

### **Item #34 (The Prologue of Hebrews Reconsidered)**

This was Entry #39 on my previous website.

**H**ebrews 1,1-4 is rightly regarded as one of the New Testament's parade examples of a periodic structure involving a detailed presentation of the Son who is Christ.<sup>1</sup> Various proposals have been made as to the way this prologue is to be interpreted.<sup>2</sup> They can be found in every commentary on the epistle. The present note will not attempt a refutation of existing suggestions. Rather, it will suggest a new interpretation which is intended to stand or fall on its intrinsic merits, disagreeing or agreeing in part with existing interpretations.

The present study will argue that two meanings of "son" are at play in Heb 1,1-4, the son as a messianic descendant of David and the Son of God. It will go on to invoke the use of the exegetical technique *gezera shawa* in Heb 1,5 to show that these two meanings refer to one and the same person.<sup>3</sup>

#### 1. *The Key Importance of Vs. 2*

In conventional interpretations of the prologue the phrase ἐν υἱῷ is taken as referring to the Son of God. The absence of the article

---

<sup>1</sup> For this assertion no documentation would seem to be necessary. In the presentation that follows this same principle of not giving documentation unless really useful will be followed. It seems unnecessary to rehearse in detail opinions available in the standard commentaries just to be rehearsing opinions. Further, the present writer is not aware that the interpretation which he is advancing has been advanced by any other author. If such there be, he would of course be most willing to cede the role of originator.

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent presentation of a typical current view of the prologue cf. H. W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia 1989) 36-48.

<sup>3</sup> The word "person" here is not intended anachronistically to refer to anything involving the technical use of the word at Chalcedon, but is used for want of a better word to refer to an individual who thinks and wills.

is interpreted as referring to the Son precisely under the formality of being a son, the “Son” precisely as son.<sup>4</sup> This makes sense in the context, because the following verse, v. 3, gives a presentation of the Son’s identity in terms of uniqueness: the words “of God” are not used with reference to the Son in order to indicate that his is the prime analogate of sonship.

However, immediate as is v. 3 in the context of v. 2, v. 1 is even more immediate. The reason for this is the way the verb λαλέω (“I speak”) is used. In v. 1 it is used as a participle, and in v. 2 it is used in the indicative. The more natural way to read v. 1 is to take the participle λαλήσας (“having spoken”) as an introduction to the ἐλάλησεν (“[God] spoke”) of v. 2, which implies that the contrast is between “in the prophets” of v. 1 and “in a son” of v. 2.<sup>5</sup> The contrast implied by the phrase “in a son” is not between earthly prophets and heavenly Son, but between earthly prophets and earthly son. That is, the Son taken as “a” son of the royal line of David. That is to say, in a messiah. God’s definitive speaking is not in the line of prophets, but in the line of kings.

But another element of v. 2 is essential to arrive at the

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 39: “The expression, without a definite article, does not imply that there are many sons whom God could have chosen as agents of revelation. Rather the term emphasizes the exalted status of the final agent”. The present note will pursue the option rejected by Attridge.

<sup>5</sup> “In this context, the omission of the article contrasts with ἐν τοῖς προφήταις, and prepares the way for similar contrasts with Moses (3:5) and levitical high priests (7:28)” (P. Ellingworth [NIGTC; Grand Rapids/Carlisle 1992] 93). But after noting which way the syntax of vv. 1-2 points, Ellingworth goes on to contrast in his interpretation the phrase (ἐν υἱῷ) with v. 3 and not with v. 1.

conclusion that in the prologue there are two meanings of “son” in play. That element is represented by the word *καί* in the phrase *δι’ οὗ καὶ ἐποίησεν τοὺς αἰῶνας* (“through whom he created the ages”). To translate this *καί* as a simple copulative in the context of the previous clause which has God making the son heir of all things results in a call for an explanation rather than in the provision of one: “(God) in these end days spoke to us in a Son, whom He placed as heir of all things, and he is the one through whom he created the ages”: the reader instinctively wonders how the two ideas of being an heir of all things and creating the ages of time are related. Much more plausible would be a translation which takes the *καί* as indicating a contrast: “(God) in these end days spoke to us in a Son, whom he placed as heir of all things, who yet is the one through whom he created the ages”. This adversative sense for *καί* is self-explanatory for it explicates the opposition implicit in the ideas of being heir of all things and being the agent for the creation of the ages.<sup>6</sup>

There is still one more important indicator that the “son” of the first part of v. 2 is the messianic son of David: the allusion in the

---

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the tentative suggestion of W. L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* (WBC 47A; Dallas 1991) 12: “*δι’ οὗ καὶ ἐποίησεν τοὺς αἰῶνας*, ‘who yet is the one through whom he created the world.’ The force of the *καί* is to link the second relative clause to the first, possibly in an adversative sense: the Son was appointed heir, and yet He was the one through whom God created the world”. But Lane does not take advantage of this insight and give to the adversative cast of *δι’ οὗ καὶ ἐποίησεν τοὺς αἰῶνας* the importance of indicating a change in supposition regarding the subject the way the present writer does.

A translation of “also” for *καί* (as, for example, in Attridge, *Hebrews*, 35) would also seem to be possible if the “also” were to be understood in an attenuated adversative sense. But such an interpretation would seem to suppose that the author of Hebrews is indulging in understatement: “who, by the way, is the one through whom God also created the ages”.

phrase ὃν ἔθηκεν κληρονόμον πάντων (“whom he placed as heir of all things”). The allusion is to Ps 2,8.<sup>7</sup> In the original use of Ps 2, with reference to the enthronement of the Israelite king, the declaration by God that the descendant of David is “son”, gives the reason for his being heir. The new son is instructed by God to ask as his inheritance all nations. In tradition subsequent to its original use Ps 2,8 was used to indicate that the inheritance was of a transcendent nature.

Christians, as exemplified in Hebrews, applied this thinking to the resurrection/exaltation of Christ viewed as an enthronement, in which Christ was given a heavenly inheritance.<sup>8</sup>

There the royal son (i.e., the messiah) is instructed by God at his investiture as king to ask as his inheritance all nations--the case for the allusion is all the stronger by reason of the presence of the citation of Ps 2,7 in Heb 1,5, a verse which will be adduced as explanatory of the solution of the presence of the two sons in vv. 1-4. But the principal point with reference to the meaning of the first part of Heb 1,2 in which the allusion to Ps 2,8 is found is that the original meaning of Ps 2,8 is about the Davidic messiah as son. This tends to support the view being advanced here that Heb 1,2 is speaking of “son” with two meanings.

---

<sup>7</sup> Nestle–Aland<sup>27</sup>, *ad loc.*

<sup>8</sup> “The general Old Testament tradition about the inheritance promised by God was developed in various ways in apocalyptic and wisdom literature. During the Hellenistic period the inheritance is increasingly specified as a transcendent or heavenly reality. Drawing on these traditions, early Christians frequently affirm that Christ, through his resurrection and exaltation, was given a heavenly inheritance that his followers share” (Attridge, *Hebrews*, 40). Attridge gives abundant references to support his assertions.

## 2. A Structure of Hebrews 1,1-4

Given the supposition that Heb 1,2 is about two meanings of “son”, the following structure suggests itself:

**A)** Having spoken in many and varied ways in the past to the fathers in the prophets, God

**B)** in these end days spoke to us in a son,

**C)** whom he placed as heir of all things,

**D)** who yet is the one through whom he created the ages,

**E)** who, being a radiance of his glory

**F)** and an imprint of his underlying reality,

**G)** and bearing all things in the word of his power,

**H)** having made purification of sins,

**I)** sat at the right of the majesty on high,

**J)** having become as much better than the angels as the name which he has inherited is superior to them.<sup>9</sup>

B), C), H), I) refer to the messianic son. D), E, F), G) refer to the divine son. A) has God as subject, J) has the messianic son as subject.

The central portion of D), E), F), G) are concentrically arranged to show the relation of the divine son to God. The clauses E) and F) are at the very center, giving the “external” and “internal” relation of the son respectively. They are designed to show that in all respects the

---

<sup>9</sup> This structure, of course, incorporates elements which are common among commentators. Only the interplay between the son as messiah and the son as divine is presented as original. But the fact that the two meanings of son fit so well into a plausible structure is suggestive.

son, while remaining different from God, is, for all other purposes, so closely related to him as to be all but identical. The flanking verses (D) and (G) show the divine son's role in creation and the maintenance of creation. These verses are what might be termed "static" in that they present a fundamental reality that abides without alteration.

In contrast to the "static" nature of the presentation of God and his divine son, the verses which present the messianic son are "dynamic" in that they present a progression as regards the messianic son's actions. Here again v. 2 is of key importance. The crucial word in this context is ἐλάλησεν ("[God] spoke"). The word is normally taken by commentators as indicating some all-encompassing, definitive revelation by God in contrast to the partial, provisional revelation by God in the prophets.<sup>10</sup> That a contrast between the general speaking in the prophets and the speaking in the son is intended is quite clear, but the context of v. 2 would seem to indicate that the speaking of the son is a specific act. For in the structure given above the phrase "[God] spoke" is parallel to three specific acts: God's placing of the son as heir, the son's effecting remission of sin, and the son's taking a seat at God's right hand. All acts, it should be noted, are in the aorist. It would be difficult to construe any of them as global; hence the aorist ἐλάλησεν ("[God] spoke") would not seem to

---

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 37-39, and Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 10-12. Ellingworth (*Hebrews*, 93) does not limit the "speaking" to Jesus.

global, as the current view has it.<sup>11</sup>

But if the verb ἐλάλησεν (“[God] spoke”) is a punctiliar aorist, referring to one particular action, it would seem that the author of Hebrews would have expressed what that action is, given its prominence in the prologue, ἐλάλησεν being the only principal verb in the entire four verses.

There is a fairly clear indication in the context of what that action is. In Heb 2,3 the verb λαλέω is used in connection with “the Lord” (ὁ Κύριος) as regards “a beginning of salvation” (ἀρχή σωτηρίας). A contrast is indicated between the Mosaic Law (referred to as a “word spoken through angels” and what is presumably something parallel in the Christian dispensation. The present writer has argued that the “speaking” in 2,3 refers to the institution of the Eucharist.<sup>12</sup> In the context of 2,3, with the contrast with the Mosaic Law and following an exposition of the son as “God” and “Lord”, i.e., fully divine, in 1,5-14, the inference to be drawn is that the “salvation” referred to in 2,3 is the Eucharist as the abiding divine presence for the Christians. And this presence can be traced back to the Lord, and, through the Lord, ultimately to God, i.e., the Father. That would seem to be the meaning of God’s speaking “in a son”: when the Lord instituted the Eucharist as the permanent divine presence among men

---

<sup>11</sup> On the “global aorist” cf. M. Zerwick, *Biblical Greek* (Scripta Pontificii Instituti Biblici 114; Romae 2005 [8<sup>th</sup> reprint]), §253 (p. 83).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. J. Swetnam, “Τῶν λαληθησομένων”, *Biblica* 90 (2009) 98; “ὁ ἀπόστολος in Hebrews 3,1”, *Biblica* 89 (2008) 252-262. “The Crux at Hebrews 2,9 in Its Context”, *Biblica* (2010) 103-111.

he did so as the messianic son, and his speaking is really the speaking of God. That is to say, it is God who, in Hebrews, is portrayed as being responsible for the replacing of the Mosaic Law with the Christian Eucharist as the focal point of the divine presence among men.

### 3. *The Relevance of Hebrews 1,5.*

The structure of the prologue as outlined above leaves the earthly messiah juxtaposed with the divine son. It is the function of v. 5 to justify understanding the earthly messiah as the same as the divine son. V. 4 hints at how this is done by speaking of the Davidic messiah—v. 4's participle modifies the subject of "sat" in the previous verse—as "inheriting" a name which indicates that he is superior to the angels (the highest level of created beings).

The "name" in question is normally taken to be "son".<sup>13</sup> That this is so is reasonably clear from the occurrence of the name "son" in the two Scripture citations in v. 5. The two occurrences are stressed by the fact that they occur in emphatic positions in the two citations, one at the beginning and one at the end:

To whom of the angels did he ever say,

*"Son to me are you, I today have generated you"?*

And again,

*"I shall be to him a father and he shall be to me a son"?*

---

<sup>13</sup> "That unspecified name is clearly 'Son.' the title emphatically presented in vs 2 and the focus of the first quotation of the following scriptural catena" (Attridge, *Hebrews*, 47). In footnote 156 on p.47 Attridge comments: "Cf. 1:5 (bis) and also 1:8. Most commentators recognize the identity of the name".



Knowing just how the exegesis of v. 5 involving “son” functions in the thinking of the author of Hebrews demands recourse to the Jewish exegetical technique known as “*gezera shawa*” (“equal inference”). According to this technique, when two verses of the biblical text share a common word or phrase they may be considered as providing mutual illumination, so that what is true of one verse is true of the other, and vice versa.<sup>14</sup>

The first of the two citations is from Ps 2,7. As it occurs in its original context in the Old Testament the verse alludes to the protocol of the enthronement of a new king under the imagery of a birth.<sup>15</sup> This enthronement, in the eschatological context of *the* messiah (cf. “in these end days” of v. 2), was considered as the moment when he was revealed as messiah. As the first Christians looked back on this verse with the awareness of the significance of the resurrection in revealing Jesus as the messiah, they interpreted Ps 2,7 in this way.<sup>16</sup> This is

---

<sup>14</sup> “... an exegetical argument in which a term in one verse of scripture is interpreted according to its use in another” (Attridge, *Hebrews*, 128-129).

<sup>15</sup> “Der Akt der Inthronisation (»heute«) wird hier, wie in Ägypten als mythisch-mystische Neuzeugung bzw. Wiedergeburt verstanden, die den (messianischen) König befähigt, wie Gott selbst, aber auch in Abhängigkeit von ihm Lebens- und Heilmittler für sein Reich zu sein” (F.-L. Hossfeld – E. Zenger, *Die Psalmen I. Psalm 1–50* [Die Neue Echter Bibel; Würzburg 1993] 54).

<sup>16</sup> An interpretation which seems to commend itself from the general context of the epistle is that of Lindars: “This use of Ps 2,7 [sc., at Acts 13,33] is legitimate according to the proper meaning of the psalm. The verse about God’s ‘begetting’ of his son is equivalent to v. 6, being a poetic metaphor for the religious significance of the act of enthronement. In later days, when all such psalms were interpreted eschatologically, this became a truly messianic psalm in the strict sense, and a grasp of its poetry would suggest that this verse should be connected with the moment of revelation of the Messiah, rather than literally with the time of his physical birth (for which the thought of God’s begetting would be felt to be inappropriate and distasteful, if not blasphemous). To the early Church the Resurrection, and its special aspect of Heavenly Session, were precisely the moment of this expected revelation. Granted that Ps 2,7 is a metaphor of enthronement, then it can be claimed

typical of the use of the Septuagint by the author of Hebrews: he looks back from Christ to the Old Testament and sees in the Greek texts there wording which aided the understanding of Christ in terms consonant with the basic scheme “continuity, discontinuity, definitive fulfillment”.<sup>17</sup> From the vantage point of Christ the author of Hebrews uses Old Testament texts to set forth Christian realities. Ps 2,7 is cited elsewhere in Hebrews (Heb 5,5) with reference to the son’s glorification by God, and in Acts 13,13 it is cited to indicate fulfillment of promise made to the fathers when God raises the son from the dead. In sum: the metaphorical interpretation the word “I generated” is applied to the act of God’s raising the son as messiah from the dead which concomitantly was the exaltation of the son as divine.<sup>18</sup>

2 Sam 7,14 portrays God as speaking of Solomon as a future member of the messianic line of David and therefore to be “adopted” by God as “son”. In the context of the prologue of Hebrews the verse is invested with the definitive messianic meaning that it had acquired in generations of Israelite expectations.<sup>19</sup>

---

that the expectation embodied in the whole psalm has been fulfilled in Jesus. The argument is very close to that of Ps. 110,1” (B. Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic: The Doctrinal Significance of the Old Testament Quotations* [London 1961] 160-161).

<sup>17</sup> The relevance of Ps 2,7 as cited in Hebrews is, of course, much discussed. For a presentation of this discussion cf. Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 112-114.

<sup>18</sup> The son as divine cannot die, and hence the son as divine cannot rise from the dead. But the son as divine can be exalted at the same time that the son who is man, having died as man, is raised from the dead.

<sup>19</sup> With regard to 2 Sam 7,14 cf. the note on this text in *The New Jerusalem Bible* (1984) 405: “A formula of adoption, as in Ps 2:7; 110:3d (Gk), but also the earliest expression of Davidic messianism: each king of the Davidic dynasty will be an

In the *gezera shawa* 2 Sam 7,14 in the context of the prologue represents the messiah of the Davidic line in whom God speaks at the end of these days as *the* messiah. By implication God thus speaks in a definitive way in contrast with the prophets of the past in whom he spoke in a non-definitive way. Ps 2,7 represents God's son, all but ontologically identical with God but still distinct. The *gezera shawa* is designed to show that *the* messiah is God's son. It does this by indirection, linking God's raising the messiah from the dead to his exalting the son to reveal his divinity. This, obviously, is not really convincing to the contemporary mind, even a faith-filled one. This is hardly surprising, for the full divinity of the messiah would never have occurred to a believing Israelite: it would have been strange if some conjunction of Old Testament words would have lent themselves to such an interpretation even in the light of Christian belief in this incredible reality.

But here the prologue would seem to offer a convincing answer. For in the transition verse, v. 4, the text speaks about the inheriting of a name. This name, judging from v. 5, is "son". And, according to the interpretation given of the prologue, this "son" is the messianic son, the subject of the previous two actions of cleansing from sin and sitting at God's right hand. V. 4 implies that there are two distinct realities involved in what follows the transition verse, for the messianic son "inherits" a "name" which makes him superior to the

---

(imperfect) type, *see* the end of the v., and Ps 89:30-33, of the ideal king to come.  
 ...".

angels. Given that the angels in Hebrews appear as the highest level of created reality, this suggests a divine status for the messiah. But the two realities are the son before his inheriting and the son after inheriting the name. But in v. 2 it was stated that God made the messianic son the inheritor of all things, and this son as heir is the one through whom God created all things. When all these elements are understood in the context, the son who is messiah is seen as the son who is all but ontologically identified with God but still distinct.

#### *4. The Dynamics of the Prologue*

It was stated above that the central section of the prologue (D], E], F], G]) is presented in static terms—there is no “movement” depicted on the part of God or of the son as divine. On the other hand, there does seem to be dynamism involved in the portrayal of the messiah. This dynamism is found in B), C), H) and I).

In B) God speaks in the messiah in the institution of the Eucharist. In C) God then is presented as making the son “heir” of all things. The allusion is to Ps 2,8. In view of the key role of Ps 2,7 in v. 5, the allusion would seem to involve in some way the messiah’s enthronement as resurrection, when the new Israelite king is made heir of all nations. In Hebrews “all nations” become “all things” as the king becomes interpreted as being revealed as God own son.

The second pairing of the dynamic grouping puts “having made purification of sins” with “sat at the right of the majesty on high”. Here it is the bloody, expiatory death of the son viewed as man which is matched with the definitive entrance of the son viewed as man into

heaven. In view of what will subsequently be stated about the son as man and his expiatory death, both viewed in the perspective of the Eucharist given as the starting point of the dynamism, the Eucharistic victimhood of the son as high priest and the Eucharistic high priesthood of the son are being portrayed in lapidary terms. Here is the Eucharist as sacrifice (cf. Heb 2,5 – 3.6). And this interpretation in turn suggests what is being portrayed in lapidary terms in the first pairing—the Eucharist as divine presence (cf. Heb 1,5 – 2,4). For once the son as messiah enters eternity with a body proper (if that word may be used) to the son as divine that divine messiah can be present at places in time.

#### *5. Some Reflections*

The interpretation of Heb 1,1-4 given above is close reading at its closest. The addressees could hardly have been expected to understand it at a first reading or at a second or a third unless they were clued in to what the text says by a possession of the truths in question through previous instruction. They were much better informed about the Old Testament than contemporary scripture scholars. And they must have been acquainted with early Christian beliefs about Christ and about the Eucharist. To put the two together was the challenge of an author of genius. And that is who the author of Hebrew undoubtedly was. **(14 August 2017)**

The above can be considered in an abbreviated version in my book  
*Hebrews: An Interpretation* (Gregorian and Biblical Press, Rome,  
2016), pp. 17-32. **(9 October 2019)**