

Why Hebrews Was Written (Part Nine)

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Personal : Why Hebrews Was Written (Part Nine)

John 1:18 reads: “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.” What does the apostle John mean by saying that Jesus “declared” Him?

The Amplified Bible suggests two alternate translations, and both are much longer statements because the translators thought the Greek word underlying “declared” needed fleshing out, as it says a great deal about a critical purpose that Jesus’ ministry accomplished. The first alternate translation is, “He has revealed Him and brought Him out where He can be seen”; and the second is, “He has interpreted Him, and He has made Him known.” Both suggest that the Father is in some way an unknown element in this unfolding story, as if He is a mysterious, surprise package.

James Moffatt translates the same phrase as “God has been unfolded by the divine one.” “Unfolded” is about as mysterious as “declared.” How does a person “unfold” another? Commentator William Barclay translates it with a long sentence: “The unique One, the Divine One, He who is nearest the heart of the Father, who has disclosed to us the mystery of God.”

The issue in the apostle John’s mind was not that nobody even knew the Father existed. His existence is revealed in the Old Testament, though not frequently expanded by its writers. Genesis 1:26 clearly states, “Let Us make man in Our image.” The plural pronouns strongly suggest co-Creators working together during creation. But the relationship between the two is not defined. Only God creates as These were creating. God’s Word shows no other beings creating as These did. Angels do not create.

There are a few passages in the Old Testament regarding another God-Being whom Jesus refers to as “the Father.” We will begin with Psalm 2:2, 7-9:

The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against His Anointed “I will declare the decree: The LORD has said to Me, ‘You are My Son, today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron; You shall dash them to pieces like a potter’s vessel.’”

First, the psalmist mentions the Messiah (“His Anointed”), and second, he brings out the idea of sonship, suggesting that some sort of family relationship already existed between the two creative God-beings in Genesis 1.

So, what did the apostle John intend in John 1:18? Jesus needed to reveal Their close, cooperative, and creative working-relationship. Also, John 1 shows that They are virtually mirror images of each other in character and purpose, as Jesus states in John 10:30: “I and My Father are one.” They are not one Person but united in purpose. They have been working harmoniously together for a long, long

time on the same project. Finally, Jesus revealed in His ministry, in part, that the Father and Son were together accomplishing a glorious purpose.

In the real Lord's Prayer, Jesus says:

I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. (John 17:20-21)

His statement summarizes what the divine Father and Son are accomplishing together. They are expanding Their kind and degree of Family unity to others as finished products in the image of the Father and Son.

The epistle of Hebrews' position in relation to other books in the New Testament is interesting considering Jesus' declaration to us that we can do nothing without Him (John 15:5). This claim is not an idle declaration. He is our Savior and the Captain or Author of our salvation. We are to follow His lead in everything, and Hebrews reveals a great deal about the responsibilities He is grooming us to meet since we will follow Him forever in the Kingdom (Revelation 14:4).

Consider that James, authored by Jesus' flesh-and-blood brother, follows Hebrews. After James comes I and II Peter, written by the man who seems to have been the leader among the Twelve. Peter's epistles are, in turn, followed by I, II, and III John, authored by the apostle Jesus loved. Jude, another flesh-and-blood brother of Jesus, comes next, and finally, Revelation concludes the Book, and its first verse declares that the Father Himself gave its prophecies to Jesus Christ, who in turn delivered them to the apostle John. These final words point back to the Father, who receives all the glory.

This sequence cannot in any way be accidental. It appears that God wanted final insights about our responsibilities within this relationship to come from those who had the closest experiences with Jesus during His human lifetime. I call this concluding section of the New Testament, "Final thoughts just before the end as glory is about to appear visibly."

A primary principle of biblical interpretation is involved here, which will help us understand the Bible's organization more clearly, as well as that of the outworking of God's purpose. Considering the variety of meanings of "declared" in John 1:18 also enhances our understanding of why some, like the Jews after Jesus' resurrection, so quickly rejected Him as High Priest under the New Covenant.

God took a long time to provide His called ones with a complete Bible. In doing so, He has arranged it piecemeal, as it were, forcing those who study it to use their faith in it and God Himself to solve its puzzling here-and-there arrangement. It requires a calling from God, years of faithful study, and patience with those who do not seem to "get" it.

A Parade of Communicators

Matthew 21:33-46 introduces us to God's experiences in communicating with mankind:

"Hear another parable: There was a certain landowner who planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far

country. Now when vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, that they might receive its fruit. And the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did likewise to them. Then last of all he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.' And they caught him, and cast him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?" They said to Him, 'He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons.'" Jesus said to them, "Did you never read in the Scriptures:

'The stone which the builders rejected
Has become the chief cornerstone.
This was the LORD'S doing.
And it is marvelous in our eyes?'

Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder." Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them. But when they sought to lay hands on Him, they feared the multitudes, because they took Him for a prophet.

Jesus is God's primary communicator of salvation. Despite their human limitations as compared to Jesus, the prophets were also sent in their time as communicators on God's behalf. Humanity claims that our Creator does not communicate with His creation, but this is a bald-faced lie. Right from the beginning, He personally communicated with Adam and Eve, showing His intention, and He patiently followed through with it, most especially to those of Israelite descent after God's work with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Of particular note is what is directly commanded in Matthew 17:5 during the Transfiguration: We and all mankind are to "Hear Him [the Son]!" This charge is no mere random command from the Father but a direct commission to the apostles—and of course, to all who followed what they learned from the Son, the highest and greatest of all of God's spokesmen.

The reality is that most of humanity is not listening—at least not thoughtfully and carefully, with a willingness to accept His teaching—as His elect do. Instead, mankind has reacted as the Jewish religious leaders did upon hearing His parables. Even so, God has made the knowledge of Jesus and His work available to the world, especially among the Israelite peoples, and this awareness has made it possible, primarily through the printed word, to communicate for almost two millennia what Jesus taught.

God does not lie. This parable provides evidence that He has continuously tried to communicate faithfully and honestly with mankind. However, humans just as frequently and sometimes violently reject God's every effort and then blame Him for it! Eventually, God must communicate differently, as He did with Israel, stripping their advantages from them to shake them into a more profound awareness of Him. Not since the original apostles walked the earth has as true and strong a witness been made to Israel as they scattered to the north and west of Jerusalem to where God desires they reside at this time in His purpose.

In the early chapters of Acts, we witness the Jews' continuing rejection of the Son through persecuting His church and God's turning to the Gentiles by preaching the gospel to them, most notably through the apostle Paul. Thus, we find the Jews having a difficult time accepting Christ. The epistle to the Hebrews, probably written before AD 70, contains theological argument after theological argument about why people must recognize their resistance to the very Son of God, overcome and repent, and move on in godly living.

Qualifications Met

It helps to remember the way the author begins this work in Hebrews: with the extolling of the given and achieved qualities of Jesus Christ. He did this partly because some Jews were dissatisfied with His being the High Priest; they considered Him to be unqualified. First on their list of reasons might have been that He was not a Levite (an argument the author engages in Hebrews 7).

The epistle's first verses, however, proceed to prove to the Jews that Jesus is qualified in every way to be High Priest despite His human descent. Israel, not Christ, is the one with the problems. The opening paragraphs demonstrate in a series of biblical quotations why Jesus should be accepted:

1. He is the Son of God;
2. He is the heir of all things;
3. He is the actual Creator God;
4. He is the brightness of God's glory;
5. He upholds all things by the word of His power;
6. He purged us of our sins; and
7. He sits at the right hand of God on high.

That is a tremendous, unrivaled pedigree.

Why did God halt His sending of prophets? He had a better Prophet to send. Consider these seven shortcomings of all prophets in comparison with Jesus' strengths:

1. All were human beings with earthly origins.
2. All were sinful.
3. All were beset by spiritual weaknesses.
4. Their messages "came" to them from God; that is, their prophecies did not originate within themselves. What they said might not be the absolute Word of God. Thus, their messages lacked full divine authority.
5. They did not grasp the fullness of the messages given to them.

6. They did not understand the fullness of God's overall revelation and purposes.
7. They only bore witness of the light or message God sent.

Jesus had none of these shortcomings because He was already God and one with the Father. The Jews greatly underestimated His qualifications, but in short order, the author rejects any prophet or angel from having better ones. He also does not stop displaying Christ's qualifications, continuing to add to and expound on them throughout most of the epistle. It becomes overwhelming proof of His fitness to be our High Priest.

Perhaps the Jews underestimated the impact of Jesus' birth, His ministry, His many miracles and healings, His controversies with the Pharisees and the Levitical priesthood, His tragic and "cursed" death, and His resurrection because they were done openly and had been much discussed. In addition, they distrusted His institution of the preaching of the gospel, which included opening salvation to the Gentiles.

We need to consider these things because the Father engineered this entire package from heaven. He knows when and how to advertise and promote His program, and He can do so vividly and with startling impact. Besides the prophets, the Old Testament figures the author selects to compare to Jesus are apparently listed in the order the Jews generally held as being of the highest regard. Abraham and Moses both ranked high on the list.

At the foundation of Jewish resistance to Christ, however, was their insistence that there was no need to change from the historical, traditional, Old Covenant truth that the high priest was appointed from tribe of Levi, specifically from the family of Aaron. But there was more to their resistance than just this one point. The parable in Matthew 21 shows that God has continuously attempted to communicate faithfully and honestly with the Israelites—and with Gentiles too. However, the Israelites—most of whom do not know they are Israelites and think they are Gentiles—have always resisted Him and the truth He gave them. Conversely, actual Gentiles seem to grasp the intent of God's message more quickly than Israelites do, probably because they do not have Israelite history and their traditional beliefs blinding their theological vision to the superiority of Jesus and the truths of the New Covenant.

Thus, God's setting aside of the Old Covenant and putting the New Covenant into effect paved the way for the Jews to resist. Theologically, it was too much change for many Jews to digest and accept as it effectively destroyed any reason for Judaism to continue because the New Covenant is far superior to Judaism in terms of salvation. Individual Jews might find a "reasonable" justification for its continued existence, but it was an emotional, uphill fight for them to overcome.

The New Covenant did away with the need for the Temple, the priesthood, and the sacrifices made at the Temple. None of those religious activities could even begin to compete with what the New Covenant offered: the forgiveness of sins, the gift of God's Holy Spirit, and a one-on-one relationship with the Creator God, Savior, and High Priest! Even the apostles, who spent three and a half years with Christ, had many questions despite being with their Creator almost constantly during that time.

A Multitude of Biblical Activities

With these important reminders in place, we are ready to begin evaluating Jesus' superiority to angels.

Overall, the Jews generally had high regard for angels, and well they might. Part of the reason is contained in the word translated “direction” in Acts 7:53, at the end of Stephen’s speech to the Sanhedrin: “. . . who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it.” The underlying term in Greek is *diatage*, which is capable of wide usage, suggesting “put into order,” “delivered,” “given,” or “put into effect.” The King James Version translates it elsewhere as “delivered,” “given,” “put into effect,” and “through.” The *Key Word Study Bible* suggests, however, that since the Old Testament says nothing of angels doing anything significant except being present when the law was given, the most suitable translation would be “instrumentality” (as *The Amplified Bible* does).

Stephen undoubtedly refers to Deuteronomy 33:1-2:

Now this is the blessing with which Moses the man of God blessed the children of Israel before His death. And he said:

The LORD came from Sinai,
And dawned on them from Seir;
He shone forth from Mount Paran,
And He came with ten thousands of saints;
From His right hand
Came a fiery law for them.

Moses speaks of the giving of the law and the making of the Old Covenant. The term “saints” in this context is literally “holy ones.” In this circumstance, it could only be angels.

Psalms 68:17 also mentions the attendance of angels on this occasion: “The chariots of God are twenty thousand, even thousands of thousands; the LORD is among them as in Sinai, in the Holy Place.” The chariots of God, to put it in human terms, refer to angels being the chariots’ drivers, manning the vehicles of God’s military might.

The apostle Paul writes in Galatians 3:19:

What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was appointed through angels by the hand of a mediator.

The Amplified Bible (1987 version) translates this final phrase as “arranged *and* ordained *and* appointed through the instrumentality of angels.” Remember that the holy angels were and still are sinless. In this way, we can grasp the biblical reasons why the Jews had so much respect for them.

Thus, the apostle Paul confirms that God did indeed use angels to some extent at Sinai when He gave the law, but he gives no specific details. The author of Hebrews shows that even though the Old Testament does not detail the part angels played in the giving of the law and the Old Covenant, the Old Testament does show that angels were strongly represented.

But there is much more. Exodus 3:2 states: “And the Angel of the LORD appeared to [Moses] in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. So he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not consumed.” Note that “Angel” is capitalized as a sign of divinity. Within the pages of the Old Testament, when Christ makes an appearance or is announced, He is often addressed as the “Angel of the LORD.”

Angel means “messenger,” and in a wide variety of circumstances, Christ is indeed the Chief Messenger of the LORD as He carries out a particular need within Their purpose. According to *Strong’s Concordance*, the term “angel” in all its forms appears 297 times in Scripture, so this article merely scratches the surface of its mentions. Overall, angels played a prominent role in a wide variety of situations.

In the Pentateuch, Moses mentions Him as the Angel of the LORD on some of these occasions. Note Genesis 16:7: “Now the Angel of the LORD found [Hagar] by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur.” The “Angel” of the Lord, Jesus Christ, dealt directly with Abraham and later Moses. Also notice Numbers 20:16: “When we cried out to the LORD, He heard our voice and sent the Angel and brought us up out of Egypt; now here we are in Kadesh, a city on the edge of your border.” The “Angel” who led Israel out of Egypt was obviously Jesus Christ.

From these mentions and many more, the Jews esteemed angels more highly than men. This is a natural reaction to biblical revelation and a good one, yet they attracted the admiration of the Jews for other reasons too. Jesus Himself makes this respectful comment about them in Matthew 24:36: “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only.” As far as we know, they are the highest of all of God’s creatures, and heaven is their home. Those two realities alone place them high above mankind.

Other characteristics that they possess motivated Jews to regard them highly, like what Psalm 103:20 says of them: “Bless the LORD, you His angels, who excel in strength, who do His word, heeding the voice of His word.” “Strength” represents enhanced traits such as intelligence, wisdom, and the obedience that is specifically mentioned. They are not merely spiritual robots.

In the New Testament, Matthew 28:2-3 contains this event:

And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it. His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow.

Angels can exude a brilliance when needed. They are far more glorious than human beings.

Psalm 104:4, quoted in Hebrews 1:7, adds, “. . . Who makes His angels spirits, His ministers a flame of fire.” They are God’s ministers, who serve Him as He sees fit. They are of such quality that they occupy positions at the top of the divine, governmental hierarchy. We can easily conclude that God carries on much of the administration of the creation through them.

Daniel 7:9-10 reveals that God has created and given life to a vast number of them:

I watched till thrones were put in place, and the Ancient of Days was seated; His garment was white as snow, and the hair of His head was like pure wool. His throne was a fiery flame, its wheels a burning fire; a fiery stream issued and came forth from before Him. A thousand thousands ministered to Him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him. The court was seated, and the books were opened.

We can be certain that those ministering to Him were angels. Revelation 5:11-13 generally repeats what Daniel saw. Angels surround God's throne in large numbers. The figure both passages give equals 100 million angels! Even if this is a round figure, it is a huge number. Compare that to the population of the United States, which is around 320 million people.

But as elevated as angels are in God's placement of them within His governance of creation, and as glorious as they are in their innate powers, they are nevertheless subject to the Lord Jesus, even as humans are. One who was made a little lower than angels, however, has ascended to heaven to the right hand of God the Father. There is now a glorified Man in heaven, who has attained a station exceedingly higher than any angels'. In the end, angels are still mere created creatures, as we are, and thus He, Jesus Christ, their Creator and God, is immeasurably higher than they.

For the Jews to be told that Jesus of Nazareth was God incarnate—that is, God made flesh—and the Messiah, yet He suffered death despite possessing glory and dignity far exceeding that of anyone on earth, excelling even that of heavenly angels, was something beyond their ability to accept readily. One of the points the author of Hebrews makes, although he never states it directly, is that the Old Covenant, in reality, achieved no higher than angelic mediation, though that in itself is impressive. In the making of the New Covenant, Jesus Christ, their Creator, replaced the angels in all their covenantal activities. God Himself mediates the New Covenant, putting it on an exceedingly higher level than the Old Covenant.

Knocking down the angelic argument proved to be an excellent place for the author of Hebrews to begin. Why? Because He establishes Christ's superiority above all who might be considered in His place, including even those the Jews respected most highly, angels.

In Christian love,