

## **STUDIES IN HEBREWS No. 3**

**Hebrews 1:1-14**

**April 28, 2002**

### **Review**

Hebrews we said is a sermon on the subject of the necessity of a persevering faith. It is a warning against apostasy and an encouragement to these Jewish Christians to press on to the end. The preacher employs extensively the history of the OT, urging his readers to imitate the perseverance of the faithful of the ancient epoch and, at the same time, warning them not to imitate those – such as the wilderness generation of Israel – who lost the promise for want of a true, living and persevering faith. Throughout the letter we are going to be told that if we want to receive the promise – by which this preacher means the fulfillment of salvation in the world to come – we must hold on firmly to the gospel and to Jesus Christ to the end. These Jewish Christians were being tempted to return to Judaism; some of them apparently already had. That is what called forth this urgent exhortation.

### **Text Comment**

Now, in the first part of Hebrews, the absolute supremacy of Jesus Christ as the only Savior and Lord is demonstrated by comparing him first to the prophets, then to the angels, then to Moses and then to Aaron and the OT priests. The reason for these comparisons, of course, is that first century Judaism – the very Judaism that was tempting these Jewish Christians to return – did not believe that Jesus Christ was necessary; all that they needed they already had. First century Judaism felt that with Moses and the Levitical priesthood, it needed no more for its salvation.

Now, one more thing by way of introduction. As you know, the Dead Sea Scrolls have confirmed that there were quite different circles of Jewish thought and life in the first century (just as there is no single “Judaism” as a religion or philosophy of life today, but several very different views). The Scrolls have greatly expanded our knowledge of what is now referred to as “non-conformist” Judaism, that is, the Judaism not primarily shaped by the rabbinical tradition and not represented by the Pharisees and Sadducees. Of course, there were huge differences of outlook between the Pharisees and Sadducees as well. Chief among those non-conformist Jewish groups were the Essenes, who had a community located at Qumran and had others elsewhere, though all of them, so far as we know, were located in the Holy Land. There were apparently both monastic Essenes, such as those at Qumran, and city dwellers. Josephus gives their number as 4,000 though their influence may have been considerably greater (there were, after all, only 6,000 Pharisee heads of families).

The Essenes had some quite different views from those of conformist Judaism and what makes this interesting to us now is that some of them seem to bear a special relation to the argument of Hebrews. The Essenes looked for the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s new covenant prophecy but in the form of a renewal, restoration, and purification of the Aaronic priesthood with its system of ceremonies. They placed special emphasis on ceremonial washings. They anticipated the appearance of a great prophet, the second Moses of Deut. 18:18, and sought to maintain a manner of life patterned after Israel in the wilderness. They also indulged in extravagant

speculations concerning angels, even expecting that in the coming kingdom the archangel Michael would play a more decisive role than the Messiah. What is more, they cast Melchizedek in the role of an end-time deliverer. Taken together, it is striking that all of these become themes in Hebrews. It can plausibly be argued that Hebrews is a point by point refutation of the doctrines of a Jewish community of the Essene-Qumran type. As you can imagine, scholars have begun to wonder if Hebrews wasn't written to a group of Jewish Christians who had come out of Essene Judaism and now some of them were being tempted to return to it.

v.2 The first sentence of the sermon is an opening salvo. This preacher is going to set the Lord Jesus Christ high above everyone and anything else that men might look to and trust in apart from Jesus Christ. Take note that the author does not say that Christ's message was any different from the message of the prophets, there is no contrast between their messages implied here; but his dignity and authority is far greater than theirs because he is no one less than the Son of God himself, the heir of all things, and the creator of heaven and earth.

The phrase "last days" is taken over from the OT where it was used to designate the prophetic future. So *these* last days refers to days that were prophesied by the ancient prophets. It does not mean, of course, that there is nothing still to come, for Hebrews will be speaking constantly about the consummation of salvation which is still in the future.

v.3 The Son, in other words, shares the divine attributes, has a nature the same as God the Father, and does what only God can do. The full deity of Jesus Christ is confessed here. Having completed his great work of redemption he is now again in heaven and has been afforded the highest conceivable honor, a place at God's Right Hand. That place is also a place of great authority. The fact that he "sat down" indicates that his work of offering sacrifice is finished. That point will be made again in 10:12-14. As the argument proceeds, it will become clear that this is the preacher's real interest: what Christ did to cleanse us from our sins. The question, the vital question for him is how to get rid of our sins and he is going to argue that only Christ can do that for us. Now the point of all this is that, if that is who Jesus is, if that is what he does and has done, if that is the honor that is accorded him in heaven, *then, obviously, any view of life, any system of salvation, any approach to God that does not have Jesus Christ at the center is obviously false and stands self-condemned.*

"Majesty in heaven" is a typical Jewish periphrasis for God. You have a similar one in 8:1. Jews became almost superstitious about pronouncing God's name. If you never said his name you couldn't be accused of misusing it and violating the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment, or so they thought. So they found other ways of referring to God without using his name.

If you count up the statements about Christ in vv. 2-3, beginning with "whom he appointed heir..." you will find there are seven of them. A seven-fold confirmation of the glory of Jesus Christ. That is no accident!

By the way, Latin does not have a perfect active participle, that is a participle in the active voice with the past tense. One result of that is that the translation of the Greek

“after he had provided purification for sin” was rendered by Jerome in the Latin vulgate with the *present* participle, “making purification for sin.” That profoundly encouraged what became the Roman Catholic view that Christ is still making purification for sin. That is not what the Greek says or what this author means. Christ *sat down!* His work was done – *once for all* as he will later say.

- v.4 The fact that he “inherited” this better name doesn’t mean that he didn’t have it by right before. Obviously, he has just said that Jesus created the universe. Here we are speaking of the *incarnate* son and of the reward that comes to the God-*man* because of his finished work of redemption. You get that same thought in 2:9.

The word the NIV translates “superior” here and “better” most other places, is an important word in Hebrews. It occurs 13x in such phrases as “the better covenant”, “the better country,” “the better resurrection.” It is intended to set forth the superiority of Jesus Christ to anything else upon which men might hope for salvation and the superiority of that which we will eventually receive in Jesus Christ to that which we might receive while we are in this world.

As I said at the outset, the comparison of the Lord Christ with the angels may be due to the special interest in angels on the part of the community of Jews from which this community of Jewish Christians had originally sprung. The fact that what follows is such an elaborate and convincing proof of this point surely suggests that in some way this was a matter in dispute. In the eschatology of the Essenes at Qumran, an angel played a more decisive role in the future of God’s people than the Messiah did. Perhaps, in their retreat from Christianity, these Jewish Christians were becoming hesitant to ascribe full deity to Jesus – which would please the Jews, of course – but were wanting still to venerate him in some way. There have been plenty of folk in the church over the centuries who have wanted to do that as a way of reconciling Christianity with some other religion.

- v.5 The first of the *seven* citations from Scripture that follow is from Ps. 2:7, which looms large in the NT as a prophecy of the incarnation, the ministry, and especially the resurrection of Jesus Christ. God could be said to “become” the Father of Jesus Christ only with reference to the exaltation of the human nature of the Son of God.

The second citation, from the covenant promise God made to David in 2 Sam. 7:14, was the basis for the prophecy, made in many forms by the OT prophets, of a king of Davidic descent who would usher in God’s everlasting kingdom.

In both cases the obvious point is that the Son of God stands high above the angels who are simply the servants of God.

- v.6 The third citation, taken from Deut. 32:43 in the longer version of that verse that is found in the LXX and DSS makes the further point that when the Son of God came into the world he was worshiped as divine, by angels also. He is also called “the firstborn” because he existed before all creation and because all the creation is his inheritance.

Taking the entire quotation from Deut. 32 in its context, this is another instance of the divine name, Yahweh, being attributed to Jesus.

- v.7 The angels, on the other hand, are servants.
- v.9 The angels are servants but Christ is God the Son. This is one of the relatively few texts in the NT where Jesus Christ is directly said to be “God.” The text is taken from Ps. 45, a wedding son for the king of Israel, fulfilled finally in the life of Jesus, David’s eternal heir.
- v.12 The sixth citation is from Psalm 102:25-27 and reiterates the majesty of Christ as the creator and as the eternal Yahweh. In context it is Yahweh who is being addressed in the psalm.
- v.13 The final and seventh citation, from Ps. 110, reiterates the royal status, the divine rule, and the promised inheritance that belong to Jesus Christ, all of which set him far above the angels.
- v.14 The angels, on the other hand, are servants of God. Some of them stand in the presence of the Lord (as Gabriel says of himself in Luke 1:19), but none of them sit at the Right Hand! Here we have the first of many indications that “salvation” in Hebrews is viewed from the vantage point of its future consummation. This salvation is something believers *will* inherit, not something they have already inherited. See, for example, in 2:5 where it is “the world to come” about which this preacher is speaking.

Now, the entire argument of this sermon is summed up in its opening paragraph. Jesus Christ is God, which is to say, God the Son; he is the creator of heaven and earth, he is the redeemer of his people, he is the Mighty Lord and King, the Eternal God whom angels worship. What is more, this same Mighty God has come into the world precisely to redeem his people from their sins. That which he came to do, he has done, and now has sat down in heaven, his great work accomplished. *That being so, we cannot be right if we are not trusting in him for our forgiveness, subject to him in our living, and looking to him for our entrance into heaven.* Everything that can be said of God, can be said of Jesus Christ. But you cannot say that about anyone or anything else. So let’s not have any more of this nonsense that you can fashion a way to God that is not Jesus Christ and faith in him. He *is* the way, the truth, and the life, and plainly the only way, the only truth and the only life. And, why? Why must Jesus be the center of everything in our lives? Because he made us and because he and he alone can save us from death and doom and bring us to heaven!

The Orthodox Jew, Pinchas Lapide published in 1984 his book, *The Resurrection of Jesus*. In that book he argued that the evidence of history supports the resurrection. He believed it actually happened. Jesus rose from the dead. But he does not accept that Jesus is the Messiah or that he must believe in him to be saved. He may be a Savior for the Christians, but not for the Jews. But there are very few people in the world who would accept that Jesus rose from the dead and then deny the implications of that resurrection, the very implications Jesus himself drew: viz. that the resurrection would prove that he had come from heaven, that he was the Son of God, that he

had salvation in his hand to give to those who trusted in him, that he was, in fact, the way, the truth, and the life and that no one could come to the Father except through him. Well, similarly here. Accept that Jesus is as the Scripture has described him to be and the vast implications follow by rigorous necessity. He becomes, he must become, the supreme person to us, the meaning and the hope of our lives. Angels are magnificent beings, but they are nothing compared to the Son of God. They didn't make us and they can't save us. They can *help* our Savior but they can't *be* our Savior.

In the brief time we have this evening I want simply to reiterate this fundamental point. Because Jesus *is who he is* he must be the central focus and the central hope of our lives. That is why it was so important for the church to clarify her mind on what she was to believe about Jesus, viz. that authentic man that he was, he was also fully and entirely God the Son, as fully God as God the Father. Tamper with this truth, understate it and you will, you must end up at last with a different religion. This was the argument of Athanasius in his great classic of the Arian controversy, *On the Incarnation of the Son of God*. Tamper with Christ's full deity, make him less than fully God and fully man, and you will end up with a different view of salvation. You cannot help it. The Christian view proceeds from Savior to salvation, from the person of the Savior to the way of salvation.

And that principle is true in our Christian lives as well. Our view of the Lord, our understanding of his person, is more fundamental to our living as Christians than anything else. We will live as Christians should to the extent that Jesus Christ himself is revered in our hearts as God and is believed to have been a true man like ourselves. We will trust him, love him, obey him, find comfort and solace in him to the extent that we find the full truth about him *living* in our hearts. It is easy to slip away from this, to begin to think more about other things concerning our Christian faith. And, to be sure, there are other things to think about. But we won't think rightly about anything unless we get right first and foremost, Jesus Christ himself, and then accept the implications of believing him to be God the Son and a true man come into the world and now sitting at the Right Hand *for us*.

John Newton was nothing like as good a poet as his friend William Cowper. But, he put sound theology in his poems, even if they weren't great specimens of the art of poetry. And he put the theology of Hebrews 1 soundly into one of his poems.

What think you of Christ? is the test,  
 To try both your state and your scheme:  
 You cannot be right in the rest  
 Unless you think rightly of him.  
 As Jesus appears in your view,  
 As he is beloved or not,  
 So God is disposed to you  
 And mercy or wrath are [sic] your lot.

Some take Him a creature to be,  
 A man or an angel at most;  
 Sure these have not feelings like me

Nor know themselves wretched or lost:  
 So guilty, so helpless am I,  
 I durst not confide in his blood,  
 Nor on his protection rely  
 Unless I was sure He is God.

Some call him Savior, in word,  
 But mix their own works with his plan,  
 And hope he his help will afford,  
 When they have done all that they can;  
 If doings prove rather too light,  
 (A little, they own, they may fail)  
 They purpose to make up full weight  
 By casting his name in the scale.

Some style him the pearl of great price  
 And say He's the fountain of joys,  
 Yet feed upon folly and vice  
 And cleave to the world and its toys;  
 Like Judas the Savior they kiss  
 And while they salute him, betray;  
 Ah! what will profession like this  
 Avail in the terrible day?

If asked what of Jesus I think,  
 Though still my best thoughts are but poor,  
 I say he's my meat and my drink,  
 My life and my strength and my store;  
 My shepherd, my husband, my friend,  
 My Savior from sin and from thrall;  
 My hope from beginning to end,  
 My portion, my Lord, and my all!

It is our life to believe that and to proclaim it to others. It is the obligation of honor to defend that true biblical conception of Jesus Christ against all comers – and there are many on all sides still today who wish to diminish Jesus Christ in one way or another so as to make him more compatible with the prejudices of our time. But, more than that, we will heed this great opening chapter of Hebrews most perfectly if we tonight realize anew that the foundation and the engine of our own lives ought to be, must be the glory of Jesus Christ himself, God and Man, Savior of sinners, hope of the world, heir of all things, to whom angels, who have no sin, know to love and worship and serve every moment of every hour of every day. You young people, make it your business, even tonight, before you go to bed, to tell the Lord that you want a life dominated, shaped, directed by the pure and powerful influences of the glorious person of the Lord Christ himself. You want to live your life looking up to him and worshipping him as the angels do and you never want anything to take his place, rather you want nothing so much as that he should

occupy the supreme position in your heart and life until the moment long years from now when you draw your last breath in this world.