

# The Epistle to the Hebrews

Lesson # 2    Hebrews 1:1-4    September 20, 2015    God Has Spoken

## Introduction

There is no greeting to open this letter, no author named and no recipients named. It simply launches immediately into doctrinal considerations – the first 4 verses bringing us face to face with the Sonship, Creatorship, Godness of, atonement of, and the superiority of The Son of God, and the excellence of His name over angels. This opening is extremely well written and majestic in wording. Schreiner calls this section “one of the most beautiful and exalted Christological texts in the New Testament.”<sup>i</sup>

The main point of these 4 important verses is that Jesus, God’s Son was His final Word. He is thus both definitive and conclusive when it comes to redemption. In the sense of progressive revelation, Jesus is first contrasted with the OT prophets.

## The Heir of All Things

vv. 1-2

i.        ) In these last days...

v. 1 - 2a

The letter begins this way, “*Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets*,”. This of course, describes God’s revelation throughout the OT where diverse prophets spoke God’s message and recorded it for posterity. The message, we are aware, paints a truthful and accurate picture of sin ( the Fall, the speedy descent into depravity, Israel, the Law, kings, judges, and so on – Biblical Theology / the storyline of the Bible ). The prophets painted detailed and broad strokes – sometimes looking into the near future, warning often of coming judgment, and looking deeper into the future – to the first advent of the Messiah, and likely unknown to them – His second and final return. Through it all, we are told in passages like Luke 24:25-27 & Heb. 10:5-10 that Christ is revealed to the world in the OT in a veiled or cryptic way.

Key in on the clause “God spoke” here in Heb. 1. The Bible is not just a collection of historic events, pithy sayings, fantastic stories and things we are to “believe it or not”. Though men were used to write it all down for posterity, it is completely and actually God’s Word. It’s veracity is attested to, by way of just one example – fulfilled prophecy. Even if you were to focus on only prophecies recorded and then fulfilled in Christ’s birth, character, life, works of healing, signs and comfort – cf. Jesus’ reply to John the Baptist’s followers’ inquiry of Luke 7:18-23 – “Are You the One to come, or should we look for another?” Jesus’ answer is not just “Yes, I am the One.” Instead, He appeals to ( v. 22 ) OT prophecy, which He knows that John is aware of, and can use to verify who Jesus is. Later, in Luke 7:27, He quotes Malachi 3:1 to tell the crowd that John the Baptist is the one being spoken of there, which itself alludes to Isa. 40:3 ( see 3-8 ).

The prophets of the OT continually made certain that the people they preached to were aware that they were not just spouting off their own opinions, but that they spoke on behalf of God Himself, giving the people His very words. In fact, “the authors of the OT speak most explicitly; 3,808 times they claim to be transmitting the very words of God.”<sup>ii</sup> Thousands of times we see the phrase, “Thus says the Lord”, or “Then the Lord said to me...”, or “the word of the Lord came to me.”, or “the Lord spoke to...” or “the oracle concerning...”, and so on.

And since it is all really about Christ, we see Him also verifying His belief that that is all God’s Word – every jot and tittle. In one case, He uses an obscure passage – Psalm 82:6 – to stop the Pharisees from attacking Him as a blasphemer – cf. John 10:30-39 ( key v. 35b ). There are numerous examples of Jesus’ complete trust in God’s Word, which during His time on earth, was the OT.

Rene Pache points out,

“Christ specifically confirmed the whole OT. He did not find any error that needed to be eliminated, nor did He express the slightest doubt about any part of it. He consistently based His arguments and exhortations on Scripture. He declared: “One jot and tittle shall in no wise pass away from the law, till all things be accomplished.”( Matt. 5:18 ). Discussing a single word with the Jews, He said; “The Scripture cannot be broken” ( John 10:35 ). And He exclaimed toward the end of His days on earth; “Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth” ( John 17:17 ).”<sup>iii</sup>

When Pache says that Jesus “specifically confirmed the whole OT”, he of course refers to the verses he mentions in the quote above, but Jesus also mentions Jonah and the great fish, Noah and the flood and ark, Adam and Eve, & God’s establishment of marriage and how it is to be defined, signifying that Jesus saw even those areas considered controversial or suspiciously mythological- seeming to be factual, historical truth. So we see that when God speaks, it is truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Even when the Bible records lies of the people within a particular narrative, it provides a truthful record of what took place, was said, or ensued, and in that sense, it is the truth. We will see more aspects of the veracity of God’s Word when we get to Hebrews 4:12.

The OT revelation was not inferior in the sense that it was incorrect or inaccurate. Rather, it was designed to be “fragmentary, incomplete and anticipatory.”<sup>iv</sup> The words were given to “the fathers” – the ancient generations of mostly Israelites - with a few Gentiles. This does not just refer to the prophetic books, but to the entire OT canon. And it is not limited to patriarchs like Abraham, Jacob and Isaac, but to all people involved in the OT record. This was the days of the Old Covenant – the era of the law of Moses which controlled the faithful ( and some not so faithful ) right up until the end of the Gospels. We will see plenty on that topic as we move forward into the book.

J.I. Packer says, “The need for verbal revelation appears most clearly when we consider the person and work of Christ. His life and death were the clearest and fullest revelation of God that ever was or could be made. Yet, it could never have been understood without explanation.

Whoever could have guessed, without being told, that the man Jesus was God incarnate, that he had created the world in which he was crucified, that by dying a criminal's death he put away the sins of mankind, and that now, though gone from our sight, he lives forever to bring penitent sinners to his Father? And who can come to faith in Christ if he knows none of this? No considerations could show more plainly the complete inability of man to "make do" in his religion without a word spoken from God."<sup>v</sup>

Hebrews continues, "*but in these last days*" – our contrast here is one of eras – of beginnings vs last days, and of messengers – men & prophets vs God's Son. God has thus been 'speaking to us' since the creation and He continues to speak to us through His written Word. As God's Son ( His only Son – JN 3:16; MT 3:17; 17:5; Rom. 8:32 ), Jesus is the subject of all Scripture and the author of our salvation as well as the One who has paid it all for us.

Thomas Schreiner comments:

"The last days ( Gen. 49:1; Num. 24:14; Isa. 2:2; Jer. 23:20; 25:19; Dan. 10:14; Hos. 3:5; Mic. 4:1 ) represent the days in which God's saving promises are fulfilled, and they have now commenced with the coming of the Son. Believers no longer live in the days when they await the fulfillment of what God has promised. They live in the eschaton; "the ends of the ages have come" ( I Cor. 10: 11 ). It is inconceivable that the readers would embrace the old era with its sacrifices and rituals now that the new has come in Jesus Christ."<sup>vi</sup>

No further word than what we now possess in our Bible is needed. The Bible is complete, and it is ( I Tim. 3:16 ) all we need to live for Christ. The significance of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, ascension and return has been clearly stated for us. We do not need to await any further revelation.

John Murray comments;

The NT stands to the Old in the relation of consummation to preparation; it embodies a fuller and more glorious disclosure of God's character and will. This is signaled by the fact that in these last days God hath spoken unto us by His Son, who is the brightness his glory and the express image of his substance ( Heb. 1:1-3 ). In Paul's language the glory of the NT is the glory that excels ( 2 Cor. 3:10-11 ). The NT Scripture enshrines and conveys to us the content of that new and better covenant, established upon better promises. Is it at all consonant with the completory nature of the NT, with the more excellent glory inherent in the NT and with the finality attaching to the revelation of God's own Son to suppose that the Scripture of such an economy should be lacking in that inerrancy which the authoritative witnesses – our Lord and his apostles – predicate of the OT? It would be contrary to all sound analogy and reason to entertain such a proposition."<sup>vii</sup>

Jesus is superior to the prophets by virtue of who He is. He is the very One the prophets spoke about. He is the One in whom all of God's redemptive plans culminate ( Eph. 1:9-10 ) and as we move forward into the book, as Stephen Wellum says,

" Old Testament prophets, priests, and kings all point forward and anticipate the final prophet, priest and king; the sacrifices and ceremonies of the old covenant point forward to what has now come in Christ and the inauguration of a new-covenant era foretold by the Old Testament."<sup>viii</sup>

How is the claim of Christ being the final word, of His being the object of the prophets' words illustrated as of great importance? There are 5 main evidences, which take us to the end of v. 4.

ii. ) Appointed Heir of All Things v. 2b

What can it mean that One who is God in the flesh is “*appointed heir of all things*”? By comparing what we read in Romans 1:3-4, we may arrive at a meaningful answer to this question. One clue is His descendency from David – a fact made plain in both Matthew’s geneology ( cf. Matt. 1:5 ) and Luke’s ( LK 3:32 ) passages; and referral to Psalm 2:7-8. Psalm 2:7 is actually cited in Heb. 1:5 as part of the author’s argument that Christ is superior to the angels.

Over the years, church theologians and commentators have understood Ps. 2:7-8 to refer to the Son’s appointment in eternity past, or what came to be called the “eternal generation of the Son”<sup>ix</sup>. However, Psalm 2 is more of a reference to the Davidic king, a type of Him who was to come. In fact, where this Psalm comes up or is explained in the NT [ Heb. 1:2, 5, 8-9, 13; 5:5 & cf. Acts 13:33-37; Rom. 1:3-4 ], the writers apply it to Jesus as an antitype of David, and the One now installed at God’s right hand as the Messianic King.<sup>x</sup> In fact, much of Hebrews 1 is centred around His kingship ( as Son of David ) and His creatorship.

However, though His incarnation and saving work is done as a human being descended from David, the next verses make it clear that He is not just another David ( 1:5; 5:5 ) or Adam ( 2:5-9 ); or Moses ( 3:1-6 ) or a priest ( 5:1-10 ); but He is God the Son from all eternity – thus, He is God.

iii. ) Agent of Creation v. 2c

“through whom he also created the world”. This text parallels others in the NT, especially JN 1:1-3; I Cor. 8:6 & Col. 1:15-17; and is fully supported doctrinally and biblically by passages such as Rom. 11:33-36; Rev. 4:11; 5:9-10 & Prov. 8:27-30 – to name a few.

“All things were brought together, and are still held together in Him. The energy which is created is alone competent to sustain...In Him this sustenation of all things reposes. He is the condition of their primary and prolonged being. What a vast view of Christ’s dignity! His arm upholds the universe, and if it were withdrawn, all things would fade into their original non-existence...The mighty and minute are alike to Him whose supervision embraces the extinction of a world and the fall of a sparrow...Every pulsation of our heart depends on His sovereign beneficence who feeds and clothes us...All things which He has evoked into being have their continued subsistence in Him.”<sup>xi</sup> John Eadie

It is through the Son that our world ( in fact, all of creation ) was made. In this verse, Christ’s deity is expressed and the roles of the Father and Son are delineated – cf. Gen. 1:1-2 – and the Holy Spirit.

The Radiance of God / The Full Deity of Jesus Christ v. 3a

#### iv. ) The Full Deity of Christ

This verse is quite possibly the strongest worded evidence of Christ's deity in the Bible. In fact, on the basis of this verse, the Arians refused to acknowledge the inclusion of Hebrews in the NT canon entirely, since they denied the eternal pre-existence of Christ and the deity of the Son.<sup>xiii</sup> Modern day Arians are the Jehovah's Witnesses and they still assert this verse as a key to their doctrinal / theological position, which denies the eternality and deity of Christ. Jehovah's Witness adherents believe that Jesus is really Michael the Archangel.

There are two parallel statements here that assert the truth about Christ:

- "He is the radiance of the glory of God"
- "the exact imprint of his nature"

To be "the radiance of the glory of God" surely means that the Son reflects God's glory (mirrors it), but could also carry the meaning of "the manifestation of God's glory". Either way, and both ways, the point is made that Christ is God because He reveals &/or shares in God's glory. Think of Isaiah 42:8; JN 17:5 and JN 14:8-10.

Jesus is also "the exact imprint of his nature". He thus reveals who God is (JN 1:18) and thus shares in His divine identity. See JN 1:1; 14:9; Col. 1:15; 2:9-10; Phil. 2:6.<sup>xiii</sup> We cannot understand the identity of Jesus apart from affirming that He is God the Son and thus fully God.<sup>xiv</sup>

### The Lord of Providence / The Upholder of All Things v. 3b

#### v. ) Upholder of All Things

Not only was everything created by Christ, but He also upholds it on a second to second, minute to minute, year to year, era to era basis! It is not as if He is juggling the planets and stars and blowing the comets and asteroids around with His breath. The text says, "he upholds the universe by the word of his power." Colossians 1:17 says "in Him all things hold together". I Cor. 8:6 says, "*yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom they exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.*"

"But how exactly, does Christ hold all things together? By what means does He do this? Hebrews 1:3 says, "upholding all things by the word of His power." "Upholding" represents the Greek word (*phero*) commonly translated 'bear' or 'carry'. You have probably seen images of Atlas, standing stationary with feet planted as he bears up under the great weight of the world on his back. That is not the image conveyed by this Greek word. The word does not refer to a static action of barely holding up or supporting but to a dynamic activity of movement. This would be the word used if Atlas were to pick up the world and carry it along with him to a destination of his own choosing.

What does Christ bear up and carry along "on their appointed course"? All things. Is this divine hyperbole? Inspired exaggeration? Or do we accept God at His word? By what means does He sustain and carry along all things? By the word of His power, The same word by which He spoke

worlds into existence ( Gen. 1; II Pet. 3:5; Heb.11:3 ) providentially maintains their continued existence.”<sup>xv</sup>

If this concept does not carry the weight of absolute proof of the deity of Christ, it is hard to imagine how better to say it. “Upholding” is a dynamic word, not a static one. It more than implies something ( here – the universe ) being carried from place to place, and we would also want to add – from past to present to future. Christ was Creator, is sustainer, and will carry His creation to its appointed end. “*he speaks and it is done*”.<sup>xvi</sup> His sovereignty, if you consider it, could not be more evident than it is right here. Consider the words of Jesus in JN 17:12 – and expand that to think about the fact that this could be applied to everything in its entirety – universe-wide.

## He Made Purification for Sins, and Sat Down at God’s Right Hand v. 3d

vi. ) He is the High Priest

v. 3d

His deity, Sonship, Creatorship, providential control and fulfillment of the prophets has been expressed in vv. 1-3c, but now in v. 3d, His work as an incarnate High Priest is noted. We don’t find out in this verse that He is High Priest, but the ground work is laid here for the recipients to conclude that this Son being described is an all-sufficient redeemer and mediator [ Priest ]– this will be fleshed out in Hebrews chapters 7-10.

His rulership – His Lordship ( Phil. 2:11 ) began after “having made purification for sins.” – the wording of which more than implies that this was a one-time event ( cf. Heb. 7:26-27; 9:12, 24-26; 10:12-14 ), which is why He was able to sit down after it was completed. The singularity of His sacrificial and priestly actions is emphasized by the repetition noted in the verses we just looked at; as contrasted with earthly priests who have to keep performing the rituals day after day, year after year and replacing those who died while in priestly service so that each subsequent generation can continue to serve their particular generation( Heb. 9:6-10, 25,26; 10:3; 5:1-4; 7:11 ). However, this was about to come to an abrupt end in AD 70!

It is significant that once He had performed the work on the cross ( implied here ) that He sat down, for more than one reason. A very basic implication here is that in the tabernacle and Temple on earth, there was no seat for the priest. Oh, there was the Mercy Seat in the Holy of Holies, but that was not a seat for a human to sit on, or even to gaze at ( hence the incense / smoke for the High Priest to engage when he entered once a year on the Day of Atonement – cf. Lev. 16: 12-13. ) Since there was no place to sit down, this implies that the work of the priesthood was never done in there.. Moreover, and probably more important to realise is where Jesus sat down when His work was done – “at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” In other words, on the throne beside His Father – cf. Rev. 3:21-22; 5:7-14. This did not occur immediately upon the resurrection – note Jesus’ words to Mary in JN 20:17. No, this is where He went when He ascended in Acts 1. ( cf. Psalm 24, and note the sequential

& interesting layout of Psalms 22-24 ). This [ His ascension ] may in fact be related to Heb. 12:2.

Psalm 110, parts of which are quoted extensively in Hebrews, identifies David's Lord with God's heavenly throne and thus with His own inherent deity – again, solidifying Jesus' deity yet once again. Jesus can fulfill all these positions and offices and do all these tasks, because He is God the Son incarnate. This Psalm so perfectly pointed to the deity of the Messiah that Jesus quoted v. 1 of it as a show stopper to the Pharisees in MT 22:41-46. They knew what it had to mean, but there was no way they were going to answer His question correctly, because by doing so, their unbelief would be exposed! At that point, they had no theological leg to stand on and they knew it. Notice their response to the Parable of the Tenants in MT 21:33-46 – and especially v. 38. They knew who He was!

## The Inherited Name

v. 4

Verse 4 continues the sentence of v. 3d, and as such, has close ties with v. 3. The interesting and perhaps confusing thing is the wording here – “*having become as much superior to angels*”, and “*he has inherited the name more excellent than theirs*”. This is not suggesting that, as the eternal Son of God, He has ‘become’ superior to angels, because He always was, in that regard, since He created them! So this must be saying that it is as the God-man He has become superior. This anticipates the argument that follows the rest of chapter 1 and 2 as well.

He reigns at the right hand of the Majesty on high ( v. 3d ), and this reign began at some point in history ( cf. Heb. 12:2; Phil. 2:11; Heb. 5:8-10; 6:19-20; 8:6, etc. ). This is after the resurrection, and is ratified by His ascension – cf. Col. 2:15.

The author will expand on this point throughout chapter 1, but why does he choose to emphasize first of all Jesus' superiority to angels? What would have made this a significant topic for the recipients of this letter? A clue may present itself in Heb. 2:2 – “*the message declared by angels*”. Acts 7:53 & Gal. 3:19 may be helpful here as well. But in what sense is the message “*declared by angels*”?

John MacArthur points out Psalm 68:17; Deut. 33:2 and Acts 7:38. These passages all connect angels to the giving of the Law – to their role as angelic messengers. This connection fits with Heb. 2:2, as the last part of the verse talks about “*every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution*”. So, not grace, but justice as when the Law was broken, God was wrathful.<sup>xvii</sup>

So, Schreiner comments that,

“Hence, the reference to the angels ties into one of the central themes of the letter. The readers should not transfer their allegiance to the law mediated by angels. Such a gambit should be rejected, for they would be opting for what is inferior since the Son rules over angels as One who has ‘inherited’ a name better than theirs.”<sup>xviii</sup>

This connects with ( it may seem perhaps minor to us, but is apparently much larger ) an OT theme that those who came out of Judaism would have understood more readily than we do.

So what is this “*name he has inherited...more excellent than theirs*”? Commentators waver between 2 main ideas. One is “Son”, the other is “Yahweh”. The term, “name” ( in Heb. 2:12; 6:10 and 13:5 ) does refer to Yahweh, so this verse could mean that as well. However, a stronger case is made for “Son” as it appears 4 times in chapter 1 ( 1,2,5, 8 ( twice ) ), and v. 5 supports and undergirds v. 4 by use of the word “for” and twice the verse calls attention to Jesus’ Sonship. Also, Jesus is said to have inherited the name. He could not really inherit the name “Yahweh” because that would suggest that there was a period when Jesus was not divine, and that He inherited deity at some point.<sup>xix</sup> That problem does not exist with the word, “Son” because here that designation refers to Jesus’ exaltation and rulership as God and man, which did not occur until after the resurrection. Yet, He was always God the Son from eternity past. To be the “Son” is more excellent than to be an angel, as exalted as angels may be.

My own thinking here as I studied this passage was that, isn’t it more likely that this inherited name is connected to Phil. 2:5-11, and is therefore, “Lord”? This is the name bestowed on Him ( v. 9 ) which is above every name, and at which every knee will bow in heaven and on earth, and under the earth. To me, that is the “inherited name given to Jesus” because it is the name of authority given to Him over everything – cf. Matt. 28:18. And as we will see in chapter 1 of Hebrews, most of the evidences from Scripture related to His superiority over the angels is tied not to His earthly name, Jesus, or even His earthly sojourn, but is the result of His finished work at Calvary, His resurrection and ascension to His Father’s right hand in heaven.

<sup>i</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, New Testament Theology – Magnifying God in Christ; Baker Academic 2008, p. 380

<sup>ii</sup> Talbert, p. 237

<sup>iii</sup> Rene Pache, essay, “Inerrancy and Inspiration”, in “The Scripture Cannot be Broken”, p. 237

<sup>iv</sup> Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson ( eds ); The Deity of Christ; Crossway, 2011, pp. 134-135

<sup>v</sup> J.I. Packer from his essay, “Scripture”, in The Scripture Cannot Be Broken, John MacArthur – editor, Crossway, 2015, p. 95

<sup>vi</sup> Schreiner, Hebrews, p. 54

<sup>vii</sup> John Murray, The Attestation of Scripture” in Scripture Cannot...”, p. 68

<sup>viii</sup> In Morgan & Peterson, p. 135

<sup>ix</sup> IBID, p. 135-136

<sup>x</sup> IBID, p. 136 – some of these references are for other Psalms, but they carry outward from references to David from Psalm 2 and other Messianic Psalms.

<sup>xi</sup> Layton Talbert, Not a Chance, BJU Press, 2001, p. 57

<sup>xii</sup> IBID – referring to David F. Wells, The Person of Christ, 1984, p.53 ; pg 136

<sup>xiii</sup> Schreiner, Hebrews, p. 57

<sup>xiv</sup> Morgan & Peterson, p. 137

<sup>xv</sup> Talbert, p. 57-58

<sup>xvi</sup> John Phillips, Exploring Hebrews, Moody Press, 1977, p. 44

<sup>xvii</sup> John MacArthur, Hebrews, p. 45-46

<sup>xviii</sup> Schreiner, p. 60

<sup>xix</sup> IBID, p. 61