

God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by [his] Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; who being the brightness of [his] glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high; being made so much better than the angels, as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.
(Heb 1:1-4)

Today we're going to cover this first portion which is a single sentence in the book of Hebrews. It is quite a statement! It begins with what has already been written and ends with the comparison of the Son and angels. And it covers an extraordinary range of material about the Son in the meantime. Our purpose today is to cover this majestic part of the word of God and to extract all that we can from this marvelous text.

The first thing we notice is that it sets up a comparison of the two ways of revelation: that is, between the prophets of old and the Son. We need to keep clear that it is the Father who is communicating. It is the Father who spoke by the prophets and it is the Father who spoke by the Son.

The central core of the paragraph is developed within the conceptual framework of the Son. It consists of a series of skillfully arranged affirmations concerning the Son. The series begins with a description based upon Ps 2 ("whom he appointed heir of everything"; cf. Ps 2:8) and concludes with one derived from Ps 110 ("he sat down at the right hand . . ."; cf. Ps 110:1). In each instance the source of the declaration concerning the Son is a coronation psalm celebrating the enthronement of a royal figure. [Lane, William L.. Hebrews 1-8, Volume 47A (Word Biblical Commentary, p.6]

Thus the prologue previews key themes in the epistle: the Son's superiority, his completed work, and his exaltation. Although some suggest that these vv. reflect an early hymn, most commentators rightly view these vv. as the author's own composition and an indication of his rhetorical skill. [Harris, Dana M.. Hebrews, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament, p. 11]

We're going to take each section of the text and consider it separately. And so we begin with:

God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by [his] Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things.

which has two parts, the part of the historic prophets, and the Son.

First, that the Father previously spoke by the prophets. There are three characteristics given of this: Long ago, in many parts and in different ways. That about sums up the Old Testament, a work consisting of 39 chapters, written by many authors. The first five chapters were written by Moses, but we are not sure who wrote Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings. Then we have Ezra, Nehemiah, and the various Psalm-writers, David, Asaph, Son of Korah, Solomon and the several authors of the Proverbs and then all the prophets. We have in the books of Moses, the story of how God interacted with Adam and Eve, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and on through Joseph. Then we have the people...

As the word signifies, which may refer either to the several ages of the Old-Testament dispensation-the patriarchal, the Mosaic, and the prophetic; or to the several gradual openings of God's mind concerning

the Redeemer: to Adam, that the Messiah should come of the seed of the woman; to Abraham, that he should spring from his loins; to Jacob, that he should be of the tribe of Judah; to David, that he should be of his house; to Micah, that he should be born at Bethlehem; to Isaiah, that he should be born of a virgin. All these partial revelations of the Messiah were given. Plus much more with reference to His life, His death, His resurrection, etc. All spread out very far and very wide.

As far as the method goes, it says in Exodus 33:11 that “the LORD spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend” and we take that as one way in which the Father revealed the Scripture to the people of Old. He furthermore wrote the Ten Commandments himself, as it says in Deut 9:10,

And the LORD delivered unto me two tables of stone written with the finger of God; and on them [was written] according to all the words, which the LORD spake with you in the mount out of the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly. (Deu 9:10)

The Lord did not reveal Himself to Elijah in the great strong wind, nor the earthquake, nor the fire but in a still small voice.

And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD. And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; [but] the LORD [was] not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; [but] the LORD [was] not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; [but] the LORD [was] not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. (1Ki 19:11-12)

The Lord appeared to Isaiah in the heavenly temple and commanded him to go forth with a woeful message,

In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. ... And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. (Isa 6:1, 9)

Ezekiel saw God in a marvelous vision in which the Lord was high and lifted up – a truly marvelous vision that is too long to replicate here (go and read it for yourself!):

As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so [was] the appearance of the brightness round about. This [was] the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw [it], I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of one that spake. (Eze 1:28)

Sometimes God revealed himself through dreams. This he did to Abimelech (Genesis 20:3), to Pharaoh (Genesis 41:25), to Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 2:28), and others. Through visions, God revealed himself to Jacob (Genesis 46:2), Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:1) and others. Sometimes God revealed himself through his mighty acts, as he did when he sent the plagues against the Egyptians (Exodus 10:1-2). He dried up the Red Sea (Exodus 14:15-30), he fed manna to the Israelites in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 8:3) and he enabled the Israelites to conquer the land of Canaan (Joshua; Psalm 105). Sometimes God revealed his will through priests and prophets. On occasion, God revealed himself through Urim and Thummim which were used by the priests (Numbers 27:21; Ezra 2:63; Nehemiah 7:65). Moreover, God revealed his message through his servants the prophets (2 Kings 17:23; 21:10; 24:2; Jeremiah 25:4; Daniel 9:10; Amos 3:7; Hosea 12:10). Sometimes God instructed that his word be written (Exodus 17:14; 34:27; Deuteronomy 17:18; 27:3, 8; Jeremiah 36:2). And sometimes God revealed himself, his commandments

and his promises, through having his word read (Exodus 24:7; Deuteronomy 17:19; 31:9-13; Joshua 8:33-35; Nehemiah 8:1-5).

The Lord seems to get further and further from the people as time goes on. The latter prophets only have the word of the Lord, and no particular visions, or other manifestations of God. So, beginning with Adam and Eve, who had unlimited access to God, through Moses, there are only some very few direct communications of God to men. He revealed Himself by revealing His word to them, as Jeremiah, "Then the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee" (Jer 1:4,5a) but here we have to suppose that the word was strictly mental, that Jeremiah didn't see or hear anything in particular but the words were formed in his mind and he knew they were from God. So with the rest of the prophets, they have the Word of God, such as Malachi which is the word of God but has no specific ways in which God interacts with men.

This is set in contrast with "hath in these last days spoken unto us by [his] Son." This makes the complete contrast with what went before in the revelation. Now, in "these last days", it says, "he has spoken unto us by Son." John Owen supposes that it means "the last days of the Judaical church and state," but it seems to me to be more general and directly related to the revelation, it is these most recent days since the coming of Christ. The Scripture speaks of the last days as those extending from the coming of Christ: in Acts 2:17, the passage quotes Joel and says that "in the last days, says God, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh," and that means that Pentecost was in the last days or the last days followed Pentecost. Here, the days include the days of the Son, since it was in the last days that the Son spoke.

The square brackets around the [his] means that that word is not in the original. In this case, the original has simply "spoken unto us by Son" in which the lack of any controlling article or possessive seems strange to us but it is allowed in the Greek. When I read it in the Greek, it doesn't make sense to me, as if Son was to be taken indefinitely. The point is that God, in His final revelation, has spoken to us in one who has the characteristics of a son. His credentials are vastly different from those of the prophets, or of the angels, as the text goes on to show. Now God has spoken through His own Son! This revelation through the Son is now set forth in all its brightness.

whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds.

This marvelous little saying coordinates the humanity and deity of Christ. For it is in His humanity that He is heir of all things but it is in His deity that He made the worlds.

What does mean to be heir of all things? We look to Ps 2 at this point to see the reference.

"I will declare the decree: The LORD has said to Me, 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession. (Psa 2:7-8)

It certainly involves His coming into the world, His birth, His life, death and resurrection. This is introduced to specify the relationship of the exalted Son via His humanity to the creation. The quotation develops the affirmation of vv 2c and 3b that the Son is the mediator and sustainer of the creation. The quotation assigns to the divine Son responsibility both for the foundation and destruction of the world. Jewish theology assigned a prominent role to the angels as those who were present at the moment of the creation and who assisted God in the government of the universe (cf. Job 38:7; Rev 7:1; 14:18; 16:5). The writer affirms it is the Son alone through whom God created the universe; it is the Son, not the

angels, who upholds it through his sovereign word. It is the Son who is heir of all things. That is an unqualified statement asserting that God has planned for Jesus ultimately to inherit absolutely everything. In Messianic usage, we have one who receives his allotted possession by right of sonship: so we have it here of Christ, as “heir of all things” all things being subjected to his sway because of both who He is and what He has done. His Messianic fulfillment comes into the picture but it is the larger issue of His Person that is brought to the front. But these are all bound up in the one Person of our marvelous savior.

Then it is mentioned that He also made the worlds. It is mentioned almost as an afterthought, given His greatness as the heir of all things but, yes, God made the worlds through the Son. The same is stated in John 1:3, “All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made” but here it is made clear that the Father created through the Son – “by whom He made the worlds” where the He is the Father and the by whom expresses the activity of the Son. Here we get into deep theological thinking in which the Father and the Son work together in perfect harmony. The Son created and the Father created through the Son – this is a marvelous Trinitarian verse.

Therefore the author presents a most powerful argument from the lesser to the greater, as one says, namely, that if the Word of the prophets has been received, the Gospel of Christ should be received all the more, since it is not a prophet who is speaking but the Lord of the prophets, not a slave but a son, not an angel but God, not to the fathers but to us, namely, in order to exclude every reason for unbelief, which they had in a very high degree because they received the Word through the angels, through Moses and the prophets, as they said in John 9:28-29: “We are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” And thus the apostle brings this argument to a conclusion in the second chapter (Heb. 2:1), where he says: “Therefore we must pay closer attention [to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it].” [Luther, Martin. Luther's Works, Vol. 29: Lectures on Titus, Philemon, Hebrews].

Who being the brightness of *his* glory

The Son is now the subject of the sentence and not the Father. The change of subject is taken in stride by comparing the Son to the Father in this section. It is a subtle shift. This amazing section declares that the Son and the Father are one and yet two – the Son emits the Father’s glory yet is the exact representation of His person.

This verse reflects John 1:18, “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared [him]” with the further idea that the Son shines forth from the Father’s glory. The person of the Son is the glory of the Father, shining forth with a truly divine splendor. As the beams are effulgent emanations of the sun, the father and fountain of light, Jesus Christ in his person is God manifest in the flesh, he is light of light, the true Shechinah.

The word rendered brightness occurs here only in the NT and is even rare in conventional literature. The Greek word means reflected or emitted brightness and that is the same question that we have about Christ. Is His brightness the reflection of the brightness of the Father or His own brightness? Whether the meaning is reflected brightness or “outshining brightness” the idea presented to us is one of unity – that the Son is not separate from the Father but is the brightness of His glory. The unity presented here is a striking idea of the singular unity of God in that the light which is irradiated is the same whether it is

reflected or refracted. The brightness of God's glory is emitted by Christ who alone is visible to us among the Persons of the Godhead.

and the express image of his person

Christ is the image of the invisible God, Col. 1:15; and this image is so perfect that Christ Himself tells us, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." John 14:9. The Son is the express image, or exact impression of that divine excellence. The same term is used in regard to stamps on wax. He is the exact impression of the Father's person, or substance. The same word is in Hebrews 11:1 rendered substance. Here it means essence, or being, or substance, as those terms have long been used by theological writers when speaking of the divine nature. Thus the Son has the very being, essence, or substance of God, and so he is God. Whoever has the nature of God is divine. God is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible – of such incomprehensible stuff is the express image of His person in the Son.

The word for "express image" also occurs here only in the NT. What we are presented with is the distinction of the Son's person from the Father. If He is the exact representation of the Father's person or nature, then He is not the Father. He is identical with the Father in every way though and that makes Him unique. There is only one God yet within this God are three Persons, each of whom is fully God and has all the attributes of God. They are each identical yet there is a structure to them. As we understand that the Father is first, the Son is second and the Holy Spirit is third. They are presented to us in this way.

Here we are presented with two closely related statements which present to us the nature of the Son. It is the Son who is the brightness of the Father's glory and the exact imprint of His character. This function Christ has performed, both before and since His incarnation; and therefore He is the Word, the Light, the visible Image to man of the invisible Godhead. Thus the Son is not the Father but shines forth His glory. His radiance is the effulgence of the Father's glory, yet the Son is a separate Person from the Father. The Son is identical with the Father and is one with Him but is not Him.

and upholding all things by the word of his power

This marvelous doctrine concerns the Son. We can almost comprehend that He is so glorious as to uphold all things by the word of His power. We have already accepted that He created all things and so the fact that He upholds them also does not seem that surprising. The one who created the world and was heir to everything in it (the beginning and end) is at the same time the power that binds together every single part of his created world. This is a marvelous characteristic of the Son!

However, this must also be true of Christ while he was in the womb or in the crib. Somehow, marvelously, the Son which came down from heaven and was incarnate yet was still in heaven and performing these marvelous works (John 3:13). This verse puts to death monothelitism – the idea that Christ had only one will. Many Christians unfortunately hold to this idea, that Christ had only one will. But here we are told that he upholds all things by the word of His power and that happened when he was in the womb and when he was in the tomb. The new clause ascribes to the Son the providential government of all created existence, which is the very function of God himself.

Calvin writes,

But from Scripture we plainly infer that the one person of Christ so consists of two natures that each nevertheless retains unimpaired its own distinctive character. . . . Surely, when the Lord of glory is said to be crucified [[1 Cor. 2:8](#)], Paul does not mean that he suffered anything in his divinity, but he says this because the same Christ, who was cast down and despised, and suffered in the flesh, was God and Lord of glory. In this way he was also Son of man in heaven [[John 3:13](#)], for the very same Christ, who, according to the flesh, dwelt as Son of man on earth, was God in heaven. In this manner, he is said to have descended to that place according to his divinity, not because divinity left heaven to hide itself in the prison house of the body, but because even though it filled all things, still in Christ's very humanity it dwelt bodily [[Col. 2:9](#)], that is, by nature, and in a certain ineffable way. [Institutes, IV.17.30]

This blows our minds to think about but the Person, the Lord Jesus Christ, clearly had two wills. In His human nature, He was just like us but in His divine nature He upheld all things by the word of His power. That includes distant galaxies with black holes, so far away that our minds can't even take it in. Christ is there personally altogether. He is altogether wholly there as He is here and everywhere else. Yet He was also very specially in that little child in the womb of the virgin, and on the cross. Now, how He who is wholly everywhere can be in a specific place also blows our minds, yet that is the way that things are.

when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high.

The uncleanness of the people of Israel was acknowledged before the Lord at the altar, and it was from this defilement that they had to be cleansed by the sprinkling of the blood of the sacrificial animal. The blood covered and obliterated the sins upon the altar (compare Exod 30:10). The purification of the people was similarly achieved by blood in an act of expiation.

For on that day shall [the priest] make an atonement for you, to cleanse you, [that] ye may be clean from all your sins before the LORD. (Lev 16:30)

This was the typical situation – that is, before Christ came, the people were purified by animal sacrifices. Purity is the essential condition for participation in the church life. The defilement of sin erects a barrier to the approach to God which must be removed. This verse declares to us that Christ purged our sins.

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.

With this brief word he makes useless absolutely all the righteousnesses and deeds of penitence of men. But he praises the exceedingly great mercy of God, namely, that “He made purification for sins,” not through us but through Himself, not for the sins of others but for our sins. Therefore we should despair of our purification from sins; for before we repent, our sins have already been forgiven. Indeed, first His very purification, on the contrary, also produces repentance in us, just as His righteousness produces our

righteousness. This is what Is. 53:6 says: "All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way, and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all." [Luther, Martin]

The middle voice indicates that the Son made purification for sins in himself, clearly relating the act of purification to his sacrifice. By that one action, the defilement of sins was removed forever. Heb 1:3 does not designate Jesus as "priest." But in this pregnant clause the writer strongly implies that God's unique Son is also a priest.

Yet He was the Prince of Life, having life in Himself, because He had cancelled the guilt of His brethren. What, then, could retain Him under the power of death? Death had lost its sting, its power was gone, and of necessity the earth cast forth its dead. Jesus rose to the power of an endless life as the head of his body the Church, as the first fruits of an abundant harvest; it was the seal of His Father's approbation of the work which He had undertaken and accomplished. And so our great High Priest sat down as a Prince on the right hand of the Majesty on high. He occupies the highest place. To Him everything in heaven and on earth is subjected. He sits as a Royal priest on His throne, consecrated for evermore, —and His sitting on the right hand of the Majesty on high, implies that all things are put under Him, excepting Him who did put all things under Him. 1 Cor. 15:27.

This is a reflection, though not a direct quote, of Psalm 110, which states:

The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool.
(Psa 110:1)

The explicit application of this Psalm to our Savior, by Himself (Mat 22:42-45) and by the apostles (Act 2:34 1 Cor 15:25 Hebrews 1:13), and their frequent reference to its language and purport (Eph 1:20-22; Phil 2:9-11 Hebrews 10:12, 13), leave no doubt of its purely prophetic character. Not only was there nothing in the position or character, personal or official, of David or any other descendant, to justify a reference to either, but utter severance from the royal office of all priestly functions (so clearly assigned the subject of this Psalm) positively forbids such a reference. The Psalm celebrates the exaltation of Christ to the throne of an eternal and increasing kingdom, and a perpetual priesthood (Zec 6:13), involving the subjugation of His enemies and the multiplication of His subjects, and rendered infallibly certain by the word and oath of Almighty God.

Here the sitting at the right hand signifies not merely an idle honor, but reception into the fellowship of God as regards dignity and dominion, exaltation to a participation in God's reigning (1 Corinthians 15:25). Just as God sits enthroned in the heavens and laughs at the rebels here below, so shall he who is exalted henceforth share this blessed calm with Him, until He subdues all enemies to him, and therefore makes him the unlimited, universally acknowledged ruler.

being made so much better than the angels, as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they

Here we are brought to the comparison with the angels which will occupy the writer for the rest of this chapter and the next. Christ is stated to have been made so much better than the angels, but the reason given is quite amazing: the name which Christ has inherited is far more excellent than the name of angels. Earlier, we spoke of Christ as being the heir of all things, here we speak of the name inherited by Christ.

Recent commentators have given various interpretations of this “name” but most understand it as a stylistic replacement of “Son”. Others have suggested “Lord” or “High Priest” – there is much confusion about this. However, interpretations of “name” typically overlook the broader context of several of the OT passages in the “string of pearls” found in 1:5-14, among them 2 Sam 7:14 quoted by the author in his next breath.

I will be his father, and he shall be my son. ... And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established forever. (2Sa 7:14, 16)

These words are spoken by God of David’s son who is not yet named. But the significance of taking just this part restricts the application to the Son, or allows application to Him who will set up His rule after those other earthly kings. The term ‘name’ occurs in this passage. In the first, a great name is made for David. So says the Lord in 2 Sam 7:9. Then, it is for the name that the house is to be built. As it says

He shall build a house for my name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom forever. (2 Sam 7:13)

Then David in his prayer twice mentions the name of God. In bringing the people out of Israel, God made a name for Himself. (v.23) Then it says,

And let thy name be magnified forever, saying, The LORD of hosts [is] the God over Israel: and let the house of thy servant David be established before thee. (2 Sam 7:26)

There is the additional fact to be considered that the word MEGALOSUNHN occurs only 8 times in the Septuagint (LXX) and also in Heb 1:3 and 8:1. It only occurs only three times in the NT and two of those are in Hebrews. The other is Jude. And it occurs only 8 times in the OT, two of which occur right in 2 Samuel 7, in verses 21 and 23. It seems that there is a connection, at least, it would be quite amazing if there were not.

For Your word's sake, and according to Your own heart, You have done all these great things, to make Your servant know them. Therefore You are great, O Lord GOD. For there is none like You, nor is there any God besides You, according to all that we have heard with our ears. And who is like Your people, like Israel, the one nation on the earth whom God went to redeem for Himself as a people, to make for Himself a name--and to do for Yourself great and awesome deeds for Your land--before Your people whom You redeemed for Yourself from Egypt, the nations, and their gods? (2 Sam 7:21-23)

The great things of establishing David’s kingdom were done by the Lord to make for Himself a name. That is, the MEGALOSUNHS which the Lord has done are for David and establish his kingdom. In verse 23, “to do for Yourself great and awesome deeds for Your land” is again MEGALOSUNHN which the Lord has done. All this God does to make for Himself a name.

Thus the use of “name” in 1:4, in association with God’s right-hand as THS MEGALOSUNHS could be understood as an anticipatory echo of 2 Sam 7 to which our author will immediately turn. The inherited “name” then is not to be understood as an allusion to the Son, but rather as an honor conferred by God on the Messiah as the Davidic heir at the establishment of His throne and in association with Christ being seated in the heavenly places, “far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come” (Eph 1:21).

And so, when the Scripture says that “he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they” it speaks of the glorious name which Christ has inherited by becoming the David heir. The covenantal thinking is central to the argument which follows, though is submerged for a time. But the New Covenant and the Davidic Covenant are not mutually exclusive but are brought forth together, in Christ. The head of the Davidic covenant is Christ the king but He who “by himself purged our sins” is the New Covenant in which Christ is the High Priest and the Offering – to be set forth later in the chapter. But now we notice that both are brought in here, thus bringing in a very first glimpse of the priestly work and the kingly glory of Christ.

Even he shall build the temple of the LORD; and he shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon his throne; and he shall be a priest upon his throne: and the counsel of peace shall be between them both. (Zec 6:13)

In the current verse we are comparing this one, who is a priest upon His kingly throne with the angels who were sent to minister salvation to the elect. Or, as it says in Heb 1:14, “are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?” How dare you compare the Christ with them?

Let us give thanks for those ministering spirits, but ever so much more for Christ because of what He did for us – something that no one else could possibly have done. It is only because of who He is, the King of kings and Lord of lords, the great and glorious Son of God, that He could purge our sins and make salvation available to many men. Oh the great glory that is due to Him!!