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Contrast or Continuity in Hebrews 1.1–2?

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Interpretation of the opening of Hebrews is vital to understanding the rest of the author's argument predicated upon his principal declaration. Commentators disagree about whether the introductory proposition of 1.1–2a contrasts revelation through the son with an assumed inferiority of earlier means of revelation, or merely compares them. The complete absence, however, of comparison language here makes sustaining either of those models difficult. A more natural reading is that the earlier stages of revelation referred to in 1.1 lead directly into the revelation in the son (1.2). In Hebrews, both of these forms of divine communication are affirmed.

1. Introduction

Πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως πάλαι ὁ θεὸς λαλήσας τοῖς πατράσιν ἐν τοῖς προφήταις ἐπ᾽ ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων ἐλάλησεν ἡμῖν ἐν υἱῷ. . .

With an alliterative flourish of five π- words, the opening sentence of the book of Hebrews launches its soaring prose. The counterbalancing string in the second clause of seven assonant words beginning with vowels (six of which are either ε or η) signals some difference between the first two affirmations of the book. But the question of how *much* difference is the subject of some debate, to which we shall return presently. These alliterative devices contribute to conveying the author's meaning to his reader/hearers: like most first-century literature, this work was meant to be read aloud and is 'artistically crafted to delight the ears of the hearer' in order to secure receptive attentiveness.[1] The prologue, which the author likely composed himself rather than importing another's phraseology,[2] immediately indicates by the elevated rhetorical style that the subject matter to follow is lofty, and by its poetic economy of language that the author's treatment will exhibit precision.

1 David A. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle 'to the Hebrews'* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 85.

2 David Wider, *Theozentrik und Bekenntnis: Untersuchungen zur Theologie des Redens Gottes im Hebräerbrief* (BZNW 87; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997) 11.

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The subject announced here is the one that is developed in the entire work that follows it. *God has spoken*: in the past in various ways through prophets, in these last days through a son. The question that occupies us is whether these two stages of revelation are placed here in deliberate contrast, as many, if not most, commentators contend. The double alliteration just mentioned clearly distinguishes two thoughts of the two respective verses, as do the pairs of deictic parallels πάλαι and ἐπ᾽ ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων, and τοῖς πατράσιν and ἡμῖν. But marking two successive periods of revelation history does not inherently denigrate the revelation that came by way of prophets.[3] Marcion omitted Hebrews entirely from his *Apostolikon* – a fact which most interpreters grasp as an indication that *he* understood the message of Hebrews to be in plain harmony and congruity with that of the Older Testament, which Marcion himself rejected.[4]

The syntactical skeleton of both the dependent introductory clause of 1.1 and the independent principal clause of v. 2a is '*GOD* has spoken', whether through prophets or through a son. Such an affirmation resounds so emphatically that it would be hard to sustain that the author intended either of these clauses to be understood in a negative way. Many commentators have, however, alleged that the two clauses (or, more precisely, the two different means of revelation expressed in them) are pitted against one another.

2. A Long Tradition of Discontinuity

Many Christian interpreters through the centuries have understood the relationship between Judaism and Christianity as one of discontinuity, and the author of Hebrews is often portrayed as one of the seminal thinkers of this paradigm. John Chrysostom appears to be the one who gave the greatest, or at least earliest, significant impetus towards the predominant tendency in Hebrews interpretation towards discontinuity. Chrysostom conjectured that Paul (the ostensive author) wanted to show the differences between the Old Testament and the New Testament and designed the entire book of Hebrews to be a series of evaluative comparisons of one with the other. Beginning with the introduction (which he thinks poses the fundamental base of his argument: God spoke to the ancients by the prophets but has spoken *to us* in his Son), Chrysostom emphasizes from beginning to end the *differences* between God's earlier activity with the Jews and

3 Erich Grässer argues that 'the God who speaks' in the faith community of both testaments (*der redende Gott*), through the provisional ministry of the prophets and the final ministry of the son, is the one and only God; therefore the connection (*Verbindung*) between the Word spoken and salvation effected is, for the author of Hebrews, decisive (*An die Hebräer* [EKK 17; 3 vols; Zurich: Benziger, 1990) 1.49–51.

4 'The whole content of the epistle would have precluded his accepting it' (F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, rev. edn. 1990] xlvi n. 104).

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his initiatives toward Christians now.[5] The growing anti-Semitism of his age may be reflected in Chrysostom's theology, which in turn influenced understanding of Hebrews – both the book and the race – for a thousand years to follow. In our own age, for example, we regularly still find commentators suggesting that the author 'invested the prologue with the dark and foreboding notions of rejection and judgment . . . central to the purpose and theology of the epistle'.[6]

There have been notable exceptions, however, to the general consensus that Hebrews contrasts the Old and New Testament revelations. Westcott, for example, found Hebrews' sense of the harmony of the various forms of God's communication to be in strong contrast with the *Epistle of Barnabas*, a work with which Hebrews is frequently compared. *Barnabas* emphasizes the failure of the law and its applications, whereas, for Hebrews, 'One message is conveyed by the different modes of God's communication to His people: that one voice speaks through many envoys: that at last the spoken word is gathered up and fulfilled in the present Son'.[7] Moffatt too was unruffled by the apparent paradox of the language of 1.1–2: 'The writer does not mean to exclude variety from the Christian revelation . . . nor does he suggest that the revelation ἐν προφήταις was inferior because it was piecemeal and varied. . . . [T]here is no contrast between the Son and the prophets.'[8] In Meier's identification of the correspondence between seven christological designations in 1.1–4 and the seven Old Testament quotations that follow and validate them, he eschews exaggerating the contrast, or devaluating the Old Testament prophets.[9] But these commentators' view of Hebrews as an irenic treatment of Old Testament revelation was, until recently, exceptional; the majority of interpreters have not seen it that way.

Most commentators after Chrysostom and right up to the present either argue for a strong contrast or else reflexively assume it. Perhaps the repeated themes of 'a better priesthood, better name, better sacrifices, etc.' that characterize the book lead many to presume that comparison of the superiority of new Christian revelation – at the expense of the Old Testament – must also be part of his argument. This might be the case, but it would need to be demonstrated, not merely asserted.

Some of the contrast is inferred from the negative tone that many believe they perceive in the opening words. Calvin reasoned from the diversity of Old

5 John Chrysostom, *Homily 12, init. on Hebrews, 7:1 f*, (discussed in Ceslas Spicq, *L'Épitre aux Hébreux* [2 vols; Paris: Librairie LeCoffre, 1952] 1.27–8).

6 Richard Dormandy, 'Hebrews 1:1–2 and the Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen', *ExpTim* 100 (10, 1989) 371–85, 371.

7 Brooke F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Macmillan, 1903; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) lxxxiii.

8 James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1924) 2–3.

9 John P. Meier, 'Structure and Theology in Heb. 1, 1–14', *Bib* 66 (1985) 168–89.

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Testament manners of revelation expressed in 1.1 that it therefore was necessarily inferior and imperfect.[10] A century ago Delitzsch rendered πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως πάλαι rather freely as 'formerly, by fragmentary and multiform means', which he then interpreted as 'a complex of manifold parts, modes, and instruments of revelation . . . bearing witness by its very multiplicity that its goal is not attained'.[11] Westcott too inferred a negative value from the multiple forms in 1.1: 'That which is communicated in parts, sections, fragments must of necessity be imperfect; and so also a representation which is made in many modes cannot be other than provisional'.[12] In our own generation, Hughes is willing to accept others' translation 'partial and piecemeal' and, from the nuances implicit in such a locution, to deduce from this alleged 'partial and scattered quality' of the older forms referred to in 1.1 that one cannot with assurance regard them as God's speaking. The Old Testament declarations are inherently 'subordinate servants of the Word rather than its very manifestation'.[13] But Ellingworth remarks that while in Heb 7.23 multiplicity is regarded as a defect,[14] this quality does not seem in 1.1 to form an implied contrast between the prophets and the Son.[15]

Dey proposes from alleged parallels with middle Platonism, particularly with Philo's usage, that πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως 'are technical terms which describe a state of imperfection', an imperfection characteristic of those who, instead of being established within intellectual or spiritual purity, are embroiled in the fleshly world of sense perception and subject to its vicissitudes.[16] Obviously such nuances, if admitted, would contrast with the perfect state of revelation brought by the son. But Dey's exposition reveals more about the conceptual world of parallel sources than it does about Hebrews. While the adjective form πολυτρόπος is used 26 times by Philo, Williamson finds no overlap at all between

10 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989) 32.

11 Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (2 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 3rd ed. 1883) 1.42.

12 Westcott, *Hebrews*, 4.

13 Graham Hughes, *Hebrews and Hermeneutics: The Epistle to the Hebrews as a New Testament Example of Biblical Interpretation* (SNTSMS 36; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 103. The source of the translation 'partial and piecemeal' is somewhat muddled. Hughes (183 n. 3) cites Hugh Montefiore (*A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1964] 36), who in turn claims to have cited F. F. Bruce, but without reference. NEB translates πολυμερῶς 'fragmentary', while NAB renders it 'piecemeal.'

14 Οἱ μὲν πλείονές εἰσιν γεγονότες ἱερεῖς . . .

15 Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 91.

16 Lala Kumar Dey, *The Intermediary World and Patterns of Perfection in Philo and Hebrews* (SBLDS 25; Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1974) 131–34, 151–53. He also briefly acknowledges examples from Josephus and *Wisdom of Solomon* that show positive value for the terms in question, before presenting his own view and the texts that support it (129–30).

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Philo's opinion of diversity and the biblical *hapax* πολύτροπως in 1.1.[17] (If Hebrews' doublet echoes anyone, it is more likely the prologue to *Sirach*, Πολλῶν καὶ μεγάλων ἡμῖν διὰ τοῦ νόμου καὶ τῶν προφητῶν ....[18]) Commentators generally recognize the rhetorical tone of the prologue to be positive, even majestic. Given the forensic power and beauty of Hebrews' opening paragraph, it would be difficult to maintain that the very first words of the poetic oratory, πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως, are intended to run counter in tone to the rest of the elocution that they have inaugurated.

Spicq noted that while the terms πολυμερῳς καὶ πολυτρόπως qualify λαλήσας ἐν τοῖς προφήταις, the phrase ἐλάλησεν ἐν υἱῷ is not qualified at all, which has the effect of making the absolute value of the supreme revelator stand out.[19] But to recognize that the writer describes the son's revelatory ministry without qualification, while he qualifies the ministry of the prophets, is not the same as *denigrating* God's revelation mediated through the prophets. The distinction is important, and missing it can lead to exaggerating the effect of the author's nuanced expression.[20]

Πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως are adverbs that modify λαλήσας, the subject of which is ὁ θεός.[21] So, whatever these adverbs are qualifying, it is the speech of God.[22] It thus seems mistaken to analyze these terms as if calculated by the author to invoke negative valuations of the manner of revelation that they describe. Both λαλήσας, the first predicate (1.1), and ἐλάλησεν, the second predicate (1.2), are aorist. Though the first is a participle and the second indicative, delineating the chronological sequence of their relationship to one another, the correspondence of verbal aspect here indicates affinity, not contrariety, between the modes by which God 'has spoken'.

17 Ronald Williamson, *Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews* (ALGHJ 4; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970) 70–74.

18 Moffatt, *Commentary*, 2.

19 Spicq, *Aux Hébreux*, 2.5.

20 Philip Hughes, one of those who emphasize the importance of contrast to the basic structure of Hebrews, designs his whole outline around five comparisons, the first of which is 'I. Christ superior to the prophets (1.1–3)' (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977] 3–4). T. H. Olbricht, who also posits a structure based on comparisons, begins his outline with 'I. Christ is Son (1.1–14) a. Above prophets (1.1–4)'. In his actual elaboration of the argument of Hebrews, however, Olbricht presents the writer as 'commencing with the angel contrast' and takes the analysis through to the end of ch. 12 without ever returning to demonstrate that Hebrews allegedly contrasted the son's ministry with that of the prophets ('Hebrews as Amplification', in *Rhetoric and the New Testament* [ed. Stanley Porter and Thomas Olbricht; JSNTSup 90; Sheffield: JSOT, 1993] 375–87).

21 Grässer characterizes the pair as a paronomasia, a playful pun on the nature of revelation throughout the Old Testament period, which can be set in contrast only to the unified *form* of New Testament revelation, not to its value (*An die Hebräer*, 1.52).

22 Meier, 'Structure and Theology', 170.

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Without pre-empting a thorough analysis of the question, we note that the earlier stages of revelatory actions alluded to in 1.1 are actually the source from which the author will develop his persuasive tract, the very base upon which he builds his argument throughout the rest of the book. This observation hints rather strongly at the author's disposition towards that speech of God which was ἐν τοῖς προφήταις. It is upon the Word of God revealed through the Old Testament writers that the Word of God addressed to contemporary readers in Hebrews is founded: a large portion of what this New Testament writer expresses in his letter is articulated using Old Testament citations. It would be incongruous for the author to begin his poetic paean to God's fulfillment of his plan and purpose announced τοῖς πατράσιν by first describing God's earlier revelation of that plan and purpose with a pair of negative evaluations.

Yet many commentaries, even those purportedly based on rhetorical analyses of the text, still propound a stark contrast between the two forms of revelation expressed in vv. 1–2.[23]

Recently, however, a growing number of scholars have come to recognize that 'the elements of contrast in this comparison should not be exaggerated'.[24] Wider's monograph on the speech of God takes full account of the subtleties and nuances of the prologue and offers an even-handed treatment of Hebrews' perspective on continuity and contrast between the older and the newer stages of divine revelation.[25] He gives extensive consideration to the possibility of intended contrasts between the various pairs of terms in 1.1–2 (πάλαι ... ἐπ᾽ ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων, τοῖς πατράσιν ... ἡμῖν, ἐν τοῖς προφήταις ... ἐν υἱῳ), concluding that while comparisons of the two elements in each pair are *implicit*, this does not form a basis for considering them to be *explicit* antitheses.[26]

Weiss stresses that for Hebrews it is programmatic that the God who spoke ἐν τοῖς προφήταις is identical with God who has spoken 'in these, the last, days in the Son',[27] and Grässer further emphasizes that since the subject proclaimed by the

23 D. J. Ebert infers deductively that a chiastic schema of the prologue necessitates a contrast, though he does not demonstrate it ('The Chiastic Structure of the Prologue to Hebrews', *TrinJ* 13/2 (1992) 168–74), while deSilva describes the beginning of Hebrews' argument as 'an extended contrast between God's earlier oracles and God's word in Jesus' (*Perseverance*, 85) and refers to the 'many and scattered pieces' of Old Testament revelation that are finally brought together into one Christocentric jigsaw puzzle (86).

24 Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 91.

25 Wider, *Theozentrik und Bekenntnis*, 12–22.

26 Ibid., 15–21.

27 Hans F. Weiss, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (KEK 13; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991) 137–40.

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one Word of God that is spoken by both prophets and the Christ is salvation, notions of contradiction or competition between them are excluded.[28]

Thus, a more balanced understanding of Hebrews' view of the relation between older and newer forms of revelation is beginning to emerge, but it remains difficult to avoid anomalies when analyzing the implications of the vocabulary and syntax of 1.1–2:

> However the multiplicity of God's speech of old is to be conceived, Hebrews' basic affirmation is that such diversity contrasts with the singularity and finality of God's eschatological speech in the Son. Thus, while the initial adverbs are not necessarily pejorative, they serve here to contrast the two phases of the divine address, to the disadvantage of the earlier. . . .
>
> While there is a clear contrast between the old and new, there is no sense that the two phases stand in contradiction to one another. In each case it is the same God who speaks and the same message of salvation that he offers. This sense of continuity within contrast emerges at various points in the work.[29]

As thorny as questions of contrast or continuity in Hebrews already are, it would seem paramount that the author's original syntax be preserved as carefully as possible, in the effort to understand it. But sometimes terms that amplify the contrast are introduced into translations of 1.1–2, apparently from presuppositions of discontinuity, embellishments that shift the rhetorical import of the original sentence significantly. For example, between his discourse analyses of individual elements in 1.1 and 1.2, Black adds, 'But God has *again* spoken',[30] a seemingly innocuous interpolation in itself. However, 'again' (πάλιν), which he emphasizes, is not in the text of Hebrews, nor is 'but' (ἀλλά or δέ) with which he begins the sentence. He also gratuitously adds the words 'but', 'now', and 'directly' to his concluding translation.[31] Moreover, he introduces punctuation that no Greek manuscript authorizes, separating v. 1 and v. 2 artificially into two distinct sentences. These interpretive additions are deliberate, supporting an argument that while Christ is contrasted at length in Hebrews with angels, Moses, Joshua, and the Aaronic priesthood, it is only at 1.1–4 that he is contrasted with the prophets.

Long's homiletically oriented commentary offers an example of how much rhetorical adornment may be rendered in connection with this '*but*' that is no more than an interpolation:

28 Grässer, *An die Hebräer*, 50–54.

29 Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989) 37–38.

30 D. A. Black, 'Hebrews 1:1–4: A Study in Discourse Analysis', *WTJ* 49 (1987) 177–94 (177, italics his, for emphasis).

31 Ibid., 193. William Lane also adds 'but' to his translation of 1.2 (*Hebrews 1–8* [WBC 47A; Dallas: Word, 1991] 4).

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> 'Long ago God spoke to our ancestors ....' Suddenly, however, the Preacher halts in mid-sentence; then, after a suspenseful pause utters a startling word: 'but' ... a dagger ... a trumpet ... a flare across the night sky signaling that now a fresh form of divine speech has broken across human hearing.[32]

All interpreters exercise a certain liberty, of course, in offering resumés of their exegetical findings. However, those who posit strong contrast in Heb 1.1–2 have a difficult task to demonstrate it from the language of the text itself. To the reasons for that difficulty we shall now turn.

3. A Conspicuous Absence of Comparatives and Particles

While many commentators and translations supply a 'but' between the clauses of 1.1–2 concerning the prophets and the son, there is no ἀλλά here, though the author of Hebrews does use ἀλλά eleven other times when he wants to make a contrast. There is not even a milder δέ, though Hebrews uses δέ 69 times elsewhere, about once for every four verses. There is no νῦν in 1.1–2 either, even though the author of Hebrews uses νῦν five other times, three times in the adversative combination νῦν δέ, when he wants to emphasize a contrast between a former and a (better) present condition. He does not employ ἅπαξ here (though he does five times elsewhere in Hebrews) nor ἐφάπαξ (three times elsewhere) nor his equivalent phrase εἰς τὸ διηνεκές (four times elsewhere), used when he wants to emphasize the definitive nature of Jesus' ministry as compared with the provisional nature of others' ministries of the same sort – precisely the sort of comparison some argue for in 1.1–2. There is not even a τε in 1.1–2, though Hebrews does use τε 19 times, 10% of all occurrences of this enclitic particle in the New Testament.

If this is supposed to be a comparison, it is somewhat surprising to find no μᾶλλον, which Hebrews uses skillfully elsewhere six times, twice with πολύ and once with πόσῳ, to highlight divergences of various kinds. If this is a comparison, one might expect to see μέν in 1.1–2, since Hebrews does employ μέν 19 times, often to set up contrasts: 'on the one hand ... on the other hand'. But he does not insert it here.

If the author, having all eleven of these different possible comparative terms at his disposal, and showing a readiness to use them prolifically elsewhere throughout his argument, did not use any of these indicators here, it would be rather dif-

32 Thomas Long, *Hebrews* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1997) 10. Later, however, in an excursus on Hebrews and Judaism, he presents Jesus as the culmination of a long string of worthies who had a part in the process of revelation, concluding, 'The word spoken in Jesus does not void the previous promises of God; it fuses, clarifies, and fulfils them; it brings them "to perfection"' (14).

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ficult to argue that he nevertheless intends for the reader to understand a contrast.

Moreover, these examples of syntactical style elements that Hebrews normally uses for calling attention to contrasts do not exhaust the wide arsenal of expressions with which this writer declares highly nuanced variations of differences. His rhetorical and linguistic skills are particularly on display when he expresses *degrees* of comparison. He formulates, for example, the sophisticated syntax found in 1.4 (only four clauses away from the text in question) τοσούτῳ κρείττων γενόμενος τῶν ἀγγέλων ὅσῳ διαφορώτερον παρ᾽ αὐτοὺς κεκληρονόμηκεν ὄνομα; in 3.3, πλείονος γὰρ οὗτος δόξης παρὰ Μωϋσῆν ἠξίωται, καθ᾽ ὅσον πλείονα τιμὴν ἔχει τοῦ οἴκου ὁ κατασκευάσας αὐτόν; in 7.22, κατὰ τοσοῦτο [καὶ] κρείττονος διαθήκης γέγονεν ἔγγυος Ἰησοῦς; and, in 8.6, νυν[ὶ] δὲ διαφορωτέρας τέτυχεν λειτουργίας, ὅσῳ καὶ κρείττονός ἐστιν διαθήκης μεσίτης, ἥτις ἐπὶ κρείττοσιν ἐπαγγελίαις νενομοθέτηται. Such elaborate comparisons as these are rare elsewhere in the New Testament. In Hebrews it is, rather, the abundance of such refined expressions of precision that characterizes the author's style.

In all, Hebrews exhibits four instances of the use of μείζον, eleven different uses of κρεῖττον (plus the single New Testament use of κρείσσονα) and fifteen different uses of adjectives or substantives with the -ότερος -ν ending.[33] (Among the latter comparatives, one finds in 9.11 the difficult, almost oxymoronic, construction τελειοτέρας, '*more* perfect', a peculiar locution to which Marcus Barth draws attention with wry humor.[34])

Such a command of the many little particles and transition terms that advance an argument in Greek, such nuanced expressions of comparison, contrast, and antitheses of many kinds, are found nowhere else in the New Testament. The author of Hebrews demonstrates a singular capacity to define with precision the contrasts between the different elements he is comparing.[35] As the statistics just related indicate, the discourse is saturated with terms of comparison. The comparatives, superlatives, particles, and other deictic discourse markers mentioned here total 171 different instances.

Given, then, the author's propensity to employ such discourse deixes so liberally and skillfully elsewhere, the conspicuous absence of *any* of them in the carefully crafted accidence of 1.1–2 can scarcely be an oversight. In a document whose

33 Statistics have been compiled using the *BibleWorks 3.5* computer program to locate and collate the data (Hermeneutika, Michael Bushell, 1997).

34 Marcus Barth, 'The Old Testament in Hebrews', in *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation* (ed. William Klassen and Graydon Snyder; New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 53–78 (66).

35 The form of the whole argument of Hebrews might be characterized as a series of amplified *qal wahomer* or *a forteriori* demonstrations.

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Greek syntax is recognized as the most sophisticated, literarily, of the New Testament, and in a pericope also recognized as among the most polished language, rhetorically,[36] the author's not using any kind of adversative particles here, nor any kind of comparatives, has to be significant. The obvious interpretive suggestion that emerges from this analysis is that 1.1–2 is not a contrast – perhaps not even a comparison.

It appears that many commentators proceed from an assumption of discontinuity, and then project it into these verses. But the statistics just enumerated demonstrate that the author, had he intended to invoke a contrast, was disposed of all the rhetorical and linguistic elements necessary to express such a comparison. That he did not use any of them suggests that he did not intend to invoke a contrast. The absence here of even a single instance of the 171 expressions of comparison the author uses elsewhere imposes the burden of proof on anyone who would posit some sort of antithesis in the author's expression of the relation between ἐν τοῖς προφήταις in v. 1 and ἐν υἱῷ in v. 2.

4. The Syntax of 'God's Speaking' in 1.1–2

In support of his view that the pericope is a contrast, Black (along with many others) observes that while ἐν τοῖς προφήταις in v. 1 has the article, ἐν υἱῷ in v. 2 is anarthous, 'to emphasize the point that the Son is radically different from the prophets, in that son-ness is the ultimate medium of communication'.[37] He lists other anarthous occurrences of υἱός at 3.6, 5.8, and 7.28 as supporting the thesis that the anarthous state of υἱός in v. 2 announces that 'it is the rank and dignity of the Son that constitutes the main contrast between the many spokesmen of God and the one Son'.[38] From the glorification of the son that follows in 1.3–4 this initially would seem correct. However, of 18 occurrences of υἱός in Hebrews, only four are *not* anarthous – and three of those are the *nomen rectum* τόν υἱόν τοῦ θεοῦ. The only remaining articular occurrence of υἱός, then, is in the comparison 'of the angels he says . . . but πρὸς δὲ τὸν υἱόν' in 1.8. This single instance, ironically, is so proximate to 1.1–4 that it undermines the interpretive explanation that sonship is signaled as a contrasted category by its anarthous state, since 1.7–8,

36 Attridge, *Hebrews*, 36; Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 5–7.

37 Black, 'Discourse Analysis', 183–84. He later repeats what apparently is his major contention, that 'the anarthous noun . . . emphasizes the absolute change of category from prophetical utterance to that of sonship' (189). Lane too rests the aspect of discontinuity between prophets and son on the sole basis of anarthous υἱῳ (*Hebrews 1–8*, 11).

38 Black, 'Discourse Analysis', 184. Lane also expresses the relation between the revelation through the prophets and revelation through the Son with the terms 'contrast', 'antithesis', and 'discontinuity', though his actual exposition of the text recognizes more continuity than discontinuity (*Hebrews 1–8*, 9–11).

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only five verses later, *is*, more clearly and expressly than 1.1–2, a contrast of categories: and there υἱός is articular! Therefore, Hebrews' demonstrable use of υἱός provides little evidence that some great variance is signaled by the articular and anarthous states, respectively, of ἐν τοῖς προφήταις in 1.1 and ἐν υἱῷ in 1.2, though commentators frequently call attention to anarthous υἱῳ for varying interpretive purposes.[39]

With so little linguistic evidence to build on, it is surprising that even commentators who elsewhere recognize and describe Hebrews' high view of the Old Testament as revelation proceed from the unnecessary – as we have seen, apparently unwarranted – assumption that Hebrews deliberately contrasts the prophets and the Son in 1.1–2. This leads to irresolvable tension as they then try to affirm – at one and the same time – that throughout his treatise the writer of Hebrews recognizes and uses the Old Testament as the authoritative Word of God addressed to his own generation, and yet that he is opposing God's speaking ἐν υἱῷ in 1.2 to God's speaking ἐν τοῖς προφήταις (the authors of the Old Testament) in 1.1.[40]

Another difficulty for a posited contrast between the revelatory ministry of the prophets and that of Jesus is the parallelism apparently indicated by the author's use of identical prepositions in both locutions: ἐν τοῖς προφήταις and ἐν υἱῷ. Moffatt approved of Chrysostom's pronouncement that ἐν here is a synonym for διά,[41] and Ellingworth agrees that ἐν before both προφήταις and υἱῷ is probably instrumental,[42] but Bonsirven argued that the author of Hebrews uses διά when he wants to invoke instrumentality, so that while ἐν can, theoretically, have instrumental sense, his use here does not mean that the prophets and Christ were merely the organs which God employed to communicate his revelation but that he was present *in* them, proffering his Word.[43] Spicq called attention to the parallel syntax of Heb 4.7, ἐν Δαυὶδ λέγων μετὰ τοσοῦτον χρόνον, καθὼς προείρηται.[44]

39 Otto Michel (*Der Brief an die Hebräer* [KEK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 13th ed. 1975] 111), Hans Windisch (*Der Hebräerbrief* [HNT 14; Tubingen: Mohr, 1931] 15), and Moffatt (*Commentary*, 10) all argued that the choice of 'Son' in 1.1–4 is influenced by the need in 1.5–14 to contrast Jesus with angels, who are frequently called 'sons of God' in the Jewish literature (Gen 6; Job 1.6; Pss 29.1, 89.7, etc.). However, the nature of the argument itself in 1.5–13 (e.g. 'For to which of the angels did he ever say, "You are my son"?') implies tacit agreement: the readers did not confuse the nature of angels with sonship, but recognized the difference. The author here presumes common understanding of Old Testament texts.

40 Typical of the problem, Joseph Bonsirven vacillated back and forth a generation ago, commenting on these verses with terms like 'continuité, discontinuité, unité, opposition, imperfection, correspondence, infériorité' jostling one another throughout his commentary (*Saint Paul – Epitre aux Hébreux* [VS 12; Paris: Beauchesne et ses Fils, 2d. ed. 1943] 161–68).

41 Moffatt, *Commentary*, 4.

42 Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 92.

43 Bonsirven, *Aux Hébreux*, 167–8.

44 Spicq, *Aux Hébreux*, 2.4–5.

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In the context of 3.7–4.13, which emphasizes that God is the speaker, addressing many different generations by his Spirit (3.7) whether the apparent human writer was Joshua, David, or the present writer himself, it is natural to understand ἐν Δαυὶδ λέγων (4.7) as God speaking *in* David.[45] Moreover, in 4.7 God is the subject of the principal verb, so that David's part is incidental, syntactically. Since the characteristic way Hebrews quotes not only this but any Old Testament writer is as the Word of God – literally as the words spoken by God – it directly corresponds to the writer's observable habit throughout Hebrews to read ὁ θεὸς λαλήσας τοῖς πατράσιν ἐν τοῖς προφήταις as God having spoken to the fathers *in* the prophets. The author's language, both here and throughout the book, indicates that when prophets spoke or wrote in his name, God himself was speaking 'in' them.[46]

In any case, whatever the author may have actually understood and meant by his affirmation that God spoke ἐν τοῖς προφήταις and ἐν υἱῷ, the significance for this study is that he uses the same preposition to express it. If the writer had wished to distinguish the two modes of revelation from one another more forcefully than he has, he could easily have used δία, or even the dative without preposition ('by means of'), for either of the two locutions. Since, notwithstanding those options, he chose instead to use ἐν with both τοῖς προφήταις and υἱῷ to express his understanding of God's speaking, we are obliged to acknowledge the parallelism and poetic symmetry of his choice and not read into the two locutions more difference than the writer himself expressed.

We are also, however, obliged to acknowledge what difference there is between the two expressions. It is at this point that the anarthous υἱῷ may be susceptible of interpretation, indicating, perhaps, that the author does distinguish between the modes of prophet-hood and sonship in order to emphasize 'the exalted status of that final agent'.[47] The clauses that follow in 1.2*b*–4 certainly amplify that exaltation.[48] Any reading of Heb 1.1–4 acknowledges that the writer is declaring the passage of means of revelation from a lesser to a greater, and is proclaiming this change with a resounding tone of celebration.[49] So our earlier caution about exaggerating the significance of anarthous υἱῷ is not meant to deny the possibility that with it the author articulates a difference between older forms of revelation associated with the prophets and new revelation mediated through the son, but to avoid expressing that difference more strongly than does the author himself.

45 Cf. Acts 4.25, where the disciples say, together, 'You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David, saying . . . .'

46 Wider, *Theozentrik und Bekenntnis*, 18.

47 Attridge, *Hebrews*, 39.

48 Grässer, *An die Hebräer*, 55–63.

49 Wider, *Theocentrik und Bekenntis*, 22–33.

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There is no direct object to the speaking verbs in 1.1–2, a syntactical anomaly from which some infer that 'the Son is both the agent of the message (revealer) and its content (revelation)'.[50] When one notices that in fact eight out of the sixteen occurrences of λαλέω in Hebrews do not have a direct object, the force of this observation is reduced.[51] However, many commentators have traditionally said similar things about the two-fold role of the son in Hebrews, *viz.*, that he is both the one by whom the message is given and himself the final message; the inference, while unnecessary on syntactical grounds, is not invalid.[52] Bruce, for example, says of vv. 1–2,

> when Christ came, the word spoken in Him was indeed God's final word. . . . The story of divine revelation is a story of progression up to Christ, but there is no progression beyond him. It is 'at the end of these days' that God has spoken in Him, and by this phrase our author means much more than 'recently'; it is a literal rendering of the Hebrew phrase which is used in the Old Testament to denote the epoch when the words of the prophets will be fulfilled, and its use here means that the appearance of Christ 'once for all at the end of the age' (Ch. 9:26, RSV) has inaugurated that time of fulfillment.[53]

Though Bruce himself would not have so averred, some might find in such 'fulfillment' language a tacit disavowal of the further ongoing value of the earlier revelation. If Jesus 'fulfils' the prophetic word of the Old Testament, what further value does that word still have?[54] These two verses do announce that a change has come in the form of revelation, a passing from one form to another. The expressions that immediately follow in 1.2–4 (and throughout the treatise as a whole), moreover, exalt and glorify the son who is both the medium and the message of that revelation 'in these last days'. But whether this exalting of the son is inferred by

50 Black, 'Discourse Analysis', 188.

51 1.1, 2; 2.5; 4.8; 7.14; 11.4; 12.24, 25. Περὶ ἧς at 2.5 and περὶ ἄλλης at 4.8 may be considered to serve as *ersatz* direct objects: 'concerning . . . .'

52 To detect Hebrews' several references to Jesus as both the final message and the definitive messenger of the Word of God one need not go so far as James Swetnam, who avers that 'in Heb 4,12–13 the discourse is more probably than not about Jesus as "Word" in the Johannine sense' ('Jesus as Λόγος in Hebrews 4,12–13' *Bib* 62 [1981] 214–24, esp. 214), or H. Clavier, who similarly argued for Jesus as a (not the only) referent of λόγος in both 4.12–13 and 13.7 ("'Ο ΛΟΓΟΣ ΤΟΥ ΘΕΟΥ" dans l'Epître aux Hébreux', *New Testament Essays: Studies in Memory of Thomas Walter Manson* [ed. A. J. B. Higgins; Manchester: University Press, 1959] 81–93).

53 Bruce, *Hebrews*, 3.

54 Analysis of this question, made more delicate both hermeneutically and socially by the highly sensitive atmosphere of Jewish–Christian relations since the mid-twentieth century, must recognize and avoid anachronism. What the writer of Hebrews was dealing with was not Mishnaic or Talmudic Judaism that later developed, much less the various phenomena that come under the broad rubric of 'Judaism' today, but rather the body of literature held in reverence by both communities of his day, those gathering in synagogues and those who called themselves 'the church.'

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corollary reasoning to lower or devaluate the earlier forms of revelation, or rather to confirm its trustworthiness as fulfilled prophecy, is largely a matter of how commentators view the book as a whole, their understanding of its *gestalt*.

5. The Author's Attitude towards Judaism

One factor influencing interpretation of the relationships implied between the prophets and the Son in 1.1–2 is interpreters' assumptions regarding the rhetorical purpose of the epistle. A long-standing tradition holds that the author wrote to a group of Jewish Christians in danger of falling back into a previous and outmoded stage of religion.[55] From this perspective, one reads the book as written to warn them of the inadequacies of Judaism and to persuade them not to return to such an impotent religion. Interpreters holding this view of the recipients of the letter, and of the author's purpose, will see the whole argument of Hebrews accordingly and from such a perspective will naturally tend to read the relationship of τοῖς προφήταις to ἐν υἱῷ as one of tension, even conflict. This tendency has been so prevalent for so long that even many commentators who do not share this view of the rhetorical purposes of the book unwittingly assume the contrast to be present in 1.1–2.

However, the historical circumstances, provenance, and purpose of Hebrews are notoriously complex; that the book was written to dissuade Jewish Christians from returning to Judaism is by no means established.[56] Indeed this view is hotly contested.[57] Käsemann called the hypothesis of a Judaizing disintegration that

55 Many commentators from earliest times, particularly following Chrysostom; more recently, Spicq, *Aux Hébreux*, 1.220–31; George Buchanan, *To the Hebrews* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972) 246–67; David Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 186; Bruce, *Hebrews*, xxvi–xxx.

56 Paul Andriessen argues that the texts usually cited to prove that the designated readers are a group of Judeo-Christians within a larger Christian community, who have either fallen back or else are in imminent danger of doing so, have been misread. His conclusion from the pertinent passages is that the readers addressed by the letter were actually very noble, strong Christians deserving no reproach whatsoever. Hence the pertinence of the term λόγος τῆς παρακλήσεως in 13.22 (interpreted by Andriessen as 'encouragement', almost 'congratulations', even) to characterize the whole tone of the book ('La communauté des "Hébreux": était-elle tombée dans le relachement?', *NRT* 96 [1974] 1054–66).

57 Among older works, see Moffatt (*Commentary*, 16), or Windisch (*Der Hebräerbrief*, 31); more recently Grässer (*An die Hebräer*, 1.24), Weiss (*An die Hebräer*, 71), and Harald Hegermann (*Der Brief an die Hebräer* [THKNT 16; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagnsanstalt, 1988] 60) posit that the readers were Gentiles or else the entire church, while Ellingworth (*Hebrews*, 21–29), F. F. Bruce ('To the Hebrews: A Document of Roman Christianity?', *ANRW* 2.25.4 [ed. Wolfgang Haase and Hildegaard Temporini; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1987] 3492–508, esp. 3498), and Michel (*An die Hebräer*, 37–58) argue for a mixed congregation as the recipients of the letter. See Attridge's balanced portrait of various modern proposals (*Hebrews*, 9–13).

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threatened the Christian community with the danger of apostasy towards Judaism 'a product of fantasy . . . that closes off understanding' of Hebrews, and grumbled that its 'final burial would be equivalent to liberation from a sinister ghost'.[58] It would be difficult to demonstrate from the New Testament that the early church defined itself over and against the rest of Judaism, of which a significant part of the church continued to consider itself a natural part. Moreover, recent studies have challenged the hoary caricature of a unified, nationalistic, and monolithic Judaism from which early Christians broke away, and have shown that the followers of Jesus were but the latest of several Jewish groups who considered the majority of other Jews to have disqualified themselves from covenant benefits. Such strong dissension existed between various rival strands of Judaism long before the appearance of the messianic church movement that even the familiar 'sons of light/sons of darkness' dualism of intertestamental literature has been shown to express the remnant theology of dissident Jewish groups who differentiated not only between Jews and Gentiles, as has traditionally been interpreted, but Israelites from other Israelites.[59] Evidence of pre-christian dissident Jewish remnant theology abounds, enough to reconsider the predominant paradigm that blames Christian and Jewish tensions solely on Christian separatism.[60]

When Hebrews' alleged anti-Semitism has been directly confronted by study of the texts with that question in mind, the surprising (for some) conclusion that emerges is that the writer is profoundly sympathetic to and loyal to Judaism.[61] No differentiation or separation from Judaism is advocated;[62] there is no denigration of Moses;[63] even the comparisons between the effectiveness of older and newer covenants 'is not an indication of the polemical anti-Judaic character of Hebrews',[64] according to those who have focused on the question. Koester notes that Hebrews calls the Christian community an ἐπισυναγωγή in 10.25 and honors Jewish 'heroes' in ch. 11.[65] He emphasizes that 'God's manner of speaking is further defined in that it took place "by the prophets" sent to Israel (Heb 1:1)'.[66] Though the author may recognize subsequent stages in the process of revelation, he can hardly be characterized as prejudiced against Judaism.

58 Ernst Käsemann, *The Wandering People of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) 24–25.

59 Mark A. Elliott, *The Survivors of Israel: A Reconsideration of the Theology of Pre-Christian Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 57–113, 140–86, 345–54.

60 Ibid., 629–64.

61 Robert Wall and William Lane, 'Polemic in Hebrews and the Catholic Epistles', *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity* (ed. Craig Evans and Donald Hagner; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 171–85.

62 Ibid., 173.

63 Ibid., 175

64 Ibid., 181.

65 Koester, *Hebrews*, 76–77.

66 Ibid., 184.

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Assertions of the author's alleged rhetorical purposes need to be drawn from the text itself, not merely read into interpretations of texts like 1.1–2. To be sure, the expanded glorification of the son in the ὅς clauses of 1.2b, 3, 4, and throughout the rest of Hebrews, almost immediately sweeps attention away from the now-surpassed prophets of the earlier dispensations, and that deliberately. The author does recognize and exalt the surpassing glory of the son's ministry of revelation:

> As the following chapters will indicate, that Son, seated at God's right hand, is superior to all other agents through whom God's word has come, particularly to the angels (cf. 1:4, 5, 14; 2:2–3, 18), to Moses (cf. 3:1–6, 11:23–29, 39), to Joshua (cf. 3:7–4:10), and to Aaron (cf. 5:4. Christ's superiority to Aaron extends to the whole tribe of Levi. Cf. 7:4–19).[67]

But, in attempting to discern Hebrews' attitude towards earlier revelation, we must be careful not to misunderstand his evaluation of the prophetic ministry that preceded, predicted, and indeed prepared the message brought by and through the son. As we saw earlier, it is only by reading into the terms πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως some sort of pejorative values that they may be used to posit a negative evaluation on the part of the author for the prophetic ministry by which, according to this same locution, God himself spoke. That the author would in the opening seven words of his treatise dramatically weaken all that he later goes on to say, by undermining the value of that which God had spoken in the Old Testament through prophets – the principal basis of his own arguments – is in our view untenable.

6. The Prologue as Affirmation of Continuity

We suggest that, rather than emphasizing the obsolescence of the Old Testament as revelation, the author builds his book-length exaltation of the final form of revelation in God's son, who is the ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης καὶ χαρακτὴρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ (1.3), upon the Word of God already spoken in various and sundry ways through his earlier mouthpieces, the prophets. This Word of God, written and recorded 'in the past' (1.1), is proclaimed with precision and authority 'in these last days' by the son and his apostles (1.2; 2.3–4; 13.7), whom the author sees in continuity with their predecessors. The author of Hebrews himself employs the Old Testament constantly as a 'living' Word of God. The key to his attitude towards the Hebrew scriptures is that he uses them to proclaim the new covenant message concerning Jesus Christ, and to show that the ministry of Jesus is the reality of which the institutions prescribed by the old covenant (i.e. 'the old testament') were ὑποδείγματι καὶ σκιᾷ (8.5):[68]

67 Attridge, *Hebrews*, 39.

68 J. Coppens argued that from the New Testament onwards, only heretics, with Marcion at the head of the parade, have opposed recognizing the unity of the two testaments (*Les Harmonies des deux Testaments, Essai sur les Divers Sens des Ecritures et sur l'Unité de la Révélation* [Tournai-Paris: Casterman, 1948] 12–16).

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> The complementary phrases 'God spoke' ἐν τοῖς προφήταις ... ἐν υἱῷ ... establish that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ can be understood only within the context of God's revelation to Israel. The Old Testament witness actually foreshadowed the utterance of God's decisive and climactic word ... awakened within the fathers an expectation that he would continue to speak to his people. ... [T]he sons of the fathers understand that the word spoken through the Son constituted an extension of a specific history marked by divine revelation.[69]

Concerning the two stages of revelation history referenced in the prologue, Lane says that while the expression ἐπ᾽ ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν in the Septuagint carries the general sense of future as distinct from the past, ἔσχατος had by this time taken on technical significance when it was understood as a prophetic expression. If the latter days' event is fulfillment, a prophetically predicted arrival, the expression being used to describe Jesus' present ministry validates, rather than undermines – heightens, rather than lessens – the importance of the word spoken through the prophets.[70]

7. Conclusion

Exegesis is both inductive and deductive. It seems that interpreters, from their (proper) understanding of the author's series of 'better' comparisons later in the book, have often (improperly) read back into the opening words of Hebrews nuances of contrast that are not actually there in the text, resulting in an inaccurate picture of what the author is affirming in 1.1–2. Hermeneutical influence also works in the other direction. Whether one sees in Heb 1.1–2 stark contrast between antiquated and present modes of revelation, or rather deliberate development from one to the other, will influence how one interprets the rest of the book. If contrast is perceived here, the rest of the message of the book will be one of contrast. If historical development is perceived, a lesser leading to a greater, with the premise accorded honor as the foundation and necessary antecedent of the conclusion, then Hebrews' treatise will be read like an expanded *a forteriori* argument, similar to what the rabbis would call a *qal wahomer* ('If A is true, how much more so A¹').

69 Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 11

70 G. B. Caird ('The Exegetical Method of the Epistle to the Hebrews', *CJT* 5 [1959] 44–51) suggested that the only proper way to approach the thorny question of Hebrews' view of the Old Testament is to ask: Does Hebrews' view reflect the Old Testament's presentation of itself? His brief article has been a *tour de force* in Hebrews studies, cutting through stalemate arguments about whether Hebrews is 'for' or 'against' earlier Judaism. Caird demonstrated that the author of Hebrews proceeds from a right understanding of the older covenant, namely, that it consistently predicted and proclaimed its own eventual obsolescence (Heb 8.6–13) while anticipating and corroborating the very message Hebrews proclaims.

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It is the latter pattern that more accurately reflects the concept of revelation emergent from study of Hebrews as a whole.[71] What God has spoken through the son both validates the earlier revelation[72] and makes clearer the meaning of earlier pronouncements made through the prophets.[73] Not that additional meaning is added to them, or that some allegorical meaning is or was their true referent, but rather their inherent meaning spoken by God, who is consistent with himself, is understood and appropriated by the faith community who listen to that son and his apostles.[74]

Whatever degree of contrast an interpreter posits for Hebrews between, for example, a mode of revelation deemed to have become inferior and a more recent and definitive form of revelation in the son, must be demonstrated from the language of the text. As we have shown, when one searches for linguistic evidence that the author intended to contrast two stages of revelation with one another in 1.1–2 at the expense of earlier stages of revelation, it is conspicuously absent. Thus it is difficult to sustain that the author wished to pit former modes of revelation and that of these last days *against* one another.

Rather, Hebrews' opening words are a ringing declaration of continuity. He affirms that the one, same God who spoke in the past to the fathers in prophets has in these last days spoken to us in a son. The rest of the treatise uses the very words spoken through those prophets to glorify that son. A simple, direct translation is 'God, having spoken in the past in various and sundry ways to the fathers in the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us in a son . . . .'

71 Grässer, *An die Hebräer*, 53.

72 Caird, '*Exegetical Method*', 47–49.

73 See Vern Poythress's two articles on 'Divine Meaning of Scripture' (*WTJ* 48 [1986] 241–79, and *WTJ* 50 [1988] 27–64) for argumentation that New Testament writers understand the full meaning of Old Testament texts because 'the speech of God is not complete until the coming of Christ (Heb 1:1–3). We must, as it were, hear the end of the discourse before we are in a position to weigh the total context in terms of which we may achieve the most profound understanding of each part of the discourse' ('Divine Meaning' [1986] 267–68).

74 Hughes, *Hebrews and Hermeneutics*, 106–7.

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