

Overview and 1:1-4

Context of the Epistle to the Hebrews

It's always helpful to have some idea of where a Bible book fits in the larger historical context (chart).

The *author* is not known, and there is no consistent early tradition. Paul is sometimes suggested. The author knows Timothy, Paul's associate (13:23), his ideas often reflect Pauline concepts (as we saw with Colossians), and he ends his epistle as Paul often does, "Grace be with you all" (but Revelation also ends with this expression). But if you read the epistle in Greek and compare it with any of Paul's letters, the difference is striking. Paul's Greek is straightforward and often reflects Hebrew syntax. Hebrews is the most elegant and classical Greek in the NT. In addition, Hebrews always quotes the LXX, while Paul often translates directly from the Hebrew, again consistent with the view that the writer of Hebrews is much more Greek than Paul.¹

The *recipients* are traditionally identified as Hebrew believers. The Chester Beatty papyrus, dating to AD 200, as well as the fourth century uncials (Sinaiticus, Alexandrinus, Vaticanus) contain the title, "To the Hebrews." The author is urging his readers to follow the Lord Jesus "outside the camp" (13:19) to a better sanctuary and sacrifices, suggesting that they are tempted to mute their testimony in order to stay within the synagogue.²

The *destination* is probably in Rome. We have already mentioned the greeting from "those from Italy" (13:24)³ and the extensive quotation of the epistle by Clement of Rome. The notion of Jewish believers in Rome fits particularly well with history. In AD 49 the emperor Claudius expelled Jews from Rome, according to the historian Suetonius, because of unrest brought about by one "Chrestus."⁴ Classical Judaism was a protected religion under Roman law, and Claudius' antagonism may have been focused on Jewish believers and the unrest that they attracted (as in Paul's travels). This event would have given a strong motive to Jewish believers to hide their faith as much as possible and blend in with the more accepted traditional Jewish worshippers.⁵

The persecution under Claudius also suggests a *date* for the epistle. The writer recalls "former days" in which they endured persecution:

Heb 10:32 But call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions; 33 Partly, whilst ye were made a gazingstock both by

1 W. Manson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1951 (Baird Lectures, 1949, available at <http://www.clydeserver.com/bairdtrust/node/46>) in fact argues that the book is the mature representation of the faith of the Hellenistic Jews represented by Stephen in Acts.

2 Barmby in the Pulpit Commentary notes a possible distinction between "Hebrews," "those who adhered to the Hebrew language in public worship and to the national Hebrew customs and traditions," and "Hellenists," Jews (like Stephen) who were more assimilated to the Greek language and culture. If this distinction is applicable here, our letter is to believing but traditional Hebrews tempted to hide or even deny their faith to reduce persecution from their unbelieving fellow Hebrews.

3 Though the expression could simply mean "the Italians," and thus suggest a Roman *origin* for the letter; Barmby in the Pulpit Commentary gives as examples Acts 10:23, τῶν ἀπὸ Ἰόππης: 12:1, τῶν ἀπὸ τῆς ἐκκλησίας: 17:13, οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Θεσσαλονίκης: 21:27, οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Ἀσίας Ἰουδαῖοι.

4 Suetonius, *Life of Claudius*, 25.4 (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:abo:phi.1348.015:25>): "He banished from Rome all the Jews, who were continually making disturbances at the instigation of one Chrestus."

5 Manson makes a provocative case that the epistle to the Romans was focused on Jewish believers (ch. 6). Among other details, he points out that in ch. 2-3, the Gentiles are "they," but the Jews are "you." See also Rom 7:1.

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reproaches and afflictions; and partly, whilst ye became companions of them that were so used. 34 For ye had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance.

A good candidate for this event is the events of AD 49, making the epistle later than that date. But it cannot be as late as AD 70, when Titus destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, forcing an end to the Jewish sacrificial worship, which the writer describes as still ongoing:

Heb 10:3 But in those sacrifices there is a remembrance again made of sins every year.

The *setting* is an assembly of believers. The last chapter contains three references to “them that have the rule over you,” more literally, “those preeminent among you,” suggesting a community with recognized leadership:

Heb 13:7 Remember **them which have the rule over you**, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation.

Heb 13:17 Obey **them that have the rule over you**, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.

Heb 13:24 Salute all **them that have the rule over you**, and all the saints.

And the exhortations of chapter 10 make most sense within a community that gathers regularly:

Heb 10:24 And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: 25 **Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together**, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.

So we have an epistle by a highly cultured Greek, written to a local assembly of predominantly Jewish Christians, probably in Rome around AD 60. Recent pressures against believing Jews are tempting them to merge into the unbelieving Jewish community and hide their distinctive beliefs. The letter is written to urge them to take their stand with their Lord “outside the camp” of Israel, leaving the shadows embraced by conventional Judaism and cleaving to the reality of the crucified and risen Messiah.

This is a message that we need to make our own. Then, the choice was between following our Lord and blending in with rabbinic Judaism, which had made its peace with Rome. Today, it is between following our Lord and blending in with generic “Christian” ideas in their peace with pagan society. The major denominations, and increasingly evangelical churches as well, have joined one or another wing of the political system. Our Lord calls us, as he called the first readers of this epistle, to come without the camp, inspired by his example and strengthened by faith.

Structure

The structure of the book has long been a puzzle, and every commentator has his own approach. Some focus on the frequent use of “better than” comparing our Lord with OT institutions.⁶ Other see Psalm 110 as the key,⁷ while still others emphasize the interchange between exhortation (notably the five warning passages) and exposition.⁸ All of these, and others, provide excellent insights that we will examine as we proceed.

6 R.T. France among many others

7 Most recently Jared Compton, *Psalm 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015.

8 G.H. Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews*. Leiden: Brill, 1994.

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Consider first the complementary distribution of three families of words: angel, words related to faith (faith, faithful, believe, unbelief), and words related to priests (priest, high priest, priesthood) (Figure 1, chart). These are concentrated in different regions of the book, and all three recur at the end.

The words for faith refer for the most part to people. The two clusters in ch. 3-4 and 6 warn against unbelief, while the big cluster in ch. 11 recalls the heroes of the faith to encourage the recipients to suffer patiently.

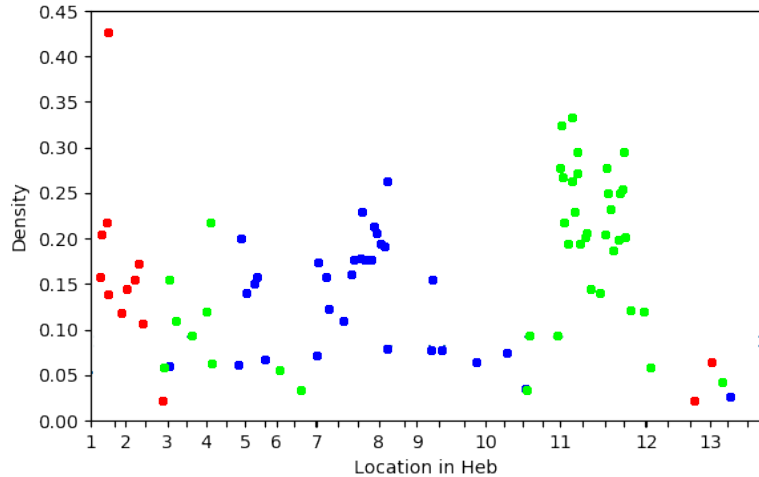


Figure 1: Instances of Angels (red), Faith/belief (green), and Priest(hood) (blue)

The references to angels and priests provide contrasts with the Lord Jesus. Chapters 1-2 compare him with the angels, while 5-10 compare him with the Levitical priests.

It is also interesting to look at the quotations of Psalm 110 in the book. The author is preoccupied with two verses (chart):

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

Ps 110:4 The LORD hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.

Figure 2 plots these citations (v. 1 in red, v. 4 in blue). Not surprisingly, v. 4, which declares the Messiah to be “a priest for ever,” is concentrated in ch. 5-8, where we saw the references to priesthood. The first two citations, of v. 1, emphasizing his exalted status, align with the references to the angels, while the last three references are also to v. 1.

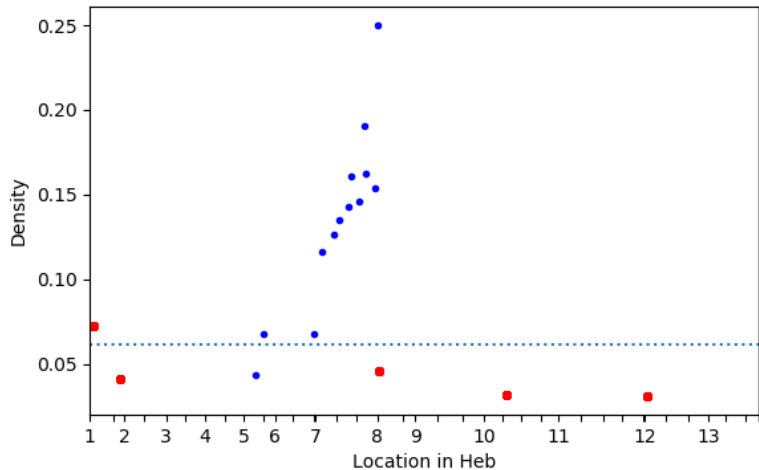


Figure 2: Psalm 110 in Hebrews (v. 1 in red, v. 4 in blue)

These distributions, and other observations that we will make, suggest an initial hypothesis for the structure of Hebrews shown in

Figure 3. Setting aside the greetings at the end, the book has two large sections: ch. 1-10a about the person and work of the Son of God, and ch. 10b-13 about the life the sons of God should live. (The title “Son” and “sons” reflect the author’s use of these terms, see note.)

In 1-10a, our Lord’s *person* is explained by comparison with the angels in ch. 1-2, then his *work* in comparison with the Jewish priests in ch. 4-10, as suggested by Figure 1.

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In the case of the angels, the author builds on Ps 110:1 to show that our Lord, seated at the right hand of the Father, is higher than the angels. Then (expounding Psalm 8) he became for a while lower than the angels (2:7) in order to become our high priest (2:17).

The priesthood section, inspired by Ps 110:4, is bracketed by exhortations to hold fast our profession and draw near to God, because we have a great high priest:

4:14 Seeing then that we have a great **high priest**, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us **hold fast** our profession. 15 For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as *we are, yet* without sin. 16 Let us therefore **come προσερχομαι** boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.

10:19 Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, 20 By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; 21 And **having an high priest** over the house of God; 22 Let us **draw near προσερχομαι** with a true heart in full assurance of **faith**, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us **hold fast** the profession of our **faith** without wavering; (for he *is* faithful that promised;)

The order here is reversed compared with the section about angels. It begins by comparing our Lord with earthly priests (ch. 5-7), before shifting the focus back to the impact of our Lord's sacrifice in the heavenly sanctuary (ch. 8-10).

Thus in discussing our Lord's person and work, the author moves first from heaven to earth, then back from earth to heaven (Table 1).

Ch. 1-10a is mostly exposition, with a few exhortations. When we move to 10b-13, not only does the focus change from our Lord's life to ours as his people, but the genre shifts as well, and we are mostly reading exhortation, with only one expository section (ch. 11), the history of faith among God's people. This faith should lead us to have patience in the face of opposition from the world, and (ch. 13) live in loving community with each other.

Against this background, observe the distribution of the "better than" statements (Figure 4, chart). Once (1:4) our Lord is said to be "better than the angels." The rest of the instances fall into two peaks. The first is in the Priesthood section, comparing the various elements of our Lord's priestly ministry with those of the tabernacle. The second is in ch. 10-13, where the word

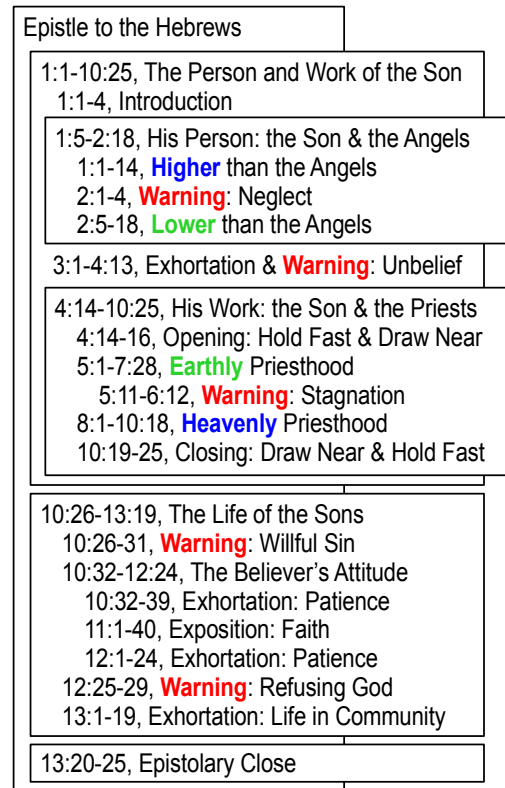


Figure 3: Initial Structure for Hebrews

	Person Who is he? Angels		Work What does he do? Priests
Heaven	1:1-14	↑	8:1-10:19
Earth	2:5-18	↓	5:1-7:28

Table 1: Movement between Heaven and Earth in Hebrews 1-10

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emphasizes the “better things” promised to those who are faithful to the Lord.

Interspersed throughout the book are five warnings. Most people assume that they all warn against falling away from the faith. In fact each deals with a distinct danger, though all relate to the common challenge of maintaining our testimony in a hostile world.

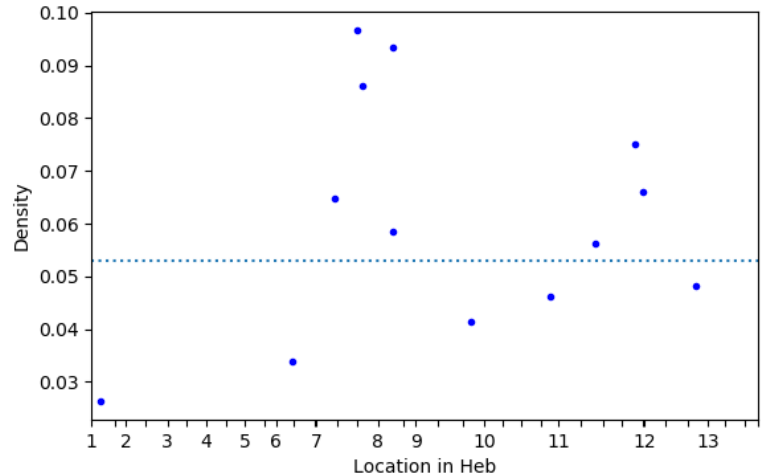


Figure 4: Density of "Better Than" in Hebrews

Heb 2:2 For if the word spoken by angels was steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward; 3 How shall we escape, **if we neglect** so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him;

Heb 3:12 Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of **unbelief**, in departing from the living God. 13 But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.

Heb 5:12 For **when for the time ye ought to be teachers**, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat.

Heb 10:26 For if we **sin wilfully** after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, 27 But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries.

Heb 12:25 See that ye **refuse not him that speaketh**. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven:

We may modify this road map as we proceed, but it is close enough to let us study the details in the context of the larger argument.

1:1-4, Prophets vs. a Son

1-2a, The Basic Contrast

The first sentence of the epistle covers four verses.⁹ vv. 1-2a present the theme of ch. 1-10:

1:1 God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, 2 Hath in these last days spoken unto us by *his* Son

⁹ The AV preserves this grammatical unity, which newer translations tend to split up to favor English style. RSV, NASB, ESV and NET each splits it into three parts; NIV uses 4. This difference is an apt illustration of the difference between the KJV's formal equivalence and the more dynamic approach of other versions.

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The writer offers three contrasts between the OT revelation that Judaism preserves, and what has happened in the New Testament (Table 2, chart).

	v. 1, Before	v. 2, Now
When?	at sundry times	in these last days
To whom?	the fathers	us
How?	in diverse manners ... by the prophets	by a Son

Table 2: Contrasts in 1:1-2a

- The old revelation took place at many different times, and was written down over a period of 1000 years, stretching from Moses (1400 BC) to Malachi (400 BC). The new has two characteristics: “these” and “last days.”
 - “These” emphasizes the recency of the revelation. Our author is writing sometime between AD 49 (the edict of Claudius) and AD 70 (the fall of the temple). The epoch-changing events that he will describe have all taken place within a single human lifetime.
 - “Last days” εσχατος των ημερων is the LXX rendering for אחרית הימים, KJV “the latter days,” which throughout the OT describes the far distant future when God’s purposes are realized. That future has arrived.
- The old revelation was to the fathers, but we are privileged to receive the new revelation, for which they longed.
- The most important contrast is how the two revelations are delivered. The old came “in diverse manners.” We will learn about many of these “diverse manners” in the different OT examples, such as Melchizedek and the tabernacle, that the writer will describe to us. “The prophets” probably refers, not just to people like Isaiah and Jeremiah, but all the OT saints through whom the Lord revealed himself. The first person called a “prophet” in the OT is Abraham (Gen 20:7). Moses is a prophet, for he told the people to expect “a prophet like unto me” (Deut 18:15; cf. v. 18). So is Samuel (1 Sam 3:20). Miriam (Ex 15:20), Deborah (Judg 4:4), Huldah (2 Ki 22:14), and even Isaiah’s wife (Isa 8:3) are called “prophetess.” The title “prophet” means “someone who speaks on behalf of another,” and the writer is pointing out that God sent many different spokespeople. But now there is only one, “a Son.”

This last title has no article and no possessive. There is no uncertainty in the one who bears the final revelation. The absolute noun emphasizes the change in the essence of the relation. Before, he sent spokespeople. Now he sends someone much more important. The whole verse sets forth the truth behind the Lord’s parable about the vineyard in Matthew 21:

Mat 21:35 And the husbandmen took his servants, and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again, he sent other servants more than the first: and they did unto them likewise. 37 But last of all he sent unto them his son, saying, They will reverence my son.

In spite of the attempt of the husbandmen to destroy the Son, he rose from the dead, and now God’s people must accept him and his revelation as superior to all that has come before.

2b-4, Introducing the Son

Vv. 2b-4 tell us more about this Son, in three subordinate clauses each connected with a relative pronoun to “Son” (Figure 5, chart), that progress in two ways. 1) In Greek, they increase in length, from 4 words, to 6, and then to 44. 2) They bring the Son from the background to the foreground, from being passive, to involvement in the Father’s work, to active.

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We will note a number of parallels between this passage, and Colossians 1 and John 1 (Table 3, chart) as we proceed. Already the title of Son in 1:2, 5 has its foundation there.

whom he hath appointed heir of all things,--First, the Son is passive. He is the direct object of the verb, acted upon by the Father.

To us, an heir is a descendant who receives the family property. In the Bible, the word can have the broader meaning of “possessor.” In Psalm 2, the Father promises his Messiah,

Psa 2:8 Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for **thine inheritance**, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession.

The verb “appoint” here may take us back to an earlier scripture, God’s promise to Abraham, where he becomes the father of many nations by divine decree, without effort on his part.

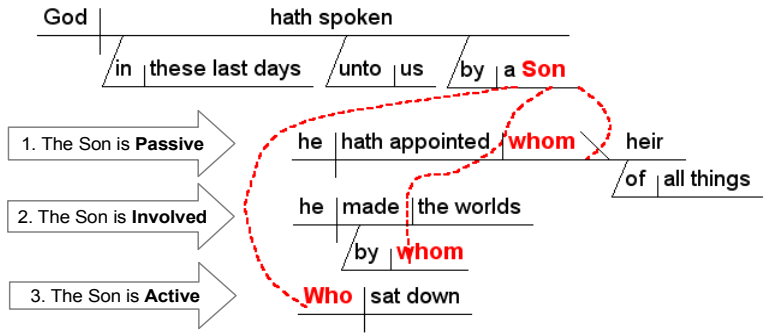


Figure 5: Skeleton Diagram of Heb 1:1-4

Heb 1:1-13	Col 1:12-20	John 1:1-5
2a by a Son; 5 my Son, ... to me a Son?	13 his dear son	
2 heir of all things; 4 by inheritance	15 the firstborn of every creature.	
2 by whom he made the worlds 10 thou, Lord, hast laid the foundation of the earth	16 all things were created by him	3 all things were made by him
3 the brightness of his glory		5 And the light shineth in darkness
3 the express image of his person	15 the image of the invisible God	1 the Word was God
3 upholding all things by the word of his power	17 by him all things consist	
3 he ... purged our sins	20 And, having made peace through the blood of his cross,	
6 when he again bringeth in the firstbegotten into the world	15 the firstborn of every creature ... 18 the firstborn from the dead	
6 let all the angels of God worship him	16 whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers	
8 thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever	18 that in all things he might have the preeminence	
10 in the beginning		1, 2 in the beginning
13 until I make thine enemies thy footstool	18 that in all things he might have the preeminence	5 the darkness comprehended it not

Table 3: Some Parallels among Hebrews 1, Colossians 1, and John 1

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Gen 17:5 Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have **I made thee**.

The language of inheritance reminds us of Col 1:15 “the firstborn of every creature.” “Firstborn” does not mean that he is himself created, but is a title of position, the one who inherits all things.

So one basis for the exalted position of the Son is his exalted position: God has decreed him to be owner of all things.

by whom δι’ ου also he made the worlds;--The second description of the Son moves him from passive recipient to actively involved in the Father’s work of creation in Genesis 1. “Worlds” (αἰῶνες Strong 165) here refers to the sum total of what has been created. Here is another echo of Colossians 1, and of John 1.¹⁰

3 who ... sat down—In the third description, the Son is independently active, the subject of the main verb, “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” As “heir of all things” took us back to Psalm 2:8, this expression takes us to Psalm 110:1, “sit thou at my right hand ...” In itself, the verb seems anticlimactic, after the high honor of being given all things and being the instrument of creation. But the subordinate clauses (Figure 6, chart) show that it is the culmination of his greatest work of all.

Paul would tend to develop a long, complex sentence like this in the order of its grammatical structure, from top to bottom. But the clauses here come in a different order, in four groups. 1) Two subordinate clauses are introduced by present participles, “being” and “upholding.” 2)

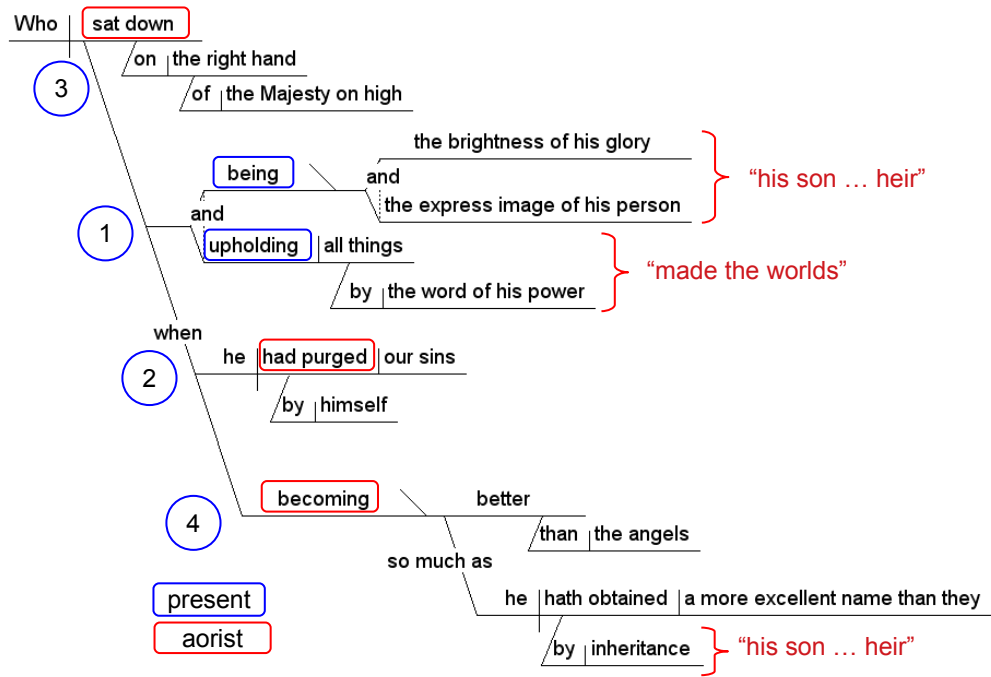


Figure 6: Grammar of 1:3-4

Another participial clause is an aorist (literally, “purging our sins by himself”). 3) The main verb is 4) followed by a complex clause whose main verb is another aorist participle modified by a subordinate clause with a perfect participle. Consider these in the order in which the writer has arranged them.

Present participles emphasize a continuing action or state of being that provides the background for the action in the main clause. The one who sits down is the one who is continually being and upholding. These clauses recall what we have already learned in v. 2.

¹⁰ Heb 11:3 “the worlds were framed by the word of God” makes the link with John 1 even stronger.

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The first clause, “being,” reminds us that he is “Son, whom [the Father] hath appointed heir of all things.” It describes what he is passively, as the son and heir of the Father: the brightness of his glory and the image *χαρακτηρ* of his person. As he said to Philip in the upper room (John 14:9), “he that hath seen me hath seen the Father.” These two expressions recall, respectively, John 1:5 “the light shineth in darkness” and Col 1:15 “who is the image *εικων* of the invisible God.” Together, they grapple with the mysterious relation between the Father and the Son.¹¹

The first emphasizes their identity. The Son is the radiance from the Father’s glory—of its very essence, inseparable from it. Glory would not exist without its associated brightness.

The second designation refers to him as an image left by a stamp. Some translations use the word “impress.” This description emphasizes the distinction between Jesus the man, and the Father as God. While the Greek word for “image” *χαρακτηρ*, like that for “brightness” *απαυγασμα*, appears only here in the NT,¹² it (and even more the synonym *εικων* used in Col 1:15) recalls God’s initial creation of man, distinct from God, as “the image and likeness of God.”

So is our Lord identical with the Father, like the brightness of glory, or essentially distinct from him, like the clay and the seal? This question, which has been the object of theological debate for centuries, is one of “the secret things” that “belong to the Lord our God” (Deut 29:29). Our best course is “not to think beyond what is written” (1 Cor 4:6), and here we have Biblical language in which to express this essential paradox. The common point of these two descriptions of what our Lord is, introduced by “being,” is that we can expect the Son to be like the Father.

The next present participle, “upholding,” takes us back to the second statement about the Son, “by whom also he made the worlds.” He not only made them “in the beginning,” but continually “uphold[s]” them. Recall from Genesis 1 (and John 1 and Heb 11:3) that God’s creation was by means of his word. The Son’s upholding of the creation is also “by his powerful word.” This role echoes Col 1:17, “by him all things consist.” God has not just wound the world up and let it go. He is continually monitoring and controlling it, and he does this in the person of his Son.

So the present participles remind us of what we have already learned in v. 2: that the Son has a special unity with the Father that involves both identity and distinction, and that he is a creative power. Next, we come to an aorist participle, emphasizing an event as a point in time:

when he had by himself purged our sins

The present participles give us the continuous background of the main verb, “he sat down.” An aorist participle usually indicates action prior to the main verb,¹³ captured in our translation by “when he had.”¹⁴ The adverbial phrase “by himself” emphasizes his active role here. No one helped him in this work. He was forsaken by the Father in the very midst of the process—in fact, the process required that he be alienated from the Father. This is his great work, and having completed it, he sat down.

Before going on to his seating, let’s reflect on the relation between his continuous being and upholding, and his definite action.

Our Lord’s work in purging us from our sin is based first of all on his relation to the Father as brightness and image. While he did this work alone, he manifested the character of God as

11 Marcus Dods in *Expositor’s Greek Testament*

12 *απ.* occurs in the LXX only in Wisd 7:26, where it describes Wisdom as “the brightness of the everlasting light.”

13 Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, pp. 624-625.

14 Later references will frequently describe our Lord’s redemptive work as “once for all,” 7:27; 9:12; 10:10

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revealed in Exod 34:6-7, his grace, mercy, and loyal love that allows him to forgive iniquity, and transgression, and sin.

The other present participle tells us that he is upholding the creation. What does that have to do with his purging of our sin?

He is the chief executive officer of the world, like a captain steering a ship, or a business manager overseeing a business. When something goes wrong, he is the one responsible for fixing it. The biggest thing ever to go wrong in God's creation is sin. The greatest responsibility for the Manager of the World is dealing with that challenge to God's authority. The one who upholds all things by his powerful word, deals with that problem. He, by himself, purges our sin.

So the present participles remind us of v. 2, setting the background. The aorist participle tells us what he has done as the Son of the Father and creator of the world. Only now do we come to the main verb, the verb that is parallel to "appointed" and "made" in v. 2:

3 who ... sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high;

"Sat down" looks in two directions. As the writer has developed the sentence, it shows the completion of the Son's work. Having purged our sins, he sat down. His work is done, and now he can rest.¹⁵ At the same time, the writer expects us to recognize this as a quotation of Ps 110:1, the first of several throughout the book (Figure 2, chart). In its original setting, echoed in 1:13 and 10:12, his sitting looks forward to a future day when his enemies are subjected to him:

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

Here is the story so far: the present participles remind us of the Son's essential relation to the Father and his past work in creation from v. 2. The aorist participle explains what he has done on the basis of that relation and work. The main verb shows him, upon completion of his work, sitting down at the Father's right hand. Now we come in v. 4 to the final subordinate clause, another aorist participle. I mentioned that aorist participles are usually antecedent to the action of the main verb, but they can be contemporaneous, particularly when (as here) they are subordinate to an aorist main verb. The author's ordering of the sequence of events here suggests that this one should be taken as contemporaneous with it. By being seated in the position of honor at the Father's right hand, he has "become ... better than the angels." "Being made" is misleading, for it sounds passive again. In fact, the verb is simply "becoming." By his redemptive work, he has earned a place superior to that of the angels.

Here is the first "better than" in the book, and the theme of the rest of chapter 1.

His work as redeemer leads to a position of honor superior to the angels. In closing this introduction, the author reminds us that we should not be surprised with this superior position. It is what we should already expect, based on the prior statements of v. 2. As Son and heir to the father, "by inheritance," he already had a more excellent name. Now, by his work in purging our sins, he has in action become what he already was in position, better than the angels.

¹⁵ This theme will be developed further in 4:9, 10.

Notes

Structural Indices

The structure of the book is not immediately obvious, and has been the subject of extensive study. We will follow up three sets of clues.

“Better Than”

A favorite word in the book is “better than,” κρείττων (Strong 2909). Of the 20 instances of this word in the NT, Hebrews contains 13. Most of these¹⁶ emphasize the superiority of the reality of Christ to the shadows. The book is sometimes seen as organized around these various contrasts.

These are concentrated in two parts of the book: ch. 7-10 (our Lord’s superior priesthood), and 11 (the believer’s better hope under the new covenant). So they are important, but probably not structural.

Hebrews 1 shows that Christ is “better than the angels”:

Heb. 1:4 Being made so much **better than the angels**, as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.

Melchizedek, whom Psalm 110 identifies with the Messiah, is better than Abraham, and introduces a better hope grounded in a better covenant:

Heb. 7:7 And without all contradiction the less [Abraham] is blessed of **the better** [Melchizedek].

Heb. 7:19 For the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of **a better hope** did; by the which we draw nigh unto God.

Heb. 7:22 By so much was Jesus made a surety of **a better testament**.

Heb. 8:6 But now hath he obtained a more excellent ministry, by how much also he is the mediator of **a better covenant**, which was established upon **better promises**.

As a priest after the order of Melchizedek, our Savior offers better sacrifices in a better sanctuary:

Heb. 9:23 It was therefore necessary that the patterns of things in the heavens should be purified with these; but the heavenly things themselves with **better sacrifices** than these.

As a result, the believers have a better future expectation:

Heb. 10:34 For ye had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven **a better** and an enduring **substance**.

Heb. 11:16 But now they desire **a better country**, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.

Heb. 11:35 Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain **a better resurrection**:

¹⁶The instances in 6:9;

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Heb. 11:40 God having provided **some better thing** for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.

Our Savior's blood brings blessing, better than the accusation from the blood of Abel:

Heb. 12:24 And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh **better things** than that of Abel.

These will be important themes for us to track. But they do not seem to align neatly with syntactic divisions in the book.

Psalm 110¹⁷

References in Hebrews: Ps. 110:1 in 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2 and Ps. 110:4 in 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:3, 11, 15, 17, 20-21; cf. also 2:17; 3:1; 7:8, 24-25, 28; 10:21 Thus 21 references

Elsewhere (Kirkpatrick, Cambridge Bible on Ps 110): 12 incidents (two of them with synoptic parallels, 16 in all)

Kirkpatrick, Cambridge Bible: "No Psalm is more frequently quoted and alluded to in the N.T. It was, as we have seen, quoted by our Lord (Mat 22:44; Mar 12:36; Luk 20:42-43); and His use of its language as recorded in Mat 26:64 (= Mar 14:62; Luk 22:69) clearly involved (since its Messianic significance was acknowledged) an assertion of His Messiahship in answer to the High-priest's adjuration. Psa 110:1 is applied by St Peter to the exaltation of Christ in His Resurrection and Ascension (Act 2:34-35), and is quoted in Heb 1:13 to illustrate the superiority of the Son to Angels. Cp. also Mar 16:19; Act 5:31; Act 7:55-56; Rom 8:34; 1Co 15:24 ff.; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1; Heb 1:3; Heb 8:1; Heb 10:12-13; Heb 12:1; 1Pe 3:22; Rev 3:21. Psa 110:4 serves as the basis of the argument in Heb 5:5 ff; Heb 6:20; Heb 7:17 ff. concerning the superiority of Christ's priesthood to the Levitical priesthood."

Quotations:

Mat 22:44; Mar 12:36; Luk 20:42-43, our Lord's debate with the Pharisees

Acts 2:34-35, Peter on the day of Pentecost

Allusions (mostly to "the right hand"):

Mat 26:64; Mar 14:62; Luk 22:69, our Lord's defense before the Sanhedrin

Mark 16:19, describing the Lord's ascension

Acts 5:31, Peter before the Sanhedrin

Act 7:55-56, Stephen before the Sanhedrin

Rom 8:34; 1Co 15:24 ff.; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1; 1Pe 3:22; Rev 3:21

Notably, only Hebrews picks up v. 4, the priesthood of our Lord

"Let Us"

English: Heb. 4:1, 11, 14, 16; 6:1; 10:22-24; 12:1, 28; 13:13, 15. These are all subjunctive 1pl verbs; that form appears also in 2:1; 3:6, 14, but not in a cohortative sense.

¹⁷The centrality of Psalm 110 for the argument of Hebrews has been most recently and thoroughly developed by Jared Compton, *Psalm 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015.

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The practical orientation of these (Figure 7) aligns with the hortatory sections of the book.

“Son” vs. “Sons”

Figure 8 shows the distribution of the singular (red and green) vs. plural (blue). The singular peaks in ch. 1, describing the exalted position of the Son of God, while the plural peaks in ch. 12, characterizing those who experience suffering as the Father’s sons. In general, the singular instances characterize the portion of the book that describes the person and work of our Lord, while the plurals shift our attention to what he expects of us.

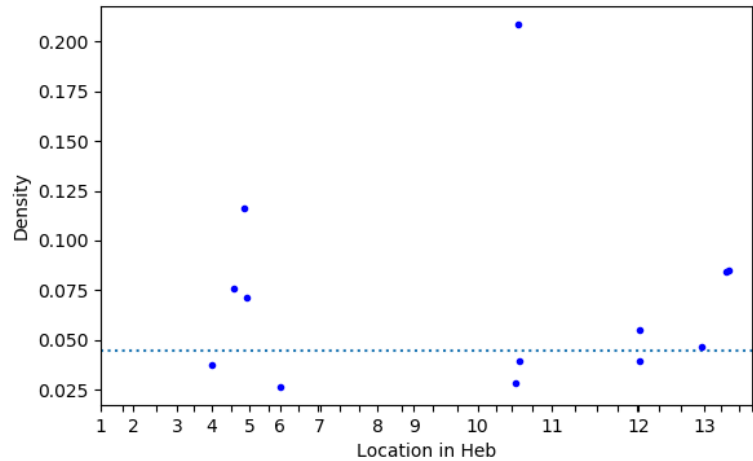


Figure 7: "Let us" in Hebrews

Four anomalous instances invite attention.

The first plural anticipates our place as sons by describing why the Son had to become lower than the angels:

Heb 2:10 For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many **sons** unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.

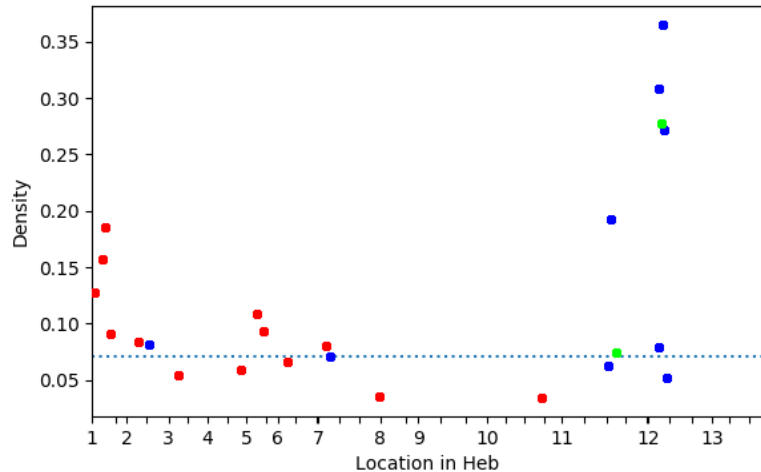


Figure 8: Singular (red, green) vs. plural (blue) of υιος "son" (Strong 5207). Red singulars refer to the Messiah; green singulars to others.

It thus ties the two uses of the word together.

7:5 refers to the sons of Levi, with whom Melchizedek, and thus our Lord, is contrasted:

Heb 7:5 And verily they that are of the **sons** of Levi, who receive the office of the priesthood, have a commandment to take tithes of the people according to the law, that is, of their brethren, though they come out of the loins of Abraham:

The first anomalous singular describes the position of Moses in the court of Pharaoh:

Heb 11:24 By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the **son** of Pharaoh's daughter; 25 Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season;

Only the Messiah is entitled to the exalted position of Son, and Moses rejects that position and its sinful presumption.

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The second anomalous singular appears with a universal quantifier, “every son,” and so might be considered a virtual plural:

Heb 12:6 For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.

But again, something more subtle may be in play. Chapter 12 exhorts us to patience in suffering by reminding us of our Savior’s suffering. Suffering is the mark of sonship, and that applies both to the unique Son of God and to us as God’s sons.

Vocabulary for Inheritance

E. Lipinski (TDOT IX p. 320) distinguishes ירש "take possession [of alien property]" from נחל "inherit [from the patriarchal estate]."

	ירש	נחל	Total
κληρονομ*	137	41	458
Total	232	59	

Col 1:12-20 and Heb 1:1-10

<p>Col 1:12 Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: 13 Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: 14 In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins: 15 Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: 16 For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: 17 And he is before all things, and by him all things consist. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence. 19 For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell; 20 And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.</p>	<p>Heb 1:1 God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, 2 Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; 3 Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high; 4 Being made so much better than the angels, as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they. 5 For unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee? And again, I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son? 6 And again, when he bringeth in the firstbegotten into the world, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him. 7 And of the angels he saith, Who maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire. 8 But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom. 9 Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity; therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows. 10 And, Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands: 11 They shall perish; but thou remainest; and they all shall wax old as doth a garment; 12 And as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed: but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail. 13 But to which of the angels said he at any time, Sit on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool? 14 Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?</p>
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Ebert's Analysis of vv. 2b-4

Ebert¹⁸ proposes a chiasmic structure:

- 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

This analysis, though interesting, ignores the internal grammar of the sentences, and relies on thematic rather than literal correspondences: prophets with angels, heir with king, creation with redemption. The scheme I propose places 3c at the center, with 3a-b recapitulating 2b-c, and 4b recapitulating 2b.

18 D.J. Ebert, 'The Chiasmic Structure of the Prologue to Hebrews', *TrinJ* 13 (1992), 163–179.