

HEBREWS 1:1-4: A STUDY IN DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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I. Introduction

The current adaptation to biblical studies of what is being learned about language generally within the dual disciplines of linguistics and semantics is a positive sign of the vitality of biblical scholarship today. The modern debt to James Barr, whose monumental study *The Semantics of Biblical Language* "demythologized Kittel" (as one writer has put it),<sup>1</sup> simply cannot be tallied. The veritable flood of recent publications which employ the theories and techniques of modern linguistics in biblical studies is clear indication of the success of Barr's pace-setting efforts.<sup>2</sup>

One aspect of the contribution which modern linguistics is making to the discipline of biblical study is a renewed appreciation of the importance of context and situation for meaning. Semantics is concerned not only with words but also with the relations that exist between words and that permeate an entire argument. The analysis of these relations is at present called "discourse analysis" or "text analysis," though the latter term is usually avoided because of its connotations with the science of textual criticism in Greek studies. This essay is offered as a contribution to discourse analysis based on the text of Heb 1:1-4, which is possibly the most refined and

<sup>1</sup> P. Grech, "Contemporary Methodological Problems in New Testament Theology," *BTB* 2 (1972) 209.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the recent periodical literature, see D. A. Black, *Linguistics, Biblical Semantics, and Bible Translation: An Annotated Bibliography of Periodical Literature from 1961* (Talbot Bibliography 2; La Mirada, CA: Biola University, 1984). For an overview of the response—both positive and negative—to Barr's writings, see R. J. Erickson, *James Barr and the Beginnings of Biblical Semantics* (Notre Dame, IL: Foundations Press, 1984) 13-31. Erickson's study of Barr is an up-to-date and concise examination of many of the fallacies which still plague studies of the biblical languages. Chapter 2, "The Discussion of Barr's Critique," is the most helpful part of the book and should be required reading in seminary language courses (cf. my review in *JETS* 27 [1984] 500-501).

literary piece of theological argument in the whole of the NT. Special attention will be focused on stylistic formulations and their function in terms of the theology and purpose of Hebrews.

The type of discourse analysis presented in this study is based upon so-called colon structure.<sup>3</sup> A colon is a unit of grammatical structure with clearly marked external dependencies. It always has either overtly or covertly a central matrix consisting of a nominal element (subject) and a verbal element (predicate), each having the possibility of extended features. Those features which are added to either the nominal or verbal element restrict the range of reference even as they supply further information.

Colon analysis is primarily a procedure dealing with continuous discourse, taking into account all possible formal features, not only those involving syntax, but all stylistic features which may be regarded as being on the rhetorical level. One must always begin with syntactic features, which have priority since they constitute ways in which basic relationships between fundamental units are most clearly marked. But stylistics and rhetorical features must also be considered when one is attempting to analyze the total semantic content of any colon or paragraph.

## II. *Syntactic Analysis*

One may state the principal syntactic and semantic relations involved in Heb 1:1-4 by means of graphic representation. This type of graphic representation is merely a heuristic device to highlight the constituent elements of a colon. Stylistic factors make any rigid analysis quite impossible, and there are always a number of syntactic features which are capable of two or more analyses. As will be immediately evident from the following analysis, this section of Hebrews is much more complexly organized than most brief discourse

<sup>3</sup> The fullest treatment of colon analysis in the NT is by J. P. Louw, *Semantics of New Testament Greek* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 95-158. The rhetorical dimension of colon analysis is emphasized in E. A. Nida, J. P. Louw, A. H. Snyman, J. v. W. Gronje, *Style and Discourse, With Special Reference to the Text of the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1983). Surprisingly, despite the very favorable reviews of these works (including my own review of *Style and Discourse* in *JETS* 27 [1984] 346-47), there have been few attempts to apply colon analysis to specific NT texts. Hopefully the present article will be an impetus to further applications of this new method of analysis to NT

units, so that other literary analysts may wish to break up some of the constituent elements into a greater or lesser number of nuclear structures.

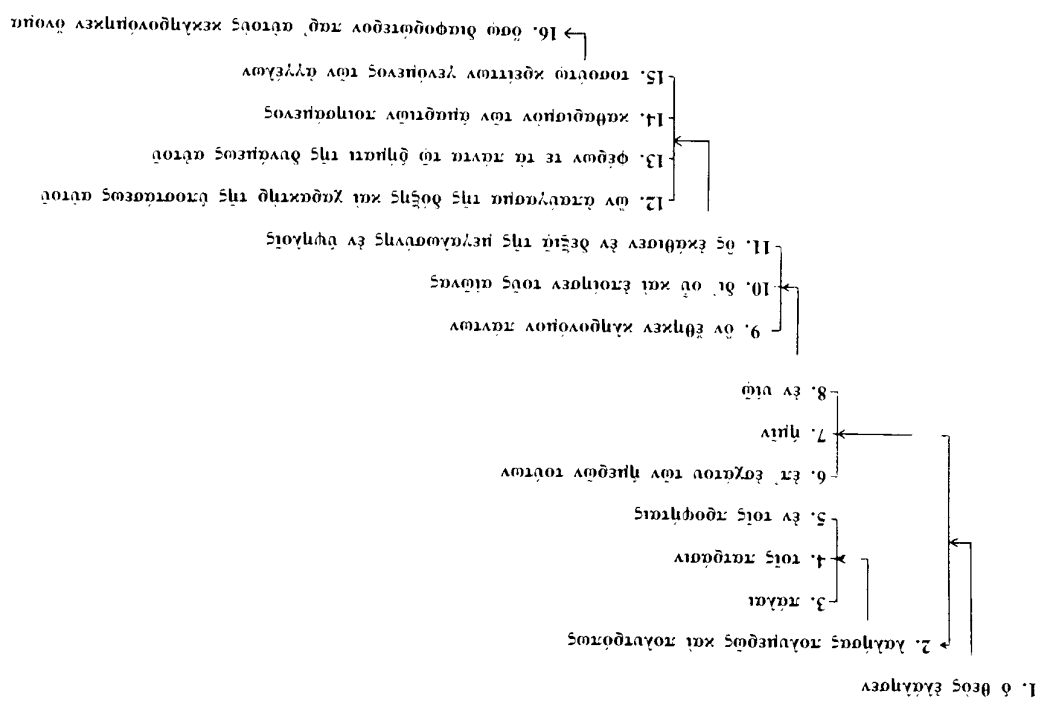
Heb 1:1-4 can now be schematized on the basis of its colon structure (which is its syntactic structure) into a graphic representation that covers the opening paragraph of the traditional text<sup>4</sup> of Hebrews (see the following page).

The arrow connections indicate the relations between the nuclear units of the colon. The surface structure can be said to represent a typical colon consisting of a nominal element (*theos*) and a verbal element (*elalēsen*) which together convey a coherent piece of information. The nominal element is made more explicit by the use of the article *ho*, a deictic element making *theos* specific. The verbal element *elalēsen* indicates an event which points to a previous act of speaking. From the combination of these two elements it is clear that God is the agent of the event, and so the text can be restated as "God has spoken." Either of these elements may then be expanded by any number of extensions which are syntactically dependent upon the so-called head words.

The event of speaking is greatly extended and the extensions themselves betray a pattern between their elements. The basic assumption of the author is that God has spoken to men. But God, in his speaking, expressed himself in two different ways, one in an earlier and preliminary revelation (items 2-5), the other in a final and definitive revelation (items 6-8). The earlier speaking, presented in multifarious ways (*polymeros kai polytropos*), cannot compare with the later, in that the earlier speaking was performed *palai, tois patrasin, and en tois prophētais*. These three extensions of *lalēsas* render the relations in terms of time, setting, and means of communication. That is to say, God spoke the earlier revelation (a) long ago, (b) to the fathers, and (c) by the prophets. But God has *again* spoken. This time the revelation came *ep' eschatou ion hēmeron toutōn, hēmin, and en huiō*: (a) in these last days, (b) to us, and (c) by his Son. At this point one can observe a clear progression of ideas moving from God (item 1) to the Son (item 8). The remainder of the extensions to the end of the colon (items 9-16) deal specifically with the Son. This shows that God is not to be understood as the focal point of the argument,

<sup>4</sup> Minus the words *di' heautou* (1:3), which are omitted in several important representatives of both the Alexandrian and Western text-types.

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for even though God is the one who is speaking, the author immediately turns to God's revelation in his Son, making the Son the main feature of the colon.

This emphasis upon the Son is carried forward by three nominal extensions of *huiō* in items 9-11. These three extensions involve a description or definition of *huiō* referring to his divine nature and to his activity as the Son of God. The clauses beginning with *hon elhēken*, each of which includes a relative pronoun and a finite verb in the aorist tense, all increase considerably what might be regarded as the specificity of *huiō*. Item 9 serves as a characterization of *huiō* and designates the natural consequences of sonship: God has appointed him to be heir. Items 10 and 11 may be regarded as the results of item 9, which conversely serves as the means of items 10 and 11. Since the Son is heir, he is also the rightful owner of all that he has created (item 10) and redeemed (item 11). Once again the Son is emphasized as the *Brennpunkt* of the discourse.

It should be noted at this juncture that some would regard *hos* (see item 11) as introducing a completely new colon and in this case a new sentence.<sup>5</sup> However, the evidence that this paragraph consists of a single colon is based upon the fact that each one of the constituent elements can be linked either directly or indirectly to the predicate element *elalēsen*. It seems clear that *hos* is a dependent restriction upon a particular structure in the previous statement, namely *huiō*, and a part of it. It therefore may be regarded as a dependent reference to *huiō* along with the two previous relative clauses introduced by *hon* and *di' hou*.

In items 12-16 the emphasis on the Son is continued by means of the addition of further relevant information about him.<sup>6</sup> Four participial clauses extend and define the nature and background of the Son's session at the right hand of God. The durative form of the first two participles indicates that the sense involves enduring qualities or operations, while the aorist form of the final two participles implies the finished nature of the Son's incarnate activities.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See Nida, *Style and Discourse*, 122.

<sup>6</sup> *on* corresponds to *pheron*, *poiōmenos* to *genomenos*, and *tosoutō* to *hosō*, so that the last clause, though appended to an idea already expressed, is called forth at least by the stylistic correspondence.

<sup>7</sup> As a tense, of course, the aorist does not suggest any such limitation, a fact emphasized by F. Stagg ("The Abused Aorist," *JBL* 91 [1972] 222-31) and C. R. Smith ("Errant Aorist Interpreters," *GJT* 2 [1981] 205-26). One

Items 12–16 are clearly a poetic summary of the Son's attributes and activities, and for this reason many scholars are inclined to think of this section as an early Christian hymn about Christ.<sup>8</sup> This means that structural embedding may well be involved in this somewhat lengthier section of the discourse.

The closing words of the paragraph form a very effective introduction to the following section of the letter (a typical feature of Hebrews). The catena of OT quotations in Heb 1:5–13 is merely an elaboration of the argument made in 1:4: the exaltation gives Christ a status superior to angels.<sup>9</sup> The author cites three texts to argue the superior dignity of the Son (1:5–6), provides the grounds for the argument (1:7–12), and returns in 1:13 to Ps 110:1 (to which he alluded in 1:3).

Having determined the different units of the discourse on the basis of syntactic arguments, the semantic content of each item can now be taken into account. This involves the content of the extensions and particularly the relative importance of each extension to the whole in order to determine the focal element in the discourse. The basic semantic content of Heb 1:1–4 can be formulated as follows:

- A (item 1): God has spoken (in a final, definitive act).
- B (items 2–5): God spoke before, but in an incomplete and preliminary way. This old revelation is that of patriarchal expectation and of prophetic utterance.
- C (items 6–8): The new, eschatological revelation is both direct and personal, since it is no longer the forefathers God is addressing but the readers, and since it is no longer a prophet speaking but the Son.
- D (items 9–11): This Son is the sovereign Lord of all creation who rules from the heavenly throne.

must take into account the basic vocabulary concept and the context to arrive at this conclusion.

<sup>8</sup> See esp. G. Bornkamm, "Das Bekenntnis im Hebräerbrief," *Studien zur Antike und Christentum* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1959) 2: 198; F. Hahn, *Christologische Hohelitteln* (FRLANT 83; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966) 127; G. Deichgräber, *Gotteshymnus und Christushymnus in der frühen Christenheit* (SUNT 5; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967) 137.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. J. W. Thompson, "The Structure and Purpose of the Catena in Heb 1:5–13," *CBQ* 38 (1976) 352–63; R. Koops, "Chams of Contrast in Hebrews 1," *NT* 31 (1983) 920–25.

E (items 12–16): He also continually radiates the ineffable light of the glory of God, whose essential nature he shares, even as he powerfully directs the universe along the way it should go. Achieving for humanity an enduring cleansing from sin, he became superior to the angels when he received a name radically different from theirs.

### III. *Rhetorical Analysis*

As a means of better understanding how and why the writer employed various features of rhetorical composition in his attempt to communicate the above semantic content, special attention may now be focused on stylistic formulations and their function in the discourse structure of Heb 1:1–4. Thinking of meaning only in terms of lexical or syntactic items can easily lead to a situation where one disregards the crucial role of rhetorical features as signs having meaning for receptors. The following treatment of rhetorical structure will help to illustrate the significance of style as an imperative component in any theory and practice of biblical interpretation. Our treatment deals first with the macrolevel and then the microlevel of rhetorical structure, although the size of the units is not necessarily a primary consideration.<sup>10</sup>

#### 1. *Periodism*

The prologue of Hebrews is possibly the finest period in the NT. Measure and balance and even a certain artistic unity secured by skillful coordination of clauses have produced a rounded and symmetrical whole, rivalled only by the prologue of Luke. Hebrews contains several other exquisitely balanced pieces (e.g. 2:14–15; 4:12–13; 5:7–10; 6:16–20; 9:24–26). This compact (*katestrammene*) or periodic (*en periodais*) style is characteristic of artistically developed prose, while the running (*etromene*) style is characteristic of plain and unsophisticated language in all periods, including that of the earliest Greek prose as well as of the narrative sections of the NT on the whole. It is instructive that the periodic style is found most frequently

<sup>10</sup> For a comprehensive treatment of the various functions and features of rhetoric and style in the Greek NT, see Nida, *Style and Discourse*.

in Hebrews, which grammarians regard as "artistic prose"<sup>11</sup> by reason of the careful composition of its words and sentences. Yet, as Nigel Turner has reminded us, "For all its oratory, Hebrews is no more than an epistle written in the exhortatory style,"<sup>12</sup> and we would do well to bear in mind that there is in it a distinctive layer of basic Jewish Greek (see our discussion of semitisms below).

## 2. Effectiveness

Familiar features (items 2-5) serve the purpose of identification, so that the receptors are able to identify with both the message and the source, while novel features (items 6-11) provide impact by virtue of their unpredictability. Poetic language (items 12-15) is also stylistically significant, for it is possible to use esthetically beautiful forms to attract receptors to the message. These various rhetorical features become highly significant in contributing to the overall effectiveness of the communicative function of the text. The author first uses familiar language as a platform for identification, then uses novel language to influence the cognitive state of the receptors, and finally uses esthetic language to overcome any reaction to disagreeable content. In short, one can say that the text moves very effectively from sympathetic to cognitive to emotive communication. The author has employed all of these functions effectively with both impact and appeal (with the corresponding "hitting" and "drawing").

## 3. Compactness

Compactness involves expressing in the fewest possible words the maximum amount of meaning. Often found in combination with other rhetorical devices (especially parallelism and ellipsis), it is typical of introductions to NT letters (e.g. Rom 1:1-7; Gal 1:1-5).<sup>13</sup> The first four verses of Hebrews are especially condensed. It seems almost incredible that the author could have packed so many relevant themes into a single sentence: the revelatory nature of God; the

<sup>11</sup> F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (trans. and rev. by R. W. Funk; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961) 242 (sec. 164).

<sup>12</sup> N. Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek, Volume II, Style* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1976) 113.

<sup>13</sup> See *loc. cit.* and *Discourse* 44.

eternal existence of the Son, the agent of creation; the temporal work of the incarnate Redeemer; the exaltation of the Son; the superiority of the Son to angels. Clearly Christianity would have been poorer had it not possessed in her writings the exordium to Hebrews.

## 4. Contrast

Contrast was a particularly important aspect of ancient rhetoric when emphasis was to be placed upon the relationship between antithetical statements.<sup>14</sup> The author of Hebrews makes skillful use of antithesis when he speaks of Christ in one category, and the prophets (1:1-4), angels (1:5-14), Moses (3:1-19), Joshua (4:1-13), and Aaron (4:14-10:18) in another. The contrast between Christ and the prophets appears only in the epistle's opening paragraph and is worked out by an important detail. Here the anarthrous noun *huiō* (item 8) serves to emphasize the point that the Son is radically different from the prophets, in that son-ness is the ultimate medium of communication. This emphasis is all the more striking when one observes that the article does appear with "prophets" (*tois prophetais*), the other member of the comparison (item 5). Similar occurrences of *huiōs* without the definite article elsewhere in the writing (3:6; 5:8; 7:28) suggest that it is the rank and dignity of the Son that constitutes the main contrast between the many spokesmen of God and the one Son. This thought is reinforced by the addition of some of the Son's divine attributes and activities (items 9-16) as indisputable evidence of the differences that exist between Christ and the prophets.

Another important thematic contrast is the series of references to God and to Christ. A careful analysis of these references indicates that the role of Christ as intermediate agent is put into focus, while the role of God as causative agent is semantically backgrounded. This results in the theme of "God has spoken" being quickly abandoned, and exchanged for the theme of "the Son and who he is." This is the "pivot point" of the paragraph. A statistical charting of the nominal, pronominal, and verbal sequences helps one to see the way in which the theme is developed:

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-32.

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Verse	God	Christ
1	N V	
2	V V V	N P P V
3	P N	P N N V P V V
4		V V
<b>Totals</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>13</b>
Nouns (N)	2	3
Pronouns (P)	1	4
Verbs (V)	4	6

This type of analysis based on statistically frequent features reveals that although Heb 1:1-4 is syntactically quite complex, its thematic structure is relatively simple. God is identified in nominal form only twice, though he is marked as the subject four times and by a pronoun once, but Christ is identified by nominal forms three times, by pronominal forms four times, and as the subject six times. It is also relevant to note that in three of the four verbal elements which have God as subject, the Son is involved either as agent or object (items 1, 9, and 10). Thus the Son is not only dealt with in the larger section of the colon but is also the culminating point of the colon.

But probably the most obvious contrastive device illustrated by Heb 1:1-4 is the intricate parallelism involving the order of time, setting, and means of communication, a parallelism which is clearly done with skill and evident theological intent. The extent of this syntactic and lexical contrast between the variety of revelations and the unique revelation becomes self-evident when charted as follows:

A. Time of speaking:	<i>lalēsās</i>	<i>elalēsēn</i>
	<i>palai</i>	<i>ep' eschatou ion</i>
		<i>hēmērōn tou-</i>
		<i>ion</i>
B. Setting of speaking:	<i>tois patrasin</i>	<i>hēmin</i>
C. Means of speaking:	<i>en tois prophētais</i>	<i>en hūto</i>

The parallel expressions in B and C heighten the distinction in meaning, while the juxtaposition of dissimilar lexical items in A is also effective as a contrastive device. This slight distinction within the parallelism contributes stylistically to avoid overcharacterization.

This makes it clear that the dissimilarities in A must not be used to try and determine distinctions of emphasis.

## 5. Cohesion

Cohesion in this discourse is reinforced by several features on the microlevel of rhetoric.<sup>15</sup> The situational markers *palai* and *ep' eschatou ion hēmērōn touōn* provide temporal orientations, while referential markers, including pronominal markers (*hon, di' hou, hos*), personal pronouns (*autou, autou*), and deictics (such as *ho* and *tois*) provide the reader with constant orientation as to the relationships between the various elements in the discourse. The logical relations of the discourse may be classified as qualification (including expressions of manner and setting as they relate to the dominant event, such as *tois prophētais* and *hēmin*) and dyadic (including both additive [*kai, te*]<sup>16</sup> and comparative [*par*] features).

Repetition as an instrument of cohesion is also involved in the discourse. For example, the event word *lalēin* is used both of God's speaking by the prophets and also of his speaking by Christ. This indicates that while there is an aspect of discontinuity there is at the same time a strong line of continuity. God is the author of both revelations, and in both cases the words are alike his words. Moreover the language implies that God has finished his speaking: this is true not only of the OT era (*lalēsās*) but also of the present era of fulfillment (*elalēsēn*), since God's word in Christ is his ultimate, definitive, and final speaking.

## 6. Poetic or Hymnic Structure

The presence of hymns in the NT is predicated on the assumption that the hymn was an important expression of worship in the early church (cf. Acts 2:47; 1 Cor 14:15, 26; Jas 5:13; Eph 5:19; Col 3:16).

<sup>15</sup> Cohesion can also be attained by thematic unity and logically organized sequences (cf. Nida, *Style and Discourse*, 15-16). The author of Hebrews is equally impressive in terms of cohesion when he constructs long sentences in 5:7-10; 7:1-3; 10:19-25; 12:18-24.

<sup>16</sup> The copulative particle *te* occurs infrequently in the NT and is usually an indication of stylistic pretension, its place normally being taken by *kai* or *oude* (see N. Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek, Volume III, Syntax* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963] 338).

The two basic kinds of hymns in the NT are the "God-hymn" and the "Christ-hymn." Whereas the "God-hymn" may have no specifically Christian elements, the "Christ-hymn" is a structure "whose contents deal with Christ and his work (mostly his humiliation and exaltation)."<sup>17</sup>

Since the poetic structures in the NT are based so largely upon Hebrew style, literary analysts have had to take into account the characteristics of Hebrew poetic form. Parallelism is a major feature of Hebrew poetry and may be understood as an equivalent of rhyme, since Hebrew poetry belongs to a class of poetry where rhyme is created by thoughts and ideas rather than by sounds.<sup>18</sup> Other conspicuous features of Hebrew poetry are: (1) a similarity in overall length of related lines, (2) condensation of meaning, usually by syntactic ellipsis, and (3) use of figurative language.<sup>19</sup>

On the basis of syntactical and stylistic criteria, Heb 1:3 (items 11-14) is held to be homological or even hymnic in form, but there is insufficient evidence to support the conclusion that one is dealing with preliterary tradition in this passage. The opening *hos*, the presence of participial predications, and the relation of the contents to other Christological pronouncements (e.g. 1 Tim 3:16; 1 Pet 3:18-22) may suggest but do not prove that the text was not written by the author of the document in which it is found. Indeed, recent evidence points to the fact that Heb 1:3 was not a previously existing hymn merely quoted by the author of Hebrews, but rather his own contribution.<sup>20</sup>

Whatever its origin, the text of 1:3 gains much by its syntactic parallelism as well as by the fact that the progression of events coincides with the historical order (i.e. preexistence, creative activity, redemption, exaltation). Moreover, the use of figurative language and complex semotaxis (the unusual juxtaposition of expressions) underscores the elegant structure of the verse in terms of the internal relationships of the parts.

<sup>17</sup> Deichgräber, *Gottes hymnus*, 19.

<sup>18</sup> T. H. Robinson, *The Poetry of the Old Testament* (London: Duckworth, 1957) 21.

<sup>19</sup> Nida, *Style and Discourse*, 64-65.

<sup>20</sup> See J. Frankowski, "Early Christian Hymns Recorded in the New Testament. A Reconsideration of the Question in the Light of Hebrews 1,3," *NT 97* (1983) 183-94.

But far more important than the structural features of poetic discourse is the function of poetry. Recent scholarship has shown that there are at least five important contributions which poetic language makes to a text:<sup>21</sup>

(1) The very unusualness of the language adds impact and therefore highlights and emphasizes the significance of the theme.

(2) The balance, symmetry, and rhythm of the language makes a text more esthetically attractive.

(3) The use of poetic language permits the grouping of ideas in ways which defy normal logical formulations but which express important insights which people can feel but not necessarily explain.

(4) The use of poetic language immediately identifies a text as having some supernatural basis or implication, since God was not supposed to speak in precisely the same manner as humans.

(5) Poetic language provides a high degree of emotive impact. One might also note that poetic communication serves to facilitate the memorization of content.<sup>22</sup> Thus the interruption of a discourse by the intrusion of poetic or hymnic language is bound to carry considerable impact. The presence of such language may also be helpful in determining whether portions of a text should be printed in poetic format or simply prose paragraph style.

### 7. Omissions

An important though often neglected element in the stylistic effectiveness of Heb 1:1-4 consists of a number of omissions, which may be regarded as having "zero significance,"<sup>23</sup> that is, a significant absence of something. Syntactic ellipses involving the omission of so-called function words make items 9-11 more concise while at the same time serving to heighten the contrast between the Son and the prophets. Although there is no marked syntactic relationship between these three units, there is an important semantic relationship marked by the pronominal structures.

Omissions may also be the result of calculated avoidance based on cultural or religious attitudes. Jews and some early Christians so revered God that often they would not pronounce his name. "Majesty on high" (*lés megalôsynes en hypsêlois*) is one such periphrasis for the

<sup>21</sup> See Nida, *Style and Discourse*, 66-68.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>23</sup> The term is Nida's, *Style and Discourse*, 33.

9. *Repetition*

Repetition has also contributed to the effectiveness and acceptability of the text in terms of impact and appeal. Both phonemic and graphemic repetition is observable in the opening verse, which contains five words beginning with the sound of *p*,<sup>27</sup> five occurrences of *l*, two adverbial prefixes in *poly-*, and two adverbial endings in *-ōs*. In the case of *polymerōs* and *polytropōs* (item 2) it is difficult to know whether one is to treat the differences as semantically or rhetorically significant. Most scholars see some distinction in meaning, though it appears evident that by means of the repetition of the morpheme *poly-*, the two semantically reinforce each other.<sup>28</sup>

Repetition of the same syntactical structure may also be rhetorically significant. Items 9-11 are completely parallel syntactically, and all three contain a single finite verb in an emphatic position. Another obvious repetition is observable in items 5 and 8, although the anarthrous noun in item 8 serves to emphasize the absolute change of category from prophetic utterance to that of sonship.

10. *Rhythm*

Elaborately structured rhythmical forms are also to be found in this colon. The text displays the following balanced clauses and lines:

- (1) *polymerōs kai polytropōs*
- This expression begins and ends with a paeon.

<sup>27</sup> Alliteration with *p* is remarkably frequent in Hebrews, as is attested by the following examples:

- 1:1 *polymerōs kai polytropōs . . . palai . . . patrasin . . . prophētais*
- 2:1 *perissotērōs prosechein . . . parayomen*
- 2:2 *parabasis . . . parakōē*
- 2:10 *eprepen . . . panta . . . panta, pollous . . . pathēmatōn*
- 3:12 *apistias . . . apostēnai*
- 9:26 *pollakis pathēin apo katabolēs kosmou*
- 11:4 *pistei plēnōna thysia Abel para Kam prosēnēken*
- 12:11 *passa men paidēia pros men to paron*
- 13:19 *perissotērōs de parakalō touto poiēsa*

<sup>28</sup> It is also possible to understand the terms as a case of hendiadys, where one idea is denoted by the use of two words joined together by the conjunction *kai*. See, e.g., N. Lightfoot, *Jesus Christ Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976) 63.

divine name, while "glory" (*doxēs*) is clearly an indirect reference to God. The probabilities are that the author considered both expressions to be particularly congenial to his special audience, Jewish believers. Moreover, from the standpoint of the purely rhetorical level of language, it is relevant to note that both of these expressions are typical features of poetic language, and that the verse in which they appear (1:3) is widely held to be part of a Christian hymn.

The fact that the epistle begins abruptly without any introductory salutation or identification of himself by the author is also extremely effective.<sup>24</sup> Full of his subject, the author plunges straight into his theme of the person and work of the divine Son. Apparently the omission of the customary greeting is the author's attempt to bear witness to the One who speaks God's final word to men. Also noticeably lacking is any explicit reference to the object involved in the process of speaking. No direct object is given or necessary, for the basic assumption of the author is that the Son is both the agent of the message (revealer) and its content (revelation).<sup>25</sup>

8. *Figures*

The text also abounds in the figurative meanings of single words, both metonymies and metaphors. The occurrences of *patrasin* (meaning "ancestors"), *prophētais* (meaning "God's spokesmen" or even "the Scriptures"), and *aiōnas* (meaning "the time-space universe") are typical cases of metonymy, based as they are upon the relation of part for the whole. Metaphors based on the principle of similarity are frequent in reference to Christ and may be classified as nonconventional since they represent novel instances of figurative expressions.<sup>26</sup> In Heb 1:1-4 these include *huiō*, *klēronomon*, *apaugasma*, and *charaktēr*. Such nonconventional use of figurative expressions is typical of religious language, since fresh Christological insights can seldom be expressed by means of traditional semantic formulations.

<sup>24</sup> 1 John provides a close NT parallel in this respect.  
<sup>25</sup> Cf. E. F. Harrison ("The Theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews," *BSac* 121 [1964] 334); "God is now speaking in One who can not only reproduce His message with fidelity, but can reflect *Him* as well. This spells fullness and finality which can be achieved in no other way."  
<sup>26</sup> Nida, *Style and Discourse*, 42-43.



- (2) *palai ho theos lalēsas tois patrasin en tois prophētiais ep' eschatou tōn hēmerōn toutōn elalēsen hēmin en huiō*  
These lines are almost identical rhythmically.
- (3) *hos ōn apaugasma tes doxēs kai charaktēr tēs hypostaseōs autou phērōn te ta panta tō rhēmati tēs dynamēōs autou*

These lines terminate identically in anapest and spondee. Thus the text includes a paeonic opening, rhythmically identical clausulae, and a pair of clausulae ending in an anapest and spondee—certainly a respectable amount of prose (or poetic) rhythm in so short a passage.

### 11. Semitisms

There are in this paragraph unquestionably some traces of Hebrew idiom, resulting chiefly from the influence of the Hebrew OT and the LXX. Thanks in part to Semitic influence, the NT often uses *en* instead of the instrumental dative. To this usage belong such examples as *en tois prophētiais* and its counterpart *en huiō*, where the value of *en* seems to be far indeed from the local sense. In these cases *en* corresponds to the Hebrew *beth instrumenti*, a usage found in classical Greek in reference to things and not to persons.<sup>30</sup> The author also displays a special fondness for *para comparationis*,<sup>30</sup> of which there are eight instances in Hebrews (1:4, 9; 2:7, 10; 3:3; 9:23; 11:4; 12:24). The phrase may well have been adapted from two of the Psalms cited in Hebrews, namely, Ps 45:6-7 (Heb 1:8-9) and Ps 8:5-7 (Heb 2:6-8).

Another interesting example of Semitic influence is the unusual expression *tō rhēmati tes dynamēōs autou* in item 13. The nature and extent of the relation involved in this expression is to be grasped by a consideration of the "Hebrew" genitive.<sup>31</sup> In this class the genitive is extended, owing to Semitic influence, to many expressions in which the Greeks used not a genitive but an adjective. This mode

<sup>30</sup> However, even though *en* has an instrumental use, the possibility remains that more is involved than mere passive instrumentality, since neither the prophets nor the Son were automata but rather persons through whom God spoke by word, deed, and by his very presence (cf. H. A. Kent, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972] 34).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934) 83, 132, 667.

<sup>31</sup> See M. Zerwick, *Biblical Greek* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963) secs. 40-42.

of speaking becomes even more alien to Greek idiom if the possessive pronoun which applies to the whole expression is put with the genitive that qualifies it (as is the case here with *autou*). "The word of his power" is therefore equivalent to "his mighty word."<sup>32</sup>

A final example of Semitic influence is the temporal expression *ep' eschatou tōn hēmerōn toutōn* (item 6), which corresponds to *ep' eschatou tōn hēmerōn*, a common designation in the LXX for the eschatological time of the Messiah.<sup>33</sup> By the addition of *toutōn*, however, our author wishes to indicate that the messianic age has already arrived.

### 11. Announcements

The paragraph also includes announcements on the author's part of subjects which he will fully treat elsewhere in his epistle.<sup>34</sup> In 1:3 he announces that Christ has made purification for sins, and he explores this theme in great detail in chapters 9-10. The heavenly priesthood of Christ is also stated generally in 1:3 but is not fully treated until chapter 7 (although it is briefly reintroduced in 2:17; 4:14; and 6:19-20). In 1:4 he says that Christ has a better name than the angels, and he deals with this topic through chapter 2. As we have seen already, that Jesus is *huios* is the pivot point of the discourse and perhaps of the entire first chapter. By demonstrating that Jesus is Son, the author shows that he is both God's final revelation (1:1-4) and "better than angels" (1:5-14).<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Other examples of the Hebrew genitive occur in Matt 19:28; Rom 7:24; Phil 3:21; Rev 13:3.

<sup>33</sup> See esp. Gen 49:1; Num 14:14; Jer 23:20.

<sup>34</sup> On the importance of announcements in Hebrews, see A. Vanhoye, *La structure littéraire de l'Épître aux Hébreux* (Paris: Desclée, 1963); D. A. Black, "The Problem of the Literary Structure of Hebrews: An Evaluation and a Proposal," *GJ* 7 (1986) 163-77.

<sup>35</sup> Michel and others have shown that the frequent characterization of angels as "sons of God" in the biblical literature (cf. Gen 6:2; Psa 29:1; 89:7; Job 1:6) is probably the background for the author's selection of *huios* to describe Jesus. See O. Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (KNT); Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966) 111; H. Windisch, *Der Hebräerbrief* (HNT; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1931) 15; J. Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1924) 10.

12. *Hook Words*

We should mention, finally, the author's use of certain words (*mois crochets*) to link or hook his units together, a stylistic device which exhibits the careful structure of Hebrews.<sup>36</sup> He does this by repeating at or near the beginning of his paragraph a word used near the end of the preceding paragraph. One such hook word is "angels" in 1:4 (item 15), a term which leads directly into the section on the Son and angels beginning in 1:5. The word is also prominent within 1:5-14, which begins and ends with the same idea of the Son's superiority to the angels. Thus the word "angels" shows not only what the author wanted to emphasize and how he did it, but it supplies real clues for an understanding of the structure of the epistle. In addition, the allusion in 1:3 to Ps 110:1 (the epistle's first distinct reference to the Jewish Scriptures) illustrates, along with the actual quotation of Ps 110:1 in 1:13, the author's tendency to frame a section by the repetition of key words or themes.

IV. *Conclusion*

It seems to be time to turn off the tap: *sat plene biberunt*. In this literary analysis the opening paragraph of Hebrews has been examined from two main points of view, according to its syntactic structure and through the distribution of its rhetorical elements. From the study of its form it has been suggested that the structure of 1:1-4 consists of a single colon made up of sixteen individual units. These units have been distributed in such a way as to build upon the central thesis that "God has spoken (finally and completely)." This central fact is expanded by means of a series of hypotactic clauses which stress the uniqueness and supremacy of Christ in comparison with the transitory and incomplete character of all that preceded his coming—a theme which the readers would almost certainly object to and which has necessitated the logic and argumentation of the remainder of the epistle. The structure, therefore, both furnishes the starting point of the epistle and highlights the theme of the whole letter: the past has given way Christ, who is "better."

But in seeking to understand the prologue in the light of the author's theme and purpose, it is not enough just to draw attention

<sup>36</sup> Vanhoye, *La structure*, passim; Black, "Literary Structure," 168-73.

to the surface structure and the relationships between individual units of the colon. Rhetorical elements in this paragraph have also been employed in an effort to elicit audience response. Over a dozen different applications of rhetorical devices have been isolated from the text, ranging from the macrolevel to the microlevel of discourse. These devices evince all the qualities of elevated style during the Hellenistic period, including *hellenismos* (purity of grammar and diction), *sapientia* (clarity of expression), *prepon* (appropriateness), *kosmos* (esthetic quality), and *synomia* (brevity of expression).<sup>37</sup> These are also evenly distributed through balancing sections of the text. Hence the prologue can be understood as the equivalent of the modern sermonic "hook" in terms of its impact and appeal, with this one difference: never was a sermonic introduction more admirably conceived and communicated than this opening paragraph of Hebrews.

The text of Heb 1:1-4 is, therefore, extremely well-organized both by form and style, and both on the macrolevel and microlevel of rhetoric. These two functions complement each other in the rather intricate design of the text. This study has attempted to read the prologue anew as a well-integrated literary introduction to Hebrews and at the same time to take seriously the process of its composition, at least in its final, most obvious structure. It is concluded that the prologue should be viewed both as a meditative reflection on the eschatological theophany affected through the Son, and as a literary, thematic introduction to the entire epistle. The presence of this twofold purpose suggests the following translation, which is offered as *one* possible way of communicating the meaning of Heb 1:1-4:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors bit by bit and in many different ways through his spokesmen the prophets. But now, in these final hours of the age, he has spoken directly to us through the one whose status is Son, whom he has appointed to be the lawful owner of everything there is, and through whom he created the entire universe.

He who shines with the glory of God  
And is the perfect likeness of God's own being,  
Who upholds the universe with his powerful word  
And has made us clean from the filth of our sins,

<sup>37</sup> Nida, *Style and Discourse*, 18.

Who was made greater than the angelic messengers of God  
Just as the name he was given is greater than theirs,  
has taken his seat in heaven at the right side of God, the Majestic  
One!

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