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# LIFE IN A LIFELESS WORLD

Encountering Jesus in the Book of Hebrews



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## SECTION 1

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# JESUS' OWN LIFE

**WE NATURALLY GRAVITATE** toward portions of the Bible that feel familiar. Stories we have heard since childhood—Noah and the flood, David and Goliath, Jesus healing a leper or calming a storm. Short proverbs with easily applied wisdom for the day. Songs that put words to our deepest feelings of abandonment, joy, anger, or thankfulness. Letters with clear introductions that help us settle in—“I, Paul . . . to the church in [Ephesus/Corinth/Rome].” But there are other parts of the Bible that start strange and stay that way, no matter how long we stare at them. Genealogies full of names we can barely pronounce, laws about sacrifices we’ll never offer, endless diatribes against this or that evil nation. Most of the rough ground is in the Old Testament, but if there is a “None of this makes sense, and I’m not even sure where to begin, so I think I’ll try something else” part of the New Testament, it’s probably the book we call Hebrews. Revelation is weirder, to be sure, but stories about dragons with seven heads and beasts with ten horns are at least fascinating, even if we have no idea what it all means. Hebrews, on the other hand, is just *hard*. Hebrews 11 is nice: a whole bunch of people had faith, and God rewarded them for it. And the general idea seems to be something like “Jesus is awesome,” so that has some potential. But sacrifices and altars and covenants and priests and dire warnings about falling away and God being a consuming fire and one quote after another from the Old Testament that doesn’t get explained—it’s all a bit much. And on top of all that, there is nothing at the beginning to get us situated; in fact, many scholars have suggested that the first sentence of Hebrews is the most densely packed and



challenging sentence in the entire New Testament.<sup>1</sup> So how do we even get started?

If you've ever been taught how to study the Bible, whether in an academic setting, or at church, or in a small group or anywhere else, you've probably been told that the original context—meaning, the historical setting within which a particular part of the Bible was written and read—is vitally important. I wholeheartedly affirm that principle, but we need to recognize before getting underway that Hebrews has long frustrated those who want to study the Bible in its original context, because we know almost nothing about Hebrews' original context. The fact is, we don't know any of the key pieces of information: *who* wrote it, *to whom*, *where* it was written, *when* it was written, or even *why* it was written. There are many theories, of course, but we're still waiting for one that is substantiated by the available evidence and really helps us understand Hebrews.

Here are some things we *don't* know that are often presented as part of the background of Hebrews. First, if you've heard a sermon or sermon series on Hebrews, you may have heard that the audience was thinking about leaving Jesus and going back to Judaism. But Hebrews doesn't say this. It does compare Jesus to various Old Testament practices and realities, and it does suggest that Jesus is superior to them, but there are plenty of reasons why the author might have done that other than to convince people not to go back to those things.<sup>2</sup> Second, you might also have heard, particularly with reference to Hebrews 1, that the audience had some weird ideas about angels—that they were equal with Jesus, or maybe even superior to Jesus. Again: Hebrews doesn't say this. It does compare Jesus to angels, but there are many reasons why the author might have done this other than to combat a particular brand of bad angelology.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>David A. Black, "Hebrews 1:1-4: A Study in Discourse Analysis," *Westminster Theological Journal* 49 (1987): 175-76; John P. Meier, "Structure and Theology in Heb 1,1-14," *Biblica* 66 (1985): 170.

<sup>2</sup>Sigurd Grindheim, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2023), 32.

<sup>3</sup>If you preach or teach, starting your series with what amounts to "This book isn't relevant to you because it was written to address problems you'll never have" might not be the best way to get your audience fired up. How many people in your audience worship angels?

Here's what we *do* know: Hebrews was written sometime in the mid- to late first century AD by a second-generation follower of Jesus—meaning, he wasn't one of the apostles who was taught by Jesus himself; he heard about Jesus from the apostles (Heb 2:3).<sup>4</sup> He was very well educated, both in terms of his writing style and his deep knowledge of the Old Testament. We also know that the recipients of the book were people who had been following Jesus for some time but were slacking off for some reason (Heb 5:11-12), that they had experienced persecution in the past (Heb 10:32-34), and that there were some people with the author and known to the audience who were from Italy (Heb 13:24). That's pretty much it. Historical background is a “do what you can with what you have” component of biblical interpretation: if you've got a lot of information, as we frequently do with Paul's letters, for example, use it; if you haven't got a lot of information, as is the case with Hebrews, don't lose any sleep over it. Do what you can with what you have, and in this instance, we don't have much.

That's the good news: you're not going to need to become an expert historian to read Hebrews reasonably well. Of course, the fact that Hebrews doesn't identify its own precise historical moment doesn't mean it didn't have one. It was written in the first century AD, in Greek, by a person solidly educated in both the Old Testament and the philosophies of his day, probably to an audience about whom we could say the same.<sup>5</sup> It was written from somewhere in the Roman Empire to somewhere else in the Roman Empire. It was written to people who were struggling to find life in their ongoing pursuit of Jesus, for a variety of reasons, which is why Hebrews speaks so well to our similar struggles today. All these things need to be taken into consideration when reading Hebrews, if for

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How many are thinking about ditching Christianity and converting to (non-Messianic) Judaism?

<sup>4</sup>Amy L. B. Peeler, *Hebrews*, Commentaries for Christian Formation (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024), 17.

<sup>5</sup>Of the many studies of Hebrews concerned with its historical context, the recent works of Michael Martin and Jason Whitlark on the use of ancient rhetorical devices in Hebrews have proven the most helpful. See especially Michael W. Martin and Jason A. Whitlark, *Inventing Hebrews: Design and Purpose in Ancient Rhetoric*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 171 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

no other reason than to keep us from assuming that the original situation of Hebrews was the United States in the twenty-first century. But the kind of specific connections we can frequently make between Paul's letters and their historical context (meals in Corinth, citizenship in Philippi) elude us here, so we must be far more cautious in using historical connections to determine the meaning of any given text in Hebrews.

On the other hand, and you've probably picked up on this if you've read Hebrews in the past, the author is clearly familiar with the Old Testament and expects the same from his readers. If you want to do the background work to get ready to dive into Hebrews, your best bet is to spend some time in the Old Testament. The fact is, you've got as much chance of grasping Hebrews without carefully studying the Old Testament as of winning the Stanley Cup without a goalie. But that doesn't mean you need to put Hebrews away until you've read the Old Testament and understood everything in it. One of the major goals of this book is to get you properly oriented to how Hebrews is reading the Old Testament, and Hebrews can teach *you* to read it as well. If you're suddenly feeling a bit behind on your Old Testament trivia, relax—we'll get there. And, truth be told, if you're feeling a bit intimidated by Hebrews, whether because of all the Old Testament references in it or for some other reason, well, there's no avoiding it: some things in Hebrews are difficult to understand. Melchizedek, tabernacles in heaven, recrucifying Jesus—these are not your run-of-the-mill small group discussion topics.

For what it's worth, at least some of these topics were quite challenging to the original audience as well, but that didn't prevent the author from writing about them anyways (Heb 5:11-14). Apparently, the potential benefits of growing in their commitment to following Jesus were worth wrestling with some things that would be overwhelming at first glance. So get ready, because some of this is going to be more like hiking up the mountain through deep snow drifts with the wind in your face than the downhill, soft-powder ski run that we sometimes expect studying the Bible to be. But remember two things as you do so. First, the beauty of the view from the top is usually proportionate to the

number of calories you burn on the way there. Second, there is someone up ahead, waiting for you, cheering you on, reminding you that not only did *he* persevere to the triumphant and glorious end for which God created you, but he has made it possible for you to do likewise.



# JESUS ON HIS THRONE



**IT'S A FAMILIAR LITERARY TROPE:** a character or set of characters, living their mundane lives, is exposed to a world of which they had not previously been aware. Lucy Pevensie discovers Narnia, Neo escapes the Matrix, you know the drill. Sometimes such stories reveal to the protagonist that their old world is entirely fraudulent, but other times they invite that character to return to their old world but live differently in it.

This second strategy is often going on not only within these stories themselves but within the experience of reading them. We, the protagonists in the event of reading, are drawn into new worlds created by our favorite authors. Eventually we have to put the book down—we have to go to work, converse with a friend, go to bed, make a meal, play a game with our kids, whatever. We leave that literary world and go back to our tangible world, but, if the book is any good, something of it will go with us, and we will live in our old worlds differently because of our participation in that new world.

The Bible offers this readerly experience: when I sit down at my desk and read Hebrews, I lose myself in a world where God the Father speaks to God the Son in heaven in the presence of many angels, where character after character defies death and lives by faith, where bones lie in the desert as testimony to God's faithfulness to his promise despite his people's unfaithfulness to theirs. And as a reader I am invited to get up from my desk and go back to my life but live differently in this world because of my time in that one.



The Bible also identifies us as the protagonists in the story itself, because it presents itself as *real*. Middle-earth exists in the mind of J. R. R. Tolkien and in the minds of millions of readers, but it doesn't exist in the sense that I might meet an elf or battle an orc, or in the sense that I could go to Hobbiton or Gondor. But when Hebrews says that the Son sits enthroned in heaven, it means it. Wherever (whatever?) heaven is, Jesus—a real, live, flesh-and-blood human being—is there.

Reading Hebrews 1 should make us uncomfortable. It should disorient us, because by showing us a world where things are as they should be, it also tells us that our world is not as it should be. Does *your* world reflect the absolute supremacy of God's Son, Jesus? When you look around, do you think, *Wow, God has spoken, and my world is obviously listening to him speak and submitting to his words?* I sure don't. I emerge from the world of Hebrews 1 and look at the world in which I live, and I think, *Something's wrong. My world is a mess. Satisfaction and fulfillment and meaning and life are not available here in the way they ought to be.* "Do you feel the world is broken? We do."<sup>1</sup> If we didn't, we wouldn't be killing ourselves trying to fix it. If this world could give me life, I wouldn't be looking so hard to find it elsewhere.

But while we sit here in our world, rightly singing songs of brokenness and shadows, the angels depart the throne room of God singing a different tune. *The Son sits. The king reigns. All things will belong to him, and we are sent to serve those whose inheritance is as certain as his. Jesus is coming. Life is coming.* He hasn't yet, and so I feel out of place, and I should feel out of place, because like the rich man in Jesus' parable, I can see across the chasm to where life is as it should be, and I'm not there. Yet.

### God Spoke (Hebrews 1:1-4)

The first sentence of Hebrews is a monster:

God, after speaking in the past in many different ways to the fathers through the prophets, spoke in these last days to us through the Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he

<sup>1</sup>Andrew Peterson, "Is He Worthy?," *Resurrection Letters: Prologue*, Centricity Music, 2018.

made the ages, and who, being the radiance of his glory and the exact representation of his being, and sustaining everything by his powerful word, after accomplishing atonement for sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, and by doing so became as much greater than the angels as the name that he has inherited is superior to theirs. (Heb 1:1-4)

Yes, that's one sentence. But keep in mind: a sentence is nothing more than a subject, a verb, and a whole bunch of trimmings. Find the subject and the verb; ignore everything else for a moment. *God spoke*. That's it. Or, if you want to add just one more component, you could say, *God, after speaking, spoke*. Everything else is just window dressing to that basic claim. So let's pause for a moment and reflect on what that tells us about Hebrews. First, this whole book is going to be about things that *God spoke*. Second, it's going to be about the fact that *God spoke* more than once: first one way, then another. Third, before we start thinking that Hebrews is about why Judaism is bad and the Old Testament is bad (every time we say the former we end up thinking the latter, even if we never actually say it) and Jesus is better than all that, we'd better notice something: the most important thing Hebrews wants to say about the Old Testament is that *God spoke* it. And that means, perhaps surprisingly, that before Hebrews says anything about how old and new are *different*, it's said something about how they are the *same*.<sup>2</sup>

Fourth and final point: there's a word missing from the sentence above that might show up in your translation of the Bible: *but*. Some English translations say "God spoke to the fathers . . . , *but* now he has spoken to us." The word *but* (or, that is, its ancient Greek equivalent) does not appear in the original text of Hebrews. It's not there, and it shouldn't be in our translations either, because it implies that Hebrews is setting up negative-positive comparison when it isn't. There's a world of difference between "After speaking in the past, God spoke in the present" and "God spoke in the past *but* now has spoken in the present."

<sup>2</sup>Gene R. Smillie, "Contrast or Continuity in Hebrews 1.1-2," *New Testament Studies* 51 (2005): 543-60.

The first draws our attention to what's the same in each case, while the second fixes our gaze on what's different.

Moving on. Every other part of this sentence answers questions about the basic claim that *God, after speaking, spoke*.

**Q:** *When* did he speak?

**A:** In the past and in these last days.

**Q:** *To whom* did he speak?

**A:** To the fathers and to us.

**Q:** *How* did he speak?

**A:** Through the prophets and through the Son.

**Q:** *What* did he say?

**A:** Oddly enough, there's no answer to this one. Hold that thought for later.

Notice, now, that the rest of the sentence is less about God speaking and more about the one through whom he spoke: the Son. It gets complicated, so try this:

The Son is

- the one God appointed heir of everything
- the one through whom God made everything
- the one who
  - *[being the radiance and the exact representation,*
  - *sustaining everything,*
  - *and after accomplishing atonement,]*

sat down at God's right hand

*[and, as a result of sitting, became superior to the angels.]*

Think of it this way. There are three things we need to know about the Son: he has been appointed heir, he was God's agent of creation, and he sat down. And the rest, once again, answers questions about the fact that he sat down.



**Q:** *Who*, exactly, is this Son who sat down?

**A:** He is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his nature, and the one who sustains everything with his powerful word.

**Q:** *When* did he sit down?

**A:** After accomplishing atonement.

**Q:** *What resulted from* his sitting down?

**A:** He became as much superior to the angels as the name that he has inherited is superior to theirs.

There’s a lot we could say about all this, but I’ll stick to three particularly important issues. First, the two pivotal phrases about what Jesus did are that he “accomplished atonement for sins” and then “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” From the second sentence of Hebrews to the very last, everything comes back to these two moments. How did Jesus accomplish atonement? Where and when did he accomplish atonement? When did he sit down, and what permitted him to do so? And, of course, why should we care? There’s not one piece of Hebrews, from Hebrews 1:5 to Hebrews 13:21, that doesn’t bring us back to these two moments in one way or another. After accomplishing atonement, he sat down (what we call his session or his enthronement). Atonement and enthronement. Keep those two events in mind.

The second thing I notice is that whoever this Son is, he’s not like anyone else we’ve ever met in the pages of Scripture. He created everything, he keeps everything going, and he will inherit everything. He doesn’t *reflect* God’s glory, like a mirror reflects light; he is the light itself that makes the mirror’s reflection possible. Or to put it in other biblical terms, he isn’t “in” God’s image, like you and I are; he *is* the image in which you and I are made.<sup>3</sup> He is what only God is; he does what only God does.

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<sup>3</sup>Carmen Imes has recently proposed that Gen 1:26 should actually be translated, “Let us make humanity *as* our image.” See Imes, *Being God’s Image: Why Creation Still Matters* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2023), 4-6. Her point is not to minimize the distinction between us and Jesus but simply to ensure—and on this point she is undoubtedly correct—that being made in this manner “is essential to human identity rather than a

It was claims about the Son such as these found in Hebrews 1 that compelled the early church to formulate the early creedal statements about Jesus' deity, contrary to occasional suggestions today that the creeds are what happens when biblical statements get forced into Greek philosophical molds.<sup>4</sup> Even the critics recognize that we don't have to move very far to get from the claims of Hebrews 1 to the claims of the creeds.

And yet—here's the third point. Many have suggested that Hebrews 1 is about the Son being divine, while Hebrews 2 is about the Son being human, but this hardly does justice to the remainder of our sentence, particularly the final phrase, "he became as much superior to the angels as the name that he has inherited is superior to theirs."<sup>5</sup> He *became* superior to the angels. Meaning, there was a time at which he was *not* superior to the angels. Say what? He created everything, presumably including the angels; he radiates the glory of God, is exactly like God in his nature, and yet had to *become* superior to the angels? If the purpose of Hebrews 1 is to say, "Jesus is God, so he's superior to the angels," this is perhaps not the easiest way to go about it. God didn't *become* superior to the angels. He just *is*. So we move into the rest of Hebrews 1 and into Hebrews 2 with a question: How can the Lord and Creator of angels *become* superior to those angels?

### The Son Sat (Hebrews 1:5-14)

The rest of Hebrews 1 is a string of quotes from various parts of the Old Testament, mostly the Psalms. Some of them are about the Son, some of

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capacity that can be lost" (6). In other words, we are no less valuable in God's eyes (and therefore in each other's eyes) by our divergence from acting out image bearing/being.

<sup>4</sup>This idea, termed the Hellenization (meaning, "Greek-ization") thesis, is certainly valid insofar as Christian thinkers have at times become more conversant with the modes of thinking that belong to their own cultural moment than the modes of thinking that belong to Scripture itself. But as a broad framework for naming what systematic theology is in relation to the Bible, it fails miserably. See David S. Yeago, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis," *Pro Ecclesia* 3 (1994): 152-64, for a particularly helpful discussion of this issue.

<sup>5</sup>For classic essays putting the flow of Heb 1-2 in such terms, see Richard Bauckham, "The Divinity of Jesus Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews," in *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, ed. Richard Bauckham et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 15-36; John B. Webster, "One Who Is Son: Theological Reflections on the Exordium to the Epistle to the Hebrews," in Bauckham et al., *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 69-94.

them are about angels, some are about both. But it's really easy to get caught up in the details of where a quote was taken from, whether it was taken out of context, which ancient version of the Bible the author of Hebrews was using, and so on, and miss the big picture. The big picture, as in the opening lines of Hebrews, is the simple subject-verb combination that tells us what the whole thing is about: *God spoke*. See the phrase near the beginning of Hebrews 1:5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 13: "God/he says." And the rest of each verse answers questions about that basic claim. So, let's ask some questions about God's speeches here, starting with this one: *When* did God say all these things?

Hebrews 1:5-14 hints at the timing of God's speech to the Son and the angels in three places. First, in the very first quote (Heb 1:5, taken from Ps 2:7), God says, "You are my Son; *today* I have become your Father." The previous verse points out that the Son became superior to the angels on account of his superior name, and the following verses suggest that the title *Son* is that name, so the story goes something like this: Jesus became superior to the angels when God identified him as Son in some particular way. And since we've already learned that he took on that name "after accomplishing atonement for sin," we can safely assume that the timeline, so far, goes like this: atonement → named Son → became superior to the angels.

The second hint comes at the end of the chapter: Which of the angels did God ever invite to sit at his right hand (Heb 1:13, taken from Ps 110:1)? We already know that the Son sat down after receiving the superior name, which happened after he accomplished atonement, so now the sequence goes like this: atonement → named Son → became superior to the angels → invited to sit down → sat down. Notice how the two key events from the first sentence (atonement and enthronement) bracket everything else. If the question is, "When did God say all these things in Hebrews 1:5-14?" the answer so far is, "After the Son accomplished atonement but before he sat down."

The third hint about the timing of all this might seem to contradict what I've said so far. Hebrews 1:6 says, "When he brings the firstborn

into the world, God says. . . .” Undoubtedly, if you’re familiar with the biblical story at all, you read “brings the firstborn into the world” and immediately thought, *Jesus’ birth—Bethlehem—the incarnation*. But the previous two hints would seem to say, rather differently, that God said these things to Jesus after he had died, been raised, and ascended to heaven.

Here’s the problem: the word that most English Bibles translate as “world” in Hebrews 1:6 doesn’t mean “earth,” as opposed to “heaven,” which is what most of us think when we see that word. It actually describes some sort of inhabited space and, ironically, in this context refers to heaven.<sup>6</sup> The scene depicted so far in Hebrews 1 is of the Son ascending to heaven, having accomplished atonement but not yet having sat down, now standing before God and the inhabitants of heaven—the angels. In addition, if we skip forward a little bit, Hebrews 2 is going to say that in the incarnation, Jesus is going to become *lower* than the angels (Heb 2:9). But Hebrews 1:6 says that when God brings his firstborn Son into “the world,” he says, “Let all God’s angels worship him!” If Jesus’ birth involves his becoming *lower* than the angels, it doesn’t fit too well into our current context (in Heb 1) of Jesus becoming so much *higher* than the angels that God commands them to worship him.<sup>7</sup>

Keeping in mind that God says all these words in Hebrews 1:5-14 to Jesus, in heaven, after he accomplishes atonement for sins but before he sits down, let’s go back and see how the whole scene unfolds. Jesus appears before God the Father and all the angels, having atoned for sin. The first thing the Father says is directed toward Jesus: “*You* are my Son!” Notice how the pronouns change in the second half of Hebrews 1:5. God says the same thing, but this time he speaks not to the Son but to the

<sup>6</sup>Among many others, see Ardel B. Caneday, “The Eschatological World Already Subjected to the Son: The Οικουμένη of Hebrews 1.6 and the Son’s Enthronement,” in *A Cloud of Witnesses: The Theology of Hebrews in Its Ancient Contexts*, ed. Richard Bauckham et al., Library of New Testament Studies 387 (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 28-39.

<sup>7</sup>If your sense of Jesus being both divine and human is getting fuzzy, feel free to stop here for a moment and go to the “Getting Deeper: Christology” section at the end of the book. Short version: I am *not* saying that Jesus stopped being God when he became human (or that he stopped being human and went back to being God at the ascension). Nothing could be further from the truth.

angels: “*He* is my Son!” And continuing to address the inhabitants of heaven, he says, “Worship *him!*” Then, in Hebrews 1:7-12, God will explain to the Son why this should be so. “Angels,” he says, “are my servants who will be whatever I want them to be; the only thing I want you to be is a king whose rule is permanent and unchanging” (Heb 1:7-9). “You [the Son] existed before them, you created them, and you will outlast them; you are the eternal Creator, and they are part of the finite creation” (Heb 1:10-12). “And because this is all true,” God concludes, “take a seat” (Heb 1:13). The final words of Hebrews 1 are the author’s, not God’s, but they form a fitting climax to the scene. The Son will take his seat and rest, but the gathered assembly, those who are “ministering spirits sent to serve” (Heb 1:14), will now get back to work.

Once more, then, the sequence of Hebrews 1:5-14. Having accomplished atonement, Jesus is brought before the heavenly assembly and declared by God to be his Son. The angels are then commanded to worship him because he is their Creator and Lord, while they are created servants. Finally, the Son is invited to sit and does so, while the angels are dismissed to continue their ministries. The two main events from Hebrews 1:1-4 bracket all that God says in Hebrews 1:5-14: atonement → God speaks [Son—“worship him”—“you’re the eternal king; they’re created servants”—“sit”] → enthronement.

### The Old Testament in Hebrews 1

Before moving on, we should take note of what Hebrews is doing with the Old Testament here. First, every single word that God the Father spoke to Jesus at his ascension is taken directly from the Old Testament. If Hebrews is about Jesus calling us to leave behind the old and move on with the new, wouldn’t you expect the conversation that got us headed in that direction to draw from a different source? And maybe even more surprising is that not only is every word spoken by the Father *to Jesus* in Hebrews taken from the Old Testament, but so is every word spoken *by Jesus* in Hebrews (for example, Heb 2:12-13; 10:5-8).

Second, most of the texts cited here have—in their original contexts—something to do with the enthronement of the Davidic king on Mount



Zion, in Jerusalem (Ps 2:7; 45:7; 110:4; 2 Sam 7:14).<sup>8</sup> The New Testament regularly calls Jesus the son of David and the king of Israel, so it isn't strange that Hebrews would describe his enthronement using promises that God made to David and liturgies that Israel recited when David's sons took their thrones. But this king hasn't been established in Jerusalem but in heaven. Capital cities on mountains were often connected to heaven in ancient thought, and kings were regularly depicted as representatives of God/gods, but the effect of that connection was that the earthly king was legitimated *by* heaven, not that the king actually reigned *in* heaven and over heaven's inhabitants. So, Hebrews is citing these Old Testament texts in a way that resonates deeply with their original use and yet relocates them from Jerusalem to heaven.

Third, if you've spent much time reading other parts of the New Testament, the last quote in Hebrews 1 probably sounded familiar. Psalm 110:1—"The Lord [God] said to my lord [David's Son]: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'" This verse is quoted or referenced more times, across more books of the New Testament, than any other part of the Old Testament (see, e.g., Mt 22:44; 26:64; Mk 12:36; Acts 2:34; 5:31; 7:55; Rom 8:34; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1; 1 Pet 3:22). It is hinted at in Hebrews 1:3 ("he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven") and quoted in Hebrews 1:13, and it will continue to be used throughout Hebrews to refer to the pivotal moment when Jesus took his seat at God's right hand. The other pivotal Old Testament text, which we'll deal with in part two, is Psalm 110:4: "The Lord [God] has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever like Melchizedek!'" Notice how the two verses of Psalm 110 correspond to the two critical moments of the story: atonement (Ps 110:4) and enthronement (Ps 110:1). Little wonder that some scholars have suggested that Hebrews is a sermon on Psalm 110.<sup>9</sup> That's probably an

<sup>8</sup>Randall C. Gleason, "Angels and the Eschatology of Heb 1–2," *New Testament Studies* 49 (2003): 92; Susan Docherty, *The Use of the Old Testament in Hebrews: A Case Study in Early Jewish Bible Interpretation*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/260 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 150.

<sup>9</sup>The most recent participant in this conversation is Jared Compton, *Psalm 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, Library of New Testament Studies 537 (London: T&T Clark, 2015).

oversimplification, but it shows you just how important this psalm is going to be for the whole argument of Hebrews.

If you're wondering what the point of all this is, don't give up yet. Hebrews 1 is primarily about the fact that God spoke *to* and *through* his Son, who happens to be awesome. The Son made everything, he sustains everything, and he inherits everything. Angels worship him as he sits enthroned in heaven. Not bad. But the last verse of Hebrews 1 hints that there's a bit more to the story: "Are not all angels ministering spirits, sent out to serve those who will inherit salvation?" The Son inherits everything, but also there are other heirs who will inherit salvation. Angels worship the Son, but they also serve his fellow heirs—those people whom he will call "brothers and sisters" (Heb 2:12). So Hebrews 1 is about Jesus, but apparently it's also about us. *We* will inherit. *We* will reign. *We* will stand in the presence of God and be called "sons and daughters." How does that work, and when does that happen? On to Hebrews 2.

### Study Questions

1. Is there a story that you love to get lost in? What is it about *that* world that you find so appealing or interesting?
2. Do you read the Old Testament with the assumption that it doesn't matter anymore or that God isn't like that anymore?
3. Have you ever tried to picture the event of Jesus' arrival in heaven before? Did it look in your head anything like it looks in Hebrews 1?

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