

Is Jesus God in Hebrews 1.8?

by Servetus the Evangelical

New Testament (NT) scholars who believe Jesus is God, called “traditionalists,” cite Hebrew 1.8-9 as one of their major texts for support. This author quotes Psalm 45.6-7 and applies it to “the Son”—Jesus Christ. Both texts have grammatical problems, making it difficult to determine whether the author of Hebrews calls Jesus “God.” To understand how he uses this quotation, we must first examine the quotation.

Psalm 45 is a wedding song entitled “a song of love” and addressed to “the King” (v. 1). It may depict an ideal king, or it may have been composed for the royal marriage of a particular king, perhaps King Solomon, or both. The psalmist writes, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of uprightness is the scepter of Your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of joy above Your fellows.”

Translators capitalized personal pronouns here because they believed that they refer to Jesus and to signify their belief that Jesus is God. And the author of Hebrews quotes from the Septuagint, the 3rd century BCE Greek version, rather than the Hebrew Bible.

Scholars regard the first clause in Ps 45.6 as one of the most difficult texts to translate and interpret in the Old Testament (OT). Most English Bibles treat *elohim* (God) as a vocative, translating it “Your throne, O God,” and thus identifying the king as God. But some versions render it as an adjective, genitive, subject, or predicate, such as “your divine throne” or “your throne is (from) God,” which do not call the king God.

A Jewish Targum and many esteemed rabbis have interpreted Psalm 45 as messianic, as does the author of Hebrews. He writes, “But of the Son He says, ‘YOUR THRONE, O GOD, IS FOREVER AND EVER, AND THE RIGHTEOUS SCEPTER IS THE SCEPTER OF HIS KINGDOM. YOU HAVE LOVED RIGHTEOUSNESS AND HATED LAWLESSNESS; THEREFORE GOD, YOUR GOD, HAS ANOINTED YOU WITH THE OIL OF GLADNESS ABOVE YOUR COMPANIONS.’” (Small capitals in the NASB signify an OT quotation.)

It is possible that the psalmist applied the Hebrew word *elohim* (God) to the king as with Israel’s rulers in other psalms (“gods” in Psalm 58.1; 82.6). But being a monotheist, he likely meant the king is God’s vice-regent (cf. John 10.34).

Furthermore, the context of Ps 45 favors that *elohim/ho theos* in v. 6a does not call the king/Messiah “God.” “God” is clearly distinguished from the king/Messiah in v. 2 (“God has blessed You”) and in v. 7 (“God, Your God, has anointed You”). This is further amplified in both verses in which God is actually portrayed as acting upon the king/Messiah. To also call the king/Messiah “God” in such a context would introduce the most inexplicable ambiguity—God acting upon God. Don Cupitt well explains, “No exegete would suggest that the Hebrew writers thought of either their present king or their ideal future king as literally and co-equally divine.... the meaning is rather that the king rules by divine right and is endowed with the fullness of God’s power.”

So, the immediate contexts of both texts show that their authors did not intend to identify the one they were writing about as Israel’s God. They distinguish God and the king/Messiah by saying, “God has blessed You” (Psalm 45.2), and “God” and “His Son” (Hebrews 1.1-2). And it is unlikely that they would have addressed the king/Jesus as “O God” and then contradict this by saying, “God, Your God, has anointed You.”

The larger context of the book of Hebrews reveals that its author did not intend to call Jesus “God.” First, he says in his prologue that the Son is “the exact representation” (image) of God’s “nature” (Hebrews 1.3). A representation or image is not the original. Second, since he does not say in his prologue, which serves as an outline, that Jesus is God, it is very unlikely that he does so in his text. Third, he spares no effort in trying to prove that the heavenly-exalted Jesus is superior to all angels (vv. 5-14) as well as all men, including Moses (3.1-19), all of Israel’s priests, including the esteemed Melchizedek (7.1-16), and that Jesus’ priesthood is greater (9.1-28). Establishing all of this is superfluous if the author of Hebrews stated that Jesus is God.

The book of Hebrews is the only NT document written specifically to Jews. Jews are monotheists, and so was the author. If he had called Jesus God, he would have been quite aware that such a provocative proclamation would have stirred up a hornets’ nest among the Jewish community to which he writes. To not provide any reasons for such a bold assertion would have been a serious literary lapse. Instead, he didn’t intend any more than the psalmist did about the king/Messiah, which was not that he was God.

What do NT scholars say about this? The majority treat *ho theos* in Hebrews 1.8 as a vocative, thus calling Jesus “God.” But its context and that of Psalm 45.6 suggest that both authors did not intend to call the king/Messiah “God.” Vincent Taylor insists that *ho theos* in Hebrews 1.8 should be treated as a nominative; yet he argues that “nothing can be built upon this reference, for the author shares the reluctance of New Testament writers to speak explicitly of Christ as ‘God.’” Taylor contends that this verse “supplies no ground at all for the supposition that the author thought and spoke of Christ as God.... the writer frequently uses the name ‘the Son,’ and he does so in introducing this very quotation. He has no intention of suggesting that Jesus is God.” William Barclay often well summarizes scholarly debates as to whether NT texts call Jesus “God.” He says of Hebrews 1.8, “This is a passage in which no one would wish to be dogmatic. In both cases both translations are perfectly possible ... But, whatever translation we accept, we once again see that the matter stands in such doubt that it would be very unsafe to base any firm argument upon it.”

