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978-0-521-88323-8 - Cosmology and Eschatology in Hebrews: The Settings of the Sacrifice

Kenneth L. Schenck

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THE QUEST FOR THE
HISTORICAL HEBREWS

Introduction

The main challenge for anyone wishing to use historical-critical methods to interpret the Epistle to the Hebrews is our almost complete lack of knowledge of its original context. Since the meaning of words is a function of their use in particular ‘language games’, biblical scholarship faces an uphill battle when attempting to interpret texts whose original ‘forms of life’ are so far removed from us in time and culture.¹ The case becomes acute with regard to Hebrews, whose origins are so uncertain. We ultimately must consign ourselves to a certain amount of agnosticism as far as the original meaning is concerned.² While we may create plausible hypotheses, we may never be able to speak definitively on even the most basic issues.

It is therefore no surprise that the ‘riddles’ relating to Hebrews’ origin have given rise to an immense body of literature, as countless individuals

¹ Wittgenstein’s well known turns of phrase. See in particular *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1966 [1953]) 23. Wittgenstein refers to the way in which certain contexts (i.e. ‘forms of life’) give rise to ‘rules’ for understanding words. If I say ‘Break a leg’ to someone before going on stage, the ‘language game’ of drama indicates that I wish him or her to have a good performance.

In New Testament studies, social-scientific criticism embodies on a macro-level some of Wittgenstein’s insights into language. When Bruce Malina writes that the ‘meanings realized in texts inevitably derive from some social system’ (*The Social World of Jesus* (New York: Routledge, 1996) 13), he indicates that the meaning of words in a text at any point in time is a function of all the ways in which people are using words at that time (language games) in all the various social situations that exist (forms of life).

² Even the phrase ‘original meaning’ is ambiguous. Is it something that the author intended or that the recipients understood? How does one define ‘author’ if there is more than one source behind a composition, if a text went through various stages of development, or if multiple variations of a tradition existed contemporaneously? Is intention cognitive, emotional, social, or a combination of these? What if the actual words an author produces work at cross purposes to his or her intention?

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have attempted to fill in the epistle's glaring gaps in context.³ Indeed, in addition to the identity of the author and point of origin, the recipients and destination of the epistle are also unidentified, together constituting its 'four great unknowns'.⁴ The matter of background in particular remains one of the most important issues on which no decisive consensus exists. Significant disagreement persists concerning what first-century milieu(s) might best explain the epistle's thought and imagery.

This area of Hebrews' research has passed through various phases, and a number of possible options have been proposed at one time or another. Lincoln Hurst's 1990 monograph on the issue surveyed five non-Christian backgrounds that various scholars have suggested as the key to the epistle's meaning (as well as three biblical traditions).⁵ As much as any other, this uncertainty has led to a myriad of widely contrasting interpretations of Hebrews and the situation of its origin.

Yet despite the immense quantity of literature, scholarly discussion has failed to yield a definitive consensus on most issues. Indeed, it is judicious to avoid drawing conclusions on many of these questions (e.g. the question of authorship). On the other hand, we cannot avoid the matter of Hebrews' 'background of thought' in interpretation. Words do not have meaning independent of their use in some socio-conceptual framework. One cannot make a judgement on any text's meaning without either intentionally or accidentally investing its words with meanings from some cultural dictionary.

Even if no definitive consensus exists as yet on the background issue, some advances in the discussion have materialized, particularly some methodological advances. For example, scholars now more often than not take seriously the possibility that Hebrews reflects a creative mixture of ideologies. In contrast, many studies from the past assumed that the epistle's conceptual framework largely derived from some monolithic system of thought. We now see that categories like 'Greek thought', 'Hebrew thought', 'Platonic', and 'apocalyptic' were overly simplistic in

³ Reference to these ambiguities as 'riddles' goes back at least as far as J. Biesenthal, *Der Trostschreiben des Apostels Paulus an die Hebräer* (Leipzig: Fernau, 1878) 1. See also W. Übelacker, *Der Hebräerbrief als Appell: Untersuchungen zu exordium, narratio, und postscriptum (Hebr 1–2 und 13,22–25)* (ConBNT 21; Lund: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1989) 11 n.1.

⁴ So Übelacker, *Des Hebräerbrief* 12, following O. Kuss, 'Der Verfasser des Hebräerbriefes als Seelsorger', *TTZ* 67 (1958) 1.

⁵ *The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its Background of Thought* (SNTSMS 65; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1990). Hurst's discussion of 'Philo, Alexandria, and Platonism' sneaks in a sixth potentially 'non-Christian' background (revealingly the one Hurst favours): 'apocalyptic'.

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the way scholars referred to them as mutually exclusive and self-contained ideologies. In reality these categories could interpenetrate and intermingle extensively with one another.

The possibility that Hebrews might reflect a mixture or merging of thought traditions heralds the need for a shift in approach to the question of Hebrews' thought world. Most notably, it argues strongly against an approach that moves primarily from background to text. An approach to the thought of Hebrews should move more intentionally than ever from text to backgrounds, constructing a world of thought on the basis of Hebrews itself vis-à-vis background traditions. It is no longer feasible to import wholesale some self-contained background ideology into the interpretation of Hebrews.

Two central methodological problems

Presumption of a single ideological background

One of the main problems with previous research on Hebrews has been a tendency to pigeonhole the epistle into a *single* ideological background such as Platonism or apocalypticism. For example, L. K. K. Dey interpreted Hebrews almost exclusively against the backdrop of Middle Platonism. His approach was indicative of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*: 'It is only when we are able to place Hebrews in its particular religious context that the significance of any concept or idea, the motivation behind it, the purpose of the writing and its literary character can be defined.'⁶

There is, of course, a fundamental truthfulness to these words. Nevertheless, Dey largely presumed that such a 'religious context' would turn out to be a distinct and isolated entity, which in his case turned out to be Middle Platonism.⁷ His work then proceeded to force the words of Hebrews into a mould fashioned by parallels from Philo, the Wisdom of Solomon, and other Alexandrian texts. Any Middle Platonic aspect to the epistle was taken so far beyond its original scope that more fundamental aspects of Hebrews' message were lost.

Scholars have often conducted the search for Hebrews' background in such a way that they inevitably 'find what they are looking for'.⁸ That is

⁶ *The Intermediary World and Patterns of Perfection in Philo and Hebrews* (SBLDS 25; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975) 3.

⁷ In reality, even 'Middle Platonism' itself was not a monolithic system of thought. A great deal of diversity existed among the group of philosophers usually included in this category.

⁸ M. Isaacs, *Sacred Space: An Approach to the Theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (JSNTSS 73; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992) 51.

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to say, it is not difficult to find parallel passages in the corpus of ancient literature that, with a bit of effort, can be made to bear at least a superficial resemblance to Hebrews. At its worst, this practice places Hebrews into whatever Procrustean bed the scholar has in mind, altering the epistle's form in favour of the background of choice.

In a sense, Hurst's monograph represents the culmination of this kind of approach to the background question, an approach that was typical of the older History of Religions school.⁹ His treatment of Hebrews' 'background of thought'¹⁰ follows the contours of previous scholarship as it discusses distinct ideological backgrounds one by one. While he eliminates most of these from consideration, it is significant (1) that his conclusions argue for a mixture of influences on Hebrews' thought and (2) that they are seen more in terms of *traditionsgeschichtlich* than *religionsgeschichtlich* forces.

We now commonly read of multiple influences on the epistle's thought world rather than of solitary conceptual frameworks. On the one hand, Hebrews is of course most fundamentally a document of early Christianity. We would therefore expect *prima facie* that early Christian traditions played the most central role in the background of its thought. Even Dey admits that there is 'in Hebrews both the eschatological language of primitive Christianity as well as the language of Hellenistic Judaism'.¹¹ Most scholars would agree that Hebrews *at least* mixes a basic Christian perspective with whatever other background tradition(s) it may reflect.

On the other hand, since C. K. Barrett's article 'The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews', it has become common to suggest a mixture of *non-Christian* traditions beyond the presence of traditional material.¹²

⁹ *Background*. The so called 'new' *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, which seeks the appropriate background to early Christianity in terms of Jewish traditions, can learn from the mistakes of the earlier History of Religions school (for the notion of a new History of Religions School, see C. Fletcher-Louis, *Luke-Acts: Angels, Christology and Soteriology* (WUNT 94; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1997) 1). It is all too easy to fall into a kind of 'parallelomania' that moves primarily from background to text in interpretation rather than from text to background.

¹⁰ The subtitle to his monograph.

¹¹ *Intermediary World* 1. So also J. W. Thompson, who also reads Hebrews Platonically: 'An analysis of the intellectual presuppositions of the author necessitates that one distinguish between tradition and redaction more carefully than has been done in previous scholarship. It is likely that the author of Hebrews employed various traditions that he reshaped for the needs of his audience' (*The Beginnings of Christian Philosophy: The Epistle to the Hebrews* (CBQMS 13; Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association, 1981) 12). In my opinion, however, Thompson does not fully heed his own advice.

¹² 'The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews', *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology: Studies in Honour of C. H. Dodd*, W. D. Davies and D. Daube, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954) 385: 'The heavenly tabernacle and its ministrations are from one point of view eternal archetypes, from another, they are eschatological events.'

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Barrett himself suggested that the epistle combined Platonic language with a more fundamental eschatology such as one might find in Jewish apocalyptic literature.¹³ James D. G. Dunn has written that Hebrews is ‘a fascinating combination of the Platonic world view and Jewish eschatology’.¹⁴ One can count a number of other scholars up to the present who believe Hebrews to be a mixture of Platonic and ‘apocalyptic’ imagery.¹⁵

The very possibility that Hebrews might blend elements from differing backgrounds reorients our approach to the text. Language reminiscent of one milieu might not carry the precise meaning and implications it had in its background setting. Indeed, a number of scholars believe that Hebrews uses Platonic *language* without that language contributing to the author’s thought in any significant way.¹⁶ And we will have to define the word *apocalyptic* very carefully if it is to be a useful category. We will have to be clear whether we are referring to a distinct and coherent movement or to specific imagery that occurs in a number of writings that may in fact be unrelated to one another. Aside from one or two key interpretive decisions in Hebrews, it is not entirely clear to me how we

¹³ One should keep in mind here that the idea of ‘non-Christian’ background – when we are referring to Jewish backgrounds – is somewhat of an anachronism. Jewish background is in fact Christian background.

¹⁴ *The Partings of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1991) 88. Dunn’s second edition will likely indicate a few shifts in his understanding of Hebrews.

¹⁵ Some of those who have held to some such mixture include G. Vos, *The Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, J. Vos, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956) 56; H. Braun, ‘Die Gewinnung der Gewißheit in dem Hebräerbrief’, *TLZ* 96 (1971) 330: ‘Metaphysik’; G. MacRae, ‘Heavenly Temple and Eschatology in the Letter to the Hebrews’, *Semeia* 12 (1978) 179: apocalyptic and Platonic imagery both present; H. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989) 223–4: earthly-heavenly intersects with new-old; S. Lehne, *The New Covenant in Hebrews* (JSNTSS 44; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990) 96 and 149, n.17: ‘blended in a creative way’; H.-F. Weiss, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991) 114: it is in a ‘Mittelstellung’ between apocalyptic and Hellenism; Isaacs, *Space* 50–6: more nuanced than ‘a simple “yes” or “no” answer’ (56).

¹⁶ E.g. O. Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer*, 13th edn. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984 (1936)) 289: one cannot ‘von einer Einordnung des Hebr in die philonische Konzeption sprechen’; S. Nomoto, ‘Herkunft und Struktur der Hohenpriestervorstellung im Hebräerbrief’, *NovT* 10 (1968) 18–19: while the terms are Alexandrian in origin, their content is no longer in a special relationship to its metaphysic or exegesis; R. Williamson, *Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews* (ALGHJ 4; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970) 557; D. Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection: An Examination of the Concept of Perfection in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (SNTSMS 47; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 131; J. Dunnill, *Covenant and Sacrifice in the Letter to the Hebrews* (SNTSMS 75; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 46: ‘Philonic influence is relatively superficial’; G. E. Sterling (‘Ontology versus Eschatology: Tensions between Author and Community’, *SPhA* 13 (2001) 208–10) believes that the quasi-Platonic imagery comes more from the audience than the author, who used the language rather superficially.

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might distinguish ‘apocalyptic’ as a background for Hebrews from early Christian tradition in general.¹⁷

The realization that the ancient world and ancient Judaism were not neatly partitioned off into distinct and unrelated ideologies argues for a text-oriented approach that allows for a combination of sources and a creative synthesis on the part of an individual author.¹⁸ Hebrews may not be as out of place in the New Testament as some scholars have assumed. Even if it has motifs reminiscent of certain background traditions, the author surely was capable of putting such imagery to new and unique uses in the light of his own particular situation and theology.¹⁹ The identification of a general background and common language does not necessarily imply how an individual author has used that imagery in a specific context.

The interpretation of Hebrews thus requires a rigorous focus on its text if it is to have integrity. The gaps in our knowledge of the epistle’s original context can lead all too easily to guessing games for the mystery author, readers, destination, origin, background and occasion, not to mention for the keys to a myriad of interpretive conundrums. While a complete interpretation will often require us to engage in speculation, the starting point must always be the apparent trajectory of the text rather than distinct ideological systems attested in the background literature.

As in all historical interpretation, individual texts are the delimiting factors in the hermeneutical circle. The totality of background information at our disposal provides us with a domain of possible meanings for ancient words, but individual texts themselves delimit these to specific meanings that (ideally) cohere. The text must always have the upper hand in interpretation. The frequently opposite focus of the earlier *religions-geschichtliche Schule* was its most fundamental weakness.

¹⁷ For a discussion of what John Collins calls ‘the apocalyptic worldview’, see ‘Genre, Ideology and Social Movements in Jewish Apocalypticism’, *Mysteries and Revelations: Apocalyptic Studies since the Upsala Colloquium*, J. J. Collins and J. H. Charlesworth, eds. (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991) 11–32. Early Christianity in general seems to participate in this ‘world-view’. See also C. Rowland’s, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1982), which denies that eschatology is even an essential element of an apocalypse.

¹⁸ M. Hengel’s decisive study, *Judaism and Hellenism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1974) should be mentioned here along with its sequel, *The ‘Hellenization’ of Judaea in the First Century after Christ* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1989). See also J. J. Collins and G. E. Sterling, *Hellenism in the Land of Israel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

¹⁹ I use the masculine pronoun advisedly in the light of the masculine singular participle in Heb. 11:32.

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Lack of attention to rhetorical elements

George MacRae was one of the first to suggest that Hebrews might reflect a mixture of distinct background traditions, particularly in its use of tabernacle imagery. What made his proposal interesting was that he saw this mixture primarily in terms of a distinction between author and audience, whom he believed came from differing ideological perspectives. To use his words, '[I]n his effort to strengthen the hope of his hearers, the homilist mingles his own Alexandrian imagery with their apocalyptic presuppositions'.²⁰ While we may not agree with his particular reconstruction of Hebrews' situation, MacRae insightfully drew our attention to an easily overlooked, yet crucial factor in the interpretation of Hebrews: the matter of rhetoric.²¹

New Testament scholarship has often overemphasized the *logical* (*logos*) element of argumentation to the exclusion of other ancient forms of proof like *pathos* and *ethos*.²² George A. Kennedy as much as anyone else has pointed out that ancient rhetoric did not function exclusively on the basis of straightforward reasoning, the favourite of post-Enlightenment Western culture.²³ Equally important were the 'emotional' (*pathos*) and 'personal' (*ethos*) modes, which respectively played on an audience's emotions or confirmed the trustworthiness of a speaker. Because interpreters have not always recognized the varying levels of logical investment an author might have in the particular argument he or she is using, they have sometimes missed points of subtlety, irony or indirectness.

MacRae's suggestion raises the possibility that the author of Hebrews had varying levels of 'logical' investment in his imagery. For example, David A. deSilva has recently drawn our attention to the prevalence of

²⁰ 'Heavenly Temple' 179.

²¹ G. E. Sterling has recently reversed the hypothesis, suggesting that the audience utilized certain Platonizing exegetical traditions – traditions with which the more eschatologically orientated author interacted on a somewhat superficial level ('Ontology Versus Eschatology').

²² Pauline scholarship has made definite improvements in recent years in appreciating the non-conceptual features of Paul's rhetoric. Few now would view Romans as a straightforward 'compendium of his theology', recognizing the centrality of the letter's rhetorical situation for understanding its argument (even if that situation is appraised differently by different scholars, see K. P. Donfried, ed., *The Romans Debate* (rev. and enlarged edn; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991)). M. M. Mitchell's *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1991) shows a similar sensitivity with regard to 1 Corinthians.

²³ *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

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honour/shame language in the epistle.²⁴ Such imagery functions primarily on the level of *pathos* rather than *logos*. We must at least consider the question of whether the audience was in as grave a danger of ‘falling away’ as Heb. 5:11–6:8 seems to indicate, or whether this language was meant to shame the audience into a stronger commitment to values they were not really in danger of losing.²⁵ While an earlier generation of scholars did not adequately address these possibilities, more recent interpretations of Hebrews have.²⁶

Hebrews’ extensive use of metaphor further complicates its interpretation. Even when the argument functions primarily in a logical mode, it can be difficult to know how literal its imagery is. Nowhere have such decisions proven more difficult than in the matter of the heavenly tabernacle, arguably the focal point of debate over the epistle’s background of thought. Thus while some have considered the heavenly tabernacle to be a Platonic model of some sort (cf. Heb. 8:5), others have seen it as a free-standing structure, more like the ‘apocalyptic’ structures that were arguably a part of the future Jerusalem envisaged by *4 Ezra* and *2 Baruch* (cf. 8:2). Still others suggest it is similar to the cosmological temple of Josephus and Philo (cf. 6:19–20; 7:26; 9:11–12, 24).

Ultimately, the difficulty of interpreting Hebrews at this point derives from the fact that the author has used the heavenly tabernacle in several different metaphorical ways that do not necessarily cohere with one another. I will argue subsequently that heaven itself corresponds most closely to what the author pictured when he referred to this tabernacle (cf. Heb. 9:24). However, the author also used tabernacle imagery in ways that defy any simple, literal referent in heaven. For example, the cleansing of the heavenly tabernacle in Heb. 9:23 presents a difficult conundrum for interpreters. How could something in heaven need cleansed? I will argue that the author is largely playing out a metaphor and thus that, as with so many metaphors, we run into difficulties if we press them too far. In my opinion, the author was not actually picturing the cleansing of a literal structure in heaven.

The key to assessing how much the author of Hebrews has invested in each particular argument and image does not come from background literature or from the interpretation of individual verses in isolation.

²⁴ E.g. *Despising Shame: Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (SBLDS 152; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995); *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle ‘to the Hebrews’* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000). Another element in this discussion is the question of genre and the ‘species’ of rhetoric in view in a particular passage (i.e. judicial, deliberative or epideictic).

²⁵ DeSilva writes of the ‘trap of regarding the passage as a precise diagnosis of the actual state of the hearers’ (*Perseverance* 211, n.1).

²⁶ E.g. B. Lindars, ‘The Rhetorical Structure of Hebrews’, *NTS* 35 (1989) 382–406.

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Rather, it comes from a proper understanding of the author's *overall rhetorical agenda*. Barnabas Lindars' examination of the 'theology' of Hebrews is a good example of a holistic rhetorical approach that takes such factors into consideration.²⁷ Rather than let traditional questions of author, recipients, destination and point of origin dominate his introduction, he rightfully places the situation of the 'readers' at the forefront, that is, the *rhetorical situation* behind the epistle.²⁸ Commentaries have intuitively moved toward the same approach as they have taken on board the reality of Hebrews' incurable uncertainties.²⁹

Holistic treatments of the epistle's 'thought' also avoid the problem addressed by William G. Johnsson in his article 'The Cultus of Hebrews in Twentieth-Century Scholarship'.³⁰ In the late seventies he noted that there was a tendency among Protestant scholars to neglect the subject of the cultus in Hebrews, while Roman Catholic scholars often did not integrate their interest in the cultus with a consideration of Hebrews' paraenetic material. Consequently, those who emphasized the cultus tended to downplay futurist aspects of the epistle's eschatology, while those who focused on paraenesis tended to miss the current, vertical aspects of the author's thought. It is thus predictable that Roman Catholic scholars have more often seen Platonic influence in the epistle while Protestants have more typically looked to 'apocalyptic' to explain the epistle's thought. Johnsson's conclusion is still apt: 'the solution to these problems will lie in a holistic view of the book of Hebrews'.³¹

Methodological conclusions

We have identified two central methodological problems in the recent history of Hebrews' interpretation vis-à-vis its world of thought: (1) the

²⁷ *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 4–15. Lindars' use of the term 'theology', a term he of course inherited from the series of which his book is a part, is another indication of how deeply New Testament interpretation is focused on the *cognitive* dimension of the New Testament writings over and against the *emotive* and *personal*.

²⁸ We should refer to the *audience* of Hebrews rather than its *readers*. The overwhelming majority of the ancients were illiterate, and we should picture the recipients of New Testament documents as hearers rather than readers. This is particularly the case for Hebrews, which styles itself a 'word of exhortation' (Heb. 13:22), a phrase Acts 13:15 associates with a homily given in synagogue worship. Hebrews was likely a short sermon sent to be read at some location the author soon hoped to visit.

²⁹ DeSilva's treatment (*Perseverance*) is an excellent example of a recent commentary that consciously adopts such priorities in interpretation, styling itself a 'socio-rhetorical' commentary.

³⁰ *ExpTim* 89 (1977–78) 104–5.

³¹ 'Cultus' 106. Isaacs also notes of Hebrews, 'its paraenesis and its theology cannot be considered apart from each other' (*Space* 22).

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presumption of a single ideological background behind the sermon and (2) a lack of attention to the rhetorical dimension of its argument. As a result of these two basic errors, other problems have resulted. At times scholars have focused on certain passages to the exclusion of others. We have often failed to recognize the author's level of 'logical' investment in his arguments and imagery. In general, we have failed to let the text speak on its own terms.

We can see Hurst's monograph as the culmination of an era of Hebrews' interpretation. The possibility that Hebrews is a unique synthesis of thought traditions indicates that we can no longer look for the key to its meaning in any one background. Dey's claim that we must 'describe the total framework of its [Hebrews'] religious thought' remains in force, but we cannot (as he) find such a total framework in any particular *religions-geschichtlich* background.³² We should rather seek out an appropriate text-oriented approach to construct the 'thought world' – or better, the *rhetorical world* – of this ancient homily.

From our discussion thus far, we can see that such an approach should have two primary characteristics: (1) it should let the text generate its own world of thought in terms appropriate to its own categories, and (2) it should take the rhetorical agenda of the whole text of Hebrews into account rather than a particular literary section or specific topical theme. A number of late twentieth-century developments in hermeneutics provide us with new possibilities and caveats for such a text-orientated approach to the meaning of Hebrews. Chiefly, the recognition that most New Testament thought is fundamentally *narrative* in orientation opens the possibility of constructing the world of Hebrews' thought using its 'narrative world' as a starting point.³³ In developing a rhetorico-narrative approach to Hebrews, we can allow the text to generate a world of thought in a category endemic to its own nature (criterion 1), doing so from a consideration of the text as a whole (criterion 2).

Hebrews' world of thought

The model of story and discourse

The category of narrative is by now no stranger to New Testament studies. Structuralism in the 1970s and narrative criticism in the 1980s and 1990s

³² *Intermediary World* 3.

³³ The groundwork for seeing a narrative substructure underlying the rhetorical arguments of a New Testament letter was laid by R. B. Hays in his *The Faith of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11* (SBLDS 56; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), especially 21–9.