

Tuesday Evening Bible Study at Tokyo Baptist Church
The Letter to the Hebrews – Chapter 1, Verses 7-14
Notes From Class on July 28
Last Revised on (July 30, 2009)

Good evening everyone!

Welcome to our continuing study of the New Testament Book of Hebrews.

Last week we had some interesting discussions, I think, but we sort of lost the train of thought near the end of class, which is my fault. Sorry about that.

So let me please begin tonight with some comments intended to get us all refocused on the text we are reading.

I hope this will also be helpful to those of you who were absent last week.

An Inspired Sermon?

As I have repeatedly emphasized, this document we are studying is inspired and authoritative and has been recognized as such by Christians from the very beginning, but nobody knows much about it, besides what is written in it.

I continue to have a very strong sense that the best way to read Hebrews is to stay focused on what we do know, in the text, rather than interpreting the text in light of some hypothetical context.

In the last seven verses of the document we read several somewhat personal remarks which suggest that the author expected these words to be read by and/or to a particular group of Christians.

From these remarks I gather that some of this group knew him, and that he knew some of them.

While these personal comments are brief and seem not nearly so warm as we read in other letters, the author of Hebrews evidently did have an immediate audience in mind, for the words that are written here.

In this respect Hebrews resembles a letter.

But Hebrews does not tell us who the author is or what group of Christians he is writing to.

And the author does not appear to be addressing a list of particular issues that are open and ongoing between himself and his readers.

In these and other ways, Hebrews is not like a letter.

Of all the books in the Bible, Hebrews seems most like the New Testament book of 1 John.

Both of these documents seem to be, more than anything else, the texts of brilliant sermons, intended to be read to Christian congregations.

Each of these "sermons" reviews and meditates on certain profound truths of our Christian faith and encourages us to remain faithful to Christ and his precepts.

The Unqualified Supremacy of Christ

The overarching theme of the sermon before us (i.e. Hebrews) is "the unqualified supremacy of Christ."

This is what they would have printed in their church bulletin and put on the sign board out in front of the church, in which this sermon was first read, assuming they had a bulletin and a sign board.

I am joking, of course, but this may be a useful picture to have in our minds, just to help us grasp and remember what we are reading here: the text of a sermon titled "The Unqualified Supremacy of Christ."

So what is meant by "the unqualified supremacy of Christ?"

In other words, Jesus is higher and better than anything and everything else in all the heavens and on earth and throughout all time and eternity.

He is, in fact, YHVH, the God of the Old Testament. We must not depart from him!

This theme is developed in some depth and detail in Hebrews.

Please continue with us in this study and see this theme unfold.

The Congregation

I just said, "we must not depart from him!"

I do not mean to suggest that the unknown author of Hebrews had you and me personally in mind, when he wrote this sermon, but I do believe he meant for his words to speak to all Christians who would hear them, including you and me.

And I am certain that the Holy Spirit, by whom these words are so evidently inspired, intends for these words to be heard by all Christians, including you and me.

This inspired sermon we are studying has been read in Christian churches for about 20 centuries, starting around the end of the first century and continuing until today, and it has always spoken powerfully to these church about the unqualified supremacy of Christ.

But at the same time, we can see that this sermon was originally written with a particular congregation in mind.

And we are naturally curious to know as much as possible about this congregation, so as to hear the sermon correctly in our own time.

So what do we know about them: the congregation that originally heard this sermon?

Well, we know from the text that this was a Christian congregation and we know that the author expected them to be reasonably familiar with the gospel of Jesus Christ, by which they had been saved, and that he also expected them to be reasonably familiar with the Jewish Bible, that is our Christian Old Testament.

In these ways, it seems to me, we are the same as that congregation to which these words were originally spoken.

I mean, we know the gospel, and we have some familiarity with the Old Testament, too. Don't we?

Of course the author intended his original audience to hear this sermon in Greek.

And he intended that they would recognize the passages he cited, and look them up, in the Greek Old Testament, either the Septuagint or a closely related text.

By contrast most of us are reading both of these things in either an English or a Japanese translation. And this is a real difference.

Furthermore the Old Testament in our Bibles is a translation into English or Japanese from the Masoretic (Hebrew) text and not from the Greek versions of the Old Testament used by our author, which is a very important difference that we will need to speak more of later.

So there are some significant linguistic differences between us and the congregation who heard this sermon originally.

But happily most of those differences have been overcome or at least made manageable for us by translators and scholars. Thank God for them!

So we should be OK on that score.

So what else then? Are there any other differences between the original hearers of this sermon and those of us who wish to hear and understand this same sermon again now?

It has frequently been suggested that the group of Christians who first heard this sermon was predominately Jewish.

I remain skeptical on this point, but let's suppose for a second that this was true.

How would that affect anything?

This is a real question. The author of Hebrews seemingly knew the congregation to which these words would be addressed. If they were a predominately Jewish congregation, then that is probably part of what he would have known about them, as he prepared his sermon. He might have taken this into account in some way that we need to notice.

Do you see any evidence of this in his message? any Jewish issues or questions that we need to be aware of and sensitive to in order to understand this sermon properly? To put it into a proper perspective?

I don't really see anything. The author addresses few if any lifestyle issues, having to do with ritual purity, (e.g. food laws) such as those that receive so much attention in Acts, Romans, Galatians, and elsewhere in the New Testament.

And there are few if any references in Hebrews to religious practices centered on the Temple in Jerusalem, even though such references are frequent in the gospels and in Acts and elsewhere in the New Testament.

In these ways we might imagine the congregation that heard this sermon to be less concerned with things Jewish that the readers of other parts of the New Testament.

Perhaps Hebrews was written after Jerusalem fell and the Temple was destroyed, in 70 A.D., and some of those particularly Jewish considerations had become moot.

In which case it is interesting that our author does not even mention the destruction of the Temple!

But for whatever reason, the issues being addressed in this document are not ethnic or national or cultic issues of 1st Century Judaism but, rather, Biblical questions looking much farther back to Old Testament times.

We sometimes need to be reminded that our author and the congregation to which he first spoke did NOT live in Old Testament times. Not even close.

As we have discussed in this class before, the Old Testament looks back to a time many centuries before the time of Christ.

The author is exploring connections between the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Old Testament. He makes it fairly plain that this is what he is doing from the very first verse.

And I would assert that the connection between Christ and the Old Testament is equally important whether a Christian congregation is predominantly Jewish or predominately Gentile, or split right down the middle, 50:50.

These are Biblical questions that concern all Christians equally.

Starting with Christ, continuing with his Apostles and woven throughout every book in the New Testament, and all subsequent Christian doctrine, is the understanding that Jesus

embodies and fulfills every teaching, every law, and every promise set forth in the Old Testament. Jesus is the God of the Old Testament.

And for this reason every Christian (Jew or Gentile) must read the Old Testament more and more carefully in order to understand Jesus better and better.

When we are reading the Old Testament and we lose sight of Christ, we have lost our way, because our reason for reading the Old Testament in the first place was to understand Jesus better.

Reading Challenges

But this presents we Christians (be we Jew or Gentile) with a unique reading challenge.

The central difficulty is that the Old Testament was written by, to, and about men of faith who did not know how God would ultimately vindicate their faith.

In other words, they did not know about Jesus explicitly, as we do, but only implicitly as he was hidden and revealed to them in law and prophesy and foreshadowed by certain prophets, priests, and kings.

Those men of old, even those like Moses and King David, who themselves foreshadowed Christ and foretold his coming, did not know Jesus as well as we do now, in these last days.

Therefore in order to read the Old Testament and understand properly what God spoke to the Fathers long ago (v. 1) we need to develop some special reading skills.

And Hebrews has been an important help to the Church, early and late, in learning how to read the Old Testament in the light of Christ.

In developing his predominate theme of the the unqualified supremacy of Christ, the author of Hebrews uses citations from and allusions to the Old Testament very frequently, more frequently than in any other book in the New Testament, with the possible exception of Matthew.

Chapter 1

Tonight we will finish the first Chapter of Hebrews.

Does everyone have a copy of that text in either English (ESV) or Japanese (Shin Kayaku)?

Please remember the overall theme of the whole sermon is the unqualified supremacy of Christ.

The First Chapter is certainly consistent with that theme and introduces that theme in a grand way!

The very first verse and the first part of Verse 2, set up a comparison between the two ways in which God has spoken to us.

In these last days. we are to remember, he has spoken to us by his Son.

We understand that the son referred to here is Jesus Christ and that these last days are the days after Jesus, having made purification for sins, sat down at the right hand of God.

Q. But how did God speak to us by his son?

A. By his words. Yes that is a good answer. His teaching as recorded in the gospels and transmitted to the Church by the Holy Spirit speaks to us continually.

A. By his birth/death. Yes. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

The incarnation and the crucifixion speak volumes about God's character: his love, his righteousness, etc.

A. By his perfect life. Yes. He alone kept the Law and was without sin, obedient even to death on the cross.

This perfect life speaks volumes about our sinfulness and his perfect righteousness.

A. By his resurrection from the dead. Yes.

When he rose from the dead he proclaiming openly and for all the world to see his, victory over Satan, Sin, and Death.

A. Etc.

This is a too big a question to answer in such a short period of time.

But for now all I really wanted to make sure of is that none of us has a too-small idea of what is meant here by God's speech by his son.

I think what is in view includes the whole arc of Jesus' earthly existence, including his conception, birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and parousia and all that these moments consist of and imply in time and eternity.

This is how God has spoken by his son in these last days.

But before the birth of Jesus, the triune God was not silent. Not by any means. He spoke at many times and in many ways to the fathers by the prophets.

We discussed this and have concluded that the speech to the fathers basically consists of what we read in the Old Testament.

It occurs to me that this sets up a controlling motif of the whole sermon, which seeks to contrast and compare and connect the Old and the New Covenants. The Old Testament and the gospel of Christ.

The remainder of verse 2 and verse 3 in Chapter 1 list precisely seven ways in which the Son of God is supreme over all things.

1. He is heir (v. 2.b)
2. He is creator
3. He is how we know God (v. 3)
4. He is the exact imprint of God's character
5. He has the power of God
6. He has made purification for sins
7. He has sat down at the right hand of God.

All of these refer to the eternal son of God, and some refer to what he accomplished in our sight on Earth, particularly in Verse 3 where it speaks of him having made purification for sins before sitting down at God's right hand, and in verse 4 where it speaks of him having become superior to the angels.

The eternal son is unchanging and cannot become anything other than what he already is. But Jesus of Nazareth, in human time and space, could and did become: He became flesh, he became an atoning sacrifice for sin, he became the firstborn among many brothers through his resurrection from the dead, he became superior to all the angels, and so forth.

There then follow in verses 5 through 13, precisely seven citations from the Old Testament demonstrating the superiority of Christ.

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		

And here the argument sort of builds from the incarnate son and his superiority to the angels up to the divine and eternal son who is finally one with God.

I have pointed out how the 7th aspect of Jesus superiority, listed at the end of verse 3, was that he had sat down at the right hand of God and, likewise, the 7th citation for the Old

Testament which we read in verse 13 is a quote from Psalm 110 which is where we read in the Old Testament of the sitting down at God's right hand.

I have also mentioned that this passage, Psalm 110.1, is the Old Testament passage most frequently quoted in the New Testament, one claimed by Jesus for himself, and one that particularly angered those Jews who had not come to faith in Christ. They saw this as a claim of his divinity and therefore blasphemy. And they saw in it condemnation for themselves--- because on a Christian reading of this verse, they were counted among the enemies that God would put under Christ's feet and, indeed, themselves guilty of blasphemy!!

Surely it is no mistake that this crucial passage, appears twice in the crucial 7th position. Having finished his work, making purification for sins, Christ sits down at the right hand of God, and is enthroned eternally. He has entered his sabbath rest. It is finished.

I have also mentioned how these two references to Psalm 110.1 form an inclusio containing the six citations listed from verses 5 through 12, all of which should be expected to illustrate the point of Christ's divinity, as indeed they do.

Last week we read the first half of these, verses 5 and 6

where the author makes the point that as the only begotten son of God, Jesus is superior to the angels, and God commands all of his angels to worship Jesus.

This truth is consistent with the words spoken to the fathers by the prophets.

In particular promises made to David by God through the prophet Nathan (e.g. 2 Sam. 7:14)

and prophecies made by David himself in the Psalms (e.g. Ps. 2:7) regarding one who would be David's son and also the Son of God

Such prophetic words spoken by/to the fathers have been more than amply fulfilled in Jesus Christ in these last days.

Concerning the Citation of Old Testament Scripture

As you can see on the white board (table above), of the seven passages cited from the Old Testament, at least five and maybe six of these come from the Psalms.

The predominate reliance on Psalms here is interesting and characteristic of Hebrews generally.

I think we need to bear this in mind and ponder what it means.

I mean our author is essentially quoting song lyrics, stuff that is poetic as well as prophetic, and stuff that devout people embrace and make their own over time, as they sing and pray these words again and again.

It is not clear where the citation in verse 6 comes from.

It may be from Psalm 97.7 or from Deuteronomy 32.43 or possibly from some other passage.

Do you understand why there is uncertainty about these things?

Well it is quite clear that the author of Hebrews is citing passages from the Old Testament, but he does not add footnotes or other references we might use to know precisely what passage he is citing.

That is a modern and not an ancient scholarly practice.

We must therefore attempt to match his citation with passages of Old Testament scripture we recognize.

Computers make this easier than it used to be.

And often this is really easy, even without a computer.

For example it has always been obvious to everyone that the reference to sitting at God's right hand was a reference to Psalm 110.1

But even in a case like this, where we are certain we have the right verse, the words we read cited in our New Testament do not match the words in our Old Testament of the passage cited.

It is good to understand why.

First of all, a New Testament author may sometimes be quoting and sometimes merely alluding to a passage from the Old Testament.

A good example of an allusion is the reference in verse 3 to the right hand of God. Everyone knows what he is talking about, but he is not trying to reproduce the verse. We do that all the time ourselves, when we know that others know the verse we are alluding to, but do not wish to take the time to look it up exactly.

And that sort of imprecision was probably much more common 2000 years ago than it is today.

But even when a New Testament author seems to be quoting exactly from the Old Testament, the words will still not match.

Why?

Well he may be quoting exactly but from a different old testament passage than you think he is. A good example of this possibility is the citation in verse 6 where he may be quoting from either Psalm 97 or Dtr. 32 or possibly from some other place.

There is no way to be certain

But even assuming that the author is quoting directly and we know exactly which passage he is quoting, he may not be looking at the same version of the passage as we are.

We have the same kind of problem today, when you read something from the NIV and I try to follow you in my ESV, sometimes the words will be very close but at other times I find myself lost for a moment.

Rarely are the words exactly the same, although the meaning almost always is.

By studying all of the citations made in Hebrews, we can figure out that our author is citing from Greek rather than Hebrew versions of the Old Testament.

Usually but not always his wording is very close to the standard Greek translation of that era called the Septuagint, usually abbreviated LXX

That would solve all or most of our problems if we could read Greek and if we had almost the same Greek manuscript that our author is working with.

But most of us don't read Greek or have the Greek manuscripts that the author is using.

In fact what we have are translations into English or Japanese --- not of the Greek versions of the OT but of the Hebrew versions.

This virtually guarantees that the citations which we read in English, in Hebrews Chapter 1 for example, will NOT match the corresponding passages which we read in English in the Old Testament in our own Bibles.

This is a very good sign! If they did match, we could only conclude that a translator or publisher was forcing a correspondence that couldn't possibly be there.

But the Bible is treated by translators and scholars with much greater respect than that.

And we must read it with much greater care and respect and PATIENCE than we normally do.

I am taking the time to say these things now, so that hopefully nobody will be overly surprised or concerned when they go to look up Old Testament passages in their Bible and find that the words do not correspond exactly with the citation of that same passage in their New Testament.

That only means that things are as they should be. And making due allowances for such language issues, there is usually not too much problem in understanding how New Testament authors are reading and quoting the Old Testament.

Without further ado, let us now read the second half of the inclusio in Chapter 1, verses 7 through 12.

First Reading: Chapter 1, Verses 7 through 12

Will somebody please read Hebrews, Chapter 1, verses 7-12 in English (ESV)

Thank you. Now will somebody please read these same verses in Japanese (Shin Kayaku.)

Thank you. Now let's see what we can make of this.

Verse 7

Of the angels he says,

**"He makes his angels winds,
and his ministers a flame of fire."**

In verse 7, God is said to refer to his angels as winds and to his ministers as a flame of fire.

This is then immediately contrasted ("But") with the language God uses to describe his son, which is very exalted in comparison.

Indeed throughout the remainder of this chapter the Son is essentially one with God.

I think we understand what is going on here, don't we?

Compared to the One who is the Son of God and God, his angels are, figuratively speaking, made winds and his ministers a flame of fire.

They are less overt, less exalted, less powerful, less permanent, less important, less everything that the Son.

Compared to him they are evanescent and transitory, almost like elemental forces of nature.

But this is only in figurative comparison to the Son of God.

Flames and winds are used as metaphors here.

I continue to insist that our author has nothing against angels. He does not question that they are very great and good and powerful in themselves.

He means only to lift up Christ by comparison.

The passage being quoted here is Psalm 104.4.

And he is quoting from a version very close to the Septuagint.

The whole of this Psalm 104 speaks in very figurative language of the surpassing greatness of God and his dominion over the heavens and the earth.

The citation supports the thought present in verse 7, and the contrast with what follows, admirably.

Again, we do need to remember that our author is here quoting small bits of poetry and song lyrics in order to communicate and evoke an appropriate (intellectual, emotional, spiritual) response.

He is not discussing natural science or systematic theology.

He just wants to make sure that he gets across to his readers how much more exalted the son is than any of God's angels.

Verses 8 and 9

But of the Son he says,

**"Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,
the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom.**

9

**You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;
therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions."**

Again in verse 8 God begins speaking of the Son in ways he never would speak to any of the angels.

The Son here is a divine eternal ruler. This looks back to verses 3 and 4 and forward to verses 13 and 14 and the thought that the Son who has sat down at the right hand of God is superior to everything, even angels.

But we are to remember that, before the son sat down eternally, he did something remarkable: his work here on earth, in the sight of men and angels, making purification for sins.

This king is worthy of his crown, and not powerful only. He has loved righteousness and hated wickedness and therefore has been anointed King, but not an ordinary King.

This King is God and the scepter of his kingdom is uprightness.

Q. But where and what is his kingdom?

A. His kingdom is everywhere and consists of everything there is, including the angels for so long as they continue to exist and also it seems some companions (v.9).

I believe we are to understand these companions to be us, believers in Christ. (c.f. 2:10)

In all that I have just said about the passage cited in verses 8 and 9, I think I have been pretty close to the mind of the author of Hebrews.

That is, I believe that he picked these two verses from Psalm 45 (LXX) and used them in order to express thoughts like what I have just outlined.

But what about the original meaning of these song lyrics?

Who sang this song originally, and why?

Of course we cannot know for certain. Perhaps the author of Hebrews didn't know either.

The best guess as to the original purpose of this song, we are told by those who study such things, is that this song was probably composed for a royal wedding, for an Israelite King, probably from the House of David.

In this Psalm one of the lesser Sons of David, is praised in hyperbolic language.

The author of Hebrews reads it, therefore, as being abundantly true of Christ, infinitely the greatest Son of David.

In this our author is not being original.

Before him, and indeed before Christ was born, the Jewish exegetes also understood this song as being about the Messiah.

And those who sang and listened to this song heard God's voice speaking in it to the Messiah for whom they longed and prayed.

Here the original intent of the psalmist, which we cannot know for certain in any event, is not the point.

The point is the sermon, the teaching being developed by the author of Hebrews and the manner in which he quotes songs and poetry to get his point across.

Verses 10 - 12

And,

**"You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning,
and the heavens are the work of your hands;**

**11 they will perish, but you remain;
 they will all wear out like a garment,**

**12 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."**

In verses 10 through 12, I believe we are still working the contrast with the angels in verse 7.

We have already learned in verses 8-9 that the Son has been anointed an eternal, divine king, which must be about the highest thing anyone can conceive of.

But the author wants to draw this out and make sure we really get it.

All of this, of course, is highly figurative language. There is hardly any way to speak literally of such things which are so far beyond our experience or comprehension.

As we have already seen, way back in verse 2, the heavens and the earth were created through the Son.

Now we learn something interesting, and something that it took physicists a long time to work out,

The heavens and the earth will eventually wear out, like a garment.

Well of course they will. It is just a question of time.

But not for the Son. He will remain. He will be the same. His years will have no end.

But everything else will be rolled up like a garment and be changed.

What a remarkable thought. This it seems to me is fully consistent with what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 and other passages in the Bible that speak of a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth.

Only one thing will be unchanged between this heaven and this earth and the new heaven and the new earth, and however many more heavens and earths they will eventually be, and that is the Son of God.

The foregoing citation is taken from Psalm 102 in the Septuagint, where the words are spoken by God to one who is addressed as Lord and whom our author, reasonably for his purpose, takes to be Christ, because who else would God address as Lord except for his Son.

In the Masoretic text, from which our Bibles are translated out of Hebrew, things are not so simple.

There these words are in the mouth of one who is complaining to God. We could read God as the Son of God without much violence to the argument being developed here, but then the author of Hebrews would be putting a complaint against the Son of God in the mouth of God, and that doesn't work very well.

This however is a problem between the Masoretic text and the Septuagint and not a problem with how the author of Hebrews is thinking or reading his Septuagint.

In fact it occurs to me that we learn something good and important from such discrepant readings. We learn that this is not an exercise in proof-texting. It is an exercise in really

understanding God and his Son using the full range of intellectual and poetic skills and spiritual insights available to man for this purpose.

In any case, I hope that this discussion will keep you from being overly surprised or shocked when you find it difficult sometimes to reconcile particular readings from the New and Old Testaments.

Verses 13 and 14

Finally we come to the end of the chapter. Would somebody please read verses 13 and 14 in English (ESV).

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"?**

14 Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?

Thank you. Now would somebody please read these same verses in Japanese (Shin Kayaku).

Thank you. Here in verse 13, we see the direct citation from Psalm 110.1 a passage regarding which I have already said so much.

It is cited 13 or 14 times of which I am aware in the New Testament, always as referring to Christ.

When Jesus said this of himself, the Sanhedrin accused him of blasphemy and finally killed him.

They did the same to Stephen and others who claimed that Christ was the Son of God and God.

Of course they did!

Everything boils down to this one thing. Either you believe that Jesus Christ is God, in which case you must worship him. Or you believe that he is not God, and merely claims to be, in which case you must reject him.

Christ was finally rejected, by those he came to save, condemned to die on a tree, crucified, dead and buried.

But on the third day, he rose again from the dead, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

From whence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead!

There, of course, I am quoting part of the Apostles Creed.

And what of those enemies who have opposed Christ and his companions, his Church, across time?

They need to be afraid. Very afraid.

God has said to his Son, just sit here beside me, until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.

And finally we are reminded (v.13) that God did not come into this world as an angel, nor is it any angel who sits beside God waiting for their enemies to be put under their feet.

No, the angels, we are reminded, are ministering spirits, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation.

And who are these lucky people?

Us. Those who are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord. His companions!

This being the case, we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. (2:1)

Because there is nothing better and, finally, nothing else, beside Christ.

To quote F.F. Bruce, "As God has no greater messenger than his son, he has no further message beyond the Gospel."

I pray that we will believe the gospel and will ever pay much closer attention to it.

And I hope that our continuing study of Hebrews will be a help in this regard.

Let's pray