

## **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.<sup>1</sup> It is generally agreed by interpreters of the epistle that the author did have one "master idea"<sup>2</sup> 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"<sup>3</sup>) in the doctrine of the high

<sup>1</sup> William G. Johnsson, "Issues in the Interpretation of Hebrews," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 15 (1977): 176.

<sup>2</sup> P. P. Saydon, "The Master-Idea of the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Melita Theologica* 13 (1961): 19-26.

<sup>3</sup> John H. A. Ebrard, "Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews," trans. A. C.

priesthood of Christ.<sup>4</sup> The whole burden of the epistle, according to Moule, can be epitomized in two resounding uses of **exomen**: "we have a high priest, we have an altar: sanctuary and sacrifice are ours (8:1; 13:10)."<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup>

Kendrick, in *Biblical Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Hermann Olshausen, 6 vols. (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman & Co., 1858), 6:472.

<sup>4</sup> John Albert Bengel, *New Testament Word Studies*, 2 vols., trans. Charlton T. Lewis and Marvin R. Vincent (Philadelphia: Perkinpine & Higgins, 1864; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1971), 2:630; Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 4 vols., rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), 4:53; Ebrard, "Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews," p. 472; Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 2 vols., trans. Thomas L. Kingsbury (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871; reprint, Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1978), 1:322, 324; 2:16-18; A. B. Davidson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1882), pp. 33-34; Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 2d. ed. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1892; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), pp. 14, 70; Alexander Nairne, *The Epistle of Priesthood* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913), p. 136; idem, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Cambridge: University Press, 1917), p. xi; E. F. Scott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1922), pp. 70, 122, 135-36; James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1924), pp. xliv-xlv, liii, 8, 104; A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6 vols. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1932), 5:350; Theodore H. Robinson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, *The Moffatt New Testament Commentary* (New York: Harper, 1933), pp. xviii, 106-7; Hugh Montefiore, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, *Black's New Testament Commentaries* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1964), pp. 16, 116; Jean Hering, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, trans. A. W. Heathcote and P. J. Allsock (London: Epworth Press, 1970), p. xi; Neil R. Lightfoot, *Jesus Christ Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), pp. 37, 39; Leon Morris, "Hebrews," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 12:14; Alan Hugh McNeile, *An Introduction to the Study of the New Testament*, rev. C. S. C. Williams (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), p. 227; Harris Lachlan MacNeill, *The Christology of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1914), p. 40; J. P. Alexander, *A Priest For Ever* (London: James Clark, 1937), p. 181; Charles C. Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1959), pp. 243, 253; F. Stagg, *New Testament Theology* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1962), p. 68; Gerhardus Vos, "Hebrews, the Epistle of the Diatheke," *Princeton Theological Review* 14 (1916): 34, 43; John McNicol, "The Spiritual Value of the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Biblical Review* 15 (1930): 509; J. F. Humphrey, "The Christology of the Epistle to the Hebrews," *London Quarterly and Holborn Review* 14 (October 1945): 429; T. W. Manson, "The Problem of the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 32 (September 1949): 6-7, 12; C. F. D. Moule, "Sanctuary and Sacrifice in the Church of the New Testament," *Journal of Theological Studies New Series* 1 (1950): 37; S. Lewis Johnson, "Some Important Mis-translations in Hebrews," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 110 (1953): 28-29; Stephen S. Smalley, "The Atonement in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Evangelical Quarterly* 33 (1961): 36; W. Harrington, "The Priesthood of Christ," *Doctrine and Life* 14 (1964): 421; J. R. Schaefer, "The Relationship between Priestly and Servant Messianism in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30 (1968): 361; James Swetnam, "Form and Content in Hebrews 7-13," *Biblica* 55 (1974): 334.

<sup>5</sup> Moule, "Sanctuary and Sacrifice in the Church of the New Testament," p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen S. Smalley, "The Atonement in the Epistle to the Hebrews," p. 36.

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 [**kef al aion**] in what is being said [**toij legomenoij**] 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."<sup>7</sup> (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.<sup>8</sup> 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 **leitourgika pneumata** (1:14, lit. "liturgic spirits"<sup>9</sup>). (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.<sup>10</sup> The title **uij** is used 12 times<sup>11</sup> 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

<sup>7</sup> Johnson, "Some Important Mistranslations in Hebrews," p. 29; cf. Nairne, *The Epistle of Priesthood*, p. 136.

<sup>8</sup> Davidson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, pp. 33-34.

<sup>9</sup> *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church*, s.v. "Angels," by A. J. Maclean, 1:59.

<sup>10</sup> J. Scott Lidgett, *Sonship and Salvation: A Study of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Epworth Press, 1921), pp. 110-13, 254-55 and passim. Cf. George Milligan, *The Theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1899; reprint, Minneapolis: James Family, 1978), pp. 66, 72.-73; Chester K. Lehman, *Biblical Theology*, 2 vols. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1974), 2:431-32; Vernon H. Neufeld, *The Earliest Christian Confessions, New Testament Tools and Studies*, vol. 5 (Leiden: E. J. Brill., 1963), pp. 135-36; Donald Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), pp. 46-59. 11 1:2, 5 (twice), 8; 3:6; 4:14; 5:5, 8; 6:6; 7:3, 28; 10:29.

important,<sup>12</sup> it is not central. It seems preferable to understand it as preparatory or basic to the central theme, the high priesthood of Christ.<sup>13</sup>

#### 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."<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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).<sup>16</sup>

#### 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.<sup>17</sup> The Levitical system failed to establish intimate

<sup>12</sup> Davidson called the idea of Christ's sonship "the fundamental idea of the Epistle" (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 79).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, p. 253.

<sup>14</sup> Philip Edgecumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), pp. 2-4, 35-36; idem, "The Christology of Hebrews," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 28 (Fall 1985): 19-27. Also see Charles W. Carter, "Hebrews," in *The Wesleyan Bible Commentary*, ed. Charles W. Carter, 6 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964-69), 6:5-7; James W. Thompson, "The Underlying Unity of Hebrews," *Restoration Quarterly* 18 (1975): 132.

<sup>15</sup> H. A. A. Kennedy, *The Theology of the Epistles* (London: Duckworth Press, 1919), pp. 195, 201.

<sup>16</sup> Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. x1; Milligan, *The Theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 71.

<sup>17</sup> *Dictionary of the Bible* (Hastings), s.v. "Hebrews, Epistle to," by A. B. Bruce,

relations between God and man. It is therefore inferior to Christianity, which has done that very thing.<sup>18</sup>

The problem with this view is that it fails to distinguish between the purpose of the epistle and its doctrinal center.<sup>19</sup> It must be conceded that one of the author's main purposes<sup>20</sup> 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 physical universe which is its shadow or copy.<sup>21</sup> In adopting this perspective, it is asserted, the author abandoned the eschatological dualism of two successive ages for a spatial dualism of two coexistent, superimposed worlds.<sup>22</sup>

This thesis must be rejected for two reasons: (1) The language in Hebrews is eschatological and not Philonic or Platonic,<sup>23</sup> and (2) the

2:327-28; Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. xxiv; Thomas Hewitt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1960), p. 40; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), pp. lii, 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 Testament*, 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 (1959): 47-49.

<sup>18</sup> 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 apologetic against Judaism as an assertion that the Old Testament was an avowedly incomplete work (pp. 47, 49).

<sup>19</sup> Saydon, "The Master-Idea of the Epistle to the Hebrews," p. 21.

<sup>20</sup> Henry C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1943), p. 304.

<sup>21</sup> F. D. V. Narborough, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The Clarendon Bible (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), p. 43; A. S. Peake, *Hebrews*, The Century Bible (Edinburgh: Jock, n.d.), pp. 16-22. For further discussion see George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), pp. 572-77; E. F. Scott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, pp. 102-21.

<sup>22</sup> Jean Hering, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. xii.

<sup>23</sup> 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."<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> 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."<sup>26</sup> Though not the first to focus on the pilgrim motif in Hebrews,<sup>27</sup> 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 paraenesis and not its theological expositions.<sup>28</sup>

article. The view is ably refuted by Ronald Williamson in his *Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews*, *Arbeiten zur Literatur und Geschichte des hellenistischen Judentums*, vol. 4 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970). Cf. also Alan M. Fairhurst, "Hellenistic Influence in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Tyndale Bulletin* 7/8 (July 1961): 17-27; Ronald Williamson, "Platonism and Hebrews," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 16 (1963): 415-24; L. D. Hurst, "How 'Platonic' Are Heb. 8:5 and 9:23-24?" *Journal of Theological Studies* 34 (1983): 156-68; idem, "Eschatology and 'Platonism' in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Society of Biblical Literature 1984 Seminar Papers*, pp. 41-74; Ronald Nash, *Christianity and the Hellenistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), pp. 89-112.

<sup>24</sup> C. K. Barrett, "The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews," in *The Background of the New Testament and Its Eschatology*, ed. W. D. Davies and D. Daube (Cambridge: University Press, 1956), p. 366. Cf. also William Robinson, *The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Birmingham: Overdale College, 1950), pp. 1-20; Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 572-77.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Robinson, *The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> Ernst Kasemann, *The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Letter to the Hebrews*, trans. Ray A. Harrisville and Irving L. Sandberg (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. for example, the popular exposition by Philip Mauro, *God's Pilgrims: Their Dangers, Their Resources, Their Rewards*, rev. ed. (New York: Gospel Publishing House, 1918).

<sup>28</sup> For comments on the influence of Kasemann, see E. Grasser, "Der Hebraerbrief 1938-

Kasemann's work has been modified somewhat by later writers.<sup>29</sup> Yet a number of observations<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> (2) The portrayal of Jesus as **αἰχμηγός** ("Pioneer" or "Pathfinder," 2:10, 12:2) and **προδρομῶς** ("Forerunner," 6:20) fits the theme. (3) The thrust of chapter 11 with its explicit pilgrimage terminology<sup>32</sup> 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

1963," *Theologische Rundschau* 30 (1964): 197-99; idem, "Das wandernde Gottesvolk zum Basismotiv des Hebraerbriefes," *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 77 (1986): 160-79; M. R. Hillmer, "Priesthood and Pilgrimage: Hebrews in Recent Research," *Theological Bulletin: MacMaster Divinity College* 5 (May 1969): 68-69; Johnsson, "Issues in the Interpretation of Hebrews," p. 176, n. 45 and p. 180. Also see C. K. Barrett, "The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews," pp. 363-93; R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. K. Grobel, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1951, 1955), 1:100; Robert Jewett, *Letter to Pilgrims* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1981), pp. 1-2; William G. Johnsson, "The Pilgrimage Motif in the Book of Hebrews," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97 (1978): 239-51.

<sup>29</sup> Two needed modifications stand out: (1) Kasemann's conviction that the wandering motif finds its background in Gnosticism is in error (*The Wandering People*, pp. 67-96, 101-17). On Gnosticism in the New Testament and in Hebrews in particular, see Edwin Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973), pp. 51, 185 and passim. (2) His stress on "wandering" needed to be altered to "pilgrimage." Kasemann used *Wanderschaft*, not terms for pilgrimage (*Pilgerfahrt* or *Wallfahrt*). Later proponents of Kasemann's views have stressed pilgrimage, not wandering. Cf. Johnsson, "The Pilgrimage Motif in the Book of Hebrews," p. 243; Barrett, "The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews," pp. 376-83.

<sup>30</sup> Johnsson, "The Pilgrimage Motif in the Book of Hebrews," pp. 239-41, 247-50.

<sup>31</sup> Citing a study of the Muslim *hajj* 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.

<sup>32</sup> **παροικῶν** (11:9, "to inhabit, live as a stranger"), **ἀλλοτρίοις** (11:9, "strange, alien, hostile"), **ἐκδεξομαι** (11:10, "to expect, wait"), **πορρωθεν** (11:13, "from a distance"), **κενοί** (11:13, "stranger, alien"), **παρεπίδημοις** (11:13, "exile, stranger"), **πατριῶν** (11:14, "homeland, fatherland"), **πολῆς** (11:16, "city"), **μισθαποδοσία** (11:26, "reward"), **περιερχομαι** (11:37, "go around, go from place to place"), **πλανῶν** (11:38, "to wander"), and **ἐπαγγελία** (11:13, 39, "promise"). Cf. Johnsson, "The Pilgrimage Motif in the Book of Hebrews," p. 241.

Hebrews. As convincing as this thesis is, however, the fact that it fails to incorporate adequately the motifs of priesthood and cultus<sup>33</sup> means that it must be rejected as the epistle's theological center.<sup>34</sup>

#### 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.<sup>35</sup>

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 **logoj parakhsewj** ("a word of exhortation," 13:22), Saydon has argued that perseverance in the Christian faith is the "master idea" in the epistle.<sup>36</sup> 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 **pistij** ("faith") word group served as the index to the theology of Hebrews.<sup>37</sup> The author of Hebrews was interpreting Christianity

<sup>33</sup> As used in this article the term "cultus" refers to the worship apparatus of ancient Israel including tabernacle, priesthood, and offerings.

<sup>34</sup> William G. Johnsson, "The Cultus of Hebrews in Twentieth-Century Scholarship," *Expository Times* 89 (1978): 105.

<sup>35</sup> William Manson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1951), pp. 6-7, 24.

<sup>36</sup> Saydon, "The Master-Idea of the Epistle to the Hebrews," pp. 19-26; cf. George Salmon, "The Keynote of the Epistle to the Hebrews," *The Expositor*, 2d Series 3 (1882): 81-93.

<sup>37</sup> Erich M. R. Grasser, *Der Glaube im Hebräerbrief* (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 **pistij** word group, not one falls outside the epistle's paraenetic sections; of the 32 occurrences of **pistij** alone, only 6 occur outside chapter 11. This distribution hardly suggests that **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."<sup>38</sup> 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.

1965). For a summary and evaluation of Grasser's work the present writer is indebted to the following: Graham Hughes, *Hebrews and Hermeneutics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 137-42, 193-96; D. B. Bronson, review of *Der Glaube im Hebraerbrief*, by Erich M. R. Grasser, in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84 (1965): 458-59; C. F. D. Moule, review of *Der Glaube im Hebraerbrief*, by Erich M. R. Grasser, in *Journal of Theological Studies* 17 (1966): 147-50.

<sup>38</sup> George W. Buchanan, *Hebrews*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1972), p. 246. Likewise, Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., wrote, "Hebrews also makes the promise the center of its message of grace and hope in some 18 references (Heb. 6:17-18)" ("The Old Promise and the New Covenant: Jeremiah 31:31-34," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 15 [Winter 1972]: 13). For Kaiser the promise included the gospel, the spiritual seed, the blessings of the second coming of Christ, and the eternal state.

## 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.<sup>39</sup> 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."<sup>40</sup> 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<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup> The theme of Christ as High Priest, however, is central to the epistle as a whole.

<sup>39</sup> Johnsson ("The Pilgrimage Motif in the Book of Hebrews," pp. 249-50) has observed that man's "problem" is different in the expositions and paraenesis. 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.

<sup>40</sup> 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).

<sup>41</sup> Johnsson, "The Pilgrimage Motif in the Book of Hebrews," p. 249.

<sup>42</sup> "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).

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