

B. Superior to the Angels (1:4-2:18)

The author opened his epistle by asserting that God's self-disclosure and interaction with men attained its fullness and completion in the Son. All previous revelation had been partial and progressive, but now, in the fullness of the times, God had spoken and acted in the prophet who fully embodies Him as His express image. The incarnate Son came to reveal God's person and accomplish His purpose to restore His creation to Himself and establish His everlasting rule through man, the image-son. All of this is "yes and amen" in Jesus, who, having reconciled all things to the Father by His purifying work (Colossians 1:18-19), has assumed His rule as the Lord of all creation as God's enthroned image-Son (cf. Matthew 28:18-20; Ephesians 1:18-22).

As noted previously, verse 4 provides the transition into the next context. It summarizes the opening three verses and points forward to the next consideration, namely Messiah's supremacy over God's angels. At first glance, this might seem completely unnecessary, since the writer already established that Jesus is God incarnate and the source of every created thing, which includes angelic beings. If He is the source, sustainer, and heir of all things, of course Jesus is superior to the angels. *Why, then, did the writer believe he needed to address this topic explicitly and at great length?* Obviously there was something about his Jewish audience and their understanding regarding angels that motivated him, and scholars have proposed a number of views. The following are among the more common:

- 1) The first is widely held, and finds support in the text itself as well as Israel's historical experience. This view focuses on the central role of angels in the Law of Moses and the institution of the Sinai Covenant. God ratified the covenant at Sinai in connection with the visible participation of angelic beings (Deuteronomy 33:2; Acts 7:53; Galatians 3:19), and some scholars postulate that these Jewish Christians (at least some among them) were perhaps depreciating the New Covenant because it lacked the same angelic involvement. The epistle seems to lend some credence to this view by insisting on the superiority of the New Covenant over the Sinai Covenant. However, a counter argument is the fact that angels *were* intimately involved in the inauguration of the New Covenant. It was angels who rolled the stone from Jesus' empty tomb, and they proclaimed His resurrection – and so the renewal of the covenant – to His followers (Matthew 28:1-6; Luke 24:13-23; John 20:1-14). As Sinai marked Israel's new life as God's image-son, so the empty tomb communicated the same truth about the true Image-Son (Romans 1:1-4).
- 2) It may be, however, that the writer wasn't addressing any sort of depreciation of the New Covenant, but the improper exaltation of angels in their own right. From the beginning, angels had always been in the forefront of God's interaction with His covenant people (cf. Genesis 18-19, 24:1-7, 28:10-15, 32:1-2; Exodus 23:20-23; Numbers 20:14-16; 1 Chronicles 21:15-20; 2 Chronicles 32:9-22; Psalm 78:40-49; Daniel 6:16-22; Zechariah 1-6). Indeed, He had manifested Himself in the angel of His presence (Genesis 16:1-13, 22:1-18, 31:1-13, 48:10-16; Exodus 3:1-6; Numbers 22:1-38; Judges 2:1-2, 6:11-16, 13:1-22; Psalm 34:1-8; Isaiah 63:7-10; Hosea 12:1-5). It was no wonder, then that the Jews afforded angels a place of great esteem; not only were they ministering spirits who carried out Yahweh's will for His covenant people (which had its high point in the covenant at Sinai), they mysteriously manifested His presence among them.

- 3) Others have speculated that the Jews who were the recipients of the epistle had been part of the Qumran (Essene) community prior to embracing Jesus as Messiah. The Essenes expected two distinct messianic figures, one kingly and the other priestly (they didn't recognize the merging of these two messianic qualities in one Messiah – cf. Psalm 110; Zechariah 6:9-15). Moreover, they maintained that both of these individuals would be subject to Michael the archangel. In Essene theology, then, at least one angelic being enjoyed supremacy over God's messiah, and some believe that the letter's recipients came out of that tradition and continued to hold this view. One possible point of support is the writer's statement that God "*did not subject to angels the world to come*" (2:5).
- 4) Another view that arguably has the best support from the epistle itself is that the writer was focusing on Jesus' *human* identity as the point of His supremacy over angels. Angels are spirit beings of great splendor, power and insight, which affords them a kind of preeminence relative to human beings. To all appearances, angels *seem* to be superior to men, but this is exactly the perception that the writer confronted and refuted. In God's design, men are actually superior to angels, *and the great evidence of this is the person and work of Jesus the Messiah*. Jesus became man for the sake of man and man's ordained destiny to rule over God's creation as image-son (2:5-8; cf. Psalm 8).

Moreover, the fact of *incarnation* itself proves the superiority of human beings over angels. Angels are glorious beings that stand in God's presence, but they weren't created capable of embodying God in truth and fullness; man alone is the image and likeness of God, a creature in whom God can be fully embodied and manifested. The unique nature and power angels enjoy enables them to fulfill their role as ministering spirits serving the good of God's image-children – children uniquely created to share in His life and nature.

While the first three views are speculative and based primarily on historical circumstances rather than the text itself, the fourth one enjoys strong contextual support.

- First and foremost, the writer used Psalm 8 to support his contention about Jesus. This psalm is a poem that exalts and celebrates man and his role in God's creation (2:5-8). Man is superior to the angels because he was created to be God's vice-regent (Genesis 1:26-28), and this glorious destiny is realized in Jesus, the true Image-Son; in Him and by His incarnational and restorative work, man becomes God's image-son in truth (2:9-18).
- But another pointer to the fourth view is the writer's assertion that Jesus *became* superior to the angels. Many have puzzled over this, since it seems to imply that the Son was, at some point and in some sense, inferior to the angels. If Jesus is the incarnate Logos, and the Logos is the eternal God (John 1:1), how can it be that He was ever, in any regard, inferior to any created being, including angels? (Notably, this statement is often cited to support the claim that Jesus wasn't fully divine.) But the key to the writer's meaning is that he connected Jesus' superiority with the triumph of His atoning work. The point of comparison isn't Jesus' essential nature, but His role in God's purposes – *the role that He performs as a man*. It was precisely as man, and for man, that Jesus "made purification for sins" and "sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high." *He triumphed as man unto man*, so that in Him the glorious destiny of God's image-son has been realized.

Jesus is True Man, so that Psalm 8 has become “yes and amen” in Him; it is because *He* has been “crowned with glory and honor” with “all things in subjection under His feet” that other human beings are able to claim the same dignity and glory (cf. 2:9-10 with Ephesians 1:18-2:6; Colossians 3:1-4; 2 Timothy 2:11-12; Revelation 5:1-10, 22:1-5).

- Finally, the writer associated Jesus’ superiority over the angels with the fact that He is God’s *Son* (1:5-14). This might seem to actually argue against the claim that the writer had Jesus’ human identity in mind, especially given his citation of Psalm 102, which praises God’s eternal sovereignty (ref. vv. 10-12). But a careful reading shows that the writer was connecting this divine sovereignty – the sovereignty of Yahweh Himself – with the *Son’s* sovereignty (ref. vv. 8-10). Most importantly, the Son exercises this sovereignty as the human *son of David* (cf. 1:13 with Psalm 110; Matthew 22:41-45).

All of this helps explain the relationship between Jesus’ superiority over the angels and the superiority of His *name* (1:4). In the ancient Hebrew world, a name served to define, characterize, or express the significance of the person or thing it was assigned to. Consider *Adam* (Genesis 2:7), *Noah* (Genesis 5:28-29), *Abraham* and *Sarah* (Genesis 17:4-6, 15-16), *Isaac* (Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7), *Jacob* and *Esau* (Genesis 25:23-30), and *Israel* (Genesis 32:24-28). The same is true of places: *Bethel* (Genesis 28:10-19), *Peniel* (Genesis 32:29-30), *Meribah/Massah* (Exodus 17:1-7), *Gilgal* (Joshua 5:9), and *Achor* (Joshua 7:24-26) are just a few of the countless examples. Even God Himself embraced (and even provided) designations that explain who He is: So *El Elyon* (Genesis 14:18-19), *El Shaddai* (Genesis 17:1), *El Gibbor* (Isaiah 10:21), and especially God’s self-declared covenant name, *Yahweh* (Exodus 3:14).

This naming convention, then, indicates that, if the Son has a better *name* than the angels, *He Himself* is better than them. Again, a name speaks to the truth of the entity itself, so that the two are inseparable and mutually implying. In this instance, the writer stated that Jesus *became* better than the angels, which implies some sort of “becoming” with respect to His name. And that is exactly what the author affirmed: Jesus has *inherited* a better name than the angels. This implies that this name wasn’t always His, but was given to Him as an heir. But what does it mean that Jesus *inherited* His superior name? And when did that occur and what, exactly, did it involve?

The context is clear that this inherited name refers to Jesus’ designation as God’s *Son* (vv. 5-8). It also shows that this sonship has two dimensions – a divine dimension and a human one, which the writer demonstrated and explained through the use of numerous passages drawn, not from the New Testament, but from Israel’s scriptures (Psalms 2, 8, 22, 45, 97, 102, 104, 110; 2 Samuel 7; Isaiah 8). This was entirely intentional, because he was addressing Jewish Christians who were being challenged by their fellow Jews with the charge that they were forsaking Yahweh and His Torah by following Jesus as Israel’s Messiah. The writer was refuting this claim by showing that the Jewish scriptures actually affirmed his readers’ faith and conviction; Jesus was indeed the Messiah revealed and promised in the Law, Prophets and Writings.

The text insists that Jesus inherited the name of *Son*, but how should this be understood? Was the writer suggesting that Jesus became the Son at the time of His conception (v. 6)? If so, does this deny sonship to the eternal Logos? And if Jesus’ sonship originated with the incarnation, why did the author connect it so closely with Calvary and the exaltation that followed (vv. 3-4)?