

APPENDIX G

Interpretive Notes on Hebrews 1:1-3a

The interpretive notes in this appendix are keyed to the English translation of Hebrews 1:1-6 translated by J. A. Crabtree entitled *Paul's Letter to the Hebrews: An English Translation* (digital file version 1.0.a-ip, dated September, 2007). The excerpt below is from Hebrews 1:1-6.

INITIAL EXHORTATION

SECTION 1

Unit 1

1

In past times, in many portions and in many ways, God, having spoken to the fathers through the prophets, has in the last of these days spoken to us through the Son—he is the one whom he appointed heir of all things; he, in fact, is the one with a view to whom he made the ages; he exists as the Glory's shining forth into the darkness and as the stamp of his particular personal identity—and he supported all that was said by the divinely authoritative command uttered through him. 2•When he had accomplished the cleansing for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much greater than the angels as the name he had inherited was more distinguished than theirs.

[1:1-4]

2

For to which of the angels did He ever say,

“2•You are my Son. Today I have begotten you.”? <Psalm 2:7>

And again,

“I will be a father to him and he shall be a son to me.”? <2 Samuel 7:14>

And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, it says,

“And let all the angels of God worship him.” <Psalm 97:7>

[1:5-6]

APPENDIX G: Interpretive Notes on Hebrews 1:1-3a

The numbering of the interpretive notes below is keyed to the translation of Hebrews 1:1-6 reproduced above. The notes are *Paul's Letter to the Hebrews: Notes on the Meaning of the Translated Text* by J. A. Crabtree (digital file version 1.0.a-ip, dated July, 2008).

The notes cover Hebrews 1:1–3a.

¶ 1

- E-1.** Summary of the point of this paragraph: God used many mere ordinary men (prophets) to be his spokesmen and to deliver his message to his chosen people in long ages past. In recent times, God has once again spoken, but this time he has sent his Son to deliver his message. This Son, having assumed his place at the right hand of God himself and, therefore, having assumed his extremely exalted status as ruler over all the cosmos, is vastly more important and greater than any angel. No angel has anything near the status that the Son has; for angels are nothing more than messengers, as their name *angelos* (=messenger) indicates.
- E-2.** In the process of making the above point, Paul makes two significant claims about the role and identity of Jesus: (i) Jesus is the Son; and (ii) Jesus is the image of the invisible God. Both are basically the same claim: Jesus is the embodiment of God's own person. Acknowledging Jesus to be the representation of God himself is not really a different claim from the claim that Jesus is the Son. That is what the Son, by definition, is. The Son is a title that indicates that human being who embodies the personal identity of the sovereign, transcendent creator himself.
- E-3.** It is particularly significant that Paul's argument is not, "Jesus is greater than angels because he is divine in his being while they are not." This is clearly and definitively NOT his argument. Rather, his argument is that Jesus, in his humble humanity, is greater than the angels. He is so, because, in his humble humanity, he has a more exalted role and status than any angel does. Angels are—it can be argued—ontologically superior to human beings. But the Son, even in his ontological inferiority to angels, has a more important and more exalted name than any angel has ever had or ever will have. Jesus is not greater because he is divine. Jesus is greater because he is that human creature who is one and the same with God himself, human being though he is.

1.1

- E-4.** The main assertion in this sentence is the following: "God has spoken to us through the Son, supporting all he says by the divinely authoritative command uttered through him." Everything else in this sentence is more or less parenthetical. This is the central claim in Paul's initial argument. He goes on to argue that if the gospel message—which is what the Son, through whom

APPENDIX G: Interpretive Notes on Hebrews 1 :1-3a

God has spoken in these last days, taught us—was delivered to us through someone as important as the Son, then we dare not disregard it. As he will argue later, if the messages delivered through angels were too important to ignore, then how much more so are the messages delivered through the Son himself?

- E-5.** Paul describes God as having spoken to his people in the past “in many portions” because any given Jewish prophet did not get the whole picture. God portioned out his revelation to various prophets, giving only parts of the picture to each. Although he does not say so explicitly, he seems to be implying that the message of the Son is no longer a fragment of the picture. Through the Son, we have been given the whole picture. Implicitly, therefore, everything that God has revealed through his prophets throughout time will be brought into focus and finally understood in the context of the revelation of Jesus. Jesus’ word is the final and complete word from God. (That need not imply that it be the final word temporally speaking; but it is the final word logically speaking. No word coming after Jesus will alter the paradigm that Jesus gave us for understanding God and his purposes toward mankind.)
- E-6.** Paul describes God as having spoken to his people in the past “in many ways” because the various Jewish prophets did not receive divine revelation in the same manner. To some God gave dreams that they were enabled to interpret. Others describe the revelatory experience as “the word of the Lord” coming to them; others as the “burden of the Lord coming upon them,” others as the “oracle of the Lord coming to them,” etc.
- E-7.** The “fathers” here denote the various previous generations of the Jewish people. These many different generations in past ages were periodically “spoken to” by prophets sent from God.
- E-8.** Paul notes that, while in times of old God revealed his messages to his people through various prophets, in these latter (more recent) times God has revealed his message to his people through his Son, the Messiah. I think the import of his observation is this: In past times, the agents of God’s message were relatively unimportant men. The message more recently delivered was delivered by the most important man in all of creation—God’s Son. The significance, presumably, is that the message must be a correspondingly important message. That is, the teaching of Jesus is of greater import than anything God has hitherto revealed; for he sent the Son himself to deliver it.
- E-9.** Jesus, the Son, is appointed by God to be the heir of all things. This is a reference to the fact that the role of the Messiah is to be that human being who rules with the authority of God over everything in God’s creation.
- E-10.** Jesus is also the one with a view to whom he (God) made the ages. In this second assertion regarding the Son, Paul maintains that God made the “ages” *dia* him, the Son. The question we have to answer is what meaning *dia* has here. What does it mean for the ages to have been made *dia* the Son, Jesus? My contention is that *dia* is being used to introduce the one who for whom the

APPENDIX G: Interpretive Notes on Hebrews 1:1-3a

“ages” were brought into existence in the first place. The ages were created FOR the Son—in the sense that all the ages were created with the Son as their *raison d’etre*. Paul is conceiving of the whole flow of cosmic history as a series of “ages.” Paul’s point is that ALL of the ages have been made for the Son; all of cosmic history is for the Son. I translate *dia* here as “with a view to.” The sense has to be something like this: All the ages were created with the Son in view; that is, everything that God has ever brought to pass occurred with the ultimate goal and intent of bringing glory and honor to his Son.” Hence, it would not be inappropriate to translate *dia* as “for” so that it would read: “he, in fact, is the one *for* whom he made the ages.” I leave it translated “with a view to” to reflect the fact that using the preposition *dia* is a more oblique way to say it.

E-11. Paul describes the Son as the “shining forth (into the darkness) of the Glory.” There is no question, I think, but what “the Glory” is the glory of God himself. Indeed, I think it is an allusion back to Israel’s history. In the time of Moses, God made his glory visible in the form of a pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day. Then, upon the completion of the tabernacle, God’s glory (some sort of visible manifestation—a bright shining appearance) located itself in the Holy of Holies. This manifestation was what later rabbinic teaching came to call the “Shekinah.” (This is not a biblical title.) The “glory” simply represents the awesome, spectacular reality of the being of God himself. The word translated “shining forth” denotes the shining forth of rays of light into an area of darkness. It is the breaking forth of light to dispel darkness. The word is often used to denote the sunrise. Paul is describing the coming of the Son into the world as a sort of dawning of the glory of God. He describes the glory of God as breaking into the darkness of human history like light. Paul is identifying the Son (Jesus) as an event wherein God is breaking into human history and experience in a concrete manifestation of his glory; for the Son is the very presence of God himself in human form. Just as the Shekinah glory in the Holy of Holies of the tabernacle—in the time of Moses and following (until the Shekinah glory departed)—was a concrete representation of the presence of God in the midst of his people, the Son is the recurrence of a similar reality. With the Son, God is making his presence manifest with his people. (See John 1:14. “The Logos became flesh and dwelt [tabernacled] among us.”) Paul’s assertion here—the Jesus is the “shining forth of the Glory”—is intimately connected with his assertion in Colossians that Jesus is the “image of the invisible God.”

E-12. Paul describes the Son as the “very stamp of his particular identity.” The word *hupostasis*—which I have translated as “particular identity”—refers to that which underlies something else. It can be used in a number of different senses and contexts. Aristotle uses it to describe that which “underlies” an existing thing in order to make it that particular thing rather than another thing. It is sometimes (misleadingly) translated “substance” in Aristotle, but it refers to

APPENDIX G: Interpretive Notes on Hebrews 1 :1-3a

the particular, unique, individual identity of that thing. In one of the ways an Aristotelian might talk about it, a particular chair that I am sitting on is a *hupostasis*. It is the combined effect of the Form of chairness coming together with "matter" (not our modern concept of matter). Hence, *hupostasis* denotes a particular, unique, numerically singular instantiation of the form of chairness. Note that *hupostasis*—under this manner of speaking—does not denote the essence of the chair, the universal form of chairness. That is a different concept—the concept of Form. It denotes the numerically singular, individual identity of a particular thing. In his assertion here, Paul is referring to the *hupostasis* of God. So, the Son is the stamp of the *hupostasis* of God. In my judgment, Paul means it to refer to the particular, unique, individual identity of God himself. It indicates his individual personhood. I have translated it "particular personal identity." Paul does not mean to refer to his divine essence, to his divine nature, nor to the ontological essence of what makes a transcendent God what he is. Rather, he means to denote the numerically singular personal identity of the transcendent God. Hence, the Son is the stamp of the particular identity of God (Yahweh) himself. The word translated "stamp" is used to denote the image left behind by a stamp. This is the sense that underlies Paul's use of the term here. The Son (Jesus) is, if you will, the "stamp" of God's very identity. In other words, Jesus is the "image" or "representation" of the identity of God in the sense that the particular identity of Yahweh has left its imprint or mark uniquely on the person and being of a particular human being. That human being is Jesus. As in the last assertion regarding the Son, this assertion is intimately connected with Paul's statement in Colossians that Jesus is the "image of the invisible God." It must be noted, however, that Jesus is the "stamp" of God's unique personal identity, not the bearer of divine ontological stuff. As to ontology, the assumption behind the whole argument in this opening portion of Hebrews is that Jesus is merely a human being. That is, Jesus is composed of merely human, and not divine, stuff. Accordingly, how can he be the Messiah? (The cultural expectation at the time of Jesus' coming was that the Messiah would be a super-human, quasi-angelic being.) It is noteworthy that Paul does not respond, "But he is more than human; he's actually divine." Rather, his argument concedes the mere humanity of Jesus, but argues that his mere humanity is a mark in favor of his being the Messiah, not a mark against it. As Paul is describing Jesus here, Jesus is not God in the sense that he contains the ontological being of the transcendent God. Rather Jesus is God in the sense that he and he alone—human being though he is—shares one and the same singular personal identity with Yahweh. Jesus just **is** Yahweh. He is Yahweh in human form, of course. But nevertheless he **is** Yahweh, the transcendent creator of all that is. To sum it up: Paul's assertion here is that the unique, singular personal identity of Yahweh is "stamped" onto the man Jesus. Jesus is the impress of the underlying personal identity of Yahweh—who Yahweh is

APPENDIX G: Interpretive Notes on Hebrews 1 :1-3a

as an individual person is being represented by and imaged in his Son. The basis for Paul’s metaphor here is the image in ink left behind by a stamp. The stamp is not the same kind of object as the ink image it creates. Yet there is a one-to-one correspondence between the particular ink stamp and the particular ink image left behind by that stamp. The image and the stamp share the same identity—they both correspond to the physical stamp that creates the image. Similarly, the Son and Yahweh are one and the same individual person—namely, Yahweh. Yet they differ in the sort of being they are—as the ink image does from the stamp.

E-13. In his opening sentence, Paul makes a series of claims about the Son: “he is the one whom he appointed heir of all things; he, in fact, is the one with a view to whom he made the ages; he exists as the Glory’s shining forth into the darkness and as the stamp of his particular identity.” These claims are parenthetical. They describe who exactly this Son is who has spoken to us in these last days. They describe his credentials. Accordingly, Paul is making three assertions regarding the Son: (i) God appointed him heir of all things [see E-9]; (ii) God created the whole of cosmic history for him, or with him in view [see E-10]; and (iii) he, the Son, exists as the Glory’s shining forth into the darkness and as the stamp of his particular personal identity [see E-11 and E-12]. It would certainly appear that all three assertions are intended to work together to make one coherent point about Jesus, the Son. Namely, Jesus is that one whom, before the creation of the world, God had purposed to make the very embodiment of himself, and to come down into the midst of his people and to rule over them as their God and King. In other words, the Son was the manner that God had devised before the world had even begun to fulfill the promise he would make to the descendents of Abraham, “I will be your God; and you will be my people.” That promise would be fulfilled with God himself literally ruling over his people in the form of their human King. All three of Paul’s assertions here can be meaningfully construed as contributing to exactly that picture; and identifying Jesus as the one who was destined for just such a role. The title “Son” is the title that conveys that whole picture. It seems probable that what I have described is exactly what Paul intends in these three assertions. This conclusion is important because, if my reading is right, each clause must be understood in such a way that it makes a meaningful contribution to that single, coherent picture. Indeed, each of them must be understood in such a way that they make the most compelling contribution to that picture. This will have the most consequence with respect to the second clause—all the ages were made *dia* him, the Son. Traditionally, this has been construed and translated as “the world was made through him” as if it indicated that Jesus, the Son, was some sort of agent in the creation of the world. (It is not exactly clear to me why they translate and construe “the ages” to be “the world.” That is to misunderstand Paul’s intent. I think it is clear that Paul has in mind all that has transpired through cosmic history, not

APPENDIX G: Interpretive Notes on Hebrews 1 :1-3a

the things that were created—birds, mountains, rivers, and caribou.) But is that Paul's point? How would the Son being the agent of creation have any necessary implications for him fulfilling the destiny of the Son? It wouldn't, not directly. But his being the primary focus of everything that God has ever made or done in cosmic history, that is completely in harmony with him being the one destined to be King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the very embodiment of God himself and his sovereign authority. For this reason, I would argue, my reading makes more sense and is more in keeping with Paul's intent than the traditional reading and translation.

- E-14.** The participle that I have translated "supporting" [*pheron*] in this assertion describes the reality of a claim being "supported." If a claim that is being made needs some evidence or some ground upon which it can be accepted, the evidence or ground upon which that claim can be accepted is *pheron* (supporting, upholding, giving a basis for) the claim. I know of no actual precedent for this particular metaphorical use of *pheron*; but I do not consider that a problem. It is a rather obvious and transparent metaphor.
- E-15.** The "all things" that are being supported, therefore, must refer back to all that the Son has spoken on behalf of God. I have translated it "all that he says," where the "he" refers to the Son. This is Paul's point: God spoke to the fathers through the prophets. In the last of these days, God has spoken to us through his Son. Everything the Son taught us on behalf of God was, at the same time, supported (*pheron*) by "the word of his power" (rendered literally). More on this below.
- E-16.** Paul says that God supported all that the Son taught "by the divinely authoritative command uttered through him." Literally, it reads, "by the word of his power through him." To understand this, we must first understand what Paul is wanting to convey by the phrase, and then proceed to understanding how each word contributes to that meaning. The phrase refers to the fact that Jesus "commanded" certain things, and then, in response to and in connection with his command, supernatural miracles occurred. For example, Jesus commanded the lake to be still, and it became suddenly still. Jesus appeared to have the authority to command nature. Paul is recognizing that the authority to command nature (and anything else) belongs to God. What we see in Jesus is the divine authority to command nature being manifest *dia* Jesus. In other words, God acted to perform spectacular supernatural deeds in connection with the actions and words of Jesus. Why did God do this? He did it in order to provide a basis for the eyewitnesses of such deeds to accept what Jesus taught as coming from God. Jesus spoke the very words of God. How do we know that? By the miraculous deeds that validated his teaching and his claims. With this in view, "the word of his power" was empirical evidence of the "authority" of God over everything in his creation. This divinely authoritative "word" [*rhema*] of command is the means by which the "all things" that Jesus taught were upheld or supported. Hence, "by the word of his power through

APPENDIX G: Interpretive Notes on Hebrews 1 :1-3a

him," a literal rendering of this phrase, refers to the fact that it is by means of the word of Jesus' command, which was effective due to God's own authority over his creation, that the teaching of Jesus was supported. In other words, the miracles that accompanied Jesus' teaching vindicated Jesus' teaching as valid and from God (that is, they "supported" it). The phrase "uttered through him" indicates that the divine word that commanded the supernatural acts were tied to Jesus as the agent of command. God commanded with divine authority by having Jesus issue the command. The word of command that was effectively supported by the power of divine authority and that was uttered through him (the Son) was the way in which God supported (*pheron*) everything that Jesus taught. See Luke 5:17–26. Jesus claimed to have authority on earth to forgive sins. He "supported" this very claim by saying to the paralytic, "Rise, take up your bed and walk." When the man did so, Jesus's claim to have authority to forgive sins (as the Messiah) was vindicated. For his word of command [*rhema*] wherein he told that man to walk proved to possess divine authority [that is, it proved to be "of his (God's) power"] when the man got up and walked.

1.2