

THE LITERARY STRUCTURE OF HEBREWS

1:1-4

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A feature of recent literary study of the New Testament has been the various attempts to discover Christian hymns, or fragments thereof, embedded in the texts of a number of books, especially the epistles. R. P. Martin offers the following list of "putative hymns" having a christological theme: Hebrews 1:3; Colossians 1:15-20; 1 Timothy 3:16; John 1:1-14; 1 Peter 1:18-21; 2:21-25; 3:18-21; Philippians 2:6-11.¹

The detection and classification of these "hymnic pieces" naturally depend on certain criteria. Martin, for instance, proposes the following: "the presence of introductory formulas; the use of a rhythmical style and an unusual vocabulary which are different from the style and language of the surrounding context of the letter in which the verses appear; the presence of theological concepts (especially Christological doctrines) which are expressed in language which is exalted and liturgical. . . ."²

A more recent monograph by Jack T. Sanders, which endeavours to get behind "the New Testament christological hymns" to their (gnostic?) historical religious background, makes use of the following passages: Philippians 2:6-11; Colossians 1:15-20; Ephesians 2:14-16; 1 Timothy 3:16; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Hebrews 1:3; Prologue of John.³ As criteria for the identification of such passages as hymns Sanders uses features such as the presence of an abundance of participles, the general absence of the article, an opening relative (*hos*) or equivalent, and *parallelismus membrorum*.⁴

Hebrews 1:3 appears in both these lists, largely on the strength of the suggestion of Günther Bornkamm (following earlier suggestions of Ernst Lohmeyer and Ernst Käsemann) that the

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1. *Carmen Christi. Philippians ii.5-11 in recent interpretation and in the setting of early Christian worship*, Cambridge University Press, 1967, p. 19.
 2. *id.* p. 18.
 3. *The New Testament Christological Hymns. Their historical religious background*. Cambridge University Press, 1971.
 4. *id.* e.g. pp. 10, 11, 16.

lines should be arranged in a hymnic form. This is Sanders' arrangement of the verse:

Who, being the reflection of his glory and the stamp of
his essence,
Bearing everything by the word of his power,
Having made purification for sins,
Sat down on the right hand of the majesty on high.

The case for considering this verse "a confessional hymn of early Christianity, quite similar in some respects to the original behind I Tim. iii. 16 and I Pet. iii. 18f., 22", is put by Sanders in these words:⁵

One notes the opening *hos*, which likely tied the hymn originally to a preceding thanksgiving, the presence of participial predications employing substantive participles without the article, and the relation of the foregoing and following words to the other hymns being considered here. . . . These observations thus strengthen the judgment that there is present here a portion of a Christological hymn similar to the others considered. According to Bornkamm, Heb. i. 4 may in fact rely on a following part of the original, but v. 2 'is no more than an isolated Christ predication . . . , and i. 5ff. has already dissolved too much into the theological argumentation'. This judgment seems to be sound, and allows the opening *hos* of v. 3 to be, as the comparison with Phil. ii. 6; Col. i. 15; I Tim. iii. 16; and also Eph. ii. 14 would lead one to expect, the beginning of the hymn.

The validity of the criteria employed in this kind of hymn-detection is not beyond question.⁶ However, it is not necessary to discuss these criteria here, as the purpose of this article is to indicate another literary feature of the opening paragraph of Hebrews, which, in any case, should be taken into account by those who employ literary tests as a basis for source criticism. This feature, while not necessarily excluding the possibility of Hebrews 1:3 being a fragment from another source, renders such a hypothesis less attractive.

5. *id.* p. 19f.

6. See C. F. D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament*, Black, London, 1962, p. 25f., who regards as inconclusive the criteria for considering (*inter alia*) Philippians 2:6-11, Colossians 1:15-20 and I Peter 1:3ff. as hymns. See also C. K. Barrett, *The Prologue of St. John's Gospel*, The Athlone Press of the University of London, 1971, p. 27: "The Prologue is . . . one piece of solid theological writing. The evangelist wrote it all." He earlier refutes the views of Bernard, Bultmann, Haenchen, Käsemann and others that the Prologue is a hymn in verse, pp. 13ff.

Before discussing this literary feature, one comment may be offered about the analysis of Sanders and others. Hebrews 1:3 is, from a literary point of view, not so distinctive in its context as Sanders' argument might suggest, and as the hymn hypothesis would in general seem to require. For the relative pronoun which begins the verse—and which is taken to mark “the beginning of the hymn”—is the third such pronoun in succession whose antecedent is “the Son”: “*whom* God appointed heir of all things, through *whom* also he made the worlds, *who* . . . sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high”. While it is only in the third relative clause that the Son becomes the subject, there is within verse 3 a perfectly natural reference to the original subject, God, by means of the person pronoun “his” (*autou*—twice). The use of this pronoun requires some such antecedent as the opening words of the paragraph supply.

At best, then, it is only by comparison with other hypothetical hymns in the New Testament that Hebrews 1:3 wears the appearance of a candidate for a similar honour; we are not dealing with a hypothesis arising from any lack of continuity in, or integrity with, the context where the verse occurs. The structure of the whole opening paragraph of Hebrews, 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 discussion.

The Opening Theme of Hebrews

The first two chapters of Hebrews deal generally with the superiority of God's “Son” to all other and previous revelation. This theme is roundly stated in the opening paragraph, 1:1-4, which thus forms a prologue to the first main division of the epistle, and perhaps to the epistle as a whole. A fairly literal translation of this paragraph, preserving the order of the Greek grammatical constructions, is as follows:

- (1) In many portions and in many ways long ago having spoken to the fathers by the prophets, God
- (2) at the end of these days spoke to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom also he made the worlds;
- (3) who, being the radiance of his glory and stamp of his being, and bearing the universe by the word of his power, having made purification for sins sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high,
- (4) having become as much better than the angels as he excels them in the name he has inherited.

The paragraph begins and ends with an assertion of the superiority of the Son to other modes of revelation. Angels do not occupy the same prominence in modern Christian theology as they

did in Jewish and New Testament theology, and as a consequence the casual modern reader may find the reference to angels in verse 4 an odd anti-climax. But in fact "the angels" stand for the whole Old Testament dispensation no less than do "the prophets", and verse 4 thus rounds off the prologue with appropriate balance. The Old Testament dispensation can be characterized as either prophetic (with reference to the human messengers) or as angelic (with reference to the divine messengers). It was not God himself speaking immediately whom men heard in the days of old, and not yet his "Son", but always a "messenger of the LORD", an angel, who brought the divine word to the prophet, to be declared to the people. The principal instance of this in the Old Testament scriptures was the angelic mediation of the law to Moses, the greatest of the prophets, but the concept was not confined to the giving of the law.⁷ Thus, the fulfilment of the prophetic word in the Son, and the excellence of his name over that of the angels, are parallel concepts.

That the role of the angels is no slight or incidental aspect of the revelatory economy is borne out by what follows as the argument of the epistle is launched. The greater part of the first chapter is taken up by the necessary scriptural evidence for the superiority of the Son over the angels (1:5-13), and their role is recapitulated in the closing verse. This statement shows how significant was that role, for they were the 'apostles' of the Old Testament dispensation: "ministering spirits sent out (*apostolomena*) to serve for the sake of those who should inherit salvation."

"Entering into the inheritance of salvation" is the central theme of the new revelation, and the contrast between "the word spoken through angels" and "the salvation spoken through the Lord" (2:3) is carried on into the opening exhortation of chapter 2.⁸ This "word spoken through angels" is usually taken to refer only to the giving of the law at Sinai, but the reference may well be to the whole Old Testament revelation, since "just recompense" was to follow rejection of the word of the prophet no less than of the commandment of the law.⁹ The introductory theme of

7. For the mediation of angels at Sinai see Acts 7:38 and Galatians 3:19. For their wider role in the O.T. see, e.g., Genesis 18 and 19:1, Exodus 3:2, Isaiah 63:9. For the contemporary view of angelic mediation in revelation see John 12:29, Acts 23:9, Revelation 22:8, 9.

8. Cf. 2:1, *ta akousthenta*, "the things heard" *sc.* in the new dispensation. This writer does not use the term *euaggelion*—along with some other NT writers—perhaps deliberately avoiding it as politically tainted through its use in the emperor cult? See TWNT, ed. Kittel, *sub voc.* *Euaggelion* does not occur in the singular in the sense of 'proclamation in our literature prior to the N.T.

Hebrews may be said to conclude with the exhortation of 3:1, where, after further evidences of the superiority of Jesus to angels in verses 5, 7, 9 and 16, the readers are bidden to "consider Jesus, the apostle of our confession", where "apostle" (*apostolos*) is clearly in contrast to the angels "sent forth" (*apostellomena*) in former times.

This coherent and well constructed argument of the first two chapters of Hebrews constrains us to look again at the structure of the prologue, and to recognize therein at least the emphatic adumbration, in the first and last verses, of the theme of supreme revelation through the Son.

The Structure of the Prologue (1:1-4)

Having noted the way in which verse 4 answers to verse 1—'the angels being excelled by the Son' answering to 'the prophetic word being succeeded by the Son's word'—we may now consider the central core of the paragraph, in which certain attributes and privileges of the Son are enumerated.

Some commentators are content merely to observe here "seven facts stated about the Son of God",¹⁰ without suggesting any particular pattern or progress in the series of statements. James Moffatt makes no observation other than that the "also" (*kai*) in verse 2b "especially suggests a correspondence between this and the preceding statement".¹¹ Gunther Bornkamm, though on the look-out for poetic structure, sees verse 2 as "no more than an isolated Christ predication", apparently unconnected with the verse following.¹²

But we have here much more than a haphazard series of seven items about the significance of Jesus. In the first place, the series begins with an affirmation about the Son derived from Psalm 2, and concludes with one from Psalm 110. The close correspondence between these two 'coronation' psalms is well known,¹³ and the royal figure in each was already equated in Jewish theology. Secondly, the intervening affirmations, though deriving from an entirely different milieu from Psalms 2/110, all relate to the figure of the divine Word or Wisdom as it appears

9. E.g. Deuteronomy 18:19, Jeremiah 29:17-19.

10. So F. F. Bruce, in *The New London Commentary*, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1964, p. 3.

11. In *The International Critical Commentary*, Edinburgh, 1924, p. 5.

12. In Sanders, *op. cit.*; see note (5).

13. See Aage Bentzen, *King and Messiah*, Lutterworth, London, 1955, pp. 16-25, and Helmer Ringgren, *The Messiah in the Old Testament*, S.C.M., London, 1956, pp. 11-15.

in the Old Testament or Apocrypha.¹⁴ Can we detect a more detailed relation in structure between the Psalms 2/110 affirmations and the Word/Wisdom affirmations?

If we begin with the point noted by Moffatt, the writer's first concern is to press an identity between the figure of Psalm 2 and the figure of the divine Word:

Whom he appointed heir of all things,
through whom also he made the worlds.

Moffatt sees the argument here as merely offering a reasonable explanation: "what the Son was to possess was what he had been instrumental in making." This element need not be denied, but more impressive is the bold claim itself that the Royal Son of Psalm 2 is none other than the divine Logos, the agent of creation. Then, in the second part of this section, the writer claims a similar, and similarly arresting, identification: the divine Wisdom is none other than the Royal Priest of Psalm 110. It is true that a different style is employed in each of these equations, but in each case there is the startling effect of claiming an identity between two disparate figures. In the first equation, two relative clauses are juxtaposed, and their nexus is contained in the (adversative?) *kai* of the second clause:

Whom he appointed heir of all things,
through *whom* also (*kai*) he made the worlds.

In the second equation the two parts are more elaborate, with three terms in the first part and two terms in the second:

Who, *being* the radiance of his glory and stamp of his being,
and *bearing* the universe by the word of his power,
having made purification for sins, *sat down* at the right
hand . . .

The three terms descriptive of the divine Wisdom are attached to present participles ("being" . . . "bearing"), which are to be taken as adverbial participles of concession,¹⁵ and are placed between the relative pronoun and the main clause whose two

14. The clearest direct link between the various descriptions and titles is probably that between the first two expressions in verse 3 ("radiance of his glory" and "stamp of his being") which are twin designations of Wisdom in the *Wisdom of Solomon* 7:25, 26, virtually quoted by our author here.

15. For concessive participles which refer to "a fact which is unfavourable to the occurrence of the event denoted by the principal verb", see E. D. Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek*, Edinburgh, p. 170, and also C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*, C.U.P., 1953, p. 102. See also Moule, p. 178, for adversative *kai*, as in verse 2.

affirmations about the Royal Priest are expressed with an aorist indicative ("sat down") and a contingent aorist participle ("having made purification"). In both styles, a deliberate contrast is achieved.

The structure of the section thus appears as a chiasmus in the way the two striking equations are arranged:¹⁶

Whom he appointed heir of all things,
 Through whom also he made the worlds:
 Who, being the radiance of his glory and stamp of his being
 and bearing the universe by the word of his power,
 Having made purification for sins
 sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high.

Since there is an already established identity between the Royal Son and the Royal Priest on the one hand, and between the divine Word and the divine Wisdom on the other hand, the chiasmus is of the order:¹⁷

Royal Son = divine Word or A = B
 divine Wisdom = Royal Priest Bi = Ai

Thus, the series of seven terms relating to the Son, which we noted at the beginning, is apparently not the main stylistic feature of these two verses. If the number seven is intentional at all, it is best regarded as a stylistic elaboration subordinate to the four main figures of the chiasmic structure. Items 3, 4 and 5 of the seven all clearly relate to the figure of the divine Wisdom, and are certainly to be taken in close association with each other. I incline to the opinion that "bearing the universe by the word of his power" is derived, like the two companion phrases, from *Wisdom 7*, where verse 27, for example, says that Wisdom, "being one, has power to do all things, and, remaining in herself, renews the universe".

16. For "rhetorical elegances" in Hebrews, see William Leonard, *The Authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Vatican Polyglot Press, Rome, 1939, p. 129f. Dr. Leonard includes instances of chiasmus, though not from this passage.

17. To the extent to which the figures of Psalm 2 and Psalm 110 already coalesced in the mind of the writer of Hebrews (and also the concepts of Word and Wisdom), this chiasmus could be represented more simply as:

Messiah = Word/Wisdom
 Word/Wisdom = Messiah

"For the close relation of Word and Wisdom in Jewish Theology, see Helmer Ringgren, *Word and Wisdom*, Lund, 1947, and J. C. Rylaarsdam, *Revelation in Jewish Wisdom Literature*, Chicago, 1946, p. 89."

Chiasmus takes many forms,¹⁸ and if its presence as a chiasmus of ideas be allowed in Hebrews 1:2b,3, the degree of stylistic variety in giving expression to the corresponding items would be of special interest. Such a style, variegated rather than precise, would accord with the style of the epistle generally. The chiasmic structure might even be taken to extend to the whole paragraph, so as to include the correspondence between verses 1, 2a, and verse 4:

1. In many portions and in many ways long ago having spoken to the fathers
2. by the prophets, God / at the end of these days spoke to us by a Son,
 Whom he appointed heir of all things,
 Through whom also he made the worlds:
3. Who, being the radiance of his glory and stamp of his being and bearing the universe by the word of his power,
 Having made purification for sins
 sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high,
4. Having become as much better than the angels
 as he excels them in the name he has inherited.

More idiomatically, and giving the *kai* of verse 2 and the present participles of verse 3 their adversative and concessive effect, we may render the passage as follows:

In many portions and many ways God spoke of old to the fathers by the prophets, and in this final age he has spoken to us by the Son whom he has appointed 'heir of all things', and who yet is the one through whom he created the worlds. Yes,

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18. Frequently a simple verbal inversion, as in Hebrews 4:16 (cited by Dr. Leonard): *hina labōmen eleos kai charin heurōmen*. But a more elaborate chiasmus can be seen in the somewhat parallel "hymn" at Colossians 1:15-20:

A. *hos estin eikōn tou theou . . . prōtotokos pases ktiseōs, hoti . . .*
 B. *kai autos estin pro pantōn . . .*

B. . . *kai autos estin he kephale tou sōmatos tes ekklesias.*
 A. *hos estin arche, prōtotokos ek tōn nekrōn . . . hoti . . .*

Here the parallelism is mainly stylistic, with the first AB lines referring to the role of the Son in creation, and the following BA lines referring to his role in the new creation. Hebrews 1:1-4 does not have such precise stylistic parallelism, but exhibits parallelism of thought.

For a more extended treatment (428 pages!) see the doctoral dissertation of N. W. Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament*, University of North Carolina Press, 1942. Lund does not, however, deal at all with Hebrews, and he takes an entirely different view of the structure of Colossians 1:15-20. See also the remarks on Chiasmus by C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*, p. 193f.

this Son, though the radiance of God's glory and stamp of his being, and though upholding the universe by his word of power, yet made purification for sins and 'sat down at the right hand' of the Majesty on high, raised as far above the angels as the title ('Son') which he has inherited is superior to theirs.

It remains only to say that, if such a chiastic structure is indeed the pattern of Hebrews 1:1-4, it becomes rather unlikely that verse 3 should be prised off and treated as a putative hymn-fragment. If there is a hymn in the background, it should at least begin with verse 2b. The criteria of style are insufficient to separate verse 2b from verse 3, and the allusions to Psalm 2 and Psalm 110 firmly sandwich the whole section together. Some confirmation of this may be seen in the way quotations from the same two psalms sandwich the seven scriptural proofs in the immediately following verses 5 to 13. There is certainly nothing foreign to Hebrews in the subject matter of verse 3. The allusion to Psalm 110—the priest who sat down at God's right hand—is crucial to the epistle, and if the author had not expressed verse 3 in the way he does, he would have been bound to express the same thought in some other way.