

THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS - PART II

THE PROLOGUE

I. The first four verses form a sort of prologue that sets forth the themes of the letter, that Jesus is the fullness of the creation, order, purification, and glory and that, through Him the revelation of God reaches its height.

- St. Thomas points out that this prologue goes over the excellence of Christ in four ways: (1) as the fullness of the nature of God, and the revelation of that nature to us; (2) as the culmination of the power of God; (3) as the summit of creation and redemption; and (4) as reflecting the fullness of the glory of God.

II. The first verse declares the theme that Jesus fulfills the partial revelation of old.

A. It affirms that God has spoken to "our fathers" in many ways through the prophets. In this case, prophets means not only those writings specifically called prophetic, but all of those inspired by God. The term prophesy is sometimes used in this broader sense. See, e.g., 2 Peter 1:20-21.

1. Revelation could thus take place in the form of history, wisdom literature, prophetic words, inspired songs (especially psalms), and words of wisdom, as well as the actions, words and visions of the prophets. These many ways are needed to enter the full mystery of God.

2. God also reveals Himself through natural means, such as natural wisdom and the beauty of creation. See Wis. 13:6-9; Romans 1:19-20, 2:12-16.

B. But these means only bring us so far. The fullness of revelation comes through His Son made man. See Vatican II Council, Dei Verbum 2.

1. Picking up on the Johannine theme of Jesus as the Word of God, the letter says God "has spoken" through His Son. This idea of God speaking through Jesus does not only mean that Jesus' words are the word of God, for the letter does not so much quote Jesus as describe what He did and does for us. The actions of Jesus, especially His life, death, resurrection and ascension are God's words, expressing His wisdom and love more than any words could express the

thoughts of a human mind.

C. The message of Jesus as "heir to all things, through whom He also created the world" indicates that Jesus reigns with the Father.

1. The letter could have simply said that Jesus is the Son, God as the Father is. However, there are at least two good reasons to avoid this theoretically more precise way of phrasing.

A. First, it is more abstract. Presenting Jesus as the heir is using a concept the Jews would have understood, for descendants would inherit the parent's estate.

B. Second, as there was a danger of people believing that Jesus is less than God, so too on the other hand there could be a danger of believing that Jesus and the Father are the same, merely different expressions of the same person. The letter is making the distinction between the persons more clear.

2. If the letter had only said that God made the Son heir of all things, one may misunderstand it to mean that the control over all things only arose at a time in history, i.e. when Christ was glorified. So the letter balances that statement out with the statement that God created all things through the Son. See Col. 1:15-17.

- Thus, in His humanity, Jesus becomes the King of heaven and earth by His sacrifice on the cross and resurrection. But as God, He is also the source of all creation. See, e.g., Phil 2:6-11. We also can become heirs through Christ by joining with His sacrifice.. See Romans 8:17.

3. The letter is picking up on the idea in Wisdom literature that describes the Wisdom at the beginning of creation that reflects the order of all things. See Prov. 8:22-31; Wis. 7:23-27, 10:1-2. But this wisdom is still created and is not heir to all things, nor does she purify although she does guide those who struggle from Adam onward. See Wis. 10:2-21. Christ, therefore, fulfills what even Wisdom cannot quite do.

III. The next two verses then describe the creative and recreative power of the Son.

A. Continuing with the theme of Wisdom reflecting the glory of God, see Wis. 7:23-27, the letter describes the Son as reflecting

the glory of God and bearing the stamp of God. But then it goes further, saying that Jesus "upholds the universe by His word of power."

- The power of upholding by the word is a divine action. See Gen. 1; Ps. 33:6.

B. Having described the creative power of the Son, the prologue then describes Jesus as bringing about the purification from sins, which is elsewhere described as the new creation. See 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 4:24; Gal. 6:15; Col. 3:10.

C. In a break from the usual Pauline tradition, the prologue and the rest of Hebrews then focuses more on Jesus sitting at the right hand of "the Majesty," an apparent reference to the ascension. (There are some references to the ascension in the letters of Paul, see Rom. 8:34, but the resurrection is much more the emphasis.) This reference reflects the royal status of Jesus as messiah, the anointed one who brings salvation and God's order to earth. See, e.g., Ps. 110:1; Dan. 7:13; Mark 14:62. The idea here is to emphasize that Jesus draws all things on earth to His place in heaven, and in fact draws even the past sacrifice and practices of the Jews to their completion. For, as the letter will argue, the earthly worship was an image of the worship in heaven.

- The phrase sitting down at the right hand of God may refer to resting again, as God did on the seventh day, and thus bringing creation again to its height in the order that the Sabbath represents. This point about entering into the Sabbath rest through Jesus is a later theme of the letter. See Heb. 4:11

IV. The letter then refocuses on the humanity of Christ, saying He "became as much superior to the angels as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs."

A. The idea is that, by becoming human, Jesus raised His humanity above the level of angels and gave us a human name, Jesus Christ, by which we have access to God. Before, the angels would appear at rare occasions to selected people, who were afraid of them. But now we can be close to God Himself through Jesus on a regular basis. The letter will address this theme near the end. See Heb. 12:18-24.

B. The name of Jesus is particularly powerful and draws all things to worship God. See Luke 10:17; Acts 3:6, 4:10; Phil 2:9. The power of God's name had been a common theme of the Old Testament, and that power is now given to the name of Jesus. See, e.g., Ps. 9:16, 33:21, 124:8; Joel 3:5.

C. The prologue then concludes by introducing the subject of Christ's superiority over the angels. The idea is that angels sometimes seemed like gods, see, e.g., Job 1:6, and when people saw them, it seemed as though they were seeing God. See, e.g., Gen. 32:31; Judges 6:22, 13:22. In this next section, what the letter argues that what the angels brought an image of, i.e., God's presence and power, Jesus brings in fullness.