

Superiority of Christ over Angels: A Non-Controversial Issue

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Abstract

The ministry of angels is one of the common things in the biblical literatures. Most especially, “Guardian angels” is a common expression often use quite seriously and sincerely. Their multiple activities on earth have a number of facets. They often act as intermediaries between the people and their God. As a result of this knowledge, many err theologically so much so that the position of angels has being placed over and above Jesus Christ. The purpose of this paper therefore is to unearth the superiority of Christ over angels. In other to achieve the set objectives exegetical, historical and sociological methods were used. Data were also gathered through secondary and internet sources. The paper found out that despite the divine functions performed by angels, Jesus Christ is still the only absolute mediator between God and man.

Key word: Angels; Superiority of Christ; intermediaries; Hebrews 1:5-14; Mediator

Introduction

The position of intermediaries is an essential part in most religions of the world. Some scholars who are interested in the concept of intermediaries have shed light on the roles they play in these religions.(Mbiti 2014:68). In Christianity; this part is played by a group of individuals and the angels. Within the Old Testament alone, Obang (1980:24) identifies at least six intercessors (1980:13). They are Priests (Lev. 16); Prophets (1 Sam.); Kings (1 Kings 8); Righteous people (Jos. 42:8-10); the Patriarchs (Gen. 18:22-32) and the Angels (Gen. 27:17-22:11; 1 King 22:10). All these acted as intermediaries between the people and their God. In the New Testament, the position of Jesus Christ transcends that of other intermediaries (Heb.1:1-2; 1 John 2:1-2).

According to Fleming (1988:23), the Jew believes that, angels were beings of a high order who had an important place in the giving of God’s law to Israel (Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19) (Fleming, 1988:81-82). As a corollary to the above statement, Rodd (1962:23) also adds that,

angels were so important to the mind of the Jew that there was constant danger of even worshipping them. In other words, Jew held angels in vastly greater esteem and in greater value (Rodd, *Ibid*). In the light of this, is it possible then to present the angels as the divine being, who could and did initiate the ministry of man's complete salvation including direct access into the presence of God? If angels are permitted to take the position of the Son as the only absolute mediator between God and man, would there not be danger involved in series of intermediaries as well as its fallacy? Again, if angels are able to perform all the functions above, the follow up question would then be. What is the essence of the birth and works of Jesus Christ on the cross? Again, how are we to understand Hebrews 1:5-14, when it talks of the superiority of Christ over angels? Is the sacrifice and atoning death of Christ not superior to anything found under the Mosaic Law? Hence the need to discuss superiority of Christ over angels: a non controversial issue.

Superiority of Christ

Seven facts are stated about the Son of God which bring out his greatness and show why the relation given in Him is the highest which God can give. God has appointed him as "heir of all things". These words no doubt echo the oracle in Psalms 2:8, addressed to one who is both the Lord's anointed and acclaimed by God as His son: "As of me, and I will make the nation your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession". Our author applies the preceding words of this oracle to Christ in Hebrews 1:5. But in His mind the inheritance of the Son of God is not limited to earth; it embraces the universe and particularly the world to come. This is restated in fuller details in Hebrews 2:5-9, where Jesus as the last Adam, has all things put under his feet. Further still, the following still add to the credibility of the fact of superiority of Christ over angels: It was through Him that God "made the universe". The Greek word here rendered

“universe” is αιονες, which primarily means “ages”; but it’s meaning cannot be restricted to “ages” either here or in Hebrews 11:3, where it reappears in similar context.(Sasse,1964:204). The whole created universe of space and time is meant and the affirmation that God brought this universe into being by the agency of His Son is in line with statement of other New Testament writers that “all things were made through Him; and without Him was not anything made that was made” (John 1:3) and that “all things were created through Him and for Him” (Col. 1:16) (Bruce1990:61-65). In these and other statements to the same effect we may track the language of a primitive Christian hymn or confession of faith in which Christ, as the Word of Wisdom of God, is acknowledged as the father’s agent in the work of creation(Perce,1946:38-9).

He is the “effulgence” or “reflection of God’s glory”. This statement, like the last, is involved in the identification of Christ with the Wisdom of God. In the Alexandrian Book of Wisdom, a work with which our author may well have been acquainted, wisdom is said to be...a breath of the power of God and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty...a reflecting of eternal light, an unspotted mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness (Wisdom 7:25 ff).

The word “reflection” or “effulgence” (Greek απαυγασμα used both there and here denoted the radiance shining forth from the source of light, and Philo similar uses it of the Logos in relation to God. But while our author’s language is that of Philo and the Book of Wisdom, his meaning goes beyond theirs. For them the Logos or wisdom is the personification of a divine attribute; for him the language is descriptive of a man who had lived and died in Palestine a few decades previously, but who nonetheless was the eternal son and supreme revelation of God. Just as the radiance of the sun reaches this earth, so in Christ, the glorious light of God shines into the hearts of men and women.

He is the very image of the essence of God—the impress of his being. “Just as the image and superscription on a coin exactly correspond to the device on the die, so the Son of God bears the very stamp of his nature” (RSV). The Greek word *character*, occurring here only in the New Testament, expresses this truth even more emphatically than *εικον* which is used elsewhere to denote Christ and the “image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15) (Bruce, *Ibid*). Just as the glory is really in effulgence, so the being (Greek hypostasis) (Strong, 1901p.224-6) of God is really in Christ, who is its impress, its exact representation and embodiment (Garvie 1916-17, p.398). What God essentially is, is made manifest in Christ. To see Christ is to see what the father is like. He upholds all things “by his enabling word” (Zuntz, 1953:45). This expression is probably an instance of the Hebraic adjectival genitive: “The word of his power” may mean “his mighty word” or “his enabling word.” The creative utterance, which called the universe by which it is maintained in being. So Paul can write to the Colossians of Christ as the one in whom all things were created and also as the one in whom “all things hold together” (Col. 1:17). He upholds the universe not like Atlas supporting a dead weight on his shoulders, but as one who carried all things forward on their appointed course.

He has “made purification for our sins“. Here we pass from the cosmic functions of the Son of God to his personal relationship with mankind to his work as his people’s high priest, which is elaborated throughout the Epistles. The reference here, as appeared from its fuller development later, is to the cleansing efficacy of “his one oblation of himself once offered” (Zuntz, *Ibid*, p.44). The underlying emphasis here, however, is that by making purification for sins, the Son of God has accomplished something incapable of achievement by anyone else. And this accomplishment has brought out the unequalled greatness of the Son of God.

He “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high”. “The Majesty on high” is a periphrasis for God. That Jesus is enthroned at the right hand of God is one of the earliest affirmations of Christian faith; it goes back to Jesus’ own application to himself of the opening words of the divine oracle in Psalms 110: “Sit at my right hand” That no literal location is intended was as well understood by Christians in the apostolic age as it is by us: They knew that God has no physical right hand or material throne where the ascended Christ sits beside him; to them the language denoted the exaltation and supremacy of Christ as it does to us. Paul can express the same thought in different language by saying that Christ has “ascended far above all the heavens that He might fill all things (Eph. 4:10), that ‘God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name’ (Phil. 2:9). Psalm 110 provides the key text of this Epistle and the significance of Christ’s being a seated high priest is explicitly set forth in the following chapters, especially in 10:11-14 where he is contrasted with the Aaronic priests who remained standing because their sacrificial service never came to an end. It may also be observed that the oracle of Psalm 110 is addressed to a prince of the house of David to be seated in the divine presence, like David himself when he “went in, and sat before Yahweh” (2 Sam. 7:12). His exaltation to the right hand of God in itself marks him out as being superior to the angels (Vanhoye, 1965, pp. 3-14), a superiority which is further shown by the title which he bears. His name which is more excellent than theirs may be inferred from the context to be the title “Son”. Our focus at this point is to further discuss in detail the testimony of scripture to the preeminence of the son over angels

Exegesis of Hebrews 1:5-14

(i) In Relation to the Father (Hebrews 1:5)

The opening question, “for to which of the angels did God ever say...implies that Christ is to be seen in all the scriptures because there is no explicit reference to him in the passage cited.(Morris,1981,p.18). In the Old Testament, angels are sometimes called “Sons of God” (cf. Job 1:6-2:1); and the term was applied to Israel (Ex. 4:23; Hos. 11:1) and Solomon (2 Sam. 7:14; 1 Chron. 28:6). But none of the angels nor anyone was ever singled out and given the kind of status this passage gives to Christ. The first quotation comes from Psalm 2:7. According to Allen (1983:19), Psalm 2 is one of several royal enthronement Psalms, which should be understood within the context of the Davidic covenant in which Yahweh promised David that his line would endure forever (2 Sam. 7:8-16; Psl. 89) (Allen,Ibid.,p.157).Each Davidic descendant was perceived as being adapted by the Lord according to the words of the covenant, ‘I will be a father to him and he will be a son to me’ (2 Sam. 18:14). This adoptive son was then God’s leader on earth, marked out to mediate the Lord’s will among his subjects “Today” in Psalms 2:7 refers to the day of a king’s enthronement or official inauguration as king. Anderson writes, Today probably refers to the day of coronation or perhaps, to its reenactment during the annual autumn festival. The idea of begetting may be on the part of the non-Israelites prototypes of the royal document, but in our context it can only refer to the adoption of the king and the declaration of his sonship.(Warren W. Wiersbe 2007,p. 874. Anderson,1972,pp.63-4).

Hebrews 1:14 alludes to this point of adoption by using the perfect tense for the son’s inheritance κεκληρονόμηκεν (he had inherited) of a more excellent name, the title “Son”. The official title of “Son” was bestowed after Christ’s resurrection, ascension and positioning at the right hand of the majesty on high (Heb 1:3). This is surely the occasion to which the writer referred in Hebrews 5:5-6, which, by quoting both Psalm 2:7, and Psalm 110:4, associates the high priesthood with this event. It should be clarified that though Christ received His royal

dignity through the title “Son “ on the day of His enthronement, he has not yet received His millennial kingdom over which He will rule (Hebrews 2:8). The final fulfillment of the Davidic covenant will be in the person of Jesus Christ as king.

Morris further stresses that, there was, however, a widespread expectation that the Messiah would be a descendant of David. The quotation points to the Father-son relationship as the fundamental relationship between God and Christ. No angel can claim such a relationship.(Morris,ibid.,p.18). This and Hebrews 12:9 are the only passages in Hebrews in which the term “Father” is applied to God. God addresses Him “my son” (Deity), in Father-Son relationship, which is in contrast to the angels’ mere creatures who are never so addressed. Jesus is superior to the angels because of His unique relationship with the Father. Although the angels are God’s servants, Jesus alone is His Son (Heb. 1:4-5).

ii) In Acts of Worship

Hebrews 1:6-12, the second division of the catenae, contrast the role of the son with the role of angels in the age to come. Verse 6 begins with an introduction formula directing the readers to the eschatological context. Scholars differ on why παλιν (“again”) is used, some say it simply introduces this passage as in Hebrews 1:5b and 2:13. Bruce is a strong proponent of this position.(Bruce,ibid.,p.15). This would mean that the verse is referring to the incarnation.

Others such as Windisch (1931,p.15) sees this as occurring at Christ’s enthronement.³⁷ Opposing this position are Westcott,(1931,p.15) Dots,(1961,4:254) and Hewith(1960,pp55-6) who suggest a third view, namely, that παλιν modifies the verb εισαγαγ (“bring in”) and is a reference to Christ’s second advent. The passage would then point to a specific eschatological event. This understanding of παλιν is preferable for several reasons: First, παλιν follows the

subordinate temporal conjunction “οτανδε” (“and when”) thereby making παλιν a part of the clause and not merely an introduction to it. Second, the use of the subjunctive mood in the verb εισαγαη (he brings in argues for a future event, rather than the past act of the incarnation. Third, οικουμην (habitable “world”) in Heb. 1:6 is also used in Heb. 2:5, where it refers explicitly to the future and directs the readers to an eschatological context. Hebrews 1:6, then, as Kent suggests, refers to the ministry of angels as the second advent of Christ (cf. Matt. 16:27; 25:31; 2 Thess. 1:7) (Kent,1972,p.42). Thus, we know that Jesus is superior to the angels because He is the object of their worship.

(iii) In the Demonstration of Authority (Hebrews 1:7-12)

Hebrews 1:7 is based on Psalm 104, which is a creation Psalm (Westernmann, *ibid.*, p.97) Hebrews 1:7 is linked with verse 6 by και (“and”) and contrasts with verse 8. In their role of serving the father, the angels are related to elements in creation (“winds and fire”). The son is seen in Hebrews 1:10-12 as creator and as unchanging in nature. This contrasts with the angels, who are created beings. Angels will serve while the son will rule in the coming age (Heb. 13-14).

Leopold (1969, p.351) opines that, Psalm 45 is a marriage code written to celebrate a royal wedding. Various kings have been suggested as the hero for whom the Psalm was written, but the writer of Hebrews applies it to Christ (cf. John’s allusion to this Psalm in Rev. 19:6-12, in his description of Christ, the Davidic king and his bride church). In Hebrews 1:8-9, the author addressed the son as God with the vocative Ὁ θεος (O God) thus ascribing full deity to the Messianic king. The fact that Christ’s throne will last forever and ever is reminiscent of the Lord’s covenant with David: “Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever” (2

Sam. 7:16). The writer of Hebrews thus envisioned the eschatological rule of Messiah in His Kingdom.

The King's rule will be noted for righteousness and justice; according to Hebrews 1:8-9. This parallels many passages in the Old Testament that predict the messiah's righteous rule (e.g. Isaiah 9:7; 11:58-66). The writer to the Hebrews extended his quotation of Psalm 4:5-7 to include the anointing of the king and τοὺς μετοχούς σου ("Thy Companion"). Bruce comments on this extending of the quotation; "In the present context, however, the term 'Companion' must have a special meaning-unless we say that our author has simply allowed the quotation to run on without attaching any particular significance to its closing words which is improbable"(Bruce, *ibid.*, p.21).

The word μετοχός was used in classical Greek to refer to a wife, a business partners, a member of a board of official and a joint owner of a house (George, 1967, p.1122). Here too the concept of close association is in view. In koine Greek usage outside the New Testament, the word μετοχός was commonly used in the sense of a "Sharer" or "partner". It was used of the "associate collectors of public clothing for the guards," of payment "to Sotas and associates, collector of money-taxes," of "colleagues" and a "joint-owner of a holding whose price is under discussion." (Moulton, 1930, p.406).

The concept of believers being μετοχοί with Christ is a key theme through out Hebrews. The term is used in Hebrews 3:1 ("partakers of a heavenly calling"); 3:14 ("partaker of Christ"); 6:4 ("Partakers of the Holy Spirit"); and 12:8 ("discipline of which all have become partakers"). This word is almost unique to Hebrews, for it appears only one other time in the New Testament,

in Luke 5:7, which refers to Peter's "partners" in fishing,(Moulton et,al 1926,p.638), ("partners" in Luke 5:10 translates *κοῖνῳ*).

Windisch (ibid.,p.16) and Moffatt (1924.,p.11) understand the companions in Hebrews 1:9 to be angels. However, this can hardly be the case, because nowhere else are angels said to be Christ companions. Also that idea is inconsistent with the four other occurrences of "companions" in Hebrews, none of which refer to angels. Rather than angels' being companions of Christ they are contrasted with the son in lesser roles and functions.

The term *μετοκοῦς* is best understood as referring to those who will be partners of Christ the King in His earthly millennial rule. As Bruce observes, "It is most likely that the reference is to the "many sons" of Hebrews 2:10, whom the first born son is not ashamed to call this "brethren" (Hebrews 2:11), and who are designated in Hebrews 3:14 as the Messiahs' *μετοκοῖ*—the same Greek word as is here (Heb. 1:9) translated "fellow's"(Bruce,ibid.,p.21).

Μετοκοῖ is used in Hebrews as a direct reference to Christians (Heb. 3:1,14,12:8). The author's extending Psalm 45 quotation to include the concept of *μετοκοῖ* was apparently for the purpose of directing his readers to see their part in messiahs' joyful rule. The anointing with the "Oil of Gladness" suggests festivity and rejoicing (cf. Isa. 61:1-3). Since the reign of the Davidic king will be characterized by righteousness and justice, the Messiah will have joy in His rule and His "companions" will participate with Him.

(iv) In Position and Purpose (Hebrews 1:13-14)

Hebrews 1:13-14 forms that third section of the catenae that began in verse 5. These verse concerns that ultimate victory of the son over His enemies. Psalm 110, alluded to in Hebrews 1:3, is quoted in Heb. 1:13. An inclusion is seen in the references to angels in verses 4

and 5 and verses 13-14 and in the use of the verb κληρονομεω (“inherit”) in verses 4 and 14 and verses 13-14 are the zenith of catenae of the Old Testament quotations in chapter 1 of the Epistle.

Psalm 110 is crucial in the argument of Hebrews because of its king-priest motif. Psalm 110 is quoted or alluded to 12 times in the Epistle (Heb. 1:3, 13; 5:6, 10,6:20; 7:3; 11:17, 21; 8:1; 10:13; 12:2). This Psalm forms the foundation of Hebrews 7-10, the central doctrinal section which elaborates on the nature of the son’s high priesthood.

In the time of Christ Psalm 110 was understood as Messianic, as seen in Mark 12:35-37 Jesus clarified his position to the Pharisees that the son of David was also the Lord of David (i.e. the Messiah is of Davidic descent and is the Lord). Psalm 110:1a is cited by the writer to the Hebrews in referring to Christ’s position at the right hand of God. As Allen writes: The sitting of Christ at the right hand of the father is an act of anticipation on His part of the coming of the kingdom of God on earth, the subjugation and universal dominion of the entire nation to Himself, and the beginning of His righteous rule. Today He is the active head over one nation, the Church. Tomorrow, he will reign over all nations not the world. The sitting of Christ is not passive, but active. The sitting of Christ at the right hand of Majesty is complex, speaking of this royalty, His priesthood and His coming rules (Ibid.,pp.175-6).

The author of Hebrews then quoted Psalm 110:1b to speak of the enemies of King Jesus as utterly subjugated. The foes of Messiah will be completely powerless. His enemies will be like His footstool. “Treating One’s enemies as a footstool is a metaphor drawn from the Old Testament of a conquering king placing his foot upon the neck of a vanquished king to emphasize his triumph. The Psalm depicts the future reign over the Messianic kingdom and all enemies will be finally brought into submission”(Kent,Ibid.,p.46).

The readers of Hebrews were undergoing persecution, reproach and tribulation (Heb. 10:32-36). The writer then reassured them that their enemies, that is, the enemies of Christ, will one day be brought into complete subjugation to the king. The Messiah's future victory will become their victory. The Old Testament quotations in Hebrews 1 help to explain the meaning of σωτηρια in Heb. 1:14. The usual Hebrew equivalent of the Greek term is related to yay-shah: ("to save"). Hartley discusses the concept of salvation conveyed by yay-shas in the Old Testament.

To move from distress to safety requires deliverance. Generally the deliverance must come from somewhere outside the party oppressed. In the Old Testament the kinds of distress both national and individual, includes, enemies, natural catastrophes, such as plague or famine or sickness...But generally in the Old Testament. The word has strong religious meaning for it was Yahweh who wrought the deliverance (Hartly1997:1414).

In the Old Testament, "Salvation" usually refers to the Lord's deliverance of His people from their enemies or trouble. Because of the extensive use of references from the Psalms in Hebrews, the meaning of σωτηρια in Heb. 1:14 requires the Old Testament concept. In the book of Psalms, Salvation most often refers to Yahweh's deliverance His own from their enemies and their enjoyment of His blessings (e.g. Psalms. 3:2; 8:117)...therefore the meaning of salvation in Hebrews 1:14 must be related to deliverance from the enemies of God in His kingdom rule as defined by the six Psalms quoted in Heb. 1:5-13. This salvation is eschatological, as "companions" (Heb. 1:9). The readers will have a role in this deliverance or σωτηρια over the Lord's enemies and will participate in the millennial kingdom (Oberhorttzer,1977,p.93).

Conclusion and Recommendation

This work has revealed the position of intermediaries as an essential part in most religions of the world. Furthermore, divine functions performed by angels should not be taken as a premise to permit any of the angels to take the position of the Son, Jesus Christ, who is the only absolute mediator between God and man.

From the foregoing, it is the belief of this writer that the following recommendations, as derived from the main discussion will assist every Christian adherent that Jesus is our sufficiency and that is the only one who can intercede for us before God. Remember that, no longer are angels sent to direct our steps into new field of revelation. Do not seek enlightenment from the angelic sources; seek it from the word of God. Furthermore, although you may be fascinated with angels, do not pray to them or worship them.

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