New Testament Theology

Perfect Priest for Weary Pilgrims

A Theology of Hebrews

DENNIS E. JOHNSON

Series edited by Thomas R. Schreiner and Brian S. Rosner

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"The book of Hebrews is a difficult nut to crack. The contemporary church often struggles with making sense of a book that is so steeped in Old Testament language and imagery. Dennis Johnson is a gifted communicator—incisive and elegant—and every time I read his writing, I learn a great deal. *Perfect Priest for Weary Pilgrims* captures the complex theology of Hebrews yet never loses sight of the book's exhortation for believers."

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Dennis E. Johnson

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To Jane—
"The heart of her husband trusts in her. . . .
She does him good . . . all the days of her life."
(Prov. 31:11–12)

Contents

Series Preface

THERE ARE REMARKABLY FEW TREATMENTS of the big ideas of single books of the New Testament. Readers can find brief coverage in Bible dictionaries, in some commentaries, and in New Testament theologies, but such books are filled with other information and are not devoted to unpacking the theology of each New Testament book in its own right. Technical works concentrating on various themes of New Testament theology often have a narrow focus, treating some aspect of the teaching of, say, Matthew or Hebrews in isolation from the rest of the book's theology.

The New Testament Theology series seeks to fill this gap by providing students of Scripture with readable book-length treatments of the distinctive teaching of each New Testament book or collection of books. The volumes approach the text from the perspective of biblical theology. They pay due attention to the historical and literary dimensions of the text, but their main focus is on presenting the teaching of particular New Testament books about God and his relations to the world on their own terms, maintaining sight of the Bible's overarching narrative and Christocentric focus. Such biblical theology is of fundamental importance to biblical and expository preaching and informs exegesis, systematic theology, and Christian ethics.

The twenty volumes in the series supply comprehensive, scholarly, and accessible treatments of theological themes from an evangelical perspective. We envision them being of value to students, preachers, and interested laypeople. When preparing an expository sermon

series, for example, pastors can find a healthy supply of informative commentaries, but there are few options for coming to terms with the overall teaching of each book of the New Testament. As well as being useful in sermon and Bible study preparation, the volumes will also be of value as textbooks in college and seminary exegesis classes. Our prayer is that they contribute to a deeper understanding of and commitment to the kingdom and glory of God in Christ.

The epistle to the Hebrews frustrates and fascinates us. We may feel frustrated because the precise situation faced by the first readers differs dramatically from ours. But we are also fascinated, for we can discern, even on a first reading, that the author is a rigorous and profound thinker, one who has meditated deeply on Jesus Christ and his relationship to the Old Testament Scriptures and the Levitical cult. If we give ourselves to understand the letter, we see more clearly the glory of Jesus Christ as our prophet, priest, and king. The storyline of the Scriptures opens up to us as the relationship between the old covenant and the new covenant is unfolded. At the same time, the typological relationship between events, persons, and institutions is clarified, granting us a clearer perception of the whole counsel of God. In addition, we realize afresh that our problem with guilt and defilement has been solved through Jesus Christ's once-for-all-time sacrifice. On understanding the letter's message, we are encouraged and motivated to persevere in faith until the end of our earthly sojourn. Dennis Johnson unpacks the message of Hebrews in this wonderfully lucid and pastoral exposition of the letter. We are confident that many pastors, teachers, and lay people will want to preach, study, and share the message of Hebrews after reading his most accessible and profound treatment of this letter.

Thomas R. Schreiner and Brian S. Rosner

Preface

TRUTH BE TOLD, I did not always love Hebrews. As a young Christian and even as a seminary student, I found Hebrews daunting. It expects of its readers a deep and wide grasp of the Old Testament. Its theological reasoning is demanding to follow, even though the author rebukes his readers for needing baby's milk rather than being able to digest solid meat. It warns us against drifting to a point of apostasy from which there is no return, and that prospect is terrifying. Then there is the Greek vocabulary and syntax, which are elegant but complex. Even with the insightful guidance of Richard B. Gaffin Jr., my New Testament professor at Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia), I found Hebrews a challenging mystery to crack, and I know that I was not alone.

After nine years in pastoral ministry, I was called to teach New Testament at Westminster Seminary California (WSC), and one of the courses assigned to me was General Epistles and Revelation. That meant many hours of study and classroom teaching on Hebrews; fewer classroom hours in the epistles of James, Peter, John, and Jude; and—eventually—a tentative attempt to introduce the book of Revelation (but that's another story). Over the next sixteen years, I fell in love with Hebrews, especially with its Christ-centered, redemptive-historical reading of the Old Testament. I became convinced that God's Holy Spirit has given us this letter—actually, a sermon in written form, as we will see—as a handbook and case study in discovering Christ in all the Scriptures, as the risen Jesus taught his apostles to do (Luke 24).

When the focus of my work at WSC switched to pastoral theology disciplines, a mentor encouraged me to draw on my New Testament studies in my approach to homiletics. I realized that God had been preparing me to teach homiletics in the years that he saturated my mind and heart in Hebrews and in its author's exegetical insight and pastoral sensitivity. After a decade of teaching preachers-to-be, I published *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures*,[1] building much of my case on Hebrews as what I called "an apostolic preaching paradigm," exemplifying the blend of Christ-centered, redemptive-historical hermeneutics and heart-searching homiletics that flows from the way Jesus himself taught his disciples to read the Old Testament. Since my retirement, I have been privileged to write two fairly brief commentaries on Hebrews[2] and to teach a course, Preaching Christ from the Epistle to the Hebrews, in the Korean-language Doctor of Ministry program offered by Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia). The insightful questions raised by these faithful pastors and preachers have enriched my own grasp of Hebrews. Fifty years after graduating from seminary, I am glad to say it: I love Hebrews.

When invited to write on the theology of Hebrews for Crossway's New Testament Theology series, I was grateful for the opportunity to step back from the close reading of the text's absorbing details to view in broader perspective the theological architecture and pastoral agenda that structure and unify this New Testament treasure. I am grateful to series editors Tom Schreiner—a brother and a friend since we sat together in New Testament seminars as doctoral students in the 1970s—and Brian Rosner—a brother and a friend whom I have yet to meet in person—for this edifying assignment. I am thankful for Crossway's editorial staff, and particularly for the editorial skill and theological insight of Chris Cowan, whose questions and sug-

1 Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007).

2 Dennis E. Johnson, *Hebrews*, in *Hebrews–Revelation*, vol. 12 of *ESVEC*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar (Crossway, IL: Wheaton, 2018); Dennis E. Johnson, *Hebrews*, in The Gospel Coalition Bible Commentary, accessed May 19, 2023, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/.

gestions have improved this book in many ways. And I am always, always grateful to our generous God for my wife, Jane—my favorite proofreader, advisor, encourager, and so much more (Prov. 31:10–31). I am awestruck by God's grace over the half-century-plus that we have shared life together.

Gentle reader, whether or not you are feeling weary, at this moment, in your pilgrimage through this world's wilderness, I can assure you that Jesus is the perfect priest who secures and supplies salvation "to the uttermost" (Heb. 7:25). My prayer is that you will come to share my love of Hebrews—better yet, to share my love for the ever-living sovereign and sympathetic Savior whose blood cleanses the conscience and to whom the Holy Spirit bears witness in this "word of exhortation" (Heb. 13:22).

Abbreviations

Ant.	*Jewish Antiquities*, by Josephus
BAGD	Bauer, Walter, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.
BTCP	Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation
CBR	*Currents in Biblical Research*
CNTUOT	*Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*. Edited by G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007.
ESVEC	*ESV Expository Commentary*
ET	English translation
HNTC	Harper's New Testament Commentaries
ICC	International Critical Commentary
Jub.	Jubilees
L&N	Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene A. Nida, eds. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains.* 2nd ed. New York: United Bible Societies, 1989.
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text (Hebrew Scriptures)
NAC	New American Commentary

NDBT	*New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Edited by T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D. A. Carson, and Graeme Goldsworthy. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000.
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIDNTTE	*New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*. 5 vols. 2nd ed. Edited by Moisés Silva. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2014.
NovT	*Novum Testamentum*
NovTSup	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
NTL	New Testament Library
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
TynBul	*Tyndale Bulletin*
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WTJ	*Westminster Theological Journal*

Introduction

Truth-Driven Transformation in Troubled Times

My word of exhortation.

HEBREWS 13:22

A Treasury of Truth and Encouragement

Hebrews is a rich treasury of life-transforming truth and heart-sustaining encouragement. Do you long to know Jesus of Nazareth? Hebrews introduces him as the eternal Son who radiates the glory of God (Heb. 1:2–3), the royal Messiah whom God calls "God" (1:8), and the Creator of earth and heaven (1:10–12). Hebrews also shows how close this glorious divine Son has come to you, sharing your human flesh and blood (2:9–16), enduring suffering and trials like yours (2:17–18), and empathizing with your weakness to help you in crisis (4:15–16).

Do you long to see why Christians base all their hopes—and risk their lives—on this paradoxical union of divine majesty and human frailty in the person of Jesus? Hebrews reveals the perfection of Jesus as the one and only mediator between God and humanity, who secures our communion with God (Heb. 7:22; 8:6; 9:15). God created you for his friendship, but your bad choices have stained you to the core, creating a chasm of estrangement that you cannot cross. The Son came into

the world to do God's will, enduring temptation without sinning and offering his body as the blameless sacrifice that cleanses your conscience and brings you home (4:15; 7:26; 9:14; 10:5–10). This same Son was raised from the dead (13:20), "crowned with glory and honor" (2:9), and enthroned at God's right hand (1:3, 13; 8:1). There he lives forever to pray for you (7:24–25).

Do you long to understand whether (or how) the confusing regulations and rituals about worship in Exodus and Leviticus have anything to teach us today? Hebrews helps us make sense of the interlocking system of architecture (9:1–5), priestly credentials and conduct (5:1–4; 7:11–16, 23–28), sacrificial rites (9:13–22), and sacred calendar (9:6–7; 10:1–3, 11) that God gave to Israel. Hebrews cuts through the complexity by showing that the core issue is the need to "perfect" worshipers—to cleanse the conscience, not just the flesh—so that they can approach God in his holiness (7:11, 19; 9:9–14; 10:1–4). The elaborate network in the ancient law functioned as "a shadow of the good things to come" (10:1), a preview of the ultimate conscience-cleansing event that would open the way to communion with God. Jesus's sacrifice on the cross was that watershed event (9:14; 10:10–14), so now through him we can draw near to God (4:14–16; 10:19–22).

Perhaps, recalling that the risen Lord Jesus explained to his apostles everything written about him "in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44), you long to see how those ancient Scriptures, given centuries before his birth in Bethlehem, foretold and foreshadowed his mission. Hebrews bursts with Old Testament passages and insightful interpretations that unveil their testimony to Jesus the Messiah. Moses testified beforehand (Heb. 3:5) to Christ's priesthood, which was foreshadowed in the mysterious Melchizedek (7:1–10; cf. Gen. 14:18–20), and the law's Levitical system prefigured Christ's singular sacrifice (Heb. 9:1–10:14). Later prophets foretold Christ's inauguration of a new covenant to surpass and displace the old, shattered covenant of Sinai (Heb. 8:5–13; cf. Jer. 31:31–34). Psalms declared the Son's superiority to angels (Heb. 1:5–13; cf. Pss. 2; 45; 97; 102; 104), his connection with humanity (Heb. 2:5–14; Ps. 8), his sac-

rificial obedience (Heb. 10:5–10; cf. Ps. 40), and his glorious exaltation to God's right hand (Heb. 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; cf. Ps. 110). If you want to read the Old Testament the way Jesus taught his apostles to read it, watch carefully how Hebrews handles Scripture.

Do you long to discern whether your own little life and human history have meaning? Hebrews reveals a God who sovereignly controls the unfolding eras of time. He directed the flow of millennia toward the arrival of the "last days" (Heb. 1:2), the "end of the ages" when the Son entered human history "to put away sin" (9:26). The Lord still maneuvers events toward a triumphant consummation, "the world to come" (2:5) and "the city that is to come" (13:14), an unshakable kingdom (12:28) reserved for those who trust him (1:14; 6:12; 10:35–36). Covenant—a sovereignly imposed commitment between the Lord and his people—is the pattern that structures God's plan for history. So Jesus's inauguration of a new covenant, replacing the covenant mediated by Moses, brings the dawn of the era of perfection for which ancient believers longed (8:6–13; 9:8–10, 13–26). Your own life and the entire universe are directed by God's design toward a glorious destiny.

Do you find yourself weary with life's humdrum struggles, discouraged by opposition, dismayed by dangers, and doubting God's promises of a better future? Hebrews presents a realistic but hopeful paradigm to make sense of your daily experience: like the Israelite generation who left Egypt with Moses, your life is a trek through a hostile wilderness, en route to a homeland that transcends this sin-stained earth (3:7–4:13; 11:9–10, 13–16; 13:14). Hebrews strengthens drooping hands and weak knees with its display of Jesus, faith's pioneer and perfecter who endured the cross and despised its shame (12:2–3) to liberate his brothers and sisters and lead them to glory (2:10–15).

A Difficult, Daunting Enigma

But Hebrews does not yield its bounty cheaply or easily. The author acknowledges that one of his central themes—how Jesus fulfills the priesthood pattern of Melchizedek—is "hard to explain" (5:10–11). The difficulty lies not so much in the complexity of his topic but rather

in the spiritual obtuseness of his audience, who "have become dull of hearing" and failed to mature spiritually (5:11–14). Nevertheless, as we turn to Hebrews from the straightforward stories in the Gospels or the theological and ethical discussions in Paul's letters, we may feel overwhelmed by a difficult, daunting enigma.

Consider the mysterious Melchizedek. This "king of Salem" and "priest of God Most High" appears briefly (three verses) in Genesis when his path crosses with Abraham's (Gen. 14:18–20). His name recurs elsewhere in the Old Testament only in Psalm 110:4, where a priestly "order" bearing his name is filled by God's oath to inaugurate a king to be a "priest forever." These two biblical texts pique our curiosity, and even the author's explanation of them poses puzzles that have been debated for millennia.

Taking a step back from Melchizedek to consider the epistle's argument as a whole, the author presupposes that his audience shares his deep and wide familiarity with Israel's ancient Scriptures. If we are not saturated in the Old Testament and its institutions, Hebrews will sound to us like a conversation conducted in a foreign language. To mine the treasures found in Hebrews, we need to invest the effort to immerse our minds in the religious heritage of ancient Israel, which was molded by the Old Testament.

Moreover, the author's interpretive strategies in exploring Old Testament texts sometimes surprise us. We may have understood Psalm 8 to describe the dignity and dominion of humanity as created in God's image in the beginning, but Hebrews presents the psalm as a promise of "the world to come," a future situation that is "not yet" (Heb. 2:5–8). In this psalm, Hebrews discerns a redemptive-historical agenda, in which man's present status, subordinate to the angels "for a little while," will lead to his being "crowned with glory and honor" (2:9). Similar redemptive-historical readings of Psalms 110 (Heb. 7:15–25) and 40 (Heb. 10:5–10) show us that we need Hebrews to teach us how the Old Testament testifies to Jesus the Christ.

Hebrews issues alarming warnings about the dire consequences of abandoning Jesus. To "drift away" (2:1), neglecting the great salvation

that the Lord announced, will incur worse punishment than that inflicted on the ancient law's vilest offenders (2:1–4; 10:28–31). To "fall away," after encountering the gospel's light and the Holy Spirit's power, is to place oneself beyond the possibility of repentance (6:4–8). Such terrifying warnings underscore the urgency of the author's repeated summons to "hold fast" our confidence and confession (3:6, 14; 4:14; 6:18; 10:23). But they also raise the troubling question of Christ's power to sustain his people's faith and secure their eternal salvation. How do we reconcile such apostasy texts with Jesus's assurance that no one can snatch his sheep from his hand (John 10:28–29) and with the assurance in Hebrews itself that Jesus "is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him" (Heb. 7:25)?

Other difficulties posed by Hebrews could be mentioned, but one more will suffice: Hebrews is obviously a communication from an author to an audience whose past history and present challenges he[1] knows, but its text does not identify either the author or the recipients. Unlike the epistles of Paul, James, and Peter, Hebrews does not open with the name of its author or the location of its addressees. Knowing the identity of a document's author, especially if he has written other documents available to us (as Paul did), would give us a broader context for reading the text before us. For Hebrews, however, we have no such wider context.[2]

Nor does Hebrews *explicitly* identify the location of the congregation to which it was first written. The title "To the Hebrews" (*pros hebraious*)

1 That the author is male is shown by his connection of a masculine present participle with a first-person pronoun (*me . . . diēgoumenon*) to refer to his action: "time would fail *me to tell*" (11:32).

2 An ancient and widespread (but not unanimous) tradition has attributed Hebrews to Paul, yet the author's identification with those who heard the gospel not from the Lord himself but from his apostles (2:3–4) is inconsistent with Paul's claim that he received his apostolic calling and gospel "not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father" (Gal. 1:1, cf. 1:11–12). Church fathers such as Origen and Reformers such as Luther and Calvin, therefore, challenged the tradition of Pauline authorship, as do most scholars today. For more on authorship, see Dennis E. Johnson, *Hebrews*, in *Hebrews–Revelation*, vol. 12 of *ESVEC*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar (Crossway, IL: Wheaton, 2018), 20–21. For a fuller discussion, see F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 14–20; William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, WBC 47A (Dallas: Word, 1991), xlvii–li.

was attached to the document early in its circulation. It reflects, I believe, an authentic tradition or valid inference from the contents,[3] but some scholars have argued for a Gentile audience.[4] Hebrews itself does not directly identify its recipients as either Jewish Christians or Gentile Christians, nor does it tell us where they lived.[5] When we read Philippians and 1–2 Corinthians, the accounts in the book of Acts about the founding of these churches give us insights into the situations of these churches (Acts 16, 18). Hebrews contains hints about the backstory of its recipients (Heb. 6:9–10; 10:32–34), but where they lived, how they came to trust Jesus, and what their relationship was to the author remain uncertain. Our ignorance complicates our efforts to listen to Hebrews as though we were sitting alongside its first audience.

A Catholic (General) Epistle or a "Word of Exhortation"?

One factor that contributes to our sense of the foreignness of Hebrews is its genre. Today it is placed toward the end of the New Testament in a group of writings typically called "Catholic Epistles"[6] or "General Epistles."[7] Unlike Paul's epistles to churches in Rome, Corinth, Colossae, or Thessalonica, several of these Catholic or General Epistles are addressed to congregations over broad regions (e.g., 1 Peter) or even to the Christian community at large (e.g., James, Jude). They tend not to address the distinctive difficulties of one specific congregation.

But is Hebrews a *general* epistle, addressed to far-flung Christian communities, as 1 Peter and James are? No, Hebrews addresses a congregation with a particular history. These believers had begun their Christian pilgrimage well, enduring rejection and loss (Heb. 10:32–34).

3 For a fuller discussion of the Hebrew/Jewish identity of the original recipients, see chap. 1.

4 Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), 11–19.

5 The greeting from "those who come from Italy" (13:24) may suggest an inference about the destination of Hebrews. This question will be discussed more fully in chap. 1.

6 The English "catholic" is derived directly from the Greek *katholikos*, meaning "universal," and derived in turn from the prepositional phrase *kath' holou, meaning* "throughout the whole."

7 On the other hand, Papyrus 46, an early manuscript of Paul's epistles (ca. AD 200), places Hebrews between Romans and 1 Corinthians, obviously assuming Pauline authorship.

But then some had grown "dull of hearing" (5:11), spiritually enfeebled, at risk of abandoning their confession altogether (2:1; 3:12; 6:4–10; 12:12–17). This congregation suffered the passing of a first generation of leaders, whom they must "remember" (13:7), and they needed to submit to their present leaders (13:17). The author hopes to visit them in person (13:19, 23). As we will see in chapter 1, the author's comments on his audience's past and present trials and his warnings and exhortations actually give us a clear picture of this congregation's spiritual situation.

Of course, the truths that Hebrews unfolds and the exhortations it issues address the needs of many churches down through the centuries, as do Paul's letters to the Corinthians, the Thessalonians, and the Philippians. But Hebrews is no more "general" or "catholic" than those very personal and passionate pastoral missives to churches in specific Greco-Roman cities.

We might also question whether "epistle" or "letter" is the literary genre that best fits Hebrews. As we have observed, Hebrews lacks the names of author and recipients that open Hellenistic epistles. The author himself describes his work as a "word of exhortation" (*tou logou tēs paraklēseōs*, 13:22). This is the expression used by a synagogue leader in Antioch in Pisidia, when, after the reading from the Law and the Prophets, he invited Paul and Barnabas, "Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement [*logos paraklēseōs*] for the people, say it" (Acts 13:15). Accepting his invitation, Paul stood and summarized Israel's history from the ancient Scriptures, leading to the announcement that from King David's "offspring God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus" (13:23). Paul's "word of exhortation" delivered to that synagogue congregation was an oral exposition of Old Testament Scriptures, with their application to the hearers. *It was a sermon.*

Other New Testament texts confirm that the reading of the Law and the Prophets was followed by its explanation with "exhortation" both in Jewish synagogues (Luke 4:16–21) and in Christian congregations. Paul instructs Timothy: "Until I come, devote yourself to the reading, the exhortation [*tē paraklēsei*], the teaching" (1 Tim. 4:13, my translation).

The Greek definite article with all three elements implies their regular role in the church's liturgy: Scriptures are read publicly, and then their truths are expounded and applied.[8]

How does hearing Hebrews *as a sermon* instead of reading it as a letter help us receive its message? In at least two ways. *First, since God is presently speaking, we must hear and heed.* The description "word of exhortation" alerts us to the way Hebrews calls us to *listen* to God's voice, his "living and active" and very sharp word (Heb. 4:12), as he speaks to us in the preaching of his word. Hebrews introduces quotations from the Old Testament in a way that differs from Paul. Paul typically introduces Old Testament quotations with the formula, "It is written [*gegraptai*]" (e.g., Rom. 1:17; 2:24; 3:4, 10; 4:17). By using "to write" (*graphō*) in the perfect tense, Paul emphasizes the fixed form and abiding authority of the Scriptures across generations. Written in the past, the Scriptures have abiding authority today. Hebrews, on the other hand, characteristically introduces Scripture with present tense/aspect verbs of speaking. This way of speaking envisions a situation in which God's word is being proclaimed to a gathered congregation—or, in the case of Hebrews, being read aloud in their hearing:

- "he *says* [*legei*]" (1:6, 7; 5:6; 8:8; 10:5[9])
- "the Holy Spirit *says* [*legei*]" (3:7)
- "as it *is said* [*legesthai*]" (3:15)
- "For it is witnessed [*martyreitai*] of him" (7:17)
- "the Holy Spirit also *bears witness* [*martyrei*] to us" (10:15)
- "the exhortation that *addresses* [*dialegetai*] you as sons" (12:5)

Old Testament citations are also introduced, less frequently, by verbs of speaking in past tenses, both aorist (e.g., *eipen*, 1:5; *diemartyrato*, 2:6) and perfect (e.g., *eirēken*, 1:13; 4:3). But the verb "to write" (*graphō*),

8 Further examples of the "word of exhortation" as a spoken sermon, expounding and applying Scripture, in early Christian and ancient Jewish assemblies are cited in Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, lxx–lxxv; William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, WBC 47B (Dallas: Word, 1991), 568.

9 ESV has "he said," but the Greek verb *legei* is present: "he says."

characteristic of Paul, appears only once in Hebrews, within a Psalm 40 citation (Heb. 10:7) that, according to Hebrews, Christ *is saying* (*legei*, 10:5).[10] This word of exhortation is being read aloud to the assembled congregation, so our author writes just as he would speak if he were present among them: at this moment and in their midst, their God *is speaking* to his people through his Scriptures.

Because God is speaking this word of exhortation to us, we must listen carefully and respond faithfully to "what we have heard," the Lord's message of salvation, now conveyed to us by "those who heard" him (2:1–3). Psalm 95:7–11, which Hebrews discusses at length (3:7–4:13), expresses the author's affirmation to that early Christian congregation that God is presently speaking to them through a psalm given through David a millennium earlier. The citation opens, "*Today*, if you hear his voice" (3:7), and Hebrews draws a twofold conclusion from this. On the one hand, since the Israelite generation that left Egypt failed to enter God's "rest" through unbelief (3:16–19), "long afterward" God spoke through David in the psalm, appointing another "today," in which God's voice must be heard with faith (4:7). On the other hand, God's appointed "today" extends into the Hebrew Christians' present: "as long as it is called 'today'" they must "exhort one another every day" (3:13).

Second, the rich theology and biblical interpretation of Hebrews are aimed toward transforming lives. We are rightly impressed by the theological depth and exposition of Old Testament passages in Hebrews. So it is tempting to approach this document as a theological and hermeneutical essay with an intellectual agenda. The author's description, "word of exhortation," however, alerts us to the *profoundly pastoral purpose* toward which his biblical exposition and theological argument are directed. He aims not merely to persuade minds but also to stir and fortify hearts, to mold character, and to motivate people to faithful action.

The semantic range of the Greek word represented by "exhortation" (*paraklēsis*) is broad. Depending on its context, *paraklēsis* and its cognate verb *parakaleō* may refer to speech that (a) summons others to

10 In 13:22 the author acknowledges that distance requires him to preach his "word of exhortation" via writing (*epesteila*) instead of in person (see 13:19, 23).

action ("exhortation," Heb. 13:22; cf. Rom. 12:1), (b) instills confidence ("encouragement," Heb. 6:18; cf. Acts 16:40), (c) makes a request ("beg," 2 Cor. 8:4), or (d) consoles the grieving ("comfort," Matt. 5:4; 2 Cor. 1:4–7).[11] In Hebrews, the verb appears four times (3:13; 10:25; 13:19, 22) and the noun three times (6:18; 12:5; 13:22). Our author's use of this word group bridges senses (a) and (b). So he urges believers, in their interactions with each other, to "exhort one another," expressing encouragement that does not merely lift spirits but also *stimulates to perseverance* those who may be wavering in faith (3:13; 10:25).

The structure of Hebrews fits its description as a word of encouragement. The author moves through the themes of Christ's superiority to Old Testament agents of revelation (1:5–4:13), his superiority as covenant mediator to the Old Testament priesthood and sacrificial system (4:14–10:35), and as the trailblazer who leads his people into a better inheritance than Canaan (10:36–12:29). Each step in this preacher's argument for Jesus's superiority lays the theological foundation for a direct exhortation to his congregation:[12]

- Jesus surpasses the angels who conveyed God's law to Moses (1:4–14), *so pay attention to his word* (2:1–4).
- Jesus surpasses Moses, who received God's law (3:1–6), *so hear God's voice and believe his promises, unlike Moses's contemporaries* (3:7–4:13).
- Jesus surpasses Aaron as eternal high priest (4:14–5:10, 6:13–7:28), *so let us leave behind the foundation and move on to maturity* (5:11–6:12).
- Jesus's self-sacrifice and new covenant surpass the old covenant, its earthly sanctuary, and its repeated animal sacrifices (8:1–10:18), *so let us draw near to God, hold fast our confession, and support each other* (10:19–31).

11 See entries on "παράκλησις" in BAGD 618; L&N 25.150, 33.168, 33.310, 33.315; *NIDNTTE* 3:627–33.

12 On the structure of Hebrews, see R. T. France, "The Writer of Hebrews as a Biblical Expositor," *TynBul* 47, no. 2 (1996): 245–76; Johnson, *Hebrews*, 22–23, 28–30.

- Jesus leads us to the heavenly inheritance for which the patriarchs longed, which surpasses the earthly land of promise (10:32–11:40), *so let us endure in faith, looking to Jesus* (12:1–17).
- Jesus welcomes us to worship in the heavenly Mount Zion, which surpasses Sinai's terrors (12:18–24), *so let us heed his voice from heaven with thankful worship* (12:25–29).

The transition between a section of biblical and theological exposition, on the one hand, and the response it elicits, on the other, is marked by the conjunction, "therefore,"[13] followed by a second-person plural verb in the imperative mood (directly commanding the audience),[14] by a hortatory subjunctive verb ("let us," in which the author *includes himself* in the exhortation),[15] or by another verb expressing the hearers' obligation.[16]

The theological argument in each movement of the sermon is driving toward its respective exhortation section. So it is unhelpful to call any of these exhortations a "parenthesis" or a "digression"[17] that interrupts the theological discourse. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. rightly observes that the exhortation sections interspersed throughout Hebrews, rather than being interruptions, are the purpose toward which the author's argument is directed:

> It is misleading to view Hebrews basically as an apologetic-polemic treatment of the person and work of Christ and the superiority of

13 The ESV's "therefore" accurately reflects the sense of six Greek words or constructions that introduce a conclusion drawn from the previous discussion, indicating the fitting response: *oun* (4:1, 6, 11, 14 [ESV: "then"], 16; 10:19, 35; 13:15 [ESV: "then"]); *dia touto* (2:1); *hothen* (3:1); *dio* (3:7; 6:1; 12:12, 28); *toigaroun* (12:1); and *toinyn* (13:13).

14 Heb. 3:1; 12:12–14.

15 Heb. 4:1, 11; 4:14–16; 6:1; 10:19–25; 12:1, 28; 13:13, 15.

16 Heb. 2:1. In prohibitions, the subjunctive mood in the second person (with the negative adverb *mē*, "not") functions as a second-person imperative: 3:7–8; 10:35.

17 Raymond Brown, *Christ Above All: The Message of Hebrews*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 46: "This *parenthesis* deals with the gospel of God. . . . In this *parenthesis* the writer reminds us of the Christian revelation of the gospel." And, strikingly: "We have already seen that 2:1–4 is a *parenthesis*. So, in order to understand the flow of the author's argument, we ought to read directly from 1:14 to 2:5, *omitting the parenthetical section*. Before his brief *digression* . . ." (53, emphasis added).

> the new covenant to the old, to which various imperatives have been appended in a secondary fashion. On this view doctrine (e.g., the high priestly ministry of Christ) would be intelligible apart from considering the exhortation. Hebrews does provide profound and extensive teaching, . . . but it does that only "in solution" with application, only as the paranetic element is pervasive and shapes the course of the argument as a whole.[18]

Gaffin's observation that the teaching in Hebrews comes "in solution" with its application so that the hortatory purpose shapes the doctrinal discussion applies throughout this word of exhortation.

The central section of Hebrews (8:1–10:18), which develops the main theological subject ("the point," *kephalaion*, 8:1)—that is, Jesus's superior priestly qualification and conscience-perfecting sacrifice—is surrounded by two exhortations (4:14–16; 10:19–25) that function as bookends (*inclusio*) to the doctrinal discussion. The echoes of 4:14–16 that appear in 10:19–25 signal their interconnectedness:

- "Since we have" (*echontes oun*, 4:14; 10:19)
- "A great [high] priest" (*archierea megan*, 4:14; *hierea megan*, 10:21)
- "Jesus" (*Iēsoun*, 4:14; *Iēsou*, 10:19)
- "Let us hold fast [our/the] confession" (*kratōmen tēs homologias*, 4:14; *katechōmen tēn homologian*, 10:23)
- "Let us draw near" (*proserchōmetha*, 4:16; 10:22)
- "Confidence" (*parrēsias*, 4:16; *parrēsian*, 10:19)

Both exhortations also speak of the access into God's heavenly sanctuary that Jesus has achieved for his people. Because our "great high priest . . . has passed through the heavens" (4:14), we too may "draw near to the throne of grace" (4:16). Through Jesus's shed blood and

18 Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "A Sabbath Rest Still Awaits the People of God," in *Pressing toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, ed. Charles G. Dennison and Richard C. Gamble (Philadelphia: Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986), 35.

sacrificed flesh, we may "enter the holy places" (10:19), drawing near with "hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience" (10:22). The similarities between these exhortations emphasize how both derive from Jesus's superior priestly office and sacrifice (the themes of 5:1–10:18). Because Jesus the Son is the great high priest whose once-for-all death completely cleanses consciences, believers may and must avail themselves of the access to God that Christ has won for them.

Yet these exhortations also differ from each other in ways that fit their respective locations in the sermon. As the "therefore" (*oun*) that opens 4:14 signals, this exhortation flows from motifs previously developed: (1) Jesus is "the Son of God," as the prologue (1:1–4) and Old Testament citations contrasting the Son to the angels (1:5–14) announced. (2) Jesus has been introduced as a "merciful and faithful high priest" acquainted with suffering and temptation (2:17–18). So the exhortation in 4:14–16 cites his sympathy, as one who has known temptation yet without sin. The exhortation in 10:19–25 marshals additional motivations (as its opening "therefore" implies) from the discussion of Jesus's priestly appointment and sacrificial ministry that has preceded it (5:1–10:18). Since our high priest has entered God's heavenly sanctuary, we too have confidence to enter (6:19–20; 7:24–25; 8:1–6; 9:11–12, 24–28). This confidence is based on his conscience-cleansing blood and body, sacrificed once for all to perfect those who come to God through him (9:13–14; 10:5–14). Because the author's *pastoral* purpose drives the exploration of Jesus's priesthood and sacrifice (5:1–10:18), this rich theology issues in the exhortation to draw near in confidence and hold fast our confession—and to do so corporately (10:24–25).

The description of Hebrews as a word of exhortation notifies us that its theology calls us to hear and heed its *call to respond* with enduring faith, approaching God's throne of grace and encouraging each other. Jesus said that willingness to do God's will is the prerequisite for understanding his teaching (John 7:17). That principle applies to the theology presented in Hebrews.

Agenda for Our Hearing This Word of Exhortation

Since the theology of Hebrews comes "in solution" with its application (as Gaffin observes), it's clear that the author wisely took into account, as faithful pastors do, the frame of mind and needs of the congregation whom he was addressing. So chapter 1 begins with the *situation of the original recipients*. Reminders of their past experience (6:9–10; 10:32–34), warnings about present dangers (2:1; 3:12; 4:1; 5:11–13; 6:4–9, 11–12; 10:35–38; 12:15–17), and exhortations (3:13; 10:24–25; 12:12–14) help us sketch the crisis of faith that those weary pilgrims experienced. They needed to step back and view their immediate trials in a wider perspective, as fitting the pattern of Israel's journey through the wilderness (3:7–4:11; 11:8–16; 13:14). We need to do the same.

More significant than the original audience's cultural context is their "last days" moment in the unfolding *history of revelation and redemption* (1:1–2). Chapter 2 examines how the flow of redemptive history structures God's unfolding revelation in Scripture, thereby reshaping the new covenant audience's perspective on old covenant institutions and reinforcing their own privilege and heightened responsibility. God structures the historical unfolding of his saving agenda through successive covenants, so this chapter explores the author's treatment of the components, continuities, and contrasts of divine-human covenants in the Bible.

The extensive appeal in Hebrews to the old covenant Scriptures to demonstrate the superiority of Christ illustrates the connection between *biblical interpretation* and theological discourse (which, in turn, issues in exhortation). Chapter 3 surveys the stimulating, sometimes surprising, and consistently Christ-centered approach that Hebrews takes in interpreting Old Testament texts. Shouldn't today's biblical scholars and pastors be learning from this hermeneutical example?

Chapters 4–6 explore the heart of the author's pastorally focused theology, namely, the *priestly ministry of Jesus*, by which he mediates the new covenant. In chapter 4, we observe how the Christology of Hebrews combines a robust confession of the immutable divinity of

the Son (1:1–14; 4:14; 13:8) with its equally strong assertion that this divine Son assumed human nature, subject to weakness, temptation, and suffering, in order to rescue the children God gave him (2:5–18; 4:14–5:10). Chapter 5 discusses Jesus's priestly office "in the order of Melchizedek," noting not only its similarities to the Levitical-Aaronic priesthood but also its superiority. Chapter 6 considers how Christ's priesthood qualifies him to mediate the new covenant, promised by God through Jeremiah, in which complete forgiveness is secured. Jesus's once-for-all sacrifice of himself and entrance into heaven as the ever-living intercessor has opened access for all believers to enter the heavenly sanctuary and to worship in ways acceptable to God.

Hebrews exhorts hearers to exercise *enduring faith* in God's promises. Chapter 7 draws warning from the faithless response of Israel's wilderness generation, foreshadowing the ultimate treason of apostasy from allegiance to Jesus (Heb. 3:7–4:13; cf. 2:1–4; 6:1–8; 10:26–31). But we will also survey the role of forward-looking faith in the lives of Old Testament saints (10:35–11:40). Such faith holds fast to one's confession (4:14; 10:23) in the face of adversity and opposition. Such endurance in faith over the long run depends on consistent, proactive commitment to engage one another in congregational worship and mutual exhortation. Those who approach God through Jesus draw near to God's throne and hold fast their hope, not as independent individuals but as members of a band of pilgrims who—though weary in the wilderness—hear and heed God's summons to gather, to exhort each other, and to stimulate each other to love and good deeds (3:12–14; 10:23–25, 32–34).

1

The Wilderness Pilgrimage of the People of God

The promise of entering his rest.
HEBREWS 4:1

Knowing Your Congregation

Good pastors know God's people. Faithful preaching demands more than orthodoxy and oratory. A biblically accurate, theologically insightful discourse delivered with eloquence is not a sermon. At least, it's not quite a sermon, since a crucial component may be missing: engagement with listeners' lives, interaction with their strengths and struggles, their joys and sorrows within, and the threats without.

Classic and contemporary discussions of preaching stress that good pastors, knowing God's people, address their sermons to their hearers' needs. In the seventeenth century, the Westminster Assembly advised the preacher, in applying the message of a biblical text, to "wisely make choice of such uses as, by his residence and conversing with his flock, he findeth most needful and seasonable; and, amongst these, such as may most draw their souls to Christ, the fountain of light, holiness, and comfort."[1] In the

1 *The Directory for the Publick Worship of God* (1645), in *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian, 1976), 380–81.

nineteenth century, Patrick Fairbairn, Scottish theologian and biblical scholar, counseled pastors to visit church members' homes and to interact with them in other ways. By such personal involvement the pastor

> will thereby gain much in respect to intimacy with their state and feelings, and so become more skillful in dealing with their spiritual interests. His knowledge of them gets individualized; their distinctive tendencies and characters, . . . the special sins and temptations which they need to be warned against, the duties which require to be most urgently pressed: these things . . . will get familiarized to the mind of the pastor.[2]

In the twenty-first century, after decades of ministry in such disparate contexts as rural Virginia and New York City, Timothy Keller counsels preachers,

> When you read the text and write the sermon, think specifically of individuals you know with various spiritual conditions (non-Christian, weak/new Christian, strong Christian), with various besetting sins (pride, lust, worry, greed, prejudice, resentment, self-consciousness, depression, fear, guilt), and in various circumstances (loneliness, persecution, weariness, grief, sickness, failure, indecision, boredom). Now, *remembering specific faces*, look at the biblical truth you are applying and ask: *How would this text apply to this or that person?* Imagine yourself personally counseling the person with the text.[3]

The author of Hebrews is a good pastor who knows God's people. Because the author knows his hearers personally, having spent time with them in the past (13:19), he knows their "various spiritual conditions" and "various circumstances." He can remind them of their

2 Patrick Fairbairn, *Pastoral Theology: A Treatise on the Office and Duties of the Christian Pastor* (1875; repr., Audubon, NJ: Old Paths, 1992), 273–74.

3 Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in An Age of Skepticism* (New York: Viking, 2015), 182 (emphasis in original).

strong beginning as disciples, and he can commend their ongoing faithfulness. But he also speaks pointedly about their immaturity, the possibility of lethal apostasy that threatens some of them, and the cost of discipleship they must be prepared to pay: social marginalization, public humiliation, imprisonment, homelessness, and perhaps even martyrdom.

Because Hebrews teaches theology *for the sake of exhortation*, to address the spiritual situation of a specific body of Christ followers, we open our exploration with what the book itself reveals about that first-century Jewish-Christian congregation and the challenges that they faced. Hebrews is tantalizingly reserved about this church's locale, but we can form a picture of the congregation's social situation and spiritual struggles, enabling us to hear this word of exhortation almost as though we were sitting in their assembly. We will also follow the author's lead by viewing their situation and ours in a context shared by God's people across various redemptive-historical epochs. In Moses's day, David's day, our author's day, and our day, the people of God are a band of pilgrims *traversing a wilderness* on the way to their heavenly homeland. This wider biblical-theological perspective on the life situation of believers helps us to hear God's voice addressing us with the truth that we need in our own time and place.

Crises in a Messianic Synagogue

The title, "To the Hebrews," attached to this document as early as Papyrus 46 in the second century, is probably correct: that first audience had been raised in Judaism and could trace their ancestry back to the Israelite patriarchs. Those to whom God spoke through prophets in times past were, biologically and covenantally, their "fathers" (1:1). These Hebrews had come to believe that Jesus was the royal Redeemer promised in the ancient Scriptures, the Messiah[4] to whom God had spoken the words of Psalm 2:

4 *Christos*, the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *Mashiach* ("Messiah" or "anointed one"), appears twelve times in Hebrews (3:6, 14; 5:5; 6:1; 9:11, 14, 24, 28; 10:10; 11:26; 13:8, 21). In two of these (3:6; 5:5), "Christ" is closely associated with "Son," as in Ps. 2:2, 6–7.

You are my Son,
today I have begotten you. (Heb. 1:5; 5:5)

They had started their Christian life confident that Jesus's death completely atoned for sins so that the animal sacrifices mandated in the law were no longer needed. Now, however, some seem to question the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice and are casting longing looks back toward the comfortingly familiar and visible rituals of Israel's sanctuary.

These Jewish followers of Jesus would recognize the divine authority of the ancient Scriptures given to Israel. Therefore, our author builds his case for Jesus's superiority squarely on those Scriptures. Hebrews cites and explains God's ancient word from the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament widely used by Jews living outside the promised land in the Dispersion (*diaspora*, "scattering"; see John 7:35; James 1:1). They are acquainted with the law's directions for Israel's corporate worship: a sanctuary constructed according to the pattern shown to Moses on Sinai (Heb. 8:5; 9:1–4), priests authorized to enter the sanctuary (5:1–4; 7:16), and sacrifices offered by those priests on others' behalf (9:5–10; 10:1–4). The hearers know Old Testament history so well that, having recounted major stories (11:2–31), the author can allude to other Old Testament individuals and events by name or circumstance, expecting that such brief mention will bring whole narratives to mind (11:32–38). As Jews throughout the Roman Empire gathered each Sabbath in synagogues (*synagōgai*) to pray and to hear Scripture read and applied (Luke 4:15–16; Acts 9:20; 13:14–15; 18:4), so our author urges this congregation not to neglect its assembly (*episynagōgē*, ESV renders as "to meet together") for mutual exhortation (10:25).[5]

But this synagogue of messianic (Jesus-following) Jews is no longer accepted by the broader Jewish community. During Jesus's days on earth, Jews who expressed faith in him risked expulsion from synagogues (John 9:22; 12:42). Jesus warned that such rejection would escalate

5 Likewise, in his epistle to the "twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (James 1:1), James uses *synagogē* to refer to an assembly of Jews who bear Jesus's name (James 2:1–2, 7).

after his death and resurrection (John 16:2), and it did (Acts 6:8–15; 13:44–50; 17:5–9; 18:4–7). The original audience of Hebrews experienced repudiation and harassment when they first came to trust in Jesus:

> But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. (Heb. 10:32–34)

Persecutions such as these—public ridicule and humiliation, imprisonment, unjust seizure of property—were not unusual in the first Christian centuries, nor have they been down to the present (Matt. 5:10–12). Hebrews 13:12–13 suggests that, for these Jewish Christians, such hostility was associated with their expulsion from synagogues and banishment from the wider Jewish community.[6] Jesus himself "suffered outside the gate" of Jerusalem (13:12), not only geographically but also socially, ostracized from the Jewish community. Therefore, his followers must "go to him outside the camp," sharing his reproach (13:13). They must embrace exclusion and deprivation as Moses did when he forfeited royal privilege in Egypt and instead chose mistreatment with God's people—"the reproach of Christ" (11:26; see 11:24–26).

6 A plausible suggestion about the occasion of the audience's persecution builds on the inference that "those who come from Italy" (13:24) are expatriates residing elsewhere in the empire and conveying greetings to friends at home—that is, in Italy and perhaps in Rome itself. The earliest patristic citation of wording from Hebrews is by Clement of Rome in the last decade of the first century AD. If this inference is correct, the sufferings listed in 10:32–34 may have been associated with the edict of the Emperor Claudius in AD 49. According to the second-century Roman historian Suetonius (*Claudius* 25.4), the emperor banished the Jews from Rome because of social turmoil surrounding a certain "Chrestus" (perhaps a Roman confusion with the Greek *Christos*, suggesting discord within the Jewish community over claims that Jesus is the Messiah). Claudius's edict was God's means to bring a Jewish-Christian couple, Aquila and Priscilla, to Corinth (Acts 18:2). See William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, WBC 47A (Dallas: Word, 1991), lviii–lx, lxiii–lxvi.

In addition to the loss of acceptance, freedom, and property, their very lives were, or could soon be, at risk. Although their "struggle against sin"—to persevere in faith—had not reached the point of bloodshed (12:4), they had witnessed "the outcome" of previous leaders' faithful patterns of conduct (13:7).[7] The direction to "remember" those leaders suggests that their lives had ended, possibly by martyrdom. If martyrdom was looming, these believers especially needed to hear that God's Son became human to set free *those who had been enslaved by the fear of death* (2:14–15). External opposition—humiliation, rejection, imprisonment, material loss, violence—exerted intense pressure on the recipients of Hebrews.

Our author, however, sees greater danger in the spiritual threats looming *within* the congregation. He is encouraged by their service to the saints (6:10). But they lack maturity, and their initial zeal is flagging as they have become "dull of hearing" (5:11; see 5:12–6:3; 6:11–12).[8] If they fail to attend to the message of salvation that they have heard, they may "drift away," like a boat that slips its mooring and is carried off by the current (2:1–3). Some in the congregation are at risk of abandoning allegiance to Jesus altogether, flirting with apostasy that would prove irremediable (6:4–6; 10:28–31). To avert that disaster, they must encourage each other constantly:[9]

- "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you [*mēpote estai en tini hymōn*] an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to *fall away* from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you [*hina mē . . . tis ex hymōn*] may be *hardened by the deceitfulness of sin*" (3:12–13).
- "Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you [*mēpote . . . tis ex hymōn*] should seem to have *failed to reach* it" (4:1).

7 The past (aorist) tense of "spoke" in 13:7 distinguishes this past generation of leaders from the congregation's present leadership, who must be respected and obeyed (13:17, 24).

8 The Greek adjective *nōthroi* appears first in "dull of hearing" (5:11) and recurs in "sluggish" (6:12).

9 The Greek negative particles *mē* and *mēpote* appear repeatedly to identify the ruinous outcome that must be avoided through persevering faith.

- "Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one [*hina mē tis*] may *fall* by the same sort of disobedience" (4:11).
- "See to it that no one [*mē tis*, "lest anyone"] *fails to obtain* the grace of God; that no [*mē tis*, "lest any"] 'root of bitterness' springs up and *causes trouble*, and by it many become *defiled*" (12:15).

This last exhortation echoes Moses's warning against hidden apostasy and idolatry (Deut. 29:18–19) and argues that unbelief can prove contagious, infecting others. The spiritual exhaustion and injury suffered by some in the congregation are expressed in vivid athletic metaphors: "Lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees . . . so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed" (12:12–13).

The apostasy that tempts the hearers involves abandoning confidence in Christ's once-for-all sacrifice and all-sufficient mediation and returning to the rituals established in the law of Moses. This is why Hebrews offers such a carefully reasoned argument for the superiority of Jesus's priestly office, sacrifice, and sanctuary to the old covenant priesthood, animal sacrifices, and tabernacle. The author reasons that, by promising a new covenant to replace the (now broken) covenant inaugurated at Sinai (Heb. 8:6–12; cf. Jer. 31:31–34), God was announcing that the first covenant was "obsolete and growing old . . . ready to vanish away" (Heb. 8:13). Now, in "these last days" (1:2), Jesus has become the mediator of this new covenant, since his death redeems his people from their transgressions under the first covenant (9:15). Christ, by offering his body in submission to God's will, "does away with" (10:9) the system of animal sacrifices altogether (see 10:5–10). Therefore, for anyone who abandons trust in God's Son and his sanctifying blood, looking elsewhere for atonement, "there no longer remains a sacrifice for sin" (10:26; see 10:26–29).

We might ask why those Hebrew Christians would be attracted to return to the law's system of Aaronic priesthood, earthly sanctuary, and animal sacrifices. One factor might have been distress over being alienated from the wider Jewish community, including their own families. Tradition and familiarity would strengthen the drawing power of

the religious framework in which they had been raised. Perhaps other objections were shaking their confidence. Did Jesus's genealogy undermine his priestly credentials? About the tribe of Judah, from which Jesus descended, "Moses said nothing about priests" (7:14). Lacking genealogical descent from Levi and Aaron, "if [Jesus] were on earth, he would not be a priest at all" (8:4). Our author is prepared to answer this objection (7:11–28), but the fact that he raises it suggests that it was troubling some of his hearers.

If these Jewish believers belonged to the Dispersion, living far from the promised land, they may not have witnessed the rites performed by priests in the Jerusalem temple.[10] Yet their upbringing in Judaism and the consensus of the Jewish community (which now dismissed them as "outside the camp") may have been influencing them toward seeking spiritual reassurance in the fact that priests descended from Aaron were offering sacrificial blood incessantly in God's temple on Mount Zion, where the Lord had "put his name" centuries ago (Deut. 12:5; see 1 Kings 8:27–30). The whole system of atonement—sanctuary, priests, blood—vividly impressed the senses. It could be seen, touched, smelled, even tasted (Heb. 9:10; 13:9–10).

On the other hand, Hebrews challenges any preoccupation with the physical, visible features of the old covenant system of worship. Psalm 102:25–27 contrasts the transience of the entire created order—earth and heavens—to the immutable eternity of the Creator (Heb. 1:10–12). The whole visible universe, "not only the earth but also the heavens," is destined to be "shaken" and removed by the thundering voice of God (12:26–27). The Jerusalem temple, to which the hearers may have been tempted to return, belonged to this transient created order. It was made with hands and belonged to this creation, which is destined for destruction (9:1, 8–11, 24). Our author strives to lift his hearers' eyes higher and deeper into the reality of communion with God, anchoring

10 The law required Israelite men to converge on Jerusalem from their various tribal allotments throughout the promised land for three annual feasts (Deut. 16:16). It is unlikely that most Jews living outside the land were able to make these pilgrimages on a regular basis.

their hearts' hope in "the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf" (6:19–20).

Pilgrims Traversing the Wilderness

One more dimension of this congregation's life situation is important for our understanding of Hebrews. In order to understand and respond rightly to the visible trials and threatening opposition that confront them as followers of Jesus, the congregation must see their challenges as fitting the pattern drawn centuries earlier as their ancestors sojourned in the wilderness for forty years. What we could call the "wilderness pilgrimage paradigm" for Christian living in this world is developed especially in the exposition and application of Psalm 95 in Hebrews 3:1–4:13.

Psalm 95:7–11 recalls two instances of the Israelites' rebellious unbelief in the wilderness after their liberation from slavery in Egypt. First, the "rebellion" (*parapikrasmos*[11]) and the day of "testing" (*peirasmos*) in Hebrews 3:8 (Ps. 94:8 LXX) refer to their complaint at Rephidim, even before they reached Mount Sinai, when they found no water (Ex. 17:1–7). After quenching their thirst with water from a rock, the Lord memorialized their defiant doubt by renaming the location "Massah" (*peirasmos*), which means "testing," and "Meribah" (*loidorēsis*), which means "quarreling" (Ex. 17:7 LXX).

The second incident is the people's refusal to enter the promised land at Kadesh-barnea, when they believed the hopeless report of ten spies instead of the faith-filled encouragement of Caleb and Joshua (Num. 13–14). Their refusal to trust provoked God's solemn oath that the exodus generation would not enter the land God promised to the patriarchs but would die in the desert (Num. 14:26–35; Ps. 95:9–11; see Ps. 106:24–27). The psalm, and therefore Hebrews, refers to that promised land as God's "rest." Hebrews later describes that destination as "a place that [Abraham] was to receive as an inheritance [*klēronomia*] . . . the land of promise" (Heb. 11:8–9). Hebrews follows Old Testament

11 Although this noun does not appear in Ex. 17 LXX as the Greek counterpart to the Hebrew *meribah*, the cognate verb is found in Deut. 31:27 LXX, where Moses summarizes Israel's history of rebellion against the Lord.

precedent when it describes the promised land as the "inheritance" promised to the patriarchs (Lev. 20:24).[12] In Hebrews, inheritance language (heir, inherit, inheritance) is associated, at least implicitly, with a homeland promised to those who trust God (Heb. 1:14 with 2:5; 6:12, 17; 9:15; 11:8–9).[13] So God's "rest," "inheritance," and "promise" all refer to the homeland that awaits people of faith.

Those who traveled in the desert with Moses were temporary residents, sojourning in a region that was not their own; but they were not wandering aimlessly, despite the delay that resulted from their obstinate unbelief at Kadesh. They were moving toward the inheritance that God had promised them. Even when the patriarchs resided in the land of promise, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob sojourned in tents "as in a foreign land," describing themselves as "strangers and exiles on the earth" (11:9, 13; see Gen. 23:4; 47:9). In fact, Hebrews contends that the patriarchs anticipated a homeland that would transcend territory in the present, destined-for-destruction earth. They viewed from afar "the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God" and "a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (Heb. 11:10, 16).

The discussion of Psalm 95 in Hebrews 3–4 draws together these glimpses of the wilderness paradigm, teaching that ancient Israel's wilderness ordeal is a template for Christians' present experience. The pattern applies to three generations of God's people:

1. *Moses's generation*, who experienced the exodus but doubted in the desert and, so, failed to enter the promised land, God's "rest";
2. *David's generation*, to whom Psalm 95 was originally addressed "so long afterward" (Heb. 4:7–8), who, living in the promised land, heard God's voice in their "today" and were called to enter God's rest by trust in God's promise;

12 God had promised Abraham, "I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess" (Gen. 15:7). The LXX translates the Hebrew *yarash*, which the ESV renders "possess," with "inherit" (*klēronomeō*). So also LXX of Gen. 28:4; Ex. 23:30; Num. 14:24, 31; Deut. 1:8.

13 Exceptions seem to be Heb. 1:2 (the Son is the "heir of all things"); 1:4 (he "inherited" a name better than the angels); 12:17 (Esau wanted to "inherit" the blessing).

3. the *Jewish-Christian recipients of Hebrews* and all new covenant believers in Jesus, who hear God's voice "today" and must "therefore strive to enter that rest" through enduring faith (4:7, 11; cf. 3:7, 12–15; 4:1–3).

David's psalm looks back to Israel's hard-heartedness in the wilderness and concludes that a new "today," a new moment of invitation and testing, has arrived. Through the psalm, David's contemporaries were hearing God's voice calling them to believe his promise, unlike their ancestors. Hebrews, now addressing the *new covenant* people of God (3:1), argues that this "today" of testing and invitation extends into the present, as God's voice has spoken in a Son (1:2) and as the Holy Spirit still speaks (3:7).

The life situations of Moses's contemporaries, the original audience of David's psalm, and the recipients of Hebrews are linked to each other through four parallel features: (1) an experience of *liberating grace* in the past, (2) *God's voice* speaking in the present, (3) the *trial of faith* in the present, and (4) the prospect of entering *God's rest* in the future.

Liberating Grace

What made the expressions of unbelief both at Massah/Meribah and at Kadesh-barnea so heinous was that those Israelites had previously experienced the Lord's mighty deliverance from slavery. Hebrews highlights their culpability: "For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses?" (3:16) Moreover, that unbelieving generation "saw [God's] works for forty years" (3:9; cf. Ps. 95:9–10). Those works included not only the cloud of God's fiery glory and the parting of the Red Sea but also water from the rock, bread from heaven, victory in battle, the terrifying splendor of Sinai, and more. Moses's generation had indeed experienced the Lord's liberating grace in many ways.

Hebrews gives less attention to the liberating grace experienced by David's contemporaries, the original audience of Psalm 95. Such grace is implied in the mention of Joshua, whom God used to bring Israel

into the promised land and give them temporary peace from enemies (Heb. 4:7–8; see Josh. 21:43–44). (We will revisit this theme below.)

The liberating grace experienced by the recipients of Hebrews is recalled throughout this sermon. They heard the message of salvation conveyed by those who heard the Lord Jesus himself as God testified through miraculous signs (2:3–4). By the word of the gospel, God had "enlightened" them (6:4; 10:32) and gathered them to enjoy companionship with Jesus the Messiah and his Spirit (1:9; 3:14; 6:4).[14] This grace that drew them together did not, however, guarantee that every member would persevere in faith and, thus, reach the destination that God had promised. To have received God's liberating grace is a vital beginning, but more is needed to traverse the desert and enter his promised rest.

God's Voice

Hebrews seizes on the opening lines of his citation of Psalm 95,

> Today, if you hear his voice,
> do not harden your hearts (Heb. 3:7–8),

to assert that Moses's generation, David's generation, and new covenant believers share the experience of being addressed by God's word of promise and command. These two lines appear three times (3:7, 15; 4:7) in Hebrews 3:7–4:11, and the word "today" (*sēmeron*) is highlighted twice more (3:13; 4:7). As we saw in the introduction, this line expresses a twofold emphasis in Hebrews: God's word comes *in the present*, and God's word comes *in speech*, which is heard and must be heeded. God—specifically, the Holy Spirit (3:7; see 10:15)—is presently speaking to his people: to the exodus generation in the wilderness through Moses, to David's contemporaries in the promised land in Psalm 95, and now to us in these last days (Heb. 1:2).

14 Although the ESV and other versions use varying glosses in these three verses, Greek readers/hearers would recognize their lexical and syntactic similarity: "your companions," *tous metochous sou* (1:9); "companions of Christ," *metochoi Christou* (3:14); "companions of the Holy Spirit," *metochous . . . pneumatos hagiou* (6:4).

The content of God's speaking is "good news"—specifically, "the promise of entering his rest" (4:1–2). Elsewhere, our author also speaks of the law's commands and the penalty for violating them (2:2; 10:28), but the exposition of Psalm 95 in Hebrews 3–4 focuses on God's promise of a future homeland. Since God's voice speaks promise, he expects a response of hopeful trust.

The mode of God's speaking changes as we move from his speech to Israelites in the Sinai wilderness to his address to Jesus's followers in these last days. The Israelites heard God's voice shake the earth under their feet. Now he warns us from heaven (12:25–26) since the Son has passed through the heavens to sit at God's right hand (4:14; 8:1; 9:11–12). From his heavenly throne, the Son addresses us through faithful human leaders, who have spoken God's word in the congregation (13:7).

The most significant difference in the way God's word came in the wilderness, on the one hand, and the way it comes to us, on the other, lies in the contrast between Moses, the mediator of old covenant revelation, and Jesus, the mediator of new covenant revelation. The prelude to the exposition of Psalm 95 highlights this contrast (3:1–6). To the fathers, God spoke through Moses the faithful *servant*. Now God speaks to us through his faithful *Son*. Hebrews 3:2–4 alludes to the Lord's defense of Moses in Numbers 12:6–8: "If there is a prophet among you, I the LORD make myself known to him in a vision; I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the LORD." Moses is a uniquely privileged recipient of divine revelation. With Moses, God speaks immediately and clearly. He commends Moses as faithful to the mission that God has entrusted to him "in all my house" (the people of God). The quality of faithfulness links Moses and "Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession," because Jesus too "was faithful to [God] who appointed him" for his mission (Heb. 3:1–2). Having mentioned Christ's faithfulness in his priestly calling (2:17–18), Hebrews now applies to Jesus the

title "apostle"[15] to focus attention on Christ's role in revelation, the motif introduced in the sermon's prologue (1:1–4).

This prologue contrasted God's ancient speech through prophets with his last-days speech in the Son (1:1–2). Now, the superiority of Christ to Moses, the old covenant's prophet par excellence, is shown in the contrast between the titles "Son" and "servant." Moreover, Jesus is the "builder" of the "house" and "all things," whereas Moses is part of the "house" constructed by the Son (3:3–4). Contrasting prepositions "in" and "over" express the difference between servant and Son: "Moses was faithful *in* all God's house as a servant," whereas "Christ is faithful *over* God's house as a son" (3:5–6). Finally, Moses's role in revelation is not only subordinate but also preparatory for a later, better era of divine revelation: Moses was faithful "to testify to the things that *were to be spoken later*" (3:5).[16] Jesus had taught that Moses "wrote of me" (John 5:46) and that "everything written about me in the Law of Moses . . . must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44; see also 24:27). Israel's wilderness generation and the original recipients of Hebrews heard God's voice, but the Son's divine glory demands that the latter audience pay even closer attention than those who heard Sinai's thunders.

The Trial of Faith

At both Massah and Kadesh the Israelites wrongly "tested the LORD" (Ex. 17:7; cf. Num. 14:22). In fact, though, in the wilderness the Lord was putting their hearts to the test, to reveal whether they would trust his promises and obey his commands. Moses reminded the younger generation as they were about to enter their promised inheritance: "And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing [LXX: *ekpeirazō*] you to know what was in your heart, whether

15 Our author's choice of *apostolos* may reflect the influence of Jesus's statements that the Father had "sent" (*apostellō*) him into the world to accomplish his redemptive mission (John 3:34; 5:36, 38; 6:57; 7:29; 8:42; 10:36; 11:42; 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25; 20:21).

16 The ESV accurately reflects the Greek *future* passive participle, *lalēthēsomenōn*.

you would keep his commandments or not" (Deut. 8:2). The dangers of the wilderness put human hearts on trial, raising the question whether they would give greater credence to the threats their eyes could see or to the voice of the Lord they heard, which promised rest to come in an unseen future. Sadly, the generation that left Egypt with Moses failed the test of their trust. They "heard and yet rebelled . . . sinned . . . were disobedient . . . were unable to enter [God's rest] because of unbelief" (Heb. 3:16–19). Unbelief and disobedience are interrelated. To doubt God's promises breeds rebellion against his commands.

Since Moses's contemporaries "who formerly received the good news failed to enter [God's rest] because of disobedience," God announced "through David so long afterward" that he had appointed another moment of opportunity and testing, another "today" (Heb. 4:6–7). Although David's contemporaries were not wanderers in a wilderness but settlers in the promised land, the psalm announces the "today" in which they must trust God's voice, lest they, like their ancestors, fall short of God's rest. And "the promise of entering [God's] rest still stands" (4:1) not only in David's era but also in the lifetimes of the Hebrew Christian recipients of this sermon (4:3, 11). Both David's contemporaries long ago and new covenant believers in the last days are sojourning in a "wilderness" that tests their hearts.[17]

God's Rest

The final piece of the wilderness paradigm is its trajectory toward a destination in which wilderness trials are left behind and God's people enjoy rest—God's rest—glorifying and enjoying him in his presence. God's oath at Kadesh banned the unbelieving generation from entering the promised land, God's "rest" (Num. 14:21–23; Ps. 95:11; Heb. 3:11, 18; 4:1–11). The next generation, under Joshua's leadership, not only conquered the land but also experienced "rest" from warfare:

17 Near the end of his reign, David's prayer indicates that he shared the patriarchs' perspective of themselves as strangers who hoped for a homeland better than Canaan: "We are strangers before you and sojourners, as all our fathers were. Our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding" (1 Chron. 29:15).

> Thus the LORD gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers. And they took possession of it, and they settled there. And the LORD *gave them rest* (MT: hiphil of *nuach*; LXX: *katapauō*) on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the LORD had given all their enemies into their hands. (Josh. 21:43–44)

Yet the historical background of Psalm 95 and other Scriptures gives hints that God's rest transcends the land promised to the patriarchs. The first clue that God's rest is bigger than the land of Canaan is found in Genesis. When God finished creating heaven and earth, "God rested [*katepausen*] on the seventh day from all his works" (Heb. 4:4, citing Gen. 2:2). God's rest blends his completion of labor, cessation from labor, and delight in the product of his labor. Hebrews suggests that God's rest *extends across the ages* from the completion of creation, so the opportunity for humans to enter God's rest is open to every generation.[18]

The second indication that God's rest transcends the promised land is in Hebrews 4:8: "For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on." Although Israel had momentary rest in the land under Joshua (Josh. 21:44), the implied offer of entering God's rest extended to David's contemporaries who lived in the land suggests that God had another, better "rest" in store for those who hear his voice with faith. The interim between Joshua's (military) rest and David's (military) rest (2 Sam. 7:1), the era of Israel's judges, had been *anything but restful*, even though the Israelites were dwelling in the land promised to the patriarchs. Even when David ascended the throne and "the LORD had given him rest[19] from all his surround-

18 In Moses's creation account, the boundaries of the six days of creation are marked by "evening and morning," but the seventh day of God's rest is not so delimited (contrast Gen. 1:5, 8, etc., to 2:1–3). Although Hebrews does not call attention to this feature, its redefinition of "God's rest" as epoch transcending in duration is consistent with it.

19 The Hebrew original, "caused to rest" (*yanach*, hiphil of *nuach*), is interpreted "caused to inherit" (*kateklēronomēsen*) in the main LXX manuscripts. Lucian of Antioch (c. 240–312) is reported to have revised the LXX to conform the Greek text more closely

ing enemies" (2 Sam. 7:1),[20] still Israel's life in the land was troubled by their spiritual adultery and the Lord's jealous discipline through foreign enemies.

The destination that Hebrews calls "rest," drawing on the language of Psalm 95, is elsewhere described as "the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God," which Abraham anticipated (Heb. 11:10). It is the heavenly country that the patriarchs greeted from afar (11:13–16), the coming "lasting city" for which the new covenant audience of Hebrews hopes (13:14). Every Christian generation must recognize that, in their "today," God's voice is promising that present trials, endured with faith and hope, are leading to a homecoming of indelible joy. "We who have believed" are entering[21] God's rest (4:3), but we have not yet "rested from [our] works as God did from his" at creation (4:10). Believers are presently engaged in a lifelong process of entering God's rest through enduring faith, as we undergo the trials of the wilderness, but we have not yet arrived. Because we have not yet reached that heavenly country that God promised to the patriarchs (11:14–16), the "lasting city" that is still to come (13:14), we must "strive to enter that rest" and guard each other "so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience" that Moses's contemporaries displayed (4:11). Richard B. Gaffin Jr. sums up the relationship between our "today" in the wilderness and "God's rest" to come:

> "My rest," as *rest*, stands in pointed contrast to the believer's present circumstances; it is the antithesis of exposure to hardship and temptation, to the *toil* which the present involves. Believers are presently *at*

with the Hebrew original, and his recension apparently has "caused to rest" (*katepausen*) at 2 Sam. (2 Kgdms LXX) 7:1.

20 See also God's promise that David's son Solomon would, in fact, build God's house because "he shall be a man of rest (MT: *menuchah*; LXX: *anapauseōs*). I will give him rest (MT: *hanichoti*, hiphil of *nuach*; LXX: *anapausō*) from all his surrounding enemies" (1 Chron. 22:9; cf. 23:25).

21 A translation of the Greek *eiserchometha* in 4:3 that highlights the progressive sense of the verb's present aspect ("are entering") is preferable to the ESV's simple "we . . . enter."

work (cf. 6:10; 10:24); they are not at rest, but are strenuously seeking it (*spoudazōmen*, 4:11).[22]

Conclusion

The Jewish Christians who first received this word of exhortation had strengths and weaknesses, temptations and trials, and a social environment that set them apart from later generations of Jesus's followers. Yet the author's exposition of Psalm 95 and its commentary on Israel's wilderness generation set his first hearers' distinctives into a *theologically defined* paradigm that unites them not only with Moses's and David's generations but also with future Christian generations, including our own. Those Hebrew Christians brought to their encounter with this sermon a richer grasp of Old Testament Scriptures than we have and more vivid memories of rejection and hardship for their faith than we have endured. Yet Hebrews draws together its first-century hearers and its twenty-first century readers, linking their spiritual experience and ours by its portrayal of our shared character and context as God's redeemed pilgrims, traversing a hostile wasteland toward the haven of rest that he promises.

22 Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "A Sabbath Rest Still Awaits the People of God," in *Pressing toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, ed. Charles G. Dennison and Richard C. Gamble (Philadelphia: Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986), 38. See 36–49 for Gaffin's detailed interpretation of Heb. 3:7–4:13 and his critique of the view that "God's rest" refers to Christians' present experience in this life.