

“ARCHEGOS” IN THE SALVATION HISTORY OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS(1)

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***Archehos*, Its Background and Meaning**

Archehos is part of a Greek word-group(3) with a broad range of meanings, "beginning," "head," "origin," "rule," ruler," "originator."(4) A survey of Septuagintal(5) and non-Biblical limited to the use of *archegos* suggests a threefold connotation: [a] path-breaker (pioneer) who opens the way for others, [b] source or founder, and [c] leader-ruler.(6) Most suggested translations of *archegos* tend to gravitate toward one or another of these meanings.(7)

Scholarly discussions frequently enquire about the cultural background from which *archegos* entered Christianity or the identity of the of the group(s) within early Christianity who used it. These generally seem to assume that the source-founder emphasis is more likely to be Greek while the leader-ruler connotation probably reflects a Semitic background.

Archehos, as a title for Jesus appears only four times in the NT, twice each in Acts (3:15; 5:31) and Hebrews (2:10; 12:2). Nevertheless, it seems that both linkages(8) and affinities with other terms and concepts may make it part of one or more theological "packages" which could extend its influence beyond that indicated by mere occurrence count.(9)

James P. Martin(10) argues that *archegos* is closely associated with the early church's understanding of faith within Salvation History (*Heilsgeschichte*). It identified Jesus, as *archegos*, as standing at the central point of Salvation History "which opens up the future to the completion of God's purpose"(11) while, at the same time, proclaims his unique role in the past and present of both history and the experience of the Christian community.

I wish to endorse the general thrust of Martin's contribution, but here to look more precisely at the function of *archegos* as a description of Jesus within the Epistle to the Hebrews. I suggest that the specific situation faced by the intended audience and the solution proposed by the writer made *archegos*, when employed in its broadest sense, a most appropriate concept around which to present the person and work of Christ.

The Situation Envisaged

The writer of the Epistle seems to have feared that his readers

were in danger of sliding away from Christianity back to Judaism, which they believed to be the religion of the OT. Evidently, the readers did not see this as an abandonment of one religion for another. The faith of OT Israel, they may have argued, came by revelation of God, the same God whom they served as Christians. Judaism and Christianity, the recipients probably assumed, were equally valid, alternate forms of the same religion.

The language of the Epistle implies that although the readers had faced persecution in the past (10:32-34), the source of the immediate threat lay, not in a frontal attack or direct challenge, but in the community's own inattention, indifference, and distracted state. The writer warns of "drifting away" (2:1), "neglect" (2:3), and "sluggishness" (6:12); he accuses his readers of being "dull of hearing" (5:11) with "drooping hands" and "weak knees" (12:12). He calls for them to pay "closer attention" (2:1) and to exercise vigilance (3:12), to be steadfast (3:6; 4:14), to show "earnestness" (6:11) and "endurance" (10:36, 38; 12:1).

Such a state of dissipated zeal could have been caused by the passage of time since accepting Christ, a fading awareness of certain essential features of the content of the new faith, and/or preoccupation with other matters. Clearly, the writer was convinced that what was needed was a "word of exhortation" (13:22)(12) which called for renewal, growth, conscious effort, a reminder of the distinctive claims of Christianity, and above all a refreshed and enlarged view of the person and work of Christ.

The precise date and provenance of the Epistle are, of course, uncertain. Although the use of the present tense in describing the worship in the Jerusalem Temple (7:8; 9:6-7, 9, 13; 13:10) is not conclusive,(13) a date just before or immediately after the destruction of city and temple in AD 70 catastrophe seems likely. In any case the writer certainly saw the old order "in the process of passing away" (8:13), and **that** is the crucial point. However, if the book does come from the general period of the Jewish war, then a possible reason for the assumed preoccupation and distraction of the readers becomes clear. The inclination to return to Judaism may have been linked to patriotic motives. It would have been natural for many Jews, even some in the diaspora, to desire to unite, even symbolically, with their embattled nation in her hour of need.

For the writer, even considering the possibility of returning to Judaism indicated a failure to grasp the nature and implication of the present state of Salvation History. Jesus Christ inaugurated a new phase in God's dealings with men. The result is a new period, a new age, which has supplanted that which had gone before.

The opening statement of the document demonstrates the writer's

commitment to a "new age" theological perspective. He contrasts God's revelation "to our fathers by the prophets" (1:1) with that "to us by a Son" (1:2). This has come about "in the end of these days" (*ep' eschatou ton harmeron touton*, 1:2), a much discussed phrase which I, with Montefiore, understand to mean, "With the entry of the Son into the world, a completely new era has begun, superseding the old order of existence which had all but passed away."[\(14\)](#)

Throughout the Epistle we encounter both implicit and explicit evidence that, for the author, the concept of different ages and a change in the ages inaugurated by Christ was of greatest significance. Most obvious are such references as "the world to come" (2:5), "powers of the age to come" (6:5), "Christ ... a high priest of the good things that have come" (9:11),[\(15\)](#) and "he appeared once for all at the end of the age" (9:26). In addition the writer makes much of the present reality of salvation (1:14), a "better rest" (3:18-4:1 ff), Christ's entrance into the heavenly sanctuary (9:24), and the perfecting in the present of forefathers who had "not received what was promised" (11:39 f). In fact, the major argument of the Epistle, that of changes in revelation (1:4-2:9), the position of Moses (3:3-6; contrast Deut. 34:10-11), priesthood (4:14 ff), law (7:12), sanctuary (8:1 ff; 9:11), covenant (8:6 ff; 9:15-22; 10:16 ff), sacrifice (9:12 ff; 10:11-15), and of access before God (9:6-14; 10: 19-22) is predicated upon just such a change of ages.

To those tempted to return to Judaism the author's message is plain; in Christ Salvation History has taken a quantum leap forward. You cannot go back. To turn away from Christ is to attempt to push Salvation History backwards, to reject the reality of "the age to come" (6:4 ff). History, including Salvation History, cannot be made to retreat. To return to Judaism is an attempt to live in the past. To do so leaves one without hope (6:4) for there remains no Jewish sacrifice for sin (10:26), only judgment (10:27-31). In Christ the old covenant and all that pertains to it has become "obsolete ... and ... is ready to vanish away" (8:13). Judaism and Christianity are not equally valid alternatives, for Christ "abolishes the first in order to establish the second" (10:9). He warns them "lest ... [they] ... fall away from the living God" (3:12).

Archegos in Hebrews

In 2:10 Jesus is called "the *archegos* of salvation (*tes soterias*)."
Previously (beginning in 1:4) his position is contrasted with that of angels. Although Jesus is superior to angels and has brought a superior revelation and salvation, he "for a little while was made lower than the angels" (2:9). In this humiliation he suffered, tasting death, but has, as a consequence, been "crowned with glory and

honor." These dual themes, suffering and glory, are repeated in 2:10 ff, this time in something of a cosmic-redeemer setting, as the immediate context in which *archegos* occurs; he who is the "*archegos* of salvation" leads "many sons into glory" and was "perfected by suffering (*dia pathematon teleiosai*)."

Two points stand out. First, both the immediate and the larger context associate *archegos* with the type of dramatic reversal of fortune which C. H. Dodd has shown to be an important part of the "plot" common to several OT contexts and evidently prominent in the minds of NT writers as they cite them.⁽¹⁶⁾ However, in Hebrews something is added. Those associated with Jesus share in his glory and honor. Secondly, that Jesus is the *archegos* of salvation raises the question of the *soteria* in the Epistle as a whole and how it fits with the *archegos* concept.

Elsewhere *soteria* occurs six times in Hebrews (1:14; 2:3; 5:9; 6:9, 9:28; 11:7). In 11:7 it clearly means, "to rescue from danger" (Noah built an ark for salvation of his family). In 9:28 it refers to the future, final realization of God's work of redemption at the culmination of the eschatological drama, the final result of Salvation History. With this as a clue, we may inquire if other occurrences of *soteria* also have a point of reference broader than simply the rescue or deliverance from either physical or spiritual danger. This appears to be the case, for each of the first four occurrences (not counting 2:10) may well refer to the time or period characterized by that salvation which is available since the completion of the work of Christ. In fact, Montefiore explicitly associates it with the new age, "The world to come [2:5] is a way of referring to this salvation about which he has just been speaking, and which is described later as 'the age to come' (vi. 5) and 'the city to come' (xiii.14)".⁽¹⁷⁾ If this is true, then calling Jesus "*archegos* of Salvation" is equivalent of hailing him as "the *archegos* of the new age." He is the one through whose sufferings (the "birth pangs of the Messiah") the new age becomes a reality and whose personal honor and glory, which is shared with his "sons," is a major characteristic of it.

Heb 12:2 again finds *archegos* in a setting marking the transition from the past to the present and contrasting former suffering with present honor. The "cloud of witnesses" from the former age encompasses those who now "run ... the race." Central is Jesus, the faith's *archegos* and perfecter (*teleiotes*), who "endured the cross" but now has been "seated at the right hand of the throne of God." He opened the race, the new faith, within which his followers struggle, and he remains the focus of their attention.

Time would fail me were I here to attempt a comprehensive investigation of the Epistle. Suffice to note briefly that the same concepts, suffering as a prelude to glory and as the means of

benefit for humans, occur throughout the Epistle, even where *archegos* is absent. For example, in 7:27-8:1 Jesus, as high priest, "offered up himself" [i.e., suffered], has been made perfect (*teteleimenon*) and is now "seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven." Again, 10:12-14 speaks of Christ's "sacrifice for sin," session at the right hand, and the perfecting (*teteleioken*) of human persons. The same concept is less obvious, but probably also present, in 4:1-10. Jesus, as had Joshua previously, provided a "rest" both for himself and others after a time of struggle (suffering?) and labor. [\(18\)](#)

Heb 5:8-9 is particularly interesting in our quest for the possibility of a conceptual atmosphere within which *archegos* was an important part. Here the author says, Jesus "learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect (*teleiotesis*) he became the source of eternal salvation (*aitios soterias aioniou*) to all who obey him." Obvious are the themes of suffering, glory, and benefit for others. There are also direct lexical and probable conceptual parallels with *archegos* contexts. A form of the verb *teleioo* ("to complete, bring to an end, finish, accomplish, perfect") [\(19\)](#) appears here as well as in the two examples just mentioned above (7:28; 10:14) and along with **both** occurrences of *archegos*. *Soteria* (salvation) is associated with Jesus here just as in 2:10. Furthermore, *aitios*, in its masculine form, means "cause" or "source," [\(20\)](#) ideas also inherent in *archegos*. In fact, *aitios* in 5:9 may be a virtual synonym for *archegos*.

The Task/Function of *Archegos*

The requirements of translation have probably promoted the attitude that the different elements of the threefold connotation of *archegos*, noted above, are mutually exclusive. The traditional association of one of its emphases with a particular cultural milieu may also be too rigid a distinction for all contexts. Given its full range of meaning, the word designates an individual who opened the way into a new area for others to follow, founded the city in which they dwelt, gave his name to the community, fought its battles and secured the victory, and then remained as the leader-ruler-hero of his people.

A number of Jewish and pagan [\(21\)](#) sources illustrate one or more facets of *archegos*. A fairly close one, in the LXX of Judges 11:6 ff, is often overlooked. Jephthah was asked to become *archegos* over the inhabitants of Gilead in order to deliver them from the Ammonites (v. 6). He agreed on condition that the position would be made permanent; the elders consented and he was *madekephale kai archegos* [\(22\)](#) even before the battle (vss 8-11). At the conclusion of his struggles, "Jephthah judged Israel six years" (12:7). Other OT leaders, especially during the time of the Judges, were also occasionally called *archegos* by the LXX

translators (cf., Judges 5:2, 15, etc.) as well as *soter*,⁽²³⁾ a term which, we have noted, could be a part of the context associated with *archegos* in Hebrews.

It should be expected that in any document from a Hellenistic Jewish provenance the classical distinctions of the meanings of such a term as *archegos*, even if they actually existed, would tend to be blurred. Here, too, the so-called Semitic and Greek nuances both may be present and even intertwined. This certainly seems to be the case in the LXX Jephthah account.⁽²⁴⁾ If, as I believe, Hebrews represents a Hellenistic Jewish Christian document, then here also we might expect this all-inclusive type of meaning for *archegos*.

Jesus as *Archegos* and Salvation History in the Epistle to the Hebrews

For the writer of Hebrews, Jesus opened the way into the presence of God (9:11-12) and into the new age (1:2). His followers are to "seize the hope" (6:18), to "strive to enter the rest" made available (4:11), to "run the race" set before them (12:2) by Jesus. They are to accept the reality and implications of the new phase of Salvation History by recognizing Jesus as better or superior⁽²⁵⁾ to all OT persons and institutions which have now been rendered "obsolete" (8:13) and are "set aside" (7:18) by him. Through Jesus the city sought by Abraham (11:10) has become a reality (12:22) and those identified with him may gratefully receive an unshakable kingdom (12:28).

The past has been fulfilled, new benefits have been won through the struggles and sufferings⁽²⁶⁾ of Christ. Consequently he has received the superior name (1:4) that is proclaimed and praised "in the midst of the congregation" (2:12), in demonstration of which name works and love are shown (*enedeixasthe eis to onoma*, 6:10); it is the name readers are admonished continually to acknowledge (13:15).

Now, following his sufferings and victory, Jesus is elevated to the position of honor and power "at the right hand" (1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2). Christians are to rally round him (13:13) for he is Lord (1:10; cf. 2:3; 12:6; 13:20). In times of stress and difficulty his followers find encouragement and strength as they look to and consider the person and example of Jesus, their great hero (12:2-3).

There are other points of contact, but these will suffice to suggest that the author of Hebrews proclaims Jesus as the *archegos*, the pioneer-founder-victor-leader-ruler-hero who established the new age and remains in that capacity for the people of God of that new age. The two occurrences of the term are but the tip of the iceberg of a distinct way of thinking and talking about Jesus. This provides

a sub-stratum for at least a part of the theology of primitive Christianity,[\(27\)](#) especially for that of the Epistle to the Hebrews.

For the readers, those who had been enlightened by the "powers of the age to come" (6:6), a return to Judaism was no valid option. In the onward movement of Salvation History the former founding heroes -- Moses, Joshua, Aaron, and the other worthies of chapter 11 -- and all for which they stood have been supplanted. In Jesus Salvation History has reached a new phase, a new stage of completion (*teleioo*) which has a permanence not found in the former, a once-for-all character (*hapax*, 6:4; 9:26, 28; 10:2). Therefore, readers must leave the framework provided by the earlier phase of Salvation History, they must go "outside the camp" (13:13) to Jesus who himself was thrust "outside" (13:12) and rejected by representatives of the old order. To attempt to return to it would be apostasy, a rejection of the benefits of Christ's crucifixion, an act of contempt for Jesus (6:6).

The *Archehos* and Salvation History in the Future

Even with the inauguration of the new age, Salvation History is not yet complete. The writer is conscious of the tension between a "realized" but "not yet consummated" eschatology; there is a distinction between the age of fulfillment and the final age or world to come.[\(28\)](#) The work of Jesus, even as pioneer-victor-founding hero, is not yet complete. All things are "not yet in submission to him" (2:8), he "will appear a second time" (9:28), and awaits "until his enemies should be made a stool for his feet" (10:13; cf. 1:13). Readers are to "exhort one another; so much the more as you see the day approaching (10:25).

But even in times of change and incompleteness there is stability. The old order with its institutions pass. The new is established, but not yet consummated. The distraught believer may still find "an anchor for the soul" (6:19) because the entirety of Salvation History is centered in him who is the *archegos* of the new age of salvation (2:10), of the faith (12:2) for those who follow him. This *archegos*, this "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (13:8).

Epilogue

It is inevitable in a study such as this that the question will be asked, "how then should *archegos* be translated in the English Bible?" The variety of suggested translations already noted attest the complexity of the matter. "Pioneer-founder-victor-leader-ruler-hero" is obviously too cumbersome and the English reader is likely to miss the connotation that these are not mutually exclusive functions but all held and performed simultaneously by the same individual. Since some choice must be made perhaps something

like "pioneer prince" or "founding king" is the best we can do. Certainly here, as in so many cases, the translator could do well to include a note which provides the reader with some idea of the full meaning of the term.

(1) A slightly revised version of an article published in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 26/1 (1986), 47-54.

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(3) Including *arche* (beginning, cause), *archo* (to begin, to rule), *archon* (ruler, prince, head), and *archaios* (old, ancient).

(4) BAG, 112; G. Delling, "archegos," *TDNT* I (1964), 487-488; D. Müller, L Coehen, H. Bietendhard, *NIDNTT* I (1975), 164-169.

(5) In the LXX *archegos*, usually a translation for *pera'*, *qasin* and *ro's*, according to Hatch-Redpath, *Concordance to the LXX*, at least five other words. It is usually applied to the political and or military leader of the whole or a part of the people. Lachish is called *archegos tes harmartias*, a leader or example followed by others (Mic 1:13). In I Macc 10:47 Israel is said to have been pleased with Alexander, "Because he was the first (*archegos*) to speak peaceful words to them." In Jer 3:4, *archegos* is used in the sense of a guide.

(6) Note that in Codex Manichaicus Coloniensis 94,10-11 Mani calls Elchasaiho *archegos tou nomou humon*, in referring to him as either "founder" or "special leader." According to Luigi Cizillo ("The Codex Manichaicus Coloniesis and the Elchasaites," a paper presented to "The Seminar on Jewish Christianity," of the Society of Biblical Literature, December 22, 1982), the community of the Mani codices "has many *archegoi*- leaders who are apparently the *presbuteroi*." However, there was only one founder-leader.

(7) (1) Pioneer, hence, "guide," "hero;" (2) Source or founder, hence "author," "initiator," "beginning;" (3) Leader-ruler, hence, "captain," "prince," "king."

(8) Cf. G. W. H. Lampe, "The Lucan Portrait of Christ," *NTS* 2 (1956), 167.

(9) Cf. George Johnston, "Christ as Archegos," *NTS* 27 (1981), 231.

(10) "Faith as Historical Understanding," *Jesus of Nazareth: Savior and Lord*. Carl F. H. Henry, ed. (London: Tyndale, 1960), 177 ff.

(11) *Ibid*, 181.

(12) Cf. Acts 13:15. "The epistle is fundamentally a practical sermon," C. K. Barrett, "The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews," *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology: Studies in Honor of C. H. Dodd*. W. D. Davies and D. Daube, eds. (Cambridge: University Press, 1954), 363.

(13) W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*. trans by Howard C. Kee (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), 403; D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1970), 716-718.

(14) H. W. Montefiore, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (HNTC; New York: Harper, 1965), 34. F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 3, n 14, "The use of the phrase here implies an inaugurated eschatology;" cf. James Moffat, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, 1924), 4. G. W. Buchanan, *To the Hebrews* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 4, states that the phrase indicates a particular semitic view of time and "refers to the last days of this undesirable age which would be followed by a better future."

On the eschatology of Hebrews in general see Barrett, "Eschatology of Hebrews," 363-393.

(15) Reading *genomenon* rather than *mellonton*.

(16) *The Old Testament in the New* (1952; Philadelphia: Fortress, Facet Book, 1963); cf. *According to the Scriptures: The Sub-structure of New Testament Theology* (London: Nisbet, 1952).

(17) *Hebrews*, 55; cf. Bruce, *Hebrews*, 33.

(18) The fact that "Jesus" and Joshua" are the same name (although in Greek and Hebrew forms) combined with the writer's propensity for topology raises the possibility of his assuming some sort of a Jesus-Joshua messianic concept of Christology. The passing reference by Stephen, Acts 7:45, the textual variant of Jude 5, as well as the present context suggests such a possibility. In a paper read before the Manchester (England) Theological Society (Nov, 1962), "Was there an Expectation in Late Judaism that the Messiah would Fulfill A Joshua Role?" Robert A. Kraft presented an impressive list of texts from the OT, Second Commonwealth Jewish literature, and Christian sources which may indicate that such an expectation did exist. For possible allusions to Jesus-Joshua thought in John see T. F. Glasson, *Moses in the Fourth Gospel* (SBT; London: SCM, 1963), 82 ff; cf. Bruce, *Hebrews*, 77 n 28.

(19) BAG, 817.

(20) *Ibid*, 26.

(21) Cf. Delling, "*archegos*," *TDNT* I, 487.

(22) So the reading of B; but A has *kephale kai hegoumenos*.

(23) Neh 9:27; II Kings 13:5; and esp. Othniel (Judges 3:9), Ehud (Judges 3:15), and frequently Moses in the accounts of Exodus.

(24) Philo may have a similar idea in mind when describing Moses as *archegetes* (*On Abraham* 276; *Moses* i:8); cf. Delling, 487, n 1.

(25) *kreisson*, *kreitton*, a term used thirteen times in this epistle, 1:4; 6:9; 7:7, 19, 22; 8:6 (twice); 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24.

(26) Lampe ("Lucan Portrait," *NTS* 2 [1955:56]), in commenting on *archegos* in Acts, draws attention to the identification of this term with the Suffering Servant. The same connection appears to be present in Hebrews.

(27) Cf. the statement of Vincent Taylor, "It is perhaps significant that the name 'the pioneer' appears in two strata only of New Testament teaching, in the Jerusalem sources used in the Acts of the Apostles, and in an epistle despatched to Rome by a teacher who for the time being is an exile from home. We appear to catch a glimpse of an item of Palestinian tradition in transit westward. The name never becomes a technical expression and did not gain a wide currency, but it indicates the direction of men's thinking in the primitive church, and it testifies to a valuation of Christ's person which became permanent." *The Names of Jesus* (London: Macmillan, 1953), 91-92.

(28) Cf. W. D. Davies, *Torah in the Messianic Age and/or the Age to Come* (JBL Monograph; Philadelphia: SBL, 1952).