

Hebrews and Pre-Existence

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This article will examine the interpretation of Heb 1:10-12 and, after dismissing current interpretations, present a new reading. A corollary of the study is that it is shown that the text does not presuppose the pre-existence of the Son.

Introduction

The largest quotation deployed by the author of Hebrews is from Psalm 102,

And, Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thy hands: They shall perish; but thou remainest; and they all shall wax old as doth a garment; And as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed: but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail. Heb 1:10-12 (KJV)

Of old hast thou laid the foundation of the earth: and the heavens *are* the work of thy hands. They shall perish, but thou shalt endure: yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment; as a vesture shalt thou change them, and they shall be changed: But thou *art* the same, and thy years shall have no end. Ps 102:25-27 (KJV)

The quotation is a composite quotation¹ from the Psalm because there is added the extra phase “...Thou Lord” from v. 12 of the Psalm, “But thou, O Lord, shalt endure for ever”. How should this quotation be handled? What does a reader take from Psalm 102 *into* Hebrews 1?

Interpretations

There are four interpretations to cover:

1) Some commentators ascribe this utterance to the Messiah who says to the Father that he laid the foundation of the earth. However, this suggestion fits badly with the argument in Hebrews 1 which is centred on things that are *said of the Messiah*. This quotation from Psalm 102 is the largest of the O.T. texts that the author selects, and it would break the structure of his argument to read it as referring to the Father, especially as the author concludes his reasoning with a quote from Psalm 110 which is an undisputed example of something said to the Messiah. This last quote is tied to the opening quotation of the author’s reasoning by the phrase “said he at any time”, and this link encloses the whole piece as assertions spoken to Christ.

2) This quotation has also been thought by some commentators to ascribe the work of the Genesis creation to Christ.² However, the language of creation is used to describe other “beginnings” in God’s purpose, for example, the Flood, the Exodus, and the Gospel.³ It cannot

¹ Here I eschew the view that the author quotes the LXX text of Ps 102:27 (101:27), which has the expression, “And thou Lord...”; the word order of the LXX in the *Vaticanus* and *Alexandrinus* editions differs in two places from that of the NT text, and we cannot be certain that the LXX has not been edited to bring it into line with the NT.

² A. T. Lincoln, *Hebrews* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2006), 64, 93.

³ The new creation is mentioned in Heb 1:2 in the mention there of “all things” (John 1:3-4, Heb 2:8). The Son is the ‘heir’ of all things (including the most excellent name (v. 4)), and the scope of ‘all things’ is defined in v. 14 in the reference to the “heirs” of *salvation*. This salvation is grounded in the promises to the patriarchs, because it is these to which the Messiah is an *heir*. Hence, we encounter in the author’s exposition a *beginning* and what “the Lord” did in that beginning, for he

be assumed that the Genesis creation is the only possible meaning. Literally speaking the earth and the heavens will not perish,⁴ and therefore a “Genesis” reading seems unlikely.

3) Another proposal has been that the quotation refers to the creation of Israel, the foundation of that nation viewed as a figurative “heavens and earth”.⁵ It is argued that these “heavens and earth” were to “perish” in the sense that the Mosaic order and the state were brought to an end in AD70. The difficulty with this view is that it is unclear *how* Christ could be said to be the one who laid the foundations of the Mosaic order.

4) A further interpretation⁶ is that the “heavens and the earth” are a new creation, the foundations of which were laid by Christ in his ministry, in the beginning, and which will be realized upon his return. It is further said that *even* these “heavens and earth” will perish, once the millennium has run its course. The problem with this suggestion is that it looks like an *ad hoc* solution; the post-millennial state of affairs is elsewhere not the subject of prophecy. It is difficult to see why the new heavens and earth of the millennium would perish.

Against these proposals, we offer here a nuanced merger of views (3) and (4), and suggest that Heb 1:10-12 is a typology based on the restoration of Judah under Hezekiah.

Quoting Psalm 102

The presumption in (4) is that the pronoun in “...they shall perish...” (v. 11) refers to the “heavens and earth” of the previous verse (v. 10). If we take the text of Hebrews alone, this may appear to be the only option, but a close reading of Psalm 102 supplies a different reference for what will perish, something other than the “heavens and the earth”. Hence, our suggestion is that the author of Hebrews has taken into his text the reference of the “they shall perish” from Psalm 102; he has not created a new reference. In other words, the author of Hebrews expects his readers to understand the whole of Psalm 102 and to use the references *in that Psalm* for the pronouns in his quotation.

Our proposal is that “the Lord” (Jesus) did lay the foundation of the new heavens and earth in his ministry “in the beginning”, and that this is spoken to “the Lord” at his return. At that time, when the new heavens and new earth are brought to completion, they will replace an old order which will perish. This old order is identified as the Mosaic order in Hebrews 8. Speaking of the Mosaic system the author of the letter says,

That which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away. (Heb 8:13).

And this is the topic of Heb 1:10-12,

They shall perish; but thou remainest; and they all shall wax old as doth a garment... Heb 1:11

says, “How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord...” (Heb 2:3).

⁴ See 1 Chron 16:30, Ps 37:9-11, 115:16, Prov 10:30, Eccl 1:4, Isa 11:19, 45:18, Hab 2:14, Matt 5:5.

⁵ A. Perry, *Before He Was Born* (1st ed.; Sunderland: Willow Publications, 1995), 193-219. The purpose of the current study is to place into discussion an alternative to this “Israelite” view, which has now been replaced in the 2nd edition of *Before He Was Born*.

⁶ J. Carter, *Hebrews* (Birmingham: CMPA Publishing, 1947), 22-23.

In contrast, the salvation of the Messiah would be from generation to generation (Isa 51:8, Ps 102:28, Heb 1:14, 2:3).

In Psalm 102 the same transition is outlined, except that the terms of Psalm 102 refer to a “type” rather than the antitype of Hebrews 1. This type revolves around Hezekiah⁷ and the foundation of a new earth that God had laid in his early reign, overturning the idolatry of Ahaz. During the Assyrian invasion and his sickness, power passed to the political enemies of Hezekiah in Jerusalem. It is against this background that the hope of the psalmist is expressed that these men would perish and the new earth laid down by Hezekiah would come to fulfillment.

Psalm 102

Psalm 102 is a “Hezekiah Psalm”, and its language is closely tied to prophecies of the eighth century. At this time, Judah was in mortal danger, facing extinction as a nation and captivity in Assyria. Hezekiah was sick and power had transferred to his opponents in Jerusalem who sought a policy of appeasement with Assyria.

The psalm is both a public and a private prayer, for it is addressed both to God and then published for the people. The prayer begins in v. 1 with a first person address to God. In v. 16 there is a shift to the third person and the psalm addresses an audience describing what “the Lord” will do for Zion. In v. 23 there is a recapitulation of a prayer that has been addressed to God.

Hezekiah’s Prayer

The situation of the prayer is one where Zion is under threat from an external enemy and the one who is praying has opponents inside the city who are advocating a policy of appeasement. In addition, the person is sick unto death. Hezekiah is fearful for the state of the nation and his capital city Jerusalem (v. 20), with enemies without and *within* (v. 8). The contrast in the Psalm is between his declining days⁸ and the everlasting days of Yahweh. He senses the passing of his generation, he feels the reproach of his political opponents, and so he looks to the next generation, and he writes his words for them — a ‘generation to come’ and a ‘people which shall be created’ (Ps 102:18).

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|---|---|
| Day of Distress v. 2 (RSV) | A day comparable to the “day of the Lord” |
| Days consumed in smoke v. 3 | Days characterized by the destruction of the cities of Judah, cf. Isa 51:6 |
| My bones are burned as a hearth v. 3 | The “bones” are his kinsman who are being “burned” in the land, cf. Job 30:30, Isa 24:6 |
| I am withered like grass vv. 4, 11 | This is the refrain describing the state of Jerusalem and Judah in Isa 40:6-8 |
| I am like a vulture of the wilderness and an owl of the waste places v. 6 (RSV) | The wilderness and waste places of Jerusalem Isa 51:3 |

⁷ See G. Booker, *Psalm Studies* (Austin, Texas: Booker Publications, 1988), 592-594.

⁸ His days were ‘like a shadow that declineth’ (v. 11), and so the Lord reverses his decline using the shadow of the sun on a sundial as proof.

| | |
|---|--|
| My “enemies” have access to me and reproach me all the day v. 8 | These are internal opponents at the Jerusalem court hostile to Hezekiah cf. Isa 51:7 |
| I have been lifted up and cast down v. 10 | The king has been replaced during his sickness |

Hezekiah laments his sickness and contrasts his plight with the everlasting days of Yahweh. His days are like a shadow, but the Lord endures for ever (vv. 11-12). Nevertheless, he declares to his God that He (Yahweh) will arise and have mercy upon Zion, because His servants, of whom Hezekiah was one, took pleasure in the stones of Zion (v. 14).

At this juncture the Psalm breaks off from recording Hezekiah’s prayer and records Hezekiah’s own thoughts on the prayer and addresses an audience. Thus v. 16 begins with a confident expression of hope — ‘When the Lord shall build up Zion, he shall appear in his glory’. This change of fortune for Zion will come about when the Lord ‘appears’ in His glory. Hezekiah offers his thoughts on his prayer in vv. 17-22 in a soliloquy.

The immediate fulfillment of Hezekiah’s expectations lies in the deliverance of Jerusalem from the invading armies of Sennacherib. Hezekiah is confident that God has ‘looked down’ and seen the groaning of the prisoner and determined to loosen those appointed to death (by the Assyrian invaders). In this expected deliverance, Hezekiah anticipates that a people will be gathered together and by this process ‘created’ (vv. 18, 22), and they will praise the Lord in Zion (vv. 18, 21). This ‘generation to come’ (Ps 78:4, cf. Deut 29:22) are described as the children of Yahweh’s servants, who would ‘continue’, indeed the children of these children would also be established before the Lord; this is a picture of stability and long life (Ps 102:14, 28).

The prayer and the address to the audience go together, because the soliloquy emerges out of the prayer (v. 17). It is written for a generation to come and the people who would be created out of the coming deliverance. The Psalm concludes with a recapitulation⁹ of the prayer and its occasion (v. 23ff). God had weakened Hezekiah and shortened his days, and in response, Hezekiah had said in prayer, ‘O my God take me not away in the midst of my days’ (v. 24ff, cf. Ps 89:45). Naturally, this review repeats elements of the prayer from vv. 2-15 as well as expanding upon its content. So we learn again that God is throughout all generations (vv. 12, 24), and that He endures for ever (vv. 12, 26). Indeed, Hebrews 1:10 binds the prayer and the recapitulation together because it quotes from v. 12 (of the prayer) and vv. 25-26 (of the recapitulation), ‘And, thou Lord (from v. 12), in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth (from v. 25)’.

New Heavens and New Earth

While it is natural to take “heavens and earth” to refer to the Genesis creation, these terms can also carry a poetic reference to God’s people in the land, Jerusalem, and the temple. Isaiah prophesied of a “new heavens and a new earth” in the context of the restoration of Judah after the invasion of 701 B.C.E.,¹¹

⁹ The recapitulative force of Hezekiah’s remark is indicated by the change in tense in v. 24, “I said, O my God”.

¹⁰ It is possible that the re-capitulation was subsequently added to the Psalm, since Isaiah records that Hezekiah had written similar words when he had recovered from sickness (Isa 38:9-10).

¹¹ We presume here an eighth century reading of Isaiah 40-66, which is contrary to most commentators. For an introduction (albeit with problems), see J. Barton Payne, “Eighth Century Israelitish Background of Isaiah 40-66” *WTJ* 29 (1966-1967): 179-190; 30 (1968): 50-58; 185-203.

For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind. But be ye glad and rejoice for ever *in that* which I create: for, behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy. Isa 65:17-18 (KJV)

The partial interpretation of the figure “new heavens and a new earth” is given in the statement that ‘I create Jerusalem a rejoicing’. The most plausible suggestion is that Jerusalem and in particular its temple and priests are the “new heavens” and the “new earth” is the general population and the civic leaders in a restored land. Such a “new heavens” is indicated by Isaiah in other references to Jerusalem and the temple needing to be re-built at this time:

Our holy and our beautiful house, where our fathers praised thee, is burned up with fire: and all our pleasant things are laid waste. Wilt thou refrain thyself for these *things*, O Lord? wilt thou hold thy peace, and afflict us very sore? Isa 64:10-11 (KJV)

Thus saith the Lord, The heaven *is* my throne, and the earth *is* my footstool: where *is* the house that ye build unto me? and where *is* the place of my rest? Isa 66:1-2 (KJV)

Isaiah indicates that the work of restoration was not proceeding; but this does not detract from the pleading and encouragement implied in the promise of a “new heavens and a new earth” at this time in Hezekiah’s reign. The intention of Yahweh was that righteousness would go forth from Jerusalem (Isa 62:1).

This (faltering) work of restoration implies that a foundation had been laid for the heavens and the earth. Hence, we read earlier in Isaiah,

Therefore thus saith the Lord God, Behold, I have laid in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner *stone*, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste. Isa 28:16 (KJV revised)

This text is interpreted in the NT in relation to Christ, but in its primary application it refers to Hezekiah and his faith in Yahweh. Spoken before the siege of Jerusalem has been lifted, and before Jerusalem has been delivered, it calls the people to have faith in Hezekiah as God’s servant, and to not “make haste” out of the city.

It is this background that informs Hezekiah’s thinking in Psalm 102:10-12. He says two things:

1) Firstly, the foundation of the earth was laid “of old”; the expression (לפנים) strictly means “from before” and it is generally translated as an expression of temporal priority (e.g. Deut 2:10, Jud 1:10, Job 17:6). In the context of the Jerusalem siege, Hezekiah is saying that God had laid the foundation of the earth *before this crisis*, and this poetic figure is naturally taken as a reference to Hezekiah’s prior reforming reign which was ostensibly the foundation for the future.

2) Secondly, Hezekiah says that the heavens are the work of God’s hands;¹² he does not say that the foundation of the heavens has been laid—he is not making the same point as Isa 28:16. However, he is saying that the work of fashioning the heavens belongs to God. In terms Isaiah’s prophecies, this work has to do with reforming the temple and the priesthood so that righteousness goes forth out of Zion.

¹² This work of constructing the tabernacle was very much the work of God’s hands, since he set down the pattern for the tabernacle (Exod 25:9, 40), and he gave the spirit-gifts for its completion (Exod 35:30-35).

These statements are an expression of Hezekiah's confidence in Yahweh: he contrasts work that God has already done (the foundation of the earth) and work he is currently engaged upon (fashioning a new people—the heavens); he contrasts this work with “those who shall perish”.

Garments

The rhetorical flow of the Psalm identifies the “they” of “they shall perish” as the “they that are mad against me” (v. 8). Apart from his own physical health, and apart from the crisis facing the nation, it is about his “enemies” that Hezekiah offers complaint. His expression of confidence in Yahweh is therefore to be contrasted with the future in store for his enemies. The language that he uses to describe them is echoed in Isaiah.

They shall perish, but thou shalt endure: yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment; as a vesture shalt thou change them, and they shall be changed... Ps 102:26 (KJV)

Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look upon the earth beneath: for the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall become old like a garment, and its inhabitants shall die in like manner: but my salvation shall be for ever, and my righteousness shall not be abolished. Isa 51:6 (KJV)

Behold, the Lord God will help me; who *is* he *that* shall condemn me? lo, they all shall wax old as a garment; the moth shall eat them up. Isa 50:9 (KJV)¹³

These Isaiah prophecies use some of the language of Psalm 102.¹⁴ The problems that Hezekiah had with his enemies in Jerusalem during the Assyrian siege continued after Jerusalem was delivered. At this time these same enemies advocated policies of treaty and alliance with the surrounding nations as a way of bringing stability to the region in the wake of the power vacuum left behind by the Assyrians. Hence, Hezekiah describes the fate of these enemies in the same terms as Isaiah who saw in them the opponents of Yahweh; Isaiah advocated reliance on Yahweh alone.

Isaiah 50 opens with a rhetorical question about a bill of divorcement. Where were the divorce papers, if God had cast away his people? There were none, even though the people had sold themselves into slavery in their efforts to appease the Assyrian Superpower. Now, they were failing to take up arms and re-conquer the land. They had been delivered from Assyria, but they were refusing to take up the task of conquest. Hence, Yahweh was complaining that there was ‘no man’ to lead the forces out of Jerusalem (Isa 50:2, 52:11).

In this context, the Servant of the Lord meditates about his situation (Isa 50:4-9). He was experiencing considerable dissension inside the city by those in the establishment who favoured diplomatic solutions to the political situation. Nevertheless, they would “wax old as a garment” (Isa 50:9), and so the Servant appeals to those who fear Yahweh that they should follow him.

¹³ The echo here goes back to the provision of God during the wilderness. The people were not only fed and watered, but they were also clothed, ‘Thy raiment waxed not old upon thee’ (Deut 8:4, 29:5, Neh 9:21). This declaration by Isaiah is tantamount to the statement that the provision of God was to be taken away. In other words, a defining act of their redemption from Egypt is reversed in a description of their destruction.

¹⁴ For example, the language of heaven and earth, the figure of the garment waxing old, the theme of what was done ‘before’, the loosing of the captive, and the everlasting salvation-righteousness of the kingdom age.

This appeal is continued in Isaiah 51, ‘Hearken to me, ye that follow after righteousness’ (Isa 51:1, 4). It would seem that Hezekiah’s confidence in God was pilloried and discounted, and his political enemies orchestrated public demonstrations of opposition, during which he (like politicians today) was buffeted and spat on (Isa 50:6-7).¹⁵ In this context, he declares that the earth would ‘wax old as a garment’ (Isa 51:6). The parallelism of Isa 50:9 and Isa 51:6, namely, ‘they shall wax old’ (Isa 50:9) and ‘the earth shall wax old’ (Isa 51:6), identifies the poetic reference for “the earth”— it is comprised of those who ruled the land.

The same point is being made in Psalm 102. When Hezekiah says, ‘Mine enemies reproach me all the day, and *they* that are mad against me are sworn against me’ (v. 8), this is the language of political opposition. It is these enemies who are metaphorically “the earth” and who would “wax old” as a garment and perish (Ps 102:26).

Hebrews 1 and Psalm 102

The use of Psalm 102 in Hebrews 1 is typological. The words are spoken to the Davidic messiah when he returns to establish the kingdom. At this time, when God brings again the firstbegotten into the world, it is said that,

And, Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thy hands: They shall perish; but thou remainest; and they all shall wax old as doth a garment; And as a vesture shalt thou fold them up,¹⁶ and they shall be changed: but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail. Heb 1:10-12 (KJV)

At this time, the “beginning” refers back to the beginning of the Gospel ministry; it was at this time that the foundation of the new earth was laid. When the Son returns, those who held sway over the people would perish and wax old as a garment; the kingdom of the Son would not fail.

This use of Psalm 102 reflects the expectations of the author of Hebrews. He was living in the “last days” of the Jewish Commonwealth (v. 2). In these days those who ruled the nation would perish, and the Son would set up his own rule. Speaking of the Mosaic system, the author says, ‘That which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away’ (Heb 8:13), and ‘He taketh away the first, that he may establish the second’ (Heb 10:9). The salvation of the Messiah’s age would be from generation to generation (Isa 51:8, Ps 102:28, Heb 1:14, 2:3).

This ending of the Jewish Commonwealth is described as the *passing away* of a “heaven and earth” by *other* N.T. writers, but it is important to recognize that the author of Hebrews is not making his point in these precise terms; he is not saying that ‘heaven and earth’ shall perish.

Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Matt 5:18¹⁷

¹⁵ The messianic focus of Isaiah 50 is the trial of Jesus. It presents Jesus as an obedient son, full of confidence in the Lord God who will justify him in his trial against his adversary (vv. 7-8). His confident assertion is ‘who is he that shall condemn me?’ (v. 9).

¹⁶ This description of the Messiah’s work, ‘as a vesture, thou shalt change them’, is chosen because of the way in which his vesture was taken from him and parted (Ps 22:18). It is therefore *his* work to change their vesture. The irony is directed against his priestly accusers (cf. Zech 3:4-5), who laid great store by their own vestures.

¹⁷ See Matt 24:35, Mark 13:31, Luke 16:17, 21:33.

But the day of the Lord will come...in which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are in it shall be burned up...Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, in which dwelleth righteousness. 2 Pet 3:10-13

This passage identifies the sequence and the timing of the new heaven and earth: an old heaven and earth passes away, and a new heaven and earth come about in its place. The elements here are the rudiments of the Law of Moses, as is shown by the occurrence of the same Greek word for 'elements' in Gal 4:3, 9, Col 2:8, 20 and Heb 5:12. If we combine the teaching of Heb 1:10-12 with 2 Pet 3:10-13, we add the detail that the foundation of the new earth was laid in the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

Conclusion

In Psalm 102, Hezekiah thinks of Yahweh. The use of Psalm 102 in Hebrews is solely messianic, and the thought is not of the Father but of Christ. A fair amount of biblical reading is required to understand Hebrews 1. It is not correct to read 'laid the foundation of the earth' with a 20c. cultural perspective, as if the author was describing the planet. The author is using a Psalm which employs figurative language in referring to a heaven and earth, and this language is descriptive of the restoration of Judah under Hezekiah. The interpretation of the author of Hebrews is that this restoration is typical of the kingdom that Jesus will establish on his return. This kingdom will replace a Jewish leadership which will perish.

The letter to the Hebrews is very much a Jewish letter addressing *Jewish* concerns and issues. One such issue concerned the status of Christ, and the author shows that the superiority of Christ derives from his status as a Son who has *inherited* a most excellent name. None of his argument fits well with Trinitarian or pre-existence claims about Christ; indeed, it is difficult to conceive his readers understanding the idea of an incarnation of a pre-existent Son. Instead of this idea, we have seen that the author sets various Psalms in a context of *inheritance* and *delegated* authority. This authority far exceeded anything that had been possessed by the angels.