

Hebrews 1:4-14  
Tim Anderson 4/11/18

I wonder what you think of angels,  
if indeed you do think of angels.

With the increase in interest in the variety of spiritualities  
that constitute the New Age movement,  
there has been a bit of a resurgence in interest in angels in recent years.  
If you go to a new age shop, you can buy little angel figurines  
and decorations with pictures of angels  
that allegedly will protect you against all manner of things.

It's interesting how the pictures of angels have changed over the centuries.  
In years gone by,  
angels would be painted in shining light,  
they often had a sword,  
people quaked in fear.

Here are three sample paintings.

In more recent years,  
depictions of angels have become cute and cuddly.  
The features have become childlike and plump.  
Compare the work of years gone by with this recent effort.  
It's quite a contrast, isn't it?

Now this isn't an art appreciation class,  
so our question is simple.

Which picture of an angel is more true to what we read in Scripture?

Here's a story you may not have heard since you were in Sunday School.  
"Balaam got up in the morning,  
saddled his donkey  
and went with the Moabite officials.  
But God was very angry when he went,

and the angel of the Lord stood in the road to oppose him.

Balaam was riding on his donkey,  
and his two servants were with him.

When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord  
standing in the road with a drawn sword,  
it turned off the road into a field.

Balaam beat it to get it back on the road.

Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path through the vineyards,  
with walls on both sides.

When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord,  
it pressed close to the wall,  
crushing Balaam's foot against it.

So he beat the donkey again.

Then the angel of the Lord moved on ahead  
and stood in a narrow place  
where there was no room to turn,  
either to the right or to the left.

When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord,  
it lay down under Balaam,  
and he was angry and beat it with his staff.

Then the Lord opened the donkey's mouth,  
and it said to Balaam,

"What have I done to make you beat me these three times?"

Balaam answered the donkey,

"You have made a fool of me!

If only I had a sword in my hand,

I would kill you right now."

The donkey said to Balaam,

"Am I not your own donkey,

which you have always ridden to this day?

Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?"

"No," he said.

Then the Lord opened Balaam's eyes,  
and he saw the angel of the Lord  
standing in the road with his sword drawn.  
So he bowed low and fell face down.

Which picture of angels is true to the Scripture?

Here's a picture of Balaam and his angel.

That's more like a true picture of an angel.

When people see an angel in the Bible,  
they don't say, "Oh how cute."

They fall on their faces in fear.

The first words that an angel says to the person they are visiting are often,  
"Do not be afraid!"

The angel said to Mary,

"Do not be afraid, Mary."

The angel said to Zechariah,

"Do not be afraid, Zechariah."

We need to expel the picture of chubby babies with wings from our minds.

Angels are fearsome heavenly beings.

I don't care how tough you think you are,

if you meet an angel,

you will fall down in fear.

Why is this important?

Because in our passage today,

the basic message is that Jesus is superior to the angels.

And if you start out with a view of angels that says

and angel is like a cuddly baby with wings,

then you aren't going to get what this passage is saying about Jesus.

You'll just say,

"Yeah so what.

Of course he's superior to angels."

But angels are wonderful and fearsome heavenly creatures.  
And Jesus is immeasurably greater than they are.

The next question is,  
Why was the writer to the Hebrews  
even concerned to bolster the church's view of Jesus?  
Didn't they already think that Jesus is their majestic and glorious saviour?  
Why does he even think to do a comparison with angels?

The answer is  
that the letter to the Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians.  
That's why it's called Hebrews.  
These Jewish Christians were coming under pressure to return to Judaism.  
They had been Jews.  
They had become convinced that Jesus is God's Messiah sent to the Jews.  
They had decided that if God sends a messiah to his people,  
then the best thing they could do is to follow their messiah.  
But their friends and family members were trying to woo them back.  
These Christians were causing tension  
in their families and friendship groups.  
They were making an exclusive claim,  
that the only way to be faithful to God is to follow Jesus.  
True Jews follow their messiah.  
That their loved ones who were not following Jesus  
were on a path to eternal destruction.  
And so they were coming under pressure to return to the fold.

Now if you want to pressure someone to return to the fold,  
how do you go about it?  
Do you tell them,  
"This Jesus fellow you are following,  
he was a charlatan.

He didn't do any of the miracles that were claimed about him.  
His teaching is unrealistic nonsense.  
you should just forget about him."?  
No. you don't tell them that.  
Why not?  
Because if you do they will feel attacked.  
And the sense of being under attack will harden them in their conviction.  
Instead what you do is this.  
You tell them that Jesus was a wonderful teacher.  
He was as good possibly even better than all the great rabbis of old.  
Jesus was a wonderful healer.  
He did wondrous works  
that we haven't seen the like of since the days of Elijah.  
Jesus could even be considered on a par with the angels.  
Angel means messenger.  
Jesus was a messenger sent from God.  
You could reverence him like an angel.  
And if you would just stop saying that he's equivalent to God  
which by the way is blasphemy,  
then we could all get along well again.  
You could keep revering Jesus as a special prophet,  
a messenger sent from God and in that sense an angel.  
And you could be part of the synagogue again.  
And this terrible division  
which is infecting our community would be overcome.

You see this is a far better strategy if you want to undermine genuine faith.  
Affirm just about everything the Christian believes  
except for one or two crucial matters.  
And then play on our hunger for good relationships.  
That's what was happening  
to the original recipients of the letter to the Hebrews.

And that happens in different guises in many places today.

"Jesus was a wonderful guy but ..."

It's not just a strategy of Jehovah's witnesses.

It was the strategy the government adopted when it tried to control the RE curriculum before it abolished RE altogether.

We're very happy for you Christians to say that Jesus is a wonderful guy.

We're very happy for you to say that Jesus was a wonderful teacher.

In fact we would quite like it

if you could convince our children 'to do unto others'.

Just don't tell us he needs to be worshipped.

Just don't tell us he will return to judge the world.

Just don't tell us that every knee will bow before him, and some of those knees will do so unwillingly.

And once you realise the strategy today is the same as the strategy then, you realise that this stuff about angels is not as left field as you first thought.

So what does our writer tell us about Jesus compared to the angels?

"Jesus became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs."

Jesus has a superior name.

What is that name?

"You are my Son;  
today I have become your Father."

"I will be his Father,  
and he will be my Son."

His superior name is Son.

None of God's angels are called Son.

None of God's angels inherit his kingdom.

Jesus is heir of all things.

Jesus is Son.

Jesus has a superior name.

Jesus also has superior honour.

In the book of Revelation,

when the apostle John was given visions from God

mediated through an angel,

he fell down at the angel's feet as if to worship.

And the angel said,

"Don't do that! ...

Worship God!"

Angels are not for worshipping.

But in verse 6, our writer tells us,

"When God brings his firstborn into the world, he says,

"Let all God's angels worship him.""

Not only human beings,

but marvellous angelic beings

who fill our hearts with fear if we look at them,

they worship the Son.

Jesus also has a superior calling.

What are angels called to do?

Verse 7 tells us,

In speaking of angels he says,

"He makes his angels spirits,  
and his servants flames of fire."

Angels are messenger spirits.

They carry messages from God to people.

They are servants.

Serving the great and mighty God is a wonderful calling.

But they are servants.

What is Jesus' calling?

Jesus' calling is to rule.

Verse 8 tells us,

"But about the Son he says,

'Your throne O God will last forever and ever;

a sceptre of justice will be the sceptre of your kingdom.'"

Jesus rules.

He holds the sceptre.

The sceptre is the staff that a king holds which designates his authority.

Jesus holds the sceptre in heaven.

Jesus is addressed as God.

Serving the Almighty God like the angels is a wonderful calling.

Ruling alongside the Almighty God as one with the Almighty God is a completely superior calling.

Someone who is a ruler

will not be flattered if you mistake them for a servant.

Similarly Jesus is not flattered by being mistaken for an angel.

As our writer says in verse 13,

"To which of the angels did God ever say,

"Sit at my right hand

until I make your enemies a footstall for your feet."?"

Don't mistake Jesus for an angel.

Jesus rules.

Jesus also has a superior existence.

Why do angels exist?

Verse 14 tells us.

"Are not all angels ministering spirits

sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?"

Angels are glorious beings.

But actually their purpose is to serve us.

We are 'those who will inherit salvation'.

And angels serve us by bringing us messages from God.

Why does Jesus exist?

Well Jesus has always existed.

Jesus was the agent of creation.

He was the one through whom God made everything that is.

Jesus will also be there when this world comes to an end  
and the next world comes into being.

We're told about this in verses 10-12.

The amazing thing about these verses,  
is that Hebrews applies them to Jesus.

It's a follow on from verse 8 where it says,

"But about the Son he says ..."

And so here it says,

"In the beginning, Lord,  
you laid the foundations of the earth,  
and the heavens are the work of your hands.

They will perish but you will remain;  
they will wear out like a garment.

You will roll them up like a robe;  
like a garment they will be changed.

But you remain the same,  
and your years will never end."

Jesus can change the fabric of the universe  
in the same way that we change our clothes.

And he will.

Jesus is superior to the angels.

His name is superior to theirs because he is the Son who inherits.

His honour is superior to theirs because he is to be worshipped.

His calling is superior to theirs.

They serve and Jesus rules.

His existence is superior to theirs.

They are created beings but he was the agent of creation and he will be the agent of recreation.

I'm going to tell you a story of angelic protection. This is to help you see how powerful angels are. So that you realise just how much more powerful the Lord Jesus is.

In the 19C, the Reverend John G. Paton was a missionary in the New Hebrides Islands. Hostile natives surrounded his mission headquarters one night, intent on burning the Patons out and killing them. John Paton and his wife prayed all during that terror-filled night that God would deliver them.

When daylight came they were amazed to see the attackers unaccountably leave. They thanked God for delivering them.

A year later, the chief of the tribe was converted to Jesus Christ, and Mr. Paton, remembering what had happened, asked the chief what had kept him and his men from burning down the house and killing them.

The chief replied in surprise, "Who were all those men you had with you there?"

The missionary answered, "There were no men there; just my wife and I."

"The chief argued that they had seen many men standing guard – hundreds of big men in shining garments with drawn swords in their hands.

They seemed to circle the mission station so that the natives were afraid to attack."

Only then did Mr. Paton realize that God had sent His angels to protect them.

The chief agreed that there was no other explanation.

There are numerous stories like that one.  
Elisha is protected by a legion of angels in 2 Kings 6.  
I've spoken with an Indian man  
whose village was protected by angels only 30 years ago.  
Angels aren't particularly creative.  
Jesus is the creator.  
Angels are just messengers.  
The stories are all similar.  
Men with shining clothes and drawn flaming swords.  
And God's enemies unfailingly get the message.  
No one wants to take the angels on.

We can be awestruck by the power of God's angelic servants.  
And then we realise that Jesus has legions of angels at his command.  
And we worship him.