

## THE CHIASTIC STRUCTURE OF THE PROLOGUE TO HEBREWS

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The opening verses of the Epistle to the Hebrews form one of the most beautiful sentences in the NT. The sentence reflects the careful style of the writer and calls for special attention. Many have remarked on its literary excellence.<sup>1</sup> The text is important theologically as well. It provides material for the doctrines of revelation, redemption, for christology and eschatology.<sup>2</sup>

Recently a number of studies have focused on the structure of this prologue.<sup>3</sup> The unit is so structurally intricate and theologically pregnant that it almost defies a full analysis: each approach, while highlighting certain important features, obscures others. What would be helpful would be an understanding of how the author intended to organize his opening sentence.<sup>4</sup> The studies on the structure of Heb 1:1-4 to date, though in many ways helpful, have failed to identify correctly the prologue's overall symmetrical design. This is partly because the hymn fragment theory has directed attention away from the text to its alleged pre-history. But clues to the author's intended pattern must be taken

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<sup>1</sup>Typical of a long history of such praise is the remark of W. H. Attridge (*The Epistle to the Hebrews* [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989] 36): "The rhetorical artistry of this exordium surpasses that of any other portion of the New Testament."

<sup>2</sup>D. A. Black ("Hebrews 1:1-4: A Study in Discourse Analysis," WTJ 49 [1987] 183) writes, "It seems almost incredible that the author could have packed so many relevant themes into a single sentence. . . . Clearly Christianity would have been poorer had it not possessed in her writings the exordium to Hebrews."

<sup>3</sup>See D. W. B. Robinson, "The Literary Structure of Hebrews 1:1-4," *AJBA* 2 (1972) 178-86; J. Frankowski, "Early Christian Hymns Recorded in the New Testament: A Reconsideration of the Question in Light of Heb. 1.3," *BZ* 27 (1983) 183-94; J. P. Meier, "Structure and Theology in Heb. 1.1-14," *Bib* 66 (1985) 168-89; id., "Symmetry and Theology in the Old Testament Citations of Heb. 1, 5-14," *Bib* 66 (1985) 504-33; Black, "Discourse Analysis."

<sup>4</sup>Compare the remark of E. Grässer ("Hebräer 1.1-4. Ein exegetischer Versuch."

from the text itself and from the text taken as a whole.<sup>5</sup> The proposal of this paper is that when this approach is followed the structure of the prologue can be identified as an A B C D C' B' A' chiasmic pattern. The presentation and validation of this proposal follows in section II. Observations are then made with regard to the hymn fragment theory in section III. In the final section some implications of this proposal for the study of Hebrews are briefly discussed.

## II. THE STRUCTURE OF HEB 1:1-4

### A. CHIASMIC STRUCTURES IN HEBREWS

The seminal work of Albert Vanhoye on the literary structure of Hebrews will inevitably change the way commentators approach the epistle.<sup>6</sup> The initial neglect and criticism, to which new research is often subject, will give way to attention and adaptation.<sup>7</sup> This direction is already manifest in the noteworthy commentary of W. H. Attridge. Although Attridge recognizes the weaknesses inherent in a purely structural approach, he writes of Vanhoye's work, "In its appeal to a variety of structurally significant literary indices this analysis marks a definite advance over simple catalogues of content and artificial thematic structures."<sup>8</sup> It is this new direction, rather than all the details of Vanhoye's approach, that will be lasting. Black points out that "Vanhoye's analysis has already led to several helpful studies on the structure of specific pericopes in Hebrews."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Robinson ("Literary Structure," 180) correctly says, "The structure of the whole opening paragraph, and the meaningful relation of this paragraph to the theme of the epistle as it begins to unfold, must be the first consideration in any evaluation of the particular verse under question."

<sup>6</sup>Vanhoye's work on Hebrews includes: *La structure littéraire de l'Épître aux Hébreux* (Paris: Desclée, 1963); *Situation du Christ* (Paris: Cerf, 1969); "Discussions sur la structure de l'Épître aux Hébreux," *Bib* 55 (1974) 349-80; "La question littéraire de Hébreux 13,1-6," *NTS* 23 (1977) 121-39; "Situation et signification de Hébreux 5,1-10," *NTS* 23 (1977) 445-56; and "Literarische Struktur und theologische Botschaft des Hebräerbriefes (1. Teil)," *SNTU* 4 (1979) 119-47. For the evaluation of Vanhoye's work see the bibliography in D. Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection* (Cambridge: University Press, 1982) 211-12, n. 2.

<sup>7</sup>In 1986 D. A. Black complained of the fact that the majority of new commentators on Hebrews showed no signs of Vanhoye's influence ("The Problem of the Literary Structure of Hebrews: An Evaluation and a Proposal," *Grace Theological Journal* 7 [1986] 172-73).

<sup>8</sup>Hebrews, 16. Attridge's own outline of the epistle is a modification of Vanhoye's. He points us in the right direction when he describes his own analysis as an attempt "to recognize the static organizational principles of the discourse as well

In his analysis of Hebrews, Vanhoye draws attention to the author's penchant for chiasmic structures. While his attempt to exhibit the overall structure of the epistle as a chiasm may be invalid, or at least need modification, his identifications of such structures on the smaller unit level are, in several cases, irrefutable.<sup>10</sup> Chiasmic structures found in Hebrews range from the simple to the highly complex.<sup>11</sup> The inversion found in Heb 4:16 serves as an example on the simple level:

ὕνα λάβωμεν ἔλεος  
καὶ χάριν εὐρωμεν

A simple structure which illustrates how this device formed a part of the author's literary milieu is found in Ps 2:8. The author alludes to this verse in Heb 1:2 and cites an earlier verse of the same Psalm in Heb 1:5. Below is a translation which follows the word order as found in both the LXX and the MT:

"Ask of me and I will give you

the NATIONS for your INHERITANCE

and for your POSSESSIONS the ends of the EARTH."

A more complex example is Vanhoye's presentation of the structure of Heb 1:5, the verse immediately following the prologue. By coordinating Ps 2:7 and 2 Sam 7:14, two important messianic texts, the author creates the following chiasmic structure:

242-52; and P. Auffret, "Essai sur la structure littéraire et l'interprétation d'Hébreux 3,1-6," *NTS* 26 (1980) 380-96.

<sup>10</sup>For some judicious remarks on the value of observing chiasms for exegesis, as well as a tendency for the identification of chiasms to get out of hand, especially when attempts are made to see entire books so structured, see M. Silva, *God, Language and Scripture: Reading the Bible in the Light of General Linguistics* (Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation, vol. 4; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 122-23.

<sup>11</sup>For a good, though now outdated, introduction to chiasmic structures in the NT see, N. W. Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament* (Chapel Hill, NC: North Carolina Press, 1942). Though Lund's work has been rightly faulted for being overzealous (cf., e.g., H. J. Cadbury's review in *JR* 23 [1943] 62-63), it has served as a landmark in the study of NT chiasmic structures. Writing a generation later, J. W. Welch says, "Interpreters and critics of the New Testament can no longer confidently proceed without some awareness of chiasmus as a basic aspect of the literary structure of the books of the New Testament" (*God—Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structure*

- A. υἱός μου εἶ σύ,  
 B. ἐγὼ σήμερον γεγέννηκά σε;  
 (καὶ πάλιν)  
 B'. ἐγὼ ἔσομαι αὐτῷ εἰς πατέρα,  
 A'. καὶ αὐτός ἔσται μοι εἰς υἱόν

What makes this construction particularly interesting is the inversion of the Greek word order in the A/A' lines. The resulting concentricity of the verse is illustrated in the following diagram:

- A. υἱός  
 B. μου  
 C. εἶ  
 D. σύ  
 E. ἐγὼ σήμερον γεγέννηκά σε;  
 (καὶ πάλιν)  
 E. ἐγὼ ἔσομαι αὐτῷ εἰς πατέρα, καὶ  
 D'. αὐτός  
 C'. ἔσται  
 B'. μοι  
 A'. εἰς υἱόν

This inversion is found in both the LXX and the MT.<sup>12</sup>

A careful analysis of Hebrews shows that the author of this epistle not only knew this literary device but used it with consummate skill. Vanhoye says that Hebrews was "not just one case among others, in the utilization of concentric structure, but truly the chief work of the genre."<sup>13</sup> It should not then be surprising if the author has at the outset organized his prologue concentrically. Black anticipates this proposal when he writes, "Does not one get the impression that the magnificent prose . . . is intended to express not only the general theme of the writing but its compositional genre as well?"<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup>On the association of these two verses at Qunran, see Attridge, *Hebrews*, 53, n. 39. For the graphic display of an even more complex concentric structure, identified by Vanhoye in Heb 2:1-4, see G. W. Buchanan, *To the Hebrews* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972) 30.

<sup>13</sup>Quoted in G. W. Buchanan, "The Present State of Scholarship on Hebrews," in *Judaism, Christianity, and Other Greco-Roman Sects: Festschrift for Morton Smith* (2 vols.; ed. J. Neusner; Leiden: Brill, 1975) 2:313.

<sup>14</sup>Black, "Literary Structure," 177. Black's own article on the prologue ("Discourse Analysis"), while offering a helpful presentation of many of the

### B. THE PROPOSED A B C D C' B' A' STRUCTURE OF HEB 1:1-4

It is the argument of this study that the author of Hebrews did design his prologue as a chiasm.<sup>15</sup> The pattern is graphically displayed below:

- vv. 1-2a Πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως πάλαι ὁ θεὸς λαλήσας τοῖς πατέραςιν  
 ἐν τοῖς προφήταις ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων ἐλάλησεν  
 ἡμῖν ἐν υἱῷ  
 ὃν ἔθηκεν κληρονόμον πάντων.  
 2c δι' οὗ καὶ ἐποίησεν τοὺς αἰῶνας.  
 3a ὃς ὢν ἀπαύασμα τῆς δόξης καὶ χαρακτηριστῆρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ,  
 3b φέρων τε τὰ πάντα τῷ ῥήματι τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ,  
 3c καθαρισμὸν τῶν ἀμαρτιῶν ποιησάμενος  
 3d ἐκάθισεν ἐν δεξιᾷ τῆς μεγαλωσύνης ἐν ὑψηλοῖς,  
 4 τοσοῦτῳ κρείττερον γενόμενος τῶν ἀγγέλων ὅσῳ διαφωρότερον παρ' αὐτοὺς κεκληρονόμηκεν ὄνομα.

In v. 3, at the center of the sentence, are two participial clauses, which go closely together.<sup>16</sup> They make three statements about the Son in his relationship to the Father. On both sides of this center are declarations concerning what the Son has "made." On the one hand he is the agent of creation, through whom God has made the worlds. On the other he is the redeemer, who has himself made cleansing for sin. Continuing to move outward we find two allusions to OT messianic psalms which speak of the Son's exalted position.

<sup>15</sup>This view is independent and different from the proposal of Robinson, who argued that Heb 1:2b-3 was a chiasm ("Literary Structure"). His view is summarized by P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 49. See also W. L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1991) 5-7. In general, Lane follows Robinson, but he also makes some comments which come close to the proposal made in this article. Meier ("Symmetry and Theology," 528) thinks that the chiasm Robinson discerns in vv. 2b-3 is "artificially constructed." For this writer the suspicion that Heb 1:1-4 was chiasmically structured was stimulated by an article on the parallel passage in Colossians by S. M. Baugh ("The Poetic Form of Col 1:15-20," *WTJ* 47 [1985] 227-44).

<sup>16</sup>Y. T. Radday says, "Biblical authors . . . placed the main idea, the thesis, or the turning point of each literary unit at its center" ("Chiasmic Patterns in Biblical Hebrew Poetry," in *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 51). To find the focal point of a biblical book Radday suggests opening to the middle. Whatever one makes of this, it is striking that in the middle of Hebrews, i.e., 8:1, we find the author's own summary. According to Vanhoye's analysis 8:1-9:28 is the midpoint of the epistle's concentric

Finally, at the extremes of the chiasm, we find a pair of statements which contrast the Son with other mediators of revelation, i.e., prophets and angels. According to this proposal the introduction to Hebrews follows the chiasmic pattern: A B C D C' B' A'. It could be represented in outline form as follows:

A. The Son contrasted with prophets — vv. 1-2a

B. The Son as messianic heir — v. 2b

C. The Son's creative work — v. 2c

D. The Son's threefold mediatorial

relationship to God — v. 3a-b

C'. The Son's redemptive work — v. 3c

B'. The Son as messianic king — v. 3d

A'. The Son contrasted with angels — v. 4

### C. VALIDATION OF THE PROPOSED STRUCTURE

What justification is there for identifying the first two clauses concerning the Son in v. 3 as the center? Each member on the one side of these two clauses mirrors a corresponding member on the other side. This in itself is a strong suggestion that we have correctly identified the center. It is confirmed by a number of other observations.

Although the center consists of two distinct clauses, it is clear that the writer intended them to be taken together. They are coordinated by the conjunction τε, which tends to link more closely than the usual conjunction και.<sup>17</sup>

Four of the seven "laws" of chiasm which Nils Lund defines and illustrates in *Chiasmus in the New Testament* are directly related to the center of single chiasmic units.<sup>18</sup> These four principles are listed below. It will then be shown how the center of Heb 1:1-4, as it has been identified above, exhibits in a remarkable way these particular chiasmic tendencies.

1. The center is always the turning point.
2. A shift takes place at the center.
3. A similar idea occurs at the center and at both extremes.
4. Certain phenomena tend to gravitate to certain positions.

<sup>17</sup>BDF, par. 443; cf. S. J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 30. Meier discusses whether δε ων απαύγασμα της δεξης και χαρακτηρ της υποστασεως αυτου consists of one clause or two separate "facts" ("Structure and Theology," 174). He opts for one clause to preserve his "seven christological statements" in 1:2b-4. The distinction is really an invalid one: there is one clause which contains two separate descriptions of the Son in his ontological/functional relationship to the Father.

<sup>18</sup>Lund's seven laws are summarized and illustrated throughout his volume (see, e.g., *Chiasmus*, 3-30). The three laws which do not apply to Heb 1:1-4 relate to larger or multiple chiasmic units.

The prologue contains ten verbals (five participles and five finite verbs). The four verbals which lead up to the center have God as their subject (vv. 1-2). Upon reaching the center the subject changes to the Son.<sup>19</sup> The Son then remains the subject till the end of the sentence (vv. 3-4). Thus the center is a kind of turning point.<sup>20</sup>

With the shift of subjects from God to the Son, the passage begins to lean forward, so to speak. The three participles (ων, φερων, ποιησαμενος) will lead to the announcement in the finite verb (εκαθησεν) that the Son has taken his seat in exaltation. To mistake the shift of subjects as a sign of a borrowed hymnic fragment is to miss the author's subtle flow of thought. As Meier aptly says, "By a carefully constructed slant in the movement of thought and language, the theo-logy gradually becomes christo-logy."<sup>21</sup>

Lund's second law of chiasm is illustrated by a different feature of these ten verbals. The only present tenses among them are found in these two center clauses, which contain present participles. In other words, there is a shift at the center from the aorist to the present and then back to the aorist once the center is passed.<sup>22</sup> The "shift at the center," which takes many forms, is a common device in biblical chiasms.<sup>23</sup>

According to Lund's third law, the same theme or idea occurs at the center of a structure and at both extremes, but nowhere else in the system.<sup>24</sup> At the center of Heb 1:1-4 are the statements which

<sup>19</sup>Black, in a helpful discussion of these verbs with regards to their subjects, describes the switch of subjects as "the pivot point of the paragraph" ("Discourse Analysis," 183).

<sup>20</sup>In her treatment of the chiasmic center of Heb 12:1-2, E. B. Horning cites the shift of subjects from "us" to "Jesus" ("Chiasmus, Creedal Structure, and Christology in Hebrews 12:1-2, BR 23 [1978] 40-41).

<sup>21</sup>Meier, "Symmetry and Theology," 527.

<sup>22</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 180.

<sup>23</sup>Lund cites Gen 12:16 as an example (*Chiasmus*, 43). The opening and closing lines list animals, and at the center is a shift to people:

And Abraham acquired sheep and cattle,

male donkeys,

and menservants

and maidservants,

and female donkeys

and camels.

<sup>24</sup>This principle is most evident when there are verbal parallels at the center and extremes. See Matt 9:17, cited by Lund (*Chiasmus*, 34), where the word "wine" functions this way:

ουδε βαλλουσεν οινον νεον εις δοκους παλαιους

ει δε μη γε, σπηλυνται

α δοκοι

και ο οινος εκχεται

και οι δοκοι

απολλυνται.

δλλα βαλλουσιν οινον νεον εις δοκους καινους

describe the Son as God's supreme self-expression.<sup>25</sup> At the outer perimeters the author sets forth the Son as a greater spokesman than the prophets (v. 1) and the angels (v. 4). The chiasmic structure, which repeats the idea of the Son as God's ultimate spokesman at both extremes as well as at the center, reveals this theme to be of primary importance to the author.<sup>26</sup>

The fourth principle related to the center concerns the tendency for certain phenomena to gravitate to certain positions. One of the most common is the occurrence of triplets at the center.<sup>27</sup> Although the center of Heb 1:1-4 contains two clauses, they make three statements concerning the Son's mediatorial relationship to the Father.

In addition to the above characteristics, the center also exhibits a poetic euphony which helps to hold the center together. The two clauses both begin and end with a similarity in sound: at the beginning are the matching sounds ὅς ὢν and φέρων; and at the end is the matching cadence τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ and τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ. The rhythm and balance cannot be missed by the attentive reader.<sup>28</sup>

A number of lines of argument thus leads to the conclusion that the center of vv. 1-4 consists of these two clauses in v. 3a-b. The NIV translation reflects the cohesiveness of this central structure by rendering it as an independent sentence: "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word."

On either side of the center are found clauses which speak of the Son's work:

<sup>25</sup>These statements describe the Son in his fundamental relationship to both the Father and the universe. These relationships are the basis for the Son's ability to be the supreme mediator. His ontological relationship to the Father qualifies him for his function as the revealer of God.

<sup>26</sup>G. Hughes argues that the epistle is a development of the prologue's emphasis on the Son as God's "Final Address" (*Hebrews and Hermeneutics* [Cambridge: University Press, 1979] 1-24).

<sup>27</sup>Lund (*Chiasmus*, 246) points to the three verbs at the center of Matt 5:10-12 as an example:

μακάριοι ὁ δειδιωγμένοι ἐνεκεν δικαιοσύνης,  
ὅτι αὐτῶν ἔστιν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν.  
μακάριοι ἔστε  
ὅταν διειδίωσιν ὑμᾶς  
καὶ διώξωσιν  
καὶ ἐπώσιν πάντων ποιητῶν καθ' ἑμῶν . . .

χαίrete καὶ ἀγαλλιάσθε,  
ὅτι ὁ μισθὸς ὑμῶν πολλὸς ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς·

<sup>28</sup>On the use of other poetic devices in combination with chiasm, see Watson, "Chiasmic Patterns," in *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 157. J. Moffatt discusses at length the rhythm and cadences found in Hebrews (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [ICC; London: Adam and Charles Black, 1964] lvi-lxiv). G. Zuntz is unduly influenced by  $\beta$ <sup>46</sup>, which omits the second αὐτοῦ in Heb. 1:3, when he says its retention "results in an unpleasant echo of the preceding colon" (*The Text of the Epistles* [London: Oxford University Press, 1953] 45).

v. 2c δι' οὗ καὶ ἐποίησεν τοὺς αἰῶνας·

CENTER

v. 3c καθαρισμὸν τῶν ἀμαρτιῶν ποιησάμενος

The verbal parallel based on the word ποιέω is not accidental. In v. 3c the author appears to have deliberately used the periphrastic καθαρισμὸν . . . ποιησάμενος, combining the participle with the adjective, rather than using the simple verb καθαρίζω.<sup>29</sup> In this way he has made the parallel with the ἐποίησεν of v. 2c explicit.<sup>30</sup> The verbal parallel would be even more pronounced if the rejected reading δι' ἐαυτοῦ at the beginning of v. 3c proved to be genuine.<sup>31</sup> But the parallel is clear enough without the uncertain reading.

The creation/redemption motif is found frequently in the OT.<sup>32</sup> It occurs in other carefully constructed christological passages. Col 1:15-20 is similar in many respects to Heb 1:1-4. In this "poem" about Christ, as Baugh calls it, Paul parallels the two ideas of creation and redemption in the following fashion:<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup>This is the classical use of the middle participle with the adjective to express the same idea as the cognate verb (M. Zerwick and M. Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament* [Rome: Biblical Institute, 1981] 654). The closest parallel to the Heb 1:3 structure is found in Job 7:21 (LXX): "And why did you not make (ἐποίησάω) a forgetting of my iniquity and a cleansing of my sin (καθαρισμὸν τῆς ἀμαρτίας μου)?"

<sup>30</sup>On the unusual construction see also the remarks of B. Lindars, "The Rhetorical Structure of Hebrews," *NTS* 35 (1989) 391, n. 3. N. Lightfoot says, "These words stem from priestly symbolism and supply an early hint to the major theme of the Epistle" (*Jesus Christ Today* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976] 56).

<sup>31</sup>UBS<sup>3</sup> rates the omission of the prepositional phrase as (C), indicating a considerable degree of doubt as to which reading is superior. Though there are strong witnesses for the retention of the prepositional phrase in both the Alexandrian (P<sup>46</sup>) and Western (D) MSS, B. M. Metzger sees the reading of D, along with the Majority Text, as weakened by the evidence of conflation (*A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [London and New York: United Bible Societies, 1975] 662). The inverted word order of the variant reading in v. 2c (τοὺς αἰῶνας ἐποίησεν, D', Ψ, Byz, a, b, sy<sup>h</sup>) would also heighten the parallel, but the refinement of the doubtful reading must be rejected.

<sup>32</sup>For example, the motive for keeping the Sabbath in Exod 20:11 is God's creative activity, while in Deut 5:15 it is God's redemptive activity. B. R. Riding argues that Ps 95:1-7a is an abb' a' structure, whose members speak of the Lord as Savior and the Lord as Creator ("Psalm 95:1-7c as a Large Chiasm," *ZAW* 88 [1976] 118). Gen 14:19-20 is another OT text familiar to the author which exhibits this parallel. Melchizedek blessed Abraham with these words:

Blessed be Abram by God Most High  
Creator of heaven and earth.  
And blessed be God Most High

Who delivered your enemies into your hand.

See also Isa 45:17-25; Psalms 135 and 136.

<sup>33</sup>See Baugh, "Col 1:15-20," 236-37.

Because in him were created all things  
in the heavens and upon the earth  
... all things  
through him  
and unto him were CREATED (v. 16).

Because in him (God) was pleased that all the  
fullness dwell  
and

through him that he RECONCILE  
all things unto himself (vv. 19-20).

Likewise the similarity between Heb 1:1-4 and the Johannine  
prologue has often been noticed. In John's prologue we find these two  
parallel ideas:

all things through him  
came into being (ἐγένετο) (v. 3)  
grace and truth through Jesus Christ  
came into being (ἐγένετο) (v. 17)<sup>34</sup>

In view of these and other parallels it is not surprising to find  
the ideas of creation and redemption symmetrically aligned in  
Hebrews.<sup>35</sup> Coordinating Christ's work of redemption with his  
work of creation lays a broad christological foundation. Upon this  
the writer can securely build his presentation of Christ's saving  
work.

Continuing to move outward, the next two lines speak of the Son  
in his messianic role.

v. 2b ὃν ἔθηκεν κληρονόμιον πάντων  
v. 3d ἐκάθισεν ἐν δεξιᾷ τῆς μεγαλοσύνης ἐν ὑψηλοῖς

The first line is derived from Ps 2:8: "Ask of me, and I will give  
you the nations as your inheritance, and for your possessions the  
ends of the earth." Though it is not a word-for-word quotation, the  
connection is commonly recognized.<sup>36</sup> This psalm was a part of the

<sup>34</sup>Cf. R. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (2 vols.; AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1966) 1.21.

<sup>35</sup>Lane notes that this central portion "consists of predications familiar from Jewish wisdom literature, which exalt divine Wisdom as the agent of creation, revelation, and reconciliation (e.g., Wis 7:21-27; 9:2)" (*Hebrews* 1-8, 6). What must be added is that these three components are symmetrically aligned.

<sup>36</sup>See the "Index of Allusions and Verbal Parallels" in UBS<sup>3</sup>; cf. B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970 [1889]) 8. The patristic writers correctly recognized in this clause a reference to Ps 2:8 (Hughes, *Hebrews*, 39). On the use of Psalm 2 in the NT, see Kistemaker, *Hebrews*, 36.

Church's earliest understanding of Jesus. It was quoted in the prayer  
of the believers led by Peter and John in Acts 4:24-30.<sup>37</sup>

"In Hebrews, Christ's status as heir is manifested in his  
exaltation to the 'right hand' (vs. 3d)."<sup>38</sup> This leads to the parallel  
line of the chiasm: "He sat down at the right hand of the majesty  
on high" (v. 3d). An allusion to Ps 110:1—"Sit at my right hand  
until I set your enemies as a footstool for your feet"—seems clear  
(NA<sup>25</sup> printed these words in dark letters, indicating a quotation).<sup>39</sup>  
Psalm 110 is the most frequently cited OT text in Hebrews and lies  
at the center of the author's argument.<sup>40</sup>

It is important not to sever the quotation of Ps 110:1 from what  
has just been said in Heb 1:3. What the writer of Hebrews will  
expound in his epistle, as no one ever had, is the exaltation of the  
Son in light of his priestly sacrifice. When he had made cleansing  
for sins as the priest of a new order (Ps 110:4), he sat down as the  
exalted messianic king (Ps 110:1).<sup>41</sup>

That the author intends for the reader to associate Psalm 2 and  
Psalm 110 is confirmed by two other passages in his epistle where  
he deliberately coordinates them. First is the catalogue of seven  
OT quotations in vv. 5-14 of chap. 1. It begins with Psalm 2 and ends

<sup>37</sup>Ps 89:27 (88:28 LXX) may also have influenced the writer. It prophesies, "I  
will set him as the firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth." There are  
two factors which suggest a connection between this verse and Heb 1:2b. First the  
word "appoint," which is lacking in Ps 2:8, is found here (κάγω πρωτότοκον θέσομαι  
αὐτόν; cf. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 39, n. 62). Second, the word "heir" (κληρονόμιον)  
overlaps in meaning with the word "firstborn" (πρωτότοκον). In the ancient Orient  
the firstborn was the one who gained the main part of the inheritance (Deut 21:15-  
17). Paul, in the Col 1:15 parallel, uses "firstborn" instead of "heir"; Hebrews uses  
"firstborn" in 1:6. This NT messianic title is generally traced to Ps 89:27. Cf. Meier,  
"Symmetry and Theology," 510.

<sup>38</sup>Attridge, *Hebrews*, 40. See also Meier, "Structure and Theology," 176, n. 34.  
<sup>39</sup>NA<sup>26</sup> no longer indicates a quotation, but see the UBS "Index of Allusions and  
Verbal Parallels."

<sup>40</sup>According to the "Index of Quotations" in UBS<sup>3</sup>, Ps 110:1 is quoted at Heb 1:13,  
while Ps 110:4 is quoted at Heb 5:6; 7:17, 21. It is important to note that there are  
numerous other allusions to Ps 110:1 in Hebrews: see 8:1; 10:12-13; 12:2; also to be  
included are the references to Christ's having passed into the heavens, such as 4:14  
and 7:26. It is thus understandable that some have gone to the extreme of calling  
Hebrews a midrash on Psalm 110; e.g., Buchanan, *Hebrews*, xix. D. F. Wells points  
out that there are numerous "lesser midrashim," such as 2:5-9 on Ps 8:4-6; 3:7-4:11 on  
Ps 95:7-11; 8:8-13 and 10:15-18 on Jer 31:31-34; 10:5-10 on Ps 40:6-8; 10:37,38 on Hab  
2:3,4; and 12:5-11 on Prov 3:11,12 (*The Person of Christ: A Biblical and Historical  
Analysis of the Incarnation* [Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1984] 187, n. 51).

<sup>41</sup>In his judicious evaluation of the varied proposed backgrounds to Hebrews, L.  
D. Hurst (*The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its Background of Thought* [SNTSMS 65;  
Cambridge: University Press, 1991] 133) writes: "How Auctor proceeded from Christ  
as the 'priest like Melchizedek' of Ps. 110:4 to a high priest who operates within a  
Levitical-type framework remains a riddle. Whether he made this jump himself or  
whether the jump had already been made by some external influence which acted  
upon him may be difficult to determine." Hurst may himself have earlier pointed  
toward the answer when he declared, "It is Ps. 110 which forms the impetus for  
Auctor's speculations rather than any alien notions of priesthood" (p. 49). Cf.  
Linders, "Rhetorical Structure," 392, n. 1.

The belief that v. 3 of the prologue to Hebrews consists of pre-existing hymnic material continues to be widespread.<sup>51</sup> The debilitating effect of this approach upon the interpretation of the prologue is well illustrated by the remark of G. Hughes:

Although we are unquestionably in touch with both the thoughts and words of the writer of the letter in these opening phrases, there is a great deal less certainty about this with regard to the succeeding statements of the prologue.<sup>52</sup>

He also suggests that, due to the extraneous material of v. 3, "too narrow an analysis is not in order."<sup>53</sup>

The strongest case for the presence of a hymnic fragment is that form of the theory which limits the borrowed material to what we have identified as the center of the exordium (v. 3a-b).<sup>54</sup> The chief arguments for viewing these lines as part of pre-existing hymnic material include:

1. The shift of subjects from God to Son in the transition from v. 2 to v. 3.<sup>55</sup>
2. The introduction of the material by ὅς (cp. 1 Tim 3:16; Phil 2:6).<sup>56</sup>
3. The presence of two NT *hapax legomena*: ἀπαύγασμα and χαρακτήρ.<sup>57</sup>
4. The asyndeton that occurs in v. 3c (καθαρισμὸν τῶν ἀμαρτιῶν ποιησάμενος), which in the words of Deichgräber "befremdlich wirkt."<sup>58</sup>

euphonious close. For the development of the inheritance motif, see 1:14; 3:1; 6:17; 9:15; 12:25-29.

<sup>50</sup>For bibliography on the "Christ-hymn" literature related to Heb 1:3, see Meier, "Symmetry and Theology," 524, n. 60 to n. 69. For bibliography on the form and content of the other NT hymns, see Attridge, *Hebrews*, 41, n. 81.

<sup>51</sup>See, for example, J. W. Thompson, *The Beginnings of Christian Philosophy: The Epistle to the Hebrews* (CBQ Monograph Series 13; Washington, D.C.: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1982) 129; Buchanan, *Hebrews*, 10. Buchanan wavers over whether the author composed this "verse of poetry" or borrowed it (cf. p. 8). The hymn fragment theory is common in evangelical circles as well—e.g., Kistemaker, *Hebrews*, 33; and Wells, *The Person of Christ*, 53. Black refers to Heb 1:3 as an "intrusion of poetic or hymnic language," and as possible "structural embedding" ("Hebrews 1:1-4," 180, 187).

<sup>52</sup>*Hebrews*, 6.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>54</sup>E.g., M. Rissi, *Die Theologie des Hebräerbriefs* (WUNT 41; Tübingen: Mohr, 1987) 46-49.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup>See Meier, "Structure and Theology," 526-27.

<sup>58</sup>Quoted in Rissi, *Theologie des Hebräerbriefs*, 46.

with Psalm 110.<sup>42</sup> Second, at the center of the author's argument concerning the Son as priest in Heb 5:1-10, he juxtaposes these two psalms: Psalm 2 is quoted in Heb 5:5 and Psalm 110 in Heb 5:6.

It is clear that these two psalms were linked in the writer's mind. And he wants the reader to make the same connection. The author helps us to do this in Heb 1:2b and Heb 1:3a by a balance of sound between the two corresponding verbs ἔθηκεν and ἐκράθισεν. It could be described as a kind of "echo assonance."<sup>43</sup> The inversion of the two consonants θ and κ in these parallel verbs is a happy coincidence.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, the two extremes of the chiasm serve as a framework around the rest of the structure. They contrast the Son with the two main figures of revelation in the pre-messianic era: prophets and angels.<sup>45</sup> God spoke by the prophets, but the speaking, especially with reference to the law, was mediated through angels.<sup>46</sup> This association of the prophetic word with angelic mediation is made explicit in Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin in Acts 7:38.<sup>47</sup> In a different light, Paul mentions the angelic mediation of the law in Gal 3:19. The writer of Hebrews, moving in this circle of thought, wants his readers to see in the Son a mediator superior to that whole prophetic-angelic system of the past.<sup>48</sup>

It is only in these two extremes of the structure that the Son is explicitly mentioned. The Son in his character is emphasized in vv. 1-2a by the use of the anarthrous υἱὸς. The same thing is accomplished in v. 4 by the focus on the superior name, which is "Son."<sup>49</sup>

<sup>42</sup>Meier attempts to show that the structure of the seven quotations of 1:5-14 reflects the circular symmetry of the seven christological statements in 1:2-4 ("Symmetry and Theology").

<sup>43</sup>For a discussion of "echo assonance," see Watson, "Chiasmic Patterns," in *Chiasmus*, 156.

<sup>44</sup>Watson, speaking of chiasmic structures in Hebrew poetry, says, "Occasionally the consonants of a word in the first colon are inverted to form another word in the second" (*ibid.*, 155). Root plays are found elsewhere in Hebrews, for example ἔμαθεν and ἔκραθεν in 5:8; cf. *MHT*, 3:107.

<sup>45</sup>The period begins and ends by asserting the ultimate significance of the revelation through the Son. The completion of the prophetic revelation with the word spoken through the Son and the superiority of his name to the rank and titles of the angels are parallel concepts. The revelation of God in the OT may be described by referring to the human messengers (the prophets) or the divine messengers (the angels) who delivered God's word" (Lane, *Hebrews* 1-8, 6). What needs to be added to these accurate remarks is that the center of the prologue also focuses on the motif of revelation.

<sup>46</sup>Cf. Heb 1:1 with Heb 2:2.

<sup>47</sup>For a summary of the relationship between Hebrews and the Stephen Story in Acts 7, see Hurst, *Hebrews*, 89-106.

<sup>48</sup>See Meier, "Symmetry and Theology," 522, n. 57.

<sup>49</sup>Cf. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 47. Meier argues, "It was just after the mention of 'Son' in 1.2a that the author first used *kleronomon*; the inclusion *kleronomeken* implies that *onoma* is to be understood as the title 'Son' ("Structure and Theology," 187). The careful reader will note the repetition of the "onoma" sound here at the

end of the prologue (κεκληρονόμηκεν ὄνομα), which brings the introduction to a

The cumulative weight of these arguments is greatly reduced by the recognition of the overall literary pattern of the prologue. The shift of subjects at v. 3 is an integral part of the author's theological agenda and literary design, coming at the center of the structure. The ὅς, unlike in 1 Tim 3:16, follows relative clauses introduced by ὅν and δι' οὗ, and it has a clear antecedent in the ἡμεῖς of v. 2. The asyndeton in v. 3c is accounted for by the movement from the center (D) of the structure to the start of the presentation of the C'B'A' members. This leaves the issue of the *hapax legomena*, and the possible source of these lines. The statement of Meier is to the point:

Put simply: *apaugasma* and *character* do occur in Jewish Alexandrian literature; they do not occur in any NT hymn. The choice of the more likely background seems clear.<sup>59</sup>

In light of the very careful construction of the sentence, the unique combination of vocabulary, and the complex interrelationship of the themes with the balance of the epistle, it is highly unlikely that the writer has made use of a pre-existing hymn.<sup>60</sup> Verse 3 is not an extraneous hymnic fragment but instead an integral part of the unit.<sup>61</sup>

#### IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STUDY OF HEBREWS<sup>62</sup>

The prologue in its entirety has been deliberately structured to prepare the reader for the main themes of the treatise.<sup>63</sup> Its chiasmic structure draws particular attention to the threefold function of the Son as prophet, priest, and king. Viewing the Son's roles under this rubric can be useful for the study of the rest of Hebrews. The following observations serve to illustrate this point.

<sup>59</sup>Meier, "Symmetry and Theology," 527. Robinson argues that all three statements have a common background in Wis 7:25-27 ("Literary Structure," 184). His arguments, however, are not conclusive.

<sup>60</sup>See, for example, Robinson, "The Literary Structure of Hebrews 1:1-4," 178-86; Frankowski, "Early Christian Hymns," 183-94; Meier, "Symmetry and Theology," 504-33, esp. 524-28; and Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 7-8.

<sup>61</sup>In response to the view that v. 3 is both a borrowed fragment and an integral part of the prologue, note the statement of Meier ("Symmetry and Theology," 528): "To explain such a neat fit one must again appeal to heavy redactional activity by our author. Indeed, for such a snug fit, the redactional activity would have to be so heavy that the supposed traditional material would, for all practical purposes, disappear into the composition of the author of the Epistle."

<sup>62</sup>For bibliography on the "programmatic significance" of the prologue, see Atridge, *Hebrews*, 36, n. 11.

<sup>63</sup>Meier's remark on the literary structure of the entire epistle is particularly appropriate for the prologue: "Its intricate structure and dense theology are so tightly interwoven that an investigation of Hebrews' literary design inevitably draws one into the heart of its theology" ("Structure and Theology," 168).

#### A. THE SON AS PROPHET

The emphasis at the center (D) and at both extremes (A/A') reveals the main point to be the Son's role as God's final and supreme agent of revelation.<sup>64</sup> The implicit comparison with the prophets points to Christ as the ultimate medium of revelation (A). The main purpose of the threefold statement about the Son at the center is not to define his ontological relationship with the Father, though this is done implicitly. It is rather to stress the divine-revelatory capacity of the Son (D).<sup>65</sup> The comparison with angels is not intended to refute a false worship of angels but to set forth the superiority of the message in the Son over the angelic-mediated word of the past (A').<sup>66</sup>

The OT law was mediated through angels; but the Son is better than the angels (v. 4). Hence his revelation is better. This last point sets the stage for the first section of the epistle, where the Son is further compared with angels (Heb 1:5-14). It also prepares the reader for the crucial teaching concerning a change in the law, which will be argued in the central portion of the treatise.

In light of the Son's revelatory function, the very prominent warning sections of Hebrews are better understood. They are not mere asides or hortatory interruptions. Rather they are a call to respond properly to the Son as the ultimate revelation from God.

The first warning (2:1-4) is a direct application of the prologue to the readers. The Son reveals the way of salvation. It is for this reason that

we must pay more careful attention . . . to what we have heard. . . .

For if the message spoken by angels was binding . . . how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation which was first announced by the Lord . . . (2:1-3).

This initial warning is programmatic. The rest follow the pattern: "Christ has spoken . . . we must listen." The next warning grows out of the comparison between Christ and Moses in Heb 3:1-6 and extends to 4:13.<sup>67</sup> It is based on the exhortation of Ps 95:7-11, "Today, if you will hear his voice. . . ." Only by responding

<sup>64</sup>Welch's comment is appropriate: "Chiasms may often supply the needed element of order, or coherent structure, which draws to one's attention the central meaning and fundamental artistry of the writing being studied" (*Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 248).

<sup>65</sup>Black describes the prologue as not only an introduction to the epistle but also as "a meditative reflection on the eschatological theophany affected through the Son" ("Hebrews 1:1-4," 193).

<sup>66</sup>Cf. Heb 2:1-4 and Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 8-9.

<sup>67</sup>An unusual title is assigned to the Son in 3:1; here, and only here, he is called τὸν ἀπόστολον. This is another reference to the Son's work as messenger. In 1:14 the writer had described angels as ministering spirits sent (ἀποστολλόμενα) to serve those who will inherit salvation. Christ is superior in this function, for he is *the* apostle.



properly to the message of Christ can the Hebrews avoid the fate of the ancient Israelites. The third warning (5:11-6:12) begins with a rebuke for being slow to learn (νῶθεοί . . . ταῖς ἀκοαῖς). It ends with a call for the readers not to be "lazy" (νῶθεοί, 6:12). The Son has spoken and the recipients of his message must have ears that hear and lead to obedience. In 10:26-39 there is a warning very similar to the initial one (2:1-4). There the law was described as the message through angels, here it is the law of Moses. Those who rejected this law died without mercy. How much worse will be the punishment of the one who rejects the Son? The final warning comes in Heb 12:25-29. Once again it is immediately preceded by a comparison between the Mosaic message and the message of the Son. Heb 12:25 contains a good summary of all the warnings of the epistle: "See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks." The writer is deeply concerned that his readers willingly respond to the Son as the one in whom God now speaks. This accounts for the emphasis on the Son's role as God's spokesman in the prologue, and for the numerous carefully placed warnings throughout the composition.<sup>68</sup>

### B. THE SON AS KING

The remaining parallels in the prologue stress the Son's role as exalted King (B/B) and powerful Priest (C/C'). The prologue emphasizes three important points about the Son's role as king: it is the Son who is king; he is king with reference to creation; and he is king with reference to redemption. The Son's right as royal heir is related to creation. He is the appointed heir because it was through him that God made the worlds (v. 2c). This will be reinforced in 1:10-12 when again in the context of the Son's reign his creative activity is cited.

Yet the author also associates the Son's reign with his redemptive work. It is upon completion of the atonement that the Son takes his seat at the right hand of God (v. 3d). Understanding the Son as King in this dual capacity prepares us for what immediately follows. Heb 1:5-14 consists of a series of OT quotations which serve to prove the Son's superiority over angels. They are primarily verses of kingship or enthronement. Much like the prologue, the series begins with an emphasis on the Son's reign as appointed messianic "Son" (vv. 5-6), moves to an emphasis on his reign as the eternal One (vv. 7-12), and then returns to his enthronement as the exalted messiah (v. 13).

In Heb 2:5-9 the author develops the Son's role as heir in light of his incarnation. The question being answered is to whom has God subjected "the world to come"? This question might be reworded, "who will reign in the kingdom of God?" We are then given an

<sup>68</sup>Lane, in summarizing G. H. Guthrie's text-linguistic approach to Hebrews, correctly notes that all of the warning passages "reflect the same basic admonition to be responsive to the word of God" (*Hebrews* 1-8, xcviij).

exposition of Psalm 8. Though people have been entrusted with a kingly role over the creation, we do not yet see this reign fully realized (2:8). But we do see Jesus. Having become man to die on our behalf, he is now crowned with glory and honor (2:9). This turns our attention back to his royal enthronement. On the basis of his incarnation and suffering the Son has become the representative heir of the new creation. The result, for the many sons who are led to glory by the "captain" of their salvation, is a kingdom which cannot be shaken (12:28).

### C. THE SON AS PRIEST

Christ's priestly function will be the author's central doctrinal theme. In this light the association in the prologue of the Son's creation work (C) with his work of dealing with sin (C') is of special significance. Lindars has argued that the real issue at stake among the readers is that they have "lost confidence to draw near to the throne of grace because of the barrier of sin."<sup>69</sup> In this light the rhetorical impact of these parallel lines in the prologue becomes clear: the one who was powerful enough to be the agent of creation is the very one who in his own person has effectively dealt with the barrier of sin.

<sup>69</sup>Lindars, "Rhetorical Structure," 394.