

THE FIRST CHAPTER
OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS.

VERSES 7-9 (IN PARTICULAR, VERSE 7).

STAR after star comes out in the brilliant constellation of quotations. In verses 7-9 there is a pair, in a conjugate relation, somewhat resembling those double stars of diverse hue, revolving on one another, which the modern telescope has revealed. The verses are as follows in our English Authorized Version: *And of the angels he saith, Who maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire. But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom. Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity; therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows.*

The conjugate relationship referred to is veiled in this rendering. The delicate particles indicating it (*μέν* and *δέ*), and laid to the hand of the writer by the wealth of the Greek language in niceties, have no adequate counterparts in our English tongue. But the reciprocal relation of the two quotations may be fairly represented in the following free translation: *And whilst, on the one hand, it is said of the angels, Who maketh his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire; of the Son, on the other, it is said, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever. And, The sceptre of equity is thy kingdom's sceptre: thou lovedst righteousness and hatedst lawlessness: therefore, O God, thy God anointed thee with oil of gladness above thy fellows.*

There is thus a contrast instituted between the way in which the angels are spoken of in Scripture, and the manner in which the Son is addressed. The contrast is such as admirably illustrates the affirmation of the fourth verse, that *our Lord—(as regards rank)—is made so much better than the angels, as he hath obtained by inheritance a more excellent name than they.*

We say "illustrates," for the writer's citations belong rather to the category of illustration and embellishment than to that of demonstration. In this respect they are analogous to the second quotation in verse fifth, in its relation to the first. The argument regarding the name of our Saviour was settled by the first citation. The second was appended as a rider, significantly illustrative. In like manner the argument in reference to the transcendent rank of the Son is really settled in verse sixth. And hence the quotations in the verses before us—not being required for the purpose of demonstration,—are simply corroborative illustration and embellishment, poured forth with an orator's prodigality from his overflowing cornucopia. This being the case, they do not require to be weighed, measured, and tested, with the same rigidly logical severity, that needs to be applied to proof-texts proper.

The distinction we have marked, between demonstration and illustration or embellishment, is not, in express terms, drawn by the Letter-writer himself. Possibly it was never explicitly formulated in his consciousness. But it lies nevertheless deeply imbedded in the essence of his representations. And it is the function of the expositor to mine down into

the depths of its bed, so as to mark the various strata of thought in their inter-relations, and to note in particular the overlapped ideas as distinctly as the overlapping. If such shafts of exploration are not sunk, the peculiarities of the fine rolling scenery on the surface will never be accounted for and scientifically understood.

We shall consider, then, in the first place, what is said of the angels in the seventh verse; and then, in a future article, we shall turn our attention to what is said, contrastively, of the Son in the eighth and ninth verses.

“*Of the angels he saith.*” The expression *he saith* is here really equivalent to the impersonal *it is said*, viz., in Scripture. Formally, it is true, the expression means *God saith*. But in so speaking, the orator was occupying a standpoint which is somewhat different from that, which is most commonly used by ourselves, and which was also generally employed by both St. Paul and St. Peter. We are in the habit of distinguishing the different writers of the sacred Scriptures, and ascribing their respective sayings to themselves. So at times did our orator, as for example when in chapter ii. 6 he introduces a quotation thus,—“One in a certain place testified.” But in this first chapter he merges out of sight all distinction of writers in the Old Testament Scriptures, and looking on ‘the volume of the book,’ in its entirety, as “the word *of God*,” he represents the Divine One Himself as speaking in the various passages which he quotes. It is an instruc-

tive representation, but of course not always to be pared to the quick.

The expression 'of' *the angels*, in our English Version, is a free but legitimate and admirable rendering of the original; though the Rheims and Lord Cromwell's Bible have respectively, and more literally, 'to' and 'unto' *the angels*. The free rendering is found also in the Geneva Version, and was adopted from Tyndale. It is Luther's rendering. Calvin, too, gives it in his French translation,—the French Geneva Version. And although in his Latin Version he has *to*, yet the very first note in his Latin Commentary runs thus, "*to* the angels, for *concerning* the angels" (*ad angelos pro de angelis*). The Greek preposition (*πρός*) is by no means an exact synonym of the English *to*, or the Latin *ad*. It denotes, in a more generic manner, *direction toward*, and must often be rendered in English *in reference to*.

In the case before us it is not unlikely, as Bleek has suggested, that the actual address 'to' the Son, which is contained in the contrastive quotations of verses 8-12, was already floating before the mind of the writer, so that this particular preposition, so peculiarly adapted for cases of direct address, was readily fixed upon by him, under the influence of an instinctive longing for rhetorical symmetry. Bengel, not unhappily, puts the contrast thus,—"*to the angels*, in indirect speech : *to the Son*, in direct."

The saying quoted is taken from the fourth verse of the 104th Psalm, and consists of the words, *Who maketh his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire.*

Instead of *winds*, our Authorized Version—strangely, it might be supposed—has *spirits*. But not it alone. All the older English Translators, from Wycliffe downward, give the same rendering. Luther, too, in his *Version of the New Testament*, though not in his *Version of the Psalms*. Erasmus also. They all followed the Vulgate. And the Vulgate Translator seems to have got into the meshes of the same perplexity in which the Greek expositors—Chrysostom, Theodoret, Œcumenius, Theophylact—one after another, got entangled. In the intensity of their zeal for the cardinal doctrine of the divinity of our Lord, these renowned expositors were not invariably deliberative, or deliberately eclectic, in the arguments which they employed. Certainly they were not deliberative in reference to the verse before us. For when they came to it, in the course of their Expositions, they at once fastened on the word *maketh*, applied to the angels, as if it were a prize, and assumed that it must denote *creation*. “Lo, the greatest difference!” exclaims Chrysostom. “They are created: He is increate.” “The word *maketh*,” says Theophylact, “signifies the transition from not-being to being.” Having impressed this strong meaning on the verb, and drawn their theological inference, they looked with comparative indifference on the rest of the verse. Their interest in it was arrested,—so that they slurred over the relation of the second clause to the first, and even the relation of the word *spirits* to the word *angels*. They assumed that *spirits* was a designation of the metaphysical nature of the creatures referred to, while the term

angels was intended to denote their office. *God created his angels spiritual beings*;—so they interpreted the saying. Erasmus in his Version expressly substitutes the word *creates* for *makes*. Primasius, long before, hazarded a different kind of substitution. Reversing the order of the nouns, as being, he says, “preposterous,” he brings out this interpretation,—*He makes his spirits angels*. The Geneva Version corresponds,—*He maketh the spirits his messengers*.

It seems surprising that sensible men should have stumbled into such exegetical ineptitudes. They are so manifestly beside the mark, that it would be entirely unnecessary to make reference to them at all, were it not for the purpose of finding out what it was, that led Luther and our English Translators to set aside, in their respective Versions, the natural idea of *winds*, and introduce instead the metaphysical idea of *spirits*. The reason of the strange phenomenon has been indicated:—*Emphasis had been laid for ages on the word ‘maketh,’ as if it meant ‘createth.’* If this time-hallowed emphasis was not to be disturbed, it was necessary to substitute *spirits* for *winds*, inasmuch as it would be ridiculous to say, *Who createth his angels winds*, that is, *Who giveth to his angels, in the act of their creation, the nature of winds*. There seemed to be no alternative but to fall back on the secondary import of the noun, and say,—“Who createth his angels *spirits*.”

It appeared, indeed, astonishing to some of the Fathers referred to, that the inspired writer, while emphasizing the creation of the angels, should, in his representation, say *maketh* rather than *made*.

One would, of course, naturally have expected *made*, if the act of creation were denoted. But says Theophylact, the reference is to the perpetual creation of preservation, for "the Father worketh hitherto."

Doubt as to the true rendering of the word is impossible to the modern expositor. It cannot be *spirits*. It must be *winds*. All modern expositors without exception—cases of insignificancy apart—are agreed that, both in the Psalm and in the quotation, the word must be thus rendered. The antithesis proves it;—"and his ministers *a flame of fire*." The context of the Psalm proves it. The Psalmist is contemplating—from a certain high and spiritual angle of view—material nature; and in the immediate context he is making reference to light, the sky, the clouds, the waters, the wings of the wind.

But while all modern expositors of the Psalms, and of the Epistle to the Hebrews, are agreed that it is *winds* that are referred to, many make no secret of their suspicion that the statement in the Psalm has been misunderstood and misapplied by the writer of the Epistle. They imagine that the observation, on which the Letter-writer founded his illustration, has, in its passage from the Old Testament to the New, suffered a complete *bouleversement*, so that what in Hebrew was first, has in Greek been made last, while what was last has been turned into first. The subject of the proposition in the Psalm has, they suppose, been metamorphosed in the Epistle into the predicate; while the predicate in the Psalm has taken the place, in the Epistle, of the

subject. They insist, in short, that the Psalmist was not speaking at all of *angels*, but of *winds*, and that, instead of saying, as the Letter-writer represents him, *who maketh his angels winds*,—he said, *who maketh winds his messengers*.

Even Calvin was of this opinion. He says:—
 “ The passage cited seems to be strained to a foreign
 “ sense (*videtur in alienum sensum trahi*). For as
 “ David is describing in the Psalm the order which
 “ we perceive in the government of the world, nothing
 “ is more certain than that he speaks of *winds*, which
 “ he says are made *messengers* by the Lord (*nuntios*,
 “ *messagers*). For He makes use of these winds as
 “ couriers—even as, when He visits the earth with his
 “ lightnings, He shews how swift and prompt are the
 “ ministers which He has to execute his behests. *But*
 “ *this has nothing to do with the angels.*”

One admires the moral fearlessness and candour of the great Reformer. He was animated by heroic conscientiousness. Yet we can hardly, at the same time, repress a feeling of wonder at the exegetical perplexity, which had wrapped him so inextricably in its coils. There seemed to him to be no alternative. There was, apparently, but one expedient possible,—to *cut the knot*, and let the quotation in the Epistle drift whithersoever it might! Hence he did cut it.

Under the broad ægis of his authority many have felt emboldened to say some rather hard things in reference to the quotation. And among the German expositors, there has been of late almost absolute unanimity in maintaining that there is no reference at all to angels in the Psalm, and consequently

nothing on which the Letter-writer could found a legitimate argument or illustration. "There can be no doubt," says Bleek, "that *winds* is the subject of the proposition, not the predicate, and that in the predicate there is no reference at all to *angels*, but to *messengers* in the generic sense." "To angels, as celestial beings," says de Wette, in his *Commentary on the Psalms*, "there is no reference at all." The application of the passage to such beings is founded,—he says in his *Exposition of Hebrews*,—"on an incorrect rendering." "The rendering," says Hupfeld, "which Hebrews i. 7 and Luther follow, yields a sense entirely foreign and inappropriate." Rosenmüller, Knapp, Vaihinger, Kuinöl, Krahmer, Ewald, Ebrard, Olshausen, Lünemann, Bisping, Kurtz,—all maintain that in the Psalm it is *winds* that is the subject, and *messengers* the predicate. Tholuck, too, in his *Exposition of the Psalms*, though he takes the other view in his *Exposition of the Epistle*.

The writer to the Hebrews is not, indeed, accused by any of these critics of having wilfully perverted the obvious import of the Psalm. The mistranslation is laid at the door of the Septuagint translator, whose version is followed by the Letter-writer. But then the dilemma is either obtruded or suggested: *The Letter-writer, either wittingly, or else unwittingly, accepted a translation, which is not only a mistranslation, but an actual inversion of the idea of the original.*

We are amazed; especially at the long succession of waves running all in one direction and lashing the same rock.

Mistranslation! There is none. Inversion of subject and predicate! There is nothing of the kind. Misapplication of the Psalmist's meaning! There is no such blundering.

The Psalmist *is* speaking of the angels in the fourth verse of his Psalm—the angels in their relation to God, just as truly as he is speaking absolutely of God in verses first, second, and third. Nothing was more natural. Why might not the God of nature be regarded by the hymnist as “the Lord of hosts”? Why should it be supposed that He must not be attended by his spiritual retinue? Why might He not be surrounded by his ministering angels? Is there any special congruity in attributing a kind of spiritual lonesomeness to the Monarch of the material universe?

Let us glance at the Introduction of the Psalm. It is comprised in the first four verses.

God is represented grandly as clothing Himself with “light,” as with a garment. He is veiled by it, and yet revealed.

The “heaven” is the work of his hands. It is God's awning over the earth. Underneath it He at times rides forth gloriously in his “chariot of clouds,” borne along by the “winged wind.”

But there is more than common eyes can see. There is awning above awning,—flights of heavens *heaved* above the heaven that is visible from our earth. God is there too. He seems at times to *retire* thither as it were. But He never really forsakes the earth. He visits it. He works in it. He rules and overrules within it, and sends out his attendants, as their presence may be required, to fulfil his

pleasure, in rewards or in punishments, in still small voices and bright visions, or in storms and tempests and bolts of fire.

Such is the Introduction to the Psalm; and in what comes immediately after, the poet begins at the logical beginning, and depicts God's relation to our earth in the "laying of its foundation." He then proceeds with his sublime descant, from stage to stage, from scene to scene.

There is obviously, then, no incongruity in making reference to attendant angels in verse fourth. There is, on the other hand, real incongruity in construing the expressions *winds* and *a flaming fire* as 'subjects,' while the terms *messengers* and *ministers* are treated as 'predicates.' For, in the first place, such a construction does violence to the natural order of sequence. When there is nothing in the nature of the case, or in the adjuncts of the phraseology, to determine respectively the subject and predicate of a proposition, then the order of position in relation to the verb is the natural guide. This order of position represents the logical order of thought; and in that logical order the subject stands before the predicate. The thing that is spoken of naturally takes precedence of the other thing—that is spoken of it. To construe *winds* and *flaming fire* as subjects, instead of predicates, is to disturb this natural order.

Then, in the second place, there is incongruity in the employment of the singular expression *a flaming fire*, as the subject of the plural predicate *his ministers*. *A flaming fire* might, with perfect propriety, be represented as *God's minister*; but surely

not as *his ministers*, without incongruity. It is in vain to plead that the poet might be excused for giving to the singular noun a plural reference, inasmuch as the word employed is not used in the plural. Why should this have hampered a poet? It would have been easy to meet the emergency by varying the expression; by employing, for example, such a plural phrase as is found in Psalm xxix. 7.

It is, moreover, a matter of significance that the Chaldee Targumist agrees with the Septuagint in the adjustment of subject and predicate. He paraphrases the verse thus—*Who has made his messengers swift as wind, his ministers powerful as gleaming fire.* The Syriac translator construed the expression in like manner; for he too makes the first predicate singular, as well as the second.—“He has made his angels *wind*, and his ministers *flaming fire.*”

The translation, then, which is found in the Septuagint, and which was thence adopted by the Letter-writer, is unchallengeable.

But what is the interpretation of the representation? Shall we take the view of the Chaldee Targumist? Does the Psalmist mean that *God makes his ministering angels swift and ardent in his service, like winds and flames of fire?* Are *winds* and *flaming fire* referred to as similitudes? There is one fatal objection to any such interpretation. It puts the passage out of harmony with its context in the Psalm. For the Psalmist is not drawing analogies between beings spiritual and things material. His ode is altogether different in

its aim. He is meditating on the presence and active operation of the invisible One in visible nature: and at one particular turn in the Introductory portion of his meditation, he refers to the angels, not to find similes in nature to illustrate the promptitude and efficiency of their ministry, but to assign them their natural but subordinate place in the Divine government of the world.

In what respect, then, is it the case that the angels are made *winds* and *flame of fire* by the Almighty Monarch of the universe? Delitzsch, in his *Commentary on the Psalms*, renders the couplet thus,—

*Who maketh his messengers 'out of' winds,
His ministers 'out of' flaming fire.*

And there can be no doubt that, in a large number of passages in which the verb *make* is construed with a double accusative, the second of the two, when the verb precedes both, or stands intermediate, denotes the material 'out of' which the first is fashioned. (See Gen. vi. 14; Exod. xxvi. 26; xxviii. 13, 26; xxxvi. 14; Cant. iii. 18, &c.) But it seems far-fetching to introduce such an idea in the case before us. For if we shall suppose that it is the '*personal*' angels that are spoken of, then it seems extremely absurd to represent them as fashioned 'out of' winds and flaming fire. We must not lightly assume that such an idea could have been entertained by the Psalmist. But if we should, on the other hand, suppose that the reference is to '*impersonal*' messengers or couriers, poetically extemporized, then it is surely strange that they should be represented as made 'out of' wind and fire, when,

without any process of extraction or elaboration, they are themselves the wind and fire referred to. The idea of 'raw material' is lost. And even though it were not, it would still be strange,—provided the existence of personal angels be postulated as an item in the poet's belief,—that God should be represented as "making *his messengers* out of winds, *his ministers* out of flaming fire." We should have expected the pronouns to have been dropped,— "who maketh *messengers* out of winds, *ministers* out of flaming fire." This theory of 'raw material' must be abandoned.

What, then, is meant? The representation really is, "*who maketh his angels 'into' winds, his ministers 'into' flaming fire.*" (See Exod. xxx. 25, 35; comp. Psalm civ. 3.) What is the interpretation? Certainly it cannot be meant that God's angels are actually transubstantiated by Him into physical winds and scorching lightning; for it is postulated that the angels, who are "made into winds and fire," remain angels still, and continue to be "ministering spirits sent forth to minister" intelligently "for the heirs of salvation." Literal transubstantiation cannot be referred to: phenomenal transformation may possibly be meant.

It is a poet whose language we are considering. His spirit, at the moment that we listen to him, was in one of its loftiest moods. His imagery is vivid as the lightning:—"Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment: who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain: who layeth the beams of his chambers in the waters: who maketh the clouds his chariot: who walketh upon the wings

of the wind." It is immediately after these brilliant flashes, and as part of the same shower of inspiration, that he adds, "who maketh his angels winds, his ministers a flaming fire." His language is by no means intended to be strictly scientific or tamely prosaic. It glances, representatively, at the phenomena of storms, and especially of thunderstorms, which have always excited among men a profoundly ethical interest. The rapidity of movement in the perturbed elements, the fury of the gale rising into the hurricane or the tornado, the lurid grandeur of the flashes as they fitfully illumine the overarching darkness, strike into an attitude of solemn and religious awe every unsophisticated spirit.

The Psalmist spoke as a true hierophant of nature, and of human nature, when he assumed that in these storms there is the presence and agency of God. And not *his* solitary presence and agency alone. He is surrounded with his spiritual attendants. And when He has designs of retributive Providence to fulfil, He sends them forth on his errands, investing them for the occasion with what phenomena may be befitting—the phenomena of the hurricane, the thunder, or the gleaming bolts of fire. That is, "he makes his angels tempests, his ministers a flame of fire." When we gaze on the storm-drift, and feel awed by the flashes that leap out from the darkness, lo, God's ministers are there! his servants are working there!

Such is the representation of the Psalmist. It is coincident with many other representations in 'the volume of the book,' which make mention of the ministry of angels, and some of which assume

that their spiritual nature may be temporarily manifested under various material conditions and forms. If the true philosophy of these representations be inquired for,—that would lead into wider questions, which have no special bearing on the passage before us. But there is nothing unreasonable in the Biblical representations, when they are reasonably interpreted. If ministering angels there be at all, we can have no difficulty in believing, that wherever God is wielding the sceptre of his Providence, there they are around his throne, fulfilling, in their own peculiar though subordinate sphere, his high behests.

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THE HUMAN ELEMENT IN THE GOSPELS.

GIVEN a God, a personal God — something more than a cold block of marble, or the colder abstraction of a philosopher's brain—One who knows, and rules, and loves: given also Man, with his little life of mystery vanishing at either end in greater mysteries still—let him, endowed with reason, passion, affection, have to sound his dim and perilous way down the stream of freewill to an unknown sea, and we possess the known quantities of an equation whose unknown quantity will be *revelation*, such a revelation as we find in the Bible.

But any revelation of God to man must necessarily have to contend with two grave difficulties: first, in regard to the subject-matter of revelation; and, second, in regard to the imperfect media of communication. We may reasonably assume that God would not disclose what we by searching might