

THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

Hebrews 1:1-14

I. The Prologue: 1:1-4

1. The author of Hebrews is unknown. Though the letter is sometimes attributed to Paul, he is nowhere identified as the writer or sender. Unlike all the Pauline epistles, Hebrews has no greeting which identifies Paul as the author; indeed, the letter has no greeting at all.

2. In Greek, 1:1-4 is one sentence but is broken up in normal English translation. The clear focus of the prologue is the contrast between what is asserted in 1:1 and what is asserted in 1:2. The weight of the prologue, and of the whole letter, is concentrated on the uniqueness of the way God has spoken in the Son.

3. The contrast comes in two forms, between the many times God has spoken “by the prophets” (1:1) and the even of God speaking “by his Son” (1:2) and between God speaking “at many times” (1:1) and God speaking “in these last days” (1:2). After making this contrast, the letter will go on to argue that the response required to God’s speaking in the Son is greater than the response required to God speaking “at many times and in many ways” (1:1).

4. The fact that God speaks through prophets is an important biblical conviction, though here “prophets” probably has a wider meaning than we normally assign to it. Moses, for example, is primarily remembered not as a “lawgiver” but as a prophet, in fact as *the prophet* (Deuteronomy 34:10). In the old covenant, Hebrews emphasizes, God spoke through many and varied *prophets* but in the new covenant God has spoken in his Son. A prophet, of course, could only speak for God under the influence of the Spirit and even then was still limited by the fact the prophet remained a human being with a human perspective on God—no matter how inspired.

5. The multiplicity of revelations is now replaced (but not simply displaced or negated) by one revelation through the Son. The Son has a place in God’s design of creation and redemption which is unique. The Son is the one *through whom* God created the world and as such he is the one who is the “heir of all things” (1:2). The Son’s unique role in creation parallels the unique role played by Wisdom in the Old Testament where Wisdom precedes creation and plays a role in it (Proverbs 8:23-36; Wisdom 8:1-6). Because he is the one through whom all creation has been brought into being, the Son is the Father’s “heir” in that all that belongs to the Father is destined for the Son (cf. Colossians 1:15-20).

6. While prophets are always limited by their humanity, the Son is no so limited for the simple reason that he “is the radiance of the glory of God” as well as “the exact imprint of his nature” (1:3). What does this mean? The Son share all the qualities of the Father. He shares in the glory of God, glory being the visible presence of God among his people (cf. Wisdom 7:26-27) and the very being of God. The image suggested by the phrase “exact imprint of his nature” is that of the impression of a seal made in warm wax; the warm wax bears the exact impress of the seal. The Son, as the Nicene Creed puts it, is “of one being with the Father”.

7. The prologue goes on to insist that the Son “upholds the universe by the word of his power” (1:3). That is, the Son has a role not only in the creation of the universe but also in its governance. In thinking about the Son we have to think on two levels simultaneously. On one hand we have to think on the historical-human level in that Hebrews clearly treats the Son as a historical, actual person. On the other hand we also have to think on the divine-eternal level. For Hebrews, it must always be remembered that whenever anything is said about the actions of Jesus one is speaking about the action of a person and about the action of God himself *simultaneously*.

8. This is the foundation of the claim that Christ made “purification for sin” (1:3) in a way that is final. The finality of Christ’s sacrifice is not due to the fact that he was the most moral or spiritual persons ever but, rather, it is due to the fact that this sacrifice of atonement is made by God himself. The supremacy and sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice and hence the supremacy and sufficiency of the new covenant consist in the fact that it is effected by God’s own action. This action takes place in continuity with what has been revealed through prophets and through creation but it surpasses these and brings them to their culmination.

9. The affirmation that Christ “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (1:3) helps us to understand what was meant by the resurrection. By claiming that Jesus was raised from the dead the early Church did not simply mean that Jesus had come back to life. Resurrection and Ascension go together. With Psalm 109:1 in the background, it is affirmed that with his resurrection Christ entered into the divine life of God there to share in God’s sovereignty over creation. The Son shares fully in the being and power of God.

II. The Son is Greater Than the Angels: 1:5-14

1. 1:5-13 is an argument for the superiority of the Son over the angels and consists of a string of citations from the Septuagint. The following texts are employed: 1:5=Psalm 2:7+II Samuel 7:14; 1:6=Deuteronomy 32:43; 1:7=Psalm 104:4; 1:8-9=Psalm 45:6,7; 1:10-12=Psalm 102:25-27; 1:13=Psalm 110:1. Note that these citations indicate that the writer understands the Son to be proclaimed in the Old Testament. It is in light of Christ that the true meaning of these texts can now be seen.

2. 1:14 summarizes the argument. There is a clear distinction between the Son and the angels for while the Son shares in the very being and power of the Father, the angels are “ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation”.

3. Modern readers of Hebrews tend to find the drawing of a clear distinction between the Son and angels puzzling. Why go through all this effort to say what we already know? Jewish literature roughly contemporary with the New Testament writings gives a fair amount of attention to angels, to their creation, their role as guardians of nations, their power to intervene in human affairs, their role in the heavenly worship of God and their place in the governance of the world.

4. Given this emphasis, it is understandable why the first chapter of Hebrews would be devoted to making that point that Christ differs from the angels not simply in degree but in kind. In every age there are factors which challenge the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ. For the first readers of Hebrews the challenging factor was the angels and their operations; in our day it is

St. Peter's Anglican Church, Tallahassee, Florida
Fr. Michael Petty

technology and science which combine to create a sense of self-sufficiency and progress without limits. It is not that these things are in themselves bad, just as angels are certainly not bad; it is that we are tempted to place our faith in them when that faith should be placed elsewhere.

THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

Hebrews 2:1-18

I. 2:1-9: So Great a Salvation

1. One conclusion to be drawn from chapter 1 is stated clearly in 2:1: "Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it." The New Covenant is not "Old Testament lite" but, because it comes from what God speaks in the Son (1:2) is God's final word. Hebrews traces out the logic of this fact. If the Old Covenant, which Jewish thought understood to be mediated through angels, proved to be "reliable" (2:2) and if violations of it were punished, how much more is the New Covenant reliable and how much more dire the consequences of its violation or abandonment since it was mediated through the Son. The New Covenant is not to be taken up as another religious opinion and then set aside when it proves to be convenient or desirable to do so.

2. These words are addressed to a church facing persecution, a church which may be tempted to deny the faith as a way of getting around the persecution. The word for this denial is apostasy and Hebrews warns against it in the strongest terms: "how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" (1:3). This refers back to 1:14. The point is not that God will be very angry if the faith is denied but that to deny the faith is to deny the immense gift which comes with it—salvation.

3. The revelation of the New Covenant was delivered by the Lord and now it is "attested to by those who heard" (1:3). The recipients of the letter are at a distance from the human history of Jesus and are dependent upon of the testimony of others to this history. This testimony, while human, is not merely human because it is attested to by God who "bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit" (1:4). One point being made here is that the tradition of testimony to Jesus (both in its oral and written forms) is not merely information but is, through the work of God, a means of Jesus's living presence. Furthermore, this is the case because Jesus is not simply a historical figure, not a figure confined to the past. The New Covenant confronts the Church as a demand which requires a response.

4. 1:1-4 dwells on the exalted status of the Son and now 2:5-8 returns to this theme. "The world to come" (1:5) has been subjected to the Son. This refers back to 1:2 and means that the redeemed creation is a created subjected to the sovereignty of the Son. One way to express this idea is to say that the Son's death, resurrection and ascension mean that the future of the created order belongs to him; the Son is not simply a figure who exerts an influence on he world from the past. Nor does he simply exert an influence on the world by being present now. The future of creation is precisely his future and it is for this reason that Christian hope is simply an interpretation of the statement "Jesus is Lord".

5. 2:6 cites Psalm 8:5-7 and interprets this psalm as being about Jesus (prophetically). The Psalm is understood to express the paradoxical nature of Jesus's life. On one hand, Jesus is the son

of man to whom every thing is subjected and who is crowned with God's own glory and on the other hand Jesus was for a while, through the incarnation, made "lower than the angels" (2:7). We will discover why both elements of this paradox are necessary, that is why Jesus must be seen as God present to us and as representing us to God. There is a sense in which the nature of Jesus's lordship is contested. While God "left nothing outside his control" (2:8), at the present moment "we do not yet see everything in subjection to him" (2:8). This is to say that what has been accomplished *in Christ* is not yet fully manifested *in the world*. But this does not mean that God's salvation is not "real" or that it is "merely a hope". God's salvation exists in its fullness and as a fact *in Christ* and this will be fully manifest when, so to speak, the world catches up to (or is caught up to) Christ. Why is this? Remember the statements of Hebrews 1 that Christ is the one through whom the world was created (1:2) and the one who uphold creation "by the word of his power" (1:3). The counterintuitive position of Hebrews only makes sense if we first realize that Christ is "more real" than the universe and that the universe is completely dependent upon him for its existence and future.

6. The reason why Jesus, who is exalted above the angels, is made for a time lower than them is hinted at in 2:9. Suffering and death are an essential part of his work and he must do this work as a human being. As a human being, as *the human being*, Jesus became incarnate so as to "taste death for everyone" (2:9). The nature of Jesus' death is complex in that while he dies his own death he dies on behalf of others.

II. 2:10-18: The Son and His Brothers

1. We need to be aware just how jarring a connection between God and suffering would have been to both a Jewish and a pagan audience. It is important to remember that Jesus's horrible fate invalidated his claims in Jewish eyes and was the reason why pagans dismissed Christianity as a religion for fools (gods are supposed to be exalted; why worship one that allowed himself to be humiliated?).

2. The big question is that of what this suffering accomplishes. Why is Good Friday not just a bad day in the life of Jesus but the center of his life and mission? What does it mean to affirm that the "founder of their salvation" (1:10) was made "perfect through suffering" (1:10)?

3. First, the Son's suffering has the effect of "bringing many son to glory". We have already seen that the Son has entered into "the Majesty on high" (1:3). It is the Father's purpose to bring many into this same realm which is "the world to come" (2:5). This same idea is expressed by Paul in Romans 8:29.

4. Second, the archetypal Son is made perfect through suffering and his perfection makes possible the perfection of other sons (to be understood inclusively as children). Perfection has a very specific meaning here; it has the sense of complete or whole. What is being spoken of here is not the perfection of the Son (as 1:1-4 makes clear this would be impossible) but the perfection of the Son's *humanity* or, more specifically, the redemptive capacity of the Son's humanity. This does not imply that the Son's humanity is defective and in need of redemption itself but that the Son's capacity to bring about human redemption is realized, made complete, through suffering.

St. Peter's Anglican Church, Tallahassee, Florida
Fr. Michael Petty

5. Third, Jesus is the “founder” or “pioneer” of salvation (1:10), meaning that salvation is first realized in his human nature and then become a possibility for others. The emphasis is on the solidarity established between the Son and those whom he saves: “For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified have the same origin” (1:11). The point at stake here can be seen in relation to the often expressed opinion by (misguided) people: Since Jesus was God, wasn't it *easy* for him to be sinless? Hebrews answer to this question is “no”. The sinless perfection of Jesus is a perfection which is an attainment of a real human being, a perfection which reaches its full realization in Jesus's complete self-sacrifice. And this perfection is attained by Jesus for all human beings.

6. The bond between the Son and his brothers is supported by citations from Psalm 22:22 (2:12) and Isaiah 8:17-18 (2:13). Both these verses are read as statements made by the Son.

7. 2:14-18 is devoted to explicating one aspect of this brotherhood or solidarity. Both the Son and “the children” “share in flesh and blood” (2:14), meaning that the Son share the same human reality as those whom he saves. The phrase “flesh and blood” emphasizes the human reality of weakness and it is emphasized that the Son fully shares in this weakness. In his human reality, the Son accomplishes two things. First, the Son overcomes the power of evil by experiencing its ultimate consequence—death. Second, the Son frees human beings from the fear of death. This fear is not momentary but a “lifelong slavery” (2:15). The fear of death pervades the whole of human society and culture causing all sorts of twisted responses. In order to counter our own fear of death we engage in continuous efforts to make ourselves secure and important; for some it involves the embrace of some kind of “identity politics” while for others it involves the hope that science will discover a “cure” for aging and death. The Son demonstrates his freedom from this fear precisely in his willingness to die on behalf of others. While the Son is a real human being subject to the frailties and temptations that beset human beings he steps beyond these so as to present to God a perfect act of obedience on our behalf.

8. The relationship between us and Jesus as “high priest” (2:17) at the human level is a real one for because he himself has endured suffering and temptation he is able to help us who suffer the same things.

THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

Hebrews 3:1-19

I. 3:1-6: The Son is Greater Than Moses

1. 3:1 summarizes and emphasizes what has gone before. The addressees are reminded that they are “holy brothers” (cf. 2:11) and that they share in a “heavenly calling”(cf. 2:3). The status of Christians as holy is the consequence of Christ’s action since he make purification for sins (1:3) and sanctifies (2:11).

2. The addressees are invited to “consider” (literally in Greek “to contemplate”) Jesus. This may be referring to 2:3, the testimony of “those who heard” (the declaration of Jesus). What is to be considered is Jesus’ faithfulness. Two titles are attributed to Jesus, apostle and high priest (3:1). Hebrews is the only New Testament writing to make this attribution. In a sense these two titles designate Jesus’ divine and human aspects. Jesus is God’s apostle (Greek: authorized messenger, designated representative) who brings the divine summons (1:2). In this sense Jesus is from God. Jesus is also high priest which here means that he responds to God from the human side. As high priest, Jesus offers the response to God that humans do not make and does so on their behalf.

3. If Jesus’ chief attribute is faithfulness, then the figure to compare him to from the Old Covenant is Moses. There is a very specific reason for this. The mention in 3:2 that Moses was “faithful in all God’s house” echoes Numbers 12:7. In this chapter the leadership of Moses is challenged by Miriam and Aaron, who insist that God has spoken through them as well as through Moses. Moses is defended by God who declares “He is faithful in all my house” and that “with him I speak mouth to mouth”. The obvious point is that Moses’ faithfulness is vindicated by God himself and in this Hebrews sees a type of Jesus’ faithfulness.

4. Of course, Jesus is not just another Moses. Two metaphors are employed to make this point. First, there is the metaphor of the builder and the house (obviously building on Numbers 12:7). The builder of a house has more honor than the house built because the house (however glorious) is a creation of the builder (houses do not design and build themselves). 3:4 provides a somewhat cryptic interpretation of this metaphor which probably refers back to 1:2. Second, there is the metaphor of the son in relationship to a servant. In the Greco-Roman world the son in a wealthy family would have more status than a family servant, regardless of the age of the son. This is not a disparagement of Moses but a comparison made on basis of fact. While Moses may have seen God’s glory (Exodus 33:18), Jesus “is the radiance of the glory of God” (1:3). How is the Son greater than Moses? The point is not to contrast their faithfulness to God but the status and place of each in the purposes of God.

5. All this is not simply information, however significant. The “holy brothers” who have a “heavenly calling” are reminded the house in which Moses was a servant and over which Jesus presides as a Son is something concrete: “And we are his house if indeed we hold fast to our confidence and our boasting in our hope” (3:6). The faithfulness of Moses and Jesus are not merely topics for discussion but models for imitation.

II. 3:7-19: Warning Against Apostasy

1. 3:7-11 consists almost entirely of a citation from Psalm 94:7-11. 3:7 is important for what it says about the view Hebrews has of Scripture (the Old Testament). In citing this Psalm as an utterance of the Holy Spirit and in making it clear that the utterance takes place in the present (not “the Holy Spirit said” but the “the Holy Spirit says”) it becomes clear that the words of Scripture are living in that they continue to have relevance and power. The Scripture of the Old Covenant becomes, through the Holy Spirit, becomes God's address to the people of the New Covenant in the present. This offers a view of Scripture which is rather different than the two principle modern ones. Scripture is neither a book of “timeless truths” (in the Enlightenment sense of the term) nor a collection of myths and stories from which scholarship extracts the “real meaning”. For Hebrews, the consistency and power of Scripture comes from the God who speaks through it over and over again in ever new situations, not to say different things but to make it clear what it means to be faithful in different circumstances.

2. The citation from Psalm 94 creates a connection between the addressees of the letter and Exodus generation of Israel. The point is that while the situations are different the perils faced are the same. 2:7 returns to the theme of hearing which was introduced in 2:1. What is it that causes people not to hear God? Psalm 94:7-11 offers a radical answer. It is possible for people who have benefitted from God's saving work (as the Exodus generation had) to respond with a hardened heart which is “rebellion” (3:8). From the perspective of Psalm 94, Israel in the wilderness is simply a replay of Adam and Eve in the garden (Genesis 3). The consequence of a hardened heart is that “they have no known my ways” (3:9). Simply put, hardness of heart, rebellion against God, blots out true knowledge of God. Hardness of heart (sin) produces not merely naughty people but perversity, a people incapable of obedience and listening. Such a people can not enter into God's “rest” (3:11), which in Hebrews means both the promised land and God's salvation. Here we might want to recall the warning in Leviticus 18:28 that Israel should not become unclean “lest the land vomit you out when you make it unclean”.

3. 3:12-15 is an exhortation. Two things are demanded. First, the Church must be in a posture of continuous listening (2:1) and, second, there must be continuous mutual exhortation (3:13). This, of course, implies mutual responsibility. Listening and exhortation are aimed at weeding out qualities that will destroy faithfulness, qualities which lead to faithlessness. One quality is an evil, faithless heart (3:12). The other quality is a heart which is hardened (3:13). The two qualities are signs of a life closed to God, a life which can not but be the object of God's wrath (3:11). The hardened heart and the faithless heart are fundamentally in rebellion against God (3:15). The reason why rebellion is incompatible with the Christian life is because this life is a matter of sharing in Christ (3:14).

4. 3:16-19: The lesson of the narrative referred to in Psalm 94:7-11 is made unambiguously clear. Even though the Exodus generation shared in God's saving acts and witnessed them, the faithlessness of this generation caused it to turn away from God and to fall into disobedience and rebellion. The result was that such people could not enter the promised land. This narrative speaks

St. Peter's Anglican Church, Tallahassee, Florida
Fr. Michael Petty

directly to the addressees of the letter to remind them of the choice facing them: either the faithfulness of Moses (who is a type of Christ) or the faithlessness of the Exodus generation who could not enter the promised land.