

The Book of Hebrews



Lesson 2: Superiority of the New Creation to the Old Creation

Introduction

In this section of Hebrews, the author begins his argument for the superiority of “the Son” to the angels. Living in the light of centuries of Christian thought, it is easy to forget that for early Christians, particularly Jews, questions arose that are no longer issues for us. Among these is the question of just who “the Son” was, given that angels are also referred to in the Old Testament as “sons of God.” Was the Son just a particularly powerful and important angel or is he something altogether different? The writer of Hebrews sets out now to explain that the Son is no creature at all—not even an angelic one. He is God himself and the Davidic Messiah promised by the prophets. The author of Hebrews continues the discussion of the relationship of the Son to the angels. Building on the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Davidic Messiah, the author continues to insightfully draw his reader’s attention to the startling implications of the nature and identity of that Messiah: that he would be, not merely a king, but “God” and would inherit the “name” of God as well as the name of the Davidic dynasty—a figure both fully divine and yet fully a “son of David.” The mystery could only be unraveled by the incarnation of God the Son in the womb of the Blessed Virgin and his assumption of the humanity handed down through the family of David.

Hebrews 1:5-14

⁵ For to what angel did God ever say, “Thou art my Son, today I have begotten thee”? Or again, “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son”? ⁶ And again, when he brings the first-born into the world, he says, “Let all God’s angels worship him.” ⁷ Of the angels he says, “Who makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire.” ⁸ But of the Son he says, “Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever, the righteous scepter is the scepter of thy * kingdom.” ⁹ Thou hast loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, thy God, has anointed thee with the oil of gladness beyond thy comrades.” ¹⁰ And, “Thou, Lord, didst found the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of thy hands; ¹¹ they will perish, but thou remainest; they will all grow old like a garment, ¹² like a mantle thou wilt roll them up, and they will be changed. But thou art the same, and thy years will never end.” ¹³ **But to what angel has he ever said, “Sit at my right hand, till I make thy enemies a stool for thy feet”?** ¹⁴ Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation?

Points to Ponder

The Superiority of the Son to the Angels

Angels are extremely important in biblical thought. They are, as Hebrews tells us, “ministering spirits” sent by God to assist us in salvation and to participate in the governance of the universe. In the order of nature, angels are creatures vastly superior to us in power and intelligence. They have no body but can assume a human form when necessary. Devils are angels who, through the exercise of their free will, have rebelled against God and opposed themselves to both the Creator and his creation.

Angels frequently appear in the Old Testament. They appear throughout Genesis, barring Adam and Eve from the Garden after the fall (Gen 3:24), appearing to Abraham (Gen 18), Lot (Gen 19), Hagar (Gen 21:17), wrestling with Jacob (Gen 32), and, in particular, mediating the Mosaic Covenant to Israel as they administered the ten plagues to Egypt and were made manifest in the pillar of cloud and fire, and as they delivered the Law to Moses



(see Exodus). Indeed, the manifestation of angelic beings was, for ancient Jews, one of the things that gave the Old Covenant its stamp of authenticity and marked the covenant with Moses as being from God. So a Jew would naturally ask “Why is your alleged ‘new covenant’ superior to the covenant with Moses, which was given through angels (who are also called ‘sons of God’)?” (Job 1:6)

Hebrews is the answer to this: it aims to show that the sonship of Christ is better than the sonship of the angels. Hebrews tells us that the reason for this is because his “name” is superior. The importance (and rationale) of this argument is somewhat lost on a modern audience since we do not quite take angels seriously and, if we are Christians, we are used to thinking of Jesus as God and not as an angel. But for an ancient Jew this was not at all clear. What made this “Son” so much greater than these other “sons”?

What Is In A Name?

What sonship does Jesus have? Several things contribute to the author’s answer here. First, in Hebrew, the word for “name” is “Hashem.” The term is still used in modern Jewish parlance as a shorthand for the name of God himself. That is, instead of uttering the sacred Name “Yahweh,” orthodox Jewish practice is simply to refer to God as “Hashem.” In addition to this, Hashem is a term fraught with another critical significance: it recalls the promises made in the Old Testament concerning the founding of dynasties—especially the Davidic dynasty. When David seeks to build a “house” (temple) to God, God’s reply is that David won’t build him a “house,” rather God will build David a “house” (dynasty) and that a “son” from that dynasty will build the “house” or temple for God: “He shall build a house for my *name*, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son” (1 Sam 7:13-14). Moreover, that dynasty will last eternally: “And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever” (2 Sam 7:16).

Dynasty, power, authority, inheritance, the temple, the eternal Davidic kingdom and the Name of God are all evoked in the use of the term “Hashem” or “name,” and it is this “name” that the author of Hebrews has in mind when he says that Jesus is superior because of

his “Name.” So to inherit “the Name” or “Hashem” is to inherit everything from God—it is to be his dynastic heir. It is also to be David’s dynastic heir too. Hebrews makes this clear by the Old Testament verses to which it now begins to appeal. The first of these is from Psalm 2:7 and is one of the most important Messianic psalms. In it, the Davidic king is called a “son of God.”

This psalm, like so many texts concerning the House of David, has both an immediate aspect and a long-term prophetic aspect. What do we mean by “an immediate aspect and a long-term prophetic aspect”? The conception here involves the belief that reality is sacramental. That is, it rests on the idea that just as we use words to convey meaning, so God uses creation to convey meaning. We write with words, but God can “write” with persons, places, historical events, and natural phenomena to convey truth and love to us. Thus, prophecies frequently have an immediate fulfillment but these fulfillments themselves look forward to some greater fulfillment. So Solomon, the “son of David” builds a big stone Temple or “house” for God, and the prophecy to David is immediately fulfilled. But both Solomon and the Temple themselves foreshadow a “son of David” who is “greater than Solomon” (Mt 12:42) and the true Temple, which is the Body of Christ (Jn 2:19-21; Eph 2:19-22).

Notably, Hebrews drives exactly this point home by quoting from 2 Sam 7:14 in the second half of verse 5. In so doing, this would clearly signal to the Jewish reader that Christ is indeed the Messianic “son of David” prophesied

in 2 Samuel. God promises David that he will “make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth” (2 Sam 7:9). This is a promise that is the divine truth which was parodied by human pride in the story of the Tower of Babel, when the builders sought to “make a *name* for ourselves” (Gen 10:4). Here, David’s humility before God is blessed, just as their pride was cursed. Rather than David “making a name for himself,” God will make David’s *name* great. And that name will be glorified in the Temple built by David’s son. That great name which the son of David inherits in Ps 2:7 makes him king over all the earth.

This understanding of the supreme exaltation of the Messianic “son of David” occurs elsewhere in the Old Testament, notably in Psalm 89:20-27, where the psalmist, meditating on the covenant made with David in 2 Sam 7, speaks prophetically of the Davidic Messiah and says:

I have found David, my servant;
with my holy oil I have anointed him;
so that my hand shall ever abide with him,
my arm also shall strengthen him.
The enemy shall not outwit him,
the wicked shall not humble him.
I will crush his foes before him
and strike down those who hate him.
My faithfulness and my steadfast love shall be with him,
and in my name shall his horn be exalted.
I will set his hand on the sea
and his right hand on the rivers.
He shall cry to me, “Thou art my Father,
my God, and the Rock of my salvation.”
And I will make him the first-born,
the highest of the kings of the earth.

The Davidic Messiah is, therefore, even in the Old Testament, a “firstborn” Son of God, greater than the angels, who have never received such a promise. For this reason, in verse 6, the author quotes the Septuagint translation of Deuteronomy 32:43 and applies it to the Davidic Messiah. This matters greatly because, repeatedly in Scripture, the question of who is to inherit the blessing and promises of Abraham is a contentious one. Will it be Isaac or Ishmael (Gen 17:17-21)? Jacob or Esau (Gen 25:19—27:38)? Saul or David (2 Sam 7)? And repeatedly, the “heir according to the promise”—Isaac, Jacob, David—is the one who receives the inheritance, not merely the heir according to nature (Rom 9). The angels are, according to nature, vastly superior to human beings. The Davidic Firstborn Son of God is, by the grace of the divine promise, made greater than the angels and so they worship and serve him.

For this reason, the New Covenant inaugurated by the Son (who is both Son of God and Son of David, the Messianic Davidic King, who is also God the Son Incarnate) is superior to the Mosaic Covenant that was merely mediated through angels. That is the central point that the author of Hebrews wishes to make in chapters 1 and 2.

The Marriage Covenant of the Son

The author of Hebrews continues his argument for the superiority of the Son to angels by citing a number of Old Testament texts (again, always with the assumption that you will know them and their context by heart). The first text cited in this passage is Psalm 45:6-7, a famous royal wedding ode, originally written for a Davidic king. In Jewish antiquity, a son got his inheritance when he married, not at his parent’s death. The reason for this is simple: that is when he needs it. The point of Psalm 45 is that the Davidic king receives his inheritance when he needs it, at marriage. It is also worth noting that the first Davidic King—David—entered into his own kingship with language that was distinctly and unmistakably nuptial.

Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron, and said, “Behold, we are your bone and flesh. In times past, when Saul was king over us, it was you that led out and brought in Israel; and the Lord said to you, ‘You shall be shepherd of my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel.’” So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron; and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the Lord, and they anointed David king over Israel.

(2 Sam 5:1-3)

This language of “bone and flesh” is the same sort of language used to express the marriage covenant in Gen 2:23: “Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.’” So the “marriage” of the Davidic Messiah to his people is already present in Old Testament thought. However, the marriage of God to his people is also present there as well, notably in prophets such as Hosea. Interestingly, the Septuagint translation of Psalm 45 (made long before the birth of Christ) calls the Husband-King “O God,” again curiously and prophetically associating the son of David with divinity.

Why does this matter when Jesus was celibate? It matters because it reflects the nuptial imagery that Jesus associates with himself and his kingdom (Mt 22:1-14). When did Jesus marry? “When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb 1:3). That is, he received his inheritance on his wedding day, like the Davidic king in the psalm—the day he married his people, the New Israel, the Church. John makes the same point in the Passion scene when he stops the narrative to point out that blood and water flowed from the side of Jesus, which is, for John, the origin of the sacrament of Baptism and the moment at which the New Eve—the Bride of Christ, the Church—is born from the side of the Last Adam the way the old Eve was born from the side of the old Adam. Paul notices the same nuptial parallels in Eph 5. In short, the Davidic Messiah King has taken a wife: the Church.

Psalm 45 continues by referring to the King as “anointed.” “The Anointed One” is, of course, what “Messiah” or “Christ” means. The psalm also recalls Isaiah 61:3. And that recalls the larger passage in which that verse sits, the very passage Jesus preached at the beginning of his public ministry:

“And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the Sabbath day. And he stood up to read; 17 and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written.” The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

(Lk 4:16-21)

Therefore, the “anointing” the Davidic Messiah is more than mere olive oil signifying earthly rulership: it is the oil of the “Spirit of the Lord.” That Spirit is elsewhere prophesied in Isaiah to rest on a Davidic Messiah, the “shoot from the stump of Jesse:” “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord” (Is 11:1-2).

The Inauguration of a New Covenant and New Creation

Hebrews means to do more than merely argue that the New Covenant of the Son is superior to the Old: as though the discussion is merely limited to Christian Jews and non-Christian Jews. The writer means to draw out the full implications of the deity of Christ and of the New Covenant he has inaugurated. To do this, he cites verses 10-12 in both Psalms 102 and Is 34:4. Both these passages from the Old Testament make clear the transitory nature, not merely of the Mosaic covenant, but of the entire old world order. His point is that Christ’s New Covenant does more than transcend the old Mosaic covenant. It establishes a new creation, not only making us new creatures but to begin the process of creating “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 21:1).

The Old Covenant, in a certain way, reflects God’s “administration” of the world before the coming of Christ. Just as the Levites were to be priests for Israel, Israel was called to be a “kingdom of priests” for the world (Ex 19:6). The worship of the Old Covenant was to reflect, in a certain way, the worship the entire cosmos was to give God. Thus, for instance, the Temple in Jerusalem is described as being constructed in seven years, just as Genesis depicts the universe being made in seven days (1 Kings 5-9). Similarly, Adam is set to work in the garden of creation, and the Hebrew terms used to describe his work are the same ones used to describe the work of the Levitical priests in the temple. In short, the Temple is a micro-cosmic cosmos, just as the cosmos is a macrocosmic Temple. The one reflects the other. The Tabernacle is God’s covenant in the language of architecture, a covenant in space, just as the Sabbath is God’s covenant in time.

Thus, the Old covenant is about more than God’s relationship with the Jews. It is about his relationship with the whole world and that covenant is flawed because of our sins. The flawed nature of that covenant (and the need for a new and superior covenant) is not something the author of Hebrews has invented in order to proclaim the superiority of Christ to Moses. It is something that one of the greatest prophets of the Old Covenant—Jeremiah—will himself make clear (Jer

31:31-32). But the passing away of that Old Covenant will also mean that an old creation is passing away. For according to the prophets cited in verses 10-12, creation itself is going to wear out and be replaced. That covenant, as Hebrews is at pains to argue, is the New Covenant inaugurated now by the Son who is the eternal God. The New Covenant not only transcends the mere Mosaic covenant, it transcends all the covenants and all creation. For it is inaugurated by the Son who is both Son of God and son of David.

That note is now sounded even more loudly in verse 13 as the author now cites Psalm 110 which he has only alluded to in verse 14 and which will form a huge part of his argument in subsequent chapters. That psalm, which we will analyze in detail in subsequent lessons, is the promise to the “son of David,” who is also, mysteriously enough, called “Lord,” that he will sit at God’s right hand and that he will be a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. It summarizes the argument of Hebrews that the New Covenant, New Priesthood, New Temple, New Kingdom, and New Jerusalem of the New Davidic King Messiah are, in every way, superior to the Old Covenant and old cosmic order that prefigured them.

Catechism Connections

- CCC 334-336 discusses the watchful care and service of angels in the life of the Church.
- The interaction of the angels with humanity at the moment of Jesus’ birth is described in CCC 437.
- For more information on the significance of Jesus’ titles as “Son of Man,” “Son of David,” and “Son of God,” read CCC 439-441.

Rome to Home

From the very first moment of his human conception and birth (descended from David), Jesus was the eternal Son of God, become Son of man. In the resurrection this divine sonship was manifested in all its fullness through the power of God, who restored Jesus to life by the work of the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom 8:11) and constituted him in the glorious state of Kyrios (cf. Phil 2:9-11, Rom 14:9; Acts 2:36), so that Jesus merits under a new, messianic title the recognition, worship and glory of the eternal name of Son of God (cf. Acts 13:33; Heb 1:1-5; 5:5).

—Pope John Paul II, *General Audience, March 8, 1989*

Study Questions

1. The author of Hebrews expends much effort to persuade his audience that Jesus is not an angel. Why might ancient Jews be inclined to view Jesus as an angel rather than as the true Davidic Messiah promised by the prophets? (See *Points to Ponder*, Gal 3:19, Acts 7:53, Job 1:6)

Voices of the Saints

“We are like children, who stand in need of masters to enlighten us and direct us; and God has provided for this, by appointing his angels to be our teachers and guides.”

— St. Thomas Aquinas

Questions for Reflection

The following questions are intended to help you reflect upon ways in which the discoveries you’ve made in this lesson can be applied to your own life.

1. Do you ever think about or pray to your guardian angel? How can you interact more closely with your guardian angel on a daily basis?
2. In a world of dirty laundry, Monday mornings, and daily blues, do you find it hard to believe that a whole new creation has been brought into existence with the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ? Where do you encounter that new creation in your life?

Summary

In lesson two, we observed:

1. The author of Hebrews continues his argument for the superiority of the Son.
2. This superiority is not only a superiority to the Old Covenant and to angels, it is a superiority to all of creation.
3. The “Name” Jesus inherits is the Name of God himself, as well as of the firstborn Son of God who is the Davidic King and Messiah.
4. The Son is divine Groom to his Bride, the New Israel; the Church.
5. The Son inaugurates a new creation in his inauguration of the New Covenant.
6. The Old Testament itself bears witness to the impermanence of the old creation and the Old Covenant.
7. The Old Covenant also bears witness to the establishment of a “son of David” or Davidic king at “God’s right hand”—the place of a son and heir. That “son of David” is called “O God” and “Lord” in prophecy, prefiguring the Incarnation of God as a son of David.
8. Angels are extremely important both in Old Testament revelation and to the audience of the letter to the Hebrews. Angels worship and serve the Son, who is Son of God and son of David.