CHAPTER TWO

ANGELS, ANTHROPOLOGY, AND THE AGE TO COME
IN HEBREWS 1–2

2.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapter I surveyed the positions of modern commentators on Hebrews regarding the presence and significance of Jesus’ resurrection in this sermon. I argued that, in spite of their differences, most interpreters see little or no reference to Jesus’ resurrection as a discrete event in Hebrews, and find even less significance attached to the confession of this event for the Christology and soteriology the writer develops.

The primary goal of the next two chapters is to challenge that consensus by establishing both the presence and importance of the resurrection of Jesus’ human body in Hebrews, and by exploring some of the particular contributions this affirmation makes to the high-priestly Christology uniquely expounded in this homily. A close reading of Heb 1–2 and Heb 5–7 suggests that two central concerns the author seeks to address are 1) the rationale for Jesus’ exaltation above the angels, and 2) the means by which Jesus was able to obtain his position as high priest. While chapter three of this study primarily examines the latter of these concerns, the present chapter focuses on the former.

In this chapter I argue that the author advances the somewhat surprising claim that Jesus’ elevation to a status above the angels follows from the fact that when he ascended into heaven, he entered that realm as a human being. That is, unlike the angelic spirits, Jesus is in heaven as a human. Only as a human being is he qualified to be elevated above the angels and to accede to the throne at God’s right hand. Two interrelated arguments will establish this thesis.

First, I explicate the contrast between the Son and the angels in the author’s argument in Heb 1–2. In Heb 1 the author stresses the spiritual nature of the angels. In Heb 2, he emphasizes the Son’s assuming blood and flesh. The being called the Son in Heb 1, in other words, became a human being, a being with a kind of body that was
susceptible to corruption, suffering, and death. Jesus was, in every respect, like every other human being, albeit without sin (4:15). Many commentators rightly note that the Son’s experience of human mortality qualifies him in some way for his high-priestly ministry.¹ Not only must he be human to be a high priest (5:1), his personal acquaintance with temptation and suffering enables him to be a merciful and faithful high priest (2:17), one who understands human frailty and can offer help to those who come to him in their time of need (2:18; 4:16).

I, however, demonstrate that while the points just delineated are not incorrect, the majority of modern commentators have failed to apprehend that the author adduces an additional rationale for why the Son must be human—namely, to qualify him to be elevated above the angels and reign over the world to come. I will argue that the contrast between the Son and the angels primarily concerns the kind of beings humans are (which includes human blood and flesh) and the kind of beings angels are (i.e., πνεῦμα).

Second, I study the conception of a coming world or age attested in other texts from the Second Temple period. Such a survey shows that some Jews, who were near contemporaries with the author of Hebrews, envisioned the “world to come” as the eternal and incorruptible fulfillment of God’s promise to give Israel a land for its inheritance. When this promise finally comes to fruition, the descendants of Abraham will assume their rightful place above all of God’s creation, including the angels. I show that this logic is rooted in an Adam typology often overlooked by interpreters. Once this typology is recognized, however, the fullness of the author’s eschatological hopes and the logic and imagery of his argument in Heb 1–2 can be explained.

I begin, then, by exploring the contrast the author presents between the “ministering spirits” and the exalted Son.

¹ It is not uncommon to identify the primary import of the Son’s humanity, and his suffering in particular, as the precondition of his being merciful and faithful in his role as high priest, not as a precondition for his being a high priest per se (e.g., Harold W. Attridge, The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress], 95; William L. Lane, Hebrews 1–8 [WBC 47A; Dallas: Word, 1991], 54, 64; H.-F. Weiss, Der Brief an die Hebräer [15th ed.; KEK 13; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991], 223–4).