

THE CHRIST OF HEBREWS AND OTHER RELIGIONS

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In a very real sense, the topic of other religions is the subject matter of the entire NT, since every book to one extent or another addresses the clash between Christianity and the religions that surround it. That is especially true of Hebrews, where the conflict of religions is especially pervasive. This study will attempt to probe this clash and contextualize it for the current situation. First, we will study the situation behind the book, then map the rhetorical strategy of the author in correcting it, especially in terms of the christological solution, and finally note implications for the witness of the church in the postmodern conflict of religions.

I. THE SOCIAL SITUATION BEHIND THE BOOK

Virtually every aspect of this subject is clouded by massive debate. The only general area of agreement is the danger addressed in the book, namely apostasy and the need for faithfulness on the part of the readers. But who were they? For much of the history of the church, it was assumed that they were Jewish, hence the title “To the Hebrews,” which goes back at least as far as Tertullian. However, many see this as an early conjecture, perhaps in order to provide a canonical response to Judaism for the early church.¹ In fact, the title has been challenged by some who argue that the contents of the book do not point to a Jewish audience. Several characteristics are taken as evidence of a more Gentile readership: (1) the strong Hellenistic style of the rhetoric, employing techniques of deliberative rhetoric like *synkrisis* (comparison), *anaphora* (repetition of key words), and both a grammatical style and 154 *hapax legomena* that betray rich acquaintance with Hellenistic thought; (2) the danger of “turning away from the living God” (3:12) and “carried away by all kinds of strange teachings”² (13:9), pointing more to a Hellenistic than Jewish setting; (3) “repentance from acts that lead to death” in 6:1; 9:14 favors conversion from paganism; (4) the typology regarding the real and the shadow in 8:5; 9:23; 10:1; (5) the challenge to honor marriage vows would better fit a Gentile setting; (6) the OT quotations from the LXX, fitting the strong emphasis on the OT as divine scripture among Gentile

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¹ So D. A. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle “to the Hebrews”* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 2–3.

² All quotations are taken from the TNIV.

Christians. The purpose of the epistle would then be to address Gentiles, probably later in the first century, who had tired of the societal pressures placed on them and were tempted to return to their pagan religions.³

While this is quite viable, it is doubtful that it is superior to the traditional Jewish interpretation. The LXX was acceptable even to the Jewish people in the homeland and was the primary Bible of diaspora Jews. Moreover, Paul at times turns the language used by Jews against Gentiles (e.g. “dogs” in Phil 3:2 and “their god is their stomach,” etc. in Phil 3:18–19) against the Judaizers. So the language of 3:12; 6:1; 9:14; 13:9 could fit a Jewish-centered epistle as well.⁴ For Jewish Christians to apostasize from Christ and return to Judaism would constitute “turning away from the living God,” and the idea of Judaism as “dead works” is quite similar to the “works righteousness” that Paul speaks against in Galatians and Romans. Guthrie sums up⁵ the reasons for accepting a Jewish background: (1) The massive use of OT quotes, allusions, and background favors a Jewish provenance; (2) The theological concepts are similar to hellenistic Jewish synagogues, e.g. the veneration of Moses, angelic mediators, divine Wisdom; (3) the danger addressed seems to be a return to Judaism proper.

It is, of course, possible that the author is addressing a mixed congregation of Jewish and Gentile believers,⁶ and that both groups are tempted to return to their respective religions. This possibility would be strengthened if the epistle was indeed being sent to Christians in Italy, especially in Rome,⁷ given the Jewish-Gentile church situation in Romans. The reality is that many Gentiles had been converted as God-fearers who had been steeped in synagogue worship. Still, the fact that Hebrews discusses Jewish issues so exclusively makes it likely that the primary group addressed consists of Jewish believers. DeSilva⁸ makes a strong case that the argumentation could fit Gentiles as well (since Gentiles were inculcated into the OT Scriptures and also had a cultic background in sacrifices), but, on balance, the string of comparisons with OT revelation, angels, priesthood, covenant, sacrifices, and tabernacle is too Jewish to be ignored.

³ See J. Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1924) xv–xix; H.-F. Weiss, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (15th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991) 70–72. .

⁴ See also D. Hagner, *Hebrews* (NIBC; Peabody, MA: Hendricksen, 1990) 3–4.

⁵ G. H. Guthrie, *Hebrews* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 19–20.

⁶ So H. W. Attridge, *Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989) 10–13; A. H. Trotter, *Interpreting the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997) 28–31; and P. Ellingworth, *Commentary on Hebrews* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 23–26. DeSilva, *Perseverance* 6, says, “The letter, unfortunately named, would be equally meaningful to Christians of any ethnic origin, since both Jewish and Gentile converts are socialized into the same Christocentric reading of the same Scriptures.”

⁷ Favored by 13:24, “Those from Italy send their greetings,” suggesting a group of Christians “from” Italy are greeting their friends in Italy (so most today). W. L. Lane, *Hebrews* (WBC 47; Dallas: Word, 1991) 1.l.iii, shows it was an urban church, as seen in 13:14, “we do not have an enduring city.” The concerns of 13:1–10 also fit an urban church, e.g. the need for hospitality (v. 2), the numbers in prison (v. 3), the need for sexual responsibility (v. 4), and the caution against materialistic greed (vv. 5–6).

⁸ DeSilva, *Perseverance* 3–5.

Let us trace the social situation behind the epistle. While there is no explicit mention in the text of the actual problems (unlike Galatians, Romans, Corinthians, for instance) there are implicit hints that yield a fairly good picture. Koester⁹ posits three phases (conversion, persecution, and malaise), but it is likely that the first two constitute one phase. The book talks of the past and the present, and that is probably the best way to go. The origin of the church there may be described in the proclamation of the gospel by “those who heard” Jesus in 2:3b–4. Those eyewitnesses (the use of the plural suggests a team similar to that in Paul’s missionary journeys) may have come after Pentecost or perhaps after the dispersion caused by the persecution in Jerusalem following the death of Stephen (Acts 8:1). Their proclamation was accompanied by “signs, wonders, and various miracles,” (2:4), a type of evangelistic ministry quite similar to that of Philip in Samaria (Acts 8:4–8) as well as of Paul. The “gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will” (2:4) most likely were charismatic gifts,¹⁰ perhaps the type expressed in the Pentecost repetitions in Acts.

If the current consensus that the letter is addressed to the church in Rome is correct (and I believe it is), then we know something of the history of the church behind the book.¹¹ In the first decade or so after it was founded by Jewish Christian evangelists, the church was probably predominantly Jewish (there were 40,000–50,000 Jews living in Rome). Then in AD 49, the emperor Claudius forced a sizable number of Jews and Christians to leave Rome because of riots caused by conflict between them. At that time the only ones left were the Gentile Christians, with many of them probably former God-fearers who had converted while worshipping in the synagogues (see Acts 10:2, 22; 13:16, 26). For the next several years Gentile leadership developed, and many Gentiles were converted. Then after Claudius died in AD 54, the Jewish Christians were allowed to return, and many of them did (like Priscilla and Aquila, Rom 16:3–5). The ensuing tension between the Jewish and Gentile believers led to Paul’s epistle to the Romans.

Probably very early in the life of the church there a period of persecution developed. The proclamation of the Gospel often led to conflict and riots (Acts 13:50; 14:4–7, 19; 17:5–8, 13; 18:6; 19:9, 23f), and Rome was no exception. Heb 10:32–34 says that very soon after they had “received the light,” there began “a great conflict of suffering.” This would be natural, for conversion would change their behavior and social interaction greatly. As Koester puts it, “the movement from repentance to faith (6:1) involves an interior reorientation and a shift in social relations.”¹² The Roman world centered on cultic interaction, and it suffused every aspect of life. In the guilds to which virtually every basic worker belonged, everyone was expected to pay tribute to the patron gods, especially at the regular guild banquets. To refuse to do

⁹ C. R. Koester, *Hebrews* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 2001) 64–72.

¹⁰ Lane, *Hebrews* 1.40.

¹¹ For the following, see G. Osborne, *Romans* (IVPNTC; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003) “Introduction.”

¹² Koester, *Hebrews* 66.

so was unheard of, so Christians would have been vilified for rejecting the gods. This would have been multiplied in every aspect of first-century life.

The positive confession and hope in the Christian God of the covenant (3:1; 4:14; 10:23) paralleled the negative displacement from the gods with which they had grown up. The basic teachings in the early period are described in 6:1–3, centering first on Jesus as the promised Messiah and of the need to repent from the “dead works” of the Jewish levitical demands and of Gentile idolatrous practices, indeed of all practices that “lead to death” rather than to life in Christ.¹³ The “cleansing rites” or “baptisms” may well refer to Christian baptism in contrast to the purification rites of Judaism and pagan rituals (so Spicq, Bruce, Lane, Ellingworth, Attridge) or perhaps to all the purification rites of churches (so Buchanan, Attridge) or the cleansing of the body and the heart in 10:22 (so deSilva). Of these the former seems best in the context. The “laying on of hands” could be the confirmation with the gift of the Spirit following baptism (so Attridge, deSilva, Koester). There is little conclusive evidence that such a rite was done in the early church (except possibly Acts 19:6), but in Acts 8:17–19 the two are closely connected. In the NT laying on of hands accompanied healing (Matt 5:22), the giving of the Spirit (Acts 8:17), and ordination (Acts 6:6; 1 Tim 4:14). The most likely is probably the first, as seen in the connection with baptism here. The “resurrection from the dead” and “eternal judgment” refer to the fate of believers and unbelievers, respectively.

In short, the list demonstrates their inculcation into the differences between being a Christian and their former way of life. They had been removed from their previous social world and schooled in their new-found faith in such a way that they belonged to a new community and no longer belonged to the old. DeSilva,¹⁴ following Mary Douglas, describes this new self-perception as “dying to their old life” and being “reborn to the new,” so that the rituals signified a new allegiance that rendered them marginal with regard to the society around them. They had rejected their past life and associations and found a new status within their own sect, but a status not recognized by the pagan world around them. As a result, while they rejected their former way of life, they were in turn rejected and persecuted by their former neighbors and fellow workers. Tacitus accused the Christians of “hatred against humanity” (*Annals* 15.44.2), and this was undoubtedly connected to their refusal to participate in the civic life.

The form this persecution took is described in 10:33–34. First, they were “publicly exposed to insult and persecution,” which could refer generally to public scorn and ridicule (so Koester) but probably included more serious events such as “the confiscation of property” (v. 34, so Lane, who sees these verses as a chiasm). It does not include the type of persecution practiced by

¹³ Lane, *Hebrews* 1.140 sees them as levitical practices. Attridge, *Hebrews* 164; and deSilva, *Perseverance* 216, argue that it is sin and idolatry, respectively. The latter says the author of *Hebrews* never shows any indication of combating “works-righteousness” (p. 216). That, however, depends very much on whether or not one sees *Hebrews* as combating a Jewish-Christian situation. Most likely the phrase refers in a general way to all “works that lead to death.”

¹⁴ DeSilva, *Perseverance* 10–11.

Nero, who used Christians as human torches and threw them to wild animals, nor the public mockery in theatres (the verb *theatrizein* contains the idea of public exposure as in a theatre) described by Philo (*Gaius* 359). The fact that these believers had property to be seized points to a certain amount of wealth in this community (so deSilva) and shows they had a lot to lose. Still, the author makes a point to the current readers that these early believers “joyfully accepted” their loss because they “had better and lasting possessions,” a definite message to the current readers who were forgetting how much they had in Christ. Moreover, they had “leaders” in the past who had helped them through their ordeals and had become models to the present Christians (13:7). Finally, some of the Christians had been imprisoned, and the others had “stood side by side” and “suffered along with” them through their ordeal. It is clear that no one had been martyred, even up to the time when the letter was written (12:4), but in the past they had suffered greatly. Koester brings out the fact that this had to involve official action against the church. While mob action could have resulted in stolen property, imprisonment had to be governmental action. Because Christians were the only group that stood outside the community and refused to participate, this would be easily justified. While these were local rather than empire-wide persecutions, they were just as difficult for the believers themselves to handle.

The present situation was some years removed. We do not know how many, but it was of sufficient duration that the author could challenge them that they had been believers long enough to be teachers (5:12). The persecution was still occurring, for some were still in prison (13:3), and Christians were still held in disgrace by those around them (13:13). The central problem was a basic “laziness” (*nōthros*, 5:11; 6:12), a term that often means dim-witted but in a context like this refers to people who refuse to work at understanding but instead remain mentally dull. They listen, but fail to respond or grow. It is a current consensus (Attridge, Lane, Ellingworth, Koester) that the letter is written to one group, perhaps a single house church or so, among others. This is seen in the request to “greet all your leaders and all God’s people” (13:24). If “meeting together” (*episynagōgē*) is a reference to a local house church (thus “do not abandon your assembly,” so Hughes, Lane, Koester, emphasizing the localizing influence of the *epi-* prefix), the likelihood that this is a small group of believers increases. They had been meeting for several years but had failed to grow spiritually and were seriously slipping in their walk with Christ.

It is difficult to know what the exact danger was. Some (e.g. deSilva, Koester) emphasize the spiritual malaise they had fallen into and state that the problem is slipping back into their old patterns. This is possible in light of some of the warning passages like “drift away” (2:1), “ignore” (2:3), and “give up” (10:25). The danger in this sense would be a gradual turning away from the Christian life. DeSilva says,¹⁵ “Neither the threat of violent persecution nor a new attraction to Judaism motivates this apostasy, but rather

¹⁵ Ibid. 19.

the more pedestrian inability to live within the lower status that Christian associations had forced upon them, the less-than-dramatic (yet potent) desire once more to enjoy the goods and esteem of their society.” But this misses the main point: the author is not inveighing against materialism and a desire for societal status but sees this as a very serious apostasy¹⁶ from the Christian faith that involves committing a virtual unpardonable sin. Therefore, as a result of the persecution from without and the spiritual weakness from within, some in the community were contemplating leaving the Christian community and returning to Judaism (and for the Gentile minority, a return to their pagan background).

The language makes this clear—if these Christians “harden their hearts,” they will “never enter God’s rest” (3:8, 11); if they “fall away” after all they had experienced, they can never again be “brought back to repentance” (6:4–5). All that remains is “a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (10:27). The reason for this harsh sentence is that they will commit apostasy knowingly and willingly (10:26a), having “a sinful and unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God” (3:12). When they do so they will be “crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace” (6:6). They will have “trampled the Son of God underfoot” and “treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant,” thereby “insulting the Spirit of grace” (10:29). This is not a passive slipping back into sin but an active repudiation of Christ. The passive type of apostasy is redeemable, as in James 5:19–20, “if any of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring them back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save their soul from death.”¹⁷ This active type of apostate cannot be brought back, because they have with finality rejected Christ.

II. THE RHETORICAL STRATEGY AND PLAN

Certainly the primary strategy is that of warning. It has been common of late to understand Hebrews in terms of Hellenistic rhetoric. Aristotle (*The Art of Rhetoric*) identified three types of rhetoric, and all three have been applied to Hebrews by various scholars: (1) forensic rhetoric, determining guilt or innocence by examining evidence (von Soden, Windisch);¹⁸ (2) delib-

¹⁶ It is important to realize that all scholars, Calvinist as well as Arminian, use apostasy language to describe the danger. G. E. Rice, “Apostasy as a Motif and Its Effect on the Structure of Hebrews,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 23 (1985) 29–35 even organizes the book into five sections on the basis of the apostasy passages. In terms of the debate over eternal security, the act of apostasy can fit both schools. The Calvinist would divide the church into visible and invisible segments, with apostasy happening only to the non-elect, while Arminians would argue that both groups can commit the sin. For both groups, this is a danger for those “once enlightened . . .” (6:4–6), that is, the members of the church.

¹⁷ See R. P. Martin, *James* (WBC; Waco, TX: Word, 1988) 219, who points out that *psychē* refers to the eternal soul and *thanatos* is “of eternal consequence rather than only physical demise.” Therefore the issue is “a recovery of the apostate.”

¹⁸ H. von Soden, *Der Hebräerbrief* (HKNT; Tübingen: Mohr, 1899) 8–11; H. Windisch, *Der Hebräerbrief* (HNT; Tübingen: Mohr, 1931) 7–8.

erative rhetoric, in which arguments are given in order to encourage or dissuade a certain set of actions (Lindars, Übelacker);¹⁹ (3) epideictic rhetoric, celebrating the influence of a person and using that as a model for behavior (Attridge).²⁰ The problem is that no single approach has been able to explain the structure or argumentation of Hebrews. It is deliberative in trying to persuade the readers to maintain the Christian faith and epideictic in his presentation of Jesus as “the author and perfecter of our faith” (12:3). The author applies more than one form. Probably the best genre for the book is that of the synagogue homily within Hellenistic Judaism.²¹ The author weaves Hellenistic patterns into his rabbinic argumentation with great skill. Koester centers on the three elements of persuasion²²—logic, centering on the superiority of the exalted Christ, who through suffering came to a glory greater than that of Moses and inaugurated a new covenant; emotion, entailing both the positive (sympathy and confidence in the hope that Christ has given) and negative aspects (fear of judgment and shame in their childish malaise); and character, namely via God as the principal speaker in the book and the author as the one calling them “brethren” and “beloved.” Through these the book calls the original readers back to the centrality of the Christian way. DeSilva interprets this in the sense of honor and shame,²³ noting a rhetorical use of these key elements of ancient society. If believers seek the honor of this world, they will have shame before God. Only by accepting shame and rejection in the eyes of this world can people have honor before God. As with the heroes of chapter 11, the Christians are called to accept a lower status in this world in order to have lasting honor in eternity.

It is clear that the author wants them to do three things: repent of their spiritual weakness, put Christ first in their lives so they can begin to grow spiritually, and find a new spirit of *communitas* so they can endure their struggles together. There is a vertical and a horizontal dimension to the solution for apostasy as demonstrated in the three hortatory subjunctives in the conclusion to the string of comparisons in 10:22–25 (vv. 19–21 effectively summarize the first ten chapters on the significance of Christ). First, they must “draw near to God” (cf. 4:16; 7:25; 11:6; 12:18, 22), meaning a new commitment to the centrality of God in every area of their lives. Second, they must “hold unswervingly to the hope we profess,” combining two major terms in the epistle, “confess” (cf. 3:1; 4:14) as the corporate profession of the lordship of Christ and of faith in him, and “hope” (cf. 3:6; 6:11, 18; 7:19; 11:1) as the future orientation of the believer to the salvation secured by the high priestly activity of Christ. Third, they must develop a caring community centered on love and good works. There are two sides of this

¹⁹ B. Lindars, “The Rhetorical Structure of Hebrews,” *New Testament Studies* 35 (1989) 382–406; W. G. Übelacker, *Der Hebräerbrief als Appell: Untersuchungen zu exordium, narratio und postscriptum* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1989).

²⁰ Attridge, *Hebrews* 14.

²¹ See W. L. Lane, “Hebrews: A Sermon in Search of a Setting,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 28 (1985) 13–18.

²² Koester, *Hebrews* 87–92.

²³ DeSilva, *Perseverance* 65–67.

in Hebrews, both flowing out of the use of *parakalein* in the book. Here in v. 25 this will mean “encouraging” one another, and in 3:13 it will also mean “admonishing” one another in light of “sin’s deceitfulness” in their lives.

The vertical aspect is the complete surrender of themselves to God and Christ, as demonstrated in every parenetic section of the book, e.g. “so great a salvation” in 2:3, “the promise of entering his rest still stands” in 4:1, the need to “be taken forward to maturity” in 6:1 and to “make your hope sure” in 6:11, the centrality of believing that God “exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” in 11:6 (cf. 11:7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 16, 20, 25, 26, 35b, 40), “run with endurance the race that God has set before us” in 12:1, “keeping our eyes on Jesus in 12:2, “submit to the discipline of our heavenly Father” in 12:9, and “see to it that you obey God” in 12:25. DeSilva calls this “responding to the divine benefactor,”²⁴ believing that the author is building on one of the great social forces in the Roman world, the necessity of the average person to depend on help from a patron to whom they would owe allegiance and gratitude. This theme of reciprocity would remind these Christians how much they owe God and Christ. The horizontal aspect is a caring community that will enable them to help one another through the troubled times, as seen in “we have come to share in Christ” (3:14), “imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised” in 6:12, “you stood side by side with those who were so treated” in 10:33, 34, “look after each other” in 12:15, and especially “mark out a straight path for your feet” in 12:12, 13, which pictures the strong members of the church holding up the weak members when they are about to stumble. The two aspects are summarized in chapter 13, with vv. 1–5, 7, 16–17 centering on corporate caring and vv. 6, 8–15 concluding the emphasis on looking to God and Jesus for help.

Yet there is a third dimension to the solution as well, the temporal aspect. The author wants them to take their eyes off the temporal and center on the eternal, to learn the lesson of the past and rely on the God of the future. This is the meaning of “hope” in the book. In their past suffering they triumphed over the plundering of their possessions because they “knew they had better and lasting possessions” (10:34). So now the beleaguered believers must realize that “he who promised is faithful” (10:23). This is the message of the “heroes of the faith” in chapter 11. Like Abraham they could look upon themselves as “strangers” on this earth (11:9), because they, too, could look forward to the final “city with foundations.” One of the basic messages of the faith chapter is that every prayer was answered, not in the present, but in the future, the final result of God keeping his promises (cf. 11:11, 16, 20, 39–40), summed up in v. 13, “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.”

Yet the author does not wish only to admonish and warn them of the terrible danger. He also wants to encourage them and let them know of his

²⁴ Ibid. 59.

confidence in them. This is seen in his affectionate terms for them, calling them “holy brothers and sisters who share in the heavenly calling” in 3:1 and “dear friends” (literally, “beloved”) in 6:9, as well as “brothers and sisters” in 10:19 and 13:22. This pastoral encouragement is especially seen in the two most serious warning passages. After warning them that apostasy is irredeemable in 6:4–6, he adds, “we are convinced of better things in your case—the things that have to do with salvation” (6:9). God would not forget them or their past faithfulness (v. 10), and he believed that with God’s help they would endure this time as well. This confidence does not mitigate the seriousness of the warning, a very real danger due to their present weakened spiritual condition. But it does show the author’s trust in them. The same occurs in 10:32 after the warning that a fiery judgment would be certain if they “shrink back” (10:26–31); as the author says, “we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.”²⁵ Again, this does not mean the warning is only hypothetical, but rather that the author believes their past victory over persecution and mockery would be repeated in the present. The rhetorical strategy of Hebrews is therefore to combine reminders of the superiority of Christ with a mixture of negative warning and pastoral comfort in calling the believers to a renewed faithfulness in Christ.

III. CHRIST IN HEBREWS

The primary epideictic aspect of Hebrews is the centrality of Christ for salvation. The author employs *synkrisis* (comparison) to show the superiority (*kreittōn*, thirteen times in Hebrews) of Christ over every aspect of Judaism. DeSilva²⁶ states that the emphasis is not just on Christ’s superior accomplishment but also that he “serves as an extended development of a topic of amplification, magnifying the value of the access to God made possible by Jesus—an access never before made possible to God’s covenant people.” The purpose is to “motivate the hearers to preserve that advantage (10:18–25), as well as to heighten the folly and danger of renouncing such an advantage.” This is caught well in the summary of 10:19–21, stating that Jesus has opened “a new and living way” to God and thus has become “a great priest over the house of God.” The question is why they would want to return to their Jewish roots, in which God dwelt in the Holy of Holies, a sanctuary available only through the blood ritual of the Day of Atonement. Jesus entered by becoming the once-for-all sacrifice (9:12, 26–28), thereby becoming the eternal priest who has effected “a better covenant” (7:16–17, 22).

Many have made the central christological theme of Hebrews the high priesthood of Jesus (e.g. Ladd, Bruce). However, while that is certainly the most creative aspect of Hebrews, it is not the central motif. Guthrie has

²⁵ See the interesting chart on the parallels between 6:4–12 and 10:26–32 in Lane, *Hebrews* 1.296–97.

²⁶ DeSilva, *Perseverance* 55.

shown²⁷ that the references to Ps 110:1 in Hebrews with Jesus exalted to the right hand of God (1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12–13; 12:2) occur at “key turning points of the book” and serve as “temporal and spatial indicators” that “move the discussion from one stage to another.” As such, these references “support the superiority of the Son over the angels, the location (in heaven) of the Son’s offering of his superior sacrifice, the present posture of the heavenly high priest, and the ultimate subjection of all things to the Son.” This makes sense in light of the author’s concern to emphasize the superiority of Jesus over the levitical system and Jewish modes of salvation. So an exaltation Christology is at the heart of the epistle. Hughes²⁸ goes so far as to organize the epistle on the basis of Jesus’ superiority over the prophets (1:1–3), the angels (1:4–2:18), Moses (3:1–4:13), Aaron (5:1–10:18), and as the new and living way (10:19–12:29). While this is somewhat overdone, it does demonstrate how central this theme is. The basic point is that the exalted Christ is far superior to Judaism and therefore salvation can be found only in him, not by any other religious approach.

Let us flesh this out by surveying the presentation of Christ in Hebrews. The high Christology of the book begins in the first chapter, where we see (in a near-Johannine sense) that God’s revelation through his Son transcends the OT revelation through the prophets because he is “heir of all” as well as both Creator and sustainer of the universe (1:1–3). The Son of God motif will dominate the book. In a strong section in which Jesus is presented as the very Wisdom of God, we see that he also transcends that category because the Shekinah glory radiates through him, and he is not only in the place of power at God’s right hand (the first use of Ps 110:1 in the book) but is the very “representation of his being.” In a Philonic sense this could mean the imprint of the divine in his mind,²⁹ but the emphasis here is in the other direction, that Jesus is the exact replica of the very nature of God.³⁰ This is saying that he is not only Son but is united with God (cf. 1:8). Finally, the author turns from his exaltation to his salvific work, noting that he provides “purification for sins,” a cultic image in which Jesus removes the defiling presence of sin, thereby preparing for the later emphasis that he did so by becoming the once-for-all blood sacrifice for sin. In other words, the primary theme here (as in the book as a whole) is the cross and exaltation of Jesus.³¹

²⁷ G. Guthrie, “Exaltation Theology in Hebrews: A Discourse Analysis of the Function of Psalm 110:1 in Hebrews 1:3” (Th. M. Thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1989) iii–iv. See also M. Saucy, “Exaltation Christology in Hebrews: What Kind of Reign?” *Trinity Journal* 14 (1993) 45–52, who adds that the primary thrust is not Jesus reigning in heaven but his intercessory work. As such it provides the capstone to Jesus’ earthly ministry (p. 52).

²⁸ P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 3–4. So also B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d. [originally 1892]) xlviii–li.

²⁹ So Attridge, *Hebrews* 44; Koester, *Hebrews* 187.

³⁰ See Lane, *Hebrews* 1.13; Ellingworth, *Hebrews* 99–100.

³¹ It is interesting that the resurrection of Jesus is not explicitly mentioned until 13:20 (though it is implied in 7:24), and yet the exaltation of Jesus is the core theme.

Then in 1:4–2:18 the exaltation of Christ is highlighted further by showing that he is also “superior to the angels.” The situation may have stemmed from a Jewish veneration of angels as seen at Qumran and the LXX and reflected in Col 2:18 and Rev 19:10; 22:8–9,³² although this hypothesis will always be speculative since their worship of angels is never mentioned in the text. The catena of OT quotations introduces the central technique of anchoring the parenetic sections via an appropriation of OT proof texts and demonstrates that the author believed Christ to be the fulfillment of OT promises; even more, that he is the point of continuity between the old and new covenants. Bateman³³ argues that the Psalm 45 quote in vv. 8–9 is the center of a chiasmic arrangement in the seven OT quotes of 1:5–13 and proclaims “the Son’s status as divine Davidic monarch.” This is seen in the direct claim of v. 8, which says of Christ, “Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever.”³⁴ This attribution of divinity to Jesus makes explicit what is implicit in 1:3 (see above). Jesus is not only superior to the angels but is their eternal God³⁵ as well as the God of these Christians. He is thus the proper object of the worship of angels (v. 6) and the worship of the readers. This becomes the basis of the epistle’s first warning in 2:1–4. Jesus has established “so great a salvation,” and if the covenant established at Sinai via the angels contained serious punishments (2:2), how much more the great salvation inaugurated by Christ.

In 2:5–18 a new emphasis develops, centering on v. 9, which introduces for the first time Jesus “tasting death for everyone.” In his suffering Christ has achieved what Lane calls “solidarity with the human family.”³⁶ He died, so that all people could share his glory and holiness (vv. 10–11) and find in him the defeat of death and Satan, ending their slavery to sin (vv. 14–15). Mankind lost their dominion over God’s created order, but Jesus has returned that dominion.³⁷ In v. 8b we see that the promise of Ps 8:6 that “God has put everything under their (i.e. mankind’s) feet,” as “not yet” realized, awaited an expected future resolution. That resolution has now come to pass (v. 9), but only in Jesus, who suffered humiliation as the path to exaltation as not only Savior but the paradigm for the people of God.

³² So Kittel in *TDNT* 1:80–82; Hughes, *Hebrews* 51–52, Windisch, *Hebräerbrief* 17, R. Jewett, *Letter to Pilgrims: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1981) 5–13; J. D. Charles, “The Angels, Sonship and Birthright in the Letter to Hebrews,” *JETS* 33 (1990) 171–78; contra Lane, *Hebrews* 1.8–9; Attridge, *Hebrews* 51.

³³ H. W. Bateman, “Psalm 45:6–7 and Its Christological Contributions to Hebrews,” *Trinity Journal* 22 (2001) 11–12, 20.

³⁴ For the text-critical and exegetical arguments favoring this translation, see M. J. Harris, *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992) 205–27.

³⁵ The emphasis in this quote from Ps 45:6–7 LXX is more on the eternity of the Son (contra the angels who are created beings) than on his divine status, though both are intended.

³⁶ Lane, *Hebrews* 1.50.

³⁷ I agree with the majority of scholars (e.g. Lane, Attridge, Koester) that “son of man” in v. 6 is not a title of Christ but is used in the sense of the psalm to mankind. D. A. Carson says that of the forty commentaries in his library, thirty take it this way, cf. his “The Limits of Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation” (to be published in the festschrift to Ronald Youngblood) 28.

The basis of the next great warning section (3:7–4:11, utilizing Ps 95:7–11 on failing to enter God’s rest like the Hebrews in the wilderness wandering) is Jesus’ superiority over Moses and the Law (3:2–6). As the one to whom God gave the Torah, Moses had an exalted place in Judaism. After Antiochus Epiphanes outlawed Torah observance, Moses came to have an even greater position in the hearts of the Jews, a position approaching veneration. D’Angelo has shown³⁸ that owing to his intimacy with God, Moses was viewed within some segments of Judaism as actually greater than the angels. In showing that Jesus is “worthy of greater honor than Moses,” there is one comparison (both are “faithful”) and two contrasts with Moses here: (1) using imagery of the household of God, Moses was faithful as part of the “house,” but Jesus was the builder, not only of the house but of all creation (as Lane points out,³⁹ there is a chiasm in vv. 3–4 equating Jesus with God in creation a la 1:2b); (2) in terms of their functions, Moses is the “servant in all God’s house” (a quote from Num 12:7), Jesus the “Son” who rules “over” God’s house. This gives greater force to the warning regarding Israel in the wilderness from Ps 95:7–11. If they (the household of the servant) “failed to enter God’s rest” due to unbelief, how much more those who constituted the household of the Son? Wray defines “rest” here as “participation in the completed cosmic work of God,” anchored in Jesus as Messiah, Son, and high priest and demanding faithfulness on the part of the people of God.⁴⁰

This leads directly into the best known aspect of Jesus’ superiority to Judaism, his high priestly ministry (4:14–7:28). It is very possible that this is not just the creative contribution of the writer but stems from liturgical materials employed in the book,⁴¹ but the fact is that the author has presented a brilliantly constructed argument. Guthrie states⁴² that this theme actually extends all the way from 4:14 to 10:25, noting that 4:14–16 and 10:19–25 form an *inclusio* as “overlapping constituents” that introduce and conclude the theme of Jesus’ high priestly ministry. As earlier, the purpose of this emphasis is to exhort the readers to “hold firmly to the faith” they profess. Since he is “a great high priest who has ascended into heaven,” they can maintain their faith by “approaching God’s throne of grace with confidence” (vv. 14, 16). DeSilva points out⁴³ that the image of drawing near to God is found throughout the book (7:25; 10:22; 11:6; 12:18, 22) as the antidote for “shrinking back” or “turning away” (3:12; 6:6; 10:38–39). The Jewish high priest went into the very presence of God once a year on the Day of Atonement, but that was only because he represented the nation. Jesus as the

³⁸ M. R. D’Angelo, *Moses in the Letter to the Hebrews* (SBLDS; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979) 91–131.

³⁹ Lane, *Hebrews* 1.77.

⁴⁰ J. H. Wray, *Rest as a Theological Metaphor in the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Gospel of Truth: Early Christian Homilies of Rest* (SBLDS; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997) 94 (cf. 90–94).

⁴¹ G. Friedrich, “Das Lied vom Hohenpriester im Zusammenhang vom Hebr. 4:14–5:10,” *TZ* 18 (1962) 95–115; Lane, *Hebrews* cxi–cxli.

⁴² G. H. Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews: A Text-Linguistic Analysis* (New York: Brill, 1994) 102–4.

⁴³ DeSilva, *Perseverance* 185.

greater high priest went into the actual presence of God in heaven itself and presented a once-for-all offering that sufficed for eternity (8:1–2; 9:11–12, 24, 26; 10:10).

What makes the work of Jesus so superior is not only that he provided the final sacrifice but that he was both the priest offering the sacrifice and the sacrifice itself. He has not only met all the qualifications of the priesthood (5:1–10),⁴⁴ but has exceeded them, because his is a heavenly ministry and by his suffering “he became the source of eternal salvation” (5:8–9). The idea of the “perfecting of Jesus” occurs three times (2:10; 5:9; 7:28) and has become something of a *crux interpretum*, debated as to whether it constitutes the vocational “completion” of his office⁴⁵ or the eschatological arrival at his glorious heavenly destiny.⁴⁶ Actually, this is another case of both-and; as Lane brings out,⁴⁷ there is in this the idea of the eschatological exaltation of Jesus and the fact that he is “fully equipped for his office.” The thrust of the epistle as a whole is that the “completion” of Jesus’ work and destiny allows the believers also to “complete” their walk in Christ and share in his glory (2:10–11; 4:16; 7:18–19; 10:14; 12:23). The reason, as here in this passage, is Jesus’ solidarity with humanity; his suffering unites him with us in our suffering.⁴⁸ Once again, therefore, Christology functions as a pastoral device to enable Christians to find victory in the battle against sin.⁴⁹ Jesus is both “the author and perfecter of our faith” (12:2).

The central theme is, of course, Jesus as “high priest in the order of Melchizedek,” emphasized early (5:6, 10; 6:20) and then developed in detail after the excursions on the spiritual lethargy of the Hebrew Christians (5:11; 6:12). The biblical precedent is Ps 110:4, quoted in 5:6; 7:17, 21. The author is saying that since 110:1 applies to the exalted Christ (8:1, “we do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven”), Ps 110:4 does also when it says, “You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.” Then he links Ps 110:4 with a midrashic exposition of Gen 14:17–20 and develops a typological fulfillment in which Jesus as the Melchizedekian high priest is superior to the Jewish priesthood for four reasons: (1) as Melchizedek received a tithe from Abraham and

⁴⁴ Koester, *Hebrews* 292, brings out the three aspects—the high priest’s position, qualities, and service—and shows that the three paragraphs (4:14–16; 5:1–4, 5–10) cover them in inverse order: ABC/CBA/ABC.

⁴⁵ See D. Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection: An Examination of the Concept of Perfection in the ‘Epistle to the Hebrews’* (SNTSMS 47; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 66–73; Attridge, *Hebrews* 86–87.

⁴⁶ See Westcott, *Hebrews* 49; M. Silva, “Perfection and Eschatology in Hebrews,” *WTJ* 39 (1976) 60–71; deSilva, *Perseverance* 197–99.

⁴⁷ Lane, *Hebrews* 1.57–58. So also Bruce, *Hebrews* 105; Koester, *Hebrews* 124–25.

⁴⁸ So P. D. Duerksen, “Images of Jesus Christ as Perfect High Priest for God’s People,” *Quarterly Review* 14 (1994) 328–30, who adds, “This willing, submissive death led directly, then, to his appointment as high priest” (p. 330).

⁴⁹ K. M. Woschitz, “Erlösende Tränen: Gedanken zu Hebr 5, 7,” *Bibel und Liturgie* 56 (1983) 199–201, shows how 5:7 accomplishes this. Jesus’ “prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears” demonstrated his solidarity with human suffering and allowed him to be the paradigm for the discouraged Christians.

blessed him, demonstrating the superiority of Melchizedek, so Jesus is superior due to his greater glory; (2) as Melchizedek's priesthood was eternal (he has no genealogy in Genesis and thus his office has no beginning and end), so Jesus' high priesthood is eternal and permanent rather than temporal like the Aaronic priesthood (7:24);⁵⁰ (3) Melchizedek was a priest-king, combining the two functions only the Messiah could fill (kings could not also be high priest, as demonstrated in the opposition to Simon and Jonathan in the Maccabean period), and Jesus is both priest and royal Messiah as well; (4) the priesthood received their office "without any oath" (7:20) by simple right of succession, but Jesus received his office directly via an oath from God: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest forever'" (7:21). Thus Jesus, who did not fulfill the Torah qualifications for priesthood because he was from the line of Judah rather than Levi, has fulfilled the true qualifications and has established a permanent priesthood that makes the earthly priesthood unnecessary.

Again the purpose is pastoral. As Lane says,⁵¹ "By interpreting sonship in terms of priesthood, the writer is able to show the members of the community how the Son can help them in their present adverse circumstances . . . (and) to show that the Son can save the community in the present and to the end." Thus the answer to the apostasy of 6:4–8 and the basis of the optimism in 6:9–10 is the priestly work of the Son in the community.

Yet we are not yet finished, for the superiority of Jesus to the sanctuary, covenant, and sacrifice has yet to be developed. This is the topic of 8:1–10:18. In 8:1–6; 9:11, 23–24 Christ is pictured as entering the heavenly sanctuary with his perfect offering and therefore providing final salvation as the heavenly high priest. Hughes, after a lengthy excursus in which he discusses the options for interpreting the "true tent" of 8:2 and the "greater and more perfect tent" of 9:11 (the human body of Christ, the church as the body of Christ, the earthly sanctuary/heavenly sanctuary) opts in light of the exalted language throughout these passages for the heavenly sanctuary containing the actual presence of God.⁵² This is certainly correct. In 8:1–6 the contrast between the earthly tabernacle built by Moses and the perfect

⁵⁰ J. H. Neyrey, "'Without Beginning of Days or End of Life' (Hebrews 7:3): Topos for a True Deity," *CBQ* 53 (1991) 440 (cf. 440–45), sees in the teaching that Melchizedek was "(1) unregenerated, (2) uncreated in the past and imperishable in the future, and (3) eternal or immortal," three Hellenistic *topoi* often used as proof of deity. Thus the emphasis is on Jesus as divine. P. Pilhofer, "KREITTONOS DIATHĒKĒS EGGYOS. Die Bedeutung der Präexistenzchristologie für die Theologie des Hebräerbriefs," *TLZ* 121 (1996) 320–21, 326–28, connects this with 1:1–4 as stressing Jesus' preexistence, thereby making him "the guarantor of a better covenant" (7:22).

⁵¹ Lane, *Hebrews* 1.cxliv.

⁵² Hughes, *Hebrews* 283–90. So also Hagner, Lane, Attridge, Ellingworth, deSilva, Guthrie, Koester. It should be added that this is not the result of hellenistic dualism. Attridge, *Hebrews* 222–24, shows the counterpart in 1 Enoch 14:10–20; T. Levi 5:2–4; Qumran (4QŠir'ōlat Haššaabat) and Philo (*Vit. Moses* 2.88, 98, 102–3 *et al.*). As to whether the imagery is due to Philonic allegorizing, I would opt for Jewish typology throughout. For an excellent summary of the issues involved in the debate over Philonic background vs. general Hellenistic Jewish background, see G. Guthrie, "Hebrews in its First-Century Context: Recent Research," in *The Face of New Testament Studies* (ed. S. McKnight and G. Osborne; Grand Rapids: Baker, forthcoming) 22–26.

heavenly sanctuary is developed, and once more the readers are made aware of the superiority of the way to God made possible only by Christ. This lays the basis for the superiority of Jesus' priesthood and of the covenant of which he is mediator (8:6, so Guthrie, Koester).

The new covenant established by Christ is developed in 8:7–13 and then applied throughout the next two chapters. The theme is inaugurated in 7:22, in which Christ as the permanent high priest is "the guarantor of a better covenant," and then in 8:6 in which it "is established on better promises." Jesus has already been shown as superior to Moses; and since Moses was mediator of the old covenant, he is the superior "mediator" of the new covenant. Jesus' superior mediatorial work was his sacrificial death and exaltation to the right hand of God (8:1–6). The citation of Jer 31:31–34 to anchor the new covenant is also remarkable in the sense that it is used in this way only at Qumran⁵³ and never played a central role in Judaism. The citation occurs in Jeremiah at the time of Josiah's revival and shows that the prophet did not trust the people in their acquiescence to Josiah's reforms (cf. Jer 3:10) and foretold Yahweh's decision that only a whole new covenant would suffice.⁵⁴ The reason for the extensive citation (the longest in the NT) is its message: it is caused by unfaithfulness in the people of God (v. 9); there will be a new internal relationship to God (v. 10); there will be a new access to God (v. 11); and their sins will be forgiven (v. 12). It is interesting that no midrashic development of this quote is made; the author obviously felt that the text itself was sufficient to carry his message. Instead, the author develops only one word, "new," and uses it to frame the quote with the "faulty" (v. 7) and "obsolescent" (v. 13) nature of the old covenant. This means it is "outmoded" or "antiquated," no longer sufficient to bring the people to God.

The new covenant theme is developed further in 9:15–22, which Ellingworth shows is the middle part of a chiasmic arrangement in 8:3–9:28.⁵⁵ There the analogy is a last will and testament, building on the meaning of *diathēkē* as both "covenant" and "testament."⁵⁶ The old covenant allowed the people to inherit the promised land, but only the new could bring an "eternal inheritance," because as a testament it demanded that the one who made the will die (v. 16). So Christ became the priestly mediator of the new covenant by giving his life as a permanent blood sacrifice, thereby surpassing in effectiveness the continual blood sacrifices needed in the old covenant.

⁵³ See deSilva, *Perseverance* 284n, utilizing S. Lehne, *The New Covenant in Hebrews* (JSNTSS 44; Sheffield: JSOT, 1990) 32–61. See also Lane, *Hebrews* 1.cxxxii; and Ellingworth, *Hebrews* 414, who say Jeremiah 31 is not used in the Qumran literature.

⁵⁴ See Bruce, *Hebrews* 170–72.

⁵⁵ Ellingworth, *Hebrews* 397: A (8:3–6), B (8:7–13), C (9:1–10), C' (9:11–14), B' (9:15–23), A' (9:24–28), with A = sanctuary, B = covenant, C = worship.

⁵⁶ Several scholars (Westcott, G. D. Kilpatrick, "Diathēkē in Hebrews," *ZNW* 68 [1977] 263–65, Lane, Guthrie) believe this word play is not present, because a will would have no mediator. Other recent scholars (Attridge, Ellingworth, deSilva, Koester) believe that the word "inheritance" as well as the emphasis on the death of the testator favors the word play. While both are viable, it seems slightly better in terms of the language to accept the word play.

Building on Exod 24:3–8, the author describes the elaborate sacrificial ceremony needed to ratify the old covenant in vv. 19–21, concluding in v. 22 that “nearly everything” had to be cleansed with blood for atonement to occur.

This moves naturally into the final of the three aspects in chapters 8–10, Christ’s provision of a superior sacrifice. It is introduced in 9:11–14, connected to the new covenant in 9:15–23, and then consummated in 9:23–10:18. One basic contrast permeates the whole. The blood of bulls and goats could never suffice, because it did not last but had to be continually renewed. Only the final, once-for-all blood sacrifice of Christ himself could provide eternal atonement for sin. This contrast is introduced in 9:11–12, where the author relates that Christ has entered the heavenly sanctuary with his own blood,⁵⁷ thus procuring eternal salvation. He develops this in three directions:⁵⁸ (1) Christ gave his own blood as the offering (9:13–22); (2) the place of the offering was not the earthly tabernacle but the heavenly sanctuary (9:23–24); (3) it was a once-for-all offering (9:25–28). In this final section the contrast with the annual Day of Atonement offering is especially prominent.

This last point, the eternal efficacy of Christ’s sacrifice, is driven home extensively in 10:1–18. At the same time this section sums up many of the themes presented in the book thus far—the perfecting of the saints, the high priestly work, the superior sacrifice, the earthly versus the heavenly, exalted to the right hand of God, the new covenant—turning it into the “theological crescendo”⁵⁹ of the christological section. There is a chiasmic arrangement contrasting the Torah injunctions (A) with the new covenant (B): A (1–4), B (5–10), B’ (11–14), A’ (15–18).⁶⁰ Once again the author does so by way of a midrash homily, this time on Ps 40:6–8 (vv. 5–7), with Christ as the divine speaker (v. 5a, “when Christ came into the world, he said”). In the psalm he first states God’s dissatisfaction with Jewish sacrifices and then gives the solution in “a body you have prepared for me” (v. 5b) and “I have come to do your will” (vv. 7, 9a). The implication, the author states, is that God has set aside the law and replaced it with the new covenant established through the bodily sacrifice of Christ (vv. 9b–10). It is this once-for-all sacrifice that has brought about the new covenant of Jeremiah 31 (vv. 15–17), so that “sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary” (v. 18).

As was the case with each aspect of the superior work of Christ, this final section also leads to a paranetic section (10:19–25) which concludes that on the basis of Christ’s forging a new access to God and of his high priestly work, the beleaguered saints are to draw near to God and function effectively as a family of believers. In conclusion, the Christology of Hebrews has not been an end in itself, i.e. worship, but a means of exhorting the believers to recognize the superiority of Christ primarily to Judaism but also (the

⁵⁷ K. Grayston, “Salvation Proclaimed: III. Hebrews 9:11–14,” *ExpTim* 93 (1982) 164–68, points out that “he entered once for all into the Holy Place” (v. 12c) is the central point of this passage and even of the epistle as a whole. Jesus’ entrance into the heavenly sanctuary with his blood made salvation possible.

⁵⁸ Guthrie, *Hebrews* 309.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 326.

⁶⁰ See Lane, *Hebrews* 2.258; Koester, *Hebrews* 436.

extent to which the Gentile believers of Rome are also addressed) to all the religions of this world. This is a critical part of the warning not to reject Christ and return to their former religions. Why go from the superior to the inferior? It is also the central solution, to place your hope in what you have confessed as a Christian “synagogue” or assembly (10:25), namely the exalted Christ. In fact, in 12:3 the solution is in every way to “fix our eyes on Jesus,”⁶¹ who is the final “hero of the faith” developed in ch. 11, the one who as our *archēgos* or “champion” begins and ends our walk in faith. He is the one who both has shown the way by winning the ultimate victory and returned to coach us to victory in the great race of life. Several recent articles have shown the relationship between Christology and faith in Hebrews; the central idea is that Jesus is both the object of our faith and the model for our faith.⁶² Here we are at the heart of Hebrews and its message.

IV. THE CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE MESSAGE

The primary purpose of the epistle is to warn the readers of the danger of relapsing back into the Judaism (and possible paganism) of their past, and the Christological teaching of the book intends to prove the superiority of Christ over every aspect of Judaism as well as to show how he can help the readers persevere in their pilgrimage.⁶³ Thus at the outset there are two major contextualizations, the comparison of Christianity with Judaism and instances where Christians are tempted to convert to another religion. Judaism today is quite a different religion than the one discussed in Hebrews. After the destruction of the temple in AD 70, Judaism was forced to reconstitute itself without the central cultic ritual, and it became an ethical religion centering more on orthopraxy than orthodoxy. Still, the Torah remained central, as did the boundary markers of Sabbath, circumcision, the food laws, and the required feasts such as Day of Atonement.

So many of the details in this epistle apply directly. The main truth is that Jesus is the promised Messiah. Whether or not he fulfilled the Isaianic emphasis on the suffering Messiah (that is dependent on one's interpretation of Isaiah 53 as a messianic prophecy), he did fulfill the priestly ministry described in Heb 5:11–7:28. He was the final blood sacrifice and procured final atonement for sin. By entering the heavenly sanctuary he did indeed open a new, direct access to God that was prophesied in Jeremiah 31, and he provided a new covenant relationship with God that made the old covenant obsolete. The unceasing succession of the high priestly ministry and the annual demands of the Day of Atonement ritual were broken and made

⁶¹ E. B. Horning, “Chiasmus, Creedal Structure, and Christology in Hebrews 12:1–2,” *BR* 23 (1978) 39–41, argues that “fix your eyes on Jesus” is the centerpiece of a chiasm and the focus of emphasis for this section that functions to summarize the major christological themes of the book.

⁶² T. Soding, “Zuversicht und Geduld im Schauen auf Jesus. Zum Glaubensbegriff des Hebräerbriefes,” *ZNW* 82 (1990) 387–96; N. C. Croy, “A Note on Hebrews 12:2,” *JBL* 114 (1995) 117–19; V. Rhee, “Christology and the Concept of Faith in Hebrews 5:11–6:20,” *JETS* 43 (2000) 83–96.

⁶³ On the pilgrimage theme of the book see E. Käsemann, *The Wandering People of God* (trans. R. A. Harrisville and I. L. Sandberg; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984); and Jewett, *Letter to Pilgrims*.

unnecessary, so why go back to those inferior demands when this is not necessary? Jesus has not only become the permanent high priest, but he also gave himself as the once-for-all blood sacrifice, so that the old rituals have been replaced by the blood of Christ and his permanent intercessory work (Heb 7:25: "he always lives to intercede for them"). Again, the point is, why take the road that demands repeated intercessions by an earthly mediator when we have a heavenly mediator engaging in final intercession?

The second primary thrust is the appeal of other religions to many Christians, for instance, the growth of the cults in Christian lands and the appeal of Islam to many urban blacks. Many years ago I was asked to write a brief article on why it is that the cults are so appealing to many evangelicals.⁶⁴ I was shocked at the statistics that indicated that as many as half of the members of some cults were former members of evangelical churches, e.g. the *Time* Magazine article on David Koresh's tragic group in Waco, Texas that showed many of those who died were formerly active in various churches. My findings indicated that there were two factors missing in many of our churches: a sense of community and a deep understanding of the Word of God, including theological awareness and a knowledge of when someone was misusing God's Word. Both issues are addressed in Hebrews. It is community, a mutual bond stemming from a family togetherness and deep involvement in one another's lives, that is a major deterrent to apostasy (cf. 3:13; 10:24–25; 12:12–13). Moreover, the whole epistle is built on a serious knowledge of the Word (for the believers of Rome, the OT Scriptures). Both of these aspects are desperately needed today, as the evangelical church has serious problems in both areas.⁶⁵

With respect to Islam, I remember when I was a senior in college and was privileged to spend a semester in Pakistan as a student missionary under TEAM. I was in Abbottabad, a major university town, and after consultation with the missionaries decided to do a series of lectures on the Gospel of John. These lectures were designed as an evangelistic tool to address a major misunderstanding among Muslims that Jesus was merely a great prophet who had prepared for Islam and spent forty years in Kashmir preaching Islam after being revived in the tomb following his crucifixion. I could have used Hebrews as well, for the exaltation Christology of the book is perfect for Islam. The five pillars of Islam are the creedal confession ("There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the Apostle of God"), the ritual prayers facing Mecca, almsgiving, fasting, and the pilgrimage (the *hajj*) to Mecca. Like Judaism Islam is a legalistic religion centering on rituals. The emphasis on Hebrews that Christ has replaced the rituals with himself is immensely helpful. Unlike Judaism, Allah is an impersonal God who completely directs the lives of his people (*In Sh'Allah*). The emphasis on the new direct access to a personal God on the basis of Christ's heavenly ministry will be

⁶⁴ G. R. Osborne, "Countering the Cultic Curse," *Christianity Today* 23/18 (June 29, 1979) 22–23.

⁶⁵ See D. F. Wells, *No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); and O. Guinness and J. Seel, eds., *No God but God: Breaking with the Idols of Our Age* (Chicago: Moody, 1992).

quite appealing to Muslims. Muhammad's trip to heaven from the spot in Jerusalem on which the Mosque of Omar sits pales into insignificance compared to the heavenly ministry of Christ.

The warnings against apostasy apply in many parts of the world. In the west, the major pagan god is actually secularism, and it fits every definition of idolatrous worship. The idol of America is the dollar sign, and too many Christians are far more controlled by the great Ba'al of money, status, and possessions than they are by God and Christ. They must be warned of the detrimental effects of secularism on their walk with Christ, namely "the sin that so easily entangles" (12:1). In every country of the world believers are bombarded by the religions out of which they were converted. In Asia ancestor worship is a huge problem,⁶⁶ and in both Africa and South America syncretistic cults predominate. The absolute demand of pure worship in this book is essential to the world-wide mission. The danger of Christians beset by spiritual lethargy must not be minimized anywhere. The Church is too easily satisfied, with the majority of its adherents being spiritually insensitive. In the last hundred years evangelism has so dominated that discipleship has all too often been neglected. The church must be grown qualitatively (i.e. spiritual growth) every bit as much as quantitatively (i.e. new converts). The Great Commission, it must be remembered, says to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:18), so we must center our church ministries on the Word of God "that is sharper than any double-edged sword" (4:12) rather than on the shallow preaching and teaching that so often characterizes us. We must create "Berean Christians" who "examine the Scriptures every day to see if what is said is true" (Acts 17:11). That is exactly what Hebrews also demands of us.

⁶⁶ See M. Thomas, "The High Priestly Christology of Hebrews as a Paradigm for an Indian Christology," *Bible Bhashyam* 27 (2001) 271–85, for an application to the situation in India.