

## CHAINS OF CONTRASTS IN HEBREWS 1

**Robert Koops** is a Translations Adviser with the United Bible Societies based in Jos, Nigeria.

In the book of Hebrews there are a number of passages where we find what seems to be a series of contrasts linked together like a chain. These passages can prove to be problem passages for the translator.

The **first chain of contrasts** is found in chapter 1, verses 4 to 8. The following is an arrangement of the RSV text of these verses, set out in a way that shows the “links” of the chain. In each case the Greek conjunction and/or particle that is used is shown at the left, and the conjunction in the English text is shown in bold letters.

. . . having become as much superior to angels as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs. (4)

(Greek *gar*) **For** to what angel did God ever say, “Thou art my Son, today I have begotten thee”? (5a)

(Greek *kai*) **Or** again, “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son”? (5b)

(Greek *de*) **And** again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, “Let all God’s angels worship him.” (6)

(Greek *kai . . . men*) Of the angels he says, “Who makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire.” (7)

(Greek *de*) **But** of the Son he says, “Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever, the righteous scepter is the scepter of thy kingdom . . .” (8)

Of the Greek conjunctions and particles which are used in each of these “links”, *kai* commonly means “and”, and does not usually indicate a contrast with the previous statement. On the other hand *de* often means “but” or “to the contrary”. And the sequence *men . . . de* clearly marks a contrast between two statements, “on the one hand . . . on the other hand”.

A major problem in dealing with contrasts such as we find in this passage is that some elements of them may be implied, rather than being clearly stated in the words of the text. So the translator may have to search for these elements. In the discussion which follows I will try to restate the text so that all the elements of contrast are brought out. (The elements which are implied in the text will be shown in italics.)

### Verses 4-6

The theme of this passage is given in verse 4. It is a contrast between the honour and status of Christ (“The Son”) and the angels. This is not very clear in the RSV text. But even if the reader understands the text here, he may still find it difficult to tell either from the Greek or from the English versions exactly what the details of the comparison are. So let us first try to restate verse 4 so that the contrast comes out clearly. Then the reader may have a better chance of understanding what follows.

God honoured the Son above the angels, and the name “Son” that God gave him has more honour than the name “angel”. (4)

Verse 5 then carries on with the superiority of Christ as displayed by his

name "Son of God". But there are a number of problems for the reader and the translator here. They include the complication of speaking "to an angel" in one place and "about an angel" in another, and the rhetorical question form. The Good News Bible tries to deal with these problems, and renders verses 5 and 6 as follows:

For God never said to any of his angels,

"You are my Son; today I have become your Father."

Nor did God say about any angel, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son."

But when God was about to send his first-born son into the world, he said, "All of God's angels must worship him."

The GNB rendering suggests two possible ways of understanding the contrast between Christ and the angels which is presented here.

- (1) God does *not* speak to or about an *angel* regarding being his father (verse 5). *But* God *does* speak about *Christ* that way—"firstborn son" in verse 6 implies that God is his father. In addition, he commands the angels to worship the Son. This is not a neat contrast, because "to or about" in the first part does not completely match "about" in the second part. Also, God's fatherhood in the second part needs to be understood from "when God was about to send his first-born Son . . ."
- (2) The quotation in verse 6 about God's angels worshipping the Son may suggest that the Son is being honoured. The reader then takes that back to verse 5, about God being the Son's father, and it makes sense.

Now let us try to bring out the contrast of verses 5-6 clearly following these interpretations. The structure which results might be something like this:

- (1) God never *called any angel his "Son"*. *He never* said to any of his angels, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father." Nor *did God say about any angel* "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son." But when God was about to send *Christ* into the world, *he called him* his firstborn Son, and said, "All God's angels must worship him."
- (2) God did not *honour* any angel by saying, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father." He did not say about any angel, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son." But he *honoured Christ*, his Son, by saying, "All God's angels must worship him." He said this when he was preparing to send his firstborn Son into the world.

A third possibility is to say that the matter of the "name" is concluded for the time being at the end of verse 5. Then *de* at the beginning of verse 6 need not indicate a contrast by simply the addition of a new point. The only contrast would then be *within* verse 5, with verse 6 simply adding another example to support the main theme, that is the superiority of "The Son". A full statement following this approach would be:

For God did not say to any of his angels, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father." *But he did call Jesus his Son*. Again, God did not say about any angel, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son." *But he did say it about Jesus*. When he was preparing to send that firstborn Son into the world, he *even* said, "All of God's angels must worship him."

In my opinion this third approach is to be preferred. It is the most natural way

to read all those English versions which do not have “but” at the beginning of verse 6. And it is certainly followed by the Living Bible:

For God never said to any angel, “You are my Son, and today I have given you the honour that goes with that name.” But God said it about Jesus . . .

Now someone may object here that the author of Hebrews seems to be deliberately avoiding the names “Jesus” and “Christ”. (The first reference in the Greek text is at chapter 2 verse 9.) In other words, the author may be using the name “Son” in the early part of the book, not just as another name for Jesus, but for some special reason—perhaps to emphasize the close relationship of God as Father and Jesus as Son. This focus on “Sonship” is certainly an important point in the section. If we accept this, we might do well to bring out this emphasis as early as verse 2, by stating something like:

. . . in these last days he has spoken to us by *one whom he calls* “Son”.

The following references to the Son could be adjusted appropriately, and our statement of verse 5 would then come out something like:

It was not to any of his angels that God said, “You are my Son; today I have become your Father.” *But he did speak like this to the one he calls his Son.*

### Verses 7-8

In verse 7 a new point, signalled by *kai* in Greek, begins. The author has already said that God has given Jesus a more honoured name (“Son”) than the angels, and that God has even commanded the angels to worship Jesus. Now, in verses 7 and 8, he is making a third point about the superiority of Jesus over angels.

This progression to a third point is not clear in the rendering of the Good News Bible:

*But* about the angels God said . . .

The reader of the GNB must be confused when he comes to verse 7. This is because verse 6 already starts with “but”, in contrast with verse 5. So the second half of the contrast has been “used up” in verse 6, and “but” repeated at the beginning of verse 7 must leave him confused.

In the Greek of verses 7 and 8 the sequence *men . . . de* is a fairly strong indication of contrast between the status of the angels (verse 7) and the status of the Son (verse 8). The contrast is complicated, however, by the use of figures of speech, “winds” and “flames of fire”, and by the two different terms “angels” and “servants” which really refer to the same people. (The quotation here is from Psalm 104.4 where the author is saying that God uses wind and fire as his “servants”, that is as instruments to do his will. The author of Hebrews, however, is using the verse with a different meaning: he is taking wind and fire as metaphors to picture a characteristic of angels.)

There are two possible grounds of comparison for the metaphor:

- (1) The *servicing* status of the angels.

The lowly function of wind and fire and angels.

- (2) The *temporary* nature of wind, fire and angels.

Although both of these are possible, when we look at the other half of the contrast in verse 8 it seems that the second alternative is more likely. The temporary nature of the angels is thus contrasted with the enduring nature of the Son. The following restatement clearly expresses the ground of comparison in the metaphor; and as a result the whole contrast becomes clearer as well.

God said, about the angels, "His angels are *as temporary* as wind. His servants *pass away quickly*, like tongues of fire." But of the Son he says, "O God, your kingdom will last for ever. Your kingdom is a kingdom where righteousness rules."

This may be expressed even more simply by turning the quotation in verse 7 into indirect speech, and by reducing the two terms "angels" and "servants" to one.

God says that his angels are *as temporary* as winds. They are *like* flames of fire *which quickly disappear*. But he says of the Son, "O God, your kingdom will last for ever. Your kingdom is a kingdom where righteousness rules."

#### A second chain

A second chain of contrasts, in which some elements are implied rather than stated, is found in chapter 1, verses 11 to 14. The following is again an arrangement of the RSV text set out to show the "links" of the chain.

(The earth and the heavens) will perish, (11a)

(Greek *de*) **but** thou remainest; (11b)

they will all grow old like a garment, like a mantle thou wilt roll them up, and they will be changed. (11c-12a)

(Greek *de*) **But** thou art the same

and thy years will never end." (12b)

(Greek *de*) **But** to what angel has he ever said,

"Sit at my right hand,

till I make thy enemies a stool for thy feet"? (13)

Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation? (14)

We may pass over the simple contrast which is expressed twice in verses 11 and 12, the contrast between "change" and "stay the same". But we will need to think carefully about verses 13 and 14, and to consider various possibilities for stating clearly the contrast which is hidden there.

The RSV rendering is confusing at the beginning of verse 13, because of the inclusion of "but", just as the GNB rendering was confusing back at the beginning of verse 7. It is not at all clear what "but" might refer back to. And in fact it seems better to take the Greek *de* as simply introducing a new point here, rather than making a contrast with something stated earlier. The GNB has no conjunction here:

God never said to any of his angels . . . (13a)

We may well ask what is the point of the quotation in verse 13? The theme

of the section provides the answer. The quotation about “sit at my right hand . . .” refers to a position of honour. And the author is suggesting, by means of a rhetorical question with a negative answer, that Christ is highly honoured. Verse 14 then brings out the lowly position and role of angels. The contrast is present here, although it is not clearly stated in words. It is rather surprising that of all the English translations, only the Living Bible has marked it clearly:

And did God ever say to an angel, as he does to his Son, “Sit here beside me in honour until I crush all your enemies beneath your feet”? No, for the angels are only spirit-messengers sent out to help and care for those who are to receive his salvation.

There are three possible approaches to the translation of this contrast. One focuses on the contrast between elevation and honour on the one hand and submission and obedience on the other. A second approach focuses on the contrast between the positions of ruler and servant. In each case there is a negative element that has to be understood (brought out by the word “never” in GNB) and a negative-positive contrast. Here are models for these two approaches.

(a) *Honour/submission brought out:*

Did God *honour* any angel by saying to him, “Sit here at my right side until I put your enemies as a footstool under your feet”?

*No.* Angels are *only* spirits who serve God. They are sent by him to help people who are going to be saved.

(b) *Servant/ruler contrast brought out:*

Are angels *rulers* that God should say to one of them, “Sit here at my right side until I put your enemies as a footstool under your feet”?

*No.* The angels are just spirits that help God *as servants*. He sends them to help the people he is going to save.

Both of these models may be changed further, by converting the rhetorical question to a negative statement, as the GNB has done. This will be absolutely necessary in many parts of the world if the passage is to be understood clearly. With this conversion the two models above would start as follows:

God did not *honour* any angel by saying . . . (a)

Angels are not *rulers* that God . . . (b)

A third approach to verses 13 and 14 would bring out the positive thought about Christ which is implied, but not stated, in verse 13. With the same conversion of the rhetorical question to a negative statement at the beginning, the model for this approach would be:

(c) God did not say to any of his angels, “Sit here at my right side until I put your enemies as a footstool under your feet.

*But he did say it to the Son.*

The angels are *not honoured like this*.

They are only spirits who serve God.

They are sent by God to help people who are going to be saved.

The translator should also be aware that it is possible to reverse the order of

the positive and negative elements of the contrast, to give a more natural translation in his own language. The normal pattern in Greek is negative first and then positive; but this is just a matter of form, and it can be changed if positive first and then negative is the normal pattern in another language. With this reversal of order our last model would become:

*God honoured his Son, saying,  
 "Sit here at my right side, until I put your enemies under your feet like a stool."  
 But he did not say that to any angel.  
 Angels are not so honoured.  
 They are only spirits who serve . . . (c)*

A further shift that might be made in this last model, if it is more natural in the translator's language, is a change from direct speech to indirect speech:

*God honoured his Son by saying that he should sit at his right side . . . (c)*

### Conclusion

In this article I have tried to do a number of things. Firstly, I have tried to show how there can be a series of contrasts in an extended passage, which are linked together like a chain. And it is very important for the translator to recognize such contrasts. Then, secondly, I have tried to show how certain elements of the contrasts may be hidden and not clearly stated.

I hope that this article also provides some helpful advice for the translator, in dealing with contrasts and chains of contrasts. I have tried to show how it is important to think through the more difficult contrasts, discovering all the hidden pieces. And I have also tried to stress the importance of restructuring their meaning in ways that are natural and appropriate for the audience which has to understand the translation at the end.

JOHN ELLINGTON

## TRANSLATING OLD TESTAMENT BOOK TITLES

**Dr John Ellington** is a UBS Translations Consultant based in Zaire.

There are many small matters in the work of translation which make a big difference in the overall impact of a new version of the Bible. One such matter has to do with the way in which we translate the titles of the different books of the Bible.

In many older translations important words in the book titles were transliterated rather than translated and the readers were faced with meaningless words. In the old Efik translation in Nigeria, for example, the names of the five books of the Pentateuch as well as Judges, Chronicles and Psalms were taken over directly from English. In the Central African Republic such titles were borrowed from French in the currently used Sango translation. In neither of these cases was there any attempt to adjust the names to the spelling system of the African language. However, in such languages as Luchazi (Angola and