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Hebrews 1:1–4



IN 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. ⁴So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.



BECAUSE HEBREWS BEGINS like a sermon,¹ without any mention of sender, addressees, or words of greeting, the author opens with a majestic overture, rhetorically eloquent and theologically packed. This beautifully constructed opening statement begins by contrasting the revelation given under the older testament economy with that given under the new. This contrast focuses on and climaxes in the person of God's Son—heir, agent of creation, sustainer of the universe, Savior, and sovereign—who now sits at the right hand of God.

Although most translations, including the NIV, present this introduction in several sentences, Hebrews 1:1–4 in Greek forms a single, multclause sentence, built around the main clause "God . . . has spoken."² Thus God and his communication to humanity through the Son engage the author's attention from the first. These beautifully crafted verses fall into two main subdivisions, the first addressing divine revelation (1:1–2a) and the second the person, work, and status of God's Son (1:2b–4).

The Climax of Divine Communication (1:1–2a)

THE AUTHOR BEGINS by presenting divine revelation in parallel contrasts between the "older" communication during the time of the prophets and the

1. See above, p. 24.

2. This clause is made of the main subject, "God" (*theos*), in v. 1 and the main verb, "he has spoken" (*elalesen*), in v. 2. The word translated "spoke" in the NIV's v. 1 is actually a participle dependent on the main verb.

Hebrews 1:1–4

"newer" communication through the Son. He contrasts four areas: the era of the revelation, the recipients, the agents, and the ways in which the revelation was manifested.

	<i>Older Communication</i>	<i>Newer Communication</i>
<i>Era</i>	in the past	in these last days
<i>Recipients</i>	to our forefathers	to us
<i>Agents</i>	through the prophets	by his Son
<i>Ways</i>	in various ways	in one way (implied)

The eras mentioned contrast two time frames. The time "in the past" (or "formerly") refers to the time prior to the coming of Messiah, and correspondingly, the coming time was seen as initiating "the last days." The author uses the adjective "these" (*touton*) in verse 2, expressing the Christian conviction that the last days have been initiated already.³

Divine revelation came "to our forefathers [i.e., those under the older covenants] through the prophets." The latter phrase should not be understood as narrowly referring to those designated as the "major" and "minor" writing prophets of our Old Testament. Rather, the author considers all through whom God manifested his will as owning the prophetic mantel, although the manner of these prophesies varied considerably. As to the manner of the divine revelation, it was "at many times" (*polymeros*)—that is, it was temporally fragmented rather than in a complete package—and "in various ways" (*polytropos*), a word that suggests the diversity of forms of that revelation. The suggestion brings to mind Old Testament commands, exhortations, stories, visions, dreams, mighty acts, breathtaking theophanies, and a still small voice, to name a few.⁴

This older revelation was expansive but incomplete. By contrast, the revelation of these last days has come "to us," the receptors of the Christian message. It constitutes God's climactic communication to humanity and has been brought via God's Son; that is, rather than being fragmentary and varied, it may be considered whole, focused in the person and work of Christ. The author included no article prior to the word "Son" (*huio*). Whereas in many languages this may suggest that Jesus is merely one son in a crowd of sons, the emphasis here is on the unique relationship of Jesus with the

3. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 10. Early Christian doctrine corresponded to Jewish thought of the day in understanding the history of God's working as divided into two successive ages. Christian thought, however, understood the final age, that of the "last days," to have been ushered in with the coming of Jesus.

4. Harold Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 37.

Father—*one who relates to him as son*.⁵ Whereas the prophets of old were many, the bearer of God's word for the last days was uniquely qualified for the responsibility. The author's statement should not be understood as concentrating only on the teachings of Jesus, although the words of Christ are vitally important to him (2:3–4). Rather, the whole of the incarnation—person, words, and acts—should be understood as communicating God's ultimate word to his new covenant people.

The Person, Work, and Status of the Son (1:2b–4)

FOLLOWING THE TERM "Son" the author of Hebrews provides seven affirmations describing the Son's person, work, and current status. (1) "Whom he appointed heir of all things" probably alludes to Psalm 2:8: "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession." At Hebrews 1:5, a verse in the immediate context of 1:1–4, the author quotes Psalm 2:7, again affirming the unique relation of this Son with God the Father. If this psalm indeed lies behind the author's thought in Hebrews 1:2, the inheritance of "all things" expands the idea to include the whole of the created order (2:5). In our author's thought, this royal inheritance of Christ has only been inaugurated but will be consummated at the end of the age (1:13; 2:8–9). Thus this initial proposition both affirms the present and anticipates the future rule of Christ.

(2) The next affirmation, "through whom he made the universe," takes a backward look at another of the Son's roles. With other writers of the New Testament, Hebrews proclaims the Son as the Father's agent in the creation of the universe (see 1:10; cf. John 1:3; Col. 1:16). Note Paul's expression of this conviction in 1 Corinthians 8:6: "Yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live." Paul here makes a distinction between the role of the Father and that of the Son; yet, both are included in the work of creation. He affirms the Father as the source of the created order and the Son as the Father's agent in the creative process.⁶ The Son, to whom all of creation will be subjected in the end (cf. 1 Cor. 15:28; Heb. 1:13; 2:5, 8), is he through whom it originated in the beginning.

(3) Four participial clauses flank and support the author's next main statement concerning the Son's exaltation to the right hand of God (1:4). The first of these deals with the Son's divine nature: He "is the radiance of God's glory

5. Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 93–94.

6. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 372.

and the exact representation of his being." The two parts of this statement affirm the same truth. In biblical literature the "glory" often refers to the luminous manifestation of God's person.⁷ The word translated "radiance" (*apaugasma*), used only here in the New Testament, carries the sense of "splendor" or "intense brightness."⁸ One cannot separate the experience of looking at the brightness of a light from seeing the light itself because they are too closely associated. By analogy, to see the Son is to view God's glory or manifest presence. So as the "radiance of his glory" the Son is the manifestation of the person and presence of God (e.g., Luke 9:32; John 1:14; 2:11; 17:5; Rom. 8:17; 1 Cor. 2:8; Phil. 3:21; 2 Thess. 2:14).

Similarly, the Son is "the exact representation of his being." The word rendered "representation" (*charakter*), also used only here in the New Testament, originally denoted an instrument used for engraving, and later the impression made by such an instrument. For example, it could refer to the impression made on coins.⁹ The word thus speaks of the features of an object or person by which we are able to recognize it for what it is.¹⁰ The imagery may also call to mind the "representation" of a parent one often sees in the face of his or her children. To see the face of the child immediately exhibits the close family relationship. What the Son represents is the "being" of the Father, that is, his essential nature. The phrase "representation of his being," therefore, closely parallels other New Testament passages that speak of Jesus as the "form," "likeness," or "image" of God (e.g., John 1:2; Phil. 2:6; Col. 1:15). So the Son provides a true and trustworthy picture of the person of the Father.

(4) The Son is also the one "sustaining all things by his powerful word." The background of the Son's "sustaining [bearing] all things" should probably be understood in a managerial sense. The action speaks of the continual organization and carrying forward of the created order to a designed end, an activity ascribed to God in Jewish writings. This is not the idea of the Son holding up the weight of the world as the mighty Atlas of Greek mythology, but rather the dynamic progression of creation through his governmental power.¹¹ He carries out this government "by his powerful word." So, as the world was created by the word of God through the Son (1:2; 11:3), it is sustained by the Son's powerful word.

7. E.g., Ex. 16:7; 33:18; Isa. 40:5.

8. Donald Hagner, *Hebrews*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1990), 23.

9. Leon Morris, "Hebrews," *EBC* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 12:14.

10. B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1889), 12.

11. *Ibid.*, 13–14.

(5) “Purification for sins” constitutes one of the author’s major concerns (see esp. 9:1–10:18, which addresses the superior offering for sin under the new covenant). Behind his treatment of the subject stand the Old Testament concepts of the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16) and the blood of the covenant (Ex. 24), along with a number of other subtopics.¹² Here, in the statement of Hebrews 1:3, is the introduction’s reference to Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross. What the Son “had provided” was a forgiveness that would be permanent and lead into the very presence of God.

(6) At the heart of the introduction, the author centers on the Son’s present status as the one at God’s right hand (1:3). This allusion to Psalm 110:1, the Old Testament passage to which authors of the New Testament refer most often, presents the exaltation of Christ. The concept of “the right hand” represents either superior power or ultimate honor, though it also carries the derivative meanings of “greatness” or “favor.”¹³ As adapted in the New Testament, Psalm 110:1 supported Jesus’ messiahship, vindication (through resurrection and exaltation), role as judge, lordship, and his intercession on behalf of believers.¹⁴

The references to “the Majesty” here and at 8:1 are unique among allusions to Psalm 110:1 in the New Testament. The word originally described God’s power, greatness, or strength (e.g., Deut. 32:3; 1 Chron. 29:11; Ps. 145:3, 6). As used in Hebrews 1:3 it constitutes a reverential periphrasis for “God” commonly used in Jewish circles of the day.¹⁵ “In heaven” is God’s locale and particularly his privileged position.¹⁶ Thus, the Son, creator of the universe and heir of all things, has been exalted to an exceptional position of authority and honor.

(7) The result of the exaltation is that the Son “became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.” Many commentators have noted this book returns again and again to contrast Christ and Christianity with the persons and institutions of the older

12. E.g., the ashes of the red heifer (Num. 19:9; cf. Heb. 9:13); a variety of sacrifices, such as the whole burnt offering and the sin offering (Heb. 10:5–11). It seems from 10:11 that the daily sacrifices were also in view.

13. Walter Grundmann, “*δεξιός*,” in *TDNT*, 2:38.

14. This psalm is quoted or alluded to twenty-two times in the New Testament. See W. R. G. Loader, “Christ at the Right Hand: Psalm 110:1 in the New Testament,” *NTS* 24 (1978): 199–217; David M. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand: Psalm 110 in Early Christianity*, SBLMS (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1980). For a discussion of the treatment of this psalm in Hebrews, see George H. Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews: A Text-Linguistic Analysis*, *NovT-Sup* 73 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 123–24.

15. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 46.

16. Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer*, KEKNT (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 102.

covenant. Here, in his comparison of the exalted Son with the angels, the author has moved from Jesus' nature and work to his status. The Son has moved to a position of authority and governance above the status of the angels.

How much greater is his position? "As much superior . . . as the name he inherited is superior to theirs." The first word translated "superior" in 1:4 (*kreitton*) is the author's favorite when drawing attention to the preeminence of Christ and the new covenant religion. Christ is a superior priest (7:7); Christ's followers have a superior hope (7:19) because they are involved in the Son's superior covenant (7:22; 8:6), which is based on superior promises (8:6); Christ made a superior sacrifice (9:23; 12:24); therefore, believers have a superior possession (10:34), a superior country (11:16), a superior resurrection (11:35), and a superior privilege (11:40). A comparative, the other term translated "superior" (*diaphoroteron*), can also be rendered "more excellent" and is used again at 8:6 to describe Christ's ministry in comparison with the old covenant system.

Based on the previous reference to "Son" in verse 2 and the Old Testament texts that immediately follow in verses 5–14, most scholars have understood "name" in verse 4 to refer to the title "Son."¹⁷ However, "Son" in verse 2 is not titular; in the collection of quotations that follow, the title "Son" is joined by the titles "God" (v. 8) and "Lord" (v. 10). Although it cannot be denied that the concept of "sonship" is prominent in this section of the book, it seems that uppermost in the author's mind in the collection of Old Testament texts of 1:5–14 is the preeminence of the exalted Son. He is the one who deserves worship (v. 6), has a throne and a scepter (v. 8), has been anointed (as a king?) (v. 9), has made the earth and heavens (v. 10), and has been exalted to the right hand of God (v. 13).

The word translated here as "name" has a broad range of meanings, including "name," "status," "title," "rank," "reputation," or even "person." Richard Longenecker has pointed out "the name," initially used as a pious reference to God, came to be employed among early Jewish Christians as a designation for Jesus.¹⁸ Both Ephesians 1:21 and Philippians 2:9, for example, speak of the exaltation of Christ over powers of the universe, as does the author of Hebrews. In each of those texts Jesus' "name" is said to be above every other. This designation connoted the Messiah's power and divinity. In Hebrews 1:4 what the Son inherited was the title "the name," a designation or rank formerly reserved for God.

17. See Héring, *L'Épître aux Hébreux*, 24; Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer*, 106.

18. Richard Longenecker, *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 41–46 (see Acts 3:16; 4:7, 10; 16:18; 19:13–17; Eph. 1:21; Phil. 2:9).

Summary. Through his brief but tightly packed introduction, the preacher eloquently proclaims in two movements a rich, full overture to the “symphony” of ideas in Hebrews. In the first (1:1–2a) he declares to his first hearers that God, a communicator of expansive, foundational revelations through the older testament, has offered his ultimate revelation in one related to him as son. Then, in the second movement, the introduction climaxes in the Son’s sacrificial work and resultant exaltation to the “right hand” of God. Through graphic imagery the purification for sins and exaltation are related dynamically to the close relationship of the Son to the Father, attributing to Christ a nature (the “radiance of God’s glory” and “the exact representation of his being”), works (the creation and sustaining of the universe), and status (the inheritance of a “name”) that point to his deity and the uniqueness of his relationship with the Father. With this well-spoken word the author begins his sermon and lays a potent theological foundation for the rest of the sermon.

*Bridging
Contexts*

WHAT, THEN, ARE the vehicles on which the meaning of this beautiful passage can be brought to our context today? In the process of bridging the contexts between the author’s message and con-

temporary culture we are confronted with a number of challenging dynamics. The passage is complex in the original language since the author presents us with one extended sentence in these four verses. How, then, are we to understand the organization of his ideas? Which ideas are focal for the author? What is he trying to accomplish through the introduction?

These questions raise a second important issue. In 1:1–4 we find no fewer than ten weighty topics, which span from heaven to earth and from eternity past to eternity future. The list of themes reads like part of the table of contents in a systematic theology textbook! How can we focus our application when we are confronted with so much substance in such a short space?

Finally, terminology used of the Son in this introduction, such as “radiance,” “representation,” and “having become superior,” is somewhat vague and carefully nuanced. It is, therefore, open to theological abuse by those who would do a surface reading without further probing the significance of the author’s language. How can we discern what the author is trying to say about Christ?

When presented with a complex passage, one finds help in returning to basic principles of interpretation. These provide stability and direction in sorting through the complexities confronting us. In “Bridging Contexts,” therefore, we need to consider how genre (i.e., the kind of literature with which

we are dealing) impacts our understanding, and therefore our application, of the text. The grammatical structure of the text offers further assistance. Moreover, certain terminological and theological clarification may be found by considering the broader context of the book of Hebrews itself.

Focusing on the author's central concerns. In the introduction, we reflected the critical judgment that Hebrews presents us with an early Christian sermon, crafted by a person whose experience of worship was oriented to the Greek-speaking synagogue and whose rhetorical abilities had been honed in the Greco-Roman educational institutions of the day. Both ancient Jewish homiletics and Greco-Roman oratory placed great emphasis on a work having an appropriate beginning, otherwise known as the *exordium* or *proem*.¹⁹ In that introduction the speaker presented the main topic(s) or text of his speech or sermon and sought to rivet the attention of the audience. Our author accomplishes both with admirable skill.

We need to recognize that this approach to crafting a sermon's introduction has both similarities with and differences from sermon preparation today. The student in a seminary homiletics class will likely be taught to "grab the audience's attention" through several means, including the reading of the passage to be preached and the use of a graphic illustration or a clear statement of the sermon's main thesis. In this way the intention of a contemporary sermon's introduction is the same as that of an introduction in an ancient speech or sermon—we want to make sure our listeners are tuned in before we get to the body of the message. However, most preachers today have not been taught to include stylistic devices and a tightly woven overview of the sermon's main theological assertions, two dynamics evident in Hebrews 1:1–4. Therefore, we must alert ourselves to these aspects of this passage to catch the full impact the author intends for his introduction.

True to the form of well-executed oral presentations in his culture, the preacher of Hebrews weaves together a series of topics in his introduction that forms the core of his sermon. His purpose is to alert the reader to the foundational propositions of the book. When read in light of the rest of Hebrews, we find at least nine themes in the introduction that exercise con-

19. For example, Jewish sermons were often introduced by referring to the text to be expounded. On this aspect of Jewish homiletics see Peder Borgen, *Bread From Heaven: An Exegetical Study of the Concept of Manna in the Gospel of John and the Writings of Philo*, NovTSup (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), 59–98; E. Earle Ellis, "Isaiah in the New Testament," *SwJT* 34 (1991): 31–32. For the form of speeches in the rhetorical schools see Duane F. Watson, *Invention, Arrangement, and Style: Rhetorical Criticism of Jude and 2 Peter*, SBLDS (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 21; Donald L. Clark, *Rhetoric in Greco-Roman Education* (Morningside Heights, N.Y.: Columbia Univ. Press, 1957), 112–13; D. A. Russell and M. Winterbottom, eds., *Ancient Literary Criticism: The Principal Texts in New Translations* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 170.