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# HEBREWS-JAMES

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SMYTH & HELWYS BIBLE COMMENTARY

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# HEBREWS-JAMES

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# CONTENTS

## HEBREWS

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

INTRODUCTION TO HEBREWS

- |    |   |                     |
|----|---|---------------------|
| 1  | Introductory Statement of Faith   | <i>Heb 1:1-4</i>    |
| 2  | Christ Superior to Angels   | <i>Heb 1:5-14</i>   |
| 3  | Warning: The Peril of Ignoring the Word<br>Delivered by the Son   | <i>Heb 2:1-4</i>    |
| 4  | The Humiliation and Exaltation of Jesus   | <i>Heb 2:5-18</i>   |
| 5  | Christ's Faithfulness Over God's House as Son<br>Compared with Moses' Faithfulness as Servant           | <i>Heb 3:1-6</i>    |
| 6  | The Rejection of Jesus More Serious than the Rejection<br>of Moses: A Lesson from the Exodus Generation | <i>Heb 3:7-19</i>   |
| 7  | The Promise of Rest Remains But May Be Forfeited  | <i>Heb 4:1-11</i>   |
| 8  | Exhortation to Diligence<br>and the Encouragement of Christ   | <i>Heb 4:12-16</i>  |
| 9  | Christ's Qualifications as High Priest  | <i>Heb 5:1-10</i>   |
| 10 | Hortatory Introduction to a Difficult Discussion,<br>Part One: A Call for Maturity                      | <i>Heb 5:11-6:3</i> |
| 11 | Hortatory Introduction to a Difficult Discussion,<br>Part Two: Warning and Hope                         | <i>Heb 6:4-12</i>   |
| 12 | Hortatory Introduction to a Difficult Discussion,<br>Part Three: The Steadfastness of God's Promise     | <i>Heb 6:13-20</i>  |
| 13 | Christ the Perfect Eternal High Priest<br>According to the Order of Melchizedek                         | <i>Heb 7:1-28</i>   |
| 14 | The Heavenly Sanctuary and the New Covenant   | <i>Heb 8:1-13</i>   |
| 15 | The Ministry of the Levitical Priests   | <i>Heb 9:1-10</i>   |
| 16 | Christ's Sacrifice Secures Eternal Redemption   | <i>Heb 9:11-14</i>  |
| 17 | Christ's Sacrifice Ratifies a New Covenant  | <i>Heb 9:15-22</i>  |
| 18 | Christ's Sacrifice Is a Perfect Sacrifice   | <i>Heb 9:23-28</i>  |
| 19 | Christ's Sacrifice Is the Reality<br>of Which the Old Order Was a Shadow                                | <i>Heb 10:1-10</i>  |
| 20 | Perfection of the Sanctified  | <i>Heb 10:11-18</i> |

21	Exhortation: Privileges and Duties of Christians	<i>Heb 10:19-25</i>
22	Warning: The Fate of the Willful Sinner	<i>Heb 10:26-31</i>
23	Exhortation to Endurance	<i>Heb 10:32-39</i>
24	The Faith of Past Heroes and Heroines	<i>Heb 11:1-40</i>
25	Exhortation to Faithful Endurance as Children	<i>Heb 12:1-29</i>
26	Concluding Admonitions	<i>Heb 13:1-21</i>

## JAMES

### INTRODUCTION TO JAMES

1	Struggles of the Faithful	<i>Jas 1:1-27</i>
2	Living Out the Royal Law	<i>Jas 2:1-26</i>
3	New Perspectives on the Tongue and on Wisdom	<i>Jas 3:1-18</i>
4	Friendship with the World	<i>Jas 4:1-17</i>
5	Struggles of the Faithful (Reprise)	<i>Jas 5:1-20</i>

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

### INDEX OF MODERN AUTHORS

### INDEX OF SIDEBARS FOR HEBREWS

### INDEX OF SIDEBARS FOR HEBREWS

### INDEX OF SCRIPTURES

### INDEX OF TOPICS

### ILLUSTRATION CREDITS

# ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS COMMENTARY

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

## *The Old Testament*

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

*Abbreviations*

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

*The Apocrypha*

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

*The New Testament*

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

Other commonly used abbreviations include:

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

Selected additional written works cited by abbreviations include:

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

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

## SERIES PREFACE

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

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

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

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

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

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

This wealth of information might easily overwhelm a reader if not presented in a “user-friendly” format. Thus the heavier discussions of detail and the treatments of other helpful topics are presented in special-interest boxes, or Sidebars, clearly connected to the passages under discussion so as not to interrupt the flow of the basic interpretation. The result is a commentary on Scripture that

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

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

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

*The Editors*

# HOW TO USE THIS COMMENTARY

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

## **Basic Design of the Volumes**

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

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

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

## **Commentary and Connections**

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

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

### **Sidebars**

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* provides a unique hyper-link format that quickly guides the reader to additional insights. Since other more technical or supplementary information is vital for understanding a text and its implications, the volumes feature distinctive Sidebars, or special-interest boxes, that provide a wealth of information on such matters as:

- Historical information (such as chronological charts, lists of kings or rulers, maps, descriptions of monetary systems, descriptions of special groups, descriptions of archaeological sites or geographical settings).
- Graphic outlines of literary structure (including such items as poetry, chiasm, repetition, epistolary form).
- Definition or brief discussions of technical or theological terms and issues.
- Insightful quotations that are not integrated into the running text but are relevant to the passage under discussion.
- Notes on the history of interpretation (Augustine on the Good Samaritan, Luther on James, Stendahl on Romans, etc.).
- Line drawings, photographs, and other illustrations relevant for understanding the historical context or interpretive significance of the text.
- Presentation and discussion of works of fine art that have interpreted a Scripture passage.

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



### **Alpha & Omega Language**

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



### **Culture/Context**

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



### **Interpretation**

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



### **Additional Resources Study**

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

### **Additional Features**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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# HEBREWS

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# PREFACE TO HEBREWS

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

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

I was an undergraduate student in 1955, and I continued studies at Southern to complete a Th.D. in New Testament studies. The New Testament faculty (including Dr. Jones) guided me in the study of New Testament Greek, literature, history, theology, and archaeology.

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

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

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

tools and follow the same procedures if we do not wish to treat the letter as answers in the back of an algebra book.

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

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

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

department at Furman for nearly four decades, Theron D. Price and David A. Smith.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> J. Estill Jones, "Now Faith Is . . . Hope," *RevExp* 52 (1955): 508, 521.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 530.

# INTRODUCTION TO HEBREWS

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

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

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

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

### **Authorship, Destination, and Dating of Hebrews**

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

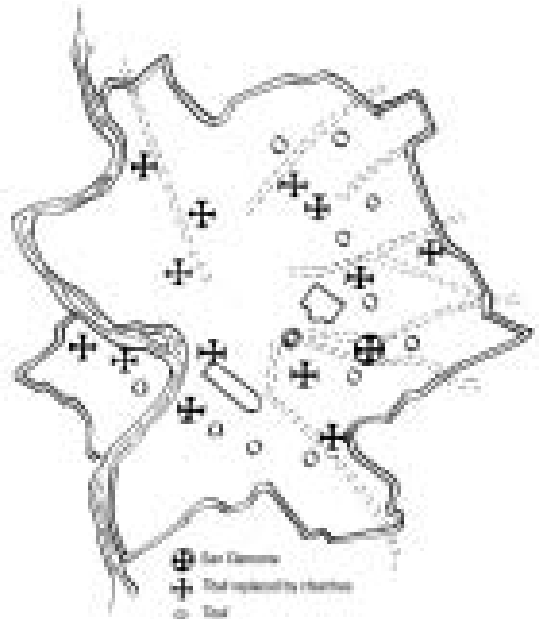
I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been set free; and if he comes in time, he will be with me when I see you. Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those from Italy send you greetings.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

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

Since this is inconclusive, we turn to more indirect evidence to characterize the author, the audience, and the relationship of the author to the audience. The writer was a Christian, not one of the immediate hearers of the Lord, but one who received the message from the first generation of believers (2:3-4). From the general

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

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



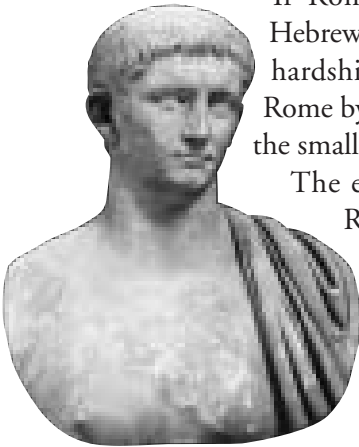
**Churches in Rome**

leaders, but now those leaders were deceased. The author called on the congregation to pay attention to the original message of the earliest leaders: “. . . we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it” (2:1). The temptation of the congregation was to disregard the claim of the word of God that had been preached to them. But the author uses the community’s courageous stance of commitment in earlier difficulties to encourage boldness in the present:

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

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

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



**Emperor Claudius**

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

## Hebrews as a Sermon

In his epistolary conclusion, the author of Hebrews has given modern readers information about the nature of the writing; it is a “word of exhortation.” The original readers responded to the writing in light of their linguistic, literary, and religious competence and doubtless their earlier experience with the preaching of the author and did not need this information. Some irony is found in the author’s appeal for his brothers and sisters to “bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly” (13:22). This appeal, then, is not designed to give information but to gain a positive response to this exhortation—his sermon.

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

Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels. (2:5)

About this we have much to say that is hard to explain, since you have become dull in understanding. (5:11)

Even though we speak in this way, beloved, we are confident of better things in your case, things that belong to salvation. (6:9)

Now the main point in what we are saying is this . . . (8: 1)

Of these things we cannot speak now in detail (9:5)

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of . . . (11:32)

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

the King James Version. The vocabulary in Hebrews is also rich and cultured, and classical linguistic distinctions generally ignored by New Testament writers are maintained by the writer of Hebrews. The sentence structure of the author is extraordinary. The first sentence in Hebrews, including the first four verses, is a “periodic sentence.” To modern readers, a “period” is a dot at the end of a sentence. Originally, a “period” was a type of sentence. Aristotle distinguished between the running or continuous style and the compact or periodic style. In the periodic style, the discourse is composed of carefully articulated units. (The NRSV divides this sentence into three sentences, and each of these three is elegantly balanced.) The author has organized a large number of clauses and phrases into a balanced unity. In this unity there is a parallelism of sound and sense, variation of word order, and alliteration.

A standard Greek grammar of the New Testament indicates:

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

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

the basis for the appeal is Jesus and his sacrifice, readers are also able to read Hebrews as a writing designed to celebrate the significance of Jesus so as to reinforce values and commitments associated with Jesus and his sacrifice.

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

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

The believers have experienced the loss of property and status in the host society without yet receiving the promised rewards of the sect, and so are growing disillusioned with the sect’s promise to provide. As time passes without improvement, they begin to feel the inward

pressure for their society's affirmation and approval. The fervor and certainty of their earlier life in Christ has cooled with their prolonged exposure to the pagan witnesses of their degradation, who no doubt continue to disparage the believers and regard them as subversive and shameful. They have begun to be concerned for their reputation before society. Though they were able to resist it at the outset, the machinery of social control is in the long run wearing down the deviants' resistance. While they could accept their loss in the fervor of religious solidarity, living with their loss has proven difficult.<sup>2</sup>

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

### **The Use of Scripture in Hebrews**

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

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

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

used a form of the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. [The Septuagint (LXX)]

### The Septuagint (LXX)



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

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

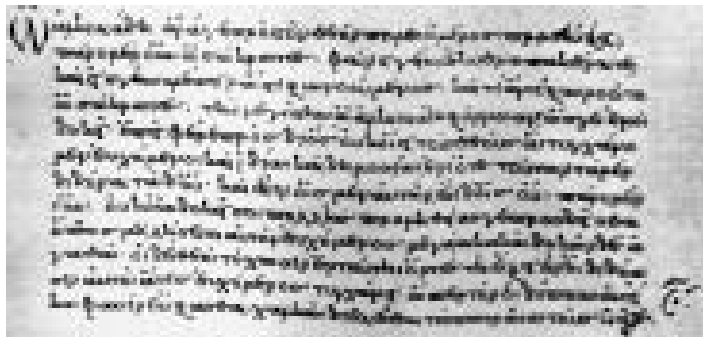
While the process of translating all the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek transpired over at least two centuries, a legend developed, best preserved in The Letter of Aristeas that was written in the second half of the second century B.C., that explained its origin. The letter purports to be from an Alexandrian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

two translators. The legend itself only refers to the translation of the Pentateuch; later books from the Prophets and the Writings also came to be considered part of the LXX, as did works later excluded from the Hebrew Bible used by Jews after the first century A.D.

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

## Hermeneutics



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **The Inclusive Christology of Hebrews**

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Composition and Connections: Author and Readers

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Outline of the Book of Hebrews**

- I. Introductory Statement of Faith 1:1-4
- II. The Son and Angels 1:5–2:18
  - A. Christ Superior to Angels 1:5-14
  - B. Warning: The Peril of Ignoring the Word Delivered by the Son 2:1-4
  - C. The Humiliation and Exaltation of Jesus 2:5-18
    - 1. Subjection of the World to the Son—the Way of Suffering 2:5-9
    - 2. The Pioneer of Salvation made Perfect through Suffering 2:10-18
- III. Participation in the House of God and in the Rest along the Way 3:1–4:16
  - A. Christ's Faithfulness over God's House as Son Compared with Moses' Faithfulness as Servant 3:1-6
  - B. The Rejection of Jesus More Serious than the Rejection of Moses 3:7-19
  - C. The Promise of Rest Remains But May Be Forfeited 4:1-11
  - D. Exhortation to Diligence 4:12-16
- IV. The Nature of the Son's High Priesthood 4:14–7:28
  - A. Christ's High Priesthood as Encouragement to His People 4:14-16
  - B. Christ's Qualifications as High Priest 5:1-10
  - C. Hortatory Introduction to a Difficult Discussion 5:11–6:20
    - 1. A Call for Maturity 5:11–6:3
    - 2. Warning and Hope 6:4-12
    - 3. The Steadfastness of God's Promise 6:13-20
  - D. Christ the Perfect Eternal High Priest according to the Order of Melchizedek 7:1-28
- V. The Superiority of the Heavenly Reality over Its Earthly Copy 8:1–10:18
  - A. The Heavenly Sanctuary and the New Covenant 8:1-13
  - B. The Ministry of the Levitical Priests 9:1-10
  - C. The Character of Christ's Sacrifice 9:11–10:18
    - 1. Secures Eternal Redemption 9:11-14
    - 2. Ratifies a New Covenant 9:15-22
    - 3. A Perfect Sacrifice 9:23-28
    - 4. The Reality of which the Old Order Was a Shadow 10:1-10
    - 5. Perfection of the Sanctified 10:11-18
- VI. The Way of the Christian as the Way of Faith 10:19–12:29
  - A. Exhortation: Privileges and Duties of Christians 10:19-25
  - B. Warning: The Fate of the Willful Sinner 10:25-31
  - C. Exhortation to Endurance 10:32-39
  - D. The Faith of Past Heroes and Heroines 11:1-40
  - E. Exhortation to Faithful Endurance as Children 12:1-29
    - 1. Jesus the Pioneer and Perfector of Faith 12:1-3
    - 2. Discipline as Children 12:4-13
    - 3. A Renewed Warning 12:14-17
    - 4. The Earthly Sinai and the Heavenly Jerusalem 12:18-24
    - 5. A Final Warning 12:25-29
- VII. Concluding Admonitions 13:1-21
  - A. Acceptable Worship: The Obligations of Christian Holiness 13:1-6
  - B. True Worship 13:7-19
  - C. Prayer and Doxology 13:20-21
- VIII. Postscript 13:22-25
  - A. Personal Notes 13:22-23
  - B. Final Greetings and Benediction 13:24-25

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

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

[[Outline of the Book of Hebrews](#)]

## NOTES

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

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

<sup>3</sup> William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (WBC 47A; Dallas: Word Books, 1991), cxvi.

# INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT OF FAITH

## Hebrews 1:1-4

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

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

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### Revelation as Self-disclosure



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

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

**Literal Translation of Hebrews 1:1-4**

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

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

The author's love for rhetorical flourishes is evident even in English translation: the chiasmic arrangement of statements about the Son, framed with reference to the old dispensation [**Chiasm**]; the contrasts ("long ago" *versus* "in these last days"; "by the prophets" *versus* "by a son"; "to our ancestors" *versus* "to us"); temporal sequence (preexistence, incarnation, exaltation); and the repetition of participles and relative pronouns. A transliteration from Greek

into English reveals alliteration and assonance in v. 1: *polymerōs kai polytropōs palai ho theos lalēsas tois patrasin en tois prophētais* ("In multiple forms and multiple fashions of old God having spoken to the fathers in the prophets . . ."). Note the use of *polys* in the first two adverbs and the fact that five words begin with the letter "π."

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

A chiasm (also called chiasmus) is a distinct form of expression in which the elements in the first part are repeated in reverse order in the second part. The emphasis usually falls on the center where the two lines of movement intersect; hence, the term "chiasm" from the Greek letter  $\chi$ , which consists of two lines intersecting at the center. The chiasm may comprise one sentence, a series of sentences, a pericope, an extended section of a writing (or speech), or even an entire work.

An example of chiasmic repetition can be seen in Mark 2:27: "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath." A longer chiasm is reflected in Isaiah 6:10:

A Make the heart of this people fat,  
B and their ears heavy,  
C and shut their eyes;  
C' lest they see with their eyes,  
B' and hear with their ears,  
A' and understand with their hearts,  
and turn and be healed. {End quote}

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

**COMMENTARY****God's Speaking, 1:1-2**

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

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

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

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



### The Revelation of the Prophets

According to William Barclay,

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

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



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

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

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

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



### **The Prophet Isaiah**

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

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

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

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



#### Christ in Majesty

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

**The Son's Relationship to God, 1:3**

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

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

## Glory

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Philo**

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

Philo's works typically reveal a Jewish apologetic concern. He argued that Moses had actually been the world's first great philosopher and that the various Greek philosophical systems had taken their lead from him. Many of his works consist of commentaries on the writings attributed to Moses. In these works, Philo often employed an allegorical method of interpretation. As the Stoics and

others had done with the traditions of ancient Greece, Philo understood that those passages of the Pentateuch that did not offer clear and unobjectionable teaching should be read symbolically. He considered each text to have two meanings: the surface meaning was the literal meaning; the deeper meaning, or spiritual sense, was accessible only by decoding the symbolism embedded in the text. Whenever the literal meaning resulted in a reading that contained contradiction, inconsistency, or negative views of God, then one should resort to the underlying, allegorical meaning. Thus, one could discover that Moses had actually, symbolically, discussed various philosophical issues that were of concern to all philosophers.

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

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

**Philo on the Word as the Stamp of the Divine Imprint**

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

*Allegorical Interpretation* 3.95-96

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

given, even so the Image becomes the pattern of other beings, as the prophet made clear at the very outset of the Law-giving by saying, "And God made the man after the Image of God" (Gen. i. 27), implying that the Image had been made such as representing God, but that the man was made after the Image when it had acquired the force of a pattern.

*Noah's Work as a Planter*, 18-19

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

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

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

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

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

2:5-11: A Christological Hymn]

### Philippians 2:5-11: A Christological Hymn

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

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

**The More Excellent Name, 1:4**

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

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

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

## CONNECTIONS

**Sophisticated Text and Readers**

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

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

### **The Readers' Involvement**

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

### **The Text and the Creation of a New World**

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

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

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

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

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

## Hebrews and Judaism

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

## Codes for Deciphering the Presentation of Jesus Christ in Hebrews

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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JAMES

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# INTRODUCTION TO JAMES

In 1938 fishermen trawling off the South African coast caught a “living fossil.” Their surprise catch, dubbed *Latimeria chalumnae*, was the scion of an ancient order of fish, the coelacanths, thought long extinct. About 120 species were known from fossil records, the earliest from about 410 million years ago. The coelacanths flourished 250 million years ago, when more than thirty species coexisted, before presumably dying off with the dinosaurs about 65 million years ago. The surviving coelacanth is an evolutionary oddity, a living “dead end,” with gills and lungs, two pairs of fleshy fins resembling stubby legs, and a hinged skull of a type found in frogs. The strange *Latimeria chalumnae* also gives birth to live young.

Why this lesson in ichthyology? The letter of James is something of a New Testament coelacanth, a surviving representative of a once flourishing “Jewish Christianity,” the living voice of a theological “dead end.” Just as the coelacanth reminds us that fish have taken, and do take, very different forms from those familiar to us, the letter of James exposes a form of early Christianity distinct from the Pauline line that later predominated.<sup>1</sup> Its initial niche was the conservative, Aramaic-speaking, “Jewish-Christian” communities of Palestine, particularly the Jerusalem church, where James the Lord’s brother was a recognized pillar and where the sayings of Jesus were cherished. Following the dispersion of that community associated with the war with Rome, this species of Christianity adapted to Diaspora environs, such as those in Antioch and Alexandria, perhaps as far away as Rome. However, these “Jewish-Christians” continued to affirm James as their apostolic founder and the authoritative voice of their distinctive tradition.

## **The Historical James**

John Painter observed that discussion of the historical James has tended to reflect three uncritical assumptions:<sup>2</sup>

- (1) James and the other brothers and sisters of Jesus were not believers during Jesus ministry.
- (2) James became a believer through a resurrection appearance of Jesus to him.

(3) A transition from Peter's leadership to that of James was necessitated by Peter's forced flight from Jerusalem

In a meticulous critique, Painter has called all three assumptions into question, offering an alternative historical reconstruction. First, Jesus mother and brothers were among his retinue during the Galilean ministry (John 2:12; 7:3-5; Mark 3:21 // Matt 12:46 // Luke 8:19). Painter suggested the Gospels' treatments of Jesus family must be read against the evangelists' editorial tendencies.<sup>3</sup> In both Mark and John, the brothers of Jesus "are portrayed as 'fallible followers' rather than as outright unbelievers."<sup>4</sup> Matthew and Luke view the family more favorably.<sup>5</sup> Acts opens with the family of Jesus among his Jerusalem-based followers (1:14).

Second, the resurrection appearance to James is not a "conversion" account<sup>6</sup> but rather an apostolic commissioning (1 Cor 15:7); Paul understood his own appearance experience in the same light, as the authentication of his witness to the resurrection (15:8-11).

Third, from the start James was recognized as first among equals in the Jerusalem church. Paul named James before Cephas (Peter) and John when identifying the Jerusalem pillars (Gal 2:9), those who were apostles before him (Gal 1:17). According to Acts, Peter reported to James upon his release from prison (12:17). During Paul's first post-commissioning trip to Jerusalem (before AD 36), he met both with Cephas (to compare missionary strategies?) and with James, who could not be overlooked (Gal 1:18-19). Acts 15 and 21 portray James as the chief spokesperson for the Jerusalem church in its interactions with the Pauline mission. Galatians 2 confirms this role, showing Cephas, Barnabas, and other Jewish believers at Antioch yielding to James's concerns regarding table fellowship with Gentile believers. Painter concluded that although the nomenclature of the traditional ascription "first bishop of Jerusalem" is anachronistic, James's leadership role is supported by Acts 15, 21 and Galatians 2; "More than likely James was one of a group of leaders among whom he stood out, from the beginning, as the leading figure and dominating influence."<sup>7</sup>

Painter has categorized the early Christian movement in two broad missions, each with three factions. The first he termed the circumcision mission because it viewed the demands of the Law as normative; its factions included: right-wing "Christian Pharisees" for whom the Way was a Jewish movement; James's group, centrists engaged in the messianic mission to the Jews, though acknowledging others had a mission to the nations; and moderates, represented by Peter, whose ministry to Jews overflowed to (God-



## The Circumcision Mission

### Two Missions, Many Factions

#### The Hebrews: The Circumcision Mission

Cultural conservatives, maintaining the Mosaic traditions

Maintained traditional boundary markers of Jewish identity—circumcision, food and purity laws, and Sabbath observance.

#### *First Faction, represented by Pharisaic believers*

- Insisted all believers, whether Jews or Gentiles, should be circumcised and keep the Mosaic law (Acts 15:1,5; Gal 2:4).
- Saw no salvation without full observance of the law.
- Rejected the uncircumcision mission.

#### *Second Faction, represented by James*

- Committed to the messianic proclamation of Jesus to the Jews.
- Recognized the validity of the two missions but engaged in the circumcision mission.
- Understood the two missions as separate ventures, to different geographic and cultural spheres, and governed by distinct rules.
- Expected Hebrews to be law-observant even outside Palestine (Gal 2:12).
- Expected Jews engaged in the uncircumcision mission (e.g., Peter, Barnabas, Antiochene Jews) to keep the law, including food and purity law.
- Expected Gentile converts to abstain from practices particularly offensive to Jews, requirements also laid on Gentiles living in Jewish territory.
- Held an attitude to the Jewish law shaped by the demands of being a church in the Jewish land.

#### *Third Faction, represented by Peter and the later Matthean community*

- Committed to a mission based on circumcision and law-keeping, oriented primarily to Jews, including the Diaspora, but overflowing in a mission to Gentiles.
- Accepted the validity of an alternate, Pauline mission to the Gentiles free from the demands of circumcision and the keeping of the Mosaic law.
- Viewed the circumcision mission as the path of greater righteousness: Circumcision and law keeping were not necessary to enter the kingdom of heaven, but those who do not meet the conditions and taught others to follow their example would be least in the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:19).

John Painter, *Just James: The Brother of Jesus in History and Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 73-75.

fearing) Gentiles. [The Circumcision Mission] The second he termed the uncircumcision mission because it dismissed with the requirements of the ritual law; its factions included: moderates, represented by Barnabas, who attempted to balance accommodations to the Gentile mission with James's concern for maintenance of Jewish identity; centrists, represented by Paul, who proclaimed a circumcision- and law-free gospel, though not renouncing his own Judaism; and a left wing, represented by the Corinthian libertines, who rejected even the moral demands of the Jewish law. [The Uncircumcision Mission]

Galatians illustrates James's position (though reported from Paul's perspective). While in Jerusalem Paul adopted the home rules of



### The Uncircumcision Mission

#### Two Missions, Many Factions

#### The Hellenists: The Uncircumcision Mission

Culturally progressive, open to radical reinterpretation of the tradition in new situations

Adopted an approach to missions that did not require circumcision, maintenance of the food and purity laws, or observance of the Sabbath

#### *Fourth Faction, represented by Barnabas*

- Accepted the validity of the Petrine mission to Jews and Gentiles.
- Made accommodations to the needs of the Gentile mission outside Palestine; home rules applied when the two missions intersected.
- Yet when confronted at Antioch, bowed to the authority of James on boundary issues (Gal 2:12).
- Jewish members were law observant; Gentiles were not burdened with ritual matters.
- Likely more ambivalent regarding the superiority of the circumcision mission.

#### *Fifth Faction, represented by Paul*

- Affirmed a law-free, circumcision-free mission to all the nations, including Jews.
- Saw the law-free mission of the true expression of the gospel (Gal 2:15-21).
- Saw the expediency of a mission restricted to Jews based on circumcision but did not engage in this mission.
- Adopted home rules while in Jerusalem as an expediency.
- Acknowledged the historic priority of the circumcision mission (Rom 1:16; 2:9,10) and the debt that Gentile churches owed to the Palestinian church (Rom 15:25-27).

#### *Sixth Faction, represented by the Corinthian Libertines*

- Advocated an absolutely law-free mission recognizing no restraints whatsoever, ritual or moral.
- Likely rejected all factions of the circumcision mission.
- Represented a sharp break with Jewish identity.

John Painter, *Just James: The Brother of Jesus in History and Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 73, 76-77.

the circumcision mission: “To the Jews I became as a Jew. . . . To those under the law I became as one under the law” (1 Cor 9:20). So the Jerusalem pillars extended the right hand of fellowship to Paul, acknowledging Paul’s mission to the nations (Gal 2:8-9). However, Peter’s circumcision mission (2:8) and Paul’s uncircumcision mission intersected at Antioch. Though one of the Hebrews, Peter adopted the local custom (2:12); within the Hellenist church, Jews and Gentiles had shared table fellowship; Jewish boundary markers had given way to a new, common “Christian” identity (cf. Acts 11:26). James objected to such accommodation, however, demanding “fundamental separation of the two missions in the withdrawal of Jewish believers from table fellowship with Gentile believers” (Gal 2:12).<sup>8</sup> In the end, Peter, Barnabas, and the other ‘Jews’ yielded to James’s concern for Jewish boundary issues.<sup>9</sup>

For James, the law remained normative for Jews engaged in mission work, whether at home or abroad; Paul understood himself to be no longer “under the law,” though he might submit to the

law for expediency's sake (2 Cor 9:20). As Painter observed: "The tradition that named James "the Just" or "the Righteous" implies that James was faithful to the law, and the (Pharasaic?) response to his execution/murder suggests that even unbelieving Pharisees might have been sympathetic to James."<sup>10</sup> According to Acts, Paul's publication of his mission to the nations during his final visit to Jerusalem generated a very different response from the populace (22:21-23).

### ***Authorship***

Although Jacob was a common name among the first believers, the letter of James is recognized as the (purported) voice of only one of these: James the brother of the Lord and leader of the Jerusalem church. The question remains whether the letter is from James's hand or is a posthumous production by one who acknowledged the continuing authority of James's voice over the dispersed Jewish-Christian communities. Arguments favoring James's direct authorship include: the simple self-designation (Jas 1:1); familiarity and affinity with the oral tradition of Jesus sayings; and an economic critique that reflects the Judean situation before the war with Rome. Arguments in favor of a later disciple's mediating James's teaching to his own generation include: the address to the Jewish-Christian Diaspora, thought more natural after the dispersion of the Jerusalem church associated with the war with Rome; mastery of the Greek language, reflected in the use of catchwords, play-on-words, coined terms, and in exclusive use of the Septuagint; use of *Christos* as a name (2:1) rather than a title; rejection of a "misunderstood Paulinism" (2:14-26); and the late attestation of the letter (first cited by Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.16.2, in about AD 180). The preponderance of the evidence favors the theory of mediated authorship since that position is best able to accommodate the strengths of its alternative.

### ***Genre and Coherence***

James was apparently less concerned with presenting a clear genre signal than interpreters have been in discerning one, for his mixed signals are proverbial: James used an epistolary address and then dropped that form or at least played loosely with it; James used stinging diatribal style in chapters 2 and 3, but in chapters 1 and the conclusion of chapter 5 adopted a form nearer a collection of wisdom sayings; James appealed to scripture, sometimes with sensitivity to its larger context, but it does not seem as a whole to be a sustained exposition of scripture. Given the dissemination of

**Outline of James**

- I. Living Lives of Integrity (1:1-27)
  - A. Salutation (1:1)
  - B. A New Perspective on Struggle (1:2-4)
  - C. A New Perspective on Prayer (1:5-8)
  - D. A New Perspective on the Poor and the Rich (1:9-11)
  - E. A New Perspective on God's Place in Trials (1:12-18)
  - F. A New Perspective on Integrity (1:19-25)
  - G. A New Perspective on Pure Religion (1:26-27)
- II. Living Out the Royal Law (2:1-26)
  - A. A New Perspective on Partiality and Active Mercy (2:1-13)
  - B. A New Perspective on Faith and Works (2:14-26)
- III. Displaying the Wisdom from Above (3:1-18)
  - A. A New Perspective on the Tongue (3:1-12)
  - B. A New Perspective on Wisdom's Source and Fruit (3:13-18)
- IV. Living as Friends of God (4:1-17)
  - A. A New Perspective on Allegiances (4:1-10)
  - B. A New Perspective on Intra-Christian Conflict (4:11-12)
  - C. A New Perspective on Tomorrow: Opportunities for Gain or to Do Good (4:13-17)
- V. Living Lives of Integrity (reprise) (5:1-20)
  - A. A New Perspective on Economic Injustice and Acquisitiveness (5:1-6)
  - B. A New Perspective on Endurance in the Struggle (5:7-11)
  - C. A New Perspective on Honest Speech (5:12)
  - D. A New Perspective on the Power of Prayer (5:13-18)
  - E. A New Perspective on Restoration (5:19-20)

Hellenism, the proximity of Nazareth to urban Sepphoris,<sup>11</sup> and his long-term residence in Jerusalem, James the Lord's brother could have written an epistle, diatribe, paraenesis, or sermon. A pseudonymous writer would likewise not have been limited to writing paraenesis or diatribe, since the letter format was widely used throughout the Greco-Roman world.

Concern for the apparent lack of cohesiveness and order of topics in James has motivated many genre proposals. [Outline of James] F. O. Francis proposed an epistolary structure.<sup>12</sup> J. H. Ropes found argumentation like in the diatribes.<sup>13</sup> M. Dibelius found no cohesiveness, which is exactly what he expected with paraenesis. Indeed, he prohibited reading James's admonitions in light of a particular social or literary context based on his understanding of this genre.<sup>14</sup> Those proposing some secret key in another text were similarly motivated by the desire for text coherence.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps E. Tamez's liberation perspective recognizes what coherence James has.<sup>16</sup> If so, past struggles to make sense of James were hindered by reading from a perspective of privilege rather than from that of the marginalized and oppressed: "Oppression and pain tends to make people feel depressed, to dehumanize them, to destroy not only their bodies but also their spirit, to make them see

their oppression as normal and natural." Thus, James writes to challenge this self-destructive way of thinking and offer hope: "God has created men and women for life. So they have to lift themselves up, to resist the pain of oppression, to confront the unjust reality, which is not normal and natural. God is on their side and against the oppressors."<sup>17</sup> Although James's context was not identical with Tamez's Costa Rica, James's issues, such as the problem posed for those who trust God by the suffering of the just, bridge the world of the text and that of its faithful, modern interpreters.

### *Theology*

James is one of the most theologically (as distinct from Christologically) dense and robust writings in the New Testament. James presents God as one, the very model of integrity (2:19). God is the Creator, the unchanging “Father of lights” (1:17), the giver of every good gift. God does not struggle with evil and is not the source of the evil against which the righteous struggle (1:13); rather evil takes root in self-centered human desires. God’s will is to give birth to a new creation through the word of truth (1:18). God is the generous source of wisdom from above (1:5; 3:17) who gives to those who pray with undivided minds. God is the Lawgiver and Judge (4:12; 2:11), whose law liberates us from enslavement to selfish ambition to lives of loving service (2:12). Yet despite our failings in many ways (3:2), God is merciful and gracious to the humble (4:6); God is ready to be found by those who seek God with their whole hearts (4:7-10). God shows special concern for the poor, choosing them to be rich within the sphere of faith and heirs of God’s kingdom (2:5; cf. 1:9, 4:6). God rewards those who stand firm in the struggle out of love for God (1:12). God befriends those who, as Abraham did, share God’s active concern for those in need (2:23; cf. 4:4); such active, compassionate religion meets God’s approval (1:27). Yet, for those who practice injustice and exploitation, God is Lord Sabaoth (5:4), who heeds the cries of the oppressed and comes speedily to their aid. God works for justice but does so apart from human anger (1:20; 3:18). God spoke through the prophets who challenged the injustices of their days “in the name of the Lord” (5:10). Job serves as an example of one who persevered and discovered God brought his story to a merciful and compassionate end (5:11). In a shrinking world in which inter-faith dialogue among adherents of the great monotheistic faiths is needed, James serves as a witness to common roots and shared convictions of those who serve the one God.

### *Christology*

S. Laws contended James “has no apparent interest in Jesus as a redeemer-figure.”<sup>18</sup> Rather James views Jesus as Teacher, “present Lord whose authority is acknowledged in daily life,” and “future judge.”<sup>19</sup> For James, Christianity consists in fulfilling the commandments and instructions of the Lord, who will be the final Judge. Within the larger New Testament context, James functions as the probing question “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46). That is, James is a warning against a Christianity that neglects the role of Jesus as Teacher and

empties the term Lord of its meaning as one whose authority is acknowledged in daily life. Others have noted similar Christological emphases in Q, the Sermon on the Mount, and other literature.<sup>20</sup> Although James does not explicitly refer to Jesus as Teacher or identify traditional material as Jesus' teachings, James may view the "royal law" of neighbor love (2:8) as kingly because Jesus singled it out and because it epitomizes the ethics of the kingdom Jesus proclaimed.

### ***Soteriology***

Does salvation for James indeed consist in fulfilling the commandments and instructions of the Lord? James answers, "In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures" (1:18). Assuming these images of (re)generation and first fruits refer to salvation, the question remains: To what does the word of truth refer? This word is identical with "the implanted word that has the power to save your souls" (1:21). This word is one that must be welcomed, i.e., heard and practiced with meekness (1:21). Since the call to be doers of the word follows immediately upon this call to welcome the word with meekness, this charge is naturally a call to put this implanted word into practice in the believer's life (1:22). Indeed, welcoming or receiving the word involves becoming a doer of the word. Likewise, the perfect law, the law of liberty (1:25) is a functional equivalent of the implanted word in that one can be a doer of both. Later, James indicates the law of liberty is a standard for judgment that pertains to right speaking and doing (2:12). At the judgment, God blesses whoever contemplates that perfect law and goes on to become a doer of that word (1:25). Similarly, the do-nothing hearer is self-deceived (1:22) and will be found wanting at judgment (2:13-14, 16). James 5:19 warns that one can wander from the truth (and can be brought back). James does not seem to be talking about a doctrinal error but the departure from a way of life. Salvation for James is connected with restoration to this way of truth: "Whoever brings back a sinner from [his] wandering [way] will save the sinner's soul from death" (5:20).

The word of truth and its synonyms—the implanted word, the word, the perfect law, the law of liberty, and the truth—perhaps refers to the letter as a whole, and the tradition that stands behind it. This moral tradition with its many links to the sayings of Jesus must be received and practiced in meekness as a right way of speaking and doing, since it will be the basis for God's judgment. The letter thus prepares hearers for that judgment by clarifying the



### James's Word of Truth and Paul's Gospel

James's "word of truth" can be taken as the gospel or *kerygma*, understood as the message of Jesus' saving death and resurrection, a message associated with Paul's epistles and the final form of the Gospels. That James can be so read and, thus, accommodated to the dominant theology in the age the canon was set, likely aided in Could Paul have spoken of doing the gospel as James speaks of doing the word? What Paul speaks of doing is "the law" (Rom 2:13,25,27; 8:4; Gal 6:13), "the whole law" (Gal 5:3), the "law of Christ" (Gal 6:2), and the command to love one's neighbor that is viewed as the summary of "the law" (Rom 13:8; Gal 5:14). If the "word of truth" and "the implanted word" are understood as a code of law, a body of moral teaching, this "word" can be done. Paul comes closest to this thought of Christianity as lived obedience to a code of conduct when he admonishes the Romans to fulfill the law by loving one's neighbors and the Galatians to fulfill the law of Christ by bearing one another's burdens.

criterion. The letter models restoration of sinners to the way of truth by instruction in the heavenly wisdom that they are called to practice (3:17). If Christianity for James consists primarily in adherence to a way of life before God, the Way that Jesus taught, then the letter serves as a handbook or epitome to this body of oral teaching. Perhaps this handbook was used in the training of new converts, perhaps as part of their baptismal catechesis or instruction. Perhaps the letter served as a church manual for restoration to the Christian community. [James's Word of Truth and Paul's Gospel]

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Sophie Laws dubbed the Letter of James an oddity that is, nonetheless, "important in showing one form in which early Christianity made its initial appeal in the Roman world and one example of what conversion to Christianity might mean." She further noted that James's interpretation "may have been more widespread and influential in the early period than the epistle's now isolated position in the New Testament canon would suggest." *The Epistle of James* (HNTC; New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 138.

<sup>2</sup> John Painter, *Just James: The Brother of Jesus in History and Tradition* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 13

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Mark's concern to downplay the twelve and the Jerusalem church and John's corresponding concern to exalt the Beloved Disciple. *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 69-70.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>11</sup> R. A. Batey, *Jesus and the Forgotten City: New Light on Sepphoris and the Urban World of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991); E. M. Myers, "Roman Sepphoris in Light of New Archeological Evidence and Recent Research" in *The Galilee in Late Antiquity*, ed. L. I. Levine (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 321-38; J. F. Strange, "Six Campaigns at Sepphoris: The University of South Florida Excavations, 1983-1989" (*The Galilee*, ed. L. I. Levine), 339-355.

<sup>12</sup> "The Form and Function of the Opening and Closing Paragraphs of James and I John," *ZNW* 61 (1970) 110-126.

<sup>13</sup> *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James* (ICC, New York: Scribner's, 1916).

<sup>14</sup> *James*, rev. H. Greeven, trans. M. A. Williams (*Hermenia*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) and the majority of modern interpreters.

<sup>15</sup> They understood James as: an onomastic allegory on the twelve patriarchs (A. Meyer, *Das Rätsel des Jakobusbriefes* [Giessen: Töpelmann, 1930]); as a community rule patterned after the Qumran Rule (D. L. Beck, "The Composition of the Epistle of James" Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1973); or as a midrash or series of midrashim on a Biblical text or texts (M. Gertner, "Midrashim in the New Testament," *JSS* 7 [1962] 267-292; A. Hanson, "Seminar Report on Working Group on 'The Use of the Old Testament in the Epistle of James,'" *NTS* 25 [1978/79] 526; A. Blenker, "Jacobs brevs sammenhaeng," *DTT* 30 [1967] 193-202).

<sup>16</sup> Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James: Faith without Works Is Dead*, trans. John Eagleson (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>18</sup> Laws, *James*, 33. If Jesus is the Lord in Jas 5:14-15, however, Jesus is savior and healer to whom the community's prayer is now addressed. These dual roles are familiar to readers of the Gospels. That James does not refer to the passion/resurrection suggests James focused on Jesus as teacher/lawgiver and judge rather than (primarily) as crucified and risen Lord. If James was familiar with the passion/resurrection (as seems likely), the events probably functioned for James as grounds for accepting Jesus' roles as authoritative teacher, present Lord, and future judge of the community.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> W. H. Kelber found a similar Christology in Q. *The Oral and Written Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 201. Dieter Betz has done so in the Sermon on the Mount. "An Episode in the Last Judgment" in *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount*, trans. L. L. Welborn (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 152. Earlier, Hans Wilhelm Bousset recognized such a Christology in 1 Clement, James, Barnabas, the Shepherd of Hermas, and 2 Clement. *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Earliest Christianity to Irenaeus*, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 387.

# STRUGGLES OF THE FAITHFUL

James 1:1-27

## COMMENTARY

### Struggles of the Faithful, 1:1-27

Chapter 1 consists of a letter opening, followed by several units that on first glance appear only loosely tied together. [Outline of James 1:1-27] Chapters 2–4, however, develop themes introduced here that are recapped in chapter 5: resources for faith's struggle (1:2-8); God's place in the economic struggles of the poor and the eschatological trials of the rich (1:9-11); God's role in the inner struggle (1:12-18); and active engagement in the struggle for justice and mercy (1:19-27). In addition, two related pastoral concerns govern the choice and arrangement of materials here in chapter 1 and in the letter as a whole.

First, James's concern is to restore wanderers to the way of truth (5:19-20); the varied instructions in the letter outline the demands of this way of life and expose common ways that disciples go astray. The letter encourages adherence to these moral demands by frequent appeal to consequences—rewards for obedience and punishment for lawbreakers.

Second, James's concern is for the oppressed poor, the victims of an unjust world and of the faith community's indifference; the letter repeatedly contrasts God's estimate of the poor with the world's devaluation of them. Since the church has adopted the world's perverse perspective, the letter urges believers to embrace God's valuation of the poor and to act with mercy towards the oppressed.

#### Outline of James Chapter 1

- I. Letter Opening—1:1
- II. Resources for Faith's Struggle—1:2-8
  - A. Endurance and Maturity—1:2-4
  - B. Prayer and Wisdom—1:5-8
- III. God's Place in Struggles—1:9-18
  - A. Struggles of the Poor and Rich—1:9-11
  - B. Blessing on Those Enduring Struggle—1:12
  - C. True Source of the Inner Struggle—1:13-16
  - D. God's Good Gifts for the Struggling—1:17-18
- IV. Actively Engaging in the Struggle—1:19-27
  - A. Listening, Speaking, and Controlling Anger—1:19-20
  - B. Mere Hearing versus Doing the Word—1:21-25
  - C. Genuine Religion—1:26-27



### Which James?

New Testament documents often qualify commonly used names when misunderstanding was possible. Three common means of specification were: patronymics, i.e., references to one's paternity; epithets or nicknames; and mention of other family connections.

#### (1) Patronymics

- James, *son of Zebedee*—

Mark 3:17

- James, *the son of Alphaeus*—

Mark 3:18

- Simon *Barjona*, i.e., *Simon son of Jonah*—Matt 16:17 KJV

#### (2) Epithets

- James and John, the *Boanerges*, i.e., *Sons of Thunder*—Mark 3:17

- James, *the younger*—Mark 15:40

- Simon *Peter*, i.e. the *Rock*—Matt 16:7

#### (3) Other Familial Qualifiers

- John, *the brother of James*—Mark 3:17

- Jude, *the brother of James*—Jude 1



Georges de La Tour. *James the Lesser*. Musee Toulouse-Lautrec, Albi, France.

James of Jerusalem, the authority who addressed the Diaspora through this letter, required no introduction.

Though James (Gk. *Iakōbos*, lit. Jacob) was a common name among first-century Jews and Jewish-Christians, James is introduced without patronymic, epithet, or other qualifier; this James expected to be recognized immediately. [Which James?] Even if James, the half-brother of the Lord and leader of the Jerusalem church, was not the final author of this collection, he certainly remained the authority whose voice spoke for many early Jewish believers and who confronts us today with a somewhat different model of what it means to be Christian. The long English tradition of Anglicizing references to early Christians as *Jameses* rather than *Jacobs* has, intentionally or not, downplayed the Jewish roots of the church.

The author's self-effacing designation is "a servant." James may have wished to identify with the poor and marginalized in his audi-

ence. “Servant of God,” however, can be a prophetic title; so James may be cast as God’s champion on behalf of the poor and critic of their powerful, rich oppressors just as the earlier Hebrew prophets were. James stood in service both to God and to “the Lord Jesus Christ” (one of only two unambiguous references to Jesus in the letter; cf. 2:1). Given the letter’s many links to the Gospel sayings traditions, James may have understood service to God precisely as that conduct demanded by Jesus teaching and by Jesus compassionate outreach to the down-trodden.

The twelve tribes in the dispersion suggest the totality of the Jewish community scattered outside Palestine. **[The Twelve Tribes]** The ten tribes comprising the northern kingdom of Israel ceased to function as geopolitical units with the collapse of Samaria in 722 BC and the resulting deportation throughout the Assyrian realm. The twelve tribes, however, remained a powerful image of the (as-yet-to-be-restored) people of God. The reconstituted “twelve tribes” James addresses are an idealized community that hints at the eschatological context of his admonitions and to his concern for restoration of wanderers to the true way (5:19-20).

Here, the Diaspora refers to a far-flung Jewish-Christian community still comfortable with metaphors drawn from its Jewish roots and pressured by the wider Greco-Roman society whose values were antithetical to its own. **[The Jewish Diaspora in the First Century]** In John 7:35, Jesus antagonists ironically presage the Christian mission to “the Dispersion among the Greeks.” In the remaining New Testament reference (1 Pet 1:1), “the Dispersion” may characterize the social position of the oppressed and suffering Christian communities rather than designate their ethno-religious back-



**James the Lesser**

El Greco. *Apostle St. James the Less*. 1606. Oil on canvas. Museo del Greco. Toledo.



### **The Twelve Tribes**

The New Testament reflects continuing awareness of tribal identity and the old tribal homelands. The prophetess Anna was of the tribe of Asher (Luke 2:36); Saul of Tarsus was of the tribe of Benjamin (Rom 11:1; Phil 3:15). Jesus left Nazareth and made Capernaum “in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali” his home (Matt 4:13). When relations with the Judeans soured Jesus retreated to Ephraim (John 11:12). Jesus contact with Samaritans (John 4; Luke 17:16), just as his Galilean and trans-Jordan ministries, can be understood as parts of an eschatological action of a mission to greater Israel (cf. Matt 4:14; 10:6; 15:24; 19:28).



### The Jewish Diaspora in the First Century



At the beginning of the Christian era, the Jewish communities were mainly concentrated in the Eastern, Greek-speaking half of the Roman Empire. Two outlying areas were central Italy, where Jews had been brought as slaves after Pompey's campaign [against Jerusalem, 63 BC] and where conditions became favorable under Julius Caesar [Roman dictator, 49-44 BC], and Babylonia, where the communities grew strong under Parthian rule [c. 238 BC–AD 224]. But the bulk of the Jewish Diaspora was still confined to the Greek world; the largest and most affluent community was in Egypt. . . . There the Jewish communities were centered around the synagogue, with full internal autonomy, their archons and elders, communicating with each other and with Jerusalem. . . . The communities were on the whole prosperous, but dependent on Gentile authorities and anxious to preserve good relations with them.

ground.<sup>1</sup> James's audience likely would have faced anti-Semitism from Greeks and Romans, as well as economic injustices from merchants and landed aristocrats. Their financial problems were perhaps exacerbated by their own congregations' failure to serve as a means of social support for those in need (cf. 1:17; 2:15-16).

### Greetings

**ΑΩ** *Chaire* was the common address on meeting people. BAG renders *chaire*, *chairete* as "welcome, good day," "I am glad to see you," "good morning" or even "hello." Paraphrases such as "I am glad to address you" or "I am glad to speak with you (through this letter)" capture the informality and provide the necessary tie-in to James's opening theme—joy in the struggle.

James employs the standard Hellenistic letter opening—*Greetings* (*chairein*)—in anticipation of his call to sheer joy (*charan*) in the struggle (1:2). English translations lose this wordplay and the conversational tone. [Greetings] James's "Greetings!" rather than the now-to-us familiar Pauline letter opening, "Grace and peace," perhaps hints that James has not come to bring us peace, but to stir things up in the church!

In 1:2, as elsewhere, James addresses the community of believers in warm, familial tones (*my brothers and sisters*, NRSV) reflecting solidarity with those struggling under oppression and his concern to encourage. Indeed, later James's address remains affectionate even as he exposes hypocrisies of partiality in the worshiping assembly (2:1ff.), of faith without active compassion (2:14ff.) and of praising God while cursing those [poor?] who are made in God's image (3:10; 2:7). James seems well aware of the destructive, divisive powers of the tongue (1:19,26; 3:6), and generally seeks to reign in his rhetoric even while offering sharp correction.

From the start, James's challenges his hearers to shift their perspective, to see things as God's trusted friends do (cf. 2:23; 4:4). That shift demanded of the Christian community is perhaps nowhere more surprising than in 1:2 where the command is to consider struggles nothing but an occasion for joy. From the world's vantage point, multifarious forms of oppression produce suffering not joy. Later, James specifies representative trials of the community's poor. [Representative Trials of James's Poor] For now, James does not clarify the nature of these trials rather he focuses on their assuredly positive outcome.

Those struggling will prevail because God provides the resources needed to withstand the test—determination, maturity, wisdom, prayer, and faith (1:2-8). [God's Role in trials] James equips those facing hard trials with knowledge of how their journey will transform them into determined, mature believers who will discern what faithfulness demands and stand firm in God's cause (1:2-3). In using a military term for *holding one's position when under attack* (endurance, NRSV), James calls not for quiet resignation to trials, but rather active resistance in God's cause. [Determination] James does not here name the source of this joy-filled tenacity in the face of struggles. Later, James will credit God for every perfect gift (1:17). Here, James focuses on how "militant patience" transforms those

### Representative Trials of James's Poor



- Disrespectful treatment at the hands of the worshiping assembly—2:2-4,6
- Empty "blessings" spoken on the hungry and ill-clothed—2:15-16
- Economic injustice in various forms, such as withheld wages and careless acquisitiveness—4:3,13; 5:2-5
- Miscarriages of legal justice, including acts of brutal violence—5:5:6; 4:2; cf. 2:6
- Severe illness (5:14-16) is not exclusive concern of the community's poor but nevertheless affects poor, day-laborers particularly harshly since they would be unable to pay a physician (cf. Mark 5:26) and would not have reserves if they could not work for their daily bread.

### God's Role in Trials



In contrast to popular theology, James does not credit God with sending trials for the purpose of moral education. For James, God is the giver of good gifts not the architect of evil (1:13,17), even if God brings good out of evils suffered (Rom 8:28; cf. 3:8). James does not explain the ultimate source of trials anymore than James explains why human will tends toward selfish desire (1:14; 4:1-5). Life is characterized by struggle, and human self-centeredness adds to the suffering.

### Determination



*Patience* (KJV) is a misleading translation of *hypomonēn* (1:3-4). Elsa Tamez rendered *hypomonēn* variously but always actively: militant patience, steadfastness, and (borrowing from Martin Dibelius) heroic endurance. Elsewhere she noted "to be patient means to persevere, to resist, to be constant, unbreakable, immovable." Likewise, Clarence Jordan rendered *hypomonēn* actively as determination (CPV).

Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James: Faith without Works Is Dead* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 37, 74, 53.



Photo by Bill Goodman. 1960. *Nashville Banner*. Nashville Public Library.



### Resistance

Will Campbell's memoir of the Nashville, lunch counter sit-ins (13 February 1960) illustrates the wise, nonviolent resistance to oppression that James has in mind.

The basic training was over, and this was not the first day of combat. But it was the first day these non-violent soldiers would be taken prisoner of war. Although it was a snowy February day in Nashville, the storm was not enough to keep the Saturday crowd at home. And not enough to keep the black students, assembled since early morning at Kelly Miller Smith's First Baptist Church, from their intentions—to send a delegation to all the variety and department stores lunch counters in the downtown area. . . . As soon as one group was arrested and hauled to jail in the paddy wagons, another group would be summoned to come from the church and take their seats at the counters and tables. Again and again. And so it went. As the white officers armed with pistols, billy clubs and handcuffs made arrests made arrest after arrest, they seemed irritated that there was no occasion to use force. . . . But these lawbreakers were sober, quiet, clean and well mannered. When told they were under arrest, they offered no resistance. They arose as a body and moved to the waiting paddy wagons, a phalanx of sacrifice, an oblation as foreign as Martians to men trained in the use of physical might. They were witnessing a power they had not seen before.

Will D. Campbell, *Forty Acres and a Goat* (Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers, LTD, 1986), 71.

standing up under the struggle; elsewhere, James urges steadfastness in certain hope of the in-breaking of God's rule within history (2:5; 5:7-8). This God-given determination to face struggles is joy-filled because heroic endurance in God's cause will "have its full effect," namely, "mature and complete" (1:4 NRSV) believers who stand firm when moral courage is required from persons of faith. [Resistance] Elsa Tamez noted standing firm with God against oppression is paradoxically "a humanizing process" for the oppressed: "In the very process of resisting dehumanizing forces,

the communities and their members are humanized.”<sup>2</sup> Successful resistance is empowering and breeds hope of further change: “With hope we are moved to action. Hope not only keeps us afloat in oppressive situations, but it strengthens us to overcome these situations.”<sup>3</sup>

Wisdom (understanding, discernment) is needed if one is to stand firm with God in the struggle but is often lacking. For James, wisdom is conceptual, contextual, and pragmatic; wisdom is an understanding of God’s will and of the situation that translates into appropriate action. First, understanding entails reconceptualizing, rethinking familiar concepts such as *struggle* and *the poor*, revising flawed assumptions and values by adopting God’s valuation. James reframes the struggles the community faced as opportunities for faith to mature and find expression in appropriate acts of courage and integrity; James reframes the poor as those honored by God (1:9), the rich in faith, and the heirs of God’s kingdom (2:5). Second, understanding is context specific; for example, it entails seeing the given situation of struggle and deprivation through God’s eyes rather than as “the world” sees and grasping what action the context demands from people of faith. Finally, understanding entails acting in ways appropriate to this new understanding; to fail to act consistently with this revised perspective is to be self-deceived. [Wisdom in James] If we see things as God sees them, if our hearts are stirred as God’s is, we will take our rightful place in the struggle against oppression but should do so only using God’s non-violent means (1:19; 3:13,17-18; cf. 5:6).



### Wisdom in James

#### Wisdom in James

##### *New Understanding*

- God has chosen the poor for preferred treatment.
- Mercy triumphs over judgment.
- Human anger does not bring about God’s justice.
- God can bring good out of a trial; God rewards those who withstand trials; endurance under trials demonstrates love for God.

##### *Past Action(s)*

- The Christian community has dishonored the poor.
- The Christian community has not shown mercy to those in physical need.
- Community members have spoken and acted out of anger.
- Community members have despaired; trials have dehumanized the oppressed, who have accepted the world’s negative judgment on their worth.

##### *Corrective Action(s)*

- The Christian community should respect the poor and address their physical needs.
- The community should show mercy through concrete acts that address basic human needs.
- Community members should listen, avoid self-deception borne of self-interest, and respond to challenges in appropriate ways, e.g., via nonviolent resistance.
- Community members should strengthen their resolve, recognizing that God is for them.

### Divine Generosity

**ΑΩ** The adverb *haplōs* (Jas 1:5) appears only here in the New Testament, although its cognates *haplous* and *haplotēs* appear in the Synoptics (Matt 6:22; Luke 11:34) and Pauline epistles (Rom 12:8; 2 Cor 1:12; 8:2; 9:11; 11:3; Eph 6:5; Col 3:22) respectively. Its precise sense is debatable and James may have chosen it because of its “multivalence.” The immediate context favors the meaning *singly* in the sense of *without reservation* or *without division of will*, in contrast to the “double-minded person” who is unable to commit. A later passage on God’s giving (Jas 1:17) lends weight to the second possible meaning, *generously, liberality* or more expansively *out of pure generosity unmingled with any selfish interest*. This meaning also fits well with James dual concerns that God’s people model God’s active concern for those in need (1:27; 2:15-16) and that they resist selfish ambition and self-indulgent desire (3:14; 4:1-3). A third possibility, *sincerely, openly, without hypocrisy*, fits well with James emphasis on God’s absolute integrity (as does the first proposed meaning). Again, God’s sincerity contrasts with the hypocrisies of those congregations that confess faith in Christ and in the one God and yet dishonor the poor and disregard their appeals for assistance (Jas 2).

God is the model for generous (*haplōs*) giving, unhesitatingly equipping *all* who ask in faith, without discrimination. [Divine Generosity] Though God gives wisdom for the struggle without second thoughts, some who pray only do so with reservations. James calls such a petitioner an *anēr dipsychos*, literally a “double-minded person.” Clarence Jordan called such a one a “fence-straddler” (CPV). Jordan here captures that the problem is being unable to commit whole-heartedly to God’s movement rather than being uncertain. In the struggle for justice, those with divided allegiance find they are like waves driven and tossed by angry winds. Loyalties that compete with God direct them “any which way,” and their half-hearted efforts for the right, such as they are, yield nothing because God does not bless “ambiguity, fickleness, and instability.”<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. addressed his letter from the Birmingham Jail to just such “fence-straddling” clergy who failed to sense the urgency of the quest for civil rights. Dr. King saw such silent friends of eventual change as a greater threat to the civil rights movement than hard-core segregationists. Elsa Tamez voiced similar concerns: Christians “should be sure of themselves, resolute, decisive. The author rejects shilly-shallying, for a community with indecisive members is doomed to failure.”<sup>5</sup> In contrast to those living double lives, those approaching God *en pistei* (1:5), “with complete trust” (CPV) or with undivided loyalty, receive God-given wisdom necessary to stand firm.

Earlier, James commands his hearers to adopt a new perspective on struggle, to see trials as an occasion for sheer joy (1:2). In vv. 9-11 James challenges his audience to reevaluate their appraisals of themselves as poor and rich. The “lowly” (*tapeinos*, 1:9) are the



### The Poor in James

James understands the poor to include:

- orphans and widows (1:27);
- those dressed in dirty clothes or else “naked” (2:2,15);
- those lacking daily food (2:15);
- those treated with contempt, even by the gathered Christian community (2:3,6);
- those who are poor in the world’s eyes (2:5); and
- day laborers defrauded of their fair wages, who cry out to God for justice (5:4).

These “lowly” ones are not merely “poor in spirit”; they are not simply identified with the humble or pious whatever their economic status might be. These are truly poor; they are economically disadvantaged, often dependent on others’ kindness, and often oppressed by those with economic clout who are concerned only with amassing fortunes and living the good life.

James’s special concern is the poor among the believing community. These poor have an exalted status because they are:

- raised up to a dignified status by God (1:9);
- chosen by God to be rich in the sphere of faith and heirs of God’s kingdom (2:5);
- counted among those who love God (2:5); the innocent who are slaughtered by the powerful even though they do not respond to violent oppression in kind (5:7);
- brothers and sisters, and thus the proper objects of the community’s compassionate concern (2:15); and
- those crying out for justice to God who hears and responds (5:4).

impoverished who are invisible to the economic powers who oppress them. [The Poor in James] God sees their plight, however, and elevates them to new status. James does not say that the poor brother “will be rich, but rather exalted, that is, raised up to the dignified level of a human person and recognized as a preferred creature of God.”<sup>6</sup> Within the Hebrew Bible, “the poor are poor generally because they are oppressed and exploited; the oppressed are the impoverished.”<sup>7</sup>

The Greek text does not repeat *adelphos*, “brother,” in 1:10. Thus, it remains unclear whether James includes the rich man within the family of faith. [Rich Man or Rich Brother?] The command to these rich to boast “in being brought low” is likely an ironic warning of coming judgment (cf. 5:1-6) rather than a harsh call to repentance (cf. 4:1-10). The reversal in status of rich and poor here envisioned may be eschatological: “at the end of time the oppressed will be favored; therefore, they rejoice in anticipation of that new order.”<sup>8</sup> Alternately, this transformed status may be realized already within that believing community that welcomes the poor as valued assets and accepts the rich as “just plain people.” James, however, was well aware how the believing community has frequently dis-

**Rich Man or Rich Brother?**

**AΩ** James employs similarly ambiguous grammar at 3:15, where he does not repeat the noun *wisdom* when characterizing that self-serving understanding that threatened the community's peace. There the omission seems deliberate; such an understanding is not wisdom and certainly not that from above. Most English translators have left James's meaning in 1:10 ambiguous as well. Two exceptions are the *Good News Bible*, which has "rich Christians," and probably *The Message*, which has "arrogant rich." Tamez counseled, "in the text of James, the rich are a stigma, just as the poor (*ptochos*) are for an unjust society" (*The Scandalous Message of James: Faith without Works Is Dead* [New York: Crossroad, 1992], 48).

paraged their poor while courting the sometimes hostile rich (Jas 2). James's overall context favors reading this call for the rich to celebrate their devaluation as a message of judgment. **[Withered Flowers]** Knowing that the rich and powerful will soon perish and

**Withered Flowers**

The image of quickly wilting wildflowers (from Isa 40:6-8) recurs in the Hebrew Bible as a metaphor for transitory life (cf. Jas 4:14). For Isaiah, what remains forever is God's word, which in context is God's hope-filled message of return for the oppressed exiles.

that God remains forever unchanged, the rich ought to embrace kingdom values (2:8), including respect for the poor. However, James's expectation is that the rich "will fail completely in their pursuits, namely, their business dealings." Such are "precisely the cause of their ruin since usually they are rooted in injustice and the

desire for gain."<sup>9</sup>

**A New Perspective on God's Place in Trials (1:12-18)**

James returns to the note of confident joy in the struggle with the beatitude of 1:12 (cf. 1:2-4). Persons can endure almost anything if they know there will be an end to their suffering or know there is a reason for it.<sup>10</sup> Here, James offers both sources of reassurance—the struggle is temporary; those who of love for God stand firm out till

**Struggle**

**AΩ** *Peirasmos* can refer to an inner, spiritual struggle—the KJV translates it *temptation/s* in both 1:2 and 12—or to struggles with external forces opposed to God's coming kingdom. Most modern versions translate the term as *trial/s* in both contexts (so RSV, NASB, NEB, NIV); however, the NRSV follows the KJV tradition (*temptation*) here in v. 12. Jordan rendered *nos hypomonei peirasmon* as one "who doesn't yield to compromise" (CPV).

the end will have their reward, "the crown of life." **[Struggle]** The reward promised to the victors is "life itself, good, lasting, eternal, different from the past."<sup>11</sup> This promised life is God's gift to those who love God. In context, these divine lovers are those who endure trials: for the love of God they engage in the struggle for justice and resist oppression, as an expression of their faith they make common cause with the defenseless and desperately needy (1:27; 2:15-16).

James's understanding of God's place in our struggles is at odds with some folk theology. Earnest believers sometimes repeat thoughts, such as "God never puts more on you

than you can bear,” or else warn, “Don’t pray for patience” out of fear for what trial God will send to teach patience endurance. James, however, contends God *never* sends evil (1:13)! In contrast to double-minded disciples (1:6-8) and to the changing heavens (1:17), God is faithful both to God’s own gracious, self-giving character and to God’s beloved. We are not God’s offspring by accident; God birthed us in keeping with God’s single-minded loving purpose. In James’s understanding of God we hear echoes of Jesus’ teachings—believers should not fear to ask God’s assistance (Jas 1:5; cf. Matt 7:7-8); like a loving parent, God gives only good gifts (Jas 1:17; cf. Matt 7:9-11).

The inner battle is rooted in our own self-centered desires. James describes such desires as an almost irresistible lure that baits us like dumb animals. Once we bite, the natural history of desire plays out: with our cooperation, self-centered desire conceives and births sin; and once mature, sin spawns death (1:14). God, however, stands outside of this natural progression of desire, sin, and death, as the one who is not tempted (to be self-centered) nor tempts anyone (1:13). Rather, God models other-centeredness; indeed, James teaches that all giving originates in God, who is always and forever the great giver (1:17). From the good gifts of the first creation, to God’s liberating acts on behalf of Israel, to God’s self-giving in the Christ-event, God shares freely and without discrimination. Furthermore, God is responsible for a competing progression: according to God’s loving purpose, God births believers through the word of truth (1:18); once birthed, these first fruits of new creation offer promise to all. Earlier in this unit, James identified this promise as “the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him” (1:12). So for those who deny themselves out of love for God and whole-heartedly enjoin in the struggle for justice, self-centered desire and its spawn, death, will not have the final word rather God’s creative and regenerative purpose will. As first fruits, James’s community is tangible evidence of the in-breaking of God’s gracious rule. As such, disciples ought to pattern their own behavior after God’s model of gracious, indiscriminate giving: “To know that God acts with integrity and then not act like God is useless.”<sup>12</sup>

In 1:19-25 James urges a new perspective on integrity. James offers guidance for those seeking justice—beware, for human anger does not produce God’s justice (1:20). [God’s Justice] Clarence Jordan’s rendering, “a man’s temper contributes nothing to God’s cause,” calls to mind Mohandas Ghandi’s and Martin Luther King Jr.’s practice of nonviolent resistance. Deaf to cries for human retal-

### God's Justice



In the aftermath of the September 11th attacks, the Pentagon initially dubbed the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan “Operation Infinite Justice.” Bowing to criticism from many religious leaders that God alone could dispense infinite justice, the Pentagon opted for the less presumptive “Enduring Freedom” as the moniker for the fall 2001 campaign.

iation, James offers another way out of conflict: listen to the other, do not interrupt, wait your turn to speak (1:19). Turn the critical gaze inward, first radically reform your own life, and accept the word with power to save lives (1:21).

James calls on believers to be persons of integrity, just as God is the one without “variation or shadow due to change” (1:17). In particular, James demands that those who have heard God’s word act out the truth they have heard read aloud in worship. In ethics, knowing what is the right thing to do or even why that course is morally correct is insufficient; the ethical person not only knows what is right and why it is right, but also does the right thing, even when doing so demands moral courage.

The mirror does not lie, but not all who glimpse themselves act on what they have seen; too many quickly forget what they looked like. [Ancient Mirrors] Likewise, Scripture reveals what we are like—ephemeral as a wildflower (1:10), grand as the image of God (3:9), morally responsible (4:17), blessed despite struggles (1:12; 2:5). The wise not only take these lessons to heart but incorporate these life lessons in their doings.

James’s second beatitude is for those “doers who act” (1:25); the promise is that “they will be blessed in their doing.” Frederick Buechner has described vocation as the place God calls you to be “where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”<sup>13</sup> Precisely in the course of acting on what has been heard—by loving one’s neighbor as oneself (2:8), do active believers find joy.

James closes chapter 1 with a challenge of a new perspective on religion (1:26-27), that at once looks back on the demand to be doers of the word (1:22,25) and anticipates the call to active concern for the poor in chapter 2.

James offers two tests by which the worth and purity of one’s religion can be assayed. The first is the test of a bridled tongue, that is, of controlled speech (1:26). James warns that those who lash out with angry words (1:19) or bad-mouth one another (4:11; 5:9) are self-deceived. Those merchants who boast of a future under their control (4:13-16) are similarly deceived. The second test is that of active compassion towards those who are from the “world’s” perspective of no account (1:27).

### Ancient Mirrors



Relief of an aristocratic woman in a wicker chair attended by four servants, one holding a mirror, from a grave monument from Neumagen, third century AD. Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Trier, Germany.

In the New Testament world mirrors were a luxury item. Highly polished bronze mirrors were labor intensive products; “high end” end mirrors were fashioned from silver and often featured elaborate gilded decoration. James’s appeal to the image of the mirror may be a subtle jab at those rich enjoying consumptive lifestyles. They (or their servants) adjust their hair based on what they see in the mirror but they do not see themselves in the scripture’s call to adjust their lives to sow active concern for those in need.



Relief of an aristocratic woman in a wicker chair attend by four servants, one holding a mirror. From a grave monument in Neumagen. Third century AD. Rheinisches Landesmuseum. Germany.

Orphans and widows represent those poor, oppressed, and exploited ones who are unable to rescue themselves from their harsh circumstances. To “*visit them*” is not to pay a social call but to intervene in their lives, as God visited the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, upsetting the powers that oppressed them and setting them free. James defines religion that matters as visiting and helping orphans and widows, that is, “spending time with them, joining them in their oppression, and sharing basic necessities with them.”<sup>14</sup> James’s sense of justice is not a dispassionate requirement for equality rather a caring advocacy for those in need for whom the Christian community has special responsibility. James is concerned for the poor and vulnerable and ‘leans’ in their direction; in James’s view Christians owe these least fortunate more; in James’s experience, the rich can and do fend for themselves.

The “world” represents “the institutions, the structures, and the value system that promote injustice or are indifferent to it.”<sup>15</sup> The “world” confuses having with being, and thus encourages acquisitiveness rather than solidarity with those in need. For James, as for Jesus, life does not consist in getting and grasping more and more; all worth comes as a gift from God, who has birthed James’s community, giving them new life and a new status as “first fruits,”

whether they be sisters or brothers in need of food and clothing or else those with the means to assist those “family members” in need. “Keeping oneself uncontaminated by the world” means not conforming to the twisted, dehumanizing values of society at large: “Christian communities must the avoid accommodation to this unjust system and not fall into the trap laid by its value system.”<sup>16</sup> As Tamez has noted:

Our contemporary value systems are backwards. For people today, perfection is linked to success, competition, and excelling at the expense of others. For James, it is the opposite; for him it is to attend to the needy in order to be consistent with what we believe and what we read in the Bible.<sup>17</sup>

For James, believers display pure religion when they do not buy into the world’s dismissive estimate of the underprivileged but care for them as those especially loved by God (cf. 1:9; 2:5). Those whose love and faith compels them to merciful action toward those pressed down in the struggle find that by this active care their own faith is brought to maturity and integrity (1:5) and shows evidence of being alive (2:17,26).

## CONNECTIONS

### **Poor “Somebodies”**

James’s command, “Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up” by God (1:9) resounded often during the 1960s civil rights struggle. James echoed from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, as Martin Luther King Jr., challenged America to live up to the words of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal.” James’s command to the poor to appreciate their worth to God reverberated during the civil rights struggle in Memphis through Bishop Henry Starks’ oft-repeated message to those suffering oppression, “You *are somebody*.” James command to the poor to reassess their worth was heard again in April 1968, when striking sanitation workers in Memphis carried signs that proclaimed, “I AM A MAN.” Those working poor had to proclaim that good news of their own worth and contribution to the community because “city hall” had refused to acknowledge



**Memphis Sanitation  
Workers' Strike**

Working poor proclaim their  
human worth.

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them at the bargaining table. Only Dr. King's assassination exposed the powers and created an opportune time for a just resolution to the workers' grievances. Again we hear echoes of James: "You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you" (5:6).

How are poverty and oppression liked today? Many labor full-time at minimum wage and nevertheless find themselves with annual incomes well beneath the federal poverty level. Livable wage campaigns seek to redress this injustice. Some of these working poor labor in states that demand that they pay state income tax. In 2003, efforts to revise the Alabama tax code to offer relief for the working poor from disproportionate burdens were defeated, in part because of vocal opposition from a "conservative" Christian lobbying group, even more so because of ignorance, disinterest, or perceived conflict with self-interest of many Alabama Christians. Many laborers work for employers who are careful to schedule them just shy of full-time hours, so that they can skirt laws requiring employer contributions to health care insurance or retirement benefits. Undocumented aliens often labor long hours under dangerous conditions for less than minimum wage, all the while in fear of being reported to Immigration.

James seems unaware that some rich might make common cause with the poor, ceasing to be rich in things as they expend their resources in single-minded demonstrations of mercy (1:10-11).



### Koinonia Farm

Clarence Jordan putting faith to work.

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Such was the case with Milliard and Linda Fuller's founding of Habitat for Humanity. Their action of selling all they had and giving the proceeds to the poor (cf. Mark 10:21) was not that of double-minded persons, rather it was done in faith by those wholly committed to pursuing God's will for themselves and God's justice for others (Jas 1:6-8). Such was also the case with Clarence and Florence Jordan's founding of Koinonia Farm. Their action of demonstrating that Christian persons, black and white, could work side-by-side for equal pay as true partners, could eat side-by-side at one table of fellowship, and could search the scriptures side-by-side under one shady tree were acts of those who understood that Christian faith is incompatible with discrimination (Jas 2:1).

But what of us have who nevertheless desire to live out our faith all the while conforming to our self-indulgent society? James leaves us with a lingering disquiet: can we live as Christians *and* be rich in a world of such pressing needs? Can we remain comfortable *and* exhibit unadulterated loyalty to God's cause? It was far easier to read James's letter as a seminarian serving a poor inner-city congregation than it is to read it as a homeowner with a well-paying job, health insurance and a retirement plan.

### Making My Life My Argument

During a BBC interview late in his life, Albert Schweitzer, renowned organist, pioneering New Testament scholar, and medical doctor, was asked why he left his privileged life in Germany to slave at the Lambaréné mission hospital buried in the jungles along the Ogowe river, deep in the Belgian Congo. He replied, "I have decided to make my life my argument."

As people of faith, we listen for God's voice to discern what will make our lives matter. James defines "real religion" in terms of living a life that makes a difference, specifically making a difference for those who lack the power to change much by themselves (Jas 1:27). Real religion makes you see others as God sees them, and makes you demonstrate active care for them



### Albert Schweitzer

Albert Schweitzer doing the word.

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as God does. The world takes a different view towards the overlooked, underestimated, passed-by, stepped-on people; in the world's eyes, such folk are expendables, no names, no accounts, just statistics. Those whose religion has been spotted by the world's perspective don't make eye contact with the needy, don't give them a second thought, nor offer them a helping hand. Those with world-spotted religion may be important figures in their congregations or in the political arena but pass by the wounded from the far side of the road and never risk getting involved. Their religion is dead; their hearts are cold; their faith profits no one.

Now, those who see with God's eyes and feel with God's heart serve as God's hands. In James's context, "to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction" means "to rescue" them from (or at least stand in solidarity with them in) their oppressive circumstances. God once heard the cries of Hebrew slaves weighed down by state-sponsored terrorism in the twin forms of forced labor and the horrific genocide of the Hebrews' male children that threatened to rob the community of its future. When God "visited" them God intervened in their story in a powerful way that exchanged slavery to Pharaoh for freedom to serve the Living God. God's 'visit' led undocumented aliens to a new home of their own. Those freed, homebound slaves knew abundant life because God had visited them and made a difference in their lives. And they sang for joy.

James uses "the fatherless and widows" as shorthand for all the overlooked, underestimated, passed by, stepped on 'little people' who do not have the strength to rescue themselves from all that enslaves them. Such people populate our communities though they may be invisible to the privileged.

- An HIV+ patient lacks insurance coverage for life-prolonging medications her doctor has prescribed. Alienated from her family and church, she is fearful and alone. [Samaritan Ministry]



### Samaritan Ministry

Central Baptist Church Bearden's Samaritan Ministry demonstrates how a local congregation can reach out to those affected by HIV and AIDS. Ministries include:

- regular grocery "rounds";
- First Tuesday, a monthly gathering for food, prayer and support;
- a Thanksgiving dinner, held the week before the holiday, at which church members share table fellowship with those living with HIV/AIDS;
- a community service of remembrance and hope, coinciding with world AIDS day; and
- holiday "buckets of hope," stuffed with self-care items and sweets, distributed through a local clinic.

For more information on the Samaritan Ministry, see <<http://www.cbcbeardean.org/samaritan3.html>>.

### Children's Defense Fund



We can and must build a nation where families have the support they need to make it at work and at home; where every child enters school ready to learn and leaves on the path to a productive future; where babies are likely to be born healthy, and sick children have the health care they need; where no child has to grow up in poverty; where all children are safe in their communities and every child has a place to call home—and all Americans can proudly say, “We Leave No Child Behind.”

From the Children's Defense Fund website, <<http://www.childrensdefense.org/about/default.asp>>.

- A preschooler has no one at home to read to him; his hardworking mother is one late rent payment away from homelessness. A child victim of physical or sexual abuse is ‘acting out’ in school or at church. A toddler sleeps on the backseat of a daycare van unnoticed by a driver already late for his second job; the forecast calls for 90 degrees. [Children's Defense Fund]

### Families to Families



Family-to-Family is a nonprofit organization dedicated to connecting families with more to families with less: “The program creates a bridge between upscale suburban communities and some of our country’s most impoverished areas.” Family-to-Family is a hands-on ministry: “members welcome the concrete responsibility of shopping for, packing, and sending a carton of fundamental necessities to a family they ‘adopt.’” Since November 2002, Family-to-Family members in Hastings-on-Hudson, New York (1999 per capita income of \$48,914) have sent more than 10 tons of food to residents of Pembroke, Illinois (per capita income of \$9,642).

For more information on Family-to-Family, see their website, <<http://www.family-to-family.com/about.htm>>.

### Livable Wage Campaigns



Living-wage laws “set higher minimum wages for the employees of companies benefiting from public contracts, subsidies, or actions, and in some cases also for direct government employees. Living-wage laws prevent the use of public dollars to create poverty-wage jobs.”

From the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) website, <[www.acorn.org/index.php?id=42](http://www.acorn.org/index.php?id=42)>.

- An undocumented alien who has traveled two thousands miles, mostly on foot, in search of a better life and in hope of sending money home to his hungry family, finds himself too sick to work and unable to speak English.

- A young father with a full-time, minimum-wage job finds his best efforts at supporting his family yields a salary about one-half the federal poverty line. What would a visit mean to him in his discouraging situation? [Families to Families] [Living Wage Campaigns]

- An older adult woman roasts in summer heat without air conditioning, afraid to raise her window for threat of a break-in. A colleague is grieving the loss of her spouse, trying to be strong for her children, and overcome by sadness each day as she works.

James calls us to look around us for the needy who cannot help themselves. God has not forgotten them; indeed, “God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom God promises to those who love him” (2:5). God cares for the needy, and the religion that God approves does not leave them forgotten. Pure and undefiled religion sees the other as a brother or sister who merits our active love, not just our weak sentiment. Pure and undefiled religion sees

the stranger dying by the roadside as my neighbor, as my responsibility.

## Real Religion

John Greenleaf Whittier (1807–1892) was a Quaker poet, ardent abolitionist, and a founder of the Republican Party. His “O Brother



### O Brother Man!

The Pagan’s myths through marble lips are spoken,  
And ghosts of old Beliefs still flit and moan  
Round fane and altar overthrown and broken,  
O’er tree-grown barrow and gray ring of stone.

Blind faith had martyrs in those old high places,  
The Syrian hill grove and the Druid’s wood,  
With mothers offering, to the Fiend’s embraces,  
Bone of their bone, and blood of their own blood.

Red altars, kindling through that night of error,  
Smoked with warm blood beneath the cruel eye  
Of lawless power and sanguinary terror,  
Throned on the circle of a pitiless sky;

Beneath whose baleful shadow, over-casting  
All heaven above and, and blighting earth below,  
The scourge grew red, the lip grew pale with fasting,  
And man’s oblation was his fear and woe!

Then through great temples swelled the dismal moaning  
Of dirge-like music and sepulchral prayer;  
Pale wizard priests, o’er occult symbols droning,  
Swung their white censors through the burdened air:

As if in the pomp of rituals, and the savor  
Of gums and spices could the Unseen One please;  
As if his ear could bend, with childish favor,  
To the poor flattery of the organ keys!

Feet red from war fields trod the church aisles holy,  
With trembling reverence: and the oppressor there,  
Kneeling before his priest, abased and lowly,  
Crushed human hearts beneath his knee of prayer.

Not such the service the benignant Father  
Requireth at His earthly children’s hands:  
Not the poor offering of vain rites, but rather  
The simple duty man from man demands.

For Earth he asks it: the full joy of heaven  
Knoweth no change of waning or increase;  
The great heart of the Infinite beats even,  
Untroubled flows the river of His peace.

He asks no taper lights, on high surrounding  
The priestly altar and the saintly grave,  
No dolorous chant nor organ music sounding,  
Nor incense clouding up the twilight nave.

For he whom Jesus loved hath truly spoken:  
The holier worship which he deigns to bless  
Restores the lost, and binds the spirit broken,  
And feeds the widow and the fatherless!

Types of our human weakness and sorrow!  
Who lives unhaunted by his loved ones dead?  
Who with vain longing, seeketh not to borrow  
From stranger eyes the home lights which have fled?

O brother man! For to thy heart thy brother;  
Where pity dwells, the peace of God is there;  
To worship rightly is to love each other,  
Each smile a hymn, each kindly deed a prayer.

Follow with reverent steps the great example  
Of him whose holy work was ‘doing good’;  
So shall the whole earth seem our Father’s temple,  
Each loving life a psalm of gratitude.

Then shall all shackles fall; the stormy clangor  
Of wild war music o’er the earth shall cease;  
Love shall tread out the baleful fire of anger,  
And in its ashes plant the tree of peace!

John Greenleaf Whittier, “O Brother Man!”

Man!” (1848) reflects his Quaker disdain for external trappings of religiosity, his commitment to peacemaking, and his reformer’s zeal for solidarity with the oppressed. [O Brother Man] James’s letter echoes in Whittier’s critique of worship practices across the centuries:

- God is “the benignant Father” (cf. God as the Source of “every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift,” Jas 1:17);
- God “Knoweth no change of waning or increase” (cf. “with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change,” Jas 1:17);
- God “asks no taper lights, on high / Surrounding the priestly altar” (because God is “the Father of Lights,” Jas 1:17);
- “The holier worship which he deigns to bless / Restores the lost” (cf. Jas 5:19-20);
- “And feeds the widow and the fatherless” (cf. “to care for orphans and widows in their affliction,” Jas 1:27);
- “Who with vain longing, seeketh not to borrow / From stranger eyes the home lights which have fled/” (cf. “Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God,” Jas 4:4).

Whittier’s harsh words regarding organ music, chants, and deadening prayers take issue with the worth of the church’s worship, whether traditional or contemporary praise. True worship does not take place at hill-top shrines, cavernous cathedrals, or arena-sized ‘worship centers.’ For Whittier as for James, real religion consists in simple caring for those in need, whether their needs are spiritual or basic physical needs. If the worship hour does not equip God’s people for ministry in the ‘mission field’ outside the church house, worship has lost touch with what God deigns worthwhile.

Whittier’s harshest rhetoric points at those who kill in the name of religion, whether they be pagan Druids or Christian Crusaders. If the worship place becomes a “den of thieves” to which modern Crusaders retreat in blood-stained boots, seeking absolution from war crimes, believers are deceived regarding God’s demands on their lives. If the mosque becomes a forum for plotting murder of noncombatants, believers are deceived regarding the will of the “Merciful and Compassionate.” James likewise regards peacemaking as the appropriate action of those professing faith in the one true God and demonstrating that wisdom from above

(3:17-18). James views wars and other human conflict as rooted in human selfishness (4:1-2) rather than in God's will.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Elsa Tamez applied John Elliott's sociological (and metaphorical) reading of *Diaspora* in 1 Peter to James: "Those of the dispersion are the Christian communities who are outcast and despised in the societies where they live. The majority are poor or very poor" (*The Scandalous Message of James: Faith without Works Is Dead* [New York: Crossroad, 1992], 35). As other liberation theologians do, Tamez typically opts for a literal reading of texts the church has "spiritualized" throughout Christian history. Here, such a literal reading would take the audience as Diaspora Jews (or Jewish-Christians), many of whom were outcast and despised not only because of their marginal social standing, but also because of their religious identity. See also John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> Tamez, *Scandalous Message*, 57-58.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>10</sup> Wayne Oates, reflecting on Victor Frankel's work.

<sup>11</sup> Tamez, *Scandalous Message*, 40.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>13</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 95.

<sup>14</sup> Tamez, *Scandalous Message*, 21-22.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-87.