

“Sit at My Right Hand”

The Second in a Series on the Epistle to the Hebrews

Texts: Hebrews 1:1-14; Psalm 110:1-7

We may not know who wrote the Book of Hebrews, but the unknown author’s opening declaration is crystal clear. God has spoken through the prophets—the Old Testament. But in these last days (the present era) God has finally and definitely spoken in and through the person of his son, Jesus Christ. Since Jesus is creator and sustainer of all things, Jesus is superior to Moses. Since Jesus has completed his work of redemption, he is superior to Israel’s priesthood. Since Jesus now sits at the right hand of God, he possesses a greater name and a greater authority than any angel. Given the fascination with angels typical of many first century Hellenistic Jews, the author of this epistle must deal with the role of angels in redemptive history, and in doing so, make his case that Jesus Christ is superior to all angelic beings.

This is the second sermon in our new series on the Book of Hebrews. Last time, we addressed the difficult questions surrounding the authorship, destination, and date of this epistle—so I encourage you to listen to or read the first sermon which is now posted on the church website, or my blog. We don’t know who wrote this epistle, nor do we know when it was written. We don’t even know to which church this epistle was originally addressed. But based upon the contents of the Epistle to the Hebrews, we do know a great deal about the original recipients.

The author very likely knew the people to whom he is writing, and he was quite familiar with their current situation. The recipients were Greek-speaking Jews (Hellenistic Jews), who believed that the Old Testament was God’s self-revelation. They lived in a large city (most scholars think Rome or Alexandria), and probably were a small group meeting in someone’s home. Many in the church which received this letter were recent converts to Christianity from that type of Judaism found throughout the major cities of the first century Mediterranean world. Not as legalistic as the Judaism found in Palestine (closer to the temple, Jerusalem, and home to many Pharisees), the Judaism in which the recipients of this letter were raised and the synagogues in which they worshiped were probably as much Greek in ethos, as they were Jewish in theology. This form of Judaism focused upon speculative topics like angels, and made Moses (not Abraham), the center of Old Testament religion. This kind of Judaism would be as distant from traditional Judaism as mainline Protestant liberalism is from the Protestant Reformation.

From the contents of the Epistle to the Hebrews it is clear that people in this church were under great persecution which likely took two main forms. The first was some sort of external persecution from civil authorities. As the gap between Christians and Jews began to widen, Christians lost the protection they received because Judaism was a legal religion. As Christianity began to be recognized as a different religion from Judaism, Christians became the object of persecution from Roman authorities for refusing to acknowledge the deity of Caesar. The other form of persecution was the pressure these people were facing from those who were urging them to renounce their baptism and profession of faith in Christ, and return to the synagogue. This is an option which persecuted people will seriously entertain. We forget the tremendous cost people in that era paid for their profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

Aware of the difficulties these Christians were facing, and saddened that some of their number had already renounced Christ and returned to Judaism (the sin of apostasy) the author of this epistle seeks to encourage those who remain to stay in the faith by demonstrating the superiority of Jesus Christ over all things. In the opening verses of Hebrews, the author divides redemptive history into two eras—the Old Testament era, and

the New Testament era (which the author describes as the “the last days”). He does this in order to remind his hearers that the Old Testament era has passed away, being superceded by a new and superior era in redemptive history. This means we have been living in the last days since the time of Jesus and his apostles, and that renouncing Jesus Christ, means returning to a religion which belongs to the former, and inferior era of redemptive history.

Given what we know about Hellenistic Judaism, and as seen in issues addressed by the author in the epistle, many Jews (including these recent converts to Christianity), were fascinated by the ministry of angels. We also know that the prominent figure in their version of Judaism was Moses, a human mediator with all the flaws which go with a human mediator. The sacrifices for sin were conducted by priesthood whose roots can be traced back to Aaron, and beyond that to Melchizadek (the ancient priest of Salem). In responding to those who are renouncing Christianity and returning to this form of Judaism, the author now makes his case that since Jesus Christ is creator and sustainer of all things, and since his redemptive work is now complete, Jesus, God’s Son, has taken his rightful place at the Father’s right hand—the position of ultimate authority.

As we saw last time, seven facts underlying the superiority of Jesus are set forth in the first four verse of Hebrews. These are the last days and Jesus is that one in and through whom God has spoken (revealed himself).

In verses 1-4, the author sets forth his purpose in writing this epistle. These are among the clearest passages in all the Bible which teach the deity of Jesus Christ. *“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.”* The exaltation of Jesus Christ to the right hand of the Father becomes the critical point of reference from which everything else follows—especially verses 5-14 of chapter 1, where the author discusses in great detail the superiority of Jesus over angels.

If God has definitively and finally spoken through Jesus Christ, his Son, who is presently at the Father’s right hand, then Jesus is superior to all things—including that Old Testament religion (Judaism) to which many of these people were seriously considering returning. Why abandon the superior (Jesus), for the inferior (Moses, angels, Israel’s priesthood)? It is not an accident that the word “better” is used thirteen times in this epistle.¹ Jesus is a better mediator than Moses. His priesthood is better than Israel’s priesthood. The new covenant is better than the old covenant. But given this congregation’s particular struggles, the author turns first to the subject of angels.

Since those reading this letter believe and accept the LXX to be the authoritative word of God, the author will now set out a series of Old Testament passages designed to demonstrate that if Old Testament revelation was communicated through angels, then New Testament revelation comes from one much greater than the angels, that one whom the angels worship and serve. More than that, the son’s exaltation over all things surpasses anything which is ascribed to angels.

Angels have long been a source of interest and an object of undue speculation for the people of God. The

¹ Bruce, Hebrews, 51.

reason why the author so strongly emphasizes that Jesus Christ is superior to angels possibly stems from the presence of a group within this church who were worshiping angels, or who were perhaps unduly preoccupied with them and their ministry. This lends credence to the Yogi Berraism that “the more things change the more things stay the same.” By a wide margin, books on angels outsell virtually all books on Christian theology. People buy angel figurines and jewelry, and put pictures of so-called “guardian angels” in children’s bedrooms. Our age is very much like that of the Hellenistic world.

We know that fascination with angels was a huge problem in the churches in the Lycus valley in western Asia Minor (Turkey) as mentioned by Paul in his letter to the Colossians (2:18)—“*Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind.*” Similar things may have also been a problem in this particular church, as we see in chapter 13:9 where the author warns his readers, “*do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings.*” Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that some in this congregation were fascinated with angels, which the author addresses in the following verses when he cites seven well-known Old Testament passages, all of which demonstrate that even in the Old Testament, Jesus Christ is superior to any of God’s angelic messengers.

After the author asserts this superiority in verse 4, he strings together a series of seven Old Testament passages in verses 5-14 which serve to prove his assertion. In verse 5, the author cites Psalm 2:7, pointing out the implication that this verse has regarding the authority of angels. “*For to which of the angels did God ever say, ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you?’*” Psalm 2 reflects a coronation of a divine king in the line of David. In the context of that coronation it is clear that angels are inferior to Jesus. Angels are divine messengers. They do God’s bidding. But not one angel has ever been called “God’s Son.” That title uniquely applies to Jesus. Not one of angel has ever been given the authority Jesus possesses. The angels serve Jesus, since he is their king and creator.

It is noteworthy that this same heavenly benediction is pronounced upon Jesus by the Father as found in the account of Jesus’ baptism in Mark 1:9-11. “*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.’*” Jesus *is* God’s beloved Son. That one who from all eternity is the Son of God, at a certain moment in history ascended to God’s right hand after suffering unto death and being raised from the dead in triumph. This is why the author of Hebrews can state in verse 5, that when Jesus was raised to the Father’s right hand his eternal sonship was recognized.² The author is not saying that Jesus was not God’s son until that moment when he became God’s son, but rather is affirming that Christ’s death, burial, resurrection, and ascension confirm his eternal sonship.

The second biblical citation found in verse 5 is taken from 2 Samuel 7:14. “*Or again, ‘I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son’?*” In 2 Samuel 7, the prophet Nathan revealed to David that God will ensure that David will build a temple for the ark of the covenant. But through Nathan’s prophecy, God also reveals that his house is not merely a building made of cedar (like that David and Solomon will build), but that God’s temple will endure forever—something which could be said of no earthly temple. The prophet reveals that after David and Solomon build such a temple, the earthly throne they establish in Jerusalem will some how and in some way endure forever.

The precise nature of this promise finally becomes clear in the gospels. In Luke 1:32, when the angel

² Bruce, Hebrews, 54.

informs Mary about her as yet unborn son (who has been miraculously conceived), he tells her “*He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David.*” When the angel reveals this to Mary, it is clear that it is Jesus who is being spoken of by Nathan. Notice, it is an angel who announces that Jesus is the Son of the Most High! Although David and Solomon did indeed build God’s temple, that temple (glorious as it was) was but a mere type and shadow pointing ahead to Jesus who is the true temple of God. In Matthew 12:6, Jesus says “*I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.*” And then in John 2:19-21, when challenged by the Pharisees, “*Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ The Jews then said, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?’ But he was speaking about the temple of his body.*” For those Jews who knew their Bibles well enough to know of these ancient prophecies in the Psalter and the prophets, everything in these verses pointed ahead to Jesus, the only one of whom God said, “he is my son.” This was never spoken about angels.

The third citation from the Old Testament is found in verse 6 of Hebrews 1. “*And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, ‘Let all God’s angels worship him.’*” The first part of the verse alludes to Psalm 87:29 (which reads, “*and I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth*”). In the original context of the Psalm, God says of David (and of the future Davidic kings who will come from David), that David and his descendants are somehow pre-imminent. David was king of Israel. So was his son Solomon. But the king being spoken of in the Psalm is said to be eternal, and he alone rightly can be called “firstborn.” Jesus Christ created all things, and having created them, he ordains all things for his sovereign purposes.³ That cannot be said of any angel.

To the words of Psalm 87:29, the author adds the words of Psalm 92:7, “*Let all God’s angels worship him.*” In the psalter, the verse refers to YHWH, and is close in wording to the closing verses of the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32. Anyone who knew the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament would have immediately known what the author is doing. As angels worship God, so too they also worship that one who is declared to be “firstborn,” that one who although eternal has come into the world in his incarnation, then lived a perfect life and died for our sins, was then raised from the dead before taking his place at the right hand of the Father. As the angels worship God, they worship this one identified as God’s son. The point is now becoming obvious—even in the Old Testament, Jesus is said to be vastly superior to the angels, and they are said to worship him.

In verse 7 of Hebrews 1, the author next quotes from Psalm 104:4. “*Of the angels he says, ‘He makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire.’*” This time the author makes the point that although angels are inferior to Jesus the Son of God, they do have an important role in the created order. In fact, it is clear that when God created all things (all things visible and invisible), he created that world which is visible to us, as well as those invisible things and creatures which occupy the same created space we do. Although angels have access to heaven (which we do not have), angels also move throughout the same created space we do.

But they are immaterial (they don’t have bodies), and as Scripture indicates, they appear in critical moments in redemptive history as God’s messengers, or emissaries. They are just as real as any created things, yet they are not visible to us with the naked eye. No doubt, this is why so many are fascinated with them. Throughout the Bible, it is angels who execute God’s commands. In Psalm 104, they are said to be

³ See the discussion in Bruce, Hebrews, 56.

swift like wind, and strong like fire.⁴ But as messengers and servants of YHWH, they are inferior to the Son, who is eternal and who issues the very orders which the angels carry out. No doubt, angels have great glory. No doubt, the Son's glory is much, much, greater.

The next quotation of an Old Testament passage is clearly designed to serve as a contrast to Psalm 104:4. In verses 8-9 of Hebrews 1, the author now quotes Psalm 45:6-7 which celebrates a royal wedding being held in the royal house of David. The author to the Hebrews writes "*but of the Son he says, 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.'*" The messianic implications of the author's argument would have been crystal clear to those who knew this passage in the LXX. While this passage, apparently, was spoken to David, it can only apply to someone who reigns at God's right hand, and who possesses an eternal kingdom in which he rules with righteousness. The reigning one (Jesus Christ, Israel's Messiah) is identified as God. He is God forever. He rules over all things (which is why he is given the scepter, the symbol of such rule). Angels possess no such authority because they are creatures.

The sixth Old Testament passage is taken from Psalm 102:25-27, and is cited in verses 10-12. "*And, 'You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment, like a robe you will roll them up, like a garment they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will have no end.'*" Just as in Psalm 45, the words spoken by the Psalmist to God, are now applied to Jesus Christ, the Son. God laid the foundation of the earth. The heavens are the work of his hands. God has created all things, but all created things will eventually perish, because they are finite and temporal. But God, who created all things is eternal. He is not bound by time or by space. He is not subject to the limitation of created things. Once again, the author of Hebrews applies these verses to Jesus Christ, who is the creator and sustainer of all things. Everything we can say of God, Scripture applies to Jesus, God's Son, who took to himself a true human nature in the womb of the virgin to fulfill the ancient promise made to David. No angel could become incarnate, and no angel can save us from our sins.

The seventh and final quotation taken by the author from the Old Testament is found in verse 13 of chapter 1, and is taken from Psalm 110:1 (our Old Testament lesson, and a passage which is cited eight times in the New Testament). "*And to which of the angels has he ever said, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet'?*" Jesus quoted this same passage and applied it to himself when confronted by the Pharisees as he was teaching in the temple. In Mark 12:35-37, we read, "*And as Jesus taught in the temple, he said, 'How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? David himself, in the Holy Spirit, declared, 'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.' David himself calls him Lord. So how is he his son?'*" And the great throng heard him gladly." The author to the Hebrews uses this passage in the same way as Jesus did. Only the author uses the affirmation about the eternal nature and majesty of the Son to make the point, "*and to which of the angels*" did he every say such a thing? YHWH said no such thing to any of the angels. Rather, YHWH said this of his Son. The point is obvious—Jesus is much greater than the angels.

Having culled a huge amount of Old Testament evidence for the superiority of Jesus to the angels, in verse 14, the author now addresses the role that angels do play in redemptive history. "*Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?*" The most exalted of the angels stand in the presence of God. According to Revelation 8:2, John sees seven such angels

⁴ Bruce, Hebrews, 58.

standing in the presence of God. We know from Luke 1:19, that one of these angels is Gabriel, who says to Zechariah, *“I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God.”* Gabriel’s standing posture indicates that these angels are ready to do God’s will and execute his decrees. Notice that the angels do not sit in God’s presence—they stand. Nor do they sit in the position of honor which alone belongs to God’s Son. That singular place of honor is the Son’s alone. Therefore, there can be no doubt, that Jesus Christ is superior to the angels who are creatures, who worship him, and do what Jesus commands them to do.

What, then, do we take with us from this passage?

The multiple citations the author makes from the Old Testament accomplish several important things. For starters, this enables him to prove from the Old Testament that Jesus is vastly superior to the angels. This is a significant point for people who were considering giving up their profession of faith in Jesus Christ and returning to a form of Judaism which was preoccupied with the various roles angels played in the Old Testament. Although angels played a significant role “long ago,” the Old Testament era is now over. The current era in redemptive history (these last days) is one in which God has spoken in and through Jesus Christ, who created the angels and who directs them to fulfill his purposes.

Angels are invisible spiritual beings who operate at Christ’s direction. In Matthew 18:10 we read, *“See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.”* We should not develop an entire theology of guardian angels from a passage such as this one when Jesus speaks of children having “their angels,” but we certainly must acknowledge that angels as spiritual beings do in fact behold the face of God. Their work as ministering spirits is but one indication that God uses means and creatures to fulfill and accomplish his purposes. We know that angels ministered to Jesus during his temptation in the wilderness, and we know *“there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents”* (Luke 15:10). Furthermore, the angelic hosts will accompany Jesus at his return, and will separate believer from unbeliever. Although invisible, angels are real. They serve Jesus Christ and accomplish his purposes. And since this is the case, while acknowledging the role they play, the author’s point is that God has spoken through Jesus Christ, not through the angels who are Jesus’ servants.

The second point is that it is quite remarkable that the author of Hebrews is able to quote so many Old Testament passages (especially from the Psalms) which demonstrate that Jesus is God, and who according to the Father, “sits at my right hand.” This proves that Jesus is superior to the angels. But it also proves that Jesus is God. Jesus created all things. Jesus sustains all things. Jesus has accomplished and finished the work of our redemption. Jesus possesses divine glory, manifests divine attributes, and possesses divine glory. And since Jesus is God (even in Old Testament revelation) this not only points us in the direction of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, the deity of Jesus proves that Christians do not worship the same God as Muslims, or even Jews, the other so-called religions of “Abrahamic faith.”

If Jesus is God, then Allah is not. If Jesus is God, then Jews worship the God of Abraham without recognizing the Trinity—an indication of a defective or heretical view of God. If Jesus is God, then Christianity alone is true (all other religions are false), and Jesus is vastly superior to those key figures in the Old Testament, whether that be angels, Moses, or Israel’s priests. It means that everything written in the prophets long ago pointed ahead to these last days when God has spoken by his son, who sits at his right hand, where he rules and reigns over all things.

If Jesus is superior to everything else, why preoccupy ourselves with mere creatures—such as angels? For they serve that one who sits at God’s right hand, and whom the angels themselves worship and obey.