



The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Hebrews–Revelation
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Text and Exposition

I. BETTER THAN THE PROPHETS (1:1–3)

OVERVIEW

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The first four verses of Hebrews form a single Greek sentence. By the end of the sentence, we have already been introduced to the theme of the superiority of the Son to angels, which will remain in focus throughout the rest of chs. 1–2. To impose a section break between vv.3 and 4 is therefore to favor a thematic analysis of the text over its grammatical form. My reason for doing so is that the contrast with the prophets with which the sentence opens (and which will not be made explicitly again

in the rest of the letter) serves to set the scene more broadly than just in relation to angels and provides our author with the cue for his most powerful christological statement—indeed one of the three or four most striking accounts in the NT of the incarnate Son of God. The theme and indeed much of the language of vv.2–3 is closely parallel to what is said about the role of the Word/Son in creation and revelation in John 1:1–18 and especially Colossians 1:15–20.

¹In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways,²but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.³The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

COMMENTARY

.....

1–2a One of the chief glories of OT religion was its prophetic tradition. Israel lived not by human insight but by divine revelation as God “spoke through the prophets.” Our author has no wish to belittle this privilege, and he will quote from those same prophets later in the course of his argument. But now God has provided something even better. The prophets were many and varied, and their revelations came to the forefathers sporadically over a considerable period. But now their place has been taken by a single spokesman, whose message has

been delivered once-for-all “in these last days” (lit., “at the end of these days,” echoing the OT formula “in the end of the days,” Ge 49:1; Isa 2:2; etc.). The period of preparation is over, and all that the prophets have looked forward to is now fulfilled in the single person of “a Son.” (The lack of article does not indicate one son among many but rather the true nature and status of this new spokesman as against his predecessors the prophets.) This title, which will form the backbone of Hebrews’ presentation of Jesus, is dramatically introduced in contrast

with the mere messengers who have gone before and will immediately be filled out with a series of descriptive clauses that totally set him apart from all merely human representatives. Note that the name “Jesus” will not appear until 2:9, when the focus will be on the period of the human incarnation of the Son. In his essential nature he is better designated not by his human name but by a title that directly links him to God.

2b–3a Seven arresting statements now fill out the unique status of “the Son” and make it unmistakably clear he is much more than a passing historical figure like the prophets. The first five statements focus on his relationship to God and to the created universe in such a way as to place him outside the natural order as its originator and sustainer. Two further clauses in v.3b will then bring his historical work of redemption into focus, but first we are invited to contemplate the eternal glory of the Son since before the world was made.

Three clauses trace the role of the Son in relation to the universe, covering respectively its past, present, and future. It was “through” the Son that God made the universe in the past; in the present that same Son upholds everything “by his powerful word”; and the future destiny of the universe is understood also in relation to him who has been made the “heir of all things” (perhaps echoing Ps 2:8; cf. the quotation of Ps 2:7 that follows in v.5). This is the same threefold relation to the creation, embracing all eternity, which is succinctly expressed in Paul’s formula in Romans 11:36: “from him and through him and to him are all things”; Paul was speaking there of God, not of Christ, but in Colossians 1:16–17 he says the same of Christ: “all things were created by him and for him . . . , and in him all things hold together.” The author of Hebrews, like Paul (and John in 1:1–3), has no hesitation in saying of Jesus what in Jewish orthodoxy was reserved for God the Creator.

The double clause that opens v.3 describes the Son’s relation to God more directly and even more unequivocally, not now in his creative role but in his essential nature: he is “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.” He is, in other words, as in John 1:14, 18, God made visible. To see what God is like we must look at the Son. “Radiance” (*apaugasma*, GK 575) means literally the “outshining” (though it is sometimes also used of a “reflection”) of the glory that is God’s essential character, while “exact representation” translates the vivid Greek metaphor *charaktēr*, “imprint, stamp” (GK 5917), used, for instance, of the impression made on a coin, which exactly reproduces the design on the die. (The idea is the same as the more familiar phrase “the image of God.”) Again there is a close echo of Colossians 1:15, 19: “He is the image of the invisible God. . . . God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.”

3b The glory of the Son consists not only in his eternal nature but also in his role in bringing salvation to human beings. The two clauses that conclude the description of the Son take up this theme and thus introduce two of the most prominent themes of the letter as a whole. First, he has “provided purification for sins.” The theme of the sacrificial work of Christ will come into focus especially in chs. 9–10 as the outworking of his office as our great high priest, where the author will emphasize that this work of purification is now fully complete. While at this point he does not yet spell out the means by which this “purification” has been achieved, his readers would be well aware that it must be through the shedding of blood (9:14, 22, etc.). The way is thus prepared for the paradoxical argument of ch. 2 that it is in his humiliation and death that the superior glory of the Son, as our perfect redeemer, is revealed.

But humiliation is followed by exaltation, and the author’s first allusion to Psalm 110:1 introduces the language of “sitting at the right hand,” which will

echo through the letter (cf. 1:13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2). The Son, his earthly work complete, now occupies in heaven the place of highest authority next to God himself.

Such is the nature of the Son, who has now added to his unique creative work by coming into the world he made in order to bring the final and perfect

revelation of God by making the true nature of the invisible God visible on the canvas of a human life, and by his redeeming work has fulfilled God's purpose of salvation. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory" (Jn 1:14). Here is a work of God on a different level altogether from what the prophets could offer.

NOTES

1 The opening words are carefully crafted for rhetorical effect. The writer begins not with the subject of the sentence but with two matching adverbs which, while easily understood, were not in normal use: πολυμερῶς, *polymerōs*, and πολυτρόπως, *polytropōs*, are effectively synonymous, literally "in many parts" and "in many ways." The sentence, having begun with two striking adverbs beginning with *p*, increases the effect with further alliteration: πολυμερῶς και πολυτροπως παλαι ο θεος λαλησας τοις πατρασιν εν τοις προφηταις, *polymerōs kai polytropōs palai ho theos lalēsas tois patrasin en tois prophētais*.

2 "The universe" at the end of v.2 renders τὸν αἰῶνα (*tous aiōnas*, GK 172), which elsewhere more often means "the ages." In Jewish thought time was divided into two "ages," "the present age" and "the age to come" (see 6:5), so that "the ages" taken together represent the totality of time but by transference can also be used of the whole physical creation. See 11:3 for the same use of τὸν αἰῶνα, *tous aiōnas*, with reference to the original creation of the universe; cf. the title "King of the Ages" used for God, e.g., in 1Ti 1:17. Paul speaks of this αἰῶν (*aiōn*) in parallel with this κόσμος (*kosmos*, "world," GK 3180) in 1 Corinthians 1:20 and 3:18–19.

3 The first-century BC Alexandrian Jewish work, the Wisdom of Solomon, uses similar language in a poetic description of the divine Wisdom: she is "a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; . . . an outshining [ἀπαύγασμα, *apaugasma*, GK 575] of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness" (Wis 7:25–26). Philo, also an Alexandrian Jew, spoke of the Logos (which he identifies with "Wisdom") as God's image, as the imprint on a seal. Early Christians delighted to claim for Jesus what Jewish thought attributed to Wisdom, who was also understood (following Pr 8:22–31) to have been God's agent in creation.

"Being" renders ὑπόστασις (*hypostasis*, lit., "substance," GK 5712), a wide-ranging word Hebrews will use for the "reality" or "assurance" of future promises (11:1) and for Christian "confidence" (3:14), but which here must have its more basic meaning of "real nature, fundamental reality" (as opposed to outward appearance). We should not read back into Hebrews the later philosophical usage of Christian Trinitarian debate, which (rather confusingly) distinguished between God's essential οὐσία (*ousia*, "substance," GK 4045) and the three ὑποστάσεις (*hypostaseis*, "persons") of Father, Son, and Spirit.

"The Majesty in heaven" is literally "the greatness in the heights" (ἡ μεγαλωσύνη ἐν ὑψηλοῖς, *hē megalōsynē en hypsēlois*). A similar use of ἡ μεγαλωσύνη, *hē megalōsynē* (GK 3488), as a substitute for the name of God occurs in 8:1; it reflects Jewish reverential language, as when Jesus refers to God as "the Power," again in connection with sitting at his right hand (Mk 14:62). Not that Hebrews finds any difficulty in speaking directly of God in such a connection (10:12; 12:2), but this is part of the author's natural Jewish idiom.