Superior to [Better Than] The Angels

In the ancient world, there was a sense that supernatural beings were all around humanity. They influenced humanity; they helped humanity; and, at times, they even hindered humanity (see Genesis 6:1-4 (“sons of God” are same as “sons of God” in Job 1:6, 2:1). I don’t know if this will be helpful or not, but let me share with you a table I did showing those words often translated as “angels” in English translations. Note that Hebrews 2:7 which we will study on March 15th is a quotation from Psalm 8:5.

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| **Translation** | **Genesis 6:2, 4** | **Job 1:6, 2:1** | **Psalm 8:5** | **Hebrews 2:7** |
| **American Standard Version** | **"sons of God"** | **"sons of God"** | **"God"** | **"angels"** |
| **Christian Standard Bible** | **"sons of God"** | **"sons of God"** | **"God"** | **"angels"** |
| **Common English Bible** | **"divine beings"** | **"divine beings"** | **"than divine"** | **"angels"** |
| **Complete Jewish Bible** | **"sons of God"** | **"sons of God"** | **"angels"** | **"angels"** |
| **Contemporary English Version** | **"supernatural beings"** | **"angels"** | **"you yourself"** | **"angels"** |
| **English Standard Version** | **"sons of God"** | **"sons of God"** | **"heavenly beings"** | **"angels"** |
| **God's Word translation** | **"sons of God"** | **"sons of God"** | **"yourself"** | **"angels"** |
| **Good News Translation** | **"heavenly beings"** | **"heavenly beings"** | **"yourself"** | **"angels"** |
| **King James Version** | **"sons of God"** | **"sons of God"** | **"angels"** | **"angels"** |
| **New American Standard Bible (rev.)** | **"sons of God"** | **"sons of God"** | **"God"** | **"angels"** |
| **New English Bible** | **"sons of the gods"** | **"members of court of heaven"** | **"a god"** | **"angels"** |
| **New International Version** | **"sons of God"** | **"angels"** | **"angels"** | **"angels"** |
| **New Revised Standard Version (up.)** | **"sons of God"** | **"heavenly beings"** | **"God"** | **"angels"** |
| **Revised Standard Version** | **"sons of God"** | **"sons of God"** | **"God"** | **"angels"** |
| **Young's Literal Version** | **"sons of God"** | **"sons of God"** | **"Godhead"** | **"messengers"** |

I share these with you because there are many interpreters who try to make the Genesis “sons of God” into the children of Seth and that is simply indefensible from a biblical perspective. Those interpreters do that because they don’t have the same perceptions of supernatural beings that those in the ancient world have. In Genesis 6 where supernatural beings (probably fallen or falling angels) violated human women, they are a hindrance so powerful that their offspring are monsters (literally “Fallen Ones” and sometimes rendered as “giants”). And they hinder humanity right into the flood because God is forced to judge them. In the Job verses, even the Satan, God’s primary opposition, reports to God in the heavenly court and that is where the Satan begins to work his trouble on Job.

Now, in Psalm 8:5, the Hebrew doesn’t say angels and doesn’t say “sons of God.” It literally says either God or, because this is the Hebrew word that is the generic name for the divine, gods. Most translators take it as “God” and meaning that God didn’t hold very much back from humanity. Some thought that was blasphemous as translated it as gods, suggesting the idea of heavenly beings. The Greek translators who wrote the Septuagint translation wanted it to be heavenly beings, so they translated it as angels. And the writer of Hebrews, since he used Greek, quoted from the Septuagint instead of the Hebrew text. So, we have these heavenly beings who could help or hinder and would normally be, according to the Septuagint, LOWER than the angels.

But the writer of the Hebrews didn’t want anyone to think that Jesus as Son of God was merely a human being subject to the machinations and designs of angels, whether good or bad. So, right after he (or she) writes about the Word of God as God Incarnate, we get verse 4 about the glorified, exalted Son being as far above the angels as His title, Son of God.

To prove his point, our author quotes from Old Testament texts about the son of God. When you’re teaching this, it would be a good idea to look at the passages quoted here. First of all, Psalm 2:7 was originally a promise to an earthly king. If possible, I would have the students look quickly at verses 1-3 of Psalm 2. I would ask them the following questions:

1. Who is (are) the subject(s) of these verses? [foreign nations and foreign kings]

2. What do they want to do? [Make war on Israel and God’s appointed king, especially if they have been conquered by Israel and need to throw off their captivity (v. 3)]

Then, look at verses 4-6 and ask the same two questions: 1 [God] 2 [Threatens them with God’s king]

Do the same with 7-9 and ask the same two questions: 1 [God] 2 [Claims the king as His son to give him victories]

And 10-12 concludes with a warning to the foreign nations and kings that God is in charge and it is better to be on God’s side.

Well, if in the context of Psalms, the “son of God” is this earthly king, why would the writer of Hebrews choose to quote this verse? It is because he wants to make clear that Jesus is king/ruler over those pesky angels that seem so powerful to his readers/hearers. And, as with most Old Testament texts, the New Testament writers realized that the Old Testament texts always gave a partial fulfillment, a foreshadowing, a preview of the perfect fulfillment in Jesus. Ask if anyone knows where else in the New Testament God identifies Jesus as His Son [Matthew 3:17].

The next part of the verse isn’t really about angels as much as it is about royalty and sonship. It quotes the Septuagint text of 2 Samuel 7:14. If I were teaching, I would inform them that 2 Samuel 7:12-14 is addressed to King David and have someone read 2 Samuel 7:12-14 aloud. Ask if this verse is specifically about Jesus? [Not originally, because v. 14 says that God will punish when he does wrong.] Who is about originally? [Probably Solomon, but could and was applied to any Davidic ruler, including the anticipated Messiah—Who, of course, proved to be Jesus without need of punishment for His own wrongs because He didn’t have any.]

With that in mind, you shouldn’t have any trouble understanding why the writer of Hebrews has God present Jesus as first-born. As first-born, He is the rightful King. In fact, He is so much the rightful King that the angels must bow down to Him. Again, our writer has chosen to quote from the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Deuteronomy 32:43 has “gods” bow down before him (remember our earlier chart of English
translations?) just as a similar verse in Psalms (97:7) has “gods.” So, once again, Jesus is proven superior to these supernatural forces which seemed so powerful in the lives of the readers of and listeners to Hebrews.

Our writer quotes from Psalm 104:4 to show how the angels/supernatural beings serve God as Supreme Majesty and by extension, Psalm 45:6-7 is quoted in verses 8-9 of Hebrews 1. I would ask the students to read Psalm 45:1 and ask them who the subject of this poem is [The king]. Then, look at the promise in verses 6-7. Again, the emphasis is on Jesus as the King. But, lest anyone think being King reduces Jesus, our writer plucks Psalm 102:25-27 from the Septuagint and emphasizes that it is God Himself who sustains this King. Then, we read a verse from Psalm 110 (verse 1) which corresponds to the rest of the New Testament and Jesus being raised to the right hand of God.

No other Psalm is quoted in the New Testament as often as Psalm 110 and it is often verse 1 being quoted. If you have time, you can distribute slips of paper with the following verses on them and have the students read them to see how this quotation is used: Matthew 22:41-46, Mark 12:35-37, Luke 20:41-44, Acts 2:34, 1 Corinthians 15:25, Hebrews 1:13, 5:6, 7:17, 21, and 10:13. Students can compare these New Testament references with Psalm 110 and try to figure out why the NT writers chose to quote from that Psalm.

So, as we reach the end of Chapter 1, we see where the argument is telling us that the angels actually serve His royal courts. As Franz Delitizsch wrote about the angels in his 1868 commentary on Hebrews: “*They* stand before God as λειτουργοί [servants] awaiting His commands, but *the Son* sits at God’s right hand: *they* minister to God and man, but *the Son* rules; and everything, even against its will, must bow to His dominion.” [Delitzsch, Franz, *Delitzsch’s Commentary on the Hebrews: Volume 1* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1868), p. 93.] A century later, F. F. Bruce wrote in his commentary: “The most exalted angels are those whose privilege it is to ‘stand in the presence of God’ like Gabriel (Luke 1:19), but none of them has ever been invited to sit before Him, still less to sit in the place of unique honor at His right hand. Their standing posture betokens their promptness to execute His commands, or simply to abide His pleasure.” [Bruce, F. F., The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Hebrews (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1964), p. 25. Bruce goes on to say on the same page: “More remarkable still, their service is performed for the benefit of a favored class of human beings, the heirs of salvation.” And who are those heirs of salvation? All of those who are given Jesus’ legacy of salvation!

So, not only is Jesus higher than the angels, favored at the right-hand of the Father, but the angels are supposed to benefit us and, of course, the original hearers/readers of Hebrews. So, why should the Hebrews be tempted in this matter of angelology when Jesus is Lord over the angels and they do His bidding for our benefit. That’s the gospel message for us, as well. Let us never be beholden to external circumstances or powers when we know that they are all (even the bad ones) subject to our Lord’s reign.