

## D. Overview

The writer penned his epistle with the intent of nurturing and strengthening the faith of his readers, who apparently were a community of Jewish Christians struggling in the face of great opposition and temptation. On the one hand, they were experiencing severe hardship in deprivation; on the other, they were being psychologically and spiritually oppressed by other Jews who insisted that their new-found faith in Jesus as Israel's Messiah was a cruel hoax that had left them in a perilous state. Whatever they believed about Him, the truth was that they had abandoned Yahweh and His Torah, and so separated themselves from His covenant people. They may have thought they were serving God in truth, but they had become His enemies.

Some of what they were experiencing wasn't new; the writer indicates that they'd encountered opposition and persecution from the moment they embraced Jesus as Messiah. This persecution was likely instigated by Jewish antagonists, but it likely implicated Roman authorities inasmuch as it involved imprisonment and the seizure of their property (10:32-34). Their open faithfulness to Jesus as the enthroned Lord of the world had provoked the same reaction and incurred the same outcomes as Luke recorded throughout his Acts account. In that sense, their experiences weren't unique. At the same time, the opposition against them was especially fierce because they were *Jews*; they met with the same response from their Jewish countrymen as Paul did. He put himself under a death sentence the day he began to proclaim Jesus as Israel's Messiah (Acts 9:1-25), and that threat hung over him right up until he sailed for Rome many years later.

And Paul wasn't alone; everywhere Jews embraced and proclaimed Jesus as Israel's long-awaited Messiah, they put their personal well-being, and even their lives, in serious jeopardy. Across the Roman Empire, the Jewish world reacted to this new phenomenon with one accord. From their vantage point, it was bad enough that this false "way" promoting a false messiah was gaining ground and drawing in proselytes and Gentiles. But the fact that Jews were being deceived and lured away from Torah and the true faith made it all the more repugnant and intolerable. And perhaps worst of all, the widespread Gentile perception was that this movement was a new sect of Judaism. It used Jewish terminology, was grounded in Jewish religious ideas, and proclaimed the Jewish God and His faithfulness to His purposes and promises. To a Gentile observer, the followers of Jesus were simply Jews who had a certain take on Jewish religious notions. And so it's no wonder the Jews responded as they did: This new "way" altered, undermined and threatened everything they held dear – everything that defined them as a people and ordered their daily lives under God. That sort of blasphemy could not be allowed to stand.

This was the circumstance behind the Hebrews epistle, and the writer penned it with it in mind. He wrote, not to advance his readers' theological understanding, but to meet them and assist them in their dire need. They didn't need better theology, *per se*, but to be reminded of, and perhaps given deeper insight into, *who they were* as followers of Jesus. They needed the endurance that comes from a right understanding of their lives and circumstance in the light of the Messiah, what He'd accomplished and enacted, and their share in Him and His kingdom.

This was the writer's goal in His presentation of Jesus, and his approach was to show how all things – most especially, the things pertaining to Israel and its relationship with God – have their ultimacy, meaning and purpose in Him. In that way, He enjoys absolute supremacy.

Jesus' supremacy over all things, with the focus on the various aspects of Israel's covenant life, is the central theme woven through the entire epistle. And the writer treated this theme in terms of the obvious categories: Jesus' *person* and His *ministration*. He further partitioned his letter by pausing at appropriate points to spotlight implications of his instruction and issue exhortations suited to them (ref. 2:1-4, 3:1-4, 12-15, 4:11-16, 5:11-6:12, 10:19-39, 12:1-29). Lastly, he concluded with a broad exhortation in which he applied his instruction to a number of issues and disciplines inherent in being a follower of Jesus (13:1-19).

## **II. The Supremacy of Christ's Person (1:1-4:13)**

### **A. Superior to the Prophets (1:1-3)**

The author's close shows that this document was a letter correspondence to a community of individuals and not a generic doctrinal treatise. But, whereas he closed the epistle with a recognizable greeting, he omitted any sort of salutation from his opening. Rather than identify and greet his readers (or identify himself), the writer began with a statement (vv. 1-4) that is profoundly significant for several reasons.

- First of all, it sets the stage for the entire epistle. It does so in two ways: First, it highlights the foundational and primary truth (i.e., the Son as the full disclosure of God and His purposes) that undergirds all that the writer presents. But it secondly hints at his perspective and orientation in bringing his instruction.
- And what the statement shows is that the author derived his perspective from the Scriptures themselves. Specifically, he approached his instruction from the vantage point that God's interaction (His self-disclosure and activity) with the world – which He carried out in the unfolding salvation history having Israel at its center – reached its climax and consummate fullness in Jesus.
- Also, this opening statement speaks to an issue that has dominated theological and scriptural discussions for many centuries, and that is the relationship between the two testaments. At the heart of this relationship is the question of *continuity* and *discontinuity*. This question underlies countless important issues, such as the role of the Old Testament in Christian doctrine and practice, the apparent differences between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament revealed in Jesus, the Christian's relationship to the Law of Moses, the relationship between Israel and the Church, and how Old Testament prophecies should be understood in the light of the Christ event.

Here, in one succinct statement, the writer affirms that both continuity and discontinuity are fundamental to God's purposes for the world and the way He has worked them out in the process of human history. First and foremost, there is an essential continuity in God's interaction with the world (as recorded in the two scriptural testaments), because He and His purposes are unchanging. Yet God determined to accomplish His purposes *progressively* over time, through the ever-changing dynamics of human history and its people and circumstances.

More than any other scriptural writing, the epistle to the Hebrews addresses and clarifies the relationship between continuity and discontinuity in the outworking of redemptive history recounted in the two testaments, and the writer established the fundamental nature of that relationship in just his opening statement.

1. An essential continuity overarches and flows through all the developments and changes that have transpired in the world since God created it and began to disclose His intent for it. And that continuity, again, is the unchanging person and purpose of God Himself. The *outworking* of His purpose is saturated with countless changes of every sort – some by design, and some by human disobedience and disruption, and yet, ordering all of that is the God who “works all things according to the counsel of His own will.”

The Creator-God is the singular continuity behind all things, and the writer appropriately made this his starting point by identifying God as the One who *speaks* (1:1) – the God who is not a silent, detached deity, but a God whose nature and desire is to reveal Himself in love to a creation He brought forth and cherishes. This God who was “in the beginning” before the creation existed (Genesis 1:1) is the One who speaks into His creation, first to order and fill it (Genesis 1:2-31), but then with an eye toward His ultimate goal: the creation’s consummate ordering and filling in the “new heavens and new earth” that are His everlasting dwelling place (cf. Isaiah 45:15-25, 65:8-25; Zechariah 14:9-11; Revelation 21:1-7). This God who speaks has made Himself and His designs known in various ways and through various means at various times throughout history, but that disclosure has always remained the same in the sense that *He* is the same. Here, the writer emphasized two distinct phases of God’s disclosure: that which came through the mouths and actions of His *prophets*, and that which has come in the *Son*.

In Greek, the first four verses are one continuous and concentrated thought, with the fourth verse providing the transition into the next context. This extended sentence, which introduces the entire discourse, begins with a declaration containing the main clause of the sentence, which the writer then developed with a series of relative clauses.

This kernel declaration is simply, “*God spoke to us.*” Again, this statement points to the absolute consistency of God’s self-communication, for the One who spoke doesn’t change. The writer was clearly intentional in beginning his discourse this way, for it highlights a truth that is critically important for answering his readers’ struggles. They needed to understand – *and fully own* – that the God who spoke to their Jewish forefathers through prophets is the same God who spoke in the Son (1:2a).

*The reason this was so important is that it seems these Hebrew Christians were being pressed with the claim that, by embracing Jesus as Israel’s Messiah, they had forsaken Israel’s God and His Torah.* Their Jewish brethren were trying to convince them that this new “way” they were following was actually a destructive deception that was leading them away from the truth. But the writer wanted them to understand that, in fact, the God who spoke Israel’s Torah and communicated through Moses and His prophets is the same God who has now brought that revelation and instruction to its climax in the Son.

This circumstance was nothing new; it began with Jesus Himself and was experienced by every Jew who embraced and followed Him. When Jesus spoke, most of His fellow Jews didn't hear the voice of Israel's God, or even a prophet who spoke as the other prophets did. Rather, they heard a man who seemed to contradict and even dismiss Yahweh's Torah and the word of His prophets (John 7:11-49). Jesus understood this, and this is why He introduced His great sermon on the kingdom He'd come to inaugurate with the exhortation: "*Do not begin to think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I didn't come to abolish, but to fulfill*" (Matthew 5:17). Virtually all the people of Israel believed God had spoken to Moses and the prophets; few believed the same God was speaking to and through this strange Nazarene (John 9:24-34).

So it was for Jesus' disciples; they endured the same scorn and condemnation as their Master had. But, ironically, the disciples who listened to Jesus and embraced Him weren't exempt from the confusion and unbelief that characterized their detractors. Even the inner circle of the Twelve struggled to reconcile Jesus with their understanding and expectation of Israel's Messiah (Matthew 16:13-23, 17:1-13; Mark 4:36-41; John 13:3-8; cf. also Matthew 11:1-6), and their confusion continued even after His resurrection (Luke 24:33-48; John 20:19-21:12; Acts 1:1-8).

It would take the Spirit's coming and illumination for them to finally understand, not just that Jesus is the Messiah, *but that He's precisely the One of whom all the Law, Prophets and Writings spoke* (Acts 2:1-36). He's not a different "word" to Israel and the nations, but the fullness of the word that God had spoken all along (John 1:1-18). Again, this truth was critical to the perseverance of the Hebrew Christians addressed in the letter; it reminded them that there was no Judaism to return to, for all that Yahweh had said and done was now "yes and amen" in the One they'd embraced (cf. Colossians 2:16-17).

2. God's person and purpose (implied in the idea of God speaking) are the great and enduring constant in the movement from creation to consummation, *but this constancy (continuity) is itself expressed within a fundamental discontinuity*: The unchanging God has, "in these last days," fully disclosed Himself and His purpose for the world in the person of the incarnate Son (1:2a). The Logos that is eternally God has now become the Logos embodied as man (John 1:14). *Thus God's design for His creation includes a destiny for Himself* – a destiny centered in the incarnation. ***The eternal, immutable God has now, in Jesus, become forever humanized.*** And this profound discontinuity, in turn, implies a further discontinuity: The God who formerly communicated through men moved by His Spirit (2 Peter 1:20-21), now does so through the "Man of the Spirit" – the man in whom "all the fullness of deity dwells bodily."
  - a. The writer distinguished between the instruments of God's speech, but also its *timing* and *manner*. The prophetic word came to Israel in the times past in various portions, during various seasons, and through various means. God spoke through His prophets, but in a way that was intermittent, progressive, and incomplete. In contrast, the word that has come through the Son is full and final. It is the word, not of illumined prophets, but of the incarnate Son.

- b. The writer emphasized this difference by introducing the Son without any descriptor: “In these last days, God has spoken *in Son*.” This grammar highlights the qualitative difference between the prophets and the Son. The distinction in God’s utterance in the former times and in “these last days” (i.e., the “fullness of the times” that has inaugurated the messianic age and its kingdom) isn’t merely in the nature and content of the communication, but in the *communicators*:
- The prophets were men who spoke the things God gave to them through the leading of His Spirit. They were simply mouthpieces who, in many cases, didn’t understand the things that were revealed to them and the words they uttered (cf. Daniel 7:13-16; Zechariah 1-5; etc.); in every case, they spoke better than they knew (cf. Matthew 3:1-17 and John 1:19-34 with Matthew 11:1-11; also 1 Peter 1:10-12).
  - On the other hand, God’s communication through Jesus is the communication of His own personal presence. It is the communication of a man who doesn’t merely hear God, but who *embodies* Him as a Son – a Son who shares in God’s life and nature (John 14:1-11).
- c. The distinctions between *prophet* and *son* are profound and transcendent, and the writer summarized them by means of several descriptive clauses:

First, the Son is the *perfect and complete embodiment of the living God* as “the refulgence of His glory and the very imprint of His being” (1:3a). This language would not have been lost on the original Hebrew readers; they understood that, throughout Israel’s history, God had been present among His people in His *Shekinah* – His glory-presence that led them into His sanctuary land (Exodus 13:17-22, 15:17-18, 33:7-10), and then dwelt among them mysteriously between the wings of the cherubim in the Most Holy Place, first in the tabernacle (Exodus 40:33-38), and then in the temple (1 Kings 8:1-11). God’s glory-presence departed just prior to the destruction of the first temple (Ezekiel 10), *but with the promise that He would return to His sanctuary*. And when He did, He would remain forever, bringing with Him forgiveness, liberation, healing, and the renewal of the covenant (cf. Haggai 2:1-9; Zechariah 1-2; Malachi 3:1).

The Jews understood that this return and renewal would come in connection with the Messiah. Their Scriptures addressed this in shadowy terms, but it was clear that somehow Messiah’s work would see Yahweh’s glory restored to His sanctuary. In this way, Israel associated the Messiah with the “radiance of God’s glory,” but the Hebrews writer went further, insisting that Jesus the Messiah is *Himself* the full embodiment of that glory (John 1:14-18), because He is “the express image of God’s being.” The prophets’ reassurance that Yahweh would return to Zion and His glory would again fill His sanctuary wasn’t the promise of the *Shekinah*’s return, but of the *incarnation* (cf. Isaiah 9:1-7, 59:1-60:3; Malachi 3:1; Matthew 4:12-17; Luke 1:57-2:32).

This, then, is the basis for understanding how the Son is God's appointed *source* and *heir* of every created thing (1:2b). The created order originated in Him in the sense that He is the eternal Logos – the effectual “word” that expresses the divine intent and gives material existence to it. All things were created through Him, but also for Him (Colossians 1:16); the entire creation is destined to find its meaning, purpose and function in relation to Him (Ephesians 1:9-10).

And as the Son is the source and heir, He is also the *sustainer* who upholds the creation. The “word of His power” – the power of the living God – brought all things into existence, and is now sustaining and moving the creation forward toward its final destiny, namely to be “summed up” in the Son as heir of all things and the One in and through whom God becomes “all in all” (cf. Colossians 1:17 and 1 Corinthians 15:20-28).

Finally, this supremacy, previously manifested as the Logos who brought forth and upholds the creation (John 1:1-3), has “in these last days” been manifested in the supreme triumph of incarnation, atonement and renewal (Matthew 28:18; Romans 8:33-34; Ephesians 1:18-23; Philippians 2:5-11). The “word made flesh” has taken His rightful seat “at the right hand of the Majesty on high,” having fully attested and accomplished the divine will for the creation (1:3b, cf. 10:1-12). The creative word has become the re-creative word – the full and final “yes and amen” to God and His design. More than a *revealing* “word,” Jesus is God's *reconciling* “word,” the One in whom human beings become true as God is true.

The writer sketched in powerful, compelling imagery the transcendent qualitative difference between *prophet* and *son*, and it's this distinction that underlies and informs the vast difference in their work as communicators. The prophets spoke words and did works that communicated something of Israel's God and His mind, heart and will; the Son fully disclosed those realities by embodying them in His person; *to experience Him is to experience the God who sent Him*. Jesus didn't merely speak God's words; He is the incarnate Word, the fullness of God's self-disclosure. *Put simply, all that God is with respect to His creation, He is in the Son*. This is the way in which the Son infinitely transcends the prophets, and it shows how the same is true of the Son's communication: It is a communication that is full-orbed and exhaustive as well as definitive and final. The coming of the Son in the fullness of the times didn't merely enhance God's communication with His creation (with human beings at the center), it *consummated* it. Jesus' person and work brought together and summed up all previous divine communication (whether in word or deed), but they also fulfilled and completed it.

- This means first that all of God's interaction in the world prior to Jesus' coming finds its truth and meaning in Him; *He* is what God was communicating by His words and works through His prophets.
- But this also means that there is no further communication to come. If Jesus is the sum and substance of the Father's word to His world, there is nothing more to say. All that remains is for people to hear and heed by embracing the Son.