

## **Item #27 (Suggested Outline of the Epistle to the Hebrews)**

This was Entry #28 in my previous website.

Perhaps it would not be amiss to indicate the background of my thinking about the structure of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Like everything else I do in Scripture, it is intended to be plausible and nothing more. It has now been published in *Hebrews—An Interpretation* (Subsidia Biblica 47; Rome: Gregorian and Biblical Press, 2016). With Second Thoughts in Item #2.

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The macro-structure of the Epistle to the Hebrews is based on the use of the Greek word ὑπόστασις which has three different but related meanings in the epistle. All three have the common element of indicating that which “stands under” something. All three stand at the beginning of their respective macro-parts.

**1.** 1,1 – 3,6. The “reality” of the Father is that which “stands under” (ὑπόστασις) the Father’s glory, and it is this underlying reality which has acted as a die reproducing an “exact likeness” (χαρακτήρ) who, as Son, is a ray of the glory. (This use of ὑπόστασις is the prime analogue of the other two uses of the word in Hebrews.)

**2.** 3,7 – 10,39. The “reality” of the Son “stands under” the Christian realization of the promises to Abraham of Land and Offspring (ὑπόστασις in 3,14).

**3.** 11,1 – 13,21. The efficacious faith-trust of the Son “stands under” the appearances of human hope in the past, in the present, in the future (ὑπόστασις in 11,1).

A plausible micro-structure of the epistle in the context of the macro-structure given above would be as follows:

### **1. 1,1 – 3,6. The Son as ὑπόστασις**

**1.1.** 1,1-4. Prologue

**1.2.** 1,5 – 3,6. The Son

**1.2.1.** 1,5 – 2,1-4. The Son of God

**1.2.1.1.** 1,5-14 Exposition on the Son of God

**1.2.1.2.** 2,1-4. Paraklesis on the Son of God

**1.2.2.** 2,5 – 3,6. The Son of Man

**1.2.2.1.** 2,5-18. Exposition on the Son of Man

**1.2.2.2.** 3,1-6. Paraklesis on the Son of Man

**2.**

**2. 3,7 – 10,39. The Ὑπόστασις Underlying the Promises to Abraham of Land and Offspring**

**2.1.** 3,7 – 7,28. The Promises to Abraham of Land and Offspring

**2.1.1.** 3,7 – 4,12. The Promise to Abraham of Land

**2.1.2.** 4,13 – 7,28. The Promise to Abraham of Offspring

**2.1.2.1.** 4,13 – 5,10. Christ as High Priest and Victim

**2.1.2.2.** 5,11 – 6,8. Negative Paraklesis

**2.1.2.3.** 6,9-20. Positive Paraklesis

**2.1.2.4.** 7,1-28. Christ and Melchizedek

**2.2.** 8,1 – 10,39. Christ as High Priest and Victim

**2.2.1.** 8,1-6. Introduction

**2.2.2.** 8,7-13. The New Covenant [Frame]

**2.2.3.** 9,1-10. Introduction to the Three Entrances of Christ

**2.2.3.1.** 9,11-23. The Entrance of Christ into the Holy of Holies

**2.2.3.2.** 9,24 – 10,4. The Entrance of Christ into Heaven Itself

**2.2.3.3.** 10,5-14. The Entrance of Christ into the World

**2.2.4.** 10,15-18. The New Covenant [Frame]

**2.2.4.1.** 10,19-30a. Negative Paraklesis

**2.2.4.2.** 10,30b-39. Positive Paraklesis.

**3. 11,1 – 13,21. The Ὑπόστασις Underlying Faith**

**3.1.** 11,1-40. The Faith of the Past

**3.2.** 12,1-29. The Faith of the Future

**3.3.** 13,1-21. The Faith of the Present

**Final, Personal Remarks.** 13,22-25.

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The above macro-exegesis of Hebrews will make sense, of course, only according to the extent that it organically relates to the micro-exegesis which it purports to structure. The following remarks have as their purpose an indication of the content of the various parts of the structure given above. For some of the detailed grounding of the reasons for assessing the content as given here the published version of my book must be consulted. Since the above macro-exegesis reflects my current thinking on the matter, most of the earlier Bibliography items can be disregarded. This is particularly true, of course, of my previous published attempt to structure the entire epistle (cf. Bibliography §§58 and 63). Much of what is here presented has been taught in various places with class notes serving to convey the ideas. But nothing so complete as this has been set out in the public forum.

The meaning of ὑπόστασις in Hebrews 1,3 as the “inner reality” of God underlying his external glory and reproduced exactly in the Son would seem to be superficially defensible in terms of the language of the prologue of the epistle. What it meant in terms of the understanding of the addressees and of subsequent generations required centuries for the Church to work out. The meaning in 3,14 and 11,1 is obviously even less clear. As presented above its use in 3,14 would reflect the presence of the Word in the continuing membership of the addressees in the Church, and the resulting certainty of their entrance into God’s rest, and as such is based on the Son’s ability in the maintaining of all created things in his power (cf. 1,3). In 11,1 its use would seem to reflect the presence of the faithfulness (see Entry #2) which the Son manifested during his life on earth (cf. §§208, 211) as made available to mankind (see Hebrews 11,6).

Hebrews 1,1-4 is about the Father and the Son and their mutual relation. It is straightforwardly ontological as well as functional.

1,5-14 takes up the theme of the Son and seeks to show that he is fully divine. It is exposition. 2,1-4 is a paraklesis based on the previous exposition and presents the Son as the New Dispensation equivalent of the presence of God in the Mosaic Law which accompanied the people of God in the Exodus. Thus in the New Dispensation the Eucharistic presence of Christ is the presence of God for his people.

Hebrews 2,5-18 is about the Son of Man. Not primarily about Jesus as human (though that is explicitly indicated), but primarily about Jesus as having faithfulness in God in the face of death based on the “parable” of Isaac (Bibliography §§208, 211, 216). This exposition is explicitly parallel to the exposition of 1,5-14 (linked by the phrase “under his feet” of Psalm 110,4 and Psalm 8,7). It is followed by a paraklesis at 3,1-6 parallel to the paraklesis at 2,1-4; this paraklesis at 3,1-6 is based on Jesus’ earthly and heavenly priesthoods (the latter, based on his risen

body, being a perfection of the former, which was based on his earthly body) and carries on the allusion to the Christian Eucharist in 2,12 in terms of a fulfillment of Moses' expiatory use of blood at the inauguration of the Sinai Covenant. This fulfillment involves the "house" of the Son or the Church (cf. Bibliography §216 and Entry #25). Underlying all of this, 1,5 to 3,6, is the presence of the Son as the "stamp" of God's inner being.

The second major part, 3,7 to 10,39, is concerned with the Christian fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham of land and offspring (3,7 – 7,28) and of the priesthood and victimhood of Christ in terms of Jeremiah's New Covenant (8,1 – 10,39). Underlying all of this is the Son's sustaining power mentioned in 1,3. Central to 3,7 – 7,28 is the presentation of the Son as Λόγος in 4,12-13 (cf. Bibliography §§184, 204, 197). 3,7 – 4,12 presents as God's own Rest the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham of land. 4,13 – 5,10 presents as those who consciously obey the priestly command of Christ to celebrate the Eucharist the Christian fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham of offspring (cf. Bibliography §178). The paraklesis which follows (5,11 – 6,8 being negative; 6,9-20 being positive) looks at Christ's earthly priesthood and victimhood. In 7,1-28 the author of Hebrews uses the Scriptural presentation of Melchizedek to illumine the timelessness of Christ's priesthood (the point of view is of looking back at Melchizedek from the standpoint of Christ, not of looking forward to Christ from the standpoint of Melchizedek): the effects of Christ's death in time as the earthly high priest are applicable to all men regardless of where they exist in time, because of the timeless existence of Christ as the heavenly high priest). This is the true meaning of Abraham's descendants as numerous as the stars in the heavens and the sand of the seashore.

The second half of the second part is the central section of the entire epistle. It has a framing device—the longest citation of any Old Testament passage in the New Testament—Jeremiah's prophecy about the New Covenant. In 8,7-12, followed by a brief reprise at 10,16-17. This central section is about the Eucharist. The citation from Jeremiah has its own introduction (8,1-6) which explicitly states the centrality of the section which follows (8,1-2). 9,1-11 are devoted to establishing the imagery which will be used in Christ's three "entrances" (εἰσέρχομαι). (Bibliography §180 gives an indication of what is involved in its treatment of 9,2, the crucial verse.) 9,11-23 is about the risen Christ's "entrance" into the Christian "Holy of Holies"—ἅγια, a term explicitly created by the author of Hebrews because it signifies two things: 1) the Holy of Holies of the desert tabernacle as he defines it, and 2) "holy things", i.e., holy food, a common expression also taken from the Septuagint. The risen Christ enters into the holy food of Christianity which at the same time is the Christian place of the Divine Presence. Here is the author's presentation of what later became known in Catholic faith as "the Real Presence". 9,24 – 10,4 speak of Christ's

entrance into “heaven itself”, i.e., the establishment at the resurrection of Christ’s presence of heavenly high priest. 10,5-14 speaks of Christ’s entrance into the world at the moment of his taking on blood and flesh to be able to die in expiation for the sins of mankind through the shedding of blood. These three “entrances” portray the three essential aspects of Christ’s expiatory priesthood in terms of its Eucharistic relevance: 1) the entrance into the “Holy of Holies” / “Holy Food” achieves his presence in the Eucharist as Victim; 2) the entrance into heaven itself achieves his presence at God’s right hand from which he presides as heavenly high priest at every Eucharist liturgy; 3) the entrance into the world achieves his presence as possessed of blood and flesh and constitutes his earthly high priesthood. The entrance into heaven itself is central because Christ as heavenly high priest abides in the sphere of God’s presence. The entrances into the Eucharistic species and an earthly, mortal body are not central because the earthly priesthood of Christ has already “disappeared” into Christ’s heavenly priesthood: Christ died once and for all and can die no more; his earthly priesthood has fulfilled its purpose and its expiatory effects are now forever a part of his heavenly priesthood. With the end of time the role of Christ’s Eucharistic victimhood will disappear, no longer needed to guide Christians to sanctity (Hebrews 2,11) in faithfulness, for all will be sanctified and faithfulness will have given way to vision.

Hebrews 10,19-30a and Hebrews 10,30b-39 are negative and positive *paraklesis* regarding Christ’s sacramental victimhood with regard to his heavenly priesthood (cf. 10,29), just as 5,11 – 6,8 and 6,9-20 are negative and positive regarding Christ’s physical victimhood with regard to his earthly priesthood (cf. 6,6). (Cf. Bibliography §159.)

Hebrews 11–13 (Part 3) are about faith-trust in God. The ὑπόστασις refers to the underlying cause of the faith-trust under discussion in the various categories of time—past (Chapter 11), future (Chapter 12) and present (Chapter 13). Basically it is the faith-trust of Christ himself as he faced death fortified by his faith-trust in the face of death as Abraham had as a spiritual descendant of Abraham but also his own faith-trust in the face of his own personal death (cf. Bibliography §208) which Christians are called on to participate in. The exact import of the examples shown has yet to be properly understood, certainly by the present writer. An attempt to come to grips with the enigmatic 11,11-12 which presents Sarah, Abraham’s wife, as endowed with the male capacity to generate was caused by the improbability of the surface meaning of v. 11, an improbability obviously intended by the author to signal something of importance which he wished to convey in the text (cf. Bibliography §210). On the role of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac in Hebrews and in Christian hermeneutics cf. the published version of my Oxford doctoral dissertation (Bibliography §84), and my final lecture given on my retirement from teaching at the Pontifical Biblical Institute (Bibliography §§189, 190, 195; also 191). I have not discussed at any length Chapter 12. But a detailed presentation of Chapter 13 is, of

course, what I consider to be the chief contribution I have made to the study of Hebrews. (See Bibliography §§200-201.)

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The above is my current thinking as regards the macro-exegesis of Hebrews. Perhaps in no other New Testament writing is the structure so important for determining the meaning. The structure given above is not the result of a hasty attempt to come to terms with the meaning, but is the result of years of patient confrontation with the ideas of others and above all with the text of Hebrews itself. Especial attention has been given to the cruces of the epistle, for it seems to me that unless an exegete confronts cruces head on, his interpretation of any passage where a crux is found is bound not only to be suspect but to be highly suspect. Plausibility comes only at the price of risking mistakes. (**1 October 2009**)

As has been noted elsewhere, the “faithfulness” of Jesus as human should be understood in the context of his realization that he is the new Isaac and thus a child of Abraham destined to bring to fulfillment the foreshadowing contained in Isaac’s being raised from the dead only symbolically. It was the destiny of Jesus to be raised from the dead literally. It was in this destiny that the human Jesus was faithful to the example in Genesis and to the God who was to bring it to fulfillment. (**8 August 2017**)

The entire text retouched with occasional important modifications **5 August 2019**.

