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HEBREWS-JAMES

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Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc.
6316 Peake Road
Macon, Georgia 31210-3960
1-800-747-3016
© 2004 by Smyth & Helwys Publishing
All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America.

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials. ANSI Z39.48–1984 (alk. paper)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McKnight, Edgar V.
Hebrews-James / by Edgar V. McKnight & Christopher Church.
p. cm. (The Smyth & Helwys Bible commentary, 28)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 1-57312-085-5 (hardback : alk. paper)
1. Bible. N. T. Hebrews–Commentaries.
2. Bible. N. T. James–Commentaries.
I. Church, Christopher Lee, 1960–
II. Title. III. Series.

BS2775.53.M35 2004
227'.8707–dc22
2004022447

SMYTH & HELWYS BIBLE COMMENTARY

HEBREWS-JAMES

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In this superb volume, Edgar McKnight and Christopher Church not only make solid contributions to the prevailing scholarship on Hebrews and James, they also shine the spotlight on how these documents can shape the struggles of faith today. This is one of those rare examples of biblical commentary that will impress both the technical scholar and the preacher, that will benefit both the academy and the church.

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Hebrews-James is a clear and lively guide to a satisfying reading of these biblical texts. The commentary illuminates important intertextual dynamics and helps bridge the gap between the culture in which these texts were written and our own. Most importantly, *Hebrews-James* is highly successful at making the strategies of the authors of the texts apparent to all readers. The practical appeals and exhortations of some of the earliest Christians to their struggling brothers and sisters come alive for a new generation. *Hebrews-James* offers access to a fresh engagement with this important scriptural testimony to the faith and faithfulness of the early church.

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Edgar McKnight and Christopher Church have produced an outstanding volume based on sound scholarship and wise discernment. McKnight, a world-class scholar on New Testament interpretation, brings to Hebrews his incisive and keen eye to explore the dual covenant of perfection and faithfulness. His warm style and wise understanding offer readers of any level much to consider and contemplate. Church offers readers a pastoral scholarship that makes the "epistle of straw" come alive and serve the community of faith as living, breathing words about God.

Vaughn CroweTipton
Chaplain/Associate Professor of Religion
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Another quality volume in the outstanding Smyth & Helwys series! As one who comes from a different theological tradition, I admire the integrity and value the insights of Edgar McKnight on Hebrews. His study is riveting and rewarding. Christopher Church's application of James to the issues of our day is powerful as well.

Robert Black
Professor of Religion
Southern Wesleyan University

Edgar McKnight is not only a first rate scholar, he is also an excellent church person. I was his pastor for nearly a dozen years and remain his colleague and friend. Edgar's devotion to worship and ministry, as well as teaching, in our community of faith adds immense credibility to the depth and integrity of his scholarship in my view. He doesn't simply study and teach the Bible well, he lives the faith in an exemplary way.

Hardy Clemons
Pastor Emeritus
First Baptist Church, Greenville, SC

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ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS COMMENTARY

Books of the Old Testament, Apocrypha, and New Testament are generally abbreviated in the Sidebars, parenthetical references, and notes according to the following system.

The Old Testament

Genesis	Gen
Exodus	Exod
Leviticus	Lev
Numbers	Num
Deuteronomy	Deut
Joshua	Josh
Judges	Judg
Ruth	Ruth
1–2 Samuel	1–2 Sam
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kgs
1–2 Chronicles	1–2 Chr
Ezra	Ezra
Nehemiah	Neh
Esther	Esth
Job	Job
Psalm (Psalms)	Ps (Pss)
Proverbs	Prov
Ecclesiastes	Eccl
or Qoheleth	Qoh
Song of Solomon	Song
or Song of Songs	Song
or Canticles	Cant
Isaiah	Isa
Jeremiah	Jer
Lamentations	Lam
Ezekiel	Ezek
Daniel	Dan
Hosea	Hos
Joel	Joel
Amos	Amos
Obadiah	Obad
Jonah	Jonah
Micah	Mic

Nahum	Nah
Habakkuk	Hab
Zephaniah	Zeph
Haggai	Hag
Zechariah	Zech
Malachi	Mal

The Apocrypha

1–2 Esdras	1–2 Esdr
Tobit	Tob
Judith	Jdt
Additions to Esther	Add Esth
Wisdom of Solomon	Wis
Ecclesiasticus or the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach	Sir
Baruch	Bar
Epistle (or Letter) of Jeremiah	Ep Jer
Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three	Pr Azar
Daniel and Susanna	Sus
Daniel, Bel, and the Dragon	Bel
Prayer of Manasseh	Pr Man
1–4 Maccabees	1–4 Macc

The New Testament

Matthew	Matt
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	Acts
Romans	Rom
1–2 Corinthians	1–2 Cor
Galatians	Gal
Ephesians	Eph
Philippians	Phil
Colossians	Col
1–2 Thessalonians	1–2 Thess
1–2 Timothy	1–2 Tim
Titus	Titus
Philemon	Phlm
Hebrews	Heb
James	Jas
1–2 Peter	1–2 Pet
1–2–3 John	1–2–3 John
Jude	Jude
Revelation	Rev

Other commonly used abbreviations include:

BC	Before Christ
(also commonly referred to as BCE = Before the Common Era)	
AD	*Anno Domini* ("in the year of the Lord")
(also commonly referred to as CE = the Common Era)	
v.	verse
vv.	verses
C.	century
c.	*circa* (around "that time")
cf.	*confer* (compare)
ch.	chapter
chs.	chapters
d.	died
ed.	edition or edited by or editor
eds.	editors
e.g.	*exempli gratia* (for example)
et al.	*et alii* (and others)
f./ff.	and the following one(s)
gen. ed.	general editor
ibid.	*ibidem* (in the same place)
i.e.	*id est* (that is)
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
lit.	literally
n.d.	no date
rev. and exp. ed.	revised and expanded edition
sg.	singular
trans.	translated by or translator(s)
vol(s).	volume(s)

Selected additional written works cited by abbreviations include:

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	*Anchor Bible Dictionary*
ACCS	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture
ANF	*Ante-Nicene Fathers*
ANTC	Abingdon New Testament Commentaries
BA	*Biblical Archaeologist*
BAR	*Biblical Archaeology Review*
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CPV	Cotton Patch Version
DTT	*Dansk teologisk tidsskrift*
GNB	Good News Bible
HNTC	Harper's New Testament Commentaries
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
HUCA	*Hebrew Union College Annual*
ICC	International Critical Commentary

IDB	*Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*
Int	*Interpretation*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JSNT	*Journal for the Study of the New Testament*
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSS	*Journal of Semitic Studies*
KJV	King James Version
LXX	Septuagint = Greek Translation of Hebrew Bible
MDB	*Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*
MT	Masoretic Text
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NEB	New English Bible
NIB	*The New Interpreter's Bible*
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGCT	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
OTL	Old Testament Library
PRSt	*Perspectives in Religious Studies*
RevExp	*Review and Expositor*
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SBLSP	*Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers*
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SP	Sacra pagina
TDNT	*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*
TEV	Today's English Version
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
ZNW	*Zeitschrift fur die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der alteren Kirche*

SERIES PREFACE

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* is a visually stimulating and user-friendly series that is as close to multimedia in print as possible. Written by accomplished scholars with all students of Scripture in mind, the primary goal of the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* is to make available serious, credible biblical scholarship in an accessible and less intimidating format.

Far too many Bible commentaries fall short of bridging the gap between the insights of biblical scholars and the needs of students of God's written word. In an unprecedented way, the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* brings insightful commentary to bear on the lives of contemporary Christians. Using a multimedia format, the volumes employ a stunning array of art, photographs, maps, and drawings to illustrate the truths of the Bible for a visual generation of believers.

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* is built upon the idea that meaningful Bible study can occur when the insights of contemporary biblical scholars blend with sensitivity to the needs of lifelong students of Scripture. Some persons within local faith communities, however, struggle with potentially informative biblical scholarship for several reasons. Oftentimes, such scholarship is cast in technical language easily grasped by other scholars, but not by the general reader. For example, lengthy, technical discussions on every detail of a particular scriptural text can hinder the quest for a clear grasp of the whole. Also, the format for presenting scholarly insights has often been confusing to the general reader, rendering the work less than helpful. Unfortunately, responses to the hurdles of reading extensive commentaries have led some publishers to produce works for a general readership that merely skim the surface of the rich resources of biblical scholarship. This commentary series incorporates works of fine art in an accurate and scholarly manner, yet the format remains "user-friendly." An important facet is the presentation and explanation of images of art, which interpret the biblical material or illustrate how the biblical material has been understood and interpreted in the past. A visual generation of believers deserves a commentary series that contains not only the all-important textual commentary on Scripture, but images, photographs, maps, works of fine art, and drawings that bring the text to life.

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* makes serious, credible biblical scholarship more accessible to a wider audience. Writers and editors alike present information in ways that encourage readers to gain a better understanding of the Bible. The editorial board has worked to develop a format that is useful and usable, informative and pleasing to the eye. Our writers are reputable scholars who participate in the community of faith and sense a calling to communicate the results of their scholarship to their faith community.

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* addresses Christians and the larger church. While both respect for and sensitivity to the needs and contributions of other faith communities are reflected in the work of the series authors, the authors speak primarily to Christians. Thus the reader can note a confessional tone throughout the volumes. No particular "confession of faith" guides the authors, and diverse perspectives are observed in the various volumes. Each writer, though, brings to the biblical text the best scholarly tools available and expresses the results of their studies in commentary and visuals that assist readers seeking a word from the Lord for the church.

To accomplish this goal, writers in this series have drawn from numerous streams in the rich tradition of biblical interpretation. The basic focus is the biblical text itself, and considerable attention is given to the wording and structure of texts. Each particular text, however, is also considered in the light of the entire canon of Christian Scriptures. Beyond this, attention is given to the cultural context of the biblical writings. Information from archaeology, ancient history, geography, comparative literature, history of religions, politics, sociology, and even economics is used to illuminate the culture of the people who produced the Bible. In addition, the writers have drawn from the history of interpretation, not only as it is found in traditional commentary on the Bible but also in literature, theater, church history, and the visual arts. Finally, the *Commentary* on Scripture is joined with *Connections* to the world of the contemporary church. Here again, the writers draw on scholarship in many fields as well as relevant issues in the popular culture.

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focuses on the theological significance of a text while also offering the reader a rich array of additional information related to the text and its interpretation.

An accompanying CD-ROM offers powerful searching and research tools. The commentary text, Sidebars, and visuals are all reproduced on a CD that is fully indexed and searchable. Pairing a text version with a digital resource is a distinctive feature of the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary.*

Combining credible biblical scholarship, user-friendly study features, and sensitivity to the needs of a visually oriented generation of believers creates a unique and unprecedented type of commentary series. With insight from many of today's finest biblical scholars and a stunning visual format, it is our hope that the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* will be a welcome addition to the personal libraries of all students of Scripture.

The Editors

HOW TO USE THIS COMMENTARY

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* is written by accomplished biblical scholars with a wide array of readers in mind. Whether engaged in the study of Scripture in a church setting or in a college or seminary classroom, all students of the Bible will find a number of useful features throughout the commentary that are helpful for interpreting the Bible.

Basic Design of the Volumes

Each volume features an Introduction to a particular book of the Bible, providing a brief guide to information that is necessary for reading and interpreting the text: the historical setting, literary design, and theological significance. Each Introduction also includes a comprehensive outline of the particular book under study.

Each chapter of the commentary investigates the text according to logical divisions in a particular book of the Bible. Sometimes these divisions follow the traditional chapter segmentation, while at other times the textual units consist of sections of chapters or portions of more than one chapter. The divisions reflect the literary structure of a book and offer a guide for selecting passages that are useful in preaching and teaching.

An accompanying CD-ROM offers powerful searching and research tools. The commentary text, Sidebars, and visuals are all reproduced on a CD that is fully indexed and searchable. Pairing a text version with a digital resource also allows unprecedented flexibility and freedom for the reader. Carry the text version to locations you most enjoy doing research while knowing that the CD offers a portable alternative for travel from the office, church, classroom, and your home.

Commentary and Connections

As each chapter explores a textual unit, the discussion centers around two basic sections: *Commentary* and *Connections*. The analysis of a passage, including the details of its language, the history reflected in the text, and the literary forms found in the text, are the main focus

of the *Commentary* section. The primary concern of the *Commentary* section is to explore the theological issues presented by the Scripture passage. *Connections* presents potential applications of the insights provided in the *Commentary* section. The *Connections* portion of each chapter considers what issues are relevant for teaching and suggests useful methods and resources. *Connections* also identifies themes suitable for sermon planning and suggests helpful approaches for preaching on the Scripture text.

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- Graphic outlines of literary structure (including such items as poetry, chiasm, repetition, epistolary form).

- Definition or brief discussions of technical or theological terms and issues.

- Insightful quotations that are not integrated into the running text but are relevant to the passage under discussion.

- Notes on the history of interpretation (Augustine on the Good Samaritan, Luther on James, Stendahl on Romans, etc.).

- Line drawings, photographs, and other illustrations relevant for understanding the historical context or interpretive significance of the text.

- Presentation and discussion of works of fine art that have interpreted a Scripture passage.

Each Sidebar is printed in color and is referenced at the appropriate place in the *Commentary* or *Connections* section with a color-coded title that directs the reader to the relevant Sidebar. In addition, helpful icons appear in the Sidebars, which provide the reader with visual cues to the type of material that is explained in each Sidebar. Throughout the commentary, these four distinct hyperlinks provide useful links in an easily recognizable design.

Alpha & Omega Language

This icon identifies the information as a language-based tool that offers further exploration of the Scripture selection. This could include syntactical information, word studies, popular or additional uses of the word(s) in question, additional contexts in which the term appears, and the history of the term's translation. All non-English terms are transliterated into the appropriate English characters.

Culture/Context

This icon introduces further comment on contextual or cultural details that shed light on the Scripture selection. Describing the place and time to which a Scripture passage refers is often vital to the task of biblical interpretation. Sidebar items introduced with this icon could include geographical, historical, political, social, topographical, or economic information. Here, the reader may find an excerpt of an ancient text or inscription that sheds light on the text. Or one may find a description of some element of ancient religion such as Baalism in Canaan or the Hero cult in the Mystery Religions of the Greco-Roman world.

Interpretation

Sidebars that appear under this icon serve a general interpretive function in terms of both historical and contemporary renderings. Under this heading, the reader might find a selection from classic or contemporary literature that illuminates the Scripture text or a significant quotation from a famous sermon that addresses the passage. Insights are drawn from various sources, including literature, worship, theater, church history, and sociology.

Additional Resources Study

Here, the reader finds a convenient list of useful resources for further investigation of the selected Scripture text, including books, journals, websites, special collections, organizations, and societies. Specialized discussions of works not often associated with biblical studies may also appear here.

Additional Features

Each volume also includes a basic Bibliography on the biblical book under study. Other bibliographies on selected issues are often included that point the reader to other helpful resources.

Notes at the end of each chapter provide full documentation of sources used and contain additional discussions of related matters.

Abbreviations used in each volume are explained in a list of abbreviations found after the Table of Contents.

Readers of the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* can regularly visit the Internet support site for news, information, updates, and enhancements to the series at <**www.helwys.com/commentary**>.

Several thorough indexes enable the reader to locate information quickly. These indexes include:

- An *Index of Sidebars* groups content from the special-interest boxes by category (maps, fine art, photographs, drawings, etc.).
- An *Index of Scriptures* lists citations to particular biblical texts.
- An *Index of Topics* lists alphabetically the major subjects, names, topics, and locations referenced or discussed in the volume.
- An *Index of Modern Authors* organizes contemporary authors whose works are cited in the volume.

HEBREWS

To the memory of
Theron Douglas Price
and David Anthony Smith,
colleagues for three decades
in the Religion Department
of Furman University

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

In September 1955, J. Estill Jones, as the new assistant professor of New Testament interpretation at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, gave an inaugural lecture titled "Now Faith Is . . . Hope." With that lecture came my first awareness of the nature of the exhortation of the entire Letter to the Hebrews. The lecture matched the challenge of the Letter to the Hebrews in its style and content and introduced me to a view of faith or faithfulness that parallels or supplements (but is certainly not the same as) that of the writings of Paul. Jones found the thesis of Hebrews in 10:39–11:1. His free translation of these two verses was, "Now we are not of the shrinking kind, headed for destruction, but of the faith kind, headed for the preservation of our soul. And faith is the essence of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Jones said that the concept of faith as hope or the realization of hope is not limited to these two verses. "Exhortations toward this kind of faith alternate throughout the letter with paragraphs of logical development, each of which furnishes sufficient justification for the author's appeal." Elsewhere Jones expanded on the relationship between the author's purpose and his description of faith: "There can be no doubt . . . that the author's main purpose is to show how faith enables men [*sic*] to live courageously. Faith is not a moral or intellectual abstraction, but essence—by faith future events become so certain that it is as though they had already taken place—as though the very substance of the future were in our hands now."[1]

In the conclusion of his lecture, Jones brought his treatment to a head: "It is necessary . . . to interpret faith for what it is in Hebrews—security-forsaking obedience, faithfulness, hope." He acknowledged that for some the presentation of a concept of faith as the realization of hope "may be as helpful to the Christian life as the answers in the back of an algebra book are to the student who has not worked the problems. These need the experience of solving the problems of faith in daily living—of looking hopefully to the future."[2]

I was an undergraduate student in 1955, and I continued studies at Southern to complete a Th.D. in New Testament studies. The New Testament faculty (including Dr. Jones) guided me in the study of New Testament Greek, literature, history, theology, and archaeology. The Letter to the Hebrews was not the major focus of my graduate

study or of my study for several decades to follow. It has not been a favorite book in the church, although certain passages have become favorite verses. Perhaps the lack of popularity of Hebrews is due to the impossibility of determining the precise historical setting. Perhaps it is the fact that Hebrews is a minority voice in its treatment of faith and its (at least theoretical) acceptance of the possibility of apostasy. Perhaps it is the fact that the author of Hebrews was extremely sophisticated in his literary style and use of the Greek language, utilizing methods of biblical interpretation that are foreign to modern readers.

Only when I was asked to teach the Letter to the Hebrews at the Furman Pastors School in July 1985 did I begin to take the entire writing more seriously. By that time, I had completed an advanced degree in philosophical theology at Oxford under John Macquarrie and had developed interest in hermeneutics in general and literary approaches to biblical writings in particular. Those interests enabled me to integrate literary and theological concerns with historical concerns. One theological problem introduced by Hebrews is the question of apostasy. Dale Moody had made the possibility of apostasy a part of his theology, and the question of apostasy arose in the Pastors School. We did not solve the problem, but we discovered the necessity of looking at the question within a comprehensive hermeneutical approach to the Bible as covenant. Covenant in the Bible sees God and God's grace as primary. Humans respond to God's grace. The Bible is studied in the church as covenant, not as historical source, but historical and literary resources are available for dealing with the challenge of reading it as covenant.

We saw that Hebrews is a rhetorical production (the author refers to his writing as "a word of exhortation" [13:22]) designed to encourage readers to faithfulness in a discouraging time. The warning against apostasy is not designed as systematic theology, but as practical exhortation. We saw that in his practical exhortation, the author of Hebrews presented Jesus as the high priest of the order of Melchizedek and explained what it means to make that confession. Such confession makes apostasy unthinkable! But we saw that in order to bring readers to such confession and confidence, the author "allegorized" and "spiritualized" Jewish and primitive Christian ideas. First-century linguistic and literary tools were used to make Old Testament texts and the story of Jesus useful for readers, and we recognized that we must appreciate those tools and follow the same procedures if we do not wish to treat the letter as answers in the back of an algebra book.

Fifteen years after the lectures on Hebrews at Furman's Pastors School, Alan Culpepper invited me to prepare a commentary on a New Testament writing of my choosing to form a part of the Smyth & Helwys Commentary Series. I chose Hebrews because of my growing interest in the literary aspect of Scripture. Instead of focusing on a historical "cause" behind a biblical text, a literary approach seeks the relationships within the text, the appeal to the readers, and the role of actual modern readers in discovering and creating meaning and significance of the text. A commentary on Hebrews would allow me to give further attention to the linguistic and literary excellence of the letter and the important message conveyed by its unknown author.

In this commentary I attempt to relate the two aspects of Hebrews as covenant—the appeal to the perfection and finality of Jesus Christ and the exhortation to faithfulness based on that appeal. I also highlight the interpretative strategies of the author—strategies that are often strange to modern readers. I attempt to bring the ancient text into the world of present readers and to take readers back to the world of Hebrews. The text allows basic assumptions about the nature of Hebrews and the problems faced by its readers that serve as a "guardrail" against improper and inappropriate readings. While final answers to questions such as authorship are not available, they are not required for a satisfying reading of the letter. We are able to frame the author's treatment of the problems of our spiritual ancestors from the perspective of our modern world and problems presented in our pilgrimage. There are different ways of reading the ancient text as covenant, different ways of relating it to our lives today. I provide a reading—not the only or final reading of Hebrews. I invite readers to use the resources of the commentary to make sense of the text for themselves in light of their needs and abilities.

I am grateful to the many groups and individuals who have influenced my life and career and helped prepare me for writing this commentary. These include my family (especially my wife Shirley and my children Lynn and Ed), Sunday school classes and churches (especially First Baptist Church of Greenville and the Price Class), teachers in seminary and graduate school, and teaching colleagues (especially those at Furman University and the Wake Forest University Divinity School). I dedicate this commentary to the memory of two colleagues with whom I taught in the religion department at Furman for nearly four decades, Theron D. Price and David A. Smith.

NOTES

[1] J. Estill Jones, "Now Faith Is . . . Hope," *RevExp* 52 (1955): 508, 521.

[2] Ibid., 530.

INTRODUCTION TO HEBREWS

Modern reading and studying of Hebrews yield fresh and exciting insights when readers utilize the many resources available for appreciating the book. One-dimensional reading of the book, however, may result in frustration, disappointment, and failure to benefit from the richness of Hebrews. For example, a purely dogmatic or theological approach may reduce the message of Hebrews to the question of whether repentance is possible after apostasy. Hebrews seems to deny this possibility (see 6:4-6). The church in the West (Rome) held that repentance after apostasy was possible, and in that church in the second and third centuries, Hebrews was not popular reading. Only a part of its message was understood, and that part was misunderstood. The question of apostasy is indeed raised in Hebrews, but the book's treatment of apostasy must be seen not from the perspective of systematic theology or abstract doctrine but from the perspective of the practice of doctrine. It must be seen in light of the overall pastoral function of the book of Hebrews. Another dogmatic approach might reduce the message of Hebrews to Christology, to the teaching that Jesus Christ is high priest of the order of Melchizedek (see 5:8-10). From the perspective of Christology, readers may at first find the titles and functions of Christ emphasized in the Gospels and in Paul's writings more convincing than those in Hebrews. The message of Jesus as high priest of the order of Melchizedek will be as meaningless as the figure of Melchizedek is obscure unless the pastoral purpose of Hebrews is clearly seen.

Modern students of the Bible expect commentaries to deliver basic historical information about the text: the name of the author, the author's circumstances, the date of the composition, and so on. Questions like these, designed in part to enable us to determine what a writer said and meant in his or her own context, may serve as a guardrail to keep us from inappropriate, unhelpful theological and religious construction and practice. The historical approach does assist us with Hebrews by reminding us that the book grew out of the actual life and faith of a particular group of early Christians. However, we are unable to pinpoint precisely the location of the original congregation to which Hebrews was addressed or the date and authorship of the book. Thus, a severely historical approach that

demands answers to questions of dating, destination, and authorship before proceeding with reading and interpretation will not succeed with Hebrews. Readers must be willing to begin with the text of Hebrews itself and gradually build a picture of author and audience by close reading.

This introduction is designed to assist readers in their own reading of Hebrews and in their use of this commentary. It will deal with authorship, destination, and dating of Hebrews; Hebrews as a sermon; the use of Scripture in Hebrews; the inclusive Christology of Hebrews; and the way the author and readers make sense of the book as a whole.

Authorship, Destination, and Dating of Hebrews

Hebrews itself provides indications that it is connected with the Pauline community and with the church at Rome. This information is given in an epistolary closing modeled after the Pauline epistles (travel plans, benediction, appeal and greetings, farewell).

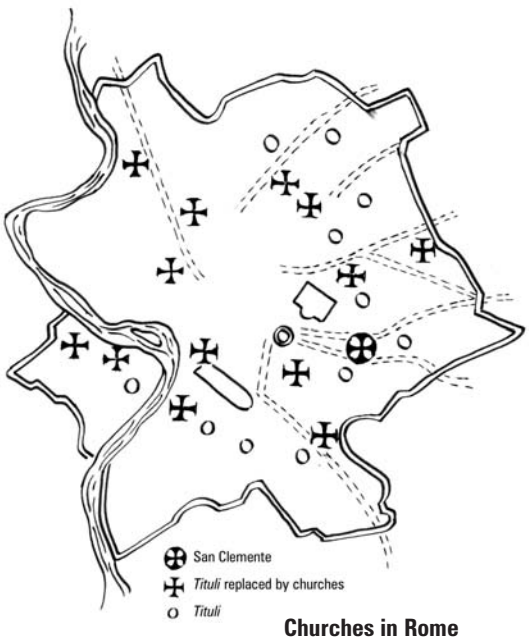
> I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been set free; and if he comes in time, he will be with me when I see you. Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those from Italy send you greetings. Grace be with all of you. (13:22-25)

The Pauline world of missionary activity is recalled by this conclusion. The writer and the congregation know Timothy (doubtless the same Timothy who was a companion of Paul and who was associated with Paul in several of his writings). The reference to "those from Italy" is probably to members of the church of Rome. Acts 18:2 speaks of Aquila and Priscilla as having come from Italy, and we know Rome is intended at that point. But are "those from Italy" Christians who are with the writer in Rome as he writes to Christians in another place? Or are they Roman Christians who have traveled away from Rome and are now with the writer as he writes to a congregation in Rome?

Since this is inconclusive, we turn to more indirect evidence to characterize the author, the audience, and the relationship of the author to the audience. The writer was a Christian, not one of the immediate hearers of the Lord, but one who received the message from the first generation of believers (2:3-4). From the general content, it may be supposed that the writer lived in a typical Greco-Roman city, where cults and cultic sacrifice were common.

Themes of defilement, blood, and cleansing were doubtless common in the writer's environment. Beyond this, clearly he himself was steeped in the cultic language of the Old Testament. The community and the author obviously knew each other personally. The author planned to revisit them soon (13:19, 23). The language and literary form of Hebrews indicates that the writer combined a high degree of competence in the Greek language and Greco-Roman style of argumentation with knowledge of the Old Testament and its interpretation. Candidates for authorship include individuals such as Barnabas, Luke, Apollos, Silvanus, the deacon Philip, and Priscilla and Aquila. Since we cannot know the actual author, we must be satisfied by saying that it was someone like Apollos. The book of Acts describes Apollos as "a native of Alexandria . . . an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures" (18:24).

Many scholars conclude that the congregation addressed was in Rome, partly because of how well the book of Hebrews fits an urban setting. The admonitions in chapter 13 concerning hospitality to strangers, remembering those in prison, honoring marriage, and keeping free from materialism and the reminder that "here we have no lasting city" (13:14) are appropriate for Christians in a city like Rome. If this is correct, the congregation addressed would have been one of several Christian groups scattered throughout Rome. Early Christians met in private homes, and a congregation consisted of members of the household, associates, and friends. House churches were the basic cell of the people of God in a particular locality, consisting of perhaps as few as fifteen or twenty individuals. At several points the author indicated detailed knowledge of the history of the particular congregation addressed. The members of the congregation themselves had not participated in the events surrounding Jesus' ministry. They had responded to the preaching of those who had heard Jesus. Those who first preached to the community had remained as their first leaders, but now those leaders were deceased. The author called on the congregation to pay attention to the original message of the

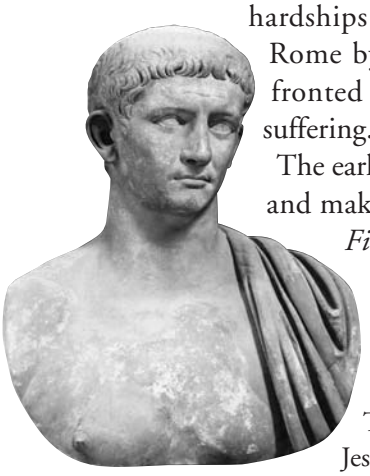


Churches in Rome

earliest leaders: ". . . we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it" (2:1). The temptation of the congregation was to disregard the claim of the word of God that had been preached to them. But the author uses the community's courageous stance of commitment in earlier difficulties to encourage boldness in the present:

> But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting. Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward. (10:32-35)

If Rome is the location of the congregation addressed by Hebrews, then the suffering described in chapter 10 could well be hardships Jewish Christians endured after being expelled from Rome by Emperor Claudius in AD 49. A new crisis has confronted the small congregation with a new experience of suffering.



Emperor Claudius

The earliest citation of Hebrews connects the writing with Rome and makes it likely that Hebrews was composed before AD 100. *First Clement* was a pastoral letter sent by the church in Rome to the church in Corinth sometime near the end of the first century, and Clement's knowledge of Hebrews is reflected especially in *1 Clement* 36:1-6:

> This is the way, beloved, in which we found our salvation, Jesus Christ, the high priest of our offerings, the defender and helper of our weaknesses . . . "who being the radiance of his Majesty is so much greater than the angels as he had inherited a more excellent name." For it is written, "who makes his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire." But of the Son the Master said, "You are my son. Today I have become your father. Ask me, and I will give you the nations for your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for your possession." And again he says to him, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a stool for your feet."

Hebrews as a Sermon

In his epistolary conclusion, the author of Hebrews has given modern readers information about the nature of the writing; it is a "word of exhortation." The original readers responded to the

writing in light of their linguistic, literary, and religious competence and doubtless their earlier experience with the preaching of the author and did not need this information. Some irony is found in the author's appeal for his brothers and sisters to "bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly" (13:22). This appeal, then, is not designed to give information but to gain a positive response to this exhortation—his sermon.

The sermonic quality of the writing is evident throughout the letter. The author gives the impression that he is present with the assembled community and is delivering a sermon he has prepared.

> Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels. (2:5)
>
> About this we have much to say that is hard to explain, since you have become dull in understanding. (5:11)
>
> Even though we speak in this way, beloved, we are confident of better things in your case, things that belong to salvation. (6:9)
>
> Now the main point in what we are saying is this . . . (8: 1)
>
> Of these things we cannot speak now in detail (9:5)
>
> And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of . . . (11:32)

What sort of sermon is Hebrews? Some aspects are familiar to modern-day readers through sermons they hear weekly, but others must be appreciated and appropriated by coordinating what we have said about the author and audience with what we find in the text of Hebrews. The sophisticated language of Hebrews cautions us that what we are experiencing is out of the ordinary. The language is Greek, of course, but it is not the sort of Greek used by people in the street and marketplace. The common people would have been able to understand the Greek of Hebrews, but the language would have impressed them as special—fitted for elevated content. The original readers' reaction to the classical Greek of Hebrews would be comparable to modern readers hearing or reading a sermon in the language of Shakespeare or the language of the King James Version. The vocabulary in Hebrews is also rich and cultured, and classical linguistic distinctions generally ignored by New Testament writers are maintained by the writer of Hebrews. The sentence structure of the author is extraordinary.

The first sentence in Hebrews, including the first four verses, is a "periodic sentence." To modern readers, a "period" is a dot at the end of a sentence. Originally, a "period" was a type of sentence. Aristotle distinguished between the running or continuous style and the compact or periodic style. In the periodic style, the discourse is composed of carefully articulated units. (The NRSV divides this sentence into three sentences, and each of these three is elegantly balanced.) The author has organized a large number of clauses and phrases into a balanced unity. In this unity there is a parallelism of sound and sense, variation of word order, and alliteration.

A standard Greek grammar of the New Testament indicates:

> The periodic style is characteristic of artistically developed prose, while the running style is characteristic of plain and unsophisticated language in all periods. . . . The period, i.e. the organization of a considerable number of clauses and phrases into a well-rounded unity, is rare in the NT. Since the period belongs to the more elegant style, it is most frequently met in Hebrews, which certainly is to be regarded as artistic prose by reason of the composition of its words and sentences.[1]

Appropriate to the classical Greek of the author is the classical rhetorical language of the book. Logic and dialectic may be found in Hebrews, particularly a form of logic found in scriptural interpretation, but this logic is subordinated to rhetorical purposes. Hebrews, of course, is not a wooden application of rhetorical models learned in the university. It is a rhetoric appropriate to the Christian pastoral context and function. Ancient readers and hearers would have been familiar with different sorts of rhetoric. Forensic rhetoric was used in the law courts to persuade hearers concerning the truth of a past event. Deliberative speeches before political assemblies were designed to persuade hearers concerning a future decision or course of action. Ceremonial speeches persuaded hearers of the virtue of individuals whose lives were worthy of emulation. These rhetorical patterns involved persuasion of listeners, a different goal than that in logic and dialectic. Read as deliberative rhetoric designed to advise and dissuade, Hebrews may be seen as persuading readers and hearers to accept Jesus' unique sacrifice for sins as providing believers access to fellowship with God. But since the basis for the appeal is Jesus and his sacrifice, readers are also able to read Hebrews as a writing designed to celebrate the significance of Jesus so as to reinforce values and commitments associated with Jesus and his sacrifice.

Readers today are familiar with the same sorts of rhetorical patterns as were the readers of Hebrews. They bring to the text experiences with different sorts of persuasive writing and speaking and can apply that experience in reacting to the book and its various parts. Recognizing Hebrews as "a word of exhortation" utilizing readers' expectations and competence helps us to see that readers are to be changed intellectually and emotionally in the process of hearing and reading Hebrews. Each section must be read in light of the rhetorical presentation of Christ and the significance of that presentation for decisions readers and hearers must make in the present.

The major decision is whether the Christians addressed will reaffirm or abandon the confidence of the early days of their Christian lives. In the early days, the Christians accepted a lower status in the world's eyes for the sake of heavenly reward. They "endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated" (10:32). Members sought their honor and self-worth not in terms of the dominant Greco-Roman culture but in terms of an alternate court of opinion. The lifestyle of Christians would have been considered subversive in the Greco-Roman world. Loyalty to the gods of the Greco-Roman world was considered loyalty to the state. Christians, then, were viewed with suspicion. It was dangerous to be a Christian. But in the early days, the Christians' confidence enabled them to bear the reproach of their neighbors with steadfastness. Now the confidence of these Christians is being sorely tried. The early confidence may have been related to belief that Jesus would soon return. An early Christian worldview left no room for an extended period of the church. Christians emphasized the ministry of Christ concluding with the passion and the return of Christ in glory. That early confidence is not only challenged because of the delay of the parousia but also because of the Christians' continuing lack of support from their society. David A. deSilva describes the basic crisis of the Christians as a crisis of commitment.

> The believers have experienced the loss of property and status in the host society without yet receiving the promised rewards of the sect, and so are growing disillusioned with the sect's promise to provide. As time passes without improvement, they begin to feel the inward pressure for their society's affirmation and approval. The fervor and certainty of their earlier life in Christ has cooled with their prolonged exposure to the pagan witnesses of their degradation, who no doubt continue to disparage the believers and regard them as subversive and

> shameful. They have begun to be concerned for their reputation before society. Though they were able to resist it at the outset, the machinery of social control is in the long run wearing down the deviants' resistance. While they could accept their loss in the fervor of religious solidarity, living with their loss has proven difficult.[2]

The rhetoric of Hebrews can be understood over against the various sorts of appeal made to the wavering Christians by their non-Christian society.

The Use of Scripture in Hebrews

Two sorts of material fit together in a complementary fashion in Hebrews. One sort of material is exhortation proper; the other is exposition or thematic development, which is essentially scriptural interpretation. The expository or thematic sections furnish the presuppositions for the exhortations. The first exhortation is in the form of a warning:

> Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the message declared through angels was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? It was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, while God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will. (2:1-4)

But this warning is based on a collection of seven passages from the Old Testament. In the remainder of Hebrews, six specific quotations are grouped fairly uniformly in relation to exhortation: Psalm 8 (2:6-8), Psalm 95 (3:7-11), Psalm 110 (5:6), Jeremiah 31 (8:8-12), Habakkuk 2 (10:37-38), and Proverbs 3 (12:5-6). In addition to these quotations, other quotations, allusions, and references are found. Hebrews is filled with the Old Testament! A recent commentator makes a conservative judgment that in all there are thirty-one explicit quotations, four implicit quotations, thirty-seven allusions, nineteen summaries of Old Testament material, and thirteen instances of a citation of a biblical name or topic without reference to a specific context.[3] The author of Hebrews used a form of the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. [The Septuagint (LXX)]

The Septuagint (LXX)

The author of Hebrews apparently used a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures known as the Septuagint, often referred to by the Roman numerals LXX. Of the 290 quotations from the OT appearing in the NT, most of them come from the LXX. In fact, the LXX was the Bible of the early church, especially as the church became predominantly Greek as to its language. The apostle Paul typically quotes from the LXX in his letters rather than the Hebrew text.

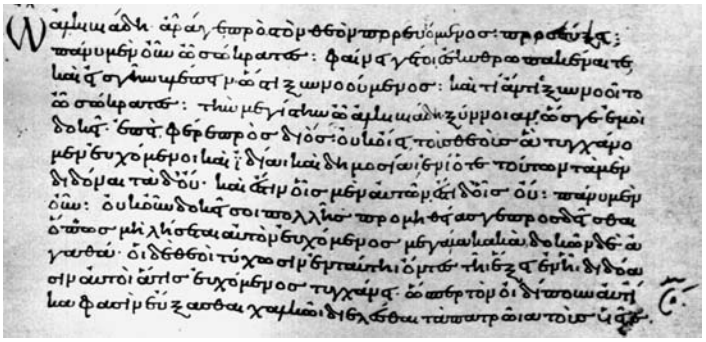
The origins of the LXX are somewhat obscure but definitely have connection to the Alexandria, the Hellenistic city established in Egypt by Alexander the Great in 331 BC Alexander's successor in Egypt, Ptolemy I Soter (323–285 BC), upon invading Palestine and capturing Jerusalem, carried a large number of captives from Judea and Samaria to Egypt. Many were settled in Alexandria. Because of the generous treatment of the Jews by Soter and his Ptolemaic successors, many more Jews voluntarily migrated to Egypt, eventually making Alexandria the city with the largest Jewish population in the ancient world. This significant, affluent Jewish population adopted Greek as its primary language, thereby eventually necessitating the rendering of its sacred scriptures from Hebrew into Greek.

While the process of translating all the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek transpired over at least two centuries, a legend developed, best preserved in The Letter of Aristeas that was written in the second half of the second century BC, that explained its origin. The letter purports to be from an Alexandrian Jew named Aristeas, a member of the court of Ptolemy Philadelphus (285–247 BC) to his brother, Philocrates. The letter describes how Philadelphus consented to the request of his chief librarian, Demetrius Phalerum, to secure a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures for the famous Alexandrian library. The king asked the high priest in Jerusalem, Eleazar, to select six scholars from each of the twelve tribes of Israel to engage the work of translation. According to the legend, these seventy-two translators produced their work after only seventy-two days. The Latin title, *Septuaginta*, evolved apparently as a rounded-off reference to the seventy-two translators. The legend itself only refers to the translation of the Pentateuch; later books from the Prophets and the Writings also came to be considered part of the LXX, as did works later excluded from the Hebrew Bible used by Jews after the first century AD.

The Greek of the LXX clearly belongs to the style of Hellenistic Greek known as Alexandrian, but it also clearly reflects the influence of the Hebrew language from which it was translated. Many of the features of Hebrew syntax are carried over into the LXX rather than reproducing the thought of the Hebrew text in the more standard character of Greek grammar. The actual translators seem to have deliberately tried to preserve the Hebrew sentence structure as much as possible, often simply replacing Hebrew terms with roughly equivalent Greek terms, sometimes resulting in awkward Greek.

The Jews of Alexandria, but also other Hellenized Jews throughout the ancient world, adopted the LXX as their sacred text. The learned first-century AD Alexandrian Jew, Philo, even affirmed the idea that the entire LXX was divinely inspired. Jews later rejected the LXX, largely because of its extensive use by Christians, and produced other Greek translations of their scriptures, including well-known versions of the second-century AD, attributed to Aquila, Theodotion, and Symmachus. The early church adopted the entire LXX, including those works rejected by Judaism, and gave priority to it over the Hebrew Scriptures. The popularity of the LXX overshadowed the minor use of translations of Hebrew Scriptures in other languages until Jerome's Latin Vulgate eventually became the Bible of choice in the western part of the church.

See T. C. Smith, "Septuagint," *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1990), 808-809.



For the author of Hebrews, the Old Testament is the word of God (1:4; 4:12-13) or of God's spirit (3:7; 10:15). Readers and hearers are expected to know the Old Testament, for as word of God it has decisive significance for contemporary hearers (3:13; 4:7; 12:5-7). Readers, then, are urged to respond to the exhortation by rhetorical presentation of Jesus Christ in relation to Old Testament institutions. There is continuity between God's speaking under the old covenant and God's speaking under the new covenant. But there is a development that means Old Testament religious institutions are seen as ineffective, symbolic, or provisional. The God who spoke through the prophets has spoken decisively in God's Son (1:2; 2:3). The writer of Hebrews exhibits great skill and boldness in his christological interpretation of the Old Testament.

The writer used a form of the verb "to say" instead of "to write" when introducing a quotation from the Old Testament, and he generally omitted specific references to biblical books, for the authority of the biblical text is the ultimate speaker, God. The way the writer interpreted the Old Testament as well as the way he introduced specific texts indicate that God not only spoke in the text but continues to speak. In the method of exposition used by the writer (termed "homiletical midrash"), key phrases of an extended quotation from Scripture are explained and elaborated for the congregation in order to bring the text to life.

The biblical exposition of Hebrews is not historical-critical exposition with emphasis upon what the Old Testament writer intended in an original historical context. At times, the assumed original historical context plays a part in interpretation (3:7; 7:10). Generally, however, Old Testament passages are applied to Christ and/or to the contemporary situation by taking them out of their original context, placing them within a new hermeneutical context, and utilizing conventional interpretative strategies of Judaism and early Christianity. [Hermeneutics] Some of the strategies were (and are) in common usage and need little elaboration. Some are uses that developed within Judaism. The "word of exhortation" is effective not only because of the use of classical rhetorical strategies but because of strategies connected with biblical interpretation that had their home in Jewish Hellenistic schools and synagogues and early Christian churches.

The writer reinforced exhortation by citation of biblical statements that have relevance for the present time. For example, midway through the text, the writer exhorted his audience to remain true to their confession (10:19-39). Near the end, he

Hermeneutics

The task of interpreting Scripture so as to determine its "meaning" for the reader is often referred to as "hermeneutics." The term itself is derived from the Greek word meaning to "interpret" or "explain," but which in its passive form can be rendered as to "mean." In biblical studies, hermeneutics sometimes refers to the principles and procedures used to ascertain the meaning of a text in its original context. Generally, though, hermeneutics refers to the ways that an ancient text can be understood to be meaningful in another context, specifically the modern context of the readers. In this latter sense, hermeneutics takes its lead from the remark of Soren Kierkegaard: "It is no use remembering a past that cannot be made present." Hermeneutics seeks to take the past as remembered in a biblical text and make it present in some sense to those who read the text in another time and place.

One can see that the Bible itself is a product of the hermeneutical process. From the earliest books of the OT to the latest books of the NT, a continuous process of engaging, interacting with, and reformulating ideas of the past can be observed. The existence of a canon of Scriptures for communities of faith, in fact, is testimony to the conviction that the past should continue to be made present.

The task of hermeneutics is recognized to be a demanding one. The world of the modern reader is vastly different from the worlds reflected in the biblical texts. Customs, concerns, perceptions, assumptions, modes of thinking, and manners of expressing thoughts—all these differ vastly between the ancient times and places of the people represented in the Bible and those of readers today. The texts that were written to address such matters in an ancient context do not always readily translate into a modern environment. For example, most of the oracles by the prophets of the OT addressed the plight of the tiny nation of Israel and its oppressed people as they faced the threat of major powers in the ancient Near East. What can these oracles have to do with people living affluently in the world's one "superpower" nation? Or, how can letters addressed to particular fledgling congregations in the first century AD offering guidance for the problems and threats they encountered still be read meaningfully by congregations and individuals whose concerns and problems hold little, if nothing, in common with the ancients? As W. Lee Humphreys has put it: "'Hermeneutics' is the term applied to the ways people wrestle with questions such as these and to the methods developed to allow ancient texts to speak across centuries and vast expanses of space."

See W. Lee Humphreys, "Hermeneutics," *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1990), 372-75.

brought together phrases from Isaiah 26:20 and Habakkuk 2:3-4, modifying and arranging them so that "my righteous one" who is to "live by faith" and the line about shrinking back refer to the reader. The key is the scriptural warning: "My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back" (Heb 10:38). The author has arranged and modified the texts in a creative fashion, but this creativity is controlled by a particular view of Scripture and a particular view of the people of God. The writer was able to apply passages from different literary and historical contexts to the contemporary scene because he saw the people of God of his day as the Israel of the Old Testament and the people of God of the end time. In a severely historical-critical approach, the original references of the texts must be established and then application made to a new situation. For Hebrews, such a detour was not necessary.

Special attention was given to syntax and to literal meanings of words and phrases in order to make the biblical text relevant for the readers' own time. For example, the writer quoted Psalm 95:7b: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion" (Heb 3:7b-8a). This "today" was taken out of the time of the psalmist and related in a literal fashion to the "today" of the

readers: "But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (3:13). The literal reading of phrases in Psalm 110:4 is important for Hebrews: "The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.'" The writer pressed home the literal meaning of the significance of the phrase "like Melchizedek" ("of the order of Melchizedek") and the word "forever" in Psalm 110:4b (see Heb 7:11, 23-25) to establish the eternity of Christ's high priesthood. Taking the "you" to refer to Jesus, the author of Hebrews argued that the Lord's oath confirmed Jesus in his priestly office (7:20-22) and that his priesthood was superior to the levitical priesthood. (See Heb 8:8-13 and 12:26-29 for a literal interpretation of Jer 31:31-34 and Hag 2:6-7.)

The writer often interpreted Scripture by drawing out the implications of the biblical text; for example, the author quoted Psalm 8:4-6 (Heb 2:6-8a). That passage asserts that God crowned mortals with glory and honor, "subjecting all things under their feet." Hebrews 2:8b-9 then draws out the implications of the phrase, "subjecting all things under their feet."

> Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. (See implications of biblical texts drawn out in 3:16-19; 4:6-10; 7:11-12; 10:8-9; 12:7-10; and 12:27-29.)

Two rabbinic principles of interpretation are important for Hebrews: the argument from the lesser to the greater (*a fortiori*) and the argument from verbal analogy. The argument from the lesser to the greater is found throughout the ancient world and is essential for Hebrews 2:2-4; 9:13-14; 10:28-29; and 12:25. The argument holds that if something is true in a lesser case, it is even more true in a greater case. Hebrews 2:2-4 is an exemplary use of the principle:

> [I]f the message declared through angels was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? It was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, while God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will.

The presence of the same words (or cognates) in different passages of Scripture allows a verse from one historical and/or literary context to be correlated with verses from other contexts. In Hebrews 1:5-13, the writer followed the rabbinic practice of stringing together a chain of biblical quotations on the basis of the presence of the same words (or cognates) in the different passages. Here, the writer joined three pairs of passages and gave a concluding quotation. The first pair (Ps 2:7 and 2 Sam 7:14) are joined on the basis of the term "Son," the second pair (Deut 32:43 and Ps 104:4) on the basis of the plural term "angels," and the third pair (Ps 45:6-7 and Ps 102:25-27) on the basis of the plural pronoun "your" and the concept of the enduring nature of the Son. The concluding quotation ("sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet") is from Psalm 110, introducing the royal enthronement text, and is cited and alluded to throughout the book.

One verse may be explained or clarified by another verse. The argument from verbal analogy allowed the author of Hebrews to move in 5:5-6 from presentation of Jesus as Son to discussion of Jesus as priest. Psalm 2:7 declares, "You are my son, today I have begotten you," while Psalm 110:4 declares, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek." The emphatic pronoun "you" connects the two verses and facilitates the movement from sonship to priesthood.

A more complex use of the principle of verbal analogy is found in Hebrews 4:1-11 where the theme is the rest of God. God's primordial rest following the work of creation (the rest from which the desert generation was excluded) and salvation in God's presence at the end of time are interpreted in terms of each other with a concluding admonition: "Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs" (4:11).

Typological interpretation is associated with the argument from analogy in the discussion in 4:1-11. The experience of rest in Canaan was only a type or symbol of the complete rest God intended for God's people. This rest was prefigured in the sabbath rest of God. Typology is an appropriate method of interpretation because the history of Israel and the history of the church are seen in the context of redemptive history. Historical correspondences between old and new orders of redemption facilitate typological interpretation. The thematically and theologically central section of Hebrews 8:1–10:18 illustrates the writer's use of typology in its contrast of the earthly and heavenly sanctuaries. Here we have

interpretation that can be understood in terms of a platonic metaphysics *and* in terms of Jewish and Christian eschatological ideas. The heavenly liturgy is an eschatological reality foreshadowed in the cultic provisions of the Sinai covenant. Appeal to the ultimately inadequate cultic appointments and actions in the tabernacle demonstrate the necessity for the new cultic acts of Christ. In this section argument from the lesser to the greater is related to the use of typology. When the author compared the ministry of Jesus to the ministry of the Levitical priest, he argued, "But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one" (8:6-7).

The Inclusive Christology of Hebrews

Examining the presentation in Hebrews of Jesus from typological and platonic perspectives emphasizes a Jesus who rivals the Jesus of the Gospel of John. (John presents Jesus as the Word of God who was active in creation.) As high priest of the order of Melchizedek, Jesus has made purification for sins and is now seated at God's right hand, a high priest forever, making intercession for the saints. But the historical is not denigrated; rather, it is accented. The historical is essential in the total scheme of redemption. Jesus was a human being, tempted, subject to death. The writer emphasizes that as a priest, Jesus had to be chosen from among the people in order to sympathize with their weakness and to "deal gently with the ignorant and wayward" (5:2). Jesus showed his followers how to bear suffering, endure hostility, and disregard shame (12:1-3).

The writer's use of christological interpretation of the Old Testament to support exhortation to faithfulness leads to the question whether improper understanding of Jesus might not be related to the threatened abandonment of confidence. Could the possibility of failure to remain faithful result from a failure to see the reality of Jesus beyond the human and humiliated Jesus of Nazareth? Or could it be the opposite, a failure on the part of those addressed to appreciate the significance of the humanity and historicality of Jesus—and the significance of their own historical experiences? The classically-trained author of Hebrews would have been familiar with the argument between Plato and Aristotle and their disciples over what is really real—the universal beyond things (the Idea) or the things themselves.

The writer did not attempt to validate either the view of Plato that forms and universals constitute the objectively real—before things (with the Idea being the schema for interpretation)—or the view of Aristotle that the real is the universal in things (with the schema for interpretation being the particular historical thing). The writer emphasized both "idealism" and "realism." The interplay between idealism and realism will be seen in the Christology of Hebrews and in the understanding of the importance of the historical experiences of the community to which Hebrews is addressed.

The detailed comparisons between the foreshadowing of the reality and the eschatological reality itself clearly established the preeminence of Jesus and his ministry and the covenant Jesus has mediated. The writer's conviction about Jesus thus led to a distinctive reading of the Scriptures. Yet, Hebrews is not an attack on Judaism. The pejorative statements about the resources and supports of those who rely upon the provisions of the first covenant for access to God must be read within the context of the entire sermon of Hebrews. The issue of adherence to belief in Jesus was of critical importance, for it would determine salvation or absolute loss, so it was not a matter of church versus synagogue. It was a matter of turning from the living God altogether (3:12-13). The writer saw that the matter must be decided on the basis of the word God has spoken in Scripture and through the Son.

This writer does not see Hebrews as designed to advocate a triumphalist or supersessionalist Christianity. Nevertheless, Hebrews can be read as supporting some such idea. The readers of Hebrews are warned not to follow the pattern of the faithless wilderness generation. A distinction is made between the speaking of God to "the ancestors" by the prophets and the speaking "to us" by a Son. Because of the anti-Semitic or anti-Jewish potential of Hebrew's treatment of the spiritual forebears of Christianity, Christians must be careful not to identify Christianity as over and against Judaism. To be sure, the New Testament writings took shape in the context of tensions between Jews and Christians, and Christian writers sought to present the Christian movement as a proper response to contemporary developments such as the destruction of the temple in AD 70. In this presentation there was an implicit and even explicit disapproval of approaches that were not in agreement with the Christian faith (see especially the treatment of "the Jews" in the Gospel of John). Christians today must be careful (1) to understand what it means to confess Jesus Christ as Lord in terms of thought and practice and (2) to appreciate the thought and practice

of those who do not share that confession. A stance of witness and dialogue but not triumphalism is appropriate.

Composition and Connections: Author and Readers

The author of Hebrews used conventional techniques to reveal to readers the structure of the composition and the relationship between sections of the writing. These techniques and indicators enabled readers to follow the argument and to respond intellectually and emotionally to the pastoral message. The audience addressed by Hebrews would have been trained to watch for indicators of movement and relationship. Modern-day readers may train themselves to follow the clues given by the author. The use of the Greek words translated "therefore" or "since" (see for example 2:1; 3:7; 4:1, 14; 6:1; 10:19; and 12:1) in movement from exposition to exhortation is rather obvious. The word "therefore" tells readers to recall the previous argumentation. The regular pattern of exposition and exhortation gives readers notice that exposition is to lead to exhortation and affects their processing of the exposition. Readers await the practical claim to be made on the basis of the christological exposition. Readers' attention and interest are aroused and sustained by the alternation of exposition and exhortation.

The author connected successive sections of the book by means of catchwords or hookwords—repetition at the beginning of a new paragraph of a word or expression that occurs at the close of the preceding paragraph. The hookword joining 1:1-4 to 1:5-14 is "the angels" (1:4/5), while the word "high priest" (2:17/3:1) joins 2:10-18 to 3:1-6. At times three units are joined by hookwords, and at times more than one hookword may be used to join sections. At times units separated by another unit (two units of exposition separated by a unit of exhortation) are joined by hookwords, enabling readers to see relationships between them.

The author frequently used characteristic words or expressions throughout a section, indicating to the reader the unification of that unit. Such characteristic words may be related to other sections by use of hookwords. For example, the hookword "angel" joining 1:1-4 to the following section occurs not only in the first verse of the section 1:5-14 but ten times in the larger section 1:5–2:18.

At times, the author indicated the limits of a section by ending the section with the same word or phrase that began it (an *inclusio*). The section 1:5-14 begins with the following: "For to which of the angels did God ever say . . . ?" and concludes in v. 13: "But to

which of the angels has he ever said . . . ?" The section 3:1–4:16 begins with reference to Jesus, high priest, and confession (3:1) and concludes in 4:14-15 with the same references: "Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses." But the conclusion of this *inclusio* forms an appropriate introduction to another section running to 10:18—just as the conclusion to 1:1-4 forms an appropriate introduction to the section 1:5-14. Here we have cases of overlapping constituents.

Explicit clues are provided about the structuring of the smaller paragraph-size units of the book and the relationship of these units to the major goal of the author. The precise structuring of the overall relationship of these units is more problematic. Scholars have attempted to discern some basic framework or structure to explain the ordering of the various sections, but there is no general agreement about the precise overall structure. The hortatory nature of Hebrews and the need to tie exhortation to the readers' life situation (not made fully explicit in the text) may help us understand the apparent looseness of the overall structure. An examination of the intricate relationships of early sections of Hebrews reveals how the christological expositions function in relation to exhortation. The first major section (1:5–2:18) is superficially a comparison between Christ and the angels. It establishes the proposition that Christ, the eternal Son, is also the high priest who achieved his status through suffering. But the section is moving toward the warning against falling away (2:14) and (in the next major section, 3:1–4:13) to a fuller treatment of Christ's faithfulness as high priest (itself developed under a superficial rubric, a comparison of Jesus with Moses, 3:1-6) supporting a call to faithfulness on the part of readers (4:12-13). These summons to faith will be more fully developed in later sections after the implications of Christ's status as high priest have been clarified. The reader is not led astray by the cyclical and dialogical arrangement. The author had one basic goal in mind in his sermon—to provide encouragement to sustain readers in a period marked by stress and to offer a basis for such encouragement in an interpretation of Jesus that addressed the reality of their lives. The finality of God's revelation in the Son and the unique priesthood of Jesus furnish the presupposition for the call to live actively in response to God's absolute claim on their lives and to the judgment of God should they renounce their Christian commitment. The exposition of Jesus is the formal presupposition for the exhortation, but the life and practice of the Christian con-

gregation and the need for exhortation is prior to and indeed generates the sermon and the exposition of Jesus.

A clearer understanding of the precise life situation of those addressed could assist present-day attempts to make sense of the overall structure of Hebrews. The structuring and relationships of the expository christological sections, for example, could result in part from the author's interacting with christological views already held by the readers. Within the christological sections different themes are found (Jesus as Son of God, Jesus as divine wisdom, Jesus as great high priest). Which of these themes was already a strand of the tradition and formed the horizon against which a new theme (or themes) was developed by the author? Modern readers need not await some conclusive decision on the matter. They can balance the richly orchestrated motifs as they are introduced and reintroduced in the book of Hebrews. Indeed Hebrews resembles a musical composition with its variation of motifs in terms of and by means of such things as transposition, sequence, inversion, interval addition and expansion, and interpolation. Modern-day readers recapitulate the activity of original readers as they begin with their own dominant understandings of Christology provided by Paul's writings and the Gospels and have those understandings challenged and modified.

The original readers and the author shared knowledge of the life situation of the congregation that influenced the content and tenor of the exhortation. Modern readers may reconstruct the situation from the text in order to make the text applicable to their own day. But, in fact, the text allows different reconstructions. For example, Hebrews 5:11-14 indicts the readers as immature milk drinkers instead of meat eaters. How are we to relate the pessimistic attitude expressed here to the letter's more typical view that the readers possess extraordinary capacity and to the complimentary and encouraging words in 6:9-12? Is this isolated misgiving about the capacity of the readers irony? Exaggeration? A considered evaluation of the condition of those addressed? How do we relate the description of those who have apostatized from the faith (6:4-6) to the entire section 5:11–6:12 with its positive and negative judgment of readers?

Our task in part is to attempt to make sense of the text as it would have been read by its original readers, that is, section by section with insights achieved at one point influencing the later reading. By the conclusion, readers would have developed a more comprehensive and satisfying understanding of the nature of Jesus Christ and would have been challenged to relate this understanding

Outline of the Book of Hebrews

I. Introductory Statement of Faith 1:1-4

II. The Son and Angels 1:5–2:18
- A. Christ Superior to Angels 1:5-14
- B. Warning: The Peril of Ignoring the Word Delivered by the Son 2:1-4
- C. The Humiliation and Exaltation of Jesus 2:5-18
  - 1. Subjection of the World to the Son—the Way of Suffering 2:5-9
  - 2. The Pioneer of Salvation made Perfect through Suffering 2:10-18

III. Participation in the House of God and in the Rest along the Way 3:1–4:16
- A. Christ's Faithfulness over God's House as Son Compared with Moses' Faithfulness as Servant 3:1-6
- B. The Rejection of Jesus More Serious than the Rejection of Moses 3:7-19
- C. The Promise of Rest Remains but May Be Forfeited 4:1-11
- D. Exhortation to Diligence and the Encouragement of Christ 4:12-16

IV. The Nature of the Son's High Priesthood 4:14–7:28
- A. Christ's High Priesthood as Encouragement to His People 4:14-16
- B. Christ's Qualifications as High Priest 5:1-10
- C. Hortatory Introduction to a Difficult Discussion 5:11–6:20
  - 1. A Call for Maturity 5:11–6:3
  - 2. Warning and Hope 6:4-12
  - 3. The Steadfastness of God's Promise 6:13-20
- D. Christ the Perfect Eternal High Priest According to the Order of Melchizedek 7:1-28

V. The Superiority of the Heavenly Reality over Its Earthly Copy 8:1–10:18
- A. The Heavenly Sanctuary and the New Covenant 8:1-13
- B. The Ministry of the Levitical Priests 9:1-10
- C. The Character of Christ's Sacrifice 9:11–10:18
  - 1. Secures Eternal Redemption 9:11-14
  - 2. Ratifies a New Covenant 9:15-22
  - 3. A Perfect Sacrifice 9:23-28
  - 4. The Reality of which the Old Order Was a Shadow 10:1-10
  - 5. Perfection of the Sanctified 10:11-18

VI. The Way of the Christian as the Way of Faith 10:19–12:29
- A. Exhortation: Privileges and Duties of Christians 10:19-25
- B. Warning: The Fate of the Willful Sinner 10:26-31
- C. Exhortation to Endurance 10:32-39
- D. The Faith of Past Heroes and Heroines 11:1-40
- E. Exhortation to Faithful Endurance as Children 12:1-29
  - 1. Jesus the Pioneer and Perfector of Faith 12:1-3
  - 2. Discipline as Children 12:4-13
  - 3. A Renewed Warning 12:14-17
  - 4. The Earthly Sinai and the Heavenly Jerusalem 12:18-24
  - 5. A Final Warning 12:25-29

VII. Concluding Admonitions 13:1-21
- A. Acceptable Worship: The Obligations of Christian Holiness 13:1-6
- B. True Worship 13:7-19
- C. Prayer and Doxology 13:20-21

VIII. Postscript 13:22-25
- A. Personal Notes 13:22-23
- B. Final Greetings and Benediction 13:24-25

to their lives as his followers. Our analysis will take into consideration the dynamic nature of such reading. Three different tasks can be delineated. First of all, attention will be given to what a particular section of the book is saying. Careful linguistic and literary analysis will be made of the text. Then, the relationship of the particular section under discussion to earlier and later sections will be delineated. As indicated earlier, Hebrews constantly foreshadows motifs that find fuller development later in the book. Later treatments repeat and refocus earlier treatments. Earlier and later

relationships, of course, have relevance for the meaning and significance of that unit, and they have relevance for the process of reading. Readers do not come to premature closure; they remain open to new insights. Or, if they have come to some conclusion, that decision may be reopened by later insights. Finally, the relationship of the particular section to the totality of the meaning and significance of Hebrews will be sought. These more-or-less historico-linguistic tasks are set within the more important task of making sense of Hebrews for our lives today. A multitude of passages have immediate modern relevance independent of their relationship to the entire book, but an attempt will be made to make modern sense of the message of Hebrews as a whole. The outline provided offers a way of viewing the individual sections and their relationship to each other and to the book as a whole.[Outline of the Book of Hebrews]

NOTES

[1] Robert W. Funk, F. Blass, and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 239, 242. For other artistic periods, see 2:2-4, 14-15; 3:12-15; 4:12-13; 5:1-3, 7-10; 7:1-3.

[2] David A. deSilva, *Bearing Christ's Reproach: The Challenge of Hebrews in an Honor Culture* (North Richland Hills TX: BIBAL Press, 1999), 33.

[3] William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* (WBC 47A; Dallas: Word Books, 1991), cxvi.

INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT OF FAITH

Hebrews 1:1-4

The literary and theological artistry and complexity of the entire book of Hebrews is foreshadowed in the first four verses. In this prologue, the writer used speech to talk about God's speaking. The limits of human language and the limits of human thought are reached. The writer has used all of the creative possibilities that the beautiful Greek language provided. And the preacher has plumbed the depths of God's revelation [Revelation as Self-disclosure] in Jesus Christ. The form and the content match each other. In exalted language the writer declares that the Son of God is the focus for God's climactic word and work, God's revelation and God's saving act for us.

These verses constitute a periodic sentence in the Greek text [Literal Translation of Hebrews 1:1-4] consisting of three carefully balanced segments. In the first segment (vv. 1-2), God is the subject. Two clauses contrast God's speaking of old and God's speaking in the last days, and then two clauses specify important characteristics of the Son (heir of all things in the end time and active in creation). In the second segment (v. 3), the Son is the subject. Four affirmations are made about the Son, with movement from the Son's preexistence to his exaltation (the opposite of the movement in the first segment).

Revelation as Self-disclosure

Frank Stagg described revelation and showed how Hebrews builds upon a biblical understanding of revelation:

> Revelation is God's disclosure of himself [*sic*] to persons. Revelation includes information expressed in words, but it is more than the giving out of facts. In revelation, God gives himself to us. Information can be important, but we are not saved by information. We are saved only by a Savior. Salvation is in knowing God, not knowing facts about God. Jesus put it this way, "This is eternal life, that they should know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent" (Jn. 17:3). Saving faith is trust, not believing theological truths. Saving knowledge is knowing God, not knowing theology. Hebrews builds upon this understanding of revelation and salvation. That is why revelation is presented as reaching its final form only when God spoke to us in his son.

Frank Stagg, "God Speaks in His Son," *The Way of Faith*, ed. James M. Pitts (Wake Forest NC: Chanticleer Publishing Company, 1985), 18.

Literal Translation of Hebrews 1:1-4

ΑΩ Having spoken of old in many and various ways to the fathers in the prophets, in the last days God has spoken to us in a son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world, who being the radiance of his glory and the exact representation of his being, bearing all things by his word of power, having made purification for sins, sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high, having become as much superior to the angels as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs.

The final segment (v. 4) contains two clauses that argue for the superiority of the Son and his name on the basis of his exalted state spoken of in the previous segment.

The author's love for rhetorical flourishes is evident even in English translation: the chiastic arrangement of statements about the Son, framed with reference to the old dispensation [Chiasm]; the contrasts ("long ago" versus "in these last days"; "by the prophets" versus "by a son"; "to our ancestors" versus "to us"); temporal sequence (preexistence, incarnation, exaltation); and the repetition of participles and relative pronouns. A transliteration from Greek into English reveals alliteration and assonance in v. 1: *polymerōs kai polytropōs palai ho theos lalēsas tois patrasin en tois prophētais* ("In multiple forms and multiple fashions of old God having spoken to the fathers in the prophets . . . "). Note the use of *polys* in the first two adverbs and the fact that five words begin with the letter "p."

ΑΩ **Chiasm**

The *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* defines and illustrates chiasm:

> A chiasm (also called chiasmus) is a distinct form of expression in which the elements in the first part are repeated in reverse order in the second part. The emphasis usually falls on the center where the two lines of movement intersect; hence, the term "chiasm" from the Greek letter χ, which consists of two lines intersecting at the center. The chiasm may comprise one sentence, a series of sentences, a pericope, an extended section of a writing (or speech), or even an entire work.
>
> An example of chiasmic repetition can be seen in Mark 2:27: "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath." A longer chiasm is reflected in Isaiah 6:10:
>
> A Make the heart of this people fat,
> B and their ears heavy,
> C and shut their eyes;
> C′ lest they see with their eyes,
> B′ and hear with their ears,
> A′ and understand with their hearts,
> and turn and be healed.

Edgar V. McKnight, "Chiasm," *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1990), 141-42.

COMMENTARY

God's Speaking, 1:1-2

In vv. 1-2, God's relationship to the Son is described. Three assertions about Christ are made with God as the subject: (1) God has spoken by a Son; (2) God has appointed him heir of all things; and (3) through the Son God created the worlds. The contrast and the continuity between the old and new dispensations are noted in the first two verses. "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors, . . . but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son." This comparison

foreshadows the comparison of the old and new people of God (3:7–4:11) and the contrast between the old and new sacrifices and covenants (8:1–10:18).

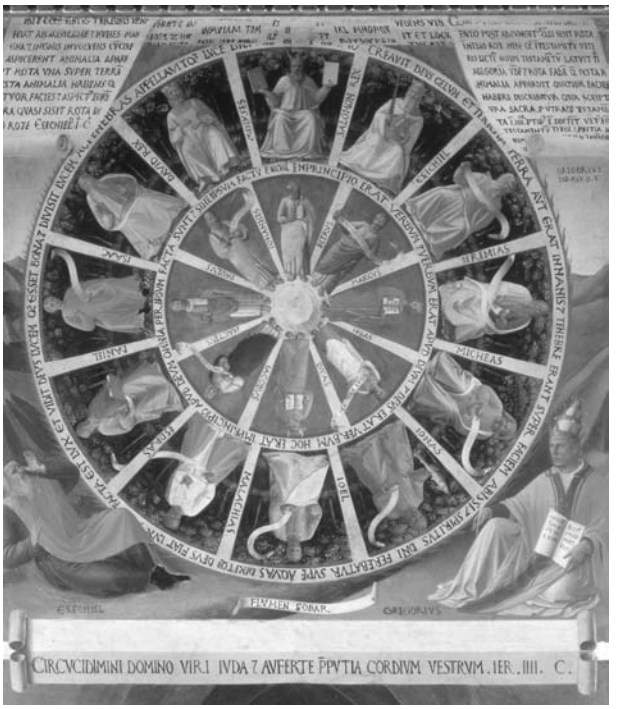
The "many and various ways" that God spoke long ago to the ancestors by the prophets are not specified. The Old Testament is witness of a variety of form and content—stories, oracles, commandments—and a variety of human receptions—visions, dreams, theophanies, and still small voices. [The Revelation of the Prophets] These diverse revelations and receptions were real, but they contrast with the eschatological speech of the Son—his speech is singular and final. Yet the author of Hebrews continually refers to and interprets the Old Testament. What God says in the prophets has contemporary and not merely ancient relevance. For Hebrews, however, this relevance grows out of the fact that the Old Testament speaks of Christ and is spoken by Christ (see 2:12-13; 10:5-7) as well as by God and the Holy Spirit.

God spoke through the prophets in appropriate language. God spoke through prophets who fitted their messages to their age.

The Revelation of the Prophets
According to William Barclay,

The revelation of the prophets was great and manifold, but it was fragmentary and presented by such methods as they could find to make it effective; but the revelation of God in Jesus was complete, and was presented in Jesus himself. In a word, the prophets were the *friends* of God; but Jesus was the *Son*. The prophets grasped *part* of the mind of God; but Jesus *was* the mind of God. It is to be noted that it is no part of the purpose of the writer to the Hebrews to belittle the prophets; it is his aim to establish the supremacy of Jesus Christ. He is not saying that there is a *break* between the Old Testament revelation and that of the New Testament; he is stressing the fact that there is *continuity*, but continuity that ends in *consummation*.

William Barclay, *The Letter to the Hebrews,* Daily Study Bible (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1955), 4.



Fra Angelico was an active monk at the monastery of St. Mark, and many of his frescoes functioned as visual meditations for the contemplative journeys of the monks.

Fra Angelico. 1387–1455. "Sacred Wheel" from the doors of the Silver Cabinet. c. 14th C./15th C. Museum of St. Mark, Florence, Italy.

Each of the prophets addressed a glaring need and is characterized by one idea. Amos, for example, called for social justice. Isaiah stressed God's holiness. Hosea understood the forgiving love of God through his own experience. No prophet grasped the fullness of God's revelation as it was expressed in Jesus. The fullness of God's revelation at the end of the ages was made known in the Son.

The temporal eschatological perspective in 1:2a is replaced by or supported by a spatial perspective in 1:2b. Hebrews declares that God established the Son as heir of all things. This status as heir is

The Prophet Isaiah
The piercing eyes and the energy-swept torque of the body bespeak of God's holy presence as reflected in the unfurled scroll revealed by the prophet Isaiah.

Raphael. 1483–1520. *The Prophet Isaiah*. 16th C. Fresco. S. Agostino, Rome, Italy.

demonstrated in Christ's exaltation to the right hand (v. 3) and guarantees his brethren their inheritance and share in a "heavenly calling." The installation of the Son as heir is to be understood in light of Psalm 2:8 where the royal Son is assured that the LORD will give him the nations as his inheritance: "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession." In Hebrews the Son is the heir of all creation ("heir of all things," see 1:14; 3:1; 6:17; 9:15; 12:25-29 for development of the inheritance theme).

Christ in Majesty

The "Royal Portal" was named as such because of the jamb statues of French kings and queens flanking the doorways. The western entrances were regarded as the "gateways to the Heavenly Jerusalem"—where Christ as king is shown enthroned in majesty.

Anonymous. *Christ in Majesty with the Symbols of the Four Evangelists.* Royal Portal, Cathedral, Chartres, France.

Yet another perspective that supports but also differs from the temporal eschatological perspective is found in the affirmation that the Son and heir is also the one through whom God created the universe. In Judaism's wisdom tradition, the idea developed that God worked through an intermediary in creation (see Prov 8:22-31; Wis 7:22-27). [Proverbs 8:22-31 (LXX): Description of Wisdom] [Wisdom of Solomon 7:21-30: Description of Wisdom] This intermediary is called Sophia (wisdom) or Logos. The church used these terms in attempting to understand the relationship of Christ to God. Various New Testament texts show that praise of Christ as agent of creation

Proverbs 8:22-31 (LXX): Description of Wisdom

In Proverbs, Wisdom is sometimes personified as a woman who embodies the ways of God and beckons the faithful to follow her rather than the "woman of foolishness." Here, in a long speech, Wisdom recounts how she was the LORD's companion at the creation.

> The LORD made me the beginning of his ways for his works. He established me before time was in the beginning, before he made the earth: even before he made the depths; before the fountains of water came forth: before the mountains were settled, and before all hills, he begets me. The LORD made countries and uninhabited tracts, and the highest inhabited parts of the world. When he prepared the heaven, I was present with him; and when he prepared his throne upon the winds: and when he strengthened the clouds above; and when he secured the fountains of the earth: and when he strengthened the foundations of the earth: I was by him, suiting myself to him, I was that wherein he took delight; and daily I rejoiced in his presence continually. For he rejoiced when he had completed the world, and rejoiced among the children of men.

Wisdom of Solomon 7:21-30: Description of Wisdom

Wisdom as the agent of God's creative activity is depicted in the Hellenistic Jewish writing known as the Wisdom of Solomon in language similar to attributes of Christ given in Hebrews 1:1-4 (noted in italics).

> I learned both what is secret and what is manifest, for *wisdom, the fashioner of all things*, taught me. For in her there is a spirit that is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear, unpolluted, distinct, vulnerable, loving the good, keen, irresistible, beneficent, humane, steadfast, sure, free from anxiety, all-powerful, overseeing all, and penetrating through all spirits that are intelligent and pure and most subtle. For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness *she pervades and penetrates all things*. For she is a *breath of the power of God*, and *a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty;* therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her. For *she is a reflection of eternal light*, *a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness*. Though she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets; for God loves nothing so much as the man who lives with wisdom. For she is more beautiful than the sun, and excels every constellation of the stars. Compared with the light *she is found to be superior*, for it is succeeded by the night, but against wisdom evil does not prevail.

entered into Christian thought (see John 1:3, 10; Rom 11:36; 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:16).

The Son's Relationship to God, 1:3

The assertions of vv. 1-2 are repeated in v. 3, this time with the Son as subject. The Son's relationship to God is described in the following order: Son, Creation, and Inheritance. The Son is "the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being." Although two statements are made, one idea is expressed: Jesus Christ provides a perfect expression of the reality of God. "God's glory"(*doxa*) may refer to the divine splendor or power perceived when God is manifested or even to the essence of God as a transcendent being (Ps 113:4; Luke 2:9). [Glory] The Greek word translated "reflection" (*apaugasma*) is found nowhere else in the New Testament and is relatively rare elsewhere. It does occur in Wisdom 7:26 where wisdom is said to be a "reflection of the glory of the Almighty." The Greek word may be translated as "radiance" as well as "reflection." The translation "reflection" conveys a passive sense and the translation "radiance" conveys an active sense. Both meanings are possible, and both meanings help us understand the Son's relationship to God. In the context, the passive meaning is preferred, a meaning consistent with the use of "exact imprint."

The word translated "exact imprint" (*charaktēr*) is not found elsewhere in the New Testament and is found only three times in the

Glory

ΑΩ The Greek word for "glory" found in Heb 1:3 (*doxa*) appears seven times in Hebrews, five times referring to Jesus. Once it refers to those whom God brings "into glory" (2:10), and once it refers to the "cherubim of glory" hovering over the ark (9:5). The term appears significantly in Heb 2:7 where it is a quotation of Ps 8:5 and represents a translation into Greek of the Hebrew term that is used to refer to glory most frequently in the OT, *kabod*. In the OT, *kabod* may also be rendered "weight," "heaviness," or "honor," and it may be in this last sense ("honor") that it is intended in Ps 8:5 since it is coupled with the Hebrew word *hadar* ("honor"; note the equivalent in Heb 2:7 is the customary Greek term for "honor" or "weight"). The Hebrew *hadar* may also be translated "glory."

People or things may have glory (either *kabod* or *hadar* in the OT) attributed to them, especially in the sense of power, wealth, or reputation. Nature can display glory, and certain objects may be so beautiful as to have glory. Human glory, though, may be offensive if it leads to false pride.

While the various terms translated "glory" may be applied to people and things in the biblical literature, the references to glory typically have some connection to God. God's essence as a divine being may be expressed as God's glory, or the powerful presence of God, whenever manifested to humans, may be perceived as God's glory. Such theophanies of God's glory may be exhibited as natural phenomena (e.g., cloud, fire, light, storm, earthquake). The place where the theophany occurs may acquire aspects of God's glory (ark, tabernacle, temple). Certain events (cultic rituals, historical events) may be the locus of God's glory being revealed.

In the NT glory is generally associated with Jesus. God's glory was present in him before creation and became evident in his incarnation and birth. His disciples beheld his glory in his miraculous deeds. Especially in his transfiguration, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and anticipated return is God's glory evident in Jesus. Jesus, by fulfilling the glory of God in his suffering in the flesh (Heb 2:9), has made it possible for humans, who failed to live up to the glory with which they had been endowed by their Creator (Heb 2:7) to become God's children of glory at last (Heb 2:10).

See Bob R. Ellis, "Glory," *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1990), 332-33

Septuagint. Philo uses it frequently [Philo] to describe humankind whose soul bears the imprint of God. In Philo's view, God's creative Word, the Logos, functions as a seal with the imprint of the divine. The Logos in turn reproduces the imprint of the divine in the human mind (see Philo, *Allegorical Interpretation* 3.95; *On Noah's Work as a Planter* 18). [Philo on the Word as the Stamp of the Divine Imprint] The "very being" (*hypostasis*) of God imprinted upon Jesus Christ is God's fundamental reality or essence. The term "very being" refers to whatever underlies a particular phenomenon, whatever is a thing's most basic or fundamental reality.

With the statement that "he sustains all things by his powerful word," we move beyond the preexistence of the Son and the Son's activity in creation to the Son's relationship to the creation. The Son carries out the function of God and God's providential government of the created order. This estimate of the Son's share in the divine government of the world reflects the view of the wisdom tra-

Philo

Philo Judaeus of Alexandria (c. 20 BC–AD 49) was a Jewish philosopher whose extensive writings provide important insight into the development of Hellenistic Judaism in the Second-Temple period, the study of Hellenistic philosophy in general, and certain concepts that arose within early Christianity. He was born into a wealthy and influential family, and although his brother Alexander became a prominent actor on the Roman political scene in Egypt, Philo directed his efforts to learning. He sought to utilize Hellenistic philosophy, particularly Middle Platonism, to articulate his understanding of Jewish piety. In addition to Plato's metaphysics, Philo was influenced by Neo-Pythagoreanism, Stoicism (from which he appropriated the Logos concept and allegorical interpretation of texts), and Hellenistic mysticism in general.

Philo's works typically reveal a Jewish apologetic concern. He argued that Moses had actually been the world's first great philosopher and that the various Greek philosophical systems had taken their lead from him. Many of his works consist of commentaries on the writings attributed to Moses. In these works, Philo often employed an allegorical method of interpretation. As the Stoics and others had done with the traditions of ancient Greece, Philo understood that those passages of the Pentateuch that did not offer clear and unobjectionable teaching should be read symbolically. He considered each text to have two meanings: the surface meaning was the literal meaning; the deeper meaning, or spiritual sense, was accessible only by decoding the symbolism embedded in the text. Whenever the literal meaning resulted in a reading that contained contradiction, inconsistency, or negative views of God, then one should resort to the underlying, allegorical meaning. Thus, one could discover that Moses had actually, symbolically, discussed various philosophical issues that were of concern to all philosophers.

The allegorical approach championed by Philo influenced early Christian interpretations of the OT, especially in Alexandria where an important school of Christian learning developed. Influential Christian scholars such as Clement of Alexandria and the prolific writer Origen were all indebted to Philo. Even theological giants of the Western church, such as Augustine, Jerome, and Ambrose, bore the marks of Philo's influence on their work.

See T. C. Smith, "Philo," *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1990), 686-87.

Philo on the Word as the Stamp of the Divine Imprint

AΩ

Philo used the term "exact imprint" (*charaktēr*) to speak of humankind that bears the "exact imprint" of God. The stamp of that divine seal is the eternal Logos. This idea of Philo is seen in the passages quoted below:

Allegorical Interpretation 3.95-96

This, moreover, is the reason of God's proclaiming Bezalel by name, and saying that He has given him wisdom and knowledge, and that He will appoint him artificer and chief craftsman of all the works of the Tabernacle, that is of the soul (Exod. xxxi. 2ff.), though He has so far pointed to no work or deed of Bezalel's, such as to win him even commendation. We must say, then, that here too we have a form which God has stamped on the soul as on the tested coin. What, then, the image impressed on it is we shall know if we first ascertain accurately the meaning of the name. Bezalel means, then, "in the shadow of God"; but God's shadow is His Word, which he made use of like an instrument, and so made the world. But this shadow, and what we may describe as the representation, is the archetype for further creation. For just as God is the Pattern of the Image, to which the title of Shadow has just been given, even so the Image becomes the pattern of other beings, as the prophet made clear at the very outset of the Law-giving by saying, "And God made the man after the Image of God" (Gen. i. 27), implying that the Image had been made such as representing God, but that the man was made after the Image when it had acquired the force of a pattern.

Noah's Work as a Planter, 18-19

Now while others, by asserting that our human mind is a particle of the ethereal substance, have claimed for man a kinship with the upper air; our great Moses likened the fashion of the reasonable soul to no created thing, but averred it to be a genuine coinage of that dread Spirit, the Divine and Invisible One, signed and impressed by the seal of God, the stamp of which is the Eternal Word. His words are "God inbreathed into his face a breath of Life" (Gen. ii. 7); so that it cannot but be that he that receives is made in the likeness of Him Who sends forth the breath. Accordingly we also read that man has been made after the Image of God (Gen. i. 27), not however after the image of anything created.

dition that wisdom "reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other and she orders all things well" (Wis 8:1; see Wis 7:24-27 for a view of wisdom that would have been shared by readers of Hebrews).

"When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of majesty on high." Here we move away from the wisdom tradition and come to the major themes of the Christology in Hebrews. The Son's earthly career is summarized in the image of a priest at the altar making purification for sins. Then the Son is enthroned. Psalm 110:1 is clearly in mind, for this Old Testament text speaks of the king enthroned beside God: "The LORD says to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.'" The continuing exaltation at the right hand of God speaks of the Son's royal power and paralleled glory. But it also implies Jesus' resurrection and ascension.

Verse 3 (and perhaps the last of v. 2 and also v. 4) may have been a hymn. The evidence for the author's use of an early Christian hymn includes content and form. The evidence from content includes the use of the rarely found words "reflection" and "exact imprint" and the pattern of preexistence, incarnation, and exaltation. The evidence from form includes the participial style and balanced clauses. The hymn is a confession that would have been sung regularly by the congregation. Some such confession may have been in mind when the author exhorted, "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful" (10:23) or "Through him, then, let us continually offer his sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name" (13:15).

The hymn or hymnlike material in Hebrews 1:3 exhibited the transcendent dignity of the Son in order to strengthen the congregation as they faced a hostile world and were in danger of losing heart. A similar christological hymn was used in Paul's appeal to the Philippians (Phil 2:5-11) to look not to their own interests but to the interests of others (2:4). [Philippians 2:5-11: A Christological Hymn]

Philippians 2:5-11: A Christological Hymn

ΑΩ In Philippians, Paul included a hymn that that is often called the "Kenotic Hymn" (from the Greek word *kenoō* = "empty"). In language similar to Hebrews, the hymn stresses the humiliation of Christ that led to his exaltation.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

The More Excellent Name, 1:4

Verse 4 brings the prologue to a climactic conclusion. It also introduces the first major section of the letter, a section designed to show that the eternal Son is also the high priest who has achieved his exalted status through suffering (1:5–2:18). The section is developed by means of a comparison between Christ and the angels that is introduced in v. 4. Comparison is an important strategy in Hebrews, with the word "superior" being one of the book's most characteristic adjectives (see 6:9; 7:7, 19, 22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24).

Tension exists between a temporal perspective whereby the Son becomes superior to angels and inherits a more excellent name and an eternal perspective whereby the Son has a primordial relationship with the Father. The tension is not resolved here or elsewhere. At this point in Hebrews, the emphasis is not upon the temporal achievement of Christ's position but in the fact of the superiority of his position. This position is related to the possession of a special "name." The name is not specified. The reader will know that the name "Son" is intended, and this is confirmed by the questions in v. 5: "For to which of the angels did God ever say, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you'? Or again, 'I will be his Father, and he will be my Son'?"

But the sonship is not simply the eternal sonship; it is a sonship that involves priesthood and suffering. Therefore, the tension between the temporal and the eternal, the human and the divine, the eternal word and the word become flesh must be maintained. We may begin from above with the eternal or we may begin from below with the temporal, but to do justice to the Christian message and to the message of Hebrews in particular we must see the relationship of each to the other. Hebrews will continue to challenge the reader as it moves from one perspective to the other and back again.

CONNECTIONS

Sophisticated Text and Readers

The introductory sentence in Hebrews challenges the modern reader as it did its first readers. The sophistication and artistry of this passage (and the remainder of Hebrews) challenges the image

of early Christians as a group of poor and uneducated people on the borders of society, and it encourages modern Christians to use the best of our culture to appreciate our faith. The passage shows that at least some of the early Christians were well-educated and able to use what their language and culture offered to understand their faith. When God speaks, God uses our minds. God does not silence our minds. Our minds are released to gain some measure of God's own meaning. However, human activity does not replace God. God's speaking challenges human pride that pretends to answer the central questions of life apart from God.

The Readers' Involvement

Hebrews invites readers to participate in the reading process. The effectiveness of the text depends upon readers' involvement. The use of "us" (v. 2) establishes a relationship between the author and his readers. The hymn of confession invokes faithful memories of past worship services. The chiastic construction allows readers to make connection between corresponding lines. Later in the word of exhortation, the writer will become explicit in probing the memories of readers (see especially 6:9-12 and 10:32-36). The Scripture of the church is cited and interpreted. At times Scripture is merely alluded to and readers are expected to pick up on the allusions. Hebrews is not simply an argument to be followed logically and intellectually. It is a sermon to be entered into intellectually, emotionally, and volitionally. Readers today may enter into the text indirectly by observing how original readers would have engaged with the text. However, for the full effect of the text, readers must ultimately stand before the same word and world the text created for the earliest readers.

The Text and the Creation of a New World

The Letter to the Hebrews is designed to accomplish something. Biblical texts in general and Hebrews in particular not only say something; they do something. They perform an action in the hearing and/or reading of the text. Psalm 23, for example, speaks to the wounded soul: "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me." The text creates a place for the divine in the mind and heart of the hearer. God's word brings comfort in its very recitation. It is not simply an intellectual dissertation on the possibilities of God's comfort.

Readers of Hebrews need confidence and courage to sustain them. They have a rich heritage of work, love, and service (see 6:10), but they are now exhausted. The writer of Hebrews does more than talk about courage and confidence. His word of exhortation creates courage and confidence. The writer creates a world in his sermon. It is a world in which God has spoken and speaks still. It is a world in which the truly real is experienced in God's speaking in the Son, not in human scheming and achieving.

Modern readers of Hebrews come to the text from their real world. This is a world where political, military, and economic force seems to reign. But the world of Hebrews is quite a different world. It is a world created and sustained by God. The world uncovered or revealed by the entire book of Hebrews is a world that is not created or essentially sustained by human will and effort. It is a world properly spoken of as a given, or a gift, that does not exclude the world of the achievements of humankind but parallels that world and makes it meaningful. One value of reading Hebrews as a sermon whose parts form a whole to make a claim on the reader is a revelation of meaning that challenges the readers' everyday experience of the world. In the world of the book of Hebrews that challenges the experience of our everyday world, God has spoken in a singular and decisive way in Jesus Christ.

The book of Hebrews does not present a difficult thesis. It is a simple thesis that is stated in 1:3b: "When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high." The readers' major involvement is not in understanding the presentation of Jesus Christ in the book of Hebrews. The readers' major involvement is the articulation of the readers' own situation vis-à-vis that understanding of Jesus Christ.

Readers today face the challenge of creating a world in which the presentation of Jesus makes sense. In order to appreciate the world of Hebrews, the reader must enter into that world imaginatively and spiritually. Modern readers may create such a convincing world that they wonder how the readers implied by the book of Hebrews could possibly even contemplate apostasy from the faith. When modern readers see how the book of Hebrews as a whole operates in this ironic fashion to claim their allegiance, they may appreciate more fully the rhetorical devices of the author in creating a claim upon the original readers.

Hebrews and Judaism

Hebrews magnifies the power and significance of what God has said and done in Jesus Christ and encourages readers' confidence in this Christian faith. In the writing, the Old Testament is presupposed and used to make Jesus Christ more understandable. Interpretation is used that sees Old Testament events, figures, and practices as types that are fulfilled finally in Jesus Christ. The writer is not concerned to interpret the Old Testament simply in light of its own historical time and place. Though resources are available in Hebrews for such an evenhanded interpretation, the agenda of the author was to interpret the Old Testament as a foil for the revelation in Jesus Christ. The author speaks of Jesus as having a "more excellent ministry" and as the "mediator of better covenant . . . enacted through better promises" (8:6). He speaks of the Old Testament law, then, as "weak and ineffectual" (7:18) and of the old covenant as "obsolete" (8:13). From this typological and rhetorical stance, it is an easy move to read Hebrews in a simplistic triumphalistic fashion with the objective of heralding Christianity as superior to Judaism. The language of Hebrews may be used for such problematic purposes. However, when the rhetorical situation of Hebrews is kept in mind and the dialectic relationship between the speaking of God in the prophets and the speaking of God in the Son is maintained, readers may value the word declared in Jesus without denigrating God's earlier words. The word spoken in Jesus does not invalidate the earlier promises of God. For Christians, the word spoken in Jesus clarifies and fulfills those promises.

Codes for Deciphering the Presentation of Jesus Christ in Hebrews

Jesus may be understood and spoken about as an historical figure, as an historic figure transcending his historical origins, as the subject of art and literature, and as a model and revelation of the nature of the divine. To be honest to the data that exist about Jesus, all of the ways of understanding Jesus must be acknowledged. But each way of understanding Jesus presents its challenges, and the coordination of knowledge from these approaches is a staggering task. Paralleling the different sorts of knowledge related to Jesus are the different functions of the sources of information about Jesus—the different functions of language and literature. Language in general and the language of the New Testament in particular may serve to convey historical information. It also conveys theological

convictions. Moreover, the language of the New Testament serves noncognitive affective functions.

The book of Hebrews is primarily concerned with (1) theological conviction and truth concerning Jesus Christ and (2) moral and spiritual exhortation on the basis of this conviction. In Hebrews, the Jesus event is interpreted by means of images and categories provided in large measure by Jewish thought. What had happened was seen as a saving act of God. The God of Israel revealed in Jesus was the creator who controlled the course of history and gave meaning to that history, the God who was revealed through the actual happenings of human history. History, then, is not unimportant. Still, historical codes and ways of making sense differ from theological codes and ways of making sense. Historical, historic, and theological codes interact in the book of Hebrews.

New Testament historians are generally agreed about basic historical facts concerning Jesus. Jesus was a Galilean Jew who carried out a ministry to Israel. He appeared on the scene historically when he responded positively to the preaching and baptism of John the Baptist. Jesus himself carried out a ministry involving preaching and healing. His preaching centered on the kingdom of God, the reign of God that signified God's triumph. Jesus called twelve disciples to be associated with him in his role as herald of God's kingdom. The ministry of Jesus involved exorcisms and cures and also an initiative toward social outcasts. Jesus undertook a mission to Jerusalem that concluded with his execution outside Jerusalem by Roman authorities. Historical data must be sorted out, related to each other, and evaluated according to historical criteria; and factual information is always susceptible to different historical evaluations. We must, therefore, distinguish between historical events, that is, events that took place at particular times and particular places involving particular individuals, and our reconstruction of those events.

The book of Hebrews does not present a narrative of the historical Jesus. The narrative of interest to Hebrews is the theological narrative beginning with Jesus the high priest entering the holy of holies, continuing with his being exalted to the right hand of God and making intercession, and concluding with his return "to save those who are eagerly waiting for him" (9:28). But the proper understanding of this theological narrative requires appreciation of the humanity of Jesus (2:14, 17) and the testing and suffering of Jesus (2:18; 4:15; 5:8). Hebrews presents a Jesus who faced decisions and chose to endure the cross (12:2). The historical

experience of crucifixion outside the walls of Jerusalem is cited (13:12).

The New Testament also presents Jesus as an historic figure. Historic individuals are historic because they are seen by later individuals to have put their mark on history and to be significant for later generations. Socrates' acceptance of his death and his drinking of the hemlock as the consequence of his own convictions is historical knowledge that becomes historic as it assumes direct significance for a future time. When the historical Jesus and historical knowledge of Jesus assume a direct significance for the present, we have moved from historical knowledge to historic knowledge. Historic knowledge is related to historical knowledge, but these two types of knowledge are not the same. Historic knowledge is acknowledged to be related to the present. In some way, historic figures are exemplary individuals. The significance of these individuals, the way they are exemplary, is not static. That Jesus died on the cross is historical knowledge. Historical knowledge might also include the facts that Jesus accepted his death as the inevitable consequence of his life, that he proclaimed the kingdom, and that he focused on social outcasts. Jesus' acceptance of the cross may become historic knowledge as it influences our time and we find ourselves touched or moved by it in some way.

Hebrews presents Jesus as an historic figure. The high point of Jesus as example is in 12:1-2:

> Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

In 13:13 the suffering of Jesus "outside the gate" is used as the basis for the exhortation: "Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured." From this perspective, readers will review the earlier presentations of Jesus and find there an implicit picturing of Jesus as an historic figure worthy of our emulation.

The force of the presentations of Jesus as an historic figure depends upon the historical experiences of Jesus—the fact that Jesus was subject to all of the contingencies of life that humans experience and the fact that he chose to suffer for his brothers and sisters. The Christology of the book of Hebrews may be seen as having two starting points. The logical and theological starting point of the historical Jesus has been suggested, but the literary

starting point threatens to obscure the historical starting point. In the first chapter of Hebrews, the description of the Son as the one "whom he [God] appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds" (1:2) fixes the eyes of the readers on the preexistent and eschatological framing of the historical experience of Jesus. The next verse fixes the eyes of readers on the transcendent world: "He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word" (1:3a). Then comes the theologically-oriented narrative: "When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high . . ." (1:3b).

Just as knowledge of Jesus as an historical individual is related to but not the same as the significance of Jesus for later epochs as an historic figure, historic knowledge and appropriation is related to but not the same as confession of faith in Jesus Christ as one who affects the world as revealer and makes known the nature of the sacred. Acceptance of Jesus Christ as Word of God, Son of God, Wisdom of God, and High Priest at the right hand of God has to do with faith. This faith knowledge is not necessarily opposed to historic knowledge, but it acknowledges and views the Jesus event as in some way revelatory of God and God's relationship to humankind. It is not knowledge that is verifiable by historical research or established through conceiving of Jesus as an heroic example.

The use of the different codes necessary for deciphering depiction of Jesus in Hebrews allows us to repeat the critical, creative, and devout reading of the author and first recipients of the book. We recover an historical Jesus worthy of our emulation and devotion.

CHRIST SUPERIOR TO ANGELS

Hebrews 1:5-14

The unit on the superiority of Christ to angels introduces the first major section of Hebrews—"The Son and Angels," (1:5–2:18). [Angels] Two of the three parts of this major section are expositions of Scripture. This first expository part demonstrates the superiority of the Son to the angels (1:5-14), while the second clarifies the relationship of the Son to angels and to humanity (2:5-18). Separating these parts is an exhortation warning about the peril of ignoring the word delivered by the Son (2:1-4).

The initial expository section consists of a string of seven scriptural quotations designed to undergird the assertions concerning the Son made in the prologue. The quotations follow the order of those earlier assertions:

Appointment as royal Son (1:5-9; see 1:2b)
Mediator of the creation (1:10; see 1:2c)
Eternal unchanging nature (1:11-12; see 1:3a and b)
Exaltation to God's right hand (1:13; see 1:3c)

The quotations are treated as divine utterances to or about the Son. It is quite possible that these passages had been collected and used as messianic proof texts by the early church. The form of the material in 1:5-14 resembles collections found at Qumran, and such collections must have circulated in early Christian circles. [Florilegium (Collection) of Biblical Texts from Qumran] They were used (just as the hymn of 1:3) by the author to emphasize Christ as exalted Lord. The traditional nature of the collection may partly account for the author choosing to present Christ as superior to the angels. The "angels" serve a literary function relating the prologue to the first major section and are designed to reinforce (1) Christ's exalted status guaranteeing salvation to his followers and (2) the humiliation of Christ through which that salvation is achieved. Another literary function is to guard against a misunderstanding of the high-priestly Christology that will be developed later. Readers familiar with the sources of the image of the heavenly high priest need to be alerted that Jesus is not simply an angel.

Angels

The word "angel" is derived from the Greek word for "messenger" (*angelos*; Heb *malak*). The messenger may be human or divine, but typically in both the OT and NT the reference is to a supernatural being entrusted with delivering God's message or carrying out some action as God's agent.

In the OT, angels are portrayed primarily as messengers delivering God's word to God's people. Since, at a later stage in Israel's history, the prophets performed this important function of delivering God's word, angels appear very infrequently in the prophetic books, with the late book of Zechariah being an exception. Angels appear frequently in the narratives of Genesis and Judges, most often addressing people on behalf of God, such as when the angels in Judges remind the people that despite God's faithfulness and efforts on their behalf they have proven faithless in breaking their covenant with God. Angels may also appear to announce some impending event, such as the birth of Samson (Judg 13:3-7). At times, angels act as agents of God in protecting the people or destroying their enemies (cf. Exod 14:19-20; 2 Kgs 19:35). In the descriptions of their appearances, though they are supernatural beings, the angels may not always be recognized as more than humans (cf. Gen 18:1–19:38).

Angels become more prominent in the literature of Israel following the exile, perhaps due to the influence of Persian angelology. During the Hellenistic period, following Alexander the Great's defeat of the Persians, numerous Jewish writings gave a prominent role to angels. One such work, Daniel, even identifies angels by name. Other works of the period and later, written in the form of apocalypses, depict angels as crucial agents active in the struggle between good and evil. Certain angels, such as Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, and Raphael, in such works as 1 Enoch and Tobit, are identified as archangels supervising the hierarchy of God's army of angels in their struggles against evil angels. The idea of fallen angels arose, influenced by the Gen 6:1-4 account of the "sons of God" who took human wives and produced a generation of giants.

By the time of the NT, angels were an assumed part of the perspective of many Jews, though the Sadducees were noted (both in the NT and in Josephus) for not believing in angels. Paul shared the perspective of fellow Pharisees in assuming the existence of angels, though he seldom mentions them in his letters. According to Paul, angels watch over believers (1 Cor 4:9; 11:10). Even they, however, will be judged by believers (1 Cor 6:3). Presumably these angels to be judged are evil agents (Rom 8:38) of Satan, who may also disguise himself as an angel of light (1 Cor 11:14). Even good angels should not be worshiped (Col 2:18).

In the rest of the NT, angels appear most prominently in Matthew, Luke-Acts, Hebrews, and Revelation (an apocalypse). Like the angelic messengers of the OT, in the narrative works Gabriel or an unnamed angel appears to announce the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:5-23) and Jesus (Luke 1:28; 2:13-14) or to guide people (Matt 1:18-25; Acts 8:26). Angels may also carry out the judgment of God on the wicked (Acts 12:23). In Revelation, angels are present among the host of heaven worshiping God (5:11) and are instruments of God's wrath against evil (numerous passages). As in Colossians (2:18), Revelation warns against worshiping angels (19:10; 22:8-9). In Hebrews, while the important role of angels as servants of God is acknowledged (1:7, 14), the author stresses the superiority of Christ over the angels (1:1-14).

See Mark J. Olson, "Angel," *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1990), 29-30.

It is possible, however, that the "angels" served more than a literary function for the first readers. That is, there could have been an historical problem that related to angels. It is possible that the community was involved with a worship revolving around angels, either worship of angels or worship with angels (the notion that the community's worship involved participation in the worship engaged in by angels). Another possibility is that Christ was believed to be an angelic being, thus compromising his unique status and minimizing his sacrificial death. However, since the angels fade into the background, not to reappear in Hebrews, it is

Florilegium (Collection) of Biblical Texts from Qumran

By citing and interpreting biblical texts, the author of this collection describes a time of trial for his community, the House of Judah, to be followed by a glorious era. This time of future glory shall witness heightened purity, triumph over the community's enemies, a new temple, an inspired interpreter of Scripture, and a messiah descended from David.

[. . .] who swallow up the offspring of [. . . en]raged against them in his zeal [. . .] This is the time when Belial shall open his mouth [. . . to bring] trials [a]gainst the House of Judah, cultivating animosity against them [. . .] and he shall seek with all his might to disperse them [. . . th]at he brought them to be.

[. . .the House of Ju]dah, but the God of I[sra]el sh[all] [be with them, as He said through the prophet: "And I will appoint a place for My people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and [no] enemy [shall overtake them ag]ain, [nor] evildoer [afflict] them any [mo]re, as formerly, from the time that [I appointed judges] over My people Israel" (2 Sam 7:10-11a). This "place" is the house that [they shall build for Him] in the Last Days, as it is written in the book of [Moses: A temple of] the Lord are you to prepare with your hands; the Lord will reign forever and ever" (Exod. 15:17-18). This passage describes the temple that no [man with a] permanent [fleshly defect] shall enter, nor Ammonite, Moabite, bastard, foreigner, or alien, forevermore. Surely His holiness shall be rev[eal]ed there; eternal glory shall ever be apparent there. Strangers shall not again defile it, as they formerly defiled the Temp[le of I]srael through their sins. To that end He has commanded that they build Him a Temple of Adam (or Temple of Humankind), and that in it they sacrifice to Him proper sacrifices.

As for what He said to David, "I [will give] you [rest] from all your enemies" (2 Sam. 7:11b), this passage means that He will give them rest from [al]l the children of Belial, who cause them to stumble, seeking to destroy the[m by means of] their [wickedness]. They became party to the plan of Belial in order to cause the S[ons] of Li[ght] to stumble. They plotted wicked schemes against them, [so that they might fall pr]ey to Belial through guilty error.

"Moreover the Lord decl[ares] to you that He will make you a house," and that "I will raise up your offspring after you, and establish the throne of his kingdom [fore]ver. I will be a father to him, and he will be My son" (2 Sam. 7:11c, 12b, 13b-14a). This passage refers to the Shoot of David, who is to arise with the Interpreter of the Law, and who will [arise] in Zi[on in the La]st Days, as it is written, "And I shall raise up the booth of David that is fallen" (Amos 9:11). This passage describes the fallen Branch of David, [w]hom He shall raise up to deliver Israel.

From 4Q174. English translation from Michael Wise, Martin Abegg Jr., and Edward Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 227-28.

likely that these quotations serve only as a literary device and that the angels are merely foils for the exalted Christ. [The Worship of Angels]

COMMENTARY

"You are my Son , . . ." 1:5a

The series of Old Testament quotations begins with the rhetorical question, "For to which of the angels did God ever say . . . ?" The expected answer is that God never said what is cited to any angel. But God did say it *to* the Son! Also, God made statements *about* the Son that he never made about angels. The first

The Worship of Angels

Angels are important for the author of the book of Hebrews. The book mentions angels thirteen times. Although the author uses angels to demonstrate the superiority of Christ (and then moves to the central subject of his Christology), angels are plainly important. They are "spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation" (1:14). The message declared through angels "was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty" (2:2). In the comparison of Jesus to angels, the author indicates that for a time Jesus "was made lower than the angels" (2:9).

Some scholars have argued that Hebrews is designed to deal with a heresy that involved worship of angels. This heresy is seen in Colossians. It is suggested that Colossians and Hebrews were written at approximately the same time to deal with the same sort of situation.

The Archangel Gabriel

Anonymous. *Head of the Archangel Gabriel.* 12th C. Russian icon. Russian State Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia.

Col 2:16-19 indeed can be read along with the book of Hebrews in light of Christological debates and the danger of worship of angels in place of Jesus Christ:

> Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.

In the book of Revelation, we read an admonition against the worship of angels. The admonition characterizes the angel as a "fellow servant" with the author of the book and admonishes John not to worship the angel but to "worship God. "

> I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me; but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God!" (Rev 22:8-9)

statement is from Psalm 2, a royal psalm composed for the coronation of a king. [Psalm 2] In the psalm, the newly-enthroned king cites God's promise of universal rule. The citation begins with the formula of adoption: "You are my Son; today I have begotten you." Early Christians applied this text to Christ. They alluded to it in the accounts of his baptism (Matt 3:16-17; Mark 1:10-11; Luke 3:21-22), and they cited it explicitly in the context of Christ's exaltation (Acts 13:33-34). In 1:4 the writer had spoken of a more excellent name. Readers are now given that name: Son, God's Son, God's unique Son.

Psalm 2

Psalm 2, probably used at coronations of kings in Jerusalem, depicts the political powers in chaotic rebellion against God. In response, the LORD who rules from heaven empowers the divinely appointed king to overcome this opposition and warns all resisting powers to surrender to God's rule enacted through the king. The NT often applies this text to Christ.

Why do the nations conspire,
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and his anointed, saying,
"Let us burst their bonds asunder,
and cast their cords from us."

He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the LORD has them in derision.
Then he will speak to them in his wrath,
and terrify them in his fury, saying,
"I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill."

I will tell of the decree of the LORD:
He said to me, "You are my son;
today I have begotten you.
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.
You shall break them with a rod of iron,
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."

Now therefore, O kings, be wise;
be warned, O rulers of the earth.
Serve the LORD with fear,
with trembling kiss his feet,
or he will be angry, and you will perish in the way;
for his wrath is quickly kindled.

Happy are all who take refuge in him.

"I will be his Father , . . ." 1:5b

The second statement that was never spoken to or about an angel declares, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son." This is from Nathan's declaration of God's promise to David that David's house would be established forever—unlike that of Saul's (2 Sam 7:14). [2 Samuel 7:14-17] This statement and the first citation had already been drawn together in Jewish tradition to serve as a messianic proof text. In Hebrews they are connected by the adverb "again." This rhetorical piling up of scriptural quotations is found elsewhere in Hebrews (see 2:13; 4:5, 7; 10:30; see also John 19:37; Rom 15:10-12; and 1 Cor 3:20).

"Let all God's angels worship him," 1:6

The third quotation is introduced with the adverb "again" and with the temporal notation ". . . when he brings the firstborn into the world." The NRSV treats the adverb as having the same force as it has in v. 5b, "And again . . . he says." The adverb, however, may be used with the verb "brings": ". . . when he brings again the firstborn into the world." The determination of the use of the adverb and the determination of the meaning of "world" are related. The Greek word translated "world" (*oikoumenē*) could refer to the world inhabited by humans or to the

2 Samuel 7:14-17

ΑΩ The title of "son," which was used in Nathan's speech on David's behalf upon David's succession to the throne, has in Hebrews been applied to Jesus.

I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever. In accordance with all these words and with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.

heavenly world. If "world" refers to the world of humans, then "when he brings the firstborn into the world" refers to the incarnation of Christ, and the NRSV is correct. This, most likely, is what the author meant, but there are other possibilities. If "world" means the heavenly world, then the verse refers to Christ's exaltation; or if "again" belongs with "brings the firstborn into the world," then the verse refers to the parousia. The time reference is not the crucial matter; the emphasis is that the angels bow down before the Son.

The author's reference to bringing the firstborn into the world (which sets the context for the quotation) comes from Psalm 89:27 (which is closely related to Ps 2 and 2 Sam 7), "I will make him the firstborn." Here the psalm speaks of the unalterable covenant that God established with the Davidic dynasty. [Psalm 89:27-29] The concept of "firstborn" was a rich concept. It was used by Christians in reference to Christ's resurrection ("For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family" [Rom 8:29]). It was also used in reference to Christ's priority to and supremacy over all creation ("He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation . . ." [Col 1:15]). Ideas of preexistence and exaltation, of being Son and becoming Son are combined here as elsewhere without attempts at reconciliation (see Paul's citation of both exaltation traditions [Rom 1:3] and preexistence traditions [1 Cor 8:6]).

Psalm 89:27-29

Psalm 89 is a prayer for deliverance from enemies uttered by God's chosen king (David). The heart of the psalm is the LORD's assurance of divine protection, a portion of which provides the basis for its use in Hebrews.

I will make him the firstborn,
the highest of the kings of the earth.
Forever I will keep my steadfast love for him,
and my covenant with him will stand firm.
I will establish his line forever,
and his throne as long as the heavens endure.

The text applied to the Son at his introduction into the world ("Let all God's angels worship him") is similar to both Psalm 97:7 and Deuteronomy 32:43 (in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible used by the author of Hebrews). The psalm reads, "Worship

Deuteronomy 32:43 (LXX)

Statements addressed to the LORD in Deuteronomy 32:43 have been applied to Jesus in Hebrews. Note the italicized lines that do not appear in the Hebrew Masoretic Text but do appear in the LXX.

> Rejoice, ye heavens, with him, *and let all the sons of God worship him; rejoice ye Gentiles, with his people, and let all the angels of God strengthen themselves in him*; for he will avenge the blood of his sons, and he will render vengeance, and recompense justice to his enemies, and will reward them that hate him; and the LORD shall purge the land of his people.

him all his angels," and Deuteronomy reads, "And let all the angels of God worship him." The translation in Deuteronomy was immediately applicable as indication of the subordination of the angels to the Son. [Deuteronomy 32:43 (LXX)] When the text is taken out of its original context (where the "him" refers to God), the reference is open and can be taken as a reference to Christ. The writer to the Hebrews, accordingly, understands the text christologically. Because of the Son's superiority the angels are commanded to worship him.

"He makes his angels winds , . . ." 1:7

Verses 7-12 contrast the angels and the Son, stressing the transitory and mutable character of the angels and the unchangeable and eternal character of the Son. In v. 7 the angels are characterized by means of a short quotation from the Greek version of Psalm 104:4, "He makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire." The original Hebrew text spoke of wind and fire as instruments of the sovereign creator: "You make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers." The Greek translation used by the author of Hebrews reverses the objects: messengers (angels) become winds and ministers become fire and flame. [Psalm 104:1-4 (LXX)] Angels, just as winds and flame of fire, are subject to God's creative activities and subject to change and decay. The Son stands above the created order.

Psalm 104:1-4 (LXX)

In the LXX, used by the author of Hebrews, the last line of this passage inverts spirits (winds) with angels (messengers) and ministers with flaming fire (fire and flame).

> Bless the LORD, O my soul. O LORD my God, thou art very great; thou hast clothed thyself with praise and honor: who dost robe thyself with light as with a garment; spreading out the heaven as a curtain. Who covers his chambers with waters; who makes the clouds his chariot: who walks on the wings of the wind. *Who makes his angels spirits, and his ministers a flaming fire*.

"Your throne, O God, is forever , . . ." 1:8-9

The quotation in vv. 8-9 is the first of two from the book of Psalms that make explicit the contrast between angels and the Son. The quotation is from Psalm 45:6-7, an ode for a royal wedding in which the king is addressed as deity:

> Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.
> And the righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom.
> You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;
> therefore God, your God, has anointed you
> with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.

The author cited the text to emphasize the eternal and exalted reign of Jesus, but the application of the royal quality of deity to the Son serves to intensify the contrast between the mutable angels and the unchanging Son. The messianic imagery in vv. 8b-9 is unmistakable, although it is not the dominant element in the Christology of Hebrews. For Hebrews, the love of righteousness and the hatred of wickedness are exemplified in the sacrifice and death of Christ. The writer might have had angels in mind when he indicated that God has anointed the Son "with the oil of gladness beyond your companions." Nevertheless, kings, priests, and prophets were anointed upon their installation into office, and the Son's superiority distinguishes him from all those who participated in sonship.

"In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth , . . ." 1:10-12

The second lengthy quotation that explicitly contrasts the Son and angels is from Psalm 102:25-27. These verses praise God's eternity and support the affirmation in1:2c-3b that the Son is the mediator and sustainer of the creation. The radical distinction between the transitory created order and the eternal nature of the Son is stressed by applying to Christ the title "Lord." This title (found in the first line of the quotation, "In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth") is found frequently in the Old Testament to translate the divine name, Yahweh. [The Divine Name] Early Christians confessed Jesus Christ as Lord (see Acts 2:36; Rom 1:4; 10:9; 1 Cor 1:2, 3; 8:6; Gal 6:14; Phil 2:11; 1 Thess 1:1, 3; 1 Pet 1:3). Hebrews regularly uses "Lord" as a title for Christ (see 2:3; 7:14; 13:20; and perhaps 12:14). Christ is the creator of the earth and the heavens and is thereby the creator of the angelic realm (see Col 1:16).

The Divine Name

In the Old Testament, the name Yahweh is used most often for God. It is used nearly 7,000 times. This name is found in the account in Exodus of Moses' call to free the enslaved Israelites. When summoned by the deity, Moses requested the name of the deity. "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" In response to this question, God said to Moses, "I AM who I AM." He told Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD [Heb. *Yahweh*], the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations" (Exod 3:13-15).

In the account in Exodus, the name Yahweh is linked to the Hebrew verb "to be." "Yahweh" is most likely a form of "to be," with a sense of "to cause to be or happen; to create." In Jewish tradition, there was a high regard for the sanctity of this name of God. Consequently, Jews avoided using the name Yahweh. In place of this name, the term "LORD, or my LORD" [Heb., *Adonai*] was substituted. As a result, many English translations of the Bible use the term LORD. The term "Jehovah" arose in later Christian groups as a combination of the consonants YHWH with the vowels of Adonai.

The tense of the verb used as a name (imperfect) reflects the frequentative or constant character of God. Yahweh, then, can be translated as "caused things to happen, causes things to happen, and will keep on causing things to happen." The name is a title, but it also describes God's unique character as creator, sustainer, and hope for the future.

See John Joseph Owens, "Tetragrammaton," *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1990), 889-90.

"Sit at my right hand , . . ." 1:13

The concluding quotation is introduced by the same formula used to introduce the initial quotation: "But to which of the angels has he ever said. . . ." These two formulas form an *inclusio* [Inclusio] that ties the paragraph together. The quotation ("Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet") is from Psalm 110, a royal psalm extolling the king and the king's close relationship to God. [Psalm 110:1-4] This is the same psalm that seems to have prompted the reflections concerning the Son and angels (see v. 3c). In v. 3c ("When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high . . ."), the implication is that the Son seated himself at the right hand of God. The quotation in v. 13, however, explains that the Son's enthronement was at the invitation of God. As the concluding and climactic quotation in the series, the text underscores all that has been affirmed in the previous verses: angels are inferior to the Son and can never share the Son's position.

Inclusio

The term "inclusio" is used by rhetorical critics to refer to a literary device that defines the limits of a particular section. Derived from a Latin term meaning to "shut off" or "confine," an inclusion indicates that an author has defined the scope of a subunit by means of returning at the end to an element present at the beginning. The element may be a phrase or a concept with which a section begins and to which the discussion returns. The device may also be labeled "cyclic composition" or "ring composition," in that the inclusion forms a ring around the subunit.

Related to the inclusion are such rhetorical devices as *epanalepsis* and *anadiplosis*. In *epanalepsis* a phrase or idea present at the beginning of a sentence is repeated at the end. An example is Phil 4:4: "*Rejoice* in the Lord always; again I will say, *rejoice*." The *epanalepsis* frames the sentence, setting it apart from the rest. An *anadiplosis*, however, connects a sentence to what follows by repeating the last word or phrase in a sentence immediately in the next sentence. An example is Ps 121:1: "I will lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will *my help come*? *My help comes* from the LORD, who made heaven and earth."

See Edgar V. McKnight, "Inclusio," *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1990), 406.

Psalm 110:1-4

The first statement of this psalm provides the climatic assertion about the Son's superiority over angels. The last statement in v. 4, however, provides the basis for the author's elaboration of the superior priesthood of Christ later in Hebrews.

The LORD says to my lord,
"Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies your footstool."

The LORD sends out from Zion your mighty scepter.
Rule in the midst of your foes.
Your people will offer themselves willingly
on the day you lead your forces
on the holy mountains.
From the womb of the morning, like dew, your youth will come to you.
The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind,
"You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."

Rhetorical Question, 1:14

The conclusion to the section is a rhetorical question: "Are not all angels spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?" This recalls the language of Psalm 104 (cited in v. 7) that contrasts the angels who are ministering spirits with the Son seated in majesty. Here the service performed by angels has to do with "those who are to inherit salvation" (not service in the heavenly sanctuary). This reference to the heirs of salvation recalls the appointment of the Son as the heir of all things in the prologue and prepares for the exhortation to follow in 2:1-4.

To this point the author has used passages referring originally to the king to speak of Jesus Christ. Implicit in this use is a comparison of the king of Israel with Jesus Christ the royal Son. A lesser to greater argument may be stated. If the king of Israel is worthy of enthronement at God's right hand, how much more worthy is Jesus Christ the royal Son. Enthronement at God's right hand, then, is not to be thought of as describing an event in time and space. The language is to be taken seriously but not literally—in the case of the king of Israel and in the case of Jesus Christ the royal Son.

CONNECTIONS

Use of the Old Testament

The Bible for the early church was the Old Testament, and the writer of Hebrews used the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. Different interpretative strategies allowed the writer to find a contemporary word from God in the Bible. What made those strategies effective was the assumption that God has spoken and that God continues to speak in the Bible. The introduction of Old Testament quotations with the phrases "God says," "Christ says," and "the Holy Spirit says" reflects the author's conviction and enhances the authority of the Old Testament for readers. [The Use of Psalms in the Early Church]

The Use of Psalms in the Early Church

The book of Psalms is central for the author of Hebrews. Psalms are quoted seventeen times and alluded to sixteen additional times. Ps 110:1, 4 are repeatedly cited or appealed to in the development of the Christology of Hebrews. This reliance upon psalms is what we would expect in light of the use of psalms in Judaism and in the early church.

The book of Psalms (the Psalter) was the "hymn book of the Second Temple," and the Mishnah (a 2d century AD rabbinic code) specifies specific psalms to be recited in worship in the temple.

Psalms were prescribed for special feast days: Ps 35 for Passover, Ps 81 for the New Moon festival, and Pss 120–134 for Sukkoth. Ps 36 was recited on festival days and Pss 113–118 for all festivals. Altogether some eighty-four biblical psalms formed a regular part of Jewish worship.

In the Christian church also, psalms were used in worship. Important is the fact that both Jesus and Paul used psalms in understanding the life and significance of Jesus Christ. The Gospels indicate that Jesus applied to himself the passage in Ps 118:22 that speaks of the "stone that the builders rejected." (See Matt 21:42.) On the cross he quoted Pss 22:1 and 31:5, indicating his desolation and supreme act of surrender. Important also is the fact that the early Christians were Jews who worshiped in the temple and synagogue as well as in their house churches.

We have only indirect evidence from the earliest age of the Christian church about the use of psalms in Christian worship. When direct evidence becomes available, it shows a great deal of variety. The book of Psalms was used in different ways: as Scripture reading, as prayer, and as hymns for the praise of God. The church fathers recommended the regular use of psalms. Ignatius (c. 35–c. 107) introduced antiphonal singing of the psalms in accordance with the tradition of the Church of Antioch. The custom of reciting the whole Psalter over a fixed period of time is a later development. In the Anglican Church this is to be done once a month. In the Roman and Orthodox churches it is to be done once a week and twice a week during the major feasts of the Eastern church.

As far as the ways the psalms were rendered, there existed before the Christian use of psalms a solemn melodic chant in addition to the usual spoken recitation. Certain psalms were intended from the beginning for responsive use. The development of more artistic forms of recitation and the introduction of the daily prayer of the breviary resulted in the increasing prominence of clergy and choirs. With the reformers, the Psalter was rediscovered as a vehicle for the worshiping community. The free versions of the psalms by Luther, fitted to the tunes of folk songs, played an important part in the renewal of the church. This is even truer of the "Huguenot Psalter," which appeared in its complete version in 1562 at the instigation of Calvin.

Eric Routley has suggested different ways that psalms may be used in worship today: (1) the easy way of reading the psalms, either in unison or responsively; (2) dramatic readings of various sorts; (3) singing the psalms metrically; (4) the use of plainsong, using Gregorian tones or the "Anglican chant"; (5) the use of antiphonal psalmody in the style associated with the work of the French priest-musician Joseph Gelineau; or (6) the use of psalms as anthems to be sung by a choir.

Eric Routley, *Exploring the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 165-68.

The hermeneutical strategies of the author of Hebrews do not grow out of historical-critical assumptions and procedures. The writer did not first of all determine what a text meant in a given historical situation in order to apply that meaning to a contemporary situation. The author began with the contemporary situation and discovered a relevant word from the ancient text. The author's poetic and creative approach to the Old Testament is in line with earlier approaches in the Hebrew Bible itself and in the process of the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek. Texts are understood in light of a multifaceted story of God's saving initiatives toward humankind. They are understood in light of a transcendent world that must be acknowledged in making sense of the human story. And they are understood in light of God's activities and revelation of God's self in Israel and in Jesus Christ.

How can modern historical-critical insights be coordinated with higher-level schemata? In this commentary we provide historical background for the Old Testament texts that are interpreted christologically by the author. We can appreciate and transcend original historical references and meanings if we acknowledge that historical-critical approaches do not serve as the only gateway to all biblical truth. These approaches serve well as guards against private and willful playing with biblical texts. There is continuity between meanings available in the original circumstances of origin and meanings discovered in later contexts. But for the author of Hebrews (as for modern literary critics), the meaning of texts goes beyond the conscious historical intention of the author. The author of Hebrews is concerned with the deeper-level significance of events, practices, and characters in the biblical text. The original historical meanings are often helpful as they point beyond themselves to more profound significance and meaning.

The creative and yet governed use of traditional sources by the communities of Israel and the early church shows that they discerned the significance and were able to distinguish between original verbal meaning and contemporary meanings that involved the world of the readers. This is part of the explanation of the richness for present-day readers and also a pattern for modern methods of making sense. Historical study, concerned with recovering the most original sources of the history of Israel or the authentic words of Jesus, tends at times to look at the development of the tradition as a progressive falsification of the data, which must be discounted. It is possible to see the development of tradition as a dynamic matching of the literary tradition with the needs and capacities of later readers. Sense was made of the "events" of Israel and Jesus

Christ by succeeding generations so that their meaning and significance were extended and made available in the later tradition. In the book of Hebrews, contemporary interpretation is made of Old Testament texts. Hebrews is also a part of the telling and retelling, writing and rewriting of the story of Jesus so as to make sense of Jesus for later generations.

Angels

Angels are not at the center of Christian faith. They are not a part of the ancient creeds of the church. It may be that angels become important when the divine becomes far removed from human experience; angels substitute for God. Perhaps they become important when the gospel becomes mundane and boring and in need of new speculations. For the writer of Hebrews, a strong Christology is the answer to whatever challenge was presented by an overemphasis upon angels. The reality of angels is not denied, but angels do not seem to be vital to the faith of the author of Hebrews. What is vital is Jesus who is not an angel but receives homage as God's firstborn. Jesus is not a changeable angel but exercises eternal sovereignty and is now enthroned in heaven. Jesus Christ is at the center of Christianity in the book of Hebrews, and angels must be interpreted in light of this historical and theological center. [Christology and the Psalms]

Final Triumph and Human Choice

The belief in the final and complete triumph of Christ is basic in Christian faith. Christ is the goal and horizon of human history. Faith cannot mean that there are no decisions to be made, no battles to be fought, no struggles to endure. Christians must do more than sit back and wait for God's appointed time. The triumph of Christ reflected in v. 13 serves not to detract from the significance of decisive choices that must be made today. Rather, the triumph of Christ introduces an urgency in terms of those choices and confronts us with imperatives for life today. The book of Hebrews holds in creative tension the assurance of the final triumph of God in Jesus Christ and the urgency of human response and action (see 2:1-4; 4:1-13; 10:19-39; 12:1-2).

Christology and the Psalms

The Old Testament speaks of Israel, and the New Testament speaks of Jesus Christ. But the Old Testament supplied the early church and the New Testament writers the resources for understanding and telling the story of Jesus. The different historical contexts of the Old Testament and the New Testament may be ignored, and the Old Testament in general and the book of Psalms in particular may be read as predicting or foretelling the life of Jesus in a narrow sense. This approach loses part of the richness of both Testaments. The application to Jesus Christ of Old Testament texts that originally referred to Israel may be seen, however, as a claim that there is a relationship between Israel and Jesus Christ. A christological claim is then made in the use of psalms to understand and appreciate Jesus Christ.

To view the whole of the Old Testament and the whole of the Psalter from the perspective of their witness to Jesus Christ does not do away with the difference between the Testaments. It means reading the story of Jesus from the broad perspective of what God was doing in and through Israel. The pattern for reading the Old Testament christologically is provided in the account in Luke 24:25-27 and 44-48. The passage has the risen Lord interpreting to his disciples "the things about himself in all the scriptures." The account in Luke cites the resources of the law, the prophets, and the psalms.

The entirety of the book of Psalms and the entirety of the Old Testament can be read christologically, but the New Testament writers chose a relatively small number of psalms to apply in a decisive way to Jesus as messiah. Pss 2 and 110 were used at the coronation of kings of Israel. Pss 22 and 69 are psalms of individual lamentation. Ps 8 celebrates God's glory and the God-given dignity of human beings. Ps 118 is a thanksgiving for deliverance.

In the choice of these psalms, New Testament writers are influenced by keywords in the tradition about Jesus. The terms "anointed" ("messiah" or "Christ"), "Son," "Son of man," and "Lord" in these psalms help explain their use. These keywords and the passages in which they are found refer to historical kings of Israel, human beings, and Yahweh (the LORD). New Testament writers see in them a testimony to Jesus and the messiah. (See Acts 4:25-26; 13:33; Heb 1:5; 5:5; 2 Pet 1:17; Matt 21:15-16; Heb 2:6-9; 1 Cor 15:28; 1 Pet 2:3; compare also Heb 1:6 with Psalm 97:7.)

The book of Psalms (along with the book of Isaiah) proved indispensable in the portrait of Jesus in the New Testament and in the statements of the significance of Jesus. He is "the Son of God," "the Son of man," the "Lord" and "king," "the servant of God," the "Messiah." Sermons by Peter and Paul in Acts 2:25-36 and 13:35-41 show how early Christians held in creative tension the historical sense of Ps 16:8-10 and the psalm as a prophecy of Christ. (See C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures: The Sub-structure of New Testament Theology* [New York: Scribner, 1953] and Christoph F. Barth, "Jesus Christ in the Psalter," in *Introduction to the Psalms* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966], 65-71.)

WARNING: THE PERIL OF IGNORING THE WORD DELIVERED BY THE SON

Hebrews 2:1-4

In these verses, the author compares two revelations. One revelation is the law that was seen as mediated through angels. A breach of that law was followed by strict and just punishment. The other revelation was through Jesus Christ the Son. It was infinitely greater than the revelation of law. Therefore any refusal to listen to that revelation must be followed by a far greater punishment than violation of law.

In many ways, Hebrews 2:1-4 reads like the first chapter stylistically, but in some respects it reads very differently. The elevated style of the section marks it as similar to 1:1-4. After an oratorical imperative in v. 1 ("we must") comes a periodic sentence in vv. 2-4 in the form of a rhetorical question (an involved conditional sentence). Alliteration abounds in the first two verses. In v. 1 (just as in v. 1 of the first chapter), the alliteration involves the "p" sound: we read "therefore we must pay greater attention [*perissoterōs prosechein*] . . . , so that we do not drift away from it [*pararyōmen*]"). In v. 2 there is alliteration with the "l" sound: *di' angelōn lalētheis logos* ("message declared through angels") and again with the "p" sound: *pasa parabasis kai parakoē* ("every transgression or disobedience"). In v. 4 several words end in *–sin*, creating a pattern of rhymes ("by signs and wonders [*terasin*] and various miracles [*dynamesin*] and by gifts of the holy spirit, distributed according to his will [*thelēsin*])." The section also uses unusual words and idioms. Hebrews 2:1-4 is related to what has gone before in content as well as style in that it continues the contrast of the old and new dispensations and continues with the development of God's "speaking."

However, the differences between 2:1-4 and the previous chapter are marked. There is a move from exposition to exhortation. The exhortation is based, of course, on what has come before, but the hortatory style is obviously different from the expository style. The vocabulary is also different. The language of the first chapter is flavored by the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Because it would have sounded formal and old-fashioned, readers could have

been lulled into semiconsciousness by such vocabulary (as English-speaking readers could be by use of the King James Version). By contrast, 2:1-4 uses contemporary Hellenistic diction with a concentration of juridical terms. Readers would have been challenged by such vocabulary and style more than by the familiar words and phrases of the first chapter.

COMMENTARY

"Therefore we must pay greater attention , . . ." 2:1

The move to exhortation is introduced by the transitional phrase "therefore" (*dia touto*) and a verb form expressing logical necessity "it is necessary" (*dei*). This construction is joined with a comparative form ("pay greater attention") that probably carries the superlative force "pay the greatest attention." The writer used the pronoun "we" in the warning not only because he as well as the readers must pay attention, but also as a strategy to gain their *favorable* attention by emphasizing what he shares with them. Throughout the remainder of the work, the writer alternates between the imperative "you must" (see 3:1, 12; 10:32; 12:12; 13:7) and the hortatory subjunctive "let us" (see 4:1, 11, 16; 6:1; 10:22-24; 13:13).

"Greatest attention" must be paid to "what has been heard." What has been heard, of course, is the word proclaimed in the one who is Son. Failure to pay attention to what is heard leads to drifting away from it. Readers may see the hint of a nautical metaphor in the Greek word translated "drift away." The readers are not to lose their grip on the truth through carelessness like a ship carried by the current beyond its port. By neglecting their heritage, Christians may miss the opportunity of being a part of the kingdom established by Christ that "cannot be shaken" (12:28).

"For if the message declared through angels was valid, . . ." 2:2

Instead of specifying the source of the distraction, the author, in a powerful periodic sentence, compared the word brought by angels and that brought by Jesus and declared the danger of inattention to the word of Jesus (spoken of as "so great a salvation"). The sentence

is conditional with an "if" clause and a "then" clause. The "if" clause expresses a certainty and could be translated, "Since the message declared through angels was vali. . . ." The "then" clause is a rhetorical question with the answer known to author and readers: "How can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation—we cannot escape!"

The argument that makes the case is the argument from the lesser to the greater (*a fortiori*). If the message declared through angels was valid, how much more valid is the message declared through the Son! To make the case more persuasive, the author uses numerous juridical expressions in v. 2: "was valid," "every transgression or disobedience," "received a just penalty." The "message declared through angels" is the law. Although the biblical account of the giving of the law speaks of God dealing directly with Moses, the notion of angels as intermediaries developed in Second Temple Judaism and was appropriated by early Christians. Paul, for example, speaks of the law as being "ordained through angels by a mediator" (Gal 3:19).

Moses Holding the Tablets of the Law

The Truth of God as reflected in the commandments.

Joos (Justus) van Ghent. c. 1435–1480. *Moses Holding the Tablets of the Law.* 15th C. Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino, Italy.

"How can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?," 2:3-4

Verses 3 and 4 describe the new word of God that is contrasted with the law. It is described in terms of salvation: ". . . how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" Exactly what is escaped is not spelled out here, but clearly in mind are the eschatological judgments that await sinners. Elsewhere, the writer had eschatological punishment in mind and stated it in figurative terms. Ground that produces thorns and thistles instead of a useful crop "is worthless and on the verge of being cursed; its end is to be burned over" (6:8). For those who willfully persist in sin,

"there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries" (10:27). The salvation in mind is escape from such eschatological punishment, but positive benefits of salvation are also presented. The action of Christ brings remission of sin, sanctification, and access to God. Through the high-priestly action of Christ, it is possible, then, to taste the powers of the age to come. A true covenant relationship with God is enabled, and continuation in that relationship guarantees a share in God's eternal rest (see 4:16; 6:5; 8:7-12; 9:13-14, 26-28; 10:2, 15-18, 22).

The readers are made aware of the seriousness of the exhortation by the words "how can we escape," but the significance of these words is matched with the affirmation that this salvation was "declared at first through the Lord." The expression "at first" invites readers to conceive of a beginning point of salvation, and readers are able to supply different times of inauguration since the author

Early Christian Debates about Jesus' Humanity and Divinity

The prologue to John's Gospel announced the incarnation of the divine Word (Logos) become flesh and introduced centuries of debate about ways of understanding the union of humanity and divinity in the person of Jesus Christ. The early christological affirmations of the church attempted to link Jesus to "being" itself and utilized metaphysical abstractions that are difficult to appreciate today. But it is possible to see in these formulations an attempt to say something about the nature of reality. They may be seen as rooting Jesus' self-giving at the center of the Godhead. The love of neighbor says something definitive about Jesus, but it says something definitive about being and the meaning of existence. It has something to say about humans created in the image of God.

Explication of the different patterns of christological interpretation began with Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130–c. 200), who was forced to give attention to the question of the interpretation of the Bible by movements in Gnosticism. The Gnostics separated the Messiah from the Christian God. Irenaeus was able to maintain the human and the divine in Jesus by means of a view of humankind with the potentiality of growing toward God. He took the story in Genesis of the creation of humans in the image and likeness of God to mean not that Adam and Eve were created perfect, but that they were created with the potentiality of growing toward God (this potentiality was the "image") with the goal of achieving the glory of closeness (this was the "likeness"). The first attempt to create humans in the image and likeness of God failed, but in Christ God succeeded.

In the work of Origen of Alexandria (c. 185–c. 254) and Theodore of Mopsuestia in Antioch (c. 350–c. 428) and their successors we see the elaboration of ideas of Irenaeus that are really opposed to each other. Origen's Christology began with the divine Wisdom understood not abstractly or impersonally but as a living personal being (*hypostasis*). This Wisdom is eternally generated by God. That is, God the Father never existed without generating this Wisdom. Christ, then, is coeternal with the Father. This Wisdom is also called the Word as she interprets the secrets of the mind. Origin was not a docetist for he stressed that Jesus had a human soul that had always been united with the Word (For Origen, all creatures had immortal souls. That is, they will live forever in the future as they have lived forever in the past.).

The approach of Origen and the Alexandrians may be described as a "descending" Christology. Theodore and the Antiochenes were concerned that the "descending Christology" would abolish the true and complete humanity of Jesus. The Antiochenes, emphasizing the fundamental difference between the uncreated and the created nature, saw in the incarnation a divine self-emptying that operates only so far as human limitations will allow. Theodoret, Bishop of Antioch, gave a rule followed by earlier and later Antiochenes: "We 'contemplate two natures' in the Lord Christ, and 'apply to each its own properties'; we ascribe the words of humiliation as to Man . . . , and as to God . . .

does not specify the time—the exaltation of Christ, the incarnation, even the period of preexistence. The correlation of the different moments of salvation and different christological understandings is not the point here, but it is interesting to speculate as to whether the readers' discouragement arose out of a one-sided view of Jesus. If the readers saw Jesus simply as martyr, as a victim overcome by his enemies, the writer certainly altered this view by situating the Jesus of flesh and blood into a framework of preexistence and exaltation. It is possible, of course, that the opposite is the case, that readers have overvalued the wisdom tradition, the view of Jesus as Logos, and that the writer needs to make relevant the Jesus of flesh and blood. Hebrews does this in its emphasis on the humanity of Jesus (see 2:14, 17). [Early Christian Debates about Jesus' Humanity and Divinity]

In vv. 3b-4, the history of the word of salvation is traced. The historical sequence involves human and divine attestation. Jesus'

the God-befitting words of exaltation." To the Godhead belong the miracles and whatever is God-befitting; to the Man belong the birth, growth, suffering, and death. In exegesis the question is faced whether a particular text, particularly a saying of Jesus, has to do with the divine or with the human hypostasis.

In the development of Christology in the fourth and fifth centuries, progress was made essentially by reaction of church councils to statements seen as heterodox. The councils of Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451) dealt with the relationship between Jesus' humanity and divinity.

The teaching of Arius (c. 250–336) was the background for the first ecumenical council (Nicaea). Arius's teaching was designed to preserve the oneness of God and, at the same time, the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. Arius taught that the Son was a perfect creature, a kind of demigod subordinate to God the Father. In combating Arius, the council adopted a term that had been used by Origen, *homoousios* ("of one substance"), to indicate that Christ shared one common divine being with God the Father. Jesus, as Son of God, is "begotten not made" and "of the same substance as the Father."

How then could believers maintain Christ's true humanity? Apollinaris of Laodicea (c. 310–c. 390) apparently suggested that at the incarnation, the divine Logos assumed only a body and the Logos itself took the place of the human spirit. To counter this, the First Council of Constantinople (381) affirmed that Christ had a true human soul.

But how were the teachings of Constantinople (Christ being human) and the teachings of Nicaea (Christ being divine) related? The term *theotokos* (mother of God) had been introduced to express the personal unity of divinity and humanity in Jesus from his conception and birth. Cyril, bishop of Alexandria, insisted on using the term, but Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople, refused to do so. The Council of Ephesus (431) condemned Nestorius and upheld the title *theotokos* for Mary.

The Council of Chalcedon (451) is recognized as having made the fullest articulation of the early church's understanding of the person of Christ. The council dealt with the view that Eutyches of Constantinople (c. 378–456) seemed to hold—that Christ's divinity absorbed his humanity (the so-called monophysite heresy). The Council of Chalcedon reacted by acknowledging in Christ "two natures in one person (*prosōpon*) or acting subject (*hypostasis*)." This personal unity left the divine and human natures intact and did not confuse or intermingle them with each other. Chalcedon condemned extreme Antiochene tendances as it rejected the teachings of Nestorius but respected the two natures of Christ. It resisted extreme Alexandrian teachings in repudiating Eutyches while accepting the teaching of Cyril of Alexandria. In time, the Chalcedonian position prevailed throughout churches in the East and West.

Theodoret, cited in R. V. Sellers, "The Antiochian School: Logos-anthropos Christology," in *The Theology of Christ: Commentary: Readings in Christology,* ed. Ralph J. Tapia (New York: Bruce Publishing Company, 1971), 126.

message was confirmed not simply by the testimonies of those who heard him, but also by "signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will." "Signs and wonders" is a familiar Old Testament usage (see Deut 4:34; 6:22; Ps 135:9; Jer 32:20-21; Neh 9:10). This formula was widely used among early Christians who stressed miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit (for the triple formula, "signs, wonders, and miracles" see Rom 15:19; 2 Cor 12:12; 2 Thess 2:9; and Acts 2:22; for the stress on miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit see Matt 11:10; 14:2; 15:38; Mark 6:4; 1 Cor 12:10, 28; Gal 3:5).

CONNECTIONS

God, Truth, and What We Have Heard

The object of Christian faith is God. The book of Hebrews, however, focuses on Christ. This is appropriate for a community that is firm in its convictions about God the creator. But the conviction of the writer that *God* has spoken and still speaks in Christ is vital for understanding Hebrews. Truth, then, is always in terms of God. The essential idea of truth in the Bible is not conformity to some external standard but faithfulness or reliability. In the case of God, of course, faithfulness or reliability is not measured by any external standard. God is the standard. God's truth (faithfulness or reliability) is the truth that is basic for all other truth (Deut 7:9-10). God maintains covenant and steadfast love. When God is spoken of as the true God or the God of truth (Deut 32:4; 2 Chr 15:3; Isa 65:16; Jer 10:10), the idea is that God is reliable. God "keepeth truth for ever" (Ps 146:6 KJV).

The "truth" of God's commandments grows out of the fact of God and God's truth (faithfulness or reliability). The word of God and God's law are not true simply in the sense that they are in accord with science, human nature, or some abstract ethical principle. The great confession given by Ezra after the Jews returned from bondage in Babylon emphasized God's nature as truth (faithfulness) in what God did in creation, election, redemption, and the giving of the law: "You came down also upon Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven and gave them right ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments, and you made known your holy sabbath to them and gave them commandments and statutes and a law through your servant Moses" (Neh 9:13-14).

The truth of God is reflected not only in God's commandments; it is to be reflected in human life generally. "Only fear the LORD, and serve him in truth with all your heart: for consider how great things he hath done for you" (1 Sam 12:24 KJV). Paul spoke of the truth of God being revealed not so much in the law as in Christ (Rom 15:8-9). In Christ, God's kingdom has become manifested (Rom 1:1-6; 16:25-26; 2 Cor 4:6). The truth and the gospel are related in the phrase "the truth of the gospel" (Gal 2:5, 14). One hears and believes the truth and is in Christ (Eph 1:13).

Followers of Christ are of "the truth" (John 18:37). This knowledge of truth is not simply "head knowledge." It is a matter of receiving Christ (John 1:11-13). This acceptance of Jesus and receiving of the truth is accompanied by walking in the truth or in the light (2 John 4; 3 John 3-4; 1 John 1:7). It is in light of this understanding of truth that John can speak of doing the truth (John 3:21; 1 John 1:6).

The message of salvation heard by the readers of Hebrews is dependent upon God and God's faithfulness and reliability. Interpretation that begins at some less superior level cannot arrive at God's truth. The writer's note that God added God's "testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit" is not an indication that humans achieved truth and then God affirmed it. God is involved from beginning to end, establishing and validating God's truth.

Neglect

The writer makes a strong case for the message of salvation heard by the readers. God is the source and guarantee of the message. Christ the Son who is superior to angels is the messenger. The unbroken tradition and the corroborative testing from the first declaration of salvation to the present confirms the message. It might seem that such a strong case was required because of some concentrated effort to deny the truthfulness of the message, but such is not the case. The readers are simply in danger of drifting away from the message and neglecting "so great a salvation."

Hebrews does not focus on doctrinal error (although efforts have been made to find doctrinal error behind the various exhortations and expositions in Hebrews); rather, the focus is on apathy, indifference, neglect, and inattention. This condition has plagued the church from the first century to the present. The campaign made by the author against this neglect and apathy are worthy of our serious attention today.

Apathy

Apathy, indifference or sloth, is one of the seven deadly sins identified by the early church (the others are pride, envy, gluttony, lust, anger, and greed). The condition of apathy (inattention, neglect, indifference, drifting) is different from the other sins. The other sins *are* deadly. They result from willful engagement in ethical error. But apathy is just as deadly, perhaps more deadly, because one simply does nothing, one drifts away.

How does a person guard against apathy? It is not simply a matter of ridding oneself of the other deadly sins. In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante considers these sins as offenses against love and groups them as (1) sins of perverted love: pride, envy, anger; (2) sins of excessive love of earthly goods: greed, gluttony, lust; and (3) sins of insufficient love: sloth.

Does the author of Hebrews agree with Dante that apathy or sloth is the consequence of insufficient love? The role of love in the history of salvation is a story that may be read between the lines of the exhortation of Hebrews. But it becomes explicit in 6:9-12 where the author speaks of the readers' lives as lives of love:

> . . . God is not unjust; he will not overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do. And we want each one of you to show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end, so that you may not become sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. (6:10-12)

In the final chapter, the author returns to the theme of love: "Let mutual love continue" (13:1). And the author is obviously not talking simply about a feeling: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers. . . . Remember those who are in prison. . . . Let marriage be held in honor by all. . . . Keep your lives free from the love of money. . ." (12:2-5).

The writer, however, emphasizes the need to think right. The exhortation against apathy, against drifting away from the faith, is based on an understanding of Jesus as God's speaking "by a Son." Getting clear theologically about Jesus Christ leads to steadfastness, hope, and love. And it leads to "keeping on" in the service of Christ.

THE HUMILIATION AND EXALTATION OF JESUS

Hebrews 2:5-18

The exposition in 2:5-18 returns to a comparison of the Son with angels, showing that the Jesus who was superior to the angels was made subject to the angels. This subjection and suffering was a part of the divine plan for salvation. ["The King Is at the Door"] God made the Son perfect through the sort of testing and suffering that humans experience. The original readers of the book of Hebrews knew the story of Jesus' suffering and death. They would have pondered how the incarnation of Jesus and his suffering and death are related to the claim in the opening verses that the Son is the heir of all things, the reflection of God's glory, and superior to the angels. The writer early on suggested a relationship. The thrust of the opening chapter was the exalted Jesus who is superior to the angels, but 1:3 does speak of

"The King Is at the Door"

In a sermon titled "The King Is at the Door," William A. Lawson illustrates the central message of Heb 2:5-18:

> He is a successful executive in a Dallas insurance firm. He lives in a beautifully-furnished home, drives an expensive car, and regularly wears expensively-tailored clothes. But his most precious souvenir is not ivory from Africa nor a tapestry from Singapore. It is a common mop. While he went to school, he worked nights as an orderly at a huge public hospital which served the poor. One Friday he swapped shifts with a day worker, and cursed himself for the inconvenience of the arrangement. Suddenly the hospital was in an uproar; all the surgeons and the administrators and nursing staff were rushing about in a frenzy. Someone yelled at him to bring his mop and bucket and all towels he could find to the emergency ward. A patient had been shot, and was bleeding profusely.
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> "So what else is new?" he asked a fellow worker. "There is always somebody shot and bleeding. Why all the excitement about it?" He remembers his fellow-worker grabbing his arm and yelling, "Come on in and quit asking dumb questions! This is not an ordinary shooting—this is the President of the United States!" So he joined the frenzy as an entire hospital staff worked to save the life of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas's Parkland Hospital. He mopped blood and medications and sweat for the dying president, and shared the despair of the hospital when the president died. That night he confiscated the mop from the supply room of the hospital, and speaks of it almost as if it were a sacred relic. He has met dignitaries from all over the world since then, but will never forget the Friday afternoon when the president came to the public hospital in Dallas, Texas, and he mopped his blood from the floor.
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> That story is the central message of this passage from the letter to Hebrew Christians. Mankind [*sic*] is living in frustration and defeat. And into his misery comes God himself, to identify with man's frailty and despair. But God does much more than identify with man's lowliness—through Jesus Christ he rescues battered mankind and elevates him to a place of high honor.

William A. Lawson, "The King Is at the Door," *The Way of Faith*, ed. James M. Pitts (Wake Forest NC: Chanticleer Publishing Company, 1985), 25-26.

Psalm 8

This psalm expresses astonishment that God has bestowed so much honor upon human beings. The description in Ps 8:4-6 follows God's intention for the human family given in Gen 1:26-28. Created in the image of God, they are to "have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth" (Gen 1:26). The writer of Hebrews is interested particularly in the lines quoted in vv. 6-7, which provided a clue to the interpretation of the psalm. The psalm speaks of all things being subjected under the feet of mortals. But the experience of humans is different: "As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them" (v. 8b). The writer of Hebrews sees then in the quotation from Ps 8 a prophecy that will eventually be fulfilled.

O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?

Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

the high-priestly act whereby Jesus made "purification for sins." Furthermore, the interpretation of Jesus' high-priestly act occupies much of Hebrews. The detailed argument relating humiliation and exaltation begins in chapter 2 with the citation of Psalm 8 (vv. 6-8a) and a christological interpretation (vv. 8b-9) that suggests the Son was made subject to the angels although the Son was in fact superior to the angels. The reason for this is that it was part of God's plan for salvation. The remainder of the chapter provides a detailed rationale for God's making the pioneer of salvation "perfect through suffering."

COMMENTARY

"Now God did not subject the coming world . . . to angels," 2:5

The assertion that it was not to angels that God subjected the coming world is a way of connecting the present exposition with the earlier comparison of the Son to the angels. But the language actually derives from the Old Testament passage (Ps 8:4-6) cited in vv. 6b-8a and interpreted in vv. 8b-9. [Psalm 8] The psalm speaks of a "subjection of all things" that the author of Hebrews indicates is not yet complete (2:8b). However, the angels are not the ones to whom the coming world is subject. The psalm has no place for angels in the future subjection. Readers could infer from what is said that angels are involved in the governance of the present world, although they will not be in the coming world. Jewish traditions support the idea (see Deut 32:8 and Dan 10:13, 20), but Hebrews does not develop any such notion. The "coming world" is the eschatological realm of salvation. It is referred to in Hebrews by different expressions: "the age to come" (6:5), "a kingdom that cannot be shaken" (12:28), and "the city that is to come"

(13:14). This "coming world" is a future reality when every relationship will reflect the reality of God's sovereignty through God's Son. But the community has already begun to experience this reality. The testimony of God referred to in 1:4 ("signs and wonders and various miracles and . . . gifts of the Holy Spirit") is evidence of this reality (see also 6:5).

The Subjection of the World to the Son, 2:6-9

This passage shows three things: (1) the ideal of humankind is kinship with God and mastery of the universe, (2) the actual state of humankind is frustration instead of mastery, failure and not glory. Humankind has become slave rather than king. But (3) the actual is changed into the ideal through Christ who can make humankind what humankind was meant to be. Jesus' suffering and his glory accomplish this.

Psalm 8:4-6 is cited to show that God originally entrusted governance of the created order to humanity ("human beings" = "Man" = "Adam") and that Jesus fulfilled the purpose for all humanity. In the interpretation, Jesus is identified as the one who accomplished the destiny of humankind. Psalm 8 refers to humankind ("man"). It speaks of the glory God gave to humankind. How do we get from humankind to Jesus? The identification of Jesus as the one accomplishing the destiny of humankind according to Psalm 8 is made easier for the author of Hebrews because the words translated "human beings" and "mortals" are actually "man" and "Son of Man" and the pronoun "them" is actually "him." The more literal translation of the RSV will show this: "What is man that thou art mindful of him, or the Son of Man, that thou carest for him? Thou didst make him for a little while lower than the angels, thou hast crowned him with glory and honor, putting everything into subjection under his feet." "Man" and "Son of Man" refer to humankind as the NRSV indicates with its use of "human beings" and "mortals." The phrase "What is man that thou art mindful of him?" and the phrase "or the Son of Man, that thou carest for him?" are parallel and mean the same thing.

The writer's interest in the psalm is not simply in the affirmation that humankind is destined for glory and honor with "all things" subjected "under their feet." The psalmist does say that "all things" are subjected under the feet of humankind, but the author of Hebrews declares, "As it is we do not yet see everything subjected to them." Then Jesus is contrasted with humanity. He is crowned with glory and honor (with all things subjected under his feet).

Christ on the Way to Calvary

Jacopo Tintoretto. 1518–1594. *Christ on the Way to Calvary.* 1566–1567. Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice, Italy.

This position of exaltation is a result of his humiliation, his being made for a little while "lower than the angels." For the psalmist, the position "lower than the angels" (Heb. "little lower than God") is equivalent to the position of "glory and honor." However, the author of Hebrews contrasts the two positions. Being "less than the angels" is the opposite of being crowned with honor and glory. From the position arrived at by v. 9 ("[W]e do see Jesus . . . now crowned with glory and honor"), the quotation from Psalm 8 may be reread or recalled with Jesus being the referent for "man" and "Son of Man." This glory and honor is the result of "the suffering of death."

The identification of Jesus with humanity implied in the use of the psalm is made explicit in v. 9b: ". . . so that by the grace of God

Crucifixion

Jacopo Tintoretto. 1518–1594. *Crucifixion,* detail of center section. 1565. Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice, Italy.

he might taste death for everyone." The suffering and death of Jesus will be emphasized in the following paragraphs, and the relationship of Jesus and his suffering and death to humankind and their need will also be made plain.

Made Perfect through Suffering, 2:10-18

An unexpected but important thought is expressed in the development of the theme of the Son's superiority to angels in 2:5-9: Christ is God's definitive Word ("crowned with glory and honor") *because* of his salvific death ("so that . . . he might taste death for everyone"). This is the heart of the understanding of Christ in Hebrews, and 2:10-18 further develops this theme. By suffering, Christ stood in the condition of those whom he came to save. Three scriptural quotations (v. 12, v. 13a, and v. 13b) confirm the claim that the children led to salvation are brothers and sisters

(Greek "brothers") of Christ. Then what it means for Christ to share their condition is clarified (vv. 14-18).

Verse 10 ties the divine world to the mundane world by acknowledging the glorification of humankind as part of the divine plan and then by declaring that human suffering is involved in the preparation ("perfection") of the pioneer of humankind's salvation.

AΩ Jesus as Pioneer

The book of Hebrews refers two times to Jesus as "pioneer" (*archēgos*):

> It was fitting that God, for whom and through all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. (2:10)

> Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. (12:1-2)

The word translated "pioneer" (*archēgos*) is used in classical Greek to refer to the "hero" of the city, the individual who founded the city, gave it his or her name, and became its guardian. Thus, Athena is the *archēgetis* of Athens. In the Septuagint, the *archēgos* is the military leader of the people or the "head" of the clan. The word is used figuratively to refer to a leader whose example in an action stirs others to follow. In 1 Macc 10:47 the superiority of the *archēgos* is disclosed by his speaking peaceable words. His actions make it possible for weaker parties to act in the same way (see word study in Gerhard Delling, *TDNT*, vol. 1, 478-89).

Acts 5:31 translates the word *archēgos* as "leader." "The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins"(5:30-31). In Acts 3:15 the word is translated "Author." Christ is the *archēgos* or the "Author of life, whom God raised from the dead." Christians bear the name of Christ and therefore may be certain that Christ regards their affairs as his own. He also gives them a share in his power and glory. By the resurrection of Christ, Christians have the pledge that they will share Christ's destiny.

The word " pioneer" is an appropriate way to translate *archēgos* and to describe our relationship to Christ. The same idea is expressed in different terms elsewhere in the New Testament. In places, the quality of Jesus as leader or pioneer is emphasized. In other places, the relationship of followers to Christ as pioneer is emphasized. In Rev 22:13 Christ declares," I am the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." Col 1:18 declares, "He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything." Rom 6:5 reads, "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." In John 14:2-4 Jesus says, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to a proper place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going."

The uniqueness of Christ in relation to his followers is stressed by the idea of a "pioneer." But the word "pioneer" implies followers. Without followers, the idea of pioneer is empty. Profound consequences follow from the fact that Jesus is our pioneer. First of all there is a consequence in terms of our faith as we trust him as a pioneer for us to follow on to the way to God. There is also a consequence in our relationship with others who are our brothers and sisters just as we are all brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. To follow the great pioneer on the way to eternal life joins us with others along the road, requiring us to share burdens, to encourage them and share our hope.

The meaning of the present experience of the readers of Hebrews is made clear by the author's describing it in terms of Jesus as pioneer. The role of Jesus and his uniqueness in the Christian story is made clear in a way to appeal to faithfulness on the part of readers. In a sense, the story of Jesus as pioneer epitomizes the message of Hebrews. It encourages readers by its estimation of Jesus Christ as pioneer and challenges readers to persevere in the Christian pilgrimage.

"It was fitting" is the way the author explains this: "It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings." Readers then and now may think it is *not* fitting to associate God with the world of suffering. The separation of the divine and human would have been "fitting" in Greek and Greco-Jewish theology. It is fitting, according to Hebrews, because of human needs and the act of salvation that meets human need.

The glory that God's sons and daughters have as their destiny is the glory that the Son has from all eternity (1:3) and the glory with which he was crowned at his exaltation (2:7-9). This glory is a heavenly and eschatological reality. The idea of glory contrasts sharply with suffering. The word "pioneer" also contrasts with suffering. The word translated "pioneer" has various senses in Greek: the founder of school, family, city, or nation; the source or author of good things; the leader or scout of an army (the same Greek word is translated "author" in Acts 3:15 and "leader" in Acts 5:31). For the work of pioneer—creating a path for his followers—Jesus is prepared through suffering. [Jesus as Pioneer] This preparation is spoken of in terms of "being made perfect." The verb "to make perfect" and the noun "perfection" in the Greek refer not to moral perfection but to perfection or completeness for the job at hand. The expression "to make perfect" is characteristic of the book of Hebrews (see 5:9; 7:19, 28; 9:9; 10:1, 14; 11:40; 12:23). The author did not see Jesus in need of moral perfection (see 4:15), but preparation was necessary for the task of performing his work of redemption. The term "to make perfect" is used in the Old Testament to speak of the act of preparing a priest for his office (Exod 29:9, 29, 33, 35; Lev 4:5; 8:33; 16:32; 21:10; Num 3:3). [Exodus 29:4-9: Preparation of Aaron and His Sons for the Priesthood] The perfection of Jesus involves suffering and death, conditions of Jesus' incarnation.

Exodus 29:4-9: Preparation of Aaron and His Sons for the Priesthood

The description of the preparation of Aaron and his sons for the priesthood prepares readers for understanding the description of Jesus' preparation in the book of Hebrews. The preparation (perfection) of Jesus involved his suffering and death (3:10).

> You shall bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance of the tent of meeting, and wash them with water. Then you shall take the vestments, and put on Aaron the tunic and the robe of the ephod, and the ephod, and the breast piece, and gird them with the decorated band of ephod; and you shall set the turban on his head, and put the holy diadem on the turban. You shall take the anointing oil, and pour it on his head and anoint him. Then you shall bring his sons, and put tunics on them, and you shall gird them with sashes and tie headdresses on them; and the priesthood shall be theirs by a perpetual ordinance. You shall then ordain Aaron and his sons.

Verse 11 introduces another way of conceiving of the task for which Jesus' incarnation is preparation—the perspective of sanctification. This perspective has been prepared for in the use of a term, "to make perfect," that was used in the Old

Testament to refer to preparation of priests. The word "sanctify" means "to make holy," "to consecrate," "to dedicate to God and his service." Jesus (the one sanctifying) and Jesus' brothers and sisters (the ones sanctified) are united under the fatherhood of God. This is emphasized in v. 11 and is followed in vv. 12-13 with quotations illustrating that Jesus identified himself with the people of God. The three quotations are introduced as coming from Jesus. For modern readers concerned with accurate attribution, the question arises as to whether the author might possibly envision the incarnate Jesus quoting the Old Testament passages during his ministry or whether the statements are seen as words of the preexisting and exalted Lord. For the author of Hebrews, the distinction was not important. Since God's speaking is of a piece, God's decisive Word in the Son is foreshadowed by and contained in essence in other speaking. Old Testament passages may be spoken of as words of God or words of the Son through whom the Father speaks.

Psalm 22

This psalm is a prayer for deliverance from mortal illness. Jesus' passion was understood and presented in light of this psalm. The entire psalm, including its assurance of a victorious outcome, would have been in the minds of readers as they read Heb 2:10-18.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken
me?
Why are you so far from helping me,
from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not
answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
To you they cried, and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not put to
shame. (vv. 1-5)

But you, O LORD, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!
Deliver my soul from the sword,
my life from the power of the dog!
Save me from the mouth of the lion!

From the horns of the wild oxen you have
rescued me.
I will tell of your name to my brothers and
sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will
praise you:
You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of
Israel!
For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him. (vv. 19-24)

Psalm 22:23 is the first of the three quotations attributed to Jesus. The psalm is a prayer for deliverance from mortal illness. It contains the words of Jesus spoken from the cross, quoted in Mark 15:34 (Matt 27:46): "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" A reading of the psalm will indicate that the story of Jesus' passion was understood and presented in light of this psalm. [Psalm 22] Although the first verses of the psalm give a vivid account of the speaker's misery, with v. 21 the mood changes as rescue arrives. The psalmist vows to offer a formal thanksgiving at the temple. The author of Hebrews was interested in demonstrating the solidarity between Jesus as the sanctifier and Jesus' brothers and sisters as the sanctified. The entire psalm would have been in the minds of the readers as they read 2:10-18. In that context, suffering is a primary theme. The psalm, therefore, presupposes the suffering of Christ but emphasizes deliverance and solidarity in the proclamation of God's name "in the midst of the

congregation." The word translated "congregation" (*ecclēsia*) is the word used for "church" in the New Testament. The church of the readers of Hebrews is where confession is made of Christ's passion. The text is read as a contemporary experience of the readers.

The second and third citations come from Isaiah 8:17-18. These verses in Isaiah speak of the prophet's waiting for the LORD who at this time is "hiding his face from the house of Jacob" and of the prophet's hope that his own children would be signs and portents in Israel. [Isaiah 8:16–9:2] The verses come just before the section in Isaiah celebrating the accession of the messianic king: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Isa 9:2a). Verse 13a ("I will put my trust in him") is an expression of faith and reliance upon God—a characteristic that ought to be found in all God's children. Verse 13b cites only a portion of Isaiah's hope for his own children, and in Hebrews the citation indicates that Christ's brothers and sisters are children of God because they have been "given" to Christ in that congregation of God's people. The themes of the verses are important for the development of the author's discussion. The theme of "children" in the third citation (Isa 8:18) prepares for v. 14, while the themes of "brothers and sisters" (Ps 22:22) and "trust" (Isa 8:17) prepare for v. 17.

Isaiah 8:16–9:2

The author of Hebrews cites only a portion of Isa 8:17-18 in order to speak of the faithful reliance upon God that is characteristic of God's children ("I will hope in him") and the fact that the children (members of that community of faith) have been given to Christ by God ("See, I and the children whom the LORD has given me.") The theme of faith or fidelity becomes increasingly important in Hebrews. Also, an understanding of the place of faith in the text of Isaiah will assist readers of the book of Hebrews. Isaiah is expressing his determination to await the fulfillment of the word of the LORD. This confidence is impressive in light of the disbelief and rejection on the part of his contemporaries and is marked by the prophet's estimation that the children given him are signs and portents of the fulfillment of the word of the Lord. The verses come just before the celebration of the coming of the messianic king: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Isa 9:2a).

> Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples. I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him. See, I and the children whom the LORD has given me are signs and portents in Israel from the LORD of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion. Now if people say to you, "Consult the ghosts and the familiar spirits that chirp and mutter; should not a people consult their gods, the dead on behalf of the living, for teaching and for instruction?" Surely, those who speak like this will have no dawn! They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry; when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will curse their king and their gods. They will turn their faces upward, or they will look to the earth, but will see only distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be thrust into thick darkness.
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> But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.
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> The people who walked in darkness
> Have seen a great light;
> those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
> on them light has shined.

Verses 14-15 form a periodic sentence (translated as one sentence in the NRSV) affirming the incarnation and stating the purpose of the incarnation. The children and the Son *share* flesh and blood. But there is a difference in the Greek tenses. The children "share" (the tense indicates an abiding condition); the Son "shared" (the tense indicates a completed act in the past). The expression "flesh and blood" is a common description of the human condition. The Greek text actually reverses the terms, reading "blood and flesh," and may stress the suffering associated with humankind. Both terms suggest the weakness and frailty of the human condition.

The purpose for which the Son entered human life is stated in a dramatic fashion in vv. 14b-15—"so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death." The depiction of Jesus as the hero who crushed the tyrant to rescue the enslaved would have caused the original readers to think of heroes such as Hercules. [Christ and Hercules] A rich store of popular notions existed about this hero. The oldest available tradition associated him with the conquest of death; in Euripides' dramatization of the event, death is personified as a warrior armed with a sword. Later the theme was amplified into accounts of the "Herculean" labors. The Old Testament contains traditions about God as the champion of Israel that are perhaps more to the point and help us appreciate the depiction in Hebrews of the work of

Christ and Hercules

The adventures of Hercules are the high point of mythological storytelling. More stories were told about Hercules than any other hero. The basic story of Hercules is that of a man whose deeds were so mighty that when he died he was brought up to Mount Olympus to live with the gods.

By the middle of the 2d century AD, Justin Martyr had noted parallels between Hercules and Christ and was threatened by them. He argued that the similarities resulted from imitation: "And when they tell that Herakles was strong and traveled over all the world, and was begotten by Zeus of Alcmene, and ascended to heaven when he died, do I not understand that the Scripture which speaks of Christ, 'strong like a giant to run his race,' has been in like manner imitated" (*Dialogue* 69.3).

The fact that the basic features of the story of Hercules were fixed before the first century AD makes it impossible that Hercules was an imitation of Christ. But is it possible that aspects of the story of Hercules influenced the telling of the life of Jesus. David E. Aune suggests that several christological traditions in Hebrews exhibit ideas associated with stories of Hercules: "[T]he similarities between Heracles' imagery and the Christology of Hebrews . . . suggest that many of the important and vital functions attributed to Heracles as the Hellenistic savior figure were understood by some early Christians as applicable to Jesus to an even greater extent than they were to Heracles."

David E. Aune, "Heracles and Christ: Heracles Imagery in the Christology of early Christianity," in *Greeks, Romans, and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe,* ed. David L. Balch, Everett Ferguson, and Wayne A. Meeks (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 13-19.

Christ. Isaiah 42:13 announces God's intervention on behalf of Israel: "The LORD goes forth like a soldier, like a warrior he stirs up his fury; he cries out, he shouts aloud, he shows himself mighty against his foes" (Isa 42:13; see also Isa 49:24-26 and 59:15b-20). [God as the Champion of Israel] The Gospel of Luke contains the saying of Jesus that interprets Jesus' ministry of exorcism as an engagement with Satan: "When a strong man, fully armed, guards his castle, his property is safe. But when one stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his plunder" (11:22). In the Lukan context, the strong man is Beelzebul, while the stronger one who overpowers Beelzebul is Jesus. Jesus defeats his adversary by the "finger of God," thus releasing those who have been enslaved through demon possession. The readers will see themselves in this text of Hebrews. They are ones "held in slavery by the fear of death." Hebrews, however, reminds the readers of their liberated status.

Verse 16 is tied to the opening verse of this section (v. 5) by reference to angels. God did not subject the coming world to angels, nor did the Son come to help angels. The object of Christ's act in v. 16 is "the descendants of Abraham." Clearly this describes the "many children" of v. 10 and the "brothers and sisters" of 12:14. The "descendants of Abraham," then, are heirs of the promise, and this heritage is unrelated to physical descent or fleshly externals (see 8:6 and 9:10).

Verse 17 summarizes the ways that the suffering of Christ is "fitting." In essence, he "had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect" (that is, he had to be made perfect, fit for the task) so that "he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people." The incarnation and suffering fit Christ for a high priesthood characterized by mercy

God as the Champion of Israel

Old Testament passages offer a model for the depiction of Jesus as the champion who delivered God's people from the evil tyrant.

Isaiah 49:24-26

Can the prey be taken from the mighty,
or the captives of a tyrant be rescued?
But thus says the LORD:
Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken,
and the prey of the tyrant be rescued;
for I will contend with those who contend with you,
and I will save your children.
I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh,
and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine.
Then all flesh shall know
that I am the LORD your Savior,
and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.

Isaiah 59:15b-20

The LORD saw it, and it displeased him
that there was no justice.
He saw that there was no one,
and was appalled that there was no one to intervene;
so his own arm brought him victory,
and his righteousness upheld him.
He put on righteousness like a breastplate,
and a helmet of salvation on his head;
he put on garments of vengeance for clothing,
and wrapped himself in fury as in a mantle.
According to their deeds, so will he repay;
wrath to his adversaries, requital to his enemies;
to the coastlands he will render requital.
So those in the west shall fear the name of the LORD,
and those in the east, his glory;
for he will come like a pent-up stream
that the wind of the LORD drives on.

And he will come to Zion as Redeemer,
to those in Jacob who turn from transgression, says the LORD.

and faithfulness. Although the prologue (1:3) had alluded to Christ's high-priestly act of purification from sin, the title "high priest" is introduced here for the first time. This theme will be dominant in the rest of the christological expositions in Hebrews. Also, the characteristics of mercy and faithfulness will be developed.

The pastoral concern of Hebrews is highlighted in v. 18: "Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested." The ones being tested—the readers—are helped by one who was himself tested. This testing brought Christ to the position of honor and glory from which true help comes. The perfection of Christ, the preparation of Christ for giving aid, involves exaltation to the right hand of the Majesty on high, but it also involves experiences whereby Christ becomes identified with his brothers and sisters.

CONNECTIONS

The Practice of Doctrine

The book of Hebrews may be read (incorrectly) simply as a theological exposition, a systematic treatment of the person and work of Jesus Christ. When this is attempted, problems arise. For one thing, other New Testament perspectives on Christ and his work of salvation are not treated (see below). For another, the intention of the book of Hebrews in its original situation is overlooked. What is presented concerning Christ in Hebrews is in fact presented in order to meet pastoral needs. Hebrews should be read in light of those needs. In 2:5-18, Christ is presented as a pioneer who shows the way and creates a path for his brothers and sisters. He is also a champion who defeats the devil and frees those who are in slavery because of their fear of death. Christ is high priest who offers sacrifice for sins. He is an advocate before God who intercedes for those being tested. Christ is presented in terms of the functions he performs in meeting the needs of readers. The author does not simply present an objective portrait of Christ but a portrait of "Christ for us."

The insight that the doctrine of Christ is presented in terms of function and in terms of the practice of doctrine is important in modern reading and study of Hebrews. Perhaps a beginning point in understanding the meaning of the practice of doctrine might be

to ask what it means to affirm that God created the universe. To affirm God's creation is not simply to assert intellectually a proposition about reality. It is to live in the world created by God, to share a world with the creator. It is to engage with the creator and creation with reverence, gratitude, and humility. The author of Hebrews has made it easy for his readers to see what it means in practice to confess Jesus Christ. The titles and functions are vitally related. What does it mean to affirm that Christ is pioneer if not to follow the path he has made? To affirm that Christ is champion who defeats the devil is to live a life of freedom from enslavement. To affirm that Christ is high priest and our advocate before God is to depend upon God for our spiritual security. Our specific needs are not exactly the same as those of the first readers of Hebrews, but the challenge to practice our convictions about Jesus Christ is the same. [Our Response to the Savior]

Our Response to the Savior

William Lawson asks, "What shall be our response to such a Savior," a Savior "who cannot be satisfied in his glory while we struggle against our punishment, and who ultimately absorbs our hurt himself by suffering in our stead?" Lawson responds:

> What he does we are to emulate. If he is the light of the world, he expects us to be the light of the world. He performs mighty works before us, and challenges us to do great works, because he returns to the Father. He stoops to wash the feet of the disciples, reminds them that he is their Lord and Master, and then challenges them to wash one another's feet as he has done for them. He is the Good Shepherd; and tells us that if we love him we must demonstrate it by feeding his sheep. Eloquent sermons and masterful recitations about the love of God do not scratch the surface of what our high priest expects of us. He wants us to display our newly-redeemed nature by caring for the universe as he had once assigned us to do.
>
> If there is hunger, we must provide food. If there is sickness, we must bring healing. Where man [*sic*] is in despair, we must speak the word of hope. Wherever injustice oppresses the weak or aggrandizes the powerful, we must be the voice of the weak and the goad in the side of the merciless. The thrust of these fourteen verses is that God gave us a high and noble purpose, and through the suffering of his only begotten son he has provided reconciliation to himself, and a return to that high and noble purpose for which we were born. All the cathedrals in the world, and millions flocking to them to thunder anthems of praise to the God of hosts will not please him as much as a cup of cold water given by a child of God who knows the misery of thirst.

William A. Lawson, "The King Is at the Door," in *The Way of Faith*, ed. James M. Pitts (Wake Forest NC: Chanticleer Publishing Company, 1985), 32-33.

Christology and Christologies

Christology is a primary focus of the book of Hebrews. Christology deals with the question of who Christ is in relation to God. Hebrews is interested in this question because its answer affects the question of who Jesus Christ is for us. Hebrews presents a Christology that is similar in certain respects to the Christologies of other New Testament writings. However, the book's Christology is unique in certain respects. The Christologies of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) are framed on a horizontal line running from birth, life, and work to death and resurrection. The Gospel of John follows this pattern and adds a preexistence phase. Paul has a preexistence phase but condenses Jesus' existence

Early Christian Christological Views

The word "Christ" is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word "Messiah" or "Anointed." The application of this title to Jesus of Nazareth indicates that Jesus is understood in terms of the Jewish hope of a new age. Other titles were used to speak of this hope: Son of God, Son of Man, prophet, wisdom. By the time of Ignatius the categories were superseded or interpreted in terms of Jesus Christ. Ignatius speaks of Jesus as "our God, Jesus (the) Christ." Ignatius shows that Christology was already developing in the pattern to be seen in the ecumenical councils (see Eph 7:2).

We do not have direct evidence that tells us what Jesus thought about himself. The Gospels are direct witness to what the church thought about Jesus in the last part of the first century. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are acknowledged by scholars to come closer than the Gospel of John in presenting the historical Jesus. These Gospels represent Jesus himself as claiming a special relationship with God.

The Gospel writers also give their estimation of the significance of Jesus. Mark presents Jesus as Christ, the Son of God (1:1, 11). The mighty works of Jesus witness to his messiahship, but Mark's Christology of the cross (emphasized in the last half of the Gospel) guards against an overemphasis on the mighty works. According to Mark, "Son of Man" is Jesus' favorite self-designation. Whatever the title meant to Jesus, for Mark Son of Man is a glorious redeemer figure who ushers in God's final salvation. Jesus is the suffering Son of Man. Matthew's christological themes are Son of David and Messiah but also Son of God. Jesus is the one in whom the promises and hopes of Judaism have their fulfillment. Luke's two-volume work shows Jesus as the center of history and the climax of God's purpose in Israel. John has the most developed Christology in the New Testament. In the beginning of the first chapter, Jesus is shown to be the Word become flesh, and in the conclusion of the first chapter the titles "Lamb of God," "Messiah," "Son of God," "King of Israel," and "Son of Man" are used repeatedly. Within the Gospel, Jesus is conscious of having preexisted and having descended from heaven.

In Paul, the most prominent designation for Jesus is "Lord." Christ is worthy of human worship because of his resurrection and exaltation. Adam is used in Paul to explain the significance of Jesus. Jesus is the new Adam. This is related to Paul's view of Jesus as Lord since it is only as risen Lord that Christ fulfills God's original intention in the creation of the first human. Paul also uses wisdom terminology to help explain the significance of Jesus. Wisdom was an important way that Judaism spoke of God in God's creation, revelation, and redemption. As wisdom, Christ is the definitive self-expression of God.

In Colossians and Ephesians, Christ is seen as a revelation of God's mysterious purpose. In 1 Peter, the main christological concern is suffering. In the book of Revelation, the relation between God and the exalted Christ is a striking feature. The lamb whose blood enables his followers to conquer and to execute divine wrath is said to be "in the middle of the throne" (5:6; 7:17). Elsewhere it is God who is described as "he who is seated on the throne" (4:9-10). In the view of the author of Revelation, Christ is not simply exalted alongside God as a second divine power in heaven. Christ has somehow been merged with God.

The Wisdom/Word Christology of Paul and John provided the major path for developments in post-New Testament Christology. Christianity did not abandon monotheism in these developments, but the relationship between God, the exalted Christ, and the Spirit of Christ allowed the church to redefine monotheism in a trinitarian

on earth into crucifixion and resurrection. Hebrews has a preexistence phase but focuses on the suffering, death, and exaltation of Jesus. Of all New Testament writings, Hebrews emphasizes most clearly Christ's postexistence in exaltation to God's right hand.

The form that the Christology of Hebrews takes is different from other forms. The Synoptic Gospels tell stories and give sayings of Jesus Christ. Some of the stories are "Jesus stories" (the miracle stories, for example) designed to awaken faith in Jesus. Other stories are "Christ stories" (the infancy narratives, baptism, temptation, and so on) stamped by faith from the beginning and expressing this faith in impressive fashion. The sayings of Jesus are parables and short pithy sayings fitting in with the "Jesus stories." In John, the discourses of Jesus are more akin to the "Christ stories"

fashion. Later christological thought developed against the background of those who either shrank from or overemphasized interpretation of Christ as divine. Some Jewish Christians (the Ebionites) clung to the idea that Jesus was a teacher and prophet understood as other teachers and prophets. Other Christians (the Docetists) emphasized so much the idea that Jesus was a manifestation of the divine that they felt his humanity was a disguise, a mere appearance.

The first council (Nicaea) was forced to deal with the question of the person of Christ because of the view of Arius (a presbyter under Alexander the bishop of Alexandria) that the Logos was called into being by God as the means through which God made all things. Christ was divine but he was not God. This view could be called the view of subordinationism. To answer this, the council declared that Christ was "begotten, not made." He was "of the same essence as the Father." But Athanasius (the successor of Alexander whose opinion won the day at Nicaea) confirmed that it was the Son—not the Father nor the Spirit—that became incarnate as Jesus Christ. So Nicaea made necessary a clearer statement of the doctrine of the Trinity before a fuller statement on the doctrine of the person of Christ could be made. The full statement of the doctrine of the Trinity came at the Council of Constantinople in 381. The three persons of the trinity were defined as distinct from one another, but they were equal in their eternity and power.

Following the Council of Constantinople, two different ways of talking about Christ developed—defined by the sections of the church that espoused them. Alexandria stressed the divine character of Christ so much that its enemies accused it of absorbing the humanity of Christ in his divinity. Antioch, on the other hand, emphasized the true humanity of Christ so much that its enemies accused it of splitting Christ into two people.

The conflict between Alexandria and Antioch manifested itself in the refusal of Nestorius (bishop of Constantinople) to use the title "Mother of God" or "God-Bearer" for the Virgin Mary. Mary was "Christ-Bearer," not "God-Bearer." At the Council of Ephesus, Nestorius was condemned and the use of the title "Mother of God" or "God-Bearer" was upheld. But it was the Council of Chalcedon that devised a formula that expressed valid emphases of both Alexandria and Antioch.

The abstract questions dealt with in the movement to Chalcedon are almost unintelligible to modern minds. But a basic issue of Christian faith was involved. How can Christ be said to partake of divinity and humanity, to be one with God and one with his brothers? Some may hold that the whole attempt to define Christ in terms of substance, essence, nature, and the like leads nowhere. Stuart George Hall acknowledges, "A serious difficulty for many modern Christians with the way the Church Fathers thought and taught is their apparent concern with metaphysical matters about the Incarnation, with little reference to the historical Jesus or the primitive gospel as we understand it." In following Jesus Christ as Lord, however, modern Christians may be given guidelines in decisions of the ancient councils that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully Man, that these distinct natures are fully united in one person. Prayer and preaching are influenced by christological considerations even if we choose to use modern terminology and argumentation.

Stuart George Hall, "Nicea," *Jesus in History, Thought, and Culture: An Encyclopedia,* vol. 2 (Santa Barbara CA; Denver; Oxford: ABC CLIO, 2003), 655. See Edgar V. McKnight, *Jesus Christ in History and Scripture: A Poetic and Sectarian Perspective* (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1999).

of the Synoptic Gospels. They are lengthy theological discourses presupposing the revelation of God in Christ, the Word become flesh. The deeds of Jesus in John are "signs" of Jesus' relationship with God. With Paul, theological argumentation is used to express christological thought. Paul was reacting to different situations in the lives of the congregations he founded.

Hebrews is clear that Jesus Christ was one of us (2:11). He was tempted as we are (4:15), obedient to God (5:7-8), and subject to death (2:14). But this human figure is set within a larger framework of redemption. He was chosen from among the people (5:1), for example, so as to sympathize with their weaknesses (4:15). Hebrews tells us who this Jesus really is when it speaks of the high priesthood of Jesus, a high priest who continues to make intercession for believers (4:14–5:10). At the end of the ages, this Christ will return to "save those who are eagerly waiting for him" (9:28). The achievements of Jesus Christ were achievements not only of one who was of the people but also of God. So Jesus is God's Son in preexistence, heir of all things, agent of creation, the image of God's glory.

The Christologies of the New Testament must be read in light of their different forms and functions. One Christology need not be reduced to another. The preaching and teaching of Hebrews should honor the form and function of the entire book of Hebrews. The form and function of the other New Testament books may help us appreciate more fully the form and function of Hebrews, but listeners and hearers should not be confused by an attempt to amalgamate into Hebrews everything said about Jesus Christ. [Early Christian Christological Views]

CHRIST'S FAITHFULNESS OVER GOD'S HOUSE AS SON COMPARED WITH MOSES' FAITHFULNESS AS SERVANT

Hebrews 3:1-6

Hebrews 3:1-6 is the first subsection in the second major section of Hebrews—"Participation in the House of God and in the Rest along the Way," 3:1–4:16. This first subsection must be understood in its larger literary context. The larger unit is a challenge to readers to participate in the house of God and in the rest along the way. It is a challenge to the readers to be what they are—the house of God—and to enter into the Sabbath rest designed for the people of God. Pastoral exhortation was the intention of the author. This exhortation and challenge is correlated with and supported by a statement about Jesus Christ. Christological exposition instead of pastoral exhortation can be the primary focus of attention in reading and the basis of organization. When Christology is the primary focus, the notice in the conclusion of the last section that Jesus was a "*merciful* and *faithful* high priest in the service of God" (2:17) will guide the organization of the material to follow, with 3:1–4:14 emphasizing Jesus' faithfulness and 4:15–5:10 emphasizing his compassion. The reading of this commentary, however, posits the stress in Hebrews on the need for faithfulness on the part of the readers as the primary focus. The Old Testament figures of Moses and Joshua are used as models for understanding present-day faithfulness.

Hebrews 3:1–4:16, then, is divided in this commentary into the following subsections: (1) a discussion of the house of God, an ostensible comparison of Moses and Christ that challenges readers to be the house of God by maintaining a hope that engenders confidence and pride (3:1-6); (2) a quotation of Psalm 95:7b-11 (3:7-11); (3) a short sermon (homiletic midrash) on the biblical text (3:12-19); (4) a conclusion of the exhortation-exposition begun in 3:7 (4:1-11); (5) a rhetorical assertion of the vitality of the word of God (4:12-13); and (6) an appeal to readers to hold fast to their confession and draw near to the throne of grace to find help in time of need (4:14-16). The basis for this appeal is the "great high priest who has passed through

the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God" (4:14). This appeal ties the present section to the previous section (1:5–2:18), which had emphasized the preparation for Christ's high priesthood, and to the following section (4:14–7:28), which develops further the nature of the Son's high priesthood. The use of the final verses of chapter 4 (vv. 14-16) as a concluding exhortation to readers and an introductory statement for further christological exposition is an example of the flexible composition of Hebrews. Hebrews resembles a musical composition with its variety of motifs and alternate structures.

The section 3:1-6 challenges readers to be the house of God. It takes the form of a comparison between the Son and Moses. First, it contrasts the maker of a house with the house itself (vv. 2-3). Then it contrasts Christ as the Son over his house with Moses as servant in God's house (vv. 5-6). To encourage readers to faithfulness, the writer to the Hebrews began his composition in 1:1 by declaring that the full and supreme revelation of God comes through Jesus Christ. Through Jesus Christ, human beings have real access to God. The writer compared Jesus with realities that are acknowledged as great. Jesus is superior to these realities. He is superior to the prophets. He is superior to angels. Could it be that Jesus is superior even to Moses? In the thought of the Jews, Moses held an absolutely unique position. He was the recipient of the very law of God. The Jews asserted the uniqueness of Moses by the declaration that Moses "was faithful in all God's house." God made God's self known to Moses not in a vision (as with the prophets) but "face to face" (Num 12:8). But wonder of wonders, one greater than Moses has appeared! [Views of Moses]

COMMENTARY

Readers as Partners and Jesus as Apostle, 3:1

The first verse of this new section begins where the last section ended, with Jesus as the faithful high priest. But two new elements are seen. First, the readers are addressed directly for the first time, with the title "brothers and sisters" (literally "brothers," *adelphoi*) and "holy partners in a heavenly calling." "Brothers and sisters" was seen earlier as the title Jesus used for those whom he sanctified (2:11) and with whom he shared a likeness (2:17). Now the readers

Views of Moses

Moses is well known as the leader of the Hebrews in the exodus from Egypt and the giver of the Law at Sinai. Primary traditions about Moses are contained in the biblical books from Exodus to Deuteronomy. In these traditions, Moses was the leader in the wilderness, the time of Israel's beginning. Whatever was fundamental to Israel's society arose in this period. And it arose through Moses the leader and prophet.

In terms of religion, Moses was founder of the form of worship of Yahweh alone, and ultimately of the form of monotheism. In the call narrative of Exodus 3, Moses is given an answer to his question about the name of God:

> God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations." (Exod 3:14-15)

John Van Seters speaks of the development of the Moses tradition in the centuries that followed the Hebrew Scriptures, and he indicates the difficulty of doing justice to the different sources and varying traditions. But Van Seters finds four common features in the post-biblical sources: (1) The law of Moses or the Torah comes to be understood not just as laws within the Pentateuch but as the whole of the Pentateuch. This results in the view that God revealed past history and future events to Moses in addition to law. (2) The story of Moses, especially the story concerning his birth and youth, was greatly expanded. (3) Although the nature of the revelation Moses received as a prophet was not always the same, Moses is consistently viewed as the greatest prophet of Israel. (4) Moses is the intercessor and defender who is responsible for mitigating God's punishment for the sins of the people. Special developments are seen in (1) the presentation of Moses in Hellenistic Judaism; (2) Moses in the apocalyptic tradition; and (3) rabbinic views of Moses.

In the Hellenistic period, Judaism was presented in a bad light by a number of pagan writers. In reaction to this, Jewish writers portrayed Judaism in general and Moses in particular in a positive light. Moses was presented as a great culture hero, inventor of the arts of civilization. These arts included writing, philosophy, and statesmanship as well as religion.

In two apocalyptic works, Moses is shown to have received special and secret knowledge of both past and future as well as the unseen worlds of heaven and hell (*Jubilees* 1.26, *Assumption of Moses* 1.16-18). The concern with Moses as intercessor in these works extends beyond the wilderness period. Since the death of Moses is understood as an assumption into heaven, the role of Moses as defender of Israel continues throughout the history of Israel up to the last judgment (*Jubilees* 1:18-21, *Assumption of Moses* 11.17).

The rabbinic tradition contains legal and homiletic materials (halakhah and aggadah) and emphasizes Moses as a great teacher by whom Israel was instructed in the Torah and aspects of the Moses tradition that were part of Jewish piety. In these traditions, care is taken to avoid ascription of divine or semidivine powers to Moses. Moses is a man with human faults and failings. Yet Moses is the greatest of all the Jewish teachers. Moses is the man with whom God speaks "face to face." He is the intermediary between God and humankind, the master of the prophets, and the recipient of God's law for humankind.

In the homiletic tradition, the biography of Moses as the "man of God" was embellished. But more central was Moses' role as the servant of God. The role of servant emphasized Moses' function as intercessor. He was one who suffered and died on behalf of the people. As a consequence of his death in the wilderness, Moses came to be identified with the sinful generation of the wilderness. The death of Moses thus insured the salvation of the wilderness generation in the resurrection.

The letter to the Hebrews draws parallels between Jesus and Moses in order to demonstrate the superiority of Jesus. Moses as servant is inferior to Jesus, who is the Son of God. Moses instituted an earthly sanctuary where Levitical priests ministered according to law. This is only a shadow of the heavenly where Jesus is the eternal high priest interceding for the faithful. In the same way Moses is the author of the old covenant, but this was only a foreshadowing of the new covenant through Jesus (Heb 8:1–10:18).

John Van Seters, "Moses," *The Encyclopedia of Religion,* vol. 10 (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), 119.

Ephesians 1:3-14; 4:1-5: God's Calling According to Ephesians

Ephesians used the idea of "calling" or special selection by God. Hebrews treats the idea of a "heavenly calling" in a way reminiscent of Ephesians.

> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory. . . .
>
> I therefore, the prisoner in Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

are elevated; they are "holy partners," made holy (sanctified) by Christ the sanctifier, and they are participants in a "heavenly calling." Early Christianity regularly used the idea of calling or special selection by God (see Matt 22:14; Rom 1:7; 8:28, 30; Eph 4:4; Col 3:15; 1 Pet 1:15). [Ephesians 1:3-14; 4:1-5: God's Call According to Ephesians] This calling is like Israel's calling or election. Emphasis here is upon its being a "heavenly" calling. This calling not only has a divine source, but it also has a divine goal.

The second new element in v. 1 is the designation of Jesus as apostle. The word "apostle" is a transliteration of a Greek word (*apostolos*) meaning "one sent off." It identifies one who is able to speak with the authority of the one sending. In Jewish life, the term was used to describe the representative of the supreme court of the Jews. The court sent out apostles who spoke with the authority of the court. The word "ambassador" may be used to translate the term "apostle." An ambassador is invested with the authority of the country and king sending the ambassador. [The Power of the Apostle] In this case, it is God who sends Jesus. The function of Jesus as one authorized and sent by God had been stated earlier in 1:2: "[I]n these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds." The author saw the function of apostle and the function of high priest as related. This is made clear as the terms "apostle" and "high

The Power of the Apostle

William Barclay has retold a story that was reported by several ancient historians, including Polybius, Diodorus, and Livy, which illustrates the fact that an ambassador or apostle is clothed with all the power and authority of the one sending the ambassador.

> On one occasion the king of Syria, Antiochus Epiphanes, invaded Egypt. Rome desired to stop him. Rome sent an envoy called Popillius to tell Antiochus to abandon his projected invasion. Popillius caught up with him on the borders of Egypt. Antiochus and Popillius talked of this and that for they had known each other in Rome. Popillius had not the vestige of an army with him, not even a guard, no force at all. Finally Antiochus asked him why he had come. Quietly Popillius told him that he had come to tell him that Rome wished him to abandon the invasion and go home. "I will consider it," said Antiochus. Popillius smiled a little grimly; he took his staff and drew a circle in the earth round Antiochus. "Consider it," he said, "and come to your decision before you leave that circle." Antiochus thought for a few seconds and then he said: "Very well, then. I will go home." Popillius himself had not the slightest force available—but behind him was all the power of Rome. The ambassador was clothed with the authority of the empire from which he came. So Jesus came from God, clothed with all the power of God. All God's grace and mercy and love and power were in His ambassador, His *apostolos*, Jesus Christ.

William Barclay, *The Letter to the Hebrews,* Daily Study Bible (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1955) 24.

priest" are joined through the use of one article—"the apostle and high priest." They are not treated grammatically as distinct entities, nor should they be seen as distinct functions. God's revelation in Jesus Christ involves the word and the priestly office—not the word alone or the priestly office alone, but both in relation to each other.

The writer referred to Jesus as the apostle and the high priest "of our confession." Reference is made here to a confession of the readers. A specific confessional formula speaking of Jesus may have been in the mind of the writer, or he may simply be referring to the Christian faith presented in 1:1–2:18 that understands Jesus as the one through whom God spoke the word of salvation and the one who made sacrifice for the sins of the people. The earliest Christian confession is "Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil 2:11), but confessions of Jesus Christ as "apostle" and "high priest" are also possible. If such a confession existed, Hebrews could be seen as amplifying the confessional title of "high priest" in order to ground the exhortation to faithfulness. [Early Christian Confessions]

Moses and Faithfulness, 3:2-6

Moses and faithfulness are introduced in v. 2 in a way that leads to a challenge to faithfulness on the part of the readers. Moses may have been in mind as the prototype of apostleship in 3:1. The

Early Christian Confessions

The earliest Christians meditated on the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. They attempted to express their faith in Jesus in word, witness, and teaching. In the process they developed confessions, formulaic statements of Christian conviction. These confessions ranged from single-statement affirmations to hymns and prose confessions. (Richard N. Longenecker has delineated the different sorts of confessions in the New Testament as New Testament scholars have studied them. See his *New Wine into Fresh Wineskins: Contextualizing the Early Christian Confessions* [Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999]).

Single-statement confessions that ascribe to Jesus the titles "Christ," "Son of God," or "Lord" are found throughout the New Testament, including notably Mark 8:29b, Matt 16:16, Luke 9:20, John 7:41, and John 11:27. Early Christians evidently cast some confessions into poetic form and sang them as hymns. 1 Cor 14:26 refers to the singing of hymns in worship. And exhortations of Col 3:16-17 and Eph 5:19-20 speak of the use of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in the church's devotions. These early hymns praised God and extolled Jesus Christ.

Scholars have found early formulaic but nonpoetic confessional materials in the New Testament. They distinguish these materials from the hymns listed above. In these prose confessions, affirmations are found concerning the work or person of Jesus Christ. Also, the noun "confession" is used to indicate the content of the material, with the verb "confess" and the word "that" used to introduce quotations—either direct or indirect. Verbs for "preaching," "teaching," or "witnessing" introduce the confessional material. Two passages are noted as important prose confessions: 1 Cor 15:3-5 and Col 1:15-20. (See also Rom 1:3-4; 3:24-26; 4:25; 1 Cor 1:17-18, 23; 2:2; 2 Cor 5:19; Gal 3:13, 26-28; 4:4-5; 1 Thess 4:14; Heb 1:3; 5:7-9.)

The earliest Christians confessions had a quasi-creedal character, but they were used for a variety of purposes—not just to affirm the basis for membership (especially new members at baptism). The Apostles' Creed is a step beyond the earliest confessions. Despite its name, the Apostles' Creed does not go back to the period of the apostles. It can be traced back to the Old Roman Creed known in the Church of Rome at the end of the second century. The creed was apparently used as a summary of Christian doctrine for baptismal candidates in the churches of Rome. The Apostles' Creed falls into three sections, following a trinitarian pattern. The middle section contains a statement about Jesus Christ and is the longest of the three sections.

Three other early creeds are important: two creeds given the title "Nicene Creed" and the Athanasian Creed. The Nicene Creed properly so called was issued in 325 as a consequence of the First Council of Nicaea. It arose amid christological controversy and was the first to be promulgated by an ecumenical council. In common usage, the "Nicene Creed" is the creed recited in worship in churches today. It is not the same as that creed promulgated at Nicaea. (It is called the "Nicene Creed" in the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England.) This Nicene Creed is linked traditionally with the Council of Constantinople. Modern scholars call it the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.

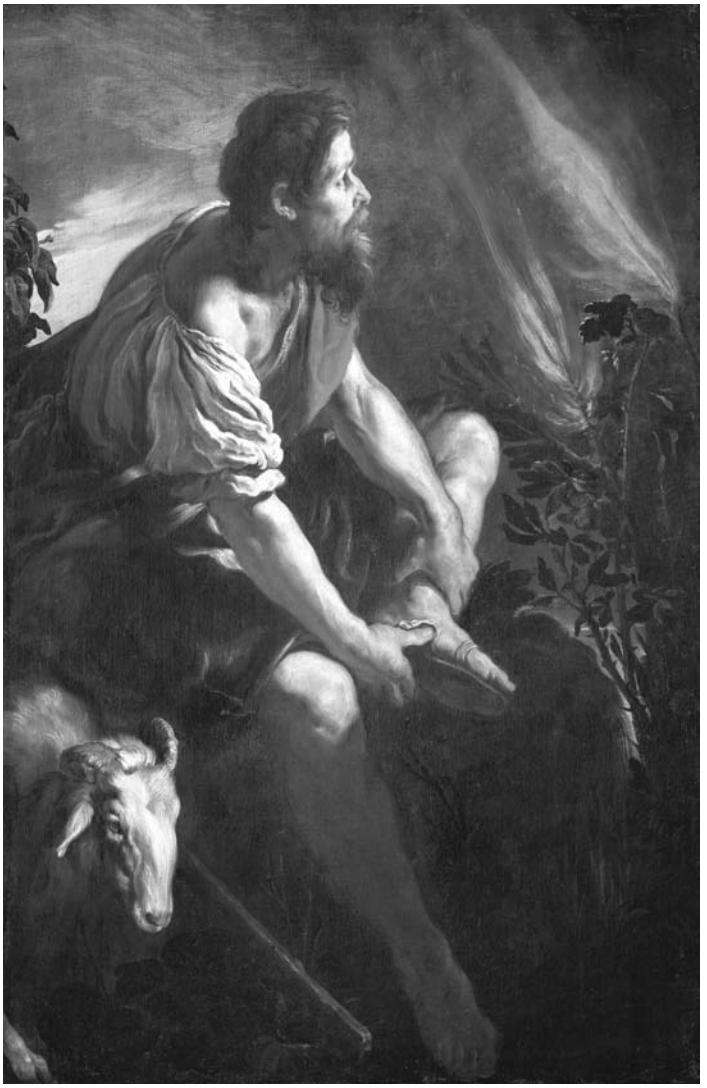
The Athanasian Creed is a creed widely used in the Western churches (it is not recognized in the East). It is also known as the "Quicunque Vult" from its opening words. It differs from the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed in form and in the inclusion of anathemas. It is divided into two halves, which speak respectively of the doctrines of the trinity and of the incarnation. It begins and concludes with the assertion that belief in the truth it contains is necessary for salvation. The authorship and dating of the creed are disputed. The attribution to Athanasius is generally abandoned and the date most generally accepted is between 381 and 428.

Greek translation of Exodus 3:10 speaks of Moses being sent (*apostellō*) by God to Pharaoh, king of Egypt. Like Jesus, Moses was called, appointed, and sent by God. [Exodus 3:1-10 (LXX): Moses' Call] Moses, according to Exodus 2:1, was a Levite, and later Jewish sources dwell on Moses' priestly connection, calling attention to the fact that Moses was especially favored by God since he alone was called into God's presence (see Num 12:8; Exod 33:11; Deut 34:10). Moses, then, is not treated lightly. The high regard in

Exodus 3:1-10 (LXX): Moses' Call

Like Jesus, Moses was called, appointed, and sent by God.

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."



Fetti, Domenico. 1589-1624. *Moses and the Burning Bush*. Oil on canvas. Kunsthistorisches Museum. Vienna, Austria.

which Moses was held is used to make a forceful statement about the significance of Jesus.

Faithfulness is a theme in this section, with the word "faithful" used of Moses (3:2, 5) and of Christ (3:2, 6) and implied in the treatment of the readers (3:6). The faithfulness of Moses and Jesus is spoken of in reference to "God's house": "Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that would be

spoken later. Christ, however, was faithful over God's house as a son." The Greek word translated "house" (*oikos*) is open to different meanings (the created world, God's heavenly household, the temple, the people of Israel, the Davidic dynasty, Jewish and Christian communities). Both Moses and Christ are faithful in God's house, but Christ has greater glory, the glory associated with being Son. The faithfulness of Christ has greater significance because it is associated with the sacred community presided over by Christ as the "great high priest." By v. 6 the referent of "house" is clearly God's people: "[W]e are his house if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belongs to hope." From this perspective, Moses was faithful as a servant "to testify to the things that would be spoken of later." What was future for Moses (as for the angels in 1:14) was a present reality—the final and decisive word of God (see 8:7-13; 10:1; 11:26, 39-40). Different perspectives on the significance of servanthood (whether a servant is viewed positively or negatively) reflect different epochs in the history of salvation. In Numbers 12:7, cited as evidence by the writer, God says Moses is not merely a prophet with whom God communicates in visions and dreams, but that he is a servant with whom God speaks face to face. The term "servant" is used in the book of Numbers, then, in a positive rather than a negative fashion. In Hebrews, however, the term "servant" is used in a disparaging way ("only a servant").

The different relationships of Moses and Christ to the house of God and the relative significance of the role of Moses as servant become clear as Moses was faithful "in" all God's house as a servant while Christ was faithful "over" God's house as a Son. Moses was "in" the community over which Christ presides in the sense that that community extends to the faithful of the past ages who heard the good news (4:2), who exemplified faith (ch. 11), and who are made perfect with the members of the new covenant (11:40). But the Son is "over" the house of God, as he presides over that house in the role of the great high priest.

The care with which the author treats Moses in 3:1-6 reflects the dilemma and opportunity created by the primacy of Moses in the Jewish tradition. Readers would have been familiar with the account in Numbers 12 of the challenge of Miriam and Aaron to the uniqueness of Moses' position as mediator. Numbers 12:2 (LXX) reports, "And they [Miriam and Aaron] said, Has the LORD spoken to Moses only? Has he not also spoken to us? and the LORD heard it." [Numbers 12:1-15 (LXX): Challenge of Miriam and Aaron to Moses] God then met the challenge of Miriam and Aaron by confirming Moses as follows: (1) Moses was the meekest man on the earth (v. 3);

Numbers 12:1-15: Challenge of Miriam and Aaron to Moses

The story of the challenge to Moses' special authority by Aaron and Miriam gives the author of Hebrews key elements for affirming the greatness of Moses, against which he pits the far superior greatness of Christ. The italicized lines are those drawn on by the author.

> While they were at Hazeroth, Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married (for he had indeed married a Cushite woman); and they said, "Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" And the LORD heard it. *Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth.* Suddenly the LORD said to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, "Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting." So the three of them came out. Then the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud, and stood at the entrance of the tent, and called Aaron and Miriam; and they both came forward. And he said, "Hear my words: When there are prophets among you, I the LORD make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams. *Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. With him I speak face to face*—clearly, not in riddles; and *he beholds the form of the LORD*. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?" And the anger of the LORD was kindled against them, and he departed. When the cloud went away from over the tent, Miriam had become leprous, as white as snow. And Aaron turned towards Miriam and saw that she was leprous. Then Aaron said to Moses, "Oh, my lord, do not punish us for a sin that we have so foolishly committed. Do not let her be like one stillborn, whose flesh is half consumed when it comes out of its mother's womb." And Moses cried to the LORD, "O God, please heal her." But the LORD said to Moses, "If her father had but spit in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut out of the camp for seven days, and after that she may be brought in again." So Miriam was shut out of the camp for seven days; and the people did not set out on the march until Miriam had been brought in again.

(2) Moses was the servant entrusted with all God's house (v. 7); (3) Moses received a direct "face to face" revelation beyond that of an ordinary prophet (not in vision or in sleep, vv. 6-8); and (4) Moses beheld the glory of God (v. 8c). The author of Hebrews affirms all that is said of Moses and then declares the superiority of Jesus: "Yet Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses, just as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself" (v. 3).[1]

The challenge implicit in v. 6 is to be the house of God presided over by Christ by holding firm "the confidence and the pride that belongs to hope." The challenge to "hold firm" (*katechō*) to what they have is a major emphasis in Hebrews (see 3:14 and 10:23; another verb meaning to "hold firm" [*krateō*] is used in 4:14 and 6:18). The objects of holding firm are also important in Hebrews: "confidence" and "pride that belongs to hope" (literally, the boast or pride of hope). "Confidence" [*parrēsia*] here has a subjective side and an objective side. In the New Testament this confidence is a self-assurance that results in boldness in speech—especially in

1 John 3:18-22: Boldness Before God
This passage helps illuminate the call in Hebrews for Christians to "hold firm the confidence and the pride that belongs to hope" (3:6).

> Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us, for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

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approach to God in prayer (see 1 John 3:21; Eph 3:12). [1 John 3:18-22: Boldness Before God] Here boldness also refers to public display of Christian faith as it is associated with the "pride that belongs to hope." It refers to a pride or a boasting that is characterized by hope, or a "hopeful boast." The theme of hope is important in Hebrews. Readers are to keep their hope alive (see 6:11, 18; 7:19; 10:23; 11:1). The pride or boasting, then, rose out of the exaltation of Christ and hope involving Christ's final victory.

CONNECTIONS

Holy Partners in a Heavenly Calling

The superiority of Christ to Moses and the extraordinary privilege and responsibility of Christians go hand-in-hand. In Hebrews 3:1-6, this superior privilege and responsibility is seen as Christians being "holy partners" and "God's house." Modern Christians have the same privileges and responsibilities as the first readers of Hebrews. We have received a "heavenly calling" that makes us "holy partners" with Jesus "the apostle and high priest of our confession." We are "God's house" over which Christ is faithful as a son. Being "holy partners" is parallel to being "God's house." The ideas go together. They are dependent on remaining faithful to the heavenly calling.

"Calling" is used throughout the New Testament with the idea of God's calling in Christ to discipleship. Privilege and responsibility are involved. Paul's first writing was addressed to a church much like the church to which Hebrews was addressed. Paul had established the church in Thessalonica during a visit that was cut short by persecution (see Acts 17:1-9). The Christian community in

Thessalonica (just as the readers of Hebrews) were threatened by social pressures and outright persecution to forsake the gospel they had heard and accepted. Paul sent Timothy from Athens to the church to discover whether they had continued in their Christian faith. Timothy returned and told Paul of the continuing faith and love of the Thessalonian Christians. In the letter Paul wrote (probably from Corinth) after receiving word from the church in Thessalonica, Paul emphasized the calling of the Thessalonians.

Paul declared to the Thessalonian Christians that "he [God] has chosen you" (1 Thess 1:4). Israel's privileges as God's chosen are transferred to the church. Evidence of this calling is that the Thessalonians "became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Acadia" (1:6-7). Later, Paul urges the Thessalonians to "lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory" (2:12). And the worthy life is a life of purity, for "God did not call us to impurity but in holiness" (4:7). Throughout Paul's writings, he emphasized that the calling of Christians is from God in Christ. He spoke of himself as being "called . . . through his [God's] grace" (Gal 1:15).

The call stories in the Gospels show dramatically what is involved in the Christian calling. The decisive call comes from Jesus himself. The initiative is essentially from Jesus, not from the prospective disciples. Nevertheless, the disciples must respond. They must respond immediately and unconditionally. The fact that the initiative comes from Jesus himself and that disciples must respond immediately and unconditionally is seen in the Gospel accounts of the call of Jesus. Mark 1:16-20 presents the pattern:

> As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him (see also Mark 2:14; 10:17-22, 46-52; Luke 5:1-11; John 1:35-51).

The collection of three unsuccessful call stories in Luke 9:57-62 illustrates that when either of the components is missing (the initial call of Jesus and the immediate and unconditional response of the disciple), the story inevitably ends in failure. The first character in

the unsuccessful call stories approaches Jesus and boasts, "I will follow you wherever you go" (9:57). Two other characters also appear willing to follow, but certain conditions must be met. "Lord, first let me go and bury my father" and "Let me first say farewell to those at my home" (9:59, 61). In response to the first character, Jesus points to the danger of a life of discipleship. "And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head'" (9:58). In response to the other two characters, Jesus makes plain that his call supersedes all ties to an individual's home and family and to occupation and possessions. Not even the requirement of burying one's father can come between Jesus and his disciple.

Christians today are encouraged by the reminder that our calling is a heavenly calling. Christians share in the calling with Jesus who was appointed by God. This means Christians are holy partners. We are not simply members of another civic club, social organization, or academic community. The divine nature of the call challenges us to be serious about the response to the call and to "hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope" (Heb 3:6). The admonition in Ephesians matches the word of the preacher in Hebrews and is appropriate today—"to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called" (Eph 4:1).

NOTE

[1] See Peter Rhea Jones, "The Figure of Moses as a Heuristic Device for Understanding the Pastoral Intent of Hebrews," *RevExp* 76 (1979), 95-107. Jones focuses upon the critical importance of Moses in Hebrews. "Moses is not merely one of the figures compared unfavorably to Jesus. Instead, Moses and Jesus are yoked throughout the entirety of the Epistle. . . . The most cursory reading of the Book of Exodus reveals a portrait of Moses as mediator not merely of the Ten Words, but of an elaborate cult. . . . The figure of Moses then can function for the alert reader as a heuristic device for understanding Hebrews. Hebrews parallels the mediators Moses and Jesus and their cults" (95-96).

THE REJECTION OF JESUS MORE SERIOUS THAN THE REJECTION OF MOSES: A LESSON FROM THE EXODUS GENERATION

Hebrews 3:7-19

The writer has been attempting to prove the supremacy of Jesus. Now he leaves his argument on the greatness of Jesus to make the exhortation for which he has been preparing. If Jesus is so great, complete trust and obedience must be given to him. The consequence of the people hardening their hearts and refusing to hear his voice are terrible.

The way the writer made his case is difficult to follow because it is doubly allusive, an allusion within an allusion. He began with a quotation from Psalm 95:7b-11 that was appealing to *its* readers to be faithful and to listen to the voice of God. The psalmist for his part alluded to a rebellious incident in the history of the pilgrimage of the children of Israel. This section consists, then, of a quotation of Psalm 95:7b-11 with the beginning of a commentary on this psalm and on the experience of the Israelites reflected in the psalm.

COMMENTARY

Citation of Psalm 95:7b-11 (LXX), 3:7-11

The memory of the fate of Israel in the wilderness has left its mark in numerous biblical sources (see Num 32:6-15; Deut 1:19-35; 9:33; Neh 9:15-17; Ps 106:24-26; and 1 Cor 10:5-10). [Numbers 32:6-15: Moses' Later Citing of the Wilderness Experience] The author and readers of Hebrews would doubtless have had the primary historical account of Numbers 13–14 in mind as they contemplated the psalmist's meditation on the event. However, the author quoted not the account in

Numbers 32:6-15: Moses' Later Citing of the Wilderness Experience

The experience of the Israelites in the wilderness was cited by Moses when the Reubenites and the Gadites wanted to stay in the land of Jazer and the land of Gilead and not help the other tribes in the battle for Canaan:

> But Moses said to the Gadites and to the Reubenites, "Shall your brothers go to war while you sit here? Why will you discourage the hearts of the Israelites from going over into the land that the LORD has given them? Your fathers did this, when I sent them from Kadesh-barnea to see the land. When they went up to the Wadi Eshcol and saw the land, they discouraged the hearts of the Israelites from going into the land that the LORD had given them. The LORD's anger was kindled on that day and he swore, saying, 'Surely none of the people who came up out of Egypt, from twenty years old and upward, shall see the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, because they have not unreservedly followed me—none except Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite and Joshua son of Nun, for they have unreservedly followed the LORD.' And the LORD's anger was kindled against Israel, and he made them wander in the wilderness for forty years, until all the generation that had done evil in the sight of the LORD had disappeared. And now you, a brood of sinners, have risen in place of your fathers, to increase the LORD's fierce anger against Israel! If you turn away from following him, he will again abandon them in the wilderness; and you will destroy all this people."

Numbers 14 but the memory of those events in Psalm 95. [Psalm 95] The text from Psalms is so important that the writer quoted it directly in 3:7-12, introduced it again in 3:15; 4:3, 5, and 7, and used it as the basis for the sermon that extends to 4:16. The fact that this psalm was used in synagogue services and was familiar to the readers influenced the choice of the psalm as well as the way the readers responded. The intent of the author was to make the Scripture speak to the situation of the readers, and the readers' knowledge and earlier use of the psalm helped him carry out his purpose. Years before the writing of the book of Hebrews, the psalmist had used the past event of the experience of Israel in the wilderness for the purpose of speaking a contemporary word to his generation. Now the writer of Hebrews was doing the same thing, making a present word out of the word of the past. The introduction to the quotation, "Therefore as the Holy Spirit says," reinforces the present significance of the word. The source of the word is not cited as being the psalmist but the Holy Spirit, who "says," not "said." The writer thereby declared, "This is what the Holy Spirit is saying to you today." The beginning of the quotation with the word "Today" (in the Greek as well as the NRSV) leaves no doubt that the writer used Psalm 95 as a direct and immediate address to the readers of his day.

The psalm is quoted from the Septuagint. The Septuagint form is somewhat different from the form in the Masoretic text. The

Hebrew text (and the translation of Ps 95 in the NRSV) refer to Meribah and Massah as places where Israel quarreled and tested God: "Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day of Massah in the wilderness" (v. 8). In the Greek translation used by the author of Hebrews, the place names have become experiences: "Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, as on the day of testing in the wilderness." Another difference between the Septuagint and the Masoretic text has to do with the placement of the "forty years." In the original Hebrew text, the forty years refer to God's anger: "For forty years I loathed that generation." In the Greek text, a "therefore" is inserted before the expression of anger, and the forty years are connected with the preceding statement: "They had seen my work for forty years."

Psalm 95

This psalm is a liturgy of God's kingship. It opens with a hymn celebrating God's kingship and closes with a sermon against disobeying God's laws. The experience of the Israelites in the wilderness is used in the sermon.

O come, let us sing to the LORD;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving,
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
For the LORD is a great God,
and a great King above all gods. (vv. 1-3)

O that today you would listen to his voice!
Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof,
though they had seen my work.
For forty years I loathed that generation and said,
"They are a people whose hearts go astray,
and they do not regard my ways."
Therefore in my anger I swore,
"They shall not enter into my rest." (vv. 7b-11)

Interpretation of Psalm 95:7-11, 3:12-19

In this section, Psalm 95:7-11 is interpreted and applied to the situation of the readers. The unity of the section 3:12-19 is established by an *inclusio*—the key words "to see"/"take care" and "underbelief"/"unbelieving heart" used in v. 12 ("Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God") are repeated in v. 19 ("So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief"). Key words of the psalm are repeated in 3:12-19 and related to the readers' situation, words such as "today," "rebel," "harden," "heart," "angry," and "rest."

In v. 12 the writer addressed his readers as "brother and sisters" as he had done in 3:1. But this time he warned them to "take care" (*blepete*) instead of asking them to consider the faithfulness of Jesus. They are to "take care" that they do not follow the example of their ancestors in the wilderness experience. The Greek construction suggests that the readers face a real and present threat. It does not describe a hypothetical situation. Language from Numbers 17, Psalm 95, and Jeremiah 16:12 and 18:12 is used to describe the action warned against. The language describes a radical disobedience, rebellion against God, apostasy.

The Importance of the Church

Chevis F. Horne cited the importance of the church in Christian faith and faithfulness:

> [T]he author [of Hebrews] stresses the importance of the church in enabling [readers] to hold on to the faith that keeps them in a vital relationship with the living God. When he says "but exhort one another every day," he is speaking about the fellowship and worship of the Christian church. If they were to avoid the fate of that tragic generation, they must be practicing Christians and a part of the Christian fellowship. The church was indispensable. They had no option here if they were to remain faithful to God and strong in their relationship with each other.
>
> We need to stress again the importance of the church. It is not an appendage to the Gospel, it is a part of the good news. We say the church cannot save us and that is true. But it is equally true to say that we could not have been saved without the church. It has been the keeper and proclaimer of the Gospel, and without it we never would have heard the good news of salvation. And a Christian cannot survive and grow into maturity without the church.
>
> I have always found the behavior of a fish out of water to be interesting. It flounces with such vigor and vitality, but it is the flounce of death. The water is its habitat and it can't survive unless it gets back into the stream. The Christian is like that fish. The church is his or her habitat, and he can't survive outside its life.

Chevis F. Horne, "The Tragedy of Unbelief," *The Way of Faith*, ed. James M. Pitts (Wake Forest NC: Chanticleer Publishing Company, 1985), 46-47.

The way this apostasy is to be avoided is through preaching or exhortation: "But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." The Greek tense indicates that they are to "continue exhorting" one another, and the specific notation "every day" is added. [The Importance of the Church] "As long as it is today" is both a promise and a warning. The invitation to hear and heed the word of God is still open, but it may not remain open. The time of demand and opportunity *and* the time of danger of deception by sin and apostasy is today. The same alternatives of faith and unbelief, of obedience and disobedience that faced Israel at Kadesh faced the readers of Hebrews. Verse 14 encapsulates the promise and challenge of today: "For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end." Readers have become "partners of Christ" (using the terminology seen in 3:1). The perfect tense of the Greek verb ("we have become") strongly affirms the reality of the partnership between God and the readers, but the readers have an obligation in the partnership. The conditional nature of the partnership ("if only") is also emphasized. They are to maintain confidence until the end. The term "end" is not defined. Readers are free to see the end as the conclusion of their own earthly existence, but the eschatological "day" awaiting believers is also a part of the available meaning. Readers are to maintain their confidence until the realization of the eschatological rest prepared for God's people.

Exactly what are the readers to maintain? "First confidence" is the way the NRSV translates the Greek expression (*tēn archēntēs*

hypostaseōs). This translation indicates that what is involved is the initial resolve of the readers. It is a call for a continuing life of faith. The word translated "confidence" (*hypostaseōs*) is different from the word translated "confidence" in 3:6. In 3:6 self-assurance and boldness were emphasized. The word used here was used earlier in 1:3 with the meaning of "being" or "nature," or "fundamental reality." It is used in 11:1: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for." The term "confidence" or "assurance" refers not to feeling but to a reality readers committed to in faith at the beginning of their pilgrimage. Readers are told that they are to hold fast to a heavenly reality that had a beginning as it was inaugurated by Christ and as it met with human response or resolve. The fundamental response of faith in the heavenly reality in which they participate through Christ must be held as securely at the end as at the beginning.

In the center of the section on interpretation (v. 15), the writer repeated the first verse of the citation. In the presentation of the sermon before a congregation, the speaker would utter the words "As it is said, . . ." and the congregation would join the speaker, saying, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." The construction in written form may indeed be taken as an exhortation by the writer for the addressees to exhort one another by saying the words of the psalm aloud.

In vv. 16-18, three questions are asked and answered, highlighting three phrases from the psalm. The first question asks, "Who were they who heard and yet were rebellious?" This is answered with a rhetorical question, "Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses?" The second question asks, "But with whom was he angry for forty years?" The answer again is given in the form of a rhetorical question: "Was it not those who sinned whose bodies fell in the wilderness?" The third question is answered rhetorically within itself: "And to whom did he swear that they would not enter that rest, if not to those who are disobedient?" The emphasis is upon Israel's defiant unbelief: "They rebelled" (v. 16); "They sinned" (v. 17); "They were disobedient" (v. 18). The anger of God and the resultant failure of Israel to enter the promised land are fully justified.

Hebrews is speaking *about* Israel, but it is not for purposes of exposition. The speaking about Israel is an address *to* the readers. The conclusion, "So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief," is an indirect exhortation for readers to maintain their "first confidence to the end." The "unbelief" of v. 19 and the "disobedience" of v. 18 are actually the same. The two words are derived from the same root and are often used interchangeably (see

Warnings for Today
William Barclay spoke of three great warnings in Hebrews 3:7-19:

> (i) God makes men [*sic*] an offer. Just as He offered the Israelites the blessings of the Promised Land, He offers to all men the blessings of a life which is far beyond the life that men can live without God.
>
> (ii) But to obtain the blessings of God two things are necessary. (a) *Trust* is necessary. We must believe that what God says and God offers is true. We must believe that what God says He can do God will do. We must be willing to stake our lives on the fact that God's promises are true. (b) *Obedience* is necessary. It is just as if a doctor were to say to us: "I can cure you if you obey my instructions implicitly." It is just as if a teacher were to say: "I can make you a scholar if you follow my curriculum with absolute fidelity." It is just as if a trainer were to say to an athlete: "I can make you a champion if you never deviate from the laws of discipline that I lay down." In any realm of life success depends on obedience to the word of the expert. God, if we may put it so, is the expert in life, and real happiness in life depends on obedience to Him.
>
> (iii) To the offer of God there is a limit. That limit is the limit of life. Now we never know when that limit will come. We speak easily about "to-morrow" but for us to-morrow may never come. All that we have got is to-day, this moment of time. Someone has said: "We should live each day as it were a lifetime." God's offer must be accepted to-day; the trust and the obedience must be given to-day—for we never know if for us to-morrow will ever come.
>
> Here then we have the supreme offer of God, but it is an offer which is only made to perfect trust and full obedience, and it is an offer which must be accepted now—before it is impossible to accept it.

William Barclay, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1955), 28-29.

Deut 9:23; 32:20; Ps 106:25; Rom 2:3, 8; 11:20, 23; 11:30, 32; John 3:36; in Jude 5 and Heb 11:31 the faith of Rahab is contrasted with the disobedience of her contemporaries). Disobedience and unbelief are the opposite of maintaining "first confidence to the end." [Warnings for Today]

CONNECTIONS

Reading with the Psalmist

The Bible for New Testament authors was the Hebrew Bible (either in the original Hebrew language or in Greek translation). Later authors used different methods to make the past word of the Old Testament a present word. The use of Old Testament traditions concerning the desert generation within the New Testament (and

even within the Old Testament) is instructive. The book of Numbers relates how the entire first exodus generation (except for Moses, Joshua, and Caleb) murmured against God and refused to take the land. It tells of how that generation died off and a new generation was led by Moses toward the promised land. The unbelief at Kadesh was the low point of Israel's history. According to Numbers 13–14, Israel was encamped at Kadesh, just about to enter Canaan. Entry into Canaan was the goal of the exodus from Egypt and would fulfill the promise to Abraham. However, a bad report was brought back by the spies sent to explore the land, and the Israelites refused to enter. They rejected the promise through their unbelief. Paul used the experiences of the desert generation to warn against overconfidence. In 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, Paul finds points of contact between experiences of the Israelites and experiences of the Corinthian Christians. Being under the cloud and passing through the sea was a type of Christian baptism. Eating and drinking of spiritual food and drink was a type of the Lord's Supper. But Paul declared that baptism and participation in the Lord's Supper do not guarantee salvation for the Corinthian Christians any more than the corresponding acts sufficed for the ancient Hebrews. The rebellious actions of the Israelites were not pleasing to God: "God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness" (1 Cor 10:5). Paul dealt with the things that happened to the Israelites as an example: "These things happen to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Cor 10:11).

In Hebrews 3:7-19 the psalmist's use of the experiences of the exodus generation is utilized in order to speak a relevant word to the readers of Hebrews. The psalmist, years after the experiences of the ancient Israelites, incorporated the experience within a liturgy of God's kingship to declare that worship without obedience is displeasing to God. The liturgy began with a timeless invitation: "O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!" A little later in the liturgy, the call is made to listen to the voice of God "today." The "today" in the liturgy is contrasted with the time of the wilderness. But the "today" of the liturgy is not simply the "today" of the author of the psalm. The "today" of the liturgical call to listen to God's voice is ever contemporary, as is the call to worship.

The choice of the psalmist's account (instead of the account in the historical books themselves) is appropriate for the purpose of the author of Hebrews—to make the ancient word a present word.

In a sense, the aim of Psalm 95 is the aim of Hebrews—to call for entry into God's presence with praise and fidelity, avoiding the ancient failure of Israel. The use in Hebrews of the psalmist's liturgy prepares modern readers to seek and find correspondence between God's saving acts in the past and present and between the response of God's people past and present. Appreciation of the power of the use of "today" by the psalmist and the author of Hebrews will prepare for appreciation of other devices that make the ancient text a modern word. Sometimes there is a play upon superficial resemblances (as with Paul's use of the types of baptism and the Lord's Supper), but for these superficial comparisons to have any effect upon readers, the more profound consistency of divine action in past and present must be observed.

The "Today" of Scripture

"Today" is one of the hooks upon which the author of Hebrews fastens his message. "Today" is important because it stands for the present tense in human experience, the present-tense experience of rest or salvation in the presence of God. There are, then, qualitative and quantitative aspects of "today."

In terms of time, "today" stands in relationship with "yesterday" and "tomorrow." Several experiences of the past are highlighted in Hebrews. One is the experience of the rebellion of the faithless wilderness generation. Another is the renewal of the promise of rest in the words of the psalmist: "Today, if you hear his voice do not harden your hearts" (Heb 3:15, Ps 95:7b-8a). Another experience of the past is the activity of Jesus Christ that opens up the promise of entry into the rest typified but not fulfilled by the possession of Canaan under Joshua.

"Today" also stands in relationship with the future. There is a future rest, a rest of the end of time when Christ is revealed as Lord, pain and toil ended, death defeated, and all the forces that would destroy God's will for God's creation are removed.

The present "today" is understood in relationship to the past and future. It indicates the possibility for the faithful remembering the past with thanksgiving and anticipating the future with hope. "Today" becomes a Sabbath rest when the people of God are confident of God's triumph, when they live ethically in the present, and when they worship together and sing of God's victory.

The "today" of Scripture, then, is marked not only in terms of time but also in terms of quality. In the New Testament, different words are used to express "the extent of time" (*chronos*) and the

quality of time (*kairos*). *Chronos* is sequential time, time we perceive as passing. The Greek god Chronos is depicted as a fearsome Father Time, a huge bearded giant who consumed his own children. The god Kairos is personified as a little god in a moving chariot or even sometimes as a god on wheels. *Kairos* is "the right time," "just-in-time," "the time of your life." The "today" of Scripture does not refer to a date on the calendar, but to "a critical time," "the propitious time to decide," "an urgent time. " It is time in the sense of *kairos*—the eternal now.

When we respond to the "today" of God's love, we will no longer live our lives simply in *chronos* time, with minutes, hours, days, and years ticking away. We have entered into a *kairos* time when the time has become eternity.

THE PROMISE OF REST REMAINS BUT MAY BE FORFEITED

Hebrews 4:1-11

The exposition-exhortation that began at 3:7 continues in this section, though there is a more direct address to the readers. In 3:15-19 the author had addressed the readers indirectly by talking about Israel. Now readers are addressed directly with a hortatory subjunctive: "Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it" (v. 1). A hortatory subjunctive not only begins the section, but one also concludes the section: "Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs" (v. 11). Furthermore, at the beginning and the end, the phrase "to enter that rest" is found. These elements at the beginning and the end mark a unity within which the theme of entering God's rest surfaces and resurfaces.

Within the larger section, two paragraphs may be seen. The first paragraph (vv. 1-5) is marked as an *inclusio* by the phrases "entering his rest" in v. 1 and "entering my rest" in v. 5. The second paragraph (vv. 6-11) is tied together by the phrases "because of disobedience" in v. 6 and "through such disobedience" in v. 11. At the center of each of these paragraphs stands a quotation from Psalm 95.

In terms of content, the section as a whole emphasizes the Christian community as the heir to the promise of entry into God's rest. The fact of the exclusion of the desert generation from God's rest remains a part of the discussion, but the stress is positive: the opportunity for the congregation.

Before examining the details, we need to look at the major thought in the section. This thought is associated with the different uses of the word " rest." (1) The word "rest" is used positively, somewhat as we use the word "peace." The rest of God is the "peace of God." (2) However, the "rest of God" refers historically to more than a general feeling of peace and goodwill. It refers to the experience of entry into the promised land after years of wandering in the wilderness. Numbers 14:12-23 tells how the children of Israel came to the

borders of the promised land. They sent scouts to spy out the land, and the scouts reported that it was a good land but the difficulties of entry were overwhelming. Caleb and Joshua alone were in favor of entering the land in the strength of the Lord. The people listened to the advice of the majority and were doomed never to enter the peace of the promised land. (3) There is a "rest" that remains. Although the ancient people missed the rest of the promised land, there is a rest that remains. This rest is the Sabbath rest. The rabbis noted that in the creation stories, God rested on the seventh day after creation had been completed. God rested from labor. Also, the creation story does not speak of the seventh day as having an ending. The first six days had mornings and evenings, but the seventh day had no evening. The rabbis concluded that the day of God's rest was eternal and everlasting. So the rest remains. It remained for those addressed by Psalm 95, hundreds of years after Joshua led the people of Israel into the rest of the promised land, and it remained for those addressed by the writer to the Hebrews. The different meanings of "rest" come together in this powerful exhortation to readers that "while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it."

COMMENTARY

The Nature of Sabbath Rest, 4:1-5

The first paragraph not only stresses the entering of God's rest but clarifies the distinctive character of that rest. Verse 1 is a warning: "Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it." But this warning is predicated upon the openness of the promise to enter God's rest. The readers would have understood that fact from the biblical account stating the verdict that none of the rebellious generation will enter Canaan, but "my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and has followed me wholeheartedly, I will bring into the land into which he went, and his descendants shall possess it" (Num 14:24). [Numbers 14:22-24: Verdict on the Rebellious Generation] The rest in mind, however, exceeds the geographical and temporal limits of entering into Canaan. The author

will later show that the rest in mind is prefigured in the Sabbath rest of God. Experience of rest in Caanan is a symbol of the complete rest God intends for God's people. The eschatological understanding of "my rest" in Psalm 95:11 is presupposed in 4:1 (to be developed later) and adds force to the exhortation "Let us take care that none of you would seem to have failed to reach it" (4:1). The NRSV translation, "Take care," parallels the "take care" of 3:12. The Greek word used in 4:1 (*phobēthōmen*), however, is stronger than that in 3:12 (*blepete*). It could be translated "Let us fear . . . lest anyone of you might be deemed to have failed to reach it." The fear is that of being found or judged to have fallen short.

Numbers 14:22-24: Verdict on the Rebellious Generation

In response to the decision of the Israelites not to follow the will of God expressed by Caleb (and Joshua), the LORD decreed that those who rebelled would fail to see the promised land. For Hebrews, their failure serves as a paradigm of unfaithfulness.

> [N]one of the people who have seen my glory and the signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have tested me these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land that I swore to give their ancestors; none of those who despised me shall see it. But my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and has followed me wholeheartedly, I will bring into the land into which he went, and his descendants shall possess it.

Verse 2 extends the exhortation by explaining what results in failing to reach the rest of God. In this explanation, the exodus generation is contrasted with the present generation. Both generations received the good news; "indeed the good news came to us just as to them." The message heard by the exodus generation, however, "did not benefit them, because the members of the exodus generation were not united by faith with those who listened." Who are "those who listened" with whom the exodus generation was not united by faith? At this point in the text, the readers doubtless have Joshua and Caleb in mind. Numbers 14:24 speaks of Caleb as one who followed "wholeheartedly," and Numbers 14:30 adds Joshua to the list. But more than the historical figures of Caleb and Joshua may be involved. A hint is given in the next verse: "For we who have believed enter that rest." Later, readers will be given a clearer insight into the relationship of past generations to the present generation. The writer declares that the faithful heroes of the old covenant are perfected only by their union with Christians (11:40; see also 9:15). So those who listened include not only Joshua and Caleb but believers in Jesus Christ. [Joshua and Caleb]

In the statement "we who have believed enter that rest" (v. 3), the present tense "enter" is used, indicating that believers enter rest at the present time—not just at death or in the eschaton. The significance of this present entry into rest is related to the meaning of "rest." The Christian's entry into rest is made possible by Christ's entry into the divine presence; and the Christian's experience parallels the experience of Christ. The concept of "rest," then, is rich.

Joshua and Caleb

Joshua and Caleb were among the twelve spies sent from Kadesh to spy out the land of Canaan. Joshua and Caleb believed the Israelites should be faithful to God and attempt to invade the land immediately. The people, however, heeded the negative report of the majority of the spies. Because the people did not listen to Joshua and Caleb, they were doomed. Because of their trust in the LORD, Joshua and Caleb were the only two allowed to enter Canaan.

Joshua ("Yahweh is salvation") was the son of Nun of the tribe of Ephraim. His name was originally Hoshea (Num 13:8, 16; Deut 32:44). Joshua's major function was the conquest and settlement of Canaan (Deut 3:21; 31:3-8; Josh 13:22). But he appears in the Bible before that as Moses' attendant and a commander who led Israel against Amalek in the battle of Rephidim (Exod 17:9-14). He also accompanied Moses in his ascent and descent of Mount Sinai (Exod 24:13; 32:17-18) and was in charge of security at the tent of meeting (Exod 33:11).

Moses appointed Joshua as his successor (Num 27:15-23; Deut 1:38) with the task of conquering the land of Canaan and apportioning the land among the Israelites. Joshua received Timnath-Serah in the hills of Ephraim as his portion (Josh 19:50), and he was buried there upon his death at the age of 110.

The similarity of the names "Joshua" and "Jesus" caused early Christians to see Joshua as a "type" of Jesus. Hebrews 4:8-9 contrasts Joshua and Jesus. Joshua brought the children of Israel to an imperfect rest. Jesus brought his believers to the true rest. Other events of Joshua's life were foreseen as anticipations of the life of Jesus. For example, Amalek with whom Joshua fought is seen as a symbol of the devil with whom Jesus had to do battle.

Caleb was a leader of the tribe of Judah and the ancestor of many families that lived in the central and southern regions of Judah. Caleb in particular was praised for his loyalty when he and Joshua opposed the negative report of the opinion of the other ten spies. God singled out "my servant Caleb" and promised to bring him into the land and give it to his descendants as a possession (Num 14:24; Deut 1:36; Caleb alone is mentioned in Num 13:30. Both Caleb and Joshua are mentioned in Num 14:6).

In the rabbinic homiletical material, additional information is given about Caleb. This information is summarized in the article on Caleb in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*:

> Caleb was twice sent to Canaan as a spy, once by Moses and once by Joshua together with Phinehas . . . . When the spies reached Hebron he paid a special visit to the grave of the Patriarchs to pray for their help against the evil intentions of the other spies. . . . It was on his insistence that they took with them of the fruit of the land in order to show its excellence to the people. . . . As a reward for their conduct, Joshua's and Caleb's portions of the land were determined not by lots, but by the command of God; they receive the portions that had been intended for the other spies. . . . Caleb married Miriam . . . and thus became the progenitor of four of the house of David. . . . He also married Bithiah, Pharaoh's daughter—a fitting match because she had rebelled against her father's idolatry, as he had rebelled against spies . . . .

Encyclopedia Judaica (CD-ROM edition), "Joshua (bib.fig.)," 1-2; "Caleb, Calebites," 1-2.

Personal and corporate dimensions are involved. Concern for individuals is prominent at 3:12 and 4:1 (see also 4:10). The rest, however, is also for the whole people of God (4:9). "Realized" and future elements are involved (see 10:25, 37-38; 12:26-29). All that is involved is not stated in Hebrews. Different understandings of salvation engender different understandings of the "rest" involved. These different understandings of salvation and rest are also related to the views of Christ developed in Hebrews.

In vv. 3-5, the "rest" of Psalm 95 is redefined as a heavenly reality by interpreting the "rest" of Psalm 95 in light of the "rest" of Genesis 2: "And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that

he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation" (vv. 2-3).

First of all, the author commented on Psalm 95 that God made the statement about rest ("They shall not enter my rest") although "his works were finished at the foundation of the world." What is the relationship between works and rest? Ancient and modern readers could read this with insight that the rest was prepared by God as one of the works of creation. Jewish traditions support the idea of an eschatological resting place prepared from the foundation of the world, and popular Christian ideas support the idea of a future resting place in "heaven." However, the idea seems to be that the rest of which the writer is speaking is the consequence of work, that God's rest consists of the completion of God's work, and that God's rest has been in existence since the foundation of the world. What is emphasized is that the promised rest has primary reference to God's own rest. This rest precedes and stands outside human history. It is not in the first instance some future reality prepared for humankind.

In vv. 4 and 5, the writer interprets the experience "my rest" of Psalm 95 from the perspective of "God rested on the seventh day from all his works." The primordial rest of Genesis 2:2 is the symbol for all later experiences of rest. It is the type of rest intended for the people of God. The purpose of the author is to encourage the community by an attractive definition of the character of the promise.

The Present Possibility of Sabbath Rest, 4:6-11

The author was primarily interested not in the scientific linguistic analysis of ancient texts or in the situation of the ancient Israelites, but in the possibilities confronting those addressed in the exhortation. He utilized texts and interpretative strategies that were effective for his purposes. The texts are familiar to the readers; they had been joined together in the synagogue liturgy for the beginning of the Sabbath. The good news that God's rest still remains open is proclaimed in the joining of the texts and in the interpretation of Psalm 95 by Genesis 2. A prophetic reaffirmation of God's promise is directed to those who have faith.

In vv. 6-8, the author first repeated the argument that (1) because of disobedience those who formerly received the good news failed to enter God's rest, but (2) the rest of God remains open for some to enter. Then the writer shifted to another section of Psalm 95

Joshua 21:43-45: The Rest Associated with the Settlement of Canaan

The tradition found in Joshua about the Israelites entering the land indicates that they received the promised "rest." Hebrews relies more on the tradition preserved in Ps 95 that indicates the Israelites did not enter God's "rest."

> Thus the LORD gave to Israel all the land that he swore to their ancestors that he would give them; and having taken possession of it, they settled there. And the LORD gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their ancestors; not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the LORD had given all their enemies into their hands. Not one of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.

(vv. 7b-8a) to reinforce the good news that the present time is the time of salvation for the Christian community. The writer seized upon the term "today" that was used by the psalmist to announce a new day four centuries after the exclusion of the desert generation: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" (v. 7b). The debate in which the author of Hebrews is engaged in v. 8 ("For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not speak later about another day") has to do with the relationship of the conquest of Canaan to the promised rest. In the Old Testament, two different traditions coexisted: the tradition that the promise of rest was fulfilled with the settlement of Canaan (Josh 21:44; 22:4) and the tradition that the settlement of Canaan pointed to another more fundamental reality (Ps 95). [Joshua 21:43-45: The Rest Associated with the Settlement of Canaan] The writer of Hebrews interpreted the Bible from the perspective of the contemporary generation of the people of God and from the perspective of the rest that was prefigured in the settlement of Canaan. That rest is the Sabbath rest of God. The character of the rest promised to the people of God is clarified by the term "Sabbath." The term gains its significance from the Sabbath instructions developed in Judaism on the basis of Exodus 20:8-10, which emphasizes rest and praise. [Exodus 20:8-11: The Sabbath] Festivity, joy, and the praise and adoration of God are involved. The rest spoken of here transcends time and place, but it is experienced here and now.

Exodus 20:8-11: The Sabbath

The Sabbath is a segment of time belonging especially to God. To keep the Sabbath holy is to observe it as a day separated from others. The character of the rest promised the people of God is clarified by the term "Sabbath."

> Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

CONNECTIONS

The Community

Hebrews presupposes the importance of the community. The author spoke of the community of Israel, dealing with the desert journey as a group experience. He spoke to a community, a particular congregation, and through that congregation to the church of Jesus Christ. The writing, which uses "us," "we," and the plural "you," was doubtless read aloud to the assembled congregation. Individuals are also important. In the desert experience, Moses, Joshua, and Caleb were important and stand over against the Israelites as a whole. Likewise, in Hebrews individuals are highlighted. Concerning the promise of rest, the author united the community and individuals in the injunction, "Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it" (4:1).

Faith and faithlessness have to do with individuals and the community. The Christian life is not the life of a "lone ranger." As individuals, we are influenced by the Christian congregation and the larger church of Jesus Christ. As individuals, we have responsibilities that are carried out within the larger body of the people of God.

Rest: Past, Future, and Present

"Rest" points back to God's "Sabbath rest" and forward to the completion of God's work of redemption. The present-day people of God are related to the people of God in the beginning and in the end. Both the beginnings with Israel and the end time impinge upon the present. In his use of the experiences of the exodus generation as a warning against overconfidence, Paul spoke of the church as those "on whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Cor 10:11). The reality of the end time may invade our present, bring a rest in the middle time, and assure us of participating in God's will (4:3). Hebrews assures us that not evil but good, not hate but love, not disease but wholeness will triumph. But Hebrews challenges us to participate in the present, not to cease our labors, but to know that those labors play their part in fulfillment of God's will for us and for creation.

Hebrews does not see the incorporation of readers in the Sabbath rest as a magical occurrence. The author used the experiences of Israel to warn and challenge his readers to faith and faithfulness. To

read Hebrews as a simplistic supercessionist claim—that the faithful church replaces the faithless Israel—is to misread it. The experience of Israel's failure in the wilderness is a warning. From the Christian perspective of Hebrews, Israel and the Christian community play their part in the totality of the people of God. The author of Hebrews calls on us to play our part faithfully in the drama of redemption. [Sabbath Rest]

Sabbath Rest

Sabbath rest combines in itself commemoration of creation, the experience of salvation, and anticipation of the eschaton as the people of God move toward the final rest. The concept of Sabbath rest is enriched by the Old Testament background of the Sabbath and the rest involved in the exodus and settlement of Canaan.

The correlation of "rest" as the peaceful settlement of Canaan and "rest" as the rest of God on the seventh day is not just the creative work of the author of Hebrews. In the Old Testament two different rationales for the Sabbath are given. The most familiar is found in the creation story of Gen 1:1–2:3 and the Exodus form of the Ten Commandments.

In Exod 16:22-30 there is an account of the provision of manna that involves emphasis on the keeping of the Sabbath rest on every seventh day. This passage may be the oldest Old Testament reference to the Sabbath. In this passage appear for the first time important aspects of the Sabbath or Sabbath rest: (1) the noun "Sabbath," (2) the expression "Sabbath feast," (3) the explicit identification of Sabbath as a "seventh day," (4) the sixth day as preparation for the Sabbath, (5) the idea of rest on the Sabbath for human beings, (6) the notion of the Sabbath as a feast and not a burden with fasting, and (7) the Sabbath being based on Yahweh's "commandments and laws."

The observance of the Sabbath was taken for granted in the early period of Israelite life (the First Temple period), and few biblical references are found. After the return from Babylonian exile, great stress is made of the Sabbath. In the early Second Temple period, Nehemiah forced suspension of trade and business activities on the Sabbath. At the time of the Maccabean revolt, the observance of the Sabbath was so strict that soldiers preferred to be killed rather than offer resistance on the Sabbath. But it was in response to this notion that a ruling was promulgated indicating that the preservation of life overrides the observance of the Sabbath. Soldiers, then, were allowed to fight in their own defense.

In an interpretation of Old Testament laws against work on the Sabbath, the Mishnah enumerated thirty-nine principal categories of work forbidden on the Sabbath, and each of these is further subdivided. These thirty-nine included sowing, plowing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, cleansing crops, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking, shearing wool, washing wool, spinning, weaving, making two loops, weaving two threads, separating two threads, tying a knot, loosing a knot, sewing two stitches, tearing, hunting, slaughtering or salting or curing the skin of an animal, cutting up an animal, writing two letters of the alphabet, erasing, building, demolishing, putting out a fire, lighting a fire, striking with a hammer, or carrying from one domain to another (*Shabbat* 7.2). In addition to the forbidding of work, the rabbis forbade the handling of certain objects associated with work. At the same time, legal fictions were introduced to allow ways around certain restrictions.

The author of Hebrews has a rich tradition to work with as he interprets Sabbath rest. The author shifts back and forth from rest as entering Canaan and Sabbath rest. He shifts from Canaan to Sabbath rest in 4:1-5. Rest is salvation. Rest is the presence of God now and in the future. But the experience of the Israelites at Kadesh is used to encourage the readers to enter into this salvation. It is used to demonstrate that Sabbath rest, and God's rest, is available in the present. The move beyond land to participation with God is accomplished by interpreting the word "rest" in Ps 95:11 and by citing the verbal form of the word in Gen 2:2, "God rested." The experience of Israel is used to show that the rest is available to believers in the present. God's offer of rest remains open because through disobedience it was not accepted by an earlier generation. It is open to those who are obedient. The argument is made that Ps 95—coming from David much later than the wilderness generation—speaks of the offer "today." So the offer rejected in Joshua's day was available in the "today" of David's time and is still available. This offer of rest, however, does not have to do with geography. This rest has already been defined in terms of God's rest. Sabbath rest tells us that God rested and invites us to enter that rest and enjoy all the blessings that come with the presence of God.

EXHORTATION TO DILIGENCE AND THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF CHRIST

Hebrews 4:12-16

The author concluded the second major section of his writing (the section that began at 3:1) with a rhetorical statement about the judgment of the word of God (4:12-13) and a positive exhortation (4:14-16) that drew on Jesus' ability to sympathize with his brothers and sisters as well as on his superiority to Moses (treated in 2:5-18 and 3:1-6). The author juxtaposed a statement about the danger of refusing God's benefits and falling under the condemnation of God as judge (vv. 12-13) with a positive exhortation appealing to the emotions of confidence and safety focusing on the favor obtained by Jesus the high priest (vv. 14-16). [The Author's Rhetoric in 4:12-16]

For the Jews, a word was more than a sound with a certain meaning. A word was power! Words not only say something; they also do something. We are familiar with words of power in our own day. In the marriage ceremony, the man and woman say, "I do."

The Author's Rhetoric in 4:12-16

David A. deSilva noted the effective use of rhetoric by the author to the Hebrews in 4:12-16:

> Aristotle's observation that confidence and fear are opposite emotions takes one to an important component of the author's strategy, seen in minuscule at 4:12-16. Hebrews 4:12-13 was crafted to arouse fear (an emotion also roused in 4:1-2, although for a different reason). The author has presented two possibilities for the way the audience will encounter God. They may have the Son as mediator and helper along the way to attaining the promised benefactions (4:14-16), or they may have God as judge and executioner, excluding the faithless from the promised benefactions (4:12-13). Emotions are aroused by orators specifically to make hearers more prone to decide in favor of the course promoted (or, in legal cases, the party represented) by the speaker. The way the author is laying out the options for the audience, the decision to remain firmly committed to one another and to God is the path that will make them feel confident, while leaving the group, undervaluing the gifts and promises mediated through Jesus, and thus displaying ingratitude toward their benefactor is the path that will make them feel afraid.

David A. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude, A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle "to the Hebrews"* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 184.

These words are powerful. If the words of humans are able to do things, how much more is the word of God able to perform God's purpose.

COMMENTARY

God's Word Still Active, 4:12-13

These verses may be read apart from their context in Hebrews as a hymn on the word. They make perfectly good sense as an independent theological statement.

> 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. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

The Word of God in this reading is understood as the personification of the means of divine creation and judgment. The Word that creates (see Gen 1:3; Ps 33:9; Isa 55:11) [Psalm 33:6-9: Creation by the Word] [Isaiah 55:10-11: The Word Accomplishes What God Purposes] is also capable of discernment and judgment (see Amos 1:2; Ps 51:6; Jer 7:13). [Amos 1:2: The Word of God in Judgment] The tongue that delivers the word is imaged as a sword (see Isa 49:2; Ps 57:5).

But when the statement or "hymn" on the Word is read in the context of Hebrews, it serves as a recapitulation of what has been said in Hebrews, that the God who has spoken still speaks and that word continues to be valid (see 2:2-4). Moreover, the perceptive readers of Hebrews related what was said about the word to the specific word of Scripture the author had just treated (Ps 95:7b-11). For the author of Hebrews, the words of Scripture are words of God today. This word of promise and challenge in Psalm 95:7b-11 penetrates our lives and sees everything the heart thinks and intends.

Psalm 33:6-9: Creation by the Word

The creative power of the word of the Lord, evident in Gen 1, becomes a source of terror and awe in Ps 33.

By the word of the LORD the heavens were
made,
and all their host by the breath of his mouth.
He gathered the waters of the sea as in a
bottle;
he put the deeps in storehouses.

Let all the earth fear the LORD;
let all the inhabitants of the world stand
in awe of him.
For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm.

Isaiah 55:10-11: The Word Accomplishes What God Purposes

The continuing effectiveness of the word of God, as described in Isa 55, is a primary hermeneutical conviction of the Hebrews. The word spoken long ago is still accomplishing God's purposes.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

The rhetorical flourish on the Word of God may be read, then, as a direct challenge to readers to order their lives by the specific word of Psalm 95. The subject of v. 12 is the word of God: "Indeed, the word of God is living and active." With v. 13, the focus changes to the "creature" who is "naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account" (13b). God, of course, is the one to whom we finally render our account. However, the phrase in 13a ("And before him no creature is hidden") is parallel to the statement in 13b, and "before him" in 13a refers grammatically to the word of God. Finally, of course, the reality conveyed is God's judgmental vision, but the mixing of metaphors and the referents suggests that God is united with God's living Word and God's living Word is related to the words of Scripture. For the author of Hebrews, God, God's word, and the words of Scripture are closely related if not identified with each other. Understanding the text of Psalm 95 (as interpreted by the author) as the word of God before whom we are all naked and laid bare will focus our reading.

Amos 1:2: The Word of God in Judgment

Amos 1:2 functions to introduce a series of judgments against the nations delivered by the prophet. The devastating effect of this word of judgment, expressed in Amos, is expressed in Hebrews as a relentless scrutinizer of the human heart.

The LORD roars from Zion,
and utters his voice from Jerusalem;
the pastures of the shepherds wither,
and the top of Carmel dries up.

The final words of 4:12-13 (*pros hon hēmin ho logos*) are ambiguous. They may be translated "our account is about him" or "to whom our account must be directed." In any case, the word translated "account" is the same word used for the dynamic and effective word of God (*logos*). The human word is confronted and scrutinized by the divine word, and as suggested, the word of Psalm 95 would have been associated with the divine word. Exposure to the word of Psalm 95 exposes readers to God. Readers are to respond with a word (account) that matches the word spoken in Psalm 95, a word of promise and challenge.

Christians come to the Bible not because of the academic or antiquarian interest of the words. They come because the Bible speaks the Word of God, the demand of God, the offer of God. God's Word is not only something to be read. It is something to be done.

"Hold Fast . . . Approach with Boldness," 4:14-16

Two exhortations are made in this unit on the basis of the high priesthood of Jesus. The first exhortation is to "hold fast to our confession" and the second is to "approach the throne of grace with boldness." These exhortations and their supporting details conclude themes developed thus far in Hebrews and also introduce topics that will be developed in following sections. The exhortation to hold fast recalls the comparison between Moses and Christ (3:1-6) and the specific declaration that "we are his house if we hold firm the confidence and pride that belongs to hope" (v. 6). The exhortation to move ahead (to "approach the throne of grace") recalls 2:17-18 where Jesus is described as being "tested by what he suffered" so that "he is able to help those who are being tested."

The basis for the challenge to "hold fast to our confession" is the fact that our high priest "has passed through the heavens" (v. 14). The passage of Jesus through the heavens (4:14) recalls the declaration of Hebrews 1:3b: "When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high." It also evokes the image of the passage of the high priest through the veil on the Day of Atonement and his entry into the holy of holies, the place of God's presence (see later discussion of Jesus' passage beyond the veil in 6:19-20; 8:1-2; 9:11; 10:20). Jesus' credentials as the "great high priest" are established. But this great high priest, at the right hand of the Majesty on high, is one who has been tested, is capable of sympathy, and is ready to dispense mercy and grace. An essential characteristic of Jesus as high priest is his capacity "to sympathize with our weaknesses." Christians may approach the throne of grace with boldness, not with timidity. Readers needed to have the sympathy of Jesus emphasized because Jesus' exalted status as high priest in heaven could imply his aloofness from weary and discouraged Christians in a hostile world. In later sections, the writer is careful to relate the designation of Jesus as high priest "according to the order of Melchizedek" to the experiences of Jesus involving suffering. The exaltation of Jesus will be stressed, but readers will know that discussions of exaltation always imply the suffering and death of Jesus. Just as the writer held different christological conceptions or traditions in tension, he held different high-priestly

The High Priest Day of Atonement

Leviticus 16:32-34 gives a summary of the action of the high priest on the Day of Atonement:

> The priest who is anointed and consecrated as priest in his father's place shall make atonement, wearing the linen vestments, the holy vestments. He shall make atonement for the sanctuary, and he shall make atonement for the tent of meeting and for the altar, and he shall make atonement for the priests and for all the people of the assembly. This shall be an everlasting statute for you, to make atonement for the people of Israel once in the year for all their sins.

The high priest first of all slaughters a bull as a sin offering for himself and his house (the priests). He then offers a special holy incense within the most holy place to hide the mercy seat so that he will not die. In the most holy place, the high priest sprinkles blood once on the front of the mercy seat and then seven times in front of the mercy seat. After purifying the most holy place on behalf of the priests, the high priest slaughters a goat for the people and repeats the ritual in the most holy place, sprinkling blood upon and before the mercy seat. Next, the high priest repeats the ritual for the tent of meeting (the outer court of the tent) and finally he atones for the altar, placing blood on the horns of the burn-offering altar and sprinkling blood on it seven times.

The blood of the priests' offering and the blood of the people's offering are apparently applied separately in the most holy place and in the tent of meeting. But the bloods of the two animals are mixed and applied together to the outer altar.

The purification in the most holy place is a dangerous procedure requiring special precautions. If these were not observed, the high priest would perish. Only the high priest (the holiest human) could enter the most holy place. The high priest wears clothing different from what he normally wears. This is special holy clothing. He bathes his entire body before officiating (in other cases priests needed only to wash their hands and feet). After the two rituals the high priest bathes again, doubtless to desanctify after working in the most holy place. Then the high priest changes to his regular priestly clothing and completes the ritual. The offering of special holy incense when entering the most holy place doubtless included an ingredient to cause a thick cloud of smoke to cover the ark.

In Hebrews, the ritual of the Day of Atonement metaphorically describes Jesus' work of salvation as a Day of Atonement ceremony performed in heaven (Heb 6–9). Jesus is the high priest of a heavenly sanctuary. He enters into the most holy place with his own blood to achieve eternal redemption for the people.

traditions in tension. The divine and the human, the eternal and the temporal, support each other in their tension. The death of the Son is the action of an eternal and exalted high priest. It has "heavenly" effects that are produced precisely through concrete human actions. As an act on the spiritual plane, the action of Christ opens a new possibility of existence for those who enter the new covenant. As an act of flesh and blood, the act of the Son leads many others to glory and can be imitated by followers of Christ. [The High Priest Day of Atonement]

CONNECTIONS

Prayer and Our Confession of Faith

The author of Hebrews indicated that there is a relationship between our confession and our prayer life. He admonished

Christians to "hold fast" to their confession and to "approach the throne of grace with boldness." Our prayer will not exceed our faith. What we believe about God and God's relationship with us is the foundation for boldness in prayer. The presentation of Jesus as the Son who descended from God's heavenly throne, participated in human history, and is now at the right hand of the Majesty on high is designed not simply to give theological information. It is designed to give readers confidence and hope. In earlier sections (1:1-4; 2:5-18), confidence and hope were the explicit themes. In 4:14-16 the focus is on the practice of prayer. The presentation of Jesus encourages boldness in prayer by emphasizing that God is approachable. A thoughtless, nonchalant approach to prayer does not recognize the audacity of believing that God hears our prayer. We do not appreciate what the author of Hebrews is saying unless we have a sense of God's majesty and stand in awe of the Holy One. Isaiah's response to the holiness and majesty of God was a confession: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips" (Isa 6:5). In the visionary experience of Isaiah, a seraph brought a live coal from the altar with a pair of tongs and touched Isaiah's mouth with it, declaring, "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out" (6:7). Isaiah's confidence brought such boldness that he could respond to the call to go speak to the people: "Here am I; send me!" (Isa 6:8).

Hebrews does not minimize the holiness of God. Indeed, the high-priestly sacrifice of Jesus Christ reinforces awareness of God's holiness. However, Hebrews emphasizes the sympathy of the one who is our high priest. Jesus not only intercedes with God on our behalf, but he does so with sympathy for our weaknesses. He is our brother who gathers his brothers and sisters back to God. Our confidence and prayer, then, is based on the foundation of theological trust.

CHRIST'S QUALIFICATIONS AS HIGH PRIEST

Hebrews 5:1-10

Hebrews 5:1-10 begins the third major section of Hebrews—"The Nature of the Son's High Priesthood"—a lengthy discussion of Jesus as high priest that continues through ch. 7. Jesus' high priesthood was hinted at in 1:3: "When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high." And it was stated explicitly in 2:17: "Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people." In 5:1–10:18, Jesus' high priesthood is the *major* theme. The writer dealt first with "The Nature of the Son's High Priesthood" (5:1–7:28) and then showed "The Superiority of the Heavenly Reality Over the Earthly Copy" (8:1–10:18).

The introduction to the lengthy section really begins with 4:14, for the presentation of Jesus in 4:14-16 serves two functions. First, it is a fitting conclusion to the theme of access to God in terms of entry into the promised land (3:1–4:13). Second, in their emphasis on Jesus as being both of the people and of God, the verses also serve as an introduction to the discussion of Jesus as high priest.

In these central chapters of Hebrews, the model used to understand Jesus is the high priest and the role the high priest played on the day of atonement. Using the analogy of the high priesthood, Jesus is both the sacrifice necessary for the entry into the holy of holies and the high priest who enters the holy of holies (the presence of God) on behalf of the people. Jesus is both the offering and offerer.

The substantive beginning of the discussion of Jesus as high priest in 5:1-10 is a comparison of Jesus and the levitical high priest. The comparison stresses the essential similarity of Jesus to the high priest (in later sections the emphasis will be on Jesus' dissimilarity to the levitical high priesthood). The comparison does not attempt to deal in an exhaustive fashion with the characteristics of biblical high priests. It focuses on attributes relevant to the theme of Christ as high priest. The comparison is organized in chiastic form with three attributes of the high priest stated and those attributes then used to understand the work of Christ.

A The Old Office of High Priest, 5:1
  B The Solidarity of the High Priest with the People, 5:2-3
    C The Humility of the High Priest, 5:4
    C' The Humility of Christ, 5:5-6
  B' The Solidarity of Christ with the People, 5:7-8
A' The New Office of High Priest, 5:9-10

COMMENTARY

"Every High Priest Chosen Among Mortals , . . ." 5:1-4

Three basic statements are made about the high priest. These attributes are made with the agenda of describing Christ from a high-priestly perspective. [Qualifications of the High Priest]

(1) The high priest's basic function is to make atonement for sins. He is "chosen from among mortals" and "put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins" (5:1; this point corresponds to the function of Christ as high priest given in 5:9-10).

(2) The note on the humanity of the high priest prepares for the next point of comparison. The high priest is subject to weakness and is, therefore, "able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward" (this point corresponds to the description of the behavior of Christ in 5:7-8). The verb used here (*metriopathein*, appearing only this one time in the Bible) means to moderate or control emotion, especially the emotion of anger. In 4:15, a stronger verb is used of the activity of Christ—"to sympathize" (*sympathēsai*). The high priest controls his anger; Christ actually sympathizes. This characteristic of the high priest is not derived from the biblical qualifications of the high priest. It is a characteristic attributed to the high priest from the perspective of Christ's role as high priest. The "ignorant and wayward" dealt with gently by the high priest does not describe two different classes of people. The two words express one idea, one class of people. The words echo the Old Testament regulation that prescribes sin offering for unwitting offenses only (see Lev 4:2; 5:21-22; Num 15:22-31; Deut 17:12).

Qualifications of the High Priest

The term "high priest" is used in reference to Aaron and his descendants who were anointed with holy oil (Lev 21:10; Num 35:25, 28; Josh 20:6). It is used for the chief priest of the temple in Jerusalem (First and Second Temples; 2 Kgs 12:11; 22:4, 8; 23:4; Neh 3:1, 20; 13:28). The term "chief priest" is an alternative for "high priest" (2 Kgs 25:18; Jer 52:24; 2 Chr 19:11; 24:11; 26:20; Ezra 7:5). But the high priest is also called "the anointed priest" (Lev 4:3) since only he has anointing oil poured on his head.

Aaron was ordained by God as the first high priest (Exod 28:1ff.). At Aaron's death, his son Eleazar was appointed to take his place (Num 20:22-29). Later Eleazar's son Phinehas was given a promise of eternal priesthood (Num 25:13). Zadok was David and Solomon's chief priest, and the priests of the First Temple times were descendants of Zadok. 1 Kgs 2:27 indicates that the high priesthood was taken away from the house of Eli and given to Zadok. Zadok, however, was a descendant of Phinehas (1 Chr 5:29).

The high priest was a sacred representative of the Israelite people. His function was ceremonial, paying homage to God on behalf of the Israelites and interceding for the Israelites in the daily sacrifices. He was consecrated for this task by having the priestly vestments placed on him:

> Then Moses brought Aaron and his sons forward, and washed them with water. He put the tunic on him, fastened the sash around him, clothed him with the robe, and put the ephod on him. He then put the decorated band of the ephod around him, tying the ephod to him with it. He placed the breastpiece on him, and in the breastpiece he put the Urim and the Thummim. And he set the turban on his head, and on the turban, in front, he set the golden ornament, the holy crown, as the LORD commanded Moses. (Lev 8:6-9)

The high priest was responsible for the atonement of sins and impurities that invaded the tabernacle and its holy place. This atonement was accomplished in the annual Yom Kippur ceremonies. The high priest also administered the divine oracles of the Urim and Thummim.

Because the high priest was to exemplify holiness, he was subject to more restrictions than the other priests:

> The priest who is exalted above his fellows, on whose head the anointing oil has been poured and who has been consecrated to wear the vestments, shall not dishevel his hair, nor tear his vestments. He shall not go where there is a dead body; he shall not defile himself even for his father or mother. He shall not go outside the sanctuary and thus profane the sanctuary of his God; for the consecration of the anointing oil of his God is upon him: I am the LORD. He shall marry only a woman who is a virgin. A widow, or a divorced woman, or a woman who has been defiled, a prostitute, these he shall not marry. He shall marry a virgin of his own kin, that he may not profane his offspring among his kin; for I am the LORD; I sanctify him. (Lev 21:10-15)

The high priest of the Second Temple period became an important political official. The high priest is not only responsible for religious life; he is also chief administrator of internal secular policy and the representative of the Jewish community in all matters of external diplomacy. The development of high priestly powers reached a peak under the Hasmoneans. Even during the period of Jewish independence when Hasmonean rulers were designated as king, it was considered essential to retain the title of "high priest." The title of high priest perhaps was even more valued than the monarchy. With the Roman conquest of Judah and Herodian rule, the office of high priest became a political tool in the hands of the administration. By the end of the Second Temple period, the high priest was considered only a religious functionary of the Roman administration. Even the garments of the high priest were entrusted to local Roman procurators and handed over to the priests just before the various festivals.

Leviticus 4:1-3, 13-14: Offerings for Unintentional Sin

Lev 4:1–5:13 gives the instructions for administering the sin offering required for one who had unintentionally violated the LORD's commandments. The first set of instructions pertained to a priest who had committed an unintentional transgression.

> The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the people of Israel, saying: When anyone sins unintentionally in any of the LORD's commandments about things not to be done, and does any one of them:
>
> If it is the anointed priest who sins, thus bringing guilt on the people, he shall offer for the sin that he has committed a bull of the herd without blemish as a sin offering to the LORD. (vv. 1-3)

> If the whole congregation of Israel errs unintentionally and the matter escapes the notice of the assembly, and they do any one of the things that by the LORD's commandments ought not to be done and incur guilt; when the sin that they have committed becomes known, the assembly shall offer a bull of the herd for a sin offering and bring it before the tent of meeting. (vv. 13-14)

The statement that because of his own weakness the high priest "must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as those of the people" (5:3) takes up the perspective of 4:15, where Jesus is depicted as one tested and "yet without sin." The need for the high priest to offer sacrifice for his own sins is an interpretation of Old Testament regulations governing the high priest. Although the life of the high priest was as blameless as possible, with stricter regulations than those governing ordinary priests, the high priest was fallible and sacrifice for his sins was necessary (see Lev 4:3-12; 9:7). [Leviticus 4:1-3, 13-14: Offerings for Unintentional Sin]

(3) The final point made about the high priest is that he does not "presume to take the honor" but that he "takes it only when called by God." The understanding of Christ's appointment to the priesthood (vv. 5-6) doubtless influenced the description of the high priest's call. Nevertheless, the statement does conform to Old Testament accounts of God's designation of Aaron (Exod 28:1; Lev 8:1; Num 16–18). [The High Priest and the Pastor]

"So also Christ , . . ." 5:5-10

The second half of the comparison between the old and new high priest begins with a direct comparison of the appointments of Aaron and Christ. God called both of them. That Christ did not glorify himself as priest is established by a scriptural citation: "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek" (5:6; Ps 110:4). The appointment of Christ (instead of his presuming to

The High Priest and the Pastor

Herbert W. Chilstrom has written of the way the pastor identifies with the high priest:

We tend to think of the Old Testament priesthood as something passed on from one generation to the next within the same family. In a sense, that was the case. The tribe of Levi had specific responsibility for priestly duties.

But we are reminded in these verses that there was also a deeper root to the priestly system, one that is often overlooked. When the system operated at its best in Israel, the high priest was more than simply a Levite; he was also a person of integrity and sensitivity. As he carried the blood of the sacrifice into the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement, the high priest knew that this was a time of sacrifice for the people. But he also knew that it was a time when he himself—"beset with weakness"—needed to receive forgiveness. Thus, when he offered sacrifice it was "for his own sins as well as for those of the people."

No pastor who reads these verses can escape a profound sense of identity with the high priest. Each time a pastor conducts a service of worship there is a dual role to be filled: represent God's presence to the people and lead the people into the presence of God. But the dual function involves a danger. One can easily think of oneself as merely doing a job or filling a role. There is the danger of merely going through the motions.

The best antidote for such an attitude is to come back again and again to the point made in these verses: the pastor is also a sinner—"beset with weakness"—who needs God's mercy as much as any other member of the congregation. One's role as the called leader of the congregation does not deliver one from weakness and sin. If anything, the temptations are even greater.

And just in case we pastors are inclined to think at times that the church should be grateful that we have chosen to follow the pastoral calling, the text quickly puts us to shame with the forthright claim that even Christ "did not exalt himself to be made a high priest." Our calling to preach the word and administer the sacraments is nothing of which we can boast. The call and appointment come from God. Like everything else, it is a gift of his grace.

Herbert W. Chilstrom, *Hebrews: A New & Better Way* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 30-31.

take the honor) is the major point supported by the citation. An important secondary function of the quotation of Psalm 110:4 is to supply a scriptural basis for the priestly Christology of Hebrews. This function becomes primary in the later citations of and allusions to the text. There are more references to Psalm 110:4 in Hebrews than to any other biblical text. It is quoted here and in 7:17, 21 and alluded to eight times in chapters 5–7. Before citing Psalm 110:4, however, the writer cites the declaration of Psalm 2:11: "You are my Son, today I have begotten you." In the first four chapters (1:1–4:14), the representation of Jesus as the Son of God was dominate. The primary focus is now the priesthood or high priesthood of Jesus, but the author wants to affirm the correlation between Christ's sonship and his priesthood as well as the appointment of Christ as high priest.

Verses 7-10 form a periodic sentence with two main ideas focused on the two main verbs, "he learned" in v. 8 and "he became" in v. 9. The language of these verses is elaborate, close to hymnic style. Readers would have responded with heightened sensitivity, as to a poem or a hymn. Verse 8 forms the heart of the argument: "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered." Readers would find echoes of 4:15 and 5:2 here.

Mark 14:32-42: Jesus in Gethsemane

Heb 5:7 may have in view the Gethsemane experience of Jesus reported in the Synoptic Gospels. While the crucifixion accounts also described Jesus crying unto God while on the cross (Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34, 37; Lk 23:46), only the Gethsemane story contains Jesus' prayer for deliverance, which is the item noted in Hebrews. Mark's version of the incident is given here.

> They went to a place which was called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I pray." He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake." And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet not what I want, but what you want." He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. He came a third time, and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand."

Christ at the Mount of Olives

El Greco. 1541–1614. *Christ at the Mount of Olives*. c. 16th-17th C. Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, Hungary.

Christ is a sympathetic high priest because of his solidarity with humanity. Verse 7 prepares for v. 8 by depicting the humanity of Christ, recalling the assertion in 2:14 that "since . . . the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things." The "prayers and supplications" offered "to the one who was able to save him from death" parallel the "gifts and sacrifices" spoken of in v. 1 as offered to God by the high priest for sins. Jesus' prayers were a sacrificial offering, and "he was heard." That is, God accepted Jesus' offering. [Mark 14:32-42: Jesus in Gethsemane]

Readers today, no less than the original readers, must fill in the gaps between the description of God as "the one who was able to save him from death," the declaration that "he was heard," and

their awareness of the death of Jesus. Were the earliest readers questioning the strength of Jesus, wondering whether the weak and suffering Jesus could also be the divine Son? Is the writer, then, deliberately affirming that Jesus' death in no way means that his offering was ineffective, but quite the reverse? Of course readers are free to accept the expression "the one who is able to save him from death" as a simple circumlocution for God without any conscious relationship to Jesus' death. They are also free to conclude that Jesus' prayer was answered in that he was led out of the realm of death through resurrection, that his prayers were answered in that he was exalted and seated at God's right hand.

The text does not demand one particular reading or way of correlating the affirmation that Jesus' prayer was heard by "the one who was able to save him from death" *and* that Jesus died. The various readings are all valid. The one that is most relevant depends upon the perspective of the reader. What is clear is that Jesus was heard "because of his reverent submission." The words "reverent submission" translate a Greek word (*eulabēs*) that means "caution" or "circumspection." It can be associated with a caution growing out of fear in general or out of awe and reverence for the divine. In Hebrews the word group from which the particular word comes is used where awe before the power of God is in view (see 11:7 and 12:28). The picture presented by Hebrews, then, is one of a righteous person at prayer. Readers could not fail to view Jesus' experiences "in the days of his flesh" in light of their situation. The picture of Jesus' "reverent submission" and his learning of "obedience through what he suffered" is an indirect exhortation to readers to submit amid their suffering.

Verses 9 and 10 form the climax, showing the consequence of Christ's human experience. He was made perfect, designated "a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek," and became "the source of eternal salvation." The perfection of Christ here recalls the imagery of 2:10 and refers to Christ's preparation for his priestly office through suffering and to his exaltation to God's presence. As a result of this perfection or preparation, Christ became the "source of eternal salvation for all who obey him." The detailed treatment of Christ's eternally effective sacrifice in 8:1–10:18 is prepared for at this point. The biblical expression "eternal salvation" (see Isa 45:17) has special significance in light of the author's concept of salvation and his repeated reference to eternal things (see 6:2; 9:12, 14, 15; 13:20). The deliverance accomplished by Christ is of a different sort than the temporary deliverance provided by the levitical law (see 9:12). Christ's deliverance is not

human-made; it is heavenly and true, and it is "for all who obey him" (v. 9). Only here in Hebrews do we have the notion of Christ's followers being obedient to him, but this emphasis is appropriate to the stress in v. 8 on the obedience of Jesus. Readers would have found in v. 8 ("he learned obedience through what he suffered") an implicit exhortation to obedience and not merely an exposition of Christ's role in securing their salvation. In v. 9 the explicit call for obedience of Christians follows appropriately on the radical obedience of Jesus.

The concluding phrase of v. 10 ("having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek") is parallel to the phrase "having been made perfect." The one making Christ perfect, just as the one designating Christ high priest, is God (this is made clear in 2:10). No additional information is given here about what is involved in Christ's role as high priest according to the order of Melchizedek, but the statement has rhetorical force. In 5:6, by citation of Psalm 110:4, the point was made that God appointed Christ high priest. In the quotation, the eternity of the high priesthood is stated: "You are a priest forever." Then in the intervening verses, the incarnation and earthly ministry are traced with the result that Christ becomes the source of eternal salvation. Then again there is the affirmation that Christ has "been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek." Readers know by now that this is important, but what exactly does it mean? Readers are thus anticipating the detailed treatment of Christ as the perfect eternal high priest according to the order of Melchizedek in 7:1-28. However, this must wait until the preliminary exhortation of chapter 6.

CONNECTIONS

The Career of Jesus and the Life of Faith

Hebrews raises the question of the meaning of the life of Jesus for the life of faith. We do not have in the book of Hebrews historical accounts of Jesus' healing, feeding, debating, forgiving, and so on. We do have insight into the significance of these experiences.

(1) Jesus was one of us. He experienced life with faithfulness and obedience. He serves as our priest with sympathy and patience because of his experience of human testing. If we wish for a narra-

tive account making the same point, we can examine the accounts in Matthew and Luke of the temptations of Jesus (Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13).

(2) Jesus in his historical experiences is a model for us. His faith and obedience are examples for us to follow. In 5:7-8 we have a model of prayer and reverent submission. Again, a narrative account illustrating Jesus' prayer and reverent submission is found in the passion narratives of the Gospels (Mark 14:26-52; Matt 26:36-46; Luke 22:39-53). For the author and readers of Hebrews, this aspect of Jesus' life was undoubtedly most significant. Readers were to draw energy and encouragement from the picture of Jesus offering supplication in submissive reverence.

(3) Jesus was a model for us as one of us. Jesus is not a model for us because he acted and spoke in order to be a model. Jesus faced his own struggles, lived his own life, and, therefore, was a model. Jesus' life is not one of play-acting in order to set an example.

(4) Different aspects of Jesus' career are important for different readers. The author of Hebrews highlighted the prayer life of Jesus, which is applicable to all readers. But other aspects of Jesus' life may serve as examples for Christians today. Those who use Hebrews for preaching have the obligation to do exactly what the author of Hebrews did—match the message to the needs of the hour.

HORTATORY INTRODUCTION TO A DIFFICULT DISCUSSION, PART ONE: A CALL FOR MATURITY

Hebrews 5:11–6:3

Hebrews 5:11–6:20 is a hortatory introduction to the difficult discussion about the high priesthood of Christ. The unit may be subdivided into three parts. Part one (5:11–6:3) is a more-or-less conventional call for maturity. Part two (6:4-12) is a stern warning moderated by a confident hope. Part three (6:13-20) is a ground for this confident hope. This three-part unit comes immediately after the statement about Christ "having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek" (5:10). It begins with a declaration that "about this we have much to say that is hard to explain since you have become dull in understanding" (5:11). Then it concludes with a restatement about Jesus "having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek" (6:20). Immediately following the unit is the "difficult discussion," chapter 7 comparing the priesthood of Melchizedek and the levitical priesthood.

The unit must be read as a whole; otherwise ironic statements designed to shame the readers will be read as actual descriptions of the community, and the warnings of dire consequences will be stressed at the expense of more positive portrayals of the future of the readers. Reading the unit as a whole will allow movement from exhortation to stern warning to encouragement.

The difficulty of the discussion does not cause the writer to water it down. We often dodge teaching something difficult by claiming that our hearers could never understand the teaching. The writer faces the difficulty of the discussion and the lethargy of the readers head on.

COMMENTARY

"[Y]ou Have Become Dull in Understanding," 5:11-14

Hebrews 5:11–6:3 is a challenge to the readers to "go on toward perfection" (6:1). The challenge begins in 5:11 with a rhetorical apology for the difficulty of the discussion concerning Christ's high priesthood that quickly turns into a critique of the dullness of the readers: "About this we have much to say that is hard to understand, since you have become dull in understanding." The author's claim that the readers "have become dull in understanding" must be read in light of his later declaration that he does not want his readers to "*become* sluggish" (6:12). Although the readers have deviated from their earlier course (or are on the verge of this move), they are not in fact "infants" (see 6:4-5, 10). The writer used the metaphors of "milk" and "solid food," derived from Hellenistic popular philosophy, to contrast immaturity and maturity. Paul used the same metaphors in his pastoral letter to Corinth. [1 Corinthians 3:1-3: Paul's Admonition to Immature Christians in Corinth] ["Milk" in Hellenistic Philosophy] In order to shame his readers, the author of Hebrews set up two alternatives—adult acceptance of responsibility or infantile regression. The discussion begins with an emphasis on theological understanding, but there is quickly a move to ethical and moral understanding and practice. Maturity has ethical as well as theological consequences.

1 Corinthians 3:1-3: Paul's Admonition to Immature Christians in Corinth

In 1 Cor 3:1-3, Paul addressed Christians in Corinth who thought they were spiritually superior when they were actually infants:

> And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations?

The author referred to readers as "infants" who required milk instead of solid food because they needed to be taught the ABCs ("the basic elements") of the "oracles of God" and were unskilled in "the word of righteousness" (v. 12). The "oracles of God" may refer to the Old Testament Scriptures or to divine revelation in general. Present-day readers will understand the "word of righteousness" in which the participants are "unskilled" as referring to the Christian message of salvation. This understanding comes from appreciation of Paul's treatment of the righteousness of God in his letter to the Romans (Rom 3:21-26). Paul sees God's righteousness as God's activity in bringing men and women into a right relationship with God's self. This is on the basis of faith. In Hebrews 11:7 "right-

"Milk" in Hellenistic Philosophy

In 1 Corinthians and in Hebrews "milk" and "solid food" are used in educational contexts as they were in Hellenistic philosophy. Classical educational theory distinguished between different levels of instruction. Seneca, for example, speaks of the role of liberal studies as preparation for the reception of virtue:

> "What then," you say, "do the liberal studies contribute nothing to our welfare?" Very much in other respects, but nothing at all it all as regards virtue. For even these arts of which I have spoken, though admittedly of a low grade—depending as they do upon handiwork—contribute greatly toward the equipment of life, but nevertheless have nothing to do with virtue. And if you inquire, "Why, then, do we educate our children in the liberal studies?" it is not because they can bestow virtue, but because they prepare the soul for the reception of virtue. Just as that "primary course," as the ancients called it, in grammar, which gave boys their elementary training, does not teach them the liberal arts, but prepares the ground for their early acquisition of these arts, so the liberal arts do not conduct the soul all the way to virtue, but merely set it going in that direction. (*Epistle* 88.20)

The use of food imagery to distinguish the different levels of education seems to be natural, and it was a commonplace in Hellenistic philosophy. Milk corresponds to initial instruction suitable for children. Solid food corresponds to teaching that is appropriate for the mature. Philo's use of food imagery is illustrative of Hellenistic philosophy in general. In *On Mating with the Preliminary Studies*, Philo gives an extended treatment of the relationship of preliminary studies to virtue. He says:

> It is profitable then to take these and the like for our associates and for the field of our preliminary studies. For perhaps indeed it may be with us, as it has been with many, that through the vassals we shall come to the knowledge of the royal virtues. Observe too that our body is not nourished in the earlier stages with solid and costly foods. The simple and milky foods of infancy come first. Just so you may consider that the school subjects and the lore which belongs to each of them stand ready to nourish the childhood of the soul, while the virtues are grown-up food, suited for those who are really men. (18-19)

In *On Husbandry*, Philo said:

> But seeing that for babes milk is food, but for grown men wheaten bread, there must also be soul-nourishment, such as is milk-like, suited to the time of childhood, in the shape of the preliminary stages of school learning and, such as is adapted to grown men, in the shape of instructions leading the way through wisdom and temperance and all virtue. (9; see also Philo, *On the Migration of Abraham* 29; *On Dreams that are God-Sent* 2.9; *Every Good Man Is Free* 160; Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.16.39 and 3.24.9)

Paul uses food imagery in his discussion with the Corinthians. Probably responding to charges that he did not give them the "solid food" or spiritual instruction, Paul sarcastically responds that the Corinthians were not ready because they were fleshly people. True wisdom (solid food), Paul says later, consists in the proclamation of Christ crucified. This was in fact the basic doctrine (milk) that he preached (see 1 Cor 2:6-8; 3:18-23). In Hebrews, milk is a figure for the basic elements of divine teaching, the ele-

eousness" and "faith" are linked, and this linkage would support an understanding of the "word of righteousness" as the Christian message. But the "word of righteousness" here doubtless means "right words" or "normal speech." Being skilled in the "word of righteousness" and being able "to distinguish good from evil" are descriptions of the same thing. The ethical branch of Hellenistic philosophy dealt with the distinguishing of things good, bad, and indifferent. The author's philosophical background could be influential here, with the author describing mature Christians as those who have ethical perception. Their ability, according to the author

of Hebrews, comes through training by practice. Here, metaphors from athletics are used. Mature people have their sense organs trained through practice or habit. Although the author set up alternatives of infancy and maturity, he did suggest how maturity is to be achieved—through practice or exercise. [Athletics in the Ancient World] [Arrested Development]

Athletics in the Ancient World

Athletics played an important role in the ancient world, and preachers of moral philosophy regularly compared life to engagement in an athletic contest. Athletic imagery occurs so frequently in Hellenistic-Jewish sources that it must have been common in synagogue preaching. So it is no surprise that athletic imagery is used throughout Hebrews to dramatize the character of Christian experience (5:14; 10:32, 33; 11:33; 12:4, 11).

Philo refers to athletic contests, particularly the Olympic contests. In *On Husbandry*, he cautions that the crown that is aimed at is not won in contests of pitiless savagery. It is not a matter of fleetness of foot, in which puny animals surpass men. The crown is won in the holy contest—the only true Olympic games. Entrants for these games, though weaker in body, are strongest in soul.

The classical games in Greece were the Olympic Games at Olympia, the Pythian Games at Delphi, the Nemean Games at Nemea, and the Isthmian Games at Corinth. The popularity of these games led later to the introduction of similar festivals in nearly 150 cities, such as Rome, Naples, Odessa, Antioch, and Alexandria. Of all the games, those staged in Olympia are the most famous (see "Olympic Games," *The New Encyclopedia Britannica: Macropaedia*, 1992 ed.). The games were staged in the valley of Olympia where the Greeks erected statures and built temples in a grove dedicated to Zeus. The ivory and gold statue of Zeus created in Olympia by the sculptor Phidias was considered one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. The games were held every four years between August 6 and September 19. They were so important that time was measured by the interval between the games (an Olympiad).

The earliest records of the games (776 BC) speak of only one event, the *stad*. This was a footrace of one length of the track (about 210 yards). Other events were added over the years—a two-length race (the *diaulos*) in 724 BC and four years later a long-distance race (the *dolichos*). Wrestling and the pentathlon were introduced in 708 BC. The pentathlon consisted of the long jump, javelin throw, discus throw, footrace, and wrestling. Boxing was added in 688 BC and the chariot race in 680 BC. In 648 BC the pancration became a part of the games. This was a kind of no-holds-barred wrestling. Kicking and hitting were permitted. Only gouging and biting were forbidden.

From time to time other events were added, and the length of time for the games was extended from one day to four days, with a fifth day devoted to closing ceremonies—presentation of prizes and a banquet for the champions.

When Greece lost its independence to Rome (the mid-second century BC), the support for the games at Olympia and other places fell off considerably. Nevertheless, the Romans realized the value of the Greek games and the emperors staged athletic games similar to the Greek festivals. By the fourth century AD, Rome had more than 150 holidays for games. Included were chariot racing in the hippodrome and horseracing in the Circus Maximus. The contests that really interested the Romans were the fighting events—wrestling, boxing, and the pancratium. The Greeks had organized their games for the competitors. The Romans, however, organized the games for entertainment.

The gymnasium was important for the athletic games and also goes back to ancient Greece, where the literal meaning of the Greek word gymnasium was "school for naked exercise." Every important Greek city had a gymnasium, usually built by the state. The gymnasium grew from a gathering place for the performance of exercise to an imposing structure with special areas for contests, training quarters, dressing rooms, and baths. The term "gymnastics" was used in ancient Greece to apply to all exercises practiced in the gymnasium. Many of these exercises came to be incorporated into the Olympic Games and later became separate sports. After the Olympic Games were abolished in AD 393, gymnastics disappeared with other sports until revived in the 18th and 19th centuries. The Olympic Games themselves were revived and made international in 1896.

Arrested Development

William Barclay distinguished between the "childlike" spirit and the "childish" spirit:

> A case of arrested development is always a pathetic thing; and the world is full of people whose religious development has been arrested. They refuse to grow up. They stopped learning years ago; their thought is still the thought of a child; their conduct is still the conduct of a child. It is true that Jesus said that the greatest thing in the world is the *childlike* spirit; but there is a world of difference between the *childlike* and the *childish* spirit. Peter Pan, the boy who would not grow up, makes a charming play on the stage; but Peter Pan, the man and the woman who will not grow up, make a tragedy in real life. Let us have a care lest we are still in the religion of childhood when we should have reached the faith of maturity. Let us have a care that we are not still behaving like children when we should be behaving like men and women full grown.

William Barclay, The Letter to the Hebrews, *Daily Study Bible* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1957), 50.

"[L]et Us Go On Toward Perfection," 6:1-3

In 6:1, the hortatory subjunctive is used, urging "[L]et us go on toward perfection." The passive form of the verb "to bear" or "to carry" (*pherō*) is used and could be translated "let us be carried on." For "perfection" the author uses a noun (*teleiotēs*) related to the verb (*teleioō*) used in describing Christ's being made perfect (2:10; 5:9) and to Christ's making perfect those who are sanctified (10:14). Here, the word "perfection" ought to be understood as "maturity," describing the ones who eat solid food instead of milk, "whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil" (5:14). The appropriation of the solid food involves becoming aware of how Christ as the perfected high priest perfects his followers. This perfection consists of forgiveness and access to God through Christ's death, but it also involves a future dimension as Christians follow their leader to the perfection of heavenly glory (2:10; 6:20).

The readers are urged to leave behind "the basic teaching about Christ" and not to lay again "the foundation." The writer did not advise readers to reject basic teachings. Such instructions constitute "the foundation," however, and not the superstructure. The NRSV translates as "the basic teaching about Christ" a Greek expression that literally says "the teaching (or word) of the beginning of Christ" (*ton tēs archēs tou Christou logon*). Both of these genitives are ambiguous. "Of the beginning" doubtless modifies teaching ("basic teaching"). It is clear from the context that readers are urged to leave behind a basic word or message. This word ("of Christ") could be "the basic teaching about Christ" as indicated in the NRSV or the basic teaching proclaimed by Christ.

The basic teaching to be transcended in the move to maturity is listed in barest form (six items). The first and second items are "repentance from dead works" and "faith toward God." The call to repentance was rooted in Old Testament piety and was part of the message of Christ and the early church. [Repentance] "Dead works" is a phrase also used in 9:14 as an equivalent for sins. "Faith toward God" accompanies the call to repentance (to turn). Faith is not simply belief in the existence of God (11:7) but trust in God, fidelity toward God. The final four items are "instruction about baptisms," "laying on of hands," "resurrection of the dead," and "eternal judgment." "Baptisms" (plural) is not simply Christian baptism. It may refer to purification by the blood of Christ (9:9-10, 19; 10:22) or to purification rites used in Christian circles in addition to baptism as an initiatory rite. "Laying on of hands" was action that accompanied baptism, healings, commissionings, and ordinations. Since the expression is used here in the context of elementary teachings, it probably refers to the "confirmation" following baptism (see Acts 8:17; 19:6). "Resurrection of the dead"

Repentance

In both the OT and NT, repentance involves both "feeling guilty" and rectification of the wrong and restitution for the consequences of the wrongful action. John Hayes has shown how this understanding of repentance is operative in the OT in descriptions of certain cultic processes. Deliberate sin disrupts the harmonious relationship between people and God. Lev 6:1-7 and Num 5:6-8 outline the steps required to restore the relationship. Hayes identifies four stages in the process. First, the wrongdoer, who has consciously and deliberately committed the offense, without being caught or convicted becomes remorseful (Heb. *'asam*; when used without an object, it means "feels guilty" rather than "becomes guilty). Second, this internal remorse is followed by a public confession. Wrong committed unintentionally does not require this step. Third, the wrongdoer must make restitution to the victim in full, plus twenty percent. Fourth, if the wrongdoer had previously sworn innocence in the name of God, thereby making God an accomplice, the wrongdoer must seek expiation by making a reparation offering (also called *'asam* = "guilt offering") to God.

The combination of restitution with repentance is evident in the rabbinical literature of later Judaism, too. The Mishnaic tractate on the Day of Atonement exemplifies rabbinic teaching on repentance. "If a man said, 'I will sin and repent, and sin again and repent,' he will be given no chance to repent. . . . For transgressions that are between men and God the Day of Atonement effects atonement, but for transgressions that are between a man and his fellow the day of Atonement effects atonement only if he has appeased his fellow" (*m. Yoma* 8:8-9).

The joining of repentance and restitution is also found in the NT. Both John the Baptist and Jesus confronted their audiences with a call to repentance. According to Luke, John the Baptist called for "fruits worthy of repentance" (3:8) and then elaborated on the corrective actions required, such as giving to those in need and not cheating or extorting (3:11-14). Jesus joined his announcement of the arrival of the kingdom of God with the urgency of repentance (Mark 1:15). Similar to John the Baptist, he called for the restoration of right relationships between humans as a part of the restoration of right relationship with God (Matt 5:23-24; Luke 6:27-31; 19:8-9). This radical reorientation of the demands of human relationships required for entry into the kingdom of God closely links repentance to conversion. Elsewhere in the NT, repentance is associated with a change in attitude or morality (2 Cor 7:9-10; 12:21; Rom 2:4). Repentance may also be linked to a reaffirmation of faith (Rev 2:5, 16, 21-22; 3:3, 19). Hebrews 6:4-6, however, seems to disallow the validity of repentance as reaffirmation, arguing that one cannot deny the faith and be "restored again to repentance."

See John H. Hayes, "Repentance," *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (Macon: Mercer Dictionary of the Bible, 1990), 753-54.

and "eternal judgment" are doctrines of early Christianity, a heritage from the eschatological expectations of Judaism. [Early Christian Rites]

Not only the individual items but also the list of six as a whole are capable of different interpretation. The six could represent such things as (1) a programmatic summary of the gospel, (2) a formula for instruction of new members, (3) a selection of particularly significant or problematic items from a longer list that provided instruction for new members, (4) foundational items related to the high priestly Christology developed in the following chapters (with "dead works" seen as external regulations associated with the levitical priesthood and the earthly sanctuary, for example). In any case,

Early Christian Rites

For the first decades, the Jewish Christians continue their participation in synagogue activities and in temple-based events in Jerusalem (prayer, sacrifice, annual feasts). Gentile converts did not enjoy some of the Jewish resources (temple worship), nor did they enjoy the multiplicity of impressive expressions of religion in the pagan world. Early Christians, Jewish and Gentile, however, adopted many liturgical practices of Judaism, including public reading of Scripture, exhortation, and teaching.

The principle rite whereby individuals became members of Christian congregations was baptism. This rite involved the invocation of Jesus' name and reflected the belief that Jesus is the living guarantor of salvation for those who trust him. Paul describes the baptized as having "clothed yourselves with Christ" (Gal 3:27) and as having been "buried with him [Christ] by baptism into death" (Rom 6:4). The laying on of hands was a ritual used at baptism (Acts 8:14-17; 19:5-6). It was also used at healings, to set aside believers for special tasks in the church (Acts 6:6; 13:3), and to ordain church leaders (1 Tim 4:14; 5:22).

The Lord's Supper was a Christian practice from the earliest days. Paul in 1 Cor 11:17-34 corrected certain misbehavior that took place in the context of a common meal associated with the Lord's Supper. This common meal came to be known as the *agape* or love feast (Jude 12). In a letter to the Emperor Trajan, Pliny speaks of the Christians' custom "to depart and to assemble again to partake of food—but ordinary and innocent food" after an earlier period of worship (*Letters* 96-97).

Invocation and confession of Jesus go back to the earliest decades of Christianity. An Aramaic phrase transliterated into Greek in 1 Cor 16:22 as *Marana tha*—"Our Lord come!"—was an acclamation or invocation used in the worship of Aramaic-speaking Christians. In Rom 10:9-13, Paul speaks of confessing "Jesus is Lord" (see 1 Cor 12:3; Phil 2:11).

Direct evidence for Scripture reading and preaching goes back to Justin Martyr (c. 100–163/5). He described the assembly of worshipers on Sunday and indicates that portions of the Gospels and Prophets were read followed by preaching about what had been read. After that there was prayer and the Lord's Supper (*Apology* 1.67). Preaching played an important role in early Christian worship in general, not just in conjunction with the reading of Scripture. Paul indicates that another common feature for Christian worshipers was prophetic speech—oracles delivered as revelation (1 Cor 12:10; Rom 12:8).

Several New Testament passages testify to the prominent place of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in worship (1 Cor 14:26; Col 3:16-17; Eph 5:18-27; Jas 5:14; Acts 16:25). And scholars have shown that a number of NT passages incorporate hymns used in first-century Christian worship.

Evidence exists in the NT of a kiss of Christian liturgical fellowship. Paul refers to the "holy kiss" (Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Thess 5:26; see also 1 Pet 5:14). In the earliest period, the kiss was exchanged with members of one's own sex and the opposite sex. In later years, there was an attempt to restrict the holy kiss to members of one's own sex (see *Apostolic Constitutions* 2.7; 8. 2. 10).

Early Christian rites encouraged solidarity and intimacy, full enfranchisement of different groups as God's redeemed people, and the sense of divine gifting. The house-church setting of early Christian worship (as over against the synagogue and temple) was important for the effectiveness of early Christian worship.

the writer can mention them without comment. They are familiar to the readers. Moreover, to go into detail would cause the writer to become bogged down in what he considered preliminary matters and would have contradicted his exhortation to move on. The crisp staccato-style listing of the foundations fits the purpose of the author.

CONNECTIONS

Pressing Forward Toward Maturity

Pastors and church members must be diligent to continue to press forward toward maturity. The list of "basic teachings about Christ" that are *not* to serve as the final answer resemble fundamentals that have been established by different religious groups. Hebrews 6:1-2 was even adopted at one time as a six-point confessional standard by a group called Six Principal Baptists. These Six Principal Baptists emphasized repentance, faith, baptism, laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal life. Fundamentalists in America established another set of "fundamentals": inerrant Bible, literal virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, physical resurrection, and literal return of Jesus to earth.

By any such set of "fundamentals," Christian minds may become locked into a propositional prison that prohibits advancement toward maturity. The Radical Reformers, including Baptists, had to move beyond the "fundamentals" established by the mainline reformation leaders. John Robinson, the minister who led a group of Separatists from England to Holland in 1608, stated the need to be ready to move forward toward maturity in his plea to the group of Pilgrims before they left for America in 1620. After upbraiding the Lutherans and Calvinists for failure to move beyond what was said by Luther or Calvin, Robinson declared: "I beseech you remember it is an article of your church covenant, that you be ready to receive whatever truth shall be made known to you from the written word of God."

Baptists at their best have recognized the need to express their faith in confessions and to treat those confessions as fallible guidelines and not as final infallible statements. The preamble to the statement adopted in 1963 by the Southern Baptist Convention reads:

> A living faith must experience a growing understanding of truth and must be continually interpreted and related to the needs of each new generation. Throughout their history Baptist bodies, both large and small, have issued statements of faith which comprise a consensus of their beliefs. Such statements have never been regarded as complete, infallible statements of faith, nor as official creeds that carry mandatory authority. Thus this generation of Southern Baptists is in historic succession of intent and purpose as it endeavors to state for its time and theological climate those articles of the Christian faith which are the most surely held among us.

The book of Hebrews is witness to cooperation between a Christian leader and a congregation in an attempt to move beyond narrow "fundamentals." The continued existence of the book of Hebrews and its use, for example, by the pastor of the church at Rome in a letter to the Corinthian church is witness to its positive reception by members of the congregation. The book itself, of course, is evidence that the pastor did not hold back and did not attempt to maintain control by withholding conversation about matters theological, christological, and ethical. Many pastors have not yet appreciated the capacity of their congregations to benefit from such mature conversation and preaching. Likewise, perhaps members of some congregations have not served to encourage their preachers to engage in such mature preaching. The book of Hebrews challenges every generation of Christians: "Let us go on toward perfection."

HORTATORY INTRODUCTION TO A DIFFICULT DISCUSSION, PART TWO: WARNING AND HOPE

Hebrews 6:4-12

This unit parallels the previous section that contrasted infantile regression with progression toward perfection or maturity. In place of infantile regression on the part of the readers, the author spoke in abstract terms of falling away. He also compared those who fall away with soil that is "worthless and on the verge of being cursed." Contrasted with this is the anticipated realization on the part of the readers of the "full assurance of hope" and the inheritance of "the promises." The unit then falls into three parts: a warning (vv. 4-6), an analogy from agriculture (vv. 7-8), and words of encouragement (vv. 9-12).

COMMENTARY

A Warning, 6:4-6

The author first of all stated the impossibility of restoring "again to repentance" those who have "fallen away" or are guilty of apostasy (turning away from the living God, 3:12). [Apostasy] This impossibility is not stated in psychological terms, in terms of limits upon human experience. It is not even stated in theological terms per se that limit God's sovereignty. It is stated in logical terms: "It is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened . . . and then have fallen away, since on their own they are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him up to contempt" (vv. 4, 6). Christ's death is decisive; it is the only way to genuine cleansing of conscience and forgiveness of sin. Those who reject that foundation have rejected the necessary presupposition of repentance. By definition, then, they cannot repent—it is not possible.

Apostasy

ΑΩ The word "apostasy" is taken from the Greek noun *apostasia*, which is itself derived from *apostatēs*, a term generally used to refer to a person guilty of political rebellion or abandonment, as in the apocryphal book of 1 Esdras (2:23; LXX 2:17), where *apostastai* (plural) refers to those Jews rebelling against the Persian king. The Greek OT (LXX) also uses the various nouns and verbs of this word family to refer to one who has rebelled, or abandoned, the Mosaic law or the command of God (cf. Josh 22:23; 2 Chr 29:19; 33:19; Jer 2:19; see also 2 Macc 5:8).

This latter sense of religious rebellion appears in the NT. In Acts 21:21, Paul is accused of abandoning the law of Moses. In 2 Thess 2:3, an element of Jewish apocalyptical tradition is evident in the prediction that a "rebellion" (*apostasia*) must occur before the return of Christ. In Heb 6:6, another term, *parapiptō* ("fall away"), actually appears. Often translated as "commit apostasy." *Parapiptō* here seems to refer to an abandonment of the faith under the pressure of persecution.

See Watson E. Mills, "Apostasy," *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1990), 47.

The argument begins with different metaphors used in an impersonal way to indicate "those who" have entered the Christian community. Not until v. 9 is this distance between the author and those in mind in the description of apostasy removed. At that point (after describing the fate of those who fall away), the author addressed the readers as "beloved" and declared that "we are confident of better things in your case." The metaphors for entry into the Christian community include enlightenment, tasting the heavenly gift, sharing in the Holy Spirit, and tasting the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come.

"Those who have once been enlightened" begins the characterization of those who have entered the Christian community. The term "once" (*hapax*) qualifies not only enlightenment but also each of the other positive statements. It could be translated "once for all," and it signifies the definitive occurrence of each of the events. "Enlightened" is used in the New Testament to refer metaphorically to removal of ignorance through the preaching of the gospel and the action of God (see John 1:9; 1 Cor 4:5; 2 Cor 4:4-6; Eph 1:18; Rev 18:1). [2 Corinthians 4:4-6: Paul's Use of the Metaphor of Enlightenment] The renewal of mind and life is signified. In a later period in the life of the church, the term "enlightened" came to be associated with the act of baptism. As an act, baptism signifies enlightenment.

2 Corinthians 4:4-6: Paul's Use of the Metaphor of Enlightenment

Heb 5:11 asserts that some of the intended readers had become "dull in understanding." Paul depicted such people as having a veil over their faces that prevented them from seeing the truth. Like the "dull" among the audience of Hebrews, they were unable to see the "light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

> Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

At this point in Hebrews, however, spiritual and intellectual illumination is the subject. [Baptism as Enlightenment]

Those who "have tasted the heavenly gift" is the second way of describing those who have experienced Christian faith. "Tasting" is a common metaphor for experiencing something personally. The "heavenly gift" refers to salvation with all that is involved. "Heavenly" for the author of Hebrews means what is ultimately true, what is real. Those experiencing salvation "have shared in the Holy Spirit." Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit as the token of the fullness of the riches of God, as a promise (Gal 3:14), the first fruit (Rom 8:23), and a down payment (2 Cor 1:22). Hebrews 2:4 speaks of the "gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will." At that point, the "gifts" (plural) refer to what the Holy Spirit

Baptism as Enlightenment

Baptism and enlightenment are important in the NT. In John 1:9, Jesus is spoken of as "the true light, which enlightens everyone." Ephesians speaks of Christians having "the eyes of your heart enlightened" (1:18). 2 Timothy speaks of Jesus Christ "who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (1:10). "To enlighten" means to bring about spiritual or intellectual illumination, to remove ignorance through the preaching of the gospel.

Baptism, on the other hand (coming from the Greek word meaning "to plunge" or "to immerse") symbolizes burial into Christ's death, from which the believer rises up as a new creature (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15). Titus speaks of God's salvation "according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (3:5), and the Gospel of John speaks of being born of "water and spirit" (3:5). But the New Testament does not explicitly refer to baptism as enlightenment. As William L. Lane says, "Illumination is not effected, but rather attested by baptism."

The explicit use of "enlightenment" as a technical designation for baptism is found in Justin Martyr (c. 100–163/5). In baptism, the Holy Spirit brings new birth (John 3:3-4). Baptism is illumination by the Logos, an illumination that empowers the believer to live a truly moral life. For Justin Martyr, baptism is illumination, and this understanding of baptism gained in popularity after the time of Justin.

> I will also relate the manner in which we dedicated ourselves to God when we had been made new through Christ; lest, if we omit this, we seem to be unfair in the explanation we are making. As many as are persuaded and believe that what we teach and say is true, and undertake to be able to live accordingly, are instructed to pray and to entreat God with fasting, for the remission of their sins that are past, we praying and fasting with them. Then they are brought by us where there is water, and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated. For, in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing with water. . . .
>
> And for this [rite] we have learned from the apostles this reason. Since at our birth we were born without our own knowledge or choice, by our parents coming together, and were brought up in bad habits and wicked training; in order that we may not remain the children of necessity and of ignorance, but may become the children of choice and knowledge, and may obtain in the water the remission of sins formerly committed, there is pronounced over him who chooses to be born again, and has repented of his sins, the name of God the Father and Lord of the universe; he who leads to the laver the person that is to be washed calling him by this name alone. For no one can utter the name of the ineffable God; and if any one dare to say that there is a name, he raves with a hopeless madness. And this washing is called illumination, because they who learn these things are illuminated in their understandings. And in the name of Jesus Christ, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and in the name of the Holy Ghost, who through the prophets foretold all things about Jesus, he who is illuminated is washed. (*First Apology* 61.12)

William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* (WBC; Dallas: Word Books, 1991), 141.

has given to those who heard and responded to the gospel. Here the emphasis is sharing the Spirit, not the gifts the Spirit distributes.

The final two characteristics of those who have experienced salvation are joined by the author in speaking of those who "have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come." "Powers of the age to come" recalls the description in chapter 2 of the manner in which the message of salvation was verified (2:3-4). The "goodness of the word" recalls the theme of the word of God in the first four chapters. Here *goodness* is stressed. Not only is the word powerful and certain; it is also good. God is active on our behalf. Nothing necessary is lacking for us to enter God's rest.

The metaphorical description of salvation is powerful and elaborate. Then comes an abrupt statement about falling away: "It is impossible to restore to repentance those who have . . . fallen away." "Falling away" (*parapiptō*) refers to the specific sin of apostasy. In 3:12 the author had warned against apostasy: "Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God." The word translated "turns away" comes from the Greek verb to commit apostasy (*apostēnai*). Falling away or apostasy is as definitive as the once-for-all entry into the Christian life. It is definitive in the sense that those who fall away cannot be restored. Two reasons are given for this impossibility: those who fall away are "crucifying again the Son of God" and they are "holding him up to contempt." These two actually form one idea. First of all, such people "on their own . . . are crucifying again the Son of God" (6:6). The word translated "crucify again" by the NRSV (*anastauroō*) is regularly used with the simple meaning "to crucify." The prefix *ana* can have the force "again," but it can also have the force "up," to "hang up on a cross," instead of "again." Regardless, the apostates join in the rejection of Christ involved in the crucifixion. This act, then, involves not only the abandonment of the fellowship of believers but the abandonment of God and God's word. In this rejection of Christ, they "hold him up to contempt" (*paradeigmatizō*). The term is used in classical and Jewish texts to refer to a shameful crucifixion or a public hanging. The description of apostates in 10:29 parallels the description here. The apostates are "those who have spurned the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified, and outraged the spirit of grace." The language is rhetorical. Every reader or hearer of the description of apostasy would be repulsed. That is exactly the agenda of the author of

Hebrews—to picture alternatives in such a way as to leave readers with one choice, to be "imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (6:12).

An Analogy from Agriculture, 6:7-8

An illustration from agriculture reinforces the warning against apostasy, showing the impossibility of a second repentance. "Those who 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 powers of the age to come" are analogous to "ground that drinks up the rain falling on it repeatedly." Those who produce "a crop useful to those for whom it is cultivated" are analogous to those who are going toward maturity. And those who produce "thorns and thistles" are analogous to those who fall away. The end of those who produce a crop is "a blessing from God," while the end of those who produce thorns and thistles is "to be burned over." Readers respond to this illustration from agriculture as it supports the message of the previous section and carries echoes of Old Testament texts that speak of thorn and thistles, blessings and curses, including the fruitless vineyard of Isaiah 5:1-7 (see Gen 3:17-18; Deut 11:26-28).

Words of Encourgement, 6:9-12

The bleak perspective for renegades to the faith is designed to elicit a response from the readers. But the confident tone of vv. 9-12 has the same design. It is especially effective against the background of the earlier warning and analogy from agriculture. Readers of the New Testament are familiar with the rhetorical function of expressions of confidence from the letters of Paul (see 1 Thess 2:19-20; Rom 15:14; 2 Cor 7:4, 16; 9:1-2; Gal 5:10; Phlm 21; 2 Thess 3:4; 2 Tim 1:5.) Along with the positive and encouraging tone is a change from the impersonal "those who" of the warning (6:4) to a personal and direct "you," used in every statement of vv. 9-12. Moreover, the writer used the affectionate "beloved" in addressing his readers. This is a feature of the rhetorical or homiletical style and is found frequently in New Testament letters (see 1 Cor 10:14; 15:58; 2 Cor 7:1; 12:10; 1 John 2:7; 4:1).

A literal translation of the first sentence of the section shows the contrast with earlier sections: "We have been persuaded, beloved, in your case, of better things that involve salvation, even if we speak in this way." The NRSV places the phrase "even though we speak

in this way" at the beginning of v. 9, and this placement causes a delay in observing the dramatic change of tone. The "better things" that "belong to salvation" relate to the agricultural illustration just used. The community is like the ground that "receives a blessing from God" because it "produces a crop useful to those for whom it is cultivated."

The author has been persuaded (and is therefore certain or sure) that the readers are not on the verge of being cursed and burned over like the ground that produces thorns and thistles. The fact that God is not unjust is the basis for this persuasion; this means that God will not overlook the past and present record of the readers' work and love in serving the saints. The commonly accepted theme of God's judgment on the basis of works is evident here (see Gal 6:4; Rom 2:6-7; 1 Cor 3:13-15; John 6:29; 17:4; Rev 22:12; 1 Pet 1:17).

The first appearance in Hebrews of the triad faith, hope, and love (*pistis, elpis, agapē*) is found here in the author's commendation of his readers. The work of love is cited in v. 10; and in vv. 11 and 12 the author expressed the desire that each one of the readers would show the same diligence in display of hope and faith (see 1 Thess 1:3, which links the "work of faith," the "toil of love," and "endurance of hope," and Rev 2:19, which lists "works—your love, faith, service, and patient endurance"). In Hebrews 10:22-24, the triad reappears in the order of faith, hope, and love.

The love of the readers was expressed in their serving the saints. The word for "serving" (*diakoneō*, from which we get the word "deacon") was used in the early church to refer to a wide range of ministries (see Matt 20:28; Rom 15:25; Acts 6:1-3; 2 Cor 9:10; 1 Pet 1:12). The writer stressed the present service by repeating the present-tense form of the verb after using the past-tense form. We would translate the sentence in the following fashion to stress the past and present service: "the love that you showed for his sake since you performed service for the saints and are still performing service." Instead of repeating the verb, the NRSV gives a more elegant translation: "in serving the saints [past tense] as you still do [present tense]." The work of love is "for his sake" (Greek: "for his name"). This phrase indicates that the ministry of love is caused by and directed ultimately toward God. The account of the great judgment in Matthew 25:31-46 vividly depicts service to one's fellows as service to God. [Matthew 25:34-40: Service to One's Fellows Is Service to God] Hebrews 13:15-16 implies this same connection between good works and praise to God. The service for the saints in the past is given in detail in 10:34: "For you had compassion for

Matthew 25:34-40: Service to One's Fellows Is Service to God

Hebrews stresses faithful, persistent service to members of the church. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus indicates that failure to render such service results in a negative verdict at the final judgment.

> Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

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those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting."

In vv. 11 and 12 the writer became more personal ("each of you") and more passionate. The NRSV translates as "we want" a Greek verb (*epithoumen*) that is strong, indicating desire or passion ("we passionately desire"). [Word Study of *epithymia*] When the word is used with less noble feelings, the meaning is "to lust" or "to covet." What is passionately desired is that each of his readers "show the same diligence" (or "zeal") as they had in the past. The verb "to show" (*endeiknysthai*) used in v. 10 ("show love") is used in v. 11 ("show diligence"). This duplication of the verb and the use of the word "same" indicate that the diligence or zeal desired is that of loving service. The goal of this diligence ("loving service") is the realization of "the full assurance of hope to the very end." Christian convictions translated into action such as that described here and in 10:34 express the sort of hope that distinguishes Christians from other communities. What "the very end" means is seen in 3:14 and 9:28 where Christ appears a second time, "not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him" (9:28).

In the final verse (v. 12), the author gave the motivation for the extended exhortation in 5:11–6:12. The aim of the author was that the readers not become sluggish but imitators of "those who through faith and patience inherit the promises." The readers will be prepared for the development in 11:1–12:3, including the roll call of heroes and heroines. One of those heroes is particularly in mind at this point—Abraham. The following section cites

Abraham as the example of one who inherited the promises through faith and patience.

Word Study of *epithymia*

AΩ The Greek words *epithymia/epithymeō* and the English words "desire"/"to desire" are similar in that they can be used positively, negatively, or in a neutral sense (for a fuller word study, see Friedrich Büchsel, "*Thēmos, epthymia,* etc," *TDNT* 3, 167-72). They can be used in a neutral way, with the adjective "evil" or "sinful" added to indicate the negative sense. They can also be used without any addition to indicate base and ungodly desire. And they can be used of pious striving. These uses can be found in classical Greek and in the writings of Hellenistic Judaism. In 4 Maccabees, for example, the author stresses that what rules over the impulsive in human beings is reason. The impulsive includes first of all desire (*epithymia*) with which are ranged pleasure, fear, and sorrow. "Thus desire precedes pleasure and delight follows it. Fear precedes pain and sorrow comes after" (1:22-23). Desire arises out of sensuality and sexuality (1:3; 2:4-5; 3:11-16). In Josephus desire (*epithymia*) is used mainly with a neutral meaning. In *The Jewish Antiquities*, Josephus has Alexander speak to Glaphyra: "For though you were betrothed and married to me as a virgin, and children were born to us, you let yourself forget my love in your desire [*epithymia*] to marry again" (17.352). In speaking of Nehemiah, Josephus says, "Nehemiah . . . held out unwearyingly and in his eagerness [*epithymia*] about the work was insensible of the hardship" (*Ant* 11.176). But Josephus also used the term for "sinful desire" or "lust." He speaks of Joseph's admonitions to the wife of the pharaoh of Egypt: "He recalled to her mind her marriage and wedded life with her husband and besought her to pay more regard to these than to the transient pleasure of lust [*epithymia*] that would bring subsequent remorse" (*Ant* 2.51).

In the NT, *epithymia* and *epithymeō* may be used in a neutral way to speak of the natural desire of hunger or longing for anything good. Luke 15:16 uses *epithymeō* to speak of the prodigal son's being glad to fill himself with the pods that the pigs were eating. In Luke 16:21 the word is used of Lazarus's longing to (*epithymeō*) satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table. Mostly, however, *epithymia* and *epithymeō* indicate evil desire. At times it is obvious that evil desire is involved because of additional information in the text. Matt 5:8 uses the term: "But I say you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust [*epithymia*] has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Mark 4:19 speaks of "the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire [*epithymia*] for other things" which "come in and choke out the word." At times *epithymia* and *epithymeō* are used to indicate sinful desire without any additional information. In Romans, the commandment not to covet (from Exod 20:15) uses the verb *epithymeō*.

Paul sees desire (*epithymia*) as a manifestation of sin that dwells in humans and controls them. Sin, then, is dead apart from the desire stirred up by law (Rom 7:7-8). James regards *epithymia* as the root of the individual acts of sin (1:14-15). 1 John points out a connection between desire and the world. Desire arises out of the world. It constitutes the essence of the world and perishes with the world.

In the New Testament, *epithymia* is seen as impulsive desire, a result of the will. It is anxious self-seeking. It is lust. When the author of Hebrews uses *epithymeō*, he is using a strong term to speak of his desire. This is his earnest desire. The readers would have used the verb *epithymeō* and the noun *epithymia* with the sexual connotations, and they would recognize the daring use the author made of language in challenging them to "realize the full assurance of hope to the very end" (6:11).

CONNECTIONS

An Account of the Martyrdom of Polycarp

In the situation of severe persecution in the early church, the acknowledgment of being a Christian could result in violent death. Christians were brought before Roman magistrates and told, "If you will deny Christ, I will let you go." The case of Polycarp (c. 69–155) is illuminating. Polycarp was called to experience martyrdom as an old man. We learn of his death in a letter from the church of Smyrna to the church of Philomelium. The letter is known as the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. The following selections from that letter tell of the experience of Polycarp:

> The church of God which sojourneth at Smyrna to the Church of God which sojourneth in Philomelium and to all the brotherhoods of the holy and universal Church sojourning in every place; mercy and peace and love from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ be multiplied.
>
> We write unto you, brethren, an account of what befell those that suffered martyrdom and especially the blessed Polycarp, who stayed the persecution, having as it were set his seal upon it by his martyrdom. For nearly all the foregoing events came to pass that the Lord might show us once more an example of martyrdom which is conformable to the Gospel. . . .
>
> Blessed therefore and noble are all the martyrdoms which have taken place according to the will of God (for it behoveth us to be very scrupulous and to assign to God the power over all things).
>
> . . . [But] one man, Quintus by name, a Phrygian newly arrived from Phrygia, when he saw the wild beasts, turned coward. He it was who had forced himself and some others to come forward of their own free will. This man the proconsul by much entreaty persuaded to swear the oath and to offer incense. For this cause therefore, brethren, we praise not those who deliver themselves up, since the Gospel doth not so teach us.
>
> Now the glorious Polycarp at the first, when he heard it, so far from being dismayed, was desirous of remaining in town; but the greater part persuaded him to withdraw. So he withdrew to a farm not far distant from the city; and there he stayed with a few companions, doing nothing else night and day but praying for all men and for the churches throughout the world; for this was his constant habit. And while praying he falleth into a trance three days before his apprehension; and he saw his pillow burning with fire. And he turned and said unto those that were with him: "It must needs be that I shall be burned alive."

And as those that were in search of him persisted, he departed to another farm; and forthwith they that were in search of him came up; and not finding him, they seized two slave lads, one of whom confessed under torture; for it was impossible for him to lie concealed, seeing that the very persons who betrayed him were people of his own household. . . .

And coming up in a body late in the evening, they found the man [Polycarp] himself in bed in an upper chamber in a certain cottage; and though he might have departed thence to another place, he would not, saying, "The will of God be done." So when he heard that they were come, he went down and conversed with them, the bystanders marvelling at his age and his constancy, and wondering how there should be so much eagerness for the apprehension of an old man like him. Thereupon forthwith he gave orders that a table should be spread for them to eat and drink at that hour, as much as they desired. And he persuaded them to grant him an hour that he might pray unmolested; and on their consenting, he stood up and prayed, being so full of the grace of God, that for two hours he could not hold his peace, and those that heard were amazed, and many repented that they had come against such a venerable old man.

But when at length he brought his prayer to an end, after remembering all who at any time had come in his way, small and great, high and low, and all the universal Church throughout the world, the hour of departure being come, they seated him on an ass and brought him into the city, it being a high Sabbath. And he was met by Herod the captain of police and his father Nicetes, who also removed him to their carriage and tried to prevail upon him, seating themselves by his side and saying, "Why what harm is there in saying, Caesar is Lord, and offering incense," with more to this effect, "and saving thyself?" But he at first gave them no answer. When however they persisted, he said, "I am not going to do what ye counsel me." Then they, failing to persuade him, uttered threatening words and made him dismount with speed, so that he bruised his shin, as he got down from the carriage. And without even turning round, he went on his way promptly and with speed, as if nothing had happened to him, being taken to the stadium; there being such a tumult in the stadium that no man's voice could be so much as heard.

But as Polycarp entered into the stadium, a voice came to him from heaven; "Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man." And no one saw the speaker, but those of our people who were present heard the voice. And at length, when he was brought up, there was a great tumult, for they heard that Polycarp had been apprehended. When then he was brought before him, the proconsul enquired whether he were the man. And on his confessing that he was, he tried to persuade him to a denial saying, "Have respect to thine age," and other things in accordance therewith, as it is their wont to say; "Swear by

the genius of Caesar; repent and say, Away with the atheists." Then Polycarp with solemn countenance looked upon the whole multitude of lawless heathen that were in the stadium, and waved his hand to them; and groaning and looking up to heaven he said, "Away with the atheists." But when the magistrate pressed him hard and said, "Swear the oath, and I will release thee; revile the Christ," Polycarp said, "Fourscore and six years have I been His servant, and He hath done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

But on his persisting again and saying, "Swear by the genius of Caesar," he answered, "If thou supposest vainly that I will swear by the genius of Caesar, as thou sayest, and feignest that thou art ignorant who I am, hear thou plainly, I am a Christian. But if thou wouldest learn the doctrine of Christianity, assign a day and give me a hearing." The proconsul said; "Prevail upon the people." But Polycarp said; "As for thyself, I should have held thee worthy of discourse; for we have been taught to render, as is meet, to princes and authorities appointed by God such honor as does us no harm; but as for these, I do not hold them worthy, that I should defend myself before them."

Whereupon the proconsul said; "I have wild beasts here and I will throw thee to them, except thou repent." But he said, "Call for them: for the repentance from better to worse is a change not permitted to us; but it is a noble thing to change from untowardness to righteousness." Then he said to him again, "I will cause thee to be consumed by fire, if thou despisest the wild beasts, unless thou repent." But Polycarp said; "Thou threatenest that fire which burneth for a season and after a little while is quenched: for thou art ignorant of the fire of the future judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly. But why delayest thou? Come, do what thou wilt."

Saying these things and more besides, he was inspired with courage and joy, and his countenance was filled with grace, so that not only did it not drop in dismay at the things which were said to him, but on the contrary the proconsul was astounded and sent his own herald to proclaim three times in the midst of the stadium, "Polycarp hath confessed himself to be a Christian." When this was proclaimed by the herald, the whole multitude both of Gentiles and of Jews who dwelt in Smyrna cried out with ungovernable wrath and with a loud shout, "This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the puller down of our gods, who teacheth numbers not to sacrifice nor worship." Saying these things, they shouted aloud and asked the Asiarch Philip to let a lion loose upon Polycarp. But he said that it was not lawful for him, since he had brought the sports to a close. Then they thought fit to shout out with one accord that Polycarp should be burned alive. For it must needs be that the matter of the vision should be fulfilled, which was shown him concerning his pillow, when he saw it on fire while praying, and turning round he

said prophetically to the faithful who were with him, "I must needs be burned alive." . . .

Forthwith then the instruments that were prepared for the pile were placed about him; and as they were going likewise to nail him to the stake, he said; "Leave me as I am; for He that hath granted me to endure the fire will grant me also to remain at the pile unmoved, even without the security which ye seek from the nails."

So they did not nail him, but tied him. Then he, placing his hands behind him and being bound to the stake, like a noble ram out of a great flock for an offering, a burnt sacrifice made ready and acceptable to God, looking up to heaven said; "O Lord God Almighty, the Father of Thy beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have received the knowledge of Thee, the God of angels and powers and of all creation and of the whole race of the righteous, who live in Thy presence; I bless Thee for that Thou hast granted me this day and hour, that I might receive a portion amongst the number of martyrs in the cup of [Thy] Christ unto resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and of body, in the incorruptibility of the Holy Spirit. May I be received among these in Thy presence this day, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as Thou didst prepare and reveal it beforehand, and hast accomplished it, Thou that art the faithful and true God. For this cause, yea and for all things, I praise Thee, I bless Thee, I glorify Thee, through the eternal and heavenly High-priest, Jesus Christ, Thy beloved Son, through whom with Him and the Holy Spirit be glory both now [and ever] and for the ages to come. Amen."

When he had offered up the Amen and finished his prayer, the firemen lighted the fire. And, a mighty flame flashing forth, we to whom it was given to see, saw a marvel, yea and we were preserved that we might relate to the rest what happened. . . .

Now the blessed Polycarp was martyred on the second day of the first part of the month Xanthicus, on the seventh before the calends of March, on a great Sabbath, at the eighth hour. He was apprehended by Herodes, when Philip of Tralles was high priest, in the proconsulship of Statius Quadratus, but in the reign of the Eternal King Jesus Christ. To whom be the glory, honor, greatness, and eternal throne, from generation to generation. Amen.

We bid you God speed, brethren, while ye walk by the word of Jesus Christ which is according to the Gospel; with whom be glory to God for the salvation of His holy elect; even as the blessed Polycarp suffered martyrdom, in whose footsteps may it be our lot to be found in the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

Relevance

Readers who wish to find relevance in this passage for their lives today face difficulties. One difficulty has to do with the different religious climate in Christian society. Often the response to what God has done and is doing is equated with and reduced to church membership. Instead of seeing falling way or apostasy in terms of a turning away from God's gracious gifts, it is seen as becoming irregular in church attendance. It is only where repentance and faith are stressed as marks of discipleship that the danger of faithlessness can be felt. Another difficulty is the theological and religious uses that have been made of the passage. This passage has been treated under the general topic of post-baptismal sin and interpreted in light of New Testament texts that address the fact of sins among believers. The ideal that those born of God do not practice sin (according to John 5:18) or are dead to sin (according to Rom 6:1-11) does not do away with the need of those very writings to deal with sin among believers. Hebrews, however, should not be seen as just another writing dealing with sins within the Christian community.

Another difficulty is the ignoring of the warning of Hebrews about the dangers of apostasy because of a theological position that makes apostasy impossible. The writer of Hebrews continually holds out the danger of believers abandoning their confidence (3:35) and shrinking back (10:39). Believers are portrayed as having the same possibility for positive and negative decision as the exodus generation at Kadesh. The author, however, does have confidence that his readers will react with renewed courage and faith. This confidence is grounded ultimately in God. God is not unjust (6:10). God is dependable. God's purpose is unchangeable (6:17). But this does not translate into human presumption on the part of the writer.

Some readers with tender conscience may be discouraged because they have slipped a bit here and there or departed from the main path for a time. Glenn Hinson addressed this difficulty in a sermon titled "Christianity, A 'No Parking' Religion":

> How are we to handle such strong words, words which have resulted sometimes in terrible agony for those who heard themselves addressed by them? John Bunyan, for example, became a manic depressive as a result of a passage from Hebrews which undermined his confidence as to whether he was among the Elect, something all Puritans wanted to know. His moods went up. They went down. He reached the point of suicide. Only those powerful words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 sufficed to counter these. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness."

One thing we must make room for is exaggeration. The preacher wanted to frighten his hearers. He was pulling out all the stops. His hearers must recognize the seriousness of what some were contemplating, that it was unthinkable.

A second mitigating factor is the preacher's focus on repentance. A deed so dastardly as departure from the faith, he insists, would carry apostates beyond the pale of repentance. So long as they could repent, he seems to imply, they have hope. The only question is: How could we harden ourselves enough to the love of God that it could no longer break through? By continuous rejections, like pharaoh's, perhaps, but not by slipping a little here and there, sliding backwards or running off the main path. If we trust the author of Psalm 139, there is nowhere we can go to escape the Hound of Heaven. "If I go up into heaven, You are there. Even if I make my bed in Sheol, You are there" (Ps 139:8).

But the most important item to keep in mind is the preacher's expression of hope for his congregation, the subject of the final paragraph. He sees some signs of salvation.[1]

NOTE

[1] E. Glenn Hinson, "Christianity, A 'No Parking' Religion," *The Way of Faith: Words of Admonition and Encouragement for the Journey Based on the Letter to the Hebrews*, ed. James M. Pitts (Wake Forest NC: Chanticleer Publishing Company, Inc., 1985), 71-72.

HORTATORY INTRODUCTION TO A DIFFICULT DISCUSSION, PART THREE: THE STEADFASTNESS OF GOD'S PROMISE

Hebrews 6:13-20

In the final part of the hortatory introduction to a difficult discussion, the writer encouraged the readers by presenting the unchangeable character of God's purpose as a basis for hope. The exposition is related to and extends themes already introduced: "blessing" (v. 7), "faith and patience" (v. 12), and "promises" (v. 12). The exposition also clarifies and further develops the theme of the character of God as the basis for confidence that God will not overlook service to the saints. In 6:10, the affirmation was made that "God is not unjust" and, hence, that God will not overlook the readers' work of love. In the present section, however, the emphasis is not upon the justice of God. Rather, is it upon God's unchangeable purpose.

The language as well as the content are designed to bolster the confidence of the readers. Technical legal terms are found throughout this section: "swear," "oath," "[legal] dispute," "show," "guarantee," "confirmation," "unchangeable." The "impossibility" of a second repentance (6:4) is matched by the impossibility "that God would prove false" (v. 18). The Christian hope is a "sure and steadfast anchor of the soul" (v. 19).

Verses 13-15 deal with God's promise and oath and Abraham's obtaining of the promises; v. 16 states a commonplace about oaths among humans; and vv. 17-20 apply God's promise and oaths to the present generation as a basis for encouragement and hope and conclude with the refrain (repeated from 5:6 and 10) about Jesus' "having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."

COMMENTARY

God's Promise to Abraham, 6:13-15

The reference to Abraham follows naturally the preceding verse about "those who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (v. 12)—especially for those readers of the Old Testament for whom Abraham is *the* prototype of those who trust in God. The writer did not need to tell the story of Abraham. Abraham is familiar to readers as he is treated in Old Testament and Jewish literature. Early Christian preaching included the story of Abraham. [Acts 7:2-8: Stephen's Account of Abraham] Also, Paul cited Abraham as the example of a person of faith (Rom 4:3; Gal 3:6). The writer of Hebrews simply stated that Abraham, "having patiently endured, obtained the promise" (6:15). The author's interest is in the fact of God's sworn promise: "I will surely bless you and multiply you" (6:14). God's promise—not our faith or endurance—is finally the ground of our encouragement and hope.

In order to remind his readers that God remains steadfast and faithful even though they themselves have been unreliable and faithless, the writer used an illustration that may be foreign to us. We are used to written documents to insure agreements. In the world of early Christianity, however, most business was carried out by verbal agreement in the presence of a witness. A person was as good as his or her word. If God was called on as a witness, an agreement became absolute and irrevocable. The writer said that God made a promise to Abraham and his descendants. The fact that God made the promise is sufficient to ensure its validity and

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Acts 7:2-8: Stephen's Account of Abraham

Abraham as a model of human faithfulness toward God appears often in both Jewish and Christian writings. Stephen's speech in Acts contains a standard depiction.

> Brothers and fathers, listen to me. The God of glory appeared to our ancestor Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, "Leave your country and your relatives and go to the land that I will show you." Then he left the country of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After his father died, God had him move from there to this country in which you are now living. He did not give him any of it as a heritage, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as his possession and to his descendants after him, even though he had no child. And God spoke in these terms, that his descendants would be resident aliens in a country belonging to others, who would enslave them and mistreat them during four hundred years. "But I will judge the nation that they serve," said God, "and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place." Then he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.

durability. God could invoke no higher authority than himself for ensuring the promise, but to make absolutely certain that the promise was reliable, God took an oath upon himself to fulfill it. God made sure there could be no question about the certainty and reliability of his promise to Abraham.

The way God dealt with Abraham is a type of the way God acts with the Christian community. The new people of God are in continuity with Abraham as heirs of the promise. The readers of the epistle can count on God standing behind the promises he made to them. Their hope, like an anchor firmly embedded in the floor of the ocean, cannot be shaken.

God made more than one promise to Abraham. In Genesis 12:7, a promise is made to Abraham when God called him out of Ur and sent him into the unknown promised land. Genesis 17:5-6 tells of the promise of many descendants to be blessed in Abraham (Gen 18 repeats that promise). The actual statement of the Old Testament quoted in Hebrews is a promise in Genesis 22:1-14 that follows Abraham's willingness to offer his son Isaac. In view of Abraham's trust, God undergirded the earlier promise of blessing with an oath:

> By myself I have sworn, says the LORD: because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice. (Gen 22:16-18)

The statement in v. 15 that Abraham, "having patiently endured, obtained the promise" ties the passage to v. 12 that speaks of "those who through faith and patience inherit the promise." The divine promises to Abraham included not only his being the father of a great nation but this nation inheriting the land. The promise of most interest to the author of Hebrews was the promise of numerous descendants after the restoration of Isaac ("I will surely bless you and multiply you," v. 14). The focus of Hebrews upon this promise is doubtless due to the fact that for readers of Hebrews, the promise of "inheritance" is fulfilled only eschatologically, for those who now believe (see 4:1-11; 9:15; 11:13; 12:22; 13:14). What is important, then, is the biblical basis offered by the author of Hebrews for the Christian community to copy the faithful endurance of Abraham with the confident expectation that God will give what God has promised to them.

God's Oath and Heirs of the Promise, 6:16-20

The practice of concluding a dispute on some subject by taking an oath (v. 16) was applied by the author to God's oath concerning God's promise (vv. 17-20). Humans "swear by someone greater than themselves," and the Old Testament declares that oaths should be taken in the name of "the LORD your God" (Deut 6:13; 10:20). Lying under oath was a violation of the third commandment (Exod 20:7; Deut 5:11). Abraham himself swore by God (Gen 14:22) and required that others do the same (Gen 21:23-24; 24:3).

After citing the universal human practice of oath taking, the author affirmed that God swore by himself in order to "show even more clearly to heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose" (v. 17). Then he spoke of the encouragement that "the two unchangeable things" (the promise and the oath) provide the "heirs of the promise" (vv. 18-20). The "heirs of the promise," of course, are Abraham and his descendants, but the author wanted readers to know that they were also heirs. In v. 18, any question about the readers' involvement is cleared up when those who have inherited the promises are spoken of as "*we* who have taken refuge." This includes the exodus generation and their refuge, but it also includes the readers. At a later point, the description of Old Testament heroes as those who were "strangers and foreigners on the earth . . . seeking a homeland" (11:13-14) will help make clearer the reference to contemporary people of God in the images of promise and refuge.

The present-day refugees have fled toward a hope. "Hope" here does not signify a subjective attitude, an abstract human expectation (i.e., hopefulness). The objective content of hope is signified, the gift of God extended to God's people through Christ. The hope here is the promise that has been realized in Christ. Hope, then, is not a matter of our feeling. It has to do with a reality and certainty of the Christian message that is not dependent on the way we feel at any particular time.

The hope "set before us" has both present and future aspects. These aspects are suggested in the

"My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less Than Jesus' Blood and Righteousness"

Some lines of Edward Mote's hymn spring directly from these verses in Hebrews:

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness;
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
But wholly lean on Jesus' name.
On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand.

When darkness veils His lovely face,
I rest on His unchanging grace;
In every high and stormy gale
My anchor holds within the veil.
On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand.

His oath, His covenant, and blood—
Support me in the whelming flood;
When every earthly prop gives way,
He then is all my Hope and Stay.
On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand.

When He shall come with trumpet sound,
Oh, may I then in Him be found,
Clothed in His righteousness alone,
Faultless to stand before the throne!
On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand.

way the author used a nautical metaphor to emphasize the present stabilizing effect of this hope ("We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul"); in this way, the author personified hope, presenting hope as like the high priest who "enters the inner shrine behind the curtain." Hope, then, is in the very presence of God. This is where Jesus has entered as "forerunner on our behalf." ["My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less Than Jesus' Blood and Righteousness"] [Learning to Trust—A Testimony]

The conclusion to the section comes with the affirmation for the third time that Jesus is a priest "of the order of Melchizedek." The

Learning to Trust—A Testimony

James M. Pitts stressed that "for the believer, Jesus secures our access to God. He is trustworthy. His promise is sure. You can count on him!" But he testified of the difficulty of learning to trust:

> As the child of an alcoholic parent, learning to trust has been difficult. Growing up in the midst of confusion and conflict did not encourage security and confidence. I learned early on that the only constant in such an environment was change. There was always crisis, always chaos, and the continual surprise of the unknown.
>
> When a child's mother is an alcoholic, there is no immediate and obvious refuge. The intended nurturer and biological protector is caught up in her own sick storm of emotions. A child's dependency is just another overwhelming demand on a person drowning in a sea of substance abuse and denial. Tossed from grandiosity to disgust, over waves of chemical highs and sinking into troughs of depression, the addicted person and the family members drift out into the depths. Everyone connected, parent and child, relative and neighbor, is negatively affected and is drawn into the family trap.
>
> With such a heritage of unreliability and instability, developing trust is difficult. For in such a setting, promises are rarely, if ever, kept. The baseline of "normal" family relationships is an unknown reference. Compensating for the deficit in missed loving and learning (for the child of an alcoholic) is a life-long recovery process.
>
> For me, the way up and out was a sheer gift of God's grace. It came in the person of my grandmother. She offered shelter and security, loving warmth and the limits of reasonable discipline. As a youngster in the second grade, she invited me into her life and heart. No one else made such a proposal. But one offer that is true and trustworthy, especially when there were none, is more than enough.
>
> I didn't know about refugees then. In a domestic way, however, I certainly was one. Through the word that became flesh in a grandmother, I was introduced to another. He became the significant other, who could be trusted.
>
> Grandmother had known him most of her life. He had provided for her, even when her husband's heart failed, leaving her as a 40-year-old widow with ten children to raise. He was the forerunner who went ahead on our behalf. He went all the way. He entered behind the curtain into the heart of God by way of Calvary's cross and an empty tomb. He is the sure and steadfast anchor of the soul. He is God's promise and our eternal hope.
>
> All the saints through the ages, including my grandmother, bear witness to his name. They call him Jesus. He is God's unchanging promise. You can count on him!

James M. Pitts, "Promises, Promises!" *The Way of Faith*, ed. James M. Pitts (Wake Forest NC: Chanticleer Publishing Company, 1985), 79-80.

significance of this for the readers has been built up by exposition and exhortation. Hebrews 6:13-20 is a high point depicting an event of promise confirmed with an oath. Christ has entered the presence of God on behalf of God's people and makes it possible for them to follow Christ in priestly service. Through seizing the hope that is also a divine reality (having entered the inner shrine behind the curtain), believers have "a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul." This exposition of the steadfastness of God's purposes (vv. 13-20) with the earlier warning (5:11–6:3) and analogy from agriculture (vv. 4-12) forms the background for the "difficult discussion"—the exposition of Christ as the perfect eternal high priest according to the order of Melchizedek (7:1-28) and the discussion of the superiority of the heavenly reality over its earthly copy (8:1–10:18).

CONNECTIONS

The Tabernacle

The imagery of the tabernacle is important for understanding the role of hope and the role of Christ in relation to believers. The "inner shrine" is the sanctuary of God that is separated from the holy place by an inner curtain (see Lev 16:2, 12, 15; 21:23; 23:3; Heb 9:3). The inner shrine was entered only by the high priest and only on the day of atonement (Lev 16:2). Christ has entered this inner shrine as a "forerunner on our behalf." The inner shrine represents a relationship with God. This relationship has been made a reality for Christians through the life and death of Jesus, his earthly career of suffering and obedience. The presence of Christ behind the curtain pledges that we shall pass through the curtain and enter the inner shrine. The Gospel of Mark makes use of the curtain that was in the temple (corresponding to that in the tabernacle) when it declares that the curtain was torn from top to bottom when Jesus died (Mark 15:38). In Mark, the unhindered access to God achieved for all by Jesus' death is signified in the tearing of the curtain. In Hebrews, the firm pledge that we shall pass through the curtain (with unhindered access to God) is the presence of Jesus behind the curtain. The work of Christ as high priest, then, contrasts with the work of regular high priests in that no others, not even priests, followed the high priest into the inner sanctuary. The

The Temple Curtains

Heb 6:19 speaks of "the inner shrine behind the curtain." This image plays a significant role in Hebrews's presentation of Jesus Christ. Christ is depicted as "entering" the inner shrine (6:20; 9:12, 24, 25; see also the discussion of the arrangements of the temple with its different furnishings, 9:3, 8, 11; and especially 10:19-20).

The image of the curtain is rooted in the biblical accounts of the desert tabernacle. According to Exodus, there were two curtains, an outer curtain and an inner curtain. Hebrews is concerned with the passage through the inner curtain because of its significance in the ritual of the Day of Atonement: "The LORD said to Moses: Tell your brother Aaron not to come just at any time into the sanctuary inside the curtain before the mercy seat that is upon the ark, or he will die; for I appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat" (Lev 16:2).

There were different understandings of the symbolism involved in the tabernacle/temple and its arrangements and furnishings. Some saw the division into inner and outer courts as representing the division of the cosmos into heavenly and earthly elements. But there was also the notion that the earthly temple was a copy of the heavenly. With this idea, the division symbolized a dichotomy within heaven.

Whatever understanding of temple symbolism is presupposed, it is obvious that the curtain is thought of primarily as enclosing the presence of God. The interior reality symbolized by the heavenly temple is a relationship made possible by Christ. Christ's presence behind the curtain affirms that we shall also pass through the curtain. We shall enter within the most holy place. (For a more complete discussion of the symbolism of the curtain see Harold W. Attridge, "Excursus: The Veil and Its Symbolism," *The Epistle to the Hebrews* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989], 184-85, and "Excursus: The Heavenly Temple and Its Significance," ibid., 222-24.)

work that Jesus achieved in salvation was unique to Jesus, but his work was preparatory for others to follow. [The Temple Curtains]

Hope as Reality

We think most often of hope as an attitude of expectation or wishful thinking about the future. The New Testament does use the word "hope" in the sense of our posture toward God and the future. Hebrews, however, does not present hope merely as an attitude of expectation, a human response paralleling faith and love. Hope is a reality regardless of how we feel. The author's treatment of hope as reality occurs appropriately in a discussion of the unchangeable character of God's purpose made clear through God's promise and oath. The fact that hope is really real is stressed by the author of Hebrews by relating Jesus' entry into the inner shrine behind the curtain (the presence of God) to the entry of hope into the inner shrine. Hope is where God is; hence, it is a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul. It is good to *feel* hopeful, to *expect* good. But hope exists when we do not feel hopeful and when we do not expect good.

In Hebrews, faith and hope are related. Faith in Hebrews is not simply an attitude. It is loyalty to God. It is based on belief in the faithfulness of God. Hope is a reality beyond the realities of this world and faith is awareness of this real or ideal world that enables believers to remain true in the face of persecution.

CHRIST THE PERFECT ETERNAL HIGH PRIEST ACCORDING TO THE ORDER OF MELCHIZEDEK

Hebrews 7:1-28

We now come to the chapter that is most important for the author of Hebrews. It contains the "difficult discussion" in mind since chapter 5. Hebrews 6:20 announced the theme of chapter 7 when it declared that as "a forerunner on our behalf" Jesus has entered "the inner shrine behind the curtain," having become "a high priest forever according the order of Melchizedek." The theme, then, is "The Perfect Eternal High Priesthood of Christ According to the Order of Melchizedek." But readers were alerted to the importance of this topic in Hebrews 5:6 when the author cited Psalm 110:4 to show that Christ did not presume to take the honor of high priesthood for himself but was appointed to this role by God: "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek." Chapter 7, then, is a fuller identification of the Melchizedek of Psalm 110. This identification combines Psalm 110:4 and Genesis 14:17-20, another Scripture passage that mentions Melchizedek.

The priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek is the most characteristic contribution of the writer to the Hebrews. Behind this contribution are ways of thinking and using Scripture that are foreign to modern readers. In order to appreciate the writer's interpretative principles and strategies, the basic goals of the author must be kept in mind. The overall goal was the renewal of his readers' hope and endurance. Verse 25 conveys the good news: "[H]e is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them." He arrived at this good news through an elaboration of Christ's exalted status. The author "proved" the exalted status of Christ in four points: (1) Melchizedek is superior to Abraham. Abraham gives the gift of the tithe to Melchizedek, not vice versa. (2) The Levites, who make up the priesthood, are of the same stature as Abraham. They are descendants of Abraham. (3) Melchizedek, therefore, is superior to the levitical priesthood as well as to Abraham. (4) Jesus Christ is, like Melchizedek, "a priest

forever." (5) Jesus Christ, therefore, is superior to the levitical priesthood.

Melchizedek is central in the christological argument. He was used to emphasize the heavenly, eternal, and spiritual realm to which Christ has been raised. This realm contrasts with the earthly, temporal, and fleshly realm of the levitical priesthood. Rhetorical and homiletical, poetic and creative moves were made by the author in this chapter. These moves are different from scientific historical-critical moves. Readers must constantly remind themselves that the author was not engaged in the critical task of discovering the historical Melchizedek. The author was not even attempting to move objectively from what can be detected about the dogmatic Melchizedek to the figure of Jesus Christ. In fact, the author began with Jesus Christ and the nature of Jesus understood as the true and eternal high priest. He then examined the qualities of Melchizedek that point forward to Jesus Christ—qualities of righteousness, peace, and timelessness. The author, consequently, was not an academic attempting to "prove" critically and intellectually certain theoretical points; he was a preacher and rhetorician providing arguments that would persuade and move his audience.

[Melchizedek in the Dead Sea Scrolls]

The author used conventional interpretative strategies with skill. One hermeneutical practice used was that of explaining one text in light of another when both texts contain the same word. The declaration of Psalm 110 mentioning Melchizedek was used to provide more insight and significance into the Genesis 14 account of Abraham paying a tithe to Melchizedek (vv. 17-20). The presupposition that an earlier revelation is the promise and pledge of a future eschatological fulfillment played a part in the interpretation of these passages, with the revelation in Psalm 110:4 understood as confirming the eschatological implications of Genesis 14:17-20. The principle that what applies in a lesser case also applies in a greater case is followed also (see 2:1-3; 9:13-14; 10:28-29; 12:9, 25). Abraham and the levitical priests were exalted in vv. 4 and 5 in order that Melchizedek may be even more highly exalted. Another important principle followed in the Hebrew author's treatment of Melchizedek (and followed as well in Rabbinic and Alexandrian exegesis) is the principle that the silence of Scripture has significance. The idea behind this principle is that all truth is in the Scripture. What is not in the Scripture is not in the world. The fact that Melchizedek's ancestry, birth, and death are not recorded in Scripture helped the writer to establish the timelessness of Melchizedek.

Melchizedek in the Dead Sea Scrolls

Melchizedek is mentioned in sources of the Second Temple period. Philo and Josephus refer to Melchizedek, but only to repeat what the Genesis narrative says about him. An Aramaic translation of the book of Genesis found at Qumran also mentions Melchizedek. But nothing is affirmed about Melchizedek beyond what is found in Genesis.

In another text among the Dead Sea Scrolls, however, Melchizedek is interpreted in light of OT passages that speak of the coming of the Last Days (11Qmelchizedek; I have used the English translation in García Martínez & Eibert J. C . Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Study Edition*, vol. 2 [Leiden and Grand Rapids: Brill and William B. Eerdmans, 1998], 1207-209). Melchizedek is no longer the human figure of Gen 14. He is an enormously exalted divine being. The second column of the scroll (containing 25 lines; only fragments remain of columns 1 and 3) presents Melchizedek as the agent of salvation by means of a "true" interpretation of the jubilee year. This is a time not only of removal of debts but also of forgiveness of sins.

The dominant text in the scroll is Lev 25, a text that deals with the year of Jubilee. The biblical jubilee year was the fiftieth year. It followed the succession of seven sabbatical years. In the jubilee year all land alienated from its original owners was to be returned to them. Hebrew slaves were to be set free. The year of jubilee began on the Day of Atonement. It was signaled by the blowing of trumpets and proclamation of universal liberty.

Lev 25:13 is quoted in line 2 and Lev 25:9 is quoted in line 25. Both passages are introduced by the phrase "And as for what he said." In other texts, this phrase is used to cite a section of the biblical text given in full earlier. It is possible, then, that at least Lev 25:8-13 was cited earlier in the scroll in a part of the text no longer extant. Regardless, the theme is the year of Jubilee, but a jubilee that is understood eschatologically.

The citation of Lev 25:13 in line 2 of the second column ("In the year of Jubilee you shall return, each one, to his property") is followed by Deut 15:2: "This is the manner of the release: every creditor shall release what he lent to his neighbor. He shall not coerce his neighbor or his brother for it has been proclaimed a release of God." The point is that the Torah requires the release of all debts in the year of jubilee. Moreover, the author interprets Lev 25 in eschatological terms. Isa 61:1 is cited as a part of the interpretation: "Its interpretation for the last days refers to the captives . . . ." Final salvation is the ultimate year of release. This fulfills the prediction of the release of captives foretold in Isa 61:1.

Melchizedek is given the leading role in the eschatological event: ". . . and they are the inheritance of Melchizedek who will make them return. And liberty will be proclaimed for them, to free them from the debt of all their iniquities. And this will happen in the first week of the jubilee which follows the nine jubilees. And the day of atonement is the end of the tenth jubilee in which atonement shall be made for all the sons of light and for the men of the lot of Melchizedek. . . ."

Lines 1-9 presuppose a periodization of history in terms of jubilee years. The final jubilee ("the 'year of grace' of Melchizedek") brings atonement and eschatological deliverance. In lines 9b-15a, the theme of salvation is developed. Predicted delivery to the captives is confirmed by the judgment of Belial and the spirits of his lot. "But Melchizedek will carry out the vengeance of God's judgments, and on that day he will free them from the hand of Belial and from the hand of all the spirits of his lot. . . . This is the day of peace about which he said through Isaiah the prophet, who said: 'How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, the messenger of good who announces salvation, saying to Zion: your God reigns.'"

Melchizedek is God's agent of judgment. The one who proclaims good news in Isaiah 52:7 is identified as Melchizedek and is brought into relation to Isa 61:2-3. There is also a reference to the one about whom Daniel speaks: "And the messenger is the anointed of the spirit as Daniel said about him." The implication is that the completion of Daniel's seventy weeks is identical with the beginning of the tenth jubilee.

For the author of the scroll, Melchizedek is an exalted divine being. Titles generally reserved for God alone are applied to Melchizedek. In the citation of Isa 61:2, the name Melchizedek is substituted for Yahweh. In addition, Melchizedek is said to atone for the sins of the righteous and to execute judgment upon the wicked. These are actions usually associated with God himself.

In Hebrews, Melchizedek is a historical figure who serves as a precedent for a priesthood that is not based on law or lineage. Melchizedek is not a redeemer; he performs no saving act. The Melchizedek in Hebrews is derived not from extra-biblical ideas but drawn from Gen 14:17-20 (which is approached typologically from the perspective of Ps 110:4).

Beyond the particular strategies are convictions that may be shared by modern readers and that make these particular strategies more understandable. God and the speaking of God is a basic conviction. The God who has spoken in the ancient texts has spoken decisively in Jesus Christ. The ancient texts have relevance for the current Christian epoch, with the ancient texts illuminating the current epoch and the current epoch illuminating the ancient texts. This relevance may be discerned by a reverent christological reading of the ancient texts.

The chapter may be divided into five interrelated sections. The first section (vv. 1-3) provides the scriptural data that is basic for the remainder of the chapter, makes etymological comments, and argues from silence that Melchizedek is timeless. A second section (vv. 4-10) interprets the Genesis story of Melchizedek to show the superiority of Melchizedek to Abraham and even to Levi (and the levitical priesthood). A third section (vv. 11-19) begins application of Psalm 110:4 to Christ by arguing that the psalm promises a priesthood that supplants the levitical priesthood. The new priesthood—and not the old—offers perfection and introduces a better hope through which we approach God. The fourth section (vv. 20-25) argues that the new priesthood is superior because it is confirmed with an oath that assures the permanence of the new priest. The final section (vv. 26-28) is a rhetorical and poetic summary of the first four sections and an anticipation of the argument to follow in the major section 8:1–10:18 ("The Superiority of the Heavenly Reality over its Earthly Copy"). Its praise of Jesus as high priest recalls the praise of Melchizedek at the beginning of the chapter and the earlier praise of the word of God (4:12-13).

COMMENTARY

Introduction of Melchizedek as King and Priest, 7:1-3

Melchizedek is introduced by a paraphrase of Genesis 14:18-20, a passage occurring in the story of Abraham's victory over a coalition of five kings who had taken captive Abraham's nephew Lot, the rescue of Lot, and Abraham's meeting with the king of Sodom on his return after the victory. [Genesis 14:17-20: Account of Abraham Paying Tithe to Melchizedek] In the Genesis story, Melchizedek is introduced

Genesis 14:17-20: Account of Abraham Paying Tithe to Melchizedek
The enigmatic character Melchizedek is described in the OT only in this brief narrative from the Abraham saga in Genesis.

> After his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him,
> the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's
> Valley). And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of
> God Most High. He blessed him and said,
> "Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
> maker of heaven and earth;
> and blessed be God Most High,
> who has delivered your enemies
> into your hand!"
> And Abram gave him one tenth of everything.

abruptly as "King Melchizedek of Salem" (Salem being used as a name for Jerusalem) and as "priest of God most high." Melchizedek blessed Abraham: "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!" (Gen 14:19-20). Abraham gave Melchizedek "one tenth of everything." Melchizedek then disappeared.

A historical-critical analysis of the Genesis account of Melchizedek would seek the motivation for the insertion of the material into the saga about Abraham (the story would have been useful to justify David's assumption of a royal role in *Jerusalem*). It would ask about the Melchizedek tradition before its insertion in the heroic story about Abraham. But the author of Hebrews was interested in depicting more than a historical personage in ancient Canaan. The etymologies supplied by the author indicate this. The name "Melchizedek" in fact apparently

The Meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek
Here, Abraham is shown to the right, having just defeated the kings and is receiving a blessing of bread and wine from Melchizedek. The artist gives a priestly, sacramental focus to his interpretation as the bread and wine have a liturgical formality about them.

Dieric Bouts. c. 1415–1475. *Abraham and Melchisedek.* From the Altar of the Last Supper. 1464–1468. Church of St. Peter, Louvain, Belgium.

means "my king is Zedek" (with Zedek as the name of a Canaanite deity). However, the conventional etymology was adopted by the author of Hebrews whereby the name means "king of righteousness." The place name "Salem" is derived from "Shalom" (peace), and Melchizedek becomes a "king of peace." "Righteousness" and "peace" evoke messianic images even though these titles and images are not stressed.

In vv. 1-2, the priesthood of Melchizedek is stated and illustrated in relation to no less a figure than Abraham. Verse 3 moves in another direction, climaxing with the affirmation that Melchizedek "remains a priest forever." The characterization of Melchizedek that supports his *perpetual* priesthood derived from the silence of Scripture about Melchizedek's birth and death. The condensed language—"without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life"—has not only a rhetorical effect but also an argumentative function. No argument is stated directly, no factual point established positively, but a way of reading the Genesis text is offered to the readers. One key point for readers searching for interpretative links between the Old Testament and the description of Melchizedek as timeless is the contrast between the familiar levitical line of priests and the unique priesthood of Melchizedek. A recorded line of descent was necessary for accession to the priestly office. Numbers 3:10 declares, "[Y]ou shall make a register of Aaron and his descendants; it is they who shall attend to the priesthood, and any outsider who comes near shall be put to death" (see Exod 28:1; Lev 21:13-15; Num 18:1; Ezra 2:61-63; Neh 7:63-65). The priesthood of Melchizedek was not established on the basis of birth and descent but on the basis of the call of God. In spite of his lack of qualification for levitical priesthood, Melchizedek was priest of God Most High.

But the major point of comparison is not between Melchizedek and the levitical priesthood. It is between Melchizedek and Jesus Christ. The clause declaring that Melchizedek resembles the Son of God ("but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever," v. 3) makes clear that the author's impression of Melchizedek was colored by the author's conviction about the eternal Son. If the priesthood of Christ is forever, that of Melchizedek must be forever in some sense. A correlation was established by the author between the conviction that Christ is our eternal high priest, the scriptural support for this in Psalm 110, and the narrative in Genesis 14.

Melchizedek Greater than Abraham or Levi, 7:4-10

In this section, the author first of all stated the fact that "Abraham the patriarch gave him [Melchizedek] a tenth of the spoils" (v. 4). Then he contrasted the identity and authority of the two priesthoods—that of Melchizedek and that of the descendants of Levi (vv. 5-7)—and the duration of the ministries of Melchizedek and the levitical priests (v. 8). In a conclusion, the author explicated the significance of Abraham's paying tithes to Melchizedek since Levi himself was involved in Abraham's payment of tithes (vv. 9-10).

An oratorical imperative begins the section and announces the theme: "See how great he is!" (v. 4). Melchizedek's greatness is seen in the fact that "even Abraham the patriarch gave him a tenth of the spoils." The designation of Abraham as "the patriarch" serves to enhance the stature of Melchizedek, but it also prepares the way for a comparison of Melchizedek and the levitical priesthood. As patriarch, Abraham represents the whole of his descendants. So Levi and the levitical priesthood are embodied and symbolized in Abraham. In v. 2, Abraham is said to have apportioned to Melchizedek "one tenth of everything." In v. 4, this is specified as "a tenth of the spoils." The Greek word translated "spoils" designates the choicest of the materials taken by the victors (gold, silver, fine furniture and clothing, and so on). This enhances the position of Melchizedek.

The author contrasted in vv. 5-7 "those descendants of Levi who receive the priestly office" and "this man [Melchizedek] who does not belong to this ancestry" in terms of priestly authority. The levitical priests are commanded "to collect tithes from the people." These people are, of course, the kindred of the levitical priests who "also are descended from Abraham." The law specified that the people paid the tithe to the Levites and then the Levites paid a tithe of that amount to the priests (Lev 18:21; Num 18:26-28). In the period contemporary with the book of Hebrews, there is evidence that the priests collected directly from the people. This seems to be the practice cited by Hebrews. Melchizedek, however, "collected tithes from Abraham." Moreover, Melchizedek blessed Abraham. Here Abraham is designated as "him who had received the promises," referring back to 6:15. Then the author declared that the inferior (Abraham) is blessed by the superior (Melchizedek). Of course, this was not intended to cover every case. Indeed, in the Genesis account of the blessing given by Melchizedek, Abram is blessed by Melchizedek but so also is God Most High. The writer was interested in enhancing the stature of Melchizedek.

The eternal nature of the priesthood of Melchizedek (7:3) was called on to support the superiority of Melchizedek: "In the one case, tithes are received by those who are mortal; in the other, by one of whom it is testified that he lives" (v. 8). Levitical priests are described as "mortal." But Melchizedek is described as "one of whom it is testified that he lives." Those who are appointed by the law to priestly service are subject to death and have a series of successors. Melchizedek, however, is free from temporal limitations. The testimony of Scripture (the testimony from silence) affirms the eternal character of Melchizedek. As far as the Melchizedek of Scripture is concerned, Melchizedek has no end of life and his unique priesthood no succession as did the levitical priesthood. This limited and poetic truth concerning Melchizedek, of course, is arrived at from the perspective of the one who serves as high priest in the presence of God.

The climax of the section is the assertion that since Levi was a descendent of Abraham ("in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him"), Levi himself "who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham" (vv. 9-10). The concept of corporate solidarity that bound Israel to the patriarch Abraham makes this more than a fanciful interpretation. The phrase of introduction, "one might even say," indicates that Levi's payment of tithes to Melchizedek was not literally true, but this fact does not negate the assertion that the tithe Abraham gave to Melchizedek anticipated the subordination of Levi and the levitical priesthood to the priesthood like Melchizedek's.

Supplanting of Old Priesthood and Law, 7:11-19

This central section of the chapter on Melchizedek argues that Psalm 110:4 promised a priesthood that supplants the levitical priesthood. This new priesthood offers the perfection not accomplished by the levitical priesthood and introduces a better hope through which we approach God. The argument begins in v. 11 with the observation that the promise of another priest of the order of Melchizedek implies that the old priesthood did not offer perfection."Now if perfection had been attained through the levitical priesthood—for the people received the law under this priesthood—what further need would there have been to speak of another priest arising according to the order of Melchizedek, rather than one according to the order of Aaron?" A contrary-to-fact condition ("Now if perfection had been attained through the levitical priesthood" [and it was not!]) and a rhetorical question (". . . what

further need would there have been to speak of another priest . . . ?") make the argument. "Perfection" here is applied in a general way to "the people." Elsewhere the notion of perfection was used of Christ (see 2:16; 5:9; 7:28). In the following chapters, a critique will be leveled at the levitical priesthood that involves the inability to remove sin. Christ, on the other hand, perfects his followers, removing sin in an effective way as his sacrifice cleans and sanctifies his followers (see 9:9, 13-14, 28; 10:2-4, 10, 14). Hebrews 7:19 contrasts law and law's inability to perfect the people with a "better hope" and the relation with God inaugurated by the sacrifice of Christ. The sacrifices of the levitical system were impotent to cleanse the worshipers from sin and enable the worshipers to approach God.

A parenthetical remark in v. 11 ("for the people received the law under this priesthood") implies that the problem was not merely the levitical priesthood but the system of law based on that priesthood. This is followed up in v. 12 with a statement that a change in priesthood means a change of law. For Hebrews, the law is seen from the perspective of cult, and the foundation for the law was therefore the priesthood ("the people receive the law under this priesthood"). This is a different perspective on the law than that of Paul, for whom law was a system of works and merit. When priesthood is seen as the foundation for the (cultic) law, a change of priesthood requires a change of law. (The implications of this change are made clear in v. 18.)

The sense in which a new priest has been installed is explored in vv. 13-17. Christ's descent from Judah rather than Levi is made a qualification—not an objection—for Christ's priestly status (vv. 13-14). But important is Christ's qualification "through the power of an indestructible life" (vv. 15-17). The author began to make specific application of the inference on law and priesthood with a change of subject from Melchizedek to Christ. "[T]he one of whom these things are spoken" (in Ps 110:4) is a priest of the order of Melchizedek—not of the order of Aaron. The law declared that only Levites were to be consecrated as priests (see Gen 49:5-7; Exod 28:1-4; Num 1:47-54). Of course, in early Israel, kings and members of their families served priestly functions (see 1 Sam 6:12-21; 2 Sam 8:18; 24:25; 1 Kgs 3:4; 8:1-5, 62; 12:33). But the author was not concerned with fine details that detracted from (but not denied) his major point. Verse 13 is commenting on Psalm 110:4 with an implicit reference to Jesus: "Now the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar." With v. 14, the reference is made

explicit, "our Lord": "For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests." The historical tradition that Jesus belonged to the tribe of Judah is cited here (see Matt 1:2-3; 2:6; Luke 3:33; Acts 2:29-36; 12:23; Rom 1:3; 2 Tim 2:8; Rev 5:5; 22:16). The statement of v. 13b (that Christ belongs to a tribe "from which no one has ever served at the altar") is restated in v. 14b with the specification that the tribe of Judah was not appointed to priestly service. The writer doubtless had in mind the Davidic descent of Jesus, but he did not draw out the relationship of Davidic christological ideas to priestly ideas. To do so would blur the image of Christ as priest.

Verse 14 states that "it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah," and v. 15 begins as a formal parallel to this statement: "It is even more obvious. . . ." What is "even more obvious," however, is hidden in the conditional and relative clauses of vv. 15b and 16. What is more obvious is the ground for the change of priesthood. The one who has become a priest has become a priest "not through a legal requirement concerning physical descent, but through the power of an indestructible life." The new priest is described then as one who resembles Melchizedek. Instead of "according to the order of Melchizedek" (v. 11), the writer used the expression "resembling Melchizedek" (v. 15). This helps readers understand the way the "order" of Melchizedek has been understood all along. The "order" of Melchizedek is not to be thought of as a matter of human authorization or lineage. The similarity between the priesthood of Melchizedek and Christ has to do with something deeper. This priesthood is in the realm of the eternal and unchanging.

The essential contrast between the levitical priests and Christ is set forth in v. 16. The contrast is between two different foundations or bases for priesthood. The levitical priesthood was established "through a legal requirement concerning physical descent." The phrase reads literally: "Through a law of a fleshly commandment." The word "fleshly" does speak of the genealogical ground of the levitical priesthood (as indicated in the translation of the NRSV), but it also speaks of the external, physical, and transitory nature of the law and the entire priestly system. The priesthood of Christ, on the other hand, is not according to a new law but is established "through the power of an indestructible life." The adjective "indestructible" is another way of describing the eternal nature of the new priesthood and stands in clear contrast to the transitoriness and corruptibility involved in the "fleshly commandment." The priesthood of Christ, then, is not something

added, something received from an external source like the priesthood of the Levites (7:5). The priesthood of Christ is connected with who he is. This life is to be seen from the perspective of Christ's eternal nature, and it is clearly manifested for readers in the act of Christ's sacrifice. At this point, Psalm 110:4 is repeated, now as witness for the description of the power of Christ's indestructible life.

Verses 18-19 summarize the argument and tie together themes appearing in the opening verses: "There is, on the one hand, the abrogation of an earlier commandment because it was weak and ineffectual. . . ; there is, on the other hand, the introduction of a better hope, through which we approach God." With the new high priest, the old law is abrogated—the law and its priesthood that did not accomplish perfection. In their place is not a new law but a "better hope" through which perfection is achieved. Verse 18 returns to the law (introduced in vv. 11 and 12 as founded on the levitical priesthood and changed when there is a change in priesthood) and states that with the inauguration of Christ's priesthood the law is abrogated (not simply changed; see 8:13 and 10:9 for restatements of the abrogation of the law). The essential disability of the law is noted in an alliterative characterization of law as *asthenes* (weak) and *anōpheles* (useless). The law is not simply inferior in a relative sense.

The final verse (v. 19) begins with a parenthetical remark (". . . for the law made nothing perfect") recalling the first verse of the section (that questioned the attainment of perfection through the levitical priesthood) and thereby forming an *inclusio*. With Christ comes "a better hope" that is the alternative to what is offered in the weak and ineffectual commandment. This is the hope that, according to 6:19, "enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus . . . has entered." Through this hope, believers are able to approach God.

The Eternal High Priest, 7:20-25

This section contains two arguments for the superiority of Christ's priesthood that repeat themes already presented but lead to unexpected conclusions. The first argument (7:20-22) moves from the theme of eternal priesthood established by oath to the theme of covenant. This is a new theme that will be discussed further in chapter 8. The second argument (7:23-25) transforms the contrast between Christ and the levitical priesthood on the basis of permanence versus lack of permanence into a contrast in terms of "one"

versus "many." Both subsections follow the same pattern. There is a contrast in each instance and then a conclusion marked by "accordingly" in the first instance and "consequently" in the second instance.

The first comparison, the comparison between the priests and Jesus in terms of an oath, recalls the discussion of oaths in 6:13-17. It begins with a parenthetical expression (vv. 20b-21) that compares the priests who took office without an oath with Christ who

Swearing Oaths in Scripture

An oath is a statement of guarantee that the truth has been spoken or that a promise will be kept. The Mosaic law attempted to safeguard the sanctity of the oath. Oaths are to be taken in the name of God: "You shall fear the LORD your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear" (Deut 10:20; see also Deut 6:13). The essence of the law on oaths is that all oaths are to be completely carried out: "When a man makes a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth" (Num 30:2).

The full form of an oath invoked the name of God as the guarantor and contained a curse that would follow in the case of perjury. Ps 7:3-5 shows the full form: "O LORD my God, if I have done this, if there is wrong in my hands, if I have repaid my ally with harm or plundered my foe without cause, then let the enemy pursue and overtake me, trample my life to the ground, and lay my soul in the dust." (See also Num 5:21-22. Often the curse was suppressed; see Ruth 1:17; 1 Sam 14:44; 1 Kgs 2:23.)

The oath was an essential element in judicial proceedings, and there was a tendency to enforce any statement with an oath. The oath was so common that God is represented as swearing oaths (see Num 14:28; Deut 32:4).

The most important NT passage on the taking of oaths is Matt 5:33-37:

> Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord." But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be "Yes, Yes" or "No, No"; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

Jesus' statement about oaths is preceded by citation of OT passages that forbid perjury (Lev 19:12) and demand the fulfillment of vows (Num 30:2; Deut 23:21). Jesus' teaching on oaths in the Sermon on the Mount and his other teachings are designed for citizens of God's kingdom.

A series of Jesus' sayings in Matt 23:16-22 is directed against a casuistical treatment of oaths and vows. The basic question of the legitimacy of oaths is not the issue. Jesus explains that it is meaningless to say we are bound by an oath by the gold of the temple or by the offering, whereas an oath by the temple or by the altar is without significance. The temple and the gold, the offering and the altar, go together. They are all consecrated to God. Therefore, God is always in view in such oaths. Jesus here reduces the casuistry of religious leaders to the absurd.

Jas 5:12 contains a prohibition similar to Jesus' statement about oaths in the Sermon on the Mount: "Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation."

In Hebrews, a strict and legalistic understanding of the taking of oaths is not followed. Indeed, Hebrews follows the Jewish Hellenistic tradition also found in Philo. Both the author of Hebrews and Philo consider it natural that God should swear. Philo called the oath which God swears good: "It is excellent that the promise is confirmed by an oath, and indeed by an oath appropriate to God; for God swears, as you see, not by another, since there is none stronger than He, but by Himself, the best of all beings" (*Allegorical Interpretation* 3.203-204). Philo judges that God swore an oath to assist faith (3.204, 207). The author of Hebrews explains that the divine oath proves how irrevocable was the resolve of the promise of God. Humans confirm their words by referring the statements to someone more powerful. God, however, takes an oath by himself to vouch for it that the will expressed in the promise will remain unchanged. The divine oath rules out all doubt.

was confirmed with an oath. [Swearing Oaths in Scripture] It then repeats Psalm 110:4 ("You are a priest forever") with the addition "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind." The entire statement is introduced as being delivered by God and addressed to Christ. The comparison is designed to support the major affirmation that "this was confirmed with an oath." That which is confirmed is the new eternal priesthood. The essential characteristic of the new priesthood is reinforced by the use of a double negative in v. 20 (which in Greek increases the negative force). Literally, the text reads: "And whereas it is not without an oath . . . ." The conclusion moves from priesthood to covenant: ". . . accordingly Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant." What the oath confirms is the central theme of chapter 7, the new, eternal priesthood. But what the new priesthood signifies is a better covenant.

The consequence to be drawn from this divine confirmation, therefore, is manifold. Already established (and implicit in the parenthetical expression) is the superiority of Christ's priesthood. Also already established is the introduction of a "better hope, through which we approach God" (7:10). But a new idea is introduced, the idea of a "better covenant." The "better hope" takes the form of a "better covenant." Christ is the "guarantee" of the covenant. To be sure, he is the mediator of this covenant (see 8:6), but here the role of Jesus as a guarantee or surety is affirmed. The term "guarantee" may signify a form of material guarantee that a debt will be paid, but it may signify an individual who offers his or her own life as the guarantee of another person. Here, then, Jesus becomes the guarantor who offers his life as a pledge that the new covenant will be fulfilled. [Word Study of *diathēkē*]

Word Study of *diathēkē*

AΩ The Greek word *diathēkē* is used in the NT to denote a last will or testament. This is the most common use in classical and Hellenistic Greek. Paul uses the word in this sense in Gal 3:15: "Brothers and sisters, I give an example from daily life: once a person's will has been ratified, no one adds to it or annuls it." Heb 9:16-17 also uses the word in this sense: "Where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive." But the word *diathēkē* is also used in the NT as it was used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures to translate the Hebrew word *bĕrît* (covenant).

A central concern of the book of Hebrews is a demonstration of the superiority of the Christian covenant. Apart from 9:16-17, covenant (*diathēkē*) is used in Hebrews in the sense of *bĕrît*. (In 9:16-17, there is a play on the popular meaning of *diathēkē* as will or testament.) Jer 31 is the source of Hebrew's theology of *diathēkē*. The new covenant is better than the first. It rests on better promises, it is more sure, it is eternal. It replaces the old, which is now antiquated and ripe for destruction. The first was given at Sinai, it was consecrated by Moses with a solemn blood ritual. The second is secured by Jesus. The new covenant (as the locus of the heavenly high-priesthood of Christ) is the true fulfillment of the first, whose earthbound priesthood and sacrifices remain imperfect.

The second comparison between the old priesthood and the new priest is given in the form of a chiasm:

A Former Priests were Many in Number, v. 23a
  B Former Priests were Prevented by Death from Continuing in Office, v. 23b
  B' Christ Continues Forever, v. 24
A' Christ Is Able for All Time to Save, v. 25

The contrast between the "many" and the one who "continues forever" is central. The fact that there were many priests under the levitical arrangement meant for the author imperfection and incompleteness. The background for this discussion is the presupposition that there is a stable and unchangeable spiritual or ideal world. Multiplicity implies instability and change—the opposite of the spiritual world. Unity is equated with finality and eternity (see Heb 1:1; 10:1-4 for a reflection of this supposition).

Exodus 40:12-15: Appointment of Aaron and His Sons to the Priesthood

Exodus indicates that the priesthood of Aaron and his descendants was to be perpetual, continuing on into all future generations. With each succession, however, a new priest had to be appointed, whereas, with Jesus, as Hebrews stresses, he alone could continue in an eternal, perpetual priesthood.

> Then you shall bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance of the tent of meeting, and shall wash them with water, and put on Aaron the sacred vestments, and you shall anoint him and consecrate him, so that he may serve me as priest. You shall bring his sons also and put tunics on them, and anoint them, as you anointed their father, that they may serve me as priests: and their anointing shall admit them to *a perpetual priesthood* throughout all generations to come.

Exodus 40:12-15 speaks of Aaron and his sons being appointed to a perpetual priesthood, but this does not contradict the point being made by Hebrews. [Exodus 40:12-15: Appointment of Aaron and His Sons to the Priesthood] The priests, of course, served in their own generations, and provision was made for a succession of priests to carry out the ministry. Jesus, in contrast to these priests, is invested with an eternal and final priesthood. This is because he "continues forever" (i.e., is not subject to limited human existence). The use of the verb "to continue" or "to remain" (*menein*) is significant. In the Septuagint, this verb is used of God's "remaining" (see Dan 6:27, LXX), and Hebrews 7:3 speaks of Melchizedek "remaining" a priest forever. The statement that "he continues forever," then, not only applies the literary and symbolic truth about Melchizedek to Christ but also implies Christ's participation in the life of God. The consequence of this remaining (always living) and, hence, continuing to make intercession, is that he is able to save for all time (or completely) those who approach God through him (the Greek expression translated "for all time" may also mean "completely"). The concept of an intercessory ministry is appropriate to the high priestly ministry. Elsewhere in the New

Romans 8:31-39: Paul's Statement on Christ's Intercession for Us

For Paul, the notion of Christ as the heavenly intercessor supports his argument that the elect of God can never be separated from God's love. For Hebrews, the stress on Christ's intercessor is similarly that it is continual.

> What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, *who indeed intercedes for us*. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,
>
> "For your sake we are being killed
> all day long;
> we are accounted as sheep to be
> slaughtered."
>
> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, not things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Testament, we find reference to a heavenly intercessor. Romans 8:34 speaks of this intercession in association with Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension, and position at God's right hand. [Romans 8:31-39: Paul's Statement on Christ's Intercession for Us] First John 2:1-2 speaks of Jesus Christ as our "advocate with the Father" and as "the atoning sacrifice" for sin.

The Merits of Our High Priest, 7:26-28

The concluding verses of chapter 7 provide a powerful statement of the characteristics of Jesus as high priest, the achievement of Jesus in contrast to the work of the levitical high priests, and the basis for the superior achievement. The term "high priest" had been used prior to chapter 7 (see 2:17; 3:1; 4:14-15; 5:5, 10; 6:20), but the term "priest" was used in the early part of chapter 7 because of the dependence upon the Scripture announcing the "priest like Melchizedek." In the conclusion of chapter 7, the term "priest" is replaced with the earlier term "high priest." Another change has to do with the function of the high priest. The function of the priest emphasized earlier was intercession. The intercessory role is effective because of the eternal, transcendent quality of Christ's life. The emphasis now is the high priest whose offering of himself puts an end to the levitical system of sacrifice. The figure of Melchizedek is

no longer dominant since Melchizedek has nothing to do with sacrifice.

The characterization of Christ as high priest is similar in a formal way to the characterization of Melchizedek in 7:3 and the word of God in 4:12-13. In all three passages, five characteristics are listed. As in 7:3, the characteristics are listed in simple staccato fashion: "holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens." The first three terms, "holy," "blameless," "undefiled," are adjectives that expand the description of Jesus as high priest in 4:15 as "without sin." The Greek word used here for "holy" (*hosios*) is different from the Greek word translated "holy" that has the basic idea of separation (*hagios*). The word used here means holy in the sense of "devout," and it describes those who are faithful to God. The word is used in reference to God (Rev 15:4; 16:5), Christ (Acts 2:27; 13:35), and believers (1 Tim 2:8; Titus 1:8). "Blameless" (*akakos*) is found elsewhere in the New Testament only in Romans 16:18. It speaks of "purity" or "innocence." "Undefiled" (*amiantos*) denotes cultic purity. It appears one additional time in Hebrews (13:4) and also in James 1:27 and 1 Peter 1:4. These terms signify that Christ was qualified as high priest not only by ritual purity and bodily integrity (as was the case with the levitical high priests) but also by spiritual and moral qualities.

Two further characteristics are given: "separated from sinners" and "exalted above the heavens." The separation from sinners does not indicate a lack of concern and sympathy for humans. Hebrews repeatedly makes the point of Christ's capacity for human sympathy (see 2:10-18; 4:14-16; 5:1-2, 7-8). "Separated from sinners" refers to the same thing as "exalted above the heavens." Christ has been elevated to the presence of God and separated from those who oppose him (see 12:3).

The reason for the unique characterization of Christ detailed in v. 26 is Christ's offering of himself that accomplishes a once-for-all sacrifice: "Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself" (v. 27). This work of Christ is contrasted with the work of the levitical high priest. Other high priests offer sacrifices repeatedly and they must offer sacrifice first for their own sin. Christ made one sacrifice once for all and had no need to sacrifice for himself. A careful reading of v. 27 uncovers linguistic and historical imprecision. One problem is the antecedent of "this." The author speaks of the lack of need for Christ to sacrifice as the high priest did "first for his own sin and then for those of the people." Then he says, "This he did once for

all when he offered himself." A strict grammatical analysis would take "this" to refer to sacrifice for his own sin and those of the people. Clearly this is not the meaning in mind. "This" refers to the sacrifice for the sins of the people—not for his own sins. The "day-after-day" double sacrifice of the levitical high priest spoken of in v. 27 presents a sharp contrast to the once-for-all-time sacrifice of Christ. But the double sacrifice of the high priest was in fact a yearly sacrifice rather than a daily sacrifice. Did the author deliberately misstate the historical practice, or did he collapse the sacrificial system into a single image? The comprehensive system would have included daily offerings of priests *and* the annual sacrifice of the high priest.

Early in Hebrews the author spoke of Christ's high priestly work in terms of intercession. Now in 7:27 the author said for the first time that "he offered himself." Chronologically, we would expect sacrifice first and then intercession, but the author of Hebrews moved in the opposite direction, establishing Christ at God's right hand as intercessory on the basis of Psalm 110 and then referring to Christ's death as a high priestly act.

The author concluded the chapter in v. 28 with a succinct and neatly-balanced contrast between Christ and the levitical high priests, with Christ referred to as "Son" (as in 1:2; 3:6; 4:14; 5:5, 8): "For the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who had been made perfect forever." The contrast recalls earlier themes in the chapter: law and priesthood (see 7:11-12; 18:19), the mortality of the levitical priests (see 7:8, 23), and the confirmation of Christ's priesthood with an oath (7:20-22). The triumphant conclusion is the appointment of "a Son who has been made perfect forever." Opposed to this are the "high priests who are subject to weakness." Opposed also is the appointment of the levitical high priest by the law and the appointment of a Son by "the word of the oath." The law was ineffective in establishing a priesthood that accomplished God's purpose for his people (7:11-19). Therefore, God swore an oath to establish a different sort of priesthood. This new priesthood superseded the old priesthood (with the word of the oath coming "later than the law").

The theme of Christ's perfection is brought to a climax in v. 28. In 2:10 and 5:9, the emphasis was on Christ's perfection through suffering. Involved in this perfection is the exaltation of Christ and his installation in the realm of the eternal. Here a form of the verb "to perfect" (the perfect passive participle) is used to emphasize the permanent and absolute character of Christ's exaltation. The

human experience of suffering and death is now behind Jesus. He has obtained a status of enduring relevance.

The argument of the author of Hebrews is challenging to modern readers because it speaks in terms of ancient ritual and ceremony. When we move behind the ancient ritual and its vocabulary, we gain one basic idea: Human beings seek God's presence. Sin is a barrier between humans and God. Jesus is the priest who can achieve the offering that opens the way back to God for humans.

CONNECTIONS

Christ as Intercessor

The book of Hebrews provides resources for understanding the present activity of Christ on our behalf. Christians frequently neglect this dimension of Christ's saving work. They concentrate upon the period of the incarnation (when Christ was here) and/or upon the period of the second advent (when Christ will be here again) and neglect the question of Christ's relationship to us today. In Romans 8, Paul spoke of the spirit interceding for us:

> Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (8:26-27)

Later in Romans 8, Paul spoke of Jesus Christ in terms of the ministry of intercession: "It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us" (v. 34).

The Gospel of John deals most fully with the glorification of Jesus Christ and the continuing ministry of Jesus Christ in the Advocate (John 13–17). But Hebrews deals most fully with the idea that Christ is continually in God's presence on our behalf. The Christ who is in God's presence on our behalf is the Christ who is active as Spirit in our lives.

The fact that the Christ who is in God's presence on our behalf is also the Jesus who existed in first-century Palestine should add to our confidence in his ministry of intercession. The Christ who is

active today no longer exists as the Jesus of the first century. The child you were as a first-grade student no longer exists as such. But that child has been subsumed into your actual self as the person you are at this time. You would not be the person you are without the first-grade student. Jesus as a first-century Palestinian Jew has been subsumed into who Jesus Christ is today as the glorified Christ—in the presence of God interceding on our behalf.

THE HEAVENLY SANCTUARY AND THE NEW COVENANT

Hebrews 8:1-13

In chapter 7, the author described the priesthood of the order of Melchizedek. It is a priesthood without beginning and end, confirmed by God with an oath, founded not on legal appointment or racial qualification but on personal greatness, a priesthood that death cannot touch, which is able to offer a sacrifice that does not need to be repeated, a priesthood so pure that it need not offer sacrifice for any sins of its own. The author then claimed, "[W]e have such a high priest" (8:1). The *rank* of Jesus as high priest has been established; Jesus is a high priest of the order of Melchizedek.

Now the *ministry* of the high priest of the order of Melchizedek must be developed. Hebrews 8:1-13 is the first part of the fourth major sectin of Hebrews—"The Superiority of the Heavenly Reality over Its Earthly Copy"—an extended treatment of the high priestly ministry of Jesus that covers two and a half chapters. To develop Jesus' ministry as high priest, the essentials of a priestly ministry must be shown: a sanctuary, a covenant within which a priestly ministry operates, and a sacrifice to be offered by the high priest. The reader will be helped by a "road map" showing how the author organized these elements in his discussion. (1) The death of Christ is understood in Hebrews as an atoning sacrifice, analogous to the sacrifice offered by the high priest on the day of atonement. But this sacrifice is interpreted in light of the new covenant of Jeremiah. The relationship of the heavenly sanctuary to the new covenant is the focus of the first part of the larger exposition (8:1-13). (2) Against the background of the new covenant as the context for the priestly ministry, the author devoted time to a discussion of the ministry carried out in the ancient tent or tabernacle with its holy place and holy of holies (9:1-10). The unfamiliar world of ritual with its strange vocabulary is not only a major challenge to modern readers, but it was also foreign to the actual experience of the original readers. (3) Following the discussion of the earthly sanctuary and regulations for worship, the characteristics of the sacrifice of Christ are presented (9:11–10:18).

The interpretation of the sacrifice of Christ in terms of the new covenant of Jeremiah makes for a rich discussion. The value of the

The Earthly and the Heavenly Act

The distinction between the earthly and the heavenly and the superiority of the heavenly throughout Hebrews, especially in chapters 8–10, involves contrasts between earth and heaven. These contrasts are related to contrasts between old and new, dead and alive, ineffective and effective, apparent and real, repetitious and once for all, shadow and substance, flesh and spirit, many and one, and external and internal. The force of the writer's argument was enhanced by the association of items on the right-hand side of the equation: heaven, new, alive, effective, real, once for all, substance, spirit, one, internal. The writer distinguished between the heavenly and earthly (and elements associated with the heavenly and with the earthly) in order to affirm the superiority of the heavenly. However, the writer had to hold heaven and earth together in some fashion, for earth is God's creation, the place of Christ's perfection, and the circumstance for the readers' faithfulness.

The use of both spatial and temporal categories in establishing the contrasts opens the way to mediation in Hebrews. The idea of God's activity in history continues to be used, and the idea that the earthly is a sketch or shadow of the heavenly and real (although seen by the author as "only" a sketch or shadow) finally allows the penetration of the eternal by the temporal. Christ is presented as effecting real atonement for sin by entering the realm of the "true" and "heavenly" (ultimately real) where God himself is present (8:2; 9:11-12; 9:23-24). But the "heavenly" act is also an earthly act. Readers must question what sort of gift or sacrifice the new high priest offers. Blood sacrifice pure and simple does not suffice as an answer. What does the sacrifice signify? The imagery of atonement may be taken as a symbolic expression of the conformity of Christ to God's will (10:5-10). The "heavenly" act will then be seen as an earthly one, done in a body (10:10), but heavenly in terms of its intentionality.

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sacrifice guarantees the forgiveness promised under the new covenant (8:12; 9:14; 10:17), and the action of Christ fulfills the promise of a new covenant of heart and mind (8:10; 10:10, 16). [The Earthly and the Heavenly Act]

COMMENTARY

Christ's Sanctuary, 8:1-5

Hebrews 8:1-13 relates the high priesthood of Jesus to the themes of sanctuary and covenant, with the first five verses devoted to Christ's sanctuary and the last eight verses to Christ's covenant. The initial phrase, "Now the main point in what we are saying is this," is a rhetorical strategy drawing attention to the significance of the affirmation just made. The significance lies in part in the fact that Christians have a high priest who has taken his seat at God's right

Christ Enthroned

"[W]e have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens."

Jovan Vasilievic. 18th C. *Christ Enthroned.* Wood. Icon. Monastery, Krusedol, Serbia.

hand: "[W]e have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens" (v. 1).

Readers know this already because in 1:3 the writer alluded to Psalm 110:1 to assert the exaltation of the Son. The significant new assertion is that Christ is the ministering priest in the heavenly sanctuary. The activity of Christ and not his status is emphasized. He is "a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up" (v. 2). Although the title "minister" is equivalent to "high priest," here the title "minister" instead of "high priest" stresses the ministering rather than the official aspect of the office of high priest.

The terms "sanctuary" and "tent" (tabernacle) may refer to the same reality. When a distinction is made, the "sanctuary" refers to the inner sanctuary entered into by the high priest, and "tent" refers to the entire tabernacle. [Tabernacle] Hebrews generally observes this distinction (see 8:5; 9:8, 11, 21; 13:10). But in 9:1 the term "sanctuary" is used for the whole complex, and each part (the "holy place" and the "holy of holies") is designated a "tent." In 9:11 the author made use of the distinction between the "tent" and the "sanctuary," but here in 8:1-5 he was simply establishing the principle that the place where Christ's priestly act occurs is the "true" tent. The term "true" here is used not in contrast to what is false, but in contrast to what is symbolic and imperfect. The adjective "true" means "what truly is," "what is eternal," or "what is really real." The true tent is set up by the Lord, not by mortals.

Verse 3 introduces the question of what this high priest offers in the true tent. By the nature of the high priest and his function, it is necessary to have something to offer: "For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer" (v. 3). The question of what is offered by Christ is not answered definitively in this section of Hebrews until 9:14, after Jesus' ministry is related to his mediation of a better covenant. (In 7:27, however, the statement is made that Christ "offered himself.") In order to guard against the idea that Christ's sacrifice is of the same order as that of the levitical priests, v. 4 establishes the principle that Jesus' priesthood is not an earthly priesthood. Were he here on earth (a contrary-to-factual condition), he would not be a priest at all. The priests who are on earth offer sacrifice according to the law (which "made nothing perfect," 7:19). They offer worship in a sanctuary that is a "sketch and shadow" of the one in which Christ ministers. As evidence for that statement, the author cited Exodus 25:40 with a reference to its biblical setting: "For Moses, when he was about to erect the tent,

Tabernacle

In the OT, three terms are used in reference to the tabernacle. One, *'ohel*, could be used of any kind of tent but was often used to refer specifically to the "tent of meeting" where God was revealed to the people of Israel. Another term, *mishkan,* a word simply meaning "dwelling," appears in Exod 25:9 in reference to God's presence with the people. Both terms could be used interchangeably and later came to refer also to permanent structures (cf. Isa 54:2; Jer 30:18). A third word, *miqdash,* often translated "sanctuary," is used specifically of the tabernacle. All of these terms, when used of a portable structure, express the seminomadic character of the Israelites, as depicted in the Pentateuch, prior to their settlement in Canaan. The tabernacle, used to house Israel's sacred objects, constituted the central focus of the cultus during the period of wandering.

Exodus provides two descriptions of the tabernacle. The first, Exod 25–30, gives God's instructions to Moses as to the tabernacle's construction and contents. The second, Exod 35–40, describes how the Israelites carried out God's instructions. Exodus 33 also refers to a "tent of meeting" that may have predated the tabernacle. The descriptions of the Tabernacle given in Exodus indicate that it followed the pattern for religious shrines already in use at other places in the area. Excavations at Hazor, Megiddo, Lachish, and Beth-Shan have uncovered remains of structures with front porches, main halls, and inner sacred areas (holy of holies). In fact, most temples of the ancient world had similar arrangements. A mid-twelfth-century Kenite-Midianite sanctuary found in the Timnah Valley had a temple and altar covered with a wool tent.

After accompanying the Israelites during their wilderness tenure, the tabernacle became part of a more permanent sanctuary at Shiloh (1 Sam 1:9). When the Philistines destroyed Shiloh, the ark and other sacred objects resided at Kiriath-jearim until David erected a tent shrine to house them in Jerusalem (2 Sam 6:17). The sacred objects were later transferred to Solomon's temple (1 Kgs 8:4).

Many OT scholars hold that the elaborate descriptions of the tabernacle in Exodus actually present a later idealized vision based on the Solomonic temple. The "tent of meeting," a simpler structure, would then have been the actual sanctuary used by Moses and the wilderness generation. Other scholars think the Exodus descriptions fit with what Israelite craftsmen trained in Egypt would have built. Either the tabernacle as described or the "tent of meeting" would have functioned as a temporary, yet sacred, reminder for the people en route to their destination of the presence of God in their midst. The book of Hebrews focuses on this dimension of the tabernacle's function.

See David C. Maltsberger, "Tabernacle," ed. Waston E. Mills et al., *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1990), 871-72.

was warned, 'See that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.'" For Exodus 25, the fact that the desert sanctuary was modeled on the pattern shown on the mountain was positive. The sanctuary was not of circumstantial origin. It did not even originate in the mind of Moses. It was of God's design. For Hebrews, the use of Exodus 25 is pejorative. The earthly sanctuary is *only* a shadow of the real sanctuary. In order to underline the provisional nature of the desert sanctuary, the author modified the Septuagint translation at two places. The Septuagint reads, "See, you shall make them according to the pattern having been shown you on the mountain." The author of Hebrews added the word "everything" ("See that you make everything according to the pattern"), and he changed the verb from the perfect participle ("having been shown you") to an aorist participle ("shown you"). The addition of "everything" as object emphasizes the total dependence of the copy on its heavenly model; and the change in tense of the participle may suggest that the heavenly temple was a

model for the earthly copy at the beginning but that this was not a permanent relationship.

The description of the sanctuary of the levitical priests as a "sketch and shadow" of the heavenly sanctuary is designed not to express two ideas but to express one idea in a powerful way—that the earthly sanctuary belongs to the realm of the changing and transitory and has only limited value because it must ultimately pass away. The term "sketch" here has the meaning "copy." The use of the term "shadow" for elements of the material world is Platonic (in the allegory of the cave in *The Republic* [7.515 A-B], those imprisoned in the cave see only shadows, but they mistake them for the "realities" that are the ultimate cause for those shadows).

In the Platonic metaphysics, what is most transcendent is most real. Philo used Plato's dualistic metaphysics to elaborate allegorical interpretations of the Septuagint. The ultimately real counterpart of the earthly temple is found to be a variety of spiritual and ethical realities: wisdom, virtue, the human soul, or the "powers" of God. For Philo, what is most transcendent is most real in a psychological and moral sense. A parallel exists between Philo and Hebrews. In Hebrews, the sacrifice consummated in the heavenly sanctuary is one of heart and will (10:1-10). Through that sacrifice, the new covenant relationship is established. This, however, is not a principle or virtue available in general to humankind. It is a relationship made possible by Christ. The earthly/heavenly contrast, then, intersects with and is completed by an old/new contrast.

Christ's Covenant, 8:6-13

Verse 6b concludes the theme of Christ's ministry in the true sanctuary (the presence of God) by declaring, "But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry." This conclusion is set directly in relation to the contrary-to-fact condition in v. 4: "Now if he were on earth, . . . But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry." It also summarizes the perspective of the first five verses. The perfect tense indicates that he has obtained and still carries out this ministry.

In 6b, the "more excellent ministry" is shown to be mediation of "a better covenant" that has been enacted "through better promises." This introduces a new thought (briefly mentioned in 7:22 but not developed in relationship to cult and priesthood). The introduction of the theme of covenant begins to answer the question about the sort of gifts and sacrifices the heavenly high priest

offers (v. 3). The introduction of the idea of a new covenant in the minds and hearts of the people allows the writer to develop the heavenly ministry in terms of the interior and spiritual dimensions of Jesus' physical self-sacrifice.

Christ is spoken of in v. 6 as "mediator" of a better covenant. In the early statement about covenant, Jesus is spoken of as the "guarantee" of a better covenant (7:22). The two terms are not exactly synonymous, but the Greek term for "mediator" can be used with the sense of "guarantee." A mediator is an intermediary or arbiter. Moses was the mediator of the Sinai covenant, and the idea that Christ was mediator was a traditional Christian perspective (1 Tim 2:5 applies the term to Christ, and there it appears to be a part of a traditional formula). The "better covenant" is a result of "better promises." The promise that has been in the background to this point is related to inheritance. It has been explicated in terms of "rest," a rich polyvalent symbol. The concept of promise will receive more definite content through its correlation with the prophecy of a new covenant. In 9:15 the covenant is related to "the promised eternal inheritance," which is related to "a death" that redeems "from the transgressions under the first covenant."

The author explained the better covenant of Christ as the new covenant anticipated by Jeremiah, and vv. 7-13 contain a quotation from Jeremiah 31:31-34 with an introduction and a conclusion. The introduction ("For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one," v. 7) underscores the need for the new covenant: fault and failure on the part of the covenant and the people. The covenant has failed to bring about the relationship between God and God's people desired by God. In his conclusion (v. 13), the author of Hebrews repeated what is said in the introduction, that a new covenant implies the failure and obsolesce of the first covenant: "And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear." The context of the new covenant passage in the book of Jeremiah (the lengthiest Old Testament quotation in the New Testament) is the series of oracles in Jeremiah 30–33 speaking to exiled Israel concerning restoration to the homeland. The oracle cited promises that God's law will be inscribed on the hearts of believers, that all from the least to the greatest will know the Lord (i.e., be in proper relationship with God), and that God will "remember their sins no more."

The text of Jeremiah makes more explicit what the "better promises" of Hebrews 8:6 involve. The covenant anticipated by Jeremiah and introduced by Christ is different in two important respects from the old covenant. It is a covenant written on the human

heart, not on tablets of stone (vv. 10-11). That is, it is an interior covenant. It is also a covenant in which sins are effectively forgiven (v. 12). The link between the themes of covenant and priesthood is the forgiveness of sin. The two features of interior covenant and forgiveness of sins are repeated in the conclusion of the major section (10:16-17); this makes clear that these features are foremost in the author's mind. The early Christians understood themselves to be members of a new covenant community. Although the Jeremiah text is not quoted elsewhere in the New Testament, the concept of the new covenant is clearly presented. In the accounts of the Last Supper, the term "covenant" is used. Mark 14:24 quotes Jesus as saying, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many." Luke uses the expression "new covenant" (Luke 22:20; see Matt 26:28). Paul used the expression "new covenant" in his account of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:25; see also 2 Cor 3:6).

CONNECTIONS

Historical Experience and the Really Real

The author of Hebrews used temporal categories and spatial categories to explain the significance of Jesus Christ. The temporal categories grow out of the biblical view of God as active in history, with the climax of God's activity being seen in Jesus Christ. The spatial categories depend upon a Platonic emphasis on the really real as a realm transcending the historical. In philosophy and theology, two different views roughly paralleling the temporal and spatial perspectives (realism and idealism) have been important ways of thinking about God and spiritual reality. Plato (c. 427–347 BC) and Aristotle (387–322 BC) are the classical philosophers whose views on the nature of reality became primary in philosophy and theology. They agreed that philosophy seeks truth, but they disagreed on the reality captured by philosophical truth. Plato saw forms and universals as being objectively real—before things. The particular historical thing is seen through the lens of the Idea. For Aristotle, however, the real was not the universal beyond things; the real was the universal in things. The schema for interpretation was the particular historical thing. These differences became important in philosophy and theology in general and in interpretation in particular. How can any reliable truth be established if reality is founded on the historical, the changing, the ephemeral? But why

should and how can any concern be focused on the historical, on historicality in general, if what is real is not directly founded on the historical? In different epochs, idealism in some form was satisfying as the overarching paradigm, and the historical and contingent were reduced in some way to that paradigm. Human activity was often devalued in favor of transhuman perspectives. The concept of God in the early church, for example, resulted in large measure from this idealistic Platonic perspective. In other epochs, the realistic Aristotelian paradigm in some form was satisfying. What is really real is what transpires in the world. But how does one make sense of natural and human data and experiences apart from some transcending or overarching reality and schema?

The book of Hebrews maintains the temporal perspective, viewing history as the arena for God's activity and anticipating an end that is the consequence of God's activity in Jesus Christ. The spatial perspective is integrated with the temporal perspective, with the earlier historical events seen as types of later events. These later events in the experience of Christ are what is really real. They are not only at the "end" of history; they also transcend history or transform history. Hebrews may be seen as beginning with a temporal perspective that is transformed with the help of Platonic ideas mediated through Philo and certain rabbinic interpreters. If we were to begin with idealistic or Platonic ideas, we would find them turned on their side by the temporal perspective. This temporal perspective is one that sees cardinal historical events as blueprints or patterns, the full meaning of which is discovered in light of later events. The model for this is the experience of the tabernacle. Moses on the mountain received the word to follow the pattern for the tabernacle and its furnishings that he had been shown on the mountain. Walter Harrelson has suggested that

> [O]ver and again, cardinal historical experiences become such patterns, the realization of which awaits later execution here on earth. Biblical eschatology gains much of its dynamism in this way: David's Jerusalem, Zion, is a place of revelation now, but it is destined to become "a house of prayer for all peoples" (Isaiah 56:7), the "mother of us all" (2 Esdras 10:7). God has in store nothing less than a new heaven and a new earth, and it behooves the faithful to shape their lives now in the light of that "pattern" that is provided now and will find realization at the consummation of God's work. Biblical eschatology turns the Platonic imagery on its side, keeps it open-ended, but firmly insists that authentic existence is lived out of a sure and coming Day of the Lord.[1]

The New Covenant: God's Promise to Israel

The Hebrew prophet Jeremiah urged Israel to accept a new relationship with God, an inward, God-centered covenant. Jeremiah's call was not a call to the past but to the future, a call to move forward. God is always doing a new thing among God's people. Hebrews, in its turn, used the work of this prophet of Israel to make sense of God's work in Jesus Christ. But the church may forget that God continues to do new things among God's people. The word of Jeremiah has relevance today when we become so concerned with the possession of the past that we forget that the new covenant is a gift of God who is continually doing new things.

NOTE

[1] Walter Harrelson, "Hebrews and Postmodernism," paper delivered at Furman University, Greenville SC (19 October 1998), 5.

THE MINISTRY OF THE LEVITICAL PRIESTS

Hebrews 9:1-10

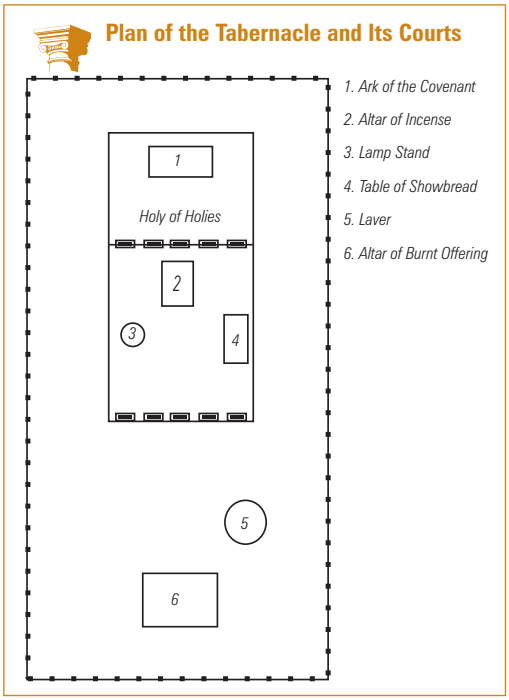
The cultic practices of the levitical priests in the earthly sanctuary are treated in 9:1-10. In the discussion of the earthly sanctuary and regulations for worship, the author indicated that he had presented a symbol of the "present time." During this time, "gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper" (9:9). The reader is being prepared for a treatment of a system in which gifts and sacrifices *are* offered that *can* and *do* perfect the conscience of the worshipers. The expectation of the reader for a positive move is met by the declaration that Christ has obtained eternal redemption with his own blood that purifies "our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!" (9:14).

The section begins with an indication that the new covenant will be the theme of the exposition in the entire section 9:1–10:18: "Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary" (v. 1). (The word "covenant" is not in the text. It is to be supplied by the reader on the basis of the previous discussion. The NRSV correctly adds the word "covenant.") The term "sanctuary" in 9:1 refers to the whole tabernacle, the holy place and the holy of holies. The description of the sanctuary as "earthly" recalls the distinction between the sanctuary "that the Lord, and not any mortal, had set up" (8:2) and the sanctuary constructed by Moses in accordance with divine instructions (8:5). What is being described then is the tabernacle of the exodus generation, and the adjective "earthly" has negative connotations. The temple in Jerusalem, of course, continued the division into a holy place and a holy of holies, but since the place of worship is being considered in relation to the old and new covenants, it is natural that the tabernacle be used instead of the temple. It was the desert sanctuary associated with the establishment of the old covenant at Sinai.

COMMENTARY

The Sanctuary, 9:2-5

Following the introductory statement about the existence of a cultic ministry under the first covenant, the author discussed the regulations for worship and the earthly sanctuary under the first covenant. This discussion is in chiastic or inverse order, with vv. 2-5 discussing the sanctuary and vv. 6-7 discussing the regulations for worship. The text speaks of two tents, but actually successive courts are involved—the holy place and the holy of holies. The writer was obviously dependent upon traditions about the arrangements in the two courts, traditions that ultimately go back to the account of the desert tabernacle in Exodus (see Exod 25:1–31:11; 36:2–39:43; 40:1-15, 16-38). [Plan of the Tabernacle and Its Courts]



In the first sanctuary (the holy place) were the lamp stand (Menorah) and the table. On the table were twelve loaves of the presentation (the bread of the presence or the showbread). According to Hebrews, the golden altar of incense was in the second sanctuary (the holy of holies or the most holy place), but the strongest traditions locate this altar at the rear of the holy place near the curtain. Priests burned incense on this altar daily (see Luke 1:8-11). The ark of the covenant was the item of central importance in the holy of holies. This ark contained the stone tablets from Sinai. Hebrews says that a pot of manna and Aaron's rod, which budded, were placed inside the ark with the tablets. (According to Exod 16:32-34 and Num 17:10-11, however, these were placed "before the covenant.") On top of the ark were the "cherubim of glory" signifying that this was the throne of divine glory. The mercy seat or place of atonement was located between the cherubim. This was the focal point of the activity of the high priest on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:14-15). The purpose of the author was not to give a detailed explanation of the furnishings of the tabernacle. His interest was the holy of holies and the mercy seat within the holy of holies, and more particularly, the ritual described in vv. 6 and 7. [The Mercy Seat]

The Mercy Seat

The mercy seat was the cover of the ark placed in the most holy place. Exod 25:1-40 gives instructions about the construction of the ark and its cover and indicates that the covenant (the tablets of law) was to be placed in the ark (hence the ark was called the ark of the covenant).

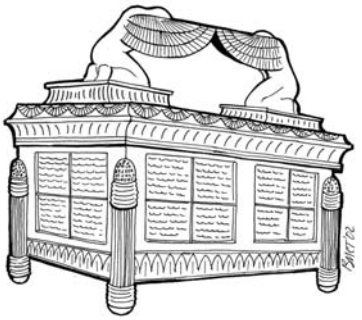
Specific instructions are given about the construction of the mercy seat:

> Then you shall make a mercy seat of pure gold; two cubits and a half shall be its length, and a cubit and a half its width. You shall make two cherubim of gold; you shall make them of hammered work, at the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub at the one end, and one cherub at the other; of one piece with the mercy seat you shall make the cherubim at its two ends. The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings. They shall face one to another; the faces of the cherubim shall be turned toward the mercy seat. You shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark; and in the ark you shall put the covenant that I shall give you. (Exod 25:17-21)

The ark was about 45 by 27 by 27 inches, and therefore the cover was 45 by 27 inches. The mercy seat was encompassed by two "cherubim"—not chubby children but members of the heavenly court. The cherubim were represented as winged creatures like the sphinx of Egypt, half-human and half-lion (Ezek 41:18-19). In antiquity, cherubim were used to adorn thrones, and these cherubim signify the presence and protection of God.

The language of "mercy seat" suggests a covering of guilt and the gift of forgiveness. The term itself means a covering or a place of covering. The mercy seat "covers" in the way a sealer covers over a contaminated area. The mercy seat, then, functions to overcome the danger from sin, with sin treated almost as a material, physical substance. In Lev 16:2-16 the term mercy seat (cover) describes the liturgical process of Yom Kippur, the day of "covering," the Day of Atonement. The high priest could not enter the most holy place at just any time, for (God says) "I appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat" (Lev 16:2). Leviticus is deeply concerned about the presence of the holy God in the midst of a sinful people.

The function of the mercy seat is given in Exod 25:22: "There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the covenant, I will deliver to you all my commands for



the Israelites." The mercy seat is the place of meeting, the place where God will meet Moses. Exod 25:22 makes this explicit. This meeting and the issuing of commandments are cited as purposes of the mercy seat—not just the covering of sin and the gift of forgiveness. But these functions—forgiveness and commandment—are not foreign to each other. The giving of law was an act of God's grace and mercy. The mercy seat, then, as a covering of the ark containing the commandments, has the explicit purpose of a meeting to receive commandments. But implicit in this is the function of covering sin and the offering of communion or relationship.

In Rom 3:25, Paul uses the term mercy seat. Paul says God put Jesus Christ forward "as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood effective through faith." The term translated "sacrifice of atonement" is *hilastērion*, the word used for mercy seat in the Septuagint. Jesus is depicted as a higher mercy seat or means of mercy, effective through faith rather than through purely external observance.

The book of Hebrews uses the worship arrangements involving the mercy seat to make a powerful claim for the decisiveness and distinctiveness of Jesus in the worship of God. The inadequacy of the tabernacle arrangements is designed to speak of the adequacy of Jesus. In Heb 9:5 the term mercy seat is used. Above the ark "were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat [*hilastērion*]. . . . the priests go continually into the first tent to carry out their ritual duties; but only the high priest goes into the second, and he but once a year, and not without taking the blood that he offers for himself and for the sins committed unintentionally by the people" (9:6-7). The offering of the blood of Christ is incomparably superior to sacrifices of the blood of goats and bulls: (1) it is the life not of irrational beasts but of a person; (2) this person, Christ, was both priest and sacrifice; (3) the offering was made once for all; (4) the offering was made in the heavenly sanctuary; (5) the sacrifice was a voluntary act accomplished through the eternal spirit; and (6) the effectiveness of the sacrifice of Christ remains for all time.

The Priestly Activity, 9:6-7

Verse 6 describes briefly the priestly activity in the first compartment of the tabernacle: "[T]he priests go continually into the first tent to carry out their ritual duties." The writer stressed the continual and routine nature of the activities, but he did not go into detail. The ritual that is briefly summarized would have included offering the scheduled sacrifices (Lev 6:8, 30; Num 28:1-10), burning incense (Exod 30:7), replacing the bread on the table every seven days (Lev 24:5), and trimming the lamp (Exod 27:21).

Verse 7 describes the important activity of the high priest on the Day of Atonement. The author made multiple use of the double negative of which he was fond: "[O]nly the high priest goes into the second, and he but once a year, and not without taking the blood that he offers for himself and for the sins committed unintentionally by the people" (see also 4:15; 6:10; 7:20; 9:18, 22). The Day of Atonement was full of elaborate rituals, but the writer referred explicitly to two sacrifices. The first was the sacrifice by the high priest of a bull with the sprinkling of its blood on the ark of the covenant for the sins of the high priest and those of his family (Lev 16:6, 11, 14). The second was the sacrifice of a goat and the offering of its blood for the sins of the people (Lev 16:15, 30). The author collapsed these two sacrifices and emphasized that the sacrifice is for "the sins committed unintentionally by the people." This is important in later discussion of the writer about the situation of his readers (and himself) "if we willfully persist in sin after receiving the knowledge of the truth" (10:26; see Num 15:22, 30).

Deeper Meaning, 9:8-10

Verses 8-10 indicate that the sanctuary and its worship have a deeper meaning than seen at first. The author used temporal language and categories—"present time" and the future time that will come "to set things right"—not so much to talk about time as to talk about the nature of different sorts of ministry and worship as such. A step-by-step analysis of how readers interpret the exposition will show how readers come to deeper meaning and significance than first appears. The reader reads the account of the construction and furnishings of the different compartments of the earthly sanctuary (vv. 1-5) as a simple factual historical account. Then the reader reads the account of the activities of the priest in the first tent and the high priest in the second tent (vv. 6-7) as history—with the historical present being used—"the priests go . . . the high priest goes." With v. 8, the reader's simple analysis of

the text is challenged with the assertion, "By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary has not yet been disclosed as long as the first tent is still standing." The writer spoke of the insight or revelation he has as to what the earthly sanctuary and its worship means as being the result of the work of the Holy Spirit. Early in Hebrews, the Holy Spirit was seen as the one inspiring Scripture. Here, the Holy Spirit reveals what had not been understood (see 1 Cor 3:13; 2 Pet 1:14). What is to be understood is the first tent's role in denying access to the sanctuary. As long as the holy place stands and has standing (in both the physical and legal senses), the way into the sanctuary (the presence of God) is not yet disclosed. The limited access of the high priest (only the high priest and even then only once a year), testifies not to the accessibility but to the inaccessibility of the sanctuary.

At first, the reader continues to understand all this as historical narrative concerning the past: as long as the first tent was still standing, the way into the sanctuary was not disclosed. But now the first tent no longer stands and the way into the sanctuary has been disclosed. Temporal categories are important in Hebrews, and these temporal categories are important for the deeper nontemporal significance. But v. 9 challenges a simple temporal or chronological reading: "This [the holy place] is a symbol of the present time." The word "symbol" is the translation of a Greek word that is normally translated "parable," and the word "parable" is appropriate here. A parable is a comparison that requires readers to see relationships that are not readily apparent. The parables of the Synoptic Gospels require hearers and readers to find some point of comparison between what is talked about in the parable and the rule of God. Here the holy place is a parable "of the present time." Of course, "present time" is not simply a chronological reference. It may be comparable to the "present age" in comparison to the "age to come." The present time (the holy place with its limitations) has been superseded by the coming of the "time . . . to set things right." In the "present time" (the epoch of the earthly holy place), "gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper" (9:9). The word "conscience" was commonly used in the Hellenistic world for awareness in both the moral and nonmoral sense. In the moral sense it signified the awareness of sins or transgressions—or the faculty for this awareness. The perfection spoken of by Hebrews is broader than cleansing from the burden of guilt, but this cleansing is involved (see 9:14; 10:2, 10, 14) and is the way Jeremiah's prophecy of a new internal covenant is fulfilled.

In contrast to the high priesthood of Christ anticipated by the writer is a priesthood that deals "only with food and drink and various baptisms, regulations for the body imposed until the time comes to set things right" (v. 10). The "food and drink and various baptisms" refer in a loose way to the purity laws of the Old Testament. They were "regulations for the body." They were "imposed." The interiority and spirituality of Christ's act in vv. 11-14 is the opposite of these rituals of the old covenant. These regulations are imposed "until the time comes to set things right." The verb "to set things right" appears only here in the Bible. It is used at times in the sense of correcting a law. Earlier the author spoke of "a change in the law" (7:12) and "the abrogation of an earlier commandment" (7:18). There is irony in the use of a legal term for the abolishment of a legal system.

By means of the parable of the first tent that still stands, the reader is drawn into the story. Past, present, and future as well as worship that perfects and worship that does not perfect the conscience of the worshiper must be correlated in order for the reader to make sense of the passage. What is important is that the "past" ineffectiveness of the levitical cult may be a "present" experience. This past and present ineffectiveness calls for the high priestly ministry of Jesus. The "future" eschatological event may also be a "present" event. The parable is not an allegory. All of the different elements of the complex need not be assigned independent meaning. The parable is ultimately a call to action on the part of the readers.

CONNECTIONS

"Of These Things We Cannot Speak Now in Detail"

The author of Hebrews took his readers into the old desert tabernacle, into the first tent, and past the curtain into the holy of holies. Readers are entranced. They are like college students studying developing nations in Africa who are on a safari in Kenya or Tanzania. The students are ever anticipating new and different sights—elephants, giraffes, rhinoceroses, lions, and perhaps even a leopard. When the instructor says it is time to return to the lodge, the students want to explore one more site in hopes of seeing something new or getting a closer glimpse of an animal they have already seen. The author of Hebrews disappointed his readers by

declaring that he would not speak further of the furniture of the holy of holies, all covered with gold. Why? Why did the author not continue with details of the ancient tabernacle? It is simply that such details are beside the point? That the real point is what happened in the heavenly tabernacle in the priestly ministry of Jesus? The college students need to move back from their experience on the safari to the point of that study—the developing nations and their problems and promise. They need to hear lecturers, local and national educators, politicians, and business people. They need to experience the structures of the new nations. In the same way, an analysis of the really real—beyond the shadow of the tabernacle—is in store for the readers of Hebrews.

Modern readers may get bogged down with preliminaries, with procedures and rules. They may find themselves laboring hard at the externals involved in the business of being religious. This activity is indeed good and useful, but it must be seen in relation to the major point—access to the living and healing God.

CHRIST'S SACRIFICE SECURES ETERNAL REDEMPTION

Hebrews 9:11-14

This paragraph is the first of five paragraphs characterizing the sacrifice of Christ. The characteristics of Christ's sacrifice are presented in these paragraphs against the background of the discussion of the earthly sanctuary and its worship in 9:1-10. They are also related to the earlier discussion of the heavenly sanctuary and new covenant introduced in 8:1-5.

The NRSV indicates the new direction of the discussion with the adversarial conjunction "but" ("But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that had come"). This prepares the reader for a contrast to the sacrifice of the levitical priest in 9:1-10 that deals only with external matters and cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper. Verses 11-14 follow the same pattern as 9:1-10, treating first of all the sanctuary of the new covenant (v. 11), then the regulations for worship (v. 12), and finally the superiority of the new sacrifice (vv. 13-14). The section is composed of two sentences (both in the Greek and in the NRSV). The first sentence describes the place and ritual of Christ's high priestly sacrifice (with both the place and the ritual discussed in positive and negative terms). The second sentence argues for the superiority of the new sacrifice (using the argument from lesser to greater).

COMMENTARY

The Place and Ritual of Christ's High-priestly Act, 9:11-12

Christ is described as "high priest of the good things that have come." This description ties the section to the earlier contrast between the "present time" (v. 9) and the "time . . . to set things right" (v. 10). Christ's sacrifice deals with more than regulations for the body. It has the power to perfect the conscience. Through Christ's

high-priestly act, what the law foreshadowed has become a reality. The promises of the new covenant are being realized.

The high-priestly activity of Christ is modeled on the ritual of the Day of Atonement. In this ritual the high priest passes through a tent. Jesus also passes through a tent, but this tent is the "true tent" set up by the Lord and not any mortal (8:2). Here the tent is described positively as "greater" and "perfect" (a literal translation of the Greek would be "more perfect," but English has no comparative form of "perfect"). Comparatives are frequently used to describe the superior elements of the heavenly order, "more excellent" (1:4; 8:6), "more glory," (3:3), "more honor" (3:3), "better covenant" (7:22; 8:6).

The negative description, "not made with hands," indicates divine origin. "Made with hands" ("manufactured") is used in Jewish and Christian discussions to contrast mere human constructions with what is of divine origin (see Lev 26:1; Isa 46:6; Mark 14:58; Acts 7:48; 17:24; Eph 2:11). The parenthetical explanation "not of this creation" indicates definitely that "not made with hands" means the transcendent, the spiritual, the "true," and not simply the natural (as opposed to the human). The author had used the image of the heavens to depict the true or the really real in 4:14. Jesus was the "great high priest who has passed through the heavens." Of course, the author was not attempting to present some sort of scientific cosmology. A distinction is to be made between the heavens as celestial spheres and the transcendent or

The Significance of the Blood

Blood is seen in the Bible as a vital element of all living things. "The life of the flesh is in the blood .... For the life of every creature—its blood is its life" (Lev 17:11, 14; see Deut 12:23). The fact that "the blood is life" meant that the consumption of blood was the same as eating the living animal. In Gen 9:4 Noah and his descendants were forbidden to consume the blood of animal flesh. The principle is reverence for life. Life, God's gift, is symbolized by blood. The blood of an animal must be drained before the flesh may be eaten (Lev 3:17; 7:26; 17:10-14; Deut 12:15-16, 20-27).

The fact that "the life of the flesh is in the blood" is also basic for the role of blood in worship in Israel. God says, "I have given it [blood] to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement" (Lev 17:11). Blood, then, plays a pervasive role in the worship of Israel. It is used to purge ritual impurity when it is placed on the horns of the altar or sprinkled inside the sanctuary (see Lev 16:1-34). Blood serves in the purification of the leper (Lev 14:1-57). Blood expiates sin and wards off future harm as it is smeared on the doorposts and lintels (Exod 12:7, 13, 22-23). Blood is also involved in the rituals of covenant and circumcision (Exod 24:6-8; 4:24-26; Ezek 16:6).

In the NT, the greatest theological significance of blood is found in relation to the death of Christ. "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Eph 2:13; see also 1 Cor 10:16; 11:27; 1 John 1:7; 1 Pet 1:2; Rev 7:14; 12:11). The focus is not on the material blood of Christ, but the life that the blood signifies. The blood of Christ (as also the cross of Christ) speaks of the death of Christ in its significance of salvation.

In Hebrews, the blood of the heavenly high priest Christ is the counterpart of the blood of animals. The language is clearly metaphorical; the real point is the religious and ethical significance of the blood.

"true" realm where God pitches a tent. The author had in mind the sort of place that is not subject to passing away.

Through this tent, Christ "entered once for all into the Holy Place." The NRSV translates correctly the word used in Hebrews, but since "holy place" often refers to the first compartment of the tabernacle (as opposed to the holy of holies), it would also be correct to translate this as "holy of holies." This is the area entered by the high priest alone to sprinkle blood on the mercy seat. [The Significance of the Blood]

The means of the atonement achieved by Christ is described first of all in terms of what it was not and then in terms of what it was. The means of atonement is *not* "the blood of goats and calves." The author did not discuss precisely what was involved in the sacrifice of the Day of Atonement (this is true of other reminiscences in chs. 9 and 10). According to Leviticus, one bull, one ram, and two male goats were involved. [Leviticus 16:1-5: Preparatory Instructions for the Ritual of the Day of Atonement] The generality of description of the sacrifices may be a way expressing contempt for what is considered by the author to be superficial and antiquated offerings (see Ps 50:13 and Isa 1:11 for deprecatory generalizing of sacrifices). The means *positively stated* is the blood of Christ. Clearly "blood" is used in a metaphorical sense. Readers will consider possible references of "blood" and see how they fit with the entire redemptive movement of Jesus' life, death, ascension, and entrance into the sanctuary of God's presence. No matter which moment is emphasized, the Old Testament emphasis upon life in the offering of blood will be a part of the meaning. Leviticus provides the background:

> If anyone of the house of Israel or of the aliens who reside among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut that person off from the people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement. Therefore, I have said to the people of Israel: No person among you shall eat blood, nor shall any alien who resides among you eat blood. And anyone of the people of Israel, or of the aliens who reside among them, who hunts down an animal or bird that may be eaten shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth. For the

Leviticus 16:1-5: Preparatory Instructions for the Ritual of the Day of Atonement

The LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the LORD and died. The LORD said to Moses: Tell your brother Aaron not to come just at any time into the sanctuary inside the curtain before the mercy seat that is upon the ark, or he will die; for I appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat. Thus shall Aaron come into the holy place: with a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. He shall put on the holy linen tunic, and shall have the linen undergarments next to his body, fasten the linen sash, and wear the linen turban; these are the holy vestments. He shall bathe his body in water, and then put them on. He shall take from the congregation of the people of Israel two male goats for a sin offering, and one ram for a burnt offering.

> life of every creature—its blood is its life; therefore I have said to the people of Israel: You shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood; whoever eats it shall be cut off. (Lev 17:10-14; see also Deut 12:23-25)

Readers find meaning going beyond literal blood language. Christ's suffering of death is an important fact. But Hebrews emphasizes Christ's life of identification with his brothers and sisters in the flesh, his testing, and the consummation of his entry into the presence of God where Christ intercedes for us. To emphasize the externals and fail to see the internalization involved is to misread the message of Hebrews. Along with "blood" used as a metaphor, an emphasis must then be placed upon the words "his own." What Christ offered was not the life of sacrificial animals but his own life. The result of this is the obtaining of "eternal redemption." The word "redemption" means purchase out of bondage, and it is used metaphorically for salvation of various kinds in the Bible—from death, from sin, from enemies, from slavery in Egypt. The offering of Christ is "eternal." It is consummated in the "true" tabernacle where God is present and has an everlasting effect as it is offered through "the eternal spirit" (v. 14).

Numbers 19:1-10: Ritual for Purifying a Person Defiled by a Corpse

The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: This is a stature of the law that the LORD has commanded: Tell the Israelites to bring you a red heifer without defect, in which there is no blemish and on which no yoke has been laid. You shall give it to the priest Eleazar, and it shall be taken outside the camp and slaughtered in his presence. The priest Eleazar shall take some of its blood with his finger and sprinkle it seven times towards the front of the tent of meeting. Then the heifer shall be burned in his sight; its skin, its flesh, and its blood, with its dung, shall be burned. The priest shall take cedarwood, hyssop, and crimson material, and throw them into the fire in which the heifer is burning. Then the priest shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water, and afterwards he may come into the camp; but the priest shall remain unclean until evening. The one who burns the heifer shall wash his clothes in water and bathe his body in water; he shall remain unclean until evening. Then someone who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer, and deposit them outside the camp in a clean place; and they shall be kept for the congregation of the Israelites for the water for cleansing. It is a purification offering. The one who gathers the ashes of the heifer shall wash his clothes and be unclean until evening.

Verses 13 and 14 contrast the blood of animals and the blood of Christ by means of an argument from lesser to greater. The "lesser" side of the argument refers not only to the blood of goats and bulls (the sacrifice of the Day of Atonement) but also to the "sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer." This has to do with the ritual of the red heifer (see Num 19 for the details of this ritual). [Numbers 19:1-10: Ritual for Purifying a Person Defiled by a Corpse] This was an ancient purificatory ritual involving a red heifer slaughtered outside the camp. Some of its blood was sprinkled at the front of the tent of meeting. Then the heifer was burned. After this, the ashes of the heifer were gathered and deposited in a clean place outside the camp and used in the water of ritual purification. Elements in the ritual serve well to set up the contrasting sacrifice of Christ. The blood is sprinkled on the outside of the tent of meeting, reminding readers of the superficial efficacy of the levitical

system. The ashes of the heifer in the water of purification cleanse the bodies of those being sprinkled. They have to do with ceremonial cleansing for activities that defiled the people (such as touching a corpse) and for cleansing of cooking utensils, furniture, and other materials in the ceremonial life of the community of Israel.

The "lesser" side of the argument assumes efficacy of the sorts of rituals carried out by the levitical priesthood. Those defiled are sanctified, but this is limited to the purification of the flesh. This cleansing has nothing to do with the conscience. The "greater" side of the argument then asserts that with the more valuable sacrifice of Christ more profound effects will follow. The more valuable sacrifice is the blood of Christ, and what the blood symbolizes is stated. Christ offered "himself." This offering was made "to God," "through the eternal Spirit." Reference to the Spirit as "eternal" is appropriate. The eternal nature of the Spirit contrasts with the daily and annual repetition of levitical sacrifices. More importantly, Christ's offering of himself is located in the realm of Spirit, in God's presence, and in Christ's internal or spiritual being (see Rom 1:4; 1 Cor 15:45; 1 Tim 3:16; 1 Pet 3:18 for association of the Spirit with Christ's death and exaltation). The victim's being "blameless" marks the superlative quality of the sacrifice. This term comes from Old Testament prescriptions about the physical perfection of the victims (see Exod 29:2; Lev 1:3, 10; 4:3; Num 6:14). The term "perfect" ("blameless") is used for moral purity in Psalm 15:2; 37:18; Proverbs 11:5, 20, and it was applied to Christ in early Christianity in a moral rather than a physical sense (see 1 Pet 1:19). The sacrifice of Christ, then, goes far beyond the purification of the flesh. It purifies "our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!" (v. 14). The interiority and spirituality of Christ's act is matched by an interior and spiritual purification. The cleansing of the levitical ritual cleansed from defilement of contact with dead bodies. The sacrifice of Christ cleanses from dead works (see 6:1), but the end in mind is the worship of the living God. The Greek verb translated "to worship" may also be translated "to serve." In this context in Hebrews it has the sense of worship. Throughout the New Testament, however, it includes not only worship but also service to God in a broader sense (see Heb 12:28; Luke 1:74; Acts 27:23; Rom 1:9; Phil 3:3).

CHRIST'S SACRIFICE RATIFIES A NEW COVENANT

Hebrews 9:15-22

This passage contains the most amazing truths of the book of Hebrews. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ wipes out the consequences of sins committed under the old covenant and inaugurates the fellowship promised under the new covenant. But this passage also contains an argument that is most difficult for modern readers. It is the argument that demonstrates why the new relationship with God involves death—the death of Christ.

Before attempting to follow the argument in detail, we will preview the twofold answer given by the writer to the Hebrews. The first answer is based on a pun! This would have been understood by the ancient readers, for this method of argument was familiar to them. The readers used the same Greek word (*diathēkē*) in two different ways, to refer to a covenant *and* to refer to a will. The normal Christian use of the word *diathēkē* was to speak of covenant, the relationship between God and humankind. But the word *diathēkē* was also used in the sense of will or testament. Up to v. 16, the writer used the term *diathēkē* with the sense of covenant. Then suddenly the writer switched to the sense of will. A will does not become effective until the death of the one making the will. Death is necessary for a will to come into operation. No *diathēkē* (will) can come into effect without the death of the one making the will. The new *diathēkē* (covenant), then, cannot come to reality apart from the death of Christ.

Original readers would have seen an argument as a clever sort of exposition. Modern readers greet it first with surprise and only later with respect as they find a deeper relationship between the new covenant and the career of Christ involving his death on the cross.

The second answer to the question why the new relationship with God involves death—the death of Christ—was given by the author in terms of the Hebrew sacrificial system. The writer went back to Leviticus 17:11: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement." The writer also went back to the inauguration of the first covenant when Moses performed

sacrifice. As death was involved with the first covenant, so death is involved with the new covenant. This is a way of saying that reconciliation is costly. Forgiveness and reconciliation does not mean sin does not matter. Sin does matter! The cross is a constant reminder of the costliness of sin and the preciousness of forgiveness.

The theme of a new covenant as discussed in Jeremiah 31 is dominant in the larger unit 8:1–10:18. This new covenant surpasses the first covenant in making available a new order of perfection. Until 9:15-22, no explicit link has been made between covenant and atoning sacrifice. Indeed, Hebrews 8:6 speaks of Jesus as the "mediator of a better covenant," and Hebrews 9:1-15 contrasts the rituals of atonement of the levitical priesthood and of Christ. But the explicit relationship between covenant and atonement has not been made clear. Jeremiah 31 itself is silent on the question of how the covenant is to be established and how the promised forgiveness of sins is achieved (8:12).

In 9:1 the writer had indicated that a relationship exists between covenant, sanctuary, and regulations for worship. Readers could assume from the wording of 9:1 ("Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary") that the cult was subordinate to the covenant, that the rituals of the old order were not foundational. The writer, however, spoke of priesthood and cult as the foundation for a people's relationship to God (see 7:11-12). Law, the sacrificial system, and covenant are in fact interdependent. They are so related that a change in one means a change in the others (see 7:11-12, 22; 8:7, 13; 9:1).

In this section, therefore, the establishment of the promised new covenant and the act through which eternal redemption is achieved are tied together. The sacrificial death of Christ is an atoning offering, but it is at the same time a covenant-inaugurating action. Verse 15 relates the atoning sacrifice of Christ to his mediation of a new covenant and summarizes the benefits of this act. Then, vv. 16-17 make a theoretical statement about wills and death to support the conclusion of v. 15. Verses 18-21 translate the theoretical argument into terms of the inauguration of the first covenant by means of blood. Verse 22 then makes a general statement about law, blood, purification, and forgiveness of sins.

COMMENTARY

Death and Redemption, 9:15

In 8:6 the author spoke of Jesus as obtaining a more excellent ministry than the levitical priests. To that degree, the author said, "he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises." In 9:15, the author continued this thought by connecting the sacrifice of Christ described in 9:11-14 to this mediation: "For this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant." The mediation of Christ, then, does not simply involve Christ's serving as messenger of God's contract or covenant with God's people. His mediation involves his death. The reasoning behind this involves the double meaning of the Greek word translated "covenant" in v. 15. In vv. 16 and 17, the NRSV translates the word as "will," indicating that a will takes effect when the one who made it dies. Since the "living God" (9:14) cannot die, the mediator fills that role. (This reasoning is not made fully explicit in v. 15, but it becomes clear from the verses that follow.) The "so that" (*hopōs*) clause gives two functions of Christ's sacrifice and even suggests that these two functions are causally related. These two functions are (1) redemption from the transgressions under the first covenant and (2) reception of the promised eternal inheritance. The first part of the clause in Greek (placed last in the NRSV) states the first function as a circumstance of time or cause for "those who are called" receiving "the promised eternal inheritance." It reads literally: ". . . a death having taken place for the redemption of transgressions under the first covenant." The circumstance may be temporal or causal. The NRSV translates it ". . . because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant."

The death that redeems is the death of Christ, and it redeems from transgressions that took place under the regime of the old covenant. Here the retroactive effect of Christ's sacrifice is stated. In 11:40 an implication of the retrospective effect of Christ's sacrifice is claimed to be the perfection of the heroes of the old covenant along with the perfection of Christians. Paul inherited atonement language that implied that the sacrifice of Christ had such a retrospective effect (see Rom 3:25 and Acts 17:30). The major result of Christ's sacrifice is that "those who are called may receive the promise of eternal inheritance." This resumes the theme of the

promised inheritance in 1:3, 4:1, and 6:17. This inheritance culminated in the promise of the new covenant in 8:6. Those who receive this inheritance are "the called," the "holy partners in a heavenly calling" of 3:1.

A Will Takes Effect Only at Death, 9:16-17

Verses 16-22 serve to show why the death of Christ was necessary. In the Greek text, *gar* ("for") introduces v. 16 (the word "for" is missing in the NRSV) and the word *hothen* ("hence") introduces v. 18. Two different explanations are involved: one is a legal explanation taking the Greek word *diathēkē* as "will," and the other is a cultic explanation taking the word *diathēkē* as "covenant." The NRSV appropriately uses the word "will" in vv. 16 and 17 and the word "covenant" in vv. 18-22.

The legal explanation in vv. 16 and 17 is simple. It states that a will is not in effect until the death of the one who made it. The reader must complete the argument: Since God is the "living God" (9:14), by definition God cannot die. The death of Christ as mediator, however, puts the will (the new covenant) into effect.[1]

A Covenant Requires Blood, 9:18-22

Verses 18-22 must be read in a cultic context. They support the need for the "shedding of blood" in the establishment of covenants (and therefore the relevance of the offering of the blood of Christ) by citing the tradition of the covenant at Sinai. Exodus 24 tells of the ratification of the old covenant. The event was observed by burnt offerings and the sacrifice of oxen (Exod 24:5). Moses dashed half the blood against the altar and, after reading from the book of the covenant, Moses dashed the other half of the blood on the people. Then Moses declared, "See the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words" (Exod 24:8).

The author of Hebrews either changed the quotation of Moses or used a text that differs from both the Hebrew text and the Greek text. He had Moses say, "This is the blood of the covenant that God has ordained for you." Instead of "See!" the writer has "This is"; instead of "he made with you," the writer has "he ordained." This form of Moses' statement supports the purpose of the author—to underscore the fact that the old covenant was ratified by the sacrificial blood of slaughtered animals and the fact that God initiated the covenant with God's authoritative word.

Other variations not found in the account in the book of Exodus emphasize the importance of blood. These include the statement that Moses sprinkled with blood the scroll (and not simply the people) and that he also sprinkled with blood the tent and all the vessels used in worship (and not merely the altar). In addition, the writer spoke of traditional elements being included with blood: water, scarlet wool, and hyssop.

The general statement in v. 22 (that "under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins") is a maxim that serves as a summary of the previous verses. It also serves as a transition to v. 23 about the need for better sacrifices and the discussion about the heavenly sanctuary. The maxim is divided into two parts. The first part declares that "[U]nder the law almost everything is purified with blood." The word "almost" is required because provision had been made under the old covenant for purification by such things as flour (by a person too poor to purchase two doves, Lev 5:11-13) and fire and water (Num 31:22-23). The second part of the maxim parallels the first part and declares that for "forgiveness" ("of sins" is understood but is not a part of the text) the shedding of blood is necessary: "[W]ithout the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." The purification "with blood" of the first part and the "shedding of blood" of the second part are parallel in meaning. The contrast of the two parts is between the restrictive "almost" of the first part and the inclusive "no" of the second part. Sacrificial blood is of crucial importance. It is the way of access to God (v. 7). It is the basis for the inauguration of the covenant (v. 18). It is the medium of forgiveness (v. 22).

CONNECTIONS

Why Did Jesus Die?

Hebrews 9:15-22 is a difficult passage. It explains why Jesus had to die for humans to be redeemed from the transgressions under the first covenant. It deals with the important themes of mediation, redemption, and inheritance. The methods of argument and categories of thought were familiar to the original readers of Hebrews, but they are not so familiar to us. The basic truth the author shares is twofold: (1) the sacrifice of Jesus redeems those who are called from the transgressions under the first covenant and (2) the sacri-

fice of Jesus provides a future inheritance. It opens the way for fellowship with God. Life in the future becomes life with God.

But why should this forgiveness and new life involve the death of Christ? Why did Jesus have to die before the new relationship became a reality? The first answer demonstrates the imagination of the author. It involves a play on words. The same Greek word *diathēkē* is translated in the NRSV as "covenant" and "will." *Diathēkē* was used for "covenant" in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. But the word in the author's day was used commonly for "last will and testament." A last-will-and-testament *diathēkē* does not become operative apart from a death, so the death of Christ was necessary for the establishment of the new-covenant *diathēkē*.

This argument is not so convincing to modern readers who disdain puns—especially in theological argumentation. But it was convincing as well as enjoyable in the time Hebrews was written. The ancient play on words might encourage us to use our imagination and compare the new covenant to a last will and testament in other important ways. With a last will and testament (1) there are *heirs* who (2) receive an *inheritance*. The new covenant is for "the called" and they receive "the promised eternal inheritance." The Christian congregation to whom Hebrews is addressed is seen in light of the covenant with Abraham in which God chooses Abraham and his descendants for blessing and to be a blessing. With a last will and testament, (3) the one drawing up the will is sovereign. It is not a matter of an agreement between equals. With the new covenant, God has made the decision. The new covenant is a sovereign expression of God's will. When we use our imagination in comparing and contrasting the new covenant with a last will and testament, we see how the author used the fact of Christ's death to assure the readers of the significance of the new covenant.

The second argument explaining why Jesus had to die goes back to the sacrificial system. No play on words is involved. The serious matters of death and blood are involved. Although a play on words is not involved, we must get behind the physical material aspect of the sacrificial system to appreciate what is involved in Jesus' sacrifice. The sacrificial system is based on Leviticus 17:11: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement."

We are able to get behind the physical material aspect of the sacrificial system that is not so appealing to moderns by recognizing that the ancient readers conceived of blood differently. Blood and

life go together. When we read of blood being sprinkled upon the worshipers, the place of worship, and all the vessels used in worship, we might translate it as the force of life, life itself. "Life" and the means of life are being spread upon these vital vehicles of fellowship with God.

The offering of the life of Christ is incomparably superior to earlier sacrifices because it is in the life of a person, not the blood of irrational beasts. Christ's death shows that forgiveness is costly. Life is in the blood! It is not a matter of God saying, "It doesn't matter!" Sin does matter. The life of Christ offered up in the new covenant is a sovereign expression of God's love.

NOTE

[1] William L. Lane rigorously defends the idea that vv. 16 and 17 should be read in light of ancient rites of covenant making in which the people making the covenant pledge with their lives the keeping of the covenant and in which the slaughter of animals symbolically represents the partners who make the pledge (*Hebrews 9–13* [WBC 47B; Dallas: Word Books, 1991], 242-43).

CHRIST'S SACRIFICE IS A PERFECT SACRIFICE

Hebrews 9:23-28

The author of Hebrews used spatial and temporal contrasts (earthly vs. heavenly) to expound the supreme efficacy of Jesus' sacrifice. The worship of this world is a pale copy of real worship. The earthly worship of the levitical sacrifices was designed to purify the means of worship—the tabernacle, the altar, and the holy place. The heavenly work of Christ is designed to have an effect on heaven and not just on earth. In this worship, worshipers really come to know God.

These verses stress once more the way that the sacrifice of Christ is supreme. (1) Jesus entered into the presence of God in heaven, not into a humanly manufactured holy place. (2) Christ's entry into the presence of God was not merely for his own glory and exaltation. It opened the way for humans to come into the presence of God. (3) The sacrifice of Christ has been made once for all and never needs to be made again. (4) As humans die and then face judgment, so Christ died and comes again as a friend for the salvation of those awaiting him.

The argument of 9:15-22 about the need for the shedding of blood is presupposed in the opening sentence: "Thus it was necessary for the sketches of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites." The "sketches of the heavenly things" needing to be purified are the scroll, the people, the tent, and the vessels used in worship. With an argument from the lesser to the greater, the author concluded that "the heavenly things themselves need better sacrifices than these." Attention to the better sacrifices goes back to the discussion in 9:11-14 about Christ's entry into the holy of holies. The present discussion specifies the benefits of Christ's blood by reference to both the heavenly sanctuary and its worship (vv. 24-26) and the consummation of the history of salvation (vv. 27-28).

COMMENTARY

Heavenly Things Need a Better Sacrifice, 9:23

The heavenly counterparts to people, tent, and vessels require greater sacrifices. But what is the nature of the "heavenly" realities? What purification do they need? What sorts of better sacrifices suffice to purify these realities? One implication of the question about better sacrifices may be answered with ease; the suggestion that sacrifices (plural) are required may be put to rest. The text does not really suggest that many sacrifices are required in heaven. The plural is used in the statement of the general principle ("the heavenly things themselves need better sacrifices") simply to parallel the plurality of sacrifices required for purification of the "sketches of the heavenly things." The author was careful to emphasize the fact that the sacrifice of the new covenant is singular and unique. Many sacrifices are, in fact, not required in heaven.

The questions concerning the nature of the "heavenly things" and the purification they require are connected. We must remember that the author used the Platonic contrast between the real (or true) heavenly sanctuary and its earthly shadow or sketch. What aspects of the true sanctuary require purification? The writer did not draw out a detailed comparison between the "sketch of the heavenly things" and "the heavenly things themselves." Readers then may imagine actual religious realities that the "heavenly things" symbolize. When the institution of the church or the people of God is related in some fashion to the heavenly things, the items purified by blood in the earthly sanctuary could be related to specific items related to the church: the tabernacle representing the institutional church, the people representing the body of Christ, the scroll representing the words of Christ. Although nothing in the text warrants such an allegorical interpretation, the notion that in some way the "heavenly things" have to do with relationships may open up space for interpretation or expansion of the author's meaning.

The heavenly aspect of Christ's sacrifice is bound up with the establishment of a new interior covenant, with the law in the minds and hearts of the people. But how does this involve a purification of the heavenly archetypes of the earthly tabernacle? The writer of Hebrews indicated that what is involved is the perfection and purification of conscience (9:9, 14). True cultic cleansing is cleansing of the mind and heart, which takes place through God's act in Christ. This understanding does justice to a Platonic

emphasis upon the heavenly things because it understands that what is most real is the realm of the human spirit. However, it also takes into consideration fundamental Christian convictions about history.

Christ Entered into Heaven and Sacrificed Himself, 9:24-26

In this section, the writer maintained two important contrasts between Christ and the levitical high priests that he had made earlier. First, Christ entered into heaven itself, the presence of God, not into an earthly copy (9:24; see 8:2-6; 9:12). Second, Christ offered himself once for all, not again and again, to remove sin (9:25-26; see 9:12). Some aspects of Christ's high priestly ministry are highlighted within these two contrasts: (1) Christ appeared "on our behalf" (v. 24). This recalls the intercessory function of his ministry stressed in 2:18, 4:15, and 7:25. But Christ's ministry of intercession is not separated from the sacrificial death of the cross. Christ's entry, then, indicates two interrelated results: the effective cleansing of the spiritual reality of conscience and the intercession of Christ. (2) That Christ's sacrifice was "once for all" is highlighted by the unacceptable alternative of his having "to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world" (v. 26). (3) Christ's sacrifice of himself is an eschatological event. With the second clause of v. 26, the author moved from language derived specifically from the Day of Atonement analogy to language derived from early Christian eschatological thought. The once for all event of Christ's appearance to remove sin by his sacrifice of himself has taken place "at the end of the age." "The end of the age" is a common phrase in Jewish apocalyptic literature and in the New Testament (see especially Matt 13:39, 40, 49; 24:3; 28:20). The idea that the death of Christ is the decisive eschatological event is expressed in a variety of ways (see 1 Cor 10:11; Gal 4:4; 1 Pet 1:20). [The End of the Age]

Christ Will Appear a Second Time, 9:27-28

Verses 27 and 28 combine three different elements: (1) the truism that one death is ordained for each person, (2) an allusion to the suffering servant's bearing the sins of many (Isa 53:12), and (3) the cultic image in Hebrews of the offering for sin. The common human experience of death (to die only once and then to be judged) is correlated with Christ's work of salvation (offered for sin only once and then to appear again to save). Our death and judg-

The End of the Age

The "end of the age" (Heb 9:26) is an idea the author of Hebrews shares with other early Christian writers who were influenced by apocalyptic ideas and writings. "Apocalyptic" refers to a brand of eschatology (doctrine of last things) that is often contrasted with prophetic eschatology. The word "apocalyptic" is derived from a Greek word meaning "revelation." The authors of apocalyptic literature claimed to have received special revelation. Apocalyptic writings and thought arose during times of crisis as a way to offer comfort and encouragement to those who saw the present situation as hopeless.

The eschatology of the prophets who ministered during the Babylonian exile conceived of the future in terms of the restoration of what had been lost. The center of the prophets' hope was the city of Jerusalem. The city was considered the center of the earth, and the temple in Jerusalem would in the future be the place to which Jews and others would come to worship and receive divine blessings (see Isa 25:6; Zech 8:22; 14:16-19). The future for the exilic prophets involved the redemption of Israel (see Isa 40:1-11) and the establishment of wonderful living conditions (see Isa 65:17-25). The prophets also spoke of the transformation of the nation and the individual person.

With the return from Babylonian exile, however, the glorious future was not realized. The Israelites suffered at the hands of world powers. Particularly difficult days were experienced in the time of the Syrian ruler Antiochus Epiphanies (see 1 Macc 1:16-64).

The book of Daniel was written during the time of tribulation upon the righteous introduced by Antiochus Epiphanies (in the second century BC). And this writing marked the transition to a new kind of eschatology—apocalyptic eschatology. This kind of eschatology enhanced the disparity between the present evil time and the future good age to be introduced by God. In the symbolic language of apocalyptic eschatology, Dan 7 depicts the coming of the end time: "As I looked, this horn made war with the holy ones and was prevailing over them, until the Ancient One came; then judgment was given for the holy ones of the Most High, and the time arrived when the holy ones gained possession of the kingdom" (7:21-22).

In the pattern of apocalyptic eschatology, God acts directly to bring the current course of history to an end. Beyond this judgment of God lies a new transformed world. The apocalyptic pattern can be seen in the New Testament writings (see Matt 25; Mark 13; 1 Cor 7:29-31).

Hebrews shares the basic apocalyptic ideas of the early church and Paul conveys these ideas in his own philosophical and liturgical vocabulary. The coming of Jesus was the primary eschatological event (1:2). The church was living in the last days, ushered in with the incarnation, death, and ascension of Christ and to be consummated shortly with his return (2:8; 10:12). The consummation, indeed, has been reached (9:26), and Christians have already begun to experience the world to come (6:12).

Hebrews makes a contribution to eschatological thought by its use of philosophical and liturgical language. The truths contained in the Old Testament not only point forward to their fulfillment in the future, they point upward to truth as it exists eternally in the mind of God. God spoke through the prophets and the same God speaks in his son. God established the Levitical institutions that serve as a pointer to the manifestation of the eternal in history.

The church lives in the last days but before the last day. The Sabbath rest of the people of God correlates with the eschatology of the book of Hebrews. The Sabbath rest is a future event, but in faith the people of God may enter this rest. The pilgrims share the reproach of Jesus Christ, but they are brought near by his blood and actually approach the heavenly Jerusalem (12:22). The high priest Christ has entered the holy place and made atonement for sin. The benefits of the sacrifice are available to believers to come to God through Christ.

ment serve as analogies to highlight the "once for all" nature of Christ's high-priestly ministry and second coming. Verse 28 refers to the parousia and emphasizes that Christ's second coming will not deal with sin. Sin has been dealt with by Christ. The mention of Christ bearing the sins of many reminds readers of the suffering servant who "poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors" (Isa 53:12). [Isaiah 53: The Suffering Servant] The second coming will not have the atoning function of the first

Isaiah 53: The Suffering Servant

Who has believed what we have heard?
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.
They made his grave with the wicked
and his tomb with the rich,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain.
When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;
through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.
Out of his anguish he shall see light;
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
because he poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.

coming. It will have to do with salvation. Salvation here is seen as a reality that has already been inaugurated by Christ and that has yet to be consummated (see Heb 1:14; 2:3, 10; 5:9).

The picture of recipients of salvation "eagerly waiting" for the return of Christ (9:28) draws its force from the experience of the Day of Atonement. On that day, the people waited outside the sanctuary for the return of the high priest from the holy of holies after fulfilling his duties (see Lev 16:17). The return of the high priest signified that the offering he had made was accepted by God. [Sirach 50:5-10: The Return of the High Priest after Ministry in the Sanctuary] When v. 28 is read in light of the event of the Day of Atonement, the return of Christ will be seen as signifying that his offering has been accepted. For the heirs of salvation, the parousia signifies the full enjoyment of their salvation. An exhortation is implicit in v. 28. Do the readers see themselves as heirs of salvation? Will they, then, not allow the entry of Christ into the sanctuary to inform their lives so that they will join those "who are eagerly waiting for him"?

Sirach 50:5-10: The Return of the High Priest after Ministry in the Sanctuary

The scribe Joshua ben Sira was present in Jerusalem when the high priest Simon II the Just (who served 219–196 BC) reappeared after ministry in the sanctuary. Ben Sira described the excitement that greeted the appearance of the high priest.

How glorious he was, surrounded by the people
as he came out of the house of the curtain.
Like the morning star among the clouds,
like the full moon at the festal season;
like the sun shining on the temple of the Most High,
like the rainbow gleaming in splendid clouds;
like roses in the days of first fruits,
like lilies by a spring of water,
like a green shoot on Lebanon on a summer day;
like fire and incense in the censer,
like a vessel of hammered gold
studded with all kinds of precious stones;
like an olive tree laden with fruit
and like a cypress towering in the clouds.

CONNECTIONS

The Role of "Sketches"

The author of Hebrews did not have the task of presenting the values of the provisional sketches of the true heavenly tabernacle. His role is the exhortation of Christians who have "drooping hands" and "weak knees" (12:12) and who need to look beyond the earthly realities to the heavenly. But we need to see clearly that there is a positive aspect of the desert tabernacle. The complete appraisal of the copy of the heavenly tabernacle is not altogether negative. The fact that Moses built it according to God's instructions makes it important not to denigrate the tabernacle as completely valueless. It did not assure salvation and access to God in itself, but it did play its part in the life of the people of God. Its full meaning and significance is revealed for Christians in the work of God and Jesus Christ.

Today Christians still have activities, individuals, rituals, and places that are not ultimate but that play a part in light of the revelation of Jesus Christ. The key to the Christians' understanding of church as an institution is to view it as a gift of God but not as the ultimate and absolute. Modern believers may relate to the provisional resources and gifts of God in the church as earlier people of God related to the provisional sketch of the heavenly sanctuary.

Theories of the Atonement

The term *atonement* (at-one-ment) signifies the condition of being at one or the result of being at one. In theological usage it means the process by which reconciliation with God takes place through the death of Christ. The term is one of the few English words that have become theological terms. The fact of this *at-one-ment* or reconciliation is more important than theories about the fact, but theologians have developed a variety of theories about how the death of Christ frees humankind from sin and overcomes the forces of evil.

The system of sacrifice practiced by the Israelites had atonement as its aim. On the yearly Day of Atonement, the high priest went into the holy of holies to the mercy seat where God was said to appear and announced forgiveness of sins to God's people. The prophets warned against the assumption that sacrifice automatically provided forgiveness. They taught that God desires mercy and repentance. In the prophetic view of a new covenant, the ritual system of sacrifice was spiritualized. Furthermore, in the actions of the suffering Servant of Yahweh, the ritual system was personalized.

There is no one New Testament doctrine of atonement. There are a multiplicity of images and metaphors. The New Testament asserts boldly that God was in Christ reconciling the world to God's self. This action is represented by such things as a military victory, a king establishing his power, a judge and prisoner in a law court, the payment of ransom for war prisoners or slaves.

Since the beginning of the Christian church, different ways of building upon the Old Testament background and the New Testament metaphors have resulted in different ways of thinking of the atonement provided by Christ. One theory suggests that Christ was offered to the devil much as an angler offers bait to a fish. With this "bait," God "caught" the devil and rendered him powerless. Another theory suggests that atonement may be viewed in terms of a scale. Christ had enough goodness to balance out the weight of evil in the world. Yet another theory approaches the death of Christ in terms of power. By the power of Christ's death, he overcomes all the forces of evil.

In 9:23-28, the writer to the Hebrews offered his theory of the atonement or a perspective from which the atonement might make sense. From his perspective, in the imperfect temple under the old covenant, imperfect sacrifices sufficed. But this temple was not the reality itself. It was only a "copy" of the heavenly temple in which God dwells. How are humans ever to enter this perfect or heavenly

temple? A perfect sacrifice must be offered—and that perfect sacrifice is Jesus Christ.

The various perspectives in the Old Testament, the New Testament metaphors, and the theories of church history may each be seen as saying something significant about Christ's death. However, even all of them taken together cannot plumb the depth of the meaning of the cross of Christ. With Paul, we confess: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Rom 11:33). Mark's confession of the significance of Christ's death on the cross was that "the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom." And Mark's confession (and ours) was placed on the lips of the centurion who was there at the cross: "Truly this man was God's Son" (Mark 15:38-39).

CHRIST'S SACRIFICE IS THE REALITY OF WHICH THE OLD ORDER WAS A SHADOW

Hebrews 10:1-10

This section completes the exposition of the high-priestly ministry of Christ and the interpretation of the new covenant of Jeremiah 31. It is divided into two parts. The first part contrasts the old and new as shadow and reality (vv. 1-4). The second part contrasts the old sacrifices with the decisive sacrifice of Christ by means of a citation from Psalm 40 (vv. 5-7) and an interpretation of that text (vv. 8-9). At first glance, the section seems simply to repeat ideas that have been covered earlier. The ineffectiveness of the repeated levitical sacrifices covered in 9:1-10 is repeated in 10:1-4, and the superior achievement of Christ's sacrifice covered in 9:11-14 is repeated in 10:5-10. But readers should not be so misled by the high degree of repetition that they miss the dramatic change of perspective.

One change in perspective has to do with the impact of the high-priestly ministry on Christian believers (the subjectivity of Christ's offering). In 9:11-28 the focus is upon the accomplishment of Christ through his death in fulfillment of God's plan of redemption. The objective benefits of Christ's sacrifice are considered. In 10:1-10, the perspective changes to the subjective. The writer discussed the subjective effects of Christ's offering for the community of the new covenant. The subjective aspect of Christ's work is not an absolutely new theme. In 9:11-14 both the objective and subjective aspects are touched upon briefly. Then 9:15-28 clarifies the nature of the objective aspect of salvation given in summary fashion in 9:11-12 (he obtained "eternal redemption"). In a similar way 10:1-10 makes plain the subjective benefits stated in 9:13-14 (he purified "our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!").

Another change of perspective is related in a complex fashion to the move to a subjective perspective. This is a move from a spatial (earthly-heavenly) antithesis to a temporal (then-now) antithesis. In 8:1-6, the "shadow" represented the earthly counterpart of a heavenly reality. In 9:23, the "sketches of the heavenly things" represented the earthly counterpart of "the heavenly things themselves." In 10:1-10,

however, the "shadow" becomes the foreshadowing of a temporal reality: "[T]he law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities." The shift is not a simple shift from a spatial to a temporal perspective, however. The offering of the body of Christ is an earthly sacrifice that is the counterpart of the earthly "shadow." The reality of that sacrifice consists in part in its physical quality, but in part it consists in the willingness with which it is made. The interior nature of the act makes it the heavenly event it is. The intentionality of a unique historical act becomes associated with the heavenly and real. This conflation of the spatial and temporal makes clear what makes possible Christ's cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary (9:23-28). Christ's sacrificial death is seen as appropriate and sufficient for the establishment of the covenant promised by Jeremiah, the covenant of interior renewal (9:15-22).

COMMENTARY

The Law Has Only a Shadow of the Good Things to Come, 10:1-4

Verses 1-4 summarize the reason for the ineffectiveness of the old sacrificial system and the results of this ineffectiveness in terms of the subjective experience of worshipers. The basic reason is that "the law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities" (10:1). The "true form" of the realities contrasts with the "shadow of the good things to come." The vocabulary closely parallels the vocabulary of Plato, who has a tri-level schema. Plato spoke of the reality being reflected in the image or "true form," which in turn is reflected by the "shadow." Hebrews, however, does not have this tri-level schema but a schema depending upon a form of Platonism that equates the "true form" with the reality. [Plato's Worldview]

Readers are prepared for the depreciation of law as a shadow of the real, for they have been told that the law is founded upon a physical or fleshly cult (7:11, 16). What is unexpected is the description of the real as "the good things to come." Although unexpected, this understanding of the real in temporal terms parallels the understanding of the real in spatial terms in Hebrews. The author spoke of a "coming world" in 2:5, and in 13:14 he will remind readers that "we are looking for the city that is to come." In

Plato's Worldview

Plato (c. 429–347 BC) was a Greek philosopher, an Athenian citizen of high birth who founded the Athenian academy. He was one of the young men who shared with his teacher Socrates in the search for the basis of individual and communal life and conduct.

At the basis of Plato's worldview lay a conviction that behind the multiple instances of each of the phenomena in the world of experience there exists an archetype or Form. These Forms are visible only to the "mind's sight," not to the "body's sight" (*Symposium* 219A). Each Form is the reality. The instances of the Forms are derivative and weakened images.

Plato assigned the title "being" to Forms in their collective character. The title "being" suggests intelligibility and stable self-identity. The realm of "becoming" contrasts with the realm of "being." "Becoming" indicates instability and changeability and hence cannot be the object of proper knowledge.

Plato sees a mediation between the realm of "becoming" and the realm of "being." The agent of this mediation is soul—the souls of individual human beings but primarily the world soul. Soul (as the principle of life and motion) has an innate affinity for both the realm of being and the realm of becoming.

Plato's aim in the articulation of his worldview is the evocation of an awareness and vision of the eternal order undergirding the cosmos and the life of humans within the cosmos. The Myth of the Cave is the most memorable of the dialogues setting forth his worldview and his ideas on "the ascent of the soul to the intelligible realm" (*Republic* 517b).

In the Myth of the Cave, Plato's Socrates likens those who are unenlightened to people living in a cave who from their childhood have had their legs and necks chained and are forced to sit on benches staring at the back wall of the cave. The chains prevent them from seeing one another or looking behind them. Behind the captives is a low wall with people "passing along the wall carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various material, which appear over the wall" (514c). The light from a fire behind the statue bearers casts the shadows of the moving statures onto the wall of the cave in front of the captives. The captives observe these shadows. When the people talk as they go by parading the statues, their voices are echoed by the cave, and it is the shadows of the replicas that seem to the captives to be talking.

The whole world of conscious experience of the captives is of the shadows of things rather than of the true things. If one of the captives is released and forced to stand up and go to the upper world, the captive would experience pain and distress.

The Socrates of Puerto insists that the Myth of the Cave must be compared with an earlier Analogy of the Sun and the Divided Line. The cave represents the world of opinion. The fire is like the earthly sun. The statues and puppets lit up by the fire are the objects of ordinary perception. The shadows on the walls are derivative copies mixed with the imaginings of ordinary people. Outside the cave represents the world of Forms, the intelligible world. These Forms have real being, and the highest Form (represented by the sun) is the idea of Goodness itself. The sun above is the source and cause of all visible things—all the way down to the shadows. Just so, the cause of all that is right and fair is Goodness. This Goodness provides truth and intelligence to all of the Forms and to the particulars that participate in the Forms.

It is tempting and possible to force the tri-level scheme of Plato onto Heb 10:1: "Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities. . . ." The three elements would be "these realities," "the true form," and "the shadow." The ultimate reality (these realities) would be reflected in the "true form," which in turn would be reflected in the "shadow."

The tri-level model of Plato is seen in Philo's allegorical treatment of the construction of the tabernacle: "He saw with the soul's eye the immaterial forms of the material objects about to be made, and these forms had to be reproduced in copies perceived by the senses, taken from the original draft, so to speak, and from patterns conceived in the mind" (*Life of Moses* 2.74). In Hebrews, however, the image is not sharply distinguished from the reality. The image, in fact, seems to be used for the reality itself. This is in keeping with later middle-Platonic thought where "image" comes to be used as a designation for the forms or ideas. Image is virtually synonymous with idea. In Hebrews, then, the "true form" is equated with "these realities" and both of these are contrasted with the "shadow of the good things to come."

this future time, Christ will "save those who are eagerly waiting for him" (9:28). The "good things to come" may, nevertheless, be experienced in the present time (see 6:4-5) through the achievement of Christ (9:10-11).

The "shadow" is described in terms of the Day of Atonement analogy. The monotony of the language ("same sacrifices," "continually offered," "year after year") suggests a weariness and monotony of the ancient system of sacrifice. It is indeed the repetition of the sacrifice that manifests the failure of the law—the inability to "make perfect those who approach" (see 7:19). In this section, perfection of those who approach involves the intimate relationship with God that can be described as having the law put in their hearts and written on their minds (see 10:10, 14, 18).

The continual offering of the sacrifices is evidence of their ineffectiveness (v. 2). If the sacrifice had been effective, worshipers would have been cleansed once for all and they would no longer have consciousness of sin. The perfection of those who approach in 10:1 involves perfection of conscience (9:9) and removal of consciousness of sin. Instead of a perfection of conscience and obliviousness of sin (promised by Jeremiah), in the continuous sacrifice there is "a reminder of sin" (v. 3). The Day of Atonement was, indeed, designated as a time of fasting (Lev 23:26-32) and confession of sins (Lev 16:20-22). The fact that sin separated the worshipers from God was dramatized by the entrance of the high priest into the holy of holies. The writer of Hebrews was impressed with the confirmation of the *remembrance* of sin by the annual Day of Atonement. From the perspective of the worshipers, however, the emphasis was upon the annual *forgiveness* of sins. One ancient Jewish text rejoiced: "It is written and ordained that he will show mercy to all who turn from their guilt once a year" (*Jub.* 5:18). The perspective of the author of Hebrews is made clear by v. 3: "But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year." The once for all character of the work of Christ is opposed to the year after year and day after day (see 10:11) sacrifices of the levitical priests. The once for all objective sacrifice makes an impact upon the conscience of the worshipers. It purifies the conscience from dead works so that worship of God may follow. The major inadequacies of the levitical system, from this perspective, were not only its inability to remove the "consciousness of sin" but its constant reminder that sin could not be erased by the process. "For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin" (v. 4).

The Decisive Sacrifice of Christ, 10:5-10

The ineffectivenes of the old sacrificial cult is seen, of course, from the perspective of the effectiveness of the sacrifice of Christ. The discussion of Christ's sacrifice and the basis for its effectiveness proceeds through exegesis of the Greek translation of Psalm 40:6-8. The introduction to the citation presents Christ as the speaker of the words cited (see 2:11-13), and the words are attributed to Christ "when Christ came into the world" (10:5). The expression "when Christ came into the world" has temporal and local connotations. When the *temporal* is emphasized, it is understood as referring to Christ's birth, the coming of Christ as eternal Son, or the particular time when Christ's act of obedience was made. The *local* perspective centers on the sphere of Christ's activity rather than upon a particular time. The world is designated as the sphere of Christ's act. In 9:1 the adjective "worldly" (NRSV "earthly") has a negative connotation. The earthly sanctuary was the realm of the external where sacrifices were offered that affected the flesh and not the spirit. Here the world is seen in a quite different light. The movement of Christ into the world is parallel to the movement of Christ into the heavenly sanctuary where Christ's sacrifice is consummated. The world, then, becomes the sphere of Christ's sacrifice.

The words attributed to Christ come from Psalm 40. This psalm contains a thanksgiving for deliverance (vv. 1-11) together with a prayer for help (vv. 12-17). A particular section of the first part was of interest to the author of Hebrews. It is the section of the first part that follows the declaration of God's gracious act of deliverance. In that section (vv. 6-8), the psalmist promised to do God's will rather than to offer a form of sacrifice or thanksgiving. The Greek translation used by the author of Hebrews differs from the Hebrew in certain respects. Both the Hebrew and the Greek begin with the line, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired." But following that line there is a difference. The Hebrew and some Greek texts read, "Ears you have dug for me" (NRSV: "You have given me an open ear"). This reading seems to indicate preparation to listen and obey, but the writer of Hebrews selected a form of the Greek text that replaces "ear" with "body": "[B]ut a body you have prepared for me." This reading fits the argument that the author made in this section, that "we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (10:10; see 2:11; 9:13; 10:14, 29; 13:12).

Another difference is found in 10:6b. The Hebrew text reads, "Burnt offerings and sin offerings you have not required." The

Greek text used by the author of Hebrews reads, "[I]n burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure." The change does make the text consistent with the actual practice since the law did require sacrifice (9:19-22)—even though it was a shadow of the real. Another change is in the shortening and rearrangement of the conclusion. Both the Hebrew and the Greek texts read, "Then I said, 'Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.'" The author wanted to show a closer connection between the coming of the speaker and the intention to do God's will, and he revised the text to read, "See God, I have come to do your will, O God."

The fact that the lines of the citation are parallel in meaning is made clear in the form provided by the author of Hebrews. "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired" (5a) is parallel to "[I]n burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure" (6a). And "[B]ut a body you have prepared for me" (5b) is parallel to "I have come to do your will, O God" (7a). This parallelism assists readers in their determination of meaning, in finding the focus in the will of God. The sacrifices listed comprise the whole cultic system. "Sacrifice" designates any animal sacrifice; "offering" is the term for the meal offerings; "burnt offering" refers to offerings wholly burned on the altar; and "sin offering" refers to offerings intended to remove defilement that sin brought to the sanctuary. In his interpretation, the author of Hebrews listed these four and then contrasted these rituals with the will of God by means of the expression "See, I have come to do your will." The will of God is set in contrast to those sacrifices "offered according to the law" (10:8b).

The text indicates that the speaker (Christ) abolishes or annuls the first (the set of cultic practices summarized in v. 8) in order to establish the second—the principle of obedience to God's will. Technical legal terminology from the sphere of laws and wills ("abolish," "establish") is used here to affirm that in Christ's act of obedience the prophetic exaltation of obedience over external cult had occurred.

Verse 10 is the focal point of the argument in this section: "And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." The statement is rich in its connection of "God's will," the sanctification of Christians, "the offering of the body of Jesus Christ," and "once for all." On the basis of discussions earlier in Hebrews, readers will associate a variety of related ideas with each of these significant realities with a

powerful result. "God's will" refers back to the citation from Psalm 40. It is set in opposition to the external legalistic ritual that cannot perfect those who approach and cannot cleanse the conscience. The doing of God's will, however, would also be connected by readers with obedience and a covenant placed in the mind and written on the heart. The will of God, then, becomes a reality that is made Christ's own. It is not separated from Christ's sacrificial act, so it is not purely an interior affair.

The will of God and all that it implies is the means by which we have been sanctified. Just as the "will of God" carries with it many implications, so does the idea of sanctification. All of the effects of Christ's sacrifice are involved, including perfection and the cleansing of conscience. "Blood" becomes important in sanctification, but this "blood" is better than the blood of animals offered according to the law; hence, it brings perfection and cleansing. "Blood," "life," "obedience," "perfection," "cleansing"—each term implies the other.

The phrase "offering of the body of Jesus Christ" makes plain that the offering of Christ is not purely an interior matter. Obedience to the divine will involves Jesus' "body." The joining of the two names "Jesus" and "Christ" for the first time in Hebrews may be given significance by the reader as movement is made from the "will of God" to "body." "Jesus" is used with particular reference to the historical figure and "Christ" with the exalted heavenly figure. One is not to be understood without reference to the other. The earthly and heavenly intersect and explain each other. In the linking of the heavenly and earthly, the "once for all" nature of the offering of Jesus Christ becomes clear. This is the last time the term "once for all" is used in Hebrews to emphasize the uniqueness of Christ's sacrifice.

CONNECTIONS

The Dynamics of Scripture

The author of Hebrews used Scripture in several different ways to support his word of encouragement: (1) careful exegetical methods similar to historical-philological methods used by modern exegetes, in which the meaning is drawn out of the text; (2) creative and imaginary literary approaches that use the text to illustrate meanings not actually drawn from the text but allowed by it; (3) a Greek

translation that differs from the Hebrew text because it supports the meaning seen by the author; (4) revisions of the Old Testament text to support his argument. Furthermore, in Hebrews 10:1-10, his argument is supported by a reading not at all similar to the Hebrew original ("but a body you have prepared for me" instead of "but you have given me an open ear"). The author even rewrote the Greek translation he used to make a tight connection between the coming of Christ into the world and the doing of God's will.

The author's rich and imaginative engagement with Scripture is allied with his conviction that Scripture never ceases to be the living voice of God. God is speaking through the original speaking of Scripture, through the later writers' appropriation of that Scripture (particularly the appropriation by the psalmist), through the translation into Greek (with changes from the original Hebrew), and even through the insights that allow the author to revise the text he is using.

Modern-day readers will note that critical theological issues are not involved in the freedom assumed by the author. They may wish to vindicate the author's use of Scripture by pointing out that he is using methods that were valid in his day. A critical assessment of the author's use of contemporaneous methods alone may, however, help distance the text from modern-day readers. Readers, therefore, may applaud the spiritual and literary creativity and freedom that are allowed the author by his conviction that God is speaking a contemporary word through the ancient Scripture. [Rewriting Scripture]

The Inwardness of the New Covenant

Hebrews uses the term "conscience" to refer to an internal faculty within humans. Readers must be cautioned that the writer was not attempting to deal with human psychology but with the human being from a theological perspective. In the Old Testament, the term "heart" was used for this internal faculty. The use of "conscience" in Hebrews is found primarily in the sections where the new covenant of Jeremiah (with its emphasis upon the law placed in the heart and written on the mind) is treated. This "conscience" causes humans to be aware of their sinfulness and to experience a sense of guilt. For Hebrews, the guilty conscience is the one real barrier to an individual's approaching and living in fellowship with God. The conscience is where the self-giving of Christ meets us and completes or perfects us. There is a correlation, then, between the inwardness of Christ and the inwardness of humans. The sacri-

Rewriting Scripture

Scripture is rewritten today by translation and retranslation into modern and understandable English.

Under the influence of John Wycliffe, the entire Bible was translated from the Latin Vulgate into English between 1380 and 1397. Two different versions were made in these years. The earlier version is extremely literal; the Latin word order and construction are preserved even when they conflict with English idiom. For example, in 1 Sam 2:10 the Latin has *Dominum formidabunt adversarii eius*, and in the earlier version that followed the Latin word order, this sentence was translated, "The Lord shulen drede the adversaries of hym." This is poor theology and a worse translation. In the second version the translation was changed to good English and varied the Latin word order, "Adversaries of the Lord shulen drede hym." Throughout the translation of the Bible the later version is less literal and manifests a feeling for the native English idiom.

Two different principles of translation are implied in the Wycliffe versions: the principle of formal equivalence and the principle of functional (dynamic) equivalence. As these principles have come to be applied in the translation of the Bible, they are seen as complementary.

Until the end of the Second World War, the King James Version reigned, with some few readers appealing to the Revised Version and the American Standard Version. These translations follow the formal-equivalence principle. They are literal more or less word-for-word from the Hebrew and Greek. Some translators (such as James Moffatt, Edgar Goodspeed, and J. B. Phillips) saw their work as idiomatic, phrase-for-phrase efforts to reproduce the meaning of the Hebrew and Greek. The efforts of these early dynamic translations were given theoretical foundations by the work of Eugene Nida, Robert Bratcher, and their associates in the American Bible Society. *Good News for Modern Man* (1976; NT, 1966) is the best-known translation using the principle of "dynamic equivalence" or "functional equivalence."

The questions of gender-biased language in the Bible and anti-Jewish language in the New Testament are being addressed in modern translations, and this has led to a "rewriting" of Scripture. The treatment of these matters in translation makes clear the difference between functional equivalence and formal equivalence. Translators who follow the principle of formal equivalence require readers to go to the world of the text to understand the translation in terms of the ancient world. Translators who follow the principle of functional equivalence bring the biblical text to the reader in terms of the reader's world. The gender-biased language in the Bible is a problem that arises because of the strong patriarchy that marked not only the ancient world but also the history of the translation and interpretation of the Bible in the Western world. But it is also an English-language problem.

Another area where it is important to take account of the historical situation is the naming of those who oppose Jesus and/or followers of the way (Jews who became Jesus' followers). In formal-equivalence translations, they are named "the Jews." In dynamic- or functional-equivalence translations, they are named "the Jewish leaders," "the people," or "the local Jewish leaders." Knowledge of the historical situation and a desire to bring the biblical text to the reader in terms of the reader's world is bringing about a change in translation. James A. Sanders has stated the case pointedly and persuasively: "If Bible translations like the NRSV can legitimately 'correct' exclusion on one level, caused by the patriarchal cultural trappings in the text, they ought to be able to 'correct' exclusion on the broader level, so that the text reflects what was essentially an intramural Jewish situation of the early first-century period."

James A. Sanders, "The Hermeneutics of Translation," *Explorations* 12/2 (1998): 1.

fice of Jesus' will to the will of God and Jesus' delight in doing God's will is the cause for the inwardness of our faith.

The author's treatment of conscience is helpful as we attempt to deal with our spiritual situation before God. However, we cannot limit God's redemptive activity in Jesus Christ to its effect on our heart, mind, or conscience. Just as Jesus Christ lived among us as one of us and offered himself on the cross in obedience to the will of God, our experience of God's activity in Christ will lead to our involvement in the church and in the world.

A Reminder of Sin

The author of Hebrews contrasts the once for all sacrifice of Christ with the continual year after year sacrifices of the desert tabernacle. The fact that worshipers under the old system continue to be conscious of sin means that they are not perfected. The writer indicated that those who approach God by means of Christ's sacrifice are perfected, are cleansed once for all, and no longer have a consciousness of sin. The year after year continual sacrifice simply drubbed into worshipers that they were sinful, guilty, and unacceptable to God. The once for all sacrifice of Christ should, contrarily, impress upon Christians that they are forgiven!

But is it possible that churches today can function in a way comparable to the old sacrifices—that they operate in a way to sound out the message of sin Sunday after Sunday, year after year? Churches are often more effective in preaching sin than they are in proclaiming grace. That system of doing church condemns people to come to church to worship again and again with a guilty conscience. In such a system, even our positive activities become means of absolving our guilt. Coming to church itself serves the same function as the ancient sacrifice—to atone for sins. This way of doing church does not acknowledge the perfection of the worshiper, the cleansing of conscience. Week after week we bring our guilty conscience and we are never cleansed. But the book of Hebrews says we are forgiven! To be sure, Hebrews tells us that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. But it also tells us that where there is forgiveness, there is no longer any sacrifice—no longer any shedding of blood. We are forgiven!

PERFECTION OF THE SANCTIFIED

Hebrews 10:11-18

The exposition of the new covenant of Jeremiah 31 reached a high point in the section 10:1-10 in its discussion of the new covenant in priestly and sacrificial terms. The present section is important, then, not because it adds new information but because it ties together in summary form the principles that have guided the discussion since 8:1. It also brings closure to the exposition of Jeremiah 31 by quoting a section of that chapter in a fashion that highlights the principles of the interiority of the new covenant and the effective removal of sin produced by Christ's sacrifice.

The section 10:11-18 begins with a contrast between Christ and the priests of the old covenant. This contrast emphasizes the once for all single sacrifice of Christ that served as a prelude to his exaltation to the right hand of God and his waiting "until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet" (vv. 11-13). Then a concise statement is given that summarizes the perfecting effects of the sacrifice of Christ (v. 14). This summary is supported by a repetition of portions of the earlier citation from Jeremiah (vv. 16-17) and a conclusion to the exposition: "Where there is forgiveness of these ['sins' and 'lawless deeds'], there is no longer any offering for sin" (v. 18).

COMMENTARY

The Once for All Sacrifice of Christ, 10:11-14

The contrast between the levitical priests and Christ is in terms of what "every priest" (not just the high priest) does. The high priest functions in the daily sacrifice along with other members of the priesthood, so the discussion of the work of "every priest" serves to characterize all functionaries of the old cult. The priest "stands day after day" while Christ "sat down at the right hand of God" after his

sacrifice. The priest offers "again and again the same sacrifices," but Christ offered "for all time a single sacrifice." The sacrifice of the priest "can never take away sins"; the effectiveness of Christ's sacrifice is seen in his completion of the offering and his sitting down "at the right hand of God." The session at the right hand of God is not only set in opposition to the continued standing of the priest; it indicates that Jesus has completed his work and has entered his glorious "rest" (see 4:4 and 4:10). ["Once for All" in Hebrews]

Psalm 110:1 ("The LORD says to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool'") provides evidence for the session at God's right hand and, by implication, the decisive finality of Christ's sacrifice. Psalm 110:1 also provides indication of the eschatological subjection that awaits Christ. Christ is now waiting "until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet." No specific referent for "enemies" is given in the psalm or in the book of Hebrews. Readers are aware of the various manifestations of sin—disease, warfare, hunger, poverty, anger, despair, loneliness. What is clear is the complete and decisive subjection of those powers that resist the gracious redemptive purposes of God. The fact that all of the powers that resist the redemptive purposes of

"Once for All" in Hebrews

AΩ The adverbs *hapax* and *ephapax* (*epi* + *hapax*), translated "once" or "once for all" are used in Hebrews to affirm the uniqueness of Christ's self-sacrifice, the absolute singularity of his self-offering. The view of the work of Christ as unique is not limited to Hebrews. In Romans, Paul contrasts the work of Christ with the legal system. The expression "but now" (*nuni de*) is used to begin the contrast: "But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction . . ."(Rom 3:21-22). 1 Pet 3:18 uses the adverb *hapax* to emphasize the uniqueness of the work of Christ: "For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit. . . ."

The author of Hebrews uses *ephapax* in 7:27 ("Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself") and 9:12 (". . . he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption").

In Heb 9:23-28, a sustained argument for the uniqueness of Christ's sacrifice is made, using the adverb *hapax* several times in contrasting the once for all offering of Christ with the annual visit of the high priest to the most holy place. Three points may be made: (1) The singular character of the sacrifice of Christ is stressed by the reference to "the end of the age" when that which is definitive will take place. (2) Uniqueness is reinforced by the repetition of the use of *hapax* in 9:26 in vv. 27 and 28:

> But as it is, he has appeared once for all [*hapax*] at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once [*hapax*], and after that the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once [*hapax*] to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him. (9:26-28)

(3) A third way that the uniqueness of Christ's sacrifice is emphasized is the application of the thought of v. 26 in v. 28. Christ is not merely the unique high priest; he is also the unique sacrifice. Heb 10:12, 14 confirms this: "But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, 'he sat down at the right hand of God.' . . . For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified."

God have not yet been subjected is an indication that Jesus does not simply wait in the heavenly sanctuary. The author of Hebrews had also spoken earlier of an active ministry of intercession on behalf of those who approach God through Christ (7:25). What is asserted here about Christ's waiting, therefore, is not that Christ is inactive, but that no further sacrifice is necessary. Christ intercedes without having to offer sacrifices. Verse 14 underscores the decisive once for all sacrifice: "For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified." The perfect tense of the verb "to perfect" and the phrase "for all time" emphasize the permanent result of the offering of Christ. [Jesus' Sacrifice Unrepeatable]

Jesus' Sacrifice Unrepeatable

William Barclay affirmed that in contrast with the animal sacrifices, Jesus' sacrifice could not be repeated:

> In contrast with that [animal sacrifice], Jesus had made his sacrifice, and that sacrifice neither could be nor needed to be repeated. (A) It *could* not be repeated. There is something unrepeatable about any great work. . . . There are certain things which can be copied, reproduced, repeated; other people can produce something which is very similar and which is just as good. But all works of genius have a certain unrepeatable quality; that is what makes them works of genius; they are once and for all productions. . . . It is so with the sacrifice of Christ. It is *sui generis*; it is unique; it is one of the masterpieces which have been done once and can never be done again. (B) It *need* not be repeated. Why should that be? For two reasons. First, *the sacrifice of Jesus perfectly shows the love of God*. In that life of service, and in that death of love, there stands fully displayed the heart of God. . . . Second, *the life and death of Jesus was one act of perfect obedience, and was, therefore, the only perfect sacrifice*. All scripture, at its deepest, declares that the only sacrifice God desires is obedience; and in the life and death of Jesus that is precisely the sacrifice that God received.

William Barclay, *The Letter to the Hebrews, Daily Study Bible* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1955), 130-31.

Support from Scripture, 10:15-18

The quotation from Jeremiah that forms the next to last verses of the section are instructive: (1) The Holy Spirit is the speaker. (2) The present tense is used: "The Holy Spirit testifies." Through the ancient prophetic oracle, the Holy Spirit makes contemporary a detail from the past. And (3) the Holy Spirit testifies "to us." The text is brought into the contemporary experience of the readers. The promises given when God announced his plan to inaugurate a new covenant have immediate relevance for the community addressed by the book of Hebrews.

The way the text is quoted (compare the quotation of Jer 31:31-34 in Heb 8:8-12) joins the heart of the concern of Jeremiah with the concern of Hebrews to view Jesus Christ in priestly and sacrificial terms. Jeremiah was concerned with the placing of the laws in the "hearts" of the people and the writing of the laws "on their minds" (the promise that the people of God are no longer directed by an external law). Modifications made by the writer of Hebrews (beyond the omission of Jer 31:34a) indicates the writer's interest in making the text contemporaneous with his readers. Instead of a covenant "with the house of Israel," the text reads "with them." This makes the covenant of a more universal application. The order of "hearts" and "minds" (v. 16) is reversed, giving prominence to

the heart that will figure prominently in 10:22. Instead of simply not remembering "sins," "lawless deeds" is added. This has the effect of reinforcing the promise.

Jeremiah did not make explicit the relationship between the replacement of the old covenant and the supercession of the old sacrifices, but Jeremiah did imply such a relationship. The final verse of this section of Hebrews draws out the implication: "Where there is forgiveness of these ['sins' and 'lawless deeds'—just spoken of in Jeremiah] there is no longer any offering for sin." This phrase not only joins the new covenant with the remission of sins, but it also ties together the insights derived from the different scriptural passages treated in the entire section 8:1–10:18.

CONNECTIONS

The Holy Spirit also Testifies "To Us"

The author of Hebrews could have written, "Jeremiah said, 'This is the covenant that I will make with them . . . .'" Then, he could have applied the ancient text to the congregation, finding the situation of the congregation analogous to the situation of those addressed by Jeremiah. But the author says that the words are "to us" by virtue of the fact that they are words of the Holy Spirit. Historical distance is dissolved.

Interpreters of Hebrews are instructed by knowledge of the background of Jeremiah and the background of the original audience of Hebrews. But for the word to become a word "for us," we must be instructed by the spiritual background that enables our generation—every generation—to be addressed by the Spirit of Christ. We must see ourselves as the people of God, as the primitive community and the eschatological community.

We must (with the author of Hebrews) see the world as one that reveals God, in which the creator God enters into personal relations with humans. God's speaking in Scripture, then, is not simply a voice to the past. Scripture speaks about the Christ who has come. It speaks to the generation living in the "today" of Psalm 95 and the days that are coming spoken of in Jeremiah 31. "The present experience of transforming power among the readers of Hebrews is . . . understood as the continued speaking of God to the people. And this present voice demands response."[1]

Luke Johnson poses three questions that are important for reading Hebrews as words of the Spirit of God to us:

> The first and most penetrating is whether our world is a biblical world in any sense. . . . Do we any longer perceive the world as mystery, as having a depth of being that lies within and beneath that which is observable, measurable, or calculable? . . . The second question is whether scripture is for us simply record of the past . . . or whether it continues to speak to us as God's word that places a demand on our lives and begins by placing our lives in question. . . . The third question is whether, with Hebrews, we see the living word of God active not only in scripture but also outside it. . . . Our capacity to hear and see God's work in our world—in the stories of real men and women—is the way in which the world again becomes as scripture imagines it, as enchanted, as revealing mystery at its heart. And reading scripture in light of such perception is again to read it as more than a historical record, as, indeed, prophetic.[2]

NOTES

[1] Luke Timothy Johnson, "The Scriptural World of Hebrews," *Int* 57 (2003): 248.

[2] Ibid., 249-50.

EXHORTATION: PRIVILEGES AND DUTIES OF CHRISTIANS

Hebrews 10:19-25

The final major section of Hebrews—"The Way of the Christian as the Way of Faith"—consists of two sets of exhortations and warnings calling for faith and endurance (10:19-39 and 12:1-29). Between these sets of exhortations and warnings, the writer gave examples of faithful heroes and heroines of the past (11:1-40). The initial set of exhortations and warnings in this section (10:19-39) may be seen as paralleling the set of exhortations and warnings given just before the exposition of 8:1–10:18. (These two sets of warnings and exhortations form a sort of framework for the exposition of 8:1–10:18.) A three-point exhortation (10:19-25) parallels the earlier exhortation to move on toward perfection (5:11–6:3). A stern warning about the fate of the willful sinner (10:25-31) parallels the warning of 6:4-8. And the exhortation to endurance based on the history of the congregation's performance (10:32-39) parallels the earlier exhortation with the same sort of basis (6:9-20).

Following the set of exhortations and warnings in 10:19-39 comes a chapter reciting the actions of faithful men and women of old (ch. 11). Then chapter 12 calls for faith as endurance. This chapter (1) calls on readers to look to Jesus as the supreme example of endurance (vv. 1-3); (2) instructs readers to consider suffering as discipline (vv. 4-11); (3) encourages readers to resolve anew to engage in the demanding contest (using the metaphor of an athletic event), and it lists specific ways that the race may be run (vv. 12-17); (4) contrasts Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion (vv. 18-24); and (5) concludes with a lesser to greater argument that "if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven!" (vv. 25-29).

Hebrews 10:19-25 is a periodic sentence in the Greek. It is connected with the previous exposition by means of the word "therefore" (*oun*) and moves from assertions about the access to God provided by Christ's sacrifice to three exhortations based on those assertions. These exhortations are to approach God in faith, to hold fast the confession of hope, and to consider how to provoke each other to love and good deeds.

COMMENTARY

Access to God, 10:19-21

The author prepared for the three exhortations by speaking of what the readers already possessed: "confidence to enter the sanctuary" and "a great high priest over the house of God." He began by addressing his readers as "my friends." The word translated "friends" is literally "brothers" (*adelphoi*), and elsewhere the NRSV renders this word "brothers and sisters" (2:11, 12, 17; 3:1, 10; 13:22). In 2:17 the writer had used this term when he indicated that Jesus "had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God." Christ shared the status of the readers of Hebrews in his participation in blood and flesh (2:14). The readers now share blessings because of what Christ has done with those marks of humanity.

The first thing mentioned by the writer as the possession of readers is "confidence [*parrēsia*] to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus" (10:19). Confidence or boldness has objective and subjective aspects. It is an attitude that enables action. It derives from the inner renewal achieved through the sacrifice of Christ and enables fearless behavior in the face of opposition. Earlier the writer had called upon his readers to maintain this confidence or boldness (the NRSV translates the Greek word "confidence" in 3:6 and "boldness" in 4:16). In this section, *parrēsia* as internal renewal is emphasized (10:22-23), and in the next section fearless behavior is emphasized (10:32-35).

The immediate object of confidence is entry into the divine presence. In comments on 9:28 the suggestion was made that the ritual of the Day of Atonement helps us appreciate the image of believers waiting for the second coming of Christ. As Old Testament worshipers awaited the return of the high priest from the holy of holies, so believers are "eagerly waiting" for Christ to return to consummate the process of salvation. Here, however, believers are "to enter the sanctuary." They are not to wait outside but to approach God in the footsteps of Christ. The means of entry is "the blood of Jesus." In chapter 9 (vv. 12, 14, 25) Christ is described as entering once for all into the true heavenly sanctuary through his blood, the blood of his obedient self-sacrifice. The book of Hebrews provides numerous suggestions about the relevance of the entry of Christ into the heavenly sanctuary for Christians and their own entry into the sanctuary. In 2:10 the image of Christ "bringing many children

to glory" implies the motif that is developed further in the call for readers to enter the heavenly rest (4:3, 10). In the image of the anchor of hope that "enters the inner shrine . . . where Jesus . . . has entered," the idea is present that the entry of Christians depends in some important way on that of Christ. In chapter 9, a key feature was Christ's entry into the sanctuary based on the analogy of the Day of Atonement (9:12, 24). In chapter 10, this entry was made possible by Christ's obedience to God's will (10:5-10). The way of Christ is Christians' way to glory in 10:19. The Christians' confidence and empowerment for entry into glory is the shedding of the blood of Christ's obedient self-sacrifice.

The way Christ "opened for us" (v. 20) is described as "new" and "living." The way is "new" or "recent" in that it was not available under the old cult (see 9:8). The way is "living"—although it arises out of Christ's death—because it possesses and provides access to the life of God. The way leads to the "indestructible life" characteristic of Christ's exalted priesthood (7:16). The new and living way is "through the curtain." This image continues the cultic imagery and refers in a literal sense to the point one must pass to enter the holy of holies. The writer declares that the "curtain" is Jesus' "flesh" and that the "way that he opened for us through the curtain" is the way "through his flesh." The Greek word translated "through" (*dia*) may have a local sense, indicating Christ's passage through the curtain. It may also have an instrumental sense, "by means of," indicating that Christ's flesh, that is, his sacrificial death, is the means of entry into the presence of God. Both meanings seem to be operating here, with readers moving from a local sense with "flesh" understood in a rather literal fashion to an instrumental sense with "flesh" understood as symbolic of Christ's obedient bodily response to God's will.

The second basis for the three exhortations is the fact that "we have a great priest over the house of God" (v. 21). The writer had already spoken of Jesus as the "great high priest who has passed through the heavens" (4:14) and of "God's house" over which Christ is faithful as Son (3:6). These ideas are brought together and made richer and clearer in meaning as they are presented in light of the exposition of 7:1–10:18.

Exhortation to Faith, 10:22

On the basis of Christ's high priesthood and the confident boldness to enter the sanctuary, three exhortations are given—exhortations to faith, hope, and love. Each exhortation is expressed in terms

appropriate for the exposition that has just been given centering on the confidence of believers and the high priesthood of Christ. The first exhortation is to "approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith" (10:22a). The approach to God through Christ is the appropriate response to the provisions made by God. In 4:16 readers were called to "approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." This passage and other passages about approaching God (7:25; 11:6; 12:18, 22) indicate that earnest prayer is a part of what is involved. But all aspects of worship and indeed the whole of the Christian life are also involved. The "true heart" with which readers are to approach God calls to mind the "new heart" that is a part of the new covenant envisioned by Jeremiah (31:33) and realized through sacrifice. It also implies the cleansing of the conscience from dead works (9:14; 10:14). When the heart is cleansed from the defilement of a "consciousness of sin" (10:2), it can be renewed in faith toward God. The encouragement to approach "in full assurance of faith" parallels other calls to certainty, confidence, and boldness. In Hebrews, faith and hope are closely related, and the expression "full assurance" has the force of the expression "the full assurance of hope" in 6:11.

Circumstances for the approach to God—conditions that have in fact been met by Christians—are cited in v. 22b. One circumstance or condition is "our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience." This indicates the means of the "true heart" spoken of earlier in the verse. The writer had spoken of Moses sprinkling the people during the ratification of the old covenant at Sinai (in 9:19-21). With this imagery in mind, the writer associated Jesus' inauguration of the new covenant with the hearts of the people being "sprinkled clean from an evil conscience." The evil conscience belongs to the past. Readers may also associate the sprinkling (and washing) with the consecration of Aaron and his sons to priestly service (see Exod 29:4, 21; Lev 8:6, 30). The text would then suggest that the believers experience a priestly consecration. However, this is at best only implicit in Hebrews, so the concern of the author is with interior purification more than with priestly consecration.

Another circumstance for the approach to God is having "our bodies washed with pure water." Just as the sprinkling of the heart refers to the inward cleansing accomplished by Christ, so the washing of the body refers to inward cleansing. The Old Testament background of ritual purification with the use of water is obvious. The expression "pure water," for example, is used in the Septuagint

to describe the water used in ritual purification (see Num 5:17; Ezek 36:25). But the reference to the washing of bodies with pure water in Hebrews would doubtless have been associated by readers more readily with Christian baptism. The circumstances or conditions for the approach to God turn out to be one; the reality symbolized by the act of baptism and the reality spoken of as the sprinkling of the heart are the same reality.

Exhortation to Hope, 10:23

The second exhortation is to "hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering." The first exhortation was for movement forward into the presence of God through Christ's obedient self-sacrifice ("let us approach"). Now the writer calls for holding fast ("let us hold fast"). Already the writer had urged this action (3:6-14; 4:14) with special reference to hope (6:19). Hope in Hebrews is not merely a feeling, a positive attitude toward the future. "Hope" describes a particular content. This content is present and future salvation. In chapter 6 "hope" was associated with Jesus' entry as high priest into the heavenly sanctuary (16:19-20). Indeed, "hope" was personified and described as entering (like Jesus) "the inner shrine behind the curtain" (6:19). "Hold fast" is strengthened by the addition of the term "without wavering"—without swerving to one side or the other. The incentive for "holding fast . . . without wavering" is the faithfulness of the one "who has promised." The basis for Christian hope is God's promises, promises such as the inauguration of a new covenant and entry into God's rest. God cannot lie. God is utterly reliable (6:17-18). Since God does what God promises, Christians are able to hold on to their beliefs without wavering.

Exhortation to Love, 10:24-25

The third and final exhortation—to love (*agapē*)—completes the triad of faith, hope, and love. Readers are called on to "consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds." "Provoke" ("irritate," "pester") in Greek as in English may have a negative connotation, but here it is used positively. The positive use is seen not only here but from classical Greek writers who speak of good examples provoking emulation in the contest of life (Xenophon [*Memoirs of Socrates* 3.3.13] speaks of the Athenians being distinguished by love of honor, which "provokes good and noble deeds"). In chapter 6 the writer of Hebrews had referred to "the love that

you showed for his sake in serving the saints, and you still do" (6:10; see also 10:33-34). This is an implicit exhortation to acts of love. The implicit exhortation of chapter 6, however, is made explicit here. "Love" is a response to need in the lives of others. "Good works" are tangible expressions of this love.

The appeal to love and good works in v. 24 is supplemented in v. 25 by a negative statement and a positive statement. The negative statement cautions readers not to neglect "to meet together, as is the habit of some." The verb translated "neglect" (*enkataleipō*) describes an action stronger than simple neglect or forgetfulness. It indicates actual abandonment. The KJV translates the word "forsake," and this is the force of the Greek verb. At least some members are forsaking the "assembly." The Greek word translated "assembly" (*episynagōgē*) can refer to the actual group assembled or to the act of assembling. (2 Thess 2:1 uses the word for the act of assembly, and Matt 23:37, 24:31, and Luke 17:37 use the term for the corporate body formed by assembly.) Here the writer doubtless referred to the failure to "come to church." In a parenthetical statement, the author said that it is "the habit of some" to forsake the meeting together. The author did not provide specific information about what led to this problem. Was it persecution (see 10:32-34; 12:3, 12-14; 13:3), opposition to belief or practice (see 10:29), the delay of the parousia (see 10:36-39), a combination of these factors, or another problem? Could it have simply been preoccupation with other affairs? A second-century work speaks of neglect of church meetings because of preoccupation with business affairs (*Similitudes of Hermas* 8.8.1; 9.20.1). Commentators frequently single out one of these factors and try to correlate the information in the text with that specific problem. Whatever problem or problems contributed to the forsaking of assembly, the real problem was a failure to understand and appreciate the significance of Christ's priestly ministry—the access to God provided by Christ. [Fear, Fastidiousness, and Conceit]

The positive statement supporting the exhortation to love and good deeds is a call for readers to encourage each other. The verb "to encourage" (*parakaleō*) comes from the same root as the word the writer used to describe his entire writing, "a word of exhortation" (*paraklēsis*, 13:22). Warning and reproof as well as encouragement are involved in the book of Hebrews and are to be involved in the care Christians exercise for each other. The writer added that this encouragement should be exercised "all the more as you see the day approaching." The writer was referring to the eschatological expectation of Christians, expectations so familiar to

Fear, Fastidiousness, and Conceit

James Moffatt distinguished three reasons that keep individuals from worshiping with fellow Christians: fear, fastidiousness, and conceit. (1) They may be fearful and ashamed to show their loyalty by being seen going to church. Friends may have no use for church, and fear of criticism and contempt of friends cause them to try to be secret disciples. Moffatt said that perhaps some of those to whom Hebrews was addressed "were growing ashamed of their faith; it was so insignificant and unpopular, even dangerous to anyone who identified himself with it openly. They may have begun to grow tired of the sacrifices and hardships involved in membership of the local church." (2) Individuals may not go to church because of fastidiousness. They may dislike the common people; they may shrink from contact with people who are not like themselves. Moffatt saw the possibility that some of the readers of the letter to the Hebrews were "a small group of teachers or more intelligent Christians, who felt able, in a false superiority, to do without common worship; they did not require to mix with the ordinary members!" (3) Individuals may not go to church because of conceit. They may believe and state that they do not need the church, that they are intellectually beyond the standard of preaching at at particular church. Moffatt cited critics who think that some of the first readers may have "left their own little congregation for another, in a spirit of lawless pique, or to gratify their own tastes selfishly."

Moffatt suggested the possibility that in the original context readers felt that they had received the sacred contents and blessings of Christianity and could now withdraw or readers felt that the Christian faith needed to be supplemented by some other cult. Regardless of the reason for failing to attend church, no one can live the Christian life and neglect the fellowship of the church. If individuals feel that they can do so, they should remember that they come to church not only to get, but to give. We come to church not only to receive but to make our contribution to the life of the church.

James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1924), 149.

readers that the writer needed only to say "the day." The writer gave no details of an eschatological timetable. Perhaps the writer and his readers shared convictions about the end and signs of the end in contemporary events. Of greater concern, however, is the assurance of salvation provided by the death and exaltation of Christ.

CONNECTIONS

Faith, Hope, and Love

Hebrews 10:19-25 is like a diamond, sparkling as a result of its content and the light shed on it by the entire book of Hebrews and other treatments of faith, hope, and love. This triad has been impressed upon the consciousness of Christians by 1 Corinthians 13:13: "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." A full appreciation of these virtues in Paul

requires an examination of Paul's treatment of the triad not only in 1 Corinthians but also in his other writings (Rom 5:1-5; Gal 5:5-6; Col 1:4-5; 1 Thess 1:3; 5:8). The specific circumstances of each of the treatments of faith, hope, and love help to make these more than abstract concepts. In Hebrews as in Paul, faith, hope, and love as a related group of Christian virtues are understood in terms of the particular challenge facing readers as well as in light of general principles of Christian discipleship. Homiletical application of Hebrews 10:19-25, therefore, will be made more significant by careful exposition of theological and christological perspectives of the author. Indeed, vv. 19-21 may be used to focus attention on the major christological insights of the book of Hebrews. These verses encapsulate the vision of Jesus Christ explicated throughout Hebrews. Each of the triad—faith, hope, and love—must also be interpreted in light of the particular problem facing the readers of the book of Hebrews, the threat of abandonment of an earlier confidence and failure to endure in circumstances that challenge faith, hope, and love.

WARNING: THE FATE OF THE WILLFUL SINNER

Hebrews 10:26-31

The writer then addressed harsh and disturbing words to people who have fallen away from the faith. He had in mind those who "sin deliberately," who have intentionally turned against the faith. The warning against apostasy contained in this section is related directly to what has come before, especially to the warning of the approach of the day of reckoning. The word "for" (*gar*) indicates this relationship: "For if we willfully persist in sin after having received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins." But the warning is also related to earlier warnings that have been given in Hebrews. Hebrews 2:3 warns, "[H]ow can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" In 3:12 the writer combined a warning against turning "away from the living God" with a plea to "exhort one another . . . so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." Hebrews 4:1 speaks of the "promise of entering his rest" and cautions readers to "take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it."

The most severe and extended warning against apostasy prior to this section occurred at 6:4-8. Indeed the warning in 10:26-31 parallels the warning in 6:4-8. Each consists of four parts: a statement about the previous experience of the readers; the description of what would constitute apostasy; the declaration of the impossibility of renewal; and the final fate of those guilty of apostasy. One major difference between the two sections is the cultic language of the present passage. The warning of 10:26-31 is clearly framed in light of the exposition that proceeded it. It begins with a statement that for Christians who willfully persist in sin there remains no longer a sacrifice for sins but only judgment and a fury of fire (vv. 26-27). This warning is bolstered by a lesser to greater argument that if violation of the law of Moses met with death, how much worse punishment is merited by those who repudiate Christ's sacrifice (vv. 28-29). In this argument, description of the action involved makes plain that willful apostasy and not sin in general is the object of the warning. Two Scripture passages are cited to support the warning (v. 30). Also, a

conclusion gives a solemn admonition: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (v. 31).

COMMENTARY

Consequence of Willful Sin, 10:26-27

In the Greek text, the section begins with the word translated "willfully" (*hekousiōs*). Willful or high-handed sin is therefore the theme, not inadvertent sins. The distinction between these sorts of sins was recognized in Judaism (see Num 15:22-31 and Heb 9:7). [Numbers 15:22-31: Unintentional and Intentional Sin] As indicated later by the author, the sin is the special willful act of apostasy. The present tense of the verb "to sin" is appropriately translated by the NRSV "to persist in sin." A continuous rejection of Christ is involved. This is a severe and strong warning. The severity of the warning to follow is designed to cause readers to distance themselves totally from the sort of action described. But the writer also drew the readers into an association of themselves with the values of the writer by associating himself with the readers in the warning: "[I]f we willfully persist in sin. . . ."

Numbers 15:22-31: Unintentional and Intentional Sin

But if you unintentionally fail to observe all these commandments that the LORD has spoken to Moses—everything that the LORD has commanded you by Moses, from the day the LORD gave commandment and thereafter, throughout your generations—then if it was done unintentionally without the knowledge of the congregation, the whole congregation shall offer one young bull for a burnt offering, a pleasing odor to the LORD, together with its grain offering and its drink offering, according to the ordinance, and one male goat for a sin offering. The priest shall make atonement for all the congregation of the Israelites, and they shall be forgiven; it was unintentional, and they have brought their offering, an offering by fire to the LORD, and their sin offering before the LORD, for their error. All the congregation of the Israelites shall be forgiven, as well as the aliens residing among them, because the whole people was involved in the error. An individual who sins unintentionally shall present a female goat a year old for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement before the LORD for the one who commits an error, when it is unintentional, to make atonement for the person, who then shall be forgiven. For both the native among the Israelites and the alien residing among them—you shall have the same law for anyone who acts in error. But whoever acts high-handedly, whether a native or an alien, affronts the LORD, and shall be cut off from among the people. Because of having despised the word of the LORD and broken his commandment, such a person shall be utterly cut off and bear the guilt.

The sin of apostasy by definition requires a prior intellectual and/or faith experience and commitment. The writer described this experience as "having received the knowledge of the truth" (v. 26). Having "knowledge of truth" was used by early Christians to speak of their faith experience (see John 8:32; 17:3; 1 Tim 2:4; 4:3). "Truth" here is not the sort of factual truth obtained by study and research. It is the saving truth, the revelation of God's activity in Jesus Christ, a gift from God. "Knowledge," then, is more than the accumulation of information. It is an acceptance of the truth of the gospel. It is faith. Hebrews 6:4-5 describes more fully the faith experience of believers, apostasy from which the writer is warning. It involves enlightenment, tasting the heavenly gift, sharing in the Holy Spirit, and "tasting the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come."

"There no longer remains a sacrifice for sins" (v. 26), states a conclusion that derives from the earlier exposition of Christ's sacrifice (in 6:4 the argument was that "it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened"). Christ's self-offering was once for all (10:10, 12, 14, 18); it cannot be repeated. In 10:18 the writer had concluded his cultic argument with the declaration that "where there is forgiveness of these ['sins' and 'lawless deeds'], there is no longer any offering for sin." This is because Christ has decisively put away sin. The declaration that "there no longer remains a sacrifice for sin" (10:26b) parallels 10:18 and implies the same logic. The sufficient sacrifice of Christ cannot be repeated if that sacrifice is repudiated.

What remains in the case of repudiation of Christ's sacrifice is "a fearful prospect of judgment and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries" (v. 27). The image of punishment by fire is common in apocalyptic expectations (see Zeph 1:18; Isa 26:11; 66:15-16, 24. See also 2 Thess 1:7-8; Rev 11:5; 20:14). [Isaiah 66:15-16: Judgment by Fire] The description of judgment is as stern as the description of apostasy and is not relieved in this section. The vision of impending judgment for those guilty of such apostasy continues. Even in the following section that presents a hopeful picture based on the readers' earlier conduct, mention is made of "those who shrink back and so are lost" (10:39).

Isaiah 66:15-16: Judgment by Fire

For the LORD will come in fire,
and his chariots like the whirlwind,
to pay back his anger in fury,
and his rebuke in flames of fire,
For by fire will the LORD execute judgment,
and by his sword, on all flesh;
and those slain by the LORD shall be many.

How Much More Punishment is Deserved, 10:28-29

In vv. 28-29 the writer used the lesser to greater form of argument, and readers will recall the same sort of argument in 2:2-3. In chapter 2 the point was made that if disregard for the law "received a just penalty," neglect of the salvation of the gospel has its inevitable consequence. The argument here is made sharper by the use of Old Testament allusions and by metaphors depending upon the earlier exposition of Christ's high-priestly actions. The writer cited the Old Testament stipulation that the idolater is to be executed "without mercy 'on the testimony of two or three witnesses'" (see Deut 13:6-11 for the notion of merciless punishment, Deut 19:15-21 for the principle concerning evidence of two or three witnesses, and Deut 17:6 for the specific regulation in the case of idolatry). The conclusion of the lesser to greater argument takes the form of a rhetorical question: "How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by those who have spurned the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace?" (v. 29). The metaphors used to describe the action of the apostates are designed to bring readers to condemn the act of apostasy and to imagine the "worse punishment" appropriate for such an act.

"Spurning the Son of God" is the first metaphor. The word translated "spurn" (*katapateō*) means literally to "trample upon." From this literal meaning comes a figurative meaning of "treat with disdain" or "spurn." The "Son of God" is a title used frequently in the early part of Hebrews (1:2, 5; 3:6; 4:14; 5:5-7). It was also used, but less frequently, in the central section (7:28). The confession of the readers involved a confession of Jesus as the Son of God (see 4:14 and 10:23). Apostasy, then, is a spurning or treating with disdain the Son of God professed and confessed by the readers.

The second metaphor is that of profaning "the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified." "To profane" (*koinon hēgeomai*) means literally "to consider common or vulgar." The sacred quality of the blood of the covenant is not recognized; the sanctifying quality is discounted.

The third metaphor views apostasy as outraging "the Spirit of grace." The verb translated "to outrage" (*enybrizō*) is composed of two Greek words, the second of which is transliterated as *hybris*. (The first word is the simple "in.") The verb indicates a *hybris*, a haughty insolence often leading to human disaster and downfall. Although the word used in Hebrews is found only here in the Bible, the form without the prefix is found in Matthew 22:6; Luke 11:45; 18:32; Acts 14:5; and 1 Thessalonians 2:2. Here the verb is

translated "mistreat," "insult," or "shamefully mistreat." The Spirit so treated is the eternal Spirit through whom Jesus Christ offered himself without blemish to God (9:14) and who testifies to the covenant in which the law is internalized (10:15-17). The Spirit is there characterized as the Spirit of grace, as the Spirit makes available the divine favor that flows from Christ's sacrificial act.

Scriptural Support, 10:30

The biblical quotations cited to support the argument from the lesser to the greater come from the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32. They are introduced with a comment, "For we know the one who said." The introduction indicates not only that Christians know the character of God ("we know") who speaks in Scripture and in Christ but that this God has a negative attitude toward sin. The first quotation cited is from the Greek translation of Deuteronomy 32:35 that reads, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." The Hebrew text that served as a basis for the Greek version used by Hebrews read, "Vengeance is mine and recompense." But the version that appears in Hebrews appears also in Jewish interpretations and in Paul. In Paul (Rom 12:19) the text is used to warn against taking vengeance, and in the original Song of Moses the text promises that God will vindicate God's people by judging their enemies. The text that originally spoke of judgment of the enemies of God's people now speaks a warning against God's new covenant people.

The second quotation is from Deuteronomy 32:36 and is found also in Psalm 135:14: "The LORD will judge his people." With both of the Old Testament verses, the original idea is divine vindication of God on behalf of his people, and the text is to be understood as "The LORD will vindicate his people." In Hebrews, readers are warned that they are judged by God.

A Fearsome Thing, 10:31

The final verse in this section intensifies the message about divine judgment contained in the two biblical passages: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." The same sort of redirection of meaning that took place with the two biblical passages takes place with this summary statement. In biblical references, falling into God's hands usually has positive connotation. Here the connotation is decidedly negative. The "living God" who is destined to be worshiped by those whose consciences have

Tough Love

Herbert W. Chilstrom asked why the author of Hebrews did not offer a softer and "more loving appeal." He answered:

> It may be that our author friend knows something about "tough love." Families with chemically dependent persons surely know about it. A teen-age son is hooked on drugs. In spite of warnings from parents, siblings, friends, and counselors, he gets more and more involved in the world of chemical addiction. His parents try to be understanding and loving. No matter how bad the situation becomes, they continue to provide food, clothing, and shelter. When it becomes impossible for them to cope any longer, they enroll their son—and themselves!—in a treatment program. They begin to learn about "tough love"—the kind of love that sets standards and absolutes, talks about limits, and lays down consequences.
>
> Finally, the eventful day comes when they must say to their own son, "Our home is no longer your home." Then for two or three anxious days they wonder where he is. They feel guilty. They fear suicide. They are sure they have done the wrong thing. But finally the phone rings: "Hello, Mom. I'm okay. I know now that you really mean it. This time I'm going into a program by my own choice. I really want to get out of the drug scene. I want to start life over again."
>
> A professor of mine used to put it this way: "God prefers to rule in mercy. If he cannot rule in mercy, he will rule in judgment. But rule he will!" God is not about to bend the principles of the universe to accommodate our every whim and fancy. Indeed, it *is* "a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." But back of God's threats is a "tough love" that wants nothing more than that prodigal sons and daughters should come home.

Herbert W. Chilstrom, *Hebrews: A New & Better Way* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 54-55.

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been cleansed by dead works (see 9:14) lives also as a consuming fire (12:24) who does not trifle with sinners (see 3:12 for a similar warning about turning away from the living God). [Tough Love]

CONNECTIONS

Good Cop, Bad Cop

The good cop, bad cop operation is known to everyone who has read police stories or seen them on television. By the time the bad cop works over the suspect, he or she is ready to cooperate with the sympathetic good cop. The good cop, bad cop psychology is at work in Hebrews 10:26-39. The severe warning of vv. 26-31 corresponds to the "bad cop." The language that describes the act of apostasy is strained: the Son of God is spurned, the blood of the covenant is profaned, the Spirit of God is outraged. Such persistent

action can only mean judgment and "a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries." The readers of Hebrews cannot possibly see themselves being described in these words! "Where there is smoke, there is fire," to be sure, and the readers are in danger of drifting. The language, however, pummels the readers. There is distance between the historical situation and the rhetorical presentation. (The later charge of growing weary and losing heart [12:3], of having drooping hands and weak knees [12:12] are pale in contrast to the charges in 10:26-31 and probably represent the historical situation more accurately.) After such a thrashing, readers are ready for the words corresponding to the "good cop," words designed to stand in opposition to the harsh words of the earlier warning. Readers are, then, prepared psychologically and spiritually to acknowledge their weariness and loss of heart and to lift their drooping hands and strengthen their weak knees.

EXHORTATION TO ENDURANCE

Hebrews 10:32-39

Hebrews 10:32-39 offers a positive word of exhortation and encouragement. This positive word parallels the word of encouragement in 6:9-12 (following the severe warning against apostasy in 6:4-8). The word of encouragement recalls the readers' past experience of faithfulness in time of suffering. The reminder of the readers' experiences is so specific that modern-day readers are encouraged to correlate these experiences with what we know of the historical experiences of early Christians in Rome. The experiences of the Christians in Rome illuminate the account in Hebrews—assuming that Rome is the destination of the "word of exhortation." The Christians addressed in Hebrews had been Christians for some time—since the reign of Claudius (AD 41–54). The reference to the "hard struggle with sufferings" after having become Christians is understood in light of hardships borne by Jewish Christians expelled from Rome by the emperor Claudius in AD 49. Acts 18:2 speaks of Aquila and Priscilla coming to Corinth from Rome "because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome." The plundering of possessions as well as general abuse and persecution resulted from official action of magistrates and from action of the general populace once Christians were forced to leave their property unattended. Throughout the experiences of suffering, the Christians maintained a courageous stance.

After a summons to remember the "earlier days" of endurance under persecution (v. 32), the writer specified two aspects of persecution: personal suffering and participation in the suffering of others (v. 33). Then in inverse order the writer detailed the compassion and personal suffering of the readers (v. 34a). He explained the cheerful acceptance of the plundering of the readers' possessions by their knowledge that they possess "something better and more lasting" (v. 34b). From recollection in vv. 32-34, the writer turned to admonition in terms of "confidence" (v. 35), "endurance" (v. 36), and faith (v. 39). A composite biblical quotation (Isa 26:20 and Hab 2:3b-4) called the readers to continued faithfulness in the present situation.

COMMENTARY

Recall a Hard Struggle with Sufferings, 10:32-34

Recalling or remembering had an important function in the early church. Paul sent Timothy to the church at Corinth to remind the Christians there of Paul's "ways in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor 4:17). Paul reminded his readers of the good news that he preached (1 Cor 15:1). Titus's heart went out "all the more" to the Corinthians as he remembered their obedience and their welcome of him when he came representing Paul (2 Cor 7:15). Second Peter asked that readers "remember the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets, and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken through your apostles" (3:2). The memory encouraged by the author of Hebrews for his readers is that of their endurance of "a hard struggle with suffering" after they had been "enlightened" (see 6:4). The word translated "struggle" (*athlēsis*) comes from the world of athletics (this imagery will be developed more fully in ch. 12). Readers are asked to look back on what the world sees as abuse, persecution, and plundering, but to view it as a contest. Endurance, then, is more than a negative experience. It is an athletic virtue, resulting from conditioning in faith and enabling the readers to "receive what was promised" (v. 36).

The two aspects of the past experience of readers were personal suffering and involvement in the sufferings of others. We may think of these as experiences that all the readers had at different times or as experiences of different elements of the congregation—some members enduring suffering directly and others enduring in sympathy with those suffering directly. The sufferings that were directly experienced are "abuse" and "persecution." The word translated "abuse" by the NRSV (*oneidismos*) was commonly used for various kinds of verbal abuse. The same term is used in 11:26 and 13:13, which suggest that this verbal abuse was an aspect of the readers' regular experience. The word translated "persecution" (*thlipsis*) is a general word for physical abuse and was used for the various forms of physical persecution endured by Christians (see Matt 24:9; Mark 13:19, 24; John 16:21, 33; Rom 5:3; 2 Cor 1:4, 8; Acts 20:23; Jas 1:27). The fact that believers were publicly exposed to such verbal and physical abuse added to the pain. The use of the word translated "publicly exposed" (*theatrizō*) indicates that more was involved than the fact that such acts were taking place openly. Such acts were intended to make of the Christians a public spectacle. Public humiliation was part of the purpose of

such abuse. "Being partners with those so treated" is especially interesting because of the current danger of neglect of fellowship that had just been emphasized (v. 25). [Abuse and Persecution]

The personal suffering and compassion stated in v. 33 are treated in more detail and in reverse order in v. 34. A specific form of partnership with those abused is first stated: "You had compassion for those who were in prison." The Greek verb translated "to have compassion" (*sympatheō*) means "to bear with" or "to suffer with." More than superficial feeling is involved, of course. The deep sympathy leads to concrete support, the sort of support praised in the judgment scene in Matthew 25:36 (see Heb 13:3 for a resurfacing of this particular form of compassion). The compassion involved reminded the readers not only of their own earlier experiences; it also reminded them of Christ's identification of himself with the human condition (see 2:14; 4:15).

A specific form of abuse experienced by the readers was "the plundering of your possessions." This was "cheerfully accepted" by the Christians (see Matt 5:12; Luke 6:22; Rom 5:3; 2 Cor 11:21-30; Acts 5:41; 1 Pet 4:13 for similar statements about the way Christians accepted or were advised to accept abuse). The Christians accepted deprivation gladly because they knew that they "possessed something better and more lasting" (v. 34). A literal translation reads: ". . . knowing that you yourselves have a better and more lasting possession." The noun "possession" used by the author here (*hyparxis*) involves a play on the word "possessions" (*hyparchonta*) that have been seized. The word used for the "possession" that is better and more lasting (*hyparxis*) can mean the same as the word used for possessions that have been plundered (*hyparchonta*). But *hyparxis* is frequently used as a technical philosophical term for "being" or "substance." The writer is clearly referring to a heavenly reality. It is the treasures "in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal" (Matt 6:20). The heavenly possessions are "better and more lasting." The term "better" is used regularly in Hebrews to speak of the superiority of the reality Christians have through Christ (see 6:9; 7:19; 9:23; 11:16; 12:24). The term "more lasting" ("abiding" or "permanent") is used to speak of the stability and permanence that characterize the heavenly world. [Early Christian Responses to Persecution]

Abuse and Persecution

Almost from the beginning the church was opposed and often persecuted. The early chapters of Acts record conflicts with Judaism resulting in the martyrdom of some of the church's apostolic leadership and others of its stalwarts. Later parts of Acts and several New Testament epistles reflect the continuation of this opposition and increasing and more serious conflicts with Rome.

In the beginning there was virtually no conflict between the church and the Roman Empire, and throughout the first century persecution by the empire was more a matter of the personal whims of certain emperors than official imperial position. The first direct persecution of Christians by Roman authority was the infamous incident that followed the burning of Rome in AD 64. It was rumored, probably without foundation, that Nero the emperor, wanting to beautify Rome by enlarging his palace complex and gardens, was responsible for the fire. Nero apparently attempted to shift the blame upon the Roman Christians. Clement of Rome, a Christian leader writing about AD 96, referred to "a great multitude of the elect" who, because of Nero's policy, "suffered terrible and impious indignities and thereby safely completed the race of faith and, though weak in body, received a noble reward of honour" (*First Epistle to the Corinthians* 6.1, 2).

For some time after Nero, Christians were exposed to increasing harassment; their opposition grew considerably worse during Domitian's reign (AD 81–96). Christian tradition makes Domitian the next emperor after Nero to persecute the church. Under Domitian, state persecution on religious grounds took place for the first time. Domitian had come to think of himself as divine and sought, therefore, to defend and restore the early Roman national religion that was threatened by oriental cults.

After Domitian's murder, brought on by measures that had made him hated, Christians may have fared better, although we lack sufficient information to be certain. At least further persecution cannot be documented until the time of Trajan (AD 98–117). Our best indication of the fact that Christianity for the first time became an illegal religion at the beginning of the second century is the Pliny-Trajan correspondence.

Pliny was imperial legate in Bithynia and Pontus. Sometime in the year 112 or 113 he investigated Christian activity in his region but was reluctant to take final action without writing to the emperor for advice. His letter opens:

> It is my custom, Lord emperor, to refer you all questions whereof I am in doubt. Who can better guide me when I am at a stand, or enlighten me if I am in ignorance? In investigations of Christians I have never taken part; hence I do not know what is the crime usually punished or investigated, or what allowances are made. So I have had no little uncertainty whether there is any distinction of age, or whether pardon is given to those who repent, or whether a man who has once been a Christian gains nothing by having ceased to be such; whether punishment attaches to the mere name apart from secret crimes, or to the secret crimes connected with the name. (Pliny, *Letters* 10.96-97)

It is clear that Pliny thought Christianity was a dangerous superstition, but he did not believe Christians were evil people. The letter makes clear that some official charge was active against Christians. The nature of this charge is in question. The emperor's reply is brief:

> You have adopted the proper course, my dear Secundus, in your examination of the cases of those who were accused to you as Christians, for indeed nothing can be laid down as a general rule involving something like a set form of procedure. They are not to be sought out; but if they are accused and convicted, they must be punished—yet on this condition, that whoso denies himself to be a Christian, and makes the fact plain by his action, that is, by worshiping our gods, shall obtain pardon on his repentance, however suspicious his past conduct may be. Papers, however, which are presented unsigned ought not to be admitted in any charge, for they are a very bad example and unworthy of our time. (Ibid.)

Other evidence of persecution during Trajan's reign is preserved in a Roman Christian tradition from the middle of the second century. According to the tradition, an earlier bishop of Jerusalem was accused and brought before a Roman official who tortured and finally crucified him. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, was also martyred sometime during Trajan's reign.

In spite of the obstacle of opposition and the losses she suffered by martyrdom, the church was strengthened in her faith and under conflict and persecution achieved a vitality and courage not to be gained in better times and circumstances.

Early Christian Responses to Persecution

Responses to conflicts with Judaism and Rome are seen in the literature of the early Christian movement. The stories of Jesus' controversies with the Pharisees and other Jewish groups were included in the Gospels partially because they paralleled the church's difficulties with the Jews. Paul's references to his persecutions and his admonitions about loyalty to the state as an instrument of God (cf. 2 Cor 11:25; Rom 13:1ff.) are part of the church's attempts to establish itself and adjust to an environment that was at least partially hostile. Luke and Acts at least secondarily aimed to demonstrate that Christianity was the fulfillment of Judaism and, therefore, a legal religion whose attitude toward the state was not intentionally hostile. In addition to these indirect responses to persecution in early church literature, three NT documents were primarily occasioned by persecution. They are 1 Peter, Hebrews, and Revelation.

First Peter is an open letter of comfort and exhortation (5:12) to Christians living in five provinces of Asia Minor. It challenges them in the face of persecution, suffering, and humiliating defamation to remain steadfast in their Christian faith. After the salutation the epistle passes into doxology, into praise of God, that reflects persecution. Christians have been born anew to hope in present and future salvation. This is certain in spite of persecution and suffering that is only a test of their faith. In fact, trial and tribulation may be a source of joy because it is the necessary prelude to the dawning of the eschatological age.

Hebrews is addressed to Christians who face the major decision whether they will reaffirm or abandon the confidence of the early days of their Christian experience. "But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated . . . . Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward" (10:32, 34).

The major strategy of Hebrews in encouraging faithfulness of Christians was its presentation of Jesus Christ. As high priest of the order of Melchizedek, Jesus has made purification for sin and is now seated at God's right hand, a high priest forever, making intercession for the saints. As priest, Jesus was chosen from among the people in order to sympathize with their weakness. Jesus showed his followers how to bear suffering, endure hostility, and disregard shame (12:1-3).

The finality of God's revelation in the Son furnished the author of Hebrews the basis for his call to live actively in response to God's absolute claim on their lives and to God's judgment should they renounce their Christian commitment.

Confidence Brings a Great Reward, 10:35-36

The writer encouraged his readers to recall the early days of courage and endurance and not to abandon their confidence. The term "confidence" or "boldness" had been used by the author to speak of the positive attitude the Christian has before both God and the world (3:6; 4:16; 10:19). Confidence enables endurance and the reception of God's promises. The admonition not to "abandon that confidence of yours" implies that in the past the endurance of abuse resulted from their "confidence" or boldness. Now future reward is indicated as a consequence of endurance. In 6:10, the author had assured his readers that God "will not overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints." In later chapters, the writer will refer to future rewards (see 11:6, 26; 12:2, 11). "The need for endurance" is directed here toward the future. Through endurance the readers "will have done the will of God." The mention of the will of God introduces other ideas. Jesus' sacrificial death resulted from obedience to God's will (10:7-10). Just so, Christians following in Christ's footsteps will set

their eyes on God's will. In the final chapter, the author prayed that his readers be made "complete in every thing good so that you may do his will" (13:21). At that point God's will is described as "working among us that which is pleasing in his sight" (13:21). The consequence of confidence, of endurance and doing God's will, is that the readers "receive what was promised" (10:36). The motif of promise was important in earlier sections of Hebrews as one way of referring to the salvation provided by Christ (4:1, 8; 6:12, 17; 8:6). The reintroduction of the motif here prepares for its use in chapter 11 (11:13, 17, 33, 39).

Scriptural Support for Doing God's Will and Enduring, 10:37-38

A biblical quotation is given to support the challenge to endure, to do God's will and thus receive the promise. The "poetic license" assumed by the author (and earlier transmitters of the biblical text) is evident in the use of Scripture here. The quotation is introduced dramatically without an introductory formula. The quotation itself is composite, made up of material from Habakkuk 2:3-4 with a phrase from Isaiah 26:20 as an introduction. We may read the passage—without concern for the original circumstances and use—as assurance of God's ultimate intervention in human affairs in terms of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is "the one who is coming and who will not delay." The passage also calls for faith in light of that decisive intervention ("my righteous one will live by faith"). But the significance and force of the passage may be increased by attention to the circumstances of origin and earlier use of the biblical material and to the author's christological reading. The introductory phrase from Isaiah 26:20 consists of three words translated "in a very little while" (v. 37a). The whole of the verse from Isaiah reads, "Come, my people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until the wrath is passed." The prophet urged his people to withdraw for a brief period while God exercised judgment on the wicked. The previous verse in Isaiah spoke of resurrection: "Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!" The context for the words "in a little while"—with the imagery of resurrection and judgment—allows an understanding of the phrase as a reference to the end time. The phrase may have been connected with the text from Habakkuk in traditions used by the author of Hebrews, or he may have made the connection himself. The passage from Habakkuk records a vision of the Chaldaeans'

violence against Israel. "If it seems to tarry," the writer said, "wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay." Following this assurance is an oracle of judgment that begins with a contrast between the righteous person and the proud or reckless person. The spirit of the proud "is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith." The author of Hebrews used the Septuagint translation of Habakkuk 2:3-4 in light of Jesus Christ to support the appeal to boldness and endurance in vv. 35-36. In place of "[I]t will surely come, it will not delay" (divine judgment), the text reads, "The one who is coming will come and will not delay," referring to Christ at his parousia. The certainty and imminence of the parousia is thus affirmed. In addition to this change, the author made clear by an alternation of phrases that the "righteous one" who "will live by faith" is the Christian who is faithful in movement toward the goal of life. The one "who shrinks back" is the Christian who loses sight of the goal.

We Are Among Those Who Have Faith, 10:39

The Scripture detailing the two types (those who "live by faith" and those who "shrink back") is then applied to the life of the community in inverse order: "But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved." The use of "we" identified the writer with his readers and helped to bring the biblical text into the experience of the readers. Shrinking back is an objective drawing back from loyalty to Christ. It is turning away from the living God (3:12; 6:6) and persisting willfully in the sin of apostasy (10:26). The consequence of this is lostness or destruction. The writer and readers, rather, are "among those who have faith and so are saved" (3:39). The text reads literally, "We are of those of faith leading to the preservation of the soul." The "preservation of the soul" is used in apocalyptic works to speak of eternal life. The NRSV translation maintains parallelism between v. 38a, "we live by faith," and v. 39, "and so are saved," but loses the apocalyptic tone that the expression "preservation of the soul" gives to the text. The emphasis upon faith in vv. 38a and 39b, nevertheless, prepares for chapter 11, whose subject is faith.

CONNECTIONS

Recalling and Renaming

The author of Hebrews highlighted important resources for Israel and the Christian church—recalling (memory) and renaming. The story of God's dealing with God's people is told and retold in the Scriptures. This memory enabled believers to relive the experiences of the past, to gain courage and strength for present-day experiences with God and God's people. When the author used the memory of the earlier experiences of his readers, then, he was using a familiar and powerful means of encouragement.

Along with memory, the author used a traditional strategy of naming or renaming. The stories of God's activity in the exodus and in Jesus Christ were told in new and different ways to match the needs of hearers and readers. Indeed, the whole of Hebrews names Jesus as priest of the order of Melchizedek—a new and challenging way for Christians to see Jesus Christ. In this section the writer gave a name to the suffering experienced in the past: "You endured a hard struggle with sufferings." An image from the athletic arena is introduced here. Readers were asked to look at the abuse and mistreatment, the plundering and public humiliation, as an athletic contest. Instead of an abuse they were forced to put up with, the suffering is a conditioning in faith that is effective because they stayed on the field. "Endurance," then, becomes a spiritual virtue akin to an athletic virtue.

The strategies of remembering and renaming are not superficial strategies that gain some momentary advantage for the readers. They are means of access to the "real" world. In this real world, readers receive the promises of God, promises that are anticipated in the present, but that will be revealed in their fullness in the future. The end of the race is near, the writer proclaims. Stay in the game and receive the victor's prize!

THE FAITH OF PAST HEROES AND HEROINES

Hebrews 11:1-40

The "roll call" of heroes and heroines of faith in chapter 11 reinforces the exhortations of 10:35-39. The chapter is a well-defined unit, bounded formally by an *inclusio* speaking of the "approval" or "commendation" of the ancestors because of their faith. In v. 2 the writer declared, "Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval." Then in v. 39, after citing the faith and faithfulness of the ancestors, the writer recalled that "they were commended for their faith." Although the NRSV uses two different expressions ("received approval" and "were commended"), the same Greek verb (*martyreō*) is used in each instance. This verb is used seven times in Hebrews (7:8, 17; 10:15; 11:2, 4, 5, 39). In each instance the reference is the testimony (attestation, approval) of the biblical record. It is interesting that the writer used a noun (*martys*) akin to the verb when he referred to the heroes and heroines of the faith as a "cloud of witnesses" in 12:1. The word "martyr" derives from the Greek word *martys* and indicates one who witnesses to his or her faith through death.

The form and content of Hebrews 11 are closely related. In terms of form, the chapter is a review of sacred history similar to reviews in Jewish and early Christian literature (see 4 Macc 16:16-23; Wis 10). It is also a catalogue of examples of virtue (see Philo, *On the Virtues*, 198-255) These two different types of literary construction reinforce each other. In Hebrews 11, the history of God's people from creation through the Maccabean revolt of the second century BC is shown as an illustration of genuine virtue.

The particular virtue extolled was introduced in 10:37-38 by means of the quotation from Habakkuk 2:3-4: For yet "in a very little while, the one who is coming will come and will not delay; but my righteous one will live by faith. My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back." The theme, then, is faith as a prerequisite for endurance. The knowledge of reality that comes through faith can provide motivation to endure verbal and physical abuse.

Biblical faith is both gift and action. Paul emphasized faith as a gift. In 1 Corinthians 4:7, Paul asked, "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not

a gift?" Faith is a gift of God. Such qualities as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control were called by Paul "the fruit of the spirit" (Gal 5:22). They are more than normal human attributes. James emphasized the fact that faith as a gift must evolve into faith as action, and the writer to the Hebrews stressed the action involved. He agreed with James that "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (Jas 2:17).

Faith is paradoxical. On the one hand, faith alone *is* enough. When we begin to add requirements beyond simple trust, we are in trouble. How many requirements are we to add to faith? Have we met those requirements? Have we pleased God sufficiently? The other side of the paradox is that faith alone is *not* enough. Faith involves faithfulness. Faith calls for action. The author of Hebrews was anxious to see evidence that Christians have remained faithful to Christ.

The chapter begins with a description of faith and a reference to creation as an event comprehended through faith (vv. 1-3). Then comes a catalogue of faithful characters and actions from Abel through Noah (vv. 4-7). The matriarch Sarah and the patriarchs Abraham through Joseph are then featured in a lengthy section of the chapter (vv. 8-22). The faith of Moses and the exodus and conquest are treated in a short section (vv. 23-31). Then, in a final part (vv. 32-40), the author simply lists individuals and events in summary fashion, reviewing the sacred history up through the Maccabean revolt of the second century BC.

COMMENTARY

Faith as Substance of Things Hoped For, 11:1-3

The noun translated "faith" (*pistis*) can be translated "trust," "commitment," "belief," "faithfulness." Instead of an abstract definition of faith, the writer discussed the aspects of faith that were important for his argument. Faith is the "substance [KJV; NRSV reads "assurance"] of things hoped for." It is the "evidence [KJV; NRSV reads "conviction"] of things not seen." The reference to "things hoped for" and "things not seen" becomes clear when we remember the twofold axis of the writer's thought. In terms of the temporal axis, we hope for future things. All of the heroes and heroines of the Old Testament cited in chapter 11 lived on the basis of the promises that were not fulfilled in their own time. These promises

were hoped for but they were not obtained. The eschatological orientation is not limited to the history of Israel. With Christians there is an eschatological or forward-looking dimension of faith. The Christian looks forward to the completion of the victory that is already inaugurated by Christ's exaltation. "Things not seen" may be understood not only in terms of the temporal axis but also in terms of the earthly-heavenly axis. In the examples of faith that follow on in chapter 11, present unseen realities are evident—God as the one "who is invisible" (v. 27), God's existence and providence (v. 6), God's faithfulness (v. 11), and God's power (v. 19). The entry into the holy of holies, the direct relationship with God, is what is most really real for the writer. This event is something that is not seen.

The two phrases "substance [or assurance; Gk. *hypostasis*] of things hoped for" and "evidence [or conviction; Gk. *elenchos*] of things not seen" are parallel in meaning. The words "assurance" and "conviction" used in the NRSV emphasize the subjective side of faith and almost seem to assert that the fact that one believes in something affirms the validity of that belief. The writer of Hebrews, however, is affirming that through faith the unseen realities of faith themselves are confirmed. The uses of the Greek word *hypostasis* in Hebrews 1:3 and 3:14 emphasize the objective force. The word denotes tangible reality in contrast to mere appearance. Faith, then, makes hoped for and unseen realities as real as what is seen with the human eye. Commentators have used words such as "objective guarantee," "certainty," "reality," "realization," and "actualization" to translate *hypostasis*. The idea in this chapter of Hebrews is that by faith heroes and heroines of the past translated the promised hope into reality by which they lived their lives. It was something substantial.

The expression "evidence [*elenchos*] of things not seen" is parallel to the "substance of things hoped for." The word *elenchos* can be translated "proof" or "demonstration." The idea is that faith enables one to make visible what is not seen, to image or to perceive the invisible in such a way that the invisible becomes the really real.

Clarence Jordan translated Hebrews 11:1-3 in a way that makes it understandable and fits the total purpose of Hebrews: "Now faith is the turning of dreams into deeds; it is betting your life on the unseen realities. It was by such faith that men of old were martyred. And by so relating *our* lives, we become aware that history is woven to God's design so that the seeing event is a projection of the unseen intent."[1]

New Testament scholar T. C. Smith said that for the author of Hebrews

> faith is the way by which invisible realities become real for people. No one should ever consider faith as inferior knowledge since it is not based on empirical evidence. In fact it is the proper mode of knowledge in relation to unseen realities. Faith is complete reliance on God by trusting in his purpose, power, wisdom, and mercy. It is the movement of finite life toward the infinite promise of God. There is a depth about faith which we in our conventional piety have failed to comprehend.[2]

"By faith our ancestors received approval." This sentence prepares readers to match the description of faith in v. 1 with the examples enumerated in the catalogue to follow. The Greek says literally that the ancestors received approval "in this" or "on this account," pointing back to the description of faith in v. 1. The approval of God in chapter 11 is not on the basis of complete achievement. The incompleteness of the achievement is emphasized in vv. 13-16 and 39-40. Part of the "conviction of things not seen" that faith provides, then, is from God's affirmation that they were going in the right direction. The approval of the ancestors is tied to the complete achievement of the faith of Jesus Christ. In his obedient self-sacrifice (10:1-10), Jesus attained to the realm of the really real—the heavenly sanctuary where God's will is done. Jesus' faith is the model for Christians (12:1-2) who by their faith attain the realm of the really real. The faith of Jesus and of Christians share in the completion of the faith of the ancestors (11:39-40).

Verse 3 develops the idea of "the evidence of things not seen" declared in v. 1: "By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible." The initial act of creation is an unseen reality, and the human mind comprehends this creation in faith as the activity of the divine word of God. The discernment of the unseen activity of God underlying the visible created order is an example of faith's capacity to demonstrate the reality of what is not perceivable through sense perception. This is the essence of faith in v. 1. Verse 3, then, is logically connected with vv. 1-2 as it is a statement about faith itself. Faith can demonstrate the really real that is not seen with human eyes.

The reader would also see v. 3 as a bridge to the individuals and actions as they are treated in the order in which they are presented in the Old Testament. Creation precedes Cain and Abel and the others catalogued in chapter 11, but prior to the visible creation

was the invisible. The word of God brought the visible into being. This is a matter of faith, the evidence (or proof) of the unseen. There is also a connection between v. 3 and the following verses in that the following verses speak of living by the unseen, living on the basis of "the evidence of things not seen." The emphasis on knowledge of unseen realities in v. 3 gives significance to the repeated "by faith" in vv. 3-31. Life is lived by faith, by recognition of what constitutes the really real.

Abel through Noah, 11:4-7

Abel, v. 4.

The roll call of those who live "by faith" begins with Abel. The source material for the author includes the Old Testament and Jewish and Christian traditions, and the schema of faith as set forth in v. 1 is used by the author—whether faith is explicit in the ancient accounts or not. "By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's" (v. 4). The writer depended on Genesis 4:3-5a for this statement. [Genesis 4:2b-10: Genesis Account of Abel] The later Jewish tradition expanded the treatment of Abel. Two questions were of special interest: (1) why God had regard for Abel's offering but rejected Cain's offering and (2) how the two brothers knew that God accepted Abel's sacrifice rather than Cain's. The author of Hebrews, however, had little interest in the elaboration of the biblical narrative. The fact that Abel offered his sacrifice "by faith" is sufficient. Verse 6 states conditions of faith that apply to both Abel and Enoch ("And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him"). This verse may shed more light on the question as to why God accepted Abel's sacrifice. Abel believed that God exists and that God rewards those who seek him.

Two results of Abel's faith are noted in v. 4. Through faith (1) Abel received God's "approval as righteous" and (2) Abel "still speaks." Genesis 4:10 speaks of Abel's blood "crying out to God" from the ground, and the Christian tradition affirms the righteousness of Abel. Matthew 23:35 speaks of "righteous Abel,"and 1 John 3:12 indicates that Abel's deeds were "righteous."

Enoch, v. 5

In the account concerning Enoch, the writer quoted from the Greek version of Genesis 5:24: "And Enoch pleased God and he

Anonymous. *Cain and Abel Sacrificing; Cain Kills Abel.* c. 1084. Ivory plaque. Cathedral of Salerno, Salerno, Italy.

Genesis 4:2b-10: Genesis Account of Abel

Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it."

Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let us go out to the field." And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him. Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" And the LORD said, "What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!"

was not found because God translated him." (The Hebrew text reads simply: "Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him.") [Genesis 5:21-24: Genesis Account of Enoch] The author of Hebrews interpreted "God translated him" of the Greek version by adding the phrase "so that he did not see death." William Barclay suggested that behind the notion of the writer of Hebrews that God in some mystic way took Enoch to God's self is the idea

> that in a wicked and corrupt generation Enoch walked with God, and so when the end came to him, there was no shock, no interruption, and that death simply took him into God's nearer presence. Because he walked with God, when other men were walking away from God, he daily came nearer and nearer to God, and for him death was simply the last step that took him into the presence of that God with whom he had always walked.[3]

Genesis 5:21-24: Genesis Account of Enoch
When Enoch had lived sixty-five years, he became the father of Methuselah. Enoch walked with God after the birth of Methuselah three hundred years, and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Enoch were three hundred sixty-five years. Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him.

The major addition to the tradition used by the author of Hebrews is the inclusion of the expression "by faith" to explain why Enoch was translated. The statement that Enoch "had pleased God" before being taken away, echoing the Greek translation of Genesis 5:24, leads to the claim that it was because of faith that Enoch pleased God and was taken away. The two components of faith are then given. These components parallel the two elements of the definition of faith in v. 1. (1) Belief that God exists is related to "evidence of things not seen." The invisible reality of God is demonstrated as real not by sense perception but by faith. (2) The belief that God "rewards those who seek him" is related to "the substance of things hoped for." Those who place their trust in God find their faith transformed into present realities. For Enoch this involved the unexpected experience of being taken. But in nearly all of the examples to follow, there is also a relationship between faith and reward. God is the rewarder of those who devote themselves with a singular devotion to the service of God.

Noah, v. 7

Noah is the final example in the series prior to Sarah and the patriarchs. The story of Noah is told in Genesis 6:8–9:17. The story is summarized here around the theme of faith, exemplifying "the evidence of things not seen." Noah trusted God's warning about what was not yet apparent. The NRSV says that Noah "respected the warning and built an ark." The Greek is a bit stronger. The verb "respect" here is built off of the same root as the noun translated "reverent submission" in 5:7. Noah paid reverent attention to the divine instruction. Faith conferred upon the events of the flood a reality so real, so substantial, that Noah took action as though those events had begun to happen.

Through his faith Noah "condemned the world." Traditions that present Noah as a preacher of repentance, such as 2 Peter 2:5 (see also *1 Clem.* 7:6) show this condemnation as the result of Noah's preaching. Perhaps more to the author's point is the fact that Noah himself as a person of faith was a judgment on unbelievers. Noah's righteousness is affirmed elsewhere in Scripture (see Gen 6:9; 7:1; Ezek 14:14, 20), and in Hebrews this righteousness is associated

Noah and his Sons Building the Ark

A touch of irony—Raphael's depiction of the sons of Noah as nude and muscular gives them the look of idealized Greek gods, reflecting his keen interest and "faith" in the antique world of ancient Greece as a source of artistic inspiration.

Raphael. 1483–1520. *Construction of the Ark.* 16th C. Fresco. Vatican Palace, Vatican State.

with faith ("the righteousness that is in accordance with faith"). Noah's reliance upon God's promises enabled him to do what is righteous. The fact that Noah was an "heir" of righteousness, however, is not traditional. In the context of the catalogue of the faithful, the remark means that Noah is in the sequence of those like Abel. Still, the theme of inheritance is important for Hebrews as a whole, and the association of faith with inheritance in the case of Noah prepares for the intensification of this theme in the case of Abraham.

Abraham and Sarah, 11:8-19

The account of Abraham's faith in Hebrews relies upon the account in Genesis 12–22. Three different examples from Abraham's life of faith are emphasized in Hebrews: Abraham's response to God's call

to set out for the land of promise (vv. 8-10); Abraham and Sarah's receiving the power to give birth to Isaac (vv. 11-12); and Abraham's offering of Isaac (vv. 17-19). Between the second and third examples, the author reflected on faith as a life lived as "strangers and foreigners on the earth" (vv. 13-16).

The Caravan of Abraham

In 1896–97, the artist actually visited the Holy Land and provided authentic studies of the people and geography as suggested in this drawing.

James Jacques Tissot. 1836–1902. *The Caravan of Abraham.* 19th C. Gouache on board. The Jewish Museum, New York.

Response to God's Call, vv. 8-10

In Genesis 12:1 the story of Abraham begins with God's call. Hebrews begins with Abraham's obedience to the call and finds Abraham's faith exemplified in obedience. Obedience is central in the Genesis account (see Gen 16:2; 22:18; 26:5), but the explicit connection between faith and obedience is not found in Genesis. According to Genesis 12, Abraham's destination was a "land" that God would show Abraham. The author of Hebrews used the term "place." The goal is not sharply defined at this point and the author of Hebrews finally referred to the "city . . . whose architect and builder is God" (v. 10).

Abraham "set out, not knowing where he was going" (v. 8). According to Genesis, Abraham learned what land God had in mind for him when he arrived in Canaan (see 12:7). For Genesis, the promise of the land was a theme that is central for the development of the narrative. For Hebrews, however, entry into the land of Canaan was not central; entry into Canaan did not fulfill the promise to Abraham. Abraham's sojourn in the land (as Isaac's and Jacob's) was "as in a foreign land." "Living in tents" corresponds to the Genesis accounts of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob pitching their tents for longer or shorter times as nomads. For the author of Hebrews, the status of Abraham as an alien indicated that, in a final sense, Canaan was not the promised inheritance. The "city that has foundations" is contrasted with the nomadic existence. That city is the "homeland" (11:14-16), the heavenly Jerusalem (12:22). Hebrews draws an image of the secure and permanent holy city founded by God (see Ps 87:1; Isa 33:20; 54:11).

God is the "architect" and "builder" of this transcendent city. These terms are not found elsewhere in the New Testament, but

Abraham, Sarah, and the Angel

Many Flemish paintings in the 15th century were known for their use of disguised symbolism in domestic interiors. Here, a miniaturized lion is shown at the feet of the angel and Abraham—a possible symbol for the tribe of Judah and the promise of God."I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore." (Gen 22:17). Judah (or Israel) is often alluded to as a lion and, by extension, Jesus Christ is himself referred to as "the lion of the tribe of Judah."

Jan Provost. 1465–1529. *Abraham, Sarah, and the Angel.* 15th C. Oil on wood. Louvre, Paris, France.

they are used in Judaism in reference to God as creator of the physical universe. The two terms together give one basic idea of God's creation. If any differentiation is to be made, "architect " would refer to God's wisdom in planning the heavenly city and "builder" would refer to God's power in carrying out that plan.

The Birth of Isaac, vv. 11-12

The second example of Abraham's faith centers on the birth of a son and from that son a promised multitude of descendants. The account in Hebrews draws on references in Genesis about Abraham's and Sarah's advanced age and barrenness (Gen 15:1-6; 17:15-22; 18:9-15; see also Rom 4:19). In the manuscript tradition accepted by translators of the NRSV (and doubtless original), Sarah is referred to in a parenthetical expression ("—and Sarah herself was barren—"). A variant reading is offered in the notes of the NRSV: "By faith Sarah herself, though barren, received power to conceive, even when she was too old, because she considered him faithful who had promised." In his old age, Abraham "received power of procreation." The Greek reads literally "received power for casting seed" and is idiomatic for the male function of producing sperm. This became a reality "because he considered him faithful who had promised." Here the exemplary faith of Abraham (vv. 11-12) is also a statement about God's faithfulness to God's promises. The result of God's faithfulness and Abraham's faith is that "descendants were born, 'as many as the stars of heaven and the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore'" (11:12). This citation describing the numerous descendants is a conflation of expressions from several texts (Gen 15:5;

22:17; Exod 32:13), with Genesis 22:17 as the primary source: "I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore."

Reflections of the Author, vv. 13-16

Before the writer continued the story of Abraham's faith by telling of the sacrifice of Isaac, he inserted his own comments. The comments are logically related to v. 10 that spoke of Abraham looking forward to "the city that has foundations." The author spoke of the "better country, that is, a heavenly one" and declared that God "has prepared a city for them" (v. 16). But the comments are also related to the fulfillment of the promise of descendants recorded in 11:12. From this perspective, vv. 13-16 emphasize the eschatological perspective—indicating that the innumerable descendants did not exhaust the faithfulness of God. The eschatological perspective serves to connect the readers with those earlier champions of faith. This connection is made explicit in the conclusion of chapter 11 where it is declared that "God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect" (11:40). Another connection has to do with death. Verse 13 associates faith with death as does v. 12. In v. 12 faith brings life from "one as good as dead," and in v. 13 faith is preserved in spite of real death. Then in vv. 17-20, God's ability "to raise someone from the dead" is mentioned. Verses 13-16, then, constitute a rich center for the author's roll call of heroes and heroines of faith. The section may be considered like a diamond in the center of the setting of chapter 11, with different faces of the diamond reacting differently as light is shed upon them from different perspectives.

Verse 13 makes four statements about the heroes of faith. (1) "All of these died in faith." The introductory "*in* faith" phrase breaks the "*by* faith" formula that will be continued in v. 17. They died "in faith" because they had not received the promises. Abraham, of course, did receive the promise of a descendant, but the promise of interest to the author of Hebrews is the promise toward which all the other promises point—"a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (v. 16) or "the city . . . whose architect and builder is God" (vv. 10, 16). (2) "From a distance they saw and greeted them [the promises]." Like Moses before the Israelites entered into Caanan, they only "saw" what was promised "from a distance." They also "greeted" what they saw. In classical examples the expression "greet [or salute] from a distance" is used with people, one's homeland, or one's native city. Here the text fits a picture of a traveler saluting the homeland upon his or her return. (3) They "confessed that they

were strangers and foreigners on the earth." The terms "strangers" and "foreigners" are used to express one idea—and hence strengthen the idea of the alien status of the patriarchs in the promised land. This land was to them "a foreign land" (v. 9).

Verses 14-16 draw out the implications of the confession of being "strangers and foreigners on the earth": "[P]eople who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland" (v. 14). This "homeland" is equivalent to "the city that has foundations" (v. 10) and the "better country, that is, a heavenly one" (v. 16). In vv. 15 and 16, the author used the refusal of the patriarchs to return to Mesopotamia—despite their longing for a homeland—as an argument for the heavenly nature of the desired homeland. The eschatological or heavenly perspective—a perspective informed by faith rather than reason or experience—is the explanation for God's not being "ashamed to be called their God." The designation of God as "the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob" or "the God of the fathers" was familiar to the readers from Scripture (see Exod 3:6, 13, 15, 16, for example). For God to acknowledge being their God was for God to act on their behalf, and God's action at this point focused on God's preparation of the heavenly city for them. God's pleasure in the patriarchs is founded on the correspondence between their search and God's activity on their behalf. God has prepared exactly what they sought.

Abraham's Offering of Isaac, vv. 17-19

In vv. 17-19, the writer displayed Abraham's faith by means of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice the very son who was to be the means of innumerable descendants. The act is described succinctly, then the significance of the act, and finally Abraham's underlying motivation. Genesis 22:1-8 is the basic source for the account of Abraham's sacrifice, but the Jewish reflection on the episode also provided material. [Genesis 22:1-19: Abraham and Isaac] The author of Hebrews did not utilize all of the tradition but focused on the faith of Abraham—faith in God's ability to raise someone from the dead. This theme ties the section 11:17-19 to 11:11-12 as the earlier verses speak of Abraham's being "as good as dead."

"[W]hen put to the test," Abraham "offered up Isaac" (v. 17). The test of Abraham's faith was the command to take Isaac to the land of Moriah and to offer him on a mountain in the region that God designated (Gen 22:2). This was so well-known that the writer could simply say that Abraham "offered up Isaac." The perfect tense is used in v. 17a to describe Abraham's action. The readers know that the sacrifice was not actually made, and the

Genesis 22:1-19: Abraham and Isaac

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you." Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.

When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place "The LORD will provide," as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."

The angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the LORD: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice." So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba.

Rembrandt. 1606–1669. *The Sacrifice of Abraham.* 1635. Oil on canvas. Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Russia.

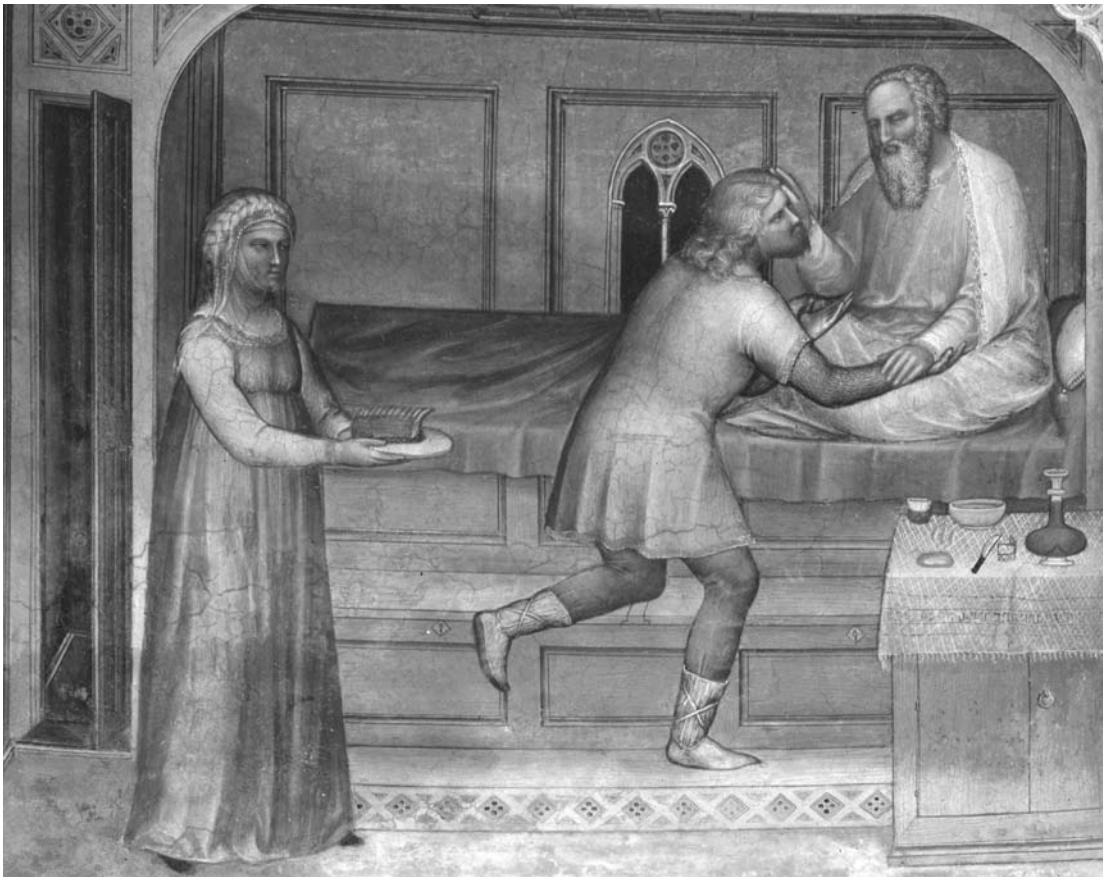
imperfect tense used in v. 17b is correctly translated by the NRSV as "was ready to offer up," indicating that the sacrifice was not actually made. In v. 17a readers are asked, in effect, to consider the perspective or perspectives from which the offering was a completed act. From Abraham's perspective of faith, the act was complete. Abraham intended to comply with the command. But from God's perspective also, the act was complete; God accepted the sacrifice.

The implications of the sacrifice of Isaac are spelled out in (1) the definition of Abraham as "he who had received the promise," (2) the promise that "it is through Isaac that descendants shall be named to you," and (3) the description of Isaac as Abraham's "only son." The fulfillment of the promise of innumerable offspring was tied to the life of Isaac. The demand for the life of Isaac, then, challenged the faith of Abraham as it threatened the integrity of the promise. The testing of Abraham contradicted Abraham's faith, the promise, and the character of God. How can these contradictions be reconciled? Verse 19 provides the answer. Abraham believed God is faithful but he also believed God is powerful. The faith that God is able to raise someone from the dead is not part of the Genesis 22 story, but it is a part of the tradition (the conclusion of the second of the Eighteen Benedictions says, "Blessed are you O God, who raise up the dead"). When the author says Abraham considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead, however, readers will recall the description of Abraham as "one as good as dead" (11:12) from the perspective of the birth of Isaac.

The conclusion to Abraham's faith is that "figuratively speaking" Abraham received Isaac back from the dead. The words "figuratively speaking" translate words that literally mean "in a parable" (*en parabolē*). In 9:9 the term *parable* is used to indicate symbolism. The standing of the first tent was spoken of as a "symbol" (*parable*) of the present time. Abraham's receiving back of Isaac from virtual death is a parable pointing forward to the future resurrection from the dead.

Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, 11:20-22

In quick succession, the author then spoke of Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Like Abraham they possessed the perspective of faith that allowed them to see beyond the historical limits to the future reality of the promise. "By faith Isaac invoked blessings for the future on Jacob and Esau" (v. 20). Genesis 27:27-40 recounts



Isaac Blessing Jacob

The deception is a *fait accompli*! Isaac blesses his son, Jacob, though he has been tricked to believe that it is Esau.

Giusto de Menabuoi. c. 1349–1390. *Isaac Blessing Jacob.* 1360–1370. Fresco. Baptistry, Padua, Italy.

Jacob's deception of his father, the defrauding of his brother Esau, and Isaac's preference of Jacob over his elder brother. But the author of Hebrews was not interested in these circumstances or even in the content of the blessing. What was important is that they were "blessings for the future." Jacob, in turn, is highlighted as blessing "each of the sons of Joseph" (Manasseh and Ephraim, Gen 48:8-22). Again, the unexpected favoring of the younger son is not mentioned. The writer does focus on the fact that Jacob was dying and that he was "bowing in worship over the top of his staff" at the time of blessing. The Hebrew text says that "Israel [Jacob] bowed himself on the head of his bed" indicating the weakness of the aged patriarch. Instead of "bed," the Septuagint reads "staff," and the author of Hebrews used that translation. But the same idea of the weakness of Jacob and his being at the point of death were emphasized. Most important was the act of worship.

The fact that Joseph was dying when he "made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave instructions about his burial" is noted—following the biblical account (Gen 50:24). The final command of Joseph is given in an abbreviated form. In Genesis 50 the story is told in greater detail:

> Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die; but God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." So Joseph made the Israelites swear, saying, "When God comes to you, you shall carry up my bones from here." And Joseph died, being one hundred ten years old; he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt. (Gen 50:24-26)

Joseph's burial in Canaan expressed his faith in the promise of possession of the land. Joseph had achieved great prominence in Egypt, but his home was not the land of Egypt. In faith, Joseph recognized that the Israelites' departure from Egypt was a certainty because this was necessary for the realization of possession of the land. When the exodus did take place, the Israelites carried out the instructions of Joseph and carried the coffin containing the bones of Joseph with them. Finally, after the settlement of Canaan, Joseph's bones were buried at Shechem (Josh 24:32).

Readers will find that Joseph's command has greater significance than Joseph's hope for the future possession of the land. In the context of Hebrews with constant allusion to death and hope of resurrection, and with the indication that God had "provided something better" than what the heroes and heroines of faith receive, readers will identify with the faith of Joseph.

Moses, the Exodus, and Conquest, 11:23-31

This section recounts examples of faith from the life of Moses and significant events in the life of Israel resulting from Moses' faith. The structure parallels the structure of the section on Abraham and the other patriarchs. In each section, seven instances of faith are cited, each introduced with the formula "by faith." Four examples are given of the faith of the major figure in each section, and then three examples are briefly cited from stories related to the major figures. The theme of faith, of course, continues to be central. Examples of faith point in suggestive ways to a yet more complete expression of faith. References to this ultimate example of faith are to be seen in vv. 19 and 26 with their references to resurrection and suffering for the Christ. But also on the level of the story of faith

being traced, there is progression. In the section on Abraham and the patriarchs, we have seen connections between promises to be realized, death, faith, and resurrection. In the section on Moses and the exodus generation, there is movement to themes of opposition, faith, and miraculous deliverance.

The four examples from Moses' own life of faith are being hidden as a child (v. 23); identification with his own people rather than with the Egyptians (vv. 24-26); flight from Egypt (v. 27); and institution of the Passover (v. 28).

The Faith of Moses' Parents, v. 23

The first example exemplifies not the faith of Moses but that of his parents. For this example, the author drew upon the story in Exodus 2:1-4:

> Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

The account in the Hebrew Bible speaks only of the mother, but the Greek translation used by the author of Hebrews makes both parents responsible by changing "she hid him for three months" to "they hid him for three months." Two reasons are given for the parents' action. First of all, "they saw that the child was beautiful." Then, "they were not afraid of the king's edict." The remark about the beauty of Moses is found in Exodus and its emphasis in Hebrews is dependent upon the tradition that a beautiful appearance was a mark of God's favor. For the parents, at any rate, the extraordinary appearance of their son was a basis for faith in the unseen purposes of God. The second explanation for the parents' action (lack of fear of the king's edict) is not found in the Exodus account. The larger Exodus account, however, does speak of the fearless response of the Hebrew midwives to the edict that male infants were to be killed (Exod 1:17-21). A similar motivation was inferred in the case of Moses' parents.

Moses' Association with the People of God, vv. 24-26

Moses himself is the subject of the next three actions. As an adult, he made a decision to associate himself with the "people of God"

Moses Rescued from the River

Raphael. 1483–1520. *Moses Rescued from the River*. 16th C. Fresco. Logge, Vatican Palace, Vatican State.

and left Egypt. Here we have actions that parallel Abraham's rejection of the security of an earthly homeland. The refusal "to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter" is open to interpretation. Exodus 2 does not tell of a conscious decision of Moses to identify himself with his people, but it does tell of an action that implies such a decision. When Moses saw an Egyptian beating one of his kinsfolk, he killed the Egyptian (Exod 2:11-12). The account in Hebrews allows readers to see Moses confronted by two choices: "being called a son of Pharaoh's daughter" (v. 24), which involves enjoying "the fleeting pleasures of sin" (v. 25), or sharing "ill treatment with the people of God" (v. 25).

Verse 26 sharpens the alternative facing Moses: "the treasures of Egypt" versus "abuse suffered for the Christ." The "treasures of Egypt" suggests limitless wealth, the treasures that had been gathered by the pharaohs and/or the granaries of Egypt that were world-renown. Readers of Hebrews would have seen in the example of Moses a challenge to themselves. They were faced with hard choices. This correlation of the plight of Moses with the plight of readers is not accidental. A dialectical relationship exists between the situation of the Old Testament people of God and the

readers. The depiction of the situation of the readers is influenced by the situation of the ancient people of God, but contrarily the depiction of the situation of the earlier people of God is influenced by the situation of the readers. The "abuse suffered for the Christ" would doubtless be read in light of the original readers' situation and in light of the work of Christ in Hebrews. The term "Christ" means "anointed one" and the author could be applying to Moses words of the psalmist about sharing the mistreatment of his brothers. Psalm 89:50-51 speaks of the "anointed" and of abuse: "Remember, O LORD, how your servant is taunted; how I bear in my bosom the insults of the peoples, with which your enemies taunt, O LORD, with which they taunted the footsteps of your anointed." Nevertheless, with the writer's understanding of some sort of prophetic consciousness on the part of Moses, a sharp distinction between an anointed one in general and Jesus the anointed one (Christ) need not be made.

The ground for such a courageous choice on the part of Moses is stated: Moses "was looking ahead to the reward" (v. 26). Moses is presented here in light of the agenda of the book of Hebrews. In 10:35 the author warned readers not to abandon their confidence, for "it brings a great reward." And in 11:6 one of the prerequisites for approaching God is belief that "he rewards those who seek him."

Moses' Flight from Egypt, v. 27

The third example of Moses' faith is his flight from Egypt: "By faith he left Egypt, unafraid of the king's anger" (v. 27). The account in Exodus (2:11-14) indicates that when he was confronted about his killing an Egyptian, "Moses was afraid." The author of Hebrews (as well as the Jewish writers Josephus and Philo) eliminated the motive of fear from the account of Moses' flight from Egypt (Hebrews emphasizing also the lack of fear on the part of Moses' parents, 11:23). The first readers of Hebrews who faced a parallel challenge certainly had fear and would have recognized that Moses also experienced fear. However, this fear (for Moses and the readers) is overcome by seeing "him who is invisible" (v. 27). This way of referring to God apparently arose in Hellenistic Judaism and was adopted by early Christians (see Rom 1:20; Col 1:15; 1 Tim 1:17), but it is especially appropriate here as it confirms the earlier definition of faith as laying hold of the hoped for and the unseen (11:1).

The relationship of perseverance to seeing him who is invisible is open to different understandings. The NRSV takes perseverance

and seeing him who is invisible as different but related actions ("[H]e persevered as though he saw him who is invisible" or [in a note] "because he saw him who is invisible"). William L. Lane called attention to the fact that the verse contains a fixed Hellenistic idiom meaning "he kept seeing continually" (*horōn ekarterēsen*) and that the emphasis is upon continually seeing and not upon endurance. The actions of the two verbs may be tied together—to persevere in seeing him who is invisible or continually to see him who is invisible.[4]

Moses' Observance of the Passover, v. 28

Moses' keeping of the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, described in Exodus 12:1-13, is noted in v. 27. The author could have cited any number of incidents from the time of Moses' flight from Egypt to the time of the exodus. He could have cited the forty years spent in Midian, the event of the burning bush when Moses was told to return to Egypt to demand release of the Hebrews, or the contest of will between Moses and the pharaoh that followed. Readers doubtless had these events in mind. However, the writer followed the advice that a few telling examples are more powerful than a multitude of weak examples, and the Passover was a most dramatic event with rich meaning for the readers. The brief statement on Moses' action contains no explicit comments on deeper meaning. Earlier, however, the writer had interpreted the sprinkling of blood symbolically (9:12-14, 18-22), and readers doubtless made such connections as they read the sermon or heard it read.

Examples of Faith Connected with Moses and the Exodus, vv. 29-31

The three examples of faith connected with Moses and the exodus are (1) the people of God who "passed through the Red Sea" (v. 29), (2) those who experienced the fall of the walls of Jericho (v. 30), and (3) Rahab who "received the spies in peace" (v. 31). The story of the crossing of the sea is recounted in Exodus 14:21-31. Hebrews 11:29 is an allusion to the Greek translation of Exodus 14:22, which states, "And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea on the dry land, and the water of it was a wall on the right hand and a wall on the left." The Egyptians attempted to perform the same feat, but when they were halfway across, with the chariot wheels mired in mud, the waters returned and the Egyptians were drowned (Exod 14:23-28). The people of Israel rather than Moses are the subject of this episode. The action of the

people gave evidence that they shared Moses' faith. Although they were terrified by the approach of the Egyptians and complained bitterly, at the command of God to "go forward" they acted "by faith." Their deliverance was secured by the response of faith.

The fall of the walls of Jericho is recounted in Joshua 6:12-21. No example of faith is given from the period after the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea until the entry into Canaan. This silence is instructive. Readers will fill in the gap with the incident of the lack of faith that is most instructive for Hebrews: the disobedience of the Israelites in the wilderness after they had experienced the exodus from Egypt (see 3:7-19). Although no mention is made of Joshua in the period prior to the entry into Canaan (see, however, 4:8), the readiness to act in accord with God's command in the conquest of Jericho was expressed by Joshua along with the priests and the company of fighting men. From a military perspective, the confidence that a walled city could be taken by encircling it for seven days was unreal. Yet the faith of Joshua and the people was rewarded.

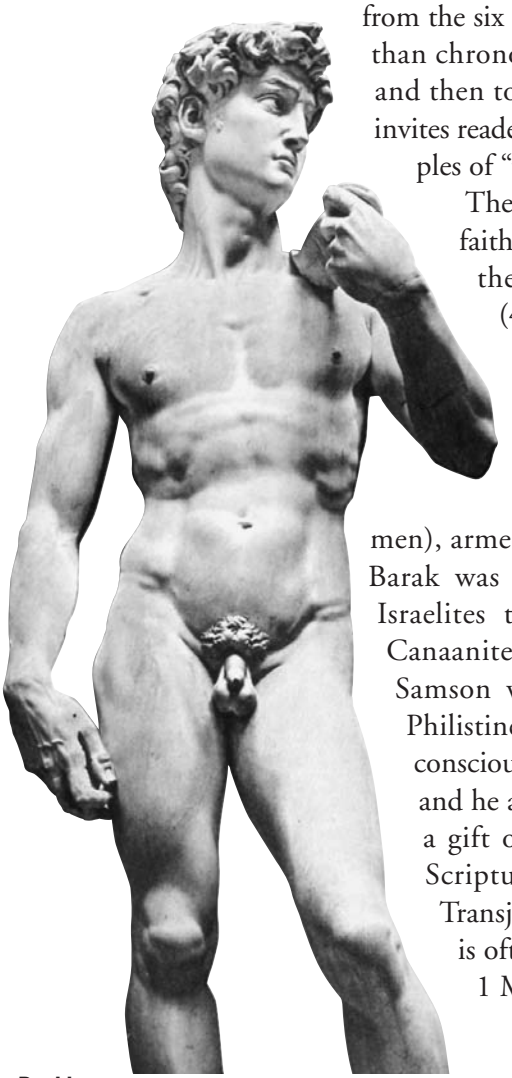
The account of Rahab is found in Joshua 2:1-21; 6:22-25. The fact that Rahab "received the spies" correctly summarizes the biblical account, but the indication that she did so "in peace" is a detail added by the writer and may anticipate some of the exhortation to follow (12:14; 13:20). In all three instances—the passage through the Red Sea, the fall of the walls of Jericho, and Rahab's receiving the spies—the fate of the people of faith is contrasted with the fate of the others. Those who fail to exercise faith and who, therefore, perish join with the faithless Israelites of the desert generation (3:13; 4:6-11) as a warning to the readers.

Subsequent Triumphs of Faith, 11:32-40

The final section of chapter 11 differs in form and style from the earlier sections. The formula "by faith" disappears and the expression "through faith" is substituted at the beginning and end (the Greek *dia pisteōs* is translated "through faith" in v. 33 and "for their faith" in v. 39). Individual cases of faith are not given; rather six heroes of Israel's history after the conquest of Canaan are listed (v. 32), and then the sorts of things these and other heroes accomplished are described (vv. 33-38). A summary statement closes this section and chapter 11 as a whole by relating the examples of faith to the readers (vv. 39-40).

"And What More Should I Say?" v. 32

The rhetorical introduction to the section prepares us for the rapid and fragmentary description of faith's many accomplishments. "And what more should I say?" is a common idiom for indicating that time and space are limited and announces an intention to abbreviate the matter being discussed. The brief mention of individuals and their actions serves to simulate the memory of the readers who doubtless know the stories of the heroes of the biblical and post-biblical period presented in vv. 32-38. The movement from the six particular individuals—listed in random rather than chronological order—to the general "the prophets" and then to nameless enumerations of accomplishments invites readers to respond by remembering particular examples of "the prophets" and of the sorts of deeds cited.



David

In Michelangelo's David, what at first may look like a casual, relaxed posture begins, upon further viewing, to reveal a deep-seeded, gathering energy—reflective of his righteous indignation at the challenge to his faith by Goliath.

Michelangelo. 1475–1564. *David*. 16th C. Marble. Gallery of the Academy, Florence, Italy.

The individuals chosen as further representations of faith include four of the judges or "deliverers" from the book of Judges: Gideon (Judg 6–8), Barak (4–5), Samson (13–16), and Jephthah (11–12); the king David (1 Sam 16); and the prophetic judge Samuel (1 Sam 1). Gideon was the hero who carried out a crushing victory over the Midianite coalition with a small band of 300 (reduced from an army of 32,000 fighting men), armed only with torches in clay jars and trumpets. Barak was the commander of the army who led the Israelites to victory over Sisera, commander of the Canaanite army that had a force of 900 iron chariots. Samson was the leader of Israel's cause against the Philistines. Samson frequently acted rashly, but he was conscious of being empowered by the Spirit of the Lord and he acknowledged his victory over the Philistines as a gift of God. Jephthah the Gileadite is known in Scripture as a great warrior who commanded the Transjordanian tribes against the Ammonites. David is often used as an example (see Sir 45:25; 47:2-11; 1 Macc 2:15; *1 Clem* 18:1-17), and the reference to David here is natural. Samuel was the last of the charismatic judges and the first of the regular prophetic line. Although the individuals are not in scriptural order, they do serve as a transition from the

individuals of the patriarchal and exodus periods to the period of the prophets and the later history of Israel.

Activities Demonstrating Faith, vv. 33-38

Verses 33 and 34 continue the sentence begun in v. 32, and readers are invited to correlate the activities listed in these verses with the individuals listed in v. 32. The activities are cited in nine clauses that fall into three groups, and readers can with ease see the three activities in the first group (conquering kingdoms, administering justice, and obtaining promises) related to the heroes listed. The four judges and David "conquered kingdoms." David especially is remembered as administering justice. And David as well as the judges Barak and Gideon "obtained promises" in the sense that they were told they would be victorious in battle (Judg 5:7; 6:16; 2 Sam 5:19).

The three activities in the next group (shutting the mouths of lions, quenching raging fires, and escaping the edge of the sword) allow readers to introduce additional characters. Escaping the edge of the sword reflects traditional language about avoiding plots and would be applicable to David and numerous biblical figures. But the shutting of the mouths of lions and quenching raging fires would make readers think of Daniel (Dan 6:19, 23) and his three youthful companions (see the addition to Daniel in the Greek translation, The Song of the Three Youths, Dan 3:50, 88).

The final three activities (winning strength out of weakness, becoming mighty in war, putting foreign armies to flight) are focused on military valor and are applicable to numerous individuals in different periods of Israel's history. Gideon (Judg 6:15; 7:6) and Samson (Judg 16:17) "won strength out of weakness," and the judges and David were "mighty in war." Although putting "foreign armies to flight" belongs with becoming "mighty in war" and would fit the judges and David, the phrase fits best the Jewish resistance to Greek repression at the time of Antiochus Epiphanes (see 1 Macc 3:17-25; 4:6-22, 30-33).

With v. 35 there is a change from accomplishments of figures from Israelite history or their deliverance to examples of suffering and apparent failure. Before this catalogue of suffering and failure comes the statement, "Women received their dead by resurrection." Thematically it is related to the earlier section as a proof of the benefits of faith, but it is related grammatically to the section on suffering and apparent failure. The concept of "resurrection" at the end of the earlier catalogue and at the beginning of the new section connects the two sections. Verse 35a refers to the widow at

Zarephath of Sidon who received back her son who had died (1 Kgs 17:17-24) and to the Shunemite woman whose son was restored to her through the faith of Elisha (2 Kgs 4:18-37). The experience of those dead was not that of final resurrection to life. Rather, it was a temporary gift of life. In the case of those "tortured, refusing to accept release," it was "in order to obtain a better resurrection." This alludes to 2 Maccabees 6:18–7:42, where Eleazar and a mother and her seven sons are martyred by Antiochus Epiphanes and his officers. The words of the brothers to Antiochus capture the spirit in which the martyrs met their death and illuminate the concept of "a better resurrection." The second brother declared, "You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws" (2 Macc 7:9). The fourth brother said, "One cannot but choose to die at the hands of mortals and to cherish the hope God gives of being raised again by him. But for you there will be no resurrection to life!" (2 Macc 7:14).

The "mocking and flogging" and "chains and imprisonment" were the lot of servants of God in almost every generation. The prophets and especially Jeremiah serve as effective representatives (for Jeremiah's imprisonment, see Jer 20:2, 7; 29:26; 37:15).

Verse 37 becomes dramatic as vivid images of persecution are piled up without grammatical connections. "They were stoned to death" (like Zechariah son of Jehoida [2 Chr 24:21] or Jeremiah who, according to legend, was stoned to death in Egypt). "They were sawn in two" (according to tradition Isaiah met this fate). "They were killed by the sword" (the prophet Uriah, Jer 26:23). "They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented" (this describes the distinctive garb of Elijah and Elisha [1 Kgs 19:13; 2 Kgs 2:8]).

In a parenthetical remark, the writer declared that the world was not worthy of these persecuted ones. Then he continued the earlier description of the faithful by speaking of their wandering "in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground." Readers would recall Elijah, Elisha and the prophets, and the Maccabees. They might even think of the stories of the wandering of Abraham (see vv. 8-10) and Moses (v. 27; vv. 13-16 also relate to the theme of wandering).

Commendation, vv. 39-40

The final two verses of chapter 11 tie the chapter together by repeating the assertion that the spiritual ancestors of the readers

received approval (commendation) for their faith. The expression "through their faith" (*dia pisteōs*) picks up the expression "through faith" in v. 33, and hence the final verses create a unity out of 11:32-40. The verses also show that the faithful ancestors of Israel are related to Christians in that the heroes of faith "did not receive what was promised" but that God had provided "something better"—the perfection that was provided by the work of Christ.

The distinction between promises that were fulfilled in an immediate and short-term sense (6:15; 11:33) and the eschatological promise (6:17; 8:6; 9:15; 10:36) is clearly made. The failure to receive the promise resulted not from some flaw in the faith of the faithful of Israel. It was due to God's purpose that tied the past, present, and future together.

The writer had earlier stated that all the faithful shared the eschatological perspective (11:10, 13, 26, 35). The future promises that moved the faithful forward are fulfilled through the sacrifice of the Son. The faithful of chapter 11 and Christians share together in the completion of the pilgrimage of faith. The perfection (the "something better" provided by God) of the faithful of chapter 11 and of the Christians has been treated earlier. It involves cleansing of conscience, sanctification, and glorification. It is made possible by Christ's sacrifice (see 7:19; 10:10, 14). Awareness of the writer's concern to exhort and encourage Christians facing challenges in their pilgrimage will caution against a Christian triumphalism. Clearly the book of Hebrews is written from a Christian perspective, and questions of those outside this faith are not really dealt with. For example, the present status of the men and women of faith in chapter 11 is not treated. It should be noted, however, that they are doubtless in the "cloud of witnesses" urging the Christians to run their race.

CONNECTIONS

Authentic Examples

The writer presented examples of faith not to persuade his readers to be examples of faith but to live lives of faith. The heroes and heroines of chapter 11 are such because they lived out of their own faith—not because they sought to be examples. One way they

served as examples is the way that they lived out of their own faith without attention to an audience. The book of Acts provides an illustration of a man whose life was an example because it had its own integrity, and an illustration of a couple who sought to mimic the actions of that man in a less than admirable fashion. In a period of dire need in the early church, a man named Barnabas (son of encouragement) expressed his faith by selling a field that belonged to him and offering the money to be used by needy members of the congregation. A couple named Ananias and Sapphira were impressed with the positive response of the Christian community and wanted to gain praise for themselves. They sold property and brought some of the money from that sale to the church. They kept the rest of the proceeds for themselves, but they told the apostles that they had actually brought all of the proceeds. The fate of Ananias and Sapphira is well-known (see Acts 5:1-11).

The use of examples is a proven method of teaching, but it is subject to misuse. When the use of a life or an act is a reflection on a life or act with its own reasons, it may serve in a powerful fashion to encourage others to live their lives of integrity and faith. Acting and living with an eye for an audience, however (as seen in the case of Ananias and Sapphira), is a dangerous matter.

Success and Failure

The eleventh chapter of Hebrews presents a triumphal description of faith, with victory over enemies and dramatic deliverance from all dangers, even death. For thirty-five verses, there is a catalogue of success through faith (vv. 25-26 do speak of Moses choosing ill treatment and abuse). But v. 35b begins to speak of "others" who have not experienced triumph: "Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground" (vv. 35b-38).

A popular idea is that people of faith always enjoy worldly success. Success is then seen as a sign of faith; failure is seen as a sign of a lack of faith. Another idea is that people of faith must suffer. A direct relationship is drawn between faith and hardship. Hebrews presents both sides. Both sides are needed by Christians today just as they were needed by the first readers. The Christians

addressed in Hebrews are enduring trials (see 12:7) even though they have not yet resisted to the point of shedding their blood (12:4). To present the life of faith as one unmarked by suffering would have been untruthful and unprofitable. Yet to present only examples of suffering faith would have added to the readers' discouragement.

Faith does not first consider the consequences and so believe—or not believe. Nor do the positive or negative events in life measure genuine faith. The writer of Hebrews reported on what has been and continues to be true for people of faith—there is success and there is failure. The reason for the differences is not in our response of faith but in the purposes of God. This ought to lead not to a lack of faith and faithfulness but to a renewed faith and faithfulness.

Reading Triumphantly or Humbly

Hebrews provides an opportunity for Christians to read themselves into the story of salvation in a triumphal fashion. After the catalogue of men and women of faith, the writer declared, "Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect" (vv. 39-40). When this statement is read triumphantly, it makes much of the distinction between our forebears and us. It points out the incomplete and unfulfilled nature of faith among our spiritual ancestors. It emphasizes those who have perfected faith through the priestly ministry of Christ. In contrast to this triumphant reading, we may read the text humbly. This humble reading does not deny the history of salvation. The humble reading sees a relationship between our spiritual forebears and us and emphasizes this relationship rather than the contrast. It does recognize that our spiritual forebears were characters in the early part of a continuous story and that we are in the last part of that story. However, it is one story and the last part cannot be separated from all that has gone before. The something better was prepared with our faithful ancestors in mind. This humble reading may recognize not only that our ancient forebears come to experience perfection with us, but that in our own day we come to be in a position like those who believed but who died "without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. . . . Therefore God . . . has prepared a city for them" (vv. 13, 16).

Faith is Multicolored

Hebrews 11 provides resources for a comprehensive view of faith with its oppositions and tensions. Faith, for example, is subjective. It is a firmly held conviction. But it is more than a conviction. It is the substance of things hoped for. Faith is always living, not a static compendium of beliefs. Faith involves the option of returning to "the land that they had left behind" (v. 15), but Hebrews also emphasizes faith as endurance. Moses is given as the example of endurance or perseverance. "[H]e persevered as though he saw him who is invisible" (v. 27). Faith does not allow death itself to dull conviction concerning God's promises (vv. 8-10, 13, 16, 29-40). Faith, then, is faith in God, but it is also trust that God rewards those seeking him. "[W]ithout faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (v. 6). Faith looks to the past and benefits from the experiences of our spiritual ancestors. Faith also looks to the future (see vv. 10, 13, 26, 35, 40). Faith and courage are correlated. Faith acts in the face of edicts and fury of kings (vv. 23, 27).

NOTES

[1] *The Cotton Patch Gospel—Hebrews and the General Epistles* (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2004).

[2] "The Characteristics of Faith: Hebrews 11:1-40," *The Way of Faith* (Wake Forest NC: Chanticleer Publishing Company, 1985), 126.

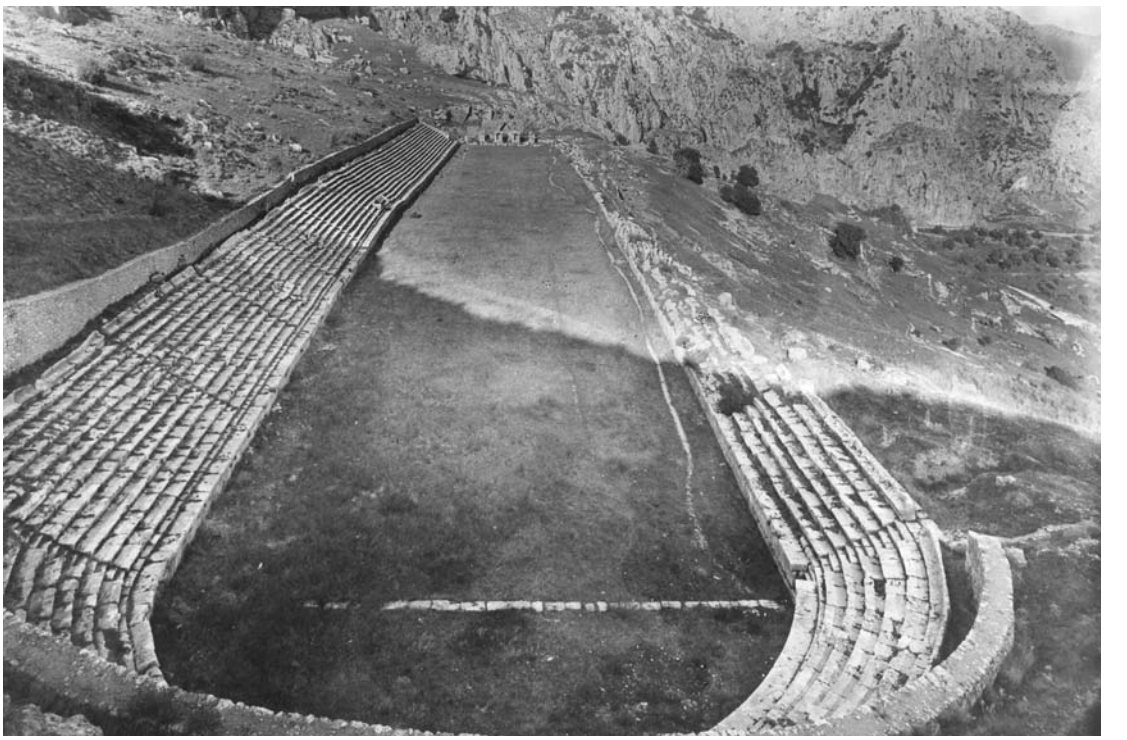
[3] William Barclay, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Daily Study Bible (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1955), 152-53.

[4] William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13* (WBC 47B; Dallas: Word, 1991), 375-76.

EXHORTATION TO FAITHFUL ENDURANCE AS CHILDREN

Hebrews 12:1-29

Chapter 12 is composed of warnings and exhortations to faithful endurance. The topic changes from the witnesses of the past to the current struggle of Christians. Instead of the indicative, there is a marked use of imperatives and hortatory subjunctives. An introduction (12:1-3) exhorts readers to consider Jesus' endurance of hostility and to "run with perseverance the race that is set before us" (v. 1). Then the hostility and suffering to be endured by readers is interpreted as discipline (vv. 3-11) and readers are exhorted to renewed commitment to complete the race (vv. 12-13). The section 12:14-17 introduces a different tone. It begins with an admonition to the congregation to pursue peace and righteousness (v. 14) and continues



Stadium in Delphi, Greece

with a stress on the responsibility of the community for members who are prone to apostasy (vv. 15-17). The following section composed of vv. 18-24 warns and encourages readers by comparing them with the exodus generation. The heavenly city (Mount Zion) the readers approach is contrasted with the Mount Sinai of the earlier generation. The section provides positive ground for the call of v. 14 to pursue peace and holiness. Finally, vv. 25-29 balance a warning about God's eschatological intervention with a word of hope.

COMMENTARY

Jesus the Pioneer and Perfector of Faith, 12:1-3

The introduction (vv. 1-3) begins with a picture of a stadium and a call to run "the race that is set before us" (v. 1). [Running] It then focuses on Jesus as the prime example of faithful endurance (v. 2) and calls on readers to imitate Christ's endurance (v. 3). The appeal for Christian endurance does not rest finally on the faithfulness of the ancestors that was depicted in chapter 11. The appeal rests finally upon Jesus' supreme example of persevering faith. The "therefore" of v. 1 ties chapter 12 to chapter 11 with its catalogue of the faithful: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses" (v. 1). The expression "cloud of witnesses" also ties chapter 11 and chapter 12 together. "Cloud" was used metaphorically for a mass of people just as it is today, and "witnesses" (martyrs) refers not only to spectators but also to those who were commended by God (11:2, 4, 5, 39) and who have given testimony to God of their faithful endurance. The word "witness" then gains part of its meaning from the athletic image developed in the introduction to chapter 12 and part of its meaning from the catalogue of those in chapter 11 who have testified to God by their faithful endurance.

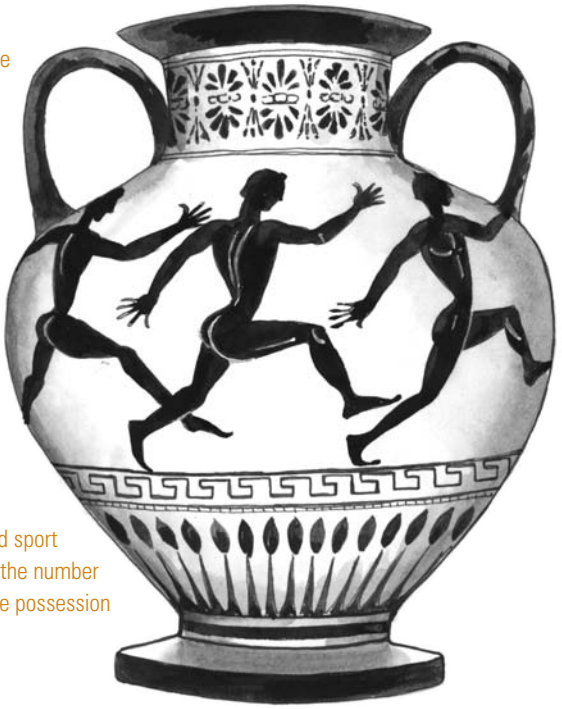
Readers are to prepare for the race by putting off what hinders them: "[L]et us . . . lay aside every weight that clings so closely" (v. 1). The noun translated "weight" is a general reference with numerous metaphorical uses. In terms of an actual marathon, weight to be put off would include excess bodily weight and clothing. Metaphorical uses would include every association that limits Christian confession—feelings of self-importance, love of money, attachment to the present culture, and so on. The noun

Running

Running is undeniably the most ancient form of athletic competition. Greek myths tell of the running of great distances by heroes such as Heracles. This sport was of major importance. Young children were educated in the techniques and philosophies of the sport of running. Runners did not have special equipment. At one point, runners wore a loincloth around their waists, but this was later abandoned, and runners ran naked. The one exception was the race in armor (the *hoplitodromos*) in which runners carried a shield, a helmet, and shin plates.

The different types of races included the *stadion*, a length of one stade or 200 meters; the *diaulos*, a length of two stades or 400 meters; and the *dolichos*, a long race between 1,400 meters and 1,800 meters. Runners in the *hoplitodromos* ran 400 to 800 meters.

Running was the most common form of exercise and sport in ancient Greece, and there was never a deficiency in the number of talented runners. Most important for runners was the possession of great strength, speed, and endurance.



Three participants in a footrace at the Panathenaic Games. Amphora. 6 C. BC.

"sin" is also a general reference. Its use in the singular may indicate that the writer does not have a catalogue of specific sins in mind but that he is concerned with sin itself. Readers would supply specific instances of sin. Certainly apostasy would be one instance, but not the only instance. The adjective that modifies sin (*euperistaton*) is used only here in the Bible and its meaning is uncertain. The NRSV translates it (with the noun "sin") as "the sin that clings so closely." The translation "the sin that so easily detracts" is also possible.

With preparation, readers are encouraged to participate in the race set before us. The call to "run with perseverance" (endurance) and the fact that the footrace was preeminent at the Greek games indicates that the race is more than a short sprint. The footrace was one of the five contests of the pentathlon. It always came first and was the only athletic contest lasting for an extended period.

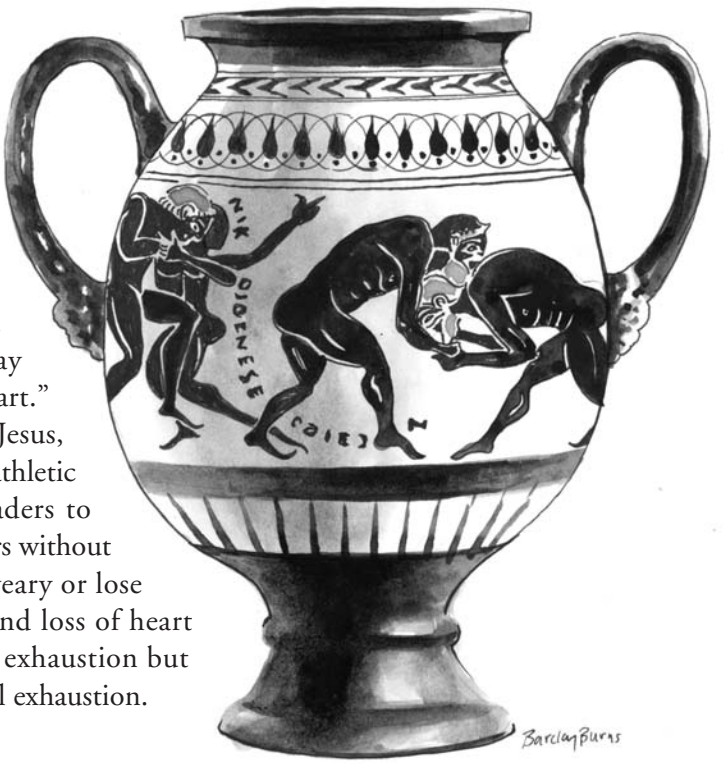
Verse 2 continues the race metaphor by calling on readers to look to Jesus. But there is a double meaning here. Readers are to look away from everything else and concentrate upon Jesus, and they are to "look to" Jesus for guidance and aid. The name "Jesus" is used here indicating that the writer has the historical Jesus in mind

(2:9-18; 4:15; 5:7-9). Jesus is described as the "pioneer [*archēgon*] and perfecter [*teleiōtēn*] of our faith." The word "pioneer" was used in 2:10 indicating that Christ was the leader or forerunner of the Christians being brought to glory (see 6:20). Jesus is the initiator of the faith of the readers and the first person to have obtained the ultimate goal of faith—the inheritance of the divine promise, which was only seen from afar by the ancients. The word translated "perfecter" is used along with "pioneer" to describe one complete idea. The Greek word is not found elsewhere in the Bible and is unknown from other literature of the period. Perhaps the writer invented the word to form a complement for the word "pioneer"—with the word "pioneer" emphasizing the origin (containing the root *archē*—indicating origin) and the word "perfecter" emphasizing completion (containing the root *tel*—indicating completion). The word "perfecter" would also be appropriate because of the importance of the idea of perfection and the prominence of the verb "to perfect" in Hebrews. Here it is not Christ or his followers who are perfected; it is the faith of Christians. The critical point in the presentation of Jesus as the prime example of endurance in suffering is found in v. 2b: ". . . who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God." The key to this relative clause is Jesus' "endurance." The cross is the scene of shame as well as death, and Jesus endured both. In sharp contrast with the humiliating death of Jesus is his enthronement. This theme is based on Psalm 110:1 and was first announced in 1:3 and then elaborated in 2:5-9, 8:1-2, and 10:12-13. In the NRSV, Jesus endured the cross "for the sake of the joy that was set before him." This would have Jesus endure by looking ahead to the joy of God's right hand. A note in the NRSV indicates that the Greek phrase translated "for the sake of" may be translated "instead of." If the translation "instead of" is accepted, the meaning is that Jesus chose to suffer rather than to maintain the joy of his pre-incarnate (or incarnate) life (1:2). In the context of Hebrews, the translation preferred by the NRSV seems to be more acceptable. It continues the forward-looking nature of faith developed in chapter 11 and acknowledges reward as the consummation of faith (see 11:6, 26).

Verse 2 sounds like a confession of faith in Jesus as the one who "for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God." It is possible that the writer of Hebrews adapted an earlier confession of faith for his hortatory purpose. In

its original form, such a confession might well have paralleled the christological confession in Philippians 2:5-11, a confession that begins with Christ "in the form of God," but declares that Christ "emptied himself" and "became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross," and concludes that as a result "God also highly exalted him." It is possible that the confession and the author of Hebrews himself mean that Jesus abandoned the joy of his heavenly status (or the joy he might have had on earth). However, this is not the major idea of the author. A complete christological confession was not the author's purpose. Rather, the author called on his readers to follow Christ's footsteps with assurance that this race has its reward.

In v. 3, the focus continues on the endurance of Christ with the object being the "hostility against himself from sinners." The change from the pain of the cross to the hostility of sinners doubtless makes the endurance of Christ more applicable to the endurance necessary for the readers. Readers are encouraged to consider the one who endured such hostility "so that you may not grow weary or lose heart." With the call to consider Jesus, the writer returned to the athletic metaphor and alerted readers to what can happen to runners without endurance. They "grow weary or lose heart" (v. 3). Weariness and loss of heart refer not only to physical exhaustion but also to mental and spiritual exhaustion.



Amphora illustrating boxing and wrestling matches. c. 530 BC. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria.

Discipline as Children, 12:4-13

These verses continue the encouragement to faithful endurance with the idea that suffering is God's means of disciplining God's children. Suffering is then to be considered a sign of God's affection. The section begins with an extension of the athletic imagery into the area of boxing or wrestling (v. 4). Then Psalm 3:11 is cited as an exhortation to readers to accept divine discipline

(vv. 5-6). The author began to apply that biblical text by observing that all parents exercise discipline (vv. 7-8). Then he compared the discipline of human parents to God's discipline (vv. 9-10). Finally, he contrasted the immediate pain of discipline with its final result (v. 11). Verses 12 and 13 return to athletic imagery to exhort the readers to prepare themselves for the race.

In v. 4 the readers are depicted as being in a "struggle against" an opponent ("sin"). The hand-to-hand struggle could be presented in the image of boxing or wrestling, and the mention that in the struggle "you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood" could mean the struggle has not been fully joined. They have not really begun to fight. "Shedding your blood," however, could as well refer to bloody persecution, and the author would be making a statement of fact: members of the community have not yet been martyred.

In the quotation from Proverbs 3:11-12 and in his interpretation and application of these verses, the author attempted to encourage his readers by putting their trials in a context where they have meaning and significance. The writer assumed that the Scriptures are authoritative and that they speak a contemporary word to the readers. In the direct application of the text to the readers, he called them children (literally "sons") of God. In 5:8 the writer had related sonship, suffering, and obedience: "Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered." Although the example of Christ is not cited in this section, it may be seen as implied. The congregation may see beyond the immediate suffering when they see it in light of the parent-child relationship. Suffering and testing are assurance that God is maturing God's children.

The first move in the author's interpretation of Proverbs 3:11-12 was a direct injunction to "endure trials for the sake of discipline." When readers endure trials for the sake of discipline, they are acknowledging their status as children. The additional comments spell this out—in a positive fashion in v. 7b and in a negative fashion in v. 8. Discipline proves legitimacy; lack of discipline proves illegitimacy. The clear assumption is that the readers "have that discipline in which all children share" and, therefore, they are legitimate children. The next step is a comparison between the discipline exercised by human parents and that exercised by "the father of spirits." An argument from the lesser to the greater is given: If we respect human parents and accept their discipline, how much more should we be willing to be subject to God?

The discipline of parents is compared with the divine discipline in terms of duration and criteria. The discipline of parents is "for a

short time" and it is designed "as seemed best to them." The discipline of God is directed toward the readers, "for our good," and it has a present and future aim. The aim is life in v. 9 and sharing of God's holiness in v. 10. The wisdom tradition emphasized that obedient children shall live, and Proverbs 6:23 declared that "the reproofs of discipline are the way of life." The beneficial result of discipline for the writer of Hebrews goes beyond the wisdom tradition's emphasis on life and involves sharing divine holiness. This refers back to the act of the true high priest and consists especially in the cleansing of conscience accomplished by his sacrifice (see 10:1, 14). The final sentence in the paragraph develops the contrast between the temporary suffering of discipline and the lasting good that results. Discipline yields fruit, and that fruit is described with the use of two important terms. The adjective "peaceful" is used, deriving from the connotation of *shalom*. Then, in an emphatic position at the end of the verse, "of righteousness" is used to describe the fruit that results from discipline. (Peace and righteousness are frequently linked in the Bible. See Isa 32:17; Ps 85:11; Jas 3:18.)

The mention of training in v. 11 ("Now, discipline . . . yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it") moves back to the sphere of athletics. This ties the interpretation of Proverbs 3:11 to vv. 1-3 and their athletic imagery. This athletic imagery continues in vv. 12 and 13 where Old Testament texts supply language for encouraging readers (see Isa 35:3 and Prov 4:26).

Verse 12 reflects a passage in Isaiah that announces the intervention of God:

> Strengthen the weak hands,
> And make firm the feeble knees.
> Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
> "Be strong, do not fear!
> Here is your God.
> He will come with vengeance,
> with terrible recompense.
> He will come and save you." (35:3-4)

Assurance of God's coming with divine retribution to save God's people furnishes the basis for the injunction to "lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees." Verse 13a is an adaptation from Proverbs 4:26: "Keep straight the path of your feet, and all your ways will be sure." The saying is cast in the plural (instead of the singular in the original) to relate it to the entire community,

and it emphasizes the need to pursue ways directed to the goal. The straight paths will assist the progress of the lame and will assist in the healing of their hurt. The specific reference to the lame here is not certain. The reference could be to the entire community with its general situation of spiritual weakness, but it could be a reference to particularly weak members of the community who are in danger of apostasy.

A Renewed Warning, 12:14-17

The final part of chapter 12 consists of two warnings (vv. 14-17 and vv. 25-29). These warnings are separated by a comparison of the earthly Sinai and the heavenly Jerusalem that modulates the stern notes of warning and encourages the readers (vv. 18-24). The first warning begins with a general exhortation (v. 14) related to the appeal in 12:13 to "make straight paths for your feet" and then an exhortation to "see to it" in respect to three items: "that no one fails to obtain the grace of God" (v. 15a), "that no root of bitterness springs up" (v. 15b), and "that no one become like Esau" (v. 16).

Upon a first reading, it appears that v. 14 is not directly related to what has gone before. But upon closer inspection the text is seen as instructing readers to interpret the specific injunctions as examples of what it means to "make straight paths for your feet." The theme of "peace" introduced in v. 14 is evidence that this sort of interpretation is the author's conscious intention. In v. 13, the author adapted Proverbs 4:26 (LXX) for his appeal to readers to pursue paths that are directed straight to the goal. In Proverbs, the text refers to the proper conduct of life: "Make straight paths for your feet, and guide your ways. Deviate neither to the right nor to the left, and turn away your feet from the evil way." The next verse in Proverbs refers to "peace": "[God] himself will make your paths straight, and he will lead your ways forth in peace." The two phrases of Proverbs 4:26-27 are parallel in meaning; the making "your paths straight" is related to leading "your ways forth in peace." Readers familiar with Proverbs, then, would have seen a clear relationship between the pursuit of peace and making straight paths.

The verb "pursue" is a strong verb, connoting earnestness and urgency. The "peace" to be pursued is the Shalom of God, an objective reality accomplished by Christ's sacrifice and the basis for the solidarity of the community. This peace, then, does involve harmony and personal relationships within the community. But it is more profound than lack of hostility. "Holiness" (or sanctifica-

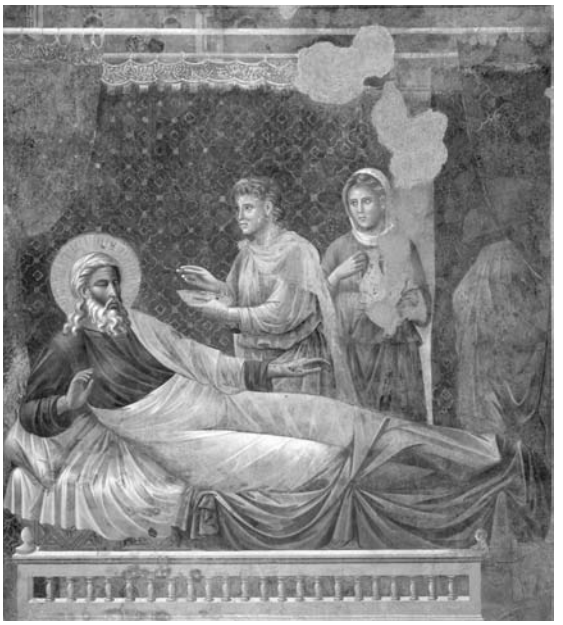
tion) is also to be pursued. This term was used in v. 10, implying that holiness is an attribute of God that may be shared by Christians. Holiness, just as peace, is a gift of God. It is a result of the cleansing through the self-giving of Christ and has moral implications. Without this holiness, "no one will see the Lord." The "Lord" here doubtless refers to God (see 8:2), but this term is used of Christ, and certain New Testament passages speak of the eschatological vision of Christ (see Matt 26:64; Mark 13:26; 1 Pet 1:7-8; Rev 1:7). In Hebrews, the term at times refers to Christ (1:10; 2:3; 7:14; 13:20) and at times to God (7:21; 8:8-11; 10:16, 30; 12:5-6). The vision of God spoken of here is an expectation current in early Christianity. It appears in the beatitudes ("Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God," Matt 5:9), in Paul ("[T]hen we will see face to face," 1 Cor 13:12), and in other eschatological contexts (Rev 22:4; 1 John 3:2).

The three-clause admonition to watchfulness flows from the exhortation of v. 14. The solidarity experienced by the Christian fellowship (pursuing peace and holiness "with everyone") results from the peace and holiness achieved by Christ and implies a responsibility for each other. The first clause is the least complex: "See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God" (v. 15). In 4:1 the writer spoke of "failing to reach" the divine "rest," warning Christians not to be guilty of the unbelief of the exodus generation. In Hebrews the reference is to the possibility of the failure of Christians resulting from carelessness and disregard for the grace of God expressed in Jesus' death (2:9).

The second clause is bit longer and more complex than the first. It consists of a citation of a passage from Deuteronomy that warns against apostasy. Deuteronomy 29:18 reads, "It may be that there is among you a man or woman, or a family or tribe, whose heart is already turning away from the LORD our God to serve the gods of those nations. It may be that there is among you a root sprouting poisonous and bitter growth." The author of Hebrews used and modified a Greek translation of this passage to warn of bitterness. The original readers would have been keenly aware of the reference. Was bitterness the result of conflict within the community, persecution from without, disappointment of eschatological hopes? Whatever the source, the danger of such bitterness is the defilement of many—defilement instead of holiness.

The third clause is the longest of the three clauses and warns against becoming "like Esau, an immoral and godless person." The term "immoral" describes one who engages in sexually illicit behavior (usually with prostitutes), and the Bible does not mention

such activity by Esau. Later Jewish tradition does speak of Esau as immoral because of his marriage to a foreign woman, and Hebrews could be relying on this tradition. Or the term "immoral" could be used metaphorically for idolatrous behavior. When the description is read in relation to the sale of his birthright "for a single meal," the metaphorical use becomes more likely. The term "godless" is a general term of moral judgment and is applicable to Esau and to his cheap sale of his birthright.



Isaac Rejecting Esau

Giotto. 1266–1336. *Isaac Rejecting Esau.* 14th C. Upper Church, San Francesco, Assisi, Italy.

Esau's sale of his birthright is related to the readers' situation in different ways. The image of Esau's meal had direct relevance for people concerned with observing Jewish dietary regulations (see Heb 13:9), but the image has relevance to any sort of activity designed to avoid the challenge of the Christian calling.

The author's reference to a later episode in the life of Esau is used to support the author's point that a second repentance is not a possibility (see 6:4). The episode in question is Jacob's deceiving of his father and obtaining of the blessing meant for Esau. Esau tried but was unable to reverse his father's action. The indication that Esau was "rejected," the implication that he wanted to repent, and his seeking of the blessing "with tears" are not an explicit part of the biblical text (see Gen 27:30-40). However, they add to the drama and make the author's case against apostasy more forceful.

The Earthly Sinai and the Heavenly Jerusalem, 12:18-24

The section 12:18-24 is made up of two periodic sentences. The first sentence indicates the situation of the exodus generation. The second sentence indicates the situation of Christians. The entire section is designed to introduce a positive ground for the appeal of v. 14, to "pursue peace with everyone and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." The relationship between the earlier appeal and vv. 18-24 is made clear by the author's introduc-

Top of Mount Sinai

Miner Kilbourne Kellogg. 1814–1889. *The Top of Mount Sinai.* c.1844. Oil on canvas. 28.5" x 19.2". Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC.

tion of the section by the word "for" (*gar*). (The NRSV omits the "for" in v. 18 that connects the section with the previous section.)

The awesome theophany of Mount Sinai was so terrifying a sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear" (v. 21). Christians, however, come to "Mount Zion" and a vision that contrasts at every point with the experience of the exodus generation. The verb "to come to" (*proserchesthai*) begins each portion of the comparison of Sinai and Zion ("You have not come to something that can be touched . . . . But you have come to Mount Zion" vv. 18, 22). This is the verb used in Hebrews for approaching God (4:16; 7:25; 10:22; 11:6). It is also the verb used in Deuteronomy 4:11 (LXX) recounting the Sinai experience. In the Greek translation of Deuteronomy 4:11, the aorist tense is used, indicating past action. The author of Hebrews changed this to the perfect tense in vv. 18 and 22, indicating action that began in the past but action that also has present relevance. The enduring relationship with God is the point of concern. The perfect tense in vv. 18 and 22 indicates that Christians have carried out the action involved and that the relationship involved is still in effect.

The Christians have not come to Mount Sinai. This name "Sinai" is not given. But readers are fully conscious that Sinai is the

reference as the writer recreates the events of Israel's experience of the fiery epiphany at Sinai. The event is recreated with the use of accounts in the Greek versions of Exodus (19:16-22; 20:18-21) and Deuteronomy (4:11-12; 5:22-27). Tangible and sensory aspects of the event are emphasized by a creative use of the sources. The first description of what the Israelites approached is "something that can be touched." The sources themselves do not use this expression. It was introduced by the author. This indicates the author's interest in the physical and tangible nature of Sinai. The experience consisted of a combination of external tangible phenomena—visible and auditory. "Blazing fire," "darkness," "gloom," "tempest," "sound of a trumpet," and a "voice . . . [of] words" are external phenomena that do not provide a clear and unequivocal revelation. Sinai was equivocal. It was an occasion not so much of revelation as of dread.

The hearers at Sinai begged that "not another word be spoken to them." A specific motive for this request is given: their inability to endure the order that prohibited under pain of death any human or beast from touching the mountain (Exod 19:12-13). In Hebrews the injunction has to do only with animals. But readers are to reason that if animals are stoned to death so will humans be stoned to death—or worse. The point is clear: distance and exclusion, dread and fear are conditions of the old covenant. The climax of the Sinai event is the reaction of Moses: "I tremble with fear." The agenda of the writer is made evident by a comparison of the sources used by the writer (Exod 19:16-25; 20:21; Deut 5:5, 31) and the writer's report. According to the sources, Moses alone was allowed to come into the presence of God. Moses did so with complete safety. When the people were fearful, Moses reassured them, "Do not be afraid" (Exod 20:20). The writer of Hebrews reinforced the notion of fear by including the fear of Moses as well as the fear of the people.

The condition of the readers contrasts radically from that of the exodus generation. The description of the new holy mountain, Zion, site of the heavenly Jerusalem, is balanced with the picture of Sinai. Every aspect of the new vision encourages readers to "approach the throne of grace with boldness" (4:16). The images are familiar to readers and are powerful means of encouraging hope. Rich in tradition and meaning, they describe the realization of the future hopes of the people of God.

The repetition of the verb "to come" ("[Y]ou have come . . .") prepares readers for the comparison between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. "Mount Zion . . . the city of the living God, the

heavenly Jerusalem" contrasts with "something that can be touched." "Zion" was the traditional site of God's presence on earth. In eschatological thought, the characteristics of the revelation on Sinai were to be repeated at the end time on Zion. Joel 3:16-17 presents the day of the LORD: "The LORD roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth shake, but the LORD is a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel. So you shall know that I, the LORD your God, dwell in Zion, my holy mountain, and Jerusalem shall be holy, and strangers shall never again pass through it."

The author of Hebrews—as Paul and other early Christian authors (see Gal 4:21-31)—contrasts the two mountains and their symbolic equivalence. Discontinuity rather than continuity is emphasized. The fact that Mount Zion is contrasted with "something that can be touched" indicates that the author of Hebrews was not describing the earthly city of David. This is made even clearer when he described it as "the city of the living God" and as "the heavenly Jerusalem" (see 11:10, 14 for an earlier image of a heavenly city).

Zion is a place of joyous festivity in which Christians join with angels in the presence of God. This is made clear in the images of the blessings of the heavenly Jerusalem. "Innumerable angels in festal gathering" and "the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven" fit together. The "innumerable angels" recalls descriptions of divine appearances. Deuteronomy 33:2 speaks of the LORD coming from Sinai with "myriads of holy ones; at his right, a host of his own." Daniel 7:10 describes the Ancient One taking his throne: "A thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him." The term "festal gathering" used in Hebrews is a classical term for a festival assembly. The term indicates that this angel population was gathered for an exalted celebration of worship. The NRSV takes "the assembly of the firstborn" with what follows ("and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven"). But the NRSV indicates in a note that the words may be taken with what precedes ("and to innumerable angels, and to the festal gathering and assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven"). Since "the firstborn" are "enrolled in heaven," human beings are in mind. The "assembly of the firstborn," then, are those who share the inheritance (v. 16) of "the firstborn" spoken of in 1:6. The metaphor of enrollment in a heavenly register is found in both the Old Testament and the New Testament and refers to those who have stood in judgment and

experienced vindication (Exod 32:33; Ps 69:29; Isa 4:13; Dan 12:1 LXX; Luke 10:10; Phil 4:3; Rev 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12).

Christians have come to "God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect"(v. 23). "God the judge of all" and "spirits of the righteous made perfect" are related to one another. There is a common theme in Jewish literature of the spirits or souls of the departed righteous being in the presence of God (see Rev 6:9). The description of the spirits of the righteous as "made perfect" is in keeping with the theme of perfection in Hebrews. The "spirits of the righteous made perfect" in the presence of "God the judge of all" parallels the "assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven."

The final pair to whom Christians have come are "Jesus the mediator of a new covenant" and "the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." The pair speak of what makes possible the entry into the "heavenly Jerusalem." The reality that is approached is also signified in these items. It is the true and lasting covenant relationship with God, a relationship effected through the "sprinkling" of the blood of Jesus Christ. The reference to the "blood of Abel" is to be read in light of the indication in 11:4 that Abel "still speaks" through his faith. Abel, then, would be seen as a martyr whose shed blood was of religious significance. But in an argument from lesser to greater, the blood of Jesus Christ speaks "a better word." Christ's blood effects true and lasting forgiveness of sin (see 8:12; 10:17-18).

A Final Warning, 12:25-29

The last section of chapter 12 gives a final urgent warning. The distinction between the old and new covenants (Mount Sinai and Mount Zion) in 12:18-24 is transformed first of all into a distinction between warning on earth and warning from heaven (v. 25). Then it is transformed into a contrast between the shaking of the earth and the shaking of the earth and the heaven (v. 26) and a contrast between what is removed and what remains with that shaking (v. 27). The focus is not on the distinction between the old and new covenants but between the faithful and unfaithful within the new covenant community. The section concludes with a plea for readers to be thankful for the unshakable kingdom they have received and a final warning reminding that "our God is a consuming fire."

The section begins abruptly with the warning, "See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking." The theme of speaking ties the

section directly to the last phrase of the preceding section with its reference to "the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." But the theme of speaking has been implicit if not explicit from the very beginning (see 1:1-2). Warning against refusal of the one speaking or neglecting what is heard is also a part of the agenda of the writer from the beginning (see 2:1).

The "one who is speaking" is certainly the God who spoke by the prophets and by the Son and whose speech is a major theme throughout Hebrews (see 1:1; 2:1-4; 4:12-13). A lesser to greater argument supports the warning by contrasting the desert generation ("they") and the present generation ("we"). The desert generation "refused the one who warned them on earth" and received their punishment (see 4:2). The present generation is warned by means of a question: "How much less we will escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven!" A contrast is not between two different speakers but between the earthly and heavenly phenomenon. The really real is to be heard in the heavenly, and the readers have experienced the voice of the "one who warns from heaven."

The temporal contrast of v. 25 is made sharper in v. 26, where three distinct moments are involved: (1) "At that time" or the past event of Sinai; (2) "Now he has promised" or the present time of the promise; and (3) "I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven" or the future shaking that will affect heaven as well as earth.

The idea of shaking is introduced with the statement that "at that time [at Sinai] his voice shook the earth" and with the quotation from Haggai about a future shaking of the heavens as well as the earth. Although the Exodus account of the Sinai event does not speak of the shaking of the earth (an earthquake), other references in the Old Testament speak of an earthquake (Judg 5:4; Pss 68:8; 77:18; 114:7). Earthquakes play a part in picturing God's appearance in general (Pss 18:7; 82:5; Isa 6:4; Amos 9:5; Job 9:6) and the day of the Lord in particular (see Matt 24:29; 27:51, 54).

In Haggai, the LORD of hosts is quoted as saying, "Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor" (2:6-7). The oracle was spoken to Zerubbabel, to Joshua, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, encouraging them in light of the fact that, compared with the glory of the old temple, their present temple was "as nothing." The prophet assured that the splendor of the new temple would be greater than that of the

former. The first part of the Greek translation of Haggai 2:6 is quoted in Hebrews with modifications that emphasize the shaking of the "heavens." "Shaking" indicates judgment. In v. 26a, the Sinai revelation is defined as one of judgment, and the future shaking will be an intensification of judgment. The reverse side of God's eschatological judgment, however, is the salvation of the new covenant. Verse 27 begins with a repetition of the phrase "yet once more" and suggests that the phrase has a special meaning. It indicates a "removal" of what is shaken. The noun "removal" was used earlier of the "change" in the law (7:12) and of Enoch's being "taken" (11:5). Fundamental alteration, abrogation, and removal is connoted. The radical destruction of what is transitory and what can be shaken is envisioned. The reverse side of that judgment is the reminder of "what cannot be shaken." Readers know what cannot be shaken: Melchizedek who "remains a priest forever" (7:3), Christ who is "a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek" (5:6; see also 6:20; 7:28; 10:13-14), the possessions of those persecuted that are "better and more lasting" (10:34), and the "city" prepared by God (11:16; see also 13:14). All of these are grounded not in the temporal but the eternal; they are anchored in what is truly real.

In v. 28, the "kingdom" is defined as something that "cannot be shaken," the kingdom "we are receiving." The kingdom of God that cannot be shaken is a relationship among those who share the unshakable quality of their God who is present with them. It is described in 12:22-24. The kingdom is the eschatological kingdom of the Gospels to which readers have access through Christ's death and exaltation. The present and future aspects of the experience are seen in v. 28: "We are receiving a kingdom." The future involves a searching judgment, but the present involves the acceptance of a gift that is already being bestowed. The present experience and the anticipation of the future fullness of the gift are the motivation for thanksgiving and offering acceptable worship to God. Such worship involves "reverence and awe" for indeed "our God is a consuming fire."

In Deuteronomy 4:24 LXX, Moses reminded the Israelites that "the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God," and the writer of Hebrews made the text into a contemporary word by substituting the plural "our" for the singular "your": "[O]ur God is a consuming fire" (v. 29). Readers would doubtless have formulated a lesser to greater argument here. If God were a consuming fire for the Israelites in terms of the Sinai revelation, how much greater severity can be expected by those who participate in the heavenly

experience. A failure to heed what God is saying now can only be catastrophic.

CONNECTIONS

Jesus the Son as Historic Figure

Hebrews vividly portrays different aspects of the church's faith in Jesus Christ. He is the preexistent one who reflects the divine glory and bears the stamp of the divine nature (1:3). But he shares the same nature of flesh and blood as the "children" (2:14). He was tempted just as we are; yet he was without sin (2:18; 4:15). Although he was Son, he learned obedience through suffering (5:7-8).

The New Testament presents a historical Jesus. Historical information is given about the human being Jesus of Nazareth. He is also a historic figure who transcends human history. His historical acts serve as examples for his followers. Jesus' value as a historic figure is dependent upon his action as a historical figure. It is easy for readers to reduce the different aspects of Jesus' life to Jesus' revelation of the divine, but this revelation too is not unrelated to Jesus' life as a historical individual. Hebrews 12:2 focuses upon the historical event of Jesus' decision to endure the cross. The writer saw this as the way that Jesus was the pioneer and perfecter of faith and the example for believers. When we consider the reading that Jesus chose the cross "instead of the joy that was set before him," it is interesting to imagine specific historical circumstances in which Jesus was confronted with a supreme moral choice. The expression "the joy that was set before him" does not refer to some future reality, but to a present possibility, a joy within Jesus' grasp. At a particular point (or points) in his life, Jesus could have embraced the joy available to him or the humbling death upon a Roman cross. Jesus deliberately chose to renounce the choice of joy and to share in the very same contest purposed for Christians.

Jesus' Present Ministry

In contrast with other New Testament writings, Hebrews emphasizes what Jesus Christ is doing in the period between the crucifixion and the eschaton. Other writings emphasize either the

passion or the second advent. Hebrews, however, says that Jesus "has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God." In the context of the athletic imagery, Jesus being seated at the right hand of God suggests an athlete's rest after the exertion of the footrace. The motif of exaltation is based on Psalm 110:1 ("The LORD says to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool'"). In Hebrews, exaltation is an important part of a christological development. After a repeated and detailed treatment of the idea of exaltation to the right hand of God (see 1:3, 13; 2:5-9; 8:1-2; 10:12-13), the writer was able to use this idea for purposes of exhortation. The force it has here grows out of and is dependent upon earlier development. Jesus being seated at the right hand of God guarantees the absoluteness of Christ's exaltation and the absolute security of those who have placed their trust in him. So readers of Hebrews are encouraged not only by what Christ has done in his passion and what Christ will do in his second coming, but also by what he is doing right now. It is against the background of the present activity of Jesus that the author referred back to the hostility Jesus experienced from sinners to encourage his readers not to grow weary or to lose heart. A comprehensive New Testament Christology will give attention to all three acts that portray Jesus Christ.

CONCLUDING ADMONITIONS

Hebrews 13:1-25

Chapter 13 is composed of two unequal parts. The first part is a conclusion to the exhortation or sermon (vv. 1-21). The second part is a personal note or postscript apparently attached to the exhortation when it was sent to the community by the author (vv. 22-25). The postscript consists of personal messages that resemble a letter, and it is to be understood as exactly what it appears to be. It is a note sent along with the word of exhortation because the writer was unable to make a personal visit to the readers at that time.

A superficial glance at the materials in the first part of chapter 13 could lead to the conclusion that there is no real connection with what has come before. In vv. 1-6, the writer gave admonitions that covered readers' responsibilities to one another, to strangers, to the imprisoned and tortured, and concerning marriage and covetousness. Then in vv. 7-19, the author asked readers to remember past and present leaders and to be faithful to the Lord. What is the relationship between the concluding admonitions and the main body of the sermon? A close examination will show that there is an intimate relationship between the sermon and the concluding admonitions. The admonitions are to be read in light of the call of the author in 12:28 "to offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe." This is a consequence of "receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken." The benediction in vv. 20-21 fits this understanding, speaking of God as making the readers "complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight." Moreover, the admonition to remember leaders—past (v. 7) and present (vv. 17-19)—frames an expository section (vv. 10-16) that forms a statement of the orthodox teaching of leaders and is actually a restatement of the main argument of Hebrews. The final chapter is then a fitting conclusion to the word of exhortation.

[Parenesis in Hebrews]

Parenesis in Hebrews

Parenesis is discourse aimed to exhort the reader or hearer to do good. Parenesis involves such things as commands, prohibitions, advice, warnings, precepts, and maxims. Hortatory devices like examples, explanations, comparisons, and concluding calls to action are utilized, along with rhetorical techniques like hyperbole, irony, paradox, and antithesis. The NT writings are replete with parenesis.

Parenesis is most obvious in the letters of James and Paul and in the speeches of Jesus in Matthew and Luke. Paul's hortatory appeals combine authoritative demand with political sensitivity and lead into parenesis (see, for example, Rom 12:1-2; 15:30-32; 16:17; 1 Cor 1:10; 4:16; 16:15-16; 1 Thess 4:1, 10; 5:12, 14). Ordinarily, the parenetic sections appear in Paul after the body of the letters. In Rom 12:1-2, for example, we find a hortatory introduction to the parenesis concluding the letter.

Hebrews, just as Romans, concludes with parenetic instructions (10:19–13:21), but parenesis is found throughout the book. The author of Hebrews urges his readers to take the word of God seriously (2:1-4); to hold fast to their confession (3:6, 14; 4:14; 10:23); to strive to enter the rest of God (4:11); to approach the throne of grace with boldness (4:16); to grow toward maturity (6:1); to realize the full assurance of hope to the end (6:11); to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus (10:19-21); to live lives of faith, hope, and love (10:22-25); to endure (10:34-36; 12:4, 12-13); to imitate Jesus (12:3); to pursue peace and holiness (12:14); to let mutual love continue (13:1); to show hospitality to strangers (13:2); to remember imprisoned fellow believers (13:3); to let marriage be held in honor (13:4); to remember and obey leaders (13:7, 17); to bear the abuse Jesus endured (13:13); to offer sacrifices consisting of praise and deeds of loving kindness (13:16); and to pray for the writer (13:18).

The author of Hebrews calls his writing a "word of exhortation" (13:22), and the character of the writing supports this description. The parenesis of Hebrews has brought agreement among scholars that Hebrews is indeed a homily or sermon, and scholars compare Hebrews with Jewish and early Christian preaching. In addition to the parenetic instructions at the conclusion of Hebrews and within Hebrews, other factors reinforce the view that Hebrews is an example of first-century preaching (preaching that would have developed in the Jewish-Hellenistic synagogue): the rhetorical use of "we," the use of "brothers" (brothers and sisters) to address the congregation, the use of particles like "therefore" in movement from exposition to exhortation, the use of the second person plural to address the hearers directly, a warm personal tone, the use of examples, and the practice of introducing biblical quotations with a rhetorical question.

But Hebrews is also a dogmatic treatise, presenting a theological argument for the finality of the salvation achieved by Jesus Christ. Harold W. Attridge has found a formal pattern in Hebrews that connects theological exposition and parenesis. The pattern includes introduction, citation, expository development, and conclusion. Attridge declares that this pattern constitutes a "homily" or a "sermon." He claims that this homily pattern parallels the three general classes of classical rhetoric—forensic oratory suited to the law courts, deliberative rhetoric suited to the legislative assembly, and epideictic rhetoric suited to people assembled for occasions of solemn festivity or mourning. Classical rhetoric would have emerged in social situations and institutional settings in classical Athens. The homily evidenced in Hebrews would have developed in the context of the Hellenistic synagogue.

Harold W. Attridge, "Paraenesis in a Homily (λόγος παρακλήσεως): the Possible Location and Socialization of the 'Epistle to the Hebrews,'" *Semeia* 50 (1990).

COMMENTARY

Acceptable Worship: The Obligations of Christian Holiness, 13:1-6

In a series of four brief admonitions interspersed with comments, the author spelled out the implications of the entire exhortation for Christian living. The seeming lack of connection of the materials in vv. 1-21 for modern readers may result in part from the fact that there is no extended treatment of the themes addressed. These materials are admonitions, exhortations, and instructions that are

traditional, not new or unfamiliar to the original readers. No extended treatment was necessary, only a reminder to readers of what they already knew. The admonitions are to actions that result from the pursuit of "peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (12:14). They are closely connected in the summons to be thankful in 12:28, and through thankfulness to "offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe." In fact, 12:28 serves to introduce chapter 13 just as well as it does to conclude chapter 12. When readers read the admonitions of vv. 1-6, the injunction to remember leaders in vv. 7-9, 17, and the hortatory exposition of vv. 10-16 in light of 12:28, they find confirmation that the author is consciously displaying what constitutes acceptable worship. Verses 15 and 16 help to confirm this way of organizing the material as they speak of doing good and sharing what you have as sacrifices that are pleasing to God. The benediction supports this as it speaks of doing God's will, "working among us that which is pleasing in his sight" (v. 21).

"Let mutual love [literally, "brotherly love"] continue." "Mutual love" is commonly included in lists of virtues required in the Christian community (see Rom 12:10; 1 Thess 4:9; 1 Pet 1:22; 2 Pet 1:7). The word "continue" (*menō*) is reminiscent of earlier exhortations to readers to continue in their Christian life and practice (see 6:9-12; 10:32-39). It has additional significance following the discussion in 12:27-28 about what continues or remains (the same Greek word is translated as "remain" in 12:27 and "continue" in 13:1). The implication is that the "kingdom that cannot be shaken" is realized in the relationships within the Christian community.

The "hospitality to strangers" not to be neglected by readers was important in the early church. Itinerant Christian teachers depended on local churches for hospitality (see Matt 25:35; Rom 12:13; 1 Tim 3:2; 1 Pet 4:9). Second and Third John reflect this practice, and 2 John 9-10 suggests criteria for testing strangers before welcoming them. Encouragement of the practice of hospitality is given by noting that in the past "some have entertained angels without knowing it," implying that such a possibility existed for the readers. The Old Testament contains several stories of hospitality to strangers (Gen 19:1-14; Judg 6:11-18; 13:3-22), but the story the readers would recall most vividly is doubtless the story in Genesis 18:1-21 of Abraham and Sarah's welcoming of visitors who brought the good news of a promised son.

The injunction to "remember those who are in prison" and "those who are being tortured" recalls the earlier mention of the

readers' partnership with those being persecuted and compassion for those in prison (10:32-34). Here the challenge for solidarity with those imprisoned and tortured is even stronger. Readers are to remember "as though you were in prison with them . . . as though you yourselves were being tortured." A literal translation of the phrase about being tortured is "as if you yourselves were in [their] body." The notion that those observing suffering are to empathize as if in their bodies reinforced the author's call to solidarity.

The injunction about marriage and sexual responsibility has two parts. "Let marriage be held in honor by all" is doubtless concerned for all of those in the Christian community. Regard for marriage is essential for maintaining "mutual love" within a common confession. The second part of the injunction ("let the marriage bed be kept undefiled") parallels the first part and places it in a cultic context: sexual impurity means desecration of the sacred. The injunction to honor marriage is based on God's judgment against sexual immorality in general, against fornicators (a general description for one who commits sexual immorality), and against adulterers. The judgment of God against those who do not pursue the life of sanctification insofar as marriage is concerned is the same as that which applies in case of spurning the Son of God, profaning the blood of the covenant, and outraging the spirit of peace (10:29-31).

The final injunction also has two parts. It advises Christians to (1) "keep your lives free from the love of money" and (2) "be content with what you have." The subjects of sex and money were commonly joined in Christian discussions of morality (see 1 Cor 5:10-11; Eph 5:3, 5) as they were in Jewish and Greco-Roman discussions. Selfishness lies behind sexual immorality *and* greed. For the writer of Hebrews, both of these entailed the desecration of the holy. The first part of the two-part injunction reads literally, "(Your) conduct (is to be) unmercenary" (*aphilargyros*). The idea that Christians should not be concerned with possessions is found frequently in the New Testament (see Matt 6:19-21, 24-34; Luke 10:22-34). The term " unmercenary" is found only one other time in the New Testament (1 Tim 3:3), but in 1 Timothy 6:10, the noun "love of money" (*philargyria*) is found in the declaration that "the love of money is the root of all evil." The second half of the injunction—the call to "be content"—is also common in Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian circles. John the Baptist advised soldiers who came to him to "be satisfied with your wages" (Luke 3:14). Two citations from Scripture are given to support the call to detachment from material possessions. The first citation is intro-

duced with "for he has said" (the speaker is most naturally understood to be God who judges [v. 4]). The actual quotation, "I will never leave you or forsake you," is also found in the Jewish writer Philo (*On the Confusion of Tongues*, 166), but the original source is not certain. Both Philo and the author of Hebrews could be dependent upon an alternate version of Deuteronomy 32:6-8. In his final charge to Joshua and the people, Moses says, "Be strong and bold; have no fear or dread of them, because it is the LORD your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you" (Deut 31:6). Regardless of the source, the author construed the text as a word spoken to his contemporaries assuring them that they need not rely on the wealth of the world since God has promised not to leave or forsake them. [Sex and Money in Jewish and Greco-Roman Writings]

Sex and Money in Jewish and Greco-Roman Writings

The holiness code of Leviticus (chs. 17–26) declares that Israel must be holy as God is holy (19:2). This involves economic matters (19:9-14, 33-37) and sexual matters (19:20, 29; 20:9-21). Sins of greed and lust are incompatible with the holiness of the community. The juxtaposition of vv. 4 and 5 of Heb 13 with their warnings against sexual impurity and greed presupposes a relationship: selfishness is at the base of both sexual immorality and greed. The treatment of these offenses in the order of sexual immorality and then greed parallels the treatment in the seventh commandment ("You shall not commit adultery," Exod 20:14) and the eighth commandment ("You shall not steal," Exod 20:15).

Jewish writers joined injunctions to sexual purity and to contentment in that order. The Damascus Document speaks of the cardinal sins as "the three nets of Baliel" used to capture the morally careless. The first net is "sexual offense" and the second and third are "greed for profit" and "defilement of sacred things" (6QD 4:17-19). *The Testament of Reuben* declares that "sins of promiscuity . . . lead to idolatry" (4:6). *The Testament of Judah* admonishes, "Keep yourselves, therefore, my children from sexual impurity and the love of money" (18:2). Philo declares, "All the worst quarrels, both public and private, are due to greed for either a well-formed woman or possessions" (*On the Posterity and Exile of Cain* 34).

Greco-Roman moralists also linked sex and money. Lucian advised that the love of pleasure "brings in adultery and the love of money" (*Nigrinus* 16). Longinus says, ". . . the love of money (a disease from which we all now suffer sorely) and the love of pleasure make us their thralls, or rather, as one may say, drown us body and soul in the depths, the love of riches being a malady which makes men petty, and the love of pleasure one which makes them most ignoble" (*On the Sublime* 44).

The Christians couple sex and money. In one of Paul's letters to the Corinthians, he reminds them of his earlier advice "not to associate with sexually immoral persons." Then he tells them what he intended by that statement—"not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since you would then need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother and sister who is sexually immoral or greedy. . ." (1 Cor 5:9-11). Eph 5:3 joins fornication and greed: "But fornication and impurity of any kind, or greed, must not even be mentioned among you, as is proper among saints."

Non-canonical Christian writings follow the same pattern. *Second Clement* advises, "Let us confess Him in our works, by loving one another, by not committing adultery nor speaking evil one against another nor envying, but being temperate, merciful, kindly. And we ought to have fellow-feeling one with another and not to be covetous" (4:3). The *Shepherd of Hermes* combines "desire of women" and "avarice" in its discussion of evidence of the work of the angel of wickedness

The injunctions to sexual purity and contentment in Heb 13:4-5 serve as a reminder to preserve holiness, but holiness that the members of the house church enjoy through the action of Christ as high priest on their behalf.

The second quotation is a text from the book of Psalms (Ps 117:6 LXX) calling on the community to praise God for God's mercy: "The Lord is my helper; and I will not fear what man can do to me." The text is introduced as something that the readers "can say with confidence."

True Worship, 13:7-19

This section begins with three formally unrelated statements: (1) an admonition to "remember your leaders" (v. 7), (2) an affirmation of Jesus Christ as one who remains eternally the same (v. 8), and (3) a warning against strange teachings by contrasting "grace" with "ceremonial foods" (v. 9). After these three statements comes a complex hortatory exposition using cultic imagery and metaphorical elaboration (vv. 10-16) and a return to a consideration of present-day leaders (v. 17), with remarks concerning the author—who has some responsibility for the readers (vv. 18-19). Readers must fill in the gaps and thereby make connections between the formally unconnected statements that begin the section and then relate that material to the hortatory exposition that follows in vv. 10-16. A dialectical relationship exists between the different parts. The theme of vv. 10-16 is discerned at the same time that connections are established between the various statements.

This reader sees the hortatory exposition of vv. 10-16 as a tightly-packed summary of the main argument of Hebrews and an exhortation based on that argument. The exposition is read as an antidote to the "strange teachings" mentioned in v. 9, as is the formula about Jesus Christ in v. 8 ("Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever"). All of these expository and hortatory moves are ways of faithfully remembering the teachers who first proclaimed the gospel to the readers.

References to former leaders and to current leaders frame the central unit. Verse 7 calls on readers to remember their earlier leaders and characterizes those leaders as those who preached to them. Then readers are asked to consider the outcome of their leaders' way of life and to imitate their faith. The word "leaders" (*hēgoumenoi*) is a general word applied to the leadership of the church. In both secular and religious usage, the term designates one who is entrusted with leadership, but it does not specify any particular level of authority or any particular position. In 12:2 the readers are asked to look to Jesus, "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith," and the author spoke of Jesus' way of life as involving the cross and exaltation. Readers are to remember their leaders as they themselves

look to Jesus. If readers recall the admonition to look to Jesus, the gap between v. 7 and v. 8 is not so great. Nevertheless, there is a lack of formal connection and the reader must find and/or make the connection. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" is tied with the theme of leaders (while early leaders have departed, the source of their faith remains) and with the theme of correct teaching that follows. The affirmation about Jesus could well be a traditional confession. Here it is used to support the injunction about communal life (v. 7) and teaching (v. 8). The sameness of Jesus, the fact that he is a part of the eternal and unchanging divine realm, is a sure foundation for life and doctrine.

The material inserted within the admonitions to remember and obey past and present leaders may have been composed with specific questionable teachings and practices of a faction within the church in mind. If so, the objectionable teachings and practices are not stated in precise terms, and the criticism suggested in v. 9 is not followed up in the remainder of the section. The warning "Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings" may, therefore, simply be read as a foil for the teaching found in Hebrews instead of as a response to an actual threat. Indeed, the warning is conventional in early Christianity (see Col 2:6-8; Eph 4:14-16; 1 Tim 1:4-7).

The contrast set up in v. 9b is between "grace" and "regulations about food." This contrast is consistent with the contrast between the death and exaltation of Jesus and the Mosaic cult found throughout Hebrews. It prepares the way for the symbolism that follows: "We have an altar from which those who officiate in the tent have no right to eat." The tabernacle ritual is used to make clear what is most significant about the sacrifice of Christ. All of the possible implications are not drawn as the exposition is unpacked. Just as the sacrifices offered on the Day of Atonement were not eaten, so Christians have an expiatory sacrifice (an "altar") that was not eaten. The reason for the sacrifices not being eaten is that they were burned outside the camp. The blood of the animals was brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin, but the bodies of the animals were burned outside the camp. Jesus was also disposed of "outside the city gate," while the blood of Jesus sanctified the people.

The expository section ends with v. 12 and the application begins with v. 13. Three specific applications are made. The first application is found in vv. 13-14 and focuses on the detail that Jesus suffered outside the gate. Christians are urged to "go to him outside the camp." Previous appeals for movement in Hebrews call

for movement to Jesus as Jesus had entered the true sanctuary or had been enthroned at God's right hand (see 4:16; 6:19-20; 9:12, 24; 10:22). Here the goal of the movement is still to Jesus, but the direction has changed. It is not movement into a special sacred sphere but movement "outside the camp." The camp symbolizes traditional holiness and security. Outside the camp is the sphere of shame and abuse. The ground for the appeal is given in v. 14—the fact that Christians have no lasting city here on earth (see 11:13; 12:22, 25). Christians seek the "city that is to come."

The second application calls on the readers to "continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God." This sacrifice is "the fruit of lips that confess his name." The term "sacrifice of praise" is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to refer to a subclass of "peace offerings" or "sacrifices of salvation" (Lev 11–18 LXX). They were sacrifices offered with unleavened bread mixed with oil. But in Hebrews, the metaphorical application is intended whereby the prayer of thanks itself is the reference. The metaphorical character of the sacrifice is made clear in the explanatory remark.

The final application continues the metaphorical transformation of the practice of sacrifice: "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God" (v. 16). The rationale for such action is that it is "pleasing to God." The reference to pleasing God recalls the remark at 12:28 about acceptable worship.

The way of Jesus is described in vv. 9-16 with the use of sacrificial language, but this language and the Mosaic cult reflected in it are used to critique and transform cultic formalism (whether it is a formalism of the Mosaic cult or another form known to the author of Hebrews and his readers). The language of sacrifice is applied to prayer and to non-cultic activities of love and service. The use of the motif of being "outside the camp" supports the appeal of the writer for a worship outside of the realm of the formal and cultic.

[Christian Witness]

Verse 17 returns to the subject of leaders. In v. 7 the writer had asked readers to remember deceased leaders and to imitate their faith. Here the appeal is for obedience and submission to present leaders. As with the earlier discussion, no titles are used and no indication given as to how leaders assumed their roles of leadership. Present-day readers may read between the lines and find tensions that existed and/or rebellion against authority. But nothing in the text demands such a reading. Two grounds are given for the exhortation to obedience and submission that have to do with the responsibilities of the leaders. First of all, these leaders are "keeping

Christian Witness

James M. Pitts, longtime chaplain at Furman University, illustrated Christian witness and our attempts to limit Christian witness in a story he told about an event on his campus:

> A bold identification with the victims of suffering and neglect is seen in the work of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. With her Missionaries of Charity, she searches out the dying, poor and abandoned elderly and infants. To the defenseless and vulnerable members of humanity, she offers comfort and nurture. Her hospices and homes are expressions of incarnate love. Through their work with the poor and broken bodies of these throw-aways of society, they minister as they would with Jesus and for Jesus and to Jesus.
>
> Henry Parr, a young attorney and alumnus of Furman, became interested in the work of Mother Teresa. Moved by this ministry of compassionate care, he committed himself to go to India as a volunteer. Upon returning home, Henry was invited to present a slide show and give a talk on his experience. This presentation was very moving, but not from oratorical eloquence or emotional enthusiasm.
>
> The fan of the slide projector and the clicking of its mechanism formed the background music of Henry's softly stated commentary. The scenes of squalor, the staring eyes, drawn and emaciated bodies of people who had been left on the street to die, who are now being cared for in sparse but clean houses of mercy, were overwhelmingly powerful. It was as if each slide was invisibly sub-titled "Inasmuch as you do it unto the least of these, my brethren . . . ."
>
> With the projector off and the lights in the small auditorium on, we had a time for conversation. An attractive, well-groomed and stylishly dressed sophomore young woman inquired, "Does Mother Teresa ever give a Christian witness?" The response to her question tried to help her understand that her life of poverty, caring action, kind words, and reverent silences were a Christian witness. The young lady obviously was not satisfied with that answer. She went on to inquire, "Why was Mother Teresa not handing out printed Scripture portions and preaching on street corners?" How can anyone be doing the Lord's work who is not appearing on a cable television talk show, running a promotional blitz with a toll-free response line, giving concerts and publishing books? Seduced by our contemporary culture's religious enthusiasm, the simple life of quiet and sacrificial service was both inadequate and alien to that young woman. She was not aware that if anyone suffers within the body of Christ, all are pained. To respond to that hurt is ministry with Christ and for Christ and even to Christ.
>
> James M. Pitts, "A Conspiracy for Life," *The Way of Faith* (Wake Forest NC: Chanticleer Publishing Company), 152-53.

watch over your souls." The "souls" here are individuals seen from the perspective of salvation. They are saved by faith (10:39) and anchored in the heavenly realm (6:19). Leaders have responsibility in terms of the salvation of the readers (see 1 Pet 1:9). The expression "keeping watch" is used elsewhere in the New Testament for watchfulness in the face of coming judgment (Mark 13:33; Luke 21:36; Eph 6:18).

A second and related ground for obedience and submission to leaders is the fact that the leaders "will give an account" for their conduct on behalf of the readers. The expression "give an account" is used in Luke 16:2 in the parable of the dishonest manager where the rich man summoned the manager and demanded, "Give me an accounting of your management." This accounting is required of individuals responsible to higher authorities and of all on the day of judgment (see Matt 12:36; 1 Pet 4:5).

Another reason for obedience and submission to leaders is that this will lead to "joy" and not "sighing" on the part of the leaders as

they carry out their responsibilities. The word translated "sighing" (*stenazontes*) is a strong word that can be translated "groaning." And the writer added that were the leaders to function unhappily, that would not be profitable for the readers. The welfare of readers is related to their response to current leaders.

In vv. 18-19, the writer associated himself with the leaders by using first person plural forms in v. 18 ("Pray for us; we are sure that we have a clear conscience") and then speaking in the first person singular in v. 19 ("I urge you . . . so that I may be"). He asked for prayer for the leaders and indicated a certainty ("we are sure" = "we are convinced" = "we are certain") of clear conscience and a desire "to act honorably in all things." The term "conscience" is important in Hebrews, denoting the whole person in his or her relationship to God. The author's conviction that he and the other leaders were in God's will was paralleled with the conviction that they desire to "act honorably in all things." Confident prayer for the leaders was tied to the leaders' integrity before God and the church. In v. 19 the writer called for special prayer for himself, that he might make a personal visit very soon. The personal note may be read in conjunction with the concluding remarks of vv. 22-25 to indicate that the author preferred to deliver the word of exhortation in person, that what he had written was merely a substitute for a personal visit.

Closing Benediction and Doxology, 13:20-21

A benediction and doxology follow appropriately after the request for prayer in vv. 18-19. As a periodic sentence, the verses form a structural unity. The NRSV is able to reproduce the verses as one sentence without confusing the modern reader since the sentence expresses one complete thought. God is invoked ("the God of peace"), and a participial clause expands the description of God contained in the invocation ("who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant"). Then the petition is given that God may supply what is lacking so that readers may live their lives in a way to please God.

The prayer appropriately concludes the remarks on leaders, but it also concludes the entire book of Hebrews as it ties together important themes of the book: peace, covenant, and the will of God. The invocation "the God of peace" identifies God as the source and giver of peace. In Romans the expression is used in a blessing: "The God of peace be with you all. Amen" (Rom 15:33). This blessing

was doubtless known and used by the congregation. In the context, readers would relate obedience and submission to leaders with the peace of God, but earlier "peace with everyone" was advised (12:14; see also 13:1, 2, 7, 17 for related admonitions).

The designation of God as the one who "brought back [led out] from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep" combines early Christian affirmations that God raised Jesus from the dead (see Rom 4:24; 8:11; 2 Cor 1:19; 4:14; Gal 1:1; Eph 1:20; Col 2:12) and the reference in Isaiah 63:11-14 to God as "he that brought up from the sea [Moses] the shepherd of the sheep." Moses was "the shepherd of the sheep" whom God led out of Egypt, but Jesus is "the great shepherd of the sheep" whom God led out from the realm of the dead. The references to "the power of an indestructible life" (7:16) and "he continues forever" (7:24) imply resurrection, but 13:20 is the only direct reference in Hebrews to the resurrection of Jesus.

John 10:11-18: Jesus as the Good Shepherd

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.

The description of Christ as shepherd is unexpected and may be akin to the metaphorical transformation of the language of sacrifice seen in 13:15-16. The one raised from the dead is the one who remains as the guide of God's flock. [John 10:11-18: Jesus as the Good Shepherd] But the expression "the blood of the eternal covenant" calls to mind the lengthy exposition in Hebrews of Christ's sacrificial act. The Christology of Hebrews is not complete without the affirmation of the sacrifice of Christ as an act accomplished by the actual shedding of Christ's own blood (2:14; 9:12, 14; 13:12). The phrase "by the blood of the eternal covenant" belongs grammatically with what comes before—the bringing back of the Lord Jesus from the dead. The resurrection, then, occurred by virtue of the sprinkling of the blood in the heavenly sanctuary and the establishment of the new covenant.

The substance of the prayer is that God may supply what is lacking ("make you complete in everything good"). The "everything good" is vague, but it is to enable the readers to "do his will." What this involves is made clear in the next clause, "working among us that which is pleasing in his sight." The working out of "what is pleasing in his sight" is not a matter of independent activity of Christians once they are equipped by God. It is "through

Jesus Christ" who is the mediator of God's grace and power in the new covenant community.

The prayer concludes with a cry of praise: "To whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen." It is impossible and unnecessary to determine whether the one to whom glory is ascribed is Jesus Christ (the closest antecedent to "whom") or to the God of peace (the one invoked at the beginning). Normal early Christian practice ascribed glory to God the Father (Rom 11:36; Gal 1:5; Phil 4:20; 1 Tim 1:17; 1 Pet 5:11; 2 Tim 4:18) or to God through Christ (Rom 16:27; Eph 3:20-21; 1 Pet 4:11). Ascription of glory to Christ, however, would not be surprising in light of the Christology of Hebrews in general and the close association of the "God of peace" and the "great shepherd of the sheep" in this section.

CONNECTIONS

Exhortations and Preaching

The themes of the exhortations of Hebrews 13:1-19 are not merely ancient themes. They deal with mutual love, hospitality, sex and money, and leadership. These are concerns with long histories extending into the present. The exhortations are best understood and used in modern sermons when they are first of all seen as historically-appropriate applications of the author's main point. They are an answer to the question as to what it meant in practice for the first readers to believe Jesus Christ is the high priest who has "endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God" (12:2). The exhortations constitute their "acceptable worship" that they offer to God "with reverence and awe" (12:28). Modern application also involves a careful coordination of our own historical situation. In what sense do we share the situation of the first readers? In what ways must we transform the exhortation into a modern idiom? Teaching and preaching the substance of Hebrews 13:1-19, then, is more than an uncritical and direct transferal for a modern audience. It will involve a careful historical-critical and hermeneutical study of the circumstances of origin of the verses and application of the abiding significance and challenge of the exhortations.

Outside the Camp

The exhortation of Hebrews for Christians "to go to him [Jesus] outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured" (13:13) can be understood clearly in terms of the origin of the book of Hebrews. Christians at that time and place were a minority. The identity, values, and place of the church were not established by the social and political structures of the world inside the camp. The historical experience of Jesus' execution outside the city gate, outside the inhabited area of Jerusalem, is used by the writer to help the readers find their own identity, value, and place. They find themselves in their identification with Jesus "outside the camp."

The exhortation in Hebrews and the exhortation of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels are parallel. The summons of Jesus to discipleship is marked by the severance of social ties. Jesus said, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26-27; see also Matt 10:37-38). Discipleship is linked with the concept of shame:

> He called the crowds with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." (Mark 8:34-38)

The call to discipleship in Hebrews as in the Gospels is a call to martyrdom. To take up one's cross is to deny one's self. In many places today the church is not outside but inside the camp. It is endowed with money and favor by social and political structures. In her new situation, how does the church discover what in the image of going outside the camp is integral to Christianity? What does it mean in our day to deny one's self and to take up the cross?

The Great Shepherd of the Sheep

Modern readers are familiar with the image of shepherd, as that image has become cherished in the art and literature of the church.

The image of the priest, however, is the major christological image in Hebrews. For original readers of Hebrews, the description of Christ as "the great shepherd of the sheep" was unexpected. Readers are indeed offered the opportunity of relating the two christological images—priest and shepherd. Each image can be interpreted in light of the other. Christ is a shepherd-like high priest. This underscores a quality already associated with the picture of Jesus Christ as high priest—Christ's heavenly intercessory function. The use of the image of shepherd encourages Christians to think of the one whom God exalted from the dead as the one who ever remains as guide of God's flock.

But the shepherd is a high-priestly shepherd—one who gives his life for his sheep. The pastoral imagery has undergone a christological transformation in the Gospel of John. In John the good shepherd is the one who—unlike the hireling—"lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). [Image of Christ as Shepherd]

Image of Christ as Shepherd

The shepherd is a symbol of caring; it is also a symbol of government—human and divine. In the ancient world, kingship was spoken of in terms of shepherding, and the good shepherd was distinguished from the false (see Plato, *Republic* 343b). The false shepherd as well as the good shepherd is depicted in the Bible. Zechariah speaks of the "shepherd who does not care for the perishing, or seek the wandering, or heal the maimed, or nourish the healthy, but devours the flesh of the fat ones, tearing off even their hoofs" (11:16). And the Gospel of John speaks of the "hired hand" who leaves the sheep and runs away when he sees the wolf coming (10:12).

The closest parallel to the image of the shepherd in Hebrews is found in 1 Peter: "For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls. . . . And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away" (2:25; 5:4).

In the art of the early church, the shepherd was a favorite image. In the early days Christian art went underground, and in the catacombs the shepherd image is seen in frescoes, reliefs on the sarcophagi, statues, and engravings on the tombs. Graydon Snyder indicates that after the peace of Constantine (313), the Good Shepherd became the most popular representation of Jesus Christ. In the earliest period, however, the Good Shepherd apparently did not represent Jesus as such. Snyder finds the pastoral depiction of Orpheus, the god of music, to be the source for the earliest Christian Good Shepherd. Orpheus represented the caring community. The early use of the Good Shepherd image in Christian baptisteries has led to the idea that in the beginning, the image of the Good Shepherd stressed the joining of individuals to a caring community. Early Christians, then, pulled a powerful symbol from their Roman social situation to express their primary experience in the Christian faith: a caring community. Snyder indicates that after the peace of Constantine, the Good Shepherd lost his rustic tunic and wore clothing such as the gold tunic. This indicates that authority and power replaced the caring symbol. The Good Shepherd shifted from a caregiver to a caretaker.

Graydon Snyder, *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life before Constantine* (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 2003), 41-45.

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JAMES

For Ruth and Jim Witherington,
Friends of God,
Partners in Struggle
and in Hope

INTRODUCTION TO JAMES

In 1938 fishermen trawling off the South African coast caught a "living fossil." Their surprise catch, dubbed *Latimeria chalumnae*, was the scion of an ancient order of fish, the coelacanths, thought long extinct. About 120 species were known from fossil records, the earliest from about 410 million years ago. The coelacanths flourished 250 million years ago, when more than thirty species coexisted, before presumably dying off with the dinosaurs about 65 million years ago. The surviving coelacanth is an evolutionary oddity, a living "dead end," with gills and lungs, two pairs of fleshy fins resembling stubby legs, and a hinged skull of a type found in frogs. The strange *Latimeria chalumnae* also gives birth to live young.

Why this lesson in ichthyology? The letter of James is something of a New Testament coelacanth, a surviving representative of a once flourishing "Jewish Christianity," the living voice of a theological "dead end." Just as the coelacanth reminds us that fish have taken, and do take, very different forms from those familiar to us, the letter of James exposes a form of early Christianity distinct from the Pauline line that later predominated.[1] Its initial niche was the conservative, Aramaic-speaking, "Jewish-Christian" communities of Palestine, particularly the Jerusalem church, where James the Lord's brother was a recognized pillar and where the sayings of Jesus were cherished. Following the dispersion of that community associated with the war with Rome, this species of Christianity adapted to Diaspora environs, such as those in Antioch and Alexandria, perhaps as far away as Rome. However, these "Jewish-Christians" continued to affirm James as their apostolic founder and the authoritative voice of their distinctive tradition.

The Historical James

John Painter observed that discussion of the historical James has tended to reflect three uncritical assumptions:[2]

(1) James and the other brothers and sisters of Jesus were not believers during Jesus ministry.

(2) James became a believer through a resurrection appearance of Jesus to him.

(3) A transition from Peter's leadership to that of James was necessitated by Peter's forced flight from Jerusalem

In a meticulous critique, Painter has called all three assumptions into question, offering an alternative historical reconstruction. First, Jesus mother and brothers were among his retinue during the Galilean ministry (John 2:12; 7:3-5; Mark 3:21 // Matt 12:46 // Luke 8:19). Painter suggested the Gospels' treatments of Jesus family must be read against the evangelists' editorial tendencies.[3] In both Mark and John, the brothers of Jesus "are portrayed as 'fallible followers' rather than as outright unbelievers."[4] Matthew and Luke view the family more favorably.[5] Acts opens with the family of Jesus among his Jerusalem-based followers (1:14).

Second, the resurrection appearance to James is not a "conversion" account[6] but rather an apostolic commissioning (1 Cor 15:7); Paul understood his own appearance experience in the same light, as the authentication of his witness to the resurrection (15:8-11).

Third, from the start James was recognized as first among equals in the Jerusalem church. Paul named James before Cephas (Peter) and John when identifying the Jerusalem pillars (Gal 2:9), those who were apostles before him (Gal 1:17). According to Acts, Peter reported to James upon his release from prison (12:17). During Paul's first post-commissioning trip to Jerusalem (before AD 36), he met both with Cephas (to compare missionary strategies?) and with James, who could not be overlooked (Gal 1:18-19). Acts 15 and 21 portray James as the chief spokesperson for the Jerusalem church in its interactions with the Pauline mission. Galatians 2 confirms this role, showing Cephas, Barnabas, and other Jewish believers at Antioch yielding to James's concerns regarding table fellowship with Gentile believers. Painter concluded that although the nomenclature of the traditional ascription "first bishop of Jerusalem" is anachronistic, James's leadership role is supported by Acts 15, 21 and Galatians 2; "More than likely James was one of a group of leaders among whom he stood out, from the beginning, as the leading figure and dominating influence."[7]

Painter has categorized the early Christian movement in two broad missions, each with three factions. The first he termed the circumcision mission because it viewed the demands of the Law as normative; its factions included: right-wing "Christian Pharisees" for whom the Way was a Jewish movement; James's group, centrists engaged in the messianic mission to the Jews, though acknowledging others had a mission to the nations; and moderates, represented by Peter, whose ministry to Jews overflowed to (God-

The Circumcision Mission

Two Missions, Many Factions
The Hebrews: The Circumcision Mission
Cultural conservatives, maintaining the Mosaic traditions
Maintained traditional boundary markers of Jewish identity—circumcision, food and purity laws, and Sabbath observance.

First Faction,represented by Pharisaic believers

- Insisted all believers, whether Jews or Gentiles, should be circumcised and keep the Mosaic law (Acts 15:1,5; Gal 2:4).
- Saw no salvation without full observance of the law.
- Rejected the uncircumcision mission.

Second Faction, represented by James

- Committed to the messianic proclamation of Jesus to the Jews.
- Recognized the validity of the two missions but engaged in the circumcision mission.
- Understood the two missions as separate ventures, to different geographic and cultural spheres, and governed by distinct rules.
- Expected Hebrews to be law-observant even outside Palestine (Gal 2:12).
- Expected Jews engaged in the uncircumcision mission (e.g., Peter, Barnabas, Antiochene Jews) to keep the law, including food and purity law.
- Expected Gentile converts to abstain from practices particularly offensive to Jews, requirements also laid on Gentiles living in Jewish territory.
- Held an attitude to the Jewish law shaped by the demands of being a church in the Jewish land.

Third Faction, represented by Peter and the later Matthean community

- Committed to a mission based on circumcision and law-keeping, oriented primarily to Jews, including the Diaspora, but overflowing in a mission to Gentiles.
- Accepted the validity of an alternate, Pauline mission to the Gentiles free from the demands of circumcision and the keeping of the Mosaic law.
- Viewed the circumcision mission as the path of greater righteousness: Circumcision and law keeping were not necessary to enter the kingdom of heaven, but those who do not met the conditions and taught others to follow their example would be least in the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:19).

John Painter, *Just James: The Brother of Jesus in History and Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 73-75.

fearing) Gentiles. [The Circumcision Mission] The second he termed the uncircumcision mission because it dispensed with the requirements of the ritual law; its factions included: moderates, represented by Barnabas, who attempted to balance accommodations to the Gentile mission with James's concern for maintenance of Jewish identity; centrists, represented by Paul, who proclaimed a circumcision- and law-free gospel, though not renouncing his own Judaism; and a left wing, represented by the Corinthian libertines, who rejected even the moral demands of the Jewish law. [The Uncircumcision Mission]

Galatians illustrates James's position (though reported from Paul's perspective). While in Jerusalem Paul adopted the home rules of

The Uncircumcision Mission

Two Missions, Many Factions
The Hellenists: The Uncircumcision Mission
Culturally progressive, open to radical reinterpretation of the tradition in new situations
Adopted an approach to missions that did not require circumcision, maintenance of the food and purity laws, or observance of the Sabbath

Fourth Faction, represented by Barnabas

- Accepted the validity of the Petrine mission to Jews and Gentiles.
- Made accommodations to the needs of the Gentile mission outside Palestine; home rules applied when the two missions intersected.
- Yet when confronted at Antioch, bowed to the authority of James on boundary issues (Gal 2:12).
- Jewish members were law observant; Gentiles were not burdened with ritual matters.
- Likely more ambivalent regarding the superiority of the circumcision mission.

Fifth Faction, represented by Paul

- Affirmed a law-free, circumcision-free mission to all the nations, including Jews.
- Saw the law-free mission the true expression of the gospel (Gal 2:15-21).
- Saw the expediency of a mission restricted to Jews based on circumcision but did not engage in this mission.
- Adopted home rules while in Jerusalem as an expediency.
- Acknowledged the historic priority of the circumcision mission (Rom 1:16; 2:9,10) and the debt that Gentile churches owed to the Palestinian church (Rom 15:25-27).

Sixth Faction, represented by the Corinthian Libertines

- Advocated an absolutely law-free mission recognizing no restraints whatsoever, ritual or moral.
- Likely rejected all factions of the circumcision mission.
- Represented a sharp break with Jewish identity.

John Painter, *Just James: The Brother of Jesus in History and Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 73, 76-77.

the circumcision mission: "To the Jews I became as a Jew. . . . To those under the law I became as one under the law" (1 Cor 9:20). So the Jerusalem pillars extended the right hand of fellowship to Paul, acknowledging Paul's mission to the nations (Gal 2:8-9). However, Peter's circumcision mission (2:8) and Paul's uncircumcision mission intersected at Antioch. Though one of the Hebrews, Peter adopted the local custom (2:12); within the Hellenist church, Jews and Gentiles had shared table fellowship; Jewish boundary markers had given way to a new, common "Christian" identity (cf. Acts 11:26). James objected to such accommodation, however, demanding "fundamental separation of the two missions in the withdrawal of Jewish believers from table fellowship with Gentile believers" (Gal 2:12).[8] In the end, Peter, Barnabas, and the other 'Jews' yielded to James's concern for Jewish boundary issues.[9]

For James, the law remained normative for Jews engaged in mission work, whether at home or abroad; Paul understood himself to be no longer "under the law," though he might submit to the

law for expediency's sake (2 Cor 9:20). As Painter observed: "The tradition that named James "the Just" or "the Righteous" implies that James was faithful to the law, and the (Pharasaic?) response to his execution/murder suggests that even unbelieving Pharisees might have been sympathetic to James."[10] According to Acts, Paul's publication of his mission to the nations during his final visit to Jerusalem generated a very different response from the populace (22:21-23).

Authorship

Although Jacob was a common name among the first believers, the letter of James is recognized as the (purported) voice of only one of these: James the brother of the Lord and leader of the Jerusalem church. The question remains whether the letter is from James's hand or is a posthumous production by one who acknowledged the continuing authority of James's voice over the dispersed Jewish-Christian communities. Arguments favoring James's direct authorship include: the simple self-designation (Jas 1:1); familiarity and affinity with the oral tradition of Jesus sayings; and an economic critique that reflects the Judean situation before the war with Rome. Arguments in favor of a later disciple's mediating James's teaching to his own generation include: the address to the Jewish-Christian Diaspora, thought more natural after the dispersion of the Jerusalem church associated with the war with Rome; mastery of the Greek language, reflected in the use of catchwords, play-on-words, coined terms, and in exclusive use of the Septuagint; use of *Christos* as a name (2:1) rather than a title; rejection of a "misunderstood Paulinism" (2:14-26); and the late attestation of the letter (first cited by Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.16.2, in about AD 180). The preponderance of the evidence favors the theory of mediated authorship since that position is best able to accommodate the strengths of its alternative.

Genre and Coherence

James was apparently less concerned with presenting a clear genre signal than interpreters have been in discerning one, for his mixed signals are proverbial: James used an epistolary address and then dropped that form or at least played loosely with it; James used stinging diatribal style in chapters 2 and 3, but in chapters 1 and the conclusion of chapter 5 adopted a form nearer a collection of wisdom sayings; James appealed to scripture, sometimes with sensitivity to its larger context, but it does not seem as a whole to be a sustained exposition of scripture. Given the dissemination of

Outline of James

I. Living Lives of Integrity (1:1-27)
A. Salutation (1:1)
B. A New Perspective on Struggle (1:2-4)
C. A New Perspective on Prayer (1:5-8)
D. A New Perspective on the Poor and the Rich (1:9-11)
E. A New Perspective on God's Place in Trials (1:12-18)
F. A New Perspective on Integrity (1:19-25)
G. A New Perspective on Pure Religion (1:26-27)
II. Living Out the Royal Law (2:1-26)
A. A New Perspective on Partiality and Active Mercy (2:1-13)
B. A New Perspective on Faith and Works (2:14-26)
III. Displaying the Wisdom from Above (3:1-18)
A. A New Perspective on the Tongue (3:1-12)
B. A New Perspective on Wisdom's Source and Fruit (3:13-18)
IV. Living as Friends of God (4:1-17)
A. A New Perspective on Allegiances (4:1-10)
B. A New Perspective on Intra-Christian Conflict (4:11-12)
C. A New Perspective on Tomorrow: Opportunities for Gain or to Do Good (4:13-17)
V. Living Lives of Integrity (reprise) (5:1-20)
A. A New Perspective on Economic Injustice and Acquisitiveness (5:1-6)
B. A New Perspective on Endurance in the Struggle (5:7-11)
C. A New Perspective on Honest Speech (5:12)
D. A New Perspective on the Power of Prayer (5:13-18)
E. A New Perspective on Restoration (5:19-20)

Hellenism, the proximity of Nazareth to urban Sepphoris,[11] and his long-term residence in Jerusalem, James the Lord's brother could have written an epistle, diatribe, paraenesis, or sermon. A pseudonymous writer would likewise not have been limited to writing paraenesis or diatribe, since the letter format was widely used throughout the Greco-Roman world.

Concern for the apparent lack of cohesiveness and order of topics in James has motivated many genre proposals. [Outline of James] F. O. Francis proposed an epistolary structure.[12] J. H. Ropes found argumentation like in the diatribes.[13] M. Dibelius found no cohesiveness, which is exactly what he expected with paraenesis. Indeed, he prohibited reading James's admonitions in light of a particular social or literary context based on his understanding of this genre.[14] Those proposing some secret key in another text were similarly motivated by the desire for text coherence.[15] Perhaps E. Tamez's liberation perspective recognizes what coherence James has.[16] If so, past struggles to make sense of James were hindered by reading from a perspective of privilege rather than from that of the marginalized and oppressed: "Oppression and pain tends to make people feel depressed, to dehumanize them, to destroy not only their bodies but also their spirit, to make them see their oppression as normal and natural." Thus, James writes to challenge this self-destructive way of thinking and offer hope: "God has created men and women for life. So they have to lift themselves up, to resist the pain of oppression, to confront the unjust reality, which is not normal and natural. God is on their side and against the oppressors."[17] Although James's context was not identical with Tamez's Costa Rica, James's issues, such as the problem posed for those who trust God by the suffering of the just, bridge the world of the text and that of its faithful, modern interpreters.

Theology

James is one of the most theologically (as distinct from Christologically) dense and robust writings in the New Testament. James presents God as one, the very model of integrity (2:19). God is the Creator, the unchanging "Father of lights" (1:17), the giver of every good gift. God does not struggle with evil and is not the source of the evil against which the righteous struggle (1:13); rather evil takes root in self-centered human desires. God's will is to give birth to a new creation through the word of truth (1:18). God is the generous source of wisdom from above (1:5; 3:17) who gives to those who pray with undivided minds. God is the Lawgiver and Judge (4:12; 2:11), whose law liberates us from enslavement to selfish ambition to lives of loving service (2:12). Yet despite our failings in many ways (3:2), God is merciful and gracious to the humble (4:6); God is ready to be found by those who seek God with their whole hearts (4:7-10). God shows special concern for the poor, choosing them to be rich within the sphere of faith and heirs of God's kingdom (2:5; cf. 1:9, 4:6). God rewards those who stand firm in the struggle out of love for God (1:12). God befriends those who, as Abraham did, share God's active concern for those in need (2:23; cf. 4:4); such active, compassionate religion meets God's approval (1:27). Yet, for those who practice injustice and exploitation, God is Lord Sabaoth (5:4), who heeds the cries of the oppressed and comes speedily to their aid. God works for justice but does so apart from human anger (1:20; 3:18). God spoke through the prophets who challenged the injustices of their days "in the name of the Lord" (5:10). Job serves as an example of one who persevered and discovered God brought his story to a merciful and compassionate end (5:11). In a shrinking world in which interfaith dialogue among adherents of the great monotheistic faiths is needed, James serves as a witness to common roots and shared convictions of those who serve the one God.

Christology

S. Laws contended James "has no apparent interest in Jesus as a redeemer-figure."[18] Rather James views Jesus as Teacher, "present Lord whose authority is acknowledged in daily life," and "future judge."[19] For James, Christianity consists in fulfilling the commandments and instructions of the Lord, who will be the final Judge. Within the larger New Testament context, James functions as the probing question "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you?" (Luke 6:46). That is, James is a warning against a Christianity that neglects the role of Jesus as Teacher and

empties the term Lord of its meaning as one whose authority is acknowledged in daily life. Others have noted similar Christological emphases in Q, the Sermon on the Mount, and other literature.[20] Although James does not explicitly refer to Jesus as Teacher or identify traditional material as Jesus' teachings, James may view the "royal law" of neighbor love (2:8) as kingly because Jesus singled it out and because it epitomizes the ethics of the kingdom Jesus proclaimed.

Soteriology

Does salvation for James indeed consist in fulfilling the commandments and instructions of the Lord? James answers, "In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures" (1:18). Assuming these images of (re)generation and first fruits refer to salvation, the question remains: To what does the word of truth refer? This word is identical with "the implanted word that has the power to save your souls" (1:21). This word is one that must be welcomed, i.e., heard and practiced with meekness (1:21). Since the call to be doers of the word follows immediately upon this call to welcome the word with meekness, this charge is naturally a call to put this implanted word into practice in the believer's life (1:22). Indeed, welcoming or receiving the word involves becoming a doer of the word. Likewise, the perfect law, the law of liberty (1:25) is a functional equivalent of the implanted word in that one can be a doer of both. Later, James indicates the law of liberty is a standard for judgment that pertains to right speaking and doing (2:12). At the judgment, God blesses whoever contemplates that perfect law and goes on to become a doer of that word (1:25). Similarly, the do-nothing hearer is self-deceived (1:22) and will be found wanting at judgment (2:13-14, 16). James 5:19 warns that one can wander from the truth (and can be brought back). James does not seem to be talking about a doctrinal error but the departure from a way of life. Salvation for James is connected with restoration to this way of truth: "Whoever brings back a sinner from [his] wandering [way] will save the sinner's soul from death" (5:20).

The word of truth and its synonyms—the implanted word, the word, the perfect law, the law of liberty, and the truth—perhaps refers to the letter as a whole, and the tradition that stands behind it. This moral tradition with its many links to the sayings of Jesus must be received and practiced in meekness as a right way of speaking and doing, since it will be the basis for God's judgment. The letter thus prepares hearers for that judgment by clarifying the

James's Word of Truth and Paul's Gospel

James's "word of truth" can be taken as the gospel or *kerygma*, understood as the message of Jesus' saving death and resurrection, a message associated with Paul's epistles and the final form of the Gospels. That James can be so read and, thus, accommodated to the dominant theology in the age the canon was set, likely aided in James's acceptance by the wider (Gentile) church. Could Paul have spoken of doing the gospel as James speaks of doing the word? What Paul speaks of doing is "the law" (Rom 2:13,25,27; 8:4; Gal 6:13), "the whole law" (Gal 5:3), the "law of Christ" (Gal 6:2), and the command to love one's neighbor that is viewed as the summary of "the law" (Rom 13:8; Gal 5:14). If the "word of truth" and "the implanted word" are understood as a code of law, a body of moral teaching, this "word" can be done. Paul comes closest to this thought of Christianity as lived obedience to a code of conduct when he admonishes the Romans to fulfill the law by loving one's neighbors and the Galatians to fulfill the law of Christ by bearing one another's burdens.

criterion. The letter models restoration of sinners to the way of truth by instruction in the heavenly wisdom that they are called to practice (3:17). If Christianity for James consists primarily in adherence to a way of life before God, the Way that Jesus taught, then the letter serves as a handbook or epitome to this body of oral teaching. Perhaps this handbook was used in the training of new converts, perhaps as part of their baptismal catechesis or instruction. Perhaps the letter served as a church manual for restoration to the Christian community. [James's Word of Truth and Paul's Gospel]

NOTES

[1] Sophie Laws dubbed the Letter of James an oddity that is, nonetheless, "important in showing one form in which early Christianity made its initial appeal in the Roman world and one example of what conversion to Christianity might mean." She further noted that James's interpretation "may have been more widespread and influential in the early period than the epistle's now isolated position in the New Testament canon would suggest." *The Epistle of James* (HNTC; New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 138.

[2] John Painter, *Just James: The Brother of Jesus in History and Tradition* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 13.

[3] E.g., Mark's concern to downplay the twelve and the Jerusalem church and John's corresponding concern to exalt the Beloved Disciple. *Ibid.*, 15.

[4] Ibid., 17.

[5] Ibid., 33.

[6] Ibid., 42.

[7] Ibid., 44.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., 69-70.

[10] Ibid., 49.

[11] R. A. Batey, *Jesus and the Forgotten City: New Light on Sepphoris and the Urban World of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991); E. M. Myers, "Roman Sepphoris in Light of New Archeological Evidence and Recent Research" in *The Galilee in Late Antiquity*, ed. L. I. Levine (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 321-38; J. F. Strange, "Six Campaigns at Sepphoris: The University of South Florida Excavations, 1983-1989" (*The Galilee*, ed. L. I. Levine), 339-355.

[12] "The Form and Function of the Opening and Closing Paragraphs of James and I John," *ZNW* 61 (1970) 110-126.

[13] *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James* (ICC, New York: Scribner's, 1916).

[14] *James*, rev. H. Greeven, trans. M. A. Williams (*Hermenia*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) and the majority of modern interpreters.

[15] They understood James as: an onomastic allegory on the twelve patriarchs (A. Meyer, *Das Rätsel des Jakobusbriefes* [Giessen: Töpelmann, 1930]); as a community rule patterned after the Qumran Rule (D. L. Beck, "The Composition of the Epistle of James" Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1973); or as a midrash or series of midrashim on a Biblical text or texts (M. Gertner, "Midrashim in the New Testament," *JSS* 7 [1962] 267-292; A. Hanson, "Seminar Report on Working Group on `The Use of the Old Testament in the Epistle of James,'" *NTS* 25 [1978/79] 526; A. Blenker, "Jacobs brevs sammenhaeng," *DTT* 30 [1967] 193-202).

[16] Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James: Faith without Works Is Dead*, trans. John Eagleson (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992).

[17] Ibid., 74.

[18] Laws, *James*, 33. If Jesus is the Lord in Jas 5:14-15, however, Jesus is savior and healer to whom the community's prayer is now addressed. These dual roles are familiar to readers of the Gospels. That James does not refer to the passion/resurrection suggests James focused on Jesus as teacher/lawgiver and judge rather than (primarily) as crucified and risen Lord. If James was familiar with the passion/resurrection (as seems likely), the events probably functioned for James as grounds for accepting Jesus' roles as authoritative teacher, present Lord, and future judge of the community.

[19] Ibid.

[20] W. H. Kelber found a similar Christology in Q. *The Oral and Written Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 201. Dieter Betz has done so in the Sermon on the Mount. "An Episode in the Last Judgment" in *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount*, trans. L. L. Welborn (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 152. Earlier, Hans Wilhelm Bousset recognized such a Christology in 1 Clement, James, Barnabas, the Shepherd of Hermas, and 2 Clement. *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Earliest Christianity to Irenaeus*, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 387.

STRUGGLES OF THE FAITHFUL

James 1:1-27

COMMENTARY

Struggles of the Faithful, 1:1-27

Chapter 1 consists of a letter opening, followed by several units that on first glance appear only loosely tied together. [Outline of James 1:1-27] Chapters 2–4, however, develop themes introduced here that are recapped in chapter 5: resources for faith's struggle (1:2-8); God's place in the economic struggles of the poor and the eschatological trials of the rich (1:9-11); God's role in the inner struggle (1:12-18); and active engagement in the struggle for justice and mercy (1:19-27). In addition, two related pastoral concerns govern the choice and arrangement of materials here in chapter 1 and in the letter as a whole.

Outline of James Chapter 1:1-27

I. Letter Opening—1:1
II. Resources for Faith's Struggle—1:2-8
  A. Endurance and Maturity—1:2-4
  B. Prayer and Wisdom—1:5-8
III. God's Place in Struggles—1:9-18
  A. Struggles of the Poor and Rich—1:9-11
  B. Blessing on Those Enduring Struggle—1:12
  C. True Source of the Inner Struggle—1:13-16
  D. God's Good Gifts for the Struggling—1:17-18
IV. Actively Engaging in the Struggle—1:19-27
  A. Listening, Speaking, and Controlling Anger—1:19-20
  B. Mere Hearing versus Doing the Word—1:21-25
  C. Genuine Religion—1:26-27

First, James's concern is to restore wanderers to the way of truth (5:19-20); the varied instructions in the letter outline the demands of this way of life and expose common ways that disciples go astray. The letter encourages adherence to these moral demands by frequent appeal to consequences—rewards for obedience and punishment for lawbreakers.

Second, James's concern is for the oppressed poor, the victims of an unjust world and of the faith community's indifference; the letter repeatedly contrasts God's estimate of the poor with the world's devaluation of them. Since the church has adopted the world's perverse perspective, the letter urges believers to embrace God's valuation of the poor and to act with mercy towards the oppressed.

Which James?
New Testament documents often qualify commonly used names when misunderstanding was possible. Three common means of specification were: patronymics, i.e., references to one's paternity; epithets or nicknames; and mention of other family connections.

(1) Patronymics
- James, *son of Zebedee*—Mark 3:17
- James, *the son of Alphaeus*—Mark 3:18
- Simon *Barjona*, i.e., Simon *son of Jonah*—Matt 16:17 KJV

(2) Epithets
- James and John, the *Boanerges*, i.e., Sons of Thunder—Mark 3:17
- James, *the younger*—Mark 15:40
- Simon *Peter*, i.e. the Rock—Matt 16:7

(3) Other Familial Qualifiers
- John, *the brother of James*—Mark 3:17
- Jude, *the brother of James*—Jude 1

Georges de La Tour. *James the Lesser.* Musee Toulouse-Lautrec, Albi, France.

James of Jerusalem, the authority who addressed the Diaspora through this letter, required no introduction.

Though James (Gk. *Iakōbos,* lit. Jacob) was a common name among first-century Jews and Jewish-Christians, James is introduced without patronymic, epithet, or other qualifier; this James expected to be recognized immediately. [Which James?] Even if James, the half-brother of the Lord and leader of the Jerusalem church, was not the final author of this collection, he certainly remained the authority whose voice spoke for many early Jewish believers and who confronts us today with a somewhat different model of what it means to be Christian. The long English tradition of Anglicizing references to early Christians as *Jameses* rather than *Jacobs* has, intentionally or not, downplayed the Jewish roots of the church.

The author's self-effacing designation is "a servant." James may have wished to identify with the poor and marginalized in his audi-

ence. "Servant of God," however, can be a prophetic title; so James may be cast as God's champion on behalf of the poor and critic of their powerful, rich oppressors just as the earlier Hebrew prophets were. James stood in service both to God and to "the Lord Jesus Christ" (one of only two unambiguous references to Jesus in the letter; cf. 2:1). Given the letter's many links to the Gospel sayings traditions, James may have understood service to God precisely as that conduct demanded by Jesus teaching and by Jesus compassionate outreach to the downtrodden.

James the Lesser

El Greco. *Apostle St. James the Less.* 1606. Oil on canvas. Museo del Greco. Toledo.

The twelve tribes in the dispersion suggest the totality of the Jewish community scattered outside Palestine. [The Twelve Tribes] The ten tribes comprising the northern kingdom of Israel ceased to function as geopolitical units with the collapse of Samaria in 722 BC and the resulting deportation throughout the Assyrian realm. The twelve tribes, however, remained a powerful image of the (as-yet-to-be-restored) people of God. The reconstituted "twelve tribes" James addresses are an idealized community that hints at the eschatological context of his admonitions and to his concern for restoration of wanderers to the true way (5:19-20).

Here, the Diaspora refers to a far-flung Jewish-Christian community still comfortable with metaphors drawn from its Jewish roots and pressured by the wider Greco-Roman society whose values were antithetical to its own. [The Jewish Diaspora in the First Century] In John 7:35, Jesus antagonists ironically presage the Christian mission to "the Dispersion among the Greeks." In the remaining New Testament reference (1 Pet 1:1), "the Dispersion" may characterize the social position of the oppressed and suffering Christian communities rather than designate their ethno-religious back-

The Twelve Tribes

The New Testament reflects continuing awareness of tribal identity and the old tribal homelands. The prophetess Anna was of the tribe of Asher (Luke 2:36); Saul of Tarsus was of the tribe of Benjamin (Rom 11:1; Phil 3:15). Jesus left Nazareth and made Capernaum "in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali" his home (Matt 4:13). When relations with the Judeans soured Jesus retreated to Ephraim (John 11:12). Jesus contact with Samaritans (John 4; Luke 17:16), just as his Galilean and trans-Jordan ministries, can be understood as parts of an eschatological action of a mission to greater Israel (cf. Matt 4:14; 10:6; 15:24; 19:28).

The Jewish Diaspora in the First Century

In the early Christian era, Jewish communities were concentrated in the Eastern, Greek-speaking half of the Roman Empire, with additional clusters in central Italy and in Babylonia. The largest and most affluent expatriate Jewish community was in Egypt, where the synagogues exercised full internal autonomy. Their archons and edlers communicated regularly with Jerusalem leaders. The Italian Diaspora originated with slaves Pompey relocated after his campaign against Jerusalem (63 BC); conditions of this community beame favorable under Julius Caesar, Roman dictator (49–45 BC). The Babylonian Diaspora dates from the Exile (586 BC); these communities flourished under Parthan rule (c. 238 BC–AD 224). By and large, these Diaspora communities prospered but were dependent on Gentile authorities and anxious to peserve good relations with them.

ground.[1] James's audience likely would have faced anti-Semitism from Greeks and Romans, as well as economic injustices from merchants and landed aristocrats. Their financial problems were perhaps exacerbated by their own congregations' failure to serve as a means of social support for those in need (cf. 1:17; 2:15-16).

James employs the standard Hellenistic letter opening—*Greetings* (*chairein*)—in anticipation of his call to sheer joy (*charan*) in the struggle (1:2). English translations loose this wordplay and the conversational tone. [Greetings] James's "Greetings!" rather than the now-to-us familiar Pauline letter opening, "Grace and peace," perhaps hints that James has not come to bring us peace, but to stir things up in the church!

Greetings

ΑΩ *Chaire* was the common address on meeting people. BAG renders *chaire, chairete* as "welcome, good day," "I am glad to see you," "good morning," or even "hello." Paraphrases such as "I am glad to address you" or "I am glad to speak with you (through this letter)" capture the informality and provide the necessary tie-in to James's opening theme—joy in the struggle.

In 1:2, as elsewhere, James addresses the community of believers in warm, familial tones (*my brothers and sisters*, NRSV) reflecting solidarity with those struggling under oppression and his concern to encourage. Indeed, later James's address remains affectionate even as he exposes hypocrisies of partiality in the worshiping assembly (2:1ff.), of faith without active compassion (2:14ff.) and of praising God while cursing those (poor?) who are made in God's image (3:10; 2:7). James seems well aware of the destructive, divisive powers of the tongue (1:19,26; 3:6), and generally seeks to reign in his rhetoric even while offering sharp correction.

From the start, James's challenges his hearers to shift their perspective, to see things as God's trusted friends do (cf. 2:23; 4:4). That shift demanded of the Christian community is perhaps nowhere more surprising than in 1:2 where the command is to consider struggles nothing but an occasion for joy. From the world's vantage point, multifarious forms of oppression produce suffering not joy. Later, James specifies representative trials of the community's poor. [Representative Trials of James's Poor] For now, James does not clarify the nature of these trials rather he focuses on their assuredly positive outcome.

Those struggling will prevail because God provides the resources needed to withstand the test—determination, maturity, wisdom, prayer, and faith (1:2-8). [God's Role in Trials] James equips those facing hard trials with knowledge of how their journey will transform them into determined, mature believers who will discern what faithfulness demands and stand firm in God's cause (1:2-3). In using a military term for *holding one's position when under attack* (endurance, NRSV), James calls not for quiet resignation to trials, but rather active resistance in God's cause. [Determination] James does not here name the source of this joy-filled tenacity in the face of struggles. Later, James will credit God for every perfect gift (1:17). Here, James focuses on how "militant patience" transforms those

Representative Trials of James's Poor

- Disrespectful treatment at the hands of the worshiping assembly—2:2-4,6
- Empty "blessings" spoken on the hungry and ill-clothed—2:15-16
- Economic injustice in various forms, such as withheld wages and careless acquisitiveness—4:3,13; 5:2-5
- Miscarriages of legal justice, including acts of brutal violence—5:5:6; 4:2; cf. 2:6
- Severe illness (5:14-16) is not an exclusive concern of the community's poor but nevertheless affects poor, day-laborers particularly harshly since they would be unable to pay a physician (cf. Mark 5:26) and would not have reserves if they could not work for their daily bread.

God's Role in Trials

In contrast to popular theology, James does not credit God with sending trials for the purpose of moral education. For James, God is the giver of good gifts not the architect of evil (1:13,17), even if God brings good out of evils suffered (Rom 8:28; cf. 3:8). James does not explain the ultimate source of trials anymore than James explains why human will tends toward selfish desire (1:14; 4:1-5). Life is characterized by struggle, and human self-centeredness adds to the suffering.

Determination

Patience (KJV) is a misleading translation of *hypomonēn* (1:3-4). Elsa Tamez rendered *hypomonēn* variously but always actively: militant patience, steadfastness, and (borrowing from Martin Dibelius) heroic endurance. Elsewhere she noted "to be patient means to persevere, to resist, to be constant, unbreakable, immovable." Likewise, Clarence Jordan rendered *hypomonēn* actively as determination (CPV).

Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James: Faith without Works Is Dead* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 37, 74, 53.

Resistance
Will Campbell's memoir of the Nashville lunch counter sit-ins (13 February 1960) illustrates the wise, nonviolent resistance to oppression that James has in mind.

> The basic training was over, and this was not the first day of combat. But it was the first day these non-violent soldiers would be taken prisoner of war. Although it was a snowy February day in Nashville, the storm was not enough to keep the Saturday crowd at home. And not enough to keep the black students, assembled since early morning at Kelly Miller Smith's First Baptist Church, from their intentions—to send a delegation to all the variety and department stores lunch counters in the downtown area. . . . As soon as one group was arrested and hauled to jail in the paddy wagons, another group would be summoned to come from the church and take their seats at the counters and tables. Again and again. And so it went. As the white officers armed with pistols, billy clubs and handcuffs made arrest after arrest, they seemed irritated that there was no occasion to use force. . . . But these lawbreakers were sober, quiet, clean and well mannered. When told they were under arrest, they offered no resistance. They arose as a body and moved to the waiting paddy wagons, a phalanx of sacrifice, an oblation as foreign as Martians to men trained in the use of physical might. They were witnessing a power they had not seen before.

Will D. Campbell, *Forty Acres and a Goat* (Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers, LTD, 1986), 71.

standing up under the struggle; elsewhere, James urges steadfastness in certain hope of the in-breaking of God's rule within history (2:5; 5:7-8). This God-given determination to face struggles is joy-filled because heroic endurance in God's cause will "have its full effect," namely, "mature and complete" (1:4 NRSV) believers who stand firm when moral courage is required from persons of faith. [Resistance] Elsa Tamez noted standing firm with God against oppression is paradoxically "a humanizing process" for the oppressed: "In the very process of resisting dehumanizing forces,

the communities and their members are humanized."[2] Successful resistance is empowering and breeds hope of further change: "With hope we are moved to action. Hope not only keeps us afloat in oppressive situations, but it strengthens us to overcome these situations."[3]

Wisdom (understanding, discernment) is needed if one is to stand firm with God in the struggle but is often lacking. For James, wisdom is conceptual, contextual, and pragmatic; wisdom is an understanding of God's will and of the situation that translates into appropriate action. First, understanding entails reconceptualizing, rethinking familiar concepts such as *struggle* and *the poor*, revising flawed assumptions and values by adopting God's valuation. James reframes the struggles the community faced as opportunities for faith to mature and find expression in appropriate acts of courage and integrity; James reframes the poor as those honored by God (1:9), the rich in faith, and the heirs of God's kingdom (2:5). Second, understanding is context specific; for example, it entails seeing the given situation of struggle and deprivation through God's eyes rather than as "the world" sees and grasping what action the context demands from people of faith. Finally, understanding entails acting in ways appropriate to this new understanding; to fail to act consistently with this revised perspective is to be self-deceived. [Wisdom in James] If we see things as God sees them, if our hearts are stirred as God's is, we will take our rightful place in the struggle against oppression but should do so only using God's nonviolent means (1:19; 3:13,17-18; cf. 5:6).

Widsom in James

New Understanding	*Past Action(s)*	*Corrective Action(s)*
• God has chosen the poor for preferred treatment.	• The Christian community has dishonored the poor.	• The Christian community should respect the poor and address their physical needs.
• Mercy triumphs over judgment.	• The Christian community has not shown mercy to those in physical need.	• The community should show mercy through concrete acts that address basic human needs.
• Human anger does not bring about God's justice.	• Community members have spoken and acted out of anger.	• Community members should listen, avoid self-deception borne of self-interest, and respond to challenges in appropriate ways, e.g., via nonviolent resistance.
• God can bring good out of a trial; God rewards those who withstand trials; endurance under trials demonstrates love for God.	• Community members have despaired; trials have dehumanized the oppressed, who have accepted the world's negative judgment on their worth.	• Community members should strengthen their resolve, recognizing that God is for them.

Divine Generosity

AΩ The adverb *haplōs* (Jas 1:5) appears only here in the New Testament, although its cognates *haplous* and *haplotēs* appear in the Synoptics (Matt 6:22; Luke 11:34) and Pauline epistles (Rom 12:8; 2 Cor 1:12; 8:2; 9:11; 11:3; Eph 6:5; Col 3:22) respectively. Its precise sense is debatable and James may have chosen it because of its "multivalence." The immediate context favors the meaning *singly* in the sense of *without reservation* or *without division of will*, in contrast to the "double-minded person" who is unable to commit. A later passage on God's giving (Jas 1:17) lends weight to the second possible meaning, *generously, with liberality* or more expansively *out of pure generosity unmingled with any selfish interest*. This meaning also fits well with James's dual concerns that God's people model God's active concern for those in need (1:27; 2:15-16) and that they resist selfish ambition and self-indulgent desire (3:14; 4:1-3). A third possibility, *sincerely*, *openly*, *without hypocrisy*, fits well with James's emphasis on God's absolute integrity (as does the first proposed meaning). Again, God's sincerity contrasts with the hypocrisies of those congregations that confess faith in Christ and in the one God and yet dishonor the poor and disregard their appeals for assistance (Jas 2).

God is the model for generous (*haplōs*) giving, unhesitatingly equipping *all* who ask in faith, without discrimination. [Divine Generosity] Though God gives wisdom for the struggle without second thoughts, some who pray only do so with reservations. James calls such a petitioner an *anēr dipsychos*, literally a "double-minded person." Clarence Jordan called such a one a "fence-straddler" (CPV). Jordan here captures that the problem is being unable to commit whole-heartedly to God's movement rather than being uncertain. In the struggle for justice, those with divided allegiance find they are like waves driven and tossed by angry winds. Loyalties that compete with God direct them "any which way," and their half-hearted efforts for the right, such as they are, yield nothing because God does not bless "ambiguity, fickleness, and instability."[4] Martin Luther King Jr. addressed his letter from the Birmingham Jail to just such "fence-straddling" clergy who failed to sense the urgency of the quest for civil rights. Dr. King saw such silent friends of eventual change as a greater threat to the civil rights movement than hard-core segregationists. Elsa Tamez voiced similar concerns: Christians "should be sure of themselves, resolute, decisive. The author rejects shilly-shallying, for a community with indecisive members is doomed to failure."[5] In contrast to those living double lives, those approaching God *en pistei* (1:5), "with complete trust" (CPV) or with undivided loyalty, receive God-given wisdom necessary to stand firm.

Earlier, James commands his hearers to adopt a new perspective on struggle, to see trials as an occasion for sheer joy (1:2). In vv. 9-11 James challenges his audience to reevaluate their appraisals of themselves as poor and rich. The "lowly" (*tapeinos*, 1:9) are the

The Poor in James
James understands the poor to include:

- orphans and widows (1:27);
- those dressed in dirty clothes or else "naked" (2:2,15);
- those lacking daily food (2:15);
- those treated with contempt, even by the gathered Christian community (2:3,6);
- those who are poor in the world's eyes (2:5); and
- day laborers defrauded of their fair wages, who cry out to God for justice (5:4).

These "lowly" ones are not merely "poor in spirit"; they are not simply identified with the humble or pious whatever their economic status might be. These are truly poor; they are economically disadvantaged, often dependent on others' kindness, and often oppressed by those with economic clout who are concerned only with amassing fortunes and living the good life.

James's special concern is the poor among the believing community. These poor have an exalted status because they are:

- raised up to a dignified status by God (1:9);
- chosen by God to be rich in the sphere of faith and heirs of God's kingdom (2:5);
- counted among those who love God (2:5); the innocent who are slaughtered by the powerful even though they do not respond to violent oppression in kind (5:7);
- brothers and sisters, and thus the proper objects of the community's compassionate concern (2:15); and
- those crying out for justice to God who hears and responds (5:4).

impoverished who are invisible to the economic powers who oppress them. [The Poor in James] God sees their plight, however, and elevates them to new status. James does not say that the poor brother "will be rich, but rather exalted, that is, raised up to the dignified level of a human person and recognized as a preferred creature of God."[6] Within the Hebrew Bible, "the poor are poor generally because they are oppressed and exploited; the oppressed are the impoverished."[7]

The Greek text does not repeat *adelphos,* "brother," in 1:10. Thus, it remains unclear whether James includes the rich man within the family of faith. [Rich Man or Rich Brother?] The command to these rich to boast "in being brought low" is likely an ironic warning of coming judgment (cf. 5:1-6) rather than a harsh call to repentance (cf. 4:1-10). The reversal in status of rich and poor here envisioned may be eschatological: "at the end of time the oppressed will be favored; therefore, they rejoice in anticipation of that new order."[8] Alternately, this transformed status may be realized already within that believing community that welcomes the poor as valued assets and accepts the rich as "just plain people." James, however, was well aware how the believing community has frequently dis-

Rich Man or Rich Brother?

AΩ James employs similarly ambiguous grammar at 3:15, where he does not repeat the noun *wisdom* when characterizing that self-serving understanding that threatened the community's peace. There the omission seems deliberate; such an understanding is not wisdom and certainly not that from above. Most English translators have left James's meaning in 1:10 ambiguous as well. Two exceptions are the *Good News Bible*, which has "rich Christians," and probably *The Message*, which has "arrogant rich." Tamez counseled, "in the text of James, the rich are a stigma, just as the poor (*ptochos*) are for an unjust society" (*The Scandalous Message of James: Faith without Works Is Dead* [New York: Crossroad, 1992], 48).

paraged their poor while courting the sometimes hostile rich (Jas 2). James's overall context favors reading this call for the rich to celebrate their devaluation as a message of judgment. [Withered Flowers] Knowing that the rich and powerful will soon perish and that God remains forever unchanged, the rich ought to embrace kingdom values (2:8), including respect for the poor. However, James's expectation is that the rich "will fail completely in their pursuits, namely, their business dealings." Such are "precisely the cause of their ruin since usually they are rooted in injustice and the desire for gain."[9]

Withered Flowers

The image of quickly wilting wildflowers (from Isa 40:6-8) recurs in the Hebrew Bible as a metaphor for transitory life (cf. Jas 4:14). For Isaiah, what remains forever is God's word, which in context is God's hope-filled message of return for the oppressed exiles.

James returns to the note of confident joy in the struggle with the beatitude of 1:12 (cf. 1:2-4). Persons can endure almost anything if they know there will be an end to their suffering or know there is a reason for it.[10] Here, James offers both sources of reassurance—the struggle is temporary; those who of love for God stand firm out till the end will have their reward, "the crown of life." [Struggle] The reward promised to the victors is "life itself, good, lasting, eternal, different from the past."[11] This promised life is God's gift to those who love God. In context, these divine lovers are those who endure trials: for the love of God they engage in the struggle for justice and resist oppression, as an expression of their faith they make common cause with the defenseless and desperately needy (1:27; 2:15-16).

Struggle

AΩ *Peirasmos* can refer to an inner, spiritual struggle—the KJV translates it *temptation/s* in both 1:2 and 12—or to struggles with external forces opposed to God's coming kingdom. Most modern versions translate the term as *trial/s* in both contexts (so RSV, NASB, NEB, NIV); however, the NRSV follows the KJV tradition (*temptation*) here in v. 12. Jordan rendered *nos hypomonei peirasmon* as one "who doesn't yield to compromise" (CPV).

James's understanding of God's place in our struggles is at odds with some folk theology. Earnest believers sometimes repeat thoughts, such as "God never puts more on you than you can bear," or else warn, "Don't pray for patience" out of fear for what trial God will send to teach patience endurance. James, however, contends God *never* sends evil (1:13)! In contrast to double-minded disciples (1:6-8) and to the changing

heavens (1:17), God is faithful both to God's own gracious, self-giving character and to God's beloved. We are not God's offspring by accident; God birthed us in keeping with God's single-minded loving purpose. In James's understanding of God we hear echoes of Jesus' teachings—believers should not fear to ask God's assistance (Jas 1:5; cf. Matt 7:7-8); like a loving parent, God gives only good gifts (Jas 1:17; cf. Matt 7:9-11).

The inner battle is rooted in our own self-centered desires. James describes such desires as an almost irresistible lure that baits us like dumb animals. Once we bite, the natural history of desire plays out: with our cooperation, self-centered desire conceives and births sin; and once mature, sin spawns death (1:14). God, however, stands outside of this natural progression of desire, sin, and death, as the one who is not tempted (to be self-centered) nor tempts anyone (1:13). Rather, God models other-centeredness; indeed, James teaches that all giving originates in God, who is always and forever the great giver (1:17). From the good gifts of the first creation, to God's liberating acts on behalf of Israel, to God's self-giving in the Christ-event, God shares freely and without discrimination. Furthermore, God is responsible for a competing progression: according to God's loving purpose, God births believers through the word of truth (1:18); once birthed, these first fruits of new creation offer promise to all. Earlier in this unit, James identified this promise as "the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him" (1:12). So for those who deny themselves out of love for God and whole-heartedly join in the struggle for justice, self-centered desire and its spawn, death, will not have the final word rather God's creative and regenerative purpose will. As first fruits, James's community is tangible evidence of the in-breaking of God's gracious rule. As such, disciples ought to pattern their own behavior after God's model of gracious, indiscriminate giving: "To know that God acts with integrity and then not act like God is useless."[12]

In 1:19-25 James urges a new perspective on integrity. James offers guidance for those seeking justice—beware, for human anger does not produce God's justice (1:20). [God's Justice] Clarence Jordan's rendering, "a man's temper contributes nothing to God's cause," calls to mind Mohandas Ghandi's and Martin Luther King Jr.'s practice of nonviolent resistance. Deaf to cries for human retaliation, James offers another way out of conflict: listen to the other, do not interrupt, wait your turn to speak (1:19). Turn the critical gaze inward, first radically reform your own life, and accept the word with power to save lives (1:21).

God's Justice

In the aftermath of the September 11th attacks, the Pentagon initially dubbed the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan "Operation Infinite Justice." Bowing to criticism from many religious leaders that God alone could dispense infinite justice, the Pentagon opted for the less presumptive "Enduring Freedom" as the moniker for the fall 2001 campaign.

James calls on believers to be persons of integrity, just as God is the one without "variation or shadow due to change" (1:17). In particular, James demands that those who have heard God's word act out the truth they have heard read aloud in worship. In ethics, knowing what is the right thing to do or even why that course is morally correct is insufficient; the ethical person not only knows what is right and why it is right, but also does the right thing, even when doing so demands moral courage.

The mirror does not lie, but not all who glimpse themselves act on what they have seen; too many quickly forget what they looked like. [Ancient Mirrors] Likewise, Scripture reveals what we are like—ephemeral as a wildflower (1:10), grand as the image of God (3:9), morally responsible (4:17), blessed despite struggles (1:12; 2:5). The wise not only take these lessons to heart but incorporate these life lessons in their doings.

James's second beatitude is for those "doers who act" (1:25); the promise is that "they will be blessed in their doing." Frederick Buechner has described vocation as the place God calls you to be "where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."[13] Precisely in the course of acting on what has been heard—by loving one's neighbor as oneself (2:8), do active believers find joy.

James closes chapter 1 with a challenge of a new perspective on religion (1:26-27), that at once looks back on the demand to be doers of the word (1:22,25) and anticipates the call to active concern for the poor in chapter 2.

James offers two tests by which the worth and purity of one's religion can be assayed. The first is the test of a bridled tongue, that is, of controlled speech (1:26). James warns that those who lash out with angry words (1:19) or bad-mouth one another (4:11; 5:9) are self-deceived. Those merchants who boast of a future under their control (4:13-16) are similarly deceived. The second test is that of active compassion towards those who are from the "world's" perspective of no account (1:27).

Orphans and widows represent those poor, oppressed, and exploited ones who are unable to rescue themselves from their harsh circumstances. To "visit them" is not to pay a social call but to intervene in their lives, as God visited the Hebrew slaves in

Ancient Mirrors

Relief of an aristocratic woman in a wicker chair attended by four servants, one holding a mirror. From a grave monument from Neumagen, third century AD. Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Trier, Germany.

In the New Testament world mirrors were a luxury item. Highly polished bronze mirrors were labor intensive products; "high end" end mirrors were fashioned from silver and often featured elaborate gilded decoration. James's appeal to the image of the mirror may be a subtle jab at those rich enjoying consumptive lifestyles. They (or their servants) adjust their hair based on what they see in the mirror but they do not see themselves in the scripture's call to adjust their lives to sow active concern for those in need.

Relief of an aristocractic woman in a wicker chair attended by four servants, one holding a mirror. From a grave monument in Neumagen. 3rd C. AD. Rheninisches Landesmuseum. Germany.

Egypt, upsetting the powers that oppressed them and setting them free. James defines religion that matters as visiting and helping orphans and widows, that is, "spending time with them, joining them in their oppression, and sharing basic necessities with them."[14] James's sense of justice is not a dispassionate requirement for equality rather a caring advocacy for those in need for whom the Christian community has special responsibility. James is concerned for the poor and vulnerable and 'leans' in their direction; in James's view Christians owe these least fortunate more; in James's experience, the rich can and do fend for themselves.

The "world" represents "the institutions, the structures, and the value system that promote injustice or are indifferent to it."[15] The "world" confuses having with being, and thus encourages acquisitiveness rather than solidarity with those in need. For James, as for Jesus, life does not consist in getting and grasping more and more; all worth comes as a gift from God, who has birthed James's community, giving them new life and a new status as "first fruits," whether they be sisters or brothers in need of food and clothing or else those with the means to assist those "family members" in need. "Keeping oneself uncontaminated by the world" means not conforming to the twisted, dehumanizing values of society at large:

"Christian communities must the avoid accommodation to this unjust system and not fall into the trap laid by its value system."[16] As Tamez has noted:

> Our contemporary value systems are backwards. For people today, perfection is linked to success, competition, and excelling at the expense of others. For James, it is the opposite; for him it is to attend to the needy in order to be consistent with what we believe and what we read in the Bible.[17]

For James, believers display pure religion when they do not buy into the world's dismissive estimate of the underprivileged but care for them as those especially loved by God (cf. 1:9; 2:5). Those whose love and faith compels them to merciful action toward those pressed down in the struggle find that by this active care their own faith is brought to maturity and integrity (1:5) and shows evidence of being alive (2:17,26).

CONNECTIONS

Poor "Somebodies"

James's command, "Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up" by God (1:9) resounded often during the 1960s civil rights struggle. James echoed from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, as Martin Luther King Jr., challenged America to live up to the words of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal." James's command to the poor to appreciate their worth to God reverberated during the civil rights struggle in Memphis through Bishop Henry Starkes' oft-repeated message to those suffering oppression, "You *are somebody*." James command to the poor to reassess their worth was heard again in April 1968, when striking sanitation workers in Memphis carried signs that proclaimed, "I AM A MAN." Those working poor had to proclaim that good news of their own worth and contribution to the community because "city hall" had refused to acknowledge them at the bargaining table. Only Dr. King's assassination exposed the powers and created an opportune time for a just resolution to the workers' grievances. Again we hear echoes of James: "You have

Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike
Working poor proclaim their human worth.

condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you" (5:6).

How are poverty and oppression linked today? Many labor full-time at minimum wage and nevertheless find themselves with annual incomes well beneath the federal poverty level. Livable wage campaigns seek to redress this injustice. Some of these working poor labor in states that demand that they pay state income tax. In 2003, efforts to revise the Alabama tax code to offer relief for the working poor from disproportionate burdens were defeated, in part because of vocal opposition from a "conservative" Christian lobbying group, and even more so because of ignorance, disinterest, or perceived conflict with self-interest of many Alabama Christians. Many laborers work for employers who are careful to schedule them just shy of full-time hours so that they can skirt laws requiring employer contributions to health care insurance or retirement benefits. Undocumented aliens often labor long hours under dangerous conditions for less than minimum wage, all the while in fear of being reported to Immigration.

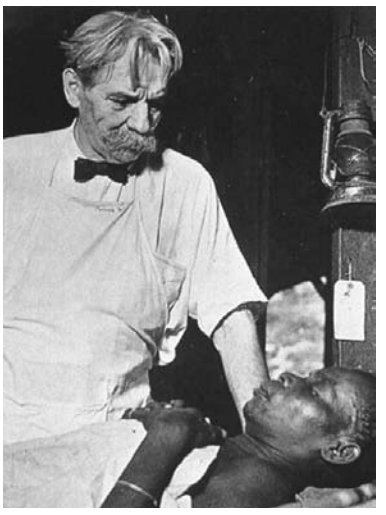
James seems unaware that some rich might make common cause with the poor, ceasing to be rich in things as they expend their resources in single-minded demonstrations of mercy (1:10-11). Such was the case with Millard and Linda Fuller's founding of Habitat for Humanity. Their action of selling all they had and giving the proceeds to the poor (cf. Mark 10:21) was not that of

Koinonia Farm
Clarence Jordan putting faith to work.

double-minded persons, rather it was done in faith by those wholly committed to pursuing God's will for themselves and God's justice for others (Jas 1:6-8). Such was also the case with Clarence and Florence Jordan's founding of Koinonia Farm. Their action of demonstrating that Christian persons, black and white, could work side-by-side for equal pay as true partners, could eat side-by-side at one table of fellowship, and could search the Scriptures side-by-side under one shady tree were acts of those who understood that Christian faith is incompatible with discrimination (Jas 2:1).

But what of us haves who nevertheless desire to live out our faith all the while conforming to our self-indulgent society? James leaves us with a lingering disquiet: can we live as Christians *and* be rich in a world of such pressing needs? Can we remain comfortable *and* exhibit unadulterated loyalty to God's cause? It was far easier to read James's letter as a seminarian serving a poor inner-city congregation than it is to read it as a homeowner with a well-paying job, health insurance and a retirement plan.

Making My Life My Argument



Albert Schweitzer
Albert Schweitzer doing the word.

During a BBC interview late in his life, Albert Schweitzer, renowned organist, pioneering New Testament scholar, and medical doctor, was asked why he left his privileged life in Germany to slave at the Lambaréné mission hospital buried in the jungles along the Ogowe river, deep in the Belgian Congo. He replied, "I have decided to make my life my argument."

As people of faith, we listen for God's voice to discern what will make our lives matter. James defines "real religion" in terms of living a life that makes a difference, specifically making a difference for those who lack the power to change much by themselves (Jas 1:27). Real religion makes you see others as God sees them, and makes you demonstrate active care for them as God does. The world takes a different view towards the overlooked, underestimated, passed-by, stepped-on

people; in the world's eyes, such folk are expendables, no names, no accounts, just statistics. Those whose religion has been spotted by the world's perspective don't make eye contact with the needy, don't give them a second thought, nor offer them a helping hand. Those with world-spotted religion may be important figures in their congregations or in the political arena but pass by the wounded from the far side of the road and never risk getting involved. Their religion is dead; their hearts are cold; their faith profits no one.

Now, those who see with God's eyes and feel with God's heart serve as God's hands. In James's context, "to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction" means "to rescue" them from (or at least stand in solidarity with them in) their oppressive circumstances. God once heard the cries of Hebrew slaves weighed down by state-sponsored terrorism in the twin forms of forced labor and the horrific genocide of the Hebrews' male children that threatened to rob the community of its future. When God "visited" them God intervened in their story in a powerful way that exchanged slavery to Pharaoh for freedom to serve the Living God. God's 'visit' led undocumented aliens to a new home of their own. Those freed, homebound slaves knew abundant life because God had visited them and made a difference in their lives. And they sang for joy.

James uses "the fatherless and widows" as shorthand for all the overlooked, underestimated, passed by, stepped on 'little people' who do not have the strength to rescue themselves from all that enslaves them. Such people populate our communities though they may be invisible to the privileged.

• An HIV-positive patient lacks insurance coverage for life-prolonging medications her doctor has prescribed. Alienated from her family and church, she is fearful and alone. [Samaritan Ministry]

• A preschooler has no one at home to read to him; his hardworking mother is one late rent payment away from homeless-

Samaritan Ministry

Central Baptist Church Bearden's Samaritan Ministry demonstrates how a local congregation can reach out to those affected by HIV and AIDS. Ministries include:

- regular grocery "rounds";
- First Tuesday, a monthly gathering for food, prayer and support;
- a Thanksgiving dinner, held the week before the holiday, at which church members share table fellowship with those living with HIV/AIDS;
- a community service of remembrance and hope, coinciding with world AIDS day; and
- holiday "buckets of hope," stuffed with self-care items and sweets, distributed through a local clinic.

For more information on the Samaritan Ministry, see <http://www.cbcbearden.org/samaritan3.html>.

Children's Defense Fund

We can and must build a nation where families have the support they need to make it at work and at home; where every child enters school ready to learn and leaves on the path to a productive future; where babies are likely to be born healthy, and sick children have the health care they need; where no child has to grow up in poverty; where all children are safe in their communities and every child has a place to call home—and all Americans can proudly say, "We Leave No Child Behind."

From the Children's Defense Fund website, <http://www.childrensdefense.org/about/default.asp>.

ness. A child victim of physical or sexual abuse is 'acting out' in school or at church. A toddler sleeps on the backseat of a daycare van unnoticed by a driver already late for his second job; the forecast calls for 90 degrees. [Children's Defense Fund]

Families to Families

Family-to-Family is a nonprofit organization dedicated to connecting families with more to families with less: "The program creates a bridge between upscale suburban communities and some of our country's most impoverished areas." Family-to-Family is a hands-on ministry: "members welcome the concrete responsibility of shopping for, packing, and sending a carton of fundamental necessities to a family they 'adopt.'" Since November 2002, Family-to-Family members in Hastings-on-Hudson, New York (1999 per capita income of $48,914) have sent more than 10 tons of food to residents of Pembroke, Illinois (per capita income of $9,642).

For more information on Family-to-Family, see their website, <http://www.family-to-family.com/about.htm>.

Living Wage Campaigns

Living-wage laws "set higher minimum wages for the employees of companies benefiting from public contracts, subsidies, or actions, and in some cases also for direct government employees. Living-wage laws prevent the use of public dollars to create poverty-wage jobs."

From the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) website, <http://www.acorn.org/index.php?id=42>.

• An undocumented alien who has traveled two thousands miles, mostly on foot, in search of a better life and in hope of sending money home to his hungry family, finds himself too sick to work and unable to speak English.

• A young father with a full-time, minimum-wage job finds his best efforts at supporting his family yields a salary about one-half the federal poverty line. What would a visit mean to him in his discouraging situation? [Families to Families] [Living Wage Campaigns]

• An older adult woman roasts in summer heat without air conditioning, afraid to raise her window for threat of a break-in. A colleague is grieving the loss of her spouse, trying to be strong for her children, and overcome by sadness each day as she works.

James calls us to look around us for the needy who cannot help themselves. God has not forgotten them; indeed, "God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom God promises to those who love him" (2:5). God cares for the needy, and the religion that God approves does not leave them forgotten. Pure and undefiled religion sees the other as a brother or sister who merits our active love, not just our weak sentiment. Pure and undefiled religion sees the stranger dying by the roadside as my neighbor, as my responsibility.

Real Religion

John Greenleaf Whittier (1807–1892) was a Quaker poet, ardent abolitionist, and a founder of the Republican Party. His "O Brother Man!" (1848) reflects his Quaker disdain for external trappings of religiosity, his commitment to peacemaking, and his reformer's zeal

O Brother Man!

The Pagan's myths through marble lips are spoken,
And ghosts of old Beliefs still flit and moan
Round fane and altar overthrown and broken,
O'er tree-grown barrow and gray ring of stone.

Blind faith had martyrs in those old high places,
The Syrian hill grove and the Druid's wood,
With mothers offering, to the Fiend's embraces,
Bone of their bone, and blood of their own blood.

Red altars, kindling through that night of error,
Smoked with warm blood beneath the cruel eye
Of lawless power and sanguinary terror,
Throned on the circle of a pitiless sky;

Beneath whose baleful shadow, over-casting
All heaven above and, and blighting earth below,
The scourge grew red, the lip grew pale with fasting,
And man's oblation was his fear and woe!

Then through great temples swelled the dismal moaning
Of dirge-like music and sepulcral prayer;
Pale wizard priests, o'er occult symbols droning,
Swung their white censors through the burdened air:

As if in the pomp of rituals, and the savor
Of gums and spices could the Unseen One please;
As if his ear could bend, with childish favor,
To the poor flattery of the organ keys!

Feet red from war fields trod the church aisles holy,
With trembling reverence: and the oppressor there,
Kneeling before his priest, abased and lowly,
Crushed human hearts beneath his knee of prayer.

Not such the service the benignant Father
Requireth at His earthly children's hands:
Not the poor offering of vain rites, but rather
The simple duty man from man demands.

For Earth he asks it: the full joy of heaven
Knoweth no change of waning or increase;
The great heart of the Infinite beats even,
Untroubled flows the river of His peace.

He asks no taper lights, on high surrounding
The priestly altar and the saintly grave,
No dolorous chant nor organ music sounding,
Nor incense clouding up the twilight nave.

For he whom Jesus loved hath truly spoken:
The holier worship which he deigns to bless
Restores the lost, and binds the spirit broken,
And feeds the widow and the fatherless!

Types of our human weakness and sorrow!
Who lives unhaunted by his loved ones dead?
Who with vain longing, seeketh not to borrow
From stranger eyes the home lights which have fled?

O brother man! Fold to thy heart thy brother;
Where pity dwells, the peace of God is there;
To worship rightly is to love each other,
Each smile a hymn, each kindly deed a prayer.

Follow with reverent steps the great example
Of him whose holy work was 'doing good';
So shall the whole earth seem our Father's temple,
Each loving life a psalm of gratitude.

Then shall all shackles fall; the stormy clangor
Of wild war music o'er the earth shall cease;
Love shall tread out the baleful fire of anger,
And in its ashes plant the tree of peace!

John Greenleaf Whittier, "O Brother Man!" (1848)

for solidarity with the oppressed. [O Brother Man!] James's letter echoes in Whittier's critique of worship practices across the centuries:

• God is "the benignant Father" (cf. God as the Source of "every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift," Jas 1:17);

• God "Knoweth no change of waning or increase" (cf. "with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change," Jas 1:17);

• God "asks no taper lights, on high / Surrounding the priestly altar" (because God is "the Father of Lights," Jas 1:17);

• "The holier worship which he deigns to bless / Restores the lost" (cf. Jas 5:19-20);

• "And feeds the widow and the fatherless" (cf. "to care for orphans and widows in their affliction," Jas 1:27);

• "Who with vain longing, seeketh not to borrow / From stranger eyes the home lights which have fled/" (cf. "Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God," Jas 4:4).

Whittier's harsh words regarding organ music, chants, and deadening prayers take issue with the worth of the church's worship, whether traditional or contemporary praise. True worship does not take place at hill-top shrines, cavernous cathedrals, or arena-sized 'worship centers.' For Whittier as for James, real religion consists in simple caring for those in need, whether their needs are spiritual or basic physical needs. If the worship hour does not equip God's people for ministry in the 'mission field' outside the church house, worship has lost touch with what God deigns worthwhile.

Whittier's harshest rhetoric points at those who kill in the name of religion, whether they be pagan Druids or Christian Crusaders. If the worship place becomes a "den of thieves" to which modern Crusaders retreat in blood-stained boots, seeking absolution from war crimes, believers are deceived regarding God's demands on their lives. If the mosque becomes a forum for plotting murder of noncombatants, believers are deceived regarding the will of the "Merciful and Compassionate." James likewise regards peacemaking as the appropriate action of those professing faith in the one true God and demonstrating that wisdom from above (3:17-18). James views wars and other human conflict as rooted in human selfishness (4:1-2) rather than in God's will.

NOTES

[1] Elsa Tamez applied John Elliott's sociological (and metaphorical) reading of *Diaspora* in 1 Peter to James: "Those of the dispersion are the Christian communities who are outcast and despised in the societies where they live. The majority are poor or very poor" (*The Scandalous Message of James: Faith without Works Is Dead* [New York: Crossroad, 1992], 35). As other liberation theologians do, Tamez typically opts for a literal reading of texts the church has "spiritualized" throughout Christian history. Here, such a literal reading would take the audience as Diaspora Jews (or Jewish-Christians), many of whom were outcast and despised not only because of their marginal social standing, but also because of their religious identity. See also John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981).

[2] Tamez, *Scandalous Message*, 57-58.

[3] Ibid., 34.

[4] Ibid., 59.

[5] Ibid., 56.

[6] Ibid., 42.

[7] Ibid., 18.

[8] Ibid., 39.

[9] Ibid., 42.

[10] Wayne Oates, reflecting on Victor Frankel's work.

[11] Tamez, *Scandalous Message*, 40.

[12] Ibid., 61.

[13] Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 95.

[14] Tamez, *Scandalous Message*, 21-22.

[15] Ibid., 62.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid., 86-87.

LIVING OUT THE ROYAL LAW

James 2:1-26

COMMENTARY

Living Out the Royal Law

In chapter 2 James returns to themes introduced in chapter 1: the measure of one's religion is the mercy one shows to the most vulnerable (1:27; cf. 2:13-17); hearing alone is insufficient; disciples must do the word (1:22-25; cf. 2:8,14-26); and God has elevated the poor to a new status so the family of faith should esteem the poor (1:9-11; cf. 2:5). Here, James weaves these familiar notes into a new composition centered on fulfilling the royal law of love for one's neighbor (2:8-13). Both partiality toward the rich (2:1-7) and inaction in the face of desperate need (2:14-26) violate this royal law of love. [Outline of James 2:1-26]

James first addresses the inconsistency between the worshiping assembly's public confession of faith in Christ as glorious Lord (2:1) and the same assembly's public humiliation of the poor who have come to share in the service (2:2-3). [Synagogue] The title "our glorious Lord" suggests the now resurrected and exalted Christ. If this Christ was

Outline of James 2:1-26

I. Partiality and Faith (2:1-7)
- A. Incompatibility of Faith and Favoritism (2:1)
- B. Discrimination in the Worshiping Assembly (2:2-4)
- C. Arguments against Discrimination (2:5-7)
  - 1. God honors the Poor (2:5)
  - 2. The rich oppress and blaspheme (2:6-7)

II. The Royal Law Demands Mercy (2:8-12)
- A. The law of neighborly love (2:8)
- B. Partiality is incompatible with the law of neighbor love (2:9-12)
- C. Mercy is the criterion for judgment (2:13)

III. Demonstrable Faith (2:14-26)
- A. "Faith" Neglecting Mercy (2:14-17)
  - 1. Worthless "faith" (2:14)
  - 2. The neglect of mercy (2:15-16)
  - 3. Dead "faith" (2:17)
- B. "Faith" Devoid of Works (2:18-19)
  - 1. The inseparability of faith and works (2:18)
  - 2. Demonic "faith" (2:19)
- C. Faith at Work
  - 1. Barren faith (2:20)
  - 2. Abraham's example (2:21-23)
    - a. Abraham's vindication (2:21)
    - b. Cooperating and completed faith (2:22)
    - c. Abraham's vindication: the "just" and "the friend of God" (2:23)
  - 3. The vindication of faith that works (2:24)
  - 4. Rahab's example (2:25)
  - 5. Dead faith exposed (reprise) (2:26)

Synagogue

AΩ James here uses the word *synagogue* for the Jewish-Christian assembly or its meeting house (2:2); later James uses the term *church* for the local congregation (5:14). James's mixed usage suggests communities that are comfortable with their Jewish roots and identity.

known to treat the poor with mercy and respect how much more so should self-professed believers follow that example (cf. Phil 2:5-11). By acting on class-based distinctions that God does not make and that Jesus did not make during his earthly ministry, the assembly belies their professed faith; they do not act like God's people or followers of the Christ. [Faith of Christ]

Faith of Christ

AΩ "The faith of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ" (KJV) can be taken as a subjective genitive—i.e., the faith that Jesus displayed—or as an objective genitive—faith in Jesus (NASB, NRSV).

Apparently, the local congregation has bought into the world's perverted values (2:4), reflected in the worshiping assembly's discriminatory seating practice. The richly clad guest is politely escorted to the best seat in the assembly; [Gold Ring] the visitor in soiled work clothes or the tatters of the homeless receives a dismissive, "Stand there" or "Sit on the floor." The command to the poor guest is literally to "sit under my feet," an invitation suggesting the public humiliation of vanquished foes (Ps 110:1). God's kingdom, however, belongs to the poor (Jas 2:5; Matt 5:3) and the poor belong in the kingdom; the ongoing life of the gathered assembly should reflect this reality. Currying the favor of the rich and powerful, who are presumed to be in a position to reward those seeking their patronage, while treating the poor as if they do not belong in the kingdom community, reveals that the assembly has been stained by the world's values (Jas 1:27). Covetous desire is their motive (Jas 4). [Judges with Evil Thoughts] Rather than holding fast to their professed faith with integrity, these 'ushers' have become judges who render decisions based on outward appearances rather than the facts of the case. For James the relevant facts are these:

Gold Ring

James describes the rich guest as *chrysodactylios*, literally "gold fingered" (2:2). Wearing of gold rings was a sign of high social status. James perhaps has in mind members of the Roman equestrian rank, those aristocrats ranked just below the landed Senators. The equestrians formed the business class, the money lenders and tax gatherers.

Illustration of a gold ring from Tarsus. 200–300 AD.

Judges with Evil Thoughts

R. B. Ward has suggested that the assembly in question may have been gathered as an ecclesiastical court (cf. Matt 18:15-20; 1 Cor 5:3-5; 6:2-4). In that case, those judges who tolerate discrimination in the seating of litigants or in their courtroom dress are perverting justice. James likely intends this example to be understood as a worship meeting and the judgments made to be the sort common in social settings. The critique of the rich in Jas 2:6 suggests that the court that they resort to is one outside the assembly rather than a congregational court.

R. B. Ward, "Partiality in the Assembly," *Harvard Theological Review* 62 (1969): 87-97.

• God has chosen the poor to be rich within the realm of faith and heirs of the kingdom (2:5);

• what the assembly can anticipate from the rich are court dates and public ridicule of Christ's name (2:6-7) rather than favors; and

• discrimination against the poor is unloving (2:8), unlawful (2:9), and unwise, given the criteria for God's judgment—that we display mercy (2:13a).

James's prohibition of favoritism in the assembly does not mean that God is strictly impartial; indeed, God has shown preference for the poor, who have been chosen to be rich within the sphere of faith and heirs of God's kingdom (2:5). The poor James has in mind are totally dependent on others' alms. Though "nobodies" from the world's vantage point, these poor who love God are nevertheless "somebodies" from the perspective of faith; they are rich heirs of God's promises. The worshiping assembly stands to gain from these poor who know about faith proven in hard struggle, who demonstrate love for God by caring for their own, and who hope that God will intervene on their behalf. The assembly ought to emulate God, welcome these poor as God has embraced them, and address their physical needs as agents of God who is their protector. Such respectful and caring practice would demonstrate "pure and undefiled religion" (1:27). Instead, the assembly caters to the rich, adopting the world's values—you are what you have; your value is measured by your net worth. Such worldly favoritism is unwise. In James's experience, the worshiping assembly can expect little more from the rich than a court appointment where the rich will use their pull to satisfy their self-centered

The Excellent Name

"The excellent name that was invoked over you" (2:7) likely refers to baptism in the name of Jesus (cf. Acts 8:16; 10:48; 19:5). Speaking a name over something expresses ownership. The general sense seems to be this: acts of discrimination and oppression against poor brothers and sisters reflect a failure to discern that excellent name that gives them an esteemed status. We should be one because we belong to one Lord; we should not make distinctions among ourselves because we share "one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (Eph 4:5-6).

desires and a public ridiculing of the Christ who is closely identified with those (poor) who bear his name (2:6-7). [The Excellent Name]

The measure of the assembly's treatment of guests, whether rich or poor, is the royal law of neighbor love (2:8). This law is "royal" because it is the king's law or the kingdom law. For those submitting to the rule laid down by "our glorious Lord Jesus Christ" this law holds sway (Matt 19:19; 22:39). Members of the worshiping assembly are invited to identify with their guests and treat them with the respect and care they would wish to be shown. Discriminatory behaviors that devalue the poor are clear violations of this law of neighbor love (Jas 2:9). James disallows any protest that his addressees have fulfilled other demands of the Law; the Law is a whole and whoever breaks a part has violated the Law entirely (2:10-11). Those who have shown disrespect for those in abject poverty are lawbreakers, just as adulterers and murderers are. Rather than continue as lawbreakers, those gathered for worship are to act as ones who are to be judged by a different standard—the law of liberty or the liberating law (2:12). [Law of Liberty] For James, the law of Christ that sets us free is that that bids us love our neighbor as ourselves.[1]

Law of Liberty

Several distinct streams of early Christian tradition viewed Christ as one bringing freedom, often time through his distinctive teaching. In Matthew 11:29-30, Jesus' reinterpretation of the *Torah* is an easy yoke and a light burden, in contrast to the Pharisees' oral tradition that weighed heavily on the "people of the land." Within the Johannine tradition, Jesus' "commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3). Chief among these commandments is that of love for community members (1 John 4:21). Within the Pauline corpus, Christian freedom is an opportunity to "through love become slaves to one another" (Gal 5:13-14). Bearing one another's burdens fulfills "the law of Christ" (6:2).

James closes discussion of faith and partiality with two proverbial sayings. The first is a straightforward warning that should one be merciless, one will be judged by the same merciless standard. The warning echoes various sayings in the Jesus tradition on the importance of showing mercy (Matt 5:17; 18:33; Luke 6:36; cf. Matt 6:12,14-15; 18:35; Mark 11:25). Perhaps members of the worshiping assembly are to remember the harsh treatment they meted out to the desperate poor; is this debasement the kind of "welcome" they hope for when they enter God's assembly? The warning likewise anticipates the judgment befalling those ignoring the plight of hungry and naked brothers and sisters (2:15-16). Given the nearness of judgment, the unmerciful should be quick to mend their ways.

The second proverb is something of a riddle. In what sense does mercy "triumph over" judgment? [Mercy in Judgment] God is a merciful and compassionate judge:

> The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity

> of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation. (Exodus 34:6-7)

Mercy in Judgment
Coin depicting the Grace *Indulgentia* or Mercy, seated on a throne and holding out a symbol of mercy in judgment.

For James God is the One who gives more grace (Jas 4:6). In doing so, God sets the example for those who would presume to sit in judgment of others. The law of retaliation (*lex talionis*) is one expression of judgment that in practice leads to cycles of violent tit for tat. Only a display of mercy can end the 'justified' violence and deliver peace.

James began discussion of living out the royal law of neighbor love by exposing the inconsistency of those professing faith in Jesus yet dishonoring the poor, who are beloved of the Lord (2:1-7). Discrimination against the poor is unloving (2:8), unlawful (2:9), and unwise, given the criteria for God's judgment (2:13a). James revisits the theme of neighbor love in 2:14-26—those who heed this love command cannot remain inactive in the face of dire human need; their faith must be displayed in merciful deeds if it is of any value. [Merciful Deeds] Faith working through merciful deeds fulfills the loyal law of love for neighbor. James's argument falls into three interrelated sections:

- a warning not to confuse profession of faith with the practice of faith (2:14-17);

- a caution not to mistake abstract theologizing for faith that connects the faithful with those in need (2:17-19); and

- a caveat not to mistake the beginnings of faith with its finish (2:20-26).

James begins his discourse on the symbiosis of faith and works with a pointed question: "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?" (2:14a). "That kind

Merciful Deeds
In this late medieval painting, the anonymous artist opts for a simple presentation of merciful deeds as the townsmen provide blankets in response to the prayerful petitions of a partially clothed man in need.
Anonymous. *Clothing the Naked.* 15th C. Florentine school. Pinacoteca, Vatican Museums, Vatican State.

Faith in Prayer

James demonstrates great confidence in prayer spoken in faith: when the elders of the church pray in faith over the sick one the Lord *will* save and raise him or her up from the sick bed (5:15). However, James expects that church elders will do more than simply pray; they will go to the sick, anoint them with oil, and listen if the sick need to confess (5:14-16a). There, James models a community in solidarity with those who are suffering; however, in James 2 the community segregates itself from the poor and ignores their pressing needs.

In Mark, unbelief apparently limits Jesus ability to do mighty works (6:5f); where belief is present, mighty works are possible (11:23). Whenever Mark specifies the presence of faith or believing a mighty work follows (2:5; 5:34; 9:24; 10:52). One might conclude that mighty works of divine intervention *of necessity* follow whenever faith is present. Is it possible that James's opponent in 2:14-26 has a bad theology of faith based not only on a misunderstanding of the Pauline concept of faith but rather on one closely akin to Mark's?

of faith cannot save, can it?" (2:14b) Clearly, James expects negative answers: profession without practice is worthless, both to the self-deceived confessor (2:14b) and to those in grave need (2:15-16). That kind of faith that is all profession and no practice, all creed and no deeds cannot save (2:14b). James's imaginary opponent thinks it enough to profess faith (2:14) and pray God's blessing on the poorly clothed and hungry (2:16). James's opponent perhaps reasons if faith is present and prayers are mouthed, God will of necessity take care of the rest; thus, human intervention is superfluous. [Faith in Prayer] However, the hungry and ill-clothed need more than a benediction, a good word; they need believers to be a blessing to them by feeding them and clothing them (2:15-16; cf. Matt 25:35-36). The poor need more than a verbal passing of God's peace; they need brothers and sisters who will incarnate God's concern for peace with justice for the oppressed. Talk of faith in itself does not help those in need; they need loving action on their behalf not empty words.

Many commentators have been puzzled by the challenge laid down by James's imaginary opponent: "You have faith and I have works" (1:18). What many readers expect from the debate partner is "I have faith and you [i.e., James] have works." However, James is not the proponent of faithless works; rather James sees merciful works as the natural and fullest expression of living faith. The opponent's error is to imagine that saving faith can be divorced from merciful works. Certainly, one can speak of faith as a theological abstraction in isolation to other concepts such as the Good or the Right; but one cannot demonstrate faith's reality by appeal to hypotheticals. (James's "*Show* me your faith apart from your works," 1:18, expects a response that living faith can only be demonstrated through actions). James will not allow the luxury of

this "armchair philosopher's 'faith'"; in its natural habitat, in the lived experience of believing people confronted with those in grave need, faith is inextricably tied to lives that express those beliefs and commitments that the faithful cherish. "Faith" by itself, as a sterile abstraction, is dead (1:17). Later, James will use the metaphors of barrenness (1:20) and a corpse, a body devoid of breath (2:26), to expose the emptiness of such isolated "faith." Action (or inaction) shows the species of faith (2:18b), whether dead or living (2:17), whether the faith of demons (1:19) or that of those righteous who trust and obey even in their great struggles (2:21-23).

Even demons have a certain faith, accepting Judaism's central theological proposition that God is one (1:19). Recognizing God's integrity, the demons shudder, probably at the judgment that awaits them.

> God is one not only because there are no other gods like God but because God acts consistently with the divine purpose, which for James is the cause of the poor. The demons are frightened by this integrity of God, for God has been their steadfast enemy. And since God does not change (1:17), the demons tremble.[2]

How then can anyone claim faith and remain unmoved by the lot of those oppressed by dehumanizing forces at work in society? James might reason if we share it is because we care; if we care it is because we are aware of the One before whom we stand, who bids us to love our neighbors. Likewise, if we do not act on behalf of the hungry and naked it is because we do not care; and if we do not care have we truly accepted that word that is able to save? For James those who claim the merciful Lord as Father have a responsible to care for their brothers and sisters in need.

The harsh address "you senseless person" is characteristic of diatribe style (2:20). James complains that faith without works does not work. *Argos* (barren NRSV) could be rendered idle, lazy, or shunning tasks that ought to be attended to. Again, deeds of mercy are the work in James's mind. Abraham serves as the antithesis to this unworking faith. [James and Paul]

For James, Abraham exemplifies faith in action. Abraham was vindicated through works that demonstrated his faith (2:21-23); Abraham's faith collaborated with his works and came to mature expression through those works (2:22); through works born of faith Abraham fulfilled the scripture and was shown to be in deeds one of the righteous and God's friend (2:23). [James and Paul's Use of Abraham] Abraham's faith is demonstrated through struggle, particularly the hardship of the *Akedah* or the *Akedat Yitshak,* the binding

James and Paul

James addresses "the twelve tribes in the Diaspora" (1:1), predominately Jewish-Christian faith communities for whom the *Torah* as interpreted by Jesus remained a moral guide. In Galatians Paul addresses predominately Gentile churches touched by his mission; there some in an effort to be "complete" were tempted to add circumcision to faith. James and Paul employ common terms but use them differently. For James, the *Torah* is epitomized by the law of neighbor love. *Works* are acts of mercy in the face of desperate need that strengthen solidarity with the weak. *To be justified* is to be vindicated or recognized as a person of integrity, one who in fact loves justice, practices kindness, and walks humbly with God (Mic 6:8). For Paul, the *Torah* can be epitomized by the requirement of circumcision that alienates Gentile and Jew and *works* are "works of the law." *To be justified* is to be pronounced right with God on the basis of faith (in lieu of works). For James, faith comes in two species—a living, active, productive, saving faith (that is displayed in acts of mercy and obedience to God's word) and a dead, inactive, unfruitful, professed faith that does not matter (that is revealed by failure to respond to human need). For Paul, faith is grateful acceptance of what God has done in Christ; as such, faith is life changing.

James

MISSIONAL CONTEXT: Mission to the circumcised (i.e., the Jews); addresses "the twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (Jas 1:1); rules associated with the Palestinian mission apply.

FOCUS: Discipleship—Being; views Christianity as the Way of being that leads to life (Jas 5:19-20; cf. Matt 7:13-14; Acts 9:2; 18:25-26; 19:9; 22:4; 24:14)

THE LAW: Positive view of the Law—The Law as (re)interpreted by Jesus and epitomized in the love command remains the standard for judgment (Jas 2:8-13; 1:25; 4:11). Saving word and law are overlapping categories: the implanted word with power to save (1:21; cf. 1:18) can be done (1:22-24), just as "the perfect law, the law of liberty" can (2:25).

JUSTIFY: To vindicate as righteous.

RIGHTEOUS/RIGHTEOUSNESS: Abraham, Rahab, the prophets, Job and Elijah exemplify the righteous. The righteous suffer at the hands of the ungodly (Jas 5:6). The righteous are persons of prayer (5:16b).

FAITH: Dead faith ignores grave human needs (2:15-17). (Living) faith is demonstrated through works of mercy (2:18); faith cooperates with loving actions born of that faith; faith comes to maturity as it is expressed in love (2:22).

WORKS: Merciful Acts—Representative works include feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for orphans and widows, and visiting the sick. These works function to integrate the needy; the poor are cared for as family members.

Paul

MISSIONAL CONTEXT: Mission (primarily) to the Gentiles (Gal 2:7); rules associated with the law-free mission to the uncircumcised apply.

FOCUS: Soteriology—Getting in; salvation is by grace through faith

THE LAW: Ambiguous view of the Law—Negative aspects: Justification is "apart from the Law" (Rom 3:21,28; Gal 2:16; 3:11; cf. Rom 8:3). The Law does reveal sin (3:20; 7:7) but in doing so brings wrath and judgment (4:15; 5:13). Believers live under grace rather than under law (6:14-15; 7:4,6). Christ is the end of the Law (10:4; cf. Gal 3:13; Eph 2:15). Positive aspects: The Law is holy, just and good (Rom 7:12). The Law was a needed disciplinarian for a time until Christ came (Gal 3:23-24). The love command sums up the Law (Rom 13:8-10; Gal 5:14; cf. 6:2).

JUSTIFY: To accept as if righteous; to credit belief as righteousness

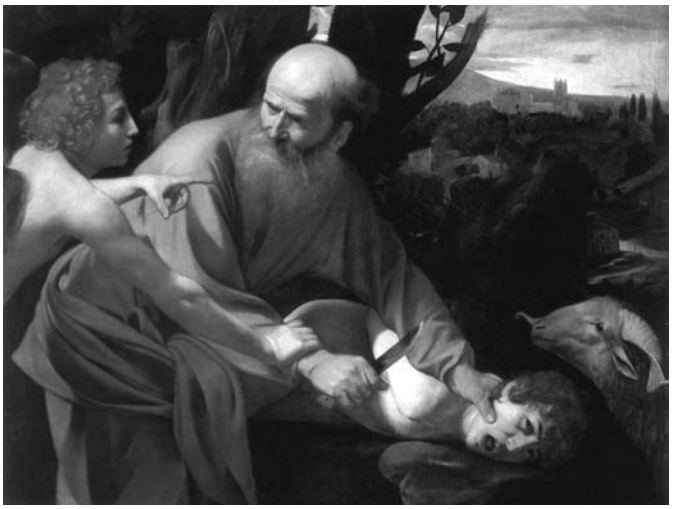
RIGHTEOUS/RIGHTEOUSNESS: From the perspective of the Law, righteousness entails keeping the whole; there are none righteous in this legal sense (Rom 3:10; Phil 3:9). From the perspective of faith, the righteous are those who live by faith (Gal 3:11; Rom 1:17; 10:6)

FAITH: Trust in God, specifically shorthand for acceptance of what God has done through Christ's death and resurrection

WORKS: Works of the Law—The representative work is circumcision. These works function as boundary markers that delineate Jew from Gentile and thus as obstacles to Christian unity.

James and Paul's Use of Abraham

James and Paul put Abraham's example to different rhetorical uses. James appeals to Abraham in an effort to clarify just what is demanded by the law of neighbor love, i.e., active mercy when confronted with pressing needs. Paul appeals to Abraham in an effort to legitimize his mission to the Gentiles that did not demand conversion to Judaism. For Paul, Abraham exemplifies those who trust in God's promise; such are accepted as if they were righteous—their faith is credited to them as righteousness (Gen 15:6), apart from any works. In contrast, James picks up on inter-textual connections, e.g., the promise of descendants as numerous as the stars (15:5; 22:17) and perceived threats to an heir from Abraham's issue (15:3; 22:2). For James, although God asserted Abraham's righteousness when he trusted God's promise (15:6), Abraham's actions in the *Akedat Yitshak,* the binding of Isaac on the altar, confirmed Abraham's fear of the Lord. "For now I *know* that you fear God since you have not withheld your only son from me" (22:17) is Abraham's vindication as one of the righteous who stand faithful to God under hard tests. James goes so far as to state that Abraham's sacrificial act represents the fulfillment of the scripture that earlier asserted Abraham's righteousness (Jas 2:23).



Caravaggio, true to Baroque drama and emotional intensity, depicts the excruciating moment when the grisly act of sacrificing Isaac is abruptly halted by the angel of God. The trauma of Isaac and a bewildered Abraham heighten the sense of urgency. The artist has captured the moment of high-pitched emotionality where Abraham is caught at the crux of perceiving that this sacrifice is not necessary—his vindication is complete….

Caravaggio. *The Sacrifice of Isaac.* 1601–1602. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

of Isaac upon the altar. James's thought on Abraham's vindication is similar to that in 1 Maccabees: "Was not Abraham found faithful in trial, and it was reputed to him as uprightness?" (1 Macc 2:52, NAB) In this thought-world, faith is inseparable from faithfulness in the struggle: "Faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works" (Jas 2:22).

James emphasizes not only that Abraham's believing was "reckoned to him as righteousness" (2:23; Gen 15:6) but that Abraham was "called the friend of God" (2 Chr 20:7; Isa 41:8). Cicero stated a friend is "a second self"; other Greek and Roman philosophers highlighted friendship as a sharing of values [Friend, Friendship]. For James, just as God is one, i.e., is characterized by integrity, so was Abraham, at least when he responded to his great test, the *Akedah.* A friend is loyal, even and especially under pressure; misfortune exposes false friends (Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, bk. 7, ch. 2).

Friend, Friendship

"A friend is, as it were, a second self."
—Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BC), *De Amicitia.*

"What is a friend? A single soul dwelling in two bodies."
—Aristotle (384–322), in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, bk. 5, sec. 17.

"To like and dislike the same things, that is indeed true friendship."
—Gaius Sallustius Crispus (86–34 BC), *The War with Catiline* (c. 40 BC).

"Friends have all things in common."
—Plato, *Dialogues, Phaedrus,* sec. 279.

"Friends share all things."
—Phythagorus (c. 582–500 BC), in *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, bk. 8, sec. 10.

"Misfortune shows those who are not really friends."
—Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, bk. 7, ch. 2.

"The best mirror is an old friend."
—George Herbert, *Jacula Prudenum* (1651).

Abraham's faith in action, the model for that faith James commends, is undivided in its allegiance and persistent under trial. Such faith contrasts with double-mindedness (Jas 1:6-8) and empty profession.

Likewise, Rahab's faith was proven by her deeds on behalf of the Israelite spies (2:25). [Rahab's Faith at Work] Jewish tradition remembers both Abraham and Rahab as examples of hospitality towards strangers. This tradition may explain in part why they were chosen to make James's case for fulfilling the law of love towards one's neighbor. James's concluding illustration—just as a body without breath is a corpse, so faith without works is dead (2:26)—recalls the similarly worded preliminary conclusion in 2:17.

CONNECTIONS

Godly Impartiality

My aunt Anne grew up in the East Georgia town that gave the Confederacy its Secretary of War, General Robert Tombs. Our

home was just three blocks from the square yet in the early sixties was down a dirt road, the last "white" house on the lane before the "colored" houses began. She was the sixth of seven children. Her daddy died suddenly when Anne was fifteen. She had been a good student, but soon dropped out of school to work full-time, first on a factory floor making rainwear, later in an office doing key punch, still later handling textile orders on a PC. Her simple gift in a community divided by scars of segregation was in showing respect for and offering friendship to coworkers, black and white. At her funeral one African-American coworker told me, "Anne knew no color." In small ways, she lived Dr. King's dream of the "Beloved Community," where all God's children were valued, "not for the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." Her coworker's word said as much or more about Anne than the preacher's did that day.

Rahab's Faith at Work

This gothic-style vignette provides a triumphal window into Rahab's act of faith, framed by trumpeting angels.

Detail. Belbello da Pavia. *Rahab Letting the Israelite Spies Down the Wall of Jericho.* From the Codex Landau-Finaly. Biblioteca Nazionale, Florence, Italy.

James warns that faith in Christ is incompatible with discriminatory attitudes and practices. And yet too often such hateful attitudes continue to plague Christian communities. Race itself may not be the master social category it was in the South of my childhood; historically white churches may welcome African-American members warmly, as long as they are doctors, judges or college students. As in James's day the test for faith may be whether we welcome the down and out, whatever their race or ethnicity. For many churches, gender remains a master category; male believers are welcomed in prominent leadership roles; female believers labor only behind the scenes in nurseries, children's departments and kitchens. James invites us to ask who among the church member-

ship displays the wisdom from above (3:13,17). Those are the servants who should lead in the fellowship (cf. 3:1).

Hunger in America

Six-year old Michael gave hunger a face. My inner-city Louisville congregation of mostly older adults and little children had gone to a neighboring church for a fifth-Sunday night singing and fellowship time. As Baptists do, the host congregation had spread a bountiful table, piled high with finger sandwiches and sweets. Yet Michael found his way to the garbage can to scrounge for scraps. As I walked him to the table and helped him fix a plate, I understood that this was not Michael's first experience finding something to eat in the trash. This timid, resourceful child was accustomed to eaten garbage, although he lived in the richest nation on earth.

Justice as Fairness

James's divine favoritism towards the poor is akin to John Rawls' concept of justice as *fairness* rather than as equality. Rawls allows that a just political, economic system can tolerate inequalities as fair only if those inequalities benefit the least well off. For Rawls, justice demands maximizing opportunity for the least advantaged.

John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999).

The National Priorities Project (www.nationalpriorities.org) reported that almost 12% of U.S. households experienced "food insecurity" during 2001. The USDA defines food insecurity as "limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially responsible ways." Food insecurity is a lack of access to food needed for "active healthy living." In all, 34 million Americans, including 13 million children, were effected by "food insecurity" at some point that year. The National Priorities Project further reported that "3.3% of households suffered from actual hunger, meaning that food insecurity is so severe that at least one member of the household goes hungry at some point during the year."[3] Federal expenditures on the Food Stamp Program decreased by about one third (in inflation adjusted dollars) between 1994 and 2002. The 1996 welfare reform act cut aid by restricting eligibility requirements and by placing caps on allotments individual could receive.

Living faith is more than best wishes and easy, empty prayers. Living faith and real religion are marked by the giving of ourselves to those who need us: feeding the hungry, clothing the poor, visiting prisoners, tending to the sick and dying, welcoming internationals, doing good unto the "least of these." Somewhere someone in need is praying a prayer that even you (or a member of

your congregation) can answer. James challenges you to make your life count.

How Poor Is Poor?

The poor that James has in mind are unable to provide for their own basic needs without assistance from others. In the North American context, these poor include the homeless and those wholly dependent on public assistance—Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Medicaid, free public clinics, community food banks and clothing centers.

James's understanding of divine impartiality leans towards the poor. [Justice as Fairness] For Tamez, "if favoritism is prohibited in the [Christian] community it is because favoritism always favors the rich, never the poor."[4] Writing from a Costa Rican context, Tamez recognized that "the community to which James addresses himself knows perfectly well about God's preference for the poor."[5] But do affluent, white, North American Christian communities know of this divine favoritism for the poor? Do sermons or Sunday School lessons stress this message or gloss over it? Some voices, e.g., the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, bear witness to this truth but it is a minor strain, particularly in conservative, white Evangelical circles.

The National Priorities Project (www.nationalpriorities.org) reported that in 2002 more than one in ten U.S. families lived in poverty (~13%), and about one in seven children (~17%) lived in poor households. The federal government considers a family of three with two children to be "poor" if they live on less than $14,494 a year. Approximately 95% of welfare recipients are women and children. Federal expenditures on Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) represent less than 1% of the total federal budget.[6] In contrast, military spending "consumes 26 cents out of every individual income tax dollar," represents "about 20% of total federal spending and over half of the discretionary budget." The United States is responsible "for over 40% of world military spending."[7]

In health care, we speak of vital signs: blood pressure, pulse rate, temperature, breathing rate. Vital signs are the evidence of life and of one's health status. For James, the vital signs of living faith are acts that demonstrate God's mercy for the forgotten somebodies.

We are warned to recognize the *rigor mortis* of dead faith that fails to respond to those in need.

Mercy's Triumph Over Judgment

James anticipates the triumph of mercy over judgment or "justice" (2:13). The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission provides one possible example of mercy's triumph. There pardon shown to self-confessed oppressors in the apartheid system has done what judgment in the form of criminal prosecution could not do, provide hope for a peaceful, multiracial society. To offer forgiveness and to be forgiven are universal spiritual needs.

The Micah Challenge offers another opportunity to let mercy triumph. This effort by 270 evangelical Christian relief, development, and social justice ministries around the world aims "to make a biblically shaped response to the needs of the poor and oppressed." Micah Challenge goals include "addressing extreme poverty, achieving universal primary education for all, reducing diseases such as HIV/AIDS, advancing greater gender equality, cutting the debt of poor nations and expanding trade justice."[8]

DATA (Debt, AIDS, Trade, Africa) offers similar opportunities to let mercy triumph. Seventy percent of Sub-Saharan Africans live on less than two dollars a day. Two hundred million go hungry every day. A million Africans, most of them young children, will die of malaria and two million will die of AIDS in 2004.[9] Many of these Africans are Christians, our brothers and sisters.[10] Despite these urgent needs to relieve poverty, hunger, and epidemic disease, Sub-Saharan African nations "spend $14.5 billion dollars repaying debts to the world's richest countries and international institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Many countries in Africa spend more each year on debt than on health care or education."[11]

For example, Nigeria (home of the largest Baptist body outside the Unites States)[12] borrowed $5 billion worth from foreign governments and institutions following independence. However, runaway interest rates and bad economic policies multiplied that debt. Though Nigeria has paid back $16 billion it still owes $32 billion.[13] However, mercy can triumph.

> As DATA notes, "in 1999, the richest countries promised to make sure that $100 billion of poor countries debt would be written off through the World Bank and International Monetary

> Fund's Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) program. So far, 23 African countries have qualified for some relief and have received approximately $25 billion in long-term debt relief. As a result, these countries paid almost $1 billion less on debt in 2002 than they did in 1998.
>
> Uganda—the first country to benefit from debt relief—used money freed up by debt cancellation to double primary school enrollment and invest in their national HIV/AIDS plan which has contributed to Uganda's successful reversal of HIV infection rates. Mozambique's debt relief has enabled the government to immunize a half million children. Tanzania eliminated fees for grade school, and Benin eliminated school fees in rural areas, allowing thousands of children to attend classes for the first time.[14]

African states owe rich countries almost $300 billion. Debt relief has resulted in reductions in what African nations pay on their debt on average by one-third. The United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany are canceling all the debt owed by these African countries. Other nations and creditors (the World Bank and International Monetary Fund), however, have not yet let mercy triumph by writing off this debt.[15]

NOTES

[1] Luke Johnson has argued persuasively that this law of neighborly love (Lev 19:18) should be read in its wider scriptural context ("according to the scripture" Jas 2:8). That context includes prohibitions of slander (Lev 19:16; cf. Jas 4:11; 5:9), partiality (Lev 19:15; cf. Jas 2:1-9), withholding laborers' wages (Lev. 19:13; cf. Jas 5:4), and also false swearing and speaking untruths (Lev. 19:11-12; cf. Jas 5:12). The "Holiness Code" further commands that provision be made for feeding the poor (via the law of gleaning, Lev 19:9-10; cf. Jas 2:15-16) and that neighbors correct each other (Lev 19:17; cf. James 5:19-20). Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1985), 235-36.

[2] Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James: Faith without Works is Dead* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 61.

[3] National Priorities Project, "Quick Report: Hunger in the United States," <http://database.nationalpriorities.org/cgibin/WebObjects/NPP.woa/11/wo/0UjUtBGURtdFUugmBp3j4w/2.0.1.3.12> (22 July 2004).

[4] Tamez, *Scandalous Message*, 44.

[5] Ibid.

[6] National Priorities Project, "Quick Report: Poverty in United States," <http://database.nationalpriorities.org/cgi-bin/WebObjects/NPP.woa/12/wo/ODHvkaCPwGttbITT9HnqWg/0.0.1.3.12> (22 July 2004).

[7] National Priorities Project, "Quick Report: Military Spending in United States,"

<http://database.nationalpriorities.org/cgibin/WebObjects/NPP.woa/12/wo/ODHvkaCPwGttbITT9HnqWg/0.0.1.3.12>(22 July 2004).

[8] Robert Parham, "BWA Resolution Endorses Initiative to Cut Global Poverty in Half," <http://ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=4535> (30 July 2004), retrieved 7 August 2004.

[9] "Why Africa?" <http://www.datadata.org/whyafrica/>, retrieved 7 August 2004.

[10] In the twentieth century, the Christian population in Africa exploded from an estimated eight or nine million in 1900 (8 to 9%) to some 335 million in 2000 [45%], marking a shift in the "centre of gravity of Christianity" from the West to Latin America, parts of Asia and Africa. By comparison, the entire United States population is about 300 million ("The Explosion of Christianity in Africa: An Unprecedented Spread of the Faith," <http://www.gospelcom.net/chi/GLIMPSEF/Glimpses/glmps151.shtml>, retrieved 9 August 2004.

For example, Africa can boast 4.5 million Baptists in 58 unions and conventions (Jack Brymer, "A Haunting Question," <http://ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=4076> (21 April 2004), retrieved 9 August 2004.

African members of Mennonite-related churches outnumber members of similar churches on any other continent (Adelle M. Banks, "African Continent Leads in Mennonite Membership For First Time," <http://ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=2745> (26 June 2003), retrieved 8 August 2004.

[11] "The Debt Crisis," <http://www.datadata.org/whyafrica/issuedebt.php>, retrieved 7 August 2004.

[12] The Nigerian Baptist Convention exceeds 1.5 million members, according to the Baptist World Alliance's 2003 statistics (Robert Parham, "Nigerian Baptist Leader Ministers to President," <http://ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=4539> (3 August 2004), retrieved 9 August 2004.

[13] "The Debt Crisis."

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE TONGUE AND ON WISDOM

James 3:1-18

COMMENTARY

James chapter 3 consists of two interrelated pericopes, the first calling for a new perspective on the tongue (3:1-12); the second, for a new take on wisdom (3:13-18). Both themes have been introduced earlier in the letter and are more fully developed here. Both recur in some form within chapters 4 and 5. Already, James's readers know that disciples should be "quick to listen, slow to speak" (1:19) and that those who think "they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues" are proud owners of worthless religion (1:26). Already, James has called his audience to speak and act as those who anticipate being judged according to Jesus interpretation of the *Torah*, epitomized by the law of neighbor love (2:12). Already, James has warned against empty professions of faith mouthed by those devoid of merciful deeds (2:14) and has complained of pious platitudes voiced by those unmoved by great physical needs within the family of faith (2:15-16). James regularly calls attention to sins of speech: angry speech, unbridled speech, and speech inconsistent with deeds.

James focuses less attention on the theme of wisdom per se. Wisdom is God's gift to all who ask in faith, without divided allegiance (1:5). Wisdom is linked both to prayer (explicitly, 1:5-8) and to reception of the word of truth (implicitly, 1:18, 21). The community's teachers played a critical role in God's plan to birth "first fruits" of a new creation; they taught that word with power to save souls (1:18, 21), that word the community was charged to "welcome" and to act out in interactions with those in need. Chapters 4 and 5 will paint disturbing pictures of communities that do not demonstrate God-given wisdom but are motivated by self-centeredness and a divisively partisan spirit.

The pericope on the powers of the tongue begins with a warning against desiring the role of teacher (3:1). Apparently, those commu-

nities James addressed held their teachers in high esteem. In a culture that valued personal honor, such public acknowledgement could prove a powerful incentive to seek this teaching role. [Teachers in the Teaching of Jesus] Here, James offers a rare glimpse of self-disclosure; he counts himself among those who teach. Yet James cautions that teachers "will be judged with greater strictness" (3:1): those who talk the talk must walk the walk (cf. Matt 23:2-3); those who claim God-given wisdom must display it through humble service (Jas 3:13,17; cf. Matt 23:11). James later will urge mutual confession of sin (5:16); already, James applies his own counsel: he counts himself among those who "make many mistakes" (3:2a). The person who "makes no mistakes in speaking" is a person of integrity (3:2b, "perfect" NRSV). For James, speech and action are of one piece (2:12); here in 3:2b, mastery of speech is equated with control of the whole body, in other words with a life lived with complete integrity.

Teachers in the Teaching of Jesus

Jewish and early Christian communities held teachers in high regard. Some sayings of Jesus reflect concern that public acknowledgement—seats of honor at banquets, choice seats in the synagogue, differential greetings, and honorific titles—could prove a powerful incentive to seek a teaching role (Matt 23:6-7). The community of Jesus disciples was to be an egalitarian association, governed by God and Christ, and characterized by humble servitude (23:8-11). The Christian community's preeminent teacher is Christ himself (23:10), who teaches by his example of selfless service (20:28).

James follows with two brief parables on the power of the tongue. Horses, though powerful and spirited, can be broken so

Roman Wine Ship

Ships during the Roman period were of various sizes, ranging from the smaller warships designed for speedy movement in battle to the large transport vessels such as the wine ship portrayed in this sculpture. Such ships might be powered by sails or by one to three rows of oars, but they were all subject to the guidance of the small rudder directing the ship from the rear. Note in the sculpture the small rudder extending above the water on the lower right.

Sculpture of a Roman-era wine ship from a grave monument or the office building of a wine merchant. Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Trier, Germany.

that they respond to bits in their mouths; as their mouths go, so goes their whole bodies (3:3). Likewise a ship, though driven by strong winds, is guided by a very small rudder wherever its pilot wills (3:5). Following these illustrations, we might expect James to round out the pericope with a call to master the little tongue and so live a self-controlled life. James, however, moves in a different direction, warning that the untamed tongue is a destructive force, the tiny spark that sets a forest ablaze (3:5b-6a).

Earlier James has characterized worthless religion as that marked by an unbridled tongue (1:26), whereas "pure and undefiled religion" in God's sight is "unstained from the world" (1:27). Here, James pictures the untamed tongue as an enemy agent, placed among the parts of our bodies with the potential to stain them all; the tongue is a microcosm of the sinful world (3:6). Its spark is kindled by Gehenna; [Gehenna] it seems nothing in creation is fireproofed; all is scorched by its flames (3:6). The human experience in taming "every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature" (3:7) reflects confidence in the creation mandate to exercise dominion (Gen 1:26, 28; Ps 8:6). Yet the tongue is untamable, restless, and venomous (Jas 3:8). [Restless Evil] The tongue lacks integrity, blessing God all the while cursing those fashioned in God's image (3:9; cf. Gen 1:26-27). [Imago Dei] James views such a lack of integrity as unnatural as several examples show. Springs do not pour forth fresh (literally "sweet") and brackish (literally "bitter") waters from the same mouth (Jas 3:11); yet the same mouth can speak sweet doxologies and bitter anathemas. Trees are known by their fruits—fig trees do not yield olives; grapevines do not yield figs (3:12)—each produces according to its own kind (cf. Gen 1: 11-12); yet double-speak does not clarify whose fruit we are (cf. Jas 1:18). Again, salt pools do not produce fresh water; similarly, it is unnatural for some to bless God and curse God's likeness encountered in one's neighbor (3:9-10). Earlier, James has accused the rich of a perverse 'integrity': they both oppress community members through the courts *and* blaspheme the name of Christ (2:6-7); their bitter deeds are consistent with their hateful speech. Some in James's community want to have it

Gehenna

ΑΩ Gehenna referred originally to the valley of Hinnom, south of Jerusalem, that served as the city's garbage dump where refuse was burned. As such, James's imagery is appropriate for those engaged in "trash talking;" their tongues have been set ablaze by the fiery trash heap. (Cf. Matt 15:18-20).

Restless Evil

ΑΩ *Akatastatos* (Jas 3:8) can mean restless, unstable, or inconstant. The same term describes the double-minded person of Jas 1:8; there it means unstable or inconstant. The double-minded cannot be counted on; their allegiance is divided; their actions inconsistent. This same sense of inconsistency is possible in Jas 3:8; Jas 3:9-10 challenges those who utter both blessing and curse from the same mouth.

Imago Dei

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: "A procession of angels pass before each person, and the heralds go before them, saying, 'Make way for the image of God!'" (*Deut. Rab.,* 4:4) Because every person bears the image of God each one demands our respect. Disrespectful labels applied to those who "differ" from us show disregard for our common source.

both ways: they want to confess faith in Christ as Lord yet practice discrimination against the community's poor (2:1), the Lord's chosen ones; they want to confess monotheism yet neglect God's call to do mercy (2:19,13). Here, they want to bless God whom they, like Jesus, acknowledge as Father (3:9) yet curse God's other children, who bear God's family likeness. Though James does not identify those here accursed as the poor, such a connection is attractive. The stain from world (1:27) is in part conformity with the world's negative estimation of the needy and inaction in the face of their affliction. Here, the tongue spouting curses (3:9) is the "world of iniquity" (3:6) encamped among the members of the body.

In 3:13-18 James contrasts the products of the wisdom from above with those of a "humanistic, merely intellectual, and devilish" (CPV) understanding. For James these distinct understandings yield two distinctive lifestyles. Diabolical understanding brings disorder and disrepute to the community (3:16). From this humanistic perspective self-interest is a primal instinct. Since goods are limited (whether tangible goods such as land, precious metals, or fine clothes or intangible goods such as seats of honor in the worshiping asssembly) others possessing these desired goods are properly viewed as objects of jealousy and competitors (3:14-16). This perspective views community either as a means to selfish ends or as an obstacle to their fulfillment. This view from below is prepared to sacrifice the community for the realization of the individual's self-centered desire. In contrast, the wise individual is free from ulterior motives ("pure") and values the peace of the community (3:17). Thus, those possessing the wisdom from above are willing to yield and gentle with others, traits valuable in conflict resolution. Those marked by heavenly wisdom live for others; they are merciful to those in need; they are actively and practically good to others. The wise do not favor the rich in hopes of pay back; they value the poor among the community as brothers and sisters. These wise are genuine; they are not actors playing a self-serving part.

In calling out "the wise" (3:13a), James perhaps has in mind those desiring the role of teacher (3:1); wisdom and understanding are expected of teachers, though they are useful for all those engaged in the struggle. To these James adds a third quality: integrity, that is, consistency of understanding, speech, and action. The teacher's (or disciple's) good life is to be marked by those gentle deeds birthed by wisdom (3:13b). Just as living faith is demonstrated though appropriate actions, so also is wisdom (3:17). [Wisdom] Just as inaction in the face of desperate need witnesses a

Wisdom

Wisdom is a relational virtue, i.e., it finds expression in our dealings with others. These dealings reveal the inner motivations of the agents. Are those claiming to be wise motivated by selfish ambition and partisanship? If so, they create discord within the community. On the other hand, if persons act on behalf of others without ulterior motives and bring people together, then their good lives and gentle tactic demonstrate that wisdom from above (3:13). Those neglecting the needs of the poor (e.g., 2:14-16) or dealing harshly with fellow believers (cf. 4:11; 5:9) do not exhibit heavenly wisdom.

dead faith (2:17, 26), inappropriate actions witness the dearth of God-given wisdom.

Just as James omitted the noun *brother* when speaking of the rich (1:10), so James omits the noun *wisdom* when characterizing the "understanding" that drives those consumed by selfish ambition (3:15). Those possessed by this 'understanding' display a perverse consistency: they err in speech ("boast and are false to the truth," 3:14), in inner motivation (harboring "bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts," 3:14,16), and in behavior (displaying "disorder and wickedness of every kind," 3:16). Whereas true wisdom is God's gift to all those who ask in faith (1:5); the "understanding" that possesses some among the community has a different source, one "earthly, unspiritual and devilish" (3:15). Jordan rendered this triad as "humanistic, purely intellectual, and devilish" (CPV). [A Devilish Understanding] Just as the untamed tongue serves as an outpost through which a hostile world gains a footing and as a spark that ignites a destructive blaze (3:5-6), so this worldly "understanding" threatens to co-opt some community members.

God-given wisdom is demonstrated through appropriate actions (3:17). The wisdom from above is pure, marked by undivided allegiance to God rather than by double-minded adoption of the

A Devilish Understanding

"Bitter envy and selfish ambition" drive those lacking wisdom from above (3:14); they are "boastful" (cf. 4:6,16); they do not face the truth. What truths do they disregard? They do not face the truth that we all stumble in many ways (3:2); they are self-confident in their own righteousness and quick to pass judgment on others (4:11; 5:9); they do not accept correction (cf. 5:19-20). They sow discord among the family of faith in an effort to solidify their power. They do not recognize that their "opponents" are in fact brothers and sisters who bear the image of God (3:9-10). They do not value the common life of the community; they are concerned only with their own private successes (4:13-15). If the cohesiveness of the community must be sacrificed to make their private victories possible so be it; they wage war (4:1-3). If others must be oppressed to feed their selfishness so be it; they defraud their workers; their even kill in order to keep their laborers in line. They do not recognize that the needy are valuable from the standpoint of faith; they treasure things and discard people (cf. 5:1-6).

world's values (cf. 4:4,8). God-given wisdom is peaceable rather than war-mongering or given to partisan bickering (cf. 4:1-2). It is gentle rather than harsh (3:13); James perhaps has in mind those (teachers) who offer correction, though this advice is applicable to all believers expressing opinions. The wisdom from above is willing to yield rather than insisting on one's own way or on one's party's agenda. Heavenly wisdom is full of mercy and good deeds rather than marked by inaction in the face of need (cf. 4:17; 2:15-16). Finally, that wisdom from above is marked by integrity of speech, motivation, and action rather than stained by partiality (cf. 2:1, 4, 9) or hypocrisy. The wise are genuine; they are not playing a part for an audience.

The pericope ends with a proverb that reflects the thought, if not the language, of Jesus beatitudes on the peacemakers and on those who hunger and thirst for justice; such are promised acknowledgement as God's children and satisfaction of their longing for justice (Matt 5:9; 6). Here, those who make peace cooperate in God's work; their reward is the harvest of justice that God is even now sowing for the sake of peace (3:18). Peace is one of the perfect gifts from above (1:17). As is usual in James, God's gift is not received passively: just as the implanted word is received as it is put into

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AΩ **Peacemaking**

Jas 3:18 presents several challenges to the translator:

(1) Is *tois poiousin eirēnēn* instrumental ("sown by peacemakers") or dative ("sown for the sake of peacemakers")? In other words, does God sow justice on behalf of peacemakers or do peacemakers sow justice?

(2) Does *en eirēnē* indicate the manner of the sowing ("sown peacefully"), the cause or reason for the sowing ("sown for the sake of peace"), or does it refer back to the fruit of justice ("justice together with peace is sown")?

(3) How is *dikaiosynēs* best translated ("justice," "uprightness," or "righteousness")?

The renderings that follow illustrate a few of the interpretive options:

- "True justice is the harvest reaped by peacemakers from seeds sown in a spirit of peace." (NEB)
- "The harvest of uprightness is grown from the seed of peace by those who are peacemakers." (Williams)
- "When we work for peace, we sow in peace a seed that produces righteousness." (Beck)
- "For the harvest of genuine peace must first be planted by men who live it." (CPV)

appropriate action—hearing the word yields doing the word—so God's gift of peace entails the work of peacemaking. [Peacemaking] Chapter 4 opens with a contrasting image of those who wage war born of their self-centered desires (4:1-2).

CONNECTIONS

Fighting Words

For the past twenty-five years, the language of "Holy War" has punctuated Baptist life in the American South. One party was urged to go "for the jugular" (Paul Pressler); the other was called "to your tents, O Israel" (Roy Honeycutt). In recent days, the rhetoric has boiled over into slanderous verbal attacks on the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. (for alleged tolerance of same-sex marriage) and on the Baptist World Alliance (for allegedly anti-American positions and tolerance of liberal theology). On a national radio program a leader of the Moral Majority (Jerry Falwell) accused a fellow minister (Jim Wallace of Sojourners) as not being an Evangelical because of Wallace's criticisms of the current Administration's social policies record. Wallace and Tony Campola have responded that Falwell is a Fundamentalist who has co-opted the label Evangelical. In 1917, Senator Hiram Johnson (R-CA) asserted, "The first casualty of war is the truth." In the ongoing Baptist holy war, one of the first truths to be sacrificed was that opponents were also persons "made in the likeness of God." A second sacrificed truth is that we are (or should be) in this work together.

Doubtless, many of these verbal attack dogs sincerely believe that they are speaking the truth and defending the historic faith from challengers to the left or the right. James calls us to that wisdom that humbly recognizes our own limitations; we are in a sense prisoners to our own incomplete and often inaccurate understandings of the truth. Socrates reported in *The Apology* that Chaerephon visited Apollo's shrine at Delphi, where the oracle revealed Socrates to be the wisest of men. Since oracles spoke in riddles, Socrates pondered in what sense he might be the wisest. After engaging experts from various fields in conversation on the streets of Athens, Socrates recognized he was aware of the limits in his own knowl-

edge—he knew that he was in fact ignorant of many fields. In contrast, others were ignorant of their own limits and presumed expertise in some area meant wisdom in all. Wisdom demands that we be teachable, and that entails acknowledging that others—even and especially those who are different from us—have something valuable to teach us.

For example, I have attended mid-week prayer services for much of my life, hold two degrees in theology, and might be expected to know something about prayer. In 2001, however, my Ghanaian students, teenagers and young adults who serve as leaders in churches and missions within walking distance of Winneba, taught me a lesson about the power of prayer I will not forget. As I prepared to return stateside, they gathered en mass, placing their hands on my head and shoulders, praying fervently in Fanté. The only content I could discern was my name and the name of Jesu but I understood that their whole hearts were in their prayer. A week later as I lay in a Memphis hospital with *falciparum* malaria, not knowing if I would live or die, I was reminded of those lessons my African brothers and sisters teach. They trust that God will take care of them and do not worry. They often lack access to adequate health care but they do not despair. They understand that they will die; we Americans seem to believe we can postpone death indefinitely. My Ghanaian brothers and sisters understand that whether we live or die we belong to the Lord (Rom 14:8). Knowing that truth made it possible to reframe a life-threatening situation. Knowing that the elders of those churches along Ghana's coast had prayed for my welfare offered me hope that the Lord would raise me up (Jas 5:13-16).

Camp David Peace Accord
President Jimmy Carter, Menachem Begin, and Anwar Sadat at Camp David in 1978.

Displaying Wisdom from Above

James regularly appeals to moral examples in his teaching: Abraham (2:21-23) and Rahab (2:25) exemplify faith in action; the prophets (5:10) and Job (5:11) model heroic perseverance in the struggle; and Elijah, power in prayer (5:17-18). Who might serve as contemporary models of that wisdom from above of which James speaks?

• *President Jimmy Carter.* A commitment to active work for the sake of peace with justice was a hallmark of the Carter Administration. The fruit of these efforts include: the Camp David Accord, a peace treaty between Israel and Egypt; the SALT II (Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty) agreement with the Soviet Union; and the Panama Canal treaty, returning the canal zone to Panama. Carter sought to make respect for human rights the *sine qua non* of America's foreign policy. This policy shift was expressed in support for emerging democracies in Latin American, e.g., support of the post-Somoza government in Nacaragua, and in personal intervention on behalf many who had "disappeared" after running afoul of Pinochet's Chilean dictatorship.

After leaving the White House, Carter has devoted himself to public policy, human rights, and charitable causes. The Carter Center is the focus of his work in international public policy and conflict resolution. The Carter Center is involved in monitoring the electoral process in support of free and fair elections, particularly in Latin America and Africa. The Carter Center provide international and domestic crisis mediations, and offers financial and infrastructure-building assistance to developing nations. The Center has also tackled world-wide health issues, such as its successful campaign to eliminate guinea worm disease. In 2002 Cater received the Nobel Peace Prize "for his decades of untiring effort to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts, to advance democracy and human rights, and to promote economic and social development." Carter has also been an active volunteer with Habitat for Humanity.

Bishop Desmond Tutu

• *Desmond Tutu.* In 1978 Bishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu became Secretary-General of the South African Council of Churches. Through publications and public advocacy, Tutu marshaled peaceful support of nearly all South African churches against apartheid. Tutu's vision was of reconciliation between both sides. Tutu received the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize for his pacifist message against apartheid. Bishop Tutu later headed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). This court-like body assembled in South Africa after the end of apartheid. The TRC provided a public hearing for those who felt victimized by violence. Perpetrators could also confess their wrongs and request amnesty from prosecution. The TRC was a crucial in the transition to full and free democracy in South Africa.

• *Millard and Linda Fuller.* Through his marketing expertise and entrepreneurial drive, Millard Fuller became a self-made millionaire at age 29. However, as his business thrived, his health, integrity, and marriage suffered. Re-evaluating his values and direction, Fuller reconciled with Linda and together they renewed their Christian commitment. Then Fullers took a step of radical obedience: heeding Jesus' advice to the rich, young ruler, they sold all their possessions, gave the money to the poor, and sought to follow Jesus. Their search for practical ways to live out Christ's teachings led them to Koinonia Farm.

With the help of Clarence Jordan and other Koinonia Partners, the Fullers began a housing ministry run according to the "economics of Jesus." The no-profit, no-interest housing program reflects the values of Exodus 22:25, making homes affordable to low-income families. Homeowner families were expected to invest their own labor into the building of their home and the houses of other families (sweat equity). This shared labor reduced housing costs, increased the pride of ownership, and fostered positive relationships with volunteers. Money from mortgage payments went into a revolving fund, enabling the building of more homes. After successful efforts initiating a housing project in Zaire (Democratic Republic of the Congo), Fuller understood that this model could be used worldwide.

In 1976 Millard and Linda Fuller founded Habitat for Humanity International. Habitat builds quality, low-cost housing using volunteer labor and donated materials. Homeowner families are chosen according to their need; their ability to pay the mortgage; and their willingness to work in partnership with Habitat (sweat equity). Habitat volunteers have built homes alongside more than 175,000 families in need in more than 3,000 communities worldwide. To date, more than 900,000 people have safe, decent, affordable shelter because of Habitat's work around the world. That includes work in 100 countries.[1]

Clarence Jordan

• *Clarence Jordan.* In 1942 Clarence and Florence Jordan and Martin and Mabel England partnered in creating Koinonia Farm, an interracial Christian farming community on land near Americus, Georgia. With a radical commitment to embodying the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, the Koinonia partners bound themselves to the equality of all persons, rejection of violence, ecological stewardship, and common ownership of possessions, reflecting their desire to live out Jesus teach-

ings in the Sermon on Mount. Locals were content mostly to ignore Koinonia until one harvest when Jordan paid all the extra help the same rate whether they were white or black. Koinonia's commitment to economic justice had repercussions for the entire Sumter County area, driving up wages black field hands expected. Koinonia became the target of an economic boycott and repeated violence, including bombings and sprays of shotgun fire. The community survived the boycott in part by starting a mail order pecan business that Jordan marketed as an effort to "ship the nuts out of Georgia." Jordan chose not to participate in civil rights marches or demonstrations, believing that the best strategy for change was to live out one's life in a community radically different that the world because of its obedience to Jesus. If trouble came from that, so be it: that was the price of authentic discipleship.[2]

NOTES

[1] "Millard Fuller," <http://www.habitat.org/how/millard.html>, retrieved 13 August 2004.

[2] "Briars in the Cotton Patch: The Story of Koinonia Farm," documentary by Faith Fuller, 2004.

FRIENDSHIP WITH THE WORLD

James 4:1-17

COMMENTARY

In 3:13-18 James contrasts the products of the wisdom from above with those of a "humanistic, merely intellectual, and devilish" (CPV) understanding. James continues this study of contrasting lifestyles in chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 4 consists of two or three units, depending on division of the second half. The first half deals with the question of allegiances (4:1-10). Different loyalties—to the world and to God—yield distinctive lifestyles, just as the two contrasting understandings—that from above and that associated with a competitive world—did in 3:13-18. There that understanding from below was poisonous to the community. Here friendship with the world fragments the community into warring factions. [Battles] In 3:13-18 the implicit antidote to the fractious spirit is to seek wisdom from God through prayer (cf. 1:5), to accept instruction in the way of wisdom (cf. 1:21), and to live out in community the demands of wisdom, including care for the oppressed (cf. 1:22-27; 2:14-26). Here the explicit solution to internecine strife is for self-serving instigators to repent of their divided loyalties. These troublemakers are challenged to forsake all rivals and be faithful to God.

Battles

Ancient warfare was characterized by the brutality of hand-to-hand combat. The pitched battle scene portrayed at right captures the chaos of war. James warns that self-interest yields just such brutal chaos.

Relief featuring a battle between Greeks and Galatians (or Romans and Gauls) on a marble sarcophagus. Capitoline Museum, Piazza de Campidglio. Rome, Italy.

The remainder of the chapter may be taken as a whole (so NRSV) or may be viewed as two separate units. The first revisits James's concern with speech, in this case abusive speech in the context of intra-Christian conflict (4:11-12). The second calls for an appropriate view of tomorrow, specifically seizing the day as an opportunity to do good rather than boasting of it as a chance to turn a profit (4:13-17). James's picture of contrasting lifestyles continues in chapter 5 with the denunciation of the acquisitive and fraudulent landowners (5:1-6). The repeated opening, "Come now" (4:13; 5:1) stitches the critique of traveling merchants (4:13-16) to that sharper rebuke (5:1-6). The focus on contrasting behaviors perhaps extends as far as the warnings against sins of speech, specifically grumbling and swearing (5:7-12), probably in the context of community feuding as in 4:11-12.

In 3:13-18 James exposed how a "devilish" understanding brings disorder and disrepute to the faith community (3:16). For this humanistic perspective self-interest is the prime mover. Since goods are limited others possessing desired goods are reduced to objects of jealousy or to competitors to be bested or eliminated (3:14-16). This solipsistic perspective views community either as a means to selfish ends or as an obstacle to their fulfillment. This view from below will sacrifice community wellbeing for the realization of individual's self-centered desire, and thus stands in marked contrast to the wisdom from above that produces communities in which *shalom* is experienced.

James in 4:1-10 presents the alternatives lifestyles as "friendship with the world"/"enmity with God" (4:4) and friendship with God (cf. 2:23). James has already touched on the source of "conflicts and disputes" among members of the community in 3:14,16—bitter envy and self-centered ambition give rise to "disorder and wickedness of every kind" (3:16). James has also presented a brief theodicy in 1:14-16. God gives only good gifts; human desire

Murderous Desires

Biblical examples of selfish desire leading to murder include David's murder of Uriah in order to possess Bathsheba (2 Sam 11) and Jezebel's murder of Naboth so that Ahab could possess his vineyard (1 Kgs 21). As these examples illustrate, those in power need not kill with their own hands; they can employ intermediaries to do their dirty work and preserve a righteous façade. Micah castigates such abuses of power:

> Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power. They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance. (2:1-2).

Confidence in Prayer

Some sayings of Jesus could (and have) given rise to mistaken beliefs that prayer is a "blank check" and God is some kind of shopping network.

> "Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive." (Matt 21:22)
> "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you." (Matt 7:7)
> "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matt 7:11)
> "Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven." (Matt 18:19)

James juxtaposes faith in prayer with the reality that those who stand firm for God's cause often suffer in the struggle. Faith does not inoculate believers from trouble.

births sin that when mature—perhaps when acted out—spawns death.

Here in 4:1-10, James asks and answers the question, Why can't we just get along? Self-centered desire is the culprit; unfulfilled, it can even lead to murder (4:2a); James lays a similar charge against the unjust landowners in 5:6. [Murderous Desires] James 4:2c ("You do not have, because you do not ask") reflects various sayings of Jesus on prayer that encourage absolute confidence in God's affirmative response. [Confidence in Prayer] James, however perceives that God's good gifts are conditioned on right asking: God does not give so that those who pray can satisfy their self-centered desires (4:3). Earlier James has cautioned that the double-minded cannot expect to receive *anything* from the Lord (1:7-8); whereas those who petition in faith are promised wisdom with which to confront their struggles (1:5). God gives "generously and ungrudgingly" to those who are wholly committed to God; God holds back from those fence-straddlers who imagine they can serve God while satisfying their own selfishness.

James labels some among his hearers adulteresses (4:5; NRSV "adulterers"). [Adulteresses] In James the paramour is the world, that value system that 'justifies' one's self-centered indulgence even when oppression is the means to that end. Some have questioned whether such harsh terms as "adulterers" (4:4) and "sinners" (4:8) can be used for members of the Christian community;[1] James normally addresses his hearers tenderly as "brothers and sisters" or "beloved." The adultery metaphor, however, is apt precisely for members of the covenant community who are not living up to their covenant commitments, such as offering relief to the oppressed. These covenant insiders are those James accuses of two-timing God.

Adulteresses

In the patriarchal Israelite context adultery was a sin against a married man, whose wife had been taken by another. "If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death" (Lev 20:10). James 4:5 alludes to a Hebrew prophetic tradition that castigates unfaithfulness to God by means of the image of adultery (e.g., Hos 2:2-13; Jer 3:6-11): Israel, pictured as God's spouse, cavorts with false gods, most notably various local fertility gods—the Baals, literally "masters" but figuratively "husbands" (cf. Hos 2:16). The adultery metaphor serves as a vivid depiction of breach of covenant obligations.

Earlier, James depicts Abraham as the paradigmatic friend of God, whose life displayed his faith, that is, his unadulterated commitment to serve God (2:23). According to the Greco-Roman conception of friendship, friends share common values.[2] James has earlier characterized God as the giver of good gifts, who shares with all without any grudging (1:17,5). The merciful who give to naked and hungry brothers and sisters are, like Abraham, vindicated by their deeds as friends of God (2:14-16, 23). But those who take the bait of self-centered desire through their destructive actions show themselves friends of the world (1:14-15; 3:14-16). Such friends as these may have religion but only a polluted kind, stained by the world's perspective, insensitive to those in need (1:27). Tamez has suggested that when speaking of friendship with the world, "James has in mind the words of Jesus about Mammon (the god of riches) and God, that is, two mutually exclusive masters."[3] [Two Masters]

Two Masters

Within a patriarchal culture, "master" can be a synonym for "husband"; thus, striving to serve both God and Mammon could be characterized as spiritual adultery. Friendship between the sexes was not a major note in the Greco-Roman antiquity.

James 4:5 is difficult on three counts. First, the introduction "the scripture says" does not introduce a direct biblical citation or even a clear allusion. Second, the grammar is ambiguous: the spirit that God "has made to dwell in us" could be the subject of the sentence (so KJV, NIV, GNB) or else the object (so NRSV, NASB). Third, the terms rendered "yearns jealously" have been taken positively—God's earnest longing for God's own or else negatively—humanity's envious coveting. [Covetous Desires] Fourth, the indwelling "spirit" has been understood as the human spirit or the Holy Spirit. The NIV rendering ("Or do you think that the Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely?") is preferable to the NRSV's translation ("God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"). First, *phthonos* refers to sinful desire in other New Testament uses; a different Greek term (*zelos*) is used for God's jealousy for Israel. Of the two terms, *zelos* has the wider semantic range, covering strong desire whether positive (e.g., zeal

Covetous Desires

AΩ The NRSV translators have supplied God as subject of the verb "yearns jealously," understanding the verse to be a general reference to God's "jealousy" for God's chosen people. This rendering is improbable on two counts: word usage and rhetorical context. First, although the preceding verse makes clear that God requires total and exclusive commitment from God's friends, the Greek term rendered "jealously" (*phthonōs*) is not used of God in the LXX. In fact, LXX usage reflects the same types of human self-centered desiring and covetousness that James has denounced (4:1-3). All eight other New Testament uses reference human envy. Although *epipotheō* ("yearns" NRSV) can refer to praiseworthy desire in the New Testament, e.g., Paul's *longing* to see his friends (Rom 1:11; Phil 1:8), when modified by *phthonos* it refers to improper desire. The KJV's "*lusteth* to *envy*" and Vulgate's "ad invidiam concupiscit" capture this usage. (Cf. the Douay-Rheims translation's "To envy doth the spirit covet which dwelleth in you," which—like the Vulgate—picks up the link with that covetousness in James 4:2.) Second, what precedes—the poisonous effects of humanity's covetous craving on community in 4:1-3—and what follows, the anecdote of God's surpassing grace, flow uninterrupted when 4:5 is taken in reference to irascible human desire for what others have.

for the law) or negative (e.g., jealousy). Evidence that *phthonos* has a similarly broad range is completely lacking. Second, since James does not refer to the Holy Spirit elsewhere, such a reference here appears forced; however, the human spirit is driven by this insatiable desire to have what others have, as Scripture often bears out. Third, the following verse opens with a strong contrast: "But [God] gives all the more grace" (4:6). God's surpassing grace is best understood in response to human unfaithfulness rather than as a response to God's own "jealousy." Finally, James's focus throughout this unit has been the dangers of self-centered desire (4:1-3); since 4:5 can be understood as a further reference to these covetous cravings importation of the concept of divine "jealousy" is unnecessary and disruptive to the flow of James's argument.

Earlier, James has acknowledged "all of us make many mistakes" (3:2). Among the most troubling of those mistakes is the ubiquitous failure to live out the challenge of the *Sh'ma Yisrael* (cf. 2:19): "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut 6:4-5). Yet, the lives of God's people often evidence double-mindedness (cf. 1:5-8), a failure of resolve to serve God alone. The desires of human hearts are often selfish cravings and animal pleasures (4:1-3); our energies are often spent on such pursuits (cf. 1:11b; 4:13; 5:2-5) rather than in seeking the kingdom of God and God's justice (Matt 6:33). For just such people, God's offer of surpassing grace is good news (Jas 4:6); such grace makes repentance possible (4:7-10).

The Devil

James 4:7 is the only reference to the devil in the letter, though demons are mentioned in 2:19. James reflects Judaism's acknowledgement of God's sovereignty; the devil is in no sense God's equal—there is but one God (2:19). James's spiritual dualism gives the devil less due than is common in many Conservative Evangelical or Pentecostal circles. James lays responsibility for sin's origin squarely in the desires of human hearts (1:14-15; 4:1-3); "the devil made me do it," a line popularized by Flip Wilson's character Geraldine, does not excuse. For James the devil is an opponent who will flee if met with staunch resistance (4:7; cf. Matt 16:18). The devil is resisted by rejecting that "devilish" understanding (3:15) that drives those who serve self rather than serve God through demonstrations of mercy. Such faithful resistance in the struggle for God's cause is an important theme in the letter (e.g., 1:12; 5:11).

The "proud" whom God opposes (4:6) are likely the affluent, who believe that they control their own destinies and who are absorbed in their own money-making schemes (1:11b; 4:13-16). The "humble" whom God graces are likely the faithful poor (cf. 1:9; 2:5). What hope is offered to the rich is that if they identify with the cause of the poor (humble themselves) that they too will experience God's gracious intervention rather than active opposition (cf. 5:4-5).

James paints a multi-faceted picture of repentance: repentance entails submission to God's will and active resistance against the devil. [The Devil] Repentance entails worshipful submission; the language of drawing near to God reflects the cultic practice of the Jewish temple (Ps 24:3). Cleansed hands, that is, hands that cease from practicing injustice—for example, the unfair business practices of 5:4—are one condition for approaching God in worship (Ps 24:4). [Hope for the Rich?] Another condition is purified hearts, that is, hearts that now "desire one thing" (Kierkegaard) rather than both God and some God-substitute such as wealth or social standing. The double-minded feel some draw to God and God's cause but they lack faith, that is, unadulterated commitment (Jas 1:6). [Double Minded] Psalm 24:4 (the text that lies behind the call for clean hands and pure hearts in Jas 4:7) includes idolaters, "those who lift up their souls to what is false" as another category of those who may not ascend the temple mount. Again, some of James's hearers exhibit a twisted consistency of stained hands and "double-minded" hearts. James calls for reform in both will and in action; James's promise is that God draws near to those who seek God's kingdom and its justice (Matt 6:33). The clustered refer-

Hope for the Rich?

"There is hope for the rich, but this [i.e., 4:7-10] is the only text in James where we see it. The condition is clear: they must be converted, that is, they must radically change their lives and purify their hands of unjust business practices. In other words, they must cease being rich, for the rich for James are those who oppress, who exploit, and who blaspheme the name of the Lord."

Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James,* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 48.

ences to approaching God, repudiating the devil, and to purifying will and action (i.e, repentance) likely reflect themes of a primitive baptismal liturgy; here again, James has members of the covenant community in mind. James's call for lamentation, mourning, and weeping reflect the language of the Hebrew prophets and the sayings of Jesus (cf. Matt 11:21; Luke 6:24-25). Such are proper responses for those who fail to repent and must face the consequences of certain judgment. This summons to eschatological bereavement serves rhetorically as a warning. The summons to humble oneself before the Lord echoes the reversals in James 1:9-10. Here the route to personal honor is not self-aggrandizement but to know the One before whom all must humbly bow.

Double Minded

ΑΩ In Hebrew idiom the heart is the seat of the will. In Greek this same function is ascribed to the mind. Thus double-mindedness, a term James likely coined, is a functional equivalent of an impure heart.

James's call not to malign fellow believers returns to one of the letter's favorite themes: right speech (cf. 1:19,26; 2:15-16; 3:1-12; 5:9, 12). Earlier, James exposes the inconsistency of those who bless God out of the same mouths they use to curse those made in God's likeness (3:9). Here, James offers another theological rationale for avoiding hurtful speech: those speaking against community members speak against the law and stand in judgment of the law. As elsewhere in James, the law is the Torah as interpreted by Jesus. James reflects a traditional Jewish perspective of rejoicing in the Torah. Jesus saying against judging others is also in the background (Matt 7:1; Luke 6:37). The contrast between those who judge and those who do recalls James's earlier concern with doing the word (Jas 1:22-25). Here God is the one lawgiver and judge with power over life and death (4:12). However, James and those communities addressed here likely also associate Jesus with both lawgiving (cf. the royal law epitomized by neighbor love as highlighted by Jesus, 2:8) and judgment (cf. 5:6,9 where the judge standing at the door refers to the *parousia*). Since the Lawgiver is one any breach of covenant obligations represents rebellion against that one Sovereign.

Like the Roman god Janus, 4:13-17 looks backwards and forward: back to the condemnation of acquisitiveness as an expression of friendship with the world and opposition to God (4:1-10) and to the theme of inappropriate speech (4:11-12); and ahead to the even harsher judgment on those rich who rob their workforce to support their lifestyles marked by amassed fortunes and consumption of luxury goods (5:1-6). James's tone in 4:13-17 is somewhat less harsh than that in the surrounding pericopes (4:1-10; 5:1-6).

The opening "come now" (4:13) reappears in 5:1 and serves to stitch the sections together. The merchants James has in mind are self-employed; they are responsible for their own schedules and business plans; their life goal is acquisition of money. James warns that they cannot even bank on tomorrow, for they are as ephemeral as the morning mist (4:14). Rather than boast of their business plans, they should acknowledge God's sovereignty (4:15). James has already identified God as the one able to save and to destroy (4:12). Teachings such as Jesus story of the rich fool perhaps lie in the background. "The Lord willing" and similar expressions are the most quoted passages in James, having woven themselves into folk piety in many cultures. James's intent is not to dictate a formula to recite before disclosing plans; rather one's speech serves as a window on one's mind, revealing any doubleness. Those who boast about their own money-making plans and fail to acknowledge God are guilty of improper speech; they lack integrity because their boasting does not reflect reality.

The chapter closes with a proverbial judgment against inaction: "Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin" (4:17). The proverb encapsulates some of James's favorite themes. To know the right is not enough; the person of integrity must do right. Hearing the word is not enough; hearers must be doers also. Confessing faith in Christ is not enough; those in the faith community must eschew discrimination against the poor and take action to meet the material needs of those lacking life's necessities. Omissions of covenant obligations are sins; failure to act mercifully is to be lawbreakers, who have disregarded the Torah's demand of neighbor love as highlighted by Jesus.

CONNECTIONS

Triumphant Consumerism

How much is enough? James finds the root of all sorts of human conflicts in the self-centered desire to possess what others have. Bread for the World founder Arthur Simon concluded that "material advantages can capture the heart," but cannot nourish the soul or give meaning or purpose to life.[4] "An affluent culture," such as that experienced by many North Americans, "turns our hearts towards fleeting satisfactions and away from God." As Simon observed, "We are human *beings* rather than human *havings*."

Thus, we are made for relationships, to be with others, or in James's language to be friends of God. [Be Thou My Vision] Simon observed "unprecedented prosperity has left our lives full but not necessarily fulfilled." Pleasure "thrives on rising expectations" that destroy satisfaction and contentment; however much we have if we see there is more to have we seem to acquire more expensive tastes. According to Simon, "the problem is not that we've tried faith and found it wanting, but that we've tried mammon and found it addictive, and as a result find following Christ inconvenient." [I'd Rather Have Jesus] Our affluence has concealed the connection "between empty stomachs on one continent and empty lives on another."

Be Thou My Vision

Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise,
Thou mine inheritance, now and always:
Thou and Thou only, first in my heart,
High King of heaven my Treasure Thou art.

"Be Thou My Vision." Ancient Irish Hymn. Attributed to Dallan Forgaill (8th century).Trans. Mary E. Byrne (1880–1931).

I'd Rather Have Jesus

I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold,
I'd rather be His than have riches untold;
I'd rather have Jesus than houses or lands,
I'd rather be led by His nail-pierced hand
Than to be the king of a vast domain
Or be held in sin's dread sway;
I'd rather have Jesus than anything
This world affords today.

"I'd Rather Have Jesus." Words by Rhea F. Miller (1894–1966).

According to James Twitchell, "materialism though unacknowledged remains "the central characteristic of modern life."[5] He warned, "until there is some system to identify and satisfy those needs and yearnings, capitalism—and the culture it carries with it—will continue not just to thrive but to triumph." Just as James does, Twitchell saw behind human strivings to satisfy needs and yearnings a conflict of value systems and ideologies. In James's parlance, we choose to be friends of the world, adopting its value system by default, or else we choose to be friends of God, and embrace God's alternative values. Our values determine how we interact with others, whether cooperatively or competitively, whether mercifully or hard-heartedly. Twitchell critiqued consumerism as "wasteful, devoid of otherworldly concerns" and "heedless of the truly poor." As Alan Wolfe has pointed out, "By encouraging people to put a monetary value on everything, markets . . . undermine the ties of solidarity associated with friendship and family ties that, if they are to endure thick and thin, must be non-economic in nature."[6] In other words, consumerism reflects values incompatible with "faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ" (Jas 2:1).

However, there is an alternative way to defining "life by the dominant culture of competition and consumerism," an orientation Tome and Christine Sine described as "Boom City."[7] The Sines characterize that alternative as the "City of Shalom." It is what Martin Luther King, Jr., termed "the beloved community." Judith Allen Shelly defined *shalom* in this way:

> Shalom refers to a God-centered community where people live in good relationship with their neighbors, caring for one another's physical, emotional and spiritual well-being, economic welfare, social interaction and environmental safety. . . . Shalom is seen [as] people relate to one another with faithfulness, integrity, mutual respect and affection. It includes peace, prosperity, rest, safety, security, justice, happiness, health, welfare and wholeness of life. The individual within the community works towards *shalom* through *sedeq*, Hebrew for righteousness. . . . *Sedeq* is essentially any action that facilitates *shalom*.[8]

It is in this sense that James speaks of righteousness (1:20; 2:23; 3:18) and of the righteous who are vindicated by God (5:6, 16); the righteous are those who embrace God's values and work towards a full and just peace with their neighbors. Robert Parham lamented that "a Coca-Cola ad brags that Coke is 'shared around the world' and is 'the one taste the whole world shares.' In other words, our common ground is consumption, not values like justice, fairness, civility and respect."[9] James calls us to that other way, the way of friendship with God demonstrated by love of neighbors. [Resources]

Greed Unleashed

James exposed the dangers of unleashed greed: "You want something and you do not have it; so you murder. You covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts" (4:2). Reflecting on the Worldcom scandal, Congressman Billy Tauzin (R-La) whose committee investigated the business improprieties concluded: "This was a case of pure theft, of inside stealing, again, from their own investors."[10] Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, commenting on pervasive and systemic corporate dysfunction represented by the likes of Enron, Worldcom, Adelphia

Resources

Barber, Benjamin. *Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism Are Reshaping the World*. New York: Times Books, 1995.

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Sine, Christine, and Tom Sine. *Living on Purpose: Finding God's Best for Your Life*. Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 2001.

Sine, Tom. *Mustard Seed vs. McWorld: Reinventing Life and Faith for the Future*. Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1999.

Twitchell, James B. *Lead Us into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

Communicatons, Rite Aid, Xerox, and Arthur Anderson, diagnosed the problem as "infectious greed. . . . Too many corporate executives sought ways to 'harvest' . . . stock market gains." Greenspan continued, "It is not that human beings have become any more greedy than in generations past. It is that the avenues to express greed had grown so enormously."[11] The time was the greedy were limited by the means and methods of financial exchange: unscrupulous merchants could rig their scales or hollow out their weights (Amos 8:5); unethical landowners could hold back the wages of their hired hands (Jas 5:4). Injustice was rampant but its effects were most often localized.

Reflecting on a century of scientific advance that made global annihilation a possibility, Bertrand Russell warned:

> If the increased power which science has conferred upon human volitions is to be a boon and not a curse, the ends to which these volitions are directed must grow commensurately with the growth of power to carry them out. Hitherto, although we have been told on Sundays to love our neighbor, we have been told on weekdays to hate him, and there are six times as many weekdays as Sundays. Hitherto, the harm that we could do to our neighbor by hating him was limited by our incompetence, but in the new world upon which we are entering there will be no such limit, and the indulgence of hatred can lead only to ultimate and complete disaster.[12]

Just as the mid-twentieth century was marked by rapid advances in nuclear science, the last decades were characterized by accelerating progress in information systems and in globalization that render previously unimaginable financial doomsdays possible.

Does Faith Matter in the Board Room?

James's call to repentance 4:7-10 plays on elements familiar in early Christian baptismal catechesis and liturgy: submitting to God through the obedience of baptism, renouncing the devil, repenting from sins of self-centered will and of corrupt hands, and living with awareness that one will one stand before God's judgment. But does Christian baptism make a difference in business dealings? Or, as Jim Wallace asks, does it matter where or if Enron executives go to church?

> I wonder if [Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neil] and his administration's friends at Enron made it to church or synagogue this weekend. If they made it, what did they hear about their business and political

> dealings? Let me be blunt. The behavior of Enron executives is a direct violation of biblical ethics; the teachings of both Christian and Jewish faiths would excoriate the greed, selfishness, and cheating of Enron's corporate leaders, and condemn, in the harshest terms, their callous and cruel mistreatment of employees. Read your Bibles. The strongest media critics of Enron call it putting self-interest above the public interest; biblical ethics would just call it a sin. I don't know what the church- or synagogue-going habits of Enron's top executives are, but if they do attend services, I wonder if they will hear a religious word about the practices of arranging huge personal bonuses and escape hatches while destroying the lives of people who work for you. It's time for the pulpit to speak—to bring the Word of God to bear on the moral issues of the American economy. The Bible speaks of such things from beginning to end, so why not our pastors and preachers?[13]

Ken Lay, former Enron CEO, was reared in the home of a Baptist preacher and has been an active member of First Methodist Church in Houston. Yet despite his civic and church leadership and love of hymn singing, Lay seems not to have "been raised to walk in newness of life," at least not as reflected in the business empire he lorded over. Enron's trading schemes carried names like "Fat Boy," after the atomic bomb that devastated Nagasaki; "Death Star," after Darth Vader's base for inter-galactic domination, and "Get Shorty," after the misadventures of a ruthless loan shark. As Robert Parham concluded, Lay "certainly appears to have lied to employees, cut deals for himself and cheated investors."[14] These are not the images of "a city set on a hill"; rather they are tributes to the dark side. As one commentator lamented, "at the heart of this failure within the Christian community" to speak a prophetic word to economic powers and principalities, "is the false division made between ethics and economics. We have seen moral behavior as that which concerns matters like private character and human sexuality. We have seen economics as morally neutral."[15] [Marketplace Morals] James warns that "God opposes the proud" (4:6). Reflecting on Enron's upper management and on King David's machinations to acquire Bathsheba through hostile takeover, Joanne Ciulla cautioned of the negative effects of inflated egos; "The challenge of leadership is not to get puffed up or arrogant."[16] With no accountability leaders get into trouble; this happens when leaders surround themselves with "yes" men (in corporate circles these usually are males) and have boards that are over-compensated (and thus beholden to management) and geographically scattered so as to make appropriate oversight difficult. Religious business and polit-

Marketplace Morals

The biblical witness tells us repeatedly about marketplace corruption, injustice, greed, lying, deceit and hiding wrong behind the veil of religious piety. These sinful realities flourished in a theistic society, long before the emergence of secularism. In addition to the prophetic tradition about right and wrong, justice, fairness and integrity, the Bible points out that Hebrew culture knew that social structures were required to protect the poor. With such a compelling and consistent economic message in the Bible, why have we taken the wrong path?

For too long in many Christian quarters, the biblical message has been individualized and privatized, robbing it of its original social message. The individualization and privatization of Christianity keeps us off track. For example, when many Christians think about greed, they think about a greedy individual. They do not think in terms of a culture of corruption, a corporation based on deceit and an economic system that encourages and rewards greedy practices. When we focus on the greedy individual, the solution is conversion—CEOs with better hearts. When we focus on the systemic problem, what Alan Greenspan called "infectious greed," then the solution is social reform. . . .

In theological terms, the problem is the sinful nature of the corporate structure, one of the powers and principalities of this age. The solution is far more than CEOs with pure hearts and absolute values. The solution is Christian realism—we need forces that counterbalance the power of corporations. Some Christians contributed to the end of slavery, child labor, apartheid and Soviet communism. Another generation of Christians can play a constructive role in corporate reform, beginning with the recovery of the prophetic witness within churches and public support for a system that pursues social fairness and justice.

Robert Parham, "What Responsibility Do Churches Have for Worldcom?" <http://www.ethicsdaily.com/print_popup.cfm?AID=1280> (2 August 2002), retrieved 22 July 2004.

ical leaders need persons like Nathan and James with the courage and creativity to expose their moral inconsistencies.

Is a Successful Christian Business Plan Possible?

Can Christians succeed in the marketplace? Can there be such a thing as a successful Christian business plan? In 1903 James L. Kraft had a good idea, to buy hoops of cheese at the Chicago farmers' market and deliver them by wagon to shopkeepers. He hoped to get rich quick as a cheese wholesaler, yet Kraft did not meet with fast success. Taking stock of his life, Kraft committed himself to pleasing God rather than getting rich, and confessed that resolve to Paddy, his cheese wagon pony. After Kraft drew near to God he experienced God's blessing on his life and in his business dealings. Later in life Kraft reflected that the most important job he held was Sunday School Superintendent for North Shore Baptist Church.[17]

James warns that anyone "who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin" (4:17). Throughout the letter James clarifies just what it means to "do the right thing" (Spike Lee).

• The right thing to do is to care for orphans and widows (1:27). How do business dealings affect children living in poverty or elders? If businesses do not pay their young workers a livable wage their unjust pay scales perpetuate poverty among those desiring to do better for their children through honest labor. If businesses rob

The Rich Get Richer

The people on the top of the American economy get rich no matter whether they make good or bad decisions, while workers and consumers are the ones who suffer from all the bad ones. In the Enron case, the company executives overestimated the company's value, ran it into the ground, lied to their employees about the company's stability, encouraged Enron's workers to invest their pension funds in company stock, and then imposed rules against selling that stock while, all at the same time, arranging an executive bailout for themselves worth $1 billion. Enron CEO Ken Lay quietly sold his company stock before the collapse for $101 million.

Jim Wallace, "Where Do Enron Executives Go to Church?" <http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=news.display_archives&mode=current_opinion&article=CO_011602> (16 January 2002), retrieved 21 August 2004.

pension funds in order to enrich the pockets of their chief executives they condemn their honest workers to retirement lived in dependence on already limited and shrinking social resources. [The Rich Get Richer]

• The right thing to do is to avoid discriminatory practices (2:1). How do business dealings perpetuate discrimination? Employers may be quick to brag that they are "equal opportunity employers" that do not discriminate on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, etc.

The Color Green

C. P. Ellis was once Exalted Cyclops of the Durham, North Carolina, branch of the Ku Klux Klan. In an interview with Studs Terkel, Ellis reflected on his reasons for leaving the Klan. Among these was a new economic insight: "When it comes to money, the green, the other colors make no difference."

> As a result of our fightin' one another, the city council still had their way. They didn't want to give up control to the blacks nor the Klan. They were using us.
>
> I began to realize this later down the road. One day I was walking downtown and a certain city council member saw me comin'. I expected him to shake my hand because he was talking to me at night on the telephone [to request armed Klan presence at council meetings to intimidate African-Americans in the audience]. I had been in his home and visited with him. He crossed the street. . . . I began to think somethin's wrong here.
>
> Most of 'em [council members] are merchants or maybe an attorney, an insurance agent, people like that. As long as they kept the low-income whites and the low-income blacks fightin', they're gonna maintain control. I began to get that feelin' after I was ignored in public. I thought: . . . you're not gonna use me anymore. That's when I began to use some real serious thinking.
>
> The same thing is happening in this country today. People are bein' used by those in control, those who have all the wealth. I'm not espousing communism. We got the greatest system of government in the world. But those who have it don't want those who don't have it to have any part of it. Black and white. When it comes to money, the green, the other colors make no difference. . . .
>
> When I began to organize [for the union], I began to see far deeper. I began to see people again bein' used. Blacks against whites. . . . There are two things management wants to keep: all the money and all the say-so. They don't want none of these poor workin' folks to have none of that. I began to see management fightin' me with everythin' they had. Hire anti-union law firms, badmouth unions. The people were makin' $1.95 an hour, barely able to get through the weekends.
>
> It makes you feel good to go into a plant and . . . see black people and white people join hand to defeat the racist issues [union-busters] use against people.

C. P. Ellis, "Why I Quit the Klan," in Studs Terkel, *American Dreams: Lost and Found* (New York: Donadio & Olson, Inc., 1980).

However, businesses can and do discriminate in other ways. The tendency for the rich to take care of the rich is older than Amos's critique of Israel's faith. This tendency lives on in the actions of well compensated board members who approve obscene salaries, stock options, and "golden parachutes" for chief executive officers. This tendency lives on in the actions of self-serving politicians who deliver lucrative government contracts to their corporate backers, sometimes without a competitive bid process. The tendency lives on in tax breaks that favor wealthy corporations at the expense of the working poor and middle class that will be saddled with the associated national debt. The tendency lives on among the privileged few who cry "class warfare" at any call for scripturally informed tax reform but who readily play upon racial animosity to maintain political and corporate power. [The Color Green]

• The right thing to do is to show mercy for others, to live out the law of love for neighbors (2:8-9,13). How do business dealings demonstrate mercy or fail to show it? A decade ago Eastman Kodak suffered the ill effects of transformations in their industry. Kay Whitmore, Kodak's chief executive officer, sought to manage costs through early retirements rather than mass layoffs. Whitmore appealed to a tradition of social responsibility originating with Kodak himself. However, the Board of Directors valued dividends for investors more than loyalty to the workforce; they fired Whitmore and two weeks later 10,000 employees received layoff notices.[18] [Resources for Socially Responsible Businesses] Ron James, president of the Center for Ethical Business Cultures, has urged fair treatment of stakeholders—employees, communities, customers, venders, even competitors, rather than an exclusive focus on dividends for shareholders.[19]

Resources for Socially Responsible Businesses

Blanchard, Kenneth H., and Norman Vincent Peale. *The Power of Ethical Management*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1988.

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Kelly, Marjorie. *The Divine Right of Capital: Dethroning the Corporate Aristocracy*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2001.

Mahan, Brian J. *Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose: Vocation and the Ethics of Ambition*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002.

Jack Quarter. *Beyond the Bottom Line: Socially Innovative Business Owners*. Westport CT: Quorum Books, 2000.

NOTES

[1] E.g., Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James: Faith without Works Is Dead* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 47.

[2] "To like and dislike the same things, that is indeed true friendship" (Gaius Sallustius Crispus [86–34 BC], *The War with Catiline* [c. 40 BC]).

[3] Tamez, *Scandalous Message*, 47.

[4] Michael Tutterow, "How Much Is Enough? Hungering for God in an Affluent Culture," <http://ethicsdaily.com/print_popup.cfm?AID=2465> (23 April 2003), retrieved 16 July 2004.

[5] Twitchell concluded, "while materialism may be the most shallow of the 20th century's various isms, it has been the one that has ultimately triumphed" (Sarah Griffith, "Consumerism Defined 20th-Centry America," <http:www.baptists4ethics.com/print_popup.cfm?AID=677> (6 November 2000), retrieved 16 July 2004.

[6] Griffith, "Consumerism Defined 20th-Century America."

[7] Michael Tutterow, "Living on Purpose: Finding God's Best for Your Life," <http://www.baptists4ethics.com/print_popup.cfm?AID=1897> (9 December 2002), retrieved 16 July 2004.

[8] Judith Allen Shelly, *Spiritual Care: A Guide for Caregivers* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 20, 64.

[9] Robert Parham, "Jihad vs McWorld," <www.baptists4ethics.com/print_popup.cfm?AID=1302> (16 October 2002), retrieved 16 July 2004.

[10] Robert Parham, "Where Do Worldcom Execs Go to Church?" <http://ethics-daily.com/print_popup.cfm?AID=1153> (19 July 2002), retrieved 22 July 2004.

[11] Robert Parham, "America's Market Crises Is More Than Some Bad Apples," <http://ethicsdaily.com_popup.cfm?AID=1164> (22 July 2002), retrieved 22 July 2004.

[12] Bertrand Russell, "The Expanding Mental Universe" in R. Egner and L. Donnan, eds., *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell* (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1961).

[13] Jim Wallace, "Where do Enron executives go to church?" <http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=news.display_archives&mode=current_opinion&article=CO_011602> (16 January 2002), retrieved 21 August 2004.

[14] Parham, "Where Do Worldcom Execs Go to Church?"

[15] Robert Parham, "Silence of the Lambs: Christian Leaders Mute on Enron," <http://ethicsdaily.com/print_popup.cfm?AID=204> (18 January 2002), retrieved 22 July 2004.

[16] Jodi Mathews, "Enron's Lesson in Failed Leadership Ethics: An Interview with Joanne Ciulla," <http://ethicsdaily.com/print_popup.cfm?AID=442> (7 March 2002), retrieved 22 July 2004.

[17] Gary Farley related this character story he heard as a Vacation Bible School pupil more than fifty years ago. One hundred years after Kraft's conversation with his pony, the Kraft Foods webpage attributed James Kraft's success to his business acumen alone; faith has been expunged from the tale (Gary Farley, "Devolution and Sanitized Secularism," <http://ethicsdaily.com/print_popup.cfm?AID=3976> (30 March 2004), retrieved 22 July 2004.

[18] Dwight A. Moody, "Unto the Third and Fourth Generation," <http://ethicsdaily.com/print-popup.cfm?AID=3991> (1 April 2004), retrieved 22 July 2004.

[19] Ibid.

STRUGGLES OF THE FAITHFUL (REPRISE)

James 5:1-20

COMMENTARY

Chapter 5 consists, as chapter 1 did, of several units that on first glance appear unconnected. However, chapter 5 revisits recurrent pastoral themes introduced in chapter 1 and developed in the middle chapters of the letter. [Outline of James 5] These topics include:

Outline of James 5:1-20
I. Economic Injustice and Acquisitiveness (5:1-6)
II. Endurance in the Struggle (5:7-11)
III. Honest Speech (5:12)
IV. The Power of Prayer (5:13-18)
V. Restoration of Wanderers (5:19-20)

- economic oppression of the working poor by the acquisitive rich (5:1-6; cf. 1:9-11; 2:1-17);
- endurance in the struggle for God's cause (5:7-11; cf. 1:2-4, 12);
- right speech (5:12; cf. 1:19, 26; 3:1-12; 4:11-12); and
- the powerful prayer of the righteous (5:13-18; cf. 1:5-8; 4:2).

The letter's concluding call to restore community members who have wandered from the way of truth, the code of conduct outlined in the letter (5:19-20), forms something of an *inclusio* with the opening address to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion, God's people who are one family though presently divided and scattered.

James's invitation to the rich to "weep and wail" (5:1) introduces an ironic pronouncement of judgment, given for the benefit of the poor and oppressed, James's primary audience, rather than a genuine call for the power brokers to repent (5:1-6). The introductory formula "come now" (5:1; 4:13) links this grim preview of judgment day with the critique of those presumptuous, profit-driven merchants that precedes it (4:13-17). Likewise, the introductory *therefore* in 5:8 links this announcement of just sentence on oppressors with the call to steadfast endurance on the part of those of suffer and stand in solidarity with the oppressed (5:8-11). Taken as an ironic

The Great Reversal

James reflects confidence in a great reversal in circumstance of the oppressed and their oppressors such as is seen in Luke's Gospel. In the *Magnificat*, Mary's hymn of praise, God is lauded as the advocate of the needy and adversary of their powerful oppressors:

[God] has shown strength with his arm;
[God] has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
[God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;
[God] has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:51-53)

James foresees a similar reversal of status of poor and rich:

Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, and the rich in being brought low,
because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field.
For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes.
It is the same way with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away. (Jas 1:9-11; cf. Luke 12:20)

The Lucan Beatitudes include woes on the rich, the comfortably well-fed, those laughing it up, and those spoken well of (in a society that priced economic clout):

But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.
Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.
Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.
Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets. (Luke 6:24-26)

Luke's woe form is a pronouncement of judgment, just as James's call to "weep and wail" is (5:1). Weeping and wailing is a reasonable response in light of the anticipated reversal. The great reversal appears again in the Lucan story of the nameless (and now status-less) rich man and poor Lazarus. Father Abraham's reply to the rich man, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony" (Luke 16:25), at first glance suggests that the reversal in circumstance experienced in the life to come depends only on one's economic status in this life. However, the Lukan story as a whole focuses on the rich man's indifference to the poor at his own doorstep:

- the rich man is clothes in purple and fine linen (16:19); while nearby Lazarus is covered in sores (16:20; cf. the "naked" brother or sister in Jas 2:15-16);
- the rich man feasts sumptuously (16:19); while close by Lazarus longs for crumbs falling from the table (16:21; cf. the hungry brother or sister in Jas 2:15-16).

Too late the rich man understood that the message of the prophets is a call to repent of self-centered indulgence by showing mercy to poor neighbors (6:27-29). The rich man had enjoyed the good life, segregated in his gated community (6:20); too late he grasped the interconnectedness of life—what went on outside the gate did concern him: the mercy Lazarus had depended on in this life that the rich man denied him was the same mercy the rich man would long for in the life to come that would likewise be denied him (cf. Jas 2:13).

pronouncement, James's prophecy is first an encouraging call to the poor and oppressed believers to devaluate the rich in light of God's coming judgment on these oppressors (5:3b, 5). The community's poor should not envy the rich, who are now conspicuous consumers of goods and hoarders of wealth, because their doom is sealed (5:3b, 5). [Great Reversal] James's graphic judgment scene is second a warning to the poor laborers against adopting the oppressive world's values and unjust means. These rich have pursued wealth by any means necessary, including fraud (5:4), abuses of the court system, even murder of those who cry out for justice (5:6). However, in an ironic twist, their ill-gotten gains—hoarded crops, fine garments, precious metals—are not only worthless to them—

Covenant Lawsuit

Covenant lawsuit is a familiar form to readers of the Hebrew Bible. These suits are opportunities for the prophets to make a case against those who have broken faith with God by violating their responsibilities under the covenant. James's tirade against the oppressive rich can be so understood. The first charge against the corrupt, landowning aristocracy is that they have withheld daily wages from farm hands (5:4). The Torah makes clear that landowners owe their day-laborers prompt payment of debts:

> You must not exploit or rob your neighbor. You must not keep back the laborer's wage until the next morning. (Lev 19:13 JB)

> You are not to exploit the hired servant who is poor and destitute, whether he is one of your brothers or a stranger who lives in your towns. You must pay him his wage each day, not allowing the sun to set before you do, for he is poor and is anxious for it; otherwise, he may appeal to Yahweh against you, and it would be a sin for you. (Deut 24:14 JB)

James personifies the stolen wages as shouting for justice, perhaps alluding to Abel's blood that cried out in witness against his murderer. Their damning testimony is corroborated by the cries of the laborers. Deliberation is not necessary; the Judge's sentence is pronounced: what from the world's perspective are lives of luxury and pleasure are in the eyes of the Commander of heaven beasts fattened for slaughter.

rotten, moth-eaten, rusted—but also deadly—toxic as flesh-eating bacteria, destructive as fire, damning as unimpeachable witnesses in a capital murder trial (5:2-3). [Covenant Lawsuit]

The Torah requires payment of laborers before sunset for work done that day. Since an unpaid day laborer cannot feed himself or his family, those compelled to work though regularly denied their fair wages are slowly starved in these *de facto* work camps (5:4). Cry, *boe,* is used for the wails of wildlife and for the Hebrew slaves' anguished protest in Egypt (Exod 2:23 LXX). Injustice has reduced the working poor to the state of wounded and dying animals; though they howl in anguish beyond words, God hears their cry for justice, understands their struggle, and promises to act on their behalf. The poor laborers' howling protest is "a prayer that reveals the unjust inconsistency between what the landowners promised and what they actually paid"[1] (cf. 5:12). [The Prayers of the Oppressed]

For the oppressive rich, "the coming of the Lord" represents a day of violent retribution; for their defrauded workers, the coming of that same Lord means the end of their oppression; God will soon set things aright. James appar-

The Prayers of the Oppressed

James cannot imagine a Christian community that is not inspired by prayer, for it is through prayer that the Christian identity of these oppressed communities becomes visible. (Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James: Faith without Works Is Dead* [New York: Crossroad, 1992], 69)

We should dialogue with God in situations of oppression and violence, pain and abandonment. Moments of prayer strengthen the spirit and inspire the practice of liberation. . . . Prayer also foresees moments of fullness in which we feel the grace of God. The experience of joy is one such moment. (Tamez, *Scandalous Message*, 71)

ently expects God's intervention in the cause of justice within human history rather than merely at its culmination. Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic" (1862) reflects a similar understanding of "the coming of the Lord" within history as the great Emancipator, though James does not issue a call to arms in the cause of liberation as Howe did. [The Battle Hymn of the Republic] Rather, that courageous persistence in the face of struggle that James calls for can be described as no resistance (cf. 5:6).

Earlier, James has taught "judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy" (2:13); here, those rich who were callused to their workers' cries are offered no hope of escape on God's day of slaughter (5:5). Earlier James has warned that God resists the proud but gives grace to the lowly (4:6); here James pictures God as Lord *Sabaoth* ("Lord of Hosts" NRSV), commander of armies (5:4). This reminder that God stands mobilized is for the benefit of the defrauded workers (and others who likewise suffer oppression and cry out to the Lord for relief). Later James will remind them that the Lord is "compassionate and merciful" (5:11)

The Battle Hymn of the Republic

James eagerly anticipates God's intervention in history to abolish the power of oppressors. As in the Battle Hymn of the Republic, for James the coming of the Lord is a day of reckoning for those who have stored up wrath by leading lives of obscene luxury built on the stolen labor of others. Julia Ward Howe understood the Union army to be the agent enforcing God's righteous sentence of condemnation upon Southern slavery. However, James does not read as a call to arms; rather James's call to active, non-violent resistance of injustice goes hand in hand with that pacifism familiar in the sayings of Jesus (Jas 5:6; 1:20; 3:17-18; cf. Matt 5:39; 5:9; 26:52).

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored,
He has loosed the fateful lightening of His terrible swift sword
His truth is marching on.

I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps
They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps
I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps
His day is marching on.

I have read a fiery gospel writ in burnish'd rows of steel,
"As ye deal with my contemners, So with you my grace shall deal";
Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel
Since God is marching on.

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat
He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment-seat
Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him! be jubilant, my feet!
Our God is marching on.

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me:
As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,
While God is marching on.

Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
His truth is marching on.

and that the good end to their stories of unjust suffering has not yet been revealed. As Job did, the working poor now victimized by economic powers should hold on for the justice God has in store.

Are the rich James castigates in 5:1-10 professed believers? If this rebuke is some type of covenant lawsuit (rather than akin to prophetic pronouncements against foreign oppressors), then these rich are judged precisely because they have not lived up to their responsibilities as God's own. Disregarding the royal law, they have defrauded their brothers and sisters of their fair wages rather than sharing freely with those in need; they have murdered their neighbors rather than loving them. [("Christian" Oppressors] If James has "Christians" in mind, such professed believers have a dead faith not unlike that James ascribes to demons (2:19)—such "believers" affirm God's existence but their loyalties lie elsewhere. Such "believers" are spiritual "adulteresses," publicly pledged to God but embracing the world and its self-indulgent, community-poisoning values (4:1-4). Such "believers" are robbers (5:4) rather than godly givers (cf. 1:17); they use the courts to carryout their dirty work of fraud and murder (2:6; 5:6). Their financial successes rest on others miseries. Such "believers" make appearances in the worshiping assembly, but they disrespect God's poor (2:2-3). Such "believers" bless God yet curse their social inferiors, unknowingly blaspheming the Lord whose holy name has been spoken over them as well (2:7; 3:9). Such "believers" trust that they control their own tomorrows and set their own agendas (4:13-16); when faced with opportunities to do the right thing they suffer from a self-imposed paralysis (4:17).

"Christian" Oppressors

Certainly, church history reveals instances in which purported believers have enriched themselves while practicing horrible oppression:

- "Christian" merchants captured child Crusaders bound for the Holy Land and sent them bound in chains to slavery in North Africa;
- "Christian" nations have fought wars of aggression for land, for gold, for oil;
- "Christian" planters constructed agricultural empires built on slave labor;
- "Christian" CEO have robbed investors and pensioners of the fair share of corporate wealth.

The introductory "therefore" ties the challenge to display determined endurance (5:7-11) to the proceeding pronouncement of judgment on oppressors (5:1-6). Once again, James's call "be patient" (5:7) is not a challenge to do nothing when confronted by economic injustice and legal travesties (5:6) rather a command to stand on alert, ever ready for what God in grace has in store.[2] [Active Resistance] James has already alerted the oppressed to the end that awaits their tormenters (5:6); earlier James has encouraged the struggling with the promised reward that awaits those who withstand the test (1:12). Though a hostile or indifferent world cannot see it, "the oppressed community of James knows that its difficult situation is in favor of those who suffer."[3] God will exalt the lowly

Active Resistance

Will Campbell's memoir of the Nashville, Tennessee, sit-in reflects the "militant, indomitable patience" of civil rights champions who grasped their "opportune time" on Saturday, February 13, 1960. We see this "indomitable patience" in a young African-American woman who would not yield her seat at the Woolworth's lunch counter, though threatened and assaulted. We see this patient endurance in a young African-American man, trained in the discipline of nonviolence, who did not give in to his rage, whose clenched fists did not draw blood. We see this persistent advocacy for the right in a "steel Magnolia" who put her body and stubborn will in the path of a runaway engine of hate.

"You know what this is, girl?" asked a big man holding a glass half-filled with clear liquid. He appeared older than most of the others. His face was leathery and wrinkled but not from age. Weathered from outside work, I supposed. I felt sick and afraid, the new burden grievous. The man looked like where I cam from. But for geography, he could be an uncle or cousin. And except for something or other, in my fear I knew not what, he could be me. He had a commanding presence and the crowd grew quiet to hear him.

"This heah is bat'try acid. Rite out o mah ole truck. Carbolic acid, ya mite say." He held it over her head, far enough forward for her to see it. . . ."And if you don't git yo' black ass out of heah befo' I count to ten, I'm gon' pour it rite over your frizzy head."

The student still did not move, just sat staring directly ahead. . . . The elderly white woman moved to the front again. She stood between the man and the student. Pretending he didn't see her, the big man began to count. She looked directly up into his face and said something I couldn't hear. When he reached eight in his count, he stopped and turned to face the crowd. They were still attentive, sensing danger. He faked a laugh, lowered the glass and began to address them. . . .

He turned to her again and with his free hand pushed her skirt almost to her thighs. "Les' jus pour this carbolic acid right in yo' nigger-ass lap!" He wheeled back to the crowd. "And the next time she spreads her legs for that jungle bunny sitting' next to 'er, well, she-itt. Ain't gon' be a kinky tail feather in sight."

The student sat with her hands on the counter, leaving the skirt where it was. The muscular built man was breathing heavily, both hands clenched tightly, leaning almost off the stool. The elder white woman jerked the student's skirt with a motion almost too quick to see and then grabbed the tormenter with both arms in a tight embrace and began to cry. "Why? Why? Why? My God, why?" He gazed down at her for one ungainly moment, his face flushed red. She continued to weep, saying nothing. Suddenly the man gently wriggled free, backing away.

"Aw, lady, I didn't mean no harm. It ain't nothing but tap water nohow." As he moved into the crowd and away from the students at the counter, everyone moved with him. The woman, no longer crying, walked up and down the path they left. Solidly in charge. (Will D. Campbell, *Forty Acres and a Goat* [Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers, LTD, 1986], 75-77)

and bring down the mighty (1:9-10); already, God opposes the proud and graces the humble (4:6).

Therefore, James urges his beloved community to take the farmer as an example of that "waiting" James has in mind. It would be a strange farmer indeed who having planted a crop did nothing but wait until harvest; true, the farmer is dependent on God's good gifts of rain but such faithful dependence does not translate into inaction in the between time. This is clear from James's second call to "be patient" (5:8) which is clarified as "strengthen[ing] your hearts"; the 'patience' James refers to demands courage.

The warning against grumbling (5:9) at first seems out of context, though James is admittedly sensitive to sins of speech. This caution echoes the stern prohibition against speaking evil of com-

Right Tactics

During the American civil rights struggle this tension over the right tactics in the fight for rights led to formal division in one historically black Baptist denomination and threatened to divide families. For example, when Jan Jordan (Zehr) desired to join an African-American friend on a civil rights march in Americus, her father (Clarence Jordan) said she would be on her own if arrested.

> Daddy didn't approve of either sit-ins or marches. He simply believed in living his life centered in and focused on Jesus. If that caused problems with other folks, so be it. He was not going to be moved. That was his point with me. Taking part in the march was going out of my way to "cause" trouble, to create confrontation. If, however, I was in town and in the course of a "normal" relationship, my black friend and I decided to go for a coke, the trouble (that getting a coke) caused was not my making. I was not going out of my way. I simply wouldn't be bowing to segregation.

In that case, Clarence Jordan assured Jan he would press the matter all the way to the Supreme Court, if necessary.

"Briars in the Cotton Patch: The Story of Koinonia Farm," documentary by Faith Fuller, 2004.
Personal communication with Jan Jordan Zehr (29 July 2004)

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munity members (4:11-12). Together these two calls to bridle the tongue frame James's denouncement of the presumptive, profiteering merchants (4:13-17) and of the fraudulent, violent land barons (5:1-6). The crisis situation in the beloved community—some suffering at the hands of the rich (5:1-6), others catering to the rich and betraying the community's poor (2:1-4)—perhaps explains James warning. The threat is that external oppression and internal hypocrisies will shatter the faith family's unity. Or perhaps the tension is over the right tactics in the struggle for the right. Should those single-mindedly committed to work for justice look for a confrontation? Or should they lead quiet lives of doing what is right but stand firm if a fight finds them? Clarence Jordan differed with Martin Luther King, Jr. on this very issue though both worked tirelessly to make the beloved community a reality. [Right Tactics] As often, James's admonition against grumbling here echoes Jesus teaching: "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged" (Matt 7:1; cf. Jas 4:11).

Returning to the theme of long-suffering and endurance under struggle, [Long-suffering] James invokes the example of the Hebrew prophets (5:10). Again, James does not counsel quietism or disengagement; these prophets spoke out in the name of the Lord; they confronted king and court with denunciations of injustice. As Tamez has observed:

Long-suffering

In 5:10-11, *makrothymia* "can be understood as a synonym for perseverance or persistence" (*hypomonē*) but "on the other occasions the word has a special nuance, namely, not to despair, to contain oneself, to await an event that is sure to come" (Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James: Faith without Works Is Dead* [New York: Crossroad, 1992], 54).

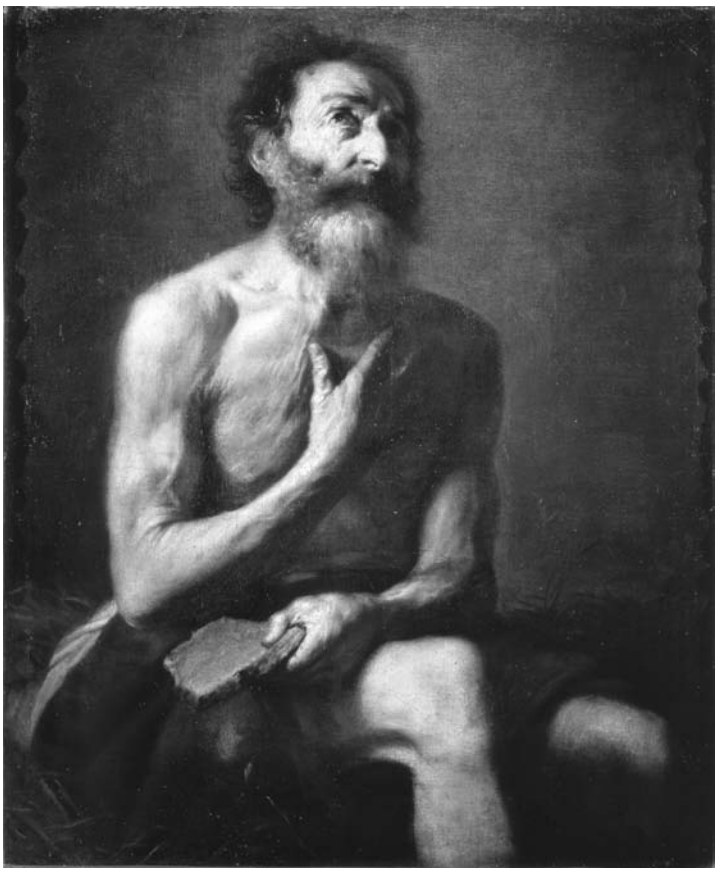
> The example of the prophets clearly shows us the heroism of their position; because of their deeds they suffer oppression and martyrdom and because of those same deeds and in defense of the oppressed and the weak they are declared blessed.[4]

James appeals to Job as a third example of endurance in the struggle for God's cause (5:11); earlier James held up the farmer as a model of persistence until harvest (5:7). Many commentators have viewed the canonical Job as a strange exemplar of patience; after all, Job's voice is one of persistent protest, dare we say grum-

The "Patience" of Job

In *The Scandalous Message of James: Faith without Works Is Dead* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), Elsa Tamez notes:

> the patience of Job was in no way passive. Only in the early moments of his miserable life was there any indication of resignation, but from chapter 3 on all his verbal fury erupted against his situation and he did not desist until the Almighty came onto the scene. Job did not succumb to pain; on the contrary, the more he experienced attacks, isolation, and suffering the greater his self-confidence. Job resisted unto death and God vindicated him. (54)



Jusepe de Ribera (1591–1652). *Job.* Galleria Nazionale, Parma, Italy.

> [Job] suffered innocently and arbitrarily. But he resisted and protested to the Almighty, and he was vindicated. It is noteworthy that in Job's case, we see 'the visible judgment of God which consists in the happy outcome of a period of suffering and not, . . . in the reward of the next world'" (38, citing Dibelius, Martin. James, rev. H, Greeven, trans. M. A. Williams (Hermenia, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 186.

Though God did not send trials upon Job, through his endurance of his struggles Job's faith in God increased (cf. Jas 1:3-4). Much as James (3:1), Job was a wise teacher whose creativity addressed his situation of oppression; Job and James each exemplify faithful thinkers actively engaged in a struggle for justice and mercy.

bling, against the injustices he endured. [The "Patience" of Job] Though James calls attention to Job's endurance, his other qualities perhaps explain why for James Job is the example of faith-perfected-through-struggle *par excellence*. Job was a champion of personal integrity and a model of truthful speech; Job refused to accept blame for what he suffered and insisted on vindication; though Job suffered much, he survived his ordeal, bloodied and unbowed (except before God); Job even played the part of peacemaker, offering sacrifices for his "comforters." For James, however, Job's story is in the end a tale about God's compassion and mercy on a victim of unjust suffering; the God who righted things for Job holds the future for the oppressed of James's community. Assured that God is for them and will reward them, the community must endure even now as it works for justice.

The prohibition against oaths again first seems to be an isolated saying (5:12). On closer reading, however, this uncredited saying of Jesus (cf. Matt 5:34) fits within its wider context. Earlier, James warned of sure judgment on wealthy landowners who defrauded their workers of their promised earnings (5:4). Such fraud begins with promises of payment. Those hiring should have kept their word; their "yes" at hiring time should have been matched by a "yes" at pay time. Such lack of integrity of speech and action characterizes the oppressive world and threatens the common life of the beloved community (cf. 2:15-16). James demands a different standard of speech for his community: "If total honesty is achieved in the community, it will not be necessary to swear, for what is said simply and without duplicity will be believed. That would mean that total personal and collective integrity had been achieved."[5] [Anabaptists and Oaths]

Anabaptists and Oath

Christ Jesus does not in the New Testament point His disciples to the Law in regard to the matter of swearing—the dispensation of imperfection which allowed swearing, but He points us now from the Law to yea and nay, as to the dispensation of perfectness. . . . To swear truly was allowed to the Jews under the Law; but the Gospel forbids this to Christians.

Menno Simons's teaching on oaths reflects the Matthean and Jacobean contexts of the prohibition. Both the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:37) and James (5:12) place their prohibitions of oaths in literary contexts that stress the call to perfection, maturity or integrity of discipleship (Matt 5:48; Jas 1:4; 3:2).

The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, c. 1496–1561, ed. John C. Wenger (Scottsdale PA: Herald Press, 1956), 518-19.

In James 5:13-16, we have a series of three acts that promote full integration into James's beloved community—prayer, singing, and sending for representative of the church to minister to the sick. Such actions bind sisters and brothers into one family, sharing the burdens of the suffering, the joy of the cheerful, the responsibility of care for the sick, and also the responsibility of mutual accountability. [Integration]

The sufferer admonished to pray is clearly a community member ("Are any *among you* suffering?" 5:13). By suffering (*kakopatheō*),

Integration

According to the integration model, the primary purpose of religious acts is the integration of the individual into the community. They give him stability in the face of extreme situations of suffering, hopelessness, and injustice.

Gerd Theissen, *Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition,* Studies of the New Testament and Its World, ed. John Riches, trans. Francis McDonough (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1983), 29.

the member shares the fate of the community's exemplars, "the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord" and endured suffering (*kakopathia,* 5:10). Through prayer, the sufferers among the community have recourse to the one God of the community and of its heroes. Possibly, James has public prayer in mind.

The call for the cheerful one to sing a psalm of praise (5:13) is another integrating act. *Psallō* is common in the Psalms (LXX), where the call to sing is often an invitation to corporate worship. Whatever the cause for cheer, the sharing of song in a setting of worship, of Christian service, or of personal distress puts the singer into relationship with God, "the audience of One," and integrates the cheerful singer into the beloved community. In times of threat, a shared song can be a witness to solidarity and a messenger of hope—consider the songs of the civil rights struggle: "We Shall Overcome"; "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round"; and "If I Had a Hammer." The optimism of these songs of common struggle is rooted not in any gaiety of present circumstances (cf. the call to rejoice in 1:2-4) but rather in the assurance that even here God is at work for good.

Illness and Isolation

Gerd Theissen has noted that illness is not just a physical and economic problem but a *social* problem as well: "The sick fear isolation, being abandoned by others, becoming a burden." For such, miracle stories, such as those recounted in the Gospels, assured the sick that "he or she would not be abandoned."

Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition, Studies of the New Testament and Its World, ed. John Riches, trans. Francis McDonough (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1983), 251.

James 5:14-15 offers reassurance to any who are sick among the beloved community: in time of grave illness, calling on the elders of the church is not merely allowed but *commanded.* Sickness can be a threat to the community, just as unconfessed sin can (5:16); both can isolate affected individuals. [Illness and Isolation] Here, the bed-bound member is not a burden but one "prayed over" by the church elders, who represent the community; the infirm one is not an untouchable but one anointed with healing oil. [Anointing with Oil] Here, the afflicted one is not a voiceless sufferer but one in communication with representatives from the church who stand ready to listen and, if sins are confessed, to speak the good news of God's pardon. "The prayer of faith" (5:15) is that of confidence that God will act through Jesus to bring about healing. Such faith is consis-

Anointing with Oil

James 5:14 gave rise to the medieval sacrament of extreme unction. Among charges leveled against Michael Sattler (c. 1495–1527), a leader among the Swiss Bretheren, at his trial for heresy at Rottenburg (17 May 1527) was that the Anabaptists rejected this sacrament. Sattler's reply follows:

> We have not rejected the oil; for it is a creature of God, and what God has made is good and not to be refused; but that the pope, the bishops, monks and priests can make it better, we do not believe; for the pope never made anything good. That of which the epistle of James speaks is not the pope's oil. Gen. 1:11; I Tim. 4:4; James 5:14.

Anointing with oil serves as a symbolic action pointing to distress remedied through the community's faithful prayer and pointing to reintegration into that community.

Thieleman J. van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror* (Scottsdale PA: Herald Press, 1987), 416-18.

tent with James's portrayal of God who cares for those who suffer and lifts them up from what enslaves them.

Several healing options were open to the sick in the first-century Mediterranean world. The sick might consult a physician, spend the night at a shrine to Asclepius, or resort to magic.[6] [Sources of Healing in the Greco-Roman World] By including an admonition for the sick to call on the elders of the church, James counters that sickness is a Christian problem with a Christian answer; when ill, community members should not seek aid from sources that would bring them in contact with pagan religion. Rather, the church elders'

Sources of Healing in the Greco-Roman World

Koester has noted, "some cities employed physicians responsible for public health care, but only the members of the wealthy upper class could afford regular medical attention" (331-32). Since Hippocratic physicians served under the auspices of a plethora of Greek deities—they swore before Apollo, Asclepius, Hygeia, Panacea, and all the gods to practice their healing art ethically—observant Jews or Christians would have looked for other healing options. The modern American two-tiered health system with superlative care for those with insurance or deep resources and spotty and evaporating care for those without reflects harsh realities familiar in the ancient world.

> The common people often had no other choice but to visit somewhat questionable wandering physicians, miracle workers, magicians and astrologers. . . . Public hospitals did not exist. The numerous Asclepius sanctuaries, which experienced a new flowering during the Imperial period, fulfilled an important function. (332)

Elsewhere, Koester noted, "The sanctuaries of the healing deities, especially Asclepius, reached the height of their popularity only in the first and second Christian centuries" (170). He noted "evidence for more than 300 Asclepius sanctuaries," (174) making that god one of the most worshiped deities of the Greco-Roman world (170). Just as Jesus was, Asclepius was hailed as *soter* "whose miracles of healing not only demonstrated his miraculous power, but also his sympathy, forbearance, and good will, especially for the poor and socially disadvantaged" (176). See F. C. Grant, *Hellenistic Religion: The Age of Syncretism* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1953), 53-59, for primary sources on the Asclepius cult.

Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament,* Foundations and Facets (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), I:170, 174, 176, 331-32.

prayer, anointing with oil, calling on the name of the Lord, and assurance of pardon promote health and healing.

Sophie Laws noted the confession of sin in James 5:16a is not directed to God (as is the case in Jewish confession), rather "the response is a communal one, a mutual conversation whose content is a humble admission of fault and a generous giving of support."[7] Mutual confession of sins:

> involves a process of self-criticism and personal and communal purification. It requires humility enough to bow our heads to let another pray for us. It means honesty and the confession of personal and collective sins, without fear, and with the freedom of love.[8]

The Prophet Elijah

Contemplative listening characterizes this icon as Elijah hovers between his personal doubts and fears and the reassuring presence of God.

Anonymous. *The Prophet Elijah,* Detail. 18th C. Russian icon. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia.

James ties the health of the community (*iasthēte* is plural) to such mutual confession and mutual prayer. Unconfessed sin threatens the community (cf. 1 John 5:16f; Matt 18:15ff); sin leads to death (Jas 1:15; 5:20). Humble acceptance of the word of truth (1:18, 21) and return to the path of truth promises life. Restoration of wanderers to this way of truth and their reintegration to the community's life is mutually beneficial (5:19-20), just as is mutual confession and proclamation of forgiveness is (5:15-16).

James's conviction that the prayer of the just is "powerful and effective" (5:16b) introduces the example of Elijah. Rather than direct attention to the prophet's well-known advocacy for the "little man" Naboth in the face of Ahab and Jezebel's murderous land grab (1 Kgs 21), James instead identifies Elijah as someone just like us. James perhaps has Elijah's fearful retreat in mind (1 Kgs 19); at times the instinct to preserve self seems

overpowering. Yet when Elijah stood firm as God's spokesperson his prayer shut (and later opened) the heavens. Elijah's eschatological role as restorer of broken community (Mal 4:5-6), though unmentioned here, provides a link to James's final charge.

James 5:19 warns that one can "wander from the truth" (and can be "brought back"). James does not seem to be talking about a doctrinal error but the departure from a way of life. The two ways of walking in the truth and wandering in error are commonly paired metaphors for alternative ways of life. The rendering "brings back a sinner from wandering" (5:20, NRSV) obscures this two-way metaphor; the Greek has "the wandering of *his way*." Salvation for James is connected with restoration to this way of truth: "whoever brings back a sinner from [his] wandering [way] will save the sinner's soul from death" (5:20). Likewise, to yield to self-centered desire is to birth sin that spawns death (1:15). The "implanted word" is also characterized as having "the power to save your souls" (1:21). This "implanted word" and "the truth" (5:19) are one in saving effect. Accepting beginning instruction in the word (1:21) and also correction in the true way (5:19) both demand "meekness"—that is, disciples must be teachable. The experience of mutual confession of sin (5:16a) presents one such teachable moment. Those who have sought God's gift of wisdom (1:5), whose faith has been brought to maturity through hard struggle (1:2-4) are trained in this way. Those who think, speak and act with integrity, who exercise self-restraint—of their tongues, of their anger, and their self-indulgent desires—are disciplined in this way. So too are those who do justice and love mercy schooled in this way. James urges that such is truly the way of life; the alternative is surely the path to death.

CONNECTIONS

Engaging Economic Injustice

James criticizes large, possibly absentee, landowners who amassed fortunes and supported luxurious life-styles through defrauding their laborers of their fair wages. Similarly, Page Kelley reminisced of his people, Alabama sharecroppers, who told a joke something like this:

> It always worked out that tenant farmers owed more on credit purchases at the landowner's store than the value of their share of the crop laid in that year. This sharecropper, by accident and not malice, had miscounted his yield and reported the wrong figure to the landlord at cotton harvest in August or September. So when the boss man came to settle up in late December, he gave the tenant a figure that showed indebtedness but would allow for a slight profit on the sharecropper's part if the "missing crop" were figured in. Being an honest man, the sharecropper admitted his accounting error, to which the landlord replied, "Now, see what you've done; I have to go home and refigure what you owe me."[9]

Such sharecropper jokes were light-hearted laments against fraud and economic justice just as those cries of protest from James's harvesters were (5:4).

Today, low wage earners are defrauded of their fair pay through the long stagnant minimum wage. The federal minimum wage ($5.15 since 1997) sets the lower limit for wages unless a state has a higher minimum. (Ten states concentrated on the West Coast and northeast together with the District of Columbia have set higher minimum wages.[10] No southern "Bible-belt" state requires a minimum wage higher than the federal wage.) A laborer working 40 hours per week, 52 weeks a year at the current minimum wage earns $10,712 per year, less than 80 percent of the poverty rate for a single adult with no dependents.[11] The same worker supporting two children earns less than 75 percent of the poverty rate for a family of three ($14,494 a year).

Low Wage Earners
Cesar Chavez struggled to improve the working conditions farmworkers, like these Mexican carrot pickers in Edingburg, Texas.

The federal minimum wage does not apply to all workers; for example, farm workers are excluded. Unless unionized, agricultural laborers face potential exploitation and have little, if any, leverage to negotiate fair wages. Employees expected to earn more than $30 per month in tips have a minimum direct wage of $2.13 per hour.[12] Those in such service roles depend on their customers and clients to earn a livable wage. Many share that the Sunday after-church crowd are among the poorest tippers.

The National Priorities Project (NPP) defined a livable wage by state. A livable wage is "the minimum income required to meet a family's basic needs," "a subsistence budget, about 33 percent less than the average family income in the state." For example, the NPP set the livable wage for a Tennessee family of four (2 adults, 2 children, 3 and 6 years old) at $29,449.55 for 1998.[13] By contrast, the federal "poverty threshold" for a family of four with two children under age 18 was $18,660 in 2003.[14] If both parents worked full-time, 52 weeks, at the federal minimum wage, their annual income would be $21,424; above the federal poverty threshold but well below the NPP livable wage of $29,449.55. Single parents are especially hard hit. Over one third of families maintained by single women had incomes below the federal poverty threshold in 1993. Among blacks and Hispanics, about half of such households lived in poverty. Since many children live in single parent households and women's earnings lag behind those of men, it is not surprising that the poverty rate for children was about 23%, higher than that of any other age group in 1993.[15]

The 1996 welfare reform act set time limits on aid to needy families and enforced work requirements. The NPP cited studies by the National Governors' Association and the U.S. Census Bureau to the effect that most former welfare recipients hold jobs paying "between $5.50 and $7.00 an hour, averaging $11,410 and $14,560 a year. Only 28% earn above the $14,500 poverty level for a family of three."[16]

Strategies for Economic Justice
- Support living wage campaigns
- Protect workers' right to organize
- Raise the minimum wage
- Close the gap between CEO and worker pay
- Invest in workers and their families

Newly created jobs often do not offer a livable wage. The National Priorities Project reported that in Tennessee, for example, 47% of jobs with the most growth paid less than $14,373 a year. These employers included "fast-food, retail services, grocery, health care, janitorial and security industries." The NPP reported that CEO salaries in these industries ranged "from 143 to 812 times the median income of workers." For example, Thomas Garrett, CEO of Memphis-based National Commerce Bancorporation (NCBC), received $5,873,000 in annual compensation; Dennis Bottorff, CEO of Nashville-based First American Corporation received $5,497,000. A low-wage worker would have to labor 399 and 373 years respectively to receive the same income.[17] [Strategies for Economic Justice]

A Good Ending to Our Story?

Kenneth Chafin told the story of his grandmother, a northeast Oklahoma hillbilly, who smoked a clay pipe and read mysteries. She encouraged young Kenneth to read, and regularly had him bring a few books for her also. Much to his dismay, his grandmother always read the last chapter of the mysteries first. Seeing that this displeased him greatly, Grandmother told him, "Kenny, it bothers you that I always read the last chapter first, doesn't it?" "Yes ma'am," he answered. "Sonny, when you get to be my age you don't have time to waste on stories you don't like the endings to."[18] James reassures the poor and oppressed who struggle to stay faithful in God's cause that they will like the ending of the story that God is busy writing.

James regularly appeals to anticipation of the coming of the Lord as a motivating factor. In contrast to ubiquitous contemporary evangelical thought, James does not expect a rapture that will rescue believers from a hurting world. James's word to the Christian community facing economic injustice and class-based discrimination is not hold on until "our sudden evacuation."[19] Rather, just as Amos did, James urges his hearers to work for the time when justice rolls "down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24). James's hope is a prophetic expectation that God will intervene within history rather than an apocalyptic hope that God will bring an end to history. Such an expectation prompts engagement with a hurting world rather than pious retreat from the world.

Is Honesty the Best Policy?

James admonishes his readers to "Let your 'Yes' be yes" (5:12), a challenge to integrity in speech. Christians' speech should be transparent; we should say what we mean and mean what we say because our integrity is at issue whenever we speak. Daniel Goodman raised truth-in-advertising concerns regarding recent and historic Southern Baptist evangelism targeted at Jewish persons.

> If the unusually careful terminology and the "friendship as a means to an end" strategies in these Southern Baptist magazines sound a little underhanded or even duplicitous, then welcome to the sometimes unsavory world of Jewish evangelism.[20]

Goodman noted that between 1921 and 1949, evangelistic crusades sponsored by the Home Mission Board were marketed as "Jewish-Christian Goodwill Meetings" or as "Great Mass Meetings for Jews and Christians." Advertisements promised presentations such as "The Basis of a Better Understanding between Jews and Christians" (actually a call to conversion) and "Why I am a Jew" (by Jacob Gartenhaus, the HMB "missionary to the Jews"). Such evangelistic marketing calls to mind "bait and switch" sales pitches. What was advertised—in this case, the opportunity for Jewish persons to affirm goodwill across faith lines or to work for better mutual understanding with Gentiles—was not available; those Jewish persons drawn in by the deceptive ads faced manipulation to "buy" into something else—a hard-sell Christian gospel. Ironic that some should resort to deception in the process of sharing "the Truth."

Time was the mark of an honest person was integrity in speech; for such persons their word was their bond. Following a recent pledge drive, a nation-wide Christian radio network announced that their board of directors had learned from experience that "changed circumstances" would not permit all those who pledged financial support of their ministry to follow through. The ad put a gracious spin on an unfortunate truth; for while some have undoubtedly met with unforeseen calamity that makes fulfilling their "vow" impossible many more likely found keeping their commitment simply inconvenient. James envisions a community in which persons can be counted on to act responsibly, even when the right thing to do is costly. For James, chief among those responsibilities is to speak with integrity, even if that means saying No.

Social Status and Physician Access
Gerd Theissen contended that healings are class specific:

> Illness is of course universal, but . . . we can find a connection between socio-economic status and belief in miracles in an unprejudiced consideration of the story of the woman with the issue of blood (Mark 5:25ff). As long as the woman had money she tried doctors. Only when her money was spent did she come to Jesus.

Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition, Studies of the New Testament and Its World, ed. John Riches, trans. Francis McDonough (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1983), 251.

I Was Sick and You Visited Me

The poor among James's audience likely would have lacked access to physicians; James's encouragement to call on the leaders of the church in time of illness is perhaps another indication of his special care for the poor of his community. [Social Status and Physician Access] About 44 million Americans, including 8.5 million children, are without health insurance. During 2000, 25.9 percent of Americans under age 65 were uninsured for part of the year; 13.3 percent were

uninsured the full year.[21] According to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, "eight out of ten people who are uninsured work or are in working families. Many hold jobs that don't offer health benefits, or can't afford co-payments and premiums."[22] A comprehensive study of racial disparities in health care by the Institute of Medicine found that race- and ethnicity-based discrimination contributed "to higher death rates among people of color from cancer, heart disease, diabetes and HIV infections."[23] Rural residents of communities now without a hospital and urbanites dependent on "safety net hospitals" face their own restrictions in access. Those Americans covered by Medicare (over age 65) often find that their limited prescription drug benefit does not allow them to purchase recommended medications without forgoing other necessities, such as food or utilities. Many of these citizens live just above the poverty threshold but on incomes that put them above the cutoff for Medicaid services.

Before the close of the fourth century AD, care of sick was a family matter, except for those rich with access to physicians. Those without family and the impoverished had few options. Responding to Christ's teaching on feeding the hungry, welcoming strangers, clothing the poor, and caring for the sick (Matt 25:31-46), Basil of Caesarea established the first Western hospital (or hospitality center) in about AD 370. Till this day, in many communities hospitals remain connected to the religious institutions. In the Unites States, church-related hospitals care for over a quarter of all hospitalized patients.[24]

How can congregations be involved in holistic ministry to the sick? For many marginalized communities, such as the Hispanic Pentecostal communities of the Bronx, the church with its faithful prayer on behalf of the afflicted and its holy anointing is the first line of defense against serious illness.[25] Similarly, the Black church has long served as its "community's psychiatrist."[26] The Church Health Center in Memphis serves as one example of a faith-based community health ministry. Founded by physician and Methodist minister Scott Morris, the center provides affordable health care to more than 32,000 uninsured workers, their families, the elderly and the homeless. This care:

> is made possible by the generosity of several hundred local physicians, hospitals, labs and diagnostic centers who willingly donate their professional services. Patients are treated in physicians' private offices, no differently than other private patients.[27]

Three Louisiana State University medical students (David Pepperman, Rick Donlon, and Steven Besh) sensed a call to provide health care to the poorest of the poor in South Memphis. After completing their training they founded the Christ Community Medical Clinic. This community-based health services program now provides more than 24,000 patient visits annually to residents in two inner-city neighborhoods. This program was developed specifically to reduce the disparity in health among African-Americans and their white counterparts.[28]

NOTES

[1] Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James: Faith without Works Is Dead* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 70.

[2] Ibid., 55.

[3] Ibid., 53.

[4] Ibid., 38.

[5] Ibid., 69.

[6] Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Foundations and Facets (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982) I:*passim*.

[7] Sophie Laws, *The Epistle of James*, Harper's New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 233.

[8] Tamez, *Scandalous Message*, 72.

[9] This account is my recollection a tale Page Kelley told in his course on Amos and Hosea, the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, spring 1983.

[10] Those states are Alaska, California, Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Maine, Massachusetts, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Washington State. Department of Labor (DOL) ("Minimum Wage Laws in the States," <http://www.dol.gov/esa/minwage/america.htm> (22 July 2004).

[11] National Priorities Project, "Where the Numbers Come From: State of the States 2001 Fact Sheet," <http://www.natprior.org/sos2001/sosSources.htm> (22 July 2004).

[12] U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), "Wages: Tips," <http://www.dol.gov/dol/topic/wages/wagestips.htm> (22 July 2004).

[13] National Priorities Project, "Working Hard, Earning Less: The Story of Job Growth in Tennessee," <http://www.nationalpriorities.org/grassrootsfactbook/jobgrowth/job-growth.html> (22 July 2004).

[14] U.S. Census Bureau, "Poverty 2003," <http://census.gov/hhes/poverty/threshld/thresh03.html>, last revised 22 June 2004 (22 July 2004).

[15] Ibid.

[16] National Priorities Project, "Working Hard, Earning Less."

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ken Chafin shared this memoir during a sermon on the occasion of my ordination to the gospel ministry (Peachtree Baptist Church, Atlanta, 26 July 1987).

[19] The Left Behind Series by Tim Lahaye, Jerry B. Jenkins is the most pervasive evidence of this escapist eschatology.

[20] Daniel Goodman. "Fogging the Difference: Southern Baptists and Strategies of Jewish Evangelism," <http://www.ethicsdaily.com/print_popup.cfm?AID=4478> (21 July 2004).

[21] Steve Ivey. "To Be Uninsured—Dangerous to Your Health," EthicsDaily.com, <http://ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1973> (2 January 2003), retrieved 30 July 2004.

[22] Amanda Montone, "Coalition Spanning Left, Right Urges Action on Uninsured," EthicsDaily.com, <http://ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=4099> (27 April 2004), retrieved 30 July 2004.

[23] Miguel de la Torre, "Race a Variable in Euthanasia Debate," EthicsDaily.com, <http://ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=3367> (17 November 2003), retrieved 30 July 2004.

[24] Harold G. Koenig, *Spirituality in Patient Care: Why, How, When, and What* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2002), 16-17.

[25] Samuel Solovan in the Spirituality and Healing video series, vol. 4 (Cambridge MA: Harvard Medical School, Department of Continuing Education, 1996).

[26] This is my recollection of Ron Bobo's comment during the Formation for Christian Ministry course, the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, spring 1983.

[27] "The Memphis Plan: A Ministry of the Church Health Center," <http://www.churchhealthcenter.org/memphisplan.html>, retrieved 30 July 2004.

[28] Leigh Page, "Memphis Practice Wants to Serve God But Needs Manna," *AMNews* staff, <http://www.ama-assn.org/amednews/2000/04/03/mksb0403.htm> (3 April 2000), retrieved 30 July 2004. "CCHF Best Practices Program: Memphis Healthy Churches," <http://www.cchf.org/BestPractices/abstracts/CCMCMemphisHealthyChurches.doc>, retrieved 30 July 2004.

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