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Paul Ellingworth

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## Jesus and the Universe in Hebrews

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*Dr. Ellingworth is a Translations Consultant with the United Bible Societies. This essay is a by-product from his preliminary work towards the writing of the volume on the Epistle to the Hebrews in The New International Greek Testament Commentary.*

The purpose of this paper<sup>1</sup> is not to explore the influences which may have contributed to the cosmology of Hebrews, nor to take issue with those who have attempted to find a coherent pattern in this puzzling area of the 'epistle', but to re-examine the relevant texts themselves, in order to discover how they relate to one another.

One must begin somewhere. We take as starting-points for this discussion three theses which, though there is much evidence to support them, will not be argued in detail. They may be stated as follows:

(1). The author's purpose in writing is to encourage (13:22) his readers, and prevent them from drifting away (2:1) or 'shrinking back' (10:39) from faith in Christ.

(2). The author does this by exploring for his readers who Jesus is, what he has done, and the results of his work.

(3). This teaching cannot without distortion be analysed into the later categories of christology and soteriology. Hebrews contains much valuable material for the later formulation of these and other doctrines; but within the perspective of the epistle itself, who Jesus was and what he did are inseparable, and in the letter as a whole, what Jesus did is primary. The theme of who he was is explored in order to throw light on what he did.

Within this teaching, there are however three distinctions to be made. The first two may be considered together. They are, first, the distinction between old and new teaching about Jesus; and second, that between peripheral and central teaching. In the nature of the evidence, a single writing by an unknown author to unknown readers and/or hearers, these distinctions cannot be made with absolute precision. As far as the distinction between old and new teaching is concerned, there is still for example

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised form of a paper presented to the British New Testament Conference held in Edinburgh in September 1984.

disagreement about how much, if any, of the teaching about Christ's high priesthood was already familiar to the original receptors. As for the distinction between central and peripheral teaching, this must be made on the basis of the epistle as a whole, not of individual verses or passages, still less on the basis of grammatical criteria. For example, a reading of 1:1-4 alone might suggest that the author was more interested in christology than in soteriology; but when one returns to this prologue after reading the entire epistle, the apparently incidental participial phrase 'having made purification for sins' proves to be of the greatest significance.

Moreover, the distinctions are themselves distinct from one another. It does not seem to be the case, as one might perhaps expect, that traditional teaching is always peripheral, or even that the new teaching is always central. The first readers of Hebrews had almost certainly already learned to confess Jesus as Son of God, yet this traditional teaching is prominent throughout the first seven chapters; by contrast, the equally traditional title 'Christ' is not developed in any distinctive way. In 3:1, Jesus is called 'the apostle and high priest of our confession'. Since neither title is given to Jesus elsewhere in the New Testament, one may presume that they were probably both new to the readers. One title, high priest, is central to the entire argument, especially from the end of chapter 4 to the end of chapter 9; the other, apostle, is never used again.

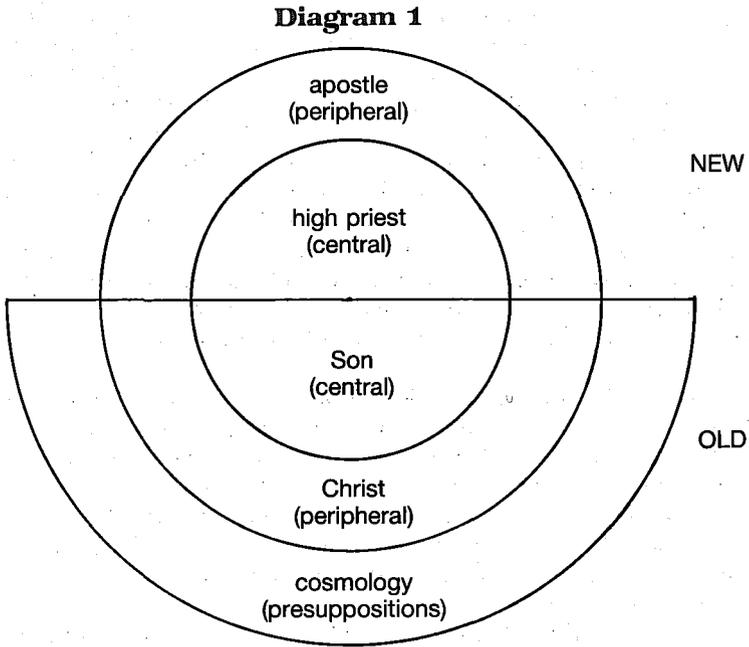
The third distinction ranges more widely than teaching about Jesus. It is the distinction between, on the one hand, concepts which, whether old or new, central or peripheral, are the subject of explicit statements; and, on the other hand, concepts which are presupposed by the author, and perhaps also by the readers. Of particular interest for the present discussion are the author's presuppositions about the universe; in other words, his implicit cosmology.

It is not claimed that the distinction between statement and presupposition in Hebrews is clear-cut in every case; only that it is valid in principle. For example, the author never reproduces the primitive confession 'Jesus is the Christ'; it is presupposed. In various places, however, e.g. in 9:11f, he makes explicit statements about Christ based on this presupposition. Conversely, in 3:7-4:11, he makes explicit statements about God's *katapausis* which, if the spatial language about 'entering' is taken seriously, must be understood cosmologically as a 'place of rest'.<sup>2</sup> More

<sup>2</sup> O. Hofius, *Katapausis. Die Vorstellung vom endzeitlichen Ruheort im Hebräerbrief*. Tübingen, 1970. So BAGD s.v. iv.2.

commonly, however, the cosmology remains latent, as in texts discussed in greater detail below. Since, therefore, the author so seldom pauses to make explicit cosmological statements, and is never sufficiently interested in the subject to draw a comprehensive picture of the universe as he sees it, it is not surprising that this aspect of his thought presents obscurities and apparent contradictions.

Before examining these in greater detail, it may be helpful to combine in a diagram the three distinctions we have made.



The most complex problems in this area are raised by a group of texts which both (a). appear to involve cosmological presuppositions, and also (b). are related to distinctive teaching about the work of Christ. 3:7-4:11, for example, is simple by comparison in this respect, because neither of these two factors is present. The cosmological statements about God's resting-place are clear and explicit, and the passage says astonishingly little about Jesus.

Nor are there any serious problems with texts which involve only one of these factors. On the other hand, there are texts in which the first but not the second factor is present: that is, where the cosmology is implied, but the work of Christ is not directly in question. Examples are the Old Testament quotations in 1:10 = Ps. 102. (LXX 101):26 and 12:26 = Hag. 2:6, both of which combine references to heaven(s) and earth to mean 'the whole created universe'.

On the other hand, there are passages such as 7:15f, 9:13f, 10:8-10, in which the second but not the first factor is present: Christ's work is spoken of without direct cosmological overtones. It is remarkable, however, how often the author's view of who Jesus was and what he did does involve presuppositions about the universe. Evidence for this statement could be quickly found in the contexts of the texts just mentioned: 7:26; 9:11f; 10:5a. The author thinks synthetically, not analytically: for him, what Jesus did, who he was, and how the universe is framed, belong together, though the last is least important for him.

Some of the less problematical texts foreshadow problems which arise elsewhere. What they say, or at least clearly and directly imply, about the universe is that it was made by God (1:10), by his creative word (11:3) and through Christ (1;2); that it is supported by God (1:3), and will in the last days be 'shaken', that is, judged and possibly destroyed, by him (12:26). What remains unclear is, so to speak, the internal structure of the universe. 12:26 makes clear (clearer than in Haggai) the distinction between heaven and earth: 'not only the earth but also the heaven'; here, at least, 'earth and heaven' is not a mere hendiadys for 'the universe'.

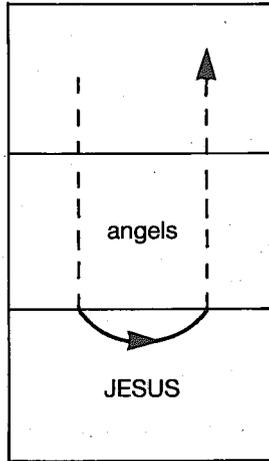
For further evidence about the author's implied cosmology, it is necessary to turn to the most problematical texts, those in which both factors (a). and (b)., latent cosmology and patent soteriology, appear to be combined.

Eight passages of this type have to be considered. Each of them presents or presupposes a picture which may be represented by a diagram. Such representation involves some simplification, because it involves, firstly, laying greater stress on cosmological features than in Hebrews itself; and secondly, taking picture language at its face value.

(1). 'Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honour . . .' (2:9, cf. v. 7 = Ps. 8:5).

Taken by itself, 'lower' could refer to status rather than place; but that Jesus was originally, and is now, above the angels is

implied in 'for a little while', expressed in 1:2-4, and again implied throughout chapter 1.<sup>3</sup>



(2). '... we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God ...' (4:14).

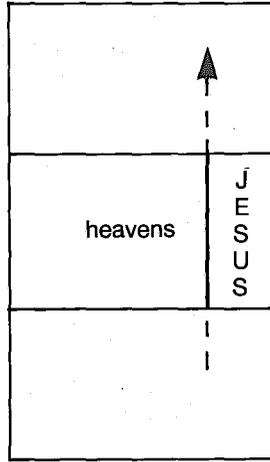
The fact that Jesus 'has passed through the heavens' appears to be incidental to the argument; a strengthening of the already emphatic phrase 'a great high priest'. In certain contexts, *dierchomai* + accusative may refer to movement within an area,<sup>4</sup> but more usually it denotes movement through an area and beyond.<sup>5</sup> Here, the second option is supported by 'above the heavens' in Heb. 7:26, discussed below. The direct implication is that he is now 'above the heavens'. Verse 15 immediately adds a complementary reference to his human experience, so to speak 'below the heavens'. There is no conflict with 2:9: the two pictures complement one another.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Brachu ti* is probably temporal: so RSV, NEB, TEV, NIV note; cf. Isa. 57:17 LXX. So most commentators and J. W. Pryor, 'Hebrews and Incarnational Christology', *Reformed Theological Review* 40 (1981) 44-46, against J. A. T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God*, London 1973, 159. *Brachu ti* is seen as spatial by Delitzsch and by A. Vanhoye, *Situation du Christ*, Paris 1969, 287f.; so MT, cf. 2 Sam. 16:1 LXX; Acts 27:28.

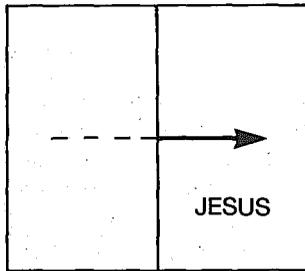
<sup>4</sup> Acts 13:6; 18:23.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 14:24; 15:3, 41; 16:6; 19:1, 21; 20:2; 1 Cor. 16:5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ouranos* s. and pl. are juxtaposed in 9:23f. and 12:23, 25f., suggesting no precise difference of meaning; so Michel on 4:14. J. McRay, 'Atonement and Apocalyptic in the Book of Hebrews', *Restoration Quarterly* 23 (1980) 4-6 unconvincingly disagrees. See also K. Galling, "'Durch die Himmel hindurchgeschritten'" (Hebr. 4:14)', *ZNW* 43 (1950-51) 263f.



(3). '... the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone ...' (6:19f).

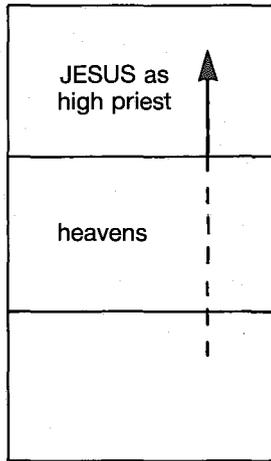


Here the imagery is quite distinct from that in 2:9 and 4:14.<sup>7</sup> The implied contrast is not between higher and lower, but between inner and outer. This is represented in the diagram by the use of the horizontal axis, and in future we shall call this 'horizontal language'. RSV's 'shrine' is not in the Greek, but it would be clearly implied even if later passages (especially 9:1-14) did not give explicit confirmation. The contrast is however confined to the use of the comparative *to esōteron*. Nothing is directly stated about an outer (part of a) tabernacle, or about Jesus' presence in

<sup>7</sup> The implied cosmology is the same, whether it is the anchor or the hope which is said to 'enter the inner shrine'. The second option is strongly supported by RSV, NEB and by N. H. Young, *The Impact of the Jewish Day of Atonement upon the New Testament*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Manchester 1973, 161-4; the first option is chosen by *Die Bibel in heutigem Deutsch*.

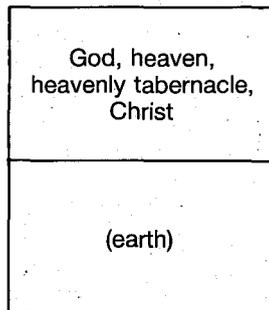
it; about the nature of the tabernacle, or any contrast between earthly and heavenly tabernacles. Following the author's usual practice, he gives here a preliminary indication of a theme which will become much more important later.

(4). '... a high priest ... exalted above the heavens' (7:26).



This text moves back to the vertical imagery of 2:9 and 4:14, to which it forms a perfect complement: 2:9 has in focus Jesus' earthly humiliation, 4:14 an intermediate stage, and 7:26 his completed exaltation. 'Exalted above the heavens' forms the climax of verse 26; but in the wider context, the theme of exaltation is subordinate to that of the permanent effectiveness (vv. 24f, 28) of Christ's high-priestly ministry.

(5). '... we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent which is set up not by man but by the Lord' (8:1-2).





This phrase reintroduces the two-part vertical contrast found in 8:1f. This is implicit in 9:2–10, and re-emerges in full strength in verse 11 ('... through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation)'), and again in verse 24 (see below). Christ's high priesthood belongs to a 'greater and more perfect tent' of which the earthly sanctuary is only a 'parable' (9:9; RSV 'symbolic'), 'copy' (9:24) or 'shadow' (10:1).

There is clearly some kind of typological parallel between what the levitical high priest did in the earthly tabernacle, and what Christ did in the heavenly. The extent of the parallel is however difficult to determine, and should not be exaggerated. Some of the dissimilarities do not involve spatial, cosmological language: for example, both offer blood, though of very different kinds (9:12). But even the spatial parallelism is not complete. On the one hand, nothing distinctive is said about the earthly high priest in the outer tabernacle (cf. 9:6), whereas Christ is said to have passed 'through the greater and more perfect tent'. On the other hand, in the heavenly tabernacle, unlike the earthly, there are no subordinate priests, so there is no counterpart to the contrasts of 9:2f, 6f. These asymmetrical features are all the more remarkable in a passage in which formal features are closely parallel.

Before attempting to explain them,<sup>8</sup> two complicating factors must be briefly mentioned, since they raise queries about how much of the language is indeed spatial.

First, it is possible, though on balance unlikely, that the *dia* of verse 12, like the two *dia*'s of verse 13, may not be local, 'through', but instrumental, 'by means of the greater and more perfect tent'.<sup>9</sup>

Second, by 9:8, as certainly by 9:9f, temporal language may be taking over from spatial, so that we should translate, not with RSV and most other translations, 'the first tent', but with NEB text 'the earlier tent'. This verse would then refer to the earthly sanctuary as a whole, as in verse 1, by implication in verse 11b, and in verse 24. This is quite possible, though there is no exact parallel: Hebrews is full of such gradual transitions. It is a question of deciding which line of interpretation causes the least problems. RSV's 'as long as the outer tent is still standing' raises

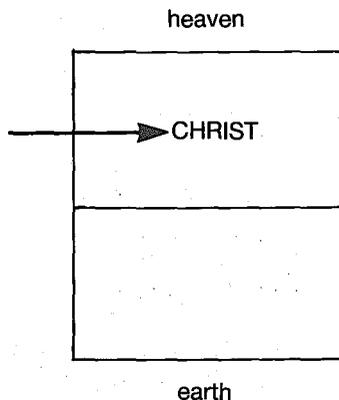
<sup>8</sup> See below on Heb. 10:19f.

<sup>9</sup> P. Andriessen and A. Lenglet, 'Quelques passages difficiles de l'Épître aux Hébreux', *Biblica* 15 (1970) 207–220, esp. 214f.; Andriessen, 'Das grössere und vollkommener Zelt' (Hebr. 9, 11) *BZ* 15 (1971) 76–92; N. H. Young, '“τοῦτ' ἔστιν τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ” (Heb. x.20)', *NTS* 20 (1973) 100–104; Andriessen, *En lisant l'Épître aux Hébreux*, Vaals 1977, 35f.

the question of what it would mean, in terms of the imagery, for the inner tent to remain standing on its own. NEB's 'the earlier tent' produces some tension with verse 2, and especially verse 6, where the language is clearly spatial. Perhaps a clue to a solution is to be found in the fact that, in verse 8, the author explicitly moves from description to interpretation: 'By this the Holy Spirit indicates . . .' NEB's temporal language may thus be preferred, though there is doubtless an element of play on words.

If this line of interpretation is generally correct, the passage can be understood as a combination and development of the implied cosmology of 6:19f and 8:1f, several aspects of the picture, however, cannot be finally clarified from the immediate context.<sup>10</sup>

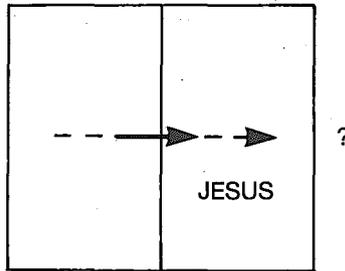
(7). 'For Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself . . .' (9:24). If 9:1-14 presents a more complicated form of 6:19f and 8:1f, the present verse combines the same two texts in a simpler form. The author does not repeat what he said in 9:11 about Christ passing



<sup>10</sup> Cf. F.-J. Schierse, *Verheissung und Heilsvollendung*, Munich 1955, esp. 210. Bleek, Michel, Hering, Michaelis in TDNT vii.376f.; P. Andriessen, "Das grossere und vollkommene Zelt" (Hebr. 9, 11), 84f., and B. Sandvik, *Das Kommen des Herrn beim Abendmahl im Neuen Testament*, Zürich 1970, 104f. see here an implied reference to a two-part heaven; but Riggerbach, Westcott, Montefiore, Zimmermann *op. cit.* 181; O. Hofius, *Der Vorhang vor dem Thron Gottes*, Tübingen 1972, 65f.; A. Cody, *Heavenly Sanctuary and Liturgy in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, St. Meinrad, Illinois 1960. 150, 155-8; F. Laub, *Bekennnis und Auslegung*, Regensburg 1980, 186; and W. R. G. Loader, *Sohn und Hohepriester*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1981, 166f. disagree. The discussion illustrates the difficulty of imposing a single cosmological structure on the whole Epistle.

‘through’ an outer tabernacle, or about any permanent division between the earthly and heavenly tabernacles. Here, he is exclusively concerned with Christ’s access to the heavenly tabernacle. Spatial language is not prominent in this passage:<sup>11</sup> the author is by this time more concerned with the permanent effectiveness of Christ’s unique sacrifice in dealing with sin, understood as defilement.

(8). ‘. . . we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh . . .’ (10:19f).



The final text in the series is also, with 9:1–14, the most problematical; yet the two passages have much in common, and it would be good to find that they threw light on one another.

The question mark beside the diagram indicates two uncertain factors.

The first is whether ‘through his flesh’ means ‘through the way of his flesh’ (NEB text), or whether the last words of verse 20 imply, as *Die Bibel in heutigem Deutsch* puts it explicitly, ‘the curtain is his mortal body’. This difficult question is important for determining what, in non-metaphorical language, the curtain stands for in this context; it is less important for understanding the picture language itself, since in either case it is said that Christ passed ‘through the curtain’. As the Germans would put it, it is more important for the *Sachhälfte* than for the *Bildhälfte* of the metaphor.

The second uncertainty is whether *dia* is to be understood

<sup>11</sup> L. D. Hulse, ‘How “Platonic” are Heb. viii.5 and ix.23f.?’ JTS n.s. 34 (1983) 156–168, esp. 167, argues that *antitupos* has the temporal meaning of ‘preliminary pattern or mould’.

locally as 'through', or instrumentally as 'by means of'.<sup>12</sup> The same problem arose in 9:11f, with this difference that there, the *dia* was repeated, so that it was easier to suppose a gliding from one meaning to another. Even here, such a transition is not impossible: 'through the curtain, that is, by means of his flesh'. What is in any case virtually impossible is to give any *non-metaphorical* meaning to 'by means of the curtain'; and for figurative language to function, it must have a literal meaning also.

The significance of all this for the implied cosmology of the passage is perhaps less than one might think, and problems concerning the *Sachhälftē* are not here our first concern. In terms of the image itself, there are two main options.

(1). The first is to think of the curtain as a horizontal barrier separating earth and heaven. To do so would run counter to the use of the *Katapetasma* image elsewhere. What is more important, it would also break the rule of the typological language game which states that the two sides to the typological comparison must not be confused; the parallel lines must not meet.

(2). The other option is to think of the curtain as a vertical feature, separating different parts of the heavenly tabernacle. This option is in general preferable, yet here we encounter once more the problem, left in suspense in our discussion of 9:1–14, of the asymmetries between the description of the earthly and heavenly tabernacles. The author is not concerned, as in the case of the earthly tabernacle (9:1–10), with the furniture of the outer part of the heavenly tabernacle, nor with any beings who may enter it to minister as priests; not even with what Christ did on his way through it.

A way through the problem can be found if a clear distinction is made between the author's vertical and horizontal language. They are distinct in the author's usage, and may also be distinct in origin,<sup>13</sup> though the argument does not depend on this. The vertical language of 2:9; 4:14; 7:26 probably owes more to primitive Christian tradition, whereas the horizontal language of the heavenly and earthly tabernacles, though not without

<sup>12</sup> 'It is by means of his body given in sacrifice that Christ enters heaven'; P. Giles, *Jesus the High Priest in the Epistle to the Hebrews and in the Fourth Gospel*, unpublished M. A. thesis, Manchester 1973, 197.

<sup>13</sup> So generally L. K. K. Dey, *The Intermediary World and Patterns of Perfection in Philo and Hebrews*, 1975, esp. 144–9, 154, on which see W. G. Johnsson, 'Issues in the Interpretation of Hebrews', *University Seminary Studies* 15 (1977) 169–187, esp. 173f.

parallels elsewhere, is developed in a distinctive way to express the author's own typology.

Two wider questions arise at this point. The first is whether everything which was described above as *prima facie* cosmological language should in fact be grouped together, or whether cosmological elements are in any way significant in the horizontal, typological texts. For example, 10:20 seems to presuppose something in heaven which corresponds to the curtain in the earthly tabernacle. Yet so little is said about it, even here, and *a fortiori* elsewhere (6:19; possibly by implication in 9:11), that one is virtually forced to conclude that what, in plain language, the author is affirming is not 'there is a curtain in heaven', but 'by his sacrifice, Christ has gained access to the immediate presence of God, just as the earthly high priest gained access once a year to the inner part of the earthly sanctuary.' In this instance, at least, cosmological language is used in an *ad hoc* and incidental way to express a soteriological reality.

The second general question is whether the two types of cosmological language cannot be reconciled by simply rotating the horizontal picture through ninety degrees. This is in principle possible, since the horizontal language, unlike the vertical, is implicit; in other words, it is assumed, not stated, that the earthly tabernacle, and by analogy its heavenly counterpart, are flat. The first difficulty with this proposal is the complete lack of evidence that the author was concerned to reconcile his alternative cosmologies in this way, or indeed at all. If, however, the modern interpreter does so on his own responsibility, he encounters the second and greater difficulty of harmonising the two-part horizontal picture with the vertical picture, which includes an intermediary world. To attempt to identify this middle area with the curtain between the two parts of the tabernacle would tend to cause serious distortion in the understanding of particular texts.

If, then, we attempt to sum up what can be drawn directly from the texts, it appears that the author works with two types of spatial language.

One is vertical, perhaps largely traditional. It presupposes an intermediate sphere populated by angels; but the author shows no interest in describing it in detail, still less in subdividing it, for example after the fashion of the *Ascension of Isaiah* 7-9.<sup>14</sup> It is concerned largely with Christ's exaltation.

The other type of spatial language is horizontal, typological, owes more to the author's own reflection, and is more concerned

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Slavonic Enoch 1-20, Greek Apocalypse of Baruch *passim*, *Test. Levi* 2:3.

with Christ's sacrifice. It presupposes a simple contrast between heaven and earth, with no reference to an intermediate sphere.

Our concentration on particular passages should not, however, blind us to the fact that in the epistle as a whole, the two types of language complement one another. They are used in close conjunction (compare, for example, 7:26 and 8:1f); both are used of Jesus as high priest; and both are used to describe the access of Christ to God's immediate presence, first for himself and then for all true worshippers.

The author's terminology is fluid, imprecise, and sometimes confusing; yet it is not incoherent, if the context is taken fully into account. If the distinction between the two types of language were to be expressed in other words, not directly those used in Hebrews, one might say that the horizontal, typological language expresses nature or origin, whereas the vertical language expresses location, and is thus more truly cosmological. In horizontal, typological language, the nature of Christ's work is heavenly, while that of the levitical cultus was of the earth. In vertical, cosmological language, Jesus lived and died on earth, and now reigns in heaven at the right hand of God. At the end of the day, what matters for the author is not the diverse imagery, but the one reality to which it points. He is therefore able, without embarrassment or confusion, to set alongside one another two distinct pictures of the one universe in which Christ is supreme.