

Hebrews 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

- [0 : 0 0] Hebrews chapter 1 Long ago at many times and in many ways God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.
- He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.
- 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. And again, when he brings his firstborn into the world, he says, Let all God's angels worship him.
- Of the angels, he says, he makes his angels winds and his ministers a flame of fire. But of the Son, he says, Your throne, O God, is for ever 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. And You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands.
- [1 : 1 9] 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.
- 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?
- While the book of Hebrews has epistle-like elements at its conclusion, in many other respects it reads very different from the epistles of the New Testament, such as the letters of Paul.
- Rather, it has more of a sermon quality to it at many points, not least in this opening chapter. It often feels like an oral communication to a congregation that has later been committed to writing.
- It begins with a description of divine revelation. God has revealed himself in many ways over the course of Israel's history. We often speak about revelation as if it were a single sort of thing.
- [2 : 1 8] However, there is considerable variety in its forms. Sometimes God dictates. Sometimes people see visions. Sometimes people are inspired to write history. Other times people are inspired to write psalms.
- God speaks in various ways. Revelation is also historical. The messages to the prophets are connected with God's actions in the history of Israel. They aren't just theological propositions detached from history.

Divine revelation was not a once-off event, but a self-revelation of God sustained with the people of Israel over the course of many centuries. However, while sustained, God is not flitting from nation to nation and context to context in his self-revelation, but is communicating himself progressively to a particular people over history.

It is also episodic. It happens at various and often surprising points, often followed by extended silence. It isn't predictable or controllable.

The prophets are, as it were, divine mouthpieces. God speaks by them. The prophets aren't merely philosophically speculating about God or trying to communicate mysterious dreams and visions about the Supreme Being.

[3 : 27] They are bearers of articulate speech from God. A God who speaks is a God who calls us to account and disrupts us. A God who speaks is not a God that we can project our own notions onto.

Christian revelation is divine self-revelation, and divine self-revelation not merely in inscrutable, mysterious, and awe-inspiring theophanic manifestation, but self-declaration in intelligible speech.

Into this sustained self-revelation over the history of Israel bursts something new and unexpected, as the God who has been revealing himself over that history reveals himself in the person of his Son.

Even amidst the variety of the earlier forms of revelation, this is a radical novelty. In the place of the intermediaries of the prophets, we have God's Son coming in person.

While in some senses continuous with what has gone before, this is also an apocalyptic break. We might remember the parable of the wicked vinedressers here, which expresses the significance of the sending of the Son, albeit from the aspect of judgment.

[4 : 30] Matthew chapter 21 verses 33 to 37. Here another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants and went into another country.

When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit, and the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did the same to them.

Finally he sent his Son to them, saying, They will respect my Son. This has occurred in these last days. God has at last spoken in this particular way, bringing his ongoing self-revelation to a fitting yet surprising climax.

These last days are also days that mark the end of the old age and the dawn of a new one. God has spoken by his Son. This is the definitive word. It's also a personal word.

God speaks not through the intermediation of prophets, but by his own Son. The author of Hebrews gives a number of glorious descriptions of Christ. He is the heir of all things, the Son into whose hands all things will be given.

[5 : 39] The destiny of all of the cosmos, the entire heavens and the earth, is to be the inheritance of Christ. He is the final definitive word of God. He brings to a climactic conclusion the progressive revelation through the prophets in a decisive self-revelation of God.

He is also, however, the first word of God. He is the one through whom the world was made. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature. Using language similar to the description of wisdom in intertestamental literature, the author describes Christ as the one in whom God is seen clearly.

His very nature and glory is made manifest in him. Christ is not just one among many of the different ways in which God reveals himself. One of the various ways mentioned in verse 1, he is the definitive revelation of God.

He is the one in whom we see God himself. As Jesus says to Philip in John's Gospel, the one who sees the Son has seen the Father. Christ is the image of God as the Son.

He is not just someone made in the image, as we are. He upholds the universe by the word of his power. Not only is he the one through whom the world was made, he is also the providential word that sustains all things in being.

[6 : 51] In association with his upholding of the creation, he is also the one who delivers the creation, making purification for sins. This passage, which closely associates Christ's supremacy over creation with his supremacy in the new creation achieved through his redemption, might well remind us of Colossians 1, verses 15-20.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities.

All things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Christ has sat down at God's right hand, at the position of greatest power in the universe, raised over all other powers and authorities. Christ came as a humble saviour, and has now been exalted above all, much as Paul describes in Philippians 2, verses 5-11.

[8 : 05] Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of servant, being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Therefore God has 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.

Much as Paul in Philippians, Hebrews speaks of the name that Christ receives in his exaltation, a name greater than any of the angels, the name that is above every name.

While the angels are powerful and prominent, Christ is exalted over any of them. Hebrews will proceed to elaborate upon the significance of Christ's superiority over the angels as the sun.

There was a lot of speculation and literature about the heavenly powers at this point in the history of the Jews. Hebrews challenges this misconception by showing just how exalted Christ is.

[9 : 22] The author of the book asks his hearers a rhetorical question. Has any angel been addressed in the ways that God has addressed the sun? He quotes Psalm 2 verse 7 and 2 Samuel chapter 7 verse 14.

Both of these verses relate to the Davidic king in their original context. Psalm 2 verse 7 addresses the special relationship that the king enjoys with the Lord as his son.

2 Samuel chapter 7 verse 14 from the original revelation of the Davidic covenant is similar. These verses took on an even greater force when read in the light of the events of Christ's baptism and transfiguration, when Christ's sonship was directly declared by the Father, a sonship that exceeded the mere covenantal sonship that many might have envisaged in the context of the Davidic covenant.

The angels surround God's throne and they exercise considerable authority. However, to contrast the sun with them, Hebrews quotes Old Testament verses concerning them, showing that while they are exalted, they do not compare to the sun.

His first point is that the angels are instructed to praise the firstborn son. The sun is placed above them, and when God brings the firstborn into the world, the angels must worship him.

[10 : 34] What God bringing his firstborn into the world is referring to isn't exactly clear. It may be referring to the incarnation, or to Christ's exaltation as the firstborn from the dead.

In the context of the incarnation, for instance, we might remember the appearance to the shepherds near Bethlehem in Luke chapter 2 verses 9 to 14. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.

And the angel said to them, Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.

And this will be a sign for you. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.

He follows this with a quotation from Psalm 104 verse 4. That verse speaks of God making the natural elements, his messengers or angels. The author of Hebrews following the Septuagint uses it to characterize the angels themselves.

[11 : 42] They are creatures who serve. The sun, by contrast, is one who rules eternally in justice. He quotes Psalm 45 verses 6 to 7. Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.

The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions. This is from a psalm that, like a number of the other texts quoted in this chapter, were important messianic texts in the early church.

It seems that the sun is addressed in these verses as God. His throne is eternal. And his rule is identified with God's own rule, which sharply contrasts with that of the angels, whose authority is limited and derivative as servants.

He quotes Psalm 102 verses 25 to 27, in which Jesus is now addressed as Lord and is spoken of as the immortal creator of all, who endures eternal, while others perish and fail.

He is the one who laid the foundation at the beginning, and he is the one who will outlast them all. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. This section began with the rhetorical question, To which of the angels did God ever say?

[12 : 53] Now, as the author brings it to its head, he repeats that question, quoting what is the most popular messianic verse of them all, Psalm 110 verse 1, The Lord says to my Lord, Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.

Christ is both Davidic King and the eternally enthroned Lord. We might recall Jesus' challenge to the Pharisees in Matthew chapter 22 verses 41 to 45. Now, while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, What do you think about the Christ?

Whose son is he? They said to him, The son of David. He said to them, How is it then that David in the spirit calls him Lord, saying, The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.

If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son? In this passage we see, as elsewhere in the New Testament, these two identities held together in Christ, recognising that the term son means more than we might originally have thought in its associations with the Davidic covenant.

It also relates to the divinity of the one of whom it is spoken. By contrast, the angels then are servants ministering to the heirs, to those who will enter into the inheritance of the son.

[14 : 07] Hebrews begins by giving its hearers an elevated understanding of Christ. This one isn't just like the angelic beings and heavenly creatures. He is God himself. Consequently, as he enters fully into human life and experience, he can take it upon himself and transform it, delivering us from the dominion of death in a way that no angel ever could.

Unless we have a high view of Christ, it will be difficult for us to recognise all of this. However, once we see the true glory of the eternal and exalted son, who has assumed our condition, everything else changes.

A question to consider. What are some of the ways that the son functions as divine revelation in the understanding of the writers of the New Testament?