

Tuesday Evening Bible Study at Tokyo Baptist Church
The Letter to the Hebrews – Chapter 1, Verses 5-6
Notes From Class on Tuesday July 21, 2009
Last Revised on (July 23, 2009)

Review From Last Week

Last week we studied Hebrews, Chapter 1, the first four verses,

which in the original Greek are one long and powerful introductory sentence.

Let us read that passage again quickly.

Will somebody please read Hebrews, Chapter 1, verses 1 through 4 in English (From ESV).

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ²but 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. ³He 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, ⁴having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Thank you. Now will somebody please read that same text in Japanese. (From Shin Kayaku)

Thank you. Our author begins by referring to things that were spoken long ago, to the fathers, by the prophets.

Last week I suggested that this can best be understood as a general reference to the Jewish Bible, our Old Testament.

Questions People Have Asked:

Following last week's class, I received an email from one thoughtful person who was concerned that I might have said that reading the Old Testament was unnecessary, now that Christ has come.

I would never mean to say that! And I don't think I did say that. But I am sorry to have caused this misunderstanding.

My point was that since the Old Testament is pointing us forward to Christ, it would be a sad mistake for anyone to turn away from Christ and back to the Old Testament.

We should read the Old Testament. Our reason for reading the Old Testament should be to understand Christ better, and not to find something better than Christ. I hope that is clear. There is nothing better than Christ. That is all I want to say.

I received another email asking : "What about the prophets in the New Testament, other than John the Baptist."

As you may recall, last week I had asked the class who they thought was the last prophet in Israel, to which someone correctly answered John the Baptist.

I then made my point that John, the last and greatest of all the prophets, had deferred to Christ, thereby bringing to an end the era of Old Testament prophesy.

I still maintain that John was the last and the greatest of the Old Testament type of prophet. I don't think that this is a controversial point, at least not among Christians.

But we certainly do read of Christian prophets and prophesy in the New Testament. What about them? This is what the person wanted to talk about. It is a good questions. I am surprised that nobody asked it in class last week. Let's touch on that briefly now.

All true prophesy, whether in the Old Testament or in the New Testament, has one thing in common. It is always about Christ. The most fundamental difference between Old Testament and New Testament prophesy is when it was given: Old Testament prophesy was spoken before the birth of Christ. New Testament prophesy was spoken after Christ had ascended to the right hand of God and after the Holy Spirit was poured out into the Church. Old Testament prophesy was progressive up until Christ and, by definition, ended with Christ. New Testament prophesy must never attempt to be progressive beyond Christ. All of that is pretty obvious.

There are some other differences between Old and New Testament Prophecy. First of all, the Old Testament prophets were few and lonely. Sometimes there were no prophets at all for a long time. Sometimes there was only one prophet. Sometimes a few. However there was never a time in the Old Testament when all or most of the people of Israel were prophets. In those days, the prophet was an intermediary between God and the people and, in that sense, a foreshadowing of Christ.

In the New Testament, by contrast, the Holy Spirit, dwells in everyone who believes in Christ. Christ is the only intermediary between God and every believer and, under Christ, every believer is a prophet, a priest, and a king. Wherever there are Christians there are prophets, of the New Testament variety. This is why, in 1 Corinthians 14, near the end of that chapter, Paul regulates the speech of prophets.

I am certain that Paul and the author of Hebrews (assuming they are different) would agree with what I have said about the finality and supremacy of Christ, although they would have said it better, and they do. This is precisely what is being argued so powerfully here in the first chapter of Hebrews

So let me now quickly finish our review of last week

God has now spoken by his Son.

God's Son was before everything.

All things were created by him and for him.

He is the one who maintains everything in existence.

He is the one and only way we can know God

He is God.

And despite all of that, there is something more and even better we can say about the Son of God

The Son of God has made purification for sins!

And having done THAT, He has taken his seat at the right hand of God.

It is FINISHED!

Christ is superior to everything, even the angels.

So ends our review of last time.

Are there any questions or comments?

My notes from last week have been posted to the Google group site so that you can review them and let me know of any additional problems.

Introduction to This Week's Reading

OK. Before we read on, I need to make some preliminary comments about today's text.

First please notice the reference to Christ being seated at God's right hand, which appears first at verse 3 and again at verse 13.

Does anybody recognize this phrase "at God's right hand?"

As we shall discuss more next week, this is a quote from Psalm 110 at verse 1

This is a passage that has long divided Christians and Jews.

And it is the Old Testament passage most frequently cited in the New Testament.

To cite one of many examples, please turn to Matthew, Chapter 26.

Will somebody please read Matthew 26, verses 64 and 65 in English (ESV).

Thank you, Now will someone please read it in Japanese (Shin Kayaku).

Thank you. As you have just heard, Jesus understood that this passage applied to himself.

And when he sought to apply this passage to himself, he was accused of blasphemy.

This important passage both begins and ends the material we will be studying today and next week

Please notice also, both at the beginning and at the end of this material, this allusion to PS 110 is followed by the related thought of Jesus being superior to angels.

The two things sort of go together here.

Jesus is at the right hand of God AND superior to the angels. This puts him VERY close to God!

It is the divinity of the man Jesus of Nazareth that coming into focus here.

It is easy to see why this claim would split the consensus Bible reading of a mixed group of Christians and Jews and Jewish Christians.

It pretty much forces you to take a clear position.

Jesus himself claims that this passage refers to himself.

Either that is true and he must be accepted, and worshiped as God.

Or it is false and he must be utterly rejected.

There is no middle ground.

Agreed?

OK, then. Now by beginning and ending with this same point, our author has created what is called an "inclusio"

The material which comes in between is all related and intended to reinforce the main point, with which the whole section begins and ends.

So we should expect everything from verse 3 to verse 13 to support the idea of the supremacy of Christ and his divinity. And it does.

This material, as I mentioned last week, consists of precisely seven citations from the Old Testament, including the crucial passage from Psalm 110 which will appear in the key seventh position.

These are listed on the white board as follows:

Verse in Hebrews Chapter 1	7 Citations Per ESV Margin	Other Possibilities
5a	Psalm 2:7	
5b	2 Samuel 7:14	
6	Deuteronomy 32:43	Psalm 97:7
7	Psalm 104:4	
8,9	Psalm 45:6,7	
10,11,12	Psalm 102:25-27	
13	Psalm 110:1	
14		

Remember that 7 is a number which is often intentionally chosen by Biblical authors to represent completeness and perfection.

We saw last week how, in verses 1-4 the author listed precisely 7 aspects of Christ's perfection.

Now we see precisely seven OT passages collected to make perfectly the point the Jesus is supreme and divine,

ending on the 7th point with the explicit citation of PS 110, at verse 1

the passage of OT scripture most quoted in the NT and seen especially by Christ and his Apostles as a description off his own divinity, but seen by unconverted Jews (such as Saul of Tarsus) as a blasphemy warranting persecution and death.

I note finally that the seventh passage, like the 7th day of creation, is one in which God, here God in Christ, sits down and rests from all his work.

Purification has been made for sin. "It is Finished. " The Lord of the Sabbath has entered his Sabbath rest. Etc.

All that remains is for his enemies to be put beneath his feet, which is already as good and done. God promises to do it!

Q. And let me ask you in passing, who do you think these enemies are (i.e. the ones referred to in verse 13 who will be put under the divine feet of Christ, God's only begotten son?

A. Satan, and Sin, and Death

Thank God for Jesus! For who he is and for what he had done. Amen

So now we turn to the six passages that form the interior of the inclusio?

These are of course all about Christ and his supremacy and divinity and they kind of build to this conclusion.

But how shall we read these?

They are intricately interconnected. They can are really should be read all at once, in a string.

But the string is too long to cover in a single class. What is the right way to break the string? I have wondered.

Many if not most of the scholars tell us that these six citations are arranged in three groups of two.

But this is based on principles of rabbinical exegesis which are pretty much invisible to us, since we are not reading in an original language.

To me it seems better to break the string into two groups of three. That is where the English grammar tends to take me.

And I also have a hunch that the author might have the order of creation in view here.

In any case, it doesn't hurt to read them that way.

So today we will read and discuss verses 5 and 6

and next week we will read and discuss verses 7-12.

Each of those two readings includes three OT citations,

Finally we will read verses 13-14 containing the important citation from Psalm 110.

I think we may also be able to do that next week

Since we will probably not need such a long introduction as I have given today.

First Reading: vv 5-6

OK. Will somebody please read Hebrews, Chapter 1, verses 5 and 6 in English (ESV)

(vv 5a-b)

**For to which of the angels did God ever say,
"You are my Son, today I have begotten you"?**

(v 5c)

**Or again,
"I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son"?**

(v 6)

**And again,
when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says,
"Let all God's angels worship him."**

Thanks. Now will someone please read the same verses in Japanese (Shin Kayaku)

Thank you. I think this is pretty easy to understand.

The first word we read is the preposition "for"

Q. What does this tell us?

A. It tells us that what follows will prove or illustrate what has just been said.

Q. And what has just been said?

A. That Jesus is seated at God's right hand, and that he is superior to all the angels, just as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

The word "for" at the beginning of verse 5 is followed by a hypothetical question.

That is to say it is not a real question, because the answer is, in effect, already given.

We are supposed to understand from the way the question is put that God has never said the following things to any of his angels.

Q. He said such things only to, whom?

A. Jesus

Right. What follows are two things that God said only to Jesus (and not to any angel) thereby demonstrating Jesus' superiority to the angels.

That is basically what is happening in verse 5.

Isn't it?

OK. So what are these things two things that God says only to Jesus?

First, he says "You are my Son, today I have begotten you."

Second, he says "I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son."

So the superior name which Jesus has inherited seems to be, or at least seems to encompass, the name "son" as we discussed last week.

Jesus is the son of God.

We should notice that it is now more clearly the incarnate Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth, who is in view and not only the eternal Son of God, through whom all things were created, and etc.

I say this because these statements speak of a point in time when the Son was begotten

and when God will become his father.

His fuller name may then be "the begotten son of God."

Q. So does this make sense to us?

Q. I mean is it consistent with what we believe as Christians that God would say to Jesus and only to Jesus and not to any angel, that Jesus is his only begotten son?

A. Absolutely it is.

Anyone who does not believe that Jesus is God's only begotten son is not a Christian, or at least not a well instructed one.

Q. So why does our author bother to say these things? Isn't he writing to Christians?

A. Well, some of his audience might NOT be Christians.

A. And some of his Christian audience might NOT be very well instructed.

A. And for some of his well instructed Christian audience, some of these things might be just "head knowledge" which they need to pay closer attention to.

Q. Do you have any other ideas as to why our author is developing this point so fully, so strongly?

Please look at the first verse of Chapter 2.

He says "Therefore...", that is in view of the teaching of Chapter 1, "we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it."

So for his readers, then and now, it is not enough just to have heard the gospel, or even just to have understood it.

We all need to pay close attention to it.

To embrace as much as possible the full counsel of God.

This little look ahead to Chapter 2 helps us see, maybe, what is going on back here in Chapter 1.

And while we are still peeking ahead into Chapter 2, let me point to just one more thing.

Verse 2 of Chapter 2 makes it clear, I think, that the author is not trying to put the angels down!

We know that there were in the early church some heresies having to do with angels that needed to be put down.

But that does not seem to be what is happening here.

No! It is because of how important the angels are that our author compares Christ to them,

so that we can see by comparison how highly exalted Jesus is.

Surely this makes the angels happy!

It is their job to exalt Jesus, and to serve him and those he came to save.

And isn't it amazing that a man, Jesus, born of woman, Mary, has been exalted even above all the angels and now sits at the right hand of God?!

And that is exactly what the Christian faith requires us to believe, or we will just drift away.

OK, So back to Chapter 1, verse 5

In comparison to the angels, who are themselves very high and exalted,

Jesus is even more highly exalted.

Because, for one thing, God never said to any angel "you are my son, today I have begotten you."

Digression on Angels

The Bible tells us that the angels are part of the heavens and the earth which God created,

created through the Son we were told in verse 2.

We do not know a lot about angels, actually, but they seem never to die.

It seems reasonable to assume that while the heavens and the earth remain, all of the angels will remain,

God sometimes refers to them collectively by names like sons of god or even as gods

And occasionally he does single one of them or a group of them out for a particular task or honor.

Angels are real and important and good and old and powerful beyond our imagination.

But however important they are, and however good, and however powerful, and however long they live, God never does single one of them out as an individual son

He only ever does this with Jesus of Nazareth, a human.

And this was not just a matter of adoption.

God somehow begot Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus born of Mary was literally the begotten son of God.

Jesus was and is literally the son of man and the son of God.

Now get this.

The son of a man is always a man.

And the son of a fish is always a fish.

Just as the the son of a horse is always a horse.

It seems to follow that...

The son of God must be a god,

but since it is the nature of God that he is One, the son of God is, curiously, God.

More precisely God the Son, the Word become Flesh, Etc.

Jesus Christ is the only begotten son of God and...God.

This pushes the exaltation of Jesus of Nazareth to the maximum.

But can this be reconciled with what God said by the prophets to the Fathers long ago?!

Yes! The author of Hebrews thinks so. So do all Christians.

The whole of Chapter One is arguing in this direction as has been said.

Here before us, in verse 5 we have the first pair of proof texts.

These two texts were linked together and used as Messianic proof texts long before the time of Christ.

That is the Jews of Jesus' day (and before and after) who fervently hoped and prayed that the Messiah promised in the Old Testament would come soon, looked to these two passages as a basis for such hope.

The first is from Psalm 2 at verse 7.

The second is from 2 Samuel, Chapter 7, at verse 14.

The latter text is part of a long speech by God to King David in the mouth of Nathan the prophet.

You really must take the time to read that soon if you have not recently done so.

This is one of the most important and awe inspiring texts in the Old Testament.

It is where God promises that he will build a house for David and that David's throne will endure forever.

This is the expression of what is called the Davidic Covenant, God's promise to David, in which all of God's previous promises (to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and the rest) are also fulfilled

It was clear to David, himself, and to all who read this prophetic text that fulfillment of the promise made to David was far out on the horizon.

But eventually one descended from David was going to rule a restored kingdom forever.

David believed it. He praised God for it. He wrote songs about it!

People read and sang these songs Sabbath after Sabbath down through the centuries.

They longed and prayed for the arrival of this Davidic Messiah long before the time of Christ.

Including all of those dark years when few if any prophets were heard to speak in Israel.

This is why Jesus was so frequently hailed and referred to, sometimes mockingly, as the Son of David and King of the Jews, and so forth.

It was understood that this was who he claimed to be: the Son of David!!

Christians are those who believe that is who he was, and is and ever shall be!

What the author of Hebrews draws from this text is the scriptural warrant, at least among we Christians, to refer to Jesus of Nazareth, the descendant of Abraham, the son of David, the Messiah of Israel, as being also the begotten son of God!

Because that is what God said, to David, through the prophet Nathan, in the text cited from 2 Samuel.

This passage from 2 Samuel really supports the teaching here nicely.

Psalm 2 was probably written by King David himself, although the inscription does not say so.

Some of the things spoken of in this and other Psalms were foreshadowed in David's own life

and some were foreshadowed in the life of Solomon and other Davidic Kings.

Just as God said would be the case

But it was clear to David that the ultimate fulfillment of these things was far in the future

This became clear to everyone, as the sad history of Israel under its earthly kings unfolded.

David is properly regarded as a prophet and the psalms have long been read as prophesy, by both Christians and Jews.

Indeed as we shall see, the New Testament book of Hebrews is largely grounded in the Psalms.

Before the time of Christ, Psalm 2 was universally regarded by the Jews as referring to the Messiah.

It was universally regarded by early Christians as applying to Jesus.

In Acts 4:25-26 the whole company of the Apostles quote the first verses of this Psalm and refer them to Christ.

The very verse quoted here (i.e. Ps. 2:7) is quoted in Acts 13:33-34 in connection with Jesus resurrection.

I think that is also what Paul has in mind in Romans 1:4 where he speaks of Jesus being declared the son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead.

There is probably also some connection between Ps 2:9 and Revelation 12:5 and 19:15 all of which speak of the parousia, the return of the Son of God, when he will rule with a rod of iron.

Although more doubtful, there may also be connections between Ps. 2:7 and the accounts of Jesus' baptism in the synoptic gospels (Mt. 3:16-17, Mk.1:10-11, Lk3:21-23).

In view of all of this support --- both Rabbinical and Apostolic --- our author was rightfully very comfortable in reading Psalm 2 as a true prophesy concerning Christ and so should we be.

This prophetic text (a poem or song actually) fits the teaching here nicely.

It is the one that speaks of the Messiah as the begotten son of God, which is, I think, what our author mostly wanted for the teaching he is developing here.

There have been all kinds of opinions regarding what particular begetting was in the mind of David, first of all, and then in the mind of the inspired author of Hebrews.

Augustine thought this begetting was something eternal.

However that seems to miss the point here, when it is the incarnate son of god who is almost certainly in view.

Jesus' birth, baptism, resurrection, ascension, and parousia are all more likely possibilities that have been suggested.

I think it may not be necessary to decide this question for our immediate purpose.

And the conclusion of this Psalm, which is consistent with the admonition that we have looked ahead to at the start of Chapter 2, is that knowing who the Son of God is, we had better be obedient to him.

There is no mention of angels in Psalm 2 or, I think, in the text immediately surrounding the passage cited from 2 Samuel.

These passages have been cited only to support the notion of the divine sonship and, at least indirectly at this point, the divinity of the son.

His superiority over the angels is here just an implication of divine sonship.

Next, in verse 6, our author establishes the relationship between angels and the son of God more explicitly.

Verse 6 begins "and again"

This seems to look back to verse 5 "or again"

This is part of why I like to keep these three citations together.

It seems to me that this is part of the same argument..

We are still looking at the superiority of Christ to the angels.

And we are continuing the theme of begottenness.

Verse 6 speaks of one called the "firstborn" whom God brings into the world, instructing all gods angels to worship him.

The most natural way to read this, I think, is to understand the firstborn as being Jesus, whom all of the angels are commanded by God to worship.

Jesus is also called the firstborn in Romans 8:29 and Colossians 1:15, 18

This usage may find its roots in Psalm 89 at verse 27 where God says of David and of Davidic Kings generally "I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth."

This would make Jesus the firstborn among firstborn!

As to when Jesus is brought into the world, to me the most natural reading is when Jesus was born,

although some read this as the time when Jesus was introduced or revealed to the world as the firstborn,

in which case the resurrection may be in view.

There are still other possible readings as we have discussed before in connection with verse 5.

However I am reluctant to add confusion at this point by trying to weigh them one against the other.

The simple fact is that Christ is the eternal son of God,

who became flesh begotten of God at a point in time, in human history.

While he remained here on earth there were historical moments in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension

and there will be historical moments in connection with the parousia (i.e. when he returns)

any or all of these moments might properly be referred to as his introduction to the world

or as a proclamation of his divine sonship.

In view of the overall structure of what is happening in Chapter 1,

I don't think we will ever be badly off the point if we are reading that Jesus is the firstborn and the only begotten son of God who is exalted above all creation, even the angels.

The really difficult thing about verse 6 is not what the author to Hebrews is doing with his teaching.

The hard thing about verse 6, for everyone, including and perhaps especially the best Bible scholars, is figuring out what Old Testament text he is citing here.

Nobody really knows for certain.

Please remember that things like the footnotes in your Bible pointing you to related texts elsewhere in the Bible are NOT themselves part of the Bible.

The inspired author and the One who inspires him know what they are quoting.

But we readers do not always know.

After puzzling over this a lot, I find it easiest to understand verse 6 as a reference to Psalm 97.7.

This is a nice little Psalm that speaks of the righteous rule of the Lord over all the earth.

It can very easily and naturally be read as applying to the rule of Christ

and I believe that is how it should be read.

In the ESV the last part of Psalm 97.7 reads "...worship him all you gods!.."

The ESV has translated the Hebrew word "elohim" as "gods" which is the usual translation.

However sometimes the word "elohim" is translated as angels.

Interestingly that is exactly what the Greek Old Testament (LXX) has done.

And we know that the author of Hebrews is always or almost always working from this or a closely related Greek text.

So working from the Greek text this translation is "worship him all his angels"

This is very close to what the author of Hebrews says in verse 6 (i.e. let all God's angels worship him.)

So as I said it is easiest to explain verse 6 as an allusion to Psalm 97.7 in Greek.

And some of the best commentators, old and new, think so too.

But this does not seem to be the majority view.

The margin note in the ESV, for example, points to Deuteronomy 32 at verse 43 and specifies the Greek text.

That is part of the Song of Moses, which is a very powerful and important piece of Old Testament scripture

and the wording is closer but still not identical to what our author has cited in Hebrews,

but this text, of the Song of Moses, is much harder, for me at least, to read Christologically.

And it is hard for me to believe that the author of Hebrews simply read the Song of Moses out of context.

There is, of course, the very real possibility that the author of Hebrews is quoting a different passage and/or a different version than any of those mentioned so far.

He may simply be quoting a version that is lost to us.

Or he may be aware of a different way of reading the song of Moses than I am presently capable of.

May God constantly give us more light to understand his words!

So I am sorry, but I am afraid that I cannot add much to the teaching of our author at this point by unfolding the significance of his old testament citation here, because I do not understand it myself.

But I am quite sure of this: the point that our author is making in verse 6 is that God commands all of his angels to worship his son Jesus.

This rounds out nicely the first half of the six citations that form the inner part of this inclusio.

Next week we will certainly read verses 8-12, the second half of those six citations.

And we may also be able to read the seventh key citation in verse 13 and concluding verse 14, bringing us to the end of Chapter 1.

I am still struggling to find the right pace and approach for this class.

Please bear with me.