

“Let all God’s angels worship him”

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Introduction

Hebrews 1:6 is often brought up to support the belief that that Jesus is God. Usually the first reason given is because the verse says Jesus is to be worshipped, and worship belongs to God alone. Usually the verse it is supposed to be quoting is Deut 32:43 (LXX) —sometimes Psa 97:7 (LXX and MT) is also considered as a possible source. A quick review of the underlying Greek word for worship in Psa 97:7, προσκυνέω (*proskuneo*), and the corresponding Hebrew form of חוה (*hawah*),¹ soon reveals that the basic meaning of this word is to bow down in respect and is applied in scripture not only to God, but to someone who is considered to be superior for some reason (rightly or wrongly)². In this paper, we will consider the relationship of Hebs 1:6 to Deut 32:43.

The initial problem with supposing that the worship of Jesus implies that he is God is that it makes no sense in the context of Hebrews 1, which starts by telling us that although God has revealed himself in many ways in the past, it is only in these “last days” that God has revealed himself through Jesus, who is described as being “appointed heir of all things”, (v 1), “having become superior to the angels”, (v 4), “having inherited a more excellent name” (v 4) – statements which make no sense if applied to the creator of the Universe. Even some Trinitarian commentators can see the validity of this.³ The

¹ In F. Brown, S. Driver, C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003 – reprint of 1906 edition), 1005, this word is given as “*shachab*” (in the Hithpael form). However, it is now understood to be the Eshtaphal stem of “*hawah*” see R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer, B. K. Waltke *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (2 vols; Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 1:619.

² For example, 1 Chron 29:20 where David and Yahweh are jointly the objects of חוה, cf. Gen 43:28, 2 Sam 15:5-6, Isa 45:14; in the New Testament, a king (Matt 18:26) and the Philadelphian church are to be the object of προσκυνέω (Rev 3:9).

³ For example, G. B. Caird, “Son by Appointment” in *The New Testament Age* (ed., W. C. Weinrich; Mercer: Macon, 1984), says “Christ ranks higher than

second problem is that the writer uses these quotations as said to the Son by the Father.¹ A quotation applied directly to “God” by Moses would make no sense in this context. J. Carter correctly observes, “Here is a manifestation of God; but as Paul expounds it, a manifestation through His Son”². While this may be a valid insight, our purpose in this article is to explore another approach.

Proposal

The premise of this article is that there is evidence which strongly suggests that in the original Hebrew text of Deut 32:43 it was the *nation of Israel* that was the object of praise, and to whom the angels were ordered to do homage, not Yahweh³. As well as dealing with a Trinitarian objection, this understanding makes more sense of its context in Hebrews 1.

The first question with the text is in identifying the source of the passage that is being quoted. It was generally believed that the writer to the Hebrews was consistently quoting from the Septuagint (LXX), a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures extant at the time of the New Testament writers.⁴ However, since the discovery of the Qumran literature, it is now probable that the text used by the writer is, on occasion, closer to, or based upon, a

the angels because, by God’s decree, he holds a superior rank; and this theme is sustained throughout the whole sequence of the seven quotations” (75), and “The author of Hebrews has no place in his thinking for pre-existence as an ontological concept. His essentially human Jesus attains to perfection, to pre-eminence, and even to eternity” (81).

¹ Caird, “Appointment”, 76, “Like most of the other scriptural passages he quotes, the author regards this one as a word spoken by God, addressed by him to the Son”.

² J. Carter, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (Birmingham: CMPA, 1964), 18-19.

³ This was recognised as early as 1921 by A. Nairne, *To the Hebrews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921 (reprinted 1957)), 32.

⁴ For example, B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 479. “The writer regarded the Greek version as authoritative; and, it may be added, he nowhere shows any immediate knowledge of the Hebrew text”.

Hebrew original (though not necessarily the Masoretic Text), or a translation of this into Greek.¹

Heb 1:6

καὶ προσκυνήσάτωσαν αὐτῷ πάντες ἄγγελοι θεοῦ.

and let all the angels of God do homage to him.

The Septuagint (LXX²) of Deut 32:43:

εὐφράνθητε οὐρανοί ἅμα αὐτῷ καὶ προσκυνήσάτωσαν αὐτῷ
πάντες υἱοὶ³ θεοῦ εὐφράνθητε ἔθνη μετὰ τοῦ λαοῦ αὐτοῦ
καὶ ἐνισχυσάτωσαν αὐτῷ πάντες ἄγγελοι θεοῦ

“Rejoice, ye heavens, with him, and let all the sons (angels) of God worship him; rejoice ye Gentiles, with his people”

As can be seen from the highlighted text the Greek is identical, and for our purposes we can postpone discussion of the relationship of υἱοὶ θεοῦ and ἄγγελοι θεοῦ in the two clauses. The *Odes of Solomon* 2:43 quotes Deut 32:43 with the clauses reversed, but the *Odes'* relationship to Hebrews and any Old

¹ In G. Howard's analysis of 41 possible sources of 35 OT quotes in Hebrews, while 8 are identical to both Hebrew and Greek, 6 are identical to the Hebrew as against the LXX but only 2 are identical to the LXX against the Hebrew. However, of those that are unlike either, more appear to be influenced by the LXX (18) than the Hebrew (10). G. Howard, "Hebrews and the Old Testament Quotations" *NovT* 10 (1968): 208-216.

² A. Rahlfs, *Septuaginta* (Stuttgart: Bibelanstalt, 1935).

³ L. C. L. Brenton, *The Septuagint Version of the Old Testament* (London: Bagster, 1844) gives this as ἄγγελοι and places υἱοὶ in the second clause, whereas Rahlfs' edition has υἱοὶ θεοῦ in the first clause. For a discussion of the textual issues surrounding the Old Greek of Deut 32:43 see R. T. McLay, *The Use of the Septuagint in New Testament Research* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 107-114.

Greek textual traditions for Deut 32:43 is uncertain; it is a Christian work from the late 1c. or early 2c. CE, but it could be later.¹

Our interest is in the fact that there is no equivalent line in the Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT). It is partly for this reason that commentators have sought for a less well matched quotation (Pss 97:7), for which the MT does have an equivalent. This Psalm may indeed be a relevant source, since NT writers show that they are quite capable of combining multiple sources in their citation of the Hebrew Scriptures. However, we should not abandon Deut 32:43 in favour of Psa 97:7 because there is no matching clause in the MT.

In Deut 32:43, the Hebrew of the first line does not agree with the LXX translation (some would say mistranslation). The Hebrew has:

הֲרִנְנוּ גוֹיִם עִמּוֹ

Rejoice, O ye nations, *with* his people (KJV)

We can make the following observations on this text:

1) The “with” has been supplied in the KJV, and is not part of the Hebrew text. Other translations follow this such as the ASV, ESV though not always placing the “with” in italics. However, there is no grammatical precedent for translating the Hebrew as “with his people”. The Hebrew consonants עִמּוֹ could be pointed to give “with him” or “his people”, but could not mean “with his people”, as, for example, in Mic 6:2.

2) The Hebrew verb underlying “Rejoice” means “to sing out”. J. J. Owen² suggests that the Hebrew form should be translated as an injunction “Praise!”. This sense allows,

¹ J. H. Charlesworth, “Introduction to The Odes of Solomon” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (2 vols; New York: Doubleday, 1983-1985), 2:726-727.

² J. J. Owen, *Analytical Key to the Old Testament* (4 vols; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1989), 1:902.

“Praise his people, o nations”¹

The alternative pointing gives the awkward translation “Praise/sing out with him, O nations” which is not sustainable; hence, we conclude that **the object of the praise is Israel**.

There is no second line in the MT equating to the “Let all *elohim* bow down before him”. However, a Qumran fragment of Deuteronomy 32 (4QDeut^d) throws some light on this problem. This Hebrew text **includes** the line that is missing from the MT but present in translation in the LXX. This supports the proposal that the quotation in Hebrews 1 is from Deuteronomy. The Hebrew text reads:

הַרְנִינוּ שָׁמַיִם עִמּוֹ
הַשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ-לוֹ כָּל-אֱלֹהִים

Praise his people,² O heavens,
Bow down before him, all *elohim*

Another interesting difference between 4QDeut^d and the MT is that those called upon to praise his people are the “heavens”, not the “nations” as in the MT.

The various texts MT, LXX and 4QDeut^d are shown below:

¹ This is the translation given for example in the RSV, NRSV, and (surprisingly) the Living Bible.

² In Hebrew, “people” is a singular masculine noun (whereas in English we would think of it as a plural), hence the “him” that is bowed down to, is “his people”.

4QDeut ^q	Masoretic Text (MT)	LXX
1 Praise his people, O heavens: 2 prostrate yourselves before him, all gods (<i>elohim</i>)	1 Praise his people, O ye nations,	1 Rejoice, ye heavens, with him, 2 and let all the angels of God worship him; 3 rejoice ye Gentiles, with his people, 4 and let all the sons of God strengthen themselves in him;

4QDeut^q is a Hebrew parallelism, in which the recipient of praise in the first line equates to those to whom the *elohim* bow down in the second.¹ If we add the second line from 4QDeut^q to the MT, we get the same parallelism.

An objection making this addition is raised by L D Hurst², who argues that it is only valid if the two lines are taken *in vacuo*. As it stands the MT has,

Praise his people, O you nations;
 for he avenges the blood of his servants... (RSV)

Hurst argues that “In the larger context it leaves the “he” of line 3 (which must refer to God) hanging in the air” (Hurst is referring to the phrase “for he avenges the blood of his servants” as line 3). However, this need not be the case, as the second line is a repetition of the first in different words

¹ G. W. Buchanan, *To the Hebrews* (2nd ed.; New York: Doubleday 1976), 17, says: “In Hebrew texts of Deut 32:43, the object of adoration was probably intended to be “his people”, with the “heavens”, “nations”, gods”, “sons of God, or “angels of God” doing the worshipping. The LXX translator understood God to the object of worship throughout. He was probably dissatisfied with the theology that suggested any object of worship other than God...”.

² L. D. Hurst, “The Christology of Hebrews 1 and 2” in *The Glory of Christ in the New Testament* (eds., L. D. Hurst and N.T. Wright: Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 158.

(similar to an explanation in parentheses), but the thought continues from the first line to the third. Even Hurst accepts that 4QDeut¹ “shows that Nairne’s interpretation is not without merit”, and “It is nevertheless quite easy to read the text the other way, and even modern scholars have read line 2 as referring to *the people* rather than to God”.

To recap: the evidence, so far, is as follows:

- a) The quotation “let all God’s angels worship him” has been assumed to be a quotation from the LXX of Deut 33:42
- b) There is no Hebrew equivalent in the MT for this line
- c) A scroll of Deuteronomy discovered at Qumran gives a Hebrew equivalent for the line missing from the LXX
- d) The Hebrew of Deut 32:43 is mistranslated as “with his people” in several translations, but correctly in others.
- e) In both the MT and 4QDeut¹, the object of praise is God’s people Israel. The subsequent phrase, in Hebrew poetic form is a repetition of the same idea. The heavens (or the nations) are being told to prostrate themselves before God’s people Israel.

Contextual evidence

While it has to be admitted that the evidence so far is not entirely conclusive due to the uncertainty of the original text, the contextual evidence is compelling. Why does the writer of Hebrews specifically make a connection between Hebs 1:6 and Deut 32:43 and the coming of the “firstborn” (Christ) into the world (most likely at his return - Heb 2:5)?

Several prophecies identified in the NT as relating to the Messiah have an initial fulfilment in Israel. Matthew¹ quotes Hosea 11:1 “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” to demonstrate that the going down to Egypt for safety and return to the land by Jesus was a fulfilment of OT prophecy (or perhaps better “an OT type”²). The precedent is set for Israel to be a type of the Messiah. However, more

¹ Matt 2:15.

² Interestingly, Matthew does not quote the LXX of Hosea 11:1 which renders the verse: “Out of Egypt have I called my sons”.

specifically, God calls Israel “my firstborn”: Exodus 4:22 “And thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, Thus saith the LORD, Israel *is* my son, *even* my firstborn:” This is repeated at Jer 31:9 “for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim *is* my firstborn”¹.

There is therefore a logical connection between Deut 32:43 and Heb 1:6 in that the title “firstborn” applies to both Israel and Christ. It makes no sense that the verse in Deuteronomy would be applied to God (the Father) as “firstborn”. Looking to a future application of Deuteronomy, Nairne says: “It is, therefore, when God brings His people, after their humiliation (of exile, etc.), into the fellowship of the nations (τὴν οἰκουμένην) again, that He bids all the angels worship this people who are His firstborn son (Jer 33:9, Hos 11:1).”² The writer to the Hebrews is therefore making the contrast between Christ’s humiliation (i.e. lower than the angels) and his return to kingship over the land of promise and over the angels as God’s true firstborn Son.

Conclusion

It can be safely concluded that the object to whom the angels bow down in Deut 32:43 is the nation of Israel, God’s firstborn. In keeping with the use of Old Testament texts as fulfilled in the New Testament, the parallel between Jesus and Israel is used to prove that Jesus is superior to the angels, because the angels bow down to him when he comes again into the world. The object of the writer is to demonstrate that Christ is superior to the angels, not that he is God.

END

¹ Compare Pss 89:27 “And I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth”.

² Nairne, *Hebrews*, 32.