14:13).

The consequential point to note here is that our Lord's superior "**name**" is much more than a title, no matter how august that title may be. Rather, this "name" represents the Person behind that name, and manifests in its meaning the glory and the honor of the One who bears it, with the superiority of the title merely demonstrating the superiority of the Title-holder.

²⁹ Legalism and Gnosticism have in common that they are both at their core attacks on the person and work of Christ: Paul uses the phrase *ta stoicheia*, "elemental principles", for the misuse by both fallacies of fundamental truths (Gal.4:3; 4:9; Col.2:8; 2:20; 2Pet.3:10; 3:12). See Peter #39: "False Teachers, False Teaching, and False Organizations".

³⁰ This subject has been treated in many places at Ichthys. See, for example, BB 6B: Ecclesiology, section II.C.3.b, "Water-Baptism".

(9) Therefore God [the Father] exalted [Christ] to the highest place and gave Him *the Name* that is above every name (10) that at the Name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth (11) and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ *is Lord* to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:9-11 (cf. Is.45:23; Rom.14:11)

Jesus Christ has always been God, before and after the incarnation, before and after His resurrection, ascension, session and glorification. He has always been intrinsically glorious (e.g., Jn.17:5). After being seated and having received back His glory with that glory now having been fully revealed (Jn.12:28; 13:32; 16:14; 17:1; 17:5), our Lord has now been glorified also within this creation in His humanity as well as His deity as the God-man who has won the victory of the conflict which creation made inevitable – if creatures with the image of God were to be created and have the right to choose their eternal status (cf. Jn.4:23-24). With His glorification at the Father's right hand, our Lord has now become not only actually but undeniably and manifestly superior to angels – not through any change in his unchangeable deity but by means of the glorification. He received in His humanity which made that superiority undeniably clear to all who witnessed it . . . and will to all, since eventually all will witness it (Phil.2:9-11; cf. Is.45:23; Rom.14:11).

I will worship toward Your holy temple,
And praise Your name
For Your lovingkindness and Your truth;
For You have magnified *Your word* above all *Your name*.
Psalm 138:2 NKJV

(22) "For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, (23) that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him."

John 5:22-23 NKJV

Jesus Christ is the Logos, the very Word of God (Jn.1:1; Rev.19:13). As the verses above declare, it is the Father's good pleasure for all to honor and worship the Son, the Logos, the Word of God as the only way to approach the Father (e.g., Jn.14:6). And to emphasize the honor and glory of the Son, the Father has given Him the "Name which is superior to every name", a title which does not merely identify Him but which encapsulates the essence of His Person along with the honor and the power and the glory pertaining there unto – and that name is *Son*.

Verse Five

For to which of the angels did He ever say, "You are my Son. Today I have begotten you (Ps.2:7)"? And again, "I will be a Father to Him, and He will be my Son (2Sam.7:14)"?
Hebrews 1:5

In the previous verse, Paul had asserted that our Lord has become "manifestly superior to the angels to the degree that He received as [a part of] His inheritance a Name so much more

glorious than theirs". In other words, the rank, title, position achieved by Jesus Christ by virtue of His victory on the cross, His "Name" – the name of ***Son*** – is what proves His superiority to the angels in every way, a statement which, if accepted, completely, on its face upends the positions of both the advocates of the misinterpreted Law (who saw the Messiah as less than or even a type of angel but not God become man) and the Gnostics (who saw Jesus as an angel or *aion* but not God become man). Proving that Jesus is indeed the Son of God *ipso facto* proves that He is superior to angels in every way as the God-man. And it is from the Law itself that Paul will demonstrate the absolute truth of this assertion.

The first double set of proofs of our Lord's superiority to angels as the Son of God comes from Psalm 2:7 and 2nd Samuel 7:14 respectively. In each passage, the Father Himself is speaking, directly to the Messiah in the first quote and about Him in the second quote. In both quotes the Father addresses the Messiah – Jesus – ***as His Son***. In both quotes, therefore, the superiority of Christ is established – because "Son" puts Jesus on the same level as the Father in terms of His divine essence as even our Lord's unbelieving contemporaries realized.

(17) But Jesus answered them, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working." (18) Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God.

John 5:17-18 NKJV

In both citations in our context of Hebrews 1:5 as well, the humanity of the Son is also established as well as His deity. "Today I have ***begotten*** you" and "I ***will be*** a Father to Him" demonstrate that there was a definite start-point to the hypostatic union, that is, the taking on of true humanity by our Lord in His divinity.³¹ Only the Messiah could be God and man; only the Messiah is God who becomes man. Thus, as we see from these two citations, the Old Testament scriptures themselves describe our Lord and His unique Person, combining, since the virgin birth, both a divine and human nature, in just this way – for anyone paying appropriate attention (as these Jerusalem believers clearly were not).³²

Having already established that "Son" is the highest possible title that the Father can bestow, there is very little that anyone from either of the groups directly opposing the truth (and causing confusion in the Jerusalem church generally) could possibly say in response to these two quotations wherein the deity, humanity, and superiority of the Messiah to the entire creation are firmly established. This very same approach, of course, was precisely the one our Lord adopted in dealing with the Pharisees a generation earlier:

³¹ The term "hypostatic union" is the traditional one used in theology to describe dynamics of the incarnation. See BB 4A: Christology, section I.5.e, "The Hypostatic Union and *Kenosis*".

³² For the details of our Lord's uniqueness, see, in addition to the link in the previous footnote, BB 4A: Christology, section I.5.f, "The Incarnation and Virgin Birth". See also in BB 1: Theology: section II, "The Persons of God: the Trinity".

(41) While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, (42) "What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?" "The son of David," they replied. (43) He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says, (44) " 'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet" ' (Ps.110:1). (45) If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?" (46) No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.

Matthew 22:41-46 NIV (cf. Mk.12:35-37; Lk.20:41-44)

In the Old Testament, the Messiah is called Lord – God – by David, speaking in the Spirit in his capacity as a prophet in the first citation given in our context (Ps.2:7). That is an irrefutable proof that the Messiah is God as well as man – because "Lord" is a title of divinity and also of superiority. The Messiah, David's son, is superior to David, and that is why David called Him "my Lord" – but that could only be true if He were both human (so as to be David's actual descendent) and also God (so as to be David's "Lord"). Similarly, in the second citation in our context ((2Sam.7:14), no one else could conceivably be called the Father's one and only unique Son except the Messiah (Jn.1:14; 1:18; 3:16; 3:18; 1Jn.4:9; cf. Heb 11:17).³³ Therefore the statements "You are my Son" (Ps.2:7) and "I will be a Father to Him, and He will be my Son" (2Sam.7:14) prove beyond any doubt that Jesus is both God and man. So the very Old Testament scriptures which the false teachers claim to be relying upon – when actually consulted – merely put them to shame.

"Search the scriptures – since you assume by how you read them that you have eternal life! These are the very scriptures that bear testimony *about Me*."
John 5:39

Therefore the Old Testament not only proclaims the deity of Jesus Christ but also calls Him, the Messiah, the one and only unique "Son of God", demonstrating His prophesied taking on of true humanity as well as being God. Since none of the angels, mere creatures as all of us human beings are as well, ever received any such recognition from the Father so as to be called "Son", then beyond all argument *the Son* is proven to be "better", "superior" to the angels, by virtue of the Father's endowing Him with that unique title.

Verse Six

But when He brings back the Firstborn into the world, He says, "And let all the angels of God worship Him! (Ps.97:7b)".

³³ The Greek word *monogenes*, often translated "only begotten" in the citations in context, actually means "uniquely born" and stresses the exclusivity of the Messiah's virgin birth and special status as the one and only "God-man". This usage comes from its equivalence to the Hebrew word *yachidh*, which is used in the case of the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah to mean an absolutely unique birth: the LXX rendered *yachidh* as *monogenes* with that meaning of absolutely uniqueness and not "only born", and it is the prior meaning of this word that occurs in Hebrews (e.g., Heb.11:17).

Hebrews 1:6

This next proof is equally devastating to any presumption of angelic superiority to Jesus Christ. Here we have it direct from the Father that all the angels are commanded to "worship Him!". Only God is worthy of worship; angels surely are not (Rev.19:10; 22:9). It must not be overlooked, moreover, that this quotation from Psalm 97:7 says that this command will be given "when He brings **back** the Firstborn into the world", in other words, at the Second Advent. The conquering Messiah was the one desired by our Lord's contemporaries who had failed to learn from scripture that the Christ first had to suffer (Is.53:1ff.; Mk.11:10; Lk.24:26; Jn.12:13; Acts 3:18). Sadly, still blinded to the truth revealed so clearly in the Old Testament, Paul's contemporaries likewise now fail to understand that the Messiah is the God-man who will return a second time to judge the world. When He does, as this passage cited here by Paul proves, the angels **will** worship Him, something only possible if the Messiah is both God (as only God may be worshiped) and thus absolutely superior to them, and also man, so as to be able to return a second time, this time in glory (whereas the first time only His humanity was directly visible).

Angels, we recall, announced our Lord's conception (Lk.1:26-38) and proclaimed His birth (Lk.2:8-14) the first time our Lord came into this world. In our verse in context, Hebrews 1:6, Paul tells us that this universal worship of the Son of God by angels will take place "when He (the Father) brings **back** [His] Firstborn into the world". Besides relating the first advent – about which backsliders and heretics had their doubts – directly to the second advent, for which they all yearned (even as we do today), the title "Firstborn" establishes the absolute superiority of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, within the entire creation and over all creatures.

[Jesus Christ] is the exact image of the invisible God, **the Firstborn over all creation**.
Colossians 1:15

Only by becoming human could Christ be of this creation; only by being God could He have won the victory on the cross in His humanity as a direct result of which this title of preeminence, "Firstborn", was bestowed.

And He Himself is the Head of the Body, [that is,] the Church. [Even] He who is [its] Ruler, **the Firstborn** from the dead, [thus resurrected] to the purpose that He Himself might become the One who occupies **the first place** in all things.
Colossians 1:18

As this verse shows, our Lord's Firstborn status stems from the fact that He died for us – and thus won the victory in the conflict which human history is resolving (Rev.1:5). Such was the plan of God from its inception (Rom.8:29).

The concept of the firstborn was another important one for the Jewish believers who were the recipients of this epistle. That status always bestowed the privilege of the "double portion" (Deut.21:15-17; cf. Gen.48:22; 1Sam.1:5; 2Ki.2:9; Job 42:10; Is.61:7; Zech.9:12), although we see examples in scripture where that privilege might be lost (e.g., Reuben: Gen.49:4; and Esau: Heb.12:16). In our Lord's case, this status of Firstborn was not merely a matter of genealogy but

a matter of **choice** on the Father's part (cf. Rom.9:10-13), bestowed, validated and confirmed as a result of our Lord's victory over sin on the cross.

I will also **appoint** Him (the Messiah) **my Firstborn**, the most exalted of the kings of the earth.

Psalm 89:27 NIV

The double portion our Lord meritoriously received concomitant with this title included His appointment as **both King and Priest** (in the manner of Melchizedek: Ps.110:4-5; Heb.7:1).³⁴ Both attributes of our Lord's Messiahship are treated by Paul in the chapters which follow, but with a special emphasis on the high priesthood of Christ in order to demonstrate that His victory, glorification and appointment as such have replaced the Law upon whose misinterpretation so much of the resistance to the truth on the part of the Jerusalem church was predicated.

Verses Seven through Twelve

(7) And while about the angels He says, "The One who makes His angels spirits, and His servants flames of fire (Ps.104:4)", (8) yet to the Son [the Father says], "Your throne, O God [i.e., the Messiah], is forever, and the scepter of Your Kingdom is the scepter of integrity. (9) You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness. For this reason God your God has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions (Ps.45:6-7)". (10) And [the Father also says], "From the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth, and the heavens are the works of your hands. (11) They indeed will perish, but you remain. And they will grow old like a garment, (12) and like a cloak you will change³⁵ them and they will [thus] be changed like a garment is changed. But you are the same, and your years will not come to an end (Ps.102:25-27)."

Hebrews 1:7-12

This next extensive proof of the superiority of the Son over angels begins a scriptural description of what the angels are (v.7): spirits created by God to be His messengers (that is what the word "angel" means in both Hebrew and Greek³⁶); creatures made to serve Him. The Son, on the other

³⁴ Our Lord also received, as we have seen previously, the double portion of the Bride of Christ complemented by the Friends of the Bride, the millennial believers, so that while the Church replaces Satan and his angels one for one, the Friends double that number as a special additional portion for Him who is the preeminent Firstborn.

³⁵ The correct reading here is as in ms. Aleph (Sinaiticus) *allaxeis* not *helixeis*, a deliberate change by Paul from the LXX (Septuagint) to emphasize the change of the heavens in contrast to the Son Himself **not** changing.

³⁶ In Hebrew, the word for angel is *malach*, and is used of human messengers as well as angelic ones (e.g., Gen.32:3); and in Greek, *angelos*, the word from which our English "angel" is derived, means "messenger" exclusively in secular Greek and is the word used to translate *malach* in the LXX or 3rd cent. B.C. Greek version of the Old Testament.

hand, is described not as a servant but is instead explicitly called "God", the Inheritor of an eternal throne and a divinely bestowed kingdom (v.8).³⁷ As the Righteous King who will finally bring just rule to the earth (a frequent Old Testament theme: e.g., Ps.94; 96; 97; 98), the Son is said to be preeminent over all (v.9). More than that: the Son, in starkest contrast to angelic creatures, is in fact the Creator of the entire universe and all it contains, angels included (v.10). And if that were not proof enough of His superiority and deity, while the universe is destined to pass away (v.11-12a) – to be replaced by the new heavens and new earth wherein only righteousness dwells (2Pet.3:13) – the Son remains "the same" as He was before creation, something which can only be said of God Himself.

Jesus Christ, yesterday and today [has always been] the same, and [will be] unto the [end of] the ages.
Hebrews 13:8

Verses Thirteen and Fourteen

(13) But to which of the angels has He ever said, "Sit down at my right hand until I make your enemies the footstool of your feet (Ps.110:1)"? Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve on behalf of us who are destined to receive salvation as our inheritance?
Hebrews 1:13-14

After the previous, extended proof, and following on the heels of so much undeniable evidence coming directly from scripture, this final, shorter citation, followed up by what by now seems such an obvious and one might even be tempted to say gratuitous conclusion, may seem to be a bit of overkill on Paul's part. There are reasons for this, however. First, Paul has been saving Psalm 110:1 for a rhetorical *coup de grâce* which is deliberately over the top – in order to entirely cut the ground out from under those who might even dare to suggest that Jesus Christ is not God (cf. 2Cor.11:12): in that passage (Ps.110:1), the Father *Himself* pronounces the Messiah the coming King of all.

Verse thirteen is thus more than a proof. It is a rebuke to any and all who have been tempted to denigrate or doubt our Lord Jesus Christ's preeminent status or divine nature. And while verse thirteen thoroughly humiliates those of the legalistic faction ("Did you actually forget about this verse?"), the rhetorical question Paul asks in verse fourteen completely "settles the hash" of any and all leaning in the Gnostic direction. The answer to the question of whether or not angels are servants of God (as opposed to being God or anything like God) cannot be anything but "yes!" – for anyone with even passing fluency in the Bible, that is. And the proofs cited and explained in this chapter in such loving detail have just made it abundantly clear that Christ is the very One to whom these angels owe their service first and foremost. But not only that: these invisible servants have as their primary duty assigned to them by God, by the Messiah, by Jesus Christ, specific service on behalf of *us*, we (at the moment) inferior human believers "who are destined

³⁷ As God, Jesus is explicitly called God throughout the Bible (e.g., Is.9:6; 40:3; Matt.1:23; 22:41-46; 28:19; Lk.1:35; 5:20-21; Jn.1:1-18; 5:18; Rom.1:4; 9:3-5; 2Cor.13:14; Phil.2:5-8; Col.1:15-20; 2:9; Tit.2:13 Heb.1:3; 1:8; 2Pet.1:1; 1Jn.5:20; Rev.22:16).

to receive salvation as our inheritance" – by virtue of our belonging to their Superior: Jesus Christ.

While not made clear just yet, Paul's reason for bringing us into the picture here is twofold: first, Christ's humanity in addition to His deity cannot be used to argue for any sort of inferiority to angels since even we who are all human and merely human are also the objects of angelic ministrations and *not* the other way around. How much more is that not true of Him who created the angels and who directs them, Jesus Christ?

Secondly, this final observation sets up the arguments Paul will use in the next chapter when he discusses the necessity for Jesus to become a human being, explaining our role in the plan of God and reminding his readers of just what it is that the Messiah did for us during His first advent by redeeming us with His spiritual death on the cross. Failure to remember these essential matters is fraught with spiritual danger (Heb.2:1-4); mankind, not the angels, is heir to the eternal kingdom on which we have set our hope (Heb.2:5-8); and that is why our Lord had to become a human being: there was no other way for us to be saved and thus to come into the marvelous inheritance the Father has for all who have put their faith in His beloved Son (Heb.2:9-18).

(5) You too should have this attitude which Christ Jesus had. (6) Since He already existed in the very form of God, equality with God was [certainly] not something He thought He had to grasp for. (7) Yet in spite of this [co-equal divinity He already possessed], He deprived Himself of His status and took on the form of a slave, [and was] born in the likeness of men. (8) He humbled Himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even [His] death on [the] cross *[for us all]*.
Philippians 2:5-8

Conclusion: Although this letter was penned nearly two thousand years ago, its message could not be more timely for us, we who stand on the threshold of the Tribulation. In our present church era of Laodicea where lukewarmness is the rule, we believers today likewise find ourselves pressed between the forces of legalism and Gnosticism, represented respectively on the one side by the spiritually dead hand of denominationalism and traditionalism which are in their own way just as deadly to spiritual growth as was the Talmudic version of Paul's day, and on the other side by the frantic search for amusement and entertainment in lieu of truth as found in the mega-church and charismatic movements, which have all too much in common with the excesses of the Gnostics. And while the parallels are perhaps not exact, they are becoming more and more so every day as each trend veers farther and farther away from the truth.

There is therefore much to learn from the experience of these first century believers (by negative example) and from this courageous attempt by one of the greatest believers of all time to rescue them. The only antidote against the pressures of evil which we see exponentially increasing every day is the truth of the Word of God. Only by drawing closer to our dear Lord and Savior, only by keeping Him foremost in our hearts, only by walking closely with the Son of God – and seeing Him as He is, true God and genuinely human having come into this world to die for our sins – can we hope to be ready for the terrible time of testing which is about to come upon the entire world (Rev.3:10).

And in your hearts, [always] set apart in sanctification [Jesus] Christ as [your] Lord.
1st Peter 3:15 (cf. Is.8:13)

"I am coming quickly. Hold on to what you have that no one takes your crown [away]."
Revelation 3:11