

# P R E F A C E

In classroom and scholarly study the Gospels, Acts, and Pauline letters receive far more attention than does the so-called “end” of the New Testament: Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation. We hope to assuage this neglect to some degree with this work written solely on the biblical books of Hebrews through Revelation. Each of us has addressed what we deemed important to treat in an introductory work of this nature. We have carefully placed the biblical letters in their respective contexts and considered traditional introductory items like authorship, destination and recipients, provenance, purpose, etc. We have also examined these books’ major themes and surveyed their contents. Care was taken in this book to be uniform in content throughout but not so uniform as to stifle each contributor’s writing style.

This book can be used as a reference work or textbook on the college or seminary level for introductory NT courses strictly on Hebrews to Revelation. It can also serve as a text in a semester’s course on Acts through Revelation or Romans through Revelation. Teachers and students alike know well that in courses with the latter scope very few professors actually get through the entire NT. This book can help professors address quickly that which is lacking.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not mention something about why this book was given the title *Faithful to the End*. Each of these biblical letters in some fashion contains a strong theme of being faithful and persevering in the faith. For example, the writer of Hebrews urges his readers to persevere in faithfulness and not to go back into Judaism and the Old Testament religious system. James the Lord’s brother exhorts his letter’s recipients to rejoice in trials for their faith and endure them until the Lord returns. In 1 Peter the apostle encourages his readers to stand firm in the faith despite being persecuted as temporary residents in a foreign land. Similarly in 2 Peter he encourages his recipients to keep living virtuous, godly lives despite false teachers in their midst who are denying the return of Christ and living immorally. Offsetting the impact of false teachers who have influenced the church, the apostle John provides assurance of salvation for professing believers who meet the criteria of being persistently faithful in obedience, loving their

fellow Christians, and believing that Christ has indeed come in the flesh. Second John and 3 John encourage their readers to be faithful in not sustaining the ministry of false teachers and in showing hospitality to traveling Christian preachers, respectively. Jude urges his readers to contend earnestly for the faith against heretics. Lastly, in each of the seven letters to the churches of Asia in the book of Revelation, Jesus promises some special blessing to “those who overcome,” that is, genuine believers who cannot be shaken from continued allegiance and faithfulness to Christ.

Our hope and prayer is that God might use this text to help its readers not only to learn about these NT books but also to appropriate the message contained in each. We serve a wonderfully holy, loving, and gracious God. May we be faithful to the end!

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# One

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## HEBREWS

### Persevere in Faithfulness

**I**n exploring the letter to the Hebrews, we are engaging simultaneously one of the most fascinating books in the entire Bible and one of the reputedly most difficult NT documents to understand. At the outset, then, we are both intrigued and intimidated. The reasons for this intimidation are multiple, arising from several obstacles:

- The letter requires a preliminary knowledge of OT writings, people, events, and institutions, not least of these being Israel's cultic sacrificial system, which is challenging even to *students* of the Bible. The combination of multiple citations from the Psalms, such as one finds in the first chapter, and a cursory knowledge of the OT sacrificial order, assumed in chapters 7–10, seems daunting, preventing the average reader from even attempting to wade through the whole epistle.
- Correspondingly, some contemporary readers would be relatively illiterate in terms of their knowledge of the Bible and the OT in particular. The average layperson more than likely has not read through the entire Bible and almost assuredly has not read through those books of the Bible from which the writer to the Hebrews draws most of his material (the Psalms excluded).
- The letter begins without any lead-up, in sharp contrast to the “letters” of the NT.<sup>1</sup>

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the New International Version (NIV).

<sup>1</sup> The obvious exception is 1 John.

- Moreover, Hebrews does not mirror the standard *form* of a letter. There is no identification of the writer, no introduction, no Christian greeting,<sup>2</sup> no salutation, and there are relatively few specific or personal references that might earmark the document as to author, recipients, destination, and surrounding circumstances.<sup>3</sup> We are correct to note that Hebrews takes on the character of a *sermon*, based on the writer's urging the readers to "bear with" his "word of exhortation" (13:22), even when the sermonic style was adopted in its final "letter" form.
- Nothing concrete is known of the recipients or the circumstances that produced the letter. Clues are present throughout, but one must dig in order to string these markers together in a coherent fashion. That there is *some* sort of crisis among the recipients is clear. The nature of this crisis and its extent, however, are not.
- Hebrews is very different in character from other documents of the NT. To illustrate, the Synoptic Gospels are a rendering of God's in-breaking into the world, through which the kingdom of God is made visible. The Gospel of John attempts a witness to God's definitive statement about divine revelation through Christ. In the Pauline epistles we find a strong emphasis on God's grace in Christ, which justifies us, freely and forensically, apart from any taint of works-righteousness. A counterpart to Paul is the emphasis in James on good works. Authentic Christian faith will demonstrate, i.e., give evidence of, its presence in our lives through our deeds. And the Revelation represents an attempt to depict hostility between

<sup>2</sup> For example, a typical greeting that one might expect to find in the epistles of the NT would be "grace and peace to you."

<sup>3</sup> On letter writing in the ancient world, see F. X. J. Exler, *The Form of the Ancient Greek Letter* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1923); W. G. Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973); J. L. White, "Ancient Greek Letters," in *Greco-Roman Literature and the New Testament*, ed. D. E. Aune (SBLBS 21; Atlanta: Scholars, 1988), 85–105; idem, *The Body of the Greek Letter* (SBLDS 2; Missoula: Scholars, 1972); idem, *Light from Ancient Letters* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); S. K. Stowers, *Letter-Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (LEC 5; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); and A. J. Malherbe, *Ancient Epistolary Theorists* (SBLBS 19; Atlanta: Scholars, 1988). On the apostle Paul's letter writing, see as well J. L. White, "St. Paul and the Apostolic Letter Tradition," *CBQ* 45/3 (1983): 433–44; D. E. Aune, "Early Christian Letters and Homilies," in *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, ed. W. Meeks (LEC 8; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 193–94; and more recently, J. Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul the Letter-Writer: His World, His Options, His Skills* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1995).

the world and Christian faith. But the epistle to the Hebrews is quite different, engaging in a multifaceted presentation of Jesus' covenantal mediation of our access to God.

- The writer's method of argumentation strikes us as strange. In addition to the fact that no other NT letter commences without any personal greeting, Hebrews begins with a declaration of salvation history—not what one might expect in a personal letter to friends.
- A cast of strange, and at times cryptic, characters parades across the stage of the letter. While the wilderness generation (chaps. 3 and 4) is by no means unfamiliar to most Bible readers, the choice of Melchizedek, to whom a total of eight verses in the OT are devoted, as an illustration strikes us as bizarre. Furthermore, what book of the Bible—NT or OT—develops an argument around *angels*? To encounter such, and that barely five verses into the letter, is to enter abruptly a world with which the average reader is wholly unfamiliar.
- And what do we make of passages such as those found in Hebrews 6? Do these verses teach that Christians indeed can fall away from the faith? Remove themselves from divine grace? Lose their salvation?
- Finally, the contemporary reader is left perplexed when encountering very solemn and disconcerting admonitions such as those recorded in 6:4–8 and 10:26–31. What are we to make of these statements? Are these warnings or threats merely theoretical? Are they present merely for rhetorical effect? Or do they suggest that Christians indeed can actually fall away from grace?

Intrigue should not be eclipsed by intimidation, however, regardless of how daunting the challenges of Hebrews might seem. The richness of the letter, despite those features that perplex the contemporary reader, beckons us yet today. There awaits the hungry inquirer a treasure of insight and understanding into both the divine purpose, mediated by “the Son,” and the human response to the divine purpose. For those who are willing to move beyond the letter's traditional neglect, or beyond “Christianity Lite,” Hebrews offers life-changing perspectives on the nature of faith, perseverance, and witness, as well as on the exalted and unchanging object of that faith. The Christian community of any

era cannot afford to neglect the message of Hebrews. Indeed, there may be no generation that has ever needed the message of Hebrews more than our own.

### Setting, Audience Situation, Destination, and Date of Writing

To whom was this letter written and why? Answers do not come easily. Hebrews begins as if it were a sermon. We find no customary opening, designation, or greeting that characterize the epistles of the NT. Who were these people, and where were they located? Were they Christians or Jews or Jewish Christians or Gentile Christians familiar with the OT? And what was the nature of the “suffering” and “hardship” they were enduring that necessitated a letter like Hebrews? This anonymous epistle has engendered no little speculation as to the identity and location of its recipients.

The earliest appearance of the heading “To Hebrews” (*Pros Hebraious*)<sup>4</sup> dates to the late second century.<sup>5</sup> Clement of Alexandria, according to Eusebius,<sup>6</sup> was said to know of this title, as did Tertullian (early third century).<sup>7</sup> What is meant by “Hebrews” remains a mystery, although in its few occurrences it denotes language or descent. Are they Jews? Jewish Christians? The frequency of OT allusions in the letter is striking, whatever the role that it plays. Is the reference perhaps a metaphor, not unlike reference to the “twelve tribes” in Jas 1:1 and the diaspora in 1 Pet 1:1, directed at readers of a mixed—i.e., Jewish and Gentile—background?

Whoever these people were, they were known reasonably well by the writer. Whether or not these were “second-generation Christians,” as many commentators assume from the inference in 2:1 and 2:3, the writer was well acquainted with their past and their present condition (2:1; 6:11–12; 10:32–34; 12:4–5), commended them for their generosity (6:10) and their sympathy toward those

<sup>4</sup> In the NT, the term *Hebraios* can refer to either descent (e.g., 2 Cor 11:22—“Are they Hebrews? So am I”—and Phil 3:5—“a Hebrew of Hebrews”) or language (Acts 6:1: Grecian Jews alongside Hebraic Jews).

<sup>5</sup> The earliest manuscript is noted by B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the New Testament* (Stuttgart: UBS, rev. 1975), and F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 3 (n. 4) to be p. 46.

<sup>6</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.14.3.

<sup>7</sup> Tertullian, *On Modesty* 20.

in prison (10:34), chided them for their immaturity (5:11–6:3),<sup>8</sup> questioned their relationship to leadership in the church (13:7,17), and hoped to visit them soon. Both author and recipients had a relationship with Timothy (13:23).

Wildly divergent commentary has been offered over the last century as to whom the letter was addressed. Explanations include, though by no means are confined to, the following:

- The letter was written to a group of Jews originally belonging to the Qumran community who were converted to Christianity but who maintained their former messianic beliefs (Y. Yadin, A. S. Woude, H. Kosmala).
- The letter mirrors a “Hellenized” or “progressive” Judaism, based on correspondences between Hebrews and Acts 7 and the model of Stephen (W. Manson).
- The letter was written by a Philonic convert to Christianity who came from the Alexandrian school of Judaism in which typological exegesis flourished (C. Spicq, S. Stowers).
- The letter represents Platonic-style dualist philosophy that emphasized the heavenly and spiritual while downplaying the earthly and the material (C. K. Barrett, J. W. Thompson).
- The author of the letter wrote from the standpoint of pre-Christian Gnosticism, which focused on the spiritual or heavenly rather than the material world (E. Käsemann).
- The letter is a Jewish-Hellenistic homily (H. Thyen).
- The letter was written to reconcile differences between Jewish and Samaritan forms of Christianity (E. A. Knox).
- The letter sets on display first-century Jewish Merkabah mysticism (H. M. Schenke, O. Hofius).<sup>9</sup>

In light of the heading “to Hebrews” and reliance on the OT and Jewish tradition material, much traditional interpretation has assumed that the letter represents a Judaizing tendency or dispute

<sup>8</sup> There is no reason to think, with W. Barclay (*The Letter to the Hebrews* [rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957], xxi), that Hebrews is “a letter written to a little group of people who were training to be teachers in the Christian Church.” The admonitions appear generic in character, i.e., to laypersons and not leadership. Otherwise, we might expect statements such as one finds in Jas 3:1.

<sup>9</sup> The number of explanations for the background to the epistle is legion and the literature itself is massive. See L. D. Hurst, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its Background of Thought* (SNTSMS 65; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), which volume is devoted to an assessment of various theoretical constructions.

with Judaism or that it is written to dissuade Jewish converts to Christian faith from returning to Jewish religion. The “Jewish” interpretation of Hebrews, in varied forms, has been remarkably persistent and for good reason. Significant disagreement exists among commentators as to who the recipients of the epistle were. Were they practicing members of the Jewish faith? Perhaps Jews who converted to Christian faith and were considering a return to Jewish religion? Or were they Gentiles who were adequately rooted in both Jewish and Gentile thought worlds? How one views the background of the audience is intricately related to how one interprets the letter.

Upon closer inspection, we find that the letter does not allude to the temple, which one might initially expect, were its recipients living in or near Palestine. Nor does it reflect anti-Jewish tendencies or polemical features, which would be anticipated were the recipients considering a return to Jewish religion. Significantly, nothing in Hebrews parallels Paul’s argument to the Galatians—no argument against law or legalism or works-righteousness, no mention of circumcision, no sustained emphasis on the cross.

Indeed, as the bulk of the writer’s argument suggests, and as the material in the closing section of the letter (i.e., chaps. 11, 12, and 13) indicates, there are *deep sympathies* toward and a strong appreciation of the shadows, patterns, and types furnished in the old covenant. A shared base of theological knowledge and orientation exists between the writer and his readership. Whether this *requires* his readers to be former Jews is the subject of much debate;<sup>10</sup> the correspondence may also be explainable on the basis of extensive interpenetration of Jewish and Gentile cultures, especially in the Diaspora.<sup>11</sup>

Establishing any sort of social or historical context for Hebrews depends first and foremost on the profile that emerges from the letter. The epistle indeed mirrors a struggle, but this struggle is not with Judaizing elements in the church. What precisely is the character of the struggle, and what is the nature of the writer’s burden? It is the struggle to endure, to be faithful, to persevere with joy (10:32,36,38; 12:1,2,3,7,27; 13:1). And it is a struggle that unites, rather than separates, the people of God in the old and the new. Hence, the compari-

<sup>10</sup> For example, elements found in Hebrews such as extended treatment of the sacrificial system, allusion to “dead works,” and correlating “shedding of blood” with “forgiveness of sins” would certainly be highly relevant to readers with a Jewish heritage.

<sup>11</sup> So P. Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids/Carlisle: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1993), 22–23.

son to the OT covenant community is meaningful. Wandering in the wilderness, priesthood, and sacrifice have their full explanation and fulfillment in the life and ministry of God's exalted Son; therefore, the new covenant is a "better" or "superior" one. Nevertheless, faith in a God who has spoken unites both covenant people.

The interpretive approach that Hebrews represents an allegorizing tendency that stems from the same school of Alexandrian Judaism as Philo<sup>12</sup> has much to commend it. This approach is certainly supported by compelling evidence, not least of which is the extensive use of type and antitype. Consider the vocabulary of the writer—*hupodeigma* (copy, pattern, outline) in 4:11 and 8:5; *tupos* (symbol, example) in 8:5,9 and 9:23; *skia* (shadow) in 8:5; *anti-tupos* (antitype) in 9:24—as well as the rampant use of typology throughout the letter—e.g., the tabernacle or tent, Melchizedek, the high priest, the wandering of God's people, the temple, the covenant. This line of thinking is difficult to eliminate, given the sheer weight of the evidence in its favor.

Whether the use of typology and the language of "shadows" (8:5) in the epistle reflect Hellenistic, and specifically Platonic, influence or Hebrew exegetical technique has been vigorously debated by some. The answer may lie somewhere in the middle.<sup>13</sup> The writer's relationship to his readers and the resultant literary strategy suggest a likely double background for both, Greek as well as Hebrew influence.<sup>14</sup>

The discoveries at Qumran in the mid-twentieth century resulted in reinterpretations of NT material. It should come as no surprise that Hebrews was center stage in the reevaluation. In its

<sup>12</sup> So, e.g., C. Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux* (2 vols.; Paris: Gabalda, 1952); H. W. Montefiore, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (HNTC; New York: Harper & Row, 1964); and S. G. Sowers, *The Hermeneutics of Philo and Hebrews* (Richmond: John Knox, 1965).

<sup>13</sup> Thus argues G. E. Sterling, "Philo," in C. A. Evans and S. E. Porter, eds., *DLNT* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 792.

<sup>14</sup> One need not maintain the writer to be adopting the Platonic notion that reality exists only in the "heavenly" realm, of which the present world is a mere "copy" or "shadow." Hebrew/Jewish thinking did not advocate the Greek/Platonic belief that this world is not reality, for such a view in fact diminishes the material world. Based on a theology of creation, Judeo-Christian belief counters and dignifies—even when it prevents idolizing of—the material world. The argument in Hebrews is not that the material world is not real or that it is unimportant; rather, it is that events and institutions and people in the old economy are shadows or types of greater truths—truths that bridge *both* the seen and unseen world. As evidence of this important distinction, the present world—inclusive of our present bodies—is destined not for some cosmic *ash heap*, rather, for glorious *transformation* (whatever that may entail). Such is the firm teaching of the NT. Thus, the view of commentators like William Barclay (*The Letter to the Hebrews*, xiv–xv), needs some moderation.

essence the Qumran line of thinking on the origin of the book of Hebrews assumed that the recipients of the letter were former members of the Qumran sect who had embraced the Christian faith and were “carrying with them some of their precious beliefs.”<sup>15</sup>

Principal points of contact, for advocates of this school, were several. Scholars who reinterpret Hebrews based on the Qumran discoveries point out several points of contact. First, like Heb 1:1, Qumran contrasts the prophets with the popular eschatological belief that a prophet like Moses would appear. Further allusions to Moses in the letter, in addition to the wilderness generation, are seen by some as confirmation of this line of interpretation. Further rationale was thought to be the purported Qumran belief in two messianic figures, one a high priest (Aaronic) and the other a lay figure (Davidic), expected to emerge in the last days. Perhaps the most inviting feature in the letter to draw comparisons to Qumran is the role of angels not only in Qumran theology and eschatology but also in Hebrews.

Given the obvious touchpoints between Qumran belief and Hebrews, how might these similarities bear on the epistle’s destination? To what extent are we justified in interpreting Hebrews against the background of the Qumran community?

The question of whether the letter’s opening salvo, namely, the declaration of Jesus’ superiority to the “prophets,” is to be understood in the light of—and as a correction to—Qumran belief is intriguing and in many respects compelling. Nevertheless, even for most Qumran scholars, the role of the eschatological “prophet”—i.e., the “prophet like Moses” (Deut 18:15)—who was to appear in the last days is not wholly clear; considerable disagreement exists as to the prophet’s identity.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, reference in the epistle is made to “the prophets,” not the singular “prophet” (1:1) and thus requires too much from the reader to qualify as a polemic against sectarian Jewish eschatological notions.<sup>17</sup> Correcting a particular eschatological notion is not the thrust of Heb 1:1–4. The context is

<sup>15</sup> Y. Yadin, “The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Epistle to the Hebrews,” in *Aspects of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, eds. C. Rabin and Y. Yadin (ScrHier 4; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1958), 38.

<sup>16</sup> Compare, for example, the varied explanations of Y. Yadin, “The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Epistle to the Hebrews,” ScrHier 4 (1958): 53–54; W. Brownlee, *The Dead Sea Manual of Discipline* (BASORSup 10–12; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), 35; and J. T. Milik, *Ten Years of Discovery in the Wilderness of Judea* (London: SPCK, 1959), 126, all of whom have devoted considerable study to Jewish sectarian belief.

<sup>17</sup> By contrast, John 1 is a transparent mirroring of contemporary Jewish eschatological ideas. For in that material no fewer than 11 more or less messianic titles appear, including

*continuity in and fulfillment of the divine purpose*; the same God who sent the prophets has now sent the Son. What's more, the function of 1:1–4 is introductory, not polemical. These verses serve a similar function as the prologue to the fourth Gospel. In addition, *prophetēs* occurs only twice in the epistle—in 1:1 and 11:32, hardly constituting a polemic of any sort against distorted eschatological notions.

A related factor that speaks against the Qumran line of interpretation is that allusions to Moses in Hebrews do not fit the eschatological “prophet like Moses” of the Qumran sect. Rather, these allusions are better explained when we view them as part of an overall contrast, using typology, between the old and new covenants—a contrast that includes mediator, tabernacle, sacrifice, and high priest. Hebrews does single out Moses for attention; in the larger scheme of things, he is a minor character. Chapters 7–10 stress the nature of the better covenant and Christ's ability to mediate that better covenant. L. D. Hurst has summarized it well: “Rather than indicating any Moses *redivivus* theme, Moses in Hebrews falls into the category of traditional biblical typology. . . . There is no use of Deuteronomy 18 in Hebrews, nor is Moses anything other than a figure of the past who points forward to the ‘better things’ of Christ.”<sup>18</sup>

The recipients of Hebrews, according to the Qumran line of interpretation, are further thought to have believed, based on the documents *Covenant of Damascus* (CD) and the *Manual of Discipline* (1 QS), that a Davidic and an Aaronic messiah would appear, the latter of which for the purposes of reinstituting Levitical sacrifice. Accordingly, the readers would have necessitated a polemic advocating the superiority of Jesus that simultaneously demonstrated Jesus' high priestly work and His uniting of the kingly and priestly offices.<sup>19</sup> But in Hebrews, significantly, there exists no trace of a Davidic messianic figure and, thus, no hint of Jesus establishing union between Aaronic and Davidic lines. This would surely be strange were the letter in fact a polemic that was aimed at correcting or countering sectarian Jewish eschatological notions. The

the Word, the Word made flesh, the Light, the Christ, Elijah, the Prophet, the Lamb of God, Rabbi, the One about whom Moses wrote, Son of God, and King of Israel.

<sup>18</sup> Hurst, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 52.

<sup>19</sup> F. C. Fensham wrote three decades ago that this manner of interpreting Hebrews is beyond dispute. See his essay “Hebrews and Qumran,” *Neotestamentica* 5 (1971): 9–21.

primary emphasis in Hebrews is Jesus' supremacy and the fact that this supremacy lies at the heart of the new covenant.

There is a notable abruptness with which Jesus' high priesthood is introduced in 4:14: "Therefore, since we have a great high priest." No discussion of the priesthood—or of messianic expectations, for that matter—precedes this remarkably abrupt transition. Such a transition would be strange if a thoroughgoing polemic were needed to counter sectarian Jewish thinking. What's more, in Hebrews Jesus as high priest is never compared to any other eschatological figure—an omission that would be most conspicuous in an argument directed at Qumran devotees or sympathizers. Finally and relatedly, the writer argues in extended fashion that the sacrificial order of the old covenant is inadequate and has been replaced by a "better," eternal order—all in the person and work of the Son. That is, the argument is not for a *reappearance* of the eschatological prophet; it is that one greater than the prophets has *already* appeared in His priestly function—on earth and in heaven.

Before we leave the subject of Qumran and its relationship to Hebrews, several observations about the high profile of the angels in Hebrews remain. Without our denying possible connections between motifs in the NT and sectarian Judaism, it would appear that the argument from angels in Hebrews 1 and 2, rather than being a polemic against those who are preoccupied with angelic beings, is simply one component in a multilayered strategy to show the superiority of Jesus. This case for superiority is accomplished through proof texts that collectively show a fundamental ontological distinction between the Son and angelic beings who are called "sons of God" in the OT. Angels are *part of creation*, while the Son is *the mediating agent of creation*. And whereas the angels are messengers "sent forth" (*apostellō*) that "serve those who will inherit salvation" (1:14), Jesus is the "apostle" (*apostolos*) and high priest of the faith (3:1).

Having presented a case for the Son's divinity and His corresponding exaltation, the writer establishes another side of the Son, His full humanity, and this is done also in relation to the angels. In Hebrews 2 a portion of Psalm 8 is interpreted Christologically in order to comment on the paradox that finds the glorified, exalted Son taking on the form of "common man" for a brief season and made "a little lower than the angels." The Son establishes solidarity with human creatures; this solidarity is accomplished through

suffering. Saints who are perfected are brought to God by the Son, who also was “perfected” through suffering. This establishes beyond any shadow of doubt both His worthiness and His full identification with humans. The Son and “sons of glory” are joined by the common experience of suffering—a message that is meaningful for those who due to suffering and hardship perhaps consider not persevering.<sup>20</sup>

Angels are described as covenant “messengers” (cp. 2:2) who, as already noted, are “sent out” (*apostellō*) to serve those who inherit salvation (1:14). Significantly, Jesus is *the* covenant “messenger” (*apostolos*, 3:1) insofar as he is high priest who leads people to God (2:10). While the angels are exalted, even “sons” of the Most High (see, e.g., Job 1:6 and Ps 89:6), they pale in comparison to “the Son.” In Hebrews 1 and 2, the angels do not lack glory; rather, they possess an inherent glory due to their station. And yet that glory pales when held in contrast to that of the Son, who “is the radiance of [divine] glory” and the “exact representation of his being” (1:3).

The Son’s superiority to the angels is predicated on His agency in creation (1:2), His preexistence and union with God, (1:3) as well as His purification of the sins of humankind (1:3). Significantly, it is the latter aspect that forms the heart of the epistle. The Son’s purification of “many sons” resulted in His glorification (corresponding to His “ascension”) and enthronement by God (1:4,13–14; 2:8 [implied in 1:8]). For this reason the writer announces that the Son inherited a name that is “superior to theirs [the angels’]” (1:4). Jesus is superior as mediator of the new covenant, and this means that He is superior to those servants of the Almighty who, in other ways and in times past, mediated God’s covenant with humankind (1:1,14; 2:2).

The point to be made is this: the purpose of the initial comparison to angels is not a humbling or lowering of the angels; it is, rather, an exalting of the Son. In support of this perspective, Jesus is said to have been “made a little lower than the angels” (2:9)—a statement that would be counterproductive in any argument designed for Qumran sectaries. In the end the angels constitute one of several building blocks in the writer’s argument, each of which enhances *continuity and comparison*. Jesus is superior to the angels

<sup>20</sup> For an excellent overview of the role that angels play in the Christology of the NT, see S. F. Noll, “Angels, Heavenly Beings, Angel Christology,” in *DLNT*, 44–48.

(chaps. 1 and 2), to Moses (chaps. 3 and 4), to the Levitical priesthood (chaps. 4 and 5), to the “high priesthood” of the enigmatic Melchizedek (chap. 7),<sup>21</sup> and to the entire sacrificial order of the old covenant (chaps. 8–10). This cumulative case for superiority should evoke a response of faithfulness in the reader that is *commensurate with* Christ’s superiority. The theological “architecture” being employed in Hebrews 1 and 2 is not designed to inhibit people who are considering a return to Judaism.<sup>22</sup> Rather, it more plausibly mirrors an audience that fails to honor, or grasp, adequately the Son’s example.

To the present, various elements in the Qumran perspective on Hebrews continue to maintain an attractiveness, engendering speculation among its proponents even decades after the discoveries at Qumran. A helpful response to and partial refutation of this line of thinking has come from the writings of F. F. Bruce.<sup>23</sup> Bruce readily acknowledges touchpoints between theological categories and images employed at Qumran and those found in Hebrews. At the same time he argues that the Qumran community was only one of multiple Jewish groups representing broader Judaism. For example, Josephus speaks of other groups found in the Diaspora, away from Judea, which practiced baptisms (cp. Heb 6:2) and ritual cleansing.<sup>24</sup> The implication is that such individuals were “Hellenists,” perhaps a mixture of former Jews and Gentiles, whose knowledge of the OT and Israel’s traditions was substantial when not firsthand (as it would have been in Jerusalem).<sup>25</sup>

Several additional factors inform our profile of the recipients, and thus the epistle’s destination. If the epistle was addressed only to Jews or Jewish Christians, why were important Pauline concepts and watchwords such as fulfillment, justification, circumci-

<sup>21</sup> The purpose of the Melchizedek “midrash” in Hebrews 7 has more to do with underscoring *the basis of priesthood* than with emphasizing mysterious or divine qualities. Priesthood in chapter 7 is perpetual and antecedent; but the focus remains the character and very nature of “priesthood.”

<sup>22</sup> Thus, against the view of W. J. Webb, “Suffering,” in *DLNT*, 1139, and others.

<sup>23</sup> See esp. F. F. Bruce, *Second Thoughts on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (2nd ed.; London: Paternoster, 1961); idem., “‘To the Hebrews’ or ‘To the Essenes,’” *NTS* 9 (1963): 217–32; idem., *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990 [1964]), 7–9; and idem., “The Kerygma of Hebrews,” *Int* 23 (1969): 3–19.

<sup>24</sup> Josephus *Ant.* 18.19.

<sup>25</sup> In favor of an interpretation that Hebrews is addressed to a homogenous and not mixed group is Eusebius’ observation that, until AD 70, the church at Jerusalem was “fully composed of Hebrews” (*Hist. eccl.* 4.5).

sion, the cross and the gospel wholly absent from the epistle?<sup>26</sup> The central Pauline burden of works-righteousness and legalism does not enter into the argument of Hebrews, in sharp contrast to Romans and Galatians.<sup>27</sup> The unique literary character of the epistle (see below), with its polished Greek and notable rhetorical flourish, as well as the absence of any allusion to the temple (which we would expect to be included were Hebrews addressed to readers in Judea before AD 70) also bear in significant ways upon our interpretation.

And if in fact the recipients have learned about the OT on a secondhand basis (2:3), and if they represent a mixture of former Jews and Gentiles (given the absence of Jews-versus-Gentiles argumentation in the letter, as contrasted with Romans or Galatians), then a metropolitan setting away from Judea is quite possible. Some commentators have suggested Ephesus, Antioch, Alexandria, and Rome as likely destinations. The writer's allusion to "those from Italy" (13:24) and Clement of Rome's (late first century) acquaintance with the letter would certainly make Rome a plausible option, even when we are resigned to uncertainty.<sup>28</sup>

The statement in 2:3 that the gospel had been "confirmed" among the recipients by eyewitnesses of the Lord, i.e., apostles, is highly suggestive. Unlike the apostle Paul, the writer does not claim direct revelation from the Lord as an eyewitness, suggesting distance both in time and geography to Christian beginnings. Additionally, mention in 6:10 of the readers' assisting the needy might be interpreted as a hint that the readers were not from the Palestinian region, since in Acts the latter are depicted as poverty-stricken and recipients of aid from other churches (Acts 11:27–30; Rom 15:26; 1 Cor 8–9).<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> A sole reference to the cross in Hebrews 12:2 is the one exception, and here the emphasis is not atonement or propitiation but *endurance*. The Christian endures because Jesus the model endured.

<sup>27</sup> All references to the "law" in Hebrews are nonpolemical and occur in a context wholly different from Romans and Galatians.

<sup>28</sup> Acts 2:10 indicates that "both Jews and converts to Judaism" were in Rome. However, see n. 26. F. F. Bruce believes that the letter's profile points to Rome as the destination. He writes that "there is little doubt in my mind that the Epistle to the Hebrews was written to a Jewish-Christian group in Rome in the sixties of the first century." "The new evidence," according to Bruce, "confirms the impression already formed by a comparison of certain allusions in this epistle—e.g. the 'instruction about ablutions' in Hebrews 6:2—with indications that the Jewish substratum of early Roman Christianity had affinities with some of the 'baptist' movements of Palestinian Judaism" (*Second Thoughts on the Dead Sea Scrolls* [4th ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972], 150–51).

<sup>29</sup> This observation has been made by T. D. Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*, 2d. ed (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 499.

Dating Hebrews is also informed by how we interpret references to “hardship,” “suffering,” and “persecution” in Hebrews (e.g., 10:32–33; 11:32–38; 12:7; 13:13). How should we understand the writer’s statement that “you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood” (12:4)? Is it to be taken literally, as most commentators do, or figuratively? If it is meant literally, then Jerusalem and Judea would be ruled out as a possible destination. Such would also place the letter before the persecution under Nero in the mid 60s, assuming in light of the reference to Timothy (13:23) an earlier (i.e., Neronian) rather than later (Domitian)<sup>30</sup> wave of persecution.<sup>31</sup> If one assumes an earlier wave (i.e., Neronian.), this would rule out Jerusalem and Judea.<sup>32</sup>

The closing allusion to “those from Italy” (13:24) suggests to numerous commentators that native Italians were sending greetings back home. This congregation may well have been a house church, given the language of “household” and “house” in the letter (3:3–6; 8:8,10; 10:21). Given the uncertainty and lack of precision surrounding the question of destination, establishing a date for the epistle is difficult. There are good reasons, however, for assuming that it was written before AD 70. An important internal marker is the allusion to Timothy (13:23), assuming that this “Timothy” is the ministry companion of Paul. A further consideration is the reference to and development of the tabernacle, not the temple, as a type. Were the temple not yet destroyed, it would be reasonable to expect references to it in the writer’s description of ritual sacrifice and the priesthood.

Finally, the use of Hebrews by Clement of Rome, as already noted, requires a dating that is prior. Thus, any time between AD 60

<sup>30</sup> AD 81–96.

<sup>31</sup> W. L. Lane (*Call to Commitment: Responding to the Message of Hebrews* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985], 22) ventures the following as background to Hebrews: “The writer prepared his sermon for some of the Jewish Christians who had shared the expulsion from Rome with Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:1–2). They had firsthand experience of the cost of discipleship. . . . Now, however, it is about fifteen years later.” G. H. Guthrie (*Hebrews*, NIVAC [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998], 20) conjectures: “A potential danger to this community seems to lie in the temptation to reject Christianity and return to Judaism proper.” What is not clear is why persecution would drive one to *Judaism*, unless, of course, Jewish religion retains a conspicuous “protected” status in the empire. The writer’s complaint, moreover, that his readers should have been mature (5:12) does not speak to the issue of “a return to Jewish faith” or a Judaizing tendency. Guthrie rightly notes, however, that “the exact mix of Jews and Gentiles in this church must remain a mystery” (*ibid.*).

<sup>32</sup> If one assumes that genuine persecution is implied, then earlier ill treatment may have been a result of the Claudius edict that resulted in Jews (and Jewish Christians) being expelled from Rome (cp. Acts 18:2).

and 95 is plausible, assuming the date of AD 96 that is typically assigned *1 Clement*. Given the uncertainty and lack of precision surrounding the question of destination, establishing a date for the epistle remains imprecise and open to conjecture.

## Important Themes and Subthemes

1. *Faith* (2:17; 3:2,5,6; 4:2,3,14; 6:1; 10:22,23,38; 11:1–39; 12:2; 13:7). In Hebrews faith possesses a distinctively ethical quality. Faith, to the writer, is a response of faithfully persevering through hardship. This persevering faith is rooted in hope and promise and, thus, in the trustworthiness of God’s character. God’s promises are guaranteed, but our response is not. The enduring and qualitative nature of faith, therefore, is important to grasp (chap. 11), notably, its verification, its certainty, its relationship to unseen reality, and its object. The qualitative nature of faith is so important to grasp that the extended catalog of the faithful is strategic to the letter’s argument. All of the individuals commended had to struggle; all were faced with insurmountable obstacles. The “genealogy of belief” that is recorded in Hebrews 11 is a necessary and rhetorically effective counterpart to the genealogy of disbelief in 3:7–11.

The allusions to Abraham in the letter are fourfold and, therefore, highly illustrative. The name of Abraham first occurs in the context of identification. The Son demonstrates solidarity with “the children of Abraham” for the purpose of atonement. Why Abraham? Perhaps the second allusion serves to clarify. In 6:13–20 the idea of promise is central. God had promised “many descendants” (6:14; cp. Gen 12). Therefore, the “binding of Isaac” (cp. Gen 22) represented for Abraham a supreme test. But “after waiting patiently,” Abraham “received what was promised” (6:15). The point of the example is patient endurance based on the trustworthiness of God’s Word and God’s character. God binds Himself by an “oath” (6:16–18); in the words of the psalmist, “He remembered his holy promise given to his servant Abraham” (Ps 105:42). Thus, Abraham represents a model of faithful perseverance. The readers should be encouraged that they will receive what God has in fact promised.

The third allusion to Abraham occurs in the wider argument of priesthood; Jesus’ priesthood is superior to the Levitical shadow, a priesthood that has antecedent action in the figure of Melchizedek.

Because the Levitical priests tithed (Num 18:26–28; Neh 10:38–39; cp. also Josephus *Ant.* 20.9.2,8) and because Abraham represents the Levites through patriarchy, the writer of Hebrews observes that Levi actually tithed to Melchizedek, who, viewed in this light, becomes the greater.

The fourth allusion to Abraham occurs in the catalog of the faithful, recorded in chapter 11. Of all the paradigms listed, Abraham receives the most extensive treatment and, thus, is exemplary. He obeyed God's call "and went" (11:8), an action that certainly was not easy since he "did not know where he was going." He made this unknown realm his home like an "alien in a strange land" and "living in tents"—a description of "not belonging" with which the readers surely can identify. Nevertheless, he kept pressing toward an ultimate goal.

Moreover, Abraham trusted God for a son, even when, naturally speaking (being "as good as dead"), this seemed utterly impossible. The result? Descendants as numerous as the sand of the sea, and this from the one son whom Abraham was asked to offer back to God as a sacrifice (11:17–19). The tradition of the "binding of Isaac" fascinated Jewish imagination, as evidenced by Jewish extrabiblical literature, in which the tradition developed a life of its own.<sup>33</sup> Abraham is thus a paradigm of faithful obedience in wider Jewish tradition, and the presence of the Isaac tradition suggests that the writer of Hebrews was influenced by this tradition.<sup>34</sup>

Faith, then, in Hebrews, is *being faithful*, and faithfulness is demonstrated in the context of testing and adversity. Faith is active, world engaging, and at times world countering. It is, quite simply, a commitment to *please God* through what one does (10:38; 11:5,6; 13:21), a commitment that often will entail hostility from the world. The writer's concern for faithfulness on the part of his readers, emphasizing the *human response* rather than divine impartation, stands in notable contrast to the Pauline accent on faith as a divine gift, independent of human activity.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> See, e.g., Sir 44:20; Jub. 17:15–18:19; 1 Macc. 2:52; 4 Macc. 7:11–14; 13:12; 16:18–20; Philo, *Abr.* 167–297; Josephus, *Ant.* 1.13.1–4; 18.5; 23:8; 32:1–4; and 40:2–3.

<sup>34</sup> Thus, N. Calvert-Koyzis, "Abraham," in *DLNT*, 2–4. Calvert-Koyzis sees in the concluding admonition toward hospitality (13:1–2) a veiled allusion to Abraham, given the implicit grace of hospitality that he evidenced in the Genesis 18 narrative and the development of Abraham's hospitality as a theme in extrabiblical literature (e.g., *T. Abr.* 1:1–3; Phil, *Abr.* 107–10; and Josephus, *Ant.* 1.11.2).

<sup>35</sup> Hebrews stands closer to James in this regard. Faith cannot be divorced from works; it expresses itself in concrete ways.

2. *Witness* (1:3; 2:17; 3:5; 7:8,17; 10:2,4,11,15,28; 11:2,4 [2x],5,39; 12:1): the human part. To give witness to something is to *confess* (13:15) and *profess* (4:14) its ultimate reality. Confession and profession are verbal expressions of our highest priorities and commitments. To “confess his name” (13:15) will exact a price in this world. But with confidence, the believer confesses, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?” (13:6). Verbal declaration is powerful and carries with it significant repercussions. Confession is important to the writer (3:1; 4:14; 10:23; 11:13; 13:15).

It is difficult to identify precisely the degree of suffering, insult, and persecution (2:18; 10:32–33; 12:2,7; 13:12,13) the recipients of the letter have endured. The writer does acknowledge that as of the present they have not yet struggled “to the point of shedding blood” (12:4)—a statement that might be taken literally in the sense of martyrdom or may be intended as hyperbole. The four allusions in the letter to prison or “chains” (10:34; 11:36 [2x]; 13:3) would seem to suggest that the ordeals associated with Christian faith are not life threatening but nevertheless serious. Moreover, the catalog of the faithful in chapter 11, i.e., those who died in the faith, prepares the reader for the *martus* (witness) notion in 12:1 (cp. 11:4,35,37). The persevering witness of those who have gone before them is intended to spur the readers on to faithfulness in their own witness, regardless of where that might lead.<sup>36</sup>

3. *Hope* (3:6; 6:11,18,19; 7:19; 10:23): what draws us on. Hope is rooted in a certain confidence regarding the future and God’s ultimate salvation. “Confidence” or “confident” (used in 3:14; 4:16; 6:9; 10:19,35; 13:6) and “salvation” (1:14; 2:3,10; 6:9; 9:28; 10:39) are key words in Hebrews. The reason for confidence, of course, is a deeper awareness of particular promises (6:12,13,15; 10:23; 11:9[2x],11,13,17,33; 12:26),<sup>37</sup> coupled with an assurance of an “inheritance” (*klēronomia*: 1:14; 9:15; 11:7,8) and the giver’s

<sup>36</sup> Lea and Black (*The New Testament: Its Background and Message*, 507) write, “The author of Hebrews was not dealing primarily with the question of the endurance of believers in their faith. He was dealing with the lifestyle of his readers. . . . If they turned from Christ, they would not find salvation anywhere else. He did not feel, however, that they would prove to be apostates.” It is supremely difficult to draw the line between “lifestyle” and “endurance in the faith,” as Lea attempts. Apostasy is a turning aside, a lapse, a decision not to persevere, and such is precisely what burdens the writer. On the other hand, what are the theological implications of apostasy represents a separate matter, one which Hebrews does not address.

<sup>37</sup> Appearing 14 times in noun form and 4 as a verb, “promise” is something of a catchword in Hebrews.

oath of integrity (3:11; 6:13,17; 7:21,22). Hope, then, is not wishful thinking; it issues out of, and is anchored in, the very nature of God Himself.

The eschatological element is strong in the letter, as evidenced by the emphasis laid on the believer's "inheritance," yet it has a distinctly ethical twist. On the one hand, entrance into a future kingdom (10:35–37) is guaranteed; at the same time, one must persevere (10:36). In Hebrews, Christ both fulfills the promise, salvifically, and guarantees its realization, eschatologically, over time. For this reason the writer of Hebrews develops the notions of swearing (3:11,18; 4:3; 6:13,16; 7:21) and oath confirmation (6:16–20; 7:18–28) as well as covenant in a manner without parallel in the NT.<sup>38</sup> The notion of covenant, *diathēkē*, is based on promise or guarantee and is to be understood as a "divine, legal arrangement."<sup>39</sup> Literally everything depends on the trustworthiness of this arrangement. Therefore, the "gospel" is more than divine goodwill or good intentions. It contains a guarantee; that is to say, it is statutory in nature.

4. *Sin and apostasy* (1:3; 2:17; 3:13; 5:1,3; 7:27; 8:12; 9:15,28; 10:4,6,8,11,12,17,18,26 [2x]; 11:25; 12:4; 13:11). Believers have been "cleansed once for all" from sin (10:2). The frequency of the expression "once for all" in Hebrews (6:4; 9:7,26,27,28; 10:2; 12:26,27) is deliberate and carries enormous implications for one's understanding of the finality of Christ's purging and purification of sin. Sin has attractive power (implied in 11:25 through the example of Moses, who resisted the "pleasures of sin for a short time"). Sin as expressed through not obeying or disobedience (*apeitheia*) and hardness of heart (the concern in 3:7–4:13; esp. 3:13,15; 4:7) must be taken seriously; hence, the firm, multiple warnings there and elsewhere in the letter. Just as true faith expresses itself in endurance and obedience (5:8), so unbelief expresses itself in not persevering (4:6), a chief concern of the writer.

The context in which sin is understood and portrayed in Hebrews is not its universality or pervasiveness or the "original" Adamic nature. Rather, the emphasis of the writer is that sin expresses volition; it is an act of human yielding, a decision. In Hebrews, sin

<sup>38</sup> Half of all allusions to *diathēkē*, "covenant," occur in Hebrews (7:22; 8:6,8,9 [2x],10; 9:4 [2x],15 [2x],16,17,20; 10:16,29; 12:24; 13:20).

<sup>39</sup> Ernst Käsemann, *The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Letter to the Hebrews* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 30.

is first and foremost *apostasy*, for that is how the writer understands disobedience. Some in the early church believed the letter to address the problem of postbaptismal apostasy. Do the texts of Hebrews 6:4–6 and 10:26–31, 35–39 teach the possibility of rejecting grace, of losing a salvation they had possessed? Is the warning theoretical or practical? Rhetorical or real? Any answer to this question turns in part on how we understand the writer’s vocabulary: sin is depicted in the letter as yielding to “temptation” (3:7–9; 4:15; 12:4; cp. 2:18), “turning away” (3:12; 6:6), “falling” (4:11), “going astray” (5:2), “drifting away” (2:1), “hardening the heart” (3:7, 12, 13; 4:7), “rebellious” (3:16), “falling short” (4:1), “falling away” (6:6), “throwing away” (10:35), and “shrinking back” (10:38, 39). All of these underscore for the readers the volitional aspect.<sup>40</sup>

To yield to temptation, to harden one’s heart, to sin and disobey, and to turn away and depart is to be ashamed of Christ; thus, the strategic counter by the writer that neither Christ (2:11–12; 12:2), nor God Himself (11:16), nor people of faith (11:4–40) were “ashamed” of identification. Our example is He who was “tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin” (4:15; cp. 2:18), for Christ bore our “disgrace” (13:13) by suffering (13:12) and enduring the cross (12:2). For this reason the writer of Hebrews sets forth a case for the incomparability of Christ.

What is then left for the readers? The writer admonishes his readers toward repentance (6:1, 6), remembering earlier days (10:32), not “ignoring” their salvation (2:2), not hardening their hearts (3:7–4:11), encouraging one another daily (3:13), and holding fast their confession (3:1; 10:23; 13:15). Repentance on their part will entail remembering “those earlier days after you had received the light” (10:32) and throwing “off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles” (12:1). All other admonitions in the letter—and they are many—are alternative ways of describing this about-face—e.g., paying “more careful attention” (2:1), fixing “your thoughts on Jesus” (3:1), encouraging “one another”

<sup>40</sup> A similar argument is presented in the brief yet rhetorically sophisticated Epistle of Jude. Therein the readers are warned to “contend for the faith” against those who would worm their way in and pervert “the grace of our God” and “deny our only master” (vv. 3, 4). Numerous historical examples, stereotypical of apostasy in Jewish tradition, are presented to illustrate the seriousness of this perversion of the faith and denying the Master: unbelieving Israel, the fallen angels, Sodom and Gomorrah, Cain, Balaam, and Korah (vv. 5–7, 11).

(3:13), entering into rest (4:11), holding to our profession of faith (4:14), and the cluster of admonitions recorded in 12:19–25.

A major factor in this turn-around in attitude is suggested by the writer of Hebrews: What will we actually *fear*? Will a person in the end be motivated by the *fear of man* (11:24–27) or the *fear of God*, a God who *requires* fear (3:10–11, 16–18; 6:4–6; 10:26–31; 12:18–21, 23, 25–29)? The past models of faith clearly demonstrate the difference. With confidence the believer confesses, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?” (13:6).

While the writer of Hebrews does not develop a “theology of apostasy,” his warnings are somber in tone. If the readers do not repent, if they “deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth,” then “no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (10:26–27). Indeed, Hebrews would seem to teach that a person may go so far in apostasy that God refuses him the opportunity of repentance.<sup>41</sup> Curiously, Esau is mentioned later in the epistle as the one who sold yet sought to repossess his birthright. The writer notes that he was “rejected” and found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears (12:16–17). A precedent for judgment is present. A warning against hard-heartedness follows (12:25–29).

The warning passages in the epistle (2:1–4; 6:4–8; 10:26–31; 12:25–29) at first glance seem to teach the possibility of apostasy in the Christian life,<sup>42</sup> but they actually warn believers to persevere in faithfulness. If the ones being addressed do not persevere, then they can expect judgment. They were merely professors of the faith and not possessors; for the mark of a believer is perseverance. Though some who profess Christ may choose not to persevere, the believer in Jesus really cannot help but do so. Not surprisingly, particular interpretations of these warning passages informed the early church’s teaching regarding repentance, forgiveness, and restoration for those who had left Christian fellowship.

<sup>41</sup> Thus I. H. Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1969), 147.

<sup>42</sup> Along these lines, several factors would seem to militate against a “hypothetical” reading of these warning verses in Hebrews—among these: (1) the writer’s warning of the readers several times throughout the epistle, and (2) the very language used—“restoring again to repentance,” former “enlightenment,” “tasting the heavenly gift,” “tasting the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come,” “being partakers of the Holy Spirit,” and “falling away.”

Given the argument of “superiority” that unfolds throughout the epistle, the question arises as to how the “warning passages” fit within the broader argument. For the writer of Hebrews, perseverance and salvation are both past and future oriented. There exists simultaneously a finality about what God has said and done and the human need to persist in faithfulness. Pilgrims are never too comfortable in this world if indeed they are motivated by unseen realities. Each of the warnings is addressed to professing Christians. The implication is that one can choose not to obey and persevere. Lapse is a moral decision, a commitment of the will. Further, the tone of the writer suggests that lapse is not merely hypothetical; it is a possibility. A difficult question emerges: In the case of apostasy and willful disobedience, does God retain the prerogative not to grant repentance? Can a person’s heart be hardened to the extent that repentance is foreclosed?

We may state, briefly, what is clear from Scripture and from Hebrews. Humans are volitional beings and possess the ability to disobey and reject truth. Indeed, the OT is filled with such examples. Judgment ultimately awaits such a disposition. Although the writer of Hebrews does not state *at what point* a person has removed himself from the truth, he is clear that the possibility is to be avoided. Significantly, the overarching trajectory of Hebrews is positive, not negative. The writer is at pains to build a case not for the judgment of God but the superiority of God’s Son. The readers are simply called to live in that light.

There is no language or argument in Hebrews to the effect that people are predestined to sin or to faithfulness. It is a conscious decision that must be made and continually embraced. Temptation is an ever-present reality, but Christians have a pioneer and champion, who was tempted in all ways just as they are. As such, Jesus perfects faith. There is no legitimate reason people must fall away, even under hardship. God has provided richly for their salvation.<sup>43</sup> Their call is a call to persevere.<sup>44</sup>

5. *Endurance and perseverance* (3:13;4:11;10:23,24,32,36; 11:27; 12:1,2,3,7). The strong emphasis in the letter on sin and turning away produces the necessity of building a strong case for persevering.

<sup>43</sup> See the perspective of I. H. Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1969), 137–57.

<sup>44</sup> The notions of election and predestination do not play any significant role in the argument of Hebrews. Rather, Christ’s example in the midst of suffering and His glory are sufficient to motivate the readers. Jesus is pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

As in James, 1 Peter, and Revelation, in Hebrews the world is understood to be a place of testing, hardship, and temptation. The goal of such testing is to persevere, to endure, as any good soldier or athlete. Having passed the test of the present life, one looks to a final day of judgment (10:27; 12:25–29), at which time the faithful and the faithless receive their respective reward. To stress perseverance is to stress the human side of hope, to be goal oriented in a manner that alters our perspective of the present. It is an expression of hope and promise and reflects one's commitment to lay hold of the goal. Perseverance lays hold of the future reward already in the present.

In James, perseverance is a mark—a necessary mark—of maturity (Jas 1:2–12). A similar association can be detected in Hebrews, to the extent that the readers should have progressed further in their faith than they have (5:11–14). Unlike James, the writer of Hebrews seeks to call forth faithfulness by emphasizing the superiority of the author and perfecter of faith. Hardship can be endured because Jesus, the champion of faith, endured suffering—suffering to the point of death—on our behalf.

Authentic faith, the letter of Hebrews reminds its readers, expresses itself in the ability to endure and persevere. Perhaps weary of their sojourn as aliens and strangers (11:13), they are reminded of Christ's example, as well as numerous models of faithfulness from the past (11:4–40). The model of the Son's suffering and endurance for the sake of humanity is a linchpin in the writer's broader argument; hence, it is a recurring theme (2:5–18; 4:15–16; 5:7–9; 7:26–28; 9:15,26–28; 10:10). The Son traveled the same road as the weary pilgrims to whom the letter is addressed. Because he did not abandon it, they are not to abandon it as well. The Son's persistence in enduring His sojourn should spur the sons of creation to endure as well.

Given the place of perseverance in the letter, the writer's emphasis on entering into "rest" is noteworthy. Rest in chapters 3 and 4 has a past as well as a present and a future character. In contrast to Israel's failure to enter rest as a result of its wilderness wandering, Christians are admonished to enter a rest that is anticipated by the promised land of Canaan. One *struggles* to enter *rest*; clearly, the relationship is paradoxical. While there is a future aspect to this entrance, the warnings of the letter indicate that a vital part of rest lies in the present if only the readers will *choose* to possess it by persevering.

The ethics of Hebrews, self-described as a “word of exhortation” (13:22), is an ethics of perseverance. The problem is not knowledge; it is rather a matter of the will. Will the readers find the fortitude to do what is known to be right? Or will disobedience (2:1), spiritual dullness (5:11), immaturity (5:12–14), and weariness (12:4) prevail over conscience? Those to whom the letter is addressed are exhorted, “Do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased” (13:16).

6. *Conflict, suffering, and death* (2:9,10,14,18 [2x]; 5:8; 6:1; 9:14,15,16,17,26,27; 10:32,33; 11:19,32–38; 12:4,7; 13:12,13): distinguishing faith from the world. Unlike other parts of the NT, there is no emphasis in Hebrews on Satan, spiritual warfare, demons, and the like in order to account for the struggle. Rather, this struggle is depicted in utterly human terms. To this end the writer uses the language and imagery of the *agōn*, the struggle (“the race” in 12:1): “Therefore . . . let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” The position taken in this volume is that the suffering being addressed in Hebrews should be understood against the background of the recipients’ willingness to stand and be a witness for Christ, not their “pain related to the departure from Judaism.”<sup>45</sup> The hardship that the readers should endure is made bearable by two important elements in the writer’s argument: (1) Jesus’ willingness to suffer on our behalf and (2) the reality of the Son’s glorification and enthronement, both of which are united in the exhortation found in 12:2.

7. *Wandering* (3:7–4:11). Israel’s 40 years is a type or foreshadow of the experience of the Christian community. Indeed, the parallels between the old and new covenant communities pervade much of the epistle. And one of the features common to many of the heroes of faith (chap. 11) is that they were wandering, seeking another city, journeying forward by faith as pilgrims, whose vision transcended this world. As with Israel in the wilderness, so it is with the new covenant community as it journeys in the present life. Believers are “aliens and strangers” (11:13). Theirs is a pilgrimage fraught with promise and peril.

<sup>45</sup> *Contra* W. J. Webb, “Suffering,” in *DLNT*, 1139. Furthermore, the language with which the writer calls his readers to endure suffering and hardship expresses itself in terms of *hupomenō* and not *hupopherō*, the latter term being a stronger term, often associated with deep suffering and grief (e.g., 1 Cor 10:13; 2 Tim 3:1; and 1 Pet 2:19).

Wandering is not the end of the story, however. The writer of Hebrews presents as an ultimate goal Zion, the holy city. But it is a Zion that is distinctly transformed (12:22). This heavenly city, whose “architect and builder is God” (11:10), is a city that “cannot be shaken” (12:28).

8. *Covenant* (7:22; 8:6,7,8,9,10,13; 9:1,4,15,18,20; 10:16; 12:24; 13:20). Covenant expresses itself in two ways in Hebrews: similarity (continuity) and difference (discontinuity). Similarity is evidenced, for example, in the writer’s use of type and antitype between Israel and the church; both have been the chosen people of God (4:9; 11:25). Difference is demonstrated, for example, in the superiority of the new covenant that has been mediated by Jesus (implicitly and explicitly in chaps. 1, 8, 9, and 10). The new covenant is “better” because it is abiding; it lasts forever (5:6; 7:17,21,24,28; 9:12,14; 13:20). We should keep in mind the standard ratification of any binding covenant to the ancient mind, whether that covenant is human or divine: blood. In Hebrews blood is both purificatory and ratifying.

9. *Blood and cultic cleansing* (1:3; 2:14,17; 3:1; 5:1–10; 6:19–10:18; 12:24; 13:11–16,20). Absent from Hebrews is the standard theology of the cross that we find developed in the Pauline epistles. Here, rather, the reader encounters OT cultic and sacrificial language and imagery to highlight the work of Christ. The writer’s statement, “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (9:22), constitutes the basis of much of his argument. The blood of Christ is qualitatively different from that of animal sacrifices (9:12–14; 10:5–10); it is a once-for-all sacrifice that is eternally efficacious. It is also a sacrifice that purges the conscience (9:14; 10:11–14,22).

Significantly, mention of “purifications for sins” is almost immediate (1:3) in the letter while the notion of “purification” occurs elsewhere as well (9:23; 10:22). Christ as sin-bearer surfaces in 9:26,28; 10:4,11. Hebrews emphasizes not only the finished work of Christ on the cross but the *process* of purification as well. The cross, as one writer notes, “is the climax of a process of sacrifice that embraces the whole incarnation of the Son, through which he unites Himself to flesh and blood, so that he might then

truly represent us as our high priest in offering Himself for us and entering the presence of God.”<sup>46</sup>

10. **Sonship** (1:2,3,5,8; 2:6,10,13,14; 4:14; 5:5,8; 6:6; 7:3,28; 10:29; 11:24; 12:5,6,7,8). Sonship, the principal theme of chapter 1, is an important motif throughout the letter. Sonship bespeaks relationship and essential identity. God Himself bestows the title on Jesus, with the significance that the Son is the content or substance of the divine “inheritance.” He has been “appointed heir of all things,” and “through whom he made the universe.” The Son is the “exact representation” of God. In sitting down at the right hand, the Son “inherited a name superior” to that of the angels; hence, the ascension gives Jesus His exalted rank and glory. But sonship as a title of honor is also predicated on His sacrifice. As a result of this, He became the *archēgos*,<sup>47</sup> i.e., the author or captain of our salvation (2:10), the “author and perfecter of our faith” (12:2), and thus, an eternal “high priest” (5:4–5) for all.<sup>48</sup> Such eulogy as we find in Hebrews agrees with Philippians 2:5–11—*kenōsis* leading to exaltation—and Revelation 5 (the Lamb-Lion’s worthiness, based on sacrifice).

The emphasis in Hebrews 1 is not incarnation but enthronement based on sacrifice. Jesus’ greatness and glory require comparison in order to be fathomed and appreciated. Of interest: angels are also described as sons. Assumed: their rank is high, yet in comparison they are inferior. The revelation of the Son occurs throughout. The Son is “now crowned with glory and honor.” Why? “Because he suffered” and experienced death “for everyone” (2:9).

11. **Completion and perfection.** The term *teleioun*, found 23 times in the NT, occurs nine times in Hebrews (2:10; 5:9; 7:19,28; 9:9; 10:1,14; 11:40; 12:23),<sup>49</sup> suggesting an important emphasis. “Perfection” in Hebrews has both theological and ethical significance. How do we understand Jesus’ completion? Not in an ethical sense of the Son of God but rather in the context of salvation history. Jesus is the mediator of salvation and thus “completes” or “fulfills” the purposes of God through His eternal sacrifice. As the “Son,” He leads the way for many “sons,” or in the words of Otto Michel, He establishes “the right relationship of humankind

<sup>46</sup> S. Motyer, “The Theology of the Cross,” in *DLNT*, 261.

<sup>47</sup> The *archēgos*, in contemporary parlance, was the guardian of a city, and thus, the hero (Gerhard Dellling, *archēgos*, *TDNT*, 1:487).

<sup>48</sup> Jesus is also our “apostle” and high priest (3:1).

<sup>49</sup> The noun form, *teleiōtēs*, occurs in 6:1.

to God.”<sup>50</sup> Moreover, Jesus’ completion (5:9; 7:28) is in regard to His glorification, not His ethical development. Jesus’ “perfecting,” therefore, stands in relationship to His many “sons” who need to be perfected, many of which are resisting this process; hence, the purpose of the letter.

For this reason the author describes his readers as “slow to learn” (5:11) and infantile (5:13), in need of relearning elementary truths (5:12), which is to say, “milk, not solid food.” Maturity is the stated goal (5:14), which, it is suggested, the readers have not attained. Perfection in Hebrews is an earthly process that has heavenly implications. Jesus, the captain of our salvation, is the model in this regard: He submitted Himself to suffering, shame, and disgrace, and as such was exalted at the right hand of God the Father. As mediator of salvation, Christ could achieve completion only through suffering, and only in this way did He become the captain of their salvation.

Both in essence and example Jesus is captain and leader; He is “captain” in both eschatological and ethical senses. Such would appear to be the rationale behind 2:10–11; the “Son” becomes the link to the “sons.” The essence of sonship, after all, is *union*, and in the letter to the Hebrews, this means the realm of flesh and blood.<sup>51</sup> The Son, through His atoning sacrifice, leads many “sons” to glory (2:10) and is God’s emphatic and abiding declaration that sin loses its power over the community (12:1–4; 13:8,11–14).

12. *Glory and majesty* (1:3 [2x]; 2:7,10; 3:3; 5:5; 8:1; 9:5). In 1:5–2:18 we find a sustained contrast between the Son and angels in which the Son’s “superiority” and majesty and glory are proclaimed. The Son’s glory is predicated upon His relational or ontological as well as functional superiority. The latter issues out of His incarnation (having been “made a little lower than the angels”), suffering (having “suffered death so that . . . he might taste death for everyone”) and ascension/enthronement (God having “put everything under his feet”). Thus, the Son is “now crowned with glory and honor.”

<sup>50</sup> O. Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebraeer* (KEK 13; Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1936).

<sup>51</sup> It is not necessary to relegate this terminology to the gnostic dualism of spirit versus matter that was nascent in the first century and then flowered in the second, *contra* Käsemann, *The Wandering People of God*, (131–67) and others.

Why would the writer need to emphasize Christ's glory?<sup>52</sup> In Hebrews it serves the purpose of comparison. Jesus is presented as superior to all of creation, including the angels, who are exalted in their right. At the same time, as the glorious one who is "superior" fully identifies with humble creation, He is made "a little lower than the angels" as a result of condescension and suffering for our sake. It may well be that there are many in the community who have a deficient understanding of the Son—deficient in their comprehending the Son's preexistent and heavenly state (1:3,6,10,12; 7:3; 13:8) but deficient also in their estimation and appreciation of His high priestly work (1:3; 2:9–11; 3:1; 5:1–10; 7:1–10:18), and thus His role in mediating a "better" covenant (7:22; 8:6,7,8,9,10,13; 9:1,4,15,18,20; 10:16; 12:24; 13:20).

This deficiency is previewed in the letter's opening verses: the Son is the express likeness of being and glory, and the ascension bestows upon Jesus an exalted rank and glory, based on His high priestly work. In sitting down at the right hand, the Son "inherited a name superior" to that of the angels. Thus, the pastoral needs call for a literary-rhetorical strategy on the part of the writer that will emphasize the Son's essential glory as well as His functional glory—a glory that is consummated in His ascension, whereby Jesus' exalted rank and glory are confirmed.

While the atoning, priestly ministry of Christ is the primary focus of most study in Hebrews, and properly so, often overlooked is the place of the Son's ascension in the letter. And yet no other book of the NT develops the theological significance of Christ's ascension and enthronement at the right hand of the Father as this letter. Thematically, it appears as bookends in the letter, serving the important rhetorical purposes of *inclusio* at the outset (1:3) and the near-conclusion (12:2) of the writing. Exaltation and enthronement are the "completion" of the Son's saving work. At the right hand of God, the Son continually makes intercession for His own (7:26; 8:1; 10:12). By virtue of His priestly ministry as well as His enthronement, the Son is doubly worthy—an argument that has been masterfully and meticulously constructed by the writer through extensive use of the OT and Jewish tradition material.

The language of Christ's ascension and session in Hebrews is distinct from its Pauline counterpart (e.g., Eph 1:20–22; 4:8–10;

<sup>52</sup> Every reference to "glory" in Hebrews but one is linked to Jesus.

Phil 2:6–11; Col 3:1; 1 Tim 3:16). The Son's exaltation in Hebrews is foremost predicated on His atoning work on earth and His pioneering work on behalf of humanity. This work, moreover, is "completed" in the heavenly realm (4:14; 6:19–20; 9:1–28). In the unfolding of the writer's argument, Jesus' priestly office and the ascension are inextricably linked.<sup>53</sup> While it recedes somewhat, the ascension is nevertheless present throughout much of the high priestly argument. Although the Son transcends all of creation, yet He expresses full solidarity with that creation. Christ's saving work begins on earth and is completed in heaven (4:14). Jesus enters the holy place "by his own blood" and once-for-all, eternal sacrifice (9:12,24). His ascension "perfects" His redemptive work.

Clearly, given the amount of material in Hebrews devoted to Jesus' high priestly ministry, many in the community did not adequately grasp the significance of Jesus' death. His entrance into human history and His full identification with humanity, in all its suffering and disgrace, in the end refract back on Him a glory greater than even His preexistent exalted stature. Christ's session (1:3,13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2) now facilitates perpetual intercession on behalf of those He redeemed (2:18; 4:15–16; 7:25). That all things are now subjugated to Christ (2:8; 10:13) and that He "sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (12:2) should greatly encourage the readers. Just as He suffered, the Son was rewarded and glorified. As they persevere in their hardships, they, too, will receive their eternal reward.

13. *Divine speaking* (1:1–2,5,6,7,8,13; 2:3,4; 3:7,10,11,15; 4:3,4,5,7,8,12; 5:5,6,12; 6:13,17; 7:17,21,22; 8:8; 9:20; 10:5,8,9,15; 12:25,26; 13:5,7). A prominent theme in the epistle to the Hebrews is that God has spoken (and, on occasion, "testified" and "sworn"). The epistle begins, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets." This prophetic speech, however, is quickly and authoritatively overshadowed by a greater revelation: "but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son." Even in the chain of citations from the Psalms throughout chapter 1, emphasis is laid on what God "says"; on every occasion that Scripture is cited, God *speaks* or *testifies*. What God has said and what He says in the present are critically important. His word is alive, and the writer is emphatic about this point: "The word of God is living and active.

<sup>53</sup> This linkage has been aptly noted by W. J. Larkin Jr., "Ascension," in *DLNT*, 98–99.

Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (4:12).

If we learn anything from the letter, it is that *God speaks* and that *His speech is authoritative*.<sup>54</sup> In Hebrews the apex of God’s speaking is the agent of His Son, who as the preexistent Son is also the medium of creation (1:2), the “firstborn” of God (1:6; 12:23)<sup>55</sup> who leads many “sons to glory” (2:10), the antitype of Moses (3:1–6), the great and eternal high priest (4:14–5:10; 7:1–10:18).

The implications of God’s speaking are staggering yet reassuring, anchoring us in times of hardship: God does not abandon His people; His word is His pledge of abiding presence. For this reason “God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you’” (13:5).<sup>56</sup> Since God has spoken once for all, definitively through the Son, to refuse the One who has spoken is to invite the wrath of God (2:1–3; 3:7–19; 6:4–6; 10:26–31; 12:14–29). An important element in the writer’s “word of exhortation” (13:22) is *not to refuse him who speaks* (12:25).

14. *Mediation*. God has mediated revelation of Himself in a variety of ways. Indeed, this is the opening pronouncement of the letter. God has mediated Himself through the prophets, through the angels, through Moses, through the institution of the high priesthood, through Melchizedek (who antedates Israel, the priesthood, and the sacrificial system), through the sacrificial system of the old covenant, and once for all, through Jesus.

To the average contemporary reader, much in the epistle to the Hebrews is striking. Perhaps foremost is the extended role that angels play in the writer’s rhetorical strategy as well as the abundant use of typology to demonstrate the extent to which Jesus was anticipated in the old covenant. As to the function of angels as messengers or servants, William Lane believes the implications to be “startling”: we are not left defenseless in the world, for without them we could not maintain our commitment to the Son. Moreover,

<sup>54</sup> Hence, the placement of the multiple warnings against hardening of the heart (chaps. 3, 4, and 12).

<sup>55</sup> A significant amount of debate in recent years has been generated over a reputed “Logos Christology” in Hebrews that is thought to draw on the language and imagery of wisdom. As it applies to Hebrews, see J. Swetman, “Jesus as Logos in Heb 4:12–13,” *Bib* 62 (1981): 214–24, and R. Williamson, “The Incarnation of the Logos in Hebrews,” *ExpTim* 95 (1983): 4–8. For a useful summary, see P. A. Rainbow, “Logos Christology,” in *DLNT*, 665–67.

<sup>56</sup> Here the writer is citing relevant parts of Deut 31:6,8.

angels protect and provide for the people of God, regardless of our awareness.<sup>57</sup> As to the use of typology in Hebrews, an earthly pattern or type in the form of the Levitical priesthood, the tabernacle, as well as the blood sacrifices, serves as a foreshadow of the finished work of Christ. With atonement provided by Christ, whose sacrifice is perfect, no need for sacrifice remains (8:12–13; 9:25–26; 10:17–18).

It is fitting that some have called Hebrews the epistle of priesthood, for the development of Christ's ministry in terms of priestly mediation is unique to the NT. The Levitical priesthood is but a prologue to—indeed, a foreshadow of—that which is once and for all fulfilled in Christ. In fact, Melchizedek, whose priesthood antedates and in some respects foreshadows the Levitical system, already is understood by the writer to point beyond himself and beyond Aaron's line to greater redemptive history. Through its abundant use of typology, Hebrews is emphatic about the association between shadow and reality, earthly and eternal. The temporal is “only a shadow of the good things that are coming” (10:1).

## Literary Features

Hebrews has been uniformly depicted as a highly stylized midrashic homily or sermon that incorporates sophisticated rhetorical forms.<sup>58</sup> As a sermon it serves as a “response to a crisis of faith”<sup>59</sup> arising from trying circumstances in the life of the readership. The writer identifies his epistle as a “word of exhortation” (*logos tēs paraklēseos*, 13:22; implied in 12:5; cp. also Acts 13:15). Hebrews corresponds with the standard genre of the sermon as practiced in first-century Jewish and Christian contexts—the use of an authoritative text or exemplar that is followed by a subsequent conclusion and related exhortation drawn from it.<sup>60</sup> This repetitive or cyclical pattern in the sermon gives it a pronounced rhetorical effect.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>57</sup> *Call to Commitment*, 37.

<sup>58</sup> Representative is G. Zuntz, *The Text of the Epistles* (London: Black, 1953), 286.

<sup>59</sup> So Lane, *Call to Commitment*, 22, and idem, “Hebrews,” in *DLNT*, 443.

<sup>60</sup> L. Wills, “The Form of the Sermon in Hellenistic Judaism and Early Christianity,” *HTR* 77 (1984): 277–99. H. Attridge (*Hebrews* [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988]), refers to the second component as the “paraenetic interlude.”

<sup>61</sup> One might readily identify three smaller sermons—3:1–4:16; 8:1–10:25; and 11:1–12:3—within the broader structure of Hebrews. J. L. Bailey and L. D. Vander Broek (*Literary Forms in the New Testament: A Handbook* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992], 193)

While Hebrews, strictly speaking, does not closely conform to the epistolary genre, lacking any author identification, greeting, or prescript,<sup>62</sup> it does contain a postscript, closing personal greetings, and a benediction, in accordance with epistolary convention. Throughout the course of Hebrews, the document increasingly appears less as an essay or sermon and more like an epistle (e.g., 3:12; 4:1–2,14; 5:11–12; 6:9,13; 10:19–39; 12:1–13:25). These transitions indicate that Hebrews was addressed to a particular Christian community, to which the writer senses a strong pastoral commitment. However the composition of Hebrews took place, the writer’s concluding remark, “I have written you only a short letter” (13:22), may be accepted at face value.

Even to the relatively unsophisticated reader, Hebrews demonstrates a style of prose that is striking. The rhythm or cadence, the rhetorical effect of alternating paradigm and paraenesis (exhortation), and creative use of language are worthy of note and indicative of an artist. In terms of their alliterative effect and style—consider 1:1 alone as a striking example: *Polumerōs . . . polutropōs palai . . . patrasin . . . prophētais*—the very opening verses of the epistle are thought by some to be virtually unparalleled in the NT.<sup>63</sup> In addition, the images used in Hebrews, fully apart from direct allusions to the OT (i.e., Israel’s wilderness wandering, Melchizedek, the tabernacle, priesthood, the Day of Atonement, and the heroes of faith), are quite vivid and varied, derived from numerous sources. These include:

- freedom from slavery (2:15),
- stewardship of a house (3:1–6),
- the Word of God as a sword (4:12),
- fruitful and barren land (6:7–8),
- hope as an anchor that secures (6:19),
- freedom from slavery due to a ransom or purchase price (9:15),

observe that the “sermons” beginning in 3:1 and 8:1 both conclude with the words “Since then we have.”

<sup>62</sup> First John is comparable in this respect, lacking epistolary elements and yet qualifying as an epistle.

<sup>63</sup> W. Barclay writes: “This [1:1–4] is the most sonorous piece of Greek in the whole New Testament. It is a passage that any classical Greek orator would have been proud to write. The writer . . . has brought to it every artifice of word and rhythm that the beautiful and flexible Greek language could provide” (*The Letter to the Hebrews*, 1).

- viewing the distant shore from sea (11:13),
- pilgrimage (11:13),
- the gymnasium<sup>64</sup> or marathon (12:1), and
- fatherhood and sonship (12:5–11).

The list of words from classical literature that are used in Hebrews but nowhere else in the NT is lengthy. B. F. Westcott identified fifty such terms.<sup>65</sup> Further, some 85 terms from the LXX are found in Hebrews but nowhere else in the NT.<sup>66</sup> Paronomasia and alliteration occur regularly enough throughout the letter to suggest a writer who is a wordsmith—for example:

- 1:1 *Polumerōs . . . polutropōs palai . . . patrasin . . . prophētais,*
- 2:10 *di' hon ta panta kai di' hou ta panta,*
- 5:8 *emathen aph' hōn epathen,*
- 10:34 *tēn harpagēn tōn huparchontōn humōn . . . prosedexasthe . . . exein . . . kreittona uparxin*
- 10:39 *esmen upostolēs eis apōleian . . . alla pisteōs eis peripoiēsēsin psuchēs.*

Such striking usage of language indicates a writer of considerable linguistic and rhetorical skill. At the same time it suggests a readership that is more than likely in a Greek-speaking environment (as opposed to Judea, for example).<sup>67</sup>

The writer's choice of citations gives the impression that he may have been aware of particular catechetical traditions with Christological significance that had been handed down.<sup>68</sup> Hebrews 1 alone, for example, which contains eight connections to the OT in a span of merely 14 verses (Pss 110:1; 2:7; 2 Sam 7:14; Deut

<sup>64</sup> To depict the need to persevere, in 12:1 the writer uses the word “struggle,” *agōn*, which in the athletic context often refers to a wrestling match.

<sup>65</sup> B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1909), xlv.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> This contrasts with the Epistle of Jude, which due to its language, imagery, and use of Jewish traditional material more than likely is addressed to Jewish Christians in or around Palestine. See J. D. Charles, *Literary Strategy in the Epistle of Jude* (Scranton/London/Toronto: University of Scranton Press/Associated University Presses, 1993), chapter 3 (“The Epistle of Jude in Its Palestinian Milieu”).

<sup>68</sup> To make as strong a case as E. Käsemann, that the writer of Hebrews was aware of and using particular catechetical and liturgical traditions (*The Wandering People of God*, 168), is speculative and requires more than the text permits.

32:43; Ps 104:4; 45:5–7; 102:25–27; and again 110:1), allows for (but does not require) this association.

A precise quantifying of OT references in Hebrews eludes us since the writer combines direct citations and fragmentary citations with general allusions, reminiscences, familiar phraseology, and use of extrabiblical traditions. The bulk of the OT material cited by the writer comes from the Pentateuch and the Psalms. Significantly, the writer frequently frames his citations in terms of God speaking and not with the typical Pauline formula “it is written”; 23 of his citations have God as the speaker.<sup>69</sup>

Following the rather dramatic, when abrupt, opening declaration of the Son as God’s definitive revelation, the writer builds a comparative case for the Son’s superior glory by means of a catena or chain of OT citations and partial citations. This technique entails stringing together statements from Ps 2:7; 2 Sam 7:14; Deut 32:43; Ps 96:7 (LXX); Ps 103:4 (LXX); Ps 44:7–8 (LXX); and Ps 101:26–28 (LXX). What serves to unite these varied quotations is the use of particular catchwords—for example, “son,” “angel,” or “glory.” This literary feature has the rhetorical effect of amplifying the comparison intended.<sup>70</sup>

An effective rhetorical device used in Hebrews is the ethical catalog. It is used in its normal, abbreviated form in 7:26 and in an expanded form in chapter 11, where moral paradigms are showcased for the reader’s consideration.<sup>71</sup> The recording of ethical lists was a salient feature of moral-philosophical discourse in Hellenistic culture and later in Hellenistic-Jewish literature. Extending from the Homeric era, the ethical list comes into full bloom in the teaching of the Stoics. Rhetorically speaking, the ethical list has an epideictic function. That is, it is intended to instill praise or shame in the hearer or listener. Vice and virtue lists were an effective teaching

<sup>69</sup> See the helpful overview by G. H. Guthrie, “The Old Testament in Hebrews,” in *DLNT*, 841–50.

<sup>70</sup> G. H. Guthrie analyzes Hebrews on the basis of the relationship between linguistic elements in the letter and the contextual flow of the argument. See his volume *The Structure of Hebrews: A Text-Linguistic Analysis* (NovTSup 73; Leiden: Brill, 1994), as well as his essay “Discourse Analysis,” in D. A. Black and D. S. Dockery, eds., *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Method and Issues* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 253–71.

<sup>71</sup> B. L. Mack (*Rhetoric in the New Testament* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990], 73–77) classifies Heb 11:1–12:3 as an encomium. Whether we view this material as an extended virtue catalog or an encomium, both literary genres belong to the same broader family; they are rhetorical devices aimed at instilling praise.

tool among Stoics,<sup>72</sup> and early Christian writers, understandably, found good reasons for incorporating the ethical list into their writings.<sup>73</sup> Because the ethical teachings of Stoicism and Christianity are shaped by the same moral-social conditions, touch points between Stoic discourse and the NT are numerous.<sup>74</sup> The cataloging of virtues and vices is an important feature of the Christian paraenetic or hortatory tradition, and most of the lists used in the NT show some debt to their pagan and Hellenistic-Jewish counterparts.<sup>75</sup>

While a shorter listing of moral paradigms is used in 2 Pet 2 (the fallen angels, Noah's generation, Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot, Balaam) and Jude (unbelieving Israel, the fallen angels, Sodom and Gomorrah, Cain, Balaam, Korah, Enoch), in Hebrews the list is expanded for the purpose of exhortation: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us . . . , let us . . . Let us . . . Consider him . . ." (12:1-3).<sup>76</sup>

Perhaps most conspicuous about Hebrews is the writer's strong reliance on extrabiblical Jewish tradition material. Four noteworthy examples are the wilderness motif (chaps. 3 and 4), the Abraham traditions (chaps. 2, 6, 7, and 11), the Melchizedek midrash (chap. 7), and the catalog of the faithful (chap. 11). The Melchizedek motif in Hebrews 7, so baffling to many a reader, mirrors an intriguing debt to later Jewish traditions and has peculiar affinities especially to rabbinic commentary on Melchizedek that

<sup>72</sup> For a fuller discussion of vice and virtue in Stoic discourse and the function of the ethical catalogue, see J. D. Charles, *Virtue Amidst Vice* (JSNTSup 150; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 99-127.

<sup>73</sup> On the use of the ethical catalog by Christian writers, see B. S. Easton, "New Testament Ethical Lists," *JBL* 51 (1932): 1-12; M. J. Suggs, "The Christian Two Way Tradition: Its Antiquity, Form, and Function," in *Studies in the New Testament and Early Christian Literature* (NovTSup 33; Leiden: Brill, 1972), 60-74; N. J. McLeneay, "The Vice Lists of the Pastoral Epistles," *CBQ* 36 (1974): 2-3,19; and J. D. Charles, "Vice and Virtue Lists," in C. A. Evans and S. E. Porter, eds., *DNTB*, 1252-57.

<sup>74</sup> In the Pauline letters, for example, vice lists occur in Rom 1:29-31; 13:13, 1 Cor 5:10-11; 6:9-10; 2 Cor 12:20-21; Gal 5:19-21; Eph 4:31; 5:3-5; Col 3:5,8; 1 Tim 1:9-10; 2 Tim 3:2-5; Titus 3:3, while virtue lists occur in 2 Cor 6:6; Gal 5:22-23; Eph 4:23,32; 5:9; Php 4:8; Col 3:12; 1 Tim 4:12; 6:11; 2 Tim 2:22; 3:10. Elsewhere in the NT, ethical lists are found in Matt 15:19; Mark 7:21-22; Jas 3:15,17; 1 Pet 2:1; 3:8; 4:3,15; 2 Pet 1:5-7; Rev 9:21; 21:8; 22:15. The most extensive virtue catalog in the NT, recorded in 1 Pet 1:5-7, mirrors both Christian and pagan ethical lists. While faith and love are the "bookends" of ethical formation, the other six virtues are all found in comparable pagan lists and conveniently allow themselves to be incorporated into the writer's purpose.

<sup>75</sup> Ethical catalogs, for the most part, do not appear in the OT (apart from a text like Prov 6:16-19). They appear to be the fruit of Hellenistic cultural influence.

<sup>76</sup> Lists of moral paradigms occur in Jewish literature as well—for example, in Sir 16:5-15; *Jub.* 20:2-7; 3 *Macc.* 2:3-7; *T. Naph.* 2:8-4:3; *CD* 2:14-3:12; and *m. Sanh.* 10:3.

are not found in Genesis 14 or Psalm 110. Moreover, the discovery in Qumran Cave 11 of a fragmentary Melchizedek text in 1965 generated an enormous amount of speculation regarding sectarian Jewish eschatological expectations and a possible connection to Hebrews 7. Resultant Melchizedek studies, which establish the plausibility of some exegetical link between the writer of Hebrews and sectarian Judaism, unfortunately have yielded exceedingly divergent interpretations and defy any sort of consensus.<sup>77</sup>

Various Moses traditions also interlock in Hebrews 11. Five elements are mentioned in the text of 11:23–28—the decision of Moses’ parents to hide him following his birth, his refusal to assume the status of Egyptian royalty, his decision to identify with his suffering people, his decision to leave Egypt, and his commitment to keep the Passover. Several details in this brief narrative go beyond the actual text of the OT, at best intimated by the OT but stated explicitly, for example, by Philo<sup>78</sup> and Josephus.<sup>79</sup>

Evidence of further reliance on extrabiblical Jewish tradition material seems plausible in Hebrews. While they evade certainty, numerous extrabiblical parallels to Hebrews are worth noting and invite comparison. These include:

- Wis 7:26 (cp. Heb 1:3);
- Philo, *The Worse Attacks the Better* 40 (cp. Heb 4:12);
- Philo, *On Husbandry* 2 (cp. Heb 5:12–14); and
- *Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah* 5:13 (cp. Heb 11:37).

While not a parallel, the intriguing admonition in Hebrews to show hospitality to strangers (13:2) invites comparison with Sir 11:29–34, in which precisely the opposite advice is given: “Receive a stranger into your home and he will upset you with commotion . . . and . . . estrange you from your family” (cp. Heb 13:2).

A chief element in the writer’s extravagant use of Jewish tradition material is his extensive use of typology. Hebrews joins the General Epistles in sustained use of typological exegesis for the sake of illustration and/or comparison.<sup>80</sup> Typological interpreta-

<sup>77</sup> The literature on Melchizedek in Hebrews is massive, although a helpful overview of explanations is contained in Hurst, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 52–63.

<sup>78</sup> Philo, *Life of Moses* 1.149.

<sup>79</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* 4.3.2.

<sup>80</sup> In the General Epistles, typology is typically pressed into the service of exhortation (using moral paradigms) rather than Christology. See in this regard J. D. Charles, “Old Testament

tion grows out of the conviction that contained within Israel's history are principal forms of divine activity that point to the ultimate purposes of God.<sup>81</sup> From the standpoint of the NT writers, the theological center of this is the life, death, resurrection, and exaltation of the Son, Jesus Christ. OT characters, events, and institutions project themselves in ways that allow them to serve as paradigms in the Christian paraenetic (or hortatory) tradition. What is often baffling to the contemporary reader is the explicit link between OT texts and paradigms and their function in the NT. The manner in which they are used by individual writers is not at all straightforward.

No book of the NT is as richly laden with types as the epistle to the Hebrews. Typology is part of a technique in Hebrews to demonstrate the superiority of Jesus to the prophets, to the exalted angels,<sup>82</sup> to Moses, to the Levitical priesthood, to Melchizedek, to the sacrificial system itself, and finally to Zion and the city of God. The purpose of these illustrations is not so much to show *eschatological fulfillment* as it is to show *relationship and superiority*. The ethical and hortatory goal of the writer's extensive use of typology is that the readers, motivated by Jesus' sacrificial and moral example, will be able to endure opposition, not grow weary, and not lose heart (12:2–3). As a result, they will not be shaken (12:28).

Klyne Snodgrass identifies helpful guidelines for the reader in understanding how the NT appropriates OT material.<sup>83</sup> The reader must be aware of exegetical methods contemporary to the writer that would have governed how texts are being used. One should also look for “corporate solidarity” between the Old and the New, between Jesus and typological figures, between Israel and the church. Relatedly, eschatological fulfillment—whether through Christ or the Christian community—serves as a plumb line by which to interpret certain OT texts. Finally, our interpretation of

in the General Epistles,” in *DLNT*, 834–41.

<sup>81</sup> The best resources on typology in the Bible remain L. Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New* (trans. D. H. Madvig, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), and G. W. H. Lampe and K. J. Woollcombe, *Essays on Typology* (Naperville: Allenson, 1957).

<sup>82</sup> Attridge's argument that comparison between Jesus and the angels merely serves as a “superficial rubric” (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 17–21) needs moderation. Each of the rhetorical building blocks in the writer's overall argument is calculated and decisive.

<sup>83</sup> Klyne Snodgrass, “The Use of the Old Testament in the New,” in D. A. Black and D. S. Dockery, eds., *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 209–29.

the OT is uniquely Christological. The NT writers wrote from a perspective that saw all things in the old covenant as pointing toward Christ, God's full and definitive expression of revelation. The NT's typological interpretation of the OT is a primary illustration of how these guiding assumptions are at work.

In seeking to understand NT writers' use of the OT, the reader must also be aware of specific Jewish methods of interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures. Several related practices were *midrash peshet* and the use of *testimonia*. Early Christian use of *testimonia*, i.e., a stringing together of various OT texts for liturgical or apologetic purposes that "testified" of Jesus' messiahship, mirrors a pre-Christian Jewish hermeneutical practice that was discovered at Qumran.<sup>84</sup> Earle Ellis distinguishes between these early Christian "testimonies" and "proof texts" in the narrower sense:

The "testimonies" . . . presuppose a worked-out Christological understanding of the particular passages and are not simply proof texts randomly selected. The earliest Christians, like twentieth century Jews, could not, as we do, simply infer from traditional usage the "Christian" interpretation of a biblical word or passage. Proof texts standing alone, therefore, would have appeared to them quite arbitrary if not meaningless.<sup>85</sup>

Even when to Christian readers the NT's interpretation of the OT appears arbitrary, this is not the case. Rather, it stems from a salvific view of history, a postresurrection Christological perspective, and a typological understanding of the old covenant. Midrashic interpretation shows that "the prophets and teachers in the early church were not content merely to cite proof texts but were concerned to establish by exegetical procedures the Christian understanding of the Old Testament."<sup>86</sup> In Hebrews 1, assorted OT texts are linked together by the theme of sonship to demonstrate

<sup>84</sup> See J. A. Fitzmyer, "'4Q Testimonia' and the New Testament," *TS* 18 (1957): 513–37. A helpful overview is found in Snodgrass, "The Use of the Old Testament in the New," 218–22.

<sup>85</sup> E. E. Ellis, "How the New Testament Uses the Old," in *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity* (WUNT 18; Tübingen: Mohr, 1978), 150–51.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

the Son's superiority to the angels.<sup>87</sup> The Son is qualitatively different from the angels.<sup>88</sup>

Midrash<sup>89</sup> may be understood as a kind of interpretive activity by which the writer attempts to apply insights from historical examples of the past to present realities.<sup>90</sup> Considerable study in recent years has shown the extent to which "midrashic" interpretation is used by the writers of the NT. Midrash entails two essential aspects: the citation of an authoritative text and commentary on that text. New problems and new situations must be addressed. Midrash comes into play to address, resolve, and affirm the religious community by way of traditions from the past. In linking OT traditions with the present, the midrashist might also help fill in those gaps which, almost teasingly, have been left out. For example, why did Cain kill Abel? What happened at Moses' death? Why did Abraham tithe to Melchizedek?

It would be misleading to assume that biblical scholars agree fully on what precisely constitutes "midrash." H. H. Brownlee<sup>91</sup> uses the term in a somewhat restricted sense, classifying a work as "midrashic" only if it exhibits a specific rabbinic mode of exegesis. R. Bloch,<sup>92</sup> on the other hand, argues for a broader definition. Midrash includes any reflection on a text that has as its aim a reinterpretation or "actualization" of that text for present circumstances. J. Doeve extends Bloch's position, viewing the Gospels themselves as Christian "midrashim." But regardless of how restrictive or inclusive one's definition of midrash is, its purpose is to make a text relevant by means

<sup>87</sup> It is significant that angels are frequently referred to as "spirits" in apocalyptic Jewish literature.

<sup>88</sup> It is plausible that the recipients of the letter in some manner were inclined to exalt angelic powers.

<sup>89</sup> The term *midrash* derives from the Hebrew verb that means "to inquire," "to investigate," and thus, "to interpret."

<sup>90</sup> Helpful resources on Jewish use of the midrashic exegetical method are A. Robert, "Les Genres littéraires," in A. Robert and A. Tricot, eds., *Initiation biblique* (3rd ed.; Paris: Duculot, 1954), 305–9; A. G. Wright, "The Literary Genre Midrash," *CBQ* 28 (1966): 118–38; E. Slomovic, "Toward an Understanding of the Exegesis in the Dead Sea Scrolls," *RQ* 7 (1969/70): 5–10; and G. G. Porton, "Defining Midrash," in *The Study of Ancient Judaism*, Vol. 1, ed. J. Neusner (Jersey City, N.J.: Ktav Publishing House, 1981), 55–92. On the NT writers' use of midrash, see J. Doeve, *Jewish Hermeneutics in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1954); E. E. Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1978); J. L. Bailey and L. D. Vander Broek, *Literary Forms in the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 42–49, 156–59.

<sup>91</sup> H. H. Brownlee, "Biblical Interpretation among the Sectaries of the Dead Sea Scrolls," *BA* 14 (1951): 76.

<sup>92</sup> R. Bloch, "Midrash," *DBSup* 5.1265–66.

of “creative historiography” or “creative philology.”<sup>93</sup> Several notable examples of this “creative” interpretive technique in Hebrews are the comparison of Jesus to Moses and to Melchizedek.

The mystery that surrounds Melchizedek in the Genesis 14 narrative, coupled with the lack of explanation in Psalm 110, appears to have left plenty of room for speculation in Jewish tradition, whether in rabbinic exegesis, Josephus, or Qumran.<sup>94</sup> The most extensive development of the Melchizedek interpretation was a midrash found at Qumran, what is known as 11QMelchizedek. While it is certainly possible that the writer of Hebrews was indirectly adjusting mistaken messianic beliefs of the Dead Sea Scroll sect, the comparative argument using Jesus and Melchizedek could have been derived from the OT.<sup>95</sup>

Despite early witnesses that attributed Pauline authorship to Hebrews, what is altogether striking about the epistle is how the language and vocabulary differ from Paul’s letters. Absent from Hebrews are numerous conspicuous features of Pauline literature—for example, the distinction between Jews and Gentiles, salvation going to the Gentiles, a forensic conceptualization of justification, the contrast between works, union with Christ (notably, use of the expression “in Christ”), the contrast of flesh and spirit, personal references to apostleship, ministry, and colleagues, problems related to liturgical practice, and a wide variety of divine names. Other elements that distinguish Hebrews from Paul’s letters include anonymity, an appeal to eyewitness authority,<sup>96</sup> the sheer amount of attention devoted to the priesthood motif,<sup>97</sup> and the rather elegant style of language and rhetoric employed.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>93</sup> So Wright, “The Literary Genre Midrash,” 129–30.

<sup>94</sup> See in particular F. L. Horton Jr., *The Melchizedek Tradition: A Critical Examination of the Sources to the Fifth Century AD and in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (SNTSMS 30; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976). The literature on Melchizedek in mainstream as well as sectarian Jewish tradition is massive. A helpful overview is W. M. Schniedewind, “Traditions of Melchizedek,” in *DNTB*, 693–95.

<sup>95</sup> In addition to E. F. Bruce’s evaluation of the Qumran interpretation of Hebrews (see n. 23), a balanced perspective is found in W. S. LaSor, “The Epistle to the Hebrews and the Qumran Writings,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 179–90.

<sup>96</sup> A statement of this sort by Paul would be unthinkable.

<sup>97</sup> Notable similarities between Hebrews and the Pauline Epistles are an understanding of salvation history that encompasses incarnation, cross, resurrection, and glorification, Christ’s role in creation, use of OT typology (Abraham in particular), the new covenant, and allusion to Timothy.

<sup>98</sup> Much debate regarding the literary character of Hebrews has concerned the role that Philonic and Alexandrian exegesis plays in the writer’s argument. Clearly, particular

## The Old Testament in Hebrews

Understanding the relationship of the OT to the NT is central to a proper grasp of Christian theology. Thus, few issues are more important for the student of the Bible than NT writers' use of the OT. The OT Scriptures represent the theological environment in which early Christians were immersed and grew.<sup>99</sup> At the same time, everything they inherited from the Scriptures—whether as converts from Judaism or as Hellenists—was reinterpreted in the light of revelation of Christ's death, resurrection, and glorification. While virtually all of the material in Hebrews illustrates this, one particular citation is instructive. Psalm 110:1 occurs several times in the NT and is cited and reinterpreted by multiple sources—in Matt 22:44; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42–43; Acts 2:34–35; 1 Cor 15:25–26—in addition to Heb 1:13. Texts such as Ps 110:1 likely achieved widespread usage in the church for confessional reasons (note the language of *homologeō/homologia* in 3:1; 4:14; 10:23; 11:13; 13:15).

What is perhaps most striking about Hebrews is the extent to which the OT, or traditions that derive from the OT, are marshaled by the writer for his own purposes. While most commentators identify 35 or 36 citations of the OT in the letter, this enumeration depends on how one “counts” citations. Are they full or fragmentary citations? In what cases is the author drawing from an extrabiblical source rather than the OT text? Do general allusions count as citations? For example, is Ps 105:42—“For he remembered his holy promise given to his servant Abraham”—being used in the writer's discussion of Abraham and promise in Heb 6:13–20?<sup>100</sup> Is Psalm 125, a Psalm of ascent, and 125:1 in particular (“Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever”), the background to statements in Heb 12:22 and 26–28? And what shall we make of the Christological interpretation of Ps 40:6–8 found in Heb 10:5–10? Can

similarities cannot be denied. The position taken here is that similarities should not minimize the eschatological and theological differences between Hebrews and Alexandrian Judaism. The exalted and thoroughly developed Christology of the epistle causes us to read it alongside the other documents of the NT and not Hellenistic Judaism of Philo. The Christian writers adapt typological exegesis and usually not allegory from their Jewish counterparts, and this for historical as well as theological reasons. A balanced view of Alexandrian influence on Hebrews is found in J. M. Knight, “Alexandria, Alexandrian Christianity,” in *DLNT*, 34–37.

<sup>99</sup> K. Snodgrass (“The Use of the Old Testament in the New,” 209–11) summarizes quite effectively the theological environment of the early Christians.

<sup>100</sup> Few commentators adduce this as a citation or reference in Hebrews.

use of the keyword “sacrifice” and the allusion to a “body you prepared for me” be legitimately transferred to Christ?<sup>101</sup>

The density of citations or allusions to the OT in Hebrews is unsurpassed.<sup>102</sup> Of all references in the epistle to OT material,<sup>103</sup> 14 are drawn from the Psalter and 13 from the Pentateuch, encompassing all five books. Midrash, chain quotations or testimonia, analogy and contrast, an extended catalog, paraenesis and typology are all skillfully employed by the writer, who is not concerned to offer any sort of exposition of the OT text. He freely cites for his own purposes,<sup>104</sup> working under the assumption that there is full continuity between divine action in the old covenant and the new. The church expresses continuity in the divine plan, not discontinuity. (This is true even when the contrast of superior to inferior is regularly used throughout the letter.) It is clear that the writer has a high view of the OT; it is divinely inspired and authoritative.

In the OT we find “shadows” or types of transcendent truth. The thoroughgoing use of typological exegesis in Hebrews, already noted (see “Literary Features”), which facilitates his strategy of comparison, is cause for many commentators drawing parallels to the Alexandrian school of exegesis with which Philo was associated. While commonalities are not to be denied, Philonic interpretation allegorizes in a manner not found in Hebrews. In Hebrews a definite *historical* correspondence is necessary to show the Son’s continuity and organic unity with the OT, as well as to demonstrate that He is “superior.” Typology is not the same as allegory, for it is predicated on an historical association.

<sup>101</sup> Despite W. C. Kaiser Jr.’s heroic attempt to discern “internal [Christological] clues in Psalm 40” (“The Abolition of the Old Order and Establishment of the New: Psalm 40:6–8 and Hebrews 10:5–10,” in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1981], 19–37), I am less convinced. At the same time, I do share Kaiser’s conviction that Christological interpretation of the OT is not merely arbitrary.

<sup>102</sup> One might legitimately argue that, though much shorter in length, the same density of citation or allusion to the OT is found in the epistles of James and Jude.

<sup>103</sup> Part of the difficulty in enumerating every specific use of OT material in Hebrews is that the author does not use the customary introductory formula “It is written” that is often used elsewhere in the NT. Many of these formulas are framed in such a way as to have God as the speaker (G. H. Guthrie, “The Old Testament in Hebrews,” *DLNT*, 842).

<sup>104</sup> *Contra* Ellingworth (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 41) it cannot be said that “the author believes that Christ was active in OT history from the beginning.” One may grant that the Psalm citations mirror the writer’s assumption that the New is revealed in the Old. But despite the exalted view of the Son in Hebrews, the epistle does not present him as “active” in the OT (even when he was the agent of creation [1:2])—only that forms of divine revelation in the old covenant are types or shadows.

The catalog of the faithful, recorded in Hebrews 11, appears to blend OT characters and events with details that in time emerged in Jewish exegetical tradition. We have already noted (see “Literary Features”) that the interlocking Moses traditions are recited in 11:23–28—his parents hiding him, identification with Israel rather than Pharaoh’s daughter, embracing disgrace for Christ rather than Egypt’s treasures, departure from Egypt without fear of the king, and his keeping of the Passover. Several of these elements extend the text of the OT itself, dependent upon both postbiblical sources<sup>105</sup> and a “Christianizing” of the story.

### Theology and Christology of Hebrews

In contrast to the difficulty we encounter in establishing the destination of Hebrews and the precise identity of its recipients, there is little doubt about the letter’s exalted theological perspective. It is a perspective that drinks deeply from the OT and Jewish tradition. At the same time it is a perspective that transcends Jewish theological thinking and one that is situated squarely within the mainstream of NT theology. As such, it interprets the OT through the lens of unfolding salvation history. It understands people, places, events, and institutions of the old covenant as types and foreshadows of greater realities.

Christology in Hebrews is built upon numerous strands; among these are royal Davidic inferences drawn from the Psalter, wisdom traditions that ascribe to the Son the agency of creation, isolated allusions to the prophets that anticipate the new covenant, comparison to Moses as a faithful covenant mediator, development of the “binding of Isaac” and the Melchizedek traditions that are part of Abrahamic promise, and most notably, in-depth typological interpretation of Israel’s sacrificial system that is embedded in the Pentateuch. All of these strands underscore the exalted status of the Son, who is superior to any other expression of divine revelation that may have served as a foreshadow.

Theologically, several features in Hebrews are unique to the NT. One is the letter’s introduction and development of Christ’s transcendent priesthood in relation to that of Melchizedek.<sup>106</sup> Several

<sup>105</sup> E.g., 4 Ezra 4:5; Tg. Ps.-J. on Deut 34:1; Philo, *Mos* 1.149; and Josephus, *Ant.* 4.3.2.

<sup>106</sup> It is plausible, as O. Cullmann (*The Christology of the New Testament*, (trans. S. C. Guthrie and C. A. M. Hall) Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959], 84–87, 90) argues, that at the

elements are important to the writer. Melchizedek antedates the Levitical system and thus serves to prefigure the priesthood of Christ. In contrast to the order of Aaronic priests, Jesus' priesthood is eternal (5:6; 7:11–28; 9:11–28; 10:1–18; 13:11–13). Also, Melchizedek is important because of how he stands in relation to Abraham, from whose seed the Messiah descended. The argument in Heb 7 rests on a typological interpretation of the OT and, as Oscar Cullmann has persuasively argued, more than likely used an already familiar Jewish tradition regarding Melchizedek.<sup>107</sup>

In addition, the exaltation and enthronement of the Son presented in Hebrews reflects the writer's indebtedness to the royal psalm tradition which comes to expression in Psalm 110, where enthronement and session unite David and Melchizedek. The Son's reign and authority are rooted in that of the eternal God, even when history awaits its consummation, when all enemies are made subject (1:13; 10:13; cp. 1 Cor 15:24–28).

A related feature distinguishes the Christology of Hebrews. It is the emphasis on Christ's "perfection" through suffering, by which the Son identifies fully in His humanity with creation and in its role in His exaltation and enthronement. Exaltation by way of suffering is the direction of the well-known hymn in Phil 2:6–11, although in Philippians this unit is abbreviated and serves the goal of illustrating what attitude is necessary to foster Christian unity. In Hebrews, it is part of the writer's greater argument for the Son's superiority, and specifically, for establishing Jesus' solidarity with Christians who suffer. That solidarity is exemplary and compelling; believers should be emboldened by their access to God, made possible by the "merciful high priest" who "perpetually lives to make intercession" for them. The writer's case for Jesus' humanity, unparalleled in the NT, is rich, nuanced, and pastorally sensitive.

While Christ's high priesthood is the chief Christology motif in Hebrews, it is by no means the sole one. The letter begins by extolling His sonship, of which there are three definable stages—pre-existence, incarnation, and glorification/exaltation—distinguished in the writer's argument. The emphasis throughout Hebrews is the relationship between the latter two. Exaltation is predicated on the

time of Jesus there existed messianic interpretations of Ps 110 associated with Melchizedek. In fact, Jesus Himself quoted Ps 110 (Matt 22:41–46; Mark 12:35–37; Luke 12:41–44) in reference to his own person.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 84–90.

Son's earthly work, a work that is rooted in His willingness to suffer, and is "completed" in the heavenly realm.

The epistle begins with an unambiguous pronouncement of Jesus' preexistence, role in creation, and representation of divine glory. As the agent of creation,<sup>108</sup> the Son is portrayed in a manner that is reminiscent of Wisdom personified in Hellenistic Judaism. Jesus is also the *prōtotokos*, the "firstborn," who enters the world of humanity (1:6; 12:23), an emphasis found in Paul (cp. Rom 8:29; Col 1:15,18; Rev 1:5). This notion is related to the contrast in Hebrews between the Son's glory and His deep humiliation. Jesus' atoning death, the goal of His incarnation, leads to His majesty. Jesus participates in full humanity, yet He does so in sinless perfection. Jesus' preexistence is further intimated by a part of the chain quotation (from Ps 45:7–8), which declares the eternity of God's throne and implies the Son's precreational status. The Son's preexistence is further suggested late in the writer's argument by comparisons between earthly and heavenly sanctuary and earthly and heavenly priesthood (chap. 8).<sup>109</sup>

The eschatological perspective in Hebrews has been described as two dimensional. That is, a vertical or spiritual element appears alongside a horizontal or temporal. In terms of His earthly sojourn, Christ fulfills through His sacrifice what was anticipated in the old covenant. The spiritual dimension is represented through the heavenly temple, which is portrayed as both a present and eternal reality (chaps. 9 and 10).

### Attestation and Authorship

The epistle to the Hebrews endured a fate not unlike that of the General Epistles and Revelation. The early church, broadly speaking, was uncertain about authorship, with eastern Christendom generally attributing the letter to Paul. The relationship of authorship to inclusion in the canon was particularly important in the case of Hebrews. Absent from earliest canonical listings, the epistle was nevertheless known and cited before the end of the first century, evidenced by Clement of Rome (AD 90s), who appears to cite freely from it.<sup>110</sup> Hermas (mid second

<sup>108</sup> In Pauline literature Jesus is both the agent and the goal of creation (Col 1:16–20).

<sup>109</sup> See D. B. Capes, "Preexistence," in *DLNT*, esp. 957–58.

<sup>110</sup> E.g., *1 Clem.* 36:1–5 (cp. Heb 1:3–4, 7; 2:18; 3:1); *1 Clem.* 9:3 (cp. Heb 11:5); *1 Clem.* 9:4 (cp. Heb 11:7); *1 Clem.*, 10:7 (cp. Heb 11:17); *1 Clem.* 17:1 (cp. 11:37); and *1 Clem.* 21:1 (cp. Heb 12:1).

century) showed notable affinities toward it, Justin Martyr may have used it,<sup>111</sup> Tertullian (early third century) was familiar with it under the title of “to Hebrews,”<sup>112</sup> and Clement of Alexandria, according to Eusebius,<sup>113</sup> referred to it as being written “for Hebrews.”

The heretic Marcion, excommunicated by the church in Rome in AD 144, subsequently organized his own church and created a “canon” of Scripture that omitted Hebrews and the Pastoral Epistles. This is, of course, as we would expect, given his rejection of Judaism and the God of the OT. From the late second century Hebrews appeared to have quasicanonical status by some in the church due to its association by some in the church with Pauline writings, particularly in Eastern Christendom.

Eusebius appears to be divided in his judgment of the epistle. In one place he acknowledged that the letter, like Jude and 2 Peter, was disputed (*antilegomenon*)<sup>114</sup> by some over against the letters of Paul which are universally recognized: “The fourteen letters of Paul are obvious and plain, yet it is not right to ignore that some dispute the Epistle to the Hebrews, saying that it was rejected by the church of Rome as not being by Paul.”<sup>115</sup> Elsewhere he wrote that Hebrews was “acknowledged” (*homologoumenon*), and part of his rationale for this acknowledgement was the letter’s antiquity.<sup>116</sup> Evidence from patristic sources suggests that questions regarding the letter’s authority arose due to its relationship to the Pauline corpus and to its perceived teaching on “postbaptismal” repentance (cp. 6:4–6 and 10:26–31). Despite its attribution to the apostle Paul<sup>117</sup> and comparison with the Pauline epistles in some quarters of the church, it did not achieve universal use and authority until the fourth century.

Notably absent from Hebrews are important Pauline concepts and watchwords such as fulfillment, justification, gospel, edification, and mystery. When we compare the language of “faith” in Paul and in Hebrews, notable differences stand out. In the Pauline epistles we find a strong emphasis placed on forensic justification, grace that op-

<sup>111</sup> So, e.g., Justin, *Dial.* 34 (cp. Heb 8:7); 13 (cp. Heb 9:13–14); and 67 (c p. Heb 12:18–19).

<sup>112</sup> This reference occurs in his early third-century work *On Modesty*.

<sup>113</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.14.3.

<sup>114</sup> Especially in Eastern Christendom, this would be understandable, due to the fairly widespread circulation of spurious documents (cp. 1 Thess 2:1–3)—Petrine pseudepigrapha as one notable example.

<sup>115</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.3.4–5.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.38.

<sup>117</sup> Origen hesitates to attribute it to Paul; for him, “God only knows” who wrote it. See *ibid.*, 6.25.11.

poses works-righteousness, unmerited favor, our station “in Christ,” spiritual liberty, a corresponding development of a theology of the cross, and the purpose of the law. These are strangely absent from Hebrews, however. By comparison, we find on multiple occasions the formula “purification for sins” (*katharizō*; *katharismos*, *katharos*: 1:3; 9:14,22–23; 10:22).<sup>118</sup> Virtually the entire argument set forth in the letter is bathed in the twin notions of sacrifice and mediation.

Moreover, faith in Hebrews is not foremost justification, as in Paul. Rather, it is responding to what is known and what has been revealed or done by God through the Son. The writer of Hebrews wished to emphasize the *ethical*, as opposed to legal or forensic, side of faith—an accent that is intended to make his readers “draw near.” He was not attempting to join in Paul’s struggle with legalism; his challenge was a group of Christians who were considering abandoning their faith. A closer resemblance to the language of Luke has caused some (for example, Clement of Alexandria, according to Eusebius)<sup>119</sup> to attribute Hebrews to the author of the Gospel and Acts.

Both in the early church and in the present, Hebrews has engendered no little speculation regarding possible authorship. Suggestions have ranged from Paul (Jerome, Augustine), Barnabas (Tertullian),<sup>120</sup> Luke or Clement of Rome (Thomas Aquinas, Calvin, Erasmus), Apollos (Luther),<sup>121</sup> to Priscilla (Adolf Harnack).<sup>122</sup> To the time of Clement of Alexandria, Luke and Clement of Rome joined the apostle Paul as the most likely candidates for authorship.<sup>123</sup> While we are left to speculate with Origen—as to the author’s identity, “God only knows”<sup>124</sup>—the lack of certainty surrounding the matter of who wrote the letter, thankfully, does not

<sup>118</sup> In the Pauline Epistles, the notion of purification for sins occurs only once—in Titus 2:14.

<sup>119</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.14.

<sup>120</sup> Barnabas is called a son of encouragement or exhortation (*huios paraklēseos*, Acts 4:36); moreover, he was equally at home in both Jewish and Greek thought worlds.

<sup>121</sup> The attractiveness of Apollos as author of Hebrews becomes apparent from his depiction in the NT. He was a Jew born in Alexandria, and his eloquence and knowledge of the Scriptures are notable (Acts 18:24–28). The effectiveness of his ministry is in keeping with one who is a cultured Alexandrian Christian.

<sup>122</sup> Cp. Acts 18:26 and Romans 16:5. See A. Harnack, “Probabilia über die Adresse und den Verfasser des Hebräerbriefes,” *ZNW* 1 (1900): 16–41. Undermining this view, however, is the self-referential masculine participle *diēgoumenon* used in Heb 11:32.

<sup>123</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.25.14.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

detract from the character and authority of the epistle.<sup>125</sup> In time Hebrews did achieve a canonical consensus within Christendom.

Whatever mystery surrounds the question of authorship, the writer was a skilled orator/rhetorician/writer/preacher who possessed an impressive knowledge of—and insight into—the OT as well as Jewish exegetical techniques. But he was more. He was a person of deep pastoral sensitivities, exuding great passion and compassion toward his readers—people with whom he had intimate acquaintance and for whom he had great concern.

## Purpose

In an important volume that probes the message of Hebrews, esteemed German NT scholar Ernst Käsemann has argued forcefully that the motif of the wandering people of God, explicit in 3:7–4:13, is the principal motif of the letter.<sup>126</sup> Noting the writer's statement that "all these people" (recorded in Heb 11) who were "living by faith" were "aliens and strangers on earth" (11:13), Käsemann builds an impressive case for sojourning as the theme of the letter to the Hebrews. Indeed, the typology of pilgrimage is supremely applicable to the Christian community in significant ways. Wandering was the essence of Israel's existence, following her deliverance from bondage in Egypt and before her inheriting the promised land. Faith was requisite during those years of sojourn, a faith rooted in divine promise and what God had spoken. The danger for Israel was a hardening of the heart and the inclination toward disobedience. The potential for Israel's forsaking the promise was by no means inevitable; nevertheless, it was real and likewise can be applied to the Christian community as it finds itself an "alien and stranger" in the present world.

Wandering, therefore, is an "existential necessity" for the people of God.<sup>127</sup> In addition, the larger pattern of ancient Israel, that rest follows sojourning and toiling, is also applicable to the Christian community (4:1). This rest is founded on a proper

<sup>125</sup> Additional attempts in the modern period to identify the author have included Jude, Stephen (Acts 7), Philip the deacon (Acts 6), Epaphras (Col 1:7; 4:12; Phlm 23), and Mary the mother of Jesus.

<sup>126</sup> Ernst Käsemann, *The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Letter to the Hebrews*, (trans. R. A. Harrisville and I. L. Sandberg) Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

understanding of and response to the gospel that has been declared by God Himself.

The concluding section of the epistle, beginning in 10:19, was thought by Käsemann to unfold the “wandering people of God” motif.<sup>128</sup> As evidence one might take note of the verbs of movement—e.g., in 10:22,33; 11:6; 12:18,22; 13:7,13. In addition, the *agōn* imagery, the language of struggle and enduring, would seem to strengthen Käsemann’s argument (e.g., 10:32; 12:1,12).

Therefore, Käsemann argued, in addressing the “wandering people of God,” the writer aimed at a “joyful enlistment in a cause already guaranteed by God.” Because the future was “secured by God’s present activity in the Word of promise,” faith was requisite to ensure a “confident wandering.”<sup>129</sup>

Käsemann’s work in Hebrews is important for several reasons. It emerged at a time when the insights from discoveries of the Qumran community were already infusing NT studies, assisting us in better understanding the religious milieu of the NT world. Further, much of Käsemann’s work in the NT was a much-needed reaction to the antsupernaturalistic assumptions of his teacher, theologian Rudolph Bultmann, and Protestant liberalism a generation prior to Käsemann. The response by Käsemann and others indeed represented a welcome turn in biblical studies and biblical theology. In addition, the combination of Käsemann’s thoroughness and his sensitivity to religious currents both within as well as outside mainstream Judaism and Christianity make his work supremely useful and lend it enduring value, even when it requires particular adjustments and might strike some as dated.

Last, and most important, Käsemann has identified an element in Hebrews that is frequently neglected by commentators. For this reason, then, probing the epistle to the Hebrews through the lens of Käsemann’s perspectives can assist us, sharpening our focus as we attempt to understand the letter’s message.

In propounding the “wandering people of God” as the principal theme in Hebrews, Käsemann brought recognition to an important motif in the epistle that more often than not has received insufficient treatment even by students of the Bible. In order to ground his thesis, Käsemann isolated 3:7–4:13 as the key section of the entire epistle. In light of other interlocking subthemes in the letter (see below),

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 43–44.

what is the support for Käsemann's thesis? Can his argument stand? Is the message of Hebrews that we are the wandering people of God? And would this theme be supported by the cumulative weight of innumerable ethical admonitions that are strewn throughout the letter (e.g., 2:1–3; 3:1,12,13; 4:1,14,16; 5:11–14; 6:1,4–6,11–12; 10:22,23,24,25,26–31,32–34,35–39; 12:1,2,3,4,5–6,12,15,25,28–29; 13:6,7,9,13,15,17,22)?

There is strong reason to question Käsemann's belief that pilgrimage is the central theme around which everything in the epistle is organized. Clearly faith as a pilgrimage is an important subtheme in Hebrews. It underscores important insights into the nature of faith and the challenges that life in this world present to faith. While wandering or pilgrimage is an effective and accurate metaphor for walking by faith, the pastoral dilemma being addressed would appear far deeper. Turning away, lapse from what is known to be true and revealed, failure to persevere, and not "wandering" per se, represent the burden of the writer.<sup>130</sup>

To be sure, pilgrimage is an important literary-rhetorical building block used by the writer in the overall architecture of the letter, and yet its linkage to material that both precedes and follows suggests that wandering is *one of several subthemes* rather than *the central motif* of Hebrews. Not merely pilgrimage, which is a relevant parallel between covenant communities, but lapse, turning aside, and failure to endure constitute the overarching burden of the writer. In support of this contention, consider the admonitions as well as the gentle—and at times not so gentle—warnings that lace the entire letter from beginning to end. Among these:

- “We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For if . . . , how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation. . . ?” (2:1–3).
- “Therefore . . . fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess. He was faithful . . .” (3:1–2).
- “See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness” (3:12–13).

<sup>130</sup> Hurst (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 70–71), has correctly identified the locus of thought in the epistle.

- “Therefore . . . let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short [of entering God’s rest]” (4:1).
- “Therefore . . . let us hold firmly to the faith we profess” (4:14).
- “We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again . . .” (5:11–12).
- “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful” (10:23).
- “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (10:26–27).
- “Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering” (10:32).
- “So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded” (10:35).
- “Therefore . . . let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (12:1).
- “Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (12:3).
- “In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood” (12:4).
- “Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees” (12:12).
- “See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven” (12:25)?
- “Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through His own blood. Let us, then, go to Him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore” (13:12–13).

Taken together, these are not the words of one who is merely encouraging Christians in general terms on their pilgrimage of faith

(however trying that pilgrimage can be). There is something more at work here. There exists a crisis—an existential and *circumstantial* crisis of faith—that has afflicted those for whom this epistle is intended. As a result of this crisis, they have been tempted to leave their confession of faith and turn away from the Lord who purchased their redemption.

In his fine commentary *Call to Commitment: Responding to the Message of Hebrews*, William Lane has speculated, quite plausibly, that the Christians addressed in Hebrews were in Rome or southern Italy and that the description of the “sufferings,” “insults,” “persecution,” and “prison” found in 10:32–34 corresponds to the hardships borne by Jewish Christians who were expelled by the emperor Claudius in AD 49 (cp. Acts 18:1–2). Lane’s attempt at reconstruction is certainly compelling.

Now, however, it is about fifteen years later. These Christians are fifteen years older. When a new crisis emerges, confronting them with the threat of a fresh experience of suffering, they are compelled to face the cost of discipleship all over again. The situation now facing the community appears more serious than the earlier one under Claudius. The pastor’s declaration that “in your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood” (12:4) suggests that martyrdom may become a fact of Christian experience in the immediate future.<sup>131</sup>

This speculative view is indeed plausible, consistent with references in the letter to suffering and persecution. At the same time it remains just that—speculation. That suffering and persecution are implied is clear from 10:32–34; the question, however, is to what degree. Undermining the belief of Lane and others that intense persecution is present, or around the corner, is the catalog of the faithful in chapter 11. Being faithful to divine revelation *and acting on that knowledge* is the thrust of the paradigms in Hebrews 11, not persecution per se or faithfulness in witness (even to the point of death). It is true that “by faith” Moses “chooses mistreatment” with his own people over “the treasures of Egypt” (11:24–28), although this does not bespeak persecution

<sup>131</sup> Lane, *Call to Commitment*, 22–23.

in the strictest sense on his part. It may be further granted that the conclusion of the catalog (vv. 32–38) does indeed contain the element of persecution leading to death, but this is illustrative of a broader concern in chapter 11, namely, *how authentic faith expresses itself* in a variety of life situations.<sup>132</sup>

Furthermore, the language used by the writer to exhort his readers toward perseverance in the face of hardship is generic language: he consistently uses *hupomenō* and not *hupopherō*, of which the latter is the stronger term, often associated with deep suffering and grief (e.g., 1 Cor 10:13; 2 Tim 3:1; and 1 Pet 2:19).

Significantly, the letter's conclusion contains no allusion to wandering or sojourning. In chapter 12, following the rehearsal of men and women of faith who *endured*, the emphasis is perseverance, not being entangled by sin, and the necessity of discipline. "See to it," the writer admonishes, "that you do not refuse Him who speaks" (12:25). This exhortation is immediately followed by a somber warning regarding those of the past who *did* "refuse" Him. The readers are consequently admonished to go to Jesus "outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore" (13:13). Such admonition doubtless is linked with the difficulty for some among the readers to "confess his name" (13:15).

Thus, the letter of Hebrews is addressed to a group of Christians who were experiencing "a crisis of faith and a failure of nerve." It is a "word of exhortation" (13:22), sermonic and epistolary in form, that aims to address those whose confession has been shaken by trying circumstances of life and who should have already attained a certain measure of maturity. It is a "word" that "throbs with an awareness of the privilege and the cost of Christian discipleship" and "proves to be a sensitive, yet impassioned, pastoral response to the sagging faith of . . . weary individuals who were in danger of abandoning their Christian commitments."<sup>133</sup>

The strategy of the writer is to mount a case for the supremacy of the Son. His argument consists of several building blocks, each

<sup>132</sup> The purpose of my distinction here is not to downplay or belittle the reality of persecution or martyrdom. It is rather to see persecution and/or martyrdom as a partial expression of authentic faith and not the inevitability for *all*. That the recipients are called immature and only capable of drinking milk (5:11–14) and the object of repeated and at times impassioned admonitions does not necessarily point to a situation in which *martyrdom*—the end of faithful confession—is the issue; rather, these individuals are wrestling with *the most basic* decisions in order to embrace what is normative for all Christian disciples—hardship, disgrace, dishonor, and temptation.

<sup>133</sup> W. L. Lane, "Hebrews," in *DLNT*, 443.

of which serves the purpose of *comparison*. Jesus is superior to the angels (chaps. 1 and 2), which establishes His superiority as *the* “covenant messenger.” He is superior to Moses (chaps. 3 and 4), by which the writer prepares his readers for the argument that the priesthood of Christ is superior to the Levitical order. He is superior to the Levitical priesthood (chaps. 4 and 5), to the “high priesthood” of the mysterious Melchizedek that was antecedent to the Levitical system (chap. 7),<sup>134</sup> indeed to the entire sacrificial order of the old covenant (chaps. 8–10). This cumulative and well-calculated case for superiority should evoke a response of gratitude and faithfulness that is commensurate with Christ’s superiority.

The goal of the writer is to admonish and motivate his readers, through Jesus’ sacrificial *as well as* moral example, so that, stated positively, they might endure opposition and hardship as a result of the faith, and negatively, they might not grow weary and lose heart (12:2–3).<sup>135</sup> Jesus is their pioneer and their champion. He has identified with them in all manner of human suffering and, thus, is worthy of their unconditional trust. Armed with this conviction, they will not be shaken (12:28).<sup>136</sup> The closing appeal for the readers to heed the writer’s “word of exhortation” (13:22) confirms the primary reason for writing: they are to obey by persevering in faithfulness.

<sup>134</sup> The purpose of the Melchizedek “midrash” in Hebrews 7 has more to do with underscoring *the basis of priesthood* than with emphasizing mysterious or divine qualities. Priesthood in chapter 7 is perpetual and antecedent; but the focus remains the character and nature of priesthood.

<sup>135</sup> Hence the letter should not be understood first and foremost as a warning to Christian converts from Judaism who are contemplating a return to Jewish religion. This argument can stand even when it is true that many of the Christians came to faith out of a Jewish background. To be sure, contrast is important to the writer’s literary-rhetorical strategy, particularly in the material of 8:1–10:16. But the positive nature of Israel’s covenant should not be denied or underestimated. Contrast *within continuity*, not full discontinuity that mirrors an anti-Jewish polemic, is the emphasis of the epistle.

<sup>136</sup> The perspective being adopted in this volume for discerning the message, and thus purpose, of Hebrews proceeds on the assumption and demonstration of a coherent theme that unfolds in consistent ways throughout the entire letter. For this reason the approach suggested by Paul Ellingworth (*The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids/Carlisle: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1993], 80) that “a coherent view of the whole situation can perhaps best be reached by beginning with the severe passages and working outwards to those which raise fewer problems” is to be rejected in favor of an approach that is in fact more “coherent.” Part of the problem with historical interpretation of Hebrews is that it has adopted the approach recommended by Ellingworth. By contrast we would argue for the reverse: the “severe” passages in the letter are best accounted for by a coherent and unified account of the letter that does *not* begin with them but rather understands them *in context*.

## Outline and Structure of Hebrews

The progression of thought in the letter, which moves from comparison to comparison, is relatively easy to discern.<sup>137</sup> Yet the multifaceted nature of the writer's argument, coupled with the dialectical movement back and forth between example and exhortation, raises some questions about the precise placement of divisions.<sup>138</sup> Depending on where the division lines are drawn, the writer has arranged his argument in roughly six, with "paraenetic or hortatory interludes" following each unit.<sup>139</sup> This pattern of argument in Hebrews, moving back and forth between paradigm or type and application, is a method similar to that found in Jude.

- I. The Superiority of Christianity (1:1–10:18)
  - A. Superiority to the Old Revelation (1:1–3)
  - B. Superiority to Angels (1:4–2:18)
  - C. Superiority to Moses (3:1–19)
  - D. Superiority to Joshua (4:1–13)
  - E. Superiority of Christ's Priesthood (4:14–7:28)
  - F. Superiority of Christ's Priestly Work (8:1–10:18)
- II. Subsequent Exhortations (10:19–13:17)
  - A. Implications of Christ's Superiority for Perseverance (10:19–25)
  - B. The Dangers of Apostasy (10:26–31)
  - C. Exhortation to Recall the Past (10:32–39)
  - D. Paradigms of Endurance from the Past (11:1–40)
  - E. Jesus' Example of Perseverance (12:1–13)
  - F. Related Moral Exhortations (12:14–17)

<sup>137</sup> We must modify E. F. Scott's contention that Hebrews represents "the riddle of the New Testament" (*The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its Doctrine and Significance* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1922]). Regarding authorship, recipients, destination, and dating, textual indicators do not paint a perfectly clear picture. These questions, however, do not obscure the epistle's message.

<sup>138</sup> G. H. Guthrie (*Hebrews*, 27–30) has correctly observed in the structure of Hebrews this dialectic between exposition and exhortation. Such is the nature of midrash as a literary technique. The basic structure of midrash is twofold: citation of an authoritative text and related commentary on the text. L. Wills, ("The Form of the Sermon," 277–99) (see n. 60), has shown a three-part pattern characteristic of the first-century sermon as a genre: (1) scriptural or theological example, (2) conclusion drawn from the example, and (3) exhortation. This form, of course, we would recognize today in standard teaching and preaching on any given Sunday morning.

<sup>139</sup> The division suggested by D. Guthrie (*New Testament Introduction* [4th ed.; Leicester/Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990],) with some modifications most accurately reflects the development of the writer's argument.

- G. Restatement of the New Covenant's Superiority  
 (12:18–29)  
 H. Epilogue (13:1–17)  
 III. Conclusion (13:18–25)

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