

**Understanding the Book of Hebrews: Portraits of Jesus**

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## Understanding the Book of Hebrews: Portraits of Jesus

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### Introduction

Hebrews is filled with descriptions of Jesus. Each of these descriptions presents a unique portrait of the Jesus whom the Hebrews in the past followed, in the present are leaving, and yet need to cling to. The book begins with a paragraph that contains seven descriptions of Jesus (Son, creator, image of God, glory of God, sustainer, redeemer, reigning). This introductory material will identify some of the portraits of Jesus as set forth in the book of Hebrews.

Despite the difficulty of the task, and the multiple options which have been suggested, it is important that we try to understand the structure of Hebrews lest we draw portraits of Jesus which are not consistent with the intention of the author and the message of the book. We want to make sure that we understand what is being said about Jesus.

Many different structures or outlines have been suggested, but one which appeals to me is that of Vanhoye (see next page). The structure reflects a clear chiasm and the use of key words. Vanhoye notes that key words appear at the beginning of the sections and then reappear at or very near the close of the section. For example, the concept of angels in 1:4 is repeated in 2:16, thus marking off a literary unit by restating at the end what was affirmed at the beginning. Further, an announcement is made at the end of each section which anticipates the next section. For example, the declaration of 1:4 (Christ has a better name than the angels) is explored throughout the next section. Jesus as a faithful and merciful high priest, as declared in 2:17-18, provides an outline for the next section. Likewise, the declaration of 5:9-10 provides the three major points of the major doctrinal teaching section, which is, as would be expected, the very center of the chiasm. Even the placement of the five exhortations or warnings can be made to fit into the structure, providing dividers, beginnings, endings, and shift points.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The placement of the second exhortation, 3:7-16, appears somewhat unpredictable and inconsistent. One solution is to note the exhortations that continue in chapter 4 and to extend the exhortation to include 3:7-4:13. This solution seems to provide more consistency for the outline. One of the objections to the outline of Vanhoye is the placement of the exhortations. The first exhortation provides a divider between the two themes the first section, and the second exhortation provides a divider for the two major declarations of the second section. The third exhortation sits almost by itself between the second and third sections, just as the fourth exhortation sits somewhat isolated between the third and fourth sections. It may be noted, however, that the third and fourth exhortations provide bookends for the third section, which provides the primary doctrinal teaching of the letter according to the chiasm. Alternately, one may note that while the first two Jesus sections include the exhortation as a divider for the section, that each of the last three sections is introduced by an exhortation.

Interestingly, while Lightfoot does not follow Vanhoye's outline exactly, Lightfoot is one of few modern scholars who do not reject the proposed structure outright. Compare Lightfoot's outline with that of Vanhoye.

### **Lightfoot Outline**

1:1-2:4	Jesus, Son of God
2:5-18	Jesus, Son of Man
3:1-4:13	Jesus, Faithful High Priest
4:14-5:10	Jesus, Merciful High Priest
5:11-6:20	Exhortation
7:1-28	Jesus, Like Melchizedek
8:1-13	Jesus: Better Ministry
9:1-28	Jesus: Better Sacrifice-1
10:1-18	Jesus, Better Sacrifice-2
10:19-39	Exhortation, call to draw near
11:1-40	Call to faith
12:1-29	Call to Perseverance
13:1-25	Call to Pilgrims

### **Outline proposed by Vanhoye**

1:1-4	Introduction
1:5-2:18	The Name of Jesus Identification with God, 1:5-14 Exhortation/warning, 2:1-4 Identification with humanity, 2:5-18 ANNOUNCEMENT/BRIDGE: 2:17-18
3:1-5:10	Jesus: Faithful and Merciful High Priest (includes a history of faith problems) Trustworthy high priest, 3:1-4:13 [Exhortation, 3:7-18 (3:7-4:13)] Compassionate high priest, 4:14-5:10 ANNOUNCEMENT/BRIDGE: 5:9-10
5:11-10:39	The priestly work of Jesus Exhortation, 5:11-6:20 According to order of Melchizedek, 7:1-28 Perfection achieved, 8:1-9:28 Source of eternal salvation, 10:1-18 Exhortation, 10:19-39 ANNOUNCEMENT/BRIDGE: 10:36-39

11:1-12:13    The Necessity of Faithful Endurance (includes a history of faith victories)  
The Faith of those who went before us, 11:1-40  
The Necessity of endurance, 12:1-13  
ANNOUNCEMENT/BRIDGE: 12:13

12:14-13:17    Make straight paths  
                    Exhortation, 12:14  
Sanctified living, 12:14-29  
Shared life, 13:1-17

13:18-25        Conclusion

It is against the backdrop of these two outlines of Hebrews that we will pursue our desire to see Jesus—

- to see him afresh, anew, differently, valuable, intimately, personally
- to see him as God, as our brother, as our high priest
- to see how these truths motivate us to faithful endurance, holy living, and shared fellowship

## SECTION ONE: 1:1-2:18

In what appears to be the introduction to the book (1:1-4), we have an intriguing portrait of Jesus with seven (?) identifying statements or phrases. **[Q: Can you find and list the seven identifying statements?]** The purpose of these statements is to introduce the book, to focus the attention of the reader on Jesus, and to introduce the first section of the book in a “bridging” or foreshadowing approach, as suggested by Vanhoye in the outline presented above. The book, while appearing to be a letter based on its closing section, does not begin as a typical first century letter following the well-known Greek style. The letter appears to be closer in form to a sermon or homily, with personal notes appended to the written version.

The last part of 1:1-4 suggests the theme: the name of Jesus. The Old Testament concept of name is closely tied to the idea of nature or character. The topics of the first part of the book are the identity of Jesus as Son of God (and thus higher than the angels) and as Son of Man (temporarily—for a little while—lower than the angels, but thereby able to minister to human beings). A key word that runs throughout the section is angels.

These two parts of the first section are divided by a word of warning or exhortation. The placement of the exhortation appears to come directly after the point that is in danger of being lost, which in this case is Jesus as superior to any other human or heavenly being on which the readers may build their faith or to whom the readers may point as the supreme example of God’s purpose. Finally, the announcement or bridge appears in the end of the section, providing an introduction to the next section.

Our discussion and study of the text of this section will be based on this general approach to the book. The focus on Jesus’ identity as Son of God is supported by seven Old Testament citations. **[Q: Can you identify the seven citations?]** The final statements of Chapter 1 explain the real purpose of the angels as servants of God’s purpose, and in fact, as servants of God’s pinnacle creation—human beings.

The focus on Jesus as the Son of Man is based on Psalm 8, followed by another citation from the Psalms and two from Isaiah. The reasoning is designed to help the reader understand God’s ultimate purpose in Jesus which is to support and provide for the human creation. **[Q: What pictures of Jesus catch your attention in chapters 1-2?]**

Notes

## SECTION TWO: 3:1-5:10

The announcement or bridge of 2:17-18 introduces the major theme of the second section of the book: Jesus is a faithful and merciful high priest. This topic or theme is treated under two major concepts which are explained one at a time. Thus, two keys words complement the overall theme of high priest: faithful and merciful.

A puzzling matter in this section is the placement of what is generally identified as the second exhortation or warning (3:7-16). If Vanhoye's outline is correct, that is, Jesus is a faithful, trustworthy high priest (3:1-4:13) and a merciful high priest (4:14-5:10), then the exhortation appears to break into the first topic somewhat awkwardly. A solution is to extend the exhortation (3:7-4:13), making both of the topics in this section relatively brief. Such an extended exhortation is consistent with the lengthy exhortation generally identified as the entry to the next section (5:11-6:20). The exhortation of 3:7-16 addresses a primary problem of returning to the Old Testament—exalting Moses over Jesus, the servant over the Son. Both were faithful, but Jesus is the greater. **[Q: What do you think of the idea of extending the exhortation? Note that this proposal includes both the warning and the corrective in the exhortation: Jesus is exalted over Moses and over the first Jesus (Joshua), both primary personalities in the Old Covenant. What do these portraits of Jesus mean to you?]**

The paragraph that describes Jesus as a faithful high priest is relatively straightforward. One can note with interest the admonition to “fix eyes on Jesus”, a phrase which has a parallel in a paragraph from the fourth section (12:1-4). **[Q: What does it mean to you in your daily life that Jesus is a faithful high priest?]**

The exhortation and connected text (3:7-4:13) should be studied verse by verse to clarify its use in the argument of Hebrews, and the important of this exhortation at this point in the argument. **[Q: In what ways are we in danger of giving up? What applications might you make from this text as you connect the descriptions of Jesus to your life?]**

The description of Jesus as a merciful high priest completes the announced intention of the author. This paragraph is an amazing summary of multiple themes previously introduced, but primarily connects Jesus with the human experience, while maintaining his connection as Son of God. He indeed provides a better priesthood (mediation) because of his ability to identify with both parties in the pact. Note the continued use of Old Testament quotations to support the argument.

The bridging announcement of 5:9-10 serves to introduce the next section which is an overview of the priestly work of Jesus: the nature of his priesthood, the completeness or perfection of his priesthood, and the results of his priesthood. These are described as priesthood after the order of Melchizedek, priesthood that brings the eternal plan of God to perfection, and priesthood that provides eternal salvation which can once for all clear the human conscience without the need for repeated sacrifices.

**[Q: What descriptions of Jesus especially catch your attention in this section?]**

Notes

### SECTION THREE: 5:11-10:39

The bridge in 5:9-10 provides a remarkable summary of this section, which in this outline is considerably longer than in many outlines of Hebrews. The Hebrew writer considers his three major affirmations in reverse order from the order found in 5:9-10. The priestly work of Jesus (1) will be according to order of Melchizedek, 7:1-28; (2) will allow perfection to be achieved, 8:1-9:28; and (3) will be the source of eternal salvation, 10:1-18.

This central section of the chiasm (which should be understood as the main point of Hebrews based on its length and position in the book), is introduced by a lengthy exhortation (5:11-6:20) and concluded by an exhortation (10:19-39). (As previously noted, it is also possible to outline the book with each of the last three sections being introduced by an exhortation.) The announcement or bridge to the subsequent section appears in 10:36-39.

The bridge in 5:9-10 introduces the major theme of this section of the book: the unique high priesthood of Jesus. Key words that run through the section include sacrifice, eternal, and forgiveness. The entire section contains numerous comparisons to the Old Testament, building on the premise that the Old Testament was a shadow of what existed in the heavens, and that the New Testament is a return to the reality. Therefore, the new covenant replaces the old, the reality in place of the shadow.

**[Q: What aspects of the third exhortation (5:11-6:20) catch your attention? How does this exhortation function to tie together the thoughts thus far presented in Hebrews?]**

Jesus will serve as a priest following in the footsteps (priestly order) of Melchizedek. Jesus will not serve as a Levitical priest. **[Q: What aspects of Melchizedek's priesthood are most likely in view?]** Consider such possibilities as king and priest, without physical lineage which justifies priesthood, righteousness, peace, eternal or indestructible life. Consider how the argument from silence is used in this context.

Perfection is achieved through Jesus' priesthood. **[Q: What does perfection mean in 5:9? What does perfection mean in chapters 8-9? How can or should the two texts be connected?]** The comparisons in this section are generally characterized by the use of the word "better".

Jesus becomes the source of eternal salvation. Eternal signifies with no more need for sacrifice in this context. **[Q: What portraits of Jesus can you identify in this three chapter section? Which of them are most meaningful to you?]**

What are the foundations of the exhortation to persevere in 10:19-35? How does v. 35 provide a fitting conclusion to the exhortation? How does the text in vv. 36-39 foreshadow the next section?

## Notes

## SECTION FOUR: 11:1-12:13

The bridge (10:36-39) which precedes this section introduces the theme of the section: faithful endurance. The major concepts of the section include confidence, perseverance, endurance, promise, and faith. This section is the shortest, and perhaps the best known, of the sections employed in this outline. The bridge summarizes the necessity of faithful perseverance in order to receive the promise of the faithful God, and concludes with a confident affirmation that the readers are among the believers who will be saved rather than the hesitant who will be destroyed. This theme, emphasized at the conclusion of the fourth exhortation, reflects and parallels the second exhortation.

Simplifying this section of only a chapter and half, one may say that the writer emphasizes the necessity of faithful endurance. He does this by recounting a selective Old Testament history, which is really a history of the victories won by faith by those who went before. This “Hall of Faith” focuses on those who remained faithful even though they had not received the things promised. The conclusion is that faith allows God’s plan for something better to develop.

Faith endures. If endurance is necessary, faith is necessary. The cloud of witnesses demonstrates that it can be done—thus the admonition to discard the things that hinder so that perseverance is possible. Of course, the supreme example is Jesus. **[Q: What portraits of Jesus are suggested in this section?]** Jesus endured the cross even to death, with the result that he was exalted. None of the readers have been required to struggle to the point of shedding blood. The conclusion is that they are giving up too easily.

Further, the presence of difficulties in our lives is seen by the writer as an evidence of the fact that we are children. Fathers discipline those they love. The discipline of God is for our good, pointing toward holiness, righteousness, and peace.

This brief summary brings us to the final announcement or bridge: the movement from section four to section five. Faithful endurance has its results. Faithful conduct helps others, especially the feeble, weak, and lame. These descriptions may be figurative pictures of those who waver in faith. The bridge includes two imperatives, thus introducing the final exhortation (12:14) and the concluding admonition to sanctified, shared living.

### Notes

## SECTION FIVE: 12:14-13:17

The last section of the book is a call to sanctified, sharing living. There follows only a brief conclusion (13:18-25). The remainder of chapter 12 is a call to holy, sanctified living. Holiness implies faithful commitment. The theme of this section may be described as holiness.

This section continues the contrast between the first covenant and the second with a comparison of the mountain of the previous covenant and the heavenly Mount Zion. Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, is the city of the living God. Those who follow Christ experience God's presence (v. 22), joy (v. 22), righteousness in the face of judgment (v. 23), holiness wrought by God (v. 23-24), and the experience of a better covenant (v. 24).

In the face of such superior blessings, how can one refuse God's new kingdom? The kingdom received cannot be shaken. The appropriate responses are gratitude, worship, reverence and awe. **[Q: What pictures of Jesus are brought to mind in 12:14-29?]**

The second portion of this section (13:1-17) contains numerous imperatives designed to guide the shared life in Jesus Christ. These are often described as concluding exhortations. **[Make a list of all the ways in which Jesus is described in this section, including the conclusion.]**

### Notes