

The Context of the Text: Reading Hebrews as a Eucharistic Homily

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Boston College
School of Theology and Ministry

The Context of the Text:
Reading Hebrews as a Eucharistic Homily

A Dissertation

by

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submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Sacred Theology

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A Dissertation by
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Abstract

The majority of exegetes agree that the so-called “Letter” to the Hebrews is actually a homily, meant to be read aloud to a Christian community gathered for worship. In *The Context of the Text: Reading Hebrews as a Eucharistic Homily*, I argue that the specific venue for the public reading of Hebrews was a celebration of the Eucharist. It is my contention that the author presumed and exploited this Eucharistic setting in order to bolster his claims about the superiority of Christ and his sacrifice to the sacrifices of the “first covenant”, as well as to entreat his readers to remain faithful to Christian Eucharistic worship. This dissertation begins in Chapter 1 by considering the “state of the question,” examining the positions of scholars who take – respectively – negative, agnostic and positive positions regarding Eucharistic references in Hebrews. Chapter 2 situates the question of Hebrews and the Eucharist within the broader milieu of the liturgical provenance of New Testament writings. Chapter 3 considers the issues of Hebrews’ authorship, date of composition, audience, rhetorical strategy, and literary structure as they pertain to my argument that the text was written for proclamation at the Eucharist. Chapter 4 offers an extensive study of several passages from Hebrews which appear to allude to the Eucharist without mentioning the sacrament explicitly (Hebrews 6:4; 9:20; 10:19-25; 12:22-24; 13:10; and 13:15), setting forth the claim that the allusive nature of these references is explained by the Eucharistic milieu for which the homily was written. In particular, I argue that a Eucharistic understanding of Hebrews 13:10 (“We have an altar from which those who officiate in the tent have no right to eat”) is the linchpin for understanding other Eucharistic references in Hebrews and that this verse serves as a major reinforcement of the author’s earlier claims regarding the supreme efficacy of Christ’s redemptive work. I hold that the author’s mention of an “altar” in 13:10 is meant to be understood as a reference to the Eucharistic table and that, taken as such, this statement parallels the claim in 8:1 (“We have such a high priest”) in order to demonstrate that Christians have both a superior priest (Christ) and a superior cultic act (the Eucharist). Finally, Chapter 5 considers interpretive traditions (particularly patristic and Eastern) which bolster the case for a Eucharistic interpretation of Hebrews.

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INTRODUCTION

Among the twenty-seven writings that constitute the New Testament (hereafter NT), Hebrews is something of an anomaly. To be sure, it lacks the cryptic, lurid imagery that has gained the Book of Revelation an often unhealthy notoriety, or the obscurity of, say, the letter of Jude. Like these other “maverick” NT documents, however, Hebrews has a unique character which rewards patient study of its contents but which also tends to frighten away less adventuresome Bible readers. In part, the enigmatic nature of Hebrews (especially for modern readers) is attributable to its deep roots in the thought world of first-century Hellenistic Judaism. For instance, its author draws on the Platonic theory of forms and the nature of Jewish cultic worship in order to make the case for the superiority of Christ, his priesthood, and his covenant. Moreover, the document is concerned with a host of matters that are often marginal to contemporary Christian theological interests, as N.T. Wright drily observes:

[I]t seems to ramble about and discuss a lot of themes which have never made it into the ‘top ten’ of Christian discussion topics. It begins with a complex discussion of angels; continues with a treatment of what Psalm 95 really meant in talking about ‘entering God’s rest’; moves on to Melchizedek; lists the furniture in the Tabernacle; and ends with an exhortation to ‘go outside the camp.’ Well, you see what I mean; were I a betting man, I would lay good odds that none of my readers have found themselves discussing these things over the breakfast table within the last month or so. Small wonder that most people don’t get very far with Hebrews, or let it get very far with them.¹

If the rather esoteric subject matter of Hebrews can be off-putting for the average Christian reader, a host of complicated critical issues regarding such matters as authorship, dating and provenance have made it equally difficult for exegetes to confidently pronounce on the document’s origin and purpose. In bygone days, pericopae from Hebrews in the Roman Catholic Lectionary were introduced as “A reading from the Letter of St. Paul to the Hebrews,”

¹ N.T. Wright, *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 3-4.

prompting countless biblical scholars to respond that, whatever Hebrews might be, it is not a letter, it was not addressed to the “Hebrews”, and it was almost certainly not written by St. Paul.² While exegetes are in general agreement on these three points, little consensus exists as to who wrote Hebrews, to whom it was addressed, and when it was written – all of which serves to muddy the hermeneutical waters surrounding this text. More than one prominent scholar has observed that the description given to Melchizedek in Heb 7:3 might be equally applied to Hebrews itself: “Without father, without mother, without genealogy.”³ Despite its complexities, however, Hebrews is widely regarded as being among the most theologically profound writings in the NT canon. Just as ordinary Christians have much to gain by according a more prominent place to Hebrews in their own devotional lives, so biblical scholars and theologians have much to gain both for the church and the academy by continuing to tackle the thornier issues of interpretation in order to more fully exploit the riches of this valuable text.

Among the many disputed points in the interpretation of Hebrews is whether the document contains references to the Eucharist. While this particular question has probably never (to borrow N.T. Wright’s terminology) made it into the “top ten” list of critical issues facing interpreters of the text, it has certainly made for a long-running minor skirmish within the broader realm of scholarly disputation over Hebrews’ overall meaning and purpose. A majority of scholars today deny the presence of Eucharistic references in Hebrews. Many contend that the document is silent on the matter of Eucharistic worship, while a few (e.g., Ronald Williamson) go so far as to suggest that the author of Hebrews was opposed to all forms of cultic worship,

² The attribution of authorship to St. Paul has since disappeared from Catholic lectionary headings.

³ See Raymond E. Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 695; and Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 457. All translations of Scripture are mine unless otherwise noted.

including the Lord's Supper. A small but vocal minority (e.g., James Swetnam and Albert Vanhoye) take the opposite position, holding that the Eucharist occupies a significant place in the sermon's theology. Nevertheless, the view of the majority at the present time is pervasive and influential. By way of example, the Revised New American Bible's (NABRE) footnote to Heb 13:10 ("We have an altar...") flatly states, "This does not refer to the Eucharist."

As with other possible references to the Eucharist in Hebrews, I do not believe that the case is so clear-cut as to warrant such a summary dismissal of the possibility of a Eucharistic reference here. Indeed, I contend that Hebrews was written to be proclaimed in the context of a particular Christian worship service, namely a celebration of the Eucharist. I suggest that the author presumed and exploited the Eucharistic setting to bolster his claims about the superiority of Christ and his sacrifice to the sacrifices of the "first covenant," as well as to entreat his readers to remain faithful to Christian worship. I contend, therefore, that the Eucharist – both as the setting in which Hebrews would have been read and as the central worship ritual of the early Christian community – plays a subtle and implicit but nonetheless significant role in the author's rhetorical strategy.

A Eucharistic setting for the document makes the most sense for three reasons. First, a context in which the Lord's Supper is presupposed helps to explain why the author merely alludes to the ritual (e.g., Heb 6:4, 9:20, 10:19-20, and 13:10) rather than refer to it explicitly. Second, it enables us to make better sense of otherwise cryptic and disputed passages, such as the declaration that hearers have "approached" the "sprinkled blood" of Christ in 12:22-24 and the exhortation to offer a "sacrifice of praise" in 13:15. Thirdly, it enhances the author's basic argument and the means by which he makes it. The author of Hebrews writes to a community that is discouraged, exhausted, and perhaps experiencing attraction to Judaism as an alternative

to Christian faith and worship. In an attempt to persuade his hearers of the superiority of Christ's sacrifice to the sacrifices of the Levitical cult, the writer employs subtle allusions to the Eucharist so as to remind them that they possess a cultic ritual in which that all-effective sacrifice is memorialized and through which they come into contact with the glorified Jesus in the heavenly realm. For example, I contend that the author's warnings against apostasy in Heb 6:4-8 and 10:19-35 are intended to dissuade his hearers from abandoning the Christian cult in which they are privileged to taste the "heavenly gift" (6:4) of the Lord's Supper and through which they have access to the heavenly realm by means of the "flesh" and "blood" of Jesus (10:19-20). Similarly, I argue that his assertion in 13:10 – "We have an altar from which those serving the tabernacle have no right to eat" – is meant to be understood as a reference to the Eucharistic table and that, taken as such, this statement parallels the claim in 8:1 ("We have such a high priest") in order to demonstrate that Christians have both a superior priest (Christ) and a superior cultic act (the Eucharist). A Eucharistic understanding of Heb 13:10 and its surrounding verses is central to any claim that the letter and its author were interested in the Eucharist.

My study unfolds in the following manner. Chapter One explores the "state of the question" regarding Eucharistic references in Hebrews. I examine the positions taken on this issue by opponents, agnostics, and proponents, respectively. I first lay out the arguments offered by those who believe that the author of Hebrews held a negative view of liturgical worship and/or was part of a Christian community that did not celebrate the Eucharist. I then investigate the views of the majority of scholars who hold that Hebrews simply evinces no interest in the Eucharist, positive or negative. Next I discuss the arguments and evidence proffered by scholars who do believe that there are Eucharistic references in the text and that its author views the Eucharist as a significant element of his overall presentation of Jesus Christ and his sacrifice.

Finally, I foreshadow my own contribution to broadening the discussion, particularly my argument that the concluding section of Hebrews (12:28–13:25) contains references to worship in general and the Eucharist in particular which help to sum up the author’s argument for the superiority of Christ’s sacrifice and to serve as a segue into the Eucharistic celebration at which that sacrifice is made present. Moreover, I set forth my contention that interpreting Hebrews through a liturgical lens is a heuristic device that best enables us to make sense of key passages and of the document as a whole.

Chapter Two serves the purpose of situating the question of Hebrews and the Eucharist within the broader milieu of the liturgical provenance of biblical writings, especially those of the NT. While there is much debate about the liturgical/Eucharistic character of Hebrews in particular, the broader notion that NT writings were composed for proclamation within the worshipping assembly is much less controversial. I begin by setting forth evidence that the biblical canon as a whole evinces a close relationship to liturgical worship in terms of (a) its content, which demonstrates profound interest in cultic matters, and (b) its provenance, which in many instances was tied to the liturgical assembly as the arena in which the writings would be proclaimed. A brief survey of relevant material from the Old Testament (hereafter, OT) is followed by a lengthier look at the liturgical orientation of the gospels and letters in the NT. I then proceed to argue that the primary setting in which first-century Christians gathered for worship and for the public reading of their literature was the Eucharistic meal. The cumulative force of the analysis presented in this chapter is to suggest that if the documents of the NT were generally composed for proclamation at worship, and if the primary worship experience of the early Christians was some form of the Lord’s Supper, then *prima facie* it stands to reason that Hebrews was written with the intention that it be read aloud at a celebration of the Eucharist.

Chapter Three builds on this argument by setting forth further evidence that Hebrews is best read and interpreted as a composition written specifically for proclamation within the celebration of the Eucharist. I begin by considering the critical issues of authorship, dating, audience and destination. I contend that these issues are important in any discussion of Hebrews, and in certain instances are pertinent to the arguments I will make in this study. For example, I suggest that Hebrews was most likely written for an audience in Rome or its vicinity, a locale in which Christians would almost certainly have celebrated the Eucharist on a regular basis. After reviewing the aforementioned critical issues, I move on to the all-important question of genre. After presenting the various options that have been proposed to describe Hebrews (epistle, theological treatise, homily, etc.), I offer my reasons for siding with the majority opinion that Hebrews is primarily a homily, albeit one with epistolary features — and then press my thesis that the homily was specifically written for a Eucharistic celebration. This will lead me to explore the author’s rhetorical strategy and to lay out my claims as to why I believe a Eucharistic setting for the homily would have served to bolster his argumentation. Finally, I examine the literary structure of Hebrews, highlighting the ways in which its shape and intricacy contribute both to the efficacy of the author’s exhortation and to my claim that he wrote with a liturgical and Eucharistic setting in view.

Having offered evidence for the overall character of Hebrews as a Eucharistic homily, Chapter Four moves on to examine seven passages which I contend contain references to the Eucharist. First, I examine Heb 6:4 with its references to “enlightenment” and “tasting the heavenly gifts,” and argue that these words and phrases refer to the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist. Next, I offer an exegesis of 10:19-35 and suggest that the author’s references to the flesh and blood of Jesus (10:19-20), his admonition regarding fidelity to assembling for worship

(10:25), and his warning that apostasy constitutes a profanation of the “blood of the covenant” are all made with the Eucharist in view. I propose that these two admonitory passages (6:4-8 and 10:19-35) serve to bracket the author’s main exposition of Christ’s priesthood and sacrifice in 7:1-10:18, and that the Eucharistic references contained therein are intended to remind listeners that forsaking Jesus (a temptation with which some of them struggle) includes a repudiation of the ritual meal that he left to his followers. I proceed to highlight two passages within the author’s central argument (7:1-10:18) that allude to the Eucharist. First, I argue that Heb 8:7-13, which draws heavily on the “new covenant” motif from Jer 31:31-34, would have reminded hearers gathered for the Lord’s Supper of Jesus’ evocation of this theme in the Pauline-Lukan Eucharistic institution narrative. Second, analyze the reference to the “blood of the covenant” in 9:20 and offer evidence to suggest that here the author has deliberately emended his quotation of LXX Exodus 24:8 so as to connote Jesus’ words over the cup in the Markan-Matthean version of the institution narrative. I then move on to look at Heb 12:22-24 with its references to approaching Mount Zion and the sprinkled blood of Jesus. I propose that here the author envisions a liturgical context in which the heavenly realities are encountered in their liturgical celebration. I then explore the author’s statement in 13:10 that “we have an altar from which those serving the tabernacle have no right to eat.” I will argue that the “altar” in question is the Eucharistic table, and that this statement, coming where it does at the conclusion of the homily, is meant both to remind its hearers of the superiority of Christ’s sacrifice and to prepare them for the Eucharistic celebration to follow. I also argue that the subsequent exhortations “Let us then go to him outside the camp” (13:13) and “Let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God” (13:15) are meant to be understood within the Eucharistic setting of the homily as enjoinders to participate enthusiastically in this liturgical act. My overall contention in my exegesis of 13:10-

16 is that these verses are crucial to understanding the author's implicit Eucharistic theology and that 13:10 in particular serves as a significant final reminder of his overall message regarding Christ's redemptive work. Finally, I briefly address the author's use of the phrase "blood of the eternal covenant" in his final benediction (13:20), contending that this evocation serves as one final reminder of the Eucharist prior to its celebration by the community. Within this chapter I also address the question of the Eucharist as a sacrifice, arguing that Hebrews' insistence on the "once-for-all" character of Christ's sacrificial death is not incompatible with a sacrificial understanding of the Lord's Supper.

The fifth and final chapter considers interpretive traditions and contexts which bolster the case for a Eucharistic interpretation of Hebrews. I begin with a consideration of patristic exegesis of Hebrews, especially that of John Chrysostom and Theodoret. These authors were much closer temporally and linguistically to the milieu that first produced the text than contemporary Western exegetes. A survey of their work indicates a favorable attitude toward Hebrews and the Eucharist. I then examine the influence of the language of Hebrews on the composition of the *Liturgy of St. James*, an ancient Eucharistic prayer whose provenance is roughly contemporary with the exegesis of Chrysostom and Theodoret. Finally, I briefly examine the contemporary interpretation of Hebrews within the churches of the East, which by and large have looked favorably on a Eucharistic understanding of the text. My aim here is to demonstrate not only that certain interpretive traditions (patristic, Eastern) have been congenial to a Eucharistic understanding of Hebrews, but also to counter the arguments of those scholars who hold that Hebrews and its author were hostile to the Eucharistic cult. I argue that it is implausible that a supposedly anti-cultic text would have had the diametrically opposite effect of inspiring a

Eucharistic interpretation on the part of those Fathers who evinced the greatest interest in Hebrews and of influencing the language of a prominent early Eucharistic prayer.

It is my desire that this study will contribute positively to the efforts of those who have argued in favor of Eucharistic symbolism in Hebrews. I intend to build on the work of those scholars — particularly John Paul Heil, Roch Kereszty, James Swetnam, and Albert Vanhoye — who have argued for the presence of allusions to the Eucharist in Hebrews. At the same time, I seek to make a unique contribution to the debate. I will do so by offering further evidence that the overall literary structure of Hebrews supports the theory that the document was intended as a Eucharistic homily; by setting forth thorough criteria for interpreting seven specific passages (6:4-8; 8:7-13; 9:20; 10:19-35; 12:22-24; 13:9-16; 13:20) with reference to the Eucharist; and by arguing that Hebrews 12:24 and 13:10 are linchpins for understanding other Eucharistic references in Hebrews insofar as 12:24 recapitulates other putative Eucharistic allusions in the document and 13:10 serves as a major reinforcement of the author's earlier claims regarding the supreme efficacy of Christ's redemptive work. Minimally, I am hopeful that my project will serve to discourage commentators from overstating the case against references to the Eucharist in Hebrews, as evidenced in the aforementioned quotation from the NABRE's footnote to Hebrews 13:10. Maximally, I hope that this study will inspire a greater openness to a Eucharistic interpretation of Hebrews by demonstrating that reading the text through a Eucharistic lens serves to facilitate a clearer understanding of the author's overall theology and purpose in writing.

CHAPTER ONE THE STATE OF THE QUESTION

There is little or no evidence in Hebrews of involvement, on the part of the author or of the community of Christians to which the epistle was addressed, in eucharistic faith and practice.⁴

Given the lack of clear reference to the [Eucharistic] meal, it seems best to interpret Hebrews without assuming that the author alludes to it in either a positive or a negative way.⁵

The importance of the Eucharist gives a coherence, relevance and depth to the letter which is otherwise lacking.⁶

1. Introduction

We can see from the quotations above that the question of Eucharistic references in Hebrews is, to say the least, a disputed point among exegetes. James Swetnam describes this question as “one of the minor points of disagreement” among NT scholars: “It is minor because relatively few people are in favor of seeing any allusions at all to the eucharist in the letter, and even these few regard the allusions as quite secondary to the main purpose of the document.”⁷ Swetnam himself, as we will see below, believes that the Eucharist is central to the structure and argumentation of Hebrews. Nonetheless, he is correct in noting that for many scholars, this topic is more or less a non-issue in assessing the theology of the document. Indeed, as I indicated in my introduction, if one were to map out a spectrum of scholarly opinion on the question of the Eucharist in Hebrews, one would find that, at one end of the spectrum, a few voices argue that

⁴ Ronald Williamson, “The Eucharist and the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *New Testament Studies* 21 (1975): 309.

⁵ Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 128-129.

⁶ James Swetnam, “Christology and the Eucharist in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Biblica* 70 (1989): 74.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Hebrews marginalizes or even manifests hostility to cultic Eucharistic celebration; at the other end of the spectrum, a few voices contend with equal vigor for the centrality of the Eucharist to Hebrews' thought and rhetorical strategy; and in between, the majority of scholars simply find no references to the sacrament, positive or negative, anywhere in the document.

As I also made clear in my introduction, I believe that the Eucharist does play a role – albeit one that is largely implicit – in the rhetorical strategy of Hebrews. Thus I place myself on the spectrum between the second and third groups enumerated above. Before laying out my arguments for the presence of Eucharistic references in the text, it will be helpful to summarize some of the principal claims made by opponents, agnostics and proponents with regard to this issue. This chapter will therefore focus on the chief arguments of these three groups, beginning with those who reject any association between Hebrews and the Eucharist. The negative position is epitomized by Ronald Williamson. I will offer a summary and evaluation of his arguments, particularly his claim that the author and audience of Hebrews may not have celebrated the Eucharist at all. I will then consider the majority opinion of Hebrews scholars, namely that the document simply does not concern itself with the Lord's Supper or make reference to the ritual. Finally, I will analyze and assess the arguments given by four interpreters who find Eucharistic allusions in Hebrews and hold that the ritual plays a positive role in its author's theology. Having examined and evaluated these divergent positions, I will conclude by laying out the broad outlines of my own contribution to this debate.

2. Hebrews and Eucharist: A Negative Assessment

Among scholars who have addressed the topic of Eucharist and Hebrews in the past half-century, prominent among those at the negative end of the spectrum is Ronald Williamson.⁸ In

⁸ See also F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964); James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York: Scribner, 1924); Friedrich Schröger, "Der

his 1975 essay “The Eucharist and the Epistle to the Hebrews,” Williamson sets forth a vociferous argument against the presence of Eucharistic allusions in the document. His analysis of the text takes into account six passages which some exegetes believe are Eucharistic in content (Heb 2:14; 6:4-5; 9:1-14; 9:20; 10:19-20; 13:9-11). In each instance, he concludes that the author of Hebrews was not referring to the Lord’s Supper, either explicitly or implicitly. I will return to Williamson’s exegesis of several of these passages in Chapter Four, where I undertake my own study of the texts in question.⁹ The present discussion will be limited to a presentation and evaluation of the overall contours of his argument.

Williamson’s study of Hebrews leads him to the conclusion that its author and audience were part of a Christian community that did not share in the Eucharistic faith and practice of the broader first-century church.¹⁰ He argues that Hebrews is silent about the Lord’s Supper precisely at those points where a reference to the Eucharist would be both expected and appropriate, had it been part of the author’s theological landscape.¹¹ For example, Williamson points to parallels between Heb 13:10 and 1 Cor 10:18-21. On the one hand, the text from Hebrews refers to an “altar” (θυσιαστήριον) from which those who “serve in the tabernacle” have no right to eat. On the other hand, Paul speaks of Jews as “partakers in the altar” (κοινωνοὶ τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου) in the same way that Christians share in the “table of the Lord” (τραπέζης κυρίου). Thus Paul uses the terms θυσιαστήριον and τράπεζα interchangeably. Had the author of

Gottesdienst der Hebräerbriefgemeinde,” *Münchener theologische Zeitschrift* 19 (1968), 161-81; and Gerd Theissen, *Untersuchungen zum Hebräerbrief* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1969).

⁹ Many commentators on Hebrews have addressed the possibility of Eucharistic content in individual verses and sections of the document. I will consider their various conclusions – positive, negative, and neutral – in Chapter Four.

¹⁰ Williamson, “Eucharist and the Epistle to the Hebrews,” 306.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 309.

Hebrews, with his propensity for typology, intended the θυσιαστήριον mentioned in 13:10 to refer to the table of the Lord's Supper, he would have explicitly suggested that the τράπεζα of the Jewish sanctuary was a "type" of the Eucharistic table. His failure to do so, Williamson contends, "confirms the impression that the Eucharist did not belong to the range of his beliefs and experience."¹²

Williamson proceeds to dismiss any idea that the community addressed in Hebrews relied upon tangible sacramental worship, either to experience Christ's presence in the here and now or to anticipate their communion with him in the life to come. He argues that the author of Hebrews believed that he and his audience had access to the "throne of grace" (4:16) by means of their faith, not by physical mediation.¹³ Similarly, contra Geoffrey Wainwright, Williamson holds that there is no place for the Eucharist within the eschatological framework of Hebrews: "There is no suggestion anywhere in the epistle that at regular intervals, in Eucharistic worship, the believer anticipates on earth what will be fully his only in heaven."¹⁴ Williamson acknowledges that Hebrews stresses the importance of the congregation's fidelity to communal worship (10:25), but he denies that the Eucharist was part of their ritual activity.¹⁵ He suggests that the sacred writer should have explicitly mentioned the Lord's Supper in 10:25 had his audience celebrated it in their worship meetings. His failure to do so supposedly serves as another example of Hebrews' refusal to speak of the Eucharist when presented with an ideal opportunity.

Ultimately, Williamson concludes that there was no celebration of the Eucharist in the community for which Hebrews was written. He points to the existence of theological diversity

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid. 310.

¹⁴ Ibid. See Geoffrey Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology* (Akron, OH: OSL Publications, 2002), 13.

¹⁵ Williamson, "Eucharist and the Epistle to the Hebrews", 310.

among the authors and communities envisioned in the NT to suggest that, in the case of Hebrews, we have a writer and a local church which diverged from the mainstream of Christian practice by eschewing the ritual of the Lord's Supper: "It may be that from within the perspective of a full-orbed Christian theology the author of Hebrews has taken up an *extreme position* when he judged that the work of Christ renders an earthly cultus of any kind unnecessary."¹⁶ Williamson suggests that the preacher's silence about the Eucharist may have been motivated by his disapproval of its celebration as a liturgical ritual.¹⁷ The author of Hebrews, according to Williamson, sees the gospel as something to be "received in faith" which "can never be anticipated materially in a sacramental cultus."¹⁸

Although Williamson raises some significant questions regarding Hebrews' failure to explicitly mention the Eucharist, I find his arguments to be largely unpersuasive. He presumes that the author of Hebrews needed to have made direct statements about the Lord's Supper in order for the ritual to have been an accepted element of his community's faith and praxis. Yet there is no real warrant for such a presumption. A number of NT documents make no mention of the Eucharist at all, but this in no way indicates what role the Lord's Supper played in the communities to which they are addressed. Indeed, if the community which received Hebrews heard it being read aloud at a Eucharistic celebration, then an explicit description of the nature of their gathering (e.g. in 10:25) would not have been necessary.

¹⁶ Ibid. 310-11, emphasis added.

¹⁷ Ibid. 311.

¹⁸ Ibid. 312.

Most problematic in this regard is the manner in which Williamson formulates his basic contention that the audience of Hebrews did not celebrate the Eucharist. Speaking in reference to Hebrews' author, Williamson poses this question:

Is it not possible that he was aware of a tradition of Jesus' words connected with the Last Supper but that he belonged to an early Christian community which, prompted perhaps by his own exposition of the nature of the redemptive work of Christ, did not share in what appears to have been the common Eucharistic faith and practice of the Early Church?¹⁹

Although it *is* theoretically possible that the author and his audience did not participate in the Lord's Supper, the likelihood that this was the case is rather slim. There is ample evidence elsewhere in the NT that the Eucharist was a central aspect of early Christian life. We will explore this evidence more fully in the next chapter, but for now it will suffice to briefly note two NT texts which highlight the centrality of this ritual during the first century. First, in 1 Cor 11:23, Paul speaks of the Eucharistic institution narrative as a tradition that he "received from the Lord" (παρέλαβον ἀπὸ τοῦ κυρίου). Many commentators believe that this claim refers not to a direct revelation to Paul from the risen Lord but rather to a teaching that was passed on to him by the leaders of the nascent church. In other words, the tradition about the Lord's Supper, including the directive to "do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11:24), was a component of the Christian tradition which Paul received, analogous to the "apostolic kerygma" of 1 Cor 15:1-8 which he also "received" (παρέλαβον). That the Eucharist was a basic element of early Christian life is corroborated by Acts 2:42, which enumerates four fundamental characteristics of the emerging church: the teaching of the apostles (διδασκαλίᾳ τῶν ἀποστόλων), the fellowship (κοινωνία), the breaking of bread (κλάσει τοῦ ἄρτου), and the prayers (προσευχαῖς). It is widely recognized that

¹⁹ Ibid. 306.

the phrase κλάσει τοῦ ἄρτου is a Lukan term for the Lord's Supper. Thus, according to Acts, the Eucharistic meal was an identifying mark of the early church.

Texts such as these are significant in light of Heb 2:3, in which the author reminds his audience that they received the gospel message from those who heard the Lord himself. As recipients of the apostolic preaching, it stands to reason that the audience of Hebrews would almost certainly have been made aware of the church's central worship ritual. It is equally likely that they would have celebrated some form of this ritual in their own gatherings. In his recent study of the relationship between the four gospels and the early Christian worshipping assembly, Gordon Lathrop contends that the church "came into existence in the first century and largely continued into the second century as a meal fellowship."²⁰ Lathrop proposes a twofold explanation for this phenomenon. First, he draws upon the insights of John Dominic Crossan to suggest that the "open commensality" by which Jesus shared meals with the marginalized carried over into the ritual practice of the early church.²¹ Second, he points to the widespread existence of *collegia* or "supper clubs" in the first-century Greco-Roman world as a major influence on the manner in which early Christian worship meetings developed, namely for the purpose of sharing a meal.²² Lathrop cites the second-century *Gospel of Judas*, with "its polemic against the meal-keeping disciples," as the "exception that proves the rule."²³ He goes on to state, "The author of that book wanted his or her readers to distinguish themselves from the ordinary practice of Christian communities, from their thanksgiving at a shared meal, perhaps indeed from what was

²⁰ Gordon Lathrop, *The Four Gospels on Sunday: The New Testament and the Reform of Christian Worship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 43.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

²² *Ibid.*, 41-42.

²³ *Ibid.*, 43.

already being called ‘the Eucharist.’”²⁴ We will see in Chapter Four that, despite Williamson’s denials, there is textual evidence in Hebrews to suggest that its audience did assemble for the Lord’s Supper and share in the wider church’s Eucharistic faith. I concur with the view of Michael Cahill that, in the absence of compelling evidence to the contrary, we must presume that any given local church (including the congregation for which Hebrews was written) did celebrate the Eucharist.²⁵

Ultimately, Williamson’s position leads him to a tendentious analysis of the textual data. For example, he acknowledges that some exegetes have adopted a Eucharistic interpretation of Heb 10:19-20 because of the references there to the *ἄμια* and *σάρξ* of Jesus. Williamson acknowledges, “It is certainly possible that the Lord’s Supper may be evoked for us by the words of Hebr. X. 19-20. *To the Christian reader who comes to such a passage as this from within a strong tradition of eucharistic faith and practice such an association of ideas is almost irrepressible.*”²⁶ However, Williamson goes on to insist that “there seems to be no good ground for thinking that such an association was present in the mind of the author of Hebrews.”²⁷ Williamson has made an *a priori* judgment that the author and audience of Hebrews did *not* come from “a strong tradition of eucharistic faith and practice.” Therefore, in his reasoning, the

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Michael Cahill, “A Home for the Homily: An Approach to Hebrews”, *Irish Theological Quarterly* 60 (1994): 144. See also James Swetnam, “τῶν λαληθησομένων in Hebrews 3,5.” *Biblica* 90 (2009): 96, n.16. Swetnam states, “It is inconceivable that they (the audience of Hebrews) were unaware of the liturgical tradition of the faith which they professed.” Likewise, Gerald O’Collins and Michael Keenan Jones, addressing similarities of wording between Heb 9:20 and the Eucharistic institution narratives, state, “Around the Mediterranean world Christians heard at their Eucharistic celebrations the language of ‘the covenant’ and ‘the blood of the covenant.’ In using such language the author of Hebrews and his audience would, one can confidently presume, share an obvious reference to the celebration of the Eucharist” (O’Collins and Jones, *Jesus Our Priest: A Christian Approach to the Priesthood of Christ* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010], 63).

²⁶ Williamson, “Eucharist and the Epistle to the Hebrews”, 306-307, emphasis added.

²⁷ Ibid. 307.

author would not have intended and the audience would not have perceived a link between the reference to ἄϊμα and σάρξ in 10:19-20 and the Lord's Supper, even though this association would be "irrepressible" under other circumstances. This is a faulty assumption, grounded less in the textual evidence than in Williamson's preordained conclusions about the Hebrews community.

Closely linked to Williamson's claim that this community did not celebrate the Eucharist is his suggestion that the author of Hebrews actually disapproved of sacramental worship.²⁸ The primary difficulty with this conjecture is that there is no evidence within the text itself that the writer held such a view. It is true that he critiques the *Jewish* cultus, but he does so by way of highlighting the superiority of Christ's sacrifice to the animal sacrifices carried out in the previous covenantal dispensation. Nowhere does he suggest that liturgical worship and sacramental mediation are outmoded and unnecessary. Rather, by insisting that Jesus retained his bodily existence following his exaltation, the author of Hebrews underscores the significance of Christ's tangible flesh and blood in the economy of salvation, a notion which is hardly inimical to Eucharistic faith.

Moreover, had Hebrews espoused an anti-sacramental theology, or even contained teaching that may have led others to do so, one might expect that this unorthodox outlook would have inhibited the book's reception into the NT canon. Williamson rightly points out in his essay that there was theological diversity within the early Christian communities and within the NT writings themselves. To cite but a few examples, one thinks of the diverse portraits of Jesus in the four gospels, the differences between Paul and James on the exact relationship between faith

²⁸ Williamson employs the later ecclesial terms "sacrament" and "sacramental" to indicate the mediation of divine grace by tangible, physical means within a cultic framework. Without wishing to anachronistically deny the complexities of both terminological evolution (i.e. from the Greek μυστήριον to the Latin *sacramentum*) and theological development, I likewise use these terms with reference to baptism and Eucharist in the NT as visible signs which convey the power and presence of Christ's grace to those who receive them.

and works, and the apparent tensions between realized and future eschatology in, say, the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation respectively. However, differences in theological outlook are not the same as blatant heterodoxy. None of the aforementioned examples involve absolute contradiction in such a way as to violently depart from Christian orthodoxy – an important point to bear in mind in light of the process by which early Christian writings were deemed canonical.

When the NT canon was being assembled, orthodox teaching was one of the basic criteria employed to determine a given work's eligibility for inclusion. Other criteria included apostolicity (authorship by an apostle or apostolic figure) and liturgical usage. As an example of how the interplay of these criteria affected the ultimate canonical status of an early Christian writing, we might consider the case of Bishop Serapion of Antioch and the *Gospel of Peter*. Because of the putative Petrine authorship of this work, Serapion initially permitted its public liturgical reading in local churches under his jurisdiction; however, when it came to his attention that the document contained elements at variance with commonly held church teaching and was being used to propound heretical ideas, he reversed his decision.²⁹ In the case of Hebrews, there was a fair amount of debate as to its canonical status in the early church, but this debate was occasioned largely by the question of its authorship. Its lack of authorial attribution raised the question of apostolicity.³⁰ To the extent that the theological teaching of Hebrews raised concerns about its orthodoxy, misgivings about its content focused primarily on its apparent claim that repentance was impossible for apostates (see Heb 6:4-8; 10:26-31).³¹ There is no evidence to suggest that early church leaders saw Hebrews as standing in opposition to the church's

²⁹ Lee Martin McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 410.

³⁰ We will explore this issue further in Chapter Three.

³¹ Koester, *Hebrews*, 20.

emerging Eucharistic theology, or that heterodox opponents of this theology were employing the book to substantiate their own beliefs. If anything, the opposite was the case. As we shall see in Chapter Five, to the extent that patristic writers commented on the relationship between Hebrews and the Eucharist, the correlation they found was positive, not negative. Moreover, Hebrews provided imagery, language and theological concepts that helped to shape the language of at least one early Eucharistic liturgy.

Williamson's claims regarding the absence of Eucharistic faith and practice in the Hebrews community – and the hostility of its author to a sacramental cult – do not stand up to rigorous scrutiny.³² Indeed, the centrality of the Eucharist in the life of the early church and the lack of evidence that Hebrews was considered unorthodox in its view of sacramental worship both militate against such assertions. What, then, is one to make of his contention that the author of Hebrews is silent about the Eucharist at points where one might expect him to make an explicitly Eucharistic statement? For Williamson, this silence serves as evidence of Hebrews' antipathy toward the Lord's Supper and its celebration. The difficulty with his argument is that silence does not equal hostility. For example, if First Corinthians – the only letter in which Paul makes *explicit* references to the church's Eucharistic traditions – were not part of the Pauline corpus, one could not therefore logically conclude that Paul was averse to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. One might simply suggest that the Eucharist was not central to his theological concerns. Indeed, other commentators on Hebrews – as we will see below – interpret its author's

³² Indeed, one might question whether he is reading his own attitudes toward the liturgical celebration of the Lord's Supper into the text. In a concluding footnote to his essay, Williamson states, "Such a conclusion regarding the teaching of the Epistle has important implications for churches today engaged in ecumenical discussions. . . . As far as eucharistic doctrine is concerned the Epistle to the Hebrews would seem to invite, *if Eucharistic faith and practice be retained*, a view of the Eucharist which sees it in no sense as a sacrifice but at most a moment in the liturgy when the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ is remembered and the End is anticipated, or at least saluted" ("Eucharist and the Epistle to the Hebrews" 312, footnote 2, emphasis added). That Williamson would consider the retention or abandonment of Eucharistic practice to be a matter for negotiation in ecumenical dialogue seems indicative of its peripheral role in his own theology.

failure to explicitly mention the Eucharist as evidence that the meal simply does not figure into his theology, for good or for ill. Viewed from this perspective, the writer's apparent silence would seem to be a serious challenge to any claim that Hebrews does, in fact, contain Eucharistic imagery and references. It would not, however, serve to demonstrate *prima facie* that the author of Hebrews espoused a negative view of the Eucharist. Nor would it prove that his community did not celebrate the ritual. As Carl Sagan once famously observed, absence of evidence is not the same as evidence of absence. In this case, however, evidence for Eucharistic practice in Hebrews is not absent but implicit – a point to which I return in the next section when I consider the agnostic stance that most scholars take vis-à-vis the question of Hebrews and the Eucharist.

3. Hebrews and Eucharist: Agnostic Views

The majority of Hebrews scholars hold that the document makes no reference to the Eucharist and that the sacrament plays no role in the author's theology. For many, the Lord's Supper simply is not an issue in a theological study of the book. A look at the table of contents of a recent anthology of essays on Hebrews, *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, lends credence to this assertion.³³ Out of twenty-five articles, which deal with a range of topics in Hebrews from Christology and soteriology to eschatology and supersessionism, only one addresses the topic of Eucharist, and this is by way of application rather than claiming that the text itself contains Eucharistic references.³⁴ Similarly, the lack of scholarly interest in Hebrews and the Eucharist is reflected in a 2005 survey of contemporary scholarship on Hebrews, *What*

³³ Richard Bauckham, Daniel R. Driver, Trevor A. Hart, and Nathan MacDonald, (eds.), *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

³⁴ Edison M. Kalengyo, "The Sacrifice of Christ and Ganda Sacrifice," in *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, 302-318. In this article, Kalengyo addresses the need for a greater emphasis on the sacrificial character of the Eucharist as a means of discouraging recourse to indigenous tribal sacrificial practices among the Ganda people of Uganda. He contends that the sacrificial imagery of Hebrews 9:1-10:18 "can be appropriated by the Ganda through the celebration of an inculturated eucharistic sacrifice" (303).

*Are They Saying about the Letter to the Hebrews?*³⁵ Out of nearly fifty works examined in this volume, only a handful of them address the issue at hand, usually indirectly.³⁶ Likewise, the topic is barely addressed in more recent commentaries and monographs on Hebrews.³⁷ If one were to pose the question “What are they saying about Hebrews *and the Eucharist?*” the answer would have to be, “Not very much.”

The dearth of scholarly attention to this topic is not surprising, given that many exegetes hold that the author of Hebrews simply has nothing to say about the Eucharist. Alan Mitchell states, “The consensus of commentators still maintains... that Hebrews is not specifically concerned with the Christian Eucharist.”³⁸ Andrew Lincoln comments, “Hebrews pays little attention to formal aspects of the Christian cult. Baptism is mentioned; the Lord’s Supper is not.”³⁹ Likewise, Myles Bourke, commenting on Heb 13:10, deems improbable any mention of the Eucharist in the document: “It seems [that] the author does not speak of the Eucharist either here or elsewhere.”⁴⁰ Concerning those passages sometimes thought to contain Eucharistic allusions (6:4; 9:20; 10:19-20; 13:10), the majority of scholars, including Harold Attridge and

³⁵ Daniel J. Harrington, *What Are They Saying About the Letter to the Hebrews?* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005).

³⁶ The works in question include John Dunnill, *Covenant and Sacrifice in the Letter to the Hebrews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Marie Isaacs, *Sacred Space: An Approach to the Theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1992); Darrell J. Pursiful, *The Cultic Motif in the Spirituality of the Book of Hebrews* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1993); and John M. Scholer, *Proleptic Priests: Priesthood in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991).

³⁷ For a notable exception, see John Paul Heil, *Worship in the Letter to the Hebrews* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011). Heil’s commentary assumes that Hebrews was written for a Eucharistic celebration and that “the author of Hebrews presupposes that members of his audience participated in a sacred eucharistic meal as part of their communal worship” (4). I will consider his work in greater detail below.

³⁸ Alan C. Mitchell, *Hebrews* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2009), 25. In his comments on individual passages that could be interpreted as Eucharistic, Mitchell sides with this consensus.

³⁹ Andrew Lincoln, *Hebrews: A Guide* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 101.

⁴⁰ Myles M. Bourke, “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 941.

Peter O'Brien, render a negative judgment.⁴¹ A brief look at the introductory sections of most major commentaries on Hebrews yields a wealth of insights on matters deemed relevant to the theology of the book, including Christology, eschatology, Platonism, Gnosticism, supersessionism, and Hebrews' use of the Septuagint (hereafter, LXX). For the most part, however, treatment of the Eucharist is absent from these works. Among recent commentators, only Craig Koester deems the subject of the Eucharist worthy of more than cursory consideration. In his magisterial volume on Hebrews, Koester includes the Lord's Supper among his treatment of "selected issues in the theology of Hebrews."⁴² After stating that the document "makes no clear mention" of the Eucharist, Koester acknowledges that there is debate about the presence of allusions to the sacrament in the text. He then identifies three viewpoints that have developed with regard to this question: some scholars believe that the author alludes to the Eucharist in a favorable manner; others (e.g., Williamson) hold that the writer is critical of the practice; and still others conclude that Hebrews simply does not mention the Eucharist, either favorably or unfavorably.⁴³ Koester himself affirms the last of these three positions:

It is most plausible that Hebrews makes no allusions to the Lord's Supper. Given the lack of clear reference to the meal, it seems best to interpret Hebrews without assuming that the author alludes to it in either a positive or a negative way. On the one hand, NOTES ON

⁴¹ Harold Attridge, *Hebrews* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 170, 287, 394-396; Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 222, 333, 521. Attridge does concede that 9:20 may contain an allusion to the Eucharistic institution narratives (257-258), but his general stance is against finding Eucharistic references in the document. In his comments on 13:9, in which the author of Hebrews engages in polemic against "foods," Attridge seems to come close to embracing the negative assessment of Williamson vis-à-vis Hebrews and Eucharist: "Many commentators have, in fact, found in the warning a repudiation of a eucharistic theology, one that emphasized either the physical reality of Christ's presence in the material elements or the quasi-magical effects of communion....That our author found questionable what later came to be regarded as orthodox Christian sacramentalism is certainly possible, although it cannot be firmly established....What emerges from the following exposition (vss 10-12) and paraenesis (vss 13-16) is a piety that is not grounded in sacramental practice, but that draws directly from the sacrificial death of Christ implications for Christian life" (395-396).

⁴² Koester, *Hebrews*, 127-129. It is indicative of the general lack of interest in this subject that Koester's treatment, which amounts to little more than one full page of text, is noteworthy for the amount of attention it gives to the question.

⁴³ See also Johannes Betz, *Die Eucharistie in der Zeit der griechischen Väter* (Freiburg: Herder, 1964), 153.

specific verses show that the passages mentioned above [6:4; 9:20; 10:19-25; 13:9-10] can be read intelligibly without reference to the Eucharist and that attempts to relate them to the Eucharist are strained. On the other hand, silence about the Lord's Supper does not necessarily imply criticism about the practice, but more probably shows that it was not an essential part of every theological discussion. Paul discusses the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians, but is silent about it in his other letters. Luke's gospel includes Jesus' words over the bread and cup, but Acts is remarkably vague about how this tradition took shape in early Christian practice. Given the lack of clear allusions to the Supper in Hebrews and the fluidity of early Christian practice, we do well not to presuppose the Lord's Supper as a background against which to interpret Hebrews.⁴⁴

Koester's viewpoint is typical of much contemporary scholarship. On the surface, it would seem to have much to commend it. He is correct in saying that the book of Hebrews makes no *clear* references to the Eucharist. He is also correct in stating that the individual verses which *might* refer to the ritual can be reasonably interpreted in other ways.⁴⁵ Lastly, he is on solid ground when he asserts that not every theological argument need have recourse to the Eucharist.⁴⁶ In short, Koester's conclusions appear to be reasonable and well-founded.

However, there is one factor which Koester (and many other commentators) fails to take into consideration when dismissing the possibility of Eucharistic allusions in Hebrews. That factor is the *context of the text*. At an earlier point in his commentary, Koester identifies the setting for which Hebrews was written as a "house church."⁴⁷ He notes that the home was the typical gathering for Christian meetings. This is evidenced by NT passages such as Acts 18:7 and 20:8; Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Phlm 2; and 2 John 10. Koester goes on to state, "The author apparently envisioned his 'word of exhortation' (Heb 13:22; cf. Acts 13:15; 1 Tim 4:13)

⁴⁴ Ibid., 128-129. Bracketed material added for clarification.

⁴⁵ However, as I will argue in Chapter Four, they are more intelligible when understood in reference to the Eucharistic liturgy.

⁴⁶ As I will make clear in the next chapter, I believe that the NT documents were mostly written for proclamation at Eucharistic gatherings, but this claim is not meant to suggest that the Eucharist is central to (or even a factor in) the theology of each individual text.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 74.

being read to a small ‘gathering’ of Christians (Heb 10:25; cf. 1 Thess 5:27; Col 4:16; Rev 1:3) who would later have occasion to greet ‘all the saints’ in their area (Heb 13:24).”⁴⁸ Koester subsequently joins a majority of scholars in categorizing Hebrews as a sermon or homily in his discussion of the document’s genre.⁴⁹ If we connect these dots, we can tentatively suggest that Hebrews is best understood as a sermon addressed to a community gathered for a worship meeting in a local house church.⁵⁰ As I argue in the next chapter, early Christian literature – including Hebrews – was read aloud at these assemblies when they gathered for worship. I further argue that this worship typically took the form of a Eucharistic meal. Given that most exegetes identify Hebrews as some form of sermon, this raises a natural question: In what sort of venue would the sermon have been read aloud?

If the answer to this question is that it would have been delivered at a celebration of the Lord’s Supper, then a major objection to the implicit nature of Eucharistic references in Hebrews would be obviated. As we have seen, Williamson has raised the question of Hebrews’ silence on the Eucharist when it would have been expected for the author to mention the sacrament. Koester and others have likewise noted the writer’s failure to mention the ritual, at least explicitly. However, a homiletic exhortation intended for delivery at a Eucharistic assembly would not necessarily have to explicitly mention the sacrament and its ritual context. Both would be mutually assumed by the author and his audience. As Cahill points out, “The obvious regularly goes unsaid.”⁵¹ In present-day liturgical celebrations, many homilists refer to the Eucharist without being explicit. One can imagine, for example, a preacher standing at the ambo,

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 80-81.

⁵⁰ Here I anticipate a fuller discussion of the genre of Hebrews which I will undertake in Chapter Three.

⁵¹ Cahill, “A Home for the Homily,” 146.

motioning to the altar and saying, “We have come here to be nourished by Jesus Christ . . .” It would be unnecessary (not to mention a bit ridiculous) for the homilist to continue, “. . . at this Eucharistic celebration, where, in a few moments, I will invoke the Holy Spirit and speak Christ’s words of institution and thus confect the body and blood of Christ from bread and wine.” The context would make the implicit Eucharistic reference abundantly clear to those present to witness the gesture, with no need on the part of the homilist to be more specific.⁵² One must, of course, be cautious about invoking an argument from silence (what Luke Timothy Johnson calls the “non-barking dog”⁵³). There is a distinction, however, between arguing from silence and arguing from a document’s likely proclamatory setting in order to suggest that the context in question explains the *implicit* character of its author’s references to the Lord’s Supper. It is the latter form of argumentation which I employ in this study. In the coming chapters I seek to demonstrate that Hebrews, like other NT documents, was composed for public reading within a ritual meal setting. The author presumed that setting and included subtle Eucharistic references at various points in his discourse, knowing that the audience would pick up on them without needing to have them spelled out in explicit terms. Admittedly, my contention is not widely held among contemporary commentators on Hebrews. At the same time, it is not without support, a point which will become evident as we now move on to consider the arguments set forth by those who argue for the presence of Eucharistic references in the text.

⁵² A related issue which critics of a Eucharistic interpretation of Hebrews often raise is the supposedly damning silence of the homilist regarding Melchizedek’s priestly offering of bread and wine. The author of Hebrews, they say, makes significant use of Melchizedek as a “type” of Christ’s priesthood, but never alludes to that aspect of his priesthood which has the most obvious Eucharistic overtones. Again, this seems to be a case of the homilist refraining from stating the obvious. His audience would surely have known that Melchizedek offered bread and wine, and the implicit comparison with Jesus’ own “priestly” offering of bread and wine at the Last Supper would not have been lost on them.

⁵³ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 39. Johnson uses the phrase in reference to Hebrews’ silence about the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE.

4. Hebrews and Eucharist: Affirmative Stances

Thus far we have seen that the majority of scholars hold that Hebrews is silent vis-à-vis the Lord's Supper, while a handful of commentators go beyond this agnostic position to contend that the document evinces a negative stance toward the ritual. It remains to consider the views of exegetes and theologians who believe that the Eucharist *is* mentioned in Hebrews and that it plays a *positive* role in the author's theological argumentation. Although this is a minority position, the number of its adherents is not negligible. This section will focus on the work of four scholars: James Swetnam, Arthur Just, Roch Kereszty, and John Paul Heil.⁵⁴ Swetnam, Just, and Heil are biblical exegetes, while Kereszty is a systematic theologian. Taken together, their respective analyses of the literary structure and theological content of Hebrews make a strong case that the document was composed for public reading in a Eucharistic worship setting and that its author weaves subtle references to the Eucharist into his work.

a. James Swetnam

Of the aforementioned scholars whose work will now be considered and evaluated, none has written as prolifically on the topic of Hebrews and Eucharist as James Swetnam.⁵⁵ In his article "Christology and the Eucharist in the Epistle to the Hebrews," Swetnam sets forth the

⁵⁴ See also Sverre Aalen, "Das Abendmahl als Opfermahl im Neuen Testament," *Novum Testamentum* 6 (1963): 128-152; Paul Andriessen, "L'Eucharistie dans l'Épître aux Hébreux," *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 94 (1972): 269-277; Johannes Betz, *Eucharistie*, 144-166; Cahill, "Home for the Homily"; Scott Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God's Saving Promises* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 624-628; John Koenig, *The Feast of the World's Redemption: Eucharistic Origins and Christian Mission* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 148-155; Barnabas Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest According to the New Testament* (Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2009), 228-232.

⁵⁵ See James Swetnam, "Christology and the Eucharist in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Biblica* 70 (1989): 74-95; "The Greater and More Perfect Tent. A Contribution to the Discussion of Hebrews 9,11," *Biblica* 47 (1966) 91-106; "Hebrews 9,2 and The Uses of Consistency," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 32 (1970) 205-221; "A Liturgical Approach to Hebrews 13," *Letter and Spirit* 2 (2006): 159-173; "On the Imagery and Significance of Hebrews 9:9-10," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 28 (1966): 155-173; and "τῶν λαληθησομένων in Hebrews 3,5," *Biblica* 90 (2009): 93-100.

claim that the Eucharist is the background of and gives theological unity to the various themes developed in this text. He admits that he cannot offer proof of the allusive character of Hebrews' Eucharistic references because "the material does not seem to lend itself to a presentation which issues in certitude."⁵⁶ Nevertheless, "the hypothesis of the importance of the eucharist gives a coherence, relevance and depth to the letter which is otherwise lacking."⁵⁷ Swetnam's argument proceeds in four stages. He begins by analyzing Hebrews' use of the word τελειόω (completion, perfection) in connection with Jesus as the ἀρχηγός (initiator, pioneer) of humanity's salvation. In what way, asks Swetnam, did Jesus need to be "perfected" or "completed"? He concludes that it was Jesus' *body* that had to be brought to completion by means of the resurrection. Next, Swetnam postulates a correspondence between Jesus' risen body and the outer σκηνή (tent) of the desert tabernacle. It is through the body of the risen Lord as the "outer tent" that believers have access to τὰ ἅγια (the Holy of Holies), that is, to the presence of God. Moreover – and this is the point at which Christology meets Eucharistic theology in Swetnam's essay – it is specifically the *Eucharistic* body of Christ which believers encounter in worship and which brings them into God's presence here and now. Having made this assertion, Swetnam then proceeds to offer a Eucharistic interpretation of several key passages in Hebrews (3:1-6; 6:4; 9:20; 10:20 and 13:10). Finally, he marshals evidence for the overall liturgical context of Hebrews by examining the author's use of προσέρχομαι (approach) and εἰσέρχομαι (enter), both of which have cultic significance elsewhere in Scripture. Their use in Hebrews implies a ritual setting for the document and bolsters the likelihood of Eucharistic references therein. Ultimately, Swetnam sees the Eucharist as a unifying theme which provides answers to hitherto difficult

⁵⁶ Swetnam, "Christology and the Eucharist," 74.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

questions about the content of Hebrews: “What Christian reality is parallel to the Law? What is the purpose of the foreshadowing of the tent which Moses erected? In what way is the new διαθήκη different from the old, and what is the point of the contrast?”⁵⁸

Having laid out the broad contours of Swetnam’s argument, let us now briefly examine some of its key elements in greater detail, beginning with his attempt to relate the concept of τελειώω⁵⁹ to Jesus’ resurrected body. Swetnam’s proposal, though somewhat novel, offers a credible answer to a difficult question raised by Hebrews: in what sense can Jesus be said to have been “made perfect” (5:9)? Clearly the author does not envision moral perfection here; he has already established that Jesus was “without sin” (4:15). Attridge favors the idea that Christ’s “perfecting, as developed in the text, may be understood as a vocational process by which he is made complete or fit for office.”⁶⁰ Nevertheless, he acknowledges that this process of perfection reaches its climax in the Lord’s exaltation, a position which dovetails somewhat with the thesis proposed by Swetnam.⁶¹ At the heart of Swetnam’s argument is his belief that Jesus’ physical body needed to be definitively transformed or perfected in order for him to be a priestly mediator whose office would endure in perpetuity (cf. Heb 7:16, 23-25):

This need of the body of Jesus to be brought to completion if it was to attain the definitive state destined for him by God emerges from a study of Chapter 7. There the reason for the appointing of Jesus (ἱερεὺς ἕτερος) as high priest is the fact that he has the power of life without end. The weakness of the Levitical priests is the innate lack of continuance because of death (7,23), a lack of continuance built into the Law. Jesus the priest lives forever, and is thus able to save all who come through him to God (7,24-25). Now it was precisely the body which made Jesus liable to death (2,14), so it must be the body which must be changed in some way if death is to be permanently avoided. . . . The

⁵⁸ Ibid., 93.

⁵⁹ For a helpful overview of the uses of τελειώω in Greco-Roman literature, including the LXX and the NT, see Attridge, *Hebrews*, 83-87.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 86.

⁶¹ Ibid. 87.

occasion at which the author of Hebrews seems to regard this “completion” of Jesus as taking place is the resurrection.... It is the transformation of the body which is crucial: just as Jesus needed a body of blood and flesh to overcome death by means of death (2,14), so he needs a body which has overcome death to be forever available to those who need his intercession.⁶²

If there is a weakness to Swetnam’s initial point, it would be that the resurrection of Jesus appears to be quite peripheral to the theology of Hebrews. Jesus’ resurrection is mentioned explicitly only once, in the concluding benediction of 13:20. However, the author of Hebrews clearly presumes the resurrection in his overall emphasis on Jesus’ heavenly exaltation and in his specific claim in 9:11-12 that Jesus entered the heavenly realm through the “greater and more perfect tent” (μείζονος καὶ τελειοτέρας σκηνῆς) and with “his own blood” (τοῦ ἰδίου αἵματος). If Swetnam is correct, then the idea that Christ’s “completion” consists in the glorification and exaltation of his risen body certainly helps to shed light on how the sinless divine Son would need to undergo perfection. It also bolsters Hebrews’ assertions about the eternal and immutable nature of Christ’s priestly office. Nonetheless, it is not immediately clear what, if any, connection this Christological conjecture has with the Eucharist as an implicit theme in Hebrews.

Swetnam seeks to draw a connection between the two ideas by means of a hypothesis regarding Hebrews’ use of τελειόω and σκηνή in 9:11. In his estimation, the “greater and more perfect tabernacle” through which Christ entered heaven is his resurrected body.⁶³ He bases this argument on two premises. First, the author of Hebrews uses τελειόω elsewhere (e.g. 2:10; 5:9) with reference to Jesus’ resurrection/glorification; therefore, the adjective τελειοτέρας in 9:11 is meant to be understood in a similar sense. Second, he contends that Hebrews employs a play on words in its use of σκηνή, which stands both for “tent” and “body” in 9:11. The double meaning

⁶² Swetnam, “Christology and the Eucharist,” 77-78.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 80.

that Swetnam sees in σκηνή enables him to propose that “the ‘tent’ which Moses erected in the desert becomes a foreshadowing of the ‘tent’ which is Christ’s body.”⁶⁴ Moreover, “the risen Christ is the new outer ‘tent’ through whose (risen) ‘body’ access to the second tent or Holy of Holies is now possible not just for the high priest on one day of the year but for all who believe in Christ.”⁶⁵ Swetnam goes on to identify a second play on words that is operative in this section of Hebrews, namely the use of τὰ ἅγια to represent both the “Holy of Holies” and “holy things”:

Based on the parallelism between the two sets of words with twofold meanings, the point would then be that just as Christ’s “completed”, i.e., risen, body was the “means” of entering the sanctuary, thus replacing the outer tent, so the sanctuary/Holy of Holies into which he enters is really a corresponding reality, the “holy things” of Christianity. These “holy things” seem to be referred to at 8,3 with the words “gifts and sacrifices” (δῶρά τε καὶ θυσίας). Their old dispensation counterparts are referred to in 8,4 (δῶρα) and 9,9 (δῶρά τε καὶ θυσία). Given the fact that Jesus offered himself (9,26.28), these “gifts and sacrifices” of the new dispensation are Jesus himself. What all this complicated imagery adds up to seems to be this: that for the addressees the glorified body of Christ which they come into contact with as the eucharistic body is the concrete means given to them by Christ the new priest of entering into the Holy of Holies, i.e., God’s presence.⁶⁶

After setting forth evidence for his thesis that the Eucharistic body of the risen Lord gives believers access to God’s presence, Swetnam goes on to investigate the possibility of specific allusions to the Eucharist in Hebrews. He focuses primarily on 9:20, in which the author of Hebrews quotes and adapts Exod 24:8, changing the LXX rendering Ἴδου τὸ αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης (“Behold, the blood of the covenant”) to τοῦτο τὸ αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης (“This [is] the blood of the covenant”). Swetnam argues that the author made this subtle alteration in order to remind his audience of the Eucharistic words of institution.⁶⁷ Rather than simply offer Heb 9:20 as a “proof text,” however, Swetnam grounds his argument in a wider exegetical comparison of 9:19-20 with

⁶⁴ Ibid., 81.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 81-82.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 82-83.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 84.

3:1-6. He claims that both passages feature Moses playing a role which prefigures the work of Christ. The link between the two passages is found in the word λαλέω, which is used in 3:5 with reference to Moses as the witness to the things that “would be spoken” (λαληθησομένων) later, that is, through God’s Son.⁶⁸ By analogy, Hebrews presents Moses in a similar prefiguring role in 9:19-20, where, “having spoken” (λαληθείσης) every commandment, Moses sprinkles the people with the “blood of the covenant” (αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης). Swetnam concludes that “the entire scene seems intended to be a prefiguration of what Jesus did at the institution of the eucharist under the form of blood. At the institution Jesus took his own blood and metaphorically sprinkled ‘all the people’ by the bestowal of the saving effects of his blood ‘on the many.’”⁶⁹

Swetnam continues his study of possible Eucharistic references in Hebrews with a brief examination of 6:4, 10:20 and 13:10, all of which he assesses positively concerning their Eucharistic content. He then goes on to ground these positive conclusions in a study of Hebrews’ use of “approach” (προσέρχομαι) and “entrance” (εἰσέρχομαι), contending that the author’s employment of these terms “suggests some underlying consistency of liturgical theology.”⁷⁰ Swetnam argues that the various exhortations to “approach” Christ in Hebrews presume a liturgical setting in which the audience would be able to draw near or approach him in the consecrated Eucharistic elements. Similarly, the imagery of “entrance” into God’s rest (chapters 3 and 4) refers ultimately to eternal life, but can also be understood by the audience in an interim

⁶⁸ Cf. Heb 1:1-2, where God spoke (λαλήσας) through the prophets (of whom Moses was the exemplar) only to speak later in a definitive way through his Son (ἐλάλησεν ἡμῖν ἐν υἱῷ).

⁶⁹ Swetnam, “Christology and Eucharist”, 84-85.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 90.

sense “as referring to the eucharist as a means of approaching God’s presence through Jesus on the Christian journey which eventually will end with entrance into eternal life.”⁷¹

Swetnam has put forward a fascinating, if somewhat convoluted, series of conjectures. His thesis is imaginative and complex, rivaling the book of Hebrews itself in its intricacy and inventiveness. Nevertheless, one might object and ask how realistic Swetnam’s proposals really are. Would the audience to which Hebrews was addressed (whose identity we will consider more fully in Chapter Three) have possessed the requisite levels of rhetorical and theological sophistication to understand the subtleties involved in the author’s supposed wordplays? In my opinion, this question has to be asked in light of the overall level of sophistication found in the book of Hebrews. The writer of a text as elaborate as Hebrews must have considered his audience capable of grasping the complexities of his arguments. They must have been sufficiently well-educated to be able to grasp both the strategies of Greek rhetoric and the intricacies of first-century scriptural exegesis. To this end, Johnson provides an apt insight into the likelihood of the audience’s ability to comprehend the author’s message:

One cannot always argue from an author’s use of texts to an audience’s appreciation of them. Origen and Augustine, to name only two, did things with texts that perhaps few of their congregants could fully appreciate. But in the case of Hebrews, the argument relies so heavily on citations and the ability to recognize their import that if the audience was deficient in this respect, the writer was a poor communicator.⁷²

Swetnam himself admits that the audience of Hebrews would not have been able to grasp the “subtle symbolism” of the author’s Eucharistic references without recourse to “an oral tradition against which this epistle could have been interpreted.”⁷³ As I argued above in addressing

⁷¹ Ibid., 93.

⁷² Johnson, *Hebrews*, 34.

⁷³ Swetnam, “Christology and the Eucharist”, 84.

Williamson's suggestion that the Hebrews community did not celebrate the Eucharist, it is virtually inconceivable that this congregation was unaware of traditions about the Lord's Supper. Having said this, the question of whether their knowledge of those traditions was intricate enough for them to have understood the subtleties of argumentation proposed by Swetnam is debatable.⁷⁴

Also questionable is Swetnam's hypothesis as to why the author of Hebrews was so indirect in his references to the sacrament. He offers two suggestions in this regard, neither of which is very convincing. His first proposal is that "the indirection of the presentation is possibly required by the need to follow the usages of the 'discipline of the secret.'"⁷⁵ Swetnam is on shaky ground in advancing this notion, because there is no evidence that the *disciplina arcani* was widely practiced until the third or fourth century.⁷⁶ His second proposal is that "the indirection may simply be the result of the author's intuition that such indirection is more effective than unveiled statements and more in keeping with the august nature of the mystery he is trying to convey."⁷⁷ In other words, the writer believed that subtlety and silence were a more effective way to communicate an important point than a forthright statement of his beliefs! A more reasonable explanation, as I have suggested above, is that the Eucharistic context in which Hebrews would have been read aloud obviated the need for explicit references to the ritual.

⁷⁴ Nonetheless, there is evidence that the author of Hebrews relied upon his audience's ability to comprehend plays on words. An obvious example of this is his dual use of διαθήκη in 9:15-20 to signify both "covenant" and "will."

⁷⁵ Ibid. 94.

⁷⁶ Edward Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: The Origins of the RCIA* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1994), 55-56. See also Nicholas V. Russo, "The Validity of the Anaphora of Addai and Mari: Critique of the Critiques," *Issues in Eucharistic Praying in East and West: Essays in Liturgical and Theological Analysis* (Ed. Maxwell E. Johnson; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2010), 38-39.

⁷⁷ Swetnam, "Christology and the Eucharist," 94.

Swetnam may be justifiably criticized for the overly labyrinthine character of certain aspects of his argument for Eucharistic references in Hebrews, as well as for his explanations as to the implicit character of these references. Nevertheless, his rigorous analysis of the textual data has contributed invaluablely to the study of the question of Hebrews and the Eucharist. Moreover, his basic premises have influenced the direction of other scholars' work in this area.

b. Arthur A. Just

In his article "Entering Holiness: Christology and Eucharist in Hebrews," Arthur A. Just builds on Swetnam's conclusions, particularly his study of Hebrews' use of προσέρχομαι, in order to argue for a liturgical and Eucharistic reading of Hebrews. Just's fundamental thesis is that Hebrews is "a liturgical text that is intended to be preached as a performative word in the context of a worshipping assembly where Christ is present bodily as he comes to the hearers in their ears through the proclaimed word and in their mouths through the Lord's Supper."⁷⁸ Like Swetnam, he emphasizes the connection between Christology and Eucharistic theology in Hebrews, arguing that the audience of Hebrews would have understood the author's high-priestly Christology as being "enfleshed at the altar" of the Eucharistic table.⁷⁹ Just decries what he describes as the "myopic reading of the New Testament apart from the sacraments" among many exegetes, a tendency especially prominent among specialists on Hebrews.⁸⁰ In his view, the audience of Hebrews, like NT audiences in general, were "liturgical Christians" who had been instructed and initiated into the Christian community by the sacrament of baptism and were

⁷⁸ Arthur A. Just, "Entering Holiness: Christology and Eucharist in Hebrews." *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 69 (2005):78.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

regularly nourished in their worshipping assemblies by the proclaimed word and the Lord's Supper.⁸¹

As the basis for his Eucharistic interpretation, Just adopts the position that Hebrews evinces a doctrine of inaugurated eschatology which results from the intersection of Christology, ecclesiology and sacramental theology: Christ is present now in his church sacramentally while its members still await a definitive eschatological union with him.⁸² Central to this argument is Just's claim that, according to Hebrews, the risen Lord provides believers with the means of entering into or approaching God's holy presence here and now. This, of course, is a point that he shares with Swetnam. Just devotes the initial portion of his article to a summary and defense of Swetnam's position that (a) the "perfection" or "completion" of Christ consists in his bodily resurrection and (b) believers share in this perfection through communion with Jesus in the Eucharist. He contrasts Swetnam's understanding of *τελειόω* with that of Koester, who argues that believers share in the "completion" of Christ by approaching him in prayer rather than in a sacramental encounter.⁸³ The problem with Koester's understanding, according to Just, is that "in prayer, there is no encounter with Christ in his body, namely with his flesh and blood. That only happens sacramentally, especially in the Eucharist."⁸⁴ In offering an explanation for the capacity of Christians to share in Jesus' completion, Koester "takes us there christologically, but he falls short in delivering the goods sacramentally. He does not make the move to the Eucharist because, for him, early Christian communities should be understood more as communities of

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 76.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 84-86. Cf. Koester, *Hebrews*, 123.

⁸⁴ Just, "Entering Holiness," 85.

prayer than as Eucharistic fellowships.”⁸⁵ Swetnam corrects this deficiency by offering a theory that takes into account the liturgical-sacramental dimension of Christian existence, in which the audience of Hebrews would have shared.

Having defended the core of Swetnam’s argument, Just proceeds to offer a Eucharistic reading of two key texts from Hebrews, namely the prologue (1:1-4) and the approach to Mount Zion (12:22-24). In a Christological statement charged with eschatological significance, the author of Hebrews states in 1:2 that “in these last days” (ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων) God has spoken to “us” (the audience) by “a Son” (ἐν υἱῷ). Moreover, this Son is the one through whom God made the “worlds”⁸⁶ (ἐποίησεν τοὺς αἰῶνας, 1:2b), who sustains all things in existence by the power of his word (φέρων τε τὰ πάντα τῷ ῥήματι τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ, 1:3) and who made purification for sin (καθαρισμὸν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ποιησάμενος, 1:3). Just sees the Christology of the prologue as indicative of a possible Eucharistic milieu in which Hebrews would be read:

If this letter is a homily delivered in the context of a liturgical rite that begins with the reading of the Word of God and climaxes with the Eucharist, the author of Hebrews may be suggesting this by the very manner in which he structures his prologue. The Word of God that creates and sustains all things becomes incarnate so that he might act in that creation as the one who in the atonement makes purification for sins. The Word made flesh not only acted in creation at the cross to purify us from our sins, but continues to act in his creation by forgiving sins at every Lord’s Supper. The reference to “making purification for sins,” then, may refer not only to the atonement but also to the Eucharist, where the atonement continues in the life of the community.⁸⁷

This initial argument seems to be a bit of a stretch. There is nothing in the author’s discussion of “purification” in 1:3 which *prima facie* suggests a connection to the Eucharist. However, Just

⁸⁵ Ibid., 86.

⁸⁶ The term αἰών can have either a temporal or spatial meaning. I concur with Paul Ellingworth that the spatial rendering is preferable in 1:2 as it connotes the bringing into existence of both the visible and invisible dimensions of creation, “thus denoting the totality of the universe.” See Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 96.

⁸⁷ Just, “Entering Holiness,” 88.

makes a somewhat stronger case for a Eucharistic reading of the prologue by positing a link between its final verse (1:4) – in which the author introduces the notion of Jesus’ superiority to the angels – with 12:22-24. He points out that both passages employ the word “superior” (κρείττων) as well as a reference to the angels (τῶν ἀγγέλων).⁸⁸ This putative link, for Just, offers an answer to another puzzling question about the rhetorical strategy in Hebrews: why does the author place such emphasis on the role of the angels vis-à-vis Jesus in chapters 1 and 2, only to seemingly drop the matter and move on to other topics?

The answer, according to Just, is found in chapter 12, where “myriads of angels” (μυριάσιν ἀγγέλων) are among those in the presence of God and his Son Jesus (12:22). Having already spoken of the angels as beings who worship (προσκυνέω) the Son (1:6) and serve as ministers (λειτουργός) in his presence (1:7), the author of Hebrews now places them among the ranks of those who, in the heavenly Jerusalem, assemble before Jesus and his “blood of sprinkling” (αἵματι ῥαντισμοῦ, 12:24). Once again, Just cites Koester, who interprets 12:22-24 as a declaration that the audience of Hebrews have approached the heavenly realm where the angels have gathered not only for Jesus but for the “firstborn” assembly of Christians.⁸⁹ Koester seems to envision the scene in 12:22-24 as being restricted to the final eschatological gathering of God’s people, but Just views this approach as too limited:

Why could this reference to angels here in Hebrews 12 refer not only to the final eschatological feast, but the ongoing anticipation and foretaste of that feast at the church’s eucharistic repast? The superiority of Christ to the angels is resolved at the Lord’s Supper where angels join the saints in Christ whose bodily presence in bread and wine offers purification of sins through blood that speaks better than the blood of Abel. . . . Hebrews 12:18-24 is climactic for Hebrews’ eucharistic theology.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Ibid., 90.

⁸⁹ Ibid. Cf. Koester, *Hebrews*, 200.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

Just undergirds this statement by pointing out that the author of Hebrews employs the perfect tense (προσεληλύθατε) when describing his audience's "approach" to Mount Zion: "This movement into God's presence has already begun here on earth. . . . The inaugurated eschatology of the New Testament encourages us to consider that our approach to God's presence in Jesus begins already now in the church's eucharistic life."⁹¹ The use of the perfect tense of προσέρχομαι signifies ongoing ramifications in the (audience's) present. I will return to this crucial passage and the significance of the word προσέρχομαι in Chapter Four.

To sum up: Just has set forth a credible argument for Hebrews' liturgical provenance and Eucharistic content. He takes the most essential and convincing elements of James Swetnam's work and defends their plausibility. He then builds on Swetnam's ideas by demonstrating that the author of Hebrews sought to persuade his audience that in Christ's Eucharistic presence they have a means of access to God's presence here and now. He accomplishes this task especially by focusing on Hebrews 12:22-24 as a text which is best interpreted within a liturgical and Eucharistic framework. Insofar as Just offers a simpler and more streamlined thesis than Swetnam, his arguments are ultimately more satisfying and persuasive. Rather than relying on the hypothesis of elaborate wordplays and double meanings, Just provides a more straightforward exegesis of selected texts, situating this exegesis within a broader argument that Hebrews, like other NT writings, was written in a milieu in which sacramentalism was a central aspect of Christian thought and life. To be sure, his argument is not without its weaknesses. At times he fails to demonstrate a clear link between the text of Hebrews and the theology of the Lord's Supper, as evidenced by the theological leap he undertakes with regard to the matter of

⁹¹ Ibid., 93.

purification from sin in Heb 1:3. Nevertheless, Just offers a credible case for interpreting Hebrews within a Eucharistic framework.

c. Roch Kereszty

The two authors whom we have considered thus far share a methodological approach to the question of Hebrews and Eucharist which eschews “proof-texting” in favor of a more holistic study of the entire document. Rather than seeking to prove that the author is interested in the Lord’s Supper by isolating individual verses and passages and then extracting a Eucharistic meaning from them, Swetnam and Just provide a framework for interpreting the text as a whole within a liturgical/Eucharistic framework. To be sure, both scholars subject particular sections and verses of the composition to close scrutiny as to their putative Eucharistic content, but only within the context of a broader study of the entire book of Hebrews. In a similar vein, Roch Kereszty’s essay “The Eucharist in the Letter to the Hebrews”⁹² provides a wide-ranging analysis of possible Eucharistic themes in the text, within which he offers evidence for a Eucharistic interpretation of select passages.

Kereszty contends that Hebrews is “a work of ancient Christian exegesis in the literary form of a homily. . . a homily at a Eucharistic service.”⁹³ As such, the document contains an implicit Eucharistic doctrine which later influenced Eastern patristic thought and liturgical celebration. Like Swetnam, Kereszty sets forth a fourfold argument for his claim that Hebrews contains a doctrine of the Lord’s Supper. First, he identifies the literary genre (homily) and central theme (Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice) as elements which lend themselves to an implicit Eucharistic theology. Second, he argues that Hebrews’ emphasis on the blood of Jesus is phrased

⁹² Roch Kereszty, “The Eucharist in the Letter to the Hebrews,” *Communio* 26 (1999): 154-167.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 155.

in a manner that recalls the Eucharistic institution narrative, especially the Matthean version. Third, he analyzes the thematic structure of the homily and concludes that it parallels the structure of a Eucharistic celebration. Fourth, he argues that Christ's sacrifice and his perpetual priestly ministry both point toward the Eucharist as a locus in which these realities are encountered by believers. Having set forth these four basic elements of his thesis, Kereszty then examines individual passages which, in light of the foregoing arguments, can be plausibly interpreted as referring to the Lord's Supper. After briefly examining the influence of Hebrews on the Eucharistic teaching of the Church Fathers and early Christian liturgies, he concludes by offering a series of reflections from his perspective as a systematic theologian as to how a Eucharistic reading of Hebrews can enrich contemporary Christian theology and spirituality.

Of particular note is Kereszty's focus on the potentially Eucharistic character of Hebrews' many references to the blood of Christ. He notes the similarity in wording between Hebrews' references to the "blood of the covenant" (αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης) in 9:20 and 10:29 and the Matthean-Markan Eucharistic institution narratives (Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24). Furthermore, he points out (as does Swetnam) that in 9:20 the author of Hebrews has changed the LXX Exod 24:8 from τοῦτο τὸ αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης to τοῦτο τὸ αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης in "a conscious or unintentional echoing of the Dominical words at the Last Supper."⁹⁴ Kereszty goes on to identify a similarity between Hebrews' focus on the atoning role of Christ's blood and a Matthean addition to Jesus' words of institution over the cup, namely the qualification that Christ's blood will be poured out "for the forgiveness of sins" (εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν): "The expiatory function of the blood of Christ in Hebrews appears to be a commentary on Mt 26:28. This conclusion is based on the fact that all the key words of Mt 26:28 show up in Hebrews at the places where the

⁹⁴ Ibid., 157.

expiatory role of blood is presented.”⁹⁵ As evidence, Kereszty cites Heb 9:22, which states “apart from the shedding of blood (χωρὶς αἱματεκχυσίας) there is no forgiveness (ἄφεσις).” He also points to 9:28, which refers to Christ “having been offered up once in order to carry away the sins of many” (ἅπαξ προσενεχθεὶς εἰς τὸ πολλῶν ἀνενεγκεῖν ἁμαρτίας). This verse echoes Christ’s statement in Matt 26:28 and Mark 14:24 that his blood will be poured out “for many” (περὶ πολλῶν). Kereszty also highlights the significance of the mention in Heb 12:22-24 of Christ’s “blood of sprinkling” (αἷματι ῥαντισμοῦ) as one of the realities that believers have “approached” (προσεληλύθατε): “The covenant blood of Christ, his sprinkled blood, continues to speak more eloquently than that of Abel; therefore, belonging to the Church includes belonging to the heavenly Jerusalem which, among other things, involves approaching the sprinkled blood of Christ.”⁹⁶ This “approach,” Kereszty suggests, takes place for believers in and through the Eucharistic celebration.

If Kereszty is correct, then Hebrews’ focus on the blood of Christ provides a balance to the typical emphasis on the Eucharistic *bread* in other NT documents.⁹⁷ There is ample evidence that the author of Hebrews is interested in the expiatory power of Christ’s blood. Moreover, several of his references to blood have strong Eucharistic connotations, the nature of which would have been especially clear to his audience if Hebrews was written for a Eucharistic celebration. The specifics of Kereszty’s theories, however, would seem to imply literary dependence on Matthew’s gospel, which in my opinion is questionable. As I will argue in

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 159.

⁹⁷ Examples include John’s “Bread of Life” discourse, the Lukan designation of the Eucharistic celebration as the “breaking of the bread” (κλάσει τοῦ ἄρτου), and Paul’s focus on the ecclesiological ramifications of participation in the “one bread” (εἷς ἄρτος) in 1 Cor 10:16-17.

Chapter Three, I believe that the author and audience of Hebrews knew *Mark's* gospel, but would not necessarily have been familiar with the Matthean account. Thus it is unlikely that Hebrews would have sought to deliberately echo Matthew's addition to Jesus' words over the cup regarding "forgiveness of sins." This is not to say, however, that there may not have been a common strand of tradition to which both Matthew and Hebrews had access. Postulating this sort of link, however, is both difficult and, in the end, unnecessary. Without insisting on the literary dependence of Hebrews on Matthew, there is sufficient textual evidence to suggest that the author of Hebrews intended his references to the blood of Jesus to evoke an association with the Eucharistic cup. I will return to this point in Chapter Four.

Also of note in Kereszty's study is his analysis of the literary structure of Hebrews. In this analysis he discerns the outline of a liturgical celebration in which there is a shift in emphasis from listening to the voice of God's Son ("liturgy of the word") to partaking of the benefits of his sacrifice ("liturgy of the Eucharist").⁹⁸ Hebrews opens with the notice that God has definitively spoken to us by a Son (1:2) and later states that the gospel message about the Son was confirmed for the community by those who heard it (2:3). The recipients are then exhorted, in the words of Psalm 95:7, to hear God's voice and not to harden their hearts to God's message (3:7-8, 15; 4:7). For Kereszty, these opening chapters are comparable to the content of a liturgy of the word. By contrast, in the second portion of the work, the focus "centers on the entry of our high priest Jesus into the sanctuary of heaven through his own blood and by the once-and-for-all offering of his body.... we cannot help noticing how cultic terminology becomes dominant and how the author insists that we enter the heavenly sanctuary in the blood

⁹⁸ Ibid., 157-158.

(*haima*) and flesh (*sarx*) of Christ.”⁹⁹ Kereszty finds a parallel to this movement from a focus on God’s word to a focus on the flesh and blood of Jesus in John’s “Bread of Life” discourse in which “there is a clear transition from coming to Jesus in faith while listening to his word (6:51a) to eating his flesh and drinking his blood (51b-58).¹⁰⁰ Kereszty also points to the Lukan account of the risen Jesus’ encounter with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) as another text which corresponds to the structure of the liturgy. In this narrative, the faith of the disciples is set alight by Jesus’ interpretation of the Scriptures (24:13-27 = “liturgy of the word”) which then enables the disciples to discern his presence in the “breaking of the bread” (24:28-35 = “liturgy of the Eucharist”).¹⁰¹

Some might criticize Kereszty’s proposal as anachronistic, reflecting the realities of second-century liturgical structures rather than those of the NT period. Certainly by the time of Justin Martyr (mid-second century), we have evidence of a Eucharistic liturgy in which the proclamation of the word is followed by the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.¹⁰² However, no direct evidence exists for the structure of first-century Eucharistic gatherings. Scholars can only make conjectures on the basis of textual clues in the NT writings and in other early documents like the *Didache*. On the one hand, Paul’s description of the Eucharistic assembly in 1 Cor

⁹⁹ Ibid., 158.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 159.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² In his famous description of the Eucharistic celebration, Justin delineates its structure as follows: “And on the day called Sunday an assembly is held in one place of all who live in town or country, and the records of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as time allows. Then, when the reader has finished, the president in a discourse admonishes and exhorts us to imitate these good things. Then we all stand up together and send up prayers; and as we said before, when we have finished praying, bread and wine and water are brought up, and the president likewise sends up prayers and thanksgiving to the best of his ability, and the people assent, saying the Amen; and the elements over which thanks have been given are distributed, and everyone partakes.” Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 67:3-5, in R.C.D. Jasper and G.J. Cuming, *Prayers of the Eucharist: Early and Reformed* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 29-30.

11:17-34 suggests that at least some early Christian ritual meals followed the pattern of the Greco-Roman symposium banquet, in which the meal was *followed* by discussion, public reading, and singing.¹⁰³ On the other hand, it is hard to deny that multiple NT texts give evidence of a movement from word to meal/flesh/blood/body of Christ.¹⁰⁴ In Acts 20:7-12 Luke portrays a Eucharistic meal presided over by Paul in which the apostle preaches and then “breaks bread.” The parallels between this narrative and the Emmaus episode suggest that Luke was aware of a ritual structure which moved from spoken word to sacramental celebration. Moreover, as we will see in Chapter Four, certain NT documents conclude in such a way as to suggest that a transition is envisaged from the reading of these texts to the celebration of the Eucharist. Given the diversity of Eucharistic practice in the first century, it is quite likely that the sequence of events in the ritual varied from place to place. If the Hebrews community celebrated the Lord’s Supper according to a pattern in which proclamation of the word and preaching/exhortation was followed by the Eucharistic ritual itself, it is possible that the author might have chosen to shape his message in such a way as to underscore the connection between listening to God’s word and encountering Christ in his (Eucharistic) flesh.

d. John Paul Heil

Swetnam, Just, and Kereszty argue for a Eucharistic reading of Hebrews by way of essays in which a general analysis of major themes in the document is combined with a specific look at individual passages with possible Eucharistic content. By contrast, John Paul Heil has recently written a book-length commentary on Hebrews which seeks to interpret the entire work

¹⁰³ See Dennis E. Smith and Hal E. Taussig, *Many Tables: The Eucharist in the New Testament and Liturgy Today* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 23-30; and Hal Taussig, *In the Beginning was the Meal: Social Experimentation and Early Christian Identity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 11-54.

¹⁰⁴ In addition to the examples cited above from John 6 and Luke 24, Kereszty identifies a similar movement in the structure of the Book of Revelation. See *Wedding Feast of the Lamb*, 79-82.

using the theme of worship as a hermeneutical lens. In *Worship in the Letter to the Hebrews*, Heil argues:

The topic of worship in all of its rich and varied dimensions provides the major concern and thrust that embraces Hebrews from start to finish. The author of Hebrews encourages his audience to hold on to the letter he has written to them as “the word of the encouragement” (13:22). In a very carefully concerted and masterfully artistic way, the letter persistently encourages the members of its audience with regard to their worship. Indeed, Hebrews was intended to be presented orally in a public performance as a liturgical or homiletic letter, an act of worship in itself, heard by its audience gathered together as a worshipping assembly. Hebrews exhorts the members of its audience not only with regard to their liturgical worship in which they engage during their communal meetings, but also with regard to their ethical or moral worship in which they engage by the way they conduct themselves outside of their communal gatherings.¹⁰⁵

Heil contends that the community that received Hebrews would have taken part regularly in celebrations of the Lord’s Supper and therefore would have been attuned to “key terms” employed by the author throughout his sermon that were meant to contain Eucharistic connotations.¹⁰⁶ He claims, moreover, that Hebrews was a homily written to be read at such a worship service in order to deepen the audience’s comprehension of what was taking place in their ritual assemblies, especially in light of the fact that some members of the congregation were in danger of drifting away from (2:1) or actually abandoning (10:25) the community’s liturgical celebrations.¹⁰⁷

Heil’s analysis of Hebrews divides the text into three macro-chiastic levels, within which are multiple micro-chiastic structures. His three primary divisions of Hebrews results in an A-B-A’ chiasm:

A 1:1-5:10: Be Faithful in Heart to Grace from the Son and High Priest

¹⁰⁵ John Paul Heil, *Worship in the Letter to the Hebrews* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 1.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 4-5. Such “key terms” include references to “body”, “blood of the covenant”, and “forgiveness of sins” in Heb 2:9; 5:1; 6:20; 7:25, 27; 9:7, 14-15, 20, 22, 24; 10:5, 10, 12, 18, 29; 12:24; 13:20.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 6.

B 5:11-9:28: We Await the High Priest Who Offered Himself to Intercede

A' 10:1-13:25: By Faith with Grace in Heart Let Us Do the Will of the Living God¹⁰⁸

Within this division, Heil highlights the theme of worship as an overarching theological principle. In 1:1-5:10 the audience is exhorted to hear and be faithful to God and God's Son who have spoken in the past and who continue to speak to them in their liturgical assembly; in 5:11-9:28 the congregation is further exhorted to worship Jesus, the high priest who offered himself in a sacrificial act of worship for the remission of sins; and in 10:1-13:25 the community is encouraged to persevere in their fidelity to approaching God and God's Son Jesus and to offer them pleasing and acceptable worship.¹⁰⁹ Heil's subsequent exegesis of each individual passage of Hebrews draws out the liturgical/cultic implications of the author's doctrinal exposition and hortatory rhetoric, showing that the carefully crafted argument is permeated with concerns about his audience's understanding of and fidelity to the proper worship of God and God's Son.

Heil is not the first commentator on Hebrews to draw attention to worship as an organizing principle in the document. Victor Pfitzner, for example, emphasizes the ritual character of Hebrews in the introduction to his commentary:

Neglect of worship (10:25) is symptomatic of external pressure and internal fatigue. That helps to explain why the Letter (meant to be read in worship; see 13:24-25) is full of cultic language taken from Old Testament texts that must have played a role in the community's worship. Hebrews asserts the certainty of faith in the context of the Christian cultus. . . . The argument of Hebrews is cultic not merely because Israel's worship is the constant point of reference, but because every climactic point in the Letter is a statement about worship (4:16; 10:19-25; 12:22-24; 13:15-16). For the writer, certainty of faith in Christ as Son and High Priest has meaning only if it leads to the priestly sacrifice of praise. . . . A case for Eucharistic allusions can also be made at several points. . . . It is in worship that the people of the new covenant experience the present work of their heavenly High Priest. . . . This reading of Hebrews as a *call to worship*

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

(10:25) provides us with a framework for understanding both the eschatology and the parenesis of Hebrews.¹¹⁰

Pfifzner goes on to offer illustrations of this principle at various points in the body of his commentary, but does not utilize the concept of worship as the primary hermeneutical lens in the manner that Heil does. Heil's approach offers a full-blown liturgical exegesis of Hebrews. He insists that the author of the text was addressing a Eucharistic liturgical assembly and attempting to impress upon them the importance of their ritual activity. One of the strengths of Heil's work is that it situates those passages which are typically cited as Eucharistic "proof texts" in Hebrews (e.g. 6:4; 9:20, 10:19; 13:10) within a larger liturgical framework, thus enhancing the plausibility of proffered claims for their Eucharistic content. When viewed apart from this broader exegetical perspective, these claims sometimes smack of desperation, as if "pro-Eucharistic" interpreters of Hebrews were furiously pointing at, say, 9:20 with its mention of "the blood of the covenant" and insisting "See! The author is obviously referring to the Eucharist!" Viewed from within Heil's liturgical perspective on Hebrews, however, assertions about the Eucharistic content of individual verses/passages assume a much higher level of credibility.

5. Summary and Prospect

The foregoing survey has shown the range of scholarly positions vis-à-vis the question of Hebrews and the Eucharist. We have seen that most exegetes believe that the document makes no reference to the ritual of the Lord's Supper or its theology. A minority of commentators holds that the community for which Hebrews was written did not celebrate the Eucharist; moreover, some of these go further and argue that the author of the text regarded the ritual with suspicion, if not outright hostility. This view is best represented by the work of Ronald Williamson. In my analysis and critique of Williamson's approach to the question, I argued that his assertions are

¹¹⁰ Victor C. Pfifzner, *Hebrews* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 28, 28, 42, 43.

ultimately unpersuasive because they presume that (a) the author embraced a heterodox view of the church's central ritual, a claim that would have seriously inhibited Hebrews' reception into the NT canon and its subsequent usage in the articulation of Eucharistic theology; (b) the Hebrews community itself existed on the extreme fringes of the nascent Christian movement, for which the celebration of the Lord's Supper was a central mark of ecclesial identity; and (c) the author needed to have explicitly referenced the Eucharist in order to demonstrate that he and his audience approved of and celebrated the ritual. Both the "negativists" like Williamson (who claim that Hebrews devalues the Eucharist) and the "agnostics" among the scholarly majority (who hold that the author is silent about the sacrament) point to the absence of *explicit* Eucharistic references in the text as proof of their claims. In response to this potentially devastating critique, I have offered the counterargument that the homiletic character of Hebrews explains the implicit nature of the writer's Eucharistic references. If Hebrews was written for proclamation within the ritual of the Lord's Supper, then the author would both have presumed that context and the audience would have understood the allusive quality of his words.

An examination of the proposals of those James Swetnam, Arthur Just, Roch Kereszty and John Paul Heil reveals a different reading of the data. Although certain aspects of their individual arguments are not entirely convincing, their work as a whole is plausible and, indeed, persuasive. Two elements unite their diverse presentations of the evidence. First, all four commentators ground their analysis of individual passages within the context of a broader argument for the liturgical/Eucharistic character of Hebrews as a whole. In doing so, they avoid the trap of simplistic "proof-texting." Second, they are united in their conviction that Hebrews is a homily that was written for proclamation at a Eucharistic service, a contention which, if true,

would go a long way toward explaining the implicit character of the author's references to the Lord's Supper.

At this point it may be fairly asked whether the work of the aforementioned scholars renders this present study superfluous. To the contrary, the aim of my project is to build on the best insights of these commentators and to address the issue of Eucharist in Hebrews from a somewhat different perspective. In the following chapters, I expand and develop the arguments set forth by Swetnam and Just regarding a Eucharistic interpretation of 12:22-24. I offer evidence that the concluding section of Hebrews (12:28–13:25) contains references to worship in general and the Eucharist in particular which both sum up the author's argument for the superiority of Christ's sacrifice and serve as a segue into the Eucharistic celebration at which that sacrifice is made present. I also develop the claims of Kereszty that Hebrews' focus on the blood of Christ has a Eucharistic dimension. Additionally, I seek to build a stronger case for an important factor which Swetnam, Just, Kereszty, and Heil all assume but do not necessarily attempt to prove: that Hebrews was a homily written specifically for a *Eucharistic* liturgy. Drawing upon the recent insights of both biblical exegetes and liturgical scholars, I will show that a ritual meal was the ordinary setting in which Christians gathered for corporate worship, and that within this setting Christian literature was read aloud. Hebrews, therefore, would most likely have been composed for public reading at the Lord's Supper. Having established this point, I then offer an exegesis of specific passages which, given the context of the text, are best interpreted from a Eucharistic perspective. It is within the context of this exegetical study that I offer another unique contribution to the issue of Hebrews and Eucharist. I set forth evidence that Heb 13:10-16 is crucial to understanding the author's implicit Eucharistic theology and that 13:10 in particular serves as a significant final reminder of his overall message regarding Christ's redemptive work.

Ultimately, what I propose to do is to offer a reading of Hebrews from a liturgical perspective as a heuristic device which best enables us to understand the meaning of the text. Although this proposed reading goes beyond the explicit evidence, I contend that it will shed light on key passages, demonstrating important connections between them and on the author's overall rhetorical strategy.

All of the arguments which I intend to advance derive their coherence from the underlying conviction that the book of Hebrews, its author, and its audience were part of the mainstream Christian movement that was emerging in the first century, a movement characterized by common ritual traditions within which their sacred writings were read aloud. It is to this broader Christian literary and ritual world that we turn in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO THE LITURGICAL PROVENANCE OF BIBLICAL WRITINGS

Biblical writings were disseminated orally, by being read publicly at worship.¹¹¹

The list of these books, the canon, can best be understood as the list of books accepted for public reading in the church. . . . The very fact of the books being gathered together as one book is a liturgical act. The Bible is a set of books written by, collected by, and intended for assemblies. . . . The prophets and apostles *were* speaking to assemblies. . . . The only stories of Jesus that we have are stories that were collected and told in *churches*, for the purposes of the faith alive in those churches.¹¹²

The letters of the New Testament were first heard by Christian communities gathered for the weekly Eucharist. Those who wrote them in the power of the Holy Spirit could presume that context and write accordingly. It follows that, when we strive to interpret the epistles, we should be ever alert to the possibility of implicit Eucharistic references.¹¹³

1. Introduction

As a first step toward substantiating the claim that Hebrews was intended to be read at a Eucharistic gathering, we must situate the document within the overall matrix of first century Christianity. Hebrews was not written in a vacuum. Its author and its audience lived and moved and had their being in the wider milieu of Christian faith and practice. They were familiar with the traditions about Jesus Christ, traditions “confirmed to us by the ones who heard him” (2:3). They were grounded in the beliefs, practices, worship, and sacred Scriptures of Judaism, enabling the homilist who wrote Hebrews to construct much of his theological argument around these elements. Moreover, they were familiar from experience with the custom of meeting together as a Christian assembly, a practice to which the preacher exhorted them to remain

¹¹¹ Gerd Theissen, *The New Testament: A Literary History* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 2.

¹¹² Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 24-25 (italics in the original text).

¹¹³ Paul McPartlan, *Sacrament of Salvation: An Introduction to Eucharistic Ecclesiology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 2.

faithful despite the lack of perseverance of some within their community (10:25). For these reasons, we may conclude that the community to which Hebrews was written shared many similarities with other NT communities.

In this chapter I lay the groundwork for my contention that Hebrews was composed for public liturgical proclamation at a Eucharistic celebration by contextualizing this particular NT document within the broader biblical canon and within early Christian cultic practice. I begin by setting forth a key assertion that will guide my subsequent analysis of biblical texts, namely that there is both a *formal* and a *material* connection between the Bible and the liturgy. I then offer a brief survey of biblical writings which demonstrate this twofold relationship. This survey takes into account the following: material from the OT, thus grounding the NT data within the sacred writings of the Jewish faith from which Christianity emerged; narrative material from the Gospels and Acts; and, lastly, NT epistolary material, the genre that bears the greatest literary resemblance to Hebrews. The ultimate aim of this analysis is to demonstrate that most if not all of the texts that comprise the NT were written for public proclamation within a liturgical worshipping assembly and that liturgical worship was a matter of significant interest to the sacred writers, who permeated their compositions with cultic references and themes.

I then offer evidence that whenever Christians assembled, they normally held a meal, and these meals included public reading. This common ritual meal, I argue, is best understood as a Eucharistic celebration, enabling us to assert that the *Eucharist* was the normal setting in which early Christian documents were read to an assembly. Because these texts were intended for proclamation within the setting of the Eucharistic meal, the authors of the literature in question often injected specifically Eucharistic elements into their compositions. In some instances, these themes are explicit, e.g. the institution narratives (Matt 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-

20; 1 Cor 11:23-26) and Paul's exhortations in 1 Corinthians 10-11. In other cases, the motifs are more implicit but still recognizably Eucharistic, as is the case with the accounts of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. In still other instances, Eucharistic references are much subtler. Arguing that the NT authors presumed a cultic setting in which their writings would be read aloud, I raise the possibility that the NT contains many allusions to worship, thanksgiving, etc. that are implicitly Eucharistic although they do not clearly express the Eucharistic milieu which its addressees would have taken for granted.

This chapter lays the foundations for Chapters Three and Four, in which I make the case for a liturgical reading of Hebrews. At present, it suffices simply to observe that the author who composed Hebrews was deeply concerned about the fact that some members of the community to whom he wrote were absenting themselves from the communal worshipping assembly. Indeed, Harold Attridge has observed that this pastoral concern is "the most concrete datum about the problem that Hebrews confronts."¹¹⁴ Troubled by the lax attitude toward worship that has permeated his congregation, and seeking to bolster greater zeal and fidelity among those who are still frequenting the assembly, the preacher composed a sermon filled with cultic themes, language and imagery. My thesis is that he did so in order to argue for the superiority of Christ's sacrifice over the sacrifices of Jewish worship, and intended that his homily be read aloud in a setting in which that sacrifice is recalled in the community's liturgical celebration.

2. Bible and Liturgy: Formal and Material Connections

Given that the intended audience of Hebrews knew the Jesus traditions and that they met together as an assembly, one might ask whether there is a common link between these aspects of belief and praxis, one which could shed light on the particular context in which the homily was

¹¹⁴ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 12.

publicly proclaimed. Indeed there is. The link is found in the organic relationship between the Bible and the liturgy.

Many biblical scholars and liturgical-sacramental theologians acknowledge a close connection between Scripture and the worshipping assembly. A large number of the documents that ultimately became canonical Scripture give evidence of being composed with a view toward public proclamation within a liturgical gathering. Moreover, the sacred authors evinced a concern for cultic issues in their respective works.¹¹⁵ For Scott Hahn, these two dimensions of the Bible-liturgy relationship point to:

a unity between Scripture and liturgy that may be described as both formal and material. Their unity is *formal* in that Scripture was canonized for the sake of liturgy, and the canon itself derived from liturgical tradition. Their unity is *material* in that the content of Scripture is heavily liturgical.¹¹⁶

The formal connection between Scripture and liturgy implies not only that the contents of the Bible were canonized for the purpose of public reading, but also that many biblical texts were originally written with the intent that they be read aloud at worship.¹¹⁷ The material connection suggests a pronounced interest in liturgy on the part of the biblical authors, who imbued their

¹¹⁵ For extensive background on the relationship between Sacred Scripture and the liturgy, see Scott Hahn, *Letter and Spirit: From Written Text to Living Word in the Liturgy* (New York: Doubleday, 2005); Hahn, "Worship in the Word: Toward a Liturgical Hermeneutic" *Letter and Spirit: A Journal of Catholic Biblical Theology* 1 (2005): 101-136; Jerome Kodell, *The Eucharist in the New Testament* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1988); Koenig, *Feast of the World's Redemption*; and Eugene LaVerdiere, *The Eucharist in the New Testament and the Early Church* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996). Hahn summarizes the significance of this connection in his call for a "liturgical reading" of the Bible: "Insofar as the canon of Scripture was established for use in the liturgy, and inasmuch as its content is 'about' liturgy, it follows that we must engage Scripture liturgically if we are to interpret these texts according to the original authors' intentions and the life situation of the believing community in which these texts were handed on" ("Worship in the Word", 105).

¹¹⁶ Hahn, "Worship in the Word," 102.

¹¹⁷ See Hahn, *Letter and Spirit*, 46-52. There are, of course, exceptions to this general principle. Carroll Stuhlmueller, who generally supported the notion of a symbiotic Bible-liturgy relationship, nonetheless pointed out that "some parts of the Old Testament, like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, were not composed for formal liturgy at all." Still, he claimed that even texts such as these "may have been used for the instruction of youths which often took place as families gathered at Jerusalem or some other important shrine for religious and social festivities." See Carroll Stuhlmueller, *New Paths through the Old Testament* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1989), 40.

various narratives, prophetic oracles, letters, etc. with liturgical themes and motifs. Hahn concisely summarizes this material relationship:

Much of the Pentateuch is concerned with ritual and sacrificial regulations; significant portions of the wisdom, historical, and prophetic books take up questions of ritual and worship. The New Testament, too, is filled with material related to the sacramental liturgy. The Gospel of John, for instance, unfolds as a kind of “sacramentary” in the context of the Jewish lectionary calendar; the Letter to the Hebrews and the Book of Revelation contain sustained meditations on the meaning of the Christian liturgy, and the letters of Paul and Peter are animated by liturgical and cultic concerns. From Genesis to Revelation, it can be argued, Scripture is, by and large, about liturgy – about the proper way to worship God and receive his blessings.¹¹⁸

Hahn’s model, in which he posits both a formal and a material unity between the Bible and the liturgy, is convincingly borne out by a survey of relevant biblical texts, as we will see in the next section of this chapter. As noted above, this survey begins with the writings of the OT and proceed to briefly examine significant material from the gospels and Acts, the NT epistles, and Revelation. The rationale for the order in which I consider this material is twofold. First, as I have already pointed out, I move from narrative material to epistolary material because the latter bears greater resemblance to Hebrews. Second, the sequence of OT/gospels/Acts/letters/Revelation follows the canonical shape of the biblical writings. A canonical reading of the Bible can facilitate our appreciation of the material relationship between Scripture and liturgy. When viewed against the backdrop of the overall thrust of salvation history, the importance of liturgy as a unifying narrative theme emerges with greater clarity.¹¹⁹

a. Liturgical Themes in the OT

¹¹⁸ Hahn, “Worship in the Word,” 105. In light of Hahn’s comments vis-à-vis the Gospel of John, it should be noted that efforts to establish a connection between hypothetical first-century Jewish lectionary arrangements and the formation of the gospels have not proven convincing to many biblical and liturgical scholars. Nevertheless, John’s narrative structure does unfold according to the pattern of the Jewish liturgical calendar, with Jesus making pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the various cultic festivals of Judaism. See Pope Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger), *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 236-238.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 102-104.

The OT is replete with liturgical directives and narratives which speak to the centrality of the cult in Israel's life and identity as worshippers of YHWH. At the heart of the five writings which constitute the Torah or Pentateuch, we find the book of Leviticus, a guidebook for Jewish ceremonial law. This document is in turn bracketed by liturgical material in both the second half of the book of Exodus (chapters 24-40) and the first part of the book of Numbers (chapters 1-10). The Exodus experience – the foundational event that undergirds Jewish identity and exerts a profound influence on the theology of the OT – is memorialized and made present to subsequent generations within the setting of a cultic meal.¹²⁰ The highest achievement of the kingships of David and Solomon as depicted in the Bible is not economic prosperity, political stability, or military strength, but rather the building of the Jerusalem Temple as the center for Israel's liturgical cult. Subsequent monarchs in both the southern and northern kingdoms are evaluated largely in terms of their fidelity to YHWH, particularly to the cultic worship of YHWH. For example, Josiah is accorded high marks by both the Deuteronomist and the Chronicler, in large part because of his efforts to reform Israel's liturgical practices (2 Kings 22-23, 2 Chronicles 34). An interest in liturgy may well have provided the impetus for the Chronicler's reworking of the Deuteronomistic history in 1-2 Chronicles; indeed, William Riley sets forth the thesis that this work was composed precisely in order to re-present the history of the Davidic monarchy from a cultic perspective.¹²¹ In the prophetic corpus, we find numerous instances in which ritual activity

¹²⁰ Hahn ("Worship in the Word," 105) states, "Though this topic has not been well-studied, liturgy appears at the most significant junctures of the salvation history recorded in the canonical Scriptures." The juxtaposition of the Exodus event – arguably the most significant episode in the OT's narrative of salvation history – with its liturgical commemoration in the Passover meal stands as a prime example of this phenomenon. One might also look to the prominence of Israelite shrines and the sacrifices offered at these locales in the patriarchal narratives in Genesis. Stuhlmüller (*New Paths through the Old Testament*, 40) points out that "[m]ost of the narratives in the Old Testament center their events at famous places of worship. Places like Bethel, Shechem, Gilgal, Beer-sheba and Jerusalem come repeatedly into the biblical story."

¹²¹ William Riley, *King and Cultus in Chronicles: Worship and the Reinterpretation of History* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

is criticized, not because the prophets found the cult problematic in and of itself but rather because they were incensed at the hypocrisy with which liturgical worship was often carried out (e.g. Isa 1:10-15; Hos 6:6; Amos 4:4-5 and 5:21-27). Each of these examples – to which countless more could be added – illustrate the principle of the *material relationship* between Bible and liturgy to which I referred above. Put simply, the biblical writers are interested in worship, and that interest manifests itself with consistent regularity throughout the narratives and prophetic oracles of the OT.

At the same time, we find ample evidence in the OT of the *formal relationship* between Bible and liturgy, that is, of the notion that the biblical texts were written for worshipping communities and were ultimately canonized for the purpose of liturgical proclamation. Take the book of Psalms, for example. This collection of poetic compositions has served as a staple element of both Jewish and Christian liturgy for millennia. This should not be surprising, as there is ample evidence to suggest that many of the psalms as they exist in their canonical form originated within the circle of musicians who served in the Jerusalem temple and that they were composed with the express intention of being sung by the community or by individuals during liturgical worship.¹²² For example, many psalms bear a superscription containing liturgical instructions. These rubrics were written to indicate the instruments on which and the melody to which a given psalm was to be played (e.g., Ps 6:1, the superscription of which states: “To the leader: with stringed instruments; according to the Sheminith”, NRSV). Moreover, the psalms abound with references to such cultic acts as the offer of sacrifice (e.g., Ps 116:17) and praise in the midst of the *qahal* (assembly; see, for example, Ps 22:25). Some psalms appear to have been written for congregational singing; Psalm 136, for example, features “a continuous refrain that

¹²² See Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

was probably echoed by the assembly.”¹²³ By the time of Jesus, specific psalms were designated for use in particular liturgical celebrations. The so-called “Hallel” psalms, Psalms 113-118, were regularly sung at the great pilgrimage festivals (Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles), while Psalm 15 was used as an “examination of conscience for worshippers” and a “preparation for worship.”¹²⁴

At times the cultic intent behind the canonization of sacred texts finds its way into the biblical narrative itself. In 2 Kgs 22:1-3 the sweeping religious reform undertaken by Josiah is formally launched by a public reading of the “book of the law” in the presence of the people. The narrative suggests that this document, probably a rudimentary form of the book of Deuteronomy, would henceforth serve as a normative guide for the reformation of cultic worship in Judah. Similarly, Neh 8:1-8 presents a narrative in which the completed Torah makes its “public debut” at a communal assembly where Ezra reads the Law of Moses to a crowd of enthusiastic worshippers. Some scholars hold that this passage serves as “an etiology for the synagogue service from the time of the author back to the time of Ezra,” while others, pointing to the scarcity of textual evidence for the content of such liturgies prior to the first century CE, suggest that the text of Nehemiah served as a blueprint for the development of later Jewish liturgical practices.¹²⁵ Exegetes detect a complicated history behind such elements of the narrative as Neh 8:8, which depicts the Levites reading from the Torah, “interpreting it so that all could understand what was read” (NABRE). This may allude to the development of targums as

¹²³ Edward Foley, *From Age to Age: How Christians Have Celebrated the Eucharist* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2008), 12.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ Ralph W. Klein, “The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (ed. L.E. Keck et al; 12 vols.; Nashville: Abindgon, 1999), 3:801.

well as midrashic homiletic techniques which, over time, made the Scriptures more accessible to ordinary people.¹²⁶ Whatever complexities may lie behind the composition of the text, however, the passage as it stands bears witness to the principle that the public reading of Scripture lay at the heart of its canonization.

The writings that ultimately became the canonical Hebrew Bible underwent a lengthy process of development. They originated with oral traditions that were told and retold, shaped and reshaped, in various settings, primarily (though not exclusively) settings of a cultic nature. A major impetus for setting these traditions down in writing was the need for texts that could be proclaimed within a ritual milieu.¹²⁷ In many instances, the liturgical practices of later eras served to shape the manner in which earlier events were recounted in the biblical narrative. The Book of Leviticus, for example, contains a host of cultic regulations which were likely developed for use in the Jerusalem Temple, but which have been projected back into the wilderness period by the authors of this biblical text. The authors of the Jewish Scriptures took the cult seriously, crafting their literary compositions for public reading and imbuing their literature with liturgical themes. Stuhlmüller offers an excellent summation of the intimate bond between the Hebrew Bible and Israel's ritual life: "More than anything else, the Bible carries the label: 'Made for worship.' The purpose of the Bible is not to describe ancient events with detailed accuracy but rather from the memory of the events to draw listeners into worshipping God and into reliving the hopes of the ancestors."¹²⁸

b. Liturgical Motifs in the Gospels and Acts

¹²⁶ Stuhlmüller, *New Paths through the Old Testament*, 51.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

When we turn to the pages of the NT, we find a similar twofold dynamic at work. Concerning the material relationship, the NT writers demonstrate a consistent interest in matters of worship, particularly Eucharistic worship. The gospels are a case in point. The four evangelists permeate their accounts of Jesus' mission and ministry with liturgical themes that go far beyond the Eucharistic narratives of institution found in Mark, Matthew, and Luke. Perhaps most noteworthy in this regard is the episode of Jesus' miraculous feeding of the multitudes, recounted no less than six times in the four gospels (Mark 6:3-44; 8:1-10; Matt 14:13-21; 15:32-39; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-15). Each of the evangelists incorporates motifs which would remind his audience of the community's chief ritual act. The synoptic evangelists employ Eucharistic language to describe Jesus' actions vis-à-vis the bread ("took...blessed...broke...gave"), while John makes use of the liturgically suggestive verb εὐχαριστέω to describe Jesus' act of thanksgiving (John 6:11, 23). Moreover, the Johannine account of the miraculous feeding leads directly into the so-called "Bread of Life" discourse (6:25-59), in which Eucharistic theology first bubbles under the surface (6:35-50) and ultimately breaks clearly through (6:51-58).

The feeding narratives offer a particularly vivid example of the material connection between Scripture and worship in the gospels. These accounts illustrate the extent to which liturgical theology and praxis have colored the manner in which the evangelists recount a significant episode from Jesus' public ministry. Although the miraculous feeding story stands as perhaps the most obvious illustration of this principle, it does not stand alone. Take Luke-Acts, for example. These two volumes form a narrative unity, in which Luke relates the story of Jesus Christ and the community he founded in such a way that the significance of the former is made fully manifest in the experience of the latter.¹²⁹ In his gospel Luke describes the origins of the

¹²⁹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (3rd ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 196.

church in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, and then in Acts traces its growth and missionary outreach from Jerusalem to “the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).¹³⁰ According to Eugene LaVerdiere, the story of the origin and development of the church in Luke-Acts is paralleled by the story of the origin and development of the Eucharist.¹³¹ In *Dining in the Kingdom of God*, LaVerdiere documents numerous instances in which Luke injects elements of liturgical theology into his accounts of the meals that Jesus shared with friends and foes alike.¹³² LaVerdiere identifies a series of ten meals in Luke’s gospel which, taken together, situate the origins of the Eucharist in Jesus’ ministry, passion, and resurrection. These meal stories also provide insights into how the Christian community is to actualize the teachings and values of Jesus in its ongoing ritual worship. In a second study, *The Breaking of the Bread*, LaVerdiere further demonstrates Luke’s interest in the integrality of cultic worship to the life of the early church. He finds liturgical significance in such episodes as the summary of the church’s early life (Acts 2:42-47) with its emphasis on the “breaking of bread” and “the prayers” (2:42); in the description of meal scenes with cultic overtones (20:7-12; 27:33-38); and in the account of the “council” of Jerusalem (15:1-35) at which the decision to integrate Gentiles into the church’s table fellowship had profound implications for worship. LaVerdiere’s findings are corroborated by the work of other scholars. Gordon Lathrop, for example, holds that the “Lukan interest in meals can be interpreted as addressed to meal-keeping communities of Christians in the late first

¹³⁰ LaVerdiere, *The Eucharist in the New Testament*, 97.

¹³¹ Eugene LaVerdiere, *The Breaking of the Bread: The Development of the Eucharist According to Acts* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1998), 10.

¹³² Eugene LaVerdiere, *Dining in the Kingdom of God: The Origins of the Eucharist in the Gospel of Luke* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994).

century, with an interest in deepening the experienced meaning of those meals.”¹³³ The abundance of meal themes in Luke offers further evidence that the gospels writers have an interest in worship and have imbued their narratives with liturgical motifs.

If the content of the gospels, like that of the writings of the OT, manifests a material connection between Scripture and liturgy, the same can be said concerning the formal relationship between the Bible and worship. In his study of the liturgical provenance of the four gospels, Lathrop sets forth the argument that there is an intrinsic connection between the composition of the gospels and their intended proclamation within Christian worship services: “The four Gospels all presume a community, an assembly, a meeting, as part of what they are, as part of their very genre. . . . The four Gospels and the Christian assembly have a mutual coherence.”¹³⁴ As one of many examples of this coherence, Lathrop cites the centrality of the “house” (οικία) as a theme in the gospel of Mark. The house, he notes, is the “place where Jesus is,” a typical location for his activities of healing, teaching, and proclaiming the forgiveness of sins, not to mention a place where meals were shared.¹³⁵ That so many Markan episodes of encounter with Jesus take place within the οικία would have “inevitably evoked in the midst of [Mark’s] readers or hearers the current house churches” of the assemblies who received and heard Mark’s gospel.¹³⁶ Lathrop believes that the designation of Jesus as κύριος τῆς οἰκίας in Mark 13:35 would have reminded the Markan audience that the Jesus whose return they

¹³³ Lathrop, *Four Gospels on Sunday*, 109. See also John Paul Heil, *The Meal Scenes in Luke-Acts: An Audience-Oriented Approach* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999).

¹³⁴ Lathrop, *Four Gospels on Sunday*, 9, 11.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

anticipated is the one whom they lauded as κύριος when they gathered for worship in their house churches.¹³⁷

In making his case for the mutual relationship between gospel genre and worshipping assembly, Lathrop nevertheless warns against “panliturgism,” the tendency to discern the presence of liturgical themes in nearly every biblical text. Panliturgism also manifests itself in suggestions that the gospels were written with a view toward proclamation in correspondence with ancient synagogue calendars and lectionaries.¹³⁸ Paul Bradshaw, like Lathrop, takes a dim view of such excesses. He is critical of scholars who would posit improvable connections between ancient Jewish and Christian liturgical practices or claim to “discover a specifically Christian liturgical context” behind certain NT writings, such as the suggestion that 1 Peter provides a model for a complete baptismal liturgy or that the Book of Revelation was structured along the lines of a paschal celebration.¹³⁹ This tendency toward “panliturgism” was noted – and critiqued – several decades previously by C.F.D. Moule.¹⁴⁰ Moule wrote at a time when the seeds of the Liturgical Movement were coming to full flower in both Catholic and Anglican circles. This movement generated much interest in the origins of Christian worship in the NT period. He argued that “it is fashionable at present for students of the New Testament to find liturgy everywhere.”¹⁴¹ While lauding the freshness of this liturgical hermeneutic, Moule offered the following caution:

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 5.

¹³⁹ Paul Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 50.

¹⁴⁰ C.F.D. Moule, *Worship in the New Testament* (Richmond: John Knox, 1961).

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 7.

Enthusiastically as these tendencies and movements are to be welcomed, they have brought with them the temptation to detect the reverberations of liturgy in the New Testament even where no liturgical note was originally struck. Granted that it is impossible to overemphasize the importance of worship in any Christian community, yet it is possible, in one's enthusiasm, to squeeze the evidence beyond its capacity.¹⁴²

Without wishing to downplay the undisputed relationship between Scripture and communal worship in the early church, Moule nonetheless argued for the need to offer a "sober presentation" of the NT evidence.¹⁴³

Such cautions are worth heeding as we proceed with this study. It would exceed the parameters of credibility to suggest that every gospel pericope or every epistolary topic is directly concerned with cultic matters. This is certainly not the case. My contention, both with regard to the NT in general and, as we shall see, to Hebrews in particular, is simply that the sacred authors were (a) concerned with issues related to worship and (b) wrote their texts for worshipping communities gathered for a meal. Given this combination of a theological interest in liturgy on the part of the biblical authors and a cultic setting in which their writings were read aloud, it is reasonable to look for and find liturgical terminology and concepts scattered throughout the NT corpus, both in the narrative genre of the gospels (and Acts) as well as the epistolary genre, to which we now turn.

c. The Pauline Correspondence

Thus far we have looked at examples from both the OT and the four gospels and Acts which indicate a close relationship between the Bible and corporate worship. This connection is both material (the texts in question deal with cultic matters) and formal (they were largely written to be read aloud in the midst of worshipping assemblies). But what about the NT

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

epistolary tradition, which bears a closer resemblance to Hebrews than do the gospels and Acts?¹⁴⁴ Here, too, we find numerous indications of an organic bond between written texts and the worshipping assembly. Nowhere is this clearer than in the letters attributed to Paul, one of which manifests a pronounced concern for matters of worship (1 Corinthians), and many of which offer textual clues indicating that they were intended for public liturgical proclamation.

Like the gospels, the letters of the NT were written principally for proclamation within the liturgical gatherings of the early Christian communities. Several of the Pauline epistles, for example, contain directives indicating that they should be read publicly. We may reasonably categorize this public reading as proclamation within the worshipping assembly:

Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. I direct you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them (1 Thess 5:26-27).

And when this letter has been read among you, ensure that it is read also in the church of the Laodiceans. You also should read the letter from Laodicea (Col 4:16).

Even Paul's letter to Philemon, written to an individual regarding a seemingly personal matter, is addressed not only to "Philemon, our dear brother" (Phlm 1) but also to "Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow-soldier, and *to the church in your house*" (Phlm 2). It was commonplace for worshippers to meet in private homes for their liturgical celebrations. In Carolyn Osiek's estimation, Philemon was meant "to be read at the liturgy when the Christian community will help reintegrate Onesimus back into his household as a fellow Christian."¹⁴⁵ It is possible that Paul envisaged the setting of ritual worship in Philemon's house church as the ideal forum to effect reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus. Or perhaps Paul felt that having his letter

¹⁴⁴ As we have already seen, and will explore in much greater detail in Chapter Three below, Hebrews is not, strictly speaking, a letter. Nevertheless, its affinities with the NT epistles are much greater than its relationship to, say, the gospel of Mark or an OT narrative work.

¹⁴⁵ Carolyn Osiek, "Paul and his Writings," *The Catholic Study Bible* (ed. Donald Senior and John J. Collins; New York; Oxford University Press, 2006), 494.

read aloud in a liturgical context would serve as a means of exerting public pressure on Philemon to forgive (and even emancipate) the runaway slave. Whatever the case may be, even this most seemingly “private” of Pauline letters has a manifestly public dimension, insofar as it was meant to be proclaimed to a community gathered for worship.

Another indicator that the Pauline letters were largely intended for liturgical proclamation is the frequent use of an expression that we find in several of them, as well as (in a similar form) 1 Peter: the injunction to “greet one another with a holy kiss.” We find references to the “holy kiss” (φίλημα ἅγιον) in Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; and 1 Thess 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14 speaks of a “kiss of love” (φιλήματι ἀγάπης). The second century testimony of Justin indicates that this gesture was liturgical in nature, used at celebrations of the Eucharist.¹⁴⁶ Because it is uncertain whether the “holy kiss” was part of Christian liturgy in Paul’s time, one cannot automatically deduce from his use of this term that he intended his letters to be read in the worshipping assembly.¹⁴⁷ However, when one takes into account the fact that in 1 Thess 5:26-27 the “holy kiss injunction” is combined with an enjoiner to have the letter read publicly, the evidence seems to suggest that Paul refers there to a liturgical act rather than simply “using a liturgical gesture in an epistolary context.”¹⁴⁸

Paul’s letters, meant to be read aloud during the corporate worship meetings of early Christian communities, therefore presuppose a cultic setting in which they will be proclaimed:

Since the letters were to be read in the liturgical assembly, Paul wrote them with that setting in mind. He adapted greetings, blessings, prayers and hymns from the liturgical assembly and used them in his letters, giving the letters a unique, apostolic, and

¹⁴⁶ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Letter to the Romans,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 868.

¹⁴⁷ Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, “The First Letter to the Corinthians,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 815.

¹⁴⁸ Fitzmyer, “Letter to the Romans,” 868.

Eucharistic form. The letters also have a strong homiletic tone, suggesting that in writing them Paul imagined himself personally addressing the Eucharistic assembly.¹⁴⁹

Because Paul intended that his letters be read aloud in a ritual context, his writings offer us another example of the formal connection between Scripture and liturgy. They also manifest the material unity between Bible and worship, insofar as Paul demonstrates a pronounced pastoral concern for worship-related issues in the local communities to whom he wrote. In Galatians, for example, Paul sternly criticizes Peter for withdrawing from table fellowship with Gentiles; the meal fellowship in question was quite possibly liturgical in character.¹⁵⁰ However, it is only in 1 Corinthians that we find explicit mention of the Eucharist, the church's primary ritual meal. To be sure, the sacrament is discussed here only because of the abuses in its celebration that were occurring in Corinth. Indeed, as Jerome Kodell has observed, "had the Corinthians been a more docile and disciplined community" we would not even know whether the Pauline churches celebrated the Eucharist!¹⁵¹ Indeed, 1 Corinthians offers us a clear example of a Pauline text which shows forth the material unity between Scripture and worship in a clear-cut fashion.

¹⁴⁹ LaVerdiere, *Eucharist in the New Testament and the Early Church*, 32. LaVerdiere envisions a specifically Eucharistic milieu for the proclamation of Paul's letters. See also John Paul Heil, *The Letters of Paul as Rituals of Worship* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2011). According to Heil, "The original setting for the public performance of these letters was communal worship that was most likely connected to the celebration of the Eucharist. Their audiences listened to the theological concepts, particularly problems, and pressing concerns Paul addressed to them, as they were gathered together, probably in house churches, for worship. Even the letters addressed to individual delegates of Paul – Titus and Timothy – were not purely personal letters but were also addressed to the worshipping community as a whole" (2).

¹⁵⁰ See Smith and Taussig, *Many Tables*, 58-63. In their commentary on Gal 2:11-14, Smith and Taussig state, "The text clearly indicates that communal meals were already a regular part of the worship gatherings of the various early Christian communities. . . . The connection of these meals with 'worship' and 'liturgy' must be assumed as well" (*Many Tables*, 59). As I will argue below, this assumed connection is highly plausible.

¹⁵¹ Kodell, *Eucharist in the New Testament*, 72. It is possible that Kodell slightly overstates his case. Koenig (*Feast of the World's Redemption*) makes a strong case for the presence of subtle Eucharistic references in other Pauline texts. See *Feast of the World's Redemption*, 127-148. See also Geoffrey Wainwright, "Christian Worship: Scriptural Basis and Theological Frame" in *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (ed. Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4-14. Wainwright offers an analysis of the liturgical language in Paul's letter to the Romans which, in his estimation, includes implicit Eucharistic motifs. Nonetheless, 1 Corinthians contains Paul's only *direct* discussion of Eucharistic faith and praxis.

When Paul wrote his first canonical letter to the Christian community in Corinth sometime around 54 CE,¹⁵² he did so in order to address and rectify a number of problems that had arisen within the church there, from questions of sexual morality (chapters 5-6) and issues surrounding virginity and marriage (chapter 7), to the controversial matter of eating food that had been sacrificed to pagan idols (chapters 8-10). Another key issue Paul had to address in this letter was the nature of proper worship. Questions had arisen about the appropriate roles of men and women in the liturgical assembly (11:2-16). More seriously, abuses were taking place when the Corinthians gathered to celebrate the Lord's Supper (11:17-34), and participation in pagan banquets threatened to nullify the meaning of the Christian Eucharist for many congregants (10:1-22). It was in response to these liturgical problems that Paul presented the Corinthians with his theology of the Eucharist, including his own account of Jesus' words of institution at the Last Supper (11:23-26).

Paul's first reference to the Eucharist in this letter occurs in his discussion of the question about eating food sacrificed to idols in 1 Corinthians 8-10. Here Paul deals with an issue that had arisen because of the pagan religious environment in which the Corinthian Christians lived and of which they had once been a part prior to their conversion.¹⁵³ They had once worshipped idols and shared in the banquets held in their honor. Having now turned from idol worship to faith in Jesus Christ, the Christians of Corinth nevertheless "had to deal with the many ambiguities of living in an urban environment where pagan temples, images, cults, public processions and festivals shaped the culture and marked every aspect of life."¹⁵⁴ A key question which divided

¹⁵² Murphy-O'Connor, "First Letter to the Corinthians," 799.

¹⁵³ LaVerdiere, *Eucharist in the New Testament and the Early Church*, 32.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

the local church was whether they could continue to participate in the “idolatrous liturgical events” of their pagan neighbors while also taking part in Eucharistic fellowship.¹⁵⁵ Some held that taking part in the pagan rituals meant nothing because the idols do not really exist (8:1-6).¹⁵⁶ Paul’s response is that love requires the “strong” to forego this practice for the sake of the “weak” members of the community who are scandalized by it (8:7-13).¹⁵⁷ In chapter 9, he offers the “strong” members of his audience a model of renunciation from which they can learn as they seek to forego their own rights in order to benefit their “weaker” brothers and sisters. The paradigm that he offers is based on his own experience as an apostle who has willingly relinquished certain rights (especially monetary remuneration) for the sake of the gospel.

It is at this point that Paul brings the Eucharist into the discussion. Aware that some in the Corinthian community have developed a false sense of security (10:12) as a result of their “superior knowledge” (8:1), he draws on OT prefigurations of baptism and Eucharist in 10:1-5 as to warn his audience against overconfidence.¹⁵⁸ If the Israelites of old became presumptuous and assumed that their incorporation into the Mosaic covenant would protect them from divine punishment for their infidelity, then, Paul reasons, the Corinthian Christians risk repeating the Israelites’ mistake by assuming that their incorporation into Christ will shield them from the consequences of their own behavior. Paul then explicitly points to the Eucharist as the source of their union with Christ: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one

¹⁵⁵ Anthony C. Thiselton, *1 Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 156.

¹⁵⁶ Kodell, *Eucharist in the New Testament*, 73.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ LaVerdiere, *Eucharist in the New Testament and the Early Church* 32. See also Kodell, *Eucharist in the New Testament*, 73.

bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:16-17). The “cup of blessing” refers to the cup of wine over which a blessing was pronounced at festive Jewish meals. In this context it recalls the cup over which Jesus spoke his words of interpretation in the Last Supper accounts.¹⁵⁹ That Paul mentions the cup prior to the bread does not necessarily suggest that the bread and wine were consecrated in reverse order in his communities (cf. 11:23-26);¹⁶⁰ rather, Paul first speaks of the cup in order to draw a more obvious contrast between the Eucharistic vessel (10:16) and the “cup of demons” (ποτήριον δαιμονίων, 10:21) which symbolized the pagan libations that he condemns.¹⁶¹ The fundamental point that Paul wishes to make in this section is that the Corinthians – who “accept the identification of the bread and wine of the Eucharist with Christ”¹⁶² and thus share in a genuine “participation” (κοινωνία) with Christ by virtue of their communion with him in the Eucharist – cannot at one and the same time share in the offerings made to the demonic forces represented by pagan idols. For Paul, κοινωνία entails “a participation in the body and blood of Christ and thus union with the exalted Christ” which consequently binds the participants in a union with one another.¹⁶³ This union is meant to be exclusive. In 10:21 Paul draws a sharp contrast not only between the “cup of the Lord” (ποτήριον κυρίου) and the “cup of demons” (ποτήριον δαιμονίων), but also between the “table of the Lord” (τραπέζης κυρίου) and the “table of demons” (τραπέζης δαιμονίων). Paul employs this “table” terminology in order to emphasize the incompatibility of sharing in the fruits of pagan

¹⁵⁹ Panayotis Coutsoumpos, *Community, Conflict and the Eucharist in Roman Corinth: The Social Setting of Paul’s Letter* (Lanham, MD: University of America Press, 2006), 82.

¹⁶⁰ Xavier Léon-Dufour, *Sharing the Eucharistic Bread: The Witness of the New Testament* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 211.

¹⁶¹ Nichols, *Holy Eucharist*, 29.

¹⁶² Murphy-O’Connor, “First Letter to the Corinthians,” 808.

¹⁶³ Coutsoumpos, *Community, Conflict and the Eucharist*, 83.

sacrificial altars with participating at the Eucharistic table, a point to which I will return in my analysis of Hebrews 13:10 in Chapter Four below.

Another problem in the Corinthian church – this time centered on behavior in the Eucharistic assembly – led Paul to elaborate further on the meaning of the Eucharist (11:17-34). Here Paul addresses the inequities that resulted when some wealthier members of the community marginalized poorer members at their Eucharistic gatherings. At the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, it appears that the Eucharist was attached to a regular meal, held in the home of one of the local church members. As the Corinthian Christian community increased in numbers, it was necessary for them to find a sufficiently large meeting space. The responsibility of hosting such gatherings fell on the wealthy members whose homes were big enough to accommodate the entire congregation.¹⁶⁴ Unfortunately, the well-to-do congregants tended to arrive early, receive the best accommodations, and treat the poor members of the church with contempt (11:17-22).

Paul is understandably disappointed and displeased at this behavior. He attempts to lead the guilty parties to a spirit of soul-searching and repentance by reminding them of the meaning of the Eucharist they celebrate and its roots in the Last Supper Jesus shared with his disciples (11:23-34). In the context of chastising his Corinthian audience, Paul offers an institution narrative which most closely resembles Luke's, albeit with the presence of a remembrance-word (*ἀνάμνησις*) over the cup (11:25) in addition to the one over the bread (11:24, cf. Lk 22:19).¹⁶⁵ Paul's emphasis on *ἀνάμνησις* is significant in light of the situation at Corinth, for the Corinthians were not authentically remembering Jesus at their gatherings "because they had

¹⁶⁴ Kodell, *Eucharist in the New Testament*, 75.

¹⁶⁵ Murphy-O'Connor, "First Letter to the Corinthians," 809.

forgotten the meaning of his life and death.”¹⁶⁶ In Paul’s words, the Christians at Corinth were not really gathering “to eat the Lord’s supper” (11:20) because there could be no genuine ἀνάμνησις, indeed, no true celebration of the Eucharist, in a community that failed to imitate Jesus’ example of self-giving love.¹⁶⁷ In light of Paul’s ominous warning that “[w]hoever. . . eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord” (11:27), his remark about “discerning the body” (11:29) may carry a double meaning. Previously in 10:16-17, Paul employed the word “body” (σῶμα) to refer both to the broken bread that the community identified with Christ’s body (10:16) and to the community itself, constituted as Christ’s “body” through their communion in the “one bread” (10:17). On one level, “discerning the body” refers to the community’s obligation to treat one another with dignity, for they are the “Body of Christ” – a point which Paul will draw out in greater detail in chapter 12. On another level, we can also see in Paul’s statement an allusion to the reality of Christ’s presence in the consecrated bread and wine.¹⁶⁸ He has prepared his readers to understand the word σῶμα in a sacramental sense not only in 10:16 but also in 11:24, where σῶμα, in the context of the Eucharistic institution narrative, clearly refers to the bread which Jesus identified with his own body.

d. 1 Peter

If we look beyond the Pauline corpus, we find evidence of ritual elements elsewhere in the NT epistolary tradition. The first letter attributed to the apostle Peter offers a particularly compelling example. It has long been argued that 1 Peter is imbued with liturgical symbolism,

¹⁶⁶ Kodell, *Eucharist in the New Testament*, 80.

¹⁶⁷ Murphy-O’Connor, “First Letter to the Corinthians,” 809.

¹⁶⁸ Kodell, *Eucharist in the New Testament*, 81.

although scholars have differed as to what sort of liturgical assembly this document may have been intended to address. Several decades ago it was fashionable to suppose that the epistle was written as a baptismal homily, and perhaps even as a blueprint for an actual celebration of baptism. Although contemporary scholarship tends to be more skeptical of this overarching claim, most exegetes nevertheless agree that parts of 1 Peter do contain baptismal imagery. This imagery is both explicit (e.g., the comparison between baptism and the Flood in 3:20-22) and implicit (e.g., the language of “new birth” and “rebirth” in 1:3, 23; 2:2). The writer’s interest in baptism offers yet another example of a biblical author’s material interest in matters of worship and ritual.

In addition to demonstrating an interest in baptism, the author of 1 Peter employs cultic terminology which is indicative of a formal relationship between his document and the liturgical assembly. He concludes the letter with an exhortation in 5:14 for his hearers to “greet each other with a “kiss of love” (φιλήματι ἀγάπης), analogous to the “holy kiss” (φίλημα ἅγιον) mentioned in several Pauline letters. Urging his hearers to “come to” the Lord (2:4), the author employs the verb προσερχόμενοι, which is used in liturgical contexts elsewhere in the LXX and in the NT.¹⁶⁹ Indeed, this verb occurs at significant points in Hebrews and will be the subject of more extensive analysis in Chapter Four.

There are thus some grounds for holding that the author of 1 Peter employs cultic language. Moreover, the content of the letter reveals the writer’s interest in baptism. It is also possible that the letter was crafted for proclamation at a Eucharist and contains one or two implicit references to the ritual.¹⁷⁰ Whether this latter point is the case or not, 1 Peter meets the

¹⁶⁹ E.g. Exod 12:48; Lev 9:5, 7; 10:4-5; 21:17-18; 22:3; Num 18:3-4; Deut 5:23, 27; Heb 4:16; 10:1, 22; 12:18, 22.

¹⁷⁰ For possible Eucharistic allusions in 1 Peter, see Koenig, *Feast of the World’s Redemption*, 153-158; Daniel Keating, *First and Second Peter, Jude* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 51; Gordon Lathrop, *Holy People: A*

overall criteria we have been considering for a dual material/formal relationship between biblical text and liturgical celebration.

e. The Johannine Letters

That the NT letters were intended for a liturgical milieu helps to explain the otherwise puzzling inclusion of 2 and 3 John in the biblical canon. According to Luke Timothy Johnson, the inclusion of these very brief and “unassuming” texts is hard to understand unless they were “the companions of a more significant writing.”¹⁷¹ The “more significant writing” in question is 1 John, which Johnson sees as a piece of homiletic-style writing accompanied by the two shorter letters in one packet sent by John “the Elder” to a congregation:

Third John was most likely a letter of recommendation from the elder to Gaius, certifying that the carrier of the other two letters, Demetrius, was to be received with open arms. Second John was to be read to the entire assembly as an introduction and cover letter for First John, which is not really a letter at all but an exhortation, closer in nature to a homily. The Johannine letters thus make the most sense when viewed as parts of the same epistolary package.¹⁷²

Johnson’s theory can explain why 1 John launches immediately into its homiletic exhortation without an epistolary prescript of any kind. Moreover, a liturgical (and Eucharistic) setting for the proclamation of the “Johannine letter packet” might lend credence to the suggestion that 1 John 5:6, 8 refers to the Eucharist. The author’s statement – “This is the one who has come by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not by the water only but by the water and by the blood. . . . There are three that give testimony, the Spirit and the water and the blood” – likely refers primarily to the baptism and crucifixion of Jesus, but in a liturgical context, might secondarily remind John’s

Liturgical Ecclesiology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 35-36; and Donald P. Senior and Daniel J. Harrington, *1 Peter, Jude and 2 Peter* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2008), 49.

¹⁷¹ Johnson, *Writings of the New Testament*, 497.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 497-98.

hearers of the two sacraments – baptism and Eucharist – by which the Johannine community witnesses and experiences Christ’s ongoing presence and testimony.¹⁷³

f. Revelation

We now turn to the final book in the NT canon, Revelation. This unusual work, which is at turns apocalyptic, prophetic and epistolary, has been the source of greater confusion and misunderstanding than any other biblical work over the past two millennia. Despite its strange and sometimes frightening apocalyptic imagery, however, it is in fact a remarkably positive and optimistic text. It was composed to assure Christians living in a time of turmoil and persecution that Jesus Christ has already won the victory over the forces of sin and evil through his death and resurrection, and that he will see his followers through the trials of life and bring them safely to his heavenly throne so long as they remain faithful to him.¹⁷⁴ It also offers us yet another vivid example of the formal and material unity of Bible and liturgy. Revelation bears the hallmarks of having been crafted for liturgical proclamation, and the worship of God is a central theme throughout the text.

There are a couple of significant textual clues which indicate that Revelation was intended to be read aloud within the context of liturgical worship. At the outset, its author, John the seer,¹⁷⁵ states, “Blessed is the one *who reads aloud* the words of the prophecy, and blessed are *those who hear* and who keep what is written in it” (Rev 1:3). The benediction which the

¹⁷³ See C. Clifton Black, “The First, Second, and Third Letters of John” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* 12: 438-39; Neal Flanagan, “1 John” in *The Collegeville Bible Commentary* (ed. Diane Bergant and Robert J. Karris; Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1989), 1025; Francis Martin, “1 John” in *The International Bible Commentary* (ed. William R. Farmer; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 1832.

¹⁷⁴ See M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press: 1989); Daniel J. Harrington, *Revelation: The Book of the Risen Christ* (New York: New City Press, 1999).

¹⁷⁵ According to most scholars, the John who wrote revelation is neither John the son of Zebedee nor the author of the Gospel of John, which differs markedly in style, theme, and the quality of Greek employed in its composition. This John is most likely a prophet/pastor charged with the care of several Christian communities in Asia Minor.

author pronounces upon reader and hearers clearly presumes that the text will be read out to an audience. But is there evidence that the audience in question is a liturgical assembly? I suggest there is. John employs the verb ἀναγιώσκω in a manner which parallels its use in other NT texts that presuppose liturgical reading, e.g. Col 4:16; and 1 Thess 5:27, which, as we have seen above, contain directives mandating the public reading of these documents in a worshipping assembly.¹⁷⁶ In itself, the reference to reader and audience in 1:3 does not automatically indicate a cultic setting. However, a liturgical interpretation of the benediction becomes more plausible when 1:3 is read in light of Rev 22:20b, in which the author exclaims “Come, Lord Jesus!” (ἔρχου, κύριε Ἰησοῦ). This invocation is a Greek rendering of the Aramaic expression *Marana tha*.¹⁷⁷ Paul employs the Μαράνα θά acclamation in 1 Cor 16:22 at the end of a letter imbued with liturgical content. The *Didache* also utilizes this phrase, with similar liturgical intent. I will further explore the significance of Μαράνα θά and ἔρχου, κύριε Ἰησοῦ in Chapter Four. At this point I will simply note that the bracketing of Revelation with liturgically evocative language in 1:3 and 22:20 raises the strong possibility of the document’s cultic provenance. Eugene Boring notes, “This text assumes that there will be Christian congregations that assemble to worship and that within their worship services this book will be read forth as a message from the Risen Christ.”¹⁷⁸

The material in 2:1-3:22 is addressed to specific Christian communities in the Roman province of Asia. The content of the so-called “letters to the seven churches” shows every sign of being grounded in actual situations faced by these real Christian communities with whom John

¹⁷⁶ Cp. Mark 13:14 (“Let the reader understand”), which is possibly an aside to the one reading Mark’s gospel to a church assembly. See John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 372.

¹⁷⁷ Wilfrid Harrington, *Revelation* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993) 223.

¹⁷⁸ Boring, *Revelation*, 67.

the seer had a pastoral relationship. This material is not a literary fiction. One can easily imagine that John intended his composition to be read aloud in the churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. Indeed, Richard Bauckham sees the written text of Revelation as a substitute for the physical presence of the seer, presently in exile on Patmos, who would otherwise address these communities in person.¹⁷⁹ We have already seen in our analysis of the gospels and epistles that NT writings were meant to be read in the liturgical gatherings of local churches. It is reasonable to suppose, particularly in light of the textual evidence, that Revelation fits this pattern. John's apocalyptic-prophetic-epistolary composition provides us with further evidence of the formal link between biblical text and ritual worship.

Revelation likewise serves as an exemplar of the material unity of Bible and liturgy. From beginning to end, the worship of God is a central theme of this work. John receives his visions while "in spirit on the Lord's day" (1:10), the day of Christian assembly for prayer, praise, and Eucharistic celebration. Chapters 4 and 5 are entirely taken up with a description of the worship offered to God and the Lamb in the heavenly throne room. Authentic worship of God is contrasted with the false worship offered to the beast (chapters 13-15). Eternal life in the New Jerusalem is characterized by ongoing worship of God and the Lamb (22:3). Revelation 8:3-5 suggests a link between earthly and heavenly worship: the praise and supplication offered by the saints on earth is a participation in the worship of Christ by the angels and saints in heaven. The idea that earthly worshippers participated in heavenly/angelic worship appears to have had some currency among Jews and Christians during this period; a similar concept is found in the Qumran literature in the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*.¹⁸⁰ Moreover, the author of

¹⁷⁹ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 3.

¹⁸⁰ See James R. Davila, *Liturgical Works* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 83-167. Davila points out several noteworthy parallels between the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* and the Book of Revelation: both feature important

Hebrews draws on the concept when elaborating his own theology of worship, as we will see in Chapter Four.

In Revelation the connection between heavenly and earthly worship is also brought out in John's vision of the heavenly throne room in chapters 4 and 5. G.K. Beale is among those commentators who assert that John intends his audience to equate the heavenly worship scenes with their own worship experiences, using the former as a blueprint for shaping their attitudes toward the latter:

One purpose of the church gathering on earth every week (as in 1:3, 9). . . is to be reminded of its heavenly identity by modeling its worship on the angels' and the heavenly church's worship of the exalted Lamb. This is why scenes of heavenly liturgy are woven throughout the Apocalypse, especially in concluding sections, which serve as interpretations of the preceding visionary narratives. It is in this manner that the churches are to learn how to worship in their gathered meetings and are to be given a zeal for worship of the true God.¹⁸¹

In a similar vein, Bauckham views the theme of worship as among John's primary theological concerns:

The unknowable transcendence of God is protected by focusing instead on the throne itself and what goes on around it. It is in these features of the vision that what can be known of God is expressed. Especially prominent in the vision is the continuous worship by the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders. It is a scene of worship into which the reader who shares John's faith in God is almost inevitably drawn. We are thereby reminded that true knowledge of who God is inseparable from worship of God.¹⁸²

Bauckham's work on Revelation serves to underscore a point that has been made repeatedly in this chapter, namely that the biblical writers consistently manifest a material interest in the significance of worship in the Christian life. Revelation, like the other texts we have surveyed,

scenes set around God's heavenly throne; both present a connection between earthly and angelic worship; both include "a tradition about an eschatological war in heaven between a warrior angel and the forces of evil" (p. 91); and both use the number seven as a symbolic organizing principle.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 176.

¹⁸² Bauckham, *Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 32.

was both written for public worship and has the importance of worship, both earthly and heavenly, as one of its themes.

3. Early Christian Meals: Were They Eucharistic?

Thus far in this chapter we have undertaken an extensive survey of biblical texts which demonstrates the close connection between the Bible and the liturgy. We have seen overwhelming evidence of the assertion proposed by Hahn that there is both a material and a formal relationship between Scripture and corporate worship. The sacred writers of both testaments have imbued their various narratives, prophetic utterances, letters, etc. with ritual themes, thus demonstrating their pronounced interest in cultic matters. Concomitant with this material focus on liturgy is the clear indication that much of the biblical canon was composed and shaped for proclamation within communal worship settings. This holds true across a spectrum of NT literary genres, from the gospels and letters to homiletic exhortations (1 Peter, 1 John) and the apocalyptic/prophetic/epistolary Book of Revelation. If the NT authors generally composed their works for proclamation in a worship setting, and, assuming this context, injected both direct and subtle references to ritual into their works, then it stands to reason that Hebrews, the subject of this present study, might be expected to do the same. This expectation is all the more reasonable if the literary genre of Hebrews is that of a homily. As a sermonic text written to be read aloud at a liturgical gathering, Hebrews might reasonably be supposed to reflect that milieu in its content and style.

Before pressing this point further, it is necessary to address more directly an underlying assumption of my work. My fundamental contention is that Hebrews was written as a homily to be read at a *Eucharistic* gathering. In this chapter I have set forth a sizeable body of evidence for the formal unity between the Bible and the liturgy, demonstrating that many biblical texts were

composed for proclamation in a ritual setting. I have also suggested, particularly with regard to certain gospel traditions (e.g. the miraculous feedings and the Lukan meal scenes), that the particular ritual setting envisioned by the authors was the Eucharist. I now wish to elaborate on this claim by demonstrating that (a) the ritual meal was the typical occasion for communal Christian worship in the first century; (b) the writings which ultimately became the Christian NT were meant to be read aloud at these gatherings; and (c) these early Christian meals are best described as “Eucharistic.” I contend that if all three of these premises are credible, then we may reasonably conclude that the Eucharistic meal was the typical cultic setting in which the NT documents were publicly proclaimed.

We find evidence that the meal was the normative Christian worship gathering not only in 1 Corinthians but also in such NT passages as Jude 12, which speaks of the community’s “love feasts” (ἀγάπαις). Moreover, we have seen that the ritual meals of various churches influenced the telling of stories about Jesus involving meals and table fellowship. According to Lathrop, “The Christian community had meetings, and the evidence is that these meetings were frequently for the sake of a shared meal. . . . The early Christian movement seems to have come into existence and to have continued to spread as a meal fellowship.”¹⁸³ At these meals the gospels, letters, and other early Christian documents were read aloud. In his comprehensive

¹⁸³ Lathrop, *Four Gospels on Sunday*, 39-40. Lathrop urges caution when applying terms such as “worship” and “liturgy” - as understood in contemporary ecclesial life - to these early gatherings: “Christian communities certainly praised God. They worshipped. They sang. Both the letters of Paul and the Gospels may reflect this singing by the hymns that are quoted and included in these texts. But ‘worship’ is not all that paleo-Christians did when they gathered. It may be more accurate to say, simply, they held a meal at which, at least by Paul’s advice, the gospel was proclaimed” (p. 39). Nonetheless, he goes on to say, “We might use the word *worship* more generally. We might thereby not so much be carefully describing what paleo-Christian assemblies did as expressing a trust in there being some continuity between what we call ‘Christian worship’ today and what happened in those meetings in houses and tenements and shops in the first and second centuries” (pp. 39-40). What is significant for this study is that Lathrop (a) holds that the typical first-century Christian assembly took the form of a meal and (b) argues for a basic continuity between the first-century assemblies and the more formalized liturgical worship that emerged a century or so later.

study of early Christian meals,¹⁸⁴ Hal Taussig claims that there was an intrinsic relationship between the meal setting and the public reading of Christian literature, including the collection of writings that eventually became the NT:

The relationship between meals and the first hundred years of Christian literature is multifaceted and extensive. These documents – most of which are in the New Testament – both depend on and are replete with references to the meals of early Christians. Perhaps the most overlooked and most basic relationship between this literature and the meals is that *the meals provided a primary location for the reading of the early Christian documents*. Again, there is little dispute in scholarship that *the writings of the first hundred years were read primarily at the meals of these communities*. It is just that scholarship has not noticed that this location for reading the early Christian literature both *confirms the social significance of the meals and frames in an important way the meanings of the writings themselves*. The most obvious kind of document read at the meals was the letter. This most frequent genre of early Christian writing was explicitly written for the meals. The letters of Paul were written to communities of mostly illiterate persons. These people gathered in the name of Christ almost exclusively at meals. . . . [Paul] meant his letters to be heard by all the members of the communities. This could have been accomplished only by reading the letters at the variety of meal gatherings in each of the cities.¹⁸⁵

Taussig points in particular to the presence of hymnic material in a variety of NT writings – including Hebrews – as “socially located within the meal gatherings of early Christians.”¹⁸⁶ Both Taussig and Dennis Smith have undertaken an extensive study of early Christian meals within the broader context of Greco-Roman society.¹⁸⁷ They conclude that the meal was the primary form of Christian assembly in the first century. They also hold that this meal setting was the milieu in which early Christian writings were disseminated and publicly proclaimed. In setting forth evidence for the diversity of meal practices among the first Christians, however, both

¹⁸⁴ Taussig, *In the Beginning was the Meal*.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 36-37, emphasis added.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁸⁷ See Taussig, *In the Beginning was the Meal*; Dennis Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003); Smith and Taussig, *Many Tables*.

scholars cast doubt on the appropriateness of describing these various meals as “Eucharistic.” Other scholars are more open to applying the Eucharistic label to the gatherings. Given these diverging views, it will be helpful at this point to address the question head-on: Were the Christian cultic meals of the mid to late first century Eucharistic in character? If the answer to this question is affirmative, then the case for implicit Eucharistic references in the NT writings – including Hebrews – is strengthened considerably. Taussig, as we have seen, acknowledges that the NT documents are “replete with references” to early Christian meals. If the meals in question were Eucharistic, then it does not require a substantial argumentative leap to suggest that the references in question might be *Eucharistic* in nature. This issue will be of prime importance in our analysis of potential Eucharistic references in Hebrews in Chapter Four.

At first glance, however, this question would seem to defy an easy answer. In his study of religious experience in early Christianity, Luke Timothy Johnson acknowledges the inherent difficulties in ascribing a particular classification to ancient Christian meals:

People everywhere eat and drink as a biological necessity. Meals are the most ordinary of human activities. People eat and drink *together*, however, out of a combination of economic and cultural factors. Meals are at once complexly significant and opaque. They can signify so many things at so many levels that the disentangling of the meal’s precise religious significance would be difficult even if we were in possession of a complete cultural code within which it took place. In the case of nascent Christianity, we do not possess a complete code.¹⁸⁸

Johnson’s warnings are valid, given both the complexities of meaning found within meals themselves and also the diversity that existed among early Christian communities. Is it nevertheless possible to discern within this web of complexity and diversity any points of commonality among Christian meal gatherings which would enable us to categorize them, in a broad sense, as “Eucharistic”? I believe it is. However, it will be helpful to look first at the

¹⁸⁸ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Religious Experience in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 138-139.

arguments proffered by those who would question the Eucharistic nature of early Christian meals.

I have already referred to the work of Smith and Taussig, each of whom has written at length on the place of Christian banquets within the broader milieu of Greco-Roman meals. Both authors argue strongly for the centrality of the meal in early Christian religious experience. At the outset of his lengthy study of this topic, Smith states the case quite clearly: “Whenever they met as a church, early Christians regularly ate a meal together.”¹⁸⁹ Taussig, moreover, identifies this meal as the main context in which Christian literature was read aloud. He further argues that the hymnic material found within a number of NT compositions (e.g., the canticles of the Lukan infancy narratives, and the Christ-hymns in Phil 2:6-11 and Col 1:15-20) were intended to be sung by the participants in ritual meals, a point with which Smith concurs.¹⁹⁰

This latter point certainly bolsters the overall case I have been making that the meal setting was the primary locus for the proclamation of NT texts. But to return to the question posed at the beginning of this section – what of the meals themselves? How might we categorize them? In *From Symposium to Eucharist*, Smith adumbrates and analyzes a wide range of Greco-Roman dining experiences – symposia, funerary banquets, sacrificial meals, Jewish festive meals, Christian Eucharists – all of which, he argues, fit into the broader pattern of a common banqueting tradition in the ancient Mediterranean world. In his view, the traditions and ideology associated with the Greco-Roman banquet, most specifically the symposium, exercised a profound influence on the development of early Christian liturgical praxis.¹⁹¹ It was the

¹⁸⁹ Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 1.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 37. See also Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 201.

¹⁹¹ Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 279.

symposium model (as evident from 1 Corinthians) which constituted the basic form of the first-century Christian ritual meal, a form that was radically altered when the location of the Christian gathering shifted from private homes to church buildings. When this happened, “liturgy moved from symposium discussion to church order. The community that began its existence in private homes around a banquet table evolved into a church that met in a meeting hall before an altar.”¹⁹² Smith identifies the development of formalized Eucharistic liturgies in the third century as marking a major shift from the structure of early Christian gatherings. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that such a shift was already underway in the first century:

The form of meal known as the *agapē* or “love feast” seems to have developed along with, or perhaps more appropriately, alongside, the Eucharist. It is unclear when the two became two separate strands of tradition. In the time of Paul. . . the Lord’s Supper is one and the same with the communal meal. In Jude 12, however, and in Ignatius (e.g., Rom. 7:3 and Smyrn. 8:2) the *agapē* is already being mentioned, so that by the end of the first century CE we know that there was such a meal, though it is still unclear in what way it related to the still developing forms of the Eucharist. The Eucharist, meanwhile, developed into a stylized symbolic meal governed by church order traditions that specified the prayers and the appropriate order and hierarchical leadership.¹⁹³

There is no doubt that the formalized Eucharistic celebration of the third century church differed in countless ways from its first-century predecessor(s), both in terms of venue and structural elements. The evolution of the Eucharistic ritual, however, is best understood as precisely that – an *evolution*, not the replacement of one ritual meal with something of a different order altogether.

A similar point might be made with regard to the diverse nature of early Christian meal gatherings. In their joint study *Many Tables: The Eucharist in the New Testament and Liturgy Today*, Smith and Taussig contend that not all early Christian meal practices refer to the Last

¹⁹² Ibid., 285.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

Supper tradition with its narrative of institution.¹⁹⁴ As an example, they cite the *Didache*, a liturgical and ethical instruction composed in the late first century and contemporaneous with some NT writings. Chapters 9 and 10 of this document contain an order of worship for a Christian Eucharist far more detailed than anything we find in the NT itself. Indeed, as the authors point out, no NT text “provides a liturgical ‘script’” as does the *Didache*.¹⁹⁵ This text serves as an interesting case study because it contains no Eucharistic words of institution and no reference to the death of Jesus, yet it refers to the celebration of a Eucharistic meal and places primary emphasis on the role of that meal in cementing bonds of unity among the congregants who partake of it.¹⁹⁶ Undoubtedly, the *Didache* bears witness to a different mode of Eucharistic celebration than is implied in those NT passages which associate the Eucharistic bread and wine with Christ’s body and blood (e.g. the Synoptic passion narratives and John 6:51-58). The diversity of witnesses to variations in Eucharistic praxis undermines the contention once advanced by such scholars as Oscar Cullmann that the liturgical practices of the first Christians were marked by an underlying unity.¹⁹⁷ Nevertheless, it must be asserted that, alongside the distinctive features which marked the ritual meals of various first century Christian communities,

¹⁹⁴ Smith and Taussig, *Many Tables*, 43. Smith and Taussig are skeptical as to whether Jesus actually instituted the Eucharistic celebration by uttering intentional words of interpretation over bread and wine at the Last Supper. For a refutation of this position, see John Meier, “The Eucharist at the Last Supper: Did It Happen?,” *Theology Digest* 42 (1995), 335-51; and Koenig, *Feast of the World’s Redemption*, 3-44.

¹⁹⁵ Smith and Taussig, *Many Tables*, 66.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid. *Didache* 14 does, however posit a link between the Eucharistic assembly and the offering of sacrifice by way of its quotation of Mal 1:11, 14: “On the Lord’s day, come together, break bread, and give thanks, having first confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure. But let none who has a quarrel with his companion join you until they have been reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be defiled. For this is that which was spoken by the Lord: *In every place and at every time offer me a pure sacrifice; for I am a great King, says the Lord, and my name is wonderful among the nations*” (*Did.* 14:1-3, in Jasper and Cuming, *Prayers of the Eucharist*, p24, emphasis added).

¹⁹⁷ See Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*, esp. pp. 7-36.

one may discern points of contact between these various celebrations, which Koenig has designated as “feasts of the church’s founding.”¹⁹⁸ As Johnson states:

Analysis of ritual meals in the New Testament, then, asks not which meal was earliest but rather what interconnections of meaning were available to the celebrants of meals and the readers of these compositions. Granting diversity of practice and wording in the beginning (it could scarcely be otherwise), we can observe in our earliest sources the emergence of a shared range of symbols that point toward some significant degree of common experience and conviction already in the middle and later first century.¹⁹⁹

What “shared range of symbols” might we identify in early Christian meals that would suggest a common link between them? Koenig, who contends that “the term ‘Eucharistic meals’ serves us well as a phenomenological description of the first-century church’s chief table liturgies,” identifies two important criteria: expressions of gratitude and an experience of the Risen Christ’s presence at table.²⁰⁰ He identifies seven key NT texts – Acts 2:46-47; 1 Cor 11:23-25; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:17-20; John 6:11-58; Rom 14:1-15:13; and Acts 27:34-36 – in which these elements are especially prominent and suggests that behind them lies a description of or an allusion to a Eucharistic celebration.²⁰¹ Johnson’s phenomenological analysis of early ritual meals likewise emphasizes the experience of table fellowship with “the risen and living Lord Jesus” as a unifying characteristic of the celebrations.²⁰² Finally, Lathrop identifies several “unifying tendencies” within the diverse meal practices of first-century Christians: the adoption of Hellenistic meal structures by Christian communities; the emphasis on striving for unity in Christian writings addressed to the assembly (e.g. 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4 and John 17);

¹⁹⁸ Koenig, *Feast of the World’s Redemption*, 45-85.

¹⁹⁹ Johnson, *Religious Experience in Earliest Christianity*, 171.

²⁰⁰ Koenig, *Feast of the World’s Redemption*, 87, 95.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 95-97.

²⁰² Johnson, *Religious Experience in Earliest Christianity*, 171.

and Christian recollection and reenactment of Jesus' own meal practices.²⁰³ Lathrop does not go so far as to designate these meals as "Eucharists" in the second- or third-century sense; however, he does assert:

In reading this New Testament material, I propose that we have been observing the origins of the Eucharist. . . . I do not mean to suggest that all the meals of the churches after the execution of Jesus. . . were not Eucharist. . . . We might guess that they were diverse meals with diverse meanings, on the way to becoming Eucharist. . . . The history of the Eucharist would thus see a variety of meal practices undergoing a steady reevaluation, continuing on toward further revaluations as the church emerged from persecution, The growing similarities in eucharistic practice, then, would be due not only to the fourth-century imperial interest in a unifying church but also and more profoundly to the common orthodox Christian heritage of the reforming word of the apostles and Gospels.²⁰⁴

In a broad sense, then, the use of the term "Eucharist" to describe the early Christian meal gatherings is appropriate, so long as we bear in mind that first-century "Eucharists" could differ significantly from community to community.

To summarize: In this section we have seen evidence that the ritual meal was the typical forum in which Christians assembled for worship and that within this gathering the documents that would later constitute our NT were read aloud to the congregation. We have also briefly explored the question of evolution and diversity within the various table rituals of the nascent first-century church. Our investigation has shown that although the first-century forms of the Eucharist differed both from each other and from the more unified model of liturgy that emerged a couple of centuries later, these early meals may nonetheless be considered "Eucharistic" insofar as they involved gatherings of the Christian community to express praise and thanksgiving to God and to experience the presence of the Risen One among them. If, then, the ritual meal setting for which the NT writings were composed can best be described as

²⁰³ Lathrop, *Four Gospels*, 45. (pp.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 55, 57. This "common orthodox Christian heritage" was, I will argue, assumed and accepted by the author and audience of Hebrews.

“Eucharistic,” then it follows that, among the many implicit and explicit cultic references contained in these documents, a substantial portion of them may be Eucharistic in character.

4. The Place of Hebrews within the Liturgical Paradigm of the NT

We conclude this chapter by posing the question: how does the Letter to the Hebrews fit into the paradigm set forth in this chapter? We have seen that there is a close relationship between Scripture and ritual which finds expression both in the material content of the biblical texts and in their composition for liturgical proclamation. We have also seen that the most common form of Christian assembly in the first century was the meal, at which Christian literature was read aloud to the participants. Finally, we have seen that these meals, diverse as they were in the early decades of the church’s existence, were marked by ritual qualities best described as “Eucharistic.” What impact do these findings have on our understanding of Hebrews?

Quite a lot, as the following chapters will make clear. Hebrews contains a significant amount of material pertaining to cultic activity, indicating its author’s material interest in worship. When placed within the broader canonical context of the Bible’s overarching narrative, Hebrews contributes to a general biblical theology of worship. As I will demonstrate at greater length in the next chapter, Hebrews is a homily, a fact which presumes a worship setting in which it would have been proclaimed. That liturgical setting would most likely have been a ritual meal, increasing the likelihood that references to eating in the sermon make the most sense when interpreted in a Eucharistic context. Finally, like many of the biblical texts we have surveyed in this chapter, Hebrews employs liturgical terms which anchor the homily in a cultic milieu and indicate that its audience will approach and encounter Jesus Christ by means of their participation in the Lord’s Supper.

CHAPTER THREE CRITICAL ISSUES

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter I undertook an exploration of the broader literary and liturgical milieu in which the NT was formed, and ended by postulating that Hebrews belongs firmly within that milieu insofar as it, too, was written for proclamation in a cultic setting and boasts substantial material content which is concerned with matters of worship. Before proceeding to a comprehensive demonstration of these claims, it is necessary to address certain critical scholarly issues pertaining to Hebrews. Any in-depth analysis of a biblical text must take into consideration the basic critical questions of authorship, dating, provenance, audience, genre, and purpose. Attention to these matters is especially valuable if the answers provided can help to shed light on a given hypothesis regarding the content of the Scriptural writing under consideration – in this instance, whether Hebrews contains Eucharistic references and imagery.

It must be stated at the outset, however, that in the case of Hebrews, finding clear-cut answers to these exegetical questions is fraught with difficulty. As I noted in the introduction, there is no consensus as to this text's author, date, provenance, etc. Kenneth Schenck aptly summarizes the problems faced by exegetes in attempting to determine such fundamental questions as the author, audience, and purpose of Hebrews:

Imagine that you find a letter one day while you are out for a walk. No one has signed the letter, and the letter itself does not say who received it. Further, the letter provides very little specific information at all about the situation it addresses. Obviously the person who wrote it and the person who received it knew the story behind the letter very well – information they left out precisely because it was well known to both parties! But all you have to go on is the content of the letter and your knowledge of the world in general. As you read the letter, you try to “place” it against some context that seems to fit.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁵ Kenneth Schenck, *Understanding the Book of Hebrews: The Story Behind the Sermon* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 1.

As the foregoing comments indicate, Hebrews – perhaps more than any other NT writing – resists the formulation of easy answers to questions about its genre, author, origin, destination, and date of composition. Interpreters must look to internal evidence within the text in order to make conjectures about these matters, and certainty in each case is impossible to attain. Nevertheless, an examination of the standard critical issues vis-à-vis Hebrews will be helpful in our attempt to determine the plausibility of Eucharistic references in the document. In this chapter I will survey those issues and comment on their significance to the Eucharistic argument being pursued in this study. I will explore successively the questions of author, date, destination, audience, genre, and purpose. The sequence in which I have chosen to treat these topics will proceed from the least to greatest degrees of certitude and relevance – certitude in terms of being able to confidently postulate an answer to the given exegetical question, and relevance in terms of the Eucharistic hypothesis with which I am primarily concerned. I will conclude the chapter by providing a basic outline of the structure of Hebrews and indicate those aspects of its structure which offer evidence of the author’s interest in the Eucharist.

2. Authorship

Attempts to identify the author of Hebrews have frustrated interpreters since ancient times. The fundamental reason for this difficulty is that the document is an anonymous composition; the author never states his name, nor does he offer any other clues as to his personal identity. It is almost certain that the writer was male, given his use of a masculine singular participle, διηγούμενον (“telling”), in reference to himself at 11:32. The presence of this strong textual indicator of the author’s male gender has not, however, inhibited some scholars from suggesting that a woman may have composed the document. Both Adolf von Harnack and Ruth Hoppin have theorized that Priscilla, the co-worker of Paul and the wife of Aquila, was the

author of Hebrews.²⁰⁶ A rather more bizarre proposal by J. Massyngberde Ford put forth the Virgin Mary as a candidate for authorship.²⁰⁷ Although I concur with Luke Timothy Johnson that “it would be pleasant to have a female author of a New Testament composition,” I also agree with his conclusion that the masculine participle in 11:23, along with the relative scarcity of opportunities for 1st century women to receive the sort of rhetorical training evidenced in Hebrews, militates against female authorship of this document.²⁰⁸

A number of ancient authorities, particularly in the East, attributed authorship of Hebrews to the apostle Paul. This facilitated its early inclusion in the eastern churches’ biblical canon; indeed, our earliest preserved text of the Pauline letters (Beatty Papyrus II) places Hebrews right after Paul’s letter to the Romans.²⁰⁹ Conversely, doubts about the author’s identity inhibited its easy reception into the biblical canon in the West. Several factors contributed to the document’s attribution to Paul: its reference to “our brother Timothy” (13:23), whose name outside Hebrews only occurs in ten Pauline letters and in Acts; similarities between Paul’s customary way of ending his letters and Hebrews’ concluding benediction and greetings; and various elements in the theology of Hebrews which bear similarities to Paul’s work. Among these points of theological congruence are the presentation of Christ as God’s agent of creation (Heb 1:1-4; 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:16); Jesus’ self-emptying death and subsequent exaltation (Heb 2:9; 14-18; Phil

²⁰⁶ See Adolf von Harnack, “Probabilia über die Adresse und den Verfasser des Hebräerbriefes,” ZNW 1 (1900): 16-41; Ruth Hoppin, *Priscilla’s Letter: Finding the Author of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Fort Bragg, CA: Lost Coast, 1997). Mitchell (*Hebrews* 5) takes issue with Hoppin’s hypothesis on the grounds that it is rooted in stereotypical assumptions about what distinguishes the female mindset from the male: “Hoppin identifies things like empathy, compassion, an interest in human weakness, and gentle tact and diplomacy as feminine, as if men were incapable of such emotions and conduct.”

²⁰⁷ See J. Massyngberde Ford, “The First Epistle to the Corinthians or the First Epistle to the Hebrews?” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 28 (1966): 402-416. Ford is no stranger to eccentric theories of biblical authorship, having also advanced the notion that John the Baptist was largely responsible for the content of the Book of Revelation.

²⁰⁸ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 41.

²⁰⁹ Brown, *Introduction*, 693.

2:6-11); the sacrificial and expiatory character of Jesus' death (Heb 9:5, 28; Rom 3:25; 1 Cor 5:7); and the notion of Jesus as intercessor (Heb 4:16; 7:25; Rom 8:34).²¹⁰

At the same time, a number of factors suggest the unlikelihood of Pauline authorship. The elegant, elaborate Greek style is very different from Paul's – a point noted by such early commentators as Clement of Alexandria and Origen.²¹¹ Moreover, the vocabulary employed in Hebrews and in the Pauline letters differs noticeably.²¹² In terms of divine titles, it is noteworthy that the author of Hebrews never employs the preferred Pauline expressions “Christ Jesus” in reference to the Son, nor does he refer to God as “Father” as Paul often does.²¹³ Hebrews' rhetorical style also diverges from the Pauline approach: whereas Paul generally tends to place paraenetic material in the concluding portion of his letters (e.g. Rom 12-15), the writer of Hebrews alternates between doctrinal exposition and moral exhortation throughout his composition.²¹⁴ Equally striking is the absence of personal references in the document. Paul's letters generally tend to be self-referential in character; the apostle often draws upon his background and experiences to elucidate the theological and pastoral points he is trying to make (e.g. 2 Cor 11:21-12:10; Gal 2:1-14; Phil 3:4-9). Hebrews, on the other hand, evinces no real

²¹⁰ See Brown, *Introduction*, 694; O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 4.

²¹¹ Clement, who held that Luke the evangelist wrote Hebrews, is thus cited by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History*: “He says that the Epistle to the Hebrews is the work of Paul, and that it was written to the Hebrews in the Hebrew language; but that Luke translated it carefully and published it for the Greeks, and hence the same style of expression is found in this epistle and in the Acts” (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6.14.2 [NPNF² 1:261]). Origen states: “That the verbal style of the epistle entitled ‘To the Hebrews,’ is not rude like the language of the apostle, who acknowledged himself ‘rude in speech’ that is, in expression; but that its diction is purer Greek, anyone who has the power to discern differences of phraseology will acknowledge” (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6.25.11 [NPNF² 1:273]).

²¹² For an extensive listing of these differences, see Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 7-12.

²¹³ The exceptions to this latter point occur at 1:5, where Hebrews quotes 2 Sam 7:14 (“I will be his Father and he will be my Son”) and 12:9, where God is called the “Father of spirits.” See Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 11.

²¹⁴ However, in the Corinthian correspondence, Paul does mix doctrinal content and hortatory material in a manner not unlike that of Hebrews.

sense of its author's personality or background. Perhaps most damning to claims of Pauline authorship is the writer's statement in 2:3 that he (along with his audience) received the message of salvation from those who heard the Lord – in other words, he was a recipient of the apostolic preaching. It is impossible to imagine that Paul, who in his letters goes to great lengths to insist on his status as an apostle and an eyewitness of the risen Lord (see, e.g., 1 Cor 9:1; 15:8-10; Gal 1:1, 11-12), would make such a statement. With regard to the doctrinal concerns of Hebrews and the Pauline corpus, although there are some theological affinities between the two, the differences are more noteworthy. Hebrews never deals with such favorite Pauline themes as justification, grace/works, and flesh/spirit. Apart from one oblique reference in 13:20, Hebrews also never mentions the resurrection, another concept which is heavily stressed in Paul's writings. Conversely, Paul never deals with the high priesthood of Jesus Christ, the central theme of Hebrews. Indeed, Hebrews is unique among the NT documents in its emphasis on Jesus' priestly identity.²¹⁵

For all of the reasons adumbrated above, we can confidently rule out Paul's authorship of Hebrews. Indeed, contemporary scholarship has almost entirely abandoned the notion.²¹⁶ Nevertheless, the various points of contact with Pauline thought that the work displays, as well as its mention of "our brother Timothy," have led interpreters both ancient and modern to posit a wide range of authorial candidates who were connected in some way with the apostle. These candidates range from Priscilla and Aquila to Luke the evangelist and Paul's colleagues Barnabas and Apollos. Of the various possibilities from the Pauline school, Barnabas and Apollos have perhaps attracted the most attention. As regards Barnabas, it was Tertullian who

²¹⁵ Although it should be noted that Rev 1:13 provides a visual depiction of the Risen Christ in high-priestly attire.

²¹⁶ For an exception, see David Alan Black, "Who Wrote Hebrews? The Internal and External Evidence Reexamined," *Faith and Mission* 18 (2001): 3-26.

notably put forth his name as a potential author during the patristic period. Although he gave no particular reason for this suggestion, modern commentators have identified several factors which may have led Tertullian to connect this associate of Paul with Hebrews: in Acts 4:36, Luke identifies Barnabas as a Levite from Cyprus, which could account for Hebrews' knowledge of the Jewish levitical priesthood; Barnabas's generosity in selling his property and donating it to the apostles (Acts 4:37) is consistent with the attitude of an author who could personally identify with those who "happily accepted the seizure of your possessions" (Heb 10:34); and the description of Barnabas as a "son of encouragement" (υἱὸς παρακλήσεως) in Acts 4:36 might possibly bear a connection with Hebrews' self-designation as a "word of encouragement" (λόγος τῆς παρακλήσεως, Heb 13:22).²¹⁷ None of these arguments is particularly strong, however; many of the claims made for Barnabas could just as easily apply to countless other persons in the NT period, both known and unknown.²¹⁸ A somewhat more credible possibility is Apollos, whose authorship of Hebrews was championed by Martin Luther and whom many present-day exegetes consider to be the closest we will ever come to identifying a NT figure who could reasonably be postulated as the composer of this text. The description of Apollos in Acts 18:24-28 contains several elements which are congruent with the content of Hebrews: he was a Jew from Alexandria (18:24) and thus likely to be grounded in both Hellenistic philosophy and extensive knowledge of the LXX; he was "strong in the Scriptures" (18:25), utilizing them to demonstrate the messianic identity of Jesus (18:28); and he was instructed by Priscilla and

²¹⁷ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 41.

²¹⁸ Even if one were to consider Barnabas as a serious candidate for the authorship of this text, one would have to distinguish, as Ellingworth insists, between the "historical" figure of Barnabas as presented in Acts and the anonymous author of the *Epistle of Barnabas*: "The so-called Epistle of Barnabas and the Epistle to the Hebrews cannot have a common author. The sensitivity of the author of Hebrews to his Jewish readers (e.g., his carefully prepared statement that the old covenant is 'near to vanishing away' [8:13]) contrasts with the blunt assertions by 'Barnabas,' for example, that physical circumcision has now been 'completely set aside.'" (Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 14).

Aquila (18:26), just as the author of Hebrews received the message of salvation from others (Heb 2:3).²¹⁹ As interesting as these points of congruence might be, they are not sufficiently convincing to do more than identify Apollos as a “definite maybe” in terms of authorial candidates. As Ellingworth has observed, “his name is perhaps the *least unlikely* of the conjectures which have been put forward.”²²⁰

It is certainly worth noting that nearly all of the putative authors whose names have been put forth over the centuries are persons who were affiliated with Paul in some way. Granted, there is no way to definitively prove authorship by someone in the Pauline “family.” On the one hand, any points of similarity between the theological outlooks of Paul and Hebrews could just as easily be explained by the possibility that the apostle’s theology exerted an influence on an otherwise unknown author, particularly if Hebrews was written a few decades after Paul’s lifetime, when the Pauline writings had come to be regarded as sacred Scripture.²²¹ On the other hand, if the Timothy mentioned in Heb 13:23 was the same Timothy who collaborated with Paul, a connection between Hebrews and Paul’s circle of co-workers becomes more likely, albeit unverifiable. *If* one of Paul’s associates had a hand in Hebrews, then it is all the more likely that the author and his audience would have celebrated the Eucharist and been conversant with its basic theological underpinnings, given the importance Paul attaches to the rite in 1 Corinthians. Ultimately, however, we can only agree with Origen’s assessment: “But who wrote the epistle, in truth, God knows.”²²²

²¹⁹ For an extensive list of Apollos’ potential authorial credentials, see Johnson, *Hebrews*, 42-44.

²²⁰ Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 21, emphasis added.

²²¹ Cf. 2 Peter 3:16.

²²² Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6.25.14 (NPNF² 1:273).

What, then, can we say with relative certainty about the author of Hebrews? Given the impossibility of identifying him conclusively with any known personage in the NT, we must rely on internal textual evidence to draw our conclusions. Based on the written content of Hebrews, we can assert that the author was highly-educated, as evidenced by his sophisticated use of the Greek language and his familiarity with Greco-Roman rhetorical forms (a point to which I will return in the section on the author's purpose below). His intimate knowledge of the LXX and of the beliefs and institutions of Judaism suggest that he was most likely a Hellenistic Jewish Christian. He was, moreover, a profound theologian who drew on his deep faith and extensive knowledge of Scripture to craft a portrait of Jesus as pre-existent Son, compassionate high priest, and sacrificial victim for the sins of humankind. His theological acumen, however, should not lead us to think of our author as an "ivory tower" academic cut off from the challenges and exigencies of ordinary Christian life in the late first century Greco-Roman world. Rather, the writer was as much a pastor as a theologian, concerned with the practical applications of his doctrine for a specific Christian community facing a particular set of pastoral struggles. Lastly, the author of Hebrews was, as we have already noted, a recipient of the salvific message declared first "through the Lord" (διὰ τοῦ κυρίου) and "confirmed to us by those who heard him" (ὑπὸ τῶν ἀκουσάντων εἰς ἡμᾶς ἐβεβαιώθη, 2:3). At various points he demonstrates familiarity with such elements of the gospel tradition as Jesus' suffering in Gethsemane (5:7) and his crucifixion outside the city of Jerusalem (13:12).²²³

I suggest that a person who had been grounded in the basics of Christian tradition and who appeared to be particularly familiar with the events of Jesus' passion and death would

²²³ Commentators have identified numerous points of contact between Hebrews and the Markan passion narratives in particular. See Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 10-11; Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave* (2 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1994), 1:225-229, 234.

almost certainly have had an appreciation for the events of the Last Supper. Both Paul (1 Cor 11:23-26) and the synoptic evangelists (Mark 14:22-25; Matthew 26:26-29; Luke 22:14-20) link the Supper to the events of Jesus' passion; indeed, for Mark, Matthew and Luke, the events of the Last Supper, including the Eucharistic institution narrative, serve as a prologue to their accounts of Jesus' suffering and death. Furthermore, it is widely accepted that liturgical praxis shaped the manner in which the Last Supper traditions were handed down and ultimately included in the canonical writings of the NT. In light of all this, it seems likely that the author of Hebrews would not only have been familiar with the story of the Last Supper but also with the Eucharistic celebration in which it was commemorated – a tradition, moreover, that he would likely have embraced.

3. Date

As with so many other critical issues in the study of Hebrews, determining the document's date of composition with any degree of certainty is enormously difficult. However, it is possible to establish some broad parameters within which the composition of Hebrews can be placed. The text obviously could not have been written prior to the death and resurrection of Jesus, which gives us an absolute *terminus a quo* of 30 CE. Internal evidence suggests, moreover, that a date before 60 CE is improbable. Hebrews was likely directed to second-generation Christians who had been initiated into the faith for some time. As we have already seen, they received the gospel from those who heard the Lord's preaching (2:3). Enough time has elapsed since their initial embracement of Christianity that the author can chastise them thus: "You have become sluggish in your understanding. Although you should be teachers by this time, you need someone to teach you again about the basic principles of the oracles of God" (5:11b-12). Later the hearers are exhorted, "Remember the earlier days, when, after you had been

enlightened, you endured a great struggle with suffering” (10:32), and “Remember your leaders, who spoke God’s word to you; reflect upon the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith” (13:7). This latter exhortation seems to imply that the community’s first leaders have passed from the scene. The overall force of these statements suggests that the audience to which Hebrews was addressed had been in existence as a local church for a fair amount of time.

As regards an upper limit for the date of Hebrews, the document must antedate the composition of *1 Clement*, as Clement quotes or alludes to the former at several points. Most scholars date *1 Clement* to 96 CE, on the assumption that Clement’s mention of “the sudden and successive calamitous events which have happened to ourselves”²²⁴ is a reference to the intimidation or persecution of Christians under the Roman emperor Domitian. Although some commentators question this hypothesis,²²⁵ the majority continues to maintain that *1 Clement* was written around 96 CE and thus assign Hebrews a *terminus ad quem* of approximately 90 CE. This outer limit for dating the document gains additional support if the “Timothy” mentioned in Heb 13:23 is the Timothy of the Pauline circle. Although he was apparently a relatively young man during Paul’s lifetime (1 Tim 4:12), it is unlikely that Timothy would have been alive or active much beyond the year 90. We can therefore be fairly confident in stating that Hebrews was written sometime between 60 and 90 CE.

Within this spectrum, decisions about greater specificity in dating depend on three factors: the situation of the audience vis-à-vis known persecutions of Christians, particularly in the vicinity of Rome; whether one believes the document was composed before or after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE; and whether Hebrews reflects the division

²²⁴ *1 Clement* 1:2 (ANF 1:5).

²²⁵ See, e.g., Attridge, *Hebrews*, 7-8.

between church and synagogue that prevailed toward the end of the first century. The first of these three factors becomes significant if Hebrews was written to a Christian community living in Rome. As I will argue at greater length below, I believe that a Roman destination for the document makes the most sense. For this reason, I will briefly address in this section the dating issues which arise in connection with events that affected Christians living in Rome during the mid-to-late first century.

Most proponents of a Roman destination for Hebrews have argued that the text must have been written after the expulsion of Jews and Jewish Christians from Rome under the edict of Claudius in 49 CE but prior to the persecution of Christians instigated by Nero ca. 64 CE. Two pieces of internal evidence are typically cited for this claim. First, Heb 10:32-34 evokes the memory of a time of prior tribulation in which the community “endured a great struggle with suffering” (10:32) that involved a public spectacle of insult and persecution (10:33) as well as the loss of property (10:34). The scenario envisioned in these verses is thought to be consonant with Claudius’s actions against Jewish Christians living in Rome.²²⁶ Second, in Heb 12:4 the author reminds his audience that “in your battle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.” These words are usually interpreted as evidence that the recipients of Hebrews have not yet faced torture or martyrdom. Given the bloody nature of Nero’s persecution of Christians in 64 CE, it is commonly held that Hebrews (if written to a Roman audience) must have been composed prior to these events. Against this argument, however, lies the distinct

²²⁶ According to the famous account of Suetonius, Claudius expelled from Rome those Jews who “were constantly making disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus” (Suetonius, *Life of Claudius*, 25.4). “Chrestus” is commonly held to be a variant form of “Christos”; therefore the “Jews” in question may have been Jewish Christians who provoked riots in Roman synagogues over their claims that Jesus was the Messiah (Koester, *Hebrews*, 51). One must, however, acknowledge the lack of specificity regarding the suffering of Jews and Jewish Christians under Claudius. For example, Mitchell points out that Suetonius never mentions imprisonment, which Heb 10:34 specifically includes in the list of sufferings endured by the community (Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 8). Conversely, Heb 10:32-34 is silent regarding any experiences of expulsion or exile on the part of its hearers.

possibility that the particular community to which Hebrews was addressed was not directly affected by Nero's actions.²²⁷ The textual data of Heb 10:32-34 could just as easily fit a later period of suffering experienced by Christians living in Rome. Indeed, Kenneth Schenck has proposed that Hebrews may well have been written during the reign of Domitian (81-96 CE).²²⁸ He suggests that Christian communities at this time could have faced charges of convening unlawful assemblies and failure to take part in the state religion.²²⁹ Subsequently, the author of Hebrews may have feared that some in his audience might acquiesce to demands by the state to offer sacrifice to the emperor and the Roman gods; hence his focus on apostasy and the impossibility of repentance afterward (6:4-8; 10:26-31).²³⁰

Proposals such as Schenck's are sufficiently credible to negate the Neronian persecution of 64 CE as a necessary terminal date for Hebrews – again, assuming the document was intended for a Roman audience. Weightier by far is the question of whether Hebrews pre- or post-dates the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. This issue has attracted the most attention in attempts to identify the time of writing with greater specificity. Not surprisingly, the data in Hebrews admits of more than one interpretation in this connection. On the one hand, several factors weigh

²²⁷ “Even on the presumption of a Roman destination, an early date is not guaranteed. It is equally possible that Hebrews was directed to a portion of the community, perhaps a house church, which had not experienced the full brunt of the Neronian persecution. Or it may have been directed to Christians who came to Rome after that persecution” (Attridge, *Hebrews*, 8).

²²⁸ Schenck, *Understanding the Book of Hebrews*, 95-98. While acknowledging the emerging consensus of scholars that Christians did not necessarily experience widespread persecution under Domitian, Schenck contends, “What is important for Hebrews is not so much that an extensive persecution *actually* took place during his reign as that the circumstances were such that the author of Hebrews might have anticipated one. On the whole, we have good reason to believe that Christians experienced some hardship during the reign of Domitian and that many would have feared an escalation involving martyrdom” (96). This position is also favored by Werner Kümmel, who opts for a late date for Hebrews: “The persecutions the community has experienced (10:32-34) and the spiritual proximity to Luke-Acts point in all probability to the post-Pauline period. . . . The new suffering which threatens the readers (12:4) may point to the time of Domitian.” (Werner Georg Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1975], 403.)

²²⁹ Schenck, *Understanding the Book of Hebrews*, 97.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

heavily toward a pre-70 date of composition. The author speaks of the Jewish priesthood and sacrificial offerings in the present tense, as if the priesthood still exists as a religious institution and the sacrifices are still taking place (see 7:27; 8:3-5; 9:6-7, 25; 10:1-3, 8, 11; 13:9-11).²³¹ Moreover, he says nothing about the Temple's destruction. Given the author's belief that the priesthood and sacrifice of Jesus Christ have replaced the Jewish priesthood and sacrificial system, it seems strange that he would not have pointed to the destruction of the Temple as primary evidence for his contention. Instead, at 10:1-2a he writes: "Because the law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not their very likeness, it is never able, by the same sacrifices that they offer year after year, to perfect the ones who approach. Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered?" The question posed in 10:2a has been read to imply that the Jewish sacrificial system is still in operation and thus to undermine any claim to the contrary. Johnson, for example, contends that it is difficult to imagine the author of Hebrews making his case in this manner if the Temple had been destroyed.²³²

On the other hand, both internal and external evidence cautions us against too readily assuming that the Temple was still standing when Hebrews was written. First, it is noteworthy that the author never actually mentions the Temple in Jerusalem. All of his discussions of the Levitical priesthood and its rituals focus on the desert Tabernacle, the precursor to the Temple and the subject of much of the cultic material contained in the Pentateuch.²³³ Second, the fact

²³¹ However, 7:23 is written in the past tense: "Indeed, the former priests were many because they were prevented (κωλύεσθαι) by death from remaining in office."

²³² Johnson, *Hebrews*, 39.

²³³ Koester (*Hebrews*, 52-53) holds that a Tabernacle-based argument could suit either a pre- or post-70 situation: "Before 70, the author might have focused on the Tabernacle because the Mosaic statutes concerning the Tabernacle constituted the divinely-revealed basis for the sanctuary and the priestly practices of subsequent generations. Descriptions of the Tabernacle were available through the Jewish Law, even to those who lived outside of Palestine and who had never seen the Temple. Yet these factors also obtained after AD 70. Although the Temple was destroyed, it was not immediately clear that it would not be rebuilt, and later rabbinic writings include rulings

that the author speaks of the priesthood and sacrifices in the present tense need not automatically indicate a pre-70 CE point of origin. As O'Brien points out, the Greek language in which Hebrews was written frequently makes use of the so-called "historic present" to emphasize the relevance of past events in the present moment.²³⁴ Furthermore, we have the witness of two other ancient writers, Josephus and Clement of Rome, who also refer to the cultic practices of the Levitical priesthood in the present tense.²³⁵ Both authors were writing twenty to thirty years after the destruction of the Temple. It is quite possible that they – along with many of their contemporaries – imagined that the present cessation of sacrificial activity was but a temporary phenomenon, and that the Temple would one day be rebuilt. Indeed, it is this very possibility that provides a counterargument to the claims that the question posed in Heb 10:2 – "Would they [the Jewish sacrifices] have not ceased to be offered?" – must preclude a date for Hebrews after 70 CE. Raymond Brown has argued:

The idea that the author to prove his point would have had to appeal to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, if that had already taken place, misunderstands his point. The

concerning sacrifices. Accordingly, Hebrews' interest in the Law's enduring provisions for a sanctuary could have been designed to move Christians away from hope for a restoration of the new order and toward the new life in Christ."

²³⁴ O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 18. O'Brien cites F.F. Bruce (*The Epistle to the Hebrews: The English Texts with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964], 22), who, while favoring the notion that the present tense is most likely employed because the Levitical priesthood is still operative, nevertheless acknowledges that it could also "be explained as a literary present, setting forth rather vividly the state of affairs portrayed in the Old Testament record."

²³⁵ In *Against Apion*, Josephus, writing in the present tense, claims that the Jewish people offer sacrifices for the emperor: "We also offer perpetual sacrifices for them; nor do we only offer them every day at the common expenses of all the Jews, but although we offer no other such sacrifices out of our common expenses, no, not for our own children, yet do we this as a peculiar honor to the emperors, and to them alone, while we do the same to no other person whomsoever" (*Ag. Ap. 2.77* in *The Works of Josephus* [Trans. William Whiston; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987]). Josephus also alternates between the past and present in his extensive description of the Tabernacle, the priesthood and the sacrificial system in his *Antiquities of the Jews* (see *Ant. 3:102-257*; cf. Heb 7:23, written in the past tense amid present-tense references to the priestly cult). Clement states, "Those, therefore, who present their offerings at the appointed times, are accepted and blessed; for inasmuch as they follow the laws of the Lord, they sin not. For his own peculiar services are assigned to the high priest, and their own proper place is prescribed to the priests, and their own special ministrations devolve on the Levites. The layman is bound by the laws that pertain to laymen" (*1 Clem 40:4-5* [ANF 1:16]).

sacrifices ceased when the Babylonians destroyed the First Jerusalem Temple, but they resumed seven decades later when the Second Temple was rebuilt; and many would have expected the same recurrence after the Second Temple was destroyed. Hebrews is saying that there is no more value in such cultic observances, not because the Jerusalem Temple has been destroyed – an argument that would have reduced the issue to the temporary and the temporal – but because Christ has replaced forever their significance.²³⁶

If Hebrews was written after the destruction of the Temple, it is possible that part of the author's rhetorical strategy was to dissuade his hearers from developing nostalgia for its rites or to reassure them that its loss did not mean a loss of access to God.²³⁷ I will consider these possibilities further when I treat the author's purpose below.

As we can see from the preceding evidence, the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE does not serve as a convincing *terminus ad quem* for the composition of Hebrews. The fact that the author speaks of the Jewish priesthood and sacrificial system in the present tense need not automatically lead us to assume that the tumultuous events of the Jewish War (66-70 CE) had not yet taken place when Hebrews was written. Another development within Judaism, however, is reflected in the text, and seems to argue for a somewhat later date. The situation in question is the split between "official" Judaism and the nascent Christian movement that had taken place by the late 80s-early 90s CE. This break is reflected, for example, in the gospels of Matthew and John. The former contains references to Christian disciples being scourged in the Jewish synagogues (Matt 10:17) as well as strong anti-Pharisee polemic (Matt 23); the latter contains an episode in which a disciple of Jesus is banished from a synagogue.²³⁸ By contrast, the letters of Paul, written in the 50s, do not imply such a radical split. Paul still considered himself a Jew,

²³⁶ Raymond E. Brown and John P. Meier, *Antioch and Rome: New Testament Cradles of Catholic Christianity* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1982), 150.

²³⁷ On this latter point, see Marie E. Isaacs, *Sacred Space: An Approach to the Theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1992), 15-67.

²³⁸ Brown, *Introduction*, 82.

albeit a messianic Jew who acknowledged the lordship and messianic identity of Jesus (see Rom 9-11; 2 Cor 11:22; Phil 3:4-6). Where does Hebrews fit within this spectrum? The textual evidence strongly suggests that its writer was much closer to the mindset of Matthew and John than of Paul. Although his concern is with priestly sacrifice rather than synagogue membership, the author's rhetoric, like Matthew and John's, clearly reflects the emergence of two distinct forms of worship, Jewish and Christian, at the time he was writing.²³⁹ Addressing his fellow Christians in Heb 13:10, he tells them, "We have an altar from which those serving the tabernacle have no right to eat." I will address the specific content of this statement in the next chapter; at present it will suffice to note that the writer's words presuppose a divide between the two cultic systems. Indeed, as I will argue further below, much of Hebrews' argument is directed toward (a) demonstrating the superiority of Jesus Christ and his sacrifice to the Jewish cultus and (b) dissuading the audience from embracing or reverting to some form of Jewish religious practice. This mode of argumentation is best suited to a mid-80s timeframe, when the break between Judaism and the Christian movement was solidifying.

The foregoing analysis illustrates the challenges inherent in determining a precise date for the composition of Hebrews. No matter which side of the 70 CE dividing line one chooses to place the document, persuasive counterevidence can be marshaled to eviscerate one's confidence. My own preference is for a somewhat later date, between 80 and 90 CE, in part because the oppressive situation faced by the community (10:32-34; 12:4) seems to fit best with the circumstances of Domitian's reign, and also because the content of the text seems to envisage

²³⁹ Indeed, Hebrews, like the Gospel of John, depicts Jesus as the fulfillment of the cultic institutions of Judaism. I have already pointed out in Chapter Two that the narrative structure of John's gospel follows the cycle of Jewish liturgical observances. Moreover, the Johannine Jesus is presented as the one in whom the religious festivals of Israel are brought to completion. For instance, Raymond Brown argues that in John 7 Jesus appears in Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles and claims "by way of replacement" that he is "now the source of life-giving waters" (*The Gospel According to John* [Anchor Bible 29-29A, 2 vols.; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966-1970], 1:381; see also 326-329). In a similar vein, the author of Hebrews depicts Jesus as the true fulfillment of the Day of Atonement ritual in Heb 9. See also Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* vol. 1, 236-72.

the definitive break between Christianity and Judaism that occurred after 70 CE. I concur with Attridge that the evidence is inconclusive both with regard to the destruction of the Temple and the specific type of persecution to which Hebrews alludes.²⁴⁰ However, I suggest that the situation of Christians vis-à-vis “official Judaism” in the mid-to-late 80s is reflected in Hebrews, and that this issue tips the scales in favor of a later date, between 80 and 90 CE.

As was the case with our consideration of authorship, it is necessary to ask how the question of dating might affect arguments about Eucharistic imagery in Hebrews. To a large extent, the precise time of writing is not crucial to this issue. We know that the celebration of the Eucharist was part of the church’s life from its earliest beginnings. As I pointed out in Chapter One, Acts 2:42 lists the “breaking of the bread” (κλάσις τοῦ ἄρτου) – Luke’s preferential term for the Lord’s Supper – as one of the defining marks of ecclesial life in the nascent Christian community.²⁴¹ Paul, as we have seen, counts the ritual as one of the elements of tradition that he “received” (1 Cor 11:23) and in turn handed on to the Corinthian community, probably around 50-51 CE. Therefore, an early date (i.e. pre-70 CE) for Hebrews would neither serve to affirm nor deny the likelihood that the author was addressing a Eucharistic gathering. Moreover, arguments regarding the sacrificial character of Eucharistic references in Hebrews do not depend on a later date; one can already begin to detect the presence of sacrificial themes in relation to the Eucharist in 1 Corinthians²⁴² and the Gospel of Mark,²⁴³ both of which are relatively early NT

²⁴⁰ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 54.

²⁴¹ Granted Luke’s tendency to craft an idealized portrait of the early church, there is nevertheless no strong reason to doubt his insistence on the importance of the Eucharist in the emerging Christian movement. See LaVerdiere, *The Breaking of the Bread*, esp. pp. 7-35, 77-102. See also Heil, *Meal Scenes in Luke-Acts*, 237-38.

²⁴² According to Robert Daly (*The Origins of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978], 59), Paul’s “treatment of the Eucharist in 1 Corinthians 10 and 11 as a cultic anticipation of Christ’s sacrificial death and as a participation in the blood and the body of Christ makes sense only on the supposition that he and his readers view the Lord’s Supper and the Passion as sacrificial events.” This is especially evident in 1 Cor 10, where Paul contrasts pagan sacrifices with the Christian Eucharist. According to Roch Kereszty (*Wedding Feast of the Lamb:*

documents. It is only with regard to Hebrews' use of the term θυσιαστήριον ("altar") in 13:10 that a later date of composition might be of some significance. As I will argue at length in Chapter Four, I believe that the author of Hebrews employs this term with reference to the table of the Lord's Supper. It is not until Ignatius of Antioch that we find a clear connection between the Eucharist and altar terminology²⁴⁴ – unless Hebrews was the first extant Christian document to make such a connection. If the author of Hebrews was living and writing in closer temporal proximity to Ignatius, then there is an increased likelihood that the former was employing a conceptual relationship between Eucharist and altar that had begun to emerge in the late first century. However, even this argument is not absolutely dependent on a late date, as I shall also point out in the next chapter.

4. Audience and Destination

Because the identity of the community and the geographic location to which Hebrews was addressed are closely intertwined, this section will consider audience and destination

Eucharistic Theology from a Historical, Biblical and Systematic Perspective [Mundelein, IL: Hillenbrand Books, 2004], 66), "Unique...in 1 Corinthians 10:16 is the sacrificial and cultic connotation of *koinonia*. Paul does not simply speak about *koinonia* with the Son (1 Corinthians 1:9) but with the body and blood of Christ. This participation in the blood and body of Christ is both compared to and contrasted with participation in pagan sacrifices in which the sacrificer enters into a real partnership with demons (10:20). This parallelism and contrast between the Lord's Supper and pagan sacrifices ('the cup of the Lord' vs. the cup of demons, the 'table of the Lord' versus 'the table of demons': 10:21) indicates that, for Paul, the Lord's Super is in some way the real sacrificial cult of the Church." See also George T. Montague, *First Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 174-76.

²⁴³ Regarding Mark's account of the institution of the Eucharist (Mark 14:12-25), John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington (*Mark* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002], 400) state, "Mark's somewhat sober narrative stresses above all the sacrificial death of Jesus 'for many' and so is a caution against overstressing the community meal as the leading motif of the Eucharist. We recall not only a meal, but the final meal of one who was to be executed as a criminal for our sake."

²⁴⁴ The most explicit linkage between Eucharist and altar in the writings of Ignatius is found in *Philadelphians* 4:1, written ca. 108-110 CE: "Take care, therefore, to participate in one Eucharist (for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup which leads to unity through his blood; there is one altar, just as there is one bishop, together with the presbytery and the deacons, my fellow servants), in order that whatever you do, you do in accordance with God" (Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999], 179). See also *Ephesians* 5:2; *Magnesians* 7:2; *Trallians* 7:2.

together. Not surprisingly, the same factors which inhibit easy identification of Hebrews' author and date of composition also restrict our ability to construct precisely a portrait of the community which received the document and to pinpoint the location to which it was sent. For example, Hebrews lacks the sort of epistolary prescript which characterizes the Pauline correspondence. This forces us to rely on other forms of internal and external evidence to formulate conjectures about these issues. The traditional title of the document, "To the Hebrews" (ΠΡΟΣ ΕΒΡΑΙΟΥΣ), is not particularly helpful in this regard, as it represents a second-century hypothesis about the audience based on Hebrews' content.²⁴⁵ There is no credible basis for the suggestion that the title can be interpreted as meaning "against the Hebrews."²⁴⁶ We can confidently say that the work was *not* written "to the Hebrews" if by this we mean that it was written to practicing Jews whom the author was attempting to proselytize. All of the evidence within the text indicates that the author is writing to a group of believing Christians – Christians who, nonetheless, were well-versed in the LXX translation of the Jewish Scriptures and were familiar with Jewish cultic practice.²⁴⁷ Until the 19th century, the consensus of most exegetes was that the audience of Hebrews was composed exclusively, or at least primarily, of Jewish Christians on the assumption

²⁴⁵ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 12; Koester, *Hebrews*, 46-47.

²⁴⁶ Cf. Ellingworth (*Epistle to the Hebrews*, 21-22): "The suggestion that πρὸς Ἑβραίους means 'against the Hebrews' is a priori unlikely, since the title corresponds to those of the Pauline epistles, which were certainly not written 'against' the Romans, etc. It also goes against the content of Hebrews, which is consistently unpolemical in its discussion of Jewish matters. In any case, πρὸς + acc. in a hostile sense would mean rather 'In response to...,' and there is no suggestion in Hebrews that its author was responding to Jewish arguments."

²⁴⁷ That the document was written in highly-polished Greek and drew upon the LXX (and, indeed, made theological use of biblical texts that differed significantly from the MT in their LXX form, e.g. Heb 2:6-8; 10:5-7) casts further doubt on the appropriateness of the title "Hebrews" to describe this particular audience. According to Brown (*Antioch and Rome*, 140), "Acts 6:1 uses the designation 'Hebrews' to refer to one type of Jews (who believed in Jesus) as distinct from another type of Jews (who believed in Jesus). It describes a Hebrew-speaking group loyal to the Jerusalem Temple and its cult as distinct from 'Hellenists,' a group speaking (only?) Greek, acculturated to the Hellenistic world, and liberated from cultic loyalties." In general, the audience envisioned in Hebrews has more traits in common with the latter than with the former, particularly with regard to the linguistic distinctions between the two groups.

that only a Jewish community would be able to fully appreciate the author's biblical arguments and, especially, his detailed arguments which contrasted Jesus with the Levitical priests and their offerings. However, more recent commentators have pointed out that Paul, for example, addressed predominantly Gentile communities in Galatians and 1 Corinthians, both of which presuppose familiarity with the LXX and other Jewish traditions. A Gentile readership for Hebrews therefore should not be ruled out.²⁴⁸ Perhaps the most credible possibility, especially in light of the destination for Hebrews which I will propose below, is that the community to which the text was addressed was a mixed audience of both Jewish and Gentile Christians.²⁴⁹ Given the close familiarity with Judaism that Hebrews presupposes, members of the latter group would most likely have come predominantly from the ranks of the "God-fearers" (φοβούμενοι του θεου) or "worshippers" (σεβομένοι), Gentiles who were attracted to Judaism but had not undergone a full-fledged conversion to the Jewish faith.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁸ According to Koester (*Hebrews*, 47), "Other interpreters find evidence that Hebrews was written for Gentile Christians. Repentance from dead works (6:1) and enlightenment (6:4; 10:32) were ways of speaking about conversion from paganism. Warnings about falling away from the living God (3:12) and avoiding strange teachings (13:4) could counter the ascetic teachings of some Hellenistic groups." Against these claims, the argument can be made that the references to "dead works," "falling away from the living God," and "strange teachings" could equally be applied to Jewish Christians, while "enlightenment," as I shall argue in Chapter Four, can just as easily be interpreted as a reference to baptism.

²⁴⁹ Ellingworth (*Epistle to the Hebrews*, 25-26) identifies several factors which support the thesis of a mixed audience: "If Hebrews were in fact addressed to a mixed community (like most if not all of the churches to which Paul wrote), this would also explain some otherwise slightly puzzling features of the epistle. These include the general expression 'the word of righteousness,' and especially 'the fathers' (not 'our fathers,' as in most translations), the almost certain reading in 1:1. Even 'the fathers,' however, would suggest a predominantly Jewish readership. The argument for a mixed Jewish and gentile readership is strengthened by the systematic exclusion, from the author's OT quotations and verbal allusions, of negative references to Israel, and also gentiles, present in the OT contexts. . . . The epistle's pervasive use of the OT suggests that at least a large proportion of its readers were converted Jews. However, its consistent avoidance both of distinctively 'Jewish' and also of distinctively 'gentile' language suggests a mixed group of addressees."

²⁵⁰ On the presence of "God-fearers" within Roman Christian communities, see Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 69-79. Koester (*Hebrews*, 48) points out that by the mid-first century, local churches in Rome "were almost certainly mixed."

Internal evidence within the text does not offer us certainty as to the precise ethnic makeup of the audience, but it does provide us with a number of clues that enable us to begin to craft a portrait of the community and the challenges it faced. As we have already seen, the recipients of Hebrews were second-or-third-generation Christians (2:3) who had been instructed in the “basics” of the faith (5:12; 6:1-2) and, in the author’s estimation, should at this point have been instructing others in Christian belief and practice (5:12). They were initiated into the church by means of sacramental baptism (6:4; 10:22).²⁵¹ They were (to anticipate my central argument and its full-blown development in the next chapter) familiar with the ritual and language of the Eucharist (6:4; 9:14, 20; 10:10, 19, 29; 12:24; 13:10, 20).²⁵² The community had undergone harassment and persecution (10:32-34), but apparently not physical violence or martyrdom (12:4). Many of the exhortatory sections of Hebrews suggest that its hearers were experiencing discouragement and struggling in their commitment to the Christian faith (4:1, 11, 5:11-14; 6:4-8; 10:24-29; 12:12, 16-17). One consequence of this struggle was that some in the community had abandoned the worshipping assembly (10:25). Attridge, as we have already seen, describes this drifting away from worship as “the most concrete datum about the problem that Hebrews confronts.”²⁵³ Indeed, as I shall argue at greater length below when I address the author’s purpose in writing, it was this pastoral crisis that motivated him to craft his “word of exhortation” (13:22) to the community. Mention of the author leads to the final piece of significant internal evidence about the recipients of Hebrews, namely that they had a personal

²⁵¹ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 12.

²⁵² On this point, John Paul Heil states: “The author seems to rely upon his audience’s general familiarity with key terms employed in the narratives about the institution of the eucharistic Lord’s Supper. They may have gained this familiarity from their having heard the traditions behind the gospel passion narratives or other traditions about Jesus’ suffering and death, from the ritual they used to celebrate the Eucharist, and/or from eucharistic catecheses” (*Worship in the Letter to the Hebrews*, 5).

²⁵³ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 12.

relationship with the man who addressed them in this document. This is evident from his knowledge of their situation (2:3; 3:6, 12-14; 4:1-2; 5:11-6:12; 10:25-39; 12:1-5, 7-16; 13:1-19); from the concluding verses of the text, in which he exhorts his hearers to pray for him (13:18) in order that he be “quickly restored” to them (13:19); and, above all, from his pastoral concern for their spiritual growth and perseverance.²⁵⁴

As to the geographic location of this community, a number of possible destinations for Hebrews have been proposed over the centuries, with Jerusalem/Palestine and Rome attracting the most adherents.²⁵⁵ The single piece of explicit geographical data in the text – “Those from Italy send greetings” (13:24) – has been interpreted in differing ways. The majority of patristic commentators, including John Chrysostom, Jerome, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Theodoret believed that Hebrews was directed to a Palestinian audience, a position defended by such modern exegetes as Ceslas Spicq and G.W. Buchanan.²⁵⁶ It was generally felt by the ancients that Christians living in close proximity to the Jerusalem Temple and the Levitical priesthood would have found the subject matter of Hebrews most relevant and persuasive.²⁵⁷ Moreover, many early commentators understood the aforementioned reference to “those from Italy” as an indication that Hebrews was being written *from Italy to* Jerusalem and its environs. Neither argument is persuasive, however. Against the argument from Hebrews’ theological content, one would have to ask why the author would choose to focus his attention on the desert Tabernacle

²⁵⁴ O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 11.

²⁵⁵ Other suggestions over the centuries have included Alexandria, Antioch, Bithynia and Pontus, Corinth, Colossae, Cyprus, Ephesus, and Samaria. See Attridge, *Hebrews*, 10; O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 14.

²⁵⁶ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 9.

²⁵⁷ Koester, *Hebrews*, 48; O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 14.

rather than the actual Temple in Jerusalem if he was writing to Christians living in its shadow.²⁵⁸ Moreover, the writer's decision to communicate his message in Greek (very sophisticated Greek, at that) rather than in Hebrew or Aramaic, using the LXX rather than the MT or an Aramaic targum as his biblical text, is hard to explain if he sought to address a Palestinian audience. Lastly, the commendation in 13:24 ("Those from Italy send greetings") can just as easily indicate that a group of Christians originally from Italy but now living elsewhere are sending greetings to their fellow Christians presently living somewhere in that territory. Indeed, this explanation is more likely. According to Lampe:

The greetings at the end, ἀσπάζονται ὑμᾶς οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰταλίας (13:24), suggest – if they are not a mere literary device – a writing directed to Italy: ἀπὸ replacing ἐκ designates the geographical origin of people who for the most part are not presently living where they came from. Matt 21:11; John 12:21; Acts 6:9; but also Sophocles, *El.* 701, et alia. Accordingly, in Hebrews 13:24, some Italian Christians, who are staying at the letter-sending church outside Italy, greeted the addressees at home.²⁵⁹

Lampe's analysis provides an entrée into our consideration of the most likely candidate for Hebrews' geographic destination, the city of Rome.

As Lampe and others have shown, 13:24 makes the most sense when read as if the senders were writing from outside Italy to fellow Christians living inside that territory, rather than vice versa. Another piece of internal evidence, drawn from the same section of Hebrews, corroborates the strong possibility that the author is addressing Roman Christians. In 13:7, 17 he refers to the community's leaders using the term ἡγουμένοι, which is employed in other early Roman Christian literature (Rom 12:10; *1 Clem* 1:3; 21:6; 37:2, 3; *Hermas, Vis.* 2.2.6; 3.9.7) to

²⁵⁸ "Paradoxically, the literary and idealized antiquarianism of the cultic debate in Hebrews makes Jerusalem the least likely recipient!" (Brown, *Antioch and Rome*, 143).

²⁵⁹ Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 77. See also Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 29: "The crucial question is that of the interpretation of οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰταλίας in 13:24....It may mean either (1) 'those in Italy,' 'the Italians,' or (2) 'those who come from Italy,' implying that they have left their place of origin. (1) is not linguistically impossible, but (2) gives the more natural sense for ἀπὸ (cf. Jn. 1:44; Acts 6:9; 10:23)."

designate the leadership of the local churches.²⁶⁰ If Hebrews was indeed written to Christians in Rome, it was most likely sent to a particular local house church, of which there were many by the mid-to-late first century.²⁶¹ On this basis, it is possible to detect a double meaning in 3:6, in which the author tells his audience, “We are his house” (οὗ οἴκος ἐσμὲν ἡμεῖς). The author’s description of the past sufferings and imprisonments experienced by the community (10:32-34) is compatible with a first century Roman *Sitz im Leben*, whether during the period following the Edict of Claudius or, more likely, during the reign of Domitian, when memories of both the Claudian and Neronian persecutions would still be fresh in the audience’s minds. A Roman destination for the homily might help explain certain parallels with Paul’s Letter to the Romans and with the Gospel of Mark.²⁶² External evidence also enhances the likelihood that Hebrews was directed to Roman Christians. The first extrabiblical source to quote Hebrews is 1 Clement, which, as we have seen, originated in Rome around 96 CE. Justin Martyr, writing at Rome in the mid-second century, also quotes the document in his writings.²⁶³ Koester makes the interesting observation that Hebrews’ controversial statements regarding the impossibility of second repentance (6:4-8; 10:26) are addressed in the *Shepherd of Hermas*, which also originated in

²⁶⁰ Koester, *Hebrews*, 49; Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 7.

²⁶¹ Koester, *Hebrews*, 49. See also Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2007), 59-70. Jewett draws upon the work of Bo Reicke (*Diakonie, Festfreude und Zelos in Verbindung mit der Altchristlichen Agapenfeier* [Uppsala: Universitets Arsskrift, 1951]) to suggest that the Eucharist was regularly celebrated in the Roman house churches.

²⁶² Concerning the similarities between Hebrews and Romans, see Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 699-700. Concerning the Gospel of Mark, the author of Hebrews makes implicit reference to the gospel tradition (see 2:3-4; 5:7; 13:12), a fact which has led some scholars to suggest that the author was familiar with Mark’s gospel and that he was using his sermon to develop the Christological traditions of the Roman churches whose theology was shaped by Mark. See Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 10-11. Mitchell offers the intriguing suggestion that the “longer ending” of Mark’s gospel, with its references to Christ being seated at the right hand of God and the confirmation of the Christian message by signs, might have been influenced by Hebrews’ proclamation of the exaltation of Christ (10:12) and the claim in Heb 2:3-4 that God confirmed the message by “signs.” In this line of reasoning, Hebrews may have been influenced by Mark, and the later editor of Mark who added the longer ending in turn may have been influenced by Hebrews.

²⁶³ Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 700.

Rome.²⁶⁴ Lastly, it is significant that in the dispute over Pauline authorship of Hebrews in the early church, it was the Roman church that was most reluctant to accept Paul as the author of the text. This reluctance may be attributed to the fact that Roman Christians, if indeed they were the original recipients of the document, would have remembered that it was not composed by Paul.²⁶⁵

Despite the considerable time and attention that exegetes have devoted to determining the geographic destination of Hebrews, at the end of the day many commentators attach little in the way of profound importance to this issue. Attridge, for example, states, “Perhaps the least significant aspect of the question of the addressees is their physical location,”²⁶⁶ while O’Brien asserts, “Fortunately, few exegetical issues depend on determining the geographic location of the addressees.”²⁶⁷ This is true of many exegetical issues in the study of Hebrews, but in terms of this present study, which seeks to demonstrate the credibility of Eucharistic references in the text, the particular vicinity proposed here does attain some significance. A Roman destination for the document would certainly bolster claims that its audience would have known and celebrated the Lord’s Supper. It strains credulity to suggest that Christian communities influenced by the apostles Peter and Paul as well as the Gospel of Mark would be ignorant of or hostile to the church’s central act of worship. Paul Bradshaw, though himself not a strong proponent of interpreting the Eucharist primarily in terms of sacrificial imagery, acknowledges the presence of such imagery in both Paul and Mark, and connects the latter’s use of it with the life setting of Roman Christianity:

²⁶⁴ Koester, *Hebrews*, 49.

²⁶⁵ Brown and Meier, *Antioch and Rome*, 148.

²⁶⁶ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 9.

²⁶⁷ O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 15.

Someone, however, possibly even St. Paul himself, did begin to associate the sayings of Jesus with the supper that took place on the night before he died, and interpreted them as referring to the sacrifice of his body and blood and to the new covenant that would be made through his death. This interpretation had some influence within the churches founded by Paul and possibly beyond. It certainly reached the author of Mark's gospel, who inserted a version of the sayings into his already existing supper narrative, perhaps because he was compiling his account of Jesus in Rome, where the Christians were particularly subject to sporadic persecution and so the association of their own spiritual meals with the sacrificed body and blood of their Saviour would have been especially encouraging to believers facing possible martyrdom themselves.²⁶⁸

Bradshaw's description of the experience of Roman Christians coheres in important ways with the identity and situation of the Hebrews community that I have proposed: they belonged to a Roman church; they were subject to persecution; and they faced the possibility of suffering, even martyrdom. Moreover, they knew the gospel traditions and, given a Roman milieu, may well have known the Gospel of Mark. It is not much of a stretch to further imagine that this particular community would have understood the relevance of the Eucharistic traditions, including the sacrificial dimension of those traditions, to their own lives and struggles.

5. Genre

It has been observed that Hebrews "begins like a treatise, proceeds like a sermon, and closes like an epistle."²⁶⁹ This statement would seem to indicate that identifying precisely the document's genre is as difficult as discovering its author and date of composition. Happily, such is not the case, as we shall see. Its traditional title notwithstanding, the "Letter" to the Hebrews is not a letter in the conventional sense. The opening contains none of the standard elements of an ancient letter such as we find, for example, in the writings of Paul: greetings, identification of the names of the sender and the recipients, and expressions of thanksgiving. Indeed, with the

²⁶⁸ Paul F. Bradshaw, *Reconstructing Early Christian Worship* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 19.

²⁶⁹ H.E. Dana, quoted in Brown, *Introduction*, 690.

exception of 1 John, Hebrews is the only NT “letter” that lacks these elements.²⁷⁰ Despite the absence of the aforementioned epistolary features, the ancient attribution of Hebrews’ authorship to Paul and the document’s inclusion among the Pauline letters served to reinforce the popular notion that this work was, in fact, a letter.²⁷¹ Hebrews does, moreover, have an epistolary ending. This seeming discrepancy between its opening and conclusion has contributed to the so-called “literary riddle of Hebrews.”²⁷² A few commentators have tried to resolve this by suggesting that a once-extant epistolary introduction has been lost; a somewhat more popular view, but one that is ultimately unpersuasive and not widely held today, is the possibility that chapter 13 of Hebrews, in whole or in part, was a later addition to the document.²⁷³

In certain respects, Hebrews resembles a theological treatise. The document is permeated with doctrinal exposition and argumentation. From its opening lines, which assert the divine status of the Son and emphasize his role as agent of creation and God’s ultimate word to humanity, the author of Hebrews masterfully employs theological methodology to develop his Christology and to assert Jesus’ superiority over the angels, Moses, the Levitical priesthood, etc. However, Hebrews is not the first-century equivalent of a doctoral lecture on Christology. As the rhetorical content of Hebrews bears witness and as countless exegetes have insisted, the text’s primary purpose is pastoral and hortatory. The author puts doctrine at the service of exhortation

²⁷⁰ The lack of an epistolary prescript (and, for that, matter, a postscript) in 1 John is easily explained if L.T. Johnson’s theory about the relationship between 1, 2, and 3 John (cited above in Chapter Two) is correct.

²⁷¹ Koester, *Hebrews*, 80.

²⁷² Attridge, *Hebrews*, 13; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 60.

²⁷³ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 13. For convincing arguments concerning the literary unity of Hebrews, see Marie Isaacs, “Hebrews 13:9-16 Revisited,” *NTS* 42 (1997): 268-284; and Ceslas Spicq, “L’authenticité du chapitre XIII de l’Épître aux Hébreux,” *ConNT* 11 (1947): 226-236. My own view is that Hebrews 13 is integral to the document and to its author’s arguments, as I shall elaborate in Chapter Four.

as he seeks to convince his hearers to stay faithful to Christian belief and practice.²⁷⁴ Because of its exhortatory tone and strong pastoral orientation, Hebrews is – as I have already suggested in this study – best understood as a sermon or homily.²⁷⁵ Johnson points to four stylistic features which indicate that the text was meant to be read aloud: the author consistently uses first person plural language (“we,” “us”), enabling him both to identify with his hearers and to maintain an air of authority over them; he regularly uses the terminology of speaking and hearing rather than writing or reading; he strategically alternates between doctrinal exposition and moral exhortation in such a way as to quickly make points without losing the attention of his audience; and he introduces themes without developing them immediately (e.g., Jesus’ solidarity with humanity is introduced in 2:17-18 and developed at length in 4:14-5:10) so as to create a “wavelike, cumulative effect.”²⁷⁶

There is, moreover, an important textual clue which indicates that the author of Hebrews wanted his work to be understood as belonging to the homiletic genre. In his concluding remarks, he makes this appeal to his hearers: “I urge you, brothers,²⁷⁷ to be patient with my word

²⁷⁴ Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*, 406.

²⁷⁵ On the distinction between a sermon and a homily, see Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 690. Brown argues that if a sermon is “topical” and a homily is more concerned with drawing out the implications of a biblical text, then the latter designation is preferable in the case of Hebrews, whose author makes extensive recourse to the Scriptures in order to advance his argument. Koester (*Hebrews*, 81) acknowledges that both sermons and letters in the ancient world contained points of similarity: “NT letters were usually written to groups of people, rather than to individuals, and would have been read aloud to a number of listeners at one time (Col 4:16; 1 Thess 5:27). Paul dictated his letters, using rhetorical techniques and often referred to speaking rather than writing (e.g., Rom 6:1; 1 Cor 9:8; Gal 1:9; cf. Rom 16:22). Yet ancient theorists assumed that letter writing and speech making were two different types of activities that could be analyzed using different sets of categories. Letters can be read aloud and speeches can be sent in written form, but in formal terms a composition will correspond more closely to one genre than to the other. If a genre is a ‘specific way of visualizing a given part of reality,’ Hebrews envisions communication taking place more in the manner of a speech than in a letter.”

²⁷⁶ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 10.

²⁷⁷ In order to fashion as literal a translation as possible, I have chosen to translate ἀδελφοί as “brothers” as opposed to “brothers and sisters.” However, I do this with the recognition that the term can be translated inclusively and that the audience addressed by the author of Hebrews – an assembly in a house church likely located in Rome – would have consisted of both men and women.

of exhortation (λόγου τῆς παρακλήσεως), for I have written to you briefly” (13:22). Although one might dispute the writer’s attribution of “brevity” to his rather long and complex composition, his designation of this work as a “word of exhortation” (λόγος παρακλήσεως) must be taken seriously as a self-description of its genre. Elsewhere in the NT, the phrase λόγος παρακλήσεως is used to describe a synagogue homily. In Acts 13:14 Paul and Barnabas visit a synagogue in Antioch on the Sabbath and attend the service there: “On the Sabbath day they entered the synagogue and sat down. After the reading of the law and the prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, ‘Brothers, if you have a word of exhortation (λόγος παρακλήσεως) for the people, speak it’” (Acts 13:14b-15). Paul proceeds to offer a lengthy discourse on the soteriological significance of Jesus’ death and resurrection, drawing on OT salvation history and explicitly applying various OT quotations to Jesus (e.g., Acts 13:22, 33-35, 41). Paul’s methodology in this speech is not unlike that employed in Hebrews. Granted, Paul’s discourse in Acts 13 is in all likelihood a Lukan creation rather than an authentic Pauline sermon. Moreover, some scholars have argued that neither this sermon nor Hebrews itself bears much similarity to existing Hellenistic Jewish homilies from the period. Others, however, have argued with equal forcefulness that many points of convergence can be found among them.²⁷⁸ Ultimately, as Koester points out, what is significant about the speech in Acts 13 is that it “indicates how the shape of early Christian preaching was perceived.”²⁷⁹ One might go even

²⁷⁸ Koester, *Hebrews*, 81. However, compare Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 14-16. Mitchell cites the work of Hartwig Thyen (*Der Stil des jüdisch-hellenistischen Homilie*, FRLANT 47 [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1955]), who claimed to have reconstructed the basic form of a diaspora synagogue homily from various Jewish sources and to have identified several characteristics of such works which are also found in Hebrews, namely “homiletic language marked by a communal tone, the use of the LXX as a source, the introduction of scriptural citations with rhetorical questions, and the use of paraenesis and exhortation” (*Hebrews*, 15). Although Thyen’s work received a mixed reception from other scholars, some commentators on Hebrews, including Attridge (*Hebrews*, 14) have endorsed his judgment.

²⁷⁹ Koester, *Hebrews*, 81.

further and say that Luke’s perception would appear to have been accurate, given the witness of Hebrews as an example of an early Christian homily which bears many similarities to the Lukan sermons in Acts.

It has been suggested – partly on the basis of the sermonic material in Acts – that the stylistic qualities of Christian preaching in the first century would likely have been profoundly influenced by the conventions of Greco-Roman rhetoric.²⁸⁰ Again, Hebrews offers us a solid example of why this is so. As a work intended primarily to persuade its audience both with regard to doctrinal belief and practical behavior, Hebrews employs a wide range of rhetorical devices in order to achieve its purpose.²⁸¹ Especially noteworthy is the author’s use of *synkrisis* (comparison). Throughout the sermon, the homilist employs an argumentative strategy known, in its Jewish form, as *qal wachomer* (“from the light to the heavy”) and, in its Greco-Roman form, as *a minore ad maius* (“from the lesser to the greater”).²⁸² The assumption of this type of argument is that if something is true in a smaller matter, it is even truer in an analogous greater matter. The author of Hebrews makes a number of such arguments, such as, if the message of the old covenant, declared through angels, was valid, how much more valid is the message declared through Christ (2:2-3); if Moses was great, how much greater is Christ (3:2-6); and so forth. As we will see below, a subtle form of this rhetorical strategy appears to be at play in the author’s implicit discussion of the Eucharist in his sermon.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ See Johnson, *Hebrews*, 12-15; 31-38 for a thorough overview of the use of Greco-Roman rhetoric in the text. Attridge (*Hebrews* 20-21) enumerates and describes a wide range of rhetorical features employed in Hebrews, including alliteration, anaphora, and antithesis.

²⁸² Johnson, *Hebrews*, 31.

Although there is widespread agreement that Hebrews utilizes the conventions of Hellenistic rhetoric in order to persuade its hearers, scholars are divided about which fundamental type the author employed. Greco-Roman rhetorical handbooks delineated three major categories of rhetoric: judicial/forensic, deliberative, and epideictic. In judicial or forensic rhetoric, a listener is asked to make a determination of the rightness or wrongness of a charge, accusation, or past action. In its contemporary form, forensic rhetoric is used by attorneys arguing a case before a judge or a jury. Exegetes generally agree that Hebrews is not an example of judicial rhetoric, as the author is not asking his audience to make a judgment of this sort. It is concerning the latter two types of rhetoric – deliberative and epideictic – that division exists among commentators. Deliberative rhetoric is a style of argumentation that seeks to persuade listeners to take (or not take) a certain course of action. Epideictic rhetoric is a type of speech or writing that engages in praise or blame while attempting to encourage hearers/readers to concur with the speaker/author in these sentiments. Which type of rhetoric predominates in Hebrews?

Those who argue for the primacy of deliberative rhetoric²⁸³ point to the hortatory quality of the entire homily (more on this below), while in those in favor of epideictic²⁸⁴ as the dominant style note the use of synkrisis as well as the panegyric in honor of the heroes of the faith in chapter 11.²⁸⁵ Koester provides the best answer to this question in his assertion that both rhetorical forms are present and the dominance of one over the other would depend on the mindset of each individual addressee: “For listeners who remain committed to God and Christ, Hebrews is epideictic, since it maintains the values they already hold. For those tending to drift

²⁸³ Ibid., 13-15.

²⁸⁴ E.g. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 14.

²⁸⁵ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 13.

away from the faith, Hebrews is deliberative, since it seeks to dissuade them from apostasy and move them toward a clearer faith commitment.”²⁸⁶ We will see in our discussion of the author’s purpose below (and at greater length in Chapter Four) how he employs this twofold rhetorical strategy in urging his hearers to faithfully participate in the Eucharistic assembly.

Given that a majority of exegetes describe Hebrews as a sermon or homily,²⁸⁷ it follows logically that the document was, like many NT writings, intended to be read aloud at a public gathering of some sort. At what sort of gathering might it have been read? In light of the evidence presented in Chapter Two, the most likely venue would be a liturgical setting in which a ritual Eucharistic meal was celebrated. Before pressing this claim, however, we should ask if there are any other possibilities. Marie Isaacs, for example, has proposed a more specialized (and non-cultic) setting for the public reading of the sermon:

A. Nairne has said of the Epistle, “It smells of the study, not the open air of life where history is being made.” Certainly there is much to suggest, in its concept and execution, that this treatise-like sermon had a study group as its intended audience. Some members had not been attending as assiduously as in the past (10.25), and our author exhorts them to meet together and thereby to encourage one another “to love and good works” (10.24). If it were addressed to a group in training for some form of Christian “rabbinate,” then it would explain not only our author’s recourse to exegetical methods which he does not bother to explain or justify, but would give more point to his jibes: “Solid food is for the mature, and those who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil” (5.14).²⁸⁸

At first glance, Isaacs’ theory would appear to have a lot in its favor, given the level of sophistication present in the theology and rhetorical structure of Hebrews. Indeed, it has often

²⁸⁶ Koester, *Hebrews*, 82.

²⁸⁷ For an opposing view, see Lindars, *Theology*, 6. Lindars prefers the traditional designation of Hebrews as a “letter”; nevertheless, he believes that this particular “letter” was “written as an address to be read at the Christian assembly.” Indeed, even if Hebrews was a letter as opposed to a homily, this would not negate the probability of its being read aloud in the liturgy. As we saw in Chapter Two, the letters of Paul were in all likelihood composed for liturgical reading in connection with the Eucharist.

²⁸⁸ Isaacs, *Sacred Space*, 30.

been asked whether an “ordinary” audience would have been able to follow the complex threads of argumentation present in the homily, especially if it were delivered orally.²⁸⁹ Against this view, however, it must be pointed out that other NT compositions contain equal levels of theological sophistication (e.g., Romans) or complex imagery (e.g., Revelation), yet there is little doubt that these texts were addressed to a broader Christian community as opposed to a small, esoteric fellowship. Furthermore, as I have already intimated, and as I shall further address below in my discussion of the author’s reasons for writing, the homilist’s concerns are not primarily those of a dry academician immersed in theological abstractions but of a pastor intent on assisting his congregation to draw connections between theology and its “real world” applications.

This leads us back to the question first posed in Chapter One: In what setting would the sermon have most likely been read aloud? We saw in Chapter Two that early Christian literature (including the documents that became the canonical NT) was generally read publicly in a cultic milieu. Therefore, the most likely arena for its proclamation would have been the Christian liturgical assembly. Moreover, the typical ritual gathering for first century Christians was the celebration of a meal, a meal most likely Eucharistic in character. Thus it follows that, unless Hebrews was addressed to a sectarian group far outside the mainstream of Christian fellowship and praxis, a liturgical/Eucharistic/meal setting was the probable venue for its public reading. We saw in Chapter One – over against the hypothesis of Williamson (among others) – that Hebrews does not, in fact, give evidence of standing outside mainstream Christianity in its doctrine and outlook. Indeed, if the evidence presented thus far in this chapter is correct, Hebrews was written by an author steeped in Christian tradition for an audience most likely living in Rome (and thus likely to have been familiar with Pauline, Petrine, and Markan

²⁸⁹ See, e.g., Johnson, *Hebrews*, 34.

traditions, none of which would have been anti- or non-sacramental in outlook). Thus, both the author of Hebrews and the community to which it was addressed would surely have belonged within the mainstream of Christian faith and practice, including Eucharistic practice. If Hebrews was a homily intended for reading at the Eucharist, this would account for the oblique nature of Eucharistic references in the sermon.

6. Purpose and Argument

Our survey of critical issues leads us to the question of the author's purpose in penning his sermon. Why was Hebrews written? As was the case with the question of genre, here too we can offer a more confident explanation, for the internal textual evidence offers us many clues about the situation of the hearers and thus about the rhetorical strategy of the author. The homilist wrote his "word of exhortation" both to chide and to encourage a community that was facing multiple challenges.²⁹⁰ They had experienced abuse and persecution in the past (10:32-34) and faced the possibility of doing so again (13:13). They were discouraged, exhausted, and struggling in their faith commitment. They were "tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of being spoken poorly about in society, tired even of Jesus. Their hands droop and their knees are weak (12:12), attendance is down at church (10:25) and they are losing confidence."²⁹¹ Discouragement and fear of persecution had put them at risk of "drifting away" from practicing their faith (2:1) or even of falling into outright apostasy (3:12; 6:4-6; 10:26-29). The community was failing to progress beyond a rudimentary understanding of Christian doctrine (5:12); they had become "sluggish" in their understanding (5:11) and in their response to God's word (6:12). The author's strong emphasis on faith and faithfulness (3:1-4:11;

²⁹⁰ For an interesting (albeit hypothetical) reconstruction of the history of the community and the possible impact of that history on the rhetorical situation of Hebrews, see Koester, *Hebrews*, 65-72.

²⁹¹ Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 3.

11:1-12:3; 13:7) suggests that the community was experiencing significant difficulties in the practice of these virtues.

In a similar vein, the author's concerted effort to demonstrate the superiority of Christ over the persons and institutions of Judaism (1:4-2:3; 3:1-6; 7:1-10:17; 12:18-24; 13:10) indicates that some members of the congregation may have been struggling with an attraction to or a nostalgia for Jewish faith and worship. The precise nature of this temptation depends in large part on when Hebrews was written. If the sermon was composed prior to 70 CE – when the Temple in Jerusalem was still standing – it is possible that some members of the audience were experiencing the temptation to abandon their Christian commitment and to embrace (or return to, in the case of Jewish Christians) Jewish sacrificial theology and practice; if it was written post-70 CE, they may have felt a longing for the restoration of the sacrificial system due to uncertainty over the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice. Perhaps, as Lindars suggests, some in the community were either contemplating or actually engaging in a return to *synagogue* worship in order to “feel the benefit of the [Jewish] sacrificial system.”²⁹² Or perhaps they were attracted to Judaism as an alternative to Christianity that would permit them to worship the one God of Jewish/Christian faith within the safety of a religious cult that enjoyed legal rights which the Christian movement did not.²⁹³

To be sure, not all commentators accept the notion that a reversion to Judaism was among the pastoral concerns which motivated the author of Hebrews to pen his sermon. It is often

²⁹² Lindars, *Theology*, 11.

²⁹³ Cf. Johnson, (*Hebrews*, 37): “It may well be...that the Jewish cult – either as a new attraction or as a return – gains in attraction because of the negative consequences of commitment to Jesus as Messiah. Because they belonged to Jesus, some had been imprisoned, and some had their property taken away. These are significant sufferings by any measure, and calculated to reduce enthusiasm for belonging to such a small and unpopular cult associated with a crucified messiah. Such negative experience would encourage attraction to a form of religion in which oppression or persecution was not an essential feature.” Compare Koester, *Hebrews*, 71-72 for a negative assessment of this possibility.

claimed, for example, that the warning in 3:12 – “Beware, brothers, lest any of you have an evil, unbelieving heart that forsakes the living God” – would hardly be apropos for Christians allured by Judaism, as a reversion or conversion to the Jewish faith would hardly entail a rejection of the “living God” of Israel. Moreover, if a later date for Hebrews is favored, one must contend with Mitchell’s objection: “The comparisons with Judaism deal mostly with its ritual and priesthood, and since there is nothing really to tie those comparisons to actual Jewish practice at the time Hebrews was written, the sermon is probably not directed to Jewish Christians who wish to return to their synagogue.”²⁹⁴ Against Mitchell’s argument stands the very real possibility that the homilist is addressing his claims for the superiority of Jesus’ priesthood and sacrifice to members of the community who questioned its true efficacy and believed that the loss of the Temple and its sacrificial rituals had deprived them of a “proven” means of remitting their sins and gaining access to God.²⁹⁵ Considering how much effort the author of Hebrews devotes to demonstrating Jesus’ preeminence vis-à-vis the Levitical cult, it is hard to imagine that *some* form of attraction to Judaism was not an issue for at least a portion of his audience. However, this does not mean that the entire community was experiencing such an attraction or temptation. Hence, the warning in 3:12 about abandoning the “living God” may have been directed at those

²⁹⁴ Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 13.

²⁹⁵ Brown (*Antioch and Rome*, 154) suggests that some Christians living in a post-70 CE milieu (including those addressed by Hebrews) may have expected the Jewish Temple cult to be revived in a different form: “After the destruction of the Temple, might not Christians of such a church think that the Temple was to be replaced by a return to the levitical sacrificial cult of the desert – a cult no longer tied down to a fixed building in Jerusalem and for that reason suitable to a spiritual Israel in the diaspora; a levitical cult not weighed down by the corruption of wealth and splendor and so more suitable to a pilgrim people?” See also Isaacs, *Sacred Space*, 67: “What situation would therefore be answered by a presentation of Jesus as the pioneer (ἀρχηγός, 2.10; 12.2) whose pilgrimage attained the true, promised land of heaven itself, and whose role as victim and priest enabled him to gain access to God where he is now seated at His right hand? The most likely answer would be the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple. A sense of loss, inevitably felt keenly by Jewish Christians, called forth from our author a reinterpretation of Judaism’s established means of access to God.”

members of the congregation who were simply in danger of “drifting away” (2:1) from Christian faith and praxis.

An analogy from contemporary Catholic experience might help to shed light on the situation of Hebrews’ audience. There are some Catholics today who drift away from the practice of their faith (especially regular attendance at Mass) out of apathy, indifference, or a failure to understand and/or appreciate the church’s teachings (either in a broad sense or, specifically, with regard to what is believed to take place in the celebration of the Eucharist). There are others, however, who deliberately renounce their faith and embrace another belief system whose doctrinal claims and ethical teachings they find more credible or palatable. Still others may have converted to Catholicism from another faith tradition (Christian or otherwise), only to leave the Catholic Church and return to their prior confessional affiliation. At any given time, Catholics struggling with the temptation to take any one of these three paths might be present at a Catholic Eucharistic celebration. A homilist who is aware of these various tendencies within individual members of the community might wish to craft an overall appeal for fidelity to Catholicism that would speak to the concerns of the subgroups mentioned above.

A similar dynamic appears to have been at work in the rhetorical strategy of Hebrews. The textual evidence clearly suggests that the preacher’s congregation was tempted, in one form or another, to turn away from its Christian commitment. Throughout the homily, the author’s exhortations are aimed at countering these diverse temptations. To those who feared abuse and persecution, he urges them to fix their gaze on Jesus, who “endured the cross, despising its shame” (12:2), and to “go out to him...bearing the reproach he endured” (13:13). To those who had become “sluggish in understanding” (5:11), he exhorts them to “pay far more attention” to the things they had heard (2:1) and to “see to it that you do not reject the one who speaks”

(12:25). To those struggling with faith and perseverance, the homilist directs them to the examples of Jesus and Moses (3:6), of the entire panoply of OT “heroes of faith” in the encomium (chapter 11), of Jesus again (12:1-3), and of their own leaders (13:7). To stave off further desertions from the worshipping assembly (10:25), the preacher urges his hearers to offer God “acceptable worship” with “reverence and awe” (12:28) and a continual sacrifice of praise (13:15); he also entreats them to “draw near” or “approach” Jesus (4:16; 10:22), using a term (*προσέρχομαι*) which has strong cultic overtones.²⁹⁶ To those who questioned the comparative value of Christ’s sacrifice over against the sacrificial cult of Judaism, the author devotes a central section of his sermon (7:1-10:18) to countering such concerns. Ultimately, the homilist’s entire argument is intended to (a) dissuade his congregation from renouncing or drifting away from the Christian faith and (b) reinvigorate their appreciation of the new and unique thing that God has done for humanity in and through Jesus Christ.

What is this new and unique thing that God has done through Jesus? He has “secured eternal redemption” for humanity by entering “once for all into the Holy of Holies, not with the blood of goats and bulls, but with his own blood” (9:12). The author of Hebrews is intent on persuading his hearers that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross is not only superior to the animal sacrifices of the Jewish cult, but also efficacious in a way that the offering of “goats and bulls” could never be. Moreover, his doctrinal argument goes hand in hand with a pastoral exhortation to his audience to remain faithful to Christian worship (10:25; 12:28; 13:15). Indeed, as I will illustrate in greater detail below, the lengthy theological reflection on Christ’s priesthood and sacrifice in 7:1-10:18 is framed by a series of warnings against apostasy in 6:1-12 and 10:19-31. Significantly, these warnings include liturgical and sacramental motifs, among

²⁹⁶ I referred to the cultic usage of *προσέρχομαι* in Chapter Two above and shall revisit this point in greater detail in Chapter Four.

which are several implicit references to the Eucharist. Is there a connection between the preacher's doctrinal exposition of the meaning of Christ's priesthood/sacrifice (7:1-10:18) and his paraenetic exhortation to cultic fidelity (6:4-8; 10:19-39)? My sense is that there is, and it is to be found in the Eucharist, the liturgical act in which Christ's saving act is made manifest. As Lindars points out, "the sacrifice of Christ is proclaimed in every meeting of Christians for worship, *especially in the Eucharist*. . . . The readers then should not be frequenting synagogue worship. . . but should gladly participate in the Christian worship in which the sacrifice of Christ is celebrated."²⁹⁷

It stands to reason that a reciprocal relationship should exist between the doctrinal and hortatory components of Hebrews, as Cahill contends in his analysis of the sermon's message:

In terms of logical argument, the doctrine is outlined and leads to parenetic considerations designed to lead to practical behavioral conclusions. . . . There is a link between the content of the doctrinal part and the content of the paraenesis, similar to the link that is generally presumed between the content of an argument and the content of the conclusion drawn from that argument. No preacher is going to spend time explaining the evil of adultery and conclude with an exhortation to avoid robbing banks. The internal logic of Hebrews must be presumed to involve an identity between the content of the doctrinal exposition and the concern of the paraenesis; this must be presumed unless evidence to the contrary can be presented.²⁹⁸

For Cahill, it is the Eucharistic liturgy that serves as the point of intersection between these two elements of the sermon:

I contend that the homily is addressed to the practical issue of motivating the members of the church to attend the Eucharist, which was the eschatological memorial of the Lord "until he comes." The doctrinal analysis and exposition of the priestly function of Christ leads to a call to faith in the memorial-meal in which the priestly action of Christ is made accessible.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁷ Lindars, *Theology*, 11, emphasis added.

²⁹⁸ Cahill, "A Home for the Homily," 142-143.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 144.

He further argues that “the purpose of this homily is to explain how the priestly mediation of Christ touches this world through the Eucharist.”³⁰⁰ The author had to explain to his audience how the presence of Christ the High Priest in heaven (8:1; 9:12) continues to impact believers on earth.³⁰¹ If Christ’s cultic priestly activity is located only in the heavenly realm, says Cahill, then “the Old Testament dispensation must be graded as superior” because it at least had a “sketch and shadow” of the heavenly sanctuary (8:5), whereas adherents of the new Christian covenant would have nothing tangible in the cultic realm by which they could come into contact with the heavenly reality of Christ’s priestly mediation.³⁰²

This is an important consideration in light of the broader rhetorical plan of Hebrews. As we saw in our analysis of genre in the preceding section, throughout the sermon the homilist employs a rhetorical strategy in which he argues “from the lesser to the greater.” Most of these arguments aim at asserting the superiority of Christ over against some Jewish personage, belief or practice, from Moses (3:1-6) to the Levitical priesthood (7:1-28). Along these lines, the homilist raises the issue of worship in 9:1, saying, “Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary.” The implication is, if worshippers in the first dispensation had a system of cultic worship, replete with liturgical rubrics and a sacred space, then Christian worshippers have...what? It is difficult to believe that the author of Hebrews, addressing a congregation in which some, perhaps many, members had come to Christian faith from a background of Jewish belief and practice, is suggesting that the “lesser to the greater” in this

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Ibid., 145.

instance is a move from the Jewish cult to a disembodied, “spiritual” form of worship devoid of any tangible, liturgical-sacramental elements.

In my judgment, the homilist is not making such an implication at all. Rather, he is using the context of a Eucharistic homily to remind his audience that they do, in fact, have a means of contact with the efficacious sacrifice of Christ whenever they gather for worship. The animal sacrifices of the Jewish cult cannot avail them, for they are separated from the priestly cult either spatially (i.e., they are in Rome, the sacrifices are offered in Jerusalem) or temporally (they are living in a post-70 CE world in which the Temple lies in ruins) or both. However, by means of their Eucharistic liturgies, the congregants are able to “approach” (προσέρχομαι) the “throne of grace” (4:16), the “heavenly Jerusalem” (12:22), and Jesus’ “blood of sprinkling” (12:24), and thus come into living contact with Christ the High Priest. Most significantly, in 13:10 the preacher will return to the issue raised in 9:1 (“Now even the first covenant had. . . an earthly sanctuary”) by confidently asserting, “We have an altar from which those serving the tabernacle have no right to eat.” It is my contention that the “altar” in question is the table of the Lord’s Supper. This table’s presence in the earthly sphere and the liturgical rituals surrounding the celebration of the Supper provide the “new covenant” counterpart to the “earthly sanctuary” and “regulations for worship” of the first covenant mentioned in 9:1.

Before leaving this discussion of the author’s purpose in writing Hebrews, let me be clear that I am not arguing that his sole concern was to encourage his hearers to participate in Eucharistic worship. As I stated at the outset of this section, the community to which he wrote was facing multiple obstacles to living out their Christian commitment. They feared persecution, faced challenges to their faith, and wavered in their zeal for Jesus. A good number of them seemed to be questioning the all-sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice. The author of Hebrews sought

to address all of these issues. Above all, his rhetorical aim was to inculcate in his audience a profound sense of the supremacy of Jesus Christ and the total efficacy of his sacrificial death in dealing with sin. Nonetheless, it is clear from the internal evidence of the text that the community was flagging in its commitment to worship. It is also evident that the author's intricate doctrinal exposition of Christ's priesthood and sacrifice, which occupies a central position in the sermon's overall argument, is surrounded by hortatory material intended to rouse the congregation to greater fidelity to their worshipping assembly and to warn them of the dangers of walking away. The relationship between these two components of the sermon is best explained with reference to the Eucharist. This connection becomes more perceptible when we attend to the literary structure of Hebrews, a point to which we now turn.

7. Structure

Hebrews boasts an intricately planned and complex structure. On that point, commentators on the text are in unanimous agreement. When it comes to delineating the precise nature of that structure, however, unanimity evaporates. Countless organizational schemas have been proposed for the sermon, most of which fall into two broad categories: content-based (thematic) approaches and formal (non-thematic approaches).³⁰³ F.F. Bruce's analysis of Hebrews³⁰⁴ offers a paradigmatic illustration of the first of these methodologies:

The Finality of Christianity (1:1-2:18)
The True Home of the People of God (3:1-4:13)
The High Priesthood of Christ (4:14-6:20)
The Order of Melchizedek (7:1-28)
Covenant, Sanctuary, and Sacrifice (8:1-10:18)
Call to Worship, Faith and Perseverance (10:19-29:29)
Concluding Exhortation and Prayer (13:1-21)

³⁰³ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 14-16; Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 17-18.

³⁰⁴ Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, lxiii-lxiv.

Postscript (13:22-25)

Thematic approaches to Hebrews have come under criticism in recent decades, with some commentators claiming that content-based analyses of Hebrews tend to be very subjective, raising the specter of eisegesis on the part of those who claim to be exegeting the text.³⁰⁵ Moreover, thematic structural proposals have typically been constructed around the doctrinal aspects of the text, the result of which has been to obscure the hortatory dimension of Hebrews and convey the impression that it is primarily a dogmatic work.³⁰⁶ As a result, formal analyses of the homily have grown in popularity. The formal approach studies Hebrews from the perspective of language, literary features, and rhetorical style. Perhaps the best-known formal structural study of Hebrews is that of Albert Vanhoye.³⁰⁷ Vanhoye identifies the following literary techniques in the text: (a) announcement of the subjects to be discussed; (b) inclusions which delineate the boundaries of the author's theological developments; (c) alternation between doctrinal exposition and paraenesis; (d) words which characterize a development; (e) the use of "hook words" to indicate transitions; and (f) symmetric arrangements.³⁰⁸ All of these elements combine to create a concentric symmetry in the sermon which he maps out as follows:

The Name of Christ (1:5-2:18)
Jesus, high priest worthy of faith (3:1-4:14)
Jesus, merciful high priest (4:15-5:10)
- Preliminary exhortation (5:11-6:20)
High priest after the manner of Melchizedek (7:1-28)
Made perfect (8:1-9:28)
Cause of an eternal salvation (10:1-18)

³⁰⁵ Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 18.

³⁰⁶ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 14.

³⁰⁷ Albert Vanhoye, *Structure and Message of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1989).

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

- Final exhortation (10:19-39)
- The faith of the ones of old (11:1-40)
- The necessary endurance (12:1-13)
- The straight paths (12:14-13:21)

Vanhoye's proposal has much to commend it, and it has influenced many subsequent formal approaches to the structure of Hebrews.³⁰⁹ Indeed, I find certain aspects of it quite attractive, particularly his identification of two exhortatory sections (5:11-6:20; 10:19-39) that frame the material in 7:1-10:18.

Nevertheless, I am not convinced that a content-based approach to the structure of Hebrews is inappropriate. To the contrary, I agree with Brown that a thematic analysis of Hebrews does not have to result in a depiction of the document as a dogmatic theological treatise; moreover, I concur with him that emphasizing the formal qualities of the sermon at the expense of its content risks obscuring the apologetic nature of the text.³¹⁰ Vanhoye is spot-on in his assertion that a proper apprehension of the structure of Hebrews is essential to grasping its meaning: "In order to understand correctly the message which the author of Hebrews has left us it is not enough to read his sentences one after the other. One must also and above all figure out the composition of the work as a whole. . . . An error with regard to the literary structure is never without consequences on the interpretation of the thought."³¹¹ It is precisely for this reason that attention to thematic content in Hebrews becomes important, for the preacher continually puts that content at the service of his pastoral exhortations. Additionally, a structural analysis of Hebrews that attends to its major theological and spiritual themes, as well as to its rhetorical

³⁰⁹ Attridge, for example, draws on Vanhoye's schema in his own approach to the text. See Attridge, *Hebrews*, 16-21.

³¹⁰ Brown, *Introduction*, 691.

³¹¹ Vanhoye, *Structure and Message*, 18.

character, is of enormous value in a study such as this which seeks to engage the document from a liturgical and Eucharistic standpoint. The broad structural outline of Hebrews that I will propose below serves to highlight those areas of the sermon in which implicit Eucharistic themes contribute to the author's overall argument.

Hebrews begins with a theologically dense prologue (1:1-4) which emphasizes the preexistence and divine nature of the Son, through whom God has created the world and spoken a definitive word to humanity. The homilist then sets forth the first of his arguments "from the lesser to the greater," contrasting Christ with the angels and affirming his superiority over them (1:5-2:18). This argument unfolds as part of an overall summons to the audience to join in the angelic worship of the Son (cf. 1:6) and to attend carefully to the word of salvation spoken through him (2:1). It is my contention that this initial section, when read aloud at a liturgical gathering, would have functioned as an initial call to worship Jesus, the preexistent Son of God. The author subsequently moves on to offer the first of two exhortations to his community in which he urges them to maintain their faith and perseverance (3:1-15). He holds up Jesus and Moses as exemplars of these virtues, offering at the same time a second "lesser to greater" argument in which he asserts Jesus' primacy over Moses (3:5-6). This exhortation leads into a series of warnings (3:16-4:13) in which the Israelites of the exodus generation are set before the hearers as a negative example of failure to persevere in faith and to listen to God's voice. Within the setting of a Eucharistic liturgy, this section of the homily (which includes an extensive midrash on Psalm 95) may well have functioned as a reminder of the importance of listening to the scriptural word of God read aloud at these gatherings.³¹²

³¹² This coheres to some degree with the theory of Roch Kereszty, discussed in Chapter One above, that the literary structure of Hebrews contains parallels with the Eucharistic celebration.

Having directed a message to those in his congregation who are struggling with fidelity and perseverance, and having offered a sober reminder of the consequences of failure in this regard, the preacher goes on to introduce the concept of Jesus as high priest (4:14-5:10), a theme he will develop at greater length in the central section of his sermon (7:1-10:18). He begins with an exhortation (4:14-16) in which he portrays Jesus as a merciful priest who can sympathize with their weaknesses (4:15) and urges his hearers to confidently “approach” (προσέρχομαι) the “throne of grace.” This brief hortatory section, marked by the cultic term προσέρχομαι, sets the stage for a short doctrinal exposition (5:1-10) of Christ’s high priestly identity. It is at this point that the homilist introduces a comparison between Christ and Melchizedek, upon which he will expand in 7:1-28. For an audience hearing this sermon at a Eucharistic celebration, the priestly terminology in this section would serve as a reminder of the sacrificial character of their worship, in which Christ’s own sacrifice was memorialized in the Lord’s Supper. Mention of Melchizedek, moreover, would have triggered in the biblically literate members of the audience a recollection of Gen 14:18, wherein the mysterious priest is described as bringing forth bread and wine. Indeed, if Hebrews was indeed addressed to a community gathered to break bread and drink wine in their memorial of Jesus’ actions at the Last Supper, it is hard to believe that the comparison between Jesus and Melchizedek could have failed to evoke such an association among its hearers.

As I have already suggested, this succinct block of parenetic/doctrinal material on Christ’s priesthood in 4:14-5:10 sets the stage for a fuller development of the themes of priesthood and sacrifice in 7:1-10:18. Before proceeding to this full-blown doctrinal exposition, however, the preacher introduces a series of exhortations, warnings, and encouragements in 5:11-6:20. He chides the audience for being “sluggish in understanding” (5:11) and for their lack

of progress in both comprehending and living the Christian faith (5:12-6:3). This reproof sets the stage for a stern warning against the dangers of apostasy (6:4-8). The homilist's admonition bluntly states the impossibility of repentance for those who have apostatized after having been "enlightened" and "tasted the heavenly gift" (6:4). As I will argue in the next chapter, these terms are best understood as references to baptism and Eucharist. The likelihood that the author is using sacramental references here is bolstered when the entire section (5:11-6:20) is considered in tandem with a second block of exhortatory material which brackets the preacher's central discourse on Christ's priesthood and sacrifice. In 10:19-39, the author once more cautions his audience against apostasy, and once again employs imagery which would remind the audience of baptism and Eucharist. His exhortation to "approach" (προσέρχομαι) with "our bodies washed with pure water" (λελουσμένοι τὸ σῶμα ὕδατι καθαρῷ, 10:22) would have brought to mind the experience of baptism, while his warning in 10:29 that apostasy is nothing less than a profanation of the "blood of the covenant" (αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης) would have reminded his hearers of the occurrence of this phrase in the Eucharistic cup words (Mark 14:24; cf. Matt 26:28).

Indeed, the central exposition of Jesus' high priesthood and sacrificial atonement in 7:1-10:18 would already have prepared the audience to make these connections. This section is replete with cultic and sacrificial imagery, some of which I contend to be Eucharistic in character. After devoting the entirety of chapter seven to a dogmatic exposition of the nature of Christ's priesthood, the preacher offers a summary statement in 8:1: "We have such a high priest." He goes on to state in 8:3 that, since every priest is ordained to offer "gifts and sacrifices" (δῶρά τε καὶ θυσίας), it is necessary for "this priest," that is, Jesus, to likewise "have something to offer." What "gifts" and "sacrifices" did Christ offer? He offered "his own blood"

(9:12) and his “body” (10:10). Once again, if Hebrews was heard in a Eucharistic setting, the audience could hardly have failed to associate these references to the offering of Christ’s body and blood with their sacramental offering in the form of bread and wine at the Lord’s Supper. Moreover, the identification of Christ’s priestly offering of his flesh and blood as a “gift” (δῶρον) as well as a sacrifice in 8:3 lends weight to the possibility that the preacher’s reference to tasting “the heavenly gift” (δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου) in 6:4 is Eucharistic. At 8:6 the homilist introduces a meditation on the new covenant mediated by Christ, quoting at length from Jeremiah 31:31-34 (8:8-12). Here we have another instance in which the reading of Hebrews at a celebration of the Lord’s Supper would lend a decidedly Eucharistic tone to the author’s rhetoric, especially if his audience was familiar with the Eucharistic traditions that linked Jesus’ words of institution with the “new covenant” prophesied by Jeremiah (1 Cor 11:25; Luke 22:20). A Eucharistic interpretation of the preacher’s covenant imagery is strengthened by his quotation of Exod 24:8 in 9:20. In this verse the author makes his first mention of the “blood of the covenant” (αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης). As I will seek to demonstrate in the next chapter, this reference is almost certainly intended to evoke associations with the Lord’s Supper, and would have subsequently led the hearers to make a similar association in 10:29 where the “blood of the covenant” is said to be profaned by those who apostatize.³¹³

The central argument about Christ’s priesthood and sacrifice (7:1-10:18), with its bracketing series of warnings and exhortations (5:11-6:20; 10:19-39), is followed by the famous panegyric on the heroes and heroines of faith in 11:1-40. This encomium offers the audience a

³¹³ It is widely recognized that the Markan-Matthean “cup-words” (Mark 14:24; Matt 26:28) have as their background the “blood of the covenant” motif from Exod 24:8, whereas the Pauline-Lukan version (1 Cor 11:25; Luke 22:20) draw on the “new covenant” imagery of Jer 31:31-34. I am suggesting that the author of Hebrews is drawing on knowledge of both Eucharistic traditions in chapters 8-9, and indeed that he is blending them together. That he could do so is plausible if, as I have already suggested, the homilist was familiar with both the Pauline traditions and the gospel of Mark.

series of positive examples of fidelity. It also serves as a counterbalance to the negative example of the wilderness generation in 3:16-4:13. As with that previous portion of the sermon, the encomium would also serve as a reminder to an audience gathered for worship that they should imitate their forebears and listen to God's word, especially as it would have been read aloud in their Christian assembly and actualized in their ritual worship. Moreover, at a key point in his panegyric, the homilist sets forth the example of Moses, who, among his noteworthy deeds, "by faith instituted the Passover and the sprinkling of blood" (11:28). Here we have another instance in which an audience assembled for the Eucharist would easily have drawn a connection between a significant OT theme and their Christian ritual gathering. Just as the figure of Melchizedek served to remind the hearers of a priest offering bread and wine, and the "new covenant" motif from Jeremiah recalled the use of this image in the Pauline-Lukan Eucharistic institution narratives, so the mention of Moses and the Passover would have led the audience of Hebrews to bring to mind the link between Judaism's greatest liturgical festival and the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Given the widespread use of Passover imagery in connection with the Eucharist elsewhere in the NT,³¹⁴ it is quite likely that the original hearers of Hebrews were familiar with this association. Moreover, the affiliation between Moses and the "sprinkling of blood" in 11:28 served two additional functions: first, to recall the cultic material in 9:19-22 in which the preacher reminded his audience of the Sinai covenant and Moses' act of sprinkling the blood of

³¹⁴ The synoptic gospels, for example, explicitly identify the Last Supper at which Jesus instituted the Eucharist as a Passover meal (Mark 14:12-16; Matt 26:17-19; Luke 22:7-13, 15). John, on the other hand, places Jesus' death on the afternoon of Passover (John 18:28; 19:14). Nonetheless, John associates the Eucharist with the Passover elsewhere in his gospel. In John 6, the evangelist's places the miraculous feeding narrative and Jesus' subsequent "Bread of Life" discourse in chronological proximity to the Passover (6:4). Earlier in his gospel he similarly linked the miracle at Cana with the Passover festival (2:13). Thus, in the Johannine narrative, two miracles – one involving bread, one involving wine – are connected to the Jewish Passover festival in what bears the hallmarks of an implicit Eucharist/Passover motif. Lastly, although Paul does not mention the Passover in his Eucharistic institution narrative (1 Cor 11:23-26), he does associate the death of Christ (which *is* linked to the Eucharist in 1 Cor 11:26) with the Passover in 1 Cor 5:7 ("Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed").

slain bulls on the people; and second, to set the stage for a key statement in 12:24, in which the audience is told that they have approached the outpoured blood of Jesus, his own “blood of sprinkling.”

Following the encomium in chapter 11, the preacher then issues a second exhortation to his hearers to persevere in their Christian commitment (12:1-17) which parallels his entreaties in 3:1-15. At this point the preacher begins to bring his homily to a close as he summons the community to worship.³¹⁵ Just as the sermon began with a call to worship Christ, who is superior to and worshipped by the angels (1:5-2:18), so now the preacher urges his audience to engage in worship of the Lord that has both cultic and ethical dimensions. In their liturgical gathering, the community has “approached” (προσεληλύθατε) Mount Zion, where angels are gathered with the “assembly of the firstborn” (12:23) in the presence of God. They have also “approached” Jesus’ own “blood of sprinkling” (αἵματι ῥαντισμοῦ, 12:24) – a term which not only harkens back to the blood sprinkled by Moses when inaugurating the first covenant (9:19, 21) but also implies a liturgical approach to the Eucharistic blood of Jesus in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. The hearers are then exhorted to offer God “acceptable worship” (12:28) which is expressed during the liturgical assembly with an attitude of “reverence and awe” (12:28) and in daily life by virtuous behavior toward others (13:1-6). At a pivotal moment in this call to worship, the preacher reminds his community that “we have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat” (13:10) – a reminder which, coming near the end of the homily, is designed to shift the hearers’ focus directly to the Eucharistic meal they will soon share. A call to offer God a regular “sacrifice of praise” (θυσίαν αινέσεως, 13:15) is followed in 13:20-21 by a closing benediction in which the preacher once again sets before his audience the image of the “blood of

³¹⁵ Here I am indebted to Pfitzner (*Hebrews* 182-208), who discerns in the concluding segment of the sermon a call to heavenly worship.

the eternal covenant” (αἷματι διαθήκης αἰωνίου, 13:20). The overall function of these images and phrases – “we have an altar,” “sacrifice of praise,” “blood of the eternal covenant” – is to transition the community from reflecting on the word of God to celebrating the Lord’s Supper. Thus after a few concluding remarks (13:22-25) the homily comes to an end.

The structure of the sermon can therefore be expressed in the following manner:

Prologue (1:1-4)
 Call to worship Christ, superior to the angels (1:5-2:18)
 First exhortation to fidelity and perseverance (3:1-15)
 Negative example of the wilderness generation (3:16-4:13)
 Excursus: Exhortation to approach Christ, the merciful priest (4:14-16)
 First (minor) exposition on Christ’s priesthood (5:1-10)
 Warnings, chastisements and encouragements, Part I (5:11-6:20)
 Second (major) exposition on Christ’s priesthood and sacrifice (7:1-10:18)
 Warnings, chastisements and encouragements, Part II (10:19-39)
 Positive example of the heroes of faith (11:1-40)
 Second exhortation to fidelity and perseverance (12:1-17)
 Call to worship and closing benediction (12:18-13:21)
 Concluding remarks (13:22-25)

Moreover, this structure follows a more-or-less chiasmic pattern:

A Prologue (1:1-4)
 B Call to worship Christ, superior to the angels (1:5-2:18)
 C First exhortation to fidelity and perseverance (3:1-15)
 D Negative example of the wilderness generation (3:16-4:13)
 [EXCURSUS: Exhortation to approach Christ, the merciful priest (4:14-16)
 First (minor) exposition on Christ’s priesthood (5:1-10)]
 E Warnings, chastisements and encouragements, Part I (5:11-6:20)

- F Second (major) exposition on Christ's priesthood and sacrifice (7:1-10:18)
- E' Warnings, chastisements and encouragements, Part II (10:19-39)
- D' Positive example of the heroes of faith (11:1-40)
- C' Second exhortation to fidelity and perseverance (12:1-17)
- B' Call to worship and closing benediction (12:18-13:21)
- A' Concluding remarks (13:22-25)

As this schema indicates, 4:14-5:10 constitutes an exception to the otherwise neatly chiasmic arrangement of the text. The presence of such an exception is not surprising. As Attridge points out:

Some of the difficulty in analyzing the structure of Hebrews is due not to the lack of structural indices, but to their overabundance. Hebrews constantly foreshadows themes that receive fuller treatment elsewhere and frequently provides brief summaries that resume and refocus earlier developments. Any structural scheme captures only a portion of this web of interrelationships and does only partial justice to the complexity of the work.³¹⁶

Indeed, I make no claim that the schema I have proposed fully encapsulates the complex “web of interrelationships” found in Hebrews. Nonetheless, I believe that this structure: faithfully maps out the broad contours of the sermon; demonstrates the author’s literary skill (especially in his use of chiasmic argumentation); and, most significantly for this study, draws attention to the liturgical dimensions of the text and the ways in which the author has organically incorporated subtle but consistent references to the Eucharist at pivotal points in his discourse. As the following chapter will make clear, these Eucharistic references serve an important, albeit implicit, role in the preacher’s rhetorical strategy.

³¹⁶ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 16-17.

8. Summary

In our survey of critical issues in the study of Hebrews, we have seen that formulating confident answers to many of the basic questions exegetes ask of a biblical text is a formidable task. The question of authorship is almost impossible to answer. Ascertaining the date of Hebrews' composition is almost equally difficult; we can only say with complete confidence is that the text was written roughly between 60 and 90 CE. Nevertheless, because the internal evidence of the text suggests a clear break between Christianity and Judaism, a date in the mid-80s seems most credible. Identifying the document's audience and destination is challenging, although it is possible to set forth a credible hypothesis, as I have done in postulating a mixed audience of Jewish and Gentile Christians living in the environs of Rome. The issue of genre is a much easier matter to address. Although Hebrews has an epistolary conclusion, it is not a letter; nor is it a theological treatise, despite its profound doctrinal content. The exhortatory character of the composition, not to mention its self-designation as a "word of exhortation" (13:22; cf. Acts 13:15), enables us to identify the document as a homily. Lastly, as regards the purpose for which this homily was written, we have seen that its author was concerned to persuade his hearers to maintain fidelity in their Christian commitment and refrain from embracing an alternative religious system, most likely that of Judaism.

In light of the material we have covered in this chapter, I offer the following summary: Hebrews was a homily written by an anonymous Christian theologian and pastor at some point between 60 and 90 CE (most likely ca. 80-90) to a group of predominantly Jewish Christians (but also including a number of Gentile "god-fearers") living in Rome, in order (a) to persuade them of the superiority and all-sufficiency of Christ's atoning sacrifice and of the need to remain faithful to Christian belief and practice, and (b) to dissuade them from abandoning the Christian

worshipping assembly and reverting to or embracing Jewish forms of worship. Both the homiletic character and the literary structure of Hebrews suggests that the document was intended to be read aloud at public worship, most likely at a celebration of the Eucharist. Furthermore, Hebrews' genre (homily) and its markedly cultic content combine to set forth this document as a paradigmatic example of the twofold relationship (formal and material) between the Bible and the liturgy, which we discussed extensively in the previous chapter. Hebrews was written for liturgical proclamation, and its author was keenly interested in the theology of worship. These characteristics lend credence to the notion of reading Hebrews from a liturgical and Eucharistic perspective, a heuristic device for interpreting the document which I contend makes the best sense of the text. In particular, the structure of Hebrews which I proposed above points to the plausibility of such a reading. The text begins with a call to worship and ends on a similar note. In between, a series of exhortations to fidelity lead toward a central argument about the all-sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice and priestly mediation. It is very striking that this central argument is bracketed with warnings against apostasy – warnings which appear to contain references to the Eucharist. Hebrews' homiletic genre, its pronounced interest in cultic matters, and its literary structure are all foundational steps toward demonstrating the plausibility of individual Eucharistic references in the sermon. It is the demonstration of these references to which we now turn.

CHAPTER FOUR EUCCHARISTIC IMAGERY IN HEBREWS

1. Introduction

We come now to the heart of our quest to identify Eucharistic content in Hebrews. Our study thus far has unfolded in three preparatory stages. In Chapter One I explored the “state of the question” among contemporary scholars. My survey of modern scholarship on this issue demonstrated that most exegetes believe that the author of Hebrews was silent about the Lord’s Supper. A minority (albeit a vocal one) hold that the writer was antagonistic toward Eucharistic faith and practice. However, an equally vociferous minority argue that the Eucharist occupied a central place in the author’s theology and rhetorical strategy. Arguing against those in the “negativist” camp (particularly Williamson), I asserted that the textual evidence in Hebrews suggests that the author came from a mainstream Christian background which would hardly have been hostile to or ignorant of the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Against the “agnostics” who maintain that the writer of Hebrews manifested no interest in the Eucharist because of his ostensible silence on the topic, I contended (in anticipation of a broader discussion of genre in Chapter Three) that the author was writing his text for proclamation within a Eucharistic liturgy. This intended setting for Hebrews’ public reading would have obviated the need for more explicit references to a liturgical rite which the audience was gathered to celebrate. Finally, I sided with those who detect the presence of Eucharistic references and theology in Hebrews, and proposed that reading this document through a liturgical – specifically, Eucharistic – lens best enables us to make sense of the author’s theology and purpose.

In Chapter Two I set forth the evidence for credibly undertaking such a reading of Hebrews by situating the text within the broader literary and ritual milieu of first century

Christianity. Drawing on the insights of Scott Hahn, I highlighted a twofold relationship between the Bible and the liturgy that is (a) material, insofar as the content of many biblical writings is concerned with cultic matters, and (b) formal, insofar as the Scriptures were largely composed for public reading in a ritual setting. I then proceeded to show that the typical ritual setting for the public reading of Christian literature (including what ultimately became the canonical NT) was the communal meal, a meal best described and understood as Eucharistic. From this chain of evidence I argued that, if the NT documents were written for proclamation in a liturgical setting, and if, furthermore, the most common liturgical gathering for first century Christians was the ritual Eucharistic meal, then Hebrews was most likely composed for public reading at a Eucharist.

The credibility of this syllogistic argument depends, to a large degree, on our ability to situate Hebrews within the mainstream of the emerging Christian movement. Had the provenance of the document been within a community on the fringes of early Christianity, it would be difficult to fit the text into a model such as that proposed in Chapter Two. However, this does not appear to be the case, as my extensive survey of critical issues in Chapter Three made clear. Although the exact identity of Hebrews' author will probably remain forever unknown to us, we can confidently say that he saw himself as a faithful conduit of established tradition (Heb 2:3-4; 6:1-2). The community to whom he wrote may well have been located in Rome, as I also argued in the previous chapter. If this was the case, then it is reasonable to suppose that an audience located in a city so closely associated with the apostles Peter and Paul (as well as with the Gospel of Mark) would be familiar with the basic traditions about Jesus, including the accounts of the Last Supper and the institution of the Eucharistic meal.³¹⁷

³¹⁷ On a possible relationship between Hebrews and the Gospel of Mark, see Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 10-11. On the possible Roman provenance of Mark's gospel, see Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 41-46; James R. Edwards, *The*

Our survey of critical issues in Chapter Three also yielded the crucial identification of Hebrews' genre. I offered evidence that the document is best understood as a sermon or homily, a conclusion supported by the majority of exegetes. I further argued that the author wrote his sermon to simultaneously castigate and encourage a community that had become lax in its commitment to Jesus Christ. In particular, he sought to address the potentially catastrophic decline in attendance at worship (10:25) by arguing in the central section of his sermon (7:1-10:18) for the superiority of Jesus' priesthood (7:1-28) and sacrifice (9:1-10:18). The internal evidence suggests that some members of the community were simply drifting away (2:1), while others were tempted to embrace or revert to some form of Jewish faith and practice. Either way, the hearers were placing themselves at risk of apostasy, which the preacher condemned in no uncertain terms (6:4-8; 10:26-31).

My assessment of these aspects of the author's argument is fairly uncontroversial. It is widely accepted that the preacher argued strongly for the superiority of Jesus' priesthood and sacrifice over against the sacerdotal and sacrificial institutions of Judaism. Likewise, scholars generally agree that the author sought to counter his audience's tendency toward apathy, drifting away, and even outright apostasy by urging them toward greater fidelity, including fidelity to communal worship (10:25). However, the question must be asked: if the preacher was trying to persuade his hearers that (a) Christ possesses a superior priesthood/sacrifice, and (b) they should remain faithful to the worshipping assembly, should there not be a thread that links these two elements of argumentation together? In other words, if the author of Hebrews was worried that his audience was undervaluing the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice, might his insistence that they not neglect to meet together (10:25) somehow be aimed at countering their seeming inability to

Gospel According to Mark (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 5; R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 36-39; and Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 11-12.

appreciate the value of Christ's priestly act of redemption? I contend that this question can be answered in the affirmative, especially if the purpose of their communal assembly was to liturgically recall and make present the sacrifice of Jesus Christ in the Eucharistic meal. It is my assertion that the preacher, writing to a community gathered precisely for this purpose, wished to remind his audience not only that Jesus' priestly and sacrificial roles were superior to their Jewish counterparts, but also that the community possessed a ritual means of "approaching" their priest and victim (4:16; 10:22, 12:22-24) in their liturgical worship.³¹⁸ Indeed, if we read Hebrews through a Eucharistic prism, the preacher's twofold affirmation "We have such a high priest" (8:1) and "We have an altar" (13:10) attains a degree of theological comprehensibility which surpasses other attempts to explain its significance.³¹⁹ The typical reading of Hebrews – which focuses on the author's twofold rhetorical strategy of teaching his audience about Christ's superiority and exhorting them to remain faithful to the Christian commitment – is accurate as far as it goes. In my opinion, however, it is incomplete. The reading which I am proposing allows for a deeper understanding of the text.

All of this assumes, of course, that the heuristic device of reading and interpreting Hebrews Eucharistically is a credible approach to the text. Given that early Christian literature was typically read at cultic meals, there is a good likelihood that Hebrews was written for a Eucharistic gathering. But are there other possibilities? Even today, in ecclesial communities where the celebration of the Lord's Supper holds primacy of place among liturgical celebrations,

³¹⁸ It might be asked whether the homilist would not be "preaching to the choir" if he is addressing those who are intentionally gathered for a Eucharistic celebration. The very fact that they are present to hear the homily might suggest that they are not like those who have developed the habit of absenting themselves from community gatherings (10:25). However, like any local congregation at any point in time and space, the audience of Hebrews most likely consisted of the "committed faithful" as well as the "lukewarm." In my view, the preacher's rhetoric is designed in part to stave off further bleeding from the latter group.

³¹⁹ E.g., that Christ's priestly intercession and the Christian "altar" are located exclusively in the heavenly realm – a claim I will address in greater detail below.

it is not the *only* form of public worship in which the Scriptures are read aloud. Indeed, in the Catholic Church there are many settings in which the Bible is read publicly – in the Liturgy of the Hours, in communal celebrations of such sacraments as baptism, reconciliation, and anointing, and so forth. Is it not possible that Hebrews may have been composed for public reading at a gathering for worship other than the Lord’s Supper? Possible, yes – but a number of textual indicators point to the likelihood that the Eucharist was, in fact, the liturgical venue for which Hebrews was written. The sermon contains numerous statements that could be interpreted as referring to the Eucharist and as indicative of a Eucharistic milieu in which Hebrews was meant to be read. They include the reference to tasting the “heavenly gift” (6:4); the subsequent mention of Jesus as the high priest who offered “gifts” and “sacrifices” (8:3); the linkage between Christ’s sacrifice and the “new covenant” (8:8-13; 9:15; 10:16); multiple references to the “blood of the covenant” (9:20; 10:29; 13:21); allusions to the “body” (10:10), “flesh” (10:20), and “blood” (9:14; 10:19; 12:24) of Christ; the cultic notion of “approach” (4:16; 10:22; 12:22); the Christian “altar” from which the Jewish priests have no right to eat (13:10); and the closing exhortation to the community to offer a “sacrifice of praise” (13:15). Taken separately, one could easily dismiss the Eucharistic character of this or that reference – as indeed many scholars have done. Considered as a whole, however, and in light of the author’s central argument, these tantalizingly implicit references cohere in such a way as to strongly suggest the innate credibility of engaging Hebrews liturgically and eucharistically.

In this chapter I set forth my central argument that Hebrews was a Eucharistic homily that abounds in implicit references to the Lord’s Supper. After presenting a reiteration of those structural elements of the sermon that indicate its author’s theological interest in liturgy and the Eucharist, I offer an exegetical study of seven key passages (6:4-8; 8:7-13; 9:11-22; 10:19-29;

12:22-24; 13:7-17; 13:20-21) that are best interpreted from a Eucharistic standpoint. I begin by looking at the first of two warnings against apostasy in 6:4-8. In this short passage the preacher excludes the possibility of repentance for apostates once they have been “enlightened” and “tasted the heavenly gift.” It is my contention that “enlightenment” and the “heavenly gift” refer to the initiatory sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, respectively. I then examine his second warning against apostasy in 10:19-31. I assert that the preacher has not only bracketed his central argument with these warnings (6:4-8; 10:19-31) but also has inserted references, in both cases, to the Eucharist in such a way as to remind his audience that apostasy from the Christian faith includes a rejection of Jesus’ Eucharistic body and blood. In the first warning, the author evokes the imagery of baptism (“enlightenment”) and Eucharist (“tasting the heavenly gift”) to remind his hearers that solemn initiation into the community carries grave consequences if they walk away from their faith commitment. In the second, he claims that those who *have* walked away are guilty of having “spurned” the Son of God and profaned the “blood of the covenant” (10:29) – the latter a likely reference to the Eucharist, which apostates treat as a common thing by renouncing the worshipping assembly. Other liturgical and sacramental references in this section of warnings and exhortations (10:19-22), along with the author’s key statement in 10:25 about fidelity to the worshipping assembly, bolster the overall case for a Eucharistic reading of the material in 6:4-8 and 10:19-31.

A Eucharistic reading of these bracketing sections is all the more plausible when one considers the all-important intervening material – the author’s central argument regarding the priesthood and sacrifice of Jesus Christ (7:1-10:18). I examine two key texts from this central section of the homily, both of which attain deeper theological significance when interpreted with reference to the Eucharist. First, I highlight the connection between Christ’s sacrifice and the

“new covenant” prophesied by Jeremiah (8:8-13; 9:15) – a link that, outside of Hebrews, only appears in the NT in the Eucharistic institution narratives of Paul (1 Cor 11:25) and Luke (Luke 22:20).³²⁰ Second, I draw attention to the author’s significant use of the clause “This is the blood of the covenant” at 9:20, arguing that the preacher has subtly altered the citation of LXX Exod 24:8 in order to align it more closely with the Eucharistic words of institution over the cup in the Markan-Matthean accounts (cf. Mark 14:24; Matt 26:28). It is striking that the texts analyzed here allude to themes found in two separate strands of Eucharistic tradition – the Pauline-Lukan strand (Heb 8:7-13) and the Markan-Matthean strand (Heb 9:20).

The next occurrence of liturgical material in the sermon begins at 12:18-24, the opening section of a long “call to worship” which brings the homily to its conclusion. I argue that the preacher here reminds his community that their Eucharistic worship has enabled them to cultically draw near to the heavenly realm by means of their encounter with the blood of Jesus (12:24). An exhortation to offer to God “acceptable worship” (12:28) sets the stage for the paraenesis in 13:1-19 that is both ethical and liturgical in content. Indeed, it is in this section of the homily that I identify what I consider to be one of the author’s most significant Eucharistic statements, namely his assertion in 13:10 that “we have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat.” I offer evidence that this statement, strategically placed near the conclusion of the sermon, both recapitulates the author’s fundamental argument in 7:1-10:18 and prepares his audience for the Eucharistic celebration that will follow the public reading of his homily. The function of 13:10 as a transition to the enactment of the Lord’s Supper is accentuated by an exhortation to offer a “sacrifice of praise” in 13:15 and by the closing

³²⁰ Paul also refers to the “new covenant” in 2 Cor 3:6, but this is not within the context of a discussion of Christ’s sacrificial death.

benediction in 13:20-21, in which the preacher once more refers to the “blood of the (eternal) covenant” (13:21).

The ultimate goal of this chapter’s exegetical study is twofold. First, a careful examination of the aforementioned passages reveals the plausibility of a Eucharistic interpretation of their content, especially when the individual passages are read in tandem; a Eucharistic reading of each particular text gains credence when one considers their cumulative force. Second, this analysis of individual texts highlights the overall liturgical and Eucharistic orientation of Hebrews. It not only shows forth the reasonableness of reading Hebrews through the lens of the Eucharist but also demonstrates that Hebrews fits neatly into the liturgical paradigm of the NT as set forth in Chapter Two. First, Hebrews was a homily written for proclamation at the Eucharistic liturgy; thus it stands as a prime example of the formal relationship between Scripture and the liturgy, in which texts ultimately included in the biblical canon were first composed for public liturgical proclamation. Second, worship – including the Eucharistic celebration – was a key aspect of the author’s theological interest; therefore Hebrews also serves as an excellent model of the material relationship between Scripture and liturgy, in which the content of biblical writings is focused to some degree on matters of ritual and worship.

2. The Literary and Theological Structure of Hebrews Revisited

In the previous chapter I set forth a proposed structure for Hebrews which offers evidence that the sermon exhibits a basically chiasmic structure centered on the exposition of Christ’s priesthood and sacrifice in 7:1-10:18. The author’s primary argument about the superiority of Christ and his sacrificial offering of himself over the priesthood and animal sacrifices of Judaism is bracketed on either side (5:11-6:20; 10:19-39) by a set of admonitions and counsels in which, among other things, the preacher warns his hearers about the danger of apostasy. This material,

in turn, is bookended by two series of examples, one negative (3:16-4:13) and one positive (11:1-40), from salvation history. These object lessons are intended, respectively, to warn the audience against hardening their hearts to God's word, and to encourage them to maintain an attitude of faith and trust in God.³²¹ On either side of the two example sections is an encouragement to the audience to persevere in fidelity to Christ (3:1-15; 12:1-17). A summons to worship both begins (1:5-2:18) and concludes (12:18-13:21) the body of the homily, while a theologically rich prologue (1:1-4) opens it and a series of greetings (13:22-25) brings it to an end.

What is striking about this schema is that, at almost every stage of the homily's development, the author weaves cultic motifs into his exposition. It is crucial to reiterate and emphasize this point before proceeding to an analysis of individual passages in Hebrews which may contain Eucharistic imagery. The various Eucharistic references which I detect in the homily are not alien intrusions into a text otherwise unconcerned with Christian worship, nor are they the products of an overactive "eisegetical" imagination, desperate to find the Eucharist where it does not exist. Rather, they emerge organically in a text that is saturated with liturgical content and appears to have been directed to a worshipping assembly gathered for the Lord's Supper. Let us look again at my proposed structure for the sermon, this time with an emphasis on its liturgical elements:

- A Prologue (1:1-4) – God **speaks to us (present-day worshippers)** through his Son
- B **Call to worship Christ**, superior to the angels (1:5-2:18)
- C First exhortation to fidelity and perseverance (3:1-15) – audience should **listen to the word of God**

³²¹ As also noted in the preceding chapter, the otherwise neat chiasmic structure of the homily is offset slightly by the material in 4:14-5:10, in which the author introduces the subject of Christ's priesthood and his likeness to Melchizedek, only to defer developing this subject until 7:1.

D Negative example of the wilderness generation (3:16-4:13) – they did not **listen to God’s word** with faith

[EXCURSUS: Exhortation to **approach** Christ, the merciful **priest** (4:14-16)

First (minor) exposition on Christ’s **priesthood** (5:1-10)]

E Warnings, chastisements and encouragements, Part I (5:11-6:20) – no repentance for those who have already **“tasted the heavenly gift”**

F Second (major) exposition on Christ’s **priesthood and sacrifice** (7:1-10:18)

E’ Warnings, chastisements, and encouragements, Part II (10:19-39) – do not profane the **“blood of the covenant”**

D’ Positive example of the heroes of faith (11:1-40) – audience should imitate the faith of those who did **listen to God’s word**

C’ Second exhortation to fidelity and perseverance (12:1-17)

B’ **Call to worship and closing benediction** (12:18-13:21)

A’ Concluding remarks (13:22-25)

The words and phrases highlighted in bold print indicate themes in the sermon that specifically relate to matters of liturgy and worship. As this outline suggests, the homilist who wrote Hebrews not only composed a logically structured sermon but did so with the express intention of addressing a community in a cultic setting. At the outset of the homily, the audience is exhorted to join in the worship of the angels (1:6) whom the preacher identifies as God’s “ministering spirits for service” (λειτουργικὰ πνεύματα εἰς διακονίαν) in 1:14, employing the cultically significant term λειτουργικός in reference to the angels. The hearers of the sermon are to attend all the more closely to what they have heard (2:1), that is, the message about Jesus, who continues to address his brothers and sisters in the liturgical *assembly* (2:12, quoting Ps. 22:22

[LXX 21:23]). They are told to maintain their focus on Jesus (3:1-6) and not fail to listen to the voice of God speaking to them (3:7-15) as the wilderness generation did (3:16-4:13). The preacher's emphasis on listening to the word of God in sections 3:1-15 and 3:16-4:13 would have especially resonated with an audience that heard the sermon proclaimed in a ritual setting, where the scriptural word of God was often read aloud.³²² Beginning at 4:14, the focus of the homily shifts from God's word to the concept of priesthood and sacrifice. Much of the subsequent liturgical content in the homily is employed by the writer to demonstrate the superiority of Jesus' priesthood and once-for-all sacrifice over the Jewish priesthood and sacrificial offerings. Some of it, however, is incorporated into the sermon in an effort to rouse the weary audience to a greater zeal for participation in their own worshipping assembly (10:25). It was in the Christian assembly that the celebration of the Lord's Supper provided believers with a means of ritually encountering Jesus Christ and remembering his saving death on their behalf. Throughout Hebrews, the preacher drops subtle hints as to the meaning of their Eucharistic gathering. It is to these specifically Eucharistic passages that we now turn our attention.

3. Particular Eucharistic References and Images

a. The Heavenly Gift (6:4)

The first passage in Hebrews in which a possible reference to the Eucharist occurs is 6:4. At the outset of a stern warning about the dangers of apostasy, the preacher states, "For it is impossible for those who have once been *enlightened* (φωτισθέντας) and have *tasted the heavenly gift* (γευσαμένους τε τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου). . . to restore them again to repentance" (6:4, 6; emphasis added). Commentators are divided as to whether there are

³²² Given the preacher's extensive use of Psalms 95 (3:7-4:11) and 110 (1:13; 5:6; 7:17, 22) and Jer 31:31-34 (8:7-13; 10:16-17) it is tempting to speculate that these texts may have been read aloud to the community prior to the proclamation of the homily.

sacramental references here. Some find an allusion to baptism in the word “enlightened” and to the Eucharist in the mention of “having tasted the heavenly gift.”³²³ Others see these phrases as more general terms for embracing faith in Christ and or experiencing God’s bestowal of salvation, respectively.³²⁴ Against this more generalized interpretation stands the later usage of both terms in early patristic writings to describe baptism and Eucharist.³²⁵

Before setting forth my arguments in favor of a Eucharistic interpretation of the phrase *δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου*, it will be helpful to briefly situate it within the context of a broader unit (5:11-6:12), wherein the homilist employs a rhetorical strategy of warning and encouragement to capture his audience’s attention. Any decision about the meaning of *δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου* must necessarily take into account the surrounding material, some of which lends support to a Eucharistic reference in 6:4.

5:11 About him we have much to say, and it is difficult to explain, since you have become sluggish in your understanding. 12 Although you should be teachers by this time, you need someone to teach you again about the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, 13 for everyone who lives on milk is unacquainted with the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. 14 But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties of perception have been trained to discern both good and evil. **6:1** Therefore, let us move on toward maturity, leaving behind the elementary teachings about Christ, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith in God, 2 of instruction about baptisms and of the laying on of hands, and of the resurrection from the dead and of eternal judgment. 3 And we will do this if God allows it. 4 For it is impossible for those who have once been enlightened and have tasted the heavenly gift and have become partners of the Holy Spirit 5 and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, 6 and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, because they are crucifying the Son of God anew and holding him up to contempt. 7 Soil that drinks up the rain that continually falls upon it and brings

³²³ E.g. Andriessen, “L’Eucharistie dans l’Épître aux Hébreux,” 270-72; Heil, *Worship*, 92; Kereszty, “Eucharist,” 160-161.

³²⁴ E.g. Williamson, “Eucharist,” 303.

³²⁵ As we will see below, *δωρεά* occurs in Eucharistic contexts in 1 Clement and in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch. If Hebrews was written in the 80-90 CE timeframe, the early patristic usage of the term follows its appearance in Hebrews by a decade or less in the case of Clement (writing ca. 96 CE) and by twenty to thirty years in the case of Ignatius (writing ca. 108-110 CE). Justin, writing in the mid-second century, employs *φωτίζω* as a designation for baptism (*Apol.* 61:12, *Dial.* 122:5). See Hans Conzelmann, “*φῶς κτλ.*,” *TDNT* 9:357-58.

forth a crop that is beneficial to those for whom it is cultivated receives a blessing from God. 8 But if it yields thorns and thistles, it is useless and close to being cursed; its end is to be burned. 9 Even though we speak in this manner, beloved, we are confident of better things about you, things belonging to salvation. 10 For God is not so unjust as to forget your work and the love that you showed for his name by serving the holy ones, and continuing to serve them. 11 And we desire each of you to demonstrate the same fervor for the full assurance of hope until the end, 12 so that you may not become sluggish, but imitators of those who inherit the promises through faith and patience.

Having introduced the topic of Christ's priesthood and its likeness to that of Melchizedek in 4:14-5:10, the author of Hebrews takes his hearers on an apparent detour from the central focus of his sermon in 5:11-6:20. This broader section is best split into two subsections, the first of which (5:11-6:12) is characterized by the bracketing function of the word *ᾠθροῦς* ("sluggish") in 5:11 and 6:12. The reason for the preacher's deviation from his primary focus on Christ's priesthood is set forth in v. 11: "About him³²⁶ we have much to say, and it is difficult to explain, since you have become sluggish in your understanding." Prior to introducing the linchpin argument of the homily, the author must ensure that he has the full attention of his audience, who at this point would have been listening to the discourse for about fifteen minutes.³²⁷ Moreover, he is concerned to highlight the importance of the message that will follow by emphasizing the gravity of failing to properly comprehend and appropriate its meaning. To this end he employs a pedagogical strategy of reverse psychology in 5:11-14, suggesting that his audience may not be capable of following the complex argument that he is about to unfold. His assertion that the hearers lack the capacity to grasp his message is designed to elicit the opposite response ("Wait a minute! We are certainly capable of understanding what you have to say!").³²⁸ That the preacher

³²⁶ Commentators are divided as to whether *Περί οὗ* in v. 11 refers to priesthood in general, to Melchizedek and his priesthood specifically, or to Jesus. I have chosen to translate *οὗ* as "him" on the basis of my belief that Melchizedek, and not priesthood in general, is the referent of *οὗ*. The immediately preceding verse refers to Melchizedek, who will be reintroduced in 6:20 and will serve as a focal point of comparison with Jesus in 7:1-28.

³²⁷ Koester, *Hebrews*, 307.

³²⁸ See Attridge, *Hebrews*, 157; Koester, *Hebrews*, 308; Long, *Hebrews*, 75.

attempts to get a rise out of his audience here becomes clear in 6:1 when, after having chided them for their sluggishness and immaturity in the preceding verses, he urges them to “move on toward maturity,” that is, to strive for a knowledge of Jesus Christ and the Christian life that goes beyond the basics of catechetical instruction. Those basics are listed in 6:1-2: repentance from dead works, faith in God, instruction about baptisms and the laying on of hands, resurrection from the dead, and eternal judgment. The homilist is not suggesting that his hearers “leave behind” these foundational teachings in the sense of rejecting them; rather, he insists that the community should not need to be continually reminded of the elementary points they learned when they were first instructed in the faith, just as a mathematics professor teaching advanced calculus should not have to reeducate her students about basic addition and subtraction. In 7:1-10:18 the preacher will give his congregation an advanced lesson in Christology and soteriology, and they must be prepared to exercise their spiritual and intellectual powers at a higher level.

Likewise, the hearers of Hebrews must be aware of the grave consequences that would ensue should they willfully reject the spiritual gifts they have received through their initiation into the Christian community. To this end, the preacher offers a dire admonition against apostasy in 6:4-8. He flatly states in 6:6 that it is “impossible” to restore apostates to repentance once they have “been enlightened and have tasted the heavenly gift and have become partners of the Holy Spirit and have tasted the powers of the age to come” (6:4-5).³²⁹ The homilist offers a supporting illustration in vv. 7-8 before dramatically changing his tone in v. 9: “Even though we speak in this manner, beloved, we are confident of better things about you, things belonging to salvation.”

³²⁹ The definitiveness and seeming harshness with which the author of Hebrews appears to exclude the possibility of post-baptismal repentance for sinners has engendered much discussion, debate and concern within the church, from the patristic period to the present day. Fortunately, this issue is not crucial to our pursuit of Eucharistic imagery in the text; indeed, any attempt to treat it here would unnecessarily divert us from the purposes of our study. See Attridge, *Hebrews*, 167-169; Koester, *Hebrews*, 318-323 for a helpful analysis of the topic.

In the *captatio benevolentiae* that begins with v. 9 and continues on through v. 12 and into the next subsection, the author expresses confidence that his hearers will not succumb to the evil of apostasy or suffer its horrific consequences. Rather, their good works and their love for God, demonstrated through service to the “holy ones,” has already put them in good stead, and, if they persevere in faith, hope, and love, they can anticipate sharing the lot of “those who inherit the promises” (6:12).

The message of Hebrews 5:11-6:12 can thus be summed up as follows: the preacher goads his audience by suggesting that they have become “sluggish” (νωθρός) and incapable of grasping his message (5:11-14); exhorts them to strive for theological maturity, moving beyond the basics that they learned at the time of their initiation (6:1-3); warns them that repentance is impossible for apostates who have been “enlightened,” “tasted the heavenly gift,” and become “partners of the Holy Spirit” (6:4-6); offers an illustration from the realm of agriculture to buttress his point (6:7-8); asserts confidence that his hearers will not fall away (6:9-12); and concludes by expressing the desire that they avoid becoming “sluggish” (νωθρός). Within this section there is a reference to having “tasted the heavenly gift” (γευσάμενους τε τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου). Earlier, I suggested that the “heavenly gift” (δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου) is a reference to the Eucharist. The first – and indeed, most significant – indicator that the preacher had the Eucharist in mind is to be found in the context of the surrounding verses, which abound in references to Christian initiation.

We have seen that immediately prior to delivering his warning against apostasy in 6:4-6, the author encouraged his hearers to be ready to move beyond the basic elements of their Christian faith. Among these elements are “repentance (μετανοίας) from dead works” and “instruction about baptisms (βαπτισμῶν) and the laying on of hands (ἐπιθέσεώς τε χειρῶν)” (6:1-

2). Elsewhere in the NT these words and phrases are employed in contexts related to Christian initiation. For example, in Acts 19:1-7 Luke describes an episode in which Paul arrives in Ephesus and encounters a group of Christian believers who had undergone the “baptism of repentance” (βάπτισμα μετανοίας) offered by John the Baptist (19:4), but had neither received Christian baptism nor the knowledge and experience of the Holy Spirit that was imparted through the laying on of hands (19:2-3, 6). In response, Paul has these disciples baptized in the name of Jesus (ἐβαπτίσθησαν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ, 19:5) and lays hands on them (ἐπιθέντος αὐτοῖς τοῦ Παύλου χεῖρας, 19:6). In this passage baptism followed by the laying on of hands is presented as a ritual of Christian initiation. Is the author of Hebrews evoking these initiatory rites in 6:2 when he refers to “instruction about baptisms and the laying on of hands” (βαπτισμῶν διδαχὴν ἐπιθέσεώς τε χειρῶν)? Against this possibility, some commentators have noted that Hebrews unusually uses the plural form βαπτισμῶν here rather than the singular βάπτισμα, which is more commonly used in the NT to refer to Christian baptism.³³⁰ It is possible that the homilist is not speaking about the Christian sacrament³³¹ in particular, but about ancient ceremonial washings in general – a category that would include not only Christian baptism but such rites as the baptism of John, Jewish proselyte baptism, the ritual lustrations practiced in the Qumran community, etc. However, given that the context of Heb 6:2 is catechetical instruction, it is most likely that the author uses the plural βαπτισμῶν in order to call to mind the distinction that his audience was once taught between Christian baptism and other ritual washings.³³² As for the phrase “laying on of hands” (ἐπιθέσεώς τε χειρῶν), this terminology occurs at other points in

³³⁰ See, e.g., Attridge, *Hebrews*, 164; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 315-16; Johnson, *Hebrews*, 159.

³³¹ With regard to my use of the term “sacrament,” see my comments in Chapter One, footnote 26.

³³² This is the solution favored by Ellingworth (*Epistle to the Hebrews*, 315) and Johnson (*Hebrews* 159).

the NT and the LXX to describe, variously, healing (e.g. Mark 5:23; 6:5; Luke 4:40; Acts 9:12), commissioning (Num 27:18; Deut 34:9; Acts 13:3), ordination (Acts 6:6; 1 Tim 4:14; 5:22; 2 Tim 1:6), and the reception of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:17-19; 19:6).³³³ It is probable that the author of Hebrews has this final usage in mind when he refers to “instruction about. . . the laying on of hands,” for two reasons. First, he employs the term in direct connection with baptism: βαπτισμῶν διδασχῆν ἐπιθέσεώς τε χειρῶν. Second, given the overall context of 6:1-2 (“the elementary teachings about Christ,” τῆς ἀρχῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ λόγον), it makes most sense to understand ἐπιθέσεώς τε χειρῶν as a reference to the giving of the Holy Spirit, as instruction about such matters as ministerial ordination would be less likely to fall under the rubric of “elementary teaching.”

It therefore seems likely that in his adumbration of the basic elements of Christian instruction in 6:1-2, the author refers to baptism and the related laying on of hands, which was understood to impart the Holy Spirit to believers. This is significant for interpreting 6:4, in which the preacher launches into his warning about the consequences of apostasy. As we have seen, he states in this verse that repentance is impossible for those who have “once been enlightened (φωτισθέντας) and have tasted the heavenly gift (γευσαμένους τε τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου) and have become partners of the Holy Spirit (μετόχους γενηθέντας πνεύματος ἁγίου).” What did the preacher have in mind with the triad – enlightenment, tasting of the heavenly gift, and partnership with the Holy Spirit? The proximity of *this* list to the references to baptism and the laying on of hands in 6:2 suggests that the homilist returns to the same ideas in 6:4. Thus, having been “enlightened” (φωτισθέντας) and become “partners in the Holy Spirit”

³³³ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 164-65; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 316. I use the term “ordination” to indicate official appointment to a ministerial role by means of the ritual gesture of the imposition of hands, as is implied in the NT texts cited above; I am not attempting to impose later ecclesial understandings of the term on the NT documents.

(μετόχους...πνεύματος ἁγίου) could well be understood as descriptions of baptism and the giving of the Spirit through the laying on of hands. Indeed, by the mid-second century, φωτισμός had become a technical term for Christian baptism, as evidenced in the writings of Justin.³³⁴ It is not impossible that, if the author of Hebrews was using φωτίζω to refer to baptism, his terminology could have influenced later usage among the early Fathers. This possibility is all the more credible if the imagery of “enlightenment” was already being employed during the first century in connection with the celebration of baptism.³³⁵ Granted, φωτίζω in 6:4 could refer more broadly to the believer’s experience of coming to faith in Jesus Christ, that is, of “having been enlightened” by the truth of the good news about Jesus. However, an allusion to baptism is also likely, even if the preacher was using φωτίζω in this more general sense as well. The homilist speaks of this “enlightenment” as having occurred “once” (ἅπαξ), which may refer to the unrepeatable character of Christian baptism. Moreover, he links being enlightened with being “made partners in the Holy Spirit” – a pairing that, as we saw in our analysis of 6:2, connotes the experience of Christian initiation in which a person is baptized and receives the Holy Spirit through the imposition of hands.

If, then, “having been enlightened” and “become partners of the Holy Spirit” in 6:4 can reasonably be interpreted as references to ritual Christian initiation, what of the third member of the triad, the tasting of the “heavenly gift” (δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου)? Is this term also related to the rituals of entrance into the Christian life? I contend that it is. In light of the other likely references to Christian initiation in Heb 6:2 and 4, the best explanation of the phrase

³³⁴ Justin, 1 *Apol* 61:12, 65:1. See Attridge, *Hebrews*, 169.

³³⁵ Attridge (*Hebrews* 169, n. 45) suggests that Eph 5:14, which uses the related word ἐπιφάσκω, might have been part of an ancient baptismal hymn. Additionally, Maxwell Johnson includes “enlightenment” as used in Heb 6:4, 10:32 and 1 Pet 2:9 among the “images and metaphors” for baptism found in the NT. See “The Apostolic Tradition,” in *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (Ed. Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 37.

γευμαίνοντες τε τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου is that the homilist refers to the first experience of *consuming the Eucharist* by newly baptized believers. Despite the paucity of information about Christian initiation in the first century, we know from the *Didache* that baptism was a prerequisite for participation in the Lord's Supper: "Let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist except those who have been baptized in the name of the Lord" (*Did.* 9:5). Some commentators detect an allusion to post-baptismal reception of the Eucharist in Acts 9:18b-19: "Then, having arisen, he [Saul] was baptized, and having received food, he regained his strength."³³⁶ Moreover, the verb γεύομαι occurs elsewhere in the NT in a Eucharistic context. In Acts 20:11 Paul is presented as presiding at a celebration of the Lord's Supper: "And having gone upstairs and broken bread (κλάσας τὸν ἄρτον) and eaten it (γευσάμενος), he [Paul] spoke for a considerable time until dawn and thus departed."³³⁷ The author of 1 Peter also employs a form of γεύομαι in 2:3 (εἰ ἐγεύσασθε ὅτι χρῆστος ὁ κύριος) in what is likely a Eucharistic context.³³⁸

³³⁶ Heil (*Meal Scenes in Luke-Acts*, 246) states, "Saul's sharing of meal hospitality in the house of Judas with Ananias and the other disciples at Damascus suggests Eucharistic connotations to the audience. Not that Saul's 'taking of food' in itself necessarily indicates a Eucharistic meal. But it occurs in the context of the meal fellowship he shared with the disciples at Damascus 'for some days' (9:19). Since the audience knows that the meal fellowship of an ideal believing community includes regular devotion to the Eucharistic breaking of the bread (2:42, 46), Saul's meal fellowship with the Damascus disciples for some days implies his sharing in their Eucharistic meals." LaVerdiere (*Breaking of the Bread*, 142), while less sanguine than Heil regarding the Eucharistic character of this text, nonetheless claims, "Eating with Ananias, Saul expressed solidarity and reconciliation with him. . . . Read in this way, the story of Saul's conversion is a very Eucharistic story. It is not that Paul's fast was a preparation for baptism, or that Paul's eating after being baptized was part of his initiation as a Christian. Later, in the second century, in the time of Justin Martyr, that would have been the case. As described by Luke, the conversion of Saul did not include a Eucharistic meal. The story of his conversion did say a great deal, however, about the solidarity and reconciliation implied in eating and drinking with others. In the context of Luke-Acts, that eating and drinking surely included meals where the Christians gathered as a church for the breaking of the bread."

³³⁷ See Heil, *Meal Scenes*, 283-291; LaVerdiere, *Breaking of the Bread*, 200-214. As I pointed out in Chapter One, the phrase κλάσει τοῦ ἄρτου is Luke's preferred term for the Lord's Supper, occurring in such eucharistically significant passages as Luke 24:13-35; Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7-12; 27:33-38.

³³⁸ Keating (*First and Second Peter, Jude*, 51): "Peter may intend to include here participation in the Eucharist in which the faithful taste the goodness of the Lord Jesus in his body and blood"; Senior (*1 Peter, Jude and 2 Peter*, 49): "Some commentators have suggested that the metaphors of nourishment and tasting may refer to the Eucharist, especially since the psalm [Psalm 34, alluded to in this verse] was often connected with the Eucharist in early Christianity."

The preacher's use of baptismally charged language as well as the verb γεύομαι in 6:4 strongly suggests that he had the Eucharist in mind when speaking of the "heavenly gift" (δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου). Although the term δωρεᾶς does not occur outside of Hebrews in the NT as a designation for the Lord's Supper,³³⁹ its usage in early patristic texts as an almost indisputable term for the Eucharist bolsters the case for identifying it with the Eucharist here. Clement of Rome, as we saw in Chapter Three, was familiar with Hebrews and quoted from the sermon in *1 Clement*, a document that may have been written within a decade of the sermon. It is noteworthy that Clement speaks of "offering the gifts" (προσενεγκόντας τὰ δῶρα) in *1 Clem* 44:4 as one of the duties of bishops; this is most likely a reference to their role in presiding over the Eucharist. Approximately ten years after Clement, we find Ignatius of Antioch (writing ca. 108-110 CE) referring to the Eucharist as the "gift of God" (δωρεᾶ τοῦ Θεοῦ) in *Smyrneans* 7:1.³⁴⁰ Assuming a date for Hebrews in the mid-80s, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the preacher is employing a term for the Eucharist that would be taken up by other writers within ten to twenty years of his own work.

³³⁹ At a later point in the homily, the preacher uses this term again what may be a double sense, one aspect of which is Eucharistic. In 8:3, he states, "Every high priest is appointed in order to offer both gifts and sacrifices (δῶρά τε καὶ θυσίας); thus it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer." The primary referent here is to Christ's sacrificial self-offering as a propitiation for the sins of humanity, as the homilist already made clear in 7:27: "He does not have need, as do the other high priests, to offer up a daily sacrifice for his own sins and then for those of the people; he did this once and for all *when he offered up himself*" (emphasis added). However, it is possible that the author also intended a Eucharistic meaning to this statement. He has already undertaken a lengthy comparison of the similitude between Christ's priesthood and that of Melchizedek in 7:1-28. It is possible, therefore, that the preacher, writing for an audience assembled at a Eucharistic celebration, would have intended his hearers to draw a subtle connection between Melchizedek, a priest who offered bread and wine (Gen 14:18), and Jesus, whose sacrificial offering of himself was commemorated in the Lord's Supper through the offering of gifts of bread and wine.

³⁴⁰ Interestingly, Ignatius employs this designation for the Eucharist in the context of a passage in which he condemns those who refrain from participation in the Lord's Supper because of their heterodox views: "They abstain from Eucharist and prayer because they do not confess the Eucharist to be the flesh of our savior Jesus Christ, which suffered on behalf of our sins but was raised up by the Father in his goodness. Those who oppose the gift of God will die" (*Smyrn.* 7:1). The notion of schismatics as standing in opposition to the Eucharist as the "gift of God" in *Smyrneans* is not dissimilar to the warnings against apostasy in Hebrews 6:4 and 10:29, especially the latter verse, in which are said to have "profaned the blood of the covenant."

As the foregoing commentary suggests, a good case can be made for interpreting the “heavenly gift” of Heb 6:4 as a reference to the Eucharist. Indeed, if we read Hebrews as a Eucharistic homily as I have proposed in this study, this line of interpretation becomes all the more credible within the context I have suggested. Furthermore, the force of this proposal will become stronger in light of the cumulative effect of further Eucharistic allusions in the text. Before we proceed to examine these passages, however, we must consider several potential objections to the line of interpretation that I have set forth. The first challenge to a Eucharistic interpretation of 6:4 might be raised in light of what follows in the next verse. For having stated that repentance is impossible for those who have “once been enlightened and have *tasted* the heavenly gift and have become partners of the Holy Spirit,” the author adds in 6:5 “and have *tasted* the good word of God and the powers of the age to come” (emphasis added). The latter verse contains another reference to “tasting” in what is clearly a *metaphorical* context, that of experiencing the power of the word of God, a theme that the preacher emphasized so strongly in the first sections of his homily.³⁴¹ It would seem, therefore, that the image of “tasting” the heavenly gift in 6:4 should also be interpreted on the level of metaphor, if the author of Hebrews is being consistent. This is the opinion of Ellingworth, who states, “The context suggests that γεύομαι, here as in v. 5, is figurative and does not refer to the physical eating of bread and wine in the Eucharist.”³⁴² Ellingworth, however, neglects to consider the possibility that the preacher could have chosen to blend the literal with the metaphoric in this passage. One finds examples of such blending elsewhere in the NT. For example, in John’s “Bread of Life” discourse (John 6:22-

³⁴¹ Attridge (*Hebrews* 170): “[This] phrase, with its traditional epithet for God’s word, recalls the motif of God’s speech so prominent in the first four chapters.”

³⁴² Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 320. It should be noted, however, that Ellingworth does not go so far as to dismiss the possibility of a Eucharistic reference here: “The language of the present passage is not specific enough either to limit the reference to the eucharist, or to exclude such a reference entirely. In Philo, *Fuga* 139, references to light and food are similarly associated.”

59), we find a division between a “sapiential section” that occurs in vv. 22-50 and a “sacramental section” found in vv. 51-59. In the first section, the Johannine Jesus describes himself as “the bread of life” (ὁ ἄρτος τῆς ζωῆς, 6:35) and “the bread that has come down from heaven” (ὁ ἄρτος ὁ καταβάς ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, 6:41). Here, Jesus presents himself as the incarnation of divine wisdom, whose words and teaching will nourish those who believe in him. He then goes on in v. 51 to describe himself as the “living bread come down from heaven” (ὁ ἄρτος ὁ ζῶν ὁ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καταβάς, 6:51). He further equates “bread” with his “flesh” (σάρξ), which he insists must be *eaten* (6:52) along with his blood, which must be *drunk* (6:53). Thus, the evangelist moves from a metaphorical depiction of Jesus as the “bread of life” who sustains believers with his word to a more literal presentation of Jesus as the “living bread” which must be eaten and drunk sacramentally. In Heb 6:4-5, I suggest that the same dynamic is present, albeit in reverse. The preacher moves from a more literal reference to “tasting” the “heavenly gift” – that is, to actually consuming the Eucharistic bread and wine – to a more metaphorical reference to “tasting” the “good word of God” – that is, to experiencing spiritual delight and sustenance through exposure to God’s word.³⁴³

Another objection to identifying the “heavenly gift” as the Eucharist comes from Williamson, who, as we saw in Chapter One, strongly denies the presence of any Eucharistic imagery in Hebrews. Williamson finds a correspondence between the phrases Ἀδύνατον γὰρ τοὺς ἅπαξ φωτισθέντας γευσσάμενους τε τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου (6:4a) and καὶ καλὸν γευσσάμενους θεοῦ ῥῆμα (6:5a) such that “the parallelism of the passage requires the ‘gift’ in

³⁴³ Swetnam (“Christology and the Eucharist,” 89) contends that the author of Hebrews may have intended the image of “heavenly gift” to function on both the metaphorical and literal levels: “There is no need to make an either-or choice of eucharistic allusion or non-eucharistic allusion. The principal meaning could well be a general, metaphorical reference to ‘tasting’ God’s ‘gift’ connected with the coming of Christ, while a specific connotation of the eucharist is sensed by the reader/listener.”

question to be associated with the ‘word’ of God. That was spoken ‘in the Son,’ and it was, according to ii. 3, a ‘word of salvation.’ The ‘heavenly gift’ is almost certainly the gift of salvation.”³⁴⁴ A more convincing argument, in my opinion, is that the parallelism intended by the author of Hebrews – writing for a Christian liturgical assembly where Scripture was read aloud and the Eucharist was celebrated – was a parallel between “tasting” the word of God and “tasting” the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper. This is the view of Heil, who states:

That the audience have “tasted” or experienced the pronouncement of God (6:5a), with its allusion to their hearing the word of God that is proclaimed in the worshipping assembly, complements their having ‘tasted’ of the heavenly gift (6:4a), with its allusion to their partaking of the Eucharistic meal in the worshipping assembly.³⁴⁵

Despite the arguments cited above for preferring a metaphorical understanding of the “heavenly gift” as a reference to God’s word, or as the gift of salvation,³⁴⁶ or the Holy Spirit,³⁴⁷ I argue that, within the overall context of Heb 6:1-6, a Eucharistic understanding of the term makes the most sense. As I have shown, the language found in vv. 2 and 4 is steeped in the imagery of Christian initiation, the experience of which would have included “tasting” the Lord’s Supper for the first time. Koester, one of the “agnostics” cited in Chapter One who find no mention of the Eucharist in Hebrews, perhaps unsurprisingly dismisses the likelihood that *δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου* refers to the sacrament in 6:4.³⁴⁸ Yet, in an initial analysis of this verse, he acknowledges that the homilist addresses the experience of conversion to Christianity and states, “The author reflects the positive and *palpable* character of this coherence between belief

³⁴⁴ Williamson, “Eucharist,” 303.

³⁴⁵ John Paul Heil, *Hebrews: Chiastic Structures and Audience Response* (Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2010), 145-46.

³⁴⁶ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 170; Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 124.

³⁴⁷ Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 320; Johnson, *Hebrews*, 162-63.

³⁴⁸ Koester, *Hebrews*, 314.

and experience by describing conversion in terms of *sensory experience*.”³⁴⁹ Koester’s insight is sound as far as it goes, but he fails to take it to its logical conclusion: the author of Hebrews describes conversion “in terms of sensory experience” because conversion would have involved *sacramental* initiation, an experience that is sensory by its very nature! Submersion in water, the imposition of a minister’s hands, and the physical consumption of bread and wine were the tangible, palpable realities that brought the believer from initial faith to sacramental life within the Christian community. This, I contend, is what the preacher alludes to in 6:4. But why is it significant to his argument that he should do so?

The rhetorical aim of the author’s reference to Christian initiation and participation in the Eucharist is to bolster both his warning against apostasy contained in 6:4-8 and his subsequent exposition of the nature of Christ’s salvific work in 7:1-10:18. Concerning the former, the preacher wishes to impress upon his hearers the gravity of falling away from their Christian commitment. Apostates are guilty of “crucifying the Son of God anew” (6:6) – in part because they have repudiated Christ’s gift of himself in baptism and the Eucharist (6:4). By recalling for his audience the benefits that they have received through Christian initiation – participation in the Lord’s Supper (6:4a), partnership with the Holy Spirit (6:4b), knowledge of God’s word (6:5a) and a foretaste of eschatological existence (6:5b) – the homilist reminds them in no uncertain terms what sacred blessings they would spurn should they abandon the path of Christian discipleship. To turn one’s back on Christ (perhaps by publicly renouncing one’s faith) after having been sacramentally initiated into the Christian community and participated in its Eucharistic worship is, in the preacher’s view, an unspeakably grave offense; hence the incorporation of sacramental imagery into his harsh warning. Moreover, the use of this imagery

³⁴⁹ Ibid. 66, emphasis added.

sets the stage for the author's detailed explanation of Christ's priesthood and sacrifice in 7:1-10:18, a section in which he also implicitly sets forth for the congregation the ways in which that sacrifice is made manifest in the Lord's Supper. We will examine selected texts from this central section of the sermon shortly in an effort to uncover the latent Eucharistic content contained therein. First, however, it is helpful to turn our attention to 10:19-35, another section of exhortatory material which frames the expository content of 7:1-10:18. Like 5:11-6:12 this second "bracket" contains admonitions and encouragements – as well as several implicit sacramental references.

b. Flesh, Blood, Approach, and Assembly (10:19-35)

Following his central exposition of the meaning of Christ's priestly and sacrificial mediation (7:1-10:18), the author of Hebrews presents his hearers with a series of exhortations, admonitions, and encouragements (10:19-39) that corresponds to the block of hortatory material in 5:11-6:20. Just as the first exhortatory section can be divided into two subsections (5:11-6:12; 6:13-20), so 10:19-39 merits a similar division for the purpose of exegetical analysis. Commentators break up the passage in various ways. For example, Attridge, Ellingworth and Koester favor a threefold division: vv. 10:19-25; 26-31; and 32-39;³⁵⁰ Johnson divides the section between vv. 19-31 and 32-39;³⁵¹ Heil adopts a different strategy yet, joining vv. 15-18 to the section to create a division between vv. 15-30 and 31-39.³⁵² I have chosen to treat 10:19-35 as a unit because the preacher employs the word *παρησία* as an *inclusio* in v. 19 and v. 35,³⁵³ and the intervening material has an internal thematic consistency that parallels themes developed

³⁵⁰ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 283-304; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 515-557; Koester, *Hebrews*, 442-68.

³⁵¹ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 254-74.

³⁵² Heil, *Worship*, 186.

³⁵³ A point noted by Ellingworth, although he divides the text differently. See Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 516. See also Vanhoye, *Structure and Message*, 29-30.

in 5:11-6:12. Moreover, 10:36-39 appear to function as a short unit leading directly into the encomium of chapter 11.

10:19 Therefore, brothers, since we have boldness to enter the Holy of Holies by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the veil, that is, his flesh, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us approach with a sincere heart and with the full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold firmly to our confession of hope without wavering, for he who has promised is trustworthy. 24 And let us consider how to spur one another to love and good works, 25 not forsaking to assemble together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and this all the more as you see the Day drawing near. 26 For if we continue to sin willfully after receiving knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27 but a fearful expectation of judgment and of a blazing fire that will consume the enemies. 28 Anyone who has transgressed the Law of Moses dies upon the testimony of two or three witnesses. 29 How much worse punishment do you think the one will deserve who has trampled upon the Son of God and considered profane the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified and has insulted the Spirit of grace? 30 For we know the one who said, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay,” and again, “The Lord will judge his people.” 31 It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. 32 But remember the earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a great struggle with suffering, 33 sometimes being exposed publicly both to reproach and to persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. 34 For you shared the suffering of prisoners and joyfully accepted the seizure of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves had a better and more enduring possession. 35 Therefore, do not throw away your boldness, which has a great reward.

In the central argument of his homily (7:1-10:18), the preacher demonstrates the superiority of Christ’s priesthood to that of the Jewish Levitical priests. The priesthood of Jesus is eternal (7:16, 24-25), like that of the mysterious Melchizedek (7:17); it is also marked by moral perfection (7:26-28). Additionally, the preacher shows that Christ’s offering of himself is a superior sacrifice to that of the Levitical sacrificial offerings. Jesus’ sacrifice has inaugurated the “new covenant” prophesied by Jeremiah (8:7-13; 9:15; 10:16). It has purified the hearts of believers, making it possible for them to worship the living God (9:14) and to receive an eternal inheritance (9:15).

Having set forth this profound theological teaching, the author of Hebrews now seeks to draw out its practical implications in 10:19-39. The priestly work of Jesus has made it possible for believers to gain access to the presence of God in the heavenly realm. They have “boldness” to “enter the Holy of Holies” because Jesus’ “blood” and “flesh” have opened up a “new and living way” into heaven (10:19-20). Because they possess this “boldness” (10:19) and because they have in Jesus a “great high priest” over the “house of God” (10:21), the homilist exhorts them to “approach” with sincere hearts, with faith, and with “bodies washed with pure water” (10:22). He exhorts his congregation to rouse each other to do good works as an expression of their love for one another (10:24). In a pivotal statement in 10:25, he pleads with them not to abandon their practice of assembling together for worship. To do so would be tantamount to committing the apostasy which the preacher previously condemned in 6:4-8. Indeed, a second warning against apostasy immediately ensues in 10:26-31. For those who persist in deliberate sin after “receiving knowledge of the truth,” there is no longer a “sacrifice for sin” (10:26) but the terrible prospect of divine judgment (10:27). As he has done elsewhere in the homily (e.g., 2:2-3; 3:3-6; 9:13-14), the homilist employs an argument “from the lesser to the greater” in vv. 27-31: if those who violated the Law of Moses were subject to capital punishment (10:28), far greater will be the penalty for those Christian believers who repudiate Jesus, the definitive source of redemption. Those who have deserted the worshipping assembly are guilty of trampling upon the Son of God, profaning the “blood of the covenant” and insulting the “Spirit of grace” (10:29). Although a fearful fate awaits such persons (10:31), the preacher does not necessarily include his audience among their number. Rather, as he did in 6:9-12, he appears to hold out hope that his congregation will choose a better path – so long as they continue in the patterns of behavior that they exhibited in the “earlier days” after being “enlightened” (10:32). In those earlier times they

not only showed solidarity with victims of persecution but also joyfully endured such persecution themselves (10:33-34). In light of all this, the homilist enjoins his hearers not to “throw away” their “boldness,” which has a “great reward” (10:35). The “great reward” for the community’s “boldness” was made clear at the outset of the passage: the right to draw near to the heavenly realm (10:19).

Two aspects of this exhortation are noteworthy. First, both the general language and tone of the passage exhibits many parallels with the hortatory material in 5:11-6:12 that preceded the author’s central argument in chapters 7:1-10:18. In both sections of the homily, the preacher opens and closes with a key word that serves as an *inclusio* (*νωθρός*, 5:11, 6:12; *παρρησία*, 10:19, 35) and as a catalyst for his congregation to cultivate appropriate attitudes and behaviors:

About him we have much to say, and it is difficult to explain, since you have become *sluggish* (*νωθοί*) in your understanding. (5:11)

We desire each of you to demonstrate the same fervor for the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not become *sluggish* (*νωθοί*), but imitators of those who inherit the promises through faith and patience. (6:11-12)

Therefore, brothers, since we have *boldness* (*παρρησίαν*) to enter the Holy of Holies by the blood of Jesus. . . . (10:19)

Therefore, do not throw away your *boldness* (*παρρησίαν*), which has a great reward. (10:35)

In both hortatory passages the preacher balances severe admonitions (6:4-8; 10:26-31) with hopeful appeals to his audience’s better nature (6:9-12; 10:32-35). He stresses the impossibility of repentance for inveterate sinners with equal gravity in each section (6:6; 10:26). At the same time he gives due weight to his hearers’ impressive track record regarding love and good works (6:10; 10:32-34).

Second – and most significantly for the purposes of this study – the preacher incorporates the language of Christian initiation into both passages and raises the issue of apostasy. We have

already seen that in 6:2 the author spoke of “baptisms” (βαπτισμῶν) and “the laying on of hands” (ἐπιθέσεώς τε χειρῶν), which I identified as references to Christian initiation. Moreover, we saw that in 6:4 the homilist made a threefold reference to “enlightenment,” “the heavenly gift,” and partnership with the Holy Spirit – terms that can reasonably be interpreted as, respectively, references to baptism, the Eucharist, and the reception of the Spirit in connection with baptism. I proposed above that the rhetorical force of 6:4-6 was to warn the audience that those who were initiated into the community through baptism and Eucharist (6:4) and who came to know the word of God and the promise of eternal life (6:5) could not be “restored to repentance” if they apostatized (6:6). A similar dynamic unfolds in 10:19-35. In the opening verses we encounter an explicit reference to baptism (“bodies washed with pure water,” 10:22) as well as an implicit reminder of the Eucharist in the preacher’s mention of the “blood” (10:19) and “flesh” (10:20) of Jesus. Those who abandon the Christian liturgical assembly (10:25) and persist in sin (10:26) are guilty of treating the “blood of the covenant” as a common thing (an implicit reference to the Eucharistic blood of Jesus, as we shall see) and of insulting the “Spirit of grace” – the Spirit they received at their baptism (10:29). All of these sacramental motifs occur within a passage that abounds in cultic references, including additional references to Christian ritual worship.

In 10:19 the preacher benevolently addresses his audience as “brothers”³⁵⁴ (ἀδελφοί), a designation that would have served both to reassure them in light of the harsh words still to come (10:26-31) and, from a cultic perspective, to remind the hearers that Jesus addresses them in their worshipping assembly and is “not ashamed” to call them “brothers” (2:12; cf. LXX Ps. 21:23). Drawing on the imagery of the desert Tabernacle, the homilist states that his listeners have “boldness” (παρρησία) to enter the “Holy of Holies” (τῶν ἁγίων), that is, the heavenly presence

³⁵⁴ Cf. my statement regarding the translation of ἀδελφοί on pp. 117-18, footnote 277.

of God. Access to the divine realm is possible for humanity by means of the “blood of Jesus” (τῷ αἵματι Ἰησοῦ, 10:19) and by the “new and living way” (ὁδὸν πρόσφατον καὶ ζῶσαν, 10:20) that Jesus opened for the human race through the “veil” (καταπετάσματος, 10:20) that is his “flesh” (σαρκός, 10:20). Once again the preacher uses the concepts and terminology of Jewish worship in an analogical sense, comparing the καταπετάσματος, the veil which separated the two parts of the Tabernacle, with the flesh (σάρξ) of Jesus. Just as the curtain in the Tabernacle served as the high priest’s means of access to the Holy of Holies, so the flesh of Jesus is the means of access to the presence of God. Although the “veil” could be understood in a negative sense, that is, as a barrier to God’s presence, the context of this passage seems to suggest otherwise. As Attridge states, “It is possible to understand the veil as simply the point of entry into God’s presence, rather than as a means of exclusion. . . . The ‘veil,’ an element derived from the symbolism of the heavenly tabernacle, suggests the point through which one gains access to the divine presence.”³⁵⁵ The author of Hebrews appears to suggest that it is through the flesh and blood of Jesus that Christian believers are able to approach God. In light of what he has already said in 9:1-10:18 about Christ’s self-offering, the *primary* meaning of 10:19-20 is that Jesus has obtained the means for humanity to enter the divine presence by the sacrificial oblation of his own flesh and blood.³⁵⁶ However, if Hebrews was written for a community gathered for the Lord’s Supper, is it possible that the preacher’s use of the words “blood” and “flesh” in these verses are also intended to evoke for his audience an association with the Eucharistic flesh and blood of Jesus, which they would soon be consuming under the form of bread and wine?

³⁵⁵ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 287. For a summary of the various interpretations of the phrase διὰ τοῦ καταπετάσματος, τοῦτ’ ἔστιν τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ, see Attridge, *Hebrews*, 285-287; and Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 518-521.

³⁵⁶ Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 521: “By means of his self-offering, Christ has done perfectly and in reality for us what the levitical high priests did imperfectly and figuratively: he gained access by a new way to the living God, not only for himself, but for all who through him will share God’s life.”

Such a possibility is, I propose, highly likely. Indeed, any congregation listening to a homily prior to the celebration of the Eucharist could hardly avoid making a connection between references to the flesh and blood of Jesus and their ritual meal. As we saw in Chapter One, no less a critic of Eucharistic interpretations of Hebrews than Williamson stated:

This passage is included by Andriessen in the list of those examined by him³⁵⁷ because of the presence in it of the words αἷμα and σάρξ. . . . *It is certainly possible that the Lord's Supper may be evoked for us by the words of Hebr. x. 19-20.* To the Christian reader who comes to such a passage as this *from within a strong tradition of eucharistic faith and practice*, such an association of words and ideas *is almost irrepensible.*³⁵⁸

However, after clearly affirming that it is reasonable for partakers of the Lord's Supper to hear an allusion to the Eucharist in these verses, he goes on to state with equal confidence: "There seems to be no good grounds for thinking that such an association was present in the mind of the author of Hebrews."³⁵⁹ Williamson makes this assertion because, as was pointed out in the first chapter above, his contention is that the author and recipients of Hebrews belonged to a community that did not celebrate the Eucharist. I have detailed at length the flaws in this assumption; there is no need to rehash the evidence here, except to reiterate that, contra Williamson, such data as we have regarding the preacher and his listeners suggests that they *did* belong within a "tradition of eucharistic faith and practice."³⁶⁰ Therefore, to use Williamson's

³⁵⁷ Andriessen, "L'Eucharistie," 269: "Au lieu de cette dernière formulation, si forcée, n'aurait-on pas dû s'attendre plutôt à quelque chose comme « participa au même genre d'existence » ou « à la même nature humaine » ? Il est plus que probable que l'auteur anonyme a voulu dès le début attirer l'attention sur le rôle que le sang et la chair du Christ jouèrent dans l'oeuvre de la rédemption, de même qu'il dira ailleurs, tout d'une baleine, que nous avons accès au sanctuaire dans le sang de Jésus par la voie de sa chair {10, 19-20}3, ou que « nous sommes sanctifiés par l'oblation du corps de Jésus Christ » aussi bien que « par son propre sang » (10, 10 ; 13, 12)." Andriessen further states: "En traitant de 2, 14 nous avons déjà fait remarquer que dans le passage 10, 19-20 il n'est pas question directement de l'eucharistie, mais que par le choix des termes « sang et chair » la pensée de la dernière Cène est évoquée" (274).

³⁵⁸ Williamson, "Eucharist," 306, emphasis added.

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

³⁶⁰ According to Vanhoye, it was just such a background that provided the preacher with the theological tools he needed in order to fashion a new image of priesthood and sacrifice that would enable his audience to appreciate what

own words, a link between the Eucharist and the references to αἷμα and σὰρξ in 10:19-20 ought to have been “almost irrepressible” in the minds of the preacher’s congregation.

Williamson is not alone in dismissing a possible Eucharistic allusion in 10:19-20, however. In the view of Attridge, “Eucharistic interpretations of the imagery of blood and flesh are also unconvincing. Hebrews refers not to any sacramental reenactment of the events of the passion, but to the act itself by which the new and living way has been opened.”³⁶¹ Ellingworth, moreover, holds that “a reference to the Eucharist is foreign to the context, if not to the epistle as a whole.”³⁶² Ellingworth’s statement is particularly unpersuasive. In fact, the context of the passage in question actually argues strongly for a Eucharistic allusion, not only in vv. 19-20 but also in v. 29, with its reference to the “blood of the covenant” (αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης). For after speaking of Jesus’ “blood” and “flesh,” the preacher goes on in v. 21 to allude to the house church setting in which his hearers were gathered; he uses the cultic term προσέρχομαι in v. 22 in conjunction with a reference to Christian baptism; he urges his listeners to remain faithful to assembling as a worshipping community in v. 25; and he once again evokes the initiatory experience of receiving the Holy Spirit (v. 29) and being “enlightened” (v. 32). Taken as a whole, 10:19-35 is replete with liturgical and sacramental imagery. Let us now consider each of these images in turn.

Jesus had accomplished for them: “One must observe that the author of Hebrews did not begin from scratch. In the gospel catechesis, in the apostolic preaching, and in the life of the Christian community various elements already existed which prepared the way. The most important was undoubtedly the words Jesus had spoken at the Last Supper over the cup of wine, words which declared the establishment of a covenant in his blood and hence evoked the sacrifice of a covenant (Matt 26, 28 and Mark 14, 24; Luke 22, 20 and 1 Cor 11, 25). An unexpected link was thus suggested between the death of Jesus and the ritual of sacrifice carried out by Moses at Sinai (Exod 24, 6-8). The Christian community met regularly to relive this ‘supper of the Lord’ (1 Cor 11, 20) and to hear again this word” (*Structure and Message*, 16).

³⁶¹ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 287.

³⁶² Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 520.

After reminding his hearers that they have access to God by means of the “blood” and “flesh” of Jesus in 10:19-20, the preacher adds in v. 21 that they have “a great high priest over the house of God” (ιερέα μέγαν ἐπὶ τὸν οἶκον τοῦ θεοῦ). Earlier, in 3:6 he told the congregation “We are his house” (ὄς οἰκός ἐσμεν ἡμεῖς), a statement that referred primarily to their status as members of the community of faith³⁶³ but which could also have alluded to their particular identity as members of a local house church.³⁶⁴ At that prior stage in the homily, the preacher’s concern was to focus his listeners’ attention on the importance of listening to the word of God, which they would have heard read aloud in their assembly. Now, having just offered a major exposition on the significance of Christ’s sacrifice (7:1-10:18), he once again reminds the audience (who have gathered to recall that sacrifice in their liturgical worship) of their identity as “God’s house.” Just as in 3:6 the congregation was assured of its identity as God’s house so long as they held on to their “boldness” (παρρησίαν), so at this point in the homily they are told that they possess the “boldness” (παρρησίαν) to come before God, thanks to the path that Jesus has opened for them through his “blood” and “flesh” – the same Jesus who is “high priest” over their “house.” Because of this, the preacher can now exhort them in v. 22 to “approach” (προσέρχομαι).

The author’s use of the verb προσέρχομαι in 10:22 is highly significant from a liturgical standpoint, given its widespread occurrence in cultic contexts elsewhere in ancient literature. Johannes Schneider documents a number of such cases:

There are many instances of the cultic use in the sense of “to come before the deity”: Dio C., 56, 9, 2: τοῖς θεοῖς προσερχώμεθα; Porphyg. Abst., II, 47: προσέρχεσθαι τῷ θεῷ; P.

³⁶³ Koester, *Hebrews*, 252.

³⁶⁴ Heil, *Worship*, 54: “The emphatic affirmation, ‘Whose house are we’ (3:6), explicitly and poignantly identifies the author and audience with the ‘house’ of God as a worshipping assembly or household”; Pfitzner, *Hebrews*, 145: “The earlier appeal for mutual encouragement ‘every day’ (3:13) may suggest that the community met daily – the phrase ‘house of God’ (10:21) would have special meaning for a house-church.”

Giess., 20, 24: ἵνα ἀξίως σου καὶ τῶν θεῶν ἀόκνως προσέλθῃ. Philo, too, knows the word in the cultic sense: τῷ θεῷ προσέρχεσθαι (Deus Imm., 8; Sacr. AC., 12)... In the Septuagint... there is a common cultic use for “to come before God,” “to come to sacrifice” or “to worship.” In Nu. 18:4 no one unqualified is to draw near in the cultic sense.... In Hb. and 1 Pt. the word is used in a purely cultic sense. The offering of sacrifices is by προσερχόμενοι (Hb. 10:1). Christians have drawn near to God through faith (Hb. 11:6), through Christ (7:25). They have come to Mount Sion (12:18, 22). But they are also admonished to come to the throne of grace (4:16) or to Christ the High-Priest (10:22). In 1 Pt. 2:4 the Christian decision of faith is called a προσέρχεσθαι πρὸς τὸν κύριον.³⁶⁵

προσέρχομαι is not strictly a cultic term; it is used elsewhere in Scripture to describe approaching a woman for sexual relations (Exod 19:15); drawing near to sin (Sirach 21:2); appearing in court (Deut 25:1); and manifold times in the gospels to describe men and women coming to Jesus.³⁶⁶ However, as Schneider states, in Hebrews the verb is used exclusively in the liturgical sense. The listeners are exhorted to “approach the throne of grace” in 4:16 in what is clearly a ritual context. In our present passage the preacher issues a similar injunction: his audience is to “approach” God with sincere hearts, faith, with clean consciences, and with “bodies washed with pure water” (10:22). Later, in 12:22-24 the homilist will inform the congregation that they have “approached” (προσεληλύθατε) a plethora of supernatural realities in their earthly worship: “Mount Zion, and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and a festal gathering of myriads of angels, and the assembly of the firstborn registered in heaven, and God, the judge of all, and the spirits of the upright made perfect, and Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, and the blood of sprinkling that speaks a greater word than that of Abel.” Granted the cultic context in which the author of Hebrews uses προσέρχομαι, it remains to be considered how this admittedly liturgical usage is specifically *Eucharistic*.

³⁶⁵ Schneider, Johannes, “ἔρχομαι,” *TDNT* 2:683-84. In Chapter Two I pointed out specific liturgical occurrences of προσέρχομαι in the LXX, including Exod 12:48; Lev 9:5, 7; 10:4-5; 21:17-18; 22:3; Num 18:3-4; and Deut 5:23, 27.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

A full answer to this question must wait for our treatment of 12:22-24 later in this chapter, but an initial clue is contained within the passage we are currently considering. At the beginning of v. 22, the preacher exhorts his congregation to “approach” (προσερχόμεθα). They might reasonably have asked themselves, “Approach what, exactly?” The context of worship obviously suggests that he intends them to draw near to God, but is there anything more specific that the preacher had in mind? I propose there is, and a hint of its identity can be found in the ensuing list of qualities with which the hearers are to make their approach: “a sincere heart. . . full assurance of faith... hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience. . . bodies washed with pure water.” The last of these characteristics stands out in particular: “Let us approach with. . . our bodies washed with pure water” (προσερχόμεθα μετὰ. . . λελουσμένοι τὸ σῶμα ὕδατι καθαρῷ). Most commentators – even those who generally find no sacramental references in Hebrews – acknowledge that this phrase is an image for baptism.³⁶⁷ That being the case, one might wonder why the preacher would include baptism as a necessary condition for “approaching” the divinity if he were speaking in more general terms about drawing near to God in prayer. Indeed, it is not likely that he would do so. Rather, the sense of v.22 is that the author is alluding to a particular form of cultic approach for which initiation into the community via baptism was a prerequisite. The obvious candidate for this specific cultic action is the act of drawing near to the Eucharistic elements of the Lord’s Supper. As we saw earlier, *Did.* 9:5 provides late first-century attestation of the necessity of baptism prior to reception of the

³⁶⁷ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 289; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 523; Koester, *Hebrews*, 445; Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 212. Koester states, “Along with a clean conscience, the listeners have their bodies washed with pure water (10:22d) through baptism. Although Hebrews has emphasized internal cleansing, the author assumes that a physical washing is also important. Baptism is associated with repentance (6:1-2) since the conscience is not cleansed without turning from sin (10:22c). Hebrews links baptismal washing to faith (10:22b) without saying whether baptism fosters faith or whether baptism is the external expression of faith” (*Hebrews*, 449). Against the general tendency to explicitly affirm a mention of baptism in 10:22, Johnson (*Hebrews* 257) more obliquely acknowledges a reference to “the common practices of the nascent Christian movement” in this verse.

Eucharist. In my opinion the author of Hebrews was seeking to remind his audience in 10:22 that they had the right to approach the table of the Eucharist by virtue of their baptism.³⁶⁸ If I am correct, then the cumulative rhetorical strategy of vv. 19-22 is – at least in part – to bolster the confidence of the original hearers of Hebrews regarding their participation in the Lord’s Supper. Essentially, I believe the preacher was telling them: “In the flesh and blood of Jesus, we have a means of access to God. This same Jesus is the great high priest over our house church. Do not be afraid, therefore, to approach the divine presence that is set before you in the Eucharist – after all, you have sincere hearts, you are full of faith, your consciences are clean, and you have been baptized.”³⁶⁹ This message, meaningful in itself, takes on even greater significance in light of the preacher’s subsequent plea in 10:25 that his listeners maintain their fidelity to assembling as a worshipping community.

Having encouraged the congregation to “approach” the divine presence (10:19-22), the homilist embarks on a further series of exhortations in 10:23-25. He exhorts his audience to “hold firmly to our confession of hope” (v. 23) and to “consider how to spur one another to love and good works” (v. 24). These pleas set the stage for a key entreaty in v. 25, where the preacher enjoins his hearers to remain faithful to attending their liturgical assembly. He urges them not to neglect “to assemble together, as is the habit of some” but to encourage “one another, and this all

³⁶⁸ Koester (*Hebrews*, 447) states in connection with this passage, “The first part (10:19-22) directs attention to the heavenly sanctuary. Listeners are enjoined to enter it.” A Eucharistic interpretation of these verses helps to clarify an otherwise puzzling question, namely, how can believers presently living on earth “enter” the “Holy of Holies,” that is, the heavenly realm? They do so by means of their communion with the flesh and blood of Christ in the Eucharist, whose sacramental presence in the assembly serves as a point of intersection between heaven and earth.

³⁶⁹ The interpretation which I propose is supported by Albert Vanhoye (*Old Testament Priests and the New Priest According to the New Testament* [Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2009], 228-29): “[W]hen the author mentions the body and blood of Jesus, he refers to the possibility of actual availability: the Christians have at this moment the right to enter the sanctuary thanks to the blood of Jesus, it is at this moment that they have at their disposal the living way which is his glorified body. On the other hand, Baptism appears only as a preliminary condition, already realized – the verbs which refer to it (10:22) are perfect participles. It permits participation in the liturgy of the community, in which the mediation of the body and blood of Christ is presently at work giving the assembled faithful access to God.”

the more as you see the Day drawing near” (10:24-25). The author’s use of the verb ἐγκαταλείπω is significant here, given his warnings against apostasy in this section and in 6:4-8; the term is employed in the LXX to denote “abandoning God and his ways.”³⁷⁰ To abandon the liturgical assembly is a grave offense, as the preacher’s subsequent rhetoric (vv. 26-31) will make clear.

The homilist’s plea for fidelity to the communal worship meetings is recognized by many commentators as a crucial hortatory element in Hebrews, indeed, as a key to understanding the crisis which motivated him to write his sermon. For Attridge, “The parenthetical remark that it is the ‘custom’ (ἔθος) of some to act in this fashion is the strongest indication of the concrete problem that Hebrews as a whole is designed to address. Some members (τισίν) of the community are not ‘coming to church.’”³⁷¹ Likewise, Johnson claims, “This verse is one of the keys to a possible reconstruction of the rhetorical situation faced by the author.”³⁷² It is not entirely clear what circumstances were prompting some members of the community to turn their backs on the worshipping assembly. Possible factors include fear of persecution, the allure of rival religious systems (particularly the Jewish cultus), frustration at the delay of the parousia, or simple apathy.³⁷³ In all likelihood, as I suggested in the previous chapter, a number of issues were at play, with different members of the community drifting away or actively apostatizing for

³⁷⁰ Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 528. Attridge concurs with this assessment of the seriousness of the situation envisioned in 10:25: “The warning not to ‘forsake’ (ἐγκαταλείποντες) connotes not simply neglect, but wrongful abandonment” (*Hebrews*, 290).

³⁷¹ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 290.

³⁷² Johnson, *Hebrews*, 261.

³⁷³ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 290; and Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 214.

different reasons.³⁷⁴ Whatever the causes may have been, the preacher clearly saw the abandonment of the worship meetings as a serious issue. Why might this have been the case?

One explanation may lie in the sphere of human social interaction and communal solidarity. In 10:24 the homilist encouraged his hearers to “consider how to spur one another to love and good works.” In order for any intentional community – in this instance, a first century Christian house church – to function properly, social cohesion and mutual support are necessary. This is all the more the case when the community in question is the victim of marginalization or persecution by the broader society in which it is situated. Such was undoubtedly the situation facing local Christian churches during the period in which Hebrews was written. Although the worship of God is obviously the primary aim and function of a communal worship meeting, one cannot discount the horizontal dimension of mutual support that accrues from such gatherings. As Koester points out:

The call to show love calls for resistance to tendencies to abandon the Christian assembly in the face of reproach from outsiders (10:25a). Few people can maintain their beliefs, values, and hopes without social reinforcement, for their ties are mutual: Social bonds reinforce belief just as expressions of belief reinforce social bonds. Both personal commitment and community support are needed for people to maintain their convictions and manner of life within a larger society that does not share their views.³⁷⁵

On one level, then, the author of Hebrews was certainly concerned that failure to attend the house church meetings would lead to the erosion of his congregation’s ecclesial identity. However, I do not believe that this was the only, or even primary, reason for his apprehension. A deeper issue was at stake in the preacher’s admonition against “forsaking to assemble together” (ἐγκαταλείποντες τὴν ἐπισυναγωγὴν ἑαυτῶν), an issue that included the communal-horizontal

³⁷⁴ A similar explanation is set forth by Attridge: “It may, however, have been the case that our author confronted a complex problem with no single simple key or that he was aware of a problematic phenomenon, such as the decay of community solidarity, the cases of which were obscure even to him” (*Hebrews*, 290-91).

³⁷⁵ Koester, *Hebrews*, 450. See also Johnson, *Hebrews*, 260-61.

dimension described above but that also directly impinged upon the congregants' relationship with God through Jesus Christ. I contend that the fundamental issue at hand was the abandonment of *Eucharistic* worship in particular, a form of apostasy that had both vertical (human-God) and horizontal (human-human) consequences.

That the author of Hebrews was referring specifically to a Eucharistic gathering in 10:25 becomes clear when we consider the nature of the Christian assembly in the first century. What did believers typically do when they “assembled together” as a church? As we saw in Chapter Two, they read their literature out loud and they shared a Eucharistic meal. As I have argued in this study, barring any evidence to the contrary, we should assume that the celebration of the Lord’s Supper was a standard worship practice in any given community. In this instance not only does the context of our passage fail to disprove a Eucharistic setting, but two pieces of evidence argue strongly in its favor. First, the homilist chooses a somewhat unique term to describe the worshipping assembly: ἐπισυναγωγή. As Ellingworth has shown, this word occurs only rarely in Scripture, and where it does, it does so in connection to eschatology.³⁷⁶ In 2 Macc 2:7 we read, “The place will remain unknown until God gathers his people together and shows them his mercy” (Καὶ ἄγνωστος ὁ τόπος ἔσται, ἕως ἂν συναγάγη ὁ θεὸς ἐπισυναγωγῆν τοῦ λαοῦ καὶ ἴλεως γένηται). Here ἐπισυναγωγή is used to indicate the final “eschatological gathering and restoration of Israel from dispersion.”³⁷⁷ A similar usage is found in 2 Thess 2:1, where Paul³⁷⁸ employs the term to refer to the final assembling of believers with Jesus: “With regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to him” (ὕπερ τῆς παρουσίας τοῦ

³⁷⁶ Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 528.

³⁷⁷ Schrage, Wolfgang, “συναγωγή,” *TDNT* 7:842.

³⁷⁸ The putative author of the text, notwithstanding modern debates as to the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians.

κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ ἡμῶν ἐπισυναγωγῆς ἐπ’ αὐτόν). The preacher’s decision to use the term ἐπισυναγωγή in Heb 10:25a to describe the community’s worshipping assembly would seem to indicate that their liturgical gathering had an eschatological dimension, especially in light of what follows in v.25b: “and this all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”³⁷⁹ This eschatological imagery fits well with the notion that the preacher was addressing a Eucharistic assembly. Evidence elsewhere in the NT as well as in the *Didache* indicates that the celebration of the Lord’s Supper included an element of eschatological expectation. In 1 Cor 11:26 Paul states, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.” The Eucharistic institution narratives of Matthew, Mark, and Luke associate drinking the “fruit of the vine” with the coming of the kingdom of God (Matt 28:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:18). *Did.* 9:4 associates the gathering of the fragments of Eucharistic bread with the gathering of the kingdom. Given the widespread attestation of an eschatological dimension to the church’s Eucharistic celebrations in the first century, it is all the more noteworthy that the author of Hebrews should use a rare and eschatologically significant term to describe his community’s worshipping assembly.³⁸⁰

The second contextual indicator in 10:19-35 that the liturgical assembly envisioned by the preacher was Eucharistic comes in the warning against apostasy that occurs in vv. 26-31. As v. 25 demonstrates, the homilist is concerned that some in his congregation might succumb either

³⁷⁹ Attridge (*Hebrews*, 291): “The urgency of the summons is underlined by the final, eschatological notice. Expectation of ‘the day’ (τὴν ἡμέραν) based upon the Old Testament’s prophecies of God’s judgment was a common element of the eschatology of early Christians who could, as here, simply refer to the day, or define it as the day of God, or of the Lord.”

³⁸⁰ Pfitzner, who is favorable to the presence of Eucharistic references in Hebrews, makes the following observation regarding 10:19-25: “Essential elements of worship are alluded to in verses 22-23: the confession of Christ, baptism, and, possibly, the Eucharist. Two observations support an allusion to the latter. First, the appeal for mutual love in the context of worship would recall the concrete expression of love in connection with the Eucharist (v. 24). Second, verse 25 links worship and eschatology. Early Christian celebration of the Lord’s Supper included an eschatological motif: the Lord who came in this meal was coming in the future (see Luke 22:16; 1 Cor 11:26; 16:22; Rev 22:20). The cry *Maranatha*, best understood as ‘Our Lord, come!’ seems to have been a eucharistic formula” (*Hebrews*, 145).

to apathy, to fear, or to outright apostasy and stop attending the community's liturgy. He wants to forestall this possibility by warning them that doing so would be disastrous. For this reason, he immediately follows up his plea in v. 25 with another harsh description of the consequences of apostasy. Those who persist in deliberate sin (v. 26) are guilty of "trampling upon the Son of God" (v. 29b, cf. 6:6, where apostates are said to be guilty of "crucifying the Son of God anew and holding him up to contempt"), of "considering profane the blood of the covenant" (v. 29c), and of insulting "the Spirit of grace" (v. 29d, cf. 6:4, in which those initiated into the community became "partners of the Holy Spirit"). As in 6:4-8 Christians who deliberately forsake the blessings they have received within the community of faith are guilty of the most egregious sin, and deserving of even greater punishment than those in past ages who transgressed the Law of Moses (v. 28). Among their wrongdoings, the homilist states that they have "considered profane" (κοινὸν ἠγησάμενος) the "blood of the covenant" (αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης). What exactly is the preacher trying to convey in directing this charge against apostates who have abandoned the worshipping assembly?

The preacher has already introduced the key phrase "blood of the covenant" (αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης) in 9:20, where he quotes LXX Exod 24:8 and draws a connection between Moses' act of splashing the blood of slain bulls on the altar and on the people with Christ's sacrificial death, through which God has brought about a "new covenant" (διαθήκης καινῆς, 9:15) with humanity. Significantly, the other major occurrences of αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης in the NT are in a Eucharistic context, namely in Jesus' words of institution over the cup in Matt 26:28 and Mark 14:24. Indeed, as I shall demonstrate later in this chapter, it is probable that the author of Hebrews employed the term in 9:20 precisely in order to suggest a *threefold* connection: between Moses' actions in Exod 24:8, Christ's self-sacrifice on the cross, and the commemoration of that

sacrifice in the Lord's Supper. Similarly, a Eucharistic allusion is highly likely in 10:29. Those who have forsaken the assembly (10:25) where the Eucharist is celebrated are guilty of having "considered profane" (κοινὸν ἡγησάμενος) the "blood of the covenant" (αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης). In other words, they have contemptuously regarded both the sacrifice of Christ and its *sacramental commemoration* as a "common thing." This interpretation best fits the context of the passage, where the preacher is describing in vivid language the actions and attitudes of those who have ceased attending the community's *liturgical gathering*. Apostates have not only insulted the "Spirit of grace" which they received at their baptism,³⁸¹ but have also spurned the blood of Christ which is available sacramentally to them in the assembly.

A Eucharistic interpretation of αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης is, nevertheless, contested by several scholars. Attridge, for example, states:

The phrase "blood of the covenant" (τὸ αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης), although similar to the eucharistic blessing of the cup, is in this context not sacramentally focused. It rather designates the equivalent in the new order of the blood with which the old covenant was inaugurated (9:20), namely, the blood shed on the cross, which provides access to God and to God's forgiveness.³⁸²

Mitchell expresses a similar view:

Although "blood of the covenant" sounds like an echo of the words spoken by Jesus at the final meal with his disciples (Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25), it should probably be taken here in a non-sacramental way to mean the blood of the new covenant as compared to the old (9:20).³⁸³

³⁸¹ It is telling that, in tandem with references to baptism and the Spirit in 6:2, 4, the preacher includes two mentions of baptism ("bodies washed with pure water," 10:22; "enlightened," 10:32) and a mention of the Spirit in his admonitions in this section of the homily. The effect of these references, along with the mention of the "blood of the covenant" (cf. 6:4 and the "heavenly gift"), is to suggest that apostates have rejected the sacramental gifts that they have received in the Christian community.

³⁸² Attridge, *Hebrews*, 294.

³⁸³ Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 217.

Likewise, Ellingworth argues: “This phrase alludes to Ex. 24:8; quoted in Heb 9:20 (cf. v. 18), and reapplies it by implication to the covenant established by the sacrifice of Christ (cf. 13:20). There is no reason to suppose a reference either to baptism or to the eucharist.”³⁸⁴ None of these interpreters offers a justification for their stance, even though the context of the passage actually favors a Eucharistic reading of the phrase. They are correct in linking the use of αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης in 10:29 with its earlier occurrence in 9:20; moreover, they are right to connect both instances with the Sinai covenant in Exod 24:8. However, they fail to set forth any criteria for dismissing a Eucharistic reference in the passage, choosing instead simply to reject the possibility outright. Furthermore, they downplay or overlook two key pieces of evidence that would justify interpreting Hebrews’ use of αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης in a Eucharistic sense, even if only secondarily. First, as I have already pointed out, the only other occurrences of this phrase are in the Markan-Matthean Eucharistic institution narratives.³⁸⁵ If, as I suggested in Chapter Three, Hebrews was written for a Roman milieu, there is a good chance that its audience was familiar with the Eucharistic traditions contained in Mark’s Gospel and would easily have recognized the Eucharistic connotations of the phrase αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης. Second, the author of Hebrews has already referred to the “blood of the covenant” in 9:20 in what is most likely an allusion to the Eucharist. We will examine this text shortly with regard to its Eucharistic content.

³⁸⁴ Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 540.

³⁸⁵ Kodell offers the following analysis of the background of the phrase as it occurs in Mark 14:24: “The phrase ‘blood of the covenant’ is a direct allusion to the Sinai covenant, when Moses splashed the blood of the offerings on the altar and on the people (Exod 24:5-8). The bond between God and his people was ratified in the sacrificial animal’s blood, symbolizing a sharing of life (Dt 12:23). The animal was neither divine nor human, but now the covenant is ratified in the blood of Jesus, son of God and son of man. Just as at Sinai the people were first asked to agree to the demands of the relationship (Ex 24:3), so at the Last Supper the disciples are asked to drink from the cup as a sign of their willingness to share the destiny of Jesus” (*Eucharist in the New Testament*, 91). It is not apparent why a similar interpretation of αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης in Hebrews is so often summarily dismissed, especially if Hebrews was written for a worshipping community where the Lord’s Supper was celebrated.

For now it will suffice to reiterate that the presence of αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης in a passage (10:19-35) that contains many other liturgical-sacramental images can hardly be coincidental, especially in light of the parallels between this section of the homily and 6:4-8, where we also identified a Eucharistic reference (δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου, 6:4). As in that earlier passage, the preacher seeks in 10:19-35 simultaneously to encourage and caution his hearers. By way of encouragement, he enjoins them to recall that through the flesh and blood of Jesus, they have boldness of access to God and can approach the sacred mysteries. By way of warning, he seeks to dissuade the congregants from abandoning the worshipping assembly. Those who do so, he says, show contempt for the “blood of the covenant” by treating it as a common or profane thing.

Once again, the heuristic device that I have set forth for reading Hebrews from a Eucharistic perspective yields a richer, more multilayered interpretation of the author’s language than the standard interpretation affords. On one level, in 10:19-22 the preacher clearly affirms that access to God is made possible through Christ’s self-sacrifice, the offering of his “flesh” and “blood” on the cross. This is the typical explanation given to these verses. On another level, I propose that he also reminds his congregation that this access is presently and immediately available to them by means of Christ’s sacramental “flesh” (σάρξ) and “blood” (αἷμα) made present in the Eucharist; therefore they can “approach” (προσέρχομαι) the sacred mysteries with boldness. In 10:24-25, the author exhorts his congregation to prompt one another to express love through good works (v. 24) and to remain faithful to assembling together (ἐπισυναγωγή) for worship (v. 25). If the worshipping assembly to which he was referring was a gathering for the Lord’s Supper (a likelihood in any event, and one enhanced by the eschatological tone of the word ἐπισυναγωγή), then the author’s plea takes on an even more compelling character, both in terms of the congregation’s relationships with one another and with God. With regard to the

former, we saw earlier that part of the homilist's insistence on fidelity to worship was to bolster the solidarity of the church members toward each other. Participation in the Eucharist would have achieved that aim in a preeminent fashion. As other texts in the NT bear witness, there is a horizontal dimension to the Lord's Supper whereby communion in the body and blood of Christ unites the communicants with one another.³⁸⁶ The author of Hebrews is implicitly reminding his audience that by sharing in the Eucharist, they can better maintain their bonds of unity and so express love and good deeds. With regard to the latter – that is, the vertical relationship between the congregants and God – Eucharistic communion with Christ provided the community with the concrete, tangible means by which they could simultaneously be present “in the Holy of Holies” (10:19) while remaining on earth, gathered in their house church.³⁸⁷ Moreover, sharing in the Lord's Supper gave believers a means of participating in the sacrifice of Christ (cf. Paul's notion that the “death of the Lord” is proclaimed in the Eucharist; 1 Cor 11:26). Abandoning the assembly showed contempt for both that sacrifice and its liturgical commemoration – profanation of the “blood of the covenant” (αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης). As the next two sections of this chapter will demonstrate, the concept of covenant plays an important albeit subtle role in the Eucharistic imagery of Hebrews.

c. The New Covenant (8:7-13; 9:15; 10:16)

We turn now to consider the first of two texts in the central portion of the author's homily (7:1-10:18) which draw on the key biblical concept of “covenant” (διαθήκη). The preacher

³⁸⁶ See especially 1 Cor 10:16-17, in which Paul states that those who consume the Eucharistic bread become “one body”; cf. Acts 2:42, where the “breaking of the bread” is identified as one of the hallmarks of unity among the first Christians in Jerusalem. A similar idea to that of 1 Cor 10:17 is expressed in *Did.* 9:4, where we read, “As broken bread was scattered on the mountains, and then gathered into one, so let your church be gathered from the ends of the earth into your kingdom.” Both an ecclesial and an eschatological dimension are present in this prayer.

³⁸⁷ Koester (*Hebrews* 447) points out that the earthly community is the “counterpart to the heavenly sanctuary” (447). The Eucharistic liturgy could be seen as the place where the two dimensions intersect, as I shall argue below.

employs the term in such a way in 8:7-13 that an alert listener could pick up on allusions to the Lord's Supper. Having undertaken in 7:1-8:5 the task of demonstrating that the priesthood of Jesus preeminently exceeds that of the Levitical priests, the homilist turns his attention to the self-offering of Jesus from 8:7-10:18. He now seeks to establish that, as was the case with Jesus' priesthood, his sacrifice is also superior to the oblations of the Jewish liturgical system. 8:6 serves as the fulcrum point in which the homilist transitions from one topic to another: "But now [Jesus] has received a more excellent ministry, insofar as he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted upon better promises." In the exposition that follows, the preacher will argue that this "better covenant" (κρείττονός διαθήκης) – of which Jesus is the "mediator" (μεσίτης) and because of which he "has received a more excellent ministry" (διαφορωτέρας τέτυχεν λειτουργίας) than the Levitical priests – is enacted through the offering of Christ's own flesh and blood. In the first stage of this argument, the author presents his hearers with the longest of his many quotations from the OT,³⁸⁸ Jeremiah 31:31-34 (LXX 38:31-34). This quotation constitutes the bulk of 8:7-13, appearing in vv. 8-12, with v. 7 and v. 13 serving as an inclusio; both verses mention the "first" (πρῶτος) and "second" (δεύτερος) covenants.³⁸⁹

8:7 For if the first one had been faultless, there would have been no need to seek a place for a second one. 8 For [God] found fault with them, saying, "Behold, days are coming, says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; 9 not according to the covenant which I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, for they did not continue in my covenant, and I rejected them, says the Lord. 10 For this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will place my laws in their minds and inscribe them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they will be my people. 11 And each one shall not teach his fellow citizen and his kinsman, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because all will know me, from the least to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their misdeeds and remember their sins no more." 13 When he

³⁸⁸ Indeed, this is the longest OT quotation in the NT.

³⁸⁹ Pfitzner, *Hebrews*, 120.

speaks of a “new [covenant],” he has made the first obsolescent, and that which is being made obsolete and growing old will soon cease to exist.

In its original historical and theological context, Jer 31:31-34 belongs to a series of oracles in chs. 30-31 in which the prophet offers hope to the people of Judah as they face the likelihood of the destruction of Jerusalem and their Temple. Although scholars disagree about the date this oracle was composed,³⁹⁰ it looks forward to a time when the divided kingdom is again united, as the prophet states God’s intent to forge a new covenant with both the “house of Israel” (οἶκον Ἰσραὴλ) and the “house of Judah” (οἶκον Ἰούδα). For the author of Hebrews, however, the text’s original *Sitz im Leben* is not as significant as what he believes it means for his first-century CE Christian audience.³⁹¹ The preacher draws on this passage from Jeremiah to advance his primary argument about the superiority of Jesus Christ, begun in 7:1. Having already made a case that the imperfections of the Levitical priesthood required a new type of priest (7:1-28), he now argues that the shortcomings of the Sinai covenant necessitated a new type of covenant, inaugurated on “better promises” (8:6). Just as he drew on biblical texts referring to the priesthood of Melchizedek (Gen 14:17-20; Ps 110:1-4 [LXX 109:1-4]) to undergird the former argument, so in 8:7-13 he cites Jeremiah’s promise of a “new covenant” to shore up the latter. The importance of this prophetic oracle for the preacher is underscored by a further reference to the “new covenant” in 9:15 and by his decision to quote part of the oracle again in 10:16-17 as he wraps up his presentation of Christ’s sacrifice. As Pfitzner states, “the entire

³⁹⁰ Some commentators favor a date at the time of the exile (ca. 587 BCE) or afterward, while others date the oracle to an earlier point in the prophet’s ministry, at the time of the reforms instituted by king Josiah (ca. 628-22 BCE; cf. 2 Kings 22:1-23:30).

³⁹¹ Koester (*Hebrews* 389): “God’s words concern the ‘house of Israel’ and the ‘house of Judah,’ but Hebrews brings the oracle to bear on the listeners’ situation, since they belong to God’s ‘house’ (3:6).”

discussion of Christ's high-priestly sacrifice in 9:1-10:14 is framed by references to the promise of the new covenant."³⁹²

The primary significance of Hebrews' use of Jer 31[38]:31-34 is, as I have stated above, to demonstrate the supremacy of the covenant inaugurated by Christ over God's covenant with Israel at Sinai. In this "new covenant," God will inscribe the divine law upon the hearts of God's people. Moreover, this covenant will bring about the forgiveness of sins: "I will be merciful toward their misdeeds and remember their sins no more" (Heb 8:12; cf. Jer 31[38]:34). Whereas the sacrifices of the previous dispensation could only bring about an exterior, ritual cleansing (Heb 9:13), the sacrifice of Christ effects an internal transformation whereby the blood of Christ serves to "purify our consciences from dead works to worship the living God" (9:14).³⁹³ As Attridge points out, it is the capacity of the new covenant to bring about the forgiveness of sins that connects it to the author's previous focus on the priestly ministry, while the link between covenant and sacrifice – to be developed in 9:1-10:18 – enables him to present Christ's death "as a covenant-inaugurating event."³⁹⁴ Thus, the concept of covenant serves a vital role in the development of the preacher's argument in 7:1-10:18, so much so that O'Collins and Jones can claim without hyperbole that "the new covenant forms a linchpin, without which Hebrews would fall apart."³⁹⁵

As the preceding commentary suggests, the "new covenant" motif from Jeremiah plays a vital role in the didactic and rhetorical strategy of Hebrews, its primary function being to bolster

³⁹² Pfitzner, *Hebrews*, 120.

³⁹³ For an excellent summary of this segment of Hebrews, including a sensitive treatment of the issue of supersessionism that arises in connection with the author's claim that Christ's "new" covenant has rendered the old one obsolescent (8:13), see Johnson, *Hebrews*, 203-15.

³⁹⁴ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 226.

³⁹⁵ O'Collins and Jones, *Jesus our Priest*, 55.

the author's case for the superiority of Christ. In light of the heuristic device proposed in this study – that of reading Hebrews from a liturgical perspective as a Eucharistic homily – we might wish to consider what additional insights can be gained into the preacher's use of the covenant theme by once again analyzing Hebrews from a Eucharistic viewpoint. In this case the answer is fairly clear. As I pointed out earlier in this chapter, the only other texts in the NT which draw upon Jeremiah's presentation of the "new covenant" in connection with the sacrificial death of Jesus are the Eucharistic institution narratives of Paul and Luke. In the Pauline-Lukan version of Jesus' words of institution over the cup,³⁹⁶ we find an allusion to the "new covenant" theme:

This cup is the *new covenant* in my blood (Τοῦτο τὸ ποτήριον ἡ **καινὴ διαθήκη** ἐστὶν ἐν τῷ ἐμῷ αἵματι, 1 Cor 11:25)

This cup is the *new covenant* in my blood which will be poured out for you (Τοῦτο τὸ ποτήριον ἡ **καινὴ διαθήκη** ἐν τῷ αἵματί μου, τὸ ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν ἐκχυννόμενον, Luke 22:20)

It is widely agreed that this version of the cup-words has been influenced by the prophetic oracle found in Jeremiah 31[38]:31-34 in which God pledges to establish a new covenant between himself and the people.³⁹⁷ In 1 Cor 11:23 Paul states that he "received from the Lord" (παρέλαβον ἀπὸ τοῦ κυρίου) the tradition about what Jesus said and did at the Last Supper. As I indicated in Chapter One, Paul's claim is not that the details of the Supper were vouchsafed to him in a revelation from Jesus but rather that they were passed on to him by the other apostles. These initial followers of Jesus handed on traditions about the foundation of the Eucharistic meal, including the apparent conviction of Jesus himself that his impending death would bring about the foundation of a covenant between God and humanity. Jesus' association

³⁹⁶ On the background and differences between the Pauline-Lukan and Markan-Matthean words of institution, see Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1966); and Léon-Dufour, *Sharing the Eucharistic Bread*, 82-156.

³⁹⁷ See Johnson, *Hebrews*, 214; Kodell, *Eucharist in the New Testament*, 77; and Léon-Dufour, *Sharing the Eucharistic Bread*, 149-54.

of his death not only with the covenant concept but also with the Eucharistic cup soon found its way into the liturgical formulae of the emerging church, with Paul quoting from one such formula approximately twenty years after the death of Jesus.³⁹⁸ It is almost certain that by the time Hebrews was written – between 60 and 90 CE, with a likely date around 80-85 – that the covenant motif had become firmly entrenched in the ritual words of the Lord’s Supper. As we saw earlier in this study, O’Collins and Jones assert:

Hebrews. . . makes it clear that. . . the sacrificial death of Jesus established a new, superior covenant. Around the Mediterranean world, Christians heard at their Eucharistic celebrations the language of “the covenant” and “the blood of the covenant.” In using such language the author of Hebrews and his audience would, one can confidently presume, share an obvious reference to the celebration of the Eucharist.³⁹⁹

If Hebrews was indeed written for proclamation at a Eucharist, it seems likely that, in drawing on the “new covenant” imagery to introduce the concept of Christ’s sacrifice, the homilist intended his listeners to draw a connection between this imagery and the ritual meal they had gathered to share, where some form of the words of institution would likely have been spoken.⁴⁰⁰ Let me be clear: I am not suggesting that Heb 8:7-13 contains a direct reference to the Eucharist. I am simply setting forth the likelihood that, given the putative setting in which his homily would be read aloud, he intended his hearers to link the reference to the “new covenant” with Jesus and the

³⁹⁸ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 214.

³⁹⁹ O’Collins and Jones, *Jesus our Priest*, 65.

⁴⁰⁰ Pfitzner (*Hebrews* 122): “The [author’s] lack of commentary on the Jeremiah oracle indicates that the author’s chief point is the replacement of the old covenant by the new (v. 13). Yet the use of the prophecy to frame 9:1-10:14 suggests connections yet to be drawn. One of these connections will be explained in 9:15-22 and 10:11-18. Both covenants are inaugurated in blood. Though Jer 31:31-34 contains no reference to priesthood or sacrifice, it is reasonable to suggest that, for both writer and audience of Hebrews, *the phrase ‘new covenant’ had sacrificial connotations by means of the eucharistic words, embedded in early Christian worship* (Luke 22:20, 1 Cor 11:25). The double reminder that the new covenant will offer perfect forgiveness (Jer 31:34 in Heb 8:12 and 10:17) recalls that the new covenant in Christ’s blood is ‘for the forgiveness of sins’ (Matt 26:28)” (emphasis added).

Eucharistic cup.⁴⁰¹ This conjecture takes on even greater credibility when we consider the author's next use of the covenant motif in 9:20.

d. The Blood of the Covenant (9:20)

A new priest, a new covenant, and now a new cultic sacrifice: following his presentation of the contrasts between the Levitical priesthood/Sinai covenant with Christ's priesthood and the covenant that he came to inaugurate in 7:1-8:13, the author of Hebrews contrasts the Day of Atonement ritual with Jesus' self-offering in chapter 9. In doing so he weaves together the themes of priesthood, covenant, and sacrifice in such a way as to show that Jesus is both the priest who makes the sacrificial offering and the sacrificial victim himself; through this self-oblation, a new and lasting covenant is forged between God and humankind. In 9:1-5 the preacher initiates a discussion of the furnishings of the desert tabernacle in order to introduce a contrast between the earthly sanctuary and the heavenly realm where Christ lives as high priest. He will pick up this theme again in 9:23-24 and 10:1-2, but at 9:6 he interrupts his presentation in midstream in order to emphasize the inability of the Levitical rites (including the once-a-year sacrifice offered in the Holy of Holies by the high priest) to allow genuine access to God (v. 8) or to perfect the consciences of believers (vv. 9-10). He has now prepared his audience for the claim in 9:11-22 that Christ's sacrificial death has the power to do what the Levitical sacrifices could not, namely to secure "eternal redemption" (9:12) for the human race. It is within this section that the theme of the covenant is reintroduced and expanded. As in 8:7-12, the preacher includes an OT cultic motif with possible Eucharistic significance.

9:11 But Christ has come as high priest of the good things that have come about. Through the greater and more perfect tabernacle (not made by human hands, that is, not of this creation),

⁴⁰¹ To an audience that was well-grounded in Jewish biblical theology, the implicit link that the author draws between the "new covenant" and the Eucharistic liturgy would have been easily recognizable. As Betz points out, "Für biblisches Denken – und der Hebräerbrief wurzelt tief in ihm – bilden Bund und Kult eine grundsätzliche Einheit" (*Eucharistie*, 153).

12 not through the blood of goats and calves but through his own blood he entered once and for all into the Holy of Holies, thus securing eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkling of a heifer's ashes are able to sanctify those who have been defiled, so that their flesh is purified, 14 how much more will the blood of Christ, who offered himself unblemished to God through the eternal Spirit, purify our consciences from dead works to worship the living God. 15 Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, in order that, with a death having taken place for redemption from transgressions under the first covenant, those who are called might receive the promise of an eternal inheritance. 16 For where there is a will, the death of the one who made it must be proven. 17 For a will takes effect only at death, because it is never valid when the one who made it still lives. 18 Therefore not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood. 19 For when every commandment had been announced by Moses to all the people in accordance with the law, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people 20 saying, "This is the blood of the covenant that God has decreed to you." 21 And in the same way he also sprinkled the tabernacle and all the liturgical vessels with the blood. 22 And indeed, according to the law it is by blood that everything is purified, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

As we saw in the preceding section, the author of Hebrews incorporates a lengthy quotation from Jeremiah 31[38]:31-34 into his homily (Heb 8:8-12) in order to introduce the idea that through Jesus and his priestly/sacrificial work, God has brought to fulfillment the promise of a "new covenant" spoken through the OT prophet. Now in 9:11-22 the preacher returns to this idea, beginning with v. 15, where he states unequivocally that Jesus "is the mediator of a new covenant" (διαθήκης καινῆς μεσίτης ἐστίν) by virtue of his death, which took place to deliver people from transgressions committed under the "first covenant" (πρώτη διαθήκη) and to provide them with an "eternal inheritance" (αἰωνίου κληρονομίας). He then goes on to develop this idea in vv. 16-17, putting in place the next building block of his argument through a play on words. The Greek word διαθήκη can mean both "testament" (will) and "covenant" (contract).⁴⁰² The preacher wishes to show that outpoured blood is necessary in the forging of a covenant, so he draws on this double meaning of διαθήκη to make the following argument: Just as a "will" (διαθήκη) requires the death of the testator in order to come into effect (vv. 16-17), so a

⁴⁰² Pfitzner, *Hebrews*, 131.

“covenant” (διαθήκη) cannot be inaugurated without death and the shedding of blood (vv. 18-22). He offers the Sinai covenant as a case in point: “Not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood” (v.18). The remainder of our passage is taken up with a summation of the events of Exod 24:3-8, where Moses ratified the covenant by slaying bulls and splashing their blood on the altar of sacrifice and on the people.

In recounting the ratification of the Sinai covenant, the author of Hebrews draws upon the language of the LXX. However, when quoting Moses in 9:20, he slightly alters the text of LXX Exod 24:8, from “Behold, the blood of the covenant” (Ἴδου τὸ αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης) to “This is the blood of the covenant” (Τοῦτο τὸ αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης). The subtle shift from ἰδοῦ (“behold”) to τοῦτο (“this”) is significant insofar as it appears to be an attempt on the preacher’s part to bring the words of Moses in line with Jesus’ words over the cup in the Markan and Matthean Eucharistic institution narratives. Both Mark and Matthew draw on Exod 24:8 and the inauguration of the Sinai covenant in their presentation of the Eucharist.⁴⁰³ They formulate a connection between the two events by placing the following words on Jesus’ lips: “This is my blood of the covenant” (Τοῦτό ἐστιν τὸ αἷμά μου τῆς διαθήκης, Mark 14:24, Matt 28:28), words which directly echo those of Moses in Exod 24:8.⁴⁰⁴ In Heb 9:20 it seems that the preacher has slightly altered his quotation of LXX Exod 24:8 in order to highlight a connection between the Sinai covenant ratified by Moses and the covenant which Jesus Christ ratified in his blood and which he foreshadowed in the Eucharistic cup-words at the Last Supper. Indeed, of all the possible Eucharistic references in Hebrews that I am proposing in this study, the allusion to the Lord’s Supper at 9:20 is the least contested by contemporary scholars. Ellingworth, for example,

⁴⁰³ Kodell, *Eucharist in the New Testament*, 91, 100; Léon-Dufour, *Sharing the Eucharistic Bread*, 144-49.

⁴⁰⁴ Matthew adds the conjunction γάρ: “τοῦτο γάρ ἐστιν τὸ αἷμά μου τῆς διαθήκης.”

acknowledges that “most scholars, with varying degrees of certainty, believe that τοῦτο in Hebrews reflects eucharistic tradition.”⁴⁰⁵ He goes on to state:

Such tradition may derive either from Mk. 14:24 (Τοῦτό ἐστιν τὸ αἷμά μου τῆς διαθήκης; cf. Lk. 22:20) or from a precanonical source. . . . The argument for eucharistic influence, while admittedly falling short of proof, does not rely only on the use of τοῦτο, but on *the typological significance of the wider argument*. The author, it is true, shows no sign of direct or explicit concern with the eucharist as regularly celebrated in the church. He is, however, concerned in this passage with the inaugural ceremony of the old covenant, and *this strongly suggests a corresponding allusion to the inaugural ceremony of the new covenant, that is, to the initial celebration of the Lord’s Supper.*⁴⁰⁶

Clearly, I would dispute Ellingworth’s contention that the author of Hebrews “shows no sign of direct of explicit concern with the eucharist as regularly celebrated in the church.” However, I strongly concur with his assertion that the preacher wished to manifest a link between the Mosaic ritual which commenced the Sinai covenant and the ritual institution of the new covenant. Indeed, if we adopt my heuristic of reading Hebrews as a sermon composed for reading at the Lord’s Supper, we can see that this link would have been quite clear to the original hearers.

⁴⁰⁵ Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 469. See also Betz, *Eucharistie*, 145-46.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., emphasis added. It is striking that a number of scholars, including those who are generally not receptive to the idea of Eucharistic imagery in Hebrews, acknowledge its presence in 9:20. Johnson (*Hebrews* 241) states: “The use of *touto* is most intriguing, because it makes the words of Moses more closely resemble those ascribed to Jesus at the Last Supper: ‘for this (*touto*) is my blood of the covenant’ (Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25). It is possible that, consciously or unconsciously, Hebrews’ wording accommodates Moses’ words to those of Jesus.” Andriessen, an advocate of Eucharistic imagery in Hebrews, says in regard to 9:20: “Un passage qui selon beaucoup d’exégètes se réfère à l’eucharistie est encore *He* 9, 20. A la différence de *Ex* 24, 8, où on lit: «voici (ἰδοὺ) le sang» etc., le texte porte, en accord avec *Mt* 26, 28 par: « Ceci (τοῦτο) est le sang de l’alliance que Dieu a prescrite pour vous ». Mais il y a plus. Non seulement *He* 9, 19-20 a la formule d’introduction λαβὼν... λέγων en commun avec *Mt* 26, 27, et cela en opposition avec *Ex* 24, 8 (= λαβὼν καὶ εἶπεν), mais un peu plus loin nous lisons: « Sans effusion de sang il n’y a point de rémission » et « pour nous » et « le Christ s’est offert pour enlever les péchés de beaucoup » (*He* 9, 22. 24. 28). Ce sont autant de réminiscences de la continuation des paroles de l’Institution : « (sang de l’alliance) versé pour beaucoup (pour vous : *Lc* 22, 20) en vue de la rémission des péchés » (*Mt* 26, 28)” (“L’Eucharistie,” 274); Pfitzner, also generally favorable to the notion of Eucharistic allusions in Hebrews, finds one in this passage as well: “The opening phrase (‘This is...’) suggests a veiled reference to the words of Jesus at the Last Supper – all the more likely since verse 22 contains two more terms (‘shed’; ‘forgiveness’) that appear in the eucharistic tradition (Matt 26:28)” (*Hebrews* 132). Attridge (*Hebrews* 257-58) somewhat grudgingly acknowledges the possibility of a Eucharistic reference at 9:20: “The use of τοῦτο may indicate the influence of the eucharistic words of institution. If Christian liturgical language has left its mark in this verse, it is an isolated phenomenon. Our author does not proceed to find any typological significance in Moses’ words in relation to an ongoing Christian cult. Their symbolic significance lies rather in the relationship that they help to establish between the once-for-all shedding of Christ’s blood and the new covenant.”

Although a majority of commentators on Hebrews posit some form of Eucharistic allusion in 9:20, some exegetes discount the possibility. Williamson, perhaps unsurprisingly, dismisses the likelihood that the words of Jesus at the Last Supper influenced the preacher’s rewording of LXX Exod 24:8 in this verse. Even he admits, however, that “an allusion to the words of institution is not impossible.”⁴⁰⁷ Nonetheless, Williamson is not favorable to the notion, pointing out that the author has made another change in the words of the LXX, substituting the word “God” (θεός) for “Lord” (κύριος) in his rendering of the quotation;⁴⁰⁸ the changes, he contends, could be just as easily explained by the writer’s desire to make the LXX quotation “better fit his own carefully structured argument.”⁴⁰⁹ In my opinion Williamson adopts a reasonable premise but follows it through to a faulty conclusion. In making the change from ἰδοῦ to τοῦτο in 9:20, the author of Hebrews has indeed adjusted the LXX in order to align it with his “carefully structured argument” – part of which, I suggest, is the implicit connection that he draws throughout the homily between Christ’s sacrifice and the Eucharistic worship of his listeners.

Other interpreters follow Williamson in citing the preacher’s substitution of θεός for κύριος in 9:20 as evidence that he did not intend a Eucharistic reference in this verse. Koester, for example, states, “An echo of Jesus’ words is unlikely. . . . Hebrews does not refer to ‘the Lord’ – which could refer to Jesus as well as to God – but speaks of what ‘God’ commanded, making an allusion to Christ’s words less likely.”⁴¹⁰ Likewise, Mitchell contends:

⁴⁰⁷ Williamson, “Eucharist,” 306.

⁴⁰⁸ Cp. Ἴδου τὸ αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης, ἧς διέθετο κύριος πρὸς ὑμᾶς περὶ πάντων τῶν λόγων τούτων (LXX Exod 24:8) with Τοῦτο τὸ αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης ἧς ἐνετείλατο πρὸς ὑμᾶς ὁ θεός (Heb 9:20).

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ Koester, *Hebrews*, 419.

The substitution of God for Lord is curious, since often in biblical citations the author allows the word “Lord” to stand (1:10; 7:21; 8:8, 9, 10, 11, 30; 12:5, 6; 13:6). The effect of this change is to direct the words away from Christ, thus rendering a eucharistic reference unlikely. . . . It is probable that the author is not making an explicit eucharistic reference here, but the change from “Lord” to “God” more probably intends to show that it was God who ordained the second covenant, and not Christ.⁴¹¹

It is not clear from either Koester or Mitchell’s analysis why the preacher’s desire (a) to echo the Eucharistic words of institution and (b) to emphasize that it was God who initiated the covenant should be mutually contradictory. Could it not, rather, be possible that the author wished to emphasize both points, and thus made two noteworthy changes to the original rendering of Exod 24:8 in the LXX?

We have seen that a majority of exegetes are willing to concede the possible presence of a Eucharistic allusion in 9:20. At the same time, many of these commentators view this possibility as a noteworthy exception, occurring almost as an aberration within a composition otherwise unconcerned with the Lord’s Supper. Attridge, for example, calls it “an isolated phenomenon” and refuses to ascribe much significance to the allusion.⁴¹² As I have endeavored to demonstrate in this study, however, Eucharistic references in Hebrews are not isolated but emerge naturally and cumulatively in a text that is directed to a worshipping assembly and that seeks to draw connections – albeit implicit ones – between the theological themes discussed in the homily and the ritual life of the congregation. The occurrence of a Eucharistic allusion at 9:20 is no exception. In this portion of the sermon, the preacher has endeavored to draw a sharp contrast between the Levitical cult and the new form of worship that Jesus has made possible. Under the old sacrificial system, only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies, the sacred point of intersection between the earthly and heavenly realms. Moreover, he could only do so

⁴¹¹ Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 189.

⁴¹² Attridge, *Hebrews*, 258. Cf. footnote 83 above.

once a year, on the Day of Atonement. Through Jesus' self-offering, all believers are able to "approach" (προσέρχομαι) the divine presence (4:16; 7:19; 10:22; 12:22-24). How, concretely, are they able to do this? One possible answer that the author of Hebrews offers – the feasibility of which increases exponentially if we read his sermon as a Eucharistic homily – is that they "approach" the deity by sacramentally consuming the body and blood of Jesus Christ: the "blood of the covenant" (αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης) referenced in 9:20 and later in 10:29.⁴¹³ Ellingworth suggests that the preacher wished to highlight the connection between the inauguration of the Sinai covenant and the inauguration of Christ's "new covenant" by evoking an allusion to the Last Supper. I agree with his claims, but I would press them further. In my view the author did not merely wish to draw attention to the Last Supper tradition in 9:20 in order to reference an isolated event, namely the *first* celebration of this ritual meal. Rather, I hold that he wished to remind his hearers that the covenant foreshadowed in Jesus' final meal with his disciples and inaugurated through his death on the cross touches their lives in a concrete way each and every time they participate in the Lord's Supper. This subtle reminder would add even greater weight to the preacher's subsequent warning against deserting the assembly (10:25) and his characterization of those who do so as profaners of the "blood of the covenant" (10:29).

There is, nevertheless, an additional objection to consider in terms of a Eucharistic reference in this section of the homily – one which, if accurate, would call into question the presence of *any* positive sacramental imagery in Hebrews. At various points in Hebrews, most notably in chapter 9, the author draws a contrast between the earthly realm and the heavenly

⁴¹³ Vanhoye (*Old Testament Priests*, 228): "The author. . . is not content to speak only of spiritual attitudes; he also suggests concrete means of being tied to Christ's mediation. The logic of his exposition requires the existence of such means, for a mediation that is not concretely expressed is no longer a mediation. If the possibility for Christians to worship God remains always tied to the mediation of Christ, then this mediation must be offered to them in a tangible fashion. This is precisely what the author tries to convey. He speaks not only about faith, but about what we might call the sacraments of the faith. They are nothing other than the tangible expression of the actual mediation of Christ."

realm. He presents the latter as clearly superior to the former. In 9:1-5, as we have seen, he begins to expound on the furnishings of the desert Tabernacle before abruptly cutting off. Later, in 9:23 he returns to this theme, and describes the earthly liturgical appurtenances in Platonic terms as “copies of the heavenly things” (cf. 8:5); the sanctuary itself is said in 9:24 to be “a copy of the real one,” that is, the heavenly “sanctuary” where God dwells. The preacher describes Christ’s entry into heaven as taking place “through the greater and more perfect tabernacle (not made by human hands, that is, not of this creation)” (9:11). Christ’s ongoing, priestly mediation takes place, according to Hebrews, in the heavenly sphere (9:12, 24; 10:12). Given the preacher’s insistence on this point, as well as his general tendency to regard earthly cultic worship as inferior to the perfect sacerdotal ministry of Christ in heaven, where, one might ask, is there room for the Eucharist, or for sacramentality of any sort, in his theological outlook?

The answer may be found, I believe, in a more carefully nuanced understanding of the preacher’s view of the “earthly” and the “heavenly.” Johnson, who sees a strong identification with Platonic dualism in our author’s worldview, nevertheless acknowledges that “the contrast is not simply between matter and spirit, but above all between what is merely human and what is of God.”⁴¹⁴ It is in this distinction that an authentic understanding of the preacher’s viewpoint lies. The author of Hebrews is not, in my opinion, a Platonist who views matter in and of itself as negative or inferior. Nor does he disdain material forms of divine mediation. If that were the case, then he would have to downplay the significance of both the incarnation and Christ’s ongoing, *bodily* existence in the heavenly realm – both of which he unequivocally affirms (see, for example, 2:14-18; 4:14-16; 5:7-10; 7:16; 9:12, 24; 10:5, 10, 12). The preacher does draw a contrast between mere earthly realities – ordinary priests, marked by moral and physical frailty;

⁴¹⁴ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 331.

the blood of sacrificial animals; etc. – and the greater and more perfect realities embodied in Jesus Christ. Foremost among the latter, in Hebrews’ presentation of the salvific order, is the *blood* of Jesus Christ, which truly has power to redeem and to cleanse the consciences of believers (9:12, 14), and the offering of his *body*, through which human beings “have been sanctified” (10:10). According to Hebrews, Jesus Christ has entered bodily into the heavenly dimension “with his own blood” (9:12). Yet the author also claims that believers have access both to heaven and to the blood of Christ. In order for this to be the case, it seems necessary that, in the new order of Christian cultic worship, there should be a point of intersection between the heavenly and earthly realms, an equivalent of the Holy of Holies in the Levitical cult where all believers (not only the high priest) can approach God. Indeed, at various places in his homily, the preacher has made allusions to a locus of this sort (for example, 4:16; 10:22). Where might it be found? It is my contention that the new point of intersection, the place where heaven and earth meet in the worship of the new covenant, is in the Eucharistic assembly of the Christian community. The evidence for this claim may be found in the next section of the homily that we will analyze: the opening verses of a lengthy “call to worship” in 12:18-24.

e. Call to Worship, Part 1: Heavenly Zion, Blood of Sprinkling (12:18-24)

Thus far in our quest to illuminate the presence of Eucharistic imagery in Hebrews, we have examined texts from the central portion of the homily (8:7-13; 9:11-22) and from the two bracketing sections (5:11-6:20; 10:19-39) which frame the primary argument. We saw in our analysis of 6:4 that the author’s reference to the “heavenly gift” (δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου) may reasonably be interpreted as a reference to the Eucharist, especially in light of the other sacramental imagery contained in 6:1-4. The credibility of identifying the “heavenly gift” with the Eucharist is enhanced when one considers the passage in which it occurs (5:11-6:12) in

tandem with 10:19-35. The latter section of the homily also contains warnings against apostasy, encouragements to right behavior, and sacramental references – including a warning that those who fall away from the liturgical assembly (ἐπισυναγωγή, 10:25) are guilty of profaning the “blood of the covenant” (αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης, 10:29). Within the preacher’s linchpin presentation on the significance of Christ’s priesthood and sacrifice (7:1-10:18), we saw evidence that his usage of “new covenant” (καινὴ διαθήκη) imagery from Jeremiah 31[38]:31-34 in 8:7-13 was intended to evoke associations with Jesus’ words at the Last Supper. Moreover, in our analysis of 9:20, we saw that the author likely altered his quotation of Exod 24:8 so as to align the words with the Markan-Matthean cup words (Mark 14:24; Matt 26:28).

Yet again, we must ask ourselves how this language would have impacted an audience gathered for the Lord’s Supper. Viewed through the prism of my suggested heuristic, the rhetorical effect of the Eucharistic references catalogued so far is (a) to caution the hearers about the dire consequences of apostasy for those who have consumed the Eucharist as part of their Christian initiation (6:4); (b) to implicitly remind them that the “new covenant” (8:7-13; 9:15; 10:16-17) ratified through the “blood” of Christ (9:20) is memorialized in their reenactments of the Last Supper; (c) to encourage them to boldly “approach” (10:22) the heavenly realm to which they have access through the “blood” (10:19) and “flesh” (10:20) of Jesus; and (d) to exhort them to be faithful to their “assembling together” (10:25) with the accompanying warning that those who abandon the assembly profane the “blood of the covenant” (10:29). Elements from all of the texts we have considered thus far converge in a dramatic way in 12:18-24, the overture to a summons to worship through which the preacher brings his lengthy homily to a conclusion.

12:18 For you have not approached that [mountain] which can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness and gloom, and a storm, 19 and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made its hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. 20 For they could not endure the command that was given, “Even if an animal should touch the mountain, it

shall be stoned to death.” 21 Indeed, the sight was so alarming that Moses said, “I am terrified and trembling.” 22 But you have approached Mount Zion, and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and a festal gathering of myriads of angels, 23 and the assembly of the firstborn registered in heaven, and God, the judge of all, and the spirits of the upright made perfect, 24 and Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, and the blood of sprinkling that speaks a greater word than that of Abel.

Between 10:19-39 and the text we are presently considering, the author has presented his listeners with a lengthy exhortation to faith and perseverance (11:1-12:17). The examples of the heroes and heroines of the OT (11:1-39) are set forth to bolster the congregation’s courage so that they may “run the race that lies before us” (12:1), endure divine discipline with equanimity (12:5-11), and avoid dangers to the life of grace such as bitterness (12:15) and the desire for carnal gratification (12:16-17). Now, the preacher brings his “word of exhortation” (13:25) to an end with a summons to his hearers to put what they have heard into practice by worshipping God both in their liturgical assemblies and in their daily lives (12:18-13:21).⁴¹⁵

The first stage in this summons sees the author once again presenting his community with a study in contrasts between the old way of worship under the Levitical system and the new way inaugurated by Christ. In a *synkrisis* teeming with powerful sensory imagery, the preacher draws a vivid distinction between what his hearers *have not* approached (Οὐ γὰρ προσεληλύθατε, 12:18) – the Levitical cult epitomized by Mount Sinai – and what they *have* approached (προσεληλύθατε, 12:22) – the Christian cult symbolized by Mount Zion. The author’s use of the

⁴¹⁵ On the unity of Hebrews 13 with the rest of the document, see Attridge, *Hebrews*, 384-85; Marie Isaacs, “Hebrews 13:9-16 Revisited,” *New Testament Studies* 42 (2, 1997): 268-284; and Koester, *Hebrews*, 554-56. Koester argues convincingly for the integrity of the entire document by presenting 12:28-13:21 as a lengthy epilogue or peroration which brings the sermon to a conclusion: “‘Peroration’ is the term for the conclusion of a speech, according to the canons of classical rhetoric. Used in various types of speeches, the peroration gave the speaker a final opportunity to influence the listeners by reviewing key arguments and appealing to the emotions. The strength of this section comes not from new arguments, but from a creative fusion of themes and images from earlier portions of the speech, together with appeals for solidarity in community life” (554). Indeed, Hebrews 13 contains much in the way of reiteration of concepts and themes from earlier portions of the homily, integrated, woven together, and designed to present the congregation with concrete means of applying what they have heard to their daily lives. Koester rightly points out that “[w]orship or service pleasing to God is the theme of the peroration” (555). In light of this, I would go beyond Koester’s parameters and extend the beginning of the peroration forward to 12:18, as vv. 18-27 manifest profound concern with worship, especially vv. 18-24.

verb προσέρχομαι alerts us to the fact that, as in 10:19-35, we are dealing with matters related to ritual worship. Just as he did in 9:11-22, the homilist contrasts the covenant at Sinai with the new covenant mediated by Jesus Christ. Whereas the ancestors' experience of worship at the mountain of Sinai was characterized by abject terror ("a blazing fire, and darkness and gloom, and a storm, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made its hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them," 12:18-19), the liturgy of the new covenant is joyous, with its participants joining in a "festal gathering" (πανήγυρις), involving throngs of angels and human beings in the heavenly realm. The disparity between the two cultic epochs could not be sharper: fear, gloom, and death on the one hand; joy, festivity, and life on the other.

The main point that the author makes in this section is that, unlike the participants in the old Levitical system who worshipped strictly in the earthly sphere, his congregation are worshipping in unison with the denizens of the heavenly realm. Moreover, in and through their corporate worship, the listeners have already, in this present life, "approached" (προσεληλύθατε) the eschatological "assembly of the firstborn" (ἐκκλησία πρωτοτόκων, 12:23).⁴¹⁶ In our brief survey of liturgical themes in the Book of Revelation in Chapter Two, we saw that the notion of earthly worshippers participating in a heavenly/angelic cult was fairly widespread in the first century CE, as attested not only in Revelation but also in texts from Qumran. The author of Hebrews expresses a similar idea here. Somehow, his small Christian congregation gathered in a very ordinary, this-worldly house church was mystically joining in the festive worship of the angels and saints in the "city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (12:22). Unlike

⁴¹⁶ Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 680: "Worshippers now enjoy communion in advance with the righteous of earlier generations with whom they will be made perfect at the end"; and Pfitzner, *Hebrews*, 187: "The eschatology of Hebrews makes sense only when understood within the context of worship. Indeed, the stress here is not on pilgrimage to the future, but on present arrival. Faith grasps the future as though it were in the present (11:1). Earthly beings join heavenly beings in worship, so that angels and humans are no longer separated as at Sinai."

Johnson, who holds that the Zion imagery in 12:22-24 is “an entirely imaginative evocation,”⁴¹⁷ I contend that the author is pointing here to *real* earthly participation in *real* heavenly worship. Moreover, I suggest that in this text he provides his audience with the key to understanding *how* this participation takes place. Just as in the Levitical cult the Holy of Holies was seen as the meeting place between the dimensions of heaven and earth, so too, our author implies, Christian worshippers have their own point of intersection, their own meeting place between heaven and earth: the Eucharistic blood of Jesus, his “blood of sprinkling” (αἵματι ῥαντισμοῦ, 12:24).

In 12:22-24 the preacher offers his audience a catalog of the various realities that they have “approached” in their worship. Most of these belong clearly within the heavenly realm: “myriads of angels” (μυριάσιν ἀγγέλων), “the assembly of the firstborn registered in heaven” (ἐκκλησία πρωτοτόκων ἀπογεγραμμένων ἐν οὐρανοῖς), “God, the judge of all” (κριτῆ θεῷ πάντων), “the spirits of the upright made perfect” (πνεύμασι δικαίων τετελειωμένων), and Jesus himself, the “mediator of a new covenant” (διαθήκης νέας μεσίτη Ἰησοῦ). One of these realities, however, stands out as *not* belonging to the heavenly sphere: Jesus’ outpoured “blood of sprinkling that speaks a greater word than that of Abel” (αἵματι ῥαντισμοῦ κρεῖττον λαλοῦντι παρὰ τὸν Ἄβελ). Using terminology that refers back to the sacrificial imagery of 9:19-21,⁴¹⁸ the author draws a comparison here between the blood of sacrificed animals that Moses “sprinkled” on the people and the ritual appurtenances of the tabernacle, and the blood that Christ shed in his death on the cross. He clearly speaks here of Christ’s sacrificial blood rather than the flesh and

⁴¹⁷ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 330.

⁴¹⁸ In 9:19-21 the author reminds his audience that Moses “took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and *sprinkled* (ἐράντισεν) both the book itself and all the people saying, ‘This is the blood of the covenant that God has decreed to you.’ And in the same way he also *sprinkled* (ἐράντισεν) the tabernacle and all the liturgical vessels with the blood” (emphasis added).

blood of his glorified body that he took into heaven (cf. 9:12).⁴¹⁹ Jesus' *outpoured* blood is not present in the heavenly realm: he no longer suffers or dies (9:26; cf. Rom 6:9). However, it is present in *sacramental* form in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. By liturgically "approaching" the blood of Christ in their celebration of the Eucharist, the audience of Hebrews are able to unite themselves with the worship of the blessed ones in heaven – Christ is present to them at the Eucharistic table as he is present in glory to the angels and the "spirits of the righteous" in heaven.⁴²⁰ The sacrament of the Lord's Supper, therefore, serves as the meeting place between earthly and heavenly worship.

The author's notice that his hearers have "approached" the things of heaven by means of their cultic approach to the Eucharist serves as one of two climactic Eucharistic statements in the

⁴¹⁹ In his commentary on this section, Attridge is silent regarding any possible Eucharistic allusion. However, he does state, "The final item in the last pair makes the evocation of Christ's death even clearer and continues the allusion to the central section. What Christians ultimately have approached is not some distant or ethereal eschatological reality, but 'blood' (αἷματι)... It was through the 'sprinkling' of Christ's sacrificial blood that true atonement was effected and thereby a true and lasting covenant relationship with God established. That is really what the addressees have 'approached'" (*Hebrews* 376). I would argue that if the "blood" which the listeners have approached is not a "distant or ethereal eschatological reality," then the only credible explanation for the capacity of Christians to "approach" it is in the sacramental realm.

⁴²⁰ Just ("Entering Holiness," 93-94): "There can be no argument that this passage refers to the final feast on the Last Day in heaven, especially by the phrase 'heavenly Jerusalem' (12:22 – Ἱερουσαλήμ ἐπουρανίῳ). Yet in Christ's bodily presence among us now, heaven is on earth, so that Mt. Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem where the exalted Christ now sits at God's right hand (1:3) exists at the altar. . . . Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, pours out the blood of the covenant into the eucharistic cup that speaks better than Abel's blood. Here in this cup a purification of sins takes place through forgiveness." Koenig, *Feast*, 152: "It is difficult to believe that the author of Hebrews, who has already used the verb *proserchesthai* in 10:22 to designate a liturgical 'approach' to God 'by the blood of Jesus' (10:19), does not refer here also to an eschatological ritual taking place at table." See also McPartlan, *Sacrament of Salvation*, 4-5. Few other commentators evaluate Heb 12:24 in terms of a Eucharistic reference, either positively or negatively. Ellingworth (*Epistle to the Hebrews* 671) does state, "προσέρχομαι (→4:16) is always used in Hebrews of worship or nearness to God, but there is nothing to support a reference to the Lord's Supper." However, he offers no further justification for his claim that the verse does not allude to the Eucharist. Interestingly, he says later, "προσέρχομαι in cultic contexts is not be understood as 'approach' in contrast to 'arrive,' but rather of *communion with God in worship* – the fulfillment, for Hebrews, of what the old dispensation could not achieve" (678, emphasis added). In my opinion, this statement actually serves to *bolster* the case for interpreting 12:24 Eucharistically because no Christian worship ritual could offer believers "communion with God" in a more real and tangible sense than participation in the Lord's Supper. Ellingworth further undermines his claim that 12:24 does not mention the Lord's Supper when he connects this verse to 9:15-22: "'The closest parallel [to 12:24] and best commentary [on it] is 9:15-22, where, as here, the new covenant, Jesus as its mediator, and the blood by which the covenant is sealed, are inseparable" (681). Recall that in his commentary on that earlier passage, Ellingworth actually conceded a probable reference to the Eucharist, at least in terms of the Last Supper as the inaugural ceremony of the new covenant.

call to worship section (12:22-13:17) that concludes the sermon. We will look at the second of these statements (“We have an altar,” 13:10) shortly. First, however, it will be helpful to set forth additional evidence that the preacher (a) references the Eucharist in 12:24 and (b) intends this reference to be, in fact, climactic. Our first suggestion that he presents the “blood of sprinkling” as a culminating Eucharistic allusion lies in the recurrence in this passage of vocabulary and images that have previously appeared in passages associated with the Lord’s Supper. In 6:4 the community was said to have “tasted the *heavenly* gift” (γευσάμενους τε τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου), which I identified as the Eucharist; in 12:22, they have liturgically “approached” (προσεληλύθατε) the “*heavenly* Jerusalem” (Ἱερουσαλὴμ ἐπουρανίῳ), the source from which this “gift” is bestowed. In 8:7-13 (cf. 9:15; 10:16-17) Jesus was described as the mediator of a “new covenant” (καινὴ διαθήκη), using language that evoked the Pauline-Lukan Eucharistic cup formula; and in 12:24 Jesus is presented once again as the “mediator of a new covenant” (διαθήκης νέας μεσίτη), whom the congregation has “approached” in its worship. In 10:25 the author pled for fidelity to communal worship, using a term for “assembly” –ἐπισυναγωγή – that is laden with eschatological significance; and in 12:22-24 the worshipping assembly is united to the heavenly realm in imagery that is meant to evoke the eschaton. In 9:19-21, the author compared and contrasted the Sinai covenant and the covenant inaugurated by Jesus by using the image of “sprinkled” (ἐράντισεν) blood; in 12:24 Jesus’ sacrificial blood is likewise referred to as the “blood of sprinkling” (αἷματι ῥαντισμοῦ). Finally, in the warning section that followed the author’s main argument (10:19-39), he claimed that, for apostates, it is a “fearful” thing to fall into the hands of the “living God” (θεοῦ ζῶντος, 10:31); now in 12:22 the description of the deity as the “living God” recurs, but not in terms designed to evoke fear and dread. Rather, those who have remained faithful to the community’s liturgical assembly have “approached” the “city

of the living God” (πόλει θεοῦ ζῶντος) in a festive celebration. The reappearance of so many words and images from earlier portions of the homily where the author alluded to the Lord’s Supper cannot be coincidental here. Rather, in 12:22-24 he gives every indication of drawing together all of the previous references and weaving them into a sort of “Eucharistic tapestry” as he presents his climactic teaching that his listeners are able to approach the heavenly realm by means of the Eucharistic blood of Christ.

The second indication that the author is doing something climactic with his allusion to the Lord’s Supper in 12:24 lies within the broader rhetorical intent of 12:18-13:21. As I already intimated, at 12:28 the preacher starts to bring his homily to an end with a “call to worship.”⁴²¹ His listeners are to worship God both in the cultic sphere (12:22-24; 13:9-10, 15) and in the arena of their daily lives (13:1-6, 16-18). The final exhortations in this section of the sermon are designed to prepare the audience to offer this twofold worship. With regard to daily living, the ethical injunctions found at various points in chapter 13 are aimed at inculcating virtuous behavior on the part of the congregation once they have left the worshipping assembly. With regard to liturgy, the homilist has peppered the closing segment of his address with several final references to Eucharistic worship, one of which (the “blood of sprinkling” in 12:24) we have already identified, and three more which we will take up in the next section. His intent, I believe, is to prepare his listeners for what will happen *immediately* after the public reading of his sermon – namely, the celebration of the Eucharist. Thus, the preacher’s declaration that the congregation has “approached” Jesus’ “blood of sprinkling” (12:24), along with his forthcoming statements

⁴²¹ Pfitzner, (*Hebrews* 182): “Another thread runs through this section: the picture of Christians as a new worshipping community. They have ‘come to’ the presence of God in the new cultus (12:22-24), to ‘offer to God an acceptable worship’ (12:28), also in a life of holiness (13:1-6). The call to ‘remember’ leaders summons readers back to the word that produces and sustains faith (13:7), a faith that calls forth a ‘sacrifice of praise’ in the form of confession, though it means following Christ ‘outside the camp’ (13:8-16). The injunction to obey leaders and to pray for the writer, as well as his own benediction and ‘Amen’ (13:17-21) bring to a fitting conclusion the whole Letter as a call to worship.”

regarding an “altar” (13:10), a “sacrifice of praise” (13:15), and the “blood of the eternal covenant” (13:20), serve the function of facilitating a transition from the proclamation of the homily to the enactment of the Lord’s Supper.⁴²²

A rhetorical tactic of this type has parallels in other NT writings. As we saw at length in Chapter Two, many of the documents found in the NT give evidence of having been composed for liturgical proclamation. We also saw that Paul ends several of his letters with a liturgical directive, enjoining his hearers to greet each other with a “holy kiss” (φίλημα ἅγιος, Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Thess 5:26). Similarly, 1 Peter concludes with the author telling his audience to greet one another with a “kiss of love” (φιλήματι ἀγάπης, 1 Pet 5:14). The authors of these texts seem to presuppose a transition from the public reading of their letters to the next phase of the assembly’s ritual activity. In two NT writings, moreover, we find evidence that suggests the authors may have sought to conclude their work in such a way as to segue the assembly into the celebration of the Eucharist. In the closing verses of 1 Corinthians, the most explicitly Eucharistic of the Pauline writings, Paul incorporates the exclamation “Marana tha!” (Μαράνα θά) into his conclusion (1 Cor 16:22). This is an Aramaic expression meaning “O Lord, come!” which was commonly used in ancient Christian liturgy and may have served the function here of providing Paul’s audience with a transition into the Lord’s Supper. We find a similar motif in the conclusion of the Book of Revelation. We saw in Chapter Two that this document seems to have been crafted for liturgical proclamation and that its author was interested in ritual worship. There are good indications that the Eucharistic celebration was the particular milieu for which he wrote. Boring sees Revelation in its entirety as being oriented toward the Lord’s

⁴²² The proclamation of the homily prior to the praying of a Eucharistic prayer need not negate the author’s contention that his hearers are “approaching” or “drawing near” to the blood of Jesus. Even if the consecration of the elements has not yet taken place, the worshippers are drawing near to the Eucharistic mystery by virtue of their presence in the assembly where the Lord’s Supper will be celebrated.

Supper: “John expects his letter to be read to the assembled congregations, after which they will celebrate the Eucharist. . . . the concluding lines (22:6-21) form something of a transition to the Eucharistic celebration.”⁴²³ I pointed out earlier that John concludes Revelation with the invocation, “Come, Lord Jesus!” (ἔρχου, κύριε Ἰησοῦ), a Greek equivalent of the Aramaic expression *Marana tha* (which Paul employs in 1 Cor 16:22). This phrase is believed by some commentators to have been a prototype of the *epiclesis* spoken over the bread and wine at the Eucharist.⁴²⁴ According to Boring:

Like Paul’s letters, this letter is designed to be read in the liturgy, probably just prior to the celebration of the Eucharist. With wonderfully tensive ambiguity, John joins his worshipping community in the liturgical prayer [“Marana tha!”] that had already become traditional, words that can be a prayer for Christ to come in power at the End and establish the justice of the kingdom of God, and/or words that can be a prayer for the presence of Christ at the Eucharistic worship of the church: “Come, Lord Jesus!”⁴²⁵

Jürgen Roloff agrees with the foregoing assessment, contending that one of the primary purposes of the concluding chapter of Revelation is to “address pointedly the central aspect of life in which the book’s promises of salvation converge with the present experience of salvation in order for each to confirm the other: the Eucharistic worship service.”⁴²⁶ The concluding verses of

⁴²³ Ibid., 6.

⁴²⁴ Kereszty, *Wedding Feast of the Lamb*, 80. See also Paul Bradshaw, *Eucharistic Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 126. In discussing the roots of the epiclesis as found in Eucharistic prayers of the second and third centuries, Bradshaw points to the *Marana tha* exclamation as “the most likely antecedent for an early Christian use of a direct invocation in general within a Eucharistic celebration” and cites its use as such in 1 Cor 16:22, *Did.* 10:6, and (in its Greek equivalent) Rev 22:20.

⁴²⁵ Boring, *Revelation*, 226.

⁴²⁶ Jürgen Roloff, *The Revelation of John: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 249. In his commentary on Rev 22:20, he concurs with Boring and others who discern a “proto-epicletic” quality to John’s use of the phrase ἔρχου, κύριε Ἰησοῦ: “This verse indicates that the concrete area of life in which the church responds to [the message of Jesus to his church] is in the Eucharistic worship service. There is much to suggest that John assumes that his book will be read in worship. Similarly, Paul has also assumed the reading of his letters in worship and at their end has them flow into the liturgy of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 16:19-24; 2 Cor 13:11-13). In the celebration of the Lord’s Supper the church prays for the coming of the Lord with the Aramaic prayerful declaration ‘Maranatha’ (= our Lord, come! Cf. 1 Cor 16:22, *Did.* 10:6). It thereby looks to the future appearance of Jesus in the Parousia and, at the same time, anticipating this appearance, asks that he come into the present communion meal.

Revelation, like those of 1 Corinthians, presume a transition from proclamation of the written word to a celebration at the Eucharistic table and employ liturgical language to signal this transition.

I contend that the author of Hebrews, like Paul and John, consciously intended his sermon to end on a series of notes which would herald the congregation's move from listening to his exhortation to partaking of the Lord's Supper. In 12:22-24 he has drawn together elements from earlier Eucharistic allusions in the homily (6:4, 8:7-13; 9:20; 10:19-20, 22, 25, 29) to dramatically announce to his listeners that their access to the heavenly realm occurs by means of the sprinkled blood of Jesus, which they receive sacramentally in the Eucharist. This pronouncement does not, however, conclude his homily quite yet. Nor is it the last of his striking concluding references to the Lord's Supper.

f. Call to Worship, Part 2: Altar and Sacrifice of Praise (13:7-17)

In 12:28 the author of Hebrews exhorts his hearers to "offer God acceptable worship" (λατρεύωμεν εὐαρέστως τῷ θεῷ) with "reverence and awe" (εὐλαβείας καὶ δέους). A reminder of the power and majesty of God follows in 12:29: "Our God is a consuming fire" (ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν πῦρ καταναλίσκων). In 13:1-17 the preacher then draws out the practical implications of his enjoinder in 12:28. The congregation is to worship God both through ethical deeds in daily life (13:1-6, 16) and through consistent participation in cultic activity (13:10-15). An initial series of

Precisely this double meaning is also intended here. Prompted by the Spirit-inspired prophetic testimony, the church can and may cry out in its worship, 'Come!' In this cry, which every hearer of the reading of Revelation is invited to join, the entire fulfillment of salvation, which is promised for the future in 21:1-22:5, is transposed into the personal sphere and brought together with the present coming of Jesus in the Lord's Supper" (252-53). McPartlan (*Sacrament of Salvation* 9) holds a similar view: "Just as the author of the Letter to the Hebrews urges the downcast recipients of his message to see with the eyes of faith what they have really come to, namely Mount Zion and the heavenly Jerusalem, so when the Spirit takes possession of John (cf. Apoc 1:10) in exile on Patmos, he too sees 'the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven' (Apoc 21:2). This vision, born in the Eucharist, is written down to edify the faith of other communities who will hear it at the Eucharist. Just before John himself signs off with 'Come, Lord Jesus!' and the community proceeds to the Eucharistic meal, he actually pronounces an invitation to come for refreshment to the heavenly scene which is thrown open: 'Let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price' (Apoc 22:17)."

moral exhortations constitutes 13:1-6, in which the listeners are encouraged to practice such virtues as hospitality (v. 2), solicitude for prisoners (v. 3), respect for marriage and sexual morality (v. 4), and a right attitude toward money (v. 5). A quotation from Ps 118:6 (LXX 117:6) concludes this section. A section of predominantly cultic material follows, framed by an inclusio in vv. 7 and 17 centered on the word “leaders” (ἡγουμένων). Within this passage, I detect three allusions to the Eucharist: an almost certain reference in 13:10, a possible allusion in 13:13, and a likely mention in 13:15.

13:7 Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. 8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. 9 Do not be led astray by all manner of strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace and not by [laws regarding] foods, which have not benefitted those who observe them. 10 We have an altar from which those serving the tabernacle have no right to eat. 11 For the bodies of those animals whose blood the high priest brings into the Holy of Holies for a sin [offering] are burned outside the camp. 12 Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the gate, that he might sanctify the people by his own blood. 13 Let us then go out to him outside the camp, bearing the reproach he endured. 14 For we do not have a lasting city here, but we are seeking the one to come. 15 Through him, therefore, let us regularly offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is to say, the fruit of lips that confess his name. 16 But do not fail at doing good and sharing what you have, for God is pleased with such sacrifices. 17 Obey your leaders and be subject to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls as ones who will have to render an account, that they may do this with joy and not with distress, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Within a section framed by enjoiners to “remember” (μνημονεύετε, 13:7) and to “obey” (πειθεσθε, 13:17) their “leaders” (ἡγουμένων), the audience of Hebrews is presented with a reiteration of several important themes in the sermon: the eternal significance of Jesus Christ (v. 8); the inability of the Levitical cult to perfect its adherents (v. 9); the superiority of Christian cultic worship (v. 10); the sacrifice of Christ (vv. 11-13); life to come in the heavenly realm (v. 14); the importance of regular participation in worship (v. 15); and right behavior toward others (v. 16). As the preacher brings his homily to a close, it is fitting that he should offer this reiteration. It is also to be expected – if all of my foregoing analysis is correct – that a text

written for proclamation at the Lord's Supper and containing several implicit but important references to the Eucharist should point to the ritual at this critical juncture, especially if the author was expecting his hearers to celebrate it after listening to his "word of exhortation" (13:25). Indeed, as I indicated above, I suggest that he has incorporated at least two and possibly three mentions of the Eucharist into this final section.

The first – and most explicit – indication of a Eucharistic reference in the section is in 13:10, where the author states, "We have an altar from which those serving the tabernacle have no right to eat." Immediately prior to this, he has warned the audience not to "be led astray by all manner of strange teachings, it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace and not by laws regarding foods, which have not benefitted those who observe them" (v. 9). The identity of the "foods" (βρώμασιν) mentioned in 13:9 is the subject of much debate, as, indeed, is the question of how to translate this term. I have chosen to follow Johnson – who translates βρώμασιν as "dietary laws" – in my translation "laws regarding foods" because I contend that the preacher alludes one more time in this verse to the inability of the Levitical rites to truly purify and perfect those who observe them.⁴²⁷ In 9:9-10 the preacher has already spoken of "gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the worshiper in conscience, but only with regard to foods and drinks and various washings, regulations for the flesh imposed until the time of the new order." This is likely a reference to clean foods and unclean foods; in fact, the LXX tends to use the word

⁴²⁷ Johnson (*Hebrews* 347): "What sort of teachings are these, and who is propagating them? This historical judgment is made difficult by the multitude of possibilities. The only specific detail provided is the noun *brōma* in the plural ("foods"), which I have translated as 'dietary laws' because of the context of 'teaching' and because the author speaks of some 'walking' (*peripatein*) in them. A concern for dietary rules – together with mention of those who worship in the tent (*skēnē*) suggests that some form of contemporary Jewish practice and ideology is enticing some of the hearers." Lindars (*Theology*, 10) suggests that the author may have been concerned with "synagogue meals, held especially at festival times to give the worshippers a stronger sense of solidarity with the worship of the Temple in Jerusalem."

βρῶμα to refer to the former (e.g. Lev 11:34; 25:6).⁴²⁸ As in 9:9-10, the author reminds his listeners that the Levitical sacrifices only served to bring about external purification for those who had transgressed such outward matters as dietary regulations but had no real power to cleanse one's conscience from the effects of sin. I suggest that the preacher reiterates his earlier teaching at this point so as to prepare his audience for what follows in 13:10, namely a reminder of the superiority of Christian cultic worship. He does not, as some have claimed, anathematize Christian ritual meals – i.e. celebrations of the Eucharist.⁴²⁹ For immediately after critiquing “laws regarding food” that have not benefitted those who observe them, he states in 13:10, “We” – that is, Christian believers – “have an altar” from which “those who serve the tabernacle” – that is, practitioners of the Levitical cult referenced in 13:9 – “have no right to eat.” What, then, is the “altar” to which the preacher refers?

It is natural for present-day Christian readers of Hebrews (especially those who come from ecclesial traditions in which the Lord's Supper is regularly celebrated and in which a sacrificial dimension to the rite is affirmed) to immediately think of the Eucharist when they hear language about eating from an altar. The question is, would a first-century author and audience have shared this contemporary understanding? Although the table of the Lord's Supper was not clearly designated as an altar until the third century by Cyprian of Carthage,⁴³⁰ we saw in

⁴²⁸ Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 177. Pfitzner (*Hebrews*, 196-97) rejects the idea that the “foods” in 13:9 refer to dietary regulations but nonetheless connects them to the Levitical cult: “The problem is not one of Jewish dietary rules; Old Testament food laws could hardly be called ‘strange teachings.’ . . . That foods have not ‘benefitted’ people recalls earlier statements (see 4:2 and esp. 7:18: a cultic regulation proved ineffectual). The simplest solution to the *crux interpretum* of verse 9 is to read it in connection with 9:9-10: the old sacrificial system dealt with externals like ‘food and drink,’ things that could not purify the conscience. Only the sacrifice of Christ can purify the conscience and mediate heavenly grace (9:14; 10:22).”

⁴²⁹ Attridge (*Hebrews* 395-96): “Many commentators have, in fact, found in the warning a repudiation of a eucharistic theology, one that emphasized either the physical reality of Christ's presence in the material elements or the quasi-magical effects of communion.”

⁴³⁰ Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 712.

Chapter Three that Ignatius of Antioch applied “altar terminology” to the Eucharistic celebration much earlier, ca. 108-110, when in *Phil.* 4:1 he stated,

Take care, therefore, to participate in one Eucharist (for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup which leads to unity through his blood; there is one altar, just as there is one bishop, together with the presbytery and the deacons, my fellow servants), in order that whatever you do, you do in accordance with God.

If, as I have suggested, Hebrews was most likely written in the mid-80s CE, it is not too much of a stretch to suggest that the author of our text was the first to make the connection between the Lord’s Supper and a sacrificial altar, anticipating Ignatius’s usage by approximately twenty years. There is considerable evidence from both the NT and the *Didache* that the Eucharist was already being thought of in sacrificial terms in the first century (see the excursus on sacrifice below); moreover, several of Hebrews’ putative references to the Eucharist occur in sacrificial contexts (e.g. 9:20; 10:29; and 13:15 as we will see shortly). If any NT author were to draw a parallel between the table of the Lord’s Supper and an altar of sacrifice, the writer of Hebrews would a likely candidate, given his general interest in sacrificial themes.

As several commentators have pointed out,⁴³¹ Paul, writing ca. 54 CE, draws a connection between the sacrificial altar of Israel and the Eucharistic table of the Lord in 1 Cor 10:18, 21. Having previously spoken of the “communion” (κοινωνία) that is brought about among participants in the Lord’s Supper through their consumption of the Eucharistic bread (10:16-17), Paul draws an analogy with Israel in 10:18: “Consider Israel according to the flesh: are not those who eat the sacrifice partakers (κοινωνοὶ) of the altar (θυσιαστηρίου)?” A few verses later, referring to those members of the community who ate meat offered in sacrifice to idols, he states emphatically, “You cannot partake of the table of the Lord (τραπέζης κυρίου) and the table of demons (τραπέζης δαιμονίων).” Although Paul clearly uses two different terms in

⁴³¹ E.g. Kereszty, “Eucharist,” 161; Pfitzner, *Hebrews*, 204; and Williamson, “Eucharist,” 309.

this section – θυσιαστήριον in the case of Israel’s sacrificial meals, τράπεζα in the case of the Eucharistic meal – he does use the words with a certain degree of interchangeability. He may not directly refer to the Eucharistic table as a θυσιαστήριον, but the context of the passage allows for an analogy between θυσιαστήριον and τράπεζα, given that Paul compares the “Lord’s table” (τραπέζης κυρίου) with the sacrificial tables of both Israel and the pagans.⁴³² Indeed, in the LXX we find an example of τράπεζα and θυσιαστήριον used equivalently in Mal 1:6-7. In this text, the prophet presents a dialogue between the Temple priests and YHWH, who has railed against them for their illicit ritual practices: “And you said, ‘In what way did we despise your name?’ By bringing defiled bread to my altar (θυσιαστήριόν). And you said, ‘How did we defile it?’ When you say, ‘The Lord’s table (τράπεζα) may be scorned, and the food laid on it disdained.” The synonymous usage of τράπεζα and θυσιαστήριον in LXX Mal 1:7 provides a precedent for Paul’s analogous use of the terms in 1 Cor 10. We should, as Pfitzner cautions, exercise care not to interpret Hebrews through a Pauline lens.⁴³³ Nevertheless, if Paul was already drawing very subtle connections between the Eucharistic table and the altar of Israel in the mid-50s, it is certainly feasible to suggest that the author of Hebrews, writing around 80-85 CE, could have made a similar connection, especially given his profound theological interest in the topic of sacrifice.

I have set forth the preceding evidence in order to suggest that a reference to the Eucharistic table as an “altar” in a first-century document such as Hebrews is not *de facto* anachronistic. Having done so, it nonetheless remains for us to consider whether the preacher

⁴³² O’Collins and Jones (*Jesus our Priest*, 29): “‘Altar’ and ‘table’ seem to be used here as equivalents. Even if they are not strict equivalents, Paul obviously compares the Eucharistic meal to Jewish and pagan sacrifices.” See also Aalen, “Das Abendmahl als Opfermahl,” 128-143.

⁴³³ Pfitzner, *Hebrews*, 204.

actually intended an allusion to the Lord's Supper at this point. Modern scholarship is divided as to the precise identity of the θυσιαστήριον mentioned in 13:10. Three primary alternatives have been proposed: the altar as heavenly sanctuary; the altar as the cross and/or sacrifice of Jesus; and the altar as the table of the Eucharist.⁴³⁴

The idea that the θυσιαστήριον refers to Christ's presence in the heavenly realm is advocated by, among others, Isaacs,⁴³⁵ Franz Joseph Schierse⁴³⁶ and Williamson.⁴³⁷ In Williamson's opinion:

Those scholars who understand the θυσιαστήριον of Heb. xxxii. 10 as an 'altar' situated in the heavenly sanctuary are correct. According to Heb. ix. 1 ff. the earthly σκηνή of the Jewish cultus contained various objects, including the 'golden altar of incense' (Exod. Xxx. 1, Καὶ ποιήσεις θυσιαστήριον θυμιάματος). In other words, the 'altar' of the old dispensation is to be found within the σκηνή. In the new dispensation too the 'altar' is to be found within the σκηνή, only in this case the σκηνή is not a material sanctuary but is (in) heaven itself. When, in viii. 1 ff., Christ is said to have taken His seat on the throne of the 'majesty in the heavens' He is also said to be a λειτουργὸς καὶ τῆς σκηνῆς τῆς ἀληθινῆς (cf. ix. 23 f.). The 'true tabernacle' is therefore a heavenly tent. The 'altar' which the Christian possesses is, since it belongs to the 'true tabernacle,' a heavenly altar.⁴³⁸

Although it is not impossible that the Christian "altar" may bear some connection to the heavenly realm (a point to which I will return below), it is unlikely that heaven is the primary referent

⁴³⁴ For yet a different view, see Johnson, *Hebrews*, 348. In keeping with his belief that the author of Hebrews held a Platonic view of the material world, Johnson states, "When the author asserts that he and his hearers 'have an altar,' he cannot – in light of everything that has gone before this – mean an actual physical altar or place of cult. He refers, rather, to the 'heart' (*kardia*), the seat of human disposition. It was the heart that led people astray under the earlier covenant (3:8, 10), and was to be renewed under the new covenant (8:10). It is on the heart that God was to inscribe his laws (10:16). And it is with true hearts full of faith and cleansed of an evil conscience that people now can approach God (10:22). The author therefore affirms that this internal 'place' that is the altar from which they 'eat,' that is, share in the worship consisting in praise and thanksgiving to God (12:28)."

⁴³⁵ Isaacs, *Sacred Space*. See also "Hebrews 13:9-16 Revisited."

⁴³⁶ Franz Joseph Schierse, *Verheissung und Heilsvollendung: zur theologischen Grundfragen des Hebräerbriefe* (München : K. Zink, 1955): 191.

⁴³⁷ Williamson, "Eucharist," 308.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*

intended by the author. It is *prima facie* difficult to understand how one would “eat” from the heavenly sphere.⁴³⁹ Only if the author were speaking in a metaphorical manner would this make even a modicum of sense, but there is no indication (a) that he intended to speak metaphorically here, as the “eating” in v. 10 would seem to correspond to the literal eating envisioned in the “laws regarding foods” mentioned in v. 9, or (b) of what the metaphor (“eating” from heaven) might refer to, if he was, in fact, speaking symbolically.⁴⁴⁰ Moreover, as Koester points out:

Hebrews does not suggest that the heavenly sanctuary contained an altar of sacrifice. An incense altar (*thymiatērion*) is mentioned in 9:4, but 13:10 refers to an altar (*thysiatērion*) on which victims can be offered (7:13). Such an altar stood in the sanctuary’s outer courtyard, not the inner court.⁴⁴¹

On balance, the notion that heaven is the locus of the θυσιαστήριον in 13:10 is unconvincing. A somewhat more credible but still ultimately unsatisfying suggestion is that the “altar” represents the cross of Christ or his sacrificial death. This view is held by a number of exegetes, including Bruce,⁴⁴² Koester,⁴⁴³ and Mitchell.⁴⁴⁴ It is true, as some commentators have noted,⁴⁴⁵ that the verses that follow the statement about the altar in 13:10 deal with Christ’s sacrificial death (vv. 11-13). Moreover, Ellingworth points out that the only other occurrence of the term θυσιαστήριον in Hebrews is in 7:13, where the preacher refers to the Levitical altar of

⁴³⁹ A similar difficulty is encountered when the “altar” is interpreted in terms of the cross, as we will see.

⁴⁴⁰ As I will argue below, it is only by way of a Eucharistic interpretation that a secondary and metaphorical reference to heaven might make sense.

⁴⁴¹ Koester, *Hebrews*, 569.

⁴⁴² Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 399-401.

⁴⁴³ Koester, *Hebrews*, 568-69.

⁴⁴⁴ Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 299.

⁴⁴⁵ See, e.g., Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 711; Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 299.

sacrifice.⁴⁴⁶ In light of the author's central argument, wherein he repeatedly contrasts the ineffective Levitical sacrifices with the efficacious self-offering of Christ, a comparison here between the unprofitable ceremonial regulations of the Jewish cultus (13:9) and the all-sufficient sacrifice of Jesus (13:10) seems to fit not only the context of the passage but of the entire homily. The primary difficulty with this line of interpretation – as was the case with the identification of the θυσιαστήριον with Jesus' presence in heaven – is that no credible explanation is set forth by its adherents as to how one can “eat” or “not be allowed to eat” from the cross of Jesus.⁴⁴⁷ As Kereszty observes, “*thusiastērion* can hardly mean the cross, as some have suggested, since no New Testament parallel exists to suggest that Christians would ever eat, even metaphorically, from the cross.”⁴⁴⁸ Again, the obvious sense of 13:10 is that “we” (Christians) have an “altar” from which the practitioners of Levitical religion, with its ineffectual “laws regarding foods” (v. 9), cannot eat and which, by implication, “we” can. Given the author's reference to literal foods and eating in v. 9, it is likely that he continues to speak literally in v. 10. Of the major alternatives proposed, the best explanation of the meaning of θυσιαστήριον in 13:10 is that it

⁴⁴⁶ Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 711.

⁴⁴⁷ Attridge (*Hebrews* 397) argues that the author of Hebrews is not suggesting that Christian believers actually eat from an altar: “One might infer from it that the tabernacle servers cannot eat from ‘our’ altar, but that ‘we’ can and do, possibly in the eucharist. One could make the same inference, but understand its implications differently. ‘We’ could thus have an altar from which we ‘eat’ in a quite metaphorical sense. Hebrews, however, does not draw the inference that Christians do have an altar to eat from, nor does it deal any further with the motif of food or eating, in either concrete or derived senses.” Against this view, I believe that the obvious sense of 13:10 is that Christians *do* have an altar, from which they *do* eat; the challenge of correctly interpreting this text lies in identifying precisely what sort of altar and what sort of eating the author had in mind.

⁴⁴⁸ Kereszty, “Eucharist,” 161. See also O’Collins and Jones, *Jesus our Priest*, 64: “The reference to ‘eating from the altar,’ however, seems to make a Eucharistic sense more plausible. It seems less plausible to take ‘eating’ in the sense of believing in Jesus’ cross or sacrificial death.”

refers to the table of the Eucharist, from which adherents of Judaism would not be permitted to eat.⁴⁴⁹

We have already seen that it is not inconceivable that the author of Hebrews could have used altar terminology to describe the table of the Lord's Supper. Moreover, an emphatic reference to the Eucharist at this point in the homily would have made great deal of sense from a rhetorical perspective. As I pointed out in the previous section, Eucharistic language is found at the conclusion of other NT documents to signal a transition to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Rhetorically, the statement, "We have an altar," situated almost at the end of the sermon, would ring out as a powerful reminder to the listeners: "Don't be attracted to the Levitical cult, with its food regulations that can't benefit those who observe them! WE have our own altar, from which those who participate in Judaism cannot eat – the altar of the Lord's Supper!" An audience tempted to abandon the assembly (10:25) – perhaps to embrace Jewish ceremonial practices – would be powerfully impacted by an assertion of this sort. Having incorporated subtle Eucharistic allusions into the homily at a number of significant junctures – in the central argument (8:7-13; 9:20), in the two warning sections that bracket it (6:4-8; 10:19-29), and at the overture of the "call to worship" (12:18-24) – it is fitting that the preacher would wish to bring to mind the Eucharist's importance as he concludes the homily.

⁴⁴⁹ Aalen ("Das Abendmahl als Opfermahl," 147) interprets Heb 13:10-15 with reference to the Eucharist, finding in the text an implied critique of the Levitical sacrificial system: "Die Ähnlichkeit dieser Anschauungsweise mit der Beraka des R. Aqiba, die oben angeführt wurde, ist unverkennbar. Die Wendung „vom Altar essen" ist nur eine verkürzte Wiedergabe der längeren Formel, daß man von den Opfern ißt, deren Blut die Wand des Altars getroffen hat. Ja, man wird sogar annehmen müssen, daß die Abendmahlstradition, die Hebr. xiii iof. zum Vorschein kommt, z.T. polemisch gegen die Anschauung der jüdischen Beraka gerichtet war. In dieser wird gemäß der Vorschrift des A.T. und der Mischna die heilige Stätte gepriesen, an der ein Opfermahl allein stattfinden durfte, d.h. Jerusalem. Demgegenüber bezeichnet Hebr. xiii 14 Jerusalem als die vergängliche Stadt, und die Opfermahlteilnehmer werden dazu aufgefordert, den Umkreis der heiligen Mauern zu durchbrechen 1). Durch die abschließende Aufforderung zum Lobopfer, V. 15, wird die Abwendung vom Muster des großen Versöhnungstages und die Zuwendung zur Denkform des Mahl opfers endgültig besiegelt. Denn V. 15 nimmt auf Lev. vii 12 bezug, wo vom Mahlopfer die Rede ist."

It is also important to note that a Eucharistic interpretation of 13:10 would not negate, but rather lend credence to, the kernel of truth found in claims that “eating from the altar” somehow relates either to Christ’s cross or to his presence in the heavenly realm. With regard to the self-oblation of Jesus on the cross, it is in the Eucharist that believers call to mind the Lord’s death and consume the body and blood of the victim who offered himself in atonement for the sins of humanity. Koester, who favors a sacrificial interpretation of 13:10 but discounts any reference to the Eucharist, nonetheless undermines his position when he states, “In one sense, the altar is the place where Jesus was crucified (13:12). The community meets at this altar, not by assembling at Golgotha, but by *gathering for the proclamation of Christ’s self-sacrifice.*”⁴⁵⁰ The obvious question one might ask in response to this claim is, “*Where* would the Christian community have gathered to proclaim Christ’s self-sacrifice?” The equally obvious answer, it seems, is: “In the celebration of the Eucharist!” Bearing in mind Pfitzner’s aforementioned caution about reading Hebrews through a Pauline lens, one nevertheless cannot help but be reminded of Paul’s words in 1 Cor 11:26: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.” It is by consuming the Eucharistic flesh and blood of Jesus Christ that one could eat, on a metaphorical level, from the cross/sacrifice of Jesus. Likewise, Eucharistic communion unites earthbound congregations with the reality of heavenly worship, as we saw in our analysis of 12:22-24. It is by “approaching” Jesus’ “blood of sprinkling” (12:24) made sacramentally present in the Eucharist that one is able to become present, here and now, in that dimension of reality where God is fully present, where angels and sanctified human believers assemble in a festal gathering, and where Jesus lives forever as high priest. Thus, by “eating” from the altar of the Eucharist, one can be said to “taste” the future eschatological blessings of heaven while still living on earth. The best way to make sense out of 13:10 and still do justice to

⁴⁵⁰ Koester, *Hebrews*, 575 (emphasis added).

the legitimate insights of exegetes who see a reflection of the cross and of heaven in the text is to read it Eucharistically: by literally eating the bread and wine from the Eucharistic altar, one can be said to metaphorically “eat” of the fruits of Christ’s passion and death and of his intercessory work as heavenly high priest.

The likelihood of a Eucharistic reference in 13:10 becomes all the more credible when one considers the content of the verses that immediately follow (vv. 11-15). In 13:11-12 the preacher offers his hearers one final comparison between the Levitical sacrifices and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Just as “the bodies of those animals whose blood the high priest brings into the Holy of Holies for a sin [offering] are burned outside the camp” (v.11), so also Jesus “suffered outside the gate” in order to “sanctify the people by his own blood” (v.12). As he did in 9:11-28, the author evokes for his audience an association with the Day of Atonement ritual by alluding to Lev 16:27, where it is prescribed that the bodies of animals slain for the ceremony be taken “outside the camp” and burned. Analogously, Jesus suffered “outside the gate” – that is, outside the city walls of Jerusalem. 13:11-12 is sometimes cited as evidence that the author of Hebrews was opposed to the celebration of the Eucharist. The rationale for this claim is as follows: if the bodies of the sacrificial animals whose blood was used in the Day of Atonement ceremony were not meant to be consumed as food but rather burned, then, by drawing a comparison between these animals and Jesus, the writer suggests that Jesus’ “body” should likewise not be ritually “consumed” in the Lord’s Supper.⁴⁵¹ Against this view, it should be noted that nowhere does the preacher claim that Jesus’ body was burned or otherwise obliterated after his crucifixion, a detail which would seem necessary if he were intending an exact parallel between the Levitical

⁴⁵¹ *Koester, Hebrews*, 569; see also *Attridge, Hebrews*, 397: “There may be some hint that the body of Christ is similarly destroyed in his sacrifice, and hence unavailable for consumption.”

sacrifices and Christ's self-offering.⁴⁵² In fact, the author's subsequent exhortation in 13:13 suggests the possibility of another veiled reference to the Eucharistic celebration: "Let us then go out (ἐξερχώμεθα) to him outside the camp, bearing the reproach he endured." It would obviously be impossible for the audience to literally travel through time and space and "go out to" Jesus on the hill of Calvary. However, when his death is proclaimed in the Lord's Supper, participants in the ritual are able to "approach" Jesus in his flesh and blood, as Hebrews has already (10:22; 12:24) suggested.⁴⁵³ The verb which the preacher uses to exhort his listeners to "go out to" Jesus, ἐξέρχομαι, is a compound form of ἔρχομαι. Like the related verb προσέρχομαι, ἐξέρχομαι is used in cultic contexts elsewhere in Scripture (e.g. Exod 34:34; Lev 8:33; 9:23-24; 10:7; 16:17-18, 24; Jud 12:6).⁴⁵⁴ Given the overall context of 13:9-15, in which other Eucharistic motifs appear to be present (13:10 and, as we will see, 13:15), it is possible that the preacher wishes to evoke the Eucharist at this point as well. Because it is likely that some members of the preacher's audience experienced nostalgia for Jewish worship and longed to participate in the Jewish sacrificial system (whether or not the Temple was presently standing), I suggest that in 13:13 he subtly reminds them that the truly efficacious sacrifice is not celebrated within the ritual framework of Judaism but in the Eucharist.⁴⁵⁵ By exhorting his hearers to go to Jesus "outside the camp," the

⁴⁵² Indeed, for the author to even implicitly make such a claim would militate against the fact that (a) he draws on a historical recollection of the death of Jesus outside Jerusalem (see Johnson, *Hebrews*, 348 on this point), and (b) he clearly manifests belief in Jesus' resurrection and ongoing bodily existence.

⁴⁵³ Pfitzner (*Hebrews* 203) suggests that the author's claim that "We have an altar" may have been intended to counter the "taunts of non-Christian neighbors who questioned the legitimacy of the Christian religion on the grounds that it possessed no priesthood and no sacrifices." Might the preacher's injunction to "bear the reproach he endured" – in addition to serving as a broader exhortation to the community to willingly endure rejection for their Christian beliefs (cf. 12:1-11) – perhaps have functioned on a secondary level as an encouragement to continue their Eucharistic celebrations despite the misunderstandings and mockery of their form of worship by Jews and pagans alike?

⁴⁵⁴ Schneider, "ἔρχομαι," 679: "In the Septuagint.... the word is particularly significant in its cultic and sacral use."

⁴⁵⁵ This view is held by Betz, who sets forth a very explicit interpretation of the preacher's implicit exhortation: "Hatten die Adressaten geglaubt, um ihres Judentums willen Christus und seine Eucharistie aufgeben zu müssen, so

homilist draws a contrast between the elaborate rituals of Judaism which took place within the Jerusalem Temple and the Eucharistic meals that were held in humble house churches “outside the camp,” that is, outside the cultic boundaries of the Levitical system.

Whether or not the Lord’s Supper is present in the preacher’s thought in 13:13, a more likely Eucharistic reference may be found in 13:15. Having offered a final, brief exposition of Christ’s sacrifice (vv. 11-12), enjoined his listeners to “go out” to Jesus (v.13), and reminded them that “we do not have a lasting city here, but we are seeking the one to come” (v. 14), the homilist now urges the congregation, “Through him, therefore, let us regularly offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is to say, the fruit of lips that confess his name” (v. 15). The precise nature of the “sacrifice of praise” (θυσίαν αἰνέσεως) that the hearers are told to offer is much debated, although a majority of commentators interpret the preacher’s injunction as a “spiritualization” of the concept of sacrifice because he goes on to specify “the fruit of lips that confess his name.” Johnson’s analysis exemplifies the typical approach to this verse: “By identifying their sacrifice as one consisting in praise, ‘the fruit of lips confessing his name,’ Hebrews joins a broad stream of Greco-Roman and Jewish piety that regarded moral virtue and verbal praise as more appropriate offerings to the Divine than animal sacrifices.”⁴⁵⁶ To a certain extent, it is likely that the preacher did intend to emphasize the importance of praising God through one’s ethical conduct, especially since he goes on to state in 13:16, “But do not fail at doing good and sharing what you have, for God is pleased with such sacrifices.” Nonetheless, I propose that our author had something more in mind than a simple ethical injunction in 13:15. The fact that the first words of the following verse include the conjunction δέ suggests that the

erhebt der Verfasser des Hebräerbriefs die radikale Gegenforderung: ‚Weg vom überholten Judentum, das kein Heil bringt! Hin zu Christus und dem Abendmahl, wo uns das Heil winkt!‘” (*Eucharistie*, 160).

⁴⁵⁶ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 349.

“ethical” sacrifices with which God is said to be pleased in 13:16 are not the same sacrifices of which the writer was speaking in 13:15.⁴⁵⁷ More significant, however, is his use of the phrase θυσίαν αινέσεως.

In the LXX θυσίαν αινέσεως occurs regularly as the Greek translation of the *tôdâ* (תָּדָא) sacrifice, appearing in such texts as Lev 7:12-15 and Pss 50:14 (LXX 49:14), 107:22 (LXX 106:22), and 116:17 (LXX 115:8). The author of Hebrews, steeped in the LXX and in the liturgical world of Judaism, would surely have been aware that θυσίαν αινέσεως was a technical cultic term. More importantly, he would have been aware of the elements of the *tôdâ* ritual, as described by Swetnam:

A type of bloody sacrifice proper to the worship of the temple which is intrinsically connected with ceremonies which in themselves are not bloody. These ceremonies consist of a ritual offering and consumption of bread that is accompanied normally by a hymn or hymns of praise and thanksgiving. These non-bloody ceremonies constitute, with the bloody temple sacrifice, an integral religious ceremony of public praise and thanksgiving.⁴⁵⁸

In my estimation there is a strong likelihood – given a Eucharistic setting in which Hebrews would have been read aloud – that the preacher calls to mind here a well-known Jewish ritual involving the liturgical offering of bread to suggest to his hearers that, just as they have their own “altar” (13:10), they also have their own *tôdâ*, their own ritual thanksgiving offering: the celebration of the Eucharist, whose very name means “thanksgiving.” Rather than abandon the

⁴⁵⁷ It must be acknowledged that δέ is a flexible conjunction that could be translated “and,” “now,” etc. I have chosen to translate it as an adversative conjunction because I believe this best fits the context; however, even a choice to translate δέ as a coordinating conjunction (e.g. “and”) would demonstrate the joining together of two separate phrases, each of which expresses a different idea: “regularly offer up a sacrifice of praise” (13:15) and “do not fail at doing good and sharing what you have” (13:16). In other words, I believe that the preacher is presenting his hearers with a “both/and” scenario: they regularly take part in liturgical worship and at the same time express that worship by doing good in their daily lives outside the cultic realm.

⁴⁵⁸ James Swetnam, “A Liturgical Approach to Hebrews 13,” *Letter and Spirit 2* (2006): 165, emphasis added.

Eucharistic assembly as some have done (10:25), the listeners are to “regularly”⁴⁵⁹ offer a “sacrifice of praise (θυσίαν αινέσεως) to God” by continually setting forth the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper and praising God’s name in their liturgical gatherings.⁴⁶⁰ A Eucharistic interpretation of 13:15 does not negate the ethical dimension of the concept of “sacrifice” as subsequently laid out in 13:16, nor does it run contrary to the widely held idea that Hebrews, along with many other NT writings, understands sacrifice in a “spiritualized” sense – provided, of course, that the concept of “spiritualization” is properly grasped and articulated.

Excursus: Hebrews, Sacrifice, and the Eucharist

Throughout this study, and especially in the exegetical project of the present chapter, I have been arguing for the presence of implicit references to the Eucharist in Hebrews. The cumulative effect of the arguments presented in my analysis of specific passages from the homily has been to suggest that the author of the sermon possessed a particular theological outlook regarding the Lord’s Supper which, however understated it might be, nevertheless becomes manifest in those segments of his work where the Eucharist is subtly evoked. The preacher’s insistence on faithful participation in the liturgical assembly (10:25) might be taken as an indicator that he shared in the Pauline and Lukan outlook on the Eucharist as a meal which both created and sustained the bonds of community life and identity (see 1 Cor 10:14-22; Acts 2:42,

⁴⁵⁹ I follow Swetnam in translating *διά παντός* as “regularly”: “The phrase *διά παντός* in the Old Testament is used for, among other things, an indication of the occurrence of the daily sacrifices of the temple, where it is appropriately translated ‘regularly’ (Num. 28:15, 23, 24, 31). To translate this phrase as ‘continually’ or ‘constantly’ on the assumption that it refers to a ‘spiritualized’ reality is unwarranted. On the supposition that a distinct ceremony is involved – the Christian ‘sacrifice of praise’ – the translation ‘regularly’ in imitation of the regularity of the temple sacrifices, makes good sense” (“Liturgical Approach,” 167-68).

⁴⁶⁰ For Swetnam the entirety of Heb 13:9-15 alludes to the *tôdâ* ritual: “This section is centered on the Christian version of the *zebach tôdâ*. . . . Verses 9-10 refer to the ritual consumption of bread; vv. 11-13 refer to the bloody sacrifice; vv. 15-16 refer to the accompanying hymns and prayers. The central element is the bloody sacrifice of Jesus; the bloody or expiatory aspect is explicitly mentioned” (ibid., 166).

46). His use of an eschatologically suggestive term to describe the act of assembling (*ἐπισυναγωγή*, 10:25), as well as his subtle depiction of Eucharistic worship as a present participation in the future life of heaven (12:22-24), further suggests that he saw the Lord's Supper as an eschatological event, another common motif that was already present in the nascent Eucharistic theology of the first century (see 1 Cor 11:26; Matt 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 24:17-18, 30; *Did.* 10:5-6). Finally, the homilist's evocation of the Sinai covenant, with its strongly sacrificial connotations, in relation to the Supper (9:20; 10:29; 13:20) offers a strong indication that our author also shared in the emerging view of the Eucharist as a sacrificial meal.

Simply to make this suggestion, however, is to open oneself up to an onslaught of protest. How, it is asked, could the author of Hebrews have *possibly* viewed the Eucharist in sacrificial terms? Even if he *did* happen to refer to the Eucharist in this or that passage, how could this writer, out of all the contributors to the NT, even remotely adopt the view of the Lord's Supper as a sacrifice, given his emphatic insistence on the "once-for-all" character of Christ's redemptive death on the cross? It is often further argued that the theological outlook of Hebrews leaves no room for a sacrificial liturgical rite. Rather, the author clearly adopts a "spiritualized" outlook on sacrifice, as evidenced by 13:15, where he exhorts his hearers to "regularly offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is to say, the fruit of lips that confess his name." In the eyes of many interpreters, there is simply no way to reconcile claims for a sacrificial understanding of the Eucharist in Hebrews with (a) the writer's unequivocal insistence on the unrepeatable quality of Jesus' self-sacrifice, and (b) his "spiritualized" understanding of Christian sacrifice as exemplified by his comments in 13:15. I contend, however, that both of these challenges can be addressed in such a way as to allow for a sacrificial component to our author's understanding of the Lord's Supper. The two objections cited above may be countered by evidence for the

widespread understanding of the Eucharist as a memorial-sacrificial meal in the first century (an understanding which I suggest the author shared) and by a proper understanding of the “spiritualization” of sacrifice.⁴⁶¹

I have already taken pains to demonstrate that the author of Hebrews belonged to the mainstream Christian movement of the first century, as evidenced by his statement in 2:3 that he and his audience received the gospel message from “those who heard” the Lord. In other words they were recipients of the “apostolic preaching,” and seem to have shared in the basic convictions that characterized the emerging Christian movement, despite the diversity of expression found in various communities and geographic locales. It is evident, for example, that the preacher, in presenting Christ’s death as a sacrificial act, draws on a broader tradition reflected in the writings of Paul, the Synoptic evangelists, the Johannine community, etc. Did he also share in the wider Christian movement’s understanding of the Eucharist as a sacrificial celebration? In order to properly answer this question, we must first establish that there was, in fact, a broad consensus regarding the sacrificial character of the Lord’s Supper in the first century.

A brief look at written texts from this period which discuss the Eucharist will confirm that such a view was prevalent. Indeed, all of the first century documents that contain undisputed Eucharistic content – 1 Corinthians, Mark, Matthew, Luke-Acts, John, and the *Didache* – clearly manifest a belief that there is a sacrificial dimension to the Lord’s Supper. The Eucharistic

⁴⁶¹ It would be impossible in a study of this limited scope to present a full-blown survey of the development of sacrificial theology in the Jewish and Christian biblical traditions. Among the many noteworthy treatments of this topic, the reader is encouraged to consult the following: Robert Daly, *The Origins of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice*; idem, *Sacrifice Unveiled: The True Meaning of Christian Sacrifice* (London: T & T Clark, 2009); Roland De Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd: 1961); S. Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); Jonathan Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Peter Schmiechen, *Saving Power: Theories of Atonement and Forms of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

institution narratives (Mark 14:22-25; Matt 26:26-29; Luke 22:14-20; 1 Cor 11:23-26) all depict the inaugural celebration of the ritual using the language and imagery of sacrifice. In his words and gestures over the bread and wine, Jesus anticipates his sacrificial death and explicitly links it with the meal that he shares with his disciples. As we have seen, Jesus' words over the cup in the Markan-Matthean institution narrative – “This is my blood of the covenant” (Τοῦτό ἐστιν τὸ αἷμά μου τῆς διαθήκης) – intentionally echo Exodus 24:8 with its patent sacrificial imagery. Moreover, Matthew adds “for the forgiveness of sins” (εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν), which serves as a reminder of the atoning purpose for which sacrifice is offered.⁴⁶² The Pauline-Lukan version of the institution narrative does not draw on the Sinai covenant background of Exod 24 but rather on the “new covenant” imagery of Jeremiah 31:31-34 by having Jesus speak of “the new covenant in my blood” (ἡ καινὴ διαθήκη ἐν τῷ αἵματί μου). This language nonetheless connotes sacrifice, especially the Lukan version, which adds the words, “poured out for you” (τὸ ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν ἐκχυννόμενον, 22:20) in reference to Jesus' blood.

In addition to his use of the Eucharistic institution narrative in 1 Cor 11:23-26, Paul employs other sacrificial motifs in his explanation of the theological meaning of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians. He poses a rhetorical question to his audience in 1 Cor 10:16, asking them, “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?” The connection between the cup that is blessed in the Eucharistic ritual and Christ's blood connotes the image of blood poured out in sacrifice, while the comparison of broken bread with Christ's body suggests an analogy with “the body of Christ broken on the cross.”⁴⁶³ Moreover, Paul significantly compares the Christian

⁴⁶² Daly, *Origins*, 56, 128.

⁴⁶³ O'Collins and Jones, *Jesus our Priest*, 29.

celebration of the Lord's Supper with both Jewish (10:18) and pagan (10:20-21) sacrifices.⁴⁶⁴ In Robert Daly's opinion Paul's presentation of the Eucharist in 1 Cor 10:14-22 indicates that he "takes sacrifice for granted as part of the religious picture and obviously expects the Corinthians to follow his understanding of the Eucharist as a kind of communion sacrifice."⁴⁶⁵

The Fourth Gospel does not, of course, contain a Eucharistic institution narrative. However, the Eucharistic content of John's gospel is, if anything, even richer than that found in the Synoptics. In addition to the "Bread of Life" discourse (6:22-59), there are possible allusions to the Lord's Supper in the miraculous transformation of wine into water at Cana (2:1-11); in the "vine and branches" portion of Jesus' farewell discourse at the Last Supper (15:1-10); in the evangelist's depiction of "blood and water" flowing from the side of the crucified Jesus (19:34); and in Jesus' post-resurrection meal of bread and fish with his disciples (21:9-14). Although John does not include a Eucharistic institution narrative in his gospel, he does, very interestingly, inculcate a subtle link between the Eucharist and Jesus' final meal by associating a miracle involving wine (2:1-11) with the first Passover of Jesus' public ministry (2:13); a miracle involving bread (6:1-14) with the second Passover (6:4); and a final meal on the eve of the third and final Passover, when Jesus dies a sacrificial death on the cross. The explicit Eucharistic imagery of John 6:51-58 is of particular interest to our present quest to identify sacrificial motifs in connection with the Eucharist, for Jesus' twofold mandate to "eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood" (6:52) implies the separation of flesh from blood in a sacrificial action.⁴⁶⁶

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁵ Daly, *Origins*, 59. Daly states, moreover, that Paul's "treatment of the Eucharist in 1 Corinthians 10 and 11 as a cultic anticipation of Christ's sacrificial death and as a participation in the blood and in the body of Christ, makes sense only on the supposition that he and his readers view the Lord's Supper and the Passion as sacrificial events."

⁴⁶⁶ O'Collins and Jones (*Jesus our Priest*, 24): "The reality of Jesus' sacrificial death comes through the separation of 'flesh' to be eaten and the 'blood' to be drunk. . . . These verses are driven by a sense of a priestly, sacrificial meal and a violent, sacrificial death." Andrew Lincoln (*The Gospel According to Saint John* [Grand Rapids: Baker

Moreover, if we allow a Eucharistic association with the image of blood and water pouring forth from the side of the crucified Christ (19:34), the connection between Eucharist and sacrifice in this verse is virtually undeniable.

It is significant that the Synoptic evangelists and the author of John's gospel associate Jesus' Last Supper with the Passover celebration. The two streams of tradition famously disagree as to whether the Supper took place on the feast of Passover (as in the Synoptics) or on the day before (as in John), and the question of which tradition is historically accurate will probably never be definitively settled. However, it is clear that the Synoptic writers, John, and (in a more implicit manner) Paul⁴⁶⁷ drew connections between this greatest of the Jewish liturgical festivals, the sacrificial death of Jesus, and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The celebration of the Passover probably originated as a nomadic shepherds' meal that ritualized the shifting of feeding grounds for the flocks and was celebrated by sacrificing, roasting, and eating one of the new lambs. However, as Exod 12:1-28 indicates, its meaning was later invested with new significance in light of the Israelites' experience of liberation in their flight from Egypt. The Passover meal attained its salvific sacrificial character by virtue of its association with the "original" Paschal lamb of the Exodus, whose blood the Israelites were enjoined to place on the doors and lintels of their homes (Exod 12:7), where it would act as a sign to the destroying angel, who would "pass over" the homes of the Israelites while wreaking plague on the firstborn sons in Egypt (12:13). As the "institution narrative" in Exod 12 makes clear, the Passover was to be celebrated by all

Academic, 2005], 232: "Eating the flesh and drinking the blood entail that the flesh has been broken and the blood shed."

⁴⁶⁷ In 1 Cor 5:7 Paul states, "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed." For Daly, "the significance of this text comes from the fact that, in its context, it is not something that Paul is teaching, or trying to prove; it is almost a throw-away line. It is something that Paul and his readers took for granted. . . . This is a powerful indication that the earliest Christians, at least in the Pauline communities, looked upon the death of Christ as a Passover event, a Passover sacrifice" (*Sacrifice Unveiled*, 55).

generations as a memorial meal or “remembrance” (זכרון). To the Jews who celebrated it, the Passover ritual was not merely a recollection of a past event. Rather, it was “a making present, a calling into present reality of God’s ongoing and enduring fidelity to the covenant,” where “God’s saving deeds in the past again become a gracious and enduring present” with “an echo of the expectation of final, eschatological liberation.”⁴⁶⁸ The significance of the association between the Lord’s Supper and Passover in the NT lies not only in the fact that the latter feast had attained clear sacrificial connotations by the time of Jesus, but also in the theological significance of Passover as a ritual in which a past salvific event was understood to become present to those who cultically recalled it.⁴⁶⁹ We will return to this point shortly.

Outside of the NT, but within the parameters of first century Christianity, the *Didache* also attests to a widespread belief in a sacrificial component to the Eucharistic celebration. In *Did.* 14:1-3 we read: “On the Lord’s own day *assemble together and break bread and give thanks* (συναχθέντες κλάσατε ἄρτον καὶ εὐχαριστήσατε), having first confessed your sins so that your *sacrifice* (θυσία) may be pure. But let no one who has a dispute with a companion join you until they have been reconciled, in order that your *sacrifice* (θυσία) may be undefiled. For this is what the Lord said, ‘In every place and time offer me a pure sacrifice (θυσίαν), for I am a great king, says the Lord, and my name is great among the nations’” (emphasis added). This text clearly refers to the Eucharistic celebration, with its injunction to the community to “assemble

⁴⁶⁸ Johannes Emminghaus, *The Eucharist: Essence, Form, Celebration* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), 19.

⁴⁶⁹ Daly (*Sacrifice Unveiled*, 42-43): “The Christian gospels explicitly place the Lord’s Supper in the context of the Passover feast. Whether or not it was an actual Passover meal, all the gospels see it as a Passover event. As such, the three temporal dimensions are present and operative (as they also are for Christians celebrating the Eucharist): the past, the present, and the future. The past is obviously present because Israel consistently historicized the Passover into a memorial of the Exodus. . . . the *present* is also operative because the participants also believed that they were part of a salvific action taking place with them and upon them here and now. For the Passover celebration was not just a memorial, but also a living sacrificial action. . . . Israel [also] saw the original Passover as the archetype of the eschatological event to come at the last day. The Passover celebration became the occasion or anticipation of the future final salvation event now also seen as a Passover event.”

together” (συναχθέντες) in order to “break bread” (κλάσατε ἄρτον) and “give thanks” (εὐχαριστήσατε). In preparation for this assembly, its participants are to confess their sins and be reconciled with their fellow believers so that their “sacrifice” (θυσία) might be pure and undefiled. For emphasis, a quotation from LXX Mal 1:11 is added, referring to the “pure sacrifice” (θυσίαν καθάραν) that will be offered to God by the Gentiles. Clearly, the author(s) who composed this manual of worship and Christian discipline considered the Eucharist to be a sacrificial event, as well as an eschatological and ecclesial event (cf. *Did.* 9:4; 10:5). As Daly points out, in the *Didache* “the idea of the Eucharist as sacrifice is taken for granted,” although the question of *how* the document’s writer(s) understood the sacrificial character of the ritual is not apparent from the context.⁴⁷⁰

The cumulative weight of this evidence for a widespread sacrificial understanding of the Eucharist in the first century is obviously of great import for our study of implicit Eucharistic themes in Hebrews. It staggers the imagination to suggest that the author of this text, who evinces familiarity with other basic elements of Christian tradition in his sermon, would be unaware of what appears to have been a fairly common understanding of the Lord’s Supper as a sacrificial event. Nevertheless, as I pointed out above, the objection can easily be raised that it is difficult to reconcile a sacrificial interpretation of the Eucharist on the part of the preacher (assuming he is talking about the Eucharist at all) with his insistence on the self-contained and unrepeatable character of Christ’s sacrifice. This is, admittedly, a challenging roadblock to overcome, unless one concedes that the author of Hebrews was likely conversant with the basic Eucharistic theology of other NT writers. We have already seen in this study that the preacher seems to have been familiar with the two main strands of Eucharistic institution tradition, the

⁴⁷⁰ Daly, *Origins*, 130.

Pauline-Lukan and the Markan-Matthean. His references to both the “new covenant” of Jeremiah (echoed in Paul and Luke’s institution narratives) and the Sinai covenant of Exodus (echoed in Mark and Matthew’s) within the context of a Eucharistic homily demonstrate the plausibility of this hypothesis. I suggest that the preacher’s knowledge of these traditions goes a step further, particularly in connection with the Pauline-Lukan version of the institution narrative.

It is in 1 Cor 10:24, 26 and Luke 22:19 that we find Jesus mandating the repetition of the ritual that he inaugurated at the Last Supper: “Do this in remembrance (ἀνάμνησιν) of me.” The key term here is ἀνάμνησις, which means “remembrance” or “recollection.” Used in its active sense, as it is in the Pauline and Lukan Eucharistic texts, it implies not merely remembering a past event but making that past event actually present in the cultic act of recollection.⁴⁷¹ Like the Passover meal (within which context the Eucharist is presented in the NT as having been instituted), the Lord’s Supper is understood in these texts as a memorial meal, with ἀνάμνησις serving as the functional equivalent of the Jewish concept of memorial, *zikaron* (זִכָּרוֹן).⁴⁷² If, as I believe, the author of Hebrews was aware of and, furthermore, subscribed to the Pauline-Lukan notion that the one sacrifice of Christ could be made ritually present in the “remembrance” (ἀνάμνησις) of that sacrifice in the Lord’s Supper, then the apparent dichotomy between the

⁴⁷¹ Behm, Johannes. “ἀνάμνησις, ὑπόμνησις,” *TDNT* 1:348-349. According to Behm, “Christians are to enact (→ ποιέω) the whole action of the Lord’s Supper—this is the reference of the twofold τοῦτο—in recollection of Jesus, and this not merely in such sort that they simply remember, but rather, in accordance with the active sense of ἀνάμνησις and the explanation in v. 26, in such a way that they actively fulfil the ἀνάμνησις. The making present by the later community of the Lord who instituted the Supper, and who put the new → διαθήκη into effect by His death, is the goal and content of their action in which they repeat what was done by Jesus and His disciples on the eve of His crucifixion.”

⁴⁷² David E. Stern (“Remembering and Redemption,” *Rediscovering the Eucharist: Ecumenical Conversations* [Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2003], 2-3): “In Hebrew, the terms *zekher* and *zikaron* are equivalent to *anamnesis*. In the Kiddush, the prayer of sanctification that inaugurates the Sabbath and the festivals, we recite the phrases *zekher litsiat mistrayim* (in remembrance of the exodus from Egypt) and *zikaron le-ma-aseit vereishit* (in remembrance of the work of creation). The Sabbath and festivals are structured not simply for us to recall past events, but for us to re-experience them: on the Sabbath, we rest as God rested; on Passover, we taste affliction in the bitter herbs. . . . *Zekher* is a pointer through time, connecting the present to the past. The Sabbath is a remembrance because it is a pointer to creation; our festivals are remembrances because they are pointers to the Exodus.”

“once-for-all” sacrifice of Christ on the cross and its actualization in the Eucharist would be obviated. This speculation goes beyond the explicit textual evidence of Hebrews, of course, but it is compatible with the implicit evidence that the preacher was familiar with the broad contours of first-century Christian theology, including the emerging notion of the Eucharist as an ἀνάμνησις of Jesus’ unrepeatable sacrifice on the cross. This is all the more likely if the author’s injunction to “regularly offer a sacrifice of praise” (13:15) is understood in reference to the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

As I argued above in my exegesis of Heb 13:15, the preacher’s use of the phrase θυσίαν αἰνέσεως there can credibly be interpreted as an allusion to the *tôdâ* sacrifice, as this term is regularly employed in the LXX where the *tôdâ* is mentioned. In light of the Eucharistic context for the sermon that I have proposed, this interpretation makes a great deal of sense. However, many commentators argue that the author intended a much different meaning by exhorting his hearers to offer a θυσίαν αἰνέσεως. Among the texts in which this expression is used in the LXX, Psalm 49:14a is singled out for attention: “Offer to God a sacrifice of praise (θυσίαν αἰνέσεως).” Prior to making this statement, the psalmist has depicted God as rejecting animal sacrifice: “I will not accept young bulls from your house, nor he-goats from your flock” (49:9). The psalm is therefore sometimes interpreted as signifying a disavowal of cultic sacrifice in favor of so-called “spiritual sacrifice” – the offering to God of one’s virtuous behavior. Subsequently, the fact that the author of Hebrews uses the phrase θυσίαν αἰνέσεως in 13:15 and goes on in v. 16 to exhort his hearers to good behavior is taken as an indication that the preacher draws on the “spiritualized” notion of sacrifice in Ps 49:14 to reject cultic ritual in favor of ethical behavior. Such an interpretation, however, is overly simplistic, both with regard to Heb 13:15-16 and the psalm which it supposedly echoes. Concerning the latter it is true that the psalmist condemns

cultic sacrifice. However, he does not reject ritual sacrifice in and of itself, but rather cultic acts undertaken by persons who live sinful, unethical lives: “But God said to the sinner: ‘Why do you speak my righteous precepts and place my covenant in your mouth, you who hated instruction and threw my words behind you? If you see a thief, you run with him, and you take your place with adulterers’” (49:16-17). The psalm concludes with the statement, “A sacrifice of praise glorifies me” (θυσία αινέσεως δοξάσει με, v.23a). There is no indication that the psalmist understands θυσίαν αινέσεως in a different sense than its typical usage in the OT, namely as the ritual offering of a *tôdâ* sacrifice. The overall thrust of the psalm is not that liturgical rituals, including the offering of sacrifice, are intrinsically inferior to ethical deeds or, still less, meaningless; indeed, they have been mandated by God. However, in order for them to possess any merit, they must be the outward expression of an interior orientation toward right behavior.

This, indeed, is the key to a proper understanding of the “spiritualization” of sacrifice. As Daly points out, this term is often used in a misleading fashion:

A rationalist approach, for example, that builds narrowly on what can be learned from the discipline of comparative religions, tends to assume that cultic worship is imperfect to the extent that it is material, and perfect to the extent that it is immaterial. Someone working from that approach will tend to think of “true” sacrifice in terms of a radical dematerialization of it. But such an understanding of spiritualization is clearly at odds both with the Christian Scriptures and with the incarnational thinking of the founding figures of Christian theology: Paul, Barnabas, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, the two Clements, Origen, Augustine, etc.⁴⁷³

Understood correctly, however, the concept of “spiritual sacrifice” highlights the “inner, spiritual, or ethical significance of the cult over against the merely material or merely external understanding of it.”⁴⁷⁴ In the OT a consistent theme that echoes through the sacred writings is that one’s relationship with God cannot be compartmentalized: a healthy liturgical life must go

⁴⁷³ Daly, *Sacrifice Unveiled*, 69.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

hand-in-hand with a healthy moral life. To the extent that cultic acts are undertaken in a spirit of hypocrisy, their meaning and value is lessened, if not negated entirely. When the prophets rail against ritual activity (see, e.g., Isa 1:12-20; Jer 7:23; Amos 5:18-27; Mic 6:6-8) they are not condemning the cult *per se*, but rather the insincere piety of those whose outwardly praiseworthy liturgical acts are belied by their misguided interior dispositions (and, indeed, by their sinful deeds outside the sanctuary).⁴⁷⁵

The critique of ethically empty ritual behavior in the OT serves as the first of three stages in the “spiritualization” of sacrifice identified by Daly in his recent study of the topic.⁴⁷⁶ The second stage, he believes, occurred as the result of exilic and post-exilic developments within the Jewish community that necessitated a move away from material sacrifice. The temporary loss of the Temple during the Babylonian exile (ca. 587-39 BCE), the situation of Jews living in the Diaspora, the voluntary sectarian separation from Jerusalem by the Jews of Qumran, and the eventual destruction of the second Temple in 70 CE all contributed to a growing emphasis within Judaism on “obedient piety” over the actual performance of cultic sacrificial ritual.⁴⁷⁷ Finally, according to Daly, the climactic stage in the movement toward “spiritualization” took place with the rise of the Christian movement, in which ritual sacrifice was transcended by “the

⁴⁷⁵ Roland De Vaux (*Ancient Israel*, 454-55) offers an excellent (if not entirely ecumenically sensitive) summation of the prophetic critique of the cult: “The pre-exilic prophets uttered some violent attacks on sacrifice. . . . They contrast the futility of sacrifices with obedience to Yahweh, and with the doing of right and of justice. . . . Some authors have therefore drawn the conclusion that the prophets condemned sacrifices of every kind. Since several of these passages mention sacrifices along with pilgrimages and feasts, the same authors admit that the prophets condemned all exterior worship. But these prophets do not condemn the Temple itself; hence, they are regarded as advocates of a Temple without altar and without sacrifices; they would thus be the Protestants of the Old Testament. If this attitude is adopted, then one should go further, for Is 1:15 mentions, along with sacrifices and feasts, prayer itself: ‘No matter how many prayers you say, I shall not listen.’ Now since no one holds that the prophets condemned prayer, the whole argument leads to an absurd conclusion and simply falls to pieces. These biblical texts, therefore, cannot mean that the prophets uttered condemnations of sacrifice itself.”

⁴⁷⁶ See Daly, *Sacrifice Unveiled*, 69-75.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 69-70.

performance of down-to-earth, practical, diaconal, ministerial and apostolic works of the Christian faith.”⁴⁷⁸ Daly sees the replacement of the cultic with the ethical as “much more than just a possible interpretation,” arguing that all of the NT passages that “seem to talk about Christian sacrificial activity do so in practical, ethical terms.”⁴⁷⁹ In his 1978 study he was equally emphatic on this point:

There is a long and controversy-laden history to the idea that Christian sacrifice, or, more generally, *true Christian worship, is centered not in acts of ritual and liturgical worship but in the practical, ethical sphere of the lived Christian life. The idea as such is not new.* What is new, and what establishes the necessary starting-point for all future reflection on the meaning of Christian sacrifice, is our demonstration that *the commonly accepted methods of modern critical scholarship prove beyond reasonable doubt that this primarily ethical concept of Christian sacrifice is indeed the one that is operative in the New Testament.*⁴⁸⁰

In my estimation, Daly’s analysis achieves mixed results. On the one hand there is no denying that the Christian notion of sacrifice as presented in the NT contains a markedly ethical dimension, as exemplified in such texts as Rom 12:1-2 and 1 Pet 2:4-10. Moreover, the direction in which sacrificial theology developed in early Christianity was contiguous with the trend already apparent in those OT writings which criticized cultic practices that were divorced from interior ethical purity. That the first Christians should move even further in this direction is unsurprising, given the belief that Christ’s sacrificial death eliminated the need for the animal (and vegetable) sacrifices that were offered in the Levitical cultic system. On the other hand Daly goes too far when he claims that “true Christian worship is centered not in acts of ritual and liturgical worship but in the practical, ethical sphere of the lived Christian life,” and that contemporary critical exegesis validates his viewpoint “beyond reasonable doubt.” We have seen

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 72.

⁴⁷⁹ The passages in question are Rom 12:1-2; 15:15-16; 1 Pet 2:4-10; Heb 10:19-25; 12:18-13:16.

⁴⁸⁰ *Origins*, 82-83, emphasis added.

in this excursus that a wide range of first-century Christian writings present the Eucharist as a sacrificial ritual act.⁴⁸¹ Moreover, this ritual was (as the Pauline-Lukan institution narrative attests) meant to be repeated on a regular basis. Indeed, Acts 2:42 witnesses to the centrality of the “breaking of the bread” in early Christian community life, a way of life that also emphasized the importance of charitable ethical acts such as ensuring a just distribution of goods and resources (Acts 2:45). The NT evidence actually suggests that both the sacrificial ritual of the Lord’s Supper and the sacrificial ethical practices of daily life were of paramount value in the emerging Christian movement.

I argue, therefore, that a more nuanced understanding of Christian sacrifice is necessary, one which gives due weight to both the liturgical and ethical dimensions of sacrificial activity. Indeed, if the interpretation of Heb 13:15-16 that I have proposed above is correct, then Hebrews actually provides a paradigmatic example of how this understanding might be achieved. In 13:15 the preacher (according to my interpretation) exhorts his audience to “regularly offer up a sacrifice of praise,” that is, to consistently participate in Eucharistic worship, the Christian *tôdâ* sacrifice. “But,” he adds in v. 16, “Do not fail at doing good and sharing what you have, for God is pleased with such sacrifices.” In an exhortation consistent with the very best of OT liturgical piety, our author encourages his listeners (a) to regularly and consistently take part in the communal celebration of the Lord’s Supper (cf. 10:25) and (b) to see to it that their ritual activity is matched by a genuine concern for right behavior, especially as regards sharing their goods with the poor and vulnerable in their midst. Far from devaluing or disavowing the cultic

⁴⁸¹ A claim which Daly does not dispute, but rather acknowledges, as we have seen. In light of Daly’s own recognition of the sacrificial dimension of the Eucharist, and given the centrality of this ritual in the life of the first century church, I contend that a more balanced approach to the question of sacrifice in the NT is to say that the cultic and ethical models each have significant weight, and indeed interpenetrate one another. In his 2009 work, Daly does condemn the “radical dematerialization” of *sacrifice* (*Sacrifice Unveiled*, 69), as I noted approvingly above. However, he goes on to find the locus of Christian sacrificial activity in “the performance of down-to-earth, practical, diaconal, ministerial and apostolic works of the Christian life” (ibid., 72) without assigning compatible gravity to the place of sacrifice in Christian liturgical life.

sacrificial ritual of the Christian Eucharist, the author of Hebrews enjoins his community to make it a central part of their lives, while at the same time giving equal weight to proper ethical conduct.

g. Closing Benediction: Blood of the Eternal Covenant (13:20)

The “long goodbye” which constitutes Hebrews’ lengthy closing peroration comes to a soaring conclusion with a final benediction in 13:20-21, after which the author adds some personal notes and greetings before bidding his hearers farewell.

13:20 Now may the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great shepherd of the sheep by the blood of the eternal covenant, Jesus our Lord, 21 provide you with every good thing, so that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

This benediction is noteworthy in several ways. For the first time, the preacher makes explicit mention of the resurrection of Jesus (ἀναγαγὼν ἐκ νεκρῶν, 13:20). He employs the image of “shepherd” (ποιμήν) to describe Jesus, a symbol used in such texts as John 10 and 1 Pet 2:25. He also once again evokes the motif of Jesus’ blood, poured out to establish a lasting covenant with humanity: αἵματι διαθήκης αἰωνίου. As we have seen, in the other texts in which the author refers to the “blood of the covenant” (9:20; 10:29), there is likely an allusion to the Eucharist. Given the author’s previous usage, we are on solid ground in detecting a similar allusion here, especially as the preacher would wish to offer his listeners one more reminder of the connection between Christ’s sacrifice and the ritual that they will celebrate once the sermon has come to an end.

4. Summary

In this chapter I have set forth evidence for reading Hebrews as a homily written for proclamation at the celebration of the Eucharist. I first presented the case for the overall liturgical

and Eucharistic orientation of the sermon by proposing a chiasmic structure for the text which centers on the author's exposition of Christ's sacrifice and is permeated at each significant point with cultic themes and imagery. I then identified seven sections of the homily (6:4-8; 8:7-13; 9:11-22; 10:19-29; 12:22-24; 13:7-17; 13:20-21) which contain references and allusions to the Lord's Supper and its celebration. In a warning against apostasy (6:4-8), the author claims repentance is impossible for those who have definitively rejected Christian faith after having "once been enlightened" and "tasted the heavenly gift" and "become partners of the Holy Spirit" (6:4). I argued that these three terms are best understood as references to sacramental initiation, with the "heavenly gift" (δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου) referring to the Eucharist. This proposal takes on greater credibility in light of the material that follows, especially a parallel text (10:19-35). This passage contains a similar warning against apostasy (vv. 26-31), along with exhortations (a) to "approach" (προσερχώμεθα, v. 22) the Divine with "bodies washed with pure water" (v. 22), and (b) to remain faithful to the worshipping assembly (v. 25). Failure to do so would be tantamount to apostasy and would, among other transgressions, be accounted as profanation of the "blood of the covenant" (αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης, v. 29). A Eucharistic reading of this passage yielded the following insights: having been baptized ("bodies washed with pure water"), believers can confidently "approach" the flesh and blood of Christ in the Eucharist; the audience should remain faithful to attendance at the Lord's Supper (v. 25) lest they apostatize and treat the Eucharistic "blood of the covenant" as a common thing (v. 29).

The presence of a Eucharistic allusion in the author's reference to the "blood of the covenant" gains credence in light of his mentions of the covenant motif elsewhere in the sermon, as I argued in my subsequent analysis of 8:7-13 and 9:11-22. In the first of these two passages, the preacher quotes extensively from Jer 31(38):31-34 in order to demonstrate that through Jesus

and his sacrifice, God has established the “new covenant” with humanity promised by the prophet. Strikingly, the only other place in the NT where the “new covenant” theme is invoked in connection with Jesus’ sacrificial self-offering is in the Pauline-Lukan version of the Eucharistic institution narrative; the author of Hebrews likely intended his listeners to make a connection to the Lord’s Supper when they heard the phrase “new covenant” here as well as in 9:15 and 10:16-17. In the second passage, 9:11-22, the homilist appears to draw on another strand of Eucharistic tradition, the Markan-Matthean, in his quotation of Exod 24:8 in 9:20. Here he subtly alters the LXX in order to align the Exodus text with Jesus’ words over the bread and cup in Mark 14:24 and Matt 26:28 when speaking of the “blood of the covenant.” The rhetorical force of these combined references to the new covenant and Sinai covenant would have served to remind the audience of Hebrews that they had sacramental access to Christ’s covenant blood in their Eucharistic celebrations.

In the lengthy peroration and “call to worship” (12:18-13:21) that concludes the sermon, I identified several additional allusions to the Eucharist. In 12:22-24 the preacher informs his congregation that they have “approached” (προσεληλύθατε) a plethora of heavenly realities: the heavenly Jerusalem, myriads of angels, the “firstborn” in heaven, God himself, and Jesus. They have also approached Jesus’ “blood of sprinkling” (αἷματι ῥαντισμοῦ, v. 24), which I interpreted as a reference to the Eucharistic blood of Jesus, the consumption of which places believers in union with Jesus, the high priest who is present both in the heavenly realm and in the earthly ritual celebration of the Lord’s Supper. In 13:9-15 the preacher draws a final series of contrasts between the Levitical cult and Christian worship. Whereas Jewish dietary observations have no power to benefit those who observe them (13:9), Christian worshippers have an “altar” (θυσιαστήριον, 13:10) from which the Levitical ministers cannot eat but from which Christians

(by implication) can. Rather than understanding this “altar” as a metaphorical way of speaking about the cross of Jesus or his presence in heaven, I argued that the θυσιαστήριον in question is best understood as the Eucharistic table. By literally eating from this table, Christians reap the benefits of Christ’s sacrificial death and experience a foretaste of union with him in the heavenly realm. Furthermore, the acclamation “We have an altar,” coming as it does near the end of the sermon, serves to focus the audience’s attention on the Lord’s Supper which they will celebrate after the homily has been read aloud. The possibility that the author intended to direct his listeners to the coming Eucharistic celebration is enhanced by his subsequent exhortations to “go out to” (ἐξερχώμεθα) Jesus (13:13) and to continually offer a “sacrifice of praise” (θυσίαν αινέσεως, 13:15), a phrase which in the LXX refers to the Jewish *tôdâ* sacrifice, in which bread is offered and consumed as part of the ritual. A final reference to the “blood of the eternal covenant” (αἷματι διαθήκης αἰωνίου, 13:20) in the closing benediction serves to recall once more the covenant motif in connection with the Eucharist for the audience as they transitioned into its celebration at their house church.

As we have seen, many commentators have contested the Eucharistic nature of some or all of these putative references. Nevertheless, it is my contention that a Eucharistic interpretation of the verses in question is eminently reasonable, given the likely *context of the text*. Hebrews, as most exegetes agree, is a sermon. I have endeavored to demonstrate that the particular intended milieu for the reading of this sermon was a cultic celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Within such a setting, the fact that the author’s references to the Eucharist are allusive and implicit rather than direct and explicit makes a great deal of sense. Moreover, a Eucharistic reading of Hebrews enables us to make the best exegetical sense out of some otherwise difficult-to-interpret terms and images, such as the “heavenly gift” (δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου) in 6:4; the

“sprinkled blood” (αἷματι ῥαντισμοῦ) in 12:24; the “altar” (θυσιαστήριον) in 13:10; and the “sacrifice of praise” (θυσίαν αἰνέσεως) in 13:15. The author’s warnings against apostasy (6:4-8; 10:26-31) take on greater depth and poignancy if one understands him to be telling his community that a rejection of the worshipping assembly (10:25) entails a rejection of the Eucharist, a “heavenly gift” (6:4) and a sacramental participation in Christ’s “blood of the covenant” (αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης, 10:29; cf. 9:20). Above all, an approach to Hebrews through the lens of the Lord’s Supper best helps to explain how believers can both avail themselves of the benefits of Christ’s sacrifice and stand with Christ in the heavenly realm.

The historical and literary analysis of Hebrews that I have undertaken in this chapter and in Chapter Three demonstrates the plausibility of interpreting this document as a homily written for oral proclamation at the Lord’s Supper. This, I maintain, is the best explanation for the provenance of Hebrews, one which enhances our understanding of its literary quality and theological argumentation. At the historical-critical level, I argue that the author of Hebrews intentionally alluded to the Eucharist at various points in his sermon with the expectation that his hearers would have understood such allusions, given the nature of their liturgical assembly. In taking this stance I am conscious of going against the grain of most contemporary interpretation of Hebrews, which generally holds that the writer of the homily was silent about the Eucharist or even hostile toward the Eucharistic cult. Nevertheless, I contend that reading Hebrews as a Eucharistic sermon provides us with a richer and more accurate perspective on the mindset of its anonymous author and the situation of its hearers than traditional hermeneutical approaches to the text have done. Moreover, I believe that the hypothesis that the Eucharist was the intended milieu for the homily not only sheds greater light on its original historical context but also explains the tendency to connect motifs from the text to the Eucharist by subsequent generations

of exegetes, as well as composers of liturgical texts and hymnody. We take up this history of interpretation in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE
HEBREWS AND THE EUCHARIST:
PATRISTIC, LITURGICAL, AND EASTERN PERSPECTIVES

1. Introduction

In the preceding chapter, I undertook an exegesis of seven passages in Hebrews (5:11-6:12; 8:7-13; 9:11-22; 10:19-35; 12:18-24; 13:9-16; 13:20) in which I sought to demonstrate the presence of references to the Eucharist at key points in the homily. Underpinning my arguments for these allusions to the Lord's Supper was my assertion that Hebrews is best read and interpreted as a sermon written for proclamation at a Eucharistic celebration. This, I contended, was the document's original literary, historical, and theological *Sitz im Leben*. Indeed, the entire thrust of this study thus far has been to focus on the actual intent of the author and the situation of his original hearers, as evidenced by the text itself. My approach has been typical of contemporary interpretive methodology. It is, moreover, in harmony with the directives set forth for Catholic exegetes by the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* (hereafter *DV*):

Since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate *what meaning the sacred writers really intended*, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words. To search out the intention of the sacred writers, attention should be given, among other things, to "literary forms." For truth is set forth and expressed differently in texts which are variously historical, prophetic, poetic, or of other forms of discourse. The interpreter must investigate *what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances* by using contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture.⁴⁸²

In my analysis of Hebrews, both in its entirety and in the aforementioned passages in particular, I have endeavored to present a credible theory regarding the meaning that its author "intended to

⁴⁸² *DV* 12, emphasis added. All quotations from the documents of the Second Vatican Council are taken from http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

express and actually expressed” in his sermon. My arguments for the presence of Eucharistic imagery in Hebrews have been based on (a) the textual evidence for the author’s original intention vis-à-vis his audience and (b) the evidence that I set forth for the already-existing Eucharistic faith and practice of mainstream Christians living the late first century CE. Simply put, the case I have made has been centered primarily on the contention that the Lord’s Supper served as an important background influence on the *original* meaning of Hebrews.

Before bringing this study to a conclusion, however, it is fitting that we should briefly consider a broader interpretive context for Hebrews, within which my argument for the presence of Eucharistic motifs in the text attains even greater clarity and credibility. This wider context includes the insights of patristic exegesis and the sermon’s influence on the language of ancient Eucharistic liturgy. Although an analysis of this sort goes beyond the parameters of historical- and literary-critical exegesis of the text of Hebrews, it is nonetheless in continuity with the methodology embraced thus far in my study, insofar as it seeks to shed light on how subsequent generations have discerned and developed an *already existing* motif in Hebrews. Moreover, this approach seeks to address a sometimes neglected dimension of hermeneutics, namely the ongoing relevance of a biblical text in the life of the church. In a 1996 study of the Book of Isaiah, which he described as “a pilot project designed to persuade future writers of Biblical commentaries to look at the texts they are working on from a wider perspective,”⁴⁸³ John F.A. Sawyer emphasized the importance of taking into account the multitudinous ways in which a biblical text has been actualized through such means as sermons, hymns, paintings, and theological treatises, noting that “There is just as much evidence, indeed usually far more, for

⁴⁸³ Sawyer, John F.A. *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 14.

what people believe the text means, or what they are told to believe it means, as there is for what the original author intended.”⁴⁸⁴

By drawing attention to the need to cast a wider hermeneutical net when approaching a biblical book, Sawyer’s interpretive proposal is on solid ground. At the same time, it must be reiterated before proceeding further that any valid subsequent interpretations of sacred Scripture cannot be divorced from the original meaning intended by the author. Otherwise, putative exegesis actually becomes the worst sort of eisegesis wherein later interpreters find meanings in a text that simply are not there to be found. My purpose here is to demonstrate, rather, that we can find additional confirmation of my hypothesis that Hebrews contains Eucharistic imagery by looking at how a Eucharistic interpretation of the sermon coheres with readings of the text that go beyond (but are in continuity with) the document’s original provenance.

To this end, this final chapter explores two pathways of biblical interpretation that transcend the historical and literary approach adopted thus far. First, I draw on the insights of several Church Fathers in order to show that certain Eucharistic motifs that I have identified in Hebrews were already recognized by some of the earliest commentators on this biblical text. Second, I invoke the principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi* as I set forth an example of an ancient liturgical text, the *Liturgy of St. James*, in which the subtle Eucharistic imagery of Hebrews has shaped the development of the language employed in Eucharistic worship. The force of this brief survey will be to show that the interpretation of Hebrews that I have proposed is taken up in those places where one would most logically expect to find it: in the writings of ancient exegetes and liturgists, especially in the eastern Churches that employed the Greek language in which Hebrews was written. The connections drawn between Hebrews and the Eucharist by the Fathers and the liturgy lend further credence to the heuristic device of reading Hebrews as a Eucharistic

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., 13.

homily. I conclude this chapter by presenting examples of contemporary Eastern Christian interpretations of Hebrews which have been shaped by this twofold stream of patristic and liturgical interpretation and have, consequently, demonstrated a greater openness to Eucharistic content in the homily than have many of their Western counterparts.

2. Hebrews and the Eucharist in the Writings of the Church Fathers

Before proceeding to consider the insights of the Fathers on Hebrews and the Eucharist, it must be acknowledged that the use of patristic biblical insights in modern exegesis is a controversial point. On the one hand, the Second Vatican Council commended the work of the Fathers in *Dei Verbum*:

The bride of the incarnate Word, the Church taught by the Holy Spirit, is concerned to move ahead toward a deeper understanding of the Sacred Scriptures so that she may increasingly feed her sons with the divine words. Therefore, she also encourages the study of the holy Fathers of both East and West and of sacred liturgies.⁴⁸⁵

This view was echoed and deepened in the 1993 Pontifical Biblical Commission document *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*:

From earliest times it has been understood that the same Holy Spirit, who moved the authors of the New Testament to put in writing the message of salvation (*Dei Verbum*, 7; 18), likewise provided the church with continual assistance for the interpretation of its inspired writings. . . . The fathers of the church, who had a particular role in the process of the formation of the canon, likewise have a foundational role in relation to the living tradition which unceasingly accompanies and guides the church's reading and interpretation of Scripture. . . . Within the broader current of the great tradition, the particular contribution of patristic exegesis consists in this: to have drawn out from the totality of Scripture the basic orientations which shaped the doctrinal tradition of the church and to have provided a rich theological teaching for the instruction and spiritual sustenance of the faithful.⁴⁸⁶

⁴⁸⁵ *DV* 23.

⁴⁸⁶ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* Ch. III, Sec. B, Par. 2. Accessed online at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/curia/pbcinter.htm>.

On the other hand, Raymond Brown and Sandra Schneiders offer a less-than-glowing appraisal of the contemporary relevance of patristic exegesis, albeit one that acknowledges its role in dogmatic theology:

When one reads the actual exegesis of the Fathers. . . it really has little in common with the methods and results of modern Catholic exegesis. We have recorded a reluctance to return to the more-than-literal exegesis of the Fathers. What then is the practical import of patristic exegesis as a guide? First of all, the area in which patristic authority is strongest is that of the dogmatic implications of Scripture, not that of literal exegesis. . . . The Church's insistence on the exegetical authority of the Fathers reflects her desire that Catholic exegetes should not forget the dogmatic heritage that comes to them from the Fathers. . . . but in terms of practical guidance in modern literal exegesis of individual texts, patristic authority is of restricted importance.⁴⁸⁷

Brown and Schneiders raise some valid cautions about the Fathers' relevance in the quest to identify the literal and historical meaning of a given Biblical book or passage. However, we should not be too quick to dismiss the possibility that patristic interpreters may be able to provide us with a valuable link to the original insights of the biblical authors, as Christopher Hall argues:

People reading the Fathers for the first time need to keep in mind what the Fathers can and cannot offer them in their exegesis of the Bible. Patristic exegetes had fewer linguistic, historical, and theological tools available to them in their study of Scripture than the modern exegete. Students coming to patristic exegesis and expecting to find a modern commentary will walk away disappointed. Yet patristic exegesis provides both an indispensable foundation and a vital supplement for much modern commentary. The Fathers' insistence on the connection between spiritual health, life in the Church, and commentary on the Church's book, rebukes the modern tendency to separate scholarship from spirituality and worship. . . . The hermeneutical and historical proximity of the Fathers to the New Testament Church and its apostolic traditions demands that we listen carefully to their exegetic insights, advice, and intuitions.⁴⁸⁸

Hall's reference to the "hermeneutical and historical proximity of the Fathers to the New Testament Church" is of particular relevance to this present study. It is my contention that the

⁴⁸⁷ Raymond E. Brown and Sandra M. Schneiders, "Hermeneutics," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (ed. R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmyer, and R. E. Murphy; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 1164.

⁴⁸⁸ Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 195-96.

tendency on the part of certain patristic scholars to recognize Eucharistic allusions in Hebrews is not merely a case of retrojecting later theology into a biblical text but rather of taking up and developing a theme that was already present and discernible to its original audience.

It must be admitted that the evidence for a Eucharistic interpretation of Hebrews in the writings of the Fathers is not overwhelming. When it does emerge, it is not until the late fourth and early fifth centuries.⁴⁸⁹ However, this “absence of evidence” should not be attributed to a lack of belief in the presence of Eucharistic content in the sermon on the part of patristic interpreters. Rather, the explanation lies in the complex relationship between this particular biblical text and those Fathers who wrote commentary on it. As we saw in Chapter Three, questions about the authorship of Hebrews and doctrinal concerns over its seemingly rigorist stance on second repentance (6:4-8; 10:26-31) occasioned debate over the document’s canonicity. Particularly in the churches of the West, support for inclusion of Hebrews in the NT canon was slow to gain traction, with Jerome and Augustine emerging as the first staunch proponents.⁴⁹⁰ Consequently, early Christian commentary in Hebrews was relatively slow to

⁴⁸⁹ A possible early reference to Hebrews and the Eucharist is found in a fragment attributed to Irenaeus: “The Lord instituted a new oblation in the new covenant, according to [the declaration of] Malachi the prophet. For, ‘from the rising of the sun even to the setting my name has been glorified among the Gentiles, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure sacrifice,’ as John also declares in the Apocalypse: ‘The incense is the prayers of the saints.’ Then again, Paul exhorts us ‘to present our bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.’ And again, ‘Let us offer the sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of the lips.’ Now those oblations are not according to the law, the handwriting of which the Lord took away from the midst by cancelling it; but they are according to the Spirit, for we must worship God ‘in spirit and in truth.’ And therefore the oblation of the Eucharist is not a carnal one, but a spiritual; and in this respect it is pure. For we make an oblation to God of the bread and the cup of blessing, giving Him thanks in that He has commanded the earth to bring forth these fruits for our nourishment. And then, when we have perfected the oblation, we invoke the Holy Spirit, that He may exhibit this sacrifice, both the bread the body of Christ, and the cup the blood of Christ, in order that the receivers of these antitypes may obtain remission of sins and life eternal. Those persons, then, who perform these oblations in remembrance of the Lord, do not fall in with Jewish views, but, performing the service after a spiritual manner, they shall be called sons of wisdom” (*Fragment of a Lost Writing* no. xxxvii, *ANF-CE1*: 574-75, emphasis added). However, given the questionable authenticity of this text, we can only safely identify Eucharistic interpretations of Hebrews beginning with Chrysostom around 403-404 CE.

⁴⁹⁰ *Hebrews* (ed. E.M. Heen and P.D.W. Krey; Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament X; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), xviii.

emerge, and it did so first within the churches of the East. Moreover, among those Greek Fathers who drew upon Hebrews, most did so by way of reference to the text in their exegetical works on other biblical writings and in other theological treatises.⁴⁹¹ Additionally, certain aspects of Hebrews, such as the exordium (1:1-4), the aforementioned controversial passages dealing with second repentance, and the homily's references to Melchizedek attracted the lion's share of attention from patristic writers.⁴⁹² Nevertheless, it is significant that those authors who composed full-fledged commentaries on the sermon – such as Chrysostom and Theodoret – all drew connections between the content of Hebrews and the celebration of the Lord's Supper. We turn now to consider their insights.

A primary issue taken up by these early commentators on Hebrews is that of the seeming contradiction between the once-for-all character of Christ's sacrifice as depicted in the sermon and the notion of the Eucharist as a memorial sacrifice. As I argued in the previous chapter, an understanding of the Lord's Supper as a ritual *ἀνάμνησις* of Jesus' sacrificial death was already operative in the first century; there is thus reason to hold that the author of Hebrews was familiar with this concept and could thus refer to the Eucharist as a "sacrifice of praise" (13:15) without contradicting his staunch belief in the unique and unrepeatable nature of Calvary. The argument

⁴⁹¹ "The way in which the verses of Hebrews were referenced among the early Christian exegetes are far from uniform. The early Christian writers could draw in the text of Hebrews to their exegesis in a variety of ways. Sometimes, if they started with the text of Hebrews (as Chrysostom often did in his *Homilies*), they would pursue a close reading of a particular verse or verses. Sometimes, however, they might begin with another biblical text, either from the Old Testament or the New, and a particular theme or theological or hermeneutical point raised in its exegesis might evoke a text or texts from Hebrews and/or passages from other portions of Scripture" (ibid., xxiv).

⁴⁹² Ibid., xxv. See also Koester, *Hebrews*, 19-27. The prologue (1:1-4) speaks rather clearly of the divinity and preexistence of the Son, thus making it an important piece of biblical support in the emerging Christological controversies of the ante-Nicene period, while the passages dealing with the impossibility of repentance after apostasy (6:4-8; 10:26-31) were invoked by figures on both sides of rigorist controversies associated with Montanism and other such movements. The Melchizedek texts became a point of contention when some second century authors claimed that Melchizedek was superior to Christ, because the former had no parents (Heb 7:3) while Jesus had a human mother (Koester, *Hebrews*, 24-25). It could be that patristic commentators were relatively silent about Eucharistic references in Hebrews because this was not a disputed issue at the time.

that I have advanced was already being made, albeit in a somewhat different form, in the patristic period. John Chrysostom, writing around 403-404 CE,⁴⁹³ states:

What then? Do not we offer every day? We offer indeed, but making a remembrance of His death, and this [remembrance] is one and not many. How is it one, and not many? Inasmuch as that [sacrifice] was once for all offered, [and] carried into the Holy of Holies. This is a figure of that [sacrifice] and this remembrance of that. For we always offer the same, not one sheep now and tomorrow another, but always the same thing: so that the sacrifice is one. And yet by this reasoning, since the offering is made in many places, are there many Christs? But Christ is one everywhere, being complete here and complete there also, one Body. As then while offered in many places, He is one body and not many bodies; so also [He is] one sacrifice. He is our High Priest, who offered the sacrifice that cleanses us. That we offer now also, which was then offered, which cannot be exhausted. This is done in remembrance of what was then done. For (He said) “do this in remembrance of Me.” It is not another sacrifice, as the High Priest, but we offer always the same, or rather we perform a remembrance of a Sacrifice.⁴⁹⁴

Writing a few decades after Chrysostom, Theodoret, the bishop of Cyr, sets forth a similar view:

So if the priesthood according to the Law also came to an end, and the high priest according to the order of Melchizedek offered sacrifice and made further sacrifices unnecessary, why do the priests of the New Covenant perform the sacramental liturgy? It is clear to those versed in divine things, however, that it is not another sacrifice we offer; rather, we perform the commemoration of the one, saving sacrifice. The Lord himself, remember, required this of us, “Do this in memory of me,” so that we should recall with insight the type of the sufferings undergone for us, kindle love for the benefactor and look forward to the enjoyment of the good things to come.⁴⁹⁵

Oecumenius, a sixth century author, goes a step further in his attempt to relate the celebration of the Eucharist by Christian priests to the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ:

The word makes clear that if Christ himself offered a sacrifice not unstained with blood – for he offered his own blood – then in contrast the priests who derive their office from him (whomever God and the high priest deem worthy to be priests) will bring a sacrifice untainted by blood. For the phrase *forever* reveals this. For he did not speak to the sacrifice and offering made once and for all when he said “forever,” but he had in mind

⁴⁹³ Ibid., xx.

⁴⁹⁴ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistle to the Hebrews* 17 (NFPF-CEI.14: 449).

⁴⁹⁵ Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Letters of St. Paul* (2 vols.; trans. R.C. Hill; Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2001), 169-70.

the present sacrificing priests, by means of whom Christ sacrifices and is sacrificed, who also gives to those in the mystic supper the character of such a sacrifice.⁴⁹⁶

We see in the work of these commentators, especially Chrysostom and Theodoret, a recognition that Hebrews' insistence on the unique and utterly efficacious sacrifice that Jesus offered on the cross is not irreconcilable with the notion of the Eucharist as a sacrificial memorial of that salvific act.

Some Fathers also recognized individual Eucharistic references in Hebrews. Chrysostom, for example, draws a connection between Heb 10:29 and the Lord's Supper. As I argued in Chapter Four, the warning against apostasy in this section of the homily contains a Eucharistic dimension, which I related to the author's claim that apostates are guilty of profaning the "blood of the covenant" (αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης). I suggested that the phrase αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης functions here (and elsewhere in the sermon), at least on a secondary level, as a reference to the Eucharistic blood of Jesus. Interestingly, Chrysostom also discerns a link with the Eucharist in 10:29, although he relates the Lord's Supper not to the "blood of the covenant" but rather to the author's reference to "trampling upon the Son of God":

And how does a man "tread underfoot, the Son of God"? When partaking of Him in the mysteries (he would say) he has wrought sin, has he not trodden Him under foot? Has he not despised Him? For just as we make no account of those who are trodden under foot so also, they who sin have made no account of Christ; and so they have sinned. Thou art become the Body of Christ, and givest thou thyself to the devil, so that he treads thee under foot. . . . Let us listen, whoever partake of the mysteries unworthily: let us listen, whoever approach that Table unworthily. "Give not" (He says) "that which is holy unto the dogs, lest in time they trample them under their feet" (Matt. 7:6), that is, lest they despise, lest they repudiate [them]. Yet he did not say this, but what was more fearful than this. For he constrains their souls by what is fearful. For this also is adapted to convert, no less than consolation. And at the same time he shows both the difference, and the chastisement, and sets forth the judgment upon them, as though it were an evident matter. "Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy?" Here also he appears to me to hint at the mysteries.⁴⁹⁷

⁴⁹⁶ Oecumenius, *Fragments on the Epistle to the Hebrews* 5.6, quoted in Heen and Krey, *Hebrews*, 71.

⁴⁹⁷ Chrysostom, *Homilies on Hebrews* 20 (NFPF-CE1.14: 458).

For Chrysostom, unworthy participation in the Eucharistic mysteries is a concrete way in which sinners “tread underfoot the Son of God.”

Elsewhere, Chrysostom relates the reception of the sacrament to the concept of “approach” or “drawing near” (προσέρχομαι), a term which, as we have seen, occurs at significant liturgical junctures in Hebrews (10:22; 12:22). Exhorting his audience to take part regularly in the Eucharistic liturgy, Chrysostom writes:

Tell me, I beseech thee, when after a year thou partakest of the Communion, dost thou think that the Forty Days are sufficient for thee for the purifying of the sins of all that time? And again, when a week has passed, dost thou give thyself up to the former things? Tell me now, if when thou hast been well for forty days after a long illness, thou shouldst again give thyself up to the food which caused the sickness, hast thou not lost thy former labor too? For if natural things are changed, much more those which depend on choice. As for instance, by nature we see, and naturally we have healthy eyes; but oftentimes from a bad habit [of body] our power of vision is injured. If then natural things are changed, much more those of choice. Thou assignest forty days for the health of the soul, or perhaps not even forty, and dost thou expect to propitiate God? Tell me, art thou in sport? These things I say, not as forbidding you the one and annual coming, but as wishing you to *draw near continually*.⁴⁹⁸

Theodoret also offers some comments on the Eucharistic character of two passages that I discussed in the last chapter. He explicitly identifies a Eucharistic allusion in Heb 10:19-20, in which the preacher tells his hearers that they have “boldness to enter the Holy of Holies by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the veil, that is, his flesh.” Theodoret states:

He called the Lord’s flesh veil: through it we enjoy entrance into the Holy of Holies – that is to say, just as the high priest by Law entered through the veil into the Holy of Holies, and otherwise it was not permissible for him to enter, so those who believe in the Lord enjoy the way of life in heaven *through participation in the all-holy body*.⁴⁹⁹

⁴⁹⁸ Chrysostom, *Homilies on Hebrews* 17 (NFPF-CEI.14: 449, emphasis added).

⁴⁹⁹ Theodoret, *Commentary*, 178, emphasis added.

And, more obliquely, he appears to connect the altar of 13:10 with the Eucharistic celebration:

This [altar] by far enjoys precedence over the old, he is saying, which is a shadow of it. The old received the offerings of brute beasts, whereas this receives the rational and divine one. Hence none of those former priests *participate in this* unless first giving admittance to faith in the Lord.⁵⁰⁰

That Theodoret here envisions the “altar” as a reference to the table of the Lord’s Supper may be surmised from the context. “None of those former priests” may take part in “this,” that is, the Eucharist, “unless first giving admittance to faith in the Lord.” The language employed by Theodoret suggests the necessity of a confession of faith (followed, no doubt, by baptism) as a prerequisite for participation in Eucharistic communion. As we saw in the previous chapter, already in the first century these preliminary steps were required of anyone who would take part in the Lord’s Supper. Therefore, it would be unfair to accuse Theodoret of reading fifth-century liturgical practice into the text. Rather, he assumes a consistency between the practice of his time and that of the first-century church to which the author and audience of Hebrews belonged.

This brief survey of patristic commentary on the relationship between Hebrews and the Eucharist is admittedly scant. Nonetheless, as I asserted in the introduction to this section, it is noteworthy that the major commentators on Hebrews in the period of the Fathers not only fail to discount this relationship but actually reinforce it through (a) their insistence on the compatibility between Hebrews’ teaching on the once-for-all character of Christ’s sacrifice and its sacrificial commemoration in the Lord’s Supper and (b) their Eucharistic interpretation of individual passages that appear to mention the ritual, such as 10:19-35 and 13:10. Present-day exegetes who dispute the presence of Eucharistic allusions in Hebrews might be tempted to seize on the relative paucity of patristic commentary on these allusions to claim that the silence of the Fathers on this topic is damning to those who would argue for a Eucharistic reading of the sermon.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., 194, emphasis added.

However, the argument from silence works both ways. One could just as easily claim that the Fathers saw no need to press this point because the Eucharistic character of Hebrews would have been fairly obvious to Christians living in the first several centuries of the Common Era, when the celebration of the Lord's Supper was a regular, consistent element of the church's life⁵⁰¹ and when the language of Eucharistic worship – some of which was explicitly drawn from the words and imagery of Hebrews – served to further underscore this relationship. A particularly lucid example of this liturgical language is found in the ancient *Liturgy of St. James*.

3. Hebrews and the Eucharist: The *Liturgy of St. James*

In the preceding section, I quoted *Dei Verbum* 23, which encouraged contemporary exegetes to take into consideration the hermeneutical insights of the Fathers. Also contained in that conciliar statement is an encouragement to study liturgical texts: “The Church... also encourages the study of the holy Fathers of both East and West *and of sacred liturgies*.”⁵⁰² The council's exhortation to study the content of liturgical texts is rooted in the principle that the words used by the church in public liturgical prayer show forth the thinking of the church in matters of theology. This principle is enshrined in the famous dictum *lex orandi, lex credendi* (“the rule of prayer is the rule of belief”). As Aidan Nichols observes, “The liturgy is the continuation of the atoning work of Jesus Christ and, as such, is the Church's primary expression from within of the covenant relationship binding her life to God's. It is, therefore, rich in implicit theology.”⁵⁰³ It stands to reason that the liturgy is a preeminent forum in which the meaning of sacred Scripture is interpreted and actualized. When words and phrases from a biblical text are

⁵⁰¹ A reality to which Chrysostom's exhortation to frequent participation in the Eucharistic mysteries in Homily 17 attests.

⁵⁰² *DV* 23, emphasis added.

⁵⁰³ Aidan Nichols, *The Shape of Catholic Theology: An Introduction to its Sources, Principles and History* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 187.

incorporated into an ecclesial community's liturgical prayer, we see very concretely how the community in question understands the meaning of that text.

In light of this general principle, it is noteworthy that a venerable form of the Eucharistic anaphora that emerged in the churches of the East during the patristic period employs language and imagery from Hebrews at several key junctures. The text in question is the so-called *Liturgy of St. James*. An order of worship which appears to have originated in Jerusalem, it was attributed to "Saint James, the first bishop of Jerusalem and the brother of the Lord," but actually dates to the late fourth- or early fifth-century CE.⁵⁰⁴ It may be an amalgam of Palestinian liturgical texts with a primitive form of the anaphora of St. Basil.⁵⁰⁵ The prayers of this liturgy have been transmitted in a variety of languages (Greek, Syriac, Georgian, Armenian, Ethiopian, and Old Slavonic), the most significant of which are the Greek and Syriac forms.⁵⁰⁶ When the center of gravity of the Eastern churches shifted from Jerusalem to Constantinople, the *Liturgy of St. James* declined in usage and influence, being supplanted in many regions by the *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*. However, it continues to be used among West Syrian churches to the present day.⁵⁰⁷ In its use of Scripture – and, from the standpoint of this study, its particular use of Hebrews – the *St. James* anaphora stands as an important witness to the ecclesial interpretation of the biblical text at the same point in time as such figures as Chrysostom and Theodoret were writing their commentaries on Hebrews.

⁵⁰⁴ Baby Varghese, *The Syriac Version of the Liturgy of St. James: A Brief History for Students* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2001), 5.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid.

The first of two significant usages of texts from Hebrews in the *Liturgy of St. James* occurs in the “Prayer of the Veil” that precedes the anaphora proper. This prayer incorporates quotations from Heb 10:19-20 and 13:15, as indicated below in the Greek form of the anaphora and its English translation:

Εὐχαριστοῦμέν σοι, Κύριε ὁ Θεὸς ἡμῶν, ὅτι ἔδωκας ἡμῖν **παρρησίαν εἰς τὴν εἴσοδον τῶν ἁγίων σου, ἣν ἀνεκαίνισας ἡμῖν ὁδὸν πρόσφατον καὶ ζῶσαν διὰ τοῦ καταπετάσματος τῆς σαρκὸς (10:19-20)** τοῦ Χριστοῦ σου· καταξιοθέντες οὖν εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τόπον σκηνώματος δόξης σου, ἔσω τε γενέσθαι τοῦ καταπετάσματος, καὶ τὰ ἅγια τῶν ἁγίων κατοπεῦσαι, προσπίπτομεν τῇ σῇ ἀγαθότητι· Δέσποτα, ἐλέησαι ἡμᾶς· ἐπειδὴ ἔμφοβοι καὶ ἔντρομοὶ ἐσμεν, μέλλοντες παρεστάναι τῷ ἁγίῳ σου θυσιαστηρίῳ καὶ προσφέρειν τὴν φοβερὰν ταύτην καὶ ἀναίμακτον θυσίαν ὑπὲρ τῶν ἡμετέρων ἀμαρτημάτων καὶ τῶν τοῦ λαοῦ ἀγνοημάτων· ἐξαπόστειλον, ὁ Θεός, τῆς χάριν σου τὴν ἀγαθὴν, καὶ ἁγιάσον ἡμῶν τὰς ψυχὰς καὶ τὰ σώματα καὶ τὰ πνεύματα· καὶ ἀλλοίωσον ἡμῶν τὰ φρονήματα πρὸς εὐσέβειαν, ἵνα ἐν καθαρῷ συνειδῶτι προσφέρωμέν σοι ἔλεον εἰρήνης, **θυσίαν αἰνέσεως**.⁵⁰⁸

We thank Thee, O Lord our God, that Thou hast given us **boldness for the entrance of Thy holy places, which Thou hast renewed to us as a new and living way through the veil of the flesh of Thy Christ (10:19-20)**. We therefore, being counted worthy to enter into the place of the tabernacle of Thy glory, and to be within the veil, and to behold the Holy of Holies, cast ourselves down before Thy goodness: Lord, have mercy on us: since we are full of fear and trembling, when about to stand at Thy holy altar, and to offer this dread and bloodless sacrifice for our own sins and for the errors of the people: send forth, O God, Thy good grace, and sanctify our souls, and bodies, and spirits; and turn our thoughts to holiness, that with a pure conscience we may bring to Thee a peace-offering, the **sacrifice of praise (13:15)**.⁵⁰⁹

It is significant that the composers of this text chose to employ material from Heb 10:19-20 and 13:15. As I argued in Chapter Four, a strong case can be made that both passages contain allusions to the Eucharist. Regarding the former, I argued that although the primary sense of 10:19-20 is that Jesus’ self-offering of his body and blood on the cross has made it possible for human beings to enter into God’s presence, a Eucharistic setting for the reading of Hebrews suggests that the preacher would have also intended his hearers to pick up on an allusion to their

⁵⁰⁸ *Liturgies: Eastern and Western* (ed. C.E. Hammond; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1878), 39, emphasis added.

⁵⁰⁹ *The Divine Liturgy of St. James* (ANF 7:543), emphasis added.

consumption of these elements in the Lord's Supper. In the prayer quoted above, we see evidence that a fourth/fifth-century audience construed the words of Heb 10:19-20 precisely in this Eucharistic sense. Similarly, the Prayer over the Veil refers to the Eucharistic celebration as a "sacrifice of praise" (θυσίαν αινέσεως), which echoes the words of Hebrews 13:15 in which the preacher exhorts his audience to "regularly offer up a sacrifice of praise to God." In the previous chapter, I interpreted this phrase as a summons to continual participation in the Lord's Supper, and the term θυσίαν αινέσεως as a euphemism for Eucharistic worship. Its occurrence in the *Liturgy of St. James*, in what is clearly a Eucharistic context, suggests that the composer of this liturgical prayer understood θυσίαν αινέσεως as a fitting designation for the ritual.

Another reference to Hebrews in *St. James* is found in the Eucharistic preface that quotes Heb 12:22-23:

Ὡς ἀληθῶς ἄξιόν ἐστι καὶ δίκαιον, πρέπον τε καὶ ὀφειλόμενον, σὲ αἰνεῖν, σὲ ὑμνεῖν, σὲ εὐλογεῖν, σὲ προσκυνεῖν, σὲ δοξολογεῖν, σοὶ εὐχαριστεῖν τῷ πάσης κτίσεως ὀρατῆς τε καὶ ἀοράτου δημιουργῷ, τῷ θησαυρῷ τῶν αἰώνιων ἀγαθῶν, τῇ πηγῇ τῆς ζωῆς καὶ τῆς ἀθανασίας, τῷ πάντων Θεῷ καὶ Δεσπότη· ὅς ὑμνοῦσιν οἱ οὐρανοὶ τῶν οὐρανῶν, καὶ πᾶσα ἡ δύναμις αὐτῶν· ἥλιός τε καὶ σελήνη, καὶ πᾶς ὁ τῶν ἄστρον χορός· γῆ, θάλασσα, καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς· **Ἱερουσαλὴμ ἡ ἐπουράνιος πανήγυρις, ἐκκλησία πρωτοτόκων ἀπογεγραμμένων ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς πνεύματα δικαίων (12:22-23)** καὶ προφητῶν· ψυχὰι μαρτύρων καὶ ἀποστόλων· ἄγγελοι, ἀρχάγγελοι, θρόνοι, κυριότητες, ἀρχαί τε καὶ ἐξουσίαι καὶ δυνάμεις φοβεραί, καὶ τὰ χερουβὶμ πολυόμματα καὶ τὰ ἐξαπτέρυγα σεραφίμ, ἃ ταῖς μὲν δυσὶ πτέρυξι κατακαλύπτει τὰ πρόσωπα ἑαυτῶν, ταῖς δὲ δυσὶ τοῦς πόδας, καὶ ταῖς δυσὶν ἰπτάμενα, κέκραγεν ἕτερον πρὸς ἕτερον ἀκαταπαύστοις στόμασιν, ἀσιγήτοις δοξολογίαις...⁵¹⁰

Verily it is becoming and right, proper and due to praise Thee, to sing of Thee, to bless Thee, to worship Thee, to glorify Thee, to give Thee thanks, Maker of every creature visible and invisible, the treasure of eternal good things, the fountain of life and immortality, God and Lord of all: Whom the heavens of heavens praise, and all the host of them; the sun, and the moon, and all the choir of the stars; earth, sea, and all that is in them; **Jerusalem, the heavenly assembly, and church of the first-born that are written in heaven; spirits of just men (Heb 12:22-23)** and of prophets; souls of martyrs and of apostles; angels, archangels, thrones, dominions, principalities, and authorities, and dread powers; and the many-eyed cherubim, and the six-winged seraphim, which

⁵¹⁰ *Liturgies: Eastern and Western*, 40, emphasis added.

cover their faces with two wings, their feet with two, and with two they fly, crying one to another with unrelenting lips, with unceasing praises⁵¹¹

It is noteworthy that once again the composers of this liturgical text have invoked a text from Hebrews which itself is liturgical in character and, more specifically, Eucharistic. As I indicated in Chapter Four, Heb 12:18-24 serves as the overture to an extended call to worship by which the preacher brings his homily to a conclusion. The author contrasts the fearful worship of the Sinai covenant with the joyous worship of the heavenly Jerusalem, to which his hearers have drawn near (προσεληλύθατε, 12:22) in their liturgical gathering. I argued that the key to understanding the link between the earthly worship of the audience of Hebrews and the worship of the angels and the righteous humans in heaven is the presence of Jesus in both realms: in heaven in his glorified humanity, and on earth in the Eucharist, where the hearers approach his outpoured “blood of sprinkling” (αἷματι ῥαντισμοῦ, 12:24). Although the *Liturgy of St. James* does not mention the “blood of sprinkling,” it is noteworthy that its composers have incorporated language from the broader passage into a preface that introduces the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, where Christ’s outpoured blood is understood to become sacramentally present.

Indeed, traditional interpretations of Heb 12:18-24 within Eastern Christianity have posited a link between the heavenly worship depicted therein and the Eucharistic worship of earthly congregations. A recent appraisal of Eastern Orthodox Christianity from an Evangelical Protestant perspective, that of James Payton, offers this interesting perspective on the passage’s significance in Eastern liturgical theology:

Consequently, for Eastern Christianity, worship shows especially clearly what the church is. This is borne out by a biblical text that has played little if any role in Western Christian understandings of either ecclesiology or worship. Western Christianity most often uses this particular text as an indicator of the special privilege enjoyed by Christians in the present age. The text clearly speaks to that, but Orthodoxy understands it to mean

⁵¹¹ *The Divine Liturgy of St. James* (ANF 7:543-544), emphasis added.

far more: for Eastern Christianity, this text describes what happens as a church engages in worship or liturgy. The text is Hebrews 12:18-24. . . . For Eastern Christianity, Hebrews 12:18-24 shows what the church does and, in so doing, shows what the church is. Orthodoxy understands this passage to teach that whenever a congregation engages in worship, that congregation is not “alone” in the presence of God, but is included with the whole church As a congregation meets to worship God, it comes into God’s presence – where the multitude of angels unceasingly praise God, in concert with the fullness of the church of all times and places.⁵¹²

Payton’s analysis is accurate, but insufficient, for he fails to note that it is specifically by means of *communion in the Lord’s Supper* that this unity with the “church of all times and places” is achieved. This all-important Eucharistic connection is highlighted by the Orthodox bishop and scholar Timothy Ware:

Worship, for the Orthodox Church, is nothing else than “heaven on earth.” The Holy Liturgy is something that embraces two worlds at once, for both in heaven and on earth the Liturgy is one and the same – one altar, one sacrifice, one presence. In every place of worship, however humble its outward appearance, as the faithful gather *to perform the Eucharist*, they are taken up into the ‘heavenly places’; in every place of worship *where the Holy Sacrifice is offered*, not merely the local congregation is present, but the Church universal – the saints, the angels, the Mother of God, and Christ himself.⁵¹³

Likewise, the conventional Eastern interpretation of Hebrews 12:18-24 is reflected in the notes of the *Orthodox Study Bible*:

We are encouraged to approach and touch the **heavenly** mountain, for we already participate in the Kingdom and dwell there. It is more like **Mount Zion** and **Jerusalem** (v. 22) than Sinai (popular Jewish images at that time), for Jerusalem was a habitable place and Zion a place of God’s holy presence. This Kingdom is not earthly but *heavenly*, inhabited by **angels** as well as men. There is an unending **assembly** (v. 23), the divinely instituted gathering of God’s people of all ages where they know themselves as **church**. There all are collectively **firstborn** (v. 23) and have inherited all. There, **blood** (v. 24) cries out not for vengeance and further death – as did Abel’s (see 11:4; Gen 4:10) – but for mercy, forgiveness, atonement and unending life. *This is the blood of Christ given to us in the Eucharist.*⁵¹⁴

⁵¹² James R. Payton, *Light from the Christian East: An Introduction to the Orthodox Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 173-74.

⁵¹³ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin, 1997), 265, emphasis added.

⁵¹⁴ *The Orthodox Study Bible: New Testament and Psalms* (ed. J. Allen, M. Najim, J.N. Sparks, and T. Stylianopoulos; Nashville: Nelson, 1993), 534, emphasis in italics in last sentence added; bold text present in original.

It would be strange to say the least that a biblical text which many deem to be silent on the Lord's Supper should have influenced such a significant Eucharistic prayer as the *Liturgy of St. James* and, furthermore, helped inspire an Eastern Christian theology of Eucharistic worship if, in fact, no Eucharistic theology was present in the original passage.⁵¹⁵ However, this is not likely the case. Rather, the appropriation of liturgical texts from Hebrews in the Eucharistic worship of the Eastern churches suggests a conviction that the author of Hebrews intended a Eucharistic meaning to these texts when he first composed them. As a contemporary Orthodox commentator on Hebrews, Dmitri Royster, states by way of justifying his use of Eastern liturgical materials in his commentary: "Another source, to which we have had recourse from time to time, is the liturgical texts, hymns, verses and readings, which convey to the worshipping people of God the true meaning of familiar verses from the Epistle to the Hebrews."⁵¹⁶

4. Hebrews and the Eucharist in Contemporary Eastern Christian Interpretation

In the foregoing remarks on the use of Hebrews in the *Liturgy of St. James*, I considered the ongoing influence of Hebrews (particularly 12:22-24) on the liturgical and Eucharistic theology of the Eastern churches. It is both interesting and relevant to the case I have set forth for Eucharistic references in Hebrews that, unlike much scholarship in the West, Eastern Christian

⁵¹⁵ In a similar vein, one might note the liturgical use of this passage in the present-day Latin Rite *Lectionary for Mass*, where Heb 12:18-19, 22-24 is offered as an optional second reading for votive Masses of the Most Holy Eucharist. Might not the church's suggestion for using this text (which, as we saw in Chapter Four, heralds the "approach" of believers to the outpoured blood of Christ) in a votive Mass that highlights the theological meaning of the Eucharist be construed as an implicit recognition of the Eucharistic content of the passage? The Catholic *Lectionary* also prescribes Heb 9:11-15 (which speaks of the power of the "blood of Christ" to purify from sin and also evokes the image of the "new covenant") on the feast of the Body and Blood of Christ, Year B, and as another option for the second reading for votive Masses of the Eucharist. As with the usage of Hebrews in the anaphora of St. James, it seems puzzling that the Catholic Church would employ these passages in a Eucharistic context if there were no exegetical basis for interpreting them Eucharistically.

⁵¹⁶ Dmitri Royster, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 15.

interpretation of Hebrews has been remarkably open to the recognition of allusions to the Lord's Supper in the sermon. In contrast with Western Christianity, which since the Reformation has seen a wide divergence of belief with regard to the centrality of the Eucharistic celebration and the nature of Christ's presence in the sacrament, the churches of the East have consistently maintained a uniform belief in both the central importance of the Lord's Supper to the life of believers and in the "real presence" of the Lord in the consecrated elements. Furthermore, many of these churches have preserved close links to the Greek language and thought world which first produced Hebrews. It is therefore striking to note that Eastern Christian interpreters much more readily acknowledge the presence of references to the Eucharist at those selfsame points in the sermon which I have analyzed in my exegetical arguments. A brief look at pertinent commentary from the aforementioned work of Dmitri Royster and the footnotes of the *Orthodox Study Bible* demonstrates the hermeneutical contrast between the typical Eastern Orthodox interpretation of these passages and the standard position of most Western scholars, which, as we have seen, is not generally favorable to discerning Eucharistic references in Hebrews.

We will take the relevant passages in order, beginning with the references to "enlightenment" (φωτισμός) and the "heavenly gift" (δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου) in Heb 6:4, which I identified in Chapter Four as references to baptism and Eucharist, respectively. With regard to this verse, Royster states:

From St. Justin Martyr on, the term "enlightenment" or "illumination" has been regularly used as a name for baptism (*Apology I*, chap. 61). He [the author of Hebrews] goes on to apply the same [warning] to those who have "tasted of the heavenly gift," that is, those who have experienced the forgiveness of sins. . . and have tasted of the Bread of Heaven, Christ Himself, in the Eucharist (John 6:33-58). Those who have received the holy mysteries have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, for He is thereby given to them.⁵¹⁷

Likewise, the footnote to this passage in the *Orthodox Study Bible* declares:

⁵¹⁷ Ibid., 87-88, bracketed material added for clarification.

The basic sacraments are crucial to salvation: One is **once enlightened** in baptism, which is unrepeatable and called the sacrament of illumination (see Eph. 5:14). **Tasted the heavenly gift** (see 1 Pet 2:3) may refer to the grace of baptism – St. John Chrysostom says this *gift* is especially the forgiveness of sins experienced in baptism – and it most certainly refers to the Eucharist. **Become partakers of the Holy Spirit** refers to the fruit of chrismation, the experience of knowing the Holy Spirit.⁵¹⁸

Royster also recognizes an allusion to the Markan-Matthean Eucharistic institution narrative in the words of Heb 9:20, stating:

When the Lord by anticipation sealed the New Covenant at the Supper with “This is my blood of the New Testament, which is shed for many,” we may recall the words of Moses at the sealing of the Old Covenant: “This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord hath made with you, concerning these words” (Exodus 24:8).⁵¹⁹

He similarly discerns references to the Eucharist at key points in Heb 10:25 and 29. Recall that in the previous chapter I argued at length that in this section of the sermon the preacher warns his audience against abandoning the Eucharistic assembly and characterizes apostasy as a profanation of the “blood of the covenant,” which I identified as a reference to the Eucharistic cup. Royster takes a similar approach in his analysis of this passage, beginning with comments on 10:25:

Apparently some members of the community were guilty of “rejecting the assembly.” The term translated by “assembling” was very frequently used for the gathering of the faithful for the Eucharist (in Greek, *episynagōgēn*). Their absence will result in the loss of concern for the other members. The coming together so as to constitute the body of the church is not an optional feature of the Christian life, but an essential one: no one is a Christian alone, rejecting the company of fellow Christians; above all, he must participate in the feast of God’s love for us, the Eucharist.⁵²⁰

⁵¹⁸ *Orthodox Study Bible*, 521; bold and italic print in original text. By way of contrast, the footnote to this verse in the *Catholic New American Bible, Revised Edition* is much less sanguine about a sacramental interpretation of these words: “This may refer to baptism and the Eucharist, respectively, but more probably means the neophytes’ enlightenment by faith and their experience of salvation” (NABRE, accessed online at <http://www.usccb.org/bible/hebrews/6#65006004-c>).

⁵¹⁹ Royster, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 144.

⁵²⁰ *Ibid.*, 162-63.

Later, in his interpretation of 10:29, Royster takes up this theme anew, quoting Chrysostom's 17th homily on Hebrews, which we examined above:

With "forsaking the assembling of yourselves together" (v. 25) still in mind, the Apostle brings forth the same kind of warning we find in 1 Corinthians (11:27-30) concerning unworthy reception of the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist. He who considers the Eucharistic elements are merely common bread and wine rather than the consecrated body and blood have insulted, "done despite unto" (*enybrisas*), the Spirit of grace. That the Eucharist is referred to here is taken for granted by the holy Fathers. St. John Chrysostom asks: "And how does a man 'tread under foot the Son of God?' When partaking of him in the mysteries he has wrought sin, has he not trodden him under foot? Has he not despised him?" It is the Holy Spirit who has given us the benefit of receiving Christ in the Eucharist, but he who "accepts not a benefit does despite to the Benefactor" (Chrysostom). . . . The very cause for the rejection of the assembly was evidently the rejection of the Eucharist itself.⁵²¹

Concerning Heb 13:10 and its mention of an "altar" (θυσιαστήριον) from which the Levitical priests and ministers have no right to eat, Royster identifies this "altar" with the Eucharistic table:

The altar that we Christians have is Christ; He was both the priest and the victim in the supreme sacrifice that He offered for the sins of the world. . . . Those who serve (here the Greek is *latreuontes*, "worship") the tabernacle have no right to eat at the Christian altar. By this the Apostle must mean not only the spiritual eating or communion with Christ that one has by believing in him, but also, and rather directly, by participation in the divine Eucharist, wherein one receives the body and blood of Christ. The warning of St. Paul concerning the eating of pagan sacrificial offerings is no doubt applicable here. "Ye cannot drink of the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils: ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's table, and of the table of devils" (1 Corinthians 10:21).⁵²²

Lastly, both Royster and the compilers of the *Orthodox Study Bible* find a Eucharistic allusion in Heb 13:15 and its exhortation to the audience to regularly offer a "sacrifice of praise" (θυσίαν αἰνέσεως). Royster states:

⁵²¹ Ibid., 166.

⁵²² Ibid., 235. The *Orthodox Study Bible* hints at a Eucharistic interpretation of the "altar" but is less explicit: "In the OT, priests were given part of most sacrifices for food, but lay people had **no right to eat this food**. Under the New Covenant, all Christians may eat the food of the **altar**" (536). By way of stark contrast, the NABRE footnote states: "This does not refer to the Eucharist, which is never clearly mentioned in Hebrews, but to the sacrifice of Christ."

Since the great sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ was offered once and for all, as has been emphasized earlier in the Epistle (see 7:27; 9:12; 10:10), there is no necessity for any new sacrifice. The Christian community's response, then, is to offer up (*anapherō* in Greek) through him a continual sacrifice of praise (*thysian aineseōs* in Greek, a phrase which forms part of the people's initial response in the Divine Liturgy to the exhortation "Let us stand aright...that we may offer the holy oblation in peace"). . . . It is in hymns of praise and confession, the fruit of our lips which confess His name. . . that we participate in the Lord's sacrifice. That this verse refers to the Eucharist we have the very early witness of St. Irenaeus.⁵²³

Similarly, the footnote to 13:15-16 in the *Orthodox Study Bible* notes the homilist's twofold enjoinder to sacrifice and good works in these verses and applies it to fruitful participation in the Eucharistic celebration:

These verses constitute a summarizing exhortation: (1) we experience the heavenly city and the heavenly Most Holy Place when we **sacrifice** our whole being, body and soul, in the Divine Liturgy – a mystery in which our part is that of praise consistent with true doctrine (v 15; see vv. 9-14). (2) Good works and life in community (**to share**, Gr. *koinonias*) must be united with worship.⁵²⁴

As these examples demonstrate, the contrast between mainstream Eastern Orthodox interpretation of potentially Eucharistic texts in Hebrews and the exegesis of most Western commentators is striking. At the outset of this section, I suggested that the difference in outlook may be partially attributable to the fact that Eastern churches have consistently maintained a central place for the Eucharistic celebration in their liturgical and spiritual life; moreover, these same ecclesial entities retain a closeness to the linguistic world in which the NT Scriptures were written. It is also significant that biblical interpretation in the East has generally shown a greater attentiveness to the exegetical insights of the Church Fathers and to the liturgical use of Scripture.⁵²⁵ As I suggested earlier in this chapter, both of these strands of interpretation have

⁵²³ Royster, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 239. Royster accepts the authenticity of the "lost fragment" attributed to Irenaeus, quoted above.

⁵²⁴ *Orthodox Study Bible*, 536.

⁵²⁵ See Theodore G. Stylianopoulos, *The New Testament: An Orthodox Perspective, Volume One: Scripture, Tradition, Hermeneutics* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2004), esp. 62-64 and 101-122.

been amenable to the presence of Eucharistic allusions in Hebrews. Without prejudice to the irreplaceable value of modern hermeneutical methodologies (the importance of which I emphasized at the beginning of this chapter), a strong case can be made that greater openness to the interpretive traditions and methods of the Eastern churches could enrich biblical scholarship in the West and shed greater light on difficult exegetical issues such as that which we have pursued in this study of Hebrews and the Eucharist.

5. Summary

The purpose of this chapter has been to go beyond the historical and literary analysis with which I made my primary case for Eucharistic references in Hebrews by exploring two broader avenues of interpretation – patristic and liturgical – which lend greater weight to my central exegetical arguments. In my presentation of patristic commentary on Hebrews, I set forth evidence that the primary interpreters of Hebrews, particularly Chrysostom and Theodoret, recognized allusions to the Eucharist in the text and also set forth arguments for compatibility between Hebrews' presentation of the once-for-all nature of Christ's sacrifice and the concept of the Eucharist as a sacrificial memorial. I then moved on to consider a significant fourth-century liturgical text, the *Liturgy of St. James*, which incorporates quotations from several passages in Hebrews (10:19-20; 12:22-24; 13:15) which arguably contain allusions to the Eucharist. The use of these texts in a Eucharistic prayer with venerable roots in the faith and praxis of the Jerusalem

Stylianopoulos laments the modern scholarly tendency toward a “professional deafness to the value of the patristic exegetical heritage,” which he particularly associates with “interpreting the theological witness of Scripture and making its saving message alive for the Church and society” (103). Regarding the significance of liturgy as a locus for biblical interpretation, he states, “The liturgy is the main gathering of God’s people for the celebration, remembrance, and renewal of the community’s life with God. Most of the biblical writings were written to be aloud at such gatherings (Col 4:16; Rev 1:3), which were for prayer and worship, and not only for reading. In such context, the Scriptures were heard and interpreted as the word of God. A creative relationship also exists between worship and Scripture in that liturgical language has influenced the composition of biblical writings and in that the Bible has in turn powerfully impacted the forms and language of worship. The Orthodox tradition with its immense treasures of hymnological books, liturgical services, and calendar of feasts, exemplifies a thoroughly biblical character which has been insufficiently studied” (62-63).

church suggest that they were understood eucharistically during the patristic period. Given the gap between the writing of Hebrews in the late first century and the appearance of favorable patristic commentary and liturgical texts in the fourth century, critics could argue that these later writers imposed their own Eucharistic presuppositions on a text that originally contained no such insights. However, in light of my arguments in Chapter Four, it is just as likely that the Fathers and liturgists of the fourth century were developing a Eucharistic interpretation of Hebrews that was already present in the sermon itself. Indeed, as my subsequent brief survey of contemporary Eastern Orthodox interpretation of Hebrews demonstrated, the churches of the East have consistently maintained a belief that Hebrews speaks about the Eucharist in all of the passages where I have endeavored to demonstrate the presence of Eucharistic allusions. While it could be argued that an entire branch of Christianity has badly misinterpreted this biblical text from the time of the Fathers down to the present day, it is more reasonable to suggest that the biblical and liturgical insights of Eastern theologians have steadfastly (and correctly!) discerned a relationship between Hebrews and the Lord's Supper which most of their Western counterparts have downplayed or dismissed. To be sure, the heuristic device that I have proposed in this study, namely that of reading Hebrews as a Eucharistic homily, would find a welcome reception within the Eastern interpretive tradition, where the liturgical provenance of the NT writings has been widely recognized and where the relationship between Bible and liturgy has been powerfully sustained in an unbroken cycle of Eucharistic worship throughout the centuries. In such a milieu, the Eucharistic dimension of Hebrews has been acknowledged and affirmed. Might not both the churches and the academy in the West benefit from according greater weight to the Eastern approach to Hebrews in their own ongoing evaluation of this text, its liturgical content, and its attitude toward the Lord's Supper?

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study has been to set forth criteria for reading and interpreting Hebrews as a homily composed for proclamation at a celebration of the Eucharist. When viewed through this Eucharistic lens, both the overall rhetorical strategy of Hebrews and the meaning of several key passages attain a clarity and a coherence that other traditional interpretive approaches have not been able to accomplish. In Chapter One I set forth and analyzed the three predominant scholarly approaches to the question of Eucharistic references in Hebrews. I showed that a majority of exegetes deem the text to be silent with regard to the Lord's Supper. One vocal minority argues that Hebrews is critical of the Christian Eucharist. A second minority contends that its author draws on the Eucharist as a positive means of reinforcing his theological arguments. Siding with the last of these three groups, I proceeded in Chapter Two to place Hebrews within the broader canonical framework of the NT. I demonstrated that the NT writings were composed for public liturgical proclamation, and that the primary arena in which these writings would have been read aloud was some form of the Eucharistic meal. Given the general applicability of these two factors to the documents of the NT, I suggested that Hebrews also was most likely written for proclamation at the Lord's Supper. This likelihood becomes all the stronger, I argued, in light of Hebrews' genre, which I identified as a homily in my survey of critical issues in Chapter Three. Proposing the heuristic device of reading Hebrews specifically as a homily designed to be read at a Eucharistic celebration, I proceeded in Chapter Four to undertake an exegetical study of seven passages (Heb 6:4-8; 8:7-13; 9:20; 10:19-35; 12:22-34; 13:9-16; 13:20) in which I argued that the author alludes to the Eucharist. The proposed context of a Eucharistic homily explains the allusive nature of these references and enables their rhetorical function to become more readily apparent. In the concluding chapter of this study, I

offered a brief survey of early patristic and liturgical appropriations of the Eucharistic content in Hebrews, the nature of which has continued to exercise influence on the interpretation of Hebrews within the churches of the East. The overall force of this survey was to demonstrate a line of continuity between Hebrews' origin as a Eucharistic homily, its subsequent Eucharistic interpretation by the Fathers and the liturgical texts of the East, and its ongoing Eucharistic interpretation by contemporary Eastern Christians.

The significance of this study is twofold. First, it contributes to the growing body of biblical scholarship that seeks to shed light on the liturgical provenance of scriptural texts. The relationship between the Bible and the liturgy is of paramount significance to biblical theology, insofar as it (a) sheds light on the original historical and literary circumstances within which the biblical writings were composed, and (b) illuminates the ongoing connection between Scripture and liturgy in those ecclesial communities in which biblical passages are read at celebrations of the Eucharist. Recognition of the liturgical and Eucharistic provenance of Hebrews makes clear that this document, while quite unique in many respects among the writings of the NT, is not an aberration in terms of its cultic provenance and its ongoing relevance for contemporary Eucharistic worshipping communities.

Second, this study lays the groundwork for future scholarly study of the sacrificial theology of Hebrews vis-à-vis the concept of the Eucharist as a sacrifice. As we have seen, a widespread impression persists that there is a dichotomy between Hebrews' affirmation of the definitive character of Jesus Christ's sacrificial death and the idea that the Eucharist is a sacrificial memorial of that unique and unrepeatable salvific act. In recent decades great headway has been made in ecumenical discussions of the sacrificial character of the Eucharist, facilitated in large part by a better understanding of the Jewish concept of memorial that prevailed in the

first century. As I argued in Chapter Four, it is highly likely that a writer as thoroughly grounded in Jewish cultic theology as the author of Hebrews would have been familiar with this concept and would have had little difficulty in understanding the Eucharist as an anamnesis of Christ's once-for-all sacrificial self-offering. It my fervent hope that this work serve as a foundation for future research in this area and thereby contribute to a recognition that the theological outlook of Hebrews is congenial to the church's understanding of the Eucharist – both as that understanding existed in the first century and as it has developed in subsequent centuries.

The essential compatibility between the theology of Hebrews and the theology that underlies the celebration of the Eucharist is perhaps nowhere so poetically illustrated as in the final verse of William Chatterton Dix's 1866 hymn "Alleluia Sing to Jesus," which draws a clear link between Hebrews' imagery of Jesus' exalted, fleshly presence in the heavenly realm and his sacramental presence in the Lord's Supper. It is with his words that I bring this study to a conclusion:

Alleluia! King eternal, Thee the Lord of lords we own;
Alleluia! born of Mary, Earth Thy footstool, heav'n Thy throne:
Thou within the veil hast entered, robed in flesh our great High Priest;
Thou on earth both priest and victim in the Eucharistic feast.⁵²⁶

⁵²⁶ William Dix, "Alleluia Sing to Jesus," (no. 426) in *The St. Michael Hymnal* (Lafayette, IN: St. Boniface Parish, 2011).

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