

“Greater than Angels”—Hebrews 1:4-14

Brandon Holiski

Southern Oaks Baptist Church

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Take a Bible and meet me in Hebrews 1...

Every generation develops inordinate fixations on certain topics related to spiritual things. These fixations give way to imagination and that imagination gives way to many unorthodox notions that, over time, emerge as the accepted norms. There are many examples of this from our own day. We can think, for example, of the rise of these heavenly journey books, where someone claims to have died, entered into heaven, and then returned to tell us all about it (for the small fee connected to their book sale). How many of those have been released in the past decade? Curiously, their descriptions share so little in common. Imagine that. And this is just one example, but others could be cited from our own lifetimes ranging from end-times views to obsessions with certain spiritual gifts.

But this is not something unique to our generation. In the first century, one topic that attracted a lot of speculation had to do with angelic beings. You can see this infatuation developing in the Jewish literature that came out of the intertestamental period, that is, the centuries between the events of the Old and New Testaments, sometime referred to as Second Temple Judaism. This Jewish literature has much to say about angelic beings, no doubt fueled by some of the amazing things the Scriptures say about them. All sorts of ideas that we would find strange that anyone would even care about were debated in Judaism in that period. By the time you get to the days when the book of Hebrews was written, there was a lot of misinformation out there about angels and an unhealthy emphasis on these creatures.

I suppose the same could be said of our day. There is a lot of attention given to angels today and most of the ways they are depicted in our art and conversations have very little in common with the descriptions we find in the Bible. Just like the original audience, there certainly is a good mixture of truth and fiction present in most people's view of angels. I read one author this past week who speculated that spiritual beings like angels “appeal to our age because they seem to offer us access to heavenly blessings without having to deal directly with heaven's God himself.”¹ He's probably correct. And, furthermore, there remains much confusion on the relationship between Christ and the angels among many of the cults. So while this section may seem a bit detached from your experience, it has more relevance for our day than might immediately be obvious.

But why bring this up at this point in Hebrews? Does it seem random? Well it's actually not. Remember that the writer begins this letter by contrasting the way God has spoken in the past with the way He has spoken in the last days in a superior and climactic way by His Son. He's going to go on to show that the covenant that the Son has established in these last days is greater than the old covenant established in the past. He has to do this because some of his audience are, for whatever reason, being tempted to abandon the Christian faith and go back into their former Judaism. To help them avoid that departure, he labors to show the superiority of the new covenant in Christ. But what does that have to do with angels?

Well, the old covenant, connected to the Old Testament Law, was revealed in part through angels. In fact, if you look at chapter 2, verse 2, you see the author referring to that—*“the message declared by angels.”* This is likely a reference to the Law, which the Scriptures suggest elsewhere was *“delivered by angels”*

(Acts 7:53). So demonstrating that Christ is superior to angels serves the larger argument that Hebrews is making, which has to do with “the superiority of the new covenant to the old, the gospel to the law, that covenant which is mediated by Christ to the covenant mediated by angels.”² Christ has rendered the old obsolete, so we dare not trade away what He offers in exchange for what He supplants.

Yet that was a real temptation for these Jewish Christians. Why? Well, while we can’t know all their particulars, it almost certainly had to do with pressures and persecutions they were experiencing in society at large and Jewish society in particular for their belief in the divinity of Christ. Maybe if they would just accept that Jesus was something less than God, maybe an angel, or even the most exalted angel, then their Jewish family and friends would accept them and the local synagogue would welcome them back with open arms. Instead of an “outright denial of Christ” they could merely adopt “a different affirmation of him” that would be more palatable to those around them.³ But this kind of compromise is very dangerous, as this book makes clear. So the author is pleading with them not to make such a mistake that could cost them everything in the end.

So one could argue that, while the particular issues may have changed a bit in our day, the same temptations are still present. Kent Hughes helps us see the common experience:

“It takes only a little thought to identify with this temptation, because the supremacy of Christ brings tension in everyday life. The world bristles at ‘Jesus only.’ But one does not have to deny him outright to get along. Rather, we are encouraged to simply affirm that he was the very best of men to ever walk on this planet—that his ethics were exalted—that his life was heroic from beginning to end—and that he is the supreme example for sacrifice. If one does this, the pressure will be off. What a temptation for the Hebrew Christian in a life-threatening context. A simple change of emphasis on the person of Christ from Son to angel and one would be spared suffering.”⁴

But what good is it to be spared suffering in this life, if in so doing you are trading away belief in the only One who can spare you suffering in the next? So the writer of Hebrews shows us, by way of seven Old Testament quotations, that Christ is not an angel and is infinitely superior to all angels. He’s trying to “recalibrate the theological understating of his audience—particularly concerning Christ’s relationship to angels.”⁵ It is to his argument that we now will turn our attention.

Verse 4 is the bridge verse that connects the prologue to this first section. Let’s begin reading at verse 4. Follow along as I read. This is God’s Word concerning the Son...

“having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.”⁵ For to which of the angels did God ever say, ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you’? Or again, ‘I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son’? ⁶ And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, ‘Let all God’s angels worship him.’ ⁷ Of the angels he says, ‘He makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire.’ ⁸ But of the Son he says, ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom. ⁹ You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.’ ¹⁰ And, ‘You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands; ¹¹ they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment, ¹² 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.’ ¹³ 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’? ¹⁴ Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?”
(Hebrews 1:4-14)

There is so much good stuff in this chapter, but people usually just gloss over it because they are in such a

hurry. Before we get to some of that though, let me pause and just illustrate again the incredible skill of the writer. He is not just pulling arbitrary verses out of thin air and stringing them together in some random way. He has chosen these particular verses for good reason and he has arranged them incredibly thoughtfully.

Let's start with the *reason* these particular verses are cited. It's not simply that these verses show the superiority of the Son to angels. It's the way they show His superiority to angels. All of these verses have to do with the Son's divine status and/or His status as the long-awaited Davidic King. The writer is showing that Jesus is superior to angels specifically because He is divine and because He is the King that God promised Israel. There were things said of and promised to that King that were never said to an angel. So the cumulative effect of all of these Old Testament quotations, which are fulfilled in Christ, is that they decisively show Christ's superiority to angels.

Now consider the *arrangement* of these two themes. Do you remember a couple of weeks ago we talked about a way of writing known as a "chiasm"? I told you the writer of Hebrews loves to use chiasms. Well, just like the prologue, this section also has a chiastic arrangement as well. We won't linger on this for long, but it's at least worth pointing out so you can see the care with which our author is writing this section and something of his main points. This will make more sense once we have a chance to finish considering each of the Old Testament quotations points of Christ's Divine status or His Davidic status, but if you'll give me the benefit of the doubt for now, I would argue that the themes are arranged like this:

- A The Son's Status as the Davidic King (1:5)
- B The Son's Status as Divine (1:6-7)
- C The Son's Status as the Divine-Davidic King (1:8-9)**
- B' The Son's Status as Divine (1:10-12)
- A' The Son's Status as the Davidic King (1:13)⁶

So at the heart of this chapter are the citations that bring together these two themes, showing that the Davidic King that Israel had been waiting for has arrived in the Son, who also shared the Divine nature. He is both Son of David and Son of God. The Divine-Davidic King. This is how the author shows Christ's superiority to the angels. With that bird's-eye view in mind, let's get down to the nitty-gritty. What we have time to do today is look at the bookends of this passage that deal with Christ being the Davidic King (A and A'). So that will be our focus this week. Then in a couple weeks we will work our way to the center (B, B', and C). Make sense? Good. Then let's get to it...

After having made purifications for sin, the Son sat down at the Father's right hand, according to verse 4, "*having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.*" This raises a question. What excellent "*name*" is being referenced here?

Hardly anyone argues that the name is "Jesus," though that is the name we know Him by ever since the incarnation. Some say the name is the title "Lord," which also doubled as a Greek translation for the personal name of God (Yahweh) revealed in the Old Testament. This doesn't mean that there was ever a time when Jesus wasn't "Lord," but rather that in raising Christ from the dead the Father was making plain that Jesus, the God-man, is in fact the exalted Lord as He claimed when He walked the earth prior to His crucifixion. In support of this view, Philippians 2 is often brought into the conversation. There we read that because of Christ's humility and sacrifice, God the Father "*highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*" (Philippians 2:9-11). The resurrection and ascension clearly were the Father's public validation that Jesus is Lord, a fact that everyone will acknowledge one day.

As incredible as that truth remains, it doesn't seem to be the point the writer of Hebrews is making here. Why? Because look at the way the next verse, verse 5, begins. It begins with the word "For" or "Because," which shows that there is a logical connection between verses 4 and 5. Christ has been given a more excellent name (verse 4). What's the proof of that statement? Verse 5—"*For to which of the angels did God ever say, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you'?* or again, *'I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son'?*" So what is the name or title that God uses of Jesus in those citations? "Son". He calls Him the Son. He never called any angel His Son. Only Jesus is *the* Son. So "the more excellent name that makes Jesus better than the angels is 'Son.'"⁷

Now maybe you're thinking, well wasn't He always "the Son," so why say, as verse 4 does, that "*he has inherited*" this name? Paul helps us to answer that question in Romans 1. Here's how that famous letter opens,

"Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God,² which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures,³ concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh..." (Romans 1:1-3)

Notice that He too emphasizes that God spoke through the prophets in the past and that Christ, the Son, was a descendent of David. But then He says this about the Son:

"and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord..." (Romans 1:4; cf. Ephesians 1:20)

So, according to Paul, there is a sense in which Jesus was declared the Son of God at the resurrection. But it's not that He was not the Son of God before the resurrection (cf. His baptism, transfiguration, etc.). It's that the resurrection was the Father making a public and definitive declaration of this reality "*in power.*" I think that is the same idea behind the inheritance language that the writer of Hebrews is using. As John Piper explains it,

*"He has always been the Son of God, just like he has always been the heir of all things (v. 2). But when he had made purification for sins and triumphed over death and Satan, Christ was declared Son of God and heir of all things on a new basis and in a new way. Now he reigns as the God-man Jesus Christ—the Son of God not only by his eternal right, but now by right of his victory over sin and death."*⁸

Now the point of verse 5 is that the same is not true of angels. God never said anything like that of any angel. He backs that up with some Old Testament references. The first citation in verse 5 is from Psalm 2:7—"*You are my Son, today I have begotten you*".

That's a strange quote for modern readers. We might wonder, why would God say, "today I have begotten you" of the Son, if the Son is eternal (which the opening verses suggest)? How could an eternal being ever be considered "begotten"? Well this is a question that the early church and early creeds address at great length and there is certainly not time to explore all of that. Suffice it to say that this particular "begotten" passage is an instance where Scripture helps us interpret Scripture. The writer is not referring to the virgin birth. He's not even referring to the eternal begetting of the Son by the Father, for those of you familiar with those discussions. Something else is in view. Let me explain.

Once upon a time Paul was preaching a sermon in Pisidian Antioch. During that sermon he also quotes Psalm 2:7. After describing the crucifixion of Christ, Paul said,

“And when they had carried out all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. ³⁰ But God raised him from the dead, ³¹ and for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people. ³² And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, ³³ this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you.”” (Acts 13:29-33)

So Paul quotes the exact same section of Psalm 2. But when did he say that “begetting” occurred? The resurrection. So the verse is used in Acts 13 (and I believe also in Hebrews 1) as a reference to God’s public declaration and confirmation of the Jesus Sonship when He raised Him from the dead and exalted Him to His right hand. Just like Paul says in Romans 1, He declared Him to be the Son in power by the resurrection from the dead. So Psalm 2 is fulfilled in Christ, but it was fulfilled at “Christ’s exaltation and enthronement as Son subsequent to the resurrection”.⁹ So it is right for us to view Christ as the reigning King.

But there is more that can be said on the writer’s use of Psalm 2. We must remember that Psalm 2 is a very famous text for a first-century, Jewish reader. It was recognized it as a famous messianic text, which means that it was a text that said something about the promised Messiah, a descendant of David, whom God was sending to deliver and rule His people. Why did they consider it a messianic text? Because the word “Messiah” is actually used in Psalm 2. Here’s how the psalm begins...

“Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? ² The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed...” (Psalm 2:1-2)

Who is the “Anointed”? The promised Davidic King. But the word “Anointed” there is the Hebrew word that sounds like “Messiah.” The title “Messiah” literally means “anointed one.” That Hebrew word is translated into Greek as “Christ.” So “Christ” means “Messiah” and both mean “anointed one.” So this Psalm begins describing the nations plotting against the Lord and His Messiah. But the Lord in heaven is then described in the psalm as laughing at their scheming because it all amounts to nothing (Psalm 2:3-6). The nations can do no harm to the Lord and they cannot thwart His plan for the His Messiah.

And what is his plan for His Messiah? That’s what the Psalmist describes in the verses immediately after the one the writer of Hebrews quotes from. Commercial. Modern readers have to remember that ancient Jewish readers knew the Scriptures very well, so the biblical authors quote passages with the assumption that the readers will remember the context. That’s why it’s so important for Christians today to look up the original context when New Testament writers quote from the Old Testament. End of commercial. So what do the very next verses say about the Messiah? *“You are my Son; today I have begotten you.”* Next couple of verses...

“Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.” (Psalm 2:8-9)

What is that a picture of? The Messiah as heir of all things. The Messiah being exalted above all nations and ruling them as King. It’s a picture of the Davidic King ruling over everyone, including all His enemies whom He has utterly defeated and brought into absolute subjection. So Israel expected there to be a descendent of David one day that could be described in that way. That Son of David was Jesus Christ. He is the long awaited Davidic King.

And is that not also the point of the final Old Testament quotation in Hebrews 1? Look at verse 13.

“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?’” (Hebrews 1:13)

What is that? That’s verse 3 again. That’s the Son reigning at God’s right hand over everyone and everything. His enemies are seen as subjected. They are made His “*footstool*.” But the thing to notice again is that He is quoting from another Messianic text that describes the promised Davidic King that God would send for Israel. This is from Psalm 110, which just so happens to be the most frequently quoted psalm in the New Testament.¹⁰ What does that tell you? It tells you that the “Christ as King” theme is very prominent in the New Testament.

But it’s not just Psalms 2 and 110 that the author taps into that theme with. Look again at the second half of verse 5. Drawing on 2 Samuel 7:14, we read, “*I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son*”. Once again, we are expected to know something about where that quotation comes from. What is 2 Samuel 7 about? The covenant that God made with David, the Davidic Covenant. That is one of the most important passages in the New Testament and it just so happens to lead us to Christmas. So we are going to save that verse for next week, Christmas Eve, when we gather together for one service at 10:30 am. We will take the Lord’s Supper together at that morning service, so come with your heart prepared for that. And please, by all means, bring a friend (or an enemy).

But before you close your Bible and mentally check out, let’s ask a final question: Just who are those enemies presented as Christ’s footstool? Well, of course, that could be anyone who sets himself or herself up against the Lord and rejects His Christ. But it’s broader than that. It’s all His enemies and all the enemies of His people. And that extends this hope beyond mere flesh and blood categories. In one of the most famous biblical passages about the Resurrection, the Apostle Paul wrote this:

“Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power.”²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” (1 Corinthians 15:24-26)

Isn’t that beautiful? Come on people! Death, the last enemy, defeated and subjected under the feet of Christ. Where would we be without such hope? We’d still be in our sins. We’d still have no hope in life and death. Jesus came and offered up His life on the cross because, among other things, we had an enemy called death that was gunning for us. He put Himself between us and death’s crosshairs and He took the bullet for us. That bullet had the form of nails. And those nails fastened our sin to this Savior. But when death dealt Him a bloody welcome on the cross, God dealt death a crushing blow by raising Christ back to life three days later. By His wounds and His new life, we too can be victorious over death. That’s the good news of the Gospel. Trust in Christ to save you and He will deliver you from death. Will you trust Him? Nothing you can do and no one else you can trust will ever deliver you from death. Christ alone can defeat that enemy. Will you trust Him for that victory?

Richard Phillips writes:

“The curse of the law, sin, Satan, the worldly powers, death, the grave—these are Christ’s enemies. During his earthly ministry he advanced into the ranks of his enemy, casting out demons, purifying leprosy, bringing healing to the sick, exposing hypocrisy, opposing false teaching, humbling the proud, cleansing the temple of moneychangers, and all the while calling sinners to faith and repentance. It is especially in the extension of the gospel that he now overcomes his foes as men and women come to saving faith in him. In the end, he will have no enemies left standing, as the Book of Revelation tells us: ‘Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire’ (Rev. 20:14). ‘He will wipe away every tear from [his people’s] eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away’ (Rev.

21:4).”¹¹

Now let me close with the words of Paul from the end of that same chapter that speaks of Christ destroying that last enemy, death...

“Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ ⁵⁵ ‘O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’ ⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 15:51-57)

And all God’s people said? Amen!

Let’s pray...

¹ Richard D. Phillips, *Hebrews* (REC; Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2006), 26.

² *Ibid.*, 27.

³ R. Kent Hughes, *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul* (PWS; Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 35.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

⁵ R. Albert Mohler Jr., *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in Hebrews* (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2017), 17-18. Mohler also reminds us that the Biblical author's approach to describing Christ is a bit different than many commonly employ today: "One of the problems Christians have when we talk about Christ is that we often jump straight to the *work* of Christ before talking about the *person* of Christ. This particularly true with evangelistic conversations. We typically start by talking about what Christ has done for us without first giving a clear testimony of who Christ is. Hebrews, however, reminds us to keep first things first. 'Who is Christ?' is the first question we must address when we talk about Jesus." *Ibid.*, 16-17.

⁶ This represents an adaptation of the chiasm found in Herbert W. Bateman, *Charts on the Book of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2012), 167.

⁷ Thomas Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews* (Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation Commentary; Nashville: Holman Reference, 2015), 64. He continues, "Angels were identified as 'sons' but never as the Son (cf. Gen 6:2, 4; Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7)."

⁸ John Piper, "Jesus Christ: Infinitely Superior to Angels," preached on April 14, 1996, to Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, MN (Italics mine). Similarly, Mohler writes, "the context of Hebrews indicates that the name Jesus inherited is the name 'Son.' Again, this does not mean that Jesus was adopted into divine sonship. He has always been the eternal Son of God. Hebrews 1:2 makes this clear. Instead, as verse 5 tells us, it points to that messianic element of sonship that fulfills the promises of the Davidic covenant (Rom 1:4)." Mohler, 18. Similarly, J. I. Packer describes the relationship between the "God-man to the Father while He was on earth was not a new relationship between the Son and the Father in heaven. As in heaven, so on earth." J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1979, 54-55. And, finally, William Lane writes, "Although Jesus was the preexistent Son of God..., he entered into a new experience of sonship by virtue of his incarnation, his sacrificial death, and his subsequent exaltation." William Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (WBC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 26.

⁹ Hughes, 37.

¹⁰ "The psalm is clearly a favorite for the author for the psalm speaks of a priest-king, and this king functions as a priest according to the order of Melchizedek (Ps 110:4). The author alludes to Psalm 110 in 1:3 where he declares that the Son 'sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.' The letter elaborates upon the Melchizedekian priesthood of Jesus (5:6; 6:20; 7:1-28), drawing on Ps 110:4. When the author summarizes his 'main point,' he alludes to Ps 110:1 again, claiming that Jesus as the 'high priest' 'sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens' (8:1). The psalm verifies one of the fundamental themes of the letter. Jesus' priestly work is finished, and hence he now reigns as king at the right hand of God.... Psalm 110:1 was also cited by Jesus during his ministry (Matt 22:41-46 par.). He befuddled the Pharisees by asking how the Messiah could be both David's Lord and son since according to verse 1 David's heir was also his Lord. Hebrews, among other books in the NT, supplies the answer. Jesus is both human and divine. He is both David's son as a human being and his Lord as the Son of God. New Testament writers regularly quote or allude to Ps 110:1 to indicate that God exalted Jesus (Acts 2:34; 5:31; Rom 8:34; 1 Cor 15:25; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1; 1 Pet 3:22). The reference to Jesus' exaltation, therefore, draws on a common Christian theme, a staple of NT theology. Jesus reigns at God's right hand." Schriener, 76-77.

¹¹ Phillips, 43-44.