

# Hebrews 1:1–4 as the Interpretive Guide for the Book of Hebrews

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**Abstract:** The exordium in the Book of Hebrews (1:1–4) stands as one of the most exceptional examples of Koine Greek in the entire New Testament. A careful study of these four verses is warranted, not only because of their brilliant literary construction, but because the exordium serves as an interpretive guide for the rest of the book. Seven statements about the Son are presented in the exordium, and these Son statements preview the major themes discussed throughout Hebrews. This article utilizes discourse analysis of the Greek text to evaluate the construction of the exordium. Alongside the discourse analysis, this article demonstrates the connection between the themes found in the exordium and the main arguments found throughout the rest of the book.

Keywords: Slavery, Mosaic Law, Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic, Anti-slavery, Gentiles

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## Introduction

**T**he Book of Hebrews opens with an *exclamation mark!* This vivid opening, also known as *the exordium* (1:1–4), arrests the attention of the reader with lofty statements that create a resounding picture of the excellence of the Son. In these magnificently weighty verses, the Son is presented as the pinnacle of God’s communication with mankind and the completion of God’s redemptive plan; he is presented as the Creator and the Redeemer, and his superiority over even the angels is declared. The vivid exaltation of Christ that is presented in these opening four verses

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serves as a springboard for rich theological truths that continue to be unpacked throughout the entire book. Hebrews presents the Son as the fulfillment of all Messianic hope, and it demonstrates the superiority of the Son above all things.

Hebrews is profound in its doctrinal truth, and it is compelling in its practical call to faithfulness to God. It is written as a homily, as expressed by the author in 13:22, and the theological arguments of the author are masterfully intertwined with words of exhortation that are presented throughout the letter. Bruce describes the theme and practicality of Hebrews in a succinct but profound manner: "... this is the book which establishes the finality of the gospel by asserting the supremacy of Christ.... More than any other New Testament book it deals with the ministry which our Lord is accomplishing on his people's behalf now. In a day of shaking foundations, it speaks of the kingdom which cannot be shaken."<sup>2</sup> The scope of the theological and practical exhortations of the book are immense, yet the root of the major arguments of the book can be traced back to the four short verses of the exordium. The exordium may be appreciated for its compelling literary beauty, its high view of the Son, and its function in capturing the reader's attention. However, the exordium's value transcends its immediate context, as it serves as the *program guide*, or interpretive key, for the entire book.<sup>3</sup> The exordium opens with a comparison of God's former method of communication with the final means, which is through His Son (1:1–2a). The exordium continues by detailing seven truths concerning the Son (1:2b–4); these seven

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<sup>2</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), xii.

<sup>3</sup> The idea that Hebrews 1:1–4 introduces the major themes found throughout the epistle is expressed by many authors, including Rick Boyd, "The Role of Hebrews 1:1-4 in the Book of Hebrews," *The Journal of Inductive Biblical Studies*, 4, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 155–181; David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, NAC (Nashville: B & H, 2010), 95–96; Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 86–87; David Alan Black, "Hebrews 1:1-4: A Study in Discourse Analysis," *Westminster Theological Journal* 49, no. 1 (1987): 175–194; George Wesley Buchanan, *To the Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972) 3–10; Dana M. Harris, *Hebrews*, Exegetical Guide to the Greek NT (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2019).

statements are theologically robust, and the concepts found within these statements are explored in greater detail throughout the book.

Hebrews 1:1–4 as an interpretive key to the book is not an idea unique to this paper. However, this paper will offer a unique contribution by testing this common suggestion with an evaluation of the connection between the seven themes presented in these four verses and the manner in which these seven themes are discussed and expanded throughout the book. The methodology utilized in this paper will include a discourse analysis (DA) of the exordium.<sup>4</sup> These four verses compose one highly structured sentence in the Greek text and exploring the linguistic structure of the sentence will demonstrate its prominent components, as well as the sentence's connection with the rest of the chapter and the rest of the epistle. Each clause within the exordium will receive a detailed explanation within the discourse analysis, and an evaluation of the major themes of the book will be discussed in light of the discourse analysis.

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<sup>4</sup> The discourse analysis [DA] presented in this paper follows a format based on Clark's methodology utilized in his DA of 3rd John in David J. Clark, *Analyzing and Translating New Testament Discourse* (Dallas: Fontes P, 2019), 217–219. Other works on discourse analysis in Hebrews include Cynthia Long Westfall, *A Discourse Analysis of the Letter to the Hebrews: The Relationship between Form and Meaning*, vol. 11, The Library of New Testament Studies (London: T&T Clark, 2005); Black, "Hebrews 1:1-4," 175–194; and L. L. Neeley, "A Discourse Analysis of Hebrews," *OPTAT* 1 (1987): 1–146. Westfall breaks the book into three separate sections: Jesus the Apostle of our Confession (1:1–4:10), Jesus the High Priest of Our Confession (4:11–10:25), and Partners in a Heavenly Calling (10:19–13:25). Her DA recognizes an overlap in the discourse themes of her second and third sections in 10:19–25. Neely's discourse analysis deals with the entire book, and it presents a chiasmic structure of the entire epistle. David Alan Black's analysis focuses primarily on the exordium, and he places particular emphasis on these four verses as a colon consisting of sixteen items.

### Discourse Analysis of Hebrews 1:1–4

<sup>1</sup>Πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως πάλαι  
[S]<sup>1</sup>ὁ θεὸς [S]<sup>1</sup> λαλήσας τοῖς πατράσιν ἐν τοῖς προφήταις

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<sup>2</sup>ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων  
ἐλάλησεν ἡμῖν ἐν <sup>[VIP]</sup>υἱῷ <sup>[VIP]</sup>,

ὃν ἔθηκεν κληρονόμον πάντων,  
δι' οὗ καὶ ἐποίησεν τοὺς αἰῶνας·

<sup>3</sup>ὃς ὢν ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης καὶ χαρακτὴρ  
τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ,  
φέρων τε τὰ πάντα τῷ ῥήματι τῆς δυνάμεως  
αὐτοῦ,  
καθαρισμὸν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ποιησάμενος  
ἐκάθισεν ἐν δεξιᾷ τῆς μεγαλωσύνης ἐν  
ὑψηλοῖς,  
<sup>4</sup>τοσοῦτῳ κρείττων γενόμενος τῶν ἀγγέλων  
ὅσῳ  
διαφορώτερον παρ' αὐτοὺς  
κεκληρονόμηκεν ὄνομα.

**Translation:** <sup>1</sup>God, who long ago, in various seasons and in various ways, spoke to the fathers by the prophets, <sup>2</sup>has in these last days spoken to us by the Son, whom he appointed heir of all (things), by whom also he made the universe; <sup>3</sup>He is the radiance of his glory and the exact representation of his substance, and he upholds all things by the word of his power. After making a cleansing for sin, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high. <sup>4</sup>Having become so much greater than the angels, as he has inherited a more excellent name than theirs.

### A Detailed Discourse Analysis of 1:1

<sup>1</sup>Πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως πάλαι  
[S]<sup>1</sup>ὁ θεὸς [S]<sup>1</sup> λαλήσας τοῖς πατράσιν ἐν τοῖς προφήταις

**Translation:** *God, who long ago, in various seasons and in various ways, spoke to the fathers by the prophets,*

The opening to the book describes the previous forms of communication that were employed by God in past times. Three adverbial modifiers to the aorist active participle *λαλήσας* head the sentence, and these modifiers begin alliteration of the *p* sound in verse 1.<sup>5</sup> The first two modifiers, *πολυμερῶς* and *πολυτρόπως*, are hapax legomena, and they express a temporal aspect and a modal aspect, respectively, and the third modifier, *πάντα*, gives an additional temporal detail.<sup>6</sup> The subject of the participial phrase in verse one, as well as the primary clause of the sentence, found in verse two, is *ὁ θεὸς*, as indicated by the superscript <sup>[S]</sup> in the DA. Concerning the structure of the sentence (1:1–4), Ellingworth writes, “Grammatically, this carefully composed opening sentence consists of a participial phrase (v. 1), the main clause (v. 2a), and two subordinate clauses (v. 2b), all with God as their subject, followed by two subordinate clauses (vv. 3, 4) having the Son as subject, and each including further participial phrases.”<sup>7</sup>

The exordium explores the manner of communication that God has used to speak to his people. Verse one begins by describing the previous forms that were used to communicate; they were varied in their essence and in their time. This communication was also varied in messengers and recipients, as *πατέρας* and *προφήταις* are both plural. While verse 1 stresses the multiplicity of God’s revelation in past times, verse 2 describes the culmination of God’s message.

### A Detailed Discourse Analysis of 1:2a

<sup>2</sup>ἐπ’ ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων  
ἐλάλησεν ἡμῖν ἐν υἱῷ,

**Translation:** “*has in these last days spoken to us by the Son,*”

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<sup>5</sup> Allen wrote, “The author’s use of rhetorical techniques such as alliteration, meter, rhythm, phonetic and semantic parallelism, syntactical/semantic repetition, and chiasm are all evidenced in this sentence” (*Hebrews*, 95).

<sup>6</sup> Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000), 847, 850.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Ellingworth, *Commentary on Hebrews*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 89.

The statement ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων, *in this last days*, is a point of departure from the statement made in verse one.<sup>8</sup> The phrase, *last days*, was common in Jewish apocalyptic literature, but its form, *in these last days*, is distinctive in Hebrews. Ellingworth commented, "Hebrews' distinctive (not Septuagintal) addition of τούτων indicates that the last days have begun. τούτων should be taken with the whole phrase: 'in these days which are the last days,' not 'at the end of these days.'" <sup>9</sup> This point of departure distinguishes the previous dispensations described in verse one from the current dispensation in which the readers of the letter, which includes the recipients of the letter, as well as today's readers, reside. The order of this adverbial modifier that begins the verse is significant, as the verb-initial order is considered the "default pragmatic order in New Testament Greek, regardless of the discourse genre."<sup>10</sup> About the departure from this typical order, Levinsohn notes, "The presence of adverbial or nominal constituents before the verb in individual sentences is then viewed as a marked order, motivated by the desire to establish the constituent concerned as a point of departure or in order to focus on or emphasize that constituent."<sup>11</sup> Thus, the statement "in these last days" may be understood as a point of departure from the previous clause, as noted by the dashed lines in the DA. This point of departure sets the stage for the following statement, which explains the present form of communication utilized by God.

### ἐλάλησεν

The sentence contains the aorist active indicative 3s ἐλάλησεν (λαλέω), translated *has spoken*. About the place that this verb occupies within the wider structure of the exordium, Allen comments, "The structural weight of the entire 72 words in Greek rests upon a single finite verb *elalesen* and its subject *ho theos*: 'God...has

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<sup>8</sup> Cynthia Long Westfall, "Hebrews" in Todd A. Scacewater, *Discourse Analysis of the New Testament Writings* (Dallas, TX: Fontes P), 548.

<sup>9</sup> Ellingworth, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 93.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Levinsohn, *Discourse Features of New Testament Greek: A Coursebook on the Information Structure of New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed. (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 2012), 17.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

spoken.”<sup>12</sup> A contrast may be seen between this verb and the participle *λαλήσας* in the preceding verse: while various means and methods were used by God to communicate in times past, the Son is the means of communication in “these last days.” This contrast demonstrates both the *continuity* and the *discontinuity* between the former mode of revelation described in verse one and that which is described in verse two. Dana Harris writes,

Together with v. 1, this clause highlights both continuity and discontinuity in divine revelation. *λαλήσας* and *ἐλάλησεν* stress God’s consistent self-revelation with speaking vbs. (e.g., *λαλέω*, *λέγω*), not writing vbs. (e.g., *γράφω*), as in Pauline epistles. Discontinuity includes: (1) God’s former (*πάλαι*) revelation and his speaking ‘in these last days’; (2) the ‘fathers’ vs. the pres. audience (and subsequent readers); (3) *many* prophets vs. the *one* Son; and (4) the many forms, times, and ways of God’s previous revelation vs. the definitive, final revelation in the Son.<sup>13</sup>

Continuity is demonstrated by the use of the aorist form of *λαλέω* in both clauses; it is evident that across the various dispensations, God has demonstrated his intention to communicate with his people in a direct manner. Hebrews sees the communication in this dispensation as the completed revelation from God in comparison to former modes, because this communication comes through the Son. A distinct aspect of God’s communication, as described in Hebrews, is the description of God speaking to his people, rather than a focus on his written Word, as in Pauline literature. This distinction does not discount the written Word; rather, it emphasizes the idea that God speaks with a loud voice through a number of manners, including that which has been written.

God *speaking* is a distinct form of revelation that is explored in Hebrews. Often in Pauline literature an appeal is made to the Scriptures, or that which has been written aforetime for the reader’s admonition. However, in Hebrews, an appeal is made to the Hebrew understanding that God speaks to his people, i.e., “Thus says the Lord.” Having understood that God has spoken to his people, it may

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<sup>12</sup> Allen, *Hebrews*, 95.

<sup>13</sup> Dana M. Harris, *Hebrews*, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2019), 13–14.

be demonstrated that the people are expected to hear his voice. This is a common motif that is found throughout the OT Scriptures. In Deuteronomy 6:4, the people were commanded to *shema* (hear or listen). Their willingness to *hear* God's voice would be a marker of their willingness to obey God's voice, as evidenced in the following passages: In Judges 2:2 the people of God were rebuked by the angel of the LORD with the charge "you have not obeyed my voice,"<sup>14</sup> and in Zechariah 1:4, the prophet offers an evaluation of the preceding generations, as he issues the warning "Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets cried out, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, Return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds.' *But they did not hear* or pay attention to me, declares the Lord" (emphasis added).

This motif of hearing God's voice (i.e., obedience) is referenced in the exordium with the acknowledgment that God has spoken. In 2:1, the author challenges the reader to take heed to things that have been heard. This theme is further explored in Chapter 3, as the reader is cautioned against hardening one's heart in a manner similar to their ancestors. Hebrews 3:15 reads, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." This cautionary theme continues in the last of the five "warning passages" in Hebrews, as a pointed reminder about the gravity of hearing and obeying the voice of God is issued: "See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven" (12:25). A contrast is made in this passage between the gravity of the words of Moses the earthly messenger, and the gravity of the words of God, who speaks from Heaven through his Son. Hebrews begins by referencing the fact that God has revealed himself by speaking to his people, and the author offers exhortations and warnings throughout the letter in order to motivate the audience to hear and obey God.

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<sup>14</sup> Aside from the author's original translation of Hebrews 1:1–4, all Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.



### *The Son (ἐν υἱῷ)*

*The Son* is first introduced in Hebrews within an adverbial prepositional phrase modifying ἐλάλησεν in 1:2. An interchange of prepositions may be seen in this phrase, as ἐν is utilized rather than διὰ, which would normally be the expected preposition for this phrase.<sup>15</sup> The object of the preposition, υἱῷ (Son), functions as a dative of means, describing the medium of communication, or *how* God has finally spoken. The introduction of *the Son* in this verse is the introduction of the main character or topic of consideration in the book. As Levinsohn puts it, the Son is the salient participant, or the “global VIP” of the book.<sup>16</sup> The prominence of the Son as the global VIP is referenced in the DA by the <sup>[VIP]</sup> tag.

Ellingworth observes that, distinctive from other NT writers who use the title “Son of God,” Hebrews is unique in that the absolute title “Son” is employed.<sup>17</sup> The article is not present in the Greek text, yet *Son* is often translated with the article. Rienecker noted that the absence of the article suggests that the meaning of υἱῷ within this phrase is “in one who is a son.” He comments, “The absence of the article fixes attention upon the nature and not upon the personality of the mediator of a new revelation. God spoke to us in one who has this character that He is Son.”<sup>18</sup> Taking a similar perspective concerning the lack of the article, Wallace comments,

Although this should probably be translated “a Son” (there is no decent

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<sup>15</sup> Murray J. Harris, *Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament: An Essential Reference Resource for Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 35.

<sup>16</sup> Levinsohn, *Discourse Features*, 136. Black notes the emphasis on the Son as the focal point of 1:1–4: “God is identified in nominal form only twice, though he is marked as the subject four times and by a pronoun once, but Christ is identified by nominal forms three times, by pronominal forms four times, and as the subject six times. It is also relevant to note that in three of the four verbal elements which have God as subject, the Son is involved either as agent or object (items 1, 9, and 10). Thus the Son is not only dealt with in the larger section of the colon but is also the culminating point of the colon” (Black, “Hebrews 1:1–4,” 184).

<sup>17</sup> Ellingworth, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 94.

<sup>18</sup> Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, ed. Cleon L. Rogers II (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 663.

way to express this compactly in English), the force is clearly qualitative (though, of course, on the continuum it would be closer to the indefinite than the definite category). The point is that God, in his final revelation, has spoken to us in one who has the characteristics of a son. His credentials are vastly different from the credentials of the prophets (or from the angels, as the following context indicates).<sup>19</sup>

Allen also wrestled with the various choices that are present in translating this anarthrous word, but he concluded that including the article in one's translation is the best way to express the force that is found in this phrase.<sup>20</sup> It may be observed that the construction of this phrase indicates the stark distinction that is made between the Son and all created beings, both heavenly and earthly, in relation to his attributes, work, and medium of divine communication; i.e., only *this One* functions as a Son.

Although the lack of the article creates somewhat of a grammatical puzzle for the translator, it may be observed that this construction, ἐν υἱῷ, possesses thematic significance within the exordium. Concerning the connection of this construction with the wider themes explored in the exordium, Allen comments, "Most commentators conclude that the absence of the article focuses on the character and nature of the Son as compared to the prophets. Furthermore, given the scope of the prologue, the lack of the article likely indicates that the revelation in the Son includes his incarnation, death, resurrection, and second coming."<sup>21</sup>

The first part of the exordium, 1:1–2A, serves as a brief introduction to the grand subject of the book, the Son. The author appeals to a motif that was very relatable to the recipients of the letter, a description of the ways that God had previously spoken to their ancestors. This communication took place via a number of different means, and it spanned multiple generations. The author punctuates the shift that took place in this current dispensation; communication from God has reached its fullest expression, which is God speaking

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<sup>19</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament with Scripture, Subject, and Greek Word Indexes* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 245.

<sup>20</sup> Allen, *Hebrews*, 105.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 104–105.

through the Son.<sup>22</sup> The second part of the exordium serves to identify *Who* the Son is.

### **A Detailed Discourse Analysis of 1:2b–4: Seven Descriptions of the Son**

Beginning in the second half of verse two, the author launches into an extensive and magnificent description of the Son. This is done by a series of clauses that refer back to *viō*, the Son. In the discourse analysis of this passage, each one of these clauses are subordinate to the noun *viō*, as they illustrate the following seven details about the Son:<sup>23</sup>

1. The Son is the Heir of All Things
2. The Son is the Creator of All Things
3. The Son is the Reflection of the Father
4. The Son is the Sustainer
5. The Son is the Great High Priest
6. The Son is Seated
7. The Son is Greater than the Angels

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<sup>22</sup> Commenting on the contrast between the two methods of God’s communication discussed in the exordium, Black wrote, “The basic assumption of the author is that God has spoken to men. But God, in his speaking, expressed himself in two different ways, one in an earlier and preliminary revelation (items 2–5), the other in a final and definitive revelation (items 6–8). The earlier speaking, presented in multifarious ways (*polumerōs kai polutropōs*), cannot compare with the later...” (Black, “Hebrews 1:1–4,” 177).

<sup>23</sup> There is not a consensus on the number of statements about Christ in this passage. Allen states that the number may be between six and eight, and he sets the number at eight on semantic grounds (*Hebrews*, 109). Dana Harris numbers the list of statements about Christ in 1:1–4 at seven (*Hebrews*, 14), which is the view presented in this paper.

***First and Second Statements about the Son:  
The Son is the Heir of All Things and  
The Son is the Creator of All Things***

ὃν ἔθηκεν κληρονόμον πάντων,  
δι' οὗ καὶ ἐποίησεν τοὺς αἰῶνας·

**Translation:** “whom he appointed heir of all (things), by whom also he made the universe;”

The first two statements concerning the Son in 1:2 will be dealt with together due to their close connection concerning their respective topics, as well as their unique order. Discourse analysis of these two relative clauses demonstrates a close connection; the second clause in the pair includes what Runge describes as a *thematic addition*, which is indicated using an adverbial καὶ “to create a connection between two things, essentially ‘adding’ the current element to some preceding parallel element. Thematic addition is generally translated in English using ‘also’ or ‘too.’”<sup>24</sup> Both of these relative clauses, as well as the following clauses through 1:4 give additional information concerning *the Son*. The clauses refer back to the Son using pronouns. The omission of proper nouns or titles after the initial identification of the Son, as well as the use of relative pronouns, is a general discourse feature; according to Levinsohn, there is a tendency “for references to the VIP to be *minimal*, once he or she had been activated.”<sup>25</sup> These first two clauses refer back to the Son by way of relative pronouns. The first relative clause in 1:2 is linked to υἱῷ by the accusative relative pronoun ὃν, while the second relative clause in 1:2 is linked by the genitive relative pronoun οὗ, which is the object of the preposition δι'. This preposition and its object express agency, i.e., that God used the Son to make the universe.

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<sup>24</sup> Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010) as cited in Constantine Campbell, *Advances in the Study of Greek* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 188.

<sup>25</sup> Levinsohn, *Discourse Features*, 143.

***The First and Second Statements about the Son:  
Their Connection with the Rest of the Book***

Consummation and creation are important themes that are explored beginning with the opening of the book (1:2). The order of these two subordinate clauses is important; one would expect the Son's creative acts to occupy the initial spot, but instead, the author initially looks to an eschatological theme. There is purpose in the order, as Harris observed, "By placing the eschatological first, Hebrews indicates that the Son is the ultimate goal of creation."<sup>26</sup> This consummation-creation phrase is a marked word order that is also observed in 2:10: "For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the originator of their salvation through sufferings" (NASB).

Seeing a link between the purpose of inheritance as a component of creation, Allen comments,

What is unusual is the order in which they appear: consummation first, then creation . . . . The Son made it all and he inherits it all, but the order of these clauses and then the repetition of the root in *kekleronomeken* in v. 4 at the end of the paragraph indicates that the author's thought really moves from the eschatological to the protological and then back to the eschatological. The Son inherits all he has made.<sup>27</sup>

Moffatt also notes the link between the Son's creative acts and his inheritance; he notes the grammatical and thematic link between these two relative clauses by commenting, "the καὶ especially suggests a correspondence between this and the preceding statement; what the Son was to possess was what he had been instrumental in making."<sup>28</sup> The consummation-creation word order is a theme consistent with the emphasis on eschatological themes in Hebrews. For example, the link between Jesus Christ's past activities with his future actions may be seen in 13:8: "Jesus Christ is the same

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<sup>26</sup> Dana Harris, *Hebrews*, 14.

<sup>27</sup> Allen, *Hebrews*, 114.

<sup>28</sup> James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Hebrews* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1924), 5.

yesterday and today, and forever” (NASB). As Ellingworth observed, “... no NT writing preserves a better balance than Hebrews between the past, present, and future aspects of God’s work in Christ. Within the opening, programmatic statement, Christ’s future possession of all things by God’s gift (1:2, κληρονόμον πάντων) is given a degree of prominence by being mentioned, somewhat unexpectedly, before Christ’s role in creation.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, the marked order demonstrates an emphasis on consummation-creation that is demonstrated throughout Hebrews.

The concept of the Son as *heir* fits into the metanarrative of the book; the Son/heir is greater than Moses (3:5–6). The comparison between Moses and the Son is significant in terms of the very idea of Sonship because the Son is greater than Moses simply because of his status as Son. The divine identity and superiority of Christ has at its foundation the idea of Sonship in Hebrews. The believers addressed in Hebrews are of the same house as this heir (3:6). In comparison, Moses rejected his earthly sonship, which included regal identity, because “he considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt” (11:26, ESV). From Moses’ viewpoint, according to Hebrews, being an earthly heir to the greatest of earthly kingdoms was worth renouncing in order to be a part of the Son’s kingdom (cf., 12:25–29).

### *The Third Clause: The Son is the Reflection of the Father*

ὁς ὢν ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης καὶ χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ,

**Translation:** “He is the radiance of his glory and the exact representation of his substance”

The discourse analysis presented in this paper contains a line break between verse two and verse three to indicate a shift in subject. While God was the subject of the first two relative clauses, the third relative clause marks a shift in subject, as the Son is the subject of the last five clauses of the paragraph. This third statement is used to describe the essence of the Son, i.e., the intention of the author is to inform the reader just *who* this Son under discussion truly is, as evidenced by the present active participle ὢν (from εἰμί). The

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<sup>29</sup> Ellingworth, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 77.

previous two clauses contained aorist active verbs, but this third clause, as well as the subsequent clause, contain present active participles. The KJV and NKJV render these words as participles in their translations; the NIV renders the first with the force of a present active, while the second is rendered as a participle; and the ESV and NASV render both participles with a present active force, which is the manner employed in this paper.

The identification of the Son in this clause includes two hapax legomena that function as predicate adjectives of the relative pronoun ὅς. The first predicate is ἀπαύγασμα, radiance.<sup>30</sup> The second predicate is χαρακτηρ, which is “a mark or impression placed on an object - of coinage **impress, reproduction, representation**” (emphasis his).<sup>31</sup> This statement about Christ indicates the splendor and glory of the Son; authority and deity are inherent with one who is described in such compelling terms. Neither of these two predicates appear with the article, but they are translated definitely. Hoyle comments,

Surely, given the whole focus of Hebrews on the uniqueness of Jesus, we are to understand that Jesus is not simply *an* heir, *a* radiance, and *a* representation, but *the* heir, *the* radiance, and *the* representation. Anarthrousness here, I posit, is to mark the comment as salient, by presenting it as if it were NEW (even though, presumably, the recipients of Hebrews knew these facts).<sup>32</sup>

This statement about the Son is sandwiched between two former modes of communication from God to his people; the prophets are referenced at the beginning of the exordium as a former mode of communication, while the angels (messengers) are referenced in the last of seven statements about the Son in 1:4. The Son supersedes the prophets, and even the angels, because of His divine nature. His deity is evidenced by the radiance and character of God that beams from the Son. Dods comments on the ramifications of this form of

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<sup>30</sup> William D. Mounce, *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 83.

<sup>31</sup> BDAG, 1077–1078.

<sup>32</sup> Richard A. Hoyle, *Scenarios, Discourse, and Translation: The Scenario Theory of Cognitive Linguistics, its Relevance for Analysing New Testament Greek and Modern Parkari Texts, and its Implications for Translation Theory* (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 2008), 716.

revelation:

This revelation was final because made by one who in all He is and does, reveals the Father. By uttering Himself He expresses God. A Son who can be characteristically designated a son, carries in Himself the Father's nature and does not need to be instructed in purposes which are also and already His own, nor to be officially commissioned and empowered to do what He cannot help doing.<sup>33</sup>

The third statement concerning the Son, that he is the reflection of the Father is an indication of his deity, a truth that is explicitly declared in 1:8. This divine distinction elevates the Son above the angels, and it demonstrates that within himself, the Son possesses a divine imperative due to his very nature.

***The Fourth Statement about the Son:***

***The Son is the Sustainer***

φέρων τε τὰ πάντα τῷ ῥήματι τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ,

**Translation:** “and he upholds all things by the word of his power.”

Similar to the rendering of the aorist active participle in the previous statement, φέρων, a present active participle, is translated with the force of a present active indicative verb. This clause is linked with the preceding clause by τε, which is a marker of connection between coordinate phrases or clauses.<sup>34</sup> The Son as the Creator has already been established by the second statement in this series. The statement in this clause builds off of the idea of creation, and even the final idea of consummation, both of which are executed by the Son, a concept further explored in 1:10–12. The fourth statement in 1:3 indicates that between creation and consummation, the Son is actively upholding all things with the same method that was employed in creation, with his very word. God's sustaining power in light of the coming consummation of all things is an idea that is referenced in 12:25–29. Christ's activity in the past, present, and future is possible,

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<sup>33</sup> Marcus Dods, “The Epistle to the Hebrews” in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, vol. IV (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 249.

<sup>34</sup> BDAG, 993.



as evidenced by the statement concerning his immutability in 13:8, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”

The duration of the Son’s work of sustaining all things is explored in 12:25–29, which references the consummation of all things. In this passage, an exhortation is made to listen to the one who will shake the heavens and earth; Hebrews 12:26 reads, “At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, ‘Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.’” The Son’s work in sustaining all things is a display of his omnipotence, an attribute that is equally on display when he purposefully ceases his sustenance of the heavens and earth, and shakes them. Although the created realm will be changed, as evidenced in 1:10–12 and 12:26–27, the exhortation in 12:25–29 includes the comforting statement, “let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.” Thus, above the temporary upholding of the created realm, the Son’s permanent sustenance of the kingdom is held out as a word of encouragement to sustain and challenge the reader.

***The Fifth Statement about the Son:  
The Son is the Great High Priest***

καθαρισμὸν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ποιησάμενος

**Translation:** “After making a cleansing for sin,”

Discourse analysis of this passage will recognize that this clause contains a marked form of the verb. Rather than following the verb-initial pattern that is typically present in Greek, the direct object of the verb has been fronted in this clause, perhaps to emphasize the offering or cleansing that was made or accomplished by the Son’s redemptive acts. The discourse analysis presented in this paper links this clause with the following clause, a link that may be seen by the absence of punctuation in the UBS and NA editions of the text. This close link is present because the aorist participle ποιησάμενος functions in a *temporal* manner, indicating the completion of the Son’s redemptive work that precedes the aorist active indicative verb found in the subsequent clause. In addition to functioning in a temporal manner, this participle also functions in a causal manner, as noted by Wallace: “To sit down at God’s right hand meant that the

work was finished, and this could not take place until the sin-cleansing was accomplished.”<sup>35</sup>

***The Fifth Statement about the Son:  
Its Connection with the Rest of the Book***

While the exordium contains several themes that are referenced in great detail throughout Hebrews, no theme is explored in greater detail than the Son’s redemptive work as the Great High Priest. This title is first given to the Son in 2:17, and the significance of his work as the High Priest continues to be unpacked by the author in great detail through Chapter 10. The very possibility of the Son making an offering for sin is discussed in 2:9–19. In fact, the entire purpose of the incarnation entails redemptive purposes, i.e., he was born so that he could suffer and die for man’s sin. Not only did the frailty that the Son subjected himself to in the incarnation enable him to die as a sacrifice, it also enabled him to show empathy for man’s weakness, and it enables sustenance from the High Priest for those who flee to him for refuge (2:17–18 and 4:15–5:3). The distinction between Christ’s priesthood and the Levitical priesthood is presented as a study of contrasts in Hebrews. The following list presents four major areas that distinguish the Son’s priesthood from the Levitical priesthood:

a) The Class of the Son’s Priesthood: Melchizedkian

Jesus is from the tribe of Judah, a fact mentioned in Hebrews 7:14. A lack of Levitical lineage would cause a conundrum for any Israelite desiring priesthood. However, Psalm 110:4, a verse that, in addition to multiple partial references in Hebrews, is quoted directly three times in the book, spoke of a different priesthood altogether, that which was after the order of Melchizedek. According to 5:4–6, both the Levitical and the Melchizedekian priesthoods were commissioned by God, but only the Melchizedekian priesthood was established by the unalterable oath of God (Ps 110:4; Heb 7:21).<sup>36</sup> In comparison, Levi may be seen as inferior because he paid

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<sup>35</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 624.

<sup>36</sup> Allen, *Hebrews*, 427.

tithes to Melchizedek through Abraham according to Hebrews 7:8–10.

b) The Length of the Son's Priesthood: Eternal

There was a limit that each Levitical priest faced due to the frailty of human life (7:23). Priests died and were replaced. However, Jesus is alive forevermore, and therefore, he is able "to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them" (7:25, KJV).

c) The Place of the Son's Priestly Service: Heavenly

Hebrews 8:5 describes the tabernacle as a pattern of the heavenly holy place, a theme further explored in 9:1–13 and 9:19–24. The priests under the system instituted by Moses served in the terrestrial realm, as they stood before God on behalf of the people in the earthly tabernacle. However, this earthly tabernacle, along with all of its implements, was patterned after the heavenly things, where Christ appears before God on the behalf of his people (9:23–24).<sup>37</sup>

d) The Extent of the Son's Priestly Sacrifice: Final

Hebrews 10:1–18 contrasts the Levitical sacrifices with the ultimate sacrifice of Christ. The Levitical sacrificial system was not capable of freeing man from the grip of sin; if it were capable of doing this, the repetition of the sacrifice would be unnecessary. The continual Levitical sacrifices, made by priests who were standing daily to attend to their duties, were merely a shadow of the final sacrifice yet to come. In contrast, Jesus would offer His own blood once, and sit down. The finality of Christ's sacrifice is further detailed in 13:10–13; Jesus made a sacrifice with his own blood in order

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<sup>37</sup> Allen notes that there are nine views concerning what the term *heavenly things* describes (ibid., 485).

to sanctify his people and provide them permanent access to himself.

***The Sixth Statement about the Son:  
The Son is Seated***

ἐκάθισεν ἐν δεξιᾷ τῆς μεγαλωσύνης ἐν ὑψηλοῖς

**Translation:** “he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high.”

The discourse analysis of this passage places this aorist active indicative verb ἐκάθισεν to the left of the preceding participles in verse three, distinguishing it as a mainline verb. Conversely, in David Allen Black’s DA of the exordium, he sets the preceding clauses from verse 3, as well as the subsequent clause underneath and subordinate to this sixth statement about the Son.<sup>38</sup> While this clause is prominent in this portion of the exordium, it is best to retain the order of the clauses from the text in one’s DA for sake of clarity and thematic order. Dods notes that the relative pronoun at the beginning of verse three is the subject of this verb *seated*; he writes, “The relative ὅς finds its antecedent in **οὗτος**, its verb in **ἐκάθισεν**; and the interposed participles prepare for the statement of the main verb by disclosing the fitness of Christ to be the revealer of God, and to make atonement” (emphasis original).<sup>39</sup> Dods is correct, at least in relation to the first participial clause in verse three that describes his reflection of the Father’s radiance. However, the subsequent participial clauses describe the actions of the Son, both finished and ongoing, which occasion his position of being seated. While the first two participial clauses in verse three are linked together by the enclitic conjunction τε, the preceding participial phrase, “having made a cleansing for sin,” is linked to this clause, as indicated by the lack of punctuation in the UBS and NA texts. The preceding phrase may be seen as an adverbial modifier for the verb ἐκάθισεν, describing the occasion that preceded the Son’s action of sitting, which was His action of making a cleansing for sin. The verbal combination in this clause is what Hoyle describes as a verbal *end stage*; in this instance, a main verb follows an aorist participle to describe a completed action. Hoyle

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<sup>38</sup> Black, “Hebrews 1:1-4,” 178.

<sup>39</sup> Dods, “Epistle to the Hebrews,” 250.

translates this phrase/clause combination as “having made purification for sins he sat down.”<sup>40</sup>

***The Sixth Statement about the Son:  
Its Connection with the Rest of the Book***

Christ as the seated redeemer is an important motif in Hebrews (1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2).<sup>41</sup> This motif conveys the completion of His priestly work. After offering one sacrifice for sin, The Son is now seated in the position of honor, at God’s right hand (10:11–12). The exordium introduces this motif, and it is described in further detail in 1:13 with a direct quote from Psalm 110:1. Commenting on the role that this motif has in Hebrews, F.F. Bruce wrote, “Psalm 110 provides the key text of this epistle, and the significance of Christ’s being a *seated* high priest is explicitly set forth in the following chapters, especially in 10:11–14, where he is contrasted with the Aaronic priests who remained standing because their sacrificial service never came to an end.”<sup>42</sup> While the Levites would continually stand for their service, the Son is seated. His being seated has nothing to do with exhaustion or a needed recuperation due to the work on the cross; instead, it is a picture of the completion of redemption.<sup>43</sup> Barclay described the personal ramifications that apply to those who know the Son, “To Jesus belongs the mediatorial exaltation. He has taken His place on the right hand of glory; but the tremendous thought of the writer to the Hebrews is that He is there, not as our judge, but as the one who makes intercession for us, so that, when we enter into the presence of God, we go, not to hear God’s justice prosecute us, but to

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<sup>40</sup> Hoyle, *Scenarios, Discourse, and Translation*, 472.

<sup>41</sup> Hebrew 1:13 is a direct quotation of an OT Passage. Hebrews 1:3, 8:1, and 10:12 are aorist active indicative, while 12:2 is marked, in that it is a perfect active indicative. Campbell notes that “perfect tense-forms often end up depicting a state,” which is the usage of the tense in 12:2. See Constantine Campbell, *Basics of Verbal Aspect in Biblical Greek* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 106.

<sup>42</sup> Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 50.

<sup>43</sup> Paul Ellingworth and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator’s Handbook on the Letter to the Hebrews* (London/New York: United Bible Societies, 1983), 11.

hear God's love plead for us."<sup>44</sup> In addition to the intercessory work of the Son, the seated nature of the Son is used as a focal point and motivation for those who are running their race (12:1–3); Christ's finished work is used as a motivation to press on rather than becoming weary or fainting during the race.

***The Seventh Statement about the Son:  
The Son is Greater than the Angels***

τοσούτῳ κρείττων γενόμενος τῶν ἀγγέλων  
ὅσῳ διαφορώτερον παρ' αὐτοῦς κεκληρονόμηκεν ὄνομα.

**Translation:** “Having become so much greater than the angels, as he has inherited a more excellent name than they.”

In 1:4, the author uses the demonstrative pronoun τοσούτῳ, which is a dative of measure or dative of degree of difference, a rare use of the dative.<sup>45</sup> This pronoun indicates that this verse is furnishing further information about the Son, specifically in comparison with the angels. The correlative pronoun ὅσῳ, another dative of degree of difference, is used to justify the author's statement concerning the Son's superiority to the angels. It is followed by the comparative adjective διαφορώτερον. Köstenberger notes that the author of Hebrews utilized comparative adjectives and adverbs 45 times, more than any other NT author.<sup>46</sup> This comparative clause explains that the Son's superiority is based on his inheritance of a greater name than theirs.

The prominence of the Son's inheritance is referenced in both 1:2 and 1:4, which is indicative of a chiastic structure within the exordium; the first of the seven statements about the Son states that the Son has been appointed as heir (κληρονόμον) of all things, and the verbal form of this cognate (κεκληρονόμηκεν) is used in the seventh statement about the Son, stating that he has inherited a

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<sup>44</sup> William Barclay, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew P, 1960), 6.

<sup>45</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 166.

<sup>46</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, “Jesus, the Mediator of a “Better Covenant”: Comparatives in the Book of Hebrews,” *Faith and Mission* 21, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 30–51.

name.<sup>47</sup> The verb in this clause, *κεκληρονόμηκεν*, is a perfect active indicative, as indicated in the DA by being placed left of the preceding participles. The placement of *name* within the clause is emphasized, as Ellingworth and Nida observe, “In the Greek, the word *name* is in emphatic position at the end of the sentence, and the context (especially verse 2 and 5) makes it probable that the name is that of the Son.”<sup>48</sup> The statement concerning his name is significant, not just because of the placement, but also because of the concept of the phrase. Ellingworth and Nida explain, “In Hebrew thought, a name was not just a means of identification; it referred to someone’s whole nature or personality.”<sup>49</sup> The Son’s deity is at least hinted, if not explicitly referenced, in this clause, a concept that will be declared in 1:8.

***The Seventh Statement about the Son:  
Its Connection with the Rest of the Book***

From a DA perspective, verse four serves as an important link between the first three verses of the exordium and the rest of the chapter. The rhetorical question that begins verse five serves as a discourse boundary marker.<sup>50</sup> Verses 5–14 contain a series of arguments based on seven OT direct quotations that elucidate the comment that the Son is greater than the angels. This series of arguments concludes with a stronger discourse boundary in 2:1, a hortatory subjunctive unit marked by *Διὰ τοῦτο*, which serves as a mark of departure. About the shift in 2:1, Greenlee comments, “It indicates the logical connection between theology and practice. It begins a practical exhortation based on the preceding argument.”<sup>51</sup> Hebrews 2:1 shifts to a practical application of the theological arguments from the preceding chapter, as the author demands that the reader make a reflection on his or her obedience to God based on the arguments made in Chapter 1. Throughout the book, the author utilizes a similar structure of theology/reflection. Westfall comments on the discourse pattern evident in 1–2:1 and the rest of the book; she

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<sup>47</sup> Allen, *Hebrews*, 114.

<sup>48</sup> Ellingworth and Nida, *Translator’s Handbook*, 13.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>50</sup> Levinsohn, *Discourse Features*, 282.

<sup>51</sup> J. Harold Greenlee, *An Exegetical Summary of Hebrews* (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1998), 42.

wrote,

Most of the hortatory subjunctives provide a conclusion to the preceding unit and the point of departure for the subsequent unit. The author often marks the hortatory subjunctive unit as a conclusion with an inferential conjunction, but also expands the sentence with information that introduces the next unit, so that the hortatory subjunctive units look forward and backwards.<sup>52</sup>

The forward/backward style is a masterful tool utilized by the author to shift to new themes, while calling attention to how the various arguments fit within the metanarrative of the book (i.e., 8:1).

The exordium may be seen as a programming guide for the rest of the book, because, in addition to the aforementioned elements that are explored throughout the epistle, verse four sets a precedence of comparison for the book. The comparison between the Son and the angels is discussed in this verse, and it is determined that the Son is greater because of his inheritance of a name.<sup>53</sup> The word that is used to express this concept is κρείττων, which is defined in BDAG as “pert. to being of high status, more prominent, higher in rank, preferable, better.”<sup>54</sup> Hebrews begins a precedence of comparison in the exordium, a comparison between the Son and the great aspects of OT religion, including its angelic messengers, its prominent hero Moses, and its sacrificial system. The Son is seen as *better* or *greater* than these things, a paradigm of comparison that is made throughout the book. If expressed in a simple formula, the argument made by the author in this passage and throughout the book could simply be expressed in this manner: The Son > all things.

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<sup>52</sup> Westfall, “Hebrews,” 565.

<sup>53</sup> The word ὅσῳ indicates *the degree of correlative extent* between the two clauses (BDAG, 729). Rather than functioning as independent clauses, the second clause, *as he has inherited a more excellent name than they*, furnishes a single argument as to why the Son is greater than the angels.

<sup>54</sup> BDAG, 566.



## Conclusion

*“Now of the things which we have spoken this is the sum:”* (Heb 8:1, KJV)

The exordium is a literary masterpiece that is packed with theological content. Its themes are so rich that the author spends 13 chapters unpacking many of the truths within these four verses. Using discourse analysis, the structure of the exordium was evaluated in this paper, and it was demonstrated that the exordium is made up of two major sections. In 1:1–2a, the author distinguishes between God’s former means of communication, and his final form of communication, which is through his Son. The second section of the exordium (1:2b–4) delineates seven profound statements concerning the Son that reference his magnificent identity, his completed and ongoing work, and his eternal inheritance. Allen writes, “That so much could be said in the confines of four verses is a testimony to the author’s theological ability. God’s protological, eschatological, and soteriological purposes, otherwise undisclosed, are now revealed in his Son.”<sup>55</sup> There is much more that could be said concerning the significance of Hebrews 1:1–4, but time would fail us to discuss these things. This article presents a short synopsis of the grandeur of the exordium, as well as making a case for the necessity to deal with the exordium thoroughly in one’s exegesis of the chapter, as well as one’s exegesis of the rest of Hebrews.

The details contained within the exordium are too important and too grand to merely gloss over. Hebrews 1:1–4 is much more than a fancy introduction to a lesser-known book in the New Testament. These verses would not make a good introduction to a sermon on Chapter 1; rather, these four verses demand thorough exploration in their own right. Perhaps a seven-part sermon series that exalts the person of Christ could be delivered from merely the exordium! A careful study and delivery of this short passage of Scripture, and by extension, the wonderful Epistle to the Hebrews in its entirety, would greatly enrich any pulpit ministry.

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<sup>55</sup> Allen, *Hebrews*, 115.