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# hebrews THRU revelation

WISDOM FOR TODAY—AND FOREVER

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## HEBREWS 1:1–14

## THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST

The Writer's Thesis

1:1–4

Jesus Is Superior to the Angels

1:5–14

**Setting Up the Section**

**In response to hearing about a number of Jewish Christians beginning to leave the church in order to return to the familiarity of their traditional rites and rituals, the author sends this letter to show them exactly what they are abandoning. In the opening chapters, he describes the superiority of Jesus by making a number of contrasts. In this section he begins by comparing Jesus to angels.**

## 📄 1:1–4

## THE WRITER'S THESIS

The first sentence of the Hebrews sermon is an opening salvo. The author immediately begins to set Jesus Christ high above everything and everyone that people might otherwise trust for salvation and security. He does not say, however, that Jesus' message is any different from that of the prophets. The content of the *message* is never contrasted, as will become apparent with a close reading of the letter. But the dignity and authority of Jesus Christ is far greater than any other because He is no less than the Son of God, the heir of all things, and the Creator of heaven and earth (1:2). And the salvation He has accomplished brings to fulfillment all that came before.

The phrase "last days" (1:2) has its background in the Old Testament, referring to the time when God would bring about the restoration of fallen creation. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus represent the climax of God's plan of salvation, beginning the period of the "last days." At the same time, the writer of Hebrews continues to turn his readers' eyes to the future as he writes about the eventual consummation of their salvation.

The full deity of Jesus Christ is made evident in that He is the Creator of all things, His nature is the same as that of God the Father, and He does what only God can do (1:2–3). After completing His great work of redemption, He is again in heaven at the place of highest honor and authority—God's right hand (alluding to Psalm 110:1–2). The observation that Christ sat down indicates that His work of offering the sacrifice is finished. That point will be reemphasized in 10:12–14, and the reasoning behind this emphasis is that any view of life, any system of salvation, and any approach to God that does not center around Jesus Christ is obviously false and stands self-condemned.

**Demystifying Hebrews**

“Majesty in heaven” (1:3; 8:1 NIV) is a typical Jewish *periphrasis* for God. In order not to break the third commandment of misusing the name of God, even unintentionally, the Jews began to use other terms to avoid speaking it at all. Some people became almost superstitious about pronouncing God’s name.

The comment that Jesus inherited a better name (1:4) does not mean He did not have it by right all along. After all, the writer of Hebrews has just attributed to Christ the creation of the universe, among other things (1:2). But the rewards and inheritance that are due Christ because of His incarnation, death, and resurrection will be shared by those who place their faith in Him.

 1:5–14

## JESUS IS SUPERIOR TO THE ANGELS

The concept of Jesus being better than or superior to other things will be a recurring pattern in Hebrews, occurring in more than a dozen other phrases. The writer begins, however, by citing Jesus’ better name and His superiority to the angels.

This would have been a particularly relevant and potentially sensitive subject to many Jewish believers. The Jews held angels in high esteem. Beyond a doubt, angels held important roles as messengers of God. Particularly significant to the Jews was the fact that angels had participated in the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai (Deuteronomy 33:2). So the author uses no fewer than seven citations from Hebrew scripture to make his point.

The first and second citations (Hebrews 1:5), from Psalm 2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14, respectively, show that Jesus is far more than just another one of God’s heavenly messengers. The first quotation is from a psalm that looms large in the New Testament as a prophecy of the incarnation, the ministry, and especially the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The second was originally a covenant promise to David referring to Solomon that was later appropriately applied to Jesus. And by quoting these two passages, the author of Hebrews states boldly that the name of Jesus—the one that is superior to that of the angels—is that of *Son*. Jesus had been God’s Son from the beginning, of course. But His incarnation and resurrection were demonstrative examples of that fact. That’s why it is said here that Jesus inherited the name (1:4) and that “today” God has become His Father (1:5).

Angels are sometimes referred to as sons of God, just as believers are considered children of God. Yet the singular use of *Son* is a reference applicable to Jesus alone. No angel or person can claim to be *the* Son of God. Angels are only servants of God; Jesus stands high above them as God’s Son.

The third Old Testament reference (1:6) is from Deuteronomy 32:43 but is based on the Septuagint—an ancient translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek. The Septuagint was translated in the third century before Jesus’ birth and would have been the version of scripture familiar to many of the recipients of the letter to the Hebrews. (The text used

by those translators had a clause that isn't found in other manuscripts, so the section quoted in Hebrews 1:6 is not found in Deuteronomy 32:43 in most modern Bibles.) The point the writer is making is that the angels, who were exalted by certain people, worshiped Jesus. Christ is not equal to angels; He is their object of worship. This point is made stronger by the writer's reminder that Jesus is the firstborn of God—a title less to do with birth order than to indicate position, authority, and preeminence.

The fourth reference (1:7), from Psalm 104:4, makes a similar point. Not only do angels worship Christ, but they are also His servants—God controls them as He does the winds and the flames. Angels could announce Jesus' birth in Bethlehem and attend to Him in the Garden of Gethsemane, but they couldn't take His place in living and dying for the salvation of humankind.

The fifth reference (1:8–9) is from Psalm 45:6–7, a wedding song for a triumphal king. But since the king is addressed as "O God" and has an eternal throne, the description certainly points to the messianic king. The author of Hebrews shows that Jesus is this king—one of the relatively few texts in the New Testament where Jesus Christ is directly said to be God.

The emphasis is also on this ruler's love of righteousness and hatred of wickedness. Since Christ is being contrasted to angels, it is important to remember that not all angels are good. The focus on righteousness might have been directed to the Jews who still believed that Jesus had been a false prophet who had misled their people.

The next Old Testament reference (1:10–12) is to Psalm 102:25–27. It is a continuation of the previous thought and suggests that while angels are created beings, Jesus is the Creator. To human beings, the life span of a universe appears eternal, but from God's perspective, worlds are created and eventually wear out like a suit of clothes. The reminder that God (Jesus) is eternal and unchanging must have been a welcome consolation to first-century believers during a turbulent time in human history.



### Critical Observation

Just as there are numerous denominations and groups that comprise the Christian church today, so were there different sects that professed Judaism in the first century. The Pharisees and Sadducees are mentioned most frequently in scripture, but another group was known as the Essenes. They were nonconformists who tended to isolate themselves in various communities (one being Qumran, the site of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls). Among their nontraditional beliefs were extravagant speculations regarding angels. For example, they believed the archangel Michael would play a decisive role in the coming kingdom. Some Bible scholars think that this section of Hebrews might have been a point-by-point refutation of arguments posed by Jewish Christians who had come out of Essene Judaism and were being tempted to return to it.

The seventh and final reference in this section (Hebrews 1:13) is from Psalm 110:1, and it reiterates the royal status, the divine rule, and the promised inheritance that belong to Jesus Christ. Then, linked with the quote, the author adds his own insight: that angels not only serve God and Christ, but also human beings—those who will inherit salvation (1:14). Some angels minister in the very presence of God, but only Jesus Christ sits at God's right hand.

In addition, here is found the first of many indications in Hebrews that "salvation" is more than the believer's initial commitment. The author will repeatedly speak of salvation as something believers are yet to inherit.



### Take It Home

Modern culture has a fascination with angels that may or may not be grounded in biblical fact. From the bumbling Clarence in *It's a Wonderful Life* to the belief by some that we become angels when we die, there are a lot of twisted perspectives. What is your personal belief about angels and their status in comparison to Jesus and to human beings? What questions do you have about angels?

## HEBREWS 2:1-18

### SUCH A GREAT SALVATION

No Better Options	2:1-4
The World to Come	2:5-9
Jesus, Humans, and Angels	2:10-18

### Setting Up the Section

**After an emphatic opening showing that Jesus is far superior to any other prophet and even the angels, the author now applies that knowledge to personal faith. Throughout the letter he will repeatedly return to the importance of persevering in the Christian faith.**

2:1-4

### NO BETTER OPTIONS

In some early translations of scripture, the word used for *drift away* (2:1) was *glide*. Sometimes a departure from faith is not as much a conscious decision as it is a careless sliding past the point where one ought to be (akin to losing a ring from one's finger without noticing). Either way, it is wise to heed the writer's admonition to pay more careful attention.

The author also begins an ongoing argument that the gospel of Christ is not a new teaching. The Jewish readers of this letter were steeped in the ancient scriptures and had no doubts whatsoever about the authority of those writings. They took the Law and Prophets seriously because they believed scripture had been mediated by angels (Acts 7:53; Galatians 3:19), and those who did not submit to it would be subject to severe punishments.

Therefore, after making it clear in Hebrews 1 that Jesus is superior to the angels in numerous ways, the logical question is how the Jewish Christians could ignore what He had taught. If they honored the presence and work of God's angels, how could they possibly overlook or reject the personal appearance and message of God's Son? And if breaking the commands of the old covenant brought severe punishments and discipline, how much greater was the danger of rejecting the much greater revelation given through the Son? In addition to hearing the message itself, the people had witnessed signs, various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit (2:4). So the question begged to be asked: "How will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" (2:3 NASB).

What, exactly, should people hope to escape? Although not a popular topic in many churches today, the writer of Hebrews is making a reference to hell and God's judgment of nonbelievers. He will be more specific later (10:26–31).

 2:5–9

## THE WORLD TO COME

After stating his clear warning, the author returns to the theme he had begun in Hebrews 1: the superiority of Jesus Christ to the angels. He wants his readers to consider the world to come (2:5), and he makes it clear that this is what he has been talking about all along. If indeed the Hebrew believers were being influenced by members of the Essene communities, they would be presented with teachings that included the exaltation of angels in the end times.

The Essenes had not missed the scriptural description of the influence of angels—both good and bad—throughout human history. For example, Michael (the archangel) had come to the aid of Daniel and Israel by opposing other evil angelic beings (Daniel 10:20–21; 12:1). The author of Hebrews does not bother to differentiate good angels from bad, but simply raises the issue and declares that God did *not* appoint the angels to rule in the world to come. Like so much of his argument throughout this sermon, he states the position of the opposition and disproves it biblically without stopping to reconfigure the doctrine from the ground up.

In this case he quotes a portion of Psalm 8 (verses 4–6) to make his point (Hebrews 2:6–8). The psalm can be read as simply a description of how human beings fit into God's creation. Yet the writer perceives the messianic implications of the psalm, acknowledging Jesus as the quintessential human being. Jesus frequently used "Son of man" as a reference to Himself, and in the author's interpretation of the psalm, that title has a double meaning, referring both to human beings generally, and then to Jesus as the fulfillment of humanity's destiny. *All* people have been created a little lower than the angels. Yet this high status is not seen today because of the fallen state of humanity. But through His perfect life, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus reversed the results of

the fall and achieved this glorified status predicted in the psalm (see Philippians 2:6–11). In Christ the true dignity and destiny of humankind are fulfilled.



### Critical Observation

Psalm 8 happens to be a psalm of David, but the author of Hebrews doesn't single him out. A current tendency is to highlight the individuality of biblical authors and analyze their personal outlooks, styles, and theologies. While certain benefits can come from such an approach, the downside is that people begin to look at scripture as just another human book. The Jewish perspective—and the one taken by the author of Hebrews—is to see scripture as God's authoritative Word. If something is included in scripture, it is valid no matter who said it. Throughout the author's writing can be seen his belief that human authorship is a matter of no great importance, but the Word of God certainly is.

The image portrayed by Psalm 8 and Hebrews 2:5–8 is far different from that of some people who see human beings as merely specks in the universe, lost amid the vast cosmos. The psalmist and the writer of Hebrews acknowledge that humans are not only created in the image of God, but are also given authority to oversee creation.

Hebrews 2:9 reprises the author's thought expressed in 1:3–4, which will be a repeated theme throughout this letter. Even though being a little lower than the angels sounds quite impressive to human ears, for Jesus it was a demotion. Yet He had to voluntarily submit to such a status in order to take on human form and sacrifice Himself for all other humans. Because Jesus is now sitting at the right hand of God, believers should acknowledge that setting aside one's own entitlements for the good of others will certainly result in receiving God's reward of glory and honor when it really matters.

 2:10–18

## JESUS, HUMANS, AND ANGELS

Since the writer of Hebrews is making the point that Jesus is far superior to the angels, he explains why the Son of God had to become a man and suffer and die as a human being. The author is extolling a figure who incurred unprecedented suffering and ignominy in His death. Yet Christ's suffering was the only way God could redeem His people from their sins and deliver them from the wrath to come. Jesus' incarnation was not a pageant or a mere role play. A salvation that would meet the requirement of a just God and atone for the sin of guilty humans required suffering that only a divine-human Savior could endure.

The heavenly Father is referred to here (2:10), as often in the New Testament, simply as God. He is regarded as the source of salvation. The description of Jesus as *author* of salvation (2:10; 12:2) might better be translated as "pioneer" or "trailblazer" (6:20). As the perfect and obedient human being (Psalm 8), Jesus is the "pioneer" of our faith, who brings "many sons and daughters to glory" through His death and resurrection for them (Hebrews 2:10 TNIV).

At first it may appear odd to consider that God *made* Jesus perfect (2:10), since Jesus *was* God. The answer is that Jesus was made perfect or "complete" in His *humanity*. As a human being, He was conceived and born without sin. He lived without sin. And by His obedient suffering, He became the perfect sacrifice for sin and so achieved complete or "perfect" humanity—the position of glory that Adam and Eve failed to achieve because of their rebellion against God. Jesus reversed the results of Adam's fall and became the perfect mediator and High Priest for us. He is now able to save us, as well as to truly sympathize and help us in the midst of trials and temptations.

In Hebrews, sanctification, or being made holy (2:11), does not refer to the moral renewal of a person's life after he or she experiences salvation. Rather, it speaks of the person's reconciliation to God. So here the reader begins to see the great significance of Jesus' incarnation. The Son of God not only forged an identity with very unworthy people, but also was not ashamed to do so. It was an honor beyond anything human beings could ever imagine! And it was something that only Christ could do. No angel was capable of such a feat.

The proclamation of Jesus' solidarity with His people is followed by three citations from Old Testament scripture as proof (2:12–13). The first (2:12) is from Psalm 22:22. The second and third (2:13) are from Isaiah 8:17–18. The Old Testament prophet had expressed faith in the Lord and a willingness to oversee the children of God. Such commitments, when applied to Jesus, were even more powerful. During Jesus' incarnation, He shared the human need to live by faith and put His trust in God the Father.

Jesus was certainly an exemplary human being. Rarely are people both sympathetic and strong. Christ, however, could relate to the limitations of humanity even as He was overcoming the forces that imposed many of those limitations (2:14–15). Had Jesus not accepted the limitations of humanity, He never could have tasted death on behalf of all people (2:9, 14–15). Only Christ was a perfect human being. His humanity allowed Him to die. His perfection made Him an appropriate sacrifice to God. And His willingness to go through with such an awful sacrifice was the only way to break the hold of sin and the devil.

It was Jesus' mission to provide salvation for human beings (Abraham's descendants)—not angels (2:16). Jesus helps in a very real way by seeing His people through whatever they are facing. He relates to human suffering because of His incarnation. He had to take on human form in order to die, and by doing so, He also experienced the emotions, pains, and temptations common to all human beings. His experience perfectly qualifies Him to act as High Priest—an intercessor between sinful humankind and a perfect God (2:17–18). No one can rightly claim that God doesn't understand how he or she feels, because Jesus lived through everything any human being can face—and worse. The writer of Hebrews will have more to say on this topic later in the letter.