

# Lost in the Translation: Hope and Hypostasis in Hebrews

*John C. Médaille*

*“What hope must always defer to the future, faith is capable of grasping as a present reality.”*

The letter to the Hebrews is written by an unknown author to an unknown audience. But while the audience may be unknown, their situation may be gleaned from the letter; they have lost their initial enthusiasm for the faith and have become “sluggish” (5:11). The author wishes them to “hold fast to” (4:14, 6:18) to the hope they received. But this hope is not presented as something ephemeral; rather the author insists that it is “substance” grasped only in faith, and is to be invested solely in Jesus, the high priest, who has endured what we have endured, in perfect solidarity with his brothers. The call to hope, as something as solid as an anchor (6:19), reverberates throughout the letter and climaxes in 11:1 in which the faith is defined as the very hypostasis of hope, the very proof of things not seen. But what is meant by this hypostasis? Since the time of Luther many translators have taken it in a subjective sense to mean “assurance”. But this translation is itself not self-assured; there is wide disagreement as to what precisely the author means, a problem compounded by the fact that the word hypostasis has a wide variety of meanings. The author seems to expect that his audience knows precisely what he means, but for later readers it has become an open question. Which of the many meanings of the word did the author intend his audience to

understand? This question could only be answered in the context of the letter and the context of the times, bearing in mind what it is the author intends to do. Obviously his intention is to reinforce the flagging faith of his audience, but does he do this by presenting the faith as something fully assured or by presenting it as a solid reality? The difference in the readings has to do with whether we ascribe “faith” to some subjective state within ourselves, or to an objective reality to which we are required to cling. These two understandings result, I believe, in very different understandings and applications of the teaching.

The overall structure of the letter offers a complex argument. But following Vanhoye's outline<sup>1</sup>, we may conveniently divide it into five sections. The first section, (1:5-2:18) following the introduction of 1:1-4, is a brief exposition of traditional Christology. The next two sections (3:1-5:10), and (5:11-10:39) are two expositions of priestly Christology, and likely constitute an innovative use of traditional materials. The fourth section (11:1-12:13), which seems to be the climax of the letter, addresses directly the question of faith and give a long

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Vanhoye, “Hebrews” in *The International Bible Commentary*, editor William R. Farmer et al., Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998, p. 1767.

catalog of examples from the Old Testament. The final section, running from 12:14-13:18, consists of exhortations to live in holiness and peace with everyone. There is, in a sense, three pictures of Christ presented: first, a glorified Christ, resurrected and seated at the right hand of the Father; secondly, the priestly Christ, who intercedes before the Father at the true tabernacle not made by human hands and whose rites replace the old, ineffective ceremonies of the Levitical priesthood. But both of these views of Christ are based firmly on Jesus, who is like us in everything but sin, and who is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. It is evident in the author wishes to convey a reality, but what kind of reality? Is this an internal, subjective reality best conveyed by the word "assurance" or is it something palpable and best conveyed by the word "substance" or by the word "reality"?

Raymond Brown lends his considerable prestige to the subjective interpretation of the word "hypostasis". He seems to base this view on internal evidence of the letter, specifically verse 3:14. Here he finds the word hypostasis clearly used in a subjective sense, a sense compatible with assurance. "There is no reason," says Brown, "to think that either word is to be taken in an 'objective' sense; the context suggests that each has to do with the attitude of the believer."<sup>2</sup>

However, other authors are not so confident about assurance; Attridge finds that evidence for such a

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<sup>2</sup>Brown, R. E., J. A. Fitzmyer, & R. E. Murphy. *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1996, c1968.

psychological reading is "slender."<sup>3</sup> The Bauer's lexicon will find little support for the subjective meaning,<sup>4</sup> and Vanhoye will find the objective meaning "preferable."<sup>5</sup> In examining this question, we need to look at three sources: one, the meaning of the word at the time; two, the use of the word in the tradition of the Septuagint, and; three, the meaning of the word within the letter in itself, where it is used three times.

The word "hypostasis" will come to bear a great weight in the theology of the early Fathers. The two natures of Christ will be explained in terms of the hypostatic union, while the Trinity will be explained as three divine hypostases of a single Godhead. But all of that lies in the future; the word which has such a crucial importance to the Fathers actually has very humble beginnings indeed. Its original meaning seems to derive from medicine, in which in which the ὑπόστασις, that which "stands under," stood for sediments precipitated out of urine, or even for the urine itself. The word is formed as a verbal from ὑφίστημι, and reflects some of the meanings of the in transitive and middle forms, namely "support," "concealment," "deposits or sediments," "existence or reality," and, technically, "lease."<sup>6</sup> The

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<sup>3</sup> Harold Attridge, edited by Helmut Koester. *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989, p. 117.

<sup>4</sup> Arndt, W., F. W. Gingrich, F. W. Danker, & W. Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, c1979, s.v. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Vanhoye, p. 1782.

<sup>6</sup> Kittel, G., G. Friedrich, & G. W. Bromiley. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Erdmans, 1995, c1985. s.v. 2.

Stoics are the first to bring the term into philosophy where it denotes that which has come into being or attained reality. Unlike οὐσία, which is eternal being as such, hypostasis indicates being as manifested in individual phenomenon. "Because being is primal matter, its coming into existence may be viewed as a physical process, and thus hypostasis offers itself as a suitable term for the resultant reality."<sup>7</sup> In general usage, the word is used to denote any reality behind appearance and can have such general senses as "plan," "purpose," or "basic conception." Liddell's lexicon will give the word a wide variety of meanings. As an act, it means standing under or supporting. As a thing, it may denote the aforementioned sediments in urine, foundation or substructure, the "substantial nature," or "substance." In rhetoric, it can mean "the full its expression or expansion of an idea." It also means a "camp," "wealth," "substance," or "property."<sup>8</sup> All of the meanings discussed so far, however diverse they are, are united in indicating a reality, a palpable reality of some sort. But Liddell's also indicates that the word can refer to "plan or purpose," or to the "confidence, courage, resolution, or steadiness of soldiers," "an undertaking" or "a promise." While these meanings have can have *psychological* connotation, they seem to indicate the reality that stands behind something. Thus the evidence from the Lexicons seems to give little support for a psychological understanding of the term.

<sup>7</sup> Kittel, s.v. A.3.a.

<sup>8</sup> Liddell, H.G., R. Scott, H. S. Jones & R. McKenzie. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1996.

The use of hypostasis in Scripture also exhibits a wide range of meaning. The word is used 23 times<sup>9</sup> in the Septuagint and translates 12 Hebrew terms. Generally, the word denotes something substantive, such as "property" (Dt 11:6, Job 22:20), "burden" or "bundle" (Dt 1:12; Jer 10:17), "plan (of a building)" (Ezk 43:11), "outpost" (1 Sam 14:4), "pillars" (Ezk 12:11), or "sustenance" (Judges 6:4). The best evidence for a subjective understanding comes from Ruth 1:12 and Ezekiel 19:5, where "hypostasis" is used to translate "*tiqwa*," the Hebrew word "hope." However, in regard to these usages, Attridge says they are "best understood in the sense of an underlying 'plan' or 'purpose.'"<sup>10</sup> Given the author's use of the LXX, it is likely that this forms his understanding of the term, and not the philosophic usage.

The word hypostasis is used five times in the New Testament, three times in this letter (1:3, 3:14, and 11:1) and twice in II Corinthians (9:14 and 11:17). Both usages in Corinthians have to do with making good on a boast, and the word is generally translated in English as "confidence" or "conviction," although the Vulgate translates it as "*substantia*."<sup>11</sup> Both meanings will fit,

<sup>9</sup> Dt. 1:12, 11:6; Judges 6:4; 1 Sam 13:21,23, 14:4; Psalms of Solomon 15:5, 17:24; Jer 10:17, 23:22; Ezk 19:5, 26:11, 43:11; Ruth 1:12; Ps 38:6, 68:3, 88:48, 138:15; Job 22:20; Wisdom of Solomon 16:21; Nahum 2:8.

<sup>10</sup> Harold Attridge, edited by Helmut Koester, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989, p. 118, note 74.

<sup>11</sup> We may take note of the evidence of the Vulgate, which generally uses "substance" for hypostasis. However, this cannot be considered decisive, since by that time the word had assumed such importance in the Christological

since the sense of this "confidence" is to make real that which exists only in boasting. Paul is concerned that is boast not be an empty one, but find a fulfillment in the reality of the lives of his audience; he is seeking to get substance to what would otherwise be empty words.

The usage in Hebrews is far more complex. The first use occurs in the opening exordium at 1:3. Here there can be no doubt that the "objective" meaning is intended. The phrase *χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ* is translated, "the exact imprint of God's very being (NRSV)," or "the impress of God's own being (NJB)." This is the cosmic, glorified Son, and introduces the theme of his superiority to the angels, and hence to all other human messengers, even Moses. At this point, there is no dispute about the meaning of the word; it clearly meant to denote something "objective." The next usage is at 3:14, and at this point the translations vary. The Greek phrase, *τὴν ἀρχὴν τῆς ὑποστάσεως*, is translated with objective readings, "the beginning of the *reality* (NAB)," as well as subjective ones, "our first *confidence* (NJB)" or "the beginning of our *confidence* (ASV)." The major problem with a subjective translation, however, is that it would stand in such jarring contrast to 1:3. Having called Christ the "exact imprint of God's own being," it would be difficult to now use the word in such a weak sense, a sense that would cast doubt on the very reality in which the author urges his audience to have confidence. More likely is that the verse

forms an inclusion with 1:3; the "beginning" which is urged on us is none other than the reality of the Christ who is the exact image of God. Of course, it is paradoxical to talk about the "beginning" of a timeless reality,<sup>12</sup> but indeed, the object of faith *does* have a beginning in history, in the incarnation. The argument, up to this point, has stressed the "reality" of Christ's role as Son of God (1:4-9), his cosmic role (1:10-14), his superiority to the angels (2:5-9) along with his paradoxical solidarity with mankind (2:9-18), and concludes with a discourse on the faithfulness of Jesus, the "apostle and high priest" (3:1-6), along with a warning against disbelief of these realities, (3:7-19). It is appropriate that this discourse on the "realities" be framed by the term "hypostasis."

This brings us to the climactic use of hypostasis in 11:1, Ἔστιν δὲ πίστις ἐλπιζομένων ὑπόστασις, πραγμάτων ἔλεγχος οὐ βλεπομένων. There is an obvious parallelism here, with ἐλπιζομένων ("things hoped for") being paired with πραγμάτων ("things"), and ὑπόστασις paired with ἔλεγχος ("proof" or "demonstration"). Πραγμάτων denotes a concrete deed or act (LSJ, s.v. I), or a concrete reality (LSJ s.v. II.2); by paring "concrete reality" with "things hoped for," the parallel conveys something startling; no longer are the things hoped for grasped as feelings, but as something concrete. The same is true with the second pairing; the idea of the "(concrete) things not seen" as something "proved" reinforces

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and Trinitarian debates, and its connection with substance so crucial, that any other translation might have seemed problematic.

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<sup>12</sup> Harold W. Attridge, "Hebrews," in *Harper's Bible Commentary*, J.L. Mays, ed. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1996, c1988.

the idea of “things hoped for” as “realities.”

Having said all this, however, we are left with a problem, namely the problem of interpretation. Whatever may be said about faith as an “assurance,” as an interior disposition of confidence, at least it is easy to understand. Perhaps it is too easy, presenting us with no real paradox and approaching the level of mere platitude. But the idea of faith as the “substance” of hope, something of a present reality, must have been as startling to the original audience as it is to us. How can we grasp the “things hoped for,” things that always remain in the future, as something “substantive” in the present moment? Certainly, this is a paradox, for a “present” reality cannot be the object of hope, as someone cannot both have something and hope for it. Attridge explicates it this way:

Other examples, however, indicate that the “things unseen” are not only future, but also present, or rather eternal, realities, such as God, “The unseen one” (11:27); God’s existence and providence (11:6); God’s fidelity (11:11); and God’s power (11:19). Thus the “things unseen” comprise that realm of “true” reality in which hopes are anchored (6:19). It is only because faith, in the footsteps of Jesus, is directed to that world that eschatological hopes can be realized.<sup>13</sup>

This is helpful, but it is still problematic, and very difficult to apply to the concrete world, to the real situations in which we find ourselves. The author of Hebrews himself helps us

to understand this paradox with a long excursus on the relation between faith and action (11:3-40), a long catalog of the faithful. One peculiarity of this catalog is that none of the original stories from which they are drawn explicitly highlights faith, and accounts where faith plays a role are ignored.<sup>14</sup> What seems to unite all these examples is that they emphasize what has been accomplished through faith; action in the present moment is the hallmark of this faith, a faith which enlightens and empowers, hence enables us to endure. Yet, despite their dying, and acting, in faith, “They did not obtain what had been promised but saw and saluted it from afar (11:13).” Full realization of the promises had to wait both on Christ and upon us. “God had a better plan, a plan which included us. Without us, they were not to be made perfect (11:40).” The fulfilling the promises transcends time past and includes us. As faith grasps the future in a present reality, so also it includes the past. Thus it is suggested that our perception of the promises is more immediate, and the more so because these forerunners of our faith form a “cloud of witnesses (12:1).” Moreover, this faith is not commanded by a remote God, as soldiers are commanded by generals remote from the battlefield. Rather, the path to the future has already been traversed by Jesus, who is the ἀρχηγός, the “pioneer” (12:2) who is “like his brothers” (2:17).

A more immediate sense of grasping in the present the future promises of hope only through faith is given by Hans Urs von Balthasar in his discussion of the relationship between faith and love. When we behold the

<sup>13</sup> Attridge, *Letter to the Hebrews*, p. 311.

<sup>14</sup> Attridge, *Letter to the Hebrews*, p. 306.

beloved, we behold what is, being human, a mixed bag of attributes, some less attractive than others. But a human person is not just a being, but a becoming; a person is not just what they are, but what they will be. We all journey towards the archetypal knowledge that God has of us. This archetype is not some “free-floating ‘ideal reality’ in some impersonal, abstract ‘domain of pure formal values’”. The actual locus of these ideal images is the personal love of another being,<sup>15</sup> and ultimately in the love of God. God alone possess this archetypal knowledge of each person.<sup>16</sup> By faith, and by faith alone, we are able, however imperfectly, to participate in this archetypal knowledge, and to translate or hopes into concrete actions which alone make them a concrete presence in the world. In the relationship of love, we imitate the divine knowledge thusly:

The lover considers the ideal image of the beloved to be his true reality and directs his action according to it. He keeps his eyes on the “true” image of the beloved; he addresses him in view of this image; he treats him as if he were this image. It is not as if he deluded himself about this imperfect reality because of the enthusiastic blindness produced by being in love; it is not as if he thought that the coincidence of the ideal and the real had already been realized in the beloved. He does see the gap, but at the same time he overlooks it. He is not interested in the beloved’s faults. And by

overlooking them like this, he overcomes them. The lover simply lets the real, imperfect image of the beloved sink into nonbeing.<sup>17</sup>

Here we see at a practical level how the hypostasis of hope, the grasping of the future reality in the present moment, may function in our daily lives, and in this von Balthasar has brought a meaning to the text which is at once theological and practical.

The author of Hebrews uses the same word three times, and does so for a specific reason. The repetition reinforces that sense of confidence and boldness in approaching God which is emphasized in the letter. But when the same word is translated with three different words, and when those words vacillate between objective and subjective meanings, then something crucial to the author and his audience is lost in the translation, something that affects our fundamental understanding of the letter. If we were to read the same word, say “reality,” all three times, if we were to begin the letter by reading that the Son is the “imprint of (God’s) reality,” and then to read that we must “hold fast to the first reality,” and finally to read that “faith is the reality of things hoped for,” then we would get, I believe, the same sense of the letter gotten by those who first heard it. And every translation should, one hopes, attempt to convey to each new nation the same sense conveyed by the author to the original audience.

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<sup>15</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic: Volume I: Truth of the World*, Translated by Adrian Walker. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000, p. 116.

<sup>16</sup> Von Balthasar, p. 119.

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<sup>17</sup> Von Balthasar, p. 116-17.

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