

THE SUPERIORITY OF  
THE NEW COVENANT OVER THE OLD COVENANT  
HEBREWS 1:1-10:18



CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO THE MINISTER OF THE NEW COVENANT 1:1-4

LIKE the grand, comprehensive, evangelical, Christ exalting introductions of John 1:1-18; Romans 1:1-6; Galatians 1:1-5; Ephesians 1:3-14, so Hebrews 1:1-4 ranks in the same elevated category. F. W. Farrar explains: “It is hardly possible in a translation to preserve the majesty and balance of this remarkable opening sentence of the Epistle. It must be regarded as one of the most pregnant and noble passages of Scripture.”<sup>1</sup>

Biblical Christianity is essentially revealed truth; it starts with God, even as does the Epistle to the Hebrews. This means that, contrary to the popular thought that God may be known through self-discovery, in reality God may only be known according to His determined self-revelation. Put another way, when encountering a great ruler or governor, there is a vital principle of approach that says, “Speak only when you are first spoken to!” To do otherwise is presumptuous and likely to gain a deaf ear. So it is even more the case with the God of heaven. Man is not to presume that he can first initiate speaking with God. Yet the wonder is, as Hebrews commences, that God has indeed spoken first. But how has He addressed man? Is it with a gruff growl or a gracious greeting?

A. God’s speech to man in history, vs. 1-2.

These two verses must be translated together even though a vital temporal distinction is made. Literally: “In many portions/parts and in many ways/styles of old, God having spoken to the fathers in the prophets, in the last/extremity of these days He spoke to us in [His] Son whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also he made the ages [world].” From creation, God has initiated speaking directly to man, first in innocence (Gen. 2:28-30; 2:16-17), then as a sinner (Gen. 3:9-19). However, the ongoing moral barrier led to His customary means of communication, first via the Seer who later became known as the Prophet (II Kings 17:13).

1. The past conversation, to the fathers through prophets, v. 1.

Over the Old Testament era, there were distinctive periods, associated with Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Moses, which dispensations were known according to “the fathers,” that is the leaders of each segment of history. But God’s speaking to the leaders of His people especially focused on Israel through “the prophets” who addressed the fathers of the nation. Even then there was great variety between princely

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<sup>1</sup> F. W. Farrar, *The Epistle To The Hebrews*, p. 51.

Isaiah and Amos the shepherd, rulers and commoners, Urim and Thummim, law, prophecy, history, parable, hymn, sign, object lesson, etc. Chiefly God addressed His chosen people concerning the ramifications of sin and righteousness in relation to Himself, and for this reason special as opposed to general revelation is the exclusive focus here. Nevertheless the level of communication was human mediation that involved inherent limitation. Then, after Malachi concluded with the promise of God, “Behold, I am going to send My messenger and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple” (Mal. 3:1), the voice from heaven became silent for four hundred years. The days of this era ended with a hushed, unfulfilled conclusion.

2. The present conversation, to us through His Son, v. 2.

Then, “in the last/extremity of these days [described in v. 1],”<sup>2</sup> God spoke as He had never done so before. A new medium was introduced, by comparison vastly more communicative than a modern computer is to a school slate! Here is a quantum leap. Here the principle of progressive, elevated revelation is plainly indicated. All that God speaks is true, yet He has revealed greater portions and levels of truth over the centuries. Owen adds: “God’s gradual revelation of himself, and of his mind and will unto the church, was a fruit of infinite wisdom and care towards his elect.”<sup>3</sup> This truth is similarly reflected in the Parable of the Landowner who first sent “his slaves to the vine-growers,” and then “he sent his son to them” (Matt. 21:33-41).

Hence the silence of the intertestamental period is broken with God in all of His holiness addressing sinful man in person (John 1:14-18). The main clause, the primary thrust in this sentence is: “God spoke to us in [His] Son.” Hence the absence of the definite article here indicates the character of this communication as “Son quality,” that is vastly superior to the ministry of a prophet. Consequently, as Westcott explains: “The new revelation is a continuation of the old so far as God is the author of both. It is wholly new and separate in character so far as Christ is the Mediator of it.”<sup>4</sup> Here then the foundation of the newness of the New Covenant is established (8:7-13).

a. This Son is the Heir of God.

Being “appointed heir of all things” brings to mind the Father’s “appointment” in Psalm 2:6: “But as for Me, I have installed My King upon Zion, My holy mountain,” as well as His invitation to the Son in Psalm 2:8: “Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance.” Note how v. 5 here also connects with Psalm 2:7. Thus, “the Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand” (John 3:35). So the Son “came to His own [things/possessions] τὰ ἴδια, ta idia, that is His [embassy/residence/inheritance]” (John 1:11). After all, if Christ created all things according to the plan of the Father, then he is certainly heir of that creation. Hence at the end of His earthly ministry, Jesus announces, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth” (Matt.

<sup>2</sup> The emphasis here is upon the close of the old era, the conclusion of it, not the new gospel era. So John Owen, *An Exposition of Hebrews*, II, pp. 11-12.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., II, p. 461.

<sup>4</sup> B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle To The Hebrews*, p. 7.

28:18). Thus, “all things have been created through Him and *for* [εἰς, in]Him” (Col. 1:16).

b. This Son is the Creator for God.

The Father’s creative plan is implemented by His heir and filial agent, “through whom also He made the ages [τοὺς αἰῶνας, world]” (cf. 11:3). There is a parallel with John 1:1-3, where “all things came into being through Him [the Word, λόγος, logos],” except that here the thought is of the succession of various ages which comprise the universe. It is this total panorama of history which Jesus Christ has established at the Father’s behest, but in particular the age of the Son of God that has succeeded the age of the fathers and the prophets. Again, “all things have been created *through* [διὰ, dia] Him and for Him” (Col. 1:16). Now while the Father remains the dominant head in terms of the economic relationships existing in the triunity of God, the following context focuses upon the transcendent glory of the Son which the Father delights to uphold. Thomas Goodwin concludes:

If God now speaks by his Son, then hear him. . . . If God speaks by his Son, and his speaking is better than of all the prophets, then never rest till you hear Christ speak to you; you may hear the minister long enough, but labor to get Christ to speak to your hearts. . . . If he [Christ] be good at making worlds, then if thou wouldst have thy heart mended, go to him, who is maker of worlds and hearts also. . . . If Christ be thus glorious, then labor to manifest his glory to the world, shine with his glory and grace. . . . Would you see the brightness of Christ’s glory, which wicked men and devils shall never see? Labor to get your hearts changed into the image of Christ; be humble, as he was humble, &c.<sup>5</sup>

B. God’s spokesman to man in history, vs. 3-4.

The subject of God speaking through His Son continues, except that the manner of His advanced discoursing is now qualified. It is the language, the divine dialect of glory from the Father, inherent in and reflected by the Son toward “us,” v. 2a, who have believed.

1. His supreme glory, v. 3.

Thus, “He [the Son] is the radiance of the [Father’s] glory and the precise representation of His nature, and so upholding all the things [he has made] by the word of His power. Having made cleansing for sins, he sat down on the right hand of the majesty/greatness in the high places [heaven].”

a. The person of the Son.

*First*, He is the “radiance,” ἀπαύγασμα, apaugasma, the brightness shining forth, and thus the “explanation/exposition,” ἐξηγέομαι, exēgeomai (John 1:18; cf. 14:9) of “the [Father’s] glory.” *Second*, He [the Son] is the “precise representation [χαρακτήρ, charaktēr, impression, stamp] of His [the Father’s] nature [ὑπόστασις, hupostasis, essence, being].” This is similar to Paul’s declaration that

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Goodwin, *Works*, V, pp. 539, 547-8.

Christ is, “the image [εἰκών, eikōn] of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). Here is the doctrine of Jesus Christ’s deity expressed in its most precise form. As Josiah Conder has written:

In Thee, most perfectly expressed,  
The Father’s glories shine:  
Of the full Deity possessed,  
Eternally divine:  
  
True image of the infinite,  
Whose essence is concealed;  
Brightness of uncreated light;  
The heart of God revealed:  
  
Worthy, O Lamb of God, art Thou,  
That every knee to Thee should bow!

Spurgeon exhorts us here:

Shade your eyes, for you cannot look upon this wondrous sight without being dazzled by it. . . . Some commentators say—and it is not an ill figure, yet we must not push any figure too far,—that, as light is to the sun, so is Jesus to the glory of God. He is the brightness of that glory; that is to say, there is not any glory in God but what is also in Christ: and when that glory reaches its climax, when God the Ever-glorious is most glorious, that greatest glory is in Christ. Oh, this wondrous Word of God,—the very climax of the Godhead,—the gathering up of every blessed attribute in all its infinity of glory! You shall find all this in the person of the God-man, Christ Jesus. . . . I said, a minute ago, “Shade your eyes;” but I might now say, “Shut them,” as I think of the excessive brilliance described by these words: “the express image of his person.” Whatever God is, Christ is; the very likeness of God, the very Godhead of Godhead, the very Deity of Deity, is in Christ Jesus: “the express image of his person.” Dr. John Owen, who loves to explain the spiritual meaning in the Epistle to the Hebrews by the types in the Old Testament, which is evidently what Paul himself was doing, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit,—explains the brightness of the Father’s glory by a reference to the Shekinah over the mercy-seat, which was the only visible token of the presence of God there. An extraordinary brightness is said to have shone forth from between the cherubim. Now, Christ is God manifesting himself in his brightness.<sup>6</sup>

b. The work of the Son.

Having established Jesus Christ’s qualification to authoritatively and mediatorily speak for His Father, we have revealed in more detail the substance of His message. It is the accomplishment and communication of the gospel which is, “the power of God for salvation” (Rom. 1:16), that is the power of God which “upholds all things” and makes “purification for sins.”

- (1) In *creation*, cf. v. 2b, where “He made the ages [world]” (Col. 1:16).
- (2) In *providence*. He “is upholding [sustaining] all the things [he has made] by the word [ῥῆμα, rhēma, specific utterance] of His power.” Hence what

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<sup>6</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, V. 45, p. 516 (Ages CD).

Christ creates he maintains, or as Paul explains, “in Him [Christ] all things hold together [συνίσταμι, sunistami, cohere]” (Col. 1:17). Hence the created universe is not abandoned by Christ on account of the Fall, but preserved with a glorious prospect in view through his redemptive accomplishment.

- (3) In *redemption*. “Having made [aorist] cleansing for sins, he sat down [aorist] on the right hand of the majesty/greatness in the high places [heaven].” His coming to earth from heaven was essentially to combat sin. Hence the focus is upon the decisive completion of redemption, its finality that is crowned with the satisfactory session of the Son, at the place of honor beside the Father, back in heaven (8:1; 10:12; 12:2).

## 2. His supreme name, v. 4.

In writing to Hebrew Christians, the author appreciates the substantial role of angels in the Old Testament and thus Jewish theology. This particular emphasis here is proven by the fact that ἄγγελος, angelos, is used thirteen times in Hebrews and yet a total of fourteen times in all of Paul’s thirteen Epistles. This concluding item for comparison in the opening thematic proposal is at the same time about to become a major introductory thrust. Reasons for this comparative emphasis on angels include: 1. Angels, in being created before the creation of mankind (Job 38:4-7), enjoyed an especially holy communion with God. 2. Angels were understood to have had a major role in the transmission of the law to Israel (Acts 7:38, 53; Gal. 3:19; Heb. 2:1-2). 3. Angels, as spirit beings and messengers with a heavenly disposition, had come to earth from the holy presence of God (Deut. 33:1-2; Ps. 89:5, 7). 4. The interaction of angels with Israel as a nation, over the centuries of its history, had been both powerful and substantial (Gen. 28:12; Ps. 91:11; 103:20-21; Dan. 7:9-10; cf. Heb. 1:14). Hence, to the Jewish mind, no mere mortal, even of the stature of Abraham, Moses, or Elijah, could rank with an angel of God.

### a. He is superior to angels in rank.

“Having become so much greater/superior than the angels.” The expression “greater,” κρείττων, kreitōn, being central to the argument of this epistle, is used thirteen times in Hebrews, 1:4; 6:9; 7:7, 19, 22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24, yet only thrice by Paul. The plural “angels” excludes “the Angel of Jehovah” who, as a christophany/theophany in the Old Testament, is identical with Jesus Christ (Gen. 18:1-19:1; 22:9-16; 31:11, 13; 32:24-30, cf. Hos. 12:4; Ex. 3:1-6; Judg. 6:12, 14; Isa. 63:8-9; Zech. 3:1-2; 12:8; Mal. 3:1),<sup>7</sup> except that this manifestation was not incarnation. Hence the superiority here is that of Jesus Christ’s rank that arises from being “seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high,” v. 3. No angel has ever been so enthroned; this is the status of a Son, which name is now mentioned as further proof of Jesus Christ’s superiority.

<sup>7</sup> J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament*, pp. 167-70.

- b. He is superior to angels in appointment.

“In the same manner as He has inherited a more excellent/higher-ranking name than they.” The expression “more excellent,” **διαφορώτερος**, *diaphorōteros*, with “than,” **παρά**, *para*, is a comparative construction found six times in Hebrews, 1:4; 2:9; 3:3; 9:23; 11:4; 12:24, yet not once in a Pauline epistle. So at the annunciation to Mary, the angel Gabriel declared concerning Jesus that: “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; . . . the holy Child shall be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:32, 35; cf. Eph. 1:20-21; especially Phil. 2:9-11 where Jesus is acknowledged as “Lord”). So it was the Father’s good pleasure to bestow this inheritance of exalted filial title upon He who had dwelt in His bosom in eternity past (John 1:1-2, 18, 34; 17:5).

Jesus! The Name over all  
In hell, or earth, or sky;  
Angels and men before it fall,  
And devils fear and fly.

Hence God’s speaking “to us in His Son,” v. 2, is transcendently greater communication than in the Old Testament era, the exalted status of the holy angelic hosts notwithstanding. It is “Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel. [Consequently] See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused Him [God, not Moses<sup>8</sup>] who warned them on earth, much less will we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven,” 12:24-25.

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<sup>8</sup> Although the NASB and NIV have “him”, the NKJV more correctly translates “Him,” with the support of Farrar, Owen, Westcott. especially in the light of the context of v. 26.