



LITERARY UNITY OF HEBREWS 1:1-4

“The Preeminence of Christ”

- A The Son’s preeminence demonstrated in God’s final word in Him (1-2a)
- B The Son’s exaltation as universal heir of all creation (2b)
- C The Son’s agency in the creation of the ages (2c)
- X THE DIVINE NATURE OF THE SON (3a-b)**
- C’ The Son sustains all things by His word (3c)
- B’ The Son’s exaltation after His purification for sins (3d-e)
- A’ The Son’s preeminence demonstrated in His name above the angels (4)

Figure 1

The literary structure of Hebrews 1:1-4 is an excellent example of how an author may weave intricate, concentric symmetry between rhetorical form and his thematic content, between the structure and his theological meaning.

Analysis of the Literary Structure

The framing panels A//A’ enunciate emphatically the theme of the Son’s supremacy in both revelation (vv. 1-2a), and His exalted position over the angels (v. 4). The sentence in Greek begins and ends by assessing the ultimate significance of God’s revelation through His Son.

The completion of God’s prophetic revelation with the word spoken through His Son, and the superiority of His name above the rank and titles of the angels, are parallel concepts. God’s revelation in the Hebrew Scriptures (commonly called the “Old Testament”) may be described by referring to the human messengers (the prophets), or the divine messengers (the angels), all of which delivered God’s Word.

The reference to the angels in A’ as the agents of divine revelation in comparison developed in A to the prophets, is not as abrupt as it might appear. Those who are familiar with the prominent role assigned to angels functioning as vehicles of divine revelation will immediately make this link.

In the Hebrew Scriptures the angels are ascribed a broad role in God's revelation and redemption (*e.g.*, Ex. 3:2; Isa. 63:9). Scriptures state that Moses gave the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures) which were mediated through angels (*cf.* Acts 7:38-39, 53; Gal. 3:19). This concept was also understood by the writer and his readers of the Epistle to the Hebrews (Heb. 2:2). God's revelation of old as "the message declared by angels" in Hebrews 2:2 is determinative for the proper interpretation for the angelic reference in Hebrews 1:4 that balances the prophetic revelation in A.

In summary, the opening paragraph (one sentence in Greek) is framed by a twofold reference to the superiority of the Son as the bearer of the supreme revelation of God, both to the prophets and to angels. The shift from the prophets (A) to the angels (A') is deliberate. The writer's intention is to announce as the subject of his first major section (Heb. 1:5—2:18) the Son's superiority over the present ruling angels of the inhabitant world (Heb. 2:5).

Moving toward and away from the central core of the chiasmus (B/C/X/C'/B'), our author amplifies the identification of the Son (vv. 2b-3). He does this by ascribing seven qualifying statements concerning the Son. These are as follows:

- The Son's heirship of all things (2b)
- The Son's agency of creation of the ages (2c)
- The Son's divine nature as to its glory (3a)
- The Son's divine nature as to its exact representation (3b)
- The Son's administration (3:c)
- The Son's sacrifice (3d)
- The Son's exaltation (3e)

In these seven aspects of the Son, we have God's portrait of Jesus, the Son. What a prelude that has opened this epistle!

The central core demonstrates a skillful arrangement of affirmations ascribed to the Son. It begins with a predication based upon Psalm 2, "whom He appointed heir of everything" (B, *cf.* Ps. 2:8), and concludes with one derived from Psalm 110, "He sat down at the right hand" (B'; *cf.* Ps. 110:1). In each instance, the allusion is to an enthronement Psalm, celebrating a royal figure.

Flanking the very core of the chiasmus (X) is the Son's agency in the creation of the ages (C) and His sustaining of those elements (C'). The apex of the structure underscores the Son's divine nature with a two-fold description. The first amplifies the Son's identification with God as to "the radiance of His [God's] glory". This term applies particularly well to the Son's incarnation: "We have beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten Son from the Father" (Jn.

1:14). The concept is not so much that of the glory of the Son's deity shining through His humanity, but of God's glory being manifested in the perfection of His manhood (cf. 2 Cor. 4:6; Heb. 10:7, 9).

The inscrutable glory of God streams forth in the Son who is the radiance of that glory. The term "glory" is most simply defined as "manifested/revealed" excellence. Thus, the Son is the outshining of God's excellence, or may be paraphrase by "He is the One who shows how excellent/magnificent God is".

The Son's radiance of God's glory is nothing less than the essential glory of God Himself. This corresponds to the Shekinah glory that in the Old Testament signified the very presence of God in the midst of His people. It was the radiant glory of the LORD's presence which settled as a luminous cloud on Mount Sinai when Moses went up to meet with God (Ex. 24:15ff.). The same glory was seen at the door of the Tabernacle when the LORD "used to speak with Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex. 33:9ff.). It was, moreover, the glory manifested at Christ's transfiguration, again accompanied by the resplendent cloud of the Shekinah (Mk. 9:2ff.). The transfiguration demonstrated that this glory belonged to the Son, and was not simply a reflected glory. The brilliant light, brighter than the midday sun, seen by Paul at his encounter with the Risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, was the same radiant glory of the divine presence (Acts 9:3; 22:6; 26:13).

The second aspect of the Son's divine nature is expressed in that He is the very image of the substance of God. The Greek word translated "exact representation", occurring here only in the New Testament, was used for an engraved character or the impress made by a die or a seal. This word underscores more emphatically than another Greek word used elsewhere to denote Christ's "image" of God (cf. 2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15). The principal idea intended here is that of exact correspondence.

The Son is the exact representation "of His nature". This same Greek term is used in Hebrews 11:1, and rendered usually as "substance". Here, it means essence, being, or substance. Thus the Son has the very being, essence, or substance of God, and so He is God. Whoever possesses the very nature of God is divine.

Of the two expression pertaining to the Son's divine nature, "the radiance of His glory" and "the exact representation of His nature", the former implies the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father. The latter balances the former, and implies the distinctness of the Incarnate Son who, as the Light and the Truth is the revealer of God to mankind (Jn. 8:12; 9:5; 14:6).

In conclusion, Jesus as the Son in this epistle's prologue is held up as the all-excellent "Son" by virtue of His divine nature and works. All things pale in significance in comparison to Him. Jesus is found alone because of His greater glory in that He is the final revelation of God. We are not to seek signs concerning the will of God, for He has revealed and sealed His least revelation in His Son, Jesus Christ.

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