

Interpreting the Epistle to the Hebrews

Andrew H. Trotter, Jr.

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NRSV New Revised Standard Version

NIV New International Version

To my wife, Marie

*But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
All losses are restor'd, and sorrows end.*

1

Historical and Cultural Context

To know the author of an epistle, when it was written, its geographical destination, and something about its readership helps modern day readers to relate the teaching of that epistle more clearly and more consistently to their own concerns. This principle, known as reading a work in its historical and cultural context, occupies the place of primary importance in the interpretation of any writing. Literary genre, style, and grammatical and structural context are perhaps equally important but are often more easily ascertained. This is particularly true in the case of Hebrews, where so many of the answers about historical and cultural context are inconclusive.

Nevertheless, to know the answers to these questions, even in a tentative form, is necessary for us to continue with the process of interpretation. We ask the questions so that we may better know the author and, particularly, his intended audience. To know them better, though not thoroughly, helps us at least to know more about what sort of people they were, and to know that helps us better relate them and their concerns to similar people and concerns today. Therefore even with all the obstacles in our way keeping us from knowing for certain the circumstances in which and to which Hebrews was written, we must find out what we can.

The question of authorship is so large that we have devoted a whole chapter to it. The present chapter will deal primarily with the destination, date, and readers of the epistle. The text of the book itself offers the most evidence concerning the last of these elements, and so we will begin with the question of the readers of the epistle. While dating the epistle is a risky endeavor, we nevertheless will be helped more in determining the destination of the epistle by first tentatively

dating it. Thus we will next concern ourselves with the date of the epistle and then look at its destination.

Who Were Those Guys?

A famous line from one of my favorite films, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, expresses the frustration of the scholar when trying to figure out the anonymous audience of a biblical book. In the movie, Butch and Sundance begin their flight from lawmen with a cocky and self-assured attitude, promising their mutual friend Ellie that they will shortly be back after shaking their trackers. Starting well, and using every trick they know to evade the trackers, they find that their pursuers are relentless, and they can never seem to make good their escape. In exasperation, they begin to ask the question “Who *are* those guys?” since the trackers never flag in their mission. In the film, Butch and Sundance eventually jump off a cliff and effect their escape. Though the analogy isn’t perfect, the frustration Butch and Sundance felt is a lot like that of the scholar trying to pursue the elusive audience of Hebrews. As the pursuers rather than the pursued, we are still asking today: Who *were* those guys?¹

Ideas about the readership of the epistle must be based first and foremost on the best evidence we have: the text of the epistle itself. The first evidence that the modern reader encounters is, of course, the title of the epistle, which would seem to indicate, in English at least, that the readers of the epistle were Jews. This has been widely disputed, however, for a number of reasons. Some question the meaning of the title itself. They have argued that the title should actually be translated, “against the Hebrews,”² but there seems little

¹ Those investigating the background of the Book of Hebrews sometimes wish that they could use the same trick as Butch and Sundance, but it’s not as easy as jumping off a cliff!

² See Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,

likelihood that the title could actually mean this. In fact, the title itself is somewhat irrelevant to our question, because it seems to have been added much later and probably reflects a later writer's opinion about who the recipients were.

Much more important for our investigation are clues within the text itself. We may state conclusively that the epistle is written to Christians. They may be Christians who need warnings about their faithfulness, (cf., e.g., 5:11–6:19; 10:19–39), but these warning passages themselves make it quite clear that the author considers both his readers and himself to be among those who are of the community of faith in Christ (Heb. 6:9–10; 10:39). Two additional questions arise from the text about the recipients of Hebrews. Were they predominantly Jewish, Gentile, or a mixture of both? And are they members of the community in general, or a particular group within that community? The answers to these two questions will give us most of the information that we can reliably state about the readership of Hebrews.³

The interpreter of Hebrews might instinctively opt for a Jewish readership, not only because of the title of the book but because of what is immediately apparent upon reading the text: the OT is quoted on almost every page. It is clear that the author expected his readers to be acquainted with the OT in great detail, not only because he explicates it at some length but also because he leaves some questions unanswered and yet seems to expect his readers to dig up those answers for themselves (cf., e.g., Heb. 9:5). This argument, however, is not as watertight as it might at first seem. The gentile world in many quarters was well aware of the OT, particularly the

1993), 21–22, who mentions this view in order to refute it but does not say where the suggestion comes from.

³ A third question, What is the readers' relationship to the author of the epistle? is answered best in the discussion of the authorship of the epistle (see chap. 2).

OT Old Testament

LXX. Use of various rabbinical practices in the interpretation of Scripture in the Book of Hebrews (see below, chap. 9) is a stronger argument for Jewish readership, but still not conclusive since many of the techniques used in Hebrews were also found in the Hellenistic world as well. Even the extensive discussion of sacrifices and priests, while of course taking place within a Jewish context, does not settle the matter. These practices were widely employed in Hellenistic worship as well. To get ahead of ourselves a bit, if this epistle is destined for Rome, another argument against assuming an exclusively Jewish readership is that Jewish practices were known more widely in Rome than elsewhere in the empire. Many Gentiles were well aware of Jewish sacrifices and customs, so any reference to these would not necessitate a Jewish readership.

On the other hand, it is difficult to see any evidence for a purely gentile audience. Some see a gentile background in the following:

1. reference to families sharing the same flesh and blood (Heb. 2:14) and children's duty to submit to their parents' discipline (Heb. 12:5–11);
2. the analogy of the field (Heb. 6:7–8);
3. the contrast between milk and solid food (Heb. 5:12–14);
4. the typological language concerning shadows and realities (Heb. 8:5; 9:23; 10:1);
5. the use of the word στοιχεῖα (Heb. 5:12); and
6. the exhortation to be faithful in marriage (Heb. 13:4).

But these are all references that both Jews and Gentiles would understand and cannot be used to argue for an exclusively gentile origin for the book. The use of typology in the large central section of the book (Hebrews 7–10) does not point to a gentile authorship either, as we know from the techniques attributed to Philo, a Jewish philosopher working in Alexandria who synthesized the Jewish faith with Greek philosophy. A final argument for gentile readership

comes from the reference to “dead works” (Heb. 6:1; 9:14). Yet the author of Hebrews does not consider the works of Judaism to be alive either, as his calling those works a mere shadow makes abundantly clear (cf. Heb. 8:5; 9:23; 10:1). Hence, there is no conclusive evidence that any of the language used in Hebrews could be understood only by Gentiles.

The weight of evidence tends toward a congregation of mixed background. The very fact that the Jewish references could be understood by Gentiles and the gentile references could be understood by Jews is an initial, though not strong, indicator in this direction. Paul Ellingworth points to the recurring contrast between true worship and apostasy as pointing to “the likely setting of the epistle and the likely situation of its addressees.”⁴ While agreeing that the predominance of the OT probably indicates a large Jewish population in the community, he makes the point that the author consistently avoids both distinctively Jewish and distinctively gentile language in the discussion. In other words, rather than describe the Jews as Pharisees or legalists (some equivalent of the “Judaizers” of Paul, cf. Gal. 1:7; 3:1–3) or the Gentiles as “barbarians” or some equivalent (cf. Paul’s description in Romans 1), he avoids describing them at all. This would perhaps suggest a mixed group of addressees, neither of whom he wanted to offend by references to their backgrounds.

A second question is whether the author of Hebrews addressed his epistle to a particular group or to the broader community of Christians as a whole. Wherever the original readers of the Epistle to the Hebrews may have been, they seem to be a subgroup within the larger community of Christians in that place. A number of references within the text lead us to that conclusion. Perhaps foremost among this evidence is the extensive condemnation of the readers in Heb. 5:12–14. There the author admits that he has much to say about Melchizedek, but it is “hard to explain” (δυσερμήνευτος, Heb. 5:11).

⁴ Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 25.

This is because his readers have “become dull in understanding” (νωθροὶ γεγονάτε ταῖς ἀκοαῖς, Heb. 5:11), implying that they once understood more than they do at the present. Amplifying this thought, the author goes on to say that they ought by this time to be “teachers” (διδάσκαλοι, Heb. 5:12), but they now need someone to teach them basic truths once again. It is hard to believe that the author would address an entire community as those that ought by now to be teachers; by definition the office of teacher necessitates a much larger group to be taught. The contrast between those who feed on milk and those who feed on solid food, and the references to infancy and maturity, further support this idea in the passage.

A second important passage that demonstrates Hebrews to be addressed to a subgroup of the Christian community is found in Hebrews 13. While most of the exhortations in this chapter are general, several of them have to do with paying deference to the recipients’ leaders. Hence, Heb. 13:7 enjoins the readers to “remember” (μνημονεύετε) their leaders and extensively describes the way in which they should remember them—as those who “spoke the word of God” to them and as models to be imitated in “faith” (πίστις) and “way of life” (ἀναστροφή). Moreover, in Heb. 13:17 the readers are enjoined to “obey your leaders and submit to their authority” (NIV). Once again, this idea is elaborated by describing the leaders as those who must give an account to God and keep watch over the souls of the readers. The author goes on to enjoin his readers to help their leaders in their oversight of them so that they may do it “with joy and not with sighing—for that would be harmful to you” (Heb. 13:17 NRSV). Last and perhaps most revealing, the readers are exhorted to “greet all your leaders and all the saints” (Heb. 13:24 NRSV). This distinguishes the readership of this epistle from the larger group of the community and not just from the leaders. Hence,

the readers of this epistle seem to be some smaller subgroup of the larger community that has a particular need to hear what our author has to say to them.

A further indication that the readers are a subgroup of the whole is found at Heb. 10:25, where the readership is enjoined not to neglect meeting with other Christians. There the readers are encouraged to “consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another” (Heb. 10:24–25 NRSV). The command points to a group that has either separated itself semipermanently or at the very least regularly separates itself from the community during worship. Our author sees this as a serious breach of the gospel and clearly condemns it, using it as a lead-in to perhaps the strongest warning of the epistle (Heb. 10:26–39).

It is fruitless to speculate much further about the character of this group. Many have accepted the judgment of Spicq that the readers constituted a group of converted priests from Jerusalem.⁵ William Manson thought them to be former leaders of the church, who, having been kicked out of Rome during the persecution of Claudius in A.D. 49, now have returned to the community in Rome. They are no longer leaders, and they are having difficulty with their status as followers in the community.⁶ Others have associated these with converts in the community at Qumran or other more well defined groups. All these suggestions have something to commend them, but their difficulties are just as great. While we will make some tentative suggestions concerning the date and place of the recipients of the epistle, we should see this epistle as addressed to a particular group within the community rather than to the community as a whole, and that is all we can say for sure about who they are.

⁵ Ceslas Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux*, 2 vols., Études bibliques (Paris: Gabalda, 1952–53), 1:226–42.

⁶ William Manson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: An Historical and Theological Reconsideration*, 2d ed. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1953), *passim*.

When Were Those Guys?

Dating a NT book is a process of elimination, starting from the dates on both ends of a time line before and after which the book could not possibly have been written and moving toward the date on the line that seems to fit both the best internal and the best external evidence.⁷ First, one looks for references to the book in other early Christian literature that can be dated with some certainty, in order to find a date after which it could not possibly have been written (the *terminus ad quem*). For instance, we are fortunate enough to have several clear references to Hebrews in *1 Clement*, traditionally dated ca. A.D. 96. Therefore, we know it was written prior to it, but the question is: How much prior? This is a much more difficult question to answer, but there is internal evidence that may at least give us some clues.

Only a few interpreters would date anything in the NT prior to ca. A.D. 45–50; only a very few documents could even qualify for a date that early.⁸ Hebrews, however, could have been written prior to A.D. 70, perhaps long before. The evidence for this early date comprises several facts. First, all the discussion of the sacrificial system is done

NT New Testament

⁷ Cf. John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 1–12, for a superb discussion of the principles and biases that have gone into the dating schemes of many modern NT scholars. What began as a joke for Robinson turned into a serious scholarly passion until he became convinced that there was no good, objective reason to date anything in the NT after A.D. 70. While his conclusions have not been generally accepted, he has shown that no *proof* exists against his position.

⁸ The date before which anything in the NT *could* have been written (the *terminus a quo*) is of course ca. A.D. 30, the approximate date of Jesus' death, but the reasonable supposition that it took some time for the early church to recognize the need for written documents that could be kept and distributed causes almost all NT scholars to regard A.D. 45–50 as the earliest reasonable date for any NT writing. Even Robinson dates only 1 and 2 Thessalonians and James prior to A.D. 50.

in the present tense, indicating to some that the sacrifices were still continuing and that the temple had not yet been destroyed (as it was in A.D. 70 during the Roman wars). This evidence is not as strong as it might at first appear, however, because the concept of tense in Greek is not so much time-oriented as it is aspect-oriented, and therefore it gives very little indication of time.⁹ Even if it did reflect present time in this instance, as some scholars still contend, it would not prove conclusively a pre-A.D. 70 dating; others writing much later than the destruction of the temple used the present tense to describe the cultic phenomena that went on there.¹⁰ The whole discussion, too, is something of an abstraction; our author discusses the sacrificial system only in its typological relation to the present sacrifice that Christ brings before the Father in heaven. The notions of history and of time take second place to the eternal sacrifice of our great High Priest, and, therefore, whether the temple and what went on there is a present or past reality is less significant than it otherwise might be. Given all these arguments against the relevance of the present tense in Hebrews to describe temple rituals, there is nevertheless a strong argument from silence that, if the author knew the temple had been destroyed, he would not have used the present tense, since the substance of his argument revolves around the old having passed away and the new having come.¹¹

The reference to Timothy's release from prison in Heb. 13:23 appears to be relevant only to the 50s and possibly the early 60s A.D. But this connection assumes that the Timothy mentioned in Hebrews is the famous associate of Paul. Even if it is that Timothy, we have

⁹ Cf. D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 399–400.

¹⁰ Cf., e.g., Josephus *Antiquities* 4.102–87.

¹¹ Carson et al. argue rightly that Josephus and others were not “engaged in a theological argument about their [the temple rituals, etc.] principial obsolescence, about their utter replacement by the corresponding realities of the new covenant; but that lies at the very heart of the argument in Hebrews” (*Introduction*, 399). See more below on this argument from silence.

no knowledge of how long Timothy outlived Paul, and since Paul is not the author of the epistle in any case (see below), Timothy could easily have lived until the 80s or even early 90s. Thus this reference, too, is not as conclusive of an early date as we may at first glance imagine. Ellingworth relates that some have suggested the reference from Ps. 95:10 to forty years (Heb. 3:9–10) may indicate that the author was writing forty years after the crucifixion. As he points out, this is a tentative guess at best, since the author only relates the forty years to the people of Israel and not to his present readers. A more direct reference to the forty years, connecting it to the “today” of the passage, would add more weight to this contention, but such a reference is lacking.

More important is the argument from silence—admittedly dangerous, but strong nevertheless—concerning the fact that the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple are not mentioned in the epistle. The argument that these physical realities are only shadows of a truer reality in heaven is so strong in the epistle that clear proof of that argument in the form of the events of A.D. 70 would seem too good for our author to omit, if it had already happened. But there is no mention of these events. It is true that the statements about the levitical sacrifices are based on OT rather than contemporary practice, even referring to the tabernacle rather than the temple; nevertheless, reference to some sort of present activity among the Jews in Jerusalem seems clearly to be intended. The lack of reference to the destruction of the temple is simply too hard to believe if Hebrews were written after the event. So it seems certain that it was written before A.D. 70.

But how far before A.D. 70? Two factors indicate that at least some time has passed since the readers first became Christians. We saw above that they are expected by our author to have reached a level of maturity beyond what they have actually attained (Heb. 5:12–14). This would indicate a period of some time for their spiritual lives to have developed since the gospel first came to them. Add to

this the reference in Heb. 2:3, indicating that the community to which our author writes was evangelized by second generation Christians, and one must allow some time to have elapsed between the first spreading of the gospel and the founding of this community. However, neither of these arguments requires a date later than A.D. 55–60. The gospel spread so rapidly during the *Pax Romana* that one could easily speak of second generation communities within five to ten years after the beginning of Paul’s evangelistic thrust in the late 40s or early 50s.

Most problematic for a very early dating are the references to the persecution of the community, especially since this persecution seems to have taken place a while before (cf. Heb. 10:32–34; 12:5). Here decisions we make about other aspects of the historical and cultural background of the epistle come into play. If, for instance, the community is assumed to be at Rome, then the persecutions under Claudius in A.D. 49 and Nero in A.D. 64 are important, as is the supposed persecution that took place under Domitian (A.D. 91–95). If, however, the epistle was written to Palestine, there were of course persecutions afflicting the Christian church from its inception at Pentecost, recorded as we know in the Book of Acts. We do not want to get too far ahead of ourselves, but it may be time to move to the question of where the recipients were. Tentatively, let us conclude, then, that there is good reason to date the epistle prior to the fall of the Jerusalem temple, somewhere in the mid–60s.

Where Were Those Guys?

Date, authorship, and the nature of the recipients all play a role in determining the place to which the epistle was written, but there is some slender evidence that comes from the text itself. This is found in the greeting that “those from Italy” (οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰταλίας, Heb. 13:24) give to the readers. The phrase can mean that those who are in Italy with the author are sending a greeting to the readership, implying that the author is in Italy surrounded by others who are also

from that place. This would indicate a place of destination outside the borders of Italy. It can also mean, however, that those who are with the author somewhere outside Italy, but who come from Italy, are sending back greetings to the recipients. The latter is the more likely reading for this text. F. F. Bruce points out that the phrase is used in the first way in one of the papyri,¹² but here it is certainly the more natural reading to let ἀπό have its normal sense of separation. If the author wanted to say the former thing, he would probably have said “those who are in Italy with me” (οἱ ἐν τῇ Ἰταλίᾳ σὺν ἐμοί; cf., e.g., Gal. 2:3), and while this is another argument from silence, it is nevertheless a compelling one.

A complete determination of the destination of the epistle cannot be made on the basis of this one simple reference, however compelling it seems to be, but other indications point to a destination somewhere in Italy. Given that our knowledge of persecution in the early church is limited, there are nevertheless persecutions that fit both what we know of the community at Rome and the statements in Hebrews concerning the persecutions that the readers experienced. References to the loss of property, public exposure to abuse and persecution, and being imprisoned (Heb. 10:32–34) but not having suffered to the point of shedding blood (Heb. 12:4) perfectly fit the situation of the Christian community in Rome between A.D. 49 and A.D. 64—after the persecution of Claudius (a bloodless persecution so far as we know) and yet before the persecution of Nero (one in which members of the community suffered to the point of death). As we said above in reference to dating, much is being read between the lines here. Nevertheless, the details fit so well that until a better hypothesis enters the picture, we will work with this one.

There have been other ideas put forward. Some have seen Alexandria as a destination for the epistle, but this is based purely on the notion that the methods of interpretation, particularly the use of

¹² F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 391 n. 132.

typology, in the epistle show an affinity for the works of Philo. This is true, but Alexandria is an unlikely destination since there the epistle was quite clearly, but also quite wrongly, first attributed to Paul.¹³ This mistake would be difficult to understand if the epistle had originally come to readers in this area. The second suggested destination is Jewish Christians in Palestine, an idea supported by several commentators down through the years.¹⁴ This is difficult, however, on many grounds, not least of which is the reference to the readers' generosity to others (Heb. 6:10; 10:34; 13:16), when we know from Paul's letters that the church in Jerusalem was so poor that it itself was in need of financial help (cf., e.g., Rom. 15:26).

We have stated that our conclusions must remain tentative, but a working hypothesis that one can employ for understanding the Book of Hebrews from a historical and cultural perspective is as follows: A small group of former leaders in the church have encountered difficulties submitting to the current leadership. These leaders had been persecuted in Rome and were forced to go underground for a time during the persecution of Claudius in A.D. 49. Surfacing again some time around A.D. 64, they rejected the new leadership and now must be rebuked for their lack of devotion to their new leaders, to the community in general, and ultimately to Christ. They need a clearer and newer vision of him, perhaps because of doctrinal error in their midst in addition to their unwillingness to submit to authority. To this situation the author of the epistle wrote. But who was that author?

¹³ This attribution was first made by Clement of Alexandria (cf. Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 6.14.1–4).

¹⁴ Cf., e.g., Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 15–19.

2

Authorship

Charlotte Brontë once wrote in a letter to her good friend William Smith Williams that, as far as she was concerned, to her critics she was “neither man nor woman—I come before you as an author only. It is the sole standard by which you have a right to judge me—the sole ground on which I accept your judgment.”¹ But can any author reach such a high degree of objectivity that their economic and social background, their education, and, yes, even their sex do not matter at all in the reading and understanding of their work? For years it has been a commonplace of biblical interpretation that knowledge of an author—his or her social and economic background, influences, tendencies, etc.—is crucial to a proper interpretation of that author’s work.² Of course the interpretation of a novel is very different from that of an epistle; the purposes, aims and goals of any nonfiction work are radically different from those of fiction. But even poetry has been judged by its authors to be a work so unto itself that

¹ Charlotte Brontë to William Smith Williams, 16 August 1849, *The Brontës: Life and Letters*, ed. C. Shorter (New York: Haskell House, 1908), 2:64.

² We will not engage the question here, but discussion about the “objectivity” of the text, independent of authorial intent, has been going on for some time in critical circles, particularly among critics of English literature (cf., e.g., the recent discussion by Umberto Eco, Richard Rorty, and others found in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). See particularly E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967) for the best defense of the importance of authorial intent for discovering meaning in texts and Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1991), 366–96, for a good summary of the issues.

knowledge of the details of the author's life are not needed to understand the work.³

Is it essential for us to know much about the author of a work for us to understand that work? If it is, then we are in trouble when we turn to the Epistle to the Hebrews, for we do not, indeed *cannot*, know conclusively who its author is, since he is not named anywhere in the work. In fact Origen, one of the first church fathers ever to investigate the question of the authorship of the epistle, wrote what is the most famous, and probably the wisest, dictum on this subject: τίς δὲ ὁ γράψας τὴν ἐπιστολήν, τὸ μὲν ἀληθὲς θεὸς οἶδεν (“As to who wrote the epistle, only God knows for sure”).⁴

To know the background of and influences upon the author of a work is helpful, but not essential to at least a basic understanding of a work, especially the Epistle to the Hebrews. This is so for at least two reasons, one that would apply to any writing, the second a reason that applies particularly in the case of Hebrews.

Language is a universal tool of communication, and if the communication is relatively simple (i.e., about well-known concepts using widely recognized vocabulary and symbols), then who is doing the communicating becomes less important. When a communication has a very narrowly defined code in which it is transmitted, understanding may depend on specific definitions or formulations that the particular person might use. Then knowledge of that person is essential. Such is the case at times in Hebrews, but by no means is it always so. The idea of the levitical priesthood, for example, and

³ William Wordsworth, for example, was reticent to give life details to one who requested them because, as he said, “Nothing could be more bare of entertainment or interest than a biographical notice of me ... the date and place of my birth, and the places of my Education [are] correct—the date of my publications is easily procured—and beyond these I really see nothing that the world has to do with, in my life which has been so retired and uniform” (William Wordsworth, *Letters of William Wordsworth: A New Selection*, ed. Alan G. Hill [Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984], 277).

⁴ Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 6.25.14.

how Jesus might relate to it is not limited to a tiny group of people or some one person who would give this idea thoroughly new content. The levitical priesthood is as broadly known as Judaism itself; any Jewish person, and in fact many Gentiles, might have said what is said about it in Hebrews, so which one did so is somewhat irrelevant. And such is the case with the vast majority of Hebrews, while, on the other hand, there are some things we do not know that could probably be answered if we were certain of the identity of the epistle's author.

Second, to say that we do not know exactly *who* wrote the epistle is not the same thing as saying we know absolutely nothing about its author. In fact, as we shall see below, we know quite a bit about him and can use this information in making interpretative judgments with some confidence. As we build a picture of the author based on this evidence, we will find that we can differentiate him and his world from most people in the ancient world and give him a relatively definite background in Hellenistic Judaism that will yield quite a bit of exegetical fruit.

If we do not, and cannot, know exactly who he is, why will we spend time discussing the various alternatives that have been proposed on this subject in the history of Christian thought? That is a good question, and in another sort of book, perhaps the amount of time we will spend would be inappropriate. But we will look at the question in detail more as an exercise in gaining an understanding of, and an appreciation for, the *process* scholars go through in determining authorship of an ancient document than as an attempt to solve a problem that has been recognized as unsolvable since the earliest days of the church. The process of examining authorship is useful for several reasons. It develops our observational skills. It increases our historical knowledge of the epistle and its interpreters, introducing us to some of the most interesting characters in the story of the Christian church. It develops our ability to think logically

about the text. All these are useful skills when it comes to learning how to do exegesis.

But still the question persists: How important is it for us in the twentieth century to know in detail the character and influences of a first-century author in order for us to understand his or her work? The question is unanswerable, of course, as are all questions that ask one to measure things that are not measurable. Suffice it to say that the church has benefited for almost two thousand years from this magisterial work without knowing with any more certainty than we do today who authored it. If Origen's famous dictum remains true forever, and there is no reason to think it will not, then we will continue nevertheless to benefit from the doctrine and ethics taught in this marvelous book, and it will continue to challenge us well into the twenty-first century to act and think in obedience to God.

What We Know of the Author of Hebrews

The author of Hebrews tells us much about himself in spite of neglecting to give us his name.⁵ The most important thing that he tells us about himself is found in Heb. 2:3–4. In this passage, where he for the first time addresses the people to whom he is writing in a personal way, the author announces that the salvation of which he is speaking “was first announced by the Lord, [and] was confirmed to us by those who heard him” (ἦτις ἀρχὴν λαβοῦσα λαλεῖσθαι διὰ τοῦ κυρίου ὑπὸ τῶν ἀκουσάντων εἰς ἡμᾶς ἐβεβαιώθη NIV). This clear statement of secondary knowledge of the gospel message is an important factor in determining who wrote Hebrews, as we shall see below.

The language is very much like that of other passages in the NT that in fact argue for primary knowledge of the gospel on behalf of their authors. In Gal. 1:11–12, for instance, Paul makes it quite clear

⁵ We have already observed that the masculine participle διηγούμενον in Heb. 11:32 designates the author as male.

that he “did not receive it [the gospel] from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:12 NIV). Similarly, in 2 Peter 1:16–18 Peter says that he told his readers about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, that he himself was an “eyewitness” (ἐπόπτης) of his majesty, and that he had “heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain” (NIV), referring to his experience at Christ’s transfiguration (cf. Mark 9:2–8 = Matt. 17:1–8 = Luke 9:28–36). Perhaps an even more important parallel is found in 1 Peter 1:12 where Peter says that the gospel was revealed to the prophets when they wrote of the things “that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven” (NIV), making a clear distinction between himself, those to whom he is writing, and those who preached to them.

In a strikingly different way, the author of Hebrews places himself with his readers as a secondary recipient of the gospel. The statement “this salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us” does not mean that the salvation was announced to them by the Lord, but is rather a historical statement about the good news having been brought by Christ, who was not only the content of the good news but the announcer of it. Thus it was not given to the readers and the author by revelation in the way that Paul speaks of receiving the gospel in Galatians 1.⁶ Rather, the gospel “was confirmed” (ἐβεβαιώθη) to the author and his readers “by those who heard him” (ὕπὸ τῶν ἀκουσάντων). While almost all commentators have agreed that Paul and Peter would not have written in such a way, it is just as strongly argued that Barnabas would not have, an opinion for which there is little basis (see more

⁶ Ellingworth suggests that this does not mean that the author and readers “were Christians of the second or a later generation ... , but it is in sharp contrast with Paul’s claim ...” (Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], 7, cf. also p. 30).

below). Nevertheless, it seems impossible that anyone who would write this could have been one of the twelve apostles.

The author of Hebrews also tells us in the crucial verses at the end of the book that he knew Timothy, referring to him as “our brother Timothy” (Heb. 13:23). He intimates not only that he knows him but that he will go with him to see the readers if Timothy comes to him soon, implying that Timothy will be meeting with him in the near future. This is an important but often overlooked piece of evidence for the Pauline authorship of this epistle, though it can of course be interpreted in a variety of ways. In any case, it shows that he did not have only a passing knowledge of Timothy, but a very close knowledge of him. This evidence assumes that it refers to the same Timothy who was a compatriot of Paul and who was involved in the sending of at least six of his letters (2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon). It is sometimes implied that this may not be a reference to the biblical Timothy,⁷ but the coincidence seems too great for the name to refer to someone other than the Timothy we know from the Pauline Epistles.

Other evidence treated in more detail elsewhere may be mentioned. Our author states that he is dwelling with people who are “from Italy” (Heb. 13:24). He speaks of having written them only a brief letter, which is referred to as a “word of exhortation” (Heb. 13:22), pointing to the fact that he is a preacher of the gospel, an assumption that is not difficult to support from many other elements in this epistle (see the chapter on genre). He also writes, “I particularly urge you to pray, so that I may be restored to you soon,” perhaps implying that he is in prison, but not necessarily so. These passages complete the use of the first person singular in the Book of Hebrews, but there is much else that we know of this author from the text itself.

⁷ Cf. Werner Georg Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), 401: “if indeed the well-known companion of Paul is intended.”

The author of Hebrews was a well-educated man. The writing of Hebrews is easily the finest in the NT, both in its use of grammar and vocabulary, and in its style and knowledge of the conventions of Greek rhetoric.⁸ The epistle's author had almost certainly received rhetorical training, as his use of everything from alliteration to diatribe will attest. He is familiar with philosophy—both Jewish and, to a lesser extent, Greek—in that he uses many Philonic terms and, to a lesser extent, Stoic ones.⁹

Our author is an exceptional scholar when it comes to the use of the OT Scriptures. He knows their content intimately, as can be seen from the long list of heroes of the faith (presented in Hebrew 1) referring to people from the earliest chapters of Genesis right through to the later prophetic and poetical writings. He interprets the Scripture in varying ways, too, all with equal degrees of facility, employing everything from an almost allegorical technique to straight literal application. Once again, his great knowledge of Greek is demonstrated by his extensive use of the text of the LXX, the Greek Bible, throughout the epistle.

The author's education is displayed not only in his use of well-known rhetorical techniques that were taught in the ancient world but also in his ability to do theology creatively. The many innovations in this epistle demonstrate an extremely active mind, one that could only be spurred by deep and intensive study of the Scriptures. These innovations, shown in the arguments the author uses, also point to a high level of education. His has been said to possess “an architectural mind,”¹⁰ and this is certainly correct. Our author states a thesis, develops it by way of analysis, departs from it for very well thought-

⁸ “The language of Hebrews constitutes the finest Greek in the NT ...” (William L. Lane, *Hebrews*, Word Biblical Commentary [Dallas: Word, 1991], 1:xlix). Cf. Nigel Turner, *Style*, vol. 4 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, by J. H. Moulton (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1976), 106–13.

⁹ Cf. Turner, *Style*, 107.

¹⁰ Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:xlix.

out and structured reasons, and then comes back to it brilliantly, incorporating the themes of his digression into the subsequent argument. The structure of Hebrews is a complicated matter (see below, chap. 4), but even a quick read-through of Hebrews leaves the impression that the author has taken care in its construction.

The author of Hebrews also distinguishes himself by his intensely “religious” nature. All of the authors of the NT are religious in one sense, of course, in that they speak of God and man and the relation between the two, but we mean “religious” in the sense of showing an intense interest in the symbols and the cultic actions of religion. Here our author has no peer in the NT. Much of his writing centers on the priesthood, the sacrifices, the tabernacle, the feasts, and just about anything else that has to do with the religious life of the people of Israel and how it points to Christ. While he certainly uses other metaphors and ideas to communicate, the majority of his illustrations come from the cultic activity of Israel. While comparing the “religiousness” of the writers of the NT (in the truest and best sense of that word) would certainly be a mistake, one would nevertheless be hard-pressed to find a more “religious” person (in the sense we have defined above) in the history of Christendom.

The author of Hebrews is clearly a preacher with a pastoral heart. He shows that combination of toughness and tenderness that is so crucial in ministry. Even when his warnings are as stringent as any in the NT, he makes sure to encourage those whom he believes are on the right track. One example is Heb. 6:4–6, the famous “apostasy” passage. Having just rebuked his readers because they need to be taught again the “elementary teachings about Christ” (Heb. 6:1), he then warns them of the impossibility of returning to God if they “fall away.” But he is quite clear that he believes none of them are as yet in this situation, for he goes on to say that he is “confident of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation” (Heb. 6:9 NIV). He goes on to remind them that God will not forget their work and life and tells them that he only speaks to them in this way so that

they will not “become lazy,” but will “imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised” (Heb. 6:12 NIV). This “tough and tender” attitude displays itself in other places in the epistle as well (cf., e.g., Heb. 10:26–39).

The author also lets us know something about his relationship with his readers. While we cannot know the exact nature of that relationship, it is evident from the tone in which the epistle is written that he expects to be listened to as an authority in the community.¹¹ The author’s exhortations reveal an intimate knowledge of problems taking place in the community. For instance, it would be unlikely that he would simply mention, with no specific instance in mind, something like 13:4: “Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral” (NIV). While sexual immorality was a common problem in the early church, as evidenced by both Paul’s letters and the other epistles in the NT, mention of it is usually kept to a word, unless the problem is a serious, specific one. This passage, while betraying no details of the problem (such as mentioning names or describing the situation so specifically that identification of the offenders would be clear to the readers), nevertheless seems to point to a specific situation known to the author and readers.

Even more certainly, the problem of obedience to leaders is clearly a difficulty for the community. At Heb. 13:17, the readers are enjoined one last time to obey their leaders and “submit to their authority,” but this is not the first time that leadership is mentioned as a problem. Leadership concerns seem to underlie the statements at Heb. 5:11–6:3, 10:25–39, and 12:15 and 25. Other references to problems in the community that may reflect intimate knowledge of it

¹¹ While this is an argument from silence, it does cause some problems for the argument that our author does not claim authority and so can be neither Paul nor Barnabas, both known as apostles in the church. Paul does not assert his authority when he does not need to but reserves that for those epistles where his authority is clearly being challenged.

are found scattered throughout the epistle, particularly chapter 13. He calls his readers “brothers” (Heb. 3:1, 12; 10:19; 13:22) and “dear friends” (Heb. 6:9). He speaks of “each of you” (Heb. 6:11), individualizing them, anticipates being restored to them (Heb. 13:19), and refers to “*our* brother Timothy” (Heb. 13:23).

As we study the Epistle to the Hebrews, it is important to remember that this author knows his readers intimately; otherwise, the esoteric opening of Hebrews 1 could be misinterpreted as “doctrine without life,” as if the statements about Christ and the angels have no practical significance for our author but rather are only part of an abstract theological treatise. What we know of the author prevents our regarding him this way. Similarly, knowing that he is well educated and uses the Greek Scriptures helps us to understand his particular attitude toward the law and to discern whether his view is at odds with the apostle Paul’s or complementary to it. This knowledge can be of great use at many other points in interpreting the epistle.

But this is not the end of the investigation of the authorship of Hebrews. We can go further and give some tentative, if not absolutely certain, conclusions as to who actually wrote the epistle.

Suggested Authors of Hebrews

The number of those proposed as possible authors for Hebrews probably exceeds that of any two NT books put together. The author’s not being named in the text precludes us from saying anything with certainty about his identity, but the question still remains: Who wrote the epistle? This question has been particularly important in the history of the book’s interpretation because it is tied so closely to the question of canonicity. In the writings of Eusebius of Caesarea, much of the discussion of the authorship of Hebrews revolves around the authority of the epistle and, therefore, its canonicity. In short, if it was written by Paul, it should be accepted as

authoritative; if not, real questions remain about its acceptance into the canon.

But the question of the canonicity of Hebrews is secondary to our study. We are interested in the identity of the author, and we shall now look at three of the suggestions that have been put forward, in order to get some notion of how scholars work on these sorts of questions.¹² As we said above, in addition to uncovering further information about the possible authorship of Hebrews, the exercise will be instructive for us, even if we cannot reach definite conclusions. Deciding the relative merits of these three common suggestions is pointless, so after looking at their strengths and weaknesses, we will proceed to the question of the literary genre of the epistle.

Apollos

Martin Luther first mentioned the idea of Apollos as author of the epistle, a proposal that has been widely accepted in the twentieth century.¹³ The suggestion seems plausible, when one looks at how many parallels there are between the NT figure of Apollos and what we know from the text itself about the author of Hebrews. The Book of Acts tells us that Apollos was a Jew, a native of Alexandria, and a learned man with a firm knowledge of the Scriptures (Acts 18:24). The four major elements found in this description—that he was (1) Jewish, (2) Alexandrian, (3) educated, and (4) knowledgeable in the Scriptures—are all elements that fit well the picture of the author of Hebrews that emerges from the text itself. The author was certainly a Jew, he was educated (i.e., learned), and he had a fair knowledge of

¹² There are of course many other names that scholars have proposed over the years, but there is so little scholarly consensus on any of them that they do not merit attention here. For a relatively full account of the possibilities, cf. Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1990), 668–82.

¹³ Cf. Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 20–21.

the Scriptures. The connection with Alexandria arises from the author's acquaintance with a variety of interpretative methods used on the OT in educated circles in the ancient world, especially those of Philo of Alexandria. This also squares with his extensive knowledge and use of the LXX, since it was commonly used in Alexandria.

In addition, we are told that Apollos had been "instructed in the way of the Lord," and that "he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately" (Acts 18:25 NIV). This would indicate that he had the kind of knowledge of the sacraments of Jewish ritual that would allow him to develop the themes of Hebrews and that he had the pastoral, kerygmatic heart that could both proclaim the Scriptures fervently and yet teach them pastorally. We know too from Acts that he was "a great help" (συμβάλλω) to those in Achaia who had believed, "proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ" (Acts 18:27–28 NIV). The Acts passage even describes Apollos as refuting the Jews in public debate, certainly something that the author of Hebrews is very much concerned to do as he argues against a Jewish interpretation of the law and in favor of a specifically Christian one. Apollos is mentioned by Paul in almost the same breath with Timothy (1 Cor. 16:10–12), indicating a connection with Timothy that our author also had (Heb. 13:23). A more subtle but no less clear piece of evidence is that Apollos seems to have had the same kind of mind as our author; he was an eloquent man and argued successfully, suggesting that he thought in the same logical and erudite manner as the author of Hebrews (Acts 18:28).

The great problem with accepting Apollos as the author of the epistle is that he is not identified as such anywhere else in Christian literature prior to Martin Luther. Apollos was a well-known and well-liked figure in early Christian writing, and if he had indeed been the author of this epistle, it is difficult to believe that it would not have been mentioned somewhere. Nevertheless, it must be recognized that this is an argument from silence, and arguments from silence are sometimes not very sturdy planks upon which to stand.

Other objections to Apollonian authorship also rely on silence: (1) nothing is explicitly mentioned about Apollos having a formal education or any link with Philonic methods of interpretation in Alexandria; this is only inferred from Acts 18:24–28. (2) We know of no other writings of Apollos, while the author of Hebrews is so comfortable with the written word that it is hard to believe he wrote nothing else. Many of the things that are said about Apollos could be said about hundreds of other people in the ancient world, but this says nothing more than that we don't know precisely who the author is. But Apollos is certainly distinctive among the candidates, and this suggestion remains one of the more likely ones that have been put forward.

Barnabas

From ancient times it has been suggested that Barnabas is the author of Hebrews. Some believe this to be the oldest attribution on record.¹⁴ Tertullian (ca. A.D. 200) refers to “an epistle of Barnabas entitled ‘to the Hebrews,’ ”¹⁵ but it is difficult to tell much about this reference for several reasons. First, it seems to imply that his information was secondary, and therefore it would point back to a still earlier period in the second century when Barnabas was believed to be the author. Tertullian's language, however, is extremely difficult, and so the idea that Barnabas's authorship was widely accepted from an early period cannot be accorded much weight. The second problem with this reference is that Tertullian could well be confusing the Epistle to the Hebrews with the well-known *Epistle of Barnabas*, a work commonly attributed to Barnabas though certainly not written by him. Also, no one else among the North African fathers seems to make this attribution, though later, Jerome (ca. A.D. 400) mentions it, and it has had advocates in the twentieth century.¹⁶

¹⁴ Guthrie, *Introduction*, 674.

¹⁵ *De Pudicitia* 20.

¹⁶ Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 14.

Hebrews certainly has nothing in common with the *Epistle of Barnabas*; the two differ widely in both theology and style.¹⁷ Therefore, though the attestation is early, it is not particularly strong.

The strongest basis for the connection between Barnabas and the author of Hebrews rests on parallels between the text itself and biographical details from Acts. Acts 4:36 describes Barnabas as a Levite, linking him with references in the epistle to the levitical cult. He is said to be from Cyprus, making him a Jew of the Diaspora and giving him more likely acquaintance with the LXX than a Palestinian Levite would have. Hebrews describes itself as “a word of encouragement” (λόγος τῆς παρακλήσεως, Heb. 13:22); this fits well with the interpretation of Barnabas’s name, which is “son of encouragement” (υἱὸς παρακλήσεως, Acts 4:36). Lastly, Barnabas is said to have given some of his property and money for the gospel (Acts 4:37), which parallels the encouragement to the readers of Hebrews who “joyfully accepted the confiscation of [their] property, because [they] knew that [they them]selves had better and lasting possessions” (Heb. 10:34 NIV). All of these are remarkable coincidences to say the least and give a strong basis for this conjecture.

A further argument in favor of Barnabas being the author of Hebrews is his connection with Paul. This connection argues for his authorship in two ways: (1) the epistle reflects Pauline ideas and (2) the author seems to assume that his authority will be recognized. Barnabas traveled with Paul on his missionary journeys, being much in favor of the gentile mission, and he would have been constantly exposed to Paul’s preaching and therefore to his ideas (Acts 11:22–30; 13–14; 15, esp. vv. 2, 12, 22, 25–26, 35). Of course, Barnabas broke with Paul and did not accompany him on his second missionary journey (Acts 15:36–40), and Paul also seems to fault him for his lack of fellowship with the Gentiles at Antioch (Gal. 2:13),

¹⁷ Cf. Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 3d ed. (London: Macmillan, 1909), lxxx–lxxxiv.

though the reference there still reflects his great affection for Barnabas. But these negative references do not really hinder the likelihood that Barnabas was an interpreter of Paul for the Hebrews.

Even more important is the status Barnabas seems to be accorded vis-à-vis Paul. Both Paul (1 Cor. 9:6) and Luke (Acts 14:14) count Barnabas as an apostle, showing that he was on equal footing with Paul in the ministry to the Gentiles. In addition, the reception of Barnabas and Paul by the Gentiles at Lystra (Acts 14:8–18) shows that there was no doubt about their equal status in the minds of those who heard them. The recognition and respect accorded Barnabas could explain the kind of authority the author wields in the epistle and his readers' ready acceptance of this authority.

The arguments *against* the authorship of Barnabas seem weak. The strongest is that it is odd that not more of the early church acknowledged his authorship. But this could be due to the fact that the *Epistle of Barnabas* (which was wrongly attributed to him) contains a great deal of defective theology, which may have made others reluctant to attribute to Barnabas a clearly orthodox epistle like Hebrews. In addition, this once again is an argument from silence and so should be given less weight.

There is a second argument against Barnabas's authorship. Hebrews 2:3–4 indicates that the author sees himself as a lesser authority than the primary witnesses to Jesus. The problems with this argument are two-fold. First, Barnabas *was* a secondary witness to Christ as far as we know, since there is no reference to him knowing Jesus prior to his association with Paul in the Book of Acts. Therefore, he could easily have made the statement in Hebrews without any notion that it reflected a lack of authority. Second, he could claim to be an apostle, to have all the authority of the risen Christ behind his teaching, and still be a secondary witness. This is obvious in the case of the historical Barnabas: Luke and Paul both refer to him as an apostle, as we mentioned above, and yet no one thinks he was a primary witness to Jesus.

Perhaps the most telling argument against the authorship of Barnabas is connected with the question of the supposed readership of the epistle. If in fact the readers are in Rome, there is no evidence that Barnabas ever got there or would have had as intimate an acquaintance with that community as that reflected by the author of the epistle. This is, of course, another argument from silence. But it is a powerful one, since so much depends on a strong relationship with the community at Rome, and there simply is no evidence of such a relationship in the case of Barnabas. Of course, this does not mean that he *did not* have a strong relationship, simply that no evidence of it has come down to us in Christian history. The possibility of Barnabas being the author of Hebrews, therefore, has strong elements in its favor, and the opposing arguments are not convincing.

Paul

In the history of the discussion of the authorship of Hebrews, authorship by the apostle Paul still ranks as the most often supported hypothesis. Very few scholars in the twentieth century believe that Paul is the author, however, and they have good reasons for rejecting this view, but the idea certainly has enough substance historically to warrant serious investigation.

A discussion of Pauline authorship of Hebrews should probably begin with the external evidence, meaning the references made in early Christian literature connecting Paul with the epistle. In all background matters, of course, we are on much more solid ground with arguments based on texts and references we actually have in the ancient documents, as opposed to the more subjective arguments that modern scholars have come up with based on style, grammar, theology, and other elements. And the matter of authorship is no exception to this rule. So let us turn first to the references linking Paul to Hebrews in the early church fathers.

An important distinction, usually made when investigating a matter in the fathers of the church, is that between what is known as

“Western” versus “Eastern” writings and their relative differences.¹⁸ When we turn to the West, we find a very strange set of circumstances regarding the Epistle to the Hebrews and its authorship. The epistle was certainly known very early on, since Clement of Rome quotes it several times and refers to it as an authoritative source. Nevertheless, he does not mention authorship or carry on any discussion concerning the matter. In fact, there is virtually no discussion of the authorship of the epistle in the West until very late. Not surprisingly, the canon of Marcion (ca. A.D. 150) omits the epistle altogether, since Marcion was attempting to drive a wedge between what he considered to be the OT God of wrath and the NT God of love. Hebrews would be just the sort of book he would reject out of hand because of its favorable attitude to the OT and its willingness to portray Jesus as a high priest. The Muratorian Canon (ca. A.D. 185) omits the epistle also, though the poor textual condition of that canon may be the reason for this. As we saw above in our discussion of Barnabas as an author, the powerful church father Tertullian mentions the epistle, but this evidence is confused and so scant in any case that it does not afford us much information on any of the discussions that may have been taking place in his circles about the epistle’s authorship.

It is not until the time of Augustine, Jerome, and Hilary of Poitiers (fourth century A.D.) that we get much discussion in the West of the authorship of Hebrews at all. Perhaps this silence and Tertullian’s minimal use of the epistle points to a rejection of Hebrews as Pauline. For whatever reason, the Western fathers did not join in defending its authenticity. The case was far different in Alexandria, however.

¹⁸ This is a distinction often made in discussions involving early church history but never clearly defined. At the risk of oversimplifying the matter, the Western fathers wrote predominantly in Latin and were loyal to the Bishop of Rome; the Eastern fathers wrote in Greek (or Syriac, Coptic, or another of the Eastern languages) and resisted the dominance of Rome.

Our chief source of information about the Alexandrian fathers and their use of Hebrews comes from Eusebius of Caesarea and his *Ecclesiastical History*. He quotes Clement of Alexandria (d. ca. A.D. 215), who refers to the opinion of Pantaenus (d. ca. A.D. 190), his predecessor as bishop, as favoring Pauline authorship.¹⁹ Clement intimates that Pantaenus believed Paul to be the author and defends against the only problem he saw for Pauline authorship (anonymity) by saying that “Paul, through modesty, since he had been sent to the Gentiles, does not inscribe himself as an apostle of the Hebrews, both to give due deference to the Lord and because he wrote to the Hebrews also out of his abundance, being a preacher and apostle of the Gentiles.” His point was that the Lord Jesus was the apostle to the Hebrews, so Paul does not make himself out to be one, especially since he was the apostle to the Gentiles.

Clement obviously does not buy this argument, for as he says earlier in the passage,²⁰ he regards Luke as the translator of a Hebrew original written by Paul. The epistle is therefore in the same style as the Book of Acts, and he hints that “the [title] ‘Paul, an apostle’ was naturally not prefixed.” The second reason Clement believes Paul did not affix his name to the document is that he “very wisely did not repel them [the Jews] by putting his name,” since he was the apostle to the Gentiles and had, in the Jews’ eyes, turned his back on his Jewish heritage. Clement shows that he views Paul as the real author by elsewhere quoting Hebrews as being by Paul.²¹

Perhaps the most important Alexandrian to discuss Pauline authorship is the brilliant scholar Origen (ca. 185–254). Eusebius has an extensive discussion of Origen’s views as well.²² Origen states that the style is definitely not Paul’s, pointing to the eloquence of the language of the epistle and the fact that it does not have the “rudeness

¹⁹ *Ecclesiastical History* 6.14.2–4.

²⁰ *Ecclesiastical History* 6.14.2.

²¹ Cf., e.g., *Stromata* 6.8.

²² *Ecclesiastical History* 6.25.11–13.

of speech of the apostle” (τὸ ἐν λόγῳ ἰδιωτικὸν τοῦ ἀποστόλου) that Paul even characterizes himself as having (2 Cor. 11:6). Origen admits that the thoughts of the epistle are elevated (i.e., the theology is admirable and worthy of attribution to Paul), while the style is lacking. This leads him to the hypothesis that Hebrews was written by a disciple of Paul who was taking “short notes of what his master said” (σχολιογραφήσαντός τινος τὰ εἰρημένα ὑπὸ τοῦ διδασκάλου). Thus Origen is able to eat his cake and have it too. He states that though the epistle was not actually written by Paul, it is perfectly legitimate for any church to regard this epistle as Paul’s. His final conclusion is, of course, that God alone knows who actually wrote it.

Lastly, it is important to note that Eusebius himself seems to accept the Epistle to the Hebrews as Pauline, while making it clear that there is much disagreement about this in the church.²³ As Ellingworth points out, however, Eusebius does refer at one point to “the letter to the Hebrews and the rest of Paul’s letters.”²⁴ He sees this as “suggesting some difference of status or circumstances.”²⁵ Other church fathers, among them Epiphanius (ca. 315–403), Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. 350–428), and Ephraem Syrus (ca. 306–373), refer to Pauline authorship but are less important in this discussion.²⁶

The internal evidence concerning Pauline authorship is not scanty. Much has been written about the style and theology of Hebrews versus the style and theology of Paul, even from the earliest days of the church. But there are several direct statements that must be dealt with before we move on to such subjective matters. Perhaps

²³ *Ecclesiastical History* 3.3.5.

²⁴ *Ecclesiastical History* 2.17.12.

²⁵ Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 6.

²⁶ *Ibid.* Ellingworth also gives a good summary of the manuscript tradition, which shows varying degrees of acceptance of the Pauline authorship of Hebrews. Sometimes the epistle is placed alongside Paul’s epistles in a prominent place, at other times it is left out altogether, and at still other times it is found in a variety of places such as after Galatians or 2 Corinthians (*ibid.*, 6–7).

the most important passage is Heb. 2:3–4. No author in the NT makes a stronger claim to his direct reception of the revelation of the gospel than Paul. In writing to the Galatians, he says “I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:11–12 NIV). It seems impossible that the author of this and similar statements (cf., e.g., 2 Cor. 12:1–7) could so easily place himself among those who learned of the gospel from someone else. As much as Paul may wish to identify with his readers, he would not have done so by minimizing his authority as an apostle.

A corollary to this objection is that Paul never fails to “sign” his other letters. The anonymity of Hebrews, while perhaps explainable on literary grounds (since in any case the epistle does not have a formal opening), nevertheless speaks strongly against Pauline authorship. The idea that Paul left the letter unsigned because he was the apostle to the Gentiles and did not want to undermine that work by having it become known that he was fraternizing—even through a letter—with Jews, is doubly wrong since it assumes something false both about Paul (i.e., the favoritism that he condemns in Peter, Gal. 2:11–21) and about the composition of the community reading the letter (see above, chap. 1). Better is Clement of Alexandria’s suggestion that Paul omitted his name out of deference to the true apostle to the Hebrews, the Lord Jesus, but this suggestion is unprovable and remains unconvincing.

Paul Ellingworth gives strong internal evidence of the difference between the vocabularies of Hebrews and the Pauline epistles that is overwhelmingly against the possibility of their being written by the same person.²⁷ There are differences in the terms related to knowledge and revelation; life and death; power, conflict, and judgment; the people of God; expressions of emotion; anthropological, ethical, and liturgical terms; divine names and titles;

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 7–12.

and references to the author's own situation and work. Perhaps chief among the differences is the lack of forensic language to describe salvation in Hebrews. Paul often uses δικαιοσύνη and its cognates to describe legal justification; the author of Hebrews, when he uses the word group, regularly does so to speak of ethical righteousness (i.e., obedience to God's will; cf., e.g., Heb. 1:9; 12:11).

Stylistically also, Hebrews is far from Paul. William Lane points both to the author's sentence-building techniques and to his distinctive imagery as just two of many stylistic and grammatical elements that separate the author of the epistle from Paul.²⁸ The classical smoothness with which the author makes transitions contrasts with Paul's rough, hiatic style, and the long, contrived periods of Hebrews—which approach the best of classical writing—are unlike Paul's equally long but often rambling and diffuse sentences. The judicious use of the genitive absolute in Hebrews, his variation of word order, and “his love of the pure nominal phrase and avoidance of the copula” have also been suggested as stylistic differences between our author and Paul.²⁹

Last but not least, among the differences separating the author of Hebrews from Paul is theology. As D. Guthrie rightly points out, “it should be noted that differences from Paul do not amount to disagreements with Paul,”³⁰ and he provides a useful list of theological elements in Hebrews that could rightly be called Pauline.³¹ But the differences in emphasis cannot be missed. The author considers the resurrection to be among the *elementary* teachings of the faith (Heb. 6:2), stressing the *exaltation* of Christ to the right hand of the Father as his triumph over death (Heb. 9:24–27), while Paul clearly elevates the *resurrection* to that status (cf. Rom. 1:4). Paul focuses more on the forensic and redemptive aspects of the

²⁸ Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:xlix.

²⁹ Cf. Turner, *Style*, 106–7.

³⁰ Guthrie, *Introduction*, 673.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 709–10.

blood of Christ; Hebrews clearly stresses the cultic cleansing, sanctifying, and perfecting work of the sacrifice. The struggle between flesh and spirit and the individualism of Paul's teaching of union with Christ is absent from Hebrews, where faith means holding fast to the confession and adhering to rules of obedience and belief. Lastly, Paul refers to the new covenant only in passing (2 Cor. 3:6) and never speaks of Christ in terms of the high priesthood, but these ideas form the central thoughts of the Epistle to the Hebrews.³²

Concluding Profile of the Author of Hebrews

We have argued above that a working hypothesis concerning the specific identity of the author is not necessary for doing good exegesis of the epistle. Among those known to us from the first century, the choice of possible authors seems effectively narrowed to Barnabas and Apollos, and the evidence for and against both is so balanced as to make it impossible to choose between the two. Whoever the author, we know that he was a second-generation Christian who knew his readers intimately. We know he had a pastoral heart and knew when to be direct, and when oblique, in his attempts to shepherd the flock. We know that he was an accomplished preacher, displaying a wide range of classical rhetorical devices for communicating his message. We know that he was a superb interpreter of Scripture, able to use a number of different hermeneutical methods to explicate the text. We know he was well educated, a writer who had a number of different literary genres at his command. But which genre did he use in penning this epistle? That is our next question.

³² Cf. *ibid.*, 673, and Kümmel, *Introduction*, 395, for more examples of the differences between Paul's thought and Hebrews.

3

Genre

Genre is a fancy-sounding French word that simply means the type of literature a document is. Every day, without even thinking about it, we use different types of literature with different literary conventions and different hermeneutical rules. Let's see how many different kinds of literature an average person might encounter in the course of a normal day by following a typical Christian reader through her day.

Jane Reader wakes up, gets her coffee, and reaches for her Bible from which she reads a psalm to start off the day. Continuing her devotional time, she reads that day's entry from *My Utmost for His Highest* and then turns to the list she uses to aid her in prayer. After a shower, she goes downstairs and brings in the morning paper, leaving it on the table as she prepares breakfast. She reaches into the cupboard for the box of Pop-Tarts and puts one into the toaster in accordance with the instructions on the side of the box.

Jane reads the paper as she eats her breakfast, scanning articles on the front page about the president's continued battle with Congress over his new tax bill, a local department store opening, and a street juggler who stopped a runaway car and rescued a little girl in the process. She looks at the editorial page, carefully reading one editorial on a proposed new law to limit vagrancy on city streets. She then turns to the financial pages to find out what the Dow Jones Average was yesterday and to check on some of her stocks. Then it's on to the sports page to see how the Red Sox did last night, reading both the stories about the game and the box score and then moving on to a recap of the current women's tennis tournament. She finishes

her quick browse of the *Daily Telegraph* with a look at what's on at the movies and her two favorite cartoon strips, "Calvin and Hobbes" and "The Far Side."

On to work. Pulling the car out of the garage, she drives down the street, noticing just in time the detour sign that directs her to a different freeway on-ramp. As she gets on the freeway, the homeless person with his hand-held sign saying "Food for Work" reminds her to say a quick prayer for him and to make a mental note of Saturday morning's monthly volunteer time at the Salvation Army. On the freeway she sees three billboards, reinforcing her decision to see *Jurassic Park* tomorrow night, to buy some suntan lotion, and to think about that new car again. As she pulls into the parking garage of her building, she checks the ticket spit out by the machine; they have been printing the wrong date on these tickets recently for some unknown reason. When she speaks to the attendant, she is reminded by the name sewn on his shirt to call him Ernie.

In the elevator, she absentmindedly reads the state certificate of operation as she waits for the elevator to stop at her floor. Stepping out of the elevator, she takes a quick glance at the daily notice board that reminds her of the visit that day of one of the company's most important clients and of a special lunch planned in the cafeteria for their guests. Arriving at her office, she begins to work through the stack of papers left on her desk at the close of work yesterday—memos, reports, summaries, sales figures, computer printouts, correspondence, phone messages. Reading these items takes her until lunchtime.

Her afternoon is taken up with meetings, phone calls, and more reading—this time a lengthier study done by a research facility on the possibility of developing a new product. In the late afternoon, Jane takes off early from work because she needs to do a little shopping. There she reads everything from labels to price tags to brochures containing descriptions of the dresses she is thinking about buying. After a quiet dinner with friends at her favorite restaurant, where

reading the menu is always fun for her because she gets to work on her Italian, she goes home. When she finishes going through her mail—which consists of letters, advertising fliers, catalogs, news and literary magazines, and the ubiquitous direct-mail appeals—she sits down at the piano to play a little relaxing music before curling up with the latest John le Carré spy novel and going off to sleep.

How many different kinds of literature did Jane Reader encounter in one ordinary day? One could easily count as many as forty different kinds of literature, all of which she would read with different expectations, different responses, different levels of trust and interest. She reads everything from the highly technical research document, which perhaps only she and a handful of others could understand, to the common comic strip enjoyed by children and adults, rich and poor, black and white, male and female alike. She reads works with a highly developed grammatical structure and works with no thought for proper grammar—in fact some without even an alphabet (sheet music). Some items are almost entirely pictures, others have no pictures at all; some are highly personal, others completely impersonal; some are in her native language, others not; some strain to be as historically and scientifically accurate as possible, others make no pretense of being accurate in these senses.

All these different types of literature have been developed for the same purpose—to communicate something to someone. Their authors differ merely in the forms chosen for communicating and in what they seek to say. Writers choose their forms, expecting certain things of their readers. Authors of devotional books know their readers are going to understand that they are merely writing their opinion about what a certain passage or an experience meant to them. A writer of an advertisement desires from the reader a high level of interest and trust in the writer's truthful objectivity, as does the newspaper reporter. The author of a comic strip seeks to entertain and does not care about "truth" in a historical sense at all; ditto the

novelist. Some seek to inform; some seek to persuade; all seek to communicate.

But readers would fail to understand the document and the message it seeks to communicate, if they failed to understand the type of literature it was. What an impossible situation Jane Reader would face in understanding anything, if she took “Calvin and Hobbes” as seriously as she does her business correspondence or, conversely, if she took her business correspondence as lightly as she takes “Calvin and Hobbes”! We all naturally, usually instinctively, interpret the various communications we receive every day with different sets of hermeneutical rules, looking at a passage of OT poetry with very different eyes than those with which we read newspaper reports. Knowing a document’s literary genre forces us to read it differently than we would read a document of a different genre, and employing the proper rules for interpreting that document entails knowing the rules for rightly reading that genre. So what is the literary genre of the Book of Hebrews, and what are the rules for interpreting it?

The Sermon That Changed Its Name

Hebrews, unlike many of the writings of the NT, gives us an indication in the body of its own text as to what sort of document it is. Near the end of the epistle, the author asks his readers to “bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly” (Heb. 13:22 NRSV). The two parts of this sentence are equally important for our understanding of Hebrews’s genre: it is a document to be understood from both an oral and a written perspective. What are the implications of the dual nature of the book? First, we need to do a bit more to establish this dual nature.

The phrase “word of exhortation” (λόγος τῆς παρακλήσεως) could at first glance refer to either a spoken or a written message. This particular construction is found in the NT only here and at Acts 13:15, where Paul is invited by the synagogue officials to speak εἴ τις

ἔστιν ἐν ὑμῖν λόγος παρακλήσεως πρὸς τὸν λαόν. The implication from this passage, and from several other uses of language similar to this phrase in contemporary literature, is that it functions as “an idiomatic designation for the homily or edifying discourse that followed the public reading from the designated portions of Scripture in the hellenistic synagogues.”¹ We will have to take seriously the fact that words were chosen, structures formed, and thoughts woven together in this book very largely with an oral presentation in mind. The ramifications of this for exegesis will be apparent shortly, but for now the important thing to note is that the description λόγος τῆς παρακλήσεως in Heb. 13:22 indicates that Hebrews is primarily regarded by its author as a sermon, an exhortation to believe and to do the great truths spoken of in the epistle.

In a variety of other ways, the epistle exhibits an essentially oral character. At Heb. 5:11, 6:9, 8:1, 13:6, and perhaps 12:5, the author self-consciously refers to his communication to the Hebrews, and the language he uses is that of verbal communication. In Heb. 5:11, he admits his inability to convey all that he would like to get across to them because they have become literally “dull in the ears” (νωθοροὶ ταῖς ἀκοαῖς), and the language he uses to express his frustration apparently recalls the idea of a lengthy speech for which the speaker has no time available.² In 6:9, the author claims to “speak” (λαλεῖν)

¹ William L. Lane, *Hebrews*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1991), 2:568. Lane mentions 1 Macc. 10:24, 2 Macc. 7:24, 15:8–11, and particularly 1 Tim. 4:13. For further reading on this topic, see particularly the essay by Lawrence Wills, “The Form of the Sermon in Hellenistic Judaism and Early Christianity,” *Harvard Theological Review* 77 (1984): 277–99, and the mostly positive response to it by C. Clifton Black II, “The Rhetorical Form of the Hellenistic Jewish and Early Christian Sermon: A Response to Lawrence Wills,” *Harvard Theological Review* 81 (1988): 1–18.

² Cf. Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 299, for many references in classical literature to phrases similar to πολλὸς ἡμῖν ὁ λόγος which indicate orations. Cf. particularly Acts 15:32 and 20:2 where,

in a certain way. Similarly, in 8:1 and 13:6 the use of λέγειν seems to fit a verbal context better than a written one.³ The strong emphasis throughout the epistle on God's *speaking* (cf., e.g., Heb. 1:1; 12:25–27) is another indication of the conscious orientation of the document toward oral communication rather than written.

The *Epistle* to the Hebrews, however, was obviously not simply a sermon, given once or twice and then lost forever in the mists of time. It is not even the transcription of a sermon, notes taken by a devoted disciple and put into rough written form.⁴ We have known of the book since very early in the church's history, and always as an epistle. In its earliest manuscripts it is found in several different places within the Pauline corpus, but always connected with Paul's writings. The title "To the Hebrews" stands over its first page, just as Paul's epistles have headings like "To the Philippians" or "To the Thessalonians," and this, coupled with the fact that it is always found with Paul's letters in the manuscript tradition, accounts for why the church has always considered it an epistle.

There are also some internal considerations that point to its epistolary nature. In the same verse where the author calls his appeal a word of exhortation, he mentions that he has written to them briefly (διὰ βραχέων ἐπέστειλα ὑμῖν, 13:22). And it is clear from many

according to Ellingworth, λόγος πολὺς "means 'a long speech,' without any indication of quality or content."

³ λέγειν is generally used to describe oral expression, though it can be used to refer to writing too (cf. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the NT and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and adapted by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 2d ed. rev. and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker [Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979], s.v. "λέγω"). λαλεῖν, though sometimes used of the sounds inanimate objects make to "speak" (cf. the thunder and the trumpet in Rev. 10:4; 4:1), always refers to expressions aurally received and almost always to human speech.

⁴ Cf. the preservation of the *Discourses* of Epictetus (ca. A.D. 55–ca. A.D. 135) by Arrian (2d cent. A.D.) as an example of this practice, one that was quite common in NT times.

passages in the book, that he knows his readers and their circumstances and is writing to address those circumstances, a common purpose of other NT epistles. He also mentions mutual acquaintances in the much-discussed statement “those from Italy greet you” (Heb. 13:24), a phrase that would hardly occur at the end of a sermon but seems to have been consciously added at the end of a written document.

Commentators often point out that the author was writing because he was not able to address his audience face to face. One of his last appeals to his readers is for prayer “so that I may be restored to you soon” (13:19 NIV). Hebrews, then, is an epistle, but it is fair to say that it is not a “true” epistle, at least in the Pauline fashion. Later we will discuss more of the differences and similarities between this epistle and those of Paul, but suffice it to say for now that Hebrews is not simply a transcript of a sermon but a consciously written document.

Given the combination of oral and written elements in the work, what are the chief characteristics of these two literary genres that make up Hebrews? How do they fit to make a unified whole? Is it more like a written sermon or more like a preached epistle? How can we recognize oral and epistolary elements so that we can isolate them, define their influence, and better interpret the epistle? Finally, how important is it to our understanding of the epistle to be able to answer these questions?

The issue of their importance aside, the simple fact is that answers to these questions are ultimately not to be found. Perhaps if we had audio tapes of this sermon,⁵ we could compare the oral presentation with the epistle and say with confidence “This is oral” and “This is written,” but as it is we have only the written form, and

⁵ Or is it a *set* of short sermons or homilies? We cannot answer this question. The connecting devices that unify the book’s argument and make it seem like one continuous sermon could well have been added after the original sermons were given (see chap. 4 on structure).

distinguishing how our preacher/author may have differentiated one from the other is difficult. Since the final form of Hebrews is a written document, it is perhaps correct to say that oral elements are embedded in its writing, so that even some elements that we will discuss here were intended primarily for oral persuasion, whereas all now serve the ultimate purpose of written persuasion. For instance, one may speak of alliteration as a stylistic characteristic that primarily affects the hearer, while brachylogy (the use of a simple shorthand expression or ellipsis) seems to have greater effect on the reader. Neither, however, can be said to function exclusively so. We must also remember that Hebrews was probably intended to be read publicly and to be meditated on in private as well (though the ancients, even when reading privately, read aloud to themselves!). Hence the importance of viewing each element as contributing at both the oral and written levels. Both oral and written considerations bear upon this complex subject, but separating the two is virtually impossible.

Before moving on, however, we should deal with one question that might arise in discussing literary genre that can be answered relatively simply. The Epistle to the Hebrews is definitely *not* a translation of a document written in another language. There are many indicators of this, not least of which are its clear dependence on the Greek version of the OT, the Septuagint, for its OT quotations. It is unlikely that a translator, presumably translating a work that was using the Hebrew OT, would have changed the Hebrew verses to their LXX equivalents. While there are some relatively literal translations of the Masoretic Text (the best version of the Hebrew OT that we have) in the LXX, differences occur quite often and are varied enough to make it unlikely that the writer of Hebrews was using the MT. The author also makes some wordplays in Greek that would not have occurred to him in another language. Harold Attridge notes two: “the plays on ἀρχηγός at 2:10; 12:2; and the exploitation

of the ambiguity of διαθήκη at 9:16–17.”⁶ Add to this the classical style of the document, with its linguistically–based rhetorical elements (e.g., its numerous plays on Greek etymology; see below, chap. 8), and the idea that this is a translation becomes impossible.

Sermonic Elements

In many ways a sermon in NT times was not like those we hear today. Sermon styles today are so various that it is probably impossible to standardize them, but one element that seems to be less important to modern preachers than to the ancients is memorability. The reason for this is simple: the availability of various media (print, audio and video tape, etc.) gives hearers more than one shot at what the preacher has to say. Certainly preachers today seek to persuade and make their preaching memorable, but easy access to sermons in book form, to say nothing of printed outlines, notes, and audio tapes, lessens the need the ancients felt for enabling their hearers to recall what was said. The following well–known quotation from Socrates may not express the opinion of everyone in the ancient world, especially in the first century, but it certainly reflects a much more widespread belief than one would find today: “If men learn [writing], it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks.”⁷ Socrates was concerned that if people learned writing, their ability to memorize would atrophy and something would be lost. These words have proved prophetic; people today probably do not instantly retain as much as they would if they did not know how to write. Ancient speakers employed a number of devices to help words and ideas stick in the heads of their listeners. The

⁶ Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 20 n. 141.

⁷ Plato *Phaedrus* 275.

Epistle to the Hebrews reflects its oral character by using many of those devices.⁸

Rhetorical Elements Found in Hebrews

Element	Reference
Alliteration	Heb. 1:1
Anaphora	Heb. 11 (<i>passim</i>)
Antithesis	Heb. 7:18–21, 28; 10:11–12
Assonance	Heb. 10:26–27
Asyndeton	Heb. 11:33–34, 37
Brachylogy	Heb. 12:24
Chiasm	Heb. 7:23–24; 2:17
Diatribes	Heb. 3:16–18
Ellipsis	Heb. 12:25
Hendiadys	Heb. 5:2
Hyperbaton	Heb. 2:9
Isocolon	Heb. 1:3
Litotes	Heb. 4:15
Paronomasia	Heb. 5:8

⁸ Of course the rhetorical devices used by our author were not intended simply as an aid to memory. Persuasion was an even more important goal among speakers in the ancient world, and the conventions of rhetoric were used as much to convince the emotions and the mind as they were to create accurate memories of what had been said. As G. Kennedy has put it: “Rhetoric is that quality in discourse by which a speaker or writer seeks to accomplish his purposes. Choice and arrangement of words are one of the techniques employed, but what is known in rhetorical theory as ‘invention’—the treatment of the subject matter, the use of evidence, the argumentation, and the control of emotion—is often of greater importance and is central to rhetorical theory as understood by Greeks and Romans” (George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* [Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1984], 3).

Rhythm

Reverse Paeon	Heb. 1:1
Anapest	Heb. 1:6
Iambus	Heb. 2:1
Trochee	Heb. 12:8

The elements of rhetoric are thoroughly discussed in a number of places in ancient literature.⁹ Above is a list of rhetorical devices employed by our author, with references to examples in the Book of Hebrews. We will later look in some detail at many of those that deal with smaller units of language (words, phrases, etc.) as examples of the style of our author (chap. 8). Several of these categories may be unfamiliar to the reader, but all are defined where they are discussed in detail, either here or in chapter 8. The full list is given above in order to provide some feel for the breadth of control the author/preacher had over what he was saying and the care he took to say it well and memorably. Here we will discuss two elements that deal with larger literary units (listed in boldface in the preceding table). The first, diatribe, actually comes close to being a literary genre in and of itself, while the other, rhythm, can affect much of a particular passage or section of a book.

Diatribes

The diatribe is an element of ancient rhetoric much talked about by ancient rhetoricians but curiously not analyzed and categorized in quite the same way that many other elements were.¹⁰ Twentieth-century classical scholarship has often discussed the definition of the

⁹ Cf., e.g., Aristotle (*Topica* and the *Ars Rhetorica*) and pseudo-Cicero (*Rhetorica ad Herennium*) and the bibliographical discussion in Kennedy, *Interpretation*, 161–62.

¹⁰ Cf. Kennedy, *Interpretation*, 155: “The diatribe is not a literary genre, in the sense of genre understood by classical grammarians and rhetoricians, but it does have some claims to be regarded as a form with distinctive traditions.”

diatribe and its relationship to the writings of the NT, with the doctoral thesis of Rudolf Bultmann on Romans setting the pace on the subject.¹¹ More recently, though, the work of Stanley Stowers on the use of the diatribe in Romans has shown that both classical scholars and Bultmann have misunderstood the diatribe. Stowers maintains that it is not primarily “a form of mass propaganda which used various sorts of dialogical and rhetorical techniques in order to create interest and persuade the common man on the street.” Rather, “the form of the diatribe and the way it functions presupposes a student–teacher relationship.”¹² The form is suited to the philosophical school and is essentially oral and dialogical in nature, and Paul, according to Stowers, uses it frequently in Romans.

Basically, the diatribe is a technique for answering objections to an argument. The speaker makes a statement and then puts into the mouth of an imaginary interlocutor a question that seems relevant to that statement. He may pile several questions on top of each other, but he finally gives an answer to the question. The technique is effective in part because of its harshness; generally the one using the diatribe intends to mock or shame the student into a consideration of the truth. Because of its rough tone, scholars thought for a long time that it was a technique used against enemies or in large crowds where it could be assumed that opponents to the teacher lurked. But Stowers shows that this is not the case at all; the diatribe was used in one of the most intimate of teaching situations in the classical world—that of master and disciple.

As this works out in Romans, Stowers rightly hypothesizes that the many diatribes in the book reflect teaching Paul had given to those mentioned by name in Romans 16; in short, that they were his

¹¹ Published as Rudolf Bultmann, *Der Stil der paulinischen Predigt und die kynischstoische Diatribe* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910).

¹² Stanley Kent Stowers, *The Diatribe and Paul's Letter to the Romans*, SBL Dissertation Series 57 (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1981), 175.

pupils. But what does this have to do with Hebrews? And where is the evidence that the author of Hebrews employed this technique?

To answer the first of these questions, we need go no further than the information we explored above in chapter 1. There we discovered that regardless of whether one thinks the community was more Jewish or more Hellenistic in nature, the author was quite well acquainted with these people. Hence he could feel comfortable chastising his “students” and using a technique that might be rough on occasion, without fear of damaging his relationship with them. We also noted that he characterizes his message to them as a “word of exhortation” (λόγος τῆς παρακλήσεως), a term that reflects an oral presentation. The phrase does not inherently refer to a tough method of speaking, but it is striking that in the one other place it is used in the NT (Acts 13:15), Paul criticizes the Jews in Jerusalem who crucified Jesus (Acts 13:26–29), ending his speech with a strongly worded warning for the people he is addressing not to fulfill the words of the prophets as the Jews in Jerusalem did (Acts 13:40–41). Similarly, Hebrews is filled with warnings for its listeners/readers and in tone is generally more like a kick in the pants than a gentle arm around the shoulder.

In answer to the question of where the author employs this technique, we can note several passages in the book. Although the diatribe is not a predominant method of argumentation in Hebrews, it is used in 3:16–18 with a distinctive triple rhetorical question format.¹³ In Heb. 3:15 the author quotes Ps. 95:7, referring back to the lengthier quotation of Ps. 95:7–11 in Heb. 3:7–11. He now picks up key phrases in that passage to ask a series of three rhetorical questions, which he answers with three more questions, all of which

¹³ Cf. James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1924), 48: “The pointed questions which now follow (vv. 16–18) are a favorite device of the diatribe style.”

are probably based on Numbers 14.¹⁴ Our purpose here is not to do a full-scale exegesis of what points the author of Hebrews was trying to make, but rather to indicate the method he used. He blasts away at them, probably in order to drive home the exceeding seriousness of rebellion and unbelief and the fact that no one is safe—even those who have led the community of belief in the past like at least some of his listeners/readers.

This passage is not the only example of diatribe in the book. The author's repeated use of the rhetorical question in order to make a point, prove an assertion, or answer another question he has raised probably indicates that the diatribe is never far from his mind. As early as the first chapter, he uses the rhetorical question to open his defense of the deity of Jesus (1:5 [twice!]) and to close it again (1:13–14), thereby heightening the impact of the intervening material (1:6–12). While this would work well enough in a written document, the effect in an oral presentation would have been dramatic, and the pedagogical effect is undeniable.

Other rhetorical questions sprinkled throughout the work appear in similar teaching contexts and point toward the diatribal style. In 2:2–4, the author asks his question immediately after the conditional clause, diatribal style, and then extends the sentence by heaping up other reasons why we will not escape if we ignore God's great salvation. In 7:11 there is an imaginary interlocutor, a common device of diatribe. Many in our author's audience would have questioned the claim that moral perfection could not be attained through the levitical priesthood, so he anticipates their question and answers it.¹⁵ The importance of the diatribe for the author is indicated by his use of it here at a major transitional point in his argument, where he leaves the consideration of the Genesis material on Melchizedek (7:1–10) and begins to argue for the superiority of the

¹⁴ Cf. Attridge (*Hebrews*, 120) and, more confidently, Lane (*Hebrews*, 1:88).

¹⁵ Cf. Lane's excellent discussion (*Hebrews*, 1:180–81) of the eschatological, rather than ethical or cultic, nuance of τελείωσις in 7:11.

“priest like Melchizedek.” He has already prepared his audience for this theme twice before (5:10; 6:20). The question found at 10:2 is a straightforward rhetorical question containing no obvious diatribal element, but the author seems to return to the style near the end of the chapter at 10:29, where he issues some of his most severe warnings to the congregation. The *a fortiori* argument contained in the question, along with its harsh verbs (καταπατέω, ἡγέομαι κοινόν, ἐνυβρίζω), marks it as diatribe. Other rhetorical questions in the book may also indicate the style (cf., e.g., 12:7, 9).

The importance for the modern interpreter of recognizing our author’s use of the diatribe does not rest with the form itself; the diatribe is a relatively insignificant part of the puzzle of the literary genre of Hebrews. Its significance is found, rather, in two facts to which the use of diatribe points. First, the diatribe is a part of the larger genre area of *ancient rhetoric*. Blindness to the fact that our author employs rhetorical technique at point after point in his epistle may cause us to miss the *persuasive* element in our author’s approach to truth. Biblical exegetes and preachers should make no apology for the ancient author’s penchant for polemical technique. The early Christians believed that what they were handling was the very λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ; it was crucial to them to use any means short of deceit to persuade their audience to believe (cf., e.g., John 20:31). Perhaps persuasive technique was even more important for the author of Hebrews since no less than salvation was at stake (Heb. 2:2–4; 5:12–14; 6:4–12; 10:26–39). We will have much more to say later about the general rhetorical techniques our author uses (see chap. 8 on the style of Hebrews).

The second significant factor about our author’s use of diatribe is that diatribe is a sermonic or, more accurately, a teaching device. We spent a lot of time above emphasizing that Hebrews is an *oral* work, but it is worth restating now: Hebrews is as much a sermon as it is an epistle and must be understood as such. A second rhetorical device

that demonstrates the importance of this element is the use of rhythm in Hebrews.

Rhythm

Rhythm is not the most involved and complicated subject in classical Greek oratory, but it is nevertheless too extensive a subject to cover completely here. We will define it and then look at a few of the many examples in Hebrews in order to demonstrate its importance for the interpreter. Commentators have long recognized that Hebrews “is distinguished, among the prose works of the primitive church, by its rhythmical cadences.”¹⁶

Rhythm, when the word has to do with words and not music or general patterns, is “the pattern of recurrent strong and weak accents, long and short syllables, and vocalization and silence in speech.”¹⁷ The use of the technique is of course much more structured, formal, and repetitive in poetry than in a prose work like Hebrews. Indeed, according to one commentator, “The primary rule for using rhythms in prose is ... negative. Monotony should be avoided and variety cultivated, and Hebrews clearly abides by that prescription.”¹⁸ Our author seems to be acquainted with the oratorical rhythmical structures made popular by Isocrates in the fourth century B.C., though he handles them freely.¹⁹

Clear-cut instances of attention to rhythm abound in Hebrews. For example, the famous first four verses of the book, so full of literary devices, demonstrate a penchant for rhythmical balance in several places, so much so that the Nestle–Aland²⁷ text lays out verses 3 and 4 in a semipoetic fashion. This format is justified not

¹⁶ Moffatt, *Hebrews*, lvi.

¹⁷ *Random House Webster's College Dictionary* (New York: Random House, 1992), s.v. “rhythm.”

¹⁸ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 20.

¹⁹ Moffatt, *Hebrews*, lvi.

only by the clear rhyming effect of phrases like τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ / τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ and ὃς ὢν ἀπαύγασμα / φέρων τε τὰ πάντα but also because of their rhythms:²⁰

Phrase	Rhythm Pattern	Comment
τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ	— U U — U U U — — U — U U U —	One unstressed beat is the only difference between the two.
τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ		
ὃς ὢν ἀπαύγασμα φέρων τε τὰ πάντα	U U U — U U — U U U — U	The inconsistencies are due to minor, barely pronounced syllables like the —μα at the end of ἀπαύγασμα.

The opening words of the book are an indication not only of the author's interest in rhythm but also of his inventiveness with the convention. Πολυμερῶς, with its rhythmic pattern of U U U —, is a paeon—a pattern of any combination of four syllables, three unstressed and one stressed. Aristotle suggests the use of a paeon for the opening of a rhythmic passage. But Aristotle suggested a paeon with the opposite pattern of — U U U for opening a phrase, the one our author uses for *closing* a phrase!²¹ To emphasize the point that the author of Hebrews was interested in doing something out of the ordinary, he repeats the pattern in the second word of the opening pair and throws in some alliteration for good measure.²² To

²⁰ The symbols — and U stand respectively for stressed and unstressed syllables.

²¹ Aristotle *Rhetoric* 3.8.6. This has been inaccurately called a “reverse” paeon. In fact a paeon is a pattern of any combination of three unstressed syllables and one stressed one.

²² Πολυτρόπως by itself does not follow the — — — U pattern, but coupled with the preceding καί the word has exactly the same rhythm with a meaningless unstressed syllable added on the end: — — — U —. See Heb. 3:1, 7:10, 12:25, and 13:20 for other examples of this form of paeon opening a sentence.

demonstrate the principle of variation mentioned above, Moffatt points out that our author might begin a period with any number of combinations of anapests, trochees, and iambs.²³

Another favorite use of rhythm surfaces in the author's penchant for beginning a new sentence, or even a new paragraph, with the same rhythmical structure with which he ended the last, contributing to the sense of smoothness for which he is noted.²⁴ A good example of this occurs at the end of Heb. 4:11 and the beginning of Heb. 4:12. There the rhythms of the last clause of 4:11, emphasizing in the negative the example of the Israelites who fell through their unbelief, are parallel to those of the first few words of 4:12, emphasizing the life and power of the word of God.²⁵ Other similar parallels, though with some departure from precise parallel, are found at 7:21 and 22, 8:13 and 9:1, and 10:10 and 11.

This parallelism of rhythm has practical significance for interpretation of the epistle. One might think that rhetorical form might take precedence over careful theological statement, but the opposite is the case. In order to make connections between thoughts that may not be apparent on the surface, he not only uses rational argument but also literary device. The verses mentioned above are an example. In Heb. 4:11–12, the author uses a negative encouragement (don't fall as the people of Israel did) and a positive encouragement (the word of God is living and active) to set the stage for the mention of Jesus, the high priest who can help us. The connection between the

²³ Moffatt, *Hebrews*, lvi. Anapest, trochee, and iambus are poetic terms used to designate three different types of metric feet: anapest (three syllables = — — U), trochee (two syllables = U —), iambus (two syllables = — U). The reader unfamiliar with the technical terminology of poetic rhythm or meter should consult W. Thrall, A. Hibbard, C. H. Holman, eds., *A Handbook to Literature*, rev. ed. (New York: Odyssey Press, 1960), or other similar handbook of English literature.

²⁴ Nigel Turner, *Style*, vol. 4 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, by J. H. Moulton (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1976), 106: "He avoids all roughness."

²⁵ Moffatt, *Hebrews*, lvi.

two is not readily apparent from their content, but the author makes that connection more obvious by his use of parallel rhythms.

From all this, it becomes apparent that close study of the use of rhythm in classical Greek would be invaluable for the twentieth-century interpreter of Hebrews. Unfortunately, we cannot even begin to do the subject justice here. But we can urge the reader to consider some of the implications of the fact that the author of Hebrews has taken such pains in the use of rhetorical techniques like diatribe and rhythm. The interpreter needs to gain a feel for what the author was trying to accomplish by this technique, to gain a feel for the *texture* of the text. It is a *literate* text, a polished work that demands from its interpreters care and attention to complex rhetorical and literary forms in order to be understood fully. It is a *polemical* text using techniques designed to persuade the heart, rather than dry, scientific language designed merely to inform or describe. The “poetry” and style of Hebrews, flowing from its oral character, must be stressed in any attempt to describe principles for understanding this book. That Hebrews comes to us in written form should force us to take its oral character all that much more into account. With this in mind, it is now time to try to understand the significance of its written character for interpretation.

Epistolary Elements

It is commonplace for any description of a biblical epistle to declare how different NT epistles are from modern letters. While modern letters, especially before the invention and widespread use of the telephone, convey all sorts of trivial, often personal information, the biblical epistle generally speaks to larger issues of theology and ethics. While conveying some necessary information about such things as the travels of Paul and Timothy (cf., e.g., Phil. 2:19–30), the primary purpose of a biblical epistle was to convey theological and ethical teaching.

Hebrews is no exception. “For all its oratory, Hebrews is no more than an epistle written in the exhortatory style, mingling theology and paraenesis in alternating sections, as distinct from Paul’s method of keeping the theology and paraenesis apart. Nevertheless, Hebrews begins as a sermon and ends as an epistle.”²⁶ As overstated as this opinion is, Nigel Turner nevertheless does capsule two characteristics that have allowed Christian writers through the ages to characterize Hebrews as an epistle: (1) The alternation of doctrine and exhortation and (2) The epistolary form of its ending. The first of these, however, does not fundamentally distinguish an epistle from a sermon; Hellenistic sermons and epistles alike interwove things to be believed (doctrine) with things to be done in light of those beliefs (ethics), as have all types of Christian teaching down through the ages for that matter. At times, though, Hebrews betrays some traces of editing that are the result of shaping an epistle from a sermon.

Hebrews as Epistolary Teaching

Despite all the rhetorical flourish with which Hebrews begins, it quickly settles into confronting the traditional task of an early Christian epistle, that of giving advice to a community that faces a problem of some sort. Paul, Clement, and others in the early church attempted to deal with such situations by writing letters with the right combination of doctrinal and ethical teaching to help solve the “problem.” Of course the writer did this with one distinct disadvantage compared to the preacher: his absence from the situation. Whereas the preacher could speak directly to a situation and could clarify immediately and directly what he said, if misinterpreted, the writer had to try to anticipate any questions and misunderstandings and give responses to them. Rebuttal could only come to him by word of mouth some time, often a *long* time, later.

²⁶ Turner, *Style*, 113.

This need to anticipate audience response provides hints about the development of the book from its oral to its epistolary form. A small example of a written element seemingly added to the oral text in the book's movement from sermon to epistle is found in Heb. 2:14. There, apparently in order to explain more clearly whom Christ defeated, the author of Hebrews has added an appositive to what appears to have been the text of the original sermon. Where rhetorical elements are found in phrases like καταργήσῃ ... κράτος ἔχοντα and the repetition of θανάτου, the phrase τοῦτ' ἔστιν τὸν διάβολον intrudes in a way that is didactic and explanatory at best, heavy and needless at worst. In any case, it indicates the sort of appositive that could be the result of a more reflective written form of the epistle, especially since it interrupts the flow of the oracular presentation of the material.

This example may extend further and encompass the whole last clause of the sentence (Heb. 2:15). There is a balance of negative and positive content between the clauses that speak of Christ "destroy[ing] the one who has the power of death" (negative) and "free[ing] those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death" (positive; 2:14–15 NRSV), but scansion of the lines for parallel rhythms yields no discernible rhetorical elements. Surely the final clause of the sentence is part of the original sermon. It makes sense and rounds out the thought of the sentence, picking up on the identification of the children with Christ and their salvation by his action, a thought that is of course extended in the next few verses. The only question here is whether the rhetorical elements of a sermon, so discernible in other places, are present here or whether this particular language is more likely a part of the later written work.

This and other examples of the reworking of Hebrews into an epistle make the point: the interpreter must be aware that explanations and elucidations have been put into the text of the original sermon in order to anticipate difficulties and answer possible questions. Evidence that Hebrews was ultimately intended in its final

form to be an epistle is found in more than these subtle changes in content, however. It is seen in its formal epistolary closing.

The Epistolary Closing of Hebrews

Paul's writings follow a fairly well-defined order of formal elements.²⁷ His salutation—an identification of himself, his colleague(s), and those to whom he is writing, along with some form of greeting, such as his unique χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη (1 Thess. 1:1)—is lacking in Hebrews, as are his normal extended thanksgiving and reminiscence of ministry among his readers, his identification of a purpose for writing, and any specific reference to past visits by himself or colleagues. Instead, in Heb. 1:1–4 the reader finds a highly rhetorical opening, crying out to be read aloud because of its alliteration and assonance, its “developed sense of rhythm, the variation of meter, and the cultivation of those elements of a literary style that command the attention of the ear when read aloud... The writer has cultivated the instincts of an orator, which are now brought into the service of preaching.”²⁸

Similarly, the body of the Epistle to the Hebrews does not parallel the typical epistle except, as we noted above, in its intermingling of teaching and exhortation. But since the so-called “body” of the Pauline epistle resists definite categorization anyway, it is hard to state dogmatically that Hebrews departs from a well-known or commonly followed formula.²⁹ Nevertheless, David Aune has

²⁷ For ancient letters in general see David E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, Library of Early Christianity 8 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 158–225, and for a fine summary of structural elements in Paul's epistles see Thomas R. Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, Guides to New Testament Exegesis (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 25–31.

²⁸ Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:5–6.

²⁹ Aune, *Environment*, 188: “The central section (or body) of the letter is the section containing the information constituting the purpose for which the letter was written. It is also the section that has proven most resistant to formal analysis.”

surveyed five types of material found in central sections of early Christian letters,³⁰ and Hebrews includes none of them except what Aune calls “concluding paraenesis,” material that more properly belongs to the formal category of the closing of an epistle.

At Heb. 13:22–25, Hebrews does have a somewhat typical closing, highly reminiscent of Paul’s. Almost no one disputes the epistolary nature of this unit of material nor that it had little to do with the eloquent sermon that was preached or to be read aloud to the congregation that received the letter. Many things in these brief verses point to their written character: (1) the author’s reference to writing them briefly (13:22); (2) the pedantic information that Timothy has been set free and may be accompanying the author on his visit; (3) the ineloquent greetings to ἡγουμένους ὑμῶν καὶ πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους, with the similarly plain passing on of greetings from those with the author who are from Italy; (4) the standard closing reference to grace. All of these are standard elements of the NT epistle and are unknown to the first century exhortation.

The literary question whether Heb. 13:1–21 forms the exhortatory conclusion to the sermon or an epistolary addendum to the sermon remains unsolved, however.³¹ The arguments for and against these two hypotheses are too extensive to treat sufficiently here. Suffice it to say that the weight of the evidence points to the chapter being an addition to the sermon, filling out some of its themes in typical epistolary fashion and adding a number of random reminders and warnings as something of an afterthought.³² The last chapter is filled

³⁰ They are: (1) internal transitional formulas, e.g., “I want you to know, brethren” (Phil. 1:12); (2) epistolary *topoi* (themes and motifs used in ancient letters), e.g., health or domestic events; (3) autobiographical statements, e.g., the lengthy Gal. 1:10–2:21; (4) travel plans, e.g., Rom. 15:14–33; and (5) concluding paraenesis, e.g., 1 Thess. 4:1–5:22. Aune, *Environment*, 188–91.

³¹ See Attridge, *Hebrews*, 384 n. 5, for the classic articles defending the notion that Heb. 13 is a later appendage.

³² Attridge, *Hebrews*, 384–85, and especially Lane, *Hebrews*, 2:491–507, argue eloquently for the “integrity” of chapter 13, meaning that chapter 13 formed part of

with ethical injunctions, a practice in which Paul sometimes engaged (cf., e.g., 2 Cor. 13:5–10), although he did not always do so and never so fully as the author of Hebrews. While the lack of connection between the content of the last chapter and the rest of the epistle has been overemphasized, there remain some standard ethical injunctions that would be puzzling in a sermon, though they fit the “tidying up” exercise at the end of an epistle quite well. For instance, while there is much in the epistle about leaders (13:7, 17) and suffering with Jesus our sacrificial Lamb (13:11–13), there is no prior mention of the marriage bed (13:4), hospitality to strangers (13:2), or even regulations about food (13:9),³³ all topics treated with equal stature in this chapter. The style of the last chapter is also much less poetic and eloquent than any section of the rest of the book, especially the hortatory sections. As Aune puts it: “Here the author relaxes the literary character of his Greek.”³⁴ Lastly, while there are some flashes of the compositional brilliance of the earlier chapters, the chapter is largely a string of exhortations, with relatively little relation to each other or to what precedes. This looseness of character shows itself particularly clearly in the lack of connection between Heb. 13:1 and Hebrews 12.³⁵

the original composition of Hebrews. This is surely correct, if by “composition” one means the *epistle* as it was sent to its readers for the first time. But that has nothing to do with the question of whether it was part of the original *sermon*—a view that I find difficult to accept in light of the difference in content, style, and care of composition.

³³ The reference in Heb. 9:10 to food and drink is inconsequential since it does not occur in an exhortation about abandoning or refraining from food regulations, nor does it give any hint that this was a concern among the congregation.

³⁴ Aune, *Environment*, 213.

³⁵ Even Lane, who staunchly defends the unity of chapter 13 with what precedes, can only say that the injunction of 13:1 (and its following “pairs” of injunctions) “evokes the exemplary stance that the community had assumed under harsh circumstances in the past (10:32–34),” saying only that it is “entirely appropriate that the sober recognition of the holiness of God in 12:28–29 should be followed

What does all this mean? So what if Hebrews is a complex literary form, basically a sermon but clearly reconstructed as an epistle? The question is not merely academic. For the twentieth-century reader it means that we cannot read Hebrews like we do *anything* from our era; it was even a unique document in the first century, much more so in ours. To summarize much of what we have written above, the rhetorical nature of Hebrews requires that we be particularly aware of the underlying Greek poetic devices used by the author and not attempt to press, for instance, the choosing of a particular word by the author on the basis of its content when evidence would indicate that the word was simply chosen because it rhymed with another one. Second, we should be on the lookout for passages that were reworked by the author to anticipate questions or make fuller explanations and, conversely, for passages that do not seem to answer obvious questions—neither blaming such passages for not doing so nor, especially, trying to force such passages into answering questions they simply do not address. In sum, understanding the literary character of Hebrews should make us even more reticent than usual to build whole theologies on highly rhetorical and emotive passages like Heb. 6:4–6, since the wording of these passages is often dictated by literary rather than strictly theological concerns.

by the admonition, ‘Brotherly love must continue’ ” (*Hebrews*, 2:509). One must ask what ethical injunction would *not* be appropriate in those circumstances?

4

Structure

There is more to understanding a document than can be gained from simply understanding its literary genre. Lots of clues to understanding an author's thought can be discerned by asking a set of commonsense questions that reveal structures, emphases, transitions, and minor patterns in any piece of literature—whether it be Jane Reader's business letters or the sports stories in her morning newspaper. This process results in an outline of the structure of a document.¹

Outlining is a common feature of exegesis at every level of training, from the simplest children's Bible study to the most complex doctoral analysis. The question of the proper outline of Hebrews has been the subject of a lot of study in recent years, and the difficulties raised by almost every attempt at delineating a structure for the book has caused one recent commentator to remark bluntly:

¹ There is some justification for thinking that a discussion of outlining should come after the discussion in chapter 5 on the textual criticism of Hebrews. After all, how can one outline a text before it has been established? Alternatively, one could argue that outlining should come before a discussion of literary genre. These questions deserve a longer, more complex answer, but the simple one is this: outlining is somewhat dialogical in nature. It cannot proceed without some understanding of the cultural, historical, and literary background of the text (see the preceding chapters), but at the same time it must form the overall basis for a detailed examination of the text (see the ensuing chapters). Perhaps in light of discoveries made during that examination, we will revise our outline, but we must start the exegesis of particular texts with at least a general picture of where the author is going.

“There is at the present time no consensus regarding the literary structure of Hebrews.”² The most recent approach has freely, and probably rightly, acknowledged that a proper outline should take into account the literary genre, rhetorical elements, and content of the book, with a weighting in favor of content.³

Much of the scholarly discussion moves in a technical sphere with subjects like discourse analysis, structuralism, and semantic theory making it difficult for all but the very few to understand. Such discussions are beyond the purview of this book, but there are a number of insights to be gained from working at outlining the book at any level.⁴ We will discover some of them as we lay down principles for doing an outline ourselves. A few questions are in order before we begin.

Some Introductory Questions

First is the question of the usefulness of outlining itself. After all, why do we need to understand the overall structure of a book? Why not simply start studying the text sentence by sentence? If scholars have spent all this time studying the text in depth and cannot figure out for sure what the author was trying to do, why should we think we can? This is the same question we faced earlier when discussing authorship of the epistle. The answer is also similar to the one we gave there: we discover elements of the author’s mind by going through the *process* of outlining, even if we can come to no final conclusion concerning the outline itself. There is no doubting the

² William L. Lane, *Hebrews*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1991), 1:lxxxviii.

³ Steve Stanley, “The Structure of Hebrews from Three Perspectives [Genre, Rhetoric, Content],” *Tyndale Bulletin* 45 (1994): 245, 270–71.

⁴ For interesting discussions of the relevant books and articles by Vanhoye, Dussaut, Guthrie, and others, see Stanley, “Structure,” 245–71; Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:lxxx–xcviii; Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 50–58.

usefulness of knowing the overall argument of the book when interpreting some part of the text, and outlining helps us see the overall argument more clearly.

Second, some features of the structure of the book are obvious, and ignoring them would distort our perspective on the book. The warnings occurring at four places throughout the book (Heb. 2:1–4; 3:7–4:13; 5:11–6:12; 10:19–39), the several different comparisons to Christ and how they are linked together in the mind of the author, the famous chapter on faith (Hebrews 11) and its place in the book—all these deserve some cohesive response from the reader. Otherwise, we are in grave danger of misunderstanding the message our author is giving to his readers.

On what should we focus in outlining the book: form or content? The answer to this question is relatively simple—neither. Why? Because form and content cannot be divided all that simply. Is it form or content when our author brings the text back around to a discussion of Melchizedek, as he does so very neatly at the end of Hebrews 6? Certainly this is a rhetorical device, intended to be felt by the audience hearing or reading it (form), but the teaching of Heb. 5:11–6:20 has also prepared us powerfully for the following discussion too; we are ready to hear who Melchizedek is and now know how important it is to the author that we pay attention (content).

Is it form or content when the readers of the letter are enjoined to “look unto Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” at the beginning of chapter 12? The use of the word “pioneer” (ἀρχηγός) certainly brings the reader back to the earlier use of the word at Heb. 2:10, because it is such a rare word and stands out in both places (form), but the powerful phrases also emphasize the Jesus who in the central arguments of the book has been proved superior to all others (content). The question is ultimately unanswerable; form and content

are so interwoven in this epistle that to differentiate greatly between them is futile.⁵

Similar to the dichotomy between form and content is the dichotomy between doctrine and ethics in Hebrews. This helpful distinction often forms the main dividing line in outlining a Pauline epistle; Ephesians is perhaps the best example with its clear division between chapters 1–3 and 4–6. Hebrews, too, has sometimes been outlined this way,⁶ but such a division is far too simple for this book. While warning passages and simple commands can be separated from doctrinal passages and straightforward doctrinal statements, these two elements are so interwoven throughout the text that a simple “doctrine, then ethics” or “doctrine is the foundation, ethics is the outworking” formula does not do justice to the text as it stands.

At the same time, there is a major difference between the form/content problem and the ethics/doctrine one. It is helpful and necessary to emphasize in the outline the fact that the author regularly “interrupts” a doctrinal section to provide paranaesis and then returns to the place he left off. But simply to claim that “doctrine and ethics are hopelessly mixed in Hebrews” is unwise. Most passages in the text are quite clearly ethical or doctrinal, and the author seems to have a clear purpose for keeping them distinct, but in developing the larger structure of the work, he skillfully interweaves them. I hope that what is sometimes a difficult line to draw can nevertheless be marked sufficiently in the outline prepared at the end of this section.

⁵ Ellingworth, primarily a linguist, insists “that the form and the meaning of a text operate on different, in principle independent, levels, and that little is to be gained by forcing a common meaning on an essentially formal feature.” In the next sentence, though, he goes on to add: “It must, however, be admitted that the author himself probably did not make such a sharp distinction between form and meaning as a modern linguist would make ...” (*Hebrews*, 57–58).

⁶ Cf. Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1990), 717–21.

The Process of Outlining

Outlining is best done from the core of a work outward. One must first determine what the central teaching of a book is and then move to outline its elements in relation to that center and in relation to each other. How does one determine the main theme? There is no magic key to doing this. Probably many readers of this book learned the techniques of outlining in the first few years of their Christian life, and I know of no reason to depart from the simple techniques learned at that stage. Sometimes as we develop sophistication (yes, even in scriptural study!), we depart from the simple rather than building upon it, although that basis is fundamental to moving on to higher levels of understanding. Many books on Bible study go into great detail on outlining, so I will give just a few basic steps.

First, read through the book once, looking for three things. (1) Look for any statements that the author makes to his readers concerning the central purpose of the book. These may be very direct (“I am writing you because ...”) or less direct as here (“bear with my word of exhortation,” Heb. 13:22). (2) Look for themes that recur so often that they cannot be missed. These should be obvious; if they seem too subtle to you, they probably are not the author’s main point! The third thing to look for, however, is more subtle than the first two. (3) A main theme may not meet the two criteria above, and yet the author may point to it in a special way by giving it a place of prominence in the book stylistically. It may occur, for example, in the center of the work with the preceding argument leading up to it and the following argument explicating it. Nevertheless, the major theme should be clear enough to be recognized in a serious reading of the book.

From this material, decide what you think the main theme of the book is, and write it down in one sentence in your own words. The sentence should be relatively short and simple. While your sentence may show deference to important subthemes, unless you simply cannot decide between two or three themes, *make clear the one idea*

the author is trying to get across to his readers. You may have trouble doing this (particularly with Hebrews!), but work at it until you believe you know what the main theme of the book is.

Next, read the work and note any transitional elements that might be clues to the author's movement from one section to the next. Remember of course that the chapter and verse divisions in our Bibles are not always reliable guides to changes of this sort. Transitional words such as "therefore," "for," "however," and the like are good indicators of movement from one section to the next. As we will see below, Hebrews employs many devices not found in other books by which the author signals his intentions. One of the most important of these devices is called the *hook word*, a clearly substantial term or phrase that is used to link sections of text. A good example is the use of the word ἄγγελος in both Heb. 1:4 and 1:5. George H. Guthrie has discerned five different sorts of hook words operating in Hebrews.⁷ Sometimes the author of Hebrews uses brief passages to link larger units together, having them serve either as the conclusion to one section and the introduction of the next or as a hinge between two passages, although belonging to neither.⁸ The key to recognizing these special features is looking for similar concepts and/or vocabulary that seem to link two passages together.

⁷ Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:xcī–xcīīī. See also George H. Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews: A Text-Linguistic Analysis*, Novum Testamentum Supplement 73 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 96–102.

⁸ Guthrie calls these two uses "overlapping constituents" and "direct intermediary transitions" respectively (see Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:xcīīī–xcv, and Guthrie, "Structure," 102–11). Guthrie employs two other useful categories: "parallel introductions" and "woven intermediary transitions." The one example of a "parallel introduction" found in Lane is the similar wording in Heb. 5:1 and 8:3 that helps link Heb. 5:1–7:28 to Heb. 8:3–10:18. This link between the two passages enables the author to pick up his train of thought once again after leaving it briefly to deal with other matters. A "woven intermediary transition" is a cross between the "overlapping constituent" and the "direct intermediary transition"; themes from a preceding and a following section are woven together in the intermediary text to form a bridge between them. Lane offers Heb. 2:5–9 as an example.

Begin making an outline on your final reading. Of course any outline attempts to show connections among the various sections of a work, but an outline should also attempt to show the relation of the various sections to the main theme. To accomplish this, try to make the headings of each of your largest sections reflect the main theme in their wording. Lesser section headings may do this too, but it is more important that they reflect their relationship to the section in which they occur and derive their titles from it.

Outlining Hebrews

This simple model for outlining a book can be applied to Hebrews, but the reader should be warned that this task is not as simple as it is for some of the other books in the New Testament. We noted above that Hebrews presents special difficulties because of the complexity of its literary form. As one author noted about the Book of Revelation: “there are as many different outlines as there are interpreters.”⁹ What follows is my attempt at such an outline, along with explanation and justification at critical points.

The Main Theme of Hebrews

What in one sentence is the main theme of Hebrews? *Have faith in (by holding fast to and obeying) Jesus as the supreme, unique Son of God and priest of our faith.* Two words capsule the core of the purpose of Hebrews: Jesus and faith. From the opening sentence to the last command of the epistle, the author never seems to depart from a complex of truths revolving around these two ideas, and that complex can be further distilled into two subsets under each idea. The importance of holding fast or persevering in the faith (stated negatively, this means *not* apostatizing) is regularly stressed in the epistle, not only in the warning passages which are central to the

⁹ J. Ramsey Michaels, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, Guides to New Testament Exegesis (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 69.

purposes of the author but also, for example, in the commands to draw near to God (express and implied) found throughout the epistle (cf. Heb. 4:16; 7:19). The importance of obedience is shown in a variety of ways, from Christ's being the mediator of a new covenant (Heb. 9:15) to the straightforward commands for obedience found in the last chapter of the book (Heb. 13:1, 2, 3, 5, etc.). Faith is explicitly defined in the epistle (Heb. 11:1) and given an entire chapter full of illustrations. Either the command to believe or something equivalent is found from the earliest moments of the epistle (cf., e.g., Heb. 2:1; 3:1) until the end (cf. Heb. 13:15).

Just as our author's view of faith can be subdivided usefully into perseverance and obedience, so his view of Jesus divides between Jesus as Son of God and as priest. In chapter 9 we will demonstrate how pervasive these two themes are in the epistle, but suffice it to say now that throughout the book the author rarely departs from the theme of the sonship of Jesus. From the first few words where he proclaims the Son as God's final revelation of himself to man (Heb. 1:2) to the next to last chapter where he sets forth the Son as the supreme example for those who are sons of the grace of God's discipline (Heb. 12:2–3), the theme constantly vies for attention. And it alternates with the picture of Jesus as "merciful and faithful high priest" (Heb. 2:17). The sonship of Jesus is mentioned often early and mostly only implied late in the epistle; the opposite is true for his priesthood. As *high priest* he has "made purification for sins" (Heb. 1:3), but as *a priest after the order of Melchizedek* Jesus functions as the one through whom we "continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God" (Heb. 13:15 NRSV).

Two distinguishing characteristics of Jesus as Son and priest that are prominent in the epistle and should be included in the theme sentence are the uniqueness and the supremacy of his sonship and priesthood. Each of the contrasts of the epistle stresses that Jesus is unique vis-à-vis other possibilities for faith. Jesus is not just a better angel, "for to which of the angels did God ever say ..." (Heb. 1:5).

He has more honor than Moses, just as the unique builder of the house is superior to the house itself (Heb. 3:3). He is the only high priest who is without sin (Heb. 4:15), and as the only source of eternal salvation was designated by a unique title: priest forever after the order of Melchizedek (Heb. 5:10; 6:20). He is the unique Son through whom God has spoken (Heb. 1:2) and the unique Jesus Messiah—the same yesterday, today, and forever—to whom glory is attributed forever and ever (Heb. 13:8, 21).

And yet in Hebrews his uniqueness is never completely divorced from anything known before or since. His uniqueness derives from his being the reality of things we know as imperfect and fleeting shadows in this life. Thus he is supreme over the angels as the one who, like them, has spoken the message of God (compare the use of λαλεῖν in Heb. 2:2 and 1:2), but he has spoken it finally. Like Moses, he rules and leads his people faithfully (Heb. 3:2, 5–6), but he leads them into the final promised sabbath rest. He is a high priest who, like other priests, had to have something to offer (Heb. 8:3) and ministers according to covenant regulations within a tabernacle (Heb. 9:1–15), but everything about his ministry is supreme over its shadowy counterpart: his sacrifice is permanent (Heb. 9:24–26), his covenant is forever (Heb. 7:22; 8:13; 9:15), and his tabernacle is the heavens (Heb. 9:24).

The Transitions of Hebrews

The first four verses of Hebrews 1 stand out plainly as an introduction. The γάρ of Heb. 1:5 points to the first division of the book. The key word ἄγγελος holds together the next nine verses, with the rhetorical question of Heb. 1:14 and the διὰ τοῦτο of Heb. 2:1 signaling a clear break, but at the same time a clear link, with the previous passage. A change of subject marks off Heb. 2:5–9 both from 2:1–4 and from the following passage, which no longer discusses Jesus in relation to angels but in relation to humanity. Hebrews 2:10–18 continues this discussion until in Heb. 3:1 another

clear transition is marked by the word ὅθεν. The comparison between Jesus and Moses holds together Heb. 3:1–6 until Heb. 3:7, where the somewhat weak διό suggests a break. This assumption is confirmed by the development of the theme centering on the OT quotation “Today, if you hear his voice...” This scriptural exegesis goes on until Heb. 3:19, where the summarizing καί (“So” in NRSV and NIV) combined with the contrastive οὖν of Heb. 4:1 signals a shift in thought. Hebrews 4:1–11 is really more of the same, and another complex scriptural exegesis follows until two powerful, independent statements at Heb. 4:12–13 prime the listener/reader for a major change of argument beginning at Heb. 4:14.

The mention of Jesus’ priesthood at Heb. 4:14 harks back to Heb. 2:17 and 3:1, closing off the extensive teaching of Heb. 3:1–4:13 and unifying it. Having read the epistle and sensed that the exhortation to hold fast and to obey is central, as are the themes of the sonship and priesthood of Jesus, we are tempted, rightly, to mark Heb. 4:14–16 as a major transitional passage for the entire epistle. The verses mention prominently each of the elements of our main theme, both summing up the major ideas expressed in Heb. 1:5–4:13 and introducing those of Heb. 5:1–10:18.

Hebrews 5:1 moves from the exhortation of 4:16 into an explication of the earthly high priesthood, an explication that would continue clearly, logically, and virtually without a break until Heb. 7:28, were it not for Heb. 5:11–6:20. At Heb. 5:10 we see the power of the hook word for our author. He abruptly halts his straightforward teaching about Christ’s priesthood, when he mentions Christ’s having been designated “high priest according to the order of Melchizedek” (Heb. 5:10). At the repetition of the name Melchizedek (Heb. 5:6), he realizes that he is about to get into some very deep and complicated issues, and he dare not do so without a word of warning to his readers

about their spiritual readiness for such teaching (Heb. 5:11–6:3). This leads him to the famous warning about not only losing the ability to teach others but falling away from the faith altogether (Heb. 6:4–8). The warning leads to an affirmation of the author’s belief that his readers are bound for salvation, and he encourages them to persevere on the basis of God’s faithfulness (Heb. 6:9–20). He then resumes the theme of Christ’s priesthood (Heb. 6:20).

Hebrews 7:1–10 is the first half of the author’s exegesis of Ps. 110:4b based on his reading of Gen. 14:18–20. It is self-contained, being both unified with Heb. 7:11–28 by content and separated from it by the movement from the historical to the theological. Hebrews 7:1–10 largely recounts facts about Melchizedek and compares him to Abraham and Levi, developing the theme of Melchizedek’s superiority to both. Hebrews 7:11–28, prompted by the rhetorical question of verse 11, moves to the heart of the comparison between the Melchizedekian and the levitical priesthoods. One is permanent, perfect, and once for all; the other is temporary, weak, and in need of constant repetition.

The strong marker phrase κεφάλαιον δὲ ἐπὶ τοῖς λεγομένοις at Heb. 8:1 demonstrates the author’s desire both to simplify and summarize and to move on to even more important issues. Hebrews 8:1–2 is an important, apex-like transitional statement with its references *back* to the very opening sentences of the book (Heb. 1:3) and *forward* to the closing ones of, if not the book, at least this long central section (Heb. 10:11–18). These verses serve to summarize the Son’s appointment as high priest on our behalf (“seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens,” Heb. 8:1 NRSV) and provide as good a brief summary of the teaching of the first half of Hebrews as can be done. They also introduce a new idea that will be central to what follows: heaven as the sanctuary where this High Priest serves to make intercession for us. The description of this sanctuary includes two elements that will dominate the explanation of the following chapters: (1) The tabernacle of the heavens is the

“true” (ἀληθινῆς) one and (2) It was set up by the Lord, not by humans.

Hebrews 8:3 introduces a short passage establishing that Jesus will offer a superior offering to that of the levitical priests. At Heb. 8:6 the author seems to digress slightly in order to explain an even more fundamental basis for superiority than that of the heavenly offering to the earthly ones. The superiority of the new covenant to the old covenant, as prophesied in Jer. 31:31–34, is the subject of Heb. 8:6–13 and forms a further basis for understanding the inherent superiority of the sacrifice of Christ to the earthly sacrifices. The μὲν οὖν of Heb. 9:1 signals the beginning of a long section, relatively unbroken, about that sacrifice, explaining that it

takes place in heaven (Heb. 9:24);
 uses the blood, not of bulls and goats, but of the perfect Lamb of God (Heb. 9:12–14);
 makes Christ the mediator of a new covenant (Heb. 9:15);
 signifies the reality of Christ’s ministry and covenant and the shadow-like character of all that went before (Heb. 10:1);
 is offered once for all (Heb. 9:25–26); and
 provides a perfect, eternal salvation for “those who are sanctified” (Heb. 10:14).

All this and more is developed in Heb. 9:1–10:18.

Hebrews 10:19–25 bears a resemblance to Heb. 4:14–16 in that it closes off the long section that precedes it by summarizing so many of that section’s themes in a few short verses.¹⁰ The heavenly tabernacle, sacrifice, and priesthood of Jesus are all explicitly mentioned and pressed into service for the salvation of believers, both cleansing from past sin and providing a basis for drawing near

¹⁰ On the basis of both verbal and conceptual parallels, some even see Heb. 10:19–22 as a conscious and direct echoing of Heb. 4:14–16 (cf., e.g., Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 521).

to God now. The section also encourages the reader to approach God “in full assurance of faith” (Heb. 10:22), to “hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering” (Heb. 10:23), and to “consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds” (Heb. 10:24 NRSV)—a three-fold injunction so illustrative of the content of the last three chapters of the book that some have seen it as a programmatic outline for it.¹¹ Thus, like Heb. 4:14–16, Heb. 10:19–25 at the same time summarizes the preceding major section and introduces the last major section of the epistle.

The negative command encapsulated in the participle of Heb. 10:25, warning his readers not to neglect meeting together (μὴ ἐγκαταλείποντες τὴν ἐπισυναγωγὴν ἑαυτῶν), seems to lead the author into a deeper, more serious warning in a manner similar to the one we discovered in the transition from Heb. 5:11–6:3 to Heb. 6:4–8. Hebrews 10:26–39 follows the same pattern as Heb. 6:4–20: after a strong statement of the terrible consequences of apostasy (Heb. 10:26–31), the author recounts the very good reasons why he considers them bound for better things (Heb. 10:32–34) and exhorts them to persevere on the basis of God’s faithfulness (Heb. 10:35–39).

The hook word πίστις provides the transition into the next major section of the epistle, Heb. 11:1–40, the famous “Hall of Fame of Faith.” Clearly bound together by the catch phrase “by faith” which occurs eighteen times in the chapter, the section now signals a major shift from doctrinal exposition to paraenesis. Having been encouraged throughout the epistle to hold fast and to obey, the readers are now taught *how* to do so. The examples of their ancestors

¹¹ Cf., e.g., James Swetnam, “Form and Content in Hebrews 7–13,” *Biblica* 55 (1974): 333–48. Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 283, rightly points out that—while the three virtues of faith, hope, and love are highlighted in the next three chapters, and thus the three injunctions serve as an introduction to the chapters generally—to see these as providing an outline by which the last three chapters are structured is to force a separation between faith and hope that is artificial since the author so intimately links them in Heb. 11:1.

who persevered in the faith will encourage them to remain as “those who have faith and so are saved” (Heb. 10:39 NRSV).

Hebrews 12:1, with its strong particle *τοιγαροῦν*, moves from the past to the present but continues the same exhortation to faith and perseverance by encouraging the readers to consider the supreme example of faithfulness and obedience, Jesus, so that they “may not grow weary or lose heart” (Heb. 12:3 NRSV). After a discourse on discipline and its purposes (Heb. 12:4–13) and a brief pastiche of commands (Heb. 12:14–17), the author begins to gather phrases and ideas from the entire sermon, bringing to mind everything from the angels mentioned in Hebrews 1–2 (Heb. 12:22) to the new covenant and better sacrifice of Hebrews 5–10 (Heb. 12:24) and the faithful saints just mentioned in chapter 11 (Heb. 12:23–24).

The separate nature of Heb. 13:1–25 is so apparent that many have thought it an addendum to the otherwise finished sermon. The summarizing character of Heb. 12:28–29 and the abrupt change in style found in Heb. 13:1ff. clearly mark chapter 13 off from what precedes. But the chapter in no way reads as a later addendum; it picks up on paraenesis scattered throughout the epistle, sometimes reemphasizing (Heb. 13:15–17), more often extending into new areas (Heb. 13:2, 4–5), the need for obedience to the supreme Son and Priest—a theme that has been present throughout the epistle. A brief epistolary conclusion finishes the letter (Heb. 13:20–25), and even here significant themes found throughout the epistle recur (cf. Heb. 13:20, 24).

An Outline with Titles

All that is now left to do is the actual outline with titles. Scholars have chosen to represent their outlines in as many different ways as the bases they have chosen for them. Although trying to organize an outline that makes very little distinction between form and content, I have nevertheless tried to reflect the author’s movement back and forth between doctrinal and ethical exposition. Hence I have adopted

a form attributed to Guthrie¹² that portrays the epistle in three columns, though the divisions are somewhat different and the titles are entirely mine. The first column gives the reference to the passage with indention signaling subcategorization or dependence upon a previous passage. The second column gives the titles of passages that are *primarily* doctrinal, the third those that are *primarily* exhortatory.

Reference	Doctrine	Exhortation
1:1–4	Introduction	
1:5–4:13	The Superior Son	
1:5–14	The Son Is Superior to Angels	
2:1–4		Warning to Listen to God’s Salvation
2:5–9	Jesus Made Lower Than Angels to Die	
2:10–18	Jesus Made Like His Brothers to Die	
3:1–6	The Son Is Superior to Moses	
3:7–19		Scripture on Believing and Obeying
4:1–11		Scripture on Entering the Rest Today
4:12–13	God’s Word Judges	
4:14–16	Jesus Son and High Priest	Is to Be Held on to and Obeyed
5:1–10:18	Jesus the Unique High Priest	
5:1–10	Introduction	to

¹² As found in Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:xcvi–xcvii; cf. Guthrie, “Structure,” 144.

	Priesthood of Jesus	
5:11–6:3		Warning about Slackness
6:4–8		Warning about Apostasy
6:9–20		Encouragement of God's Promise
7:1–10	Historical Exegesis about Melchizedek	
7:11–28	Theological Exegesis about Melchizedek	
8:1–2	Jesus the Priest of Heavenly Realities	
8:3–5	Jesus Has an Offering	
8:6–13	Jesus' Superior Covenant	
9:1–10:18	Jesus' Superior Offering and Tabernacle	
10:19–25		Draw Near, Hold Fast, Stir Up
10:26–13:19		Believe, Persevere, Obey
10:26–31		Warning about Apostasy
10:32–39		Persevere on the Promise of God
11:1–40	Examples of Faith	
12:1–3		Encouragement to Persevere
12:4–13	Teaching on Discipline	
12:14–17		Some Calls to Obedience
12:18–29	A Summary of the Sermon	A Summary of the Sermon

13:1–19

Godly Exhortations

13:20–25 Conclusion

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¹Trotter, A. H. (1997). *Vol. 6: Interpreting the Epistle to the Hebrews*. Guides to New Testament exegesis (88). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books.