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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

Robert W. Thurston

Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews

We are glad to welcome Mr. Thurston back to the pages of THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY with a further contribution on the thought of the Epistle to the Hebrews.

In a previous article in *The Evangelical Quarterly* the author discussed the relationship between Acts 7 and Heb. 1-4, and concluded that the reason for the similarities was Hebrews' use of the Book of Testimonies.¹ But this conclusion raises as many questions as it answers. Why does Hebrews quote so frequently from this book? And what about the other literary affinities of Hebrews? The present article is an attempt to answer some of these questions. We will consider especially the alleged Alexandrian or Philonic influence in Hebrews and its relationship to the subjects discussed in the earlier article.

1. Philo and the Christology of Hebrews

The relationship between Philo and the Christology of Hebrews would be impossible to treat in a short article if it were not for the monumental studies of C. Spicq and R. Williamson. Spicq has carefully catalogued an impressive list of parallels between Philo and Hebrews.² So numerous are the parallels that many writers would agree with Spicq's conclusion that the author of Hebrews was well acquainted with Philo's writings, and was perhaps even a convert from Philonism. In Spicq's view, Philo's Logos doctrine underlies the Christology of Hebrews.³

But Williamson disagrees.⁴ In a thorough and painstaking analysis he comes to the following conclusions:

- (1). There is no evidence that a single doctrine in Hebrews is borrowed from, or influenced by Philo. On the contrary, the teaching of Hebrews is in several respects in direct conflict with the teachings of Philo.

¹ R. Thurston, 'Midrash and "Magnet" Words in the NT', *EQ* 51 (Jan. 1979). 22-39.

² C. Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux* (Paris, 1952).

³ *Op. cit.* II, 70.

⁴ R. Williamson, *Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Leiden: Brill, 1970).

- (2). There is no clear evidence that Hebrews quotes any passage or phrase from Philo.
- (3). There is no clear evidence that any of the vocabulary of Hebrews is borrowed from Philo.

In some respects the views of Williamson seem to be in direct opposition to those of Spicq. And yet each writer has performed his research carefully and thoroughly. We may not be able to totally accept the conclusions of both writers, but we cannot ignore the wealth of data each writer has presented to us. Ultimately, any adequate view of Hebrews must take both sets of data into account.

The differences between Spicq and Williamson can perhaps best be illustrated by comparing their views of Heb. 4:12, 13, which Spicq considers especially significant. Spicq notes numerous similarities between this passage and Philo, including the following:

- (1). The concept of a living word (*zōn ho logos*) is at once suggestive of Philo's *Logos*. Spicq cites numerous passages in Philo which he finds similar to this phrase.⁵ But Williamson points out that not one of these passages includes the phrase '*zōn ho logos*', nor is the wording similar enough to prove that the author of Hebrews had read Philo's works.⁶ Still we must agree with Spicq that there is at least some similarity between the concept of a living word and Philo's repeated use of personal terms in relation to the *Logos*—such terms as *God's Man*,⁷ *First-born*,⁸ and *Firstborn Son*.⁹
- (2). Spicq points out that Philo in several places speaks of the *Logos* as a sword, which again is similar to Heb. 4:12. But Williamson points out that in each of these passages Philo refers to a single-edged sword, not the kind referred to in Hebrews. Williamson's point is valid, and yet we must again agree with Spicq that there is a degree of similarity between Philo and Hebrews at this point.
- (3). Hebrews speaks of the word as 'piercing' and 'dividing'; Philo calls the *Logos* the 'Severer', the 'invisible Severer', the 'all-severer'. As Williamson notes the similarity is not close enough for us to conclude that Hebrews is quoting or alluding to any of these passages in Philo. Still, the

⁵ *Op. cit.* I, 50–2.

⁶ *Op. cit.* 386–9.

⁷ *De conf. ling.* 41.

⁸ *De conf. ling.* 146.

⁹ *De agric.* 51.

similarities are unmistakable. In one passage Philo says, 'For the soul is tripartite, and each of its parts . . . is divided into two, making six parts in all, to which the holy and divine Word, the all-severer, makes a fitting seventh.'¹⁰ There are obvious differences between Hebrews and Philo at this point, but the similarities are striking.

When we investigate the other alleged parallels between Hebrews and Philo the picture is similar. For example let us consider the various nouns which Philo either equates or associates with the Logos. Our list of such words will include First-born,¹¹ Firstborn Son,¹² instrument (of creation),¹³ Wisdom,¹⁴ image of God,¹⁵ angel,¹⁶ Moses,¹⁷ house of God,¹⁸ all-severer,¹⁹ sword,²⁰ Great High Priest.²¹ It is at once apparent that this list is a virtual catalogue of terms which are discussed or alluded to in the opening chapters of Hebrews in reference to Jesus or the living word. In Heb. 1:2, 5, 8 Jesus is the 'Son'. In 1:2 he is God's instrument of creation. In 1:3 he is the image of God. In 1:4–2:16 he is compared to the angels. In 1:6 he is the First-begotten. In the third chapter he is compared with Moses. In 2:17; 3:1; 4:14–8:1 he is high priest or the Great High Priest. In 4:12, 13 the word is compared to a piercing and dividing sword. In 3:2–6 there is a midrash on God's house. Furthermore, many writers see the Son passages in Hebrews as allusions to Wisdom.²²

It is true that the above list of nouns has been selective rather than exhaustive. And yet this list is so strikingly similar to the subjects of Heb. 1–5 that the parallels can hardly be coincidental. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that Spicq is correct in seeing a relationship between the Logos doctrine of Philo and the Christology of Hebrews. But when Williamson studies the use of these terms in Philo and Hebrews, he repeatedly comes to the same conclusions: there is no evidence that Hebrews borrows doctrines, phrases or vocabulary from Philo.

¹⁰ *Quis rer.* 225.

¹¹ *De conf. ling.* 146.

¹² *De agric.* 51.

¹³ *Mig.* 6.

¹⁴ *Leg. All.* I, 65.

¹⁵ *Spec.* I, 81.

¹⁶ *De agric.* 51.

¹⁷ *De migr. Abr.* 23.

¹⁸ *De migr. Abr.* 4–6.

¹⁹ *Quis rer.* 225.

²⁰ *Quis rer.* 130.

²¹ *Fug.* 110.

²² H. Montefiore, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 36; T. H. Robinson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: 1933), 3.

How can we resolve this dilemma? Not by weighing the arguments of Williamson against those of Spicq. Both sets of arguments are supported by large volumes of data. We must view Hebrews in a way which does justice to both lines of evidence. But how can we do this? If the author of Hebrews borrows no doctrine or phrases from Philo, and probably not even his vocabulary, what is the nature of the relationship? What does he take from Philo?

The answer is that Heb. 1–5 takes its *subjects* from Philo. Spicq has demonstrated that the Christology of Hebrews involves terms which are largely the same as (or similar to) terms which Philo uses in reference to the Logos. But Hebrews discusses these terms, as Williamson notes, without borrowing any doctrines from Philo. In fact, Williamson shows that it is very difficult to prove that the author of Hebrews had even read Philo's works.

I believe these conclusions are well documented by Spicq and Williamson, and yet this serves only to raise a further question. Why does Hebrews discuss all the subjects related to Philo's Logos doctrine, if the author is not going to incorporate any of Philo's ideas? Since the author does not explicitly tell us, our answer can only be based on inference. We must infer what situations would have arisen if, as Spicq suggests, the author of Hebrews was a Philonist converted to Christianity. We need to begin by seeing what doctrines would have resulted if he incorporated Philo's Logos doctrine into a Logos Christology.

To do this we must again review the above list of nouns associated with Philo's Logos doctrine. As we do so we should pay special attention to those which are most prominent in Heb. 1–5: angel, Moses and the Great High Priest. What does Philo say about the relationship between these subjects and the Logos? Williamson has already answered this question for us in great detail. He cites several references to show that Philo 'can say quite simply that the Logos is an angel' (p. 184). Similarly, Williamson states that 'Biblical references to angelic beings are taken by Philo as references to the divine Logos or logoi' (p. 187). Elsewhere he cites Drummond's statement that 'no fewer than seventeen times the term angel is applied either to the Logos or Logoi' (p. 427).

Concerning Moses, Williamson says that Philo's estimate of him prompts us to ask: 'Was Moses, in Philo's view, human or divine?' He also notes that Philo 'comes very near . . . to an identification of Moses with the Logos' (p. 455).

Similarly, Williamson notes that there are a number of passages in which Philo 'refers to the Logos as "high priest" or even "great high priest"' (p. 411).

For our purposes it is not of paramount importance to know what Philo meant by such statements. What is more important is to see how these statements would be viewed by a Philonist who came to accept Jesus as Philo's Logos. A natural conclusion for such a person would be that Jesus was an angel, and that he was the Logos in the same sense as Moses and the Great High Priest. This would suggest the existence of an angel who had appeared in a variety of human forms, including that of Jesus, Moses and the 'Great High Priest'.

The pseudo-Clementine *Constitutiones Apostolorum* may record vestiges of such a Christology. A passage in V.20 quotes Deut. 18:15, to show Christ as the prophet like Moses. It also quotes Prov. 9:1: 'Wisdom built herself a house'. In the same passage we then read:

Ezekiel and the following prophets affirm everywhere that he is Christ, the Lord, King, the Judge, the Law-giver, Angel of the Father, the only-begotten God. Him therefore do we also preach to you, and declare him to be God the Word.

Thus in a single passage we find Christ described as the prophet like Moses, an angel, the Word and Wisdom. This seems to confirm the existence of a Christology similar to the one which we have postulated.

But if some early Christian held such a Christology, it was not the author of Hebrews. Instead this seems to be precisely the Christology which Hebrews refutes. Montefiore concludes that the recipients of the epistle were in danger of lapsing into the view that Jesus is an angel.²³ E. L. Allen sees Heb. 1-2 as a refutation of an angel-Christology, and Heb. 3:1-6 as a refutation of a Moses-Christology.²⁴ In the preceding article we saw further evidence to support this view.

Several other statements in Heb. 1-4 can be interpreted as a refutation or correction of a Christology derived from Philo's Logos doctrine. Philo speaks of the Logos as the 'image (eikōn) of God', but Heb. 1:3 says that the Son is the 'express image (charaktēr) of God'. Philo used the phrase 'house of God' in reference to the Logos, but Heb. 3:6 says that believers corporately are the house of God. Philo speaks of the Logos as a single-edged sword, but Hebrews says that the living word is even *sharper* than any *double-edged* sword. Hebrews agrees that Jesus is the Great High Priest, but even here the view of Hebrews is quite

²³ H. Montefiore, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 41.

²⁴ E. E. Allen, 'Jesus and Moses in the NT', *ExpT* 67 (1955-5), 105.

different from that of Philo. (We will consider this subject further later in the article.)

The most natural conclusion, therefore, is that some individual or group incorporated Philo's Logos doctrine into a Logos Christology. The opening chapters of Hebrews were written to refute this Christology. But if this analysis is correct there should be patristic evidence of the existence of such a group. We will examine this patristic evidence next.

2. Who were these Philonists?

Whoever these Philonists were, they must have been Jews; no one else would likely have had such an intense interest in Philo and the OT. They must also have considered themselves Christians, since they accepted Jesus as the Logos. This agrees with the patristic evidence, because as F. F. Bruce notes, 'it is principally among the Ebionites that a "Moses Christology" is attested.'²⁵ Epiphanius gives us further details, stating that the Ebionites viewed Christ as an archangel who repeatedly appeared in human form.²⁶ This is precisely the view of the Philonists, but unfortunately the name Ebionite seems to have been applied to more than one group.

Still, there is one individual who may merit our special attention: Cerinthus. Pseudo-Hieronymus,²⁷ Filaster²⁸ and pseudo-Tertullian²⁹ state that Ebion was Cerinthus' successor. Furthermore there is a possibility that Epiphanius may have confused Cerinthus with 'Ebion'. Evidence of this comes from a comparison of two different versions of the story about John and Cerinthus in the bath house at Ephesus. Irenaeus tells this story and indicates that the tradition came from Polycarp, who heard it from John.³⁰ Epiphanius tells the same story, attributing it to John himself. But in this account the name 'Ebion' replaces that of Cerinthus. This suggests that Ebion (Poor) may be a derisive name humorously given to Cerinthus as the founder of a sect known as Ebionites. Epiphanius may have misinterpreted this to mean that Ebion was an actual person, distinct from Cerinthus.³¹

²⁵ F. F. Bruce, *Op. cit.* 58. Bruce cites *Clem. Recog.* 1.36ff.; 4:5; *Clem. Hom.* 3:47ff.; 8:5ff.

²⁶ *Pan.* 30:14:4; 30:16:3.

²⁷ *Indic. de haer.* X.

²⁸ *Div. her. liber.* XXXVII.

²⁹ *Adv. omn. haer.* 3.

³⁰ *Adv. haer.* III. 3.4.

³¹ *Anaceph.* 30:24. Such a play on names was generally accepted in Jewish culture. We know this from the example of Simon Bar Kochba, whose name was altered by friends and also by opponents.

The story about 'Ebion' and John appears in *Anaceph.* 30.24. Almost this entire section—30:1–3; 30:13–24—concerns the teachings and activities of this 'Ebion'. Since 30:24 apparently confuses Ebion and Cerinthus, this may be true of the rest of this section also, and it is precisely in this section that Epiphanius describes the Christology of Ebion and his followers. This suggests that it may have been Cerinthus who first viewed Christ as an archangel who appeared in various human forms.

Epiphanius tells us another element of this Christology. The Ebionites contrasted Jesus with Christ, saying that Jesus was born of Mary and Joseph, but that Christ descended on him at his baptism.³² Irenaeus,³³ Hippolytus,³⁴ Epiphanius,³⁵ and Theodoret of Cyr³⁶ all confirm that Cerinthus taught that Christ descended on Jesus at his baptism.

The patristic evidence also suggests that Cerinthus may have studied philosophy in Alexandria. Hippolytus says that Cerinthus was trained in Egypt, and that he based his doctrines on the ideas of the Egyptians.³⁷ Theodoret says that Cerinthus spent considerable time in Egypt, where he was instructed in philosophy, before coming to Asia.³⁸ Neither writer mentions Alexandria, but this city was the centre of Jewish philosophy in Egypt, if not the world. And since Philo was Alexandrian Judaism's most famous philosopher, this suggests that Cerinthus may have based his doctrines on those of Philo.

Unfortunately, the patristic evidence concerning Cerinthus' doctrines is not as reliable as we would like; there is too much evidence that patristic sources sometimes confuse one Ebionite sect with another.³⁹ A further complication arises from the fact that Epiphanius tells us that the Ebionites at some point changed their views regarding Christ.⁴⁰ But for our purposes none of this destroys the value of the patristic sources. Even if these sources

A more common view is that Epiphanius mistakenly assumed from the name *Ebionite* that the founder was named *Ebion*. This does not explain his use of the name *Ebion* rather than Cerinthus in the story about John in the bath house. But even in this view, it is clear that Epiphanius applied to Ebion a story which Irenaeus applies to Cerinthus.

³² *Anaceph.* 28:1:1–5.

³³ *Adv. haer.* I:26:1.

³⁴ *Refutatio omn. haer.* VII:33:1–2; X:21:3.

³⁵ *Anaceph.* 28:1:1.

³⁶ *Pro. lib.* II:3; V:2.

³⁷ *Refutatio omn. haer.* VII:7:33; X:21:1.

³⁸ *Pro. lib.* II:3.

³⁹ A. F. J. Klijn and G. J. Reinink, *Patristic Evidence for Jewish-Christian Sects* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 18, 19.

⁴⁰ *Pan.* 30:3:1–6.

confused various Ebionite sects, the evidence indicates that some such sect held doctrines similar or identical to those which we found refuted in Heb. 1–4. Furthermore, two sources state that the founder of one such sect was trained in Egyptian philosophy and based his doctrines on the ideas of the Egyptians. The patristic sources therefore support a major part of the hypothesis proposed in the preceding section.

3. The Great High Priest

We have seen evidence suggesting that many statements concerning Jesus in Heb. 1–4 refute a Christology which was based on Philo's Logos doctrine. If this is correct, we can probably assume that the same is true of Hebrews' statements about the Great High Priest. Philo refers to the Logos as 'the Great High Priest;' those who viewed Jesus as Philo's Logos would relate this statement to Jesus. But unlike Hebrews, Philo never directly links Melchizedek's name to the term 'Great High Priest'.

The Philonists who accepted Jesus as the Logos would have wanted to identify the Great High Priest to whom Philo refers. We have no direct evidence to tell us what their conclusions were, but there are certain hints. Synge sees in Heb. 4:14 an implied contrast between two high priests: Joshua (Jesus) the son of Josedech, and Jesus the Son of God.⁴¹ Similarly, J. R. Harris showed that the *testimonia* included a typology which compared Jesus to Joshua the son of Nun and Joshua the high priest.⁴² This suggests that the Philonists equated Jesus with the son of Josedech, just as they equated him with Moses. This would have been a natural conclusion for the Philonists, because Heb. 1:5 seems to suggest that they equated Jesus with the 'son' of 2 Sam. 7:14. Of this son it was prophesied 'he shall build a house for my name' (7:13), and the Philonists could point out that the son of Josedech was the high priest under whom the second temple was built. Similarly, the passage we cited from the *Const. Apost.* quotes Prov. 9:1: 'Wisdom built herself a house.' Like 2 Sam. 7:14, this passage could have been applied to both Christ and the son of Josedech.

We noted above that the passage in *Const. Apost.* seems to reflect a Christology somewhat similar to that of the Philonists; it may also suggest that Joshua the high priest was in some way connected with this Christology. This passage (V: 20) refers to Christ as the prophet like Moses, an angel, Wisdom, and the

⁴¹ F. C. Synge, *Hebrews and the Scriptures* (London: SPCK, 1959).

⁴² J. R. Harris, *Testimonies* (Cambridge: 1920) vol. 2, 51ff.

Word. The next section (VI: 1–3) builds on this thought; it warns against heresies by showing the fate of those who rebelled against Moses. It quotes Ex. 2:14 ('Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?') which, as we saw in the previous article, was part of the Jesus-Moses Christology. Section VI: 4 continues the thought by applying all this to the heretics. The next section (VI: 5) says that seditions are of the devil, and quotes Zech. 3:2–4, one of the few OT passages to name Joshua the high priest. What makes this reference especially significant is that the author calls him 'the great high priest'. This expression has no parallels in the OT references to Joshua, and it occurs nowhere in the NT except Heb. 4:14.

It seems probable, therefore, that the Jesus-Moses Christology viewed the son of Josedech as another appearance of the same angel. Since this Christology viewed Christ as an angel who had descended on the earthly Jesus at his baptism, the Philonists could quite naturally have viewed Zech. 3:2–4 in the same way. This passage pictures the call of Joshua, and the passage immediately following (3:8) has messianic elements. Furthermore, the reference in Zech. 3 to a change of garments would have fit into this Christology, because patristic sources say that this Christology spoke of Christ 'putting on' Jesus.⁴³ The Philonists could have interpreted the change of garments in Zech. 3 as indicating a change of human forms.

Two statements by Tertullian seem to confirm that the Ebionites held some such view:

So then, even as he is made less than the angel while clothed with manhood, even so he is not less when clothed with an angel. This opinion could be very suitable to Ebion who asserts that Jesus is mere man . . . so as to say that an angel is in him in the same way as in Zechariah (*de carne Chr.* 14).

So also in Zechariah, Christ Jesus the true High Priest of the Father, in the person of Joshua . . . is portrayed in a twofold dress with reference to both His advents. At first He is clad in sordid garments, that is to say, in the lowliness of suffering and mortal flesh (*adv. Marc.* 3:7).

The second of these quotations definitely alludes to Zech. 3. It seems reasonably clear that the first alludes to the same passage, since it also refers to a twofold dress of Christ, and since both quotations specify 'in Zechariah'. Between these two quotations we see almost all the elements of the Christology we postulated above: the identification of Christ with Joshua and also an angel;

⁴³ Epiphanius, *Pan.* 30:3:3; John Damascene, *De haer.* 30; Tertullian, *De carne Chr.* 14.

the allusion to Zech 3; the concept that the filthy garments of Zech. 3 allude to human flesh. And although these quotations offer no complete statement of the Ebionite Christology, the first tells us that the Christology it mentions would be 'very suitable to Ebion'.

It may be to refute this Christology that Heb. 7:14 reminds the readers that 'our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.' Similarly it may be in this context that we should read Heb. 9:24-28. If the Philonists' Logos Christology had been correct Christ would have needed to suffer many times since the foundation of the world. But this is impossible because 'it is appointed unto man once to die'. Therefore Christ died *once*; when he appears again it will be for the *second* time.

This may also account for Hebrews' repeated emphasis on the changelessness of Christ (1:12; 7:24; 13:8).

4. Hebrews and Adam

We saw previously that according to Epiphanius, the Ebionites viewed Christ as an angel who appeared in a variety of human forms. He also reports that some Ebionites say that Jesus is Adam, and that he appeared to the patriarchs 'clothed with a body'.⁴⁴ According to John Damascene the Ebionites say Christ dwelt in Adam, withdrew from him, then 'put him on again'.⁴⁵

There are some hints that Heb. 1-4 may refute such a Christology. F. F. Bruce sees allusions to the last Adam in 1:6⁴⁶ and 2:6-8.⁴⁷ In neither of these passages does Hebrews explicitly speak of Adam as a type of Christ, and yet this concept seems to be assumed. This suggests that some such concept may have been part of the Philonists' Christology. That is, they may have equated Christ with Adam in the same sense that they equated him with Moses. Heb. 1:6 does not endorse such a Christology. But it may be intended to show that *if* we grant such a Christology, it would show that the angels were commanded to worship Christ. This would demonstrate his superiority to the angels.

It would have been easy for the Philonists to infer such a Christology from Philo's works. Philo interprets Gen. 1 as a description of the creation of the heavenly man, and Gen. 2 the creation of the earthly man.⁴⁸ This distinction would be very

⁴⁴ *Pan.* 30:3:3.

⁴⁵ *De haer.* 30.

⁴⁶ *Op. cit.* 16.

⁴⁷ *Op. cit.* 35.

⁴⁸ *Leg. All.* 12.

compatible with the Philonists' Christology. Furthermore in Philo's view it was the heavenly man who was made in the image of God;⁴⁹ the first man was therefore far superior to all who lived after him.⁵⁰ In one passage he seems to call the first man Wisdom and the image of God.⁵¹ Since Philo associates these terms with the Logos, the Philonists probably viewed Adam as the first appearance of this angel.

5. The Book of Testimonies

At this point we return to the first question we raised in this article: why does Hebrews quote so frequently from the Book of Testimonies? We saw evidence in the previous article that this book pictured Jesus as the prophet like Moses; according to Harris it also viewed Jesus as the anti-type of Joshua the high priest. Hebrews, on the other hand, refutes a Christology which equated Jesus with Moses and the son of Josedech. Similarly, the Son passage in 2 Sam. 7:13, 14, when applied to Jesus, would identify Jesus as the one who would build the temple. The selection of this quotation would seem natural for those who equated Jesus with the son of Josedech, but not for an author who refutes these views. It is evident from this that the Book of Testimonies is not quoted in Hebrews because it refutes the Philonists' Christology. Furthermore, many of the arguments of Heb. 1-4 would have been unintelligible in a spoken sermon, unless the listeners were already well familiar with the quotations and allusions.

The natural conclusion from this is that the Philonists quoted the Book of Testimonies in defence of their Logos Christology. Hebrews quotes the book only to show that it does *not* support such a Christology. In this connection we should note that the author of Hebrews nowhere states that Jesus is the 'Son' of 2 Sam. 7:14. Instead, Hebrews simply asks a rhetorical question: 'To which of the angels did God ever say . . .' 'I will be to him a Father and he shall be to me a Son?'

I submit, then, that Hebrews' affinities with Philo and the Book of Testimonies do not stem primarily from the author's background. Instead, the author alludes to these sources because he is refuting a Christology based on these sources.

⁴⁹ *Leg. All.* 12.

⁵⁰ *On creation* 49.

⁵¹ *Leg. All.* 14.