

HEBREWS

CONTENTS

General Editors' Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xiii
Dedication	xiv
List of Abbreviations	xv
Introduction	1
I. Author	2
II. Date	5
III. Destination and Addressees	6
IV. Genre and Structure	10
V. Purpose	13
VI. Religious-Cultural Background	15
VII. Hebrews Outline	17
VIII. Hebrews and the Story Line of the Bible	20
IX. Biblical and Theological Structures	29
Exposition	
Hebrews 1:1–4	51
Hebrews 1:5–14	62
Hebrews 2:1–4	78
Hebrews 2:5–9	84
Hebrews 2:10–18	93
Hebrews 3:1–6	111
Hebrews 3:7–11	120
Hebrews 3:12–19	124
Hebrews 4:1–5	132
Hebrews 4:6–13	139
Hebrews 4:14–16	149
Hebrews 5:1–10	155
Hebrews 5:11–14	167
Hebrews 6:1–3	173
Hebrews 6:4–8	178
Hebrews 6:9–12	192
Hebrews 6:13–20	196
Hebrews 7:1–10	205
Hebrews 7:11–12	214
Hebrews 7:13–14	218
Hebrews 7:15–17	220
Hebrews 7:18–19	224
Hebrews 7:20–22	228
Hebrews 7:23–25	231
Hebrews 7:26–28	235
Hebrews 8:1–6	240
Hebrews 8:7–13	247
Hebrews 9:1–10	255

HEBREWS

Hebrews 9:11–14	265
Hebrews 9:15–22	272
Hebrews 9:23–28	280
Hebrews 10:1–4	288
Hebrews 10:5–10	293
Hebrews 10:11–14	302
Hebrews 10:15–18	307
Hebrews 10:19–25	311
Hebrews 10:26–31	322
Hebrews 10:32–39	329
Hebrews 11:1–2	337
Hebrews 11:3–7	341
Hebrews 11:8–22	347
Hebrews 11:23–31	360
Hebrews 11:32–40	367
Hebrews 12:1–3	374
Hebrews 12:4–13	380
Hebrews 12:14–17	389
Hebrews 12:18–24	394
Hebrews 12:25–29	403
Hebrews 13:1–6	408
Hebrews 13:7–17	415
Hebrews 13:18–25	426
Biblical and Theological Themes	435
§1 God in Hebrews	435
§2 Jesus Christ	441
§2.1 Divine Son	445
§2.2 The Humanity of the Son	452
§2.3 The Priesthood of Jesus	455
§2.4 Jesus’ Better Sacrifice and Human Anthropology	460
§2.5 Perfection and Assurance	466
§2.6 Jesus’ Resurrection and Exaltation	471
§3 The New Covenant	474
§4 The Spirit in Hebrews	477
§5 Warnings and Exhortations	480
§6 Sojourners and Exiles	491
§7 Faith, Obedience, and the Situation of the Readers	493
§8 Assurance	496
§9 The Future Reward	498
Bibliography	501
Name Index	519
Subject Index	523
Scripture Index	527



*To my son, John,
and daughter-in-law, Brooke.*

“I thank my God every time
I remember you.” (NIV)



INTRODUCTION

The words of Jesus on the cross, “It is finished!” (John 19:30), capture the theology of Hebrews. My aim in this commentary is to focus on the letter’s biblical theology. The emphasis on biblical theology shows up especially in the introduction and conclusion of this commentary where I consider theological structures and themes. In the introduction I will examine four different structures that are woven into the entire letter: (1) promise/fulfillment; (2) eschatology; (3) typology; and (4) spatial orientation (which can also be described as the relationship between heaven and earth in the letter). The commentary will conclude, after presenting an exegesis of each chapter, with a discussion of some major theological themes in Hebrews.¹

Most modern commentaries begin with significant introductions and then conduct an intensive exegesis of the text, chapter-by-chapter and verse-by-verse. By way of contrast, this introduction and the commentary are relatively brief and nontechnical. With the proliferation of commentaries today, a new commentary should have a distinctive approach. We now have many excellent commentaries on Hebrews that examine the letter in some detail. Many of these commentaries provide a useful function in that they draw on other parallels from both Jewish and Hellenistic literature to illuminate Hebrews. The advantage of such an approach is that the reader is plunged into the cultural world of the author. On the other hand,

¹ Given the constraints of this commentary, I cannot delve into the history of interpretation. For a start one should consult Jon C. Laansma and Daniel J. Trier, eds., *Christology, Hermeneutics, and Hebrews: Profiles from the History of Interpretation*, LNTS (London: T&T Clark, 2012); E. M. Heen and P. W. D. Krey, eds., *Hebrews*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005).

the careful sifting of various traditions may cause the reader to lose track of the letter's argument. At the same time, the author's theology may be muted, not because it isn't recognized but because it may be difficult to follow in the welter of information given to readers. I hope a commentary that probes the theology of Hebrews will prove to be helpful. I have been helped by many scholars in preparing this commentary, especially those who have written in-depth commentaries and those who have written monographs on the letter. No one writes from an objective standpoint, and hence I should state up front that I write as an evangelical Christian who believes that the Scriptures are the living and authoritative Word of God.

I. Author

The authorship of Hebrews is a fascinating issue that continues to interest Christians today. Clement of Alexandria (ca. AD 150–215) thought the letter was written by Paul in Hebrew and then translated into Greek by Luke.² Origen (ca. AD 185–253) said the thoughts are Pauline but suggested someone else made short notes and wrote up what the apostle taught and said.³ Origen passed on the tradition that either Luke or Clement of Rome was the writer, but he remained noncommittal on the identity of the author. Most scholars believe Origen was agnostic about the author since he wrote, “But who wrote the epistle, truly only God knows.”⁴ David Alan Black, however, argues Origen believed Paul was the author but someone else was the penman.⁵ Black's interpretation of Origen should be rejected. It has been shown that when Origen speaks of who wrote the epistle he was referring to the author, not merely the secretary.⁶ Hence, the notion that Origen believed Paul was the author fails to persuade. As time passed, however, the notion that Paul was the

² Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.14.1.

³ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.25.13.

⁴ This is my translation of Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.25.14.

⁵ David Alan Black, “Who Wrote Hebrews? The Internal and External Evidence Re-examined,” *Faith and Mission* 18 (2001): 3–26. See also David Alan Black, *The Authorship of Hebrews: The Case for Paul* (Gonzales, FL: Energion, 2013).

⁶ See David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 32.

author gained credence, and by the third century Pauline authorship was accepted in the East.⁷

The situation in the West was different. Tertullian (ca. AD 155–220) suggested that Barnabas was the author, which indicates there was no inclination in the early centuries in the West to ascribe the letter to Paul.⁸ Identifying the author as Barnabas is interesting since Barnabas was a Levite (Acts 4:36), which could explain the interest in and knowledge of priestly matters in Hebrews. Pauline authorship, however, finally triumphed in the West due to the influence of Jerome and Augustine.⁹ Pauline authorship reigned as the view of the church until the time of the Reformation. Erasmus inclined against Pauline authorship but said he would submit to ecclesiastical authorities since the matter was inconsequential.¹⁰ Luther rejected Pauline authorship, believing that Heb 2:3 proves the book could not have come from Paul. Luther had a novel but brilliant guess regarding authorship, proposing that the book was written by Apollos.¹¹ Hebrews is beautifully written and has an Alexandrian feel, fitting with Apollos's eloquence and Alexandrian roots (Acts 18:24). Calvin also agreed that Paul wasn't the writer based on Heb 2:3, suggesting that either Luke or Clement of Rome penned the letter.¹²

⁷ See here Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 1–2, n7. See, e.g., Eusebius who accepts Hebrews as Pauline, though he thinks it was written originally in Hebrew and translated by Clement of Rome into Greek (*Hist. eccl.* 3.3.5 and 3.38.2–3).

⁸ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 3.

⁹ For the views of Jerome and Augustine, see Philip Edgecumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 21–22.

¹⁰ For Erasmus's comments on Hebrews, see *ibid.*, 23.

¹¹ Guthrie nicely summarizes the evidence favoring Apollos, and he also provides a historical overview of those who have supported Apollos as the author (including Zahn, Lenski, Montefiore). Guthrie is not dogmatic on the matter but suggests Apollos as the author. George H. Guthrie, "The Case for Apollos as the Author of Hebrews," *Faith and Mission* 18 (2001): 41–56. For the development of Luther's views, see Hughes, *Hebrews*, 23; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 4. In support of Apollos, see Ceslas Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux*, 2nd ed., 2 vols., EB (Paris: Gabalda, 1953), 1:197–219.

¹² See John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, trans. J. Owen (repr.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 54, 358. Despite the

In the contemporary period scholars continue to propose various authors, such as Priscilla, Silas, Epaphras, Jude, Aristion, etc.¹³ In recent years a vigorous defense of Lukan authorship has been proposed by David Allen,¹⁴ and there is also a significant defense of Pauline authorship by David Alan Black.¹⁵

Pauline authorship should be rejected despite the attempts, both ancient and modern, to mount a defense. First, in Paul's 13 letters he identifies himself by name, thus the absence of a name in Hebrews renders it doubtful that Paul wrote the letter. Second, stylistic arguments should not be relied on too heavily since the Pauline corpus is so limited. Still, the polished Greek style of Hebrews doesn't accord with what we find in the Pauline letters. Third, the writer separates himself from the original eyewitnesses in Heb 2:3. Paul, by way of contrast, emphasizes repeatedly his authority as an apostle of Jesus Christ and refuses to put himself in a subordinate position to the apostles and eyewitnesses. This last reason, in particular, rules out the notion that Paul was the author.

Once Paul is excluded, the door is pushed wide open for any number of candidates. David Allen argues intriguingly for Luke, but one can only say that he has shown that Lukan authorship is possible. He has certainly not proved his thesis. The linguistic evidence is not decisive, and the differences between Hebrews and Acts call into question Lukan authorship.¹⁶ Barnabas is an attractive choice since he was a Levite, and the book has an interest in all things Levitical. Similarly, Luther's guess that the author was Apollos is appealing, for Apollos's eloquence accords with the letter's elegance, and his Alexandrian background fits with the character of

title of the commentary (which doubtless doesn't come from Calvin), Calvin clearly rejects Pauline authorship in his comments on 2:3 and 13:23.

¹³ Adolf von Harnack defended Priscilla as the author (Adolf von Harnack, "Probabilia über die Adresse und den Verfasser des Hebräerbriefes," ZNW 1 [1900]: 16–41). For Silas, see Thomas Hewitt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, TNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960), 26–32. For Epaphras, see Robert Jewett, *Letter to Pilgrims: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York: Pilgrim, 1981), 7–9.

¹⁴ Allen, *Hebrews*, 29–61. David L. Allen, *Lukan Authorship of Hebrews* (Nashville: B&H, 2010).

¹⁵ See note 5 above.

¹⁶ Rightly Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 9.

the letter. Many scholars have seen an affinity between Hebrews and Platonic/Philonic thought, and Alexandria was a fertile center for such thought. But we come face-to-face here with the paucity of evidence in assigning an author. All the theories are guesses, though some are fascinating and alluring to be sure. We don't really know who wrote Hebrews. No theory of authorship has won the day and for good reason, for the answer to our quest lies outside the domain of historical knowledge. Origen's words about the author still ring true today: "God only knows." Hence, in this commentary I will refer to the writer as "the author." I will also use the title of the book as the subject so that the reader will find sentences like "Hebrews says."

II. Date

Dating NT documents is notoriously difficult, and Hebrews is no exception. No date was inscribed on the letter, and no historical referent in the letter gives us a definite date. Timothy was still alive (13:23) when the letter was written, and thus the letter was written in the first century. Since the author mentions the second generation of Christians (2:3), Timothy (13:23), and the death of some Christian leaders (13:7), the document was not written in the 30s or 40s. Furthermore, 5:12 indicates that the believers had been Christians for a while. The earliest date usually assigned is in the 60s.

Some date the book to the decades after AD 70, but there are reasons that suggest a date in the 60s, before AD 70.¹⁷ The author refers often to the tabernacle and the ritual carried out there. In fact, he uses the present tense to describe the cultic system, indicating, perhaps, that the temple was still standing when he wrote. Against this, however, is the fact that 1 Clement also uses the present tense when referring to the temple, and he wrote in AD 96, well after the time when the temple was destroyed (AD 70).¹⁸ Even though the argument from tense is not decisive, the reference to the tabernacle

¹⁷ See e.g., Donald A. Hagner, *The New Testament: A Historical and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), 651–52.

¹⁸ The dating of 1 Clement is not certain. Eisenbaum suggests a date late in the first century or early in the second. See Pamela M. Eisenbaum, "Locating Hebrews Within the Literary Landscape of Christian Origins," in *Hebrews: Contemporary Methods—New Insights*, ed. G. Gelardini (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 224–31.

is still significant in calculating the date. One of the fundamental arguments of the book is that Jesus' sacrifice is definitive and final so that the sacrifices of the old covenant belong to a former era.¹⁹ The destruction of the temple in AD 70 would demonstrate conclusively (in accord with Jesus' prophecy; cf. Matthew 24) that temple sacrifices were no longer valid. Hence, it is improbable that the author would have failed to mention the destruction of the temple, suggesting that he wrote in the 60s before the temple was destroyed. A more definite date than this can't be assigned due to lack of evidence.

Another argument that may point to an early date also relates to 1 Clement. Most scholars date 1 Clement ca. AD 96, and Clement clearly cites Hebrews (e.g., 36:1–6). As noted above, this is not a knock-down argument since the date of 1 Clement is not certain either.²⁰ But if 1 Clement was written in AD 96, Hebrews had to have been around long enough to become part of the tradition, which suggests to me a pre-AD 70 date.²¹

III. Destination and Addressees

To whom was the letter written? It has been common to think it was written to a Jewish community since the readers, given the content of the letter, were tempted to revert to the sacrificial system from Judaism, perhaps to avoid persecution or to obtain assurance of forgiveness.²² Attraction to Jewish rituals and practices, of

¹⁹ The author probably refers to the rituals of the tabernacle rather than the temple worship of his day because he draws literarily from the account of the tabernacle in the Pentateuch.

²⁰ See William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1991), lxiii–lx; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 7–8.

²¹ Cf. Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2006), 38–40; Barnabas Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 20–21; Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 15–20; Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 33; Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, lxvi.

²² For a recent article that supports such a reading, see Susan Haber, "From Priestly Torah to Christ Cultus: The Re-Vision of Covenant and Cult in Hebrews," *JSNT* 28 (2005): 105–24. Cf. Lindars, *The Theology of Hebrews*, 11. Lindars argues that the readers struggled with their consciences and lacked confidence that their postbaptismal sins were forgiven (14, 59, 86). Selby shows that in Hebrews

course, does not necessarily point to Jewish readers. The presence of God fearers in synagogues and Gentile proselytes who converted to Judaism indicates that Gentiles may have found Judaism alluring as well. Indeed, the readers were possibly a combination of Jews and Gentiles.²³ Still, I side with the dominant view that the letter was written to Jewish Christians.²⁴ The title of the book “to the Hebrews” suggests that an address to Jewish readers is an old interpretation. Koester says the title was affixed by the end of the second century and hence isn’t of much value in determining the recipients.²⁵ Certainly the title doesn’t resolve the question of addressees, but it is an ancient witness for the letter being addressed to Jewish Christians, and it at least shows that the predominant view of the addressees reaches back to the earliest interpreters of the letter. At the end of the day, we can’t rule out that the letter was intended for Gentiles rather than Jews or included both Jews and Gentiles.²⁶ Still the title of the letter and its contents (with the focus on the Mosaic law and the Levitical priesthood) render it more likely that the book was addressed to Jewish readers who wanted to revert to Judaism.²⁷ Fortunately the interpretation of the letter doesn’t depend

the conscience signifies one’s “internal awareness of . . . sinfulness and guilt and resulting in a guilty conscience which stands as the one effective barrier to enjoying true fellowship with God.” Jesus’ sacrifice is superior since it has truly cleansed the conscience. See Gary S. Selby, “The Meaning and Function of *συνείδησις* in Hebrews 9 and 10,” *ResQ* 28 (1985–86): 153.

²³ So George Guthrie, *Hebrews*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 20; David deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 2–7.

²⁴ So O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 11–13; Hagner, *Introduction*, 646–48, and most commentators. See the helpful summary of the situation by Scott D. Mackie, *Eschatology and Exhortation in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, WUNT 2/223 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 9–17.

²⁵ Koester, *Hebrews*, 46, 171–73.

²⁶ In support of Gentile readers, see James A. Moffat, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ICC (New York: Scribner’s, 1924), xv–xvii.

²⁷ Mason vigorously challenges this thesis (Eric F. Mason, “The Epistle [Not Necessarily] to the ‘Hebrews’: A Call to Renunciation of Judaism or Encouragement to Christian Commitment?” *PRSt* 37 [2010]: 7–20). He rightly says the author does not specifically call on the readers to avoid reverting to Judaism. Mason shows the main theme is a call to be committed to Christ and to avoid apostasy. So the interpretation of Hebrews offered here does not depend on the addressees being Jewish Christians. Still, despite Mason’s salutary cautions, it seems that the content of the

on the recipients. The meaning of the letter is fundamentally the same whether it addresses Jews or Gentiles, and thus the interpretation and biblical theology offered here do not rest on the identity of the addressees.

If we assume the letter was written to Jewish Christians, where were the Jews to whom the letter was addressed? Were they in Jerusalem, Palestine, Alexandria, or Rome? All of these locations make good sense. And scholars have also suggested Samaria, Antioch, Corinth, Cyprus, Ephesus, Bithynia, and Pontus.²⁸ It has even been argued that the letter was addressed to the Qumran community, but such a specific destination seems unlikely. No firm evidence in the letter ties it to Qumran, and the readers were almost certainly Christians, and there is no evidence of a Christian presence at Qumran.²⁹

The most important clue for determining the location of the recipients comes from the letter itself, for the author closes the letter with the words, “Those who are from Italy greet you” (13:24). It is possible, of course, that he wrote *from* Italy, and those with the author in Italy sent their greetings. But it seems more probable that he wrote *to* those in Italy (cf. Acts 18:2), i.e., to Rome itself, so that

book is directed to those tempted to revert to the Jewish cult to obtain forgiveness. The apostasy warned against has a particular profile that has to do with Jewish ritual practices. Mason says the author engages in syncrisis to encourage and instruct the readers. This is certainly the case, but the *content* of the comparisons and the detailed attention to the OT cult suggest the author employs syncrisis to address readers who were tempted to find forgiveness through OT sacrifices. Incidentally, the author doesn't denigrate the OT or Judaism in making his argument. He argues salvation historically. The OT cultus was commanded and ordained by God, but its time, according to Hebrews, has expired. Now that Christ has come, the readers should not revert to the old covenant. The previous regulations were acceptable in their time and place, but they don't apply in the new period. Still, the old is not rejected, for the author believes the old covenant is fulfilled in the new.

²⁸ For these proposals, see Attridge, *Hebrews*, 10. Allen argues that the letter was addressed to converted priests who migrated to Syrian Antioch (*Hebrews*, 61–74; cf. Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux*, 1:221–31).

²⁹ I am not saying that the worlds of Qumran and Hebrews are completely segregated. Some fascinating correspondences exist between Hebrews and the writings found at Qumran. See, e.g., Eric F. Mason, “Hebrews and the Dead Sea Scrolls: Some Points of Comparison,” *PRSt* 37 (2010): 457–79. Mason notes parallels in cosmology, messianism, and the conception of Melchizedek.

those absent from Italy sent their greetings back to Rome.³⁰ If this is the case, then Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians in Rome. A Roman destination also fits with 1 Clement, for Clement wrote from Rome and knew the contents of Hebrews. His knowledge of Hebrews makes sense if the letter was directed to Rome. In addition, if we accept the nearly universal view that Paul didn't write Hebrews, it is suggestive that the West didn't accept Pauline authorship as early as the East did. If Hebrews was written to the Romans, they would have a more accurate historical memory regarding the author of the letter.

Carl Mosser, on the other hand, has made a sustained and powerful case for the letter's being written to Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.³¹ He argues that what the author says about the tabernacle in the letter applies to the temple of his day.³² The letter was written to persuade Jewish Christians to leave the city of Jerusalem, just as Rahab left the city of Jericho and identified with the people of God (11:31). Space is lacking, given the nature of this commentary, to investigate fully Mosser's thesis. He has certainly shown that a Jerusalem destination is possible, and such a destination has been rejected too quickly by scholars today. I still incline to a Roman destination, but the interpretation proposed here does not depend on such a hypothesis, and my reading of the letter in most respects could fit with a Jerusalem destination as well. We are reminded by Mosser's work that certainty often eludes us when it comes to historical reconstruction.

What we know from the letter is that the readers had experienced persecution in their early days as believers (10:32–34),³³ but they, apparently, had not suffered martyrdom (12:4). They were probably tempted to return to Judaism, perhaps to avoid persecution. Since Judaism was a legal religion under Roman law, it

³⁰ Cf. Lane, *Hebrews* 1–8, lviii–lx; Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 29; O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 9.

³¹ Carl Mosser, "No Lasting City: Rome, Jerusalem and the Place of Hebrews in the History of Earliest 'Christianity'" (Ph.D. diss., St. Andrews University, 2004).

³² *Ibid.*, 194–206.

³³ See here Bruce W. Winter, "Suffering with the Saviour: The Reality, the Reasons and the Reward," in *The Perfect Savior: Key Themes in Hebrews*, ed. J. Griffiths (Nottingham: InterVarsity, 2012), 147–67. Lane thinks it refers to Claudian expulsion in AD 49 (*Hebrews* 1–8, lxiv–lxvi), but such a suggestion, though fascinating, is probably too specific.

would afford protection from Roman imperial power.³⁴ If Hebrews was written to Rome, then it was composed before Nero lashed out against Christians, putting many to death. The author's bracing words about staying true to Christ prepared the readers for what was to come. Nevertheless, the situation posited here is a hypothesis that can't be established with certainty. We know *what* the author wrote, but we don't know all the *whys* and *wherefores*.

IV. Genre and Structure

The epistle to the Hebrews is elegantly written and structured. The quality of the writing might provoke us to think it is a literary essay, especially since the writing doesn't begin as a typical epistle by introducing the author and the recipients. Chapter 13, however, makes clear that the letter is an epistle, concluding with features (benediction, news, greetings, grace benediction) typical of letters. Some scholars have argued that chapter 13 was not originally part of the letter, but such a view is a historical curiosity, for it has been demonstrated that the themes in the chapter fit with the rest of Hebrews.³⁵ When we think of the warning passages that pervade the letter, calling Hebrews an essay doesn't fit. The admonitions have a practical and urgent tone that don't fit with an essay. In fact, the writer identifies his words as "a word of exhortation" (λόγου τῆς παρακλήσεως, 13:22). The same expression is used for Paul's sermon in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:15). Hebrews, then, is a sermon, an exhortation, in epistolary form.³⁶ The author urgently exhorts the readers to hold fast to their faith, to persevere to the end. The letter was read orally to the congregation; hence we should attend to the letter's oral character.³⁷ The oral character of the discourse is but-

³⁴ See here Winter, "Suffering with the Saviour," 147–67, though I think Winter probably overemphasizes the role that imperial authority played in the lives of the readers.

³⁵ See especially Floyd V. Filson, "Yesterday": *A Study of Hebrews in the Light of Chapter 13*, SBT 2/4 (Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1967). Despite the recent objections of A. J. M. Wedderburn, "The 'Letter' to the Hebrews and Its Thirteenth Chapter," *NTS* 50 (2004): 390–405.

³⁶ See the discussion in Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, lxxix–lxxv; Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 13–16. Cf. L. Johnson, *Hebrews*, 10. Against this see Mosser, "No Lasting City," 210–39.

³⁷ So Steve Stanley, "The Structure of Hebrews from Three Perspectives," *TynBul* 45 (1994): 248–50; Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, lxxv; Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 11.

tressed particularly by two features:³⁸ (1) the emphasis on speaking and hearing that pervades the letter; (2) the alternation between exposition and exhortation, where the exhortations take precedence. As O'Brien says, "The author is skillfully conveying the impression that he is present with the assembly and actually delivering his sermon to them."³⁹

NT letters have been examined as to whether they conform to Greek rhetoric, and Hebrews is no exception.⁴⁰ For instance, the commentaries by Attridge, Johnson, and Koester adopt a rhetorical stance, where the canons of Greek rhetoric are used to unlock the structure of the letter.⁴¹ Certainly the writer is exceptionally well educated and was familiar with Greek rhetoric. Despite the rhetorical artistry in the letter and the rhetorical features of the writing, evidence that the writer followed the rhetoric found in Greek handbooks is lacking.⁴²

Scholars have also investigated the structure of Hebrews carefully, and space is lacking to interact with the various structures

³⁸ Cf. O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 20–22. R. T. France rightly sees the oral and sermonic character of the letter but goes beyond the evidence in detecting seven discrete expositions in Hebrews ("The Writer of Hebrews as a Biblical Expositor," *TynBul* 47 [1996]: 245–76).

³⁹ O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 21.

⁴⁰ See the brief survey of scholarship in O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 24–27. See also Michael W. Martin and Jason A. Whitlark, "The Encomiastic Topics of Synchrisis as the Key to the Structure and Argument of Hebrews," *NTS* 35 (1989): 382–406, idem, "Choosing What Is Advantageous: The Relationship Between Epideictic and Deliberative Synchrisis in Hebrews," *NTS* 58 (2012): 379–400; T. H. Olbricht, "Hebrews as Amplification," in *Rhetoric and the New Testament: Essays from the 1992 Heidelberg Conference*, ed. S. E. Porter and T. H. Olbricht, JSNTSup 90 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 375–87; Duane F. Watson, "Rhetorical Criticism of Hebrews and the Catholic Epistles Since 1978," *CurBS* 5 (1997): 175–207, esp. 181–87; Barnabas Lindars, "The Rhetorical Structure of Hebrews," *NTS* 35 (1989): 382–406. Cf. Timothy W. Seid, "Synchrisis in Hebrews 7: The Rhetorical Structure and Strategy," in *The Rhetorical Interpretation of Scripture: Essays from the 1996 Malibu Conference*, ed. S. E. Porter and D. L. Stamps, JSNTSupS 180 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 322–47. For a balanced approach, see deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 39–58.

⁴¹ Cf. Koester, *Hebrews*, 84–86; Johnson, *Hebrews*, 12–15.

⁴² So Guthrie, *Structure of Hebrews*, 32–33; Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, lxxxv–lxxx; O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 26–27.

suggested.⁴³ Many outlines divide the letter up on the basis of content. Such approaches often ignore literary clues in the letter and underestimate the centrality of the exhortations. Hence, such outlines give the impression that Hebrews is a piece of systematic theology, which is misleading since it was addressed to a specific situation. The deficiencies evident in a content approach have been remedied by the careful studies of the structure of Hebrews in the work of Vanhoye,⁴⁴ Nauck,⁴⁵ Westfall,⁴⁶ Neeley⁴⁷ and Guthrie.⁴⁸ If anyone thought literary approaches would solve the problem, an analysis of the structures proposed by the scholars mentioned above demonstrates that such is not the case. It is evident from the diversity of opinion and the different outlines proposed that the outline of the letter is not an entirely objective issue. Indeed, the entire matter is remarkably complex and not easily solved, requiring a much longer discussion than is possible here.

The work of Vanhoye has been programmatic and suggestive, and yet virtually all scholars have concluded that it is not fully convincing.⁴⁹ Vanhoye set the course for future scholars through his careful analysis. He explored literary features that helped discern

⁴³ See the helpful survey and proposal of Barry C. Joslin, "Can Hebrews Be Structured? An Assessment of Eight Approaches," *CBR* 6 (2007): 99–129. Cf. Rodney J. Decker, "The Intentional Structure of Hebrews," *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 4 (2000): 80–105; David J. MacLeod, "The Literary Structure of the Book of Hebrews," *BSac* 146 (1989): 185–97; Stanley, "The Structure of Hebrews," 245–71.

⁴⁴ See Albert Vanhoye, *La structure littéraire de l'épître aux Hébreux*, StudNeot 1, 2nd ed. (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1976); idem, *Structure and Message of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, SubBi 12 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1989), 18–44. Cf. David Alan Black, "The Problem of the Literary Structure of Hebrews: An Evaluation and Proposal," *GTJ* 7 (1986): 163–77. Black focuses on Vanhoye's contribution.

⁴⁵ Wolfgang Nauck, "Zum Aufbau des Hebräerbriefes," in *Judentum-Urchristentum-Kirche: Festschrift für Joachim Jeremias*, ed. W. Eltester (Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1960), 199–206.

⁴⁶ Cynthia Long Westfall, *A Discourse Analysis of the Letter to the Hebrews: The Relationship Between Form and Meaning*, LNTS 297 (London: T&T Clark, 2005).

⁴⁷ Linda Lloyd Neeley, "A Discourse Analysis of Hebrews," *OPTAT* 3–4 (1987): 1–146.

⁴⁸ George H. Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews: A Text-Linguistic Analysis*, NovTSup 73 (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

⁴⁹ For criticisms of Vanhoye, see O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 27–29; Guthrie, *Structure of Hebrews*, 34–35, 79.

the letter's structure, such as announcement of the subject (e.g., "angels" in 1:4 introduces the subsequent verses), framing devices (inclusio) which set the boundaries for a section, hook words (such as Melchizedek in 6:20 and 7:1), characteristic terms, shifts in literary genre (from exposition to exhortation), and chiasms (cf. the commentary on 5:1–10). Guthrie's work on the structure seems to have been the most convincing to scholars.⁵⁰ In any case, both literary features and content should be considered in determining the structure and outline of the letter. My approach here is rather eclectic and inevitably subjective. My outline takes into account rhetorical criticism, discourse analyses, and the content of the letter. Space is lacking to defend what is specifically proposed, but I hope it will prove to be illuminating in setting forth the message of Hebrews.

V. Purpose

Readers are immediately struck by the distinctive message and style of Hebrews, for it is different from anything else we read in the NT. By different I don't mean contradictory, for it fits well with Pauline theology. Still the theology is played in a different octave and a different key. In considering the theological message of the letter, it is important to locate the fundamental purpose of the writing. We may become dazzled and dazed by Melchizedek, angels, and the contrast between heaven and earth so that we fail to see why the letter was penned. The author isn't attempting to amaze us with his theological sophistication, his understanding of the relationship between the old covenant and the new, his reading of the Levitical and Melchizedekian priesthods, and his construal of old and new covenant sacrifices. He writes for a practical reason, which becomes evident when we observe the warning passages that permeate the letter. The exact parameters of the warning passages are debated, but my concern here is not to delineate where the admonitions begin and end. What must be observed, regardless of where the warnings begin and end, is how pervasive the warnings are in Hebrews (2:1–4; 3:12–4:13; 5:11–6:12; 10:26–39; 12:25–29). Here we find the main

⁵⁰ E.g., Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, lxxx–xcviii; O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 29–34; Joslin, "Can Hebrews Be Structured?"

purpose of the letter.⁵¹ It is imperative to understand that the warnings, with all their diversity, essentially make the same point. In other words, the warnings should be read synoptically. They mutually cast light on one another. Hence the purpose of the letter becomes clear, for the warnings urge readers not to fall away. They must not turn away from Jesus and the new covenant and revert to the Mosaic law and the old covenant. The same message could be formulated positively. The readers are called on to persevere, to hold on, and to keep believing until the end. If they fall away, the author insists, they will face destruction and damnation.

The structure of the book also plays into the discussion. Some think Jesus' priesthood and sacrifice are the main point of the letter (cf. 8:1), while others see the main point as the exhortation. The strength of both positions can be acknowledged, for the priesthood and the sacrifice of Christ certainly pervade the letter. Still, to say that Christ's priesthood and sacrifice are central makes the letter too abstract and academic, and it misses the pastoral thrust of the work, for the theology of the book, the priesthood and sacrifice of Christ, serves the exhortation.⁵² The author's point is that since the work of Christ is so great, it would be folly to turn away from him. The main point in the theology of the letter (8:1), then, provides a foundation for the central purpose of the letter: don't fall away.

Why were the readers tempted to fall away? We have several clues that aren't mutually exclusive. The readers were persecuted and discriminated against for their faith (10:32–34). Perhaps such persecution accounts for their moral lethargy and temptation

⁵¹ Lane is particularly clear about this matter (*Hebrews 1–8*, xcvi–civ). See also Schenk, who notes that the exhortations are particularly linked to a loss of confidence in Christ's atonement relative to the Levitical cult. Kenneth L. Schenk, *Cosmology and Eschatology in Hebrews: The Settings of the Sacrifice*, SNTSMS 143 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 24–47.

⁵² Hooker argues that the letter was written after AD 70 and assures Jewish believers that they don't need the temple cult to obtain forgiveness of sins. Morna Hooker, "Christ, the 'End' of the Cult," in *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, ed. R. Bauckham, D. R. Driver, T. A. Hart, and N. MacDonald (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 189–212. If it was written before AD 70 (which I favor), readers were likely tempted to revert to the temple cult, but in either case the admonition is largely the same: readers must put their confidence in Christ's sacrifice and continue to follow Jesus Christ.

to renounce their commitment to Jesus Christ (cf. 5:11–6:12).⁵³ Judaism was a legal religion in the empire, and hence identification with the Jewish cult could spare them from further distress and from the shame and dishonor attached to a new religion. At the same time they may have pined for the concrete picture of forgiveness obtained through the Levitical cult. Perhaps they had lost the assurance of cleansing through Christ's blood, which would explain why the author emphasizes the boldness to enter God's presence through Christ's sacrifice.

VI. Religious-Cultural Background

Scholars have proposed a variety of backgrounds to the letter.⁵⁴ The matter is extraordinarily complex and hence can't be treated adequately here. Of course, the most important background is the OT itself since the author is clearly immersed in and familiar with OT Scriptures.⁵⁵ Along the same lines, Hebrews stands in close affinity to other NT documents; thus it is most fruitful to consider the message of Hebrews in light of the OT Scriptures and the witness to Christ in other NT documents.

A number of monographs have been devoted to tracing the religious-historical background of the letter. Some have postulated a Gnostic background,⁵⁶ but the Gnostic turn in NT scholarship is yesterday's news and has been abandoned by most scholars.⁵⁷ Others,

⁵³ See Attridge, *Hebrews*, 13.

⁵⁴ See the thorough discussion of this matter in Lincoln D. Hurst, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its Background of Thought*, SNTSMS 65 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Hurst evaluates various alleged backgrounds, including Philonic, Qumranic, and Gnostic. He shows that the evidence is wanting for any of these to be postulated as the specific background for the letter. At the same time he demonstrates that the letter fits within the stream of other NT books. See also the compact but elegant survey in Lindars, *The Theology of Hebrews*, 21–25.

⁵⁵ See e.g., George B. Caird, "The Exegetical Method of the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Canadian Journal of Theology* 5 (1959): 44–51.

⁵⁶ Most notably, Ernst Käsemann, *The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Letter to the Hebrews*, trans. R. A. Harrisville and I. L. Sundberg (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1984).

⁵⁷ See e.g., Otfried Hofius, *Katapausis: Die Vorstellung vom endzeitlichen Ruheort im Hebräerbrief*, WUNT 11 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1970); Jon Laansma, "I Will Give You Rest": *The Rest Motif in the New Testament with Special Reference to Mt 11 and Heb 3–4*, WUNT 2/98 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997); cf. Graham

EXPOSITION

Hebrews 1:1-4

Outline

- I. **Prologue: Definitive and Final Revelation in the Son (1:1-4)**
- II. Don't Abandon the Son Since He Is Greater than Angels (1:5-2:18)

Scripture

¹Long ago God spoke to the fathers by the prophets at different times and in different ways. ²In these last days, He has spoken to us by His Son. God has appointed Him heir of all things and made the universe through Him. ³The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact expression of His nature, sustaining all things by His powerful word. After making purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. ⁴ So He became higher in rank than the angels, just as the name He inherited is superior to theirs.

Context

The opening of Hebrews is elegant and eloquent, demonstrating the literary artistry of the author. The introduction gives no evidence that the writing is an epistle, for the author doesn't introduce himself, the recipients aren't identified, and there isn't a greeting. The opening suggests a literary work, something like a literary essay on the significance of Jesus Christ. We know from the conclusion of the work, however, that Hebrews has epistolary features, and thus

Hebrews 1:1

the book should not be classified as a literary essay. Still, the artistry and beauty that characterize the entire letter are evident from the opening. The author invites the reader via the elevated style of the letter to reflect on and apply his theology.

The main point of the first four verses is that God has spoken finally and definitively in his Son. The author beautifully contrasts the past era in which God spoke to the ancestors and prophets with the last days in which God spoke to us in his Son. A table should illustrate the contrast in the first two verses.

Long ago	In these last days
God spoke to the fathers	He has spoken to us
by the prophets	by His Son
at different times and in different ways	

Verses 2–4 focus on the identity of the Son and what he has done. Here we have a chiasm.

A He has spoken to us by His Son	D ¹ He is the exact expression of His nature
B God has appointed Him heir of all things	C ¹ sustaining all things by His powerful word
C He made the universe through Him	B ¹ After making purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high
D The Son is the radiance of God's glory	A ¹ He became higher in rank than the angels, just as the name He inherited is superior to theirs

The main point of the chiasm is found under A and A¹: the Son is superior to angels since he is the Son. Indeed, he is the heir and ruler of the universe since he is the Creator of the universe and shares God's nature.

Exegesis

1:1

God is a speaking God, and he has spoken to the prophets in a variety of ways and modes in the OT. The first verse is marked by alliteration in the Greek, with five different words beginning with “p”:

“at different times” (πολυμερῶς); “in different ways” (πολυτρόπως); “long ago” (πάλαι) “fathers” (πατέρας); and “prophets” (προφήταις). From the outset the literary skill and the deft style of the author are apparent so that the reader sees a master craftsman at work. The diversity of revelation in the former era is featured. God spoke “at different times” and “in different ways.” OT revelation was transmitted through narrative, hymns, proverbs, poetry, parables, and love songs, through wisdom and apocalyptic literature. God communicated with his people for hundreds of years, speaking to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to Moses and Joshua, Samuel and Saul, David and the kings of Judah and Israel, and to the prophets, and to the people who returned from exile.

One of the major themes in Hebrews emerges: “God spoke to the fathers.” The one true God is a speaking God, one who communicates with his people and reveals his will and his ways to them. The “fathers” can’t be limited to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob but include and encompass all those addressed in OT revelation.¹ Similarly, the word “prophets” should not be restricted to books that are labeled as “prophetic” in our English Bibles.² The writer identifies the entire OT as prophetic. Finally, the revelation given in the past is described as occurring “long ago” (πάλαι). The author is not emphasizing primarily that the revelation occurred in the distant past. His main point, given the remainder of the book, is that OT revelation belonged to a previous era. A new day has arisen, a new covenant has arrived, and the old is no longer in force. The “first” covenant is “old” (παλαιούμενον) and hence obsolete (8:13). The words of the previous era are authoritative as the word of God, but they must be interpreted in light of the fulfillment realized in Jesus Christ.

1:2

The God who spoke in the past still speaks, but “in these last days” he has spoken finally and definitively in his Son. This Son is the Davidic heir promised in the Scriptures, and he is also the agent of all creation. He is the Davidic heir and more since as Creator he shares God’s nature.

¹ So Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 38.

² *Ibid.*, 38–39. The word ἐν in the phrase “in the prophets” (literally) is instrumental and is rightly translated by the HCSB as “by the prophets” (cf. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 38n41).

The last days (Gen 49:1; Num 24:14; Isa 2:2; Jer 23:20; 25:19; Dan 10:14; Hos 3:5; Mic 4:1) represent the days in which God's saving promises are fulfilled, and they have now commenced with the coming of the Son. Believers no longer live in the days when they await the fulfillment of what God has promised. They live in the eschaton; "the ends of the ages have come" (1 Cor 10:11). It is inconceivable that the readers would embrace the old era with its sacrifices and rituals now that the new has come in Jesus Christ.

God has spoken in his Son. If we look at the table introducing this section, we see that the one phrase with no corresponding phrase is "at different times and in different ways." Still the author expects the readers to fill in the gap. The revelation in the former era was diverse and partial, but the revelation in the Son is unitary and definitive.³ The final revelation has come in the last days for God has spoken his last and best word. No further word is to be expected, for the last word focuses on the life, death, and resurrection of the Son. As 9:26 says of Jesus, "But now He has appeared one time, at the end of the ages, for the removal of sin by the sacrifice of Himself." Believers await the return of the Son (9:28), but they don't expect a further word from God. No more clarification is needed. The significance of what the Son accomplished has been revealed once for all, and hence the readers must pay attention (2:1) to this revelation.

The author also emphasizes that God has spoken "by his Son." In the OT Israel is the Lord's son, his firstborn (Exod 4:22). And the Davidic king is also identified as God's son (2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7). The author implies that Jesus is the true Israel and the true king. But the subsequent verses indicate that sonship transcends these categories, for Jesus is also the unique and eternal Son of God, one who shares the nature of God. Indeed, the following verses indicate why the readers must pay heed to the word spoken in the Son, for the Son is far greater than angels. He is the exalted and reigning Son, the one who rules the universe.

The reference to the Son begins the chiasm represented in the second table above, and it matches 1:4, which emphasizes that Jesus as the Son is greater than the angels because he has inherited a more excellent name. The author desires the readers to see the majesty of

³ Cf. also Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2006), 66.

Jesus as the Son so they understand that he is supreme over angels and any other entity in the universe.

Jesus as the Son was appointed (ἔθθηκεν) by God as “heir of all things.”⁴ In the OT, inheritance language is typically used with reference to the land of Canaan, which was promised to Israel as an inheritance (cf. Deut 4:38; 12:9; Josh 11:23). But the Son is the heir of “all things,” which echoes the promise given to the Davidic king in Ps 2:8: “Ask of Me, and I will make the nations Your inheritance and the ends of the earth Your possession.” The Son is the heir because he is the Davidic king, the fulfillment of the covenant promise made to David that he would never lack a man to sit on the throne. The Son as heir matches in the chiasm his sitting down “at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (1:3). The Son’s heirship is tied to his kingship, to his rule over all, and hence it commences with his exaltation to God’s right hand.⁵

Jesus’ rule as the Son demonstrates that he is the Messiah, the Davidic king, the one through whom God’s promises to Israel are fulfilled. As the son of David, he is a human being, but he is more than a human being, for “God made the universe through him” (see §2.1). The phrase “the universe” (τοὺς αἰῶνας) is most often temporal, but here it designates the world God has made (cf. Wis 13:9), and the author features the Son as the agent of creation (cf. John 1:3; 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:16).⁶ The author likely draws here upon wisdom traditions, for we see in the OT that the Lord created the world in wisdom (Prov 3:19; 8:22–31; Ps 104:24; Jer 10:12; cf. Wis 7:22; 9:2). The Son is greater than wisdom, however, for wisdom is a personification, but the Son existed as a person before the world was formed.⁷ We can easily fail to see how astonishing this statement is.

⁴ The word τιθῆμι means “appoint” in other contexts as well (1 Thess 5:9; 1 Tim 2:7; 2 Tim 1:11; 1 Pet 2:8).

⁵ So Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 52.

⁶ Amy L. B. Peeler says that God chose to include the Son in creating, but this notion sounds a bit adoptionistic, as if the Son isn’t equally God. Peeler actually strongly emphasizes the Son’s deity elsewhere in her work (*You Are My Son: The Family of God in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, LNTS 486 [New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014], 16).

⁷ Against Kenneth L. Schenk, *Understanding the Book of Hebrews: The Story Behind the Sermon* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2003), 17. Rightly Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 99.

The one who was put to death in Jerusalem on a cross a few decades earlier is now praised as the one who created the world!⁸

1:3

Verse 3 unpacks further the nature and supremacy of the Son. First, the author speaks ontologically about the Son, maintaining that he fully shares the divine nature and identity. Second, the Son's role in sustaining the cosmos is affirmed. Third, and most crucial for his argument, the Son's reign at God's right hand is featured. The Son reigns and rules as the one who has accomplished full cleansing for sin.

The first two clauses in verse 3 focus on the nature of the Son,⁹ showing that the Christology here is not merely functional but also ontological.¹⁰ The Son is the King and the Creator because of who he is because he shares the nature of God. Similarly, the author grounds Christ's atoning work as high priest in who he is. Sometimes scholars focus on functional Christology and minimize ontology, but Hebrews makes ontology the basis for function so that Christ saves because of who he is.

The author begins by claiming that Christ "is the radiance of God's glory" (see §2.1). The word "radiance" (*ἀπαύγασμα*) could mean "reflection," so that the Son mirrors God's glory.¹¹ Or it could be defined as "radiance" or "outshining" to emphasize the manifestation of God's glory.¹² The use of the term in Wis 7:26 doesn't settle the issue,¹³ for the same interpretive issues arise there. It is difficult to determine which meaning is correct, though the active radiance

⁸ So L. Johnson, *Hebrews*, 68.

⁹ Some scholars detect dependence on a hymn here (see Attridge, *Hebrews*, 41–42).

¹⁰ John P. Meier says the participle "stands out like a metaphysical diamond against the black crepe of narrative" ("Structure and Theology in Heb 1,1–4," *Bib* 66 [1985]: 180). He rightly notes that the author here probes "speculative, philosophical implications" of the person of Christ (180). Against Caird and Hurst who limit what Hebrews 1 says to Christ's humanity. See G. B. Caird, "Son by Appointment," in *The New Testament Age: Essays in Honor of Bo Reicke*, ed. W. Weinrich, 2 vols. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), 1:73–81; Lincoln D. Hurst, "The Christology of Hebrews 1 and 2," in *The Glory of Christ in the New Testament: Studies in Christology*, ed. L. D. Hurst and N. T. Wright (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 151–64.

¹¹ So O. Hofius, "ἀπαύγασμα," *EDNT*, 1:117–18.

¹² See LN 14.48; G. Kittel, "ἀπαύγασμα," *TDNT* 1:508.

¹³ Rightly Attridge, *Hebrews*, 42.

seems slightly more likely.¹⁴ In either case God's glory is revealed in the Son, and it really doesn't matter much which we choose, for as Johnson says, "Reflection becomes radiance, and radiance is what is reflected."¹⁵

The Son is also "the exact impression of his nature." The word translated "exact impression" (*χαρακτήρ*) is used of the impression or mark made by coins.¹⁶ Here it denotes the idea that the Son represents the nature (*ὑπόστασις*) and character of the one true God.¹⁷ He reveals who God is, and thus he must share the divine identity. The Son cannot represent God to human beings unless he shares in the being, nature, and essence of God. The Son of God reveals the reality of the one true God.

Hebrews is not alone in the sentiments expressed in the previous two phrases. John's Gospel emphasizes that God speaks to human beings in Jesus Christ. He is the "Word" of God (John 1:1) through whom the world was created (John 1:3). John directly tells us in John 1:1 that the "Word was God" (1:1). God is invisible and in that sense inaccessible, but Jesus Christ explains to human beings who God is (John 1:18). In the same way Jesus instructs Philip that the one who has seen him has also seen the Father (John 14:9). Paul in Colossians celebrates and affirms the truth that Christ is "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15), and in Philippians he says Christ "was in the form of God" (2:6 ESV).

After affirming the Son's ontological divinity, Hebrews returns to the Son's role in the created world. He is not only the one through whom the world was made but also sustains the universe "by His powerful word." The thought is similar to Col. 1:17, "And by him

¹⁴ Ellingworth slightly prefers "radiance" (Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993], 98–99). See also O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 69–70; Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 94. The Son's radiance is eternal and should not be limited to the time following his exaltation (rightly Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 95).

¹⁵ L. Johnson, *Hebrews*, 69. Barnard says the main point here is "the unique unity of the Son with the Divine glory" (Jody A. Barnard, *The Mysticism of Hebrews: Exploring the Role of Jewish Apocalyptic Mysticism in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, WUNT 2/331 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012], 151).

¹⁶ G. Kelber, "χαρακτήρ," *TDNT* 9:418; K. Berger, "χαρακτήρ," *EDNT* 3:456.

¹⁷ See H. Koester, "ὑπόστασις," *TDNT* 8:572–89.

all things hold together.”¹⁸ Not only did the created world come into being through the Son; it also continues, “And is upheld because of the Son. The created world does not run by “laws of nature,” so that the Son’s continued superintendence is dispensed with. The author of Hebrews does not embrace a deistic notion of creation. The universe is sustained by the personal and powerful word of the Son, so that the created world is dependent on his will for its functioning and preservation. Implied in the expression is that the universe will reach its intended goal and purpose.¹⁹

The author reprises the idea that the Son reigns over all, pre-saging one of the major themes of the book in doing so. The Son’s rule commences “after making purification of sins.” The word for “purification” (καθαρισμός) is cultic (cf. Exod 29:36; 30:10; Lev 14:32; 15:13; 1 Chr 23:28), anticipating the discussion on the efficacy of Levitical sacrifices in chs. 7–10 (see also Heb 9:14, 22–23; 10:2). The Son’s once-for-all sacrifice cleanses the sins of those who believe in him. Hence, those who are “purified” (κεκαθαρισμένους) “no longer have any consciousness of sins” (10:2). They are free from the stain of guilt that defiled them. Since atonement has been accomplished, the Son has now “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” The allusion as noted above is to Psalm 110 in the letter, a psalm that pervades the entire letter and plays a fundamental role in the author’s argument.

The allusion, as noted above, is to Ps 110:1, where David’s Lord sits down at God’s right hand (see also 1:13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2).²⁰ The right hand signifies power (Exod 15:6, 12), protection (Pss 16:8; 73:23; Isa 41:10), and triumph (Pss 20:6; 21:8). Indeed, it signifies that Jesus shares the same identity as God, as Bauckham argues. The “potent imagery of sitting on the cosmic throne has only one attested significance: it indicates his participation in the unique sovereignty

¹⁸ Against Peeler, the reference here is not to the Father’s powerful word (*You Are My Son*, 18).

¹⁹ O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 56.

²⁰ See here David M. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand: Psalm 110 in Early Christianity*, SBLMS 18 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973); Martin Hengel, *Studies in Early Christology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 119–225; W. R. G. Loader, “Christ at the Right Hand—Ps. cx.l in the New Testament,” *NTS* 24 (1977–78): 199–217.

of God over the world.”²¹ Here the author emphasizes the forgiveness of sins, for the Son is seated at God’s right hand since his work is finished. And he reigns at God’s right hand as the Lord of the universe and as the Davidic Messiah. The exaltation of Christ is a common theme in the NT (see Phil 2:9–11; Col 1:15–18; Eph 1:21; 1 Pet 3:22), and thus we see Hebrews shares the worldview of the NT generally in presenting Christ as the exalted and reigning king over the universe.

1:4

Verse 4 is tied closely to 1:3. The Son who is seated at God’s right hand and rules the world as the Davidic Messiah and Lord has become greater than angels. Israel was called as God’s son to rule the world for God (Exod 4:22–23). David and his heirs had a special calling as God’s son and the king to mediate God’s rule to the world (2 Sam 7:14; Pss 2:7–12; 72:1–20). The kingly role of both Israel and David is fulfilled in Jesus as the one who rules over all. Clearly the author is not suggesting that he has become greater than angels as the eternal Son of God. His argument, anticipating chapter 2 as well, is that the Son has become greater than the angels as the God-Man. The author introduces here one of his favorite words: “better” (*κρείττω*).²² Believers in Christ have a “better hope” (7:19), a “better covenant” (7:22; 8:6), “better sacrifices” (9:23), a “better possession” (10:34), a “better resurrection” (11:35), and “better” blood than Abel’s (12:24). The one who shares God’s nature and manifests his glory has purified believers of sins and now reigns at God’s right hand. In other words his reign commenced at a certain point in history. He began to rule at his resurrection and exaltation.

The author introduces angels here, which play a major role in the ensuing argument (1:5–2:16). Why does the author emphasize Jesus’ superiority to angels? Were the Hebrews assigning a particular significance to angels?²³ If we examine the letter as a whole, and what the author says in the next chapter, we discover the most

²¹ Richard Bauckham, “The Divinity of Jesus Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” in *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, ed. R. Bauckham, D. R. Driver, T. A. Hart, and N. MacDonald (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 33 (see his whole discussion, 32–33).

²² My translation.

²³ Cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 9. It is unlikely that the readers were tempted to identify Jesus as an

probable answer. The angels were the mediators of the Mosaic law (2:2; cf. Acts 7:53; Gal 3:19). In stressing the Son's superiority to the angels, the author features Jesus' supremacy over the Mosaic law and the Sinai covenant.²⁴ Hence, the reference to the angels ties into one of the central themes of the letter. The readers should not transfer their allegiance to the law mediated by angels. Such a gambit should be rejected, for they would be opting for what is inferior since the Son rules over angels as one who has "inherited" a name better than theirs. God promised to make Abraham's name great (Gen 12:2), and the same promise is given to David (2 Sam 7:9). And this covenant promise, first given to Abraham and then channeled through David, finds its final fulfillment in Jesus Christ. The word "inherited" (*κεκληρονόμηκεν*) reaches back to "heir of all things" (1:2). Such an inheritance has been *gained* through his suffering and death, signifying again the rule of the Son at his resurrection.²⁵

The more excellent name is typically understood to be Son.²⁶ But others argue that the name here is probably Yahweh, the name of God revealed to Israel. Joslin, in particular, makes a powerful argument supporting a reference to Yahweh.²⁷ First, the term "name" elsewhere in Hebrews almost certainly refers to Yahweh (2:12; 6:10; 13:5). Hence, the presumption is that the same name is in view here as well. Second, Joslin says that the term "Son" is not a name but

angel in order to soften a reference to his deity (against Donald A. Hagner, *Hebrews* [New York: Harper & Row, 1983], 10).

²⁴ Hence, the author is not countering those who unduly venerated angels, as if Hebrews addresses a problem similar to what Paul opposed in Colossae (against Robert Jewett, *Letter to Pilgrims: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [New York: Pilgrim, 1981], 5–13; Thomas W. Manson, "The Problem of the Epistle to the Hebrews," *BJRL* 32 [1949]: 1–17). Nor is there any evidence that he combats an angelic Christology (against Ronald H. Nash, "Mediator in Alexandrian Judaism and the Hebrews," *WTJ* 40 (1977): 89–115, esp. 109–12).

²⁵ Schenk rightly says the author features the rule and enthronement of Christ over angels here, though he mistakenly suggests the Christology does not involve preexistence. See Kenneth L. Schenk, "A Celebration of the Enthroned Son: The Catena of Hebrews 1," *JBL* 120 (2001): 469–86.

²⁶ E.g., Attridge, *Hebrews*, 47; Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 98; Meier, "Structure and Theology," 187.

²⁷ Barry Joslin, "Whose Name? A Comparison of Hebrews 1 and Philippians 2 and Christ's Inheritance of the Name," unpublished paper. Cf. also L. Johnson, *Hebrews*, 71; Bauckham, "The Divinity of Jesus Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews," 21–22; Barnard, *The Mysticism of Hebrews*, 157–70.

a title or a description of Jesus (1:2, 5, 8; 2:6; 3:6; 4:14; 5:5, 8; 6:6; 7:3, 28; 10:29). The word “name” echoes the name of God that plays a central role in biblical tradition (cf. Exod 3:13–15), for God’s name signifies his character and in revealing his name God reveals himself. The superiority of Jesus’ name in a context where his exaltation and divine identity are communicated points to his deity.

It is difficult to decide between Son and Yahweh here, though I prefer the former for the following reasons. First, the word “Son” occurs four times in the chapter (1:2, 5 [twice], 8), so that the reader naturally thinks of the word “Son.” Second, in the chiasm of verses 2–4 presented in the table above the term “Son” (v. 2) matches the inheriting a more excellent name (v. 4). Third, the word “name” refers to the Lord elsewhere in the letter, but all these references are to the Father rather than to the Son, so the parallel isn’t as close as claimed. Fourth, verse 5 supports and grounds verse 4 with the word “for” (γάρ), and the verse twice calls attention to Jesus’ sonship, suggesting that Son is the name that makes Jesus greater than angels. Fifth, the author speaks of Jesus inheriting the name. It is difficult to see how Jesus could inherit the name of Yahweh. Such a state of affairs would suggest that there was a period when Jesus wasn’t divine and that he inherited such deity at some point. But doesn’t the same objection apply to the word *Son*? No, for in using the word *Son*, the author would be referring to Jesus’ exaltation and rule as God *and* man, and such a rule only commenced at his resurrection.²⁸

Bridge

Jesus is the culmination of God’s revelation. The OT Scriptures point to him and are fulfilled in him. We see in the introduction of Hebrews that Jesus is the prophet, priest, and king. He is the

²⁸ Perhaps there is also an echo of 2 Samuel 7 where “name” (7:9, 13, 23, 26) and God’s greatness (7:21, 26; cf. Heb 1:3) point to the “honor conferred by God on the Messiah as the Davidic heir at the establishment of his throne and in association with God himself” (so George H. Guthrie, “Hebrews,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007], 925). See also his discussion on p. 924. Guthrie maintains that the title here is “name,” which could fit with the view stated above (George Guthrie, *Hebrews*, NIVAC [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998], 50), though it seems to me that “Son” is the more natural reading.

prophet, for God’s final word is spoken by him and in him.²⁹ He is the priest by whom final cleansing of sins is accomplished. He is the king who reigns at God’s right hand. The last days have arrived in Jesus and the final word has been spoken, and hence there will be no further revelation until Jesus’ return. The great revelatory events have taken place in Jesus’ ministry, death, resurrection, and exaltation. Believers do not need any other word from God for their lives. They are to put their faith in what God has revealed in and through Jesus the Christ.

Hebrews 1:5–14

Outline

- I. Prologue: Definitive and Final Revelation in the Son (1:1–4)
- II. **Don’t Abandon the Son Since He Is Greater than Angels (1:5–2:18)**
 - A. **The Son’s Nature and Reign Show He Is Greater than Angels (1:5–14)**
 - B. Warning: Don’t Drift Away (2:1–4)
 - C. The Coming World Subjected to the Son (2:5–18)

Scripture

⁵ For to which of the angels did He ever say, You are My Son; today I have become Your Father, or again, I will be His Father, and He will be My Son? ⁶ When He again brings His firstborn into the world, He says, And all God’s angels must worship Him.

⁷ And about the angels He says: He makes His angels winds, and His servants a fiery flame, ⁸ but to the Son: Your throne, God, is forever and ever, and the scepter of Your kingdom is a scepter of justice. ⁹ You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; this is why God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of joy rather than Your companions. ¹⁰ And: In the beginning, Lord, You established the earth, and the heavens are the works of Your hands; ¹¹ they will perish, but You remain. They will all wear out like clothing; ¹² You will roll them up like a cloak, and they will

²⁹ In saying God’s final word is spoken in and by Jesus, I am including the entirety of the NT canonical witness to Jesus as the Son.