

Jesus at the Right Hand of God.

SCRIPTURE

To which of the angels said He at any time, 'Sit on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool?' Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?

Hebrews 1. 13-14 (*King James version*)

MEDITATION

1. INTRODUCTION

The writer to the Hebrews more or less closes what we have as the first chapter of his epistle with the rhetorical question, 'To which of the angels said He at any time, Sit on my right hand...?'¹

To the writer and his readers, the obvious—and only—answer is 'None'. And the writer makes this clear by immediately saying of the angels, 'Are *they* not all *ministering*² *spirits*, sent forth to minister³ for them who shall be heirs of salvation?'

2. THE 'RIGHT HAND'

In the ancient world, for someone to sit at another's right hand was to occupy the position of the very highest honour and eminence. See, for example, the following instances:

(i) According to the Ugaritic myth, 'The Epic of Ba'al', the craftsman god Kothar-and Khasis ('The Very Skilful and Intelligent One') is described as sitting *at the right hand* of the victorious god Ba'al.⁴

(ii) When the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus described the seating arrangements in the camp of Israel's King Saul, he recorded that 'there sat by him (King Saul) his son Jonathan *at his right hand*, and Abner, the captain of his host, at his other hand'.⁵

(iii) Scripture tells us that, when 'Bathsheba went unto King Solomon to speak unto him for Adonijah...the king rose up to meet her, and bowed himself unto her, and sat down on his throne, and he caused a seat ('throne', literally) to be set for the king's mother; and she sat *at his right hand*'.⁶

(iv) The Roman historian, Suetonius, informs us that when Tiridates, king of Armenia, visited Emperor Nero in AD 62, the emperor gave Tiridates a seat *at his right hand* in the theatre as a token of respect and honour.⁷

But we rejoice to know that our Lord Jesus is *not* seated at the right hand of some mythical god or of some earthy ruler—whether in Israel or in Rome!

No, indeed.

3. WHERE ANGELS CAN AND CANNOT SIT

Chapter 8 of this very epistle opens by speaking of our Lord as 'set at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty (of 'the Greatness') in the heavens'.⁸ And it is unthinkable that any angel should presume to sit in that place of supreme dignity and honour. It is not that angels cannot sit – but that they cannot sit *there*!

For we know that angels certainly can sit. For example:

(i) We read in the Old Testament of the time when 'an angel of the Lord came and sat under the oak which was in Ophrah, that pertained unto Joash the Abiezrite: and his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the winepress, to hide it from the Midianites'.⁹

(ii) We read in the New Testament of the time when an 'angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone (the 'very great stone'¹⁰ from the entrance to our Lord's tomb, that is) ... and sat upon it'.¹¹

(iii) We read in the last chapter of the Gospel of Mark of the occasion when the women from Galilee arrived at the tomb and saw an angel, in appearance as a young man. 'Entering into

the sepulchre', Mark says, 'they saw a young man *sitting* on the right side, clothed in a long white garment; and they were affrighted'.¹² Later in the same chapter, Mark tells us that 'after the Lord had spoken unto them (the disciples), he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God'.¹³

We can hardly miss the contrast which Mark strikes in chapter 16, telling us first that the (seeming) 'young man' was '*sitting on the right side*' of the tomb, whereas 'the Lord ... was received up into heaven, and *sat on the right hand of God*'. Indeed, the Greek word translated 'right side'¹⁴ is the same as that translated 'right hand'. Mark is telling us that an angel could sit at 'the right hand' *of the tomb*; but that no angel could ever sit at 'the right hand *of God*'!

4. WHAT ANGELS CAN AND CANNOT DO

We know that:

- (i) Angels could both foretell and announce our Lord's coming into the world.¹⁵
- (ii) An angel could minister to Him following His temptations in the wilderness.¹⁶
- (iii) An angel could strengthen Him during His agony in the garden.¹⁷
- (iv) An angel could make known His resurrection.¹⁸
- (v) Angels could witness His ascension.¹⁹

But no *angel* could—or can—ever sit where *He* is now sitting.

According to the closing verses of Hebrews chapter 1, only God's Son '*sits*'. The angels are just '*sent*'; 'sent forth to minister (to render service) for them who shall be heirs of salvation'.

5. WHERE THE LORD JESUS ONCE SAT, NOW SITS AND WILL YET SIT

The Gospels speak of several occasions when our Lord sat while He was in the world.

We read, for example, that:

- (i) When He was twelve years old, Mary and Joseph 'found Him in the temple, *sitting* in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions'.²⁰

Just think of that for a moment. The very Lord of hosts, who the prophet Isaiah had once seen in his great temple/palace vision of chapter 6, '*sitting* upon a throne', over which stood seraphim in an attitude of service, in the heavenly temple,²¹ is now found *sitting* on the ground,²² surrounded by a group of Jewish teachers, in the earthly temple.

- (ii) He came to 'Jacob's well Jesus therefore, being wearied with his journey, *sat* thus ('sat just as He was') on the well'.²³

I note that the One who Himself experienced weariness at first hand, later, in the context of the feeding of the four thousand, expressed His sympathy for the multitude, telling His disciples that He had 'compassion on the multitude, because they have now continued with me three days and have nothing to eat ... if I send them away hungry to their own houses', He added, 'they will faint on the way; for some of them have come from afar'.²⁴

Oh yes, our Lord knew all about weariness.

- (iii) He later '*sat* over against the (Temple) treasury, and beheld how the people cast money into the treasury'.²⁵

Yes, when in the world, our Lord Jesus *sat* (i) to hear, (ii) to rest and (iii) to observe. And one day He will return to the world in glory, when, in the imagery of Revelation 19, heaven (which opened *on* Him when He was in the world²⁶) will open *for* Him, and He will then come forth, '*sitting*' on a white horse, followed by the armies of heaven.²⁷

But today He is seated where no angel has ever sat, or ever will sit.²⁸

During our Lord's passion:

- (i) The disciples '*sat*' in Gethsemane, Matt. 26. 36 – the Lord Jesus wasn't sitting then; He was lying on the ground, Mark 14. 35.
- (ii) The governor '*sat*' at Gabbatha, John 19. 13 – the Lord Jesus wasn't sitting then; He was standing on trial, Matt. 27. 11.
- (iii) The soldiers '*sat*' at Golgotha, Matt. 27. 36 – the Lord Jesus wasn't sitting then; He was hanging on the tree, Acts 5. 30.

But, following all His suffering:

(iv) the Lord Jesus 'sat' at the right hand of God in heaven, Mark 16. 19.

6. ABOVE ALL CREATED HEAVENLY BEINGS

The apostles Paul and Peter stress this most clearly:

(i) For his part, Paul speaks in Ephesians 1 of the exertion of God's 'mighty power which He wrought in Christ when He raised Him from the dead, and *set Him at His own right hand* in the heavenly places, *far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion*'.²⁹

(ii) For his part, Peter speaks at the close of chapter 3 of his first letter of 'the resurrection of Jesus Christ: who is gone into heaven, and *is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him*'.³⁰

His exaltation to God's right hand means that He towers over all angels and over every form of created heavenly intelligence.

7. JESUS SEATED AT GOD'S RIGHT HAND BY VIRTUE OF HIS FINISHED WORK

But we remind ourselves that the Saviour sits at God's right hand, not only by virtue of *God's personal invitation* ('sit at my right hand'), but also by virtue of *His own completed work*. This is stressed by the writer to the Hebrews on three occasions:

(i) It is, we are told at the beginning of Hebrews chapter 1, *as having purged (made purification for) sins*, that our Lord Jesus 'sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high'.³¹

(ii) It is, we are told in chapter 10, *as having 'offered one sacrifice for sins for ever'*, that 'this man ... sat down on the right hand of God'.

(iii) It is, we are told at the beginning of chapter 12, *as having endured the cross, despising the shame*, that our Lord Jesus has sat down 'at the right hand of the throne of God'.³²

That is, the fact that the Lord Jesus is now seated at the right hand of God is the certain proof that every question raised by the sins of us, His people, has been forever settled.

It has been well said that, 'So much has God been glorified about my sins (that is, in respect of what Christ has done on account of my sins), that *this is the title of Christ to be there, at the right hand of God* ... Where are my sins now? where are they to be found in heaven or on earth? I see Christ in the glory. Once they were found upon the head of that blessed One; but they are gone, never more to be found. Were it a dead Christ, so to speak, that I saw, I might fear that my sins would be found again; but with Christ alive in the glory the search is in vain. He who bore them all has been received up to the throne of God, and no sin can be there'.³³

Make no mistake, no angelic being will ever receive a divine invitation to sit where the Lord Jesus sits – in the place of *supreme* dignity and honour – for no angelic being has accomplished (nor could have accomplished) what He did for us at the cross.

8. 'THE HIGHEST PLACE'

Well do we sometimes sing:

*The head that once was crowned with thorns
Is crowned with glory now;
A royal diadem adorns
The mighty Victor's brow.*

*The highest place that heaven affords
Is His by sovereign right,
The King of kings and Lord of lords,
And heaven's eternal light.*

(Thomas Kelly, 1769-1854)

Endnotes

¹ For a scholarly note on the source of the quotation (Psalm 110. 1), see L. W. Hurtado, 'Two Case Studies in Earliest Christological Readings of Biblical Texts', pages 2-14; accessible at ...
<https://larryhurtado.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/perth-symposium-paper.pdf>.

We can compare the other rhetorical question which the writer poses in the context of our Lord's superiority to the angels; 'unto which of the angels said He at any time, Thou art my Son...?', Heb. 1. 5.

² *Λειτουργικα*. This word 'has to do with the fulfillment of an office, the discharge of a function', W. E. Vine, 'Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words', article 'Minister', B. 2.

³ *Διακονιαν*. This word 'signifies "to be a servant, attendant, to serve, wait upon, minister"', W. E. Vine, *op. cit.*, article 'Minister', B. 1.

⁴ 'Afterward Kathir-and-Khasis did come; an ox, a fatling, was set before him and a seat was made ready for his presence, and *he was seated on the right hand of the victor Ba'al*', 'The Ba'al Cycle', also known as 'The Epic of Ba'al', cited and translated in G. R. Driver, 'Canaanite Myths and Legends', 1956, pages 98-99.

⁵ 'The Antiquities of the Jews', Book VI, Chapter XI, Section 9. Cf. 1 Sam. 20. 25.

The ancient world made a careful distinction between the relative value (a) of being at a person's right and (b) of being at a person's left hand. For example, note:

(i) Joseph's reaction when his father Jacob crossed his hands and placed his left hand on the head of Joseph's firstborn, Gen. 48. 13-19; and

(ii) Our Lord's account of the coming judgement of the nations, when the goats (the 'cursed') are set at the left hand of the Son of man, whereas the sheep (the 'blessed') are set at His right hand, Matt. 25. 31-46.

⁶ 1 Kings 2. 19.

Note further the words of Psalm 45. 9, addressed to the king, 'upon thy *right hand* did stand the queen in gold of Ophir', and of Psalm 80. 17, 'Let thy hand be upon the man of thy *right hand*, upon the son of man whom thou madest strong for thyself'.

⁷ Suetonius: 'De Vita Caesarum', section XIII. See too Edward Champlin, 'Nero', page 75.

Note, also, 'Being seated at the 'right hand' of deity was another important part of the ritual and symbolism of the emperor cult. A coin minted in Rome in AD 55 depicts "divine" Claudius seated at *the right hand* of Augustus ('God from God') atop a chariot drawn by four elephants', H. Mattingly, 'Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum', page 201.)

⁸ Heb. 8. 1.

⁹ Judg. 6. 11. I am aware that many understand ‘the angel of the Lord’ to be either a ‘theophany’ or a ‘Christophany’, rather than to be a created angel. I would not wish to be dogmatic on the matter, but, with respect to the wording of Judg. 6. 14 and 16, I note the following:

(i) ‘The narrator highlights *the total identification of the envoy with his commissioning authority* by having him speak in the first person, thereby representing the voice of Yahweh and identifying the speaker in this exchange alternately as Yahweh’s “messenger/angel” and as Yahweh himself ... The following sequence of events will demonstrate that this is not a human prophet (v. 8) but a heavenly visitor’, D. I. Bock, ‘Judges, Ruth: The New American Commentary’, comment on Judg. 6. 11.

(ii) ‘If the Angel who represented Him spoke and acted with a Divine authority, and received Divine honours, we are referred to the force of the general law whereby, in things earthly and heavenly, *an ambassador is temporarily put in the place of the Master who accredits him*’, H. P. Liddon, ‘*The Divinity of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*’, page 57.

(iii) ‘The angel of the Lord is just that—an angel. The angel of the Lord is a special representative or messenger of God to God’s people, and according to the ancient concept of agency, he ... was to be treated as if he were the one who sent him’, Ben Witherington III, ‘*The Living Word of God*’, page 224.

(iv) ‘Someone may say, Why then is it written, “The Lord said to Moses”; and not, rather, The angel said to Moses? [Exod. 3] Because, *when the crier proclaims the words of the judge, it is not usually written in the record, so and so the crier said, but so and so the judge. In like manner also, when the holy prophet speaks, although we say, The prophet said, we mean nothing else to be understood than that the Lord said; and if we were to say, The Lord said, we should not put the prophet aside, but only intimate who spoke by him* ... So far as the divine declarations from the Holy Scriptures have been made clear, those words and bodily appearances which were given to these ancient fathers of ours before the incarnation of the Saviour, when God was said to appear, were wrought by angels: whether themselves speaking or doing something in the person of God, as we have shown that the prophets also were wont to do’, Augustine, ‘*On the Trinity*’, Book III, Chapter 11, Paragraphs 23 and 27.

I note also that, when Stephen referred to ‘*the angel of the Lord*’ which appeared to Moses ‘in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush’ at Horeb in Exodus 3, he said, ‘when forty years had passed, *an angel* appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush’, Acts 7. 30, speaking separately of ‘the voice of the Lord’ which subsequently came to Moses, vv. 31-32. Stephen went on to speak of ‘*the angel* who appeared to him in the bush’, v. 35, and ‘*the angel* who spoke to him at Mount Sinai’, v. 38; cf. Stephen’s later mention of ‘angels’ in connection with the giving of the law, v. 53.

¹⁰ Mark 16. 4.

¹¹ Matt. 28. 2.

¹² Mark 16. 5.

¹³ Mark 16. 19.

‘On earth, God is at Christ’s right hand [Acts 2. 25] and the situation is reversed a few verses further on where we find Christ exalted to the right hand of the Father on High [Acts 2. 33-34]’, Jim Elliot, ‘*Resurrection Sermon*’, accessed at <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jimelliottesurrection.htm> ... which link provides an audio recording of Jim Elliott preaching the message.

¹⁴ Δεξιοις..

¹⁵ Matt. 1. 20-23; Luke 1. 26-37; 2. 10-12.

¹⁶ Matt. 4. 11.

¹⁷ Luke 22. 43-44.

¹⁸ Matt. 28. 5-7; Mark 16. 5-7; Luke 24. 4-7.

¹⁹ Acts 1. 9-11.

²⁰ Luke 2. 46.

²¹ Isa. 6. 1-3.

²² 'The *hearers sat on the ground, at the feet of the teachers* who were themselves seated', I Howard Marshall, 'The Gospel of Luke' in the New International Greek Testament Commentary, on Luke 2. 45-46.

"Let thy house be a meeting-house for the sages and *sit amidst the dust of their feet* and drink in their words with thirst", Pirkie Avot 1:4', quoted in J. Nolland, 'Luke 9. 21-18. 34', Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 35B, page 603.

²³ John 4. 5-6.

²⁴ Mark 8. 2-3.

²⁵ Mark 12. 41. Compare also Matt. 9. 10; 13. 1-2; 15. 29; 24. 3; 26. 7, 20; 26. 55; Mark 2. 15; 9. 35; 11. 7; Luke 4. 20; John 6. 3; 8. 2.

²⁶ Matt. 3. 16; Mark 1. 10; Luke 3. 21.

²⁷ Rev. 19. 11, 14. We read of five occasions when heaven opened/opens:

(i) In *judgment*: 'the windows of heaven were opened' (Gen. 7. 11).

(ii) In *blessing*: 'open the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing' (Mal. 3. 10).

(iii) In *testimony*: 'the heaven was opened ... and a voice came from heaven, which said, "You are my beloved Son; in you I am well pleased"' (Luke 3. 21-22).

(iv) In *encouragement*: 'I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God' (Acts 7. 56).

(v) In *victory*: 'I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and He that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war' (Rev. 19. 11).

²⁸ The one who had 'come down from heaven' (see John 3. 13; 6.38, 51, 58) and had 'laid down His life' (see John 10. 15, 17), 'sat down on the right hand of God' (Heb. 10. 12).

²⁹ Eph. 1. 20-21.

³⁰ 1 Pet. 3. 22.

³¹ Heb. 1. 3.

³² Heb. 12. 2.

³³ J. N. Darby, 'The Accepted Man', Collected Writings, Volume 12, page 338.