

Hebrews

Series 1

Lesson 2

“Hebrews Chapter 1”

Objective: To explore the ancient text of Hebrews in order to understand how this product of the mature early Christian movement interpreted Christological understandings. In doing this it is the aim of this study to encourage, enable and inspire people to live a more Christ-centered existence.

It is also the hope and the design of this material to provide materials for the use of small groups as well as in Sunday morning Bible classes. A new section has been added at the end that can be used either with the family or with a small group.

Materials: The Bible, Commentaries, journal articles, dictionaries, the internet and other resources as may be appropriate.

Procedures

1. To explore this text first as it would have been understood by its original audience, in its original context.
2. Next we will hope to understand more fully the nature of our God and in so doing comprehend his call upon our existence in order to fulfill our destiny as image-bearers.
3. We will seek to find practical guidance in these ancient words that will empower, enlighten and inspire us as we live in a twenty-first century world dominated by a focus on self and the individual. We are called as God’s people to live in community as a people that unleashes His compassion in a world filled with pain and suffering. God is the only hope for a better world.
4. Provide a sheet to take home as a reminder of what has been examined and to provide additional opportunities for consideration of God’s word and application in our daily living out of our eternal destiny beginning now.

From the moment we begin reading the Epistle of Hebrews we are made aware of the theological artistry and complexity that will unfold throughout the book.¹ This is a book filled with grandiose ideals and concepts and they are expressed with an elegance and majesty that is truly magnificent. The initial affirmation of this book is “God has spoken.” This initial affirmation is basic to what is said throughout the remainder of the book, as indeed it is basic to all of Christian faith. Had God not spoken, and had He remained silent in the thick darkness, the plight of mankind and of the creation would be desperate, even hopeless. God has, however not remained silent, he has spoken revealing his plan for the redemption of humanity and of creation. God has given this revelation in two stages: the first stage to the fathers through the prophets and secondly, and finally, the revelation brought to humanity through His beloved son, Jesus Christ.² In highly exalted language the writer of Hebrews declares that the Son of God is the focal point for God’s climactic word and

¹ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2004), p. 27.

² F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), pp. 44-45.

work; He is the ultimate form of God's revelation and provides the saving act for us and for creation.³

Below is a very literal translation of Hebrews 1-4:

1:1 Many times and in many ways, long ago, God spoke to the fathers in the prophets ² in these last days he has spoken to us in a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the ages. ³ Who exists as the radiance of the glory and the character of His being, sustaining all things by the word of His power, after he made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high. ⁴ Having become as much superior to the angels as he has inherited a name superior to theirs.

In verse one of this epistle, the two stages of divine revelation correspond roughly to the Old and New Testaments respectively. In this way, divine revelation is seen to be progressive in nature, but the progression is not from the less true to the more true, but from the less worthy to the more worthy. Another way of stating this would be from the less mature to the more mature. Some may ask how this could be so since all the

³ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, p. 27.

revelation is from the same God? God has not changed, but over time our understanding and perceptions of God have changed, they have grown and become clearer, especially with His continuing revelation of His inherent nature and His ultimate plan. The progression is one that moves from promise to fulfillment (cf. 11:40). The earlier stage of revelation came in a variety of ways: God spoke through, and in, His mighty works of mercy and judgment, and initially made known the purpose of His works through His servants the prophets. The word of God was, however, not fully uttered until Christ came.⁴

I would like to make note of translation issue at the end of verse two. At the end of verse two the word *αἰῶνας* is used, which is the plural form of the Greek word from which we get our English word “eon.” This word has a considerable range of meaning and can have a meaning that focuses very much on the temporal, (“ages,” or “eternity”) or it can focus much more upon the physical, such that here we might translate this word something like “worlds” (as it is plural). If we translate it in a temporal manner it would be more like “ages,” or “eternity.”

⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, pp. 45-46.

Because of the nature of English, and due to the nature of translation in general we are really forced to make a choice as to how we translate this. Doing this however, forces us to provide clarity where it does not really exist and narrows the meaning beyond that of the original text. If the author had simply intended to say “worlds” then there is another Greek word that specifically indicates that, instead the author chose this word, with the wider meaning of both worlds and time. Even translating it as “universe” comes up short, especially if we do not include the concept of time in our understanding of the universe. I have left it ages to counter the focus that most of our modern translations provide, between the two translations we come closer to what is meant here.

The issue of time was an extremely important issue among the ancient Jewish people. There is considerable evidence that at least one of the contributing factors that led to the rift between the Qumran sect (Dead Sea Scroll community) and the Maccabean priests was over the issue of time and how it was to be measured. It appears that this Qumran group split off from the rest of Judaism in their worship at the Temple due in part to how time

was measured. These ancient people had a very deep understanding of time, at some levels, and this understanding led them to measure time very carefully as well as to observe the markers of time created by God (the sun, the moon and the stars).⁵ To exclude the element of time here and to totally focus on the physical universe seems to limit what is being said here in a way that is not correct.⁶ Therefore I tentatively have translated the word αἰῶνας as “ages,” though I am far from satisfied that this actually translates fully the meaning here.

These first four verses constitute a periodic sentence that consists of three carefully balanced segments. In the first segment (verses 1-2), God is the subject. There are then two clauses that contrast the way God spoke to the fathers with the way He speaks in the last days. These two clauses specify important characteristics of the Son who is the heir of all things, in the end time, and was a central agent in the beginning at creation. In the second segment, (verse 3), the son is the subject. There are four affirmations made regarding the Son that move from His

⁵ James C. VanderKam, *Calendars in the Dead Sea Scrolls: Measuring Time*, in *The Literature of the Dead Sea Scrolls* series (London: Routledge, 1998).

⁶ Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews in the Anchor Yale Bible* series, Vol. 36 (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 178.

preexistence to His exaltation. The final segment (verse 4), contains two clauses that state the case for the superiority of the Son and His name on the basis of His exalted state previously highlighted in the segment just previous to this one.⁷

What God had to say through the prophets of the Old Testament has relevance to the present audience in part because it speaks of Christ and was indeed spoken by Christ as the Word of God in the past. Did you get that, was spoken by Christ, the Old Testament was spoken by Christ and about Christ. God spoke through the prophets in a manner that was delivered in language that was appropriate for their age and their contextual situation. Each of the prophets addressed a glaring need that was currently relevant to them and no single prophet grasped the fullness of God's revelation as it was more fully expressed in the person of Jesus Christ. The fullness of God's revelation was revealed at the end of the ages through the Son.⁸ At verse 3, we are made aware that Jesus is the "radiance" (ἀπαύγασμα) of God's glory. This idea

⁷ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, pp. 27-28.

⁸ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, pp. 29-30.

of the “glory of God” was huge among the ancient Jews and is definitely a major topic in the New Testament as well.⁹

In verse 3, there are some that translate the phrase **χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ** as “the representation of his essence.” NET. In my opinion this is a terrible translation and though I generally love the New English Translation this in my opinion is a major flaw. This entire talk of “essence” leads one to view what is said here much more in Greek conceptual frameworks than in a Hebrew, or an Eastern framework. I believe this is extremely misleading here, for one thing the word “essence” never actually occurs anywhere in Scripture, for another, it leads one to wrong conclusions about what is said here. It leads us to define issues in unbiblical ways using unbiblical words and concepts. It is in that sense flawed. In my opinion a far better way to translate this section would be along these lines: **“Who exists as the radiance of the glory and the character of His being”** This in my opinion aligns much more closely with the text and does not mislead us. The focus here is that Jesus is

⁹ John 11:40; Acts 7:56; Romans 3:23; 5:2; 15:7; 1 Corinthians 10:31; 2 Corinthians 1:20; 4:6; 4:15; Philippians 2:11; Revelation 15:8; 21:11; 21:23.

the fullness of God in both his nature and in His character. In Jesus we see the reality of who God really is.

The introduction provided sets up for what is to follow as the author of Hebrews will build on what he has begun here and elucidate the details of this far more fully as we proceed. He will provide evidence, primarily from the ancient Hebrew Scriptures to make his case throughout. We need to keep in mind that it is very unlikely that much of what we call the New Testament would have been available to Christians of the first century and certainly if Hebrews is written before the destruction of the temple at Jerusalem it is even less likely as parts of the New Testament will not even have been written yet. The author of Hebrews goes to great lengths to explain that Jesus is not just another angel and that indeed he is totally different in character, authority, and in nature.

At verse 5, we begin a unit on the superiority of Christ to the angels. Two of the three parts of this major section are expositions of the Old Testament. The first expository part (1:5-14) demonstrates the superiority of the Son to the angels. The second (2:5-18) will clarify the relationship of the Son to

angels and to humanity. Separating these two sections is an exhortation warning about the perils of ignoring the word that has been delivered by the Son (2:1-4). The initial expository section is made up of a string of seven scriptural quotations that are designed to undergird the assertions that have been put forward in the prologue (1:1-4). The quotations then follow the order set out by those earlier assertions:

Appointment as royal Son (1:5-9; cf. 1:2b).


Mediator of the creation (1:10; cf. 1:2c).

Eternal unchanging nature (1:11-12; cf. 1:3a and b).

Exaltation to God's right hand (1:13; cf. 1:3c).¹⁰

The quotations from the Old Testament are then treated as divine utterances to, or regarding, the Son. It is highly possible that these passages come from texts previously collected by the early church as proof texts of the Messianic claims regarding Christ. The form of these materials was not unique to the church as the form of the materials in 1:5-15 resemble collections of scriptures found at Qumran (The Dead Sea Scroll community cf. *Florilegium* 4Q174). This collection of scriptures (the one collected by the Early Church) was used to emphasize the exalted nature of Jesus Christ as Lord. As to why the comparison with

¹⁰ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, p. 43.



angels, it may be that in this collection traditionally there was an association with angels. In addition, for readers that were familiar with the sources of the imagery regarding the heavenly high priest there is a need to be alerted to the fact that Jesus is not simply and exalted angel.¹¹

Our English word for “angel” is derived from the Greek word *ἄγγελος* and simply refers to a messenger who may be either heavenly, or simply a human being delivering a message. The idea of such messengers was that they were entrusted with the task of delivering a message, or performing some action on behalf of God. In the early part of Old Testament history angels are portrayed primarily as messengers delivering God’s message either in words, or deeds to God’s people. In a later stage in Israel’s history, this function was performed more often by prophets, though to be certain there is no clear demarcation between the two types of messengers.¹² The goal of the writer of Hebrews is to clearly distinguish Jesus from those spiritual beings we know as angels and to mark Him as the unique messenger of God who is the Son.

¹¹ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, p. 43.

¹² Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, p. 44.

Jesus as the Son is unique and no other has ever been addressed in the way that He is, with the full implications of such address. God made statements about the Son that he never made regarding angels. The quote given here is taken from Psalm 2, which is a royal psalm that was likely composed originally for the coronation of the king. The idea conveyed in the Psalm is that the newly enthroned king is citing God's promise of universal rule. Early Christians applied this passage to Jesus Christ as the true Son and the true and unique king, the true fulfillment of what was said so long ago. These words are alluded to in the accounts given of Jesus' baptism (Matthew 3:16-17; Mark 1:10-11; Luke 3:21-22) and these words are cited explicitly in the context of Christ's exaltation (Acts 13:33-34¹³). In 1:4, the writer of Hebrews wrote concerning a more excellent name. Here the readers are given that more excellent name: Son, God's Son, God's unique Son.¹⁴

At 1:5b, the second statement that was never applied to an angel is, "I will be His Father, and He will be my Son." This quote comes from Nathan's declaration of God's promise to David that

¹³ **33 he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising Jesus; as also it is written in the second psalm, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you.'**³⁴ **As to his raising him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he has spoken in this way, 'I will give you the holy promises made to David.'** NRSV.

¹⁴ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, pp. 46-47.

his house would be established forever before God, unlike that of Saul's house (2 Samuel 7:14). This statement had already been drawn together in Jewish tradition, before the advent of the church, to serve as a messianic proof text. At 1:6, we come to the third quotation which comes from Psalm 89:27 and likely refers to the incarnation of Christ as the NRSV has, but there are other possibilities such as that this verse may be a reference to the heavenly world, but this is less likely to be what is intended here. The concept of the "firstborn" was a rich concept within Judaism and indeed in the ancient Eastern world. This rich concept was used by Christians in reference to the resurrection of Christ (cf. Romans 8:29). This concept was also used as a reference to the priority and supremacy of Christ over all of creation (cf. Colossians 1:15). This verse carries with it the concept of the preexistence and exaltation of Christ and the concepts of being Son and becoming Son are not reconciled here in Hebrews (cf. Romans 1:3; 1 Corinthians 8:6).¹⁵ They are merely stated and left to challenge us to think and ponder further.

¹⁵ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, pp. 47-48.

Verses 7-12 point out the contrasts between the angels and the Son stressing the mutable character of angels alongside the unchangeable and eternal character of the Son. In verse 7 the angels are characterized using a short quotation from the Greek (LXX Septuagint) version of Psalm 104:4.¹⁶ Angels, like wind, and flame, are all subject to God's creative activity, change and decay. In contrast the Son stands above, and outside, all of these possibilities because He is inherently different in nature. The quotation in verse 8-9 is the first of two quotes from the Psalms that make very explicit the contrast between angels and the Son. The quotation is from Psalm 45:6-7, which is a psalm for a royal wedding in which the king is addressed as deity. The author of Hebrews cited this text in order to emphasize the eternal and exalted reign of Jesus. The application of the royal quality to the Son also serves to intensify the contrast between the mutable angels and the unchanging Son.¹⁷

The second lengthy quotation used by our author is from Psalm 102:25-27 and it explicitly contrasts the Son and angels. In

¹⁶ Septuagint version of Psalm 104:4 - **The one making His spirits messengers, and His ministers flaming fire.**

¹⁷ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, pp. 49-50.

this quote there is a contrast made between that which has been created, which would include the angels, and that which is eternal and of a different character and quality, the Son, who was not created. This is highlighted by the usage of the title “Lord” that occurs in the Septuagint translation of this Psalm, but not in the Hebrew (Masoretic Text). Certainly this title Lord would have been understood as a reference to Yahweh, or God, by a Jewish audience. However, early Christians confessed that Jesus was Lord (cf. Acts 2:36; Romans 1:4; 10:9; 1 Corinthians 1:2,3; 8:6; Galatians 6:14; Philippians 2:11; 1 Thessalonians 1:1,3; 1 Peter 1:3). In the Epistle to the Hebrews the title “Lord” is regularly used as a title for Christ (cf. 2:3; 7:14; 13:20 and perhaps even at 12:14). Jesus Christ is creator of the heavens and the earth and therefore is the creator too of the angelic realm as well as of angels (cf. Colossians 1:16).¹⁸ He is therefore superior to them.

The name of God, *Yahweh*, was given to Moses in Exodus (Exodus 3:13-15). When God was going to send Moses into Egypt in order to rescue the people he asked who do I tell them has sent me. God’s response was *Yahweh*, which is often times translated

¹⁸ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, pp. 49-50.

as “I am,” but in reality is more complex and because of its imperfect tense in Hebrew: it can be translated as “caused things to happen, causes things to happen, and will keep causing things to happen.” So often today names are not descriptive of the person, but in Hebrew and Eastern tradition they often were descriptive of character, or some great act that was performed by a person. In other words, the name was more than a title, it was also descriptive and this unique name (*Yahweh*) describes God’s unique character as creator, sustainer and as hope for the future. Because of the great regard ascribed to the name of God (*Yahweh*), and the great sanctity that was associated with this name the Jewish people avoided using this name altogether. Instead, when they would see this name written they would substitute the term “Lord, or my Lord” [Hebrew - *Adonai*].¹⁹


The final quotation in this section is introduced using the same formula that was used to introduce the initial quotation: “But to which of the angels has he ever said....” The usage of these two formulas serve as an *inclusio* that ties this paragraph together. The quotation that is then given is from Psalm 110, a royal psalm

¹⁹ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, p. 50.

that extols the king and his close relationship to God (Psalm 110:1-4). This quotation explains that the enthronement of the Son was at God's invitation. As the final quotation in this series, this text underscores all that has been affirmed in the previous verses which is: angels are inferior to the Son and can never share in the Son's position. This chapter then ends with a rhetorical question: **Are not all ministering spirits sent for service unto those about to inherit salvation?** This recalls the language of Psalm 104 (that was cited in verse 7) which contrasts the role of the angels as ministering spirits with the role of the Son seated in His royal majesty. The service of the angels is for "those who are to inherit salvation: they however do not primarily serve in the heavenly sanctuary. The royal language used in this chapter speaks of Jesus Christ in terms of being King.²⁰ Jesus Christ is portrayed as King of all that is created, of both the earthly and the heavenly realms and is superior in this and a multitude of other ways to angels.

The role of this chapter is to enable the audience to begin to understand the place of Jesus Christ in relationship to the

²⁰ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, pp. 50-51.




creation, to heaven, and to earth, to the angels, and to God. In this understanding would then begin the process of helping the people to understand both the place of the Old Testament revelations given in Scripture and their place in God's plans for the current time as well as the future. In order to begin this process, it is crucial to recognize the status, nature, and role of Jesus Christ. For us today, this understanding is also incredibly important as so often we live as if we must walk in fear and trepidation while the author of Hebrews would challenge us to walk in faith and confidence, after all, we are servants of the King and even more than that. We serve the creator, the sustainer, the one who stands above all that we see and far more. We are challenged to live in faith and confidence, rather than in fear and trepidation. We are challenged to live in service of the King.

Synopsis

From the outset, the author of Hebrews begins addressing the fact that God has spoken to humanity and then he begins to contrast the way this occurred in the past with the way it occurred in the sending of His Son. Implicit in this explanation is that there has been a change, a difference between how God communicated in one time as opposed to another time. From the very outset we are given information regarding both the nature and power of the Son. He is not only heir of all things, He also created them. He is in reality, all that God is, as His reflection, His imprint, and in His power. In addition to all of this, He is also described as the one who has made purification for our sins, all sins. He sits in heaven in the place of honor, at the right hand of God. He sits there not simply as a rite of inheritance, but through His own excellence.

The author of Hebrews, at verse 5, begins an extended comparison of Jesus to the angels using the Old Testament to make his case. In each instance Jesus is shown to be incomparably superior to the angels as God's Son. The chapter ends with a final volley where the role of the angels is explained more fully and the concept of them as servants for the sake of those who are to



inherit salvation is brought very much to the forefront. Of course this is a reference to humanity, who will benefit from the salvation offered by God.

This chapter should challenge us in not only as to how we view Jesus Christ, but it should challenge our perceptions of the universe as a whole, and our understanding of our place within that universe. It should, in that sense, change our grasp of reality and the way we live our lives each day. We are servants of the King.

Questions

1. Why do you think it would need to be explained that Jesus was not an angel?
2. How do you perceive the role of the Old Testament for us today?
3. How are Jesus and the Old Testament related to each other?
4. What are some ways that you see Jesus Christ revealing the nature and intentions of God?
5. What does it mean for Christ to sustain all things?
6. Why do you think it was necessary for Jesus to make purification for sins?
7. How would you define honor and glory? What do you think their role should play in our lives?
8. Why is the Son of God an exalted title?
9. What is the role of worship in exaltation? Contrast the role of the Son who is to be worshipped by angels with other places in Scripture where it is specifically forbidden to worship angels (cf. Colossians 2:18; Revelation 9:20; 19:10; 22:9)?
10. How does the fact that angels are made into wind and fire fit into the argument that Jesus is superior to the angels (verse 7)?
11. What does it mean for Jesus to sit on the throne of God?

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12. What do you think it means for God to wield “the righteous scepter”?
 13. In verse 11, the idea of the heaven and earth perishing is contrasted with the Son remaining, what are we to understand from this?
 14. What is the implication of Jesus sitting at the right hand of God (verse 13)?
 15. Who are those that are intended to inherit salvation (verse 14)?
 16. Why is understanding the superiority of Christ over the angels important for us today?
 17. What is the role of the Old Testament for us today as Christians living in the 21st century?

To Take Home

What is Important to know?

As we examine not only the verses of Hebrews chapter 1, but also the contextual framework for which it was written it is important for us to know a great many things. One of those things is that people were struggling then, as they do now, as to the implications of Jesus and His relationship to the Old Testament. How then does our understanding of these things change how we perceive our world and our role in the world on a daily basis?

Where is God in these words?

As we look at the words of chapter 1 it becomes hard to distinguish between God and His words. What are some ways that you see God in His word? What perceptions do those words create in your mind and your heart relative to His nature, and His calling for His creation? The author of Hebrews goes to great lengths to indicate that Jesus is indeed the “Word” of God. Taking that then for granted, what is God’s message for us?

What does any of this mean for how I live my life?

How we perceive the world and our reality changes who we are. These two things are linked in an inseparable loop. If we only see the darkness and the danger in our world, this cannot help but change how we respond to that world. An optimist sees the glass as half full while the pessimist sees the glass as half-empty. What are some ways that you think having Jesus Christ in charge of the universe should change the way you live your life today, and tomorrow? Why?

What is the word of God calling us to do?

So often as we go to church, or even when we read the Bible, we fail to either fully apply what is said to us individually and as a community. As you read the words of Hebrews 1 what are some ways that you feel God is challenging us both on an individual basis, and as a community? What are some ways that you would respond to the call of God if you understood it? Why? How do you think God calls us today? In what ways is this the same as God has always called people, and in what ways is it different? What do you think are the implications of failing to follow the calling of God in our lives and in our community?