

The Purpose, Structure and Theme of the Epistle to the Hebrews

by Steven C. Ger, ThM
Director/Sojourner Ministries
www.sojournerministries.com

Adapted from introductory material within the author's commentary:
The Book of Hebrews: Christ is Greater (AMG, 2009)

Introduction

Many believers have the perception that the book of Hebrews is confusing; indeed, its reputation for impenetrability extends beyond the layman and even to the clergy. To the modern reader, the density of the author's argument and the complexity of his rhetorical style have caused many to avoid this singular epistle. Even the title is off-putting to those who are not Jewish themselves, although interestingly enough, the corresponding argument is never made that non-Greeks might struggle with Paul's letter to the Philippians or non-Italians with Romans.

This perception of comprehensive difficulty causes many believers to choose to skip rapidly through the book in their time of personal Bible study. They are frustrated at the author's statements to the effect that his arguments are "evident" (7:14) and clear (7:15). Perhaps two thousand years ago on the other side of the world, to people with a deep familiarity with the Old Testament text and who were comfortable with and knowledgeable about animal sacrifice, the arguments within Hebrews were evident and clear, but it is not usually the case for the current generation approaching the text. An examination of the book's purpose, structure and theme will provide ample momentum in facilitating the contemporary reader's understanding of the text.

Purpose

The book of Hebrews is designed to definitively demonstrate the supremacy of Jesus Christ (see Table 1) in both His identity (person) and ministry (priesthood). In the epistle's central core, the commencement of the eighth chapter, the author straightforwardly reveals the central point of his argument, "Now the main point in what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man" (8:1-2).

Table 1. The Supremacy of the Messiah

Superior Regarding

Prior Prophetic Revelation
Angels
Moses
Levitical Priesthood
Abraham
The Torah
Mosaic Covenant

Reference

1:1-3
1:4-2:18
3:1-6
4:14-5:10; 7:11-28; 9:1-10
7:1-10
7:12, 19, 28; 10:1
8:1-13

The entirety of the text's concern is to establish a doctrinal foundation of Jesus' supremacy in every area pertaining to God and His divine program: revelation, priesthood, law, hope, human/divine relationship, covenant, promise, sacrifice and sanctuary; and having established this foundation, to then erect upon it a practical and ethical structure upon which the community of faith may suitably apply these doctrinally foundational truths in every situation. Hebrews explains that what God has supplied for His people in this present age is, in all ways, new and superior. God's provision therefore demands a commensurate response from the faith community.

The complete argument of Hebrews can be broken down as follows:

God's new and superior revelation (1:1-2)
discloses that with a new and superior permanent priesthood (7:11-19, 28)
necessarily comes a new and superior permanent law (7:11-19, 28),
which yields a new and superior permanent hope (7:18-19)
by which to relate to God (7:25),
who provides a new and superior permanent guarantee (7:22-24)
of a new and superior permanent covenant (7:22; 8:6-7)
based upon new and superior promises (8:6-7),
established through a new and superior sacrifice (9:23-28)
offered by a new and superior permanent Priest (7:11-8:6)
within a new and superior sanctuary (8:2-5; 9:11-12, 24).

In consideration of the above breakdown, it becomes obvious that the motivating force that undergirds the author's passionate defense of the Messiah's superiority is his equally passionate conviction regarding the inferiority of the Mosaic Covenant and the entire Levitical system. One simply cannot demonstrate superiority in a vacuum; in order to demonstrate the essential superiority of one thing, it is compulsory to reveal the essential inferiority of another.

For the author of Hebrews, the Mosaic Covenant is inferior to the New Covenant (7:22; 8:6-7); God's guarantee of the Mosaic Covenant is inferior to that of the New Covenant (7:22-24); the Mosaic Covenant's promises are inferior to those of the New Covenant (8:6-7); the Torah is inferior to the law of Messiah (7:11-19, 28); the Aaronic High Priesthood is inferior to the Melchizedekian High Priesthood (7:11-19, 28); the Levitical High Priests are inferior to the Messiah (7:11-8:6); the Levitical system's sacrifices are inferior to the Messiah's sacrifice (9:23-28); the Tabernacle/Temple is inferior to the Messiah's heavenly sanctuary (8:2-5; 9:11-12, 24); the hope incited through the Levitical system is inferior to the hope incited through the Messiah (7:18-19); the way to relate to God through the Levitical system is inferior to the Messiah's new means (7:25); the supernatural mediators of the Torah, angels, are inferior to the Messiah in both identity and ministry (1:4-2:18); the human mediator of the Torah, Moses, is inferior to the Messiah in both identity and ministry (3:1-6); Abraham, the Jewish national father, is inferior to the Messiah (7:1-10); and all prior prophetic revelation is inferior to God's

new revelation in His Son (1:1-2) (see Table 1). Two thousand years later, the argument of Hebrews' stunning indictment of first century Judaism's inadequacy in light of Jesus' superiority still possesses the power to astonish.

However, the author of Hebrews never demeans Judaism. The student of Scripture must always bear in mind that the author's indictment of Judaism, the Mosaic Covenant and the Levitical system is only germane when in comparison with the Messiah's eminence. No one belittles the moon for the limited quantity of light it provides from the night sky; in the absence of a superior heavenly body, the moon does a tremendous job, and when the moon remains hidden, its light is sorely missed.

However, when both moon and sun share the same sky and can be directly compared, no one would prefer the moon's output in lumens over the sun's. In the light of day, one heavenly body is so obviously superior to the other that it then becomes obvious that although they both emit light, their quality is so different that they really cannot be compared. The author of Hebrews is simply pointing out that the intrinsic glory of God's Messiah is superior to the reflected glory of the Mosaic Levitical system.

Having established the author's stated purpose, that of definitively demonstrating the supremacy of Jesus Christ in both His identity (His person) and ministry (His priesthood), the next issue to be resolved is the author's underlying motivation in writing to the recipient community; the likely event, issue or concern that prompted the author to place ink to parchment.

The Jewish Christian recipients of Hebrews had previously undergone a brutal season of persecution (10:32-34) and were now menaced by its imminent resumption and perhaps, intensification (12:4). The community was most likely situated in the holy city of Jerusalem or, alternatively, the nearby environs of Judea, and it is not hard to imagine the pressure of living among a general populace that had grown progressively hostile toward the church over the past two decades. It had been quite some time since the church had found notable favor with the residents of Jerusalem (Acts 6:7; 9:31). The Jerusalem of the first century's seventh decade was a volatile place to call home.

One can surmise from the author's topical emphases that a portion of the community was in the process of considering a renunciation of their messianic faith for the purpose of alleviating the tension and escalating pressure of living under threatened or actual persecution. The duration of their intended hiatus from their faith commitment to Christianity is unclear, perhaps it was only temporarily, until the storm cloud of threatened persecution had passed from sight.

Their thinking about the status of their salvation may have been similar to those who have, at one time or another, not paid our premiums and allowed our insurance policies to lapse. Most insurance policies have what is called a "grace period" (appropriately enough), when, although the policy is currently in arrears, the insurance company will still honor their prior commitment. If we allow the grace period to pass without paying our outstanding balance, then the policy lapses. Yet most of the time, all we need do is pay our premium once again and the policy is promptly renewed. These Jewish Christians may have contemplated a temporary lapse in their salvation insurance which they could promptly renew when it was more convenient to stand for Jesus.

Alternatively, the clues within the text leave open the possibility that what was being contemplated was no timid renunciation of Christ born of fear, but the defiant act of rebellion by a spiritually immature (5:11; 6:12), insecure, and frustrated group who had had enough of taking heat for their hope in the Messiah (2:3, 18; 3:6, 12–15; 4:1, 11, 14; 6:4–6, 9–12; 10:19–29, 35–39; 12:1–3, 14–17, 25; 13:9, 13). Whether the community was timid or bold in their contemplation of spiritual mutiny, the author of Hebrews makes every attempt to persuade them not to press forward with this ill-conceived strategy.

The Warnings. Countless commentators expend a great deal of effort and literary real estate in their commentary introductions attempting to successfully establish the Jewish Christian identity of the letter's original recipients. Yet, upon achievement of their goal regarding the establishment of Jewish Christian identity, throughout the remainder of their commentaries many of them incongruously proceed to underplay or ignore the Jewishness and specifically time-bound contemporary Jewish sensitivities of the letter's contents, concerns and arguments, all of which are based upon a first century understanding of well-known Old Testament texts as seen through the early church's innate messianic filter.

The contextual lodestone that leads our way to the successful interpretation of Hebrews is the reality that there are issues that color the arguments addressed within the text that are simply not universally applicable to the entirety of the church throughout all generations and in every age. It is the inability to accept this singular point, or even to recognize this essential distinction, that has created such exceptional confusion and variety of opinion in the interpretation of certain sections of Hebrews, in particular, the warning passages.

Specifically, it is crucial to read Hebrews' warning passages in light of the impending judgment that was to be inflicted upon the specific generation of Israel that had rejected Jesus ("against this generation," Luke 11:50-51; "upon this generation," Matt 23:35-36; "this perverse generation," Acts 2:40). The Jewish leadership had dismissed Jesus' messianic identity, and consequently, the messianic kingdom, through their ruinous accusation that His miracles were demonically empowered. Jesus identified their rejection as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit; the commitment of the infamous, unpardonable sin (Matt. 12:22-45). A nation is always held responsible for the actions of its leadership; therefore, this was considered Israel's formal, national rejection of their Messiah. Jesus consequently pronounced irrevocable divine judgment upon the entire generation.

The unpardonable sin of Jewish national rejection of Jesus and consequent forthcoming judgment (Matt. 3:7; 12:22-45; 23:35-36; Luke 11:50-51; Acts 2:40) would result in the devastation of Judea, the desolation of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple (Matt 24:2). This divine judgment had been central to the witness of not only Jesus, but John the Baptist, who repeatedly warned his audience of "the wrath to come," which would imminently descend upon Israel (Matt. 3:7), and the apostle Peter, who warned his people to save themselves ("be saved from this perverse generation," Acts 2:42) from the excruciating and cataclysmic maelstrom forthcoming upon the particular generation of the nation of Israel that had rejected the Messiah.ⁱ

Israel's commitment of the unpardonable sin meant that national judgment on that specific generation (and solely that specific generation) was inevitable. However, God graciously provided the means for individual Jews to escape the impending national calamity. While it was solely through faith in Jesus that they could be saved from their personal sins, assuring their eternal destiny, the avoidance of participation in the national sin and assurance of their interim physical destiny required repentance from their former rejection of Jesus' messianic identity as well as a decisive act of allegiance: their public identification as His disciple through water baptism (Acts 2:38-40).

The book of Acts records that by the first century's sixth decade, tens of thousands of individual Jews had pledged allegiance to the Messiah (Acts 21:20) and thereby removed themselves from the curse of future judgment. Yet no matter the impressive extent of the numerical expansion of the church's Jewish "wing" before 70 A.D., it would not affect God's immutable verdict. Just as with the rebellion at Kadesh Barnea, even following Israel's national repentance coupled with divine forgiveness (Num. 14:20-23), divine judgment on the nation remained unalterable.

The Jewish believers to whom the author was writing were members of the same generation that was guilty of the unpardonable sin and facing the coming judgment of A.D. 70 ... If the readers go back into Judaism now, they will re-identify themselves with the generation guilty of the unpardonable sin ... When the judgment strikes, they will die a physical death as a divine discipline.ⁱⁱ

That the warning passages should be understood as time-bound and only relating to one specific generation of Jewish Christians is admittedly a minority opinion that has not yet received broad acceptance. Yet majorities have never possessed a monopoly on truth. When exposed to this view, many initially reject the idea out-of-hand, posing one objection in particular. They reason that this view is contradicted by the indisputable historical fact that not every first century Jew who rejected Jesus was annihilated. In fact, most Judean Jews who rejected Jesus, even members of the national leadership, managed to escape death.

This objection is easily addressed by the equally indisputable historical fact that God's judgment of His chosen people is never total and complete. He always unleashes his wrath on a representative national sample and preserves for Himself a substantial remnant (Ex. 32:28-35; Num. 14:20-32; 25:8-9). This is true even at Kadesh Barnea, the historical event that most closely parallels Israel's first century situation, according to the author of Hebrews (3:7-19). It is implausible to envision that Israel's faithlessness at Kadesh Barnea was limited to those Israelites over the age of twenty; nonetheless, God completely exempted those twenty and under from His wrath. Utter annihilation is never requisite for the satisfaction of a divine curse. Therefore, while it was thoroughly unknowable in advance whether Jerusalem or Judea's Jewish Christian apostates might escape actual death, no one in Judea could escape the ramifications of God's judgment on Israel's leadership: Jerusalem's conquest and the Temple's destruction.

Alternative perspectives on the warning passages exist, and there is exceptional confusion and diversity of opinion in the interpretation of these passages. Tellingly, even

after the passing of two thousand years, no single interpretation of the warning passages has received popular acceptance, particularly among evangelicals.

Structure

The book of Hebrews is unique within the New Testament corpus, neither fitting neatly into the category of epistle nor the category of sermon. It is a rare hybrid of both letter and homily. There can be no doubt that it was to be read as a letter written to a particular community undergoing specific circumstances within a particular environment. While it is not addressed to any one group by name and lacks the customary opening salutation, nonetheless, it concludes with a series of final greetings that conform to the structure of a first century letter.

Yet the pronounced oratorical style and method of argument, along with the numerous allusions to time and speech found throughout (see Table 2), indicate that this singular letter was also designed as a sermon. It is a sermon written by an author who was not physically present to verbally deliver the message due to extenuating circumstances the author fails to disclose. It was obviously left to the author's representative to personally deliver the message to the community for whom it had been written. Townsend coins the clever phrase, "*homiletter*," to describe this unique hybrid.ⁱⁱⁱ

Table 2. The Oral Orientation of Hebrews

Text	Statement of Oral Orientation
2:5	"...We are speaking."
5:11	"We have much to say... you have become dull of hearing."
6:9	"We are speaking in this way "
8:1	"The main point in what has been said ..."
9:5	"We cannot discuss these things in detail"
11:32	"What more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell ..."

The oral orientation of this book is paramount to proper appreciation of its contents. Johnson affirms, "Hebrews was written to be read aloud to an audience."^{iv} This is a letter that was intentionally designed for oral presentation. The audience would "receive its message not primarily through reading and leisured reflection but orally."^v The writer artfully conveys the impression of his presence through avoiding reference to the impersonal actions of writing or reading (with the unavoidable exception of the post-script, 13:22ff), instead evoking a warm, conversational tone by emphasizing the activity of speaking and listening.^{vi}

The author self-classifies his text as a *logos tes parakleseos*, "word of exhortation" (13:22). This is "an idiomatic, fixed expression for a sermon in Jewish-Hellenistic and early Christian circles."^{vii} It is the same phrase that was used by Pisidian Antioch's synagogue officials upon hospitably extending a customary invitation to their distinguished guests, Paul and Barnabas, to deliver a short lesson or sermon based upon the contents of that Sabbath's *Torah* (five books of Moses) or *Haftorah* (the writings and the prophets) selections (Acts 13:15).

Hebrews seems to fit comfortably within the stylistic confines of a first century Jewish sermon. The main ideas are based upon a few central Old Testament Scriptures and are illustrated with additional Old Testament Scriptures. Several more Old Testament Scriptures tie the main ideas and illustrations together. It is interlaced throughout with old-fashioned, Jewish passion for the Lord and his revelation.

In addition, the text of Hebrews reveals a treasure trove of stylistic technique. For example, the author of Hebrews makes liberal use of the rabbinic rhetorical technique of *qal vachomer*, “light and heavy”; the application of truth about that with lesser significance to that with greater significance, which usually is recognizable by their telltale, “how much more so?” comparisons (2:1-4; 9:13-14; 10:28-29; 12:25).

He also seems particularly fond of comparisons, and the author’s argument is thick with the use of the term, *kreitton*, “better” (see Table 3). Jesus is better than angels (1:4), there is a better hope (7:19), a better covenant (7:22; 8:6), better promises (8:6), better sacrifices (9:23), a better possession (10:34), a better country (11:16), a better resurrection (11:35), something better (11:40), better blood (12:24), etc.

Table 3. Hebrews’ Use of “Better” (*kreitton*)

Reference	What is “Better”
1:4	Jesus has become “much better than the angels”
6:9	“Better things concerning you”
7:7	“Lesser is blessed by the greater”
7:19	“A better hope”
7:22; 8:6	“A better covenant”
8:6	“Better promises”
9:23	“Better sacrifices”
10:34	“A better possession”
11:16	“A better country”
11:35	“A better resurrection”
11:40	“God has provided something better”
12:24	“Better blood”

Indeed, the author’s argument is stylistically dependent upon the use of comparison (see Table 4).

Table 4. Additional Comparatives (other than *kreitton*) in Hebrews

Reference	Comparative
2:1; 13:19	“All the more”
2:7, 9	“Lower”
3:3	“More glory”
3:3	“More honor”
4:12	“Sharper than”
6:13, 16	“One greater”
6:17	“Even more”
7:23	“More numbers”

7:26	“Exalted above”
9:11	“Greater and more perfect”
9:14	“How much more”
10:25	“All the more”
10:29	“How much worse”
11:26	“Greater riches”
11:4	“A greater sacrifice”
12:13	“Rather”
12:9	“Much rather”
12:25	“Much less”

Finally, the author of Hebrews is particularly fond of frequent and punchy metaphors and he uses them to great strategic affect (see Table 5).

Table 5. Hebrews’ Use of Metaphor

Text	Metaphor
6:7-8; 12:11	Agricultural activity
6:1; 11:10	Architecture
5:14; 12:1-3	Athletic activity
5:12-14	Education
12:7-11	Family
2:10; 4:3, 6, 11, 16; 6:20; 10:22; 12:1-2, 12, 22; 13:13	Movement, forward
2:1; 3:12; 4:11; 10:25; 12:1; 13:9	Movement, sideways, backward or downward
5:19	Sailing
2:3-4; 6:16; 9:16-17	The legal realm

Theme

To the modern reader, the structure of Hebrews is cumbersome; the author’s method of presentation, unfamiliar; and his argument, often confusing. His dizzying methodology, on exhibition throughout the book’s entirety, of briefly introducing a subject and then completely dropping the newly introduced subject in favor of a topic already discussed, then returning to the subject he had introduced, developing it for awhile and then dropping it again to introduce a new topic, can be intensely disconcerting. Assurance of subject matter comprehension poses a challenge. Frustration sets in, together with a longing for someone to iron out the multiple creases and curves within the text’s argument; for an author who writes straightforwardly without continuously backtracking over previous material.

However, Hebrews is a book that rewards multiple readings. Only upon multiple readings can one derive an overview and a sense of what can only be called the book’s “rhythm.” For this commentator, it is the concept of rhythm, along with musical concepts such as point and counterpoint, harmony and dissonance that provided a key to finally seeing Hebrews’ “big picture.”^{viii} While Hebrews does indeed progress along a straight

line with a definite structure of beginning, middle and end, it does so with style and attitude. The author takes his time, methodically laying the groundwork for each new theme, intermittently revisiting and, eventually, fully developing them. Occasionally a theme is treated separately, but generally the themes are played in tandem, layered one on top of another in point and counterpoint.

These layered themes usually play together harmoniously, but now and then create dissonance, the absence of harmony. Most people instinctively reject dissonant music. The absence of harmony simply “hurts their ears” and they cease to listen. That is why a great many people do not like jazz, because it is musical style chock full of dissonance.

Many readers treat the book of Hebrews like an album of jazz music that we originally purchased because we liked one particular song or piece. They reject Hebrews’ singular style in favor of more easily digested and absorbed New Testament works. Although since the album is already in their collection, they may, from time to time, take it out, play a favorite selection or two (chapter 11’s “Hall of Faith, for example) and then turn it off before having to listen to the remainder. Nonetheless, we should not treat Hebrews like an album that we are proud to have in our collection but to which we no longer listen. Reading the whole word of God is not really an optional activity.

Continuing with this musical analogy, it is an interesting observation that many students, upon protracted evaluation of the book of Hebrews perceive a symphonic masterpiece. Such is the author’s artistry (and, indeed, artistry it is; no other descriptive would so well apply) that his work transcends the normative literary categories of description, demanding from the commentator terms such as “crescendo,” “leitmotif,” “dominant motif,” “composition” and “orchestration”^{ix} and “brilliantly orchestrated.”^x

While there is a variety of opinion as to exactly how many themes are contained within the text of Hebrews, this commentary sees one main theme and six underlying subthemes of support. The main theme is, of course, the absolute Supremacy of Jesus (1:1-3; 1:4-3: 6; 4:14-5:10; 7:1–10:18). The six supporting subthemes are Jesus as Son (1:2; 1:3-12, 3:6; 4:14; 5:5-10; 6:6; 7:3; 7:28; 10:29); the New High Priest (1:3; 2:17-3:1; 4:14-5:10; 6:19-8:6; 9:11-12; 9:24-25; 10:11-14; 10:21-22; 13:20); the New Covenant (7:18-22; 8:6-13; 9:15-18; 10:15-18; 10:29; 13:20); the Tabernacle (8:2-5; 9:1-10; 9:19-24); the New Sacrifice (2:9-15; 6:6; 7:27; 9:11-10:22; 10:29; 13:11-13); and Faith (2:17; 3:2; 3:5; 4:2; 6:12; 10:22-23; 10:38-39; 11:1-12:2; 13:7).

Table 6. Progressive Advancement of Hebrews’ Supporting Sub-Themes

Theme	Jesus as Son	New High Priest	New Covenant	Tabernacle	New Sacrifice	Faith
Introduced	1:2	1:3	7:18-22	8:2-5	2:9-15	2:17
Advanced		2:17-3:1			6:6	3:2
Advanced					7:27	3:5
Advanced						4:2
Advanced						6:12
Advanced						10:22-23
Advanced						10:38-39
Developed	1:3-12	4:14-5:10	8:6-13	9:1-10	9:11-10:22	11:1-12:2

Developed		6:19-8:6				
Reinforced	3:6	9:11-12	9:15-18	9:19-24	10:29	13:7
Reinforced	4:14	9:24-25	10:15-18		13:11-13	
Reinforced	5:5-10	10:11-14	10:29			
Reinforced	6:6	10:21-22	13:20			
Reinforced	7:3	13:20				
Reinforced	7:28					
Reinforced	10:29					

The author’s technique in his use of these six supporting themes follows a basic pattern (see Table 6). There are usually four distinct stages to each supporting theme: introduction, advancement, development, and reinforcement (three themes, those of Sonship, New Covenant and Tabernacle, skip the advancement stage). The first thematic stage, introduction, briefly introduces a theme, providing a teaser or hint of the topic to come, after which the theme is usually temporarily abandoned in favor of engaging some stage of the subsequent theme.

The second thematic stage, advancement, begins when the theme in question is again picked up, perhaps slightly advanced and fleshed out, but then, once again, full development is deferred and the theme is exchanged in favor of yet another. Eventually, within this series of introducing, hinting, advancing and intermingling, the author brings each theme to its third stage, that of development. In this thematic stage, the author finally gets to his point, presenting the crux of his topical argument. Once fully developed in the third stage, each theme reaches the fourth stage, that of reinforcement. This is where each theme receives a series of brief echoes, or reprises, throughout the remainder of the piece.

The genius of Hebrews is that the author weaves these themes together, intermingling the stages of introductions, advancements, developments, and reinforcements, as he simultaneously treats varying stages of each theme. An additional layer is added whenever the main “Supremacy” theme also resonates, which is often.

A final tier is added by the five warning passages strategically strewn throughout the book. As in a Wagnerian opera (or, alternatively, a Star Wars movie), these warning passages are leitmotifs, expressly designed to punctuate the theological music. They sound a dark, ominous motif that calls us back to the author’s symphonic themes, lest our attention has wandered.

The inherent complexity of this process may be visualized by imagining yourself as singing all three round parts of “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” while standing upside down on your head, accompanying yourself by blowing a kazoo through your nose and keeping rhythm by clanging together the cymbals affixed to your knees.

Table 7. Graphical Representation of Hebrews’ Integrated Thematic Development

Key	
—	Introduction
—	Development Stage
—	Advancement Stage
—	Main Theme
—	Reinforcement Stage
—	Warning Motif

Theme/Chapter	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Jesus as Son													
New High Priest													
New Covenant													
Tabernacle													
New Sacrifice													
Faith													
Resultant Warning													
Jesus' Supremacy													

Throughout the text of Hebrews, the main theme and the six supporting themes are symphonically interwoven with profound dexterity. This symphonic metaphor is especially applicable in the author's opening words. No common, simple epistolary greeting will suffice to introduce this author's grand theme. With the startling intensity of the opening measures of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, he skillfully grabs hold of his reader's attention in the first three breathtaking verses by announcing the definitive supremacy of Jesus. This majestic main theme will underscore the remainder of the piece.

Such is the author's artistic mastery within the first chapter that in conjunction with the main theme, he is simultaneously introducing his first two supporting themes, that of the Sonship of Jesus and the New High Priesthood (see Table 7). As the main Supremacy theme continues, the briefly introduced New High Priesthood theme is dropped, and the Sonship theme, skipping over the advancement stage, flows directly into the third stage, that of development.

Just as chapter two commences, we are briefly introduced to the initial dark, ominous tones of the warning passages. They pass quickly away, yielding to other themes. Within chapters two and three we find the Sonship of Jesus theme in the reinforcement stage, the New High Priesthood theme in the advancement stage, as well as the introduction of two new themes, that of the New Sacrifice and Faith. Faith enters the second stage, that of advancement. The main Supremacy theme continues from chapter two through the center of chapter three, at which point it rests and the dark, ominous notes of warning sound again, continuing through chapter four.

Chapters four through six again find the Sonship of Jesus theme in the reinforcement stage, both the New Sacrifice and Faith Themes in the advancement stage, and the New High Priesthood Theme in a "double" development stage. So important is this particular supporting theme that it alone warrants two separate stages of development (4:14-5:10; 6:19-8:6). Although briefly pausing in chapter five, the dark warning motif dominates this section.

Chapter seven introduces a new supporting theme, the New Covenant. The Sonship theme is in the reinforcement stage. The New Sacrifice theme is in the advancement stage. The New High Priesthood theme continues in its second development stage. The author again picks up the main Supremacy theme throughout the chapter. The Faith theme rests through chapter seven.

Chapter eight introduces the final supporting theme, that of the Tabernacle. In the development stage is the New Covenant theme, as is the New High Priesthood theme.

The main Supremacy theme plays throughout chapter eight, and the Sonship, New Sacrifice and Faith themes rest.

In chapters nine and ten, with no new themes to introduce, the author interweaves all six supporting themes along with the main Supremacy theme. In the advancement stage is the Faith theme. Skipping over the advancement stage and proceeding directly into the development stage are both the Tabernacle and New Sacrifice themes. In the reinforcement stage are the Sonship, New High Priesthood, and New Covenant themes. The main Supremacy theme sounds its final note midway through chapter ten, overtaken by the dark, ominous warning motif.

Analyzing Table 7, it is easy to see that the past four chapters, seven through ten, provide the heart of the author's masterpiece. Every major and minor theme, along with the warning motif, is heard at some point in this section, often simultaneously. To some readers this might seem a cacophony while to others, it represents a theological smorgasbord. This central section is the eye of the storm, where the author fully develops four of his six supporting themes like stair steps, one advancing upon another, all the while sounding the main theme of the Messiah's Supremacy. The author has demonstrated his proficiency in building every theme to an appropriate climactic crescendo in the very heart of the book. The author's first century rhetorical style demands that for maximum effectiveness, he build not toward a "big finale," the rousing conclusion, but rather to place the stirring climax, the very heart of his argument, within the physical center of the book.

The author startles us with chapters eleven and twelve, arresting our attention. After four complex chapters of theme swirling upon theme, layer upon layer, he silences all but one theme, that of Faith, which finally enters the development stage, the last theme to do so. The simple, focused hush of that chapter's contents provides a much-needed opportunity to catch our breath. A final section of warning motif punctuates the last section of chapter twelve.

In the final chapter, the author concludes his piece by gently restoring only four supporting themes, all now in the reinforcement stage: New High Priesthood, New Covenant, New Sacrifice, and Faith. Thus concluded, the masterpiece is then (hopefully) met by the metaphorical thunderous applause of its readers hastening to apply its message to their lives.

The Use of the Old Testament in Hebrews

The author of Hebrews' entire argument rests upon the Old Testament scriptures, indeed, in a memorable phrase, "Hebrews is impregnated with the OT."^{xi} The challenge for both the commentator and the student of the book is to recognize that the Old Testament is not the basis of the author's argument; rather, the Old Testament is his argument. Hebrews is not a book that contains Old Testament scriptural quotations to bolster and support the author's line of reasoning. On the contrary, this book actually inseparably weaves the Old Testament directly into the book's fabric from start to finish.

The Biblical quotations, allusions and references fly fast and furiously at the reader throughout the text. As the language utilized within the letter is the actual language of the Old Testament, the author's argument is accordingly strengthened. According to Lane, "it

is proposed that there are thirty-one explicit quotations and four more implicit quotations, a minimum of thirty-seven allusions, nineteen instances where OT material is summarized, and thirteen more where a biblical name or topic is cited without reference to a specific context.”^{xii} My estimate of Old Testament usage is slightly higher than Lane’s but not worth quibbling over. With so many quotations, allusions and references repeated more than once, precision in this area proves challenging.

So robustly integrated is the Old Testament with the argument of Hebrews that any attempt at excision or deconstruction results in forcefully stripping the meat from the bones of this theological banquet and leaving behind a ravaged carcass of literary conjunctions, connectives and one lone personal salutation at the letter’s conclusion. To use an additional culinary metaphor (and your indulgence is most appreciated), the book of Hebrews is like one of those expensive gourmet chocolate chip cookies, so resplendent with embedded chips that it is difficult to separate out the taste of the actual “cookie” component. It is impossible to “bite” into a passage of Hebrews without experiencing the savory taste of the Old Testament.

Of great significance is that while the author inarguably interprets the Old Testament using both a literal and grammatical methodology (in other words, he portrays the events that are recorded within the Hebrew Scripture as actually having happened just the way that they are presented therein), he nonetheless views the Old Testament through a dominant Christological perspective. The author’s major arguments all fundamentally acknowledge the great theme that flows from one extremity of the Hebrew Scriptures to the other, that of the messianic promise.

With gusto, the author of Hebrews vigorously wrings dry the ancient Scriptures, constraining them in the winepress of his exalted vision and extracting every possible ounce of intrinsic Christology contained within each text. The text of Hebrews becomes a platform upon which, strata by strata, the author develops his theology about Jesus. As he builds his case, each new layer of propositional truth adheres to its neighbors through his slathering a liberal application of Old Testament mortar between every tier, without exception, creating an unassailable tower of Christological, messianic doctrine, assurance, exhortation and encouragement which stands today as resolutely as when the tower was first constructed some two millenia ago.

The oral character of Hebrews has previously been established (see Table 2). The author’s oral orientation extends to his introductions of Scripture. When the author of Hebrews introduces a Scripture quotation, his standard emphasis rests upon its character not as the written word of God, but as His spoken word. “Scripture ... is the voice of the living God ... It speaks directly and urgently to people here and now.”^{xiii}

Through this oral orientation of introducing Scripture (see Table 8), the author is able to underline the contemporary character of the living Old Testament prophetic word to his audience. The Old Testament must not be understood as merely the written record of ancient historical and theological events or the catalogue of specific phrases that God had spoken long ago. It is, rather, to be received as the active and dynamic means by which all believers may still hear God personally speaking to them (“the living and powerful word of God,” 4:12) in the present (“if you hear His voice today,” 3:7). Hebrews reminds

us that, through the Scriptures, God Himself still addresses His people, in the present active voice.^{xiv}

Table 8. The Oral Orientation of Hebrews' Introductions to OT Scripture Quotations

Text	Introduction
1:5	"He said"
1:6; 2:12; 8:8; 10:5, 15	"He says"
2:6	"One has testified somewhere"
3:7	"The Holy Spirit says"
3:15	"It is said"
4:3	"He has said"
5:5	"The One who said"
6:13-14	"He swore by Himself, saying"
7:17	"It is attested"
12:16	"He promised"

I once asked my aunt, the Jewish missionary, Hilda Koser, to list what she considered to be the indispensable books of the New Testament, without which inclusion our theology and understanding of our faith would be deficient. Within the NT, my assumption was that one synoptic gospel along with the gospel of John and a fistful of Pauline epistles would be more than sufficient for establishing orthodox faith and practice. In my estimation, of course, Hebrews would be included in the shortlist of least essential books. Having struggled with the author of Hebrews' complexity of expression, I could confidently affirm the books less than scintillating nature. Imagine my surprise when my aunt expressed her opinion that perhaps *the* one indispensable NT book was the epistle to the Hebrews! It is only within this book, she reasoned, that the New Testament reveals with great depth and vivid imagery the present work of our Messiah as perfect high priest, his fulfillment of *Yom Kippur*, the Levitical Day of Atonement, the Melchizedekian priesthood and the necessity of the New Covenant. Nothing non-essential there for believers, Jewish or Gentile. It was not the book of Hebrews that was dull; it was, rather, my own understanding. My own density, not the text's density, was the problem.

The salvific colors and messianic hues painted by Hebrews' anonymous master wordsmith alternately shade, brighten and intensify in relation to the spiritual maturity of the reader. Not for the faint of heart is this epistle. Hebrews demands attentive, conscientious study but yields rich theological rewards for those who diligently apply themselves. Together with Romans, it is no overstatement to claim that it ranks as the greatest of the epistles.

ⁱ The Biblical record indicates that the duration of a generation was forty years. This was the length of time it took for the torch of the Egyptian Exodus generation to be passed to their children, the generation raised in the wilderness (Num. 32:13). Approximately forty years after John the Baptist's initial warnings

and the commencement of Jesus' public ministry, the Romans decimated Jerusalem, completely demolishing the Temple.

ii Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, "Hebrews," *The Messianic Jewish Epistles: Hebrews, James, First Peter, Second Peter, Jude*, 1st ed. (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 2005), 12.

iii James A. Townsend, "A Structural Synthesis of the Book of Hebrews," *Emmaus Journal* (Emmaus Bible College, 9:1, Summer 2000), 94.

iv Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006),

33.

v William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary vol. 47A (Dallas: Word, 2002, lxxv.

vi Ibid. lxxiv.

vii Ibid. lxix.

viii Please pardon the use of mixed metaphors of both audio and visual arts.

ix While many recognize the symphonic scope of this masterpiece, none depicts it so engagingly as William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, cxxxix.

x Ibid. cxl.

xi Ibid. cxiv.

xii Ibid. cxvi.

xiii Johnson, 23.

xiv Lane underscores the author's stylistic preference for the verb λέγειν, "to say," especially in the form of the present participle λέγων, "saying." Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, cxvii.