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Bible Study
Saint Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews
Introduction and Chapter 1

Introduction

The nineteenth book of the New Testament is Saint Paul's epistle to the Hebrews. Unlike his other epistles, Saint Paul's name is not mentioned in Hebrews, which has led some to doubt his authorship. However, Church Fathers including Saint John Chrysostom, Blessed Augustine, and Saint Clement of Alexandria are all of the opinion that Saint Paul wrote this epistle.

Saint John Chrysostom and some modern Orthodox Christian authors say that the reason Saint Paul does not mention his name in this epistle is that he was hated and despised by many of the Jews, especially after he had been such an important and influential Pharisee. Many of his Jewish brethren would not have read the epistle had Saint Paul's name been mentioned.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews, we see how Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. It is only in the light of Christ that we can begin to explore and to understand the Old Testament. It is in Christ that the Old Testament becomes theologically relevant to us.

One of the major themes of this epistle concerns the priesthood of our Lord Jesus Christ. There is a threefold definition of the priesthood:

1. A priest is taken from among men; this ensures that the priest's actions will be motivated by love, compassion, and mercy
2. A priest is appointed by God to represent men before God
3. A priest accomplishes this representation by offering gifts and sacrifices for sins

Christ perfects these three categories of the priesthood. He took on our humanity and identified with our condition in every way, except for sin. He is appointed by God to be the priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, the mysterious king of peace and righteousness making offerings of bread and wine with no genealogy and no successors. Finally, Christ enters the heavenly sanctuary once for all and makes intercession for us.

Another theme that we find in Chapter 11 is the definition of faith. In this chapter we find the heroes of faith, who prepared the way for the advent, crucifixion, and resurrection of our Lord. However, the hope and faith of these Old Testament men and women come to nothing without our participation in putting our faith in the Incarnate Word – the One prophesied and prefigured in the Old Testament.

Verse-by-Verse Commentary on Chapter 1

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets (v.1)

Since this epistle is directed to the Hebrews, Saint Paul begins with a statement with which they would all agree: that God had spoken to their forefathers through the prophets. For many generations, the prophets revealed to God's people His will, His judgment, and foretold of things to come, especially the things pertaining to deliverance and salvation.

God spoke through the prophets in many ways and through many eras (times). However, no one revelation of Himself was complete, but was given in many parts. The revelation was progressive in a sense. God revealed many things to Moses, and others to Isaiah and Jeremiah, and to all the other prophets.

The end of this progression is the revelation in Jesus Christ, the complete revelation. In the Gospel according to Saint John, we read, "*No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him*" (John 1:18).

As we say in the Orthodox Creed, the Holy Spirit spoke through the prophets as He continues to do now in the Church, in God's servants, pastors, and teachers.

has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds (v.2)

God's revelation of truth is made once and is complete. In the expression, "in these last days," we understand that since Christ's coming into the world, no greater or further revelation can be expected and that the final period of history has begun until His second coming.

The Son or the Word was an active agent in creation. We know that before each act of creation, "God had said;" that is, by His Word He spoke and things were created (John 1:3, LXX Psalm 32:6, Psalm 148:5).

As God's Son by nature and in His divine essence, the Word is the heir to all things. Now, having become man, He has been appointed heir, so that all men might become heirs through Him. Saint Paul writes to the Romans, "*The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together*" (Romans 8:16-17).

Saint John Chrysostom tell us that the emphasis of "whom he hath appointed" is on the humanity of our Lord, while "by whom He also made" is on His divinity.

who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (v.3)

“The brightness of His glory” now gives us a clear indication of whom Saint Paul is writing. Saint John called the Word, “the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world” (John 1:9), and in his first epistle declares that “God is light” (1:5). Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, calls Himself, “the light of the world” (John 8:12). In the Orthodox Creed, we confess that our Lord Jesus Christ is Light of Light. Our Lord spoke of the glory that He had with the Father before the world was: “And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was” (John 17:5).

“The express image” means that the Son is the expression of all that the Father is: He is of the same nature and of the same essence. It was not only through the Son that the world was created, but He continues to preserve and uphold all things.

This verse contains a summary of the doctrine of Christ. After establishing Christ’s divinity through the work of creation and His providential care, He now turns to Christ’s saving work for fallen man, purging our sins. This is the culmination of His work: that Christ came into the world and having completely identified with man’s condition, except for sin, He Himself underwent the consequence of sin, which is death. He offered the one perfect life – which was not deserving of death – for all, so that He might conquer death by rising from the dead.

After completing His work, Christ ascended to the heavens, not only as God, but as Man. He opened up the heavens for us and prepares a place for us, as He sits on the right hand of God. As God-Man, He has power over all things in heaven and earth.

having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they (v. 4)

In humbling Himself and becoming obedient even unto death, Christ has been exalted and given a name above every name (Philippians 2:8-11). The humanity that He assumed as even become higher than the angels. This glory and exaltation is offered to all who believe in Him. Christ has become the great High Priest, who now reigns and will come again as King and Judge. He invites us to be glorified, to ascend, and to reign. “To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen” (Revelation 1:5-6).

For to which of the angels did He ever say: “You are My Son, Today I have

begotten You”? And again: “I will be to Him a Father, And He shall be to Me a Son” (v. 5)?

As further evidence of the Son’s unique relationship to the Father, Saint Paul turns to the Old Testament prophecies. Our Lord Jesus Christ is eternally the Son, but when He was born in time, the Father declares, “You are My Son, today I have begotten You.” Saint John Chrysostom says that the word “today” refers to the flesh. However, Origen of Alexandria says that “today” refers to the “eternal today,” which is God’s time; that is, the Son is eternally begotten of the Father.

King David prophecies concerning Christ the King, whose throne will be eternal and whose reign will be over all people.

But when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says: “Let all the angels of God worship Him” (v. 6).

Christ is called the “firstborn” or the “first-begotten.” Saint Athanasius explains that the term “Only-Begotten” refers to His generation from the Father, while “First-begotten” refers to His condescension to the creation and His making the many His brethren. Our Lord Jesus Christ is called the “firstborn of every creature” and the “firstborn from the dead” (Colossians 1:15, 18; Revelation 1:5).

The “world” could mean the world to come and Christ’s second coming, or when Christ came into His inheritance, that is, the whole world.

Here, Christ is due all the same worship and honor as the Father. He, glorified and ascended into heaven, is worshipped by “ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands of angels” (Revelation 5:8-14).

And of the angels He says: “Who makes His angels spirits And His ministers a flame of fire” (v. 7).

In order to show that the Son of God is not an angel and not created, Saint Paul quotes LXX Psalm 103:4. The angels are created beings who are the servants and ministers of God, proclaiming His word. They are messengers and bodiless spirits, fulfilling and accomplishing God’s will.

When the name “Angel” is applied to the Son in the Old Testament, it is to be understood with reference to the divine economy and to describe functions or specific missions.

But to the Son He says: “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; A scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your kingdom (v. 8).

To continue describing the unique relationship of the Son to the Father, and to contrast Him with created beings, Saint Paul refers LXX Psalm 44:6, which contains two symbols of royal power: the throne and the scepter. These refer to the eternal kingship of the Son as well as His reign as God-Man in the Church.

You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; Therefore God, Your God, has anointed You With the oil of gladness more than Your companions" (v. 9).

This is the continuation of LXX Psalm 44. As the incarnate God, our Lord Jesus Christ taught and practiced righteousness and was also a battle against the sin and iniquity around Him. Christ, the "anointed," was anointed for His earthly ministry as Prophet, Priest, and King, just as these were all anointed under the Old Covenant. Since He took on humanity, all men are fellows with our Lord Jesus Christ, yet He is at the same time unique and superior. When we are anointed with the oil of joy in Baptism in our anointing in the Mystery of Holy Chrism, we are sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, and have share and a fellowship with Christ and His righteousness.

And: " You, LORD, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, And the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You remain; And they will all grow old like a garment; Like a cloak You will fold them up, And they will be changed. But You are the same, And Your years will not fail" (v. 10-12).

Once again, we see our Lord Jesus Christ as creator. The Son is not a created being but of one essence with the Father.

All created things are perishable and changeable by nature. They grow old and can be discarded. But our Lord Jesus Christ, being Divine is constant and unchangeable. Being perfect, He is immutable and remains the same. Through the prophet Malachi, God says, "For I am the Lord, I do not change" (Malachi 3:6). Later in this epistle, Saint Paul writes, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8).

The term "years" cannot be applied to God who is outside of time. But it is appropriate to show that God does not grow old with the passing of man's years. God will not change when heaven and earth pass away. Heaven is His throne and earth is His footstool. He is outside them and above them and of a different essence than the created world.

But to which of the angels has He ever said: "Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool" (v. 13)?

God has never said this to any angel, but only to Christ, who having completed His saving mission on earth, ascended to heaven, and sat down at the right hand of the Father.

His enemies are those who are wicked and set themselves to oppose His will. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death (1 Corinthians 15:25-26).

Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation (v. 14)?

Chapter one ends with a rhetorical question. Once again we are told the purpose of the existence of angels. They do God's bidding and have been sent to serve and assist those who believe in Christ to become heirs of salvation. Christ is *the* Heir, and in Him we have a share and inheritance with Him as co-heirs.

Christ said, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Saint Athanasius reminds us that on seeing an angel, we could not say that we have seen the Father. Angels are ministering spirits, but Christ, as we have said, is in the brightness of His glory and in the express image of the Father. In seeing the Son, we do not see an angel, or someone merely greater than the angels, or any other creature, but the Father Himself.

Conclusion: Know Christ and Live Accordingly

The first chapter of Saint Paul's epistle to the Hebrews identifies the Person, Christ, who is to be the whole subject of this letter. He is the Son of God, the express image of the Father, eternal and unchangeable, and an active agent in creation itself. He is not an angel and was not created to be a minister or servant of God's will. The Son became one with us in our nature, without ceasing to be what He always was. As God and Man, He purged our sins, made us heirs to salvation, and gave us eternal life.

We see the works of Christ as Prophet (God spoke to us through His Son), King (He sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high), and Lord (obtaining a more excellent name than the angels).

Saint Paul is demonstrating to the Hebrews through the use of all the Old Testament prophecies that being familiar with these prophecies, they were prepared, they should have known, and should have been the first to recognize Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God. We also have been given this opportunity. What are we doing to recognize Christ as God? Are we praying and worshipping Him? Are we fulfilling His will? Are we following His commandments in order to be worthy of the inheritance He has given to us through His blood? Are we demonstrating our love toward Him by following His commandments and fulfilling His will?

We pray that this first chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews will always enlighten our minds to the knowledge of Christ and warm our hearts, as He speaks to us and reigns over us.

Glory is due to our God unto the age of all ages. Amen.

References

1. Royster, Archbishop Dmitri. The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary. Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003 (p. 7-28).