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## THE RHETORICAL STRUCTURE OF HEBREWS\*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Hebrews is the most accomplished writing in the New Testament. The unknown author's command of the art of rhetoric is universally recognized. He was evidently well educated by the standards of Hellenistic education of the time. His use of Greek is more cultivated than that of Paul, and he makes greater use of rhetorical devices than Luke. Spicq gives an impressive list of the stylistic features and rhetorical devices that are to be found in Hebrews.<sup>1</sup> But every reader can appreciate the fine style and persuasive power of the author's writing.

Recent studies have shown an increasing awareness on the part of New Testament scholars of rhetorical factors which have a bearing on the interpretation of New Testament books. An illuminating study of these factors in relation to 1 Corinthians was given by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza at the Atlanta meeting of SNTS in 1986.<sup>2</sup> She was there concerned to show how the recognition of different types of rhetorical composition can help to elucidate the complex relationship between the various sections of the letter and the different groups in Corinth to which it is addressed. Hebrews is much simpler from this point of view, because it is a sustained argument all the way through, addressed to one group of people. But it is still necessary to determine the class of rhetoric to which it belongs, because that will have a bearing on the interpretation, i.e. on how we hear what the author is saying.

Rhetoric is the art of persuasion, and when we look at Hebrews as a whole from this point of view (as opposed to searching for rhetorical devices in matters of detail) it is evident that the primary

purpose of Hebrews is persuasion. The classical tradition accepted three main types of rhetoric, epideictic, deliberative and forensic. Only the second corresponds with the true character of Hebrews.<sup>1</sup> The epideictic type, which consists of an oratorical display aimed at reinforcing positions already accepted by the audience, might suit those who think of Hebrews primarily as a theological treatise, but it cannot account for the passionate anxiety of the author and the harsh warnings which frequently interrupt the theological exposition. The forensic type also fails, because the composition does not have the character of prosecution or defence in a courtroom. The deliberative type, however, has its home in politics, being concerned with persuading the audience to accept a policy decision. It is thus a matter of changing their minds with regard to action. This is precisely what Hebrews is doing. Once this is recognized, every detail of the letter will be found to fall into place.<sup>2</sup>

When read from this point of view it quickly becomes apparent that Hebrews is addressed to a real and urgent situation, and that the author is making use of all the rhetorical skill at his command to cope with it. Thus Hebrews is not in any sense a school exercise, and it is a mistake to view it as a product of conscious artistry. Spicq compares it with the formal scheme put forward in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, but there is no close similarity.<sup>3</sup> Vanhoye observed the remarkable symmetry of the composition, and proposed an analysis in which the whole book is built on a perfect chiasmus.<sup>4</sup> But the

1 Cf. Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* III. iv, confirming the threefold division. On deliberative rhetoric he says, 'Its functions are twofold and consist in advising and dissuading' (III. viii. 6, Loeb).

2 It is disputed whether Hebrews should be regarded as a letter. It is described by F. F. Bruce as 'a homily in written form, with some personal remarks added at the end' (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1964, 413), cf. more recently H. Braun, *An die Hebräer* (HNR 14; Tübingen: Mohr, 1984) 1-2, and for discussion of the issue J. Swetnam, 'On the Literary Genre of the "Epistle to the Hebrews"', *NovT* 11 (1969) 261-9. But this does not decide the question whether the primary object is to give doctrinal teaching or moral exhortation. The claim of G. W. Buchanan (*To the Hebrews*; The Anchor Bible; Garden City: Doubleday, 1972, xix) that Hebrews 'is a homiletical midrash based on Ps 110' deprives it of all the urgency, which nevertheless demands recognition. Once it is seen that Hebrews is dealing with a pressing practical problem of the readers, its character as a letter is decisively re-established. It is a letter, consisting of a homily, sent to the church of destination, because the author is not able to address the recipients in person, and the absence of a formal epistolary opening does not negate its essential character as a communication to specific persons from a distance.

3 Op. cit., I.38.

4 A. Vanhoye, *La Structure littéraire de l'Épître aux Hébreux* (Studia Neotestamentica 1; Paris/Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1963).

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1 C. Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux* (Études bibliques; Paris: Gabalda, 1952-3) I. 351-78.

2 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Rhetorical Situation and Historical Reconstruction in 1 Corinthians', *NTS* 33 (1987) 306-403. This article includes discussion of some of the wider issues raised in connection with rhetorical criticism in recent studies.

result is not altogether convincing, and has won only qualified support from later commentators. In fact the symmetry consists in two main features, first the well known device of inclusion, whereby a key-word at the beginning is re-introduced at the end, and secondly the careful proportions of the work, whereby the balance of the major sections of the argument is maintained. The author no doubt derived these features from his rhetorical training, but he uses them not for their elegance but for their rhetorical effect. Thus the purpose of inclusion is to assist the audience to grasp the argument, or a particular section of the argument, as a whole, by taking their minds back to the beginning. Similarly the balanced proportions of the whole are intended to help them to focus their attention on the important points in relation to the scale of the argument. These features, then, are aspects of the dynamic character of the composition, which is skilfully planned to make its point with the greatest possible impact.

In what follows I shall review the composition of Hebrews entirely from the point of view of its intended effect upon the readers. We shall see that the climax of the argument is not to be found in the central chapters on the sacrifice of Christ (7. 1-10. 18), as is assumed by so many readers and is implied by Vanhoye's chiasmic analysis, but in the great section on faith which follows (10. 19-12. 29). I shall argue that the problem before the writer is a matter of religious practice, though it touches vital issues of theology which the audience have not properly understood. I shall also argue that the author has no intention of propounding a new doctrine, nor is he concerned to correct doctrinal heresy, but his aim is to win back the audience to the foundations of the apostolic faith and to renew their confidence in the form of Christian practice which is already established in their church. All through we shall bear in mind that the author is dealing with an extremely urgent practical situation which demands his utmost skill in the art of persuasion, if disaster is to be averted.

## 2. THE SITUATION OF THE READERS

What, then, is the practice of the readers which has caused such grave anxiety to the author? If we look at the opening of the epistle, with its solemn and measured periodic structure, we shall not suppose that anything is wrong at all. Even in 2. 1-4 there is only a faint suggestion of neglect of the way of salvation. It is implied that

the readers might be 'drifting away' from it and falling into behaviour that is incompatible with it, but this is only a very gentle rebuke compared with what is to come in 6. 4-6. It is evident that the author is intentionally concealing the real issue at the outset, and we must look elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

There is, however, quite a good deal of valuable information in the final chapter 13, where practical issues are referred to. In reviewing this evidence, I will make no comment on the heading πρὸς Ἑβραίους, or the reference to Timothy in 13. 23, or the interpretation of οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰουδαίας at the end.<sup>2</sup> However, it will be necessary to make decisions about some much disputed questions. Where a number of possibilities are present, I will be guided by the overall focus of the letter and the rhetorical impact of what is said upon the readers. It must be remembered that this is the end of a long letter (in spite of the author's disarming διὰ βραχείων, 13. 22), which, like Romans or 1 Corinthians, would have taken about an hour to read to the Christian assembly.<sup>3</sup> The audience have heard forthright warnings and impassioned speech, but the author knows that it is necessary to his purpose to end on a gentler note. So the final chapter is an appeal to the readers to adjust their behaviour in such a way as to maintain good will on all sides. Starting significantly with the need to maintain φιλαδέλφια, it consists for the most part of short sentences in asyndeton, aphoristic in style and easily memorable. After the blessing and doxology (13. 20 f.) the author adds a few personal remarks in his own hand, which serve as a covering note to the whole address. This he describes simply and accurately

1 This point is generally overlooked by commentators, who think of Hebrews as encouraging Christians who have grown slack. Thus, most recently, M. Rissi, *Die Theologie des Hebräerbriefes* (WUNT 41; Tübingen: Mohr, 1987) suggests that Hebrews is a 'meditation' to encourage them to accept persecution bravely.

2 The designation Ἑβραίους cannot have the same meaning as it has in Acts 6. 1, where it refers to Aramaic-speaking Christians in contrast with the Hellenists. As a national name for Jews in contrast with Gentiles (cf. 2 Cor 11. 22; Phil 3. 5), it was used for Jewish-Christian groups in the second century (cf. τὸ καθ' Ἑβραίων εὐαγγέλιον). This suggests that it arose at that time as a deduction from the contents of the epistle, considered to be addressed to Jewish Christians, and so it tells us nothing about the actual destination (so Braun, 3). The reference to 'our brother Timothy' ties up with the Pauline letters, especially 1 Thess 3. 2. If the same person is meant, some kind of connection, both of time and place, with the Pauline churches must be presupposed, though the community presupposed by Hebrews is not to be identified with Paul's Gentile foundations as such (see the concluding remarks of this paper). The reference would, however, support an early date for Hebrews. The people from Italy' suggests that Italy is either the destination or less likely the country of origin of the letter, and so contributes to the external evidence which connects Hebrews with Rome (cf. Bruce, op. cit., xxxiv f.).

3 Bruce, op. cit., 413.

as τοῦ λόγου τῆς παρακλήσεως (13. 22), which is not a 'thème en courageant' (Spicq), nor a 'Mahnrede' (Braun), but an exhortation to appropriate action. But the important thing is that the author implies that he cannot be sure of success (παρακαλώ . . . ἀνέχεσθε). Looking back through the chapter, we discover in 13. 17 that the readers are urged to obey their leaders.<sup>1</sup> It is this verse which has persuaded many commentators that the addressees are a dissident group within the church. In fact we can read more out of it. The leaders have a pastoral responsibility for them and so must give account for them – presumably at the coming judgment, which the author still expects to happen soon (10. 25, 37).<sup>2</sup> But he fears that they may have to do so with sorrow. In the context, where the author is intentionally using gentle language and writing in a low key, this is surely an indication of the desperate anxiety which the leaders feel. As we also learn from 13. 19 that the author belongs to the same church, though at present he is unavoidably absent, it becomes clear that he has written the letter at the instigation of the leaders. They are at their wits' end to know how to cope with the situation, and have appealed to him as a sort of elder statesman who is well known and respected by everyone in the church. It is precisely because of the alarming report which they have given to him that he has composed his letter with such immense care, in the hope of producing the change of heart which the leaders themselves have failed to achieve.

We gain more information earlier in the chapter. Other leaders are mentioned in 13. 7, and these are clearly the founders of the church, the evangelists to whom the readers owe their conversion.<sup>3</sup> The readers are to consider the behaviour of these leaders which resulted from their message and to imitate their fidelity (πίστις) in pursuing it.<sup>4</sup> Thus we have here three points which are of great

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Acts 15. 22; 1 Clem 1. 3. Both passages show that ἡγουμένοι is a general term and does not denote a particular office. See below on v. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Spicq, II. 431 f.

<sup>3</sup> It seems to be clearly implied in 2. 3 f. that these were missionaries who had themselves 'heard the Lord', though the author may be referring to the succession of apostolic witness, and caution on this issue is recommended by H. W. Montefiore, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (BNTC; London: A. & C. Black, 1964) 54. cf. Braun, 49 f. The appeal is comparable to the well known claim of Papias (Eus. *H.E.* III. 39.4).

<sup>4</sup> Πίστις in Hebrews never refers to the content of faith (here designated τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ) but is always an active virtue, embracing acceptance, obedience, trust and perseverance (see further below on Heb 11). It is not incompatible with the Pauline concept of faith, but Paul's special issue of justification does not arise in Hebrews. See G. Dautzenberg, 'Der Glaube im Hebräerbrief', *BZ* 17 (1973) 161–77 and excursuses in Spicq (II 371–81) and Braun (106–8).

importance in the light of the total argument of the letter: the message, the practical behaviour, and the virtue of πίστις. What, then, was the message? The answer must be 'Jesus Christ', and the author's point is that this message is unchanging: what was spoken then is the same today and for ever (13. 8). Here we have a clear indication that the author does not intend to pass on a new doctrine. The use of the full designation Jesus Christ is not accidental, for it reflects the primitive confession 'Jesus is the Christ.' It is significant that he does not reproduce the precise formula, which would be Χριστός Ἰησοῦς, for it is an example of his practice of allusive reference to what he holds in common with the readers, which we shall see elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Moreover it is this confession, using ὁ υἱός, which is the core of the opening statement of christology in chapter 1. This statement can now be seen to be a carefully composed presentation of what the author regards as the faith of the founders which he can take for granted as doctrine held also by all his readers. It is the foundation of the whole argument of the epistle, for the presentation of the sacrificial death of Jesus presupposes it, and is not valid without it, because only on this basis can his death be identified as an eschatological event. Thus Hebrews takes its stand on the apostolic kerygma, and it is this which the readers are in danger of denying by their mistaken behaviour.

The allusive style in the author's use of Jesus Christ as an oblique reference to the primitive confession also explains why he never mentions the name of Jesus or even the title Christ in chapter 1, though the reference is not in doubt. This characteristic of Hebrews' style serves a distinct rhetorical purpose. The reason for it, in view of the delicate situation which he is handling, is likely to be to maintain a light touch and to avoid an aggressive and didactic attitude, which might alienate the readers, whereas he is most anxious to retain their good will. This point is important for what follows in 13. 9–15, where the allusive style has led to very wide divergencies of interpretation. What are the διδαχαὶ ποιήματα καὶ ζῆναι which the readers are to avoid? What are the βρώματα which are useless βεβαιουῦσθαι τὴν καρδίαν? What is our θυσιαστήριον which requires that we should go forth ἔξω τῆς παρεμβολῆς? This last phrase, though not previously used in the epistle, is a further reference to the ceremonial of the Day of Atonement (Lev 16. 27),

<sup>1</sup> Spicq refers to the verse as formulaic, but the form of the verse is literary (cf. Braun, 459) rather than confessional. For Χριστός Ἰησοῦς as the most primitive confession, which tended to be replaced by Κύριος Ἰησοῦς (1 Cor 12. 3) in Gentile congregations, cf. V. Neufeld, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (Leiden: Brill, 1963).

which has been so prominent in the central argument of chapters 7-9. The single-minded drive of the epistle excludes the possibility that at this late stage the author is bringing in a new and important issue. The implied contrast is still the major one between the Jewish sacrificial system and the sacrifice of Christ. Here, however, the author is concerned not with theory but with practice. The 'diverse and strange teachings' on this view should not be identified with gnostic heresy,<sup>1</sup> but are an oblique reference to the comprehensive Jewish teachings on purification, of which the Day of Atonement is a central item. If the readers are tempted to resort to such teachings, it is for practical reasons, because they feel the need for them. The situation presupposed is that the readers are under pressure to join (or if, as seems likely, they are converts from Hellenistic Judaism, to return to) the local synagogue in order to obtain the benefit of purification of sins, which they miss in their present Christian position. Thus they are under pressure of conscience, as they see no other way of dealing with their consciousness of sin (9, 14; 10, 2). It seems that they have stayed away from the Christian assembly (10, 25). This explains βρώματα, which in spite of all objections is best interpreted as an allusion (note the allusive use of language once more) to the communal dinners which were held on Jewish feast days in Diaspora Judaism.<sup>2</sup> These were one way in which Jews far away from Jerusalem maintained the sense of solidarity with the temple and its cultus. More will have to be said on this subject later. It is possible that these references to the διόχαί

1 They are identified with the Colossian heresy by T. W. Manson, 'The Problem of the Epistle to the Hebrews', *BjRL* 32 (1949) 1-7 (reprinted in *id.*, *Studies in the Gospels and Epistles*, Manchester, 1962). Bruce, 398, thinks of some form of syncretistic gnosticism, perhaps with Essene or quasi-Essene affinities. Most commentators assume a form of Jewish teaching, or Judaizing teaching if the recipients are held to be Gentile Christians.

2 Cf. Josephus, *Ant.* XIV. 213-16. Spicq objects that the word used by Josephus is σνδευνα, and βρώματα must refer to particular foods, and so he suggests that it refers to the sacrificial meat used at temple banquets. Braun points out that the σνδευνα had no sacramental significance, contrary to the implications of the context. This view presupposes anti-sacramentalism on the part of the author, and therefore also excludes the possibility of a reference to the eucharist in the following verses. Braun even suggests that the word βρώματα itself refers to the Christian eucharist, which the author disapproves. But once more the allusive style of Hebrews favours the identification of both διόχαί and βρώματα with Jewish practices, which the readers obviously do regard as spiritually beneficial, not because of any supposed sacramental significance, but because they are the prescribed means of remaining within the Jewish covenant and so obtaining purification of sins. The reason for singling out the meals is to make a foil to the eucharist, which is the Christian means of remaining in the new covenant, and is referred to equally allusively in what follows.

and the βρώματα are intended to be slightly pejorative, as there are signs of this elsewhere in the author's references to the purificatory rites prescribed in the law.<sup>1</sup> This also suits the next point, that the Christians have their θουαστήριον 'outside the camp', which surely expresses complete alienation from the Jewish community, involving some form of suffering (10, 32-4) and abuse (13, 13). It seems that this separation belongs to the foundation of this church, so that we have to do with a strand of early Christianity which required a complete break with Jewish worship. By contrast the readers are urged to focus their worship on the Christian θουαστήριον, which is of course not meant literally, but is a way of speaking of the sacrificial death of Christ.<sup>2</sup> It is the theme of the worship in the Christian assembly, and it is natural to suppose that the author means the gathering for the eucharist by contrast with the synagogue meals. This interpretation is disputed by those who want to apply βρώματα to the Christian eucharist (or a heretical form of it) and so enrol the author of Hebrews in the company of primitive Christian anti-sacramentalists. But this imports an issue which is not present in Hebrews, i.e. the contrast between spiritual and material,<sup>3</sup> and it disregards the fact that the primitive liturgy was primarily a celebration of the saving death of Christ. In fact the θουαστήριον of 13, 15 illustrates our author's subtle and delicate choice of language, aimed at warming the response of the readers by its emotive associations. For it is a carefully chosen allusion to Ps 116, 17, and it transfers to Christian worship the devotion and gratitude expressed by this psalm, which properly applies to the Jewish sacrificial worship which is no longer open to them.

1 Cf. 9, 9 f., 13. Hebrews' objection to the temple sacrifices is that they are the ordinances of the old covenant, but these verses suggest that the author shared the revulsion against such rites which was widely held by educated people in the Greco-Roman world. This explains the reference to the red heifer (9, 13), which is not part of the ritual of the Day of Atonement in Lev 16. See Bruce, 201-4, who adduces the statement of Maimonides (*Mishneh Torah*, VIII. viii. 1.4) that the high priest was twice sprinkled with the ashes of the heifer during the week before the Day of Atonement. If this was the case in New Testament times, it would suggest that Hebrews does show knowledge of contemporary practice, and is not relying solely on the law, as is generally assumed.

2 Spicq, II 425 f.

3 It is necessary to distinguish this from the temporal contrast between the era of the old covenant and that of the new, and also from the spatial contrast between earthly and heavenly, to which the era of the new covenant belongs. The sacrifices of the temple are inadequate because they belong to the old covenant, not because they are material. On the other hand the Christian eucharist, as the setting of the earthly celebration of the sacrifice of the new covenant, belongs to the new era, though it is at present performed with material things. Cf. n. 1, p. 400 below.

Our review of the information in Hebrews 13, undertaken with particular attention to the function of this chapter at the conclusion of a long and sustained argument, and to its emotional impact upon the readers, has suggested that the author writes as a greatly respected member of a church which is torn by dissension. He writes at the instigation of the leaders. The church is a Jewish Christian group of Hellenists, probably in the Diaspora. It has required separation from the synagogue from its foundation. The dissident group, however, are reverting to the synagogue on account of an unresolved problem of conscience. This, in the eyes of the leaders and of the author, entails denial of the foundation of Christian faith, though this is not necessarily how these people see it for themselves. But to the author they are heading for apostasy, and the purpose of the whole letter is to draw them back from the brink before it is too late. He has a difficult and delicate task to perform, because the efforts of the leaders have not been successful, and he has been approached as a last resort. They will be difficult to persuade, not because they are obstinate or arrogant, but because for them the whole issue is a question of conscience. This is an aspect of the matter which cannot be deduced from chapter 13, but it will become clear as we now review the main argument of the epistle from the point of view of its rhetorical effect.

### 3. THE MAIN ARGUMENT

The opening of the epistle, comprising the whole of chapter 1, sets the scale of the composition, and by its solemn declaratory style is calculated to persuade the hearers to settle down to a long and weighty discourse. In addition the author is careful to begin with propositions which are not in dispute. As already suggested, 1. 1-4 is really a rather elaborate version of the basic confession that Jesus is the Christ. Though it is fundamental to the subsequent argument, it will turn out not to be the real subject at issue. Thus, although the author is genuinely afraid that the readers are likely to fall into apostasy if their present practice continues unchecked, he starts with what should be regarded as a non-controversial issue with which they are in agreement. This holds true, even though the christology, suggesting pre-existence and using the language of Wisdom in a manner reminiscent of Philo and the Wisdom of Solomon, goes beyond the primitive kerygma. This feature places the

author in a situation comparable to Paul, the Deutero-Paulines and John, and simply represents the attempt of Hellenist converts to give a philosophically coherent account of their faith.<sup>1</sup> But his debt to the mainstream tradition of earliest Christianity is clear from his use of the classic christological texts, especially Ps 110. 1 and Ps 2. 7 in 1.3,5.<sup>2</sup> But far more important for our purpose is that the real issue is only just touched by the merest hint in four words in v. 3: καθ'ἁρισμὸν τῶν ἀμαρτιῶν ποιησάμενος.<sup>3</sup> Thus everything is done to avoid alienating the readers at the outset, and the brief mention of purification of sins is to be seen as a rhetorical device. It is a well known ploy, whereby the ground is prepared for an important disclosure by dropping a hint, like sowing a seed which will germinate slowly in the ground.

It is only at 2. 1-4 that the author first indicates that not all is well. He associates himself with his exhortation by saying ἡμῶς, but he means the readers. They are urged περισσوترῶς προσέχειν τοῖς ἀκουστέοις, i.e. to make a fresh effort to stick fast to the original teaching of the founders, and not to go after new-fangled ideas. He then reveals why he has devoted so much space in his opening statement to the contrast between the messianic Son of God and the angels. It is because of the humanity of Jesus, which is essential to salvation, for otherwise he would not have died a human death. Though the point is not taken up immediately, it is an indispensable prerequisite for the later exposition of the purification of sins. But what the author does now is to relate the humanity of Jesus to the readers, presenting Jesus as one of themselves. This gives opportunity for a further hint of the ensuing argument, because the representative character of Jesus suggests the metaphor of priesthood, with its function of making 'expiation

<sup>1</sup> Cf. W. R. G. Loader, *Sohn und Hoherpriester. Eine traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zur Christologie des Hebräerbriefes* (WMANT 53; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981) 61-80; M. Hengel, *The Son of God* (London: SCM Press, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> Loader, *op. cit.* 7-30. He points out that ἀρχηγός (2. 10; 12. 2) may well be derived from this primitive tradition, which has left a trace in Acts 5. 31, where ἀρχηγὸν καὶ σωτήρα occurs with an allusion to Ps 110. 1.

<sup>3</sup> The death of Jesus as a sacrifice is, of course, traditional (cf. 1 Cor 15. 3), but the vocabulary is distinctly unusual, and deliberately chosen for the sake of the following argument. καθ'ἁρισμός to denote the effect of the sacrificial death of Jesus is unique in the New Testament. The only close parallel is 2 Pet. 1. 9, which is generally regarded as a reference to baptism, cf. R. J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (Word Bib. Com.; Waco, 1983) 189 f. For καθ'ἁρισμὸν in connection with the death of Jesus, cf. Eph 5. 26; Tit 2. 14; 1 Jn 1. 7, 9 and Heb 9. 14, 22, 23; 10. 2. The middle ποιησάμενος points to Jesus himself as the effective agent of the action (hence the Western Text adds δι' ἐαυτοῦ).

for the sins of the people' (2. 17).<sup>1</sup> It also relates closely to the situation of the readers, who are 'tempted' and in need of 'help' (2. 18).

It is evident that in this chapter there is no sharp distinction between doctrine and parenesis.<sup>2</sup> The humanity of Jesus is basic to the theological argument, but it is also the means of an intensification of the author's approach to his readers. Their faith is involved, as they are faced with temptation. Doctrine and parenesis continue side by side in chapter 3. The virtue which the readers require is faith, not in the Pauline sense of justification by faith, but in the usual biblical sense of fidelity, in this case fidelity to the original message, which Hebrews refers to as 'our confession' (ὁμολογία) (3. 1, cf. 13. 7). Jesus himself is the model of this virtue, both as an ἀπόστολος who is faithful to his commission and as a high priest who is faithful to his representative function. In commenting this virtue the author cites the example of Moses, who was πιστός ἐν ὅλῳ τῷ οὐκὸν αὐτοῦ (3. 2, 5, referring to Num 12. 7). The comparison with Moses is calculated to appeal to the readers, who hold Moses in great esteem, like all good Jews. But as soon as the author has won their agreement, he seizes the opportunity to point out the contrast between Moses (α θεράπων, v. 5) and Jesus (α υἱός, being Χριστός, v. 6). He also takes up the contrast of context, for Numbers 12 relates to the journey of the Israelites to the promised land, with all their moral failings on the way, whereas the readers

<sup>1</sup> It is disputed whether the designation high priest had already been attributed to Jesus on the basis of the christological use of Ps 110. 4 (but the way this is introduced in 5. 1-10 is against this), or in relation to the application of Is 53. 12 to Jesus (but this alone would not supply the title), or in existing speculations with regard to Melchizedek (but we have no other evidence for this in Christian sources). Loader (203-22) argues that it is likely on grounds that the concept is introduced in 2. 17 as if it is familiar to the readers, and that ἀρχιερεύς shows a development from Ps 110. 4 (ἱερεὺς). Kissi (55) maintains on the basis of 2. 17 and 3. 1 that the priesthood of Christ was a datum of the Hebrews church. Our approach through rhetoric suggests on the other hand this is another case like καθαρισμόν in 1. 3, where the author slips in a concept which he will use later in the argument. It does not therefore have to be already familiar. The use of ἀρχιερεύς can also be attributed to the author, as he will use the model of the Day of Atonement for his central argument, and Loader does admit that this feature has no precedent in the kerygma (254). The author's rhetorical skill appears here in the fact that the concept of high priest is used *metaphorically* both here and in 3. 1; 4. 15, so that the readers have time to get accustomed to the idea before it is proved that Jesus *really* is high priest in 5. 1-10.

<sup>2</sup> It is particularly in his attempt to keep doctrine and parenesis separate that the chiasmic scheme of Vanhoye is most obviously open to criticism. The whole composition is parenesis (or παρακλήσις, 13. 22), and the doctrinal exposition is subordinate to this purpose.

are on the way to perfection (3. 7-4. 10).<sup>1</sup> Thus the author sets up a contrast between old and new which introduces a further dogmatic presupposition. Using Ps 95. 7-11, he shows that the promised rest (κατάπαυσις) of the people of God was not achieved by the conquest of Canaan (4. 8). He assumes that the Psalm was composed by David, and therefore the promised rest must still lie in the future in David's time (4. 7). But the Psalm is also prophetic, voicing the word of the Holy Spirit (3. 7). This means that the future reference is to be understood eschatologically in terms of the age to come, which is the σαββατισμός prepared for the people of God (4. 9).<sup>2</sup> There is here an idea which is known from Hellenistic Jewish sources, especially *Joseph and Asenath* 8. 9; 15. 7; 22. 13 (all with κατάπαυσις),<sup>3</sup> and it can therefore be assumed that the author is working within accepted categories of thought without fear of disagreement on the part of the readers. They are thus urged to 'strive to enter that rest' (4. 11), and the context shows that what stands in the way is the eschatological judgment (4. 12). Not surprisingly the parenesis here takes the form of stern words of warning, aimed at bringing home to the readers the potential danger of their situation.

Two points need to be mentioned here. In the first place, there is the rhetorical aspect. Now that the author has issued a strong

<sup>1</sup> This motif has been taken as the clue for the exposition of the whole epistle by E. Käsemann, *Das Wandern Gottesvolk: Eine Untersuchung zum Hebräerbrief* (FRLANT n. f. 37; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1957), cf. E. Grässer, 'Das Wandern Gottesvolk. Zum Basismotiv des Hebräerbriefes', ZNW 77 (1986) 160-79. But this makes Hebrews a call to perfection (in the sense of full response to the revelation of existence of which Jesus is the pioneer and high priest), and completely misses the practical nature of the crisis which the author is facing. However Hebrews here uses a paraenetic theme of Jewish moral discourse (used also by Paul in 1 Cor 10. 1-11), and does not return to it later (Käsemann's attempt to trace it in 10. 19-39 and 13. 13 is not convincing). For the idea of perfection in Hebrews, see n. 1, p. 398 below.

<sup>2</sup> Conjectured by Moffatt to be a word coined by the author of Hebrews himself, σαββατισμός occurs only here and in Plutarch, *De Superstit.* 3 (II. 166A), referring to superstitious practices. It is used to make the link between the conquest as 'rest' (cf. Dt 3. 20; 12. 9; Jos 1. 13, 15, etc.) and the seventh day of creation (Gen 2. 2 f) as a type of the age to come (cf. M. Tamid 7.4: 'On the Sabbath they sang A Psalm: a Song for the Sabbath Day; a Psalm, a song for the time that is to come, for the day that shall be all Sabbath and rest in the life everlasting', Danby, 589).

<sup>3</sup> R. Williamson, *Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Leiden: Brill, 1970) 544-57, has shown that Philo's metaphorical use of the idea is a timeless sharing in God's rest, which has no direct bearing on the argument of Hebrews. But the idea is clear in *J. and A.* 8. 9: 'Let her enter your rest which you have prepared for your chosen ones.' Cf. C. Burchard in *J. H. Charlesworth, ed., The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha II* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1985) 213; O. Hofius, *Katapausis. Die Vorstellung vom endzeitlichen Ruheort im Hebräerbrief* (WUNT 11; Tübingen: Mohr, 1970), says that this is the earliest evidence for this use of the idea.

warning, which shows that he is well aware of the trouble caused by the readers, but might for that very reason have the effect of antagonizing them, he at once softens it by recalling the point already made in chapter 2 that Jesus, in his capacity as high priest, can 'sympathize with our weaknesses', having been 'tempted as we are' (4. 15). Secondly he has at the same time laid out a third fundamental point of doctrine, which joins the messiahship of Jesus and his human sufferings and death as foundations of the theological argument, and that is the eschatological plan of God.<sup>1</sup> These three doctrinal positions are not in dispute, but form a basis of argument which he can take as agreed between him and the readers. This means that he is now ready to tackle the real point at issue, which was just mentioned fleetingly at the beginning as 'purification for sins' in 1. 3, but now appears in a form suited to this parennetic section in the words, 'Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace' (4. 16).

It is thus above all a practical issue which has to be dealt with. The readers have lost confidence to draw near to the throne of grace because of the barrier of sin. That this is the central issue is evident from the fact that the purification of sins is now moved into full focus as the crucial matter for understanding on their part, and it is in this connection that the real possibility of apostasy is most forcefully presented. It will become apparent in the course of the author's treatment of this theme that the problem of the readers is how to cope with their consciousness of sin (10. 2, cf. 9. 9, 14).<sup>2</sup> They have, of course, accepted the gospel that 'Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures' (1 Cor 15. 3), for that is part of the agreed basis, implied in 1. 3. So they started well, enduring considerable abuse and deprivation (6. 9-11; 10. 32-4). The allusion is too general to reveal the precise situation, but if we are correct in supposing that the church of Hebrews had made a complete break with the Jewish community from which the converts were drawn,

<sup>1</sup> See especially C. K. Barrett, 'The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews' (*The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology. In Honour of C. H. Dodd.* Cambridge: CUP, 1956) 363-93.

<sup>2</sup> The position of Rissi is exactly the reverse, for he holds that the readers have *einer mystischen Erfüllungslaube* (58) whereby they share in the heavenly priesthood of Christ regardless of their sins and need for atonement. This view is based on the highly dubious analysis of H. Zimmermann, who separates Christ as heavenly high priest (= tradition accepted by the readers) from Christ as earthly high priest (= new teaching by the author to promote his christology of the death of Christ) on the basis of supposed contradictions in the presentation of the theme (*Das Bekenntnis der Hoffnung: Tradition und Redaktion im Hebräerbrief*, BBB 47; Köln: Hanstein, 1977).

it is likely that this breach was the occasion of the harassment and even imprisonment referred to. On this assumption we can assert that their original acceptance of the gospel included the concept of reconciliation with God through the atoning death of Jesus, so that they were not at that time lacking in confidence to 'draw near to the throne of grace'. What, then, has happened to upset their confidence? If, as we have just seen, the original proclamation was set in a framework of vivid and immediate eschatological expectation, there would have been little attention given to the problem of post-baptismal sin. But the delay of the parousia could make this a serious issue, just as it caused a different problem for the Thessalonians (1 Thess 4. 13-18). The author, of course, still holds that the parousia is imminent (10. 25, 37), for he is strongly committed to the original teaching. But he cannot shut his eyes to the reality of the problem, especially as it is leading this group of Christians to drastic behaviour, which has caused great alarm to the leaders of the church. Consequently he must now argue convincingly and conclusively that such behaviour is unnecessary, because the sacrifice of Christ, when properly understood, is lasting in its effect, and so provides the means of coping with consciousness of sin during the interval before the parousia, however long that may be delayed. Moreover, the Jewish methods of purification and atonement, which the readers left behind on their conversion, are no substitute, because they do not have lasting effect (9. 9; 10. 1 f.).

If this is the situation to which Hebrews is addressed, it at once becomes apparent that the aim of the central argument is not to prove that the death of Jesus was a sacrifice for sins, for that is not in dispute, but to prove that the effects of that one act are *permanent*. This must be shown not only theoretically but practically. In such a way that the readers, with their troubled consciences, can feel and appreciate, so that they may return to full Christian practice with renewed confidence. It is highly significant that the method of argument in what follows takes the Jewish *practice* of atonement as the standard to which any exposition of the permanent effectiveness of the sacrifice of Christ must conform. It is because the readers are converts from Judaism, and this is the basis for their understanding of the issues. The author therefore takes certain features of the laws relating to atonement, and shows how they are covered more fully and effectively in the case of Jesus. As it is not self-evident that by the standards of the law Jesus can be regarded as a high priest in fact, he at once settles this point by the brilliant and original observation that the messianic Psalm 110 (already well established as a basis of christology) actually includes

appointment of the Messiah as 'a high priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek' (Ps 110. 4). There is no evidence that this verse had been applied to Jesus before,<sup>1</sup> but the author is able to make immense capital out of it. Not only does it overcome the technical difficulty that Jesus was not a Levite, but it offers a new set of standards of priesthood, derived from the figure of Melchizedek in Genesis 14,<sup>2</sup> and it includes the crucial point that his office is 'for ever'.

From the point of view of the rhetorical structure of the epistle, 4. 14-5. 10 marks the transition from agreed dogmatic positions to teaching that is new. So before going further the author appeals to the readers to make a special effort of understanding (5. 11-6. 3).<sup>3</sup> It is obvious that this is because he is producing a new line of argument, which he has devised specially to deal with the practical problem. He wants to persuade them to desist from their present behaviour by providing an explanation of the original proclamation which will restore their confidence. It is precisely because this is the crucial issue that he now issues the dire threat of 6. 4-6. These verses, which have caused anguish to countless sensitive Christians through the centuries by their uncompromising rigorism, must be seen in relation to their rhetorical function.<sup>4</sup> They reveal the author's passionate anxiety to win acceptance of his case. They

1 The possibility is suggested by those such as Zimmermann who postulate a christological hymn as the source of 5. 1-10, cf. Loader, 107 f., for brief presentation and critique. For criticism of Loader's own view see n. 1, p. 392 above.

2 The figure of Melchizedek in Hebrews bears no direct relation to 11Q Melchizedek and comparable traditions in Jewish sources, cf. M. de Jonge and A. S. van der Woude, '11Q Melchizedek and the New Testament', *NTS* 12 (1966) 301-26; F. L. Horton, *The Melchizedek Tradition* (SNTSMS 30: Cambridge: CUP, 1976); B. A. Demarest, *A History of Interpretation of Hebrews 7, 1-10 from the Reformation to the Present Day* (BGBE 19: Tübingen: Mohr, 1976). For Philo, cf. Williamson, 434-9. The one point which Hebrews has in common with Philo is the explanation of the name (Heb 7. 2; Philo, *Leg. All.* III. 79), but this kind of popular etymologizing was not confined to Philo, but rather suggests that both writers are indebted to some extent to current Jewish traditions of exegesis.

3 Most commentators remark on the contradiction between the readers' need for 'milk' in 5. 12 and the author's determination to 'leave the elementary doctrines and go on to maturity (τελειότητα)' in 6. 1. It is, of course, a further example of rhetorical skill, aimed at persuading the readers to want to prove their maturity by attending to the new doctrine. The 'foundation' (θεμέλιον, cf. 1 Cor 3. 11) is capable of being regarded entirely as Jewish teaching (so A. Nairne, *The Epistle of Priesthood*, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913, 15), especially as the plural βαρταριῶν is very strange for Christian baptism (for which βαρταρία is normally used). But this is probably another example of the author's allusive style. All the points in this list can then be regarded as subject-headings of Christian catechesis.

4 For the history of exegesis see the very full study of R. C. Sauer, *A Critical and Exegetical Re-examination of Hebrews 5: 11 to 6: 8* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Manchester, 1981). See also the excursions of Spicq, II 167-78, and Braun, 170 ff., and B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Macmillan 31903) 165 ff.

also show his real fear that the behaviour of the readers, which involves association with the Jewish community for the sake of purification of sins, is bound to lead to apostasy. I think it is a mistake to suggest that they have actually reached this point, for he at once takes it back with a *captatio benevolentiae* in 6. 9-12.<sup>1</sup> So at one moment he almost accuses them of apostasy, although he knows that they have not actually done so, and the next moment he speaks of his assurance that they are not doing so, although he fears that it might actually be the case! With such a delicate balance of contradictory emotions it seems to me entirely beside the point to see in 6. 4-6 a statement of universal truth, that apostasy necessarily renders repentance impossible (Westcott tries to argue this on psychological grounds). We must remember the actual situation of the readers. By adopting behaviour which belongs to their former life within Judaism, they are denying the continuing efficacy of atonement through the sacrifice of Jesus, thus repudiating the very thing that they want. It is as if they are 'crucifying to themselves the Son of God' (6. 6).<sup>2</sup> It is a bold and highly emotive metaphor which can only have been chosen to make the point with maximum effect, and would be especially effective if they are Jews themselves, as seems to be the case. It is not to be supposed that the readers saw themselves in this lurid light, or would agree that their association with the Jewish community necessarily involved apostasy. After all, other Christian Jews elsewhere maintained Jewish practices. But clearly the church of Hebrews is different, and the author is polarizing the issue so as to force them to take a definite stand on one side or the other.

With this practical concern for the salvation of the readers before him, the author glides back to the main argument by taking up the theme of God's promises (6. 13-20). He wishes them to be left

1 The use of this device here is not generally recognized by commentators. Of those I have been able to consult only Luther comes near to suggesting it ('The Apostle . . . neither persecutes them in all respects nor does he flatter them in all respects', M. Luther: *Early Theological Works*, tr. J. Atkinson, London: SCM 1962, 124). Bengel calls the verse a case of *epithetapia*, i.e. an after-mitigation, when what has been said might have injured the listener's self-respect or feelings.

2 The versions (d r vg sy<sup>p</sup> sa bo) understand ἀναστασινοῦντας as 'crucify afresh', but this is rejected by most modern scholars on the grounds that this meaning is impossible in the examples in the contemporary literature (chiefly Josephus and Plutarch; full references in Braun ad loc.). The preposition has its primary meaning (to put up on a stake), and so does not denote repetition. This misunderstanding evidently goes back to the third or even the second century, and could be a result of reading the passage in the light of anti-Judaic polemics.



in no doubt that, by following the argument which he is now about to set forth, their own problem of conscience will be solved. So although chapter 7 is almost entirely theoretical, being concerned with establishing the priesthood of Jesus after the order of Melchizedek which the argument requires, it is arranged in such a way as to lead to the crucial point, the permanent efficacy of the sacrifice of Jesus. This has been prophesied in scripture ('for ever', Ps 110. 4 = 7. 17, 21), is characteristic of the new covenant of eschatological salvation (v. 22), and is therefore precisely what the readers need (v. 23 ff.). It thus differs from atonement under the old covenant, which failed because of its inherent weakness, 'for the law made nothing perfect' (v. 19). It is important to remember that, as Peterson has shown, perfection in Hebrews is fundamentally a matter of completion, specifically the completion of God's plan of salvation.<sup>1</sup> The law fails, because it belongs to the conditions of the old covenant, which has no lasting quality and in any case is destined to be superseded by the new covenant. This contrast is set out in detail in chapter 8, with a full quotation of Jer 31. 31-4. The new covenant passage is crucial to the whole of this central argument, and the author will come back to it at the conclusion of it at 10. 16-18. It will then at last be clear how the death of Christ, which is of course a past event, avails now, in the interim before the parousia, to deal effectively with the consciousness of sin, which is the real problem.

Meanwhile in chapter 9, having established the lasting character of the priesthood of Jesus, the author turns to proving the permanent efficacy of his sacrificial death. Here he gives a new exposition of the apostolic kerygma that 'Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures', which is carefully shaped to prove this essential point. He takes for this purpose the Day of Atonement as the main source for a definition of a sacrifice for sin, and therefore the best standard for his argument from a Jewish point of view. But his debt to the traditional kerygma can be seen in allusions to the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 (e.g. 9. 14, 28) and possibly the Last Supper

<sup>1</sup> D. Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection. An Examination of the Concept of Perfection in the 'Epistle to the Hebrews'* (SNTSMS 47; Cambridge: CUP, 1982). Jesus was 'perfected' (κατεωθεύε, 5. 9) by his death and exaltation to the presence of God. Christians already have access to God through him, but their 'perfection' awaits the parousia. Thus perfection in Hebrews is concerned with access to God, which is the goal of salvation, and is not to be identified with human striving after moral perfection through some form of self-help.

tradition (9. 15).<sup>1</sup> The significant thing for our present purpose, however, is that he makes no attempt to show *how* the sacrifice works. Having listed the arrangements for the Day of Atonement, and pointed out to the readers that they were never expected to have the permanent effect which is desired (9. 9), he resorts to the *a fortiori* argument to assert that the sacrifice of Jesus *does* have this effect (9. 14), and this means referring once more to the new covenant to make the point (9. 15 ff.).<sup>2</sup> Now the *a fortiori* argument, which is common in Paul and in the rabbinic literature, is not a strictly logical argument, but it is much more a mark of rhetorical style. It enables a writer to jump over a series of logical steps to reach the desired conclusion without more ado. This explains why we look in vain for any detailed comparison or contrast between the blood ritual of the rites here referred to and the shedding of the blood of Jesus. For indeed no detailed comparison is possible. In the case of Jesus, to speak of his blood is simply a way of referring to his death, and it gives an opening for the use of the metaphor of sacrifice in relation to it. But in reality the point of comparison between his death and sacrifice is confined to the *effect*, for both are means of reconciliation with God.<sup>3</sup>

The author of Hebrews knows this perfectly well. In his view the death of Jesus is lasting in its effect, not because of details of ceremonial, but because it is the sacrifice of the new covenant. But the argument is not finished, because he must still explain how it applies to Christians between the crucifixion and the parousia. It is the dialectic of the 'now' and 'not yet' of salvation. He shows

<sup>1</sup> Though not generally referred to by commentators, the eucharistic words of Mk 14. 24 and 1 Cor 11. 25 may well be one of the sources of Hebrews' theology, especially if other possible allusions to the eucharist are allowed. The new contribution of Hebrews is the use of the Day of Atonement, but the references to the covenant ceremony of Ex 24. 3-8 certainly depend on earlier tradition, which is reflected in the eucharistic words. Spicq, II 264, suggests that τοῦτο, which replaces LXX ἰσοῦ in the quotation of Ex 24. 8 in 9. 20, is due to reminiscence of the eucharistic words.

<sup>2</sup> The meaning 'testament' for διαθήκη in 9. 16 f. is not a case of juggling with double meanings to slip in an invalid step in the argument, but it is part of the meaning of the word as a whole from the author's point of view. As such it suggests to him the comparison which is needed at this point. Just as a covenant is concluded by a sacrifice, which ratifies it and brings it into force permanently, so the lasting effect of the death of Christ can be compared to the death of a person which brings that person's last will and testament into force.

<sup>3</sup> The same is true of Paul's fundamentally important statement in Rom 3. 25, ὁ θεὸς ἰλασθῆναι διὰ τῆς πίστεως ἐν τῷ αἵματι αἰωνίου, which bears a close relation to the present argument. See the discussion in C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975-9) I 199-218, who considers that Paul's language may have been influenced by contemporary thought about the Maccabean martyrs and the 'Binding of Isaac' (both referred to in Heb 11. 17 f., 35 ff.).

awareness of this in 9. 28, where he boldly asserts that, Christ's sacrifice having been done once and for all, his second coming will be 'not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly awaiting him'. So first he points out that the old sacrifices could not 'make perfect those who draw near' (10. 1). It is important to realize that the implied difference is not the contrast between material and spiritual but between temporary and permanent.<sup>1</sup> He knows, and his readers know too, that in any case sacrifices are not acceptable to God unless they are accompanied by a sacrifice of the heart and will, and he quotes one of the well-known prophetic passages to prove it (10. 5-7 = Ps 40. 7-9).<sup>2</sup> But this passage *also* provides the point that he needs here, that in the plan of God the sacrificial system is to be superseded by the accomplishment of the will of God. Now we know from the new covenant prophecy that it is God's will to remove the barrier of sin altogether, and therefore what has been achieved by the death of Jesus applies to the readers themselves (10. 10). They on their part must 'hold fast the confession' (v. 23) during the interval before the parousia (v. 12-13). This is done by faith, faith that the permanent relationship between them and God has been established, so that their ultimate salvation is assured.

And so it comes about that the answer to the readers' problem of conscience is the virtue of faith which was referred to in chapter 2. They are to 'look to Jesus' as 'the pioneer and completer (τελειωτήν) of our faith' (12. 2). The argument of the central chapters has been aimed at convincing them that this is sufficient, and more than sufficient, for their need. But the point is so important for the whole purpose of the letter that the author presses it home with all his resources of rhetorical skill. So in 10. 19-39 there is alternation of

exhortation, dire warning (comparable to 6. 4-6), another *captatio benevolentiae* (v. 32) and renewed exhortation. The great 'faith' chapter which follows is not an optional extra, but an essential part of the argument as a whole. For the readers are to maintain hope by *acting in faith* that their sins are done away and that they have access to God through their incorporation into Christ. So the chapter consists of numerous examples of people who acted in faith<sup>1</sup> during the long period of the old covenant, though of course they could never reach the completion of God's plan 'without us', i.e. without the eschatological fulfilment which we now experience (11. 39 f.). The importance of this magnificent chapter for the author's purpose is not often sufficiently realized. Faith for Hebrews is a practical matter, the human side in the new covenant.<sup>2</sup> It has its tangible expression in Christian worship (12. 28), which can be identified with the 'sacrifice of praise' (13. 15), which is the theme of the Christian assembly. The author wants to show that this is sufficient as a practical alternative to the Jewish rites which the readers have adopted. The great length of chapter 11, taking up the theme of acting in faith from 10. 19, and carrying it forward through the whole of chapter 12, is proportionate to the total composition, giving to faith the prominence that belongs to it in the theology as a whole. Moreover it presents faith in a thoroughly positive manner, well adapted for Jewish readers, who love the stories of the Old Testament heroes and the Maccabean martyrs. But in this presentation of them the readers can identify with them as companions in the life of faith which they themselves must lead. The sheer inspirational quality of the writing needs no demonstration, nor the tremendous emotional impact of the following chapter, where every detail is laden with meaning for the

<sup>1</sup> Nearly all commentators assume that Hebrews is seeking to replace a material understanding of sacrifice by a spiritual one, especially in the light of 10. 4. But in my view this is not a point of dispute between the author and his readers, who would have readily agreed with 10. 4. Rather, it is the ground on which he makes his real point (δύο, v. 5). Cf. n. 3, p. 389 above.

<sup>2</sup> The LXX reading σῶμα is important for the author's argument (v. 10), but he shows no awareness of the discrepancy with the original Hebrew. Though disputed by recent scholars (Spicq, Bruce, Montefiore, Braun), the best explanation of the reading is inner Greek corruption through dittography of Σ before the original reading ΩΤΙΑ, which has been restored in Aquila, Theodotion and Symmachus from the Hebrew. The corruption is clearly older than the text used by Hebrews (which shows characteristics of both A and B, cf. K. J. Thomas, *The Old Testament Citations in Hebrews*, NTS 11 [1965] 303-25). The suggestion that σῶμα is a deliberate change to secure messianic interpretation is grotesque, and owes its popularity to Hebrews itself (v. 5a, cf. 1. 6). No one would ever suppose it was intended to be messianic without this context.

<sup>1</sup> The repetition of πιστεῖ is an example of anaphora, a rhetorical device which heightens the emotional effect. The concept of faith here is practical, and the meaning of the chapter is appreciated better if πιστεῖ is translated 'acting in faith'. This applies even to 11. 3, where πιστεῖ νοσηρῶν refers to the act of faith required by the concept of creation as a divine act, cf. Rom 1. 20. This reflects the Hebraic notion of firmness, cf. O. Betz, 'Firmness in Faith: Hebrews 11. 1 and Isaiah 28. 16', in *Scripture: Meaning and Method. Essays presented to A. T. Hanson*, ed. B. P. Thompson (Hull: Hull University Press, 1987) 92-113.

<sup>2</sup> The influential study of E. Grässer, *Der Glaube im Hebräerbrief* (MThS 2; Marburg: Elwert, 1965) is vitiated from the start by his argument that the highly specialized concept of faith used by Paul in the Judaistic controversy was normative for early Christianity, so that Hebrews (which uses a normal Jewish concept of faith = firmness, fidelity) marks a fatal degeneration of Christian understanding. In fact Hebrews comes near to reflecting Paul's πιστός in his use of ἐπιλογία (10. 23). For criticism of Grässer, cf. G. Hughes, *Hebrews and Hermeneutics* (SNTSMS 36; Cambridge: CUP, 1979) 137-42.

readers' situation,<sup>1</sup> building up to the grand finale of 12. 18–29 with its awesome picture of the coming cataclysm, when nothing will survive – except the kingdom! Finally the selection of homely details in chapter 13, which has provided basic information for our interpretation, brings down the temperature, and enables the author to finish on a note of calm, comparable to the stately opening in chapter 1.

#### 4. FURTHER COMMENTS AND CONCLUSION

Two further points need to be made before this study is concluded. In the first place, much of the argument in the central chapters depends on details of liturgical practice, but these are drawn entirely from the prescriptions in Leviticus, and there is never any reference to the actual temple in Jerusalem. It is often supposed that the author's interest in scripture is only theoretical, and the conclusion has been drawn that the temple is no longer standing, which would require a time of writing after A.D. 70. But against this it has been pointed out that, if temple and sacrifice were no longer available, it is inconceivable that this should not be mentioned, because the author repeatedly says that they are obsolescent. Though he takes all the details of sacrifices from the

<sup>1</sup> In 12. 4 their struggle 'against sin', comparable to the death of Jesus at the hand of sinners (v. 3), reflects the pressure to apostasy, which ironically is bound up with their problem of consciousness of sin. The period of discipline is the interval before the parousia. They need to 'strive for peace with all' (v. 14) in view of the serious division in their church, and to maintain 'holiness', in spite of the fact that the author is trying to restrain them from reverting to Jewish practices which they feel to be necessary to gain this. So the issue of apostasy is raised again (v. 15, alluding to Dt 29. 18, which is a context of apostasy). The example of Esau is especially telling. He sold his most precious possession for the sake of immediate satisfaction, and that is precisely what the readers will do if they pursue their present intentions. Esau also suggests the impossibility of repentance (v. 17, cf. 6. 4–6), though the rhetorical use of this theme should not be taken to imply that the readers are in fact beyond the possibility of repentance. The concept of participation in the new covenant underlies the elaborate contrast between Sinai and Mount Zion in v. 18–24. The description builds up to a climax with mention of 'the spirits of just men made perfect' (τὰ πνεύματα ἁγίων, cf. 11. 40), Jesus as 'the mediator of a new covenant', and 'the blood of sprinkling which speaks something better than that of Abel' (cf. Gen 4. 10). These details, which reflect contemporary apocalyptic (notably 1 En 22), remind the readers of the crucial steps in the preceding argument, to the effect that their 'perfection' is a consequence of the new covenant established through the death of Jesus. Finally, the exhortation in v. 25–29 leads to the practical consequence that participation in Christ opens the way to acceptable worship, which the readers have been tempted to abandon (10. 25), but are urged to resume (13. 13–15). Though God remains 'a consuming fire' (v. 29, cf. Dt 4. 24), and therefore a terror to sinners, the saving act of Jesus has made God accessible in spite of human weakness.

Pentateuch,<sup>1</sup> he always speaks as if they are actually performed. The alternative explanation, that the author is dealing with a group who hold a spiritualizing interpretation of the sacrifices after the destruction of the temple, fails because the author never deals with the material in this way. He takes the details of sacrifice literally and assumes that actual animals, etc., are used. This being so, we need to know why he refers exclusively to the Pentateuch and never to the actual practice at the temple in Jerusalem. The answer, as already indicated above, is that the law provides the standard which his readers accept. They want purification of sins, and so he goes to what he regards as the best available description, which is the ceremonies of the Day of Atonement. The legal prescriptions give the correct standard for understanding what sacrifice and atonement and purification really are. His argument is that by *these* standards the death of Jesus passes the test. In fact it is lastingly effective in a way that the prescriptions of the old covenant could never be, because it is the sacrifice which inaugurates the new covenant, when the Lord has promised that 'I will put my laws on their hearts and write them on their minds . . . I will remember their sins and their misdeeds no more' (10. 16 f.). Hence there is no attempt at a sustained typology in the argument. It is a matter of requirements. Atonement requires the ministry of the high priest: Jesus is a high priest. Atonement requires the death of the sacrificial victim to release the blood: Jesus died. Atonement requires the sprinkling of blood: Jesus' blood was shed. Atonement requires the entry of the high priest through the veil into the holy of holies: Jesus passed through the veil of his flesh to enter into the presence of God in heaven. The author simply selects details which the readers are certain to respect as central to Jewish understanding of atonement and which can readily be applied to the death of Jesus.

The second point is the actual practice of the readers, who have these standards as their basis of understanding. Are we to suppose that they are frequenting the temple and offering sacrifices for sin? This is possible, but not likely. There are no references to individual sin-offerings. The Hellenistic character of Hebrews, combined with the lack of any allusion to participation in the cultus, makes it far more probable that the church of Hebrews is located in the Diaspora in some such place as Alexandria, Antioch, Ephesus or Rome. Their Jewish practice would thus be that of Diaspora

<sup>1</sup> For a possible exception, cf. n. 1, p. 389 above.

Judaism.<sup>1</sup> This carried with it a strong sense of solidarity with the worship of the temple, so long as it was still standing. Contact was maintained by the voluntary payment of the *didrachma* tax, by occasional pilgrimages and by sending money for votive offerings and temple dues, such as the firstfruits. The extent to which purity rules and other liturgical acts could be performed in the home and in the synagogue helped to reinforce the sense of belonging. These included the communal meals on feast days, which I think are alluded to in the βρώματα of 13. 9. The idea that almsgiving is equivalent to an atonement sacrifice (Tobit 12. 9) does not suggest that such sacrifices are unnecessary, but rather helps further to maintain the sense of solidarity with the sacrifices of the temple, however far away it might be. The daily sacrifices were offered there on behalf of Jews everywhere, and they could rely upon the efficacy of them, so long as they did their part by observing the law as well as local conditions permitted. All this can be seen in Philo, who led an exemplary life as a practising Jew at the same time as rationalizing it by means of allegorical interpretation. Thus the behaviour of the dissident group in Hebrews, which caused so much anguish to the church leaders, need only be the resumption of Jewish practices which express solidarity with the covenant people and the temple at its heart, and so provide assurance of the reconciliation with God which they need. But this also means that they are subject to the emotional pull of their old faith. The renewed contact with the Jewish community would almost certainly open them to pressure to break their ties with the Christian church, because of the alienation of the two groups, however much they think they can keep a foot in both camps. In the situation of the Hebrews church such a compromise would be impossible.

I have tried in this lecture to expose the essentially rhetorical character of the argument in Hebrews. The epistle is an outstanding example of the art of persuasion, undertaken not as a school exercise but in response to a real and urgent situation. It has been necessary to suppose that the church concerned consisted of converts from Hellenistic Judaism who had separated from the rest of their Jewish community on grounds of principle. We thus gain a glimpse into a strand of Jewish Christianity which can be traced back to the position represented by Stephen in Acts 6, but which does not appear in quite the same form elsewhere in the New

<sup>1</sup> Cf. E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, rev. G. Vermes, F. Millar and M. Goodman (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark) III. i (1986) 138–49.

Testament.<sup>1</sup> It is obviously different from the Jewish Christianity of Peter and James and the Jerusalem church. But it also differs from the mixed congregations associated with Barnabas and Paul. The point at issue is a matter of practice, and no doubt the readers could point to other Christian congregations in which such continuation of Jewish practice would be tolerated. They did not necessarily regard themselves as apostates. But for their leaders and the author their behaviour strikes at the root of the Christian faith. Hence the task of persuading them to change their behaviour must take the form of recalling them to the confession, the ὁμολογία, which they had originally accepted. It is clear that, in spite of the signs of advancing christology in 1. 1–4, the author is in close touch with the primitive kerygma, and this also favours an earlier rather than a later date. Contrary to a common opinion among scholars, the epistle shows no clear signs of Early Catholicism.<sup>2</sup> The author has a real sense that the parousia is near. He promotes the apocalyptic faith, not because he is a traditionalist, but because to him it is vital and real. There is no sense in which the Spirit is tied to the ecclesiastical institutions. The worship of the Christian assembly, whether it is the eucharist or not, is understood dynamically as the corporate 'sacrifice of praise' (13. 15). The sacrificial character of almsgiving is complementary to *this* sacrifice, just as much as to the temple sacrifices (13. 16). Moreover the author never speaks of the leaders in hierarchical terms. His concept of faith is not the holding fast of a deposit of doctrine, such as we see in the Pastoral Epistles, but a vital response to the sacrifice of Christ, the human side in the new covenant. The new teaching in the epistle consists in the argument which he uses in defence of the apostolic kerygma of the sacrificial death of Christ. He makes it plain that it is new, and the reason for it is the compelling need to find a way of persuading the readers which will speak to their actual problem of conscience

<sup>1</sup> Both W. Manson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews. An Historical and Theological Reconsideration* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1951) and Spicq argue for the origin of the thought of Hebrews in the views of the Hellenists attributed to Stephen in Acts 6. 11–14. Spicq even identifies the readers with the large number of priests referred to in Acts 6. 7 (Spicq, I 226–31), but this suggestion is open to many objections. For the importance of the Hellenists in the development of earliest Christianity cf. M. Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul* (London: SCM, 1983), especially 1–29, 54–8.

<sup>2</sup> Against E. Grässer, *Glauke* (n. 2, p. 401), cf. R. H. Fuller, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament* (London: Duckworth, 1966) 144–50; H. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament. II History and Literature of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 272–6. For the marks of Early Catholicism see H. Conzelmann, 'Luke's Place in the Development of Early Christianity' in L. E. Keck and J. L. Martyn, *Studies in Luke-Acts* (London: SPCK, 1968) 304; J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1977) 341–66.

and accord with their own Jewish presuppositions concerning purification of sins. The fact that his defence opened up new vistas for the subsequent development of Christian doctrine, particularly in relation to the atonement, the priesthood and the eucharist, must not mislead us into supposing that he had any other intention than to reassert the apostolic faith. Finally, because the aim of the epistle is essentially practical, the climax of the argument should be seen, not in the central argument of 7. 1–10. 18 (extremely important as it is), but in the grand exposition of faith which follows it in 10. 19–12. 29. Thus by following through the rhetorical structure of the epistle, an integrated interpretation of it is obtained which, while having much in common with the traditional view of Hebrews, sharpens the issues and clarifies the situation to which it is addressed, and so shows the benefit of the contemporary emphasis on literary genre and social setting.

Last of all, there is the tantalizing question: did the unknown author succeed in drawing his unknown readers back from apostasy and in reintegrating them into the church? Of course we can never know the answer. But the fact that Hebrews has survived for posterity perhaps permits the conclusion that this passionate appeal did not fail in its effect and  $\phi\lambda\alpha\delta\epsilon\lambda\phi\acute{\iota}\alpha$  was restored (13. 1).