
§1 *God's Definitive Revelation (Heb. 1:1-4)*

The magnificent opening verses of this passage provide an immediate expression of the author's theological perspective: he moves from past revelation to definitive revelation, from God's word to the OT "fathers" to his final word through his Son, Jesus Christ. He gives first his doctrine of Christ in order to set the tone for the entire book. The introductory christological prologue in these verses is thus similar to the prologue of the Fourth Gospel (John 1:1-18) in its function as well as in its christocentric theology. The author, however, does not want to present such an exalted Christology without first indicating that God's word spoken in his Son is continuous with, and not alien to, what has preceded. What God has done in Christ is the climax of what he had begun to do in earlier times. And having finished the work of atonement, Christ enjoys an exalted status far superior to that of the angels.

1:1 / God has spoken **at many times and in various ways** in the past. This serves as a good characterization of what we call the Old Testament—the account of God's revelation of himself to Israel through not only his words, but also his acts. Moreover, our author identifies himself and his readers with those to whom God spoke in the past, **our forefathers**. This statement is an affirmation of what the Jews have always been committed to: God has indeed spoken to us in the past **through the prophets**. **Prophets** here are to be understood as God's spokesmen, his representatives to people in every era and therefore as all the writers of Scripture, not just those referred to in the literature we designate as "the Prophets." This affirmation provides a strong sense of continuity, of reaching back; it says God began with Israel but is even now at work in the church and in what the church believes. A unity of revelation can be seen as we move from the past into the incomparable present.

1:2 / In these last days (lit., “at the end of these days”) God has spoken through his Son. The writer uses eschatological language, that is, language of the last or end time, thereby affirming that we have entered the eschatological age. In other words, God’s plan has now come to fruition; we have entered a new age (cf. 9:26). A fundamental turning point has been reached as God speaks climactically, definitively, and finally through his Son. Any further speaking about what remains to happen in the future is but the elaboration of what has already begun. All that God did previously functions in a preparatory manner, pointing as a great arrow to the goal of Christ. This is the argument our author so effectively presents throughout the book. Christ is the *telos*, the goal and ultimate meaning of all that preceded.

But in what sense was the writer, or any of the writers of the NT for that matter, justified in referring to his time as the **last days**? The key to understanding this kind of statement (see also 4:3; 6:5; 9:26; 12:22ff.), is found in the theological ultimacy of Christ. There is no way our writer can have recognized the reality of Jesus Christ—who he is and what he has done—and not have confessed this to be the last time. The sense in which it is “last” is not chronological but theological. The cross, the death, and the exaltation of Jesus point automatically to the beginning of the end. Theologically we have reached the turning point in the plan that God has had all through the ages, so by definition we are in the last days. Eschatology is of one theological fabric: when God has spoken through his Son, the eschatological age has begun, and we are necessarily in the last days theologically. These are the last days because of the greatness of what God has done. The surprise is, of course, that this period of eschatological fulfillment is so prolonged that these last days are not necessarily (though for any age it may turn out that they are) the last days chronologically.

This book, this opening passage, and particularly verse 2, point to the centrality of the Son and the superiority of the Son to all that preceded, all that exists now, and anything that might exist in the future. God has now spoken to us climactically **by his Son**, in whom, as Paul puts it, all of God’s promises are “Yes” (2 Cor. 1:20). The very mention of the Son has strong OT messianic overtones, as is evident immediately in verse 5, which quotes Psalm 2:7, “You are my Son; today I have become your

Father," and 2 Samuel 7:14, "I will be his father, and he will be my son." Indeed, the remainder of the chapter, with its numerous OT quotations, points to the unique identity of the Son as the Promised One, the Messiah designated by God to bring about the fulfillment of God's great plan and purpose.

The true nature of the Son is then expounded in seven glorious phrases that portray his incomparable superiority. He is, in the first instance, the one **whom he [God] appointed heir of all things**. In the Hebrew culture, to be a son means to be an heir, especially when one is the only or unique son. Therefore, the Son of God, by virtue of his sonship, is appointed the one who will finally possess everything. To the messianic Son of Psalm 2:7 (quoted above) are also spoken the words, "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession" (Ps. 2:8). The Son is thus of central significance at the beginning, in creation, and at the end, in inheritance. Paul's language is parallel: "all things were created by him and for him" (Col. 1:16).

Second, the Son is described as the one **through whom he [God] made the universe**. The Son is God's agent in the creation of the universe of all space and all time—in short, of all that exists. This view of Christ is present also in the Fourth Gospel (John 1:3, "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made"), and in Paul (Col. 1:16, "all things were created by him"; 1 Cor. 8:6 "through whom all things came"). The background of this view possibly lies in the concept of Divine Wisdom, which, personified, is instrumental in creation according to Proverbs 8:27-31 (cf. *Wisd. of Sol.* 9:1f., 9).

1:3 / The third and fourth phrases in this characterization of Christ turn to the manner in which the Son is a true expression of the father. **The Son** (lit., "who") **is the radiance of God's glory**. The word **radiance** or "radiant light" means intense "brightness." Barclay effectively paraphrases: "The Son is the radiance of his glory just as the ray is the light of the sun." Again a parallel exists between the personification of wisdom, this time in the apocryphal book the *Wisdom of Solomon* (7:25f.): "For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; . . . she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his good-

ness" (RSV). Other NT writers hold a similar view of Christ. In the prologue of the Gospel of John, Christ is designated "the true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world" (John 1:9), in whom "we have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father" (John 1:14). For John, as for our author, Jesus expresses the brilliant glory of God. Paul, too, speaks of the light that Christ brought, referring to "the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6; cf. 4:4).

The next phrase, he is **the exact representation of his being**, is simply a more explicit way of expressing what the author has just said. The Son is a perfect representation of God's being "just as the mark is the exact impression of the seal" (Barclay). The thought is again reminiscent of Christology elsewhere in the NT, for example in Paul's statements that Christ is "the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4) and "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15); although in these two instances, the Greek word (*eikōn*, from which comes the English word "icon") is different from that used here. John expressed the same idea in the words "anyone who has seen me [Jesus] has seen the Father" (John 14:9). It is to be noted further that it is God's own **being** that is expressed so accurately, the word **being** here to be understood as "substance" or "essence." These two parallel phrases at the beginning of verse 3 obviously speak of the uniqueness of the Son. They also point to the extraordinary connection between the Father and Son. In order for the Son to be the kind of direct, authentic, and compelling expression of the Father described in these phrases—for him to be the radiance of God's glory and the impress of his very essence—he must participate somehow in the being of God itself, that is, he must himself be deity to accomplish the wonderful mission described here. Our author would have us conclude, without denying the distinction between Father and Son, that the Son is of the same order of existence as God, and so with God over against all else that exists.

As the Son was instrumental in the creation of the universe (v. 2), so the continuing significance of the Son is seen, in the fifth phrase, in his **sustaining all things by his powerful word**. Philosophers of every age are prone to ask what it is that underlies reality—that is, what dynamic sustains and makes coherent all that exists. Our author, further revealing his christocentric perspective, finds the answer in the mighty word of the Son. This

view also finds parallels in Paul and John. When John uses “Word” (*logos*) to describe Jesus, he uses a term that has both Jewish and Greek associations. For the Greek Stoic philosophers *logos* was the underlying principle of rationality that made the world orderly, coherent, and intelligible. Without using the technical term *logos*, Paul argues in similar fashion: “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Col. 1:17). Although the author of Hebrews does not use the specific term *logos* in this passage, the idea that Christ sustains the universe, is behind it all, and keeps it all going (as the present participle **sustaining** indicates), is parallel.

Our author, however, is not content simply to mark off the incomparable character of the Son against all others and all else, as he has done in the first five phrases. He wants also to get to one of the main points of the epistle, the atoning work of the Son, for this, too, is vitally a part of and dependent upon the Son’s uniqueness. What makes these the last days is that “once-and-for-all” (to borrow language that will be encountered later in the epistle) **he . . . provided purification for sins**. This indeed is the preeminent work of the Son. The “cleansing of sins” (a literal translation) may seem strange in the midst of glorious clauses pointing to the deity of the Son. This phrase, after all, describes the work of the high priest and, though impressive in itself, would seem familiar enough to a Jewish reader. With the insertion of this clause, however, the author anticipates a main argument of the book (cf. chaps. 9 and 10): the work of the high priest is not efficacious in itself but rather foreshadows the priestly work of the one who alone can make atonement for sins. Only God in the Son can accomplish the sacrifice that makes possible the cleansing and the forgiveness of sins (see Rom. 3:24–26). Thus the cleansing of sins rightly belongs with phrases that describe the uniqueness of the Son in his relationship to God.

When he had thus accomplished the purpose of his incarnation, **he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven**. The words of this final and climactic clause convey a sense of completion and fulfillment of God’s purpose. They are drawn from a messianic psalm of the OT (Ps. 110) that is exceptionally important to our author’s argument. Psalm 110:1 is cited or alluded to here and in 1:13 (more fully); 8:1; 10:12–13, and 12:2. Psalm 110:4, the Melchizedek passage, is cited or alluded to in

5:6, 10; 6:20; and throughout chapter 7 (vv. 3, 11, 15, 17, 21, 24, 28). Why is this psalm so important to our author? Two main arguments of the epistle can be supported by Psalm 110: the incomparable superiority of Christ (as revealed in his exaltation to the right hand of God) and the extraordinary high priesthood of Christ (as paralleled and prefigured by Melchizedek). The ascension of Christ to the position of power and authority at the side of the Father is the vindication of the true identity of the one who suffered and died in accomplishing the forgiveness of sins. This view is found often in the NT and is regularly associated with the ascension of Christ. “He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe” (Eph. 4:10); Christ, “who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him” (1 Pet. 3:22). Jesus alludes to Psalm 110:1 in the synoptic tradition (see Mark 12:36 and 14:62, both with parallels in Matthew and Luke). What the psalmist promised now had come to pass—hence the note of completion and finality. That he has **sat down** signifies the completion of his atoning work (cf. 10:11–12).

1:4 / So he became . . . superior to the angels describes the result of the reference in the preceding clause to Christ’s exaltation; it thus refers not to the character of the Son from the beginning, but to the last clause of verse 3, which refers to the ascension of Christ. In this exaltation to the right hand of the Father, the Son comes to hold a position that indeed was always his by virtue of his identity, but which was set aside during the incarnation. The ascension is a dramatic attestation of the true identity of the Son and thus also of his superiority to angels. By the ascension the son **became . . . superior to the angels**. In this statement the author employs one of his favorite words in describing the definitive and final character of the Son and his work, the comparative **superior** (lit., “better”).

We have come to the end of this important christological prologue. It sets the tone of the book and has been put first by the author in order that it may inform our understanding of all that follows. The Son is set forth as the embodiment of the three main offices of the OT: prophet (speaking for God), priest (accomplishing forgiveness of sins), and king (reigning with God at his right hand). But he is even more than this marvelous combination

of traits can express. He is the one through whom and for whom everything that exists has been created, the one who sustains the universe, and who is the very expression of God's glory and essence. He is the one with whom not even the angels can compare. The person of Christ is the key to understanding this epistle.

Additional Notes §1

1:1 / The opening sentence in the Greek is skillfully constructed from the literary standpoint, beginning with effective alliteration and measured cadence. See D. W. B. Robinson, "The Literary Structure of Hebrews 1:1-4," *Australian Journal of Biblical Archaeology* 1 (1972), pp. 178-86. **At many times** (lit., "in many parts") . . . **various ways** are two Greek words occurring only here in the NT, whose nuance is captured nicely in NEB: "in fragmentary and varied fashion." On **prophets** as spokesmen of God, see G. Friedrich, "*prophētēs*," *TDNT*, vol. 6, pp. 830ff.

1:2 / **In these last days** is language of the Greek translation of the OT (the LXX) commonly used for describing the eschatological expectation of the prophets (e.g., Jer. 23:20; Ezek. 38:16; Dan. 10:14). The first coming of Christ and the second coming of Christ are closely related theologically in that both are eschatological in character. This being so, it is normal to expect that the second will quickly follow the first. The theological interconnectedness of Christ's work implies (but does not necessitate) the chronological imminence of the second coming. Christians must be careful to preserve the eschatological character of Christ's first work without weakening their expectation of his future work. For a masterly description of the tension of this as the time of the end yet not the end, see O. Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, trans. F. V. Filson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964). On the eschatology of Hebrews, see C. K. Barrett, "The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews," in *The Background of the New Testament and Its Eschatology* (Festschrift for C. H. Dodd), ed. W. D. Davies and D. Daube (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), pp. 363-93.

On the designation of the Messiah as the Son of God, see E. Lohse on *hyios* in *TDNT*, vol. 8, pp. 360ff.; see too M. Hengel, *The Son of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), pp. 85-88; on the Christology of Hebrews see V. Taylor, *The Person of Christ* (London: Macmillan, 1958), pp. 89-98.

Universe is literally "the ages"; hence Barclay's translation, "the present world and the world to come" (cf. 6:5). For "age" as a spatial term meaning "world" see H. Sasse on *aiōn* in *TDNT*, vol. 1, pp. 203f.

The eschatological dimensions of "inheritance" and its connection with sonship are important not only for Christ, but for his people who, according to Paul (Rom. 8:17) and Peter (1 Pet. 3:7), enjoy their sonship

by adoption and are made fellow-heirs with Christ. For our author the inheritance of the saints is important. See 6:12, 17; 9:15; 10:36; 11:8.

1:3 / Some scholars have argued that v. 3 was originally part of a confessional hymn. The opening relative pronoun “who” (*hos*), the characteristic participles, and the content all point to this possibility. (On these points see the similarity in other “hymns” in New Testament epistles, e.g., Col. 1:15, Phil. 2:6ff., and 1 Tim. 3:16). See further J. T. Sanders, *The New Testament Christological Hymns*, SNTSMS 15 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 19f. and pp. 92ff. It is striking that the major christological passages of the NT bear marks of being adapted from hymns. The best theology, after all, is better sung than spoken. See also J. Frankowski, “Early Christian Hymns Recorded in the New Testament: A Reconsideration of the Question in the Light of Heb 1,3,” *Biblische Zeitschrift* 27 (1983), 183-94, who argues that the hymn is the author’s own, created from already existing hymnic fragments.

This verse contains two key words that are found only here in the entire NT, “radiance” (*apaugasma*) and “exact representation” (*charaktēr*). The former has the active sense of “effulgence” as well as the passive sense of “reflection” in its occurrences in Philo, who uses the word to describe what God breathed into man at his creation. The active is probably the nuance here. (See R. P. Martin in *NIDNTT*, vol. 2, pp. 289f.) The latter word, also found in Philo, means accurate representation in the manner of an “impress” or “stamp,” as of a coin to a die. (See U. Wilckens in *TDNT*, vol. 9, pp. 418-23.) The Greek word *katharismos* is a technical term for cultic cleansing and is so used in the LXX and even within the NT, where it can signify “ritual washing” (John 2:6; 3:25) or, more generally, **purification** (as also in Luke 2:22; 2 Pet. 1:9). The use of the word here is no accident, given the central argument of our author about the sacrificial ritual of the temple finding its goal in the work of Christ. **Purification for sins** is used in an absolute sense, thus including the sins of all humanity.

Psalm 110 is of very great importance in the early church. Understood widely as bearing messianic significance by Jewish interpreters before the time of Jesus, this psalm was seen to be vividly fulfilled in the risen and ascended Christ whom the church now confessed as sovereign Lord. See the excellent study by David M. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand: Psalm 110 in Early Christianity*, SBLMS 18 (Nashville and New York: Abingdon, 1973). The extensive use of Ps. 110 by the author of Hebrews is striking and is to be explained by the effective way in which its content supports the arguments of the epistle. G. W. Buchanan, however, probably goes too far in describing Hebrews itself as “a homiletical midrash based on Ps. 110.” *To the Hebrews*, AB 36 (New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. xix.

The Greek text of the prologue studiously avoids unnecessary use of the word “God” (*theos*), as is befitting a document addressed to Jewish readers who regarded the word as very holy. Thus, apart from the initial use in v. 1, the word does not occur again in the Greek text. Our translation repeats it in v. 3, where it is substituted for a pronoun. Two

circumlocutions for God may be noted in v. 3: **glory and the Majesty in heaven.**

1:4 / This verse introduces the author's favorite word in drawing the contrast between new and old, "better" (*kreissōn*, alternately spelled *kreittōn*). The word occurs thirteen times, being used in reference to the Son (1:4), Melchizedek (7:7), salvation (6:9), covenant (7:22; 8:6), sacrifice (9:23; 12:24), promises (8:6), present possession (10:34), and future expectation (7:19; 11:16, 35, 40). The frequent use of this word is exactly in line with the central argument of the book.

On the theological significance of the ascension, see J. G. Davies, "Ascension of Christ," in *DCT*, pp. 15f.