

The unfolding of God's revelation in Hebrews 1:1–2a



Author:
Albert Coetsee¹

Affiliation:
¹North-West University,
Potchefstroom Campus,
School for Ancient Language
and Text Studies, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Albert Coetsee,
albertcoetsee@gmail.com

Dates:
Received: 15 Oct. 2015
Accepted: 19 Nov. 2015
Published: 24 June 2016

How to cite this article:
Coetsee, A.J., 2016, 'The
unfolding of God's revelation
in Hebrews 1:1–2a', *HTS
Theologese Studies/
Theological Studies* 72(3),
a3221. [http://dx.doi.
org/10.4102/hts.v72i3.3221](http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i3.3221)

Copyright:
© 2016. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work
is licensed under the
Creative Commons
Attribution License.

In the introduction to his sermon, the writer of Hebrews suggests that God's revelation unfolded from his so-called 'Old Testament' revelation to his 'New Testament' revelation in his Son (Heb. 1:1–2a). By doing a thorough exegesis of Hebrews 1:1–2a, the author's view of such an unfolding revelation is confirmed.

From this conclusion, certain hermeneutical implications of the unfolding of God's revelation are drawn for believers and scholars today. Among others, it is determined that God's revelation is progressive, that his revelation in his Son is superior, climactic and final, and that God's final revelation in his Son can only be understood within the context of his Old Testament revelation, and *vice versa*.

Introduction

The writer of Hebrews starts his sermon¹ by making the following statement:

Πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως πάλαι ὁ θεὸς λαλήσας τοῖς πατέρας ἐν τοῖς προφήταις ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων ἐλάλησεν ἡμῖν ἐν υἱῷ

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son. (Heb. 1:1–2a ESV)

With these introductory words, the writer of Hebrews suggests that God's revelation is an unfolding revelation. He seems to indicate that God gradually gave his revelation over a period of time. Moreover, the introduction seems to rest upon the idea that God's revelation unfolded from his so-called 'Old Testament' revelation to his 'New Testament' revelation in his Son.

These features of Hebrews' introduction lead to the following questions:

- Is the writer of Hebrews' conviction that God's revelation unfolded from his so-called 'Old Testament' revelation to his 'New Testament' revelation in his Son indeed supported by his words in the introductory sentence?
- Does a thorough exegesis of verses 1 and 2a within the context of the immediate pericope context give any confirmation of the author's view of such an unfolding revelation?
- If this is the case, what are the hermeneutical implications of an unfolding revelation of God for believers and scholars today?

In this article, the exegetical investigation that these questions call for is embarked. In the process, Hebrews 1:1–2a is subjected to a detailed exegesis, which is carried out along the lines of the grammatico-historical method of exegesis (cf. Fee 2009; Tolar 2002). Accordingly, a syntactical analysis, a semantic analysis and a stylistic and rhetorical analysis of Hebrews 1:1–2a is carried out, followed by a thought structure analysis of Hebrews 1:1–4. From the conclusion of the exegesis, certain hermeneutical implications of the unfolding character of God's revelation are drawn for believers and scholars today.

Exegesis of Hebrews 1:1–2a

The determination of the place of Hebrews 1:1–2a within the sermon

The book of Hebrews does not display the typical form or characteristics of an ancient letter or epistle. It does not start like a letter: it has no letter introduction (*prescriptum*) with the name of the

1. The writer of Hebrews calls his own work a 'word of exhortation' (λόγος τῆς παρακλήσεως) in 13:22. A comparison with Acts 13:15, where the same statement is made by Paul, as well as extensive research on Jewish-Hellenistic sermons in early Christian circles (Attridge 1990; Black 1988; Gelardini 2005; Thyen 1955; Wills 1984), has led many scholars to accept that Hebrews is a Christian Jewish-Hellenistic sermon with a letter ending (cf. Cockerill 2012:15). Consequently, in this article Hebrews is referred to as a sermon, and the addressees as hearers.

Read online:



Scan this QR
code with your
smart phone or
mobile device
to read online.

writer and addressees, a greeting, benediction, prayer or thanksgiving.² This phenomenon has led a small number of scholars to propose that the letter introduction was lost.³ But a missing introduction does not fit within the structure of the book, nor is there any textual grounds to support such a theory (cf. Ellingworth 1993:62; Moffatt 1924:xxviii). The description in Hebrews 1:1–4 of God’s revelation and the superiority of his Son by whom he gave his revelation is the true introduction of the sermon. Virtually all modern scholars agree on this.⁴

This means that the words of Hebrews 1:1–4 are in fact the first words of a sermon. As a sermon introduction, these verses are significant because their position brings emphasis to them. In this respect, Lane (1991:lxv) remarks that the words of Hebrews 1:1–4 ‘would not tolerate any prescript preceding them’. By not adding a prescript, the words of Hebrews 1:1–4 are emphasised. As a result, we can expect that ‘these verses are fundamental to all that follows’ (Cockerill 2012:86). That this is indeed the case is seen by the many references to God’s speech throughout Hebrews, and the consistent description of the superiority of his Son by whom he spoke. Throughout the sermon, the writer develops the thesis of God’s speech (Coetsee 2014:281).

Moreover, as the first words of the sermon, Hebrews 1:1–2a is emphasised especially. It would therefore not be strange if the writer of Hebrews makes a bold statement in these verses, as is indeed the case. This emphasis lets the full weight of the bold statement that the writer makes in these words come to their right.

A syntactical analysis of Hebrews 1:1–2a

With syntactical analysis conjunctions and particles indicate relation between sentences and phrases, as well as the tense, time and aspect of verbs for their specific nuance.

The syntactical analysis of Hebrews 1:1–2a can visually be presented as in Figure 1.⁵

The beauty of the writer of Hebrews’ classical writing style and rhetorical skills are immediately clear from the first words of his sermon. The pericope consists of one, long, complex and artistically composed sentence. Blass and Debrunner (1961) describe 1:1–4 as an example of a period, namely ‘the organisation of a considerable number of clauses and phrases into a well-rounded unity’. Many scholars who

2. Only the end of Hebrews (13:22–25) shows resemblance to the Hellenistic letter form. Yet, this final greetings, although part of the original book (Ellingworth 1993:61), was probably added when the book as a whole was sent via courier to the hearers (Lane 1991:497).

3. See Attridge (1989:13) for examples.

4. Inter alia Attridge (1989), Bruce (1990), Cockerill (2012), Ellingworth (1993), Koester (2001) and Lane (1991).

5. This method of the visual exposition of the syntactical analysis of a verse and/or pericope is based on the method that was developed by Janse van Rensburg (1980) in his doctoral dissertation.

have studied this pericope in detail are full of praise for the beauty of its composition.⁶

From the above syntactical analysis, the main clause and subsequent emphasis of the whole of 1:1–4 is indicated as 1:2a, namely ἐπ’ ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων ἐλάλησεν ἡμῖν ἐν υἱῷ. Every other clause or phrase in the pericope is dependent on this main clause. Within this clause, the aorist indicative ἐλάλησεν denotes an action in the past.

This main clause is preceded by the participle phrase Πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως πάλαι ὁ θεὸς λαλήσας τοῖς πατέρας ἐν τοῖς προφήταις in 1:1. Formally, the aorist participle λαλήσας qualifies ὁ θεός, but semantically speaking, it determines ἐλάλησεν in adverbial sense. From the context, it seems that λαλήσας has the nuance of an adverbial modifier of time (‘after’), rather than an adverbial modifier of concession (‘although’). This supposition is strengthened by the striking elements of contrast and continuity between the main clause and the participle phrase.

Within this participle phrase, the initial words πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως are a beautiful example of paronomasia, and possibly even features a hendiadys. The phrase ἐπ’ ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων is an example of a Hebraism, where the writer uses the genitive τῶν ἡμερῶν instead of an adjective (Blass & Debrunner 1961[8]). This genitive can be identified as a genitive of quality (Blass & Debrunner 1961). The phrase can literally be translated as ‘in the last of these days’, or more freely as ‘in these last days’.

The writer of Hebrews’ choice of words that God spoke ἐν τοῖς προφήταις and ἐν υἱῷ, with the use of ἐν instead of the dative of instrument, clearly indicates a general Semitic influence in his Greek (Black 1987:190). The possibility that the writer tried to indicate that God not merely spoke *through* the prophets, but *in* them, is less likely (Allen 2010:101; *contra* Cockerill 2012:90).⁷

The use of the relative pronouns ὃν in 1:2b and ὃς in 1:3 makes it clear that the entire 1:2b–4 is grammatically dependent on ἐν υἱῷ (Black 1987:179; Meier 1985:171).⁸ With the emphasis of 1:2b–4 on ἐν υἱῷ, the absence of a definite article before υἱός is striking. In a period as artistically composed as this, the argument that the writer accidentally forgot to add the article does not make sense. The possibility that God has many ‘sons’ by whom he could have given his revelation can also quickly be discarded because the rest of the sermon emphasises the uniqueness of Jesus Christ (cf. Attridge 1989:39; Ellingworth 1993:93). It rather seems that the exclusion of the article emphasises the Son’s superior status as God’s final agent of revelation. In this way, he is contrasted to all of God’s previous agents of revelation (Black 1987:183;

6. To give just a couple of examples: Meier (1985:170) calls Hebrews 1:1–4 ‘the most beautiful periodic sentence in the NT’; Black (1987: 181) describes it as ‘possibly the finest period in the NT’; Ebert (1992:163) calls it ‘one of the most beautiful sentences in the NT’.

7. Cf. the similar Semitic use of ἐν with dative to denote agent or instrument in Luke 22:49 (πατάξομεν ἐν μαχαίρῃ; ‘shall we strike with the sword?’ ESV).

8. Meier (1985:172) calls ἐν υἱῷ the ‘grammatical pivot’ of the whole pericope.

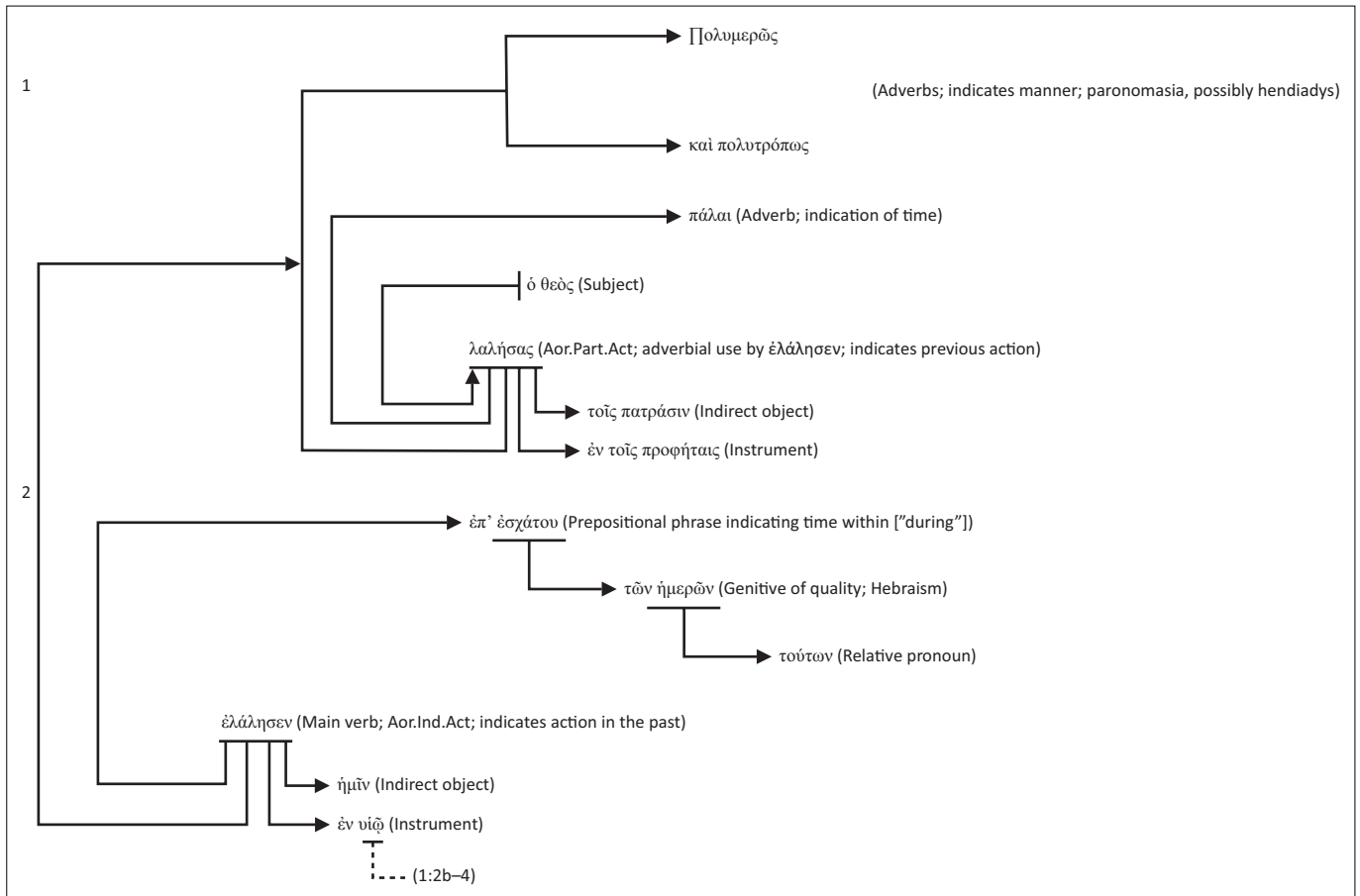


FIGURE 1: The syntactical analysis of Hebrews 1:1–2a.

Wallace 1996:245). The absence of the article also implies that the description of who this Son is would follow, as is indeed the case.

On the basis of this syntactical analysis, it is possible to translate Hebrews 1:1–2a for the time being as follows: ‘After God at many times and in many ways in the past spoke to the fathers by the prophets, he has spoken to us in these last days by the Son’.

A semantic analysis of Hebrews 1:1–2a

An exegesis of Hebrews 1:1–2a also calls for a thorough semantic analysis or word study of key words within these verses. These words include the following: πολυμερῶς, πολυτρόπως, πάλαι, λαλέω, πατήρ, προφήτης and ἔσχατος. For the sake of clarity, the analysis of words is carried out within the phrase in which it appears, and for the sake of brevity, abbreviations are used for Greek dictionaries.⁹

πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως

The fact that the phrase πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως is an example of paronomasia, and possibly of hendiadys, makes it necessary to study these two words together.

⁹The following abbreviations are used: TDNT refers to Kittel and Friedrich's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (1976), LSJ to Liddell, Scott and Jones' *A Greek-English Lexicon* (1996), L&N to Louw and Nida's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (1996) and BDAG to Bauer, Danker, Arndt and Gingrich's *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (2000).

Both πολυμερῶς and πολυτρόπως are *hapax legomena* in the New Testament. According to entries in the main Greek dictionaries, the use and translation of these two words can be given as follows:

- πολυμερῶς: The adjective πολυμερής indicates something that consists of many portions (μέρη) or parts (LSJ 1996: 1440). In step with this, the adverb πολυμερῶς can be translated as ‘fragmentary’ (L&N 63.19) or ‘in various parts’ (BDAG 2000:847; cf. DeSilva 2000:86).
- πολυτρόπως: The adjective πολυτρόπος indicates something that has many forms (τρόποι), thereby being manifold or various (LSJ 1996:1445). The adverb πολυτρόπως can be translated as ‘in various ways/manners’ (BDAG 2000:850; L&N 58.29, 89.82).

In the context of 1:1, these words would then indicate that God spoke ‘in various parts’ and ‘in various ways’ in the past.

The fact that the meaning of these two words is so closely knit together makes L&N (89.81) state that the phrase πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως is indeed a hendiadys. The two adverbs are synonyms that merely reinforce one another, both used for their stylistic or rhetorical effect (cf. Black 1987:189). But, although the semantic concepts that πολυμερῶς and πολυτρόπως express are closely related, in my opinion it is better not to see these two words as synonyms in order that the specific nuance of each word is retained. From the context, it is clear that the writer of Hebrews is phrasing a certain

contrast between God's former revelation and his revelation in his Son. This contrast is brought forward best if both *πολυμερῶς* and *πολυτρόπως* are understood in distinctive meanings and are translated differently (Attridge 1989:37; *contra* Lewicki 2004:19).

Subsequently, from the context it becomes clear that *πολυμερῶς* refers to God's former revelation, which he gave in segments or portions over a long period of time, whereas *πολυτρόπως* refers to the diversity of ways in which he has revealed himself formerly. From the context, it is also clear that the writer by this two-fold description is referring to God's Old Testament revelation. We can therefore conclude that *πολυμερῶς* and *πολυτρόπως* refer to God's Old Testament revelation as a whole (cf. Wider 1997:14–15).

πάλαι

All four primary dictionaries consulted (BDAG 2000:751; L&N 67.24; LSJ 1996:1289; TDNT 1976:5:717) agree that *πάλαι* is an adverb of time that normally denotes past time and that it should mainly be translated as 'long ago'. Yet, there are a few other semantic uses: LSJ (1996:1289) indicate that in some cases *πάλαι* can be translated as 'just past' or 'not long ago', whereas L&N (67.22, 67.141) and BDAG (2000:751) indicate that *πάλαι* can also have the semantic value of 'all this time' or 'already'. However, the contrast between *πάλαι* and the phrase *ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων* in Hebrews 1:2a makes it clear that *πάλαι* in 1:1 is used with its general semantic usage of 'long ago'. Given the overall context, *πάλαι* most likely refers to the entire Old Testament period in which God revealed himself (Allen 2010:99).

λαλέω

In ancient Greek, the verb *λαλέω* normally referred to informal communication like chatter or prattle – the opposite of normal, rational speech (*λέγειν*). The basic meaning of the stem mimics the babbling of infants (TDNT 1976:4:76; cf. LSJ 1996:1025–1026). If *λαλέω* was used for the speech of adults, it was a sign of either intimacy or contempt. *Λαλέω* is also used when referring to sound rather than meaning (cf. BDAG 2000:582).

However, in later Greek literature, *λαλέω* is equated to *λέγω* in such a measure that the original semantic meaning of *λαλέω* is lost (BDAG 2000:582–583; L&N 33.70; cf. TDNT 1976:4:69–192). Both occurrences of *λαλέω* in 1:1–2a thus simply refer to the act of talking, specifically God's speech. In a sense, by using this verb the writer of Hebrews is echoing the many references in the Old Testament to God's speech (cf. Ellingworth 1993:92).

πατήρ

By far, the most common use of *πατήρ* in Greek literature is to refer to a person's biological father. In line with this, the word is also sometimes used to refer to parents or ancestors. Outside familial relations, *πατήρ* is used as a title of respect, especially for a leader or someone who is metaphorically the origin of something (BDAG 2000:786–788). *Πατήρ* is also used

in ancient times in religious and/or philosophical contexts, amongst other things as/in reference to Zeus (LSJ 1996:1348). In the New Testament, *πατήρ* is used specifically as a title for God (cf. TDNT 1976:5:982–1014).

From the context of 1:1–2a, it is clear that *πατήρ* in 1:1 is used as a reference to the forefathers of the hearers. Almost all scholars agree that *τοῖς πατράσιν* is a metonymy for Old Testament believers in general, everyone who received God's Old Testament revelation (cf. Allen 2010:100; Black 1987:188; Lewicki 2004:17; Wider 1997:19).

προφήτης

In almost all Greek literature, *προφήτης* refers to a prophet, someone who spoke for a God or interpreted his or her will (L&N 53.79; LSJ 1996:1540; TDNT 1976:6:781–861). This usage is also found in the Septuagint and the New Testament, where *προφήτης* is specifically used to refer to a prophet of the Lord. Throughout Scripture, there are references to God speaking through his prophets. In a few New Testament passages (e.g. Lk. 24:25; Jn. 6:45), *προφήτης* is used as metonymy for the Old Testament prophetic literature as a whole (BDAG 2000:891).

The possibility that *ἐν τοῖς προφήταις* in 1:1 refers to Old Testament prophetic literature is highly unlikely because of the parallel between *ἐν τοῖς προφήταις* and *ἐν υἱῷ* (Ellingworth 1993:92; *contra* Lane 1991:11). The use of *προφήτης* should rather be understood in the same way as *πατήρ*, namely as metonymy in the broadest sense of the word. If understood as such, *ἐν τοῖς προφήταις* not only refers to the Old Testament prophets but also to all agents of God's revelation, everyone through whom he spoke one way or the other at some time (Black 1987:188; MacLeod 2005:214).

ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων

In general, *ἔσχατος* refers to something which is 'last', whether materially, spatially or temporally (TDNT 1976:2:697–698). In line with this, *ἔσχατος* is also used to refer to 'last' in respect of rank, value, grade and status, or the last item in a series (BDAG 2000:397–398; L&N 61.13, 87.66; LSJ 1996:699). The general meaning of *ἔσχατος* as 'last' fits perfectly within the context of 1:2a. Consequently, the phrase *ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων* can be translated as 'in these last days'.

It is noteworthy that the phrase *ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν* (and variants) is often used in the Septuagint with reference to the future, especially when referring to the eschatological 'end of days' (e.g. Nm. 24:14; Jr. 23:20; 25:19; Ez. 38:16; Dn. 2:28; 10:14; Hs. 3:5; Mi. 4:1). According to the Old Testament and Rabbinic teaching of aeons, world history (apart from the period before the fall) is divided into two ages or eras: the current era of sin and the coming eschatological era of salvation (cf. Coetzee 1995:35–36; MacLeod 2005:213). Thus, with the phrase *ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων* in 1:2, the writer of Hebrews is referring to the concept of the succession of two eras in the course of salvation history (Allen 2010:102; Lane 1991:10).

However, the demonstrative pronoun τούτων in 1:2 is not taken from the Septuagint; it is the writer of Hebrews' own addition. With this addition, the writer is indicating that the expected eschatological era has arrived recently in the past (cf. Black 1987:191; DeSilva 2000:85; Hughes 1977:37; Wider 1997:21). Later on in his sermon (9:26), the writer refers to Christ's appearance 'at the end of the ages' (ἐπι συντελείᾳ τῶν αἰώνων). Consequently, it is clear that like other New Testament writers, the writer of Hebrews also saw Jesus Christ's life, death, resurrection and exaltation as the beginning of the 'last days' (cf. BDAG 2000:397; Allen 2010: 103; TDNT 1976:2:697). However, it is important to take note that, like most other New Testament writers, the writer of Hebrews interpreted Christ's first coming only as the introduction of the 'last days'; the complete fulfilment of these days will only take place at Christ's return (Heb. 9:28; cf. Coetzee 1995:35–36).

Thus, when the writer of Hebrews says that God ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων spoke through his Son, he is referring to God's recent speech through his Son during the transitional period from the old to the new dispensation (MacLeod 2005:212). The fact that God has spoken through his Son in this eschatological transitional period makes it clear that there is a certain finality in his revelation through his Son (Peterson 2002:123; cf. Wider 1997:20). On the other hand, this phrase also makes it clear that the hearers lived in a time of intense expectation and revelation of salvation (Lewicki 2004:21; cf. Black 1987:191; Bruce 1990:46).

A stylistic and rhetorical analysis of Hebrews 1:1–2a

It has already been shown that 1:1–2a has a number of stylistic and rhetorical features, specifically that the phrase πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως is an example of paronomasia and τοῖς πατράσιν and τοῖς προφήταις of metonymy. Hereto can be added the six-fold alliteration of π in 1:1,¹⁰ and the nine-fold assonance of ε/η in 1:2a.¹¹

As interesting as this may be, the most important stylistic and rhetorical feature of 1:1–2a is the striking parallelism in 1:1 and 1:2a. This parallelism can be tabulated as shown in Table 1.

At first glance, this parallelism clearly has elements of both contrast and continuity. However, there are more elements of continuity than is often suspected. Smillie (2005:543–560) rightly warns exegetes to be careful not to read later elements of contrast in Hebrews back into 1:1–2a (as is often the case).¹² There are no explicit words of contrast in 1:1–2a.¹³ The use of the same verb (λαλέω) makes the writer's opening words echo continuity: the same God spoke in both eras; the one

10. Πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως πάσαι ὁ θεὸς λαλήσας τοῖς πατράσιν ἐν τοῖς προφήταις.

11. ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων ἐλάλησεν ἡμῖν ἐν υἱῷ.

12. Smillie (2005:559) convincingly argues that if contrast is overstated in the introduction of the sermon, the interpreter's interpretation of the rest of Hebrews will be that of contrast as well.

13. Smillie (2005:550–552) notes that of the 11 Greek words for comparison that the writer of Hebrews uses throughout his sermon, not one is found in 1:1–2a.

TABLE 1: The parallelism in Hebrews 1:1 and 1:2a.

Hebrews 1:1	Syntax	Hebrews 1:2a
Πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως†	Manner	-
πάσαι‡	Indication of time	ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων
ὁ θεός	Subject	(ὁ θεός)
λαλήσας	Verb	ἐλάλησεν
τοῖς πατράσιν	Indirect object	ἡμῖν
ἐν τοῖς προφήταις	Instrument	ἐν υἱῷ

†Attridge (1989:37) and Moffatt (1924:2) indicate that Greek prologues and introductions of a rhetoric nature regularly began with a form of πολύς.

‡Interestingly enough, Cockerill (2012:88) in my opinion unconvincingly argues that πάσαι should be taken with πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως in this parallelism.

people of God is as always still hearing the one word of God (Cockerill 2012:88; cf. Hughes 1977:37; Lewicki 2004:16).

The fact that 1:1–2a has such a clear and central element of continuity does not however mean that there are no elements of contrast in these verses (cf. Smillie 2005:558). The following contrasts can be seen in 1:1–2a:

- While God has revealed himself throughout the Old Testament era (πάσαι), he now revealed himself 'in these last days' (ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων).
- While God gave his Old Testament revelation to various Old Testament believers (τοῖς πατράσιν), he now gave his revelation 'to us' (ἡμῖν).
- While God had a great variety of agents by whom he gave his Old Testament revelation (ἐν τοῖς προφήταις), he now revealed himself exclusively 'by his Son' (ἐν υἱῷ).¹⁴

All these contrasts emphasise that God's revelation in his Son is at the outset different from and superior to all of his Old Testament revelations.

The only element in 1:1 which does not have a parallel in 1:2a is the phrase πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως, which refers to God's Old Testament revelation which he gave in various parts and in various ways. But, although 1:2a does not state that God's revelation in his Son came once only (ἅπαξ/ἐφάπαξ),¹⁵ it is implied in a sense (cf. Lewicki 2004:16). Moreover, the absence of a parallel for πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως in this parallelism virtually emphasises the uniqueness and superiority of God's revelation in his Son by way of an aposiopsis (cf. Wider 1997:14).

A thought structure analysis of Hebrews 1:1–4

In the syntactical analysis, the main clause of 1:1–4 was identified as 1:2a, with 1:1 as a preceding action to the main clause and 1:2b–4 as a description of the one who is identified in 1:2a as υἱός. In short, this means that 1:1–4 can be divided into two parts:¹⁶

- Hebrews 1:1–2a, which is about God's superior revelation in his Son.

14. Koester (2001:185) fittingly says: 'Multiplicity gives way to the singularity of God's communication in the Son'.

15. Cf. Heb 6:4, 9:26, 27, 28, 10:2, 12:26, 27 for ἅπαξ, and Hebrews 7:27, 9:12, 10:10 for ἐφάπαξ.

16. Other thought structure analyses of Hebrews 1:1–4 include those of Meier (1985:188–189) and Ebert (1992:164). Meier's (1985) ring structure and Ebert's (1992) chiasmic exposition, however, do not give sufficient emphasis to 1:1–2a, which has been indicated as the main focus of the pericope (cf. Wider 1997:48).

- Hebrews 1:2b–4, which describes who this Son is and why God could reveal himself superiorly in him.

The thought structure analysis of Hebrews 1:1–4 can visually be presented as in Figure 2.

Although there are differences of opinion about how many things there are said of the Son in 1:2b–4 (cf. Bruce 1990:46–50; Kistemaker 1984:31), in my opinion, along with Meier (1985:172), seven clauses can be distinguished. The writer of Hebrews thus lists seven reasons why the Son *par excellence* could be God's superior agent of revelation through whom he has spoken 'in these last days'. In short, he is God's superior agent of revelation because his relationship with God is entirely different than the relationship between God and his previous agents of revelation. As *the Son of God*, Christ *par excellence* is suited to be God's superior agent of revelation. Remarkably, many of these clauses touch on themes which the writer of Hebrews will expound on later in his sermon (cf. Attridge 1989:36; Black 1987:182; Lewicki 2004:14–15).

Conclusion from the exegesis

In the introduction of the article, the following questions were asked: Is the writer of Hebrews' conviction that God's revelation unfolded from his so-called 'Old Testament' revelation to his 'New Testament' revelation in his Son indeed supported by his words in the introductory sentence? Does a thorough exegesis of verses 1 and 2a within the context of the immediate pericope context give any confirmation of the

author's view of such an unfolding revelation? After a detailed exegesis of Hebrews 1:1–2a, the answer to both these questions can be given as a definite 'yes'.

In the striking parallelism between Hebrews 1:1 and 1:2a, the writer emphasises that after God gave his Old Testament revelation in various parts and in various ways over a long period of time to different believers through different agents, he continued to speak: recently, in the transitional period from the old to the new era, God has spoken to the hearers through his Son. The fact that the writer of Hebrews states that the same God continued to speak, proves that it is indeed his conviction that God's revelation unfolded. And the fact that 1:1 undoubtedly refers to God's revelation in the Old Testament, and 1:2a to his revelation in his Son, enables the exegete to conclude that the writer is convinced that God's revelation unfolded from his so-called 'Old Testament' revelation to his 'New Testament' revelation in his Son.

Hermeneutical implications from Hebrews 1:1–2a

Now that it has been established from Hebrews 1:1–2a that the writer of Hebrews is convinced from the outset that God's revelation is an unfolding revelation, certain hermeneutical implications of the unfolding character of God's revelation can be drawn for believers and scholars today.

The following seven hermeneutical principles emerge from Hebrews 1:1–2a:

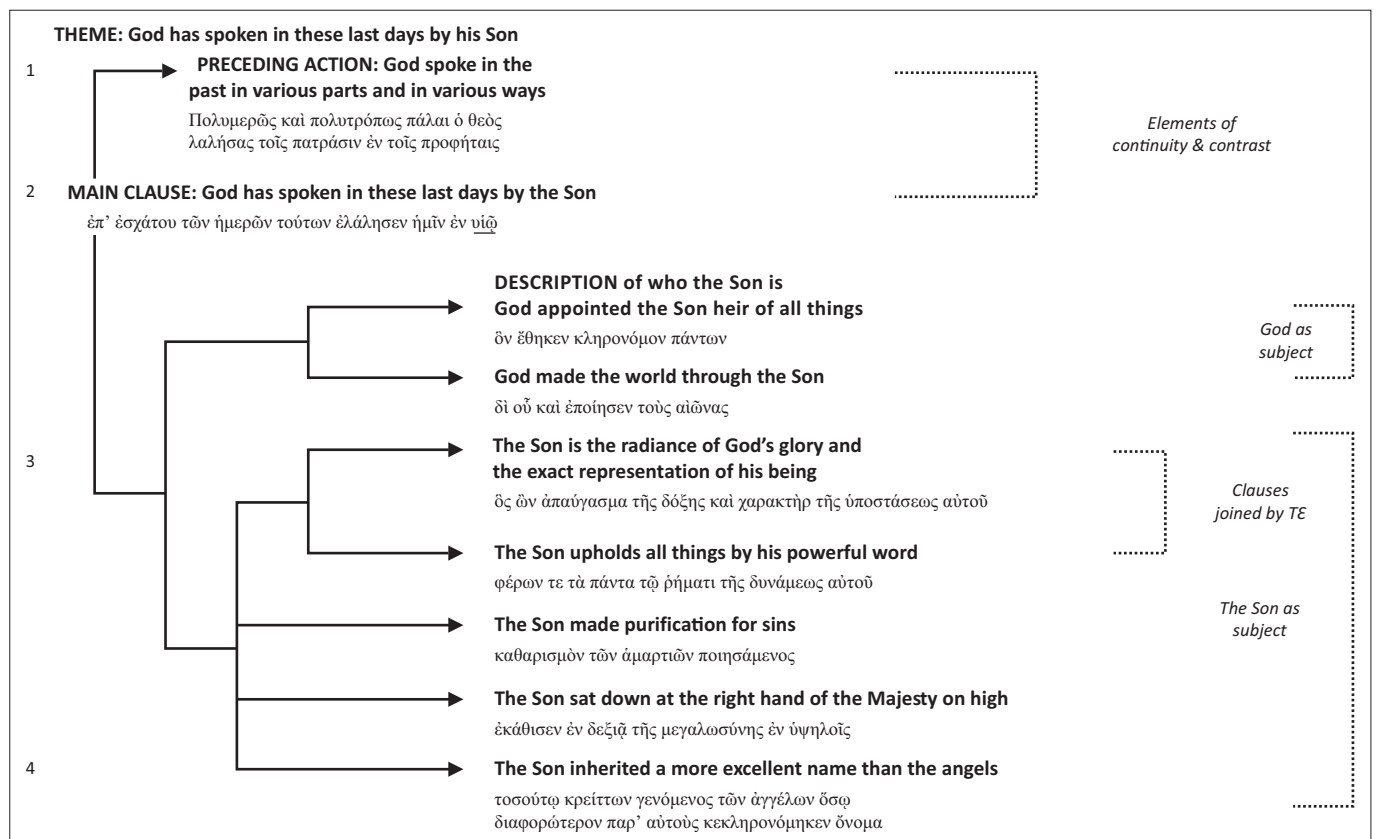


FIGURE 2: The thought structure analysis of Hebrews 1:1–4.

1. **God's revelation is progressive:** First and foremost, from the parallelism between 1:1 and 1:2a, it is clear that God's revelation is progressive. Although there is continuity between that which God spoke in the Old Testament and that which he has now spoken in his Son, God's revelation progressed from his Old Testament revelation to his revelation in his Son. God's Old Testament revelation was incomplete in relation to the revelation he now gave in his Son (cf. Black 1987:180; MacLeod 2005:214). However, Hebrews 1:1–2a does not indicate progression in the sense of less true to more true or from less worthy to more worthy. This could not be the case, because one and the same God is revealed throughout. The progression is rather one from promise to fulfilment (Bruce 1990:45).
2. **God's revelation in his Son is superior:** Closely connected to the previous principle, Hebrews 1:1–2a indicates that God's revelation in his Son is superior. Although Hebrews affirms that the same God continued to speak, the emphasis throughout is constantly on the fact that God revealed himself superiorly in his Son. This is clear from the elements of contrast in the parallelism between 1:1 and 1:2a, as well as the seven-fold description of who the Son is in 1:2b–4.
3. **God's revelation in his Son is climactic:** Again in close connection with the previous principles, the parallelism in 1:1 and 1:2a seems to imply that God's self-disclosure in his Son is the climax and fulfilment of all previous Old Testament revelations (Cockerill 2012:86–87). This is not directly stated in 1:1–2a, but the fact that God's revelation in his Son is superior while still in continuity with his revelation in the Old Testament, seems to imply such a climactic unfolding. Throughout the rest of the sermon, the writer indeed proceeds to indicate that the Son is the fulfilment of previous Old Testament revelations (especially Heb. 7–10, which is about priesthood, covenant, sanctuary and sacrifice). As such, the Old Testament revelation is partly a foreshadow of God's climactic revelation in his Son (cf. Attridge 1989:38; Lane 1991:11).
4. **God's revelation in his Son is final:** Closely related to all the previous principles, Hebrews 1:1–2a suggests that God's revelation in his Son is final. The very fact that God's revelation in his Son occurred during the transitional period from the old to the new era, implies that the Old Testament period of revelation is now considered closed (Ellingworth 1993:91) and that God's revelation in his Son is final (Bruce 1990:46; Peterson 2002:123–124). As Bruce (1990:46) aptly puts it: 'The story of divine revelation is a story of progression up to Christ, but there is no progression beyond him'.
5. **God's revelation in his Son is personal:** The writer of Hebrews' statement that God gave his revelation in his Son 'to us' (ἡμῖν) makes it clear that God's revelation in his Son is personal. With 'us' the writer does not only refer to the first eyewitnesses of Jesus (cf. Heb. 2:3) but also to the hearers to whom he wrote, and eventually to all Christians everywhere (Allen 2010:103). God's revelation in his Son is not something vague or distant or meant for 'others'; no, it is personal and directed to everyone who hears it.
6. **God's revelation in his Son is urgent:** Although not explicit in 1:1–2a, the personal nature of God's revelation in his Son as well as the superiority of the Son by whom God gave his final revelation, imply that the original hearers and hearers today should diligently listen to what God revealed in his Son. Throughout his sermon, the writer explicitly warns his hearers that an unbelieving, disobedient or careless attitude towards God's superior revelation in his Son can expect nothing else than God's judgement and wrath. Therefore, he urges his hearers to reverently react with the greatest faith and obedience possible to that which God has spoken by his Son (2:1–4; 3:7–4:13; 5:11–6:12; 10:19–39; 12:14–29). The same urgent reaction to God's revelation in his Son is expected from modern day hearers.
7. **God's revelation in the Old Testament is still valid and binding:** The writer of Hebrews in no way rejects the Old Testament. It still remains *God's* revelation. In fact, throughout the sermon he makes it clear that God's final revelation in his Son can only be understood within the context of his Old Testament revelation (cf. Allen 2010:107; Koester 2001:176). The Old Testament bears witness to Christ. But, the unfolding of God's revelation also suggests that the Old Testament revelation can only be understood within the context of God's revelation in his Son. Thus, the writer of Hebrews interprets Christ in the light of the Old Testament, and the Old Testament in the light of Christ (cf. DeSilva 2000:86; Koester 2001:117). This leads to the basic hermeneutic principle that the Old Testament should always be read in the light of the New, and the New Testament in the light of the Old.

In a sense, all the hermeneutic principles above can be summarised by the statement that God's revelation unfolded from his Old Testament revelation to his New Testament revelation in his Son. As could be expected, the idea of the unfolding of God's revelation is not unique to the writer of Hebrews. In other parts of the New Testament, it is confirmed that the ministry of the old covenant pointed forward and had a passing character (2 Cor. 3:4–11), that the law was meant as a part-time measure within salvation history until Christ would come (Gl. 3:19), that Christ's coming is the turning point in salvation history (Jn. 1:17) and that Christ's suffering and exaltation was part of God's original plan (1 Pt. 1:10–12).¹⁷

Nowhere else in the New Testament, however, is there any indication of contrast between God's previous revelation and his revelation in his Son. The emphasis is solely on continuity and fulfilment. Consequently, it is clear that in the Old Testament Christ was a dormant part of God's revelation that came to a complete unfolding in the New Testament (cf. Gl. 3:19) and that the Old Testament in its core points forward towards Christ (cf. 1 Pt. 1:10–12). Precisely therefore, the 'unfolding' of God's revelation is a most fitting term and a crucial, overarching, hermeneutic principle.¹⁸

¹⁷The idea of the unfolding of God's revelation is also found in the Old Testament. For example, in Deuteronomy 18:15–19 God promises to reveal himself continually in the future to his people – a promise that indirectly contains the idea that he will unfold his revelation.

¹⁸For biblical theologies on the unfolding of God's revelation, see Beale (2011) and Goldsworthy (2002). For the development of biblical doctrines, see Walgrave (1972).

Conclusion

In the article, it has been determined that the writer of Hebrews is convinced that God's revelation unfolded from his so-called 'Old Testament' revelation to his 'New Testament' revelation in his Son. From this conviction, certain hermeneutical implications were drawn for believers and scholars today.

All things considered, the overarching hermeneutic principle of the unfolding of God's revelation should not only strengthen the doctrines of the unity of the Old and the New Testament and the divine inspiration of Scripture but should also influence the way we read the Scriptures. Whenever the Old Testament is read, we should read it *inter alia* as promises and prophecies concerning the coming of Christ. Whenever the New Testament is read, we should read it *inter alia* as the climax and fulfilment of Old Testament promises and prophecies. We should always remember to read the Scriptures backwards and forwards. By doing so, we may come closer to the divine intent of the divine revelation.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

References

- Allen, D.L., 2010, *Hebrews: The New American commentary*, vol. 35, Broadman & Holman Publishers, Nashville, T.N.
- Attridge, H.W., 1989, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: Hermeneia*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, P.A.
- Attridge, H.W., 1990, 'Paraenesis in a homily (λόγος παρακλήσεως): The possible location of, and socialization in, the "Epistle to the Hebrews"', *Semeia* 50, 211–226.
- Bauer, W., Danker, F.W., Arndt, W.F. & Gingrich, F.W., 2000, *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature, Based on Walter Bauer's Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen [sic] Literatur*, 6th edn., University of Chicago Press, Chicago, I.L.
- Beale, G.K., 2011, *A New Testament Biblical theology: The unfolding of the Old Testament in the New*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, M.I.
- Black, C.C., 1988, 'The Rhetorical form of the Hellenistic Jewish and early Christianity sermon: A response to Lawrence Wills', *Harvard Theological Review* 81(1), 1–18.
- Black, D.A., 1987, 'Hebrews 1:1–4: A study in discourse analysis', *Westminster Theological Journal* 49(1), 175–194.
- Blass, F. & Debrunner, A., 1961, *A Greek grammar of the New Testament and other early Christian literature*, Transl. ed. R. W. Funk, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, I.L.
- Bruce, F.F., 1990, *The epistle to the Hebrews: The new international commentary on the New Testament*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, M.I.
- Cockerill, G.L., 2012, *The epistle to the Hebrews: The new international commentary on the New Testament*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, M.I.
- Coetsee, A.J., 2014, 'Die sprekende God in die boek Hebreërs: 'n openbaringshistoriese studie', PhD dissertation, North-West University, Potchefstroom.
- Coetzee, J.C., 1995, *Key's to God's revelation in the New Testament*, EFIS Drukkers, Orkney.
- DeSilva, D.A., 2000, *Perseverance in gratitude: A socio-rhetorical commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, M.I.
- Ebert, D.J., IV, 1992, 'The chiasmic structure of the prologue to Hebrews', *Trinity Journal* 13(2), 163–179.
- Ellingworth, P., 1993, *The epistle to the Hebrews: The new international Greek testament commentary*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, M.I.
- Fee, G.D., 2009, *New Testament exegesis: A handbook for students and pastors*, 4th edn., Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, K.Y.
- Gelardini, G., 2005, 'Hebrews, an ancient synagogue homily for Tisha be-Av: Its function, its basis, its theological interpretation', in G. Gelardini (ed.), *Hebrews: Contemporary methods – new insights*, Biblical Interpretation Series 75, pp. 107–127, Brill, Leiden.
- Goldsworthy, G., 2002, *According to plan: The unfolding revelation of God in the Bible*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, I.L.
- Hughes, P.E., 1977, *A commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, M.I.
- Janse van Rensburg, J.J., 1980, *Die ontleding van sintaktiese struktuur in die Griekste Nuwe Testament: Die ontwerp van 'n metode, geïllustreer met Romeine 8: 'n hermeneutiese studie*, PhD dissertation, PU for CHE, Potchefstroom.
- Kistemaker, S.J., 1984, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews. New Testament Commentary*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, M.I.
- Kittel, G. & Friedrich, G. (eds.), 1976, *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1–10, Transl. ed. G.W. Bromiley, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, M.I.
- Koester, C.R., 2001, *Hebrews: A new translation with introduction and commentary. The Anchor Bible*, vol. 36, Yale University Press, New Haven, C.T.
- Lane, W.L., 1991, *Hebrews 1–8: Word Biblical commentary*, vol. 47A, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, T.N.
- Lewicki, T., 2004, "Weist nicht ab den Sprechenden!": *Wort Gottes und Paraklese im Hebräerbrief*, Paderbornes theologische Studien 41, Ferdinand Schöningh, Paderborn.
- Liddell, H.G., Scott, R. & Jones, H.S., 1996, *A Greek-English lexicon*, 9th edn., with revised supplement, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Louw, J.P. & Nida, E.A. (eds.), 1996, *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament based on semantic domains*, 2nd edn., vol. 1 & 2, United Bible Societies, New York.
- MacLeod, D.J., 2005, 'The finality of Christ: an exposition of Hebrews 1:1–4', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162, 210–230.
- Meier, J.P., 1985, 'Structure and theology in Heb 1:1–14', *Biblica* 66(2), 168–189.
- Moffatt, J., 1924, *A critical and exegetical commentary on the epistle to the Hebrews: The international critical commentary*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh.
- Peterson, D., 2002, 'God and Scripture in Hebrews', in P. Helm & C.R. Trueman (eds.), *The trustworthiness of God: Perspectives on the nature of Scripture*, pp. 118–138, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, M.I.
- Smillie, G.R., 2005, 'Contrast or continuity in Hebrews 1:1–2?', *New Testament Studies* 51(4), 543–560.
- Thyen, H., 1955, *Der Stil des jüdisch-hellenistischen Homilie*, Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments 47, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.
- Tolar, W.B., 2002, 'The grammatical-historical method', in B. Corley, S.W. Lemke & G. Lovejoy (eds.), *Biblical hermeneutics: A comprehensive introduction to interpreting scripture*, 2nd edn., pp. 21–38, Broadman & Holman Publishers, Nashville, T.N.
- Walgrave, J.H., 1972, *Unfolding revelation: The nature of doctrinal development*, Hutchinson, London.
- Wallace, D.B., 1996, *Greek grammar beyond the basics: An exegetical syntax of the New Testament*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, M.I.
- Wider, D., 1997, *Theozentrik und bekenntnis: Untersuchungen zur theologie des redens gottes im hebräerbrief*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 87, De Gruyter, Berlin.
- Wills, L.M., 1984, 'The form of the sermon in Hellenistic Judaism and early Christianity', *The Harvard Theological Review* 77(3–4), 277–299.