

The Book of Hebrews Study Guide

Chapter 1

The unique writing style of the author

Unlike other epistles in the New Testament, the book of Hebrews begins without any preliminaries, such as an identification of the author or a salutation of any kind. It just immediately dives into the depth of the subject matter, while also demonstrating the unique writing style of the author that is only apparent in Greek.

1:1 – The writer employs the literary technique of alliteration, using three words beginning with the letter P: “*Polumerōs kai polutropōs palai,*” meaning “In many portions and many ways long ago.” He follows that up with another phrase with two more words beginning the same way” *patrasin* and *prophētais*, meaning “fathers” and “prophets.” While there is not any particular spiritual significance by using alliteration, it typifies the unique writing style of the author.

But there is significance in the grammar. Greek is different from English in that the order of words does not change the meaning of a sentence. Unlike English in which the subject tends to precede the direct object, in Greek the subject or the direct object or any clause can be placed anywhere in the sentence and the meaning will be exactly the same. The reason is that Greek nouns are modified by declensions that indicate the case of the word, which expresses relationship of the elements like the subject and the direct object. This structure enables New Testament writers to put the part of the sentence they are emphasizing at the beginning of the sentence.

In this case, in verses 1 and 2, the initial words, and thus the point being emphasized, is the timing of God’s revelation. It may begin with the word “God” in your English Bible, but in both verses, the subject (God, He) is in the middle of the verses. Verse 1 literally begins: “In many portions and many ways long ago” and verse 2 begins: “In these last days.” This structure tells us that the author is emphasizing a change in the way that God has spoken over time. It is a new day, a new era in which God is revealing His message. And that is the basis for the initial point that the writer is making . . .

The superiority of the Messiah as divine revelation

vv. 1-2 – The author makes a series of points made to show how Judaism with the Messiah is better than Judaism without the Messiah. The action that is at the heart of the initial two verses is the way that God speaks. In a general sense, when God speaks, things happen:

- The universe came into being by His spoken Word (i.e. “God said, ‘Let there be light’”).
- The Torah was spoken by God and recorded by Moses, and that changed everything for how the people of Israel lived their lives.
- A dead man, Lazarus, came alive when Yeshua spoke the command to come forth from the tomb.

When we think of God speaking through the prophets, we see the same kind of certainty of the intended result. Messianic prophecies were fulfilled exactly as foretold. Likewise, prophecies of judgment came upon the people exactly as foretold.

We do not have to be too restrictive with the use of the word prophets here, namely the section of the *Tanakh* (Old Testament) called the prophets, for we know that God called Moses a prophet as well (Deut 18:18). So this is more of a reference to the complete revelation that God had given before Yeshua.

The use of the phrase, “many portions” conveys progressive revelation—it was not all given at once. In the Torah it was revealed that:

- God is the Creator.
- He is the only God.
- We are told about His attributes—He is holy, merciful and a God of justice.
- He is a God who keeps His promises.
- He calls people to specific purposes.
- He called Israel to be a holy nation and a kingdom of priests, which describes a people with a close relationship with Him.

It was not revealed until later by the prophets about:

- Life after death.
- The resurrection
- The Messiah who would be God incarnate, yet He would suffer and die for the sins of people.

The implication is that God would continue to reveal His truths progressively over time until everything is revealed that He deems necessary. But even though the words spoken by the prophets accomplished God’s purpose, there was still a better way to communicate His intentions and plan for this world. A final revelation was yet to come.

This is where another literary device called parallelism comes in. The writer compares the revelation of long ago (*palios*) in verse 1 with the revelation of the last days or final days (*eschatos*) in verses 2-3. And within this parallelism, we see the superiority of the final revelation over the past revelation through the prophets:

- The past revelation was given to the fathers. The final revelation have been given to “us.”
- The past revelation was given through many prophets. The means of the final revelation is through the Son.
- The past revelation was given in many ways, like visions, dreams, messages from angels, typology and so on. The final revelation was given in the words and actions of the Son.
- The past revelation was communicated through men, which has limitations. In verses 2-3 we are given seven points about the Son that makes the final revelation better:
 1. He is the “heir of all things,” which is another way of saying that everything belongs to the Son. That means He has better awareness than the prophets. After all, who is better capable of revealing the secrets of a corporation, a messenger who delivers documents or the chairman of the board?

2. He made the world—He is what is called a first cause, an originator, not just a contributor. So the prophets would be considered a secondary source and the Son would be a primary source.
3. “He [the Son] is the radiance of His [God’s] glory” (v. 3). When Moses was allowed to be in the presence of God’s glory, his face shined, but it faded away over time. But the glory of the Son radiates. This is the only time this Greek word is used in Scripture. It conveys the meaning of shining forth from a source, not a reflection. This is God’s glory being manifested, which is, of course, evidence of the deity of the Son.
4. The Son is “the exact representation” of God’s nature. The Greek word translated as “exact representation” (KJV, “express image”) is *charakter*. It literally means an “engraving.” It is not something superficial like we mere mortals might possess, but it is something that is cut into His being permanently, so that it marks Him as being identical to God.
5. He upholds and preserves all things by the word of His power. It’s not the kind of thing a Messiah who was a mere human could do. This is a description of providence, which is reserved for God alone.
6. He made purification of sins. Isaiah talks about that in his 53rd chapter. But whose sins were purified. Isaiah makes it clear that it refers to “all of us” (53:6), and that would include Isaiah himself, along with all of the other prophets. Yeshua alone never sinned.
7. He sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high. Two things are evident in that statement. First, the purification of sins is a completed work. Second, in the Ancient Near East, anyone who was positioned at the right hand of a king was considered to have equal authority to the king. So the Son has supreme and complete authority over the universe. This is not a foreign concept in the *Tanakh*. It is clearly indicated in Dan 7:13-14.

The point is in the first three verses is that everything about the revelation we have been given in the Son is superior to that which preceded it in the prophets. The prophets may have spoken the word of God, but the Son as we are told in John 1:1 *is* the Word of God. And that is far better.

The superiority of the Messiah over the angels

In verses 4-14, the writer uses seven passages from the Old Testament to support his statement in v. 4 about the Son being better than the angels, and thus having a better name. Verse 5 begins with a rhetorical question, which is one of the unique characteristics of this book. It is the kind of question that is not used for soliciting information, but to prove a point. In this case, it is to prove that the angels have an inferior relationship and standing before God than the Son.

- v. 5 – The first reference is taken from Psalm 2:7. It refers to a son being born to someone, but the quotation does not mention who that is. In order to make that determination, we have to evaluate the context of the Psalm. Verse 4 identifies the one speaking as being Adonai in heaven. He declares His plan to install His King on Zion v. 6) and then He describes His role as being a father, and that this King will be born as His Son (v. 7). But this is no ordinary king

and son. He is the Messiah (v. 2). The Hebrew word there is *Mashiach*, meaning “Anointed one.” While that term can refer to the kings of Israel in general and David in particular, but they only ruled over Israel and the rule of the Son extends to all of the nations to the ends of the earth, which are His inheritance and possession (v. 8). Lastly, the Son is deserving of homage (KJV, kiss) and has power that no human possesses (v. 12).

So the writer to Hebrews, by quoting this Psalm, is showing that this is no ordinary Son. He is the Messiah, the Son of Adonai, and He has divine attributes and abilities.

Hebrews 1:5 goes on to quote a second Old Testament passage from 2 Samuel 7:14. The entire verse is not quoted by the writer to Hebrews, leaving out the phrase regarding the king being punished for committing iniquity. At first glance, these words may appear to present a theological problem. This is where issues of translation come in. The NASB and the NIV say, “when he commits iniquity” and the KJV says “if.” Which is it? The Hebrew word *asher* can mean when or if, among other terms (cf. Deut 11:27; Josh 4:21). The writers of the Septuagint, all of whom were Jewish scholars, used “if” when they translated the *Tanakh* into Greek. That indicates their understanding of this passage as being evaluative of the descendants of David serving as the kings of Israel. And context bears out that understanding. The ultimate king of Israel, the Messiah, who would rule over the Messianic kingdom would be a descendant of David. That is why one of the terms for the Messiah is the Son of David. So this passage is saying that *if* a king sins, or even *when* they sin, they will be punished. Most notably they would be disqualified from being the ultimate king that we have already seen described in Psalm 2. Thus the sinlessness of a descendant of David would serve as an indicator that he was the Messiah and would rule over all of the nations forever. And this is consistent with 2 Samuel 7:19, where David understood this would be fulfilled in the distant future. That is the full context of the quotation used by the writer to Hebrews.

The writer to Hebrews did not quote the full verse from 2 Samuel, because there was something to hide, but merely because he was staying focused on the declared intent of Adonai that the Messiah would be the only Son of God, which has significant implications and this title supports the position that He is better than the angels.

- v.6 – Here the Son is called the firstborn (*prōtokos*). The basic meaning of the concept of primogeniture in the Ancient Near East was that the firstborn was the Son who was entitled to assume the role of the head of the family and to receive a double inheritance. Its usage here is not about birth, but the right to inherit and possess the world, as shown earlier in Psalm 2, and to have the authority of the Father.

The word “again” is used differently in the NASB and the KJV. The former translation—“When He again brings the firstborn into the world” is more accurate than the latter, based on the Greek. Thus the thrust of this verse is that the Messiah has already come once, and when the Father sends Him a second time, all the angels of God will worship Him. That is a quotation from the Septuagint version of Ps 97:7 (where *angeloi*—angels is used to translate the Hebrew *elohim*—mighty ones/gods.” Surely that is a clear indication that the Messiah is divine, for only God may be worshiped, and that powerfully shows His superiority over angels.

- v. 7 – In contrast, the inferior status of angels is shown by quoting from Psalm 104:4. That verse describes Adonai changing angels or messengers like wind or fire, which is a picture of

service as needed. There is an example of the form of an angel being changed to fire in Judges 13:20. So we have a contrast of the changeable nature of angels and the unchanging nature of the Son, which makes Him superior once again

- vv. 8-9** – The next quotation is from Psalm 45:6-7. That Psalm describes the wedding of the king. But this is no ordinary king, for he is acknowledged as being God, as quoted here in Hebrews 1:8 – “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.” Moreover, this Divine King is anointed by God. That tells us two things. First, being anointed makes it a description of the Messiah, like Psalm 2 shows. And second, since He has already been described as *being* God, but He is anointed *by* God, we have evidence of the triune nature of God. So in Psalm 45 and confirmed in Hebrews 1, the Messiah is shown to be a divine King, and that could never be surpassed by the angels.
- vv. 10-12** – The writer quotes from Psalm 102:25-27. The latter half of this Psalm was considered by the ancient rabbis to be descriptive of the Messianic kingdom to come. The words were “written for the generation to come” (v. 18). The nations, not just Israel, are serving Adonai (v. 22). Then, in verses 25-27 (the portion quoted in Hebrews) God is described as the one who created the earth and the heavens, as well as being eternal—He doesn’t change and His “years will not come to an end.” Since the writer to Hebrews had already shown the eternity of the Messianic King from Psalm 45, the Messiah is the subject of this Psalm as well. Moreover, since the Son (Messiah) is the creator, He is superior to the angels because they are only created beings.
- v. 13** – The author quotes the Old Testament once more, this time from Psalm 110:1. There is a notable difference in the words. The writer to Hebrews leaves out the first phrase: “The LORD says to my Lord.” This is another rhetorical question. So the answer will be obvious to the reader, which is the nature of rhetoric that this writer has mastered. In this case, the 110th Psalm was very well known in second temple times. In fact, it is the most frequently cited Messianic prophecy in the New Testament. Yeshua used it to confound the Pharisees on a couple of occasions (Mat 22:43-45; Lk 20:41-44) and both times, He too, posed it as a rhetorical question. In other words, the people knew what it said, but it presented a problem for them theologically because it clearly conflicted with their rejection of the divine nature of the Messiah as the Son of God.

This phrase, “The LORD says to my Lord,” in Hebrew reads, “*Yahweh le Adoni.*” *Yahweh* is God’s personal name that we normally do not pronounce, in keeping with Jewish custom going back into biblical times. Instead we substitute *Adonai* when verbalizing the Hebrew letters *Yod Heh Vav Heh*. *Le* means “to.” *Adoni* means “my Lord” or “my master,” and it can refer to God or to earthly masters. It all depends on context. The context here shows that the one being addressed by *Yahweh* is told to sit at His right hand. In keeping with the earlier referenced passage in Daniel 7:13-14, the Son of Man is the one who will be given supreme authority and everlasting dominion over the universe. And the right hand is the place of equal authority to the king. Notice also that this Lord is given a footstool from *Yahweh*. That informs us that he Lord, who is the Son, is sitting down. And in the Ancient Near East, kings ruled while sitting down. Thus the text demonstrates that the Son is equal in every way to *Yahweh*. He is fully God, yet retains a personal distinction, which we have come to know as the triune nature of God, for we see in other places in Scripture that the Spirit is equated to the Father and the Son.

This is the message that God wove into the *Tanakh*, and Yeshua used to perplex those who opposed Him, like the Pharisees. And it was used in Hebrews 1:13 along with the other quotations from the *Tanakh* to prove the point of the rhetorical questions of the author. “To which of the angels did God say these things?” None of them.

- v. 14 – And then to punctuate his point, he asks one more rhetorical question: “Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?” At this point, the reader is left with no option but to say decisively, “Yes, that is all that angels are—servants. The Messiah as the Son of God is superior in every way.”