

Hebrews Series Handout 4

Clarification of How to Understand Hebrews 2:13 (¶8)

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If you had trouble following my explanation of ¶8 [my translation, “Handout 3: Translation, Installment 1, Update B”] and its role in the argument of Hebrews last Sunday [audio: 09_Hebrews 2:13-15], it’s not your fault. As I reflected on the passage later that evening, I came to realize that I had been unclear in my own understanding. I was missing some critical pieces. I had not grasped a couple of elements that are critical to clearly understanding what Paul is doing in that passage. Here I offer a brief explanation of how I now understand ¶8. I think I was mostly on the right track last Sunday, but I needed to change slightly the way I thought about a couple of elements. As a consequence, the following explanation presupposes much of what I did successfully explain this past Sunday. So, it may require remembering (or listening to the audio file) of last Sunday to fill in the explanation below:

1. Here is the translation of ¶8 that I originally provided for you:

8.

And, as a response,

“²I will put my trust in HIM.” [Isaiah 8:17]

³Even further,

“⁴Behold, I and the children whom God has given me” [Isaiah 8:18a]

2:13

For the purposes of these notes, let me update my translation of ¶8 as follows:

8.

But, in the face of this, I respond back,

“²I will put my trust in HIM.” [Isaiah 8:17]

³Indeed, I respond back,

“⁴Behold, I and the children whom God has given me” [Isaiah 8:18a]

2:13

The question is this: how ought one understand and translate the two phrases *kai palin* (καὶ πάλιν) in ¶8. In my updated translation, I have translated (paraphrased) the first occurrence of *kai palin* (καὶ πάλιν) as “But, in the face of this, I respond back.” The second occurrence of *kai palin* (καὶ πάλιν) I have translated (paraphrased) as “Indeed, I respond back.” Virtually every published English translation translates *kai palin* (καὶ πάλιν) here as “And again” or simply as

“Again.” Herein lies the problem. In our ordinary idiom, to translate it “again” suggests that Paul is continuing or extending the argument that he has been making up to ¶8. I don’t think that is right. Paragraph 8 does not continue or extend the argument—neither is he augmenting his previous argument with further proof or evidence. Rather, with ¶8 Paul is doing something entirely different. Having finished stating his contention that (1) Jesus, because of his crucifixion, has been crowned with glory and honor, (2) it was entirely fitting for the Son to become qualified for his exalted status as the Son through suffering and death, (3) the Son had to come as a mortal human being to accomplish what God wanted to accomplish, and (4) we do not see Jesus actually exerting any authority and power over the whole of the created order (as was promised to David in God’s original promise to him), Paul now has a completely different purpose in ¶8. Namely, his purpose is to exhort his readers to believe in Jesus—that is, to embrace the truth that Jesus is the promised Messiah—even though it may appear as if it cannot possibly be the case that Jesus is the Messiah. (If Jesus were the Messiah, wouldn’t we see him reigning over all of reality right now, just like God promised?) Exhorting his readers to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, *in spite of appearances*, requires his readers to believe on the basis of God’s promise, not on the basis of how things actually seem to be. This is how paragraph 8 is functioning. Paul is inviting and encouraging his readers to believe in Jesus on the basis of God’s promises with regard to the Son, and not to doubt because of the failure of their expectations to be realized exactly as they would have hoped.

As such, ¶8 does not continue and extend the argument of ¶5–7, rather, it draws it to a close with a final exhortation to believe. Hence, the two occurrences of *kai palin* (καὶ πάλιν) should not be translated “and again.” Rather, they should be understood and translated in a manner more in keeping with Paul’s purpose for ¶8.

I have noticed that while *palin* (πάλιν) does seem to mean something like “again” in many of its occurrences in the New Testament, this fact is rather misleading. The word *palin* (πάλιν) does not always mean “again.” Sometimes, the meaning of *palin* (πάλιν) is not so much that a thing is being repeated or that something is being done or said a second time. Rather, it is that a response is being made to something. Something is being done or said back. That is, something is being done or said in return. It describes the answer back to something. (Note Mark 10:24 in that regard. It should be translated, “The disciples were amazed at His words. But Jesus answered in response and said to them, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!” It is not capturing Mark’s intent to translate it, “The disciples were amazed at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!”) It is this latter sense of *palin* (πάλιν), I think, that captures how Paul is using it here in

¶8. Paul is giving his response, his return answer, or his reaction to the dilemma that he has just described in the first portion of Part 3 [my translation]. Namely, he is offering his response to this dilemma: Jesus was purportedly the Son of God. He was crucified by the Romans. He purportedly was raised from the dead. But, as of now, we do not see the promises made to the Son being fulfilled or actualized in and because of Jesus. How are we to respond? Paul offers his response (*kai palin* [καὶ πάλιν]), “I will put my trust in him (God).”

2. It makes very little sense to think that Isaiah’s statement in 8:17 (cited by Paul here) is any sort of confirmatory evidence of any of the points Paul has been trying to drive home. It is difficult to see how Isaiah’s statement, “I will put my trust in him (God),” could offer any proof or evidence that (a) Jesus is more exalted than any *angeli*, (b) that the Son is to be an ordinary mortal, (c) that Jesus is crowned with glory and honor, or (d) any other claim that Paul has been arguing for in the preceding context is true. Hence, it does not make sense to construe *kai palin* (καὶ πάλιν) as introducing a proof or one more piece of evidence. It makes a lot more sense to see *kai palin* (καὶ πάλιν) as introducing (at the climax to Part 3) a description of how he (Paul) would respond to the circumstances we find ourselves in. (Circumstances that he has described and identified in the first portion of Part 3—namely, that it does not appear that Jesus is reigning with the power and authority of God over all creation.) And, presumably, he describes his own personal response to these circumstances as an indirect way to encourage his readers to respond similarly. Hence, indirectly, it is a sort of exhortation to his readers to believe, as he himself does.

3. But there are two difficulties that emerge if we take the statement “I will put my trust in him” as a description of Paul’s response to the dilemma he has described: First, the statement in Isaiah 8:17 is a statement made by Isaiah, not a statement made by Paul. It is Isaiah describing his (Isaiah’s) response to the promises of God. Why would Paul quote Isaiah’s words to describe his (Paul’s) response? And, second, Isaiah’s statement in Isaiah 8 is not an exhortation in Isaiah, so how can Paul employ it as an exhortation in Hebrews ¶8, when it does not have that import in Isaiah itself? I will take these difficulties up in order.

4. To appropriate some famous quote and to make the words of that quote my own words (whether by citing them verbatim or by alluding to them) is a perfectly understandable rhetorical device. That is exactly what Jesus did when he was dying on the cross. Jesus said, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” These are actually the words of David in the opening line of Psalm 22. Jesus is doing two things simultaneously when he cites the opening words of Psalm 22. First, on the one hand, he is appropriating those words as his very own.

Those words describe the subjective experience of David who is describing, in his poetry, a dangerous situation in which he found himself. But, those very same words describe Jesus' subjective experience as he is dying on the cross. Hence, it is perfectly understandable and appropriate for Jesus to appropriate the language of David and describe his own experience using David's language. Second, on the other hand, Jesus is drawing attention to an important connection between the suffering that David describes in Psalm 22 and his (Jesus') own suffering. David is suffering at the hands of the enemies of God who are making him the target of their hatred because he is God's Messiah. That is exactly what is happening to Jesus as well. Jesus is suffering at the hands of the enemies of God who are making him the target of their hatred because he is God's Messiah. By appropriating the words of David from Psalm 22, Jesus is drawing attention to the important analogy that exists between the circumstance described in Psalm 22 and the circumstance of Jesus' dying on the cross. Paul is doing exactly the same thing by quoting Isaiah 8:17-18. On the one hand, he is appropriating Isaiah's words as his own words, as a description of his (Paul's) own response to the dilemma that he has described. (The dilemma, remember, is this: Can we believe that Jesus is the Messiah when it does not appear that he is actually reigning in power over all God's creation.) On the other hand, by appropriating the words of Isaiah from Isaiah 8, Paul is drawing attention to the important analogy that exists between the dilemma that Isaiah is responding to in Isaiah 8 and the dilemma that he (Paul) is responding to in Hebrews 4:14. Specifically, Isaiah was announcing his willingness to trust in the promises of God in the face of circumstances that made it look unlikely that God would or could keep those promises. Isaiah was willing to trust God to keep his promises in whatever way God wants to keep those promises. Likewise, Paul is announcing his willingness to trust that God's promises will be kept in and through Jesus even in the face of circumstances that make it look unlikely that Jesus is the one in whom God intends to keep those promises. Paul is willing to trust God to keep his promises concerning the Son in whatever way God wants to keep those promises. By quoting Isaiah and appropriating his words as his own, Paul draws attention to the parallels between Isaiah situation and Paul's (and his readers') situation. Drawing attention to the parallels is instructive. It informs his readers—very efficiently (if they are familiar with Isaiah 8 in its context)—of the exact nature of the choice they face. Like Isaiah, they must make the choice whether they will embrace what God has promised or focus on unmet expectations that they have had.

5. I am not suggesting that Paul is quoting Isaiah as if it were an exhortation. In Isaiah it is a statement of fact: The fact is, I, Isaiah, am going to put my trust in God and his promises. In Paul, it is also a statement of fact: The fact is, I, Paul, am going to put my trust in God and his promises with respect to his Son. However, while Paul is making a statement of fact about his

own resolve, about his own response to the circumstances that he and his readers find themselves in, the purpose for stating this fact is in order to encourage his readers to do likewise. Paul wants his readers to join him in believing in the promises of God, no matter how much those promises might seem contradicted by appearances. So, his quote of Isaiah is not turning it into something that it is not. But, he quotes a statement of resolve, appropriating that statement of resolve as his own, in order to serve the rhetorical purpose of exhorting his readers by his own example. The role of Isaiah 8:18a is to call to mind that Paul (like Isaiah before him) is joined by others in his resolve to trust God's promise. He is not alone. Just as Isaiah's children were equally committed to trusting in God's promises and living and behaving in accord with that, so also Paul has "children" who are equally committed to trusting in God's promises with regard to his Messiah and living and behaving in accord with that. Noting the fact that there are others who believe God's promises simply fortifies the example he wants to confront his readers with. There are a significant number of people who believe in the promises of God and trust God to bring them to pass in his own time and way. "You, my readers, ought to join them," Paul is implying. So, ¶8, taken as a whole, is an exhortation based on the example of Paul and his fellow-believers. Paul is saying this: I and those who are "my children" have chosen to believe in the promises regarding God's Son in spite of the obstacles to belief. There are, therefore, those who do believe. Implicitly, therefore, I hope that you will join us in believing as well.