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## An Interpretive Tool for Understanding the Book of Hebrews

Stuart L. Love  
slope@pepperdine.edu

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# An Interpretive Tool for Understanding the Book of Hebrews

Stuart L. Love

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When I was in college I took a class on the Gospel of John from Frank Pack at Abilene Christian College. One of Dr. Pack's assignments was to create an extended outline of the Fourth Gospel. I resisted the assignment at first; but I did it. The positive reward in doing this exercise is difficult to measure. For the first time I had a big picture of the writing. I was able to see what the author was doing as a whole. What I learned from Dr. Pack has remained with me through the years. Whenever I teach a Bible class or preach a sermon from a particular text of scripture I want to know how it fits into the larger framework of the writing. This, I believe, contributes to better biblical interpretation.

What I propose in this article is to create an outline of the book of Hebrews and allow it to guide us in a brief exposition of the book. I hope this "birds-eye" perspective will benefit you. I make no claims to being an expert on this rich, ancient biblical writing. Maybe this too can be useful, because it possibly demonstrates how all of us who teach and preach the word of God can engage in a profitable study exercise without being experts. I went about this task by reading the book of Hebrews from several excellent translations that also provided some excellent notes and numerous parallel passages.

So, draw up a chair with your Bible in hand and read what I've done. You will need more than ten or fifteen minutes. You might need a morning in your study or an evening in your home to benefit from this exercise. Turn off your cell phone or HDTV and let's together read the book of Hebrews afresh.

First, I suggest you read aloud the writing in its entirety—from start to finish. Don't get bogged down by asking about Melchizedek or the peril of falling away. These and other details will tempt you to stray from your objective. Keep in mind that this is how the early church heard the writing—they most probably listened as it was read aloud in one setting. So, resist the temptation to read the writing in a series of stops and starts. Keep on track.

Second, after you've read the book examine the outline I have provided below and then follow it as a guide to the writing's overall message. This exercise is an attempt to see the writing from thirty thousand feet. I believe such a view can be both challenging and exhilarating.

## **An Outline of Hebrews**

1.1–4—Introduction of the writing (a sermon): God has spoken by his son. This is a confession—the exalted Son is God's eternal son and final revelation.

**1.5–10.18—An argument is made concerning Jesus as God's Son and high priest.**

1.5–14—Christ is supreme over the angels, illustrated by a series of scriptural citations, mostly from royal psalms.

2.1–18—Sets forth the significance of Christ's suffering as the means of his exaltation.

2.1–4—The audience is warned against neglecting the Son's message—a message that is greater than the law.

2.5–9—Humanity, not angels, is the crowning expression of God's creation.

2.10–13—God's Son stands in solidarity with all of God's people.

- 2.14–18—The reality of Christ’s high priesthood—he is a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God.
- 3.1–4.13—Warns the audience of the danger of missing the heavenly rest.
- 3.1–6—Christ is greater than Moses (the theme of faithfulness is introduced).
- 3.7–4.13—A short sermon affirms the danger of unbelief.
- 3.7–19—A warning is made to the audience concerning unbelief.
- 4.1–11—Further warning: the eternal rest of God may be lost.
- 4.12–13—Epilogue to the sermon provides a reflection on the power of God’s word. It is powerful and active.
- 4.14–5.10—Christ, the great, merciful high priest and an encouragement to his people.
- 4.14–16—Christ’s high priesthood is explored.
- 5.1–4—A high priest’s qualifications are described.
- 5.5–6—Christ is designated a high priest by God.
- 5.7–10—Christ’s experience of suffering is set forth.
- 5.11–6.12—The audience is warned against backsliding.
- 5.11–14—Sermonic imagery serves as a warning; the audience is immature.
- 6.1–8—A severe warning—no second beginning is possible.
- 6.9–12—A warning to the audience is followed by a note of encouragement.
- 6.13–10.18—The new covenant is introduced.
- 6.13–8.13—Christ is a new high priest.
- 6.13–20—God is faithful because his promises are certain.
- 7.1–28—An application of Psalm 110.4 is made to Christ; God’s son is of the order of Melchizedek; the Levitical priesthood is imperfect.
- 8.1–10.18—Perhaps the central section of Hebrews; affirms that Christ is the heavenly high priest.
- 8.1–13—A summary of Christ’s role as the heavenly high priest and a prophecy of a new covenant is made.
- 9.1–22—Christ’s “heavenly” sacrifice inaugurates a new covenant.
- 9.23–28—The unique character of Christ’s sacrifice is affirmed.
- 10.1–18—Final reflection—Christ’s sacrifice inaugurates Jeremiah’s promised covenant (in accordance to God’s will); the old order is but a shadow of the new.
- 10.19–13.19—Application of the argument—faithfulness to God is absolutely necessary.**
- 10.19–39—The response of faith to what has been said entails a call to true worship and faithful endurance.
- 11.1–12.29—Examples of faithful endurance are set forth culminating in the example of Jesus.
- 11.1–3—Faith involves both belief and fidelity (faithfulness).
- 11.4–40—Examples of belief and fidelity are cited.
- 12.1–13—Jesus is the prime example of faithful endurance.
- 12.14–29—A final warning is given.
- 13.1–19—A series of admonitions conclude the homily.
- 13.1–6—A behavioral admonition is rendered.
- 13.7–16—True Christian sacrifices are described.
- 13.17—A faithful response includes submission to the audience’s leaders.
- 13.18–19—Request for prayer is made
- 13.20–25—A conclusion follows the model of a personal letter.
- 13.21–22—A benediction is given.
- 13.22–25—Personal remarks, final greeting and a final word of exhortation are made.



### Thinking Through the Outline

*1.1–4.* The writing does not open (1.1–4) like a personal letter. It does not mention the author or the persons to whom she/he is writing. And yet, it closes (13.22–25) with a number of personal references, including Timothy, the church’s leaders and all the saints, along with a reference to “believers from Italy” who send their greeting. Perhaps the reference to a “word of exhortation” in 13.22 is a good description for all of Hebrews. If so, it is a sermon that concludes with several personal references. Accordingly, 1.1–4 sets the stage for all that follows. One can hardly escape the notions of the progressive character of the biblical revelation now finalized in Christ, the son’s preeminence, the enthronement of Christ at God’s right hand, Christ’s priestly service, and his superiority to angels. Verses 2–3a may be compared to John 1.1–3 and Colossians 1.15–20. The language seems to be confessional in nature.

#### **1.5–10.18. Beginning with verse 5 an argument is made concerning Jesus as God’s son and high priest.**

*1.5–14.* The argument begins with a careful development of the last point of the introduction—Christ’s superiority to the angels. Seven OT quotations are used to establish his superiority (v. 5a = Ps 2.7; v. 5b = 2 Sam 7.14; v. 6 = Deut 32.43 [the Septuagint]; v. 7 = Ps 104.4 [the Septuagint]; vv. 8–9 = Ps 45.6–7; vv. 10–12 = Ps 102.25–27; v. 13 = Ps. 110.1). Each citation carries some aspect of messianic significance. Sitting at God’s right hand could never be the prerogative of angels. Angels are ministering messengers. The words of the citations speak of God’s son who was instrumental in creating the world.

*2.1–18.* The argument continues by establishing the significance of Christ’s suffering as the means of his exaltation. Put in other words, the purpose of these verses is to highlight the dignity of the good news.

*2.1–4.* The exposition of OT scripture is interrupted with a warning against neglecting the message of the son. Renunciation of our faith arises not only from deliberate apostasy but also out of neglect.

Drifting downstream can cause us to miss our destination. The theme of neglect that leads to a renunciation of the son’s message appears several times (see 3.12; 4.11; 6.4–8; 10.26–31; 12.16–17). Also, watch for other instances of when the author’s message is interrupted with a warning.

*2.5–9.* After the warning we return to the theme that the son is superior to the angels. But an additional truth is affirmed—humanity is also superior to the angels. This is demonstrated through a citation of Psalm 8.4–6 (vv. 6–8), which celebrates the lofty status of all human beings and the subjection of all things to them by God (see Gen 1.26–28). However, there is a problem; now we do not see everything under human control. But we do see Jesus who for a time experienced humiliation (he was made lower than the angels) but is now crowned with glory and honor. Suffering death was his lot so that by the grace of God “he might taste death for everyone” (2.9).

*2.10–13.* God has acted on our behalf. He has given his son to be the “pioneer” (see 12.2) of our salvation. Christ’s solidarity with us (the exception being that he did not sin, 4.15) is found in his suffering. Three quotations are used from the OT—Psalm 22.12 cited in verse 12 and two verses from Isaiah 8.17–18 in verse 13. Isaiah is seen as a type of Christ, that is, Isaiah and his sons and disciples foreshadow the solidarity of Christ’s people with him and his work. Christ, who is the priest who consecrates, and those who are consecrated are all children of God.

*2.14–18.* Christ’s brothers and sisters are human beings. Therefore, for Jesus to share solidarity with them, he too, must be fully human. Christ’s sacrifice is effective for our salvation because he, through his trials, temptation and persecution, identified fully with human suffering. But in addition, by dying Christ dealt the death-stroke to the devil, the former master of the realm of death. Verse 17 introduces the central and distinctive theme of Hebrews—the high priesthood of Christ. He is a merciful and faithful high priest. Thus, he can plead his people’s cause before God and provide for them effective help because he has known from personal experience the difficulties and tests that characterize human existence.

*3.1–6.* A comparison now is made between Moses and Jesus. The theme of fidelity is stressed, a theme that continues through 4.13. Jesus is apostle and high priest of our confession. As apostle he is God’s messenger to humanity and as high priest he is his people’s representative before God. Moses performed both the function of apostle and priest to Israel’s faithful (Num 12.7). But Moses’ faithfulness was as



God's servant in God's house. Christ as God's son is set over the house and thus bears greater responsibility and honor. The title of Jesus as "apostle" is found only here in the NT. But see the parallels in the Gospel of John affirming that Jesus is sent by the Father (John 4.34; 5.24, 30, 37; 6.38, 44; 7.16, 28; 8.16, 29; 12.44, 49). Christ's superiority over Moses suggests the superiority of Christianity to Judaism and takes us beyond the notion that Jesus was a second Moses. Christian hope is stressed probably due to a waning enthusiasm over Jesus' return as time moved on and persecution increased. Notice the continuous notion of God's household under Moses and under Christ (see 11.40).

3.7–19. At this point a little sermon begins and lasts through 4.11. The theme of the homily is fidelity and stresses the weighty consequences of faithlessness. Christians need to keep their hope high lest they fall into unbelief. Israel's unfaithfulness in the wilderness serves as a warning to the author's audience who may be faced (like ancient Israel) with the temptation to apathy or apostasy. The quotation of Psalm 95.7–11 in verses 7–11 sums up Israel's rebellion. The warning is grave. The author's audience is not just threatened with a relapse to Judaism, but a complete break with God (see 6.4–6). Continued faithfulness is the test of real faith. Partnership with Christ demands continued loyalty in God's household.

4.1–11. The sermon continues and warns the audience that unfaithfulness to Christ will lead to a loss of the eternal rest of God. The theme of "rest" probably refers to God's rest after creation described in Genesis 2.2 (quoted in verse 4). Thus the rest that can be forfeited is a share in God's unending Sabbath rest. God's voice must be heard "today." Ultimately there is no true rest on earth because the real Sabbath is eternal and God's people will enter that rest when their labor is done. God's rest remains a possibility because the present good news is part of God's salvation history (see 1.1; 11.39–40).

4.12–13. An epilogue to the sermon underscores the power of God's word, his penetrating wisdom. For God's word as a "sword" see Ephesians 6.17; Revelation 1.16; 2.12. Nothing is "hidden" before God's eyes (Jer 11.20; Rom 8.27; 1 Cor 4.5; 1 Thess 2.4). The word of God probes and judges all creation.

4.14–5.10. Christ, the great, merciful high priest is an encouragement to his people.

4.14–18. Emphasis upon Christ as the great, merciful high priest is the most important way that the book of Hebrews interprets the meaning of Christ's redemptive work. This theme will be interrupted momentarily by exhortations (5.11–6.12), but it is resumed at 6.13. On Christ's role as a tested high priest see 2.17–18. Christ was tested in every way we are. Yet he committed no sin. He never lost his faith in God or shrank in his obedience to him. The high-priestly office of Jesus is presented as a motivation to perseverance. Because he was faithful to God, Christ has now "passed through the heavens" to the very throne of God. He is able to help others because the mercy seat of God is the place where his faithful followers receive grace and strength as they face the time of trial and crisis (see 2.18).

5.1–4. All high priests must fulfill certain conditions. This is also true of Jesus. The priests of Aaron were appointed to represent Israelites before God, especially in the presenting of gifts and sin-offerings. To do this they were required to have a sympathetic understanding of human weakness because they, too, were weak. Further, they were required to present sin-offerings for themselves as well as for others. They were to "deal gently" with others—that is, not indifferently. For parallel passages see Exodus 28.1; Leviticus 8.1–8; 9.7; 16.6; Numbers 16–18.

5.5–6. Christ's appointment as high priest by God is supported by a citation from Psalm 110.1. The psalm's first verse was quoted in 1.13. In Psalm 2.7 God addresses the Messiah as his Son (cf. 1.5a), but now God addresses him as a priest after the order of Melchizedek. As mentioned, Psalm 110.1 has already been mentioned with a messianic meaning (1.13), but the author of Hebrews is the only NT writer to quote Psalm 110.4. The best-known priest-king found in the OT is Melchizedek. Simply born into the tribe of Judah would not qualify Jesus to be a priest-king. Early Christians accepted Psalm 110 as being messianic and fulfilled by Jesus. The Messiah's perpetual priesthood comes from another order other than Aaron. This theme will reappear in 7.1–10.

5.7–10. The language of these verses might recall Gethsemane (Matt 26.36–40; Mark 14.32–43; Luke 22.40–46) but the overall perspective seems to suggest the pious prayers of such psalms as



- 22.1–2 and 116.8–11. Jesus' obedience is a model for his followers (5.9; 12.1–3). The theme of humiliation and suffering followed by exaltation and glory was central to the early Christian message. Christ was made "perfect"—that is, he was fully qualified from his position of superiority to obtain "eternal salvation to all who obey him" and to be their high priest in view of God's appointment (5.10). The final reference to the order of Melchizedek (5.10) cited in verse 6 anticipates chapter 7.
- 5.11–14. Perhaps a reason that a discussion of Melchizedek's priesthood is deferred to chapter 7 (or to Christ being the heavenly high priest in chapters 8–10) is because the audience needs to be nurtured by milk of some basic instruction about discerning "good from evil" (5.14). So, once again, a warning is given—the audience is "dull in understanding" (5.11), which will only cause them to slip back rather than press on. The problem is not that they are neophytes to the faith. They should now be teachers but they still need to learn the *ABCs* of Christianity all over again. They need milk. They are not ready for solid food (see 1 Cor 3.1–3). The phrase, the "oracles of God," designates Israel's scriptures (see Acts 7.38; Rom 3.2; 1 Pet 4.11). Solid food would advance them to the "word of righteousness," or Christian ethics. Mature Christians have mastered ethical matters and are prepared for more "advanced" teaching that requires a greater understanding of Jesus. On being "trained in practice" see 12.11; 1 Timothy 4.7; 2 Peter 2.14.
- 6.1–8. As we might expect, our author now issues a severe warning: apostasy after baptism rules out the possibility of repentance, that is, a second beginning. This is a rigorous position and seems to parallel the notion of the unforgiveable sin "against the Holy Spirit" (Matt 12.32; Mark 3.29; Luke 12.10) or the "mortal sin" of 1 John 5.16. This does not mean that there is now no forgiveness for Christian sinners. Rather, our preacher has in view the deliberate repudiation of a faith once embraced, the shutting of one's eyes to the light, the "falling away from the living God" (3.12). He probably speaks of an insulting renunciation of Christ and his cross. In so doing, both are brought into contempt. The audience is called to maturity (6.1; 5.14). Our author refers to other "impossible things" in his sermon (6.4; see 6.18; 10.4; 11.6).
- 6.9–12. The possible peril of falling away laid out in verses 1–8 is followed by a note of encouragement. The audience is called "beloved" (6.9; see 1 Cor 10.14; 15.58; 1 John 2.7), an address that begins the preacher's message of encouragement. The audience has not yet fallen from grace. The author's purpose is not to frighten but to encourage his listeners. He remembers their work and love "showed for his sake in serving the saints" (6.10), and he emphasizes that they still do serve their fellow Christians. They must keep on this track so they might "realize the full assurance of hope to the very end" (6.11; see 10.22; 3.14). He calls them to be "imitators," a theme frequently used by Paul (1 Cor 4.16; 11.1; 1 Thess 1.6; 2.14).
- 6.13–10.18—The new covenant is now explored.
- 6.13–8.13—Christ is a new high priest.
- 6.13–20—The encouragement found in verses 9–12 is now followed with an assurance of God's faithfulness. God's promises are certain. Two irrevocable acts show God's faithfulness to Abraham, God's promise and God's oath (see Gen 22.16–17). Actually, the promise that Abraham would be the father of a great people is repeated in Genesis 12.2–3; 15.5; 17.5. In Genesis 22.16 God confirms the promises by swearing an oath on God's own name. Is it possible that the author has in mind Psalm 2.7 as the basic promise and Psalm 110.4 as the confirming oath (see Heb 5.5–6)? Jesus has entered the inner shrine behind the curtain (see Exod 26.31–33; 40.3; Matt 27.51), a matter that anticipates his teaching in chapters 8–10. The reference to "forerunner on our behalf" (6.20) recalls the notion of "pioneer" in 2.10. This paragraph anticipates the discussion of the tabernacle in chapters 8–10.
- 7.1–28. The author now makes an application of Psalm 110.4 to Christ. Melchizedek (see Gen 14.17–20) is designated as a priest for all time (7.3) because scripture says nothing about either his birth or his death. Thus, he is a prototype of Christ, the eternal priest (7.23–25). The Levitical priests are mortal. Melchizedek is not (7.8). The inferiority of the Levitical priesthood requires the institution of a new order of priests that, in turn, involves a change of law. According to the old law priests are chosen from the tribe of Levi (Num 18.21–34). Jesus, however, is from the tribe of



Judah. Christ's priesthood does not depend on a legal statute of the Pentateuch. Rather, Jesus' priesthood is based on the uniqueness of his own person as God's eternal son (1.1–4; 13.8). Thus, he secures for the people "a better hope" (7.19). In verses 20–25 the argument is made that Jesus' priestly office was conferred by a divine oath (Ps 110.4; Heb 6.13–18). Because death does not terminate his service "he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him because he always lives to make intercession for them" (7.25). In verses 26–28 the preceding argument is summarized. Christ's priestly mediation is alone redemptive because he is God's son. He is without sin and his office is established by "the oath," not the law. In addition, he offers a "once for all" sacrifice of his own life and subsequently is "raised high above the heavens" to be with God (see 9.11–12). For Christ's intercession (7.25), see 9.24; John 17.9; Rom 8.34; 1 John 2.1. For Christ as one who is "holy," see Psalm 16.10 as cited in Acts 2.27; 13.35.

8.1–10.18. Perhaps this is the central section of Hebrews, which develops most fully the theme that Christ is the heavenly high priest.

8.1–13. These verses provide a summation of Christ's role as the heavenly high priest and a prophecy of a new covenant. Christ, enthroned as high priest at God's right hand, serves not in any earthly shrine but in the heavenly sanctuary above, a tabernacle not made with hands. The Mosaic tabernacle was but a material copy of this heavenly sanctuary. Because Christ's ministry was discharged in heaven this is an indicator of its superiority, as well as the superiority of the covenant mediated by him to the covenant enacted at Sinai. This new covenant, enacted on better promises, is demonstrated by a lengthy quotation from Jeremiah 31.31–4. Promises like these were not made at the inauguration of the Sinaitic covenant (Exod 24.3–8). Citing Jeremiah at this juncture prepares the audience for several points that will be developed in chapters 9–10. The promise of a "new covenant" leads to criticism of the old (8.13; 9.9–10) and to confidence in what Christ made available (10.19–22). God's forgiveness (8.12) is central to the new covenant (10.17–18).

9.1–22. The themes of chapter 8 are now considered further to establish how Christ's "heavenly" sacrifice inaugurates a new covenant. To achieve this goal a comparison is made between Christ's sacrifice and the wilderness tabernacle and ritual with some changes. The actual furnishings and ritual of the tabernacle proclaimed the transitory nature of the covenant with which it was associated. Focus on the inner shrine, the Holy of Holies, demonstrates how on the Day of Atonement, the high priest passed through the curtain from which he was normally barred access, to present the sacrificial blood of goats and calves as a sacrifice for his own sins and those of his people (Lev 16). But now (Heb 9.11), Christ's perfect redemption changes this previous cultic system. The Messiah has appeared, a high priest of the good things that have come, and he has entered the heavenly Holy of Holies on the basis of his own self-sacrifice. It was through Christ's own blood, his self-oblation, that Jesus procured eternal redemption for his people. He entered into the presence of God. Israel's high priest had to repeat an atoning sacrifice year by year (that is, what he did was inadequate), but Christ's sacrifice has permanent benefit. It need not be repeated. Christ acted on his own free will (see 10.7–10; Isa 53.10; Mark 14.36). Put in other words, the new covenant brings a new order (9.10) because with Christ as high priest (9.11) the annual rites are replaced by one perfect sacrifice effective for eternal redemption (9.12). Emphasis is on "how much more the blood of Christ" purifies "our conscience from dead works to worship the living God" (9.14). Accordingly, Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, a new testament, because his death is the event by which his new covenant becomes effective. He is mediator not in the sense of one who comes between two persons, but as God's representative who bestows this settlement on people, and as the one who validates it by his own death (9.15). As God's mediator he is the guarantor of the testament.

9.23–28. Now further consideration is given to how the unique character of Christ's sacrifice takes away sin. Christ's voluntary sacrifice has entitled him to enter the true sanctuary above and



represent his people before God. By his death he has consecrated the new covenant together with the heavenly sanctuary itself and everything associated with it (see 10.19–22). No repetition of his sacrifice or of his entry into God’s presence is necessary because he has effected the removal of his people’s sin from the sight of God once for all. That Christ will appear a “second time” (9.28) was a common expectation in the early church (see Mark 13.24–27; Acts 1.10–11; 1 Cor 15.23–24; Rev 1.7).

*10.1–18.* In a final reflection on Christ’s sacrifice the author sets forth how it inaugurates Jeremiah’s promised covenant as an act of conformity to God’s will. The old order was but a “shadow of the good things to come” (10.1; see Col 2.17). However, the new covenant imparts the heavenly reality itself. Only the heavenly reality can bring perfection. It was in this world that Christ made his decisive sacrifice. This is supported by a quotation from Psalm 40.6–8 (see also 1 Sam 15.22; Pss 50.8–15; 51.16–19; Isa 1.10–17; Jer 7.21–26; Hos 6.6). Real sacrifice is conformity to the will of God (Heb 10.9). The priests of Aaron never sat down in the performance of their priestly duties—their work was never done. But Psalm 110 affirms the Messiah as a seated priest. Christ’s enthronement means that his sacrificial work is finished, his sacrifice has accomplished once for all what generations of Levitical sacrifices never accomplished. This complete removal and forgiveness of sin, we are reminded, is promised in Jeremiah’s prophecy of the new covenant (quoted in Heb 8.8–12). The promise of verse 17 implies that no further sin offering is necessary (10.18). At this point the argument is complete. Now, the author will apply what he has argued.

#### **10.19—12.29—Application of the argument—the necessity of faithfulness**

*10.19–39.* The response of faith necessitates a call to true worship and faithful endurance. As emphasized above, the theological argument now gives way to practical appeals. The hope enshrined in the new covenant and sealed by Christ’s sacrifice should sustain and shape the life of God’s people in this world. Christians need to remain firm and unswerving (10.23) in the face of their difficulties. The exalted Christ is their new and living way to God (compare John 14.6). To this end, faith (Heb 10.22), hope (10.23) and love (10.24) are to be followed. Notice how Jesus’ flesh (his body) is the approach to God’s presence (10.20). Beginning in verse 26 stern words repeat an earlier warning (6.4–8). The author probably is referring to the rejection of the only means by which pardon may be secured—Christ’s sacrifice. Hebrews holds to a deep conviction concerning the awesome holiness of the divine majesty (3.12; 4.13; 12.28–29). After the warning (10.26–31; see 6.1–8) a fresh encouragement to faith is made (10.32–39). A concern with endurance dominates chapters 11–13. The audience is to remember their earlier steadfastness in the face of persecution as an incentive for present perseverance. Perseverance is needed to attain the fulfillment of God’s promises. A composite citation is made in verses 37 and 38 (Isa 26.20; Hab 2.3–4). No middle way is allowed between pressing on in faith and shrinking back. To stand still is to slip back.

*11.1–12.13.* This portion of the application catalogs examples of faithful endurance culminating in the example of Jesus to support the preceding exhortations (10.19–39).

*11.1–3.* Faith involves belief, hope and faithfulness. Hope plays a prominent part in that it is the firm assurance of the fulfillment of God’s promises. It persuades us of the reality of what is not seen as yet, and enables us to act upon it. The commendation given to people of old from God is an example to their descendants. The creation of the material world by divine command (see Gen 1.3; Ps 33.6, 9) is a matter of which we can have no visible proof. It is apprehended by faith. Faith primarily is holding fast to hope. What follows are various examples that exemplify hopeful belief and fidelity.

*11.4–40.* Examples of belief, hope and fidelity now are cataloged. Only a few comments on these examples will be made; a number of scriptural references for what our author is affirming will be given.

*11.4.* For Abel see Genesis 4.4 and Hebrews 12.24.

*11.5.* For Enoch see Genesis 5.24. For the importance of belief that God rewards those who seek him see Psalms 14.2; 34.10; 53.2; 119.2; and Amos 9.12 as cited in Acts 15.17.



11.7. For Noah see Genesis 6.8—9.17.

11.8–22. For Abraham see Genesis 11.31—12.4. For the birth of Isaac see Genesis 18.1–15; 21.1–7. For the status of being “strangers and foreigners” see Genesis 23.4; 47.4, 9; Leviticus 25.23; 1 Chronicles 29.15; Psalm 39.12; Ephesians 2.19; 1 Peter 1.1. For the story of Abraham offering his son, see Genesis 22.1–14. For Isaac’s blessings see Genesis 27.27–40. For Joseph’s sons see Genesis 48.8–22.

11.23–28. For Moses’ infancy see Exodus 2.1–10; Acts 7.20–22. For Moses’ decision to share the fate of the Israelites see Exodus 2.11–12; Acts 7.23–24. For a possible connection between Moses and Christ see Deuteronomy 18.15–20 cited in Acts 3.22–23. Moses’ journey to Midian is found in Exodus 2.15; see Acts 7.29. For Moses seeing the face of God see Exodus 33.11; Numbers 12.8; Deuteronomy 34.10. For the first Passover see Exodus 12.1–28.

11.29–40. The listing of other Israelite heroes is given more rapidly. For crossing the Red Sea see Exodus 14. The fall of Jericho is found in Joshua 6. For Rahab see Judges 4–5. For Samson see Judges 13–16. For Jephthah see Judges 11–12. For David and Solomon see 1 and 2 Samuel. For shutting the mouths of lions see Judges 14.6; 1 Samuel 17.34–35; Daniel 6.19–23. For quenching fire see Daniel 3. Strength out of weakness may allude to Gideon (Judg 6.15), Samson (Judg 16.17), or Esther. For examples of resurrection see 1 Kings 17.17–24 and 2 Kings 4.18–37. Chains and imprisonment may speak of Jeremiah (Jer 20.2; 29.36; 37.15). Zechariah was stoned (2 Chr 24.21). Legend tells that Isaiah was sawn in two.

12.1–29. The author’s audience, like the witnesses just recalled (chapter 11), should run the race for salvation with disciplined resolution.

12.1–13. Jesus is the supreme example of faithful endurance. His suffering (2.10; 5.8–9; 7.28) perfected his faith. Suffering often is seen as divine discipline (Prov 6.23; 2 Cor 6.9; Eph 6.4). The expression “drooping hands” and “weak knees” may derive from Isaiah 35.3. Straight paths are referred to in Proverbs 4.26.

12.14–29. A final warning is given. The true worship of God is enabled by the new covenant, not by the old. The old covenant produces fear (see Exod 19.12–22; 20.18–20). But as glorious as the new covenant is there is all the more reason for the disobedient to fear.

13.1–19. A series of ethical admonitions conclude the sermon. Brotherly love, hospitality and kindness are enjoined for those suffering imprisonment and injustice (13.1–3). The example of the audience’s leaders and teachers from whom the audience heard the gospel should be an incentive to faith, but the greatest motivation is the unchanging Christ (13.7–8; 12.2–3). If the teachings in verse 10 arose out of the charge that Christians no longer had an altar (a charge leveled by pagans and Jews alike), Christians are reminded that they do have an altar, and a better one than was available to the priests of Israel in the tabernacle service. Jesus suffered outside the gate of Jerusalem (13.12) as a perfect sacrifice for the purifying of his people. His people, however, follow him outside the closed circle of Judaism and know him as alive from the dead, one to whom they may go and from whom they may by faith derive abiding sustenance. Persecution is a small price to pay (10.13–14) for the privilege of inheriting the eternal city Jesus ensures his followers. Therefore let them worship God through Jesus. This is the true spiritual worship of which the old sacrificial ritual was but a shadow. Praise should be accompanied by deeds of kindness and love. These also are sacrifices that bring pleasure to God. The entire basis of Christian living is sacrificial in character.

13.17. A part of the problem for the author’s audience may have been a tendency to disregard their true leaders in favor of some unsettling teachers. But their leaders should be respected and obeyed, for it is they, and not the other teachers and their improper teachings, who have a real concern for the community’s well-being and know that they will have to render to God an account of their pastoral service. To this end they should be able to perform their task with joy and not with sorrow (see 13.7; 1 Peter 5.5).

13.18–19. Possibly this request for prayer is because the author is under some form of restraint, perhaps in prison, but his conscience is clear, and he hopes that his friends’ prayers will soon be answered in his restoration to them.

13.20–25. The writing ends with a conclusion that follows basic features characteristic of a personal letter (see Rom 16.20–27; Phil 4.20–23; 1 Thess 5.23–28). The reference to Timothy probably identifies the person who was Paul’s companion (see Acts 16.1–3; 17.14–15). Most scholars, however, do not believe these closing remarks are sufficient reason to identify the apostle Paul as the author of Hebrews.

Even though the book of Hebrews is probably addressed to a group of Jewish Christians who have endured great suffering because of their faith (10.32–34), the writing retains its abiding value for Christ’s followers today. Its warnings are meaningful whenever we are tempted by “an evil, unbelieving heart” to turn “away from the living God” (3.12). Further, among its positive contributions are its insistence on the finality of Christianity, the trustworthiness of Christ, the perfection of his self-sacrifice, and our consequent free access to God. The writing underscores the necessity of our pressing on in the steps of the pioneer of our faith until we reach our goal in the eternal city where he is exalted as priest-king forever. Further, the sermon encourages us to have our ultimate hopes and purposes bound up only with Christ and to have a proper detachment from tradition and from the transitory institutions that sooner or later are shaken into nothingness. Never should we allow apathy or apostasy to be the easier way. We, too, are called to follow Christ’s example and live as he did—hopeful, faithful, loving and patient in the midst of life’s struggles. So, let us reflect on Jesus through whom God has definitively spoken (1.1–2).

**STUART L. LOVE** IS ONE OF THE GENERAL EDITORS OF *LEAVEN* AND TEACHES NEW TESTAMENT AND CHRISTIAN MINISTRY AT PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY IN MALIBU, CALIFORNIA.

