

SUFFERING IN THE FACE OF DEATH: THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE
EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

by

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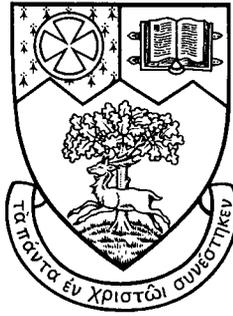
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ABSTRACT

“Suffering in the Face of Death: The Social Context of the Epistle to the Hebrews”

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The topics of suffering and death appear throughout the Epistle to the Hebrews but have rarely been examined in New Testament scholarship. This study offers a thorough investigation of each reference to these topics in the epistle using semantic domain analysis. Incorporating the work of linguist M.A.K. Halliday, it then attempts to connect these topics to the social situation addressed by the author of Hebrews. It is determined that the author is responding to the reality of suffering in the lives of his audience. This is closely connected to a perceived threat or fear of death on the part of the probable recipients. With this social context in place, this study examines how the author responds to this situation by creating models of endurance in suffering and death. The author establishes these exemplars in order to motivate his audience toward similar endurance within their own social context.

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INTRODUCTION

“Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured.”
-Hebrews 13:12–13¹

The passage quoted above, found in the closing chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews, is a powerful appeal to follow the example of Jesus despite the reality of suffering and probability of death for such actions. These two topics—suffering and death—often appear together in Hebrews (2:9–10; 5:7–8; 9:26–27; 11:35–38; 12:1–4; 13:12–13) and are each developed as important topics for the author’s argument.² Surprisingly, Hebrews scholarship has paid little attention to these topics and their significance for interpreting the epistle.³ Only one monograph has been devoted to the topic of suffering in Hebrews—N. Clayton Croy’s *Endurance in Suffering*—although it limits its scope to Heb 12:1–13.⁴ The topic of Christ’s death in Hebrews has been addressed in a few places,⁵ but the topic of death as a whole, especially in reference to the audience or figures other than Jesus, has received little attention.

Encapsulated in Heb 13:12–13 are several aspects of these topics that are developed throughout Hebrews. First, these two verses move from exposition (Jesus’ sanctifying death outside the city gate) to exhortation (“let us then go to him”). This is a pattern throughout Hebrews and references to suffering and death are found in both types

¹ All Scripture passages are taken from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

² I am using the term “topic” in a broad sense signifying an issue or matter being dealt with within a discourse. My choice of this term should not be confused with how “topic” is commonly understood—as the unifying subject of a given sentence, paragraph, or discourse. According to Brown and Yule, “The notion of ‘topic’ is ... [a] way of describing the unifying principle which makes one stretch of discourse ‘about’ something and the next stretch of discourse ‘about’ something else” (Brown and Yule, *Discourse Analysis*, 70). When I refer to the “topic” of suffering or death, I do not necessarily refer to a unifying subject, but rather to a “concept” or “issue” that surfaces in the text.

³ Those scholars who have written on these topics will be explored in chapter 1.

⁴ See 6–9.

⁵ See, for example, Motyer, “Atonement in Hebrews,” 136–49.

of material. Second, Jesus is presented here as a model for the audience to follow. The author creates several exemplars of proper behavior in the midst of suffering and in the face of death in his epistle—this includes not only Jesus, but also heroes from Israel’s history (11:4–40) and the audience’s own past (10:32–35). Third, this passage contains strong eschatological imagery. After the audience is exhorted to follow Jesus outside the city gate, the author tells them, “For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” (13:14). When addressing suffering and death, the author often encourages his audience to look past their present situation to a heavenly future and reward (2:9; 10:35–39; 12:11). Finally, these verses tell us something of the social reality that the original audience of Hebrews found themselves in. The author here assumes that, for these believers, following Jesus’ example would result in abuse and possibly death. Indications of this are found elsewhere in the epistle (10:35; 12:4; 13:3) and together with an abundance of references to suffering and death suggest that the audience found themselves in a context where such discourse would be meaningful.

Determining the social context is difficult because Hebrews is an anonymous document that provides no explicit indication of its provenance. Little is revealed of the original recipients or their social situation in the epistle —although plenty of suggestions have been put forward (see chapter 2 of this study). In the chapters that follow, I argue for the modest proposal that Hebrews was written to an audience that found themselves in a context of suffering and under a threat of, or in fear of death. This is a problem that the author identified when composing the epistle and responded to it in a variety of ways. This included providing models of endurance in such contexts and offering hope beyond death. This social reality was most likely not the *only* problem addressed by the author of

Hebrews but, as I will argue, it does appear to be a *significant* issue that he thought needed to be dealt with.⁶

A major part of my argument involves identifying and analyzing the wealth of terms and references to suffering and death in Hebrews. This aspect of the study is a significant contribution to Hebrews scholarship in its own right. No major study has examined these two topics in the epistle, and their significance for interpreting the epistle has often been overlooked. Regardless of what one makes of my argument concerning the social context of Hebrews, it will be clear that suffering and death were important topics for the author as they appear throughout the text in a variety of ways.

Outline for the Present Study

Chapter 1 presents an overview of scholarship on the topics of suffering and/or death in Hebrews. This study is not the first to see the significance of these topics for the author of Hebrews and several important works have identified their value for interpreting the epistle. The majority of these studies appeared as articles or sections of commentaries, so there remains a need for a more detailed and exhaustive study of these topics in Hebrews.

Chapter 2 of this study offers a survey of the various proposals regarding the social situation of Hebrews. Unlike the letters of Paul and several other epistles in the New Testament, Hebrews offers no explicit indication for its author, audience, destination, or date. This has not kept scholars from offering numerous suggestions for the social situation of the original recipients and the purpose of the author's discourse. As I show in this chapter, while some of these proposals have more value than others, none

⁶ I refer to the unknown author of Hebrews as male because of the masculine singular self-reference in Heb 11:32 (δηγούμενον). For another opinion, see Hoppin, "Priscilla's Letter."

is able to fully account for the social situation addressed in Hebrews. It is likely that the author wrote the epistle for multiple reasons and to address multiple issues.

In chapter 3, I put forward a methodology for moving from a written text to making determinations regarding its context. Three major methodological concepts are put forward: semantic domain theory, the work of linguist M.A.K. Halliday, and systemic functional linguistics. The chapter then examines the practice of mirror-reading a New Testament text and argues that more linguistically robust principles offer a better method for making determinations of a social context from a text. At the conclusion of chapter 3, I present a three-step methodology for examining suffering and death language in Hebrews in order to arrive at some conclusions regarding its social context.

Chapter 4 contains the first two steps of this methodology. The first step involves using semantic domain theory to identify the relevant vocabulary and passages for a study of suffering and death in Hebrews. Moving beyond a simple word study, semantic domains allow us to expand each topic's vocabulary and determine what counts as evidence and data. Once the vocabulary and key passages are identified, these references to suffering and death are analyzed in order to determine their meaning. Chapter 5 comprises the third step—namely, the application of linguistic principles to the topics of suffering and death in Hebrews. This involves further analysis of the data identified in chapter 4 with an eye to its relevance for understanding the social context of Hebrews.

The sixth chapter builds upon those that precede it by analyzing the text of Hebrews rhetorically to understand how the author responded to a context of suffering and death. Specifically, it shows that a significant way that the author responded to his audience's situation was by offering models of those who had endured through times of

suffering in the face of death. The author sets up three groups of exemplars: figures from Israel's history, the community themselves, and Jesus. Each is shown to be worthy of emulation by enduring through times of affliction even on the brink of death. This has the rhetorical purpose of providing motivation for similar endurance for the audience in their own social context.

CHAPTER ONE

Previous Studies on the Topics of Suffering and Death in Hebrews

Introduction

While the topics of suffering and death are generally overlooked in Hebrews scholarship, this does not mean that they have been totally ignored. Several scholars and commentators have identified these topics, either together or individually, as important for the author of Hebrews' theology and argument. Several articles have been written on these topics, as have several commentaries that bring out the significance of the topics of suffering and death. These studies have observed important aspects of suffering and death in the epistle and serve as encouragement for a more detailed examination. It is important, therefore, to survey this scholarship and to recognize those that have paved the way for this present study.

N. Clayton Croy

In his monograph *Endurance in Suffering: Hebrews 12:1–13 in Its Rhetorical, Religious, and Philosophical Context*, N. Clayton Croy offers the only monograph-level study on the topic of suffering in Hebrews. Focusing on the first thirteen verses of Hebrews 12, Croy presents a corrective to several assumptions or “primary frameworks” used to interpret this passage. First, Croy argues that the martyrdom imagery in 12:1–3, while undeniable, has often been exaggerated. In response, he stresses the athletic imagery in the text and understands Jesus in this passage not as a supreme martyr but rather as a model athlete.¹ Second, interpreters motivated by the author's use of Prov 3:11–12 have understood Heb 12:4–13 within the Jewish wisdom tradition. Croy argues

¹ Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 76.

that the author of Hebrews draws from this tradition selectively and was also heavily influenced by Greco-Roman views of suffering, which tended to be “non-punitive” and educative. In his analysis of Heb 12:1–13, Croy argues that the author utilizes the rhetorical, religious, and philosophical currents of his day—both Jewish and Greco-Roman.²

Croy makes several valuable contributions to our understanding of suffering in Hebrews and interpretation of 12:1–13. First, Croy helpfully fleshes out the use of athletic imagery throughout this passage. His in-depth survey of Hellenistic literature firmly establishes the use of such imagery in moral exhortation (Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.* 1.8.9; 2.2.6–7; Seneca, *Epist.* 88.18–19; Philo, *De Agr.* 111–21) and places Hebrews 12 within this context.³ This background allows Croy to convincingly argue that νέφος μαρτύρων in 12:1 should be understood as “actively engaged spectators and witnesses” rather than passive observers.⁴ Croy also shows how it was common for both a race (ἀγών) and a prize to be “set before” (πρόκειμαι) a person in such literature. In the case of Hebrews, Croy argues that χαρά (“joy”) is substituted for a term for “prize” (γέρας, ἄθλον, or ἔπαθλον) and that the joy of Jesus’ exaltation serves as the reward of his race.⁵

Secondly, Croy rightly identifies the author’s use of exemplars of endurance despite suffering in Hebrews. Concerning Heb 12:1–13, he examines how Jesus is presented as a model athlete and a paradigm of endurance. Croy provides a brief but helpful survey of relevant Greco-Roman literature on the rhetorical use of examples and

² Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 217.

³ Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 43–58.

⁴ Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 61.

⁵ Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 67; also 177–85.

shows how Hebrews' portrayal of Jesus both adheres to and defies these conventions.⁶

Third, Croy's examination of Jewish and Greco-Roman views on suffering is especially enlightening for interpreting Hebrews.⁷ According to Croy, Jewish perspectives on suffering tend to understand suffering as punishment for wrongdoing—or, to use Croy's category, "punitive"—although several documents challenge such a view (Job, 4 Maccabees, the Babylonian Talmud). Greek and Roman literature, however, moves in the other direction. Some writers reflect a "punitive" view but more commonly a "non-punitive" perspective is put forward.

Fourth, Croy draws from his understanding of punitive and non-punitive perspectives on suffering to argue that the author's portrayal of suffering as *παιδεία* is non-punitive.⁸ Croy acknowledges that Prov 3:11–12 (quoted in Heb 12:5–6) expresses a punitive view of discipline, but argues that the author uses this quotation selectively and re-contextualizes it.⁹ The author, according to Croy, drops any punitive language after his quotation and focuses on *παιδεία* as training and educational.

Croy's study is a significant contribution to Hebrews scholarship and influences my own argument at many points. Since it focuses on just one passage in Hebrews, there is still a need for a more thorough examination of the topic of suffering (and death) in the epistle as a whole. Croy's presentation of how the author of Hebrews utilizes Jesus as an exemplar is enlightening, but should be understood as a part of the author's effort throughout the epistle to establish models of behavior—especially in response to suffering and death.

⁶ Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 70–76.

⁷ Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 77–161.

⁸ Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 192–213.

⁹ Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, esp. 198–202.

There are also a few shortcomings to Croy's study. The first concerns Croy's determination of the range of this pericope. This may be a minor point, but 12:14–17 are intricately connected to the first thirteen verses of Hebrews 12. Verse 14 continues a string of imperatives found in 12:12–13 and continues the use of athletic imagery. Second, Croy's division of the Jewish and Greco-Roman perspectives on suffering into two categories—punitive and non-punitive—is problematic.¹⁰ The category of “non-punitive” is particularly broad and in need of nuance. Third, Croy's understanding of Heb 12:4–13 as “non-punitive” imposes an artificial dichotomy upon the text that the author likely did not intend. I agree with Croy that in this passage the author does not blame the audience for the suffering that they are facing. However, given the passages elsewhere in the epistle that warn against falling away from the faith (3:12; 6:4–8; 10:26–31) it may be possible for the author's use of Proverbs 3 to be corrective without being “punitive” (or blaming the believers for their suffering).

Charles Talbert

In his book *Learning through Suffering*, Charles Talbert includes a chapter in which he examines the author of Hebrews' understanding and theology of suffering.¹¹ He begins by presenting Hebrews as a homily (a “word of encouragement”; λόγου τῆς παρακλήσεως, Heb 13:22) with a postscript attached in the manner of a letter. The author of Hebrews, Talbert argues, discusses both the suffering of Jesus and that of God's people. The suffering of Jesus is treated in Heb 2:9–10, 18; 5:8–9; 12:1–3; and 13:12; the suffering of believers in 10:32–34; 11:1–12:1; 12:2–4, 5–11; and 13:13.¹²

¹⁰ See Westfall, review of *Endurance in Suffering*, 121–22.

¹¹ Talbert, *Learning through Suffering*, 58–74.

¹² Talbert, *Learning through Suffering*, 58.

Talbert categorizes the references to Jesus' suffering as having two purposes: personal and vocational. The personal purpose of Jesus' suffering refers to the function that suffering plays in Jesus' own growth, perfection, and exaltation. In 2:5–18, Jesus' suffering plays a role in his being crowned with glory and honor (v. 9) and perfection (v. 10). Elsewhere in the epistle, suffering results in Jesus learning obedience (5:8) and being seated at the right hand of God (12:2). The vocational purpose of Jesus' suffering refers to how his personal experiences "yielded benefits for believers."¹³ Jesus' suffering qualifies him as a high priest (2:17–18; 5:10), sanctifies the people by his blood (13:12), and establishes him as a model of endurance (2:10; 12:2–3).

Turning to the suffering of believers in Hebrews, Talbert highlights the reference to the audience's prior time of suffering as presented in 10:32–34.¹⁴ The statement in 10:36, that the audience needs to model the endurance that characterized their past, signals for Talbert that they were presently in a time of adversity. The following material that addresses the suffering of believers, according to Talbert, provides several reasons for continued endurance. Hebrews 10:37–38 quotes from Hab 2:3–4 (LXX) to motivate the audience in light of Christ's imminent return and the attached judgment it brings. A second reason comes from the model of faithfulness in suffering demonstrated by heroes from Israel's past (ch. 11) and Jesus (12:2–3). Talbert identifies the third reason for the believers' endurance in the author's presentation of hardships as divine discipline in Heb 12:5–11. This section incorporates the "Jewish notion of parental correction of youthful misdirection."¹⁵ As an earthly parent disciplines a child for his or her good, so also God uses suffering to discipline his children. The fourth, and last, reason is found in Heb

¹³ Talbert, *Learning through Suffering*, 68.

¹⁴ Talbert, *Learning through Suffering*, 69.

¹⁵ Talbert, *Learning through Suffering*, 71.

13:13 where the author exhorts his audience to follow Jesus outside the camp. The motivation from this passage, according to Talbert, is to identify with Jesus in sharing the same abuse that he bore.¹⁶

Closing his chapter, Talbert summarizes the view of suffering presented in Hebrews. While he does not attempt to recreate the social context of the epistle, Talbert does clearly believe that the believers addressed by the author were presently facing a time of suffering. In the midst of this time, the author calls them to endure. The title of Talbert's book makes clear that he is interested in *educative suffering* and he sees this as a common aspect of both Jesus' and the believer's suffering in Hebrews. Jesus learned obedience through suffering (Heb 5:8) and believers are told to view their hardship as discipline. Apart from this, Talbert notes a significant difference between Jesus and believers in regard to suffering.¹⁷ Christians, in Hebrews, are presented as in need of correction for misdirection and in this sense suffering is educational. Talbert understands the author's response to this problem as stemming from a Jewish view of divine discipline that leads to holiness. Jesus, by contrast, is sinless (4:15) and learns not because of misdirection but rather in the sense of an athlete training and being strengthened. This, Talbert argues, is a Greco-Roman understanding of educative suffering that had influenced other Jewish writings of the time (particularly 4 Maccabees).

Talbert's chapter on suffering in Hebrews is the only significant treatment of the topic throughout the entire epistle. At the same time, his study is still only about seventeen pages and he is not able to treat any of the passages in much detail. In his

¹⁶ Talbert, *Learning through Suffering*, 72.

¹⁷ Talbert, *Learning through Suffering*, 73.

examination, Talbert observes the key passages and correctly identifies suffering as a significant topic in Hebrews. He also emphasizes the author's presentation of Jesus as an exemplar of endurance in suffering. The categories of *personal* and *vocational* to describe the suffering of Jesus help bring out the dimensions of the author's argument, although the nuances of text do not fit neatly into one category or the other. That suffering prepared Jesus for his role as an empathetic high priest serves both a personal and vocational function—these two purposes may be much more closely linked than Talbert portrays. More problematic is his understanding of the suffering of believers in Hebrews as linked to misdirection or disobedience. Such language is found in the author of Hebrews' quotation from Proverbs 3 in 12:5–7, but, as Croy points out, there seems to be an intention to move away from blaming the community for their suffering.¹⁸ Nowhere else in Hebrews is the believer's suffering understood as a result of disobedience, but rather it is presented as a result of his or her status as a Christian. Further, Talbert's separation of Greco-Roman and Jewish views of suffering in Hebrews is too simplistic. He connects the author's presentation of Jesus' suffering to Greco-Roman sources and believers' suffering to Jewish sources. Talbert is correct that both sources provide a helpful background to the understanding of suffering in Hebrews, but they are not so distinctly separated. The Greco-Roman notion of hardships as training like that of an athletic informs not only suffering connected to Jesus (5:8), but also of believers (12:5–17). The author of Hebrews demonstrates a stronger integration of Jewish and Hellenistic thought on suffering than Talbert seems to recognize.

¹⁸ On this, see Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 192–213.

Craig Koester

Craig Koester has touched on the topic of suffering in his articulation of the community of Hebrews' history and social context.¹⁹ Drawing from how the author of Hebrews construed the audience's situation in the epistle, Koester identifies three phases of their history. The first phase, "Proclamation and Conversion," includes the audience's original hearing of the gospel message and identifying with the Christian community. This time includes the members' confession of faith and baptism, and is marked by miracles and "distributions of the Holy Spirit" (Heb 2:4).²⁰ The second phase, "Persecution and Solidarity," involves harsh conflict with those outside the community and, as a result, strong solidarity among the members. Described in Heb 10:32–34, the author presents this time as including public denunciation, physical persecution, imprisonment, and a loss of property. Koester understands the conflict referred to in 10:32–34 as a local outburst rather than a systematic persecution of Christians.²¹ He also argues that the author's portrayal of Moses in 11:25–26 is intended to mirror this phase of the community's history in order to encourage them.²² The third phase, "Friction and Malaise," involves on-going tension with those outside the Christian community. While this tension is likely not as violent as that experienced in phase two, the continued hostility has taken its toll on the community and led some to consider abandoning their commitment. It is during this phase, according to Koester, that the epistle was written. The repeated references to "drifting away" (2:1), becoming "sluggish" (5:11; 6:12), and

¹⁹ Koester, "Conversion, Persecution, and Malaise," 231–51; Koester, *Hebrews*, 64–72.

²⁰ Koester, "Conversion, Persecution, and Malaise," 235.

²¹ Koester, "Conversion, Persecution, and Malaise," 240.

²² Koester, "Conversion, Persecution, and Malaise," 242.

“neglecting” the community (2:3; 10:25) reflect this context.²³ The author’s response, according to Koester, is to address the seeming contradiction between the promises of the faith and the reality of suffering. He does this by developing a contrast between the seen and the unseen.²⁴

Koester’s work helpfully identifies the significance of the topic of suffering—both that of the believer and of Christ—for the author of Hebrews. The connection between the references to suffering in the epistle and its social context is important. Koester also shows how this context influences the way that the author portrays important figures (Jesus, Moses, Abraham) in the epistle. Although Koester does not develop this concept, these figures not only mirror the context of the original audience but they become exemplars of behavior and faith. Koester’s three phases reflect unique aspects of the audience’s history that the author makes clear references to. However, one should not hold too firmly to the distinct beginning and end of each phase as if they do not overlap. It is possible—even likely—that Koester’s first two phases occur at the same time for the believers. Similarly, it is not clear that the third phase of continued malaise should reflect an entire new period but rather a continuation of past hostility. It is also curious that Koester makes no reference to Heb 12:5–14 in this discussion.²⁵ That the author thought that he needed to address the need for endurance and articulate a view of difficulty as divine παιδεία lends support for the reality of present suffering for the audience.

²³ Koester, “Conversion, Persecution, and Malaise,” 245.

²⁴ Koester, “Conversion, Persecution, and Malaise,” 247–49.

²⁵ This passage does not appear in Koester’s articulation of the social context of the epistle, but he does spend time on Heb 12:1–17 in his commentary. Here Koester does make some attempts to connect this teaching to the audience’s context (*Hebrews*, 533–42).

In 1955, Jean Costé published a study on the concept of educative suffering in Greco-Roman and Jewish literature and its relevance for interpreting Heb 5:8 (καίπερ ὄν υἱός, ἔμαθεν ἀφ' ὧν ἔπαθεν τὴν ὑπακοήν).²⁶ He devotes special attention to the wordplay μαθεῖν-παθεῖν (and their equivalents) and its use in Hellenistic literature. Costé establishes that the notion of educative suffering existed before the use of this pun, but Greek thought “si facilement coulée cette idée dans une paronomase bien connue qui s’y adaptait merveilleusement.”²⁷ Costé surveys Greek literature to establish the use of this paronomasia. He notes that the negative aspect of this saying was more firmly established in the literature:

Le jeu de mots ἔμαθον ἔπαθον est resté lié dans l’ensemble à ce fond d’idées religieuses que l’on retrouve, sous des formes diverses, un peu tout au long de la littérature grecque et qui enseignent à l’homme l’instabilité de sa condition de mortel, vérité de base dont seule une expérience douloureuse peut réellement l’instruire. Les plus beaux textes eux-mêmes ne sont pas dénués d’amertume.²⁸

Costé next traces the theme of educational suffering through the Old Testament—looking at wisdom literature, the book of Job specifically, and the Prophets. He reached the conclusion that, in this literature, one learns a new dimension of religious life from suffering. Through suffering, one is prepared to learn from God. As Costé summarizes: Suffering was for the Greek a school; for a believing Jew it was instructive, which, in

²⁶ Costé, “Notion grecque,” 481–523. Around the same time a similar study was published by Henrich Dörrie that traced the wordplay μαθεῖν-παθεῖν in Greek literature—drawing upon Aristotle, Herodotus, Aeschylus, Plato and others (“Leid und Erfahrung”). However, Dörrie’s article was not interested in interpreting Hebrews.

²⁷ “...so easily cast this idea into a well-known paronomasia that adapted it beautifully” (Costé, “Notion grecque,” 486). All translations of Costé’s article are my own.

²⁸ “The play on words ἔμαθον ἔπαθον remained dependent as a whole in this background of religious ideas to be found, in various forms, sporadically throughout Greek literature and which teach humanity the instability of its mortality, basic truth that only a painful experience can really teach. The most beautiful texts themselves are not devoid of bitterness” (Costé, “Notion grecque,” 496).

unexpected ways, prepares one to be open to the lessons of the Master.²⁹ Finally, Costé looks at the work of Philo—who made extensive use of the wordplay μαθεῖν-παθεῖν. In Philo, Costé argues, there is not a far-reaching discussion of the educative value of suffering. Rather, Philo emphasizes *experience* in intellectual work and the mystical journey of the soul.³⁰ Further, according to Costé, the pun loses some of its bite in Philo as πάσχω shifts from “suffering for education” (la souffrance à l’instruction) to the idea of “living experience” (d’expérience vitale).³¹

In the conclusion to his study, Costé makes some comments on the use of ἔμαθεν-ἔπαθεν in Heb 5:8.³² First, as might be obvious, Costé points out that the author of Hebrews did not invent this wordplay but was taking over a stylistic device with a long history in Greek literature. Second, the Christology in Hebrews prevents us from ascribing to the epistle the use of the paronomasia from paganism. As Costé argues, Greek literature assumes a subject in the initial state of imperfection and that can not be assumed of Christ as his pre-existence with the Father is clearly stated (Heb 1:2; 3:6; 4:14; 12:3, 28). Third, Costé argues that Philo may have had an impact on Hebrews at a literary level, but his use of μαθεῖν-παθεῖν does not seem to fit theologically with the epistle.³³ Finally, Costé argues that Hebrews’ use of the pun does not find direct interpretive precedent in the Old Testament either. So, he concludes, the author’s use of μαθεῖν-παθεῖν in Heb 5:8 is unique and interpretation of the passage should focus on the literary context rather than the Jewish and Hellenistic backdrop.³⁴

²⁹ Costé, “Notion grecque,” 508.

³⁰ Costé, “Notion grecque,” 517.

³¹ Costé, “Notion grecque,” 517.

³² Costé, “Notion grecque,” 518–22.

³³ Costé, “Notion grecque,” 518–20.

³⁴ Costé, “Notion grecque,” 521–22.

Costé’s article lacks discussion of some relevant passages from antiquity that he either overlooked or that were not available to him. These include the fables of Aesop³⁵ and the work of the Greek dramatist Menander.³⁶ These examples help fill in some of the gaps of Costé’s research and further establish μαθεῖν-παθεῖν as a well-known wordplay by the first century CE. An important concept that Costé misses in his examination of Old Testament literature is suffering as a consequence of being a mediator.³⁷ In his examination of Heb 5:8, Costé unfortunately determines that the Hellenistic use of ἔμαθεν-ἔπαθεν and the Jewish concept of educative suffering have little value. While this literary background must not dictate one’s interpretation of Heb 5:8, it does shed significant light upon it. A common use of μαθεῖν-παθεῖν in Greek literature describes a feature of the human condition—one learns through times of suffering (see Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 177–178). Against this background, it becomes clear that the author of Hebrews uses this pun to emphasize Jesus’ humanity as a fulfillment of the high priestly requirement of serving on behalf of the people.³⁸

Knut Backhaus

In his article “Zwei harte Knoten: Todes- und Gerichtsangst im Hebräerbrief,”

Knut Backhaus examines how the author of Hebrews presents and responds to a “fear of

³⁵ The juxtaposition of μαθεῖν-παθεῖν appears as early as Aesop’s fables in the sixth century BCE. The conclusion to the fable of the Dog and the Butcher (ΚΥΩΝ ΚΑΙ ΜΑΚΕΛΛΕΥΣ) reads: ὁ μῦθος δηλοῖ, ὡς ἐν τῷ παθεῖν τις ἐπισπᾶται τὸ μαθεῖν καὶ προσεκτικῶς ἔχειν (“the fable is clear, as in this case, in suffering someone understands learning and having patience”). Other fables end with a similar moral: ὁ μῦθος δηλοῖ ὅτι πολλάκις τὰ παθήματα τοῖς ἀνθρώποις μαθήματα γίνονται (“the fable is clear that often sufferings become lessons for people”). (Hausrath, *Corpus Fabularum Aesopicarum*, Fables 134 and 233; located in the *TLG*). The use in these fables highlights μαθεῖν-παθεῖν as a general rule or proverb: suffering provides an opportunity to learn.

³⁶ Menander, a Greek dramatist of the late-third and early fourth centuries BCE, wrote (*Fragments* [Kock], 553.2): ἐὰν πονηροῦ γείτονος γείτων ἔση, πάντως παθεῖν πονηρὸν ἢ μαθεῖν σε δεῖ· ἐὰν ἀγαθοῦ γείτονος γείτων ἔση, ὡς προσδιδάσκεις ἀγαθὰ καὶ προσμανθάνεις (“If you have a wicked neighbor, you must in every way suffer or learn what is wicked. If you have a good neighbor, you will both teach and learn what is good”).

³⁷ Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection*, 93–94.

³⁸ See Johnson, *Hebrews*, 147.

death” in the epistle. He begins by looking at Heb 2:14–15 and argues that it stands out from the cultic symbolism and typology of its surrounding literary context and thus seems to be determined by an outside context.³⁹ The existential reality of death, according to Backhaus, is responded to in several ways by the author of Hebrews. In passages such as 2:5–18 and 5:7–10, Christ is presented soteriologically as the Liberator and Pioneer who defeated death and ethically as a model of piety and faith.⁴⁰ This is incorporated into a theme of the physical as transitory and cognitive reality of an alternative world. The heroes of Hebrews 11, Backhaus points out, demonstrate a perspective beyond their earthly existence to the afterlife.⁴¹ This is reinforced by the images of the eternal Sabbath rest, Mt. Zion, and the eternal Kingdom/everlasting city.⁴² Thus, “Das Leben als Ganzes wird transitorisch. Der Tod wird im Wortsinn durchschaubar und kann so auch durchstanden werden.”⁴³

Backhaus describes the author of Hebrews’ technique as “terror management.”⁴⁴ Death is incorporated into the Christian grand narrative within which the addressees are players. As such, death is marginalized by integration into this narrative. This causes the audience to place themselves within this story and to rethink their purpose. Finally, Backhaus discusses the author’s rhetorical technique and what he terms the “court of fear.”⁴⁵ Here Backhaus focuses on three passages that seemingly communicate that there is no possibility of forgiveness for apostates (6:4–8; 10:26–31; 12:16–17). This emphasis

³⁹ Backhaus, “Zwei harte Knoten,” 200, 203.

⁴⁰ Backhaus, “Zwei harte Knoten,” 204–7.

⁴¹ Backhaus, “Zwei harte Knoten,” 208. “Wo die Weitsicht weiter reicht als der eigene Tod, ist der Glaube zum Ernstfall geworden” (“Where the vision reaches further than one’s own death, the belief has become the real thing,” 209). Translations are my own.

⁴² Backhaus, “Zwei harte Knoten,” 211.

⁴³ “The whole of life is transitory. Death is transparent, quite literally, and can also be withstood” (Backhaus, “Zwei harte Knoten,” 211).

⁴⁴ Backhaus, “Zwei harte Knoten,” 211–12.

⁴⁵ Backhaus, “Zwei harte Knoten,” 212.

on future judgment, for Backhaus, is a part of the author's deliberative rhetoric—it leads the audience to hope.⁴⁶

Backhaus's article is significant for many reasons. First, it correctly links the topic of death in Hebrews to a need that the author identifies in his audience. Second, it develops the author's portrayal of Jesus as an exemplar within his response to the problem of a "fear of death." Third, it brings out many of the sociological aspects of Hebrews' response to the reality of death. Backhaus's understanding of "terror management" and the "court of fear" are helpful for understanding how the author is responding to this social context. Backhaus focuses on the "fear of death" in Hebrews, but a fuller picture might have been presented if he would have incorporated the numerous passages referring to the suffering of Christ and the audience. Both suffering and death are important for Hebrews and how it responds to the situation of its audience. Backhaus may also focus too much attention on death as an existential problem rather than its historical or situation-specific context. Death as a part of the human condition may illicit the type of response that Hebrews offers, but there seems to be a larger driving force than philosophical reflection on death that prompts the author's discourse.

Pamela Eisenbaum

Pamela Eisenbaum has offered an "ascetic" reading of Hebrews to show how the topics of suffering, discipline, and perfection bring together the Christological and moral dimensions of the epistle.⁴⁷ In her essay "The Virtue of Suffering, the Necessity of Discipline, and the Pursuit of Perfection in Hebrews," Eisenbaum establishes that asceticism is goal-oriented, communal (as well as individual), and developmental. These

⁴⁶ Backhaus, "Zwei harte Knoten," 217.

⁴⁷ Eisenbaum, "Virtue of Suffering," 331–53.

three elements, she argues, are each present in the topics of suffering (πάθημα), discipline (παιδεία), and perfection (τέλος) in Hebrews. First, she argues that the author of Hebrews presents suffering as a choice—as was typical of asceticism. Jesus, the archetypal sufferer in early Christianity, is presented in Hebrews not as a tragic victim but as one who “endured” suffering. Similarly, for Eisenbaum, when the audience is directly told to experience suffering (13:3; 13:12–13) it appears as an active choice. The author encourages his audience to actively take on suffering and “if one does not have an actual opportunity to endure suffering, one should try to simulate the effect artificially.”⁴⁸ Second, in her discussion of discipline, Eisenbaum argues that suffering in Hebrews is understood as having inherent spiritual value and a part of one’s spiritual development.⁴⁹ Drawing from ascetic terminology, she states that suffering (understood as παιδεία) in Hebrews can be its own spiritual reward—allowing one to encounter transcendence of one’s earthly self. Third, Eisenbaum argues that the link between suffering and Jesus’ process of perfection establishes a pattern for believers to follow.⁵⁰ On one hand, believers are presented in Hebrews as being perfected through Christ (10:14), but on the other hand, Jesus’ struggle and endurance—which led to his perfection—are models for the believer to follow.

Eisenbaum rightly identifies the topic of suffering as present throughout the expositional and exhortative material in Hebrews. Its connection to the topics of discipline and perfection are clear in the text and Eisenbaum’s essay is helpful in fleshing out the significance of these connections. As she points out, suffering is understood to potentially create positive effects and the author articulates a view that challenges his

⁴⁸ Eisenbaum, “Virtue of Suffering,” 337.

⁴⁹ Eisenbaum, “Virtue of Suffering,” 338–42.

⁵⁰ Eisenbaum, “Virtue of Suffering,” 344–45.

readers to reinterpret hardships. Correct also is her presentation of the author's establishing of Jesus as a model, or exemplar, of endurance in suffering that the audience is meant to emulate. However, Eisenbaum's essay should be challenged in a couple of areas. First, she calls out historical-critical presuppositions regarding the epistle's portrayal of the audience's suffering while herself working from a view that the epistle is not attempting to speak into a special social situation.⁵¹ This leads her to wrongly conclude that Hebrews encourages its audience to seek out suffering.⁵² When the author of Hebrews presents suffering as a *choice* in 13:3 and 13:12–13, the goal is not the acquisition of suffering per se but rather communal solidarity and endurance. In 13:3, the author encourages his audience to visit those in prison and to share in their suffering. In 13:13, the imperative is to continue following Christ despite the reality that suffering will come in doing so. The audience is not to seek out or deliberately create contexts of suffering. Rather, it is best to understand the epistle as written into a context of suffering as the author empowers his audience to choose how they will respond to these circumstances. This focus on the audience's choice in how they respond to suffering is seen elsewhere in the epistle. In 10:36, after reminding his audience of past suffering, the author exhorts his readers that they need "endurance" (ὑπομονή)—not that they need suffering.

Second, Eisenbaum at places seems to force ascetic thinking upon the text of Hebrews. This is obvious in her description of suffering-as-παιδεία as aspiring to achieve transcendence from one's earthly body.⁵³ To understand suffering as educative and, to borrow the terminology of Hebrews, athletic training does not, as Eisenbaum concludes,

⁵¹ Her view of the lack of a social context is presented in the next chapter.

⁵² Eisenbaum, "Virtue of Suffering," 337.

⁵³ Eisenbaum, "Virtue of Suffering," 342.

signify that suffering is itself a reward. Rather, the author is encouraging his audience to transform their view of suffering by recognizing the positive benefits of endurance. Again, it is not suffering that is emphasized here, but rather the virtues that emerge when one continues in endurance. The language of transcendence is foreign to Hebrews and imposed upon the text.

Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner

In a 2003 article, Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner looked at the author of Hebrews' teaching on suffering and perfection in order to assess its application in a twenty-first century context.⁵⁴ The epistle, Stevenson-Moessner determines, prepares the reader to expect suffering in this life and the pattern of Christ's perfection through suffering provides a model for Christians to follow. Yet, she asks, "What constitutes justified as well as unjustified suffering, if there is such a thing?"⁵⁵ For women and other minorities who regularly face abuse, does the notion of perfection through suffering encourage staying within contexts of violence?⁵⁶ Stevenson-Moessner argues that Christ's suffering in Scripture is *self-sacrificial*, and that Christians are also called to be self-sacrificial (although, this starts with an understanding of their true *self* in Christ). Citing the example of Moses in Heb 11:26–27, she stresses that the call to follow Christ does not mean staying within contexts of abuse but rather actively resisting evil—even if, in some cases, it may cost your life.⁵⁷

Stevenson-Moessner's article correctly identifies the importance of the topic of suffering in Hebrews and attempts to bring out its contemporary theological significance.

⁵⁴ Stevenson-Moessner, "Road to Perfection," 280–90.

⁵⁵ Stevenson-Moessner, "Road to Perfection," 281.

⁵⁶ On feminist interpretations of suffering in Hebrews, see Dyer, "'Great Conflict Full of Suffering'."

⁵⁷ Stevenson-Moessner, "Road to Perfection," 289.

She rightly points to the author's portrayal of Jesus and Moses as exemplars of suffering. Stevenson-Moessner's emphasis on contemporary application goes beyond the purview of this study, but the significance of this topic for the modern reader is a worthy endeavor for Christian theology. However, one must use caution when drawing parallels regarding the suffering addressed in Hebrews and contemporary experiences of suffering. The application of the teaching found in Hebrews to sufferers in contexts of abuse may be useful theology, but it must be remembered that the author likely wrote to a context unlike that experienced by a modern reader.

Norman Young

An article by Norman Young titled "Suffering: A Key to Hebrews" approaches the topic of suffering in the epistle with an eye to its historical context.⁵⁸ Although noting that there is "limited linguistic data" for the topic, Young understands Hebrews to be written to a community facing ongoing persecution for their faith.⁵⁹ He identifies the audience as Jewish Christians who had yet to completely detach themselves from the synagogue for a variety of reasons—including a fear of abuse. The persecution that they actively faced was mostly verbal and, according to Young, likely came from other Jews.⁶⁰ The author responds to this situation by encouraging his audience to look beyond their present situation to a future hope secured by the work of Christ. This is present in the list of ancient heroes of faith in chapter 11—especially the Maccabean martyrs. Of more significance is the example of Christ who not only endured suffering but also became a merciful high priest on the community's behalf. Having been made perfect through

⁵⁸ Young, "Suffering."

⁵⁹ Young, "Suffering," 50–51.

⁶⁰ Young, "Suffering," 50.

suffering, Christ now sits at the right hand of God—a vision of a secure future for the community regardless of their present circumstance.

Young’s article helpfully identifies the topic of suffering in Hebrews and connects it to the historical context of the epistle. Young convincingly argues that Hebrews addresses a context of suffering and offered numerous examples of faithful endurance for the audience to emulate. He notes a lack of linguistic data (i.e. words translated “suffering”) in support of this topic in Hebrews, but seems to be working with a limited understanding of what counts as data. As we will see in this study, semantic domain theory allows us to expand the relevant vocabulary beyond *πάσχω/πάθημα* and reveals an abundance of references to suffering throughout Hebrews. Young also unfortunately presents the topic of suffering using questionable assumptions regarding the context of Hebrews. That the community addressed by the epistle was of Jewish origin, fearful of leaving the synagogue, and experiencing abuse by Jews is far from certain. It is a possible explanation, but moves beyond what is ascertainable from the text of Hebrews.

Luke Timothy Johnson

Luke Timothy Johnson devotes attention to the subject of suffering in his commentary on Hebrews.⁶¹ In an excursus titled, “Suffering and the Obedience of Faith,” he presents the argument that the suffering of Jesus went beyond the physical abuse he experienced during his passion. Rather, Johnson argues that suffering can emerge from disequilibrium of one’s mental or emotional position. To learn or grow mentally is a type of suffering. So too, according to Johnson, is the disruption or change in one’s desires. In Hebrews, suffering is linked closely to faith and to an obedient response to God. The call to follow God’s will often disrupts one’s desires and choosing to be obedient to God

⁶¹ Johnson, *Hebrews*, esp. 53–54, 149–52, 317–19.

necessitates a repeated choice to suffer to one's comfort. Thus, God's call for Jesus to die went against his very human response of self-preservation.⁶² Although he was without sin (4:15), Jesus as fully human "learned obedience" by suffering to his human desires in order to be faithful to God. This emphasis on the mental and emotional, rather than physical, suffering of Jesus is seen by Johnson in such passages as 2:9–10, 5:7–8, and 12:2–3.⁶³

Johnson offers a helpful nuance to our understanding of suffering in Hebrews by taking into account its mental and emotional toll. He rightly argues against understanding Jesus' "suffering" simply as a reference to his death. It will be helpful to remember as we move through this study that "suffering" involves not only physical discomfort but distress on a variety of levels. Johnson may however place too great an emphasis on the mental or emotional experience of suffering in Hebrews since references to physical suffering occur at multiple places (10:33; 11:35–37; 13:12).

Conclusion

Suffering and death are important topics for the author of Hebrews but have been generally overlooked in Hebrews scholarship. Several important studies, however, have picked up on these topics and helped to articulate their significance for interpreting the epistle. There remains a need for a thorough examination of the topics of suffering and death in Hebrews with attention to their relationship to the social situation being addressed by the epistle. This study will show that the author of Hebrews wrote to an audience presently facing some form of suffering and felt a substantial fear that death was

⁶² Johnson, *Hebrews*, 151.

⁶³ Regarding 12:2–3, Johnson notes that the author of Hebrews "says nothing ... of the physical dimension of Jesus' death" (*Hebrews*, 317) and that the focus is not on the physical but the experience of opposition (318).

likely on the horizon. This is reflected in the abundance of suffering and death language in Hebrews and the rhetorical and theological response of the author. Independent of this hypothesis regarding the social situation of Hebrews, this study will firmly establish these two topics as not just present in the epistle but essential to its interpretation.

CHAPTER TWO

History of Research on the Situation Addressed in the Epistle to the Hebrews

Introduction

In a 1985 article, William Lane describes the Epistle to the Hebrews as a “sermon in search of a setting.”¹ As Lane’s description suggests, Hebrews comes to the modern reader as something of an isolated text. It is a fascinating document, but contains little indication of the circumstances from which it emerged. Since we lack key information about the epistle—the identity of the author, audience, provenance, dating—the situation being addressed by the anonymous author is itself not clear. This has not, however, kept scholars from formulating a variety of interpretations based upon internal evidence from the epistle. Yet, as Lane points out, “Any reconstruction of the life situation which makes Hebrews intelligible must be put forth tentatively as a working proposal.”²

The purpose of this chapter is to present and engage with the various views of the situation addressed in Hebrews.³ Many of these “working proposals” overlap with others and classification is not always easy. Theories of the situation of Hebrews often engage with hypotheses regarding authorship, dating, destination and other introductory matters. While some of these issues will need to be explored in the survey that follows, it is not

¹ Lane, “Sermon in Search of a Setting,” 16. Similarly, Marie Isaacs titles the first chapter in her monograph *Sacred Space*, “A Text in Search of a Context” (Isaacs, *Sacred Space*, 15). In using this quotation from Lane I do not wish to suggest that Hebrews should be understood as a “sermon.”

² Lane, “Sermon in Search of a Setting,” 16.

³ For previous surveys, see Isaacs, *Sacred Space*, 22–67; Salevao, *Legitimation*, 108–18. Salevao unfortunately lumps the various proposals into two categories: relapse to Judaism and “an untenable alternative”—that is, a Gentile or mixed audience relapsing to paganism.

my intention to rehearse the variety of views regarding those issues—most of the major commentaries on Hebrews offer helpful overviews.⁴

Pessimism toward Identifying the Situation Addressed in Hebrews

Nearly a century ago, Alexander Nairne remarked that Hebrews is better understood as a theological treatise than a letter addressing a specific situation: “it smells of a study, not the open air of life where history is being made.”⁵ Acknowledging the lack of explicit evidence regarding the situation of the epistle’s audience and the tentative nature of any historical reconstruction, some scholars have followed Nairne in understanding Hebrews as a theological essay independent of historical setting.⁶ The most persistent advocate for this view is Pamela Eisenbaum, who writes:

Indeed, many scholars, myself included, have expressed resignation about ever possessing knowledge about Hebrews’ chronological, geographical, and social situation, unless, perchance, some miraculous new evidence appears. Thus we often make and hear calls for recognizing the limits of our evidence and laying aside those questions about the text’s context.⁷

As Eisenbaum points out, the lack of specific evidence regarding the social situation of Hebrews makes any reconstruction tenuous. While she acknowledges that there were “real-life circumstances that influenced the writer of Hebrews,” Eisenbaum argues that the discourse itself—a “theological essay” rather than a “letter”—is more concerned with a theological topic than a social situation.⁸ The genre of Hebrews reflects this, she argues,

⁴ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 1–34; Koester, *Hebrews*, 41–53; Johnson, *Hebrews*, 32–39; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 3–33; O’Brien, *Letter to the Hebrews*, 1–20; Hughes, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 1–32; Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 3–22; Cockerill, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 1–41; deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 1–39; Westcott, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, xxxv–lxxix; Michel, *Brief an die Hebräer*, 1–33.

⁵ Nairne, *Epistle of Priesthood*, 7.

⁶ Hurst, “New Testament Theological Analysis,” 156; Isaak, *Situating the Letter to the Hebrews*, 153–58. Isaak argues that Hebrews, like most early Christian literary texts, is properly understood as a “literary product” (as opposed to a “documentary product”) and that it was “intended for a general readership with a low degree of audience particularity” (156).

⁷ Eisenbaum, “Locating Hebrews,” 213.

⁸ Eisenbaum, “Locating Hebrews,” 230.

as does its textual history. Eisenbaum identifies Christology as the main theological subject of Hebrews and argues that the author was more concerned with a systematic understanding of this topic than addressing the social or practical concerns of a community. Eisenbaum argues that Hebrews was written to an “ideal audience imagined by the author,” rather than to a specific community or church.⁹ The author certainly had a particular type of audience in mind, but the composition—as a “theological essay” that circulated within a Pauline corpus—was intended to reach as wide an audience as possible.

Assessment

The appeal of this position is that it avoids the attempt to impose an historical situation on Hebrews based upon little evidence. Eisenbaum and other scholars offer a much-needed corrective regarding the extent to which we can reasonably reconstruct this situation with the available evidence. Her appeal to the “imagined reader” of Hebrews serves to remind contemporary scholarship that the internal evidence of the epistle provides access to the original audience of Hebrews *from the perspective of the author*. Since we have just one side of this conversation, it may only be possible to reconstruct the “implied reader” that the author perceived for his epistle—whether or not this lines up with the actual historical situation of the first readers.¹⁰ The “implied reader” is a textual construct, but that does not mean that it does not refer to a historical reader. Eisenbaum may wish only to discuss the audience that the author of Hebrews has imagined for his epistle, but one does not need to disconnect this from an actual reader to which the letter

⁹ Eisenbaum, “Locating Hebrews,” 231.

¹⁰ On the “implied readers” of New Testament writings, see Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word*, esp. 68–74 (who is indebted to the work of Umberto Eco).

was written and sent. This notion, however, is a beneficial reminder of the limitation that the internal evidence places upon reconstruction of the original audience of Hebrews.

Besides the few comments presented above, there is little constructive merit for this proposal regarding the social context of Hebrews. In response to Eisenbaum and others, Scott Mackie has argued that one can in fact reconstruct some sense of the original recipients' situation in Hebrews—and that it is desirable to do so.¹¹ First, he argues that there is present within the text specific knowledge of the history of the community (their conversion in 2:3–4, 6:4–5; and early life in 6:10–12, 10:32–34 and 12:4) and 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). The account of past trials in 10:32–34, for example, is too specific to have been composed to an audience constructed in the author's head. Second, Mackie points out that a clear personal relationship between the author and recipients can be seen in the epistle (13:18–19, 22–24).¹² Further, Barnabas Lindars comments that theories that Hebrews is a theological treatise “cannot account for the urgency and anxiety which characterizes the letter from end to end.”¹³ As Marie Isaacs has argued, the situation of the original recipients and the theology of the epistle are “so interrelated” that “our view of its audience will largely condition our understanding of Hebrews’

¹¹ Mackie, *Eschatology and Exhortation*, 10–11.

¹² Some have argued that Hebrews 13 was a later addition and therefore these personal remarks were not originally attached to the epistle (see Overstreet, *Zur Geschichte des Kanons*, 16; Torrey, “Authorship and Character,” 147–53; Wedderburn, “‘Letter’ to the Hebrews,” 390; Wrede, *Das literarische Rätsel des Hebräerbriefs*, 39–63; Grässer, *An die Hebräer*, 1.17–18). However, there is no evidence that Hebrews ever existed without its final chapter and shifts in vocabulary and style are likely the result of the author turning to parenetic instruction—not necessarily a different author (see Rothschild, *Hebrews as Pseudepigraphon*, 45–62; also, Dyer, “Epistolary Closing of Hebrews”).

¹³ Lindars, “Hebrews and the Second Temple,” 413.

message.”¹⁴ While Hebrews certainly offers a strong theological argument, its theology grows out of a specific historical situation that it is tailored to address.¹⁵

While we can share in the caution concerning our knowledge of the social situation of Hebrews presented by advocates for this position, it is not necessary to share in their pessimism. To remove Hebrews from its situation-specific context does a disservice to the epistle and limits our interpretation of it. As Mackie, Isaacs, and others have shown, investigations into the occasion of Hebrews are able to provide valuable insights when interpreting the epistle. Since the author demonstrates intimate knowledge of his audience, a prior relationship with them, and pastoral concern for them, it is better to understand Hebrews as written for a specific audience under authentic social circumstances.

Jewish-Christian Relapse into Judaism

There is no consensus among scholars regarding the social situation of the recipients that Hebrews addresses. The most widely held view, however, is that the epistle was written to a group of Jewish Christians who were on the verge of relapsing to Judaism.¹⁶ Many scholars hold to this reconstruction on broad terms while allowing a diversity of opinion regarding the specifics. The title “To the Hebrews” was attached to the epistle by the late second century CE and most likely reflects a deduction based upon

¹⁴ Isaacs, *Sacred Space*, 23; cited also by Mackie, *Eschatology and Exhortation*, 10. The same point is made by Rissi, *Theologie des Hebräerbriefs*, 3.

¹⁵ Isaacs, *Sacred Space*, 67.

¹⁶ Scholars who hold to some form of this view are many. They include Filson, ‘Yesterday’, 61–66; Spicq, *L’Épître aux Hébreux*, 1.228–29; Lane, *Hebrews*, 545–46; Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 7, 100; Bruce, *First Apology for Christianity*, 7; Johnson, *Going Outside the Camp*, 129; Lindars, *Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*, 10–12; Manson, *Epistle to the Hebrews*; O’Brien, *Letter to the Hebrews*, 9–13; Witherington, *Letters and Homilies*, 26; Hagner, *Hebrews*, 11–12; Salevao, *Legitimation*, 108–18; Hughes, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 580–83; Westcott, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, xxxvi.

the book's contents.¹⁷ The author of Hebrews, it is reasoned, seems to assume that his audience was familiar with the Old Testament as well as facets of Jewish cult and worship. The epistle contains comparisons with Jewish historical figures (Moses, Melchizedek, Abraham) and other significant aspects of the Jewish faith—the tabernacle, Day of Atonement, and the high priesthood. Therefore, specific passages from Hebrews are often interpreted as warnings against returning to Judaism. F. F. Bruce interprets Hebrews' warning that no one fall away from the living God in 3:12 to concern Christians returning to Judaism: "It would not be a mere return to a position previously occupied, but a gesture of outright apostasy, a complete break with God."¹⁸ Similarly, the author's exhortation that his audience follow Jesus "outside the camp" (13:13) is often understood as "an exhortation to sever the emotional and social ties with the Jewish community."¹⁹ William Manson emphasizes Hebrews' comment regarding food laws in 13:9 alongside other passages to show that the audience "had sentimental leanings toward the old religion of Judaism with its worship, sanctions, sacraments, holy prerogatives and means of grace."²⁰

Understood this way, Hebrews offers not just a comparison between Christianity and Judaism but a polemic or critique against Jewish worship and practice.²¹ The superiority of Christ and his sacrifice over the ineffectual Levitical system and old

¹⁷ Koester, *Hebrews*, 46; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 21.

¹⁸ Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 100.

¹⁹ Lane, *Hebrews*, 545; see also Filson, 'Yesterday', 61–66.

²⁰ Manson, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 158. *Contra* Thompson, who argues that the reference to food in 13:9 need not refer to Jewish food laws but "is intended to suggest that the church will not find its stability in any earthly assurances" (*Beginnings of Christian Philosophy*, 145).

²¹ Walker, "A Place for Hebrews?" 236; Lehne, *New Covenant in Hebrews*, 103. Salveao, *Legitimation*, 113: "The anti-Jewish polemic in Hebrews is indeed real; it cannot be ignored, it is obvious." Lloyd Kim surveys the polemic passages in Hebrews (7:1–19; 8:1–13; 10:1–10) and determines that the author was attempting to persuade Jewish Christians tempted to revert back to Judaism by legitimizing the Christian community and distinguishing it from the dominant Jewish culture (Kim, *Polemic in the Book of Hebrews*, esp. 197–201).

covenant is fleshed out to persuade Christians from returning to their past religious practice. Reverting back to Judaism was, in effect, a return to an inferior and superseded form of worship.²² In a similar way, stern warnings from the author are understood as admonitions against the apostasy of returning to Judaism. This includes passages such as Heb 2:1 (“Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it”), 6:4–6 (“For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those ...[who] have fallen away”), and 10:29 (“How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by those who have spurned the Son of God?”).

While many scholars hold that the original audience of Hebrews was in danger of returning to Judaism, there is little agreement as to the reason for this apostasy. Some simply hold that the recipients have a sentimental attachment to Judaism and had not yet completely abandoned their involvement in it. Others have argued that the author of Hebrews is attempting to correct certain theological issues. Ronald Nash, for example, argues that Hebrews was written to expose aspects of Alexandrian-influenced Jewish thought—particularly the concept of mediators.²³ Similarly, Lala Kalyan Kumar Dey argues that the recipients were drawn to a certain Hellenistic Jewish theology promising perfection without a mediator and the religious stature of Moses and Aaron.²⁴ Michael Goulder argues that Hebrews was written to address the threat of a heretical angel-

²² Salevao, *Legitimation*, 113.

²³ Nash, *Christianity & the Hellenistic World*, 89–112. “The superiority of Christ is demonstrated by showing significant ways in which Jesus differs from Alexandrian *logoi*. In part, this demonstration of the superiority of Jesus may have been made necessary by the life situation of his readers. The Book of Hebrews suggests that its readers may have been tempted to return to one or more of the ‘older’ mediators because of pressure brought to bear on the Christian community” (98).

²⁴ Dey, *Intermediary World*. “The people addressed in Hebrews, accordingly, were not in the danger of relapsing into a less taxing Judaism which promised inferior salvific benefits than Christianity, nor were they in a state of post-apostolic fatigue, as some have characterized it, but on the contrary their ‘neglect’ (2,3) of Christianity was occasioned by a particular tradition of Judaism which promised much more—perfection and immediacy to God without intervening mediators and the highest of religious status, like that of Aaron and Moses” (126).

Christology like that of the Ebionites.²⁵ In his commentary, Buchanan understands Hebrews as written to Diaspora Jewish Christians who had travelled to Jerusalem to await the coming Messiah.²⁶ With the delayed parousia, the epistle was meant to discourage these sojourners from participating in the Day of Atonement while in Jerusalem by emphasizing that Christ's sacrifice was once-for-all.²⁷

Barnabas Lindars has suggests that the "root issue" addressed in Hebrews is a renewed consciousness of post-baptismal sin and the lack of confidence in Christian liturgy to address it.²⁸ The gospel message that Christ died for one's sins assured atonement for past sins, but what of sins committed since then? This concern, Lindars argues, led some Jewish Christians to return to the Jewish synagogue to benefit from the sacrificial system. Lindars writes:

It is the reason why these people have got themselves into such an unhappy position, unable to accept the assurances of their fellow Christians and turning to the Jewish community from which they had previously separated themselves, thereby causing friction and division in the church and presenting the leaders with a problem which they cannot resolve.²⁹

Knowing this, it is argued, the author of Hebrews sets out to renew confidence in the value of Christian liturgy and the once-and-for-all atonement of Christ's sacrifice.

Lindars reasons that Hebrews articulates the continual efficacy of the sacrificial death of Christ in relation to the Jewish ceremonies of the Day of Atonement. The author of

²⁵ Goulder, "Hebrew and the Ebionites," 393–406. The Ebionites believed that Christ was an angelic power that possessed the human Jesus at his baptism. To counter this, Goulder reasons, Hebrews emphasizes the inferiority of angels and the humanity of Christ throughout the epistle. As Mackie points out, Goulder makes too much of the supposed angel polemic in the opening chapter and it is hard to believe that if the author were facing such a serious heresy he would respond in such an indirect way (Mackie, *Eschatology and Exhortation*, 17).

²⁶ Buchanan, *Hebrews*, 255–67.

²⁷ Buchanan, *Hebrews*, 266.

²⁸ Lindars, *Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*, 4–14.

²⁹ Lindars, *Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*, 12.

Hebrews “makes the essential point ... that the death of Jesus is not merely a sacrifice for sins, as is stated in the kerygma, but has ongoing effect for all time.”³⁰

Others have argued that the appeal of returning to Judaism was in response to persecution. David Peterson writes: “It is most likely that the original recipients were Jewish Christians, tempted to slip back into a form of Judaism in order to escape the hostility and suffering associated with being Christian.”³¹ Since Judaism was an approved religion under the Roman Empire (*religio licita*), Jewish Christians facing persecution would have been tempted to return to this status.³² Seeing this reality in front of them exacerbated the temptation to escape persecution by returning to Judaism.³³ Some hold that the original recipients were feeling pressure and hostility from fellow Jews in response to their conversion. Montefiore argues that the epistle was written by Apollos to the church in Corinth who were “in danger of succumbing to Jewish pressure” to show them “the superiority of Christianity over the Judaism into which they were in danger of lapsing.”³⁴

Assessment

This view rightly emphasizes the Jewish character of the epistle. Drawing from Israel’s history and scriptures, the author demonstrates a deep knowledge of the Jewish faith and assumes that his audience is familiar as well. The author not only quotes extensively from the Old Testament, but also describes aspects of Jewish practice that move beyond a basic understanding of these elements. This includes an extensive

³⁰ Lindars, *Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*, 14.

³¹ Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection*, 186.

³² Manson, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 41; Mason and Robinson, “Superiority of the Son,” 674–75.

³³ Loader, *Sohn und Hoherpriester*, 258: “Unmittelbar vor ihnen lauert offenbar heftige Verfolgung. Das verschärft die Versuchung, sich dem Judentum anzuschließen und sich so der Verfolgung zu entziehen.”

³⁴ Montefiore, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 19–20.

knowledge of Jewish historical figures (7:1–10; 11:4–39), descriptions of high priests and their sacrifices (5:1–10; 9:1—10:18), and the movements of the Day of Atonement (13:10–16). This does not necessarily mean that no Gentiles were among the original community to which Hebrews was written. Some scholars have argued that little in the epistle necessitates a Jewish audience.³⁵ However, the text clearly assumes an audience who identified with the history of Israel and who would have held the Old Testament scriptures as authoritative.

That Hebrews was written to a community in danger of relapsing to Judaism is a viable reconstruction of the situation of the epistle, yet there are numerous problems with this theory.³⁶ Foremost is the objection that this view assumes a sharp distinction between “Christianity” and “Judaism” in the first century. To speak of these as two separate religions, neatly distinguishable and separated by the time of Hebrews’ composition, is anachronistic. It is not clear that Jewish Christians of the first century had completely severed ties with Jewish practice—whether that be participating in the temple cult or paying the temple tax.³⁷ Recent discussions regarding the “parting of the ways” between Christianity and Judaism point out that such a separation took place much later and more gradually than previously considered.³⁸ Further, to speak of one definitive “Judaism” goes against what we know of the diversity and various movements among Jews in the first century.³⁹

³⁵ deSilva argues that many aspects of the epistle that have been used to indicate a Jewish Christian audience—the use of the Old Testament, use of examples of Israel’s history, familiarity with the Levitical system—would have been familiar and of interest to Gentile Christians (*Perseverance in Gratitude*, 4–5). See also Gray, “Hebrews among Greeks and Romans,” 14–15.

³⁶ Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 12–13; Hvalvik, “Jewish Believers and Jewish Influence,” 207–08.

³⁷ deSilva, *Socio-Scientific Perspective*, 34–35.

³⁸ See Docherty, *Use of the Old Testament*, 1 n. 1.

³⁹ “Increasingly scholars are becoming aware of the dangers of classifying the Judaism of the first century of the Common Era according such simplistic distinctions. Hence we are now appreciating that the

Second, the “Judaism” that is presented within Hebrews is based exclusively upon the Old Testament and does not necessarily reflect Jewish practice of the first century.⁴⁰ The author does not seem to be interested in the contemporary Judaism of his day—he discusses the tabernacle rather than the Temple or synagogue; Aaron and Melchizedek rather than the high priests of the first century. Hebrews contains no interaction with the Jewish rites or institutions of the first century.⁴¹ If the author were writing to discourage his audience from returning to Judaism, it is curious that he would not focus his polemic against the contemporary practices of the Judaism that they would return to.⁴²

Third, some articulations of this view present Judaism as a shelter from persecution or social ostracism that the early Christians faced because it was *religio licita* in the Roman Empire. Judaism may have been a “recognized” (*religio licita*) religion under Roman occupation in the first century, but the relationship between the Jews and Romans was anything but friendly. As the Romans forced Hellenistic culture upon Jerusalem and the Jews, it was commonly met with resistance and interpreted as religious persecution. From the Roman perspective, the Jews were suspicious and a potential threat as they refused to incorporate Roman gods and to worship Caesar.⁴³ Several times in the first century the conflict between the Jews and Romans escalated. Around 49 CE the emperor Claudius expelled Jews from Rome in response to, according to Suetonius,

differences between Judaeans and Diaspora Jewry in this period were of degree rather than kind” (Issacs, *Sacred Space*, 24).

⁴⁰ On this point, see Hvalvik, “Jewish Believers and Jewish Influence,” 207–08; Sandmel, *Jewish Understanding*, 233; Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 13.

⁴¹ Hvalvik, “Jewish Believers and Jewish Influence,” 208.

⁴² Hagner argues that the author’s focus on Israel’s past and what was recorded in Scripture is a result of the motif of promise and fulfillment: “Thus the new that has come in Christ succeeds not simply the present manifestation of Judaism but also its ideal statement in the Torah (Genesis through Deuteronomy)” (*New Testament*, 647–48). However, it is striking that the author makes *little to no* reference at all to Judaism as it was practiced in the first century. The promise and fulfillment motif would certainly be an effective rhetorical tool to argue against relapsing to Jewish practice, but this is not backed up by any concrete reference to the Judaism of the first century.

⁴³ See Skarsaune, *Shadow of the Temple*, 47–65.

“constantly making disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus.”⁴⁴ This event is referred to in Acts 18:2 as it describes that Aquila and Priscilla arrived in Corinth “because Claudius has commanded all the Jews to leave Rome.” Between 66 and 73 CE the Jews, led by the Zealots and Sicarii, rebelled against Emperor Nero and Rome. This resulted in the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and removed many of the institutional foundations of Judaism. The war of 66–74 “endangered the status of Jews throughout the Roman Empire; it threatened the very survival of Judaism.”⁴⁵ During this time and the decades following, the relationship between the Jews and Romans continued to be strained. Two other times the tension resulted in war: 115–117 CE, between the Jews of Alexandria and neighboring regions and Romans; and the Bar Kokhba Revolt in Judea in 132–35 CE.⁴⁶ The composition of Hebrews is often placed in the second half of the first century or into the early decades of the second. This entire time period was marked with serious tension between Judaism and its Roman occupiers. The claim that Christians might have been tempted to return to Judaism to avoid persecution or social ostracism seems less likely in light of the historical record. Judaism may formally have been a “recognized” religion in the Roman Empire, but the relationship was severely strained and escalated to full-out war at numerous times and places.

Gentile-Christians Relapse to Paganism

In light of the some of the issues noted above, some scholars have argued that Hebrews was to some degree written to a Gentile audience.⁴⁷ Evidence cited to support

⁴⁴ *Claudius* 25.4, quoted in Lane, *Hebrews*, lxiv.

⁴⁵ Cohen, *Maccabees to the Mishnah*, 24.

⁴⁶ On the Bar Kokhba revolt, see Fitzmyer, “Bar Kochba Period,” 305–54.

⁴⁷ Moffatt, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, xvi–xvii; Grässer, *An die Hebräer*, 24; Braun, *Hebräer*, 2; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 21–27; Trotter, *Interpreting Hebrews*, 28–31; deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 2–7; McCrudden, *A Body*, 24–29. See Attridge, *Hebrews*, 11 n. 93 for a more complete list.

this claim includes: the author's use of the Greek translation of the Old Testament (LXX); the elegant Greek and rhetorical style used throughout the epistle; the absence of any Jew-Gentile tension that is found throughout Acts and Paul's letters;⁴⁸ and the author's use of Greek philosophy and Platonic ideas. Certain passages in Hebrews—including the warning against having a heart that “turns away from the living God” (3:12) and the references to “dead works” (6:1; 9:14)—speak more directly to a Hellenistic context than a Jewish one.⁴⁹ It is argued that Jewish Christians relapsing to Judaism would hardly have been understood as turning away from the living God—although a return to paganism certainly would have.

As with the previous theory, supporters of this view do not share a consensus on what motivated the recipients of Hebrews to return to paganism. T.W. Manson contends that Hebrews was written to the churches of the Lycus valley in order to refute the claims of what was later labeled the Colossian heresy—that is, “a hankering after Jewish religious observances and a doctrine of intermediaries between God and man.”⁵⁰ Ernst Käsemann famously argues that Hebrews reinterprets the Old Testament theme of the journey of God's people in light of Gnostic thought.⁵¹ In this way, the epistle speaks to a Gentile audience weary from some tribulation of faith. The author, Käsemann argues, incorporates the Gnostic polarity between the heavenly and the earthly to refocus his

⁴⁸ Gray, “Hebrews among Greeks and Romans,” 14. Weiss writes that Hebrews was written to Gentile Christians at a time when tensions between Jewish and Gentiles Christians were on hold: “Dementsprechend geht man heute weithin mit Recht davon aus, daß der Hebr ursprünglich an Heidenchristen gerichtet gewesen ist, und zwar in einer Zeit und Situation, in der die ältere Geschichte des Urchristentums bestimmenden Spannungen zwischen Juden- und Heidenchristen bereits weitgehend überhold sind” (Weiss, *Der Brief an die Hebräer*, 71).

⁴⁹ Weiss, *Der Brief an die Hebräer*, 71–72.

⁵⁰ Manson, “Problem of Epistle to Hebrews,” 12. Manson's full reconstruction is that Hebrews was written (between 55–70) by Apollos to the churches of the Lycus Valley to address the same heresy that Paul would later address in his epistle to the Colossians (17).

⁵¹ Käsemann, *Das wandernde Gottesvolk*. See also, E. Grässer, “Das wandernde Gottesvolk,” 160–79.

audience toward endurance. Others, such as David deSilva, argue that the Gentile audience of Hebrews was facing social pressure and ostracism by their non-Christian neighbors.⁵²

Assessment

Whereas the previous view rightly places Hebrews within its Jewish context, proponents of this view identify the Hellenistic influences upon the epistle. The impressive use of the Greek language, the use of the LXX, and rhetorical style of Hebrews all point to an author and audience deeply saturated in Hellenistic culture. This does not necessitate a Gentile readership since many facets of Judaism in the first century had been Hellenized. Yet, any attempt to understand Hebrews purely within a Jewish context will not fully comprehend the background of the epistle, its author, and original readers.

Iutisone Salevao rejects the theory that Hebrews was written to a Gentile audience in danger of returning to paganism since there is, in his view, a “preponderance of evidence” pointing to the danger of a relapse into Judaism.⁵³ The evidence for a relapse to Judaism is so clear in the text, Salevao argues, that the alternative theory simply misconstrues this evidence because of the presupposition that it is addressed to a Gentile audience. It is, however, not clear from the text of Hebrews that the audience was either predominantly Jewish or Greek—arguments for both theories have shown how the epistle speaks to both potential audiences. Recent scholarship has tended to move to understanding Hebrews as addressing a mixed audience. Further, as Koester points out, “A simple distinction between Jewish and Gentile Christians does not help the

⁵² deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 2–20. For more on deSilva’s reconstruction, see below, 50–53.

⁵³ Salevao, *Legitimation*, 116.

interpretation of Hebrews ... [I]nstead of seeking to identify the listeners' ethnic background, we do well to consider the complex way in which they would have related to the dominant Greco-Roman culture, Jewish subculture, and Christian community."⁵⁴

Similarly, while the text is clear that the audience was in danger of turning away from their Christian faith, it seems less concerned with what they are turning (or returning) to. As Isaacs writes, "He [the author] is more concerned to emphasize what they would be leaving rather than to discuss what they might be reverting to."⁵⁵

Therefore, discussion of the ethnic makeup of the original audience of Hebrews does not signify a "relapse" into either Judaism or paganism. It is more likely that the epistle was written to Hellenistic Jews who did not necessarily risk returning to Judaism proper (however this is understood) but faced a different social situation.

Essene-Christians and Former Qumran Members

The publication of literature found in the caves at Qumran in the middle of the twentieth century launched a new interpretation of the situation addressed in Hebrews.⁵⁶ In a 1958 article, Yigael Yadin offers what he considers to be the "missing link" in discussions of the audience of Hebrews.⁵⁷ After highlighting many similarities between Hebrews and the Dead Sea Scrolls—interest in angels, a messianic high priest, abundance of Pentateuch material—Yadin reasons that the addressees of Hebrews "must have been a group of Jews originally belonging to the DSS Sect who were converted to Christianity,

⁵⁴ Koester, *Hebrews*, 48.

⁵⁵ Isaacs, *Sacred Space*, 27.

⁵⁶ Surveys on the impact of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Hebrews include Attridge, "How the Scrolls"; Hurst, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 43–66; Grässer, "Hebräerbrief," 138–226, esp. 171–77; Mason, 'You Are a Priest Forever', 64–68.

⁵⁷ Yadin, "Scrolls and the Epistle to the Hebrews," 38. Mason notes that a similar position was articulated by David Schulz in 1818 (Schulz, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* [Breslau: Holäuffer, 1818]) (Mason, 'You Are a Priest Forever', 64).

carrying with them some of their previous beliefs.”⁵⁸ Yadin describes the Qumran community as anticipating two messianic figures—a royal Messiah and a priestly Messiah—who are subordinate to the angelic figure Michael. Hebrews’ description of Jesus as a high priestly Messiah who has angels subjected to him, Yadin argues, speaks directly into the theology found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. He concludes: “There could be no stronger appeal to the hearts and minds of the people descending from the DSS Sect than in those metaphors which are abundant and characteristic in the Epistle to the Hebrews.”⁵⁹

Yadin’s article was initially very influential and spawned the “Essene theory” regarding Hebrews’ original recipients. Among those impacted by Yadin was Ceslas Spicq, who had originally argued in his commentary that Hebrews was written to converted Jewish priests.⁶⁰ Spicq altered his hypothesis to include Essene-type Christians, possibly from the Qumran community, who may have been former priests.⁶¹ Philip Hughes describes Yadin’s work as “undoubtedly the best theory yet advanced to explain the occasion and purpose of the Epistle to the Hebrews. It is a key which seems quite remarkably to fit the lock and open a door that has for so long remained closed.”⁶² This hypothesis has found support from many other scholars—including David Flusser,⁶³ Richard Longenecker,⁶⁴ and Hans Kosmala.⁶⁵

⁵⁸ Yadin, “Scrolls and the Epistle to the Hebrews,” 38. Yadin further developed this thesis with regards to the role of Melchizedek in 1965 (Yadin, “Note on Melchizedek and Qumran,” 152–54).

⁵⁹ Yadin, “Scrolls and the Epistle to the Hebrews,” 55.

⁶⁰ Spicq, *L’Épître aux Hébreux*, 1.242.

⁶¹ Spicq, “L’Épître aux Hébreux,” 365–90. “Tout s’expliquerait au mieux si Apollos s’adressait à des esséno-chrétiens, à des prêtres juifs—parmi lesquels pouvait se trouver un certain nombre d’ex-qumrâniens—et dont il connaît la formation doctrinale et biblique, les préoccupations spirituelles, les « préjugés » religieux” (390).

⁶² Hughes, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 14.

⁶³ Flusser, “Dead Sea Sect,” 215–66.

⁶⁴ Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, 161.

Assessment

Despite initial enthusiasm for this hypothesis, numerous critiques emerged that downplayed the connection between Hebrews and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Herbert Braun's 1966 study shows how supposed connections between the Qumran literature and the New Testament belonged to Judaism of the first century more generally than distinctively to the Essene community.⁶⁶ Bruce makes a similar case in showing that many similarities in language and topic between Hebrews and the Qumran literature—including angels, purification, and sacrifice—are often used for different purposes and hardly distinctive among other Jewish literature. Bruce concludes that to understand Hebrews as written “to the Essenes” would be “outstripping the evidence.”⁶⁷ Renewed interest in the Essene theory came with the publication of 11QMelchizedek in the mid-1960s, which portrays Melchizedek as a supernatural figure. After publishing the document, Van der Woude and De Jonge argued that while Hebrews probably did not address members of Qumran, 11QMelch offered numerous insights for interpreting the epistle.⁶⁸ Looking specifically at the portrayal of Jesus as superior to angels in Hebrews 1–2 and of Melchizedek in Hebrews 7, van der Woude and de Jonge argue that 11QMelch reveals certain backgrounds of thought for Hebrews otherwise unknown.⁶⁹ Contemporary scholarship

⁶⁵ Kosmala, *Hebräer-Essener-Christen*. Kosmala moves beyond Yadin's hypothesis and argues that Hebrews was written to non-Christian Essenes to convert them.

⁶⁶ Braun, *Qumran und das Neue Testament*, esp. 1.241–78. Similar arguments are put forth by Grässer, “Hebräerbrief,” 171–217; Hurst, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 65–66.

⁶⁷ Bruce, “‘To the Hebrews,’” 232.

⁶⁸ de Jonge and van der Woude, “11QMelchizedek.” For a summary of their argument and its responses, see Mason, ‘*You Are a Priest Forever*’, 66–70.

⁶⁹ The strongest critique of de Jonge and van der Woude is offered by Fred Horton (*Melchizedek Tradition*, 152–72). Horton argues strongly against the view that the author of Hebrews understood Melchizedek as a divine or heavenly figure. The author draws upon the tradition of Melchizedek, Horton argues, because he is the first priest mentioned in the Pentateuch and was therefore considered the first ever priest. The priesthood of Melchizedek, therefore, serves as an antitype of the higher priesthood of Christ. “Any thought of Melchizedek as a divine, angelic, or heavenly being would have completely destroyed the author's scheme” (164). With this understanding, Hebrews should not be understood as directly influenced by any

generally acknowledges that the Dead Sea Scrolls illuminate the Jewish milieu from which Hebrews emerged, but not the position of Yadin, Spicq, and others who hold that the epistle was written to those with affiliation with the Essenes.⁷⁰ The studies of Braun, Bruce, and others have identified important differences between the epistle and the Qumran literature. The figure of Melchizedek, for example, is used very differently by the author of Hebrews compared to the figure in the Scrolls. In 11QMelch, Melchizedek is an eschatological agent of divine judgment and not portrayed with a priestly function. 11QMelchizedek never alludes to Genesis 14 or Ps 110:4 when discussing Melchizedek, as Hebrews does. “There is little reason to think that Hebrews was informed by material like that found in this Dead Sea text.”⁷¹ Further, as Attridge points out, the rhetorical style and character of Hebrews distinguishes it from the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁷²

Realized Eschatology

In his work *Die Theologie des Hebräerbriefs*, Mathias Rissi argues strongly that the theology of the epistle is closely tied to the situation that it addresses.⁷³ Rissi understands the community addressed in Hebrews to be Jewish Christians who had relocated to Rome and become increasingly ingrown as a community. Part of the problem being addressed is a lack of motivation to move forward in the faith since the audience believed that they had already obtained the full salvation provided by Jesus the high priest. In response to such a situation, Rissi argues, the author makes clear that the

literature that understood Melchizedek in such a way—although Horton does identify some parallels between Hebrews and 11QMelchizedek (167–70), he argues against any direct relationship between the two documents.

⁷⁰ Koester, *Hebrews*, 62–63; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 48–49; Attridge, “How the Scrolls;” Mason, “Cosmology, Messianism, and Melchizedek,” 53–76.

⁷¹ Koester, *Hebrews*, 340.

⁷² Attridge, “How the Scrolls,” 355.

⁷³ Rissi, *Theologie des Hebräerbriefs*, 3.

audience—like the wilderness generation—are still awaiting the fullness of salvation.⁷⁴ In the meantime, then, the believer must strive to live a life of faith as an offering of praise and worship to God. John Scholer supports this understanding of the original audience’s realized eschatology as a significant problem addressed in Hebrews. The author, Scholer contends, “skillfully argues that the ‘perfection’ which Christians purportedly enjoy cannot, in fact, be the end of the matter ... The latter is still to come, with dire consequences for those who ignore its claims.”⁷⁵

Assessment

A positive aspect of Rissi’s reconstruction is its emphasis on the social implications of the community’s situation. According to Rissi, the community’s withdrawal from the world is motivated by their unwillingness to “den Kampf mit der Welt aufzunehmen und bereit zu sein zu leiden“ (“do battle with the world and be prepared to suffer”).⁷⁶ This may be because of previous persecution (10:32–34), but the community now lacks “dynamische Energie” (“dynamic energy”), refuses to break out of their camp (13:13), and risks perishing (10:39). According to Rissi, the author presents a choice to the community: they can withdraw to the ghetto of their circle, be left alone but betray their faith; or run the race toward its goal (12:1).⁷⁷ Such a reconstruction rightly emphasizes the social aspect being addressed in Hebrews. It also takes seriously the attention by the author to suffering and its implications for the social situation addressed in the epistle.

⁷⁴ “Der Verfasser sieht die Lage der Lesergemeinde typologisch vorgebildet in dieser Geschichte der Exodusgeneration, die 40 Jahre lang in der Wüste dem Ziel entgegen wandern mußte” (“The author sees the position of the community represented typologically in the story of the Exodus generation, which for forty years had to wander in the desert toward a goal”) (Rissi, *Theologie des Hebräerbriefs*, 16). All translations of Rissi are my own.

⁷⁵ Scholer, *Proleptic Priests*, 206.

⁷⁶ Rissi, *Theologie des Hebräerbriefs*, 22.

⁷⁷ Rissi, *Theologie des Hebräerbriefs*, 22.

Rissi's reconstruction is built upon several suppositions that are contested in Hebrews scholarship. That the audience was located in Rome, while a popular contention, is a hypothesis that is less than certain and that has been criticized on several points.⁷⁸ Further, little in Hebrews appears to be a corrective to an excessive, realized eschatology. As Mackie points out, if this were so, one would expect the author of Hebrews to place a corrective emphasis on future-oriented eschatology. Instead, Hebrews displays an "already-but-not-yet" eschatology that actually focuses a great deal on eschatological benefits already experienced by the community.⁷⁹ While an interesting reconstruction, Rissi's theory is less than convincing.

Response to the Destruction of the Temple

It has been argued that Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians in response to the Jerusalem Temple's destruction in 70 CE.⁸⁰ It is likely that following its destruction, most Jews expected the Temple to be rebuilt.⁸¹ As Richard Bauckham acknowledges: "Few Jews would have expected the loss of the temple to be permanent."⁸² Jewish literature written after 70 CE—such as 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch—reflect a hope of restoration to the temple much like what had happened after its first destruction by the Babylonians.⁸³ It was not until 135 CE—the defeat of the Bar Kokhba revolt—that hope of the Second Temple's restoration began to die down.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ On a Roman destination, see Lane, "Sermon in Search," 16–17; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 28–29; Brown and Meier, *Antioch and Rome*, 142–51. Against this view, see Isaacs, *Sacred Space*, 35–37.

⁷⁹ Mackie, *Eschatology and Exhortation*, 16–17.

⁸⁰ Dunn, *Partings of the Ways*, 115–21; Isaacs, *Sacred Space*, 67.

⁸¹ Koester, *Hebrews*, 53; Dunn, *Partings of the Ways*, 116.

⁸² Bauckham, "Parting of the Ways," in *Jewish World Around the New Testament*, 188.

⁸³ Bauckham, "Covenant, Law and Salvation," in *Jewish World Around the New Testament*, 294–320.

⁸⁴ Clark, "Worship in the Jerusalem Temple after A.D. 70," 269–80: "Destroyed indeed was the Holy Place in A.D. 70 but not entirely nor finally" (275).

Within this context, James Dunn has argued that *Hebrews* was written to a group of Hellenistic Jewish Christians to argue against any hope of a restored temple. The lack of any reference to the temple, Dunn argues, supports this theory. “[I]t was the very principle of a sacrificial cult and special priesthood and continuing sacrifice which the author wished to contest, thus undercutting the theological rationale on which any renewed or rebuilt Temple might be reconstituted.”⁸⁵ Thus, everything that Christ achieved as high priest—access to God, a conscience cleaned from sin, Christ’s continuing priestly role—“has made the Jewish cult wholly redundant.”⁸⁶

Similarly, Marie Isaacs has argued that *Hebrews* responds to a context formed from the recent destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. She writes that especially for Jewish Christians whose concern would have been the holy land and its sacred cult, *Hebrews* “set[s] out to divert the focus of their attention away from the Temple to the wilderness tabernacle upon which it was thought the former was patterned.”⁸⁷ She later writes: “A sense of loss, inevitably felt keenly by Jewish Christians, called forth from our author a reinterpretation of Judaism’s established means of access to God, replacing them by Christ and relocating sacred space in heaven itself—understood as the presence of God.”⁸⁸

Raymond Brown makes a similar argument that the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple brought with it nostalgia for the Jewish cult and a longing for its replacement.⁸⁹ Brown suggests that an early Christian community heavily influenced by the Old Testament might have thought that the destroyed temple would be replaced with the

⁸⁵ Dunn, *Partings of the Ways*, 116–17.

⁸⁶ Dunn, *Partings of the Ways*, 118–19.

⁸⁷ Isaacs, *Sacred Space*, 44.

⁸⁸ Isaacs, *Sacred Space*, 67.

⁸⁹ Brown and Meier, *Antioch and Rome*, 139–58.

levitical sacrificial cult of the desert. Hebrews, he argues, is a corrective to such hopes as its author portrays Jesus as the high priest whose sacrifice and intercession is more effective than any earthly sanctuary.⁹⁰ Brown argues that the situation addressed in Hebrews was not a relapse to Judaism, but rather to a “more conservative form of Jewish Christianity”—that is, an attraction to “a deeper commitment to the values of the Jewish cult.”⁹¹ Understood in this way, the author is not simply countering a movement back toward Judaism, but is pushing them away from certain Jewish adherences that Christ has made obsolete.

In this category we can also add Gabriella Gelardini’s thesis that Hebrews was written as a synagogue homily on the occasion of the fast day of Tisha be-Av.⁹² Gelardini rightly points out that the author of the supposed homily interprets sections of Scripture for his audience to address their current situation.⁹³ The primary place where this occurred in the first century, she argues, was the synagogue. Based upon the epistle’s structure and use of specific passages from the Old Testament, Gilardini reasons that the homily was written for Tisha be-Av—a day commemorating the destruction of the first and second temples and the crushing of the Bar Kokhba revolt. This fast day represented a low point in the liturgical calendar and is presented as a shadowing image of its highest point, Yom Kippur. The author, therefore, seeks to encourage his audience despite the

⁹⁰ Brown and Meier, *Antioch and Rome*, 154.

⁹¹ Brown and Meier, *Antioch and Rome*, 155.

⁹² Gelardini, *‘Verhärtet eure Herzen nicht’*. For a shorter articulation of Gelardini’s theory, see “Hebrews, Homiletics, and Liturgical Scripture Interpretation,” 121–43; and “Hebrews, an Ancient Synagogue Homily,” 107–27. For a critique of Gelardini’s thesis on many points, see Mosser, review of *‘Verhärtet eure Herzen nicht,’* 1–7.

⁹³ Gelardini, “Hebrews, Homiletics, and Liturgical Scripture Interpretation,” 122.

fact of the absence of an earthly temple by pointing to the original, celestial one that remains.⁹⁴

Assessment

These reconstructions, of course, assume that Hebrews was written after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. Numerous scholars object to this hypothesis since other evidence points to a pre-70 CE composition of Hebrews.⁹⁵ The references in the epistle to the continuing activity of the sacrificial cult (especially 10:2) are often used to argue that the author understood the sacrificial cult to be presently practiced.⁹⁶ However, as has been pointed out by numerous scholars, there are examples of similar comments by authors who wrote assuredly after the temple's destruction.⁹⁷ Further, the appeal to the present tense verb forms as communicating temporal values is based upon a dated, and defunct, understanding of New Testament Greek.⁹⁸ As Stanley Porter has shown, "Greek does not grammaticalize temporal reference in its verb forms"; other factors (deictic indicators, discourse features) help establish temporal relations.⁹⁹ The discussion has almost become exhausted and has led Lindars to declare that the temple should be left out of the issue of dating.¹⁰⁰ If Hebrews was written after the destruction of the Temple, scholars such as Dunn, Isaacs, Brown and Gelardini rightly

⁹⁴ Gelardini, "Hebrews, Homiletics, and Liturgical Scripture Interpretation," 143.

⁹⁵ Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 22; deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 20; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 23–33; Witherington, *Letters and Homilies*, 27.

⁹⁶ Hughes, for example, writes that, "these present tenses signify that the levitical priesthood was still functioning ... Had the Jerusalem temple been in ruins and its ministry abruptly ended, the use of the past tense would have been expected throughout" (Hughes, *Hebrews*, 30). Also, Westcott, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, xlii.

⁹⁷ I Clement 41:2–3; Josephus, *Ant.* 2.193–98.

⁹⁸ Porter, *Verbal Aspect*.

⁹⁹ Porter, "Date of the Composition of Hebrews," 304. He further writes: "So far as the use of the present tense-forms for establishing the date of composition of Hebrews, without further information of an extra-textual sort, one cannot, I believe, use the verb tenses to establish such a date" (313).

¹⁰⁰ Lindars, "Hebrews and the Second Temple," 411. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 20; Westcott, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, xxxix; Witherington, *Letters and Homilies*, 27.

point out that its loss would have been significant for Jewish Christians. The argument of Hebrews is not dependent upon its dating in reference to the Temple and it can reasonably be understood as speaking into either a pre- or post-70 CE date. The discussion of the tabernacle rather than the Temple seems to lend itself to some movement away from the Temple cult—whether that be after its destruction or while it was standing.

Loss of Honor and Social Status

In several works, David deSilva has put forward the theory that the major issue affecting the original recipients of Hebrews was a loss of honor and social status.¹⁰¹ deSilva has shown that honor and shame were foundational values in the Greco-Roman world and were used to establish certain actions or orientations as desirable or to impose sanctions against other actions.¹⁰² The community addressed in Hebrews “had undergone a rigorous process of socialization into the worldview of the sect and had experienced ritual and ecstatic markers of transition from their old identity and status to their new identity” (2:1–4; 5:11—6:3).¹⁰³ Such a process, it is argued, only heightened the boundaries between the members of the sect and their previous lifestyle and culture. Embracing the rituals and markers of the Christian sect meant abandoning other values and associations. In a culture where religious worship was closely tied to political and social enterprises, the abandonment of such values and practices could have been seen as antisocial and subversive.¹⁰⁴ deSilva allows for both Jewish and Gentile Christians among the community addressed in Hebrews and argues that both groups would have felt outside

¹⁰¹ deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 7–20; *Social-Scientific Perspective*, 37–56; *Despising Shame*.

¹⁰² deSilva, *Despising Shame*, 25. See 1–155 for deSilva’s in-depth look at the classical sources that support these findings; also, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*, 23–93.

¹⁰³ deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 11; *Social-Scientific Perspective*, 37–50.

¹⁰⁴ deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 12.

pressure after their conversion.¹⁰⁵ “The goal of all non-Christians was the same—to correct the dangerous and vicious errors of their former colleagues by any means necessary.”¹⁰⁶

When the author reminds his audience of their past suffering in 10:32–34, deSilva identifies this as the “correcting” done by the sect’s non-Christian neighbors. He writes: “These believers became the target of society’s deviancy-control techniques, most notably shaming, which aimed at coercing the believers to return to a lifestyle that demonstrated their allegiance to the society’s values and commitments.”¹⁰⁷ Thus, the affliction, imprisonment, and confiscation of property described in 10:32–34 were intended to strip the community of their honor and to publically shame them. As the author of Hebrews makes clear, the Christian community held strong and endured this ordeal. With this example, we glean insight into the tension that this early Christian sect felt from their surrounding community.

While the community endured such suffering in this past example, something had changed by the time of the composition of Hebrews. deSilva argues that the community’s danger of “drifting away” (2:1) and apostasy (2:3; 6:4–6) stemmed from continued marginalization and the effects of the loss of status and honor in their society.¹⁰⁸ The toll of this marginalization and the delay of any reward for their endurance had led many in the community to seek out the esteem of their society—to essentially reclaim their social status. This, according to deSilva, is the occasion that the author of Hebrews addresses. The response of the author, therefore, is to redefine honor and shame in terms of

¹⁰⁵ deSilva, *Social-Scientific Perspective*, 48–50.

¹⁰⁶ deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 12.

¹⁰⁷ deSilva, *Social-Scientific Perspective*, 46.

¹⁰⁸ deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 18–19.

obedience to God and the lasting honor that only he can grant. Fidelity to God, while bringing shame from one's society, will bring ultimate honor and status. To accomplish this, the author "makes extensive use of the social code of reciprocity, the mutual expectations and obligations of patrons and clients, in his sermon."¹⁰⁹ According to deSilva, the author of Hebrews establishes the metaphor of God as benefactor or patron, the audience as clients, and Jesus as broker. In this way, the author appeals to the audience's sense of honor and their obligation to respond to God, their benefactor, with obedience and fidelity.

Assessment

deSilva offers an interesting reconstruction of the history of the audience of Hebrews and the occasion to which the author writes. In highlighting the effects of the audience's conversion upon their outside culture and the values of honor/shame in the first century, deSilva has brought clarification to the sociological aspects of what the original recipients were facing. He rightly brings out the opposition that the community continued to face and identifies it as the source of their waning commitment and temptation toward apostasy.¹¹⁰ However, it is peculiar that deSilva is so careful to specify that the community was not facing active persecution. He writes: "The situation thus presented appears to be a crisis not of impending persecution, nor of heretical subversion, but rather of commitment occasioned as a result of the difficulties of remaining long without honor in the world."¹¹¹ Yet, it is not clear why the "correcting" that the

¹⁰⁹ deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 52.

¹¹⁰ Among recent commentators, James Thompson has most embraced deSilva's socio-scientific analysis for identifying the situation facing the recipients of the epistle. See Thompson, *Hebrews*, 6–10.

¹¹¹ deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 18. Also: "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" (19).

community was subjected to by their non-Christian neighbors (physical abuse, imprisonment, etc) should not be considered “persecution”? deSilva may have in mind a sort of official persecution—like that under Nero—which he rejects, but he does not make this clear. Instead, deSilva prefers to connect this harassment to the more “pedestrian” issues of a living with a lower status in society.¹¹² This does not account for the appeals to severe suffering and the fear of death that emerges from the text, but rather downplays the situation to societal marginalization and oppression.¹¹³

Persecution

In several of the historical reconstructions presented above, some sort of persecution or outside oppression has been suggested as a potential cause of the audience’s waning commitment to the Christian community. deSilva presents outside opposition as a factor in the community’s loss of honor and status within its neighboring culture. Peterson, Manson, and Montefiore suggest persecution as a motivation for the Jewish Christian audience’s relapse to Judaism. Other scholars have drawn out this threat of persecution as the situation to which the author of Hebrews responded.¹¹⁴

Harold Attridge argues that the various hypotheses regarding the situation of the addressees are attempts at figuring out why some within that original community had grown disaffected. Also, according to Attridge, many scholars move beyond what the evidence from the text allows.¹¹⁵ Most of what can be reconstructed regarding the

¹¹² deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 19.

¹¹³ Grant Osborne similarly critiques deSilva for missing the point of how serious the situation was for the original recipients—although he identifies apostasy for returning to Judaism as the main issue facing the audience (Osborne, “Christ of Hebrews,” 254). For a critique of deSilva’s model of reciprocity, see Whitlark, *Enabling Fidelity*, 138–46.

¹¹⁴ Dunnill, *Covenant and Sacrifice*, 37; Loader, *Sohn und Hoherpriester*, 258; Lane, *Hebrews*, lviii; Koester, “Conversion, Persecution, and Malaise.”

¹¹⁵ Attridge, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 12.

situation being addressed in Hebrews is derived from how the author responds to the problem in the letter. With this in mind, Attridge writes:

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 to the community’s confessed faith. To the first he responds with his stern warnings and his exhortations to faithful discipleship. To the second he proposes a renewed and deepened understanding of the community’s confession that will inspire covenant fidelity.¹¹⁶

Attridge calls these two threats “broad but interrelated,” which is helpful since attempts to isolate what exact persecution the community was facing often leads to speculation. Yet the comment that these threats are interrelated identifies that the second threat might be a direct result of the first—the waning commitment addressed in the epistle is a result of the present reality, and threat, of persecution.

Patrick Gray similarly argues that the author of Hebrews wrote his epistle to encourage his audience in the face of persecution.¹¹⁷ In particular, Gray focuses on how the author presents examples of endurance in the face of persecution in 11:32–38 to speak into his audience’s situation: “In these verses the author fixes on dangers most closely resembling those facing his audience at the end of the preceding chapter.”¹¹⁸ In this way, the original audience is encouraged to view their own story as a continuation of the long story of faith, modeled by those who went before them. “[I]f it appears as if they [the original audience] may pass away without first receiving ‘what was promised’, this

¹¹⁶ Attridge, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 13.

¹¹⁷ Gray, *Godly Fear*, 156–65.

¹¹⁸ Gray, *Godly Fear*, 161.

should not cause the audience to faint since that fate befell the heroes and heroines of faith.”¹¹⁹

Assessment

Hebrews 10:32–34 make clear that the original recipients endured a period of persecution in their past. However, indications that the recipients were facing persecution at the time of the composition are less certain. Marie Isaacs, for example, writes:

There is nothing in the Epistle which would suggest that the particular impulse for such negligence was a present experience of persecution. Mention of the group’s suffering (παθήματα) is clearly with reference to the past—the ‘former days’ (10.32)—a time soon after their initial conversion (‘after you were enlightened’), rather than a description of their contemporary experience.¹²⁰

While Isaacs is correct to note that this section on the believers’ suffering all takes place in the past, she fails to acknowledge several other factors that point to either existing suffering or the threat of impending persecution. Many of these arguments are fleshed out in greater detail in this study, but a few points are worth examining here. First, Isaacs fails to account for the rhetorical function of this reminder of the community’s past suffering by the author. This section falls within a call for perseverance (10:19–31) and appeal to not shrink back (10:36–39). The author is reminding his audience of past endurance in the face of persecution in order to encourage them for their current struggle. They are called to “remember” their endurance and then encouraged to endure in the present time (vv. 35–36). Second, other passages point to the present reality of suffering in the life of the community. In 12:5–13, the author of Hebrews encourages his audience to “endure hardship as discipline” (v. 7). Here, as in 10:32–34, they are called to

¹¹⁹ Gray, *Godly Fear*, 162.

¹²⁰ Isaacs, *Sacred Space*, 31. See also Eisenbaum, “Virtue of Suffering,” 335–38; Kelhoffer, *Persecution, Persuasion, and Power*, 127–42.

“endure” (ὑπομονή/ὑπομένω) and are compared to athletes (10:32 “great contest;” 12:12–13). Elsewhere, the community is encouraged to follow the example of Jesus, who endured suffering from outside forces (12:2; 13:12–13). Similarly, Hebrews 11 presents many exemplars of faith as those who faced suffering yet endured (11:35–38). Finally, the author seems to identify that some in the community were in prison and being mistreated in 13:3.

The difficulty here may be in how one defines “persecution.” If meaning official persecution handed down from the Roman Empire, then Isaacs is most likely correct that the audience of Hebrews was not facing active persecution. There is no indication that Nero’s persecution of Christians is the source of the conflict present in Hebrews. If persecution refers to suffering or hardship received as a result of one’s religion, status, or some other factor, then there is a stronger case that this is occurring in Hebrews. The audience clearly faced some sort of suffering with an impending threat of death weighing upon their commitment to Christ. This suffering is often linked to outside forces (12:1–3; 13:3, 13).

Conclusion

Returning to the concerns put forth at the beginning of this chapter, I believe that it should be clear from the variety of reconstructions presented above that each addresses an element present in the text of Hebrews while not accounting for the entire picture. Every reconstruction must be taken tenuously since the evidence does not lend itself completely to any one articulation. Some theories have more merit than others, but it seems clear that the situation addressed in Hebrews is more complex than any one theory alone can account for. Rather, it is apparent that Hebrews was written to address multiple

concerns at varying degrees of emphasis. By this I do not mean to indicate that each of the views present above is definitely a concern of the author. Rather, I am suggesting that *at best* when one makes an argument for the epistle's social situation, it should be understood as *a part of* the overall purpose of Hebrews rather than *the* purpose. The author of Hebrews seems to be addressing numerous issues in his epistle and, like much of communication, is not limited to addressing just one particular concern.

In the chapters that follow, I hope to make the modest claim that one concern addressed in Hebrews is the reality of suffering in the lives of believers and a threat or fear of death. I believe that a probable origin for both of these issues is active persecution—understood broadly—faced by early Christians in the first century CE. However, it is not my intention to connect such persecution to any specific historical event—i.e. the persecution of Christians by Nero in 64 CE. It is clear from much early Christian literature that many Christian communities faced maltreatment for their faith.¹²¹ Yet what I have articulated as the “reality of suffering” and “threat of death” do not necessarily need to be linked to what we might label “persecution.” This reality in the lives of the original audience can be explained several other ways. It may be that the original recipients were only indirectly affected by persecution at the time of the epistle's composition. That is to say that they may have become aware of Christian persecution elsewhere and this triggers a concern for their own safety, creating a crisis of commitment. Possibly this community was impacted by Jewish revolt (66–73 CE), seeing

¹²¹ A recent study on Christian persecution in the first century CE can be found in Williams, *Persecution in 1 Peter*, 210–26.

its devastation looming in the distance.¹²² Or their present suffering may be the result of the social impact of abandoning certain Jewish or pagan practices in order to follow Christian practice. While its specific cause is difficult to identify with any certainty, the reality of the audience's suffering and fear of death is clear in Hebrews. The author surely wrote into a complex social situation, but addressing the presence of suffering and threat of death in the lives of his audience warranted a response.

In order to argue that the author of Hebrews addresses the reality of suffering and threat of death experienced by his audience, I will ground my argument in an understanding of how written texts relate to their context. For this I turn to semantic domain theory and the work of M.A.K. Halliday. It is surprising how many scholars who articulate a view on the situation addressed in Hebrews fail to take into consideration how discourses work or any theory of language. These linguistic theories help to craft a model of analyzing a text in order to make determinations of its social context. We now turn to these methodological concerns.

¹²² Josephus (*War* 6.9.3) claims that over a million people were killed and nearly 100,000 were captured and enslaved during this time. Many Jews lost their lives and certainly many Jewish Christians—because of their Jewish identity—would have been killed as well.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology: Moving from a Text to Its Context

Introduction

Knowing so little about the historical context surrounding the Epistle to the Hebrews—including its author, audience, destination, situation, and date of composition—how can one go about making any determinations regarding the composition’s social situation? Scholars often draw conclusions from the text of the epistle (see previous chapter), but rarely is this done with any theoretical foundation for how a discourse functions or of the relationship between a text and its context. The purpose of this chapter is to present a groundwork for the study of suffering and death in Hebrews and how those topics relate to the social context of the probable recipients. Two major methodological concepts will be presented to assist in this endeavor. Semantic domain theory will be presented in order to assist in identifying the vocabulary that is germane to our study as well as the key passages that deserve a close examination. Then the work of M.A.K. Halliday and systemic functional linguistics, especially the concept of “context of situation,” will provide the theoretical foundation for how a text is related to its context.

After these methodological concepts are presented, this chapter will look at the method of “mirror-reading” a text. In New Testament studies, mirror-reading is an important but often carelessly used model for drawing determinations of a discourse’s context directly from its text. Two New Testament scholars—John Barclay and Nijay Gupta—have each set out to limit the pitfalls of mirror-reading by presenting a careful

methodology for the task. In their studies, Barclay (in 1987) and Gupta (in 2012) offer helpful ways forward in moving from a New Testament text to understanding the context from which it emerged. Yet their methodologies remain problematic—both theoretically for the method itself and practically in the execution of mirror-reading. In the final portion of this chapter, I will propose six linguistically-informed principles to help in making determinations of a social context from a text.

Beyond a Simple Word Study

A possible reason why the concepts of suffering and death have been neglected in Hebrews scholarship is that their individual words do not appear that frequently in the discourse. Yet while *πάσχω/πάθημα* occurs only seven times in Hebrews, references to suffering appear throughout the text using a variety of terms and phrases. The same is true for the related concept of death, as *θάνατος* and *νεκρός* only account for a portion of the numerous references to death. There is a need, then, to move past a simple word count when investigating a topic in a discourse to account for the variety and creativity that authors commonly use when communicating. The study of semantics—and semantic domain theory—offers significant help in doing this type of study.

Semantics breaks down the common assumptions that the word is the fundamental unit containing meaning and that the sentence (or phrase) is the sum of the values of their components.¹ Rather, the meaning of a word does not come from something inherent to itself, but from its relation to the other words surrounding it and its linguistic environment. The term “co-text” is used by linguists to refer to the linguistic environment of a text (that is, the literary units that surround a word) in order to

¹ For a helpful critique of this assumption, see Thiselton, “Semantics and New Testament Interpretation,” 78–79. See also Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 27–64; Silva, *Biblical Words*, esp. 103–08; Louw, *Semantics*, esp. 67–158.

differentiate it from the extra-linguistic factors that make up the “context” of an utterance.² While words do often have an established core of meaning attached to them, it is the linguistic co-text that determines how that word is being used. Most words have a variety of potential meaning that may be pulled from in any given discourse. The word *steal* may refer to one taking something that does not belong to them, a baseball player advancing to the next base before being tagged, a bargain price on an item, or a type of bluff in the game of poker. Depending upon the words that surround *steal* and how it is being used in a sentence (as a verb, noun, or adjective), the word can draw from any of these meanings. This variety of meanings is often understood as the *semantic range* of any given word.

Connected to this is the idea that in order to express a certain meaning, one often has a variety of words or ways to express something broadly similar in meaning. So, if I wanted to articulate that I purchased a new car at a very low price, I might say that I got a *steal*. I might also say that I got a *bargain*, or a *deal*, or a *good buy*. These words all convey something similar to *steal* and in this way share a *semantic domain* of buying and selling. Any of the words listed would help express the meaning that I wish to convey; yet each communicates something slightly different than *steal*. A speaker might choose any of these words to express their idea, but what word they choose may depend upon: what nuanced meaning they wish to convey, the vocabulary that they know and can draw from, rhetorical purposes, or the desire to use several words to convey one meaning so as not to repeat oneself. Further, while in this context these words help communicate that I bought a car at a low price, they have meanings beyond this in different contexts. *Deal*, for instance, can also mean an agreement without connotations of getting a bargain, or a

² Halliday and Hasan, *Language, Context, and Text*, 76.

more formal contract, or to hand out playing cards in a game, and so on. The point here is that semantics helps flesh out the variety of meaning that any word may convey and shifts attention to discerning meaning at the phrase, sentence, or discourse level. As Silva points out: “Little genuine progress can be made in language study unless we recognize that, as a rule, the association of a particular word with a particular meaning is *largely* arbitrary.”³

Semantic Domain Theory and the Louw-Nida Lexicon

Louw and Nida’s *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* is an exceptional, yet often under-used, resource for New Testament translators and scholars. The authors categorize New Testament Greek words not according to alphabetical order (and then listing a range of meanings for a given word) but according to the semantic domain(s) to which they belong. As Stanley Porter has pointed out, this illustrates “by the construction of the lexicon itself that words are not univocal independent entities, but items that convey a variety of meanings according to the way that conceptual spheres are lexicalized by users of a language.”⁴

In their introduction, Louw and Nida present the significant features, reasons for, and directions on how to use their lexicon.⁵ They also present the basic principles upon which it was developed. It will be helpful to look briefly at these five principles to better understand semantic domain theory as we apply it to the text of Hebrews.

The first principle of semantic analysis is that there are no synonyms. As Louw and Nida explain: “no two lexical items ever have completely the same meanings in all of

³ Silva, *Biblical Words*, 103–04.

⁴ Porter, “Concept of Covenant,” 275.

⁵ Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, I, vi–xx. They supplement this introduction in their *Lexical Semantics of the Greek New Testament*.

the contexts in which they might occur.”⁶ Certainly two words may share the same meaning in some contexts (compare λέγω/λαλέω, ὁράω/βλέπω, γινώσκω/οἶδα, ῥῆμα/ἔπος).⁷ Yet, no matter how closely related in meaning, no two words share the exact same range of referents or set of connotative or associative features.⁸

The second principle states that differences in meaning are marked by the textual and extra-textual contexts within which a word occurs. Given this principle, it follows, then, that the correct meaning of any term is that which best fits its context (including both its co-text and outside context). This principle, as Louw and Nida point out, “maximizes the coherence of meaning within the context.”⁹ It also places little weight on an individual word in order to place greater weight on the linguistic features surrounding it. In a separate article, Nida explains this principle:

Without a context, lexical units have only a potentiality to occur in various contexts, but in combination with contexts, words have meaning. For example, in order to understand the meaning of *run*, it is essential to put the word into some type of context, for example *the boy was running, the snake ran across the lawn, the water is running, his nose is running, his heart is running, the play ran for three weeks, he is running for election, he hit a run, he lives up the run*. In each of these expressions it is the context that contributes the major semantic elements of the combined conceptual meaning, because in each instance the semantic role of *run* is the least that it contributes to the meaning of the combinations.¹⁰

This goes against the idea that a single word, when placed into any co-text, brings with it its specific meaning or theology. Louw and Nida also identify the “extra-textual context”

⁶ Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, I, xvi.

⁷ Examples taken from Louw and Nida, *Lexical Semantics*, 5.

⁸ Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, I, xvi. The authors clarify that this rule of “no synonyms” does not rule out variation for the sake of rhetorical purposes. That is to say that an author may shift between two words sharing a similar meaning for the sake of stylistic variation.

⁹ Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, I, xvi.

¹⁰ Nida, “Role of Context,” 20.

as having an impact upon a word's meaning. This is an idea that we will pick up on later as we discuss "context of situation," but it is worth noting now.¹¹

The third principle, according to Louw and Nida, is that the meaning of a word is defined by a set of distinctive features.¹² That is to say that a word's meaning in a given context is constrained by those features that surround it. Further, a word may have several different meanings depending upon the distinctive features within which it is placed. The authors use the example of *πατήρ* to make this point. The meaning of *πατήρ* may be defined by contrasting it with the set *μήτηρ*, *υἱός*, and *θυγάτηρ* to designate a "father." However, *πατήρ* can include both male and female and therefore mean "parents." Or, *πατήρ* can be used in direct address to God as "Father," or in reference to several generations before a person and translated "ancestor." "The term *πατήρ* is thus described as having several different meanings because there are significantly different sets of distinctive features."¹³ This very example can be seen in Heb 12:9, which contrasts the discipline of earthly fathers (*τῆν σαρκὸς ἡμῶν πατέρας*) with that of God as a spiritual Father (*τῷ πατρὶ τῶν πνευμάτων*).

The fourth principle concerns figurative meanings of words. Louw and Nida point out that figurative meanings of a word differ from their bases with respect to three factors: 1) diversity in domains; 2) differences in the degree of awareness of the relationship between literal and figurative meanings; and 3) the extent of conventional usage.¹⁴ For example, the verb *γεύομαι* is used three times in Hebrews with the figurative

¹¹ Thiselton makes the same point: "The meaning of the words [used in his example] depends upon their setting or non-linguistic situation, even more than upon grammar" ("Semantics and New Testament Interpretation," 77).

¹² Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, I, xvi–xvii.

¹³ Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, I, xvii.

¹⁴ Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, I, xvii.

sense of experiencing something first-hand (Jesus “tasting death” in 2:9 and a person having “tasted” the heavenly gift, in 6:4, and the goodness of God’s word, in 6:5). The movement from physically tasting something (Domain 24) to experiencing first-hand (Domain 90) is a significant shift. At the same time, there seems to be an awareness of this usage in New Testament literature as γεύομαι in this figurative sense is used more often than the more literal sense.¹⁵ Other figurative uses are more difficult to determine. As Louw and Nida point out, “it is not always possible to know whether a figurative meaning has become conventional in the language and thus may be defined as an established figure, or whether the expression is completely innovative.”¹⁶

The fifth, and final, principle of semantic analysis and classification states that the variety of meanings for a single word or the related meanings of different words are not easy to organize. They tend to form “irregularly shaped constellations rather than neatly organized structures.”¹⁷ Thus, the attempt to construct these varied meanings into a systematic structure often betrays the evidence or reduces meanings to simple glosses. Louw and Nida classify their lexicon in terms of “shared, distinctive, and supplementary features of meaning.”¹⁸ Their domains list words proceeding from generic to specific meanings as opposed to listing by alphabetical order or numerical occurrence.

Louw and Nida’s lexicon is certainly a breakthrough in New Testament lexicography, but it is not without its weaknesses.¹⁹ One issue is that the lexicon only incorporates evidence from within the New Testament. While there is merit in isolating

¹⁵ Γεύομαι is used figuratively in Matt 16:28; Mark 9:1; Luke 9:27; John 8:52; Heb 2:9; 6:4, 5; 1 Pet 2:3. Used literally to denote physically tasting or eating: Matt 27:34; Luke 14:24; John 2:9; Acts 10:10; 20:11; 23:14; Col 2:21.

¹⁶ Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, I, xvii.

¹⁷ Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, I, xvii.

¹⁸ Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, I, xix.

¹⁹ For a critique of Louw and Nida, see Lee, *New Testament Lexicography*, 158–66.

the New Testament writings as a contained corpus, the lexicon would be strengthened by incorporating evidence from the LXX, contemporary Greek writers (Philo, Josephus), or even Classical Greek writings. Another issue is how domains are categorized and terms within each domain distinguished. The Louw and Nida lexicon should not be used as the final word on a New Testament word's domain classification and meaning potential. The lexicon is highly beneficial resource, but not the final authority and discussion of the authors' categories and classifications should be challenged where appropriate.

Application of the Theory to the New Testament Text

With an understanding of semantic domain theory—especially in relation to the classification of words—the next step is to look at how this theory actually assists in analyzing a New Testament text. Surprisingly, there has been limited discussion of how to use the Louw and Nida lexicon for this next step. This section will look briefly at the various works that have attempted to apply the semantic domain theory (and the Louw and Nida lexicon) into the realm of New Testament interpretation.

In his monograph *A Discourse Analysis of Philippians*, Jeffrey Reed writes that the vocabulary, or lexis, of a language is a significant factor in conveying the ideational meanings of a discourse.²⁰ By “ideational meanings,” Reed is referring to “what is ‘going on’ in the text with respect to what is going on outside of the text.”²¹ Or, to put it another way, it is the use of language by humans to convey what is going on around them.²² Through the organization of their lexicon, Reed argues, Louw and Nida reveal an essential function of words: “namely a means of storing and communicating human

²⁰ Reed, *Discourse Analysis of Philippians*, 76–78.

²¹ Reed, *Discourse Analysis of Philippians*, 62.

²² For more on “ideational meaning,” see Halliday, *Functional Grammar*, 109–42.

knowledge of culture and experience.”²³ Further, semantic domains represent categories “by which language users organize the phenomena of their world into expressible forms.”²⁴

In analyzing the text of Philippians, Reed develops the use of the Louw and Nida lexicon to establish “semantic chains” (or words of the same semantic domain that are linked together throughout a discourse).²⁵ Reed’s study of semantic chains across Philippians allows him to explore the coherence, idealistic structure, and integrity of the letter.²⁶ Stanley Porter and Matthew Brook O’Donnell perform a similar study on the book of Romans.²⁷ They write:

Rather than simply studying an individual word in all of its occurrences, or a single word in relation to its semantic field—as necessary as these preliminary stages are—analysing entire semantic domains as they are lexicalized across a corpus, or even corpora, seems to be the way forward in lexical study.²⁸

Porter and O’Donnell’s semantic study of Romans annotates each word by its domain and then extends this method over the entire book. The authors then identify the number of occurrences of each domain per chapter to detect semantic clusters and a semantic structure.²⁹

In her article “Blessed Be the Ties that Bind,” Cynthia Westfall shows how semantic domain theory relates to several core theories of discourse analysis (cohesion,

²³ Reed, *Discourse Analysis of Philippians*, 78.

²⁴ Reed, *Discourse Analysis of Philippians*, 78.

²⁵ See Reed, *Discourse Analysis of Philippians*, 298–346. Reed does clarify that he moves beyond the Louw and Nida lexicon by incorporating Halliday and Hasan’s theory of cohesiveness and semantic chains. See Halliday and Hasan, “Text and Context,” 4–90.

²⁶ For his conclusions, see Reed, *Discourse Analysis of Philippians*, 401–18.

²⁷ Porter and O’Donnell, “Semantics and Patterns of Argumentation,” 154–204.

²⁸ Porter and O’Donnell, “Semantics and Patterns of Argumentation,” 160.

²⁹ See also O’Donnell, *Corpus Linguistics*, 314–54.

coherence, and the recognition of topic).³⁰ Cohesion concerns the formal links within a discourse that connect it internally and with its co-text. As Westfall notes, “cohesion involves the interpretation of some element in the text as depending on another element.”³¹ Since semantic domains are based upon shared features, identifying these features in a literary unit can assist in understanding how each element relates to the others. The coherence of a text means that it makes sense both internally and with relation to the hearer/reader’s ability to process the discourse.³² As was noted in Louw and Nida’s third principle, semantic domain theory “maximizes the coherence of meaning within the context.”³³ The topic of a literary unit is what that given unit is about. Westfall notes:

A topic above the sentence level is determined by one of the following or a combination of the following criteria: tracing the participant and process semantic chains and their interaction, the spatial and temporal circumstances of a situation or episode, central sentences, scenarios activated by roles and register, and logical patterns of organization.³⁴

Semantic chains, as mentioned earlier in reference to Reed’s work, are formed by words sharing the same domain. Participant chains are formed by words or phrases referring to the same person. Chains that highly interact with other chains are likely to be significant to understanding the topic.³⁵

Finally, Porter has shown how semantic domain theory—along with the Louw and Nida lexicon—can be helpful in doing word and concept studies within the New Testament. This is demonstrated by his investigations into the concept of covenant in

³⁰ Westfall, “Blessed Be,” 199–216.

³¹ Westfall, “Blessed Be,” 202.

³² Westfall, “Blessed Be,” 206.

³³ Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, I, xvi. Quoted in Westfall, “Blessed Be,” 207.

³⁴ Westfall, “Blessed Be,” 208.

³⁵ Westfall, “Blessed Be,” 208.

Paul³⁶ and “penitence and repentance” in the epistles.³⁷ Porter warns against falling into two extremes: focusing too much on single word occurrences and attempting to establish a concept without linguistic support.³⁸ Semantic domain theory allows Porter to do two things as he begins his studies of these concepts. First, it allows him to expand the vocabulary that related to his concepts. So, for example, in his investigation of *covenant*, he moves beyond just looking at διαθήκη in the literature to include those found in the same subdomain (34.42–34.49 “Establish or Confirm a Relation”).³⁹ Second, semantic domain theory allows Porter to identify the key passages and units of discourse that incorporate the theme under investigation. Porter writes:

The advantage of using semantic fields as a means of approaching word and concept studies is that one can see where there are concentrated uses of words within the same domain. The reasoning is that when more significant or extensive discussion of a concept occurs it is more likely that a number of different conceptually related words are utilized by the author.⁴⁰

Such an investigation allows Porter to focus on passages in Romans 2, 2 Corinthians 7, Hebrews 6 and James 5 as he studies the concepts of *penitence* and *repentance*.

Semantic domain theory will serve as a launching point for our study of the language of suffering and death in Hebrews. By looking at the semantic domains in the epistle, we will be able to identify the language used by the author to refer to these topics as well as the key passages where they appear. The semantic domains of suffering and death broaden the relevant vocabulary beyond πάσχω/πάθημα, θάνατος, and νεκρός. In this way our study will move beyond a simple word study as it gathers evidence for the

³⁶ Porter, “Concept of Covenant,” 269–85.

³⁷ Porter, “Penitence and Repentance,” 127–52.

³⁸ Porter, “Penitence and Repentance,” 128. Here, Porter is echoing James Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language*.

³⁹ Porter, “Concept of Covenant,” 281–83.

⁴⁰ Porter, “Penitence and Repentance,” 129.

presence of our topics throughout the epistle. Further, semantic clusters of these domains will help in indentifying key passages referring to suffering and death. Since we have this tool as a starting point for our study, I now move to the work of Halliday in order to flesh out a theory of language and communication.

M.A.K. Halliday and “Context of Situation”

The approach to language that I adopt in this study is that of M.A.K. Halliday and his “systemic functional linguistics.”⁴¹ Language, according to Halliday, is a system of choices and meaning potential in which users convey meaning within a social context. Foundational for Halliday’s study of language is the notion that language is shaped and brought to life within some social environment. Any text—understood as an act of discourse (written, spoken, or otherwise communicated)⁴²—is constructed and given within a certain context: “[A]ll language is language-in-use, in a context of situation, and all of it relates to the situation, in the abstract sense in which I am using the term here.”⁴³ Halliday argues that extra-linguistic features influence or constrain the linguistic structure or choices of a text. These extra-linguistic features are identified by Halliday in the *context of situation* and the *context of culture*. The context of culture is the broad background within which a text originates.⁴⁴ This might include the language, setting, role structures, and unspoken assumptions from which a culture attaches meaning and

⁴¹ Some key works of M.A.K. Halliday include Halliday, *Language as a Social Semiotic*; Halliday, *Explorations in the Function of Language*; Halliday, *Functional Grammar*; and Halliday and Hasan, *Language, Context, and Text*.

⁴² “We can define text, in the simplest way perhaps, by saying that it is language that is functional. By functional, we simply mean language that is doing some job in some context, as opposed to isolated words or sentences that I might put on the blackboard. (These might also be functional, of course, if I was using them as linguistic examples.) So any instance of living language that is playing some part in a context of situation, we shall call a text. It may be either spoken or written, or indeed in any other medium of expression that we like to think of” (Halliday and Hasan, *Language, Context, and Text*, 10).

⁴³ Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic*, 33.

⁴⁴ Halliday and Hasan, *Language, Context, and Text*, 46.

value.⁴⁵ The context of situation is more particular in scope and refers to the specific environment in which a discourse occurs.⁴⁶ According to Halliday, language is experienced within its context of culture, but concentrated on a precise context in which the language occurs. Thus, the context of situation occurs within the larger context of culture, but is defined by those participating, the subject matter, and the type of discourse. The term *register* is used by Halliday to refer to the diversity found in language that corresponds to a variety of situation.⁴⁷ For Halliday, register “refers to the fact that the language we speak or write varies according to the type of situation.”⁴⁸ Further, register “attempt[s] to uncover the general principles which govern this variation, so that we can begin to understand *what* situational factors determine *what* linguistic features.”⁴⁹ Register is to be distinguished from *dialect*—which is variety in language according to a user (rather than according to a situation or particular use).⁵⁰

The term “context of situation” was used prior to Halliday in the work of Bronislaw Malinowski in order to emphasize the importance of broadening the concept of “context” beyond an expression’s linguistic surroundings and to incorporate the influence of that expression’s situational circumstances.⁵¹ Malinowski rejected the notion that meaning was simply contained within an utterance or text. Instead, he stressed that, “a statement, spoken in real life, is never detached from the situation in which it has been

⁴⁵ Porter writes that the context of culture includes “such extra-linguistic factors as setting, behavioural environment, language itself ... and extra-situational factors, often referred to as frames or scenarios” (Porter, “Dialect and Register,” 198).

⁴⁶ Jeffrey Reed refers to the context of situation as “the immediate historical situation in which a discourse occurs” (Reed, *Discourse Analysis of Philippians*, 42; see also, 53–57).

⁴⁷ Halliday and Hasan, *Language, Context, and Text*, 38–39; Halliday, *Language as a Social Semiotic*, 31–35.

⁴⁸ Halliday, *Learning How to Mean*, 126.

⁴⁹ Halliday, *Language as a Social Semiotic*, 31–32.

⁵⁰ Halliday and Hasan, *Language, Context, and Text*, 41.

⁵¹ Malinowski, “Problem of Meaning,” esp. 306–09.

uttered.”⁵² In this way, an utterance and its situation are intricately bound together and a consideration of this context of situation is vital to its understanding. Thus Malinowski argued that not only an utterance’s linguistic context (co-text) but also the context of its situation were indispensable for understanding its meaning. Malinowski was particularly interested in translating primitive languages, which stemmed from his work among natives in the Trobriand Islands in New Guinea.⁵³ To do so, he also stressed that understanding the culture within which an utterance occurs—its “context of culture”—was also vital to conveying its meaning.⁵⁴

The British linguist J.R. Firth developed Malinowski’s concept of context of situation into his own linguistic approach.⁵⁵ According to Firth, Malinowski understood context of situation as “an ordered series of events considered as *in rebus*”—that is, a concrete and discernable series of events.⁵⁶ Since Malinowski had been concerned with actual instances of language use, his context of situation was not abstract enough for Firth to incorporate it into a general theory of linguistics.⁵⁷ For Firth, context of situation should be understood as “a suitable schematic construct to apply to language events.”⁵⁸

⁵² Malinowski, “Problem of Meaning,” 307.

⁵³ In a later work, Malinowski stressed that his theory of language was not restricted to primitive language but that “even in the most abstract and theoretical aspects of human thought and verbal usage, the real understanding of words is always ultimately derived from active experience of those aspects of reality to which the words belong ... Between the savage use of words and the most abstract and theoretical one there is only a difference of degree. Ultimately all the meaning of all words is derived from bodily experience” (*Coral Gardens and Their Magic*, 58).

⁵⁴ “[L]anguage is essentially rooted in the reality of the culture, the tribal life and customs of a people, and ... it cannot be explained without constant reference to these broader contexts of verbal utterance” (Malinowski, “Problem of Meaning,” 305).

⁵⁵ Firth, “Personality and Language in Society,” esp. 181–83.

⁵⁶ Firth, “Personality and Language in Society,” 182.

⁵⁷ Halliday describes Firth’s assessment of Malinowski’s concept of “context of situation” in *Language, Context, and Text*, 8: “Firth needed a concept of the context that could be built into a general linguistic theory: one which was more abstract than that, not simply an audio-video representation of the sights and sounds that surrounded the linguistic event.”

⁵⁸ Firth, “Personality and Language in Society,” 182.

His description of context of situation brought together the following categories:⁵⁹

participants, actions, relevant features, and effects. The *participants* are the persons or personalities, including their roles and statuses, in the situation. The *action* refers to what the participants are doing in the situation; this includes both verbal and non-verbal action. Other *relevant features* (or “relevant objects”) in the situation include objects or events that have some bearing on what is happening. Finally, the *effect* of the verbal actions considers what changes occurred as a result of what the participants said in the situation.

Halliday drew from both Malinowski and Firth to develop his theory of context of situation. He incorporated three components of the context of situation, which serve to interpret the environment of a text: field of discourse, tenor of discourse, and mode of discourse. He describes these components in the following way:

1. The FIELD OF DISCOURSE refers to what is happening, to the nature of the social action that is taking place: what is it that the participants are engaged in, in which the language figures as some essential component?
2. The TENOR OF DISCOURSE refers to who is taking part, to the nature of the participants, their statuses and roles: what kinds of role relationships obtain among the participants, including permanent and temporary relationships of one kind or another, both the types of speech role that they are taking on in the dialogue and the whole cluster of socially significant relationships in which they are involved?
3. The MODE OF DISCOURSE refers to what part the language is playing, what it is that the participants are expecting the language to do for them in that situation: the symbolic organisation of the text, the status that it has, and its function in the context, including the channel (is it spoken or written or some combination of the two?) and also the rhetorical mode, what is being achieved by the text in terms of such categories as persuasive, expository, didactic, and the like.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ The following is taken from Halliday’s description of Firth’s understanding of context of situation in *Language, Context, and Text*, 6. Firth presents this material in “Personality and Language in Society,” 182.

⁶⁰ Halliday and Hasan, *Language, Context, and Text*, 12.

According to Halliday, these are the “general concepts needed for describing what is linguistically significant in the context of situation.”⁶¹

These three features of context of situation are intricately related to the three *functions* of language within Halliday’s linguistic framework. As mentioned above, Halliday understands language from a functional perspective—that is to say, all language is used in order to accomplish something. Function, for Halliday, is not just the use of language but a “fundamental property of language itself.”⁶²

Halliday has identified three “metafunctions” of language: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The first function, *ideational*, refers to how language expresses content and has the function of being about something.⁶³ Ideational meaning is often determined by analyzing the grammar (with attention to processes and their participants and circumstances and the overall “transitivity” of the verbal system) and lexis (or word choice). *Interpersonal* is the second metafunction and refers to the interaction and relationships occurring and impacted by the discourse. Unlike ideational meaning, which uses language as a way of reflecting upon reality, interpersonal meaning is a way of acting.⁶⁴ Jeffrey Reed describes interpersonal meaning as concerned with “the use of language to establish and maintain social relations.”⁶⁵ The third metafunction, *textual*, is concerned with the semantic and grammatical balance and thematic structure of a text. It

⁶¹ Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic*, 33.

⁶² Halliday and Hasan, *Language, Context, and Text*, 17.

⁶³ Halliday and Hasan, *Cohesion in English*, 26, 238. Often in a Hallidayan framework, the ideational function is divided into two components—experiential and logical. In this rubric, the logical component refers to “logical relationships that are built into natural languages” and “are expressed in the grammar as different forms of parataxis and hypotaxis” (*Language, Context, and Text*, 21). The experiential component is concerned with “representing the real world as it is apprehended in our experience” (*Language, Context, and Text* 19). However, the logical component is often vague and is realized in similar ways to the experiential—so it is not always necessary to distinguish between the two (Porter, “Dialect and Register,” 206–07).

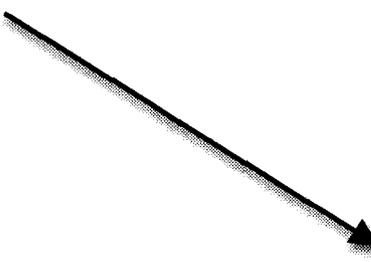
⁶⁴ Halliday and Hasan, *Language, Context, and Text*, 20.

⁶⁵ Reed, *Discourse Analysis of Philippians*, 59.

is what distinguishes a text from a non-text (a random assortment of words or sounds). The textual component utilizes all the resources of language for creating a text—that is, “being operationally relevant, and cohering within itself and with the context of situation.”⁶⁶

Halliday suggests that the three features of the context of situation (field, tenor, and mode) are “realised by” (or “expressed through”) the metafunctions of ideational, interpersonal, and textual.⁶⁷ This can be seen in the following table:⁶⁸

Table 3.1. Context of Situation

<p>SITUATION: Feature of the discourse</p> <p>Field of discourse (what is going on)</p> <p>Tenor of discourse (who are taking part)</p> <p>Mode of discourse (role assigned to language)</p>	<p>(realised by)</p> 	<p>TEXT: Functional component of semantic system</p> <p>Ideational meanings (transitivity, naming, etc.)</p> <p>Interpersonal meanings (mood, modality, person, etc.)</p> <p>Textual meanings (theme, information, cohesive relations)</p>
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As is clear from the diagram, the field of discourse is expressed through the ideational function of language; the tenor of discourse is expressed through the interpersonal function; the mode of discourse through the textual function.

Halliday stresses that since extra-linguistic factors influence the actual linguistic structure of a text, the two are linked. He writes: “Now the context of situation, the

⁶⁶ Halliday and Hasan, *Cohesion in English*, 27. Reed states that textual meaning “allows speakers to bring together both ideational and interpersonal meanings into a coherent whole” (*Discourse Analysis of Philippians*, 60).

⁶⁷ Halliday and Hasan, *Language, Context, and Text*, 24–25.

⁶⁸ Taken from Halliday and Hasan, *Language, Context, and Text*, 26. I have replaced “experiential meanings” with “ideational meanings” in this chart.

context in which the text unfolds, is encapsulated in the text ... through a systematic relationship between the social environment on the one hand, and the functional organization of the language on the other.”⁶⁹ Identifying this connection, Halliday argues “we can get from one to the other [the context of situation and text] in a revealing way.”⁷⁰ The relationship between text and its context of situation, in Halliday’s view, means that one can make determinations regarding both the meaning of a text through knowledge of its context and of the context through the features of the text. In this way, Halliday has provided a framework for understanding how the context of a text is expressed within its discourse. That is not to say that all aspects of a text’s context of situation can be realized through analysis of its grammatical and lexical structure and choices. This is because the situation of a text does not determine the text—it constrains it. However, it does provide a way to move from elements of the text to possible aspects of its context.

Application

Significant work has been done in New Testament studies to apply a Hallidayan framework to the Greek text.⁷¹ Specific to his notion of context of situation, several scholars have conducted a “register analysis” on various New Testament texts to make determinations of audience identity and social contexts.⁷² My purpose here is more modest. I present Halliday’s notion of context of situation in order to lay a theoretical

⁶⁹ Halliday and Hasan, *Language, Context, and Text*, 11.

⁷⁰ Halliday and Hasan, *Language, Context, and Text*, 12.

⁷¹ An early and significant work is Reed’s monograph *A Discourse Analysis of Philippians*, which uses a Hallidayan framework—with emphasis on ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions of language—to argue for the literary unity of Philippians. Westfall’s *A Discourse Analysis of the Letter to the Hebrews* develops a model of discourse analysis based upon the functional approach of Halliday—incorporating especially his notions of field, tenor, and mode.

⁷² Two essays by Porter develop and apply “register analysis” to a New Testament text. The first essay, “Dialect and Register in the Greek of the New Testament: Theory,” offers a definition of register using the metafunctions of language put forth by Halliday. Porter’s second essay, “Register in the Greek of the New Testament: Application with Reference to Mark’s Gospel,” applies the method to an analysis of Mark’s Gospel. An article by Gustavo Martin in *Biblica* (“Procedural Register in the Olivet Discourse”) applies Halliday’s theory of register to the Olivet discourse in Mark 13 to show its direct relevance to its audience.

foundation for understanding the relationship between and text and its social context. I believe that Halliday is correct—along with Malinowski and Firth before him—that a text must be understood within both its contexts of culture and situation. With these scholars, I affirm that these extra-linguistic features influence and constrain a text in significant ways.

Admittedly, Halliday is not interested in reconstructing historical events. His work reflects a greater interest in the predictive nature of register. That is to say that he often engages with the notion of register while informed of the context of situation and showing that certain types of language occurred in such contexts.⁷³ However, when describing language in use, it is clear that the actual situation and circumstances in which the discourse occurs is a known quality to both parties and an essential feature of that communication. This context is often not made explicit within the text, but according to Halliday it can be inferred from the language. This understanding of how language is used (or how it means) serves as the theoretical foundation for my study of the language of suffering and death in Hebrews.

Determining Context from a Text: More Than Just a “Mirror-Reading”

Halliday’s theory of context of situation explains the link between a text and the circumstances in which it was crafted. However, this connection has long been assumed in New Testament studies as numerous scholars have attempted to make determinations of a discourse’s context through inferences pulled from the text. Such work is often called “mirror-reading” and, when practiced apart from any solidified methodology, can lead to questionable results. John Barclay’s influential 1987 article identified many of the

⁷³ “The notion of register is thus a form of prediction: given that we know the situation, the social context of language use, we can predict a great deal about the language that will occur, with reasonable probability of being right” (Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic*, 32).

problems and “pitfalls” of such an approach while also presenting certain criteria to assist in future attempts of mirror-reading.⁷⁴ Even with Barclay’s careful methodology—and Nijay Gupta’s later adaptation of Barclay’s method—a mirror-reading of any New Testament text remains highly subjective and offers questionable judgments regarding its context. What the method lacks are clear linguistic and contextual principles for making the types of determinations that mirror-reading aspires to. The work of Halliday and systemic functional linguistics offers a better approach for determining the type of social context that a text reveals.

In this section I will first present an overview of mirror-reading, looking closely at the work of Barclay and Gupta. Second, I will offer a critical look at this method and suggest its shortcomings from a linguistic perspective. Third, drawing from Halliday and systemic functional linguistics, I will present five linguistic principles for moving from a text to its context. The purpose of this section is to set out some guiding principles for analyzing the text of Hebrews with the intent of making responsible determinations of its social context with consideration of its suffering and death language.

Barclay and Gupta on Mirror-Reading

The term “mirror-reading” refers to the analysis of one side of a conversation (i.e. a New Testament epistle) in order to make determinations of the conversation as a whole. This might include the identity of the conversation partner(s), their thinking, social context, and relationship to the New Testament author. Barclay used the method to understand the polemic in Galatians—that is, who the opponents of Paul were and what they were teaching. The method of mirror-reading, according to Barclay, is “both

⁷⁴ Barclay, “Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter.” For an overview of “mirror-reading,” including Barclay’s method, see Wilson, *Curse of the Law*, 50–52; Gupta, “Mirror-Reading,” 362–70.

essential and extremely problematic.”⁷⁵ He lists three problems with mirror-reading Galatians: Paul does not directly address his opponents in the epistle but rather responds to the Galatian community about them; Paul’s polemic is most likely inflammatory and highly rhetorical; and the circular nature of using one side of a conversation to establish the context for that conversation, which assists in determining how to interpret the side of the conversation available.⁷⁶ These inherent problems with mirror-reading reflect the reality of such an endeavor: one will never reach a definitive conclusion.

Barclay then identifies four “pitfalls” or dangers of mirror-reading.⁷⁷ First is *undue selectivity*, which occurs when an interpreter focuses on a specific portion of a text without taking its entirety into consideration. Barclay notes that one must have a method by which the most relevant statements are identified in light of the entire text. The second pitfall is the *over-interpretation* of the text so that every utterance is viewed as a rebuttal to or directly relevant for understanding Paul’s opponents. The third pitfall stems from the problem of *mishandling polemics* and not allowing for misrepresentation or exclamation in Paul’s letter. Barclay reminds us that the mirror through which we see Paul’s opponents is entirely his. Thus, a Pauline epistle only reflects the opponents as Paul perceived them. The final pitfall is that of “*latching onto particular words and phrases* as direct echoes of the opponents’ vocabulary and then hanging a whole thesis on those flimsy pegs.”⁷⁸ Such attempts are based upon numerous assumptions of Paul’s access to his opponents’ words, ability to recreate their meaning, and our ability to discern such things.

⁷⁵ Barclay, “Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter,” 74.

⁷⁶ Barclay, “Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter,” 74–79.

⁷⁷ Barclay, “Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter,” 79–83.

⁷⁸ Barclay, “Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter,” 81–82.

With the problems and pitfalls of mirror-reading laid out, Barclay then offers seven criteria for applying this method.⁷⁹ First, he draws attention to the *type of utterance* used by Paul and its potential implications. Barclay lists several types (*assertion, denial, command, prohibition*) and notes the range of possibilities for their mirror-reading. For example, a Pauline *command* could signify (at the very least) that the recipients may be in danger of neglecting the command or (at the most) that they are intentionally disobeying. The truth likely lies somewhere in between these options and is assisted by the other criteria. The second criterion is *tone*, which points out that an important issue in the epistle is likely emphasized by Paul. The third, *frequency*, states that a repeated topic is likely important while something rarely mentioned likely is not. The fourth and fifth criteria, *clarity* and *unfamiliarity*, state that something ambiguous makes for poor evidence while something unique within the Pauline corpus may reflect a specific concern of that letter. The final two criteria are meant to test and further refine the conclusions drawn from the first five. The criterion of *consistency* examines the findings of the previous five criteria to determine whether they present a coherent picture of Paul's opponents. The final criterion, *historical plausibility*, scrutinizes these findings from what else we know of the historical context of the first century and the unique circumstances of the text.

Once he has moved through these criteria, Barclay presents his findings along a spectrum of probability: "Certain or Virtually Certain," "Highly Probable," "Probable," "Possible," "Conceivable," and "Incredible."⁸⁰ His findings regarding the opponents of Galatians identify them as Christians ("certain") and likely *Jewish Christians* ("highly

⁷⁹ Barclay, "Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter," 84–86.

⁸⁰ Barclay, "Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter," 88–89. These categories are taken from the work of E.P. Sanders (*Jesus and Judaism*, 326–27; Barclay, "Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter," 86).

probable”). It is, according to Barclay, “probable” that they made reference to Genesis 17 in their arguments and “possible” that they told the Galatians that Paul circumcised converts in some instances. Barclay finds it “conceivable” that the opponents talked of completing Paul’s work but “incredible” that they were Gnostics. These categories allow Barclay to place his findings after mirror-reading into hypotheses of varying probability. In doing so, Barclay does not completely avoid the problems and pitfalls inherent to mirror-reading, but he allows for nuance and some sort of control over his findings.

In 2012 Nijay Gupta published an article that adapted and refined Barclay’s model of mirror-reading for moral issues in Paul’s letters.⁸¹ Whereas Barclay developed his model for analyzing polemical material, Gupta crafted a method for mirror-reading moral discourses and problems. As such, he offered several modifications to Barclay’s model for his purposes while emphasizing the same “care and accuracy” in its application.⁸² Concerning Barclay’s “problems,” Gupta views the issues of *over-interpretation* and the *rhetorical* nature of Paul’s letters as directly relevant.⁸³ Adding to these, Gupta identifies the problem of discerning whether moral discourse—particularly paraenesis and virtue/vice lists—reflects trouble that already existed or a warning against potential trouble.⁸⁴ Are these texts merely conventional ethical warnings or do they reflect a situation in need of being addressed by Paul? Moving to “pitfalls,” Gupta carries

⁸¹ Gupta, “Mirror-Reading Moral Issues.”

⁸² Gupta, “Mirror-Reading Moral Issues,” 366.

⁸³ Barclay actually discusses *over-interpretation* as a “pitfall,” not in his “problems” section. Thus, it is curious that Gupta does not include *over-interpretation* when he states that *undue selectivity* is the only “of Barclay’s [pitfalls] is directly useful for mirror-reading moral discourses” (Gupta, “Mirror-Reading Moral Issues,” 368).

⁸⁴ Gupta, “Mirror-Reading Moral Issues,” 366–67.

over just one of Barclay's criteria: undue selectivity. He warns against focusing on specific parts of a letter without awareness of the letter as a whole.⁸⁵

In his model for mirror-reading moral issues, Gupta uses the following criteria borrowed from Barclay: *type of utterance*, *tone*, *frequency*, *rarity* (from Barclay's *unfamiliarity*), and *coherence*.⁸⁶ To these, Gupta adds three more principles (a term he prefers to "criteria").⁸⁷ The first is the *variety* of terms and forms of speech used by the author to describe the moral issue. The greater this variety, the more likely the author was responding to a specific issue. The second principle, *elaboration*, suggests that the more extensive the discussion of a moral issue signifies a greater likelihood of it being a direct response. The third, *centrality*, states that when a moral issue appears at key points of a letter it is more likely that that particular issue motivated the composition of the letter. Finally, Gupta incorporates Barclay's spectrum of validity ("certain," "plausible," etc) to his own analysis of sexual immorality in 1 Thessalonians and Romans.

Assessment

Barclay and Gupta are to be commended for their attempts to bring methodological precision to the task of moving from a text to a context. As Barclay points out in his 1987 article, any attempt to make determinations of a letter's context from just the text itself is prone to subjectivity and questionable results.⁸⁸ The strongest aspect of Barclay's article is his presentation of the problems and pitfalls of mirror-

⁸⁵ Gupta, "Mirror-Reading Moral Issues," 368.

⁸⁶ The criterion of "coherence" signifies that "any theory regarding moral problems behind an ethical discourse must take into account the character of the whole letter" (Gupta, "Mirror-Reading Moral Issues," 369). "Coherence" was not one of Barclay's original seven criteria, but seems to be influenced from his criterion of tone and pitfall of *undue selectivity*. Gupta finds Barclay's criterion of "consistency" to be unique to polemical discourse, and the criteria of "clarity" and "historical plausibility" to be less of a concern for moral issues (368 n. 13).

⁸⁷ Gupta, "Mirror-Reading Moral Issues," 369.

⁸⁸ See esp. Barclay, "Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter," 79–83.

reading. Focusing on Paul's Letter to the Galatians, Barclay exposes numerous false readings and faulty determinations pulled from the text. The caution that both Barclay and Gupta emphasize when examining a text is a valuable contribution to any attempt at a mirror-reading.

The methods that Barclay and Gupta each put forward as responsible approaches to mirror-reading are problematic for a number of reasons. First, there is a lack of awareness and use of linguistic principles. The task of mirror-reading only has a text as its source, so it is alarming that any theory of how language works is missing from their methodologies. Second, it is never clear how Barclay and Gupta decide which passages in their texts are relevant for their studies. When Gupta, for example, examines the moral issue of sexual immorality in Romans, he simply states that this topic "occurs primarily in four places" and then lists them.⁸⁹ But how did he determine that these were the relevant passages? Barclay seems to work through Galatians and emphasize passages that he believes are pertinent to the questions of the identity of Paul's opponents.⁹⁰ Yet it is never clear why those passages were chosen and others deemed irrelevant. Third, it is often unclear how a criterion is met and what counts as sufficient evidence for its fulfillment. In Barclay's criterion of "tone," for example, he writes that, "If Paul issues a statement with emphasis and urgency (he has a variety of ways of doing so), we may conclude that he perceives this to be an important and perhaps central issue."⁹¹ Yet apart from the acknowledgement that Paul can demonstrate emphasis using a "variety of

⁸⁹ Gupta, "Mirror-Reading Moral Issues," 373. In a footnote he states that the four passages are derived from Mark Reasoner's book *The Strong and the Weak* (67–68).

⁹⁰ For example, he asks whether Paul's opponents were Jewish or Gentile Christians and highlights several passages (1:6–7; 2:14; 4:30; 6:13) that he believes contribute to answering that question (Barclay, "Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter," 86).

⁹¹ Barclay, "Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter," 84.

ways,” there is no discussion of identifying emphasis in a text. Similarly, when Gupta discusses his criterion of “centrality,” he never explains how to identify “key points in the letter” in order to assess whether the topic or issue of interest is being discussed there.⁹²

Finally, it is not clear how the results of a mirror-reading are categorized along a spectrum of plausibility. Both Barclay and Gupta assign their findings as “certain,” “probable,” “possible,” etc., but how these determinations are connected to the criteria that precede them is not made explicit. What makes something “certain” rather than “possible,” or “highly plausible” rather than “plausible”? Must a hypothesis be supported by a specific number of criteria in order to be “certain”? Is any criterion of more value than others? An example from both Barclay and Gupta will illustrate this point. Barclay finds it “certain or virtually certain” that Paul’s opponents wanted the Galatians to be circumcised.⁹³ In his mirror-reading, he argues that Paul both explicitly (Gal 6:12–13) and implicitly (5:2–4, 11–12) connects his opponents’ message to circumcision, which fulfills the categories of “tone” and “frequency.”⁹⁴ Categorized as “highly probable” is that the opponents’ argued from Scripture—particularly the Abraham narratives. Barclay supports this claim using three criteria (“type of utterance,” “frequency,” and “unfamiliarity”).⁹⁵ How Barclay came to determine that the opponents’ desire that the Galatians be circumcised is more certain than that they used the Abraham narratives is not clear from his mirror-reading. In fact, the latter claim has the support of more criteria than the former. Curious also is Gupta’s declaration that it is “possible” that the Thessalonians did not hold a strict sexual ethic because of a misunderstanding of the

⁹² Gupta, “Mirror-Reading Moral Issues,” 369.

⁹³ Barclay, “Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter,” 88.

⁹⁴ Barclay, “Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter,” 86.

⁹⁵ Barclay, “Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter,” 87.

eschatological implications of the gospel.⁹⁶ The problem with this example is that Gupta has almost no discussion in his mirror-reading to support this claim. Other than a reference in a footnote that some scholars have argued that the Thessalonians had abandoned a sexual ethic due to eschatological misperceptions, Gupta never demonstrates how a mirror-reading addresses this issue.⁹⁷ Its placement in Gupta's results seems to be derived from the fact that some scholars had argued for such a conclusion in the past, but it is never clear how Gupta determined that it was a "possible" scenario. In both of these illustrations it is unclear exactly how, other than by the subjectivity of the scholars, the results of the multiple criteria of mirror-reading are translated into a spectrum of plausibility.

Determining a Social Context from a Text

The methodologies of Barclay and Gupta represent a positive step forward among those scholars attempting to "mirror-read" a text, but, as we have seen, they are still problematic. In my effort to identify a social context from the text of Hebrews, I will demonstrate how a more linguistically robust approach is better suited for the task than mirror-reading. The work of Halliday offers valuable tools for analyzing a text with the purpose of garnering insight of its context of situation. That said, I do believe that Barclay and Gupta offer some valuable warnings and a helpful framework for attempts at determining a context from a text. At some places I will build upon the criteria of Barclay and Gupta (see "type of utterance" below), but even then I will incorporate linguistic principles that both strengthen their criteria and expose their weaknesses.

⁹⁶ Gupta, "Mirror-Reading Moral Issues," 372.

⁹⁷ Gupta, "Mirror-Reading Moral Issues," 371 n. 19.

Determining a social context from the Epistle to the Hebrews shares similar problems to those identified when analyzing a Pauline letter.⁹⁸ As with a Pauline letter, one approaches Hebrews with the limitation of having only one side of the conversation taken place. There is no record of communication from the other side (i.e. the community to which Hebrews is addressed). This problem is even greater for Hebrews as, unlike an authentic Pauline letter, we do not know the author of the epistle nor do we have any confidence in knowing who the audience was or where they were located. There are no other writings by the author of Hebrews for us to compare and see if a particular topic or issue is unique to this letter. All that we know of the situation surrounding the composition of Hebrews—including the relationship between its author and audience—is derived from the text itself.

A second problem identified by Barclay that can be applied to Hebrews is the rhetorical nature of the epistle. Since the author of Hebrews was likely not responding to an opponent in this epistle, we can expect that his tone is not as inflammatory as in Pauline polemic. However, this does not mean that the author's self-described "word of exhortation" (13:22) did not use exaggeration or amplification for rhetorical effect. Finally, analyzing the social issue of suffering and death language in Hebrews shares the problem of paraenesis—are such imperatives merely conventional or do they reflect a unique problem being addressed?⁹⁹

Two of Barclay's pitfalls are relevant for determining a social issue: undue selectivity and over-interpretation. Concerning the first pitfall, an analysis of suffering

⁹⁸ The only problem that Barclay identified in his article that is not relevant for our purposes is of Paul's letters not being directed to his opponents but rather writing about them to his audience. This is unique to polemical literature, and particularly to Paul's letters, but is not applicable to a mirror-reading of a social issue in Hebrews.

⁹⁹ The problem of vice and virtue lists identified by Gupta is not relevant to the text of Hebrews.

and death in Hebrews must be done in light of the epistle as a whole. Does the picture that emerges concerning suffering and death conflict with other parts of the epistle? As I mentioned at the end of the previous chapter, we need not assume that the author of Hebrews was addressing just one social issue or responding to a single problem. However, our analysis must not only consider those passages determined to be relevant for our study but must have a grasp on the epistle as a whole. The second pitfall, over-interpretation, reminds us that not *every* reference to suffering or death in Hebrews is the author's attempt to respond to the situation of the audience. All linguistic evidence should be considered, but a collective picture must emerge rather than making claims from single instances or phrases.

Linguistic Principles for Moving from a Text to Its Context

With these concerns in mind, I present five linguistic principles to assist in making determinations of a context from a text. These principles are heavily influenced by the work of Halliday, moving beyond the foundational concept of “context of situation.” I have chosen the term “principles” over “criteria” since these are not intended to be seen as items that must be checked off one-by-one. Rather, they are meant to be guiding principles that overlap with each other and collectively contribute to understanding a social context from a text. The first four principles (pervasiveness, semantic variation, type of utterance, and prominence) could be grouped together as they involve an analysis of a text with the intent of gathering evidence in support of a hypothesis. The remaining principle (cohesion and coherence) is more geared to testing a hypothesis in light of the text as a whole. While this incorporates some progression through these principles, they are intended to be interactive and overlap with each other.

There are places where these principles coincide with those of Barclay and Gupta as there is a functional resemblance and shared goal.

1. Pervasiveness

If an author returns to a subject several times in a discourse, it is likely that the topic is important for that author. When analyzing a text to make determinations of its social context, the question that should first be asked regarding a particular issue is whether it is something that the author returns to throughout his or her discourse. If an author addresses a specific topic just once or twice, then caution must be used in order to not fall victim to an “over-interpretation” of topic. An example of this from Hebrews is the author’s appeal that his audience keeps the marriage bed pure since God will judge adulterers (Heb 13:4). It may be that the author knew of, or feared, some members of the community that were failing to be faithful in their marriages. However, this one passage is the only place where the topic is addressed. Even if it is referring to a specific problem, it is not something that the author gives much importance to in his letter. The placement of the imperative against adultery among numerous other paraenetic remarks (13:1–9) makes it likely that it is a general remark and not necessarily linked to a specific situation. The level of pervasiveness, or how frequently a topic or issue appears throughout a text, signifies its importance for the author.

Pervasiveness can also move in the opposite direction as prominence (discussed below). As we will see, prominence refers to the ways that an author marks or emphasizes a topic or issue in a text. The more prominent a topic is, the more likely that it is of importance for the author. Yet it should be remembered that context of situation is often assumed by both parties of the communication and is not always referred to

explicitly. It may appear as background material or be hidden behind an exophoric reference (see below). Prominence is easier to identify while background material is more difficult. If a topic is pervasive throughout the discourse—even if these references are not particularly prominent—it may contribute to the context of situation. If a topic is both pervasive and prominent, then the case is stronger for its relevance to the context of situation.

In addition to the appearance of terms related to a topic, pervasiveness is also demonstrated through expansion on that topic by an author. Expansion refers to places in the text where a topic is developed at comparable length and a significant amount of space in the discourse is devoted to it. This concept moves beyond simply counting a number of references to a topic toward determining whether a topic is given notable attention in the text. Where a topic or issue is expanded upon contributes to its overall pervasiveness in the text.

So how does one establish pervasiveness within a text? Here semantic domain theory and an analysis of the relevant domains in a text are essential. Pervasiveness is something of a subjective concept—what one might deem pervasive, another might view as marginal or insignificant. The occurrence of relevant semantic domains and clusters provides some objectivity to such determinations. Generally speaking, if domains that contribute to a particular topic appear frequently throughout an entire discourse, then it is likely that it is a pervasive topic.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Both Barclay and Gupta use a criterion of “frequency” that states that any theme or issue that is repeated in a text is likely important for the author (Barclay, “Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter,” 84; Gupta, “Mirror-Reading Moral Issues,” 368). Both authors, however, fail to provide any means of identifying “frequency” in a text. This is an example of how semantic domain theory adds linguistic depth and methodological rigor to “mirror-reading.” I would also argue that “pervasiveness,” being tied to the concept of context of situation and working in collaboration with other principles from Systemic Functional

2. *Semantic Variation*

In an effort to distinguish conventional or stock language from that which is situation-specific, Gupta offered the criterion of variety. He argued that it is more likely that an author is responding to a particular issue if “a variety of terms and forms of speech are used.”¹⁰¹ Gupta, I believe, is on to something here but he offers little to explain *why* variety signifies authorial concern. To answer that question we must return to issue of semantics and Louw and Nida’s basic principles of semantic analysis. While Louw and Nida build their analysis upon the notion that there are no synonyms, they are quick to identify word variation for the sake of rhetorical purpose.¹⁰² By this Louw and Nida are referring to uses of two or more terms used relatively interchangeably in order to avoid repetition or to make an emphatic point. We may also include here metaphorical or figurative expressions that use variation when referring to a topic in an engaging and memorable way.¹⁰³ An example of this occurs in Heb 12:1 with the reference to a νέφος (“cloud”) of spectators as opposed to a variety of Greek words that often designate “crowd” (ὄχλος, πλῆθος, λαός, ὄμιλος). The use of a figurative expression in place of a more conventional term brings emphasis to a topic and rhetorical flare.¹⁰⁴ Semantic variation for rhetorical purposes lends some justification for Gupta’s criterion: a variety of terms likely stems from an author’s desire to bring attention to a particular issue in an engaging way.

Linguistics, offers a better model of looking at an entire discourse and its relation to its context than a criterion that simply equates authorial emphasis with repetition.

¹⁰¹ Gupta, “Mirror-Reading Moral Issues,” 369.

¹⁰² Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, I, xvi.

¹⁰³ Louw and Nida describe the semantic shifts necessary when moving from a literal to figurative meaning of an expression. They also point out that it is difficult in the New Testament to determine how conventional or innovative a figurative use of an expression—and thus, difficult to determine the extent of the semantic shift (Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, I, xviii).

¹⁰⁴ The example of νέφος in Heb 12:1 is used by Louw and Nida (*Lexicon*, I, xviii). They point out that figurative uses of the term to designate a group of people can be seen in Classical Greek.

Further support for semantic variation as an indication of authorial attention derives from how this principle supports and collaborates with the principles of pervasiveness and prominence. A variety of terms contributing to a topic help to establish how pervasive that topic is in a discourse. Something can be pervasive without having semantic variety, but variation strengthens a topic's pervasiveness. In terms of prominence (discussed below), semantic variation can often bring attention to a particular topic. As we saw with the example of νέφος in Heb 12:1, variety can often be used to bring emphasis to a topic. Another way that prominence is established in a discourse is through repetition of a word or semantic domain. Semantic variation contributes to repetition and, thus, markedness in a text.

Semantic domain theory will again be important for determining semantic variety in a text. After an evaluation of the relevant domains in Hebrews, we will be able to identify the number of terms by the author. Beyond this data, an investigation into the significance or effect of semantic variety will be informative. How should we account for the semantic variety found in the discourse? Is the author using variation for rhetorical effect? Are figurative or metaphorical expressions being used to create prominence? Is the author simply avoiding repetition—even if this is the case, does the variation contribute to the topic's pervasiveness in the text? These questions should be asked throughout our examination as they overlap with several methodological concerns.

3. Type of Utterance

Barclay helpfully identified that the type of utterance used in a relevant passage will have varying importance for identifying a context from a text. He further pointed out that each type of utterance (assertion, denial, command, prohibition) “is open to a range

of mirror-images, and one must be aware of rash over-interpretation.”¹⁰⁵ What Barclay did not specify is how one can identify a particular utterance in a Greek text nor did he clarify the significance of certain utterances over others. In Koine Greek, type of utterance is mainly expressed through the mood system. The indicative and non-indicative moods communicate the author’s perception of how an event relates to reality.¹⁰⁶ As such, mood helps express the interaction between writer and audience—the interpersonal meaning of a text.¹⁰⁷ The indicative mood expresses what Barclay identifies as an “assertion” or “denial.” The indicative mood can be valuable for our reading as it states directly what the author perceives or disagrees with.

Of particular importance for identifying a social issue is the non-indicative mood (imperative, subjunctive, optative, future).¹⁰⁸ An indication that an author wishes to address a problem and motivate his or her audience toward a certain action is the use of imperatives.¹⁰⁹ If an author uses an imperative as either a command or prohibition, it is likely that the audience is at least perceived as possibly going against the author’s desire and is in need of direction. However, one must not make too much of an imperative as they do not “necessarily indicate that those addressed have already fallen prey to the temptation.”¹¹⁰ Yet if an author uses a command or prohibition, it is likely that from the author’s perspective, there is a danger of misguided thinking, behavior, or action. The negated aorist subjunctive is another way that an author can express a prohibition, which

¹⁰⁵ Barclay, “Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter,” 84.

¹⁰⁶ Porter, *Idioms*, 50.

¹⁰⁷ Porter, “Dialect and Register,” 85–86; Reed, *Discourse Analysis of Philippians*, 81–82.

¹⁰⁸ Gupta pointed this out for moral issues: “All things being equal, mirror-reading imperatives (commands and prohibitions) will provide more appropriate grounds for arguing that a letter-writer is reacting against moral problems among the readers” (Gupta, “Mirror-Reading Moral Issues,” 368).

¹⁰⁹ “The imperative form is normally used to direct someone’s action” (Porter, *Idioms*, 53).

¹¹⁰ Hooker, “Were There False Teachers in Colossae?,” 317.

functions much like an imperative in a discourse. Another important non-indicative form is the hortatory subjunctive (first person plural), which also functions like an imperative.

Studying the types of utterances that the author of Hebrews uses when incorporating suffering and death language will provide insight into the author's perception of the context into which he writes. Stress should be placed on uses of the non-indicative to express commands and prohibitions (imperatives, negated aorist subjunctives, hortatory subjunctives) since these utterances articulate the will of the author. The use of the indicative mood grammaticalizes an author's assertion about what the author perceives about reality.¹¹¹ The relation between this perception and reality is often tenuous, but the indicative mood can provide a glimpse into the author's view of reality.

Of further assistance is the realization of person (first, second, third) in the subject and predicate. In general, utterances in the second person (addressed to the audience) provide better evidence that an author is responding to a situation unique to their readers. Second person utterances provide insight into the interpersonal nature of the discourse. This is true also of first person plural utterances as the author may intend to include himself or herself with those being addressed—establishing a relationship between them.

4. Prominence

A passage concerning a social issue that is given greater prominence is more likely to reflect a concern of the author. Barclay and Gupta use the term "tone" to categorize passages that are given greater urgency or emphasis as evidence of authorial concern. Yet, neither presents any way of identifying tone in a discourse. The term *prominence*, I believe, allows for more precision as it includes elements of urgency and

¹¹¹ Porter, *Idioms*, 51.

emphasis, but also refers to the ways in which an author draws the reader's attention to important elements in the discourse. An important aspect of information flow is how information is focused and prominence is one way this is accomplished.¹¹² Prominence is present at the textual level of a discourse as it represents grammatical choices of an author.¹¹³ However, Westfall highlights the significance of prominence for interpersonal meaning: "[Prominence] is meant to involve the reader with the text when the author highlights some element as more significant as others. It causes no change in the information structure, but flags an element for attention."¹¹⁴

Put simply, prominence is the result of linguistic choices that allow an author to highlight certain material in order to make it stand out from the rest of the discourse.¹¹⁵ Every utterance has some degree of emphasis as greater stress is given to specific words or phrases. Such material is brought forward from the less-stressed materials, which serve as background for the more prominent elements. This, of course, is true of entire discourses and in Greek can be identified through a variety of linguistic choices. Prominence can be seen in an author's choice of verb tense, mood, and voice, as well as case and person.¹¹⁶ The choice of a verb tense form should be understood as expressing verbal aspect, which is how an author grammaticalizes a perspective on the action being described.¹¹⁷ Understood this way, specific tense forms have certain degrees of markedness when used in a discourse.¹¹⁸ The aorist tense, having perfective aspect, is the default tense and is usually used for background or supporting material. The imperfect

¹¹² Halliday, *Functional Grammar*, 38–67.

¹¹³ Reed, *Discourse Analysis of Philippians*, 105–113.

¹¹⁴ Westfall, *Discourse Analysis*, 85.

¹¹⁵ Westfall, *Discourse Analysis*, 55.

¹¹⁶ See Westfall, *Discourse Analysis*, 56–73.

¹¹⁷ See Porter, *Idioms*, 20–45.

¹¹⁸ Porter, *Idioms*, 302–03; Westfall, *Discourse Analysis*, 56–58.

and present tenses, having imperfective aspect, are more marked and serve to foreground material. Finally, the perfect and pluperfect tenses, having stative aspect, are the most marked and are used to emphasize prominent features in a discourse.

In a similar way, linguistic choice in numerous other elements in Greek display prominence. In the system of mood, the indicative is the most common choice with the non-indicative moods having more markedness (imperative => subjunctive => optative). The active voice is the default voice while the passive and middle are more marked. Within the case system, the accusative is more common than the others, while the vocative (direct address) is more stressed. Similarly, the choice of person can move from general (third singular and plural) to more specific (second) and personal (first person). Prominence is created using a variety of other techniques in Greek. This includes word order, redundant pronouns, extra words, interrogatives, and thematic repetition.

In the following analysis of the suffering and death language in Hebrews, it will be important to examine if such language is prominent in the discourse. Does the author use the more marked tense form alongside other choices such as the first-person, non-indicative mood, and/or repetition? These, and many other lexical and grammatical choices, provide insight into what an author wishes to emphasize in a text. Through the use of semantic domain theory, relevant suffering and death terms and semantic clusters will be identified in Hebrews. A next step will be to analyze these terms and clusters to determine whether the topics of suffering and death are prominent within their passages and the discourse as a whole. If the language of suffering and death can be shown to be prominent in the discourse, then there is a higher likelihood that they are issues which the author thought needed to be addressed.

5. Cohesion and Coherence

Cohesion and coherence are important concepts for Halliday and others who follow a functional approach to language.¹¹⁹ The two terms are related to each other but are used to describe different concepts within Systemic Functional Linguistics. For Halliday and Hasan, cohesion “refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text, and that define it as a text.”¹²⁰ There are two important aspects of this definition. First, cohesion is what defines something as a text, instead of nonsense or unrelated groups of words/sentences. Cohesion is what “hold[s] a discourse together.”¹²¹ Second, the focus for Halliday and Hasan is cohesion *within a text*. That is to say that cohesion is the relation between an element in a text and another element *within that same text* that is crucial for interpreting it.¹²² For example, the beatitude of Matt 5:4 states:

μακάριοι οἱ πενθοῦντες, ὅτι αὐτοὶ παρακληθήσονται.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

The pronoun αὐτοὶ in the second clause has a semantic relation to οἱ πενθοῦντες in the first clause and is dependent upon it in order to be interpreted. The second clause by itself is intelligible and while we would be able to decode it, we could not interpret it apart from its relation to the first clause. Αὐτοὶ and οἱ πενθοῦντες share a *cohesive tie* and illustrate, in a basic form, how cohesion is present within a text and necessary for interpretation.

On the textual level a text may have cohesion, but it may not necessarily be coherent. Coherence involves not only cohesion within the text, but also the readers’ or

¹¹⁹ Halliday and Hasan, *Cohesion in English*; Halliday and Hasan, *Language, Context, and Text*, 70–96; Westfall, *Discourse Analysis*, 28–36; Porter, *Idioms*, 304–07; Reed, “Cohesiveness of Discourse,” 28–46.

¹²⁰ Halliday and Hasan, *Cohesion in English*, 4.

¹²¹ Porter, *Idioms*, 304.

¹²² Halliday and Hasan, *Cohesion in English*, 8.

hearers' ability to interpret that text.¹²³ The two terms are related (although not in any quantifiable sense), but are used to describe different concepts. Cohesion on the textual level is important for coherence, but a text must also be coherent with regard to its context of situation. Halliday and Hasan write: "A text is a passage of discourse which is coherent in these two regards: it is coherent with respect to the context of situation ... and it is coherent with respect to itself, and therefore cohesive."¹²⁴

These two areas of coherence—the textual level and context of situation—help to shape the focus of this principle. For the purposes of this study, the goal is not to analyze a Greek text in order to determine whether its grammar, word choices, or other aspects of its composition demonstrate cohesion. Rather, the first question for this principle is whether a particular hypothesis is coherent with relation to the rest of the text. Is this hypothesis coherent with the text itself?

The second question of this principle concerns the coherence between a text and its context of situation. Halliday and Hasan do not develop in much detail coherence of a text and its context of situation since their focus is on the textual level, but they do introduce a concept that will be helpful for our purposes: exophoric reference.¹²⁵ Looking again at the example from Matt 5:4, we can illustrate a cohesive tie by stating that it contains two elements: A (οἱ πειθοῦντες) and B (αὐτοῖ). As we have shown, B is dependent upon A for its interpretation; it presupposes A and knowledge of A is necessary for making sense of B. For our purposes here, B will always be a textual element—that is, it is found in the text. In the example of Matt 5:4, A (οἱ πειθοῦντες) is

¹²³ Westfall, *Discourse Analysis*, 36.

¹²⁴ Halliday and Hasan, *Cohesion in English*, 23.

¹²⁵ On the subject of coherence between a text and its context of situation, see Halliday and Hasan, *Cohesion in English*, 18–26. On "exophoric reference," see Halliday and Hasan, *Cohesion in English*, 18; Halliday and Hasan, *Language, Context, and Text*, 76–77; Reed, "Cohesiveness of Discourse," 36–37.

also a textual element, so information needed to interpret B is all within the text itself. This type of relation is called endophoric.¹²⁶ If A is an element not found in the text and one must look to the context to find A, then its relationship to B is called exophoric. I wish to incorporate these concepts of exophora and coherence between a text and its context of situation into the second question that drives this principle: Are there passages in Hebrews that assume or are dependant upon the hypothesis being tested? Put differently, are there passages in Hebrews (B) that rely upon or presuppose the context of situation being tested (A) in order to be coherent? If so, then it is a much stronger possibility that such a hypothesis is valid.

Conclusion: Putting Forth a Procedure

The purpose of this chapter has been to develop a method for analyzing the language of suffering and death in Hebrews in order to make determinations regarding the epistle's social situation. Semantic domain theory provides a way to move past a simple word study and helps to expand the relevant vocabulary and identify key passages for analysis. The principles of semantics put forward by Louw and Nida will help with that analysis as we attempt to ascertain the meaning of these terms within their linguistic co-text. The work of M.A.K Halliday presented a theoretical linguistic foundation for moving from a text to an understanding of its context. These linguists also equipped us with linguistic tools and terminology to assist in this task. Finally, the method of mirror-reading was critiqued and it was shown that more linguistically refined principles are better suited for the task of determining a social context from a text.

Our study of the language of suffering and death in Hebrews in the next two chapters will be done in three major steps.

¹²⁶ Halliday and Hasan, *Cohesion in English*, 33.

Step 1: *Identify relevant vocabulary and passages using semantic domain theory.*

Equipped with the Louw and Nida lexicon and the principles of semantics, this step will work through the semantic domains of suffering and death to detect where they appear in Hebrews. The presence of semantic clusters of suffering and death domains will reveal key passages—although each term should be included in the study.

Step 2: *Examine each occurrence of suffering and death language to understand how it is being used by the author.* This will involve an examination of each term's linguistic co-text to make determinations of its meaning. With an eye to the next step, the analysis of suffering and death terminology will incorporate the principles utilized in step 3.

Step 3: *Move through each principle of determining a social context in order to develop and test a hypothesis regarding the suffering and death language.* Many of these criteria will have been fleshed out in step 2, but will be collected here under each criterion to present a fuller picture.

CHAPTER FOUR

Suffering and Death Language in Hebrews

Introduction

The previous chapter presented the procedure that our examination will follow. In this chapter the initial two steps will be taken: first identifying and then examining the relevant vocabulary and passages for our study. By the end of this examination it will be clear that suffering and death language is found throughout Hebrews and that these two topics are significant for the author's purpose and argumentation. In the next chapter we will begin to articulate hypotheses regarding the situation of Hebrews using the linguistic principles for making determinations of a social context from a text.

Step One: Identify Relevant Vocabulary and Passages

Semantic domain theory provides the jumping-off point for a study of the topics of suffering and death in Hebrews. This initial step will divide into two parts. The first part will identify the semantic domains and subdomains that contain the relevant words or idioms involved in the topics of suffering and death. The second part will locate the relevant vocabulary in the discourse of Hebrews to identify semantic clusters and key passages.

To begin, we can start with two words that are often rendered "suffering" in Hebrews: *πάσχω* and *πάθημα*.¹ Both words appear together in Domain 24 "Sensory Events and States" under the subheading F "Pain, Suffering" with the definition "to suffer

¹ *Πάσχω* appears in 2:18, 5:8, 9:26 and 13:12; *πάθημα* in 2:9, 2:10, and 10:32.

pain” (24.78).² Seventeen other words (or groups of words) appear in this subdomain, two of which appear in Hebrews: συμπαθέω (“suffer along with someone else” 24.80) and συγκακουχέομαι (“undergo the same type of suffering as others do” 24.84).³

We can further expand the relevant vocabulary by looking at other domains that involve suffering. In volume 2 of Louw and Nida’s lexicon is an English index that connects semantic domains to English words. The authors tie suffering to five more semantic domains (22, 38, 57, 88, 90).⁴ Domain 22, “Trouble, Hardship, Relief, Favorable Circumstances,” holds three subdomains that contain references to suffering. In subdomain A, “Trouble, Hardship, Distress,” is located θλίψις, which means “trouble involving direct suffering” (22.2) and is found in Heb 10:33.⁵ The second subdomain, “Experience Trouble, Hardship” contains θλίβομαι, found in Heb 11:37, which has the gloss “to experience trouble or hardship” (22.15). The third subdomain, “C. Cause Trouble, Hardship,” includes the word ἐνοχλέω, “to cause hardship by continual annoyance” (22.24), which is located in Heb 12:15.⁶

² Louw and Nida also provide one differing meaning for each word: πάσχω can also have the meaning “to undergo an experience, usually difficult, and normally with the implication of physical or psychological suffering” (90.66) in Domain 90 (“Case”) under the subdomain M (“Experiencer”); πάθημα has the differing meaning of “to experience strong physical desires, particularly of a sexual nature” (25.30) in Domain 25 (“Attitudes and Emotions”) under the subdomain B (“Desire Strongly”). All uses of πάθημα in Hebrews fall under domain 24 as opposed to 25. The uses of πάσχω are a different matter and an investigation of both domain 24 and 90 is warranted.

³ Συμπαθέω appears twice in Hebrews: 4:15 and 10:34. The first use is most likely an example of a second meaning of συμπαθέω (“to share someone’s feelings in the sense of being sympathetic with” 25.57). The second use could arguably fall into either domain—however in the context of the passage, the author is probably referring to the fact that the recipients suffered along with those in prison rather than simply feeling sympathy for them. Συγκακουχέομαι is only listed in this domain (24.84) and appears in Heb 11:25.

⁴ Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, II, 324.

⁵ This subdomain also contains ἀνάγκη and ἀσθενής, which are found in Hebrews but with different meanings (found in other domains).

⁶ Domain 22 also contains words that are held in contrast with those designating trouble or hardship. The only one found in Hebrews is εἰρήνη (Heb 7:2; 11:31; 12:14; 13:20) “a set of favorable circumstances involving peace and tranquility” (22.42).

Domain 38, “Punishment, Reward,” contains a wealth of words that are important for our study. In subdomain “Punish,” are the following words: παιδεύω; παιδεία (38.4), “punish for the purpose of improved behavior” (12:5, 6, 7, 10, 11); παιδευτής (38.5), “a person who punishes for constructive purposes” (12:9); τιμωρέω (38.6), “punish, with the implication of causing people to suffer what they deserve” (10:29); ἐκδίκησις (38.8), “punish, on the basis of what is rightly deserved” (10:30); μαστιγῶω (38.11), “punish severely, implying whipping” (12:6); and τυμπαίνω (38.13), “punish by physical torture or torment” (11:35). The subdomain “Reward, Recompense” also has relevant words for our study: μισθαποδοσία (38.17), “a reward or recompense, whether positive or negative, which has been granted to someone” (2:2; 10:35; 11:26); μισθαποδότης (38.18), “one who delivers reward or recompense (whether good or bad)” (11:6); ἀνταποδίδωμι (38.19), “case someone to suffer in turn because of actions which merit such retribution” (10:30).⁷

Louw and Nida cite three other domains that contain words designating “suffering” (57, 88 and 90). While the authors identify eight suffering words in these domains, there is only one new word that appears in Hebrews. Κακουχέω, “cause someone to suffer ill-treatment” (88.126) appears in 11:37 and 13:3.⁸ Domain 57 contains two words that designate suffering (ζημιόομαι, ζημία), but these do not appear in Hebrews.⁹ In domain 90 (“Experiencer”) is located an alternative meaning for πάσχω

⁷ This use could also fall into the word’s other meaning in domain 57 (57.154), “pay something back to someone as the result of an incurred obligation.” However, the co-text involving “vengeance” (ἐκδίκησις) and “judgment” (κρίνω) implies a meaning within domain 38.

⁸ Domain 88, “Moral and Ethical Qualities and Related Behavior,” is an extremely large domain that incorporates over 300 words/idioms. As a result, I limited my study to only the subdomain which κακουχέω is a part of (“Treat Badly”), and found no other occurrences in Hebrews.

⁹ Further, those within its subdomain that do appear in Hebrews (λαμβάνω, ἐπιτυγχάνω, περιποίησις) do not signify suffering but acquiring or possessing something. Thus, this subdomain is not relevant for our discussion.

(“undergo an experience, usually difficult, and normally with the implication of physical or psychological suffering” 90.66). The question is then whether we are to understand any of the occurrences of πάσχω in Hebrews as falling within this domain. Louw and Nida provide some assistance for establishing the “experiencer of an event.” They comment that an “experiencer” is commonly marked morphologically by a passive form of the verb or by an “object case form.” Further, they are marked lexically by certain prepositions (έν, επί, προς, εις, μετά) and/or by marked event words (usually verbs).¹⁰ None of the four uses of πάσχω in Hebrews falls into these categories. As a result, domain 90 will not be incorporated into this study.

There are numerous domains relevant for the topic of death that appear in the text of Hebrews. Semantic Domain 20 (“Violence, Harm, Destroy, Kill”) contains two subdomains (“Destroy” and “Kill”), which can further expand the use of death-related vocabulary. In the “Destroy” category, six words are found in Hebrews to designate the destruction of persons: ἀπώλεια (10:39), συναπόλλυμαι (11:31), ὀλοθρεύω (11:28), ἐσθίω (used figuratively; 10:27), καταναλίσκω (12:29); and καταπίνω (used figuratively; 11:29). In the “Kill” subsection there are several more words found in Hebrews. The word κοπή, used to express violent and extensive slaughter, is used in 7:1. A figurative extension of “touch,” by use of the term θιγγάνω, to convey “cause death” is used in 11:28. In 6:6, the author of Hebrews uses the term ἀνασταυρόω, “crucify again.” References to killing by way of stoning are found in 11:37 (λιθάζω) and 12:20 (λιθοβολέω). Finally, the term φόνος (“murder”) is used in 11:37.

Domain 23 (“Physiological Processes and States”) includes a subdomain entitled “Live, Die” (subdomain G). Within this subdomain are several direct references to death.

¹⁰ Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, I, 805.

The word θάνατος (“death”) appears ten times in Hebrews with a concentration in 2:9–15 (which accounts for five of its uses).¹¹ The verb ἀποθνήσκω (“die”) appears seven times (7:8; 9:27; 10:28; 11:4, 13, 21, 37). Νεκρός, meaning “lifeless” or “dead,” appears seven times in the epistle (6:1, 2; 9:14, 17; 11:19, 35; 13:20).¹² The figurative use of the word πίπτω, an expression of a violent death, is used twice—in 3:17 and 4:11. Further, the verb τελευτάω, used figuratively to denote someone coming to the end of their life, is used in 11:22 in reference to Joseph.

Within this subdomain are several figurative uses of αἷμα (“blood”), which refer to the death of a person.¹³ Concerning use 23.107, Louw and Nida write that when αἷμα is used in speaking of the death of Christ, there is “an additional component derived from the occurrence of αἷμα in contexts speaking of atoning sacrifice.”¹⁴ They comment that many translators use a phrase like “the shedding of his blood.”¹⁵ The word αἷμα appears twenty-one times in Hebrews. Of those occurrences, only one is clearly not implying death (2:14 uses the phrase αἵματος καὶ σαρκός to refer to the human condition). Of the remaining twenty occurrences, twelve refer to the blood of sacrificial animals (9:7, 12, 13, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 25; 10:4; 11:28; 13:11), six refer to the blood of Jesus (9:12, 14; 10:19, 29; 13:12, 20), and one occurrence is in reference to the Christian community (12:4). Within this discussion on αἷμα should be an extension of this meaning to the use of αἵματεκχυσία (“shedding of blood”) in 9:22. Louw and Nida place this word within Domain 23, yet under the subdomain “Sickness, Disease, Weakness” to convey “cause

¹¹ The other occurrences are Heb 5:7; 7:23; 9:15, 16; and 11:5.

¹² Louw and Nida would classify the uses of νεκρός in 6:1 and 9:14 (νεκρῶν ἔργων) under Domain 65.39 within which they would refer to “useless rituals.” It is better to understand this phrase as “dead works” or “works which lead to death.” See discussion below for each use at 112–13, 116.

¹³ This includes 23.83, 23.84, 23.107, and 23.112.

¹⁴ Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, I, 265.

¹⁵ They warn that in English the phrase “the shedding of his blood” can be ambiguous and refer to either the killing of someone else or experiencing death.

bleeding.”¹⁶ However, given the use of αἷμα in these chapters to refer to “blood” but also the blood that comes from a sacrificial death, αἱματεκχυσία in 9:22 more properly fits within subdomain G to include some reference to death.

Louw and Nida’s lexicon is not the final authority on semantic domains and there is a necessary flexibility concerning how a domain is categorized or a word assigned. Users of the lexicon should not uphold the domain lists and assignment as infallible, but rather engage with the principles behind its classification to offer corrections or improvements.¹⁶ After analyzing the text of Hebrews, a few terms that fall outside of the domains relevant to this study are nonetheless additions to the topics of death and suffering in the epistle. Κῶλον appears only at Heb 3:17 in the New Testament and refers to a dead body or corpse. A term referring to a dead corpse by itself already is linked to the topic of death. The co-text of this passage includes a figurative use of πίπτω to signify death: ὧν τὰ κῶλα ἔπεσεν ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ (“whose bodies fell in the wilderness”). Louw and Nida list κῶλον in Domain 8 (“Body, Body Parts, and Body Products”), but warn against interpreting its use in Heb 3:17 too literally since it might suggest that “the people died while they were still standing, and that only the corpses fell.”¹⁷ Rather, used alongside πίπτω, the phrase is to be taken figuratively to signify that the people died in the wilderness. Therefore, both πίπτω and κῶλον in Heb 3:17 contribute to the topic of death.

Another reference to death in Hebrews is the phrase ὑπεμεινεν σταυρὸν (“endured the cross”) in 12:2. Louw and Nida include σταυρός in the domain of artifacts (6) in reference to the actual pole used in crucifixion. They further include various idioms using the word (i.e. λαμβάνω τὸν σταυρὸν) to convey one’s willingness to suffer even to death

¹⁶ Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, I, 274.

¹⁷ Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, I, 95.

(as in, “to take up one’s cross”).¹⁸ The phrase in 12:2, however, seems to incorporate a figurative use of the word to signify Jesus’ death. Louw and Nida allow for symbolic uses of the term to express, for example, “the event of execution” (*Lexicon*, 57). Such a symbolic use certainly appears in this verse. Finally, the use of the term ἔκβασις in 13:7 may refer to the “end” of a life—something that Louw and Nida present as a possible interpretation (*Lexicon*, 638).¹⁹

Three additional terms involving suffering should be added to our investigation. The first, ὀνειδισμός, refers to verbal forms of abuse or reproach.²⁰ Louw and Nida identify the verbal sense of this term and list it under Domain 33 (“Communication”), Subdomain P (“Insult, Slander”).²¹ However, ὀνειδισμός (and the verb form ὀνειδίζω) is closely connected with disgrace, scorn, and public shaming (Jer 23:40; Ezek 36:6, 15, 30; Reub 4:2; Levi 15:2). In the New Testament it is used in reference to the suffering of Jesus Christ (Matt 27:44; Mk 15:32; Rom 15:3) and the persecution of Christians (1 Pet 4:4). It is used three times in Hebrews (10:33; 11:26; 13:13) and each time signifies a form of verbal suffering.

A second term is μάστιξ, which Louw and Nida include in Domain 19 (“Physical Contact”) with the gloss, “to whip, to beat with a whip, whipping, flogging.” It is used alongside the third term, ἐμπατημός (“to mock, to ridicule”), in Heb 11:36 to describe the suffering experienced by past heroes of faith. The co-text of these terms includes several of the terms for suffering and death already identified in this analysis.

¹⁸ Each of these idioms is categorized in the “Pain, Suffering” subdomain of Domain 24 (24.83).

¹⁹ The argument for this interpretation is presented below, 128–29.

²⁰ Koester, *Hebrews*, 459; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 546.

²¹ Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, I. 433.

Two additional terms are the noun μακροθυμία and verb μακροθυμέω, used to denote a patient attitude. Louw and Nida place these terms in Domain 25 (“Attitudes and Emotions”) under the subdomain of “Patience, Endurance, Perseverance.”²² While these terms can sometimes refer to patience in general (Matt 18:26, 29; 1 Cor 13:4; 2 Pet 3:4), they were often used to denote patience in the face of suffering or misfortune (Sir 2:4, 29:8; Bar 4:25; Josephus, *War*, 6:37; Col 1:11; Jas 5:7, 10). Each term appears once in Hebrews (6:11, 13).

After an analysis of relevant domains for suffering and death are conducted, the following terms emerge in the text:

Suffering Domains in Hebrews

Domain 22

- 22.2 θλίψις: “trouble involving direct suffering” 10:33
- 22.15 θλίβομαι: “experience trouble or hardship” 11:37
- 22.24: ἐνοχλέω: “cause hardship by continual annoyance” 12:15

Domain 24

- 24.78 πάσχω, πάθημα: “pain, suffering, to suffer, to be in pain” 2:9, 10, 18; 5:8; 9:26; 10:32; 13:12
- 24:80 συμπαθέω: “suffer along with someone else” 4:15; 10:34
- 24:84 συγκακουχέομαι “undergo the same type of suffering as others do” 11:25

Domain 38

- 38.4 παιδεύω; παιδεία: “punish for the purpose of improved behavior” 12:5, 6, 7, 10, 11
- 38.5 παιδευτής: “a person who punishes for constructive purposes” 12:9
- 38.6 τιμωρέω: “punish, with the implication of causing people to suffer what they deserve” 10:29
- 38.8 ἐκδίκησις: “punish, on the basis of what is rightly deserved” 10:30
- 38.11 μαστιγόω: “punish severely, implying whipping” 12:6
- 38.13 τυμπανίζω: “punish by physical torture or torment” 11:35
- 38.17 μισθαποδοσία: “a reward or recompense, whether positive or negative, which has been granted to someone” 2:2; 10:35; 11:26
- 38.18 μισθαποδότης: “one who delivers reward or recompense (whether good or bad)” 11:6

²² The verb form μακροθυμέω also appears in Domain 67 (“Time”) as it can also be used to designate a slowing or delaying of time (Luke 18:7).

38.19 ἀνταποδίδωμι: “cause someone to suffer in turn because of actions which merit such retribution” 10:30

Domain 88

88.126 κακουχέω: “cause someone to suffer ill-treatment” 11:37; 13:3

Other²³

όνειδισμός: “insult, disgrace, reproach” 10:33; 11:26; 13:13

ἐμπαιγμός: “mock, ridicule” 11:36

μάστιξ: “to whip” 11:36

μακροθυμία: “a state of emotional calm in the face of provocation or misfortune and without complain or irritation” 6:12

μαρκοθυμέω: “demonstrate patience despite difficulties” 6:13

Death Domains in Hebrews

Domain 20

20.31 ἀπόλεια: “ruin, to destroy, destruction” 10:39

20.32 συναπόλλυμαι: “be destroyed with, to perish with” 11:31

20.34 ὀλοθρεύω: “destroy, to ruin, destruction” 11:28

20.44 ἐσθίω: used figuratively – “destroy, to consume” 10:27

20.48 καταναλίσκω: “destroy completely, to consume completely” 12:29

20.52 καταπίνω: used figuratively- “to destroy, to ruin completely” 11:29

20.74 κοπή: “kill, to slaughter, to defeat” 7:1

20.75 θιγγάνω: used figuratively – “to kill, to slay, to cause the death of” 11:28

20.77 ἀνασταυρόω: “crucify again” 6:6

20.79 λιθάζω, λιθοβολέω: “stone to death” 11:37; 12:20

20.82 φόνος: “murder, to commit murder” 11:37

Domain 23

23.99 θάνατος: “death” 2:9 (x2), 14 (x2), 15; 5:7; 7:23; 9:15, 16; 11:5

ἀποθνήσκω: “die” 7:8; 9:27; 10:28; 11:4, 13, 21, 37

23.102 τελευτάω: used figuratively – “end” 11:22

23.105 πίπτω: used figuratively – “die” 3:17; 4:11

23.121 νεκρός: “lifeless, dead” 6:1, 2; 9:14, 17; 11:19, 35; 13:20

Other

κῶλον: “dead body, corpse” 3:17

ὑπεμεινεν σταυρόν: “endured the cross” 12:2

ἐκβασίς: “end of one’s life” 13:7

αἷμα: “blood” 9:7, 12 (x2), 13, 14, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22 (x2), 25; 10:4, 19, 29; 11:28; 12:4, 24; 13:11, 12, 20.

²³ These are the terms or idioms incorporated into the themes of suffering and death—although not included in the relevant domains by Louw and Nida. The glosses presented here are my own.

This analysis has identified twenty-three terms semantically linked to “suffering,” which appear thirty-six times in the text. It also located twenty different “death” terms that appear sixty-three times throughout Hebrews. Next, our goal is to identify where these terms appear in the discourse and locate any semantic clusters or specific passages worth a closer investigation. The following charts map where terms related to suffering and death appear in Hebrews.

Table 4.1. Suffering Domains

Chapter	Domain 22	24	38	88	Other
1					
2		2:9, 10, 18	2:2		
3					
4					
5		5:8			
6					6:12, 13
7					
8					
9		9:26			
10	10:33	10:32, 34	10:29, 30 (x2), 35		10:33
11	11:37	11:25	11:6, 26, 35	11:37	11:27, 36 (x2)
12	12:15		12:5, 6 (x2), 7, 9, 10, 11		
13		13:12		13:3	13:13

Table 4.2. Death Domains

Chapter	Domain 20	23	Other	Αἴμα
1				
2		2:9 (x2), 14 (x2), 15		
3		3:17	3:17	
4		4:11		

Chapter	Domain 20	23	Other	Αἷμα
5		5:7		
6	6:6	6:1, 2		
7	7:1	7:8, 23		
8				
9		9:14, 15, 16, 17, 27		9:7, 12 (x2), 13, 14, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22 (x2), 25
10	10:27, 39	10:28		10:4, 19, 29
11	11:28 (x2), 29 (x2), 31, 37 (x2)	11:4, 5, 13, 19, 21, 22, 35, 37		11:28
12	12:20, 29		12:2	12:4, 24
13		13:20	13:7	13:11, 12, 20

Language of suffering and death appears in every chapter of Hebrews except chs. 1 and 8. The majority of occurrences appears in the later chapters of the epistle—10:32–39; 11; 12:1–11; 13:11–20. Other significant clusters appear in 2:9–18, 6:1–6, and 9:14–27.

Language of suffering and/or death outside of these clusters—2:2, 3:7, 4:11, 5:7–8, 7:1–8—is also worth investigation as we consider these topics in the entire discourse.

Step Two: Examination of Death and Suffering Language

In the previous section we used semantic domain theory to identify the relevant suffering and death vocabulary and then mapped out where they appear in the text. The purpose of this section is to briefly examine this vocabulary in the discourse to see how it is being used. What follows is a survey of each occurrence of the language of suffering and death in Hebrews with brief grammatical and semantic analysis. Our goal is to (1) better understand the meaning being conveyed through these suffering/death terms, and (2) to begin to develop how these topics are fleshed out through the discourse as a whole. With a mind to making determinations regarding a context of situation, this examination

will incorporate aspects of the criteria set out in the previous chapter—including type of utterance, prominence, elaboration, and coherence. This section will move through Hebrews in the order of the flow of the discourse—focusing more closely on clusters where numerous terms from the semantic domains identified above are located.

2:2

The term μισθαποδοσία signifies a reward that can be understood as either positive or negative (“punishment”) which has been given to someone.²⁴ That it is understood negatively in this context is apparent in that it is a “reward” received because of disobedience (παράβασις and παρακοή). Speaking of the Law, the author makes clear that every (πᾶς) disobedience receives a “just” (ἔνδικος) μισθαποδοσία.²⁵ In 2:1, the author encourages the audience—himself included (using the pronoun ἡμᾶς)—to pay attention to what they have heard so that they do not drift away. Verse 2 is the first half of a conditional sentence (εἰ) comparing the severity of disobeying the law with neglecting the salvation found in Christ (vv. 3–4). In this sense, the term ἐκφεύγω (“to escape”) in v. 3 is parallel to μισθαποδοσία and carries the connotation that what is being escaped from is punishment. Within the co-text of 2:2–4, ἐκφευξόμεθα is foregrounded as a first-person plural future middle indicative verb.²⁶ The author emphasizes this question and particularly the verb “escape”: “How can we *escape* [punishment] if we neglect so great a

²⁴ In the New Testament, the word only appears in Hebrews (2:2; 10:35; 11:26). It is used to designate a positive reward given by God in 4 Baruch 6:6. The term μισθός, denoting a positive or negative recompense based upon what someone has earned (38.14), is much more common in the New Testament (Mt 5:12; 1 Cor 3:8; Rev 11:18) as well as the LXX and Second Temple literature, but is not used by the author of Hebrews.

²⁵ The term for “just” appears just one other time in the New Testament and also in the context of an appropriate punishment for disobedience (Rom 3:8). On its use in legal contracts, see Attridge, *Hebrews*, 65 n. 34.

²⁶ These verses, however, are supporting material to the prominent first verse of chapter two: “Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it” (Westfall, *Discourse Analysis*, 97).

salvation?” The emphatic pronoun ἡμεῖς lays stress on the audience (within which the author places himself).²⁷ In this sense, ἐκφεύγω in 2:3 reinforces the suffering topic found in Hebrews and is a point of emphasis for the author.

2:9–18

This passage comes within the larger unit of 2:5–18 and contains several uses of the terms πάθημα (2:9, 10), πάσχω (2:18), and θάνατος (2:9 [x2], 14 [x2], 15). Hebrews 2:5–18 marks a shift from the focus of the Son's exalted position in 1:5–2:4 to his humanity.²⁸ Hebrews 2:9 is a fascinating verse that links Jesus' incarnation and exaltation to his suffering and death: “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.”²⁹ Between the events of his incarnation and exaltation, Jesus suffered death (τὸ πάθημα τοῦ θανάτου). Grammatically this phrase could be attached to Jesus' being made lower than the angels or to his crowning with glory.³⁰ However, it is best understood as the grounds for Jesus' exaltation rather than the goal of his incarnation.³¹ The clause that concludes 2:9 declares that Jesus “tasted death for everyone.” The author uses the idiom γεύσεται θανάτου (Matt 16:28;

²⁷ Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 139.

²⁸ Hebrews 2:5–18 also serves as the basis for Jesus' identification as high priest and the foundation for the exhortation in 3:1 to consider him as high priest (Westfall, *Discourse Analysis*, 109). It therefore not only serves as a transition into a discussion on the humanity of Jesus, but also introduces the new concept of his high priesthood that will be fleshed out in chapters 5–10.

²⁹ Backhaus writes that in this mysterious verse is an anticipation of the whole soteriology of Hebrews (“Zwei harte Knoten,” 204).

³⁰ It could also be taken to mean that the crowning with glory and honor preceded Jesus' suffering of death—possibly referring to the transfiguration of Christ (see discussion in Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 75–76).

³¹ This follows a pattern in Hebrews in which endured suffering precedes—rather than excludes—glorification (1:3–4; 5:7–10; 12:2) (Koester, *Hebrews*, 217). See also Attridge, *Hebrews*, 73; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 155; Lane, *Hebrews*, 49; Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection*, 215 n. 26; Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 76; Cockerill, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 132 n. 38. *Contra* Johnson, *Hebrews*, 92.

Mk 6:1; Jn 8:52) to convey that Jesus *experienced* death, or died—rather than merely *tasted* it.

Hebrews 2:10–18 begins and ends with a reference to suffering. 2:10 states that God made Jesus, the pioneer of salvation, διὰ παθημάτων τελειῶσαι (“to be perfect through sufferings”). Verse 18 concludes a discussion concerning Jesus’ relationship with his human brothers and sisters by stating that he “was tempted by what he suffered” (πέπονθεν αὐτὸς πειρασθεῖς). Παθημάτων in 2:10 is connected to πάθημα in the verse before it, but the two are not necessarily talking about the same thing. Although many scholars assume παθημάτων refers to Jesus’ death (as πάθημα τοῦ θανάτου does in 2:9),³² there is good reason to think that the term has a broader meaning in 2:10. First, the plural παθημάτων points to something more than just one event (to which the singular πάθημα refers). Sufferings, in 2:10, points to “the whole web of suffering through which Jesus passed in his lifetime.”³³ Second, whereas διὰ plus the accusative in v. 9 stressed that suffering was the *ground* of Jesus’ exaltation, David Peterson points out that the genitive with the preposition in 2:10 stresses that suffering was something *through* which Christ had to pass.³⁴ Beginning in 2:10 and extending to v. 18, the emphasis is on sufferings that Jesus endured in his lifetime that link him to his brothers and sisters. Verses 14–15 discuss the communal benefit of Jesus’ death, but suffering that he endured is among the things that he shared in common with his brothers and sisters. By 2:18, πάσχω refers not to death but is linked to temptation.

Hebrews 2:14–15 presents a fuller expression of what Jesus’ suffering and death accomplished. In v. 14 the author writes that Jesus shared in humanity so that “through

³² Cf. Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 161; Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 107.

³³ Talbert, *Learning Through Suffering*, 61.

³⁴ Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection*, 68.

death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.” The concept of the Messiah having victory over demonic forces was significant in Jewish Apocalyptic literature and the early Christian tradition.³⁵ Further, the association between death and the devil was established in Jewish literature.³⁶ This first result clause (v. 14) reveals that Jesus’ death accomplished a victory over cosmic forces—“a breaking the evil tyrant’s stronghold.”³⁷

The second result is that Jesus’ death frees those who “all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death” (v. 15). This verse uses language of “rescuing” or “setting free” (ἀπαλλάξῃ) and “slavery” (δουλείας—which is elsewhere connected to φόβος – Rom 8:15), which portrays Jesus’ work as liberation from the power of death. Ironically, Jesus’ death defeats the one who holds the power of death—as well as the fear that has plagued the human race. The second purpose clause moves from the cosmic scope of Jesus’ death to its practical implications for humanity. Φόβῳ θανάτου is spoken of in general terms. deSilva reasons that this is a common philosophical topos used to encourage believers to not be guided by external pressures.³⁸ Other scholars identify the “fear of death” as the human condition³⁹ or as a weapon of intimidation used by the devil.⁴⁰ So, in what respect should it be understood that Jesus’ death serves as a liberation of those held in slavery by their fear of death? Certainly this cannot mean that those set free will not face death. Hebrews 9:27 makes clear that “people are destined to die once.”

³⁵ 1 Enoch 10:13; 4 Ez 13:1; T. Levi 18:2; T Dan 5:10; T Jud 25:3 (Attridge, *Hebrews*, 92; O’Brien, *Letter to the Hebrews*, 114 n. 161). Matt 12:25–30; Luke 10:18; John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11; 1 Cor 15:26, 55; 2 Tim 2:10; 1 John 3:8; Rev 12:7–10, 20:14, 21:4.

³⁶ Gen 3:1; Exod 12:23; Jub 49:2; 1 Macc 7:11 (Attridge, *Hebrews*, 92).

³⁷ O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 115.

³⁸ deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 118. Greek writers such as Euripides (*Orestes* 1522), Cicero (*Letters to Atticus* 9.2a), Dio Chrysostom (*Disc.* 1.17.25), and Plutarch (*Mor.* 34B; 106D) discussed the “fear of death” in their writings (Koester, *Hebrews*, 232).

³⁹ Gray, *Godly Fear*, 117; Thompson, *Hebrews*, 75.

⁴⁰ Koester, *Hebrews*, 239–40; Also, Witherington, *Letters and Homilies*, 156–57, who follows Koester.

Rather, death is no longer something to be feared (and the judgment that comes along with it). Through his death Jesus provides access to God “that renders death and the fear it inspires irrelevant.”⁴¹

Hebrews 2:9–18 provides one of the densest clusters of suffering and death domains. These are linked throughout the passage to the domain of kinship (Domain 10). In 2:10, the author links God’s perfecting of Jesus through suffering to “bringing many children [υιούς] to glory.”⁴² In the first chapter of Hebrews, Jesus is identified as the υιός that is heir of all things (1:2), begotten by his Father God (1:5), and worthy of worship (1:8). In 2:10 the term is used not of Jesus but of believers.⁴³ Other kinship terms that appear in this passage include ἀδελφός (“brother” Domain 10.49; Heb 2:11b, 12, 17), παιδίον (“children” 10.37; Heb 2:13, 14), and σπέρμα (“descendant” 10.29; Heb 2:16).⁴⁴ The kinship motif continues into the next section where the author addresses his audience as ἀδελφοί (3:1). In this passage, then, there is interaction between the domains of suffering and death and that of kinship—something that will continue to play out in Hebrews.

3:17 and 4:11

These verses use the verb πίπτω in a figurative sense of “to die” or “to be destroyed.” Πίπτω can be rendered in the literal sense of something falling (like the walls of Jericho in Heb 11:30) or the more abstract sense of forsaking something or “falling

⁴¹ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 94.

⁴² I have opted for a gender-inclusive translation for this term, but the connection between Jesus as Son (υιός) and the believer as sons (υιούς) should not be lost.

⁴³ Hebrews 2:6 contains the phrase υιός ανθρώπου (“son of man”) in reference to humans in general.

⁴⁴ Hebrews 2:11a contributes to the kinship theme when it states that both the one who sanctifies (Jesus) and those being sanctified (believers) ἐξ ἑνός πάντες (“all from one”). The phrase ἐξ ἑνός is ambiguous and has been understood as declaring the Jesus and believers share in humanity (Hughes, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 105–06), an earthly source such as Abraham (Johnson, *Hebrews*, 97–98), or a spiritual Father (Attridge, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 89; Lane, *Hebrews*, 58). Within the context of the passage, it is clear that the author is establishing a close, familial relationship.

away” (as with the compound verb *παραπίπτω* in 6:6). The use of *πίπτω* in 3:17 is metaphorical, “to die,” as the use of the word *κῶλον* (“corpse”) immediately before it supports. In this passage, the author refers to the wilderness generation after the Exodus in their failure to enter God’s rest due to disobedience (3:16–19). God was angry with them for forty years because of their sin—and their corpses fell in the wilderness (*ὅν τὰ κῶλα ἔπεσεν ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ*). This is a reference to Num 14:29 in which God tells the Israelites: *ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ ταύτῃ πεσεῖται τὰ κῶλα ὑμῶν* (“your dead bodies shall fall in this very wilderness” LXX; repeated in vv. 32 and 34). *Κῶλον* signifies a dead body left unburied—an accursed death appropriate for an apostate.⁴⁵ Immediately before these verses the author encourages his audience to hold fast to their assurance in Christ and to not give in to disobedience (vv. 12–14). Thus, the wilderness generation is used as a negative example of those who were disobedient—resulting in an accursed death and failure to enter God’s rest.

The use of *πίπτω* in 4:11 most likely has a broader meaning than “to die” as it lacks a clear indicator such as *κῶλον* in this usage. In 4:1–11, the author takes up the idea that God’s rest—here understood as a heavenly reality rather than the land of Canaan—is still open to the believer.⁴⁶ Given this premise, the author warns against failure to enter this rest because of disobedience—a quality of the wilderness generation (3:18; 4:6) that should not be a characteristic of the community addressed. In 4:11, he encourages his audience to be diligent to enter the rest so that no one may fall (*πίπτω*) as with the example (*ὑπόδειγμα*) of the disobedience of the wilderness generation. This use of *πίπτω*—together with references to disobedience (*ἀπειθεία*), rest, and the wilderness

⁴⁵ See Isa 66:24; Num 14:29–34. Cockerill, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 193; O’Brien, *Letter to the Hebrews*, 154; Koester, *Hebrews*, 233.

⁴⁶ See Attridge, *Hebrews*, 123.

generation—echoes the use in 3:17.⁴⁷ The author is clearly linking the readers to their disobedient ancestors.⁴⁸ If the disobedience of that generation led to an accursed death and failure to enter God’s rest (3:16–18), then that option remains open to the current readers. The author is explicit that the readers will fail to enter the rest unless they remain diligent (4:1, 11) and the use of πίπτω in v. 11 carries with it the connotation of its use in 3:17 that disobedience will also lead to an accursed death.⁴⁹

5:7–8

Uses of θάνατος and πάσχω in 5:7–8 are a part of a contained unit (5:1–10), which is itself a subunit of the larger section of 4:11–6:3.⁵⁰ 5:1–10 focuses on Jesus as high priest—a concept that will be picked back up with greater detail in 7:1–10:18. In 5:1–4 the author provides a description of the Levitical priesthood and establishes the requirements of a high priest. In 5:5–10 the attention shifts to Jesus in order to develop his qualifications as a high priest in the order of Melchizedek. 5:1–4 makes clear that a high priest must be able to empathize with those he represents (vv. 1–3); and be called by God (v. 4).⁵¹ In 5:5–10, the author responds to the two qualifications for “every high

⁴⁷ Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 233.

⁴⁸ Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 99.

⁴⁹ An interesting parallel to this is found in 1 Cor 10:1–12 where Paul uses the wilderness generation as a negative example for his readers. Similar to Hebrews, Paul encourages his audience to avoid the pitfalls of their ancestors so as to avoid their fate. Paul also uses πίπτω to reference the death of some Israelites as a result of sin: μηδὲ πορνεύωμεν, καθὼς τινες αὐτῶν ἐπόρευσαν καὶ ἔπεσαν μιᾷ ἡμέρᾳ εἴκοσι τρεῖς χιλιάδες (10:8). Paul repeats that these things happened as an example to instruct his audience (10:11). In v. 12, Paul warns his audience that while they may think that they are standing, they should watch out that they do not fall (πίπτω). This second use of πίπτω mirrors the use in Heb 4:11 as it is not clearly a reference to death, but carries that connotation as it refers back to a previous use of πίπτω that does have this meaning. “‘Does not fall’ [in v. 12] echoes the ‘fall’ of the ancestors mentioned in v. 8. Paul is urging that Corinthian Christians ... see to it that they do not suffer the same fate as such ancestors” (Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 388).

⁵⁰ Westfall, *Discourse Analysis*, 141–51. This section (4:11–6:3) is itself a subunit of 4:11–7:28.

⁵¹ Attridge points to three general points of comparison being made between 5:1–4 and vv. 5–10 by adding that the high priest’s basic function is to make atonement for sin. This is expressed at the end of 5:1 and compared to Jesus’ salvific function expressed in vv. 9–10 (Attridge, *Hebrews*, 143). The requirement of a divine calling for the high priesthood, see Dyer, “‘One Does Not Presume.’”

priest” in reverse order:⁵² vv. 5–6 use quotations from Psalms 2 and 110 (109) to make Jesus’ divine calling as a priest in the order of Melchizedek clear; vv. 7–10 communicate his ability to empathize with those he serves.

Hebrews 5:7, which portrays Jesus as crying out and being heard by the one who could save him from death, has been the subject of numerous interpretations and debates. What exactly does it mean that Jesus “offered up prayers and petitions”? What was he praying for? In what sense was he “heard”?⁵³ That this event happened while Jesus was on earth is clear from the first part of the verse: ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις τῆς σαρκός (“in the days of his flesh”). It was during this time that Jesus “offered up prayers and petitions.” This is a parallel expression to 5:3 where the priests “offer” (προσφέρω in both cases) sacrifices for their sins. The connection communicates that Jesus offered prayers and petitions on his own behalf.⁵⁴ What exactly Jesus prayed for has yielded numerous suggestions.⁵⁵ It is best understood as a prayer to be saved from death. The author writes that Jesus prayed to “the one who could save him from death” (πρὸς τὸν δυνάμενον σώζειν αὐτὸν ἐκ θανάτου). This is more than just a description of the One being prayed to; it provides some insight into what the prayer consisted of. Understood this way, the parallel to the Gospels’ accounts of Jesus’ prayer that God “take this cup” in Gethsemane becomes

⁵² Many scholars like to present 5:1–10 as a chiasm (Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 192–93; Lane, *Hebrews*, 111; Thompson, *Hebrews*, 114; Witherington, *Letters and Homilies*, 196–97). A chiasmatic structure dictates that emphasis is placed on the center elements. However, the discourse does not peak in the middle of this unit but rather builds to an apex at the closing verses.

⁵³ For an overview of the various proposed answers to these questions, see Attridge, “‘Heard Because of His Reverence’,” 90–93; Lightfoot, “Saving of the Savior,” 166–73; and Swetnam, “Crux at Hebrews,” 347–61.

⁵⁴ Koester, *Hebrews*, 288.

⁵⁵ Lane argues that Jesus’ prayers were a sacrificial offering; the totality of his high priestly service (*Hebrews*, 119). He understands the phrase “the one who was able to save him from death” as defining God’s character and not the content of Jesus’ prayer (120). Swetnam connects καίπερ ὦν υἱός (from 5:8) to v. 7 and understands Jesus’ prayer as a plea to not be spared at the last minute through divine intervention (as Isaac was) but to finish what he was called to do (Swetnam, “Crux at Hebrews,” 356). Backhaus understands Jesus’ prayer as a petition to be rescued from death in the pattern of petitionary psalms (esp. Pss 114–15 LXX) (“Zwei harte Knoten,” 206).

likely (Matt 26:39; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42). However, there is no indication that the author of Hebrews was familiar with the Gospels so at best he is drawing upon an early Gethsemane tradition.⁵⁶

The major problem with such an interpretation is that Jesus was not saved from physical death. So, in what sense can the author say that his prayer was heard? F. F. Bruce pointed out that the author's reference to "fervent cries and tears" may have been influenced by the language of Psalm 22. An early Christological interpretation of the psalm, he notes, understood God listening to the one crying out as a reference to the resurrection of Christ.⁵⁷ Whether or not the author had this interpretation in mind, it does communicate a similar idea: Jesus was saved from the power of death in his resurrection. In this sense, the author elaborates a bit more on how Jesus broke the power of the "one who holds the power of death."

The reference to *πάσχω* in Heb 5:8 similarly refers to Jesus' time on earth and is used for similar purposes as the previous verse. The author's comment that Jesus "learned obedience through the things he suffered" (*ἔμαθεν ἀφ' ὧν ἔπαθεν τὴν ὑπακοήν*) utilizes a common word play (*μαθεῖν-παθεῖν*) in Greco-Roman literature to stress the humanity of Christ and his ability to empathize with those he represents as high priest.⁵⁸ *Πάσχω* in this context includes his death but, as in 2:10, it also points to hardships beyond his final

⁵⁶ For an alternative take on the Gethsemane tradition, see Blaising, "Gethsemane," 333–43, which builds an argument that the cup which Jesus asked to be removed is not one of human suffering but of God's wrath. Thus, Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane is not that he be spared from physical death but that God's wrath would not remain on him after he had drunk from it. If this is indeed the case, Blaising argues, then Jesus' prayer "reveals the consistent impeccable nature of Christ and his unchanging resolution to do the Father's will" (342).

⁵⁷ Bruce, *Hebrews*, 129.

⁵⁸ See Dyer, "'Learned from What He Suffered'"; also Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, esp. 139–44; Dörrie, "Leid und Erfahrung"; Costé, "Notion grecque."

moments.⁵⁹ This verse is further connected to the previous reference to suffering in 2:9 since the author links Jesus' suffering to his perfection (5:9). In both passages, suffering is an essential element of Christ's perfection by the Father. The emphasis on perfection has a vocational aspect in that it is necessary for Jesus' role as high priest, but it also emphasizes the faithful obedience that Christ demonstrated in the face of adversity.⁶⁰ Connecting this passage to 2:10–18, as well, is the specification that Jesus suffered as υἱός. The link between death, suffering, and kinship is continued in this passage.

In 5:7–8, Jesus is presented as one who suffered and struggled and who can identify with those he represents as high priest. Further, it shows that Jesus faced a similar threat of death as those addressed in the epistle. In 2:14 it was the believer who was described as having a “fear of death.” Jesus is not portrayed in 5:7 as having a “fear of death,” but he does cry out to God in the face of death. Yet the author makes clear that Jesus remained faithful despite his situation.⁶¹ In 5:8, the author writes that even though he held the status of “Son” (καίπερ ὄν υἱός), Jesus learned in times of suffering—like all of humanity—and responded with obedience.

⁵⁹ This is for similar reasons as those argued in the section on 2:10. Note that use of the plural relative pronoun (ὄν) by ἔμαθεν—specifying that Jesus learned through the *things* he suffered. Further, the learning component in this verse signifies that more than Christ's final moments are in mind (Johnson, *Hebrews*, 148).

⁶⁰ Peterson fleshes both aspects of Christ's perfection, see *Hebrews and Perfection*; also, Hoekema, “Perfection of Christ.”

⁶¹ Jesus' commitment to submitting to the will of God is connected to the phrase ἀπὸ τῆς εὐλαβείας, which directly follows καὶ εἰσακουσθεῖς (“and he was heard”). Εὐλαβείας could be translated “fear,” with “was heard” signifying that Jesus was delivered from the fear of death (Koester, *Hebrews*, 288–89; Johnson, *Hebrews*, 146). Elsewhere in *Hebrews*, εὐλάβεια means “reverence” or “piety” (11:7; 12:28) (Johnson, *Hebrews*, 146), while “fear” is communicated with φόβος (2:15). Thus, what is being communicated here is not that Jesus was saved from his fear—rather, it points to his reverence in the face of death. By choosing εὐλάβεια instead of φόβος, the author communicates a very different concept. Gray writes, “In a way that φόβος is not able, εὐλάβεια conveys the idea of healthy caution together with that of reverent attentiveness to the divine will” (Gray, *Godly Fear*, 205). Therefore, in this passage Jesus is presented as one who can be identified with—who faced suffering and the threat of death. His response of reverence and faithfulness to God is something to be emulated.

The opening verses of chapter six contain two uses of the term νεκρός. In 5:11–14, the author chastises his audience for being slow to understand (νοητοὶ γέγονατε ταῖς ἀκοαῖς) the elementary teachings of the faith. In 6:1, he encourages them to move past the basic teachings about Christ—listing such things as instructions regarding baptism, laying on of hands, and eternal judgment. Within this list is repentance from “dead works” (νεκρῶν ἔργων; 6:1) and resurrection of the dead (νεκρῶν; 6:2). There is nothing within the co-text to suggest that νεκρῶν ἔργων refers to Jewish works of the Law.⁶² Rather, the phrase is best understood as referring to works that lead to death, or sin.⁶³ A basic component of the Christian faith, the author argues, is repentance from sin, which leads to death. Here, then, is a continuation of the theme that we saw previously in 2:2, 3:17, and 4:11, that disobedience, like that of the wilderness generation, ultimately leads to death.⁶⁴ The inclusion of resurrection of the dead (ἀναστάσεώς [τε] νεκρῶν) in the list of elementary teachings signifies that the author assumed his readers understood this concept. The plural νεκρῶν refers to the resurrection of many—not only Jesus’ resurrection.⁶⁵ The concept of the resurrection and judgment (κρίματος) points to the hope beyond death found in the resurrection and exaltation of the Son. As we saw in a previous section, the author argues that in his resurrection Jesus freed people from the bondage of their fear of death. Here the author presents that obedience to God results in resurrection beyond physical death as a basic tenet of the faith.

⁶² For an overview of how νεκρῶν ἔργων has been interpreted, see Koester, *Hebrews*, 304–05.

⁶³ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 164; Koester, *Hebrews*, 304; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 314.

⁶⁴ Cockerill similarly makes the connection between νεκρῶν ἔργων and the wilderness generation (*Epistle to the Hebrews*, 265).

⁶⁵ Koester, *Hebrews*, 305.

There is some debate on how to translate ἀνασταυρόω in Heb 6:6. The stem σταυρόω (“crucify”) is attested throughout the New Testament, but the addition of the prefix ἀνά- appears only here in Hebrews. In 6:4–6, the author warns his audience against falling away from their faith—citing the severity and finality of such a decision.⁶⁶ A person who falls away from the faith, the author writes, essentially does two things to the Son of God: crucifies him (ἀνασταυρόω) and submits him to public disgrace (παραδειγματίζω). Attridge and others point out that the verb ἀνασταυρόω was often used with the meaning “to crucify”—with the prefix adding the force of “up,” as in, “to raise up on a cross.”⁶⁷ Others translate ἀνασταυρόω “re-crucify” or “crucify again,” taking the prefix to signify the repeated nature of the verb in 6:6 alongside the presence of πάλιν and ἀνακαθίξειν immediately prior to it.⁶⁸ A translation of “to crucify again” fits the context of the passage, but ultimately the point is clear regardless. The author exposes what apostasy essentially consists of: participation and identification with those who crucified and publically humiliated Jesus. In 10:33, the author reminds the audience of when they were publically humiliated (θεατρίζω; a word tied semantically to παραδειγματίζω⁶⁹) during a time of persecution. Here, in Heb 6:6, it is the one that has fallen away from the faith who is doing the public shaming.

⁶⁶ This passage is often labeled a “warning passage” and, together with similar passages in Hebrews, has been the source of much theological debate. For an overview of these passages and the history of their interpretation, see Bateman, “Introducing the Warning Passages,” 23–85.

⁶⁷ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 171. He cites the following places for this usage: Herodotus 7.184, 238; Thucydides 1.110; Plato *Gorg.* 473C; Josephus *Bell.* 4.5.2 § 317; *Ant.* 11.6.10 § 246. See also Weiss, *Der Brief an die Hebräer*, 346–47; Koester, *Hebrews*, 315; Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 138 n. 7.

⁶⁸ This is how many early church fathers understood the term. Among modern commentators, see Ellingworth, *Epistle the Hebrews*, 324; Cockerill, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 274; O’Brien, *Letter to the Hebrews*, 226.

⁶⁹ Louw and Nida list the two words right after each other (25.200 and 25.201) in the subdomain “Shame, Disgrace, Humiliation” of Domain 25 (“Attitudes and Emotions”).

Following a harsh warning against falling away in 6:4–8, the author builds up his audience by stating that he is confident of “better things” (τὰ κρείσσονα) in their case. He reminds them of their past good work and encourages them to continue in their actions “to the very end” (ἄχρι τέλους, 6:11)—a possible reference to death. The author then encourages his audience to be imitators of those who inherited the promises through faith and μακροθυμία, a term used to denote patience in the face of misfortune. The example of Abraham is presented as one such person worthy of imitation (6:13–15). The author describes Abraham as one who “patiently endured” (μακροθυμέω) and inherited the promise.

The uses of μακροθυμέω and μακροθυμία denote not just waiting for time to pass but rather patient endurance through difficulty. An interesting parallel to this passage is Jas 5:10 where the connection between patience and suffering is made explicit: “As an example of suffering (κακοπαθίας) and patience (μακροθυμίας), beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.”⁷⁰ As with Heb 6:12–13, the term is used to describe a characteristic worthy of emulation as the author sets up an exemplar for the audience. It may be that in Heb 6:12–13 the terms simply mean to “wait” or allow time to pass. However, the immediate co-text includes an affirmation of the audience’s past work and service (6:10), an appeal for continued diligence (σπουδή, 6:11), and a prohibition against sluggishness (νωθρός, 6:12). The μακροθυμία the audience is meant to emulate is proactive and not just a passive waiting for time to pass.

⁷⁰ The author of the Epistle of James uses the verb form μακροθυμέω multiple times in Jas 5:7–8 to illustrate patience through the image of a farmer waiting on their crops to rise. While these uses of μακροθυμέω are more in line with patience as waiting, rather than enduring through struggle, it should be remembered that this entire section (Jas 5:1–12) is meant to address the present suffering of the audience.

Three different terms related to death appear in chapter seven of Hebrews. The first, κοπή, is found only here in the New Testament and can mean “kill” or “slaughter.” In 7:1 the term refers to the “slaughter of the kings” (τῆς κοπῆς τῶν βασιλέων) from which Abram was returning when he met Melchizedek. In choosing this term, the author was following the LXX of the Genesis 14 account—which he draws closely from in Heb 7:1–2a.⁷¹ Nonetheless, the author’s inclusion of the term here contributes to the topic of death in the epistle.

The references to death in v. 8 and v. 23 are used for similar purposes: to contrast the mortal levitical priesthood and its limitations with the eternal priesthood of Jesus and Melchizedek.⁷² In 7:5–7, the author establishes a contrast between the descendants of Levi and Melchizedek as one of status. In v. 8, the author argues further that the contrast is one of life—the levitical priests are mortal (literally “dying people”; ἀποθνήσκοντες ἄνθρωποι) while Melchizedek is testified as living (μαρτυρούμενος ὅτι ζῆ). A similar contrast is made in 7:23–34 between the mortality of the levitical priests and the eternal nature of Christ’s priesthood. The “former priests” were many and were prevented from remaining in office due to death (θάνατος). The priesthood of Jesus, on the other hand, is permanent since he continues forever (τὸν αἰῶνα ἀπαράβατον). These passages not only expose the limitations of the levitical priesthood and the eternal nature of Christ’s, but they continue the theme of humanity’s subjection to death and Christ’s overcoming and defeating death since he now actively serves as high priest.

⁷¹ See Koester, *Hebrews*, 338; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 356.

⁷² On the connection between these verses, see Attridge, *Hebrews*, 196, 209; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 345.

In Heb 9:14, the author once again makes use of the phrase νεκρῶν ἔργων—as he did in 6:1. In the previous passage, it was argued that a basic tenet of the faith was repentance from dead works—that is, works which leads to death. The author may have a similar idea here, but stresses that such νεκρῶν ἔργων defile the conscience.⁷³ In this section (9:11–14) the author contrasts the old cultic order and that of Christ. In v. 14, it is argued that since Christ’s sacrifice was of more value than that of the previous cult, so also is its result. The blood of Christ, the author argues, cleans the conscience of those he represents from (ἀπό) “works that lead to death” to (εἰς) worship of the living God. There is an obvious connection between “dead” works and the “living” God, but this does not necessarily indicate idolatry.⁷⁴ Rather, this is a continuation of the themes of life/death, the assurance of Christ’s victory over death, and his ability to rescue those who face death due to sin.

Αἷμα

The second half of Hebrews contains twenty uses of αἷμα—with the majority of occurrences appearing in chapter nine. The term can refer simply to “blood,” but is often used figuratively to denote death.⁷⁵ In Hebrews, there are places where αἷμα is clearly being used figuratively to mean death (9:18; 12:2). The author often uses αἷμα to refer to the physical blood of the atonement sacrifice. The occurrences of αἷμα found within the co-text of sacrifice are valuable for our study and contribute to the topic of death in Hebrews. When αἷμα refers to physical blood within this co-text, it is closely connected

⁷³ Pace Ellingworth who argues that “works that lead to death” may not carry over into this use in 9:14 (*Epistle to the Hebrews*, 458).

⁷⁴ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 159.

⁷⁵ On figurative uses of αἷμα denoting death, see subdomains 20.83, 20.84, 23.107, and 23.112.

to the slaughter of that sacrifice. The blood being offered—whether that of animals or of Jesus—is the result of death. These references to physical blood in Hebrews (9:7–14, 25; 10:4, 19, 29, 11:28; 12:24; 13:11–12, 20) are mentioned just briefly here, but are important as they continue the topic of death.⁷⁶ The places where αἷμα is used figuratively to denote death are examined more closely below.

9:15–18, 26–27

Hebrews 9:15–28 puts forward an important contrast between the old covenant of Sinai and the new covenant inaugurated by Christ’s death. It is significant for this study as the topic of death permeates the entire pericope. While key words within the domain of death appear throughout this section, the argument for the necessity of death (in the inauguration and curse of a covenant) extends beyond this vocabulary.⁷⁷ The author begins by stating that because of his death (θάνατος), Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant (διαθήκη; v. 15). His death has redeemed the disobedience (παραβάσις) of those under the first covenant and invited them to eternal inheritance (αἰωνίου κληρονομίας). The significance of death for the establishment and strength of a διαθήκη is repeated in vv. 16 (θάνατος) and 17 (νεκρός). Verse 18 makes clear that the first covenant was

⁷⁶ In his study *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Moffitt puts forward the thesis that in early Jewish thought—and in the argument of Hebrews—death is not the conceptual center of atonement (esp. 256–78). Looking especially at Leviticus, Moffitt argues that “blood” was often identified with “life”—that is, it is the life of the animal that is being offered as sacrifice. In fact, he argues, there is a general lack of interest in the slaughter and death of the animal in Jewish writings (258). In Hebrews, according to Moffitt, the emphasis is on the presentation of Jesus’ blood before God rather than his death. While his death is a necessary and significant component, the crucifixion is not the place where atonement occurs—it is in the offering of his blood (that is, his indestructible life) to God. However, Moffitt cannot escape the close connection between blood and death in his effort to emphasize the life of the sacrificial victim being offered. Without Jesus’ death, his blood would not be able to be offered to God in heaven.

⁷⁷ Θάνατος (vv. 15, 16); νεκρός (v. 17); ἀποθνήσκω (v. 27).

inaugurated with blood (αἷμα; here clearly being used with reference to death). Verses 19–22 continue to use αἷμα to show how the first covenant was inaugurated with death.⁷⁸

Westfall has shown that Heb 9:15–18 contains a semantic chain of death that includes the reference to blood in v. 18 (θανάτου [v. 15] => θάνατον [v. 16] => νεκροῖς [v. 17] => ζῆ [antonym; v. 17] => αἵματος [v. 18]).⁷⁹ This chain continues into vv. 19–22, using just the domain of blood to continue the semantic concept chain of death/blood. While foregrounded and abbreviated, Westfall notes that this “semantic chain of death and blood is continued in every verse” of 9:23–28.⁸⁰ Thus, blood and death are closely tied in this section with an emphasis on the necessity of death for the inauguration and effectiveness of a διαθήκη.

In 9:26 the author refers to Christ’s suffering (πάσχω) in arguing that unlike the repeated nature of the sacrifices under the old covenant Jesus needed to only offer himself (προσφέρει ἑαυτόν; possibly a euphemism for death) once (v. 25). Jesus did not need to suffer again and again, but rather appeared “once for all” to remove sin by his sacrifice (v. 26). Hebrews 9:27 presents a truism that all mortals are destined to die

⁷⁸ While Moffitt identifies the connection between blood and death in 9:18, he argues against this connection in the other uses of αἷμα in 9:15–22 (*Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection*, 289–94). However, in support for this argument, Moffitt defends the theory that διαθήκη shifts in semantic range from “covenant” in 9:15, to “will/testament” in 9:16–18, and then back to “covenant”. Thus, within the discussion of the necessity of death for a “will/testament,” αἷμα is connected to death. However, Moffitt reasons, as the author slides back into the semantics of “covenant,” this αἷμα is once again used within the context of atonement and blood manipulation, and therefore commutates “life.” Despite the fact that numerous commentators support this rhetorical movement between the two meanings of διαθήκη in Hebrews 9 (Attridge, *Hebrews*, 253–54; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 462–63; Koester, *Hebrews*, 424–26), there are multiple problems with this interpretation (on this, see Hahn, “Covenant, Cult, and the Curse-of-Death,” 69–74). As Hahn has pointed out, the use of διαθήκη for “testament” appears nowhere else in Hebrews (the author uses the term seventeen times!). Further, this interpretation creates an artificial schism in the text from the Jewish understanding of covenant to the Greco-Roman concept of will/testament, with little linguistic support. Regardless of how one understands διαθήκη in 9:15–28, it is clear that death is a persistent theme throughout the passage. Further, blood is closely linked to the concept of death throughout the passage. In vv. 19–22, the author is supporting the argument that a διαθήκη is inaugurated by αἷμα—revealing how blood played an important role in the inauguration of the first covenant.

⁷⁹ Westfall, *Discourse Analysis*, 214.

⁸⁰ Westfall, *Discourse Analysis*, 215.

(ἀποθνήσκω) once and face judgment. In a similar way, Jesus was “offered” once (προσφέρω; within this context certainly meaning death) to bear the sins of many (v. 28). However, the author points out, he will appear a second time—this time to save (presumably from judgment) those who await him. Here again the author establishes the human condition of death and provides hope beyond death to life with Christ—who defeated death.

10:26–31

Like Heb 6:4–6, 10:26–31 serves as a warning against those who abandon and fall away from the faith. As in that previous passage, the author uses strong language to describe the outcome of the person who “willfully persists in sin after having received the knowledge of the truth” (v. 26). In 10:27, the author writes that such a person faces “fearful” (φοβερός) judgment and a fury of fire (πῦρ) that will “consume” (ἐσθίω) them. Ἐσθίω, commonly rendered “to eat,” is used with a metaphorical sense to convey a meaning closer to “to destroy.” This passage parallels Isa 26:11 LXX, which states: “a fury of fire [πῦρ] will consume [ἐσθίω] the adversaries [ὑπεναντίος].”⁸¹ Hebrews 10:28–29 sets up a lesser-to-greater argument concerning the punishment for rejecting Christ: Since anyone who violates the law of Moses “dies” (ἀποθνήσκω) without mercy, a much worse punishment (τιμωρία) comes to those who “trample on” (καταπατέω) the Son of God. Τιμωρία is only found here in the New Testament and, like its cognates τιμωρέω (Acts 22:5; 26:11) and ἐπιτιμία (2 Cor 2:6), is used negatively to denote “punishment”—with the notion that such punishment is deserved.⁸² The author reinforces his point in v.

⁸¹ Koester, *Hebrews*, 452.

⁸² Τιμωρία is used to denote “punishment” in the LXX (Prov 19:29; 24:22) and Second Temple literature (1 Esdr 8:24; 2 Macc 6:12, 26; 3 Macc 2:6; 4:4, 13; 7:3; 4 Macc 4:24; 5:10; 11:3). Daniel 2:18 LXX uses τιμωρία to mean “mercy.”

30 by quoting scripture: “For we know the one who said, ‘Vengeance (ἐκδίκησις) is mine, I will repay (ἀνταποδίδωμι)’” (Deut 32:35). Both ἐκδίκησις and ἀνταποδίδωμι carry similar notions of deserved punishment as τιμωρία (v. 29). All three words convey the idea that such punishment is deserved retribution for actions done by the receiving party. The author’s purpose in these verses is to emphasize the punishment awaiting those who reject Christ—a punishment worse than death (v. 29). This passage is filled with the language of fear (φοβερός; 10:27, 31) and graphic imagery illustrating the severity of falling away.⁸³

10:32–39

Following the stern warning of 10:26–31, the author next presents his audience with a positive example of obedience: their own endurance during a time of suffering (10:32–39). The author encourages the audience to remember (ἀναμνησθε) this earlier time when they endured through a “great challenge of suffering” (πολλὴν ἄθλησιν παθημάτων). This struggle included public disgrace and persecution (ὄνειδισμοῖς τε καὶ θλίψεσιν θεατριζόμενοι) for some while others partnered with those being treated as such (v. 33). Some were put in prison while others “suffered with” (συνπαθέω) them (v. 34a).⁸⁴ The community also had their property forcefully taken (ἄρπαγή) from them. Through all of this, the community responded with comradery and joy (χαρά) because of their assurance in God.

⁸³ Some examples: πυρὸς ζῆλος (“fury of fire”), 10:27; ὁ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ καταπατήσας (“trampled the Son of God”), 10:29a; τὸ αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης κοινὸν ἡγησάμενος (“defiled the blood of the covenant”), 10:29b; τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς χάριτος ἐνυβρίσας (“insulted the spirit of grace”), 10:29c; τὸ ἐμπεσεῖν χειρὰς θεοῦ ζῶντος (“fall into the hands of the living God”), 10:31.

⁸⁴ By using the construction τοῦτο μὲν ... τοῦτο δέ, the author is not suggesting that some in the group suffered while others did not (as with Koester, *Hebrews*, 459; Lane, *Hebrews*, 229), but makes the point that when some in the group suffered the whole group suffered (Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 546; Cockerill, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 499).

Hebrews 10:35–36 contains two subjunctives by which the author encourages his audience to certain action in light of their past experience with suffering. In 10:35 the author encourages them not to abandon (μὴ ἀποβάλητε) their confidence because it has a “great reward” (μισθαποδοσία). Μισθαποδοσία was used in Heb 2:2 as a “penalty” for disobedience; here it is modified by μέγας as a positive reward for obedience. In 10:36 the author tells them directly, “You are in need of endurance” (ὑπομονῆς γὰρ ἔχετε χρεῖαν). The author connects endurance to doing the will of God (τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ ποιήσαντες), which will a result of them receiving (κομίσησθε; aorist middle subjunctive) what is promised (ἐπαγγελία). After quoting from Hab 2:3–4, the author reminds his readers that they (ἡμεῖς; first person plural, “we”) are not among those who shrink back and are “destroyed” (ἀπόλεια), but rather among those who have faith and preserve their souls (περιποίησιν ψυχῆς). This last verse conveys in a succinct way a theme that has been utilized throughout the epistle: those who reject Christ and fall away from the faith will face punishment, judgment and death; those who remain faithful will receive reward, salvation, and life.

Chapter 11

This chapter is famous for its description of the faith of many prominent Old Testament figures, but it is rarely identified that the author repeatedly emphasizes some kind of relationship of their story to death. For example, Cain still speaks even though he is dead (ἀποθνήσκω, 11:4). Enoch is said to have pleased God and therefore did not experience death (θάνατος, 11:5). Abraham was given what was promised even he was “as good as dead” (νενεκρωμένου, 11:12).⁸⁵ In 11:13 the author summarizes that “all of these died in faith” (κατὰ πίστιν ἀπέθανον οὗτοι πάντες). Hebrews 11:19 states that

⁸⁵ Νενεκρωμένου is a figurative reference to Abraham’s old age.

Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son because he believed that God could even raise the dead (νεκρῶν ἐγείρειν). Hebrews 11:21 affirms that Jacob acted in faith “when he was dying” (ἀποθνήσκων); similarly, Joseph acted in faith “when his end was near” (τελευτῶν περὶ τῆς ἐξόδου) in v. 22.⁸⁶ The people of Israel acted in faith and safely passed through the Red Sea, while the Egyptians tried to chase them and “they were drowned” (κατεπόθησαν, 11:29). Rahab acted in faith and was not killed as a result (οὐ συναπώλετο, 11:31). In 11:35a, the author writes that some women received back their dead (νεκρός) by resurrection.

The author draws attention to the fact that many of the exemplars of faith also suffered greatly and faced times of affliction. Moses chose to be mistreated (συγκακουχεῖσθαι) alongside God’s people rather than “to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin” (11:25). He considered “abuse” (ὀνειδισμόν) for the sake of Christ of more value than the riches of Egypt because he was looking ahead to his reward (μισθαποδοσία).⁸⁷ This point is clearly expressed in vv. 35b–38:

Others were tortured (τυμπανίζω), refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking (ἐμπαιγμός) and flogging (μάστιξις), and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death (λιθάζω), they were sawn in two (πρίζω), they were killed by the sword (ἐν φόνῳ μαχαίρης ἀπέθανον); they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted (θλίβω), tormented (κακουχέω)—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

⁸⁶ Alexander writes that in this section of ch. 11 (vv. 17–22), “the focus is on seeing beyond death, holding on to the hope of God’s unseen future at the point of death” (“Prophets and Martyrs,” 406).

⁸⁷ The cognate μισθαποδότης appeared in 11:6 in the general statement: “And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards (μισθαποδότης) those who seek him.”

These men and women who were commended for their faith (11:39) suffered immensely in their obedience and endurance and were reduced to rags and poverty—the majority of them either died or were refugees, or both.

More will be said about this section in chapter six as we examine the author’s use of exemplars to respond to a context of suffering and death. At this point, it is important to stress how the language of death and suffering permeates this list of heroes of faith from ancient Israel. Nearly every exemplar of faith is presented within a context of death, near-death, or conflict. There are sixteen terms from death semantic domains in this passage; nine from suffering domains.

12:1–4

The list of figures demonstrating faith despite hardship and death culminates with the example of Christ in 12:1–3. In 12:1, the readers are called to join in the “race,” encouraged by those who ran before them and fixing their eyes on Jesus “the pioneer and perfecter of faith.”⁸⁸ The author clearly presents the race that Jesus ran as involving suffering and death. That Jesus “endured the cross” (ὑπέμεινεν σταυρὸν) is an obvious reference to his death—here for the first time mentioning the instrument of his death. Several features of Heb 12:1–2 mark its prominence in the discourse.⁸⁹ These verses serve as both as a summary and point of departure from the previous section (10:25–11:39) and introduces the main focus of the next section: running the race (12:1–17). The conjunction *τοιαυτοῦν* (“therefore”) in 12:1 is highly marked; as is the hortatory subjunctive *τρέχωμεν* (“let us run”). The author uses the emphatic first person plural in both his verb choice and the intentional use of the pronoun (twice in 12:1).

⁸⁸ “Jesus is the pioneer because he takes faith to its goal, going where others have not yet gone. He is the source and model of faith for others” (Koester, *Hebrews*, 523).

⁸⁹ See Westfall, *Discourse Analysis*, 274–76.

The author stresses Jesus' suffering in 12:3 by stating that he endured strong opposition (ἀντιλογία) from sinners. That the original audience was to apply Jesus' own endurance through suffering to their own situation is made clear in this verse: "Consider him ... so that you may not grow weary or lose heart." The author uses the imperative (ἀναλογίσασθε, "consider") and points his audience's attention to Jesus as one who endured. The participle ὑπομεμενηκότα ("the one who endured"), in the perfect tense and stative aspect, is highly marked and the hostility he endured is given greater prominence by τοιαύτην ("of such a kind"). The stress in this verse is on Jesus' endurance and the hostility he faced, and this is what the audience is commanded to consider.

In something of a rebuke, the author reminds his audience that in their own struggle against sin they have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood (μέχρις αἵματος ἀντικατέστητε). Here αἷμα clearly denotes death and the phrase conveys something like "to the point of death."⁹⁰ The phrase "struggle against sin" (τὴν ἁμαρτίαν ἀνταγωνιζόμενοι) refers not to the inward struggle of sinfulness (as with 12:1), but rather personifies "sin" as those persons or forces that oppose or abuse the audience (as with "sinners" in 12:3).⁹¹ The author's point is that his audience has yet to suffer to the extent that Christ did, yet seem to "grow weary."⁹² The verb ἀνταγωνίζομαι ("to struggle against") is a New Testament *hapax legomenon*. Its only other occurrence, 4 Macc 17:14, uses the term to describe the "tyrant" Antiochus as "being struggled against"

⁹⁰ Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 645.

⁹¹ Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 194: "In the context of verses 3–4 and given the community's experience described in 10:32–4, a more likely interpretation [than 'sin' as an inner struggle] is that 'sin' here is personified and is equivalent to 'sinners' (cf. ὑπὸ τῶν ἁμαρτωλῶν, vs. 3). What sense would it make to speak of struggling to the point of bloodshed against one's own inner desires?" So also Westcott, *Hebrews*, 400; Cockerill, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 619 (see n. 24); deSilva, *Peseverance in Gratitude*, 446–47. Pace Koester, *Hebrews*, 525–26, who argues that it is sin within the community that is being addressed.

⁹² "The writer is not *blaming* them for their failure to resist to the point of bloodshed but *shaming* them: their sufferings are much less than Jesus had to bear, and they are apparently ready to 'lose heart and grow faint'" (Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection*, 170).

(ἀντηγωνίζετο). This passage is an interesting parallel as it presents the Maccabean martyrs as “enduring torments to death” (17:10) in a “race” or “struggle” (ἄγων; 17:11) in which victory comes through endurance (ὑπομονή; 17:12). Eleazer and the other martyrs are presented as athletes (17:13, 15, 16), Antiochus as an antagonist, and the world (both the κόσμος and “human race” ὁ τῶν ἀνθρώπων βίος) comprises the spectators. This parallels Hebrews’ presentation of the audience as running a race (ἄγών; 12:1) in front of a crowd of spectators (νέφος μαρτύρων; 12:1) and antagonist (personified as ἁμαρτίαν; 12:4). However, unlike the Maccabean martyrs in 4 Macc 17:10 and Jesus in Heb 12:2–3, the audience had not yet resisted to death.

12:5–11

Hebrews 12:5–11 flows out of 12:4 and continues the discussion regarding the audience’s “struggle against sin” that has yet to reach the point of shedding blood. The author repeats the word παιδεία and its cognate παιδεύω five times (12:5, 6, 7, 10, 11)—establishing a semantic chain throughout the passage. This Greek word commonly had to do with educating youth with various disciplines and chastisement. It was the way in which to achieve a goal, not the goal itself.⁹³ Παιδεία commonly involved correction of error but was also understood to mean “instruction” or “training.” It involved being educated and equipped in order to help one meet a challenge.⁹⁴ “Educative discipline also involved the endurance of rigorous exercise that trained the mind, soul, and body.”⁹⁵ Louw and Nida place παιδεία in three domains—33.226, “teach/instruct;” 36.10,

⁹³ Bertrand, “Παιδεύω, etc.,” 596–625.

⁹⁴ Koester, *Hebrews*, 527.

⁹⁵ deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 448.

“discipline/train;” and 38.4, “punish.”⁹⁶ The nuances among these domains are not between punitive or non-punitive παιδεία—Croy has effectively shown how this passage presents a consistently non-punitive understanding of suffering⁹⁷—but rather between the context and purpose of παιδεία. The author does not use παιδεία here with such sharp distinctions between meanings—rather, he seems to be playing with the range of meanings. The author surrounds his use of the word in this passage with other words from all three domains in which παιδεία occurs.⁹⁸

The author offers his audience a new way to understand their hardships as he encourages enduring them as divine παιδεία (12:7).⁹⁹ Two contexts emerge—playing off of the various meanings of παιδεία—for how the audience is to understand their hardships: parental discipline (vv. 5–10) and athletic training (vv. 11–13). The quotation from Proverbs 3 in 12:5–6 introduces the idea of divine discipline understood as God acting as a father would to his children. After encouraging his audience to understand their hardships as παιδεία, the author presents discipline as a validation of their Father-child relationship with God (v. 7b) and then makes the same point by affirming the negative equivalent in v. 8 (“If you are not disciplined ... then you are not legitimate children”).¹⁰⁰ A lesser-to-greater argument is presented in verse 9 saying that, if they

⁹⁶ 33.226 is in the domain of “Communication” and the subdomain “Teach”; 36.10 in the domain of “Guide, Discipline, Follow” and subdomain “Discipline, Train”; 38.4 is in the subdomain “Punish” within the domain of “Punish, Reward”.

⁹⁷ Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, esp. 198ff. See also Koester, *Hebrews*, 526–27.

⁹⁸ Ἐλεγχῶ (33.417), 12:5; μαστιγῶ (38.11), 12:6; παιδευτή (38.5), 12:9; ὑποτάσσω (36.18), 12:9; γυμνάζω (36.11), 12:11.

⁹⁹ Verse 7 actually has no direct object related to ὑπομένω—that is, what they are to endure. However, given the context of hardships described in the audience’s background (10:32–34) and in the immediate context of 12:1–4, what the audience is to “endure” is certainly some type of hardship, trial, or difficulty. Elsewhere in the epistle, whenever ὑπομένω is used it is some sort of suffering, oppression, or trial that is being referred to: παθημάτων (“sufferings”), 10:32; σταυρὸν (“the cross”), 12:2; ἀντιλογίαν (“strong opposition”), 12:3.

¹⁰⁰ Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 200, calls this a contrapositive form: “The contrapositive of ‘If A, then B’ is ‘If not B, then not A.’”

respected their earthly parent's discipline, "how much more" should they submit to God's. Verse 10 continues this comparison and declares that God's discipline is always for their good while their earthly parents' was simply what "they thought best." The author also encourages his audience to view their παιδεία as an athletic training by picking up athletic imagery used in the opening verses of chapter twelve (τρέχω, 12:1; ἀγών, 12:1; κάμνω, 12:3).¹⁰¹ In 12:11 the author declares that no παιδεία is pleasant at the time, but later yields fruit for those who are "trained" or "exercised" (γυμνάζω) in it. This language continues in 12:12–13 as the author encourages his audience to "lift your drooping hands," "strengthen your weak knees," and "make straight paths for your feet."

Through the illustrations of paternal discipline and athletic training, the audience is encouraged to understand their own hardships as παιδεία intended to benefit them. As a father disciplines his children for their edification, so the audience is to understand their sufferings as a sign of their status as God's children and of his affection for them.¹⁰² This continues the motif of suffering and kinship established earlier in the epistle. Terms of kinship appear frequently in this section: υἱός (12:5 [x2], 6, 7 [x2], 8), πατήρ (12:9 [x2]), and νόθος ("illegitimate child" 12:8; domain 10.39). Similarly, as an athlete endures trials as a part of their training so that they might build strength, the recipients are to treat times of difficulty as opportunities to strengthen and train.

12:20, 29

References to death appear in the section comparing Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion and offering a final warning to the recipients in 12:18–29. Here again the audience is compared to the wilderness generation (3:1–4:11; 11:27–30). Drawing from Exod 19:12–

¹⁰¹ On athletic imagery in 12:1–13, see Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 58–70.

¹⁰² Attridge, *Hebrews*, 362.

13, the author abbreviates the command to Moses on Sinai that no person or beast was to touch the mountain under penalty of death. In Heb 12:20 only the beasts are mentioned, but that this applies to humans is implied.¹⁰³ The word used (λίθοβοληθήσεται) is pulled from Exod 19:13 LXX and means to “stone to death.”¹⁰⁴ This threat of death is included with language of terror and fear in 12:18–21 that defines Mt. Sinai as a place of judgment for those who have turned away from God.¹⁰⁵

In his final warning against turning away from God, the author encourages his audience to have gratitude (χάριν) and to serve God with reverence and awe (εὐλαβείας καὶ δέους). This is concluded with a reminder: καὶ γὰρ ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν πῦρ καταναλίσκων (“For our God is a consuming fire”). This verse quotes from Deut 4:24 (changing σου to ἡμῶν) and offers the justification for reverence and awe toward God. The context of Deut 4:24 involves Moses warning Israel against breaking the covenant and idol worship.¹⁰⁶ The phrase used here concludes with a similar warning against falling away and mirrors the conclusion to the previous warning section in 10:31. The word καταναλίσκω (“consume or destroy completely”) is used only here in the New Testament but appears in the LXX with the connotations of judgment and punishment (Zeph 1:18; 3:8; Sir 27:29; 15:19).¹⁰⁷ Thus, once again the author uses imagery of punishment and death in describing the fate of those who turn away from God.

¹⁰³ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 373; Koester, *Hebrews*, 543.

¹⁰⁴ The same word λιθοβολέω is used in 11:37 in the description of those heroes of faith who suffered and ultimately died for their faith.

¹⁰⁵ Language of terror in this section includes γνόφω καὶ ζόφω (“darkness and gloom”), 12:18; φοβερὸν (“fearful”), 12:21; ἐκφοβός (“terrified”), 12:21; ἔντρομος (“trembling”), 12:21.

¹⁰⁶ Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 691.

¹⁰⁷ See Attridge, *Hebrews*, 383 n. 83.

In 13:3 the author encourages his readers to remember and sympathize with those in prison and those being maltreated. The recipients are to remember those in prison (δεσμίων) as if in prison as well (συνδεδεμένοι). This comes in the form of an imperative (μνησθε; “remember”). Solidarity with those in prison was a defining characteristic of the community’s previous struggle with suffering (10:34) and continues to be necessary in their current situation. In a similar way, the author encourages solidarity also with those who are being mistreated (κακουχουμένων). The word used here (κακουχέω) appears within the New Testament only in Hebrews and is linked to the mistreatment of the heroes of faith in 11:37 (κακουχούμενοι) and to Moses and the Israelites in 11:25 (συγκακουχεῖσθαι). Jesus demonstrated similar solidarity in 2:14–15 as he shared in humanity in order to destroy the power of death of those who have lived in slavery and fear of death.¹⁰⁸ Here the audience is called to share in the sufferings (ὡς αὐτοὶ ὄντες ἐν σώματι; literally “as if you were in [their] body”)¹⁰⁹ of those being mistreated—suggesting that such treatment was currently going on within the community.¹¹⁰

In 13:7 the recipients are encouraged to remember their leaders, who shared the word of God with them, and to imitate their faith. A possible reference to death appears within the use of the ambiguous phrase ἀναθεωροῦντες τὴν ἔκβασιν τῆς ἀναστροφῆς (“consider the end/outcome of their way of life”).¹¹¹ It is unclear whether the death of the

¹⁰⁸ Koester, *Hebrews*, 565–66.

¹⁰⁹ A similar expression is used by Philo in *Spec. leg.* 3.161 (Attridge, *Hebrews*, 387; Johnson, *Hebrews*, 341).

¹¹⁰ Ellingworth writes: “The author’s repeated insistence on care for prisoners ... is clearly related to a situation of persecution for the faith” (*Epistle to the Hebrews*, 695).

¹¹¹ The use of ἔκβασις as figurative of death—as in, “the end of life”—does not appear in Louw and Nida’s lexicon. They do allow that one could take its use in Heb 13:7 in this way (using ἔκβασις in the domain of “Time” with reference to one’s life), but point rather to the subdomain “Result” in Domain 89 “Relations.” However, the use of ἔκβασις to denote the end of one’s life is attested in Wis 2:17 (supported by the use of

leaders or their faithful lives leading to and including their deaths is meant. While martyrdom is not necessarily implied, ἔκβασις, whether understood as “outcome” or “end,” includes the death of the leaders. Its use makes clear that the community’s leaders have passed away and that their deaths reveal their faith.¹¹²

13:11–13, 20

Prompted by his command against strange teachings pertaining to food regulations in 13:9, the author moves into a discussion of Jesus’ sacrifice in 13:11–13. Hebrews 13:11 presents the customary Jewish ritual for a proper sacrifice: “the bodies of those animals whose blood (αἷμα) is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp.” The author draws from Lev 16:27, a passage on the rites for Yom Kippur, for this verse.¹¹³ The phrase “outside the camp” (ἔξω τῆς παρεμβολῆς) refers to a place of uncleanness: lepers dwelled “outside the camp” (Lev 13:45–46; Num 5:2–4); those defiled waited out their purification there (Num 12:14–15; 31:19–20), and lawbreakers were executed there (Num 15:32–36).¹¹⁴ The uses of αἷμα in vv. 11–12 do not in themselves denote death, but references to the animals’ bodies being burned (κατακαίεται; v. 11) and Jesus suffering (πάσχω) imply as much.

θάνατος in 2:20). This should spur the addition of its potential use in this way within the Louw and Nida lexicon—not just within the domain of time, but as a figurative expression of death (i.e. “end of one’s life”).

¹¹² Koester, *Hebrews*, 567.

¹¹³ “The bull of the sin offering and the goat of the sin offering, whose blood was brought in to make atonement in the holy place, shall be taken outside the camp; their skin and their flesh and their dung shall be consumed in fire” (Lev 16:27).

¹¹⁴ deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 501. deSilva calls the reference to *outside the camp* “ambiguous” since it was also the place where God’s presence is found in Exod 33:1–7. The parallel between Moses moving outside the camp and pitching God’s tent to Jesus shedding his blood there may be intentional. If not deliberate, it is at least a backdrop to our understanding of “outside the camp.”

However, the emphasis here is not on what happens to the sacrificial victims, but on the situation or circumstances in which the key action takes place.¹¹⁵

Hebrews 13:12 contains a reference to Jesus' suffering (πάσχω), but emphasizes the place of this suffering—outside the gate. The reference is to Jesus' crucifixion, which occurred—like most executions of the time—outside the city walls (John 19:17–20).¹¹⁶ Concerning his suffering, the author focuses not on the physical pain of his crucifixion but the disgrace (ὄνειδισμὸν) he bore (v. 13). Jesus' example serves as motivation to the recipients of Hebrews as they are encouraged to go to Jesus outside the camp and endure that same disgrace. This call is marked in the text by the particle τοίνυν (“therefore”) and the hortatory subjunctive ἐξερχώμεθα (“let us go out”). Some have argued that going “outside the gate” for the community signified a movement away from Judaism.¹¹⁷ However, it is better understood as any form of security that must be abandoned in order to follow Jesus—a task that would certainly involve suffering. Lane writes: “Christian identity is a matter of ‘going out’ now to him. It entails the costly commitment to follow him resolutely, despite suffering.”¹¹⁸

The last reference to death appears in the benediction found in 13:20–25. The author refers to the “God of peace” who brought Jesus back from the dead (ἐκ νεκρῶν). The verb used here, ἀνάγω, has the sense of bringing or leading something and is only used in reference to Jesus' resurrection in Rom 10:7. The typical word used by New

¹¹⁵ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 398.

¹¹⁶ Koester, *Hebrews*, 570. He notes that it was commonplace in Jewish (Lev 24:14; Num 15:35–36; Acts 7:58) and Roman (Plautus, *Braggart Warrior* 2.4.6–7) practice to hold executions outside the city.

¹¹⁷ Filson, ‘Yesterday’, 62; Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 381; Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 440. Against this view see Koester, *Hebrews*, 571.

¹¹⁸ Lane, *Hebrews*, 543.

Testament writers for the resurrection is ἐγείρω, “raise up.”¹¹⁹ The author of Hebrews uses ἐγείρω in reference to resurrection in general in 11:19—which leads Attridge to determine that the use of ἀνάγω in 13:20 is deliberate.¹²⁰ The use of ἀνάγω instead of ἐγείρω still conveys the concept of the resurrection of Jesus but alludes also to his exaltation. It recalls the use of ἄγω in 2:10 where God is described as bringing many sons and daughters to glory.¹²¹ The point of this reference to death is that God is to be understood as one having power over death—demonstrated in the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus.

Conclusion

This chapter has utilized semantic domain theory to identify and expand the relevant vocabulary for the topics of suffering and death in Hebrews. Moving beyond a simple word study of πάσχω or θάνατος, this investigation has identified a spectrum of semantically related terms and phrases used throughout the epistle. This analysis has identified twenty-three terms semantically linked to “suffering,” which appear thirty-six times in the text. It also located twenty different “death” terms that appear sixty-three times throughout Hebrews. The result of this analysis and the exegetical examination of each occurrence in the epistle is that one can no longer deny that suffering and death are significant topics for the author of Hebrews. Appearing throughout the discourse—including many passages of prominence—these two topics are significant contributions to argument and theology of Hebrews.

¹¹⁹ Of numerous examples: Matt 28:7; John 21:14; Acts 3:15; Rom 4:24; Gal 1:1; Eph 1:20; Col 2:12; 2 Tim 2:8; 1 Pet 1:21.

¹²⁰ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 406.

¹²¹ Koester, *Hebrews*, 579; deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 511; Weiss, *Die Hebräer*, 756.

Before moving on to the criteria for determining a social context from a text in the next chapter, I wish to comment briefly here on the recurring motifs that emerged from the examination of the suffering and death language in Hebrews. Several could be mentioned, but I wish to focus on three motifs that were prominent in our examination and worth a brief summation. First, a major motif is of God's power over death. Repeatedly in Hebrews the author focuses on the reality of death for humanity (7:23; 9:15–28, 11:13) and the hope beyond death for those of faith (2:9, 14–15; 5:7; 6:2; 13:20). This is seen clearly in Jesus' death. The author presents Jesus not just as one who suffered and died, but also as now sitting at the right hand of the Father (2:9; 5:9; 12:2) and actively serving as a high priest for his people. This, for the author, offers hope beyond death for his audience. Through his death, Jesus had defeated the one holding power over death and set free those held captive by their fear of death (2:14–15). He is an empathetic high priest who is not limited by death (7:24) and has bore the sins of the people (2:17; 9:28) and brought many sons and daughters to glory (2:10). In these ways the author of Hebrews presents hope beyond physical death to eschatological life and reward for the faithful in light of the work of Christ.

Second, an inverted motif parallels the one just mentioned: disobedience results in eschatological punishment (3:17; 4:11; 10:28–29, 35–39). The concept of disobedience is expressed in a variety of ways in the text. The author uses such phrases as “turning away from the living God” (3:12), not entering “God's rest” (4:6), “falling away” (6:6), and “shrinking back” (10:39) to describe disobedience. Terms such as “rebellion” (3:15–16), “sin” (3:17; 12:1), and “godless” (12:16) are also used. In such cases, the author is clear that the outcome will be punishment (2:2; 3:17; 4:11; 10:28–29, 35–39). The wilderness

generation serves as an example of this motif as they acted in disobedience and unbelief and were not able to enter God's rest (3:18–19). Esau serves as another example. After selling his birthright, Esau pleaded for it with tears but received only rejection and no chance to repent (12:16–17).

Third, the connection between suffering, death, and kinship appeared frequently in Hebrews. The concept of sonship is established right away as the author writes that in the past God spoke through the prophets, but “in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (1:2). The term υἱός is the predominant title for Jesus in the early chapters of Hebrews (1:5, 8; 2:6, 10; 3:6; 4:14; 5:5, 8). The Son, the author writes, “is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being” (1:3). The Old Testament is cited to act as direct speech identifying Jesus as God's Son (1:5; 5:5). Elsewhere in the epistle the Christian community is referred to as υἱοί. Hebrews 2:10 states that part of Jesus' salvific act involved bringing many υἱοὺς to glory. Again in 12:7, the author writes, “God is treating you as children (ὡς υἱοῦς).” A sibling relationship is established between Jesus and believers as the two are linked by death, suffering, and temptation (2:10–18). God serves as father to both Jesus (1:5; 5:5) and the believing community (12:5–11). The connection between sonship and suffering was also established in 5:8 when referring to Jesus learning through suffering καίπερ ὄν υἱός (“although he was Son”). Likewise, the community is encouraged to endure their hardships as a child would parental discipline (12:7–11).

CHAPTER FIVE

Clues of a Social Context from the Suffering and Death Language in Hebrews

Step Three: Principles for Determining a Social Context

Were the topics of suffering and death important for the author of Hebrews as he wrote to the particular situation of his recipients? Specifically, did Hebrews speak into a context of situation that involved a presence of suffering and threat of death? In chapter three of this study, a methodology for making determinations of a *social* context in an ancient text was developed. The emphasis on a social issue is to differentiate it from a *theological* issue or concern. This is not to imply that a social issue is not also theological (and vice versa). However, a topic or issue might have theological significance but not directly relate to the social situation from which the text emerges. The purpose of this chapter is to move from the textual examination in the previous chapter to an analysis of the social function of the discourse. Based upon the examination in the previous chapter, the working hypothesis moving into this chapter is that the author of Hebrews wrote his epistle to address the reality of suffering in the lives of his audience which had resulted in a fear of death.

1. Pervasiveness

This principle states that if a topic appears throughout a discourse, in both background material and more emphatic passages, it is likely a concern of an author. Using semantic domain theory, we found not only numerous references to suffering (thirty-six) and death (sixty-three) in nearly every chapter of Hebrews, but several clusters in the discourse (2:9–18; 9:14–17; 10:32–39; 12:1–11; 13:11–20). The majority

of references appear in the later chapters of the epistle, but some reference to suffering and/or death appears in every chapter except ch. 1 and ch. 8. The author uses this language to refer to the suffering/death of Jesus (2:9–10; 5:7–8; 12:2–3; 13:12), of the recipients (10:32–35; 12:5–11; 13:3, 13), of figures from Israel’s history (3:17; 11:4–37), of humans in general (2:15; 9:27), and in more abstract terms (6:1–2). These topics appear in both expository (2:9–18; 5:7–8; 9:14–17) and hortatory material (10:32–39; 12:1–11; 13:3, 13). With the presence of so many semantically related terms throughout the discourse across a spectrum of participants and topics, it becomes clear that suffering and death are established topics in Hebrews and are both backgrounded and foregrounded by the author.

In two places the author focuses on instances of suffering and expands upon them in detail. The first is 10:32–34 where the author depicts the audience’s past experience of suffering with descriptive language and specific examples. It is clear that the purpose of these verses is to motivate the audience to act with endurance and boldness in their current context (10:35). The space devoted to this past experience in vv. 32–34, then, serves to strengthen this exhortation and reveals a piece of the author’s intention for writing the epistle. The second detailed description of sufferings appears in 11:35–38 as the author dramatically depicts many unnamed heroes of faith from Israel’s history. These verses contain an emphatic list of the tremendous afflictions and painful experiences that these exemplars endured without losing their faith. The graphic language and elaboration in these verses serve a similar purpose as 10:32–34: to motivate the audience in their current context.

The topic of death, as we have seen, appears throughout the epistle but is rarely the topic of any lengthy treatment of expansion. Hebrews 2:9–18 provides a rare examination of death on a philosophical and existential level. In 2:9 Jesus is presented in two ways: being crowned with glory because of his death and tasting death for everyone. This leads to a discussion of the familial relationship between Jesus and God’s people (2:10–13). This culminates in some significant comments on death in 2:14–15: part of Jesus’ sharing humanity was his experiencing death; by his death, Jesus destroyed the devil, who holds the power over death; in doing so, Jesus freed all those (the descendants of Abraham, 2:16) who were held in slavery by their fear of death. While only a small passage with the large discourse of Hebrews, the focus on death here marks intentional elaboration by the author and a topic he thought needed attention.

2. Semantic Variation

The principle of semantic variation looks at the diversity of terms and forms of speech that an author uses to address a particular issue or topic. The greater this variety the more likely the author is not using stock language and is addressing a situation-specific issue. In our analysis of semantic domains, several unique terms for both suffering (twenty-three) and death (twenty) were identified. As was presented in the criterion of pervasiveness, this variety of terms appears throughout the discourse. They were found among expositional sections (2:9–18; 5:7–8), exhortations (10:35; 12:1; 13:13), quotations (12:5), paraenetic passages (13:3), and historical surveys (3:17; ch. 11). There is also a level of specificity in the author’s comments on suffering and death, particularly in his commands and prohibitions. The topic of suffering is presented as temptation (2:18), public shame and persecution (10:33), imprisonment (10:34; 13:3),

and discipline/training (12:5–11). The author speaks of death generally (2:9, 14; 5:7; 7:23; 9:15–16), figuratively (3:17; 4:11; 11:28, 29), and specifically using a variety of causes for death (7:1; 11:37; 12:20).

We can also identify a few places where the author uses metaphorical or figurative extensions of related terms for rhetorical effect. Several figurative uses of death-related terms appear in Hebrews. In 10:27, the author describes divine judgment as a fire that “consumes” an extended use of ἐσθίω, often used to refer to eating food. The same usage is found outside of the New Testament (Isa 26:11; 30:27; Jer 21:14), but the author of Hebrews’ use still retains rhetorical flare. Two appearance of figurative expression are found in Heb 11:28–29. In v. 28, the author writes that during the Passover death did not “touch” (θιγγάω) Israel’s firstborn. Verse 29 states that when the Egyptians entered into the Red Sea they were “swallowed up” (καταπίνω). Both of these terms are used within their co-text to refer to death, but their use by the author is intended to be rhetorical and memorable.

Metaphorical or figurative uses of terms related to suffering appear in two places in Hebrews. The first is at Heb 10:32 when the author reminds the audience of their prior “contest” (ἄθλησις) of sufferings. The word ἄθλησις, found only here in the New Testament, was used to refer to an athletic contest (Philo, *Dreams* 1.170).¹ By using the term metaphorically to refer to a time of persecution, the author of Hebrews establishes a theme of enduring suffering as an athlete (12:1–3, 12–14) and adds emphasis to this usage. The second metaphorical usage is found in Heb 12:5–11 as the author encourages his audience to demonstrate endurance like a child being disciplined by their parent. The

¹ Koester, *Hebrews*, 458–59; Lane, *Hebrews*, 298.

connection is a familiar one to a first century audience and would have been both memorable and emphatic.

3. Types of Utterance

The author of Hebrews uses twenty-nine imperative verb forms; thirteen of which appear among a string of commands in the closing chapter.² Among those twenty-nine imperatives, one-third appears among references to death and suffering.³ They are often supported by further commands or prohibitions using the subjunctive form—often a negated aorist subjunctive (which acts as a prohibition).⁴

In Heb 10:32, the author commands his audience to “recall” (ἀναμνησθεσθε) their former trial of suffering. This is followed in 10:35 with a prohibition (a negated aorist subjunctive; μὴ ἀποβάλητε) to “not abandon” their confidence.⁵ This command to recall previous suffering and prohibition against losing courage (in their present context) suggests a similar context of suffering for the audience’s current circumstances. Why else would the author need to so emphatically command them in this direction? At the very least, the author perceived the audience to be in a situation where their prior boldness in suffering would motivate them. Another imperative is found in 12:3 as the author commands his audience to “consider” (ἀναλογίσασθε) the “one who endured” (ὑπομεμενηκότα) great hostility (ἀντιλογία) from sinners. This command is linked by an ἵνα-clause to the prohibition that the audience not “grow weary” (μὴ κάμητε) or become discouraged (ἐκλυόμενοι). As with the previous example, the author provides a command

² Hebrews 1:6, 13; 3:1, 12, 13; 7:4; 8:5, 11; 10:32; 12:3, 5 [x2], 12, 13, 14, 25; 13:1, 2, 3, 7 [x2], 9, 16, 17 [x2], 18, 22, 23, 24. The first two imperatives (1:6, 13) are third-person commands found in quotations from the Old Testament (“Let all God’s angles worship him;” “Sit at my right hand”) and are of less relevance for our purposes.

³ Hebrews 10:32; 12:3, 5 [x2], 12, 13, 14; 13:3, 7 [x2].

⁴ Porter, *Idioms*, 57.

⁵ Παρησία, often translated as “confidence,” refers to a state of boldness. Louw and Nida state that the word sometimes implies “intimidating circumstances” and provide the additional gloss “courage” (25.158).

to recall a positive example of endurance in the context of suffering followed by a prohibition against failing to follow that example in their present circumstances.

The section on understanding endurance as divine παιδεία (Heb 12:5–14) contains five imperatives: two in the quotation from Proverbs and three at the concluding remarks in 12:12–14. While he is quoting from Scripture, the author makes clear that the passage from Proverbs 3 is addressed to his audience (ὕμῖν ... διαλέγεται; Heb 12:5a). The quotation commands the audience to not “make light of” (μὴ ὀλιγώρει) God’s discipline (παιδεία) or become discouraged (μηδὲ ἐκλύου) when rebuked. With this understanding of Godly discipline, the author states that his audience should recognize endurance as παιδεία because it is a sign that God is treating them as children.⁶ As stated in our previous exposition of this passage, the author draws not only from the notion of divine discipline but also from athletic imagery—that is, παιδεία as training. Hebrews 12:11 states that παιδεία yields “peaceful fruit of righteousness” for those who have been “trained” (γεγυμνασμένοις) by it. In a string of second person imperatives in 12:12–14, the author makes clear what the result of such training should entail. Continuing the athletic imagery, the author commands his audience to “straighten up” (ἀνορθώσατε) their “drooping hands” and “weak knees” (v. 12); “make straight” (ὀρθὰς ποιεῖτε) paths for their feet (v. 13), and “pursue” (διώκετε) peace with everyone (v. 14).⁷ In v. 13, the imperative is followed by a conditional clause that incorporates the subjunctive form. Here the author offers the result of such imperatives: ἵνα μὴ τὸ χολὸν ἐκτραπῆ [aor pass

⁶ This statement is brief—εἰς παιδείαν ὑπομένετε—and the verb could be read as either a present indicative (Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 650) or present imperative (Lane, *Hebrews*, 421).

⁷ Some scholars understand 12:14 as connected to what follows it rather than what precedes it (Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 661; Lane, *Hebrews*, 444–45). However, 12:14 not only continues the athletic imagery of vv. 12–13 (διώκω), but is tied semantically to his preceding co-text. It is also linked to 12:12–13 by asyndeton (see Westfall, *Discourse Analysis*, 266).

subj], ἰαθῆ [aor pass subj] δὲ μᾶλλον (“so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed”). The imperatives found in this section—tied closely to the topics of endurance (in suffering) and παιδεία—speak to the need for the audience to continue in endurance and reach the goals of their training.

Hebrews 13 contains many imperatives, as it comprises a paraenetic section as the author begins to wind down his letter.⁸ Several of these imperatives are brief and introduce topics that appear nowhere else in the epistle. These topics may reflect the concerns of the author and the audience’s social context, but many may simply be stock commands or general commands.⁹ The imperative in 13:3 that the audience “remember [μυμήσκεσθε] those in prison [...and] those being mistreated” and share in their affliction recalls earlier themes from the epistle. The community was praised in 10:34 for sharing in the suffering (συνεπαθήσατε) of those in prison (δέσμιος) during their prior experience with suffering. In 13:3, the author commands his audience to remember those in prison (δέσμιος) as if they were in prison with them (συνδεδεμένοι). This at least implies that members of the community continued to be imprisoned and that the audience was perceived to be in need of encouragement to continue visiting them. The reference to those being mistreated (τῶν κακουχομένων) reflects the same language used in 11:37 to describe the exemplars of faith that experienced suffering (κακουχούμενοι). This implies that, to a certain degree, some members of the community were presently suffering.

⁸ The differences in style and uniqueness of language and topics in ch. 13 have led some scholars to argue that it is a later addition to the text. However, these features are common in a paraenetic section of an ancient letter and there is no manuscript evidence of Hebrews lacking chapter thirteen. See Dyer, “Epistolary Closing,” 275–79.

⁹ This includes Ἡ φιλαδελφία μενέτω (“let mutual love continue” 13:1), τῆς δὲ εὐποίας καὶ κοινωνίας μὴ ἐπιλανθάνεσθε (“Do not neglect to do good and to share” 13:16), and Προσεύχεσθε περὶ ἡμῶν (“pray for us” 13:18). These may still reflect the social context of the epistle, but their lack of specificity and their presence among a long string of exhortations make it likely that they reflect more general concerns or language.

Two imperatives are found in 13:7 where the author calls the recipients to “remember” (μνημονεύετε) their leaders, consider the result of their lives, and “imitate” (μιμεῖσθε) their faith. Between these two imperatives is a participle (ἀναθεωροῦντες) that not only functions as an imperative (“consider”) but brings clarity to what the audience is to remember and imitate. If, as was argued in the previous chapter, the phrase τὴν ἔκβασιν τῆς ἀναστροφῆς refers to the leaders’ death, then the imperatives of this section are linked to the topic of death.¹⁰ The author here is calling his audience to remember their leaders who have since passed away and imitate the faith that they demonstrated up until the end of their lives.

In addition to imperatives and negated aorist subjunctives, the author of Hebrews also expressed commands through the hortatory subjunctive.¹¹ One such command appears in Heb 12:1 as the author presents his audience as runners being encouraged by the witnesses (μάρτυς) that went before them: δι’ ὑπομονῆς τρέχωμεν τὸν προκειμένον ἡμῖν ἀγῶνα (“Let us run with endurance the race set before us”). There are numerous points of contact between this command and the topics of suffering and death found elsewhere in Hebrews. The “cloud of witnesses” referred to earlier in the verse recalls the heroes of faith from ch. 11, which—as we saw—were portrayed as acting in faith despite suffering and facing death. The reference to endurance (ὑπομονή) not only calls back to 10:32–36 (the community’s previous trial of suffering) but is connected to the verses that follow. In 12:2–3, Jesus is presented as the model of endurance as he “endured the cross” (ὑπέμεινεν σταυρὸν; 12:2) and is called “the one who endured” (ὑπομεμενηκότα; 12:3). Further, Jesus’ race involved both suffering (αἰσχύνη, ἀντιλογία) and his death

¹⁰ For a discussion of this phrase, see 138–39.

¹¹ Porter, *Idioms*, 57–58.

(σταυρός). Within this context, the author's command to his audience to run their race implies that in doing so they will certainly experience similar trials as Jesus and the witnesses who went before them did.

A second hortatory subjunctive appears in Heb 13:13 right after Jesus' suffering (πάσχω: a reference to his death) outside the gate in terms of a Day of Atonement sacrifice is described. The author then commands his audience: τοίνυν ἐξερχώμεθα πρὸς αὐτὸν ἔξω τῆς παρεμβολῆς ("Therefore, let us go out to him outside the camp"). That this would involve suffering is clear as the author describes this action as carrying the abuse that Jesus did (τὸν ὄνειδισμὸν αὐτοῦ φέροντες). This hortatory subjunctive and the one in 12:1 comprise direct calls by the author for his audience to actively step out into a context of suffering rather than to shrink back from it. There is no hint from the author that his audience needs to create a context of suffering, rather he assumes that such a context already exists.

Alongside commands and prohibitions are several declarative statements in Hebrews that are significant for our analysis. An important statement comes after the author has recounted the community's prior experience of suffering and praises their display of endurance during that time. In 10:36 he writes: ὑπομονῆς γὰρ ἔχετε χρείαν ("For you have need of endurance"). Since this follows the prohibition to the audience against losing their boldness in their current situation, the statement in v. 36 implies one of two things. It could signal that the community was in danger of losing their boldness and the author perceived them as needing to demonstrate the endurance that they had abandoned. Or, the author might not necessarily have believed that the audience had stopped enduring but that their present situation calls for even more. In either scenario,

we can pull from this statement that the original recipients were perceived as within a social situation that called for endurance—a term elsewhere tied to times of suffering (10:32; 12:2–3, 5).

Another important declarative statement is found in Heb 12:4: Οὐπω μέχρις αἵματος ἀντικατέστητε πρὸς τὴν ἁμαρτίαν ἀνταγωνιζόμενοι (“In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood”). In the previous exposition of this verse, it was suggested that 12:4 was some kind of rebuke by the author. Having just described Jesus’ suffering and death at the hand of “sinners” (τῶν ἁμαρτωλῶν) in 12:3, the author here states that the audience’s own struggle with “sin” was not as severe. The use of αἷμα in 12:4 is clearly a reference to death—the community had not reached a point in their struggle where members had died as a result. This statement offers both insight and caution for determinations of the social issue addressed in Hebrews. On one hand, it points toward some type of “struggle” that found similarities with the hostility and shame that Jesus endured. On the other hand, it presents clearly that this struggle was not extreme enough that it had resulted in martyrdom.

Following Barclay’s lead, an analysis of the types of utterances that an author utilizes in a text can offer helpful clues to its social context. The use of commands or prohibitions—including imperatives, negated aorist subjunctives, and hortatory subjunctives—provides insight into an author’s perception of his audience and their situation. A third of all imperatives in Hebrews are connected to suffering and death. These imperatives are often supported by further prohibitions and commands that clarify and further exhort the audience. These further commands include exhortations to remember examples of endurance in suffering (10:32; 12:3a; 13:7), demonstrate similar

endurances (10:35; 12:3b; 13:13), and to help those currently suffering (12:12–14; 13:3). These utterances help to form a profile of the author’s perception of his audience as within a context of affliction and in need of encouragement. Two declarative statements in which the author speaks directly to his audience help to round out this picture: the audience is in need of endurance (10:36), find themselves within a current struggle but have yet to suffer to the point of death (12:4).

4. Prominence

One can identify numerous places in Hebrews where the author’s treatment of the topics of suffering and death is given strong emphasis or prominence. One way that this occurs is through the use of non-indicative verbs—many of which were identified in the previous section. When the author puts forward a command or prohibition—over a dozen instances of which occur within the context of suffering and/or death¹²—it stands out in the discourse. The use of the hortatory subjunctive (12:1; 13:13) is especially marked as the mood is combined with the first-person plural. Some key ways that the topics of suffering and death are given prominence in Hebrews include the author’s use of person, verb tense, repetition, discourse markers, and other devices. Several of these features of prominence were highlighted in the previous examination of the terms identified using semantic domain theory. In order to demonstrate how the author emphasizes the topics of suffering and death, this section will focus on three passages identified as semantic clusters (2:5–18; 10:32–39; and 12:1–14). By concentrating on these passages we will better be able to see how the author used a variety of techniques to establish prominence.

¹² Hebrews 10:32, ἀναμνήσκεσθε; 10:35, μὴ ἀποβάλητε; 12:1, τρέχωμεν; 12:3, ἀναλογίσασθε, μὴ κάμητε; 12:5, ὀλιγώρει, ἐκλύου; 12:12, ἀνορθώσατε; 12:13, ποιείτε, μὴ ... ἐκτραπή; 13:3, μμνήσκεσθε; 13:7, μνημονεύετε, μιμῆσθε; 13:13, ἐξερχώμεθα.

Hebrews 2:5–18

In Heb 1:1–2:4, the author presents the son as God’s ultimate messenger (1:1–14) and encourages his audience to pay attention to what the son had said (2:1–4). In 2:5–18 the focus is on Jesus and his relationship to humanity and can be divided into three units: Jesus’ exaltation is tied to humanity (2:5–9), his familial relationship to believers (2:10–13), and his sharing in humanity preparing him to be a merciful high priest (2:14–18).¹³ This entire section builds to the author’s highly prominent command in 3:1—which serves as both a conclusion to 1:1–2:18 and a transition to the next section.¹⁴

This section, on its own, is not highly prominent in the discourse as a whole; however, suffering and death play an important role in this passage and are emphasized in the text. At Heb 2:8b a shift occurs from the use of the third person to the first, and from aorist verbs to present verbs—both are movements into greater prominence. This shift is further marked by the use of *vũn* and *de*. The first person plural continues into 2:9, which grows in prominence by the author’s use of the present tense. Jesus remains the subject of this section and here for the first time the author, in a climactic way, uses the name *Ἰησοῦς*—previously being referred to as *υἱός*.¹⁵ Jesus, the author continues, was “made lower” (*ἡλαττωμένον*; perfect tense) than the angels, “crowned” (*ἐστεφανωμένον*; perfect) with glory and honor because of “suffering of death” (*τὸ πάθημα τοῦ θανάτου*) so that he “might taste” (*γεύσῃται*; subjunctive) death (*θανάτου*) for everyone. Within its co-text, this verse is highly marked and death plays a supporting role in the author’s

¹³ I am following Westfall, *Discourse Analysis*, 100–10.

¹⁴ Westfall, *Discourse Analysis*, 114–15. Hebrews 3:1 is highly marked as it addresses the community directly (*ἀδελφοὶ ἅγιοι*) by using a second person imperative (*κατανοήσατε*) and declaring Jesus an apostle (*ἀπόστολον*) and high priest (*ἀρχιερέα*). That this builds from what proceeds it is clear from the use of *ὅθεν*.

¹⁵ Ellingworth notes that the word order of 2:9 (placing *Ἰησοῦν* after *βλέπομεν*) increases the emphasis on Jesus’ name (*Epistle to the Hebrews*, 153). Placing Jesus’ name after a “dramatic affirmation of the incarnation” in the sentence adds to its emphasis (Cockerill, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 132).

description of Jesus. This leads to the next subunit, 2:10–13, and while it is introduced using γάρ (suggesting that what follows is supportive material), its opening verb uses the marked imperfect tense (ἔπρεπεν). Ἐπρεπεν is closely linked to διὰ παθημάτων and the author emphasizes that “it is fitting” that “through suffering” God perfected the son.¹⁶ Hebrews 2:9–10 are prominent within their larger unit and both verses feature the topics of suffering and death in a prominent way.

The beginning of the third subunit (vv. 14–18) is marked by the use of ἐπεὶ οὖν, “which signals a prominent inferential relationship with the preceding co-text.”¹⁷ The conditional statement in 2:14–15 is prominent in both its protasis and apodosis. The protasis is marked by the use of οὖν and the perfect κεκοινώνηκεν (“share”) and emphasizes the shared humanity of Jesus and believers. The apodosis is marked by elaboration of the ἵνα clauses and use of the present and subjunctive: Jesus, through death (διὰ τοῦ θανάτου), “might destroy” (καταργήσῃ; subjunctive) “the one having power” (τὸν τὸ κράτος ἔχοντα; present active participle) over death and “set free” (ἀπαλλάξῃ; subjunctive) those held as slaves by their “fear of death” (φόβῳ θανάτου). Verse 17 begins with ὅθεν (“therefore”) and the imperfect ὄφειλεν (“obliged”) as the author again emphasizes that Jesus shared in humanity. Hebrews 2:18, which closes down this unit, is marked by the use of the perfect πέπονθεν (“to suffer”) as suffering is emphasized in the presentation of Jesus being able to sympathize with humanity.¹⁸

The topic of 2:5–18 is Jesus and specifically how he shared in the humanity of his brothers and sisters. This builds from the beginning of the epistle to 3:1 where the author

¹⁶ Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 158.

¹⁷ Westfall, *Discourse Analysis*, 107.

¹⁸ Attridge points out that Heb 2:18 is marked by alliteration (πέπονθεν ... πειρασθεῖς ... πειραζομένους), which allows the verse to stand out from its co-text (*Hebrews*, 96).

emphatically commands his audience, “Consider Jesus, apostle and high priest of our confession.” As the author builds to this exhortation, it is significant for him that Jesus’ shared human experience that involved suffering (2:10, 18) and death (2:9, 14). Further, the author’s elaboration on how Jesus’ death destroyed death for all (who were captive by their fear of death) and the repetition of death terms marks this topic as emphatic. The author ties many of these elements together in his discussion of Jesus’ qualifications for the high priesthood in 5:1–10. In that section, Jesus’ humanity is again emphasized (ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις τῆν σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ; 5:7) and characterized by suffering and death.

Hebrews 10:32–39

Various elements in Heb 10:32–39 make it more prominent than its surrounding co-text. The section prior to it, 10:26–31, is relatively low in prominence as it follows a peak in the discourse at 10:19–25 (which contains three hortatory subjunctives and repeats themes found in 4:11–16) and includes a string of unmarked third person singular indicatives.¹⁹ The following section, 11:1–40, is characterized by the third person singular and is not emphasized by the author. Hebrews 10:32 begins this new section

¹⁹ Stating that Heb 10:26–31 is less prominent than its immediate co-text may need to be defended as this passage has historically been given a great deal of attention for its theologically difficult themes. Bateman is correct that this passage “has raised a great deal of consternation for biblical theologians” (“Introducing the Warning Passages,” 64) and the warning of no repentance after apostasy generated attention from very early on (Koester, *Hebrews*, 23). More recently, advocates of Calvinist-Reformed and Arminian theologies have argued the implications of this passage (and other “warning passages” from Hebrews) upon the doctrines of election, atonement, and predestination (see overview in Oropeza, “Warning Passages,” 81–100).

While this passage has featured prominently in the study and interpretation of Hebrews over the last two centuries, it is clear that within the text these verses are not highly marked from a linguistic standpoint. This is partly due to the fact that the verses preceding it (10:19–25) are peaks in the discourse and highly prominent. Several aspects of Heb 10:19–25 demonstrate its prominence within the text: the vocative ἀδελφοί (v. 19), the reference to Ἰησοῦ (v. 19), three hortatory subjunctives (vv. 22–24), and the use of present and perfect tense verbs throughout (see Westfall, *Discourse Analysis*, esp. 235–37). Hebrews 10:26–31, while retaining a couple of first person references (ἡμῶν, 10:26; οἶδαμεν, 10:30), generally uses the less marked third person and aorist verbs. The result is a drop in interpersonal involvement and a shift in prominence. The following section, 10:32–39, is marked by the second person and is highly interpersonal.

with the conjunction δὲ and the second person imperative ἀναμνησθεσθε (the first imperative since Heb 7:4). The use of the second person continues as the section builds to v. 35, which is marked by οὖν and the second person prohibition μὴ ἀποβάλητε. The author uses seven second person verbs in 10:32–36 which, along with ὑμῶν in v. 34, mark this passage as highly interpersonal. Lane points to a “concentration of rare vocabulary and expressions” in 10:32–39 that would have made it stand out for its original audience.²⁰

The content of these verses (10:32–35) is a description of the community’s prior suffering, which the author encourages them to remember (v. 32) and apply to their current context (v. 35). The terms used to describe the community’s past trials are a combination of second person present and aorist verbs. In 10:37–38, the author quotes from the Old Testament—a conflation of Isa 26:20 and Hab 2:3b–4. The quotation is closer to the LXX than MT and utilizes the future tense verbs (ἔξει, χρονίσει, ζήσεται) alongside a subjunctive (ὑποστείληται) and a present middle participle (ἐρχόμενος).²¹ The last verse of the section is marked by the author’s emphatic use of the first person plural. Whereas 10:32–36 made extensive use of the second person and the quotations in vv. 37–38 use the third person,²² in 10:39 the author uses the first person and includes himself among those who “do not” (οὐκ ἐσμέν) shrink back but have faith. This is made emphatic by the use of the pronoun ἡμεῖς at the beginning of the verse.

²⁰ Lane, *Hebrews*, 280–81. This includes the *hapax legemena* ἄθλησις (10:32) and ὑποστολή (10:39) and the rare phrases τοῦτο ... τοῦτο (10:33) and μικρὸν ὅσον ὅσον (10:37).

²¹ Gert Steyn has argued that the author of Hebrews used a LXX reading of Hab 2:3b–4 for his quotation and any alterations of the text (including the reversal of the clauses from Hab 2:4, a change to the future tense, and replacing ὅτι with ὅ) were likely from his own hand (*Quest for the Assumed LXX Vorlage*, 310–25).

²² This is apart from the first person pronoun μου (10:38) in reference to God, the speaker of the quotation.

Hebrews 10:32–39 is an example of how an author creates prominence in the context of a discourse. Within its surrounding co-text, these verses stand out for a variety of reasons: a shift to the second and first person; numerous imperatives and prohibitions; conjunctions such as οὖν and δὲ; and the use of the audience’s own history. The author has clearly intended this section to stand out for his audience and the presence of suffering language and instruction regarding endurance should not be overlooked.

Hebrews 12:1–14

In her discourse analysis of Hebrews, Cynthia Westfall calls ch. 12 a “fascinating study in prominence” and later declares that it “has the highest prominence in the discourse.”²³ Westfall has in mind the entire chapter, which builds to a climactic peak in vv. 28–29 with two hortatory subjunctives and emphatic language. Our focus is the first half of the chapter as this more directly deals with the topics of suffering and death. The chapter begins with a prominent departure from its preceding co-text (ch. 11): the use of the highly marked τοιγαροῦν (“for this very reason”) and a shift to the first person plural (note the pronouns ἡμεῖς and ἡμῶν) in 12:1. The author’s use of the hortatory subjunctive τρέχωμεν in 12:1, second person imperative ἀναλογίσασθε, and subjunctive μὴ κάμητε in 12:3 further elevates these opening verses. The name Ἰησοῦς, not used since 10:19, is placed emphatically at the end of the clause in 12:2a.²⁴ The second person is used throughout 12:3–4 (κάμητε, ὑμῶν, ἀντικατέστητε), adding to the interpersonal involvement. As noted elsewhere, terms related to suffering and death are frequent in 12:1–4 and the author’s emphasis on these verses further establishes these topics as prominent in the discourse.

²³ Westfall, *Discourse Analysis*, 274, 278.

²⁴ Koester, *Hebrews*, 637.

The author's section on παιδεία in 12:5–11 is noticeably less prominent than the rest of ch. 12. However, several features in this section retain the prominence of what precedes it and continues to mark this chapter above the rest of the discourse.²⁵ These verses repeatedly use the second person (ἐκλέησθε, ὑμῖν, ὀλιγώρει, ἐκλύου [12:5]; ὑπομένετε, ὑμῖν [12:7]; ἔστε [twice, 12:8]) and two imperatives appear in the quotation from Proverbs 3 (12:5). A shift to the first person in 12:9 (note the emphatic ἡμῶν) increases the prominence and strong interpersonal features of this section. The four first person verbs in 12:9 are either the future tense (ὑποταγησόμεθα, ζήσομεν) or the highly marked imperfect (ἔνευρετόμεθα, εἶχομεν). The tense forms in 12:10–11 remain highly marked (present: δοκοῦν, συμφέρον, δοκεῖ, εἶναι, ἀποδίδωσιν; imperfect: ἐπαίδευον; perfect: γεγυμνασμένοις). The repeated use of παιδεία/παιδεύω in this section firmly establishes the concept of “discipline/training” as a topic and emphatic. The terms appear seven times in these verses and such repetition signals an important issue for the author.

Three second person imperatives in 12:12–14 make this section highly prominent, even when surrounded by an already prominent co-text. These three commands are closely linked and the third is further elaborated in vv. 15–18. The use of two perfect middle participles in 12:12 (παρειμένας, παραλελυμένα) and the presence of διὸ further establishes its prominence; as does the continuation and deactivation of athletic imagery (which began in 12:1). Two subjunctives in 12:13 (ἐκτραπῆ, ἰαθῆ) continue the prominence alongside the emphatic ὑμῶν. Verse 14 states the goal of παιδεία and the race imagery as the pursuit (διώκετε) of peace and holiness.

The high prominence of 12:1–14 continues to build to the closing verses of the chapter, but it should not be lost how these verses themselves stand out in the discourse.

²⁵ This is noted by Westfall, who structurally connects 12:3–11 (*Discourse Analysis*, 276).

Further, the topics of suffering and death cluster in the opening verses, are included in the repeated use of παιδεία, and come to an emphatic conclusion in vv. 12–14. As we have seen, the author uses a variety of methods to establish this section—drenched in suffering and death language—as prominent in his discourse.

Concluding Thoughts on Prominence

The goal of this section was to demonstrate how the author of Hebrews emphasized the topics of suffering and death in his epistle. Rather than look at each instance of the topics, I have chosen to present three significant clusters to show how they stand out within the discourse. In the first example, Heb 2:5–18, the unit itself is not prominent compared to its co-text, but its references to suffering and death are emphasized. This shows how, on a smaller level, the author presents our two topics in the more prominent verses of a unit. The two other examples, Heb 10:32–39 and 12:1–14, demonstrate how a particular unit stands out in the discourse as a whole. The implication is that since these units contain a high cluster of suffering and death language, then these topics are emphasized in the discourse. The first of these, 10:32–39, stands out within its immediate co-text and emphasizes the role of past suffering as encouragement for contemporary action. The second, 12:1–14, is among the most highly prominent section of Hebrews and contains a dense cluster of suffering and death language.

5. Cohesion and Coherence

At this point in our analysis there is sufficient linguistic evidence to demonstrate that suffering and death are important topics for the author of Hebrews. In terms of coherence, we must ask whether the scenario being tested—that the original audience faced active suffering and a threat of death—is consistent with the rest of the epistle. I

will approach this question in two ways, taking a cue from Halliday and Hasan's notion that a text must be coherent with its context and with itself.²⁶ First, in an effort to establish that the text is coherent with my proposed context of situation, I will argue that this hypothesis in some form is necessary for many of the passages incorporating suffering and death language to make sense. I will demonstrate how the author of Hebrews assumes this context within the text. Second, in order to demonstrate coherence within the text, I will examine three central themes in Hebrews not directly related to suffering and death to show how my hypothesis fits within the author's larger argument.

Three brief passages demonstrate that the author of Hebrews assumes a context of situation that involves suffering. Hebrews 10:35–36 follows the reminder to the audience of their previous time of suffering with an exhortation to not abandon their courage. Verse 36 tells the audience that they are in need of endurance. Both of these verses assume a context of suffering within which to demonstrate courage and endurance. Later, in Heb 12:1–4, the author encourages his audience to run their race with perseverance. Within the co-text of the heroes of faith in ch. 11 and Jesus' example in Heb 12:2–3, the race involves opposition, affliction, and possibly death. Verse 4 references a struggle that has not yet resulted in martyrdom, but does seem to assume some level of suffering. In Heb 13:3, the author exhorts the audience to visit members of their community who are in prison and who are being tortured. The author previously mentioned the audience's sharing in the mistreatment and imprisonment in 10:33–34. In Heb 13:3, the author seems to be working from the knowledge that this mistreatment and imprisonment has continued to their current situation.

²⁶ Halliday and Hasan, *Cohesion in English*, 23.

A problem for those scholars who identify Hebrews as a theological treatise void of a situation-specific context is the question of what to do with its teaching and references to suffering and death. In particular, what does one do with the specific exhortations regarding endurance and suffering found in 10:35–36, 12:1–4, and 13:3? Pamela Eisenbaum identifies the role of suffering in Hebrews alongside exhortations to its recipients, yet—being consistent with her view that Hebrews did not address present suffering for its hearers—she concludes that the hearers must seek out suffering: “[I]f one does not have an actual opportunity to endure suffering, one should try to simulate the effect artificially.”²⁷ Similarly, James Kelhoffer writes, “In the absence of an environment of oppression and persecution ... how does one gain the opportunity to endure hardships ... Or, how does one bear Christ’s abuse (13:13b) when there is no abuser?”²⁸ He concludes that Hebrews provides no answer to that question. What Eisenbaum and Kelhoffer fail to understand is that Hebrews does not need to provide an answer since the audience already found themselves within a context of suffering. The author of Hebrews does not need to flesh this out since it would have been obvious to the recipients and a part of the shared information behind the text. A context of situation of present suffering and fear of death essentially work with these passages as an exophoric cohesive tie. They are incoherent without reference to this type of context of situation.

If the author offers direct exhortations to endure suffering to an audience that was not actively facing hardships, then such communication is irrelevant and potentially incoherent. If such exhortations appear infrequently in the text, or are one-offs instances expressing token or stock language, then it might be argued that the author is not

²⁷ Eisenbaum, “Virtue of Suffering,” 337.

²⁸ Kelhoffer, *Persecution, Persuasion, and Power*, 141.

addressing an actual situation. But since they appear at several places in the text using very specific references, this appears unlikely. It is more probable that the abundance of suffering and death language—especially those found in second person imperatives—spoke into a context characterized by suffering than one with an absence of suffering. Otherwise, as Eisenbaum has suggested, the audience must create such contexts for themselves. This seems highly unlikely.

Hebrews 12:7–8 is another passage that necessitates a context of present suffering. In this passage the author offers a radical reconfiguration of how the audience is to view hardship and endurance.²⁹ Specifically, he indicates that the presence of trials—properly understood as divine παιδεία—should be viewed as confirmation of one’s status as a child of God. “God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children” (12:7b–8). Verse 8 is emphatic since the author essentially repeats the point by showing how the opposite scenario is true. Further, the author shifts to the second person in order to address his audience directly. It is clear that the author does not consider his audience to be illegitimate children. He therefore seems to assume that they are currently experiencing some form of hardship. This reality, the author emphasizes, is not a sign of God’s disapproval or abandonment, but rather is a sign of belonging to God. In order for his argument in 12:7–8 to be effective, there must be an assumption that the audience did in fact face some form of hardship in their present context.

The principle of coherence must also look at the discourse of Hebrews as a whole in light of our hypothesis of the social situation of the text. It was acknowledged at the

²⁹ See deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 450–51; Koester, *Hebrews*, 538–39.

beginning of this study that the author of Hebrews most likely wrote his epistle for a variety of reasons and to address multiple issues. This is to say that it is not expected that every passage in Hebrews is somehow linked to the reality of suffering and threat of death that the original audience faced. However, coherence dictates that a hypothesis not contradict what is found in the epistle and that it is consistent with the author's argument. This is a significant endeavor and worth elaboration.

It is beyond the purposes of this study to offer a full commentary-style rereading of Hebrews in light of our hypothesis regarding suffering and death, so instead I intend to demonstrate the coherence of this theory among some of the epistle's most prominent topics. Again, my goal is not to show how every aspect of Hebrews' argumentation and theology is enlightened by our hypothesis, but rather to establish it within the epistle's overall message. We will look at three major themes from Hebrews: eschatology, faithfulness, and Jesus the High Priest.

Eschatology

Underpinning the epistle to the Hebrews are both temporal and spatial eschatological considerations.³⁰ In a temporal sense, the author of Hebrews understands himself and the community as living in “these last days” (ἐπ’ ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων, 1:2),³¹ experiencing the “powers of the age to come” (δυνάμεις τε μέλλοντος αἰῶνος, 6:5) while awaiting God's eschatological kingdom (12:28; 13:14). Jesus' death

³⁰ On the eschatology in Hebrews, see Barrett, “Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” 363–93; Mackie, *Eschatology and Exhortation*, esp. 3–8; deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 27–32. Some may restrict the term “eschatology” to only temporal consideration of the last things. However, Ellingworth has rightly pointed out that while the author of Hebrews' thought is fundamentally temporal, he is “capable of using alternative, independent spatial representations of the universe in different contexts and for different purposes” (*Epistle to the Hebrews*, 76).

³¹ This phrase might also be translated “at the end of these days.” As Attridge has argued, the phrase is derived from an expression for the future (בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים, Gen 49:1; Num 24:14; Deut 4:30) that was later used in an eschatological sense (Isa 2:2; Mic 4:1; Dan 10:14) (*Hebrews*, 39).

occurred at “the end of the age” (ἐπὶ συντελείᾳ τῶν αἰώνων, 9:26) and he will come a second time (9:28) “in a very little while” (10:37) to save those who are waiting for him. For this reason, the community should continue in their faithfulness and not neglect to meet together as the “day”—presumably the Day of Judgment—is approaching (10:25). Hebrews’ temporal eschatology has often been understood in terms of Jewish apocalyptic two-age eschatological thinking.³² In spatial terms, the author of Hebrews presents a duality of the things connected to this world and those of a heavenly reality.³³ In chs. 8–9, the author contrasts the earthly sanctuary (an “example” [ὑπόδειγμα] and “shadow” [σκιά], 8:5) with the heavenly sanctuary, which is described as “greater” [μείζωνος] and “perfect” [τελειότερος] and “not of this creation” (9:11). The law is “only a shadow” of the good things to come and “not the true form of these realities” (10:1). The believers are praised for having accepted the confiscation of their possessions because they knew that they “possessed something better and more lasting” (10:34). The author points to a reality beyond what is visible (11:1, 3) or can be touched (12:18). The earth is something that will be shaken (12:26), but the heavenly kingdom cannot be shaken (12:28). Hebrews’ spatial duality has numerous points of connection with Platonism,³⁴ although this has been challenged.³⁵ Spatial categories are often at home in Jewish apocalyptic thought, which probably is a better backdrop for Hebrews’ eschatology.³⁶

A function of both the temporal and spatial eschatology in Hebrews is to encourage the audience to think beyond their present situation. As with apocalyptic

³² See Mackie, *Eschatology and Exhortation*, 5–8; 35–37; Barrett, “Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews;” Lane, *Hebrews*, cviii; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 27–28; Cockerill, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 26–28.

³³ See Koester, *Hebrews*, 97–100; Adams, “Cosmology of Hebrews,” 122–39.

³⁴ See especially Thompson, *Beginnings of Christian Philosophy*; also, Thompson, “Middle Platonism,” 31–52.

³⁵ Hurst, “Eschatology and ‘Platonism,’” 41–74; Adams, “Cosmology of Hebrews,” 122–39.

³⁶ Aune, “Apocalyptic,” 245.

literature, Hebrews' eschatology offers its audience hope beyond death and this earthly existence.³⁷ In fact, as Mackie points out, two-age dualistic eschatology flourished within conditions of persecution and/or social-economic marginalization.³⁸ Such an eschatological vision encouraged those marginalized or persecuted that their present reality did not reflect the true state of affairs. They could look to a future time and another world as a source of hope in the midst of despair. Held up against my hypothesis that its audience faced actual suffering and a threat of death, Hebrews' eschatology takes on a socio-scientific and rhetorical function. For a community facing active suffering, the author encourages them by placing them within a cosmic drama that promises salvation to those who endure in faith (10:36, 39). This should calm any fear they have of death since death, it is shown, is not the end.³⁹

Faithfulness

Faith is an important topic in Hebrews. The term πίστις occurs thirty-two times in the epistle—most of which appear in chapter eleven—and seems to convey two concepts: (1) *belief* in the gospel message (4:2, 14; 11:6) combined with *trust* in God (6:1) and his promises (10:22–23) as demonstrated by numerous examples of faith (11:6, 11, 19, 20–22); and (2) *faithfulness* to God despite difficulty or hardship.⁴⁰ This notion of faithfulness takes on various forms in Hebrews and is the focus of the paraenetic purpose

³⁷ Collins, "Apocalyptic Literature," 45.

³⁸ Mackie, *Eschatology and Exhortation*, 32.

³⁹ Backhaus, "Zwei harte Knoten," 208–12.

⁴⁰ Koester, *Hebrews*, 125–27. Several scholars have taken on the issue of whether faith in Hebrews should be understood Christologically—that is, whether Jesus is an object of faith. Erich Grässer argued strongly that πίστις in Hebrews is not Christological but ethical in nature (*Glaub im Hebräerbrief*, esp. 35, 63, 79). In response, Dennis Hamm demonstrated that faith in Hebrews is deeply connected to its Christology and that Jesus is not only presented as a model and enabler of faith, but also as an object of faith ("Faith in the Epistle to the Hebrews," 272). Victor Rhee built upon Hamm's argument to show how Heb 5:11–6:20 reveals the author's implicit depiction of Jesus as an object of faith ("Christology and the Concept of Faith," 84).

of the author.⁴¹ Faithfulness is a praiseworthy characteristic of Moses and Jesus (3:1–6) along with other exemplars from Israel’s history (ch. 11). Faithfulness is presented as an active forward movement and is tied to obedience and loyalty to God. This is continued by the numerous exhortations for endurance (6:11; 10:36; 12:7; 13:13), fidelity (4:14; 10:23), and movement toward God (4:11, 16; 6:1; 10:19–22).⁴² Examples of a lack of faithfulness are found in the wilderness generation (3:16–19; 4:2–11) and Esau (12:16–17). These negative examples are presented alongside numerous warnings against drifting away (2:1), turning from God (3:12; 6:6), being disobedient (3:18; 4:11; 10:26), sluggishness (6:11; 12:3), and failure to move forward (4:1; 10:39). Faithfulness in Hebrews is presented as active obedience and fidelity to God despite any hardship or difficulty that may occur.

The author’s repeated appeals for faithfulness and warnings against disobedience and sluggishness suggest that he thought that his audience was in need of such exhortation. The examples of faithfulness provide behavior to emulate and the negative examples warn of the consequences of a lack of faithfulness. The repeated warnings against laziness and turning away from God and the confession strongly imply that the author perceived his audience as in danger of following such a path—if they had not already. But what has caused the original recipients to be in danger of disobedience, shrinking back, and essentially abandoning the faith? This is essentially the main question of the social situation address in Hebrews: Why is the community perceived as risking waning commitment and outright disobedience? The hypothesis put forward in

⁴¹ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 21–23.

⁴² Käsemann famously identified this notion of faith as active movement, or “confident wandering” (*Das wandernde Gottesvolk*, 24). He wrote that in Hebrews the paradox of faith “consists in the choice of a transcendent future over earthly delight for the sake of the Word alone, despite the waiting and suffering attached to that future in the immanence of the present” (*Wandering People of God*, 39).

this study offers a viable answer—the community found themselves in a trial of suffering with a real threat of death. If this is true, then there appears to be a connection between acting in faithfulness and facing suffering and possible death. The author presents Jesus’ faithfulness as entailing suffering (5:8; 12:2–3; 13:12); so also with Moses (11:25–26) and other heroes of faith (esp. 11:35–38). The author’s exhortations for faithfulness often occur within references to suffering and death (4:14; 10:36, 39; 12:7; 13:13).

Jesus the High Priest

The high priesthood of Jesus is a defining motif in Hebrews (2:17; 4:14–5:10; 6:20; 7–10) and an important contribution to the author’s argument and theology.⁴³ It stands out not only in this epistle but also in the entire New Testament as no other book utilizes this title or concept.⁴⁴ It is an important contribution to the Christology of the epistle as well as of early Christianity.⁴⁵ The title ἀρχιερέυς is first given to Jesus in 2:17 and used throughout the text (3:1; 4:14–15; 5:5–10; 6:20; 7:26; 8:1; 9:11). The author also uses the title ἱερέυς for Jesus, specifically within the context of Ps 110:4 (4:17, 21; 5:6) or when qualified by ἕτερος (7:11, 15) or μέγας (10:21).⁴⁶ In 2:17–18, the author introduces the concept of Jesus as high priest as a result of his becoming like his brothers and sisters and offers two benefits of this role: (1) Jesus offers atonement for the sins of the people (v. 17); and (2) He is able to help those in their present need (v. 18). In 5:1–10,

⁴³ For more on the high priesthood of Jesus in Hebrews, see Mason, ‘*You Are a Priest Forever*’, 8–39; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 183–88; Gray, “*Brotherly Love*,” 335–51; Horbury, *Messianism Among Jews and Christians*, 227–54; Nairne, *Epistle of Priesthood*; O’Collins and Jones, *Jesus Our Priest*, 57–67; Scholer, *Proleptic Priests*, 82–90. See also Dyer, “‘*One Does Not Presume*,’” 1–21.

⁴⁴ Attridge is quick to point out that while Hebrews’ presentation of the high priesthood of Jesus is unique in the New Testament, it was not created “*ex nihilo*.” He points to a variety of Jewish literature—particularly the concept of priestly angels (*Jubilees*, *1 Enoch*, the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, and the Qumran literature)—that were already a part of early Christian liturgy by the time of Hebrews’ composition (Attridge, *Hebrews*, 97–103).

⁴⁵ Koester, *Hebrews*, 109.

⁴⁶ Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 183–84.

the author presents Jesus as fulfilling the requirements of a high priest, including quotations from the Psalms that serve as his divine appointment (Ps 2:7, Heb 5:5; Ps 110:4, Heb 5:6).⁴⁷ In 5:6, the author quotes from Psalm 110 and applies to words to Jesus: “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek” (also 5:10; 6:20; 7:11, 15, 17). Jesus, like Melchizedek, did not derive from a priestly family line (7:14) but was called by God and serves “through the power of an indestructible life” (7:16). Jesus’ high priesthood is superior to earthly high priests since he did not share their limitations (7:27–28), served in the true sanctuary (8:1–2; 9:11–12, 24), and offered a once-and-for-all sacrifice of himself (7:27; 9:25–28; 10:12). The two benefits of Jesus’ high priesthood introduced in 2:17–18 are repeated throughout the author’s discourse. Jesus the high priest offers atonement for the sins of the people (5:9; 7:27; 9:12; 10:10, 14) and is able to help those in their present distress (6:19–20; 7:25; 9:28).

The presentation of Jesus as high priest appears to be new information for the audience of Hebrews⁴⁸ and the author indicates that it is an important topic for them (5:11; 8:1). In two ways the author’s presentation of Jesus as high priest coheres with a social situation of suffering and threat of death. First, the author intentionally stresses Jesus’ ability to help those he serves in their current distress. It is highly significant that Jesus’ sharing in humanity—including an emphasis on his suffering and death—prepared him for his role as high priest (2:10–18; 5:7–10). Jesus not only has secured salvation for his people, but he knows their suffering and temptations and is able to help them (2:18).

⁴⁷ The quotations are both first-person direct speech that the author has taken from their original co-text and, when placed in this new co-text (5:1–10), are spoken to Jesus. They are held together by the pronoun σύ and are addressed to Jesus directly (“You [Jesus] are a priest forever”). See deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 189.

⁴⁸ Koester, *Hebrews*, 109; Lane, *Hebrews*, cxlii. Cf. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 95, who notes that the abruptness in which the author uses the title ἀρχιερεύς in 2:17 may indicate that it was familiar to the audience.

His role as high priest is not limited by death, but he continues to serve and offer intercession on behalf of the people (7:27–29). Second, the author’s high priestly Christology serves a pastoral function of strengthening the audience’s theological confidence.⁴⁹ The experiences of suffering and fear of death lead to a waning commitment and a questioning of God’s promise. Several members of the community are in danger of falling away and abandoning the confession. In response, the author offers a high Christology and deepened understanding of the confession to encourage fidelity.⁵⁰ Jesus’ high priesthood communicates to the audience that Jesus is able to save them in their present context and to the end. As Lane writes, “Christology in Hebrews is fully contextualized.”⁵¹ It is tailored to address the needs of the audience and to give them confidence in the confession they seem so willing to abandon.

Concluding Thoughts on Coherence

The purpose of this principle is to test how well our hypothesis coheres with the entire discourse of Hebrews. That the author is responding to his audience’s present experience of suffering and threat of death is a plausible explanation for the passages that directly refer to suffering and death—in fact, they seem to necessitate some form of this hypothesis (10:35; 12:1–4, 7–8; 13:3). Not every passage in Hebrews necessitates this social context, but the epistle as a whole should still make sense in light of our hypothesis for it to be valid. By analyzing three of Hebrews’ core topics, it was shown that a context of present suffering and fear/threat of death fits well within the epistle. This context helps explain the use of temporal and spatial eschatological imagery as a way of providing hope beyond the audience’s current situation toward life after death. It also helps account

⁴⁹ Lane, *Hebrews*, cxxxviii–cxliii.

⁵⁰ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 13; Lane, *Hebrews*, cxxxviii.

⁵¹ Lane, *Hebrews*, cxliii.

for the warnings against idleness (understood as the result of a context of suffering) and exhortations to faithfulness (the proper response to this context). Finally, this hypothesis helps explain the high priest Christology in Hebrews and offers some insight into how it is tailored as a pastoral response to the audience's situation.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study up to this point has been to articulate from the text of Hebrews a probable context of situation that motivated the author to compose the epistle. As I have stated elsewhere, communication is often driven by multiple purposes and is not necessarily prompted by just one concern. This study has attempted to make sense of the abundance of suffering and death terms in Hebrews by articulating a probable context of situation. Through the six linguistic principles outlined in chapter three, I have argued that the author of Hebrews wrote his epistle in response to active suffering and a fear of death experienced by his probable audience. This context of situation is supported by the pervasiveness of the topics of suffering and death in Hebrews, along with the semantic variation of terms used by the author. It was shown that the author's use of commands and prohibitions (including imperatives and subjunctives) within his discussion of these topics supports the proposed context of situation. The prominence given to these topics in the discourse of Hebrews further collaborates this hypothesis. Finally, the principles of coherence and cooperation tested the proposed context of situation against the epistle as a whole. It was shown that Hebrews not only coheres well with this context but often necessitates it in order to be relevant and make sense.

At this point in the study, then, we can move forward with the hypothesis that the author of Hebrews composed his epistle to meet the needs of his recipients' crisis of suffering and fear for their lives. With this context of situation in place, the next chapter turns to the question of *how* the author responds to this context in his epistle. Specifically, the next chapter will examine Hebrews rhetorically to demonstrate how the author created models of endurance in times of suffering and in the face of death.

CHAPTER SIX

The Use of Exempla in Responding to a Context of Suffering and Death in Hebrews

Introduction

In the previous chapters it was argued that the Epistle to the Hebrews was written to an audience that was facing active suffering and feared death as a realistic threat. This chapter will build upon that argument by analyzing the text rhetorically to examine *how* the author responds to this crisis. In the present chapter I will show that a significant way the author responds to his audience's situation was by offering models of those who had endured through times of suffering in the face of death. The rhetorical device of presenting *exemplars* within a discourse has a long history in both Greco-Roman and Jewish literature and examining this history will shed light on how the author uses this trope. As will be shown, the effectiveness of an *exemplar* is connected to how well it relates to the audience's own context. That the exemplars put forth by author of Hebrews are repeatedly defined by suffering and death implies that these are issues needing to be addressed in the epistle. Thus, the following presentation of how the author of Hebrews provides models of those facing suffering and the threat of death—which the audience is meant to emulate—will provide further evidence for my overall thesis.

This chapter will begin by placing the use of *exemplars* within the context of Hellenistic Judaism. While used across various cultures—both ancient and contemporary—the use of examples within a discourse to motivate an audience was an established device in both Greco-Roman and Jewish literature. The second part of this chapter will examine the text of Hebrews, indentifying three main groups of *exemplars*:

figures from ancient Judaism, the community itself, and Jesus Christ. It will be shown that these *exemplars* do not merely illustrate a theological point, but rather serve as models that the audience is to emulate. These figures endured suffering in the face of death and their rhetorical purpose in the epistle is to motivate similar endurance in the audience in their own context.¹

Exempla in Greco-Roman Literature

The use of examples in a discourse was an established rhetorical device that received a great deal of attention in ancient rhetorical handbooks and was used throughout Greco-Roman literature.² Aristotle discusses examples as forms of induction—allowing only actual historical figures or events.³ Cicero writes that the use of an *exemplum* “supports or weakens a case by appeal to precedent or experience, citing some person or historical event.”⁴ Valerius Maximus (14–37 CE) compiled a collection of examples for use in rhetoric—explaining how to introduce, correct, and conclude example stories.⁵ As Skidmore has shown, Valerius understood examples not only as rhetorical techniques but also sources of moral guidance. Examples were included to

¹ I use the term “rhetorical” in a general sense of the effectiveness of a discourse—particularly in its attempts to persuade or motivate its audience. This is to be differentiated from the “rhetorical criticism” that incorporates categories and techniques from ancient rhetoric and applies them to the New Testament. Examples of this method include Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*; Betz, *Galatians*; Witherington, *New Testament Rhetoric*; also see the bibliography by Watson and Hauser, *Rhetorical Criticism of the Bible*. Such approaches are not without merit, but often assume a New Testament writer’s training in rhetoric and can lead to imposing foreign categories on the text (for a critique of this approach, see Porter and Dyer, “Oral Texts?,” esp. 328–41). The treatment of *exempla* in Greco-Roman literature below is not meant to suggest that the author of Hebrews was consciously incorporating categories or training from ancient rhetoric, but rather to place this text within its milieu. On the incorporation of ancient Greek rhetoric for interpreting Hebrews, see Koester, “Hebrews, Rhetoric, and the Future of Humanity,” Gelardini, “Rhetorical Criticism in Hebrews Scholarship,” and Small, *Characterization of Jesus*, 15–24.

² On the use of *exemplum* in Greco-Roman literature and handbooks, see Cosby, *Rhetorical Composition*, 93–105; Fiore, “Paul, Exemplification, and Imitation,” esp. 228–237; Price, “Paradeigma and Exemplum.” See also Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 70–76; Mitchell, *Rhetoric of Reconciliation*, 39–46; Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 59–73.

³ *Rhetoric* 1.2.19.

⁴ *De Inventione*, 1.30.49. Translation from Hubbell.

⁵ Fiore, “Paul, Exemplification, and Imitation,” 231.

provoke imitation of praiseworthy behavior.⁶ Valerius's collection of stories from the Roman world under the reign of Tiberius provides a glimpse into the Roman world at that time. Valerius's intention in collecting these examples is spelled out in its opening words: "I have determined to select from famous authors and arrange the deeds and sayings worthy of memorial ... to the end that those wishing to take examples may be spared the labor of lengthy search."⁷ Proof by example, often followed by a call to imitation, was heavily used in Greco-Roman literature—with examples from Isocrates, Plato, Dio Chrysostom and many others.⁸ Andocides' speech *On the Peace with Sparta* makes extensive use of examples from history to support his argumentation.⁹ At the beginning of his speech he validates his use of examples by reminding his listeners, "one must use the past as a guide to the future."¹⁰ The historian Livy emphasizes the importance of historical examples in providing figures worthy of imitation and also those to avoid (*Ab Urbe Condita* 1.pr.10). Seneca uses numerous examples in his letters—often commenting on the usefulness of identifying examples for what he was discussing. Interesting in its parallels with my study on Hebrews, Seneca on several occasions presents *exempla* of figures that faced death without fear (*Epistles* 102.30, 104.22). Often the use of an example is followed by a call to imitate (μιμῆσθαι) the exemplar.¹¹ Isocrates makes good use of this call to imitate exemplars. In *Archidamus*, he has the title character encourage the Spartans to follow the example of their ancestors: "It were fitting, then, to imitate

⁶ Skidmore, *Practical Ethics*, 2–3; Walker, "Introduction," xiii.

⁷ *Memorable Sayings and Doings*. Translation by Bailey.

⁸ See Mitchell, *Rhetoric of Reconciliation*, 42–46. Mitchell limits her discussion to deliberative rhetoric, but it is clear that the use of example was used in forensic and epideictic rhetoric as well.

⁹ See Jost, *Das Beispiel*; Perlman, "The Historical Example," 150–66; Usher, "Symbouleutic Oratory," 221.

¹⁰ Andocides, "On the Peace with Sparta." Translation by Maidment.

¹¹ Fiore, "Paul, Exemplification, and Imitation," 230–31.

(μμήσασθαι) our forefathers and, by retracing our steps, now that we have stumbled in our course, try to win back the honors and the dominions which were formerly ours.”¹²

The ancient rhetorical handbooks often theorize the role of exempla as a persuasive tool in rhetorical speeches. Aristotle understands exempla as secondary to enthymeme, or deductive reasoning. For this reason, they should appear toward the end of a discourse, after the main argument has been presented.¹³ In *Rhetoric* 2.20.9, he writes, “If we have no enthymemes, we must employ examples as demonstrative proofs, for conviction is produced by these; but if we have them, examples must be used as evidence and as a kind of epilogue to the enthymemes.”¹⁴ Aristotle differentiates between historical examples (those that actually happened) and fictional examples.¹⁵ Historical examples are to be preferred as more persuasive “because as a rule the future resembles the past” (*Rhetoric* 2.20.8). Despite acknowledging its usefulness, Aristotle clearly holds the use of exempla as inferior argumentation and only a necessity when one’s deductive reasoning needs further support. In *Problems* 18.3 he states, “[People] like to learn and to learn quickly, and this end is achieved more easily by examples and fables [than by enthymemes].”¹⁶

The use of exempla is also discussed in *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum*, a 3rd century BCE handbook written from an anonymous source.¹⁷ Examples (παραδείγματα) are described as:

[A]ctions that have occurred previously and are similar to, or the opposite of, those which we are now discussing. They should be employed on

¹² *Archidamus* 6.82. Translation by Norlin. Cited in Mitchell, *Rhetoric of Reconciliation*, 42–43.

¹³ Cosby, *Rhetorical Composition*, 95

¹⁴ Translations from *Rhetoric* by Freese.

¹⁵ *Rhetoric* 2.20.2. Fictional examples are further divided into “comparison” and “fables.” See Cosby, *Rhetorical Composition*, 94; Price, “Paradeigma and Exemplum,” 37–46 (note especially the chart on 39).

¹⁶ Translated by Forster.

¹⁷ Quintilian identifies Anaximenes as the author (*Inst. or.* 3.4.9).

occasions when your statement of the case is unconvincing and you desire to illustrate it, if it cannot be proved by the argument from probability, in order that your audience may be more ready to believe your statements when they realize that another action resembling the one you allege has been committed in the way in which you said that it occurred.¹⁸

The author agrees with Aristotle in understanding exempla as having a secondary and illustrative role in argumentation. There is no distinction between historical and fictitious examples—only historical examples are considered. An interesting feature from this definition is that the author highlights the role of negative examples alongside positive examples.¹⁹ Also, the author indicates that the effectiveness of an example is its similarity (or dissimilarity) to the issue being addressed. Further, effective exempla are tied to the nearness in time and place of the hearers (1439a 1–3). That is, historical examples close to the time of the hearers are more effective than those further away.²⁰ If such examples are not obtainable, according to *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum*, then those that are “the greatest and best known” (μέγιστα καὶ γνωριμώτατα) are to be preferred. *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* distinguishes between two types of παραδείγματα: expected and unexpected. Examples of expected events serve to support what is assumed and probable, while unexpected examples discredit them (1439a 7–11).²¹

The Latin rhetorical handbook *Rhetorica ad Herennium* also places exempla among the inferior types of argumentation.²² The author defines exempla as “the citing of something done or said in the past along with the definite naming of the doer or author” (4.49.62). Distinguishing it from testimony, the author writes: “The difference between

¹⁸ *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* 1429a 21–27. Translation from Rackham.

¹⁹ Price, “Paradeigma and Exemplum,” 22–23.

²⁰ *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* also allows for examples from the present (1439a 14–18). See Price, “Paradeigma and Exemplum,” 23–26.

²¹ Price, “Paradeigma and Exemplum,” 17–19.

²² Price, “Paradeigma and Exemplum,” 88, notes that *Rhetorica ad Herennium* understands exemplum solely as stylistic and illustrative.

testimony and example is this: by example we clarify the nature of our statement, while by testimony we establish its truth” (4.3.5).²³ As Cosby points out, by making this claim, the author demotes exempla below where even Aristotle placed it. Rather than an inferior type of proof, *Rhetorica ad Herennium* states the examples can only help clarify and not help prove an argument.²⁴ However, this does not necessarily mean that the author sees no value in exempla. In 4.49.62, it states that an example “renders a thought more brilliant when used for no other purpose than beauty; clearer, when throwing more light upon what is somewhat obscure; more plausible, when giving the thought greater verisimilitude; more vivid, when expressing everything so lucidly that the matter can, I may almost say, be touched by the hand.” However, as Price points out, *Rhetorica ad Herennium* clearly states that an exemplum must be specific in its use (“definite naming of the doer or author” 4.49.62). This is hinted at in previous rhetorical handbooks, but is made clear here.²⁵

Unlike the previous rhetoricians, Quintilian understood exempla as not merely illustrative but as a significant facet of persuasive argumentation.²⁶ In *Institutio Oratoria*, he argues against distinguishing between a *comparison* and an *example*—as, he notes, Cicero and others do (5.11.1–2). He does, however, distinguish between examples as a form of proof and those used for simply stylistic reasons—apparently being the first ancient writer to do so.²⁷ Quintilian defines the use of example as “the adducing of some past action real or assumed which may serve to persuade the audience of the truth of the

²³ Translation by Caplan.

²⁴ Cosby, *Rhetorical Composition*, 100.

²⁵ Price, “Paradeigma and Exemplum,” 98.

²⁶ Cosby, *Rhetorical Composition*, 103.

²⁷ Kennedy, *Quintilian*, 70.

point which we are trying to make.”²⁸ He identifies five types of example: similar, dissimilar, contrary, greater to lesser, and lesser to greater (5.11.6–10).²⁹ In using historical examples, Quintilian points out that the extent to which one needs to recount the details of the example depends upon its parallel in the argument and the audience’s knowledge (5.11.6, 15–16). Often, he notes, it is only necessary to allude to the historical example. “Such parallels will be adduced at greater or less length according as they are familiar or as the interests or adornment of our case may demand” (5.11.16). Finally, Quintilian rejects the notion advanced by some rhetoricians that *exempla* are useful in oratory but not written discourses (12.10.51).³⁰

The rhetorical handbooks do not agree on all points regarding the use of *exempla* in a discourse, but we can discern some basic qualities of how *exempla* are utilized in Greco-Roman culture. First, *exempla* are often understood as secondary to deductive reasoning and designed to serve merely as illustrations of the argument put forth (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 2.20.9; *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum*, 1429a 23–24). At the same time, the value of using examples is often seen in their power to persuade and to affect emotions. Cicero acknowledges the power of historical examples, claiming that they delight the audience and enhance the credibility of the speaker.³¹ Even the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, which does not allow that the use of examples can help prove an argument, still identifies their ability to clarify and support certain argumentation (4.49.62). Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria* denotes a shift in thinking since it understands *exempla* as a legitimate facet of inductive argumentation—and not a lesser type of proof. When we

²⁸ *Inst. Or.* 5.11.6. Translation from Butler.

²⁹ On the five types of *exempla*, see Price, “Paradeigma and Exemplum,” 154–73.

³⁰ Price, “Paradeigma and Exemplum,” 183.

³¹ Fiore, “Paul, Exemplification, and Imitation,” 233, who cites Cicero, *Or.* 34.120.

consider the widespread use of examples in Greco-Roman literature together with the theoretical discussion found in the handbooks, it is clear that examples are a valuable and often-utilized facet of Greek culture.

Second, some attention is given in the handbooks to the features of an example that make it most effective. *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* discusses only historical examples as “actions that have occurred previously and are similar to, or the opposite of, those which we are now discussing” (1429a 21–22). This indicates that the effectiveness of an example is connected to its relevance for the present situation being addressed. Similarly, Quintilian points out that the success of a historical parallel is dependent upon shared knowledge of the story by an audience (*Inst. or.* 5.11.15–16). Further, effective exempla are tied to the nearness in time and place to the hearers (*Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* 1439a 1–3). That is, historical examples close to the time of the hearers are more effective than those further away. If such examples are not obtainable, according to *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum*, then those that are “the greatest and best known” (μέγιστα καὶ γνωριμώτατα) are to be preferred.³² There is a connection between an effective example and the context of the discourse—an effective example has strong similarities (or dissimilarities, if using a negative example) with the situation being addressed and often assumes common knowledge between its author and the audience.³³

Finally, it is clear that often the purpose of using an example—while rhetoricians disagree on the role of examples in argumentation—is to assist in moving an audience

³² See Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 72.

³³ Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 62, writes: “While the use of examples, both theoretically and practically speaking, can apply to judicial as well as to deliberative and exhortative speeches, their function lies in their power to affect one’s thinking about a current situation [...] Thus, the description of an example from the past will always be colored by an interest in the present.”

toward some action or belief (*Rh. Ad.* 1429a; Quintilian, *Inst. or.* 5.11.6).³⁴ An example encourages the audience to reconsider their current situation in light of a parallel circumstance or event. The appeal to imitate an exemplar reinforces the need to take present action in light of the past. This is why similarity and familiarity between the example being used and the audience being addressed is so vital to its effectiveness.

Exempla in Jewish Literature

Unlike the Greco-Roman literature surveyed above, there is little to no theorizing about the use of exempla in Jewish literature. That is not to say that Jewish authors do not use examples in their discourse. Yet, prior to any Hellenistic influence on Judaism, the use of exempla in Jewish literature seems to have had a very different purpose than that of the rhetorical handbooks and orators. With the influence of Hellenism, this no doubt changed as exempla were incorporated in writings for embellishment, persuasion, and other rhetorical purposes. It will be valuable in this section to look at the use of exempla in both Jewish and Hellenistic Jewish writings.

Broadly understood, one could argue that the Hebrew Bible contains countless exempla throughout its various books. The Historical Books, recounting the historical narratives of the Israelites, can be understood as providing models of the past with relevance for their contemporary context.³⁵ Regardless of their historicity, the stories of Job, Jonah, Ruth, or many other figures, could be regarded as providing examples of behavior, belief, and God's faithfulness. Yet we are concerned here with the invoking or citation of a figure within the context of a discourse rather than the telling of an entire

³⁴ Fiore, "Paul, Exemplification, and Imitation," 234, writes: "Example expresses the best way, to be followed, or the worst, to be avoided. Moreover, it gives a precedent that shows the desired course can be followed or ought not be followed." See also Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 62.

³⁵ See Howard, *Old Testament Historical Books*, 25.

story—regardless of its implications for modeled behavior or action. The invoking of examples does occur within the Hebrew Bible, but much less frequently than in Greco-Roman writings.

Where historical examples are most utilized in the Hebrew Bible are within sections that retell Israel's history for various rhetorical purposes. Such passages include Josh 24:2–15; Psalms 78, 105, 106, 135; Ezek 20:5–44; and Neh 9:6–38.³⁶ These passages typically move chronologically through the history of Israel, highlighting various figures and actions. In Joshua 24, Israel's leader speaks to the people one last time by recounting God's faithfulness from Abram, through the exodus, and up to their present time. At the close of his speech, Joshua encourages the people to remain faithful to God (v. 15) and they respond by making a covenant with God (v. 25). In Psalm 106, the psalmist retells Israel's story beginning with the exodus through the years of rebellion in the wilderness. In the psalm, emphasis is placed on the failures of the people with a select few (Moses, Aaron) set apart for their righteous actions.

In her study of these passages, Eisenbaum notes several common features to these historical summaries.³⁷ First, the topics of covenant and land emerge in these texts. The summary in Joshua occurs within the context of covenant renewal, but unlike the other texts it does not include covenants in its summary. The inheritance and possession of the land promised by God resurfaces throughout these texts as a goal toward which the history points. Second, Eisenbaum points out that often in these texts the identities of the ancestors being mentioned and the people being addressed are conflated. The historical distance of the summaries from their hearers is acknowledged (esp. in the later texts), but

³⁶ For a thorough analysis of these passages, see Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 20–35.

³⁷ Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 30–35.

they reflect their historical context in many ways. This is done, Eisenbaum reasons, “by their perspective on early Israelite history or by grafting the current situation onto the historical retelling.”³⁸

The literature of the Second Temple period—written in a time when Judaism had begun to be influenced by Hellenism—reflects a greater use of exempla. The *Testament of Reuben*, written in the second century BCE,³⁹ warns against promiscuity by first presenting Reuben—writing in the first person—as a negative example (4:1–7) and then Joseph as a positive example (4:8–10). Of Joseph, it says:

You heard how Joseph protected himself from a woman and purified his mind from all promiscuity: He found favor before God and men. For the Egyptian woman did many things to him, summoned magicians, and brought potions for him, but his soul’s deliberation rejected evil desire. For this reason the God of our fathers rescued him from every visible or hidden death.

The *Testament of Benjamin* similarly holds up Joseph as an example to follow, telling its readers to “pattern your life after the good and pious man, Joseph” (3:1) and to “be imitators of him in his goodness because of his compassion” (4:1). In Tobit 4:12, as Tobit encourages his son not to marry a foreign woman, he uses examples from the past: “Remember, my son, that Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, our ancestors of old, all took wives from among their kindred. They were blessed in their children, and their posterity will inherit the land” (NRSV).

The martyrdoms of Eleazer, the seven brothers, and their mother at the hands of King Antiochus in 2 and 4 Maccabees are excellent illustrations of exempla in Second Temple Judaism. Second Maccabees 6:18–7:42 tells the story of these martyrs and serves

³⁸ Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 34.

³⁹ On the dating of the *Testaments of Reuben*, see Kee, “Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs,” 777–78. Translations are also taken from Kee.

as a turning point in the narrative.⁴⁰ Eleazer, the seven brothers, and their mother each are given the choice of eating pork in front of the king (and thereby renouncing their faith) or death. The author of 2 Maccabees presents each martyr as “ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our ancestors” (7:2). In this way, as Henten remarks, “the martyrs are presented as model figures and indicate the proper way of life for other Jews.”⁴¹ This is clear in the text—in the words both placed on Eleazer’s lips (“By bravely giving up my life now, I will ... leave to the young a noble example [ὕπόδειγμα] of how to die a good death willingly and nobly for the revered and holy laws” 6:27–28) and spoken by the narrator (“So in this way he died, leaving in his death an example of nobility and a memorial of courage, not only to the young but to the great body of his nation” 6:31). Fourth Maccabees presents itself as a philosophical (φιλοσοφώτατον) treatise on the thesis that “devout reason is sovereign over the emotions” (1:1).⁴² The author chooses to prove this thesis by appealing to the example of the martyrs: “I could prove to you from many and various examples that reason is dominant over the emotions, but I can demonstrate it best from the noble bravery of those who died for the sake of virtue, Eleazar and the seven brothers and their mother” (1:7). Throughout the detailed description of their martyrdom, 4 Maccabees regularly connects their example to its overall thesis. Through these examples the author highlights that both male and female, whether they are young or old, are capable of such nobility (7:16; 8:1; 14:11; 16:1–2;

⁴⁰ Just prior to 6:18, 2 Maccabees details the drastic Hellenization and attack on Jerusalem by King Antiochus (5:1ff.), robbery and sacrilege of the Temple (5:15–16), and Antiochus’s decree against practicing Judaism (6:1–2). After the account of the martyrs, the next chapter details the early victories of Judas Maccabaeus (“As soon as Maccabeus got his army organized, the Gentiles could not withstand him” [8:5]). The next several chapters detail the death of Antiochus (9:28), the restoration of the Temple (10:1–8), overturning of the decrees against Judaism (ch. 11), and finally the defeat of Nicanor (15:27–28).

⁴¹ Henten, “Martyrdom,” 918.

⁴² In this sense, the book is not necessarily a historical account but rather a philosophical demonstration that reason—which ultimately comes from training in the Jewish law (1:17)—is able to control one’s passions. See deSilva, “3 and 4 Maccabees,” 664.

17:9). The mother, being an elderly woman forced to watch her seven children be tortured, is presented as an ultimate example—showing that devout reason is sovereign over emotions (16:1).⁴³

In Second Temple literature are also numerous historical surveys—like those identified in the Hebrew Bible—that list many examples from Israel’s past. Such lists include Sirach 44–50, 1 Macc 2:51–60, 4 Macc 16:20–23, 18:11–19, and 4 Ezra 7:105–11.⁴⁴ Sirach 44–50 is a lengthy retelling of “the praises of famous men, our ancestors in their generations” (1:1 NRSV). Such figures include Noah (44:17–18), Abraham (44:19–21), Aaron (45:6–22), Samuel (46:13–20), Elijah (48:1–11), and many others.⁴⁵ This list praises these figures for their accomplishments within the offices they occupied while also retelling the history of Israel.⁴⁶ First Maccabees 2:51–60 is a more succinct list encouraging its readers to “remember the deeds of the ancestors, which they did in their generations” (2:51 NRSV). Beginning with Abraham (v. 52) and ending with Daniel (v. 60), this list presents exemplary figures that endured in the face of adversity and were rewarded for it. Joseph, for example, kept the commandments “in the time of his distress” and “became lord of Egypt” (v. 53). The author of 4 Maccabees has the mother of the seven martyrs encourage her sons by reminding them of their ancestors who endured suffering for the sake of God (16:20–23). Her list of exemplars includes Abraham, Isaac, Daniel, Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael. In 16:24 the author writes: “By these words the mother of the seven encouraged and persuaded each of her sons to die rather than violate God’s commandment.”

⁴³ See Young, “Woman with the Soul of Abraham,” 73–79.

⁴⁴ On these and other Hellenistic Jewish lists, see Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 35–57.

⁴⁵ For a more detailed analysis of this text, see Mack, *Wisdom and the Hebrew Epic*;

⁴⁶ The emphasis on the designation of offices in Sirach 44–50 is a major thesis in Mack, *Wisdom and the Hebrew Epic*, 18–19.

Consistent in the use of exempla in Jewish literature is the appeal to Israel's history to shed light on the contemporary context. In this way, such literature did not share the concern of the ancient rhetorical handbooks that effective exempla be close in time to the audience.⁴⁷ For these writings, the ancient heroes of Israel's past—particularly Abraham, Moses, and Joseph—serve as effective models of behavior. Unique also is the emphasis on the retelling of Israel's history as a part of one sequence of events. Older examples are connected to more recent ones and essentially tell one big story into which the audience can fit themselves.⁴⁸ In other ways, we can see exempla in Jewish literature being used in similar ways as in Greco-Roman works. Often exempla are utilized to promote a certain action or way of life. This is particularly evident in the retelling of the Maccabean martyrs. The use of exempla to persuade a certain course or actions is also seen in the appeals to Joseph in the *Testament of Reuben* and the *Testament of Benjamin*.

Exempla in the New Testament

The use of exempla is well established in the writings of the New Testament. They are found in the teaching of Jesus (Matt 12:3–7) and the disciples (Acts 7:2–53), the letters of Paul (Rom 4; 1 Cor 11:1; Phil 3:17), and throughout the general epistles (James 5:10–11; 1 Pet 2:20–24). For the purposes of this chapter, I will narrow this analysis to the use of historical examples (that is, those that are understood as having actually happened) in a discourse and to emphasize places where the topics of suffering and death emerge. So, while in the Gospels Jesus made abundant use of parables in his teaching, this type of example will not be examined.⁴⁹ Similarly, the use of the Old Testament by

⁴⁷ Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 79.

⁴⁸ Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 80–81.

⁴⁹ Aristotle and other rhetoricians categorized parables (παραβολή, or “comparison”) alongside fables as types of examples alongside historical examples (*Rhetoric* 2.20.2; Quintilian, *Inst. or.* 5.11.1–2). Parables

early Christian writers, regularly understood as typological—while overlapping in some ways with the use of exempla—will not be analyzed in this section.⁵⁰

In the Gospels, Jesus uses historical examples infrequently in his teaching. As pointed out above, he more commonly uses parables to illustrate and reinforce his teaching—particularly in the Synoptics. Historical exempla, however, are not entirely absent from the Gospels' accounts of Jesus Christ. When confronted by the Pharisees concerning his disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath, Jesus refers to the example of David in response (Matt 12:3–7; Mk 2:25–26; Lk 6:3–4): “Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests.” In his teaching, Jesus also uses present examples (as opposed to historical ones), including a child (Matt 18:2–5; Mk 9:36–37; Lk 9:47–48), the woman at the Pharisee's house (Lk 7:44–50), and the poor widow at the temple (Mk 12:41–44; Lk 21:1–4). The Gospel of John's portrait of Jesus explicitly sets him up as an exemplar for its readers. In John 13:15, the Gospel writer presents Jesus, after washing his disciples' feet, telling them that he has “set [them] an example” and that they should do as he has done. Later in that same chapter, Jesus tells his disciples, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (13:34).

In the Acts of the Apostles, the author presents Jesus' disciples appealing to examples on a few occasions in their teaching and interactions. Throughout the text,

are certainly a type of example and I do not wish to neglect their contribution to this discussion. The purpose in excluding this from this section is to narrow our focus and best place Hebrews' own use of examples within its cultural context. On the use of parables in the Gospels, see Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*; Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*; Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*.

⁵⁰ Typology here refers to a Christian writer emphasizing a word, person or event from Jewish scripture as a “type” having parallels in the current context. On the use of typology in the New Testament, see Goppelt, *Typos*; Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament*, 126–35.

however, the apostles retell Israel's history to show how it validates, and culminates in, the life of Jesus Christ. When Peter speaks at Pentecost in Acts 2:14–36, his speech compares Jesus to David—using him as a lesser-to-greater example. Israel's great King David, Peter argues, died, was buried, and remains in his tomb (v. 29). Yet Jesus, whom David attested to long ago (vv. 25–28, 30), was raised from the dead by God (v. 24) and is exalted to the right hand of the Father (v. 33). Similarly, the author presents Paul in Acts 13:16–41 rehearsing the history of Israel to show how it culminates in the resurrection of Jesus. Beginning with the Exodus (v. 17), through the time in the wilderness (v. 18), the reigns of Saul (v. 21) and David (v. 22), Paul continues Israel's history with John the Baptist (vv. 25–26) and the resurrection of Jesus (v. 30). Paul's speech is reminiscent of the type of retellings of Israel's history using a variety of historical examples found in Jewish literature.

Stephen's speech in Acts 7 is another example of retelling Israel's history in early Christian literature. This speech includes numerous historical figures and is very similar to the history lists found in previous Jewish writings.⁵¹ Stephen traces Israel's history from Abraham (vv. 2–8), Joseph (vv. 9–14), and Moses (vv. 20–44), to David and Solomon (vv. 45–47) and the prophets (v. 52). Stephen finishes by declaring to his oppressors, “You are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become” (vv. 51–52). By retelling the history of how numerous figures of Israel's history faced opposition, adversity, and death, Stephen is essentially providing examples of his own situation. Just

⁵¹ Some scholars have identified Acts 7 as a possible influence on Hebrews 11. See Hurst, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 89–106.

as these figures endured suffering and death, he shares, along with other Christians, a similar situation. Further, Stephen is making clear that those persecuting him are doing exactly what those who persecuted Israel's heroes had done.

Paul makes extensive use of examples in his letters—including figures from Israel's history (Rom 4:1–3), his missionary companions (Phil 2:22), Christian communities (Gal 4:14; Phil 3:17), Jesus Christ (Phil 2:5), and even himself (1 Cor 4:16, 11:1; Gal 4:12; 1 Thess 1:5–6).⁵² As many scholars have identified, Paul repeatedly calls his readers to be “imitators” (μιμητής) of exemplary figures who display desired behaviors (1 Cor 4:16, 11:1; Phil 3:17; 1 Thess 1:6–7).⁵³ In 1 Thessalonians, Paul describes the readers as imitators (μιμητής) of himself and of Christ (1:6) because they received the word with joy despite suffering (θλιψις).⁵⁴ As a result, the readers themselves became an example (τύπος) for the believers in Macedonia and Achaia (1:7). In 2:14 Paul commends his readers for imitating the churches of Judea by faithfully enduring in the face of suffering.⁵⁵ When writing to the Corinthians, Paul directly appeals to his readers: “be imitators of me” (μιμηταί μου γίνεσθε, 1 Cor 4:16) and “be imitators of me, as I am of Christ (μιμηταί μου γίνεσθε καθὼς καὶ γὼ Χριστοῦ, 1 Cor 11:1).⁵⁶ The first exhortation to imitate Paul arrives after a recitation of his weakness and affliction in 4:9–13: being hungry, poorly clothed, slandered, persecuted, and considered among the

⁵² See Fiore, “Paul, Exemplification, and Imitation,” 228–57. Paul also utilized examples taken from nature: a branch (Rom 11:17–24), the human body (1 Cor 12:4–27), and food (1 Cor 3:2).

⁵³ Brant, “Place of *mimesis* in Paul's Thought,” 285–300; Michaelis, “μυμείομαι,” 661–78; Furnish, *Theology and Ethics*, 218–24; Dodd, *Paul's Paradigmatic 'I'*, 18–29; Reinhartz, “Pauline Exhortation,” 393–404; Fowl, “Imitation of Paul/of Christ,” 428–31.

⁵⁴ On the connection of imitation despite suffering, see Fee, *First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, 38–39.

⁵⁵ Furnish states that in this letter the one “clear and specific point to be imitated” is “patient and loyal obedience even in the midst of suffering” and cites passages in Hebrews (5:8; 12:1ff.; 13:12) as other examples of this motif (*Theology and Ethics*, 221).

⁵⁶ On Paul's use of himself as an example worthy of imitation in 1 Corinthians, see Mitchell, *Rhetoric of Reconciliation*, 49–60.

“scum of the earth.” In displaying his weakness, Paul demonstrates that in such circumstances the power of the cross is revealed; by calling his readers to imitate him, Paul points to his life of weakness as worthy of emulation.⁵⁷ To help remind his readers of his ways “which are in Christ,” Paul writes that he has sent Timothy to the Corinthians.⁵⁸ In 11:1, Paul’s example is that of one who puts aside his own needs for those of others (10:23–33)—an example modeled closely after that of Christ. Two points can be made regarding Paul’s appeal to imitate himself. First, Paul presents himself as an example with the caveat that he himself is imitating Christ’s own example. The authority of Paul and the validity of his example both stem directly from his imitation of Christ.⁵⁹ Second, since the readers are to imitate Paul as he imitates Christ, it follows that both Paul and his readers are engaged in the same *mimesis*. That is, they are both called to emulate Christ.⁶⁰

Paul’s letter to the Philippians is illustrative of Paul’s use of exempla.⁶¹ Throughout the epistle, Paul cites numerous exemplars worthy of imitation.⁶² In Phil 2:19–30, Timothy is presented as a person known for his “proven worth” and the audience should hold persons like him in high regard (Phil 2:29). This is especially true of Timothy, as Paul points out, because his work for the Lord nearly resulted in his death

⁵⁷ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 146–47.

⁵⁸ Paul’s example is closely linked to Christ. Brant states that “Paul’s role as an example hinges upon his relationship to Christ” (“Place of *mimesis* in Paul’s Thought,” 294).

⁵⁹ “The authority of Paul’s example lies in the fact that he concretely manifests the ethic inherent to a life in Christ. Clearly Christ provides the supreme exemplar of self-renunciation, and Paul appeals to Christ’s example. Paul, however, puts himself forward as the principal model precisely because of his emphasis upon the concrete” (Brant, “Place of *mimesis* in Paul’s Thought,” 299).

⁶⁰ Brant, “Place of *mimesis* in Paul’s Thought,” 297. This is especially pronounced in Paul’s use of *συνμιμητής* in Phil 3:17.

⁶¹ In *New Testament Ethics*, Frank Matera titles his chapter on Philippians, “An Ethic of Imitation and Example” (174–88).

⁶² Markus Bockmuehl writes that “the theme of imitation recurs as an integrating focus in every major section of Philippians” (Bockmuehl, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 254).

as he risked his life for Christ (Phil 2:30). Jesus Christ is the ultimate exemplar and the readers are to have his same attitude (Phil 2:5). The Christological hymn of Phil 2:6–11 portrays Jesus as a model of humility, self-sacrifice, and obedience to God to the point of death. The surrounding co-text of this passage emphasizes the humility that the Philippians are to demonstrate in their attitudes and behaviors (Phil 1:27–2:16) and Paul’s autobiography in 3:4–11 similarly follows the pattern set out by Christ.⁶³ In Phil 3:17 Paul encourages his audience to be συμμιμηταί (“co-imitators”)—a noun form found only here in the New Testament. The example in this case is Paul himself and the Philippians are to join together in imitating him. In this sense, the call is not only to imitation but also to unity.⁶⁴ Further, the Philippians are to “observe those who live according to the example (τύπος) you have in us” (Phil 3:17).

A few aspects of Paul’s use of exempla should be highlighted. First, a large percentage of Paul’s examples came not from persons in history but from those still alive and actively demonstrating the qualities to emulate. This includes Paul himself (“imitate me”) along with various early Christian communities that he features. At times Paul does appeal to historical examples (Abraham in Rom 4 and Gal 3:6–9; the wilderness generation in 1 Cor 10:1–13; Jacob and Esau in Rom 9:10–13), but more frequently he utilizes living examples. The ancient handbooks do not differentiate between past and living examples but are more concerned with historical as opposed to fabricated examples. However, if the effectiveness of an example is understood as connected to its proximity in time and type with the audience, then appeals to living examples would be powerful rhetorical tools. Second, Paul presents Jesus Christ as a supreme exemplar—in

⁶³ Spencer, “Imitation of Jesus,” 398. Note the emphasis on following Christ in his suffering and death in 3:10.

⁶⁴ Reinhartz, “Pauline Exhortation,” 400.

his calls to “imitate” Christ (1 Cor 11:1; 1 Thess 1:6) and his descriptions of Jesus’ modeled behavior (Phil 2:5). Although he does not develop his understanding of Christ as exemplar, Paul’s letters demonstrate an early tradition of Jesus as a model of behavior and thought within the earliest Christian communities.

Exempla are used at numerous places in the remaining New Testament texts. In the Epistle of James, the author appeals to the examples of Abraham and Rahab to show that a person is justified by works and not faith alone (Jas 2:20–26).⁶⁵ In 5:10–11, the author provides two examples of patience in suffering:

As an example (ὑπόδειγμα), brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord’s dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful.

Following this, the author presents Elijah as an exemplar of the power of prayer (Jas 5:17–18). In 1 Peter the author presents Jesus as an exemplar to servants who suffer unjustly at the hands of their masters: “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example (ὑπογραμμός), so that you should follow in his steps” (1 Pet 2:21). Jesus’ conduct while enduring unjust suffering—he did not retaliate or threaten, but trusted God—is then described (1 Pet 2:22–23). Again in 1 Pet 3:17, the author encourages the audience in their suffering for what is right because “Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous” (1 Pet 3:18). In 1 Pet 4:1a, the author states: “Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same intention.” The author of 1 Peter challenges the elders within the church to not lord their power over others, but to “be examples (τύποι) to the

⁶⁵ The Epistle of James also makes use of examples from nature and the audience’s own context: grass/crops (1:10–11; 3:12; 5:7), the rudder on a ship (3:4), fire (3:5b–6).

flock” (1 Pet 5:3). In 2 Peter the author uses numerous examples from Israel’s history (angels, Moses, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot) to argue that the readers can rest assured in their present situation that God knows “how to rescue the godly from trial” and punish the ungodly (2 Pet 2:4–9).⁶⁶ Finally, the author of 1 John presents Cain as a negative example illustrating a failure to love one’s brother (1 John 3:12).

It is interesting how often examples are invoked in these early Christian letters to respond to a context of suffering. The epistles of James and 1 Peter each present examples of patience and endurance in the midst of suffering (Jas 5:10–11; see also Jas 1:2–4; 1 Pet 3:17–18, 21–22; 4:1). In 2 Peter the examples from Israel’s history are meant to assure the addressees that God rescues his people from trials. Many of Paul’s exhortations that his readers imitate either him or other believers are within a context of suffering or hardship (1 Cor 4:9–16; 1 Thess 1:6; 2:14). Not all uses of *exempla* by the New Testament writers come within contexts of suffering or affliction, but it is striking how many do. Given this evidence, the extensive use of exemplars facing suffering and death in Hebrews fits well within what we find in other writings of early Christianity. This brief look at the New Testament writings makes clear that (1) the authors commonly use *exempla* for a variety of purposes in their arguments and exhortations, and (2) appealing to examples to speak into a context of suffering or hardship is often utilized—especially in the early Christian epistolary writings.

Summary

The above survey demonstrates that, by the time of the composition of Hebrews, the use of examples in a discourse was a common rhetorical technique in Jewish,

⁶⁶ With the example of Sodom and Gomorrah, the author specifically states that they were made an example (ὕποδειγμα) of what was coming to the ungodly. This same example is used also in Jude 7.

Hellenistic, and early Christian contexts and that they were used for a variety of purposes. Their main function, particularly as presented in the rhetorical handbooks, was to support or prove an argument. If logic or reasoning could not fully persuade, then an example might help illustrate or strengthen an argument (Aristotle *Rh.* 2.20.4; *Rh. Her.* 4.49.62). For such examples to be effective, they must be specific (*Rh. Her.* 4.49.62), similar or dissimilar to the point being made (*Rh. Alex.* 1429a 21–22), close in time (*Rh. Alex.* 1439a 1–3), and familiar to the audience (Quintilian, *Inst. or.* 11.15–16). The use of examples to support an argument is not exclusive to Greco-Roman literature. Fourth Maccabees sets up its retelling of the martyrs as examples to prove “that reason is dominant over the emotions” (1:7). Similarly, Jesus’ use of examples (Matt 12:3–7; Lk 7:44–50; 21:1–4) supports his teaching or sets a precedent for his ministry.

Examples are also used to construct models of behavior to be either emulated or avoided. This purpose often emerges implicitly from examples used to support an argument. Historical examples often serve the dual purpose of strengthening an argument while also demonstrating that a particular action or exhortation is feasible (Aristotle, *Rh.* 2.20.8; Quintilian, *Inst. or.* 5.11.6). In this way, these examples invite the audience to enter into the story and to draw connections to their own lives. The retellings of Jewish history in the Old Testament and Second Temple literature often served this function.⁶⁷ However, exemplars—that is, historical examples worthy of emulation—are often used independently of supporting an argument for the purpose of exhortation.⁶⁸ Second Maccabees, for example, presents Eleazer and the other martyrs as examples of

⁶⁷ See Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 76–78. She points out that unlike most Greco-Roman writings, these Jewish retellings provided models of behavior worthy of emulation.

⁶⁸ My intent is not to set up examples for argumentation and exemplars for emulation as mutually exclusive. Often argumentation and emulation are derived from the same example. My point here is that the presentation of an exemplar in a discourse is often used independently of an attempt to prove an argument.

faithfulness to the law despite torture and persecution (6:27–28, 31). Paul’s call for *mimesis* among his churches similarly constructs a model of behavior or a way of life. The effectiveness of such examples derives from their parallels with the contemporary situation of the recipients. An interesting example of this is the mother of the seven martyred brothers in 4 Maccabees retelling the history of Israel to her sons (16:20–23). The features of her examples revolve around faithfulness to God in the midst of persecution—like that being endured by her sons. Similarly, the epistle of James calls its audience to look to the prophets and Job as examples of suffering and patience (5:10–11) since they faced a similar situation (1:2–4, 12; 5:7–9). Likewise, 1 Peter presents Jesus as a model of endurance in suffering (3:17–18, 21–24)—often connecting his example to the life circumstances of the audience (3:21; 4:1).

Use of Exempla in the Epistle to the Hebrews

The author of Hebrews uses exempla throughout his epistle to strengthen his argument and to encourage his audience. The author’s use of examples and his presentation of exemplars to be imitated are evident throughout the composition but have rarely been examined at much length in Hebrews scholarship.⁶⁹ For this reason, a brief summary of the author’s use of examples in Hebrews will be helpful before examining the specific use of exemplars in the face of suffering and death. With this groundwork presented, three groups of exemplars will be identified with reference to suffering and death in the epistle: figures from Jewish history, the community itself, and Jesus Christ. Each group will be examined below to show how the author presents these exemplars as worthy of emulation and related to the audience’s own situation.

⁶⁹ For Hebrews’ use of examples generally, see Koester, *Hebrews*, 469–70. The significant amount of work has been done on the use of examples in Hebrews 11: Crosby, *Rhetorical Function*; Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, esp. 135–87; deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 377–81.

The Author's Use of Examples and Exemplars

The author of Hebrews uses examples in his discourse in similar ways to both the Greco-Roman and Jewish literature surveyed. Examples are used to both strengthen an argument (7:1–28) and to encourage specific actions or behavior (6:12–15; 12:1–4). The author uses examples—to borrow Quintilian's categories—that are similar (3:12–19), contrary (5:13–14), lesser-to-greater (11:31; 12:9), and greater-to-lesser (12:4).⁷⁰ He also uses positive examples for emulation (12:2–3), including calls to *mimesis* (6:12; 13:7), and negative examples of actions to be avoided (3:12–19; 12:16–17). Also, Hebrews contains a lengthy example list (11:1–40) like those found in the Old Testament and Second Temple literature.

The figure Melchizedek appears numerous times in Hebrews—first introduced in the quotation from Ps 110:4 in Heb 5:6—with a retelling of his encounter with Abraham from Gen 14:17–20 (Heb 7:1–10). This figure is used in a variety of ways in the discourse—the author presents him as a typological forerunner for Christ's high priestly role and also conducts a comparison, or *synkrisis*, between Melchizedek's priesthood and that of Levi.⁷¹ In many ways, however, Melchizedek serves as an example to support several lines of argumentation in Hebrews. The main argument that Melchizedek's example appeals to is that Jesus Christ—despite not coming from the priestly line of Levi—is a legitimate high priest. As Heb 7:14 makes clear, Jesus was understood as coming from the line of Judah, which had no connection to the priesthood. The author goes to great length to present Jesus as a great high priest, even spelling out his qualifications in 5:1–10. Yet an expected objection would be that he did not derive from a

⁷⁰ The only of Quintilian's categories not represented here is a dissimilar example.

⁷¹ deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 262–63.

priestly lineage. In response to this, the author presents Melchizedek as a scriptural precedent of a non-levitical priest.⁷² The example of Melchizedek further lends support for a high priest who is both priest and king. In this way, Melchizedek serves also as a contrary example to “unsettle the fixed structure of the conceptions of priesthood.”⁷³ That is to say that this example goes against what was commonly assumed—clearing the path for understanding Jesus as a great high priest.

When encouraging his readers to view their hardships as divine discipline, the author uses the example of parental discipline to support his argument (12:5–11). Such discipline, the author reasons, is an understandable aspect of their status as children of God (v. 7a). Since discipline serves as a marker of a legitimate child’s status under their earthly parents (vv. 7b–8), one should expect similar hardships as legitimate children of God.⁷⁴ The discipline within the earthly parental relationship serves as a lesser-to-greater example for the discipline of God.⁷⁵ Verse 9 makes this clear as it states that since one is to respect their parents for their discipline, “should we not be even more” (οὐ πολὺ [δὲ] μᾶλλον) willing to submit to God. The Greek literally compares “our fathers of the flesh” (τῆς σαρκὸς ἡμῶν πατέρας) with the “Father of spirits” (τῷ πατρὶ τῶν πνευμάτων), making the lesser to greater argument even stronger.

The generation of Israelites who wandered in the wilderness after fleeing from Egypt serves as a negative example of disobedience—resulting in failure to enter God’s

⁷² Koester, *Hebrews*, 346; deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 268: “In Melchizedek ... one sees the prototype of Jesus ... a priest of God whose claim to priesthood rests not on a genealogical qualification but on a certain quality of life beyond the reach of death.”

⁷³ Dunnill, *Covenant*, 167.

⁷⁴ Lane, *Hebrews*, 422: “The point that genuine sonship is attested in the experience of disciplinary sufferings is driven home by means of an analogy drawn from the household. Paternal discipline is an integral aspect of family life. All legitimate children are sharers (μέτοχοι) in this experience (v 8a). An absence of discipline, then, would actually be an indication of a father’s rejection.”

⁷⁵ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 362; Thompson, *Hebrews*, 255; Cockerill, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 624; deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 452.

rest (3:7–4:11).⁷⁶ After a comparison of Jesus and Moses that emphasizes the fidelity of both figures, the author quotes from Psalm 95, which refers to the infidelity of the Israelites led by Moses (3:7–11). These Israelites had hardened hearts (3:8a), provoked God (3:8b, 16), and their disobedience resulted in God not allowing them to enter his rest (3:11, 18). This was ultimately due, according to the author, to the generation’s unbelief (3:19). The significance to the readers of Hebrews is made clear by the author’s exhortation to take care that none of them have a hardened and unbelieving heart that turns away from God (3:12–13). That is to say that no one should be guilty of the same disobedience and unbelief as the wilderness generation. In fact, the author states, the promise of God’s rest is still available to the believer—despite the failure of some to enter due to disobedience (4:1–10). Connecting the readers’ current situation to that of his negative example, the author concludes by writing that they should make every effort to enter God’s rest so that no one falls by following the example (ὑπόδειγμα) of disobedience demonstrated by the wilderness generation (4:11).

The most extensive use of exempla is found in ch. 11—a list of exemplars that spans Israel’s history from Cain and Abel (v. 4) to the Second Temple period (vv. 36–38). As with the use of examples in Greco-Roman literature, the author of Hebrews appeals to figures from the past in order to encourage behavior in the present. However, he is not concerned with using recent examples but rather draws from the entirety of Israel’s history. As such, this list has more affinities with the example lists found in

⁷⁶ On the use of the wilderness generation as a negative example in Jewish and Christian literature, see Johnson’s excursus “The Wilderness as Paradigm” in *Hebrews*, 119–22. Tracing the use of the wilderness generation from Deuteronomy through *4 Ezra* to 1 Corinthians (10:1–13), Johnson concludes that Hebrews “stands within a long—and continuing—tradition of inner-biblical exegesis and inner-Jewish critique, when it rereads the story of the wilderness and uses it for hortatory purposes in the present” (122).

Jewish writings (Sirach 44–50, 1 Macc 2:51–60, 4 Ezra 7:105–11).⁷⁷ Attention will be given to how this chapter responds to the context of suffering faced by the original audience, but here we should mention three purposes behind the author’s use of this example list. First, through the rapid fire listing of figures of faith, the author offers evidence that living in this way is a possibility.⁷⁸ This way of life has been demonstrated since the very beginning of time. Second, the praiseworthiness and honor given to these figures is intended to provoke emulation in the audience.⁷⁹ Not only is such behavior possible, but it is to be sought after as well. Third, the retelling of Israel’s history serves the function of solidifying the community and placing them within the context of that history.⁸⁰

This overview of the author of Hebrews’ use of examples and exemplars places him squarely within common Jewish and Greco-Roman practice. He often uses examples to prove an argument in ways reminiscent of the rhetorical handbooks. At the same time, he is not concerned to use only examples that are close in time, but pulls from the entirety of Israel’s history. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to how the author uses exemplars to address the context of suffering and threat of death facing the original recipients. At various places in the discourse, the author sets up models of people who faced contexts of suffering and responded with endurance, perseverance, or other desired qualities. Often these exemplars stared into the face of death—some even dying—but all

⁷⁷ Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 56–57.

⁷⁸ Cosby, *Rhetorical Composition*, 89: “These heroes of the past tenaciously held to their belief in the truth of God’s promise of heavenly reward, even though they had far less evidence of its reality than the Christians addressed in this homily. This provides tangible evidence that such a life of faith is possible.”

⁷⁹ deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 380.

⁸⁰ Cockerill, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 516–17.

modeled godly characteristics in the midst of actual suffering. Three exemplar groups emerge from the text: figures from Israel’s history, the community, and Jesus Christ.

Suffering/Death Exemplar Group #1: Figures from Israel’s History

In response to the original recipient’s context of suffering, the author of Hebrews draws from the rich history of the Jewish faith to present exemplars of faithful endurance in the midst of hardship. In Heb 6:12, the author encourages his audience to be “imitators” (μιμηταί) of those who inherited promises through faith and μακροθυμίας (“patience”). As we saw in the previous chapter, this term refers not to simple waiting but rather to patience in the face of provocation or misfortune. The example of this that the author provides is Abraham, who “patiently endured” (μακροθυμέω) and obtained the promise. This early example sets the stage for the much longer list of exemplars that received the promises of God through acting by faith in the face of misfortune and death.

The example list in Hebrews 11 presents numerous exemplars of faith that—the author makes clear to point out—endured times of suffering and faced death. As presented already in this study, the language of death and suffering appear throughout this chapter.⁸¹ In fact, of the ten figures mentioned by name that acted “by faith,” nine did so with some mention of death or suffering in their description.⁸² Concerning all of the figures, the author states that they died without receiving God’s promise (11:13) and this becomes an aspect of their commendable lives. Often the author links these exemplars to

⁸¹ Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 178–79.

⁸² Noah (11:7) is the only individual mentioned by name that was not placed within some context of suffering or death. Eisenbaum points out that the account of Noah building an ark and surviving the flood should be understood as a “near death experience” (*Jewish Heroes*, 178). The reference in 11:30 to the walls of Jericho falling “by faith” also lacks any reference to suffering or death. Not included in this statistic is the summary statement mentioning Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets in 11:32—although it does include references to escaping death and fighting in wars in v. 33.

the experiences of his audience and in doing so makes clear the application for their own lives.

The list begins with Abel, an early figure in the Genesis narrative who is murdered by his brother Cain—despite being pleasing and considered righteous by God. The author of Hebrews writes that although he died (ἀποθνήσκω), by faith he still speaks (11:4). How Abel continues to speak after his death is often debated, but the point is that in some real way he continues to do so after death.⁸³ James Thompson argues that the author’s main purpose in using the example of Abel is that he overcame death. “If he [Abel] speaks beyond death, he has overcome death. Thus the voice of Abel ... speaks to the temptations of a suffering community, telling them of a reality beyond death.”⁸⁴ Abel, then, is an example of someone who died innocently, yet transcended death by faith and the power of God. The next example is Enoch, who serves as a counterpart to Abel. Unlike Abel, Enoch “did not experience death” (μὴ ἰδεῖν θάνατον; 11:5) but similarly was attested before death as pleasing to God (μεμαρτύρηται; compare with Abel attesting [μαρτυροῦντος] as righteous in 11:4). Instead, Enoch was rescued from death. In both cases, the examples of Abel and Enoch serve to “underscore the transcendence of death as a result of a life of trusting God.”⁸⁵

⁸³ Many scholars argue that this is an allusion or reference to Gen 4:10: “Your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground.” This is reinforced by the reference to the blood of Abel in Heb 12:24 (Attridge, *Hebrews*, 317; Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 283–84; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 573; Spicq, *L’Épître aux Hébreux*, 2.343). Others have argued that Abel speaks since Scripture continues to tell his story despite his death (Moffat, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 165; Lane, *Hebrews*, 335; O’Brien, *Letter to the Hebrews*, 403–04). Moberly recently suggests that it is possible that the author is appealing to the concept of divine power over death and resurrection found elsewhere in Hebrews (11:19) and that Abel still speaks since he is alive with God (“Exemplars of Faith,” 361).

⁸⁴ Thompson, *Hebrews*, 232–33. Cf. Cockerill, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 527, who notes that Abel is a “natural choice for an opening example that would encourage the faithful who suffer without relief in this life.”

⁸⁵ deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 389.

Abraham gets a lengthy treatment in 11:8–19, with a brief digression in vv. 13–16. Abraham appears several times prior to this in Hebrews (2:16; 6:13–15; 7:1–9)—in fact, when the author encourages his audience to be “imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (6:12), he provides Abraham as an example of patient endurance through difficulties (μακροθυμέω; 6:15).⁸⁶ In ch. 11, several aspects of Abraham’s life are recounted—the call to leave his home, the promise of descendants, and the offering of Isaac. At two points in his description the author brings up the topic of death. First, when describing Abraham’s faith when promised a child while at an old age, the author describes him as “as good as dead” (νενεκρωμένου). This is more than just a reference to Abraham’s old age but rather an emphasis on his nearness to death. It thus illustrates “that through faith life can come from death.”⁸⁷ Second, in recounting the Aqedah, the author writes that Abraham was able to offer his son Isaac because he knew that “God is able even to raise someone from the dead” (καὶ ἐκ νεκρῶν ἐγείρειν δυνατός ὁ θεός; 11:19). In a figurative way, the author writes (ἐν παραβολῇ), this is exactly what happened as Abraham received (ἐκομίσατο) Isaac back.⁸⁸

Although told from the perspective of Abraham, the next exemplar—Isaac—has already been presented within the context of being near death. F. F. Bruce notes that in some strands of Jewish interpretation, Isaac is commended for his obedience to Abraham

⁸⁶ Μακροθυμέω is derived from μακροθυμία (“patience”) but includes some aspect of difficulty or hardship. Louw and Nida state that the word is often used in the sense of “to demonstrate patience despite difficulties” (*Lexicon*; 25.168). Thus, even here in 6:13–15 Abraham may be presented as an example of one who faced opposition and endured.

⁸⁷ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 326. Cf. Koester, *Hebrews*, 488; Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 159.

⁸⁸ Eisenbaum correctly warns against over-interpreting the phrase ἐν παραβολῇ to symbolically refer to the resurrection of Jesus or of believers. She argues that it simply refers to Abraham’s very real experience of receiving back his son who was as good as dead (*Jewish Heroes*, 162–63). Recently, however, Markus Bockmuehl has argued that to deny any Christological link in this passage severely short-changes the author’s point (“Abraham’s Faith,” 372–73).

and to God when being offered as a sacrifice by his father.⁸⁹ Examples of this interpretation include 4 Macc 13:12 (“Remember ... the father by whose hand Isaac would have submitted to being slain for the sake of religion”) and Josephus’ *Antiquities* (“So [Isaac] went immediately to the alter to be sacrificed,” 1.232).⁹⁰ Yet the author of Hebrews chooses to emphasize Isaac’s blessing of Jacob and Esau in 11:20. With the examples of Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, the author here reveals a concern for the blessing being passed along (Isaac to Jacob to Joseph’s sons), and so Isaac is to be praised for his active role in passing the blessing. Further, even though he is tricked into giving Jacob his blessing, he does not revoke it once Esau comes to him. Rather, Isaac seems to validate his blessing: “I have blessed him [Jacob]?—yes, and blessed he shall be!” (Gen 27:33). While it is God who “chose” Jacob over Esau, Isaac acts as the human agent (although tricked) through which that choice is given. Unlike the reference to the Aqedah in 11:19, Isaac in 11:20 has no direct link to death or suffering. However, the concept of passing one’s blessing involves some proximity to death. The next exemplar, Jacob, is similarly praised for passing on the blessing in vv. 21 at the end of his life—a similar context is implied for Isaac.⁹¹

The next two exemplars are described as acting in faith despite being on the verge of death. Jacob blesses the sons of Joseph and worships when he is dying (ἀποθνήσκω). In this way Jacob’s faith transcends his death as he looks ahead to God’s promises.⁹² Joseph, the next exemplar, mentions the exodus to the Israelites and makes preparations for his burial when he is “at the end” (τελευτάω). Here again, a defining character trait of

⁸⁹ Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 305.

⁹⁰ See also 1 Clem 31:3 (“Isaac, knowing with confidence what was about to be, was gladly brought as a sacrifice”).

⁹¹ See Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 165; Lane, *Hebrews*, 364.

⁹² Cockerill, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 561.

this exemplar is that he is able to look beyond his own death to God’s promise, even when death was staring him in the face. This quality is particularly emphasized in the examples of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Of this section, Loveday Alexander points out that the “focus is on seeing beyond death, holding on to the hope of God’s unseen future at the point of death.”⁹³

The author spends several verses on the exemplar Moses (vv. 23–28), as he did previously with Abraham in vv. 8–19.⁹⁴ Beginning with him as an infant through the exodus and Passover, the author presents Moses as a model of faith despite difficulty, opposition, and suffering.⁹⁵ The author begins by praising the actions of Moses’ parents, who hid him for three months after his birth because they “were not afraid of the king’s edict.” The beginning of Moses’ life was under a sincere threat of death and his parents acted faithfully despite that threat. Moses’ parents hiding the baby for three months due to his beauty is taken from Exod 2:2, but their fearless actions against the king’s edict is the author of Hebrews’ own inference.⁹⁶ Since this is not specified in the Exodus account, it is likely that the author adds this description to emphasize the parent’s faithfulness despite fear within a context of a perceived threat of death.⁹⁷

In v. 25, the author writes that when Moses had grown, he chose “to share ill-treatment [συγκακουχεῖσθαι] with the people of God” rather than enjoying “the fleeting pleasures

⁹³ Alexander, “Prophets and Martyrs,” 406.

⁹⁴ On the parallels between this section and the section on Abraham, see Attridge, *Hebrews*, 338–39; Cockerill, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 564–65.

⁹⁵ This is particularly true of the first three illustrations from the life of Moses—spared from Herod’s wrath as an infant (v. 23), choosing to suffer with the Israelites (v. 24–26), and fleeing Egypt (v. 27). Koester titles this section of his commentary “Faith in the Face of Adversaries” (507–10); Cockerill describes these early illustrations as “endurance in opposition” (*Epistle to the Hebrews*, 564–65).

⁹⁶ The Exodus account does refer to Hebrew midwives who defied the king’s orders out of fear of God (Ex 1:17)—something that the author of Hebrews may be picking up on. See Attridge, *Hebrews*, 339.

⁹⁷ “[The author of Hebrews] found in the conduct of Moses’ parents a paradigm for the capacity of faith to overcome fear, and this was of immediate pastoral significance to the community he addressed” (Lane, *Hebrews*, 370).

of sin.” Then in v. 26, he writes that Moses considered abuse suffered for Christ worth more than the treasures of Egypt.

In our examination of exempla in Greco-Roman and Jewish literature, it was shown that an effective example had strong similarities to the context being addressed. The author of Hebrews draws connections between the audience and exemplars throughout ch. 11—however nowhere is it as explicit as with his presentation of Moses.⁹⁸ The author achieves this by linking the example of Moses to his description of the community’s past and present situation. The word used in 11:25, συγκακουχεῖσθαι, is a *hapax legomenon* with the meaning of “to suffer together”⁹⁹ and presents Moses as choosing to suffer along with the “people of God.”¹⁰⁰ The audience too chooses to share in the suffering of the people of God—they are “partners” (κοινωνός) with those being publically persecuted (10:33) and share in the suffering (συμπαθέω) of those in prison (10:34). In 13:3, the audience is encouraged to remember those in prison as if physically with them (συνδέομαι) and those who are mistreated (κακουχέω) as if it were happening to their own bodies (ὡς καὶ αὐτοὶ ὄντες ἐν σώματι). This connection is strengthened textually as Moses chose to be mistreated—συγκακουχέομαι—and the recipients are to share in mistreatment—κακουχέω. The latter term lacks the prefix συγ-, but shares a lexical stem.¹⁰¹ Like Moses, the audience must choose to be actively identified with the people of God despite momentary suffering or opposition. Moses’ example of actively sharing in the suffering of God’s people stands in stark contrast to those in the

⁹⁸ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 340; D’Angelo, *Moses in the Letter to the Hebrews*, 33–35; Lane, *Hebrews*, 372–74; Koester, *Hebrews*, 503; deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 406–10.

⁹⁹ Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 24.84.

¹⁰⁰ This phrase, τῷ λαῷ τοῦ θεοῦ, was previously used to describe the contemporary Christian community (Heb 4:10) and demonstrates continuity between Israel and the Christian community (Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 612).

¹⁰¹ See Cockerill, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 569 n23.

community who had abandoned the group (10:25).¹⁰² That Moses chose solidarity despite suffering instead of the “fleeting pleasures of sin” identifies for the audience the severity of their own choice. “The implication is that listeners too will either identify with the maltreated community of faith or embrace sin’s transient pleasures.”¹⁰³

This continues in 11:26, which states that Moses considered abuse or disgrace suffered for Christ (τὸν ὀνειδισμὸν τοῦ χριστοῦ) of more worth than the treasures of Egypt. How this phrase should be understood and translated is often debated.¹⁰⁴ Some scholars understand χριστός generically to mean that Moses suffered the reproach of being “an anointed one”—a possible reference to Psalm 89 (88).¹⁰⁵ Others have argued that in this passage Moses is understood to have identified with the coming Messiah (χριστός) in his suffering.¹⁰⁶ Whether or not the author of Hebrews understood Moses to have identified his suffering with that of a/the Christ, he does make clear that Moses’ suffering was like that of Jesus Christ. This demonstrates the author’s fusing together the story of Moses and the situation of the audience being addressed.¹⁰⁷ The same word used here—ὀνειδισμός (reproach, insult)—was previously used to describe the audience’s public abuse (ὀνειδισμός) and persecution in 10:33. It is used again in 13:13 in an exhortation for the audience to follow Jesus and bear the same abuse (ὀνειδισμός) he did. In this way, Moses becomes a model of enduring abuse for the sake of Christ—which has direct implications for the original audience.

¹⁰² Lane, *Hebrews*, 372.

¹⁰³ Koester, *Hebrews*, 508.

¹⁰⁴ See Attridge, *Hebrews*, 431–32; O’Brien, *Letter to the Hebrews*, 432–33; MacDonald, “By Faith Moses,” 374–82.

¹⁰⁵ Lane, *Hebrews*, 373; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 614; Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 311.

¹⁰⁶ Hughes, *Hebrews*, 497; Cockerill, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 572–73.

¹⁰⁷ Koester, *Hebrews*, 502–3.

Closing the section on Moses, the author again places faithful action within a context of a threat of death. In 11:27, Moses acts by faith when he leaves Egypt unafraid of the king's anger—a callback to his parent's lack of fear of the king's edict in 11:23. In v. 28, the author praises Moses' keeping the Passover by sprinkling blood so that the firstborn of Israel would not be killed.¹⁰⁸ Just as his parents saved him from death (11:23), Moses acted faithfully and saved the firstborns of Israel from death (11:28). These bookends to the author's presentation of Moses exemplify faithful action despite fear and a sincere threat of death.

In 11:29–31, the author follows the example of Moses with illustrations from two significant events in the history of Israel: the parting of the Red Sea and the collapse of the walls of Jericho. In v. 29, the faith of the people of God, fleeing from Egypt, is praised as they passed through the Red Sea. By contrast, the Egyptians, who implicitly are understood to lack such faith, are drowned—a figurative use of *καταπίνω*, “to swallow up.” The mention of the deadly fate of the Egyptians not only amplifies the faith the Israelites demonstrated in the face of death, but “carries an implicit warning for the rebellious.”¹⁰⁹ The story of Jericho's walls crashing down, like the parting of the Red Sea, is an example of God's providence for his people of faith. The figure of Rahab is the final exemplar in the hero list of 11:1–31 and again shows that God's people of faith demonstrate such faith in the face of death and hardship. By faith, the author tells his readers, Rahab showed hospitality to the spies and did not perish (*συναπόλλυμαι*) alongside the disobedient people of Jericho. It is significant that Rahab—a non-Israelite harlot woman—is placed at the culmination of the author's list of heroes of faith.

¹⁰⁸ The Greek actually states that Moses sprinkled blood so that “the destroyer” (*ὁ ὀλοθρεύων*) would not touch (*θίγη*; a figurative meaning of “to cause the death of someone”) the firstborn.

¹⁰⁹ Cockerill, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 583.

Attridge points out that in doing this, the author makes clear that the call to faith extends beyond the boundaries of the old covenant to those typically thought of as outsiders.¹¹⁰ In this way, the ability to imitate these exemplars appears to be more in reach to those facing similar situations in the present.

The last section in Hebrews 11, vv. 32–40, departs from the form and style of the verses preceding it. After a portion recounting great feats achieved through faith—listing six additional heroes of Israel’s history¹¹¹—vv. 35–38 recount in general terms the treatment of many other heroes. This section emphasizes the role of suffering and death in the lives of these heroes and is worth reproducing in full:

Women received their dead (νεκρός) by resurrection. Others were tortured (τυμπανίζω), refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking (ἐμπαγμῶν) and flogging (μάστιξ), and even chains (δεσμός) and imprisonment (φυλακή). They were stoned to death (λιθάζω), they were sawn in two (πρίζω), they were killed (φόνος) by the sword (μάχαιρα); they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted (θλίβω), tormented (κακουχέω)—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

This section is saturated with the language of suffering and death and makes clear that God’s people of faith often must demonstrate such faith in the face of opposition and annihilation.¹¹²

The author of Hebrews does not connect any names to the suffering described in 11:35–38, but the circumstances can be linked to a number of persons in Israel’s

¹¹⁰ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 344. Eisenbaum argues that this theme is present throughout the exemplar list (Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 173).

¹¹¹ On this section and those named within it, see Alexander, “Prophets and Martyrs,” 407–15; Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 174–76.

¹¹² “The function of this summary of the later history of faith in Israel is to bring into clear focus the milieu in which faith is most urgently required, a situation of opposition and enmity from those outside the covenant community” (Attridge, *Hebrews*, 347).

history.¹¹³ The prophet Jeremiah, for example, was beaten and often imprisoned (Jer 20:1–2; 29:26; 37:15). The Maccabees wandered in deserts and mountains (2 Macc. 5:27) and met in caves (2 Macc. 6:11). God’s prophets were “killed by the sword” (1 Kgs 19:10), fled to caves (1 Kgs 18:13) and were generally mistreated. The prophet Zechariah was stoned (2 Chr 24:21); Uriah was murdered by the sword (Jer 26:20–3); Elijah wore sheepskins (2 Kgs 1:8). According to tradition, King Manasseh ordered the prophet Isaiah to be sawed in two.¹¹⁴ The mention of women receiving back their dead may evoke the Maccabean mother (who encourages her youngest son to “accept death, so that in God’s mercy I may get you back again along with your brothers” 2 Macc 7:29).¹¹⁵ It may also be a reference to the accounts of Elijah (1 Kgs 17:19–23) and Elisha (2 Kgs 4:11–37) raising sons back to their mothers.

Many scholars identify a clear reference to the Maccabean martyr tradition in these verses of Hebrews 11.¹¹⁶ The verb used in 11:36 (τυμπανίζω; “were tortured”) refers to a procedure where a victim is stretched out (like a τύμπανον, or drum) and beaten to death.¹¹⁷ This verb, found only here in the New Testament, relates directly to the presentation of Eleazar in 2 Maccabees—whose torture included being placed on a τύμπανον and beaten (6:19, 28). Eleazar also fits the description of one who was tortured “refusing to be released” (Heb 11:35). The Maccabean literature is clear that Eleazar could have avoided torture by eating pork (4 Macc 5:5–14) or even by pretending to eat pork (2 Macc 6:21–22), but refused such transgressions (2 Macc 6:23–28; 4 Macc 5:25).

¹¹³ Koester, *Hebrews*, 514–16.

¹¹⁴ Koester, *Hebrews*, 515.

¹¹⁵ Schwartz, *2 Maccabees*, 88.

¹¹⁶ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 349–50; Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 325–26; deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 419–21; Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 176; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 628; Johnson, *Hebrews*, 308; Koester, *Hebrews*, 514; O’Brien, *Letter to the Hebrews*, 443.

¹¹⁷ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 349; Koester, *Hebrews*, 514.

The youngest of the brothers is also given an opportunity by the king to be released from torture (2 Macc 7:24; 4 Macc 12:2–5), but refuses.

The motivation of a better resurrection for enduring torture (Heb 11:35) is an important motif found in the Maccabean martyr tradition. Second Maccabees presents the hope of resurrection as a significant motivation in the martyrs' embracing of death—especially in the seven brothers' words to the king.¹¹⁸ The second brother, for example, proclaims in 7:9 that “the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life” (εἰς αἰώνιον ἀναβίωσιν ζωῆς ἡμᾶς ἀναστήσει). The third brother states that his mutilated limbs will be restored (v. 11); the fourth reiterates hope in the resurrection (ἐλπίδας πάλιν ἀναστήσεσθαι) while adding that the king will have no resurrection (σοὶ μὲν γὰρ ἀνάστασις εἰς ζωὴν οὐκ ἔσται) (v. 14). The mother, when encouraging her youngest to embrace death, says that by God's mercy she might receive back (κομίσωμαι) her sons (v. 29).¹¹⁹

In Heb 11:36 the author writes that some in this history faced jeers (ἐμπαυγμός) and flogging (μάστιξ). Both of these terms are used in the Maccabean literature to describe the torture of the martyrs.¹²⁰ Second Maccabees 7:7 states that the torturers brought the second brother forward “for their sport” (ἐπὶ τὸν ἐμπαυγμὸν); the same occurs to the third brother, although the verb form is used (ἐμπαύζω; 7:10). The Maccabean literature also describes the martyrs' torture as involving μάστιξ (2 Macc 7:1, 37; 4 Macc 6:3, 6; 9:12; also the verb form μαστιγῶ, 2 Macc 6:30).

¹¹⁸ Goldstein, *II Maccabees*, 303; Shepkaru, *Jewish Martyrs*, 22–24. Schwartz notes that 2 Macc 7 is “one of the earliest, and certainly most extensive, sources for this belief [resurrection] in ancient Jewish texts—a belief that again surfaces, with emphasis, at the end of Chapter 12 and in the last verse of our book's other martyrology (14:46)” (Schwartz, *2 Maccabees*, 299).

¹¹⁹ It should be stressed that *bodily* resurrection is being referenced in the martyrs' speeches (a trait that is lost in later versions of the story) (Nickelsburg, “Resurrection,” 1143).

¹²⁰ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 308; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 350.

The author of Hebrews, then, appears to be alluding to the Maccabean martyr tradition in 11:35–36.¹²¹ This should not be surprising since the Maccabean literature sets these martyrs up as exemplars of faith and piety (2 Macc 6:28, 31; 4 Macc 1:7–8; 9:23; 12:16).¹²² The martyrs serve as examples of those who endured in the face of suffering and opposition—the very thing the author of Hebrews encourages his audience to do (Heb 10:32–39; 12:3, 7–13).¹²³

The suffering presented in 11:35–38 has parallels with the author’s description of his audience’s situation.¹²⁴ Hebrews 11:36 details mockery and flogging to a community that had itself faced public abuse and persecution (10:32). Likewise, the author emphasizes (ἐτι, “in addition”) the imprisonment that these heroes faced—an experience for many in the community in their past (10:34) and present situation (13:3). This overlap in the experiences of suffering between these heroes and the audience strengthens the effect of these exemplars. The author builds upon this and in 11:37–38 presents more extreme suffering, including martyrdom and being reduced to rags and poverty. To a probable audience struggling to make sense of the suffering they are experiencing, the author suggests that even more intense suffering has afflicted the faithful. The author is quick to point out that such suffering is not unworthy in the eyes of God, but rather it is the world that is unworthy. The author declares that “the world was not worthy” of these exemplars of faith. deSilva writes, “The addressees may be assured in their situation that

¹²¹ I am drawing from Porter’s definition of *allusion* as “the nonformal invocation by an author of a text (or person, event, etc) that the author could reasonably have been expected to know” (Porter, “Use of the Old Testament,” 95). See also Porter, “Allusions and Echoes,” 29–40.

¹²² deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 419.

¹²³ For more on how the Maccabean martyr tradition coheres with the argument of Hebrews, see deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 419–21. On other ways that the two interact, see Alexander, “Prophets and Martyrs,” 413–15.

¹²⁴ Koester, *Hebrews*, 519.

the censure and abuse that befalls them as a result of their commitment to honor and obey the One God signals not their own disgrace but the disgrace of the unbelievers.”¹²⁵

The exemplar list of Hebrews 11 provides a comprehensive catalog of those demonstrating faithful endurance in the face of suffering and death. Often overlooked, the topic of death is prevalent throughout the list with exemplars repeatedly being praised for acting in faith despite staring death in the face. This constant reminding of the audience that the heroes’ actions took place while they were threatened by death communicates to us something of the situation being addressed in the epistle. If, as we have seen, the effectiveness of an example or exemplar is tied to its similarity to those being addressed, it is a reasonable assumption that the author of Hebrews at least perceived that his audience needed to be exhorted regarding their own fear of death. Another interesting theme of this example list is the heroes’ ability to look past their own situation to the heavenly, future reality.¹²⁶ This motif is spelled out in 11:1 by the description of faith as “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”¹²⁷ Abraham wanders and lives in tents (11:8–9), Isaac is nearly sacrificed (11:17–19), Moses shares in ill-treatment (11:25), and others were tortured, stoned, destitute, and otherwise mistreated (11:35–38). Yet each of these is able to look past their hard situation to the promise of God and the true reality.

Beyond the example list of chapter 11, an interesting negative example, Esau, is provided in Heb 12:16–17:

¹²⁵ deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 423.

¹²⁶ See Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 179–80.

¹²⁷ There is difficulty in translating this verse as ὑπόστασις (translated “assurance”) and ἔλεγχος (“conviction”) could be understood either objectively, coming from a source beyond ourselves (see Attridge, *Hebrews*, 308–10), or subjectively, meaning confidence or steadfastness (Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 277).

See to it that no one becomes like Esau, an immoral and godless person, who sold his birthright for a single meal. You know that later, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, even though he sought the blessings with tears.

That Esau is a negative example is clear in attributes associated with him (πόρνος, sexually immoral; βέβηλος, godless).¹²⁸ The author of Hebrews also clearly exhorts his audience to make sure that no one is like Esau (μή τις ... ὡς Ἡσαῦ).

The author focuses on how Esau sold his birthright for a serving of food (Heb 12:16; Gen 25:29–35) to demonstrate his negative example. He emphasizes how Esau traded away something so great (τὰ πρωτοτόκια, plural) for something so small (βρώσεως μιᾶς, a single meal). As Koester points out, Esau is an example of one who trades permanent regret for the price of a moment's pleasure.¹²⁹ As such, Esau stands as a foil to Moses, who chose to endure hardship rather than “enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.”¹³⁰ Thus, Esau's negative example speaks to the recipients who themselves face hardships (10:32–36; 12:4–13) and are warned of the permanence of shrinking back as a result (6:4–8; 10:29–31). The permanence of Esau's decision is reinforced in 12:17, which states that he could not undo his decision “even though he sought the blessing with tears.” The point is clear: for Esau there was no chance to get back what he foolishly traded away.

The appeal to the example of Esau serves to reinforce the original audience's commitment. Esau is an example of what can happen to someone who chooses against

¹²⁸ The Greek construction allows for just “godless” (βέβηλος) by itself—and not “sexually immoral” (πόρνος)—or both terms to refer to Esau. It could be read, “Let no one be sexually immoral, or godless like Esau.” However, given the association of Esau and his descendents with sexual immorality in Second Temple literature (*Jub* 25:7–9; *Test. Ben.* 10:10; Philo, *Fuga* 39), it seems best to understand that both terms are attributed to him (See Attridge, *Hebrews*, 368–69). The NRSV translation does not link sexuality to Esau's immorality in Heb 12:16—which is commonly attached to the word πόρνος.

¹²⁹ Koester, *Hebrews*, 541.

¹³⁰ deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 461.

God in favor of personal comfort. The original recipients too have firstborn rights in an inheritance and blessing in the age to come (2:5; 6:7, 12–14, 17; 12:23).¹³¹ Esau was willing to trade his away in order to avoid temporary discomfort. As the audience of Hebrews face continued suffering, they must not be tempted to make the same mistake as Esau.

Facing continued suffering and the threat of death, the recipients of this epistle may have questioned whether their commitment to Christ was worth the sacrifice or whether God would be faithful to them. In a culture that identified hardship with sin or disobedience, the original audience might have been tempted to see their own suffering as a sign of God's disapproval. Further, persistent hardships and threat of losing one's life would certainly have challenged one's commitment to the cause of such difficulties. In light of this, the author presents models of behavior in the midst of similar circumstances to demonstrate God's faithfulness to provide examples for conduct. The author uses these exemplars to demonstrate that suffering and hardship have long accompanied the life of faith for God's people. The presence of suffering and near-death experiences is not a sign of God's abandonment or disapproval, but is rather a mark of his people. Further, by providing examples of how to act (or not to act) during such times, the author presents to his audience confidence that such endurance is possible in their own situation. It is significant that at the culmination of his list of exemplars, the author presents them in 12:1 as a "cloud of witnesses" (νέφος μαρτύρων) surrounding and encouraging the community. By creating a group of spectators who are watching the actions of his

¹³¹ Koester, *Hebrews*, 542; also Attridge, *Hebrews*, 369.

audience, the author strategically creates motivation for a specific course of action.¹³² The community is not alone in their struggle; they have exemplars who went before them and who now are watching to see whether they too respond to hardships “by faith.”

Suffering/Death Exemplar Group #2: The Community

The community addressed in Hebrews is presented as an example of endurance in the face of suffering at several places in the epistle. The key text in this regard is 10:32–39 where the author encourages his readers to “remember those earlier days” (ἀναμνησθεσθε δὲ τὰς πρότερον ἡμέρας) when they “endured a hard struggle with suffering” (πολλὴν ἄθλησιν ὑπεμείνατε παθημάτων) (v. 32). Recounting the hardship and persecution that the community faced, the author makes clear that the same behavior and attitude demonstrated then should be emulated in their current context (vv. 35–36). In this way, the hearers of the epistle are to look to their previous behavior as the “best pattern for their imitation in the present.”¹³³ Other places in the discourse present the community and its leaders as examples to be followed in their present situation (6:9–12; 13:7).

Hellenistic, Jewish, and early Christian literature all demonstrate the rhetorical technique of reminding an audience of their past in order to motivate them in their current context.¹³⁴ Aristotle writes that narration of things from an audience’s past function “in order that, being reminded of them, the hearers may take better counsel about the future” (*Rhet.* 3.16.11).¹³⁵ This may be a recollection of either blame or praiseworthy actions.

Appealing to the history of one’s audience also functions to create good will between

¹³² See deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 428–29. He cites Aristotle, *Rh.* 2.6.24 as an example of this technique: “Cydias, when haranguing the people about the allotment of the territory to Samos, begged the Athenians to picture to themselves that the Greeks were standing round them and would not only hear, but also see what they were going to decree.”

¹³³ deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 356; also Koester, *Hebrews*, 458; Thompson, *Hebrews*, 221; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 545; Westfall, *Discourse Analysis*, 246; Lane, *Hebrews*, 297–98.

¹³⁴ See, for example, Aristotle, *Rhet.* 3.16.11; Pss 77:5; 143:5; Deut 32:7; 2 Thess 1:4.

¹³⁵ Aristotle cites this as a function of deliberative speech. See deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 356 n51.

rhetoricians and their hearers.¹³⁶ An example of this is found in Acts 24:2–4 as Tertullus praises the high priest Ananias’s commendable feats and knowledge before presenting his accusations against Paul.¹³⁷ The Hebrew Bible often appeals to a community’s past as encouragement for their present context. In a time of affliction, the psalmist declares, “I consider the days of old, and remember the years of long ago” (Ps 77:5; 143:5). Such appeals often point beyond the behavior of a community and serve to remind them of God’s faithfulness as demonstrated in their history. In Deut 32:7, the people are called to “remember the days of old, consider the years long past.” In his letters, Paul often presents Christian communities as examples to themselves and others (Phil 1:3–11; 1 Thess 1:7). In his letter to the Galatians, for example, Paul reminds them of their earlier good will toward him since he now feels rejected (Gal 4:12–16). In 2 Tim 1:5–6, Timothy is reminded of the faith passed down from his grandmother and mother as motivation to remain strong in faith. In Revelation, the word to the church in Ephesus similarly encourages them to remember their earlier faithfulness and to return to such behavior in the present: “Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first” (2:5).

The first presentation of the community’s past as an example for them to follow occurs in Heb 6:9–12. Following a severe warning against falling away from the faith in 6:4–8, the author of Hebrews appeals to the community’s own behavior as motivation for continued faithfulness. The author tells the audience that God will not overlook the “work and love” that they demonstrated while “serving the saints,” which continues to the

¹³⁶ deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 356 n. 50; Thompson, *Hebrews*, 220.

¹³⁷ Thompson, *Hebrews*, 220.

present time.¹³⁸ This past example is intended to serve as motivation for their present context: “We want each one of you to show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end, so that you may not become sluggish” (12:11–12). If the audience does act with the same diligence they previously demonstrated, they not only will avoid sluggishness but will be imitating those who demonstrated faith and μαρκοθυμία—patience in the midst of suffering (12:12).

When the author appeals to the community’s past behavior regarding suffering and persecution in 10:32–34, it similarly follows a stern warning against falling away (10:26–31).¹³⁹ The two units are joined together by the particle δέ, signaling a contrast between the sin of disobedience depicted in 10:26–31 and the example of endurance despite suffering in 10:32–34.¹⁴⁰ That the context of 10:32–34 is suffering and persecution may shed light on the motivation behind those abandoning the community (10:25) and the temptation to turn away from the faith (10:26–31).¹⁴¹

In 10:32 the author summons the community to “remember” (ἀναμνησθεσθε) the earlier days shortly after their initial conversion to following Christ (φωτισθέντες, or “enlightenment”).¹⁴² This time period is characterized by their “endurance” (ὕπεμείνατε) through a great “contest” (ἄθλησιν) of suffering. The language of endurance appears again in 10:36 and four times in 12:1–7. Endurance in times of suffering is a common praiseworthy attribute elsewhere in the New Testament (Rom 5:3; 12:12; 2 Cor 1:6; 6:4;

¹³⁸ The phrase incorporates the verb διακονέω twice—once as an aorist participle that continues the string of aorist participles in the verse recalling the actions that God will not overlook, and then again emphatically at the end in the present tense which sets off a string of present tense verbs encouraging the audience to continue their good deeds.

¹³⁹ On the parallel between these two sections (6:4–12 and 10:26–34), see Lane, *Hebrews*, 296–97; Thompson, *Hebrews*, 222.

¹⁴⁰ Westfall, *Discourse Analysis*, 245.

¹⁴¹ Lane, *Hebrews*, 297.

¹⁴² The description of this time as shortly after their conversion suggests that the suffering they faced was a result of their commitment to Christ (Lane, *Hebrews*, 298).

2 Thess 1:4; Jas 1:3; 1 Pet 2:20; Rev 1:9). Endurance here is understood as bearing hardship for a noble goal and not merely putting up with difficulty.¹⁴³ This goal-oriented endurance is supported by the athletic imagery used to describe persecution—ἄθλησις (“contest”). Athletic imagery reappears alongside references to endurance in 12:1–13—“cloud of witnesses” (νέφος μαρτύρων; 12:1), “race set before us” (τὸν προκείμενον ἡμῖν ἀγῶνα; 12:1), “struggle against sin” (πρὸς τὴν ἁμαρτίαν ἀνταγωνιζόμενοι; 12:4), training (γεγυμνασμένοις; 12:11).¹⁴⁴ This use of athletic imagery has a long history in Greco-Roman literature (Dio, *Or.* 8.11–15; Seneca, *Ep.* 17.1; 34.2; 109.6) and was commonly used by Philo (*Alleg. Interp.* 1.98; 3.201; *Migration* 27; *Joseph* 26) and Paul (1 Cor 9:24–27; Phil 3:12–14; 1 Thess 2:2).¹⁴⁵ The grouping of athletic imagery and endurance is frequent in Greek philosophy and Jewish literature influenced by Hellenism (Plutarch, *Mor.* 724–5; Philo, *Prob.* 26).¹⁴⁶ This is especially true in 4 Maccabees, where endurance (ὑπομένειν; ὑπομονή) appears frequently alongside athletic imagery to describe the endurance through suffering by the martyrs (1:11; 5:23–6:9; 7:9, 22; 9:6, 8, 22, 30; 13:12; 15:30–32; 17:4, 11–17, 23).¹⁴⁷

Hebrews 10:33–34 describes in detail the “contest of sufferings” endured by the community. This description can be divided into two categories: the actual sufferings experienced and the attitude demonstrated by the community.¹⁴⁸ Both are presented as exemplary. The description of the severe afflictions serves to emphasize the endurance that was modeled and the attitude similarly is upheld as ideal. The community is

¹⁴³ Koester, *Hebrews*, 459.

¹⁴⁴ Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 58–70.

¹⁴⁵ Thompson, *Hebrews*, 217. For a thorough examination of the use of athletic imagery in moral exhortation, see Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 43–58; also deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 361–64.

¹⁴⁶ Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 64–65.

¹⁴⁷ Lane, *Hebrews*, 298.

¹⁴⁸ These two elements are established using a μὲν...δὲ construction (Koester, *Hebrews*, 459).

reminded of the ὀνειδισμοῖς (“reproaches”) and θλίψεσιν (“afflictions”) that they were exposed to. Ὀνειδισμός refers to various kinds of verbal abuse and is repeated in the epistle to describe the abuse of Moses (11:26) and of Christ (13:13).¹⁴⁹ It also carries the connotation of shame for those being exposed to it.¹⁵⁰ The term θλίψις is a general term for physical abuse and was a common word used to describe early Christian persecution (Mark 13:19; John 16:33; Acts 11:19; Rom 5:3; 1 Cor 1:4; 1 Thess 1:6). That this was done publically is clear in the author’s use of θεατριζόμενοι, which carries the implication of being humiliated as a public spectacle (4 Macc 17:14; Philo, *Against Flaccus*, 72, 74, 84–85, 95; *Legatio ad Gaium*, 359).¹⁵¹ Members of the community were put in prison (δεσμίοις)—a present reality at the time of the epistle’s composition (13:3). The community also had their possessions seized from them (ἀρπαγὴν τῶν ὑπαρχόντων) either from an official confiscation or unofficial mob activity.¹⁵² The extreme nature of this persecution makes the endurance demonstrated by the community all the more exemplary.¹⁵³

In addition to the actual sufferings endured by the community, the author praises their attitude during the ordeal. When not actively facing persecution, the community

¹⁴⁹ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 298; Lane, *Hebrews*, 299. This term, along with its verb form ὀνειδίζω, is elsewhere used to describe the suffering of Jesus in the New Testament (Mt 27:44; Mk 15:32; Rom 15:3) (Koester, *Hebrews*, 459).

¹⁵⁰ deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 360; Koester, *Hebrews*, 459.

¹⁵¹ Lane, *Hebrews*, 299.

¹⁵² The reference here is ambiguous and official or unofficial action is not always clear (Koester, *Hebrews*, 460).

¹⁵³ While this description is quite detailed, it is difficult to link the community’s experience to any specific event of persecution in the early church. Some scholars have argued that 10:32–34 is reminiscent of the official persecution of Christians under Nero (Salevao, *Legitimation*, 105). However, the comment that the community had not suffered to the point of shedding blood (12:4) makes this unlikely. Rather, persecution as described in 10:32–34 could fit a variety of contexts of Christian communities in the first century (Attridge, *Hebrews*, 299).

members are said to be “sharers” or “partners” (κοινωνοὶ) with those who were.¹⁵⁴ Similarly, those not in prison showed compassion (συνεπαθήσατε) with those imprisoned. This same term for “compassion” was used of Christ in 4:15 describing his ability to empathize with humanity. Through such solidarity, the community demonstrated the solidarity of Christ (2:14; 4:15).¹⁵⁵ The community’s attitude when having their possessions plundered is emphasized by the author as exemplary. They accepted—προσδέξασθε, used here with a future reference signifying that they “anticipated” or “waited for”¹⁵⁶—the confiscation of their property “with joy” (μεταχαρᾶς). Receiving suffering or persecution with joy is characteristic of early Christian exhortations (Mt 5:11–12; Rom 5:3; Jas 1:2; 1 Pet 4:13).¹⁵⁷ Similarly, Jesus endured the cross for “the joy set out before him” (τῆς προκειμένης αὐτῷ χαρᾶς; 12:2). They were able to have this joyous attitude, the author writes, because they “recognized” (γινώσκοντες) that they had better and permanent possessions (ἔχειν ἑαυτοὺς κρείττονα ὑπαρξιν καὶ μένουσαν). Knowledge of future reward despite present affliction is a characteristic fleshed out of the exemplars of faith in chapter 11 (vv. 1, 6, 10, 13, 26). The better and permanent possessions (ὑπαρξιν) are contrasted with the possessions (ὑπαρχόντων) that were seized from them.¹⁵⁸ Their better possessions are permanent and cannot be taken away by any outside force. This knowledge served as the basis of their endurance as they had confidence in their eschatological reward.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁴ Cockerill, drawing upon the athletic imagery in this passage, comments that the community was not mere spectators but active participants—entering into and enduring the suffering of those subjected to it (*Epistle to the Hebrews*, 501).

¹⁵⁵ Hughes, *Hebrews*, 429; Lane, *Hebrews*, 300.

¹⁵⁶ Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 549; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 299.

¹⁵⁷ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 300; Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 271; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 549.

¹⁵⁸ Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 549.

¹⁵⁹ Grässer, *Glaube im Hebräerbrief*, 23; Lane, *Hebrews*, 300.

The remembrance of past endurance in 10:32–34 is the foundation for the exhortation to demonstrate that same perseverance for the present in vv. 35–39.¹⁶⁰ This is clear by the use of οὖν in 10:35, linking the two sections together. Shifting to the community’s present context, the author warns them not to abandon their confidence (παρρησία, “boldness”). He reminds them that remaining faithful to their boldness brings a “great reward”—connecting back to their attitude of knowing of better and permanent possessions in 10:34. The next verse, 10:36, presents the clearest expression of the author’s concern for his audience: “For you need endurance.”¹⁶¹ Their present situation calls for the same actions and attitudes that they demonstrated in the “earlier days” when they “endured” through a contest of suffering. Such endurance is necessary, the author reasons, so that once they have done the will of God (ἵνα τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ ποιήσαντες), they will receive what was promised (10:36). Thompson summarizes the author’s argument in Heb 10:35–36: “In order to avoid throwing away the reward (10:35), the community needs endurance (10:36), the quality that they demonstrated in the past (10:32), for only through endurance can they do the will of God and receive the promise (10:36b).”¹⁶²

The author also points to the leaders of the community as examples of proper conduct in Heb 13:7. The audience is encouraged to “remember” (μνημονεύετε) their leaders, “reflect upon” or “consider” (ἀναθεωροῦντες) the outcome of their way of life, and “imitate” (μιμεῖσθε) their faith. These terms clearly place the leaders as exemplars worthy of emulation. As mentioned in the linguistic study of chapter 3, the phrase τὴν

¹⁶⁰ “The author now turns from recollection to admonition, from the exemplary past to the challenging future” (Attridge, *Hebrews*, 300). Also, Westfall, *Discourse Analysis*, 246.

¹⁶¹ Cockerill, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 504–05.

¹⁶² Thompson, *Hebrews*, 222.

ἔκβασιν τῆς ἀναστροφῆς (“the end/outcome of their way of life”) is likely a figurative reference to death.¹⁶³ The use of ἔκβασις to denote the end of one’s life is attested in Wis 2:17 (supported by the use of θάνατος in 2:20) and likely carries this connotation in Heb 13:7. Many scholars argue that the emphasis is not on how these leaders died, but rather their way of conduct up until their death.¹⁶⁴ Even with this reading of the passage, the author’s point is that the leaders’ way of life was demonstrated up until their death—they did not fall away or abandon their confidence.

In the midst of suffering and the threat of death, the community addressed in Hebrews needed look no further than their own past for direction on how to respond. The author calls on them to “remember the earlier days” after their conversion when they suffered for their commitment to Christ. Like athletes in a contest, they endured through persecution and affliction for the goal of heavenly reward. The description of their past suffering served to place their present situation in perspective. They likely faced similar trials and felt a sense of honor to continue in their endurance. Their past actions and attitudes are held up as exemplary as their current context calls for the same response. The community is called also to remember their fallen leaders who modeled praiseworthy lives of faith up until their deaths.

Suffering/Death Exemplar Group #3: Jesus Christ

More than any other figure, the author of Hebrews presents Jesus as the supreme exemplar of obedience and endurance in the midst of hardship and death.¹⁶⁵ At numerous places in the epistle the audience is encouraged to “look to” Jesus and “consider” his

¹⁶³ So Attridge, *Hebrews*, 392; Koester, *Hebrews*, 567; Johnson, *Hebrews*, 346.

¹⁶⁴ Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 703; Lane, *Hebrews*, 527.

¹⁶⁵ Todd Still writes that Jesus “is set forth in the letter as the example of one who lived a faithful life and died a faithful death” (“*Christos as Pistos*,” 754–55).

example (Heb 12:2–3; also 2:9, 5:7–10; 13:12–13). It is significant that the author’s depiction of Jesus in Hebrews is as one who suffered greatly and died. The author, of course, does not focus exclusively on these aspects of Jesus—he devotes an even larger amount of space to his exaltation and continued activity as high priest. For this reason it is important to note that while Jesus is the author’s greatest exemplar in suffering and death, this is not the complete theological significance of Jesus’ suffering and death in the epistle. The text is clear that by his suffering Jesus was made perfect (2:10; 5:9) and able to become an empathetic high priest (4:15) and by his death atoned for sin (9:28) and sanctified his people (13:12). The intent of this section is not to explore this rich theological articulation of Christ’s suffering and death, but rather to explore its parenetic impact upon the audience. That is, how the presentation of Jesus’ suffering and death in Hebrews establishes him as an example to be followed by the audience. This must be done without ignoring its Christological and soteriological aspects. As David Moffitt writes, “Jesus’ suffering can be seen to serve as a moral example without being reduced to a spiritual or moral example.”¹⁶⁶

Hebrews 2:9 is the first place that the author refers to Jesus by his name—Ἰησοῦς¹⁶⁷—and is also the first reference to his suffering and death (τὸ πάθημα τοῦ θανάτου). Prior to this, in Heb 2:5–8, the author quotes from Ps 8:4–6, which refers to human beings as being made “a little lower than the angels” and crowned “with glory and honor.” This Old Testament text, which originally was understood anthropologically, is

¹⁶⁶ Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection*, 296.

¹⁶⁷ Attridge points out that the author commonly uses the name Jesus (Ἰησοῦς) when referring to his suffering humanity (2:9; 10:19; 12:2–4; 13:12) (*Hebrews*, 66 n. 49). Ellingworth warns against such an oversimplification and points to 4:14 (Ἰησοῦν τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ) as an example of its use outside of Jesus’ humanity (*Epistle to the Hebrews*, 153).

interpreted by the author to have Christological significance.¹⁶⁸ The author connects two phrases from the psalm directly to Christ: “made a little lower than the angels” and “crowned with glory and honor.” Since these two phrases were originally descriptive of humanity in the psalm, the author in 2:9 intends the audience to reevaluate the psalm in light of his exegesis. Understood this way, Jesus is seen as the one who did what humanity was not able to do itself. Jesus is presented as an example or model for how humans should be.

Referring to his incarnation (“made lower than the angels”), the author writes that Jesus suffered death and was crowned with honor and glory. This establishes a pattern in the author’s depiction of Jesus: his suffering and death is always followed by exaltation, perfection, or otherwise positive results. In 2:9, Jesus is crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death. A further result is the purpose clause found at the end of v. 9:

¹⁶⁸ Scholars have debated how best to understand the use of Psalm 8 in this passage. Many support a Christological interpretation (Guthrie and Quinn, “Discourse Analysis,” 235–46; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 72; Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 72–74; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 150–51; Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 96; Witherington, *Letters and Homilies*, 141). In this sense, the use of the psalm presupposes its anthropological backdrop but understands its fulfillment in the incarnation and exaltation of Jesus Christ (Guthrie and Quinn, “Discourse Analysis,” 246). Therefore the author interprets ἄνθρωπος and υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου from the psalm as a direct reference to Christ. Those who understand this quotation as retaining its original anthropological sense observe a contrast between humankind and Jesus (Blomberg, “But We See Jesus,” 88–99; Smothers, “Superior Model,” 339; Young, “Suffering,” 47–59). According to this view, the author is making clear that, what humans were unable to accomplish due to their sin, Jesus accomplished through his incarnation and suffering death. Numerous scholars argue that both lines of interpretation are present in Heb 2:5–9 (deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 108–12; Koester, *Hebrews*, 220–23; Lane, *Hebrews*, 47; Johnson, *Hebrews*, 90). Such scholars do not wish to choose one interpretation over the other and so maintain both at the same time. However one interprets this passage, Craig Blomberg is correct that a modern translation should leave room for both lines of interpretation: “What is needed in modern language translations is some kind of rendering that does not *immediately* or *naturally* suggest a Messianic interpretation in verses 6–8 and that is gender-inclusive to ensure that readers recognize that men and women alike were created in God’s image and given the charge to exercise responsible stewardship over the earth, but which can then also be *applied* to Jesus when the reader comes to verse 9 and grasps the dynamic of our author’s flow of thought: *Now* we see Jesus doing right what humanity did wrong. Yet the translation should leave the door open for the Christological interpretation just in case that approach should prove right” (Blomberg, “But We See Jesus,” 98).

“so that by the grace of God he [Jesus] might taste death for everyone.”¹⁶⁹ The next section presents numerous other positive benefits or results of Jesus’ suffering and death: God brings many sons and daughters to glory (2:10); Jesus is perfected (2:10); people are sanctified (2:11); the devil is destroyed (2:14); those held in slavery by their fear of death are set free (2:15); Jesus becomes a high priest who offers sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people (2:17) and can empathize with those he represents (2:18).

Theologically these positive outcomes of Jesus’ suffering and death have profound soteriological significance. Yet, in a parenetic sense, the author clearly presents that, with the example of Jesus, God uses suffering and death for heavenly purposes. Throughout this section God the Father takes an active role. It is by God’s grace, in 2:9, that Jesus tastes death for everyone. God is the agent in 2:10—bringing his children to glory and making Jesus perfect through suffering. In v. 11, the author states that the one who sanctifies and those being sanctified all have one source. Finally, Jesus’ role as high priest functions “in matters pertaining to God” (τὰ πρὸς τὸν θεόν). This establishes two aspects of Jesus’ example of suffering and death that the author highlights. First, Jesus’ suffering and death do not mean that God abandoned him. Instead, God is presented as a Father to both Jesus and those sanctified by his death. This is a repeated theme in Hebrews: Jesus’ status as “Son” did not exempt him from suffering but was an expected result of that status (5:8; of the Christian community, 12:5–11). Second, not only has God not abandoned Jesus in his death, but he is actively working through Jesus to bring positive results.

¹⁶⁹ Grammatically this clause is linked to Jesus’ suffering death, but may qualify all aspects of the verse—that is, Jesus’ incarnation, death, and exaltation (Attridge, *Hebrews*, 76; Cockerill, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 134; Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 76; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 155).

Hebrews 2:18 is a significant verse for the author's presentation of Jesus as an exemplar of suffering. In the context of the verse before it, Heb 2:18 argues that Jesus became like his brothers and sisters in every way so that he could be an empathetic high priest on their behalf. The way that Jesus became like his siblings was by being tested by what he suffered (ἐν ᾧ ... πέπονθεν αὐτὸς πειρασθείς). The implication is that believers—likely the audience themselves—are tested by times of suffering. The term translated “testing,” *πειράζω*, is often used with a sense of ascertaining one's true nature or character.¹⁷⁰ It is used in this sense in several early Christian writings (Matt 16:1; 2 Cor 13:5), often connected to experiences of suffering or persecution (Jas 1:2; 1 Pet 4:12). Its use here provides some possible insight into the original audience—their suffering served as a time of testing—but also extends the portrait of Jesus beyond one who suffered to one who was genuinely tested by suffering and endured.

The author's description of Jesus in Heb 5:7–10 similarly incorporates the topics of suffering, death, perfection, and exaltation. In 5:1–4, the author presented the qualifications for the high priesthood—being called by God and able to empathize with those they represent—and in vv. 5–10 reveals how Jesus met those qualifications. Using quotations from the Psalms, in 5:5–6 the author demonstrates that Jesus was called by God to be a high priest in the order of Melchizedek. Verses 7 through 10 show how Jesus is able to empathize with those he represents and is uniquely qualified to serve as high priest. Jesus' time on earth (ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ; “in the days of his flesh”) is presented here as one of toil and hardship. Possibly drawing upon an early Gethsemane

¹⁷⁰ Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 27.46. They reference several places in the New Testament where *πειράζω* is used in this way (Matt 16:1; Luke 4:12; 2 Cor 13:5; Jas 1:2; 1 Pet 4:12). The term is also used to refer to the attempt to tempt someone else into sin (Mark 1:13; Luke 10:25) and is even used as a title for the Devil, or the “one who tempts” (Matt 4:3).

tradition, the author portrays Jesus as offering prayers “with loud cries and tears” (μετὰ κραυγῆς ἰσχυρᾶς καὶ δακρύων) to the one who could save him from death (5:7). If the original audience themselves faced a threat of death, then this portrayal of Jesus would have deep resonance. They too may have cried out to God to be saved from death.¹⁷¹ The author praises Jesus’ “reverence/obedience” (εὐλάβεια)¹⁷² as the defining characteristic by which he was “heard” in his prayers. In this way, Jesus is presented as a model of obedience in the face of death.

In 5:8 the author writes, “Although he [Jesus] was a son (καίπερ ὢν υἱός), he learned obedience from what he suffered (ἔμαθεν ἀφ’ ὧν ἔπαθεν τὴν ὑπακοήν).” Here the author is more explicit than he was in 2:9–18 about the tension between Jesus’ designation as “Son” and the reality of his suffering. Jesus’ status as “Son” did not disqualify him from experiencing suffering and death. In 12:5–11, the community is told to endure hardships as divine discipline because “God is treating you as his sons/children (ὡς υἱοῦς)” (12:7). Both Jesus and the community are designated as God’s children (υἱοῦς) and both experience affliction for that very reason. Thus, the presentation of Jesus as a suffering son has implications for the audience. If learning and suffering are not inconsistent with the status of “Son” for Jesus, then, too, the believer should not expect to

¹⁷¹ This assumes that the designation for God in 5:7 (“the one who could save him from death;” πρὸς τὸν δυνάμενον σώζειν αὐτὸν ἐκ θανάτου) is not just a reference to God but descriptive of the content of Jesus’ prayer. *Contra* Lane, *Hebrews*, 119.

¹⁷² Louw and Nida write that the use of this word in 5:7 is often translated as “reverence” (53.7) but also “obedience” (36.13). See also Attridge, “Heard Because of His Reverence,” 93, on the critical issues surrounding this term and verse. Attridge points to the opening chapters of Philo’s *Quis Heres* as the proper backdrop for understanding Jesus’ prayer in Heb 5:7. According to Attridge, Jesus’ boldness combined with his “reverence” (that is, “humble recognition of divine sovereignty”) provides a model for the recipients of the epistle (93).

avoid hardships—indeed the author argues that such hardships serve as validation of their status as sons/children of God (12:8).¹⁷³

The concept in Heb 5:8 that Jesus “learned through suffering” uses an established wordplay, μαθεῖν-παθεῖν, to further designate him as related to and empathetic with humanity. This wordplay has a long history¹⁷⁴ and eventually became a fixed form by 3rd century BCE.¹⁷⁵ While it was not used in a strict sense, μαθεῖν-παθεῖν was often used to express a truism of the human condition—one learns through experiences of suffering. Aeschylus uses it in this way in *Agamemnon* when he wrote that Zeus “has established a fixed rule that learning (μάθος) comes by suffering (πάθει)” (177–78). By applying this truism to Jesus, the author of Hebrews grounds his argument regarding Jesus’ qualifications as high priest in his humanity. Just like all humans, Jesus “learned from what he suffered,” and in this way can relate to those he represents. This idea that Jesus experienced suffering, crying out to God in the face of death, establishes him as a trustworthy model for the early Christian community. He has experienced suffering as they have; he participated in full humanity—being subjected to every painful aspect of the human condition.

¹⁷³ Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection*, 173.

¹⁷⁴ The wordplay was used by Herodotus (*Hist.* 1.207), Demosthenes (*de Corona Trierarchiae* 15.5), Sophocles (*Trach.* 42–43), Aesop, and others. See Dörrie, “Leid und Erfahrung.” Cf. Costé, “Notion grecque;” Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 139–44.

¹⁷⁵ It is in the 3rd century BCE that we find a fragment from Sotades, a poet and satirists, that offers a parody of the juxtaposition of μαθεῖν-παθεῖν:

εἰ μετὰ τὸ μαθεῖν
οὐκ ἦν παθεῖν, ἃ δεῖ παθεῖν, δεῖ γὰρ μαθεῖν·
εἰ δεῖ παθεῖν με, κἂν μάθω, τί δεῖ μαθεῖν;
οὐ δεῖ μαθεῖν ἄρ' ἃ δεῖ παθεῖν· δεῖ γὰρ παθεῖν.

If after learning,

one does not suffer what it was necessary to suffer. For it is necessary to learn.

If it is necessary for me to suffer, even if I learn, why is it necessary to learn?

Sotades’ repeated use of παθεῖν and μαθεῖν seems to establish the juxtaposition of these two terms as an established formula. It certainly draws upon the assonance and consonance embedded in this wordplay. As such, Sotades can play with the form to achieve the element of satire.

In 5:8, the author specifically points out that through suffering Jesus learned obedience (ὕπακοή). The noun is only used here in Hebrews while its cognate ὑπακούω appears twice in the epistle (5:9; 11:8). Given the scarcity of the term, the close proximity of ὑπακούω in 5:9 makes it highly significant for understanding ὑπακοήν in 5:8. After stating that Jesus learned obedience through suffering, the author continues: “and, once made perfect, he [Jesus] became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey (ὕπακούουσιν) him.” There is an obvious connection between the obedience that Jesus demonstrated and the obedience that defines the follower of Christ. As Koester comments, “His [Jesus’] obedience is the basis for Christian obedience.”¹⁷⁶ As in Heb 2:9–18, Jesus’ perfection and role in providing salvation for God’s people is emphasized (5:9). Again the author stresses that Jesus’ suffering and death were followed by exaltation and reward.

In the first eleven chapters of Hebrews, the portrayal of Jesus as a model of endurance in suffering and obedience in the face of death has been mostly implicit. In Heb 12:1–3, however, the author explicitly calls upon his audience to look to Jesus as an example of endurance in suffering and death. These verses, beginning a new chapter in modern translations, are the culmination of the author’s presentation of exemplars of faith in ch. 11.¹⁷⁷ Using the first person, the author encourages his audience in their challenge of faith by again utilizing athletic imagery: “Let us run the race set before us” (12:1). As an example for running this race, the author encourages his audience to look (ἀφοράω) to Jesus. He can serve as a model for the community’s race because he, as “pioneer and perfecter of faith,” ran the race before them. Jesus’ race was plagued with suffering and

¹⁷⁶ Koester, *Hebrews*, 290.

¹⁷⁷ Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 168.

ultimately death. Specifically, the author comments, Jesus endured the cross (ὑπέμεινεν σταυρὸν), disregarding its shame (αἰσχύνῃς καταφροντήσας). After this, the author points out, Jesus took his seat at the right hand of the throne of God (12:2). In this way, the author effectively transforms the shame and dishonor of Jesus' violent crucifixion into a noble and honorable death.¹⁷⁸ Jesus demonstrated endurance (ὑπομένω)—the very quality that the community was told that they needed to acquire (ὑπομενή; 10:36). Similarly, as the community was exposed to shame and ridicule (10:32–34), so too Jesus faced the shame of the cross.¹⁷⁹ Since Jesus went before them, demonstrating endurance despite shame and suffering, and was exalted to the right hand of God, so also the community can be assured that he has created a path that the heroes of faith only saw from a distance (11:39).

The connection between Jesus' example and the situation of the community is enforced in 12:3: "Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart." This is a key verse for understanding the original recipients' situation and the role of Jesus as exemplar in the author's response. The audience is not merely to "look to" Jesus but to carefully consider (ἀναλογίζομαι) his example and its implications for their lives. Again Jesus is presented as one who endured (ὑπομεμενηκότα), but here it is not the cross that he endured but rather "hostility" (ἀντιλογίαν) from sinners. Note the emphatic language surrounding the author's presentation of Jesus' hostility. Ἀντιλογίαν is modified by τοιαύτην, a term designating the intensity of the hostility.¹⁸⁰ The author emphasizes that Jesus endured such hostility

¹⁷⁸ deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 433.

¹⁷⁹ Thompson, *Hebrews*, 249.

¹⁸⁰ Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 643.

“against himself” (εἰς ἑαυτὸν)¹⁸¹—stressing the personal nature of his abuse. Jesus, the author claims, did not suffer in some abstract way. Rather, he endured abuse heaped upon him personally from “sinners” (τῶν ἀμαρτωλῶν), a term that clearly sets Jesus’ abusers as external to the community of faith.¹⁸² The description and emphasis on Jesus’ suffering served to connect his example to the community’s situation. They too faced personal reproach at the hands of outsiders (10:33). Linking Jesus’ example to the community’s present situation, the author writes that they should consider him “so that you may not grow weary or lose heart” (12:3b). If Jesus’ example of endurance in suffering serves as encouragement for the community now, then the author’s description of his abuse would have parallels with their present—and not just past—situation. In a rhetorical move, the author reminds the audience that Jesus’ suffering far exceeded anything that they had experienced—yet he demonstrated endurance. He writes: “In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood” (12:4). The author is, in effect, shaming the community—they have not faced the level of abuse that Jesus endured (none have died as a result of their hardship) yet appear ready to grow weary and lose heart.¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ It is likely that the singular form εἰς ἑαυτὸν (A P 104 326 1241 John–Damascus) is a scribal correction as a plural form εἰς αὐτοὺς/εἰς ἑαυτοὺς is better attested (P^{13,46} N^{*.b} Ψ^c 048 33 1739*). The singular better fits the context of the passage and therefore appears in the major editions of the Greek New Testament (UBSGNT⁴, NA²⁸). If the plural form is the original reading, then the author’s emphasis would be on the “sinners” who heap hostility upon themselves (so Lane, *Hebrews*, 400; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 643–44). The concept of sinners inflicting abuse upon themselves would not have been a foreign concept to the audience, but it is foreign to the context of this passage. In 12:3, the emphasis is on the abuse that Jesus suffered and its parallel to the community’s own experience. Therefore, the plural form is more likely an early scribal error as the internal evidence weighs against it. See Metzger, *Text Commentary*, 604–05; Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 189–90; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 353–54; Koester, *Hebrews*, 525; deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 426 n. 111; Cockerill, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 611 n. 48.

¹⁸² deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 438.

¹⁸³ Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection*, 174; deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 446; Koester identifies this as a greater-to-lesser argument: “The martyrs (Heb 11:35–38) and Jesus remained faithful despite great suffering. The issue now is whether the listeners can remain faithful in lesser suffering” (*Hebrews*, 537).

Hebrews 13:12–13 is the final passage that presents Jesus as an exemplar in facing suffering and death. In the preceding verses, the author describes customary Jewish practice for preparing a sacrifice for Yom Kippur (vv. 10–11). Picking up language from Lev 16:27, he writes that the animals whose blood is used as a sacrifice in the sanctuary are burned “outside the camp” (ἐξω τῆς παρεμβολῆς). The phrase “outside the camp” refers to a place of uncleanness. Lepers dwelled “outside the camp” (Lev 13:45–46; Num 5:2–4); those defiled waited out their purification there (Num 12:14–15; 31:19–20), and lawbreakers were executed there (Num 15:32–36).¹⁸⁴ The emphasis in Heb 13:12 is not on what happens to the sacrificial victims, but on the situation or circumstances in which a key action takes place.¹⁸⁵ Against this background, the author writes that Jesus also suffered outside the city gate. It is interesting that Jesus’ suffering is not presented in connection with the time of the sacrificial animal’s slaughter but rather the last act of the ritual of Yom Kippur—burning of the animal’s body outside the city walls.¹⁸⁶ Instead of the physical aspect of Jesus’ suffering and death, the author concentrates on the shame attached to suffering outside the gate. He focuses on the “abuse” or “disgrace” (ὀνειδισμός) Jesus endured (13:13). This emphasis likely is targeted at the community’s own experience since they too experienced ὀνειδισμός in their past (10:33). The community is further connected to Jesus’ disgrace as the author encourages them to “go out to” (ἐξέρχομαι) Jesus outside the gate and “bear” (φέρω) his

¹⁸⁴ deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 501. deSilva calls the reference to *outside the camp* “ambiguous” since it was also the place where God’s presence is found in Ex 33:1–7.

¹⁸⁵ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 398.

¹⁸⁶ Moffitt writes that the author of Hebrews focuses on “exactly the wrong moment.” He continues: “Wrong, that is, if the traditional understanding of how he maps Jesus’ death and exaltation onto Yom Kippur were correct. Instead of highlighting the correlation of Jesus’ crucifixion outside Jerusalem with the moment of the slaughter of the victim, he links it with the final act of the Yom Kippur ritual—the disposal of the victim’s body ‘outside the camp’” (*Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection*, 276–77).

disgrace (12:13). Here, as in 12:2, the author explicitly encourages his audience to follow Jesus in his example of endurance despite abuse, suffering, and ultimately death.

The author's presentation of Jesus as an exemplar of endurance in the midst of suffering and death can be understood in two major steps. First, alongside the high Christology of the epistle (see esp. 1:1–4), Jesus' humanity is emphasized to reveal how he experienced the same trials and abuse that the community themselves had. In Hebrews Jesus is not only the "exact representation" (χαρακτήρ) of God's "being" (ὑπόστασις; 1:3), but he also "became like his brothers and sisters in every respect" (κατὰ πάντα τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς ὁμοιωθῆναι; 2:17). This meant that Jesus experienced great suffering (2:9–10; 5:8; 13:12) and shame (12:2, 13:13), cried out to God to be saved from death (5:7), learned from what he suffered (5:8), and was tested in every way that humans are (4:15). The author is careful to show how the suffering of Jesus relates to that which the community experienced and to draw connections to his audience. Both Jesus (2:9, 10; 5:8) and the community (10:32) have experienced great suffering (πάσχω/πάθημα)—including disgrace or shame (ὀνειδισμός; of the community, 10:32; of Jesus, 13:13). Both Jesus and the community are called God's children (υἱοῖς); this designation, the author points out, entails suffering (5:8, of Jesus; 12:5–11, of the community). Being made like his brothers and sisters in every way and experiencing suffering and ultimately death allows Jesus to be an empathetic high priest (2:17; 4:15; 5:10). This is important for the author's theological argument, but it also communicates to the audience that the suffering they are experiencing was (1) also experienced fully by Jesus, and (2) a sign of their status as God's children.

Second, for the very reason that Jesus' experience of suffering in the face of death mirrored that of the community, they can look to him as a model of how to respond. Here again the author draws explicit parallels between Jesus and the community. In his suffering and death Jesus demonstrated endurance (12:2) and obedience (5:8)—two qualities that the community is called to acquire (5:9; 10:36). Twice the author exhorts his audience to follow Christ's example. In 12:2–3, the author tells his audience to “look to” (ἀφορῶντες; 12:2) Jesus and “consider” (ἀναλογίσασθε; 12:3) his endurance so that they will not grow weary. Then in 13:13 he encourages them to “go to” (ἐξερχώμεθα) Jesus outside the camp and bear his same abuse. Jesus serves as the supreme exemplar not merely because his suffering is analogous to that of the community, but because he demonstrates endurance and obedience in those times of hardship in the midst of death. In fact, as the author points out, Jesus experienced suffering beyond what the community had yet faced (12:4), so they can look to him in times of despair. This is reinforced by the author's repeated emphasis on the heavenly outcomes of Christ's endurance in suffering and death. He was made perfect (2:10; 5:9), became a high priest (2:17; 5:10), led many to glory (2:10), defeated death and the devil (2:14), and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God (12:2). Jesus is an exemplar not only in his actions during times of struggle, but he is a model of the promises of God being fulfilled for those who endure to the end. The believers too are promised a great reward if they endure (10:36).

Conclusion

Writing to a community facing active suffering and a threat of death, the author of Hebrews presents models of endurance in affliction and faith in the face of extinction. Like the many Hellenistic, Jewish, and Christian writers before him, the author

incorporates exemplars to support his theological argument and exhortation to faithful conduct. The first group, figures from Israel's past, connects the recipients of the epistle to their ancestors in God's family who were plagued by affliction and near death experiences. These figures acted in faith in times of difficulty and faced death with the assurance of God's promise and hope beyond this life. The second group consisted of the community themselves as the author recounts their own faithfulness during a great time of suffering in their past. As similar afflictions continue to plague their community, the author encourages them to demonstrate the same attitudes and behavior that marked their previous ordeal. The third exemplar is Jesus Christ, who faced the same and even more severe trials yet modeled endurance and obedience to God. If the life of the community's great high priest, pioneer, and perfecter was plagued by suffering, then they should not be surprised that they too find themselves in similar trials. Jesus' endurance in suffering and obedience to the point of death provides a model of behavior for the community. They are to look to his example in such times and not be afraid to go out after him—even if it means affliction, shame, and possibly death. By presenting these exemplars the author offers hope beyond death, honor in the midst of public shame, and a model of behavior in times of struggle.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion and Further Research

This study has put forward the modest proposal that a probable context of situation of the Epistle to the Hebrews was the reality of suffering and threat of death experienced by the probable audience. While the historical details are unavailable to us, it is clear that the author perceives his audience as actively facing affliction and being fearful for their lives. This was likely not the only occasion for his composition, but it was an issue that he thought needed to be addressed. One significant way that he responded to this crisis was by presenting models of behavior that acted in faith despite hardship and courage in the face of death.

Significant Motifs

By way of conclusion, I wish to help flesh out a couple of significant motifs that emerge from my study of the suffering and death language in Hebrews. The goal here is not to introduce new concepts or arguments, but rather to highlight some noteworthy insights gleaned from the investigation. Of the many important motifs involving suffering and death in Hebrews that materialized during this study, I will focus on two here: sonship and suffering and victory over death.

Sonship and Suffering

A significant connection that is made at several points in this examination is that between suffering and sonship. This is part of a larger motif of the family of God in Hebrews.¹ God is presented as the πατήρ (“father,” 1:5; 2:11; 12:9) of numerous υιοί

¹ For a recent study of the familial dynamics found in Hebrews, see Peeler, *You are My Son*.

(“sons”),² which include both Jesus (1:2, 8; 3:6; 5:5, 7:28; called τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ in 4:14; 6:6; 10:29) and believers (2:10; 12:5, 7, 8). Since Jesus and believers share the same father, Jesus calls them his ἀδελφοί (“brothers,” 2:11–12). Further, these παιδία (“children”) share flesh and blood (2:14) and are alike in every way (2:17), including temptation (2:18). The author addresses the audience as ἀδελφοί (3:1, 12; 10:19; 13:22), mentions ἀδελφὸν ἡμῶν (“our brother”) Timothy (13:23), and encourages φιλαδελφία (“brotherly love,” 13:1). Believers are presented as God’s οἶκος (“house,” 3:6) and inheritors of God’s promises (6:12; 10:36; 12:28).

In his presentation of Jesus, the author makes clear that his status as God’s υἱός includes times of suffering. This connection is made explicit in Heb 5:8: Καίπερ ὢν υἱός, ἔμαθεν ἀφ’ ὧν ἔπαθεν τὴν ὑπακοήν (“Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered”). Within the composition of this verse, the juxtaposition of Jesus’ status as υἱός and the reality of his suffering is clearly presented. The author makes the significant declaration that Jesus’ status as God’s υἱός did not exempt him from experiencing suffering. Similarly in 2:9–18, Jesus’ status as son is connected to his suffering within the context of his relationship to his siblings. In 2:10–11, the author states that Jesus was made perfect διὰ παθημάτων (“through sufferings”), was used by God to bring many υἱούς to glory, and is not ashamed to call them ἀδελφούς. Hebrews 2:18 states that Jesus was made like his ἀδελφοῖς in every respect—including himself suffering by being tested (πέπονθεν αὐτὸς πειρασθεῖς). References to Jesus’ suffering elsewhere in Hebrews (12:2–3; 13:12) further corroborate this connection.

² I am using the translation “sons” here in order to emphasize the textual link between Jesus as “son” and the believers as “sons.” I am not intending to avoid gender-inclusive language, which, I believe, should be included in English translations of many of these passages where believers are in view (NRSV, TNIV, NLT, CEB).

The audience of Hebrews is similarly to understand themselves as God's υιοί (2:10). Just as Jesus' status as υιός involved suffering, so too the audience—as God's υιοί—should expect to experience suffering. Nowhere is this clearer than in Heb 12:5: εἰς παιδείαν ὑπομένετε, ὡς υιοῖς προσφέρεται ὁ θεός (“Endure for discipline; God is treating you as sons”).³ The audience is encouraged to conceptualize their hardships as a child accepting parental discipline for their own growth and correction. As with any good earthly father-son relationship, the audience should understand suffering and hardships to be a part of their status as υιοί. In stating that a son who does not receive discipline from his father is not a legitimate son (Heb 12:8), the author boldly proclaims that true υιοί of God experience suffering. The author's argument here is remarkable. He goes beyond stating simply that suffering is not inconsistent with being a child of God and argues that the presence of suffering in the lives of believers serves as a marker of their status as υιοί. However, just as Jesus' suffering led to his perfection and other positive outcomes, so too the believer can be assured that their times of struggle will yield positive results (12:11).

In this way, the author of Hebrews presents the challenging notion that suffering and being a member of the Christian community are linked. Just as Jesus experienced suffering, so too the believer should expect to suffer. Outside of a context of situation that includes present suffering, this is a difficult, almost cruel, belief. Void of a context of suffering, the believer would seem to be encouraged to seek out experiences of suffering. Here is where our thesis regarding the epistle's context of situation becomes so important. It must be remembered that the author was writing to a community that was already experiencing suffering and affliction. The author is not challenging them to seek

³ My own translation. Again, I am choosing to translate υιοῖς as the gender specific “sons” to bring out the connection between believers and Jesus' status as υιός. English translations should generally translate the word as “children” or another gender-inclusive term or phrase.

suffering but to interpret their current suffering through a theological lens. Rather than a sign of God's absence, their suffering is an assurance of God's fatherly love. Rather than a source of shame or embarrassment, the community's suffering should be interpreted as a source of honor and status. The author is addressing a very real problem in the lives of the Christian community and used it to motivate—rather than to discourage—his audience toward faithful obedience.

This is not to suggest that the community addressed in Hebrews did not have a choice regarding their experience of suffering. The author calls for them to endure and provides examples of faithful endurance despite affliction (ὑπομονή/ὑπομένω, 10:32, 36; 12:1–3, 7). A reference to members leaving the community (10:25) combined with stern warnings against abandoning the faith (2:2; 3:12; 6:4–8; 10:26–31; 12:16–17) suggests that some were tempted—and some had already chosen—to leave the community to avoid hardship (whether that be persecution, dishonor, social ostracism, or some other form of hardship). The author encourages the community to forward movement (4:16; 10:22; 12:1; 13:13) and a holding firm to their convictions (3:14; 4:14; 10:23). The community, then, has a choice between shrinking back and possibly avoiding affliction or standing firm, moving forward in faith, and receiving the reward promised by God (esp. 10:36–39).

Victory over Death

The author of Hebrews needed to address not only the problem of the reality of suffering in the lives of the community but also the fear or perceived threat of death. In order to do this, the author exhorts his audience that God, through Jesus, had achieved victory over death. The *υἱός* not only suffered, but also died. Yet the author repeatedly

reminds his audience that Jesus presently is crowned with glory and honor (2:9), seated by the throne of God (12:2), actively serves as the people's high priest (5:10; 7:24–25), and will come again (9:28; 10:37). Death did not defeat Jesus as he continues to “live” (ζάω, 7:25), has the “power of an indestructible life” (δύναμιν ζωῆς ἀκαταλύτου, 7:16), and offers a “new and living” way (πρόσφατον καὶ ζῶσαν, 10:20).

In his presentation of Jesus' death, the author's primary focus is on its relevance for the readers. In 2:9 the author makes it clear that through his death Jesus tasted death for everyone. It brought many sons and daughters to glory (2:10), it became the source of eternal salvation (5:9), it cleansed their consciences (9:14, 10:22), and it made people holy (13:12). Further, Jesus' death is understood as a ransom that brings freedom from sin (9:15) and forgiveness (9:22). In 2:14 the author writes that Jesus shared in humanity so that “by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil.” Continuing his heroic imagery, the author proclaims that by his death Jesus freed all those who were held in slavery by their “fear of death” (φόβῳ θανάτου, 2:15).

The description of Jesus' victory over the power and bondage of death uses general terms, but it has direct relevance to a community living under the threat of death. This general—even philosophical—discussion quickly becomes practical. As Koester points out, the author's comment in 2:16 that it is Abraham's descendants who are being helped communicates to the audience that they are the ones who benefit by Christ's victory.⁴ Lane writes, “The preacher knew that these men and women were frightened. They were acquainted with the paralysis that issues from the fear of death (2:14–15).”⁵

⁴ Koester, *Hebrews*, 240.

⁵ Lane, “Sermon in Search of Setting,” 17.

The community would likely have identified with those being held hostage by their fear of death and the author here encourages them that they no longer needed to live in fear. Jesus, while on earth, is similarly presented as fearing death (5:7). This is what makes Jesus such an excellent exemplar for the audience: he has experienced everything that they have and is sympathetic to their situation.

The motif of victory over death is seen in other ways in the epistle. One way is the connection between the divine and life. Four times the author uses the title “living God” (θεοῦ ζῶντος/ζῶντι, 3:12; 9:14; 10:31; 12:22) and in 4:12 states that the word of God is “living” (ζῶν). Obedience and faithfulness to God are described as living (ζῶω, 10:38; 12:9). Not only is Jesus presented as living after death (7:25), but other exemplars are described as avoiding death or continuing to act after death—including Melchizedek (7:3), Abel (11:4), and Enoch (11:5). Another tactic of the author is to point to future promise and reward after death. The heroes of faith saw this promise from a distance (11:13, 26, 39) and the community was encouraged to endure their present circumstances to receive the promise (10:35–36).

Suffering and Death Language within Early Christianity

A possible question that may arise at the conclusion of our study of Hebrews is how the text compares to other early Christian documents—particularly in relation to its emphasis on the topics of suffering and death. This task is difficult as we are unable to focus on a particular geographical region or clear timeframe. Based on a variety of factors, Hebrews is typically dated in the second half of the first-century—usually between 60–90 CE.⁶ What is undisputed in Hebrews is that the original audience was

⁶ A more precise date is difficult to confirm and depends upon one’s opinion regarding the relevance of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, relationship to (and dating of) *1 Clement*, the identity of Timothy

made up of a community of early Christians. Therefore, while we are not able to concentrate on a specific location or date, we can compare Hebrews to what we know about early Christian communities in the late first century CE.⁷

Several early Christian documents provide a glimpse into the lives of these communities and their experiences of affliction and marginalization.⁸ The Synoptic Gospels, likely composed in the middle to late first century, present Jesus as warning his followers to expect persecution and even death because of his name. In Luke 21:12–19, Jesus tells his disciples that before the end times, “they will arrest you and persecute you; ... they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name.” However, “not a hair on your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls” (cf. Matt 10:16–23; Mark 13:9–13).⁹ Similarly, Matt 24:9–13 has Jesus saying, “They will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death ... But the one who endures to the end will be saved.” The book of Acts depicts scenes of martyrdom (7:54–60; 12:2), imprisonment (5:17–18; 8:3; 12:3–5; 16:23), and persecution (5:40; 16:22–23, 37; 18:17; 21:32) of the earliest Christians.¹⁰

(13:23) and other factors. The window of 60–90 CE is suggested by Koester (*Hebrews*, 50–54); Attridge expands this slightly to a period between 60–100 CE (*Hebrews*, 6–9). Some scholars date Hebrews in the 60s CE—shortly after the persecution of Nero but before the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE (Lane, *Hebrews*, lxvi; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 29–33). Others prefer a date into the 80s–90s as the text seems to hint at the community being comprised of second-generation believers (Isaacs, *Sacred Space*, 67; Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 7).

⁷ Travis Williams arrives at a similar conclusion in his investigation of the type of suffering discussed in 1 Peter: “Our goal is to simply take what little information can be gleaned about the situation from 1 Peter and place it against the larger backdrop of Asia Minor (a world which has yielded much more data) in order to better understand the problem facing the Petrine readers” (*Persecution in 1 Peter*, 21–22).

⁸ See Reasoner, “Persecution,” 907–14.

⁹ Marshall notes that in adding *πρὸ δὲ τούτων πάντων* to the beginning of this section, Luke has changed the section (from Mark’s Gospel) from being a sign of the end times to a “description of the situation of the disciples from the outset” (*Gospel of Luke*, 766).

¹⁰ The value of such evidence of course depends upon one’s view of its historical reliability. On the topic, see Keener’s lengthy treatment in *Acts*, 1:26–30, 51–220.

The epistles in the New Testament further demonstrate early responses to hostility and marginalization toward Christians in the first century. Paul's letters contain numerous references to his imprisonment (Rom 16:7; Phil 1:7, 13–14, 17; Phlm 10, 13)¹¹ and persecution (2 Cor 11:23–24; Gal 5:11) as well as the persecution of other Christians (Gal 6:12; 1 Thess 2:14–15). The Epistle of James includes teaching at several places on the proper response to trials and suffering (1:2–4; 5:7–11, 13) as well as descriptions of oppression and affliction (2:6; 5:4–6). First Peter, dated between 60–90 CE,¹² is clearly written in response to suffering in the lives of early Christian communities (1:6; 3:14; 4:1, 19; 5:9–10) and makes numerous references to persecution (3:16–17; 4:12–16;). The author of 1 Peter refers to a “fiery ordeal” taking place among the communities addressed (4:12). The cause of this suffering appears to be due to their association with Christ (3:16; 4:14, 16) and includes both verbal (2:12; 4:14) and physical abuse (2:20) as well as legal condemnation (2:11–17; 3:14–16; 4:12–19).¹³

The book of Revelation includes several references to persecution and this reality is likely the occasion of its composition.¹⁴ At the beginning of Revelation, the author identifies himself as John—a brother who “share[s] with you in Jesus the persecution [θλιψις] and the kingdom and the patient endurance” (1:9). The book contains numerous descriptions of the suffering and martyrdom of Christians (6:9–11; 7:14; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2; 20:4), although these accounts are apocalyptic and highly figurative. However, the letters to the seven churches in Rev 2:1–3:22 contain several references to

¹¹ References to Paul's imprisonment in the disputed letters include Eph 6:20; Col 4:3, 18; 2 Tim 2:9.

¹² The dating of 1 Peter depends largely upon one's view of the authenticity of Petrine authorship. For a survey of the discussion, see Jobes, *1 Peter*, 5–19; Williams, *Persecution in 1 Peter*, 22–34.

¹³ Here following the discussion in Williams, *Persecution in 1 Peter*, 300–16.

¹⁴ Reasoner, “Persecution,” 908. Against this view, see deSilva, *Seeing Things John's Way*, 50–55.

contemporary suffering and martyrdom (2:2–3, 9–10, 13; 3:8). There is a specific reference to the martyrdom of Antipas in 2:13, who was a “witness” and “faithful one.”

Hebrews finds itself among several other early Christian writings in the late first century that address the reality of suffering and death in the lives of early Christians. In these writings, this reality is explicitly connected to persecution and martyrdom for one’s faith (Luke 21:12–19; Acts 7:54–60; 1 Thess 2:14; 1 Pet 4:12–19; Rev 2:13) but often to less intense trials or marginalization (Rom 5:3–6; Jas 1:2–4; 1 Pet 2:12). It is clear from these sources that early Christians at least perceived themselves to be the victims of persecution and social marginalization at the hands of both Jewish and Roman outsiders.

Reconstructing a Historical Scenario for Hebrews

So what is the historical situation behind the composition of the Epistle to the Hebrews? It is reasonable in response to the results of this study to ask what they can tell us about the historical scenario that motivated the author of Hebrews to compose his discourse. Throughout these chapters I have intentionally resisted the impulse to tie the outcomes of my investigation of Hebrews’ context of situation to a specific historical event. To do so, I believe, would be to the detriment of this study. After examining the topics of death and suffering with an eye to the epistle’s context of situation, it is clear that the author was writing in order to address these two issues. The audience was experiencing actual suffering and were being confronted with the reality of their deaths. In response, the author encourages his audience by offering examples of how to respond to these challenges and assurance of future reward for faithful endurance.

That the author of Hebrews wrote into a context of suffering and fear of death may cohere well among suggestions for the historical situation of the community. One

may attempt to connect the findings of this study to a variety of plausible historical scenarios—the persecution of Nero in 64 CE, the Jewish War of 66–73 CE, the harsh living conditions of urban settings within the Roman Empire, or some other suggestions. These scenarios, like those surveyed in chapter 2, would need to be examined against other historical evidence and in light of the text of Hebrews. While I make no attempt to tie the context of situation involving the reality of suffering and fear of death in Hebrews to any specific historical scenario, I would maintain that any viable historical reconstruction of the social situation of Hebrews *must account* for this context of situation. Any attempt to place Hebrews within a historical scenario that neglects the author’s concern for his audience’s suffering and fear of death has failed to incorporate vital evidence and should be rejected.

Ideas for Further Research

The present study has made several significant contributions to Hebrews scholarship—including an examination of the topics of suffering and death and a paradigm for making determinations of its social context—but it has in many ways only scratched the surface on a variety of issues. One area that should receive further attention is the application of the methodology for determining a social context to other texts, particularly the Pauline epistles. Each text comes with its own difficulties and the methodology may need to be adapted in each application, but its basic concepts and linguistic underpinnings could be used generally across texts.

A second area of further research would be the application of socio-scientific criticism to the text of Hebrews in light of this theory of its social context. Good work has

been done on socio-scientific criticism, including its application to Hebrews.¹⁵ Of particular interest—given the working thesis of this study—would be the employment of sociological theories of social conflict on the text of Hebrews. Such sociologists as Georg Simmel and Lewis A. Coser have examined how social conflict functions to reinforce a group’s identity and heightens its cohesiveness.¹⁶

A few functions of social conflict are worth noting here. First, when a group experiences conflict, there is a “need for centralization” and internal cohesion.¹⁷ The author of Hebrews’ reminder of past experiences of conflict verifies this positive function (10:32–34). In his epistle, the author similarly calls for group cohesion in his audience’s present context (10:25). Second, the need for internal cohesion leads to strict adherence to the group’s values and unity. “Every uncertainty of a member at once threatens the core and hence the cohesion of the whole.”¹⁸ Further, as Coser notes, “The only way [a group] can solve the problem of a dissenter is through the dissenter’s voluntary or forced withdrawal.”¹⁹ Such a concern may be found in Hebrews with the author’s extreme words against those who fall away from the group and its teaching (esp. 6:4–6). Third, the existence of an outside enemy strengthens group cohesion in opposition to that enemy.²⁰ In Hebrews, there are descriptions of what we might identify as opponents to the community and its heroes. Jesus is described as enduring hostility from “sinners” (τῶν ἁμαρτωλῶν) in 12:3. In their past, the community suffered from unidentified (by the author) oppressors as described in 10:32–34; similarly, exemplars from the past suffered

¹⁵ Elliott, *Home for the Homeless*; *idem*, *What is Social-Scientific Criticism?*; deSilva, *Socio-Scientific Perspective*.

¹⁶ Simmel, *Conflict*; Coser, *Functions of Social Conflict*;

¹⁷ Simmel, *Conflict*, 88.

¹⁸ Simmel, *Conflict*, 97.

¹⁹ Coser, *Functions of Social Conflict*, 103.

²⁰ Coser, *Functions of Social Conflict*, 106.

at the hands of abusers (esp. 11:36–37). The term διάβολος (“devil”) in 2:14 refers to an oppressor who holds the power of death and imprisons all of humanity to their fear of death. The author presents Jesus in a cosmic battle with the διάβολος, destroying him by his own death. The identification of a common enemy, according to John Elliott, has a sociological purpose: “Struggle with one common enemy implies the need for a united front.”²¹ Finally, a tendency in social conflict is to “give the struggle transcendent legitimation and cosmic scope.”²² In this way, a conflict becomes one of ideas or ideals—something much larger than the individual.²³ Along these lines, Hebrews envisions its audience’s present hardships as something that defines their identity and purpose. In 12:5–14, the author presents hardships as a sign of God’s fatherly discipline and their own status as his true children. These are just a few ideas of how social conflict theory, or other insights from socio-scientific criticism, may help flesh out the implications of this study and the author’s response to a social crisis.

Finally, this study has been focused on the text of Hebrews and its relationship to its context of situation. There has been very little theological reflection on Hebrews’ presentation of suffering and death for a modern reader. While I maintain that understanding the Epistle to the Hebrews within its historical context is essential for understanding the text for the modern reader, it should not be forgotten that for millions of contemporary readers Hebrews is not only written to its original audience but to them today. For many, the author of Hebrews’ comment that ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ is alive and active asserts confidence that this first century text continues to speak to the modern Christian. While outside the purview of this study, the theological significance of the

²¹ Elliott, *Home for the Homeless*, 115.

²² Elliott, *Home for the Homeless*, 116.

²³ Coser, *Functions of Social Conflict*, 114–18.

topics of suffering and death in Hebrews would be a helpful and edifying endeavor for the church today.

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