Dr. David A. deSilva, Hebrews, Session 2, Hebrews 1:1-2:4: Heeding the Word Spoken by the Son is the Top Priority

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In the first segment of Hebrews, Hebrews chapter 1:1 through 2, 4, we observe a very carefully constructed argumentative flow. Because there's so much material in these 18 verses, it's easy to overlook the basic syllogism that underlies what the author is trying to accomplish in this opening, the rhetorical goal that all of the individual details serve. In 1, 1 through 4, the author gives a rhetorically impressive opening statement by which he is sure to capture the attention of his hearers, one of the primary goals of the opening of a speech.

Those who listen to this opening, full of its rhetorical flourishes and careful structuring, can be assured that they are going to listen to a gifted speaker over the course of this hour-long sermon. In 5 through 14 chapter 1, verses 5 through 14, the author next presents a flurry of citations from the Old Testament. This also contributes to gaining an attentive hearing as he communicates to his hearers that they will be listening to an authoritative speaker, an expert in the sacred oracles of God, and, therefore, someone who is likely to open the oracles of God for them reliably.

In chapter 2, verses 1 through 4, the author explicitly draws a conclusion from this opening argument, which then sounds the keynote for the sermon as a whole, as he calls the hearers to keep paying attention to the message of Christ that they have heard and not to drift away. In this opening, we find this essential syllogism. God spoke to us by a son.

This son is far greater than the angels. It is, therefore, more urgent that we attend to the message spoken through the son than it was for former generations to attend to the message God delivered through angels. By the first century, angels were thought to have been instrumental in delivering God's law, the Torah, to Moses.

The author is arguing that the message spoken in the Son demands more attention, more obedience, and more diligent commitment than even the Torah, the law of Moses required of those to whom it had been spoken. We'll keep in mind this larger argument that the author is building throughout 1:1 through 2:4 as we move into a closer analysis of the passage verse by verse. In the opening antithesis in chapter 1, verses 1 to 2, we hear this sonorous opening statement.

In many pieces and in many ways, God long ago spoke to our ancestors in the prophets, but at the end of these days, he spoke to us in a son. In an earlier

presentation, we explored the antithesis that is being created here. There are three elements in the first verse that are paralleled in the second verse, and all stand antithetically toward one another.

God was speaking long ago as opposed to now at the end of this period of time. God was speaking to the ancestors. God is now speaking to us.

God spoke through the honorable but inferior messengers, the prophets. God has most recently spoken through his son. There is a rhetorical force in each of these opposing pairs, as the author will go on to describe.

First and foremost, the Son possesses greater dignity than the prophets. What is communicated through the son, therefore, has greater gravity and commands greater attention and obedience. What was spoken long ago has importance, of course, as divine oracles, but what is spoken in the present time is of even greater moment because it was spoken to this very audience, heightening their responsibility to respond well to what God had said.

One element in the opening sentence doesn't have a counterpart in the second antithetical clause, namely, the fact that what was spoken formally was spoken in many pieces and in many ways. This provides a clue, however, to the author's hermeneutic as the author scours the Old Testament for the many pieces and the divine means of divine revelation scattered throughout Israel's sacred history and brings them together in a kaleidoscopic way in a Christ-centered reading of these oracles. The remainder of chapter 1, verses 5 through 13, provides a grand opening flourish in this regard, pulling out some of these many pieces of revelation from 2 Samuel, the Psalms, and Deuteronomy in a kaleidoscopic way to show how these many pieces come together in the one focused divine word spoken and accomplished in Christ.

The opening paragraph of Hebrews says some very interesting things about the Son and gives us a very early Christian testimony to thinking about Jesus prior to his incarnation. As a background to this paragraph, however, we need to look at Jewish wisdom traditions from the Proverbs through the intertestamental period as the raw material that the author of Hebrews uses when he thinks about the career of the pre-incarnate Son. This starts with a personification of wisdom as Lady Wisdom in Proverbs chapter 8. Lady Wisdom is giving a speech there, and she says, When God established the heavens, I was there.

When he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep when he assigned to the sea its limit so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him like a master worker, and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and

delighting in the human race. In this quite ancient poem about wisdom, we find the idea that God had a partner in creation, that there was a figure alongside God as God created the heavens and the earth. The idea of wisdom as God's partner in creation persists, and then Proverbs takes up the Jewish wisdom tradition and perpetuates it.

We see this development, for example, in the book known as The Wisdom of Solomon. This was a Jewish text composed in Greek somewhere in the Mediterranean diaspora in the early decades of the first century AD. The author of this text also affirms that wisdom played a part in God's creation of the cosmos.

Wisdom was the fashioner of all things, and she was present with God when God made the world. Wisdom is credited with playing a part in the ongoing governance and sustaining of the created order. She renews all things while remaining in herself, the author says, and she orders all things well.

Statements are also made about wisdom's nature and wisdom's character, going beyond anything that we find in Proverbs. For example, again in Wisdom of Solomon 7, we read that wisdom is, quote, the reflection of eternal light and the image of God's goodness. Wisdom is thus envisioned as a reflection of God's own character and also as a mediating figure between God and creation, not just in the act of creation itself, but in the ongoing sustaining of God's created order, such that today and tomorrow and the next day depend in some way on wisdom's ongoing working alongside God.

Also, in the contemplation of the wisdom of God's works, one had access to a reflection of the Almighty's goodness and perfection. Traditions such as these became the raw material for Christology in the early church. Wisdom, God's mediator, had been given a definite face in the person of Jesus.

Thus, the details of the pre-incarnate life of the Son as an agent of creation, as sustaining power, and as a reflection of God's own image were filled out by means of Jewish cultural knowledge about wisdom. The author follows his opening statements about God speaking a definitive word in the Son with an encomium on the Son, that is to say, a few lines praising, glorifying, and expanding upon the honor of the Son. On the one hand, this serves directly the purpose of magnifying the importance of the word that was spoken in a Son, for the honor of the messenger has an impact on the honor due to the message.

Secondly, however, it also gives us some important windows into how early Christians were thinking about Christ. And so, we read, God spoke in a Son whom he established as heir of all things, through whom he also created the ages, who is the exact representation of his glory and stamp of his being, bearing all things by the word of his power. Having made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty in the exalted places.

The first claim that is made here on behalf of a Son is that God appointed him as an heir of all things. In the statement, the author seems to be drawing on the language of Psalm 2, which was one of the so-called royal psalms alongside, for example, Psalms 45, 46, and 110. These royal psalms were composed to celebrate the Davidic king or any of David's successors as Davidic kings.

In the long centuries after Judean independence came to an end in 586 BC with the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem, these psalms began to be read with a view to a future restoration of the monarchy. They became messianic psalms. As Jews continued to recite these psalms, they continued to keep alive the hope that God would one day restore the kingdom to Israel.

These messianic psalms are very important for early Christian reflection on Jesus, and we will see throughout Hebrews how that author, in particular, continues to mine them as he develops his understanding and presents his understanding of Jesus. In Psalm 2, verse 8, God is presented as the speaker, and he says to the Davidic monarch, ask of me, and I will give you the nations as an inheritance and the ends of the earth as your possession. In speaking of Jesus as heir of all things, the author is identifying Jesus, or the son, as the one to whom this promise, this messianic promise, has been made, and thus shares the anticipation not just of the kingdom of Israel being given to the son, but all authority over earth being given to the son.

Why should he focus thus on the status of the son? Throughout the sermon, we will find the author building on what he states in this opening chapter as. First, he promises the hearers or reminds the hearers that they themselves will have a share in the son's honor. Where Jesus has gone, they will follow. The honor with which the son has been invested will spill over to the many sons and daughters as well.

Thus, focusing on the status of the son par excellence is also, in part, a remedy for the disgrace that has fallen upon the many sons and daughters, assuring them that their neighbor's shaming of them is not the last word upon their worth, but rather God will have the last word upon their worth when they enter into the same inheritance into which Jesus has entered. The author will also use the status of the son in his warnings to the congregation against breaking faith with Jesus. That is to say, the greater the status of the one whom they would be insulting by turning away from the Christian assembly for the sake of friendship with the world, the greater the danger of the consequences that would befall them for affronting such a one.

Thus, as the author continues to expand upon the exalted status of the son, he continues to highlight the importance of responding to this Jesus appropriately in this moment. The second claim that the author makes about the son is that through him, God also made or created the ages. This is one place in particular where wisdom traditions feed early Christian Christology.

What was formerly said about wisdom being God's partner or agent in creation is now said about the Son. It is through the son that God created the world. It is the son who was the agent in creation.

One might compare this with what one finds in Colossians in the opening chapter, where Paul says that Jesus is the firstborn of all creation because in him all things were created in the heavens and upon the earth, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities, all things were created through him and for him. One might also compare what we find in Hebrews with the opening verses of the fourth gospel, where we read that the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

All things came into being through him, and apart from him, not one thing came into being. Thus, the author of Hebrews shares in this larger early Christian conversation about the son as God's agent in creation, where we see a widespread tendency then to use Jewish wisdom traditions to advance Christology. Implicit in this claim about the son is general knowledge about what is owed the creator.

Those who have been created, who have received the gift of being itself, owe everything to the one who gave them this gift. This is the basic ethical principle that not only the Jew but also the Gentile would readily acknowledge. Aristotle himself would say in his Nicomachean ethics that because of God's role in creating humans, we owe them all the worship that we can possibly give.

A third claim that the author makes about the Son is that he is the effulgence or the brightness of God's glory and the exact stamp of God's being. Here also, we find wisdom traditions, especially those that we read about in Wisdom of Solomon, feeding early Christian Christology. The author of Wisdom of Solomon spoke of wisdom as the image of God's goodness, as the exact representation of God's character.

This is now being applied to the son. It is in Jesus that one sees most perfectly the image or the imprints of God's stamp, as it were. This also resonates broadly with early Christian discourse.

For example, again in the Gospel of John, chapter 14, verse 9, Jesus says, If you have seen me, you have seen the Father. Or, as Paul wrote in Colossians 1.15, Christ is the image of the invisible God. Once again, our author shares a broad Christian tendency to look to wisdom traditions to talk about the significance of this Jesus as, in effect, the visible representation of the Almighty.

Another claim that is made on behalf of Christ is that he bears all things by his powerful word. By bearing all things, the author is here talking about sustaining all

things, continuing to carry all things by his powerful word. We saw this reflected in Wisdom of Solomon in a claim made on behalf of Lady Wisdom, who renews all things and sustains all things by her word.

We also see a similar claim made in Colossians 1:17, that all things are established in him. All things are sustained in Christ. Thus, again, wisdom traditions inform early Christian convictions about what the Son was doing prior to his incarnation as Jesus.

The author shifts here to a major accomplishment of the son by virtue of his incarnation. He made purification for sins. This, incidentally, is yet another feature of the encomium on Jesus in Colossians 1, where in verse 14, we read, "...in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." It's appropriate for the introductions of speeches to introduce the major topics that will be taken up in the body of a speech itself.

This is precisely what the author does, since the manner and the consequences of Jesus' sacrifice, his making purification for sins, will be the major topic of the central chapters of this sermon, namely chapters 7 through 10. The author also puts forward here, quite subtly, yet another reminder of the debt that the hearers owe such a benefactor. This Jesus, who as pre-incarnate son was the creator and sustainer of the cosmos, but as incarnate son was the redeemer of each one of them, who brought them back to God at such personal cost to himself.

The author quickly follows this up with a reminder of where Jesus is in the present. Having made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty in the exalted places. The author is here drawing on the language of Psalm 110, the first verse of which was an important text in the early church.

The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet. It is noteworthy that Psalm 110 is another royal psalm, originally written as a psalm about, even spoken to, the Davidic monarch. Thus, it becomes an important messianic resource in the centuries following the disappearance of the Davidic monarchy and Judean independence.

Texts like Psalm 110 supply the author with information about the career of the Son after the earthly ministry of Jesus, just like wisdom traditions supply the information for the period prior to the incarnation. The opening reminder of the exaltation of the Son, who, as the crucified Messiah, was also most marginalized, disgraced, and afflicted, is a topic that will play an important role throughout this sermon. That is to say, shame in this visible, temporary cosmos is no reflection of one's value in eternity.

And the path that the Son took through marginalization and shame is the path that brought him to the place of highest honor in the cosmos in God's court. This will

help, even from the outset, remind the hearers that the path to greatest honor may indeed be that path of enduring temporary disgrace, the path that they themselves have been trudging now for some time. And again, reminding the hearers of the exalted status of the Son implicitly reminds them of the consequences for all who have not entered into or chosen to remain in a patron-client relationship with this Son, consequences that the author will make explicit at the end of chapter 1 as he quotes Psalm 110 verse 1 in full, "' Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'" The author thus reminds the hearers at the same time of the privilege of being connected with so exalted a figure but also of the consequences of becoming disconnected from such a figure, of acting in such a way that one finds oneself an enemy of the Son rather than a loyal member of the Son's household.

The author closes his opening statements about the greatness, the status, and the achievements of the Son with a statement about the Son's relative honor in regard to the angels. He speaks of the Son having become so much greater than the angels as the name that he has inherited is more distinguished than theirs. This naturally raises the question of why the author has now started to focus on angels. If we keep in mind where the author is going, namely chapters 2:1 through 4, and that exhortation, we'll know the answer to that question.

The author is establishing the greater honor of the Son in regard to the angels for the sake of calling for an even more seriously committed response to the word spoken by God in the Son than the response demanded by the word spoken through the angels. We need to pause a bit and think about angels in early Judaism to appreciate the background of the author's statement here and the statements he will go on to make throughout the remainder of this chapter. Angels, of course, are known throughout Jewish texts as part of God's heavenly entourage.

They are God's ministers, God's agents who deliver God's messages, and they enact God's judgments and punishments upon transgressors. They're often seen intervening to protect God's servants and God's clients. The angels are also frequently seen throughout historical books or books from the Second Temple period, fighting against the enemies of Israel as a celestial army.

One particular role of angels that develops in the second temple period is their role as mediators of the requests of God's people, mediators of divine favor, of answers to prayer. Archangels stand in God's very presence. They're, in fact, often spoken of as the angels of the presence.

Therefore, they begin to be seen as well-placed to secure God's favor for God's clients who are further removed from God in the earthly sphere. It is thought increasingly that angels direct the prayers of the righteous to God. We can find this in extra-canonical books like First Enoch, Tobit, or in the book of Revelation.

Priestly functions begin to be attributed to angels as God's dwelling in heaven is increasingly viewed as a heavenly temple. The angels become priests and ministers of the courts of the heavenly temple, of which the ministry of Levi and his descendants will be a reflection on earth. The most striking expression of this comes from the Testament of Levi, one of the testaments of the twelve patriarchs likely composed during the first century BC.

There we read, there with him, with God, are the archangels who serve and offer propitiatory sacrifices to the Lord on behalf of all the sins of ignorance of the righteous ones. They present to the Lord a pleasing odor, a rational and bloodless oblation. This has some relevance for Hebrews.

In the first century AD, hearers might think of angels, Moses, and the Levitical priests as, in some fashion, all mediators of God's favor and securers of divine help for God's people. Thus, the author of Hebrews holds all three together as he compares first angels, then Moses, then the Levitical priests to Christ, showing that all mediators pale in comparison with Jesus, our great high priest. Another important role attributed to angels increasingly during the temple period is the role of mediators of the Torah.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians, for example, Paul writes, why then the law? It was added because of transgressions until the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made. And it was ordained through angels by a mediator. The same idea is reflected in the book of Acts, in Stephen's speech in Acts chapter 7. Stephen says Moses was the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai and with our ancestors, and he received living oracles to give to us.

Stephen speaks then again toward the end of his sermon, saying that you are the ones that receive the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it. This background is also relevant for Hebrews because in Hebrews chapter 2 verse 2, the author will speak of the word that was spoken through angels, by which he clearly means the Mosaic covenant, the law that was given now not by God directly, but by God's mediators and messengers, the angels. The author's claim in chapter 1, verse 4 that the son is to such a degree greater than the angels as the name he has inherited is greater than theirs becomes the launching point for a string of scriptural citations in the remainder of chapter 1. It's often overlooked that these citations develop a series of arguments in support of the author's claim, not that anyone in the audience would seriously dispute the claim that the son was greater than the angels.

We should read this chapter still as the author building common ground with his audience rather than the author entering into points of dispute with his audience. The sting of all that the author is saying in chapter 1 will come in chapter 2 verse 1

following his therefore. This string of scriptural citations falls into three blocks of argumentation.

The first is in verses 5 and 6, the second extends through verses 7 to 12, and the third in verses 13 and 14. In the first block, we read, for to which of his angels has God ever said, you are my son, today I have begotten you. And again, I will be to him for a father, and he will be to me for a son.

The author here quotes the first Psalm 2 verse 7 and then 2 Samuel chapter 7 verse 14, both of which are texts that are at the heart of Davidic monarchic ideology. They have become, however, messianic texts as Israel as a whole has continued to labor under Gentile domination, looking for the day when God might restore Judean independence and an independent monarchy, preferably from the house of David. The author of Hebrews assumes that his hearers will assent to reading a text like Psalm 2 or 2 Samuel 7 14 messianically and particularly as spoken about the son, Jesus.

This opening also forms a neat inclusion with Chapter 1, verse 13; both Verse 5 and Verse 13 open with the same rhetorical question: to which of the angels did God ever say? The second step in this argument involves a variation of Deuteronomy 32, verse 43. As the author writes, but when he again leads the firstborn into the inhabited realm, he says, and let all God's angels worship him. This text is known from the song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32.

There is some interesting variation, however, in the text of Deuteronomy 32 verse 43. The Masoretic text, upon which most of our English translations of the Old Testament depend, does not have this clause at all: let all God's angels worship him. In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament current in the first century, it reads, let all the sons of God worship him.

In Hebrews, it is let all God's angels worship him. It is possible that our author tweaked the text a bit to better suit the cosmology that he and his hearers affirm. To speak of multiple sons of God might have made sense in the context of Deuteronomy and ancient Israel.

In the Second Temple and New Testament periods, however, Jewish authors were far less likely to speak of heavenly sons of God or other potentially divine beings. So, interpreting this to mean angels would have made a lot more sense. When does this event take place, however? When are God's angels to worship the Son? This requires us to think a little bit more about what the Greek word oikumene means in this context.

What is this inhabited realm into which the Son is brought again? Here, looking ahead to the second use of this term in Hebrews chapter 2 verse 5 is helpful because

the oikumene is there specified as the coming realm, the coming oikumene. In this context, then, the author is looking not to the earthly realm, the inhabited realms of the material world, but rather to the other realm, the realm beyond, the divine realm. This is the realm that is coming in regard to the author and his hearers since they are not present in that realm yet.

But from another point of view, that realm already exists beyond the material earth and the visible heavens. In the Septuagint translation of the Psalms, the heavens and the earth are spoken of as shakable and removable. The Greek words ouranoi, heavens, and gei, earth, are used in this sense.

But the Greek word oikumene in the Greek translation of the Psalms is consistently described as unshakable. The author of Hebrews seems to be taking his cue then from the distinctions made between heaven and earth and the oikumene in the Greek translation of the Psalms. The author of Hebrews would have connected the unshakable realm with the divine realm as opposed to the created realm that is destined for shaking and removal.

Hebrews 1:6 is, therefore, about Christ's return to the divine realm, which he left in his incarnation. His return then is the moment of his glorification, including his taking his seat at God's right hand. While the son possessed a greater status than the angels before his incarnation, his triumphant return was an occasion to celebrate his exaltation afresh, with angels falling prostrate before him to acknowledge his supreme honor after his obedience unto death and his provision for the redemption of humankind.

The author begins a second argumentative move in the course of the scriptural citations that we begin to encounter in Hebrews 1:7. As he writes, with regard to the angels on the one hand, God says, the one making his angels' spirits and his ministers flames of fire. But with regard to the son, your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the rod of your kingdom is the rod of righteousness. You have loved justice, and you have lawlessness.

On account of this, your God has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your companions. The author finds in this royal psalm, Psalm 45, a warrant to assert the son's exaltation above other heavenly beings, his companions. The language of anointing here is particularly appropriate, both to the Messiah's regal but also to his priestly role and status, as the author will develop a great length through his sermon.

Not just Jesus as king, but even more, Jesus as our high priest. The son is permanent, permanently enthroned, as this psalm text bears witness. The author hints, on the other hand, that angels are a bit more flighty.

They can be transformed into wind or flames of fire to do God's bidding. But the son is constant, reliable, and unchangeable. This contrast comes out even more forcefully in the next scriptural quotation.

And you, from the beginning, Lord, laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the works of your hands. These will perish, but you remain. All of these will grow old like a garment, and like a cloak, you will roll them up; like a garment, they will be changed.

But you are the same, and your years will never run out. This text, Psalm 102, is originally part of a psalm pleading with God for deliverance, in part contrasting the limited lifespan of the suppliant to the endless years of God. As the author of Hebrews has excerpted these verses, however, the author is highlighting the difference between the material visible realm, the heavens and the earth, and the sun.

The material realm is temporary. It is destined for destruction like a garment grows old and is changed out or like a cloak is rolled up. But the sun lasts forever.

You are always the same, and your years will never run out. This is relevant to the author's argument in two important ways. First, the sun is what lasts.

Connection with the sun is a connection with what matters for eternity. Whatever one might gain or lose in this visible creation matters for a relatively short time. This will impinge on the audience's choices in their context.

Will they, for the sake of short-term gain, really let go of their grasp of the one who can grant them gain for eternity? It is also relevant to the author's argument that the sun's unchangeable character makes the sun supremely trustworthy. This comes out in a subtle way here, but more fully, it will come out in Hebrews 13 verse 8. Here, though, when the author says you are the same, it is in the context of his saying pretty much the same thing as you are constant. For example, Dio Chrysostom, a late first and early second-century Greek statesman and philosopher, wrote an oration on the subject of distrust.

In this oration, he listed reasons for why we just can't trust another human being. He writes that, quote, no one knows about anyone whether he will remain as he is until the morrow. No one knows whether a person will be the same tomorrow that he was today, and this erodes trust.

The author of Hebrews, however, has already begun to declare that the sun is a reliable ground for trust in the future. Nothing that the material creation has to offer comes close. The third argumentative move that the author then makes comes at the close of chapter one with the last two verses.

To which of the angels has he ever said, sit at my right hand until I set your enemies as a footstool for your feet? There's an implied antithesis here. What wasn't spoken to any angel was spoken to the sun in early Christian understandings of Psalm 110, which was generally read as a divine oracle spoken to Jesus. Already, the historical Jesus was remembered to have recited this verse as a messianic text, one that his opponents were overlooking.

In Mark 12, for example, we find Jesus pulling Psalm 110 out and asking the scribes, if David calls the Messiah Lord, how can the Messiah be David's son? This is again a royal psalm about the enthronement of the Israelite or the Judahite king and has become a messianic psalm about the future king, the Messiah. The eschatological significance of this verse here is to remind the hearers that the son, the Jesus whom they follow, is the end-time winner. All of whose enemies will be subjected to his rule.

Indeed, all of whose enemies are specifically dishonored, set below his feet as a footstool. The author will keep that eschatological horizon clearly in view for his audience since the eschatological horizon introduces the crisis with which he wants them to be primarily concerned. As long as their eyes are on the things of this world, commitment to the Christian group may begin to appear disadvantageous.

With their eyes firmly fixed on the day of the son's return, however, they will be more apt to accept and follow the author's plan for survival and even success, which involves continued commitment to the confession of the faith and continued investment in one another and in Christian witness. The author closes off this period of argumentation with another rhetorical question referring to the angels. Are they not all ministering spirits sent for service to those who are about to inherit salvation? The rhetorical question here again assumes the audience's readiness to agree with the author's statements about the angels.

This is another sign that the author is not addressing here some kind of deficient Christology among the audience or a hyper-enthusiasm for angel worship among the audience. The angels, in essence, are cosmic servants, as is inherent in the name given to their very species: angels, angeloi, messengers, and envoys. Their glory and status as superhuman beings are merely pointers to the greater glory and status of Jesus, now enthroned at the right hand of the Most High.

One phrase in this closing rhetorical question merits closer consideration. The author refers to believers as those about to inherit salvation. The Greek word behind salvation is the familiar one, soteria, deliverance, and salvation.

The author of Hebrews has a very different frame of reference for thinking about salvation than many Christians, especially Christians today. Many Christians today

think of salvation as something already possessed, already enjoyed. The author of Hebrews, very much like the author of 1 Peter, talks about salvation as a future good, as something that comes at the second coming of Christ or at our welcome into the divine realm for which Christ has fitted us.

Because of the author's frame of reference here and his particular use of deliverance or salvation to talk about final deliverance, it is particularly problematic to introduce the idea of losing one's salvation into any discussion of the theology of Hebrews. We will come back to this when we discuss Hebrews 6:1 through 8 in some detail. The author has advanced several of his goals in chapter 1, verses 5 to 14.

He has heightened the hearer's appreciation for the honor of Jesus. He has hinted at the dangerous consequences of failing to acknowledge that honor. He has established afresh the temporary value of the material and visible creation, such that the only firm ground for hope and trust remains the Son and not the audience's recovery of material goods or honor in the eyes of their neighbors, who are also presently the Son's enemies.

The hearers should already be primed to think about this question. How shall I respond to this Son so as to remain in favor and not fall into the number of his enemies? This is precisely the sort of question that the author goes on to answer. With the opening of chapter 2, the author arrives at the argumentative goal of chapter 1. On account of this, on account of the Son's exalted greatness, which is so great as to have left the angels behind in the dust, it is necessary for us to pay all the more diligent attention to the things that we have heard, lest we drift away.

If the word that had been spoken through angels was confirmed, and every transgression and act of disobedience received a just record, how would we flee if we neglected salvation so greatly? On account of this, with these opening words, the author explicitly identifies that he is about to give the so what of the preceding chapter, and the danger that he identifies is the danger of drifting. If we don't attend to the message that we have heard, we will drift away from a safe path. This provides an ideological coloring of the action that the Christian's neighbors would actually regard positively.

What the author presents here is drifting, which Christian's non-Christian neighbors would regard as getting back on track. Within this warning, then, the author creates a lesser to greater argument, a very common form of argumentation, both in Jewish and Greco-Roman rhetoric of the period. The lesser case is the validity of the message that was spoken through angels, namely the Torah, and the way that it was confirmed by God and taken seriously by God's people, such that the law's stipulations were enforced either with reward or punishment.

The greater case now is the message that was spoken through the Son. If the Torah, the lesser word, was so seriously enforced, how much more strictly will the word delivered through the greater messenger, the Son, be enforced? Dwelling on the honor of Christ in the first chapter, therefore, enhances the severity of the insult offered to Christ when his message and his gift are neglected. To show such neglect toward the promise of the gospel, and hence to affront the bearer of that message, would put one in greater danger than those who transgressed the Torah.

The pastor wants his audience to consider holding fast to the gospel and living with a view to honoring God and his Son to be their top priorities. The exaltation of Jesus has made pursuing this agenda more abundantly necessary. This initial exhortation emphasizes the importance of hearing and responding to God's word, which will be a central motif throughout the first four chapters of this sermon.

It also sounds like the warning of the dangers that attend neglect the great deliverance and benefits announced in the will return in chapters 4, 6, 10, and 12. Hebrews 2 verses 1 through 2, therefore, sounds like a keynote of the sermon. The author goes on in chapters 2, verses 3 and 4, to talk about the reliability of the message that the congregation has received.

It was spoken through the Son, but it was also confirmed by those who witnessed the incarnate Son's ministry. And even more importantly, it was confirmed by God's supernatural actions in their midst. In this way, the author reminds the hearers that the message around which they have reorganized their lives, and for the sake of which they have endured significant though temporary losses, is a reliable message.

It is a rock upon which to build and not some flighty myth that blew through their community. We might review, then, the rhetorical force of this opening segment of Hebrews 1:1 through 2:4. The speaker refocuses the hearers first on the Son, on the person of Jesus himself. It is not that the hearers are thinking wrong things about Jesus, but they are potentially not thinking enough about Jesus, not thinking enough of Jesus, of the benefits he has brought, and of the promises of benefits yet to come.

He is also focusing the hearers on the higher stakes at play in their situation. There is much more to be lost than whatever temporary honor or good their commitment to the Christian movement may have caused them. He also focuses the hearers on the larger picture in terms of space and time.

He's reminding the hearers of the cosmological and eschatological backdrop of their lives in the here and now. He reminds them of the temporary nature of heaven and earth itself, to remind them of the lower value of everything that belongs to the visible realm so that they might weigh alternatives better in their immediate situation and so that they might make the choices that will be advantageous for eternity. Even though its dense argumentation from Scripture about a matter that

we might take for granted, the sun's superiority to the angels, the challenge of the author of Hebrews in this portion of a sermon comes through loud and clear.

He would ask us, are we giving the message announced through the sun its due place in our lives? Do we stand in danger of neglecting so great a salvation? This is an important question for us to keep asking ourselves because it is all too easy in our context to make our discipleship the benign add-on to a very busy life that, most of the time, is invested in securing our temporary well-being. How much of our time, our energies, and our resources do we invest in the things of this life, in our jobs, in good things like providing for ourselves or our families, like social networks and connections or hobbies or entertainment? And how much do we invest in following Jesus, in growing more closely into Christ-likeness, in going to those places that Jesus would have us go as his emissaries, whether to serve or to share the good news or, in some way, to reach out as his hands to the world around us? Our answer to such questions of self-examination will show us what our top priorities are, whether they are our day-to-day life and well-being or our service to God, our proper response to Christ, our valuing of that relationship, and our obligations within that relationship above everything else. Another contribution that the author makes is to remind us that in the face of Jesus, we see the face of God.

We discover more of God's passions and God's longings in the passions and longings of the man Jesus. Christology is not ultimately just about who Jesus is, but also about who God is, what God cares about, and what God expects from us if, indeed, we share the author's basic conviction that the Son is the exact imprint of God's being. As we study the Gospels, in particular, and see what Jesus deeply cared about, how he spent his time, with whom he spent his time, how he gathered his disciples and taught them to invest themselves in the world and how not to invest themselves in the world, we are learning more about God's heart, God's values, God's agenda, and therefore receiving the invitation, indeed the privilege, of aligning ourselves more carefully with the heart of God through our everyday lives.

The author also challenges us to continually perceive the difference between what is temporary and what is eternal and to discern how to invest ourselves, align ourselves, and spend ourselves wisely. One of the things that impress us as we age is the shortness of life and the importance of every hour. Do we kill time, or do we use time? Do we invest our limited span upon this globe wisely for eternity, or do we fritter away the self, the hours, and the life that God has given us in pursuit of that which will simply evaporate on the great day of Christ's return when God will judge the world? A corollary to this is to always remember what the solid rock upon which to ground our lives is, upon which to build our lives.

In the author's reminder that Christ is eternal, whereas the world and all of its concerns are ephemeral and vapid, the preacher anticipates the hymn, Christ, and the words spoken through him as the solid rock. All other ground is sinking sand.