

The Book of Hebrews

by
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Preface

Most Christians who have been in the church for any number of years are at least generally familiar with the conclusion of Paul that the Torah was our custodian, put in charge to bring us to Christ. Now that Christ has come, of course, we are no longer under the custodianship of the law. Does that mean, therefore, that the Torah has no Christian meaning? Hardly! Again and again, the Torah is appealed to in the New Testament as the revelation of God's will.

One place where this is especially true is in the Book of Hebrews. This book, which features a christological explanation of the worship system of the Aaronic priesthood, forms a majestic connection between the old and the new. At Mt. Sinai, God revealed to Moses the pattern of worship that characterizes heaven itself. Heaven's worship had its earthly counterpart in the tent in the desert as well as in the first and second temples. It had its highest meaning, however, when Christ died! This is the burden of the Book of Hebrews--to explain the connection between heaven's worship, earthly worship as regulated by the Torah, and the fullness of worship and religious faith as it comes to its highest meaning in the death and resurrection of God's Son. Especially the book seeks to prevent believers from reverting back to any inferior religious system.

This approach to worship is markedly different than the contemporary use of the term in many churches. For the modern person, worship frequently has to do with style over content, and the final criteria is how it makes one feel. For the ancient person of faith, worship was a statement of theology. The criteria for worship was what it said about God and his purposes. This is not to say, of course, that ancient believers were without feelings or that emotion was irrelevant. In fact, the Book of Hebrews has numerous passages that show profound depth of feeling. Still, the defining factor was theological meaning, and emotional response was derived from the statement of truth about God and his works.

It is hoped that this short guide to the Book of Hebrews will enable the reader to better appreciate the profound Old Testament roots of the Christian faith. The Old

Testament is a Christian document, and the early church was right in rejecting Marcionism and any attempt to reduce the value of the Hebrew Scriptures. If the Hebrew Bible, particularly the Septuagint, contained the preaching texts for the apostles (and it did), the Book of Hebrews is one place where this connection between the old and the new is explicit. If Paul could say that the Torah was "holy" and "spiritual" while the commandment was "holy, righteous and good," the author of Hebrews would agree with the added assessment that while it was "good," it was not "best." God had provided something better in the future to which the Torah, as good as it was, could not measure up. This "better thing" comes in Jesus Christ, God's Son, and Christ is the theme of the book.

The Book of Hebrews	1
Preface.....	2
Introduction.....	6
Author and Date	6
Readers and Occasion	7
Canonicity	8
Literary Character	9
Argument, Contents and Christology	10
The Superiority of Christ (1:1--10:18)	13
Christ is Preeminent over the Hebrew Prophets (1:1-3).....	13
Christ is Superior to the Angels (1:4--2:18)	15
The Witness of the Law, the Prophets and the Writings (1:4-14)	15
The First Solemn Warning (2:1-4).....	18
The Temporary Condescension of the Son (2:5-18).....	18
Christ is Superior to Moses Who Received the Torah (3:1-19)	21
Jesus is Greater than Moses (3:1-6).....	21
The Second Solemn Warning (3:7-19)	22
Christ Is Superior To Joshua Who Gave Them The Land (4:1-13)	23
Christ's Priestly Office Is Superior To Aaron's Office And The Priestly Line (4:14--7:28).....	26
Jesus, the High Priest of Eternal Salvation (4:14--5:10)	26
The Third Solemn Warning (5:11--6:12)	28
The Inviolability of God's Promises (6:13-20)	34
Melchizedek's Priesthood (7:1-28)	35
The High Priest of a New Covenant (8:1-13).....	38
The Worship in the Earthly Sanctuary (9:1-10)	40
The Priestly Work of Christ Supersedes the Old Covenant (9:11-28)	41
Once for All (10:1-18)	45
Final Call To Perseverance (10:19--13:17)	47
Holding to the Hope (10:19-25).....	47
The Fourth Solemn Warning (10:26-39)	49
The Cloud of Faithful Witnesses (11:1-40)	50
The Fifth Solemn Warning (12:1-29)	52

Living as the Holy, Pilgrim People of God (13:1-17) 54

Introduction

Author and Date

Those familiar with the older English versions (KJV and earlier) may remember that the title is listed as "The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews." This opinion is rarely entertained any longer, even by the most conservative scholars. In the first place, the title was not part of the ancient text, and ancient opinion about the authorship of the book was divided from the earliest periods of Christianity.¹ Formally, the book is anonymous, so any conclusions about authorship must be derived from style, indirect internal evidence and tradition. Since the tradition is mixed, style and internal evidence receives more attention. There is general agreement that the Greek of Hebrews is stylistically different than Paul's--more classical, more polished, and without Paul's customary anacoluthons (i.e., abrupt changes within a sentence to a second grammatical construction inconsistent with the first). As one scholar put it, it would seem strange that Paul would write to the Hebrews in polished Greek when he spent much of his life writing to the Greeks in a style "abounding with rugged and barbarous Hebraisms."²

As to internal evidence, we know that the author knew his readers (13:19), and he knew Timothy also (13:23). He seems to place himself outside the circle of the original apostles, however (2:3), though this does not preclude that he may have known one or more of the apostles. When referring to the Old Testament, he quotes the LXX. His use of rhetoric is highly developed, and it resembles the rhetoric

¹For instance, in papyrus p46 (about A.D. 200), where Hebrews appears after Romans, Paul is listed as the author, but early leaders of the same period, like Tertullian (*ca.* 155-220) and Origen (*ca.* 185-254), offered other suggestions--Barnabas and Luke, respectively. Speculation is offered that the work may originally have been composed in Hebrew and translated into Greek. Of the ancient opinions about authorship, Eusebius (*ca.* 260-340) notes this divided opinion several times, cf. *Ecclesiastical History*, III.iii.5; III.xxxiii.2-3; VI.xx.3; VI.xxv.11-14 and frankly concludes, "But who wrote the epistle, in truth, God knows", VI.xxv.14.

²Godet, *Studies on the Epistles*, 332 as quoted in E. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964, 1971) 377.

associated with the rabbis and the Alexandrian Philo. Since the work is quoted as early as the mid-90s (3:5//1 Clement 17:1 and 1:3-7, 13//1 Clement 36:2-5), the writer must have lived in the 1st century.

From these and other indications several suggestions have been offered about who wrote the book, some more likely than others. Martin Luther suggested Apollos, and many have followed this lead that he might be the most likely candidate. He was an associate of Paul (Ac. 19:1; 1 Co. 1:12; 3:4-22; 4:6; 16:12; Tit. 3:13). He was well-versed in the Scriptures and became especially adept in convincing Jews that Jesus was the Messiah (Ac. 18:24-28). John Calvin, on the basis of literary style and the ancient suggestion that the book was translated, opted for Luke. Silas and Barnabas have been suggested (largely because of their association with Paul and because Barnabas was a Levite), as has Priscilla and Aquila (because of the "we" passages throughout the book). However, the first person plural, sometimes called the "royal we," need not indicate dual authorship. Furthermore, the book also contains first person singular passages (cf. 11:32; 13:19, 22-23). In 11:32 there appears a singular masculine participle (*diegoumenon* = me telling) which makes doubtful the suggestion that a woman was writing. In the end, the question of authorship must be left open.

As to date, a *terminus ad quem*, based on the quotations in 1 Clement, means that it cannot be later than *ca.* 95. As to how early it may have been written, any time after the death of Jesus is theoretically possible,³ though we should probably assume later rather than sooner, since the other New Testament documents date to about the mid-century and later. We know that the readers had experienced some type of persecution in the past (10:32-34), and the nature of these persecutions might imply a somewhat later date. That the writer knows Timothy and that Timothy was still a young man when he first became associated with Paul (Ac. 16:1-3; 1 Ti. 4:12) also supports a later date. Some argue that it must be before 70 A.D., when the temple was destroyed, but this argument may not be as strong as might be assumed at first glance, since the substance of the book focuses upon the tent of meeting, not the temple--whether it was still standing or not.

Readers and Occasion

If authorship of Hebrews is uncertain, the identity of the first readers is equally unclear. It seems that they were either a congregation or part of a congregation, since the farewell says to greet "all your leaders and all the saints" (13:24). Some within the congregation had apparently begun missing the congregational meetings (10:25). The traditional view, which gave rise to the title "to the Hebrews," is that the book

³L. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 417.

was written to Jewish Christians in danger of relapsing into temple worship. However, this viewpoint presupposes the debatable conclusion that the book was written before 70 A.D. If second temple worship was the threat, why did the author focus upon the tent of meeting instead of addressing the temple directly? There seems to be some association between the readers and Christians in Italy (13:24), though it is debated whether the preposition *apo* (= from) means those "away from" (i.e., absent from Italy) or those who resided in Italy. Since 1 Clement, which quotes Hebrews, was written from Rome, this Italian connection seems secure enough, but whether the readers were in Rome or only had intimate contact with Rome is unclear.

One of the most debated questions about the readers is whether they were Jews or non-Jews. Certainly the book's wide appeal to the Old Testament fits well within a Jewish context, and some would narrow this field to a group of former priests, such as those mentioned in Acts 6:7. Others suggest they might have been former members of the Essene or Qumran community. Still, there is nothing in the book that would preclude it being applicable to Gentiles or that would demand an exclusively Jewish audience. The verdict that the letter was written to Jewish Christians probably has the edge in contemporary opinion, but the question is far from settled.

The circumstance of the readers is a bit more solid. Since there are a considerable number of sections that warn against turning away from Christ (2:1-4; 3:7--4:13; 5:11--6:12; 10:26-39; 12:1-29), we may assume that this was a real danger.⁴ We know that persecution had been leveled against the community, resulting in the confiscation of personal property, public ridicule and imprisonment (10:32-34).

At the same time, the persecution had not escalated into martyrdoms (12:4). The book demonstrates no marked polemics against known heretics or heresies of the apostolic period, other than the heresy of reverting to Judaism.⁵

Canonicity

The acceptance of the Book of Hebrews in the New Testament canon was slower than for most other books, probably due to the uncertainty about its author. While it is quoted quite early, as mentioned above, it is missing in some early canon lists, such as, the so-called Muratorian Fragment,⁶ the canon of Marcion,⁷ and the

⁴The argument that these warnings were only hypothetical arises in defense of the doctrine of eternal security, but it is not very convincing. If turning away from Christianity were not possible, why bring up the subject at all?

⁵Contra R. Martin, *New Testament Foundations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 2.357.

⁶ The Muratorian Fragment is a late 2nd century canon list from the church in Rome and so-called because the beginning of the copy is mutilated.

⁷Marcion's canon, mid-2nd century, is the earliest of which we have record, but Marcion himself was a heretic because of his teaching that the God of the Old Testament was different than the God of the New Testament. In general, he attempt to purge the New Testament documents of their Old Testament connections, so it is not surprising that he omitted Hebrews, since it is so thoroughly imbued with Old Testament thought, cf. F. Bruce, *The*

canon of Irenaeus.⁸ On the other hand, especially for those who considered Hebrews to be Pauline, the book appears in early collections of Pauline letters, though sometimes in a different order than we have today.⁹ So, for a lengthy period of time the Book of Hebrews was among the "disputed books" (antilogomena). It was largely accepted in the east, where it was considered to be Pauline, but it was questioned in the west. The tendency in the west was to emphasize apostolic authorship rather than apostolic authority, and the uncertainty about authorship made the book questionable, however valuable it may have been. Eventually, however, due to the support of Jerome (340-420) and Augustine (354-430), it was accepted in the west as well.¹⁰

The issue of canonicity was raised once more in the Protestant Reformation, but in the end, the Book of Hebrews retained its status. To be sure, Luther had his reservations, and he placed Hebrews, along with James, Jude and Revelation (about which he also had reservations), after III John. Still, the Reformers as a whole accepted Hebrews, even though many of them agreed that it was not written by Paul. More recently, the Pontifical Biblical Commission decided in 1914 that the book was genuinely Pauline, even though its final form may have been produced by someone other than Paul.

Literary Character

The Greek in Hebrews is agreed by all to be superb. The sentences are carefully constructed, while the diction and rhetorical style are elevated. The letter has features that seem homiletic, so much so that some scholars doubt that it was originally a letter, but think that it may have been a written sermon.¹¹ The writer describes his work as a "word of exhortation" (13:22).¹² On the other hand, though there is no epistolary introduction, there is an epistolary conclusion (13:18-25). While its author says it is "short" (13:22), this may be taken as a convention of speech (cf. 1 Pe. 5:12), since it is the third longest epistle in the New Testament.

The book is saturated with allusions and quotations from the Old Testament. Unlike most other New Testament books, the citations from the Old Testament are not simply given as supporting documentation; they are presented as the very ground of the argument itself.

Canon of Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1988) 134-144..

⁸Irenaeus' list omits Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 3 John and Jude.

⁹In p46 (ca. AD 200) Hebrews appears between Romans and 1 Corinthians. In the Codices Sinaiticus and Vaticanus (both 4th century), it appears between 2 Thessalonians and 1 Timothy. In Codex Alexandrinus (5th century), it also appears after 2 Thessalonians.

¹⁰N. Geisler and W. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1968) 196-197.

¹¹W. Kummel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973) 398; Johnson, 413.

¹²The NIV dynamic equivalency "I have written...a short letter," may be over-translated. The Greek text reads, "For indeed through few [words] I wrote to you."

Since the 19th century, it has been popular to see a connection between the thought of Hebrews and the thought of Philo (30 B.C.--A.D. 45), the platonic Jewish intellectual from Alexandria, Egypt. This alleged connection is more along the lines of similarity than any provable dependence. Both have a tendency toward allegory, both rely upon the LXX, both cite passages in a similar manner, both argue from the silence of Scripture (i.e., 7:3), both call attention to the importance of Melchizedek through typology, both argue for a sharp distinction between the phenomenal (material, changeable) world and the noumenal (ideal, unchangeable) world, and both present a series of antitheses (i.e., earthly/heavenly, created/uncreated, past/future and transitory/abiding). However, such similarities do not prove literary dependence. The most that can be said is that they both demonstrate features of Hellenistic background and thought.¹³ Furthermore, as Ladd has pointed out, there are significant differences between the thought of Hebrews and the thought of Plato. For the author of Hebrews, the real issue is not the contrast between the phenomenal world and the noumenal; rather, it is that the Old Testament priestly system was a copy and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary, but "the real has come to men in the historical life and death of Jesus of Nazareth."¹⁴

Finally, a word should be said about the five solemn warnings in the book (2:1-4; 3:7--4:13; 5:11--6:12; 10:26-39; 12:1-29). These passionate appeals show that there is a practical end to the argument. The author does not wish to engage in some theoretical discussion that can be taken or left, but he aims to prevent his readers from turning back from their faith in Christ.

Argument, Contents and Christology

The burden of the Book of Hebrews, which has the longest sustained argument in the New Testament, is to demonstrate the superiority of Christ and Christianity over Moses and the Aaronic patterns of worship described in the Torah. Though interpreters may divide this material differently, they agree on its primary objective. The style of argumentation was familiar among the Pharisees and Greek rhetoricians. It is *a fortiori*, that is, it proceeds from "the lesser to the greater." It argues that if *that* is true, how much more is *this* true (cf. 2:2-3; 3:3; 7:4-10; 9:13-14; 12:25). In keeping with this rhetoric, the book frequently uses the modifiers *kreisson* (= better, preferable) and *diaphoros* (= superior, outstanding) to show the superiority of Christ and the Christian way.

✧ Christ is "better" than the angels (1:4).

¹³D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1970) 719-720; Johnson, 420-422.

¹⁴G. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 572-577.

- ✧ His name as God's Son is "superior" to the angels, who are created beings (1:4).
- ✧ Christianity has a "better" hope than Judaism (7:19).
- ✧ The new covenant is "better" than the old covenant (7:22; 8:6).
- ✧ The priestly ministry of Jesus is "superior" to that of the high priests of Aaron's line (8:6).
- ✧ The promises of the new covenant are "better" than the old (8:6).
- ✧ The sacrifices of the new covenant are "better" than the old (9:23).
- ✧ The heritage of heaven is "better" than the temporal world (10:34).
- ✧ Heaven is a "better" country than Canaan (11:16).
- ✧ The fulfillment of the promise in Jesus produces a "better" thing than anything available before the fulfillment (11:40).
- ✧ The blood of the new covenant, which speaks of forgiveness, offers something "better" than the blood of Abel, which called for vengeance (12:24).

The main argument of the book demonstrates by a series of comparisons that the new is better than the old (1:1--10:18).

- ✧ Christ is preeminent over the Hebrew prophets, who spoke for God (1:1-3).
- ✧ Christ is superior to the angels through whom the law was mediated (1:4--2:18).
- ✧ Christ is superior to Moses, who received the Torah (3:1-19).
- ✧ Christ is superior to Joshua, who gave them the land (4:1-13).
- ✧ Christ's priestly office is superior to that of Aaron and the priestly line (4:14--7:28).
- ✧ Christ's priestly work is superior to that of Aaron and the priestly line (8:1--10:18).

From these demonstrated superiorities, the writer urges his audience to avail themselves of the "new and living way," and especially, not to lapse into a system that was by its very nature partial and temporary (10:19--13:17).

- ✧ They must stand fast and not fall back (10:19-25).
- ✧ They must beware the dangers of apostasy (10:26-39).

- ✧ They must follow the example of the ancient people of faith, always looking forward (11:1-40).
- ✧ Their greatest example is Jesus Christ himself (12:1-11).
- ✧ They must avoid moral lapses (12:12-17).
- ✧ They must always remember that the new covenant is superior (12:18-29).
- ✧ They must live as the holy, pilgrim people of God (13:1-17).
- ✧ Finally, the letter closes with customary prayers, blessings and salutations (13:18-25).

Given the argument of the book, it is no surprise that it has a very high christology. It shows Christ as preexistent, the agent of all creation, and the very stamp of God's nature (1:1-3). Jesus is worshipped by angels (1:6) and carries a veritable plethora of christological titles, including Christ or Messiah (3:6, 14; 5:5; 6:1; 9:11, 14, 28; 11:26), Son of man (2:6), Lord (1:10; 2:3; 7:14; 12:14; 13:20),¹⁵ Son of God (1:2, 5, 8; 3:6; 4:14; 5:5, 8; 6:6; 7:3, 28; 10:29) and God (1:8; cf. 3:3-4).¹⁶ Though the title "servant" does not appear, it clearly forms the background of 9:28, where Jesus is the sufferer who bears the sins of many (cf. Is. 53:12, LXX). Similarly, though the title Word does not appear, it is assumed in 1:1-2, since Jesus was God's final spoken revelation. Other titles for Jesus are either rare or nonexistent apart from this book, such as, the Heir (1:2), the Firstborn (1:6), the Shepherd (13:20), the Author (2:10; 12:2), and the Perfecter (12:2). Christ is the Sanctifier (2:11), the Apostle (3:1), the High Priest (3:1; 6:20; 8:1, etc.), the Builder (3:3), the Source (5:9), the Forerunner (6:20), the Guarantor (7:22), the Minister (8:2) and the Mediator (8:6; 9:15; 12:24).

At the same time, the book has a strong incarnational theology. More than any New Testament document other than the gospels, Hebrews makes use of the name Jesus, the earthly name announced by Gabriel for God's Son (2:9; 4:14; 6:20; 7:22; 10:19; 12:2, 24; 13:12, 20). It is in Jesus that God, who in ancient times spoke through his human instruments the prophets, has at last spoken through his Son (1:1-2). This human incarnation was absolutely necessary in order to achieve effective priesthood, for if he was to be an effective priestly mediator, he must have been "like his brothers" (2:17-18) and able to "sympathize with their weaknesses" (4:15--5:2). As God's Savior to the children of flesh and blood, Jesus "shared in their humanity"

¹⁵This use of the term *Kyrios* (= Lord) for Jesus is all the more significant, since several times the writer also refers to God as *Kyrios* (7:21; 8:2, 8-11; 10:16, 30; 12:5-6; 13:6), cf. O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, trans. S. Guthrie and C. Hall, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963) 310-311.

¹⁶For more discussion on these titles in Hebrews, see D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1981) 249-250, 258, 266, 290-291, 299, 319-320, 330, 340-341.

(2:14-16). As a human, he learned to be obedient through suffering (5:7-10; 12:1-3). His sacrifice of himself was the offering of his own human body (9:14, 26; 10:5-10, 20).

So, just as the Christian faith affirms in its historic creeds, Jesus was both divine and human. This paradox is clearly of central significance to the theology of Hebrews.

In the broadest sense, the book of Hebrews can be divided into two sections. The larger portion of the book is a series of sustained arguments demonstrating the superiority of Christ (1:1--10:18). The latter part of the book is a paraenesis,¹⁷ that is, an exhortation to Christians toward steadfastness and a holy life (10:19--13:17).

The Superiority of Christ (1:1--10:18)

Christ is Preeminent over the Hebrew Prophets (1:1-3)

As mentioned in the introduction, the opening to Hebrews is not epistolary (as is the closing), but rather, confessional. It begins with the affirmation that God has not been silent in the past, but he has spoken through the prophets (1:1). This confession immediately establishes a continuity with the Hebrew Bible. However, as important and valid as were the prophets and their oracles, God now has spoken by his Son (1:2a). This final word embraces three important theological ideas. First, revelation is progressive. God's pattern of revealing himself has been gradual, beginning with the prophets and culminating with the Son. Second, as in the writings of John, the writer identifies Jesus with the *Logos*, the embodiment of the eternal word (Jn. 1:1-2, 14; 1 Jn. 1:1-2; cf. Rv. 19:13). Third, this final word from God has come "in these last days," a phrase that is carried over from the Hebrew prophets and carries messianic overtones. The "last days" are the time of fulfillment of all that the prophets had predicted (cf. Lk. 24:25-27).¹⁸

Then follows seven confessions about God's Son (eight if one counts the statement in 1:4). In them, the author establishes the supremacy of Christ as the final and full revelation of God. First, the Son has been appointed the "heir of all things"

¹⁷*Paraenesis* is the Greek word for "advice." In epistolary style, it consisted of moral exhortation concerned with the practical issues of living, cf. M. Thompson, "Teaching/Paraenesis," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. G. Hawthorne, et al. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1993) 922-923.

¹⁸For a sustained discussion of the "last days" as they are developed in the prophets and taken up in the New Testament, see D. Lewis, *3 Crucial Questions about the Last Days* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).

(1:2b). This title shows that the Son has supreme position in all the universe, since everything that exists belongs to him (cf. Ps. 2:8). Second, the Son is the agent of all creation, the one by whom God made the ages or the universe (1:2c; cf. 1 Co. 8:6; Col. 1:16; Jn. 1:3, 10).¹⁹ This phrase at once establishes the pre-existence of Christ and the agency of Christ.²⁰ Third, the Son is the effulgence of God's glory, that is, he is the radiance shining forth from God who is the source of all light (1:3a). If God is light (cf. 1 Jn. 1:5), then Jesus is the outshining of that light (cf. Jn. 1:4-9; 3:19; 8:12; Rv. 21:23).²¹ Next, the Son is the very image of the substance of God (1:3b). The word *charakter* (= reproduction, exact representation), appearing only here in the New Testament, was used in the ancient world to describe the impression or stamp on coins and seals.²² As such, Jesus is the exact stamp of God. Furthermore, the Son also enables the universe to have continued existence (1:3c; cf. Col. 1:17). He not only created the universe, he sustains it.

The final two confessions describe Jesus' messianic, priestly work. The Creator of all is also the Savior of all. As a priest, he provided purification for sins (1:3d), a theme that will figure as the primary argument of the whole book. Finally, when his priestly work was accomplished, he sat down at the right hand of God (1:3e; Ps. 110:1; Lk. 22:69; Ac. 2:33, etc.).²³ The fact that he is now seated denotes the rightfulness of his exaltation. The idea of being seated beside Almighty God, not facing him but facing the same way God is facing, would be shocking for anyone other than Christ. He has the place of highest honor. Later, the writer of Hebrews will point out that the Son is seated because his priestly work is finished forever (10:11-14).

This multiplying of exalted descriptions marks Jesus, God's Son, as the most exalted being in the whole universe. While the prophets were spokesmen for God, the Son is the very manifestation of God, clearly superior in every way. And, as a

¹⁹The Greek word *aions* (= ages) should not be restricted to simply periods of time, but refers to the whole created universe of space and time, cf. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews [NICNT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 4.

²⁰The agency of Christ is particularly clear by the use of the preposition *dia*, which when used with the genitive case means "through" or "by the agency of." Against the modalists, who want to disallow any personal distinction between the Father and the Son, this assertion maintains that distinction.

²¹If the Son as agent demonstrates the distinction between the Father and the Son, the Son as radiance demonstrates the inseparability of the Father and the Son. Hence, the ancient creedal statement, "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God." Trinitarian theology properly asserts that there is "one God" and that the Son is "of one substance with the Father," but at the same time, there is a distinction of persons. It is clear, of course, that the term "persons" does not mean three individuals, like Bill, Tom, and Dick. It is an adequate though imperfect analogy, and as Augustine said, he used the term person "...not in order to express it [i.e., the relationship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit], but in order not to be silent," cf. L. Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975) 92.

²²G. Kelber, *TDNT* (1974) IX.418ff.

²³The expression "majesty on high" is a metonymy for God.

corollary, it would be impossible for any self-acclaimed prophet who appears later, including Mohammed, Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy, Charles Taze Russell, William Miller, Ellen White, or any other, to add to this full and final revelation of God.²⁴ After God's final word through his Son, there is nothing more to be said!

Christ is Superior to the Angels (1:4--2:18)

The author's immediate concern with Christ's superiority over the angels at first might seem to be a digression. If the burden of the book is to describe Christ's priestly work, why drift over into the subject of angels? The answer is that the author takes his readers through a series of negations as well as affirmations about Christ. In each case, he negates inadequate proposals for Jesus' identity. Some might suppose that Jesus was a powerful prophet, and in fact, quite a number of Jews accepted such a conclusion during Jesus' public ministry (cf. Mt. 21:11, 46; Lk. 7:16; Jn. 4:19; 6:14; 9:17), among them even some of his own disciples (Lk. 24:19). To be sure, the title of prophet is distinguished and honorable, but as we have seen in the introduction, the author is at pains to show that Jesus was much more than a prophet. This same concern underlies each category he addresses. Jesus cannot be reduced to the level of angels, the level of Moses, the level of Joshua, or the level of Aaron. He is higher than all, and because he is, any effort to turn back from God's final revelation in his Son to a preliminary revelation from the past was doomed.

So, Christ's exaltation to the Father's right hand demonstrates that he is superior to angels, just as his name "Son" is superior to their name as "messengers" (1:4).²⁵ The collage of Old Testament passages, taken from the Psalms, the Prophets and the Torah, make up the remainder of chapter 1 and serve to demonstrate this basic truth.

The Witness of the Law, the Prophets and the Writings (1:4-14)

1:5a (Ps. 2:7)

Angels were never privileged to hear God say to them, "You are my Son!" To be sure, angels were called the "sons of God" (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; Dt. 32:8, LXX), but this title is rare and derives from the broader descriptions current in the ancient Near East (cf. Da. 3:25). Never, however, did God address an angel and say, "You are my Son!" He did, however, say just such a thing to Jesus, both at his baptism (Mt. 3:17//Mk. 1:11//Lk. 3:22; cf. Jn. 1:32-34) and also at his transfiguration (Mt.

²⁴For this reason, such religions as the Muslim faith and such sects as the Mormons, the Jehovah's Witnesses, followers of Christian Science, and to a lesser extent the Seventh-Day Adventists are regarded as significant deviations from the historic faith of Christianity.

²⁵The whole context requires that the "name" of Christ which is superior is "Son" (1:3, 5, 6, 8). In Koine Greek, the term *onomas* (= name) is somewhat more loose than our English distinction between names and titles.

17:5//Mk. 9:7//Lk. 9:35; cf. 2 Pe. 1:17-18)! Furthermore, the early Christians understood the enthronement of God's Son described in Psalm 2:7 to have special significance in light of Jesus' resurrection and ascension (Ac. 2:32-33; 5:30-31; Ro. 8:34; Ep. 1:20).

1:5b (2 Sa. 7:14)

The second quotation comes from the *Nebiim* (= the prophets), the second major division of the Hebrew Bible. In the Davidic covenant, the language is full of phrases that would take on deeper meaning in light of the Jesus event. The initial statements, of course, were directed toward Solomon. However, there were a number of predictions which were never fulfilled by either Solomon or his descendants. The writer of Hebrews chooses only a single phrase, "I will be his father, and he will be my son," and clearly this statement was never made to an angel! It was the universal conclusion of Christians that the statement, while referring to the sons of David's dynasty, went beyond that to Jesus, God's unique Son.

1:6 (Dt. 32:43)

The third quotation comes from the Torah. A quick glance at an English version will make clear that there is a substantial difference for this passage between the Masoretic Text (which underlies our English versions) and the Septuagint (LXX). It is the Septuagint that the author of Hebrews quotes,²⁶ where it says, "Let all the angels of God worship him." The context of this passage is the Song of Moses in which Moses recites the history of the Israelites, a history that also foreshadows their future: though they had experienced God's goodness (32:8-14), they abandoned him and served other gods (32:15-18). Because of their past and future unfaithfulness, God would reject and judge them (32:19-35). After judgment, however, God would forgive and restore his people, while dispensing judgment on their enemies (32:36-43). The climax of the song in the Septuagint is the call to rejoice over God's salvation and judgment, and all the angels are summoned to worship him. Clearly, the author of Hebrews sees this salvation and judgment to be administered by God's Agent, his Son, and the summons for all the angels to worship has its counterpart in the birth narratives of Jesus, when the angels praised God for the advent of Christ (Lk. 2:8-14).

1:7 (Ps. 104:1)

If the status of the Son is higher than the status of angels, it follows that the

²⁶The LXX text is also supported by the Dead Sea Scrolls, which says, "...and prostrate yourselves before him, all gods," (QS Cave 4), cf. P. Skehan, "A Fragment of the 'Song of Moses' (Deut 32) from Qumran," *BASOR* 136 (1954) 12-15.

nature of the Son is higher than the nature of angels. The role of angels is to serve as temporary agents of God's commands, and in this role, they are like wind and fire. Jewish tradition understood Psalm 104:4 to mean that angels were sometimes changed into wind and fire by God's command,²⁷ and this temporary state contrasts sharply with the Son, whose eternal nature is highlighted in the next two quotations.

1:8-9 (Ps. 45:6-7)

Psalm 45 celebrates a royal wedding (see the Psalm's superscription), and in the imagery of the psalm the groom is metaphorically addressed as "God" (45:6), though as 45:7b makes clear, the godlike royal groom, in fact, owes higher allegiance to Almighty God. It is likely that this psalm's original context was for the royal wedding of one (or more) of David's sons, who were honored with the title "son of God" (cf. Ps. 89:19-37). For Christians, the ascription of the title "God" to the royal king, and beyond that, the reference to "your [his] God," who is the Almighty, could have no greater meaning than in Jesus, the Son, and God, the Father.²⁸ The poet announces that this godlike royal groom will reign forever in righteousness. Because of his moral integrity, God had elevated him as his royal son above all others. This elevation has particular meaning with reference to Christ and the angels, for if Christ is God's royal son *par excellence*, then he is vastly superior to the angels who merely serve in heaven's court.

1:10-12 (Ps. 102:25-27)

The second quotation which highlights the Son's eternal nature comes from the prayer of an afflicted person who pours out his lament to God (cf. superscription). In the Septuagint text, the prayer of the sufferer includes an exaltation of God (Ps. 102:12-22), after which God responds to the sufferer (Ps. 102:25).²⁹ The remarkable thing is that God addresses the sufferer by the title *Kyrie* (= Lord). This remarkable address begs an answer to the question, "Whom would God address as Lord?" For a Christian, there could be only one answer--Jesus, God's Son!³⁰ The writer of Hebrews understands the sufferer in Psalm 102 to foreshadow the suffering of God's Son, and when God addresses his Son, he calls him Lord, confirming that the Son was the agent of creation, the one through whom God made the universe. Yet, though the tenure of the universe was limited, the Son would endure forever, something that could never be said of the angels!

²⁷Ezra addresses God as one "at whose command they [i.e., angels] are changed to wind and fire" (2 Esdras 8:22).

²⁸D. Kidner, *Psalms 1-71: An Introduction & Commentary [TOTC]* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1973) 172.

²⁹This is obviously different than in the Masoretic text, where 102:25 continues the words of the suppliant.

³⁰F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews [NICNT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 22-23.

1:13 (Ps. 110:1)

The final quotation is the messianic conversation between Yahweh and Adonai in Psalm 110:1ff, one of the favorite Old Testament passages for New Testament Christians. The Septuagint text reads, "The Lord said to my Lord...", which translates the Hebrew, "Yahweh said to my Adonai..." Similar to the previous quotation, the question must be answered, "Whom would God address as Lord?" Once again, the answer is the same--only Jesus, God's Son (Mt. 22:41-46//Mk. 12:35-37//Lk. 20:41-44)!

To David's Lord, then, God says, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." God never said such a thing to any angel! Angels stand before God, but never do they sit in his presence.

1:14

So, the conclusion is that angels are servants who minister to those God intends to save. They are not to be compared with God's Son!

The First Solemn Warning (2:1-4)

The reader now encounters the first of the five solemn warnings that punctuate the book. If what he has argued concerning Christ's superiority over angels is true, then certain implications follow along the lines of an *a fortiori* argument. Angels were mediators in the giving of the Torah, and as the Septuagint recounts it, when Yahweh descended to Mt. Sinai, "On his right hand, angels [were] with him" (Dt. 33:2; cf. Ac. 7:53; Ga. 3:19).³¹ If the Torah mediated by angels was binding so that violations were punishable by death (2:1), the word spoken by God through his Son, who is higher than angels, must surely be that much more binding (2:3a). To "drift away" from this higher word (2:1) or to "ignore" it (2:3a) would be disastrous! The word God spoke by his Son was the message of salvation, announced by Jesus (Mk. 1:14-15; Lk. 4:16-21) and testified to by his apostles (2:3b; Lk. 1:2; Ac. 2:32; 3:15; 10:39; 13:31). God also confirmed this message of salvation by miraculous signs, both in the life of Jesus (Ac. 2:22) and in the ministries of his apostles (Ac. 2:43; 4:5-12). Since these miracles were not given at the whim of human volition but by God's sovereign will, they served as events pointing beyond themselves to the validity of the gospel message (2:4).

The Temporary Condescension of the Son (2:5-18)

Someone might argue that all this talk about Christ's superiority is undermined by the fact that Jesus was a human person. Did not his humanness diminish his status

³¹Another allusion to this mediation from Jewish tradition is to be found in *Jubilees* 1:26ff.

and authority? It is to this issue that the author now turns.

The first part of his answer points out a distinction between the present world and the "world to come." The condescension of Jesus belongs to the present world, but his exaltation, and with him the exaltation of all who follow him, belongs to the next world. Lordship over the future world has not been promised to angels (2:5)! In the Jewish community, it was generally accepted that the present state of the world was under the administration of angels. The nations, according to the Septuagint, were divided under angelic protectorates (Dt. 32:8, LXX).³² Nevertheless, God's greater purpose was that the world should be under the lordship of humankind (2:6-8a; cf. Ps. 8:4-6). Though humans had been created "a little lower than the angels,"³³ they were honored and established with everything in subordination to them (Ge. 1:26). This ordained glory was marred by human sin, however, and the subordination of the world under humans was frustrated by the curse (Ge. 3:16-19). Thus, God's ideal for humans had not been fully realized, so the author says, "Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him" (2:8b). Instead, Jesus, God's Son, participated in the lowliness of the human estate by also becoming "a little lower than the angels."³⁴ The glory and lordship which God had planned for all humans was first realized in Jesus' exaltation to the right hand of the Father (2:9a). He suffered the judgment of death in behalf of all humans as an expression of God's grace (2:9b; cf. Ge. 2:17).

So, by his vicarious suffering and victory over death, Jesus not only fulfilled God's appointment that a human should be lord over all creation, he also brought with him into this new exalted state "many children" (2:10a). In doing so, Jesus is the Pioneer or Author of their salvation, perfected through suffering.³⁵ As a perfect Savior and Pathfinder, he participated in the human family and its suffering (2:10b). His incarnation, far from diminishing his status, was necessary, since humans could not by their own power establish the glory God had ordained for them. So, Jesus became part of their family in order to purify them from the effects of the fall and lead them back to the position God had ordained for them (2:11).³⁶

³²The LXX reads, "When the Most High divided the nations...he set the bounds of the nations according to the number of the angels of God" (Dt. 32:8; cf. Da. 10:13, 20; 12:1).

³³The alternative translation, "You made him *for a little while* lower than the angels," makes good sense here (cf. NIV mar.), and it is well within the semantic range of meaning for the word *brachys* (= short, little), which can refer to space, time or quantity, cf. BAG (1979) 147. Again, as before, the writer quotes from the LXX, which specifies *angeloi* (= angels) whereas the Masoretic text has *'elohim* (= God, gods, or heavenly beings).

³⁴Here, as in 2:7 the phrase may also be rendered, "But we see the one who was made *for a little while* lower than angels" (see previous footnote).

³⁵The idea of perfection here is not moral but mediatorial, that is to say, Jesus did not become morally perfect by suffering, but he became a perfect Savior by suffering.

³⁶The divine ideal that humans should be lords over creation, the marring of this ideal by human failure and Satan's deceit, and the final victory of Christ by which he brought with him "many children" into his new exalted state is the theology behind C. S. Lewis' beloved allegory, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (rpt. New York: Macmillan,

Three passages demonstrates Christ's solidarity with the human race. First, the messianic Psalm 22, from which Jesus quoted while on the cross (Mt. 27:46/Mk. 15:34; cf. Ps. 22:1) and which the early Christians had already identified with the sufferings of Jesus (Jn. 19:24/Ps. 22:18), depicts the sufferer as declaring God's name to his brothers in the church (2:12).³⁷ Jesus, of course, is the sufferer *par excellence*, and by his resurrection he declares God's name to all who will believe. The second and third passages (2:13), taken from Isaiah's statement about his two sons (Is. 8:17-18), assumes that the ancient prophet was a symbol of the coming messiah.³⁸ The Septuagint reading, "And one shall say, 'I will wait for God...and I will trust in him: behold I and the children whom God has given me...'" has a dual meaning for the author of Hebrews. In the ancient sense, it means that Isaiah and his children would take their stand with the believing community of Israel who trusted in God, enduring the coming disaster of exile but believing in God for restoration. In a second sense, it means that Jesus and his "children" will wait together for the consummation God had promised for all who believe.³⁹ Here, again, Jesus stands in solidarity with his "children," the human race.

So, since the "children" are flesh and blood, Jesus also participated in their humanity by incarnation so that, far from yielding to the judgment of eternal death, he might destroy the one who held the threat of death over them (2:14). Satan, the great accuser, is depicted as holding the threat of death against the human race. In so doing, he manipulates the sentence of God that the disobedient will "surely die" (Ge. 2:17) to enslave the whole human race in fear (2:15). But, by his incarnation, death and resurrection, Christ destroyed Satan's self-aggrandizement and set his children free from this enslavement! In doing this, it was certainly not angels that Christ helped, but humans--those who by faith were and are the descendants of Abraham (2:16; cf. Ro. 4:11-12, 16-17; Ga. 3:7). In his incarnation, Jesus became like the "children," his brothers, in every way so that he could serve as their priest in making atonement for their sins (2:17).⁴⁰ His condescension in no way diminished him, nor

1986).

³⁷The LXX has *ekklesia* in 22:22, which is the NT word for "church."

³⁸It may be significant that the name Isaiah (= Yahweh is salvation) and Jesus (= Yahweh saves) are built from the same Hebrew root.

³⁹This kind of typology in which an ancient event has christological meaning, sometimes called *sensus plenior*, is that God intended deeper and additional meaning which the original author may or may not have understood, cf. W. LaSor, "The *Sensus Plenior* and Biblical Interpretation," *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation*, ed. W. Gasque and W. LaSor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 260-277.

⁴⁰The use of the verb *hilaskomai* (= propitiate) has been much debated, since it carries the idea of appeasement. Many interpreters are reluctant to give the word full force, since it implies that God is angry against the sinner. Divine wrath that needs to be placated, they argue, seems a primitive and crude notion more akin to pagan than Christian concepts. However, the consistent biblical view is that human sinfulness, in fact, has incurred God's wrath, and that this divine wrath can only be averted by Christ's atoning sacrifice, cf. L. Morris, *The Apostolic*

did it lessen his superiority over the angels. His condescension was a temporary necessity in order to save his "children." As a perfect priest, "like his brothers in every way" (2:17), he identifies with the temptation and weakness of those who come to him. In this way he serves as an instrument of mercy and faithfulness; he suffered through temptation just as the children suffer. Because he knows their trials intimately, he is also able to help them (2:18).

In the end, then, Christ's incarnation in no way diminished his superiority over the angels. His condescension was a temporary expedient in order to secure humanity's ultimate lordship over creation, a lordship that God intended from the beginning. Furthermore, in his incarnation Jesus destroyed death and effectively served as the high priest to make atonement for human sin.

Christ is Superior to Moses Who Received the Torah (3:1-19)

The third link in the author's sustained argument moves from the prophets and the angels to Moses. Of course, Moses was himself a prophet and angels were involved in the mediation of the Torah to Moses. Moses, however, was by all accounts the great lawgiver and the most esteemed spiritual leader in the history of Israel, so much so that the names Moses, the Torah and Mt. Sinai all become symbolic and virtually interchangeable as representing the religious center for Judaism. To preach that there now was a new center in Jesus of Nazareth was a radical departure from more than a thousand years of religious continuity.

Jesus is Greater than Moses (3:1-6)

The opening word in 3:1, *hōthen* (= for this reason, therefore), connects what has previously been argued with what is to follow. If Christ is greater than the prophets, greater than angels, and lives as the conqueror of death and the devil, then the readers must keep Christ clearly in the center, fixing their attention on him and no other (3:1a). Christ's mission to bring "many children to glory" (cf. 2:10) means that the author's Christian readers are people who "share in the heavenly calling" to be lords over all creation. They must remain fixed in their confession of Jesus as the apostle and high priest, an *apostolos* (= delegate, one sent) because he came from the Father into the world, and an *archiereus* (= high priest) because he represents humans on earth before God (3:1b). As the apostle and high priest, he is the link between God and humans and also between humans and God. Jesus was faithful in both these roles as an apostle and a priest, just as Moses was faithful in his role as a lawgiver and an intercessor. As the lawgiver, Moses, also served in the role of an "apostle," that is, one sent by God. As an intercessor, he served a priestly function, representing the

people to God, even when Aaron, the proper high priest, failed terribly (see especially Ex. 32). Of Moses, God said, "With him I speak face to face," and "he is faithful in all my house" (Nu. 12:6-8). The house, mentioned here, was not understood to refer to the Tent of Meeting but to the people of Israel as a community (3:2).⁴¹

The burden of the argument to follow is based on analogy, and the writer uses two of them. The first is the analogy that the builder of the house is greater than the house itself. Taking his cue from the allusion to God's house, the writer asserts that Jesus' honor must be judged greater than Moses, since Moses was not the builder of the household of Israel, but rather a faithful servant within the household (3:3). God is the builder of all things (3:4), but he has appointed his Son as the heir of all things (cf. 1:2). Thus, Christ is joined to the Father as the builder-owner, while Moses serves as a member within the household of Israel. The difference of status is enormous! Furthermore, in a second analogy the writer points out the difference between a son and a servant. Moses was a faithful household servant (3:5), but Christ is faithful as God's Son (3:6a). Again, the difference is enormous. Part of Moses' role was to be "a witness of the things that will be said" (my translation), but if this is so, it surely implies that Moses was not to be considered an end in himself.⁴² He was a witness of something yet to come--and that greater thing has now come! Now there is a new household with bigger boundaries than the ancient household of Israel, and it encompasses all who confess faith in God's Son, Jesus (3:6b)!

The Second Solemn Warning (3:7-19)

The second solemn warning against reverting from the Christian confession, a warning that extends to the end of chapter 4, is taken from a psalm offering a historical reflection on past events in Israel's history (Ps. 95:7b-11). In this case, the reflection is on two rebellions of the Israelites, one at Rephadim (cf. Ex. 17:1-7), a site that Moses renamed Meribah (= quarreling) and Massah (= testing), and the other at Kadesh, a different site but which also was linked with the name Meribah (Nu. 20:1-13). In both these instances, the Israelites quarreled with God, refusing to trust his word and doubting that he was among them (cf. Ex.17:7; Nu. 20:12). So the psalmist, addressing his own generation, urges his community not to harden their hearts as did their ancestors. The ancient rebellions resulted in a forty-year sojourn in the desert and God's refusal to allow the Israelites entrance into the promised land of rest (Ps. 95:10-11). In particular, Moses' rash action cancelled his own chance to enter the land of rest, also (Nu. 20:12). This warning to the ancient people of Israel is now restated to the new community of Christians (3:7-11).

⁴¹In the Aramaic Targum of Onqelos, Nu. 12:7 is rendered as "my people" rather than "my house" to make clear this intent, cf. Bruce, *Hebrews*, 57.

⁴²The future passive participle *lalethesomenon* (= to be spoken) orients Moses' role as a prophet of things to come.

Members of the Christian community must take care that the unbelief and hardening against God's word which was apparent among the ancient people of Israel would not be repeated in their own lives (3:12). Daily they must encourage and strengthen each other in the faith (3:13). If the ancient people quarreled with and rejected Moses, their ancient apostle and high priest, how much worse it would be if Christians quarreled with and rejected Jesus, the greatest apostle and high priest of all! Such rebellion was deceitful, for while it promised freedom, it ended with them being shut out. God's ideal that humans would rule as lords over all creation and Christ's priestly work to bring with him "many children to glory" would only be fulfilled to those who held their faith firmly to the end (3:14). The "today" in Psalm 95:7 has a continuing relevance (3:15). In the ancient community, those who rebelled died in the wilderness during the forty-year sojourn as a judgment for their rebellion (cf. Ex. 14:26-35). They never entered the land of promise, for God took oath upon his own name that they would not be allowed to do so (3:16-18).⁴³ They could not have the land of rest because they refused to believe God's word (3:19). By implication, what would happen to anyone who turned back from God's final word that he had spoken through his Son (cf. 1:2)?

Christ Is Superior To Joshua Who Gave Them The Land (4:1-13)

The second solemn warning continues, though now the focus will gradually shift toward Joshua, Moses' successor. The final line in Psalm 95, "They shall never enter my rest," presupposes the promise that was given earlier that the land was intended to be a place of rest (cf. Ex. 33:14; Dt. 3:20; 12:9-10; 25:19; Is. 28:12). The generation that rebelled did not receive that rest. To be sure, when Joshua crossed the Jordan with the people, he reiterated that this land would be the fulfillment of the promise of rest (Jos. 1:13-15; cf. 21:43-45), but none of those who were at Meribah and Massah lived to see it. So, the author of Hebrews urges his readers that since the promise of entering God's rest still stands, they must be sure they do not fail to claim it as did the ancient people of Israel (4:1).

The idea of the promise still being open is based on the history of Israel. Though the Israelites entered the land and temporarily experienced rest at various times (cf. Jos. 11:23; 14:15; 22:4; 23:1), this rest was far from permanent. In fact, the Book of Judges details the repeated upheaval of the clans as they were oppressed again and again by various Canaanite nations (Jg. 1:19, 27-36). In fact, at Bokim the Angel of Yahweh appeared with the announcement that the Canaanites would remain as thorns in the sides of the Israelites (Jg. 2:1-3), and the record of the judges demonstrates this grim reality. Only in the latter part of David's reign and Solomon's

⁴³God's declaration "on oath" (Ps. 95:11) refers to the standard oath formula "as surely as I live" (Ex. 14:20, 28, 35), cf. T. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (New York: Scribners, 1971) 172.

reign was the ideal of rest ever realized for any substantial length of time. The history of the monarchy after Solomon was punctuated with various invasions from Syria, Egypt, Assyria and eventually Babylon. So, the promise of rest, though partially realized, was never fully realized, and therefore, it "stands open."

The good news of promised rest was preached to the ancient community in the Sinai wilderness, just as it was preached to Christians in the message of Jesus. The ancient community did not combine the message with faith, so they did not receive the promise; if the new community, that is the Christian community, would not combine the gospel with faith, they, too, would miss out on the promise (4:2). The fulfillment of the promise is to those who not only hear it, but those who believe it, for it is "we who have believed" who enter God's rest (4:3a).

The fact that the passage in Psalm 95:11 speaks of "my [God's] rest" is important, for the author connects it not only with the promises of rest from war in the land of Canaan, but also with the sabbath rest of God after his work in creation (4:3b).

After creating the universe, God rested on the seventh day (4:4; cf. Ge. 2:2). It was his sabbath rest he promised to share with the believing community in Canaan. God worked and then rested, so it was their task to complete the conquest and then rest. However, the promise of rest was withheld from the ancient community because of their unbelief (4:5-6). Throughout the Israelites' history, the opportunity for rest was only partially and occasionally realized, and in fact, at the time the Book of Hebrews was being written it was still unfulfilled inasmuch as the land of Israel still remained under the power of foreign potentates. However, God's promise of rest still stood, because many years after the ancient Israelites camped in the desert and failed to enter the land of rest, God spoke by a Hebrew poet⁴⁴ and said, "Today, if you hear his voice and do not harden your hearts [you may enter into God's rest]" (Ps. 95:7). It is apparent the psalmist means that the promise of entering God's rest is still in effect, since he uses the word "Today". The promise stands open to be claimed!

Certainly the conquest of Canaan through Joshua had not brought God's rest to the ancient Israelites, for if it had, the psalmist would not have spoken about it later (4:8). There is a deliberate play upon the name Joshua/Jesus in 4:8 inasmuch as they are both the same name, one Hebrew and the other Greek.⁴⁵ Similar to Paul's "first man Adam" and "last man Adam" (cf. 1 Co. 15:45), the writer here envisions a "first Joshua" and a "second Joshua [Jesus]". The first Joshua could not have provided the promised rest or God would not have later spoken about it again (4:8). But by implication, the second Joshua [Jesus], in fact, would "bring many sons to glory." So,

⁴⁴That the writer of Hebrews says "David" may only be a circumlocution for the Book of Psalms, since there is no superscription in the ancient text for Psalm 95 about its author.

⁴⁵The KJV translates it "Jesus," while most other English versions, both before and after the KJV translate it "Joshua."

the author concludes, "There remains a Sabbath-rest for God's people" (4:9). The promise still stands! Just as God finished his work and enters into rest, God's people finish their work and share God's rest (4:10). Every effort must be made on the part of Christian believers to confirm their faith by obedience so that they will not fall short of God's rest as did the ancient community on the edge of Canaan (4:11).

The question remains, of course, as to just what is envisioned by this rest of which the author has been speaking. The debate is to a large degree based on the use of the present middle indicative verb *eiserchometha* (= we are entering) in 4:3. Is the present tense used more generally to mean that Christians have certainty that they will receive the promise of rest (i.e., after death in the sense of Rv. 14:13), or is it more specific and intended to mean that already Christians are entering into a state of rest (i.e., as a present experience)? The former emphasis is that the rest is the reward of heaven, the better country which is still available to those who believe (cf. 11:10, 16).⁴⁶ The Christian life is a test of faith and obedience to determine whether professing Christians will fall short or enter in. The other emphasis, sometimes appearing in the holiness movements as evidence for the "second blessing" or "sanctification", is the idea that after conversion there is yet another spiritual plateau to be attained, a state of rest through perfection.⁴⁷ Even if one does not accept the theology of perfectionism, it is still possible to view the rest as the believer's present sense of security in which, because of Christ's final work on the cross, no further work is necessary for salvation.⁴⁸ Here, the rest is not eternal life after death but psychological assurance in this life that one has peace with God. On the basis of other passages in the book that speak of the promise not only as rest, but also as eternal inheritance (6:12; 9:15; 10:23, 36), the first view seems preferable.

The author closes his second solemn warning with an affirmation that God's word is alive, active, and capable of exploring the deepest recesses of human inner life.⁴⁹ God's final Word had been spoken by his Son (1:2), and this same Word penetrates deeply to judge the motives of human behavior (4:12).⁵⁰ No man or woman can fool God in matters of faith, for he truly knows whether someone sincerely believes or not. Nothing in the whole universe can be hidden from God (4:13). Thus, the readers must take seriously the author's urging that they "make

⁴⁶So Bruce, *Hebrews*, 73, 77.

⁴⁷See discussion in R. Brown, *Christ Above All: The Message of Hebrews [BST]* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1982) 90.

⁴⁸L. Morris, "Hebrews," *EBC* (1981) 12.43.

⁴⁹It is unlikely that the terms "soul" and "spirit" are intended to describe some sort of psychology (dichotomist as opposed to trichotomist, for example). Rather, the expression is no more than an idiomatic way of referring to the deepest levels of human life.

⁵⁰The context here suggests that the expression "word of God" refers to his dynamic Word especially personified in his Son rather than the more static word of Holy Scripture.

every effort to enter that rest," for if their hearts are "hardened in unbelief" and if they are not truly and solely committed to God's final revelation in his Son, God will surely know it!

Christ's Priestly Office Is Superior To Aaron's Office And The Priestly Line (4:14--7:28)

With the closing of the second solemn warning, the reader now comes to the heart of the author's argument, the priesthood of Christ. He will first emphasize the office of Christ's priesthood (chapters 5-7) and then will explore the function of Christ's priesthood (chapters 8-10). As is to be expected, themes from what he has already said in chapters 1-4 spill over into the succeeding discussion.

Jesus, the High Priest of Eternal Salvation (4:14--5:10)

Previously, in anticipation of the main theme of his work, the author has described Jesus as "a merciful and faithful high priest" who "made atonement for the sins of the people" (cf. 2:17). Jesus is "the high priest whom we confess" (3:1). However, so far the author has been content to list this title and function alongside other titles and functions, such as, the Son (1:2-3, 5, 8; 3:6), God (1:8), the Lord (1:10), the Author (2:10), the Apostle (3:1), and the Builder (3:3). Now he intends to take up the office of High Priest in a more direct way, explaining why it is important and why Jesus is superior to all other high priests before him. Especially he will concentrate his attention upon the one duty of the high priest that he alone could perform, the atonement on *Yom Kippur*.

His first statement connects what has preceded with what is to follow. Not only has the author listed "high priest" as one of Jesus' exalted titles, he has taken considerable pains to demonstrate why it was important that God's Son condescended to the human level in the incarnation. This condescension was necessary in order for Jesus "to be made like his brothers in every way," thus ensuring that he would be a merciful and faithful high priest (cf. 2:17). The earthly appearance was temporary, however, and it was followed by Jesus' entrance into heaven (4:14a).⁵¹ Such an exaltation implies what the author will go on to describe explicitly, that is, that the exalted Christ is higher than all, and because he is, Christians must not give up their faith (4:14b). On the one hand, Jesus' incarnation qualifies him to be a sympathetic high priest, one who has experienced the pull of temptation but did not succumb (4:15). On the other hand, because he has entered heaven and is now seated at God's right hand, he invites his people to approach the throne of grace, a metonymy for the

⁵¹The expression "through the heavens" means "through the heavenly realms," and it is comparable to the later statement that Jesus was "exalted above the heavens" (7:26) and Paul's affirmation that Jesus "ascended higher than all the heavens" (Ep. 4:10).

very presence of God (4:16a). Here, they will find mercy and grace in their hour of crisis.

The throne language is especially important to what will follow, for God's throne in the ancient community of Israel was the lid or mercy-throne of the ark of the covenant (Ex. 25:22). The rendering "enthroned between the cherubim" (cf. 1 Sa. 4:4; 2 Sa. 6:2; 2 Kg. 19:15; 1 Chr. 13:6; Ps. 80:1; 99:1; Is. 37:16, etc., so NIV, RSV, NEB, NAB) envisions the atonement lid of the ark as God's earthly throne.⁵² Still, as Solomon expressed it, God's true throne is heavenly (2 Chr. 6:18, 21), and the writer of Hebrews intends to make much of this fact, hence his emphasis that Jesus, the great high priest, has passed through the heavens!

There were two important qualifications for a high priest. First, he had to be ordained from among his fellows to serve as their representative to God. This was generally true of priestly service, but it was especially true of the high priest with respect to his duties on *Yom Kippur*, since on that day each year the high priest approached the throne of the mercy-seat within the most holy place to make atonement for the whole congregation of Israel (5:1, 3b; Lv. 16:15-17). Second, as the representative of the people, he was obliged to show gentleness to the ignorant, empathizing with their weakness, since he also experienced human weakness (5:2). Therefore, he offered atonement for himself first (5:3a; Lv. 16:11-14) and then for the people.

The honor of ordination was not self-chosen (5:4). Aaron, the first high priest, was appointed directly by God, confirmed by an ordination ritual, and reaffirmed in the sign of the budding rod (cf. Ex. 28:1-4; Lv. 8:1-36; 17:1-11; 18:1, 7). The succession of high priests in Aaron's family line depended upon this initial selection by God (cf. Nu. 20:22-29; 25:10-13). This being so, then to acclaim Jesus as the great high priest required God's divine appointment, just as Aaron was appointed. Christ's priesthood, our author argues, was not by self-appointment, nor by dynastic transition, but it was conferred upon him by God. In the ancient messianic Psalm, he was declared to be God's Son (5:5; cf. Ps. 2:7), a declaration confirmed in the earthly life of Jesus (cf. Mt. 3:17//Mk. 1:11//Lk. 3:22; cf. Jn. 1:32-34; Mt. 17:5//Mk. 9:7//Lk. 9:35; cf. 2 Pe. 1:17-18). Since Jesus is now the Son who sits at the right hand of God in heaven (cf. 1:3), the place of the true throne and mercy-seat (4:14), he is in position to serve as the heavenly high priest for all. Furthermore, in yet another messianic Psalm, God announced to his Son, David's Lord, that he was a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek (5:6; cf. Ps. 110:4). For the time being, the author of Hebrews will simply be content to quote this passage to establish the priesthood of Christ by God's direct appointment. Later, in chapter 7, he will explore more fully the

⁵²The Hebrew *yoshev* (= to sit, dwell, be enthroned) is used of enthronement both for royal figures and divine, and especially, where Yahweh is the subject, cf. M. Gorg, *TDOT* (1990) VI.430-437.

significance of Melchizedek's order of priesthood.

In addition to his divine ordination, Jesus' human qualifications for priesthood were equally sufficient. During his earthly life, and especially in Gethsemene, Jesus experienced the terrible reality of human horror and the prospect of brutal death (5:7a; cf. Mt. 26:38//Mk. 14:33-34//Lk. 22:44). What the children feared (cf. 2:15), their great high priest also recoiled from! There in the garden he prayed to be delivered from death, the final enemy of all humans, and God heard the cries and saw the tears of his Son (5:7b). However, it is just as clear that God did not save his Son from death, but allowed him to learn the full lesson of obedience to the Father's will, even though it meant the suffering of the cross (5:8). In this suffering he became a perfect high priest, fully able to empathize with those he came to save. As a perfect high priest, he is now the source of eternal salvation (5:9), and his priesthood was confirmed by God in the order of Melchizedek (5:10). Both by divine call and human experience he satisfied the fundamental qualifications for high priesthood.

The Third Solemn Warning (5:11--6:12)

There now follows an interlude between the assertion that Jesus was a high priest after Melchizedek's order and the explanation of why that order is significant. This interlude consists of a third solemn warning against lapsing back into an inferior system. There was much more to be said about Jesus as the great high priest after Melchizedek's order, but his readers hindered an in-depth explanation because they were sluggish (5:11).⁵³ In fact, though they had been Christians for some time, they still needed elementary education about the basic truths of the Christian faith (5:12-13). As spiritual infants, they were not ready for the solid food of maturity but still required the milk of infancy. They had not exercised themselves in spiritual perception, so they were not capable of mature moral judgments (5:14).

It was important, therefore, that the author's readers make some progress toward Christian maturity (6:1). They must not simply keep relearning the same rudimentary lessons of the new convert, which are only the foundation of the Christian life. As examples of what he means, the author offers a short list of these basic lessons (6:2), and they include:

- ✧ **Repentance**⁵⁴ **from dead works** (i.e., the negative response toward sin, a turning away from the life of sin which leads to spiritual death)

⁵³The word *nothros* (= lazy or sluggish) implicitly recalls the sleeping disciples who accompanied Jesus to the garden in his hour of crisis. Though he warned them not fall into temptation, they became drowsy and slept while he struggled in prayer.

⁵⁴*Metanoia* (= remorse, repentance, turning about, changing one's mind)

- ✧ **Faith in God** (i.e., the positive response towards God's grace by believing he good news)
- ✧ **Baptisms**⁵⁵ (i.e., the ritual of Jewish ceremonial cleansing that foreshadowed the Christian ritual of baptism)
- ✧ **Laying on of hands** (i.e., the practice of the early church in symbolizing the gift of the Holy Spirit, cf. Ac. 8:17; 9:12, 17; 19:6)
- ✧ **Resurrection of the dead** (i.e., the central Christian hope that at the end Christ would raise up from the dead those who believed, cf. 1 Co. 15:12-23, 50-57)
- ✧ **Eternal judgment** (i.e., the anticipation that at the end of history God would judge the world, cf. Ac. 17:31)

All these themes were basic Christian teachings and were part of the apostolic core of fundamental truths which all new Christians should learn (6:3). Still, they were first elements in the Christian faith, and the author of Hebrews wanted a deeper response.

It would be especially disastrous if those who had begun the new life in Christ reverted back to something less! In Christ, they had already participated in a wide range of heavenly blessings, and the writer enumerates them (6:4-5):

- ✧ **Enlightened** (i.e., in the gospel they had encountered Jesus, the Light of the world, cf. Jn. 1:4-9; 8:12; 2 Co. 4:4-6; Ep. 5:8-14; 2 Pe. 1:19; 1 Jn. 2:8); later, the author will say that his readers had "received the light" (10:32).
- ✧ **Tasted the heavenly gift** (i.e., generally God's gift in Jesus Christ, cf. Jn. 3:16; 4:10; Ro. 5:15-17; 6:23; Ep. 2:8; 1 Pe. 3:7b)⁵⁶
- ✧ **Shared in the Holy Spirit** (i.e., had participated in the ministry of the Spirit within the church)⁵⁷

⁵⁵The fact that the word is in the plural and that its form is the same as that used for Jewish ceremonial washings (cf. 9:10; Mk. 7:4) demonstrates that Jewish ablutions are in view (so RSV, NEB, NASB). Still, they are probably in view as part of elementary Christian instruction precisely because they anticipate Christian baptism, cf. M. Bourke, *JBC* (1968) II.391. Jewish ceremonial washings included not only the cleansing of pots and pans and the pouring of water over the hands before a meal but also proselyte baptisms, slave baptisms, and purification rituals, such as for menstruation and childbirth.

⁵⁶Considerable discussion arises as to just what form the heavenly gift takes in the effort to be more specific. Some suggest that the author specifically means the messianic gift of the Spirit (cf. Ac. 1:4; 2:38; 8:20; 10:45; 11:17). Others, emphasizing the verb "taste," argue for the Eucharist. Nonetheless, the statement is a general one and any attempt to be more precise than the text runs the risk of eisegesis.

⁵⁷As in the previously phrase, our author does not define his meaning closely. Does he mean that his readers had been sealed with the Holy Spirit (cf. Ep. 1:13-14) or that they had merely been part of a Christian group where the

- ✧ **Tasted the goodness of the word of God** (i.e., the goodness of God's provision in the early church's preaching about Jesus)⁵⁸
- ✧ **[Tasted] the powers of the coming age** (i.e., in the resurrection of Jesus, the new age already has begun)⁵⁹

The two listings of elementary Christian teachings (cf. 6:1-2) and basic Christian experiences (6:4-5) serve to frame the stern warning that it was impossible for those who had received such things, if they fell away from them, to be restored (6:4a, 6a). Their condition would be irremediable. Like the sin against the Holy Spirit (Mt. 12:32//Mk. 3:29//Lk. 12:10) and the sin unto death (1 Jn. 5:16), there would be no recovery. In turning away from the Christian truths and Christian experience, they would, in effect, be humiliating and crucifying God's Son again. Their rejection of Christ would be just as deliberate as his rejection and execution at the close of his public ministry under the Roman and Jewish authorities (6:6b).

This severe warning raises the deeply-debated theological question of whether or not a genuine Christian can apostatize and be lost. The present severe warning is part of the larger fabric of the Book of Hebrews, for there are five such solemn warnings (see the introduction), and indeed, the whole point of the book seems clearly aimed at preventing apostasy. Even in passages that are not among the five solemn warnings, the implicit threat of apostasy is always barely in the background. Clearly, the writer envisions that some who were part of the Christian community and were assumed to be genuinely Christian could turn back from the Christian faith. (Some interpreters suggest that this act of falling away is only a "straw man," hypothetical but impossible, but such exegesis is tendentious and superficial. If such were true, then the Book of Hebrews is an exercise in futility.) The larger question is whether or not those who fall away had genuine faith or only a pseudo-faith, that is, faith that appeared to be Christian but was not really Christian.

Theologically, the issue has been sharpened by the Protestant scholastics' theological fascination with 17th and 18th century rationalism with its unwillingness to allow paradox in discussing the categories of divine sovereignty and human freedom. Since then, of course, there has been the ongoing Calvinist-Arminian debate. In the Reformed tradition, at stake is the doctrine of the perseverance of the

gifts and ministries of the Spirit were active (cf. 2:4; 1 Co. 12:4-11; Ga. 3:5)? The Greek verb *metecho* (= have a share in, participate in) is tantalizingly ambiguous but cannot be pressed into service either way.

⁵⁸One wonders whether the verb "tasted" recalls Jesus' teaching that he was the Bread from heaven, but as before, the phrase is probably more general than modern interpreters want to concede.

⁵⁹The New Testament viewpoint is that the new age begins in the first coming of Jesus before the old age has run its course, thus creating an overlapping of the ages, cf. G. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) and D. Lewis, *Three Crucial Questions About the Last Days* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).

saints,⁶⁰ while in the Anabaptist tradition at stake is the doctrine of eternal security.⁶¹

Groups from the Reformed-Baptist traditions exegete the passage along the lines that those who apostatize were not truly Christian in the first place. They argue that to allow true Christians to fall from grace nullifies the whole concept of grace itself and makes salvation a result of human effort. For them, while human life and history have the appearance of freedom, this freedom is appearance only and is always overruled by God's sovereignty.

Groups with roots in Wesleyan Methodism, Pietism and the American Holiness Movement, all of which tend to be Arminian to greater or lesser degrees, take the opposite tack and argue that these very passages demonstrate the possibility of apostasy by true Christians. God's grace will keep everyone who wants to be kept, but human rejection of divine grace is possible, also. For them, the issue is not a denial of God's sovereignty (both sides affirm the sovereignty of God), but the belief that God exercises self-limitation of his power in order to allow human freedom. Both interpretations attempt to answer the question about falling from grace by appealing to their respective theological systems. The different ways in which they define divine sovereignty and human freedom are critical for the logical consistency of their systems.

In the Book of Hebrews, a number of passages figure in this theological disputation. Early on, the writer warns against "drift" which will be visited with punishment (2:1-3). Later, he says that the believing community comprises God's household, but then adds the conditional clause "...if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast" (3:6). After describing the rebellion of ancient Israel, he challenges his readers: "See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful and unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God" (3:12). He reasons that the ancient community in the desert did not receive the promise of rest because of their lack of faith and obedience, so the new community of Christians must "be careful" so that none of them will "be found to have fallen short of it" (4:1) Christians must

⁶⁰The "perseverance of the saints" is one of the "five points" of Calvinism, a rationalistic explanation of salvation. Composed in 1618, it was formulated as a response to the Remonstrance of 1610 (formulated by the followers of Jacob Arminius), which in turn was a divergence from stricter Calvinism. The "five points" system advocates *Total Depravity* (humans are totally incapable of coming to God on their own choosing due to their thorough infection with sin), *Unconditional Election* (God's choice of humans for salvation is out of his pure sovereignty unconditioned by a pre-knowledge of human response), *Limited Atonement* (Christ's atoning death was only for those whom God had chosen in advance to be saved), *Irresistible Grace* (God's call to those whom he chose will never fail but will always be effective), and *Perseverance of the Saints* (every human God has chosen in advance will surely persevere to salvation). So, according to this doctrine, a true Christian might sin, but he/she will never totally or finally fall away from the state of grace.

⁶¹The doctrine of eternal security, which more or less approximates the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, is generally associated with the Baptist movement. Baptists, however, tend not to be strict Calvinists, since they usually reject the doctrine of limited atonement (i.e., that Christ died only for the elect, not for the world).

"make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall" by following the ancient Israelites' example of disobedience (4:11). Christians must "hold firmly to the faith" they profess (4:14). They must realize that it is "impossible" for those who fall away "to be brought back to repentance" (6:4-6). Lives that are barren of faith are "in danger of being cursed" and in the end "will be burned" (6:8). Hence the admonition to the readers that they must make their hope "sure" (6:11), for as the author urges, "We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised" (6:12). The readers must "hold unswervingly" to their hope, for if they "deliberately keep on sinning...no sacrifice is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire" (10:26-27). If the ancient Israelites who rejected Moses died without mercy, Christians who reject Jesus will be punished even more severely, since they have "trampled underfoot" God's Son and "insulted the Spirit of grace" (10:28-29). The ancient dictum, "The Lord will judge his people," is relevant to the Christian community, and Christians must remember, "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (10:30-31). So, followers of Christ must not "throw away their confidence" (10:35). They "need to persevere," because "those who shrink back" will be "destroyed" (10:36, 39). They must "run with perseverance" (12:1) while not growing weary and losing heart (12:3). They must see to it that they do not "miss the grace of God" and be rejected as was Esau (12:15-17). If the ancient Israelites did not escape God's judgment, how much less will Christians escape (12:25)!

It must be conceded that the cumulative effect of these passages poses a formidable challenge to the Calvinist doctrine of the perseverance of the saints and the Baptist doctrine of eternal security. It is probably fair to say that the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions make St. Paul their starting point and then try to explain the Book of Hebrews. On the other hand, those from the Arminian tradition emphasizes biblical passages such as the Book of Hebrews and then try to explain Paul. Exegetically, there seems little reason to doubt that the writer of Hebrews considered his readers to be Christian, for repeatedly he calls them "brothers" and in one case "holy brothers" (3:1, 12; 10:19; 13:22). The listing of basic Christian experiences (6:4-5), all of which the writer assumes his readers had experienced, suggests that he considers them to be fully Christian. Furthermore, it seems equally clear that he expects them to persevere and be saved (6:9-10; 10:39). At the same time, if the warnings mean anything at all they must mean that those who call themselves Christian and whom the writer himself considers to be Christian may, in the end, fall away from the Christian faith and be condemned. Were they ever truly Christian at all, or was their faith a pseudo-faith? Nothing in the Book of Hebrews directly addresses this question. Rather, it is a question arising from the need for theological consistency in the Calvinist and Arminian theological systems.

In the view of the present writer, this question can have no final answer

precisely because it is not addressed directly in the New Testament. What seems apparent, however, is that some who claim to be Christians may fall away, *even though both the ones who fall away and the community that surrounds them at one time believed that they were genuine Christians*. Whether they ever were really Christian becomes academic, since only God is the judge of true Christian faith. No external signs are unmistakable. It seems equally clear that Christians are urgently called upon to actively follow Jesus Christ. They are urged to participate in the process of the Christian life and press toward its goal of final salvation. Passivity--or worse, the turning away from the Christian faith altogether--will end in disaster.

To fall on one side of the theological fence or the other does not guarantee some sort of psychological certainty, either for an individual Christian about him/herself or for a community's opinion about an individual within its midst. Even if there was a clear answer that all Christians could agree on, it would still remain true that some people who think of themselves as Christians and who the Christian community accepts as Christians can and do fall away. Whether their original claim to faith was genuine or not seems more of an academic curiosity that can only be satisfied after God's final judgment at the end. In the meantime, the individual Christian ought to take seriously the solemn warnings about perseverance. Surely a life of moral carelessness on the one hand or a life of doubt and misgiving on the other fall far short of the New Testament's description of the Christian life.⁶²

The third solemn warning closes with both a caution and a confident hope. First, the readers must realize that a fruitful life of faith will be blessed by God, while a spiritually barren life, like thistles and thorns, will be burned up (6:7-8). The analogy contrasting a fruitful land with a barren plot recalls both the land of promise flowing with milk and honey and the barrenness of the wilderness. Still, the author is persuaded that his readers will persevere to salvation (6:9). God's justice ensures that they will be rewarded for their faithfulness (6:10). Therefore, diligence about faith and the Christian life is paramount, and the writer urges this diligence upon his readers "to the very end, in order to make your hope sure" (6:11). Spiritual indolence

⁶²In the early church, this controversy emerges early, and some of it over this very passage in the Book of Hebrews. Was there any hope for Christians who sinned after being baptized? Many early Christians believed that baptism covered past sins only, but what about future ones, especially in light of He. 6:4-6? The *Shepherd of Hermas*, a Christian writing that many early Christians felt was inspired (and which appears in some early canon lists), conceded one, but only one, post-baptismal sin, cf. "The Fourth Mandate," 3. Later, the Novatians (3rd century), while they tolerated some minor offenses as remediable through penance, declared that certain sins, such as, homicide, idolatry, fraud, denial of the faith in times of persecution, blasphemy, adultery and fornication were irremediable and required excommunication from the church, cf. O. Heick, *A History of Christian Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965) I.102. Still later, the Donatist controversy in North Africa (4th century) arose during and after the Roman persecution of Christians under Diocletian. During this persecution, some Christians publicly denied their faith in order to save themselves from penalty, but later, they wanted readmittance to the church. The Donatists argued that any who had denied Christ were forever outside the church unless they were rebaptized and saved all over again, cf. V. Walter, *EDT* (1984) 329-330.

is certainly not the right path, but rather, imitation of those faithful saints who already have demonstrated by their faith and patience that God's promise still stands (6:12).

The Inviolability of God's Promises (6:13-20)

The importance of divine promises figures significantly in the theology of Hebrews. Earlier, the writer of Hebrews has spoke of the promise of rest which still stands (cf. 4:1). In explaining how the ancient Israelites in the desert could not inherit that promise because of unbelief (cf. 3:19), he warns his readers that they, too, must persevere (cf. 4:11). Then, in describing Jesus as the great high priest, he cites the promise of God to his Son that he was a priest forever in Melchizedek's order (cf. 5:6, 10). Finally, in admonishing his readers about their need for diligent faithfulness, he urges them to imitate the ones who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised (cf. 6:12). His intention is to enlarge on the significance of Christ's priestly appointment in Melchizedek's order, but first he accentuates the inviolability of God's promises, an inviolability that applies both to the promise of rest and to the appointment of Jesus after the order of Melchizedek.

God's promise to Abraham that he would have a son and great posterity was repeated many times (cf. Ge. 12:2-3, 7; 13:15-17; 15:5; 17:2, 5-8, 15-21; 18:10-14; 21:1-2), but at the binding of Isaac, when Isaac was spared only at the last moment, God's reaffirmation of his promise was accompanied by an oath (cf. Ge. 22:15-18). God took oath upon his own divine character that the promise would certainly be fulfilled, and it was fulfilled, both the promise of a son and its corollary promise of great posterity (6:13-15). The nature of an oath is that it depends upon an entity greater than the oath-taker, usually God or the gods, and the oath-taker invites disaster upon himself if his word should fail (6:16; cf. Ru. 1:17; 1 Kg. 19:2; etc.). God's oath confirming his promise makes the promise doubly certain, for its fulfillment now rests on two unchangeable things--God's word (i.e., the original promise) and God's affirming oath (6:17-18a). The inviolability of this promise ought to be a tremendous encouragement to Christians! Christians are "heirs of the promise," and the writer of Hebrews would certainly agree with Paul that those who have faith are the children of Abraham (Ro. 2:28; 4:1-25; 9:6-8).

That Christians have "fled" recalls the fleeing of Lot from the destruction of Sodom, a salvation that was due to Abraham's intercession (Ge. 18:16--19:29). When God destroyed the cities of the plain, he "remembered Abraham" by rescuing Lot (Ge. 19:29). Christians, like Lot, have fled the world in order to cling to their hope in God's promise (6:18b). This hope is like the anchor of a ship, holding it steady during storms and preventing it from drifting (6:19a).⁶³ The anchor point is Christ himself,

⁶³A popular idea but one of uncertain origin is that the high priest had a rope tied to his ankle when he went into the Most Holy Place so his corpse could be retrieved if he died there. This idea has no basis in Scripture or Jewish

who is now in heaven's Most Holy Place. Once again, we have the comparison of the earthly ritual of atonement and the heavenly sanctuary. Just as the Aaronic high priest entered the Most Holy Place in the ancient Tent of Meeting (or temple), so Christ has "passed through the heavens" (cf. 4:14), the veil that separates earthly life from heavenly life. Christ's ascension to the Father's right hand (cf. 1:3) is the heavenly counterpart to the earthly high priest entering the Most Holy Place (6:19b-20a). Jesus' high priestly work has been accomplished forever in the order of Melchizedek's priesthood (6:20b)!

Melchizedek's Priesthood (7:1-28)

Now the author addresses what surely must have been the major objection to accepting Jesus as the great high priest. High priesthood, as indicated earlier, was by divine appointment, not human choice (cf. see discussion at 5:4). All the high priests of Israel were to be ordained of Aaron's family and the clan of Levi. Jesus, however, was from the clan of Judah. About a century before the writing of the Book of Hebrews, the hereditary mandate for high priesthood had been violated by Herod the Great when he began appointing high priests of his own choice.⁶⁴ Was Jesus' high priesthood a scandal of this same magnitude? Absolutely not, says the author of Hebrews, for Jesus was divinely appointed as a high priest forever in Melchizedek's order (cf. 5:6, 10; 6:20), an order different than that of Aaron. The writer now sets out to demonstrate the importance of the Melchizedek order.

Melchizedek was the ancient priest-king of Jerusalem (7:1a).⁶⁵ After Abraham had rescued his nephew Lot from a coalition of Mesopotamian suzerains, who had come to punish a rebellion of their Canaanite vassals (cf. Ge. 14:1-16), Abraham met Melchizedek as one of the Canaanite kings to whom he returned the booty of war (cf. Ge. 14:17-20). Melchizedek, like Abraham, worshipped *El Elyon* (= God Most High), the one true God. In this confrontation, Melchizedek pronounced a blessing on Abraham, and Abraham reciprocated by giving him a tenth of the war spoils (7:1b-2a).⁶⁶ Much later, of course, Melchizedek's name arises in the psalm where God declares to his Son, "You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek" (Ps. 110:4). Because of this later reference, it was clear to the author of Hebrews that

tradition, so it must be discarded. In any case, the corpse of the high priest dragged out by a rope would hardly be a fitting metaphor of an anchor "firm and secure." The very substance of the argument in this passage is that the high priest is successful in his atonement ritual. The hope of the nation for atonement rests with the high priest as he enters the Most Holy Place.

⁶⁴W. McCready, *ISBE* (1986) III.962.

⁶⁵The ancient city of Melchizedek was called Salem (cf. Ge. 14:18), but Salem is clearly identified with Zion in Jerusalem in the Psalms (Ps. 76:1-2).

⁶⁶The practice of tithing was common among many nations of the ancient Near East, cf. P. Levertoff, *ISBE* (1943) V.2987.

Melchizedek's role was much more than incidental, and he explores the implications. First, Melchizedek's name is significant because it is a combination of the Hebrew words for "my king" and "righteousness."⁶⁷ Second, since the name Salem means "peace," Melchizedek was the "king of peace."⁶⁸ Both titles, king of righteousness and king of peace, are fitting appellations for Jesus, so Melchizedek, to whose order of priesthood Jesus was appointed, seems to foreshadow the Lord. Though he does not mention it, it may be in the author's mind that Melchizedek's offering of bread and wine (cf. Ge. 14:18) foreshadows Jesus' eucharistic offering of bread and wine at the last supper.

Even more significant for the writer of Hebrews is the absence of a priestly pedigree for Melchizedek. The brevity of the story in Genesis does not offer any details about his parents, lineage, birth or death (7:3a). This absence contrasts sharply with the way high priests were usually introduced in the Torah, for their lineage is prominent (cf. Nu. 20:25; 25:10). Melchizedek's priesthood, unlike that of Aaron's family, did not depend upon a family pedigree. Like God's Son, Melchizedek's priesthood must be assumed to be by immediate divine appointment, and therefore, it is an eternal order, not a family order (7:3b).⁶⁹

Next, the author explains the superiority of the Melchizedek priesthood to that of Aaron's family. The act of tithing presupposes the lesser of two parties honoring the greater. In the family of Israel, the superior honor of the clan of Levi is apparent in that they were the recipients of tithes from the other clans (7:4-5). If this is true among the children of Israel, how much more true is it when Abraham, the father of the whole nation, paid tithes to Melchizedek, a priest who did not descend from the levitical family (7:6-7)! Melchizedek's priesthood, by implication, must be greater than that of the levitical clan. More to the point, when the Aaronic priests died, their priestly office was passed on to one of their sons. Not so with Melchizedek! As far as the record goes, his priestly office still stands, since there is no record of his death or of the transfer of his office. In this sense, he still "lives" (7:8). It could even be argued that Levi, the grandson of Abraham who as yet was unborn, paid tithes to Melchizedek in the person of his grandfather!

This entire line of argumentation about the superiority of Melchizedek's priesthood reaches a climax in view of the hereditary nature of Aaron's priestly office. Since a hereditary priesthood, by definition, presupposes the ongoing ritual of

⁶⁷The first part of the name *melchi'* (= my king) is joined to the word *zedek* (= righteousness) and means, "My king is righteous" or "king of righteousness."

⁶⁸The place-name Salem has the same root as the Hebrew word *shalom* (= peace).

⁶⁹The language of He. 7:3 has led some interpreters to see in Melchizedek a theophany of God or a preincarnation of Jesus. This interpretation misses the point of the argument, however. If Melchizedek is already the Son of God, it makes no sense to then say he is "like" the Son of God.

atonement for successive generations, it is apparent that such a priesthood was not completely effective. In fact, the high priesthood in Aaron's family had some notable failures, such as, Eli and his sons (1 Sa. 2:12-17; 2:27-36; 3:11-14). Long after the Aaronic priesthood had been established, God indicated in his declaration to his Son that another order of priesthood was needed, the order of Melchizedek (7:11). A new priestly order, of course, meant that the laws of priesthood in the Torah would be superseded (7:12). This is how Jesus, descended from the tribe of Judah, was qualified to be a high priest, even though he did not come from the Aaronic family and even though the clan of Judah was not a priestly clan. The change in priestly order from Aaron to Melchizedek repealed the requirement that high priests all must come from Aaron's family (7:13-14). Jesus' high priesthood, like Melchizedek's, depended on God's appointment and the priest's indestructible life, not on his family pedigree (7:15-16). If the Melchizedek order of priesthood was appointed "forever," it had to be appointed to someone who would live forever, not someone who would die and pass on his office, as with the Aaronic priests (7:17). The Aaronic priesthood was marked by impermanence, while the Melchizedek priesthood was marked by permanence! So, the old regulation in Torah requiring an Aaronic pedigree was set aside so that a new, eternal priesthood could be established, one that offered a better hope of coming near to God (7:18-19). The old order required that the people maintain their distance from God, since only the high priest was able to actually enter God's presence. The new order, by contrast, guarantees that the people now may "approach the throne of grace with confidence....to find grace to help....in time of need" (cf. 4:14-16).

Yet a further contrast between the priesthood of Aaron and that of Melchizedek is the oath in Psalm 110:4. In the ordination ritual for Aaron and the passing of his office to his descendants, there was never an oath. In establishing the Melchizedek order of priesthood, however, God swore an eternal oath (7:20-21)! This oath, like the oath God swore to Abraham, makes the legitimacy of the Melchizedek order doubly firm. Such an oath guarantees the superior dignity of Jesus over Aaron and the superiority of his new covenant over the older Sinai covenant (7:22). The author of Hebrews intends to enlarge on the meaning of the new covenant, but first he brings his reasoning about the Melchizedek priesthood to a conclusion.

The Aaronic order had many priests. Since such priests lived and died ordinary human lives, the office could not continue without the laws of heredity (7:23). Jesus, however, lives forever, and so his priesthood does not need to be passed on. Laws of heredity have no provenance for a priest who never dies (7:24)! His priesthood is effective in a way that the Aaronic priesthood could never have been effective, for he is able to "save forever," since he lives forever as the perpetual intercessor for his people (7:25; cf. Ro. 8:34). He is never unavailable, never displaced and never out of office!

This is the kind of priest that all people need! Unlike Eli's sons, this priest is holy, blameless, pure and set apart from sinners (7:26a)! Unlike the Aaronic priests who die, this priest has been exalted above the heavens and now sits at the Father's right hand (7:26b; cf. 1:3; 4:14). Unlike the Aaronic priests who must perform their services repeatedly, first for their own sins and then for the people's sins (Lv. 4:3), this priest has offered one sacrifice for everyone that is effective forever! He has served as both the priest and the sacrifice, for he sacrificed himself (7:27; cf. Is. 52:15; 53:10; Mk. 10:45; Mt. 26:28//Mk. 14:24//Lk. 22:20). Far from the pattern of weak priests who were appointed on the basis of family pedigree, Jesus' priesthood has been established by God's oath to his Son (7:28a). The Son's priesthood has been made effective forever by his suffering unto death and his indestructible life (7:28b; cf. 2:10, 17-18; 7:16, 24-25)!

Having established the grounds for Christ's priesthood, the writer of Hebrews now turns to a more detailed description of Jesus' priestly work. Here, he will describe the fulfillment of the new covenant promise given to Jeremiah and the fulfillment of the *Yom Kippur* ritual in Christ's sacrifice and ascension into heaven.

The High Priest of a New Covenant (8:1-13)

The appointment of God's Son as a high priest in the order of Melchizedek directly concerns his ascension through the heavens to the right hand of the Father.⁷⁰ Earlier, the writer pointed out that Christ passed "through" the heavens (cf. 4:14). Heaven is the place of God's true throne, but this heavenly throne has its earthly counterpart in the mercy-seat, the lid of the ark in the most holy place of the Tent of Meeting (cf. 4:16). The writer amplifies this theme by stating that heaven contains the true sanctuary, while the earthly sanctuary is only a model of what exists in the heavenlies.⁷¹ The entry of Christ "through" the heavens to the right hand of the Father is the heavenly counterpart to the entry of the high priest on *Yom Kippur* into the earthly throne room of Yahweh, the most holy place (8:1-2).⁷²

Since the task of every priest is to offer gifts and sacrifices, it follows that Christ, also, should have something to offer (8:3; cf. 5:1). As far as the earthly priesthood after the order of Aaron, Christ had nothing to offer, since he was not of the family of Aaron (8:4). The Aaronic priests serve in the earthly sanctuary, but the

⁷⁰The author's "right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven," like his earlier "right hand of the Majesty in heaven," is an exalted metonymy.

⁷¹The expression "set up by the Lord, not by man" may reflect upon Nu. 24:5-6 (LXX), where there is a comparison and contrast between the "tents" of Israel and the "tents" which God pitched.

⁷²A number of scholars have pointed out the similarity between this description of "shadows" and "copies" as reflections of the "true" which is in heaven (cf. 8:2, 5; 9:23-24) and Plato's concept of forms and ideals. Whether or not our writer had any familiarity with Plato is a moot question, but in any case, similarity does not require dependence.

tabernacle (and later, the temple) was merely a copy and a shadow of the true sanctuary in heaven (8:5a). That the true sanctuary is in heaven, not on earth, is indicated by the statement in the Torah that Moses was to construct the earthly Tent of Meeting "according to the pattern shown...on the mountain" (8:5b; Ex. 25:9, 40). The word "pattern"⁷³ suggests an actual model or archetype which Moses was able to look at while on Mt. Sinai. This idea of a heavenly sanctuary was not new to the Jewish mind, for the Jews already had understood the Exodus passage in the same way as the writer of Hebrews and applied it to Solomon's temple, which followed the same architectural floor-plan as the Tent of Meeting: *Thou hast given command to build a temple on thy holy mountain, and an altar in the city of thy habitation, a copy of the holy tent which thou didst prepare from the beginning* (Wisdom 9:8, RSV).⁷⁴ So, if there is a heavenly sanctuary, there must be a heavenly priestly ministry. The Aaronic priests certainly could not minister in heaven, but the one who passed through the heavens, Jesus the great high priest, surely could minister there! His ministry, therefore, is immeasurably superior to the ministry conducted in the earthly sanctuary (8:6a), and the covenant which regulates his ministry is just as superior to the old covenant which regulates the Aaronic ministry (8:6b; cf. 7:22)! Most important, the covenant regulating heaven's ministry is established on better promises than the old covenant (8:6c). These better promises are the next subject at hand.

Just as earlier our author argued that the promise of a priesthood after Melchizedek's order presupposes the ineffectiveness of the levitical priesthood (cf. 7:11), so now he argues that the promise of a new covenant presupposes the ineffectiveness of the Sinai covenant (8:7). The promise of a new covenant through the prophet Jeremiah is clear, however, and he plainly predicted that it would not be like the old one (8:8-12; cf. Je. 31:31-34). The new one has better promises which make it superior. Whereas the old covenant was a law written in stone tablets, the new covenant would be a law written in human hearts (cf. Eze. 11:19-20; 36:26-27). Whereas the old one depended upon third party instruction, either by priest or prophet (a system that frequently failed, cf. Is. 9:15-16; 28:7; Eze. 22:26; Mic. 3:11; Mal. 2:1-9), the new one established direct communication with God (cf. 1 Jn. 2:27). Whereas the old one was couched in the conditional language of retributive justice--blessing for obedience and cursing for disobedience (i.e., Dt. 27-28)--the new one promised the justice of forgiveness without retribution.

The very fact that the covenant promised by Jeremiah was called "new"

⁷³The Hebrew *taveni't* (= shape, form, model, image) and the Greek *typos* (= image, statue, form, figure, pattern) merit hardly a word from most commentators on the Book of Exodus, but they held great meaning for our writer! The Hebrew word is the same as used for "graven image" (Dt. 4:16), and later, for an architectural sketch or model (2 Kg. 16:10). Gudea of Lagash (c. 3000 B.C.) claims that he saw in a dream the very model of a temple, which he later built, cf. R. Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary [TOTC]* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1973) 190.

⁷⁴The Book of Wisdom is generally thought to have been written about a century or so before the time of Christ.

presupposes that the "old" would become obsolete (8:13a). It is to be assumed that the author of Hebrews expected his readers to be familiar with Jesus' eucharistic words at the last supper, where he directly indicated that the new covenant would be established in his death (Mt. 26:28//Mk. 14:24//Lk. 22:20; cf. 1 Co. 11:25). If the second temple was still standing when the Book of Hebrews was written (which is unclear), his words "what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear" would have been a telling judgment comparable to Stephen's prediction of the end of temple worship (Ac. 6:14). In either case, the work of Christ superceded the old way.

The Worship in the Earthly Sanctuary (9:1-10)

The worship associated with the tent of meeting and the temple was essentially liturgical, that is, it depended upon the careful repetition of carefully prescribed ritual mediated by a priestly leader who stood between God and the people. Such worship, in a word, had "regulations" (9:1). Since earthly worship was patterned after heavenly worship, it may be assumed that worship in heaven is liturgical as well, and the brief glimpses of heavenly worship in passages such as Isaiah 6 and Revelation 4-5 seem to support this conclusion.

Our author now intends to describe some of the more important elements in this worship as regulated by the Sinai covenant. He begins by describing the layout of the earthly sanctuary. The outer room was furnished with the menorah (= light)⁷⁵ and the table for holy bread (9:2; cf. Ex. 25:23-40; 37:10-24; 40:22-25). Separating this Holy Place from the Most Holy Place was a second curtain, the first curtain being the separator between the outer room and the outside court (9:3; cf. Ex. 26:31-37; 36:35-38). Inside the Most Holy Place was the receptacle for incense and the ark of the testimony (9:4a; cf. Ex. 25:10-22; 37:1-9; 40:21).⁷⁶ The ark, in addition to the tables of stone inscribed with the Ten Words of the covenant, contained the jar of manna and Aaron's rod (9:4b; cf. Ex. 16:33-34; Nu. 17:10).⁷⁷ After the exile, of course, the ark was never recovered, but that fact is beside the point for the writer of

⁷⁵In biblical times, the menorah was a seven-branched lampstand, but the contemporary Jewish menorah, following the tradition of Hanukkah, has nine branches.

⁷⁶There is some dispute about whether the Greek term *thymiaterion* (from the verb *thymiao* = to burn incense) refers to the altar of incense (so NIV, RSV, NEB, NAB, JB, TEV) or a censer (so KJV, NASBmg, ASVmg). The above term, appearing only here in the NT, is used in the LXX to refer to a censer but in other Greek versions as well as Josephus and Philo to refer to the incense altar, cf. N. Hillyer, *NIDNTT* (1976) II.293-294; Bruce, *Hebrews*, 184. If the former translation is adopted, then it introduces an inconsistency with the Old Testament placement of the incense altar outside the Most Holy Place (cf. Ex. 30:6; 40:26; Lv. 16:18). In this case, the author must have in mind the ritual of *Yom Kippur*, the one day each year when the incense was taken inside the curtain (Lv. 16:12-13), and as such, the altar belonged to the Most Holy Place even though placed outside it.

⁷⁷Without explanation is the comment that when the ark was moved into Solomon's temple, it contained only the tables of stone (1 Kg. 8:9).

Hebrews.⁷⁸ The lid of the ark, the earthly throne of Yahweh graced by the overshadowing cherubim, was the "place of atonement," the place where the blood of atonement was sprinkled on *Yom Kippur* (9:5a; Lv. 16:14-16). Symbolism was attached to all these articles, but our author declines to comment further, preferring to press ahead with the atonement ritual (9:5b).

On a daily basis, the priests performed their services in the Holy Place, the outer of the two sacred rooms (9:6). Their duties included trimming the lamps (Ex. 27:20-21) and burning incense (Ex. 30:7-8). Each week, the holy bread had to be replaced (Lv. 24:5-8). Only on the day of *Yom Kippur*, however, was the high priest allowed to enter the inner room, the Most Holy Place (9:7a). On this day, he was to make atonement first for himself and then for the people (9:7b; cf. Lv. 16:14-17).

The fact that the high priest alone was allowed annually into the Most Holy Place had deep significance. This requirement, mediated to Moses by divine revelation (i.e., the "Holy Spirit"), meant that the people's access to God remained impeded so long as the ritual of the ancient sanctuary was in effect (9:8). Earlier, the author has pointed out that Christians can "approach the throne of grace with confidence" (cf. 4:16), but such boldness was not allowable under the old system. The restrictions of the old ritual, which were repeated annually and which mandated a distance between the people and God, were a symbolic demonstration that the ancient offerings could not truly absolve the worshiper from guilt (9:9). External rituals were incapable of clearing the inward conscience of the worshiper. By their very nature, they were external, consisting of kosher regulations for eating and drinking (Lv. 10:8-9; 11:1-47) and bathings for ceremonial acceptability (Lv. 16:4, 24, 26, 28, etc.). All these external regulations were temporary, pointing beyond themselves to something still to come.

The Priestly Work of Christ Supersedes the Old Covenant (9:11-28)

The coming of Jesus, the great high priest after Melchizedek's pattern of ordination, heralded a new order! Christ came as a priest of "the good things that are already here,"⁷⁹ that is, since Christ came, the new order for worship has already been inaugurated (9:11a). To establish this new order, Christ did not resort to the Mosaic

⁷⁸Various traditions contain speculation on what may have happened to the ark. In the Jewish Pseudepigrapha, the theory is advanced that angels descended to remove it before the Babylonians burned Jerusalem (cf. 2 Baruch 6:1-9). In the Jewish Apocrypha, the story is told that the ark was hidden by Jeremiah in a cave on Mt. Nebo (2 Maccabees 2:1-8). In the Samaritan tradition, the ark was hidden on Mt. Gerizim to await its restoration by the prophet like Moses, cf. Josephus, *Antiquities*, XVIII.iv.1.

⁷⁹Both textual variants between "good things to come" (so KJV, ASV, NASB, NKJV) and "good things that have come" (so NIV, RSV, JB, TEV, NEB, NAB, NASBmg, NKJVMg) have good support in the manuscripts, but the latter has a slight edge, cf. B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: UBS, 1975) 668.

temple ritual, but instead, he passed through⁸⁰ the "more perfect tabernacle," that is, he ascended into the heavenlies to a temple not constructed by humans as were the tent in the desert and the first and second temple (9:11b). His entry into heaven was not according to the old pattern of goat's blood and bull's blood, the traditional offerings on *Yom Kippur*, but he entered heaven's Most Holy Place with his own blood (9:12). This offering, unlike the ancient ritual of *Yom Kippur* which was repeated annually, was "once for all." The emphatic terms *ephapax* (= once for all, cf. 7:27; 9:12; 10:10) and *hapax* (= once, cf. 9:26, 28; 10:2) become repetitive themes, and they guarantee that no other offering will ever be needed again!⁸¹ In his death, Jesus gave his life as the payment price for human salvation. The term *lytroisis* (= redemption) is one member of the word-group deriving from *lytron* (= ransom), all of which carry the idea of buying something at a price (cf. 9:15).⁸² The primary idea is that humans were bought back from their slavery to guilt and sin by the offering of Jesus' blood on the cross. His sacrifice was eternally effective!

Now follows another of the author's *a fortiori* arguments. If the Mosaic rituals of purity as exemplified in *Yom Kippur* and the red heifer ordinance were effective for outward, ceremonial purity, how much more effective is the blood of God's Messiah, a perfect sacrifice offered to God through the Spirit for the removal of inward guilt (9:13-14). The author assumes, of course, his readers' familiarity with the red heifer ordinance, a ritual in which the sacrificial ashes of an unblemished cow were mixed with water and sprinkled upon a person who had contact with the dead (Nu. 19). The red heifer ritual, like the *Yom Kippur* ritual, was a sacrifice for sin (cf. Nu. 19:9), and consequently, both were relevant to the discussion. Our author is thoroughly trinitarian here. Jesus the Messiah's sacrificial work was offered "through the

⁸⁰The idea of "passing through" the tabernacle (based on the genitive *dia* = through) is similar to the earlier expression that Christ went "through the heavens" (based on the verb *dierchomai* = to go through, cf. 4:14). It is analogous to the author's statements that Jesus is now the high priest at God's "right hand" (cf. 1:3; 8:1).

⁸¹The "once for all" character of Jesus' sacrifice throws significant doubt on the legitimacy of the Roman Catholic "sacrifice of the mass" and is a major difference between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. In the Roman theology of the Eucharist, the bread and wine are transformed into the literal body and blood of Jesus. At the eucharistic mass, there is a renewing (not merely remembering) of the sacrifice of Christ so that in the weekly consecration of the bread and wine the crucified body and shed blood of Jesus is perpetually present, cf. N. Van Doornik, et al., *A Handbook of the Catholic Faith* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956) 303-312. This sacrifice is offered not only for the sins of the faithful, but also for "the departed in Christ who are not yet fully cleansed," cf. R. McBrien, *Catholicism* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981) 763. In the mass, Christ "offers himself, substantially present...to God, the Father," *The Code of Canon Law in English Translation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 166. While Roman Catholics are careful to point out that this sacrifice does not diminish the "once for all" sacrifice of Christ described in the New Testament, it is hard to see how "once for all" and "perpetual sacrifice" can mean the same thing. More to the point regarding the Book of Hebrews, it is hard to see any substantial difference between the Aaronic priests performing the annual *Yom Kippur* ritual and a contemporary priest offering a weekly or daily sacrifice of the mass. The theological argument in Hebrews is that the perpetual offering of a sacrifice means that it is not effective, since it has to be repeated over and over (cf. 9:7-10; 10:1-4, 11-12).

⁸²L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 39-40.

Spirit...to God."

The new order Christ established is the new covenant of which he is the mediator (9:15a; cf. 8:6). This new covenant guarantees what the old covenant could not produce, that is, freedom from sins committed under the old covenant (9:15b). His comments would have special relevance to Jewish Christians, for only to Jews could he speak of sins committed "under the first covenant." The old covenant, by definition, was controlled by the retributive justice of blessing and cursing; the new covenant, by definition, is a redeeming act⁸³ which sets the guilty party free and ensures that those whom God has called to an eternal inheritance will actually receive it (cf. 3:1; 5:9). Unlike the ancient Israelites who were "not able to enter because of unbelief" (cf. 3:19), those under the new covenant will truly receive what has been promised, and in fact, as the author has already argued, "the promise...still stands" (cf. 4:4).

Here the author changes the analogy slightly based on the fact that the word *diatheke* (= covenant) also doubles for a last will and testament, which is its most common meaning in *Koine* Greek.⁸⁴ The analogy is made almost in passing, since his primary focus is on the covenant. Still, an analogy from contemporary Roman law supports his overall argument about the meaning of the death of Jesus. In the case of a last will and testament, the death of the testator must occur before the will comes into effect (9:16). A will, by definition, is in force only after the death of its composer (9:17). In the same way, Christ's death made effective the new covenant. It is important not to strain the interpretation of this analogy. The author merely points out that just as a death is necessary in a last will and testament before the terms are in force, so death also figures in the establishment of a covenant.⁸⁵

The ritual of covenant-making was often characterized by the shedding of blood, and certainly the Mosaic covenant was ratified by symbolic actions of blood-letting (9:18-20; cf. Ex. 24:4b-8).⁸⁶ In summarizing the covenant ratification in the time of Moses, our author introduces several features which are puzzling, namely his reference to "water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop" and the sprinkling of "the scroll." In the Exodus account of both the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint, the only things mentioned are the blood dashed against the altar, which represents God (the first party of the covenant), and the blood dashed over the heads of the people

⁸³The term *apolytrosis* (= redemption, ransom), like *lytrosis* in 9:12, is part of the word-group deriving from *lytron* (= ransom).

⁸⁴J. Behm, *TDNT* (1964) II.124.

⁸⁵To attempt, for instance, to decipher how God made a last will and testament but his Son died to put it into effect is quite beyond the scope of the analogy.

⁸⁶Such blood ceremonies were also known among the ancient Arabs in which the covenanters would either mingle blood, dip their hands into an animal's blood, or apply blood to sacred stones representing the deity, cf. J. Hyatt, *Exodus [NCBC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 256; M. Weinfeld, *TDOT* (1975) II.262-263.

(the second party of the covenant). The writer of Hebrews obviously speaks about traditions to which we no longer have access, but whether they were written or oral is unknown. Similarly, the Torah does not record the sprinkling of blood on the tent of meeting, its furnishings and utensils, but this tradition is verified by Josephus (9:21).⁸⁷

Most things reserved for holy use were sprinkled with blood for ceremonial cleansing (9:22a), and apart from this ritual, no atonement for remission of sins was possible (cf. Lv. 17:11).

If this blood-ritual was necessary in the earthly "copies" of heavenly worship (9:23a; cf. 8:5; 9:11), it followed that in the heavenly sanctuary a blood ritual was necessary also, but with better sacrifices (9:23b)!⁸⁸ The better sacrifice is not an animal, but the Messiah. He did not enter the humanly constructed sanctuary on earth, which only served as a copy of the true one, but rather, he "passed through the heavens" (cf. 4:14; 9:11) into the sanctuary of heaven itself (9:24a). In heaven, he eternally serves as the high priest, for even "now" he appears in our behalf before God (9:24b; cf. 1:3; 8:1). The term "now" takes on special meaning in light of the *Yom Kippur* ritual. During the Mosaic ritual, the high priest performed his duties inside the sanctuary. The people waited outside for him to reappear and offer the priestly blessing, signifying that the atonement offering had been accepted. In this same way, Christ has passed into heaven's Most Holy Place where he now performs his priestly function as intercessor in behalf of the people (cf. 7:25; 8:1-2). His priestly intercession will not be complete until the end of the age, when he shall leave heaven's sanctuary to appear once again to the people who wait for him (cf. 9:28). For the present time, he "now" appears for us in God's presence.

Christ's continual intercession does not at all mean that his sacrifice is repetitive, for he does not enter heaven each year (9:25). If that were true, the Messiah would have had to suffer repeatedly since the beginning of creation. Rather, Christ's atonement is a single act which is offered "once for all," and it effectively annuls sin (9:26). The Christ event is the climax of the ages, for in Christ the coming age has already begun (cf. 6:5)! Still, in one sense the atonement ritual has not yet been consummated, for there must still be the final reappearance of the high priest from within heaven's sanctuary. In the meantime, humans know that they must face death and judgment (9:27). However, they also know that their deaths are intimately connected with his death, since he gave his life as a sacrifice to bear their sins (9:28a).⁸⁹ Their great high priest will not abandon them to death or condemnation, but

⁸⁷Josephus, *Antiquities*, III.205-206.

⁸⁸It is not immediately clear why heaven's sanctuary needed ritual cleansing at all. Some suggest the fall of Satan, others the fact that the heavenlies have been invaded by the forces of evil (cf. Ep. 6:12). The author of Hebrews does not enlarge upon it. Still, it is clear that his primary interest is in the blood-ritual with respect to the cleansing of human sin before God.

⁸⁹The NIV rendering of 9:28 is suspect on two counts as Leon Morris appropriately points out, cf. *Hebrews*, 93.

he will appear to them again, just as the Aaronic high priest appeared to the waiting congregation.⁹⁰ This time his appearance signals the perfect consummation of the atonement ritual, for his reappearance confirms that sin has been annulled, since he appears "without sin" in order to finalize the salvation of the ones waiting for him (9:28b)!

There is a superficial inconsistency in the author's analogies about the Most Holy Place. On the one hand, he argues that because of Christ's high priestly work believers can enter the Most Holy Place with confidence to find help in their time of need (cf. 4:16; 10:19-22). On the other hand, he reasons that Christian believers are like the congregation of Israel on *Yom Kippur* waiting in the outer court for the reappearance of the high priest, in this case, Jesus who will appear in his second coming at the end of the age (cf. 9:28). The tension between Christians entering the Most Holy Place and Christians waiting outside in the outer court matches the paradox of inaugurated eschatology. In fact, both analogies are true at the same time, since Christians live in the "already/not yet" tension between the present and the future. In a spiritual sense, they already have access to heaven by a "new and living way." At the same time, they await their final entry into heaven in the resurrection. This paradox is similar to the Pauline paradox in which already Christians are seated with Christ in the heavenly realms (Ep. 1:3, 20; 2:6), yet they await the "redemption of our [their] bodies" (Ro. 8:23).

Once for All (10:1-18)

The climax of our writer's explanation about Christ's superior priestly work is an enlargement on the finality and completeness of his sacrifice. He begins by reasserting that the rituals regulated in Torah were only a foreshadowing of Christ's future perfect sacrifice. The shadow, however, can never be the reality itself, and therefore, the shadow can never produce perfection in the worshipers (10:1)! The very repetition of the sacrifices demonstrate this truth. If the Torah rituals were truly effective, then they would not need to be repeated (10:2). Annually, however, the *Yom Kippur* ritual reminds the people of their sins while demonstrating the impossibility of the full removal of sin (10:3-4).

The divine response to this impossibility was Christ's willing surrender to the Father's plan. It was surely God's will that sin be atoned, so if animal sacrifices were

The infinitive *anenenkein* means "to bear," not "to take away," while the expression *choris hamartias* means "without sin" rather than "not to bear."

⁹⁰The heightened expectation of the high priest's reappearance is captured in the Apocrypha in a description of Simon ben Jochanan (in office 219-196 B.C.): *How splendid he was as he appeared from the tent, as he came from within the veil! Like a star shining among the clouds, like the full moon at the holy day season* (Sirach 50:1-21). His reappearance was accompanied by a trumpet blast (Sirach 50:16-17), and when he appeared he would raise his hands and bless the congregation (Sirach 50:19-21).

not truly effective, Christ was willing to offer himself as the once-for-all sacrifice. The validation of this assertion is from Psalm 40:6-8 (LXX), which our author quotes (10:5-7). The Psalm is a thanksgiving for God's deliverance, and in it the poet entertains the question as to what thank offering would be appropriate to give to God in return for such a great deliverance. Nothing could be more appropriate than the full surrender of one's very self to God. One's own body is far more valuable to God than animal sacrifices.⁹¹ Hence, the poet exclaims, "Here I am!" As a deep personal commitment to God's will, the poet offers his entire self, for this is the commitment for which the whole volume of Scripture calls. Yet, our author sees more in this Psalm than the commitment of an ancient person of faith. By speaking in this way, the poet has directly set aside the entire sacrificial system, even though required by the Torah (10:8), and has voluntarily offered himself in surrender to God's will (10:9a). In doing so, he has set aside the first system in order to effect a second one (10:9b). But who could have done such a thing? Surely David must have been speaking beyond himself of the coming Messiah! It is Jesus in his willingness to give his life as an atoning sacrifice for sin who sets aside the rituals of Torah and establishes the new covenant! By his submission to the Father's will, exemplified in Gethsemane and carried out on Calvary, Jesus has made the worshipers holy forever through the sacrifice of his own body (10:10). His high priestly atonement was "once for all!"

The contrast could not be greater. Under the old system, the priests performed their duties daily, offering over and over the same sacrifices. The very repetitiveness of their work demonstrated its ineffectiveness (10:11)! When Jesus, the greater high priest, had completed his sacrifice for sins, the work was perfectly accomplished forever! Its finality is confirmed by the fact that he "sat down," and his being seated is a sign of his finished work (10:12; 1:3; 8:1). Priests under the old system could never sit down while performing their sacred duties, and the fact that they remained standing showed that their work was never finished. But Jesus sat down at the Father's right hand, showing that his work was done forever! Now, he waits the consummation when the ideal mentioned near the beginning of the book, that "everything [will be] put under his feet" (10:13; cf. 2:8), will be accomplished. It is apparent that our author sees Psalm 8:6 and Psalm 110:1 as finding fulfillment in the exaltation of the Messiah, just as does Paul (cf. 1 Co. 15:24-28). In Christ's one sacrifice he has accomplished forever what never was accomplished under the

⁹¹The LXX reads "a body you have prepared me," while the Masoretic Text reads, "But my ears you have pierced," or alternatively, "my ears you have opened" (see NIV text and footnotes). Though the texts differ and it is a moot question which is original, the ideas behind the variant readings are very close. The piercing of the ear was a gesture of slave-devotion for life (Ex. 21:5-6), while the opening of the ears would describe an utter openness toward God. In either case, it is the offering of the self that is depicted, which is the same basic idea of the phrase "a body you have prepared me," a phrase indicating that God has given humans their bodies so that they might offer them back to God.

levitical system--he has forever perfected those who are continual recipients of holiness through the intercessory work of their heavenly high priest. This last statement captures the paradox of both the indicative and the imperative of holiness. In one sense, believers are forever sanctified by the one sacrifice of Christ which need never be repeated. At the same time, they are called to live up to what God has declared them to be (cf. Phil. 3:16; Col. 3:1), and as such, they "are being made holy" by the ongoing work of the Spirit.

This ongoing work of the Spirit is the promise of the new covenant, the pledge that God would put his law in human hearts and minds (10:15-16; cf. Je. 31:33). In the new covenant, this ongoing holiness is rooted in the promise, "Their sins...I will remember no more," and as the author has pointed out earlier, it is supported by the priestly intercession of Jesus in the heavenlies on behalf of his people (cf. 7:25; 8:1-2; 9:24). When sins have been remitted in such a final way like this, there will never be a need for another sacrifice (10:18)!⁹²

Final Call To Perseverance (10:19--13:17)

The final section of the Book of Hebrews is an exhortation to live in the new and living way that Christ has provided by his high priestly work. If Christ is indeed God's final word, superior over prophets, angels, and the whole Mosaic system, then it follows that Christians must live in light of this truth.

Holding to the Hope (10:19-25)

The "therefore" of 10:19 presses home to the readers that they are now reaching a climax. The foregoing lengthy discussion of Christ's office and role as the great high priest has not been an abstraction without relevancy, but a truth with profound implications. These implications follow along the lines of "since this is true...then let us live appropriately!"

Our author begins by reaffirming the substance of what he has demonstrated to this point: Christians can confidently enter the Most Holy Place, a relationship of

⁹²The finality of Christ's sacrifice calls into serious question the dispensational interpretation of Ezekiel 43:18-27; 44:15-16; 45:15-20; 46:3-7, 11-15 exemplified in the exegesis of Ralph Alexander, "Ezekiel," *EBC* (1986) VI.943-946 and others. According to dispensationalists, there will be a millennial temple with the reinstatement of the sacrificial system. To be sure, dispensationalists also strain to dismiss the conflict between such an interpretation and the plain teaching of the Book of Hebrews. Alexander offers a rather tortured example, cf. 946-952, concluding that such sacrifices are "only memorials of Christ's finished work." However, the fact that such sacrifices are clearly labeled as "sin offerings" and "atonement" leaves the explanation unconvincing. Whatever the interpretation of Ezekiel's temple vision, in the light of the Book of Hebrews it can hardly refer to the revival of Mosaic ritual after the finality of Christ's sacrifice.

closeness to God that was impossible under the Aaronic system (10:19; cf. 4:14-16; 6:19-20; 9:11-12, 24-28). This closeness to God was not possible in the rituals associated with the old tent of meeting, but it has been effected through a new and living way opened to all through the offering of the body of Jesus (10:20). Here, the body of Jesus is described as the curtain which separated the Most Holy Place from the outer room and courts, a curtain which screened the immediate presence of God hovering over the ark.⁹³ This metaphor suggests that the incarnation of Christ made possible the act of drawing near to God. Jesus said much the same thing when he asserted, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn. 14:6). If the curtain represents the fleshly incarnation of Christ, then the blood (or death) of Jesus represents the tearing of that curtain, a symbol that had its counterpart in the tearing of the actual temple curtain at the crucifixion (cf. Mt. 27:50-51//Mk. 15:37-38//Lk. 23:44-46). In the tearing of the curtain and its counterpart, the death of Jesus, the way into the Most Holy Place was now plainly open for all! To be sure, the author of Hebrews has offered to his readers a mix of metaphors that defy systematizing. Jesus is the veil, he is the priest, he is the sacrifice and he is the one whose death puts into effect the last will and testament. Readers should not attempt synthesizing these metaphors into some sort of system, for each metaphor deserves to be treated separately. Together, however, they reach the crescendo of thought that Jesus is the fulfillment of all that the old covenant system anticipated.

Christ, the great high priest, has entered into heaven's Most Holy Place once and for all (10:21), and since this is true, believers should come close to God with sincere hearts and with the assurance that they will be accepted! They are pure before God, and their purity consists not in the outward cleanliness of ancient purification rituals, but in the inward purity of heart that comes from a cleansed conscience. In the old ritual of *Yom Kippur*, the blood of bulls and goats was sprinkled on the ark and the altar, but in the new *Yom Kippur* the blood of Christ has been sprinkled on human hearts (10:22a).⁹⁴ The ancient priests and others who played a role in the *Yom Kippur* ritual were obliged to bathe for purification (cf. Lv. 16:4, 24, 26, 28), but the Christian has had his/her body washed in the pure waters of baptism (10:22b), an outward symbol of an inward reality which has been accomplished by the blood of Jesus. So, since these realities are already in effect, believers should hold firmly to the hope of God's promise, which still stands open (10:23; cf. 4:1). As they await the fulfillment

⁹³Some interpreters see the veil as symbolizing the "new and living way," but the Greek text more naturally reads that the veil represents Christ's flesh.

⁹⁴Some interpreters take the symbolism of sprinkling to refer to the ashes and water ritual of the red heifer (cf. 9:13), thus avoiding any conflicting metaphors between the sprinkling of blood on heaven's mercy seat and the sprinkling of blood on human hearts. Others, as here, given the centrality of the *Yom Kippur* ritual, take it to refer to the sprinkling of blood in the atonement ritual and accept the use of a double metaphor.

of the promise, they should stimulate each other to live the Christian life of love and good deeds while continuing in the active fellowship of the Christian community (10:24-25). Some, apparently, had dropped off from attending the gatherings of Christians for worship, but such apathy was wholly inappropriate in light of Christ's sacrificial work. Instead, believers should be all the more conscientious about participating fully in the redeemed community, since "the Day," the moment of Christ's return, was drawing near.

The Fourth Solemn Warning (10:26-39)

On the heels of this exhortation follows yet another solemn warning against reverting back to something inferior to what Christ established in his death and entry into heaven. When the author speaks of "sinning" (10:26a), it is apparent that he is not referring to general human weakness, for earlier he has plainly stated that Christ helps those who are tempted, he sympathizes with their weaknesses, and he bears gently with them when they ignorantly stray (cf. 2:17-18; 4:15-16; 5:2, 7-10). The sin of which he speaks is much more serious and deliberate, for it "tramples underfoot" God's Son, treats the blood of Jesus as "unholy" and insults the Spirit of grace (10:29). What he seems to refer to is the same aggressive non-faith of which he has spoken earlier, that is, the "unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God" and the denial that "crucifies the Son of God all over again and subjects him to public disgrace" (6:6). The person who has received the truth about Jesus but then who turns away from it has no other effective sacrifice for sin. He/she has given up the only means of salvation (10:26b). This hopelessness would be particularly acute if one turned back to the Aaronic system, for such a reversal would be a deliberate and knowledgeable rejection of Christ. No future remained except condemnation at the last judgment (10:27).⁹⁵ If those who committed capital crimes in violation of the Torah were not spared (10:28; cf. Dt. 17:6; 19:15), those who deliberately reject Jesus are even more culpable (10:29). God is the great Judge (10:30; cf. Dt. 32:35-36; Ps. 135:14), and it would be terrible to be condemned by him (10:31)!

So, our author reminds his readers of their conversion, those earlier times when they had "received the light" and faced severe persecution (10:32-33). While their distress had not resulted in martyrdoms (cf. 12:4), it was severe enough to include the confiscation of personal property and imprisonment, and they submitted to this treatment cheerfully because they knew their real home was the lasting inheritance of heaven (10:34). With such a rich heritage in the life to come, they must remain

⁹⁵The teaching of annihilationism or conditional immortality draws from the expression that in the last judgment God will "consume" his enemies (cf. Is. 26:11; Ps. 21:9; 59:12-13). This idea, of course, is in tension with the many passages that speak of the wicked being consigned to endless separation from God (i.e., Mt. 3:12//Lk. 3:17; Mk. 9:43-48; 2 Th. 1:9; Jude 6-7; Rv. 14:11; 19:3; 20:10, etc.), cf. R. Nicole, *EDT* (1984) 50-51.

steadfast in their faith (10:35-36), for the return of Christ was near (10:37; cf. Hab. 2:3-4, LXX).⁹⁶ With the same confidence that formed the conclusion of the third solemn warning (cf. 6:9-12), the author now concludes the fourth one (10:38). Including himself along with his readers as fellow-members of the same believing community, he boldly affirms that they will persevere in faith to final salvation.

The Cloud of Faithful Witnesses (11:1-40)

Several passages in the Bible have taken on a life of their own apart from their biblical contexts. Qoheleth's strophe on the ebb and flow of time comes to mind (cf. Ecc. 3:1-15) as does Paul's eloquent exultation of love (cf. 1 Co. 13). Hebrews 11, with its roll call of the faithful, is another such passage. It is probably the exception for it to be read in the context of the larger argument of the Book of Hebrews.

That larger context is important, however! The point of enumerating this "great cloud of witnesses" is to encourage the readers to "run with perseverance" and to fix their eyes on "Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith" (cf. 12:1-2). If there is any motivation, encouragement or incentive for maintaining the faith of Christianity by looking at the faithful heroes and heroines of the past, Hebrews 11 is it!

There are several repeating themes in this catalog of the faithful. First is the emphasis on faith itself as the confident certainty that God will do what he has promised. The chapter begins with the famous definition of faith as certainty (11:1). Faith is that for which the ancient people were commended (11:2), it underlies the believer's world-view about the entire universe (11:3), and without it a person cannot please God (11:6). The word *pistis* (= faith) appears in the chapter no less than twenty-four times, and it was the defining characteristic of Abel (11:4), Enoch (11:5), Noah (11:7), Abraham (11:8-9, 17), Sarah (11:11), Isaac (11:20), Jacob (11:21), Joseph (11:22), Moses (11:23-24, 27-28), the Israelites who left Egypt (11:29), Joshua (11:30), Rahab (11:31), and many others (11:32-39). Faith is intimately connected with righteousness, for it was because of his faith that Abel was commended as a righteous man (11:4), and it was because of his faith that Enoch pleased God (11:5). Noah, because of his faith, became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith (11:7; cf. Ro. 4:13; Ga. 3:6-9).

A second theme is the portrayal of the ancients as people who did not receive the finality of God's promise within their own lifetimes. From the period of Abraham and later, the promise of the land of Canaan dominates the theological landscape (11:8). Nevertheless, even though Abraham lived in Canaan, his sojourn was "like a

⁹⁶The quotation here is not an exact reproduction of the LXX, but it follows the thought of the LXX in which the prophet waits for someone who will be a deliverer. Our author naturally takes this to be a reference to the coming of the Messiah, and in this case, Messiah's second coming of which he has already spoken (cf. 9:28).

stranger in a foreign country" (11:9). He and his descendants lived a semi-nomadic life as tent-dwellers, because instinctively they knew that Canaan, even though it was the land of promise, was not the ultimate meaning of the promise. Rather, by faith they looked for "a city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (11:12). All of them died faithfully believing in God's promise, but the gift of the land of Canaan notwithstanding, they did not receive the ultimate end of what God had promised (11:13a). Rather, all the ancients agreed that the ultimate object of their faith was something beyond Canaan and beyond earthly life (11:13b-16). That this ultimate hope reached beyond death was most clearly exemplified in the binding of Isaac, where Abraham "reasoned that God could raise the dead" (11:19). Moses, similarly, rejected Egypt not merely for Canaan but "because he was looking ahead to his reward" and because "he saw him who is invisible" (11:26-27).⁹⁷ Later, some of the faithful submitted to torture "so that they might gain a better resurrection" (11:35). In the end, none of them received the fulfillment of what they believed to be the ultimate meaning of God's promise (11:39). Ultimate fulfillment would only come as a future perfection that would bring together by a single act the entire family of God's people (11:40).

Yet a third theme is that the righteous life of the present was lived in the interest of the promise yet to come. The ancient heroes and heroines were not only people of faith, they were faithful people whose lives demonstrated their faith. They were people characterized by holy fear (11:7), obedience (11:8), enablement (11:11),⁹⁸ radical sacrifice (11:17-19), vision for the future (11:20-22), bravery (11:23), godly choices (11:24-26) and dauntless courage (11:32-35). Some experienced marvelous victory (11:33-35a), others suffered persecution and defeat (11:35b-38), but they were all people of unshakable faith (11:39).

Fourth, there was in their ancient faith the germ of a messianic hope. This messianic hope is especially to be seen in the lives of Abraham (11:9-11) and Moses (11:26-28), but in a more general sense, it characterized "all these people...[who] were longing for a better country--a heavenly one" (11:13-16).

The upshot of this whole discussion about faith and the various ancient people of faith leads to the overwhelming conclusion that the readers of this letter, if they were to remain in continuity with those of the past, must firmly hold onto their faith in Jesus Christ, for *he was what these ancient people anticipated by faith!* Their ancient

⁹⁷This oxymoron doubtless refers to the fact that Moses was allowed to speak to the invisible God "face to face" (Ex. 33:11, 18-23).

⁹⁸The Greek text of 11:11 (obscured in the NIV) contains the odd statement that Sarah received power to have a *katabole spermatis* (= seminal emission), possibly a statement reflecting the ancient "double-seed" theory of biological conception in which it was believed that both men and women produced sperm, cf. P. Horts, "Did Sarah Have a Seminal Emission?" *BR* (Feb. 1992) 34-39.

faith reached toward the future, and now that future had begun in Jesus. When the ancients died, the promise had not yet been fulfilled (11:13, 39). Only by his coming had God provided "some better thing for us [i.e., us Christians]." The perfection for which the ancient people of faith longed was accomplished at the same time as the perfection of Christians who believe, for they all, both ancient and contemporary, were made perfect by the one redemptive work of Jesus Christ (11:40).⁹⁹

The Fifth Solemn Warning (12:1-29)

The "therefore" of 12:1 connects what follows with what precedes. The ancients who died in faith are the spiritual ancestors of present believers, and together they serve as a "great cloud of witnesses" who inspire faith and faithfulness. Their combined witness through the centuries is a powerful incentive for the readers of the letter to persevere in their race to the end. Like runners in the Greek games (who competed naked), Christians must throw aside every extraneous encumbrance, fixing their eyes on the goal, which is Jesus himself (12:1-2a). He is both the Author and the Perfecter of faith in that he both originates faith and brings it to completion. Jesus, also, was a model of perseverance, for in his passion he resolutely endured the cross and its shame as he anticipated the joy that lay beyond the cross (12:2b). The fullness of that joy was experienced in his finished work, symbolized when he was seated in the heavens at the right hand of God (12:2c; cf. 1:3; 8:1; 10:12). Thus, Christians must take courage from their knowledge of Jesus' perseverance, so that they, too, might persevere (12:3).

The author of Hebrews is aware of the struggles of his readers, but he also knows that so far their persecution has not resulted in martyrdom, as it did with Jesus and some of their spiritual ancestors (12:4; cf. 11:35b-38). He encourages them to remember the wisdom of the ancients about the relationship between discipline and love (12:5-6; cf. Pro. 3:11-12). Hardship is one means by which God disciplines and trains his people, and a son who receives no discipline is being treated as one unworthy of future honor (12:7-9). Discipline, while distasteful at the time, has a long-range benefit, for it provides moral training (12:10-11). Suffering is just such discipline, for it compels respect and turns the sufferer toward God. Unlike the discipline of earthly fathers, which though well-intentioned might often have fallen short of the ideal, God's discipline is always "for our good!" So, Christians should be ready to rejuvenate their brothers and sisters during times of hardship (12:12). They must work toward the healing of the weak, not crushing them further (12:13; cf. Pro. 4:26; Is. 35:3).

Now follows a series of ethical exhortations leading up to the final warning

⁹⁹Brown, 224.

against reverting back. Christians should strive toward peace and holiness, and especially, they must make certain that they do not fall short of attaining the grace that is constantly available to them (12:14-15a; cf. 4:16). They must guard themselves against bitterness (12:15b), sexual immorality, and indifference toward spiritual values (12:16-17).

The privileged place of Christians is exemplified by a comparison of the two ancient mountains of Israel's faith, Sinai and Zion. Sinai symbolizes the covenant of law, while Zion symbolizes the covenant of David and its attendant messianic blessings. Sinai, Moses and the Torah belong together as representatives of the old system. At Sinai God delivered to Moses the law and its sacrificial system while the people of Israel camped at the foot of the mountain. As was typical of the old system, the people were severely warned about the danger of coming too close to God's presence, and Sinai itself was belching fire, storm and gloom so that no human or animal was allowed to even touch the mountain at the risk of death (12:18-21; Ex. 19:9-24). The people were so fearful that they requested Moses to speak to God directly while they stayed at a distance (Ex. 19:18-21), and when the people sinned during Moses' ascent of the mountain, Moses himself admitted that he was afraid of the divine anger (Dt. 9:18-21). These elements of fear and distance were the defining characteristics of the old covenant, and they contrast sharply with the acceptance and confidence possible under the new one.

The Davidic covenant, which focused upon Mt. Zion in Jerusalem, was the foundation for the messianic hope. In this covenant, David was promised that he would have a royal son whose kingdom would be established forever (2 Sa. 7:8-16), a promise that was firmly connected with Mt. Zion where David intended to build the temple (cf. Ps. 2:6-9; 78:65-72; 132:10-18). Long after David's death, the messianic hope burned brightly as prophets looked ahead to the "unfailing kindnesses promised to David" (Is. 55:3), a hope that the early Christians understood to be fulfilled in the coming of Jesus (cf. Ac. 13:34). Just as Sinai, Moses and the Torah are inseparably connected, so Zion, David and the messianic hope are inseparably connected. Thus, when the author of Hebrews says that Christians have "come to Mt. Zion," he intends this designation with full messianic meaning (12:22a). The Zion of which he speaks, of course, is not the earthly mountain in Jerusalem, but the heavenly blessing which ancient Zion symbolizes and which has come to fulfillment in great David's greater Son! It is the heavenly Jerusalem and the city of the living God for which Abraham looked (12:22b; cf. 11:10), the "better country" which was the hope of the ancient people of faith (cf. 11:13-16). This spiritual Zion is replete with angels and the assembly (church) of God's faithful people through the ages (12:23a). Here one has access to the very presence of God, the Judge of all, and to the redeemed company of those ancients who died in faith and were made perfect in the cross (12:23b; cf. 11:39-40). Here Christians participate in the new covenant with the sprinkled blood

of Jesus that offers forgiveness rather than vengeance (12:24). How different is such closeness and confidence as compared with the distance and fear of the old!

However, if spiritual Zion is truly what the author has stated, then to refuse it would be dangerous folly. The same God who spoke from Sinai now has opened the way for believers to come to spiritual Zion, but they must heed his call! The ancient Israelites refused to leave the desert domain of Sinai and cross over into the new domain of Zion. Once more, the author employs an *a fortiori* argument. If those who refused the old covenant were judged by God, those who refuse the new one are even more culpable (12:25). In the giving of the ancient covenant, God's voice shook the mountain (cf. Ex. 19:18), but in the climax of the new covenant he will shake both the earth and the heavens (12:26; cf. Hg. 2:6-9). The whole created order will be shaken apart in God's final judgment, but there is an eternal kingdom that will endure, and it is the kingdom of the Messiah (12:27-28a)! That such a kingdom has been inaugurated in the ministry of Jesus calls for thankfulness, reverence and awe, for the God who established it is not one to be trifled with (12:28b-29; cf. Dt. 4:24)!

Living as the Holy, Pilgrim People of God (13:1-17)

The author now comes to his concluding exhortations, which are largely a series of ethical and practical advisements for living in light of the truth he has expounded. Love within the Christian fellowship, hospitality to those outside it, and care for those suffering from persecution are of first importance (13:1-3). Sexual purity in marriage in the midst of a promiscuous culture was absolutely essential (13:4). Greed must be rejected, while contentment and trust in God for daily needs must be cultivated (13:5-6; cf. Dt. 31:6; Ps. 118:6-7). Christian leaders must be respected and imitated (13:7), but while human leaders will pass on, Jesus Christ will remain constant (13:8). Believers must be on guard against innovative and outlandish teachings, especially the teachings that dietary laws will bring them close to God (13:9a; cf. 1 Co. 8:8; Ro. 14:17). Instead, their spiritual nurture must come in strengthening their hearts by grace, since as Christian believers they have access to a spiritual altar unavailable to those who still remain attached to the old system (13:9b-10).¹⁰⁰

Just as the carcasses of the sin offerings were burned outside the camp after *Yom Kippur* (13:11; cf. Lv. 16:27), so also the body of Jesus was crucified outside Jerusalem's walls (13:12). Jesus' death outside the city symbolizes the call for Christians to leave the camp of Judaism and its preoccupation with earthly Jerusalem,

¹⁰⁰The idea of eating at the altar comes from the ancient regulations in which the Aaronic priests were privileged to eat certain parts of the offerings brought for sacrifice (cf. Lv. 2:10; 6:14-18; 7:28-34; Dt. 18:3-5). Some interpreters have suggested that the Christian "altar" is the communion table, but there is not enough material in the brief statement here to warrant such a connection.

since they now are looking for the New Jerusalem to come (13:13-14; cf. 11:10; 12:22; Re. 21:2ff.). If it should be argued that by rejecting the ancient levitical system they now have nothing to offer to God, it should be understood that they indeed have a sacrifice to offer--not the atonement blood of the ancient rituals which could never cleanse the conscience of the guilty, but the sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving to God for their acceptance through the once-for-all atonement of Jesus (13:15). Also, they offer spiritual sacrifices of good works (13:16).

Final admonitions include the charge to obey their leaders (13:17) and to pray for the restoration of their correspondent (13:18-19).¹⁰¹ The book closes with a final prayer for blessing upon the readers, a prayer grounded in the sacrificial death of Jesus and the triumph of his resurrection (13:20-21). The postscript about the brevity of the correspondence has raised the question as to how such a lengthy document could be called "brief," but this description must be taken as a convention of speech or else it means brief as opposed to all that could have been said (13:22; cf. 5:11; 9:5). The writer knows Timothy personally, and he explains his recent release from imprisonment and the possibility of a visit. This comment seems to presuppose that the readers of the letter were a particular congregation, but there is ambiguity as to whether they were in Italy or out of Italy (13:23-24).¹⁰² The closing benediction is identical to the one in Titus 3:15b.

¹⁰¹The nature of the author's circumstances are unknown. Suggestions such as imprisonment, illness or other hindrances are all possible but unclear.

¹⁰²See comments under "Readers and Occasion" in the Introduction.