

Son, Sacrifice, and Great Shepherd

Studies on the Epistle to the Hebrews

Edited by

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Chapter 2

Human Beings and Angels in Hebrews and Philo of Alexandria: Toward an Account of Hebrews' Cosmology

*David M. Moffitt**

The question of the underlying cosmology held by the author of Hebrews is hardly a new one. Debates around this question are substantial.¹ The issue is a matter of essential importance for interpreting this text. One's understanding of so many elements of this homily, particularly when examining Hebrews' language of and about heavenly realities, depends on an account of the author's implicit understanding of the structure and makeup of reality. These concerns can hardly be avoided when trying to understand this ancient sermon, even though they often remain implicit in the text.

This chapter does not offer a robust, constructive account of Hebrews' cosmology. Rather, it explores the contrast between the Son and the angels in Heb 1–2 with a view to showing how the argument in these chapters effectively disallows a Platonic account of the human being and so also of cosmology. The argumentation of the opening chapters of Hebrews refuses Platonic categories just to the extent that it envisions the Son's return to the heavens after his death as a human being. The point can be seen with clarity when viewed from the perspective of some potentially important comparative reflection in Philo of Alexandria on the ontology of angels and of human beings. Whereas Philo sees death as a moment when the essential distinction between human beings and angels can be erased as the properly trained spirit (*πνεῦμα*) or soul (*ψυχή*) trapped in an individual human body has the opportunity to ascend through the

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¹ For only a few of the more recent essays on the topic see, Edward Adams, "The Cosmology of Hebrews," in *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology* (ed. Richard Bauckham, Daniel R. Driver, Trevor A. Hart, and Nathan MacDonald; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009), 122–39; Jon C. Laansma, "The Cosmology of Hebrews," in *Cosmology and New Testament Theology* (ed. Jonathan T. Pennington and Sean M. McDonough; Library of New Testament Studies 355; London: T&T Clark, 2008), 125–43; and Philip Church, "Hebrews 1:10–12 and the Renewal of the Cosmos," *TynBul* 67 (2016): 269–86.

air becoming one of the angelic hosts, Hebrews insists that even in the heavens a difference between human being and angelic being must persist in the case of the exalted Jesus. This implies, however, that Hebrews holds a very different cosmology from that of a thinker like Philo.

My arguments about the nature and role of Jesus' resurrection in Hebrews mark my own point of entry into these issues.² As is well known, Hebrews says little explicitly about Jesus' resurrection. This fact, some conclude, further implies the author's relative lack of interest in this part of the confession of the earliest Christ-followers.³ A number of scholars of the last one hundred years or so have argued further that Hebrews has no place for Jesus' bodily resurrection.⁴ For many, this conclusion correlates with the assumption that the cosmology and understanding of the human being that the author holds consists of a permutation of a Platonic dualism (a radical dualism between the material and immaterial realms), which makes it difficult to imagine that Jesus could rise from the dead with his physical, human body and ascend in that body through the heavens into the realm of God.⁵ Some argue further that Jesus' death and offering of himself to the Father as a sacrifice are essentially the same event. Hebrews' language of Jesus entering the heavenly holy of holies to appear before God and offer himself as the ultimate sacrifice (9:24–26) must, therefore, be a metaphorical reference to the crucifixion.⁶ On these kinds of readings, the Son's incarnation – his participation in flesh-and-blood humanity – is often viewed as a temporary affair.⁷ Jesus passed into the heavenly realm as a *πνεῦμα* when he expired on the cross. As I demonstrate below, this sort of concept of life after death is well represented in a thinker such as Philo, but it

² See David M. Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (NovTSup 141; Leiden: Brill, 2011).

³ The recent article by William Loader ("Revisiting High Priesthood Christology in Hebrews," *ZNW* 109 [2018]: 235–83) offers a good example. Loader allows that the resurrection of Jesus stands, even if awkwardly (275), among the early Christian traditions affirmed by the author. This tradition plays little role in the argument of Hebrews, however, because the author's primary concern is with more important matters of faith and salvation – the event and significance of Jesus' death.

⁴ For a discussion of some of the most significant positions see, Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection*, 1–43.

⁵ So, e.g., Wilfried Eisele, *Ein unerschütterliches Reich: Die mittelplatonische Umformung des Parusiegedankens im Hebräerbrief* (BZNW 116; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2003), esp. 421–25.

⁶ Many interpreters endorse a variation of this view. For a recent defense of such an interpretation, see Kenneth Schenck, "An Archaeology of Hebrews' Tabernacle Imagery," in *Hebrews in Contexts* (ed. Gabriella Gelardini and Harold W. Attridge; *AJEC* 91; Leiden: Brill, 2016), 238–58.

⁷ For only one example, see James W. Thompson, *The Beginnings of Christian Philosophy: The Epistle to the Hebrews* (CBQMS 13; Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1983), 107–8.

does not fit coherently with Hebrews' eschatological vision of human rule in the world to come.

Jesus' Bodily Resurrection and Ascension in Hebrews

I begin by briefly reprising one point relative to the bigger question of Jesus' resurrection in Hebrews – the argument of Heb 1–2 for why the Son is elevated above the angels only works if the author assumed Jesus' bodily resurrection and bodily ascension/return to the heavenly realms. The argument for the elevation of the eternal Son above the angels in the heavens requires Jesus to be the exalted human being *par excellence* in the heavens. As such the divine Son had not only to become a human being, but also to return to the heavenly realms as a human being. The incarnation must, that is, continue even after Jesus' death in order for the Son to become greater than the angels. Such an argument requires the resurrection as one of its foundational premises.

I cannot lay out the full case for the argument that follows, but instead summarize my account of how the argument in Heb 1–2 unfolds.⁸ This summary is necessary for the following comparison and contrast with Philo because the logic of the argument for the Son's elevation above the angels in Heb 1–2 is a key piece of evidence that indicates both that Jesus' resurrection is essential for the author's thinking, and that this resurrection involved Jesus' blood-and-flesh humanity. Put differently, the argument that the author lays out for the Son's elevation above the angels *requires* Jesus to be an embodied human being when he passes through the heavens and is exalted to God's right hand.

It should be noted here that some interpreters think Jesus' divinity stands as the key point that distinguishes him from the angels and enables him to take his place at the Father's right hand.⁹ The divine Son holds a place higher than the angels because unlike them, he is uncreated and unchangeable.¹⁰ This view faces two problems. First, it does not take seriously enough the fact that the Son is described in Heb 1 as *becoming* greater than the angels (1:4). How can it be that the divine Son who created and sustains all things could *become* higher than the angels whom he created? Second, such an argument amounts to a tautology. On this account, the divine Son is greater than the angels

⁸ See Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection* for argumentation.

⁹ E.g., Eisele, *Ein unerschütterliches Reich*, 411.

¹⁰ Psalm 104:4 is sometimes taken to make this distinction (e.g., Erich Grässer, *An Die Hebräer* [3 vols.; EKKNT; Zurich: Benziger, 1990–1997], 1:81–82). Undoubtedly the Son differs from the angels on this point. Angels are “made” (1:7), while the Son is God's agent of creation (1:2), but as Eric F. Mason has recently argued (“Hebrews and Second Temple Jewish Traditions on the Origins of Angels,” in *Hebrews in Contexts* [ed. Gabriella Gelardini and Harold W. Attridge; AJEC 91; Leiden: Brill, 2016], 63–93), the chief point of contrast in Heb 1:7 concerns the Son's status above the angels, not their origins.

because he is the divine Son. Certainly, the author of Hebrews could have intended to pose this tautology or even failed to see it as a tautology (as many of his interpreters seem to do). I am not suggesting some reason in principle why this is impossible. The language of *becoming* in the argument is, however, the clue that suggests a different solution. The divine Son's status relative to the angels has undergone some kind of actual change. The divine Son is the one who, the author plainly states in Heb 2:8–9, was for a little while *lower than the angels*. The status of the Son, it appears, has undergone a change relative to the angels. With Ps 8 in view, however, one can see that this change occurs in the context of the incarnation. As the human being Jesus, the Son was, like all humanity, made for a time lower than the angels. Three points support this conclusion.

First, it is clear from the author's eschatological interpretation of Ps 8 in Heb 2 that the place of rule over all things – and here one must surely think of Jesus' present, royal position at God's right hand (1:3, 8–9, 13; 10:12–13) – is reserved for humanity, not the angels (see Heb 2:5–8). Psalm 8 is interpreted by the author as a promise that humanity, though lower than the angels for a little while, will one day be exalted above them. Thus when the homilist says in 2:5 that the place of rule in the world to come is not reserved for angels, it becomes clear from Ps 8 that this is because that place is reserved for human beings.¹¹ When, therefore, Heb 1:4 claims that the Son *became* greater than the angels, the author must be referring to the eschatological dynamic he sees in Ps 8, just as he explains this as he interprets Ps 8 in Heb 2. That is to say, it is as the human being named Jesus – a human being who was in a position lower than the angels, but who is now crowned with glory and honor – that the divine Son was for a time lower than the angels but has now been elevated above them. Jesus has, in Hebrews, advanced to the goal of the eschatological promise of Ps 8.

Second, in terms of the author's argumentation as this develops from Heb 1 through Heb 2, the logic of the preceding argument identifies exactly how it can be the case that the divine Son has *become* both lower than and greater than the angels. Hebrews 1–2 must work with an incarnational logic in which the divine Son took up flesh and blood, occupying a status temporarily lower than the angels, only then to be elevated above the angels to the rule in the world to come. Precisely as the incarnate Jesus, in other words, the divine Son was for a time made lower than the angels. When, however, he returned to the heavenly realms, he was elevated above the angels as the exalted, eschatologically perfected human being Jesus. According to Ps 8 this elevation was not simply a matter of the divine Son being the divine Son, but a matter of his being a human being. The Son's elevation follows from the fact that Jesus is the first human

¹¹ For my detailed argumentation substantiating this point see Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection*, 119–32.

being to be crowned with the kind of glory and honor that makes him what God intended humanity to be. Jesus' humanity, in other words, is a central reason why Jesus is invited to sit at God's right hand, i.e., why he is given rule and dominion over the world to come. The divine Son has come to occupy a status and location that no angel could ever occupy because he is a human being (Heb 1:13; 2:5).

Third, if this reading of the argument of Heb 1–2 is correct, then the author must assume that the Son returned to the heavenly realm as a human being. Jesus must, that is, be a human being when he enters the heavens in order to be the one who, according to the promise of Ps 8, is qualified to be elevated above the angels and invited to rule at God's right hand. The Son must have returned to the heavenly realms with his humanity in order for one to say that the Son's status has changed relative to the angels.

To put all of this differently, the claim in Heb 1 that the Son has *become* greater than the angels is surely ambiguous in Heb 1, particularly since the clarification of how this change in the Son's status came to be is not developed until the author's interpretation of Ps 8 in Heb 2. Hebrews teases us with categories that appear to be incommensurable. How can it be that the divine, creator Son could *become* greater than the very things he created? Yet, the explanation just given in the three points above shows how the author moves to respond to this implicit question. The claim that the Son has inherited a status and location that makes him superior to any of the angels depends upon real development in the Son's relationship to the angels just to the extent that Hebrews draws upon the early Christian descent-ascent narrative of the incarnation and exaltation of the divine Son – Jesus.

From the preceding arguments it is clear, then, that something more than just the Son's divinity must be in play in the argumentation of Heb 1–2. In fact, the Son's humanity stands at the heart of the argument precisely because this is what qualifies him, in terms of the eschatological hope Hebrews sees in play in Ps 8, to attain a place higher than the angels. In order for such an argument to work, Angels must also in some way be ontologically different from human beings.

If this is correct so far, it follows that the development of Hebrews' argument in these opening chapters assumes Jesus' death and bodily resurrection precisely because his death and the resurrection of his humanity best explain how the creator Son could become both lower than and then greater than the angels. The Son, that is, had not only to have become a mortal human being, but must also have taken his humanity with him when he returned to the heavens. Stated differently, the Son would not have been able to be invited to sit on the throne at God's right hand had he not taken the elements constitutive of his humanity with him when we returned to the Father.

Human and Angelic Ontologies in Hebrews

The proceeding discussion demonstrates the logical necessity of Jesus' humanity for the claim in Heb 1 that the Son has become greater than the angels. After his death, Jesus must have risen and ascended in order for the Son to be elevated above the angels whom he created. Two additional arguments can, however, be brought forward to further strengthen the case just presented, arguments that look closely at the distinction between human and angelic ontologies.

First, in Heb 1:7 the author affirms that angels are a particular kind of being – beings of fiery *πνεῦμα*.¹² Humanity, as becomes clear in Heb 2, is another kind of being, a being of “blood and flesh” (2:14). Additional evidence in Hebrews suggests that the author thinks that humanity also has *πνεῦμα* and *ψυχή* (see 4:12; 6:19; 10:38–39; 12:9, 23; 13:17). The idea in 4:12 that the word of God can penetrate to the division of soul (*ψυχή*) and spirit (*πνεῦμα*) seems to imply that the word can penetrate between elements of a person that are tightly bound together so as to be virtually indivisible. Hebrews does not explain how *ψυχή* and *πνεῦμα* relate to one another, but as I discuss below, some Greco-Roman thinkers assumed that the *ψυχή* consists of *πνεῦμα*. In any case, Hebrews appears to identify the righteous dead in 12:23 as perfected *πνεύματα* – surely a reference to the faithful examples of Heb 11 – gathered at the heavenly Mt Zion. There they presently join with the angels in worship and celebration while they, together with those on earth, wait to receive the eschatological inheritance of the unshakable kingdom (so 12:23, 27–28). Given the author's belief in the eschatological resurrection and eternal judgment (e.g. 6:2; 11:35), it hardly seems a stretch to conclude that he thinks of the heavenly state of the righteous spirits as an intermediate state.¹³ Be that as it may, Hebrews appears to think that human beings consist of both flesh-and-blood body and spirit/soul, the latter of which can exist after the death of the mortal body.

It is worth noting here that the view that the human being consists of *both* the material body and *πνεῦμα/ψυχή* fits well with common assumptions about human ontology in Hellenistic philosophy and apocalyptically oriented forms of Judaism.¹⁴ I discuss below the common, though not universal, view in the

¹² Some argue that Heb 1:7 intends to identify angels with wind and fire (e.g., Joshua W. Jipp, “The Son's Entrance into the Heavenly World: The Soteriological Necessity of the Scriptural Catena in Hebrews 1.5–14,” *NTS* 56 [2010]: 557–75). Given the contrast Hebrews develops between angels and humanity in Heb 2, however, it seems best to interpret Heb 1:7 and 1:14 as a text identifying angels as fiery spirits, a notion common in Second Temple Jewish texts.

¹³ The idea that God protects the spirits of the righteous while they wait for the final resurrection is clearly attested in apocalyptic Jewish texts (see n. 14 for some evidence).

¹⁴ Several schools of Hellenistic philosophy held that humans were compound beings consisting of (at least) body (*σῶμα*) and soul (*ψυχή*). For some, such as Stoics and

Greco-Roman world that death separates the human body and the individual soul, giving the soul the opportunity to ascend close to the divine realm. For the time being, however, I note that in Heb 1–2 the author’s focus rests on what distinguishes humans and angels. Having flesh and blood, the very elements the Son inhabits when he participates in the human condition in order to help the seed of Abraham, is identified as the key difference between humans and angels (2:16–17).

Second, when one allows that Hebrews recognizes this ontological distinction between angels and humanity, the significance of the author’s invocation of Ps 8 in support of his argument becomes even more clear. Psalm 8 is read by the author as indicating that God always intended for a being other than an angel, that is, a being other than a ministering πνεῦμα (1:7, 14), to be elevated to the position at his right hand at some point. Thus, as Heb 1:5–6 and 1:13 indicate, God never invited any angel to occupy this special status or place.

The author of Hebrews therefore interprets Ps 8 as an explanation for why it is the case that no angel could be invited to sit on the heavenly throne. That special place of rule is reserved for a human being. In the context of the larger argument of Heb 1–2, it is clear that such a being is more than just a πνεῦμα. Psalm 8, in other words, implies for the author that no angel has *ever* been invited to sit at God’s right hand because no angelic πνεῦμα is a blood-and-flesh human being.

Since this place is reserved for a human being, it follows that if Jesus is qualified to take occupy this position, there must be an enduring ontological distinction between angelic beings and human beings even in the heavenly

Epicureans, the compounds were all thought to be material. Stoics and Epicureans tended to differ, however, on whether or not the soul could be separated from the body at death such that an individual person continued to exist after death. Epicureans tended to deny this, believing that the soul and the body, and thus the individual, disintegrated after death. Stoics, who viewed the soul as consisting of πνεῦμα, tended to affirm the possibility of an individual existing as πνεῦμα after death. For still others, such as Middle Platonists, the compounds that constituted human being were the material σῶμα and the immaterial ψυχή, with the latter generally thought to consist of πνεῦμα (see R.W. Sharples, *Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics: An Introduction to Hellenistic Philosophy* [London: Routledge, 1996], esp. 59–68). Those more influenced by a Platonic account of cosmology and human ontology tended to think of death as the separation of the body and pneumatic soul such that the spiritual essence of the person (the soul) continued to exist without the body. Death, that is, marked the time when the essence of the person (ψυχή) was released from its temporary entanglement in the material σῶμα. The idea that the human being is a compound of body and spirit was also evident in apocalyptic permutations of Second Temple Judaism. This can be seen in the fact that some apocalyptic Jews and early Christians believed that the spirit could be separated from the body in order to travel into the heavens (e.g., Rev 4:1–2; *Ascen. Isa.* 6:10–12; cf. 2 Cor 12:2–3), as well as in the fact that many believed that upon death, the spirits of the righteous were kept safe by God while they waited for renewed bodies at the resurrection (e.g., *L.A.B.* 23:13; Rev 6:9–11; *4 Ezra* 7:32; *2 Bar.* 30:2).

realms, at least for the human being who has received the eschatological or “better resurrection” (11:35).¹⁵ This further explains why the author can claim that the angels will not rule over the world to come (2:5). As the argument of Heb 2 makes clear, that royal prerogative belongs to humanity. Even in the world to come, then, there remains an enduring distinction between angelic beings and human beings.

From these two points it follows that when the divine Son was invited to sit at God’s right hand, he was invited to take this position precisely because he is an eschatologically perfected, i.e., resurrected, human being. He is, in other words, something other than a heavenly being of fiery *πνεῦμα*. To put the point differently, were Jesus only a *πνεῦμα* when he passed through the heavens and returned to God’s presence, he would not be qualified to sit on the throne reserved for humanity in accordance with Hebrews’ reading of Ps 8. Hebrews must envision Jesus entering God’s presence as a human being, for only as a human being can he be invited to sit at God’s right hand. Jesus’ elevation above the angels in God’s heavenly presence is, therefore, a function of his humanity.¹⁶ Jesus, that is, must continue even after his death to be something no angelic *πνεῦμα* is – human.

There is, however, another way to probe and pursue this argument. If one wants to hold that Jesus did not take his flesh and blood with him when he passed through the heavens, one has to show how what he did take is, on Hebrews’ own terms, *essentially* and eschatologically human. That is to say, one has to show that Jesus is now, after his death, something that is essentially different with respect to his humanness in comparison with the angels such that he could be become greater than the angels. A category other than Jesus’ divine identity seems to be required if the language of becoming is to be taken seriously.

¹⁵ In Heb 11:35 the author contrasts women who received their dead back with the “better resurrection.” He appears to contrast the resuscitation of people after they died with the hope for the permanent, eschatological resurrection of the dead. In the former case, the people raised up presumably died again at some point. In the latter case, the resurrection is “better” because it is the final resurrection to immortal life. See Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection*, 186–88 for detailed arguments.

¹⁶ To suggest that this kind of conclusion somehow ignores, downplays, or even stands against the Son’s eternal, divine identity (e.g., Jean-René Moret, “Le rôle du concept de purification dans l’Épître aux Hébreux: une réaction à quelques propositions de David M. Moffitt,” *NTS* 62 [2016]: 289–307) poses a false dichotomy and seems to me not to take the incarnational logic of Hebrews seriously enough. For Hebrews, the human being Jesus is always also the eternal, divine Son of God. I fail to see how a focus on ways in which Jesus’ humanity contributes to the logic and argumentation of this text stands in any way at odds with the author’s incarnational assumptions. For some detailed argumentation on this point see, David M. Moffitt, “The Role of Jesus’ Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews, Once Again: A Brief Response to Jean-René Moret,” *NTS* 62 (2016): 308–14.

Just here, however, the common assumption that Hebrews holds to a cosmology and understanding of human ontology that posits some kind of earthly, material vs. spiritual, immaterial dualism, like what one finds in Philo, breaks down. The point can be seen clearly when Hebrews is compared to someone like Philo, who does hold something like this kind of cosmology and dualism. If Hebrews thinks, as many at the time thought, that humanity is *essentially* a spirit (πνεῦμα) that is for a time trapped in a body of flesh and blood but that can be permanently freed by death from that body and the material realm, one can justifiably ask: what, in terms of this dualism, would be essentially human about the ascended Jesus such that he is something other than an angel and so can be elevated above them when he ascended if he ascended as a πνεῦμα freed from his blood-and-flesh body? In terms of Hebrews' own logic, it cannot be the case that Jesus' entry into the immaterial realm as a πνεῦμα would be sufficient to distinguish between his humanity and the angels' being/essence since πνεῦμα is also what the angels are. If, however, the author of Hebrews holds to some variation of a Platonic cosmology and this sort of understanding of human ontology, how else could he imagine a human to enter the heavenly realm other than as an immaterial πνεῦμα?

To put a finer point on it, it is clear that many Hellenistic thinkers believed that after people died, some spiritual aspect of them continued to exist beyond their flesh-and-blood bodies.¹⁷ There was, in other words, something essential to the human being that was distinct from and separable from the body, and that endured death. That part was often identified as the mind (νοῦς) or soul (ψυχή), which was thought by some to be composed of immaterial πνεῦμα.¹⁸ Philo can describe the νοῦς as fiery πνεῦμα (ἐνθερμον καὶ πεπτρωμένον πνεῦμα).¹⁹ On a Platonic account, this anthropology directly correlated with a dualistic cosmology wherein the divine realm was immaterial. The πνεῦμα properly belonged to that realm and could, once freed from the material body, ascend closer to its divine source. Could Hebrews be thinking in these terms?

¹⁷ See n. 14 above.

¹⁸ As pointed out above in n. 14, not all Greco-Roman philosophies thought the πνεῦμα was immaterial. Stoics, for example, believed the πνεῦμα was the finest material and as such penetrated throughout other material. This is not, however, of great significance for my argument since even if it were the case that Hebrews held to an essentially Stoic cosmology and anthropology, which seems implausible, the point would nevertheless remain that Jesus cannot be only πνεῦμα in the heavens, as he would then essentially be the same stuff as – and so indistinguishable from – the angels.

¹⁹ *Fug.* 134. John Dillon argues that although Philo is not a materialist, like the Stoics he thinks of πνεῦμα as the creative, fiery divine substance in the universe (“Philo’s Doctrine of Angels,” in *Two Treatises of Philo of Alexandria: A Commentary on De Gigantibus and Quod Deus Sit Immutabilis* [ed. David Winston and John Dillon; BJS 25; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983], 197–205, here 202–3).

A brief examination of the views of Philo of Alexandria on humanity, angels, and heaven demonstrates that the answer to this question is “no.”²⁰

Philo on Angels, Human Beings, and the Cosmos

At this point it is fitting to explore how someone who held conceptions of the human being and cosmology indebted to elements of Platonism could think through these sorts of issues. Philo provides a good example – not only because of his Jewish identity, use of Greek Scriptures, and belief in angels, but also because he has thought through the very questions just raised in conjunction with accounts of human ontology, angelology, life after death, and heights of the cosmos that draw heavily on philosophical traditions influenced by Plato.²¹ Philo’s cosmological commitments unsurprisingly correlate with an account of humanity that views the material body as a dispensable part of human ontology.²² Significantly for this study, however, these commitments correlate with Philo’s opinion that disembodied, purified humans *are* angels. Some of the angels, that is, are humans whose spirits were freed from bondage in the body and the material realm. As such they have ascended into the heights of the sublunar air, and some have even passed beyond the moon into heaven.

²⁰ Clearly Philo is not representative of the wide range of philosophical positions in the Greco-Roman world of the first century C.E. (see n. 14 for a discussion of only a few of the more influential schools of thought). Moreover, as Maren R. Niehoff has recently shown, Philo’s own views underwent change, shifting in some ways away from Platonism towards Stoicism as he engaged personally with Roman Stoics (*Philo of Alexandria: An Intellectual Biography* [AYBRL; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2018]). I do not here assume that Philo’s views must have been consistent across all his works on the issues being discussed, nor that everyone of the time would have agreed. Rather, given (1) that Philo is often compared with Hebrews and, as a committed Jew, has much in common with the author of Hebrews, and (2) that Philo frequently express the very kinds of dualisms, anthropology, and angelology that many think Hebrews more or less affirms, Philo offers a useful point of contrast with the logic of Heb 1–2 as spelled out above. Furthermore, on the subject of angels and humans being able to become angels upon death, there is some consistency in Philo at least to the extent that he expresses similar opinions across several writings.

²¹ Philo’s dependence on Plato, at least earlier in his career, is well known. Scholars such as John Dillon (*The Middle Platonists: 80 B.C. to A.D. 220* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977], 139–83) may overstate the case when they identify Philo as a Middle Platonist (see the counter arguments of David T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato* [Philosophia Antiqua 44; Leiden: Brill, 1986], esp. 485–519), but Philo’s cosmology and anthropology plainly owe much to a Platonic material/immaterial dualism.

²² Runia (*Philo*, 465–66) notes that for Philo, as for Plato, the human being is a microcosm of the cosmos. The material body correlates with the earthly, material realm while the soul/mind is related to heaven. The latter is the divine and essential part of humanity that exists after death and can ascend into the etherial realms once freed of the corpse of the body (*Philo*, 469).

Philo, following Plato and in keeping with many Hellenistic thinkers, assumes that individual humans are composite beings consisting of a material and an immaterial part – the body and the soul.²³ He makes the point clearly when he interprets Gen 2:7 in *De Opificio Mundi* 135. Humanity consists of a material, earthly substance (γεώδους οὐσίας) and divine spirit (πνεύματος θείου). The earthly substance is the body (σῶμα), which God formed from clay, while the soul (ψυχή) is the part related to the divine spirit God places in humans.²⁴ The visible part of humanity, the body, is mortal, while the invisible part, the spiritual soul, is immortal. Humanity is, therefore, “the borderland between mortal and immortal nature, partaking of each so far as is needful, and ... created at once mortal and immortal, mortal in respect to the body, but in respect of the mind immortal” (*Opif.* 135 [Colson and Whitaker, LCL]). Thus humanity consists of an earthly, mortal body (σῶμα) and a soul (ψυχή), which itself consists of divine πνεῦμα.²⁵

²³ See n. 14 above. For the influence of Plato’s *Timaeus* on Philo’s understanding of humanity, see the detailed discussion in Runia, *Philo*, 467–75. Philo’s understanding of human ontology is more complex than can be dealt with in this chapter. I focus here on the material/immaterial dichotomy and Philo’s view that humans whose bodies have died and who ascend into the heights are angels. Runia’s study offers a much more complete account of Philo’s cosmology correlated understanding of human ontology. See also the detailed discussion of humanity as the microcosm of the universe in Ursula Früchtel, *Die Kosmologischen Vorstellungen bei Philo von Alexandria: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Genesisexegese* (AGJU 2; Leiden: Brill, 1968), esp. 61–68.

²⁴ Marie E. Isaacs argues that in Hellenistic Judaism one occasionally finds references to the human πνεῦμα in contexts where Greco-Roman sources would tend to speak about the human ψυχή (*The Concept of Spirit: A Study of Pneuma in Hellenistic Judaism and Its Bearing on the New Testament* [Heythrop Monographs 1; London: Charlesworth, 1976], 36–37). Occasional Septuagintal usage of πνεῦμα to refer to humanity as well as with reference to God may play a role here. From a Hellenistic Jewish perspective, one can see how πνεῦμα could be understood as that part of the human being that belongs to the divine realm and, as Isaacs notes, “makes contact between God and man possible” (*Concept of Spirit*, 37).

²⁵ As with some other Hellenistic philosophies at the time (see n. 14), Philo thinks that the essential, immaterial ψυχή consists of πνεῦμα. In addition to *Opif.* 135, in *Det.* 80 he deduces from Gen 2:7 that God’s breathing the breath (πνεῦμα) of life (ψυχή) into Adam means that the essence or substance of the soul is spirit (πνεῦμά ἐστιν ἡ ψυχῆς οὐσία). Notably, in *Det.* 80 Philo cites Gen 2:7 in a way that appears to render the Hebrew phrase נשמת חיים (“breath of life”) as πνεῦμα ζωῆς, rather than the more commonly attested LXX reading of πνοὴν ζωῆς. In *Opif.* 134 Philo quotes the reading πνοὴν ζωῆς as attested in LXX. Gregory E. Sterling is surely correct in concluding that Philo is probably paraphrasing or recalling Gen 2:7 in a way that shows the extent to which he thinks that πνεῦμα and ψυχή are interchangeable terms (“‘Wisdom Among the Perfect:’ Creation Traditions in Alexandrian Judaism and Corinthian Christianity,” *NovT* 37 [1995]: 355–84, here 363–64; cf. *Her.* 55 and *Spec.* 4.123). See also Josephus, *Ant.* 1.34, who, paraphrasing Gen 2:7, refers to God placing πνεῦμα and ψυχή into Adam.

Philo also has quite a bit to say about angels. At a few points he directly refers to their ontology. In *De Abrahamo*, for example, when discussing Sarah's denial of her laughter at the announcement that she would have a child, Philo suggests that only after she was reminded that nothing is impossible with God did she see something in the three strangers that made her realize they were not humans but instead were angels, whose spiritual and soulish substance had been changed into human form (ἀγγέλων μεταβαλόντων ἀπὸ πνευματικῆς καὶ ψυχοειδοῦς οὐσίας εἰς ἀνθρωπόμορφον ἰδέαν).²⁶ Philo goes on to explain that even though angels are incorporeal (ἀσωμάτους ὄντας), those who visited Abraham condescended to give the appearance of eating and drinking with him in order to honor him and help him grow in wisdom.²⁷ Angels are bodiless, spiritual beings (οὐσία). He makes the same point in *Quaestiones et solutiones in Genesin*, claiming that the οὐσία of angels is spiritual (πνευματικῆ δὲ ἡ τῶν ἀγγέλων οὐσία).²⁸ An angel, then, is a bodiless soul, a being consisting of πνεῦμα.

It is worth pausing here to note that while Hebrews does not explicitly use the language of being (οὐσία) when discussing angels, Philo's identification of angels as spiritual beings is very similar to Hebrews' description of angels as πνεύματα.

Philo's reflections on the relationship between angels and humans is, however, particularly interesting for the purposes of this chapter, not only because of the point of identity between angels and humans, but also because his understanding of cosmology and the tendency of some souls to incline towards the material realm shows the influence of Platonic concepts on his thought. At the level of being embodied, it is clear that Philo recognizes a distinction between angels and humans. On earth, humans dwell in mortal bodies. Yet, Philo also sees important points of essential continuity between human beings and angels.

In *De Somniis*, when discussing Jacob's dream about a ladder reaching to heaven with angels ascending and descending on it (see Gen 28:10–17), he identifies angels as bodiless souls that populate the air. The ladder represents the air, that is, the substance in the sublunar region, which reaches from the earth to the moon. Above the moon, the supralunar region, is heaven, the realm of the stars. Since Philo correlates cosmology and human ontology, the ladder can also be understood to represent the human soul, which is able to ascend

²⁶ *Abr.* 113.

²⁷ *Abr.* 118.

²⁸ *QG* 1.92.

and descend and itself is a point of contact between heaven and earth.²⁹ Thus, Jacob's ladder represents links between earth and heaven.

As for the angels, Philo states that they are imperishable and immortal souls (ἀφθάρτους καὶ ἀθανάτους ψυχάς).³⁰ He then comments on tendencies in these immortal souls. Apparently drawing on Plato's concept of the fall of souls, he argues that some of these souls are inclined to earthly and material things.³¹ These souls descend and are bound for a time to mortal bodies (σώμασι θνητοῖς).³² Some of these souls will be trapped for a time in a cycle of reinhabiting new bodies after their old bodies perish being drawn again down to earth. They "retrace their steps, while others pronouncing that [earthly] life great foolery call the body a prison and a tomb, and escaping as though from a dungeon or a grave, are lifted up on light wings to the upper air and range the heights forever" (*Somn.* 1.139 [Colson and Whitaker, LCL]). There is, however, yet another class of these souls who have never felt any inclination to earthly existence. These angels may ascend and descend, but they do so in service to God, not out of a desire to dwell in bodies.

Philo discusses these same points more succinctly in *De Plantationen* 14, stating that there are beings created by God who are

wholly beyond the apprehension by sense. This is the host of the bodiless souls. Their array is made up of companies that differ in order. We are told that some enter into mortal bodies and quit them again at certain fixed periods, while others, endowed with a diviner constitution, have no regard for any earthly quarter, but exist on high near to the ethereal region itself. These are the purest spirits of all, whom Greek philosophers call heroes, but whom Moses, employing a well-chosen name, entitles "angels," for they go on embassies bearing tidings from the great Ruler to his subjects of the boons which he sends them, and reporting to the Monarch what his subjects are in need of. (*Plant.* 14 [Colson and Whitaker, LCL])

Clearly, then, there are orders of angelic souls. The purest of these never inhabit a body. Those inclined to the earth are the souls of human beings. The line between humans and angels here is not one of ontology at the level of the spiritual soul, but only one of the soul's being embodied. Humans are embodied souls. Some souls may be purer than others, but notably for Philo all the living souls are in essence the same.

²⁹ Lala Kalyan Kumar Dey offers a good discussion of the way the ladder is both cosmological and anthropological (*The Intermediary World and Patterns of Perfection in Philo and Hebrews* [SBLDS 25; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1975], 90–91).

³⁰ *Somn.* 1.137.

³¹ Philo's dependence on Plato at this point, as well as some Stoic influence, is highlighted by Émile Bréhier (*Les idées philosophiques et religieuses de Philon d'Alexandrie* [3d ed.; Études de philosophie médiévale 8; Paris: J. Vrin, 1950], 128), who notes the similarities between Philo and the *Phaedrus* and a dialogue attributed to Plato, the *Epinomis* (cf. Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Philo: Foundations in Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* [2 vols.; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1948], 1:366–70).

³² *Somn.* 1.138

Philo makes this very point more clearly in *De Gigantibus* when speaking about the angels of God who desired human women (see Gen 6:1–4). True philosophers, he explains, study from first to last how “to die to the life in the body, that a higher existence immortal and incorporeal, in the presence of him who is himself immortal and uncreated, may be their portion” (*Gig.* 14–15 [Colson and Whitaker, LCL]). These are those souls Philo spoke about in the quotations above who descended, were trapped for a while in the body, but then after a fixed period of time were able to ascend again and repudiate the desire to return to earthly realm. They are not angels in the sense that there are those angels who have never been inclined to descend to earth and be embodied, but they are angels in the sense that once they have irrevocably broken free from the body, they ascend to remain forever in the heights as angels.³³ Thus he goes on in *De Gigantibus* to say,

If you realize that souls and demons and angels are but different names for the same one underlying object, you will cast from you that most grievous burden, the fear of demons or superstition. The common usage of men is to give the name demon to bad and good demons alike, and the name of soul to good and bad souls. And so, too, you also will not go wrong if you reckon as angels, not only those who are worthy of the name, who are as ambassadors backwards and forwards between men and God and are rendered sacred and inviolate by reason of that glorious and blameless ministry, but also those who are unholy and unworthy of the title. (*Gig.* 16 [Colson and Whitaker, LCL])³⁴

Philo here claims that immortal, bodiless souls are immortal, bodiless souls. Some are better than others. There are good and bad souls, with some being purer and less prone to material temptations than others.³⁵ In essence, however, they are the same.³⁶ For those currently trapped in bodies, that is, for human beings, the ideal is, very much in keeping with Plato, to train the soul to desire its proper abode in heaven so that it will stay there and not be caught again in the cycle of ascending and descending.

³³ John Dillon points out Philo’s indebtedness to Plato here, especially to the *Symposium* (“Philo’s Doctrine,” 199).

³⁴ Cf. *QG* 1.92: “But sometimes he [Moses] calls the angels ‘sons of God’ because they are made incorporeal [ἀσώματα] through no mortal man but are spirits (πνεύματα) without body.” Here angels are described as those who are spirits without bodies not because they were mortals who have died, but because they have always been bodiless spirits.

³⁵ Valentin Nikiprowetzky argues compellingly that Philo’s distinction in *De Gigantibus* between good and evil demons/souls refers only to embodied souls who have fallen (i.e., humans) and the disembodied that inhabit the heights (“Sur une lecture démonologique de Philon d’Alexandrie, *De gigantibus* 6–18,” in *Hommage à Georges Vajda: Études d’histoire et de pensée juives* [ed. Gérard Nahon and Charles Touati; Collection de la Revue des Études Juives; Louvain: Peeters, 1980], 43–71).

³⁶ Dillon notes that whereas Plato seems to think of demons and human souls as distinct beings, Philo’s view aligns with that of some Middle Platonists who viewed these souls as the same (“Philo’s Doctrine,” 199–200).

With this account of angels in view, one can well understand Philo's claim in *De Sacrificiis* that Abraham is now an angel. He writes that the comment in Scripture that "Abraham was added to the people of God" means that "when Abraham left this mortal life ... he inherited incorruption and became equal to the angels, for angels – those unbodied and blessed souls [ἄσώματα καὶ εὐδαίμονες ψυχαί] – are the host and people of God" (*Sacr.* 5 [Colson and Whitaker, LCL]). Isaac, Philo goes on to say, advanced even higher than Abraham,³⁷ presumably passing into supralunar space/heaven, while Moses is so great that Philo seems to envision him being sent by God and then being reabsorbed into God, thereby leaving the universe entirely.³⁸

The latter point about leaving the universe versus remaining in the universe is significant, because for Philo the entire universe is God's temple with heaven as the sanctuary of that temple and the earthly realm as the forecourt. He therefore writes,

The highest, and in the truest sense the holy temple of God is, as we must believe, the whole universe, having for its sanctuary the most sacred part of all existence, even heaven, for its votive ornaments the stars, for its priests the angels who are servitors to his powers, unbodied souls, not compounds of rational and irrational nature, as ours are, but with the irrational eliminated [ἐκτετημένως], all mind through and through, pure intelligences, in the likeness of the monad. (*Spec.* 1.66 [Colson, LCL])

God is not limited by his temple, the universe. Within the universe, however, those bodiless souls in the sanctuary of God's true temple serve him as priests. They are pure mind having eliminated, literally "cut away" (ἐκτέμνω), their irrational nature.

Summary: Disembodied Humans as Angels in Philo

The preceding exploration of Philo's views on angels, humanity, life after death, and heaven is brief and far from comprehensive. There is, however, enough here for some conclusions relevant to the discussion of Hebrews' cosmology to be drawn.

First, it appears to be the case for Philo that the ideal goal for the human being is to be trained by philosophy in such a way that when the soul is released from the body by death, the soul can escape the material realm (where it has been temporarily trapped) and ascend into the heights, never desiring to descend back into a body again.

Second, such souls are identified as angels for Philo. The label "angel" can be used to refer to that spiritual part that every human being has, but it is even

³⁷ *Sacr.* 6–7.

³⁸ *Sacr.* 8–10.

more appropriate to use the term to refer to those purer souls who either have never been inclined towards the earth and bodily existence, or who have been trained such that they can ascend to that company of purer souls by eliminating their irrational body. John Dillon summarizes the point well when he writes that for Philo, “Daemons, angels and souls ... are only different terms for the same class of being.”³⁹

Third, this account of the human being does not clearly distinguish between angel and human when it comes to the essential soul. The distinction between an angel and a human is one of purity and relative location in the universe, not one of the spiritual essence of the soul. The embodied human is a soul that resides for a time in the material realm, the forecourt of the temple of the universe. The purified, disembodied human is an angel who resides in the sublunar air. The purest souls can even enter heaven, i.e., supralunar space. The spiritual substance in all cases is the same for the embodied soul that is trapped in the lowest part of the universe and the purest, unbodied soul that dwells in the highest part.

Fourth, those souls that were trapped in bodies but upon death ascend into heaven and never again desire to return to the body join with God’s people – those angels who are already serving God as his priests in sanctuary of the universe. They are not beyond or outside the universe, but rather are present in that part of the sanctuary of the temple complex that is the universe. In short, in their best state, angels are purified spirits who serve as God’s priests in the sanctuary of heaven. Some of these have never been human beings. Some, however, are humans who have eliminated the irrational nature (i.e., the material body) and have joined the ranks of the purest angels. The essential spirit or rational element is the key to their essential identity, as this element can rise and fall, passing between the spiritual and material realms.

Fifth, from the preceding four points it should be clear that this account of angelic and human ontology directly correlates with an account of cosmology in which there is a dualism between the immaterial heaven and the material earth. Human beings are angels, immaterial, pneumatic souls who have descended to the material realm and become entrapped in mortal bodies. They can, however, return to heaven by leaving the body behind at death. The part of the human being that is in essence an angel has, in other words, the capacity to be liberated at death in order to ascend back into heaven where it belongs. This essential part of the human is the ψυχή, which consists of πνεῦμα. To be a soul that ascends into the air or even into heaven is to be an angel, a pure, disembodied πνεῦμα.

³⁹ Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 173.

Conclusion: Hebrews, Philo, and Cosmology

A number of salient points of similarity between Philo and Hebrews on angels and human beings can be noted. First, both Philo and Hebrews agree that angels consist of πνεῦμα. They are soulish beings that do not have bodies of flesh and blood. Second, they agree that angels belong to the higher realms of the cosmos. Third, both note that they serve as intermediaries between God and humanity. Fourth, it appears that both authors accept that, unlike angels, humanity consists of the material body and of πνεῦμα. Fifth, it also appears that both would agree that death for the human being results in the separation of the body and πνεῦμα.

It should, however, also be clear that there are significant differences between them. Disembodied human πνεύματα in the heavens are still looking forward to their unshakable inheritance in Hebrews. For Hebrews, these spirits have not yet attained to their final goal not least because even the heavenly place where they currently are will be shaken. The eschatology of Hebrews, that is, looks forward to resurrection and the establishment of the unshakable kingdom. More significantly for this chapter, however, Philo's account of the ongoing life of a human soul after death simply does not work in the argument in Heb 1–2 for Jesus' elevation above the angels. On Philo's account, were it the case that Jesus ascended to heaven as a disembodied πνεῦμα when he died, having escaped from his flesh-and-blood body, Jesus would *be* an angel. He might return to heaven as the highest angel, the purest soul, being advanced beyond all other angels, but he would not in essence be different from or other than an angel. Hebrews cannot be thinking in this way about Jesus' ascent into heaven, for if Jesus were an angel when he ascended, then God's invitation to Jesus to sit at his right hand would be a clear example of something the author says God has never done – offered an invitation to one of the angels to take that place of honor (cf. Heb 1:13–14). Jesus, as an angel, would have no right to be invited to sit at God's right hand and rule over all things (cf. Heb 2:5).

If, on the other hand, Jesus possesses something that is essentially different from what the angels are when he ascends, then it seems that one is again forced back to the categories Hebrews itself uses to identify humanity – flesh and blood.⁴⁰ Psalm 8, when read eschatologically, looks for a time when humanity is elevated above the heavenly πνεύματα to the status of rule over the world to

⁴⁰ One might object that on Philo's account of Moses leaving the universe, he was elevated above the angels but was not himself an angel. If Hebrews thought that Jesus had, like Moses, returned to God in that sense, it could be a case of a being who is exalted above the angels although not himself an angel. Nevertheless, this kind of account also will not work in Hebrews because, as with Philo's disembodied souls, this would be another account of heavenly exaltation that depends on leaving the material of the human body behind upon ascension and thus does not align either with the author's interpretation of Ps 8.

come.⁴¹ This eschatological exaltation is now a reality for the Son precisely because he returned to the heavens after his death not only as the divine Son, which he always was and will be, but now also as the perfected and exalted human being, Jesus. As I argued above, this change in status (the Son's *becoming* greater than the angels) and the author's exegesis of Ps 8 are significant factors that require the conclusion that the author assumes Jesus' bodily resurrection. Only as the eschatological, exalted human being/incarnate Son can Jesus be elevated by God to the place of rule at his right hand – a place above even the angels – for it is only as a human being that his status can undergo change relative to the angels.

All of this, however, has further implications for the larger topic of Hebrews' cosmology. As was noted at the beginning of this chapter, a positive account of Hebrews' cosmology falls outside the scope of this brief study. The foregoing conclusions suggest, however, that Hebrews does not work with a Platonic conception of the cosmos like that of Philo. Whatever the heavens are for Hebrews, these cannot be a place unfit for a human body of flesh and blood. To be sure, the pattern established by Jesus' resurrection indicates that flesh and blood must be perfected, that is, resurrected, something that brings a transformation of the body that can allow it to enter the heavens. But for Jesus that entrance is not one of the spirit or soul devoid of the very body that was for a little while lower than all the angels. The cosmology of Hebrews, then, does not assume the dualism one tends to find in variations of Middle Platonism. Rather, the author appears to imagine reality in terms of God's kingdom space and a present age in which humanity is ruled by an evil power who keeps them enslaved by the fear of death (see 2:14–16; 11:28). True salvation and liberation from this age and this spiritual power involves not losing one's body, but having it transformed such that it can be in the presence of God and the angels as a human body. For the author of Hebrews, then, resurrected flesh and blood will inherit the kingdom of God, something that Philo would seem unable to imagine.

⁴¹ Runia makes the following observation: "The central thrust of Philo's Platonizing anthropology, that man is related to God in virtue of his rational part and his capacity for reasoning, has consequences for his thought, the importance of which can hardly be overestimated. ... Man has a special place in the cosmos not because of his dominance over the creation, ... but because he contemplates the worlds of thought and sense and so can reflect on his own nature and situation" (*Philo*, 472). This assessment of Philo only highlights the stark contrast between Philo and Hebrews, particularly with respect to the logic of the argumentation of Heb 1–2.