

THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS - PART III

JESUS AND THE ANGELS

I. The Letter then goes on to express, through a series of Scriptural quotations how Jesus is higher than the angels, and in fact divine.

A. The first two quotations are from Scriptural passages about the glorious king of Israel, who would bring God's kingdom, righteousness and order to earth.

1. The first quote is from Psalm 2, which describes the great conquering king who would bring God's justice to the earth. Verse 7, like other psalms, refers to the great king as a son of God. See, e.g., Ps. 89:27, 110:2-3.

2. The second quote is from a prophecy of Nathan to King David. King David had proposed building a Temple for the Ark of the Covenant. Nathan gave him God's word that his son instead would build the Temple. But he also prophesied that his line would be kings of Israel forever, and that God would adopt them as His sons. See 2 Sam. 7:14, 1 Chron. 22:10.

3. Because of these and similar passages, the king was thought of as an adopted son of God. The kings in general were seen as collectively the son of God, who could go astray but would be loved and preserved by God all the same. Likewise, the whole people of God together were also thought of as a son of God, or sons of God. See, e.g., Ex. 4:22; Deut. 32:5, 8; Jer. 3:19; Hos. 11:1.

4. This passage in Hebrews, along with numerous passages in the Gospels and other books of the New Testament, makes it clear that all of these images and analogies were fulfilled in the literal, full and complete Son of God, Jesus Christ. See, e.g., Matt. 17:5, 22:41-46; Mark 1:1, 11, 15:39; Luke 1:32; John 1:14, 10:30; Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:3; Col. 1:13-14.

5. It is true that in older texts angels were sometimes referred to as sons of God, for the notion of angels as we have it was very vague. See, e.g., Job 1:6; Ps. 29:1. In fact, when people saw angels, they considered themselves, in a sense, to be seeing God. See, e.g., Gen. 18; Judges 6:22, 13:22; see also Rev. 22:8-9. However, as time went on, this reference was dropped for fear of being misunderstood as supported the worship of angels or even accepting pagan gods as angels. For example, the reference to angels as "gods" in Psalm 97:7, later to be quoted in this letter, was re-translated into the

Septuagint as "angels." Furthermore, the promises of bringing about a just world and the reign of God were given only to the king.

6. The letter is thus pointing out that a mission greater than the angels was promised to the future king. This glorious promise stood in particular contrast to the fact that there had been no king of the Davidic line since 586 B.C. and no king of any sort since 63 B.C., when Roman rule began. The letter is thus indicating that the glorious promises made through the kingship, promises that no angel received, and seemingly lost in history, are now fulfilled in Jesus.

B. The next quotation more clearly indicates Jesus is God, whom the angels worship.

1. The quotation is introduced by a reference to the incarnation, the Son being brought into the world.

- Interestingly, Jesus is called the "first born," despite the fact that he comes at the end of the Chosen People's time. Likewise, Colossians refers to Jesus as "the first born of creation." Col. 1:15. See also Rom. 8:29. The meaning appears to be that Jesus is the beginning of the new order of creation, the first born of the new graced people of God, who are children of God in a new order. We are become children of God through Him who is the full Son of God. See John 1:12; Rom. 8:18-32; Gal. 4:4-7.

2. The letter quotes Psalm 97, which celebrates the glory of God and His care for the people who love Him. In the midst of the Psalm, verse 7 condemns idolatry and, in the original Hebrew, instead calls upon all "gods" or "heavenly beings" to worship the almighty God. The idea seems to be that people had mistaken lower things for God, but in fact all lesser things honor God.

3. In order to avoid the confusion that the Psalm may be calling upon pagan gods to worship the Almighty God, the Septuagint translated "gods" as "angels."

4. Moses' canticle at the end of Deuteronomy likewise concludes with a call for all the heavens and angels of God to worship Him. See Duet 32:43. The letter now attributes to Jesus the saving power Moses celebrated in that canticle, given just before the end of his life on earth.

5. By applying passages that plainly refer to the Almighty in the context of Jesus, the letter is now more clearly indicating

that Jesus is God.

C. The letter then contrasts a passage referring to the glory of creation with passages referring both to God Himself and to the king of Israel.

1. The letter applies a verse in the 104th psalm to angels. The psalm is a hymn of praise to God for all of His works in creation. The particular passage involved describes how the elements of the earth (wind and fire) are messengers and servants of God.

2. The Septuagint translates the term for messenger as *aggelos*, which can mean either messengers or angels, and the term for servants as *leitourgos*, which can mean either servants or ministers. Like the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke, this letter uses the term *aggelos* to mean angels; and it translates the term *leitourgos* as ministering angels seeing in those elements symbols for angels. St. Thomas explains that wind is a symbol for angels because of its subtlety, manifesting power without being seen, and adapting to all places. Fire is a symbol for angels because of its mystery and power.

3. The letter then applies to the Son of God passages from Psalm 45, which is a wedding song of the king and queen. In the verse quoted refers to the king as God, which to the Jews would have meant a representative of God. The letter indicates that this reference, which was then symbolic, is now made literal in Jesus. The kings were anointed ones, which in Hebrew was Messiah. But the old kings could never truly fulfill the promises made to the line of kings, the promise of a new, glorious and worldwide kingdom of righteousness and holiness. Now Jesus, the Anointed One, the Messiah (in Greek *Christos*) has come to fulfill all of the great prophecies in the new and everlasting kingdom.

4. The letter then switches to another quote from Psalm 102, which is plainly a reference to God Himself. The Psalm begins with plea for help, then switches to a praise of God, and concludes by combining the two. Being drawn into the praise of God, the psalmist experiences His saving power. In the midst of this final part of the psalm, the psalmist praises God for His creation, but also recognizes that it perishes while He remains. That praise and recognition are the subject of the verses this letter quotes.

5. As before, the letter is drawing the reader into recognizing Jesus as the glorious king promised of old, who has a mission

greater than the angels, and then sensing that this mission is accomplished by God Himself made man in Jesus Christ.

6. The letter then switches back to a royal psalm, Psalm 110, and applies it to Jesus. Psalm 110, which Jesus famously asks the Pharisees to interpret, see Matt. 22:44, describes the Almighty God (the Lord) saying to the Psalmist's lord, i.e., the king, "Sit at My right hand." Jesus asks how King David, the author of the psalm, would call one of his heirs "my lord." The answer, as this letter makes clear, is that the heir, Jesus Christ, is greater than David, bringing about the final kingdom of glory.

- This psalm goes on to describe the great rule over all the world that the future king will exercise from Mount Zion. The letter will later indicate that we now approach the new Mount Zion, that is, the heavenly worship of which the temple is but an image. See Heb. 12:22-24.

- The psalm also describes the future king as of the line of Mechizedek, the mysterious priest king of Salem (later to become Jerusalem) to whom Abraham gave homage. See Gen. 14:18-20. The letter will later expound on that image as well. See Heb. 7:1-25.

6. This commentary then ends with a description of angels as "ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation."

- This passage, one of the Scriptural bases for the belief in guardian angels, indicates that angels, even though they have a nature higher than ours, also serve us. See also Ps. 91:1; Tobit 12:14-15; Matt. 18:10. The passage is meant to give us a sense of wonder at the fact that these glorious spirits, who live in a realm greater than our imagining, still come here to serve us. That sense of wonder draws us into the even greater mystery of God Himself coming among us for our salvation. The angels are ministering spirits sent for one purpose or another. Jesus is the minister above all, sent for the salvation of all mankind. See Catechism 331; Catechism of Trent Part III, section 1(3); Part IV section 1, commentary on the word "Father."

- St. Thomas comments that, while not all of the angels are sent to minister to us, all can be so sent, and so they are all, at least potentially, ministering spirits.

II. The letter then applies this teaching to say that we must be particularly attentive to the words of Jesus, for they fulfill the words of

God given through the angels.

A. The ancient law was, in a sense, handed on through angels, the intermediaries between God and man. See Ex. 23:21, 32:34, Acts 7:38, 53. The message given by angels has the purity, power and glory of the angels shining on in a fallen world. However, alone it was not able to save, but only to lead people to a recognition of the need for salvation. See Romans 3:9-31; Gal. 3:19-29.

- Even violations of the old law were accompanied by punishments to bring people back to God. See, e.g., Duet. 28:15-30:10; Wis. 11:17-12:22; Hos. 2. The letter points out how much more worse are the consequences of rejecting the new, most powerful, law, which contains salvation in itself.

B. The letter then calls upon the reader to recognize the power of the new law by the wonders performed through it and also by the "gifts of the Holy Spirit" given to the faithful. See also Acts 2:1-3:10, 8:4-8; 2 Cor. 12:12. Those gifts, by which he may mean specifically the gifts of the Holy Spirit, or more generally, powers given by the Holy Spirit, allow the faithful to act in a particularly holy and faith-filled manner. See, e.g., Is. 11:2, 42:1; Joel 3:1-2; Acts 10:47, 15:8; Gal. 5:22. At the time, as now, both the miracles performed by the early Christians and the excellence of their lives bore witness to the faith. In addition, the spread of Christianity against all of the powers of the world bore witness to the Spirit working in the hearts of those who believed. See, e.g., St. Justin the Martyr, *Second Apologia* XII.