

## Hypostasis as a Component of New Testament Christology (Hebrews 1:3)

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1. In the ancient church's discussion regarding the divine Trinity—particularly in the works of Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus<sup>1</sup>—hypostasis characterized that which is particular to each of the three elements of the Trinity, in contrast to their unity (*ousia*). Hypostasis is connected with the concept of person (*prosopon*). Accordingly, the Council of Constantinople in 553 CE spoke of one essence (*ousia*) and three hypostases, and the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE recognized Christ as one hypostasis or person who united two natures (*physeis*) within himself. Influenced by this language, modern religious science often uses the concept of hypostases to describe the different concrete ways in which a divinity acts.

However, these semantics have only very little in common with the prior scientific and everyday use of these words in the ancient world. In general usage, hypostasis referred to that which stood behind (the Greeks would say “under”) the appearances, which could mean many things. Courageous determinism, for example, stands behind a visible display of strength and dynamic actions.<sup>2</sup> The moment is the basic building block of time and thus stands, in this way, behind or “under” time.<sup>3</sup> But above all, the term constantly appears (even in the Septuagint) with the meaning of plan, design, or project. A plan underlies an action or a concrete phenomenon as its most important element. While at first it exists only

in the mental imagination, it does not need to be reduced to it; in certain circumstances, it is (or will be) visibly implemented as well. The English word “project” is capable of comprising these two aspects. Hypostasis is the plan for a book (“book project”),<sup>4</sup> the floor plan for a huge almost-completed temple, the blueprint for a partly constructed monumental mausoleum,<sup>5</sup> a political or military plan (an attack plan, for example),<sup>6</sup> or the Egyptians’ plan (“concept”) for the year to always have 365 days, without leap days.<sup>7</sup> In the Septuagint, one finds “plan” or “project” in Deuteronomy 1:12 (directed against God, in parallel to *antilogiaz*) and Ezekiel 19:5<sup>8</sup> and 43:11 (plan or layout of the temple). God has a hidden plan for every person’s life (Ps. 138:15), and finally, God’s council, the place where God’s plans are made, in Jeremiah 23:21–22, is derived from “plan.”<sup>9</sup>

In the context of ancient natural sciences, hypostasis (as that which stands behind or underneath something) characterized the basis or foundation of a fluid: that which remained behind after the fluid has evaporated—for example, white salt in the case of saltwater. Thus, “basis” or “foundation” marks out the primary meaning of hypostasis for the natural sciences: that which has a lasting and tangible existence is deposited on the bottom when its associated solution evaporates (thus also “residue” or “accumulation”).

Some examples include the following: the residue in a jug of wine (Menander in Socrates, *Hist. eccles.* 3.7), curd as the residue of milk (Hippocrates, *de mulierum affectibus* 242: γάλακτος ὑπόστασις), the muddy bed of a standing body of water (Aristotle, *Hist. an.* 551b 28–29), the standing body of water itself as the residue or accumulation of rain (Aristotle,  *Mete.* 353b 23), or the residue from smelting iron ore (Polybius, *Hist.* 34.9.10–11). Additionally, one finds it occasionally used in the sense of support, as a derivation from the concept of basis or foundation: the forelegs of an animal serve to support or act as a basis for its weight (Aristotle, *Part. an.* 659a 24: ὑπόστασις τοῦ βάρους). In the same way, an injured hip joint can still serve as support (Hippocrates, *Artic.* 55).

In ancient philosophy,<sup>10</sup> which followed the usage of the natural sciences, hypostasis often meant tangible and lasting existence:<sup>11</sup> being, existence, reality, in contrast to that which is imagined.<sup>12</sup> Posidonius,<sup>13</sup> natural scientist and Stoic philosopher, defined ὑπόστασις τῆς οὐσίας as that being that is realized in the existence of individual things and thus has come into existence; οὐσία, on the other hand, is infinite being without form or quality—that is, the primary matter that manifests itself as ὑπόστασις in empirically perceptible matter. Existence emerges out of the depths of being—for the Stoic, who thought in materialistic terms, this represented a physical process, the result of which he termed ὑπόστασις. The primary matter is deposited in existence (just as salt is deposited as crystals on the sides of a bowl once the saltwater has evaporated). Nonetheless, even Posidonius was able to distinguish between the primary matter and its reified existence only in theory. The primary matter is only existent in “things”; ὑπόστασις is the οὐσία in its reality.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, however, for the Stoics, the οὐσία cannot be found in all visible phenomena, which is why ὑπόστασις is not used simply to refer

to any empirically perceptible phenomenon. A distinction was made between phenomena lacking substance (κατ' ἔμφασιν)—for example, a rainbow—and those with substance, those that reify the primary nature (καθ' ὑπόστασιν)—for example, hail or lightning.<sup>15</sup>

For both Posidonius and the middle-Platonic Albinus (*Epit.* 25.1), a ὑπόστασις reifies and objectifies the infinite primal being. However, for the middle Platonist, this ὑπόστασις or reality was not material, but mental and spiritual. On this middle-Platonic plane we also find Philo, *De somniis* 1.188 (a text that might have been interpolated): the world of mental reality (νοητῆς ὑποστάσεως κόσμος) is set apart from that which can be experienced empirically.<sup>16</sup>

In Plotinus's work, which also broke away from the Stoic program to connect ὑπόστασις to matter, hypostasis referred to the subordinate realization—the outflow or the product (ποιησάμενης)—of a higher level of being; the latter would, however, remain undiminished despite the outflow. For Plotinus, ὑπόστασις, as a derived and subordinate yet entirely valid reality of being, was synonymous with οὐσία. It manifested the “one” on lower levels.<sup>17</sup>

With an eye upon the philosophical usage of the word (“reality”), New Testament research has been in the habit of translating the characterization of God's Son in Hebrews 1:3 as χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ as “imprint/impression” of the “invisible, other-worldly reality” of God. The scholarly translation proposals have included “Ausprägung” der “unsichtbaren, jenseitigen Wirklichkeit” Gottes (H. Köster),<sup>18</sup> “Ausprägung/Abdruck seines Wesens” (H.-J. Eckstein),<sup>19</sup> “Abbild seines Wesens” (Einheitsübersetzung, 1980), “Ebenbild seines Wesens” (Revised Luther Bible, 1984), “exact imprint of his nature” (English Standard Version, 2001), “exact imprint of God's very being” (New Revised Standard Version, 1989), and “effigie de sa substance” (French Bible Jerusalem). Much earlier, the Vulgate proposed “figura substantiae eius.”

2. As for Hebrews 1:3a, the following brief argument will call into question the philosophical tendency to equate hypostasis with “reality” or “essence/substance,” raising its objections on the basis of micro- and macro-contexts within the Letter to the Hebrews, the New Testament as a whole, and the Septuagint. The solution is much simpler than previously thought.

In the entirety of extant Greek literature predating Origen,<sup>20</sup> who was clearly dependent upon Hebrews 1:3a, the expression χαρακτήρ ὑποστάσεως is unique; not even Philo offers any explanation.<sup>21</sup> Primarily, a χαρακτήρ (coming from χράσσω, to scratch or engrave) is active—the minter (of coins), the engraver, or the instrument that he or she uses<sup>22</sup>—and secondarily, it also became the product of this work—that is, that which is imprinted (which derives from the primary sense). Translators should test the active sense of the term before hastily adopting the translation “impression/imprint” without any discussion.

Already in 1:2, the author of Hebrews characterizes the “Son” as the mediator of God's creation (δι' οὗ καὶ ἐποίησεν τοὺς αἰῶνας). The next lines (1:3ab) elaborate further upon this role before 1:3c raises the issue of soteriology

(καθαρισμὸν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ποιησάμενος) and 1:3d; 1:4ff. raise the topos of the Son's exaltation (ἐκάθισεν ἐν δεξιᾷ τῆς μεγαλωσύνης ἐν ὑψηλοῖς) to a position higher than the angels (1:5ff.). Since the author of Hebrews purposefully progresses toward this exalted status as his argumentative goal (cf. 1:4ff.), ἐκάθισεν operates as the predicate of the relative clause, while the Son's mediatory role in creation and his work of salvation in 1:3a–c are pushed into the role of subordinate participles. Yet it is these participles that interest us.

The mediatory role in creation (1:2) is paired in 1:3b with that of sustaining creation (present participle: φέρων τε τὰ πάντα τῷ ῥήματι τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ; also Col. 1:17b). Sandwiched between these roles as creation's mediator and sustainer we find χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως, which in this micro-context is easily understood in the active sense, along the lines of "minter or engraver of his plan"—active in just the same way as φέρων. "Plan" refers to God's plan/project of creation, which the Son then implements, as both mediator and sustainer: he "imprints." The Son carries out God's blueprint for the universe (τοὺς αἰῶνας, τὰ πάντα) and sustains this work "with the word of his power."

God's power is intended here: it is God who figures as the superordinate subject of the entire sentence complex that begins in 1:1. The three relative clauses (1:2b f.) depend upon the main clause in 1:1–2a. Therefore, as with the parallel αὐτοῦ in 1:3a, the αὐτοῦ here refers to God. "The word of God's power" (the word charged with divine power) is the instrument with which the Son sustains God's creation. The Son himself is being distinguished here from the word of God, as the dative in 1:3b demonstrates. Thus, the popular equations of the Son with the Word of God, or the mediator of creation with the Word of God, do not come into play here.

If the word serves the Son as an instrument for sustaining creation, then one cannot consider the second interpretive possibility for χαρακτήρ in 1:3a—that is, "instrument of the engraver"—because the role of "instrument" is already occupied by the word. The Son, then, is not the mediator of creation in the sense that God uses him as an "engraving tool" (χαρακτήρ) for his creative work,<sup>23</sup> but rather it is the Son himself who carves out the work of creation. God's role is in delivering the plan, the blueprint, for this piece of work.

This places the Son in an extraordinary position between God and creation. He is ἀπαύγασμα, radiance/effulgence, of God's glory (1:3a), a reflector who makes the divine glory clearly visible for the creation. Αὐγή refers to dawn or sunrise, when earthly objects become clearly recognizable; correspondingly, αὐγάζειν means to see absolutely clearly or, in an intransitive sense, to shine. Αὐγασμα refers to brightness (Lev. 13:38), and ἀπαύγασμα to bright radiance.

As we have seen, ὑπόστασις is not a christological term in Hebrews 1:3. Rather the word simply represents one component of the compound christological expression χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως, "the engraver/executor of God's creative plan," an expression coined by the Letter to the Hebrews to express the mediation and sustaining of creation. That mediation and sustaining belong together is conveyed by the particle τε in 1:3b, which connects sentences

or phrases that are closely related. In contrast, the participle for the work of salvation in 1:3c is connected asyndetically and thus positioned closer to the exaltation: “. . . who, because he is the radiance of glory and the executor of his plan (of creation) and sustains everything with the word of divine power, sat down to the right . . . , after he had accomplished the cleansing from sins” (1:3).

The advantage of such a translation over against the more traditional “imprint of his (i.e., God’s) reality” is that it takes the immediate context frame (the end of 1:2 and 1:3b) more seriously. Why should Christ as an “imprint of God’s reality” be the mediator and sustainer of creation? This would only be clarified with the help of further interpretative explanations not found in the text, because the formula “imprint of God’s reality” itself is only a piece of information about the inner-Trinitarian relationship. In contrast, “executor of God’s plan” in the creation context of 1:2–3 immediately makes the connection to creation clear.

One might object that “radiance of God’s glory” is no better than “imprint of God’s reality” in linking directly to the work of creation. However, ἀπαύγασμα expresses more activity than the purely passive “imprint.” “Reflecting radiation of God’s glory” immediately raises the question of where this radiance is being directed; it is precisely as the (active) mediator and sustainer of creation, as the executor of God’s creative plan, that the Son passes the radiation of God’s glory on to the universe. Such a reading highlights (just as well as the alternative reading “imprint of God’s reality”) the parallelism between ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης and χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως.

3. Despite conventional opinion, ὑπόστασις can also be understood in the other four New Testament passages in the sense of plan, project, or intention. This would lead to a uniform usage of the term within the New Testament.

3.1. *Pistis* (faith, reliance, trust) means planning of, i.e. expecting of, counting on (ὑπόστασις) things hoped for. It is because of such *pistis* that the people of old received approval (Heb. 11:1–2).

In this future-oriented sense, the author of Hebrews interprets *pistis* as relying on eschatological goods; “hypostasis” means to plan and assume their arrival in the future, to count on them in one’s life, even though they lack any empirical tangibility in the present and are merely anticipated. Planning and counting on them means allowing the present to be determined by a future perspective that has become certain in one’s mind and heart. It does not mean bringing about these eschatological goods by oneself; that is for God to do. Luther’s rendering here of ὑπόστασις as “firm confidence” perfectly addresses the meaning behind it, but does not “translate” it; it only interprets.

It was Melancthon who suggested this solution to Luther, who had been undecided about it for some time. As a Protestant alternative to the patristic and medieval interpretation of this verse (in the sense of *ousia* or *substantia*), Luther’s rendering is by no means totally “untenable” as Köster declared in the

*Theologisches Wörterbuch*.<sup>24</sup> Luther's alternative hits the mark—at least in respect to the theological gist of this verse.

3.2. As a parenthetical remark within its context, Hebrews 3:14 represents an interjection provoked by the formulation “every day, as long as it is called ‘today’” (3:13)—that is, as long as our history still runs and the eschaton is long in coming. The interjection (3:14) then reads, “We have become and are Christ's partners<sup>25</sup> (γεγόναμεν, perfect tense), if only we firmly hold on until the end to the beginning of the planning/counting on (the announced eschaton)” (Heb. 3:14)—that is, if only we continue to count as steadfastly on God's eschaton as we did at the beginning of our Christian life.<sup>26</sup>

As a parallel we have an earlier passage in Hebrews 3:5–6, which is also formulated in a conditional sense: we are God's house, over which Christ is set as a reliable son, “if only we . . . hold firmly to the boasting in hope” (ἐάν[περ] . . . τὸ καύχημα τῆς ἐλπίδος κατ'ἀσχωμεν). The Christians' “planning” (ὑπόστασις) is essentially identical to their eschatological hope. However, we should not forget that when we read “confidence” for ὑπόστασις (as in the English Standard Version of 2001, in the Revised Luther Translation or the so-called Einheitsübersetzung), we are dealing, strictly speaking, with a paraphrase rather than a translation.

3.3. In 2 Corinthians 9:4, ὑπόστασις designates Paul's still incompletely implemented plan/project to collect offerings. Though he is currently working on this plan, Paul fears it will run aground. If the project were to fail, it would disgrace the apostle.

A similar formulation is found in 2 Corinthians 11:17, in the “fool's speech”: “What I am saying now, I say not in accordance with the Lord, but rather as a fool within the framework of this plan/project/undertaking to brag about myself,” which I am currently putting into action in this fool's speech that is not even finished yet; more foolish bragging is still to come (11:18 ff.; cf. above, e.g., the only incompletely implemented construction plan of a temple).

Conclusion: (a) We see a uniform use of ὑπόστασις (as plan/project) throughout the New Testament, which picks up a prominent semantic line from the Septuagint and from everyday pagan language. No other interpretative solution of Hebrews 1:3a can claim the same. (b) The Son of God as χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ in Hebrews 1:3a is the “shaper/executor of God's plan of creation,” both in his function as mediator (1:2) and sustainer (1:3b) of creation.

## NOTES

1. E.g., Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or. Bas.* 20 (*de dogmate et constitutione episcoporum*), 35.1072 at the end (χρῆ καὶ τὸν ἕνα Θεὸν τηρεῖν, καὶ τὰς τρεῖς ὑποστάσεις ὁμολογεῖν, εἴτ' οὖν τρία πρόσωπα, καὶ ἐκάστην μετὰ

- τῆς ἰδιότητος); Gregory of Nyssa, *ad Graecos ex communibus notionibus* 26 (φυλάττουσα δὲ μᾶλλον ταυτότητα θεότητος ἐν ἰδιότητι ὑποστάσεων ἤγουν προσώπων τριῶν).
2. Polybius, *Historiae* 6.55.2.4–6.55.3.1; similarly 4.50.10. In the example quoted, the concept of cause is amalgamated, as in Sextus Empiricus, *Math.* 10.266, where “hypostasis” is parallel, if not synonymous, to “genesis”: “The *genesis* of illness is the cessation of health, the *genesis* of health is the cessation of illness, and the *hypostasis* of motion is the end of immobility, while the *genesis* of immobility is the cessation of motion.”
  3. Pseudo-Galen, *De victus ratione in morbis acutis ex Hippocratis sententia liber* 19.188 (τῆς στιγμιαίας τῶν καιρῶν ὑποστάσεως): the “nuclear basis of time,” i.e., “hours,” “days,” “months,” etc., is a moment, e.g., “the early morning of the day” (19.187).
  4. Ibid. 4.2.1; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 1.3.7. In 1.3.2.11, the pleonastic combination ὑπόστασις τῆς ἐπιβολῆς can be found.
  5. Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 13.82.2–3; 1.66.6.1–4.
  6. Ibid. 16.32.4–16.33.1; 15.70.2.6; 1.28.7.3; Claudius Aelianus, *Fragm.* 59.1–3.
  7. Geminus, *Elementa astronomiae* 8.16.4.
  8. Ὑπόστασις is not the subject of ἀπώσται here, but the lion cub dragged off to Egypt in v. 4.
  9. “I did not send the (false) prophets . . . , I did not speak to them. . . . If they had stood (ἔστησαν) in my plan/council and had listened to my words, they would have turned my people away from their evil ways.” “Plan” or “council” is also best in Wis. 16:21. Other meanings within the Septuagint (cf. Helmut Köster, “ὑπόστασις,” *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* VIII/9, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich [Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1968], 571–88, here 579–81): “ground,” which gives a foothold, Ps. 68:3; “wealth” as a foundation, support or basis for life in Deut. 11:6; Job 22:20; Judg. 6:4; the basis of life, Ps. 88:48; 38:6; also 38:8 (used in the latter for the Hebrew “hope”); “basis of power” (ὑπόστασίν σου τῆς ἰσχύος) in Ezek. 26:11; the “physical possibility/substance/basis for bearing children” (in Hebrew “hope”) in Ruth 1:12.
  10. Cf., e.g., Jürgen Hammerstaedt, “Das Aufkommen der philosophischen Hypostasisbedeutung,” *Jahrbuch Für Antike Und Christentum* 35 (1992): 7–11; Hammerstaedt, “Hypostase,” *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, vol. 16, ed. Theodor Klauser (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1994), 986–1035; Ubaldo Ramón Pérez Paoli, *Der platonische Begriff von Hypostasis und die augustini-sche Bestimmung Gottes als Subiectum* (Würzburg: Augustinus-Verlag, 1990); M. Erler, “Hypostase,” in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart: Hand wörterbuch für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft*, vol. 3, ed. Hans Dieter Betz, Don S. Browning, Bernd Janowski, and Eberhard Jüngel (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 4th ed., 2000), 1980–81; Köster, “ὑπόστασις,” 574–76; Heinrich Dörrie, *Hypostasis: Wort- und Bedeutungsgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1955), 35–92.
  11. This meaning is probably also true for Lucian, *Par.* 27: The art of being a parasite can be distinguished from philosophy, if we look at its tangible existence (κατὰ τὴν ὑπόστασιν): it exists as a precisely identifiable and definable entity (ὑφέστηκεν)—which cannot be said about philosophy, because it is unclear what philosophy is supposed to be. The latter has unraveled into many self-contradictory schools. Köster, “ὑπόστασις,” 578, lines 30–31, mistakenly interprets ὑφέστηκεν as “allowing for a truly good life,” which is

- certainly not the point of this comparison between the art of being a parasite and philosophy, as the context shows.
12. Artemidorus, *Onir.* 3.14.9–10: *Phantasia* versus *Hypostasis*. The same in Diogenes Laertes, *Vit.* 9.91.6–8: That something really “is” and persists contrasts with mere appearance and pretense (φαίνεταί).
  13. See esp. *Fragmenta* 268 (Arius Did. 27.462.13–463,4); *Fragmenta* 267 (Arius Did. 20.458.8–11).
  14. The Peripatetics also distinguished ὑπόστασις from that which is only theoretical; Themistius, *In Aristotelis physica paraphrasis* 5.2.4.26–27.
  15. *Aetius de placitis reliquiae* 371.28–372.3; Ps. Aristotle, *De mundo* 395a 29–31. Cf. also Philo, *Aet.* 88.3; 92.2.
  16. The Peripatetics, of course, could not share in this development of meaning. As far as they were concerned, reality exists only in individual things, not beyond them. Only individual things can possess reality within themselves. Generic concepts, on the other hand, do not exist within themselves (Alexander, *Comm. Top.* 355.13–14). Cf. also Themistius, *In Aristotelis physica paraphrasis* 5.2.4.26–27.
  17. See, e.g., Plotinus, *Enn.* 3.5.3.1; 3.6.7.13. For Plotinus’s concept of hypostasis, cf. Christoph Horn, *Plotin über Sein, Zahl und Einheit: Eine Studie zu den systematischen Grundlagen der Enneaden*, Beiträge zur Altertumskunde, vol. 62 (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1995), 15ff.
  18. Köster, “ὑπόστασις,” 584.
  19. Hans-Joachim Eckstein, “Die Anfänge trinitarischer Rede von Gott im Neuen Testament,” in *Der lebendige Gott. Auf den Spuren neueren trinitarischen Denkens*, ed. Rudolf Weth (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener 2005), 37.
  20. E.g., *Cels.* 8.14.
  21. Contra Köster, whose corresponding remark (“ὑπόστασις,” 584, lines 15–16) refers to διαχαραχθέντι in the Philonic text *Somn.* 1.188. This text claims that the mental/spiritual world, which is named ὑπόστασις (see above), is molded according to the archetype. If Heb. 1:3 is read as “imprint or impression of the reality (ὑπόστασις)” of God, then the imprint is subordinated to the ὑπόστασις, whereas in the Philonic text ὑπόστασις and the imprint are ranked on the same level under the archetype. Thus, no parallels can be drawn between these two texts.
  22. Euryphamus, *Fragm.* 86.6 (ed. Thesleff); *Inscriptiones Orae Septentrionalis Ponti Euxini* (IPE) I<sup>2</sup> (1916), 16 A 14. Cf. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. and avg. Henry Stuart Jones (Oxford: Clarendon, 1958), 1977–78.
  23. A similar concept can be found in a traditional formulation (cf. 1 Cor. 8:6; John 1:3; Heb. 2:10) at the end of Heb. 1:2.
  24. See p. 585. Köster’s own translation (“ὑπόστασις,” 586) reads: “Faith is the reality of what is hoped for.” He himself recognizes how poorly such a predicative noun goes with “faith” as its subject, and therefore actually praises this “paradoxical” formulation in Hebrews for its “unequaled boldness.” Thus, he remodels his problem into a virtue. However, the problem only arises if one fails to test what is philologically more obvious. Köster’s prohibition—“Therefore one may not ask: To what degree is faith ὑπόστασις?” (586n141)—while admittedly coherent from his perspective, is unnecessary philologically and even a slap in the face to the text (ἔστιν δὲ πίστις). Faith is not “the reality of what is hoped for”; rather, having faith means *assuming* or (*pre*)*supposing* the reality of what is hoped for, as we might formulate in view of the above analysis.



25. The possible adjectival alternative, "sharing in Christ," is less convincing.
26. Hebrews offers a parallel to these beginnings in 5:12, but not in 2:3 (contra Köster), where "beginning" does not refer to the start of the Christian life of the Hebrews, but rather to Jesus' teaching, which the disciples once heard.