

*The Son and the Father in
Hebrews 1:1–4 and Philippians 2:5–11*

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Hebrews 1:1–4 and Philippians 2:5–11 are salient New Testament texts that inform the christology of the church. Both communicate deep truths about Christ with intricate style and language. Taken together, these passages compliment one another to form a well rounded portrait of the identity and work of Jesus Christ. As I lead out the meaning of these texts it will become clear that an enriched understanding of Christ will in tandem enrich our understanding of God. This is due to the fact that what both texts are asserting is that Jesus is God’s ultimate and final self-revelation.

The genre of Hebrews is that of a sermon; more specifically, it has been called a homiletic Midrash.¹ Old Testament (OT) texts are interpreted by the author in light of God’s revelation of Himself in His Son. The preacher is stern with his hearers, but his sternness comes from a yearning for their maturity (Heb 5:11–6:9). They seem to have become sluggish in their faith and disposition to Christ (5:11). The preacher seeks to draw his audience into deeper faith by urging them to consider Christ (3:1, 12:3). He does this from the outset by painting a majestic portrait of their Lord in 1:1–4, which serves as the exordium of the sermon.² This exordium presents a splendid vision of the Son of God.

It has been convincingly argued that the first four verses of Hebrews were intentionally crafted as a chiasm. In a chiasm, the crux of what the author is wanting to say is found at its center and must be read differently than more linear forms of writing.³ The proposed chiastic structure of our pericope has verse 3ab as its centre and turning point, which bears significantly on how we are to read the text.

¹ George Wesley Buchanan, *To the Hebrews* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), XIX.

² Harold W. Attridge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 36.

³ Daniel J. Ebert, “The Chiastic Structure of the Prologue to Hebrews,” *Trinity Journal* 13, no. 2 (1992): 168.

Philippians is a letter written by Paul to the church in Philippi. Although its genre differs from that of Hebrews, it was produced with a similar purpose. In this letter, Paul seeks to encourage (2:1) and exhort (1:9, 1:27, 2:5) his readers primarily by focusing their gaze on Jesus and to conform their attitude to His (2:5). Paul desired their ethical behaviour to follow suit (1:27, 2:3, 3:1, 3:17). Paul turns their gaze to Christ especially in the poetic narrative,⁴ or hymn, found in Philippians 2:5–11, whereby another majestic christological vision is cast. Regardless of its hypothetical pre-pauline origins, we must read this pericope with the assumption that it says what Paul wanted it to say.⁵ Paul's aims are rhetorical in that he wants his letter to elicit change in his audience.⁶

Each of these two texts were intended to encourage a certain way of living among their hearers by advancing a stunning christological vision. It remains to be seen what exactly these visions entail.

My reading of Hebrews 1:1–4 takes into account its nature as a chiasm. We will thus begin with the centre in order to grasp the crux of what the preacher wanted to say before moving on to the rest of the pericope. At the centre of the chiasm is verse 3ab in which the preacher shifts his focus from the Father to the Son, and which contains the only present tense verbs of the pericope. These are important rhetorical techniques used by the preacher to give a weight to the message of 3ab within the exordium.⁷ Verse 3ab speaks of the Son's identity as the "radiance (ἀπαύγασμα) of His [God's] glory (δόξης) and the exact representation

⁴ Michael J. Goreman, "Although/Because He Was in the Form of God': The Theological Significance of Paul's Master Story (Phil 2:6–11)," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 1.2 (2007): 151.

⁵ N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 57.

⁶ Joseph A. Marchal, "Expecting a Hymn, Encountering an Argument: Introducing the Rhetoric of Philippians and Pauline Interpretation," *Interpretation* 61.3 (2007): 246.

⁷ Scott D. Mackie, "Confession of the Son of God in the exordium of Hebrews," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 30.4 (2008): 440–441.

(χαρακτήρ) of His nature (ὑποστάσεως).” These two clauses are paralleled with one another and are mutually clarifying.⁸

The word ἀπαύγασμα can be translated either actively as *radiance*, or passively as *reflection*.⁹ χαρακτήρ comes across passively as “impression”, such as that of a seal impressed upon a coin.¹⁰ Jesus Christ is the exact representation, not of Himself, but of another. His identity is inextricably bound to that of the Father.

The matter which clarifies the nature of Jesus’ identity as the radiance/reflection and impression of the Father is the defining of ὑποστάσις. It is a compound word formed from ὑπο and ἴσθημι, which can literally be taken to mean “undergird”. Its semantic range includes the “invisible, transcendent reality” of a thing,¹¹ which brings out the meaning as “essence”, but it can also include the ethical “substance”.¹² The significance of ὑποστάσις is that Jesus’ identity as the impression of the Father goes beyond appearances and deep into Who the Father is at His core.

Many of the terms in verse 3ab have caused controversy since they can be interpreted in different ways. Mackie makes sense of this by suggesting that the preacher of Hebrews intended for ἀπαύγασμα and ὑποστάσις to have polyvalent meaning. He contends that the preacher of Hebrews used this technique throughout his sermon with the intent of clarifying and enriching the nature of the relationship between the Father and the Son.¹³ In this reading, both the active

⁸ Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), XI, 422.

⁹ Mackie, *Confession* (2008), 441.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 442.

¹¹ Kittel, Friedrich, and Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, VII, 585. also Mackie, *Confession* (2008), 443.

¹² Mackie, *Confession* (2008), 444. also John Calvin, *Commentary on Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), 26. Calvin makes ὑποστάσις in Hebrews 1:3 to denote one of the three substances (persons) of the Godhead, not God’s one essence. He seems to be reading a later doctrine of the trinity back into the text.

¹³ Mackie, *Confession* (2008), 445.

and passive voices of ἀπαύγασμα are intended. The Son is *both* the reflection and the radiance of the Father. The polyvalence of ὑποστάσις brings depth in presenting a Son who is the exact impression of both His Father’s essence and His Father’s ethical substance. This reading presents a grand vision of the identity of Christ in light of His nuanced relationship of mutuality with His Father.¹⁴ The force of the centre of the chiasm is that the preacher is exhorting his hearers to see that Jesus truly is God’s ultimate self-revelation.

Hebrews 1:1 speaks of how long ago, God revealed Himself and His will in the prophets. In “these last days”, the preacher asserts, God spoke to us in His Son. Here there is a shift from the old way, to the new way of God’s self-disclosure. That the Son is the revelation of the Father is what the preacher has set out to prove.¹⁵ He backs his claim by asserting the authority the Father has given the Son. The Son was appointed as heir of all things, and it is through the Son that God made the world. Christ’s work in verse 2 is framed passively as the Father’s work *through* Him. God Himself stamps Jesus with His seal of approval in appointing Him heir. The first half of the chiasm forms a temporal progression from “long ago” to “in these last days,” which comes to its crescendo in verse 3 with the present tense of ὅς ὢν.

The latter half of the chiasm begins in the aorist tense in verse 3c. Here the preacher asserts that part of Jesus’ work was making purification of sins. The middle voice of ποιησάμενος is not brought out in the NASB translation. A better translation would be, “After He made *himself* [the] purification of sins”. The preacher stresses that Jesus was the actor and was Himself the necessary sacrifice for the completion of His priestly work.

¹⁴ Mackie, *Confession* (2008), 446.

¹⁵ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1977), 36.

After his priestly work, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. Important to note is the use of the active voice in verse 3 to speak of Jesus' priestly work and his exaltation, which contrasts the passive sense of Jesus' work in verse 2. There is thus a significant shift in the nature of Jesus's identity and work from the first half of the chiasm to the second. It is after the affirmation of Jesus' equality with God, and after the completion of Jesus' priestly work (1:3ab), that the preacher clothes Jesus with the authority of the active voice.

The chiasm ends with Jesus' exaltation in 1:3d–4. The preacher affirms Jesus' superiority to angels by virtue of His more excellent name, which corresponds to his superiority to prophets in the first verse of the chiasm.

From its outset, Philippians 2:5–11 speaks about Christ. As a statement of fact, Jesus existed in the form (μορφῆ) of God (2:6a). This verse speaks to the pre-existence of Christ and compliments the claim made in Hebrews 1:2. Jesus had to have pre-existed with God (Phil:2:6) in order for God to have made the world through Him (Heb 1:2). The meaning μορφῆ can connote either “essence” or “image”,¹⁶ and makes a similar connection to that made by ὑποστάσις in Heb 1:3. Jesus and God are put on the same level by both Paul and the preacher of Hebrews.

Both N. T. Wright and Michael Gorman read Philippians 2:6b epexegetically as referring back to 2:6a. What Paul meant by ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ, he clarifies as τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ. In this way, Jesus *already* had equality with God and chose not to take advantage of His rights.¹⁷ I read 2:6 in light of this epexegetical reading.

¹⁶ Dennis W. Jowers, “The Meaning of ΜΟΡΦΗ in Philippians 2:6–7,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49.4 (2006): 740–741.

¹⁷ N. T. Wright, “ἄραγματός and the Meaning of Philippians 2:5–11.” *Journal of Theological Studies* 37.2 (1986): 344. also Michael J. Gorman, “‘Although/Because He Was in the Form of God’: The Theological Significance of Paul’s Master Story (Phil 2:6–11).” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 1.2 (2007): 155.

The Philippians text sets itself apart from the Hebrews text with its treatment of Jesus' *kenosis* in 2:6b–8. Here, the mechanics of Jesus' *human* identity and work are laid out. I say “mechanics” because the text not only says *that* Jesus became human, but *how* He did so. Rather than laying claim to what was rightfully His, Jesus emptied Himself (ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν),¹⁸ and took on the form (μορφὴν) of a servant or slave (δούλου) (2:7). His human identity was that of a servant. God did not force Jesus to empty Himself or take on the form of a servant, rather Jesus did it willingly unto Himself.¹⁹ He thus became fully human, being found in form (σχήματι) as a man. Paul's emphasis on Jesus' humanity in Philippians is largely absent in Hebrews 1:1–4.

Verse 8 affirms the extent to which Jesus' obedience took Him in His *kenosis* – death on a cross. Jesus' redemptive task necessitated His humbling and submission to the literal point of death. The Hebrews text serves to (partially) answer a question that naturally arises from Philippians 2:8, that is, “Why did Jesus have to die?” The answer supplied by Hebrews 3c is the purification of sins. Jesus' servanthood and death had to do with the purification of sins. The middle voice of ποιησάμενος in Heb 3c shows that His work of purification was done by, and *to*, His own self, thus complimenting the Philippians text. Again, the Philippians text shows *how* purification was made – Jesus' own death on a tree.

In Philippians, humiliation of Christ is followed by its antithesis: hyper-exaltation (ὑπερύψωσέν).²⁰ Philippians 2:9 tells of how Jesus was highly exalted by God *because* of His work in 2:6–8. The passive voice highlights God's agency in exalting Jesus to the *highest* position. The Philippians text renders a causal relationship between Jesus work and His exaltation with διὸ καὶ. In Heb 1:1–4, Jesus sits down in at the right hand of the place of God's

¹⁸ Kittel, Friedrich, and Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, III, 661.

¹⁹ Wright, “ἀρπαγμός” (1986): 345.

²⁰ Kittel, Friedrich, and Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, XIII, 608.

throne – higher than heaven.²¹ The relation of Jesus’ work and exaltation is not explicitly causal, but rather temporal, as indicated by the aorist participle ποιησόμενος.

Our passages line up in their treatment of the exaltation of Jesus. In both, Jesus is exalted to the highest place possible, the very throne of God. His exaltation carries with it the task of sustaining and ruling creation from on high.²² Philippians 2:10–11 pays explicit homage to Jesus’ authority over creation as outlined in Hebrews 1:3–4. The exaltation of the Son to the same level of the Father confirms the claims made in both texts about Jesus’ equality with God.

The side by side exegesis of these two texts offers much in terms of material for preaching, particularly if the preacher has a desire to inform and enrich the christological vision of his or her audience. Both of these texts were written in order to broaden the christological vision of their audience. These texts continue to meet this purpose today.

In preaching and teaching Christ today, I would not stress the differences that they present, but rather their complimentary nature as canonized scripture. These texts certainly emphasize different aspects of Christ’s identity and work, but they do not contradict each other. Jesus’ humanity in Philippians 2:6b–8 is brought out by the preacher of Hebrews later in his sermon (2:9, 5:7, 12:3–4). It is, then, not the case that the one who penned Hebrews 1:1–4 did not think of Jesus as human. An outstanding example of the complimentary nature of these texts is seen in comparing Heb 1:3c with Phil 2:6b–8. A natural question that follows a reading of the Hebrews verse is, “How did Jesus make himself purification of sins?” The Philippians text would be an important piece of the answer.

²¹ Kittel, Friedrich, and Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, XIII, 609.

²² *Ibid.*

Another complimentary aspect of these texts that needs to be heard today has to do with the present and the future aspects of Christ's work. The centre of the Hebrews chiasm speaks to Christ's work of radiating/reflecting the nature of God and of upholding all things by the word of His power. These works of Christ are present and ongoing. They have not ceased in anyway, as shown by the participial phrases in the present tense. In addition to the present authority of Jesus over all things, the Philippians text reminds the church of the future event of the submission of all creation to the Lordship of Jesus (2:10–12). These texts then help us to keep the present and the eschaton in tension with an exposition of Christ's work and identity now, and the future universal submission to His rule.

The interaction of these passages is wonderfully complimentary. Hebrews 1:1–4 fills the meaning of Christ's divinity that might be missed in a cursory reading of Philippians 2:5–11 (though Christ's divinity is certainly there). Conversely, the Philippians text fills those parts of Hebrews 1:1–4 which only allude to Christ's human work (1:3c), yet do not go into the mechanics of *how* or to what degree the Divine became human. Both of these texts show the mutuality of the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. Together they proclaim the mystery of the incarnation with an amazing range of christological assertions that serve to broaden one's vision of Christ while simultaneously informing theology proper.

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