

Hebrews 1-2

1. Hebrews begins with a series of arguments demonstrating Jesus' superiority over the angels. It's worth taking a moment to appreciate the magnitude of this. For first-century Jews, angels were known to rescue God's people (Dan 3:19-28, 6:22); support and nurture them (Ps 91:11-12; 1 Kings 19:5-8); guide and inform them (Gen 28:12, 31:11); as well as acting as agents of destruction and punishment (Gen 19:13; 2 Sam 24:16). Those who encountered angels were often overwhelmed by awe (e.g. Dan 10:11-12).
 - a. Locate where in chapter 1 it is asserted that Jesus is: priest, king, prophet, and the eternal agent of creation.
 - b. By contrast, what does Heb 1 say about angels? What is their role? (See esp. v. 14.)
2. Angels played key roles in the life of Jesus and the early Church: They comforted Jesus in the garden and the wilderness; they released Peter and the apostles from prison (Acts 5:19); instructed believers (Acts 8:26) and Gentiles (Acts 10:3); meted swift punishment to maintain the purity of the Church (12:23); and encouraged believers (Acts 27:23-25). Their activity is not confined to the early Church:

In our own century, Marie Monsen, a Norwegian missionary serving in North China, testified to the intervention of angels at times when Christians were in danger. On one occasion, when looting soldiers surrounded her mission compound, those who had taken refuge within its flimsy walls were astonished to find that they were left in peace. A few days later the marauders explained that they were ready to enter when they noticed tall soldiers with shining faces on a high roof in the compound. An unbeliever asked: 'Who were standing out on the east veranda all last night... there were many people there each time I opened the door to see if there was a fire anywhere near us.' Marie Monsen said, 'The heathen saw them, it was a testimony to them, but they were invisible to us.'¹

Tales of angels are certainly rare. Have you heard any modern tales of angels you find credible? The idea that God may use his angels to protect his church in Rochester, NY, in the twenty-first century is appealing and comforting, but is there any anecdotal or biblical reason to think it might actually be true?

3. Chapter 1 is in service of what the Jews called *qal wa homer*, a argument from lesser to greater. What, in chapter 2, follows the "therefore"? What are the lesser and greater here? Also, what do the listeners risk? (Note: In the Judaism of the day angels were connected with the Law of Moses as those who delivered it; Acts 7:53; Gal 3:19, so establishing Jesus' superiority over angels further has implications relating to the position of the Law.)

1 Raymond Brown, *The Message of Hebrews*, pp 44-45.

4. The author draws upon a series of Old Testament allusions to establish various facts about the Messiah:

- v. 5 (Ps 2:7, 2 Sam 7:14): The Messiah (the king in Ps 2) is God's Son
- v. 6 (Ps 97:7): The angels worship God²
- v. 7 (Ps 104:4): Angels are winds and flames, part of the created order.
- v. 8 (Ps 45:6-7): The king (and so the Messiah) is not only righteous, but divine: "your throne, O God"
- vv. 10-12 (Ps 102:25-27): The Messiah is eternal (the LXX has a different wording, including the "Lord" in Heb 1:10)
- v. 13: Ps 110:1: The Messiah, not the angels, is invited to sit at God's right hand

Set aside the author's taking poetic language literally in v. 6, and discrepancies between the Greek and Hebrew texts of the OT. Setting aside in fact all the references related to angels we see something surprising: these allusions treat any OT reference in the Psalms to the Lord or the king as a reference to the Messiah, even when there's no indication the original author of the Psalm had that in mind. The author of Hebrews wasn't unique among Jewish interpreters in doing this, and his allusions would have been admissible for any synagogue discussion. You, though, aren't a first-century Jewish interpreter. As a modern reader, which of the following do you most agree with?

- a. He'd flunk a modern exegesis course, and to be honest we shouldn't just give him a pass. I am disregarding his conclusions except where they are supported by other Scripture.*
 - b. Sure it's okay for him to do this—he was inspired. You won't catch me doing it, though!*
 - c. This is an interpretation principle Jesus himself used (Mt 22:41-45), found in other places in the NT (e.g. Acts). That's good enough for me; I am going to try it on for size in my reading of the Psalms!*
 - d. Wait—what were we talking about, again?*
5. Verse 2:1 reads, "Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it." "Pay attention" and "drift away" are translations of nautical terms used of a ship which is moored, and one which has slipped its moorings, and is to drift. The message which they are anchor themselves to was to them attested by those who had heard Jesus, by signs and wonders, and by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Of this, Wright writes,

In particular, when people believed the message, they discovered a strange new energy inside themselves--a warm, disturbing, personal presence which enabled them to do new things, which

2 The Psalm refers to "gods" in the Hebrew text (the Masoretic Text, or MT) but to "angels" in the Greek text (the Septuagint, or LXX) to show the angels worship God. The word translated "angels" here is *elohim*, a word usually translated "gods", but at times in the LXX rendered "angels"; cf. Carson and Beale 932.

put new ideas into their heads, which motivated and energized them to become different people from the inside out. The earliest Christians knew what to call this personal presence inside them: it was God's holy spirit, the gift of God's own presence and self, not just in Jesus, important though that was and is, but living within them...³

Wright here refers to the fruit of the Spirit which are evidence of a healthy spiritual life (Gal 5:22-23). He takes this a step further to say that if these are absent, it may be a sign that we have wandered from the truth, and asks:

What evidence is there in your own life, and in your church, that the gospel message of Jesus is true and powerful? If you find that question difficult to answer, could it be because you or your church have begun to drift, ignoring the royal message to which you should be paying closer attention?

6. In chapter 2, a bridge is made between Jesus' relation to the angels, and ours. As Jesus is superior to the angels, we will be too, since Jesus paves the way for all his "brothers and sisters" (2:11). This is expressed especially in 2:10, where Jesus is called the "pioneer" (NRSV, NIV, Message) of our salvation. This word is a fluid one, also translated "leader" (NEB, JB) and "author" (NASB), and has the sense of a "divine hero" or "champion" (Lane, 57) who goes ahead of his people to blaze the trail and be the first to face its dangers. This idea shows up also in 6:20, where Jesus is referred to as "a forerunner on our behalf" (cf. also 12:1-3).

Jesus was "crowned with glory and honor" because of his sufferings by which he was able to "taste death for everyone" (2:9). His atoning death was unique, but the trail he blazed is nevertheless one of suffering for all who take up their crosses daily to follow him (Mt 16:24-26).

Suffering for one's faith is in some ways hard to come by in the first world. Certainly one can give until it hurts, choosing to give up money or time for the sake of others. We discussed this at length in our poverty and riches studies. We also suffer for our faith when we are willing to deliberately make ourselves vulnerable in love toward others. Discuss the possibility of intentionally investing in another, in order to build a friendship neither of you would otherwise have.

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Fun fact: "The common belief was that the angels were immortal; but there were some who believed that they lived only one day. There was a belief in some rabbinic schools that 'every day God creates a new company of angels who utter a song before him and are gone.' 'The angels are renewed every morning and after they have praised God they return to the stream of fire from whence they came.'" (Barclay, 19)

³ *Hebrews for Everyone*, pp. 12-13.