Hebrews and the anticipation of completion

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The story is told of two young typists who returned from a holiday in Majorca.

‘Where’s that?’ asked one of their friends.

‘I don’t know,’ one of the travellers replied. ‘We went by air.’

The fact that this is told as a funny story points to a central fact of human nature: we expect things to fit together, and find it odd when they do not. It is what the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer has called ‘the anticipation of completion’ (der Vorgriiff der Vollkommenheit).1 We understand something only in relation to something else. ‘Only connect’ is the motto of us all. In particular, we understand something new only in relation to other things that we know already. And the end of our understanding—an end we never reach in this life—is to make coherent sense of our experience as a whole.

What, one might ask, has this to do with the Epistle to the Hebrews?2 The analogy must not be pressed very far, but Hebrews is just a little like the typists’ first view of Majorca, in that it at first appears an isolated block, unrelated to anything else in the NT. Our efforts to understand Hebrews are in large part efforts to relate it to other data which lie already in the circle of our knowledge and experience. They may be individuals mentioned in the NT, who for one reason or another may be candidates for the title of author of Hebrews. They may be groups of Christians among whom the letter may have been written, or to whom it may have been sent. They may be individuals or groups who, or literary corpora which, may have influenced the writer of Hebrews, either positively or negatively, or been influenced by him3 in their turn. It may, of course, be the other way round, though that is not our primary concern in this article: the thing to be explained may be some aspect of our own situation on which we may hope that Hebrews may throw some light.

Our repeated use of the word ‘may’ indicates the impulse, the constantly renewed hope, with which the reader of Hebrews sets out to understand it in the light of some other area of his experience. The word ‘may’ also indicates that there is no guarantee against disappointment in this quest. ‘Let us see’, the reader asks himself, ‘if Hebrews makes a little more sense in the light of what we know about ancient Rome; or early gnosticism; or the Psalms; or (in principle) anything else.’

The reader’s mental databank is structured in such a way as to tell him, more or less accurately, how promising a particular line of research is likely to be; though here, too, his presuppositions may limit as well as focus his vision. And of course, this process is not peculiar to the understanding of Hebrews: it is merely more clearly necessary in the case of Hebrews, because of Hebrews’ apparent isolation from other parts of the NT. But it is important to emphasize from the outset that the aim of all this comparative study is to relate Hebrews to a wider area of knowledge, and thus to understand it better. To learn that Hebrews was written by someone called, for example, Madmannah, about whom nothing else is known, and who is on no account to be confused with the Madmannahs of Joshua 15:31 and 1 Chronicles 2:49, would not advance our understanding of Hebrews at all.

This general principle may be applied in at least three ways to the study of Hebrews. First, it may prove a useful thread to guide us through the maze of so-called questions of introduction.

Authorship

Theories about its authorship are of two main kinds: they are intended to link Hebrews up, either with some other author and his writings, or with someone else who, from what we know of him, sounds the kind of person who might have written Hebrews. In the first group, claims have been made for Paul, Clement of Rome, Luke, the author of the (pseudonymous) Epistle of Barnabas, Peter, and Jude. Stephen may be placed in either group, depending on how precisely Acts 7 is thought to reproduce the form and content of his message. In the second group, those who have no other writing extant, Apollos is now clearly the leading contender, followed at some distance by Philip the Deacon, Silas, Aristion, and Priscilla (with Aquila); but evidence for and against such hypotheses is likely, in the nature of things, to be less firm than for members of the first group.

The leading contender in the first group has traditionally been Paul, but he has steadily lost ground, first among Protestants and later among Roman Catholics, as they came to sit freer to the 1914 decision of the Biblical Commission affirming Pauline authorship. As this development progressed, the theological question (‘Is this writing generally accepted as embodying orthodox, apostolic teaching?’) has gradually become disentangled from the literary question (‘Does this writing bear the personal mark of this author?’), and the literary question has come to predominate.

A number of comments on this process are in order, since they relate to questions of authorship in general, not just to the question of Paul’s possible authorship of Hebrews.

First, theories which attempt to fudge the literary question by appealing too heavily to the activity of secretaries are
methodologically defective: there comes a point at which they prove nothing, because they are stretched to prove anything.⁴

Second, it is a question unlikely ever to be resolved with mathematical precision, how much the language of a single individual may change in the course of his (adult) lifetime, and how much in it remains constant. All that needs to be said here is that the distinctive features of Hebrews' language (what linguists would call the author's idiolect) tend to place it at such a distance from all other NT writings as strongly to suggest a different author.

Third, a similar question may be asked about the author's theology, as long as it is asked sensitively, not polemically in the spirit of a medieval si et non type disputation, nor as part of a search for contradictions or inconsistencies in the biblical record; such an approach tends to provoke an equally insensitive conservative reaction. The point at issue here is not whether Paul's faith is fundamentally different from that of the writer of Hebrews (or how, for example, the theology of the Letter of James relates to either or both), but whether the forms in which that faith is expressed, its distinctive emphases, are so different as to suggest a different author. The questions of language and theology, though distinct, can thus not be treated in isolation from one another.

The last and perhaps the most interesting question under this heading is whether the pendulum of interest has not swung too far from the theological to the literary question, and whether it is not time for it to swing part of the way back. Of course, questions once asked cannot be unasked, even if they remain unanswered for so long that people conclude they are unanswerable in this life, and therefore lose interest in them. It will always remain legitimate to ask whose pen wrote Hebrews, or whose voice dictated it. But for the understanding of Hebrews (and that, as we said, is the ultimate aim), it is probably more important to see, for example, reflections in John of Hebrews' teaching about Jesus' high priesthood, or a common concern in Hebrews and Romans with the vocation and destiny of Israel, than to argue about authorship in the narrow sense. Another way of putting it is to ask whether it is not more profitable to plot (if necessary on a multi-dimensional map) the respective theological positions of NT writers; their respective distances from one another; and the direction in which one travels from one to another,⁵ rather than to concentrate attention exclusively on one individual or another. Such an approach would seem to be more in the spirit of the NT church itself.⁶ It may also produce more solid results. To take two examples, one old and one more recent, W. Leonard's The Authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews⁷ and P. J. Deshpande's St Jude as the Author of Hebrews⁸ contain valuable insights into the literary and theological affinities of Hebrews, insights which are however obscured rather than clarified by untenable claims for Pauline and Judaic authorship respectively.

Origins, date and purpose
A somewhat similar situation is found when one turns from the authorship of Hebrews to its geographical and intellectual setting, to the questions of when it was written, where and for what readers, questions which clearly interact with one another and with the question of authorship. These questions, like that of authorship, may be asked and answered in a narrow or in a broad sense. An example of a narrow answer would be: Hebrews was written c. 68 from Corinth to Jewish Christians in Rome. An example of a broad answer would be: Hebrews was probably written from one centre of diaspora Judaism to another at a time of threatened but not yet deadly persecution (12.4), probably some considerable time after the establishment of the local church to which Hebrews is addressed (2:3f.; 12:7).

In practice, answers are likely to be somewhere between the two extremes, since some 'hard facts' are likely to be available, though not as many as would be needed for an exhaustive narrow answer. But in practice also, answers tending towards the broader end of the scale are likely to be more illuminating, not less, than the narrower answers. It is not, for example, the possibility that Hebrews was addressed to Rome that is in itself significant, but the possibility of drawing Hebrews within the network of everything else we know about Rome in the first Christian century.

So broader answers are not to be automatically considered as a second best, to be offered and accepted grudgingly in the absence of something more specific. Broader answers are also likely to offer more fruitful points of contact for application in a distant and different setting, such as our own. From this point of view, the main point is that the original readers were under threat of persecution; whether the persecution was that of Nero or Domitian, though a valid and worthy subject of historical research, is likely to be less immediately significant now.

Let us test this line of enquiry first in relation to the question of date, an area in which, as J. A. T. Robinson's Redating the New Testament⁹ recalled, hard facts are few and far between, and speculation swirls around them like a Highland mist. Here the central argument is about whether Hebrews was likely to have been written before or after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70. There is general agreement that Hebrews was known and used (though probably not understood) by Clement of Rome, whose genuine epistle is generally dated c. 95.¹⁰ Other relatively firm dates which call for consideration include the expulsion of Jews from Rome by Claudius c. 49; the Neronian persecution of 64 in Rome; and the more widespread, but also probably sporadic, persecution of Christians by Domitian in the early 90s. How these are related to the situation in which Hebrews was written and first read, and to other, less chronologically precise, data, is a matter on which scholars are by no means agreed. Generally speaking, perhaps paradoxically, an assessment of the situation is first made on the basis of less precise data, and the precise data are then fitted in. In other words, relative chronology is given priority over absolute chronology.

On the one hand, most continental scholars¹¹ argue for a date after 70. For example, Braun (3) argues succinctly for a date between 80 and soon after 90, on the grounds (a) of Hebrews' high Christology, (b) 'the wearying of the local congregation . . . which conditions [?] the author's special insistence on the nearness of the parousia' (1:2; 3:13; 9:26; 10:25, 35–39; 12:3, 12f.), and (c) the fact that these are not
first-generation Christians (2:3). Timothy, however, is still alive and able to travel (13:23).

Most Anglo-Saxon scholars, on the other hand, prefer a date before AD 70. They would reply to Braun and others that Hebrews' references to the past (2:3; 5:11f.; 10:32) need go no further back than the earlier part of the readers' own lives; that it need not take many years for people's faith to grow cold, for those who heard the Lord to attest the faith to others (2:3), for the congregation's first leaders to pass away (13:7), or indeed for a high Christology to develop.12

The central question remains: granted that the author of Hebrews makes no clear or direct reference to the destruction of the temple, is this because he is concerned, not with contemporary events, but only with Christian faith and its OT foundations,13 because the temple had been destroyed many years before; or on the contrary because it was still standing? It seems almost14 impossible to imagine that he would have written of the old covenant as merely 'ready to vanish away' (8:13) if the central cultic expression of that covenant had in fact already vanished. If this correlation of the chronological data is indeed correct, the way is open in principle for a further correlation in which Rome could be the place to which Hebrews was addressed; the readers' earlier sufferings (10:32-34) could have taken place under Claudius; and the expectation of further persecution (12:4) could reflect the situation under Nero before 64. But none of this achieves the certainty of proof; it is a question of how various details can most satisfactorily be related to one another within a coherent general picture.

A second area in which the 'anticipation of completion' may lead to a greater understanding of Hebrews is in considering its literary structure; first in itself, then in relation to the content of Hebrews.

Analysis of literary structure has been pursued perhaps more rigorously for Hebrews than for any other NT writing; yet still there is no unanimity about it. The main reason for this may lie in the conflicting presuppositions of the scholars concerned in this debate.

Three main positions may be distinguished. The first, represented by most older and some more recent commentators, affirms (or more often assumes) that literary structure must be determined by content.

The second, represented by A. Vanhoye,15 studies literary structure for its own sake, winning thereby the independent support of those linguists who, since Saussure,16 have emphasized the arbitrary nature of linguistic signs.

The third position, represented by Dussaut,17 has much in common with that of Vanhoye, but goes beyond it by proposing a detailed structure consisting of seven pairs of panels of almost equal length.

The three positions differ also with respect to their presuppositions regarding the author's conscious intention - something on which direct evidence is naturally hard to come by. The first and third positions have in common the apparent assumption that the author followed a conscious plan; in the first case, a plan based on the content of his message, and in the third case, a plan which is an end in itself. Vanhoye's position does not require this assumption: there is ample evidence that writers and indeed speakers may follow even quite complex chiastic patterns without being aware of the fact.

The main problem with Vanhoye's proposed structure arises when one attempts to explore its implications for the semantically oriented activity of translation. One may advise translators to take account of the structural features as far as possible, while recognizing that, as structural features, they come within the same general category as plays on words, which are normally not directly translatable. For example, it may be advisable to translate ἀπειθεῖαν in 4:6 and ἀπειθεῖας in 4:11 in the same way (e.g. 'because they did not believe' in 4:11 as in 4:6, rather than ἔννοια 'because of their lack of faith'); but there are other places where the structural feature has no semantic content (e.g. διήλετο . . . μὴ ποτε, 3:12; βεβλημένες, 3:19), and the translation must therefore normally be quite different.

The wider implication is that a coherent understanding of Hebrews, as of any other text, involves making distinctions as well as recognizing relationships: understanding does not involve assimilating all the data to one another in an amorphous mass. If there is to be assimilation, if the principle of 'anticipation of completeness' continues to operate, it must be at a higher or deeper level: in common language, what the writer says, and the literary skill with which he says it, contribute to a common purpose.

It is in the definition of this purpose that the principle finds its third application. Linguists apply, most commonly to individual clauses or sentences, a distinction between 'old' and 'new' information18 which may be applied also, with some modification, to higher levels of discourse. If a text contains no new information, it will normally19 have no communicative function, in the sense that the reader or hearer will soon recognize the fact and switch off his attention. If, at the other extreme, a text contains no old information (no semantic overlap with earlier sentences), and no assumed information (no semantic overlap with the intended receptor's previous knowledge and experience), then the text will have no communicative function for the opposite reason that it will be unintelligible. Communication depends to a very great degree on the complex and delicate balance and interplay between the old and the new.

This principle is a most productive one in the exegesis of a document such as Hebrews.

Firstly, it offers a useful frame in which to evaluate the clues to significance provided by study of Hebrews' literary structure, and thus to transcend without abolishing the distinction between sense and form on which we commented above. Every language, for example, has its own ways of conveying emphasis, and the author of Hebrews uses skillfully (and distinctively) the resources of NT Greek in this as in other respects. Commentators remark on his sparing use of the name Ἰησοῦς at climactic points; Vanhoye sees in the occurrence of Χριστὸς in 9:24 the very centre of the whole epistle. Now emphasis does not always indicate new information; but the careful exegete will note indications of emphasis, and ask himself why this or that word or phrase has been emphasized, and what is its place in the development of the thought, within the sentence or over a longer span.
The distinction between old and new information may be extended in another way also. A great deal of attention is rightly paid to the study of possible influences on the formulation of a document such as Hebrews. How far, and in what ways, was it influenced by the OT? by Philo? by Qumran? by pre-gnostic currents? The example of Philo is of particular interest. There is widespread agreement that the OT (and the continuing tradition of its exegesis) is the primary literary influence on Hebrews, and a growing reaction against earlier exaggerations of Qumran-Essene and pre-gnostic influences. Opinion regarding the possible influence of Philo on Hebrews is more evenly divided.

The monumental work of R. Williamson notwithstanding, the verbal echoes of Philo in Hebrews remain as striking as the differences of thought between the two writers. The apparently conflicting facts are perhaps best held together on the assumption that the writer to the Hebrews read Philo with the same selective understanding as Clement was later to read Hebrews. A filtering process was at work, similar mutatis mutandis to the process whereby a non-western people may select and develop certain aspects of western civilization (including a western presentation of Christianity) to the exclusion of others.

Once this process is detected, one may then seek to identify the factor which limits more complete understanding or assimilation, and whether the factor is, in this wider sense, 'new' or 'old', creative (like Christianity for the author of Hebrews) or reactionary (like Clement's attempt to re-establish a form of Jewish sacerdotalism within the Christian church). It is not necessary, with Williamson, to deny any Philonic influence on Hebrews to agree that the heart of Hebrews' message is not Philonic but Christian. That negative conclusion is a necessary step on the road to a positive understanding of what Hebrews' distinctive message is.

Content
A full statement of that message, or even a full survey of current discussion of the main problems in understanding that message, necessarily lies beyond the scope of a brief article. It may, however, be helpful to suggest ways in which the pre-understanding of a reader standing in a particular exegetical tradition, and the 'anticipation of completion' of any reader, may influence his decisions on particular issues. Three such questions among others may be mentioned: (1) the pre-existence issue in Hebrews 1; (2) the nature of Hebrews' (vertical and horizontal) dualism; and (3) Hebrews' teaching about apostasy.

(1) Pre-existence in Hebrews 1.
That δι' οὗ καὶ ἐκποίησεν τοὺς αἰώνας (1:2), 'the Son', through whom [God the Father] made the worlds' (less probably, 'the ages'), assumes the Son's pre-existence at the time of creation is surely one of the hard facts of exegesis. The doctrine is assumed, not stated: this feature of what we might consider a high, developed Christology is treated by the author as part of the stock of 'old information', familiar teaching, which he and his readers share. He does not need to develop or defend it, as he will later defend his more original teaching about Jesus' high priesthood, or as in the present context he is stating and developing teaching about Christ's exaltation. The reference to Christ's role in creation appears to be thrown in, in an unexpected position, almost as an afterthought - even though, in terms of the formal structure of the passage, it may be part of a highly wrought chiasmus. Uncertainty remains on a number of secondary issues, such as the significance of 'today I have begotten you' in 1:5, or the construction and meaning of the introduction to the quotation in 1:6. But to deny any reference to Christ's pre-existence in 1:2 requires in the reader a negative prejudice amounting to invincible ignorance. The reader who, approaching this text with an open mind, accepts that its writer, and probably his readers, believed that Christ was present and active in the creation of the universe, will find the same belief reflected in such texts as Jn. 1:3, 10; 1 Cor. 8:6 and Col. 1:16. The reader may thus be encouraged, tentatively and without forced harmonization, to anticipate completion of a more far-reaching kind in the teaching of the NT as a whole.

(2) Hebrews' dualism
'Dualism' in this context refers to an aspect of Hebrews' view of the world, namely the distinction between heaven and earth. I have argued elsewhere that the author of Hebrews works with two types of spatial language: one vertical, perhaps largely traditional, which presupposes but does not describe in detail an intermediate sphere (as in Philo) populated by angels; the other horizontal, owing more to the author's own reflection, used primarily in speaking of Christ's sacrifice, and making no reference to an intermediate sphere. At the end of the day, it is difficult to be sure whether this argument is unduly influenced by the presupposition that Philo contributes little to Hebrews' theology (as distinct from his language), or whether it provides evidence to support or confirm that presupposition. In other words, is this hermeneutical circle vicious or virtuous? A full answer requires the consideration of a much wider range of data; and even then, opinions may differ and conclusions be less than final. The question of Hebrews' dualism opens out onto the wider problem of the relative strength of biblical and extra-biblical influences on the writer. On this, I can only state a working hypothesis which has tended to harden into a conviction: namely, that when all due allowance has been made for the penetration of Hellenistic ideas and practices into (especially diaspora) Judaism, the author of Hebrews remains essentially a man of one book, and that book the Bible.

(3) Hebrews' teaching about apostasy
There are two main aspects of this question: first, what does Hebrews' teaching about apostasy (6:4-6; cf. 10:26f.; 12:16f.) mean? and second, what form of apostasy does the author fear for (some of) his readers?

To take the second, relatively simpler, question first, there has been much discussion about whether Hebrews was written to warn the readers against falling back into Judaism, to incite them to world mission, to uphold the absoluteness of Christianity, or to combat some specific heresy. The more specific the attempts to define Hebrews' adversaries, the less convincing tend to be the arguments, perhaps
because Hebrews is essentially a pastoral, not a polemical, writing. Even if reference to a specific group of adversaries is left out of account, Hebrews describes the danger to the readers’ faith in less detail than, for example, in Paul’s attacks on the righteousness of works. Nowhere does the writer of Hebrews leave his readers any room for the hope that, if they abandon faith in Christ, they may find, so to speak, a fallback position in their former (in particular, Jewish) beliefs and practices. Christ has made the old covenant old (8:13), so that there is now nowhere else to go. To abandon Christ, or to accord him anything but the highest place in the universe, is not to adopt an alternative religious option, but simply ‘to fall away from the living God’ (3:12). The author’s stance, the position which he commends to his readers, is that which Simon Peter expressed as a rhetorical question: ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life’ (Jn. 6:68).

An answer to the question of what Hebrews’ teaching on apostasy means partly on the solution of a number of detailed exegetical questions. For example, for whom is it ‘impossible’ (6:4)? Does παραπεσόντας in 6:6 imply that, in the author’s view, some had in fact committed apostasy? How should one translate ἀνασταυρώντας in 6:6, and the following εὐαυτοίς? These are legitimate and important questions which, however, exceed the scope of this article. In reading some treatments of the problem, however, one is conscious of a hidden, illegitimate question: Does the writer of Hebrews really mean what he says? In hermeneutical terms, the question points to a pathological condition, and as such deserves not so much a direct answer as a sensitive treatment of the condition of which it is a symptom. The condition is one in which the exegete feels his ‘anticipation of completion’ to be under threat, either because he finds in these hard passages of Hebrews teaching which has no exact parallel in the NT, or which appears to conflict with other NT teaching; or, more generally, because it conflicts with his understanding of the nature of God as revealed in Christ; or, in the most general sense, because it conflicts with his anticipation that the purpose of God will itself not stop short of completion.

There are several possible resolutions of this agonizing tension, some more satisfying than others, though none, perhaps, entirely so. First, one may abandon the struggle, and delegate Hebrews (largely because of its teaching on apostasy) to a place on the edge of the canon (Luther) or entirely outside it, a quasi-Marcionite procedure which tends to create as many problems as it solves. Second, one may lower one’s expectation of consistency within the NT to a level which allows within it unresolved tensions regarding the fate of apostates; this procedure tends to lead, at best, to the acceptance of an area of agnosticism, even on matters on which the NT does have something to say; and, at worst, to a lowering of the authority of the NT itself. Third, one may attempt a fresh anticipation of completion by relating these negative aspects of Hebrews’ teaching to the author’s overriding positive emphasis on the supremacy of Christ and the finality of his sacrifice. May the writer, in the last analysis, not be saying: ‘I can see nothing more that God can do, beyond what he has done in Christ; I can therefore see no hope for those who abandon him’? Or is even this a watering down of the writer’s stern ἄδωνατον?

3 Probably not ‘her’, as Harnack brilliantly argued (‘Probabilia über die Adresse und den Verfasser des Hebräerbriefes’, ZNTW 1900), pp. 116-117, the text participles in 11:32 is difficult to explain away. Generally, however, in this article, masculine pronouns include both genders wherever the context permits.
4 Fortunately Hebrews is not beset by the problem of pseudonymity: it is a strictly anonymous writing, as far as the oldest manuscript tradition is concerned.
5 There is an analogy with the Claremont Profile Method for grouping NT MSS.
6 Notably 1 Cor. 3:4-9, 21-23.
7 London, 1939.
11 Except A. Strobel, Der Brief an die Hebräer (Tübingen, 1975), p. 83.
12 This argument is generally accepted by H. Feld, Der Hebräerbrief (Darmstadt, 1985), p. 18.
13 See 5:14; 8:3-5; 9:6f.; 10:1, present tenses in such passages being understood as timeless.
14 The qualification is necessary because one cannot prove a negative. It is an astonishing fact that Jane Austen never refers to the Napoleonic wars; but the analogy cannot be pressed, since Hebrews is concerned with worship, but Jane Austen is not concerned with war.
18 W. A. Chafe, Meaning and the Structure of Language (Chicago and London, 1970), ch. 15. Other linguists use different terms, such as ‘theme’ and ‘rhemé’.
19 There are borderline cases such as formalized greetings and liturgical formulations.
20 This assumes that the Christian tradition reached the author in a predominantly oral form.
21 Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews (Leiden, 1970). This was largely a reply to C. Spicq, L’Épître aux Hébreux (Paris, 1952). 1. pp. 36-91. At the time of writing, Williamson’s 1988 SNTS paper responding to this issue is not available.
22 The writer is indebted to the editor for setting these questions.
Truth, myth and incarnation
Melvin Tinker

We are glad for this further contribution to Themelios from the Anglican chaplain at the University of Keele. Many readers will recall his article a year ago on 'The priority of Jesus: a look at the place of Jesus' teaching and example in Christian ethics'.

Introduction
It is now some ten years since the controversial volume *The Myth of God Incarnate* entered the theological scene, creating something of a major storm the likes of which had not been seen since *Honest to God* in the early '60s. In the wake of the furore which followed, a wealth of literature was generated, the subject matter of which tended to revolve around some of the key issues raised by Wiles, Hick, Cupitt et al. Hard on the heels of *Myth* came another collection of essays entitled *The Truth of God Incarnate*. This was followed by *Incarnation and Myth – The Debate Continued* which formed the substance of a colloquy between some of the authors of *Myth* and others of a more orthodox persuasion. In the meantime a steady stream of articles and books have flowed from the pens of scholars showing that the Christological/Incarnational debate is still very much on the theological agenda.

Of course, during the decade which has elapsed since the writing of the *Myth of God Incarnate*, many of the original contributors have moved on in their positions. John Hick no longer sees 'Christianity at the Centre' (the title of an earlier book) but prefers to speak of the 'Centre of Christianity', with the Christian religion being viewed as just one amongst many lying on the edge of a universe of faiths. Michael Goulder, feeling the tension between his personal convictions and those formally held by the Church of England in which he was an ordained priest, decided to resign his Anglican orders. Perhaps the most significant shift has been in the thinking of Don Cupitt, who has taken leave of God altogether, at least in so far as God has been traditionally conceived by Christians down the ages, so much so that on one television programme the renowned atheist A. J. Ayer claimed Cupitt as one of his own!

Such developments in themselves provide a clear indication of the central place incarnation doctrine has in Christian belief, such that a reinterpretation of this necessitates a thoroughgoing revision of all the other major strands of the faith if some sort of coherence and consistency is to be achieved.

For example, it has long been recognized in Christian theology that questions concerning the 'who' of Jesus are integrally related to questions about the 'what' of Jesus, i.e. what he has achieved by way of the cross (function) cannot be divorced from who he is in his person (identity). Accordingly, a shift in one's conception of Christology will mean a necessary shift in one's understanding of soteriology, and vice versa. But it does not end there, for there will be other knock-on effects in the related areas of revelation, harnatiology (nature of sin) and the uniqueness or otherwise of the Christian faith in relation to other religions. That such matters are still 'alive' is further indicated by the more recent concern over what has become known as the 'Durham Affair'.

The purpose of this article is not to retrace old ground but to stand back and take another look at some of the claims of the mythographers to see just how viable their case really is. Instead of approaching the subject head on, we shall take a more indirect route via a consideration of a trilogy of concepts which lie at the heart of the debate, namely those of truth, myth and incarnation. Having examined each of these in turn, we shall then try and assess one major attempt at bringing the three together as made by one of the representatives of the *Myth* school, John Hick.

Truth
We begin with the notion of 'truth'. What do we in fact mean when we say that such and such a thing is true? Even a moment's reflection will reveal that no clear-cut universal answer can be given, for whatever answer might be proposed, it will largely depend upon what it is we are referring to and the given context in which it occurs. For