

HERMENEUTICAL ISSUES AND PRINCIPLES IN HEBREWS AS EXEMPLIFIED IN THE SECOND CHAPTER

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When our successful classes and conferences on hermeneutics at school or church come to a close, the homily of Hebrews will come back to haunt us. F. F. Bruce began his commentary with this caveat: “Since, however, neither that community nor the writer is expressly identified in the text as it has been preserved to us, the document presents us at the outset with a number of critical problems to which no agreed solution has been found.”¹ The critical problems have not evaporated:

The Epistle to the Hebrews is often said to be the most “Greek” book in the Jewish-Christian Bible. Indeed, to some it might seem that the epistle itself is something of a joke—a joke played upon a church obsessed with finding complete certainty about its origins. That the most elementary facts concerning this “final word” on the Christian faith may be arrived at only through a fancy tapestry of guesswork is what punctuates the joke with its required—and exquisite—irony.²

In other words, we do not have the information that we would seem to need for an accurate interpretation of Hebrews.

We will come to Hebrews—the book, or epistle, or sermon—to discuss the author, audience, circumstances and literary details of its composition. We will learn that the writer was obviously a dedicated, articulate Jewish-Christian leader who was trained in Hellenistic rhetoric and theological nuances. Even though we are aware that Hebrews was accepted in early manuscripts as a Pauline epistle between Romans and 1 Corinthians, we also know that it has neither the form of an epistle nor Paul’s style. Concerning epistolary form we may note the summarizing introductory sentence of Heb 1:1–4 in lieu of the customary salutation. With respect to Pauline style the author uses *legein* with reference to God’s speaking rather than Paul’s characteristic *graphein* to introduce OT quotations. On the other hand, the mention of Timothy (13:23) and the early association of Hebrews with Paul suggest a member of the Pauline circle. One is attracted to someone like Apollos, an *anēr logios*, “an eloquent (“learned,” NIV) man” (Acts 18:24). The

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¹ F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) xxiii.

² L. D. Hurst, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its Background and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1990) 1. This is an excellent source for background information in general.

appellation was associated at the time with rhetorical ability.³ In any event we discover that Paul, Barnabas, Luke, and Clement of Rome in antiquity and, more recently, Apollos, Aquila, Aristion, Philip, Jude and Silvanus have been proposed as authors.⁴ William Lane concludes: "This divergence underscores the impossibility of establishing the writer's identity."⁵

Similarly we know much about the audience, but not their identity. They were a specific Jewish-Christian group (13:17, 24), such as a house church (10:24–25), apparently in an urban setting with similar groups (10:33–34; 13:1–3, 14).⁶ The readers were threatened by defections to former affiliations that apparently held beliefs that were hostile to the truth of Jesus as Messiah and its ecclesial implications (3:12–13; 10:26–30; 13:9). The author knew his audience well enough to know about the defections and their immaturities (4:1, 11; 5:11–6:12; 12:15). Interestingly the anonymity of the author suggests his closeness to them since he did not have to explain his awareness of their problems and the appropriateness of his potentially offensive appeals. The purpose clause in 13:19b ("so that I might be restored to you sooner") implies that he considered the readers' problems to be a part of his pastoral responsibilities, so he dispatched his "word of exhortation" (1:1–13:21) with its personal postscript (13:22–25) as a substitute until he could come in person (v. 23). They had come to faith through the preaching of people who had heard Jesus, whose message had been miraculously authenticated by God (2:1–4). These preachers, now deceased (13:7), seem to have been their first leaders. The readers had formerly suffered in a commendable way (10:32–35), and perhaps during the Claudian hostilities, but were now disheartened and were tempted to drift from faith in the face of renewed persecution (2:1; 4:11; 10:26–39), which apparently involved ostracism, imprisonment and martyrdom.⁷ The author was encouraging his weakened readers to follow the example of the Son as faithful sons unto martyrdom if necessary (12:1–12). When 13:24 ("those from Italy") is compared with Acts 18:2 ("Aquila . . . who had recently come from Italy") and Romans 16's inferences about house churches in the city, we might suggest that the audience was a second-generation house church in Rome around the mid-60s. Accordingly the homily is an eloquent, passionate, pastoral appeal to this type of community in crisis. Lane summarizes the introductory dilemmas and hermeneutical challenges well:

Hebrews is a delight for the person who enjoys puzzles. Its form is unusual, its setting in life is uncertain, and its argument is unfamiliar. It invites engagement in the task of defining the undefined. Undefined are the identity of the writer, his conceptual background, the character and location of the community addressed, the circumstances and date of composition, the setting in life, the nature of the crisis to which the document is a response, the literary

³ E. Orth, *Logios* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1926) 46. On Pauline similarities Hurst, *Epistle* chap. 5, is helpful.

⁴ H. W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989) 1–6.

⁵ W. L. Lane, *Hebrews* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1991) 1.xlix.

⁶ R. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 41–42.

⁷ M. Goguel, "La seconde génération chrétienne," *RHR* 136 (1949) 31–57, 180–208.

genre, and the purpose and plan of the work. Although these undefined issues continue to be addressed and debated vigorously, no real consensus has been reached. . . . These facts constitute a continual reminder that every statement about Hebrews is a personal synthesis, an interpretive statement. Interpretation calls for humility.⁸

This paper is about a few interpretive principles that the author of Hebrews used in his homily. One can say from the start that the sermon's style can be embarrassing to language as we sometimes use it: perspicuous, normal, plain, grammatical, historical, literal, spiritual, and so forth. I would suggest that the best way to approach this topic is to observe the use of the OT in Hebrews, since that is where the author's hermeneutical practice is most evident. I would also say that my own teaching of Hebrews in church and classroom settings has left me uneasy with a disparity between the Bible's own use of its text and our sometimes modern misuse of it.⁹ The three principles that are discussed in this paper reflect a part of that disparity.

Several questions come to mind. Have scholars slipped into scientific shackles that have isolated them from the uncertainties of pastoral passions? I think of some of the highly technical dissertations on the warning passages. Have we pursued obscure details to the point that we have lost sight of the Christocentric center of Scripture that may not be so evident in the historical-grammatical meaning of some OT texts? How can the author seem to have been so imprecise about the seemingly transparent historical-grammatical meanings of texts that he used? Have modern dissertations sometimes been preoccupied with the *Sitz im Leben* to such an extent that the textual details are either neglected or rejected because they do not conform to an anticipated theory? The recent thesis of Yigael Yadin and others that attempted to establish a Qumran background for Hebrews comes to mind.¹⁰ On the other hand, can application of sermonic material in the broadest sense become interpretation? How should we handle the sermonic juxtaposition of academic meaning and practical impact? I believe that anyone who has been involved in the dissertational and homiletical processes will identify with the tensions in these questions.¹¹

⁸ Lane, *Hebrews* 1.xlvii.

⁹ B. Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1991) 2–3 (cf. p. 128), notes the difficulty of Hebrews for a modern audience: "Unfortunately the argument of Hebrews is not easily grasped. Many readers are baffled by it. It is constantly interrupted by digressions and moral exhortations. . . . A more serious difficulty is that the whole argument has an alien character from the modern point of view. There are constant quotations from Scripture, but the method of using it is difficult for modern people to appreciate." Similarly G. Guthrie wrote: "Hebrews stands as a praiseworthy example of ancient homiletic craftsmanship, an example which in all its complexity exhibits rhetorical power and beauty. The author's craft, however, may seem opaque to moderns unfamiliar with his conventions" (*The Structure of Hebrews: A Text-Linguistic Analysis* [Leiden: Brill, 1994] xviii–xix). In other words, many people have unknowingly misused Hebrews because they have not understood its first-century, Jewish-Christian genre and argument.

¹⁰ For example Y. Yadin, "The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Epistle to the Hebrews," *ScrHier* 4 (1958) 36–53; F. C. Fensham, "Hebrews and Qumran," *Neot* 5 (1971) 9–21.

¹¹ At least that has been my personal experience.

The use of the OT in Hebrews is a daunting subject because the sermon is a magisterial exposition of messianic foreshadowings and soteriology with its distinctive comparisons of the Levitical and new covenants. Therefore limitation of space for the paper is a concern. I have selected the use of the OT in Hebrews 2 somewhat arbitrarily. On the one hand the hermeneutical challenges of the entire sermon are unthinkable for present purposes. One would want, however, to discuss a crucial passage that has broader implications for the work as a whole. Hebrews 2 contains representative problems in the homily, and it occurs in the first section of the sermon's structure, drawing substantial scholarly attention in recent literary and rhetorical studies. Accordingly the paper will discuss hermeneutical issues in recent studies of Hebrews and show how the second chapter illustrates them. Admittedly texts like Psalms 95, 110¹² and Jeremiah 31, issues like the so-called "misquote" of Psalm 40 in chap. 10,¹³ and typological figures like Moses¹⁴ and Melchizedek¹⁵ will have to be bypassed. They simply cannot be adequately treated in the present study. At the same time the selection of chap. 2 necessarily limits us to the author's hermeneutical principles in that chapter. We will discuss them as pastoral/rhetorical, Christological, and contextual principles.

I. THE RHETORICAL PRINCIPLE

The pastoral/rhetorical principle is based on the primary genre and the two subgenres of Hebrews' "word of exhortation" and is validated by its tone, vocabulary and literary approach to the readers' problems. We use the term "pastoral" here because Hebrews is a sermon that was written to a church setting. "Rhetorical" is apropos for the genre, but it has a much broader field of meaning. The writer describes his work as a "word of exhortation" (13:22, *logos tēs paraklēseōs*).¹⁶ It occurs outside of the formal structure in the post-script with collegial greetings as a commendation to the homily as a whole. The sonorous play on words between *parakalō* ("I urge") and *paraklēseōs* seems to have been deliberately crafted for rhetorical effect, a frequent phenomenon in Hebrews. The phrase was also used in Acts 13:15 to describe Paul's exposition at Antioch of Pisidia in response to the synagogue's request. Hellenistic synagogues customarily had a public reading of designated por-

¹² See for example D. M. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand: Psalm 110 in Early Christianity* (2d ed.; SBLMS 18; Nashville: Abingdon, 1973).

¹³ K. Jobes, "Rhetorical Achievement in the Hebrews 10 'Misquote' of Psalm 40," *Bib* 72 (1991) 387–396.

¹⁴ See for example M. R. D'Angelo, *Moses in the Letter to the Hebrews* (SBLDS 42; Missoula: Scholars, 1979).

¹⁵ See for example F. L. Horton, Jr., *The Melchizedek Tradition: A Critical Examination of the Sources to the Fifth Century A.D. and in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (SNTSMS 30; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1976).

¹⁶ J. Swetnam, "On the Literary Genre of the 'Epistle' to the Hebrews," *NovT* 11 (1969) 268, notes that a *paraklēsis* might be a homily "which formally consoles" in distinction to a *kerygma*, a formal proclamation. The word *kerygma* (*keryssein*) is not found in Hebrews.

tions of Scripture that was followed by homiletical midrash on the passages. The early Church was familiar with the pattern as indicated elsewhere in 1 Tim 4:13: "Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching [exhortation, *tē paraklēsei*], and to teaching." The exhortation was a sermon, Hebrews being a written form to be read aloud to the readers. The additional note about its brevity, humorous in view of its thirteen chapters, was also a convention of the form at the time.¹⁷ The phrase seems to have been an idiomatic expression for a homiletical midrash in Jewish-Hellenistic circles.¹⁸ Therefore the principle means that the author used a commonly understood rhetorical form with suitable adaptation to his pastoral situation to persuade his audience more effectively to a right course of action.

Many scholars have developed our understanding of the genre. Hartwig Thyen discussed the Jewish-Hellenistic homily under three headings: (1) the influence of the cynic-stoic diatribe, (2) the use of the OT, and (3) the use of parenesis. His study laid the foundation for modern analysis of rhetorical forms, though Hebrews' sermonic style had been recognized from Reformation times.¹⁹ He drew attention to personal elements such as the use of the first-person-plural pronoun, the use of the Pentateuch and Psalms in the LXX, rhetorical devices like paronomasia and phonetic assonance in common with Hellenistic parallels, and a focus on parenetic instruction as characteristic of Jewish-Christian homilies.²⁰ Accordingly he concluded that Hebrews is the only example of a completely preserved homily from the Hellenistic period.²¹

Lawrence Wills reconstructed a tripartite form for Hellenistic Jewish and Christian sermons, using Paul's "word of exhortation" (Acts 13:16–41) as a paradigmatic homily with validation from similar passages. The form included authoritative *exempla* (Biblical quotations and exemplary figures with exposition), pertinent conclusions that applied the *exempla* to the readers' problems, and a final exhortation. He concluded that Hebrews followed the form in a complex, cyclical way.²²

¹⁷ A. Vanhoye, *Le structure littéraire de l'Épître aux Hébreux* (2d ed.; StudNeot 1; Paris: Desclée de Brower, 1976) 221–222.

¹⁸ On form and background consult Hurst, *Epistle* chaps. 1–2; D. Cohn-Sherbok, "Paul and Rabbinic Exegesis," *SJT* 35 (1982) 117–132.

¹⁹ K. Hagen, *Hebrews Commenting from Erasmus to Beza 1516–1598* (BGBE 23; Tübingen: Mohr, 1981).

²⁰ H. Thyen, *Der Stil des jüdisch-hellenistischen Homilie* (FRLANT 47; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1955) 17, 67–110. Swetnam, "Literary Genre" 269, has critiqued Thyen for his artificial distinction between Hellenistic and "Palestinian" homiletical practices without adequately describing the latter and called his work "important, but not definitive." Cf. also W. R. Stegner, "The Ancient Jewish Synagogue Homily," *Graeco-Roman Literature and the New Testament* (SBLSCS 21; ed. D. E. Aune; Atlanta: Scholars, 1988) 51–69.

²¹ *Ibid.* 106.

²² L. Wills, "The Form of the Sermon in Hellenistic Judaism and Early Christianity," *HTR* 77 (1984) 277–299, esp. 280–283, 299: "That Hebrews makes use of the word of exhortation form seems clear, although the artful composer has modified it, creating a very complex sermonic form."

Clifton Black affirmed Wills, concluding that the tripartite argument based on *exempla* cohered with principles of classical rhetoric as described in sources like Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* and Cornificius' *Rhetorica ad Herennium*. The author of Hebrews argued by exemplification and refinement, notably in the extended exhortation of Heb 5:1–10:18. The sermon, according to Black, is epideictic rhetoric to fortify the audience's weakening convictions and commitment.²³

Harold Attridge argued that the "word of exhortation" imprecisely exemplified a subgenre within the taxonomy of parenesis as discussed by John Gammie. Attridge structured the key sections of Hebrews with a fourfold formal pattern. For example, in 8:1–10:18 an introduction (8:1–6) is followed by a Scriptural quotation (8:7–13), a thematic exposition (9:1–10:18) and an application (10:19–21). This pattern is the word of exhortation that forms a subgenre of the larger category of paraclesis that characterized synagogue preaching in Hellenistic cities. The homily as a whole belongs to the larger paraclesis. The author used this form to confirm Christian commitment in a group that was experiencing ostracism.²⁴

These studies have shown us that Hebrews was a written sermon that was intended for oral reading. This is indicated by the writer's rhetorical skills that conveyed a sense of conversation through speaking and listening rather than reading and writing: "We are speaking" (2:5), "we are saying" (8:1), "we cannot discuss now" (9:5), "I urge you, brothers" (13:22), and so forth (cf. 3:1, 12; 10:19).²⁵ Rhetorical devices, to be mentioned under the third principle, would have heightened the oral effect. This means that Hebrews was to be received primarily by listening as a group rather than by reading and personal reflection. Complete consensus does not exist yet on matters of form, but the author's rhetorical intent is firmly in place, which can profoundly affect one's view of its literary structure and meaning.

Hebrews contains two interrelated subgenres: expository (or didactic) passages that alternate with hortatory (or warning) passages (such as 2:1–4). We must ask: Was the author primarily developing an advanced Christology or trying to discourage the defection of his readers? In other words, what is the relationship of thesis and parenesis within the work?²⁶ Are the warning passages merely digressions in the expository flow of the author's distinc-

²³ C. C. Black II, "The Rhetorical Form of the Hellenistic Jewish and Early Christian Sermon: A Response to Lawrence Wills," *HTR* 81 (1988) 1–18.

²⁴ H. Attridge, "Paraenesis in a Homily (*logos paraklēseōs*): The Possible Location of, and Socialization in, the 'Epistle to the Hebrews,'" *Semeia* 50 (1990) 211–226. Attridge's concern is the lack of an adequate definition for "protreptic" and "paraenetic" as descriptive titles for the subgenre. Gammie's article, "Paraenetic Literature: Toward the Morphology of a Secondary Genre," appears on pp. 41–77; a second key article is L. G. Perdue, "The Death of the Sage and Moral Exhortation: From Ancient Near Eastern Instructions to Graeco-Roman Paraenesis," pp. 81–109.

²⁵ P. Andriessen, *En lisant l'Épître aux Hébreux: Lettre au R. P. A. Vanhoye, Professeur à l'Institut Biblique Pontifical sur l'interprétation controversée de certain passages* (Vaals: Abby St. Benedictusberg, 1977) 60.

²⁶ For this issue, one should begin by consulting R. Gyllenberg, "Die Komposition des Hebräerbriefs," *SEÅ* 22–23 (1957–58) 137–147; Attridge, "Paraenesis" 215.

tively high Christology? The “word of exhortation” genre suggests that argumentation serves exhortation. Expressed precisely, Hebrews is a personal expression of its author’s pastoral concern for his readers. Most of us may be inclined to reverse the order. Thus the primary purpose is to motivate the audience to faithfulness in view of impending suffering: faithfulness both to the ethical support of an undefiled Christology and to godly behavior such as regular fellowship (10:25), prison visitation and marital fidelity (13:3–4). The expositions give the warnings substance by focusing on the accomplishments and offices of the glorified Christ, who is also the supreme example of the hurting believer. From the initial sentence (1:1–4), expositions that develop the supremacy of Christ give a persuasive basis not only to the exhortation that follows in 2:1–4 but also to the preparation of the readers for Christ’s high-priestly claims and warnings in the remainder of the sermon. The argument develops the finality of Christ as “better than” the older Levitical provisions, which were a mere preview of his perfection. The *exempla*, in quotations throughout and the forward-looking examples of faith in chap. 11, proceed to Christ himself as both exemplar and enabler of proper conduct in suffering. In Lane’s words: “The recurrence of exhortation and the fact that it is interspersed in blocks throughout the homily indicate that parenthesis holds the various sections together as a unified whole. The dominant motif in Hebrews is parenetic.”²⁷

Furthermore Guthrie’s discourse analysis showed that Hebrews’ exhortation and exposition do not relate in a merely linear pattern. Sections of exposition are not limited to giving theological substance and a persuasive basis to contiguous sections of exhortation. Instead the homily has divisions that are developed simultaneously:

In this way one can see that the complex structure of Hebrews is due to two notions or genres moving in concert along their own lines but progressing towards the same goal of challenging the readers/hearers to endure. . . . It may be suggested that the concept of the two genres moving in concert, but not exact correspondence, makes sense. . . . The discourse was not crafted to fit our neat, thematically progressing outlines. It was meant to have an impact on listeners. The switch back and forth between a logically developed exposition and a challenging exhortation would have been highly effective.²⁸

In other words, there is greater literary depth and complexity of style than has been heretofore recognized.

The pastoral genre brings a subjectivity to the interpretation of Hebrews and similar works that disorients the modern taste for objective proofs and scientific precision. Helmut Koester, for example, has found designations like “sermon” or “homily” imprecise and vague.²⁹ He does not favor the categorization of Hebrews as a sermon, because the genre has not been defined.

²⁷ Lane, *Hebrews* 1.ci.

²⁸ Guthrie, *Structure* xii, 146; cf. also pp. 139, 143.

²⁹ H. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 2.273.

Karl Donfried likewise rejects the sermon/homily designations as hopelessly vague. Thus he argues: "We know virtually nothing about the contours of such a genre in the first century A.D. . . . The term 'homily' is so vague and ambiguous that it should be withdrawn until its literarily generic legitimacy has been demonstrated."³⁰ One of the problems in assessments like this is the assumption that homilies must conform to a rather rigidly defined pattern that will yield precise comparisons within the genre. In the nature of the case, however, sermons in any day personally address the perceived needs of the audience, which necessitates flexibility. Even in a carefully crafted homily like Hebrews such variation can account in part for the lack of scholarly consensus regarding its structure.

We often speak of the text as perspicuous, and we assign to hermeneutics the task of recovering its meaning and clarity. But what do we do with imprecise, unexplained details that were apparently clear in the first century but have been obscured with passing centuries? The perennial problems in the warning passages are redolent with pastoral appeals that were written for relational impact as well as textual analysis: "It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God, and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away to be brought back to repentance" (6:4–6a NIV).³¹ "If we keep on sinning after we receive the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment" (10:26–27a). Similarly how should we treat (exegetically, theologically, and pastorally without familiar shortcuts) Paul's "committal to Satan" (1 Tim 1:20), John's "sin that leads to death" (1 John 5:16–17), and Peter's "slaves of depravity, who escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome" (2 Pet 2:19–20; cf. 1 Pet 1:6)? We look for clear parallels to interpret unclear passages, but we encounter some frustration in writings like Hebrews that have so many unique teachings, terms and literary features. Most of us eventually use Biblical and ecclesial contexts to offer a best possible view.

Hebrews has served as a reminder that the most precise understanding of its so-called imprecisions may be found in the services of the Church, even as the author was involved with his readers. Here the depth of spiritual problems are seen, felt and believed in what my students refer to as the "real world." At this level we can empathize with Hebrews' appeals for our people. "The appeal is to the emotions as much as the intellect," cautions Lane. "Forceful and artistic prose provides the vehicle for the text of the argument."³² At this level we can understand that much of Scripture focuses on the practical outworking of truths rather than essences as ontological sources of behavior. Thus, for example, could the "impossibility" of salvaging departed saints in Hebrews, Paul, John, or Peter be viewed as a practical hardening

³⁰ K. P. Donfried, *The Setting of Second Clement in Early Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 1974) 26.

³¹ Cf. Attridge, *Hebrews* 168–169.

³² Lane, *Hebrews* 1.lxxvi.

that precludes further fellowship or restorative efforts of an assembly rather than a doctrinal declaration about the lost salvation or the nonsalvation of shipwrecked members?³³ A precise hermeneutic must treat Hebrews as a sermon in an ecclesial setting rather than as a dissertation, or even a rhetorical treatise, in Athens or Rome. The pastoral setting, in the case of this “word of exhortation,” enhances our understanding by repunctuating passages like the warnings.

II. THE CHRISTOLOGICAL PRINCIPLE

Secondly, the problem of precisely understanding a seemingly imprecise text continues in the Christological principle, which is emphasized in the author’s use of the OT to demonstrate its comprehensive fulfillment in the Son.³⁴ Paul Ellington states the principle well:

It would be anachronistic to confuse the approach of the author of Hebrews with that of a modern scholar, drawing a clear line of demarcation between the meaning of an OT text in its original setting and its possible application to a later situation, whether in the first century or the twentieth century of the Christian era. The author’s approach to the OT may be summarized as follows: Christ, by whom God has now spoken his final word (1:1 f.), was alive and active in creation (1:2) and throughout Israel’s history. Any part of the OT may thus in principle be understood as speaking about Christ, or as spoken to or by him. Clues within the text may show to what parts of the OT it is most appropriate to apply this principle in practice. Indeed, since Christ was already at work in OT times, even an OT text without a future reference (such as Ps. 40:6–8 = Heb. 10:5–7) may be applied to Christ.³⁵

In general and as a prelude, we should observe four characteristics about the OT in Hebrews. First, the homily is, in Lane’s words, “impregnated with the Old Testament,”³⁶ both explicitly and implicitly, both in quotation and allusion. Contrary to recent theories that argue for the author’s indebtedness to Philonic allegory, Qumranic *pēšer*, or reductionistic Christological typology, he quotes the text with an unwavering view of its original meaning.³⁷ Instead of Platonic forms and hidden mystical meanings he views OT precedents as forward-looking history to be interpreted eschatologically and messianically: “In the past God spoke . . . but in these last days he has spoken to us by

³³ Cf. Bruce, *Hebrews* 118; also pastoral guidance passages like 1 John 5:16: “I refer to. . . I am not saying that he should pray about that.” Lindars, *Theology* xi, expresses the tone of the homily well: “This argument is not a theological treatise, but an urgent address to the original readers, who are on the brink of taking action which their leaders regard as nothing short of apostasy. The author uses his considerable rhetorical skill as a writer to persuade them to change their minds.”

³⁴ Cf. R. Longenecker, “Can We Reproduce the Exegesis of the New Testament?”, *TynBul* 11 (1970) 16–26, 31–32.

³⁵ P. Ellington, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 41–42.

³⁶ Lane, *Hebrews* 1.cxv.

³⁷ C. Spicq, *L’Épître aux Hébreux* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1952–53) 1.341. Cf. also Lindars, *Theology* 51–53.

his Son" (1:1–2). The informative word is "pattern" in Exod 25:40 (cf. Heb 9:1–10), which establishes the standards and guidelines for eschatological fulfillment to which even Messiah himself must conform. This in turn accords with apostolic usage reflected in the sermons of Acts and our Lord's exposition about himself in Matthew 5 and Luke 24. Even the intriguing correspondences with Melchizedek are grounded in Psalm 110. The author may have changed wording to emphasize or clarify his key points, but his obvious concern was to preserve the sense and meaning of the text.³⁸

Furthermore variations in the quotations do not allow for facile categorizations of the writer's method, such as directly or indirectly messianic prophecies. F. Schröger concluded that the author had no uniform method of quotation.³⁹ And Hurst concludes: "But until some consensus is reached as to which texts fall into which category (an unlikely prospect), it will be virtually impossible to conduct a comparative analysis of Hebrews with the midrash-pesher exegesis of Qumran which will be accepted universally."⁴⁰

There is disagreement about the number of quotations: Ellington identified thirty-five,⁴¹ but G. B. Caird lowered the figure to a mere twenty-nine.⁴² R. N. Longenecker suggested thirty-eight, but he concluded: "Nowhere in the New Testament is the listing of biblical quotations more difficult than the Letter to the Hebrews."⁴³ Lane's summary illustrates the problem: "In this commentary it is proposed that there are thirty-one explicit quotations and four more implicit quotations, a minimum of thirty-seven allusions, nineteen instances where Old Testament material is summarized, and thirteen more where a biblical name or topic is cited without reference to a specific context."⁴⁴ In conclusion, we know that the OT is pervasively present in Hebrews in an eschatological and messianic way. The author's method is consistent with NT methodology in general, though further study is needed to establish specific matters such as categorization and quantification.

Second, for soteriological comparisons between the old and the new covenants the writer usually depends on the Pentateuch, sometimes as viewed through the lenses of the Psalms as applicable. A noteworthy example is his exposition of Israel's wilderness experience in light of Psalm 95. His Christological source is the Psalter.⁴⁵ He frequently used the present participle of *legō* with God portrayed as conversing with the readers. His intention—"by inspiration," the Church would add with its canonical imprimatur—was not only a language of direct address but also a strategic elevation of his disheartened readers into the heavenlies to hear divine conversation about fa-

³⁸ J. C. McCullough, "The Old Testament Quotations in Hebrews," *NTS* 26 (1979–80) 378–379.

³⁹ F. Schröger, *Der Verfasser des Hebräerbriefes als Schriftausleger* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1968) 269–293.

⁴⁰ Hurst, *Hebrews* 62.

⁴¹ Ellington, *Hebrews* 37.

⁴² G. B. Caird, "The Exegetical Method of the Epistle to the Hebrews," *CJT* 5 (1959) 47.

⁴³ R. N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 167.

⁴⁴ Lane, *Hebrews* 1.cxvi.

⁴⁵ Lane, *ibid.*, counts 17 quotations and 16 allusions to the Psalms.

miliar texts in their full messianic glory (as in 10:5–7 with Ps 40:6–8; 2:13 with Isa 8:17–18; and 4:3–5 where God reflected on his own Sabbath rest and the absence of rest among his people). The quotes incarnate Hebrews' doctrine that "the Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (4:12 NIV). The writer's uniqueness on this point conforms to his rhetorical strategy, which is to bring all of the authority of God and his word to bear on his readers' problems.⁴⁶

Third, OT quotations are foundational to the author's argument and thematic development. Scholars have made reference to this at least since the work of J. A. Bengel (1742), who underlined the structural significance of Psalms 2, 8 and 110.⁴⁷ Caird argued that the author used important quotations to keynote each of the sections of the sermon, usually supporting his case for the ineffectiveness of the old covenant. According to Caird the primary texts are Pss 110:1–4; 8:4–6; 95:7–11; Jer 31:31–34.⁴⁸ Guthrie reaffirmed the thesis in greater detail with an additional insight that the use of the OT in Hebrews is a significant factor in the contemporary lack of consensus about its structure.⁴⁹ Just when we think that we have found the clear and easy-to-follow structural keys of the homily, an awkward OT detail seems to surface.

Fourth, the author used an old Greek translation that he shared with his audience, presumably the LXX.⁵⁰ Sometimes, however, his quotations differ with that translation. Scholars have argued either that he precisely used an old version that no longer exists⁵¹ or he used the LXX and made rhetorical adjustments to enhance his messianic arguments.⁵² The weight of recent research favors the latter option.

We are specifically concerned with the use of Pss 8:4–6; 22:22; Isa 8:17–18 in chap. 2. The author's hermeneutical clues are found in the introductory formulae (which have been generally neglected), variant details in the quotations, and midrashic comments in which he highlights his interest in the passage.

The vividly present rhetorical principle was so important to the author that he introduced Ps 8:5–7 (LXX) in 2:6 with "Somewhere someone has testified, saying." The introduction is strange, because a pivotal quotation follows instead of a passing allusion. From our perspective he could have been less vague. He could have written "God says" or its equivalent as he did elsewhere in the sermon. To explain the vagueness as "consistent with the strong emphasis throughout Hebrews on the oracular character of Scrip-

⁴⁶ Attridge, *Hebrews* 24: "Human instrumentality is of course recognized, since God spoke 'through the prophets' (1:1), but the humans involved are generally ignored."

⁴⁷ J. A. Bengel, *Gnomon of the New Testament* (6th ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1866).

⁴⁸ Caird, "Exegetical Method" 44–51.

⁴⁹ Guthrie, *Structure* 7.

⁵⁰ Attridge, *Hebrews* 23.

⁵¹ K. J. Thomas, "The Old Testament Citations in Hebrews," *NTS* 11 (1964–65) 303–325.

⁵² Jobes, "Rhetorical Achievement" 388–389, 394–396; McCullough, "Old Testament Quotations"; G. Howard, "Hebrews and Old Testament Quotations," *NovT* 10 (1968) 208–216, who demonstrates how complex the issue of OT citations in Hebrews really is.

ture” is to bypass the problem.⁵³ Vague allusions are not satisfying unless contextually warranted in this rhetorically precise sermon. Psalm 8 is attributed to David, and the author has just used Davidic texts in his catena in chap. 1, referring to them as words of God so as not to detract from the divine Son. The issue of the paragraph is Jesus’ identification with mankind as emphasized in the midrash on his attainment of glory by suffering in 2:9. As a creation hymn, Psalm 8 is David’s inspired reflection on Genesis 1, praising God for his majesty as evidenced both in the vastness of creation and his condescension in elevating such creatures as human beings to the glory and honor of vice-regency over it. Therefore in a profound passage on mankind’s promised glory the author seems to have rendered David’s praise representative of a believer’s proper response to God-bestowed dignity. “Somewhere someone” suggests a generic and perennial response that is reflected in 2:8: “In fact we do not see everything subject to his control.” It thereby achieves timeless applicability to fallen patriarchs, the disciples in Luke 24 and Acts, Hebrews’ suffering readers, and believers today. With this meaning it would be yet another achievement of the author’s rhetorical immediacy. In effect he says that their problems involve the dilemma of v. 8 (“we do not see”) that is solved in v. 9 (“but we see”).⁵⁴ The issue is theodicy, and the answer is eschatological relative to blessings that we anticipate through faithfulness but do not see in the injustices of the present. At the same time the author previews the proper attitude of praise that will be reflected as well in his chain-quotation in 2:12.

The hermeneutical crux of the quotation is *mēʿēlōhīm* in the phrase “a little lower than the angels” (2:7a, 9a). The expression was given a qualitative nuance in Psalm 8 (“a little lower than *ʿēlōhīm*”). One must realize that in its OT context this would not have referred to mankind’s nature and consequent position in the order of creation. In Genesis 1 and Psalm 8 it would have blasphemed the Creator by potentially divinizing humanity, promoting hubris rather than dependence. In Hebrews 2 it would have undermined the author’s argument by making Jesus, the representative man, inferior and subordinate to (or “lower than”) angels by nature.

The issue in Psalm 8 is the dominion aspect of the *imago Dei*, humanity’s divine grant to rule creation as God’s vice-regent, which was defaced but not erased by the fall (Gen 9:1–7). Its *ʿēlōhīm* probably refers to God because it is used without modification with reference to creation, which was viewed theologically as the work of God alone (cf. Isa 40:14).⁵⁵ Therefore “a little lower” would be a distinction of status. God and man are similar in their possession of dominion, but humanity is obviously lower as creature in a divinely-bestowed degree of dominion.

⁵³ The reader may note the remarks of Bruce, *Hebrews* 34; Lane, *Hebrews* 1.46.

⁵⁴ Attridge, *Hebrews* 24, identifies another aspect of indefiniteness in the Psalm 8 quote: “Thus in Ps. 8:5–7 the indefinite ‘human being’ of the text becomes a specific person, Jesus, and grammatical ambiguity is exploited to make a celebration of humanity in general read as the story of Jesus’ humiliation and exaltation.”

⁵⁵ D. R. Glenn, “Psalm 8 and Hebrews 2: A Case Study in Biblical Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology,” *Walvoord, A Tribute* (ed. D. K. Campbell; Chicago: Moody, 1982) 41.

The author of Hebrews complements the Psalm without contradicting it. To begin with, he uses the LXX as the shared version of the Hellenistic, Jewish-Christian audience. The issue of genre helps here because pastors customarily use the accepted version of their audience to avoid confusion, both of them affirming inspiration in spite of the imperfections of the versions before them. Second, the author of Hebrews testifies without question to the inspiration of the Scriptures, quoting God as speaking the OT directly to the audience's situation with profitable doctrine, reproof, and instruction in righteousness. Preserving the Biblical emphasis on the incomparability of God, the author premised the Creator-creature distinction for the entire sermon in his initial Christological sentence. We could surmise that it was sensitivity to this point that caused translators of the LXX, targums and Peshitta to choose "angels" for *ʔēlohim*. The LXX reading suited the author's argument that Jesus was transcendently divine and supremely worthy of worship instead of angelic in nature or subordinate in status. Third, he used "a little lower" to refer to the incarnation (i.e. a brief time in the earthly sphere). Verse 9 in the Greek text is chiasmic, emphasizing that "lower than the angels" is complemented by the Semitism "that he might taste death for everyone." The inner clauses bring together "suffering of death" and "crowned with glory and splendor." The author's point, with his readers in mind and consistent with the Biblical emphasis in general, was that Jesus was crowned with glory precisely because he suffered death for his family (cf. 1:3c).⁵⁶ Two contextual points that support the incarnational interpretation are the emphasis on incarnation as identification with humanity and solidarity with his people and the contrast in status between the dominion of Jesus as man and the servanthood of angels (1:14). Finally, to underscore "lowerness" as incarnation and atonement the author understood *brachy ti* (2:9) as temporal ("for a little while") and placed it in the initial, emphatic position, which also highlights Jesus' present glory and splendor through the chiasm of the verse.

In his midrash that follows, the author describes the victorious process of the Son's "perfection through suffering" as God's will and way of bringing many sons to glory (2:10).⁵⁷ His battle was with the devil, and his victory can liberate faithful believers from slavery to their fear of death.⁵⁸ The connec-

⁵⁶ For the exegesis see Lane, *Hebrews* 1.42 and nn. d, h and i.

⁵⁷ "Midrash" is used in this paper with Longenecker's definition in mind: "Midrash exegesis, then, ostensibly takes its point of departure from the biblical text itself . . . and seeks to explicate the hidden meanings contained therein via agreed upon hermeneutical principles in order to contemporize the revelation of God for the people of God" ("Exegesis" 6). Longenecker then summarizes the principles with indebtedness to Vermes and Gerhardsson. The Hebrew word means "to examine" in the sense of a commentary on a passage; cf. Guthrie, *Structure* 124 n. 31: "More recently, however, the term has been used to refer to the *activity of exposition* as well as the resulting literary genre. The essence of the *practice* of midrash involved the citation of a text, or texts, followed by exposition, often with reference to secondary texts."

⁵⁸ Cf. G. Dellings, "*argos* . . . *katargeō*," *TDNT* 1.453: "Using *katargein*, Paul says this expressly even of death, which is a curse resting on the physical and intellectual and moral life of the natural, i.e., the carnal or psychic man (2 Tim. 1:10). The Epistle to the Hebrews fills out this declaration by stating that through the death of Christ even the one who has power over death, the *diabolos* (2:14), is condemned to inactivity or ineffectiveness in relation to the Christian."

tions are numerous. The “glory” of the dominion grant is now applied to “many sons,” who specify the “everyone” object of Jesus’ death preceding. The grace of God (2:9) is defined by his “appropriate perfection through suffering.” This point about suffering unto glory and circumlocutions for deity maintain the readers’ connection with the initial sentence (1:3b). The liberation from slavery suggests the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt and the readers’ need for faith-rest as expounded in chap. 4 from Psalm 95. The exposure of the “author of salvation’s” present position as high priest-king (vv. 10, 17) looks forward to the Son’s better covenant, priesthood and sacrifice as the believer’s supreme exemplar.

Familial relationships are formed in the family of faith (“Abraham’s descendants,” v. 16), which is expressed in a chain of three OT quotations complementary to 1:5–13 in their common argument about the superiority of the Son to angels. In saying “it is not angels he helps,” the author implies that the divine-human file-leader is not angelic even as his high-priestly office is not archangelic.

The first quotation is taken from Ps 22:22 (21:23 LXX) and is introduced by “So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. He says, . . .” This appears to be an allusion to shamed disciples at their eschatological encounter with the Son of Man (Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26; cf. 1 John 2:28) when he returns with the glory of his Father and holy angels. Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers because he has identified himself with the remnant of faithful sufferers in his own death unto glory (cf. chaps. 11–12).

Specifically Jesus identifies himself with David, who in oppressive circumstances had continued to praise God and was comforted by promises of vindication to come (Ps 22:23–31). To the Messiah’s quotation of the lament on the cross (Matt 22:46; Mark 15:34; cf. John 19:24) the author now adds the vow of public thanksgiving in v. 23, a unique usage.⁵⁹ His faithfulness to his vow was demonstrated to the apostles, various followers, and large gatherings (1 Cor 15:4–6; cf. John 17:6). In eschatological perspective, the author in effect makes Jesus a royal cantor who leads the redeemed community in praise (cf. Rom 15:7–12). The psalmic interplay between lament and confession, despair and hope, and hurt and trust with its affirmation of “praise in congregation” made the quotation an appropriate word for the readers’ needs.⁶⁰ The parallelism of “brothers” and “congregation” identifies the Sanctifier and the sanctified and gives the readers a mentor to emulate.

The second quotation (“I will put my trust in him”) follows the first one with continuity (*kai palin*, cf. 1:5–6). 2 Samuel 22:3 (= Ps 18[17]:3) and Isa 12:2 have been suggested as the OT source. The final quotation, however, is

⁵⁹ Bruce, *Hebrews* 45: “Practically the whole of the lament to which the first part of the Psalm is devoted was used in the Church from very early times as a *testimonium* of the crucifixion of Christ; not only is it expressly quoted, but its language has been worked into the very fabric of the New Testament passion narratives.”

⁶⁰ The quotation agrees with the LXX except for the substitution of *apangelō* as equivalent for *diēgeomai*.

clearly from Isa 8:18, and 8:17 would fit the contextual flow of the catena. The brevity of the quote supports C. H. Dodd's point that principal OT quotations in the NT are not isolated prooftexts but carry their contexts with them.⁶¹ In other words, it is so brief that it needs contextual reinforcement for its meaning. Isaiah, another righteous sufferer like David, had issued warnings to Ahaz to trust Yahweh at a time of capricious alliances. He was rejected and bore children as signs of the need to trust God to avoid inter-cine catastrophe. In a passage that was fraught with messianic significance for the early Church (Isa 7:14 in Matt 1:22–23, Isa 8:14 in 1 Pet 2:8, and so forth) the prophet vowed his trust in the Lord. The notion of a vow at a time when God was "hiding his face" connects the Isaiah passage with the preceding psalm (22:24), and the author's addition of *egō* for emphasis parallels *idou egō* in Isa 8:18 that follows. The connections suggest that the vow of the second quotation points to the trait of faithfulness that expressed itself in the public praise of the first one. Ecclesial praise is the outward expression of faith and fidelity in suffering that becomes increasingly important in the homily (2:17; 3:13, 19; 4:2; etc.). It is a trust that will be vindicated as proven by the glorified Messiah.

The third quotation is introduced with repetition of *palin* and a reaffirmation of Jesus' speaking. Why does the author separate consecutive verses with the same formula of continuity? Bruce suggests: "The reason no doubt is that two separate points are being made."⁶² The additional idea of "children" in this citation defines the "sons" and "brothers" in vv. 10–11. In an important distinction for Jewish Christians in the first century (Romans 9–11; Galatians 3; John 1:13) "Abraham's descendants" were believing children who faithfully trusted God in their trials. The author stopped the quotation before the identification of children as signs in 8:18b, which would have been unsuitable for his argument about faith. The congregation of the faithful is a remnant that Bruce aptly calls "the *ekklesia* of the Messiah."⁶³ Therefore the fittingness of "perfection through suffering" is the common holiness of the same family over time that openly testifies of God's victorious salvation as the outward expression of their abiding mutual trust.

III. THE CONTEXTUAL PRINCIPLE

Thirdly, the contextual principle is made necessary by careful literary analysis of the text in light of its rhetorical genre and Christological themes. We have seen on rhetorical grounds that the author adapted messianic texts to his readers' immediate needs. However uncertain the introductory issues might be, careful study of the text leads to the conclusion that his message is contextually clear and precisely argued. The perspicuity of the Bible has

⁶¹ C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures* (London: Nisbet, 1952) 20.

⁶² Bruce, *Hebrews* 47.

⁶³ *Ibid.* Cf. also G. W. Grogan, "Christ and His People: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Hebrews 2:5–18," *Vox Evangelica* 6 (1969) 60–61.

been emphasized in evangelical hermeneutical texts. This is proper, for God intended his word for a priesthood of believers rather than a small coterie of elite thinkers with advanced credentials. The exhortations of Hebrews affirm that truth, and its ethics are intended for all parts of the *ekklēsia*. One must take into account, however, the large volume of research that has resulted in a better understanding of Hebrews. We can ill afford to lose either emphasis.

Rhetorical criticism over the past thirty years has demonstrated that the literary structure of Hebrews is complex and elusive. Early on, the importance of the relationship between exposition and exhortation was recognized. Modern discussion of literary structure can be dated from R. Gyllenberg's modification of Büchsel's five-part outline that was based on the interplay between the two genres.⁶⁴ Gyllenberg observed that, unlike expository material, the hortatory passages returned repeatedly to similar themes.⁶⁵ Leon Vaganay developed Thien's earlier proposals for a more sophisticated outline of Hebrews' central chapters. Thien had noticed that the author announced his themes and then discussed them in inverse order. For example, at the end of chap. 2 Jesus is called the merciful and faithful high priest. The theme of faithfulness is discussed in 3:1–4:13, and his mercifulness is developed in 4:14–5:10.⁶⁶ Vaganay's seminal work examined the structure of Hebrews in light of rhetorical devices, chiefly "hook words," the rhetorical use of key words to mark the transition from one block of material (usually a paragraph) to the next one, such as "angels" in 1:13–14; 2:2, 5, 16. As a result he modified Thien's outline into a symmetrical structure: The introduction (1:1–4) is followed by the first thematic section (1:5–2:18), a three-sectioned discussion of the Son's priesthood (3:1–13:21) and a conclusion (13:22–25).⁶⁷ A. Deschamps focused on "characteristic terms," the repeated use of the same term within blocks of discourse that identified and developed their theme and relationship to surrounding material.⁶⁸ For example, "angels" is used eleven times in 1:5–2:16 and only twice thereafter. In this case the same term (angels) served two functions, but this is not always the case in other sections, and other terms are characteristic of respective paragraphs in the first section as well. Albert Vanhoye synthesized prior insights and his own rigorous analysis to structure the homily with five devices: announcement of subject, hook words, change of genre, characteristic terms, *inclusio*. In his influential

⁶⁴ F. Büchsel, "Hebräerbrief," *RGK* (2d ed.).

⁶⁵ Gyllenberg, "Komposition" 139–140. Gyllenberg's observation has carried through to the recent conclusion of Guthrie, *Structure* 126–127: "The expository units in Hebrews, therefore, may be said to develop logically, the central propositions of each unit building on those expository units which have gone before. . . . In contradistinction from the expository material, the semantic program of the hortatory units in Hebrews does not develop in a step-by-step argument, beginning at point *x* and moving systematically to point *y*. Rather the hortatory aim of the discourse is executed by reiteration of certain key topics."

⁶⁶ F. Thien, "Analyse de L'Épître aux Hébreux," *RB* 11 (1902) 74–86.

⁶⁷ L. Vaganay, "Le Plan de L'Épître aux Hébreux," *Mémorial Lagrange* (ed. L.-H. Vincent; Paris; J. Gabalda, 1940) 269–277.

⁶⁸ A. Deschamps, "La structure de l'Épître aux Hébreux," *Revue Diocésaine de Tournai* 9 (1954) 333–338.

and widely debated text Vanhoye affirmed the symmetry of Vaganay's outline, polishing it with devices such as *inclusio*, which bracketed a pericope of material with similar statements at its beginning and end.⁶⁹ Sometimes set over against Vanhoye is Wolfgang Nauck, who objected to the significance of the *Stichworten* as advocated by Vaganay and Spicq. Instead he used Otto Michel's structural principles and called attention to parallel passages at the beginning and end of parenetic sections of material (1:1–4:13; 4:14–10:31; 10:32–13:21, the key parallels being 4:14–16 with 10:19–23).⁷⁰ As in other studies of Hebrews, there is no present consensus about its structure. David Aune concluded: "The structure of Hebrews remains an unsolved problem."⁷¹ The most promising study since Vanhoye and Nauck is that of George Guthrie, whose approach has been designated "discourse analysis" with a continuing focus on the transitional links. Guthrie expanded hook words, characteristic words, overlapping passages that simultaneously conclude one section and begin the next, parallel introductory passages, and overlapping (or woven) themes into nine transitional techniques that are identified as either "constituent" or "intermediary" transitions. He distinguished exposition and exhortation, the urgency of the latter with warnings about consequences for disobedience of God's word being supplemented by progressively developed exposition of the glorified Christ. This brief summary belies the true sophistication of recent research that commands scholarly attention but not consensus as yet. The process has been as insightful as it has been inconclusive in certain details, a kaleidoscope that has yielded intriguing designs with promise of more to come.

Therefore we should draw two conclusions that balance one another about the perspicuity of Hebrews. (1) It is a written sermon that was apparently clear to its audience, reflecting the author's close relationship with them. The mutual knowledge of author and audience about unexplained details, as in all of the Scriptures, has left a residue of unexplained details that have tantalized subsequent generations. (2) We must distinguish levels of meaning and understanding. We can draw an important distinction between its basic argument and doctrinal affirmations, which the Church has found canonically authoritative, and more subtle issues of author, audience and now structure and compositional details that retain their elusive attraction. Canonical status reflects the abiding ecclesial recognition of an inspired text. Hebrews was incorporated with Paul's epistles because the Church felt its timeless power and relevance as God's profitable sermon to a group of discouraged saints who needed the refreshment of truths about Christ's session. We have needed its exhortations so that we can be "furnished for good works" in our respective generations. Interestingly, scholarly appreciation for Hebrews has advanced as uncertainties in details have been discussed.⁷²

⁶⁹ Vanhoye, *La structure*.

⁷⁰ W. Nauck, "Zum Aufbau des Hebräerbriefes," *Judentum, Urchristentum, Kirche: Festschrift für Joachim Jeremias* (ed. W. Eltester; BZNW 26; Giessen: Töpelmann, 1960) 199–206.

⁷¹ D. E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987) 213.

We can best approach the conclusion by summarizing the hermeneutical impact of pastoral genre, Christological focus, and contextual awareness on our understanding of Hebrews 2. From its opening sentence the accent of the homily is on the God who speaks, the revelation of himself in various prophetic ways until "these last days" when he has spoken supremely through his Son. That unique Son now sustains all things "by his powerful word," having provided for purification for sins and taken his seat (cf. 10:12) as priest-king at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven (1:3). The supreme revelation and glorified priest-king is proleptic of the sermon to follow, the rhetorical announcement of the subjects to follow.⁷³ As the argument unfolds, alternatively God, the Son, and the Holy Spirit authoritatively speak to the troubled saints through the inspired text until the climactic warning: "Be careful that you do not disregard the one who is speaking" (12:25).

The initial comparison argues the superiority of the Son to angels. From its introduction in 1:4, "angels" is used ten of twelve times (only 12:22 and 13:2 elsewhere) in the first section (to 2:16) as a characteristic term as well as a hook word (1:4, 14; 2:2, 5). Two inclusios or repeated expressions mark off 1:5–13 and 2:5–16 as paragraphs, bracketing the first warning passage (2:1–4). The inclusios are "to which of the angels has God said . . ." and "for it is not to angels that he. . ."

The first paragraph uses seven quotations in a chain as an emphatic way of affirming that the Son is to be worshiped as God rather than as an exalted angel.⁷⁴ The first pair would have proven his fulfilling sonship, the second pair would have demonstrated the subservience of angels to the Son, the third pair affirmed the eternity of his reign, and the seventh quote (Ps 110:1) introduced royal motifs that are developed throughout the homily.⁷⁵ Verbally and conceptually it links the chain with the following quotation of Ps 8:4–6. A rhetorical question even places angels as servants of redeemed brethren, who are being prepared to share Messiah's glory in 2:10–16.

The warning in 2:1–4 is an appeal from the lesser to the greater (the *qal wāḥōmer* principle) to show the serious consequences of neglecting the gospel.⁷⁶ Generally the "Son superior to the angels" theme (1:5–14) had presented the evidences for the *a fortiori* conclusion that neglect of their "great salvation" would bring disastrous consequences.⁷⁷ The Law, which had been mediated by angels, would have had lesser consequences than salvation

⁷² Lindars' comment is representative: "The opening chapter, with its measured phrases and balanced clauses, describing Jesus as the culmination of the prophetic revelation and raised to the rank of divine Sonship above the angels, is enormously impressive" (*Theology* 3).

⁷³ The initial sentence, four verses long, was written in periodic style. It organizes a number of clauses and phrases into a well-balanced, artistic unity with a definite beginning and ending. Periodic style was commonly used in oratory. Though rare in the NT, such stylistic elegance is relatively frequent in Hebrews (1:1–4; 2:2–4, 14–15; etc.). Cf. BDF 242; Aristotle *Rhetoric* 3.9, 1409a.

⁷⁴ For the background problem of the Son relative to angels see Lane, *Hebrews* 1.8.

⁷⁵ M. Barth, "The Old Testament in Hebrews: An Essay in Biblical Hermeneutics," *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation* (ed. W. Klassen and G. F. Snyder; New York: Harper, 1962) 63–65; J. P. Meier, "Structure and Theology in Hebrews 1, 1–14," *Bib* 66 (1985) 168–189; J. W. Thompson, "The Structure and Purpose of the Catena in Heb. 1:5–13," *CBQ* 38 (1976) 352–363.

⁷⁶ Cohn-Sherbok, "Paul" 126.

through the Son, which is expressed in juridical language as having been authenticated by God himself. The emphasis is on spoken revelation (“we have heard”), connecting with the preceding paragraph, while the warmth of the first-person pronoun suggests the following paragraphs.

Psalm 8:4–6 is then quoted to transition to a twofold midrashic exposition on the suffering and consequent glory of the Son (Heb 2:5–9) and the solidarity of Jesus with God’s sons in their suffering and glory to come (2:10–18). Jesus’ transcendent dignity as divine ruler is made compatible with the human condition by his incarnation and death. God is using that pattern to form a family of faithful brethren to inherit the “world to come” (cf. “the city to come” in 13:14) in fulfillment of God’s mandate for human dominion at creation (Gen 1:26–28). The emphatic “We do not see. . . . But we see” is noteworthy because it brings self-evident identification and immediacy to the author’s audience’s natural response to broken expectations. This rhetorical strategy is consistent with the homily as a whole. In the form of homiletical midrash, the author calls attention to the hook word (*hypotassein*) and the twin ideas of dominion/subjectation that link Heb 1:13b with 2:5, 8 (“about which we are speaking” from 1:6–7).⁷⁸ He highlights the complete subjectation of earthly affairs to humanity in v. 8 and the representative fulfillment of the decree in Jesus, who attained glory by graciously suffering for his sons.

Thus the author transitions to the next paragraph with the hook words “suffering” and “glory” in 2:9–10.⁷⁹ In In 2:10–16 the Son is vividly pictured as the “file-leading champion” of God’s sons, leading them to perfection (2:10) out of slavery to the fear of death (2:15) by making atonement for their sins and sharing their temptations in suffering.⁸⁰ The thematic words are family terms and “death” (2:9, 14–15), which lead to the end of the section with the hook word “angel” (2:16).

Verses 16–18 are a major sectional transition, summarizing the preceding paragraph and introducing the priestly section to follow. God has not given angels an imperial destiny over creation (2:5) or salvation (v. 16), but he will give his Son and faithful remnant both. To lead and intercede for Abraham’s family, the Son had to experience complete (a theological equivalent would be substitutionary) human solidarity, excepting sin with his brothers. Using the device of inversion, he calls for his brothers and sisters to persevere in their eschatological pilgrimage under their merciful (4:14–5:10) and faithful priest-king (3:1–4:13). Christ’s example as file-leader looks to the crowning

⁷⁷ The connections between the catena and the warning have been convincingly discussed by G. Hughes, *Hebrews and Hermeneutics: The Epistle of Hebrews as a New Testament Example of Biblical Interpretation* (SNTSMS 36; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1979) 7–9.

⁷⁸ On the apostolic interpretation of the relationship of Psalm 8 to 110:1 to Christ’s exaltation see G. Dellling, “*hypotassō*,” *TDNT* 8.41–42; S. Kistemaker, *The Psalm Citations in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Amsterdam: G. van Soest, 1961) 103–106.

⁷⁹ Cf. Vanhoye, *La structure* 79–80, on the symmetry of the paragraph.

⁸⁰ The necessity of the Son’s identification is grounded in the language; cf. O. Procksch, “*hagios*,” *TDNT* 1.103: “The verb *hagiazein* (Hb. 2:11; 9:13; 13:12 f.; cf. 10:10, 14, 29) is here used, which expresses expiatory sanctification by the sacrifice here offered in Christ. Only he who himself is *hagios*, whether it be God, priest or victim, can exercise *hagiazein*. Hence Christ as *hagiazōn* (Hb. 2:11) must Himself be *hagios*.” Cf. also Heb 10:1–10; Rom 12:1–2.

exempla of the sermon in chaps. 12–13: “Now faith celebrates the reality [of the blessing] for which we hope, the demonstration of events yet unseen.”

If we think of Hebrews in terms of concentric circles of understanding, we have come full cycle with hermeneutical certainties at concentric center and challenges that blur peripheral boundaries. The paper began with a summary of well-known uncertainties, moving from the outside circles inward. The most noteworthy of these are authorship and audience, which are important hermeneutical guidelines in most texts. Lesser known problems among the general public, such as the bearing of rhetorical findings on the structure of the homily, were introduced and discussed at some length.

We now ask: Does it make a substantial difference whether we treat Hebrews as an epistle or a sermon?⁸¹ The answer is very little at the level of basic themes and doctrinal truths. We have seen, however, that hortatory passages like 6:4–6 may be understood best in the practices of ministry, where the spiritual maturity of people affects the ability of the Church to work with them.

On the other hand, if we speak of grammatical hermeneutics in terms of literary structure and style, then studies of the Hellenistic Jewish-Christian homilies have enhanced our understanding of literary details and transitions in the text. Insights that can be gleaned from a sermonic genre can make us more at home with the sometimes uneasy marriage between academic and pastoral concerns. The author’s skillful blend of exhortation and exposition contains a warning that we too can think well and behave poorly. He keeps God’s authoritative word before us, so that in the pressures of trials we can be encouraged by the examples of the Church and her Lord rather than focusing inward, as our narcissistic society would exhort us, to circumstances that are usually filled with complexity and enigmas. Studies of first-century sermonic style have forced us to adjust our expectations about how they might have expressed themselves and used OT precedents. In summary, the issues and principles of this paper make a difference in how we understand and apply Hebrews: “Certainly an accurate assessment of a book’s structure is vital for an assessment of that book’s meaning.”⁸²

If we speak of “historical” in terms of setting and approaches to apostolic issues, then recent studies in Hebrews have reminded us of how imprecisely modern some of our so-called precise studies have been. I have thought about insightful proposals of reengineering seminaries in a more pastoral direction and have imagined that the author, whoever he might have been, must be smiling with some vindication in heaven, singing praises in the congregation for the measure of godly maturity and pastoral concern that the Church will need in this postmodern, global village.⁸³

The author’s eschatological-messianic use of the OT is a perpetual reminder of the messianic dimensions of the older covenant that escape more

⁸¹ The question should not imply mutual exclusivity.

⁸² Guthrie, *Structure* xvii.

⁸³ For example T. Morgan, “Re-engineering the Seminary,” *Christianity Today* 38 (October 12, 1994) 74–78.

casual treatments. As scholars have reminded us, the author was a literal interpreter in a rich, nontrifling sense. I think of the three-dimensional books that are capturing the public's fancy. One's first impression of the images is a strange, mottled design that everyone can see. There is beauty and attraction in these patterns. With deeper perception, however, one can see several levels of depth and vivid images and figures that make each page an adventure. I would like to say analogically that Hebrews is like those three-dimensional pictures. The author has given all believers a unique Christology with profound implications for daily behavior. But the depth of his homiletical artistry still captivates the Church. He has exemplified the inspiration and authority of the text in a way that is "alive, powerful and penetrating." He leads his readers beyond his homily to the unifying foundation of apostolic Christology, which also appears in Acts and in our Lord's own OT hermeneutic in Luke 24.

Finally the uncertainties of introductory issues lead us to the certainties of the text, the contextual principle. One of the most significant benefits of contemporary studies has been a reaffirmation of the integrity of the homily. F. C. Synge attempted to disconnect the expository and hortatory materials by attributing them to two independent sources that were fused by the author.⁸⁴ This paper and the sources on which it is based demonstrate the vanity of the proposal. The authenticity of chap. 13 has been questioned as well.⁸⁵ Lane's recognition of the precision of the author has led him to the following conclusion:

Methodologically, an argument for the integrity of a composition is advanced most effectively by proceeding from an assumption of coherence and allowing that assumption to be tested as rigorously as possible. The argument will be vindicated when the text yields better sense in its constituent parts and as a whole than when a contested unit of material is regarded as intrusive, poorly integrated, or corrupt. It will be shown in the commentary that chap. 13 transmits an essential message that can scarcely be separated from the concerns and conceptual themes expressed in Heb. 1–12.⁸⁶

We should now be sensitive to key terms, overlapping themes, and rhetorical strategies that relate the various parts of the sermon to its tightly woven arguments. The result is not a new Christianity but a new apprecia-

⁸⁴ F. C. Synge, *Hebrews and the Scriptures* (London: SPCK, 1959) 43–52.

⁸⁵ G. W. Buchanan, *To the Hebrews* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1972) 229–245.

⁸⁶ Lane, *Hebrews* 1.lxviii. Cf. also Guthrie, *Structure* 134: "However, these concerns have been soundly answered by drawing attention to vocabulary, uses of the Old Testament, conceptual ties with the rest of the book, patterns of argumentation, structural patterns, and literary style, all of which witness to the homogeneity of the chapter with the previous twelve chapters."

tion for the beauty, artistry and timeless relevance of pastoral love for struggling saints.