

Hebrews' Use of the Old Testament

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Introduction

The writer to the Hebrews had a mind that was marinated in the Old Testament. Like Apollos he was “mighty in the Scriptures” (Acts 18:24 AV). His thinking was saturated with Old Testament types, echoes and allusions. He has an easy familiarity with all the main characters of the Old Testament. There is hardly a verse where the Old Testament is not quoted, summarized, paraphrased or hinted at in some way. This makes Hebrews' use of the Old Testament a vast topic. It's the stuff that doctoral dissertations are made of. So I would be fooling myself if I thought that I could do any kind of justice to this huge subject in just a single lecture. So we will need to focus, and to focus rather sharply, if any of you are going to go home with any benefit from what I have to say this morning.

So first of all I would like to limit my discussion to the Old Testament *quotations* in Hebrews. There are important allusions, hints and echoes, but they will have to wait till another day. The quotations are plentiful enough. There are forty of them. When it comes to the sheer number of Old Testament quotations in the New Testament epistles, Hebrews is second only to Romans which has sixty-three quotes. But when it comes to the population density of quotations Hebrews is well in front. Not only is it shorter than Romans but its quotations are generally longer. In the original, the Hebrews quotes total 737 words, which amount to about 15% of its complete content. For Romans, on the other hand, the quotes come to only 639 words or about 9% of the total. So the population density of Old Testament quotes in Hebrews is greater than in any other book of the New Testament. The quotes make up a significant proportion of the Epistle.

Another difference with Romans (and again with any other writing in the New Testament) is the fact that Hebrews quotes almost exclusively from the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. This translation was begun in the third century BC. Legend has it that seventy-two Jewish elders completed the work in seventy-two days. The story is probably apocryphal, but that's where we get the inaccurate abbreviation LXX (the Roman numeral for seventy) which is commonly used to designate the Septuagint. The precise origin of the Septuagint is

still debated. The translation was probably made in Alexandria, Egypt where there was a large Jewish population. The canonical books of the Old Testament were probably translated by the end of the second century BC. It is not difficult to imagine that the LXX soon became popular among Diaspora Jews in the Eastern Mediterranean region. They knew no Hebrew, as Greek had become their mother tongue. The apostle Paul often appealed to the Septuagint in his letters, and when he preached in synagogues around the Mediterranean, he may well have used the Septuagint.¹

So perhaps it's a slight irony that Hebrews never quotes the Hebrew but only the Greek version of the Old Testament. The writer is obviously very familiar with it and he may have expected his readers to have been familiar with it as well. Of the forty quotations from the Old Testament thirty-four agree word for word, or almost word for word, with the Septuagint as we know it. The appendix at the end of this article, "Old Testament Quotations in the Epistle to the Hebrews," seeks to provide an exhaustive list of the quotations in Hebrews. It also highlights some of the problems.

In this lecture the focus will be on chapter 1. This is a majestic chapter that is not only dominated by Old Testament quotations but also contains a number of problems. In fact, some of the knottiest problems in Hebrews' use of the Old Testament can be found right here.

The Structure of Hebrews 1

Even a casual reading of this chapter will indicate just how artfully it has been put together. It is a literary masterpiece in its own right. In the Greek the prologue (vv. 1-4) is one long complex sentence. A little investigation soon reveals what the central thought of the passage is:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways,

¹ The only sermon where Paul quotes directly from the Old Testament is in the word of exhortation that he delivered in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16-41). On four occasions he uses introductory formulas to indicate that he is consciously quoting Scripture: v. 33 = Psalm 2:7; v. 34 = Isa 55:3; v. 35 = Psalm 16:10; v. 41 = Hab 1:5. Each quotation agrees either exactly or substantially with the LXX.

² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.

³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

⁴ So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.²

The main thought, the principal clause in this passage, is in verse 2: “In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.” If God has taken the trouble to speak through his Son we had better listen. That’s going to be a recurrent theme throughout Hebrews – God speaks and we listen. For now, however, the focus is on the Son, who he is and what has done. In fact, following this main clause in verse 2 there are seven subordinate clauses that all say something about the Son:

1. God appointed him heir of all things (v. 2).
2. Through him God made the universe (v. 2).
3. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being (v. 3). (This is an early indication of both the divinity and humanity of Christ.)
4. He sustains all things by his powerful word (v. 3).
5. He has provided purification for sins (v. 3).
6. He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven (v. 3).
7. He became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs (v. 4)

If ever you wanted a majestic picture of Christ look no further than these verses. But our author does take matters further. He gives Old Testament support for the last of these statements: “He became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.” That claim he

² Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the NIV. Italics within those quotations are my own.

backs up with exactly seven quotations from the Old Testament. That's his main purpose in the rest of the chapter – to prove from the Old Testament that the Son has inherited a name superior to that of the angels. As he proves that point he proves the other six as well. So the whole chapter is beautifully put together. God has spoken through his Son (v. 2a). Then the writer makes seven claims about the Son (vv. 2b-4). This is followed by his proofs that these claims are true with the seven quotations from the Old Testament (vv.5-14). It is a totally brilliant chapter.

We need to work through these quotations in some detail, but by way of introduction two general comments about these verses are in order.

The first is rather obvious. What is the name that is superior to the angels'? The quotations make that clear:

“You are my *Son*; today I have become your Father” (v. 5).

“I will be his Father, and he will be my *Son*” (v. 5).

There are times in the book of Job (e.g. Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7), and possibly also in the book of Genesis (6:2), where the angels collectively are called “the sons of God”. Nowhere, however, is an individual angel ever singled out as “my Son”. That title is reserved for Jesus alone. He is the only one who can lay claim to being *the* Son of God.

The second title comes in verse 8: “Your throne, O *God*, will last forever and ever.” So not only is he the Son of God, he is God. It's a name which no angel can claim.

Then finally the last title is found in verse 10: “In the beginning, O *Lord*, you laid the foundations of the earth.”

So that's the name that is superior to that of the angels – *Son*, *God* and *Lord*. Our writer proves this with verse after verse from the Old Testament. The trouble is that if you check the Old Testament references back to their original context, the passages don't seem to be referring directly to Jesus. They may not have been our first choice of proof texts to argue that Jesus is greater than the angels. In fact, these passages hardly seem to apply to Jesus at all. In their original context these verses seem to refer to David or Solomon or another Davidic king or to Yahweh himself. That's a problem, and it's a difficult problem. Why can't the writer to the Hebrews have

selected passages that more obviously speak about Jesus? This is a question to which we must return.

There's another general observation that also needs to be made. In quoting the Old Testament as he does, the writer uses the literary device called *inclusio*. Basically that means that you end a section the way you began. It's a very neat way of holding it all together. He begins and ends his quotations with the same question. You will notice how he introduces the quotations in verse 5: "For to which of the angels did God ever say?" Then in verse 13 he introduces the last quotation with exactly the same question: "To which of the angels did God ever say?" Then in each case he quotes from a messianic Psalm.

The first quote is from Psalm 2: "You are my Son; today I have become your Father."

The last quote is from Psalm 110: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet."

Both Psalm 2 and Psalm 110 are messianic Psalms. We can take that observation even one step further. These Psalms are also enthronement Psalms. They celebrate the enthronement of a Davidic king. But our author takes these Psalms as prophetic. They celebrate the enthronement not just of any Davidic king, but of *the* Davidic king, the Messiah who is great David's greater Son. These Psalms are prophetic and their prophecies are fulfilled in the enthronement of Jesus. That's why words that originally seem to apply to Solomon or some other descendant of David are now understood to apply to Jesus. In his enthronement these enthronement Psalms are finally fulfilled.

So if the first and the last of the Old Testament quotations in Hebrews 1 are taken from messianic Psalms, then perhaps the other quotations are meant to say something about the Messiah as well. If both of these Psalms are about the enthronement of a Davidic king, then maybe the other quotations will have something to say about the enthronement of the last and greatest Davidic king. Maybe these other quotes too will shed some light on the enthronement of Jesus.

1. “You are my Son; today I have become your Father” (v. 5a).

Who was God’s son in the Old Testament? This is a rather loaded question, because in biblical times people thought of sonship differently than we do today. Today sonship is genetic. It is defined by DNA. We think of sonship mainly in terms of genes, but in the Bible sonship is functional and behavioural.³ Liars and murderers are called sons of the devil because they behave like the devil. On the other hand the sons of Abraham are those who share the faith of Abraham, and peacemakers are called the sons of God because that is what God is like. So in the Old Testament who was to be most God-like? Who had the calling to behave and function like God? First and foremost it was Israel. In Exodus 4 God says to Pharaoh, “Israel is my firstborn *son* . . . Let my *son* go, so he may worship me” (vv. 22-23). Then later in the Old Testament we read, “Out of Egypt have I called my *son*” (Hosea 11:1). The reference is of course to the Exodus. So in the Old Testament it is Israel who is to function and behave like God, and it is in this sense that Israel can be called the son of God.

Not only is the nation the son of God, however. Later it is also the king of Israel, the representative of the people, who is also referred to as God’s son. This is how God refers to David in Psalm 89:

“He will call out to me, ‘You are *my Father*,
My God, the Rock, my Saviour” (v. 26).

To which God responds:

“I will also appoint him *my firstborn*,
the most exalted of the kings of the earth” (v. 27).

So Israel is God’s son, God’s firstborn, and so is Israel’s king. But when does the king become God’s son? Psalm 2 makes that very clear. It is when he is enthroned. It is then that God declares, “You are my Son; today I have become your Father” (v. 7). Not only does he then become the king but also the heir. In Psalm 2:8 God says to the king: “Ask of me and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.” So Psalm 2 also proves the first claim made about Jesus in Hebrews 1: God

³ At this point I am indebted to D. A. Carson’s 2005 lecture series at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, “Why does Hebrews Cite the Old Testament Like That?”

appointed him heir of all things (v. 2). He is the ultimate Davidic king and the nations are his inheritance. He is the heir of all things. As the enthroned Davidic king he is the Son of God and hence superior to the angels.

2. “I will be his Father, and he will be my Son” (v. 5b).

This quote continues the same theme. Here again we meet a king of Israel who is called God’s son. If Psalm 2 was a reference to David, this is a reference to Solomon. The quote comes word for word from 2 Samuel 7:14 and 1 Chronicles 17:13. In both cases the context is the same. David has wanted to build a temple for the Lord. The prophet Nathan then comes back to David with a message from God. David is not to build God’s house. That will be left to David’s successor Solomon, but God does promise that he will build David’s house. This is the heart of the Davidic covenant. These are God’s words to David in 2 Chronicles 17:11-14:

¹¹ When your days are over and you go to be with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom.

¹² He is the one who will build a house for me, and I will establish his throne forever.

¹³ I will be his father, and he will be my son. I will never take my love away from him, as I took it away from your predecessor.

¹⁴ I will set him over my house and my kingdom forever; his throne will be established forever.”

So was this promise fulfilled in Solomon? Yes, it was. He did build God’s temple and God established his kingdom. But was the promise *completely* fulfilled in Solomon? No, it wasn’t. Think especially of the last verse, “I will set him over my house and my kingdom forever; his throne will be established forever.” This could not possibly be fulfilled in Solomon. This promise overflows the borders of any human kingdom. So the promise begins to be fulfilled in Solomon. It is partly fulfilled in Solomon, but the complete fulfillment is found only in Christ. Only of him can it be said that God sets him over his house and kingdom forever, and his throne will be established forever. So the words, “I will be his Father and he will be my son,” applied initially to Solomon, but ultimately they are about Christ. That’s why Hebrews quotes these words as it does.

3. “And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says: ‘Let all God’s angels worship him’” (v. 6).

This is a really tricky one, but it’s also the crux of the whole passage. If we get this verse right, the entire chapter will fall into place.

First of all, what are we to make of the introduction? When did God bring his firstborn into the world? It is tempting to think that this is a reference to Israel. After all, Israel was God’s firstborn. Think of God’s words to Pharaoh (Exod 4:22). But that hardly fits the context. The first two quotes have been about God’s Son, the Messiah. So it only makes sense that this quote should be about the Messiah as well. But when did God bring Jesus into the world? Was it at the nativity? That’s when the angels sang over the fields at Bethlehem. Or could it have been at Jesus’ resurrection? Is that when the angels were told to worship him? Or could it be at his Second Coming? When exactly does God bring his firstborn into the world?

Before we can answer that question there is an earlier question. What “world” does the writer to the Hebrews have in mind here? He actually tells us, but it is not till verse 5 of the next chapter. There he says, “It is not to angels that he subjected the world to come about which we are speaking.”⁴ So he is not really speaking about this world at all. He is speaking about the world to come, the heavenly Mount Zion (12:22), the city whose builder and maker is God (11:10). That puts a whole different light on it. Remember that all these quotations are bracketed by two enthronement Psalms. All of this is about the enthronement of the great Davidic king, which took place at his ascension when he sat at the right hand of God. That’s where all these quotations are heading, to the quote of Psalm 110:1 in verse 13: “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.” And when did Christ take his seat at the right hand of God? When did God bring him into the world to come? When did God enthrone him as the messianic King? It was when his work of redemption was complete. It was when the cross and the resurrection were behind him. It was then that God brought him into the world to come and said: “Let all the angels worship him.”

⁴ The Greek word for *world* in both 1:6 and 2:5 is οἰκουμένη. It is used nowhere else in Hebrews.

But this verse presents still another problem. If you have a Bible with cross references, you will be told that this is a quote from Deuteronomy 32:43. So being a diligent Bible student you take the trouble to look up Deuteronomy 32:43, and there it reads:

“Rejoice, O nations, with his people, for he will avenge the blood of his servants; he will take vengeance on his enemies and make atonement for his land and people.”

There is nothing here about angels worshipping anybody. So what has happened? Remember this writer is quoting from the LXX, and the LXX does say, “Let all God’s angels worship him,”⁵ and so do the Dead Sea Scrolls. So there seems to be a textual problem here with the Hebrew text on which our English translations are based. So the writer to the Hebrews is not making this up. These words were there in the Bible that he had before him.⁶

But we are not out of the woods yet. There is one more problem with Deuteronomy 32. This chapter is not about the Messiah. It’s all about

⁵ In the LXX the full text reads as follows:

εὐφράνθητε οὐρανοὶ ἅμα αὐτῷ καὶ προσκυνησάτωσαν αὐτῷ πάντες υἱοὶ θεοῦ εὐφράνθητε ἔθνη μετὰ τοῦ λαοῦ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐνισχυσάτωσαν αὐτῷ πάντες ἄγγελοι θεοῦ ὅτι τὸ αἷμα τῶν υἱῶν αὐτοῦ ἐκδικᾶται καὶ ἐκδικήσει καὶ ἀνταποδώσει δίκην τοῖς ἐχθροῖς καὶ τοῖς μισοῦσιν ἀνταποδώσει καὶ ἐκκαθαριεῖ κύριος τὴν γῆν τοῦ λαοῦ αὐτοῦ. (The underlined words are quoted verbatim in Hebrews 1:6.) Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright (eds.), *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), offer the following translation:

“Be glad, O skies, with him, and let all the divine sons do obeisance to him. Be glad, O nations, with his people, and let all the angels of God prevail for him. For he will avenge the blood of his sons and take revenge and repay the enemies with a sentence, and he will repay those who hate, and the Lord shall cleanse the land of his people.”

⁶ According to P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 59, “the Septuagint here reflects a Hebrew text which was in the hands of the Ptolemaic translators in the third century B. C. That such was indeed the case is now virtually confirmed by the discovery of a fragment in Hebrew from Cave 4 at Qumran which includes the clause in question and thus provides a very early witness to its authenticity.” Thus also George H. Guthrie, “Hebrews”, in G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (eds.), *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 931: “. . . the LXX parallels a reading from Qumran (4Q44) rather than the MT or the Samaritan Pentateuch.”

Yahweh. He is the one “who will avenge the blood of his servants (and take vengeance on his enemies.” So can the writer to the Hebrews take a passage about Yahweh and with a sleight of hand apply it to the Messiah? Seeing that the Messiah is divine anyway, why not just take a passage about God and say it is about the Messiah? Haven’t they become interchangeable? That’s what I used to think. That’s how I used to read other verses in Hebrews 1. But the writer to the Hebrews isn’t that sloppy. He has a whole lot more class than that. He also has more integrity than that.

Deuteronomy 32 contains the Song of Moses, and verse 43 is the last verse in that song. Verses 34-42 are all about the LORD, about Yahweh. In most of that section (vv. 34-35, 37-42) we hear him speaking directly, but then in verse 43 there is a change of person, and this change is very clear in the Septuagint: “Be glad, O skies, with him, and let all the divine sons do obeisance to him. Be glad, O nations, with his people, and let all the angels of God prevail for him.” This anonymous figure is not Yahweh. He is distinguished from Yahweh. So right at the end of the Song of Moses this mysterious person is introduced. He is a figure of great power and authority, so much so that the angels worship him, but he remains anonymous and mysterious. Now at last the writer to the Hebrews can reveal his identity. Who is it that will avenge the blood of his servants? Who will take vengeance on his enemies? Who makes atonement for his land and people? It is the Messiah, it is Jesus. Therefore, when God brings him into the world to come, “Let all the angels of God worship him.”

4. “In speaking of the angels he says, ‘He makes his angels winds, his servants flames of fire’” (v. 7).

The quote is from Psalm 104:4. Again when you look up the Old Testament reference it’s not exactly what you would expect: “He makes winds his messengers, flames of fire his servants.” It seems that the writer to the Hebrews has it exactly backwards. Yet this is actually not as big a problem as it looks. The Hebrew can actually be translated either way. The writer’s point is to further sharpen the biblical contrast between Christ and the angels. Like wind and fire they are God’s servants. Christ is God’s Son.

5. “But about the Son he says, ‘Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom.

⁹ You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy” (vv. 8-9).

This is a quote from Psalm 45:6-7. There are no translation problems here. In the first nine verses of this Psalm a royal courtier is addressing the king on his wedding day. He describes the king's majesty in God-like terms. It is the kind of language you would expect from an ancient Near-Eastern court. The king is so God-like in his functions that he is addressed as God himself. The Hebrew word is *Elohim* which sometimes can refer to judges (cf. Psalm 82:6, which Jesus quotes in John 10:34). The king is God's right hand of justice. He is, after all, the son of God. So the writer to the Hebrews takes the words of the royal courtier in Psalm 45 and puts them in the mouth of God. So although it was the courtier addressing the king, it is also God addressing the king. How can this be? How does this work? We have already been told at the beginning of Hebrews 1 that God spoke through the prophets of the Old Testament (v. 1). So when the Psalmist speaks, God speaks. When the Psalmist calls the king "God", then God calls him God. Throughout Hebrews the writer is happy to attribute the words of the Old Testament to each of the persons of the Trinity (2:12-13; 3:7-11; 4:3-5; 5:5-6; 8:8-12; 10:5-9, 15-17). So here we have God calling the Son, God.

Now remember the new context. God has brought the Son into the world to come. This is an enthronement situation. Therefore God can say to his messianic King, "Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever, and righteousness is the scepter of your kingdom." The angels are just servants who are called upon to exercise their power from time to time. The Messiah, on the other hand, sits on an eternal throne. In him the promise to David is finally fulfilled. His throne will endure forever. It is undergirded by the foundation of righteousness and justice.

But there is more. God has set him above his companions by anointing him with the oil of joy. Perhaps some of the more literal translations are better here: "God has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your companions" (cf. AV, NASB, RSV). We are told later that his companions are his brothers, the likes of you and me (2:11). Here we are told that Christ experiences a gladness beyond what any of us will ever experience. Take the greatest joy you have ever experienced, your wedding day or the birth of your firstborn child, and it pales into insignificance compared to the oil of gladness with which God has anointed Jesus. He has experienced a

joy that is so deep and so overwhelming that none of us will ever have a joy that comes even close. Now when did Jesus have that experience? When was he absolutely bursting with joy? It was when he had completed his work of purification for sins and sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high (1:3). This was the joy that was set before him when he endured the cross (12:2). It was a greater joy than any of his brothers will ever know. It was the joy of achievement that we know from a job well done. And what greater achievement was there than the atonement for sin? He has done what none of us could ever do, and therefore he has experienced a joy that none of us will ever have. That experience was his when he ascended to the right hand of God and all the angels worshipped him.

6. “He also says, ‘In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands.

¹¹ They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment.

¹² 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.”
(vv. 10-12)

This is another tough one. The quote comes from Psalm 102:25-27. Here it is in the context of vv. 23-28, where the Psalmist is speaking about God:

In the course of my life he broke my strength; he cut short my days.

²⁴ So I said: "Do not take me away, O my God, in the midst of my days; your years go on through all generations.

²⁵ In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands.

²⁶ 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.

²⁷ But you remain the same, and your years will never end.

²⁸ The children of your servants will live in your presence; their descendants will be established before you."

The quote and its source sound pretty much the same. So what's the problem? There are a couple actually. Hebrews has the important expression "O Lord". You don't find that in the Psalm, but you do find it in the Septuagint, the Bible version our writer was using. There is a more serious problem as well. These verses are addressed to God and not to the

Messiah. It's the same problem we encountered at the end of the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32. Is our writer willy-nilly taking a passage that refers to God and applying it to Christ? Is he thinking that if Christ is God then anything that refers to God can be applied to Christ? Again that would be a rash and hasty conclusion.

Yet again the answer is in the Septuagint, but how does it help us this time? Actually it helps us in much the same way as it helped us with Deuteronomy 32. In the Masoretic Hebrew text of Psalm 102 the Psalmist addresses God from beginning to end. That would mean that the words quoted in Hebrews 1 were in fact addressed to Yahweh. In the Septuagint the Psalmist's prayer ends at verse 22. Then God speaks but he does not address the Psalmist. Once again he is addressing some mysterious third party. This is how verses 23-25 read in the Septuagint:

“He (God) answered him (the mysterious third party) in the way of his strength:
‘Declare to me the shortness of my days:
Bring me not up in the midst of my days.
Thy years are throughout all generations.
Thou, Lord, in the beginning didst lay the foundation of the earth . . .”⁷

⁷ Apart from the words in brackets this is the translation offered by F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 22. In the LXX vv. 24-26 read as follows: ἀπεκρίθη αὐτῷ ἐν δόξῃ ἰσχύος αὐτοῦ τὴν ὀλιγότητα τῶν ἡμερῶν μου ἀνάγγειλόν μου

²⁵ μὴ ἀναγάγῃς με ἐν ἡμίσει ἡμερῶν μου ἐν γενεᾷ γενεῶν τὰ ἔτη σου

²⁶ κατ' ἀρχὰς σὺ κύριε τὴν γῆν ἐθεμελίωσας καὶ ἔργα τῶν χειρῶν σου εἰσιν οἱ οὐρανοί.

It is interesting to compare two form equivalence English translations of the LXX and the Hebrew Masoretic text at this point. Launcelot L. Brenton, *The Septuagint Version of the Old Testament with an English Translation* (London: Bagster, n.d.), 759, translates as follows: “He answered him in the way of his strength: tell me the fewness of my days. Take me not away in the midst of my days: thy years are through all generations. In the beginning thou, O Lord, didst lay the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands.”

Compare this to the NASB translation of the Masoretic text:

“He has weakened my strength in the way; He has shortened my days. I say, ‘O my God, do not take me away in the midst of my days, Thy years are throughout all generations. Of old Thou didst found the earth; and the heavens are the work of Thy hands.’”

In Hebrews 1 we are told that God said these words to Christ. In the Septuagint God is speaking these words to some anonymous figure. Now we know who that is. To how many people can God say, “Thy years are through all generations”? If God is speaking, how many options does he have when he says, “Thou, Lord, in the beginning didst lay the foundation of the earth”? There can be only one possible answer to these questions. He is addressing his Son, Jesus Christ. There are no other candidates who would qualify for this exalted kind of language.

So again the writer to the Hebrews is not using the Old Testament in some haphazard kind of way. He is not plucking verses about God from here and there and applying them to Christ. Here is a man so well versed in the Bible that he knew that he can go to some of its most obscure corners and find references to Christ. At the end of Psalm 102 the Septuagint gives a perfectly adequate rendering of the Hebrew. It is a completely accurate translation of the consonantal text (see footnote 7). Imagine trying to read a book that contained only consonants and no vowels. How would you cope? It would be somewhat like reading one long SMS message. That’s precisely what the Septuagint translators were facing. The earliest Hebrew copies of the Old Testament that have vowels date to the ninth century AD and this is what we know as the Masoretic text, which was not produced until more than a thousand years after the Septuagint translators started their work. So if our English translations depend on the Masoretic text and the quotations in Hebrews come from the Septuagint you can expect some differences. That’s precisely the kind of challenges that you have in Hebrews 1, but they are not insurmountable.

7. “To which of the angels did God ever say, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet’”? (v. 13).

The main differences are with the underlined words. According to Bruce, *Hebrews*, 22, these differences are purely the result of vocalization. The Hebrew consonants ענה can be vocalized to mean either “he answered” or “he weakened/afflicted.” Likewise אמר אלי can be translated either as “say to me / tell me” or “I say, ‘My God.’” Although some textual problems remain, the different possible vocalizations of the consonantal Hebrew text go a long way towards explaining the differences between the Septuagint and the Masoretic text. This also helps to account for the messianic understanding of Psalm 102:25-27 in Hebrews 1:10-12.

This is an exact quote from Psalm 110. This is really the climax towards which the writer has been working. Compared to the Son at God's right hand the angels are mere ministering spirits sent to those who will inherit salvation (v. 14). This last quote helps to explain all those that have gone before. It is when the Son sits at God's right hand that all the angels worship him, that he receives a throne that will last forever and ever, and that he is anointed with the oil of joy above his companions. This quote is also pivotal. It not only makes sense of what precedes. It also points ahead to what follows. Psalm 110 contains those crucial words: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek" (v. 4). This becomes the preacher's basic text in chapters 5-7. So Psalm 110 is one of those key passages in our author's mind. From it he proves that Jesus is both priest and king. Like Melchizedek he is the Priest-King, a combination that was never possible in Old Testament Israel. Again it shows that Jesus is vastly superior to all that had gone before.

Conclusion

Hebrews 1 has to be one of the most brilliant and beautiful chapters in the whole Bible. Seven majestic statements about Christ followed by seven well chosen supporting passages from the Old Testament – it hardly gets any better than that. The symmetry, the balance, the *inclusio* – it all makes this chapter a literary masterpiece of the highest order. Who of us could come up with a sermon introduction that comes anywhere close to this? It certainly puts us in our place. It humbles us completely.

But I must also confess that that this chapter not only fascinated me, for a long time it also frustrated me. Time and again I would try and do the right thing. I would look up those Old Testament references. I would check them in my English Bible. I would read them in their context. At times I even went back to the Hebrew. But it still didn't make sense. The writer's hermeneutics still escaped me. But then I started checking him against the Septuagint and slowly things started to change. If this was his Bible, he knew it extremely well. Now some of his quotations started to make sense. At last there was some light.

So when you work your way through Hebrews, don't take shortcuts. Do your homework. Wrestle with the text. Go back to the Old Testament. You will discover treasures about Jesus you never knew were there. Share those treasures with your people and they will love you forever.

Appendix

Old Testament Quotations in the Epistle to the Hebrews

Abbreviations:

BDB – *The New Brown, Driver and Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Lafayette, Indiana: Associated Publishers and Authors, 1981.

DSS – Dead Sea Scrolls

ET – English Translation

LXX – Septuagint

MT – Masoretic Text

No	Hebrews	LXX (ET) ⁸	Exact	Close	Paraphrase	Problem
1	1:5a	Psalm 2:7	X			
2	1:5b	2 Samuel 7:14; 1 Chronicles 17:13	X			
3	1:6	Deuteronomy 32:43	X			No MT background (but see DSS)
4	1:7	Psalm 103 (104):4		X		
5	1:8-9	Psalm 44:7-8 (45:6-7)		X		
6	1:10-12	Psalm 101:26- 28 (102:26-27)		X		Reference seems to be to Yahweh only (not messianic)

⁸ Where there are differences, Psalm references in brackets indicate the location of verses in English Bible translations, while those outside the brackets indicate locations within the LXX.

7	1:13	Psalm 109:1 (110:1)	X			
8	2:6-8a	Psalm 8:5-7		X		Seems to vary from MT (but see BDB)
9	2:12	Psalm 21:23 (22:22)		X		
10	2:13a	Isaiah 8:17		X		Seems to vary from the MT
11	2:13b	Isaiah 8:18	X			
12	3:7b-11	Psalm 94 (95):7-11		X		
13	3:15	Psalm 94 (95):7b-8a	X			
14	4:3 (cf. 3:11; 4:5)	Psalm 94 (95):11	X			
15	4:4	Gen 2:2b		X		
16	4:5 (cf. 3:11; 4:3)	Psalm 94 (95):11 (in part)	X			
17	4:7 (cf. 3:7-8)	Psalm 94 (95):7b-8a	X			
18	5:5 (cf. 1:5)	Psalm 2:7	X			
19	5:6	Psalm 109 (110):4		X		
20	6:13a-14	Genesis 22:16-17		X		
21	7:1-2	Genesis 14:17-20			X	
22	7:17 (cf. 5:6)	Psalm 109 (110):4	X			
23	7:21 (cf. 5:6; 7:17)	Psalm 109 (110):4		X		
24	8:5	Exodus 25:40		X		
25	8:8-12	Jeremiah 38 (31): 31-34		X		
26	9:20	Exodus 24:8			X	Hebrews has features not found in Exodus
27	10:5-7	Psalm 39:7-9 (40:6-8)		X (Textual variations in LXX)		Varies (significantly ?) from MT
28	10:16-17 (cf. 8:10-12)	Jeremiah 38 (31): 33-34			X	Varies from the earlier quotation in Hebrews

						8:10-12
29	10:30a	Deuteronomy 32:35			X	
30	10:30b	Deuteronomy 32:36	X			
31	10:37-38	Habakkuk 2:3-4			X (incorporates a phrase from Isa 26:20)	A difficult quote both textually and contextually
32	11:5	Genesis 5:24		X		
33	11:18	Genesis 21:12	X			
34	11:21	Genesis 47:31	X			Differs from MT only because of pointing ('staff', 'bed')
35	12:5-6	Proverbs 3:11-12		X		
36	12:20	Exodus 19:12-13			X	
37	12:21	Deuteronomy 9:19	X			Slightly different context
38	12:26	Haggai 2:6	X			
39	13:5	Deuteronomy 31:6		X		
40	13:6	Psalms 117 (118):6	X			

A. Old Testament Books Quoted

Genesis – 6

Exodus – 3

Deuteronomy – 5

2 Samuel – 1

1 Chronicles – 1

Psalms – 18

Proverbs – 1

Isaiah – 2

Jeremiah – 2

Habakkuk – 1

Haggai – 1

B. Quality of the Quotations

1. Exact Reproductions from LXX: 17/40

2. Quotations Approximating Verbatim Reproductions: 17/40

This category includes those cases where there are changes of word order, alterations in the form of verbs (e.g. in tense, person etc.) to fit the new context, or the use of a synonym to replace the original LXX term (which may have become archaic by the time Hebrews was written). Hence the modifications made in this category are strictly minor. If the results of categories 1 & 2 are combined, 34/40 of the OT quotations fall into these

two categories. This represents 85% of the quotations. Compared to other NT writers this is a remarkable result. Paul and Peter, for example, in writing their epistles agree with the LXX in 35% and 28% of cases respectively. (Paul agrees with the MT 23% of the time and Peter 50%). In 44% of cases Peter varies from both the LXX and the MT. In the case of Paul this figure rises to a whopping 61%. Compared to these apostolic writers the author of Hebrews is very conservative in his use of Scripture. He agrees substantially with the LXX in all but 15% of cases (whereas Peter and Paul vary from any known version of the OT 44% and 61% respectively). This surely demonstrates that the LXX held high authority for our author and that he knew it well. Even where he quotes the LXX from memory (as he appears to be doing in at least 2:6-8 and 4:4), the quote is still very close to the original. From this it is probably fair to conclude that the LXX was regarded as authoritative not only by the author but by the readers as well.

3. Paraphrases or Summaries of the LXX:

This represents merely six (or 15%) of all the quotations in Hebrews.

- (a) In 7:1-2 the author recounts Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek in Genesis 14:17-20. It is a summary of this incident and hardly purports to give a verbatim account.
- (b) In the case of 9:20 the difficulty is not so much with the quote itself as with the context. In v. 19 it says that Moses took the blood of the sacrifices "with the water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled the book itself and all the people." In Exod 24:8 he does indeed sprinkle all the people with blood, but there is no reference to sprinkling the book. Likewise there is no reference to scarlet wool and hyssop in the original context. There are, however, references to these items in other contexts, e.g. the cleansing of a leper (Lev. 14:4) and the sacrifice of a heifer (Num 19:6).
- (c) A particularly interesting case is the second quotation from Jeremiah 31:33-34 in Hebrews 10:16-17. It is a summary and paraphrase of the earlier quotation in 8:8-12 (which is incidentally the longest OT quote in the NT). In repeating the Jeremiah quote our author feels under no obligation to quote Jeremiah in exactly the same way. Although the sense of the original is retained, there are some significant omissions and alterations. In linking the two quotes (8:8-12 and 10:16-17) the author creates an *inclusio*. This means that throughout this section his main concern is to compare

the two covenants and demonstrate the superiority of the new over the old. Under the new covenant sins are forgiven and consciences are cleansed – both blessings that could only be adumbrated by the old covenant.

- (d) Although the wording of Hebrews 10:30a (“Vengeance is mine, I will repay”) differs from Deuteronomy 32:25 (“On a day of vengeance I will repay”), the two statements are certainly not contradictory.
- (e) Hebrews 10:37-38 appears to be a merged quotation from Isaiah 26:20 and Habakkuk 2:3-4. In the original context both quotations appear to refer to the Babylonian invasion and the ultimate punishment of the Babylonians. Hence these verses teach both deliverance and judgment. Our author, from his new vantage point in redemptive history, transposes both verses to a higher key. He relates them to the return of Christ which will also bring both salvation and judgment. (A good explanation of this difficult quote is found in Hughes, *Hebrews*, 434-437).
- (f) Hebrews 12:20 seems to be a summary of what Moses is to tell the people before they receive the Ten Commandments at Sinai (Exodus 19:12-13).

4. Problems

Most of the major problems have been discussed under the previous heading, but the following matters still deserve some attention:

- (a) Hebrews 1:6 quotes a line from Deuteronomy 32:43 that is not found in the MT: “And let all the angels of God worship him.” These words do appear, however, in both the LXX and the DSS. So it would appear that the LXX translation is based on an underlying text more ancient than the MT at this point. A problem still remains with the introduction to this quotation: “and when he again brings the firstborn into the world, he says . . .” Who is the “firstborn” and where does this reference come from? (See the discussion in the main body of this article.)
- (b) Hebrews 1:10-12 applies Psalm 102:26-27 to the Christ, although the original context seems to apply only to Yahweh. On what basis can the writer to the Hebrews interpret these words messianically? (See the discussion in the main body of this article.)

- (c) Hebrews 2:7 quotes Psalm 8:5 seemingly at variance with the Hebrew. Brown, Driver and Briggs, however, give “angels” as a possible, but rare translation of “Elohim.”
- (d) The quote from Isaiah 8:17 in Hebrews 2:13a seems to vary from the MT, although our author could be quoting from other sources at this point.
- (e) “A body you have prepared for me” (10:5) reads very differently to Psalm 40:6 (MT): “My ears you have opened / dug / pierced.” LXX versions vary between “ears” and “body.” Our author has clearly used the reading more congenial to his purposes. The underlying Hebrew text appears difficult to translate.
- (f) Hebrews 11:21 has Jacob “leaning on the top of his *staff*”, while Genesis 47:31 has Jacob bowing in worship “at the head of the *bed*” (MT). Here the LXX translators and the Masoretes have simply differed on the pointing of the original Hebrew word. In the consonantal text either reading is possible.
- (g) If Hebrews 12:21 is intended to be a quote from Deuteronomy 9:19 (only two words overlap between the LXX and Hebrews) the context has shifted somewhat. Deut 9 has Moses afraid of God’s wrath when the people have made the golden calf, whereas in Hebrews his fear seems to be in the context of the giving of the Law. Both chapters deal with Sinai, and perhaps Hebrews has this slightly later incident in mind, although that is not the immediate impression given to the reader.

Conclusion

The writer to the Hebrews uses the OT in ways that are at the same time conservative and creative. He has a high regard for the LXX which he often reproduces (almost) verbatim. The variations from the LXX text, however, suggest that the author does not view Scripture in some mechanistic way or that he has a dictation view of inspiration. He has a keen sense of the flow of redemptive history and can therefore interpret OT events in imaginative yet accurate ways. As he applies the ancient text to a new context, he does so through the grid of Christ’s redemptive work. He therefore has a Christological understanding of OT passages that we may not immediately see in that light and some of his applications remain problematic to the modern mind. Most of his quotations, however, are far from problematic. Some that appear to be problems at first sight are solved upon further examination. This leaves only a small number of remaining problems. We must remain confident that further research and more

discoveries (such as the DSS) will eventually dissolve the difficulties that are still outstanding.