

JESUS, PRIMER

BY RYAN PHIPPS

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TO HEBREWS

In the past, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

—Hebrews 1:1-4

There's one thing that it would do us well to acknowledge before we even try to make sense of the passage above. That thing is the name of the book (which really isn't a book at all, but a letter) that was written to a specific group of people at a specific time.

In the Greek manuscripts, the title of this book, this letter, is "Prós Evraíous", which translates in English as, "To Hebrews."

If you were to read the book from beginning to

end, you would start to see, almost immediately, that it's filled with ideas that a non-Jewish person would have no understanding of—things like, sins needing to be purified and atoned for, lambs being slaughtered, a High Priest of a new and better covenant, and quote after quote from the Old Testament explained in light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This is all in there because the letter is written, “Prós Evraíous,” to Hebrews.

So if we try to wrap our minds around this passage as 21st Century Christians, it's not going to make much sense to us. We have to

look at it through the lens of 1st-century Rabbinical Judaism.

That being the base from which we move forward, let's take a closer look at the passage.

The passage begins by saying;

“In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son...”

The writer here begins by pointing out that the God, Yahweh spoke to the Ancient Israelites through the words of their prophets. Ancient Judaism, being a religion of meticulous chronicling, records these things in what we call

“The Old Testament.”

And the writer here is saying that now, God is still speaking, but speaking to his people through the life and words of Jesus.

The passage continues,

“...He appointed Jesus heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe...”

The writer here is hearkening back, again to something written by the prophets to show that Jesus was always a part of the Godhead, referencing The Creation Story in The Book Of Genesis, and pointing out that Jesus was the medium through which the invisible God

created the visible world.

The passage goes on to say;

“...The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word...”

What is radiance?

Radiance is the light that shines out from any light source. So the passage is saying that what we see in Jesus comes from the Source (capital S) God.

It goes even further by saying that Jesus is the exact representation, the exact description, and

the exact portrayal of God's nature and being.

And finally, the passage concludes by saying;

“...After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.”

In Ancient Judaism (as it was in most religions of the time) sacrifices had to be made to atone for a person's sins. And in the lives of the Hebrew people, this was done at their temple, where they would bring their healthiest, most prized lambs to be sacrificed.

The lambs would be given to The High Priest,

who would go into a room inside of the inner court of the temple called, “The Holy Place” or the “Holy Of Holies” where the Ark Of The Covenant sat.

On the lid of The Ark, which was made of gold, there were two statues of angels facing one another. This space on the lid between the angels was called, “The Bema,” or “The Mercy Seat.”

Here, The High Priest would sprinkle the blood of the lambs that were given to atone for the sins of people.

This is the passage explained through the lens of 1st Century Rabbinical Judaism.

WHY IT MATTERS

So why is this important?

As we see by the title of the book and its contents, it isn't written to Christians. And much of it, to be honest, may or may not be something that you feel applies to your life today.

I can certainly understand that. I wasn't raised inside of Judaism, either.

However, when we look into everything that is being said here, there *is* something that applies

to all people, objectively. It applies to us whether we are a Jew, a Greek, or a New Englander.

It is the phrase,

“...The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being...”

Religion, faith, spirituality— whatever you choose to call it, is, at its core, the attempt of human beings to understand God. There are major religions and minor religions. There are even different sects within those religions, but they’re all trying to do the same thing.

Huston Smith, whom every first-year

Comparative Religion student will be required to read, once said it this way,

“What a strange fellowship this is, the God-seekers in every land, lifting their voices in the most disparate ways imaginable to the God of all life. How does it sound from above? Like bedlam, or do the strains blend in strange ethereal harmony? Does one faith carry the lead or do the parts share in counterpoint?”

We cannot know. All we can do is to listen carefully and with full attention to each voice in turn as it addresses the divine.”

At their core, the different faiths are all groping for the same Elephant, the same Source. And

this is why this portion of the Hebrews passage is so important.

It's telling us where to look, what to study, and who to imitate so that we might understand what God is really like— the life of Christ.

In other words, if you're praying about something and you're not getting any answers. If you're talking to God and God isn't talking back. If you're seeking a God that you just can't seem to find, maybe you're neglecting the wealth of information that is readily available in every language in myriad formats— the red letters of the New Testament.

And you might be thinking, "But wait, Ryan.

Doesn't that make Christianity exclusive, then?
Doesn't that make Christianity right and
everything else wrong?"

No. It absolutely does not.

What it means is that anytime we see people of
another faith or belief system living in the
world the way that Jesus did (even if they've
never even heard of Jesus) the God of Jesus is at
work there.

Here are the words of Jesus on the matter.

*One of his disciples said to him, "Master, we saw a
man casting out demons in your name and we
stopped him because he is not one of us." And Jesus*

said to the disciple, “Do not stop him! For whoever is not against us is for us!”

—Luke 9:49-50

and

Jesus said to his disciples, “I am the good shepherd, and I lay down my life for the sheep. I know my sheep and my sheep know me. I also have other sheep that graze in different pastures. They too hear my voice, for there is only one flock and only one shepherd.”

—John 10:14-16

That’s beautiful, isn’t it?

So it's not exclusive to think of Jesus this way.
On the contrary, it's aggressively inclusive.

In biology, a primer is a molecule that makes
the formation of another molecule possible.

In theology, it's the same. The way of Jesus is a
primer, making it possible to bond with those
that we otherwise never would, and by that
bond bringing into existence something that
can make the world a little more whole.

Now, more than ever, this is what we need—
for those of us who tag ourselves with the label,
“Christian” to fully embrace the teachings of
our founder— loving God and our neighbors
without reservation.

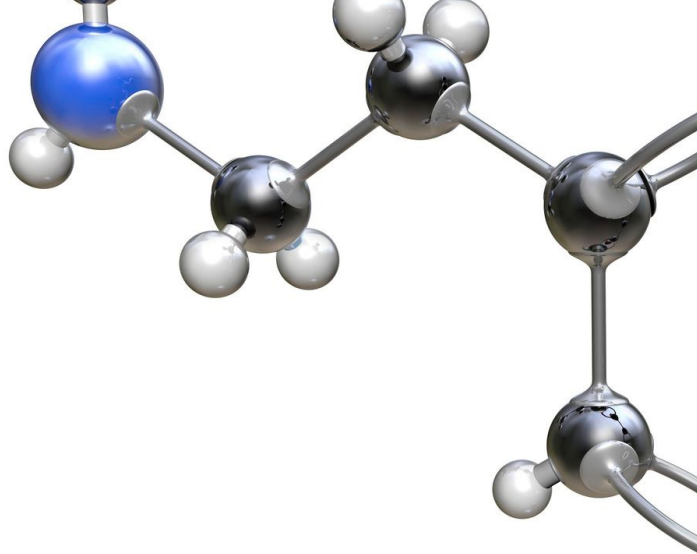
A B O U T T H E A U T H O R

Ryan Phipps is the Senior Minister at Church In Bethesda in Bethesda, Maryland.

Raised in the church, becoming a pastor was the one thing Ryan vowed he would never do. After spending many years away from faith, he found that for all of its flaws, the church can still occupy a unique place of good in the world if it is willing to evolve with reason and empathy.

He is also the host of Meditations For The Metro, a podcast of daily devotions for people with busy lives.

Ryan is an INTJ on the MBTI and a 5w4 on the Enneagram.



**IS CHRISTIANITY
THE ONLY WAY?**

**IF SO, DOESN'T THAT MAKE IT
RIGHT AND ALL OTHER BELIEF
SYSTEMS WRONG?**

