

The Universe as God's Work of Genius According to Hebrews 3 : 4

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This article attempts at an analysis of one verse of the Letter to the Hebrews. Its theme is that of God as a builder.¹

πᾶς γὰρ οἶκος κατασκευάζεται ὑπὸ τινος, ὃ δὲ πάντα κατασκευάσας θεός (Hebrews 3 : 4).²

The author of the epistle relates to God (ὁ θεός) the concept of formulating reality with the term πάντα or τὰ πάντα. The dualism of the lesson does not have a major impact on the meaning of this verse, as πάντα means “everything,” while τὰ πάντα means “all.” In the context of Hebrews 3 : 4, both terms mean “the universe.”³ Such a modern-day interpretation of πάντα or τὰ πάντα results from an analysis of the word that immediately follows: κατασκευάσας.⁴ While it does not appear in the New Testament, it appears in the Septuagint five times: in Wisdom 9 : 2, 13 : 4; Isaiah 40 : 28, 45 : 7; and Baruch 3 : 32. It is used solely to express God's work of creation, especially:

- the creation of the earth and stars (Wisdom 13 : 4; Baruch 3 : 32);
- the creation of its various elements and components (Isaiah 40 : 28, 45 : 7);
- and the creation of man (Wisdom 9 : 2).

1 Of all the books of the New Testament, the image of God as a builder is most emphasized in the Letter to the Hebrews (3 : 4; 8 : 2; 11 : 10). Hebrews 3 : 3 contains a general judgment on building.

2 Some manuscripts contain a τὰ πάντα lesson – cf. *List do Hebrajczyków. Wstęp, przekład z oryginału, komentarz, ekskursy*, oprac. S. Łach, Poznań 1959, p. 151. *The Greek New Testament*, ed. K. Aland et al. cite English translations that put the verse from Hebrews 3 : 4 in parentheses. The contemporary translations available in *Bible Works 6* NAB, NIB, NIV, NRS do not put this verse in parentheses.

3 S. Łach uses πάντα, τὰ πάντα to refer to the synagogue and the Church and has psychological reasoning for this opinion – cf. S. Łach, *List do Hebrajczyków. Wstęp, przekład z oryginału, komentarz, ekskursy*, op. cit.

4 It is a participle of the aorist active.

Together, these aspects of God's activity are tantamount to the contemporary meaning of the world "universe."

The Polish translation of Hebrews 3 : 4 according to the Millennium Bible is: „Każdy bowiem dom jest przez kogoś zbudowany, a Tym, który zbudował wszystko, jest Bóg” (“Every house is built by someone; God is the One Who built everything”).⁵ Does the above quote faithfully reflect the contents of the original? In order to solve this problem, I have done an appropriate analysis below.

1. A Preliminary Contextual Analysis

The context of κατασκευάσας in the above-mentioned verses of the Septuagint does not make the meaning of this word in Hebrews 3 : 4 more precise. This is because both relevant sources use it solely as a *terminus technicus* for God's creative activity. Using the meaning resulting from the context of κατασκευάσας in the above-mentioned verses of the Septuagint in order to explain Hebrews 3 : 4 would be an error of *circulus in probando* (“circular logic”). I will search for the meaning of κατασκευάσας in Hebrews 3 : 4 using an analysis of the context of the grammatical forms of the term κατασκευάζω⁶ in other verses of the Septuagint. This term has several meanings: “to prepare,” “to finish,” “to build,” “to create,” “to construct,” “to decorate,” and “to furnish.”⁷ It appears in various grammatical forms in Numbers 21 : 27; 2 Chronicles 32 : 5; Nehemiah 8 : 4, 1; Maccabees 3 : 29, 10 : 6, 21; 15 : 3, 7; 4 Maccabees 2 : 21, 4 : 20; 13 : 26;⁸ Proverbs 23 : 5; Wisdom: 7 : 27; 11 : 24; 13 : 4, 11; 14 : 2; Isaiah: 40 : 19; 43 : 7; 45 : 9; Baruch 6 : 8, 45 n. Several of these references (Wisdom 11 : 24, 13 : 4, 43 : 7, 45 : 7) are related to God's creative work, so due to the reason discussed above it has not been analyzed.

In my analysis, I have decided to not use the verses 2 Chronicles 32 : 5 and 1 Maccabees 10 : 6, 21; 15 : 7, as they are related to the creation of an armament

5 Unless indicated otherwise, the Biblical quotes are from: *The New American Bible*, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/_INDEX.HTM, 2002.

6 It is a lexical form of the word κατασκευάσας.

7 Cf. T. Friberg, B. Friberg, N. F. Miller, *Analytical lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, Grand Rapids, Mich. 2000.

8 Palestinian Jews did not consider the Books of the Maccabees to be part of the canon of inspired books. However, the Jews of Alexandria did include 1 Maccabees and 2 Maccabees in their canon. The division into four books originates in the Septuagint.

and for this reason they give no information that could help us to describe the meaning of the term under discussion in Hebrews 3 : 4.⁹ Likewise, I have not analyzed 4 Maccabees and Wisdom 7 : 27, as both verses are related to the internal transformation of the person, a topic that is unrelated to the subject matter discussed in Hebrew 3 : 4. Likewise, the phrase ἵνα οἰκοδομηθῇ καὶ κατασκευασθῇ πόλις Σηων from the Book of Numbers (“Come to Heshbon, let it be rebuilt, let Sihon’s capital be firmly constructed,” Numbers 21 : 27b) does not unambiguously describe the term κατασκευάζω, as it is either a rhetorical device (a parallelism), which then gives the term a meaning synonymous with οἰκοδομέω (“to rebuild, redevelop, build”), or in an aggregate function it means “to finish” or “to execute.”

An analysis of the verses Nehemiah 8 : 4, 4 Maccabees 20, Isaiah 40 : 19, and Baruch 6 : 8 allows us an essential disambiguation of κατασκευάζω. Their content unambiguously indicates the construction of a new object: a wooden platform for Ezra (Nehemiah 8 : 4), a gymnasium (4 Maccabees 4 : 20), an idol (Isaiah 40 : 19), or a crown for an idol (Baruch 6 : 8). There, the term κατασκευάζω is used to mean “to create,” “to execute,” and “to construct.”

2. Contextual Specification

A precise clarification of the term κατασκευάζω results from the application of its grammatical forms in the verses Wisdom 13 : 11, Wisdom 14 : 2, and Isaiah 40 : 19. The former is written as follows:

εἰ δὲ καὶ τις ὑλοτόμος τέκτων εὐκίνητον φυτὸν ἐκπρίσας περιέξυσεν εὐμαθῶς πάντα τὸν φλοιὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ τεχνησάμενος εὐπρεπῶς κατεσκεύασεν χρήσιμον σκεῦος εἰς ὑπηρεσίαν ζωῆς

Some carpenter cut down the right tree with a saw, skillfully debarked it, and making appropriate use of his artistic talents beautifully created equipment for everyday use (translation mine)¹⁰.

9 The context of these verses allows for κατασκευάζω to be interpreted to mean: “to prepare,” “to execute,” or “to furnish.” In all these places, the Millennium Bible uses the verb “to prepare” (“przygotować”), while the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (1969) uses forms of three different verbs: “to make,” “to equip,” and “to prepare.”

10 The author also is in favor of such a translation of the word τεχνησάμενος. A literal translation is impossible because there is no equivalent grammatical form in the Polish language.

Here, the word *κατεσκεύασεν* is used to describe the final phase of a production procedure, as a result of which valuable equipment is created. Its creator knows how to select the appropriate form of wood (which requires professional experience) and is so artistically gifted that this product has great market value. Here, the term *κατασκευάζω* means to create a masterpiece.

Another creative process, that of a ship, is described in Wisdom 14 : 2:

ἐκεῖνο μὲν γὰρ ὄρεξις πορισμῶν ἐπενόησεν τεχνίτις δὲ σοφία κατεσκεύασεν

This [ship] was thought up by a desire for profit, but it was constructed by creative wisdom (translation mine).¹¹

This verse suggests that wisdom (ἡ σοφία) is described in relation to the word *τεχνίτις*. It is a noun of feminine gender related to the male *τεχνίτης*, which in the Septuagint means someone who creates items of great artistic value, especially someone who builds a statue of a ruler (Wisdom 14 : 17n) or an idol (Deuteronomy 27 : 15), or someone who is a goldsmith (Jeremiah 10 : 9). In the present day, such a person is called a maker, an artist, or a master. Apart from the specialized aspect of manual labor, this also contains an aspect of the artist's conceptual work (his or her design).

A literal expression of *τεχνίτις σοφία* means: "creator of wisdom." Regardless of if it is a personification of wisdom ("creator of wisdom") or if it is a figure of speech meaning "creative wisdom," the phrase *μὲν... τεχνίτις δὲ σοφία κατεσκεύασεν* expresses juxtaposition (*μὲν-δε*). The aspiration described by the expression *ὄρεξις πορισμῶ* ("desire, urge for profits") is juxtaposed with the means of creating it: *σοφία κατεσκεύασεν*. In my opinion, the lexical term *κατασκευάζω* here means "to brilliantly create." Taking into account this opinion, a translation of Wisdom 14 : 2 takes the form of:

This [ship] was thought up by a desire for profit, but it was brilliantly constructed by creative wisdom (translation mine).¹²

11 New American Bible "For the urge for profits devised this latter" does not faithfully give the meaning of the text of the Septuagint, which contains a juxtaposition (*μὲν... δε*), while the New American Bible uses the conjunction "and," which indicates chronological order or a connecting function.

12 The New American Bible uses the phrase: "Wisdom the artificer produced," which has the same meaning as the phrase: "Wisdom the artificer created," which describes the subject (wisdom)

The activity mentioned in Isaiah 40 : 19 also pertains to the creation of a new object, the image of a deity:

μη εικόνα ἐποίησεν τέκτων ἢ χρυσοχόος χωνεύσας χρυσίον περιεχρύσωσεν αὐτόν ὁμοίωμα κατεσκεύασεν αὐτόν

Is not the image [of a pagan deity] created by an artisan; [it] was truly created by a goldsmith who covered the mold of that idol with gold (translation mine).

Here, the word κατεσκεύασεν pertains to the creation of the final form of an object (an idol), and this activity is juxtaposed with that of the artisan (ὁ τέκτων), who made a wooden trunk (ἡ εικόνα) of that idol. The goldsmith's activity is expressed with the following words:

χρυσοχόος χωνεύσας χρυσίον περιεχρύσωσεν αὐτόν ὁμοίωμα κατεσκεύασεν αὐτόν

the goldsmith who covered the mold of this figure with gold really created [it]¹³

encapsulates both the realization of the artistic concept and the application of a precise technology. Here, the meaning of the word κατεσκεύασεν surpasses ordinary artisanal work, which can be expressed using the phrase: “brilliantly created.”

3. A Simple Morphological Analysis

An argument in favor of such an interpretation of the meaning of κατασκευάζω both in the Septuagint and in Hebrews 3 : 4 also results from a morphological analysis. The first element of this term is the prefix κατα, which means “down from” or “against,” or intensifies the verb that it precedes.¹⁴ The first two meanings do not apply to Hebrews 3 : 4, because the context does not contain the notion of an object that could be directed downwards, while when we interpret the word as meaning “against,” Hebrews 3 : 4 makes no sense. The

with an attribute explicitly found in the predicate.

¹³ The translation presented here better represents the sequence of the original.

¹⁴ Cf. J. W. L. Roslon, *Gramatyka języka greckiego*, Warszawa 1990, p. 104.

second element of this term is the verb σκευάζω, which in principle means: “to prepare,” “to finish,” “to execute,” or “to create.”¹⁵ Thus using the prefix κατα in its intensifying action allows for κατασκευάζω to be translated as “to brilliantly create.”

4. Final Conclusion

This analysis allows us to argue that the word κατασκευάσας in Hebrews 3 : 4 can be expressed as “to brilliantly create.” Thus this verse can be summarized with the following phrase:

Since every building [is] built by someone's genius, thus God [was] the One Who **brilliantly created** the universe.¹⁶

The above translation essentially imitates the grammatical forms and syntax of the original; as a result it does not necessarily have the best literary sound. A translation that is stylistically correct and takes into consideration the hidden meaning of words would be:

Since each building is created by a brilliant builder, the universe must therefore be a brilliant work of God.

Abstract

The Universe as God's Work of Genius according to Hebrews 3 : 4

Of all the New Testament books, the Letter to the Hebrews emphasizes the function of God as the builder the most. This article analyzes only verse 3 : 4. Both the Polish and English translations of Hebrews 3:4 apply the term “builder” or the active participle of “to build” to God. In the way of contextual analysis, the author justifies a translation of Hebrews 3 : 4 that emphasizes God's conceptual design in creating the universe.

15 Cf. *A lexicon abridged from the Greek-English lexicon of H. G. Liddell, M. A. and R. Scott, M. A.*, Oxford 1852.

16 In this context, “building” refers to a house, place of worship, palace, etc. The word “was” (in brackets) has been applied to express the aorist that appears in the original text of Hebrews 3 : 4.

Keywords: Letter to the Hebrews; Universe; contextual analysis; genius; conceptional design; κατασκευάζω

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