

Hebrews 1:1 – A Unitarian Proof Text?

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In an attempt to deny any tangible existence for the Son of God prior to His virgin birth, Unitarians sometimes use the following passage:

Hebrews 1:1-2 (NASB) 1 God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, 2 in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.

Here is Anthony Buzzard's interpretation of this passage.

"A text which surveys God's activity over the ages says, 'God spoke long ago to the fathers through the prophets in many portions and in many ways, but [in contrast] in these last days has spoken to us in His Son' (Heb. 1:1,2). This would seem to confirm that until his human birth Jesus was not Son of God nor God's messenger to man. This same book of Hebrews points out that the Word was spoken through angels in Old Testament times (Heb. 2:2). If the message to Israel was through the same preexistent Jesus who became man, the writer of this New Testament book seems to lack any such information."¹

Mr. Buzzard padded his language with a hint of ambiguity by twice using the term "seems." Yet he stopped short of an emphatic statement to the effect that this passage absolutely precludes the possibility of the Son's pre-human existence. However, Kegan Chandler was far from cautious and quite emphatic. He writes:

*"But God, according to Hebrews 1, **explicitly did not speak to the fathers through His Son** until these last days, that is, until the recent days of Christ's ministry and the founding of the church. **It should be impossible to say** that it was actually the Son speaking to Abraham in Genesis 14."²*

From a purely logical standpoint, Mr. Chandler's statement is a non-sequitur. This text does not make any negative statement about the Son's past activities or existence. It only makes two positive statements: that (1) God previously spoke to "the fathers" in "the prophets," and (2) God has spoken to us – the nation of Israel – recently in His Son. Neither of these is a negative statement about God not having spoken through His Son previously. Mr. Buzzard and Mr. Chandler are drawing an inference which is neither

¹ Buzzard, Anthony F, The Doctrine of the Trinity, Christianity's Self-Inflicted Wound, p. 108

² Chandler, Kegan A. The God of Jesus in Light of Christian Dogma, p. 298

consistent with the context or logically necessary. This is because speaking to Israel through the prophets and speaking through the Son are not mutually exclusive concepts. The text does not say He spoke **exclusively** through the prophets in ancient times. The mere fact that there was a mysterious yet prominent Old Testament figure called “*the Messenger [Angel] of the LORD*,” who was not a human prophet yet God spoke to the Patriarchs in and through this mysterious Person, completely undermines the premise of Mr. Buzzard’s and Mr. Chandler’s statements.

From an exegetical standpoint, the inference drawn by both Mr. Buzzard and Mr. Chandler evaporates when context is carefully considered. Both men apparently assumed that the term “*the fathers*” in verse 1 refers to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob with whom God made and confirmed the Abrahamic Covenant. Yet it is obvious that “*the prophets*” came long after the patriarchs of the Abrahamic Covenant.

Moses was considered by the Jews to be the first and foremost “prophet” of God to Israel, yet he came more than four-hundred years after the Abrahamic Covenant.³ The remaining prophets came much later as Israel repeatedly turned away from God’s Law. This makes Mr. Chandler’s emphatic statement that – “*It should be impossible to say that it was actually the Son speaking to Abraham in Genesis 14*”⁴ – completely untenable. The patriarchs of the Abrahamic Covenant were dead generations before Israel’s first prophet,⁵ Moses, was born. The statement in verse 1 that God spoke “*in times past in the prophets*” does not include the 2500 years from Adam to Moses, but only the 1500 years from Moses to Christ, the period covered by the nation of Israel after the exodus.

The “fathers” to whom the prophets spoke were not Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Scripture refers to the Jewish ancestors generally as the “fathers,” especially those whom Moses led out of Egypt,⁶ but particularly those who rebelled in the wilderness and afterwards.⁷

*1 Kings 8:21 (NASB) “And there I have set a place for the ark, in which is the covenant of the LORD, which He made with **our fathers when He brought them from the land of Egypt.**”*

2 Kings 22:13 (NASB) “Go, inquire of the LORD for me and the people and all Judah concerning the words of this book that has been found, for great is the wrath of the LORD

³ Gal. 3:17

⁴ Cf. John 8:56-59

⁵ While Jude states that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, “prophesied,” he was not a prophet who spoke to Israel’s “fathers.”

⁶ 1 Kings 8:21, 58; 2 Kings 22:13

⁷ 1 Cor. 10:1

that burns against us, because our fathers have not listened to the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us."

The "fathers" to whom the prophets spoke were also sent into the Babylonian exile.

Neh. 13:17-18 (NASB) 17 Then I reprimanded the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing you are doing, by profaning the sabbath day? 18 Did not your fathers do the same so that our God brought on us, and on this city, all this trouble? Yet you are adding to the wrath on Israel by profaning the sabbath."

The task of the "prophets" was in response to Israel's rebellion. They were all sent to warn rebellious Israel of God's impending judgment because they repeatedly broke His covenants. The book of Hebrews opens with a theme that was common both in the Prophets as well as with Jesus Himself. That is, the "fathers" received the Law of Moses at Mt. Sinai but failed to obey it. When God repeatedly sent them prophets to warn them, they persecuted and killed the prophets.

Compare the first verses of Zechariah with the opening statement in Hebrews – "God spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets ..."

Zechariah 1:1-6 (NKJV) 1 In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to Zechariah the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo the prophet, saying, 2 "The LORD has been very angry with your fathers. 3 "Therefore say to them, `Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Return to Me," says the LORD of hosts, "and I will return to you," says the LORD of hosts. 4 "Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets preached, saying, `Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Turn now from your evil ways and your evil deeds."' But they did not hear nor heed Me," says the LORD. 5 "Your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever? 6 Yet surely My words and My statutes, Which I commanded My servants the prophets, Did they not overtake your fathers? "So they returned and said: `Just as the LORD of hosts determined to do to us, According to our ways and according to our deeds, So He has dealt with us.

That the "fathers" of the Jewish people rejected "the prophets" that God sent to them was a common theme also with Jesus.

Luke 6:22-23 (NKJV) 22 "Blessed are you when men hate you, And when they exclude you, And revile you, and cast out your name as evil, For the Son of Man's sake. Rejoice in

that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven, For in like manner their fathers did to the prophets."⁸

Luke 11:47-51 (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. 49 "Therefore the wisdom of God also said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, and some of them they will kill and persecute,' 50 "that the blood of all the prophets which was shed from the foundation of the world may be required of this generation, 51 "from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah who perished between the altar and the temple. Yes, I say to you, it shall be required of this generation.

Steven did the same in his fiery address to the Sanhedrin.

Acts 7:51-53 (NKJV) 52 "Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, 53 "who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it."

Paul said essentially the same thing.

Acts 28:25-26 (NKJV) 25 So when they did not agree among themselves, they departed after Paul had said one word: "The Holy Spirit spoke rightly through Isaiah the prophet to our fathers, 26 "saying, 'Go to this people and say: "Hearing you will hear, and shall not understand; And seeing you will see, and not perceive;

Jesus' parable of God's Vineyard (borrowed from Isaiah 5) describes this scenario, especially God's sending His own Son in person as a final warning to Israel. It stresses the superiority of God's own Son over all of the other human messengers (prophets) sent to Israel to warn them, thus emphasizing the gravity of rejecting God's own Son which far surpasses the gravity of rejecting the prophets. The theme of this parable is precisely what the writer of Hebrews had in mind.

Mark 12:1-11 (NKJV)

1 Then He began to speak to them in parables: "A man planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a place for the wine vat and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. 2 "Now at vintage-time he sent a servant to the vinedressers, that he might receive some of the fruit of the vineyard from the vinedressers. 3 "And they

⁸ Lk. 6:22-23 NKJV

took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. 4 "Again he sent them another servant, and at him they threw stones, wounded him in the head, and sent him away shamefully treated. 5 "And again he sent another, and him they killed; and many others, beating some and killing some. 6 "Therefore still having one son, his beloved, he also sent him to them last, saying, 'They will respect my son.'" 7 "But those vinedressers said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' 8 "So they took him and killed him and cast him out of the vineyard. 9 Therefore what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vinedressers, and give the vineyard to others. 10 Have you not even read this Scripture: 'The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone. 11 This was the LORD'S doing, And it is marvelous in our eyes '?"

In this parable, the "servants" (the prophets) were sent first because they were of lowest rank. But notice the words "*still having one son*" implies that the son was withheld from sending until last, not because he was not yet born, but **because the son outranked all of the servants sent ahead of him**. This is the point of Hebrews 1:1's statement, placing Jesus last among the messengers sent to rebellious Israel.

Moses announced the coming of the greatest and final "Prophet" to Israel, who is Jesus Christ, God's only-begotten Son, "*His beloved*."

*Deut. 18:15,18-19 (NKJV) 15 The LORD your **God will raise up for you a Prophet like me** from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear, ... 18 **I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren**, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him. 19 'And it shall be that **whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require it of him.**'"*

This "Prophet" had to be human like Moses and the other prophets since He would be "*like you from among their brethren*." This is why Hebrews states the following, explaining **why the Son of God had to become fully human, Son of Man**.

Heb. 2:9-18 (LGV) 9 But we see Jesus, "crowned with glory and honor," having been "made a little bit lower than the messengers" for the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God He might partake of death for every man. 10 For it was proper for Him, the Founder⁹ of their deliverance, (for whom everything is and through whom everything is)¹⁰, to become

⁹ Compare Heb. 12:2

¹⁰ This statement affirms the Son's role in the creation as already stated in Heb. 1:10-12 by quoting Psalm 102:24-27 and attributing it to the Son.

perfected through hardship, in leading many sons to glory. 11 For both the consecrating one and those being consecrated are all out of one man.¹¹ For this reason He is not ashamed to call them 'brothers,' 12 saying: "I will proclaim Your name to My brothers, in the middle of the Assembly I will sing hymns to You." 13 And again: "I will have confidence in Him." And again: "Look! I and the children God gave to Me." 14 Then since the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He likewise partook of the same, so that through death He may vanquish the one having the domain of death, who is the Devil, 15 and to release those who were prone to always live in slavery to the fear of death, 16 (for doubtless it does not take hold of the messengers, but it does take hold of the seed of Abraham). 17 For this cause **He was obliged to become like¹² His brothers in every way**, so that He could become a merciful and faithful High Priest in things toward God to atone for the sins of the people. 18 For in what He suffered, having been tempted, He is able to help those being tempted.

The entire book of Hebrews is a commentary on the substance and application of a theme that runs throughout the prophets and Jesus' teaching. Hebrews repeatedly emphasizes the contrast between the penalty for the Israelites' apostasy from the Law of Moses (when their fathers despised God's prophets) vs. the far more severe penalty for apostatizing from the Son's Law whom God sent to them in person. This is because the Son is so much greater than the angels, Abraham, Moses, and the prophets.

The whole first chapter of Hebrews sets out to prove the superiority of the Son of God to the angels by quoting several passages from the Old Testament. The writer first proved that the Son is superior to the angels because He was God's Agent *"through whom He fashioned the ages,"*¹³ then because He is the "heir" of the entire earth based on Psalm 2, and then because God has seated Him at His own right hand based on Psalm 110:1. In verses 8-9 the writer quoted Psalm 45:6-7 where the Son is called "God" in relation to His role as King in the coming Kingdom. Then in verses 10-12 the writer quoted from Psalm 102:24-27 which states, *"You laid the foundation of the earth, And the heavens are the work of Your hands,"* claiming that both Psalm 45:6-7 and Psalm 102:25-27 were spoken to (or about) *"the Son,"* confirming the Son's active role in the creation.¹⁴ This later Psalm validates the statement in verse 2 regarding the Son's active role in implementing God's plan through the ages, *"through whom also He fashioned the ages,"* by pointing to the *"work of Your hands"* (the Son's) in the creation of all things.¹⁵ This is affirmed once again in

¹¹ Adam, fully human

¹² Compare Acts 14:11 where the same Greek word is used. Compare also John 1:14 (*"the Word became flesh"*) and Phil. 2:7 (*"becoming in the likeness of men"*). All of these imply a previous state of being when He was not "flesh," was not "in the likeness of men," and was not "like His brothers."

¹³ vs. 2

¹⁴ John 1:1-2,10-12; Col. 1:15-18

¹⁵ Cf. Prov. 8:22-31 (LXX), esp. vs. 30 which reads in the Hebrew *"I was beside Him, as a master workman,"* and in the LXX *"I was beside Him, master-crafting."*

chapter 2 by the statement about Christ, “For it was proper for Him, the Founder of their deliverance, (for whom everything is and through whom everything is) ...”¹⁶

The reason why chapter 1 emphasized the Son’s superiority over the angels was because the Law was given on Mount Sinai to Moses in the presence of the heavenly hosts, as Moses’ described in the following verse.

*Deut. 33:2 (NASB) 2 And he said, “The LORD came from Sinai, And dawned on them from Seir; He shone forth from Mount Paran, And He came from the midst of ten thousand holy ones; At His right hand there was flashing lightning for them.”*¹⁷

Psalms 68:17 (NKJV) 17 The chariots of God are twenty thousand, Even thousands of thousands; The Lord is among them as in Sinai, in the Holy Place.

This theme continues into chapter 2.

Hebrews 2:1-3 (NKJV) 1 Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. 2 For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, 3 how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him,

The same theme continues in chapters 3-4, where the Son is shown to be superior to Moses to the same degree that a builder of a house is superior to the house he built,¹⁸ the implication being that the Son built the household of Moses. Then the readers are warned not to repeat the rebellion of their “fathers” in the wilderness.

Again, this theme is carried on in chapter 7 where “Melchizedek” (“King of Righteousness” who was “Priest of God Most High,” “King of Peace,” and “King of Salem” (Jerusalem),¹⁹ all of which are Messianic titles, is shown to be superior even to Abraham and the entire Levitical priesthood²⁰ in the same way that the Son is shown to be superior to the angels in chapter 1 and Moses in chapter 3. In chapter 8 the New Covenant is shown to be superior to the Old Covenant which had to be superseded. The Son has a “more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on

¹⁶ Heb. 2:10 (cf. John 1:1-3; Col. 1:15-17)

¹⁷ Compare Gal. 3:19-20, 1 Tim. 2:5, Acts 7:30-39

¹⁸ Heb. 3:1-6

¹⁹ Psalm 76:2

²⁰ Heb. 7:4-10

better promises."²¹ The New Covenant was made because God found fault with their "fathers"²² who were repeatedly warned by "the prophets."

Consequently, the point of Hebrews 1:1 is not to "*survey God's actions in history*" or to preclude the possibility that the Son appeared to Abraham, as it is misused by Biblical Unitarians. It does not limit those whom God used to speak to Israel in the past to only the "prophets." Moses recorded that God also spoke to Abraham through the one called the "*Messenger of the LORD*"²³ and "*Melchizedek*."²⁴ The point of Hebrews 1:1 was to show that after having sent many lesser agents (prophets) to warn Israel, God's warnings continually falling on deaf ears, God finally sent His "only-begotten" and "beloved" Son in Person to warn Israel. Thus, the rejection of God's only-begotten, beloved Son would bring the most severe consequences possible, far surpassing the threats to "the fathers" found throughout "the prophets."

While the Son does indeed appear in the Old Testament,²⁵ especially in relation to both the creation²⁶ and making the covenants on God's behalf, **His identity as God's Son was consistently withheld and shrouded in mystery.**²⁷

Far from denying the pre-human origin and existence of the Son of God, Hebrews demands it. The Son is even portrayed as "*the Founder and Finisher of the Faith*"²⁸ which was the "faith" of all those mentioned in Hebrews 11, including Abraham. The Biblical Unitarian authors quoted in this article have made this passage say exactly the opposite of what it was intended to say. This kind of proof-texting in order to force one's preconceived ideas into Scripture will never have any success in defeating Trinitarianism. To defeat that Goliath, one must bring superior principles of interpretation to the table, use them consistently, and show where Trinitarians are violating them. It will never come by using the same defective and subjective methodology that Trinitarians use.

Someone else, who preceded all of the human prophets, is said to have appeared to these men as God's Agent and confirmed the covenant. He was not named or identified, but only called by the very generic title, "*the Messenger of the LORD*." He confirmed the

²¹ Heb. 8:6

²² Heb. 8:8

²³ Gen. 22:11,15

²⁴ Gen. 14:18-20

²⁵ Nebuchadnezzar called the fourth man in the fiery furnace both "*the Son of God*" and the "*Messenger*" of God (Dan. 4:24-25,28).

²⁶ Prov. 8:22-31 (LXX)

²⁷ Gen. 32:29; Judges 13:17-18; 1 Cor. 2:6-10; Col. 2:2; 1 Tim. 3:16

²⁸ Heb. 12:2

Abrahamic Covenant with Abraham,²⁹ and later appeared to Moses in the burning bush,³⁰ calling him to lead Israel, and is the one who delivered the Ten Commandments to Israel on Mt. Sinai.³¹ He then led Israel through the wilderness to the Promised Land.³² In Isaiah 63:9, He was called *“the Messenger”* of God’s *“Face”*³³ (Presence) in relation to His role in leading Israel to the Promised Land. In Isaiah 9:6-7 (LXX), the Son who would be born to sit upon the Throne of David was called *“the Messenger of Great Council.”* Malachi prophesied that John the Baptist would announce the arrival of *“the Messenger of the Covenant.”*³⁴ Finally, in the first chapter of Revelation the *“Messenger”* of God³⁵ identified Himself to John as *“I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore.”*³⁶

²⁹ Gen. 22:11-18

³⁰ Exod. 3:2; Acts 7:30

³¹ Acts 7:38

³² Exod. 23:20-23; Judges 2:1-5; 1 Cor. 10:1-4,9

³³ The Hebrew word translated *“Presence”* is literally *“Face.”* (In Exod. 33:14-15 this word is translated *“Presence”* but in vs. 20 it is translated *“Face”*).

³⁴ Mal. 3:1

³⁵ Rev. 1:1-2

³⁶ Rev. 1:18 (NKJV)