

Chapter 1

Jesus, prophets and angels

Without prologue of any sort (not even mention of his own name) the writer to the Hebrews sets straight off, pitches straight in, with full vigour and enthusiasm. There is no holding him back for a single moment from what he has to set forth concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. He is like the author of Psalm 45, who wrote in his opening verse: 'My heart overflows with a pleasing theme; I address my verses to the king; my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe'. Our writer is so exercised lest any of his readers should follow through the tendency he observes in them to desert Jesus that he is determined to spare no effort and to leave no stone unturned in keeping them holding fast to the Saviour. He alone it is who has the highest claim upon them, for he is exalted above all. Throughout the epistle he meets them on their own ground, as it were, beginning here in chapter 1 with the prophets and the angels.

Jesus and the prophets (1:1-2)

Our God is the God who speaks. He is the communicating God. The idols of the nations 'have mouths, but do not speak' (Psalm 115:5), while the true and living God, Jehovah, makes his voice heard. He is also the God of variety in the ways he does this. He *'spoke to our fathers by the prophets'* and *'he has spoken to us by his Son'*. He has done this *'Long ago'* and he has done this *'in these last days'*. He has done this, moreover, *'at many times and in many ways'*.

Let us begin by unravelling this full and involved statement. *'God spoke to our fathers'* (all the generations which preceded us, but with a particular reference here to the people who lived throughout the Old Testament period). He did this *'by the prophets'*. They were all his mouthpieces, speaking what he gave them to utter, rather than giving expression to what they thought God might say or what their own ideas and opinions were. There is a reminder here of the great truth that 'All Scripture is breathed out by God' (2 Timothy 3:16). The encompassing word *'prophets'* covers in one sweep the so-called major ones, such as Isaiah and Jeremiah, and the so-called minor ones like Amos and Zephaniah; the well-known ones, such as Ezekiel and Daniel, and the lesser-known ones, including Nathan and Micaiah; the earlier ones, like Samuel and Elijah, and the later ones, such as Nahum and Zechariah.

Through these many prophets, God had so much to say. This was both *'at many times'*, or *'in many parts'*—not all at once but spanning the whole of history up to and including Malachi (after whom the voice of prophecy was silent for some four hundred years until the appearance of John), and *'in many ways'* (by word of mouth, through angels, in dreams and visions, by miracles—in prediction, poetry, prose, proverb, figure, symbol, discourse, warning, exhortation, commandment and promise). He manifested his own character as the eternal, exalted, holy and merciful God; his righteous will and commandments, expressed most comprehensively and for all time in what we call the moral law (the ten commandments); and his

gracious purposes for the salvation of sinners, by way of the countless messianic prophecies.

These latter are particularly rich and glorious, and deserve special notice in the context of this letter to the Hebrews, which is so centrally taken up with the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is, for example, ‘a star (that) shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre (that) shall rise out of Israel’ (Numbers 24:17); he is the one whose ‘name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace’ (Isaiah 9:6), who ‘was wounded for our transgressions’ and ‘crushed for our iniquities’ (Isaiah 53:5); he is ‘a righteous Branch’ who ‘shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land’ (Jeremiah 23:5); he it is who ‘shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of his God’ (Micah 5:4); he is ‘the sun of righteousness (who) shall rise with healing in its wings’ (Malachi 4:2).

Those to whom Hebrews was originally written were people who knew their Old Testaments. Indeed, so fond were they of those Scriptures that they were in danger of drifting away from the position they had been brought to in Christ through grace and returning from light to shadow. Yet these very Old Testament books are full of the Lord Jesus Christ himself—pointing to him, speaking of him, delighting in him, longing for him. He himself says so: ‘it is they that bear witness about me’ (John 5:39). All that God had spoken *‘to our fathers by the prophets’* had, again and again, revolved around the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no getting away from Jesus in the Old Testament, and neither should they (or we) want there to be! So it is fundamental to our writer’s approach in Hebrews.

Yet things were never intended to be complete with the Old Testament. For after speaking there *‘at many times and in many ways’*, what has God now done? What was it all leading up to? What was it all in preparation for? The answer is crystal clear: *‘but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son’*. In each case it is God who has spoken, but there is the most significant of distinctions. We may bring this out more clearly by rendering God’s ‘speakings’ as follows: ‘God having spoken ... spoke’. There is both discontinuity and continuity.

The prophets were the prophets. Jesus is the Son. That could not be said about any of them. They were many. He is the one and only. Through him, the Father has *'spoken to us'*—the *'us'* covering both the Hebrews to whom this letter was written in the first place (along with all those of the New Testament age) and, down the centuries, we who are reading it now. All mankind, in every generation, is *'spoken to'* by God, and all are responsible for what they do with what they hear.

The *'last days'* is a regular biblical way of describing the whole period between the first and second comings of Jesus—his incarnation (which has happened) and his return (for which we still wait). Here in 1:2, as well as this broader reference, it has a tighter aspect to it of the days in which the writer and those to whom he wrote lived. The point he is making, right from his opening words here, is that now the Son himself has come—announced by angels, greeted and worshipped by shepherds and wise men, heralded by John. He has lived, died, been buried, risen again, ascended to heaven, and reigns in majesty.

The prophets had the grand privilege, as well as the solemn responsibility, of testifying to him before he came. In them, however, revelation was fragmentary and unfinished, while in Jesus it is perfect and complete. They declared the message; Jesus is the message. Now he has come. There is a very great difference between the will of God being revealed to and through the prophets, and that will being revealed in and through God's own incarnate Son—between God speaking through men, and God speaking through the God-Man. Jesus is, by definition, therefore, superior to the prophets. While they spoke of him, they were always subject to him: 'For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy' (Revelation 19:10).

If God's people of old listened to the prophets, how much more should they (and we) listen to God's Son, 'for he was teaching them as one who had authority' (Matthew 7:29). Not to do so incurs special guilt. All that God has spoken to us by his Son should have the highest claim upon our attention in view of the exaltedness of this messenger. Yet how few paid attention to him during his lifetime, and (sad to say) how few do so today. Do you make priority and

take trouble to read all that God has spoken? Do you listen carefully and follow obediently all that is preached to you from God's Word? And do you relish most of all from the Scriptures all that you read and hear concerning 'Christ Jesus (who) came into the world to save sinners' (1 Timothy 1:15), of whom we all are chief?

So, completely seamlessly, the writer moves from prophets to angels, yet without actually leaving the prophets behind. That is why these first four verses of Hebrews 1 are so intricately woven together.

Jesus and the angels (1:2–14)

Everything spoken by God through his prophets (and, in particular, everything that he spoke through them of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ) was a preparation, then, for his final and ultimate revelation actually in and through the Son himself. In order to demonstrate the panoramic sweep of this astounding revelation, we are treated to a mind-blowing and mouth-watering sequence of no less than seven glorious statements concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, followed immediately by seven glorious prophecies concerning him. The fact that there are seven of each is significant, for in the Bible seven is the number of perfection and completeness. The theme of this entire epistle—the pre-eminence of Christ—is immediately plunged into as a great sea.

Seven glorious statements

These appear one after the other in verses 2 and 3. While these statements undoubtedly reinforce Jesus' superiority over the prophets, it is his superiority over the angels which quickly becomes the chief focus, not only throughout this first chapter, but all the way to the end of the second as well. Let us relish them closely, one by one. They follow their own natural order.

(1) *'whom he appointed heir of all things'*. As a result of him being *'his Son'* (his only Son, whom he loves) the Father has appointed Jesus to this great height. For the Father thus to appoint the Son does not imply any disunity within the persons of the Godhead, for although he is manifest in three persons (Father, Son, Holy Spirit), God is