

Hebrews 1:4-14

“Christ’s Superiority over the Angels”

Introduction:

In this passage, the author begins to show the superiority of Christ over different specific things the Jews venerated in Old Covenant Judaism, beginning with how Christ was superior to the angels. The question is, why did the author think it was necessary to demonstrate Christ’s superiority over the angels? In what way would making that point better enable him to persuade his readers that they should not abandon their allegiance to Christ? Some interpreters have suggested that the recipients of the letters were tempted to believe that angels played a role in a person gaining eternal salvation. However, the absence of any explicit warnings about the danger of such beliefs, and the fact that for the most part the discussion of angels disappears after chapter two, argues against this conclusion. A better explanation is that the author would have felt it necessary to make this point because in the Judaism of the day, angels were seen as the ultimate creation of God in terms of their power and their role in God’s purposes. This can be seen in the popular rabbinic teaching at the time that pictured the Messiah, during the coming Messianic age, being in subordination to Michael the archangel. Since within Judaism, angels were understood to be the most exalted beings in existence apart from God Himself, asserting the Son’s superiority over the angels would greatly accentuate the exalted status of Christ. And this part of the argument directly supported the author’s first admonition in the letter (2:1-4). The author’s reasoning was essentially the following syllogism:

- Christ was more exalted than the angels
- Those who disregarded a message given through angels were punished
- Therefore, it would be even more certain that if one disregarded a message given by Christ that one would be punished

I. Superior because He is the Son: (vs.4-6)

The author of the epistle introduces this portion of his argument by writing, *“having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they”* (vs.4). Two important verbs stand out here; *“having become”* and *“obtained”*. Both verbs imply that at some point there was a transition in the existence of the Son, where prior to it He had not yet become what is described here and had not yet obtained what was later to be His. But this raises an important question, since Jesus is God, and since God is by nature immutable, in what sense could the Second Person of the Trinity have gained something He did not previously possess? In what sense could He ever have not had a more excellent name than the angels? The answer to this is that the writer of Hebrews was not comparing the nature of the Second Person of the Trinity to angels; he was comparing Christ in His role as the Messianic Son to the position occupied by the angels. It is important to keep in mind that the title *“Son”* is messianic; and relates to the role Christ fulfilled, being the mediator in God’s plan of redemption.

In regard to this it is helpful to understand the way concepts such as sonship, firstborn, begotten, and inheritance were understood in the first century. In the world of the Roman Empire, it was the custom that though a male child was related to his father; he only gained the official status of a son when he attained adulthood. This status then was related to the role the son would have in the family from then on. It is helpful to know that this was a position of status in the family that a father could withhold from his son if he chose to. Another important cultural tradition in Roman society was that a man could adopt an adult outside of his physical family, an individual whom he felt was worthy to be his son and heir; despite that person not being blood kin. In addition, the idea of begetting could be used in a figurative sense, it could convey being brought into a new relationship with someone that changed one's life (I Cor.4:15). And finally, being the first-born and an heir was understood at that time as a position of supremacy over the rest of the family and did not necessarily include how one came to be in the family.

As the author continued with his flow of thought, he specifically clarified how the "*Son*" became better than the angels and obtained a superior position to them. The Greek word translated as "*more excellent*" is a comparative term and it refers to that which is distinguished from other things in the sense of being superior in quality to something or someone else in some way. In this case He obtained a superior name. And in that culture, names were more than ways of identifying or distinguishing between people, names said something about the person who bore the name, in the sense that the name described their nature or character. The question at this point is what specific "*name*" was the author referring to that Christ obtained? In light of its prominent use in this chapter, many interpreters have concluded that the name that the author had in mind was "*Son*". However, the name "*Son*" could not be intended here because if that were so it would run contrary to the logic of the author's argument. In that culture, the title "*Son*" was not something that someone could inherit. In fact, just the reverse was true, one was only entitled to an inheritance because they were already a son by birth or adoption prior to the dispersal of that inheritance. In addition, at certain points in the Old Testament, angels are referred to as God's sons, and thus the title "*Son*" would not suggest Christ's superiority to the angels, it would instead suggest His equality with them. In light of what was written in the first three verses, the name refers to a position, rank, or title that had previously only belonged to the Father but had since also been applied to Christ. In accordance with what Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians (2:9), it is best to conclude that Christ obtained the exalted name of "*Lord*" through His perfect obedience to the redemptive will of God.

In verse five the author wrote "*For to which of the angels did He ever say: 'You are My Son, today I have begotten You?' And again: 'I will be to Him a Father, and He shall be to Me a Son'.*" According to some Christian groups, these words refer to the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. However, it is important to keep in mind that the NT does not teach that Christ was a hybrid half-divine and half-human offspring that resulted from the mating of a god and a human woman. That is a pagan notion found in many ancient mythologies. The NT does not suggest that Jesus was God's

Son in a physical sense. Instead, the author's true meaning can be properly understood by looking at two different portions of Scripture.

First, the author's meaning is clarified by understanding the context of the OT quotations that the author employs here. The first quotation is from Psalm two (vs.7). That Psalm is structured according to the pattern of enthronement songs that would be sung at the coronation of a king when he was anointed and installed into his royal position. Therefore, the context of the Psalm has nothing to do with someone's birth; rather it relates to someone being established in a role of sovereignty. The second verse cited is from II Samuel chapter seven (vs.14). The context is God's promise to establish the dynasty of David forever through his son (historically this would have been assumed to be Solomon). Over time, aided by the writings of the prophets, Jewish scholars recognized that this was ultimately a reference to the coming Messiah (they were helped in coming to this conclusion by the fact that this coming king was referred to as one who is anointed, the key word in the title "*Messiah*"). Later, Christians learned from Christ that this conclusion was correct. The Jews and Christians of that era understood that a prophecy could have both a new and a remote fulfillment, with the latter fulfillment representing the more complete one. Again, the promise in the verse does not relate to birth, but to installation to a particular role; that of a sovereign.

The second portion of Scripture that clarifies the author's meaning is Paul's interpretation of the first of the two verses cited here in Hebrews 1:5. While preaching to a Jewish audience, Paul was recorded as saying the following about Jesus:

"God raised Him from the dead. He was seen for many days by those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are His witnesses to the people. And we declare to you glad tidings — that promise which was made to the fathers. God has fulfilled this for us their children, in that He has raised up Jesus. As it is also written in the second Psalm: 'You are My Son, today I have begotten You.'"

Acts 13:30-33

Paul clearly and unequivocally states that the day that Christ was "*begotten*" was the day of His resurrection and exaltation. Therefore, it was at His resurrection that Christ was made better than the angels; for it was at that point that He obtained the better title (i.e. name) than what the angels possessed. This same idea is clarified even further in the next chapter, where the author wrote:

"But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone."

Hebrews 2:9

Immediately after quoting Psalm eight (a Psalm that speaks about mankind being created a little lower than the angels), the author of Hebrews noted that at the incarnation, Christ was also made lower than the angels since He humbled Himself to be in the role of a human being. However, it is important to recognize that the

citation of Psalm 2:7 teaches us that Christ was exalted above the angels in terms of His role in God's plan at the resurrection; where He was installed as the Messianic Lord, the mediator of God's salvation to His people. It is important to understand that the reference to Sonship here does not relate to Christ's eternal relationship with the Father, rather it relates to the role the Father gave Him in His eternal plan of redemption.

Next, to further demonstrate Christ's superior to the angels, the writer asked a second rhetorical question: "*But when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says: 'Let all the angels of God worship Him'*" (vs.6). It is clear that the author intended his readers to understand that the one referred to in this verse as the "*firstborn*" is the same one that was referred to in the previous verse as the "*Son*". Also, in asking this series of rhetorical questions the author was not seeking to gain answers but was drawing out from his readers a concession that nothing like these things were ever said to the angels; thus, reinforcing his point about Christ's superiority to them. This quotation is from Psalm 97:7 and it was obviously a command of God that the angels were to worship the Son. The implication is that God never commanded that an angel was to be worshipped (in fact the Law of God specifically prohibited the worship of any being other than God-Ex.20:3). By citing the command that the angels were to worship Christ, the author was taking the point further to demonstrate the vast difference in position between the angels and Christ.

The phrase, "*when He again brings the firstborn into the world*", is well translated in the NKJV. The natural reading of the Greek text takes the adverb "*again*" (*palin*) as modifying the verb "*brings into*" (*eisagage*). The time when the firstborn is led back into this world is the same time when His Lordship will be universally recognized by those in heaven and those on earth (Phil.2:10-11), and it is the time when all the angels will worship Him. That time is shortly after the Second Coming of Christ.

The word translated as "*world*", refers to the inhabited earth, to mankind, to the social or political fabric of humanity's communal life. Some interpreters have argued that the context requires the reader to understand that this is a reference to the heavenly world of eschatological salvation which the Lord entered by way of His ascension. However, common sense dictates that this Greek term must mean the same thing here that it means in the next chapter (2:5). That is because there isn't any hint in the context that the words are used in two different senses, thus the reader would have no reason to interpret them differently. And in chapter two it is clear that the author was referring to the physical world inhabited by humans as it will exist after the Second Coming. Though the angels always worshipped the second person of the Trinity as God; here the author was speaking of them being commanded to worship Christ as the glorified God-man.

The author's point is clear from God's instructions to the angels that they worship Christ, that He is superior to them. Also, the reader should not ignore the startling implications of the author's interpretation here, since worship is only to be rendered to God Himself.

II. Superior because He is God: (vs.7-9)

In these verses, the author of Hebrews contrasted specific OT statements made in regard to the position of angels with those that relate to Christ:

“And of the angels He says: ‘Who makes His angels spirits and His ministers a flame of fire.’ But to the Son He says: ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness more than Your companions.’

Verse seven contains a quotation of Psalm 104:4, and it is a difficult verse to interpret because the meaning of the original Hebrew verse is complicated by what seems to be (from the perspective of the English language) an incomplete thought. The best way to understand what is being said here is that God is comparing the angels to the wind and to fire. In both Hebrew and Greek, the words translated into English as “*spirits*” can also refer to blowing winds. The point of the comparison is that as these two elements of nature obey God’s every thought, so do the angels. This imagery emphasizes their position as one of absolute servitude to God. It also conveys that the way they serve God changes according to the nature of the task that He gives to them. The particular Greek word translated as “*ministers*”, refers to one who renders service; however, it is not a term that is used for service in a general sense, rather it refers to service related to religious duties motivated by religious devotion. And the Greek term translated as “*makes*” does not naturally refer to designating someone to a role, it instead refers to causing or shaping something, so that here it conveys the idea of creation. Therefore, the author was expressing that God specifically created them to be servants to carry out His will as an act of worship.

In verse eight the author quoted Psalm 45:6. In its original context this was part of a wedding song, extolling the virtues of a Davidic king and his bride. There are likely three reasons why the author chose to quote this verse here:

1. The one sitting on the throne is addressed as God, an important, even climactic argument for the superiority of the Son over the angels.
2. The verse ascribes an eternal throne to the king, which complements the previously quoted word of the Davidic Covenant (vs.5, cf. II Sam.7:14).
3. The verse uses the language of anointing, which is the linguistic basis for the title Christ.

The conjunction “*de*” (*but*) at the beginning of this verse functions with the particle “*men*” (which is untranslatable) in the previous verse to form a contrast. The contrast is between what God said about the angels in the previous verse, and what God says about Christ in this one. Therefore, in contrast to the angels, the Son is addressed as God (it should be noted that this quotation in Hebrews is the most emphatic expression of the deity of Christ in the entire NT, and since it is based on a quotation from the OT, it clearly conveys that the doctrine of the Trinity is consistent with OT teaching). The Greek wording “*ho theos*” (*O God*) is a nominative form expressing a vocative function (a vocative is the form of a word

that indicates that it is being used to address someone). This usage is quite common, particularly in quotations of the Septuagint (as in this verse). Some cults argue that the translation should read “*God is your throne*”. However, not only does that translation not make sense, but it is also only adopted to avoid the obvious conclusion that Christ is addressed here as God. Therefore, the assertion is not made for good exegetical reasons, instead, it is rooted in a theological bias. This phrase is irrefutable proof that the New Testament affirms the deity of Christ. However, though this observation is true, it is not the main idea that the author was asserting. The emphasis in this verse is upon the idea that unlike the angels, Christ is not a servant, but a sovereign equal in essence and authority with the Father. The rest of the imagery reinforces the point that Christ is the universal sovereign. The throne and the scepter were symbols of the absolute political power of ancient kings. And anointing was the way that ancient sovereigns of Israel were installed into their kingly role.

In verse nine we read, “*You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness more than Your companions.*” Here for the second verse in a row, the Son is identified as God, and this time by God the Father. Here we are told that unlike human monarchs, the Divine Messianic King loves righteousness and hates lawlessness. The Greek wording expresses that the Son loves what is right (or just) and despises what is evil and twisted. The phrase indicates that the positive affirmation that the Son loves righteousness involves a definite rejection of its opposite, lawlessness (this dual affirmation is particularly relevant to the main subject of the epistle—that true righteousness through Christ is essential for ultimate salvation). This sort of expression was typical of Hebrew poetic style, where an idea is stated, followed by a denial of its opposite. It expresses the reality that one who genuinely loves righteousness has no alternative but to hate lawlessness. Something only that only the Messiah Jesus Christ has fulfilled perfectly. The Greek word translated as “*companions*” refers to sharing in, or partaking of something with others, in the sense of being partners in some endeavor, or experience. Here, the reference to the Son’s “*companions*” has in mind the company of redeemed saints whom the Son is not ashamed to call His brothers (2:11), it does not refer to angels who are never pictured as partners with the Messianic King. The practice of anointing with oil was part of the ceremony for installing a monarch to his royal office, and here the idea that Christ has been installed to a position of sovereignty, and His companions have joined Him as fellow heirs to the throne.

III. Superior because He is the Sovereign: (vs.10-14)

In verse ten we read, “*And: You, Lord, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands.*” Beginning here and going through verse twelve, the author quotes Psalm 102:25-27. The conjunction “*and*” indicates that the author was again quoting something that God had said (we see the same in verse six). The one addressed as “*Lord*” is the same individual who was addressed as the “*Son*” in verse eight. In the original context, the title “*Lord*” does

not appear, but the one who is addressed in the Psalm is God, while here in this verse the statement is applied to the Son. The phrase “*laid the foundation of the earth*” is an idiomatic expression related to the original act of creation. At this point in the author’s train of thought, the focus changes from the exalted nature of Christ’s sovereignty to the everlasting duration of His sovereignty.

In verses eleven and twelve we read, “*They will perish, but You remain; and they will all grow old like a garment; like a cloak You will fold them up, and they will be changed. But You are the same, and Your years will not fail.*”. The Greek word translated as “*perish*” refers to something brought to an end, so that it ceases to function or live. And the Greek word translated as “*remain*” refers to the permanent or continual existence of something. The Greek word translated as “*cloak*” refers to an article of clothing that covers or wraps around one’s body like a robe. The idea behind the words “*Your years will not fail*” is that the years of Christ’s existence will never cease or come to an end. Together these words stress the eternality of Christ in contrast to the temporal nature of the current creation. The imagery from this Psalm is that of a loose-fitting garment that is worn to the point where it begins to fall apart and must be discarded. The idea that the imagery conveys (which originally referred to Yahweh but is here said to relate to Christ) is that whereas the physical creation will eventually wear out and have to be replaced by a new heavens and earth, the Son will continue to exist as the sovereign of creation, just as a man outlives the usefulness of his clothing from time to time.

Some interpreters have suggested that these verses speak about the total eradication of all created things. However, in light of what we read in other portions of Scripture, it is better to understand this as a reference to the future destruction of this fallen world, followed by the restoration of all creation that precedes the eternal state. This reference was not meant to convey the idea that God has a negative view of the creation itself, rather it is simply a reference to God’s judgment upon sinful mankind. These final words represent the climax of this particular quotation, whereas the creation is temporary, the Messiah is eternal, an idea that highlights His superiority even over the angels.

Then the author makes the final comparison between Christ and the angels in this chapter by asking the rhetorical questions “*But to which of the angels has He ever said: ‘Sit at My right hand, ‘till I make Your enemies Your footstool?’ Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?*” The first quotation is from Psalm 110:1. All Jews understood this Psalm to be Messianic. It pictures God speaking to the Messiah and promising to make His enemies His footstool. The imagery of being made someone’s “*footstool*” was rooted in the custom where an ancient sovereign would literally put his foot on the neck of a defeated enemy. Here, this imagery indicates that God the Father would subjugate the enemies of the Messiah in order to demonstrate to all creation, in a powerful way, the grandeur of the Messiah’s role in the universe. The imagery here where God Himself fights on behalf of the Messiah in order to reinforce the certainty of His exaltation, further stresses the distinction that exists between the

status of the Son, and the status of the angels. The allusion to Christ's enemies being made His footstool would give these beleaguered Jewish Christians a reason to persevere in their devotion to and commitment to Christ. Because it pictured, in a powerful way, that the suffering would be temporary, and in the end their faithfulness would receive an eternal reward.

There is a change in tense related to this last declaration of God about Christ. The verb is in the perfect tense, stressing the continuing effect of what God has said. The implication is that this statement represents an irrevocable promise. In the culture of the OT, to sit at the right hand of a king meant that one was equal to that king, that his authority was yours. The clear implication of the rhetorical question is the acknowledgement of the readers that nothing like this was ever said to any of the angels.

It is suggested that through the Son, the Davidic king, the ultimate victory that was promised to Israel becomes a reality. The Father's final suppression of all of Christ's enemies will bring the final manifestation of Christ's eschatological victory. Paul outlined the same thing in one of his epistles (I Cor.15:24-25).

In contrast to the promise made to the Son, we are told that not only do the angels serve God, but they also provide service to the saints (who are of course in subjection to Christ). Using two distinct words for rendering service, one that emphasizes the lowliness of one's position, the other that what is done, is done out of sacred or religious devotion. The picture is clear; Christ is infinitely superior in His position to that of the angelic host. The structure of the rhetorical question indicates that a positive answer to the question is anticipated, meaning that the readers were expected to acknowledge that the angels were in servitude to God. . In addition, this wording about the angels providing personal assistance would be an encouragement to these believers in the midst of their difficulties. Knowing that the angels had been dispatched to help them succeed in their efforts to persevere would help them to persevere.

Conclusion:

This chapter lays the groundwork for the warning and exhortation that we find at the beginning of chapter two by presenting the reader with the exalted nature of Christ to emphasize the importance of obedience to what He has commanded.

The point in this chapter is very straightforward. Christ is both God, and the exalted sovereign over all creation. To flee from Christ is to leave behind the possibility of salvation. To rebel against angels would have been a frightening thought to first century Jewish Christians. How much more frightening should it have been to them (and by extension to us) to rebel against God's appointed king.