

Interpreting the Epistle to the Hebrews

Andrew H. Trotter, Jr.

PART II

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NRSV New Revised Standard Version

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To my wife, Marie

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

Part 2

The Exegesis of Hebrews

The questions we approached in our first five chapters were necessary to the journey we are taking, but it was not always obvious how they were directly relevant to learning how to do exegesis of Hebrews. Now we turn to the text itself, and in the next four chapters, we will learn how to do exegesis from the center out as if we were looking at concentric circles of context. The central circle is the individual word. The next chapter will focus on how to do word studies in Hebrews. Then as we surround the *word* with the circles of *phrase*, *sentence*, and *paragraph*, we must study grammar, syntax, and style. Lastly, as we try to synthesize what we have learned from this rather technical exegesis, we will look at the theology of the book and round out the circle by coming to a fuller understanding of what the author was trying to do in his “word of exhortation.”

6

Vocabulary

This may be a good time to take stock of how far we have come. We began by exploring the notion of context, our guiding principle for exegesis, and looked first at the historical and cultural context of the epistle: when was it written? to whom? to what kind of situation? Then we tackled the difficult problem of authorship,

recognizing that if we could know who the author was, we would be better able to understand the text. We would then know what sort of person he was, what else he wrote, how he thought, etc.

Unfortunately, we saw that the historical and cultural situation and the authorship of Hebrews are still shrouded in mystery, and though we can infer a lot from the text itself, we know little else about the circumstances surrounding the production of Hebrews.

After *Sitz im Leben* and authorship, we moved to the study of the form of the book itself, its literary genre and structure. Here we found ourselves on more solid ground, though questions still remain about the epistle's sources, genre, and structure. Nevertheless, we made some tentative suggestions about the exegesis of Hebrews, seeing it as a sermon with an epistolary twist having connections and shared characteristics with other ancient forms of writing. We closed part 1 by offering a table discussing some of the textual variants in Hebrews, establishing the text so that we have something to study.

In part 2, we move from looking outside the text for its historical, cultural, social, and literary context to looking at the text itself, to the words and ideas that make it what it is. We come to what is in many ways the heart and soul of exegesis itself: the analysis of vocabulary, grammar, and style—the study of the words of the text. There is no good reason to go into detail concerning the philosophy and basic tasks of word study or grammatical and stylistic analysis in this chapter; these have been treated admirably in other places.¹ We will

¹ The introductory volume of the Guides to New Testament Exegesis series, *Introducing New Testament Interpretation*, ed. Scot McKnight (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), contains two excellent essays by Darrell L. Bock (chap. 4: “New Testament Word Analysis”) and Scot McKnight (chap. 3: “New Testament Greek Grammatical Analysis”) that are useful for the student who wants to know how to do vocabulary and grammatical analysis. Of course the relevant sections in Gordon D. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, rev. ed. (Louisville:

only give a “bare bones” treatment of the basics of these avenues of study, concentrating instead on the issues of vocabulary, grammar, and style particular to Hebrews.

Word Study in General

I can remember as a schoolboy going to hear a famous preacher of the time. He spoke that evening on Acts 1:8: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (NRSV). One of his chief points was that the Holy Spirit's power was like dynamite, exploding into the ancient world with a wonder-working might that was unlike anything humans could devise. I was moved by his powerful statement that the Holy Spirit is an explosive force in the world—that where he is moving, things happen, and they happen in an exciting way.

But I was also disturbed. Didn't the Holy Spirit move in quiet ways, too, gently moving hearts and minds to follow him? In addition to Pentecost in Acts, wasn't there an audience with Agrippa? But my problem was this: the preacher based his claim squarely on the statement of the Word of God, and his claim was that the Holy Spirit's power equaled the explosive power of dynamite. And what was the basis of his claim? He did not base his case on the evidence of the stories in the rest of the Book of Acts, though he certainly could have—the stories of Peter and John healing the lame man or of Paul and Silas being delivered from prison, of Philip being directed to the Ethiopian eunuch's side and being snatched away again by the Spirit, of the conversion of Saul and the raising of Tabitha from the dead, and so on. Rather, he based it on the Greek word for “power” used in Acts 1:8 (δύναμις) from which the English word *dynamite* is derived. I can still recall him saying, “The Holy

Westminster/John Knox, 1993), are fundamental to their essays and to my present chapter.

NRSV New Revised Standard Version

Spirit gives us God’s power, God’s ‘dynamite,’ to empower us to be explosive witnesses in the world for him.” The problem is that Luke, the author of Acts, was simply using a word that meant no more than the basic idea of “ability,” a word that is used in NT Greek for everything from the power to work miracles (cf., e.g., Acts 10:38) to the ability to bear up under persecution (Cor. 1:8) and the capacity for giving money (2 Cor. 8:3). The power of the Holy Spirit, even in Acts, is manifested in many different ways—some explosive, some not. Whatever Luke meant in using the word δύναιμις, he certainly was not miraculously predicting the invention of dynamite, which, wrongly or rightly on my part, was part of the message I got!

The preacher of my story is by no means the only one making such mistakes today. Time and time again, preachers and teachers of the Word proclaim confidently, “As the original Greek says ...” and then go on to commit a linguistic fallacy that sounds convincing to the untrained listener. Lay people trust the preacher to have done the homework and believe that deeper research into the original languages of Scripture will yield great riches, but they also are usually unable to discern whether or not the preacher is using good exegetical principles. When they hear preachers wielding the power of “the original languages,” they are, to use a contemporary expression, wowed.

The seriousness of the bad exegetical technique used by preachers and teachers of the Word cannot be emphasized enough. The people of God look to their shepherds to feed and water them; too often, they are instead being slaughtered by the very hand they think is nourishing them. If the preceding words seem too harsh, there is a reason. In large measure, contemporary preachers and teachers are not totally to blame for their mistakes; in their interpretations, they are often only following the author of a commentary or study tool, who *they* hope has done the homework. Even the greatest scholars must depend on the research of others, so

they likewise go to their books expecting to find gold and silver but come away with something that appears to be precious but is in fact fool’s gold.

To break this chain of “trust in the experts,” we can neither distrust them all and throw away our books nor throw up our hands in despair since we can never be skilled enough to write our own Greek grammar. Rather, we must work hard at Greek, reviewing some first principles over and over again until they become second nature, so that we feel confident enough in our abilities to disagree with the experts sometimes and to have good reasons for doing so. Admittedly, this will not be easy. As one author put it: “Exasperation and pain, with discipline, can give birth to a settled contentment [with one’s abilities in Greek].”² Not an enthusiastic endorsement of language study, but a realistic one, and only advocated because language study is both necessary and worth the sacrifice it takes to do it.

As is often pointed out, word study is sadly misunderstood in much NT teaching and preaching today.³ Word study probably yields the most, and the most devastating, errors of any that good-hearted but wrong-headed preachers make. Perhaps reviewing just a few of these errors will help the serious expositor of Scripture to avoid them. Here is a list of some of the most common errors.⁴ Never assume that

² McKnight, “Grammatical Analysis,” 76.

³ Cf. Fee, *Exegesis*, 100–101; Bock, “Word Analysis,” 110–12. Cf. also, D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), and Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics*, rev. and expanded ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), passim.

⁴ Many of these “errors” are errors of excess; in other words, there are times and places when these approaches can be rightly used to clarify a word’s meaning. For instance, when a biblical author coins a term (i.e., creates a new word that has never been used before), the

1. a word always means what its root means (the etymological fallacy),
2. a word means everything it could mean in every place it occurs (illegitimate totality transfer),
3. a word's meaning in *later* history contributes significantly to its present meaning in a passage (semantic anachronism),
4. a word's meaning in *earlier* history contributes significantly to its present meaning in a passage (semantic obsolescence),
5. a word always has only one meaning and means the same thing in every passage (the prescriptive fallacy),
6. the study of any particular word is tantamount to a complete study of the idea that word represents (the word-idea fallacy), and
7. a word always has a very specific, inherent meaning apart from its context (the referential fallacy).⁵

Do not make the mistake of reading this list and thinking you understand the error described, if you have not ever devoted serious study to these fallacies. They are not easily grasped and require a great deal of subtle thought. For instance, the referential fallacy (fallacy 7 above) does *not* say that words have *no* meaning apart from their context; every word defines at least one or more semantic fields which differentiate it from thousands of other possible semantic fields. If this were not so, dictionaries would be an impossibility and communication would be virtually impossible,

etymology of that word is probably very important for determining the meaning of it. For an example of this, see the discussion of *μισθαποδοσία* later in this chapter.

⁵ Each of these mistakes is quite common and too complex to be explained in detail here, but I cannot emphasize enough the importance of making sure that you understand the error each of these brief statements describes and how to avoid it. The books and articles listed in n. 3 above are excellent resources for finding out about any of these fallacies that may be unfamiliar or confusing to you.

especially between those speaking different languages. But it *does* say that even the most concrete referents, a name for instance, can be seriously misunderstood without a context to determine its meaning. A friend of mine who does not have a college education once proved this point to me. In normal conversation, I mentioned my studies at Cambridge University, to which he replied that he too had gone to Cambridge ... but only long enough to change trains for Peterborough! Again, some study of words and language, and the way they work, will bring great reward.

But what are some of the *right things* to do with words? How does one do vocabulary study and use the results in such a way that the Word of God is made more understandable? Simply put, one asks the right questions. The first question one must ask is: Which words are worthy of particular study? The answer to this question requires that we divide the important words into two categories: (1) those words that are important for you the exegete and (2) those words that are important for the author.

Perhaps it is obvious to you that one should study terms that are important for the author, but at first glance it may seem illegitimate to study words *you* want to study. After all, aren't you then drifting away from the task of discovering what the author meant, the goal of exegesis, toward that of looking for what *you* want to find in the text? Not at all. To say that you are, confuses the setting of the parameters of a word study with the process of the word study itself. Words may be selected for study based on all sorts of motivations: the need of a congregation to hear teaching on a certain topic, your own desire to know what the Bible says about a certain subject, etc. The difference is this: after selecting the term you want to study, you are then obligated to find out what the *author* meant by that term in its biblical context. To do otherwise, simply to import your own theology or ideas into the word, is called *eisegesis*, the very opposite of exegesis; but your selecting the terms you want to study is merely using Scripture to find answers to the real questions you face.

So what sorts of words should you look for? Certainly the most important category of words are *theologically* or *ethically important* ones, such as παράβασις in Heb. 2:2 or σωτηρία in Heb. 2:3.⁶ Words that are *unclear and yet seem important for understanding the meaning of the passage*, like the words in the phrase ὁ δὲ ἀγγέλων λαληθεὶς λόγος in Heb. 2:2, are often ones you should further investigate. Words that seem important to the author may stand out in the passage because of their *repetition* (e.g., εἰσέρχομαι or κατάπαυσις in Heb. 3:12–4:11) or the prominence given them by their *symbolic or metaphorical content* (ἀρχιερεὺς in Heb. 4:14), their *position in a list* (all the words in the phrase θεμέλιον μετανοίας ἀπὸ νεκρῶν ἔργων in Heb. 6:1), their *inclusion in a summary sentence* (ὑπόστασις or ἔλεγχος in Heb. 11:1), or the use of some other means. *Extremely rare terms* or *terms that seem to have been coined by the author* (see the tables below) are also worthy of further attention.

After deciding which words are worthy of study, the exegete must ask the all-important question: What did the author mean by

⁶ Fee, *Exegesis*, 101, has an important warning in this regard: “Make a note of those words known ... to be theologically loaded. Do not necessarily assume you already know the meaning of ἐλπίς (hope), δικαιοσύνη (righteousness), ἀγάπη (love), χάρις (grace), etc. For example, what does ‘hope’ mean in Col. 1:27, or χάρις in 2 Cor. 1:15, or δικαιοσύνη in 1 Cor. 1:30? In these cases in particular it is important to know not only the word in general but also the context of the passage in particular.” An excellent example of this in Hebrews is the word σωτηρία, salvation, found in Heb. 2:3. Context is particularly important for getting the right meaning there, yet salvation is such a well-known word to us, we tend to assume that we know what it means in this context.

this term? Exegetes who ask this question, and ask it rigorously,⁷ will avoid a multitude of sins. This involves asking questions like Does this term have any special significance in the immediate context? Does the author seem to have a fondness for the term in the rest of his writing? Does he point in the passage to any important associated concepts that force us to take note of the term? Does he give us any clues to his defining or treating the term in a special way? Is there a biblical, philosophical, or historical significance to the term that is important for understanding its use in this context? Of course if the answer to any of these questions is yes, then a follow-up question is necessary: What is it that the author is trying to tell the reader by using this very special term? In other words, why did he use this word and not some other, and what did he mean by using it? These questions are necessary in order to determine whether one’s understanding of the passage can be enriched by doing further study of the word. Answers to them can best be found by beginning to make use of some of the plethora of tools available today for word study.

Doing Word Studies

The process of word study, like most tasks in exegesis, is time consuming but rewarding. You will find many treasures as you begin

⁷ By “rigorously,” I do not mean that the interpreter should try to do the impossible. We cannot “reproduce what the author must have been thinking at a given point or why he wrote. Rather, the interpreter’s goal is to ascertain what the writer wanted to communicate through the terms he chose for his message” (Bock, “Word Analysis,” 98 n. 1). I do mean that as we proceed with the task of exegesis, we should never stray from the question and should come back to it over and over again, asking: “Is this really what the author meant?”

to use the tools that are available to you, and you will bring immeasurable riches to those you teach from the fruit of these studies, as long as you use the tools wisely. Restraint is perhaps the first order of business at all times; remember, you are after the meaning the author intended as much as that is possible to find. You must adopt a healthy skepticism as you study, making sure that what you are learning is really useful to your listeners and not simply what you would like to find.

Word studies can be done for many purposes, as we saw above, but most purposes require the use of one of two types of word study: thematic study and expository study. Most of the process for doing the two types of studies is the same, but they start from different places. In a thematic study, one is interested in what the Bible or, more likely, a portion of the Bible has to say about a particular theme or idea. For instance, a pastor might decide to preach a series on *righteousness*. To accomplish this task, one would need to do word studies that relate to this theme. Expository study, on the other hand, may be done when a student of Scripture wants to know what a particular word means in a given passage. If asked to teach on Heb. 11:1, one would need to do an expository study of words like *ὑπόστασις* and *ἔλεγχος* and perhaps others. But what tools and procedures should one use for these two types of study?

Thematic Word Studies

The first thing one needs to do in a thematic study (after choosing the theme, of course!) is to limit the range of the study. Very few themes can be meaningfully traced through the whole Bible. To do this properly on the level at which the pastor or teacher should operate would take years and far too much work to make the task a reasonable option. So, for instance, to take our idea of doing a study of the concept of *righteousness*, one might want to limit the study to its use in the NT (a still almost impossible task) or in Paul (daunting yet) or Hebrews (yes, now we are getting somewhere!). A series on

“Righteousness in Hebrews” would not at all be impossible to handle.

We next move to the step of actually doing the word study. At this point, those who have done some biblical study might think: “Aha! I know what he’s going to advocate next. He’ll suggest that I take a concordance and look up all the occurrences in the Book of Hebrews of the word *δικαιοσύνη*, the Greek word for righteousness.” Good guess, and I will certainly advocate that shortly, but there is an important step or two that many people miss to their detriment by turning straight to the concordance.

First, without really needing another book, except perhaps a Greek dictionary, you must list any verb, adjective, adverb, and any other noun that shares a root with the noun you have chosen to study. These four parts of speech will often, if not always, be important elements for studying any concept in depth. The more concrete and specific the object, the less it is likely that all four parts of speech will be represented (there is no related adjective, adverb, or verb to be studied if your word study is “Abraham in the Book of Hebrews”!), but usually you will need to look up all four. In our case, the verb *δικαιοῦν* and the adverb *δικαίως* do not occur in Hebrews, but important verses would be missed if we did not look up the adjective *δίκαιος* and the related noun *δικαίωμα*.

Now are we ready for the concordance? Not yet! The first tool to be used in a thematic word study is not a concordance but a thesaurus or, better yet, the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* or, best of all, the *Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*. Don’t be scared off by the titles! A thesaurus should be at every pastor’s side already.⁸ It

⁸ The best thesaurus is still the granddaddy of them all: *Roget’s Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases*. Although many publishers offer this public-domain work, make sure to get a new one and to get the official version; there are many abridged and adapted editions out there, which are not as useful.

lists synonyms for almost every word imaginable and is extremely useful when preparing sermons (or writing a book!). It helps you find just the right word to express an idea or to smooth out your style and give it some diversity. It can help us in our study of righteousness in Hebrews, because the idea of righteousness may be expressed by more than just the word δικαιοσύνη and its cognates. One thesaurus entry gave several other related concepts worthy of study—holiness, purity, virtue, goodness, sanctity, and others. So word studies on these and similar terms might be in order. Here one must exercise some selectivity, since it would be impossible to study every synonym for *righteousness*. Curiosity tempered with common sense should guide the selection process.

But using a thesaurus can be cumbersome. After selecting the important linking concepts from the thesaurus, you must then find the Greek word that best translates those concepts and begin doing concordance work on each of the words. Also, a thesaurus is by its nature overly full in its entries. Its purpose is to give as many options as possible to the speaker or writer, and the time spent wading through its offerings in the interests of exegesis can be better spent. Thankfully, there are two excellent tools that can help cut short the process. If you can afford either or both of these books, or have access to them through a seminary or college library, make use of them and forget the thesaurus (for this purpose anyway).

Colin Brown, ed. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. 4 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975–86. (abbreviated *NIDNTT*)

Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds. *Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*. 2d ed. Vol. 1, *Introduction & Domains*; vol. 2, *Indices*. New York: United Bible Societies, 1989.

From *NIDNTT* and Louw and Nida’s lexicon, you can get an idea of the Greek words you will need to study in order to work on the theme of righteousness in Hebrews. You may settle on the nouns δικαιοσύνη, δικαίωμα (“regulation”), and εὐθύτης (“uprightness”);

the adjectives δίκαιος, ἔνδικος (“right, just”), and ἅγιος (“holy”); and the verb ἁγιάζειν (“to make holy”). How do you then go about doing your research on these words? If you are doing a thematic word study, it is now time to use the concordance to see when and where these words are used in Hebrews. You then begin to study each occurrence in context, and it is at this point that our two types of study, thematic and expositional, become one. When you begin to study words in their Scriptural contexts, you are doing expositional word study. Now a few words of warning about this kind of study.

Expositional Word Studies

In an expositional word study, while the goal of discerning the author’s meaning remains the same as in a thematic study, the steps taken are different. The parameters of the study are of course already set: one comes upon a word and wants to know what it means in its context. At this point it is crucial that we remember the fallacies listed above and carefully avoid them, while nevertheless employing the very books that could cause us to fall into their traps. Doing word study without going to the excesses denoted by those fallacies is both the challenge and the joy of word study. We cannot hope to reach the goal without plunging ahead. Like Odysseus, we must sail between Scylla and Charybdis; there is no other way home.

But isn’t this a little melodramatic? All of this talk about danger and sailing between Scylla and Charybdis (or should it be racing between Tyrannosaurus and Velociraptor to use a more contemporary myth?!) is overly cautious. Provided we understand from the warnings above what we should not do, can’t we just go ahead and complete our study, making sure to avoid those pitfalls?

This would be fine except for one thing: each fallacy listed above contains some truth and is the perfectly logical outcome, *not of the normal use of illegitimate categories for determining the meaning of a word, but rather of an excessive use of perfectly legitimate ones*. The meaning of a word in its context often does have something, if only very little, to do with its etymology (fallacy 1); it can have

different shades of meaning or even double meanings in any particular use (fallacy 2); its later and earlier meanings can be pointers to its meaning in the NT (fallacies 3 and 4); a word does have at least some basic range of meanings that distinguish it from other words (fallacies 5 and 7); and one word and its cognates can be the overwhelmingly agreed upon conveyor of a particular idea (fallacy 6). So we must study our word both *diachronically* and *synchronically*, looking both at the history of the word with its usage and changes through time (diachronic) and at the literary relationships the word has, particularly in its context in Hebrews but also in related literature of the time (synchronic).⁹ When the two approaches conflict, priority certainly must be given to the contemporary context of the word, but we throw the baby out with the bath water if we ignore a word's prior history and the insights we can gain from studying it.

So we come to the study of our word in context. The first order of business is to see where else in Hebrews the word is used. Concordances are the tools for that.

Using a Concordance

A concordance is an alphabetical listing of all of the words in a given text.¹⁰ Under each word is a list of references where the word can be found in the text and usually a partial quotation of each reference. Some concordances contain other information, such as the total number of times a word occurs in the text or perhaps footnote

⁹ For more on diachronic and synchronic analysis of words, see Silva, *Biblical Words*, passim. His treatment is very balanced, readable and yet thorough.

¹⁰ There are concordances available not only for the Bible but for many bodies of ancient literature (e.g., the works of Josephus and Philo) as well as for some more modern ones (e.g., Shakespeare, Milton).

and reference schemes that cross-reference the text with other texts or point out special phrases in which the word occurs regularly.¹¹

Not too many years ago, discussing concordances was a very simple matter. If you used English, you used one of three concordances, each based on the Authorized, or King James, Version. They were painstakingly compiled by hand by three men named Young, Strong, and Cruden, and the old joke ran that if you were young, you used Young's; if you were strong, you used Strong's; and if you were ... well, let's just say more people used Young's and Strong's than Cruden's. But in fact, Young's and Strong's concordances *were* better than Cruden's, because they devised ingenious ways of helping someone without any knowledge of the original languages of Scripture get at the different Greek and Hebrew words underlying the English translation. Under the main entry for each English word, Young subdivided the references based on the Hebrew or Greek word(s) lying behind that English word. Strong, on the other hand, listed all the references consecutively for each English word, regardless of the different underlying Greek or Hebrew word. Then he assigned a number to each Greek or Hebrew word and attached it to the corresponding English word used to translate that Greek or Hebrew word. In an appendix he listed all the Greek and Hebrew words by their number and defined them. Both systems have been refined and incorporated into other concordances and word study tools over the years and are still used with profit by many today, as are the concordances themselves.

¹¹ For example, the famous concordance for the Septuagint, Edwin Hatch and Henry A. Redpath, eds., *A Concordance to the Septuagint and the Other Greek Versions of the Old Testament, Including the Apocryphal Books*. 2 Vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1897; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), is painstakingly cross-referenced, giving the Hebrew word that lies behind each Greek word, when that can be determined.

If you could read Greek, until relatively recently the only concordance option you had was Moulton and Geden. Today, however, there are several other Greek concordances available for the NT, but in addition to Moulton and Geden, there are really only two that the student should know about.

- Kurt Aland, ed. *Vollständige Konkordanz zum griechischen Neuen Testament*. Band 1, Teil 1 (A–Λ), Teil 2 (M–Ω); Band 2, *Spezialübersichten*. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1978, 1983.
- H. Bachmann and W. A. Slaby, eds. *Computer–Konkordanz zum Novum Testamentum Graece*. 2d ed. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1985.
- W. F. Moulton, A. S. Geden, and H. K. Moulton, eds. *A Concordance to the Greek New Testament*. 5th ed. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1978.

The onset of computers has changed the world of biblical research, and we have not yet seen the end of the changes. Many of the best programs are still too expensive, complicated, and technical (and the lesser ones too deficient) for normal Bible study use, but that situation is changing fast. For now, however, the book remains the easiest and most sure method for doing concordance work on the NT.¹²

¹² Gary M. Burge, *Interpreting the Gospel of John*, *Guides to New Testament Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 132–34, has a very helpful summary of the programs that were available for both IBM and Macintosh computers as of 1992. For more-recent information on what is available for computer-aided biblical research, see *Software for Theologians: A Selection* (<http://www.pitts.emory.edu/bob/theosoft.html>). A few of the more popular programs are reviewed at *Bible-Search Software for Scholarly Research* (<http://www.chorus.cycor.ca/hahne/reviews.html>). For some cautions when using Bible-search software for scholarly research, see Harry Hahne, “Interpretive Implications of Using Bible-Search Software

The use one makes of a concordance depends entirely on the user. You may use it simply to look up references, or you may use all the appendices and special features of the volume. As you use the concordance and begin to look at the way a particular word is used in other contexts, I suggest that you take notes—recording observations, questions, connections, and anything else that comes to mind from reading the text. You might want to use a sheet with two columns for each word you are researching—one column for the reference where the word is found and one for your notes.¹³ This should help a great deal, but after doing what you can to understand the word in its context using only the text itself, you will probably find that you long for a little more knowledge of the word’s history and its use in other contexts. That is the job of the Greek language dictionary.

Greek Lexicons and Their Relevance

If a word derives its meaning from its context, what good are dictionaries, especially the extensive multivolume works available to NT students today? Isn’t this just so much fruitless effort—all these long, drawn out articles on the classical uses of a word, its meaning in other places in the NT, its use in the LXX, and the meanings of its Hebrew and Aramaic equivalents in the OT and in writings contemporary to the NT? In fact, worse than being useless, aren’t studies like this damaging to biblical study, misleading one into

for New Testament Grammatical Analysis” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, 24 November 1994); available online at <http://www.chorus.cycor.ca/hahne/ntgram.html>.

¹³ Burge, *John*, 138–39, shows a three-column format you may want to follow in taking your notes. His center column includes word associations that any particular reference might display.

LXX Septuagint
OT Old Testament

thinking that a word has a “meaning” apart from its context and causing one to fall into one or more of the fallacies warned against above?

We attempted to answer this objection earlier. There we acknowledged briefly that if it came down to choosing between what a word seems to mean in its immediate context versus what it may have meant generally in the culture or in its etymology or history, then one should certainly choose contextual evidence over evidence from outside the text. Context determines the clearest, final meaning of a word, as I illustrated by the two ways one could take the phrase “go to Cambridge.” But we also said that each of the fallacies mentioned above has a grain of truth in it and that to ignore all the extensive diachronic research when doing our Bible study would be a great mistake. Why is that?

The answer lies in the questions one naturally and rightly asks when one comes to a text to discover its meaning.¹⁴ First of all, the reason one often consults a dictionary to find out the meaning of a word is because the context has failed us: we do not know what the word means, even though we have all the surrounding words, indeed the context of the entire book at our service. Something is lacking in the context that keeps understanding at bay; in fact, we often speak of the term “standing out” because it is not readily apparent to us how it fits with the rest of the sentence to produce a clear and reasonable thought.

¹⁴ *Meaning* is one of those very difficult words that defies simple definition when one begins to analyze it closely. It is like the old saw about art: nobody can define it, but everybody knows what it is. Linguists rightly insist that every word has several different kinds of meaning. Bock, “Word Analysis,” 100–103, has given an excellent, brief list and explanation of such different kinds of meaning as *encyclopedic meaning*, *significance meaning*, and *figurative meaning* with footnotes guiding the student to further discussion of this topic.

The wondrous thing is that when we look up the word in a dictionary, the thought is often completed for us and suddenly the meaning of the sentence becomes clear. This confirms our suspicions: words *do* have some sort of discernible content that results from the history of their usage and development over time, meaning that has been assigned to that set of symbols—whether by convention, accident, or history—but meaning nevertheless. That content is certainly more limited than some think, and of course it can and does change over time, but nevertheless the word in its normal use¹⁵ does define some range of ideas that distinguishes it from a huge number of other terms. If I use the word *mountain* without any context, the person who hears me may think of the Alps while I think of the Blue Ridge mountains of Virginia, but neither one of us thinks of a dog or an egg.

But is this the only useful function a dictionary serves? Do we only benefit from a brief listing of the possible meanings of words, just picking up enough meaning from the list to fit the word back into the context from which it came and discern its fuller content there? This is a more difficult question and depends on the word used, the intentions and typical literary conventions of the author, and even on the understanding of the community for which the author was writing and how they might have understood the word. If the word is a simple, straightforward signifier (like our word *mountain* in the last paragraph), often a simple dictionary definition is enough to understand it in its context and is all one should attempt to read into its meaning.

But if the word is a complex theological term, fraught with cultural or social meaning or often discussed and used in a wide

¹⁵ By “normal,” I mean uses that pertain to what is usually called the “literal” sense of the word, rather than its “figurative” or “metaphorical” sense. A word can be made to mean virtually *anything* when it is used figuratively, but this is usually readily apparent to the hearer or reader.

range of writings, then we may need to know much more before we can understand it properly in its context. In a way, we are still only bringing a certain “dictionary definition” to the context, but that definition is much more rich and informed than a simple one- or two-word definition would imply. Here even the author’s conscious intention recedes somewhat into the background. Paul did not use the word *holiness* in a vacuum but as a first-century Jewish Pharisee, shaped by the OT and first-century Judaistic practice. What would the word have meant to him—a meaning not even he was aware of but that we need consciously to address?

Of course we need to take into account his conscious intentions too. Most of the NT was not written haphazardly without any thought as to the words selected and the forms used. These men were handling the Word of Truth, and it is apparent that this often moved them carefully and consciously to select the words they used for just the right effect, because they understood the seriousness of their task.

The last reason the Greek dictionary is a book worth using for more than just basic meanings is that the words in the NT were used to communicate truth to different groups of people with all their various understandings and backgrounds. First-century audiences would have automatically understood certain things by the words the authors of the NT used, and if we are not aware of these nuances, we are in danger of missing what we need to know to interpret a passage properly.

Let’s return to Hebrews and our word *righteousness* for a moment. The word could mean a lot of different things in the ancient world, and there were some relatively serious differences between a Jewish understanding of the term and a Hellenistic one. This distinction has sometimes been overdrawn, to be sure, but it nevertheless holds true that a pagan understanding of righteousness is something inherent to humans, related to their responsibility to others and to accepting their role in society and fulfilling it. It had “the idea of conformity to a standard ... and the standard was

primarily that of social obligation.”¹⁶ In Jewish thought, on the other hand, righteousness has to do with being rightly related to God—with understanding and holding covenant loyalty; loving God with all one’s heart, mind, and strength; and being obedient to the covenant God had made through the law. It was a word that could be, and very often was, used to refer to God and his loyalty to his covenant promises and obligations, whereas in classical thought, it was a purely human characteristic.

Without grasping these and other important distinguishing aspects of the word, it is virtually impossible to understand some statements in Hebrews. In the quotation of Ps. 45:7 at Heb. 1:9 (“You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness”), the covenant promise of the Son’s victory and enthronement is the focus of the psalm, within the context of the Son’s also being God who reigns in covenant righteousness. The statement about Noah becoming “an heir of the righteousness that is according to faith” (Heb. 11:7) is a striking example that only makes sense within a Jewish context. Noah obeyed the warning God had given him because of his covenant loyalty to the statements of God which flowed from his relationship of trust in him. His covenant loyalty to God was so great that it clearly transcended his relationship to society, and therein the world was condemned (Heb. 11:7). If δικαιοσύνη had to do with social obligation here, the sentence would be meaningless.

So there are many reasons to use the resources that scholars have developed to explain the Greek language. In English there are five books—or more accurately in most cases, sets of books—that stand out among the many that scholars have compiled for understanding the words of the Greek NT. Each of them, with the possible exception of BAGD, is extremely easy to use, even if you have very

¹⁶ Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975–86), 3:358.

little knowledge of Greek. But each has a different enough twist in what they offer the student, that no one of them makes any of the others redundant. They are listed in alphabetical order by author or editor.

Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds. *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*. 3 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990–93. (abbreviated *EDNT*)

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. (abbreviated *BAGD*)

Colin Brown, ed. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. 4 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975–86. (abbreviated *NIDNTT*)

Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76. (abbreviated *TDNT*)

Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds. *Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*. 2d ed. Vol. 1, *Introduction & Domains*; vol. 2, *Indices*. New York: United Bible Societies, 1989.

This is not the place to go into the particular use of each of these works.¹⁷ Suffice it to say that *BAGD* and the one by Louw and Nida are basic lexicons, while the other three are multivolume encyclopedic dictionaries each with its own strengths and weaknesses. This distinction is not perfect since even the “basic” lexicons have a great deal of information and a number of advanced uses, but it is nevertheless a helpful one as we will see, if for no other reason than to distinguish the relatively small and inexpensive tools from the large and expensive ones. Regardless of which lexicons we

¹⁷ For more information on using these works for word study, see Bock, “Word Analysis.”

use, we still must decide what sorts of words we should examine in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

Notes on the Vocabulary of Hebrews

The author of Hebrews used a very distinctive and “literary” vocabulary, compared with many of the other authors of the NT. Hebrews has 131 words (excluding proper names) not found anywhere else in the Greek NT and sixty-four more that are found in only one other NT book.¹⁸ In addition, Hebrews has an incredible eight absolute hapax legomena (i.e., words that do not appear in any Greek writing prior to the Book of Hebrews),¹⁹ which therefore have apparently been coined by the author.²⁰ Attridge rather tamely says

¹⁸ Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 21, apparently loosely following Ceslas Spicq, *L’Épître aux Hébreux*, 2 vols., Études bibliques (Paris: Gabalda, 1952–53), 1:157 (who says there are 152), puts the number of NT hapax legomena at “some 150.” I counted the hapax legomena listed in Kurt Aland, ed., *Vollständige Konkordanz zum griechischen Neuen Testament*, 2 vols. (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1978, 1983), 2:457–58, and got 131. Attridge, again probably following Spicq, puts the number of shared-once words at ninety; I counted them using Robert Morgenthaler, *Statistik des neutestamentlichen Wortschatzes* (Frankfurt: 1958), to arrive at my figure of sixty-four.

¹⁹ Both Attridge (*Hebrews*, 21 n. 173) and Spicq (*Hébreux*, 1:157) list ten absolute ἡπαξ λεγόμενα, but εὐποιΐα and μετριοπαθέω are found in several places in non-Christian writers contemporary with the NT (e.g., Josephus *Antiquities* 2:261 for εὐποιΐα and 12:128 for μετριοπαθέω), so I did not include them in my count or list them in the table below (pp. 138–39).

²⁰ Of course we cannot be absolutely sure that the author coined the terms; they could have been in current use and simply were not written down anywhere, or they may have appeared in one or more of the many thousands of books written in classical antiquity that are

of these facts: “The proportion of unique vocabulary is larger here [in Hebrews] than in the rest of the epistolary literature of the New Testament and bespeaks the author’s sound literary education,”²¹ but the presence of so many unique words says something much more significant. The author with whom we are dealing is boldly creative. Not only are several of his themes striking in their unique treatment vis-à-vis the rest of the NT and the whole early church as we know it, but his very language, while replete with well-known literary forms and vocabulary, is also impressively inventive.

More will be said in chapter 8 about rhetorical devices related to the vocabulary of Hebrews—flourishes such as alliteration and assonance—but it will suffice to say now that the vocabulary of Hebrews points to a readership that was relatively literate. Hebrews contains a high proportion of multisyllabic words and somewhat complicated grammatical forms, especially for the NT, and the high number of rare words seems to assume a widely read audience. As we shall see, the author draws on widely differing areas of experience for the metaphors he uses—including the spheres of education, agriculture, architecture, seafaring, law, athletics, and the cultus—though in fairness, most of these fields would not have been completely unfamiliar to the common folk. It is important to note that unlike many other ancient authors, he quotes no other work but the OT, which would of course have been familiar to even the most uneducated Jewish audience. Nevertheless, the sophisticated way in which he handles the OT and the very fact that he uses the LXX for his quotations points to the fact that at least some of his readership were educated people.

The following tables list some of the words in Hebrews that would reward further study. There are of course many more words in Hebrews worth studying, some more important than these. As you

now lost to us. Nevertheless, it is a striking figure under any circumstances.

²¹ *Hebrews*, 21.

seek to interpret a passage, interesting words will stand out, and you will want to pursue them. I have put together these tables both because they contain information that is hard to obtain elsewhere and because I hope they will spark new ways to think about what sorts of words are worthy of study. The first table lists words that are important for the interpretation of Hebrews as a whole because of their frequency and their apparent interest to the author of Hebrews. The second table lists the words that were apparently coined by the author, with their location and translation. I then give some suggestions on their meanings in context.

Frequency Table of Key Words in Hebrews

Generally, this table lists the significant words that appear ten or more times in Hebrews. It does not list every word that appears that frequently, because many are not really significant for one reason or another. For example, the table omits all prepositions, articles, conjunctions, pronouns, and particles, as well as words that appear so frequently everywhere that they are not really meaningful for word study (e.g., the verb “to be” [εἶναι], θεός, etc.). Limiting the frequency to ten or more is admittedly arbitrary, and in fact in one case (τελειοῦν) I have broken my own rule because the word seemed worthy of inclusion in the list. Some interesting words get left out (e.g., ἅπαξ occurs eight times out of only fourteen in the whole NT!), but that shouldn’t keep you from studying them too! The break had to be somewhere.

Greek Word	Translation	Occurrences in Hebrews	Occurrences in the NT
Ἀβραάμ	Abraham	10	73
ἄγγελος	angel	13	175
ἅγιος	holy	19	233
αἷμα	blood	21	97
αἰών	age, world	15	123

ἀμαρτία	sin	25	173
ἀρχιερεύς	high priest	17	122
γῆ	earth	11	248
διαθήκη	covenant	17	33
εἰσερχεσθαι	to enter into	17	192
ἐπαγγελία	promise	14	52
ζῆν	to live	12	140
ἡμέρα	today	18	388
θάνατος	death	10	120
θυσία	sacrifice, offering	15	28
ἱερεύς	priest	14	31
καρδία	heart	11	156
κρείττων/κρείσσω	better, preferable	13	19
ν			
λαλεῖν	to speak	16	298
λαμβάνειν	to receive, take	17	259
λαός	people	13	141
λόγος	word	12	331
Μωϋσῆς	Moses	11	79
νόμος	law	14	191
οἶκος	house	11	112
οὐρανός	heaven	10	272
πίστις	faith	32	243
ποιεῖν	to do, make	19	565
προσφέρειν	to bring, offer	20	47
σκηνή	tent, tabernacle	10	20
τελειοῦν	to complete,	9	23

	fulfill		
υἱός	son	24	375
χωρίς	apart from, separately	13	41

Words Coined by the Author of Hebrews

There are much fuller discussions of each of these terms in the commentaries. My comments here will simply explain what the author was trying to accomplish by coining a new word. As you will see, these words are not necessarily notable for their theological import, but they are sometimes important pointers to the author's style and to some of the rhetorical devices he uses in his letter.

Reference	Greek Word	Translation
7:3	ἀγενεαλόγητος	without genealogy
9:22	αἵματεκχυσία	blood-pouring, blood-sprinkling
12:1	εὐπερίστατος	easily besets
2:2; 10:35; 11:26	μισθαποδοσία	payment of wages, reward, penalty
11:6	μισθαποδότης	payer of wages, rewarder
11:28	πρόσχυσις	sprinkling, pouring
11:25	συγκακουχέομαι	suffer, be mistreated with (someone)
12:2	τελειωτής	perfecter, completer

The following discussions are not comprehensive; they are meant to provide some reasons why these particular words were coined and to give some guidelines on what is notable about them. Coined expressions sometimes make good preaching points because their meanings do often come directly from their etymologies. The problem is that in the sentence the *meaning* of the coined word or expression may be secondary. Often these expressions are brought in

for stylistic reasons and contribute more to the sentence that way. Sometimes, of course, a coined word's etymological content is important. But even if it is not, stylistic significance can be every bit as interesting and helpful to a congregation as etymological information would have been. The fact that a word has been coined by the author, for whatever reason, can contribute a great deal to one's understanding of a sentence and should be included when teaching a passage.

ἀγενεαλόγητος (7:3)

This word appears in one of the most consciously rhetorical passages in the book, so stylized in fact that scholars often think there is some sort of hymn behind the passage. It seems to have been coined for alliterative purposes: ἀπάτωρ, ἀμήτωρ, and the present word appear in a list together and all emphasize the suprahuman nature of Melchizedek. This is a particularly effective device aurally and so demonstrates the sermonic quality of the text at this point.

αἵματεκχυσία (9:22)

This word refers to the sprinkling or pouring out of the blood onto the altar, not to the actual death of the animal as has often been implied (cf. NIV “the shedding of blood”). Rhetoric plays an important part here, too. The author had plenty of ways to say “pouring out of blood,” but his coining of this term helped him create a rhythm in Greek that makes the clause a memorable proverb. A rough English equivalent for the clause where the word appears (χωρὶς αἵματεκχυσίας οὐ γίνεται ἄφεσις) might be: “No sprinkling of the blood, no forgiving of the sin.”

εὐπερίστατος (12:1)

This is a difficult term that defies easy translation,²² in addition to being textually suspect (see table, p. 107 above). It seems to point to something that surrounds and constricts us, contrasting with the runner's need to be free of encumbrances. Sin is the source of “every weight” mentioned in the first part of the verse, and εὐπερίστατος might have been coined to avoid having to use an entire phrase as an adjective. It helps focus the reader's attention on the word ἁμαρτία (sin) as the weight that restricts the runner.

μισθαποδοσία (2:2; 10:35; 11:26)

This term seems to be a special favorite of the author since he coins it in chapter 2, uses it twice more later, and also coins a spin-off of it (the next word in this list, μισθαποδοτής)! Commentators have made very little out of the fact that the word is used negatively in 2:2 and positively in 10:35 and 11:26, but the first is a remarkably ironic use of a very positive word etymologically to describe a very great evil in the author's mind. The word probably comes from combining μισθός (pay, wages) with ἀπόδοσις (payment, recompense), both terms that could be used negatively but were generally positive. In fact they are sometimes used together in Greek to express the idea of payment of wages.²³ “By coining the term μισθαποδοσία, ‘punishment as reward,’ the writer arrests the attention of his hearers and reminds them that carelessness and contempt for God's revelation under the old covenant brought in its wake just and appropriate punishment.”²⁴

²² Cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 336.

²³ Cf. Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian War* 8.85.3.

²⁴ William L. Lane, *Hebrews*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1991), 1:38.

In both 10:35 and 11:26, it is used in a positive way as one would expect. In 10:35, alliteration with the adjective *μεγάλην* aurally emphasizes the worthiness of the confidence the author is trying to encourage his readers to hold on to. He uses the coined expression because of the power it gives the whole phrase in the hearing of his congregation, and he carries this over into the written form of his sermon.²⁵ In 11:26, Moses is said to have been willing to suffer abuse because “he was looking ahead to the reward.” Here the word has the spiritual connotation of a “reward in heaven.” Some think the author is drawing attention to the parallel between the experience of Moses and that of the community, which he describes in 10:32–39, since the word also occurs in 10:35.²⁶ This seems likely.

μισθαποδότης (11:6)

This word is a cognate of *μισθαποδοσία* and means something like “paymaster.” It implies a trustworthiness on God’s part to reward in accordance with OT promises (cf., e.g., Ps. 34:4, 10), but the word does not seem to be used with any special effect.

πρόσχυσις (11:28)

This noun is simply a substantive created from the verb *προσχεῖν*, frequently used in the LXX for the ritual of pouring or sprinkling the blood of a sacrificial lamb or goat on the altar (cf., e.g., Lev. 9:12). Here of course it refers to the sprinkling of the blood on the doorposts in Egypt so that the firstborn of the Israelites would be kept safe from the angel of death (Exod. 12:7, 22). Once again the

²⁵ Remember that these letters were often read aloud in the congregation, and many ancients, even when reading to themselves, read their books aloud.

²⁶ Cf. Lane, *Hebrews*, 2:373–74, and James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1924), 181.

coining of the word may have an alliterative purpose for rhetorical effect. The first four important words of 11:28 all begin with the letter *π*, and the effect of reading the first half of the verse aloud is quite striking.

συγκακουχέομαι (11:25)

This word is also often ignored by commentators but has an important etymology. The verb *κακουχέομαι* is known well enough in secular Greek and means “to suffer mistreatment, to be tormented.” Our author uses it at 11:37 and again at 13:3, and it occurs interestingly in Greek papyri in marriage contracts, where the husband takes an oath not to abuse his wife.²⁷ The prefix *συγ-* (from the preposition *σύν*, “with”) creates a term that emphasizes the willingness of Moses to identify intimately with the people of God in their suffering in Egypt (cf. NRSV “to share ill-treatment with the people of God”). He does not shrink back from their plight or only stand up for them from afar, but he shares their plight with them as one of them.

τελειωτής (12:2)

This second hapax legomenon in two verses, and the sixth since Heb. 11:6, is one of the most interesting of all. It is a simple substantivizing of the verb *τελειοῦν* which means “to complete, finish, accomplish, perfect, or fulfill.” The author of Hebrews has used this verb eight times already in the epistle, most recently in the

²⁷ Cf. James H. Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament: Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-literary Sources* (1930; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), s.v. “κακουχέω.”

crucial summary statement of Heb. 11:40.²⁸ The noun derived from it forms the second half of a remarkably concise and thought-provoking double title for Jesus, “the pioneer (ἀρχηγός) and perfecter (τελειωτής) of our faith” (12:2 NRSV).

The noun seems to have been coined for at least two reasons. First, it echoes a favorite verb of the author and one he uses particularly prominently in Heb. 11:40 to speak in an oblique way of the perfection of Christians. Christ brings about that perfection by his actions and is thereby able to bring his people to perfection as they persevere in running the race with their eyes set on him. The substantive asserts that he is the very essence of that perfection, the great perfecter who accomplishes perfection for his people through his enduring of the cross.

A second, more subtle reason has to do with the other element of the pair, ἀρχηγός. Ἀρχ- and τελ- form the roots of many words, all having to do with “beginnings” and “endings,” and the author of Hebrews has juxtaposed these roots in several other places in Hebrews for rhetorical effect.²⁹ “Taking a clue from the writer’s interest in the notions of origin and completion, beginning and end, the predicates ἀρχηγός and τελειωτής suggest that Jesus is the initiator and head of the rank and file in the order of faith, just as he is the one who brought faith to its ultimate expression. ... The predicates express the conviction that from first to last Jesus exercised faith in an essential sense and brought it to its triumphant completion.”³⁰

²⁸ See the statistical table above where it is noted that it occurs nine times in Hebrews, out of a total of only twenty-three times in the whole NT.

²⁹ Lane, *Hebrews*, 2:411, draws attention to 3:14 (τὴν ἀρχὴν ... μέχρι τέλους) and 7:3 (ἀρχὴν ἡμερῶν ... ζωῆς τέλος).

³⁰ *Ibid.*

7

Grammar

In the last chapter, we began our study of the heart and soul of exegesis: the words of the text themselves. We started with what we might call the lifeblood of exegesis, vocabulary analysis. Blood left by itself, however, stagnates and dies; it requires the heart pumping it through the body’s system to dispense its life-giving nutrients. The heart of exegesis, the mechanism that gives life, or meaning, to a text, is grammar.

Words do not stand alone in conveying their meaning. They are involved in several different kinds of relationships with other words—relationships that we call phrases, clauses, and sentences. Understanding the connections is crucial for our doing proper exegesis of any text. The study of word relations is the study of the grammar or, more precisely, the syntax of a text.¹ This chapter will be devoted to learning ways to grasp the grammatical relationships in a passage. Mastering them brings a clarity and a certainty to exegesis that preachers and teachers need in order to execute their calling faithfully. The next chapter will be devoted to the distinctive grammatical constructions, the style, of our author, a subject more subtle in some ways but important in its own right. We will look at this subject using categories that differentiate between *oral* stylistic

¹ Syntax is technically a subset of grammar. For the most part we will be using the words syntax and grammar as synonyms in our discussion, since the other major subset of grammar, morphology, is not a concern of this volume.

devices and *written* ones, but since both involve grammar, the two are properly looked at together.

Grammatical Study

No subject strikes fear into the heart of a student, or pastor or teacher for that matter, like being told that they need to understand grammar. Palms begin to sweat, eyes dart nervously from side to side, general internal mayhem is set loose. This ought not to be the case, because grammar is part and parcel of communication, and communication is essential to our functioning well as human beings. In other words, grammar has its rules, but they are merely descriptive of a deeper reality, the very structure of how we communicate, and that deep structure, those patterns of thought that bubble to the surface as language, are part of who we are. We should not fear grammar; in a sense we create and use it every day.

But that is not the grammar that bothers us. The grammar we deplore is that activity thrust upon us in our early teens—the memorization of rules about verb endings, relative pronouns, correlative clauses, and the like. It wasn't that grammar didn't make any sense or that it was particularly difficult. It was more that it seemed so useless and boring. We knew how to speak and how to write well enough. Why did we have to know that "his" was the "third person singular masculine possessive pronoun," when we knew instinctively that the word always referred to somebody other than ourselves, whom we were not addressing, that the person was one person and not a group, that he was male, and that we used the word "his" when we wanted to tell someone that this person owned or possessed something?

Well, we didn't have to know the grammatical name for "his," that's true, at least as long as we were using the language we grew up speaking. When it came time to understand a *foreign* language, however, it was a different story. Then all of a sudden the vocabulary of syntactical relations became very handy indeed. It became important, in fact essential, to know what a subordinate clause was in

English so we could recognize a subordinate clause in French, Spanish, or German as the case may be. Even here, the better way to learn the language was to go to a country where it was spoken and to study it while talking with its native speakers. In the case of ancient Greek, though, this is not possible.

So we are stuck, needing to relearn in many cases what we should have learned so well in school that it would be second nature to us now. Nevertheless, as with the use of the vocabulary books we studied above, a little work can take you a long way.

Parts of Speech and Grammatical Categories

We will not spend a long time on the basics of grammar since very competent reviews of basic English grammar for those learning Greek are available.² Grammar begins by assigning a name to every possible function a word can have in a sentence. These names are collectively called the *parts of speech*, and consist of eight classifications:

1. noun—the name of a thing
2. pronoun—a word used in place of a noun
3. adjective—a word that qualifies a noun³
4. verb—a word that makes a statement, asks a question, or gives a command about some person or thing

² The very best review in an amazingly brief space is the first fifteen pages of J. W. Wenham, *The Elements of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965). J. Harold Greenlee, *A Concise Exegetical Grammar of New Testament Greek*, 5th ed. rev. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) also explains English grammar in a round about way by defining the terms it uses, but it is so sparse in its presentation that it is not really a good way to review English grammar.

³ The article, in English classified as either *definite* ("the") or *indefinite* ("a, an"), is actually an adjective but is used so frequently that it sometimes receives its own classification.

5. adverb—a word that qualifies a verb, an adjective, or another adverb
6. preposition—a word joined to a noun or pronoun to show its relation to something else
7. conjunction—a word that joins two sentences, clauses, or words
8. interjection—an expression of feeling, bearing no syntactical relation to other words

There are many different subcategories within these that are helpful to know, but these will suffice to get you started in studying syntax, and it really is necessary to memorize them, if you are not yet familiar with them. An inability to place any word in one of these groups will keep you from doing even basic exegesis; conversely, speed and facility in handling them will greatly increase your ability.

These parts of speech make up groupings of words (phrases, clauses, and sentences) by which we communicate with one another. Each of these groups has myriad subgroups, too, and defining them at even a basic level is difficult to do without introducing ever more complex categories. Fundamentally, the three groupings represent three different levels of completeness of thought. *Phrases* are the least complete; they may contain a verb, but only an infinitive or participle, types of verbs that are incomplete by themselves. A *clause* contains a finite verb and a subject, but it may be dependent on other clauses and phrases to make up a complete thought. The *sentence* expresses a complete thought and is the culmination of the syntactical chain. Larger groups of words (i.e., groups of sentences) form a *paragraph*, but a paragraph is a literary category more than a syntactical one. We will go no higher than sentences in this chapter.

How do we analyze sentences, then, in order to understand better the meaning of a passage? The first and most important skill to develop for that purpose is diagramming. We will discuss that first. The student should also know how to use the many grammatical tools that are available for investigating the text, and the second part of the chapter will be given over to developing that skill.

Diagramming

In the eighth grade, I had an English teacher who was dean of the junior high (this was before the days of “middle” schools). He was also the varsity track coach. He had one characteristic that carried over between all three vocations: he believed in the usefulness of discipline. Once, during a particularly rowdy study hall, when we had been warned several times to stop the noise, he took everyone in the study hall down to his office, lined us up in the hallway outside one office door, opened it and another door, and paraded each of us through his office for two applications of his “board of education” to our “seats of learning.” The study hall was very quiet after that ... at least for a few days. In track he was known for his brutal practices, but he was also loved for the time he spent with each team member, going over technique, analyzing, explaining, encouraging.

In his English class he believed in discipline, too, and his penchant for it came out in his insistence that we diagram sentences. Diagram, diagram, diagram. When we put the line in the wrong place, failed to put in the article, coordinated clauses when we should have subordinated them or vice versa, we did the assignment over. The problem was—as opposed to his spanking us when we were noisy or making the track team run more sprints at the end of practice—he never explained, as far as I can remember, *why* we had to learn diagramming in the first place. Who cares if a straight line separates the direct object from the verb, while a slanted line indicates a predicate nominative or predicate adjective? What difference will it make in fifteen years, if I put a prepositional phrase in the wrong place, having it modify an adverb when it should be modifying a participle? Do we really have to go again through the torture of eighth grade grammar, long forgotten for most of us or, for some of us with poorer teachers, never learned? The answer, with full sympathy for the unmotivated, is a qualified yes for three reasons.

First, diagramming forces us to think *closely* about the text. This is another way of saying that it makes us slow down to analyze a text

and think about what part of speech each word is and how it is related to other words, where its major relationships are to be found, etc. When we are made to think carefully about every word and its function in the sentence, we come across surprising truths that we might have missed if we had not diagrammed the sentence. The very first words of Hebrews illustrate this well.

Hebrews begins with a stunning sentence, full of importance theologically, structurally, and formally. Its first two key words, *πολυμερῶς* and *πολυτρόπως*, are obviously a rhetorical device, powerfully getting the attention of the listener by the reduplication of the *πολυ-* prefix. But attention to this and other features of the words could cause us to miss the fact that both are adverbs modifying the participle *λαλήσας*, and as adverbs, they give us important information—not primarily about God or the prophets or the fathers (the nouns in the clause), but about the fact that God *spoke* in the past. They do not really tell us much about the ways in which he spoke. In fact, commentators are divided both about whether these words should be taken as telling us something positive or negative about the old way God spoke and about whether they describe the content or the forms of God’s message. But they do emphasize the fact that God *spoke* and, by contrast with the next clause, that he has spoken in the lifetime of the author and his readers in a final and singular way in Christ. In preaching and teaching this passage, then, we could stress that this first part of the introductory sentence of Hebrews emphasizes the *activity* of God in Christ, whereas the second part emphasizes the *being* of God in Christ. There is a whole sermon on the act of revelation here, and all from knowing that these two words are adverbs pointing to the participle “spoke”!

Second, the act of diagramming a sentence forces us to think *cohesively* about a text. Not only does it help us to think of the part of speech that a word might be and therefore push us to connect that word with its particular function in the sentence, it causes us to think of the whole structure of a sentence at the same time. Diagramming answers questions such as what was most important for the author

(usually the substance of the *main*, that is, most important, clause), what subsidiary things he has to say about this main thought, or what unusual grammatical structures he has used in order to emphasize something in the sentence. In short it helps us to bring order or priority to the thought of the author. Often the ideas to which diagramming leads us will become the major points of our sermon or teaching session, because using them in this way simply links what we say that much more closely with what the Word of God says.⁴

Third, diagramming can help us to think *connectedly* about a text by giving us a visual schematic that tells us immediately where the connections are in the sentence and how things are joined to one another. This is in many ways a restatement of our point about thinking cohesively, but it involves our ability to *visualize*, adding another weapon to our discursive arsenal as we attempt to persuade the passage to unlock its meaning for us. Seeing an entire sentence diagrammed aids us in finding where the author has broken the “rules” of grammar or where we may have laid more stress on something in a sentence than we should have.

An excellent example again comes from the opening sentence of Hebrews. Should we consider the two halves of the sentence, the part about God speaking in Christ and the part about Christ’s being and activity, as equal parts? The second part of the sentence is actually part of a lengthy subordinate clause; doesn’t this imply that God’s revelation having come in Christ is somehow more important for the author than who that revelatory Son is and what he has done? Diagramming at least makes us aware of the problem, whereas without diagramming and on the basis of the content of the sentence, we might have too easily divided the introduction into equal halves.

⁴ It is important to clarify that I am not advocating ascending into the pulpit and lecturing on gerundive participles! The key to using grammar in preaching is to use it illustratively, having based your main points on it.

We must now wonder whether or not the author intended us to give greater weight to the first part of the introduction.

If a last reason is needed for diagramming, there is the high degree of unanimity among those who should know that diagramming is an excellent and important tool for getting at the meaning of any passage of Scripture. Four volumes, for instance, as well as the introductory volume in this series, spend a great deal of time explaining how to diagram a NT sentence and advocating the process enthusiastically.⁵

A Diagram of Hebrews 4:12

The best way to learn how to diagram a sentence is simply to do it. There are several fairly thorough guides to diagramming, and I would suggest that, if you are not already used to it, you have one or more of these resources available for the more esoteric problems one sometimes runs into when diagramming a passage.⁶ We will diagram

⁵ See Scot McKnight, “New Testament Greek Grammatical Analysis,” in *Introducing New Testament Interpretation*, ed. Scot McKnight, Guides to New Testament Exegesis (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 89–94; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, Guides to New Testament Exegesis (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 77–96; Scot McKnight, *Interpreting the Synoptic Gospels*, Guides to New Testament Exegesis (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 51–56; J. Ramsey Michaels, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, Guides to New Testament Exegesis (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 89–94. Gary M. Burge, *Interpreting the Gospel of John*, Guides to New Testament Exegesis (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), does not do any diagramming but mentions very positively both grammatical diagramming and Schreiner’s “argument diagramming” (cf. pp. 125 and 107, respectively).

⁶ For more detail and sophistication in diagramming than is possible here, see Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers

a well-known verse of Hebrews, just to illustrate how diagramming can help you make connections that enrich your understanding of a passage.⁷

4:12: Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart (NRSV).

4:12: Ζῶν γὰρ ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἐνεργῆς καὶ τομώτερος ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν μάχαιραν δίστομον καὶ διϊκνούμενος ἄχρι μερισμοῦ ψυχῆς καὶ πνεύματος, ἄρμῶν τε καὶ μυελῶν, καὶ κριτικὸς ἐνθυμήσεων καὶ ἐννοιῶν καρδίας .

Though it would certainly be a worthwhile exercise, I will not go through a step-by-step analysis of how I came up with every detail of the above diagram. There are some basic rules to follow, however. First, always establish what the subject and predicate of the sentence are. In this verse, the subject is very brief and the predicate extensive, but in other sentences the roles could just as easily be reversed. Second, establish what the primary noun in the subject is, if it has a primary noun, and what the main verb in the predicate is, if it has a main verb. After establishing these, one generally looks for direct and indirect objects and any other elements playing a key role in the sentence. After these steps, it becomes easier to find a place for the remaining elements in the sentence.

Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1991), 27–35, and especially Gordon D. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 65–80. Schreiner, *Pauline Epistles*, 79–94, does a very thorough job with examples from all over the NT. See also L. L. Kantzenwein, *Diagrammatical Analysis*, rev. ed. (Winona Lake, Ind.: BMH Books, 1985), and the books mentioned in n. ⁵.

⁷ Hebrews 4:12 is actually just the first of two coordinate clauses in one full sentence encompassing all of Heb. 4:12–13. In the interest of brevity, we are only diagramming v. 12, but normally one should diagram complete sentences to get the full impact of what an author is saying.

Before we look at some of the implications of this diagram, one last word of caution. There is nothing sacred about this diagram. As we shall see, there may be real cause for disagreement with some of its conclusions. Nevertheless, as we look at some of the diagram's implications, my hope is that you will see some of the benefits gained from going through this exercise.

The first thing to notice is that the main clause points us to the main thought of the author. As we said above, we should always start with the subject of the clause when thinking of what the author wants to emphasize. Sometimes the subject is not the author's focus; it may not even be stated in the sentence (i.e., the subject is sometimes understood and must be supplied from the obvious thought of the sentence or from the preceding sentence), but it is always the place to start. In this case, we have a subject: ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ. The author wants to say something about "the word of God." Notice that λόγος is the noun of greatest import; the author wishes to say something about a *word*, and a very particular word—the word *of God*. Notice that the article is used in both cases; is this significant?

Next, we look for what the author wants to say about his subject, and we will find this in the predicate of the sentence. The usual step is to focus on the main verb in the predicate to find out what the author is saying about the subject, but in our example the verb is weak. It is the verb "to be," a vague and basic verb in the first place, and it has so little prominence in the sentence that it is left unexpressed by the author. So right away we know that in this sentence the author is not talking about the word of God *doing* anything; he wants to focus on God's word *being* something. But what does he say that it is?

After identifying the subject and the predicate of the sentence, this verse could take one in so many different directions that it is difficult to suggest with any certainty what one should do next. In this case, knowing that the main verb is the verb "to be," one should look for adjectives or nouns or nominal forms (participles, noun clauses, etc.) that directly describe the subject. Immediately we find

three: one participle and two adjectives. But look how much more is said about the third adjective!⁸

In looking more deeply at this adjective, we find first that the word of God is sharper "than any two-edged sword," but the author foregoes any discussion about swords and goes on to describe how sharp it is. This is an important point for preaching and teaching: if the author did not dwell on swords at this point, why should we? Many sermons have been preached that have made much of the double-edged sword mentioned here, and there is nothing wrong with pointing out some of the parallel references to this sword in Scripture (cf., e.g., Rev. 1:16). But the lead of our author, as we can see from our diagram, is to go on to describe the word's sharpness in terms of two things: its piercing/dividing nature and its discerning nature. Here are two concepts (using three key words) that cry out for word study.

These are perhaps the most important points from our diagram for the exegesis of the passage, but there are many lesser points. For instance, the diagram helps us to see the two things we want to say about the sword: that no sword is sharper and that it is double-edged. We note that soul/spirit and joints/marrow form two parallel pairs, and we may think to look into what is going on in terms of literary convention to cause that odd occurrence. In addition, one might note that the "thoughts" and "intentions" are both connected with the heart, and one might look for a Hebraic kind of synonymous parallelism or perhaps a conceptual distinction between these two words. The relationship between κριτικός and καρδία is also worth

⁸ In fact, one could argue that the participle ζῶν may rate a little more attention than the other two because the author has given it the prime place in the sentence by putting it first. Simple observation rather than diagramming makes this clear, however, but this conclusion must be balanced with what the diagramming does show about the importance of the other two adjectives for the sharp-sword metaphor.

pursuing: Does this combination occur anywhere else in Hebrews or elsewhere in the NT? What does it signify for the way God intends to judge us?

Questions about the precise meaning of the text are also raised by the diagram. In fact, some of the best lessons learned from diagramming come from having to figure out what is going on in a passage well enough to diagram it. This passage, though fairly straightforward, is not without its difficulties. For instance, should the adjective κριτικός be subordinate to τομώτερος as it is in the diagram (qualifying the sharpness of the sword), or should it be promoted to an equal place with ζῶν, ἐνεργής, and τομώτερος (making it a fourth adjective directly describing the word of God)?

You may be saying to yourself, “I noticed many of the insights you just outlined when I last preached through Hebrews, and I never diagram sentences. Do I really need to learn this?” It’s a fair question. But I would ask a question in return: Do you have a structure for gaining your insights, one that will yield results *each* time you approach a passage, or do you discover by trial and error, hit or miss? If you do have a structure, how much time does it take you to use it, and how comprehensive is it?

I admit that none of these insights is absolutely dependent on diagramming this clause. You could simply read the text very closely with a great deal of knowledge in grammar, looking for the kinds of connections we have found here, and you would quite likely find the majority of the connections and ideas we have found. But the process of diagramming helps train us to look for the right connections and provides a clear and relatively certain way of discovering what the text is really trying to say. The comprehensive nature of diagramming—requiring us to give *every* word its proper place in the diagram—helps to make sure that we don’t miss something that could turn out to be just the point needing to be preached to the congregation that day. It does take time to master this technique, but as with anything worth doing, the rewards that it yields are worth the

time. And as with any skill, the more you do it, the easier, quicker, and more interesting it becomes.

Using Greek Grammars

The size, depth, technical vocabulary, and academic look of Greek grammars sometimes puts off pastors and teachers who have no inclination to become professors of NT at Bigtime U. But to think of these valuable resources in this way is to give up on books that can be a great source of life and joy to your ministry. Even scholars don’t regard them as something to be mastered, but rather as reference tools to be used in small bits to look up specific things. I learned this the hard way.

During the period when I was contemplating doing a Ph.D., I had occasion to get to know one of the great NT scholars of this century, Bishop Stephen Neill. He asked me what I was doing to keep up the Greek skills I had learned in graduate school (I was at that time teaching high school). Wanting to impress him, I told him I was working in Herbert Weir Smyth’s *Greek Grammar*, a famous and standard advanced grammar for classical Greek.⁹ It was, I am ashamed to say, a half truth at best. I was really using it only occasionally, certainly much more rarely than I led him to believe.

I will never forget the next words out of his mouth: “You foolish boy! Why waste your time on a massive tome like that? Unless your calling is something other than what you’ve told me (I had told him of my desire to teach the Scriptures to lay people), master the Scriptures *using* books like Smyth, but don’t spend time mastering Smyth. He put all this stuff down in his book so that we might use it in interpreting texts, not reproduce grammar for its own sake. I, at least, have always only used it when I needed to understand a text.”

I was properly chastened. I was using the book simply and easily as a reference tool with only my seminary knowledge of Greek to

⁹ Revised by Gordon M. Messing (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984).

guide me, but thinking that the great scholars used grammars a different way, I lied in order to try to impress him, only to find out that he used it exactly as I did! That exchange was an important lesson for me in many ways, but the point for our purposes is clear: there is no other way to use these grammars than as reference tools for looking up grammatical points of interest, and anyone who has had even a year of Greek can use them to great advantage.

Now, how does one use them? First, you need to become familiar with some terminology. It is generally recognized that there are three levels of Greek grammar books: beginning, intermediate, and advanced. To lay out the distinctions in this way, however, is a little misleading. It implies that one begins the study of Greek with a beginning grammar (true), and then proceeds over an unspecified number of years to use intermediate grammars (not true) until finally achieving some height of expertise where one can use the advanced grammar (certainly not true). One does normally begin with a teacher and a beginning grammar, but the categories of “intermediate” and “advanced” grammars are artificial and seem to be only terms of convenience, differentiating grammars that are less comprehensive and less lengthy (intermediate grammars) from ones that are more comprehensive and more lengthy (advanced grammars).

Which of these latter two types you should use depends on what you want to do with a text. Do you need a simple answer to a general question about some form? (Ah, yes, this commentator calls this construction a genitive absolute. What again is a genitive absolute?) Look it up in an intermediate grammar. There will often be a brief definition of the form and several examples. Are you interested in a usage in a particular passage that seems strange to you? (Hmm. Here I am reading Heb. 6:1, and I wonder why μετάνοια [repentance] appears in the genitive case? It looks like it is describing θεμέλιος [foundation], but is it somehow the source of the foundation? What does the author mean here?) Look it up in an advanced grammar.

You may well find a discussion of the verse and of your particular problem.¹⁰

Using reference grammars has always been relatively easy and is even easier now that several books have been put together to help you know where to look for what you want. All the grammatical works we will mention below have both a subject and a Scripture index, so you can use them the way you would any index. But looking through every one of these grammars in hopes of finding a discussion of your particular passage can be time-consuming. Fortunately, two books have been compiled to help you bypass this process, and they can quickly tell you which grammars discuss your passage.

Robert Hanna. *A Grammatical Aid to the Greek New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983.

Timothy Owings. *A Cumulative Index to New Testament Greek Grammars*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983.

Both of these works are arranged in canonical order; you simply look up the verse you are studying to find out which grammars refer to it. There are several minor differences between the two works, but the major difference is in content. Owings’s book indexes more grammars and is comprehensive. As he puts it: “It [the *Index*] exhaustively includes the indices of eight major advanced and intermediate grammars used in colleges and seminaries today. It is in no way selective.”¹¹ But it is simply a list of references to places in the grammars where a verse is mentioned, with no indication of how extensive the discussion in the grammar is. It could be anything from

¹⁰ E.g., A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 4th ed. (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), 498, lists the phrase under the category “genitive of apposition.”

¹¹ Owings, *Index*, 9. Owings says *eight* grammars because he is counting the Moulton-Howard-Turner grammar as one work. He actually indexes eleven grammatical works, Hanna eight.

a passing reference to a full discussion, and one has no idea from looking at Owings's citation which it will be.

Hanna, on the other hand, is much more selective and comments on each reference, giving some indication of the extent of the discussion in the grammar. His index is in no way exhaustive. In fact he has only included what he believes to be the substantive treatments of NT texts in the grammars, so one is trusting the accuracy of Hanna's judgment. Time and necessity may demand that we sometimes make that choice, but it is something to keep in mind when using this book.

There is another problem with Hanna's work, though, besides its selectiveness. In his comments on the grammatical explanations of the various authors he has indexed, it is sometimes difficult to tell the difference between his comments and those of the authors of the grammars. He admits to rewording some of their comments, but he does have a mechanism for marking his own comments "when a contradiction or question arises."¹² Nevertheless, it is essential to look up the discussion in the grammar itself and not just depend on Hanna's gloss to prove a point. Hanna's intention of course is to move the reader to the grammars he has indexed anyway, so his method actually supports his purpose nicely.

Useful Grammatical Works

There are too many useful grammatical works to comment extensively on all of them, so I will simply list some of the best ones, with brief comments on each. I have used the traditional categories of "intermediate" and "advanced" to refer to grammars that attempt to cover all aspects of syntax, but keep in mind the difference between intermediate and advanced grammars discussed above. The third category, Specialized Works, lists books that tackle one or more aspects of grammar either so comprehensively or with such a

specialized focus on the use of NT examples that they are of value to pastors.¹³

Intermediate Grammars

- F. Blass and A. Debrunner. *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Trans. and rev. by Robert W. Funk. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961. The standard companion volume to the Bauer–Arndt–Gingrich–Danker lexicon. Always worth consulting. Its layout is somewhat cut and dried, and sometimes it is hard to locate the discussion of the reference you are investigating, but when you do find it, it often is very insightful. O H
- James A. Brooks and Carlto L. Winbery. *Syntax of New Testament Greek*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1979. A very helpful grammar because of its many good examples. It is also laid out in a simple, direct format that makes the discussion of grammatical categories easy to find. Its brevity is its major drawback, but it is a useful quick–reference grammar. O
- H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey. *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*. New York: Macmillan, 1927. Old and badly indexed, but it has a useful summary of each of the standard grammatical categories. If you get used to it, it can be a helpful quick–reference tool. O
- Stanley E. Porter. *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992. This work signals a real advance in intermediate grammar. It has not been around long enough to establish itself as a standard, but its logical classifications and its thoughtful, readable

¹³ An O at the end of an entry indicates that the book is indexed in Owings's *Index*; an H indicates that the book is indexed in Hanna's *Grammatical Aid*.

O An **O** at the end of an entry indicates that the book is indexed in Owings's *Index*.

H An **H** indicates that the book is indexed in Hanna's *Grammatical Aid*.

¹² Hanna, *Grammatical Aid*, 7.

handling of difficult linguistic concepts may well make it the standard in years to come.

- A. T. Robertson and W. Hersey Davis. *A New Short Grammar of the Greek Testament*. 10th ed. N.p.: Harper & Bros., 1958; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977. As old as Dana and Mantey and not as helpful; listed because, though dated, it can still be of some use. O
- Maximilian Zerwick. *Biblical Greek: Illustrated by Examples*. Trans. by Joseph Smith. Scripta Pontificii Instituti Biblici 114. Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963. Less complete than other grammars, but good in the areas it discusses. Especially helpful when used in tandem with Zerwick's *Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*. Trans. and rev. by Mary Grosvenor. Unabridged, 4th rev. ed. Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1993. O

Advanced Grammars

- James Hope Moulton. *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*. 3d ed. Vol. 1, *Prolegomena*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908. An extended discussion of general issues having to do with the writing of grammars. Fascinating if you have the opportunity to read it, but not very useful for actual exegesis of specific passages. O H
- James Hope Moulton and Wilbert Francis Howard. *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*. Vol. 2, *Accidence and Word-Formation*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1929. A specialized volume on morphology, or word formation. O
- James Hope Moulton. *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*. Vol. 3, *Syntax*, by Nigel Turner. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963. This is the primary reference for the student interested in the syntactical aspects of the NT. It is extremely thorough, and with Blass-Debrunner-Funk and Robertson it serves as the most often consulted grammar in scholarly NT circles. O H
- James Hope Moulton. *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*. Vol. 4, *Style*, by Nigel Turner. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1976. A helpful, though somewhat idiosyncratic volume, viewing NT Greek as having been "inoculated with Semitic influence and style" (p). It is laid out

according to the various authors of the NT and describes the distinctive elements of their individual styles. O

- A. T. Robertson. *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*. 4th ed. Nashville: Broadman, 1934. This huge book is the magnum opus of this great Baptist scholar. Sometimes it is extremely helpful; sometimes it just gives lists of references, but even the lists are often worthwhile. O

Specialized Works

- Ernest de Witt Burton. *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek*. 3d ed. Chicago: University of Chicawgo Press, 1900; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, n.d. A standard work for many years, but some of its views are now being questioned by recent works like Fanning and Porter. It still offers many exegetical insights. H
- Buist Fanning. *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990. A technical work dealing with the problem of what Greek tenses mean.
- C. F. D. Moule. *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*. 2d ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959. Begun as a full-scale syntax, this long-standing work discusses in an unsystematic way some of the most interesting syntactical problems of NT Greek. It is a very clear, helpful book, if it discusses the problem you are addressing. O H
- Stanley E. Porter. *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament: With Reference to Tense and Mood*. Studies in Biblical Greek 1. Bern: Peter Lang, 1989. An extremely technical work, primarily for scholars of NT Greek. Like Fanning's book, it is a Ph.D. dissertation and assumes a very high level of competence in Greek. Nevertheless, it is an important corrective to the often simplistic view some have of the meaning of, for example, the aorist or perfect tense, and discussions of individual passages can still be helpful to the nonspecialist.
- Nigel Turner. *Grammatical Insights into the New Testament*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1965. The introduction says this book is primarily

intended for those with no knowledge of NT Greek, but don't be fooled into thinking it is therefore simplistic. It is written in an accessible style, and the discussions are lively, often demonstrating how a knowledge of Greek grammar can solve problems of interpretation in the NT. H

I should also mention two works that are useful for identifying grammatical forms in the NT, though I do so with some reluctance. We should constantly work at being able to parse Greek words in the NT without resorting to “crutches” like these, but it is true that most of us need these sorts of books from time to time.

Barbara and Timothy Friberg, eds. *Analytical Greek New Testament: Greek Text Analysis*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981.

Wesley J. Perschbacher, ed. *The New Analytical Greek Lexicon*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1990.

Having looked at how to tackle grammar through diagramming and the use of intermediate and advanced grammars—two processes useful for the study of any NT text—let's look now at the distinctive style of Hebrews so we will recognize the author's unique grammatical choices as we read his book.

8

Style

Style refers to the distinctive elements in the vocabulary and grammatical constructions of an author. An author with a “flowing” style, for instance, may use more transitional words than other authors to move from thought to thought (as long as he uses them well and doesn't clutter up his sentences with them). An author with a “clipped” style may write everything in simple sentences with little use of adjectives, adverbs, prepositional phrases, and the like—a subject, a verb, an object, and on to the next sentence. An author with a “choppy” style may fluctuate between the two previously mentioned styles with no apparent logic. None of these styles are necessarily right or wrong; they are simply different ways authors use legitimate grammatical forms to get across their ideas.¹

When we discussed the literary genre of Hebrews (chap. 3), we mentioned that the Greek of Hebrews is smoother and more polished than that of most NT books. While none of the books of the NT can properly be said to exemplify the elevated style of Attic Greek, some of them approach this classical standard (e.g., Acts, 1 Peter), and Hebrews is one. We noted, too, that this epistle exhibits a rhetorical flavor that makes it distinctive although not unique among the epistles of the NT. In chapter 3 we discussed some of the larger, genre-related stylistic elements that are apparent in Hebrews

¹ For an interesting discussion of the difference between grammar and style, see Nigel Turner, *Style*, vol. 4 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, by J. H. Moulton (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1976), 1–2.

(diatribe, rhythm, parallelism, etc.) to show that its author was well-versed in rhetoric. Now we will look at some of the smaller stylistic elements that also demonstrate the book's heavy dependence on first-century rhetorical devices and hence its quasi-classical nature.²

Before going to the specifics, the accurate and elegant summary of James Moffatt (and of W. H. Simcox before him) on the style of Hebrews, merits quotation and will serve as our guide as we look at this graceful book.

To sum up. He has a sense of literary nicety, which enters into his earnest religious argument without rendering it artificial or over-elaborate. He has an art of words, which is more than an unconscious sense of rhythm. He has the style of a trained speaker; it is style, yet style at the command of a devout genius. "Of Hellenistic writers he is the freest from the monotony that is the chief fault of Hellenistic compared with literary Greek; his words do not follow each other in a mechanically necessary order, but are arranged so as to emphasize their relative importance, and to make the sentences effective as well as intelligible. One may say that he deals with the biblical language (understanding by this the Hellenistic dialect founded

² Most of the stylistic elements we will discuss here were used in both oral and written situations. If this raises questions for the reader concerning the differences between written and oral flourishes, see the discussion above on the futility of finding the difference (chap. 3). Nevertheless, many of my observations on these rhetorical flourishes are as valid for *written* rhetoric as for *spoken*. This becomes even more apparent when one *reads* the passages, because in reading, the supposed "oral" stylistic elements still accomplish their purposes. If they work for a reader, then, how does one know they were originally fashioned for a listener? If we could determine that some were intended for oral performance, how could we distinguish them from devices created by a writer for readers? And of course, the last question is especially important for us as readers in the twentieth century: why is the distinction important? There are no simple answers to these questions, but I address some of these issues in this chapter.

on the LXX, not merely his actual quotations from it) ... as a preacher, whose first duty is to be faithful, but his second to be eloquent" (W. H. Simcox, *The Writers of the NT*, p 3).³

Specific Rhetorical Elements in Hebrews

Discussion of the style of Hebrews properly begins with a discussion of rhetoric, the art of using language to impress or persuade hearers for or against a course of action. We will not go into great depth here on this vast subject, supremely important for understanding the high arts of argument and persuasion in the first century.⁴ Nevertheless, the subject is so essential to understanding Hebrews that a brief introduction is in order.

As we said, the art of rhetoric in the ancient world was largely a matter of employing certain conventions and forms in order to persuade the hearer of one's argument. But as David Aune has pointed out, to classify these forms as if speakers simply sat down and plugged their ideas into a rigid pattern "is a little too neat."⁵

LXX Septuagint

³ James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1924), lxiv.

⁴ For a wonderfully readable and thorough treatment of the subject, especially as it relates to the NT, see George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1984). The portions of David E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, Library of Early Christianity 8 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), devoted to the epistolary form (see esp. pp. 198–204, 212–14) are a very good introduction to the study of ancient rhetoric and its impact on the authors of the NT epistles.

⁵ Aune, *Environment*, 199. Cf. also William L. Lane, *Hebrews*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1991), 1:lxix: "Hebrews cannot be forced into the mold of a classical speech."

Earlier, we looked at the rhythms of Hebrews, evidence that the author was consciously placing himself within the rhetorical tradition. Several other constructions illustrate that Hebrews can only be understood as a Greco–Roman sermon. Some of these constructions are merely interesting sidelights that fill in something of the background to Hebrews but that are not really crucial exegetical pointers, while others may be essential for understanding the passage in which they occur. Nevertheless, whether the construction is of major or minor importance, knowledge of the various distinctive stylistic elements of Hebrews will increase our ease in interpreting Hebrews.⁶

Alliteration

Alliteration, the repetition of initial consonants in words following one another in close proximity in a sentence, is a well-known device of preachers today, but many are not aware of how ancient this practice is and how well established it was at the time of the NT. In the modern world, alliteration is often denigrated, and sometimes rightly so, because the words chosen for alliterative effect are too often chosen simply because they begin with the right letter. Preachers sometimes forget that the alliterative words are supposed to bear some relation to the content of the text or the point being made! But to disregard alliteration altogether is to throw out the baby with the bath water. If employed with restraint and wisdom, it can be a useful means of making an idea memorable. Certainly, this device

⁶ Almost every one of the categories below could be illustrated copiously from the text of Hebrews, but one example of each should suffice for our purposes. Relatively complete lists of the rhetorical elements in Hebrews, at least most of the categories, are available in Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 20–21. See also Aune, *Environment*, 212–14; Turner, *Style*, 106–13; Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:lxix–lxxxiv; Moffatt, *Hebrews*, lvi–lxiv.

is not as needed in a world where people can read freely and more often than they could in the ancient world, where books were scarce. Since they couldn't just go look up something or listen to a tape, they needed “hooks” like alliteration to help them remember things. But as we today become more pictorially oriented in our approach to knowledge, we are losing our ability to listen well to talks and retain the content of what was said. Hence, the preacher's careful, thoughtful use of alliteration can be as helpful for today's listeners as it was for the ancients.

In many places, the author of Hebrews shows how effective alliteration can be as a communication tool. He often seems to order words, select vocabulary, and choose sentence constructions on the basis of their alliterative effect. The famous opening sentence of Hebrews is a clear example. Three of the first four words (πολυμερῶς, πολυτρόπως, and πάλαι) and five of the seven key words in the first clause (the same three plus πατράσιν and προφήταις) begin with π. It is dangerous to guess why an author or speaker chooses the words he does, but it seems likely that, with all the alternative forms of expression available to the author, all three of those first words were chosen for their alliterative effect. In addition, though the word of God being spoken through prophets is certainly a biblical idea, our author does not emphasize the prophetic role elsewhere in the letter⁷ and might have been more likely to speak of the law or angels as the messengers of the divine word, but for the fact that προφήτης begins with π. Whatever his motives, the alliterative effect is there and indisputable.

⁷ Προφήτης occurs only one other time in Hebrews, in a list (Heb. 11:32), and προφητεύειν and προφητεία do not occur at all.

Anaphora

Anaphora is “repetition of a word or words at the beginning of two or more successive phrases, verses, clauses, or sentences.”⁸ In Hebrews 11 the author employs this well-known rhetorical device to draw attention to faith, the chapter’s subject. The carefully constructed list of OT men and women of faith is reinforced in its effect by the constant repetition of the word πίστει (“by faith”) at the beginning of each sentence. There is no missing the focus of the chapter—the straightforward and elegant opening and closing periods are powerful enough—but with the addition of no less than eighteen occurrences of πίστει opening many of the sentences of the chapter, the effect is even more impressive.⁹

Antithesis

Antithesis, the juxtaposition of contrasting elements, is a common device of philosophical argument and even forms a key element in the structure of Hebrews at one point.¹⁰ The contrasts the author draws between flesh and spirit, earth and heaven, many priests and one priest, old covenant and new, and external and internal realities form the heart of his christological argument in chapters 7–10. Without antithesis, Hebrews would not be Hebrews. This technique accents the contrast by drawing out the differences

⁸ *Random House Webster’s College Dictionary* (New York: Random House, 1991), s.v. “anaphora.”

OT Old Testament

⁹ Ceslas Spicq, *L’Épître aux Hébreux*, 2 vols., Études bibliques (Paris: Gabalda, 1952–53), 1:362, calls this “le plus bel exemple d’anaphore de toute la Bible et peut-être de la littérature profane” (the most elegant example of anaphora in the whole Bible, and perhaps secular literature as well).

¹⁰ See chapter 4 on the structure of Hebrews, and Attridge, *Hebrews*, 216.

between the items. For example, the law is portrayed as good, but Christ, the fulfillment of the law, is presented as something better—just as the reality is better than the shadow.

The author signals his contrasts by a variety of means: contrastive copulas, contrastive vocabulary, or a combination of the two. Thus, in Heb. 7:18–19 and again in 7:20–21 a simple μέν ... δέ construction suffices. In 7:28 the language of weakness is contrasted with the language of perfection, and in 10:11–12 both methods are used: καθ’ ἡμέραν and πολλάκις being opposed to μίαν, and the μέν ... δέ construction also emphasizing the antithesis between the single sacrifice of Christ and the repeated sacrifices of the priests. All these devices create in the passage a climate of illustration and proof that lends a strong note of persuasiveness to his arguments.

Assonance

Assonance is similar to alliteration in that it involves the repetition of letters in a string of words. The difference is that assonance is word-internal: similar sounding vowels are not at the beginning of words, but in the middle or at the end of them. Thus, at a crucial point of warning in chapter 10, the author helps make his point by beginning verse 26 with the repetition of a forbidding long *o* sound (ἐκουσίως γὰρ ἁμαρτανόντων ἡμῶν) and then continues by linking several words with a long *a* sound (τῆς ἀληθείας ... ἀπολείπεται). In the next verse (v. 27) he uses a short *o* sound followed by *s* (πυρὸς ζῆλος ἐσθίειν μέλλοντος). The latter particularly heightens the threatening sound of judgment that the author wants to project, similar to our lengthening the *s* on the end of a word to make a hissing sound when we want to make someone feel uncomfortable.

Asyndeton

Asyndeton is stringing together successive parallel clauses without using any conjunctions. The power and style of this device is obvious. Conjunctions can weigh down and emasculate the impact of

communication; nouns and verbs particularly, but even adjectives and adverbs, convey the point much more forcefully. In Heb. 11:33–34 the piling up of clauses describing the mighty acts of faith of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets (and again of the “others” in 11:36–37) shows the rhetorical usefulness of this form. Stringing these impressive acts of courage together with an “and” or two and making them into two or three sentences, which could easily have been done, would have robbed them of their cumulative power. One can almost see the jaws drop in the congregation as they listen to this recounting of the faith of these OT saints, building toward the dramatic conclusion that they were willing to die for only a promise of what is now a reality.

Brachylogy

Brachylogy substitutes a simple shorthand expression or ellipsis for a longer one. It creates a shorthand image, verbally condensing and focusing it for the listener. In Heb. 12:24, where we would expect καὶ αἵματι ῥαντισμοῦ κρεῖττον λαλοῦντι παρὰ τὸ αἷμα τοῦ Ἄβελ (“and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than *the blood* of Abel,” so the NRSV, for instance), the clause instead ends παρὰ τὸν Ἄβελ (“than *Abel*”). The effect is to bring the audience up short by not fulfilling their expectations as they listen; they have completed the sentence in their minds, and when it is not finished in accord with their expectations, they are snapped back to attention.

Chiasm

Chiasm is a favorite device of many NT authors, and it is no less prominent in Hebrews. Chiasm reverses the order of parallel elements in successive clauses in order to draw attention to their importance. There are many examples of it in individual verses

where contrasts are presented in chiasmic arrangement to draw out the key elements for the reader/hearer.

An excellent but complicated illustration of this is found in Heb. 7:23–24. To facilitate analysis, scholars often use letters to designate the elements of a chiasmic construction (e.g., *a* = one word; *a* = the same or similar word to *a*, in another clause; *b* = a different word, in the same clause as *a*; *b* = a word similar to *b*, in the same clause as *a*; etc.). In Heb. 7:23–24, the author is contrasting the permanence of Christ’s priesthood with the transience of the levitical priesthood. In the first clause, three key words appear in this order: (*a*) ἱερεῖς, (*b*) θάνατος, and (*c*) παραμένειν. In the next clause, their counterparts appear in the reverse order: (*c*) μένειν, (*b*) εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, and (*a*) ἱερωσύνην. Thus, the formula looks like this: *abcc b a*.

In Hebrews, chiasm is also found at higher structural levels. Many believe, I think rightly, that the order of words in Heb. 2:17 describing Jesus as a “merciful and faithful high priest” (ἐλεήμων ... καὶ πιστὸς ἀρχιερεὺς) is a programmatic device signaling, in chiasmic order, the core themes of the next sections of Hebrews. Hebrews 3:1–4:15 declares Christ’s faithfulness to be greater than that of Moses, moves to an exhortation urging his listeners to be faithful in their “testing in the wilderness,” and ends with a strong statement of Christ’s faithfulness under temptation (πεπειρασμένον δὲ κατὰ πάντα καθ’ ὁμοιότητα χωρὶς ἁμαρτίας, 4:15). The same verse is a transition into an explanation of the merciful nature of the perfect High Priest, and the discussion from there until 5:10 is dominated by this theme. So the programmatic statement and its development form an *abb a* pattern, the powerful, though subtle, chiasm working to communicate much.

Ellipsis

The rhetorical device we call *ellipsis* can be difficult to distinguish accurately from brachylogy, mentioned above. Both

techniques omit words that the reader or hearer would expect, thus surprising them and drawing their attention even more closely to what is being communicated. The two forms are probably best distinguished by simple quantity: Brachylogy drops out individual words and combines with other figures of speech, such as synecdoche or metonymy, to communicate with simple, direct power. Ellipsis, on the other hand, omits larger phrases or whole clauses that must be mentally supplied by the reader. Its effect is cumulative and more subtle, but no less powerful in its rhetorical handiwork.

A striking example of ellipsis and the forceful result it can have is found at Heb. 12:25. Here the author is giving one of his stern warnings, building his argument on the earthly/heavenly contrast he enjoys so much. He has used condensation in the first clause of the sentence to give strength to his warning (“Look! Don’t reject the Speaking One!”), and now in the third clause, he draws on the power of ellipsis to emphasize the words ἡμεῖς, ἀπ’ οὐρανῶν, and ἀποστρεφόμενοι. He avoids repeating that we shall not escape (ἐκφεύγειν) and that the Speaking One is warning us (χρηματίζοντα), in order to stress that (1) he includes himself with his readers (“we,” not “you”), (2) the sin is rejecting God’s warning, and (3) rejecting is perilous because this warning comes from heaven and is not merely part of the earthly law.

Hendiadys

Whereas most of the forms we have been discussing *condense* language for rhetorical effect, hendiadys is *expansive*. It uses two or more terms to express a single notion, usually by balancing nouns or participles alongside one another. Attention is thus drawn to the description in a fresh, arresting way.

At Heb. 5:2, the author states that because of his own weakness, the high priest is able to deal gently τοῖς ἀγνοοῦσιν καὶ

πλανωμένοις (“with those who ignorantly go astray”).¹¹ It is important to read this as an example of hendiadys, because it links the description to the OT prescriptions concerning those who sin without realizing it (e.g., Lev. 4:2; 5:17–18; Num. 15:22–31) and avoids misunderstanding the statement as referring to two classes of people (i.e., the ignorant and the wandering). If two different groups were in view, the verse would undercut the strong warnings against willful sin that the author gives just a few verses later (cf. Heb. 6:4–6); the ignorant would be excused, but so would the wayward, and he does not seem to want to say that. The hendiadys causes the expression to be understood as referring to one class of people: those who have sinned through ignorance.

Hyperbaton

Hyperbaton is a little-used device, but one that clearly identifies the author as rhetorically trained. It is the separation of words naturally belonging together, a form that only works because Greek, a highly inflected language, does not depend on word order to communicate basic meaning (as English generally does). Thus, Greek authors can change word order to suit their purposes. Our author uses hyperbaton by quoting OT passages and then reusing them in ways that draw special attention to the interpretations he gives them. The listener hears the OT passage coming again and expects to hear the rest, but gets something else instead, and so is alerted to it.

Heb. 2:9 is a clear example of this. There the author picks up two of the lines from Psalm 8, which he has quoted in vv. 6–8:
 ἡλάττωσας αὐτὸν βραχὺ τι παρ’ ἀγγέλους,
 δόξη καὶ τιμῇ ἑστεφάνωσας αὐτόν,
 But by separating the two lines with the words βλέπομεν Ἰησοῦν διὰ τὸ πάθημα τοῦ θανάτου, he concentrates attention both on the name of Jesus and on the majesty of his suffering and death. It is through

¹¹ So Attridge, *Hebrews*, 144.

suffering and death that Jesus is crowned with glory and honor, not by wielding power, as the listener might have expected in hearing the portion of the psalm quoted. And it is Jesus, not anyone else, who is the one spoken of in the psalm. Both these points are made more forcefully in Greek than they can be in English, through the simple use of hyperbaton.

Isocolon

Balance is a cherished quality in Greek rhetoric, particularly in poetry, and Hebrews has no lack of it. Isocolon is the technical term for equally balanced parallel clauses, similar to balanced lines in poetry. Such parallelism and balance provides symmetry, and if done well and not just for show (which would draw too much attention to the form), it can provide depth and richness to a speech or a writing and impress its content upon the hearer.

The introduction to Hebrews contains a prime example of isocolon. The three participial phrases of 1:3, which work out better when translated as clauses in English, are controlled by the relative pronoun ὅς and nicely balanced in structure and content.¹² The first clause describes the essence of Jesus as a “reflection of God’s glory and the imprint of his being,” the second that he sustains all things by the word of his power, and the third that he made cleansing for sins. Each clause contains a participle (ὢν, φέρων, ποιησάμενος), an object of the participle (ἀπαύγασμα ... χαρακτήρ, πάντα, καθαρισμόν), and an accompanying description (τῆς δόξης ... τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ, τῷ ῥήματι τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ, τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν), and while each clause has some unique feature that makes the formal

¹² A fourth parallel participial phrase in 1:4 appears, for matters of content and transition, *after* the main verb.

balance between the three clauses imperfect,¹³ the form nevertheless holds well enough.

Litotes

Litotes, or the affirming of something by negating its contrary, often uses the double negative, a grammatical expression far more common and accepted in Greek grammar than in English.¹⁴ Litotes is an emphatic kind of double negative, however, that couples the negative form of a verb (or a verb that is inherently negative in meaning) with a negative particle (οὐ or μή) to express a particular truth more forcefully.

In Heb. 4:14–16, the author is attempting a double task. He exhorts his readers to enter the rest by holding fast the confession of Jesus (4:14) and drawing near to the throne of grace (4:16), and he reintroduces the sinless High Priest who has gone into heaven, looking back to the earlier introduction of him (2:17–3:1) and forward to a further explanation of his priesthood (5:1ff.). It is one of those transition passages in the epistle that calls for special handling. In 4:15, just where he states who Jesus is and how his temptation experiences enable him to relate to our weaknesses, the author uses litotes to express this ability elegantly: οὐ γὰρ ἔχομεν ἀρχιερέα μὴ δυνάμενον συμπαθεῖσαι ταῖς ἀσθενείαις ἡμῶν. The litotes has the

¹³ For instance, the first clause contains two objects with accompanying genitives, the second an instrumental dative rather than a genitive as the other two, and the third differs from the other two clauses by putting the participle last rather than first.

¹⁴ Cf. Henry W. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, 2d ed., rev. Ernest Gowers (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 384–86. Fowler makes the point that a double negative, though ungrammatical to educated ears, really almost never obscures meaning. I used to have a relative who, when asked to make a choice, would reply indifferently, “It don’t make no nevermind to me.” We never misunderstood him.

added effect of comparing the “real” Jesus to the figure who soared through the heavens, mentioned in the prior verse. This figure is of course the same Jesus, but our author wants to correct a possible misconception before it has time to take root: though Jesus is the Son of God, the High Priest who has passed through the heavens, he is nevertheless able to sympathize with us. So the “real” Jesus is neither exclusively the heavenly High Priest, high above us, nor exclusively the earthly high priest, just like us. He is both, and the litotes helps emphasize that fact.

Paronomasia

Paronomasia, or wordplay, is a favorite activity of biblical writers, OT and NT alike, though it is particularly common in the OT.¹⁵ Hebrews uses it relatively often, again displaying the book’s fondness for rhetorical devices that direct the hearer to attend more closely to its message. Paronomasia is what we know more commonly as a pun, a play on the etymology of a word in order to relate several meanings to the core meaning the speaker is trying to get across. Thus, in the famous Peter passage (Matt. 16:18), Jesus makes a play using the name Peter (Πέτρος) and the Greek word for rock (πέτρα) to signify the foundation upon which he will build his church. The meanings of (1) Peter’s name and (2) a rock are used to speak ultimately of a third meaning, the foundation of the church, through the similar sound of the two words.

Analogously, in Heb. 5:8 the author uses the sound of ἔπαθεν to create interest in the word ἔμαθεν, making the hearer want to find out what could be learned through suffering. The answer: obedience. If said in a less arresting way, one of the most powerful statements in the epistle could have gone in one ear of his listeners and out the

¹⁵ Cf. Grace I. Emmerson, “Paronomasia,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 511.

other. This is a clear example of the kind of rhetorical technique that preachers would use, especially when they wanted something to be particularly memorable.

Key Metaphors

In addition to the more technical rhetorical devices, our author utilizes a number of important metaphors, “many of which are part of the standard rhetorical repertoire.”¹⁶ Of course, the large scale ideas of the epistle are essentially metaphorical anyway. For example, there never was, nor did there later develop, a Melchizedekian priesthood. Jesus was not a Levite; the new covenant was not drawn up at a particular earthly locality with God and his people in attendance. The very reality of the priesthood of Christ and of the new covenant depends, in the mind of the author, upon the historical reality of the levitical priesthood and the covenant at Sinai, but in their present form, the priesthood and the covenant must be seen as metaphors as far as we are concerned. The whole structure of typology, by which heavenly realities are compared to their earthly shadows, is intrinsically metaphorical.

But there are other metaphors used by our speaker, illustrations employed as aids to understanding, as any good preacher or teacher would. One of these is particularly noteworthy for us. He draws from the field of ancient education as he reproaches his readers for being like children in the classroom, needing still to be taught the ABCs of Christian truth when they ought by now to be teaching others (Heb. 5:11–6:2). In this stretch of just six verses, there are no less than seventeen different words or phrases used to speak of the classroom in ancient times. The metaphor is picked up again in Heb. 12:7–11, where the focus is on the discipline needed to learn holiness or righteousness, though here the picture is of the family “classroom” where the child is taught by parental discipline. Repeated use of the educational terms παιδεία, παιδεύ-ειν, and παιδευτής, while not

¹⁶ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 21.

enough in itself to prove a rhetorical background for the author, when added to the wealth of other indicators in the book, is a firm example of the author's tendency to draw from his own experience.¹⁷

Common Rhetorical Formulas

The introductions to some of the OT citations in Hebrews bear the marks of a rhetorical background, though this may be more Jewish than Hellenistic. In Heb. 2:6 the author introduces a quotation from Psalm 8 with a phrase that sounds curiously imprecise to our ears: διεμαρτύρατο δέ πού τις λέγων, "But someone has testified somewhere saying." The introduction does not reflect slack indefiniteness, however, for it has parallels in the Jewish philosopher Philo.¹⁸ Our author seems to use it for two purposes. First, the formula indicates that the preacher does not want to dwell on the incidentals. It is as if he is saying to his hearers, "I cannot think of the source of this quotation right off the top of my head, but you know where it comes from, so let's go on to the really important thing: what the text says." Second, the formula "is consistent with the strong emphasis throughout Hebrews on the oracular character of Scripture. Precisely because it is God who speaks in the OT, the identity of the person through whom he uttered his word is relatively unimportant. A vague allusion is sufficient."¹⁹

The use of certain kinds of transitional statements also betrays rhetorical influence. In Heb. 5:11 the author uses a common Hellenistic device to express the difficulty of the teaching that he is about to exposit. The two adjectives that describe his coming

¹⁷ Attridge lists six spheres, in addition to that of education, from which the author draws his rhetorical images: agriculture, architecture, seafaring, law, athletics, and the religious cultus (*Hebrews*, 21).

¹⁸ For examples, see Attridge, *Hebrews*, 70 n. 19.

¹⁹ Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:46. A similar formula is used at Heb. 4:4.

instruction, "much" (πολύς) and "hard to explain" (δυσεμήνευτος), are common enough in pagan authors, if not in the NT, and the excuse that the teaching will be difficult because the hearers are mentally dull is also found.²⁰ Even this attribution may be what Attridge calls "a rhetorical move ... designed to elicit the response, 'no, we are not dullards, we are ready to hear what you have to say.' ... Hence, rather than a precise indictment, what these verses offer is a challenge to the addressees to progress toward a truly mature faith. The author operates rhetorically, and his rhetoric is sensitive to the perceived condition of his audience."²¹

Genitive Absolute

A Greek genitive absolute is a clause containing at least a noun and a participle, both in the genitive case, that is independent of any grammatical relation with the rest of the sentence. Our author "uses the genitive absolute well, and varies the word-order considerably."²² Whereas many NT authors use the genitive absolute in a flexible way,²³ intermixing elements that *do* connect with the rest of the sentence, the author of Hebrews uses it in the traditional classical way, a sign of his stylistic elegance and diversity. For instance, where a more boring author might have written Heb. 9:6–10 using a series of main clauses joined by simple copulas like "and" or "but," the author of Hebrews develops one long, elegant sentence,

²⁰ Cf. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 156. Attridge's discussion of this entire passage (pp. 156–58) is extremely clear and useful.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 157–58. The rhetorical question in Heb. 11:32, followed by the statement that time would fail the author to speak of Gideon, etc., is another kind of standard rhetorical transition showing the homiletical nature of the epistle.

²² Turner, *Style*, 106.

²³ Cf. F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and rev. by Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), §423.

using no fewer than three genitive absolutes and without a single copula.²⁴

Variety in the Style of Hebrews

As W. H. Simcox noted in his summary of the style of Hebrews (quoted near the beginning of this chapter), the author is relatively free of the failing that separates Hellenistic writers from classical ones: monotony of style.²⁵ Though style variation is also a function of Greco-Roman rhetorical style and could be treated as a subcategory of it like the other devices listed above, it is so pervasive and applies to so many elements within the style of Hebrews that it deserves to be treated with its own set of subcategories. Variety in the style of Hebrews is evident in the larger aspects, like the general tone of the discourse and the well-known alternation of exhortatory and explanatory passages, and in the smaller aspects, like sentence structure.

Variety in the General Tone of the Discourse

Harold Attridge points to three different tendencies in the mood of Hebrews, stating that it ranges from “solemnly festive, quasi-poetic passages through serious logical or quasi-logical argument to playfully suggestive exegesis.”²⁶ As we saw in chapter 3, our author has paid great attention to rhythm in penning his “word of exhortation,” and the most lyrical of these could certainly have been used in religious feasts and ceremonies. The exalted statements about Christ in Heb. 1:2–3; the majestic affirmation of the Word, coupled

²⁴ Of course a sentence this long in English would be impossible, but just for comparison’s sake, it is interesting to note that the NRSV translates Heb. 9:6–10 using four copulas in three sentences.

²⁵ See chap. 3 for examples of various rhythms used in Hebrews, and Attridge, *Hebrews*, 20.

²⁶ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 20.

with a solemn reminder of judgment in Heb. 4:12–13; the elegant statement of the nature of the priesthood of Melchizedek in Heb. 7:1–3, a statement for which the reader has been primed so often in the earlier part of the epistle and that, when it comes, even elicits a worshipful response from the author (θεωρεῖτε δὲ πηλίκος οὗτος, “See how great he is!” Heb. 7:4 NRSV)—all these border on the liturgical.

There is the rational argumentation of the philosopher as well. In Heb. 4:1–9, for instance, we see an extended argument, carefully applying the historical experience of Israel to his readers. The οὖν of Heb. 4:1 leads to a series of γάρ clauses in Heb. 4:2–5,²⁷ and again in 4:6, ἐπεὶ οὖν leads to the πάλιν of 4:7. Perhaps even more clear as a philosophical argumentative device is the anticipation of an objection and its answer in Heb. 4:8. There the author assumes that someone will say, “Yes, but they *did* enter their rest when Joshua led them into the promised land.” The author, sticking close to the text of Scripture, the only “proof” he needs, says that this cannot be so, otherwise David would never have spoken much later than Joshua’s time of another day yet to come. In Heb. 4:9–10, the argument is summarized and conclusions drawn: the possibility of entering God’s rest still remains, where believers cease from their labors as God did from his. Therefore we must work to enter that rest. Other examples of this type of argument abound in Hebrews (see Hebrews 7 and 10 particularly).

²⁷ Within the structure of the larger argument is a clear example of the rabbinic method of argument known as *gezerah shawah*, which uses the meaning of a term in one place in Scripture to interpret its meaning in another place. Cf. H. L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. Markus Bockmuehl (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 21. This form has a parallel in Greek rhetoric, the σύγκρισις πρὸς ἴσον; cf. Kennedy, *Interpretation*, 89.

The variety in tone sometimes approaches what Attridge calls “playfully suggestive exegesis.”²⁸ An example is the intimation in Heb. 7:9–10 that Levi and his heirs paid tribute to Melchizedek by virtue of the fact that they were “in the loins” of Abraham when he rendered his tithe to this king of Salem. Such tentative speculation is rare in our author, and probably displays an “argument weak, shout louder” feeling on his part. He shows a hesitancy of belief in the power of his own argument by the comical introduction he gives it, blending the paronomasia of a stock Philonic phrase (ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν) with only the briefest mention of the idea, and then dropping it. Of course, if he had carried it out much farther, he might have run up against the problem that some have suggested: by this logic, Jesus, being a descendant of Abraham, also paid tithes to Melchizedek!

Variety in the Alternation of Exposition and Exhortation

One of the most important aspects of the structure of Hebrews is the alternation between lengthy *expositions* of themes (drawn from Scripture and centering on the superiority of Christ) and dramatic *exhortations* (also based in Scripture and delivered with almost equal doses of encouragement and warning). This alternation is a major factor in varying the content of the epistle, and it includes brief interludes as well as longer structural movements, where the author’s attention shifts not for just a moment but for a lengthier, more focused period.²⁹ So, for instance, the first of five warnings in the book comes at Heb. 2:1–4, between the longer expositions about the Son being superior to angels (Heb. 1:5–14) and the necessary humiliation of the Son, which qualifies him to be a merciful and faithful high priest (Heb. 2:5–18; cf. also the briefer exhortations at

²⁸ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 20.

²⁹ Attridge, *ibid.*, notes that there is even variation between imperatives and hortatory subjunctives within the paraenetic sections, so interested in variety is the author.

5:11–6:12 and 10:19–39). Examples of longer, more focused exhortations are the one on faithfulness and entering into God’s rest (Heb. 3:1–4:16) and, of course, the last two chapters of the book, which are almost entirely paraenetic. For a schematic of this alternation, see the end of chapter 4 above.

Variety in Sentence Structure

Hebrews has many long, complex sentences. We have already looked at Heb. 1:1–4 from several different angles. It is probably the most famous of Hebrews’ long periods, but it is by no means the only one. The sentence contains two coordinate clauses and eight subordinate clauses in seventy-two words. Eight other sentences stand out alongside this one as worthy of note for their length and complexity (Heb. 2:2–4, 8c–9, 14–15; 5:7–10; 7:1–3; 9:6–10; 10:19–25; 12:1–2). Each of these periods is remarkable in its construction. Though there are some elements that make the passages memorable,³⁰ for the most part these rhetorical flourishes resist precise memorization.

Our author does not depend wholly, or even predominantly, on long involved sentence structures, however. He uses shorter forms as well. Sometimes his sentences bear an almost inscriptional character. The description of the people who were not able to enter into rest is short and arresting: καὶ βλέπομεν ὅτι οὐκ ἠδυνήθησαν εἰσελθεῖν δι’ ἀπιστίαν (3:19).³¹

Another less common form that he employs to great advantage is the brief, staccato question. The three verses just prior to Heb. 3:19 consist of a series of rapid-fire questions intended to shock the audience by their directness and conclusiveness. The variety in cadence is never more apparent than here, where five quick questions

³⁰ E.g., the alliteration and isocolon of Heb. 1:1–4 (see above under these headings).

³¹ Heb. 2:16; 4:9; 7:19; 9:16; 10:4, 18, 31; 11:1; 12:29; 13:1, 8 also contain examples of this brief, pithy form.

come immediately after one of the longest periods in the book (Heb. 3:12–15), which contains four coordinate clauses (counting the OT quotation) and eight subordinate clauses in sixty–eight words.

Semitic Style in Hebrews?

Before finishing our discussion of the style of Hebrews, we should take some account of the views of Nigel Turner, who claims that there are Semitisms in the Greek of Hebrews. Though he states quite clearly that “if the author was a Jew ... he has at least succeeded in eliminating many of the characteristic features of Jewish Greek,”³² he nevertheless devotes an entire section of his chapter on Hebrews to what he calls “underlying traces of Jewish Greek.”³³ We have suggested that the author’s style demonstrates the heavy influence of Greek rhetoric.³⁴ Does it also show Semitic influence?

Of course, I am not asking whether or not the author was a Jew. A Jew would not necessarily have to write in a style that shows Hebraic or Aramaic influence. Nor am I assuming that Hebraic influence cancels out Greek influence; a style could show both influences at the same time. Also, I recognize the difficulty of pinning down a definitive answer to this question. It is important to attempt an answer, though, for at least two reasons. First, if we could answer this question, it might shed light on the age–old question of who wrote Hebrews. Second, it will be helpful to know if there is

³² Turner, *Style*, 108.

³³ *Ibid.*, 108–12.

³⁴ Allen Wikgren supports the rhetorical background of the epistle while not addressing the question of Semitisms at all. See his “Some Greek Idioms in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” in *The Teacher’s Yoke: Studies in Memory of Henry Trantham*, ed. E. Jerry Vardaman and James Leo Garrett, Jr. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 1964), 145–53.

Semitic influence since this knowledge may affect how we translate certain passages.

Turner uses two kinds of evidence to argue for traces of Semitic style. He divides his data into two sections: “Semitic Quality in General” and “Semitisms.” It is not important to discuss Turner’s arguments in detail here. We shall confine ourselves to an analysis of the elements mentioned under the first heading. The evidence put forth in the second section is more technical but can be dealt with adequately in a few sentences.

Turner speaks of “general” Semitic qualities such as the fact that Hebrews is a “homily, a literary genre of which there were many Jewish examples,” listing Philo’s commentary on Genesis, *I Clement*, James, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, parts of the *Didache*, and the “Exhortation” from the *Zadokite Damascus Rule*. Quite apart from the fact that only two of these documents are Jewish, let alone examples of Jewish homilies, he does not offer any criteria for distinguishing between a “Jewish” homily and a secular speech. If he means to do so on the basis of content, then he undercuts his argument, because he is supposed to be talking about form, not content, since style is primarily a matter of form. Of course, Hebrews is “Jewish” in the sense that much of the content it expounds is Jewish, but this is simply because it is also Christian. But the document takes most of its formal elements from secular rhetorical training.

Allegorizing is also said to be evidence of the general Semitic quality of the epistle. “Like the Epistle of Barnabas, Hebrews is given to allegorizing. Its oratory therefore is probably Hellenistic or Palestinian rabbinical rather than secular Hellenistic, and its nearest parallel may be in Hellenistic synagogue addresses, such as *accabees*.”³⁵ Not only is it wrong to limit allegorizing to Jewish writing, since the Jews learned it from the Greeks in the first place, but there simply is not the allegorizing tendency in Hebrews that

³⁵ Turner, *Style*, 108.

Turner suggests. The author of Hebrews certainly uses typology liberally, and the difference between allegory and typology is admittedly difficult to define, but it is a clear distinction that should be maintained nevertheless.

Another general Semitic quality to which Turner refers is the writer's heavy use of the Pentateuch and the Psalms. This is said to indicate that Hebrews may be a Hellenistic Jewish homily rather than a Palestinian one, but again, Turner makes the mistake of arguing on the basis of content rather than form. I suppose it could be argued that the author of Hebrews had many texts from which he could have chosen, and therefore it is significant that he chose so many texts from the Pentateuch and Psalms, but the argument does not appear very strong in light of the fact that Melchizedek, the centerpiece of the author's priestly arguments, is only mentioned in those two sources. In fact, the more germane argument tends against Turner, since when discussing the covenant—a subject mentioned often in Scripture—the author does not use the covenants of Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, or Psalms as his mainstays. Rather, he chooses one of the prophets, Jeremiah (see the use of Jer. 31:31–34 in Hebrews 8–10).

It is also curious that Turner mentions possible parallels with accabees as evidence of Semitic influence in Hebrews. The two documents are similar in some ways and dissimilar in others. But the problem for Turner's argument is that accabees is recognized by many to be a good example of a work done by a Jew following classical Greek rhetorical principles.

He is unquestionably a Jew. But he is no less certainly a Jew profoundly influenced by Greek philosophical thought and thoroughly at home with the Greek language. His work is conspicuously devoid of semitisms, and citations from the Old Testament consistently follow the Septuagint. The images, symbols, and metaphors employed as well as the antitheses, climaxes, and apostrophes that abound all clearly exhibit his skill in the

craft of the Greek rhetorician. His Greek is free and idiomatic, indicating that he thinks in that language; it is his native tongue.³⁶

So 4 Maccabees hardly seems like a good example of a synagogue homily, at least one trying to distinguish itself from secular Greek rhetoric, and its likeness to Hebrews makes Turner's argument about Semitisms that much weaker.

Turner offers more evidence of a general tone of Jewish influence in Hebrews, but it does not prove his claim at all. For example, that the author uses ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων at the beginning of the letter (Heb. 1:2) is said to point to the age of the Messiah having come. It is also said to be a "Septuagintism." Both things may be true, but neither of these facts, like the parallel with accabees above, proves the point. Someone who is trained in Greek circles is *likely* to use the LXX, so all Septuagintisms only point away from Jewish style. And that the author points to the Messiah only says that he and his audience are Jewish Christian, not that he is using a Jewish style of writing.

The rest of the grammatical and stylistic items to which Turner points in this first section exhibit the same fallacy of illegitimate parallelism. The impersonal "he says/has said" (8:5; 4:4; 13:5), the use of a *minore ad maius* argument (for which there are parallels in rabbinic writings and Philo), the tendency of the author to model some sentences "on OT poetic sense–parallelism" (11:17; 4:15–16)—all are either not exclusively Jewish or are not sufficiently justified by examples to prove the point.

The same can be said for the evidence put forth in Turner's section on Semitisms in Hebrews. He claims that the epistle is full of Septuagintisms, but what does that prove? That the genitive follows the noun is claimed to be evidence of Semitic thinking, since that is the word order of the construct state, but Hebrews also places the genitive before the noun sixteen times in the epistle. Even Turner

³⁶ James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983–85), 2:532.

admits that classical writers like Thucydides and Philostratus put the genitive after the noun as often as before it. He also tries to base his case on the author's use of particles, but his own statistics deny his point. He claims that the author "is drawn by the Semitic tendency to seek only first-place particles or to place the others in first-place, as in Biblical Greek,"³⁷ but he offers as evidence three particles that appear a total of only four times in the whole epistle, while the ninety-one occurrences of γάρ (never first, of course) are passed over in silence.

Turner does point out a few expressions in the section that could be accepted as legitimate Semitisms, including the famous explanation of Matthew Black that a Hebrew circumstantial clause underlies the grammatical problem at Heb. 11:11 on Sarah's barrenness, but these examples are neither frequent nor clear enough to warrant the claim that Hebrews was written in something Turner calls "Jewish Greek." He does admit that the author could have been a proselyte, but the style of Hebrews demonstrates something stronger than that. It seems to have been written by someone who was trained in classical rhetoric and who used Greek with the ease of a native-born speaker and writer.

9

Theology

If the study of vocabulary, grammar, and style form the lifeblood of exegesis, theology is the body in which that blood moves. But each exegete's "body" is unique: the theology you bring to the text, or to any experience of life for that matter, is unique to you. It is the duty of every exegete to recognize the theology we bring to the text and to allow that theology to be shaped by the text while engaged in the exegetical task. This process of moving back and forth between firmly holding our conclusions and allowing the text constantly to challenge them forces us to recognize our presuppositions about the theological content of the text.

Nontheologians sometimes think that exegesis is exempt from the influence of presuppositions; nothing could be farther from the truth. When Rudolf Bultmann some fifty years ago wrote an essay entitled "Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?" he rightly answered no and proceeded to enumerate what he thought the presuppositions of a NT exegete should be.¹ Although we cannot take time to explore that question now, students of Hebrews should not think that they can approach passages like Heb. 1:1–14 without some preconceived notions about what sort of Christology they'll find there or read Heb. 6:4–6 without some soteriological presuppositions.

¹ Rudolf Bultmann, "Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?" in *Existence and Faith*, trans. Schubert M. Ogden (New York: World, 1960), 342–51.

³⁷ Turner, *Style*, 111.

Having said that, a limited objectivity can still be attained while investigating the theology of Hebrews, if we constantly work at basing the investigation on the grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and literary structure of the text—in other words, on the essentials of exegesis. Rigorously questioning our own biases while doing exegesis as well as when applying the fruits of that exegesis to form our theological understanding of the text, is the best way to develop a theological portrait of any biblical book.

And it is enough. The text is supposed to shape our lives, to give us thoughts and motives on which to base our belief and our behavior, so there is no reason to apologize for our subjectivity. Indeed, we should embrace it gladly but recognize it for what it is—*our* subjectivity. Humility that admits its own subjectivity and, while unashamedly arguing for its positions, acknowledges that its views are simply well-considered opinion is essential to a theology that is useful to the church. Anything else is driven by hubris. Though subjective, forming this theology is basic to our Christian growth. It is how the text is translated into our lives; it is what we communicate to others in preaching and teaching. As frustrating as it may be to have to admit that we can only begin to understand the mind of God, rather than exposit it fully and exhaustively, it is nevertheless incumbent upon us to begin and, in our attempt, to rejoice at the truth that is to be found in the biblical text.

Two Approaches to the Theology of Hebrews

To do full justice to the theology of Hebrews would require a full-scale theological commentary on the text, an undertaking well beyond the parameters of this book. But it is possible to open a window into the theology of Hebrews by giving a brief introduction to the main theological themes of the book. This exercise will enable us to read the text “theologically,” that is, to be aware at all times of the underlying thoughts that give the author his purpose, that drive him to write what he does. Without a basic understanding of this structure, we will see Hebrews as a series of isolated pericopes, a

mistake with any piece of literature in the NT, perhaps most of all with the Epistle to the Hebrews.

Two ways of summarizing the theology of any NT book have become popular in recent years. We will try to follow a combination of the two, but first let me introduce you to them. I call the first the *authorial theology* of the book, the second *reader-response theology*. Many names have been given to these two approaches down through the years; these two names reflect my own understanding of who sets the theological agenda when a text is read.

Authorial Theology of Hebrews

This approach to the theological enterprise attempts to allow the author’s theological agenda to set the direction of the theological investigation. What issues concerned him most deeply? How does he answer the questions he raises? How does he rank these questions? What are the secondary and tertiary concerns he addresses? In short, what is his primary doctrinal and/or ethical concern? Is he writing about God’s character? Human unbelief? Christ? Rebellion against authority? Salvation? The nature of the church? A problem with immorality? Eschatology?

This method of theological investigation is often called Biblical Theology, a term that came into common use in this century.² The name can be misleading to the theological novice, however, because it implies that the theological method it replaces is not based on the Bible. Indeed, its early proponents boldly stated that dogmatics had departed from the text of Scripture and Biblical Theology was needed to save the church from excessive philosophical speculation.³ Dogmatic, or systematic, theology (what we will describe below as

² See the excellent article on the history of this movement by G. E. Ladd, “Biblical Theology, History of,” in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev. ed., ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979–88), 1:498–505.

³ *Ibid.*, 1:498–501.

reader–response theology) is no less biblical than authorial theology. It simply approaches the Scriptures in a different way.⁴

Reader–Response Theology of Hebrews

A second way of looking at the theology of Hebrews is determined by us, the readers of the text. It reflects *our* questions, *our* theological interests, the passions that drive *us* to the holy text to understand God, the meaning of our own existence, our salvation, and so forth. The name reader–response theology is thus self–explanatory; it reflects our response to reading the book with our questions in mind and not necessarily those of the author.⁵

Traditionally, in fact at least since the time of Thomas Aquinas, users of this theological method have come to the text with a certain set of questions in logical order that they wished to ask of the text.⁶ Some theologians asked these questions with little reference to the historical, cultural, literary, and sometimes even the linguistic and

⁴ See Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1981), 21–74 (esp. 27–34), for a good discussion of the problems involved in doing NT theology, including the difference between Biblical and systematic theology.

⁵ This is not to be confused with a newer form of criticism called reader-response criticism, which regards the reader’s response to the text as the chief category for understanding how to interpret the text. See Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1991), 377–80, for a brief description of this form of criticism.

⁶ See Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God*, vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1987), 1–5, 322–406, for a discussion of the historical roots of this endeavor and for a superb discussion of the importance and legitimacy of doing systematic theology.

grammatical background of the text. The meaning of the text was assumed to lie on the surface. The influence of presuppositions was too–little recognized, and correlating the meaning of one text with the meaning of others to form a coherent or “systematic” theology was thought to be a tedious process but one that was not necessarily exegetically problematic.

Whatever we may think of the strengths or weaknesses of these two theological approaches, exclusively embracing one over the other will imperil our souls. To believe that we can do authorial theology without incorporating the insights of reader–response theology is to deny that we have any biases or presuppositions that will color our judgment. This is myopic. No matter how much we *think* that we are asking the author’s own questions, we are always (rightly) wondering in the back of our minds, “So what does this text mean to me now in my situation?” Unless we recognize this fact, we are likely to elevate certain questions to a higher status than they actually had for the original author.⁷ In addition, of course, our own questions about the text are important in their own right. While we may prefer the methodology of authorial theology, we are wise to ask our own questions regularly in the process. Moving back and forth between the two sets of questions lets us continue to see the text in the way we should, as the Word of God that both confronts our lives, telling us what to believe and do, and clarifies our lives, answering our doctrinal and ethical questions.

⁷ Perhaps a modern example of this is the present discussion of 1 Timothy 2–3, which is so often framed in terms of the good and important question of the role of women in ministry that we sometimes lose sight of the fact that the author was primarily concerned with describing the character traits necessary for worship and leadership in the church.

Four Doctrinal Discussions in Hebrews

How, then, do we proceed to read the text theologically? Briefly, one simply asks questions like the ones we suggest above. But which questions? I propose the following.

The first question is subtle and dangerous because it allows the subjectivity of the exegete to run wild. It nevertheless must be asked, and the answer must be understood in order to proceed. What subjects does the author assume his first readers understood that may be misunderstood by a modern reader and require further explication? As a control, I suggest that there must be good and sufficient reasons arising from the text itself to spend time studying the subject. It will do no good to say that the author presupposes an understanding of this or that doctrine, when there is no evidence from the text for the claim. In Hebrews this turns out to be a crucial question because, for example, the author clearly presupposes an understanding of how to interpret the OT that is basic to understanding anything else he has to say. Hence, that will be our first topic of investigation.

There are other questions to ask, however, that will help us set the agenda for discovering the theology of Hebrews. The most obvious approach is to pursue the subjects about which the author wrote most extensively. This can be determined to some degree simply by asking a statistical question: What subjects appear most often in the text? But the answer to that question does not give the whole story. We should also ask, What subjects does the author discuss most fervently and prominently by using the most engaging language or the most persuasive arguments or by placing the discussion in a particularly prominent place? Another question to ask is this: What subjects directly encourage or warn the readers to change their belief or behavior? These subjects must surely have been important to the author as he wrote. These four questions can get us started in our investigation of the theology of Hebrews by pointing us to the right topics. Once we are underway, other questions will arise from our own experience and from the text itself

that will enable us to do the theological thinking necessary for the text to do its work on our lives.

Having asked these questions of the text, I will now present the four topics that seem to me to have been most urgent in the mind of the author. After discussing the foundational question of how the author used the OT Scripture, the remaining topics will be treated alphabetically. With as much space as the Book of Hebrews devotes to each of these topics and the interweaving of them with each other, it is impossible to decide which was most important to the author. Handling them in alphabetical order prevents us from having to decide between them.

The Doctrine and Use of OT Scripture in Hebrews

A chapter on the theology of Hebrews should begin with a serious investigation of the author's understanding and use of the OT. This is true for a number of reasons, two of which should be readily apparent: (1) The author bases much of his carefully worded argument on OT texts and their authority, and (2) He uses distinctive methods to interpret the OT. The first gives us the author's understanding of epistemology and his sources of authority, two categories that generally belong to the prolegomena of any theological system. Understanding his methods for interpreting the OT is important, too, so that we may be better able to interpret his arguments. It will also help us answer the secondary question of whether he, being an author of inspired Scripture, used interpretive techniques that are illegitimate for us to imitate. Thus, some comments are in order on (1) The author's theology of Scripture, (2) His interpretative method, and (3) Its application for us today.

The Doctrine of Scripture in Hebrews

There is no doubt that the author of Hebrews regarded the Scriptures as in every sense the Word of God. He states as much in Heb. 1:1, when he says that *God* spoke to the fathers through the prophets in diverse times and ways (πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως

πάλαι). This certainly means the spoken word, and probably the acted parables of prophets like Ezekiel as well, but it must also include the written word. The OT itself gives evidence everywhere of the importance of the written word, especially the Torah, and of its prophetic nature, and first-century Jewish groups bear abundant testimony to this same view. It is certain that the reference to God speaking “long ago and in many ways” includes written Scripture.

But there is an even more direct statement in Heb. 4:12, where the author says that “the word of God (ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ) is ... able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (NRSV). The author’s understanding of the phrase “word of God” should be dynamic enough to include the preached word, but it should also include the written Scriptures.⁸ Lest we be unclear on this point, the author insists that the Scriptures are the Word of God’s Holy Spirit (cf. Heb. 3:7; 10:15). The author’s insistence on the divine element in Scripture is so great that, while “human instrumentality is of course recognized,” it is also true that “the humans involved are often ignored” by the author.⁹

This Word of God, however, is no static, dull book; it is “living and active” (ζῶν ... καὶ ἐνεργής, Heb. 4:12). It is a word that should strike fear into our hearts, because of its sharpness and power to judge us, but it is also a word that brings us the comfort and clarity of God speaking in history. Indeed, the key to understanding and applying the Word of God and its true significance lies in recognizing that it has been fulfilled finally and completely in the person of God’s Son, Jesus Christ (Heb. 2:3). It is to him that God has bequeathed the full inheritance of his creation and through him that God has spoken definitively to humans (Heb. 1:1–2). Probably

⁸ See William L. Lane, *Hebrews*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1991), 1:102–3.

⁹ Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 24.

no book of Scripture gives a clearer and more forceful proof that the NT authors regarded the OT as the very Word of God.

Methods of Interpreting Scripture in Hebrews

The methods our author uses to interpret Scripture is a complex subject that is treated well in the commentaries. William Lane lists nine categories of “principles guiding the writer in his approach to the OT text.”¹⁰ While these categories overlap somewhat, they are a good way of approaching this subject, and we will use them here.

1. **Dispelling Confusion.** At many points in his sermon, the author of Hebrews attempts to clarify passages of the OT text. A good example of this is found in Heb. 2:8–9, where discussing Ps. 8:4–6, he seems to anticipate an objection that the reader might have about his use of the text: Though the Scripture predicts that all things will be subject to the Messiah, we do not yet see everything in subjection. In response, he points to Jesus, who is now “crowned with glory and honor” (Heb. 2:9), who is now ruling over all things, but it is not yet (οὐπω) the time when he will rule over them finally and completely (2:8; see the discussion of eschatology below). More subtly, our author also teaches that the one to whom all things would be subject is Jesus rather than humankind in general, contrary to what a casual reader of Psalm 8 might have thought. Jesus, as the representative of his people and the head of the church, is often regarded by the NT writers as the fulfillment of OT promises that seem to have been

¹⁰ Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:cxix. In the following pages, I am heavily indebted to the fine, succinct discussion of these methods found in 1:cxix–cxxiv of his commentary. Lane’s comments are based on the research of George H. Guthrie, who presents his findings in an article titled “The Uses of the Old Testament in Hebrews,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, forthcoming).

made to either the nation of Israel or humankind in general.¹¹ Jesus is the one “in whom the human vocation finds its true expression.”¹²

2. Reinforcement. Perhaps the most common use of Scripture in the modern day, and a very important use of Scripture throughout the history of the church and Judaism as well, is citing it to support one’s argument. The author of Hebrews is no exception. In Heb. 6:13–15, for instance, his claim that through faith and patience we inherit the promises is supported by reference to the story of Abraham and a quote from Gen. 22:17. The author believed that his readers would not fall away, and as part of his warning to them, he emphasized that Abraham was able to believe and have patience and ultimately inherited God’s promise to make of him a great nation.

Similar reinforcement appears in the warning of Heb. 10:19–39, where Hab. 2:3–4 is loosely quoted to support his exhortation to endure because the Messiah is coming back, and the righteous one who lives by faith will not be lost when he returns.

3. Explaining Implications . Biblical exposition has always included the drawing out of the text’s implications for the life of the community. In Heb. 8:8–13, the author quotes the famous covenant passage of Jer. 31:31–34, and focuses on one aspect of that passage, the newness of the new covenant. Unlike category 1 above, where confusion is dispelled, here the author assumes his readers understand the passage, and he applies it to the covenant God has made through the person and work of Jesus Christ. He draws out the implications of the word *new* by saying “In speaking of ‘a new covenant,’ he has made the first one obsolete” (Heb. 8:13 NRSV). The author then goes on to explain in some detail that the old covenant has been superseded and will shortly disappear, calling it a shadow of the reality that has now replaced it. The implications of OT

¹¹ Cf., e.g., William L. Kynes, *A Christology of Solidarity: Jesus as the Representative of His People in Matthew* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1991), *passim*.

¹² Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:cxx.

Scripture are expounded in many other places in Hebrews as well.¹³ It is one of our author’s most common techniques.

4. Literal Sense of a Word or Phrase . An appeal to the “literal meaning” is a common practice of NT writers. Perhaps the most famous example is found in Gal. 3:15–18, where Paul makes a great deal of the fact that the word for “seed” in Gen. 12:7 is singular rather than plural. The author of Hebrews argues in a similar fashion when he quotes Ps. 95:7 and focuses on the word “today” (cf. Heb. 3:13, 15; 4:7–8). In Heb. 3:13, he instructs his readers to exhort each other “as long as it is called ‘today,’ ” to emphasize that this passage is relevant to them. He repeats and strengthens that warning in 3:15–18, using five rhetorical questions to convince his readers that the quotation is as relevant to them as it was to the people in Moses’ day.

The literal sense is even more important for a second point that the author wants to make. He states that the promise of entering “the rest of God” is still open and that we who have believed enter that rest. In Heb. 4:7, he speaks of “a certain day” (τινὰ ἡμέραν), stressing that David used the word “today” with reference to his own day, many days after Moses, and that “today” continues to be available to them. As he puts it: “A sabbath rest still remains for the people of God... Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest...” (Heb. 4:9–11 NRSV). The literal sense of the word “today” is being played with here, to be sure, but it is essential to the meaning of the passage that his readers regard “today” as the time in which they were living. Other instances in Hebrews of this kind of literalism show how important the method was for the author. In Heb. 7:23–25, for example, the word “forever” from Ps. 110:4 is essential to his argument.

5. Rabbinic Principles . The four categories we have just mentioned were commonly used in rabbinic writings in the post–NT era.¹⁴ Two of the seven better-known rules of interpretation laid down by Hillel

¹³ Cf. Heb. 2:8; 3:16–19; 4:6–10; 7:11–12; 10:8–9; 12:7–10, 26–29.

¹⁴ Cf. Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:cxix–cxx.

in the early first century A.D. are also used by our author. They were referred to as *qal wa-h.omer* and *gezerah shawah*. *Qal wa-h.omer* was another name for the *a fortiori* argument of lesser to greater: what is true in a less important case applies all the more in an important case.

This type of argument is used in the crucial passage at Heb. 2:2–4. Using γάρ and a conditional clause, the author argues that if the OT message declared through angels was valid and significant, how much more the “great salvation” (τηλικαύτης σωτηρίας) that had now been declared to them by the Lord and those who heard him. And if every transgression or disobedience against the angelic message received “a just penalty” (ἔνδικον μισθαποδοσίαν), how much more serious will the punishment be for those who reject the message God confirmed “by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will” (Heb. 2:4 NRSV). Our author uses this kind of appeal also in 9:13–14, 10:28–29, and 12:25.

The *gezerah shawah* argument establishes a relationship between two passages of Scripture on the basis of similar wording, allowing one passage to expand the meaning of the other. This way of thinking is largely foreign to twentieth-century Westerners, but it was common in biblical times. In Heb. 4:3–5 the author uses the statement that God rested from all his work on the seventh day (Gen. 2:2) to elaborate on the quotation from Ps. 95:11. The Genesis passage shows that God’s rest has been available from the beginning of creation, but God’s people failed to share in it because of their disobedience. The writer goes on to tell more about the kind of rest from which the Israelites were excluded: not a rest from physical work, but a rest from sin and its effects. The usefulness, then, of Gen. 2:2 in clarifying Psalm 95 hangs on the fact that the word “rest” occurs in both passages, the verb καταπαύειν in Gen. 2:2 LXX being cognate with the noun κατάπαυσις in Ps. 95:11 (Ps. 94:11 LXX).

Gezerah shawah is also found in Heb. 5:5–6, where the author links Ps. 2:7 with Ps. 110:4 on the basis of the shared word “you” (σύ).¹⁵

6. Chain Quotations . Most students of the NT will be familiar with the practice of citing several quotations from several different places in the OT in support of a point that the NT author makes. While this is not done with great frequency in the NT, it is done at very important points in order to create the impression that Scripture everywhere teaches whatever point the author is trying to make. Perhaps the best-known example of this occurs in Romans 3 near the end of Paul’s great argument that all human beings are under sin. Having established that the immoral pagan, the Jew, and the moral pagan are all nevertheless sinful, Paul then nails the coffin shut in Rom. 3:10–18 with a string of quotations from at least five different OT passages.

The author of Hebrews does the same thing, albeit only in one place. In Heb. 1:5–13, we find him quoting from seven separate sources. In 1:5, he cites two verses concerning sonship from Ps. 2:7 and 2 Sam. 7:14 (= 1 Chron. 17:13). This pair of quotations, linked together by a simple καὶ πάλιν, establishes the sonship of the Messiah Jesus, who is “as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs” (Heb. 1:4 NIV). The next quotation seems to stand on its own, linking the Son to the Father in a position above the angels because the angels “worship him” (προσκυνησάτωσαν αὐτῷ). The next quotation also mentions angels and calls them “servants” (λειτουργούς). The author then moves into a lengthy quotation from Ps. 45:6–7, a well-known passage about the Messiah having a throne that will last forever and ever. He is the one who loves righteousness and hates wickedness, who has been set by God “beyond your companions” (παρὰ τοὺς μετόχους σου, Heb. 1:9). This text is then loosely joined by καὶ to another quotation, this

¹⁵ See Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:cxxi.
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time from Ps. 102:25–27. This quotation continues the theme of the Messiah being higher than the angels, or, as the author had called him in 1:3, “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (NIV). Now he is referred to as the Lord who “laid the foundations of the earth,” whose handiwork is the heavens, and who stands changelessly above these with years that “will never end.” The created order, by contrast, will perish. The last quotation is from a psalm that the author will use frequently throughout the epistle, making its first appearance here: “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet” (Ps. 110:1 NIV). The string of quotations occurs early in the book because the theme of the superiority of Jesus is a dominant interest of the author (see below under Christology).

7. **Example Lists** . Another method of OT interpretation that the author uses effectively is the example list, a long string of examples from the OT to prove a point. The famous “Hall of Fame of Faith” in Hebrews 11 dramatically demonstrates this practice. There the writer, beginning from creation and Abel and continuing all the way through OT history to the later prophets, describes for his readers what it means to be people who live “by faith” (πίστει). The author does this to show his readers that they continue in a tradition of salvation that began by faith and continues by faith to the present age. Their faith differs from that of the OT faithful in that the Messiah has come; they have “received what had been promised” (Heb. 11:39–40).

8. **Typology** . Perhaps no other element of biblical interpretation has been as often identified with the Book of Hebrews as typology. Typology views a place, person, event, institution, office, or object in the Bible as “a pattern by which later persons or places are interpreted due to the unity of events within salvation–history.”¹⁶

¹⁶ G. R. Osborne, “Type; Typology,” in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev. ed., ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley et al. (Grand

Generally, typology consists of two elements: a *type*, which is the original element, and an *antitype*, which is the later element that serves as the final expression of the original type. These two are in a temporal relationship, a crucial factor for the understanding of typology. The type is important in the flow of salvation history in and of itself; its historicity and usefulness within its contemporary context is never doubted and is often affirmed by the later author. But the type takes on a significance beyond its historical reality when it is viewed as a picture or pattern of a more important antitype that follows. Thus, typology must be seen in a temporal context, for the type gathers significance in relation to the antitype only from its being recognized later as a pattern. Therefore, it is better to think of typology as a hermeneutical principle that discovers subsequent correspondences between antitype and type than as a prophecy/fulfillment dynamic that regards such correspondences as consciously anticipated by the OT authors.

The writer of Hebrews makes use of typology from the outset. His opening sentence makes quite clear that something happened in the past, and now has happened again in a definitive and final way in the readers’ own time. “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son...” (Heb. 1:1–2 NRSV). This ringing opening statement, so heavy with rhetorical emphasis as we have seen (see chap. 8 above), in fact has this forcefulness because of the newness of the event of Christ. The strong eschatological emphasis at the beginning of the epistle creates a context for understanding the OT as a book consistently looking forward to Christ and builds that expectation in the reader.

The list of types and antitypes discussed in Hebrews is quite lengthy and need not be repeated here. Suffice it to say that the long central section of Hebrews (Heb. 8:1–10:18) is dominated by the

Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979–88), 4:930. This article is a brief, extremely useful summary of biblical typology.

notion of typology, and the vast majority of those types apply directly to the person of Jesus Christ. For instance, while the author earlier stressed that Jesus is “a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek” (Heb. 7:17 NIV), he now presents him as the antitype of the levitical high priest in the OT who ministers in a heavenly sanctuary (Heb. 8:1–6). He offered his sacrifice once for all, in contrast to the frequent offering of the blood of bulls and goats by the levitical priests, and is the mediator of a new covenant that is the antitype of the old covenant found in OT Scripture (Heb. 8:6–13).

The heavy typology related to the sacrificial system continues in Hebrews 9. Now we see that the tabernacle and all of its particulars correspond in detail to NT realities, though the author claims that “of these things we cannot speak now in detail” (Heb. 9:5 NRSV). The crucial point for the author is that the sacrificial system of worship carried on in the earthly tabernacle—which included the lampstand, the table, the consecrated bread, etc.—is a type of the ministry that Christ now carries on for us in the heavenly tabernacle. The blood of the animal sacrifices is clearly a type of the blood of Christ, and the elements of the tabernacle, symbolic of God’s judgment upon sin, are evidence that Christ’s sacrifice for us has satisfied divine justice (Heb. 9:27–28).

Not only is Christ typified in the details of the sacrificial system, but the law itself, perhaps the most important element of Jewish life, is directly stated to be a “type” (τύπος, Heb. 8:5) of the reality that is Christ. “Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who approach” (Heb. 10:1 NRSV). Here we see that not just some of the ritual activities were understood to be typical of Christ, or only certain passages in the OT and certain teachings, but in fact the whole law—the entire focus of the Jewish mind and probably the whole OT—points to Jesus Christ. This is confirmed in Hebrews 10, where Jesus is said to be the one who “sets aside the first to establish the second” (Heb. 10:9 NIV), meaning that he set aside the law in

order to establish himself as the sacrifice that would definitively cover the sins of the people.

All of this is finalized quite clearly by the once-for-allness of Christ’s sacrifice. This is what makes typology so important for the author of Hebrews; we have reached the “end of time” in regard to the action of God in salvation. It is about Jesus that the author states, “when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, ‘he sat down at the right hand of God,’ and since then has been waiting ‘until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.’ For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (Heb. 10:12–14 NRSV). The author then follows this with two quotations (not typological) emphasizing the permanence of the law written upon the minds and hearts of the people and the certainty that their “sins and lawless acts” will not be remembered any more (Heb. 10:15–17). Then in the next section, on the basis of this three-chapter typological argument, the author encourages his readers to “draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful” (Heb. 10:22–23 NIV). Typology, then, is a major interpretive method for the author of Hebrews, which he uses to clearly instruct his readers that Christ is sufficient and the basis for encouragement to draw nearer to God. A more important hermeneutical foundation for the warnings and encouragements of Hebrews cannot be found.

9. Homiletic Midrash . There is so much debate about the meaning of the word *midrash* in modern theological usage and the idea of midrash with reference to Hebrews is so comprehensive that we must proceed with caution and be very brief in our explanation. Midrash is simply a Hebrew noun meaning “ ‘inquiry,’ ‘examination,’ or ‘commentary.’ ”¹⁷ It was a method of applying the Scriptures so as

¹⁷ C. A. Evans, “Midrash,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers

“to bring the text into the experience of the congregation. It involved making the Scriptures contemporary so that they could no longer be regarded as a record of past events and sayings but a living word through which God addressed the audience directly.”¹⁸

An example of this is found in Heb. 12:5–13. When our author wants to encourage his readers to continue in their struggle against sin, he scolds them for forgetting the “word of encouragement that addresses you as sons” (Heb. 12:5 NIV). He then quotes Prov. 3:11–12, which describes the Lord’s discipline of his children, punishing “those whom he loves, and chastis[ing] every child whom he accepts” (Heb. 12:6 NRSV). With this family metaphor in his mind, the writer then expands upon what it means to be disciplined as a son: “for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline?” (Heb. 12:7 NRSV). The author states that those who are not disciplined are illegitimate children and, using a lesser-to-greater (*gal wa-h.omer*) argument, says that if we submitted to the discipline of our human fathers, how much more should we submit to the discipline of the “Father of our spirits” (Heb. 12:9 NIV). This Father “disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness,” and the discipline that he administers “always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Heb. 12:10–11 NRSV). Therefore, we are to pursue peace and holiness and accept the discipline that God gives us as our Father. All of this material is an extension and application of the original OT quote, a text that is relatively simple and compressed. The notion of God’s parental discipline from Prov. 3:11–12 is expanded and applied more

Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992), 544. This article is an excellent introduction to the whole complicated discussion of midrash, though it is limited to a discussion of the Gospels as far as the concept applies to the NT.

¹⁸ Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:cxxiv.

concretely by the author of Hebrews. This constitutes his midrash on the text.¹⁹

Does Hebrews Use Methods We Cannot?

We will look only briefly at whether or not the author of Hebrews uses methods that we cannot legitimately use. Not only is it not a question that particularly relates to our exegesis of the text of Hebrews (but rather, the exegesis of OT texts), but also it more properly belongs in a systematic theology text. Although the subject is difficult and complex, it boils down to this question: Are we able to use the biblical texts in the same manner that the biblical writers did? Some would say yes, without hesitating. The Bible is a book that uses human language in human circumstances to discuss very human thoughts about God. His inspiration of those thoughts, and even the words chosen to express them, is not in question, but the techniques that he moved them to use are purely human, and therefore open for us to use as well in our exegesis of the text. Others would say no. The inspiration of Scripture includes not only the words the authors chose but the very techniques they used to interpret other texts of Scripture. Just as Jesus was able to say certain things because he was God and man at the same time, so Scripture can interpret itself in unique ways because it is both written by humans and divinely inspired. Therefore, there are techniques open to the biblical writers that are not open to us.

As one might expect, the answer lies somewhere in between. Surely, Hebrews is a human book, and we must understand it as such. Therefore, the interpretive techniques used are humanly devised, and it should not surprise us to find that many of the methods used by the author of Hebrews were widely used by other

¹⁹ Lane, *ibid.*, lists the following passages as containing examples of homiletic midrash, though they are also listed as fitting some of the other categories above as well: 2:5–9; 3:7–4:13; 6:13–20; 7:11–25; 8:7–13; 10:5–10, 15–18, 35–39; 12:5–13, 25–29.

biblical expositors in the first century. This legitimizes any interpretive technique we find in Scripture, as long as the text is handled in a manner consistent with the author's intent.

But therein lies the rub. The author of Hebrews is often accused of doing exactly the opposite. Some say that he has twisted certain OT texts in order to relate them to Christ, manipulating not only their interpretation but the words of the texts themselves. Is this true? If so, what does that say about our ability to use the text in a similar way? Can we also manipulate it in support of new spiritual insights? Certainly not. We can use human techniques as long as they are in line with the intent of the author, but to contradict an author's original intent by giving the words a meaning that they do not bear is certainly wrong. But did the Holy Spirit inspire the author of Hebrews to do so? That is the bone of contention. However, I think it is accurate to say that the author of Hebrews did not contradict any earlier Scriptures, but made their original intent clear to his readers and applied them clearly and forcefully to the historical reality of Jesus of Nazareth. Rather than mishandling them, he applied them properly to the coming of the Messiah and the ramifications of that event for us.

But does that mean that we can similarly apply and extend the Scriptures to refer to present-day events? The answer is yes and no. Yes, as long as you are willing to say that it is *your* interpretation and *your* application of the Scriptures to *your* situation. This is doing nothing more than applying the Word of God to our life, which is not only permissible but necessary. The Bible is a living book and intended for living people and real situations. We must apply it to our lives everyday to be able to live according to its teachings. But it is another matter to claim that we are offering a definitive interpretation that is true for all people at all times. To say that is to step over the line between divine illumination in our study of the biblical text and divine inspiration of our own new text that, if it were divinely inspired, should be printed in our Bibles alongside

Hebrews, Matthew, and Habbakuk. The church has steadfastly resisted this temptation for ages, and we must continue to resist it.

There is much more to be said about the theology and use of the OT in Hebrews, but the above discussion may be summarized as follows. The author of Hebrews accepts the OT fully and finally as the Word of God, though he is willing to regard the LXX and even text-types currently unknown to us as accurate expressions of the Word of God. Based on his theology of Scripture, he is free to use the OT text in a number of ways that seem strange and difficult for us to accept but that were recognized as legitimate within their first-century context. Knowing how the author uses the OT will help us as we seek to be faithful interpreters of the Book of Hebrews.

Christology

Systematic theologians have traditionally separated the discussion of Christology into two categories, the *person* of Christ and the *work* of Christ. The first discusses the questions of his deity, his humanity, his role within the Trinity, etc.; the second discusses the purposes for which he became incarnate, his miracles, preaching, death on the cross, etc. These categories have proved convenient down through the years for answering certain questions of reader-response theology, but as the agenda for our theology has become formed more by the biblical texts themselves, this way of dividing Christology has been increasingly less able to satisfy the needs of interpreters. In the NT, the person of Christ is generally not separated from his work, and they are certainly not separated in Hebrews, so we will proceed to discuss both together.

But at this point we face another problem. On what aspect of Christ does our author focus? There seem to be two possibilities: the sonship of Jesus and his priestly office. The first is clearly the focus of the ringing introduction to the epistle (Heb. 1:1–4). There our author focuses on the fact that God has a Son through whom he has revealed himself to humankind and who is of a certain character and accomplishes a certain set of tasks. However, beginning in Hebrews

5 and stretching through to the end of Hebrews 10, the author rarely departs from the idea of Jesus as a high priest after the order of Melchizedek and superior to the levitical priesthood. This theme is so important in this central section of the epistle that it is hard to argue against its prominence in the mind of the writer. Ultimately, the question of priority between these two foci in the mind of the author is unimportant. Both themes are so crucial to his epistle and so interwoven with each other that the question can be left unanswered as we discuss the Christology of the epistle.

Jesus the Superior Son

The epistle begins with the sonship of Christ, and so shall we. From the opening phrases, we understand that the sonship of Jesus is a sonship to the Father/Creator of the entire universe. This is the God who has “spoken” (λαλήσας) in the past, revealing himself to his people, and who has “spoken” (ἐλάλησεν) now to us in his Son, who is his heir and through whom he created. This Son “is the reflection (ἀπαύγασμα) of God’s glory and the exact imprint (χαρακτήρ) of God’s very being (ὑποστάσεως)” (Heb. 1:3 NRSV). This ontological statement about Christ will be demonstrated functionally throughout the epistle, but never outside the context of the fact that Jesus is the ἀπαύγασμα and the χαρακτήρ of God himself.²⁰ The author’s focus on the sonship of Jesus does not stay purely ontological for long, however. He immediately describes a number of Jesus’ activities that demonstrate his divinity: he (1) “sustains all things by his powerful word,” (2) “made purification for sins,” and (3) “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb. 1:3 NRSV). These three functions point to three elements of Jesus’ nature: he is (1) God, who sustains all things; (2) the perfect sacrifice, who made purification for sins; and (3) the High Priest, who at the right hand of the divine majesty

²⁰ See the commentaries for the important role these words played in the later Christological formulations of the church and for the depth of meaning they had for ancient readers.

performs the priestly function in the heavenly tabernacle. Thus, ontology and function, Christ’s person and work, are completely joined in the description of Jesus’ sonship and priesthood in Hebrews 1.

The sonship of Jesus then becomes a dominant motif for establishing the superiority of Jesus to several other possible rivals in the minds of the readers of Hebrews. The writer begins by showing Jesus’ superiority to angels (Heb. 1:5–2:18). The next major block of teaching (Heb. 3:1–6) shows Jesus’ superiority to Moses, “as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself” (Heb. 3:3 NRSV). This naturally leads into a clear statement of the superiority of Jesus to Joshua who led the people into the promised land, since Jesus now leads believers into the greater sabbath that “still remains for the people of God” (Heb. 4:9 NRSV). In each of these sections—showing Jesus superior to the angels, Moses, and Joshua—the writer focuses on the sonship of Jesus, though he mentions the high priesthood of Jesus as early as Heb. 2:17.

The prologue to the epistle introduces a notion that is crucial to understanding these contrasts. It states that Jesus is as much superior (κρείττων) to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs. Κρείττων describes someone who ranks above others by virtue of a qualitative difference; Jesus is qualitatively above the angels, Moses, and Joshua. How Jesus is superior to these other parties is variously described. Jesus is superior to the angels as the unique, divine Son of God. Angels are common spiritual beings, but only Jesus is uniquely begotten of the Father. As Heb. 1:3 makes clear, this unique Son is equal to the Father in every respect and is in no way a created being or to be placed on a par with the angels. God the Son is superior to the angels even while temporarily made lower by his suffering and death (Heb. 2:7, 9–15), because “it is not to angels that [God] has subjected the world to come” (Heb. 2:5 NIV) but to Jesus (Heb. 2:8). At the end of this comparison between Jesus and the angels, the motif of priesthood is introduced, beginning to

make the point that though Jesus is the High Priest, he is also the unique, Divine One who is superior to angels (2:14–18).

Jesus' superiority to Moses, described in Heb. 3:1–6, is also heavily freighted with theology. "Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself" (Heb. 3:3 NIV). Moses is described as a faithful servant in God's house, perhaps most importantly as the giver of the law (since he testified "to what would be said in the future"),²¹ whereas Jesus was "faithful as a son over God's house" (3:5, 6 NIV). In this brief segment, the writer also refers to Jesus as "the apostle and high priest whom we confess" (3:1 NIV), but he does not emphasize the high priesthood at this time as he moves into a description of Jesus' superiority to Joshua.

Jesus is presented as superior to Joshua, though this comparison is the least explicit of them all. The point that the author wants to make—warning the people not to be like the people of Israel in the wilderness—dominates his thinking, and the comparison between Jesus and Joshua is almost lost. Nevertheless, at the end of this segment of teaching, the comparison is made explicit (Heb. 4:8). The writer seems content to leave largely in the background the theme of Jesus as the one who leads God's people into rest. The strong statements about his leading many "to glory" (Heb. 2:10) and his freeing "those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (Heb. 2:15 NIV) is enough to sustain the comparison with Joshua throughout the two chapters. He does make an explicit statement about Jesus, the Son of God, going through the heavenlies

²¹ As the giver of the prophetic law, Moses is ranked among the prophets through whom God spoke in former times and who are superseded by Christ (Heb. 1:1–2). Cf. Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 208–9.

(4:14) to end this series of comparisons and move into the priesthood motif.

Jesus the Great High Priest

In a transitional section, at least as far as the Christology of Hebrews is concerned, our author, while continuing to call Jesus "Son," begins to focus upon the central typological teaching of our book: the priesthood of Jesus in the order of Melchizedek. In Heb. 4:14, we see Jesus called "a great high priest," but also referred to as "Jesus the Son of God." The high priestly motif is mentioned again in the following verse, emphasizing the humanity of Jesus and his ability "to sympathize with our weaknesses," where the author describes him as "one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" (Heb. 4:15 NIV). The theme of Jesus' high priesthood is then developed further, though the author briefly returns to the sonship motif by quoting Ps. 2:7: "You are my Son; today I have become your Father" (Heb. 5:5 NIV). The juxtaposition of the two ideas in the author's mind is once again apparent, however, as he immediately follows his quotation of Ps. 2:7 with the central quotation of the book, Ps. 110:4: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek" (Heb. 5:6 NIV).

In the next four verses, the author shifts the focus clearly and eloquently from sonship to priesthood by describing Jesus' days on earth as a testing period: "Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Heb. 5:8–9 NIV). These verses, so important for establishing Jesus not only as a perfect high priest but also as a perfect sacrifice—and later as a perfect example of one who learned through suffering (cf. Hebrews 12)—lead clearly to the pinnacle statement of this transitional section: Jesus "was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek" (Heb. 5:10 NIV).

After the aside containing the famous warning about not being able to repent again once one has fallen away (Heb. 5:11–6:20; see

below under “Sanctification and Perseverance”), our author begins the central section of the epistle on the priesthood of Jesus. Much has been written about Jesus’ priesthood, and one can consult the commentaries for an extensive theological exposition of this motif, but four things must be mentioned in even the briefest description of this crucial theological motif in Hebrews.

First, the comparison is made with Melchizedek in order to emphasize the uniqueness of Jesus’ high priesthood. Though the author will later describe Jesus’ priesthood largely in levitical terms, the comparison must begin with a priesthood that is separate from the Levites in order to emphasize its uniqueness. Melchizedek is mentioned only twice in the OT, both in rather strange and unique circumstances, and his priesthood was ideal for describing how Jesus’ priesthood was similar to and yet different from the levitical priestly system.

Second, the argument that Melchizedek is more important than Abraham (Heb. 7:1–10) ranks him higher than even the highest Jews. Abraham tithed to the king of righteousness and peace (Heb. 7:2, 4–8), demonstrating his subservience to Melchizedek, even though Abraham had defeated other kings (Heb. 7:1). Abraham was the father of the Jewish nation. Even Moses was not ranked higher than he by first-century Judaism. Thus, presenting Jesus as a Melchizedekian priest reinforces the claim that Jesus is superior to Moses and Joshua and to other major OT Jewish leaders.

Third, Melchizedek seems to be a theophany, which enables the writer to point once again to Jesus’ sonship. Melchizedek is said to have had no father or mother, to be without genealogy, and to be without beginning of days or end of life, and, significantly, the writer mentions that this is “like the Son of God” (Heb. 7:3).²² This makes

²² We must be careful not to make too much out of this theologically, however, because of the highly rhetorical nature of the statements about Melchizedek (cf. pp. 178–79 above).

not only his person but also his priesthood perpetual and indestructible (Heb. 7:3, 15–17).

Fourth, that Jesus’ priesthood is in the order of Melchizedek emphasizes the perfection of it. This motif dominates Hebrews 8–10 because it blends easily with the idea that Jesus’ priesthood fulfills the typological elements of the OT levitical priesthood, but it is introduced in the summary section at the end of Hebrews 7. In 7:11, the argument is made that “if perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood . . . why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron?” (NIV).

The idea of “perfection” (τελείωσις) is not emphasized as strongly in this transitional section as it is in Hebrews 8–10, but it underlies the text. The law “made nothing perfect” (οὐδὲν γὰρ ἐτελείωσεν ὁ νόμος, Heb. 7:19), but Jesus’ priesthood is “permanent” (ἀπαράβατον, Heb. 7:24), “holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, [and] exalted above the heavens” (ὅσιος ἄκακος ἀμίαντος, κεχωρισμένος ἀπὸ τῶν ἀμαρτωλῶν καὶ ὑψηλότερος τῶν οὐρανῶν, Heb. 7:26 NIV). In the last verse of this transitional passage, the underlying idea becomes explicit: “the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect (τετελειωμένον) forever” (Heb. 7:28 NIV). In describing Jesus’ priesthood, the author now shifts his focus from its relationship to Melchizedek to its superiority to all aspects of the old covenant. Since we have discussed this in some detail above, while looking at how our author used the OT, it is time to move on to the topic of eschatology.

Eschatology

Eschatology, like Christology, is a topic of such breadth and depth in NT studies that it is impossible to do justice to even one NT writer’s notion of it in the short space allowed here. The reason for this is that, while systematic theologians usually focus narrowly on

events at the end of time in their study of eschatology, most NT scholars include the whole sweep of what is called “salvation history,” or God’s redemptive action in human history. We will briefly sketch the importance of this topic for the author of Hebrews.²³

As with other aspects of the theology of Hebrews, the importance of eschatology is demonstrated in the first few verses of the book. The writer contrasts former days (πάλαι) with “these last days” (ἐπ’ ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων).²⁴ The prologue catalogs what has happened in Jesus in a historical progression of events moving from his role as Creator to Redeemer to heavenly intermediary for his people. This has all happened in human history in fulfillment of what had been taught in different ways and at various times through the prophets of old. Setting the work of Christ in the sweep of cosmic history could give the impression that the sermon will be full of abstract philosophical speculation; these first four verses—and, indeed, the whole first chapter of the epistle—do not seem aimed at the practical needs of a typical NT congregation.

Of course the author of Hebrews is never abstract, but rather these deep truths form the foundation for the message he wants his audience to heed (Heb. 2:1ff.). The eschatological mind of the author of Hebrews is seen in his desire to bring the past into the present so that it will affect the future. We spoke about this above when we looked at how the author makes the OT relevant to his readers’

²³ Many have written on this topic, but perhaps most prominent in the discussion of the eschatology of Hebrews is the article by C. K. Barrett, “The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” in *The Background of the New Testament and Its Eschatology: In Honour of Charles Harold Dodd*, ed. W. D. Davies and D. Daube (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 363–93. For further bibliography on this subject, see Attridge, *Hebrews*, 27 n. 211.

²⁴ Of course, the Greek word for “last” is ἐσχάτος, from which we get our word eschatology, “the study of last things.”

current situation. In the eschatology of the epistle, he uses a device known in NT circles today as the “already, but not yet” aspect of biblical history. Jesus is the one who now sits at the right hand of the Father, superior to the angels, but he is also the one to whom all things have “not yet” (οὐπω) been made subject (2:8).

The occurrences of this little word οὐπω in the book are instructive in this regard. In the first reference (Heb. 2:8), the focus is on the cosmic aspect of Christ as king of the universe subjecting all things to himself, showing the author’s interest in the larger questions of human history. The second occurrence (Heb. 12:4) shows the author’s interest in the part his readers play in this cosmic history. In their specific circumstances in space and time, they have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood. Nevertheless, their persecution is seen as part of God’s larger agenda in human history. Christ, the mediatorial High Priest, serves both the larger needs of humankind and the people of God worldwide, and the smaller needs of the particular community to whom the author of Hebrews is writing.

Eschatology figures prominently in several other ways in the epistle. The discussion in Heb. 3:6–4:11 about the “rest” of God is clearly eschatological and points not only to the past history of the Israelites but also to the present and future of the believing community to whom our author writes. The author begins his discussion by warning “If we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope” (Heb. 3:6 NRSV), we shall be counted as part of his house and will be found to have passed the test of the wilderness.²⁵

Hope is another theme that runs throughout the epistle and demonstrates its eschatological focus. Already eschatological by definition, this hope is nevertheless bolstered in its futurist orientation by a cluster of concepts. In Heb. 3:6, the readers are asked to “hold firm” (κατάσχωμεν) their confidence and hope. In

²⁵ For more on this theme, see Barrett, “Eschatology,” 366–73.

6:11, it is the “full assurance of hope” (τὴν πληροφορίαν τῆς ἐλπίδος) that the author wants to be realized “to the very end” (ἄχρι τέλους) in the lives of his readers, and only a few verses later he encourages them “to seize the hope set before us” (κρατῆσαι τῆς προκειμένης ἐλπίδος, Heb. 6:18 NRSV), a reference that has both spatial and temporal connotations. At the same time, 6:19–20 makes clear that this hope is “a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered” (NRSV), indicating that the hope is not only future oriented but brings present benefits through the work of Jesus in heaven. This idea is essentially repeated in Heb. 7:19, where Jesus introduces “a better hope, through which we approach God” (NRSV). In perhaps the most integrative of all the passages on this theme, the writer encourages his readers to “hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful” (Heb. 10:23 NRSV). They are to do this by considering how to stir up the Christian community to love and good deeds and by meeting together and encouraging one another, doing this “all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb. 10:25 NRSV). “Day” here is a clear reference to the future judgment of God (cf. 10:27).

Finally, the warnings in the Epistle to the Hebrews, which will be prominent below in our discussion of sanctification and perseverance, are essential to the eschatological thrust of the epistle. The threat of God’s future judgment gives these warnings their solemn tone, as does the present fearful prospect of falling into the hands of the living God (Heb. 10:27, 30–31). In Heb. 6:4–12, this theme comes to the fore as well. The author assures his readers that God will not be unjust so as to overlook their work in the day of judgment, but he wants them to continue to show “diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope” and “inherit the promises” (6:10–12 NRSV). They will obtain these promises by continuing in their salvation, which began in the past, as the author reminds them when

he says that they “have once been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come” (Heb. 6:4–5 NRSV). Whether or not this salvation will continue into the future is a question that is perhaps best discussed under our next topic, sanctification and perseverance.

Sanctification and Perseverance

No topic has created more controversy among theological analysts of Hebrews than the epistle’s teaching regarding whether or not one can lose one’s salvation.²⁶ The discussion involves many complex exegetical issues. In each of the relevant passages, the definitions of many key terms are disputed, a variety of grammatical possibilities exist, and one must make assumptions concerning the nature of the original problem in the community—and these are just a few of the problems that plague interpreters approaching this thorny issue. The difficulty even extends to the category under which we should discuss this issue. While perseverance is clearly an issue in Hebrews, it is questionable whether *sanctification* or *justification* is the proper term to describe the aspect of soteriology under dispute. The question, particularly when discussing passages like Heb. 6:4–12 and 10:19–39, is whether the author is speaking of initial salvation or of continuing to grow in holiness within the sphere of salvation. Why I have titled this section as I have will become clearer as we proceed. It can be said now, however, that Hebrews seems at the very least to have been written to those who claim to have already had an experience of justification. We will approach the subject from that

²⁶ See Scot McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions,” *Trinity Journal* 13 (1992): passim (esp. 21 n. 1 and 22 n. 2), for its extensive bibliography of recent articles on this topic in Hebrews. This article provides an excellent model of how to deal with theological issues in a biblical text of some size.

standpoint, viewing the salvation discussed as pertaining to the Christian's growth in Christ. I have chosen to discuss this theological problem because it illustrates the need to think in terms of both authorial and reader-response theology at the same time, but it is impossible to do more than outline the issue in its most basic form (though even this may prove to be easier than restoring an apostate to repentance!).

At the heart of this discussion are four passages, known commonly as the "warning passages." While there is some dispute as to the relative importance of these passages, there seems to be general agreement that in Heb. 2:1-4, 3:7-4:13, 5:11-6:12, and 10:19-39 the author addresses the need for faithfulness in holding on to the gospel.²⁷ In 2:3, the author asks "How can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" (NRSV), a rhetorical question that demonstrates his profound worry that this salvation can be lost and that the judgment of God in the eschaton will be inescapable. At Heb. 3:12, the author clearly warns his readers to "take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God" (NRSV). This is followed immediately by another command, to encourage one another daily "so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb. 3:13 NRSV). Once again in Heb. 4:1, the readers are exhorted to "take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it [i.e., the rest of God]" (NRSV). At the end of the passage, the author wraps it up with another exhortation: "Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs [i.e., Israel in the wilderness]" (Heb. 4:11 NRSV).

²⁷ Others have included 12:1-29 and a number of the exhortations in chapter 13. While these certainly have a warning character to them, they seem distant enough from the question of losing one's salvation (i.e., perseverance in the face of apostasy rather than persecution), that they are not included here.

The two most difficult and most often cited passages on this question are Heb. 5:11-6:12 and 10:19-39. They too make it quite clear that the author is concerned with perseverance and the sanctification of the believer. The first passage in fact contains the only direct accusation found in the epistle of the readers' lack of faithfulness. The author scolds them for needing "someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food," though by this time they ought to be teachers (Heb. 5:12 NRSV). An exhortation is implied as well in 6:11, where the author declares that he wants "each one of you to show the same diligence [as they had previously shown] so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end" (Heb. 6:11 NRSV). Hebrews 10:19-39 begins in a much less confrontational manner by encouraging the readers to approach the throne of God "with a true heart in full assurance of faith" and to "hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering" (Heb. 10:22-23 NRSV). Another exhortation follows: "And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together ... but encouraging one another..." (Heb. 10:24-25 NRSV). This, however, leads into a strong warning about those who "willfully persist in sin" and "have spurned the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant ... and outraged the Spirit of grace" (Heb. 10:26, 29 NRSV). All of these warnings certainly show the importance of this issue for our author; sanctification and perseverance were subjects about which the writer of Hebrews was deeply concerned.

We will now briefly examine the four passages, outlining some of the questions that one must face in trying to think theologically about Hebrews. Since these issues are complex and involve many different variables, our review will seem somewhat superficial. Nevertheless, a summary of some of the relevant issues will help us get a clearer overall picture of the debate and its importance.

Hebrews 2:1–4

Hebrews 2:1–4 follows hard upon the author’s long discussion of Christ’s superiority to angels (Heb. 1:5–14). Key terms in dispute in the passage are “escape” (ἐκφεύγειν), “salvation” (σωτηρία, Heb. 2:3), and “drift away” (παραρρεῖν, Heb. 2:1). The rhetorical question in Heb. 2:3 surely seems to refer to escaping the judgment of God. Two factors call for this conclusion. First, the passage follows hard upon two OT quotations in chapter 1 that allude to judgment by the Messiah (Ps. 102:25–27 = Heb. 1:10–12; Ps. 110:1 = Heb. 1:13). Second, the meaning of the rhetorical question in Heb. 2:3 depends upon the contrast with the law spoken of in Heb. 2:2. There the description of the law ends by stating that “every violation and disobedience received its just punishment” (NIV), connecting the escape in Heb. 2:3 with the idea of punishment. Thus, the salvation which is announced by the Lord in Heb. 2:3 must have to do with salvation from the wrath of God, his punishment of evildoers at the end of time. More difficult is a definition of the verb “drift away” (παραρρεῖν, Heb. 2:1). The vagueness of this rare verb is noted by many commentators,²⁸ but it introduces in a general way the issue of believers being able to lose their salvation, which is all that the author intends at this moment. Much fuller and more explicit warnings come later, so little can be gained from trying to define the term more fully here. We will discuss this issue further in later passages. At this point, we can say with Harold Attridge that “although . . . the community addressed is perceived to be in danger, the vagueness of the imagery and general character of the warning shed no light on the causes or nature of that danger.”²⁹

Hebrews 3:7–4:13

The major question in this passage is of course what the idea of the “rest” (κατάπαυσις) of God means (cf. Heb. 3:11). Whatever the precise meaning of this phrase, it has something to do with salvation from sin, for the warning in 3:12–13 cautions members of the community not to become “hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (ἵνα μὴ σκληρυνθῇ τις ἐξ ὑμῶν ἀπάτη τῆς ἀμαρτίας). The idea of hardening also appears in Heb. 3:8, a quotation from the OT that is directly applied to the readers of Hebrews. Further definition of the idea of hardening may come in 3:18–19, where the Israelites are said not to have been able to enter God’s rest because of “disobedience” (ἀπειθεῖν) and “unbelief” (ἀπιστία). These two elements are reinforced in 4:2 and 4:6, where faithlessness and disobedience are again linked to this issue.

Whatever else can be said about Heb. 3:7–4:13, we can at least conclude four things.

1. The section is certainly about sanctification. In Heb. 3:16 and 4:1, the wilderness journey of the people of Israel is used as an example for the readers of Hebrews. The notion of entering the rest dominates the passage and clearly refers to a journey that the readers are taking. The analogy only makes sense within the context of a spiritual journey here on earth.
2. The references to hardening can only refer to a time of sanctification as well. Logically, the readers’ hearts would first have to be soft toward God for them to be able to harden them, but there is more than just logic to support this statement. In Heb. 4:2 we read that “the good news came to us just as to them” (NRSV), and again in 4:3 that “we who have believed enter that rest” (NRSV). Therefore, the author is certainly writing to those who have already come to faith and have believed the promises. What is now required is a persevering faith in those promises, and this can only be a relevant motif within the theological framework of sanctification, not justification.

²⁸ Cf., e.g., Attridge, *Hebrews*, 64.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

3. According to this passage, those who do not enter God's rest are left outside the realm of God's grace. In Heb. 4:11, we read that we are to "make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall (πέση) through such disobedience (ἀπειθείας) as theirs" (NRSV). The use of πίπτειν and ἀπειθεία make it certain that the author is talking here about final unbelief. These terms are always used in the NT with this finality. In addition, the metaphor of anger, used so often in the passage to describe God's response to the Israelites who fell in the wilderness, implies that such anger will be extended to any readers who might fall away. The wrath of God directed toward any person indicates that they are outside the reach of the grace of God; it is one of the most common metaphors for judgment of sin used in the NT (cf., e.g., 1 Thess. 5:9). So any reader who might engage in this falling away is very clearly said to "have an evil, unbelieving heart (καρδία πονηρὰ ἀπιστίας) that turns away (ἀποστῆναι) from the living God" (Heb. 3:12 NRSV). There is no doubt that this refers to those who, having turned away from the living God, are no longer in relationship with him.
4. This passage also declares that persevering to the end of the journey is essential to salvation, to becoming "partners of Christ" (μέτοχοι ... τοῦ Χριστοῦ, Heb. 3:14). Readers are to exhort each other "every day, as long as it is called 'today' " (Heb. 3:13 NRSV), and there would be no need for this exhortation if there were no need for perseverance. Also, the rest remains "open" (Heb. 4:6, 8–9, 11); it is something that still waits to be entered. Lastly, there is an effort to be made (Heb. 4:11), to "hold fast to our confession" (Heb. 4:14), a further indication that perseverance is in view. The metaphor of holding fast cannot imply anything else.

Much of what has been said in the preceding paragraphs seems obvious, but it must be restated because so many have questioned the reality of the need for the warning passages in Hebrews. There can be no doubt that, while the author of Hebrews considers the readers to be firmly in God's hand at present, he is concerned that they

persevere to the end in order to be clearly in God's hand at the time of judgment. The question of whether they only *appear* to be in God's hands—only appear to be Christians, while in reality not being so—is simply not addressed. This passage gives us no help in answering the fundamental theological question about the nature of the salvation of the readers of Hebrews and whether they are able to lose a "real" salvation that they already possess or only able to lose an "apparent" salvation that by every human measuring stick seems to be theirs, but is in fact not really theirs. We will look at the next two warning passages in an attempt to find an answer to that question.

Hebrews 5:11–6:12

Perhaps no passage in Hebrews has been more discussed than Heb. 5:11–6:12, particularly Heb. 6:4–6.³⁰ Hebrews 5:11–6:12 has so many difficulties and can be approached in so many different ways, that it presents a formidable challenge to the interpreter. Although our evaluation must of necessity be brief and somewhat superficial, we can still observe how some of the major elements in this passage fit within the authorial theology of Hebrews as this pertains to the issue of sanctification and perseverance.

Four terms or groups of terms cause the main difficulty within the passage, all of them falling within Heb. 6:4–6. Perhaps the most important is the redundant phrase in Heb. 6:6 "to restore again to repentance" (πάλιν ἀνακαινίζειν εἰς μετάνοιαν, Heb. 6:6, cf. 6:4 in NRSV). The meaning of παραπίπτειν (Heb. 6:6) is the second crucial factor in the passage. The third element in the passage is the phrase that is translated "since on their own they are crucifying again the

³⁰ Many feel that this passage vies mightily with Heb. 10:19–39 as the NT passage that most clearly reflects the possibility of a believer falling into apostasy. Although it would be difficult to argue with this assessment, deciding between these two passages is a question of little significance.

Son of God and are holding him up to contempt” (ἀνασταυροῦντας ἑαυτοῖς τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ παραδειγματίζοντας, Heb. 6:6 NRSV). As with πάλιν ἀνακαινίζειν, so also here we have the problem of the prefix ἀνα– being used to speak of an activity that has happened once and is now happening again, but it is the definition of the activity that creates the difficulty for interpreting this verse. Fourth, the meaning of the word “impossible” (ἀδύνατον, Heb. 6:4) and of the string of terms beginning in Heb. 6:4 and extending through 6:5 are crucial to understanding what the passage is about. We must look briefly at each of these now.

1. Though ἀνακαινίζειν and καινίζειν could be used interchangeably (see *Epistle of Barnabas* 6.11), it is difficult to miss the idea of redundancy that is found in the use of the prefix ἀνα– and the use of πάλιν to reinforce the idea of repetitive action. This is especially true since πάλιν echoes its use in 5:12 and ἀνα– is echoed three words later in 6:6 by ἀνασταυροῦντας. The author is clearly addressing whether this act that has already happened once can be repeated. The act he regards as unrepeatable is *being restored unto repentance*, a clear reference to a state of salvation. As Ellingworth puts it: “The ‘impossibility’ of a second repentance is thus not psychological, or more generally related to the human condition; it is in the strict sense theological, related to God’s saving action in Christ.”³¹

2. The verb παραπίπτειν is a *hapax legomenon* in the NT. It does occur in the LXX and other early Christian literature with a variety of meanings, including “to fall beside, go astray, miss.”³² It

³¹ Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 323.

³² Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament 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. “παραπίπτω.”

also, however, commonly means to fall away from salvation (cf., e.g., Wisdom of Solomon 6:9; 12:2; and esp. Ezek. 22:4). Perhaps as important as the verb itself, is its cognate, παράπτωμα, which occurs often in the NT, almost always describing some sort of apostasy (cf. esp. Rom. 5:15–20). Judging by the context, the serious sin of apostasy is probably the meaning of the participle here. Of course this is dependent upon the meaning of the phrases in Heb. 6:4–5, which we will discuss below, but the clear link between παραπεσόντας and πάλιν ἀνακαινίζειν εἰς μετάνοιαν, pretty well decides the case. This “falling away” is the opposite of faith, which enables one to hold fast.

3. Although there is some question whether the word ἀνασταυροῦν means “to crucify” or “to crucify again,”³³ the context demands that it mean “crucify again.” Πάλιν reinforces this idea. The sin here is a further crucifixion of Christ in addition to his real, historical crucifixion. Jesus Christ has died once for all; to crucify Jesus *again* carries with it a stigma so great as to be unconscionable.

It is clear enough that complete apostasy is the author’s meaning, but just to reinforce the point, he declares that those who recrucify Jesus “are holding him up to contempt” (παραδειγματίζοντας). There is an ironic twist in the author’s use of this term. It alludes to Jesus’ crucifixion and the shame he endured from the Romans, both as a Jew and as a supposed criminal. But this sort of public humiliation was also administered by Rome in the political sphere to its conquered enemies. Thus, there is a double condemnation for those who committed this sin. The author writes to those who knew how offensive any Roman humiliation was to a Jew, having tasted it themselves (cf. Heb. 10:32–34), so he writes that one who crucifies Jesus in this way not only humiliates him but humiliates him as a pagan would.

³³ Cf., e.g., the references to commentators in Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 324.

4. The fourth important element in the passage is the word “impossible” (ἀδύνατον, Heb. 6:4). This adjective is found in three other places in Hebrews (6:18; 10:4; 11:6). The neuter gender of the adjective is significant. It indicates that his readers cannot be renewed again to repentance objectively, not that they themselves are incapable of repentance.³⁴ Ellingworth therefore asks whether the implied subject of ἀδύνατον is God or some human agency. He suggests that according to Heb. 10:26–29 even God is rendered powerless in this situation, because in Christ he has offered the perfect sin offering and it has been rejected. Therefore there remains no sacrifice for sins.³⁵ This is surely correct.

A discussion of the string of descriptions found in Heb. 6:4–5 could occupy much more space than we have to give, but it is instructive at least to lay out the parameters of the discussion. There are two major differences of opinion about the terms. On the one hand, some say that the terms describe something very close to salvation, without actually mentioning it, and refer to those who have not really believed. On the other hand, there are those who say that these terms are clear and powerful rhetorical descriptions of a “real convert” and only lack direct propositional character in the interest of literary power.

The question is a moot one because it requires knowledge of the author’s view on an issue he does not address: whether he thought that all those whom he *addressed* as Christians were in fact Christians. In either case, the author of Hebrews gives a *real* warning concerning a *real* falling away. He states this warning in the strongest of language, so that even if what he describes is purely hypothetical as far as his readers are concerned (cf. Heb. 6:9), his warning would affect those who think they are Christians and are

³⁴ Cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 144 n. 35.

³⁵ Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 319.

not. Therefore, these warnings do describe a *real* situation in their literary context; falling away is viewed as a *real* possibility and its consequences are viewed as a *real* danger. Whether such a situation is a real possibility theologically is a question for other texts at other times. As far as the author of Hebrews is concerned, people who at least appear to be Christians (genuine or not) have fallen away. This is all that matters. The true state of their hearts prior to that falling away is irrelevant.

Several other things need to be mentioned about this passage. First, the author does not believe that his readers are guilty of the things that he has described in Heb. 6:4–5 (cf. Heb. 6:9–12), so the question of whether someone who has truly believed can fall away is a hypothetical one. The warning to the readers of Hebrews is sincere. Nevertheless, the author takes some of the edge off that warning by declaring that he does not believe his readers are of the company of those who would fall away.

Second, the illustration of ground being evaluated by its fruit (Heb. 6:7–8) can be seen as favoring either side of the debate about the readers’ spiritual state. One could say that the author of Hebrews is looking purely at fruit and cannot know the true character of the land. The rain falls equally on all the land. If God blesses the land, it produces a crop; without his blessing it produces thorns and thistles. This would indicate that the land can be the same but that the blessing of God is what makes the difference. On the other hand, especially as one compares this with similar statements by Jesus (cf. Matt. 7:17–20 = Luke 6:43–45), one could conclude just the opposite: that the land is not all the same; a difference in fruit indicates a difference in the quality of the land. So the one view says that the land is, as it were, neutral (i.e., able to accept or reject the gospel at any time depending on God’s blessing), while the other view says that the land is not neutral but rather determines the kind of fruit that will be produced. If we read Heb. 6:7 in light of the statements of encouragement that follow (Heb. 6:9–12), the illustration is essentially positive. His readers are good land and he

expects them to yield good fruit. Yielding bad fruit (i.e., apostatizing and recrucifying Jesus) will show that they were bad land after all. Further discussion will move us into categories that go beyond exegesis, so we will leave the illustration here.

Lastly, there is no doubt that the passage as a whole moves toward Heb. 6:19–20, which encourages us to seize the hope that is ours in Christ, a hope that is “an anchor for the soul, firm and secure” (ἄγκυραν ... τῆς ψυχῆς ἀσφαλῆ τε καὶ βεβαίαν, Heb. 6:19 NIV). This indicates that while Hebrews 6 is certainly a warning, it can be read as much as an encouragement to persevere as a warning of what happens if one does not. We should read it in this positive light and not entirely in the negative light of reader–response theology with its question of whether or not it is possible to lose one’s salvation. For the author, the question is rather, How do we hold on to our salvation? And the answer, of course, is that we hold on to Jesus.

Hebrews 10:19–31

This passage is often held up as the most difficult passage in Hebrews for those who wish to defend the position that one’s salvation cannot be lost. As with previous passages, so here as well there seems to be no doubt that the persons described are Christian as far as that can be determined. First person plural pronouns in 10:19–26 set the tone for the passage that describes the falling away, clearly reflecting the author’s belief that he and his readers share a common faith. It is important to note, however, that the author moves to the more general “anyone” (τις) and “one who” (ὁ + participle) in Heb. 10:28–29, where he describes the person who apostatizes. Nevertheless, in 10:30 he returns to addressing his readers directly and seems to connect them with the hypothetical person mentioned in Heb. 10:28–29.

The second thing to be said about the passage is that it describes divine judgment. The sentence in Heb. 10:26—“there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins” (οὐκέτι περὶ ἁμαρτιῶν ἀπολείπεται

θυσία)—cannot be read as referring to anything other than a final judgment. This conclusion is supported by what follows: “a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries” (Heb. 10:27 NRSV). Κρίσεως, πυρός, and τοὺς ὑπεναντίους are terms that refer to God’s final judgment of unbelievers, both in the rest of the NT and in the Book of Hebrews.³⁶ The mention of punishment, vengeance, and judgment (Heb. 10:29–30) reinforce the conclusion that this is the final judgment of God.

Lastly, as serious as this passage is in its warning against apostasy, it nevertheless focuses once again on hope. Not only is the warning broken up by the author’s strong exhortation to recall the earlier days when his readers were acting more in accord with their responsibility as Christians (10:32–34) but he ends the whole passage on a confident note by saying “we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved” (Heb. 10:39 NRSV). He also makes the confident assertion that perseverance will bring reward (Heb. 10:35–36). Nevertheless, the warning is a real one and appears even in this exhortatory wrap-up: God will not be pleased with those who shrink back (Heb. 10:38).

Hebrews 10:26–27 is perhaps the strongest statement in the book warning first-century readers of the danger of apostasy. The inclusive “we” and the present tense forms reinforce the impression that this poses a real threat to his readers and is not merely a hypothetical situation. Besides using the present tense to create a sense of the vividness and continuous nature of the danger they faced, adding ἔκουσίως emphasizes that it takes repeated and willful sin against God to lose one’s salvation. Yet the author’s use of “we” implies that he saw apostasy as a real possibility even for himself. Nevertheless, this is the only statement in all of these warnings that could answer positively the question “Can one lose salvation after

³⁶ Cf., e.g., Lane, *Hebrews*, 2:293: “The consequence of apostasy is terrifying, irrevocable judgment.”

receiving it?" Perhaps we should not hang too much on such a slender thread.

If one first accepts the idea that here the author views apostasy as a real possibility, then many other passages in Hebrews can be understood as pointing in that direction. But that is just what we are trying to avoid: making theological suppositions and then going to the text to prove them. As one looks objectively at these four warning passages in Hebrews, one sees only the author's constant encouragement to his readers and his confidence that they will not fail him or their Lord but will persevere to the end. Second, one sees a great hope that the warnings will have their intended effect, driving them closer to Christ and the life of faith. There is ultimately no way to tell whether the author believed in the theological distinction between real and apparent believers when he uttered these warnings. The seriousness of salvation necessitated that the author use the strongest possible language to describe believers who had fallen away, because he believed they really were believers. Whether or not our author would have concluded that those who ultimately remained apostate were never truly believers must remain a mystery to us.

Conclusion

Each of the four theological issues we have examined highlight the importance of first seeking out the author's understanding before asking our own questions of what we have determined is in the text. We must derive our theology of Hebrews from the author's own questions and concerns, for we will do him a great disservice if we try to impose our theology upon him. At the same time, our concerns are real and important, and it is to be hoped that the text as it was originally written and understood will have something to say about those concerns. But as we saw in the last section, for instance, the text may not say anything about whether it is possible for true believers to lose their salvation, and we must be willing to leave such questions open. Nevertheless, our text has said much that we can grasp and incorporate into a theology that warns of apostasy,

recognizing that the warnings are sincere and passionately aimed at believers, whether apparent or real.

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¹Trotter, A. H. (1997). *Vol. 6: Interpreting the Epistle to the Hebrews*. Guides to New Testament exegesis (163). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books.