The Blackwell Companion to the New Testament

Edited by

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Hebrews is one of early Christianity’s most carefully crafted sermons. It addresses readers who have accepted the gospel and experienced conflict with those outside their community, and who now face the challenge of remaining faithful in a context where many in the wider society reject their convictions. The author understands that readers are confronted with the apparent contradiction between the hope of salvation and the dispiriting realities of daily life. His response involves looking to Jesus, who was subjected to abuse and death before being exalted to glory at God’s right hand. The implication is that if God brought Jesus through suffering to glory, God will do the same for those who follow Jesus. Presenting Jesus as the heroic pioneer of salvation and merciful high priest, the divine Son of God and an afflicted human being, the author seeks to bolster the confidence of his readers in order that they might hold fast to their confession of faith and continue supporting each other in community.

Major Issues in the Study of Hebrews

The authorship of Hebrews has long been debated because the book never discloses who wrote it. Three main positions have emerged concerning the author’s identity: some maintain that it was written by Paul, others that the author was a companion of Paul, and still others that the author’s identity remains unknown. Those who think that Paul wrote Hebrews observe that its concluding verses refer to “our brother Timothy,” an expression that Paul sometimes used of his co-worker Timothy (Heb. 13:23; 2 Cor. 1:1; 1 Thess. 3:2; Philem. 1), and include greetings and admonitions like those at the end of Paul’s letters. Theologically, Hebrews is similar to Paul’s letters in its presentation of the saving work of Christ and its comments about the Jewish law, the new covenant, and faith (Heb. 8:6–13; 11:1–40; 2 Cor. 3:1–18; Rom. 1:17–18). Against Pauline authorship, however, many have noted that the author of Hebrews received the gospel second-hand, whereas Paul claims to have received it from Christ (Heb. 2:3; Gal. 1:11–12), and they note that Hebrews has a distinctive style and non-Pauline themes, such as the priesthood of Christ. Today, few think that Paul wrote Hebrews. Alternatively, the pro-
posual that Hebrews was written by one of Paul’s companions would account for the
affinities between Paul’s letters and Hebrews, while recognizing Hebrews’ unique style
and content. Paul’s co-workers Barnabas, Apollos, Silas, and Priscilla have all been sug-
gested as possible authors, but since Hebrews makes no clear reference to any of them,
most interpreters now concede that the author’s identity remains unknown.

The intended readership of Hebrews has been construed in different ways. The tra-
ditional title, “To the Hebrews,” was affixed to the book by the end of the second century
CE, and many have assumed that its contents show that it was originally written for
Jewish or “Hebrew” Christians. The book mentions figures from Israel’s history, such
as Abraham, Sarah, Melchizedek, Moses, Aaron, and many more. There are contrasts
between the old and new covenants, the Levitical priesthood and Christ’s priesthood,
and Mount Sinai and the heavenly Jerusalem, all of which would have been of interest
to Jewish Christian readers. Others, however, have proposed that the book addressed
Gentile Christians, since the readers entered the Christian community by turning from
“dead works” and being “enlightened” – expressions that sometimes meant conversion
from paganism (Heb. 6:1–4). They also note that one cannot assume that only Jewish
Christians would have been interested in Old Testament imagery since Paul makes
extensive use of the Old Testament in his letter to the Galatian Christians, who were
Gentiles. In the end Hebrews does not provide enough information to determine
whether the intended readers were Jewish or Gentile Christians, and the group may
well have included people from both types of backgrounds.

A traditional way to read Hebrews has been to assume that it shows the superiority
of Christ over the institutions of Old Testament Israel. The chapter divisions found in
most Bibles emphasize the points at which the book compares Jesus to Moses (3:1),
Aaron (5:1), and Melchizedek (7:1), and Christ’s sacrifice to the sacrificial system estab-
lished by the Mosaic law (9:1; 10:1). Interpreting the structure of Hebrews this way fits
the theory that it was written to dissuade the readers from leaving the Christian faith
and returning to Judaism. An alternative was developed by Albert Vanhoye, who
divided Hebrews into five concentric sections that are arranged around the central
theme of Christ’s priesthood, which he took to be the main point of the book (8:1).
Forms of his five-part outline appear in many commentaries and studies of Hebrews.
Yet another approach, which has been especially popular among German scholars, has
been to stress that Hebrews is not so much a treatise on the superiority of Christ or a
presentation of Christ’s high priesthood as it is a “word of exhortation” that is designed
to renew the faith of its readers (13:22). They often divide Hebrews into three sections
that are marked by the calls to hold fast to the community’s confession of faith (4:14–
16; 10:19–25). Although this approach has not been entirely successful in showing
how each section relates to the other parts of the book, it points in a promising direction
by emphasizing the role of Hebrews as a form of persuasive speech that could have
addressed the dispiriting circumstances of an early Christian community. The outline
of Hebrews given below will draw on aspects of these various proposals while showing
that the work’s structure follows the flow of Greco-Roman speeches.

The distinctive form and the unique themes of Hebrews make it challenging to deter-
mine where Hebrews fits within the varied currents of early Christian theology and
practice. Most modern bibles follow the tradition of placing Hebrews between the thir-
teen letters that bear Paul’s name and the epistles of James, Peter, John, and Jude. This position in the New Testament accurately reflects the sense that Hebrews’ theology has affinities with that of Paul and other early Christian writers, even though it does not fit neatly into just one theological tradition. Like Paul, Hebrews speaks of the preexistent Son of God becoming human in obedience to God and shedding his blood to provide atonement for human sins, then being exalted to heavenly glory (Heb. 1:1–4; 2:14–17; 9:11–14; Phil. 2:5–11; Rom. 3:21–6). Both Hebrews and Paul quote Habbakuk 2:4 – “the righteous one will live by faith” – when discussing faith (Heb. 10:38; Gal. 3:11; Rom. 1:17). Both connect the reference to the lord sitting at God’s right hand until his enemies are made his footstool from Psalm 110:1 with the portion of Psalm 8:6 that tells of God putting all things under the feet of the Son of Man (Heb. 1:13; 2:5–8; 1 Cor. 15:25–7). Both also invoke Abraham as an example of faith (Heb. 11:8–19; Gal. 3:6–9; Rom. 4:1–25). At the same time, Hebrews is like 1 Peter in that it emphasizes Christ’s death “once for all” as a sinless victim (Heb. 7:26–7; 1 Pet. 2:22; 3:18) and depicts the faithful as members of God’s household, who live as strangers and sojourners on the earth (Heb. 3:2–6; 11:8–16; 13:14; 1 Pet. 2:5, 11). These and other affinities with various early Christian writings suggest that Hebrews was composed in a context where multiple streams of Christian tradition intersected and enriched each other.

Studies of Hebrews often debate whether the book works with a philosophical worldview. Many have noted that Hebrews distinguishes the transcendent world above from the visible world below in a manner similar to Plato and the Jewish writer Philo, who interpreted the biblical tradition in Platonic categories. Plato maintained that people on earth could perceive the visible “shadows” of transcendent realities, but not the realities themselves (Republic, 514A–515D). Hebrews uses similar expressions when contrasting the “true” heavenly sanctuary with its earthly “shadow” (Heb. 8:1–5). Those who highlight the similarities between Hebrews and philosophical texts sometimes note that many Christian theologians of the second through the fifth centuries CE worked within a Platonic philosophical framework, and suggest that Hebrews may have been one of the earliest texts to present the Christian message in a philosophical form to the Greco-Roman world. Nevertheless, Hebrews lacks key Platonic language, such as the distinction between the higher “intelligible” and the lower “perceptible” worlds, and the idea that visible things are “copies” of heavenly archetypes. Moreover, in Platonism one relates to the transcendent order by the power of the mind, whereas in Hebrews the connection occurs through faith. Hebrews’ complex relationship to its Greco-Roman cultural context can best be discerned by taking the circumstances of its composition into account.

Date and Place of Composition

Hebrews was probably composed between 60 and 90 CE. On the one hand, it is unlikely that Hebrews was written before the middle of the first century CE. The readers were not eyewitnesses of Jesus’ ministry but received the gospel secondhand from “those who heard” (2:3). The author implies that the evangelists who brought the message belonged to the first Christian generation without necessarily claiming that they personally
heard Jesus preach. Much of the evangelistic work of this generation took place in the 40s and 50s of the first century, and Hebrews writes about the founding and subsequent history of the readers’ community as if those early experiences were some time in the past. The vivid experience of a persecution, for example, is something that belongs to the readers’ memories rather than to their present experience (10:32–4). Accordingly, it seems unlikely that Hebrews was written before about 60 CE. On the other hand, Hebrews was probably composed before the first century ended. The conclusion refers to an upcoming visit of Timothy, who worked alongside Paul during the 50s. Assuming that this is a genuine reference to Paul’s co-worker, it seems unlikely that Timothy would be traveling in the second century CE. Moreover, material from Hebrews was used in the early Christian letter known as 1 Clement, which was probably composed at Rome in the last decade of the first century. Therefore, there is little reason to think that Hebrews was written after 90 CE.

A more precise date is difficult to determine because it is not clear whether Hebrews was written before or after the Jerusalem temple was destroyed in 70 CE. Despite Hebrews’ interest in Israel’s priesthood and sanctuary, the book never refers to the Jerusalem temple. The only sanctuary mentioned is the tabernacle of Moses’ time, which is described in the book of Exodus. Some assume that Hebrews’ references to the ancient tabernacle actually pertain to the temple that stood in Jerusalem in New Testament times, and argue that since Hebrews assumed that sacrifices were still being offered, the temple must have been standing (7:27–8: 8:3–5; 9:6–7; 10:1–3, 8). This would mean that Hebrews was written before 70 CE. Nevertheless, decades after the temple was destroyed some Jewish and Christian authors wrote as if sacrifices were still being offered and priests were continuing to carry out their ministry (Josephus, Against Apion, 2.77; 1 Clement, 40–1; Epistle of Diognetus, 3). Hebrews could have done the same. The way Hebrews develops its arguments using only the biblical descriptions of the tabernacle, without referring to the temple, leaves open the possibility that the book was composed either before or after 70 CE. Attempts to determine a more specific date by identifying the persecution mentioned in Hebrews 10:32–4 have also been unsuccessful because the kind of violence described by the author occurred at various times and places. It is best to place the book within the years 60–90 CE without making interpretation dependent on a more precise date.

The Christians addressed by Hebrews were probably located in Italy. This is suggested by the comment, “Those from Italy send you greetings” (13:24). Although some assume that the author wrote the book in Italy, most now take those “from Italy” to be people who had traveled from Italy to another location in the Roman empire and who wanted to send greetings to those back home. There were Christian congregations in the Italian cities of Puteoli and Rome by the middle of the first century (Acts 28:13–15; Rom. 16:1–16), and the earliest known authors to have made use of Hebrews were located in Rome. One was the writer of 1 Clement, who wrote of Christ the high priest in language reminiscent of Hebrews 1, and the other was the author of the Shepherd of Hermas, who discussed whether apostate Christians could repent, an issue raised in Hebrews 6:4–6.

The main alternative to a Roman destination is to suggest that the readers were in Jerusalem and that the author wrote to them from Italy. The chief reason for this view
is that Hebrews’ discussion of the priesthood and sanctuary would have been of interest to people in Jerusalem where the temple was located. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that the author would have written to people in Jerusalem using an elegant Greek style and basing his arguments on the Septuagint, the Greek translation of Israel’s scriptures, rather than on the Hebrew text. Moreover, Hebrews never mentions the Jerusalem temple, speaking only of the tabernacle as depicted in Exodus. Finally, the persecution mentioned in Hebrews 10:32–4 does not seem to have resulted in any deaths, whereas persecutions in Jerusalem led to the deaths of Stephen and James (Acts 7:58–8:3; 12:1–2). The mention of Italy in Hebrews 13:24 and the use of Hebrews by Christians in Rome in the late first and early second centuries suggest that the book was written for readers living in Italy. The author’s location, however, is unknown.

**Historical Setting**

Hebrews addressed Christians who were experiencing a sense of discouragement and a decline in community life. Their circumstances can best be understood by looking at the way their community developed over time. The author refers to the history of the group at several points, allowing us to discern three phases.

Phase 1 centered on the readers’ initial hearing of the gospel and their acceptance of the Christian faith. The author recalls that the community was formed when the message that Jesus proclaimed “was attested to us by those who heard,” while “God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will” (2:3–4). Hebrews refers to those who brought the gospel message by using the plural, which suggests that two or more evangelists worked together. Their message focused on “salvation” (2:2), which probably meant deliverance from divine judgment and from powers of evil for life in God’s kingdom. The miraculous signs and wonders that the evangelists performed to validate their message may have been healings or exorcisms (cf. Acts 14:8–18; 16:16–18; 19:11–12). Through the work of the evangelists, the readers experienced a vivid sense of the Spirit’s activity. They were moved to repent of sin, to profess their faith in God, and to be baptized (Heb. 6:1–2).

Belief and experience reinforced each other in a positive way during this initial phase of the community’s life. The message brought by the evangelists awakened hopes that the readers would obtain a place in the kingdom of God (1:14). Miracles and a vivid sense of the Spirit’s activity confirmed the message experientially. At the same time, conversion apparently planted the seeds of conflict between the Christian community and the wider society. Hebrews twice calls their conversion “enlightenment,” which implies that the unconverted remain in darkness, with its connotations of sin, ignorance, and death (6:4; 10:32). By turning away from their previous patterns of belief, the readers made at least an implicitly negative judgment on the beliefs and values of those who did not share their same faith, and this seems to have generated tensions between the newly established Christian community and the wider society.

Phase 2 was marked by open conflict with those outside the community and solidarity among those inside the community. The author recalls that in “those earlier days,”
after “you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated.” Nevertheless, “you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting” (10:32–4). The passage suggests that members of the local populace denounced Christians to the civic authorities, who imprisoned some of them (Acts 16:19–25). There is little evidence that Roman authorities carried out systematic persecutions of Christians in the first century. Although Nero became notorious for arresting and executing Christians after the great fire in Rome in 64 CE, persecutions were generally local affairs initiated by residents of a town or city. Denunciations often depicted Christians as a threat to the social order, which prompted officials to take action against them (16:20–1; 17:7). The physical abuse could have been carried out either by a mob (18:17) or by the authorities, who could beat people when gathering evidence or punishing them (16:22–3). Since there is little evidence that there were legal grounds for confiscating Christian property, it was probably seized without authorization.

The actions taken against Christians were presumably intended to pressure them into giving up their beliefs, to marginalize those who refused to do so, and to dissuade others from joining the Christian group. Tactics like public denunciation deprived people of honor and dignity in the eyes of others. Abuse and loss of property were physically and emotionally painful, and prison conditions were harsh and degrading. Nevertheless, Hebrews indicates that the persecution actually had the reverse effect, fostering a deeper sense of solidarity within the Christian community. Rather than weakening the bonds of the Christians, the attacks by outsiders defined and deepened Christian loyalties, at least for a time.

Phase 3 was characterized by ongoing, but less intense, friction between Christians and non-Christians, and an increasing sense of discouragement among the Christians. This is the phase in which Hebrews was written. The author assumed that verbal attacks against the community would continue and that some people would remain in prison (Heb. 13:3, 13). In practical terms supporting prisoners over a period of time was discouraging to those who awaited their release, and associating with prisoners brought both a social stigma and the possibility of losing one’s own freedom. Some Christians continued the practice of caring for others (6:10; 13:1), but others showed signs of malaise. The author cautions against “drift,” a term that suggests a gradual and perhaps unthinking movement away from the faith (2:1). He points to the danger of neglecting the Christian faith and community (2:3; 10:25), and reproves his listeners for their sluggishness (5:11; 6:12).

The author recognized that one way to deal with ongoing reproach would be to “shrink back” from the Christian community in order to obtain a more favorable judgment from society (10:39). If confessing faith in Christ meant losing possessions, one might seek greater economic security by abandoning one’s confession. If meeting with Christians meant being treated with contempt, one might hope for more honorable treatment by leaving the Christian community (10:25). Although apostasy could conceivably be the culmination of these tendencies (6:4–6), the author’s call to “hold fast” the confession shows that the readers have not yet abandoned the faith.
altogether (3:6; 4:14; 10:23). The challenge facing the author was to give readers an incentive to persevere.

**Purpose**

Hebrews was written to encourage readers to remain faithful to God, Christ, and the Christian community. In the face of dispiriting circumstances, the author reminds readers of what God has already done in the past, underscores the promise of what God will do in the future, and thereby gives readers reason to remain faithful in the present. The grand portrait of Christ in glory and the reminder of the readers’ hope of salvation culminate in an exhortation not to drift away from the Christian message (1:1–2:4). The depiction of Christ as the pioneer of salvation, who has liberated people from bondage to the fear of death, together with the negative example of Moses’ generation falling into unbelief and the positive announcement of God’s promise of rest, issue into an exhortation to strive in hope of entering God’s rest (2:10–4:11). Christ’s priesthood and self-sacrifice are identified as the means by which God provides atonement and establishes a new covenant, which means that readers have good reason to approach God with confidence, to hold fast their confession of faith, and to continue meeting with other Christians (10:19–25). The stories of people from Abel to the Maccabean martyrs, who lived by faith in difficult situations, encourage the readers to run their own race of faith with perseverance (11:1–12:2). Given all that God has done, readers are to show their gratitude to God by lives that offer praise to him and service to others (12:28–13:21).

**Language and Style**

Hebrews uses vivid language and bold imagery to convey its message. Ancient writers understood that ideas often find their most powerful expression when “you seem to see what you describe and bring it vividly before the eyes of your audience” so that “attention is drawn from the reasoning to the enthralling effect of the imagination” (Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 15.1.11). Hebrews follows this practice masterfully. When speaking about Christ’s incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, the author depicts Christ in heroic terms as one who entered the realm of death in order to do battle with evil and liberate the people who have been held captive by fear (Heb. 2:10–15). Instead of dealing abstractly with the atoning significance of Christ’s death, the author paints a picture of the ancient tabernacle with its forecourt, inner court, and furnishings, and then describes Christ’s entry into the inner chamber of the sanctuary through the blood that he shed for others (9:1–14). The author defines faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” in 11:1, but instead of discussing faith as a concept, he shows readers the dynamics of faith by tracing the journeys of Abraham and his descendants, by telling of Moses’ conflict with the king of Egypt and Israel’s passage through the sea, and by cataloging the sufferings of the martyrs (Heb. 11:4–40).
The author employs a range of Greek styles in order to communicate various types of subject matter. An elevated style is used for elevated subjects. The opening sentence on God’s manner of speaking is an elaborate sentence that includes all of 1:1–4. It is marked by vivid vocabulary like “reflection of God’s glory” and “exact imprint of God’s very being,” and it uses the paraphrase “the Majesty on high” for God. Nearly half the words in 1:1 begin with the letter *p*, a use of alliteration that would have helped catch a listener’s ear. Later sections of Hebrews sometimes conclude with complex sentences or “periods” that are crafted with an elegant symmetry. For example, one period begins by announcing that God’s word (*logos*) scrutinizes human hearts, and it ends by reminding readers that all people must render account (*logos*) to God (4:12–13).

The author can also use a simple and direct style to impress points upon readers. After telling of the wilderness generation’s penchant for testing God, the author addresses a forceful battery of questions to the readers in order to drive home the dire consequences of unbelief: “Now who were they who heard and yet were rebellious? Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses? But with whom was he angry forty years? Was it not those who sinned ...?” (3:16–18). Similarly, the exhortations at the conclusion of Hebrews are stated directly since they call for obedience, not contemplation: “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers ... Remember those who are in prison” (13:1–3).

Hebrews’ use of language enhances the effectiveness of its argument. Its metaphors are engaging. To underscore the surety of Christian hope, the author calls it an “anchor of the soul” (6:19). By referring to basic Christian teaching as milk, in contrast to the solid food taken by adults, Hebrews presses readers to see their dullness as a mark of immaturity that they will want to overcome (5:12–14). By depicting the life of faith as a footrace, the author helps readers see themselves not as victims of social reproach but as athletes engaged in a noble struggle (12:1–3). The technique of anaphora, the repeating of a key word, is most fully developed in chapter 11, where the author says repeatedly that the people of God must live “by faith.” Sometimes the author rapidly lists a number of items, giving the impression that many more could be added. For example, he speaks of “Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David and Samuel and the prophets” who through faith “conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire” – and the list goes on, giving readers a vivid sense of the magnitude of faith’s powers (11:32–4). The author uses an expansive vocabulary and even combines familiar components to coin new words, such as *agenealogētos* (“without genealogy,” 7:3) and *haimatekchysia* (“outpouring of blood,” 9:22).

**Intertextuality**

The author of Hebrews develops his argument by engaging many texts from Israel’s scriptures. Much of the material comes from books that are included in all Jewish and Christian bibles, but the author also knows the stories of the martyrs that appear in the deuterocanonical books of the Maccabees (11:35–8) and probably the tradition that Isaiah was killed by being sawn in two, which is found in various non-canonical writings (11:37). Hebrews relies on the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Old
Testament. This is most evident at the points where the author quotes scripture in a form that corresponds to the Septuagint but differs from standard Hebrew texts. For example, the quotation of Psalm 40:7 in Hebrews 10:5 reads “a body you have prepared,” which corresponds to the Greek version of the Psalm, rather than “ears you have dug,” which is the way the passage reads in Hebrew. The reference to Genesis 47:31 in Hebrews 11:21 refers to “staff” rather than “bed.” The idea that the son of man was made lower than the angels “for a little while” (2:7) depends on the Greek version of Psalm 8:5, since the Hebrew text of the psalm uses a word that means “a little lower” in degree.

A brief survey of Hebrews, beginning with its first chapter, shows how the author makes use of the Old Testament. Hebrews opens by announcing that God, who previously spoke by Israel’s prophets, has now spoken by a Son. To reinforce this claim, the author quotes a series of Old Testament passages almost without comment. Passages from the Psalms, 2 Samuel 7, and Deuteronomy 32 enable readers to hear God address a royal figure as his Son, who is superior to the angels. Other psalm texts show God celebrating the righteous rule of his anointed one, who is addressed as “God” (Heb. 1:5–14). The key text is Psalm 110:1, which tells of God giving his chosen one a place at his right hand. Early Christians regularly interpreted this passage as a commentary on Jesus’ resurrection and ascension to heavenly glory (Matt. 22:44; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42; Acts 2:34), and by joining other biblical passages to this psalm the author of Hebrews allows the quotations to give readers an impression of the grandeur of the exalted Son of God.

This pattern of usage shows that the author understands the Old Testament in light of Christ and Christ in light of the Old Testament. The two are taken together. When read in their original contexts many of the Old Testament passages quoted refer either to God or to the king of Israel, but the author of Hebrews reads the texts retrospectively in light of Jesus’ exaltation. The author interprets the Old Testament in light of Christ because he understands that Christ’s crucifixion and exaltation are God’s definitive means of communication, and he takes the Old Testament writings to foreshadow these events. At the same time, the author does not have unmediated access to the heavenly throne room and cannot gaze upon the exalted Christ with the unaided eye. Therefore, he seeks to discern something about the exalted Son of God by looking at the scriptures that anticipate his coming. The author finds the righteous rule of the ascended Son of God reflected in the royal psalms, which speak of the glory of God’s anointed king.

Hebrews 2–4 includes quotations of biblical texts followed by interpretations. In 2:5–9 the author quotes from Psalm 8, which tells of God creating human beings for glory and honor. The interpretation of the psalm raises the objection that people do not necessarily see God’s glorious intentions realized in their own experiences, which often fall short of glory. In response to this objection, the author directs readers to the story of Jesus, who suffered and died but was later raised to heavenly glory. Since Jesus suffered and was glorified, readers can be confident that even though they suffer, they too have the hope of future glory with God. The argument continues with a quotation and interpretation of Psalm 95:9–11 in Hebrews 3–4. The psalm recalls how Moses’ generation tested God in the wilderness and failed to enter God’s rest in the promised land, and it exhorts its readers not to harden their hearts in the same way. Hebrews first interprets the psalm as a sharp warning about the conse-
quences of unfaithfulness (3:12–19), then the author interprets the psalm as a word of promise, since it gives assurance that those who do not harden their hearts will enter God’s rest (4:1–10).

Using one passage of scripture to interpret another is one of the techniques that Hebrews employs. To show what the psalm means when it extends the hope of entering God’s “rest,” Hebrews refers readers to Genesis 2:2, which speaks of the “rest” that God enjoyed on the seventh day of the Creation. By reading Genesis 2 and Psalm 95 together, the author gives readers encouragement to hope that God’s purposes will culminate in the faithful entering the rest that God himself enjoys. A similar interpretive strategy shapes Hebrews’ intriguing discussion of Melchizedek, the priest and king of Salem who is briefly mentioned in connection with Abraham in Genesis 14:18–20. After summarizing the passage from Genesis, Hebrews says that Melchizedek has “neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever” (Heb. 7:3). This astonishing claim arises in part from the way the author reads Genesis in light of Psalm 110:4, the only other text to mention Melchizedek: “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” Since the psalm speaks of Melchizedek’s everlasting priesthood, the author of Hebrews assumes that Genesis 14 reflects it as well.

The central section of Hebrews combines elements from three major Old Testament passages to convey the significance of Christ’s death. One text is Jeremiah 31:31–4, where God declares that he will make a new covenant under which he will show mercy toward iniquity and offer definitive forgiveness for sins. The passage is quoted in Hebrews 8:8–12. Although Jeremiah’s oracle promises a new covenant, the prophet does not specify how God will bring the covenant about. Therefore, the second text that Hebrews invokes is Exodus 24:3–8, which relates that Moses established the first covenant by means of a sacrifice at Mount Sinai. Since the Sinai covenant was inaugurated with a sacrifice, Hebrews infers that the new covenant must also involve a sacrifice, the self-sacrifice Christ made through his crucifixion (Heb. 9:18–22). The author reinforces the idea that Jesus’ covenant-making sacrifice is an atoning sacrifice by drawing on a third passage, the biblical stipulations for the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16:1–22. That passage tells of the high priest offering a sacrifice in the outer court of the sanctuary before entering its inner court to complete the work of atonement. Hebrews likens this to the work of Christ, who made his self-sacrifice on earth before being exalted to God’s presence in heaven, where he has become a source of eternal redemption for people (Heb. 9:1–14). When taken together these three texts show how the notions of covenant, sacrifice, and forgiveness are interrelated ideas that convey the significance of Christ’s death.

The final section of Hebrews summarizes much of the biblical story, from the Creation to the Maccabean martyrs of the second century BCE, to show that in every generation the people of God have had to live by faith (11:1–40). The author’s interpretive lens is Habakkuk 2:4, “The righteous one will live by faith,” which is quoted in Hebrews 10:38. The relationship between this quotation and the summary of biblical history that follows it in Hebrews 11 is twofold. On the one hand, righteous figures like Abel, Enoch, Noah, and others provide examples of what Habakkuk means when he speaks of living by faith. On the other hand, Habakkuk’s words provide a way of understanding
the biblical story as a whole, enabling readers to discern that faith is what empowers biblical figures to live in the face of disappointment and conflict, even though a particular Old Testament story might not make the role of faith explicit.

Unity

Hebrews can best be understood as a unified composition. A consistent, well-developed Greek style is used throughout, and the sections of its argument are connected to each other without obvious seams or signs of editing. The text flows well from the elevated opening paragraph about God speaking through the prophets and the Son in 1:1–4 to the benediction and “Amen” in 13:20–1. Questions about its unity do, however, arise in relation to the epistolary conclusion in 13:22–5. Some have wondered whether these verses might have been appended to a previously complete composition, either by the author or by someone else. They point out that neither the opening nor the body of Hebrews has the features of a letter, whereas the concluding verses follow the usual conventions for the conclusions of letters. Elsewhere the author commonly refers to what is being “said” rather than what is being “written,” and rarely uses the first-person-singular “I,” whereas the conclusion refers to writing and repeatedly uses the first person singular. Since Paul’s companion Timothy is mentioned in 13:23, some propose that the postscript was added to give the impression that Hebrews was a Pauline letter.

There are good reasons, however, for assuming that the concluding verses are an integral part of Hebrews. Early Christian letter closings included requests for prayer, comments about future visits, and benedictions like those in 13:18–21, along with the personal notes and greetings that appear in 13:22–5. The author shifted to the first-person “I” in 13:19 so that 13:22–5 simply continues the pattern. Moreover, someone intending to give the impression that Hebrews was a Pauline letter almost certainly would have created for Hebrews an epistolary opening similar to that of Paul’s letters, and would probably have mentioned Paul’s name, rather than merely implying a connection by referring to Timothy. Hebrews can best be understood as a unified composition by one author.

Genre

Hebrews has characteristics of both a letter and a speech. For centuries Hebrews was regarded as a letter because it concludes like many other early Christian letters with a section that includes brief personal notes, greetings, and a final “Grace be with all of you” (13:22–5). Although Hebrews lacks the usual epistolary introduction, which names the sender and addressees and gave greetings, interpreters have sometimes speculated that the author might have omitted it from the original composition or that it might have been lost or omitted when the manuscript was copied.

Today it is more common to see Hebrews as a speech that was given a short epistolary conclusion. Hebrews calls itself “a word of exhortation,” an expression that was
sometimes used for sermons (13:22). For example, the book of Acts says that when Paul and his companions were in a synagogue, the officials invited Paul to give a “word of exhortation” after passages were read from the law and the prophets (Acts 13:15). In the sermon that follows, Paul expounds the meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection in light of the Jewish scriptures, which Hebrews also does. Identifying Hebrews as an early Christian sermon or speech is also helpful because the author often refers to speaking rather than to writing (Heb. 2:5; 5:11; 6:9) and follows patterns of classical rhetoric, as will be noted below.

Hebrews has affinities with different types of speeches and cannot be neatly placed in one distinct category. Ancient rhetorical handbooks called speeches that counseled people to follow a certain course of action in the future “deliberative,” and since Hebrews summons readers to pursue the path of faithfulness in the hope of inheriting a place in God’s heavenly city, the book is to some extent a deliberative speech. Alternatively, speeches that seek to reinforce values that people already hold, by commending what is praiseworthy and condemning what is shameful, are called “epideictic.” Since Hebrews calls readers to hold fast the faith they already profess, the book also has some of the traits of an epideictic speech. Trying to place Hebrews in one category or the other is not helpful because the handbooks recognize that both types of rhetoric can occur in the same speech, as they do in Hebrews.

Structure

Hebrews is structured according to the patterns of ancient speeches. Rhetorical handbooks indicated that speeches were to include several standard elements, although they also recognized that speakers could show considerable freedom in adapting typical patterns to specific situations. The usual features of a speech are as follows: The introduction or *exordium* is to prepare listeners to give proper attention to the speaker. A narration of facts pertaining to the topic may follow the introduction, but it is not essential. The next main elements are the proposition or thesis, which defines the issue to be addressed, and the arguments that support the speaker’s position. The final component is the conclusion or peroration that brings the speech to a close. Hebrews includes all of these elements except the optional section on narrating the facts.

The author makes transitions between major sections by digressions in which he departs from the main line of argument to appeal for attention and warn about the dangers of neglecting or spurning the word of God (2:1–4; 5:11–6:20; 10:26–39; 12:25–7). The digressions are important because they help to regain the readers’ attention before the author begins a new section of his speech. Short digressions, which contrast the way that God spoke in the past at Sinai with the way God now addresses the listeners, make the transition from the introduction to the proposition (2:1–4) and from the final series of arguments to the conclusion (12:25–7). Longer digressions create transitions between major sections of the argument by warning about apostasy, recalling the listeners’ faithfulness, and encouraging perseverance (5:11–6:20; 10:26–39). Hebrews can be outlined as follows:
Introduction (1:1–2:4)
Proposition (2:5–9)
Arguments (2:10–12:27)
A  First Series (2:10–6:20)
   1  Argument: Jesus received glory through faithful suffering – a way that
      others are called to follow (2:10–5:10)
   2  Transitional Digression (5:11–6:20)
B  Second Series (7:1–10:39)
   1  Argument: Jesus’ suffering is the high-priestly sacrifice that allows others to
      approach God (7:1–10:25)
   2  Transitional Digression (10:26–39)
C  Third Series (11:1–12:27)
   1  Arguments: People persevere through suffering to glory by faith
      (11:1–12:24)
   2  Transitional Digression (12:25–7)
Conclusion (12:28–13:21)
Epistolary Postscript 13:22–5

The introduction (1:1–2:4) is framed by complex sentences that deal with God’s
manner of speaking in the past through prophets and angels, and in the present through
his Son (1:1–4; 2:2–4). The first paragraph of the introduction presents the Son as the
heir and creator of all things, who is seated at God’s right hand (1:1–4), and the para-
graph that follows cites a series of Old Testament passages to provide support for these
claims (1:5–14). The final paragraph calls for the readers to give their full attention to
what is being said and warns about the consequences of neglecting the Christian
message (2:1–4).

The proposition (2:5–9) is a pivotal section, consisting of a quotation of Psalm 8:4–6
followed by a brief exposition of the text. It is located between two other sections of the
speech, each of which is neatly framed. In content, the proposition is situated precisely
at the point where attention turns from the glory of the exalted Christ to the significance
of his suffering. In the span of a few verses, the author states the themes that will be
developed in the remainder of the speech: Christ’s movement from suffering to glory,
his suffering on behalf of others, and the idea that one can “see” the fulfillment of God’s
promises in Christ, despite their apparent non-realization in human experience.

The first series of arguments (2:10–5:10) is framed by statements that Christ was
“made complete through suffering,” so that he has become the pioneer or source of
salvation for others (2:10; 5:8–10). Before this section the author focused on the glory
of the ascended Christ, whereas these arguments emphasize the suffering that preceded
Christ’s exaltation. Paragraphs comparing Christ’s glory to that of Moses and Aaron,
together with images from the exodus and wilderness wanderings, help to unify the
section. A lengthy and carefully crafted sentence that summarizes Christ’s suffering
and exaltation brings the first series of arguments to a close (5:5–10). The digression
that follows this section turns aside from the main argument to reprove the listeners
for their lack of learning (5:11–6:20) in contrast to Christ’s way of learning through
suffering (5:8). The author lets his readers know that he is returning to the main argu-
The second series of arguments (7:1–10:25) shows that Christ the high priest suffered in order to make the sacrifice that allows his followers to enter God’s presence. Successive comparisons of the Levitical priesthood and Christ’s priesthood, the old and new covenants, animal sacrifices and Christ’s self-sacrifice, integrate the section. In the previous series of arguments, the author showed the similarities between the priesthood of Aaron and Jesus, but here he stresses the differences between the Levitical priestly service and Christ’s priestly service. Formally, this segment concludes with an intricate and lengthy sentence that draws together the main themes and invites listeners to draw near to God as the Day of the Lord draws near to them (10:19–25). A digression, which echoes earlier warnings about the dangers of turning from God and encourages listeners to remain faithful, makes the transition into the final series of arguments (10:26–39).

The third series of arguments (11:1–12:24) begins and ends with comments about the blood of Abel (11:4; 12:24). The section traces the journeys of the righteous who endured conflict, disappointment, and death on earth, culminating with the spirits of the righteous being made complete in God’s heavenly city (12:22–4). Abraham lived as a foreigner on earth in the hope of life in God’s city (11:10, 16), Moses gave up wealth in Egypt for a future reward (11:26–7), and the martyrs accepted death in the hope of resurrection (11:35). The depiction of the faithful in the heavenly Jerusalem shows that they did not persevere in vain, for God will be faithful to his promises (12:22–4). A short digression urging listeners to heed the one who is speaking concludes the section (12:25–7).

The conclusion (12:28–13:21) refers to service “pleasing” to God in its opening statement (12:28) and final benediction (13:21). The first and last paragraphs of the conclusion deal with the importance of offering service or sacrifice to God, serving other people, and remembering one’s leaders. The central paragraph creatively fuses themes of Christ’s priestly sacrifice and the hope of entering the city of God in order to shape and support this view of Christian discipleship. The epistolary postscript (13:22–5) begins after the final benediction and includes many features typical of conclusions on early Christian letters: a comment about what has been written, sharing of personal information and mention of a future visit, an extension of greetings, and a parting wish.

Rhetorical Analysis

Speakers in antiquity understood that persuasion comes from the interplay of three things: the content of a speech (logos), appeals to emotion (pathos), and the character of the presenter (ethos). Considering each category in turn can help to show the multidimensional way in which Hebrews seeks to move its readers to a renewed sense of commitment to God, Christ, and the Christian community.

First we can consider the content of Hebrews. The introduction leads into the subject of the speech indirectly. Rather than stating the main theme, the introduction’s pres-
entation of Christ in glory helps establish rapport with readers by affirming some elements of the Christian tradition that they already hold to be true. Only in 2:5–9 does the author define the issue facing his readers. It seems likely that the causes of the dispiriting situation addressed by Hebrews were complex and that the author could not assume that everyone would have understood the reasons for the community’s decline in the same way. Therefore, he defines the problem as the apparent contradiction between the glory that God has promised people and the fact that they do not “see” this promise realized in their own experience. For them, being marginalized socially seems to call God’s promises into question.

The arguments in Hebrews are designed to overcome this apparent contradiction between the claims of faith and social experiences of the readers. In chapters 2–6 the author acknowledges that God’s people may not see God’s promises of glory, honor, and salvation fulfilled in their own experiences, but they can persevere by considering the experience of Jesus, who willingly identified with suffering human beings and who suffered himself before being exalted to heavenly glory. Since God brought Jesus through suffering to glory, those who follow Jesus can be confident that God will also bring them to the glory he has promised. In chapters 7–10 the author shows that Jesus can be considered a priest, whose self-offering provides a complete sacrifice for sins and establishes a new covenant. Therefore, those who trust him may draw near to God with confidence. In chapters 11–12 the author gives examples of previous generations of God’s people, who steadfastly endured disappointment, conflict, and death. The listeners, too, are called to persevere in faith by looking toward a future in God’s heavenly city and a glory that is not evident to the eye, but which can be perceived by faith in the promises of God. The concluding exhortations in chapter 13 relate the service that Christ performed for the readers to the ongoing service that they are to perform in their own communities.

Comparison and contrast sharpen the arguments. Comparison is a way for an author to praise someone by showing that the person is greater than other illustrious figures. Hebrews makes use of comparison when showing that Christ is superior to angels, Moses, and Levitical priests (1:1–14; 3:1–6; 7:1–28). All of these are worthy of honor, while Christ is worthy of even greater honor. Sometimes the author makes comparisons to enhance his warnings. For example, if transgressions of the Mosaic law warrant punishment, then spurning the grace Christ offers will bring even greater punishment (2:1–4; 10:26–31). A related technique is to create antitheses to give a clearer sense of the superiority of Christ and the benefits he provides. In chapters 8–10 the author uses antitheses to heighten the differences between the old and new covenants and between Levitical sacrifices and Christ’s self-sacrifice.

Examples enhance the appeal of Hebrews. Speakers and writers in antiquity valued the way examples could make points vividly to their audiences. Although insisting that logic is important, they recognized that logic alone often failed to persuade people. A good example, however, could demonstrate a point so vividly that readers would be drawn to the author’s point of view. In Hebrews, the wilderness generation offers a vivid example of the consequences of unfaithfulness. Those who consider the way the people of Moses’ time died in the wilderness will want to avoid following their pattern of unbelief (3:7–19). Conversely, the stories of Abraham, Sarah, and their
descendants living as strangers in the promised land, of Moses leading the people out of slavery, and of the martyrs suffering torture and death show readers the power of faith in the face of difficulty. By listing example after example in chapter 11, the author creates a kind of momentum that can make readers want to join the company of the faithful.

A second dimension is appeal to emotion. As the author of Hebrews presents his argument, he develops the interplay between the positive feelings of confidence and sympathy, which he uses to draw people to faithfulness, and the negative feelings of fear and shame, which he uses to create an aversion to unfaithfulness. On the one hand, the author gives readers reason to feel confident because help is available from God (4:14–16; 13:6), Christ cleanses their consciences (9:15), and they are encircled by a great cloud of faithful witnesses (12:1). On the other hand, readers may be inclined to abandon their faith because they fear it might lead to social conflict, but the author warns that it is more “terrifying to fall into the hands of the living God” (10:31), whose fiery judgment upon the faithless is fearsome (6:4–8; 10:27; 12:29). Again, the community addressed by Hebrews had been treated with contempt by nonbelievers, but the author of Hebrews insists that to follow Jesus is to “despise the shame” of society (12:2) in the confidence that God and Christ are not ashamed of them (2:11; 11:16). Finally, the author appeals to the readers’ sympathy when telling of the way Jesus suffered, even though he was innocent, because he identified with human beings in need (2:11–14; 4:15). Such reminders of the manner of Jesus’ suffering reinforce the listeners’ faith by awakening sympathy for one who suffered unjustly, as well as by eliciting gratitude for his suffering on their behalf.

A third dimension of persuasion comes from the character of the presenter. Readers or listeners are more likely to be persuaded by someone they trust than by someone they do not trust. Therefore, speakers developed ways to help make the audience well disposed. Accordingly, the author of Hebrews begins by focusing on God rather than on himself. He tells of the way God spoke in the past through the prophets and now by a Son, and instead of offering his own reflections on these points he offers readers a rapid series of biblical quotations in which God is identified as the speaker. Identifying God as the principal speaker in the introduction and elsewhere helps make the author’s case persuasive because listeners are expected to recognize the integrity of God’s character (6:18). The implication is that those who relinquish their faith in God’s promises in effect deny the integrity of God’s character.

The author’s own character also plays a role, even though the author’s name is never given. The author identifies himself with his audience by using the first person plural, so that his readers know that he too is addressed by the word of God (1:2; 2:3; 4:2) and shares their confession of faith (3:1; 4:14; 10:23). Like them, he must reckon with divine judgment (2:3; 4:13; 10:26), trust in divine mercy (4:15–16; 9:14), and strive in faith (4:11; 10:24; 11:39; 12:1). The author demonstrates his familiarity with scripture by frequent citation of texts, so that readers can be confident that he knows the tradition. Finally, he is bold in his confession (1:1–4) and direct in his exhortations, so that when he urges his readers to bold in their confession (3:6; 4:16; 10:19; 10:35) and to exhort one another (3:13; 10:24), his directives have integrity, since they are to do what he is already doing.
Theological Issues and Themes

Hebrews offers a rich and multifaceted portrayal of Jesus Christ. The opening chapter identifies Christ as the Son of God, who bears the radiance of God’s glory and the imprint of God’s being. According to Israel’s tradition, God created the world by his word. Hebrews in turn identifies the word of God with the Son of God, declaring that God spoke through the Son through whom he created the world (1:2). The divine Son, who is addressed as “God,” reigns forever in righteousness (1:8). The created order will pass away, but the Son will not. Readers may be discouraged because of conflict and injustice in the world around them, but the world is transient; the Son remains forever. Therefore, readers are to place their trust in the everlasting Son of God rather than being moved to unbelief by changing conditions of this world.

Jesus’ humanity and ministry on earth also play important roles in Hebrews. The Son of God identified with human beings by taking on their flesh and blood and suffering death (2:11–15). Recalling the traditions of Christ’s passion, the author tells of Jesus offering prayers to God with loud cries and tears, enduring the shame of the cross, and suffering abuse at the hands of his opponents (5:7; 12:2; 13:12). The author assures readers that Jesus can sympathize with them because he suffered and was tested in the same ways as other human beings, except that he was without sin (2:18; 4:15). Since Jesus was human and proved faithful through suffering, he can also serve as an example for other people to follow in their own lives (12:3; 13:13). Finally, Jesus’ suffering in the flesh gives integrity to Hebrews’ theology of the atonement. The author affirms that without an outpouring of blood there is no forgiveness of sins, arguing that Jesus’ death entailed the effusion of blood that fulfills what is required for an authentic sacrifice (9:12, 14, 22).

Jesus’ high priesthood is a hallmark of Hebrews’ Christology. The priests of Israel were to offer sacrifices for sin and thereby offer grace and forgiveness to those in need, and Hebrews argues that Christ offers grace in a definitive way to people through his self-sacrifice (4:14–5:4). Most distinctive in Hebrews, however, is that Jesus is a priest according to the order of Melchizedek (5:6). The basis for making this identification is fairly simple. Early Christians accepted that Jesus’ resurrection and ascension to glory at God’s right hand fulfilled Psalm 110:1: “The Lord said to my lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.’” Hebrews notes that Psalm 110:4 calls this same royal figure “a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” If Psalm 110:1 applies to Christ, the author assumes that 110:4 does as well. In Israel’s tradition the roles of priest and king were ordinarily separated, but Melchizedek was both a king and a priest, setting a precedent for ascribing both royal and priestly functions to Jesus. Moreover, Psalm 110:4 speaks of one who will serve as a priest forever, and Hebrews points out that Jesus is uniquely qualified to be such a priest because he has now risen from the dead and lives eternally – something that cannot be said of any other priest (Heb. 7:15–28). By depicting Jesus as the consummate high priest, Hebrews establishes a basis for understanding Jesus’ death as a sacrifice of atonement and his current work in heaven as intercession (7:25; 9:11–14).

Hebrews’ understanding of God’s saving work is related to the themes of promise and covenant. The promises made to Abraham establish God’s intentions for people.
God promised to bless Abraham and to give him land and descendants (6:14; 11:9, 12). Abraham received the fulfillment of the promises in a limited way when he was blessed by Melchizedek, when his son Isaac was born, and when he sojourned in the land of Canaan, but neither Abraham nor the generations that followed received fulfillment of the promises in the full and final sense. Hebrews insists that this does not mean that God is unreliable, but that the promises point to realities that are future rather than past and heavenly rather than earthly.

Sin, which involves unbelief and the actions that proceed from unbelief, constitutes a barrier to the fulfillment of God’s promises because sin separates people from God. As a way of dealing with sin, the covenant of Moses’ time prescribed sacrifices, a priesthood, and sanctuary by which atonement could be made, but the sacrifices cleansed only the flesh, the priests were subject to sin and death, and the sanctuary was earthly. Therefore God appointed Jesus to serve as the sinless high priest in the heavenly sanctuary and to establish a new covenant that would cleanse the human conscience and thereby bring people into a right relationship with God. The establishment of the new covenant fulfills the promise of mercy God made in Jeremiah 31:31–4, and it serves as the harbinger of the fulfillment of all God’s promises, including everlasting life in God’s kingdom (Heb. 8:1–10:18). There is constancy in God’s promise of blessing but change in the covenants by which God overcomes the promise of human sin in order to bring his promises to their fulfillment.

Hebrews uses the term “perfect” for the accomplishment of God’s purposes. The Greek words that are usually translated “perfect” are based on the root tel-, which has to do with reaching a goal. Jesus is made perfect through his death and exaltation to heavenly glory so that he now serves as high priest at God’s right hand (5:9). Others are made perfect when they go where Jesus has gone, following their forerunner into the presence of God. The arguments in Hebrews begin by saying that God brought Jesus to perfection in order that many others might also share in glory (2:10), and they culminate in the heavenly Jerusalem, where the faithful are made perfect by receiving the blessings that God has promised in the company of angels (12:22–4).

Annotated Bibliography


