

# HEBREWS



Sacra Pagina Series

Volume 13

# Hebrews

Alan C. Mitchell

Daniel J. Harrington, S.J.  
Editor



A Michael Glazier Book

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*In Memory of*

*Blanche V. Mitchell (1919–1991)*

*Grace J. McGinniss (1930–1994)*

*James L. Lamm (1929–2001)*

*and for my father*

*Albert P. Mitchell*



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## EDITOR'S PREFACE

*Sacra Pagina* is a multivolume commentary on the books of the New Testament. The expression *Sacra Pagina* (Sacred Page) originally referred to the text of Scripture. In the Middle Ages it also described the study of Scripture to which the interpreter brought the tools of grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, and philosophy. Thus *Sacra Pagina* encompasses both the text to be studied and the activity of interpretation.

This series presents fresh translations and modern expositions of all the books of the New Testament. Written by an international team of Catholic biblical scholars, it is intended for biblical professionals, graduate students, theologians, clergy, and religious educators. The volumes present basic introductory information and close exposition. They self-consciously adopt specific methodological perspectives, but maintain a focus on the issues raised by the New Testament compositions themselves. The goal of *Sacra Pagina* is to provide sound critical analysis without any loss of sensitivity to religious meaning. This series is therefore catholic in two senses of the word: inclusive in its methods and perspectives, and shaped by the context of the Catholic tradition.

The Second Vatican Council described the study of the sacred page as the "very soul of sacred theology" (*Dei Verbum* 24). The volumes in this series illustrate how Catholic scholars contribute to the council's call to provide access to Sacred Scripture for all the Christian faithful. Rather than pretending to say the final word on any text, these volumes seek to open up the riches of the New Testament and to invite as many people as possible to study seriously the sacred page.

DANIEL J. HARRINGTON, S.J.



## PREFACE

Hebrews is one of the most beautiful and most challenging books of the New Testament. Its elegant Greek captures the complexity of the author's thought by expressing his lofty theological ideas in sophisticated and at times enigmatic language. Anyone who writes a commentary on Hebrews quickly discovers why commentators from ancient to modern times have struggled to explain and interpret its message. Indeed, without the rich tradition of interpretation on which to depend, the task of producing a commentary on Hebrews would be even more daunting. Fortunately, there are many excellent commentaries upon which to rely for help in solving the riddle of Hebrews, and readers of this commentary will note its author's indebtedness to the great scholars who have produced them. Their names appear often throughout the following pages.

As no one can write a commentary without the help of other people, I am pleased to express the gratitude I feel for individuals who have aided me greatly in bringing this project to completion. I would like to thank the Theology Department at Georgetown University for a Senior Landegger Research Grant that supported the initial stages of research and writing. I am grateful to Prof. Dr. Cilliers Breytenbach for his generosity in providing me a place to work and making available the resources of the Institut für Antike und Christentum at the Humboldt University in Berlin during 1996–97. I also thank Dr. Eckhard Plümacher, the then Director of the theological library at Humboldt University, for his gracious assistance and for allowing me the full use of the library's resources. The Georgetown University Research Opportunities Program (GUROP) provided me with an undergraduate research assistant for the Fall 2005 semester, who happened to be one of my students, Kathleen M. Rommel. I thank her for the excellent work she did in collecting many of the more recent bibliographical entries. I also want to express my gratitude to Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., who read the entire manuscript and returned it in record time with excellent suggestions to improve it. My thanks go to the editorial staff at Liturgical Press, especially to Peter Dwyer, to Mary Stommes, Colleen Stiller, and to Linda Maloney for the fine work they have done in the production of this volume.

Last, I could never have completed this book without the love and support of my wife, Julia A. Lamm, and our son, Aidan. Both of them have made many sacrifices to allow me the time to work on this project. Throughout the many months it has taken to put the manuscript into final form, each has admirably exemplified that all-important virtue of Hebrews, “patient endurance.” A writer could not ask for a better support team.

Alan C. Mitchell  
Georgetown University

## ABBREVIATIONS

### *Biblical Books and Apocrypha*

Gen	Nah	1-2-3-4 Kgdms	John
Exod	Hab	Add Esth	Acts
Lev	Zeph	Bar	Rom
Num	Hag	Bel	1-2 Cor
Deut	Zech	1-2 Esdr	Gal
Josh	Mal	4 Ezra	Eph
Judg	Ps ( <i>pl.</i> : Pss)	Jdt	Phil
1-2 Sam	Job	Ep Jer	Col
1-2 Kgs	Prov	1-2-3-4 Macc	1-2 Thess
Isa	Ruth	Pr Azar	1-2 Tim
Jer	Cant	Pr Man	Titus
Ezek	Eccl ( <i>or</i> Qoh)	Sir	Phlm
Hos	Lam	Sus	Heb
Joel	Esth	Tob	Jas
Amos	Dan	Wis	1-2 Pet
Obad	Ezra	Matt	1-2-3 John
Jonah	Neh	Mark	Jude
Mic	1-2 Chr	Luke	Rev

### *Other Ancient Texts*

CD	Cairo Genizah copy of the <i>Damascus Document</i>
<i>Ep. Aristeas</i>	<i>Epistle of Aristeas</i>
<i>Jub</i>	<i>Jubilees</i>
LXX	Septuagint
<i>m.</i>	Mishnah
MT	Masoretic Text
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament

<i>Par. Jer.</i>	<i>Paraleipomena Jeremiou</i>
<i>P. Lond.</i>	<i>Greek Papyri in the British Museum I–VII</i>
<i>P. Oxy.</i>	<i>The Oxyrhyncus Papyri</i>
1Q20	Qumran Cave 1 <i>Genesis Apocryphon</i>
1QS	<i>Rule of the Community</i>
4Q <sup>c</sup> Amram	Qumran Cave 4 <i>Visions of ‘Amram</i>
4QDeut <sup>a</sup>	Seventeenth copy of Deuteronomy
11QMelch	Qumran Cave 11 <i>Melchizedek</i>
<i>T. Abr.</i>	<i>Testament of Abraham</i>
<i>T. Benj.</i>	<i>Testament of Benjamin</i>
<i>T. Gad</i>	<i>Testament of Gad</i>
<i>T. Job</i>	<i>Testament of Job</i>
<i>T. Jos.</i>	<i>Testament of Joseph</i>
<i>T. Levi</i>	<i>Testament of Levi</i>
<i>T. Mos.</i>	<i>Testament of Moses</i>
<i>T. Zeb.</i>	<i>Testament of Zebulun</i>
<i>Sib. Or.</i>	<i>Sibylline Oracles</i>

*Periodicals, Reference Works, Serials,  
and Books Frequently Cited*

AB	Anchor Bible
ABR	<i>Australian Biblical Review</i>
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
AJBA	<i>Australian Journal of Biblical Theology</i>
ALGHJ	Arbeiten zur Literatur und Geschichte des hellenistischen Judentums
AnBib	Analecta biblica
ANRW	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i>
ANTC	Abingdon New Testament Commentaries
<i>AsSeign</i>	<i>Assemblées du Seigneur</i>
Attridge	Harold W. Attridge, <i>The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews</i> . Hermeneia. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989
<i>AusBR</i>	<i>Australian Biblical Review</i>
AUSS	<i>Andrews University Seminary Studies</i>
BBR	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BDAG	Frederick W. Danker, reviser and editor, <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed.
BDF	Friedrich Blass, Albert Debrunner, and Robert W. Funk, <i>A Greek Grammar of the New Testament</i>
BGU	<i>Ägyptische Urkunden aus den königlichen Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin. Griechische Urkunden</i>
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
BibOr	Biblica et orientalia

<i>BibRes</i>	<i>Biblical Research</i>
BINS	Biblical Interpretation Series
<i>BJRL</i>	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester</i>
Bleek	Friedrich Bleek, <i>Der Brief an die Hebräer erläutert durch Einleitung, Übersetzung und fortlaufenden Kommentar</i> . 3 vols. Berlin: Dümmler, 1828, 1836, 1840
Braun	Herbert Braun, <i>An die Hebräer</i> . HNT 14. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1984
Bruce	Frederick F. Bruce, <i>The Epistle to the Hebrews</i> . NICNT. rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990
<i>BSac</i>	<i>Bibliotheca sacra</i>
<i>BT</i>	<i>The Bible Translator</i>
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
Buchanan	George W. Buchanan, <i>To the Hebrews: Translation, Comment, and Conclusions</i> . AB 36. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972
<i>BullBibRes</i>	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
<i>BZ</i>	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>BZNW</i>	<i>Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>CBQMS</i>	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
Charlesworth	James H. Charlesworth, <i>The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha</i> . 2 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1983–1985
<i>CSion</i>	<i>Cahiers Sioniens</i>
<i>CTQ</i>	<i>Concordia Theological Quarterly</i>
de Silva, <i>Perseverance</i>	David A. de Silva, <i>Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle “to the Hebrews.”</i> Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000
<i>EBib</i>	<i>Études bibliques</i>
<i>EcumRev</i>	<i>The Ecumenical Review</i>
<i>EDNT</i>	<i>Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Eds. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider. 3 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978–83
EKK	Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
Ellingworth	Paul Ellingworth, <i>The Epistle to the Hebrews</i> . NIGTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993
<i>EspV</i>	<i>Esprit et vie</i>
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
<i>GJ</i>	<i>Grace Journal</i>
Grässer	Erich Grässer, <i>An die Hebräer</i> . 3 vols. EKK 17. Zürich: Benziger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1990–97
Hagner	Donald A. Hagner, <i>Encountering the Book of Hebrews: An Exposition</i> . Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002
HAL	Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner. <i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> (2001)
Héring	Jean Héring, <i>The Epistle to the Hebrews</i> . London: Epworth, 1970

HNT	Handbuch zum Neuen Testament
HNTC	Harper's New Testament Commentaries
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HTSTeolStud	<i>HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies</i>
Hughes	Philip E. Hughes, <i>A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews</i> . Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JHC	<i>Journal of Higher Criticism</i>
JNSL	<i>Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages</i>
JOTT	<i>Journal of Translation and Textlinguistics</i>
JRH	<i>Journal of Religious History</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
KD	<i>Kerygma und Dogma</i>
KEK	Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament (Meyer-Kommentar)
KJV	King James Version
Koester	Craig R. Koester, <i>Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary</i> . AB 36. New York: Doubleday, 2001
Lane	William L. Lane, <i>Hebrews</i> . 2 vols. WBC 47. Dallas: Word, 1991
LQHR	<i>London Quarterly and Holborn Review</i>
LSJ	Henry G. Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart-Jones. <i>Greek-English Lexicon</i> . 9th rev. ed. 1996
<i>MelT</i>	<i>Melita theologica</i>
Michel	Otto Michel, <i>Der Brief an die Hebräer</i> . 6th ed. KEK 13. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966
MM	James H. Moulton and George Milligan. <i>Vocabulary of the Greek Testament</i> , 1930; repr. 1997
Montefiore	Hugh Montefiore, <i>A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews</i> . HNTC. New York: Harper & Row, 1964
MTS	Marburger Theologische Studien
MTZ	<i>Münchener theologische Zeitschrift</i>
NAB	New American Bible
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NEB	New English Bible
<i>Neot</i>	<i>Neotestamentica</i>
<i>NewDocs</i>	<i>New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity</i> . Edited by G. H. Horsley and S. Llewelyn. North Ryde, N.S.W.: Ancient History Document Research Centre Macquarie University, 1981–
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version
NJDT	<i>Neue Jahrbücher für Deutsche Theologie</i>
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NovTSup	Novum Testamentum Supplements

NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
<i>NRTh</i>	<i>La nouvelle revue théologique</i>
NTAbh	Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen
NTL	New Testament Library
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
Pfitzner	Victor C. Pfitzner, <i>Hebrews</i> . ANTC. Nashville: Abingdon, 1977
<i>PRSt</i>	<i>Perspectives in Religious Studies</i>
RB	<i>Revue biblique</i>
<i>ResQ</i>	<i>Restoration Quarterly</i>
<i>RevExp</i>	<i>Review and Expositor</i>
<i>RevQ</i>	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>
RSR	<i>Recherches de science religieuse</i>
RSV	Revised Standard Version
RTR	<i>Reformed Theological Review</i>
<i>SacDoc</i>	<i>Sacra Doctrina</i>
SB	Sources bibliques
SBLAB	SBL Academia Biblica
SBLDS	SBL Dissertation Series
SBLMS	SBL Monograph Series
SBLRBS	SBL Resources for Biblical Study
SBL SBS	SBL Sources for Biblical Study
SBLSCS	SBL Septuagint and Cognate Studies
ScC	<i>La scuola cattolica</i>
SE	<i>Studia evangelica I, II, III</i>
<i>SémiotBib</i>	<i>Sémiotique et Bible</i>
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SP	Sacra Pagina
SPAW	Sitzungsberichte der preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften
Spicq	Ceslas Spicq, <i>L'Épître aux Hébreux</i> . 2 vols. <i>EBib</i> . Paris: Gabalda, 1952–53
ST	<i>Studia theologica</i>
Str-B	Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, <i>Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch</i>
<i>TBei</i>	<i>Theologische Beiträge</i>
TBT	<i>The Bible Today</i>
TD	<i>Theology Digest</i>
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Eds. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich
TGI	<i>Theologie und Glaube</i>
TJ	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
TJT	<i>Toronto Journal of Theology</i>
TLZ	<i>Theologische Literaturzeitung</i>
TRu	<i>Theologische Rundschau</i>
TS	<i>Theological Studies</i>
TTZ	<i>Trierer theologische Zeitschrift</i>
TY	<i>Tantur Yearbook</i>
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>

VC	<i>Vigilae christianae</i>
VD	<i>Verbum domini</i>
VEccl	<i>Verbum et Ecclesia</i>
VF	<i>Verkündigung und Forschung</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
Weiss	Hans-Friedrich Weiss, <i>Der Brief an die Hebräer</i> . KEK 13. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991
Westcott	Brooke F. Westcott, <i>The Epistle to the Hebrews</i> . London: Macmillan, 1889, reprinted Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977
<i>WestTheolJourn</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche</i>

## INTRODUCTION

The task of any biblical commentary is to attempt to explain the text in a cogent and coherent manner. Hebrews, by its own admission, sets the bar for this task rather high, as it contains many things that are difficult to explain (5:11). Still, the ambiguities and anomalies of Hebrews make that endeavor not only challenging, but interesting as well.

This commentary follows the standard historical critical approach. Given the difficulties that Hebrews poses, it is essential to understand it on its own terms and in its historical setting. After a brief introduction, treating the usual elementary questions, the commentary conforms to the format of the *Sacra Pagina* series by offering a translation, notes, interpretation, and short bibliography for each section of the text. The translation is based on the New Revised Standard Version, with modifications that seek to provide a precise rendering of the Greek text into English. On the whole, the translation is a literal one. I have made occasional changes to the translation of the NRSV, which I believe suit the meaning of the words, phrases, or idioms in question, and which bring out nuances to the Greek that help the reader appreciate the sentiment of the author of Hebrews in these instances. The translation choices I have made were done only for scholarly purposes and not simply to change the readability of the NRSV in certain contexts. Hence they are not paraphrases of the NRSV. In my opinion, these changes reflect the range of meaning possible in the original Greek of Hebrews without dramatically changing the overall meaning chosen by the translators of the NRSV. The types of changes I have made to the NRSV translation of Hebrews are basically two: (1) Given the possibility that a Greek word, phrase, or idiom offers a translator several possible choices of English translation, I have sometimes chosen a translation that seems appropriate to the context of the verse in question. (2) The third edition of the standard NT Greek Lexicon (BDAG) was published in 2000, nine years after the publication of the translation of the NRSV. Hence in some instances I have chosen a translation that reflects advances in the lexicography of NT Greek, based on the range of meanings offered in BDAG.

The notes explain the translation and attend to textual, philological, and grammatical matters that are of interest and are necessary for understanding the meaning of Hebrews. The notes also contain references to other ancient literature that may help to elucidate the text. Special attention has been paid to the Septuagint, Hellenistic Jewish writings (notably from Josephus and Philo), and selected Greek and Roman authors, in an effort to locate Hebrews in the thought world, religious milieu, and cultural background of its author and audience. Unless otherwise noted the translations of Greek and Roman authors are taken from the volumes in the Loeb Classical Library. All translations of OT texts are taken from the NRSV. The interpretation looks to the larger picture of the developing arguments in Hebrews in order to understand its meaning and message for its first audience as well as for readers today. The bibliographies supply additional reading that may offer a more in-depth treatment of the text or an interpretation alternative to the one given in this commentary.

## 1. AUTHORSHIP

The debate over the authorship of Hebrews has focused mainly on whether it should be numbered among the letters of Paul. In the Eastern churches, confidence that Hebrews was authentically Pauline facilitated its inclusion in the canon, whereas in the West uncertainty over the identity of its author inhibited its easy reception. The earliest advocate of Pauline authorship was Pantaenus of Alexandria in the second century C.E. (Eusebius, *Church History* 6.14.4). The earliest extant manuscript of Hebrews,  $\mathfrak{P}^{46}$ , a witness to the Alexandrian text type, places it after Romans, reflecting the Eastern understanding of it as Pauline. Generally in other manuscripts Hebrews is placed among the letters of Paul or immediately after them, as in many printed editions of the Greek New Testament (Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [London and New York: United Bible Societies, 1971] 661–62).

Still, in antiquity the question of the authorship of Hebrews was unsettled. Origen's opinion, quoted by Eusebius (*Church History* 6.25.11-14), illustrates the problem well. Commenting on the style of Hebrews, Origen distinguishes it from Paul's style by describing it as less rude and written in a more elegant Greek. In his opinion the thought of Hebrews is similar to Paul's, but its style is not. He concludes that Hebrews was written by someone, perhaps a disciple of Paul, who had later recalled his teacher's thought and written it down. Curiously, Origen commends churches that attribute the authorship of Hebrews to Paul, and then claims that in truth only God knows who wrote it.

It has become standard for modern commentators to quote this agnostic opinion as representative of Origen's view on the authorship of Hebrews, although in some of his writings he attributes Hebrews to Paul (*First Principles* 1.2.5; 3.1.10, 2.4; 4.1.24, 27; *Against Celsus* 3.53; 7.29). Origen even challenges those who dispute Pauline authorship of Hebrews and claims an interest in proving otherwise (*Letter to Africanus* 8). Despite that challenge, Eusebius reports that Origen entertained the possibility of other authors, i.e., Clement of Rome and Luke (*Church History* 6.25.14). Another Eastern witness, Clement of Alexandria, shared the view that Luke had a role in the composition of Hebrews, as the translator of Paul's original Hebrew version into Greek (Eusebius, *Church History* 6.14.2).

In the West, Pauline authorship was not favored until the time of Augustine (*City of God* 16.22; *On Christian Doctrine* 2.8.13). Jerome acknowledged the difficulties of ascribing authorship to Paul, due to the difference in the style of Hebrews from the other Pauline letters. Nevertheless, he believed that Paul was its author and suggested that he could not put his name on the letter because it was written to Hebrews, who held Paul in disrepute. Like Clement of Alexandria, Jerome claimed that Paul originally wrote in Hebrew, which was translated into Greek by someone else, accounting for the stylistic differences from Paul's letters, which he had originally composed in Greek (*Lives of Illustrious Men* 5.59).

The consensus among commentators today is that Hebrews is non-Pauline, although advocates for Pauline authorship are still to be found. David Alan Black has reexamined the evidence for Pauline authorship and concluded that the internal evidence argues against it, whereas the external evidence argues for it. Regarding the external evidence of Origen's claim that only God knows who wrote Hebrews, Black takes Origen to mean that the secondary author, i.e., "the penman" is unknown. Filling in Origen's blank, Black concludes that Paul was the primary author of Hebrews with the help of Luke, as amanuensis ("Who Wrote Hebrews? The Internal and External Evidence Reexamined," *Faith and Mission* 18 [2001] 3–26).

Whereas Black's proposal is interesting, it is not conclusive. There is enough internal evidence from the style, vocabulary, and theology of Hebrews to raise serious doubts about Pauline authorship (Attridge, 2–3; Ellingworth, 7–12). Also, the external evidence reflects a common assumption among Alexandrian patristic writers that Paul authored Hebrews, an opinion that appears to rest more on an attempt to reconcile two opposing views regarding Pauline authorship than on any hard evidence (see Simon Kistemaker, "The Authorship of Hebrews," *Faith and Mission* 18 [2001] 58).

Black's suggestion that Eusebius' agnosticism over the authorship of Hebrews refers only to someone who acted as Paul's amanuensis is further complicated by the fact that there are clear instances in Eusebius where the verb *graphein*, "to write," refers both to authorship and to actual penning

(*Church History* 2.13.2; 2.17.16, 23; 2.22.6; 3.4.2; 3.4.7; 3.36.6, 11; 3.39.15; 4.7.9; 4.8.3, 5; 4.18.8). There are also places in the *Church History* where Eusebius prefers a compound of *graphein*, when he refers to actual writing alone (2.5.6; 2.8.1; 2.13.5; 2.16.1; 2.17.22; 2.22.6; 2.23.20; 3.3.3; 3.24.7; 3.38.2; 4.7.15). Black's distinction between author and amanuensis cannot be maintained in light of this evidence.

After Paul himself, individuals associated with him have also been proposed as the author of Hebrews. In the West, where Pauline authorship was not readily accepted, Tertullian had suggested Barnabas (*On Modesty*, 20; Jerome, *Lives of Illustrious Men* 5.59). His Cypriot background and status as a Levite made him a candidate, as someone who might have been interested in the ritual themes of Hebrews and the priesthood of Christ. A fair number of commentators from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have sought to establish him as the author of Hebrews, but not recently (see Spicq 1:199–200, n.8).

Paul's coworker Apollos has garnered a fair amount of interest as a possible author of Hebrews since the time of Martin Luther. Luther was of the opinion that the Alexandria-trained Apollos possessed both the knowledge of the LXX and the rhetorical skill needed to compose a document as refined as Hebrews. He cites Luke's assessment of Apollos as "mighty in the Scriptures" and notes that the "ornamental style of Hebrews" makes non-Pauline authorship plausible (*Sermons* 6.167). Later commentators continued to consider Apollos an appealing candidate because of his Alexandrian background, his connection to the Pauline circle, and his reputation as a powerful preacher whose style could be distinguished from Paul's. Among more recent commentators on Hebrews, Apollos is favored by Paul Ellingworth (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 21); Donald A. Hagner, (*Encountering the Book of Hebrews*, 23) and Victor C. Pfitzner (*Hebrews*, 26).

George H. Guthrie has seriously reexamined three centuries of evidence presented in favor of Apollos as the author of Hebrews and has categorized it in a helpful way ("The Case for Apollos as the Author of Hebrews," *Faith and Mission* 18 [2001] 41–56). He classifies the pro-Apollos arguments under three types: (1) no other NT personage fits the bill; (2) there are firm correspondences between what can be known about Apollos and the style and content of Hebrews; and (3) there are questionable correspondences between Apollos and Hebrews that rest more on speculation than on evidence (ibid. 49–54). In a refreshingly honest appraisal, however, Guthrie admits that although one may not be able to certify Apollos as the author of Hebrews he may be "as close as we are going to get" (ibid. 54).

At the beginning of the twentieth century Adolf von Harnack broke new ground in the debate over the authorship of Hebrews by proposing Paul's coworker Priscilla for the role ("Probabilia über die Adresse und den

Verfasser des Hebräerbriefes," ZNW 1 [1900] 16–41). Against the likelihood of her as author stands the masculine singular participle *diēgoumenon*, "telling," at 11:32, referring to the author. Still, in recent times Priscilla's authorship has been espoused by Ruth Hoppin (*Priscilla's Letter: Finding the Author of the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Fort Bragg, CA: Lost Coast Press, 1997], first published in 1997 by Christian Universities Press).

Hoppin's argument rests largely on a construct of femininity, which she finds in the letter; this indicates that the author was a woman, someone who was able to "identify with women." The evidence she culls from Hebrews, however, is ambiguous and relies on an assumed view of what characterizes the "feminine mind" over the "masculine mind." Hoppin identifies things like empathy, compassion, an interest in human weakness, and gentle tact and diplomacy as feminine, as if men were incapable of such emotions and conduct. The psychological portrait she draws of the author of Hebrews is tendentious to the extent that once she has defined the "feminine mind" she has no choice but to declare that the author is a woman. Hoppin employs a similar psychological construct to show that the author identifies with women, a claim that rests on the presupposition that the inclusion of women among the "Heroes of Faith" in Hebrews 11 demonstrates a "generosity" toward the portrayal of women that is characteristic of a "feminist."

Complicating the picture further is Hoppin's assumption that great pains were taken to hide the fact that the author was a woman. So, for example, she claims that the masculine accusative participle at 11:32, *diēgoumenon*, differs only by one letter from the feminine accusative, *diēgoumenēn*. Since Hoppin presupposes that changing one letter would not be difficult at all, she asserts that the feminine form was altered to the masculine in order to hide the true identity of the author. She cites Col 4:15 and Rom 16:7 as precedents for such a change. In those instances, however, the feminine form is either supported by manuscript evidence or grammatical ambiguity, neither of which applies to Heb 11:32. In the end Hoppin has presented an imaginative and creative attempt to vindicate Harnack's hypothesis, but her proposal is unconvincing.

The attempts at a precise identification of the author of Hebrews try to account for external and internal evidence to make the best possible determination of who may have written the sermon. In the history of its interpretation as many as thirteen individuals have been suggested as the author (see Ellingworth, 3). Not every one of those names merits equal attention, and much of the evidence brought forth to support the more likely candidates is speculative. Sometimes arguments based on internal evidence that some commentators amass to support Pauline authorship are used by other commentators to argue against Pauline authorship. External evidence does not always agree and cannot always be coordinated with internal evidence.

In the end, one can legitimately question the need to identify the author of Hebrews precisely. The consensus of contemporary commentators indicates correctly that Hebrews is non-Pauline and anonymous.

## 2. DESTINATION

A variety of geographical locations has been proposed for the destination of Hebrews. Even the greeting in 13:24, "Those from Italy send you greetings," which holds the only internal clue to the possible destination of the sermon, has been interpreted to identify Italy as the place of origin or as the destination for Hebrews. Still other cities have been favored for the location to which Hebrews was sent.

In ancient Christianity, because of the author's interest in the Jewish Law and cult, Jerusalem was thought to be the destination of Hebrews (Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistle to the Hebrews, Argument and Summary*, 2; Jerome, *On Illustrious Men*, 5). Some modern commentators have preferred Jerusalem or some other place in Palestine as the location of the community to which Hebrews was addressed (Buchanan, 255–56; Hughes, 19; Spicq 1:220–52; Westcott, xli). Against Jerusalem as the sermon's destination stands the absence of concrete references to the Temple and its cultic rituals. All the author's arguments relative to the Jewish priesthood and ritual practices are drawn from Scripture. Even if a later date for Hebrews, a time after the destruction of the Temple, were proposed, one might expect some reference to its destruction and to the end of sacrifice in Jerusalem. Such references, however, are lacking in Hebrews.

Apart from Jerusalem, commentators have preferred Rome as the sermon's destination. Although the salutation of "those from Italy" (13:24) has been cited as strong evidence that the letter is destined for Rome, the fact that Hebrews is quoted for the first time in a Roman document of the late first or early second century, *1 Clement*, may offer firmer evidence that the capital of the empire is the sermon's destination. In support of Rome commentators have also cited similarities between Hebrews and 1 Peter (Raymond E. Brown and John P. Meier, *Antioch and Rome: New Testament Cradles of Catholic Christianity* [New York: Paulist, 1984] 140–51).

One of the strongest modern proponents of a Roman destination is William L. Lane, who sees the following evidence as pointing to a Roman location for the recipients of Hebrews. Lane interprets "Those from Italy greet you" (Heb 13:24) as a reference to Italians living outside of their homeland who are sending greetings to a house church in Rome (1:lviii). He supports the claim with four additional reasons: (1) allusions to the community's generosity (6:10-11 and 10:33-34) are consistent with what is

known of the history of Roman Christianity as described by other ancient Christian sources like Ignatius of Antioch and Dionysius of Corinth; (2) the reference to the community's suffering (10:32-34) reflects the situation of the Roman church at the time of the Edict of Claudius, which expelled Jews and Jewish Christians from Rome in 49 C.E.; (3) the term used for the "leaders" of the community, *hēgoumenoi* (13:7, 17, 24), is found in Christian literature associated with Rome (*1 Clem* 36:1-6; *Hermas*, *Vis.* 2.2.6; 3.9.7); and (4) Clement of Rome is the first author to quote Hebrews, in his letter to Corinth (*1 Clem* 36:1-6) (Lane 1:lviii; "Social Perspectives on Roman Christianity during the Formative Years from Nero to Nerva: Romans, Hebrews, *1 Clement*," in Karl P. Donfried and Peter Richardson, eds., *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998] 196-244).

In addition to Jerusalem and Rome as possible destinations for Hebrews, other cities have been proposed: Alexandria (Charles P. Anderson, "The Epistle to the Hebrews and the Pauline Letter Collection," *HTR* 59 [1966] 429-38), Antioch (J. Vallance Brown, "The Authorship and Circumstances of Hebrews," *BSac* 80 [1923] 505-38; Vacher Burch, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its Sources and its Message* [London: Williams and Norgate, 1936] 137), Corinth (Montefiore, 11-30), Colossae (Thomas W. Manson, "The Problem of the Epistle to the Hebrews," *BJRL* 32 [1949-50] 1-17), and Ephesus (J. Vernon Bartlet, "The Riddle of the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Expositor* 5 [1913] 548-51). The consensus among commentators today is that Rome is the sermon's destination (Attridge, 11; Bruce, 14; Ellingworth, 29; Koester, 49-50; Weiss, 76).

### 3. DATE

The earliest manuscript of Hebrews,  $\mathfrak{P}^{46}$ , dates from the third century C.E. and the first clear mention of it in early Christian literature occurs in *1 Clement*, which is dated to ca. 96 C.E. While that must serve as the upper limit for the date, the lower limit is much debated. Not many would date it before 60 C.E., although some would because there is no reference to the destruction of the Temple in Hebrews, yet cultic activity seems to be referred to in the present tense. These commentators would argue that the Temple was still standing when Hebrews was written. That does not really prove much, however, since the cultic activity in Hebrews is restricted to the Levitical sanctuary and is not related to the Temple itself. Also, as several commentators point out, post-70 authors and literature such as Josephus, Clement of Rome, and *Diognetus* sometimes refer to the practice of the Levitical cult in the present tense (e.g., Attridge, 8; Koester, 53).

The internal evidence most often brought forth to support a date in the 60s is the references to the community's hardships (10:32-34; 12:4; 13:3).

Assuming a Roman destination, some commentators maintain that the suffering in 10:32-34 points to the expulsion of Jews and Jewish Christians from Rome under Claudius in 49 c.e. (Lane 1:lviii; Ellingworth, 31; Koester, 51). The mention of verbal abuse and afflictions along with imprisonment and the loss of possessions is thought to have been associated with the hardships Jews and Christians suffered under Claudius. Problematic for the assignment of these hardships to 49 c.e. is the paucity of evidence for exactly what kinds of suffering Jews and Jewish Christians endured at that time. Suetonius, for example, does not mention imprisonment (*Claudius* 25.4). It is likely that not all Jews and Jewish Christians were expelled from Rome by Claudius, so there is no telling whether his edict actually affected members of the community to which Hebrews was addressed (E. M. Smallwood, *The Jews Under Roman Rule* [2nd ed. repr. Leiden: Brill, 2001] 216). Roman Christianity in the first century c.e. seems to have comprised a number of relatively independent house churches with no centralized authority (Lane 1:lix-lx). This could mean that some Christian churches suffered more than others, since Claudius' action appears to have been targeted to those who were creating the disturbances over "Chrestus."

The later references to suffering make clear that none of the community members had shed their blood (12:4), but some were imprisoned (13:3). Commentators who see the earlier references as pointing to the time of Claudius date the later references to the time of Nero, or just prior to his actions against Christians. They conclude to a date for Hebrews in the mid- to late 60s (e.g., Bruce, 22; Lane 1:lxvi; Ellingworth, 33). It is possible, however, that Nero's persecution of Christians may have lasted even longer, continuing perhaps as late as 67 c.e., which would associate it with the events of the Jewish war (John R. Donahue, "Windows and Mirrors: The Setting of Mark's Gospel," *CBQ* 57 [1995] 21-22).

At a still later time, after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 c.e., Jews and Jewish Christians in Rome were subject to harassment and social dislocation due to the Roman victory in the Jewish War (Brown and Meier, *Antioch and Rome*, 201; Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus* [2nd ed. New Haven: Yale, 2000] 50-52). Josephus vividly describes the triumphal victory procession of Vespasian and Titus through the streets of Rome, where pictorial representations of the various campaigns were so realistically re-created on stages that the war was relived by those who had not witnessed it firsthand, as though the events were unfolding before their very eyes (*War* 7.145-46). He says further that the most conspicuous of the spoils were those taken from the Jerusalem Temple, including a copy of the Torah (*War* 7.148-52). Included in the procession were captives from Judea, among whom was a general, Simon son of Gioras, who was then publicly executed (*War* 7.155). The suffering of Christians addressed by Mark's gospel is the likely object of this kind of

abuse (see Brian J. Incigneri, *The Gospel to the Romans: The Setting and Rhetoric of Mark's Gospel*. BINS 65 [Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003] 208–52; Ivan Head, “Mark as a Roman Document from the Year 69: Testing Martin Hengel’s Thesis,” *JRH* 28 [2004] 240–59).

Ellen Bradshaw Aitken’s hypothesis that Hebrews was written in Rome during the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple and within the context of the Flavian triumph may well be correct (“Portraying the Temple in Stone and Text: The Arch of Titus and the Epistle to the Hebrews,” in Gabriella Gelardini, ed., *Hebrews: Contemporary Methods—New Insights*. BINS 75 [Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005] 131–48). The connections she makes between the text of Hebrews and the Flavian propaganda, which sought to use the Judean victory as a means of solidifying its rule, are indeed suggestive. They are not, however, conclusive as they lack exegetical demonstration from Hebrews itself. The suggestion, for example, that the Flavian triumph and apotheosis of Titus are intentionally replaced by the exaltation of the Son in Hebrews is tantalizing. But this proposal remains speculative and overlooks the fact that the exaltation of the Son is not exclusive to Hebrews in the NT, and that Hebrews employs many of the standard NT features of interpreting Psalm 110 to support his exaltation. Likewise the idea that the priesthood of Jesus was meant to critique the ideology of divine rule expressed in triumphal sacrifices is not really supported from evidence within Hebrews itself. Aitken can only point to an indirect typological reflection on the ritual of the Day of Atonement to make the point. She never really explains how the treatment of the Levitical rites becomes “the rhetorical site for resistance to the Roman imperial ideology.” Finally, the comparison between the prominence of the spoils from the Jerusalem Temple in the Flavian propaganda and the mention of the appointments of the Tabernacle in Heb 9:2-5 would be more convincing had the author of Hebrews restricted himself only to those items that were actually mentioned in Josephus’ account (*War* 7.148-50). Hebrews does not include all the appointments of the Tabernacle, but it features many more items than were displayed as part of the Flavian triumph. It would seem that the description in Hebrews is an attempt to represent the Tabernacle as it is described in Scripture. It becomes less likely, then, that the author’s purpose was to offset the Flavian propaganda with a triumphal statement of his own. Nevertheless, Aitken is correct about the date of Hebrews and the Roman environment in which it was composed, albeit for a purpose other than the one she envisions.

A post-70 date for Hebrews cannot be ruled out, and there are good reasons to think the sermon was written after the destruction of the Temple. Chief among them are the lack of specific references to the Temple cult in Hebrews and the development of the high-priestly christology, which may have been facilitated by the end of the Jewish priesthood in Jerusalem. In addition to these reasons there is the absence of a Temple in the new

Jerusalem in Hebrews. This last detail is similar to what one finds in Rev 21:22. Hebrews rather focuses on the heavenly sanctuary where the singular High Priest, Christ, serves.

Yet another reason for seriously considering a post-70 date for the composition of Hebrews is the way it complements Mark's gospel. Hebrews can be viewed as a development of the christological tradition of the Roman churches as articulated in the Gospel of Mark. Mark's emphasis on the Passion of Christ runs throughout his gospel and may have determined why he ended his gospel on a note of fear (Mark 16:8). In its portrayal of the suffering and death of Christ, Hebrews acknowledges the Markan stress on Jesus' suffering, characterized as an agony with prayers, supplication, loud cries, and tears (Mark 14:33-35; 15:34; Heb 5:7-8). Moreover, Jesus' self-offering as High Priest is completed when he brings his own blood into the heavenly sanctuary (Heb 9:12). Like Mark, Hebrews understands Christ's death as a redemption (*lytron*: Mark 10:45; *lytrōsis*: Heb 9:12). Hebrews, however, proclaims the exaltation of Christ and his session at the right hand of God at the moment when he made purification for sins by means of his death (Heb 1:3). Thus it goes beyond the Markan presentation of Jesus, which ends with the notice of the empty tomb.

Raymond E. Brown catalogued the similarities between Mark and Hebrews on the matter of Jesus' suffering. Curiously, he claimed that Hebrews was not dependent on any of the canonical gospels (*The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave*. 2 vols. [New York: Doubleday, 1994] 1:225, 227, 229, 234), even though he favors a date in the 80s (*An Introduction to the New Testament*. ABRL. [New York: Doubleday, 1997] 697). He notes in particular the use of *peirasmos*, "test," in Mark 14:38 and *peirazein*, "to test," in Heb 4:15; the fact that Mark's Jesus claims that God has the power to remove the cup from him (Mark 14:36; Heb 5:7); the way Jesus faces his death alone and feeling apparently abandoned (Mark 15:34; Heb 5:8); the notice that he died outside of Jerusalem (Mark 15:20; Heb 13:11-13); the variant reading of Codex Bezae for Mark 15:34, where "abandon" is replaced by "revile" (Heb 13:13; cf. 10:33; 11:26); and the traditions of the Temple veil in Mark 15:38 and Heb 6:19-20 and 10:19-20 (*ibid.* 1:26, 124, 231; 2:1057, 1107). Like Brown (*ibid.* 232), Craig Koester believes that biblical traditions of prayer as found in Psalm 116 (LXX: 114 and 115) may serve as a better source for Heb 5:7. The language of the psalm cannot be related any more precisely to Hebrews than can the language of Mark's gospel, apart from the use of *eisakouein*, "to hear" (Ps 114:1a), *deēsis*, "prayer" (Ps 114:1b; note that Hebrews adds *hikēteria* for "supplication"), and *dakruōn*, "tears" (Ps 114:8b).

In addition to these places where the description of Jesus' suffering in Hebrews seems to presuppose Mark's portrayal of his suffering and death, there are other apparent points of contact between the two Roman documents. Hebrews 12:25-29 may be linked to Mark 13:5, 9, 23, 25, 33 in the

use of the imperative *blepete*, “see that,” and the verb *saleuein*, “to shake” (see the Interpretation below at 12:25-29). There is also a certain affinity between Hebrews and Mark for some of the ideas associated with “tribulation” and “falling away,” notably in the Parable of the Sower. Both refer to “land,” *gē* (Mark 4:5, 8, 20; Heb 6:7), “thorns,” *akantha* (Mark 4:7, 18; Heb 6:8), and “producing,” *pherō/ekpherō* (Mark 4:8; Heb 6:8) (see Incigneri, *The Gospel to the Romans*, 357 n.128). The mention of “scorching,” *kaumatizein/kausis* (Mark 4:6; Heb 6:8) is likewise found in both texts.

Given the number of possible points of contact between the Gospel of Mark and Hebrews it seems reasonable to assume that the author of Hebrews knew some form of Mark’s gospel. It is possible, too, that the author understood his own christology to complement or develop some of the aspects of the basic Markan christology. One has to wonder also whether the later addition of Mark 16:19-20, with its reference to the session of Christ at the right hand of God, as well as the mention of the “confirmation of the message” by “signs,” was actually influenced by the proclamation of the exaltation of Christ (10:12) and the claim of God’s confirmation of the message by “signs” in Heb 2:3-4 (see the Interpretation below at 2:5-9). It is quite possible that Hebrews was first influenced by the Gospel of Mark and that the later editor who added Mark’s longer ending was influenced by Hebrews.

Commentators who favor a post-70 date for the composition of Hebrews look to the impact the loss of the Temple and the priesthood may have had on the community to which Hebrews was addressed. The fact that Hebrews appears to address a later generation of Christians who are flagging in fervor (3:14; 5:11-14; 6:1-6; 13:7; 12:12) may also indicate the appropriateness of a post-70 date (e.g., Braun, 3; Grässer 1:25; Weiss, 76-77; Pamela M. Eisenbaum, *The Jewish Heroes of Christian History: Hebrews 11 in Literary Context*. SBLDS 156 [Atlanta: Scholars, 1997] 7; idem, “Locating Hebrews within the Literary Landscape of Christian Origins,” in Gelardini, ed., *Hebrews: Contemporary Methods—New Insights*, 224-31). Some of these commentators place the date of Hebrews in the 80s or 90s, but given the context of the suffering or persecution the recipients seem to be enduring, it may be preferable to consider a time in the early 70s.

#### 4. AUDIENCE

The few clues Hebrews offers to the identity of its audience point to a second generation of Christians (2:3-4; 13:7) that has suffered in the past (10:32-34) and is undergoing another form of persecution, perhaps not as severe and more along the lines of social dislocation (12:3-6, 12-13). Initially

they appear to have made a serious effort at practicing their faith through service of one another (6:9-12). In light of the confidence the author expresses in the audience, it would seem that they had derived some initial benefit from their early instruction (10:34).

Why they are now lagging in their practice is not fully evident, but they appear not to be making the kind of progress the author expects of them (5:11-6:3). Perhaps they are threatened by the dire situation of Jews in Rome after the failure of the First Jewish Revolt and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Some have even stopped attending the common gathering, perhaps because of their malaise or because they do not want to be associated with an assembly that may be under increased scrutiny from their Roman neighbors after the Jewish war with Rome (10:25). Romans, who knew the origins of Christianity in Judaism, would easily have associated Christians with Jews and treated them with similar disdain. Such treatment need not have taken on the official status of a governmental persecution, and most likely it did not.

Perhaps, as a result of such treatment, the recipients of Hebrews wondered whether remaining Christian was to their advantage or at all worthwhile. In any event, the possibility of apostasy is very real in the sermon (6:4-8; 10:26-31). Exhortations to "hold fast" (4:14; 10:23) attempt to shore up the faith of the recipients so that they do not "drift away" (2:1). The presentation of the example of biblical figures who have endured hardship and suffering seems also to be intended to bolster the faith of those who are flagging in their practice (11:1-40).

There is no way to tell what the makeup of the audience of Hebrews is. Roman Christianity had been largely Jewish in its inception, but an increasing Gentile population became part of it after Claudius had expelled some Jewish Christians from Rome in 49 c.e. (James C. Walters, "Romans, Jews and Christians: The Impact of the Romans on Jewish/Christian Relations in First Century Rome," in Donfried and Richardson, eds., *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome*, 175-95). By the time Paul wrote Romans, Jewish Christians were again more present in Roman Christian house churches. It was common in the past to assume that the audience was Jewish Christian because of the sermon's prescript, "To the Hebrews." Often, in view of that understanding, the situation of the audience was taken to be that some of its members were no longer confident in the atoning death of Christ and so were contemplating a return to Judaism. This, then, would have been the author's purpose in exhorting his listeners not to apostasize and to stay the course (Bruce, 382; Ellingworth, 78-80; Barnabas Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991] 4-15; William R. G. Loader, *Sohn und Hoherpriester: Eine traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zur Christologie des Hebräerbriefes*. WMANT 53 [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1981] 258; Spicq 1:5-8). This hypothe-

sis is questionable in light of the evidence from Hebrews itself, which does not suggest that its readers are contemplating a return to Judaism. Any arguments in Hebrews that rely on a comparison with Judaism are confined to select scriptural texts from the LXX. Since the comparisons with Judaism deal mostly with its ritual and priesthood, and since there is nothing really to tie those comparisons to actual Jewish practice at the time Hebrews was written, the sermon is probably not directed to a group of Jewish Christians who wish to return to their synagogue(s).

The quality of Greek composition of Hebrews and the high literary level of the sermon suggest that the individuals who received it were educated. In that case they may have been of a higher social standing than some other Roman Christians (James S. Jeffers, "Jewish and Christian Families in First Century Rome," in Donfried and Richardson, eds., *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome*, 128–50). Other than that slim bit of evidence, there is really nothing else in the sermon to indicate the social makeup of the audience.

Regarding the organization of the community the evidence is equally thin. They have had past "leaders" (13:7) and have present ones (13:17). Presumably there were teachers, since there is reference to their initial instruction (6:1-2). One might assume, too, that there were preachers in the community since the author of Hebrews seems to represent that office in the composition of his sermon. The author, of course, may be a teacher if the teaching/preaching functions were combined. There is no mention of apostles, prophets, bishops, presbyters, or deacons. Since the Roman Christians seem to have been grouped in a number of house churches without central organization, it is likely that Hebrews was addressed to one of those house churches. Whether the sermon had a wider circulation in Rome cannot be determined. Certainly it was known by Clement, who referred to it in his own writing ca. 96 C.E.

## 5. GENRE

Hebrews eludes easy classification as an example of a particular genre because of the anomalies of literary form that beset it. Lacking an epistolary salutation and thanksgiving, which most NT letters contain, Hebrews does not appear to be a letter. Although it does have an epistolary postscript, not every commentator has been confident that it was part of the original document. The issue is further compounded by the traditional placement of Hebrews among the letters of Paul in the canon. In its transmitted form Hebrews appears to be more of an essay or a treatise than a letter. Consequently it is easier to describe Hebrews than to classify it.

a. *Letter/Epistle*

From an early date Hebrews was included in collections of Pauline letters. Formally, however, it does not easily fit within the form of a letter. The most obvious reason is the opening, which lacks the standard elements of a letter: a salutation along with the names of the sender and recipients and a thanksgiving. The title “To the Hebrews” is found in some early manuscripts of Hebrews, as a superscription, but it may not have been part of the original sermon (Koester, 172). To complicate matters, Hebrews does conclude like a typical letter, which frequently ends with some kind of closing remarks, benediction, and farewell. It is the opposite of James, which begins like a letter but does not end like one. Then again there is 1 John, which neither begins nor ends like a letter. All other NT letters have these opening and concluding elements. So the problem of assigning the letter form to Hebrews derives from the discrepancy between its opening and the closing.

Through the years scholars have tried to offer suggestions that might overcome the problem of defining the genre of Hebrews and place it among other New Testament letters. So, for example, a few have claimed that the epistolary prescript has been lost, while others have challenged the authenticity of the epistolary conclusion. Adolf Deissmann made the distinction between a letter and an epistle. Although he treated Hebrews as an epistle, hence a literary artistic letter, he claimed that it might just as easily have been an oration or a diatribe (Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910] 244). More substantial defenses of Hebrews as an epistle note the inclusion of expository and hortatory sections in the body of Hebrews that are typical of epistles (Spicq 1:21–22). Some commentators argue that the fact that Hebrews was sent to a concrete community indicates that it was meant to function in some way as a letter. So even if it does not contain all the formal characteristics of a letter, the epistolary elements it replicates in chapter 13 should be seen to contribute to its function as a letter (Ellingworth, 62; Lindars, *Theology*, 6–7, Spicq 1:21–22). John Dunnill designated Hebrews an “encyclical letter” because he identified in it a mixture of personal and general elements, which he believes is characteristic of NT encyclicals (*Covenant and Sacrifice in the Letter to the Hebrews*. SNTSMS 75 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992] 22).

b. *Homily*

The work of Hartwig Thyen on the form of the Jewish-Hellenistic synagogue homily opened up a new area of genre studies in the study of Hebrews (*Der Stil des jüdisch-hellenistischen Homilie*. FRLANT 47 [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1955]). Thyen found examples in Philo’s commentary on Genesis, 1 *Clement*, 4 Maccabees, Stephen’s speech in Acts 7, *Barnabas*,

*Hermas*, and the Wisdom of Solomon. He identified in Hebrews so many of the characteristics of the diaspora synagogue homily, as he reconstructed it from Jewish sources, that he actually claimed Hebrews was “the only example of a completely preserved homily” (ibid. 106). Those characteristics include homiletic language marked by a communal tone, the use of the LXX as a source, the introduction of scriptural citations with rhetorical questions, and the use of paraenesis and exhortation.

Thyen’s work was well received by some scholars (Braun, 1; Erich Grässer, “Der Hebräerbrief 1938–1963,” *TRu* 30 [1964] 153; Albert Vanhoye, *Homilie für haltbedürftige Christen: Struktur und Botschaft des Hebräerbriefes* [Regensburg: Pustet, 1981] 11; Michel, 24). Others, however, thought the category of sermon or homily was too vague and ill-defined to apply to Hebrews with certitude (Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 2: *History and Literature of Early Christianity* [New York and Berlin: DeGruyter, 1982] 273; Karl P. Donfried, *The Setting of Second Clement in Early Christianity*. NovTSup 38 [Leiden: Brill, 1974] 26).

### c. Exhortation

By its own description in 13:22, Hebrews is “a word of exhortation.” Judging from the highly paraenetic nature of the book, that is a rather accurate description. The term “a word of exhortation” occurs elsewhere in the NT in Acts 13:15, where Paul and Barnabas visit the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia and are invited by the officials to offer a word of exhortation, if they have one, after the reading from the Law and the prophets. This example associates “a word of exhortation” very closely with a synagogue homily, and one wonders whether a distinction between the two can be drawn. It must be noted, however, that Hebrews is more than just exhortation. The paraenesis (hortatory material) of Hebrews is integrated into the overall argument of the book. The hortatory sections in Hebrews usually alternate with expository sections, and they are designed to function in relation to the exposition of the main argument. Therefore one has to wonder if the category of homily or exhortation is capable of accurately describing the genre of Hebrews.

In response to the criticism of Thyen’s thesis as too vague, the challenge of defining Hebrews as a homily or exhortation was met by a fresh generation of studies that sought to vindicate the essence of Thyen’s thesis. Lawrence Wills, for example, undertook a serious study that used the text of Acts 13 to demonstrate the consistent features of an oral sermon, which he labeled “a word of exhortation” (“The Form of the Sermon in Hellenistic Judaism and Early Christianity,” *HTR* 77 [1984] 277–99). He attempted to specify the distinction between the vague categories of synagogue homily and “word of exhortation.” The peculiarities of the genre are evident in

Acts 13:16-41, where they are discerned in a three-part structure consisting of (a) exempla, (b) conclusions drawn from the exempla and applied to the audience, and (c) exhortation. In Acts 13, Luke begins with biblical examples drawn from the history of Israel, then he concludes to the application of the salvation promised to the ancestors now to the audience Paul addresses and ends with an exhortation that takes the form of a warning drawn from Hab 1:5 (*ibid.* 278–79). Simply put, then, this oral sermon proceeds from example to conclusion to exhortation, a pattern Wills finds in many early Christian documents, notably Hebrews. Several commentators agree that Hebrews is a sermon in the style of a synagogue homily (e.g., Attridge, 14; Lane, 1:lxxv; Weiss, 40).

Recently, Gabriella Gelardini has maintained that not only is Hebrews a synagogue homily; it is a particular type of synagogue homily that was prescribed for part of the Palestinian Triennial Cycle, in which the Torah was read continuously over three years (“Hebrews, an Ancient Synagogue Homily for Tisha be-Av: Its Function, Its Basis, Its Theological Interpretation,” in *eadem*, ed., *Hebrews: Contemporary Methods—New Insights*, 107–27). Gelardini’s analysis of Hebrews as a synagogue homily in the context of a sabbath gathering is indeed interesting and suggestive. The evidence she presents, however, is drawn primarily from the Babylonian Talmud and the Mishnah and is rather late in relation to the dating of Hebrews. Hebrews certainly does appear to be an exhortation or a homily of some sort, but to claim that it is a synagogue homily for Tisha be-Av, as Gelardini does, may be an exercise in overdetermination.

#### d. *Midrash*

Commentators have called attention to midrashic elements in Hebrews and have suggested that certain passages of the sermon are themselves *midrashim*. By midrash they mean a method of Jewish scriptural exegesis that was common in rabbinic Judaism. In its origin the term “midrash” did not refer to a distinct literary form but rather to a marginal gloss or explanatory note on some part of a scriptural text. In its most general sense in rabbinic Judaism midrash is a form of study directed to a particular question or issue. It is therefore an actualization of the biblical text, applied to a particular situation that occasioned it. A common feature of midrash is the citation of one or more biblical texts.

George W. Buchanan maintained that the first twelve chapters of Hebrews are a homiletic midrash on Ps 110 (*To the Hebrews*. AB 36 [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972] xxi–xxii). His classification has not been widely adopted by later commentators (Ellingworth, 61). Elke Tönges sees Hebrews as a “Jesus Midrash,” which means that although the author of Hebrews employs a Jewish method of scriptural interpretation, his midrashic exposition

is distinct from Jewish midrash because it is christological ("The Epistle to the Hebrews as a 'Jesus-Midrash,'" in Gelardini, ed., *Hebrews: Contemporary Methods—New Insights*, 89–105). Tönges acknowledges that the biggest obstacles to her hypothesis are a lack of documentary evidence to support this kind of midrash within a synagogue worship service and the lack of conformity of Hebrews to the later midrashic form of a homily. Consequently, her conclusion is tentative: if Hebrews is a Jesus-midrash, it may possibly be a version of a homiletic form that originated in a first-century Hellenistic synagogue service (ibid. 103–104).

The suggestions by Gelardini and Tönges make valuable contributions to a more precise definition of the genre of Hebrews. It would seem, however, that much more work on the synagogue homily needs to be done before one can comfortably classify Hebrews as an example of that genre and locate its *Sitz im Leben* within a synagogue worship service. Nevertheless, Hebrews may be classified as some kind of homily or sermon, though perhaps not specifically one whose *Sitz im Leben* was a synagogue. It may represent a homily that was written or delivered to a Christian house church in Rome, for a group made up mostly of Gentile Christians. Such a homily, characterized by a fair amount of hortatory material, would fit the author's designation of Hebrews as a "word of exhortation" (13:22).

## 6. STRUCTURE

The structure of Hebrews continues to be an unsettled issue, and one that is highly complicated by the variety of proposals that have been made over the years. For the most part the suggestions fall into two categories: thematic and non-thematic (Attridge, 14–15). Albert Vanhoye labels these categories "conceptual" and "literary" (*La Structure Littéraire de L'Épître aux Hébreux* [Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1963] 11–32).

(a) *Thematic Structure*: A typical thematic structure divides Hebrews into blocks according to a theme identified within these blocks by the commentator. Philip E. Hughes (*Hebrews*, 3–4), for example, divides Hebrews into six parts, with the superiority of Christ the main theme of the entire work: (I) Christ superior to the prophets (1:1–3); (II) Christ superior to the angels (1:4–2:18); (III) Christ superior to Moses (3:1–4:13); (IV) Christ superior to Aaron (4:14–10:18); (V) Christ superior as a new and living Way (10:19–12:29); (VI) Concluding Exhortations, Requests, Greetings (13:1–25).

The problem with thematic structure is that it is very subjective, depending on how well a given commentator can identify the theme in a particular section of the book. For this reason thematic outlines vary quite a bit one

from the other, making it very difficult indeed to make structural sense out of Hebrews. The reader is apt to question whether the theme is actually present in the sermon or whether the commentator has read the theme into it. As Attridge notes, thematic approaches often concentrate only on certain sections of Hebrews and do not necessarily deal with the letter in its entirety. Frequently they emphasize the expository sections, giving the impression that the work is largely dogmatic (Attridge, 14). George H. Guthrie points out rightly that thematic approaches are not altogether flawed and do have the virtue of emphasizing the relationship between structure and content (*The Structure of Hebrews: A Textlinguistic Analysis*. NovTSup 73 [Leiden: Brill, 1994] 28).

(b) *Non-Thematic Structure*: One way of overcoming some of the limitations of thematic organizations of Hebrews is to take a non-thematic approach, which looks more at the language of the sermon and analyzes it according to principles of literary, rhetorical, or linguistic criticism. In the last forty years this approach has dominated structural studies of Hebrews. Perhaps the best known literary analysis is Albert Vanhoye's.

Literary analysis attends to the literary features of a text, such as the use of distinctive vocabulary, transitions from one section to another, standard ancient literary techniques like *inclusio*, in which a section begins and ends with similar words, grammatical devices, or expressions, or chiasm, in which elements of a text are arranged in reverse parallel form around a central idea. Internal allusions and repetition are other literary features that may give some clue to the author's intended organization of a text.

Vanhoye, for example, paid much attention to the use of hook words (*mots crochets*; see Léon Vaganay, "Le plan de l'épître aux Hébreux," in *Mémorial Lagrange* [Paris: Gabalda, 1940] 269–77), *inclusio*, and chiasm. "Angel" in 1:4 and 1:5, "faithful" in 2:17 and 3:2, and "high priest" in 4:14–16 and 5:1–2 are examples of hook words that demarcate and connect sections of the sermon. Hebrews uses *inclusio* often, and one clear example comes in the framing of the unit from 7:1–10 where the name Melchizedek occurs in v. 1 and v. 10. Hebrews 13:14 is arranged as a chiasm, helping the author to compare present earthly existence with future heavenly existence:

For here we have no lasting city,  
but we are seeking the city which is to come.

In the form of a Greek chi (X), the elements are paralleled in reverse order, with the noun "city" as the central idea. What the readers now have, an earthly city, is compared with what they seek, a heavenly city. The common notion of the city anchors the author's attempt to show what is transient and what is permanent. On the basis of literary features such as these

Vanhoye assembled an elaborate five-part structure for Hebrews arranged concentrically around the central section from 5:11–10:39, which deals with sacrifice and the perfection of Jesus as High Priest. Thus he was able to map out the following scheme (Vanhoye, *Structure*, 85):

Division		Subject	Dominant Genre	Corresponding Section
a.	1:1-4	Introduction		z.
I.	1:5–2:18	The name superior to the angels'	Exposition	V.
	A. 3:1–4:14	Faithful Jesus	Paraenesis	IV. B.
II.	B. 4:15–5:10	Jesus the compassionate High Priest	Exposition	IV. A.
	p. 5:11–6:20	Preliminary exhortation: Jesus, the High Priest	Paraenesis	III. f.
	A. 7:1-28	According to the order of Melchizedek	Exposition	III. C.
III.	B. 8:1–9:28	Perfected	Exposition	Center
	C. 10:1-18	Cause of eternal salvation	Exposition	III. A.
	f. 10:19-39	Final exhortation	Paraenesis	III. p.
	A. 11:1-40	The faith of the ancients	Exposition	II. B.
IV.	B. 12:1-13	The necessary endurance	Paraenesis	II. A.
V.	12:14–13:19	The peaceful fruit of justice	Paraenesis	I.
z.	13:21-25	Conclusion		a.

Although Vanhoye's proposal has been criticized by some (see James Swetnam, "Form and Content in Hebrews 1–6," *Bib* 53 [1972] 368–85; "Form and Content in Hebrews 7–13," *Bib* 55 [1974] 333–48; Koester, 83–86), other commentators have adopted his basic scheme while trying to improve on it (see Attridge, 17–20). Attridge is correct to point out that the problem of finding the structure of Hebrews stems from the fact that it is such a literarily rich document, containing many structural signs, that arranging them in some coherent scheme is very difficult. Any attempt at a structural arrangement usually results in providing only part of the puzzle (*ibid.* 16).

Other non-thematic structural proposals have looked to ancient rhetoric for clues. These organize individual units of the sermon or its entirety into a coherent rhetorical pattern based on the elements of an ancient speech. Rhetorical handbooks from antiquity play a role in identifying the major divisions of a speech: (1) *proemium* or *exordium*, (2) *narratio* with *propositio*, (3) *argumentatio* with *probatio* and *refutatio*, (4) *peroratio*, and (5) *postscriptum*

(Cicero, *On Invention* 1.1-109). But even here commentators do not agree on what belongs in any of these divisions, nor do they agree on exactly what type of rhetoric Hebrews is. Is it epeideictic (expository) rhetoric, or is it deliberative (persuasive) rhetoric? Or is it a combination of both?

Craig Koester finds a rhetorical structure for Hebrews satisfying because he believes the author's argument is more linear than circular. His structural scheme for Hebrews is as follows (*Hebrews*, 84–85):

- I. Exordium (1:1–2:4)
- II. Proposition (2:5-9)
- III. Arguments (2:10–12:27)
  - A. First Series (2:10–6:20)
    - 1. Argument: Jesus received into glory through faithful suffering—a way others are called to follow (2:10–5:10)
    - 2. Transitional Digression: Warning and Encouragement (5:11–6:20)
  - B. Second Series (7:1–10:39)
    - 1. Argument: Jesus' suffering is the sacrifice that enables others to approach God (7:1–10:25)
    - 2. Transitional Digression: Warning and Encouragement (10:26-39)
  - C. Third Series (11:1–12:27)
    - 1. Argument: God's people persevere through suffering to glory by faith (11:1–12:24)
    - 2. Transitional Digression: Warning and Encouragement (12:25-27)
- IV. Peroration (12:28–13:21)
- V. Epistolary Postscript (13:22-25)

This structure is clean and accounts for all the sections of Hebrews in a coherent way. One quickly sees, however, that it does not conform exactly to the divisions of an ancient speech. Also, by locating the paraenetic sections under the heading "transitional digression" Koester, like previous commentators, favors the expository sections over the paraenesis. One advantage to Koester's structural arrangement is that it shows how the sermon's core is made up of three series of arguments that match the example of Jesus' suffering in the first series with the readers' suffering in the third. The second series of arguments provides the rationale for making that connection between the two. Consequently, the structure of the sermon helps the author to achieve his goal in preaching to the extent that it helps the readers to identify with Jesus.

More recent structural analysis has looked to “linguistic discourse” analysis, or “text-linguistic” analysis. George Guthrie prefers a “text-linguistic” or a “discourse” analysis, in part because it can incorporate some of the methodology of rhetorical and literary analysis. The work as a whole is understood to be a “discourse,” whereas an individual part contributing to the whole is called an “embedded discourse.” The “embedded discourse” is composed of smaller units called “paragraphs.” “Paragraphs” are made up of “cola,” at which level the individual words, grammar, and style of the author function. “Text-linguistic” analysis tries to understand the relationships between the sections of a given discourse by first examining each “colon” so that each of the “paragraphs” can be understood for how it relates to the entire “discourse.” It is the “paragraphs” that express the author’s meaning, and so the “text” can only be understood by grasping the significance of the relationship between the “paragraphs” that make it up (Guthrie, *Structure*, 46–48). Guthrie’s structure falls into two main parts: 1:5–4:13, and 4:14–13:19, with the Exordium (1:1-4), the Benediction (13:20-21), and the Conclusion (13:22-25) framing the overall arrangement. (For a fuller schematic outline showing the “embedded discourses” see Guthrie, *Structure*, 144.)

This commentary favors a five-part structure of Hebrews that modifies Vanhoye’s proposal. Following Swetnam’s suggestion that paraenetic sections come more naturally after expository sections in Hebrews (“Form and Content,” 385), the structure of the sermon is arranged thus:

- |   |            |
|---|------------|
| 1:1-4   | Exordium   |
| I. Jesus, Son Crowned with Glory as a Result of His Suffering and Death<br>(1:5–2:18) |            |
| II. Jesus, Apostle and High Priest: A Model of Faith and Hope (3:1–6:20)              |            |
| III. The Message for the Mature: Another Priest Like Melchizedek (7:1–10:39)          |            |
| IV. Heroic Faith and the Discipline of Suffering (11:1–12:13)                         |            |
| V. Warnings and Exhortations (12:14–13:19)  |            |
| 13:20-25  | Postscript |

## 7. ESCHATOLOGY

Hebrews employs a combination of realized and future eschatology to achieve its purpose of impressing on its readers the full effect of the salvific work of Christ the High Priest. Having been himself perfected through suffering, Christ became the source of eternal salvation for others (5:9), who are brought to glory along with him (2:10). Consequently, eschatology and

soteriology are closely related in the sermon (Attridge, 28). As the pioneer of salvation (2:10), Jesus has passed through the heavens (4:14) to enter the heavenly sanctuary as a forerunner (6:20) who, now in exaltation (1:13; 7:26; 8:1; 12:2), has made it possible for others to receive an eternal inheritance (9:15) as well. The eschatological pattern established in his death, resurrection, and exaltation can be replicated for those who follow him (10:19-22). As the readers run their own race they must fix their gaze on the one who has gone before them (12:2).

From the beginning of the sermon it is clear that the author understands the end times to have been inaugurated, as he addresses his audience "in these last days" (Heb 1:2). This designation is contrasted to the former times (1:1), the time of previous generations (3:16). It is equally clear that the final destination of the audience has not yet been reached, as they journey toward their ultimate goal to find "rest" (Heb 4:1, 6, 9, 11). The location of that rest is a present reality, since the readers have already come to a heavenly city (Heb 12:22) and are receiving an unshakeable kingdom (Heb 12:28). Still, the author proclaims that they have no lasting city here, but look forward to the future city that is to come (11:16; 13:14). Spanning the tension of present and future is "today" (Heb 3:13-15; 4:7), the opportune time to prepare for the ultimate destination.

The eschatological challenge for the readers of Hebrews is to live in the present with an eye to the future. They have already "tasted" the "heavenly gift," the "goodness of the word of God," and "powers of the age to come" (6:4-5). Proleptically they have already been sanctified by Christ's once for all self-offering (10:14), and still they have yet to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end (6:11), as they must await the day when Christ will return to save them (9:28). Since, however, they live in an interim period when not all of Christ's enemies have been put under his feet (10:13), the fullness of his salvific work will not be realized until he returns (10:37-39). To this end the author exhorts his readers to hold fast to their confession (3:6; 4:14; 10:19-22), to approach God with confidence (4:16; 10:19, 22), and to avoid sin that will result in a judgment (6:4-8; 12:14-17, 25-29; 10:26-31).

The problem for the modern reader of Hebrews is to discern the relationship of the three eras addressed in the sermon's eschatology. In particular the ambiguity created by the coincidence of present and future allows for the possibility of confusion over the sermon's eschatological teaching. The tension between present and future corresponds to a tension between earth and heaven. It would be fine if those living in the present earthly realm were confined to that sphere. A problem arises when one tries to understand how the once for all self-offering of Christ in history has inaugurated the future age in the heavenly realm, so that those living in the present earthly realm are already benefiting from the effects of his salvific death, resurrection, and exaltation. According to Hebrews they transcend

the present to share in the benefits of the future. The present age may ultimately be redeemed, but those living in it must await final salvation with the return of Christ.

## 8. CONSCIENCE/CONSCIOUSNESS OF SIN IN HEBREWS

Hebrews expresses the efficacious work of the sacrificial death of Christ as the “perfection of the conscience,” *syneidēsis*, which alone enables the worshiper to have access to God. Thus the once for all self-offering of Christ effected what could not be accomplished under the old covenant and through the ritual acts of the Levitical priesthood (7:11). “Perfection” in this sense is a hallmark of the new covenant written on the heart, and captures the sense of interior purification, more complete than any purification sought under the old covenant. The stress on the once for all nature of Christ’s own perfection, which is the basis for the perfection of believers, indicates that in one sense the purification of the conscience has already happened. Therefore nothing more need be done to bring about this kind of purification.

Still, one finds warnings against sinning and reminders of the possibility of “falling away” throughout the sermon. These warnings indicate that the author does not see the purification of the conscience of the worshiper as something that precludes the possibility of further sinning. Rather, what was won in the purification of the conscience was freedom from the guilt of one’s past sins; this freedom, in turn, facilitated the ability of the believer to worship God in full confidence. Christ has opened the way for the worshiper to approach the throne of God, whose grace strengthens the heart. Whereas Christ, as High Priest, has removed the consciousness of sin by purifying the conscience of guilt, the reader is not freed of sin in the final sense until the end of time.

Hebrews 9:9 makes it clear that sacrifices under the old covenant could not perfect the conscience of the worshiper. In contrast with that assertion stands 9:14 with its promise that the blood of Christ will purify the conscience of the readers from dead works. Again at 10:2 the author refers to the “conscience,” this time as the “consciousness of sin,” which theoretically should not have existed were the sacrifices of the Levitical system able to cleanse the worshiper. The opposite seems to be true: repetitive sacrifices stand as a reminder of sin (10:3). Under the new covenant, the sacrifice of Christ effected the purification that was unattainable under the old covenant and made possible the access to God that worshipers now have, because through the agency of his blood they have been sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and washed with pure water (10:22).

The teaching of Hebrews, then, is that through baptism the believer's consciousness of past sins, the evil conscience, is removed (10:2, 14, 17-18, 22). This removal of guilt was secured by the death of Christ, whose blood atoned for all sin, once for all. The realization of the complete nature of Christ's atoning death substantiates the author's claim in 10:26 that there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, something he has already demonstrated in his discussion of the inability of the Levitical system to perfect the conscience of the worshiper.

Hebrews thus emphasizes that atonement for sin was accomplished once for all in the sacrificial death of Christ (1:3; 2:17; 7:27; 9:26, 28; 10:10, 12; 13:12). Yet it warns of the possibility of sin after one's initial repentance (3:13; 10:26) and knows of the temptation to sin (4:15). This possibility applies especially to the sin of apostasy (6:6). The purification of the conscience of the worshiper, then, does not preclude the possibility of sinning again. Still, under the new covenant sin will not be regarded by God, as it had been under the old (8:12; 10:6, 17). The critical distinction is that under the new covenant sins are forgiven without repeated atoning sacrifices (10:18), and sin can be avoided through endurance (12:1, 4; 13:13).

## 9. THE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST AND THE MINISTERIAL PRIESTHOOD

The christology of Hebrews is unique for the way it introduces the notion of Christ as High Priest. By portraying Jesus as a priest the author stresses a new means of access to God through the mediation of Christ, who offers himself as an atoning sacrifice. It is clear in Hebrews that Christ is the singular High Priest. Unlike the Levitical priests, who were many in a succession of one after the other, Christ is the eternal High Priest whose sacrifice is once for all. Consistent with this christology, Hebrews does not attribute the title of priest to any Christian minister. If there are such in the community to which Hebrews was addressed, they are called "leaders." Albert Vanhoye makes this point especially when he distinguishes Hebrews from 1 Peter and Revelation, where the title "priest" is extended to the baptized collectively (*Old Testament Priests and the New Priest* [Petersham, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1986] 235, 311-18).

In Roman Catholicism, Hebrews has been enlisted to ground the ministerial priesthood of bishops, priests, and deacons. The Council of Trent cited Heb 7:12 as the foundation for a new eternal priesthood, a change from the old (*De Sacramento Ordinis*, 1). The Second Vatican Council made an explicit connection between the eternal priesthood of Christ (Heb 5:1-10; 7:24; 9:11-28) and the ministerial priesthood of those who are consecrated in his image in the sacrament of Orders (*Lumen gentium*, 28). Elsewhere

Vatican II alluded to Hebrews in support of the ministerial priesthood (*Presbyterorum ordinis*, 3) and the priesthood shared by all the baptized (*Lumen gentium*, 10).

Whether Hebrews makes a connection between the high priesthood of Christ and ministerial priesthood might be better established were there clear evidence in the sermon concerning the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Some commentators have taken the references in 6:4 to the heavenly gift that had been "tasted," in 9:2 to the "bread of the Presence" and the "table," and other references to the "new covenant" (8:8, 13; 9:15; 12:24) to be speaking of the Eucharist (Paul Andriessen, "L'Eucharistie dans l'Épître aux Hébreux," *NRT* [1972] 269–77). James Swetnam, in particular, has argued consistently for the sermon's interest in the Eucharist and has made a link between Christ as High Priest and Christian ministerial priesthood (see "Christology and the Eucharist in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Bib* 70 [1989] 74–95; "The Greater and More Perfect Tent': A Contribution to the Discussion of Hebrews 9,11," *Bib* 47 [1966] 91–106). The consensus of commentators still maintains, however, that Hebrews is not specifically concerned with the Christian Eucharist (see Ronald Williamson, "The Eucharist and the Epistle to the Hebrews," *NTS* [1975] 300–12).

In the absence of any explicit mention of ministerial priesthood one is hard pressed to say exactly how Hebrews would link that institution to the priesthood of Christ. Some fruitful avenues have been explored by John M. Scholer (*Proleptic Priests: Priesthood in the Epistle to the Hebrews*. JSNTSup 49 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991] 200–207) and John Dunnill (*Covenant and Sacrifice*, 239–60), who highlight the function of Christ's priesthood in Hebrews as effecting "communion" between believers and God. Still their conclusions speak more to a priesthood of believers than to a particular form of ministerial priesthood in Hebrews. Daniel J. Harrington has interestingly observed, however, that studies such as these can provide a context for understanding Christian priesthood and sacrifice as institutions grounded in a reality similar to what Scholer and Dunnill hold for a priesthood of believers, the paschal mystery of Christ. Any form of priesthood, corporate or ministerial, must have as its basis a participation in the salvific effects of Christ's life, death, and resurrection (*What Are They Saying About the Letter to the Hebrews?* [New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2005] 87).

## 10. HEBREWS AND ANTI-SEMITISM

The stress in Hebrews on a "new" and "better" covenant (7:22; 8:6-13; 9:15; 10:16-17, 29; 12:24; 13:20) has contributed to the view that not only has the priesthood and sacrifice of Christ replaced the sacrifices and the priesthood of the "old" covenant, but that Christianity has somehow replaced

Judaism. If the language and intent of Hebrews are not understood properly in the context of its first-century C.E. setting, it could be seen as contributing, at the very least, to “anti-Judaism,” if not to “anti-Semitism.” If, however, Hebrews is understood as a sermon to a Roman Christian house church, some time after the destruction of the Temple, which had brought an end to the priesthood and sacrifice in Judaism, its words may appear to be somewhat less polemical.

One has to wonder, indeed, whether a portrait of Jesus Christ as a heavenly High Priest could have been drawn by any Christian author as long as the Temple was still standing and its institutions were still in place. For a pastor preaching to a group within Christianity itself, in the wake of the terrible destruction wrought on Jerusalem and its most sacred shrine by the Romans, a group that was doubtless dealing with the effects of the horror inflicted on its parent religion and perhaps some collateral effects of its association with Judaism, the encouragement and consolation Hebrews offers may have a different and less strident ring.

Christianity in the city of Rome seems always to have valued its Jewish roots and to have been stamped by a certain Jewish character. In his letter to the Romans, Paul himself tried to show the close bond Gentile Christians shared with their Jewish brothers and sisters, while stressing that the salvation of Israel was a part of God’s plan (Romans 9–11). The “mystery of Israel” might have resonated so deeply in the hearts of Roman Christians that the sufferings of Roman Jews in the aftermath of the failure of the First Revolt may have been felt as if they were their own. Who knows what kinds of questions about God’s plan for Israel were raised in their own minds or what kinds of fears for what the Romans were capable of doing to them took up residence in their own hearts? One need not assume, then, that the presentation of Jesus as a heavenly High Priest, ministering in a heavenly sanctuary, had to signify the loss of Judaism itself on top of everything else that had been lost after 70 C.E.

If this scenario rings true, one has to assume first that Hebrews was a sermon written for and delivered to Christians alone. As an in-house document it could not have been intended to make a public and definitive statement on the status of Judaism at the time it was composed. Addressed to a Roman house church, probably dominated by Gentile Christians, it seems intended rather to stress what Christians have in Christ and what is worthwhile holding on to, rather than what Jews had lost in the failure of the First Revolt. The author’s logic appears to be so focused on presenting how Christians have access to God through Christ that, in creating the High Priest christology he became so caught up in the comparison with the Levitical priesthood and the Tabernacle that he drew conclusion after conclusion, albeit deliberately, without necessarily intending his composition to be detrimental to Judaism (see Knut Backhaus, *Der Neue Bund und das Werden*

*der Kirche: die Diatheke-Deutung des Hebräerbriefes im Rahmen der frühchristlichen Theologiegeschichte.* NTAbh n.s. 29 [Münster: Aschendorff, 1996] 275–82). After all, his arguments are all drawn from Jewish Scripture and are confined to a historical period in the life of Israel before there was a Temple. Were the author's arguments so constructed because he believed that the Temple never had any legitimacy, or out of respect for the fact that it was no longer standing? Were his arguments shaped to show the insufficiency of an old cultic system, or to address a question in the minds of his listeners about what kind of access to God was now possible in an age when familiar means of mediation were no longer available? When he speaks of a new covenant, which stresses the interior over the exterior, is it because he wishes to challenge the efficaciousness of the old covenant, or is it because the disappearance of the external means of the "old" now make interiority a necessity?

Surely these are impossible questions to answer with certitude, but they may be able to place Hebrews in a broader context of inclusiveness by trying to show where the "new" is the logical completion of the "old" when the usual institutions of the "old" are no longer available to accomplish their intended goals. We simply do not know enough about what kind of distance there was between Jews and Christians in Rome in the last third of the first century C.E. In this light it must be remembered that the concept of a "new" covenant, which Hebrews adopts, came from Jewish Scripture as well (Jer 31:31-34), a text that speaks more about the renewal of Judaism than the replacement of it.

Hebrews is a sermon for individuals who are wavering in their faith and appear to be somewhat diffident about their practice. We may never know the extent or depth of their malaise or what had brought it about. What we do know is the remedy the author of Hebrews proposed, a remedy that places the mediation of Jesus Christ as the heavenly High Priest at the center of his preaching and promises his listeners that their access to God is fully available because of what Christ has done on their behalf. Comparison is always based on continuity and discontinuity, so if Hebrews speaks of the discontinuity between the "old" and "new" covenants, it presupposes first the continuity between them. Nowhere in the sermon does the author suggest that what God had done in Christ was done to disadvantage Israel, and any images of past judgment or notice that previous generations did not receive the fulfillment of the promises are designed to exhort his Christian listeners to stay on track in order to reach their goal of entering into God's rest. The author rather believes that Jews and Christians will share a common destiny in the reception of promises fulfilled (11:39-40).

As Hebrews is silent on the relationship of Jews and Christians in Rome at the time of its composition, it would be unfortunate if later problems and divisions between the two groups were retrojected back onto it so as to give

the impression that Roman Christians then were inherently “anti-Jewish” or “anti-Semitic.” It would be equally unfortunate if Hebrews were enlisted for an “anti-Semitic” purpose today. Hebrews was written by a Christian for Christians, to help them appreciate the salvation that is theirs in Christ. Any attempt to use it against Jews is inappropriate, unwarranted, and unfounded.

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## TRANSLATION, NOTES, INTERPRETATION

### Exordium

#### 1. *A God Who Speaks* (1:1-4)

1. At various times in the past and in a variety of ways God spoke to the ancestors through the prophets. 2. In these last days, however, God has spoken to us through a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he made the universe. 3. The Son, as the reflection of God's glory and the exact representation of God's essential being, sustaining all things by the power of his word, when he made purification for sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4. having become as far superior to the angels as the name which he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

### NOTES

1. *At various times in the past and in a variety of ways*: The opening verses form a programmatic statement of the entire sermon, yet they are not without ambiguity. The joining of *polymerōs kai polytropōs* by the author of Hebrews has been the subject of much study. Probably these adverbs were chosen because each begins with the Greek letter *pi* (cf. Koester, 93). Such alliteration, not uncommon in Hellenistic texts (Attridge, 37), rendered a text pleasant to the ear when read aloud (Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. AB 32B [New York: Doubleday, 2000] 106–107). The beauty of the author's diction does not necessarily render his thought unambiguous, as the difficulty of translating the two opening adverbs shows. Just as the English word "polymer" signifies a substance consisting of many similar molecules bonded together, *polymerōs* connotes that the past revelation of God consisted of many parts. The parts, however, cohere because of their similarity. So one ought to be careful not to conclude that what God spoke in the past was made up of vastly differing parts. Nor would it be accurate to think of the revelation as fragmentary or partial. The second adverb, *polytropōs*, carries the sense

of something that subsists in many ways. Subsistence here connotes the sense of continued existence and has an organic dimension to it, rendering the word of God as something living. Both words are not really synonyms (Attridge, 37), as some commentators have suggested (see Weiss, 138); they get at what God's speech was in the past and how it was communicated. If this was written for a Roman community, one wonders whether the recipients heard an echo of Rom 9:4-6:

4. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; 5. to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. 6. It is not as though the word of God had failed.

Judaism consists of the various things mentioned in this text, which is written in the present tense to show continuity with the past. Paul adds in v. 6 that God's word to Israel is still succeeding. Perhaps one ought not to draw the contrast between past and present too sharply in Hebrews, as the author seems quite interested in showing how God's speech in a Son is compatible with the ways God had spoken, through prophets, in the past. Thus the first two words of the text of this exordium direct the reader to its main point: in the Son God has now spoken in a way that is consistent with God's past speech, but moving in another direction.

*God spoke to the ancestors through the prophets:* The singularity of God as the speaker here contrasts with the religious world in which Hebrews was written, where many gods communicated by means of dreams, oracles, visions, and the like (Koester, 183). While divination was practiced in ancient Israel, the prophetic oracle became a standard vehicle for God's speech. The important point is that, whereas the time and manner of God's speaking have changed, God remains the same. The noun "ancestors" is the plural of the word "father" (*patēr*) and is the standard designation for Israel's ancestral generation in the LXX (BDAG, 786; Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.255). In chapter 11 the term will be covered by the word for "elders," *presbyteroi* (11:2). "Prophets" is a general term that may include other individuals from the past who were considered to be prophets. Hebrews treats the Psalms as oracles (3:7; 4:7; 5:5-6), and there seems to have been a tradition of seeing David as a prophet (Acts 2:30; Philo, *On Agriculture*, 50).

2. *In these last days, however, God has spoken to us through a Son:* Not only have the time and manner of God's speech changed, so also has the audience. "Last days" is an eschatological term that extends the present time of the author and readers into the expected future (Acts 2:17; 2 Tim 3:1; Jas 5:3; 1 Pet 1:5, 20; 2 Pet 3:3; Jude 18). The author makes God's revelation personal for his readers by the inclusion of "to us." The first audience, "the ancestors," was undoubtedly Israel. But there is ambiguity here, too. The ancestors of the recipients are Roman Jewish Christians, and prophecy played a role in early Christianity as well. The current audience, the readers, are second generation Roman Christians. Despite the fact that the author wants to convey an important sense of continuity in God's speaking, the changes in time, manner, and audience suggest discontinuity (cf. Lane 1:11).

The remainder of the exordium will qualify the difference as the author turns his attention to the Son, who is the subject of important comparisons in the material that follows (1:4, 5, 14; 2:2-3, 18; 3:1-6; 5:5).

*whom he appointed heir of all things:* Although *klēronomos* does carry the sense of a legal heir, it is obvious that here the Son does not inherit in the usual way (Koester, 178). Commentators call attention to an allusion to Ps 2:8, where a royal descendant inherits the nations. William Lane (1:12) relies on Hugolin Langkammer's suggestion that the allusion is more properly to Gen 17:5, where after receiving a change of names Abraham is designated (*tetheika*) the father of many nations. Thus the investiture of Abraham, marking the beginning of redemptive history in Genesis, parallels the investiture of the Son, marking a new stage of redemptive history. The argument may not be that compelling, however. Abraham is not the heir of God in Genesis 17, but is rather the father whose children will inherit what God promised him. Moreover, the Son in Hebrews is not given a new name. The Son's role as heir seems to function in a different way in this verse. The term shows the relationship of the Son to the Father, a relationship that is qualitatively different from that shared by God and the prophets in the past. The remainder of this section demonstrates why the revelation by means of the Son is definitive for the author's purpose.

*through whom he made the universe:* The second determinative clause defining the Son's role appeals to the wisdom tradition. Wisdom's role at the beginning of creation serves to establish the link between Father and Son, much as the term "heir" does (Prov 8:22). The Son's preexistence is implied without the specificity of the Johannine author's placement of the *logos* with God from the beginning. The work of the Son at creation sets him apart from the prophets, through whom God had spoken in the past. In this way he is more than a mere prophet.

The noun *aiōn* has this same meaning in the LXX (Tob 13:7; Ps 65:78; Wis 13:9; 14:6; 18:4; Sir 36:17). In Matt 13:22 it refers to this world. The verse speaks of the process of creation by God's word (LXX: Gen 1:3, 6, 9; Ps 32:6; Wis 9:1; NT: John 1:3; Philo, *The Sacrifices of Cain and Abel* 65; Hermann Sasse, *aiōn, aiōnios*, TDNT 1:197–209). Unclear in this text is whether *aiōn*, translated as "universe" but meaning "ages" or "worlds," should be taken as a spatial or a temporal term. Some commentators prefer not to distinguish the two meanings in this verse (Bruce, 47; Ellingworth, 96; Koester, 178; cf. Attridge, 41; Grässer 1:59).

3. *The Son, as the reflection of God's glory:* The noun "reflection" is *apaugasma*. In the LXX this term is reserved for Wisdom, "For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness" (Wis 7:26). As such, Wisdom reflects the image and work of God (cf. Philo, *On Creation* 146; *Special Laws* 4.123; Gerhard Kittel, *augazō, apaugasma*, TDNT 1:507–508). This reflection may be interpreted as a "radiance" either streaming outward from the Son's own glory or reflecting back the glory of God (Attridge, 42; Grässer, 1:60; Koester, 180). The Greek reads literally "the radiance of glory" (indeterminate). Given that the pronoun *autou* comes at the end of the sentence, it is likely to be taken with the nouns that precede it, *apaugasma* and *hypostasis*. Thus the glory and the substance are both attributed to God. The images drawn from the LXX text must have impressed the author of Hebrews as appropriate for

describing the relationship of the Son to the Father. The author's modifications are telling, too. Wisdom is a reflection of eternal light, but the Son is a reflection of God's glory. In the Hebrew Bible God's glory is sometimes described as light (Isa 60:1) or fire (Exod 24:17). But in Exod 33:18-19 Moses asks God to show him the divine glory and God replies: "I will make all my goodness pass before you," thus, associating the two, as in Wis 7:26.

*the exact representation of God's essential being:* Whereas Wisdom, working with God at the creation, is a mirror of the "working of God," the Son is an "exact representation of his essential being." Philo uses *charactēr*, "exact representation," in the Platonic sense of an imprint. He writes of "presentation," *phantasis*, imprinting the soul like a ring or a seal that is pressed into wax. It stamps the image on the ring or seal into the wax (*On the Unchangeableness of God*, 43; Ulrich Wilckens, *charactēr*, *TDNT* 9:418-23). If that is the sense in Hebrews, then the Son is the reflection of God's glory and the representative image of the essential nature of God. In this context that is so because he, too, is capable of a powerful performative word that sustains all things. The word *hypostasis*, "substance," can have the same meaning as *ousia*, "being" (Helmut Koester, *hypostasis*, *TDNT* 8:572-89). In later Christian theology the two will be distinguished, and *hypostasis* will acquire the meaning of "person" (Attridge, 44; Koester, 180). As a philosophical term it can refer to the "essence" of something (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 7.135; 9.91; Philo, *On Dreams* 1.188; *On the Eternity of the World* 88, 92). The LXX attests the meanings "property" (Deut 11:6; Jer 10:17), "argument" (Deut 1:12), "hope" (Ruth 1:12; Ezek 19:5), "length of life" (Ps 88:48), "sustenance" (Judg 6:4; Wis 16:21), "existence" (Pss 68:3; 138:15; Job 22:20). In Hebrews the term also means "confidence" (3:14) and "assurance" (11:1). Here "substance" or "being" is an appropriate choice.

*sustaining all things by the power of his word:* The verb *pherein* normally means "to carry" or "to bear" (LXX: 2 Kgdms 8:2, 6; NT: Mark 1:32; 2:3; 7:32; 8:22; 9:17; Acts 5:16; Josephus, *War* 1.669; *Antiquities* 8.321); hence some translations prefer "bearing," as in "carrying." The usage here is unusual, coming from a transferred sense of "to bear" that means "to endure," on the analogy of Rom 9:22 "to sustain" or "to hold up" (Konrad Weiss, *pherō*, *ktl.*, *TDNT* 9:56-87). An interesting parallel is found in Sir 43:26: "Because of him each of his messengers succeeds, and by his word all things hold together" (NRSV).

Since the instrument of sustenance is the powerful word of God, the sense is that the universe continues to exist because of the powerful word, which caused it to exist in the first place (Genesis 1). The difference, of course, is that here it is the Son's word that does the sustaining, so he has been given the role of the creator God in keeping all things in existence. This verse offers yet another example of how Hebrews identifies the Son and the Father closely in the exordium.

*when he made purification for sins:* An important theme developed later in the sermon is introduced here. Christ as High Priest, who accomplishes what the Levitical priesthood was unable to do, brings "purification" of the conscience (9:14, 22, 23; 10:22; 12:24). The noun "purification," *katharismos*, as a designation for the result of Christ's self-offering, is used here and 2 Pet 1:9. Elsewhere in the NT (Mark 1:44; Luke 2:22; 5:14; John 2:6; 3:25) it refers to "purification" under the Jewish Law.

*sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high:* Another major theme of Hebrews, Christ's exaltation and session at the right hand of God, is introduced. The allusion is to Psalm 110 (109 LXX), which will be cited or alluded to throughout the sermon at key points (1:13; 5:6; 6:20; 7:17, 21; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2).

4. *having become as far superior to the angels:* Hebrews has a penchant for comparison and the author likes the word *kreittōn*, "better" or "superior" (1:4; 6:9; 7:7, 19, 22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24). Angels are another important theme introduced in the exordium. The main function of the comparison here must be seen in relation to what follows in 1:5-14, where a catena of scriptural texts will develop the comparison. The point here is to show that as Son he not only surpassed the previous prophetic messengers of God's word but was also superior to the angels, who should be looked upon as familiar mediators between God and humans. If there is an allusion in this to the Law having been mediated through angels, then perhaps the superiority of Christ to them says something about the word spoken in him as compared with the Law.

Some important manuscript witnesses (Ɑ<sup>46</sup> B) and *1 Clem.* 36:2 omit the article before angels, although the majority of them include it. As Ellingworth (106) has noted, the use of the article with "angels" in 1:5, 7a, and 13 may be intended to communicate something that was already known, because those verses look back to the reference to angels here in 1:4. This cannot explain the use of the definite article in v. 4, however, because there is no explicit mention of angels earlier in the exordium. The solution proposed is that the article was included by the author of Hebrews to make this form fit better with the later mention of "the angels" in 1:5. The author may have had in mind another stage of revelation that was mediated by angels, between the prophets and the Son.

*as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs:* Exactly what name Jesus inherited is ambiguous here. Is it Lord? Or, as Albert Vanhoye suggested, "High Priest" (*Old Testament Priests and the New Priest* [Petersham, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1986] 85–86)? Since the Son is at the center of this exordium it is likely that this is the name he is given. The point will be drawn out in the question in 1:5, which reinforces the Son's superiority to the angels: "To which of the angels did he say: 'You are my son, today I have begotten you?'" Being called Son is what sets him apart from them, so it is all the more likely that the name he had been given was precisely for that function and was therefore "Son."

If the recipients are Roman Christians one ought not to miss the similarities between the opening of Romans and the exordium of Hebrews. Romans not only refers to God's promises given through prophets in Scripture but also mentions that Jesus was declared to be the Son of God (Rom 1:2-3). Abraham was also given a name as part of the promise (Gen 12:1-3).

## INTERPRETATION

Hebrews opens with one of the most rhetorically polished statements in the New Testament. Although such stylistic elegance is characteristically

displayed throughout Hebrews, the exordium shows clearly that the author has mastered the principles of advanced rhetorical composition. Its effect on the readers is compelling and persuasive. The original Greek, all one sentence, pleases the ear with its alliteration and cadence. No less are the mind and spirit satisfied by the carefully structured phrases, leading the reader and/or listener to grasp ideas that are central to the exposition that follows. The significance of the nature of God as Speaker/Revealer and the definitive establishment of the Son as Speech/Revelation are established through pairings and parallels carefully subordinated to permit the explanation of the central ideas of the main clause, that God has spoken anew. The implication is that what has been said is effective because of the means of God's speech, which is more closely bound to the Speaker than any previous vehicles, because he is none other than God's Son.

Speech in Hebrews reveals the character of God and is an integral aspect of the sermon's theology. One cannot help but wonder if such an accomplished author as this one did not have a special appreciation of God as a communicator. The portrait of God as a speaker shows interest in fundamental principles of oratory: good oratory in the ancient world appealed to the *pathos* of the audience and demonstrated the *ethos* or character of the speaker. The most effective speech managed to achieve a balanced harmony between the two. Thus in Hebrews the very nature of God is to speak, to disclose, to reveal. To accomplish these ends, there are a variety of media at God's disposal. The opening verse mentions the prophets as a prelude to the manner of speech that is of special interest to the author, namely the Son. In the next chapter communication between God and humans will include the mediation of angels (Heb 2:2). So the author of Hebrews speaks of the manifold attempts on God's part to communicate through the ages, suggesting that God's desire for self-communication is an ongoing process of self-disclosure, which culminates in the revelation of the Son.

The exordium is structured in three parts: (1) v. 1: God's speech in the past; (2) v. 2: God's speech in these last days; and (3) vv. 3-4: a summary of the place and role of the Son. These verses function to introduce the main theme of the sermon, and they may serve as a summary of the christology of Hebrews. The Son is introduced as the new means of God's communication and is described with terms spanning his preexistence to his exaltation. At the heart of that description is the central tenet of Hebrews that Christ made purification for sins. The author will develop the elements of this brief description in what follows, in order to show how effective was God's speech in the Son by portraying him as the mediator of a better covenant.

The goal of showing what is new and different in the manner of God's speech is dramatically accomplished by the shift of subject from God to the Son in the second verse. Vanhoye (*La Structure Littéraire de L'Épître aux Hébreux* [Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1963] 65-68) has shown how this shift creates an interesting inversion of emphases, with the second half of the

unit dominating the first, despite the fact that both halves of the exordium are centered on its most important part, the opening of v. 2, "In these last days, however, God has spoken to us through a Son."

The latter two verses, 3 and 4, are rich in content. As relative clauses, they depend on the first half of the exordium (1:1-2). Thus grammatical subordination highlights the importance of the central statement while defining the role of the Son in terms of his functions, which themselves will be expanded on throughout the sermon: his nature, his role in creation, his atoning once for all self-offering, and his exaltation.

The opening verse of the exordium eludes easy interpretation. Some commentators have suggested that the two adverbs, *polymerōs kai polytropōs*, imply that the author understood God's revelation to Israel through the prophets as incomplete, whereas the revelation in the Son is complete (Attridge, 37; Bruce, 46; Hughes, 36; Lane, 1:10; Montefiore, 33-34). Hebrews does show an interest in completeness and fullness elsewhere (2:10; 5:9; 7:19, 28; 9:9; 10:1, 14; 11:40; 12:23) and the author's use of comparison supports such an interpretation (1:4; 5:14; 6:9; 7:7, 19, 22; 8:6; 9:11, 23; 10:34; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24). The manifold nature of the revelation, however, need not connote incompleteness (Koester, 176). Moreover, what may be more important for the author is the time and manner of what God has done. Hebrews also shows interest in the present time as an opportunity (1:5; 3:7, 13, 15; 4:7; 5:5; 13:8) and the means of salvation offered by the Son. The contrast of what God has done in the past through the prophets and has now done in Christ fits well with the sermon's hortatory function to encourage the readers not to lose confidence at the present moment. The vehicle of God's present revelation, the Son, is the ground of their confidence in this sermon.

The conclusion of v. 2 introduces the important series of qualifications that suit the Son for his work. The reference to his being heir of all things is frequently seen by commentators as an allusion to Psalm 2, where the kings inherit the land (Attridge, 40; Koester, 178; Lane, 1:6). The association of this notion of inheritance, and the extension of it from the land to the universe, not only applies a royal motif to the Son but also draws a comparison between the Son and previous royal figures of the LXX tradition. Implicit in the comparison is the difference between the royal Son's inheritance and theirs. Drawing such comparisons becomes a staple of the way the author of Hebrews argues. The entire exordium makes a series of these comparisons, and that tactic will be continued in the remainder of the sermon.

The beginning of v. 3 underscores the nature of the Son as capable of communicating the *realia* of God. Difficult as it may be to understand the meaning of the terms used here, the affinity of the Son with God is at the heart of the attribution "as the reflection of God's glory and the exact representation of God's essential being." To say that the Son reflects the glory

of God is not the same as saying that he is the exact representation of God's essential being. So the author does not merely express one idea through these two clauses, but tries to give distinct content to the way he sees the relation of the Son to God in the work the Son must do as bearer of God's final revelation, now spoken through him. With what seems to be a clear reference to Wis 7:26, "For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness," the author further qualifies the identity of the Son. The fact that the word "reflection" is paralleled with the expression "spotless mirror" in this LXX text may lead us to think that the author of Hebrews understood the reflection of the Son in some way to mirror the reality of God. The LXX text makes a further synonymous parallel attributing to Wisdom the "image" of God's goodness. The author of Hebrews chose not to reproduce this part of the LXX verse, preferring to call the Son the "exact representation" of God's essential being. The Greek word *charaktēr*, "exact representation," carries the meaning of a "stamp" or an "imprint," so the idea is not far from that of an image. What may be decisive here, however, is the dependent noun. In the LXX text Wisdom is the "image of God's goodness," whereas in Hebrews the Son is the "exact representation of God's essential being." One may rightly question whether this goes further than what the LXX author attributes to Wisdom herself, since "goodness" may be a metaphor for the whole nature of God. In his interpretation, however, the author of Hebrews seems deliberately to have spelled out how he understands the Son to carry the imprint of God. The word "nature," *hypostasis*, means "essential being" or "reality," what makes things what they are. That a child should somehow be a representation or reflect the character of the parent is part of the tradition of Hellenistic Judaism as seen in 4 Macc 15:4: "In what manner might I express the emotions of parents who love their children? We impress upon the character of a small child a wondrous likeness both of mind and of form" (NRSV). As both the "reflection of God's glory" and the "exact representation of God's essential being" the Son is eminently qualified for the role he must play as the vehicle of God's revelation.

The continuation of v. 3 brings into play the Son's function in sustaining the universe, which he shared in creating. Commentators usually call attention to the loose connection of this verse to the wisdom tradition, in the absence of any clear textual parallels. Frequently cited are Wis 7:24, 27, which mention that Wisdom not only has the power to do all things but renews them as well, and 8:1, where Wisdom orders all things. Attridge refers to the Philonic tradition, where the Logos guides "all things on their course" (*The Migration of Abraham* 6), is portrayed as a "pillar" (*On Noah as a Planter* 8), or is described as a "bond" that holds all things together (*On Flight and Finding* 112; Attridge, 45; see also Ronald Williamson, *Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews*. ALGHJ 4 [Leiden: Brill, 1970] 95–103).

A closer biblical parallel is found, however, in Sir 43:26, where toward the end of an extended wisdom meditation on the glory of God manifested in creation the author proclaims: "Because of him each of his messengers (*angeli*) succeeds, and by his word all things hold together" (NRSV). The LXX author most likely intends to refer the pronouns in both prepositional phrases to God, but it is possible for the second phrase to refer back to the immediately preceding noun "messenger." The author of Hebrews may have taken advantage of this ambiguity and extended this function of sustaining all things to the Son. If this is the case, the allusion to Sir 43:26 still falls within the wisdom tradition. The subject of the allusion, however, is different and makes a still closer identification of the Son with God in his designated role as the means of God's spoken word. The point is that the Son is no mere messenger of God's word, as the further qualifications of the exordium will demonstrate. An allusion to Sir 43:26 with its mention of the messenger (*angelos*) might also help to explain why the comparison with the angels in v. 4 is important for the author. This comparison will be developed further in the next section (1:5-14).

The following clause introduces the priestly function of the Son, which will become one of the major themes of Hebrews. At this point the wisdom tradition of the previous verses gives way to the tradition of Jesus' sacrificial death. Here the stress on purification for sin anticipates the attention the author will give to this aspect of the Son's priestly function in the central section of the sermon (8:1-10:18). The fact that only this aspect of the priesthood of the Son is mentioned in the exordium indicates something the author felt needed to be addressed. It is important, then, that as the major motifs are introduced in the exordium, the reader's attention be drawn to the Son's self-offering, which qualified him to be a High Priest. The placement of this aspect of the qualifications of the Son in the center of vv. 3 and 4 gives it the prominence the author wanted it to have in the structure of the exordium.

At the end of v. 3 the author mentions yet another important motif in the sermon, the exaltation of the Son and his heavenly enthronement. Allusions to Psalm 110 play a major role in the christology of Hebrews. Later in this chapter (1:13) a similar allusion will help make the comparison of the Son with the angels. In 8:1 the psalm will again be evoked to highlight the heavenly enthronement of Christ as High Priest. In 10:12 the session at the right hand of God follows on the unique sacrifice for sins, which Christ has made. In this last instance we have a close parallel to 1:3, which announces what will later be claimed for the qualitatively different priesthood of Christ in Hebrews.

The author of Hebrews is, of course, not unique in the appropriation of Psalm 110 to help develop his christology. Other allusions to the psalm in christological contexts are found elsewhere in the New Testament, indicating

that this is a firm element of early Christian tradition (Matt 22:44; 26:64; Mark 12:36; 14:62; 16:19; Luke 20:42; see David M. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand: Psalm 110 in Early Christianity*. SBLMS 18 [Nashville and New York: Abingdon, 1973]). In a number of instances an allusion to this psalm comes in a context where either Christ's death (Luke 22:69) or his resurrection (Acts 2:34; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1) relates to his exaltation. In Rom 8:34 and 1 Cor 15:25 Paul brings all three together. Lack of direct attention to or extensive discussion of Christ's resurrection in Hebrews suggests that the author has done something similar in joining it to his exaltation. In a related vein it may be that the author of Hebrews joins Christ's death to his resurrection in the context of his exaltation (Attridge, 46).

The inclusion of the Son's session here emphasizes his glory above all things. The very definite act of sitting down at the right hand of God is an unmistakably powerful biblical image. As Hay (*Glory at the Right Hand*, 86–87) points out, this is not done at the expense of the power and glory of God, but nonetheless underscores the unsurpassable exaltation of the Son after his having undergone the humiliation of death on a cross.

It is frequently asked whether Heb 1:3 derives from an ancient hymnic source. The explanation of this part of the exordium as earlier hymnic material is, however, beset with many problems. In general the identification of hymnic material in the New Testament is itself questionable. The usual texts grouped under this category are John 1:1–18; Phil 2:6–11; Col 1:15–18; 1 Tim 3:16; 1 Pet 3:18–19. The formal characteristics of these New Testament hymns vary one from another, so it is not easy to typify what exactly constitutes formally hymnic material (Lane 1:7). To complicate matters further, commentators do not agree on the limits of the hymnic material in the exordium of Hebrews. Some include the last part of v. 2 because they believe the form of the relative clause to be especially hymnic (Lane 1:8). Still others believe the exordium to be integral in itself and look skeptically on the suggestion that this part of it was taken from earlier hymnic material (Grässer 1:49; Janusz Frankowski, "Early Christian Hymns Recorded in the New Testament: A Reconsideration in Light of Heb 1,3," *BZ* 27 [1983] 183–94; John P. Meier, "Structure and Theology in Heb 1, 1–14," *Bib* 66 [1985] 168–89; Donald W. B. Robinson, "The Literary Structure of Hebrews 1:1–4," *AJBA* 2 [1972] 178–86). The abrupt change of subject from God to the Son, the use of the extended relative constructions, the fact that the author uses several words here (*apaugasma* and *charaktēr*) that are not used elsewhere in the sermon, the notice that the author diverges from the text of Psalm 110 in the choice of the preposition *en* in the expression "at the right hand," when it is correctly cited in 1:13 as *ek*, have fueled speculation that these anomalies all point to the appropriation of hymnic material that antedates Hebrews itself. Some commentators (Ellingworth, 97–98), not convinced by these lines of argumentation, point out that the so-called anomalies can

all be reasonably explained within the context of Hebrews to show that the verse is well integrated into the exordium and does not show signs of earlier material deriving from an ancient Christian hymn. Craig Koester, on the other hand, entertains the possibility that the exordium contains traditional elements (179).

The last verse of the exordium turns to the matter of the Son's name, which unequivocally is superior to that of the angels. Naming plays an important role in the biblical tradition, whether it has to do with the naming of a newborn or the change of a name already given. In Hellenistic Judaism the interest in the significance of the name is grasped in Philo's treatise on the changing of names. The verse claims that the Son became superior to the angels to the extent that he had received a name that is more excellent than theirs. Noticeable here is the stress that it is not only in name that Christ is superior to the angels. The name signifies his superiority, which derives from his status as Son. Obviously the author understands the verse as a transition to the next section, 1:5-18, which will make a formal comparison between the Son and the angels.

The name is not specified here, but many commentators understand it to be "Son," the only term by which Christ is designated in the exordium. The circular composition of the exordium supports this assumption, as "Son" is the critical term in 1:2a and the subject of the exordium as a whole (Meier, "Structure and Theology," 188-89).

Some commentators note that the exordium ends on a note of comparison similar to the way it begins. At its opening the comparison focused on the superiority of God's revelation in a Son over what had preceded it through the prophets. In its conclusion the view shifts to the comparison between the Son and the angels. Ostensibly it appears that prophets and angels have little to do with one another. In the context of an announcement about God's revelation, however, one may find a common ground.

Commentators also note that the Hellenistic Jewish tradition that angels mediated the revelation of the Law may come into play in this verse, supplying yet another stage in the ways God communicated before the definitive way announced in the opening of the exordium: through a Son. They point to Heb 2:2 for support, on the assumption that the "word spoken by angels there" is none other than the Jewish Law. A problem with that view is that even though the Hellenistic view of such angelic mediators of the Law postdates the prophetic era in biblical history, what they reveal, the Law, predates it. Thus in the exordium the sequence of revelation does not follow a linear development. One way out of the dilemma may be to understand the wider role of angelic mediators in Hellenistic Judaism to be at work here (*Jub* 1:27, 29; 2:1; Philo, *On Dreams* 1.141-43; *On Abraham* 115; Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.136; Acts 7:30, 38, 53; Gal 3:19; Attridge, 65), which would then provide yet another means of revelation between the prophets

and the Son. Such a tradition may lie behind the synonymous use of “angels” and “prophets” in Philo (*On Abraham* 113; *Questions on Exodus* 2.16). This option is attractive not only because it preserves a sequential order, but also because it may explain the anomaly of the definite article, which precedes the word “angels” in the text.

The exordium of Hebrews briefly presents the main theme of the sermon in the role articulated for the Son, first as the means of God’s final revelation and then as the one who makes complete purification for sins, i.e., purification of the conscience of the worshipers (9:14; 10:22) and is exalted at the right hand of God. Thus he is the eternal Son and eternal High Priest (2:9-10; 9:12-15; 13:20-21) who mediates access to God in a way superior to those of the past.

#### FOR REFERENCE AND FURTHER STUDY

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### I. Jesus, Son Crowned with Glory as a Result of His Suffering and Death (1:5–2:18)

#### 2. *The Son and the Angels* (1:5-14)

5. For to which of the angels then did God ever say: “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”? And again, “I will be a father to him and he will be a Son to me”? 6. And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world he says: “Let all the angels of God bow down before him.” 7. And of the angels, he says, “Who makes his angels spirits and his servants flames of fire.” 8. And of the Son, “God, your throne is forever and ever, and the scepter of righteousness is the scepter of your rule. 9. You loved righteousness and