The Doctrinal Center
of the Book of Hebrews

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The question of emphasis (or the doctrinal center) of Hebrews, is a vital one.\(^1\) It is generally agreed by interpreters of the epistle that the author did have one "master idea"\(^2\) to which all other sections of his theology are subordinate. It is important to establish the center (or unifying idea, or major theme) so that the theological materials of the epistle may be arranged in a way that reflects the author's own emphasis. Interpreters are not in agreement, however, as to what the doctrinal center of Hebrews is. There is disagreement over two questions: (1) What is the major theme of the doctrinal sections of the epistle? (2) Is the major theme of the doctrinal sections the major theme of the entire epistle or is that to be found in the paraenetic sections (i.e., in the exhortations)? The following discussion presents and evaluates the various proposals.

Proposals Stressing Theology

THE HIGH PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST

The traditional view, and the one most widely held, is that the epistle finds its center (its "keystone")\(^3\) in the doctrine of the high

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priesthood of Christ. The whole burden of the epistle, according to Moule, can be epitomized in two resounding uses of εξομην: "we have a high priest, we have an altar: sanctuary and sacrifice are ours (8:1; 13:10)."

The doctrine of Christ's priesthood is the author's central category... which draws together the theology of the Epistle and gives it its distinctive character."
Three arguments favor the view that Christ's high priesthood is the theological center of the epistle: (1) The author himself explicitly says so in 8:1: "Now the main point [καί μετὰ τοῦ θρόνου] in what is being said [τοίδ' λέγομεν] 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." The epistle centers, then, in the thought of a seated priest. "Understand all that this involves, and its message is fathomed."⁷ (2) The argument of the epistle is best understood as a development of this theme. (3) The theme of priesthood and cult "exerts a modifying influence upon almost every detail" of the author's theology.⁸ By way of illustration the following examples might be cited: (1) The person of God is related to the sanctuary (8:1-2). (2) God's Son is described at length in priestly terminology. (3) God's angels are described as λειτουργία πνευμάτα (1:14, lit. "liturgic spirits"⁹). (4) Christ's work is described in the language of priestly sacrifice (e.g., 9:12; 10:12). (5) The application of Christ's work is spoken of as forgiveness through blood (9:22). (6) God's people are described as those who in priestly fashion enter the holy of holies (10:19) and offer sacrifices of praise (13:15). (7) The author's eschatology is colored by the fact that he understands the messianic ruler of "the world to come" (2:5) to be a priest-king (cf. 7:1-2).

THE SONSHIP OF CHRIST

A second view, developed most fully by Lidgett, is that the sonship of Christ is the dominant theme of the epistle.¹⁰ The title ὥμοιοφα is used 12 times¹¹ of Christ and embraces the concepts of high priest (7:3) and incarnation (1:1-3) as well as the functions of revelation, creation (1:2), mediation (4:14-16), and sacrifice (1:3). The sonship of Christ can also be related to the doctrine of the people of God in that they are called "sons" (2:10). Though the theme of Christ's sonship is

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⁸ Davidson, The Epistle to the Hebrews, pp. 33-34.
irnportant,\textsuperscript{12} it is not central. It seems preferable to understand it as preparatory or basic to the central theme, the high priesthood of Christ.\textsuperscript{13}

THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST

Another group of scholars has concluded that the central or "comprehensive theme of the Epistle to the Hebrews is that of the absolute supremacy of Christ."\textsuperscript{14} It is true that there is an emphasis in Hebrews on Christ's exaltation (cf. 1:3; 8:1-2), yet this exaltation is linked by the author to Christ's installation and functions as priest (5:5-6, 10; 7:26-27).

THE CONCEPT OF COVENANT

Not all interpreters have found the author's theological center in the person or work of Christ. One writer, for example, has argued that the central concept of the epistle is that of covenant.\textsuperscript{15} He argued that besides this concept being central in chapters 8-10, it is also central in the earlier chapters dealing with angels and Moses, in that the angels and Moses were mediators of the covenant.

Again it must be admitted that the idea of covenant is an important one in the epistle. That it is not the doctrinal center, however, is demonstrated by the author's own assertion that priesthood is foundational to covenant (cf. 7:11-12 where "Law" refers to the Mosaic Covenant).\textsuperscript{16}

THE FINALITY OF CHRIST

Beginning with A. B. Bruce, a number of scholars have suggested that the central doctrinal thought of the epistle is the finality of Christianity.\textsuperscript{17} The Levitical system failed to establish intimate

\textsuperscript{12} Davidson called the idea of Christ's sonship "the fundamental idea of the Epistle" (\textit{The Epistle to the Hebrews}, p. 79).


\textsuperscript{16} Moffatt, \textit{A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews}, p. x1; Milligan, \textit{Theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews}, p. 71.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Dictionary of the Bible} (Hastings), s.v. "Hebrews, Epistle to," by A. B. Bruce,
relations between God and man. It is therefore inferior to Chris-

The problem with this view is that it fails to distinguish be-

between the purpose of the epistle and its doctrinal center. It must be
ceded that one of the author's main purposes is to establish the
superiority and finality of Christianity. He does this by writing an
epistle, the theology of which centers in the person and work of
Christ as High Priest.

THE SPATIAL DUALISM OF TWO WORLDS

Other interpreters of the epistle see the epistle's center ("the
fundamentally important fact") as being in the Philonic idea of two
worlds: the real heavenly world of spiritual reality and the physi-
cal universe which is its shadow or copy. In adopting this per-
spective, it is asserted, the author abandoned the eschatological
dualism of two successive ages for a spatial dualism of two coexis-
tent, superimposed worlds.

This thesis must be rejected for two reasons: (1) The language in
Hebrews is eschatological and not Philonic or Platonic, and (2) the

2.327-28; Moffatt, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the He-
brews, p. xxiv; Thomas Hewitt, The Epistle to the Hebrews, Tyndale New Testament
Bruce, The Epistle to the Hebrews, The New International Commentary on the New
Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), pp. liii, 1; idem,
The Defence of the Gospel in the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans
Publishing Co., 1959), pp. 88-97; George Barker Stevens, The Theology of the New Tes-
tament, 2d ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1918), p. 490; Donald Medford Stine,"The
Finality of the Christian Faith: A Study of the Unfolding Argument of the Epistle to
the Hebrews, Chapters 1-7" (ThD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1964), pp. 2-3;
Richard N. Longenecker, Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period (Grand Rapids:
Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), pp. 174-75; James B. Green, "Christianity: The
Ultimate Religion," Christianity Today, July 20, 1959, pp. 3-5; George B. Caird, "The
Exegetical Method of the Epistle to the Hebrews," Canadian Journal of Theology 5

18 A. B. Bruce, "Hebrews, Epistle to," p. 327. Caird's approach varied somewhat
from that of Bruce in that he viewed the author's main thesis as not so much an apolo-
getic against Judaism as an assertion that the Old Testament was an avowedly incom-
plete work (pp. 47, 49).
20 Henry C. Thiessen, Introduction to the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B.
21 F. D. V. Narborough, The Epistle to the Hebrews, The Clarendon Bible (Oxford:
Jock, n.d.), pp. 16-22. For further discussion see George E. Ladd, A Theology of the New
Scott, The Epistle to the Hebrews, pp. 102-21.
22 Jean Hering, The Epistle to the Hebrews, p. xii.
23 A discussion of the supposed Philonism in Hebrews is beyond the scope of this
author himself states that his theological center is Christ's priesthood (8:1).

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL DUALISM OF TWO AGES

Approaching the epistle from yet another angle, some have concluded that eschatology "is the determining element."\(^{24}\) The language of shadow and substance in passages such as 8:5 and 9:23 is the language not of Plato but of history and eschatology.\(^{25}\) The priestly ministry of Old Testament times was typical of the ministry fulfilled by Jesus Christ. Proponents of this view also point out that there is a futuristic eschatology in Hebrews as well as a "realized" one.

It must be acknowledged that a recognition of the author's eschatological concerns has restored a balance to the study of the epistle. It is an overstatement, however, to assert that eschatology is central.

Proposals Stressing Paraenesis

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE AS PILGRIMAGE

In 1938 Kasemann presented his thesis that "the principal motif" in the letter to the Hebrews is "the wandering of the people of God."\(^{26}\) Though not the first to focus on the pilgrim motif in Hebrews,\(^{27}\) Kasemann was the first recognized scholar to do so, and his thesis has been so influential that for many modern interpreters the center is now to be found in the epistle's paraeneses and not its theological expositions.\(^{28}\)

Yet a number of observations would confirm the fact that he has drawn attention to a key theme of the epistle: (1) The overall thrust of 3:7-4:13 (the wanderings of Israel, the goal of God's rest) implicitly supports the idea of a pilgrimage. (2) The portrayal of Jesus as αἰτητὸς ("Pioneer" or "Pathfinder," 2:10, 12:2) and προδρόμος ("Forerunner," 6:20) fits the theme. (3) The thrust of chapter 11 with its explicit pilgrimage terminology is that God's people are aliens in this world on a pilgrimage to the heavenly homeland. (4) In chapter 12 the references to Mount Zion (12:18-24, 26) and the exhortations to endurance (12:1, 3, 15-17, 25) relate to the imagery of pilgrimage. (5) In chapter 13 the ideas of "the city which is to come" (13:14) and the ill treatment of God's people "outside the camp" (13:13) suggest the foreignness of Christians in this world.

In short, the theme of the pilgrimage of God's people to their eschatological homeland ties together the paraenetic sections of


31 Citing a study of the Muslim ḥajj by H. B. Partin ("The Muslim Pilgrimage: Journey to the Center" [PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1967]), Johnsson ("The Pilgrimage Motif in the Book of Hebrews," pp. 244-46) suggested that a pilgrimage has four essential ingredients, each of which is found in Hebrews: (1) it entails a separation, a leaving home, (2) it involves a journey to a sacred place, (3) it is made for a fixed purpose, and (4) it involves hardship.

Hebrews. As convincing as this thesis is, however, the fact that it fails to incorporate adequately the motifs of priesthood and cultus means that it must be rejected as the epistle's theological center.

THE THEOLOGY OF WORLD MISSION

Manson also stressed paraenesis in his study of Hebrews. He agreed with earlier interpreters that the epistle emphasizes the finality of Christianity and the doctrine of Christ's priesthood. These doctrines, Manson asserted, are not so much argued by the author as they are assumed. There is a "givenness" to them that is shared by author and reader alike. Instead of calling his readers to advance in doctrine, he called them to resume once more the eschatological journey of life. He sought to pull them away from the protection of Judaism to a recognition of the theology of the world mission of Christianity.

Manson has failed to convince the majority of scholars that this is the author's purpose. His assumption that the theology of finality and priesthood are "givens" shared by author and reader alike does not do justice to the author's eloquent apologetic in favor of this theology.

THE PERSEVERANCE IN THE FAITH

Noting that the author of Hebrews called his epistle λογος παρακλήσεως ("a word of exhortation," 13:22), Saydon has argued that perseverance in the Christian faith is the "master idea" in the epistle. It must be conceded that his readers' perseverance in the faith is a major concern of the author. However, to say that perseverance is the doctrinal center is misleading. Saydon has confused one of the author's purposes with his doctrinal center.

THE PERSEVERANCE IN "POSTAPOSTOLIC" FAITH

Still another thesis was proposed by Grasser, who argued that the πίστις ("faith") word group served as the index to the theology of Hebrews. The author of Hebrews was interpreting Christianity

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33 As used in this article the term "cultus" refers to the worship apparatus of ancient Israel including tabernacle, priesthood, and offerings.
37 Erich M. R. Grasser, Der Glaube im Hebreierbrief (Marburg: N. G. Elwert Verlag,
for Christians living in the "early catholic" era. Faith to these Christians was no longer personal faith directed toward Christ as in the Pauline era when there was a tension between the "already" but "not yet" of eschatology. To the author of the epistle faith was more of a generalized, depersonalized perseverance in the Christian community; it was a moral quality or virtue. For Grasser the "already" of eschatology is played down, and the "not yet" has lost all sense of imminency.

The following objections argue against Grasser's view. (1) Of the 41 occurrences of the \textit{pistij} word group, not one falls outside the epistle's paraenetic sections; of the 32 occurrences of \textit{pistij} alone, only 6 occur outside chapter 11. This distribution hardly suggests that \textit{pistij} is an index to the author's theology. (2) The depersonalized, collective view of faith assumed by Grasser is overdrawn. The Christian's relationship to the high priest and the idea of heroic loyalty to the great pioneer of the faith suggest individualistic elements to faith. (3) Grasser dismissed too lightly the evidence for a date for the epistle that precedes A.D. 70. (4) The author of Hebrews did not do away with the "already" but "not yet" tension of early Christian eschatology. He emphasized both the "already" (e.g., present forgiveness through the New Covenant and a present access through a high priest who has fulfilled the Old Testament: priestly typology) and the imminent "not yet" (e.g., 9:28; 10:37).

THE ACQUISITION OF GOD'S PROMISE

According to Buchanan the "basic message" of Hebrews is "how to acquire the fulfillment of the promise God made with Abraham." Buchanan, as much as any modern commentator, has drawn attention to the importance of the promise of the land to Abraham and all believers. Jesus has made the fulfillment of the promises possible, and Christians are exhorted to be faithful "so that the precious reward might not be missed." As significant as this theme is, however, it does not seem to incorporate adequately the priestly motif of the author.


Conclusion

The expository sections of Hebrews center on the doctrine of the high priesthood of Christ. The paraenetic sections, on the other hand, are dominated by the pilgrimage motif. Two questions present themselves: Which of the two themes is central to the epistle as a whole? How are the two to be integrated? Attempting to answer the first question is almost futile. The two themes are not rivals; they belong together. "The doctrine leads to the exhortations, the exhortations are based on the doctrine." Nevertheless the author's assertion in 8:1 leads to the conclusion that the high priesthood of Jesus Christ is the controlling theme of the epistle.

As for the second question it has been suggested that the two themes are easily integrated if it is remembered that God's pilgrim people are a "cultic [or priestly] community on the move." These pilgrims on their way to the promised rest are "sanctified," "perfected," and "purified." They have the priestly privilege of access to God's tabernacle through Jesus their High Priest. With such a High Priest they can and should persevere (cf. 2:18; 4:16).

In summary, the doctrines of Christ's high priesthood and the pilgrimage of God's people dominate respectively the expository and paraenetic sections. The theme of Christ as High Priest, however, is central to the epistle as a whole.

39 Johnsson ("The Pilgrimage Motif in the Book of Hebrews," pp. 249-50) has observed that man's "problem" is different in the expositions and paraeneses. In the former his problem is defilement which bars him from access to God. In the latter it is unfaithfulness which results in a failure to enter the Promised Land.
40 N. A. Dahl, "A New and Living Way: The Approach to God according to Hebrews 10:19-25," Interpretation 5 (1951): 401. The subtle Scottish thinker "Rabbi" Duncan once quipped of Jonathan Edwards, "His doctrine was all application, and his application was all doctrine" (quoted by Alexander, A Priest For Ever, p. 178).
42 "By way of summary, it must be stressed that the high priestly christology of Hebrews does not serve speculative but paraenetical interests" (The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, s.v. "Priest," by J. Baehr, 3:34). "And though we have preferred to keep the doctrinal exposition in the foreground, it is readily admitted that the writer's chief interest in his great theme is the effect it will have upon those to whom it is presented" (Milligan, The Theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews, p. 59).