

himself. Only those who are in Christ Jesus will hear the liberating word "*acquitted*."<sup>1</sup>

**14 Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Yeshua the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.**

Beginning with this verse and continuing through 5:10, our author begins an exhortation based upon the heavenly priesthood of Yeshua. In fact, the work of Yeshua as HaCohen HaGadol (High Priest) is the main focus of all that is said from this point through 10:18.

What is the force of the opening "Therefore"? What is the connection between the exhortations to enter God's rest (along with the statements about the activity of God's word) and this comparison of Yeshua with the office and work of the High Priest? The answer is immediate and apparent! Yeshua, as our high priest has Himself passed through the heavens, that is, has Himself *entered into his rest*. As such, He stands not only as our primary example of how we too will enter God's rest, but also that our rest is assured, for He "ever lives to make intercession for us" (7:25). This is the force of the opening phrase: "Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens..." To pass through the heavens refers to more than His ascension. It compares the passing of the earthly High Priest through the veil on Yom Kippur with Yeshua's having gone directly to the very presence of God (cp. Eph 4:10). What the one did as symbolic, Yeshua did in reality, fully completing the offering of Himself as the eternal sacrifice for the sins of the elect.

But not only has Yeshua's ascension and return to the Father indicated that He has completed His work (entered His rest) of offering sacrifice, but it also demonstrates His ability and willingness to intercede for His people as their high priest. For those who are yet struggling to enter the rest, there remains the need to exercise faithful obedience and to strengthen oneself against the natural tendency of self-reliance and faithlessness. Clearly, those who strive to enter the rest are in need of an intercessor, a mediator. Thus, this section begins with the assertion that Yeshua is, indeed, our High Priest Who, through His intercession, will likewise enable all those for whom He intercedes to enter into His rest.

Note the list of characteristics ascribed to Yeshua by our author.

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1 Kistemaker, *Hebrews*, p. 119.

Yeshua is:

- (1) High Priest
- (2) Great – This does not merely speak of His superior activity as our heavenly “high priest” but rather indicates an attribute of His essential character (see below).
- (3) One who has passed through the heavens
- (4) Son of God

It is upon the basis of these qualifications that, as our High Priest, we are exhorted to “hold fast the confession” of our faith, a theme first introduced in 3:1.

This is the first use of the title “son of God” in our epistle, but it will be used three more times before the book is finished (6:6; 7:3; 10:29). Its wide use in the gospel of John, as well as in Acts, attests to its popularity during the early first century. Against the backdrop of Daniel 3:25 and 7:13, “son of God” and “son of Man” became well accepted messianic titles.<sup>1</sup> That Yeshua applies the titles to Himself attests to His own self-realization and understanding that He was, indeed, the Messiah promised by the prophets. The fact that His followers also used the title “son of God” of Yeshua (cf. Matt 16:16) shows their expectation as well that He was the long-awaited Messiah. Here, our author describes Yeshua as the “son of God” to remind us that the work of the high priest was the very goal for which Messiah came, fulfilling the work of redemption as described by the prophets. Yeshua’s fulfillment of the priestly duties is therefore in perfect harmony with the very mission for which He was sent, for it required that God’s Messiah be Himself divine.

The title “son of God” (בֶּן אֱלֹהִים, *ben Elohim*) is not found in the Tanach, but equivalent terminology may suggest the basis for its repeated use in the Apostolic Scriptures (ἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, *huios tou theou*) found some 43 times.<sup>2</sup> Thus, in 2Sam 7:14 the promise is made to David that his descendant (Solomon) would reign after him, described in this way: “I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me.” Similarly, in Ps 2:7 the Father/Son language is employed in reference to the in-

1 For the debate regarding whether “Son of God” and “Son of Man” were early messianic titles, see my *The Messiah: An Introduction to Christology* (TorahResource, 2006), pp. 47ff.

2 Matt, 7x; Mk, 3x; Lk, 6x; John, 9x; Acts, 2x; Rms, 1x; 2Cor, 1x; Gal, 1x; Eph, 1x; Heb, 4x; 1Jn, 7x; Rev, 1x.

stalled King: "I will surely tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to Me, 'You are My Son, today I have begotten You.'" And in the final verse of Ps 2, the admonition is given: "Do homage to the Son, that He not become angry, and you perish in the way..." Likewise, the sonship of the Davidic royal line is seen in Ps 89:26–27, "He will cry to Me, 'You are my Father, My God, and the rock of my salvation.' I also shall make him My firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth." Interestingly, 4QFlorilegium (4Q174) of the Qumran scrolls interprets 2Sam 7:14 to be speaking of the Messiah:

10 "Moreover the Lord decl[ares] to you that He will make you a house," and that "I will raise up your offspring after you, and establish the throne of his kingdom 11 [fore]ver. I will be a father to him, and he will be My son." This passage refers to the Shoot of David, who is to arise with 12 the Interpreter of the Torah, and who will [arise] in Zi[on] in the La]st Days, as it is written, "And I shall raise up the booth of David that is fallen" (Amos 9:10–12).

Thus, the Davidic king is portrayed as having a unique relationship with God as His "son," representing the reign of God upon the earth. The fact that one pre-Christian Judaism (Qumran) understood this "son of God" terminology to apply to the coming Messiah is significant for the use of the title as applied to Yeshua.

...since we have a great high priest – The adjective "great" (μέγας, *me-gas*) would be superfluous to the ears of a Jewish community in the first century if modifying the title "high priest." This is because the title "high priest" in the Hebrew of the Tanach is הַכֹּהֵן הַגָּדוֹל (*hakohen hagadol*), literally, "the great Priest," where our common English "high priest" has rendered *gadol*, "big, great" as "high." Since, then, the word "great" or "big" is actually part of the priestly title, to have "great" in our text function as an additional adjective would result in the redundancy "a great great priest." Rather, the phrase in our verse should be understood to mean "a high priest Who is great." In this way, the adjective "great" relates to Yeshua's essential character or person and not specifically to His role as high priest. In other words, He did not attain greatness by offering Himself as the sacrifice for sinners. Rather, He was able to offer an acceptable sacrifice for sinners because of His essential greatness, and this essential greatness is, as our author has already explained, His divine nature. Though a mystery beyond our ability to comprehend, the fact that Yeshua is divine and thus has an infinite life means that His death on behalf of sinners was likewise

infinite, and only an infinite sacrifice could atone for sin. For sin, when reckoned against the infinite holiness of God, is therefore itself infinitely unholy. Only an infinite sacrifice could pay the debt of sin. This required a high priest Who could offer an infinite sacrifice, that is, a high priest Who was Himself “great” in the sense of infinite.

...let us hold fast our confession – Once again we see an indication that one of the prime concerns our author has is that people within the community to which he is writing not give up their confession of Yeshua as the “son of God,” as the promised Messiah by Whom and through Whom salvation is alone made possible. His point is that if one considers both the very character of Yeshua as proven not only by His works but also by His death and resurrection, then there is every reason to hold fast to one’s initial confession that Yeshua is, in fact, the promised Messiah and the One upon Whom eternal salvation rests. The author’s exhortation is that we “hold fast our confession,” and the Greek word translated “hold fast” is the verb *κράτεω* (*krateō*) which generally conveys a sense of “to overcome obstacles,” “to grasp something,” “to take control,” and “to hold onto something in order to make it last.”

The point is that maintaining one’s hold upon the truth and thus remaining firm in one’s confession of Yeshua as God’s Messiah is something that requires one’s own disciplined life of faith in which the means of grace are constantly appropriated. Granted, God is the One Who enables us to remain steadfast in the faith, but we also must do our part. Remaining faithful is a cooperative work between the renewed, redeemed individual and God. God strengthens, encourages, comforts, supplies our needs, and leads us, yet we must run the race; we must subdue the flesh; we must yield our will to His will, and we must fight the good fight of faith. Our author has no place for what in our times is referred to as the “Prosperity Gospel,” that God promises us a life of wealth and comfort when we “accept His gift of salvation.” It is true that in Yeshua we enter an abundant life and obtain a hope that cannot be taken from us and that in many ways we are “rich” beyond measure. But it is likewise true that “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). The life of sanctification is one that involves a constant awareness that the battle is not yet over even if the outcome has been determined. Though we are assured of victory, we are still called to engage in the battle, fully protected by the armor which God provides, the very armor which is Yeshua Himself.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Note that every piece of armor referenced by Paul in Eph 6:14ff is an attribute of Yeshua: truth (Jn 14:6); righteousness (Jer 23:6); peace (Eph 2:14);

**15 For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as *we are*, yet without sin.**

The final exhortation of v. 14 is that we should hold fast the confession, i.e., the confession of our faith in Yeshua the Messiah. Though He has ascended into the heavens and now dwells in the very presence of God, yet He is able to fully sympathize with us as one who has been touched by the same temptations and testings which enter our lives. The difference, of course, is that there is nothing within Yeshua which corresponds with or is in any way attracted to sin.

The earthly priests during the time of the Second Temple (from the time of Nehemiah and Ezra to the destruction in 70 CE) were divided into three general groups: Levites, Priests, High Priest, where the Levites were the lowest and the High Priest the most powerful. Levites were primarily responsible for singing and music in the Temple, along with sentry duty. The priests were divided into twenty-four divisions called *mishmerot* (מִשְׁמֶרוֹת), each of which served for one week. The divisions were divided in turn into fathers' houses (בֵּית אֲבוֹת) each of which served on a prescribed day. Most of the priests during the time of Yeshua did not live in Jerusalem, but traveled up to the City for their appointed time of service, sleeping in the Temple precincts.

Generally, the people thought well of the priests (but not so of the High Priests). Josephus<sup>1</sup> indicates that the priests were generally loyal to the Temple and faithful in their duties, both to the Temple service and to the people. Particular notice is made of their great devotion during the difficult times which came upon the Temple.

The High Priesthood, however, controlled as it was by the Sadducees, was held in great contempt during the time of Yeshua and after, if the later Talmud can be received as giving at least some semblance of history.

Woe is me because of the house of Boethus! Woe is me because of their staves! Woe is me because of the house of Hanim! Woe is me because of their whispering! Woe is me because of the house of Kathros! Woe is me because of their pens! Woe is me because of the house of Ishmael son of Phiabi! Woe is me because of their fists! For they are high priests, their sons treasurers, their sons-in-law trustees, and their slaves beat

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faith (Gal 2:20); salvation (Matt 1:21); word (Jn 1:1).

1 Ant. xiv, 65-67; III, 321.

the people with staves.<sup>1</sup>

The High Priesthood was political, self-serving, and ultimately robbed the people of their right to worship and of their tithes and offerings. In the Gospels and Acts, the term “chief priests” (plural) refers to the High Priestly families who controlled the Temple and who were the very cause of Yeshua’s own consternation as He viewed the Temple as a place thieves congregate (Matt 21:12–13).

In stark contrast to the money-hungry High Priests of the 1st Century, Yeshua is here portrayed as One who was and is sympathetic to the woes of the people. The term “sympathetic” is made up of two Greek words: *συν*, *sun* (it becomes *συμ*, *sum* in compounds) meaning “with” and *παθέω*, *patheō* meaning “to feel, to suffer,” from which we derive our English word “pathos.” The meaning is obvious: Yeshua “feels with” us in our struggles and temptations.

It is provable to us that He is just such a sympathetic mediator when we consider that He underwent life on our planet and therefore dealt with the same struggles we have. He was “tested, tempted” (from the verb *πειράομαι*, *peiraomai*, “to test, try, attempt”) in the same manner in which we are tested and tempted. The verb here is in the perfect tense, which denotes action which is past, but has on-going effects or results. He was tested and so now He continues to sympathize with the tests and temptations with which we are confronted. In other words, He knows by His own experience what we now face in our daily lives.

The fact that Yeshua did not sin, and indeed, that He could not sin, does not detract from the fact that He could be tempted or tested. “What kind of test is it if you know you can’t fail?”, many might ask. But if a temptation or testing is viewed as a force—as a kind of pressure, then we may understand this issue better. A force is fully felt by the one who is able to withstand its full strength without being moved. Yeshua felt the full force of testing and tempting because He never gave in to it. When we sin, however, we feel the force of the temptation only to the point where we give in. On this analogy, the one who sins has not felt the full force of the temptation. Somehow, in the marvelous expanse of God’s wisdom, Yeshua was able to know and understand the draw of sin without ever succumbing to it. In this way, we may understand that He felt the full force of sin and therefore we can understand that He sympathizes with us in the very struggles we face.

To say that Yeshua could have sinned would seem to impugn His

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1 b.Pesachim 57a.

divinity, while to say that He could not have sinned seems to undermine His true humanity. This question divided the Church Fathers and became an issue of debate at some of the Church Councils. The question, however, is one asked from a purely theological or philosophical perspective. The fact of the matter is that the Scriptures clearly state He did not sin, and thus did not yield to temptation. In other words, as noted earlier, He felt the full force of the temptation but did not yield to its power. But it will not do for us to try to explain this further, as some did by suggesting that He was tempted in His humanity but not in His deity. Once again, the Scriptures do not speak in such terms, but in each case presume a perfect unity of the human and divine natures in Yeshua without giving further descriptions or explanations.

We should not, however, label as heretical those who hold that Yeshua could have sinned but did not. No less a renown figure as the reformed theologian Charles Hodge held this view:

This sinlessness of our Lord, however, does not amount to absolute impeccability. It was not a *non potest peccare* [no potential to sin]. If He was a true man He must have been capable of sinning. That He did not sin under the greatest provocation; that when He was reviled He blessed; when He suffered He threatened not; that He was dumb, as a sheep before its shearers, is held up to us as an example. Temptation implies the possibility of sin. If from the constitution of his person it was impossible for Christ to sin, then his temptation was unreal and without effect, and He cannot sympathize with his people.<sup>1</sup>

Yet we should be reminded that this question is not asked by the Apostles. It is a question, rather, that follows from the inquiry of the divine and human natures of Yeshua, and the mystery of their union. Since, however, such ontological inquiry seems to be foreign to the Hebrew perspective of things, we should not be surprised to find that the Apostles gave no significant attention to it. What is affirmed by them is that Yeshua did not sin; that He was, in every way, pure and holy; and that as a result, He is in every way fit to be not only the Lamb of God as sacrifice for sins, but also the High Priest for His people. It is upon these truths that the Prophets and Apostles wish for us to be well grounded in our faith.

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1 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2.457.



**16 Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.**

It is not uncommon to find Christian commentators who use this verse as proof that, following the death, resurrection and ascension of Yeshua, those who believe in Him have access to God in a way that believers before the coming of Yeshua did not. Hughes may be taken as representative of this view:

In the levitical system that had prevailed up till the time of Christ's advent only the high priest was permitted to approach into the sanctuary of God's presence, and then only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, when he passed from sight into the holy of holies. The people, however, were excluded from the divine presence because of their sinfulness and prohibited from drawing near. But the atonement effected by Christ's sacrifice of himself on the cross opened the way that had hitherto been closed. This was dramatically symbolized by the rending of the temple curtain from top to bottom at the time of the crucifixion, indicating that through an act of divine grace access into the holiest place was now available to all the people (Mk 15:38; Matt 27:51; Heb 10:20).<sup>1</sup>

But this interpretation fails at a number of points. First, the idea that believers before the coming of Yeshua did not have direct access to the presence of God cannot be sustained. We repeatedly find individuals in the Tanach drawing close to God in prayer: Abraham (Gen 20:17); Jacob (Gen 32:11); Hannah (1Sam 1:10ff); Samuel (1Sam 8:6). And though Moses might be considered an exception, still he clearly came into the presence of God without the assistance of one of the sons of Aaron.

Moreover, if the priestly service outlined in the Torah and practiced in the Tabernacle and Temples was to inform the people that they had no access to God, how could David have written these lines in Ps 139?

Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence [מִפְנֵיךָ, from Your face]? If I ascend to heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the dawn, if I dwell in the remotest part of the sea, even there Your hand will lead me, and Your right hand will lay hold of me. (Ps 139:7–10)

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<sup>1</sup> Hughes, *Hebrews*, p. 173.



Rather than contrasting the access to God's presence before and after the incarnation of Yeshua, our author has tied his exhortation in this verse to the previous verses, emphasizing that we constantly have access to God through our High Priest, Yeshua, even as did those believers who lived before His coming, for they likewise placed their faith in the "Coming One" and in the saving work He would accomplish on their behalf.

But what the priestly service (including that of Moses before the priestly instructions of the Torah were given) did reveal and foreshadow was that access to God is always through a divinely appointed mediator, a role that would ultimately and finally be fulfilled in the Redeemer Messiah. Moreover, in the yearly festival cycle, the entrance of the high priest into the most holy place only one time in the year, foreshadowed the single time in the whole scope of history when the High Priest *par excellence*, Yeshua, would offer Himself once for all time, the offering which forms the basis of His continual intercession to the Father on behalf of His people.

It is this concept (though the details will be explained in the subsequent chapters) that our author intends his readers to have in mind. So when he begins our verse with "Therefore," he is tying his exhortation back to his statement of verse 14 where he states that "we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Yeshua the Son of God...." Our author's first exhortation based upon this glorious fact is: "let us hold fast our confession" (v. 14). The second exhortation, once again based upon the fact that Yeshua has ascended to the right hand of the Father as the heavenly high priest, is: "let us draw near with confidence." Our confidence to "draw near" to God is because we have a High Priest Who has ascended to the very right hand of the Father and Who therefore lives forever to intercede on our behalf. Moreover, since Yeshua Himself experienced the woes of this fallen world, we may have every confidence that He has Himself experienced the weaknesses we ourselves experience, and therefore He is sympathetic to our needs.

The opening word of our verse is a present participle (προσερχώμεθα, *proserchōmetha*), suggesting a continuous action: "Let us *regularly* draw near...." Further, the verb itself (προσέρχουμαι, *proserxomai*) is used in the Lxx to describe the unique duties of the Aaronic priesthood who alone could "draw near" to offer sacrifices upon the altar or burn incense on the altar of incense (Lev 9:7-8; 21:17-23; 22:3; Num 17:5[16:40]; Deut 21:5). This emphasizes the fact that all who are in Messiah draw near to God through Yeshua, Who has taken up His duties as the heavenly High Priest. That is, we have both the right (or authority) and the ability to

draw near to God because we are in Yeshua Who constantly resides in the very presence of the Almighty, and we have been given the abiding presence of the Ruach HaKodesh through Whom our prayers are made acceptable in His sight (cf. Rom 8:26–27).

Further, our author exhorts us to draw near “with confidence” (NASB, “boldness,” HCSB). The Greek word is *παρρησία*, *parrēsia* which has a range of meanings, including “openness, frankness; boldness, and confidence.”<sup>1</sup> It is used in Col 2:15 of making something “public,” that is, expressing something openly. Given the word’s range of meanings, it could suggest a number of things in our text. It could mean that we are to come to the “throne of grace” with personal boldness, that is, without fear that we will be reject. We come confidently knowing we will be accepted. It could also mean that we come to the “throne of grace” openly, that is, publicly, without being ashamed of the fact that we pray to God through faith in Yeshua. The use of this same word for “confidence” elsewhere in the book may well suggest that both meanings are intended by our author.

We are admonished to approach the “throne of grace” (τῷ θρόνῳ τῆς χάριτος). What exactly are we to understand by this description? What does “throne of grace” describe? Or to ask the question a bit differently: What, in the author’s mind, as well as in the minds of his readers, was the “throne of grace”?

It is important, first of all, to note that there is no specific term in the Hebrew Scriptures for “throne.” Rather, the common word for “seat” or “chair” (כִּסֵּא, *kissē*) in context would be understood to mean “throne.” Therefore, the Greek phrase “throne of mercy” may just as well be considered as meaning “seat of mercy,” and thus the picture forms a perfect parallel with 10:19f, which clearly has the mercy seat (כַּפֹּרֶת, *kapporet*) of the Ark in view, the very place where the blood was sprinkled by the *cohen gadol* each year in order to effect atonement on Yom Kippur. In fact, every time כִּסֵּא (*kissē*) is found in the Tanach, it is translated by the Greek θρόνος (*thronos*), the word translated “throne” in our verse.

Thus, the “throne of grace” is the “mercy seat,” that place where atonement was made and which prophetically spoke of Yeshua, for He is our “propitiation,” our English word which translates the Greek ἱλαστήριον (*hilastērion*), which in turn was used by the Lxx translators to translate *kapporet* which described top of the Ark of the Covenant. What, then, is the “throne of grace?” It is our Messiah, Yeshua, for He is the very “place” where the blood was sprinkled—the very “place”

1 *Parrēsia* is used three other times in Hebrews: 3:6; 10:19, 35.

where our atonement was accomplished. The foreshadow presented by the *cohen gadol* year after year at the Yom Kippur festival is finally and completely realized in the finished work of our Messiah Yeshua.

But we should note that our author emphasizes that our atonement, secured for us by Yeshua through offering Himself as sacrifice for our sin, is the result of God's grace. Yeshua is the very "throne of *grace*" before Whom we come and through Whom we obtain mercy. All that we have, and all that we are in Him, is the result of God's grace and nothing we deserve nor that which we could earn.

But we can also see in the language our author employs that Yeshua, pictured as sitting at the right hand of God, is not only the very means of grace to all who are His, but that He dispenses this grace as the King Who possesses all authority and power in heaven and on the earth. Therefore nothing is beyond His ability and authority to grant. God is able to supply all of our needs according to His own riches in glory through the work of His Son, Yeshua (cf. Phil 4:19).

Interestingly, the later rabbinic literature also notes the attribute of God's mercy in connection with Yom Teruah, the festival which begins the seventh month, the very month in which Yom Kippur is celebrated:

*God is gone up amidst shouting, the Lord amidst the sound of the horn* (Ps 47:6). When the Holy One, blessed be He, ascends and sits upon the Throne of Judgment, He ascends with intent to do [strict] judgment. What is the reason for this statement? 'God is gone up amidst shouting.' But when Israel take their horns and blow them in the presence of the Holy One, blessed be He, He rises from the Throne of Judgment and sits upon the Throne of Mercy, for it is written, "The Lord amidst the sound of the horn"—and He is filled with compassion for them, taking pity upon them and changing for them the Attribute of Justice to one of Mercy. When? In the seventh month.<sup>1</sup>

... and find grace to help in time of need. – The Greek phrase is εἰς εὐκαιρον βοήθειαν, and the preposition εἰς (*eis*) defines the goal or end of both verbs: "...that we may receive mercy and find grace for timely assistance."<sup>2</sup> The point is that by God's grace and mercy, expressed in the heavenly high priestly work of Yeshua our Messiah, the grace and mercy we receive through approaching His throne of grace via prayer and supplication is precisely that which fits both the need and the time

1 Mid Rab Lev 29.3.

2 So Sampson, *Hebrews*, p. 170.

of the need. How often we wonder how our needs will be met, and we see God's gracious supply come just in time to meet our need! Such reliance of faith is that which strengthens our resolve to cast all of our cares upon Him, fully knowing that He cares for us (1Pet 5:7).

Indeed, the combination of "grace" and "mercy" (χάρις, *charis*; ἔλεος, *eleos*) is reminiscent of covenant language used in the Tanach, particularly the Hebrew word חֶסֶד, *chesed*, often translated "lovingkindness," but actually carrying a sense of "covenant loyalty" or "covenant faithfulness." We find the word *chesed* most often translated in the Lxx with our Greek word *eleos*, "mercy," and Hebrew חֵן, *chen* most often translated by our word *charis*, "grace." Thus "grace and mercy" may well carry the sense of God's covenant faithfulness to His elect through the work of His Messiah, Yeshua.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Note the use of this pair of words in 1Tim 1:2; 2Tim 1:2; 2John 1:3.