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HEBREWS' CHRISTOLOGY AND ITS CONTEMPORARY APPREHENSION IN AFRICA[1]

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1. Introduction

I should begin this paper by putting its significance into perspective. The Bible is a challenge especially to Christian communities. This is primarily because Christians perceive it, in some sense, as the 'word of God' which, therefore, has an absolute and universal character, and is of permanent value to them.[2] As such, what it says has to be identified for and in every culture and historical situation, and conveyed to the same. Therein in lies the challenge. How is this to be done given that the time in which the Bible was written is quite different to the times of those wishing to hear its message for, and apply it in, their times and culture? So for example, in Hebrews, we encounter a particular message concerning the identity and function of Jesus that was articulated about 2000 year ago. If we identify a part of the message of Hebrews thus, how are we in Africa to convey, and/or make sense of, it? This is the question I want to answer in this paper and by so doing, try and show how this challenge of the Bible can in some ways be met here in Africa.

What immediately follows then is a look at Hebrews and, in particular, its Christology. Once I have established the Christology of Hebrews, I shall

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1 Special thanks to Profeoward Marshall for his helpful and incisive response to this paper when I presented a draft to a PhD Biblical Studies Seminar at Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology in Nairobi, Kenya.

2 As identified by Fiorenza (1990), there are two broad approaches to the Bible in recent times that make it requisite for Christian communities. The first is the 'functional approach'. Here the understanding of the necessity of the Bible for Christianity is primarily understood through its functions in the church (and society at large): because the Bible is used by the Christian community to understand its faith and order its life, it must be reckoned with as such. The second, which he calls the 'canonical approach', perceives the Bible's as required in Christian communities on the basis of it being the locus of the primal events and traditions that constitute the beginnings of the Christian community. Because these primal events and traditions are considered to be definitive of the identity and self-understanding of the Church (ever since), the Bible is required in forming authentic Christian communities.

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look at ancestors in Africa. This will enable me in the last section of the paper to show that in Africa today it is possible to understand the Christology of Hebrews by means of the ancestral figure.

2. Hebrews

2.1 An Overview of Hebrews

Hebrews has impressed itself on its critics as a rhetorical discourse.[3] Accordingly, several rhetorical genres have been proposed,[4] by means of which Hebrews can be read rhetorically.[5] The most compelling of these seems to be *synkrisis* since it characterizes Hebrews. Evans (1988) points out that *synkrisis* was a Greek rhetorical term for comparison and a branch of Greek encomiastic tradition. Its "speciality was that it arrived at praise or blame by means of a comparison (5-6)". The comparison could be of opposites or of similar things with the intentions of finding out, by demonstrating, which was the superior. He points out that Hebrew's vocubulary and style (for example its twenty-seven instances of the comparative, and its series of antithetical statements serving to show the superiority of one over another that are introduced by μέν and δέ ["on the one hand . . . and on the other"]) show that the theme of superiority by comparison orders its argument. Indeed, except for Heb 13:1-25, Hebrews can be viewed as structured by its *synkrisis* of Jesus with Angels (1:1-2, 14), then Moses (3:1-6), and finally Aaron and Melchizedek (5:1-10; 7:1-25 and 8:4-10, 18), with each *synkrisis* subsequently followed by a relevant paraenesis. The *synkrisis* of Hebrews (in keeping with the general aim of the rhetorical genre to which it belongs)[6] functions to help the audience see the superiority of Jesus over angels, Moses, the Aaronic priesthood and its *cultus*. The author, thereafter, in his paraenesis, uses this established superiority to motivate this community to right action (in this case to obedience, faith and worship, and perseverance). In a nutshell, as

3 See for example Black II (1988) and Buchanan (1972).

4 This is important since rhetorical analysis presumes that rhetoric follows the logic of its genre (cf. Meynet, 1998, 169-172) rendering the search for a right genre critical to its investigations.

5 Such as 'paranomosia' (see Jobes 1992), 'amplification' (see Olbricht 1993), and 'homily' (see Attridge 1989).

6 See Zuntz (1953, 286) and Seid (1999).

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Attridge (1989, 21-22) and others (e.g Ellingworth 1993, 78-80) observe, exhortation to faithfulness is the practical purpose of Hebrews, and this is done primarily through the *synkrisis*. We can now consider more closely the *synkrisis* between Jesus and the angels, for lack of space, as an instance and demonstration of Hebrews mediatorial Christology, which we will attempt to understand by means of an African category.

2.2 Hebrews' Angelomorphic Christology (Heb. 1:4-2:18)

In coming to grips here with the angelomorphic Christology in Heb 1:4-2:18 we contend that the *synkrisis* between Jesus and angels is pre-eminently mediatorial.[1] Predominant in this pericope is the superiority of Jesus as a mediator over angelic mediators. In what follows, we will argue that Heb 1:4 not only introduces the *synkrisis* of Jesus with angels, but at the same time acts, as a counterpart to prophetic mediation in Heb 1:1-2, to introduce the subject of the *synkrisis*, viz., angelic mediation. We will show that this angelic mediation is alluded to in Heb 1:4 itself but made explicit in Heb 2:2-4 and, then, consider how the sections that follow these two, i.e., Heb 1:5-14 and 2:5-18, clarify this superiority of Jesus' mediation over angelic mediation. When this is done, the angelomorphic Christology of Hebrews will be thrown into sharp relief.

Prima facie, and given what precedes it, Heb 1:4ff τοσούτῳ κρείττων γενόμονος τῶν ἀγγέλων ὅσῳ διαφοπρώτερον παρ' αὐτοὺς κεκληρονόμηκεν ὄνομα appears to be a sudden inexplicable introduction of angels in the discourse. This is on account of the subject of Heb 1:1-3 which seems to have nothing to do with angels but, rather, with God and his Son: he has spoken (ἐλάλησεν) now by his Son, unlike in the past where he spoke (λαλήθας) through the prophets. Also, God's Son, unlike the prophets, is his exact representation (Heb 1:3) and is seated now at the right hand of his majesty (μεγαλωσύνης). But on closer scrutiny this is not really the case; the movement of content from Jesus' comparison with prophets to his comparison with angels can be accounted for best in the following manner.[2]

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1 As I have argued out elsewhere (Nyende 2005, 129-133), we shall understand a 'mediator' as any person who, or entity which, is perceived to be used by God in his dealing and relating with the world and human beings, or any person who, or entity which, human societies use in approaching, or relating to, God. So when I speak of mediatorial, I mean having to do predominantly with mediation.

2 Some have it that its appearance is not arbitrary but related to a word association that it has with 1:2b (see, for example, Ellingworth 1993, 103); while other scholars of Hebrews think that it is actually forced onto the writer because of the subject of Jesus appearing in heaven after making purification of sins (1:3). It is thought that this would have brought

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2.2.1 Principal Angels as Mediators

The comparison of Jesus with angels provides a counterpart to his comparison with prophets in Heb 1:1-2 and, therefore, has angelic mediation in the background. As Lane (1991) explains: 'It provides a parallel to [Heb 1] vv 1-2a, where revelation through the prophets is contrasted with the ultimate word spoken through the Son' (17). Although not explicit, but alluded to, in Heb 1.4, angels were understood too in Jewish religious tradition to be mediators of the Law (as we shall see) and were, therefore, in some respects like the prophets. We can safely presume that this was the understanding of the author of Hebrews on the basis of Heb 2:2 where he says that God's message was declared by the angels (more on this later). Lane, comes to this conclusion thus:[3]

> In the Old Testament angels were ascribed a broad role in revelation and redemption (e.g., Exod 3:2; Isa 63:9). It was commonly understood that the law had been mediated to Moses, the greatest of the prophets, through angels (cf. *Jub.* 1.29; Acts 7:38-39, 53; Gal 3:19; Jos., *Ant.* 15.5.3; *Mek.* on Exod 20.18; Siphre 102 on Num 12.5; *Pesiq. R.* 21). This conception was shared by the writer and his readers (2:2). The description of the Jewish law as "the message declared by angels" in 2:2 is determinative for the interpretation of the reference to the angels in v. 4 (Ibid.).

If this is the case, then the purpose of the introduction of angels in Heb 1:4 is to begin to show that Christ's mediation of God's word or revelation is superior not just to that of the prophets but also to the angelic one. In other words, *Jesus is a superior mediator to angels and prophets*. This should be understood as what links together the two comparisons. As a result Heb 1:5-14, and indeed 2:5-18, should be understood as clarifications of the superiority of Christ's mediation over the angelic ones. But before we look at this, and thus articulate the angelomorphic Christology in Hebrews, a look at Heb 1:4 by itself as an allusion to the mediation of angels will give credence to the view that Heb 1:4 gives perspective to Heb 1:5-14 as a clarification of the superiority of Christ as a mediator over angelic mediators.[4] Furthermore, showing the existence of such an allusion would

about a confusion between Jesus and angels (see Montefiori 1964, 40). But I think the merits of my explanation below of the appearance of angels in 1:4 are clear

3 See Westcot (1889, 16) as well.

4 This is all the more important because one could read Hebrews 1:5-14 as demonstrating the superiority of Christ to angels quite apart from the issue of mediation. On the grounds, for example, that deference to angels is being objected to (see Goulder 2003).

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support the view that Heb 2:2-4 makes explicit, or is determinative of our understanding, of Heb 1:4. Finally, demonstrating this allusion would show indeed that Heb 1:4-2:18 is:

1) a single unit in the *synkrisis* of Jesus and angels in their role as mediators and not just angelic beings *per se*, and

2. a deliberate part of the overall structure of Hebrews which concerns itself with comparing Jesus to mediatorial figures and showing him to be superior to them. In other words, demonstrating this allusion would show that the *predominant thought in this section of Hebrews is that Christ's mediation is superior to that of angels* which suits well with Hebrews' overall structure of *synkrisis* between Jesus and Jewish mediatorial figures.

From my survey of commentaries on Heb 1:4, scholars have been largely at one in stating that the name (ὄνομα) Jesus has inherited (κεκληρονόμηκεν) which is more excellent (διαφοώτερον) than that of angels is 'Son'.[5] They have also been at one on their lack of comments on what Heb 1:4 implies, viz. that angels have names, and what light that could shed on Hebrews' Christology. Yet I think that the implication that angels have names is important in establishing Hebrews' angelomorphic Christology. There would be value in exploring in detail the phenomenon of naming angels and determining what it means.[6] Short of this, we must here state one point of its pertinence to the angelomorphic Christology in Hebrews in what immediately follows.

The Second Temple period was characterized by an interest and speculation in angelic beings. Beliefs in angels in the Second Temple period became more elaborate. During this period, it is emphasized that, 'God is enthroned in heaven while carrying out his work in the world by means of angelic leaders who have myriads of other angels at their command' (Gieschen 1998, 124). These angelic leaders, unlike the many created angels, are distinct and honoured by the Jewish groups which revere them. Apparently, these angelic leaders (or 'principal angels' [Hurtado 1998, 71-2]) are the ones that assume names.[7] Given that this was the wider religio-

5 For example see Bruce (1990, 50), Lane (1991, 17) and Kistemaker (1984, 32).

6 The significance of names in biblical and post-biblical literature has been noted (see for example Eichrodt 1964, 40, and Bietenhard [in Friedrich 1967, 252-69]); an observation that may well have relevance to angels having names. But apart from Olyan (1993) who attempts to track the origins of, and account for the, naming of angels rather than the significance of so doing, there is nothing forthcoming on the significance of angels having names.

7 See Gieschen (1998, 126-151) for a survey and discussion on these angelic leaders in 2nd Temple period literature. See also Davis (1994), De Lacey (1987) and Hurtado (1998, 71-

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cultural context of Hebrews, it is possible, then, to conclude that in Heb 1:4 Jesus is not being compared to angels in general, but to principal angels and is being perceived to be more excellent than them because he has a more excellent name to their names as the verses that follow Heb 1:4 seek to clarify. Coincidentally (we would say by no mere coincidence) it is the mediatorial role of a principal angel which is found in Heb 2:2[8] (which then makes explicit what is alluded to in Heb 1:4). We consider that role in what follows.

In Heb 2:2-4, the word (λόγος) spoken by angels is compared to the word spoken by Jesus, thereby contrasting their mediation to that of Jesus'. Angels, according to Hebrews, were responsible for giving God's message to the people: (εἰ γάρ ὁ δι' ἀγγέλων λαληθεὶς λόγος ἐγένετο βέβαιος καὶ πᾶσα παράβασις καὶ παρακοὴ ἔλαβεν ἔνδικον μισθαποδοσίαν . . . 2:2). But whence did this belief come and could the same enlighten Hebrews' Christology? Its provenance is certainly not the Massoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible where the Torah is given directly to Moses (Exod 19 and 20), but, as is widely recognized,[9] from the LXX where it is understood that when God came down from Sinai, 'angels were with him at the right hand' (ἐκ δεξιῶν αὐτοῦ ἄγγελοι μετ' αὐτοῦ, Deut 33:2). This notion finds further development and elaboration in the Maccabean period in the *Book of Jubilees* (see for example, 1:27, 2:1 and 26-7) during which we encounter the perception that the Torah is dictated to Moses by 'the Angel of the Presence' (both in plural and singular form).[10] Given Hebrews' religio-cultural context, it is apparent then that the comparison is between Jesus' mediation and that of a principal angel, 'the Angel of the presence'.[11] Indeed

92), whose discussion, though, is limited by concerns to account for the genesis of the worship of Jesus without a compromise on monotheism in the 1st century.

8 The importance of this point should not be underestimated in understanding the issue of mediation here for it is only in this passage, and possibly Hebrew 2:5, that we encounter in Hebrews the role of angels in a more concrete way. The effect of this is to shed light on the precise role of angels in view in Hebrews 1:4-2:18.

9 Most commentaries on Hebrews point out this despite their reticence on its ramifications (such as the one I am arguing for).

10 See Gieschen (1998, 137-42) for a relatively detailed discussion on the 'Angel of his Presence' (singular and plural) who are understood to be four or seven and serving immediately before the throne of God.

11 This raises the possibility that the conception of Jesus as a superior mediator here ought not to be limited to this aspect of mediation carried out by a principal angel but should be broadened to cover the other mediatorial roles of these principal angelic beings. If this view is correct, then some of these functions would include: intercession (Tob 12:5, *1 En.* 9:1-3, 40:6, *T. Levi* 5:5-6, *T. Dan.* 6:2), and revelation and guidance (Dan 7:16-27, 8:15-

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it is out of this contrast that the audience of Hebrews are asked to pay attention (προσέχειν) in Heb 2:1 to what they have heard, which is the great salvation (τηλικαύτης σωτηρίας) first spoken of through Jesus (λαλεῖσθαι διὰ τοῦ Κυρίου Heb. 2:3). His mediation is superior since, first, it concerns a weightier word, i.e., a great salvation while that of angels is the giving of the law, and second, that word has been confirmed by God and the Holy Spirit (Heb 2:4). But on the whole, all of this, i.e., Jesus' superior mediation, is on the basis of who he is, and what he has done, as the verses that follow (Heb 2:5-18) clarify. This leads us now to consider very briefly how both Heb 1:5-14 and 2:5-18 clarify the superiority of Jesus' mediation to angelic mediation.

2.2.2 Jesus' Superiority over (Principal) Angels I

Following Heb 1:4 are seven scriptural quotations from the OT which serve to make clear the superiority of Jesus over angels, and thus, according to our foregoing argument, make him a superior mediator. The first two (Ps 2:7 in Heb 1:5a and 2 Sam 7:14 in Heb 1:5b) declare the Sonship of Jesus. Angels may have been collectively called 'sons of God'[12] but no angel was singly declared a Son of God. Such a quotation, then, in reference to Christ would have underlined his superiority. The third quotation (Ps 2:7 in Heb 1:6) brings out the point that angels worshipped him.[13] The fourth (Ps 104 in Heb 1:7) shows that angels are winds or spirits (πνεύματα) and as his servants, flames of fire (πυρὸς φλόγα). This, as argued by Attridge (1989, 57-8), may well show two things concerning angels. One is their transitory and mutable nature "apparent in their images of wind and flame" (58) which would contrast with the abiding quality of the Son in Heb 1:8-12; and the second is that they are servants who, as 1:14 makes clear, are sent to serve those who will inherit salvation, whilst he is Lord, as 1:13 indicates, seated at God's right hand (1:13). So, we turn now to the fifth, sixth and seventh quotations.

The fifth quotation (Ps 45:6-7 in Heb 1:8-9), as Ellingworth (1993) notes in Heb 1:8a, 'expresses briefly the eternity of the Son' (122), a theme which

16; 9:21-27; *1 En.* 72:1, 74:2, 75:4; *4 Ezra* 4:1; 5:20; 10:28). For their discussion and fuller references, see Chester (1991, 47-71), Gieschen (1998, 126-51) and Hurtado (1998, 71-92).

12 See for example, Gen 9:2, 4, Job 1:6; 2:1, and Ps 29:1.

13 Kistemaker (1984, 38) thinks that this refers to the birth of Jesus "when a multitude of the heavenly host praised God in the fields near Bethlehem (Luke 2.13)". This is because the word 'world' (κόσμος) is Hellenic and would have been used to "refer to the populated world" (Kistemaker 1984, 38).

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is developed further in the sixth quotation (Ps 102:25-27 in Heb 1:10-12). In this sixth quotation the main emphasis is the eternity of the Son in contradistinction to all creation (angels too) which are the work of his hands. In Heb 1.8b the point of distinction between Jesus and angels is not that clear but, I think, given the literary context is showing the superiority of Christ over angels. Ellingworth (1993) is right in saying that the point seems to be that 'the the Son exercises royal power, whereas the angels are mere λειτουργοί [Heb 1:7] (122). The quotation's latter content in Heb 1:9a seems to be saying, again given the literary context of Hebrews, that Jesus' anointing by God sets him above angels (Attridge 1989, 60).[14] The seventh quotation (Ps 110:1 in Heb 1:13) shows the seating of Jesus at God's right hand, and already mentioned (in Heb 1:3) is an 'enthronement accomplished at the invitation of God' (Lane 1991, 32), and one that is only given to him and not angels who, in contrast, are servants of those who will inherit salvation (Heb 1:14).

2.2.3 Jesus Superiority over (Principal) Angels II

We may turn our attention now to the other clarification of Jesus' superiority to angels in Heb 2:5-18. The opening, 'It is not to angels . . . ' (οὐ γὰρ ἀγγέλοις) in 1:5a makes it clear that the subject of what follows, yet again, is a comparison, albeit one which follows, as shown above, a more explicit comparison between Jesus' mediation and angelic mediation in 2:1-4. In Heb 2:5 the point is that the world to come will not be subjected to angels[15] but to the Son, a point made clear in the following verses. If we may turn to them, beginning with Heb 2:6-9, it seems most likely that the superiority of Jesus over angelic mediators was called into question in the mind of the audience from the consideration of Jesus being a man, i.e., of his incarnation.[16] If the Psalmist had declared (Ps 8) that human beings are lower than angels, and Jesus became a man, how could he be superior to angels? Hebrews uses the Psalm to point out two things. The first is that

14 This is not a foregone conclusion for there are some who argue otherwise (see Ellingworth [1993, 124] for more on this).

15 Implicit here is that the present world is understood to be in some way under subjection to angels. Indeed, there seems to have been a belief in principal angels ruling particular peoples on behalf of God. Sections of the Septuagint (Deut 32:8 and Dan 10:21-7 for example) alluded to this. See Kistemaker (1984, 63) and Bruce (1990, 71-2) for more. It is worth noting that if this is correct, then, our earlier argument that the comparison is between Jesus and principal angels and not just general angels is strengthened further.

16 Nash (1977, 112) and Lane (1991, 43), amongst others, think so.

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Jesus' humiliation was temporary (and for an important purpose) since he is now crowned with glory and honour, precisely because of his incarnation (Heb 2:9).

The second is that now, after his incarnation, crowned with glory and honour, all is subject to him, although at present we do not see everything having been subjected (ὑποτεταγμένα) to him (Heb 2:8b). So here the author of Hebrews argues that Jesus' glory, honour and, eventually, total dominion are tied to his incarnation. His, incarnation, therefore, he seems to say, does not make him lower than the angels but, to the contrary, superior to them. This argument is made at the end of the section (2:9b) where the author states that it is because Jesus suffered (πάθημα) death, that he is crowned with glory and honour, and, eventually, will have total dominion thus: "But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death . . . " (τὸν δὲ βραχύ τι παρ' ἀγγέλους ἠλαττωμένον βλέπομεν Ἰησοῦν διὰ τὸ πάθημα τοῦ θανάτου δόξῃ καὶ τιμῇ ἐστεφανομένον ὅπως χάριτι θεοῦ ὑπὲρ παντὸς γεύσηται θανάτου). Ellingworth (1993, 158) points out that a further reflection on Heb 2:9b is given in Heb 2.10, which is that it was fitting (ἔπρεπεν) that God should make Jesus perfect through suffering in order for him to lead many to glory. However, these two verses (Heb 2:9b and 10) do not say how his humanity, death and suffering have made him superior to angels, as one crowned with glory and honour, and also made him lead many to glory. For that, we have to look to Heb 2:14-18.

The reasons why Jesus was incarnated and suffered death are now finally given. The first is to destroy the one who holds the power of death (Heb 2:14) and free those who have been held in bondage by the fear of death (2:15). However, how this happens and what it means exactly the author does not say. The second and more explicit reason is that he may help Abraham's descendants (2:16). He does this by becoming a merciful and faithful high priest (2:17a) and making atonement for their sins (2:17b). This, as Ellingworth (1993, 190) notes, is clarified in Heb 2:18: Jesus is a merciful high priest, able to help those who are being tempted (πειρασθείς) because, as a human being, he too was tempted. In other words, the author of Hebrews is saying, in the words of Attridge (1989, 95), 'the incarnation and suffering of Christ took place so that he might be a high priest characterized by mercy and fidelity'. After he suffered and achieved this, and for this reason, he is now seated at the right hand of God in glory and honour (Heb 13; 1:13, 2:7-8) and will, eventually, rule over all.

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To put this in a clearer perspective of Jesus' comparison with angels (Heb 2:5-18), Jesus became man but that does not mean that angels are superior to him. In fact, the author seems to be arguing that, because he became man and suffered death, he has been brought to honour and glory, a rank and dignity which is greater than that of angels (2:9). This is because his experience of suffering and death enables him to become a merciful and faithful high priest, thus helping human beings as their mediator in a way the mediation of principal angels cannot aspire to.

Given the above, we may conclude that, according to Hebrews, Jesus is like principal angels but greater. More precisely, he is greater than principal angels, because:

1) like them he mediates God's word but, unlike them who are spirits, he is God's Son, which makes him superior to them and;

2) he has shared in the lot of humanity which also makes him superior to them because the kind of mediation he is now able to offer, of a merciful and faithful high priest, is one the angels cannot offer. In short, Jesus is greater than principal angels because, being God's Son and having become a man, he is a superior mediator: Heb 1:4-14 alludes to this whilst 2:1-18 makes it explicit. This is Hebrews' angelomorphic Christology.

I wish to point out here that such an understanding of Heb 1:4-2:18 is the beginning of a train of thought that will continue on in the author's *synkrisis* of Jesus with Moses and then with the Aaronic high priests and in so doing bring out the mediatorial Christology of Hebrews. In the words of Stanley (1994), the author of Hebrews "begins with the figures (mediators) that have the closest contact with God-the angels-and works out from there-Moses, Joshua and then Aaron and the priests" (264). This being the case, Heb 1.4-2.18, as mentioned earlier, forms an integral part of the overall structure of Hebrews, of Jesus' *synkrisis* with Jewish mediatorial figures, rather than a digression forced on the author by his mention of Jesus seated in heaven.

3. Ancestors in Africa

3.1 Ubiquity of Ancestors in Africa

We now turn our attention to ancestors in Africa with a view of showing how this mediatorial Christology of Hebrews can be understood in Africa. Years back, in an apparent concession to the ubiquity of ancestors in Africa's religious heritage, Young (1950) wrote: "No approach to any appreciation of indigenous ideas regarding God can take any path but through the thought-area occupied by ancestors" (38). Whilst this is the

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case, it must be emphasized, as Fortes would note (1965), that ancestors 'are only a part of a total complex of religious and ritual institutions of an African people' (16). This means that any look at ancestors in Africa has to look not only at the beliefs in and thus rituals concerning ancestors, but also try to make sense of them within the cosmology that they operate in. Starting with the ontology of ancestors, we will attempt to do this against the background of my reading, which covers more or less sixteen ethnic groups that would be found in different regions of Africa.[17] At the end, we should be able to grasp something of a concrete but generalized view of ancestors in Africa, and, more importantly, their mediatorial functions.

On looking at ancestors in Africa, one encounters a plethora of beliefs in and rituals concerning them that converge in some ways but also diverge and are in tension in other ways. Ancestors are believed to have been human beings (now spirits) who have died and are understood to have a close relationship with the living; pervasively influencing their affairs by, depending of their conduct, helping or punishing. The ancestors themselves are in certain cases classified into various groups. The Shona for example have three groups: supra tribal ones from the past ruling class, tribal ones, and family ones (Daneel 1970, 51). It would appear that in all cases (upon death and subject to the necessary funeral rites) the qualification to be an ancestor would normally be parenthood and a virtuous life (Mutah 1999, 119, Uchendu 1976, 292ff, and Idowu 1973, 186). But there are exceptions to this: Kabasale (1991, 118) for example, though without reference to any ethnic group in particular, has death in old age, i.e. a death that is not premature, as a qualification; the Malawi people seem to have no qualifications except perhaps adult initiation (Morris 2000, 222); and the Lugbara admit the childless into ancestorhood (Middleton 1960, 33).

African peoples have traditionally had a thriving and elaborate ancestor cult: shrines are built for them, there are special places designated for them, sacrifices, libations and offerings are offered to them, and they are consulted, appealed to and invoked. Accordingly, the sustenance or preservation of the community is what makes ancestors this prominent. It is in such a context that one can understand the remarks of Chidester (1991), that historically, "ancestor religion has operated as a force of conservatism, maintaining lifestyles and social relations associated with the past" (12), in short sustaining the community. This is why ancestors are consulted, appeased, appealed to, and invoked. I should think that such an

17 The Xhosa of Southern Africa (Hodgson 1982), the Tiriki of Kenya (Sangree 1974), the Yoruba of Nigeria (Idowu 1973), and the Sonjo of Tanzania (Gray 1963) to name a few.

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understanding allows for most of the multifarious functions of ancestors (such as guardians of the land, providers, guarantors of fertility, custodians of the morality, and customs of the community etc.) to be accounted for. But specifically, how are we to understand the role of ancestors in African society and thereby the kind of relationship that exists between African peoples and their ancestors? This we can only find out by looking at the cosmology of ancestors.

3.2 Ancestors in Africa as Mediators

As Idowu (1973, 139) amongst others, makes clear, the religious cosmology of Africa is encompassed by spirit beings: ancestors/ancestor spirits, spirits, and divinities or deities. It could be further argued that to this should be added nature or natural forces (whether as animistic or theophanous). This supra-human or spirit world is hierarchically ordered. Some communities like the Shona of Zimbabwe (Daneel 1970, 51) may have a simple hierarchically ordered spirit world starting from humans (themselves having a hierarchical ordering) at the bottom, then ancestors, and then a Supreme Deity at the top, while others like the Yoruba of Nigeria (Idowu 1973, 139) have a complex hierarchically ordered spirit world, having humans at the bottom, then ancestors, then a horde of deities, and lastly a Supreme Deity at the top. Simple hierarchically ordered spirit worlds characterize East, Central, and Southern African societies while complex ordered spirit worlds characterize West African societies. At issue in the understanding of these spirit worlds (and therewith the understanding of the mediation of ancestors) is the notion of a Supreme Deity.

Contingent on how one understands African beliefs on the notion of a Supreme Deity, the spirit world, as described, could be understood in one of two ways. It could be understood as a form of polytheism in which case the mediation of ancestors would just be between humans and a deity, or not be there at all. Those who are convinced that the latter is the case (e.g. Illesanmi 1991 and Hammond-Tooke 1960) perceive the ancestor cult to be an end in itself, meaning that ancestors are autonomous entities, acting in their own power and authority, and independent of other *personas.* Alternatively the spirit world could be understood as a form of pantheonism with a Supreme Deity at the top; in which case the mediation of ancestors is understood to be between humans and the Supreme Deity. Other deities (applicable only to West African societies) as well as the ancestors are understood to have power and authority that is derived from and accountable to the Supreme Deity. Furthermore, their role is seen as a delegated one and

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they are, as a result, seen as representatives of the Supreme Deity (some would say his/her/its manifestations).

So what notion of the Ultimate Deity prevails in African societies? From West to Southern Africa we encounter (at least traditionally) most widely the notion of a great deity who is above all others primarily because he/she/it ('he' from here on)[18] is, essentially, believed to be responsible for the creation of all things. However, for a variety of reasons, he is now far away up in the sky and thus almost inaccessible (cf. McVeigh 1974, Gaba 1969, Evans-Pritchard 1962 and O'Connell 1962); a characteristic that is at times called *Deus otiosus* or *remotus*. Consequently, this Deity is commonly associated with, if not identified as, the sky and sun, and it is for this reason, that the term often used for this Deity is the 'High God/Deity'. Though on some points debatable, Damman (1969) captures this phenomenon appositely in writing:

> besides spirits and deities there is an isolated deity, quite independent from and not related to other deities, solitary and of unknown origin, without dependants, neither wife nor family. Certain general characteristics always recur. This High God is usually known as creator, but not necessarily in the sense of *creatio ex nihilo*. He has set certain rules of human conduct. The phenomenon of death is traced back to him, and it is he who calls away those whose time on earth is over. In the beginning he used to live near places of men, but later—sometimes in consequence of some human awkwardness—he has withdrawn (6).

This notion of a High Deity in Africa is found in the mythologies of the African peoples.[19] The most common reason put down in the myths for the withdrawal (though by no means absolute) of the High Deity is, as alluded to by Damman, in the quotation above, due to the unacceptable conduct of human beings. So, for example, among the Barotse of Zambia, the High God withdrew because *Nyambi* (the first man) murdered other creatures (Sprowl 1991, 35-36); among the Yao of Tanzania (36-37), it is because they were burning up everything in their environment; whilst among the Ngombe of the Congo, it is because of the quarrelsomeness of human beings (47-48).

However, the withdrawal of this High Deity is not absolute; he may be withdrawn but he has not disappeared altogether. This means that some things can be said about him apart from credit for creating the world. Indeed

18 I have chosen to use 'he' when referring to this higher deity in African cosmology more for convenience than anything else, since it is evident that not all notions of a higher deity conceive of the deity as, male, or even, as female.

19 A collection of some of these myths can be found in Sprowl (1991).

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there are beliefs in, and conceptions of him that can be gleaned through a semantic study of his names. One of the best illustrations of this is found in Setiloane's (1973) study of 'Modimo: God Among the Sotho-Tswana', where he looks at not only the significance of the name of the Supreme Being, but also the praise names given to *Modimo*. For instance, he points out that *Modimo* is a noun of the second class. 'This class contains also *mosi*, "smoke", *motto*, "fire", *moya*, "wind", *ngwedi*, "moon", *mohodi (Sotho)* or *muwane*, "mist" and *meane*, "lightning"' (6). All of these are intangible elemental objects which points to a perception of *Modimo* as intangible and mysterious, a primary quality of the deity, Setiloane notes.[20]

Generally, with few exceptions, there is no worship around this High Deity; but if he is ever approached, whether directly or through intermediaries, it is mostly in times of a major crisis (Pobee 1979, 47) or when all else has failed (McVeigh 1974, 35). It is not clear whether the deity is a *persona* and, thus, whether in anthropomorphic representation he is male or female; neither is it clear whether he is moral or amoral. What seems clear from my reading of the relevant literature is that the spirit world of Africa's religious cosmology has a sense of a superior deity in its hierarchy of power and authority and would therefore best be described as a pantheon with the High Deity, at its head. This High Deity in Africa's religious cosmology may then be conceived of as the Ultimate Deity, as God.

3.2.1 Ancestors as Mediators—directly

Ancestors and other spiritual beings, consequently, can be understood to function as mediators of the Ultimate Deity. This is more openly the case, for example, amongst the Ngoni of Malawi (Read 1956, 191-192), the Mende of Sierra Leone (Sawyerr 1970, 66) and the Ibo of Nigeria (Mutah 1999, 90), where *Unkurukulu, Ngweno,* and *Chukwu*, respectively, have mediators in ancestors.[21] However, we must concede that in some African societies, there is vagueness in the precise relationship of God to spirits, divinities, ancestors, and human beings principally because addressees of prayers are the ancestors themselves. They seem to be understood to act in their own power without recourse to God to whom they would, presumably,

20 See also Gaba (1969) for a similar study on the *Anlo*.

21 Consequently attempts have been made to classify the different types of mediations that exist in Africa's religious cosmologies. Shorter (2001, 48-50), for example, classifies them into six models, viz., 'strict theism', 'modified theism', 'symmetrical mediation', 'asymmetrical mediation', 'modified deism', and 'strict deism'.

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forward the prayers of the people. (In fact it is this that has led to some scholars to reject the notion of an ultimate Deity.) But then vagueness of relationship does not mean there is none whatsoever. The very fact of a transcending and defining ultimate Deity (defining in the sense that he is credited with creation and, by extension, life) means there is a relationship of ancestors and other beings to this Deity. Such a relationship could be understood in various ways, of which I consider two.

3.2.2 Ancestors as Mediators—indirectly

We pointed out above that ancestors in Africa are believed to be sustaining and preserving the community they belong to—that is, they serve as guarantors of life to their communities. It would therefore follow that if the Ultimate Deity is credited with creating life, then those who serve to sustain it are not quite unrelated to him but on the contrary are mediators between him and the people. If we may paraphrase this: *to have power to sustain life is to mediate for the one whom the people understand ultimately to be the source of that life.* It is for this reason that on rare occasions ancestors are simply bypassed and the Ultimate Deity invoked directly. Nürnberger (1975), while looking at the relationship of *Modimo* and the ancestral spirits of the Sotho in South Africa isolates this argument in a way that deserves full quotation:

> There can be no doubt that the real addressees of prayers and sacrifices are the ancestors themselves and not a further authority beyond them, to whom they have to forward the supplications. There is also no doubt that they act—benevolently or malevolently—in their own right and power. Nevertheless there is a connection of some sort, and it has to be. After all dynamistic reality is unitarian. The life-stream of the lineage is part and parcel of a greater whole of dynamistic power. If Modimo is the source of all dynamistic power around, then it is obvious that ancestors are "closer" to the Modimo in the sense that more of such power is at their command than at the command of the living. This power they are expected to utilize for the benefit of the living offspring. Put into mythological imagery the ancestors appear as mediators (*batseta*) between man and Modimo. Obviously the example of normal social relationships between a minor and a superior (say a commoner and a chief) through the agency of intermediaries lends itself perfectly to such an imagery . . . . Existentially nothing more can be said than that there is some sort of continuity between the power of ancestors (i.e. that of lineage) and Modimo as the great beyond of all dynamistic power (187).

The second kind of relationship between ancestors and the Ultimate Deity is the perception that the Ultimate Deity manifests himself,

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consequently becoming immediate to the people, through ancestors and other beings. Here ancestors are understood to be his proxy. This is very clear amongst the Lugbara of Uganda where the power of *Onyiri* is manifest in, amongst other things, the form of spirits which include ancestors (Middleton 1960, 27). *So then, this much can be said, even in the absence of a clear and openly defined relationship between the High Deity and ancestors: ancestors function variously as mediators between people and God.*

Some scholars, such as Horton (1973), have sought to vitiate such conclusions by insisting that such a view is an interpretation highly shaped by Judaeo-Christian, and I should add Muslim, templates. Whereas I concur that Judaeo-Christian and Muslim templates are a factor in the descriptions, if not analysis, on the notions of a Supreme Deity as found in Africa's religions (missionaries had to study African religion to evangelize Africa, history of religion studies privilege one religious tradition in analysing the other), I think that our conclusion would largely be accounted for by the encounter of African societies with Christianity and Islam. The impact of these encounters has been colossal, making their mark on all aspects of Africa's cosmology and not least in their conceptions and belief of a supreme Deity.[22] Of course, this is not to say that the impact was one way or on a passive recipient (Sanneh 1980). So, our conclusion should not be in question since we are dealing with African ancestors in the Africa of today (not in the pre-colonial Africa of yesteryears) and within the cosmology they are understood to operate in today. It therefore follows that it is the second of the two conceptions of the spirit world mentioned above (i.e. pantheonism) that should be taken as the proper cosmology (context) in which to understand the role of ancestors in Africa. This role, as mentioned, is that ancestors in a variety of ways mediate between humans and the Supreme Deity.

4. Jesus as the Greatest Ancestor

As will be clear shortly, the question relevant to us now is this: How did the conception and articulation of Jesus as the Mediator come about? And how is it to be related to the possibility of an ancestor-Christology? Though seemingly a neglected point of view, religious experiences are very important in understanding the origins of Christology. This granted, we can then perceive that it was because the early Christians encountered Jesus, and

22 For more on this see Frankl 1990, Nürnberger 1975, and Daneel 1970, 36ff.

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had their lives changed in one way or another that they accentuated his significance, made efforts to make sense of (or interpret) their encounters with him, and not least, made efforts to express that significance of Jesus to others in an intelligible manner. Both making sense of their experiences of Christ and communicating it in an intelligible manner were done invariably within and through their religio-cultural milieux. Johnson (1986), who gives credit to the phenomenon of religious experiences of Christ as a factor behind the emergence of Christianity and the NT writings (11-18, 86-113), brings out this point well when he writes:

> It is in the experience of the first believers that the origin of Christianity and of the New Testament must be sought. Something happened in the lives of real men and women; something that caused them to perceive their lives in new and radically altered fashion and compelled them to interpret (and express) it by means of available symbols (96, in brackets mine).

He also argues the point that there was no core experience to these experiences of Jesus but rather a variety of experiences evidenced in the plurality of the NT writings (93-96). So some had, for example, experienced in Jesus a release from cosmic powers that had hitherto controlled their lives (1Cor 2:6-10; Rom 8:38; Eph 2:1-10; Col 1:13; 1Pet 3:22), while some had experienced peace in him (Rom 5:1; 1Cor 7:15; 2Cor 13:11; Eph 2:17, 4:3; Phil 4:13; Col 3:15; Jas 3:18).

Given the above, we could understand Hebrews to be an intelligible expression of one claim, amongst others, by an early Christian writer which is based on a particular experience of Christ that they had. It is an expression of Jesus as a definitive Mediator through the use of Jewish Second Temple religious milieux as we have demonstrated, because Jesus was experienced as such in the lives of the early Christians. What this means is that Jesus as a Mediator is the essential Christology of Hebrews. However, such a Christology is couched in the religio-cultural heritage of the time and fashioned for a given Christian community in a particular situation.

Consequently, what needs to be made sense of in the Christology of Hebrews and communicated accordingly in our African context is *Christ as the definitive mediator*. It is precisely on this account that we foremost have every cause to employ the ancestor figure for the purpose of re-conceiving and speaking of Jesus as the definitive mediator between humans and God in Africa. This is because, as pointed out, ancestors are integral to Africa's religiosity and are chiefly, if not entirely, mediatorial figures. It follows that

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if Jewish mediatorial figures are used analogously/metaphorically[23] to conceive and speak of Christ as the mediator,[24] then there is no reason why ancestors should not be used as such to conceive and speak of Christ as the mediator in Africa. For just like principal angels (and Moses and high priests) straddled the Second Temple Jewish religious cosmos as mediators between God and humans, so do ancestors straddle Africa's religious cosmos as such. Thus in employing ancestor figures in conceiving and expressing Jesus as mediator, we are applying the same principle of analogy I see at work in Hebrews.

I think though that we need to note that in employing ancestors to communicate Jesus as the definitive mediation in Africa, we may need to do so *mutatis mutandi* since the similarities between Christ and ancestors are not *in toto,* which necessitates comparisons and contrasts between the two. We have already shown from Hebrews that Jesus is like a principal angel but more superior, and this would certainly be the case when employing ancestors in articulating an ancestor-Christology. This then is to say that in conceiving Christ as an ancestor in Africa, allowance must be given for some qualifications, which would invariably cast Jesus as a superior mediator to ancestors, i.e. as the greatest ancestor.

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23 This is not the place to argue against or for the nuanced distinctions between metaphors and analogies if any, I simply use them interchangeably throughout this study in view of the fact that they overlap in usage and meaning if they are not understood as synonymous.

24 Isaacs (2002, 69-71) judges Hebrews with bringing "us face to face with the metaphorical character of much of the language of the New Testament" (69); see also Smith's (1976) discussion on the role of metaphor in Hebrews but with regard to the High Priest.

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