SCOTT D. MACKIE

Eschatology and Exhortation in the Epistle to the Hebrews

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Preface

The author of Hebrews places great emphasis on the communal nature of Christian existence. In the middle of his most emotional exhortation he urges the community to "not neglect our gatherings," as they afford vital opportunities to "encourage one another" (10:25). This present work, a revised version of a Ph.D. dissertation submitted to Fuller Theological Seminary in 2006, owes its existence to such encouragement. My advisor, Donald A. Hagner, of course merits first mention in this regard. He patiently guided and encouraged me through this entire effort. I am particularly grateful for all the practical wisdom he provided. This dissertation also greatly benefited from the keen eye and insight of Ralph P. Martin, who waded through it from beginning to end, repeatedly clarifying thought and expression.

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Venice, California September 2006

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Prolegomenon

The Epistle to the Hebrews brings us into contact with the mind of one of the great creative geniuses of the NT.[1] The author's unique high priest Christology and refined literary technique have suffered no shortage of appreciation, and so also his distinctive combination of traditional two-age apocalyptic and Heavenly Sanctuary eschatology. Receiving a comparable level of critical scrutiny are the passionate exhortations and severe warnings he issues to a community apparently contemplating an abandonment of their Christian commitment. Of particular interest to this present study is the manner in which this emotional hortatory effort is situated within and empowered by the author's eschatological convictions. In fact, as we will see, these potent and vivid eschatological convictions – centered on the person and work of the exalted high priest Jesus – are so indissolubly linked to his exhortation that the entire work can be fairly classified an "eschatological 'exhortation'" (13:22).[2] This study is offered with the conviction that Hebrews is a representative example of the fact that "perhaps the most misunderstood and neglected aspect of early Christian spiritual formation is its decidedly eschatological cast."[3]

The "eschatological exhortation" offered by the author of Hebrews is directed towards a specific context. The passion and severity of his exhortation is inexplicable if dissociated from a living context: i.e., a community of believers, whose Christian commitment is under threat from a variety of circumstances, including persecution and social

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[1] John P. Meier, "Symmetry and Theology in the Old Testament Citations of Heb 1,5–14," *Bib* 66 (1985), 533, believes the author possesses "the most subtle and recondite mind in the NT."

[2] Ronald Williamson, *Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews* (ALGHJ. Leiden: Brill, 1970), 145. Charles P. Anderson, "Who Are the Heirs of the New Age in the Epistle to the Hebrews?" in *Apocalyptic and the New Testament: Essays in Honor of J. Louis Martyn*, ed. Joel Marcus and Marion L. Soards (JSNTSup 24. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 256, deems Hebrews an "apocalyptic 'word of exhortation.'"

[3] Stanley P. Saunders, "'Learning Christ': Eschatology and Spiritual Formation in New Testament Christianity," *Int* 56.2 (2002), 159.

marginalization. This introductory section will therefore survey the textual clues pointing to the community's situation and the various analyses of these data. It will also briefly consider the pertinent studies of Hebrews' eschatology, as well as some recent efforts directed at properly understanding NT exhortation – of which Hebrews is a fair example.

As Frank Matera has noted: "While the NT consistently establishes a relationship between doctrine and morality, Hebrews does this more explicitly than any other NT writing."[4] Therefore a full appreciation of these three factors: the situation of the recipients, the author's eschatology, and his hortatory strategy, is crucial to understanding Hebrews as a whole, and is possible only when these three factors are considered in concert. Furthermore, the author's eschatology is inseparable from his rich Christology, thus his passionate exhortation to a community under threat is necessarily viewed as the full flowering of this "Christ-centered eschatology" into a passionate appeal for perseverance in Christian commitment.

[4] Frank J. Matera, "Moral Exhortation: The Relation between Moral Exhortation and Doctrinal Exposition in the Letter to the Hebrews," *TJT* 10 (1994), 170.

Chapter One

The Eschatology of Hebrews

1. Introduction

The eschatological convictions of the author of Hebrews cohere in many ways with other NT writings. He believes that the death and exaltation of Jesus has occurred at "the end of the ages" (9:26; cf. 1 Pet 1:19–21; Gal 4:4–5; 1 Cor 10:11), and in "a very little while" Jesus will return to the earth, bringing judgment and salvation (9:28; 10:37–39; cf. 1 Thess 4:13–18; Rom 13:11–12; 1 Pet 1:3–9). In the interim the community lives in a time of eschatological ambiguity, presently experiencing "the powers of the age to come" (6:5; cf. Rom 8:11; 1 Cor 12–14), yet eagerly awaiting the full unveiling of God's eschatological kingdom, which in Hebrews is envisioned as an "unshakeable kingdom" (12:28) and a heavenly city (13:14). These key moments in the community's past, present, and future find expression in the vocabulary of traditional Jewish apocalyptic two-age eschatology, though with the distinctive Christological focus characteristic of the early Church.

Without parallel in Second Temple Jewish and early Christian literature is the author's depiction of Jesus the great high priest, whose sacrificial ministry largely occurs in the Heavenly Sanctuary. Almost as unique are his descriptions of this Heavenly Sanctuary, which appear to be dependent upon metaphysical Platonic cosmology. In 8:5 and 9:23–24, the author describes the Heavenly Sanctuary *vis-à-vis* the earthly tabernacle, demonstrating the ontological and axiological superiority of the Heavenly Sanctuary by means of Platonic terminology. This cosmological construct serves as the setting of his depiction of Jesus the high priest, whose ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary similarly surpasses the sacrificial activities conducted in the earthly tabernacle (7:26–28; 8:1–6; 9:1 – 10:25; 13:10–12).

2. A Platonic thought-world

Platonic philosophical terminology appears in three locations: (1) In 8:5 the earthly tabernacle is said to be "a sketch and shadow of the heavenly

one" (ὑποδείγματι καὶ σκιᾷ τῶν . . . ἐπουρανίων). Moses was instructed to construct this earthly tabernacle "according to the pattern" (κατὰ τὸν τύπον) he was shown "on the mountain." (2) 9:23–24 also characterizes the earthly tabernacle as a "sketch" (ὑπόδειγμα) and "copy" (ἀντίτυπος) of the heavenly tabernacle. (3) In 10:1 the Mosaic law is said to the possess "only a shadow (σκιά) of the good things to come and not the true image (εἰκών) of these realities (πρᾶγμα)." One further example of Platonic cosmology has been occasionally adduced: 12:27–28, where the earth is depicted by the author as a "shakeable thing" (σαλευομένων), soon to be "removed" (μετάθεσις) and replaced by an abiding (μένω) and unshakeable kingdom (βασιλείαν ἀσάλευτον).

These occurrences have prompted a number of scholars to argue that the author's primary frame of reference is metaphysical Platonism. Most notable in this regard are James W. Thompson,[1] George W. MacRae,[2] Erich Grässer,[3] Gregory E. Sterling,[4] and Wilfried Eisele.[5] The author's eschatology is thus conceived primarily along vertical/spatial Platonic ontological lines, with an ideal metaphysical world looming above the earthly shadow-world.

While Thompson, MacRae, and Sterling recognize the presence of traditional Jewish apocalyptic-eschatological materials in Hebrews, their importance is either minimized (Thompson) or relativized (MacRae and Sterling).[6] MacRae and Sterling attribute the presence of these traditional apocalyptic materials to the author's accommodation of his audience.

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[1] James W. Thompson, *The Beginnings of Christian Philosophy: The Epistle to the Hebrews* (CBQMS 13. Washington, DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1982).

[2] George W. MacRae, "Heavenly Temple and Eschatology in the Letter to the Hebrews," *Semeia* 12 (1978), 179–99; idem, "A Kingdom that Cannot be Shaken: The Heavenly Jerusalem in the Letter to the Hebrews," in *Studies in the New Testament and Gnosticism,* ed. Daniel J. Harrington and Stanley B. Marrow (Good News Studies 26. Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1987), 98–112.

[3] Cf. Erich Grässer, *Der Glaube im Hebräerbrief* (Marburger Theologische Studien 2. Marburg: N. G. Elwert, 1965), 174: "Die für den eschatologischen Entwurf des Hb entscheidenden und ihn tragenden Begriffe sind nicht solche der Zeitlichkeit, sondern solche einer transzendenten Räumlichkeit." See also idem, *An Die Hebräer* (Hebr 7,1–10,18) (EKKNT 17/2. Zurich: Benziger / Neukirchen-Vluyen: Neukirchener, 1993), 88, 206–7.

[4] Gregory E. Sterling, "Ontology versus Eschatology: Tensions between the Author and Community in Hebrews," *The Studia Philonica Annual* 13 (2001), 190–211.

[5] Wilfried Eisele, *Ein unerschütterliches Reich: Die mittelplatonische Umformung des Parusiegedankens im Hebräerbrief* (BZNT 116. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003).

[6] Thompson, *The Beginnings of Christian Philosophy*, 154; MacRae, "Heavenly Temple and Eschatology in the Letter to the Hebrews," 190; Sterling, "Ontology versus Eschatology," 204–8.

MacRae is convinced they reflect the eschatological orientation of the recipients.[7] The author's Platonic cosmology is thus deployed as a strategic response to the delayed parousia, allaying fears by conveying the nearness of the heavenly realm.[8] Sterling has argued that the author's worldview is best characterized as "eschatological Platonism," a hybrid that has resulted from "the imposition of eschatology upon previously held Platonic views."[9] He reverses MacRae's judgment, insisting that "Platonizing exegetical traditions were already held by the community," while "eschatology is the primary concern of the author."[10] Thompson perceives a pervasive Platonic influence, and concludes that the author represents "a preliminary stage in the church's adoption of a Platonic metaphysic."[11]

3. Jewish apocalyptic two-age eschatology

The majority of scholars have argued, in spite of the presence of the aforementioned Platonic terminology, that a traditional Jewish linear/temporal eschatological viewpoint more decisively characterizes the author's thought-world. Two scholars in particular merit mention: C. K. Barrett[12] and L. D. Hurst.[13] Barrett, while prioritizing the role of Jewish eschatology, acknowledges the presence of Platonic materials, which are employed "to impress upon believers the nearness of the invisible world without insisting upon the nearness of the *parousia*."[14] Hurst utterly rejects a Platonic background of thought,[15] and ably demonstrates the fascination

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[7] MacRae, "Heavenly Temple and Eschatology in the Letter to the Hebrews," 179.

[8] Ibid., 190–2, 196. Also, idem, "A Kingdom that Cannot be Shaken: The Heavenly Jerusalem in the Letter to the Hebrews," 103–4.

[9] Sterling, "Ontology versus Eschatology," 210.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Thompson, *The Beginnings of Christian Philosophy*, 158. So also John P. Meier, "Structure and Theology in Heb 1,1–14," *Bib* 66 (1985), 180–2.

[12] C. K. Barrett, "The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews," in *The Background of the New Testament and Its Eschatology: Essays in Honour of C. H. Dodd,* ed. W. D. Davies and D. Daube (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 363–93; idem, "The Christology of Hebrews," in *Who Do You Say I Am? Essays on Christology: In Honor of Jack Dean Kingsbury*, ed. Mark Allan Powell and David R. Bauer (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 110–27.

[13] L. D. Hurst, "How 'Platonic' are Heb. viii. 5 and ix. 23f.?" *JTS* 34 (1983), 156–68; idem, "Eschatology and 'Platonism' in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *SBLSP* 23 (1984), 41–74; idem, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its background of thought* (SNTSMS 65. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[14] Barrett, "The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews," 391.

[15] Hurst, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 42; idem, "Eschatology and 'Platonism' in the Epistle to the Hebrews," 47–8.

and familiarity of the Hebraic mind with the heavenly/vertical dimension, especially in apocalyptic literature.[16] He therefore argues that this interpenetration of Hellenistic and Jewish thought should caution against use of "vertical/horizontal" and "spatial/temporal" as mutually exclusive categories in the effort to establish an authorial thought-world. Scholars endorsing and extending the conclusions of Barrett and Hurst are almost evenly divided.[17]

This study will generally follow Barrett's lead, assuming the author's familiarity with Platonic cosmology and his purposeful, yet limited employment of it in relation to the Heavenly Sanctuary (8:5; 9:23–24) and the law of Moses (10:1). Though Hurst is surely correct to stress the mutual coherence of spatial and temporal eschatologies in Jewish apocalyptic thought, the author's occasional deployment of Platonic terminology and imagery merits consideration within its milieu of origin. Nevertheless, the primacy of traditional Jewish and early Christian apocalyptic eschatology will be maintained throughout. This opinion finds its basis in the sheer volume of materials that have Jewish and Christian eschatological convictions at their core, and especially in the author's controlling conviction: that the age of the eschaton had already dawned in his own time, inaugurated by the sacrifice and exaltation of Christ (9:26). Inaugurated eschatology also explicitly surfaces in such two-age dualistic phrases as "in these last days" (ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων, 1:2), and "the powers of the age to come" (δυνάμεις τε μέλλοντος αἰῶνος, 6:5).

This proposed prioritization of temporal Jewish eschatology over spatial Platonic cosmology is also apparent in the author's portrayal of "the coming world" (τὴν οἰκουμένην τὴν μέλλουσαν, 2:5) and "the coming city" (πόλιν . . . τὴν μέλλουσαν, 13:14). These two representations of the heavenly realm may be directly equated with the Heavenly Sanctuary into which Christ has entered and now reigns exalted (1:3; 2:9; 4:14; 6:19–20;

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[16] Hurst, "Eschatology and 'Platonism' in the Epistle to the Hebrews," 42–8. Cf. the confluence of spatial and temporal eschatologies in *1 En.* 1–36 and *2 Bar.* 51:8: "For they shall see that world that is now invisible to them, and they will see a time which is now hidden to them."

[17] Those endorsing Barrett's position include: Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 36. New York: Doubleday, 2001), 98–100; David A. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle "to the Hebrews"* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2000), 283; and Kenneth L. Schenck, "Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews: Ronald Williamson's Study After Thirty Years," *The Studia Philonica Annual* 14 (2002), 114, 119. Following Hurst in his rejection of a Platonic philosophical background of thought: Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans / Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1993), 408; and William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* (WBC 47A. Dallas: Word, 1991), cviii, 207–8.

7:24, 26; 8:1–5; 9:11–14, 24; 10:12–13, 20–21; 12:2). Furthermore, this same heavenly realm is in some respects vitally accessible to the recipients (4:16; 7:25; 10:19, 22; 12:22–24). Though it must therefore be considered an extant, *present* reality, the essential *futurity* of the heavenly world is signaled by the fact that it is "coming" imminently with cataclysmic finality, its full disclosure requiring the removal of the present world (1:10–12; 12:25–29). Another indication of a preponderant temporal orientation is found in the fact that the Son's rule, while manifest in the coming world, has not yet extended to the visible realm.[18] Though "crowned with glory and honor" (2:9), Jesus is presently "waiting until his enemies would be made a footstool under his feet" (10:12). It is therefore helpful to conceive of his entry into the Heavenly Sanctuary as an "act of boundary crossing" that transcends more than just the earthly and heavenly planes. As Richard D. Nelson has correctly observed, Jesus' exaltation involved an "entry not just into sacred space, but also sacred time."[19]

Therefore, despite the author's depiction of this future kingdom as a present reality, it should not be directly equated with the Platonic "intangible metaphysical world."[20] Though the author has drawn upon the language and imagery of Hellenistic philosophical cosmological dualism, this language and imagery has been eschatologically informed and adapted.[21] As our examination of the two-ages schema will show, in spite of the commanding presence of the coming world and Heavenly Sanctuary in the author's symbolic universe, a more pervasive and influential temporal orientation – controlled largely by the two-age schema – demands that this heavenly realm be considered an eschatological reality.[22]

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[18] Robert L. Brawley, "Discoursive Structure and the Unseen in Hebrews 2:8 and 11:1: A Neglected Aspect of the Context," *CBQ* 55 (January 1993), 97, has convincingly argued for the mutual consideration of both orientations, temporal and spatial, and points to the promised future subjugation of "all things" to Jesus (2:8) as proof that "the future temporal eschatology does not recede behind a transcendent spatial concept."

[19] Richard D. Nelson, *Raising Up a Faithful Priest: Community and Priesthood in Biblical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 149.

[20] Brawley, "Discoursive Structure and the Unseen in Hebrews 2:8 and 11:1," 97.

[21] Difficulty in reconciling and relating these apparently mutually exclusive thought-worlds commonly caused the scholars of two or three generations ago to charge the author with inconsistent thought. Cf. James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of the Hebrews* (ICC. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1924), liv, xxxiv; and E. F. Scott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its Doctrine and Significance* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1922), 102, 109–12, 120. See also A. J. M. Wedderburn, "Sawing off the Branches: Theologizing Dangerously *Ad Hebraeos*," *JTS* 56.2 (2005), 400–3, 410–13, who repeatedly characterizes the author's use of Platonic ontology/cosmology as incoherent and self-contradictory.

[22] The "once for all" nature of Christ's entry into and salvific actions in the Heavenly Sanctuary (7:27; 8:6; 9:11–15, 23–28; 10:12–15, 19–22; 12:3) also militates against an

The coming world corresponds to and coheres with the "age to come." And because of their essential coherence within the two-age framework, we will consider these two occurrences of "coming" spatial realities, the "coming world" (2:5) and the "coming city" (13:14), in the course of our treatment of two-age eschatology.

ontologically static understanding of the heavenly realm. We should also note the difficulties that emerge when the author's multivalent terminology for "ages" and "world" is considered. That is, αἰών, which may mean either "age" or "world" (1:2, 8; 5:6; 6:5, 20; 7:17, 21, 24, 28; 9:26; 11:3; 13:8, 20), and οἰκουμένη (1:6; 2:5). We may assume a mundane meaning throughout for κόσμος (4:3; 9:26; 10:5; 11:7, 38).

Chapter Two

The Situation of the Recipients

1. Introduction

Attempts at reconstructing the situation of the recipients of Hebrews are frustrated on three counts: (1) the identities of both the author and (2) the recipients are nowhere clearly indicated; (3) also sorely lacking are any clear indications of the recipients' geographical setting and historical circumstances. Therefore all responsible reconstructions of the recipients' situation must ultimately acknowledge the tentative nature of the enterprise. In the face of these circumstances, some scholars have adopted stances of total pessimism. Pamela M. Eisenbaum contends "there is no way to disguise the lack of concrete data pointing to a specific historical moment."[1] Though she admits "certainly there were real-life circumstances that influenced the writer of Hebrews to compose his brilliant essay,"[2] Eisenbaum argues the author was "much more concerned about the subject of which he writes, namely a systematic understanding of Christology, than about the behavior or well-being of his audience."[3] With this "theoretical focus," it is the "quintessential example of a 'theological essay,'" and as such it is "directed to an ideal audience imagined by the author."[4] In a similar vein is Hurst's remark: "While speculative reconstructions are popular, in the end they are totally unnecessary."[5]

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[1] Pamela M. Eisenbaum, "Locating Hebrews within the Literary Landscape of Christian Origins," in *Hebrews: Contemporary Methods – New Insights*, ed. Gabriella Gelardini (BibInt 75. Leiden: Brill, 2005), 226.

[2] Ibid., 230.

[3] Ibid., 222.

[4] Ibid., 222, 230–1. In her monograph, *The Jewish Heroes of Christian History: Hebrews 11 in Literary Context* (SBLDS 156. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), Eisenbaum argues: "Even if the author did have one particular community in mind, his elaborate theological and christological reflection indicates he wanted to make a statement that could transcend any one occasion" (12). The epistle is characterized by its quest to establish "Christian identity":

> Throughout Hebrews, the reigning leitmotif can be summed up in the question 'How are Christians rooted in Judaism and ancient Israel and yet distinct from it?' Since this issue must have been fundamental to every ancient Christian community, I strongly

2. The possibility and propriety of reconstructing the recipients' situation

While such pessimistic opinions provide helpful reminders of the tentative nature of the "reconstruction" enterprise, the following factors demonstrate both the *desirability* and *ability* to attempt such a reconstruction. (1) Seemingly specific knowledge of the community's conversion (2:3–4; 6:4–5; 10:32–34)[6] and early life are evidenced (6:10–12; 10:32–34; 12:4), an indication that the author has equally accurate information about their present circumstances (2:14–15; 3:12–13; 6:10–12; 10:25, 29, 35–39; 12:3–4, 7, 14–16; 13:2–19). One wonders if an audience would have received and perpetuated his "word of exhortation" (13:22) if it contained a fictive recital of their experience. (2) A personal relationship between author and audience is apparent in 13:18–19, 22–24. There, the author addresses the recipients as a personal acquaintance, asking them to pray for him, so that he "may be restored" to them "very soon." (3) Unique maladies are diagnosed and specific remedies prescribed. The most notable examples being the author's emphasis on a decisively cleansed conscience and the high priest whose self-sacrifice provides this cleansing (9:11–14; 10:1–25). And again, we may assume that his whole enterprise would have been jeopardized if this distinctive presentation failed to resonate with its first audience. (4) Contrary to Hurst's opinion, a reconstruction of the situation is helpful, provided the dangers of mirror readings and circular arguments are guarded against. It is quite obvious that the author's Christology is tailored for the audience's situation.[7] Knowledge of the latter is essential to fully appreciate the significance of the former. Aspects

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suspect that the author envisioned several communities benefiting from his speech (10).

Cf. Alexander Nairne, *The Epistle of Priesthood: Studies in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1915), 7: "Hebrews is late, artificial, reflective; a treatise rather than a letter; . . . it smells of the study, not the open air of life where history is being made." See also Jon M. Isaak, *Situating the Letter to the Hebrews in Early Christian History* (Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 53. Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 152–8.

[5] L. D. Hurst, "New Testament Theological Analysis," in *Introducing New Testament Interpretation*, ed. Scot McKnight (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 156.

[6] Mathias Rissi, *Die Theologie des Hebräerbriefs: ihre Verankerung in der Situation des Verfassers und seiner Leser* (WUNT 41. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1987), 3–8.

[7] Marie Isaacs, *Sacred Space: An Approach to the Theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (JSNTSup 73. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 22–3, argues that "the situation of those addressed and the theological exposition of the author" are "so interrelated, our view of its audience will largely condition our understanding of Hebrews' message."

of both the recipients' situation and the author's Christological response are too unique to dismiss their relationship as an "unnecessary" fact.

Ultimately we should wonder why our author, possessed of an intellect matched only by Paul in the NT, had he been interested in forwarding a "theoretical treatise," would have tailored so much of the content of his treatise to the unique conditions facing an "idealized" community (*contra* Eisenbaum).[8] Certainly he was capable of a more mainstream presentation of the gospel, as evidenced by the profusion of Christologies in the second chapter. This same safe assumption concerning his acumen should also guard against the possibility he would construct such an elaborate response based on a misdiagnosis of their state. Surely his "word of exhortation" was a "word on target."

Finally, with regard to mirror readings, care must be exercised so that the situation inferred from specific passages does not become a solidified model that influences the interpretation of other passages. Rather, the suggestive, heuristic nature of the reconstruction enterprise must be recognized and maintained.

3. Threats endangering the community

Paul Ellingworth has shown that the threats endangering the community come to expression in three ways:[9]

(1) *Passive dangers* denote "a certain weariness in pursuing the Christian goal, or making progress along the road of Christian discipleship."[10] The readers are exhorted and warned: to not "drift away" from what they have heard (2:1); to not "neglect" the message of salvation (2:3); to not "fail to reach" the promised rest (4:1); to not lose hold of their confession (4:14); to not lose their confidence and boldness (10:19, 23); to not become "dull of understanding" (5:11) or "sluggish" (6:12); to develop from spiritual childhood into maturity (5:12–14); to not prove unproductive (6:7–8) but to continue in "faith and patience" (6:9–12); to cast off the weight of sin (12:1); to not "grow weary" or "lose heart" (12:3); to straighten up and walk a straight path (12:12–13); and to not "be carried away by all kinds of strange teaching" (13:9).

(2) *Active dangers* typically represent forces or attitudes that will potentially issue in explicit rebellion against God and his Son. These

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[8] Barnabas Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews* (New Testament Theology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 2, believes that the community and its situation are unlike anything else found in the NT.

[9] Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 78–80.

[10] Ibid., 78.

include the dangers of: "having an evil, faithless heart that turns away from the living God" (3:12); replicating the same pattern of disobedience as the exodus generation (3:7 – 4:11); "falling away," "crucifying again the Son of God and holding him up to contempt" (6:6); "neglecting to meet together" (10:25); "willfully persisting in sin" (10:26); "spurning the Son of God, profaning the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified, and outraging the Spirit of grace" (10:29); and neglecting to listen to the voice of God/Jesus (12:25). These strong warnings indicate the real possibility of apostasy in the author's mind.[11]
(3) *External/outward pressures* assault and test them (2:18; 4:16), bringing suffering through persecution (10:32–34; 12:4), torture and imprisonment (10:33–34; 13:3), and abuse (13:13).

4. Proposed reconstructions of the recipients' situation

A number of reconstructions of the recipients' situation have attempted to attain more specificity, and point to larger, systemic forces – both internal and external – as the source of their waning commitment.
(1) *Impure consciences*: The author's preoccupation with purification from (1:3), and atonement for, sins (2:17; 7:27; 8:12; 9:26, 28; 10:12, 17–18), sanctification (2:11; 10:10, 14, 22, 29; 13:12), and especially the purification of an unclean conscience (9:14; 10:22), has led many to conclude that this emphasis is directed towards the recipients' sense of having "defiled consciences." This condition is responsible for their spiritual lethargy and possible apostasy. For Barnabas Lindars, the chief proponent of this theory, it is the "root issue."[12] He believes that although the recipients received assurance of forgiveness for past sins at the time of their baptism, they were not instructed about the ongoing efficacy of Christ's sacrificial work. They have therefore "lost confidence in the power of the sacrifice of Christ to deal with their consciousness of sin"[13] and feel weighed down by their post-baptismal sin.
(2) *Persecution*: That the epistle might be viewed as a response to a situation of persecution, and a concomitant call to bold perseverance in the face of such opposition, can also be readily inferred from the text. In 10:32–34, the author encourages the recipients to

> 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

[11] Ibid., 79.
[12] Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*, 12. See also his article: "The Rhetorical Structure of Hebrews," *NTS* 35 (1989), 382–406.
[13] Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*, 12.

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.

And though Marie Isaacs believes "there is nothing in the Epistle which would suggest the present experience of persecution,"[14] current persecution may underlie 12:3–13. Though the passage is couched in the imagery of divine παιδεία, the reference to bloodshed in 12:4 may imply some form of corporal punishment. The role discipline is said to play in determining divine "paternity" (12:7–8) may also reflect a call to identify with the community in a time when such identification was costly. The author's frequent references to suffering and weakness (2:10–11, 14–18; 4:14–16; 13:12–13) further increase the likelihood that the community currently faced persecution. Among those who have recognized the role of persecution in their interpretations of Hebrews are Harold W. Attridge,[15] William L. Lane,[16] John Dunnill,[17] Craig R. Koester,[18] and Patrick Gray.[19]

(3) *A return to Judaism*: The fact that a vast portion of the author's exposition is characterized by a dialectic of superiority-inferiority with the most esteemed symbols, systems and personages of Judaism indicates he is probably addressing an audience comprised mostly, if not entirely, of Jewish Christians.[20] It is often assumed these Jewish Christians were contemplating, for various reasons, an abandonment of the Christian

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[14] Isaacs, *Sacred Space*, 31.

[15] Cf. Harold W. Attridge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Hermeneia. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 13: "From the response he gives to the problem, it would appear that the author conceives of the threat to the community in two broad but interrelated categories, external pressure, or 'persecution' (10:36 – 12:13) and a waning commitment."

[16] Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, lvii, c. Lane locates the recipients in Rome, ca. 64–68 CE. In these closing years of Nero's reign, the community faced a "new crisis" that was "more serious than the earlier one under Claudius" (William L. Lane, "Social Perspectives on Roman Christianity during the Formative Years from Nero to Nerva: Romans, Hebrews, *1 Clement*," in *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome*, ed. Karl P. Donfried and Peter Richardson [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 217).

[17] John Dunnill, *Covenant and sacrifice in the Letter to the Hebrews* (SNTSMS 75. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 22, 37.

[18] Koester, *Hebrews*, 67–71.

[19] Patrick Gray, *Godly Fear: The Epistle to the Hebrews and Greco-Roman Critiques of Superstition* (Academia Biblica 16. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 155–86.

[20] Cf. Nelson, *Raising Up a Faithful Priest*, 146:

> The deficiencies of the Jewish priestly ritual contrast at every point with the effective high-priestly achievements of Jesus. He perfects his followers (10:14), sanctifies them (10:10, 14; 13:12), and cleanses their consciences (9:13–14). Jesus serves in the true tabernacle in heaven, not in the shadowy sanctuary on earth (8:2, 5). Jesus saves completely with a single offering, having no need to atone for his own sins (7:26–27).

community and a return to their ancestral religion, Judaism.[21] This possible return is then halted by the most withering assault on Jewish religious belief and practice in the NT.[22] Those espousing this view, in varying degrees and for various reasons, include: Ceslas Spicq,[23] Floyd V. Filson,[24] F. F. Bruce,[25] Donald A. Hagner,[26] Lane,[27] Lindars,[28] Iutisone Salevao,[29]

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[21] Eisenbaum, "Locating Hebrews within the Literary Landscape of Christian Origins," 233–7, argues that Christian communities remained within the framework of the larger Jewish community until at least the 2nd century. Therefore, in her estimate, the "parting of the ways" upon which the "return to Judaism" theory is dependent has not yet occurred. Her argument, however, fails to construct a believable context for the initial reception of Hebrews. It is hard to imagine a work like Hebrews being favorably received in a mixed context, much less heard at all above the commotion it would have undoubtedly created. A similar view, with some variation, is offered by Norman H. Young, "'Bearing His Reproach' (Heb 13.9–14)," *NTS* 48 (2002), 253, who contends that

> continued 'association' and a failure to embrace the Christian ethos fully rather than 'attraction' back into a former life is probably the situation that concerns the writer. The stress throughout the epistle on going out / on (4:16; 6:1 [φέρω]; 7:25; 10:22; 11:8; 12:22; 13:13) and even into (3:11, 18, 19; 4:1, 3, 6, 10, 11, 6:19, 20; 9:12, 24, 25) would indicate that the problem is not a turning back so much as a failure to go forward and separate from Judaism completely in the first place.

According to this reading, the author's "word of exhortation," if read in a synagogue context, would certainly bring the issue to a head. The recipients, however, would not have been given the chance to obey the author's command to "go out from the camp" (13:13). They would have presumably been *thrown out* of the "camp."

[22] With blunt logic the author's analysis of the Jewish sacrificial system arrives at an inescapable conclusion: If there is "no forgiveness without the shedding of blood" (9:22) and "the blood of bulls and goats cannot possibly take away sins" (10:4), then the Jewish cultus is null and void. On the polemical character of Hebrews, see Iutisone Salevao, *Legitimation in the Letter to the Hebrews: The Construction and Maintenance of a Symbolic Universe* (JSNTSup 219. London/New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 112–18. Cf. also Richard W. Johnson, *Going Outside the Camp: The Sociological Function of the Levitical Critique in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (JSNTSup 209. London/New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 129:

> By challenging the undergirding symbols of first-century Judaism, the author set the stage for the definition of a new society. The levitical priesthood is dethroned from its noble status, the Holy of Holies is no longer an exclusively hieratic precinct, sin as a forensic matter is subordinated to internal, ethical matters of the conscience, and the inefficacy of the levitical sacrifices declared emphatically.

The author attacks these "undergirding symbols of first-century Judaism" because they stand as "boundaries" that block the easy ingress of outsiders (73–81) into the boundary-less "weak group" that the author addresses (97).

[23] Ceslas Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux,* 2 Vols. (Études Bibliques. Paris: Gabalda, 1952–1953), 1.228–9.

[24] Floyd V. Filson, *"Yesterday": A Study of Hebrews in the Light of Chapter 13* (SBT 4. Naperville: Alec R. Allenson / London: SCM Press, 1967), 61–6.

[25] F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews,* rev. ed. (NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 100.

[26] Donald A. Hagner, *Hebrews* (NIBC. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1990), 242–3.

Richard W. Johnson,[30] and most recently, Peter Walker.[31] It has also been suggested that Judaism's protected status, as a *religio licita* in the Roman Empire, would have been especially attractive in times of religious persecution.[32]

(4) *Waning commitment*: The author's call to "not neglect our gatherings, as is the habit of some" (μὴ ἐγκαταλείποντες τὴν ἐπισυναγωγὴν ἑαυτῶν, καθὼς ἔθος τισίν, 10:25) clearly indicates that at least some members in the community were failing to persevere in their commitment. Thompson has pointed to a number of other warnings that further "suggest that the author's major concern is with the endurance of the community, and not with a specific heresy."[33] These include: (1) μήποτε παραρυῶμεν ("let us not drift away," 2:1); (2) μήποτε . . . ἀποστῆναι ("do not . . . turn away," 3:12); (3) ὑστερηκέναι ("to fall short," 4:1); (4) μὴ ἀποβάλητε ("do not abandon," 10:35); (5) μὴ παραφέρεσθε ("do not be carried away," 13:9). To these warnings we should add the exhortations – offered in strategic moments in the address – to "hold fast" and "firm" (κατέχω, 3:6, 14; 10:23; κρατέω, 4:14; βέβαιος, 3:14; βεβαιόω, 13:9) to one's Christian confession and commitment. Grant R. Osborne has argued that the "central problem was a basic 'laziness,'"[34] a condition which Brent Nongbri believes "could lead to apostasy."[35]

(5) *Loss of social status*: In his numerous works, David deSilva has consistently interpreted Hebrews within the context of an honor-shame society, with a loss of honor constituting the recipients' chief concern. He observes:

> Neither the threat of violent persecution nor a new attraction to Judaism motivates this apostasy, but rather the more pedestrian inability to live within the lower status that Christian associations had forced upon them, the less-than-dramatic (though potent)

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[27] William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13* (WBC 47B. Dallas: Word, 1991), 545–6.

[28] Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*, 10–12.

[29] Salevao, *Legitimation in the Letter to the Hebrews*, 108–18.

[30] Johnson, *Going Outside the Camp*, 129.

[31] Peter Walker, "A Place for Hebrews? Contexts for a First-Century Sermon," in *The New Testament in Its First Century Setting: Essays on Context and Background in Honour of B. W. Winter*, ed. P. J. Williams, Andrew D. Clarke, Peter M. Head, David Instone Brewer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 235–46.

[32] See Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer: Übersetzt und erklärt*, 12th ed. (KEK 13. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 511.

[33] Thompson, *The Beginnings of Christian Philosophy*, 143.

[34] Grant R. Osborne, "The Christ of Hebrews and Other Religions," *JETS* 46/2 (June 2003), 249–67.

[35] Brent Nongbri, "A Touch of Condemnation in a Word of Exhortation: Apocalyptic Language and Graeco-Roman Rhetoric in Hebrews 6:4–12," *NovT* 45.3 (2003), 275.

desire once more to enjoy the goods and esteem of their society. The price was now more on their minds than the prize.[36]

The author responds to this threat with a radical critique of the honor-shame system. The transitory honor the recipients desire from society is relativized with the recognition that the honor they have been accorded as members of God's household (3:6; 10:21) is an "abiding possession" (10:34), secure in the unshakable realm (12:28). Moses embodies this redefinition of honor-shame with his costly renunciation of a royal Egyptian identity in favor of identification with the people of God (11:24–26). Christ ultimately is the finest example of one who "despised shame" (12:2). He held society's honor-shame standards to be invalid and worthless compared to the "joy set before him."

(6) *Realized eschatology*: Both Mathias Rissi[37] and John Scholer[38] argue that at least a portion of the author's effort is expended in countering the recipients' imbalanced, realized eschatology. However, where one would expect a corrective emphasis placed on future-oriented eschatology, instead our author promotes a textbook case of inaugurated, "now, not yet" eschatology. In fact, his reminders of the impartial nature of the recipients' eschatological circumstances are far outweighed by his repeated recitals of the eschatological benefits they have experienced. Experiences vastly outnumber expectations.[39] Additionally, an overarching pastoral attitude of pity, evinced by the author's frequent appeals to Christ's sympathetic

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[36] DeSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 19. This thesis is presented in greater detail in his monograph *Despising Shame: Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (SBLDS 152. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995). See also his articles: "The Epistle to the Hebrews in Social-Scientific Perspective," *ResQ* 36.1 (1994), 1–21; "Despising Shame: A Cultural-Anthropological Investigation of the Epistle to the Hebrews," *JBL* 113.3 (1994), 439–61. Osborne, "The Christ of Hebrews and Other Religions," 254, accuses deSilva of failing to see that a retreat into society constitutes apostasy. DeSilva is clearly aware of this: e.g., *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 238, 346.

[37] Rissi, *Die Theologie des Hebräerbriefs*, 15–16, 21–5, 56–9.

[38] John M. Scholer, *Proleptic Priests: Priesthood in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (JSNTSup 49. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 206.

[39] Eschatological expectations include: (1) the lordship of Jesus has not been completely established (1:13; 2:8; 10:13); (2) the promise of entering God's rest is still open (4:1–11); (3) and only at Jesus' second coming will salvation be fully realized (9:28). Eschatological benefits that the recipients have experienced: (1) the assistance of "ministering spirits" (1:14); (2) "signs and wonders and various miracles of the Holy Spirit" (2:4); (3) purification from and forgiveness for sins (1:3; 2:11, 17; 7:27; 8:12; 9:14, 26–28; 10:10, 12, 14, 17–18, 22, 26, 29; 12:24; 13:12); (4) perfection (10:14); (5) sanctification (2:11, 10:10, 14, 19–22); (6) "partaking of Christ" (3:14). Furthermore, they are repeatedly exhorted to "draw near with confidence" to the heavenly "throne of grace" (4:16), "holy place" (10:19), and God (7:19, 25); and their worship is said to occur in the "heavenly Jerusalem" (12:22–24). Finally, the infamous "warning passages," 6:4–6 and 10:26–32, are suffused with realized eschatology.

priesthood (4:14 – 5:10; 7:25; 10:19–21), is inapt for a hyper-spiritual people who presumably would be proud and self-sufficient (as the community in Corinth is generally portrayed).

(7) *Opponents*: Michael Goulder believes that the community was under threat from proto-Ebionites espousing a defective "angel Christology."[40] His interpretation, however, places too much import on the alleged angel polemic of 1:5–13. Had something as dangerous as Goulder envisages threatened the community, the author would have undoubtedly offered a more direct critique. Goulder's appeal to the "adversaries" mentioned in 10:27 is also unfounded.[41] The reference made there is a general one, offered in the context of a theoretical warning of the outcome of apostasy. And it is a warning issued to the recipients, not to proto-Ebionites. And though Robert L. Brawley has also argued for the presence of opponents, he admits "the interest of Hebrews in these opponents is astonishingly slight."[42]

5. Conclusion

Numerous factors contribute to the possibility and propriety of an attempted reconstruction of the community's *Sitz im Leben*. The first five proposals taken into consideration: impure consciences, persecution, return to Judaism, waning commitment, and loss of social status, all have a solid basis in the text of Hebrews. It is therefore possible – even probable – that a number of conditions were threatening the existence of the community. Consideration of the author's various responses to these threats provides further proof of this possibility.[43]

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[40] Michael Goulder, "Hebrews and the Ebionites," *NTS* 49 (2003), 393–406.

[41] Ibid., 395–6.

[42] Brawley, "Discoursive Structure and the Unseen in Hebrews 2:8 and 11:1," 91.

[43] Craig R. Koester, "The Epistle to the Hebrews in Recent Study," *CurBS* 2 (1994), 130, identifies the purpose of Hebrews as theodicy, thus addressing all the primary threats facing the community.

> The author of Hebrews did not identify lethargy (5:11) or failure to meet together (10:25) as primary issues but as symptoms of a larger problem, defined theologically in terms of the apparent contradiction between the glory promised to God's people and the reality of suffering in the world (2:8). By pitching his address at this level, the author produced a work that addressed a number of concerns simultaneously, and proved to be of abiding value to subsequent generations of readers.