

CHAPTER ONE  
THE BOOK OF HEBREWS: THE ABROGATION  
OF THE MOSAIC LAW

Introduction

Most discussions concerning the Christian and the Law revolve around the early writings of Paul or the book of Acts with the result that the book of Hebrews does not figure prominently in the debate. One reason for this may be that the sensitive question of the place of the Mosaic Law in the life of the early Church is thought to have been sufficiently answered by the time Hebrews was written. Thus, its message concerning the Law is considered superfluous, if not to the lifestyle of the first century Christian, at least to the debate about the Law for the twentieth century scholar. Another reason for the absence of this book from discussions of the Law may be that many understand the argument to focus on the person of Christ rather than Law. The goal of the author of Hebrews according to this understanding of the book was to encourage Jewish adherents to hold fast their confession of Christ, which he accomplished by focusing on the superiority of the *person* of Christ, favorably comparing Him to angels, Moses and Aaron.

Whatever the reason, Hebrews is neglected in discussions about the end of the Law, while attention is placed on Romans, Galatians and Acts. It is the contention of this chapter, however, that no book in the New Testament speaks more powerfully or precisely to the abrogation of the Law in the Christian economy than the book of Hebrews. Thus, the goal of this chapter is to clarify the contribution which Hebrews makes to place of the Law in the life of the later<sup>1</sup> first century believer. While a detailed exposition is beyond the scope of this exercise, I would like to trace the argument as it relates to the theme of the Law through the book in order to demonstrate that it is not only pervasive but also brings coherence to the argument, giving the best sense to the book as a whole.

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<sup>1</sup>This assumes a date of approximately A.D. 64. Cf. further discussion concerning date on page 39.

### The Argument of Hebrews

Although the word “better” is used frequently<sup>2</sup> in the book, many misunderstand the book as simply representing Christ and Christianity as better alternatives to Moses and Judaism. While this comparison may be valid, it is woefully lacking as a summary, and entirely misses the major point of the book. In the view of this writer the major focus of the book is upon the concept of revelation from God, rather than the person of Christ *per se*. Without doubt, Jesus has a major role to play in the giving of this revelation but it is the message, more than the messenger, which is ultimately critical to the argument. From the beginning of the book to its end, *previous revelation* is contrasted with the *final revelation* which is given in Christ. From this contrast the author draws two basic points. The first is fairly simple and basically hortatory in nature: greater revelation *demand*s greater obedience. His second point is more complex and didactic as he announces that greater revelation must *displace* previous revelation. This is in reality the substance and subject of his argument and carries the most sweeping implications for his audience. Thus, in a sentence, the message statement of Hebrews is:

God’s final revelation in Christ  
*demand*s greater obedience (chapters 1–4)  
 than previous revelation (namely Moses) and  
*displaces* (chapters 5–12) previous revelation (namely Moses).

In order to develop and support this thesis, the book has been divided into three major subsections which will also form the outline for this chapter: the introduction, (1:1-4); the preliminary argument on obedience (1:5-4:16); and the essential argument of replacement (chapters 5:1-12:29).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Κρείττων is used nineteen times in the New Testament, thirteen of which are found in Hebrews.

<sup>3</sup>This outline has been determined after careful consideration of (1) the relationships between theology and exhortation, (2) the more objective identifications of structure including announcement of subject, inclusions, and repetitions and (3) the more subjective conceptual development of the epistle. Important sources for this discussion have been: J. Swetnam, “On the Literary Genre of the ‘Epistle’ to the Hebrews,” *Novum Testamentum* 11 (1969): 261-68; George E. Rice, “Apostasy as a Motif and its Effect on the Structure of Hebrews,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 23 (1985): 29-35; Albert Vanhoye, “Discussions sur la structure de l’Épître aux Hébreux.” *Biblica* 55 (1974): 349-80; P. Auffret, “Essai sur la structure littéraire et l’interprétation d’Hébreux 3, 1-6,” *New Testament Studies* 26 (1980): 380-96. J. Bligh, “The Structure of Hebrews,” *Heythrop Journal* 5 (1964): 170-77; and D. A. Black, “The Problem of the Literary Structure of Hebrews: An Evaluation and a Proposal,” *Grace Theological Journal* 7 (1986): 163-77. Finally, Black summarizes well the pitfalls and the proper philosophy of the analysis of Hebrews, “Some writers would like to think (or give the impression) that the outlining of Hebrews is a rapid, simple process. The real problem is, of course, far more complex, bewildering, and time-consuming. Scholarship stands still in no field, least of all in biblical studies, and a facile approach to the structural complexities of a document like Hebrews can easily lead to a situation in which one sees an amazing number of trees or even tiny plants, but fails to see the forest at all. A letter should be viewed

Introduction to and Basis for the Argument 1:1-4  
God Has Spoken His Greater Revelation in Son

Some understand the first four verses of the book as simply the first in a long list of favorable comparisons of Jesus to various Old Testament figures beginning with a short reference to the prophets (1:1).<sup>4</sup> Hebrews 1:1-4 however is a tightly knit literary unit which introduces and summarizes the theme of the book: the superiority and finality of New Testament revelation.

The Unity of the Introduction

Hebrews has a literary style unique in the New Testament canon and this is no more apparent than in the first four verses which have been described as artistic prose.<sup>5</sup> Verses 1-2a specifically are recognized as a period, “i.e. the organization of a considerable number of clauses and phrases into a well-rounded unity . . . .”<sup>6</sup> In these carefully crafted introductory verses, the author provides several important clues to the substance of his argument, giving context and clarification to all which comes later. In these first verses he contrasts God’s revelation to man in the past with his final revelation in the present.

The literary structure of this paragraph exhibits a chiasmic symmetry with verses one and four framing two and three.<sup>7</sup>

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in the great sections that constitute its whole and not simply in detached portions,” Black, “The Problem of the Literary Structure of Hebrews,” 176.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Homer Kent, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 19.

<sup>5</sup>“Since the period belongs to the more elegant style, it is most frequently met in Hebrews, which certainly is to be regarded as artistic prose by reason of the composition of its words and sentences (§§486f.)” F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and R. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (BDF)*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), §464.

<sup>6</sup>In reference to 1:1-2a, “(by ancient standards this is a complete, two-member period, to which other loose elements are appended) . . . .” Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. D. W. B. Robinson, “The Literary Structure of Hebrews 1:1-4,” *Australian Journal of Bible Archeology* 2 (1972): 182-84.

- A ὁ θεὸς λαλήσας . . . ἐν τοῖς προφήταις . . . ἐλάλησεν . . . ἐν υἱῷ (1-2a)  
 God spoke to the fathers . . . through the prophets . . . he has spoken . . . by a Son
- B ὃν ἔθηκεν κληρονόμον πάντων (2b)  
 Whom he appointed heir of everything
- C δι' οὗ καὶ ἐποίησεν τοὺς αἰῶνας (2c)  
 and who is the one through whom he created the world
- C<sup>1</sup> ὃς ὢν ἀπαύγασμα . . . καὶ χαρακτήρ . . . φέρων τε τὰ πάντα (3a-b)  
 who is the radiance . . . and exact representation . . . and sustains the universe
- B<sup>1</sup> καθαρισμόν . . . ποιησάμενος, ἐκάθισεν ἐν δεξιᾷ (3c)  
 having made purification for sins, sat down at the right hand
- A<sup>1</sup> τοσοῦτω κρείττων γενόμενος τῶν ἀγγέλων ὅσω διαφορώτερον παρ' αὐτοὺς (4)  
 κεκληρονόμηκεν ὄνομα.  
 having become as much greater than the angels as the name which he has inherited is superior to theirs.

The section begins (1:1-2a) and ends (1:4) by affirming the superior nature of God's final revelation in contrast to old revelation. The revelation of God in the Old Testament may be described by referring to the human messengers, the prophets (1:1), or the divine messengers, the angels (1:4). Thus the transition to angels in verse four is not really a transition to a new subject but simply a different perspective of the same subject. It is therefore not as abrupt as one not familiar with the role of angels as intermediaries of divine revelation might suppose.

The Old Testament dispensation can be characterized as either prophetic (with reference to human messengers) or as angelic (with reference to the divine messengers). . . . Thus, the fulfillment of the prophetic word in the Son, and the excellence of his name over that of the angels, are parallel concepts.<sup>8</sup>

The second level of the chiasm makes use of two classic Old Testament references in describing Jesus as the royal son and royal priest.<sup>9</sup> The affirmation of Jesus as the appointed heir of all things in 1:2b ("whom he appointed heir of everything") reflects the thought of the royal Son in Psalm 2:8. The affirmation of Jesus as the royal priest draws on Psalm 110, a favorite passage of the author of

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<sup>8</sup>Robinson, "The Literary Structure of Hebrews 1:1-4," 180-81.

<sup>9</sup>"The close correspondence between these two "coronation" psalms is well known, and the royal figure in each was already equated in Jewish theology," Robinson, "The Literary Structure of Hebrews 1:1-4," 182. "In each instance the source of the declaration concerning the Son is a coronation psalm celebrating the enthronement of a royal figure," William L. Lane, *Hebrews*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 47 (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), 6.

Hebrews. The final and innermost level of the chiasm identifies Jesus in terms characteristic of Old Testament wisdom, and as the mediator of creation, (e.g., Wisdom 7:21-27; 9:2).<sup>10</sup>

### The Meaning of the Introduction

The verses which are most significant for this study are those which frame the others, 1-2a and 4.

- 1:1 In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets;  
 1:2a in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son  
 1:4 having become as much superior to angels as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs (RSV).

Several features about the first sentence (1-2a) highlight the intended contrast of the author. First, the grammar of the sentence, with ὁ θεὸς as the grammatical subject and ἐλάλησεν as the main verb, defines the semantic subject: God has spoken. In fact, the author frequently introduces passages from the OT as God's direct speech (e.g., 1:5-13; 5:5-6:7; 7:17, 21).<sup>11</sup> The author's solemn exhortation which concludes his sermon is phrased in the same terms, "See that you do not refuse him who is speaking . . ." (Heb 12:25). Second, word order emphasizes the contrast of old and new revelation with the placement of the adverbs "in many portions and in many ways in the past" (πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως πάλαι) first in the sentence. He has spoken incompletely in the past and another way in these last days (ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων<sup>12</sup>), comparing the succession of these two ages. Finally, the author describes God's communication in these last days by the anarthrous phrase ἐν υἱῷ in contrast to ἐν τοῖς προφήταις. The author's reference to the Son in this way emphasizes not so

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<sup>10</sup>Robinson, "The Literary Structure of Hebrews 1:1-4," 182-83. He says, "The clearest direct link between the various descriptions and titles is probably that between the first two expressions in verse 3 ('radiance of his glory' and 'stamp of his being') which are twin designations of Wisdom in the Wisdom of Solomon 7:25, 26, virtually quoted by our author here" p. 183. n. 14. Cf. also J. Frankowski, "Early Christian Hymns Recorded in the New Testament: A Reconsideration of the Question in the Light of Heb 1,3," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 27 (1983): 186-87; Lane, *Hebrews*, 18; and J. P. Meier, "Structure and Theology in Hebrews 1,1-14," *Biblica* 66 (1985): 178.

<sup>11</sup>Lane, *Hebrews*, 11.

<sup>12</sup>This phrase compares the two definite successive ages in Jewish thought. It is used in the Septuagint and becomes a technical phrase. Cf. G. W. Buchanan, "Eschatology and the 'End of Days,'" *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 20 (1961): 188-93.

much the person as it does the quality of God's communication.<sup>13</sup> God spoke in the Old Testament to the fathers by the prophets, but in these last days has spoken to us *in Son*. God has used "son quality" communication. He is speaking to be sure through the person of His Son in the last days, but the focus is upon the Son as a channel of revelation from the Father. The author's first and well-chosen words clearly communicate his main concern: the superior nature of the revelation from God to this generation.

In describing the superiority of the Son compared to angels in 1:4 the author curiously uses a form of the verb γίνομαι<sup>14</sup> rather than ἔμιμ, emphasizing a transition rather than a state of being. Upon first reflection this word seems out of place to the thoughtful reader. Was there ever a point in which the Son *became* (γενόμενος, 1:4) better in his person than the angels? Of course, he inherited the name "Son" at a point in time,<sup>15</sup> but to have actually "become" better in his person flies in the face of orthodox Christology. At least two solutions are traditionally offered to this conundrum.

First, Lane moves the discussion from *ontology* to *recognition* by translating γίνομαι as *exalt*.<sup>16</sup> That is, he understands the verse to describe the change in the honor which Jesus has received

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<sup>13</sup>The comments of Dana and Mantey are particularly applicable to this prepositional phrase and to the noun which in the context clearly points to a definite person. "Sometimes with a noun which the context proves to be definite the article is not used. This places stress upon the qualitative aspect of the noun rather than its mere identity." H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto, Ontario: The Macmillan Company, 1957), 149. In reference to the prepositional phrase they continue, "It is instructive to observe that the anarthrous noun occurs in many prepositional phrases. This is no mere accident, for there are no accidents in the growth of a language: each idiom has its reason. Nor is it because the noun is sufficiently definite without the article, which is true, as Greek nouns have an intrinsic definiteness. But that is not the reason for not using the article. A prepositional phrase usually implies some idea of quality or kind. ἐν ἀρχῇ in Jn. 1:1 characterizes Christ as preexistent, thus defining the nature of his person." p. 150. "ἐν is used in Heb. 1:1, 2 with about the same force that διὰ with the genitive has . . . *God spoke through prophets then, but now through a son* (cf. Mt. 12:27, 28)." p. 106. "Here the anarthrous noun *huio* . . . serves to emphasize the point that the Son is radically different from the prophets, in that son-ness is the ultimate medium of communication. This emphasis is all the more striking when one observes that the article does appear with 'prophets' (*tois prophetais*) . . ." D. A. Black, "Hebrews 1:1-4: A Study in Discourse Analysis," *Westminster Theological Journal* 49 (1987): 183.

<sup>14</sup>"having *become* as much better than the angels" (1:4).

<sup>15</sup>Whether Jesus' inheritance of the name occurred at the incarnation or baptism (Matthew 3:17) or the resurrection (Acts 13:33) is a moot point for this discussion. The inheritance of the name "Son" is not the instance of Jesus' becoming better, but merely a comparison with it.

<sup>16</sup>Lane, *Hebrews*, 7.

rather than a change in the person of Jesus. This avoids the obvious tension of some kind of development with reference to the deity of Jesus. However, though the idea of Jesus' exaltation is present in the context, this stretches the meaning of γίνομαι. The authors of the rest of the New Testament and the author of Hebrews, have words for "exalt" ("exalted above the heavens," ὑψηλότερος τῶν οὐρανῶν, 7:26; and 5:5 "So Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest" ἑαυτὸν ἐδόξασεν). In the immediate context of this extended period which describes Jesus (1:2-4), the aorist participle (γενόμενος, 1:4) is contrasted with a present participle (ὄν, 1:3) highlighting the contrast between what Jesus has always been and what he has become. Thus, the word has to do with the person rather than his treatment. Meier agrees:

To translate *genomenos* as 'showing himself' or 'proving himself to be', as some modern versions do, does not do justice to the thought here and avoids the contrast with *on* in 1, 3a. It is simply a translator's attempt to smooth over the clash of ideas in 1,2-4.<sup>17</sup>

Second, the meaning of "become better" is sometimes understood in terms of the glorification of Jesus' humanity. Lightfoot expresses this view:

The son became superior to the angels when He took His seat at God's right hand. Prior to this, while in human form, His position was a little lower than the angels. The Son's eternal existence and nature are not here in view (as in vv. 2b-3a) . . . .<sup>18</sup>

The problem with this explanation, however, is that the thrust of the argumentation of 1:5-14 which supports the statement of 1:4<sup>19</sup> does in fact concern the *deity* of the Son rather than his humanity which is discussed in chapter two. In short, if the reference in 1:4 is to the change in his humanity then the explanation and support of 1:5-14 neither explains or supports the statement.

This understanding also strains the argument of chapter two where the author states that the Son "has been made . . . lower<sup>20</sup> than the angels" (2:9). The author's point could hardly be that

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<sup>17</sup>J. P. Meier, "Structure and Theology in Hebrews 1,1-14," *Biblica* 66 (1985): 185.

<sup>18</sup>Neil R. Lightfoot, *Jesus Christ Today: A Commentary on the Book of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 56.

<sup>19</sup>The verbal and conceptual ties between 1:4 and 1:5 are very strong. Note the explanatory γὰρ at the beginning of 1:5 indicating that 1:5ff is the support for the statement of 1:4. It is likely as well, that "Son" (1:5) is the name (1:4) which Jesus has inherited.

<sup>20</sup>Whether the text, βραχύ τι παρ' ἀγγέλους ἡλαττωμένον, should be interpreted "for a little while was made lower" (RSV) or "made him a little lower" (NIV) makes little difference here. If the author's point in chapter one is to prove the superiority of the person alone because of his deity, then his

Jesus, though inherently better than angels in his pre-incarnate deity, yet lower than angels in his incarnation, has once again become better in his exalted humanity. Swetnam points out that chapter two simply does not teach that Jesus is superior in his person to angels:

But it [the argument of superiority] can hardly be applied to the entire section 1,5–2,18, for the announcement states that Christ is *superior* (κρείττων) to the angels and only 1,5–2,4 speak of this superiority; the remainder of ch. 2 speaks of his inferiority to the angels by dwelling on his suffering and death (cf. 2,9.10.14) and his brotherhood with men (cf. 2,11-16) in the context of Ps 8 with its catch phrase on the inferiority of men to angels (2,6-9).<sup>21</sup>

We would propose a different explanation of 1:4 which hopefully honors the grammar, lexicology and context. Given the message of the introduction, which is the comparison between God speaking in the past and in the present, the comparison of Christ here with angels concerns the *ability* or *suitability* as *bearers of revelation* rather than a comparison of the nature or essence of the Son versus angels. The change (signalled by γίνομαι) which has taken place is that Jesus has become the mediator and revealer *par excellence* to man. In his incarnation and pre-eminently at Calvary, Jesus mediated and communicated to man what angels or any other mediator could only hope for. By means of both his deity (in which his position and being are inherently higher than angels) and his humanity (in which his position and being are inherently lower than angels) Jesus has become a better mediator/revealer. One reason Jesus is a better mediator than angels is precisely because he is lower than them in his humanity for without his humanity he could not have functioned as a priest.

Thus, the discussion on γίνομαι has sought not only to clarify the meaning of verse four but also to demonstrate that the author's subject is the final revelation in Christ. The author's focus is not upon the person of Jesus necessarily, but on the revelation which has come through him.

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argument is compromised by the abasement of the Son whether it was temporary or permanent.

<sup>21</sup> J. Swetnam, "Form and Content in Hebrews 1-6," *Biblica* 53 (1972): 368-85.



## Conclusion

Thus, the introduction to the book clearly defines the scope of the discussion.<sup>22</sup> Rather than simply magnifying the person of Jesus in contrast to prophets or angels, the introduction contrasts God's communication and mediation in the past to the ultimate mediation and communication now given in a Son. Jesus is not simply the ultimate person, but the ultimate mediator/revealer of God. The messenger is discussed not for the sake of his person but for the implication which this has upon the theme of ultimate importance, the revelation and mediation which has been accomplished through him. What he has done and said is superior to all which has been done and said before.

### Greater Revelation Demands Greater Obedience 1:5–4:16

#### Introduction

The first major implication of having received greater revelation is that the recipients are under *greater* obligation to obey it.<sup>23</sup> If previous generations of God's people received revelation and neglected it they were certainly punished. Thus, if the readers receive greater revelation, their responsibility, and therefore punishment for failure to obey, will be even greater. The author draws two examples from the Old Testament, one general (chapters 1–2) and one specific (chapters 3–4), to illustrate his case. In both examples he is careful to point out the difference in the *revelation* by

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<sup>22</sup>“This sermon concerns the God who speaks. It begins by focusing attention upon the God who has spoken to his people in the past, and who is speaking to his people in the present time (1:1-2a). It is an urgent call for the new people of God to listen to the word he has spoken through his Son,” Lane, *Hebrews*, 15. As Hughes states the intent of the introduction, it is “to confirm the finality, and the dignity of the Son in whom has come the eschatological form of God's address. The prologue as a whole, therefore, is pre-eminently about the Word in the Son.” Graham Hughes, *Hebrews and Hermeneutics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 7.

<sup>23</sup>The divisions (chapters 1—2 and 3—4) for this the second major section (1:5—4:16) are based on content and theme. First, chapters one through four have distinguishable content concerning the Old Covenant which was given through both angels and Moses. Chapters one and two concern angels while chapters three and four deal with Moses and the wilderness generation. Chapter five however takes up the distinct topic of Melchizedek and the Aaronic priesthood. While Jesus' priesthood is briefly mentioned in chapters one through four, it becomes the main focus from chapter five onward. Second, the comparisons between Jesus and the foils in chapters one through four (angels in 1–2; Moses in 3–4) are of a different kind than that in chapters five through twelve. The correlation between Jesus and angels is one of good and better (2:1-4); Moses is also faithful, though Jesus is more faithful (3:5-6). As far as the reader is concerned through chapter four, both the good of the previous revelation and the better of the recent revelation could coexist. The comparison in chapters five and following however is of a different nature. The theme becomes one of replacement with the new making the old obsolete, rather than simply representing an improvement. Thus, the first four chapters differ in content and contribution to the message and are rightly considered as a separate unit.

following the comparison with which he began (1:1-4), namely between the different *messengers* of that revelation.

#### A General Comparison 1:5–2:18

If the context of this section is not considered one might mistakenly think that the author's point is simply a comparison between the person of Christ and that of angels.<sup>24</sup> If this were the writer's concern the comment by A. B. Bruce would certainly be appropriate.

A modern interpreter would not be sorry to pass over in silence this section about angels. It is an unwelcome task to consider gravely a proof that Christ is greater than angels; the thing to be proved is so much a matter of course. . . . The subject was probably a weariness to the writer of our Epistle.<sup>25</sup>

Bruce's comments are understandable if the reader only focuses upon the actual comparisons between Jesus and angels (1:5-14; 2:5-18). It would then appear that the author's subject was merely superiority of the person of Jesus compared to angels. The author's concern, to be sure, however was more than to convince his readers that Messiah is greater than angels. His argument begins with the comparison of the revelation which was given through angels with that which has come through Christ. He reasons simply that superior revelation comes through superior channels, and if one obeys revelation given in the past then he so much the more ought to obey superior revelation. The reasons for this understanding follow.

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<sup>24</sup>The frequent mention of angels in these two chapters identify them as a major division. The two expository sections of chapters 1–2 (1:5-14 and 2:5-18) are easily identified and serve to frame the warning passage of 2:1-4. An *inclusio* serves to bracket and identify each section. Cf. D. A. Black, "The Problem of the Literary Structure of Hebrews: An Evaluation and a Proposal," *Grace Theological Journal* 7 (1986):169.

1:5 "to which of the angels did He ever say"  
1:13 "to which of the angels has He ever said"

2:5 "He did not subject to angels"  
2:16 "He does not give help to angels"

<sup>25</sup>A. B. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1899), 45.

The Contribution of the Introduction 1:1-4

The purpose already announced by the writer (1:1-4) is to demonstrate the finality and greatness of this most recent revelation by asserting the superiority of the messenger.<sup>26</sup> Thus, it would be logical that he would continue to develop his stated purpose in the passage which immediately follows. In addition, the parallels between the introduction (1:1-4) and stated conclusion of chapter two (2:1-4) are quite strong, also indicating that the author has not changed his subject in chapter two.

1:1-4		2:1-4	
1:1	God <i>spoke</i> ὁ θεὸς λαλήσας	2:1	We must hold fast <i>what we have heard</i> προσέχειν ἡμᾶς τοῖς ἀκουσθεῖσιν
1:2	God has <i>spoken to us</i> in Son ἐλάλησεν ἡμῖν ἐν υἱῷ	2:3	what was <i>spoken to us</i> by the Lord λαλεῖσθαι διὰ τοῦ κυρίου . . . εἰς ἡμᾶς

The focus is not upon the messengers necessarily but only as their inherent quality reflects upon the importance and thus the finality of their message. “The reference to the God who has spoken in the exordium (1:1-2a) prepares for the solemn appeal to pay the closest attention to what has been heard in 2:1-4.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, the comparison between Christ and angels (1:5-14 and 2:5-18) is not for the ultimate goal of asserting His preeminence over angels, as though the readers’ understanding was deficient in this area.

#### The Direct Statement within the Passage

The essence of the author’s argument is also stated directly within the passage itself. The point of comparison is between “the *message declared* by angels” and the *message “declared . . . by the Lord”* (2:2-4).

For if the message declared by angels was valid and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him (2:2-3).

Too often this short section (2:1-4) is viewed parenthetically as only a “warning passage” when in reality it draws together all of the evidence presented in the two chapters and forcefully states the author’s point. Unless the theme of the Son *as bearer of revelation* is recognized the point of the first several chapters will be missed.

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<sup>26</sup>“The fundamental assumption of the argument is that the character of the messenger provides the test of the importance and finality of his message,” Lane, *Hebrews*, 40.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 36.

### The Harmony within the Section 1:5–4:16

If one understands the purpose of the first two chapters to be a correction of a misconception concerning angels<sup>28</sup> then it would be logical to see chapters three and four as a polemic against an aberrant view of Moses. Hughes, who sees the first two chapters as a polemic against angels is consistent here.

The content of chapters 3 and 4 in particular make it plain that they were being tempted to assign to Moses a prominence that was scripturally unwarranted and damaging to the gospel. Here, too, the influence of the type of mentality that prevailed among the Essenes of Qumran may reasonably be suggested, since the community they had formed in the desert was designed to conform faithfully to the standards laid down under the leadership of Moses in the wilderness.<sup>29</sup>

But one must question whether the situation of the readers actually entailed their worship or at least exaltation of angels and Moses.<sup>30</sup> Is it likely that Jewish believers (or at least Jewish adherents who were contemplating Christianity) could not discern who was greater, Messiah or Moses? If the author's

<sup>28</sup>Hughes speculates on the occasion of the book, "This letter, like all the letters of the New Testament, was written to meet the needs of a concrete situation. There must have been ample reason for our author to insist that angels are in no way comparable in being or dignity to Christ. The evidence now available to us shows that in the Jewish world of the first century there was a considerable amount of speculation and even dogmatism concerning the role played by angels in the scheme of things. As those to whom this letter was addressed were beyond reasonable doubt Hebrew Christians, it can readily be concluded that they needed to be warned against the danger of allowing veneration for angelic beings to threaten the absolute supremacy of Christ," Hughes, *Hebrews and Hermeneutics*, 21.

Kent arrives at the same basic conclusion by a somewhat different path. "As Hebrew Christians, they had already trusted Christ as the Son of God, one who was obviously higher than ordinary men. Therefore, they may not have been particularly troubled by comparisons between Jesus and the prophets. Such suggestions would probably have been rejected immediately. But lifting Christ above the realm of ordinary mortals did not necessarily prove that He was God. Angels too were above mortals, and were highly respected in the Old Testament and by Jews generally. Thus the point needed to be clearly established that Christ as the Son of God was superior to every angel, because He existed on an even higher plane," Kent, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 46-47.

<sup>29</sup>Hughes, *Hebrews and Hermeneutics*, 22. Lane seems to allow the possibility, though he does not attempt to answer how this logic could be followed in the remainder of the book. "In some strands of the Jewish tradition the testimony to Moses in Num 12:7 was used to prove that Moses had been granted a higher rank and privilege than the ministering angels . . . . If this interpretation may be presupposed among Jewish communities of the Diaspora as well, it clarifies the structure of Hebrews, where the son is compared first to the angels (1:1–2:16) and then to Moses, their superior (3:1-6). It would indicate that it was by no means superfluous when Jesus had been proven superior to the angels to continue with a demonstration of his superiority to Moses," Lane, *Hebrews*, 73.

<sup>30</sup>Some who posit that the readers had fallen prey to angel worship are: T. W. Manson, "The Problem of the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Studies in the Gospels and Epistles*, ed. Matthew Black (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 242. G. Dellings, "τάσσω," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)*, ed. G. Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 8:42. Philip E. Hughes, "The Christology of Hebrews," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 28 (1985): 21. Kent, *Hebrews*, 40. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* in *New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 9; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 44-46.

point is to simply discuss the superiority of the person of the Son, then the high point of his argument would have been the powerful statement of His deity and Creatorship in the introduction (1:3) and all which follows is disappointingly anticlimactic. If this indeed is the author's argument in the book then one must ask if the readership also had questions about the relative superiority of Messiah and Aaron (chapters 7–10). The answer seems doubtful. Although the theme of the superiority of the person of Jesus to others may seem to explain the text in chapter one, it fails to do so for the rest of the book.<sup>31</sup>

### The Understanding of the Passage

What then is the point of the extended discussion of the superiority of the Son? The problem of the readers (according to the rest of the epistle, 12:25) was not to exalt angels but to turn from the word of Christ back to the word of angels. There is no hint of rebuke for exalting angels as is found in Colossians, as though this had been a problem for the readership. On the contrary, the angels are assigned a positive role (2:2) and there is no polemic directed against angels in the epistle at all. By discussing the superiority of the Son to angels the author was not instructing the unlearned but simply building his argument to a crescendo giving it a more forceful impact. The purpose of chapter one is as an *a fortiori* argument leading up to the parenthesis of 2:1-4.<sup>32</sup> It repetitiously stresses a point already understood and received in order to win the heart and mind of the reader, while ultimately lending

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<sup>31</sup>After reviewing a long list of insufficient occasions for the letter Dey summarizes: "In our estimation, we do not have a satisfactory explanation for the carefully reasoned attempts of the author to establish the superiority of Jesus over the angels, Moses, Levitic and Aaronide highpriesthood, an attempt which has no comparable parallels in the rest of the New Testament. A basic issue of interpretation is whether the author is addressing himself to disparate problems or whether these comparisons fit together in a common frame of religious thought" Lala K. Dey, *The Intermediary World and Patterns of Perfection in Philo and Hebrews*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 25 (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1975), 2. Dey's solution is, "We will attempt to set Hebrews in its particular history of religions context, i.e., a particular kind of Judaism within which the features of its content become explicable. This can be done best, not by examining a particular passage or theme in the writing, but by attempting to describe the total framework of its religious thought" p. 3. A presupposition of this writer is that however helpful historical considerations may be, the most reliable guides for understanding the text are the clues given by the author within the text itself.

<sup>32</sup>George W. Buchanan, *To the Hebrews*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1972), xxiii-xxiv. "The close connection between the argument from the superiority of Christ over the angels and the parenthesis in 2:1-4 indicates that the argument in 1:5-13 serves as the presupposition for the parenthesis. . . . This fact means for the community that the word of Christ is to be taken more seriously. The author's metaphysical argument [1:5-13] thus serves the needs of parenthesis [2:1-4]. J. W. Thompson, "The Structure and Purpose of the Catena in Heb 1:5-13," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 38 (1976): 363.

impact and force to the point to be made. He moves from that which no one will contest (the superiority of Christ to that of angels<sup>33</sup>) to prove that which has escaped their notice: His revelation therefore demands greater obedience. The point was that if disobedience to revelation given by an angel met with destruction, how much more severe would be the punishment of those who turned from the revelation given by the Son.<sup>34</sup>

#### A Specific Comparison 3:1–4:16

Having established his basic premise in chapters one and two, the author now reinforces that premise with a second, more specific and graphic illustration: Moses and the wilderness generation.<sup>35</sup> Once again Jesus is compared to another channel of revelation.<sup>36</sup> As before, however, the author's ultimate goal is not simply to assert the superiority of the person, but rather the relative importance of the revelation given.<sup>37</sup> This is a valid understanding of the author's meaning, not only

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<sup>33</sup>“That angels pay homage to the heavenly Messiah is a familiar concept in Jewish literature (Asc. Isa. 11:23ff.; Apoc 5:8f.) . . .” Ibid., 356.

<sup>34</sup>The content of 2:5-18 continues the comparison between Christ and angels but with the emphasis upon Jesus humanity. Jesus' humanity distinguishes him from the angels just as remarkably as his deity. If the comparison is between the majesty of His person and that of angels, then his humanity, even if it is temporary, runs counter to the argument. If however, the argument runs that Jesus is better fit to mediate and communicate from God to man then his humanity is a clear advantage.

<sup>35</sup>These chapters are grouped together both thematically and structurally. They concern the common subject of the leadership of Moses and Joshua and the nation which followed them. Structurally, 3:1 and 4:14 form an *inclusio* to the section.

3:1-2 Therefore, holy brothers, . . . observe that the apostle and *high priest* of whom our *confession* speaks, *Jesus*, was *faithful* . . . .

4:14 Therefore, since we have a great *high priest* who has gone into heaven, *Jesus* the Son of God, let us *hold firmly* the *confession*. Lane, *Hebrews*, 68-69.

<sup>36</sup>“Moses is not merely one of the figures compared unfavorably to Jesus. Instead, Moses and Jesus are yoked throughout the entirety of the Epistle. In truth, the Mosaic era or covenant is contrasted extensively with the Jesus era or covenant. Comparisons of Jesus to angels, to Joshua, to Aaron, for example do *not* go outside but rather remain snugly inside the mosaic era. The angels are, after all, those who mediated the Mosaic covenant.” P. R. Jones, “The Figure of Moses as a Heuristic Device for Understanding the Pastoral Intent of Hebrews,” *Review and Expositor* 76 (1979): 95.

<sup>37</sup>Cf. M.R. D'Angelo, *Moses in the Letter to the Hebrews*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 42 (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1979), 66. “The first two chapters (1.4–2:18) declare Christ's message superior to and therefore more demanding than that of the angels (i.e. the law) . . . . Chapters 3 and 4 appear to make up a second and parallel treatment of the superiority of the message of Christ to the Law.”



because of the pattern set in the introduction (1:1-4), and in the first major section (1:5–2:18), but also because of several components within this passage.

The first six verses of chapter three compare Jesus and Moses through the apparently innocuous figure of a house. Moses was faithful as a servant and Jesus was faithful as a son. The illustration is not original with the author, however, as he draws upon an Old Testament story rich with meaning. The Old Testament source for this figure is most likely Numbers 12:1-8.<sup>38</sup> Miriam and Aaron had complained about Moses and God rebuked them. Their immediate complaint concerned Moses' wife, but the significant issue (based upon the response of God) was the freedom they felt to criticize Moses, apparently based upon a feeling of equality with him as channels of revelation. They reasoned that since God had spoken through them as well as Moses, they could take issue with him, “and they said, ‘Has the Lord indeed *spoken* only through Moses? Has He not *spoken* through us as well?’ And the Lord heard it” (Num 12:2). This situation provided the foil for God's answer concerning his channels of revelation.

Hear now My words: If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord shall make Myself known to him in a vision. I shall speak with him in a dream. Not so, with My servant Moses, *He is faithful in all My household*; With him I speak mouth to mouth, Even openly, and not in dark sayings, And he beholds the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against *My servant* against Moses? (12:6-8).

The central issue was the man Moses and his uniqueness as a bearer of revelation. Moses was the quintessence of one who received God's words directly and then delivered them to the people. Thus, if the author's allusion in Hebrews is to Numbers, then his comparison is between Jesus and Moses as the greatest bearer of revelation in the Old Testament. Of all of the passages to which the author could allude, this one clearly delineates Moses as the most direct channel of revelation in the Old Testament.

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<sup>38</sup>D'Angelo insists that 1 Chronicles 17:14 and 1 Samuel 2:35 are also likely texts to which the author alludes. Ibid., 69-94. Jesus' superiority in Hebrews is based on being a “Son” and building a house, both of which are mentioned in 1 Chronicles 17:14 but not in Numbers. These points do indicate a connection between the texts in question probably because the passages in Chronicles and Samuel build upon the theology found in Numbers. It is likely that the author may be drawing on all three to some extent, and yet it would seem unwise to deny that the author's primary reference was to the only passage which mentions Moses as a faithful servant, Numbers 12! In addition, certain textual clues indicate that the Numbers passage was clearly in the author's mind. The word θεράπων is only found once in the New Testament and is used of Moses several times in the LXX, not the least of which is Numbers 12:7. In addition, the critical phrase in Hebrews 3:5, Μωϋσῆς μὲν πιστὸς ἐν ὅλῳ τῷ οἴκῳ αὐτοῦ ὡς θεράπων, is only found in text of Numbers 12.

The official title θεράπων, “servant,” which occurs only here in the NT, is derived from the LXX, where the word is used of Moses not only in Num 12:7 but elsewhere (Exod 4:10; 14:31; Num 11:11; Deut 3:24; Josh 1:2, 8:31, 33; 1 Chr 16:40; Wis 10:16; 18:21). In context it carries overtones of dignity and honor and describes a relationship of intimacy and trust between Moses and Yahweh.<sup>39</sup>

That the author’s use of the incident in Numbers was for the purpose of focusing on Moses as a channel of revelation is reinforced by his commentary in chapter three. He further explains the essence of Moses’s faithfulness (3:5), “Now Moses was faithful in all His house as a servant,” with the words “for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later . . . .” Moses’ faithfulness in this comparison is defined in his mission of leaving a written record of revelation. Swetnam concurs:

For it is not Moses as leader with whom Christ is compared, but Moses as law-giver. Moses is designated faithful in Nm 12,7 because he expressed faithfully what had been told him, and this is the thought of the author of Hebrews: Moses was “faithful” as a “servant” (θεράπων) “for witness to the things which shall be spoken” (εἰς μαρτύριον τῶν λαληθησομένων, Heb 3:5). Christ, then, by implication, is praised as “faithful” because he, like Moses, is one to whom God has spoken face to face and one who has transmitted this message exactly.”<sup>40</sup>

Given this background, then, it appears that the contrast between Moses and Jesus is not simply one of faithfulness in general duties but rather faithfulness as bearers of revelation. In what sense could any man ever be compared to Jesus in his moral character and obedience? Lane adds:

The comparison between Jesus and Moses was not simply a literary exercise that enabled the writer to speak of the excellence of Jesus or to exhibit his own exegetical skill. If that were the case, he could have stressed that Moses was not faithful (cf. Num 20:12).<sup>41</sup>

The point of the parenetic section (3:7–4:16) follows closely upon this comparison. The author encourages his readership to hold fast their confession because of the historical example (3:7-19) and of the eschatological hope (4:1-16). He cites the fate of the wilderness generation which did not trust in the revelation of Moses as a warning to those who would neglect the revelation in Christ (3:7-19). The testimony from Psalm 95 is clear. Those who disobeyed the words of Moses did not enter the

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<sup>39</sup>Lane, *Hebrews*, 78.

<sup>40</sup>Swetnam, “Form and Content in Hebrews 1–6,” 376. See also G. Hughes, *Hebrews and Hermeneutics*, 9, where he says “Certainly it cannot be without significance that the Old Testament reference around which the whole comparison is built (Num 12:6-8) has to do with Moses’ superlative quality as the bearer of revelation. Over against the other prophets who hear and see in dreams and visions, with Moses God speaks “mouth to mouth, clearly and not in dark speech” (Num 12:8). Moses is there already spoken of as a servant (θεράπων), and in Hebrews this is reinforced as the “servant who bears witness of the things which shall be spoken” (εἰς μαρτύριον τῶν λαληθησομένων, 3:5).

<sup>41</sup>Lane, *Hebrews*, 80.

rest, and “their bodies fell in the wilderness” (3: 17). The point of application is simply that if those who rebelled against the greatest revelation giver of the Old Testament failed to inherit the promises, what will become of those who rebel against the revelation of Jesus? The readers are then encouraged to remain faithful to Christ and enter the rest planned for them (4: 1-16).

To summarize the point of this section, the problem of the audience was most likely not the temptation to exalt the person of Moses over the person of Christ. Rather their temptation was to abandon the revelation about Christ and turn back to the revelation of Moses. The parenetic portion applies the theology of 3:1-6 in a powerful way. If Christ is greater than Moses (and all would agree that He is) and those who rebelled against Moses’ words were punished then it would be suicidal to turn from the words of Christ. Because Christ has given greater revelation there will be greater punishment for those who disobey. It is by no mistake that this section closes with a warning about the power of the *revelation* of God, “For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit . . .” (4: 12, 13).

#### Greater Revelation Displaces Older Revelation 5:1–12:29

Having laid the groundwork concerning the necessity of obedience the author now moves to his second major and more crucial point that this newer revelation displaces older revelation. The emphasis of the first four chapters was more heavily weighted toward exhortation than instruction. The truths about Christ’s superiority to angels and Moses were essentially matters of common agreement which were included as the basis of *a fortiori* argumentation. Indeed, up to this point the readers have not been forced to make any kind of decision between Moses and Christ. At this point one could claim allegiance to the words of both. In chapter five however, the author signals a change in his letter by the mention of Melchizedek. He comments that the truth of Melchizedek will be more difficult to teach than what has come before. “Concerning him we have much to say, and it is hard to explain . . .” (5:11). In 6:1 the author exhorts the audience to press on to maturity which involves their laying hold of the deeper truths which he is about to explain. The author seems to be warning his readers that the

truths of chapters five and following are of a different nature or at least more difficult than those found previously.<sup>42</sup>

What in particular is “hard to explain” is most likely the concept of replacement. Whereas the force of the first chapters was on a simple comparison of the importance of listening to the new as opposed to the old, the message of 5–12 is much more profound in that here the new *replaces* the old. Repeatedly the author uses the terminology of *finality* and replacement. For example, in 7:12 he states, “For when the priesthood is *changed*, of necessity there takes place a change of law also.” The implication here is that the Law of Moses is to be replaced. In 7:18 the author states, “For, on the one hand, there is a *setting aside* of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness” indicating the same truth. In 8:13 the author repeats the theme in terms of covenant, “When He said, ‘A new covenant,’ He has made the first *obsolete*. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is *ready to disappear*.” Such words would have shaken the theological foundations of the audience and could easily be termed “hard to explain.”

Once again, in 10:9 referring to the sacrificial system and Christ’s once for all sacrifice, the writer states “then He said, ‘BEHOLD, I HAVE COME TO DO THY WILL.’ He *takes away* the first in order to establish the second.” Finally in a reference to the place of sacrifices after Calvary, the writer states, “‘AND THEIR SINS AND THEIR LAWLESS DEEDS I WILL REMEMBER NO MORE.’ Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is *no longer* any offering for sin” (10:17, 18).

The shock which this must have given a first century Jew is hard to overstate. For a millennia and a half the primary test of a prophet was doctrinal: “Did his message agree with Moses?” All revelation which had come from Judges to Malachi either explained, applied or built upon the bedrock foundation of the Pentateuch. Now revelation has come which demands that Moses be set aside. The skepticism with which this teaching was met is understandable. For this reason the author spends two chapters introducing his main point.

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<sup>42</sup>“This central fact is . . . the uniqueness and supremacy of Christ in comparison with the transitory and incomplete character of all that preceded his coming—a theme which the readers would almost certainly object to and which has necessitated the logic and argumentation of the remainder of the epistle,” Black, “Hebrews 1:1-4: A Study in Discourse Analysis,” 192.

### Introduction of the Theme 5:1–6:20

If the author is to succeed in persuading his Jewish audience he must base his argument on more than his personal authority. He must prove his point about setting Moses aside from the Scriptures themselves, which he does enlisting the support from the most influential of the patriarchs, David (Psalm 110) and Moses (Genesis 14).

### Jesus is a Melchizedekian priest 5:1-10

Under the Mosaic economy the first requirement which would come to mind for one aspiring to the priesthood was Aaronic lineage. God had, however, ordained other priests prior to the institution of the Mosaic covenant and the Aaronic priesthood. Melchizedek, was one such priest and in reality, the most fundamental requirements for priests both inside and outside the Aaronic order were twofold: he had to be a man (5:1-3) and he had to be called by God to be a priest (5:4). Jesus qualifies by these two criteria because he was called by God (5:4-5) and he was a man (5:7-10). The all important implication of this teaching is not articulated, however, until chapter 7. Before that all too delicate subject is broached the author first warns his audience (5:11–6:12) and reassures them (6:13-20).

### The gravity of this theme for the audience 5:11–6:12

This, the third warning passage (5:11–6:12), encourages the people to move ahead in their understanding of the revelation of God. “For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the *word of righteousness* . . . but solid food is for the mature . . . . Therefore leaving the *elementary teaching* about the Christ, let us press on to maturity” (5:13–6:1). If the readers do not move on they will find themselves in a perilous situation. The warnings which are given here are drastic and final (6:6-8). The author not only warns his readers negatively, but also encourages them positively toward personal faithfulness and about the faithfulness of God toward them (6:9-12).

### Reassurance of God’s commitment to keep His promises 6:13-20.

This reassurance (6:13-20) seems designed to meet the natural reaction to the truth which is presented in chapter seven. If the new revelation displaces Moses then the next question would most

likely be, “Has God forgotten his promises to bless Abraham and his seed?” The answer comes powerfully in 6:13-20 that not only has God not forgotten his promises to the Jew but that it is Jesus himself, who, *by being a priest like Melchizedek*, will fulfill those promises. No matter what may become of the bi-lateral Mosaic covenant, the uni-lateral promises of God can not be forgotten. An assurance such as this suggests that what is to follow would shake the faith of the readers.

#### Elaboration of the Theme 7:1–10:39

The author now begins to unfold the implications from Jesus’ priesthood in this the heart of the epistle. He speaks first of the displacement of the Aaronic priesthood and from this follows the termination of the rest of the Mosaic trappings including the covenant and the sacrifices.

#### Jesus’ priesthood displaces Aaronic priesthood 7:1-28

Although the author has already introduced the theme of Jesus’ priesthood and identified him with the order of Melchizedek he has not compared this priesthood to that of Aaron until now. In 7:1-10 he states that the Melchizedekian priesthood is both incompatible with and superior to the Aaronic priesthood. Since Jesus has been installed by God as a new priest, He must then replace Aaron, and along with Aaron, all of the regulations which applied to him.<sup>43</sup> It is not the priesthood which is dependent upon the Law, but rather the opposite. It was not the books of Exodus, Leviticus or Deuteronomy which give legitimacy to or provided the basis for the priesthood. Rather the laws of those books were given to regulate the relationship between God and his people which was based upon the priesthood which He established. Thus, the Law is subservient to the priesthood so that when the priesthood changes, the laws which regulate that priesthood no longer apply.<sup>44</sup> This is seen in the Greek syntax and is reflected in the English translation as well, “μετατιθεμένης γὰρ τῆς ἱερωσύνης ἐξ ἀνάγκης καὶ νόμου μετάθεσις γίνεται. For *when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes*

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<sup>43</sup>The immediate context (vv. 13, 16) shows that the reference is to the Mosaic covenant.

<sup>44</sup>Lane lists three ways to translate this phrase, ὁ λαὸς γὰρ ἐπ’ αὐτῆς νενομοθέτηται, “for on the basis of it the people received the Law” (NAS) in 7:11, all of which agree on the essential point that the priesthood is logically primary to the law or that the Law is subordinate to the priesthood: (1) the law was given *on the basis* of the levitical priesthood (so NEB, JB, TEV NIV; BDF §234[8]); (2) the law was given *under* (or, *through*) the Levitical priesthood (RSV); (3) the law was given *in association with* the Levitical priesthood (Hughes, 256). Lane, *Hebrews*, 174.

place a change of Law also” (7:12). While we may think of the Law as giving rise to the priesthood (see figure 1), according to Hebrews 7:11-12, it is just the opposite (see figure 2).

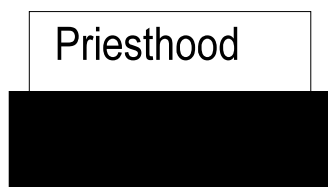


Figure 1



Figure 2

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seem false because it is clear that the giving of the law (Exodus 19–24) chronologically preceded the establishment of the priesthood (Exodus 29; Leviticus 8–9). However, the author’s subject in the chapter hinges not on *chronological* but on *logical* precedence. We say this for two reasons: (1) the statements of 7:11, 12<sup>45</sup> and (2) the contextual flow of the author’s argument in the book. In this book the abrogation of the law is not assumed, but rather the point to be proved, and this point is proved on the basis of the change in priesthood. An analogous point might be made with a new car and its repair manual. When a new car replaces an old car, a repair manual appropriate to the new car must replace the old manual. According to the author’s subject and argument in this chapter the Law was given as a “manual” or document which helped to regulate human interaction with the priesthood. As an administrative covenant it was dependent upon the centerpiece of the priesthood so that when the priesthood changed it had to be changed as well. Thus the author argues that the laws of Moses must be displaced with new revelation which regulates worship appropriate to the new priest. In the opinion of this writer this is the theological center of the book. It is here that the themes of revelation and priesthood meet. New revelation must replace old revelation precisely because of the change in priesthood. The audience must hold fast their confession of Jesus, not only because He is God’s avenue of salvation but also because with him the old regulations have become obsolete. In short, the readers must cling to Christ because they have nothing left in Moses to which they can return.

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<sup>45</sup>The author states his point twice in two verses, making it parenthetically in 7:11 and directly in 7:12. He writes in 7:11, “Now if perfection was through the Levitical priesthood (*for on the basis of it the people received the Law*), what further need . . .” and in 7:12, “For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also.”

This kind of argumentation about the Law is unique in the New Testament.<sup>46</sup> This passage argues for the abrogation of the Law upon the solid basis of Old Testament teaching. The two texts which are combined to conclude that the Mosaic covenant is gone come from the hand of Moses himself (Genesis 14) and David (Psalm 110).

The author's reasoning is both simple and solid. If Jesus is a priest like Melchizedek, and he is (Psalm 110), and if the Melchizedekian priesthood is superior to the Aaronic, and it is (Genesis 14), then Jesus must replace Aaron as High priest. And if the priesthood is changed, and it is (Hebrews 1:3; 7:13-17; *et al.*), then the regulations which govern the priesthood must change as well, and they have (7:11-12). At this point, the author's argument may need elaboration but its fundamental truth has been clearly stated and cannot be easily denied.

The rest of chapter 7 lists several more reasons for the setting aside of the old priesthood and regulations. Each of these reasons are logical and supportive of the author's argument but apart from the new priesthood would not by themselves call for the end of the Aaronic priesthood. They can be summarized as Jesus' administration replaces the Aaronic because: (1) the old was weak while the new is powerful, (7:18-19), (2) the old was temporary while the new is permanent, (7:20-22), (3) the old depended upon mortal priests while the new upon immortal, (7:23-25), (4) the old utilized sinful priests while the new priest is sinless, (7:26-28).

Jesus' priesthood requires a new covenant which replaces the old covenant 8:1-10:18

Having made his point about the change in priesthood, the author now elaborates on the implications concerning the regulations of the priesthood, namely the Law is replaced.

Statement of principle: A new covenant must replace an old covenant 8:1-13.

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<sup>46</sup>“When comparing this letter [Hebrews] with, for example, Luke's and Paul's writings, we find some of the same topics and themes, e.g., the question of the law, Moses, ceremonies, the sanctuary, etc. But the way the letter to the Hebrews deals with the topics is highly original and independent,” J. Jervell, *Luke and the People of God*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), 48. “In chap. 7 the writer expounds the new and profound concept of the priesthood of Christ implicit in the oracle of Ps 110:4, a christological theme found nowhere else in the NT.” Lane, *Hebrews*, 171. Ellingworth agrees, “Since neither title [apostle, high priest] is given to Jesus elsewhere in the New Testament, one may presume that they were probably both new to the readers,” Paul Ellingworth, “Jesus and the Universe in Hebrews,” *The Evangelical Quarterly* 58 (1986): 338.



The eighth chapter begins with the words “Now the main point in what has been said is this (Κεφάλαιον δὲ ἐπὶ τοῖς λεγομένοις).” That is, everything up to this point is somewhat preliminary to the point to be made in this chapter.<sup>47</sup> The verse continues “. . . we have a high priest who has taken his seat.” The author has already proven the theory that a new priest requires a new covenant, now his emphasis is on the present reality of Jesus’ priesthood.<sup>48</sup> The logic then follows that since His priesthood is incompatible with the laws governing the old priesthood (8:4-5) it is necessary that a new covenant replace the old one (8:6-12). The author takes time to recite the essence of the new covenant as described by Jeremiah (Jer 31:31-34; Heb 8:8-12). Although the passage in Jeremiah is not specific as to the time when the new covenant will replace the old, the fact that it would at some point replace the old is undeniable. The time element is powerfully addressed by the author in the verse immediately following the quotation from Jeremiah: “By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear (8:13). The words *obsolete*, *aging* and *soon disappear* address the issue in a sensitive and tactful way: it is now time for the covenant promised by God in Jeremiah to be *realized* and thus to *replace* Moses (8:13).<sup>49</sup>

Statement of relevance: The new covenant is now in effect and has displaced the old 9:1-28. The fact of Jesus’ priesthood has been proven in chapter seven and the principle of a new covenant replacing an old has been introduced in chapter eight. Now the author clearly states that the old

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<sup>47</sup>“The importance of the new unit [8:1–9:28] is underscored for the community by designating it ‘the chief point’ of the exposition (8:1) . . .” Lane, *Hebrews*, 126.

<sup>48</sup>Besides the crucial and final verse in the chapter which forcefully emphasizes the time element, several other components in the passage point to the present reality of Jesus’ priesthood and the implied necessity to replace the old covenant. “But now (νυνὶ) He has obtained . . .” which is the anticipated ending of the particle μὲν in v 4. Also in 8:6 the perfect tense of the verb is used (διαφορωτέρως τέτυχεν λειτουργίας) “he has attained a superior ministry,” affirming that Jesus has obtained and now possesses a better ministry than Aaron.

<sup>49</sup>The author’s stress in this section involves the fact of replacement and the timing of the replacement. He does not here address the issue of the content of the new covenant. What is clear is that the Mosaic covenant is no longer the measure of the Jewish believer’s walk with God. As Lane notes: “At this point the writer shows no interest in the promises attached to the new covenant. He focuses all attention upon the implications of the key word of the cited text, καινήν ‘new’ (cf. v 8)” Lane, *Hebrews*, 210.

covenant is not *about* to disappear, but actually *has disappeared*. He makes his point by focusing upon the time when the old covenant was displaced by the new covenant.

The author begins his argument by mentioning some of the regulations of worship of the *old covenant*; in particular he lists the furniture of the tabernacle (9:1-7).<sup>50</sup> This discussion of cultic furniture is curious because his relatively detailed description was common knowledge to every reader leaving the need to recite it in question. He answers this enigma, however in 9:8-10, which serves not only to define the meaning of the passage before (9:1-7), but more importantly of the passage which follows (9:11-14). In 9:7 he cites three limitations to access to God in the Holy place under the old covenant: (1) only the high priest could enter (2) only once a year and, (3) never without blood. The point is stated directly in 9:8, “The Holy Spirit was showing by this<sup>51</sup> that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still standing.” Simply stated, the warp and woof of the old covenant regulations reminded the worshipper that direct access to God was basically unavailable to him (9:8).<sup>52</sup> The whole Mosaic system simply reinforced the reality which was inherent to the Aaronic priesthood: cleansing of the inner man was not accomplished (9:9-10). This (9:1-10) serves as the foil for the new state of affairs (9:11-14).

What was unavailable under the old covenant is now a reality. Christ changed this state of affairs when he became high priest by gaining access to God (9:11) and cleansed the inner man (9:12-14). It becomes clearer with each paragraph that the old regulations have no place in the new system of worship. This is why the author’s next words are “For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant . . .” (9:15).

Having established the fact that Christ has changed this state of affairs, the author now (9:15-28) focuses upon the exact timing of the change from old to new covenant. He begins with the principle that a will and its attendant benefits are only executed upon the death of the one making it

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<sup>50</sup>“It is only natural therefore, that the tabernacle be used rather than the temple because of the association of the desert sanctuary with the establishment of the old covenant at Sinai,” *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>51</sup>Specifically, 9:7 and that which leads up to it, 9:1-6.

<sup>52</sup>“The reason for detailing the arrangement of the tabernacle and its furnishings in 9:2-5 is manifestly to show the lack of access to God under the old cultus,” *Ibid.*, 224.

(9:15-17).<sup>53</sup> He then moves to the sign of the inauguration of the Mosaic covenant from Exodus 24. Although the old covenant had been introduced in Exodus 19 and the people had given their approval to it (Exod 19:8), the official ratification did not take place until Exodus 24 which involved, among other things, the sprinkling of blood.<sup>54</sup> The author brings his argument in this chapter to dramatic conclusion by specifying the time of the inauguration of the new covenant at the sacrifice of Christ (9:23-28). That sacrifice was a once for all affair, never to occur again. Thus, when Jesus returns again it will not be for the purpose of shedding his blood to inaugurate the new covenant, because this has already occurred. He will not come to inaugurate, but rather, to consummate the new covenant for believers (9:28).

Statement of specific application: Sacrifice has become obsolete 10:1-18.<sup>55</sup>

Having laid the foundation for this teaching in chapters seven through nine, the author now becomes painfully specific in his application of truth. Because a new priesthood has replaced an old one and a new covenant has replaced an old one it also follows that the sacrificial system which was central to that old covenant must suffer the same fate.<sup>56</sup> This moves the author's argument from the theoretical to the actual. Discussions of priesthood and covenant can border on ideology, but discussion of the actual practice of sacrifice suddenly brings the debate to a very practical level for the Jewish reader no matter where he resides, in the land or diaspora. A reader might argue on a theoretical level that Jesus'

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<sup>53</sup>“The meaning of διαιθήκη in vv 16-17 is qualified by its meaning in v 15, where the proper frame of reference for the interpretation of v 15b is the death of the covenant-victim whose blood sealed and ratified the covenant,” Ibid., 242. But see also, Hughes, *Hebrews and Hermeneutics*, 59-65.

<sup>54</sup>Hebrews 9:20 quotes from Exodus 24:8, “And Moses took the blood, and sprinkled [it] on the people, and said, Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD hath made with you concerning all these words.”

<sup>55</sup>This section is integrally related to the argument in chapters 7–9 by thematic and literary clues. It is the final section of exposition in this section before the exhortation of 10:19-39 begins. Earlier themes are recapitulated, in particular the theme of Jesus' session at God's right hand, introduced with an allusion to Psalm 110 in 8:1, is reiterated in 10:12-13 where the author paraphrases and directly quotes Psalm 110:1. Echoes from the full quotation from Jeremiah 31:31-34 are heard once again in 10:16-17, just before the final statement of 10:18 is uttered.

<sup>56</sup>Of the author's approximate 18 uses of the term *sacrifice* (5:1, 3; 7:27; 8:3; 9:9, 23, 26; 10:1, 3, 5, 8, 11, 12, 26; 11:4; 13:11, 15, 16), half are located in this section from 9:23–10:26. Outside of chapter 10 sacrifices are only mentioned peripherally, whereas in this section they are central to the subject of the discussion.

heavenly priesthood is not incompatible with the Aaronic priesthood (chapter 7). He might also argue that even though the new covenant is somehow in effect the old covenant is still useful for spiritual growth (chapters 8–9). But if the point about sacrifice is conceded by the reader, then the author has brought closure to his argument.

Once the ultimate forgiveness of the New Covenant has come (10:16-17) there is no longer a need for the shadow of animal sacrifice, “Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin,” (10:18).

Application of this truth 10:19-39

The application of chapters seven through ten is very simply that the recipients ought to hold fast to their profession of faith in their new priesthood rather than drift back to a priest and a system which may still be functioning in Jerusalem but are no longer legitimate. Swetnam clarifies what the author’s exhortations would mean to the readers.

. . . to enter into the Holy of Holies as the Christians are being urged to do (cf. 10, 19 which is thematic for the whole exhortation) is to violate the Mosaic Law in an important matter. So important, in fact, that the penalty is death. By following Christ the Jew-become-Christian in effect apostatizes from observance of the Mosaic Law.<sup>57</sup>

With the old regulations for worship gone, the writer now lays down worship regulations which are in accord with the new covenant.

The exhortations presented express the stipulations of the new covenant. The covenant community must draw near to God in worship with sincerity (10:28); they must hold fast the hope they profess without wavering (10:23); they must show loyalty . . . . These are all functions of the new covenant.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> J. Swetnam, “Form and Content in Hebrews 7–13,” *Biblica* 55 (1974): 338.

<sup>58</sup> “Behind the writer’s discussion there can be discerned the language and imagery of the peace or fellowship offering. . . . According to the OT, a covenant was sealed with a fellowship offering signifying the acceptance of the arrangement by the participants (cf. Exod 20:24; 24:5). The fellowship meal, which was the distinguishing feature of the peace offering, expressed the firm covenant ties binding God and his people. . . .

The exhortations in 10:22-25 appear to rest on a pattern of worship influenced by the peace offering. Access to God having been secured through the purging of defilement, worshipers gather for mutual exhortation to faith, hope and love. This account faithfully reflects the experience of the old covenant people, for whom the peace or fellowship offering was an occasion for reciting God’s covenant faithfulness and love . . . . The response of the community to God and to each other ought to declare to the world the peaceful relationship the covenant community enjoys as a result of the sacrifice of Christ,” Lane, *Hebrews*, 309-10.

Application of the Theme 11:1–12:29

At this point the essentials of the author's message have been communicated. All that remains is to give a hearty exhortation to respond to the new revelation from God by faith and hold fast their confession. Chapter eleven is replete with examples of people who responded properly to revelation of God in their time, thus providing encouragement to the readers. Chapter twelve involves specific exhortations to obedience and patient endurance, and concludes with a final warning not to turn back, once again inviting the comparison between the old covenant (12:18-21) with the new covenant (12:22-24). He once again interprets apostasy with Old Testament examples that are covenantal in character (12:14-17). He refers to the "bitter root" in (Deut 29: 17-21) and to Esau (Gen 25:29-34).

With the example of Esau, apostasy is defined as a decisive contempt for the gifts of God secured on the basis of covenant and as a rejection of a significant vocation defined through covenant. Esau is the person who breaks covenant with God and who experiences divine rejection and the irretrievable loss of covenant blessing.<sup>59</sup>

The theological and pastoral climax of the homily is to be found in 12:18-29 as it combines in majestic form, themes and motifs that have been introduced throughout the letter. These would include the theme of the distance of the OT worshipper as opposed to the unrestricted access to God that is the "hallmark of the life of faith under the new covenant." That God has spoken and continues to speak, with the exhortation that listening to him is an urgent concern. Climax is found in the pointed appeal of 12:25 "See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking." Once again, the clear contrast between old and new covenants is clear in the language and theme of 12:18-24, summarized in 12:24, "and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel." "Chapter 12:18-24 enjoys the climactic position of the entire book, and I wonder if it exposes implicitly the architectural pattern of the whole letter. . . . In one grand finale 12:18-24 juxtaposes the two covenants (Sinai and Zion) and the two mediators."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 488.

<sup>60</sup>Jones, "The Figure of Moses as a Heuristic Device," 101. In the final verses of the book (13:20-21) the name of Moses is not mentioned but "the characterization of the Christian covenant as 'eternal' represented the last intentional contrast to the other covenant. Far more fascinating is the fact that the passage was based on Isaiah 63:11 (LXX) that portrayed Moses as the shepherd of the sheep leading out of the sea. . . . The fact that this appears at the very end of the letter simply demonstrates how definite and sustained an interest our author had in Moses and Jesus," Ibid., 102.

### The Dating of Hebrews

The *terminus ad quem* is certainly fixed by the date of 1 Clement which is generally agreed to be around A.D. 95. The *terminus a quo* is determined by the relationship of the letter to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. It is true that to argue a pre-70 date of composition based upon no mention of the destruction is an argument from silence. Many of the present tense verbs refer to ritual arrangements (e.g. 5:1-4; 8:3-5; 9:6f.; 10:1) which are timeless. And it is also true that Josephus gives a long account of the system in similar terms (Ant 3:224-57; Contra Apion 2:77 and 193-8), long after the fact. However, the purpose of this book is not simply an historical accounting as was Josephus' purpose. Since the destruction of the Temple would have been crucial to the author's argument we may regard his silence as a strongly suggestive of the early dating (before A.D. 70) of the letter.<sup>61</sup>

### Conclusions

We have seen that the Old Testament personages of prophets, angels, Moses and Aaron figure prominently in the book of Hebrews but that they do not enjoy individual significance. That is, they are only included in the argument of the book insofar as they are related to the Old Covenant. The actual contrast of the book does not merely involve Jesus and angels or Moses but the new revelation brought through Jesus with the old revelation brought principally through Moses. Each one of the Old Testament personages are important as they relate to this revelation. From the introduction to the conclusion, the book of Hebrews is interested in the contrast between the Mosaic economy and the Messianic economy.

Two basic implications are drawn in the book from the comparison of previous revelation to that which has come in Christ: (1) greater revelation demands greater obedience (chapters 1-4) and (2) greater revelation displaces previous revelation (chapters 5-12). In chapters one through four the listeners are warned that better revelation involves greater obligation to obey. If those who rejected the message of the Old Covenant (as given by angels, 1:5-2:18 and by Moses, 3:1-4:16) were punished

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<sup>61</sup>“In view of all the data available, it would seem reasonable to regard this epistle as having been sent either just before the fall of Jerusalem, if Jerusalem was the destination, or just before the Neronian persecutions if it was sent to Rome,” Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), 705.

then surely those who reject the message of the New Covenant as delivered through Jesus will receive greater judgment. In chapters five through twelve the second implication of displacement was explained. Since the Messiah had come who was of a different priesthood (Melchizedekian, Psa 110) which was superior to the Aaronic priesthood (Gen 14), the Aaronic priesthood has been replaced. And since the Old Covenant was based upon the priesthood it too has been replaced. Thus, the new covenant has replaced the old covenant (chapter 8) along with its Tabernacle/Temple regulations (chapter 9), the most prominent of which is the sacrificial system (chapter 10).

The book was probably written between A.D. 65 and 70. This would effectively make it one of the last books of the New Testament to have been written, except of course, for the Johannine writings.

This book, therefore, effectively closes the door on the Old Covenant. The author's argumentation is unique in the New Testament and is persuasive because it argues principally from texts firmly rooted in the Old Testament (Gen 14; Psa 110). If the Law is a unit, and we would affirm it to be, it is completely abrogated by this book. No part of the Law continues to be valid for the Jewish Christian today.

The message of Hebrews, clear and final though it is, should not however be read anachronistically into the earlier New Testament era. As Hurst so aptly warns:

“The tendency to homogenize the thinking of the New Testament writers and to read later theological concerns into their statements has been with us always. It is, however, a temptation which the New Testament theologian must resist if the purity of the discipline is to be preserved.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Hurst, “Christology,” 163.