

JEREMIAH
BIBLE STUDY SERIES

HEBREWS

THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST

DR. DAVID JEREMIAH

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Prepared by Peachtree Publishing Services



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Since 1798

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INTRODUCTION TO

The Letter to the Hebrews

“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful” (Hebrews 10:23). Jewish Christians in the first century were facing a dilemma. They had accepted Jesus as their promised Messiah, but now they were being challenged by fellow Jews who saw Jesus as a heretic or an imposter. They accused these Jewish Christians of abandoning their heritage, betraying their values, and cutting themselves off from God’s people. Some of the Jewish believers were bending under the pressure. They were wondering if they had made the right choice . . . and whether it made sense to return to life under the Old Covenant. The author of Hebrews saw the danger. So he crafted this letter to them, drawing on his expansive knowledge of the Old Testament to reveal how Jesus is superior to *anything* the old law had to offer. Jesus is higher than the angels, better than any human, and their great high priest. Furthermore, Jesus accomplished what the Old Covenant could not by offering Himself as the one, true, and only perfect sacrifice that could actually atone for the sins of His people.

AUTHOR AND DATE

The author of Hebrews is unknown, and his identity has proved to be one of the enduring mysteries of the Bible. The earliest surviving copies of the New Testament grouped the letter with Paul’s epistles, but early church fathers such as Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Clement, and Origen all expressed doubts. Tertullian, writing in the third century, claimed it was written by Barnabas, while Origen believed it was written by a close follower of Paul.

One theory embraced by a number of scholars is that a man named Apollos was the author. He was a Jew and would have been well educated in the Old Testament teachings and Jewish philosophy found throughout the book. He was also an associate of Timothy, who is mentioned by name in the closing. If this identity is correct, Apollos could have written the letter from Ephesus, c. AD 52–54. Regardless, most scholars believe the letter was penned before AD 70, as the author makes no mention of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem that occurred at that date.

BACKGROUND AND SETTING

As with the author and date, the exact audience for the letter is also unknown. However, it can be assumed they were a group of Jewish Christians located somewhere in the Mediterranean world (possibly in Rome). The author assumes his readers are knowledgeable of the Old Testament and draws on many examples from that text to make his points. He alludes to the fact they are facing persecution for their beliefs and are feeling the pressure to return to their former way of life. The Jews viewed Jesus as a heretic, and those who followed Him were seen as traitors to their people. So these Hebrew Christians were likely facing estrangement from family, friends, and the customs of Israel because of their decision to follow Christ.

KEY THEMES

Several key themes are prominent in the letter to the Hebrews. The first is that *believers must recognize Jesus is better than anything that came before*. The Jewish people held their patriarchs, their prophets, their kings, and other heroes of their faith in high esteem. It was almost inconceivable that anything could be *better* than these men and women of the past whom God had raised up to accomplish such great things for His people. But this is exactly what the author of Hebrews is saying in making his case for the superiority of Christ. Jesus is superior to any person who has gone before—and even superior to angels (see 1:4–2:18, 3:1–4:13).

A second theme is that *believers must recognize Jesus as their great high priest*. The priests in the Old Testament served as intermediaries between God and His people. They represented God to the people by teaching them His holy laws. They represented the people to God by offering an unending cycle of sacrifices to atone for their sins. But when Jesus came, He instituted a completely new system, with Himself as the high priest. He fulfilled the role of the mediator by teaching God’s holy laws to the people and atoning for the people’s sins through His own perfect sacrifice on the cross. He is thus superior to the old system (see 4:14–7:28).

A third theme is that *believers must recognize Jesus as the all-atoning sacrifice for sin*. The Old Covenant required a sacrifice of blood to be made to atone for sin. But these animal sacrifices could not *permanently* atone for sin, so priests engaged in a constant cycle of offering them again and again. Jesus broke this cycle when He came to earth, “for by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified” (10:14). Christ thus functions under the New Covenant as *both* our high priest and as the sacrifice for sin (see 8:1–10:14).

A final theme is that *believers must persevere in their walk with Jesus*. The author, having established why it makes sense to trust in Christ, ends the letter by urging believers to apply those principles and stand strong in the face of the persecution they are facing. This would have included ostracism from society, severed relationships, and actual threats to their wellbeing. The writer draws on the examples of “heroes of the faith” who have gone before them to call out the rich benefits of trusting completely in Christ. Furthermore, their perseverance in spite of trials will serve as a powerful witness to the world (see 11:1–12:29).

KEY APPLICATIONS

The letter to the Hebrews reveals that following Jesus is better than following anything else that the world offers. When trials come our way, we may be tempted to doubt God’s faithfulness and fall into old patterns of living. For a season, those old ways may seem to pay dividends—but in

reality they are merely “passing pleasures of sin” (11:25). True and abundant life only comes by walking in step with Christ, abiding under his superior New Covenant, and persevering in spite of the trials. As we do this, like the “heroes of the faith” that have gone before us, we will enter into God’s promised rest and be rewarded with eternal life.

SETTING THE STAGE

The book of Acts tells us that many Jewish people came to faith in Christ during the early days of the church. They saw Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah who had come into the world in fulfillment of countless prophecies in the Old Testament. But the years had now passed, and the excitement was beginning to wear a bit thin. Many Jewish Christians, having been accused by their fellow Jews of abandoning their heritage, were feeling the pressure to conform and return to their old ways of life. They were wondering if following Jesus was really worth it.

This attitude troubled the author of Hebrews. It is likely that he had followed a similar path. He had accepted Jesus as the Messiah and endured the same pressures to compromise, conform, and convert back to old ways of life. But somewhere along the way, he had discovered that following Christ *really was worth it*. As he looked over the pages of Hebrew Scripture that were so familiar, he could see how the arrival of Jesus had ushered in an entirely new way for humans to relate to God that was superior to everything that had come before it.

The author begins by pointing out the superiority of the Son over the prophets of the past. But his pen doesn't linger there long, for he knows that in Jewish thought, *angels* represent the highest power next to God Himself. In truth, we find angels taking the lead role throughout the Bible when it comes to enacting God's plans. They spoke on God's behalf, delivered His messages to the nations, executed His divine orders, and protected faithful followers of God. In Jesus' life alone, we find them announcing His birth, warning His parents to flee to Egypt, ministering to Christ in the desert, rolling the stone away from the tomb, and announcing His resurrection.

The Jewish people thus held angels in high regard. One sect of Judaism, established at Qumran, taught that the archangel Michael's authority was equal to or even surpassed the authority of the Messiah. So the writer of Hebrews needed to begin there—by convincing his Jewish readers that Jesus was superior to even the most powerful of angels.

EXPLORING THE TEXT

God's Supreme Revelation (Hebrews 1:1–4)

¹ God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, ² has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; ³ who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴ having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.

1. The Old Testament reveals that God spoke “at various times and in various ways” to His people through the prophets. These prophets spoke God’s words sporadically over a great period of time. What does the author of Hebrew say has now changed in the way God speaks to His people? Why is this superior to the prophets (see verses 1–3)?

2. Jesus is stated as being “better than the angels” and having “a more excellent name.” In the Bible, two prominent angels that appear are Michael and Gabriel. The name *Michael* means “who is like God,” while

the name *Gabriel* means “man of God.” Why is Jesus’ name—referring here to the title “Son”—better than that of the angels (see verse 4)?

The Son Exalted Above Angels (Hebrews 1:5–7)

⁵For to which of the angels did He ever say:

“You are My Son,
Today I have begotten You”?

And again:

“I will be to Him a Father,
And He shall be to Me a Son”?

⁶But when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says:

“Let all the angels of God worship Him.”

⁷And of the angels He says:

“Who makes His angels spirits
And His ministers a flame of fire.”

3. The author begins to make his case about Christ in verse 5 by citing Psalm 2:7 (“You are My Son, today I have begotten You”) and 2 Samuel 7:14 (“I will be his Father, and he shall be My son”). What point is he making here as it relates to Jesus’ unique relationship with God? How does this make Jesus greater than the angels?

4. Jesus is referred to as “the firstborn” in verse 6. In both Roman and Jewish culture, this was a son who had the right of his father’s inheritance. This is the only place in the letter where the author gives Jesus this designation, though elsewhere he is called God’s “heir” (1:2; see also 1:4). How does this distinction of “firstborn” and “heir” set Jesus apart from the angels?

The Anointed One (Hebrews 1:8–11)

⁸ But to the Son He says:

“Your throne, O God, is forever and ever;
A scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your kingdom.

⁹You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness;
Therefore God, Your God, has anointed You
With the oil of gladness more than Your companions.”

¹⁰And:

“You, LORD, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth,
And the heavens are the work of Your hands.
¹¹They will perish, but You remain;
And they will all grow old like a garment . . .

5. The passage cited in verses 8–9 is from Psalm 45:6–7, which is a wedding song that celebrates the marriage of a king. The psalm was widely understood to look forward to the coming of the Messiah, the great future King, into the world. How does the author of Hebrews relate these lines to Jesus? How is Christ superior to all earthly kings?

6. The passage cited in verses 10–11 is from Psalm 102:25–26, which is a prayer from an afflicted person who contrasts his situation with the eternal power of the Creator. What is the author saying about Jesus by citing this passage from the Old Testament?

Seated at the Right Hand of God (Hebrews 1:12–14)

¹² Like a cloak You will fold them up,
And they will be changed.
But You are the same,
And Your years will not fail.”

¹³ But to which of the angels has He ever said:

“Sit at My right hand,
Till I make Your enemies Your footstool”?

¹⁴ Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?

7. The passage quoted in verse 12 is from Psalm 102:25–26. All of creation will ultimately perish and be “folded up” like a worn-out cloak. But what does the author of Hebrews say about Jesus? How does this show that Jesus is equal to God?

8. The final passage quoted in verses 13–14 is from Psalm 110:1, which reads, “The LORD said to my Lord, ‘Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool.’” Once again, this was widely understood

to be God speaking to the Messiah. How does the writer’s use of this passage help to support his point that Jesus is superior to angels?

REVIEWING THE STORY

The author of Hebrews begins by announcing that we are in a new age. In the past, God spoke through the prophets, but today He speaks directly through the Son. The author then draws on several passages from the Old Testament to make the point that Jesus is superior to angels. Jesus’ name is superior because it identifies Him as the heir of God. His glory is superior because angels worship Him. His infinite nature is superior to the angels’ finite nature. And his position at God’s right hand is superior to the angels’ position of bowed reverence.

9. How does the writer of Hebrews summarize the things that make Jesus “so much better than the angels” (see Hebrews 1:2–4)?

10. How did Jesus' birth establish His superiority over the angels
(see Hebrews 1:6)?

11. Why does Jesus' role in creation make Him superior to the angels
(see Hebrews 1:10–11)?

12. What honor has God given Jesus that establishes His superiority
(see Hebrews 1:13)?

APPLYING THE MESSAGE

13. In the opening of this letter, we read that God now speaks to us through Christ. What does this mean? What are some of the ways that you have experienced God speaking to you?

14. What is the danger in giving *anything* a greater place than Christ? What happens when we give angels—or anything else—the glory that Jesus alone deserves?

REFLECTING ON THE MEANING

The letter of Hebrews begins by stressing the superiority of Jesus to the angels. We read that Christ is “so much better than the angels” and has “a

more excellent name than they” (1:4). The point being made is that Jesus alone is worthy of our praise—not angels. Yet this does not diminish the important ministry of God’s angels.

The role of angels is often misunderstood today, but the Bible identifies four key roles they fulfill. *First, angels serve as God’s messengers.* Messenger angels spoke to patriarchs such as Abraham and Jacob. They spoke to prophets like Daniel and priests like Zacharias. They also relayed God’s messages to “regular” people, including Elizabeth, Mary, and Joseph. They delivered life-changing messages from God Himself.

Second, angels serve as ministers. Ministering angels appeared to apostles such as Peter and Paul. They cared for little children. They tended to the needs of Christ in the wilderness and in the Garden of Gethsemane. They concerned themselves with the needs of the believers. They are instruments of God’s care and love.

Third, angels serve as warriors. Warrior angels do battle against God’s foes, as described in Daniel and Revelation. They also protect God’s people. In 2 Kings 6, we read how the prophet Elisha’s servant was alarmed to discover the Syrian army had surrounded the city of Dothan and planned to capture his master. Elisha prayed for his servant’s eyes to be opened. Suddenly, the servant was able to see an enormous angel army poised to protect Elisha.

Fourth, angels serve as managers. Managing angels rule the elements. They work in and through God’s creation. They help maintain His order. They carry out the justice of God’s court by smiting those who fail to heed the Lord’s warnings and must suffer the consequences.

This vital work of angels earned them great notoriety among God’s people. As the apostle Paul notes, it even led some into the “worship of angels” (Colossians 2:18). But the truth, as the author of Hebrews states, is that they are as far removed in power from the Son of God as the finite is from the infinite. Angels are emissaries from God, instruments of His grace and protection, and executors of His judgment, but they not in the same place as God or as Jesus the Son. All glory and praise for their work belong rightly to our heavenly Father.

