HOW IS HEBREWS USING THE OLD TESTAMENT IN HEBREWS 1:5-13?

By Stephen B. Plaster, Ph.D.
The author of the book of Hebrews has chosen to introduce the text with the theme that Jesus Christ is superior to the angels. In doing so, the author references seven Old Testament passages which comprise the body of this nine verse introduction in Hebrews. The opening text establishes five principles. First, Jesus Christ is confirmed as the Father’s son, which identifies His close divine familial relationship. Second, as Son, Jesus Christ is the firstborn, which declares His right to inheritance over that which the Father is creator and sovereign. Third, the kingship of Jesus Christ is previewed based upon His positioning on the Father’s throne in proximity at the right hand. Fourth, the eternality of Christ and His immutability are declared. Finally, each of these principles are claims to the superior status of Christ over the angels.

Why does the author open the text with the claims of superiority and references to angels? To whom is the author addressing these claims? What is the author’s underlying concern? To answer these questions, I will present several opinions of scholars concerning this text. I will then follow with an analysis of the meaning of the original seven Old Testament references. Next will be an analysis of the use of the Old Testament text in the New Testament’s usage in Hebrews 1:5-13. Then will be an evaluation of several scholar’s interpretations of the text. Finally, my own analysis will be suggested to conclude this article.

Herbert W. Bateman suggests that the Qumran scrolls, discovered between 1947 and 1956, shed new light on the meaning of the text under discussion. He says,

“The Qumran text entitled Florilegium (4Q Flor) provides one such window. In fact, an examination of the structural, exegetical, and conceptual use of the OT in 4Q Flor 1.1-19 will
provide historical insight into how the OT is used in Hebrews 1:1-13 as well as understanding of a first-century Christian messianic use of the OT.”

The text referred to in the Qumran text is from the Hebrew Bible whereas the author of Hebrews quotes from the Septuagint. This represents the first structural difference between the texts. The second structural difference relates to the grouping of Old Testament passages whereby the Qumran text selects a grouping of eight Old Testament passages. The Hebrews author groups seven Old Testament passages of which only one (II Samuel 7:14) is also included in the Qumran text. Third, each text, both Qumran and Hebrews, quotes some Old Testament passages verbatim yet alters the literal words in other passages. The passage which is common to both texts is from II Samuel 7:12 which is “I will establish his kingdom” but the quote is altered in both the Qumran text and Hebrews 1:12 to “your years will never end.”

Bateman also introduces in his analysis the exegetical use of rules of interpretation. Bateman says, “The first-century Jew familiar with wisdom literature would recognize the verbal and conceptual links made with Divine Wisdom in Hebrews 1:5-13.” This serves to introduce key concepts about Jesus Christ as a Davidic king, as the heir apparent Son, and the superiority of the Son to the angels. The similarity to the Qumran text and Hebrews 1:5-13 is in the linking together of Old Testament passages to form a series of theological principles concerning Jesus Christ.

Finally, Bateman refers to the conceptual re-occurrence of ideas linking Old Testament passages to both the Qumran text and the text of Hebrews 1:5-13. The key concept is the

2 Bateman, 18.
promised King-messiah. To the Jews of the first century BC, the messiah would be either a priest or a king or a combined priest-king as depicted in the Qumran manuscripts. The Florilegium asserts a Davidic king-messiah as a future deliverer of Israel. In Hebrews 1:5-13, the promise is stated as fulfilled in the King-Messiah Jesus Christ. Therefore, as Bateman concludes,

“Therefore, if the first-century Jew believed the original covenant applied to Davidic descendants like Solomon, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, Josiah, and so forth, how much more reasonable it would be for Heb 1:5-13 to use and recontextualize Messiah, the Son. In fact, the Christian community traditionally used Ps 2:7; 110:1 to speak of Jesus Christ as the Son of David, the ultimate Davidic King-Messiah (Acts 2:14-40; 13:32-37). There is no one greater. There is no other Davidic King-Messiah. The Davidic King-Messiah has come, and his name is Jesus.”

He rightly views the Qumran community as believing the latter days were “already” upon them, whereas the Christian community came to believe the latter days were “not yet.” It is evident from the history of both communities that there is a longing for the fulfillment of God’s promises to establish His kingdom, preside over the kingdom in victory, and to declare the kingdom’s permanence.

It is evident that the Hebrew’s text does not randomly select quotations from Old Testament passages but rather links passages together to support the understanding the Christians and Jews had of events which unfolded following the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

James W. Thompson comments on the structure and purpose of the author of Hebrews 1:5-13. He claims that the passages are not about denying the Gnostic’s view of angel worship. Further, he suggests that the major content of the passage is a citation from the Old Testament leaving very little of the author’s interpretation and meaning. The passage is described as a

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3 Bateman, 22.
“catena” which is a chain of connected writings from earlier texts and/or a hymn to be sung or changed. The theme of the passage is the exaltation of Christ by referral to the differences between heavenly and earthly realms of each. Thompson says,

“That Christ is or is of great importance to the author of Heb., for a fundamental aspect of his argumentation is the spatial distinction between this creation (9:11, 23: 12:18, 22) and the heavenly world of the exaltation.”

The structure is in three parts where three citations affirm the superiority of Christ over the angels. Next, follow three citations forming the arguments for Christ’s superiority. Lastly, the final citation invokes the observation of the inferiority of angels. Thompson reflects, “That angels pay homage to the heavenly Messiah is a familiar concept in Jewish literature.”

Thompson suggests the purpose of the passage is to distinguish Christ as possessing the qualities of divinity which are timelessness and unchangeableness. Thompson states that:

“The author’s contrast between the eternal Son and the changeable creation in this catena further indicates that the attribution of eternity to the Son presupposes the spatial distinction between the heavenly and the earthly.”

Finally, Thompson suggests a connection between the author of Hebrews and the metaphysics of Hellenistic philosophy. He states, “This understanding of the exaltation shows a definite point of contact with the literature influenced by Plato.”

An analysis of the Old Testament text in the context of the Old Testament will establish the foundation for the original meaning by the Jewish authors of that text. There are seven Old

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5 Thompson, 356.
6 Thompson, 359.
7 Thompson, 362.

Psalms 2:7 “…you are my Son; today I have become your Father” is a Davidic King-Messiah Psalm which establishes the linkage between the Father and the begotten One who is to rule on Earth. This is made more personal in Isaiah 42:1 where the prophet adds “in whom my soul delights” about the servant-messiah who rules by justice.

II Samuel 7:14 “I will be his father, and he will be my son…” is a reference to the promise of the extension of Davidic rule in Israel. As Richard A. Horsley says, “Moreover, in these psalms, which were heavily influenced by Canaanite and other ancient near Eastern ideas of kingship, ‘The anointed of Yahweh,’ who was always the established Davidic monarch, was understood as secured in his position by divine adoption as ‘son of God’.”

Deuteronomy 32:43 “He will avenge the blood of his servants” are the concluding remarks of the Song of Moses, where all earthly enemies of the Father will be defeated. The setting was intended to exhort the Israelites as they entered Canaan.

Psalms 104:4 “He makes winds his messengers, flames of fire his servants” is intended to link messengers to angels and angels to servants. Therefore, angels serve the creator.

Psalms 45:6-7 “Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom. You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.”

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Wayne Grudem describes this text as elevating the king to the status of God. He says, “Here the psalm passes beyond describing anything that could be true of an earthly king and calls the king ‘God (v.6), whose throne will last forever and ever’.”

Psalm 102:25-27 “In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded. But you remain the same, and your years will never end.”

This psalm, according to Grudem, establishes the immutability of God. He says, “In Psalm 102 we find a contrast between things that we may think to be permanent such as the earth or the heavens, on the one hand, and God, on the other hand.”

Psalm 110:1 is the final quotation which says “The Lord says to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.” The Old Testament author introduces the title “Lord” for a person acknowledged by David as sovereign divinity over himself and established in this position by the Father. Grudem says, “Jesus also identifies himself as the sovereign Lord of the Old Testament when he asks the Pharisees about Psalm 110:1…”

In summary of the analysis of the Old Testament, the principles of: begotten Son, Davidic rule extension, servant inferiority, eternality, immutability and Lordship are established from a Jewish perspective.

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10 Grudem, 163.
11 Grudem, 544.
The New Testament usage of these Old Testament texts indicate a technique for quotation, the use to which the text is made, the authors understanding of the quoted text, and the context in which the text is placed.

The technique used for quotation from the Old Testament to the New Testament is called “chain quotation.” Beale and Carson suggest that rabbis and scribes interpreting the Old Testament and the Qumran manuscripts would teach a theme by linking key words in a string or chain. They state, “These chain quotations, or haraz, brought to bear a quantity of scriptural evidence to support the teacher’s topic.¹²

The chain from Hebrews 1:5-12 consists of three pairs focusing on 1) the Son’s enthronement (Psalm 2:7 and II Samuel 7:14), 2) the inferior status of angels (Deuteronomy 32:43 and Psalm 104:4), and 3) the eternality and immutability of the Son (Psalm 45:6-7; 102:25-27). Hebrews 1:13 then concludes with the enthronement of the Lord (Psalm 110:1). The Son is always described first before the angels. The superiority of the heavenly Son is emphasized over the inferiority of the earthly and the angels.

The use to which the text is made is messianic and forms the link between the Old Testament promises and the fulfillment in New Testament Christology. The Davidic royal dynasty is presumed to be fulfilled in Christ. By a verbal analogy, the Son is joined to the Father by proclamation and by exaltation. The Son is related to the Father in His essence unlike the angels who are merely servants who serve the Son. Beale and Carson state that,

“First, it underscores this unique relationship the Son shares with the Father, which is a filial relationship, over against the status of the angels, who the author will go on to demonstrate are mere servants who worship this Son and serve Him (1:6-7).”\textsuperscript{13}

The Hebrews author’s understanding of the Old Testament text reveals that Jesus Christ is the Son and the Messiah of the Old Testament. The Hebrews text proclaims it, argues it, and exalts Him. Some Christians understood Christ to be victorious over His enemies in the “here and now” (e.g. Rome) and some in the “not yet” (e.g. latter days). All Christians view Christ as the fulfillment of the promised kingdom and divine ruler. Beale and Carson state,

“This is a kingdom that will put down God’s enemies, involve the eternal establishment of the Son’s throne, give the Son an inheritance over all, and…is said to be characterized by righteousness.”\textsuperscript{14}

The context in which the Old Testament passages are placed in the New Testament shows a reverence for the Old Testament promises to Israel while initiating a new understanding. The person alluded to in the Old Testament is revealed as Jesus Christ in the New Testament. In addition, His relationship to Israel as King-Priest-Messiah, His relationship to the Father as Son-Heir, and His relationship to New Testament believers as Lord-Savior are in the writings of the author of Hebrews. As Beale and Carson say,

“Consequently, the application of the psalm by the author of Hebrews, to Jesus as the Messiah, is much in keeping with traditions within Judaism that apply the psalm to the Messiah and his Kingdom.”\textsuperscript{15}

The messianic nature of these passages in Hebrews 1:13 are evidenced by the fact that Jesus answers the High Priest during His inquisition (Mark 14:62) with the same reference to

\textsuperscript{13} Beale and Carson, 930.  
\textsuperscript{14} Beale and Carson, 939.  
\textsuperscript{15} Beale and Carson, 938.
Psalm 110:1. He also debates with the Jerusalem scribes the meaning of the text (Matthew 23:41-45) about His being the Messiah. Fitzmyer recalls, “Jesus has just admitted that He is ‘the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed,’ and so He gives a Christian messianic meaning to this verse of Psalm 110.”

The everlasting nature of the dynastic rule is emphasized in Hebrews 1:8, 11, and 12. Much of Psalm 110 refers to the role of Priest-King after the example of Melchizedek. This may be because Abraham worshipped and served Melchizedek which typifies how all humanity and the angels are to worship and serve the Messiah (OT) who is Christ (NT). David, as king, also sometimes acted as a priest and his sons are called priests in Scripture. As Porter says, “Understood in this way, Psalm 110, like Psalm 2, may be understood either as a coronation psalm or a pre-holy war song.” Also “Here, though, we learn that God promised David not only an eternal dynasty but also a priesthood that will last forever. Furthermore, this priest-king is a warrior.”

There is significant debate over the meaning, role, and timing of the Messiah among Jews and Christians. Messiah in the Old Testament referred at different times and places to kings, priests, and prophets. The Qumran community foresaw a teacher, a priest, and a king depending upon which manuscript is being analyzed. Christians viewed the Messiah as being fulfilled at the cross in the person of Jesus Christ. As Ferguson says, “Christians saw in Jesus the fulfillment of all these expectations – He was God acting among human beings, the Son of Man who arises at the end of the age, the Son of David, and the anointed prophet, priest, and king.”

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16 Joseph A. Fitzmyer The One Who Is to Come (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 144.  
18 Porter, 26.  
19 Everett Ferguson Backgrounds of Early Christianity (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 552.
The different interpretations are not conclusive but do follow the patterns of: 1) examining the Old Testament context for meaning, 2) analyzing the New Testament context for meaning, 3) analyzing the interpretation of the Old Testament passages in the New Testament passages, and 4) highlighting differences between various scholars’ interpretations of 1), 2), and 3).

David M. Hay reflects on Bateman’s interpretation by focusing on the application of two of Hillel’s rules of exegesis which are “argument from greater to lesser” (i.e. Son before angels) and “verbal analogy” (i.e. repetition of identical keywords). These may be readily accepted but applying all of Hillel’s seven rules is not apparent. Hay says, “Bateman himself sometimes alternates between claiming that Hillel’s rules are ‘perhaps’ in use…”

Psalm 110:1 is the most often quoted Old Testament verse in the New Testament, being quoted twenty-two times. This psalm of David presents the problem in the form of a question. How can the Lord referred to be both David’s Lord and David’s son at the same time? This introduces the concept of a God-man which also is personified in Jesus’ perfect divinity as “Lord” and perfect humanity as “Son.” As MacDonald explains, “Messiah would be both God and man. As God, He would be David’s Lord. As man, He would be David’s son.”

Susan Haber focuses on the covenant aspect of Hebrews as it relates to Jesus Christ as High Priest. Christ is foreshadowed in the reference to Melchizedek as Priest and King in Psalm 110:4 which is linked to Hebrews 1:13 through the quote in Psalm 110:1. The superiority of the Melchizedek’s priesthood is emphasized compared to the inferiority of the Levitical priesthood.

The author of Hebrews is writing to Jewish background believers in a setting which struggled with Jewish identity in light of the coming of Christ. Hebrews reflects a concern for believers who might return to the old ways of Judaism forsaking Christianity. As Haber states, “But, the more profound ideological threat to the group’s identity came from the Jewish tradition from which the community of Christ-believers was emerging.”

Edgar McKnight chooses to interpret Hebrews by analyzing the rhetorical form and structure of the text. His conclusion is that there is not just one means of interpretation but rather several because different structures exist to explain the format of the text. One such form is that the Hebrews text is a letter to a group of believers addressing a particular issue. It is formatted as an expository message rather than with greetings and salutations. The author of Hebrews is addressing a New Testament audience of believers where Old Testament passages are quoted for encouragement and exhortation in the present. As McKnight indicates,

“The authors understanding and use of Scripture is made plain at the very beginning of Hebrews (1:5-14). In the collection of texts from the Old Testament given to demonstrate the superiority of Christ to angels, acclamations originally made to Israelite kings are taken as divine oracles directed to Jesus Christ.”

McKnight recognizes that Hebrews may be interpreted in many ways and, unlike Bateman, does not believe that only one way of interpretation is the only correct one.

Since five of the seven Old Testament quotations are from Psalms, another approach to interpretation of Hebrews 1:5-14 is that of David Wallace. Jewish Old Testament text influenced

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the message and structure of the New Testament. Psalms is the most influential and the most often quoted by New Testament authors. The influence is both literary and theological. Psalms 2 and 110 are quoted in part in Hebrews 1:5-14 and are enthronement hymns of Davidic origin. The seven quotations as expressed in Hebrews 1:5-14 form an inclusion beginning with Psalm 2:7 and ending with Psalm 110:1. The connective words are “son” and “Lord.” Wallace disagrees with Bateman regarding the identification with the florilegium as “only resembling” the Qumran text. The theological theme functions as using the royal psalms to lead to the enthronement and exaltation of Jesus Christ. As Wallace says,

“Labeled aptly as a ‘meditation on the exaltation,’ the passage ordering these citations seem intentionally ordered to certify the claim of the son’s superiority over angels by virtue of his exaltation.”

Kenneth Schenck offers the most plausible explanation of Hebrews 1:5-14. One argument is that the text is responding to Christians engaged in angel worship which is rejected by Schenck based upon lack of historical evidence. A second argument seeks to focus on the exaltation of Christ above all others which is thematically correct based on the remaining text of Hebrews. A third argument based on rhetorical hymnology interprets the text as fulfilling the Davidic throne by the Son who as heir will reign eternally. As further evidence, Hebrews 2 alludes to Psalm 8, which recollects the creation of humanity in perfection, followed by the Fall, and the restoration of communion with the Father. This recalls and substantiates the overall purpose of God which is a return to Eden by way of enablement by the Son. As Schenck states,

“This celebration is presented poetically in the form of a contrast between the now exalted Christ and the angels whose status previously was higher than his ‘for a little

while’. Now he holds the exalted status of ‘Lord’, king over the creation in fulfillment of Psalm 8, a realm in which the angels function as mere servants. Christ, on the other hand, is the enthroned Son of God.”

My own analysis and conclusion tends towards accepting the structural form of a catena which is framed in an inclusion. Theologically, the bringing together of Old Testament text presumes an intention to reflect upon and point toward an application. This means selecting royal enthronement psalms with references to “son, heir, name, Lord,” eternality, and immutability which then name the person, Jesus Christ, as the one being referred to, and intentionally exalt Him. Therefore, the purpose of the author of Hebrews is to exalt Jesus Christ in a literary manner which is understandable and familiar to Jewish background believers.

Bibliography


