

# **OPENING VERSES 1:1-4**

**<sup>1</sup>Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets,**

**<sup>2</sup>but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things**

From the outset the author identifies himself and those to whom he is writing as members of God's chosen people. The ancestors and the prophets of Israel are 'ours'. The prophets, according to their position in the community and their gifts of nature and grace, discerned in prayer the movement of God's Spirit in the various circumstances that confronted them and their contemporaries. They were considered 'prophets' for they spoke out publicly what God had communicated to them in prayer about God and about how people were to act if they wished to live in accordance with God's will. We recall the reflection of the author of the Book of Wisdom: 'In every generation divine Wisdom passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets' (Wisdom 7:27). The author is a Jew who has joined the Christian community, because he has come to believe that the Jewish heritage, rich and varied as it is, is essentially incomplete without the fulfilment that is found in Jesus. In verses one and two the word for 'speak' is the Greek *lalēō*, for God, the source of all revelation, speaks in familiar discourse.

What was promised through the prophets has been given in Jesus, who not only fulfils what is revealed through them, but also marvellously goes beyond anything which they were able to imagine. There is an intimate connection between God's self-revelation in the history of Israel, and the final decisive revelation in Jesus, the Son of God. It is this final revelation that is to bring to perfection those who have already been exposed to God's word (see 11:40). It is this faith which the author wishes to encourage in his fellow Christians in order that they will continue to believe in spite of the difficulties which they are experiencing.

Jesus is more than a prophet: he is a 'Son'. It is not only his words that have come from God to us 'in these last days', it is his very being and life. From the beginning it is the intimacy of shared love that the author highlights, for it is into this communion that he and the recipients of his writing are called. He knows of the special intimacy of communion which Jesus revealed by addressing God in prayer as 'Abba!' Like Jesus' first disciples, he found himself unable to think of God without thinking of Jesus and of the intimate communion of love which bound Jesus to God. The Christian community remained determinedly monotheistic in a society that worshipped many gods. Through Jesus, however, they came to think of God as one, not in some transcendent isolation, but in the oneness of complete communion in love. They came to recognise in Jesus the human expression of this divine communion that is God's very being. God is Jesus' 'Father'. Jesus is God's 'Son'.

As Son, Jesus is also heir. He is the Davidic Messiah, heir to the following promise:

He said to me: you are my son, today I have begotten you.  
 Ask of me and I will make the nations your heritage,  
 and the ends of the earth your possession.

– Psalm 2:7-8

The anonymous exilic prophet whose revelations are found in the scroll of Isaiah, sees the sufferings undergone by the Lord's anointed servant-king. God will glorify him. Jesus is the heir of this promise:

I will allot him a portion with the great,  
 and he will divide the spoil with the strong.

– Isaiah 53:12

We think also of the promise made concerning the one who is 'like the Son of Man': the one who identifies with the poor and the oppressed who cry out to God in their distress and are heard:

To him was given dominion and glory and kingship.

– Daniel 7:14

The Son is heir to all these promises, and more, for he has been appointed by God 'heir of *all things*'. In these introductory hymnlike verses, attention is focused on Jesus. Without taking our attention away from him, we may note that, as the oration proceeds, the author will be reassuring his readers that those who believe in Jesus will share Jesus' life and also Jesus' inheritance. He wants us to enjoy this same communion and to long for its fulfilment. We will experience the intimacy of divine communion that Jesus experiences, and with him we will experience the inheritance promised by the prophets. Paul has the same teaching: 'If you belong to Christ then you are Abraham's offspring heirs according to the promise ... God sent his Son so that we might receive adoption as children ... and if a son then also an heir'(Galatians 3:29; 4:4,7). 'We are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ'(Romans 8:17).

The authors of the New Testament use a number of biblical images to speak of the inheritance which comes to us through our communion with Jesus. With him we 'will inherit the earth (the promised land; see Matthew 5:5). We 'will inherit the kingdom of God'(1Corinthians 6:9-10). We will be 'heirs according to the hope of eternal life'(Titus 3:7). We will be 'glorified with him'(Romans 8:17), for we will be in communion with him, sharing in the radiant beauty of God's love that fills the heart of Jesus and that is revealed through every aspect of his person. Listen to Peter:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

– 1Peter 1:3-5

<sup>2b</sup>**through whom he also created the ages [NRSV 'worlds'].**

<sup>3</sup>**He is the brilliance [NRSV 'reflection'] of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being,**

**and he continues to carry all things to their goal [NRSV 'sustains all things'] by his powerful word.**

The Son is not only the one who, as Son and heir, enjoys the fullness of all that God has promised. He is also the one 'through whom God created the ages'. As a spatial term, the word 'ages' refers to all the different spheres of the created universe. As a temporal term it refers to all the periods of historical time which have come to their goal in the final age that has been inaugurated by Jesus. An ancient Rabbinic theory held that everything that has ever existed or that will ever exist was created by God before he rested on the seventh day. Each created thing is preserved in paradise and then God causes it to appear on earth at its proper time. It may be within this frame of thinking that the Messiah, as well as the Torah, the lamb sacrificed instead of Isaac, in fact everything, was thought of as having been created in the beginning.

In the Wisdom literature of Hellenistic Judaism, God first created Wisdom which was the divine blueprint or model according to which God created everything else: 'Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me' (Sirach 24:9). 'When he established the heavens, I [Wisdom] was there' (Proverbs 8:27). Our author is drawing especially on the following, from the Book of Wisdom:

Wisdom, the fashioner of all things ... pervades and penetrates all things. For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty ... a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness. Although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things ... She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well.

– Wisdom 7:22, 24-27; 8:1

The Gospel of John portrays Jesus as the human expression of the divine Word. Before speaking of creation, John takes us outside time and space to contemplate for the moment the very being of God, the love which finds expression in creation through God's gift of self. Already, beyond creation and beyond time, God exists and God's Word already was. This Word is 'towards God', for the Word is a complete expression of God and is drawn, with the gravity of love, towards God. The Word is God: not God as the source of all, but God as expressed and received. It is within this setting that John goes immediately to speak of creation, reminding his readers that 'All things came into being through the Word, and without the Word not one thing came into being' (John 1:3).

Hebrews, too, is speaking of God's self-communication, God's Word, and identifies this Word with 'the Son through whom God has created the ages'. Paul states the same truth:

There is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

– 1Corinthians 8:6

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;  
for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created ...  
all things have been created through him and for him.

He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

– Colossians 1:15-17

The Christians for whom our author is composing his work were accustomed to see the glory of God shining forth in creation, and especially in the law and cult of their ancestors. Our author is reminding them that it is the Son who is 'the brilliance (the shining forth) of God's glory'. The glory of God is the inner beauty or truth of God which radiates forth and is revealed in a way that gives rise to wonder and praise. We are to keep our eyes on Jesus, for he is the perfect radiance of God, revealing God as God really is. If we want to see the full brilliance of God's glory, let us keep looking at Jesus. Paul, too, speaks of 'the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God' (2Corinthians 4:4).

Moreover, the Son is 'the exact imprint of God's very being'. Just as wax carries the exact imprint of the seal that is impressed upon it, so Jesus bears the exact imprint (Greek: *charaktēr*) of God's very being (Greek: *hupostasis* 'sub-stance'): the ultimate reality which lies under the appearances. To know the substance we need our understanding to penetrate below that which is accessed by our senses. The author is giving expression to what the early disciples knew about Jesus, not because of their unaided intelligence, but through the understanding that is the fruit of an intimate communion of love. It was their believing (their being in love) that enabled them to perceive in Jesus the human expression of God's very being.

If God is self-giving, so too is his Son. The glory of Jesus is not for himself alone, but for the whole of creation, for 'he continues to carry all things to their goal' with all the power of God. Paul, too, has told us: 'In him all things hold together' (Colossians 1:17). Everything is a 'word' of God. Everything expresses in its own unique way something of the wonder of God's being. It is the Son, however, who is the complete human expression of God's brilliance, and it is through our union with him that we will come to experience the fullness of life and divine glory for which we long and for which we are created.

In this majestic opening our author presents Jesus in the poetic imagery of the Wisdom literature with which diaspora Jews in the synagogues of the Hellenistic world were familiar. Wisdom's role in creation, in providence and in revelation has reached its perfection in Jesus, God's Son.

**When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,  
4having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.**

From the poetic imagery of the role of Wisdom in creation, providence and revelation, our author suddenly speaks of redemption, using the cultic term 'purification'. It is the Son who 'made purification'. The form of the Greek verb used highlights the personal involvement of the Son. It will be explained later that he did so by the gift of himself. He purified us from that which prevents our being in communion with God: 'atonement shall be made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins you shall be clean before the Lord'(Leviticus 16:30). In classical Greek, the word 'sin'(Greek: *hamartia*) is used by Homer for a spear missing the mark (Iliad 5,287), and for an assembly which fails to achieve its purpose (Odyssey 21,155). We are aware of the many ways in which we miss the mark. We undermine ourselves by behaving in ways that cut us off from the divine life that is being offered to us. We turn our back on grace. We choose to walk away from the light, and find ourselves stumbling in darkness. We say No to love. If we are to attain to our heart's desire, we will need God's love to purify us from our sins. The author of Hebrews assures us that Jesus has done precisely this. He is preparing his readers for the central theme of his oration which focuses on the priestly mediation of Christ.

The author's focus is different from that of the gospels. They are interested in what Jesus said and did leading up to and including his death. Hebrews focuses on the present, on how the risen and glorified Jesus is now effecting salvation for those who choose to attach themselves to him and live as part of the Christian community. The author, therefore, asks his readers to contemplate Jesus as the triumphant and glorious Messiah, seated in the position of power at God's right hand (see also 8:2; 10:12; 12:2). From there he is able, with the unlimited power of God, to achieve the goal of the mission which he had while on earth. The imagery is traditional: 'Wisdom sits by your throne'(Wisdom 9:4). 'Send wisdom forth from the holy heavens, and from the throne of your glory send her, that she may labour at my side, and that I may learn what is pleasing to you'(Wisdom 9:10). 'Your all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne'(Wisdom 18:15). Note especially:

The Lord says to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool'.

– Psalm 110:1

We are to think also of the exaltation experienced by the suffering servant of Isaiah:

See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high.

– Isaiah 52:13

I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;  
because he poured out himself to death.

– Isaiah 53:12

Listen to Paul:

God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name.

– Philippians 2:9

He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels,  
proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up into glory.

– 1 Timothy 3:16

The opening words of the oration conclude in verse four with a statement which functions as an announcement of what will be the central theme of the following section. Having spoken of Jesus in relation to those who mediated God's word in the past, the author now speaks of the most exalted mediators of all: the angels. In Jewish tradition, the angels were God's most exalted creation. Unlike the rest of the created universe they, and they alone, shared with God the quality of being immortal. For this reason they were known as 'sons of God'. Furthermore it was the angels who acted as mediators in giving the Torah from God to Moses. Though this is nowhere explicitly stated in the Hebrew Bible, it was frequently stated in later Jewish literature, based on a text from the Torah: 'The Lord came from Sinai ... With him were myriads of holy ones; at his right, a host of his own' (called 'angels' in the Septuagint; Deuteronomy 33:2). We find reference to this also in the New Testament (see Acts 7:38,53; Galatians 3:19). They were thought of as surrounding God's throne, ever ready to carry out God's will. Already Jesus has been described as 'seated' at God's right hand on God's throne. God has chosen to direct the universe and carry out his will through his exalted Son. The author wishes now to demonstrate by means of the sacred Scriptures, that when they call upon Jesus (his 'name'), they are calling on one who is more excellent even than the angels.

Here, too, we have the first of a number of examples of the use of Hebrews by the author of 1 Clement writing from Rome at the end of the first century. There we read:

This is the way, beloved, in which we found our salvation, Jesus Christ, the high priest of our offerings, the defender and helper of our weakness ... who, being the radiance of God's majesty, is so much greater than the angels as he has inherited a more excellent name.

– 1 Clement 36,1-6

In his opening words (rhetorical exordium) the author has set the scene for his development of the theme of the exaltation of Jesus, to be developed in 1:5 – 2:18. He has also prepared the ground for other themes on which he intends to speak: the incarnation (to be developed in 2:5-18); the contrast between what was and what now is (to be developed in 3:3 – 4:11 and 8:1 – 10:18); God's powerful word (4:12-13), and the Son as high priest (5:5-6).