

Sermon 3: Hebrews 1:4-14: The Son's Superiority to Angels

OUTLINE

Superior position
Superior honour
Superior nature
Superior authority

INTRODUCTION

This Monday past, the 29th of September would have been celebrated by many Roman Catholics as Michaelmas or the feast of St Michael and all Angels. It was put into the Christian calendar late in the 5th century. This past Thursday, the 2nd of October would have been celebrated as Feast of the Holy Guardian angels, a feast begun in 1670. In the middle ages Christianity veered into a lot of unbiblical speculation around the angels, it seems to be a human weakness to allow our human imaginations to run rampant wherever there are mysteries, angels are no different. Calvin typical of the Reformers criticized this extravagant addition to God's word. For this reason he warns, 'For this reason, if we would be duly wise, we must leave those empty speculations which idle men have taught apart from God's word concerning the nature, order and numbers of angels.'¹ A warning we need today. I picked up a copy of the Catholic Catechism and inside it was a book mark encouraging the worshipper to honour St Michael the Archangel. After pointing the worshipper to Michael as the one who can help in fighting sin and satan and encouraging one to pray to Michael many times throughout the day, the booklet ends with these 5 ways to honour Michael:

'By frequently repeating this short prayer:

'O glorious St. Michael prince of the heavenly court, pray for us now and at the hour of our death.

By invoking aid in times of sickness

By praying fervently to St. Michael if we find it hard to conquer temptation or to correct some fault. He will assuredly help us to overcome the most violent, and the most inveterate temptations.

By having a little picture of St. Michael in our prayer books, saying each time we see it: 'o glorious St Michael I love you! O glorious St Michael help me

By praying to St Michael to defend the world against the devil and save us from the awful evils that threaten us. Let us occasionally offer our Mass, Communion and rosary in honour of St. Michael.' The role of the Spirit and Christ in helping us overcome sin; the point of the Lord's Supper in remembering the death of Jesus for us are put aside as angels are giving the honour and focus only Christ deserves.

It seems that the Jewish believers that Hebrews is addressed to were rationalizing their leaving of Christ in a similar way. You can imagine the arguments of the Judaizers in their ears as they seek to win them back to the synagogue: Jesus was only a man but the law was given by angels, Heb. 2:2. The author responds by showing that Jesus as a man is the Son of David, who has finished His work and is sitting upon God's throne with all authority; more than that He is a superior word to the OT; more than that He is God. Some have suggested that the recipients of this letter might be influenced by some other ideas floating around at the time. With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, we

¹ Institutes. 1:14.

have learnt a lot about a group called the Essenes, they were a group of Jews discontent with the corruption of the priesthood and the state of things in Israel, they too had a hope of the coming Messiah, they were expecting two Messiah like figures, a priest figure subject to a king figure, but both subject to an angel. Placing angels above Messiah figures. We do not have a full picture of what they thought about angels, but we do have a full picture in 1:4-14 of the Superiority of the Son over angels. What lies before us is what scholars call a Catena, which means chain, where 7 quotes of the OT are put forth each a link in a chain proving the superiority of Christ. The author, appealing to the authority of the OT as the word of God goes about to prove that the Son is greater in name, position, honour and being than angels. All of this will add up to his exhortations to endure and his warning against departing that saturate this letter.

Once again we have the joy of looking full in the face of the glory of Christ as contrasted with angels. We have four points, firstly, in v4-5 we will see that the Son has a superior position; in v6 is given a Superior honour; and v7-12, has a Superior nature; and v13-14, a superior authority.

Superior position

V4, 'having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.' V1-3 act as a foundation to the main claim of v4, which 5-14 go on to support. The claim is that the Son, who is God the Son, became a man, and having finished his work, now has a superior name and position to the angels. The arguments rallied to show the superiority over the angels is overwhelming, a multi-angled attack covering all the bases. Where the argument might have wanted to compare Jesus the man to the angels, the author breaks open the argument showing all various aspects of Christ as superior. He is a superior word than the OT, He is in a superior position to the angels even when only His humanity is considered, and He is superior in nature than angels because He is God.

V4 develops the idea, that the one who created, the one who communicates the Father is the one who has made purification for sins been exalted as a reward and in fulfillment of various OT promises and is seated on God's throne. It is important to note the OT background for the idea of God's throne. When we see God's throne portrayed in heaven. There is only one throne; God is seated while everyone else is standing; and it is high above all things. It should be noted as we view the throne that Jesus sits upon in Hebrews: Jesus throne is in heaven; He is seated while angels are standing ready to serve; and it is described as high above the heavens, 7:26. God does not have a body and needs a seat; He is Spirit, the idea of a throne is a condescension for our sake, using earthly images to convey spiritual truths, and the right hand of God's throne is likewise not literal, though Jesus humanity is literally in heaven, the idea of the right hand of God's throne is communicating the Son's participation in the Father's throne. Hebrews chapter 1 communicates that the Son is God along with the Father in no uncertain terms, being creator, sustainer, the radiance of His glory and the exact imprint of His nature, and who sits on His throne. We will see in the following verses that a God-man is seated on the throne.

In the foreground of v4 is the human nature of Jesus as the Incarnate one who lived, died, resurrected and who ascended into heaven. He is spoken of as becoming superior. God the Son, who is superior to angels, became inferior to angels as concerns His human nature when He was incarnate, that in His human

nature He might render obedience to God, die for our sins and be raised and inherit the promises given to David's Son of ruling on God's behalf, the 'becoming' superior to angels is not a description of the Son in His divine being as Creator and Sustainer, but properly predicated of His human nature. Why do I highlight this way of speaking, specifying whether the Son's Divine or human nature is in view? It is because I want to show you the way the Bible speaks about the Son. At times the Son will be spoken of as God, e.g. creator; at other times He is spoken of as human, e.g. becoming the heir of David. The author of Hebrews naturally moves between these two truths without contradiction, happy to affirm them alongside each other. Sometimes the Bible even speaks in an improper way, that theologians call a communication of properties/idioms. For example, Paul says, they 'crucified the Lord of Glory.' God who is the Lord of glory cannot be crucified, but because He also has a human nature that can be crucified, Paul comfortably puts these two seemingly contradictory things side by side. He comfortably weaves between things true of the two natures. Hebrews 1 switches regularly between what is true of the Son as God and as human. This comfortable switching further reinforces the truth that Jesus is both God and man. This comfortable switching is key to changing gear and keeping up with the author as we study chapter 1.

The becoming, the superior name, and the inheritance he received relate to His accomplishments as our human mediator. The Last Adam; the Seed of the Woman; the Son of David, the long awaited prophet, priest and king, who has completed His cross work and has entered into the next phase of His mediation as He sits with God's power over all, having been given the name above all names. And we haven't even starting talking about His superiority as the Divine Son. The author could have stopped here and he would have already won the argument, but he goes on quoting 7 OT portions that reinforce the idea of God the Son, becoming the Son of Man, succeeding and becoming the Son of David.

V5, 'For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"? Angels are called the sons of God, e.g. Job 1:6. The point of the author is that no angel has been prophesied as being or being called 'the Son.' The word son here is not being used as we would talk about being sons of God as Christians/humans/angels, this is the Son that is promised, expected, and who as a result of His obedience inherits a peculiar position made only for One. Jesus is this One. Now there is debate about what is being referenced here, older commentators say that the Son as eternally begotten is being spoken of, and the 'today' is the day of God's eternity. Now it is true that Jesus is the eternally begotten Son, an eternal Son to an eternal Father; begotten not created, consubstantial one substance with the Father. That is taught in places like John 1:18, but is not the meaning here. This first OT quote is from Ps. 2:7 and is speaking of a Son of David taking the throne and ruling the nations. This is a psalm written for the coronation day of an earthly king. The NT reveals that this is a messianic prophecy talking about Jesus when he ascends into heaven and is coronated as the king of kings. In Acts 4:25-27 we see Peter identifying Jesus as the anointed King that the nations are raging against; and in Acts 13:32-33 Paul in His first recorded synagogue sermon explains how Jesus resurrection is being prophesied here, '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.' This is what Paul means when he writes to the Romans in 1:4 that He 'was declared (literally appointed) to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.' The authority

of this exalted position is an authority that is over even angels, Eph. 1:20-22, 'that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. ²² And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church.'

Superior honour

But there is more, v6, 'And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him." Now there are a few translation issues to deal with first. There is a debate about whether the author is quoting ps. 97:7 or Deut. 32:43, I think that it is Deut. 32:43. Both of these OT quotes talk about the Elohim worshipping God, the word Elohim can be used of angels, which is how the Greek translation of the OT uses it here. Secondly, the use of the word 'world' does it mean this age and the verse is referring to the angels who first worshipped Christ at His birth; or the 'world to come' as it is used in 2:5. Most commentaries agree that this verse is teaching that Jesus, when He ascended and entered into the world to come was welcomed with the angels worshipping Him. Firstborn is a title of superiority not a description of origins.

One thing we know about the angels is that they are upholders of God's worship. You will remember when John was shown the marriage supper of the Lamb and fell down to worship the messenger angel, the angel responded, Rev. 19:10, 'Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God." For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.' Jesus however, did not refuse the worship of His disciple Thomas at His appearance after the resurrection, John 20:28. More than that we are given a glimpse of this angelic adoration in Rev. 5:6-14, 'And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷ And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. ⁸ And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹ And they sang a new song, saying,

"Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
¹⁰ and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth."

¹¹ Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, ¹² saying with a loud voice,

"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!"

¹³ And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying,

"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"

¹⁴ And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped.'

Join with the angels and worship the Son.

Superior nature

The author has proven that the Son is in the highest human position over angels, and the One whom angels worship, but he does not relent and goes on. Next we see a contrast between the angels which are servants, and the Son who is God and reigning. V7-9, '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. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions." Ps. 104:4 is quoted showing angels as part of God's creation and doing His will, they are as speedy as wind and strong as fire. But in contrast to them is the Son. Here the author draws on Ps. 45 a wedding ode written for a Davidic son on his wedding day. But here we see that the psalm is applied to the Son of David. This is one of those OT passages that has a glorious ambiguity as you think you understand it as praise to God, but there is a shift as the one spoken to as God on the throne also has a bride at His side, v9. Some have tried to say that 'God' is a high title, but even this attempt to soften dovetails with many other OT texts where the Son is given divine names, Is. 9:6, 'and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.' In v8 the Son is God on a forever throne. These ideas of forever cannot be attributed to David or Solomon, but can only be given to a never dying one, which is Christ. Then in Heb. 1:9 we see God speaking to God, two persons, both God, and we get to overhear this inner trinitarian discourse. And we see that God anoints God, this is of course referring to the human anointing of Jesus as the Messiah, but it is God getting anointed. Jesus Baptism where the Father sends down the HS as a dove, and the audible voice of the Father over His Son is an instance of this. But because the focus is upon the enthroning of the Son upon His ascension this anointing is likely the gift of the Spirit which is then given to the church on the Day of Pentecost.

But there is more, v10-12, 'And, "You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment, like a robe you will roll them up, like a garment they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will have no end." Since we know that the Son is also Creator with the Father that means He too shares in God's divine nature. God is not created but self-existent. Everything has its existence from Him, He from no one. Creation will wear out like our favourite pair of jeans; creation is subject to change, but God is immutable, unchangeable. The Psalmist is applying all of this truth about the Creator to the Son, He is the exact imprint of God's divine nature.

Superior authority

The author cycles back to an earlier idea of the Son's superior position here stressing the Son's superior authority, v13-14, '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"? Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?' The Son's role as judge, even though God says,

Vengeance is Mine, is indicated by His enemies made his footstool. The Son sits in the place of authority, but the angels, they are not sitting, they are standing, waiting for orders. Angels are not the top of the food chain, they are His servants, sent to do His will, namely serve those who will inherit eternal life.

Let me apply this for us. Firstly, we are not to honour or fixate upon angels, good or bad at the expense of clouding the glory of Christ. We must not fall prey to thinking the Son is less than an angel like these Jewish believers were entertaining. Nor just an angel like the JW's. They teach that Jesus is the Archangel Michael, that Jesus was an angel, was an incarnate angel, and after he died became an angel again who will come with the voice of an archangel when he comes again. They see Jesus as only a created being with the essence of an angel. Now there have been Christians who have taught that Jesus is the Angel of the Lord which is not really an angel but a pre-incarnate Christophany. John Gill and John Bunyan both were happy to affirm that the Angel of the Lord was Jesus and Michael which means 'in the likeness of God' is another Christophany. I disagree with these brothers, Jesus is God not an angel, the various statements from Hebrews 1 leave us in no doubt as to what these early Christians believed. We must avoid the temptation to worship the angels, to turn to them as mediators, giving them feast days and prayers and even celebrating the Lord's Supper in honour of them, this is angelolatry. Beware of the new age fixation upon angels, who want you to commune with them, get messages from them. Beware of the Charismatic emphasis on angels where they are your servants to get your money. No, worship Christ as they do, knowing that we approach the foot of Mount Zion with them, let the pictures of their ardent praise call the tune of our own worship as we come before God.

Secondly, trust in the Son's work of saving you knowing that the angels are sent out to work on your behalf. There is an age old debate whether each one of us has a guardian angel. This is really based on only one verse, Matt. 18:10, "'See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.'" We disagree with the catholic catechism that every human being has a guardian angel; and we reject the teaching of the book of the Shepherd of Hermes that every believer has a good angel and an evil angel on their shoulders. There is not enough evidence to prove that each believer has one. But, we can know that there are more good angels to evil ones; that Satan is cast out of heaven and Christ has all power and authority; that greater is He who is in us than he that is in the world, and that by resisting him, he must flee. Ps. 91:11 encourages us with, 'For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.' These unseen helpers attend every local church in the book of Revelation. They are the ones who blow trumpets, unseal seals, and pour bowls in advancing God's plans. They rejoice over the salvation of one sinner, and carry the departed soul home in death. They separate the wheat from the chaff at the judgement. And have been known to intervene in tangible ways witnessed by others. In 1956 during the Mau Mau uprisings in East Africa, a band of roving Mau Maus came to the village of Lauri, surrounded it, and killed every inhabitant including women and children, 300 in all. Not more than three miles away was the Rift Valley Academy, a private school where missionary children were being educated. Immediately upon leaving the carnage of Lauri the natives came with spears, bows and arrows, clubs, and torches to the school with violent intentions.

In the darkness lighted torches were seen coming toward the school. Soon there was a complete ring of terrorists around the academy, cutting off all avenues of

escape. Shouts and curses could be heard coming from the Mau Maus. They began to advance on the school, tightening the circle, shouting louder and louder, coming closer. Then inexplicably, when they were close enough to throw spears, they stopped. They began retreating and soon were running into the jungle. The army was called out and fortunately captured the entire band of raiders. Later, at their trial, the leader was called to the witness stand. The judge questioned him: "On this particular night, did you kill the inhabitants of Lauri?" "Yes." "Well, then, why did you not complete the mission? Why didn't you attack the school?" The leader of the Mau Maus answered, "We were on our way to attack and destroy all the people and school... but as we came closer, all of a sudden, between us and the school there were many huge men, dressed in white with flaming swords and we became afraid and ran to hide!"² Let us end here: Jesus is superior in name, position, authority and nature and rules all including the angels on our behalf, follow Him, worship Him, serve Him.

² R. Kent Hughes, [*Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul*](#), vol. 1, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993), 42.