

7. CHRIST, SALVATION, ESCHATOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN EXISTENCE

The previous chapters on the writer's rhetoric, the flow of his argument, the purposes of his writing and his use of the Scriptures have already enabled an appreciation of how he develops and applies his theology as a preacher and pastor. In this chapter more systematic consideration will be given to four major areas of thought that emerge from his theologizing. If its perspectives on these areas are to be adequately understood, the presuppositions about God and humanity, with which its writer operated and which are often remote from present-day readers, need to be explored briefly.

1. Presuppositions of the Theology of Hebrews

Both the exposition and the exhortation sections of the epistle are pervaded by assumptions, inherited from the Jewish Scriptures and Jewish cultic practices, about holiness, sin, and atonement, and these shape the way in which both God and humans are viewed. Holiness has to do with the basic distinction between God as Creator and God's creation. It signifies the incomparable otherness of God. At the same time this wholly different God wills to be in relationship with human creatures and wills that Israel in particular should somehow reflect God's holiness in its relationship to the nations by being a holy people ('You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy' – Lev. 19.2). In willing the good and in willing life, God wills that all of human life should be lived in an orderly fashion. The Jewish Scriptures reflect the view that a life-threatening disorder has, however, disrupted the good order established by God at creation. Such disorder was expressed in a number of ways - as a chaos invading creation on a grand scale, as a contagion that affected physical life, and as moral contamination. Leviticus, on which Hebrews draws extensively, focuses especially on worship as the heart of God's relationship with Israel and as the sphere in which an order which will affect the whole of life is to be established. The place in which God's presence was held to be especially manifested and

available - the tabernacle and its holy of holies - has therefore to be kept free from the threat of disorder. Access to the presence of the holy God has to be properly managed, human impurity has to be dealt with, and in the process appropriate distinctions between what is holy and profane, what is clean and unclean, have to be made. Mixing categories, with the accompanying improper exchange of matters belonging to different spheres, not only brings disorder but can drive God from the sanctuary.

The notion of sin included this sort of impurity, which could occur simply in the course of everyday living, and moral transgressions, which were also a feature of Israel's life. However, God was seen as making provision for dealing with all forms of uncleanness through the sacrificial system, which culminated in the rituals of the Day of Atonement. 'For on this day atonement shall be made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins you shall be clean before the Lord' (Lev. 16.30). In the centre of this day's rituals was the mercy seat over which God's presence was manifested and which had to be sprinkled with the blood of sacrificial animals if atonement for sin was to be made. The terms 'atonement' and 'mercy seat' are both cognates of a verb meaning 'to cover' (kipper) and signal that Israel's uncleanness had to be covered if a holy God was to dwell among the people. In the process both the threat to the profanation of God's name through Israel acting in ways that were incongruous with God's character and the threat to the community through pollution were taken care of, God's presence in the sanctuary could once again be counted on, and a relationship to this God that had become distorted could be rehabilitated. The cultic arrangements make possible and mediate the presence of God in the midst of Israel.

Priests are part of this mediating process, needing first to be made holy so that they can represent God's purity and then can guarantee the proper order that will keep impurity at bay. Priests offer sacrifices for the people, the means for restoring impure humans to a

relationship with their holy God. To this end, various types of sacrifice are brought by the people. Two particular forms of gifts and sacrifices are established in Leviticus 4-5. The 'sin offering' enables purification by dealing with the stain that particular acts can bring on a person, while the 'guilt offering' enables restitution by dealing with the guilt and indebtedness caused by sin, which would render the transgressor liable to punishment (cf. Lev. 5.17).

Blood and death play an important role in this system of holiness. On the one hand, contact with death in a variety of forms, and especially with corpses, pollutes, and blood, when lost in violent death or in menstruation, defiles. On the other hand, sacrifices are the means of the restoration of holiness and these sacrifices paradoxically involve blood and death. Indeed, the blood of the sacrificial victim stands for life taken violently through death. 'It is the blood that makes atonement' (Lev. 17.11). In this way sacrificial blood becomes the means of transition from the sphere of the unholy to the sphere of the holy, and the smoke rising from the burnt offerings of the sacrifices can be seen to represent the passage from the seen to the unseen world, from the earthly to the heavenly.

If the world of Leviticus seems alien to modern sensibilities, Brueggemann (1997: 191-92) warns against simply dismissing it as primitive and sees different sorts of threats, such as that posed by the toxic contamination from nuclear waste, as analogues in our world. Those who lived through the foot and mouth disaster in the United Kingdom in 2001 also experienced something analogous to ancient Israel's experience of life-threatening impurity. The virus that spread impurity through herds of cattle and flocks of sheep threatened the livelihood of whole communities and the slaughter of thousands of animals was seen as a necessity to keep it at bay. The countryside was marred by the sight of smoke rising from holocausts of animals in an attempt to stop the spread of contagion and to

restore order and health to rural life. The threat from impurity was further brought home by the rituals of disinfecting, which the public had to perform on entering and leaving affected areas.

The categories from Leviticus and the sense of reality they represent provide a way into the world of Hebrews and its perspective on Christ's person and work. In its worldview the holy God remains sovereign, awesome and terrifying. 'Our God is a consuming fire' who is to be worshipped with reverence and awe (12.28,29). This recalls the depiction of God both at Sinai – 'Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain' (Exod. 24.17) - and before the entry into the land – 'For the Lord your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God' (Deut. 4.24). The author of Hebrews also speaks in 10.26-31 of what awaits those who, having received the truth, wilfully persist in sin. There is 'a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries', because 'it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God'. This holy God continues to insist that worshippers be holy, and Hebrews speaks of 'the holiness without which no one will see the Lord' (12.14). It is only when such a God has made the appropriate provision for humans to be in the divine presence that such a presence no longer consumes and judges. That provision makes humans holy, purges, perfects and sanctifies them by delivering them from the guilt and power of sin and from the death that is sin's consequence. For Hebrews God's provision is now embodied in a person and, if the necessary holiness and perfection of humanity is to be achieved, this agent of salvation needs to be identified with the holy God but also identified with humanity in a way that somehow shares its condition without being personally tainted by it and that at the same time is able to change that condition.

2. Christology

This means that the key concept, though by no means the dominant title, for the writer's Christology is that of mediator. Christ is the figure who bridges the apparently incommensurable gap between a holy God and unholy creatures. This also explains why what initially seem to be two quite different ways of depicting Christ sit side by side in this epistle. It starts out by asserting that Christ is 'the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word' (1.3) and yet later can say of this same person that he is a fully human being, who is like other humans in every respect (2.17), so much so that he 'offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears' and 'learned obedience through what he suffered' (5.7,8). For Hebrews these are not two independent Christological traditions that have been loosely combined. Both aspects of this portrayal have to be held together and taken equally seriously if the true nature of Christ as intermediary is to be appreciated. The actual designation of Christ as mediator occurs three times in the argument (8.6; 9.15; 12.24), and each time this is with reference to the new covenant, the new and better arrangement for the relationship between God and God's people, which the writer holds to have been inaugurated through God's activity in Christ. It is noticeable that it is both Christ's person and his work that make him the mediator of the new covenant. The first reference in 8.6 comes after it has been established that Christ as God's Son is a permanent high priest after the order of Melchizedek, one who has been exalted to heaven (cf. 7.28; 8.1), and the second in 9.15 comes after it has been asserted that his offering of himself is able to achieve what the offering of animal sacrifices could not achieve (cf. 9.14). The final reference occurs in the climactic contrast between the old and new dispensations in 12.18-24 and brings both aspects together. Believers are able to participate in the worship of the heavenly Zion

because they come 'to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel' (12.24).

These explicit references to Christ as mediator are already associated with his role as Son and high priest, which are the two key titles for the writer's argument. But before pursuing these more fully, it is worth continuing reflection on the structure of the relationship between a transcendent, holy God and sinful human beings, which the writer presupposes. From the Jewish Scriptures it is clear that, for such a God to be in relation to creatures, intermediaries have always been necessary. The entire rhetorical structure of the writer's argument with its synkrisis, the comparison between the old and the new, depends on this notion. The comparison and contrast is between a variety of earlier forms of mediation (God's speech through the prophets, angels, Moses, the Levitical priesthood) and a final and decisive mediation in Christ. Mediation language is also explicitly employed of God's speech in 6.17, where a literal translation would be – 'he mediated or intervened (NRSV - guaranteed it) with an oath'.

It is the notion of mediation through God's word that in fact informs the two key titles for the argument of the sermon - Son and High Priest. These are not treated totally distinctly. Rather, both combine to enable the writer to make his point effectively. That point is that God has spoken in a final and decisive way in a particular person, Jesus Christ, and the message of salvation is not to be rejected unless the audience are willing to incur the direst consequences. Both the Son and the High Priest are forms of God's speech. God has spoken in the Son, and God has sworn an oath in the High Priest. These two titles, as has been noted earlier, are also linked through the use of Ps. 110. Psalm 110.1, read in the light of Ps. 2.7 (cf. 1.5), establishes Jesus as the exalted Son, and Ps. 110.4 establishes him as the High Priest. In addition, it is through his obedience and suffering as the Son in his earthly

ministry that Jesus is qualified to become the heavenly High Priest. While sonship language for Christ is to the fore in the first part of Hebrews in 1.1-5.10, the imagery of high priest for Christ is to the fore in the long middle section of the letter from 7.1-10.25, but the two titles and roles are brought together in 4.14,15; 5.5,6; 5.8-10; 7.3; 7.28.

The significance of the language about the Son in 1.1-4 and the movement of thought it entails should be noted. The Son, who is the embodiment of God's mediating word, representing God's immanence within created history, is at his exaltation appointed heir of all things, of the cosmos. But this Word embodied in the Son had a role in creation and an essential relation to God prior to creation. This formulation takes up Wisdom imagery, in which Wisdom existed at the beginning before the creation of the world, was at God's side and was instrumental in creation (cf. Prov. 8.22-31; Wis. 9.1,2), and Wisdom and the Logos or Word were often treated as functional equivalents in Hellenistic Jewish thought (cf. Wis. 9.1,2; Philo, Fug. 97, 108-9; Somn. 2.242,245). Hebrews' pattern of thought continues the Wisdom motif, applied to the Son, by moving forward again to the Son's present role in sustaining creation, and then focuses on his earthly mission with its work of purification and its culmination in his exaltation to God's right hand, thereby concluding where it had begun. In the process vv. 2c,3a place the Son on the side of the Creator rather than the creatures, and this emphasis will be continued in the discussion of the Son's superiority to angels in 1.5-13, esp. vv. 8,10-12. Without explaining it or even making it explicit, this pattern of thought has presupposed that the uncreated, pre-existent, eternal Son became human in an incarnation.

This thought is developed, however, in 2.5-18, which does not employ the title 'Son' but makes plain that the one who for a little while was made lower than the angels is the same Son who has been described as superior to the angels and that the Jesus who is

exalted is the same figure as the Son whose exaltation has just been celebrated (cf. 2.9). In addition, the argument will return to explicit use of 'Son' language in 3.6, when it takes up Christ's quality of faithfulness, which has been introduced in 2.5-18. Through the use of Ps. 8 this passage depicts the Son as the representative human being, through whom the destiny of humanity as a whole is fulfilled. The formulations of vv. 14, 17 about sharing the flesh and blood of human beings and needing to become like them in every respect imply, of course, that there was a previous mode of existence of the Son in which he did not share flesh and blood and therefore again also imply an incarnation. As Son, Jesus mediates between God and humanity, and it is only because of such an identity that he is able to taste death for everyone in a way that removes death's sting (cf. 2.14) and to make a sacrifice of atonement that is an effective one.

It is at the close of the argument of 2.5-18 that the title 'high priest' is first employed for Christ (cf. v. 17). Because the Son has become fully human, he is able to help Abraham's descendants and serve as their high priest. The sequence of thought signals that, for the writer, the common early Christian belief in Jesus as the Son of God is foundational for his own more innovative portrayal of Jesus as high priest. When the qualifications of Jesus for high priesthood are elaborated in 4.14-5.10, the emphasis is similar. The Son of God who has been exalted to the heavenly realm as high priest is able to perform this role on behalf of humans because his earthly obedience and suffering mean that he is in full solidarity with humans and their weakness. When deeper teaching on Christ as high priest according to the order of Melchizedek is offered in 6.13-7.28, the stress falls on this priesthood being for ever, as Christ's eternal status as Son of God (cf. 7.3), his indestructible life (cf. 7.16) and the permanent availability of his priestly presence (cf. 7.24) feature in the exposition. In 8.1-10.18 the focus shifts from the person of the high priest to his work, but the efficacy of that

work and his ability to function as mediator between a holy God and an unholy humanity continues to depend on the divine Son being fully human and yet without sin. This high priest offers himself as a sacrifice that is without blemish (9.14), and this takes up the earlier emphasis that Christ as high priest is 'without sin' (cf. 4.15) and 'holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners' (7.26).

It is sometimes asked when Hebrews envisages Christ as becoming high priest. Is it only when he enters the heavenly sanctuary or is he already depicted as a high priest on earth and particularly in his death? Hebrews' concern is, however, far more with his present status and role than with pinpointing precisely when this came into effect. If the question is pressed, then perhaps it is best to consider the likely development of the writer's thought about Jesus as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. The writer would have shared with other early Christians the notion that the address to the king and priest of Ps. 110 had become applicable to Jesus as a result of his exaltation to heaven. But once he develops Jesus' priesthood so that this includes Jesus' offering of himself as a sacrifice, that priesthood is not restricted, as in 9.11,12, to the imagery of the exalted Jesus entering heaven with the sacrifice he had previously made on earth. Rather, Jesus' final act in death is drawn into the significance of his exaltation so that both are encompassed in his priestly work – 'But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, "he sat down at the right hand of God"' (10.12; cf. also 2.17). Christ's priesthood was operative on both the earthly and the heavenly levels. The notion of heavenly priesthood also casts its light back on the rest of Jesus' earthly life, the nature of which is seen as constituting his qualification for priesthood (cf. 2.17,18; 4.15; 5.7-10). Indeed, just as the title 'Son' is pushed back from the resurrection and exaltation to the sphere of pre-existence (1.2), so there is also a sense in which the Melchizedek priesthood of Jesus, when associated with 'Son of God', is seen as

eternal in nature, 'having neither beginning of days nor end of life' (7.3).

This trajectory for the image of Christ as priest prompts the reflection that, starting from the belief in Christ's exaltation, Hebrews has an implied narrative of his role. This starts with his pre-existence (1.2), moves to his coming into the world in solidarity with humanity (1.6; 2.14a; 10.5) and progresses through his mission of redemption, beginning in his earthly life of testing, obedience and suffering (2.10,18; 4.15; 5.8), culminating in his sacrificial death on the cross (1.3b; 2.17b; 9.26; 12.2), and climaxing in his exaltation to heaven (1.3b; 4.14; 8.1; 9.12; 10.12; 12.2). In heaven Christ intercedes for those who approach him by faith (4.16; 7.25) and he will appear from heaven at the end of history to appropriate his inheritance, defeat finally all enemies and complete the work of salvation (1.2b; 9.28; 10.13,37).

But Hebrews' story of Christ is not simply that of an individual who acts on behalf of humanity; he also acts as representative of humanity. Its writer employs two other significant and distinctive titles for Christ that underline this aspect of his identity – 'pioneer' (2.10; 12.2) and 'forerunner' (6.20). These depict Jesus as a heroic representative figure who blazes the trail of faith and salvation into the heavenly realm for those with whom he shares flesh and blood. In solidarity with him humans can follow the new and living way of full access into the presence of God that he has inaugurated (cf. also 10.20). Associated with the 'pioneer' description is another distinctive notion that Hebrews applies to Christ's life, that of its perfecting (2.10; 5.9; 7.28). Previous to the incarnation in Jesus, the Son always already existed (1.2b,3a). Nevertheless Jesus also receives the name of Son at his exaltation (cf. 1.4,5). For Hebrews both perspectives hold, because it is through his earthly life that Jesus becomes perfected or completed as the Son – 'although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered' (5.8). Through the obedience of suffering and death,

the incarnate Son experienced that which the pre-existent Son could never experience. His lifelong obedience culminated in the perfect offering of himself in death to God. In this way, 'having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation' for other humans (5.9) or 'the perfecter of our faith' (12.2). The perfecting of Jesus' humanity took place over the course of his lifetime and as part of a process that involved conflict and struggle with the sinful conditions of its existence. This entails that the humanity assumed by the pre-existent Son was not an already perfect humanity but one that suffered from the effects of sin. Although it was without sin, it felt the force of temptation, was susceptible to death, and was fearful in the face of death (cf. 2.14,15; 4.15; 5.7). The union of the pre-existent Son and the human Jesus was the means of the perfecting of his humanity, and the goal of the earthly mission of this Son was the perfection of humanity as a whole. A perfected humanity, then, is the result of the divine becoming one with the human. Unless Jesus were both, his human obedience and death would not be saving, his own perfected humanity would not be the source of perfection for others. This returns us to the concept of mediation with which we began the discussion of Christology. In two places Hebrews describes its perspective on Christ as pioneer or as high priest as 'fitting' (2.10; 7.26). Given the worldview Hebrews presupposes, with its estrangement between a holy God and unholy creatures, it is indeed fitting that the one who mediates salvation as perfection be both fully in solidarity with humans, sharing their sufferings, and yet at the same time fully in solidarity with divine holiness and separate from actual sin.

3. Soteriology

The broad term, 'salvation', does feature in Hebrews as a description of that which is mediated from God to humanity by Christ. The noun 'salvation' occurs in 1.14; 2.3,10; 5.9;

6.9; 9.28 and the verb 'to save' is found in 7.25. Human experience of this divine rescue act or deliverance has a future orientation, since salvation is seen as being fully received or inherited at the end of history (cf. 1.14; 2.10; 9.28). At the same time this deliverance is also a present and continuing experience on the basis of a past action of God in Christ (cf. 2.3,4,10; 5.9; 7.25). The eschatological dimensions of salvation will be explored more fully in the next section of this chapter, but here it should be noted that the distinctive language of perfecting, which was used of Christ, is also a dominant category for the salvation he accomplishes and again clearly gives salvation a future orientation. The divine rescue act is seen as one that brings God's purposes for humanity to completion. What the law and its sacrifices were unable to achieve, Christ brought to realization through his sacrifice, which perfected believers for all time by overcoming sin and death and which continues to bring them into the consummation and completion of their relationship to God (cf. 6.1; 7.11,19; 9.9; 10.1,14; 11.40; 12.23; 13.21).

The focus of this section will, however, be on the main ways in which the salvation Christ has already achieved is depicted. Elsewhere in the New Testament some of the primary images for salvation are drawn from the law court (with the language of judgment, righteousness and justification), from the Jewish cult (with the language of sacrifice and atonement), from the sphere of relationships (with the language of reconciliation), from the slave market (with the language of redemption) and from battle (with the language of the defeat of or victory over hostile powers). The forensic language of accountability to the divine judge and of being approved as righteous is by no means absent from Hebrews (cf. 4.12,13; 6.2; 10.27,30; 11.4,7; 12.23). The Christus Victor motif, in which Christ conquers the devil, is combined with talk of freedom from the plight of slavery in 2.14,15, and 'redemption' terminology occurs in 9.12,15, where the implicit slavery in view is servitude to

transgression of the law. But, given again that the predominant view of the human plight in Hebrews is that of the gulf between an unholy humanity and a holy God, it is no surprise that the pervasive imagery for salvation is drawn from the cult and that this draws into its orbit both the notion of redemption (cf. 9.12,15) and the concept of the restoration of a personal relationship, formulated elsewhere, for example, in the language of reconciliation in the Pauline writings.

Since the human situation is viewed in terms of impurity and taint, caused by sin and guilt, and these are regarded as impeding access to the holy and as blighting human integrity, Christ's death, which provides the solution, is depicted as a sacrifice and atonement. In particular, the significance of that death is expounded in terms of the Day of Atonement ritual, discussed earlier in the section on the presuppositions of Hebrews' theology. The work of Jesus as high priest is described as making 'a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people' (2.17) and the analogy between his offering and that of the Aaronic high priest on the Day of Atonement is developed especially in 9.6-14. Atonement primarily entails expiation, the restoring of a relationship through removal of the sin that had disrupted it (cf. 9.26b; also 10.11,12). But just as atonement in the Jewish Scriptures could also involve propitiation, the dealing with sin in order to avert the wrath of God (cf. e. g. Num. 16.46), so also in Hebrews it has this secondary connotation, since the divine wrath is emphasized (cf. 3.10,11,17; 4.3) and Christ's sacrifice is seen as dealing with God's furious and fiery judgment (10.26-31). The importance of sacrificial blood and death within the Jewish cultic system has already been noted. Hebrews continues to emphasize this means of transition from the sphere of the unholy to that of the holy in its depiction of Christ's sacrifice. This high priest offers not the blood of animals but his own blood, the symbol of his life taken in violent death (9.12-14). His inauguration of the new covenant, just like that

of the old, requires a blood sacrifice, for 'without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins' (9.15-22; cf. 10.19,29; 12.24; 13.12). The superiority of Christ's sacrifice lies in his not having to make any offering for himself and in his voluntary offering of his own body in death and in the very presence of God (9.24-26; 10.5-10). The difference between an offering high priest and an offered victim is collapsed into the notion of self-sacrifice, since Jesus as high priest offers himself as willing victim. What is more, this sacrifice does not have to be repeated, but is decisive and final. It is once for all (ephapax - 7.27; 9.12,26; 10.10) and effective for all time (7.25; 10.12,14). Here it must be remembered that the person and the work of Christ cannot be separated. It is because this high priest is one with God as well as one with humans that his sacrifice of himself has this quality of finality and participates in the permanent and eternal validity that belongs to the divine sphere.

The imagery of atoning sacrifice with reference to Christ's death overlaps with the categories of purification and sanctification, since all have in view dealing with the sin that defiles humans and prevents them from entering the presence of a holy God. Salvation is viewed as purification in Hebrews (1.3; 9.22), and in particular it is the human conscience that is purged or cleansed in order to be able to worship the living God (9.13,14; cf. also 10.2,22). Salvation by means of Christ's death is also depicted as sanctification, a setting apart for a holy God that is at the same time a setting apart from what is unholy (2.11; 9.13; 10.10,14,29; 13.12). In the Jewish sacrificial cult blood and death were defiling but also paradoxically the means of restoring holiness. The paradox is maintained and intensified in Hebrews, especially when in 13.11-13 Jesus' sacrifice outside the city gates is likened to the destruction of the bodies of the sacrificial animals outside the camp in the place of defilement. His death in the place of apparent defilement is precisely the means of sanctification for the people by his blood.

Just as the issue of access to the presence of a holy God in the sanctuary in the midst of Israel was at the heart of the rationale for the Jewish cult, so qualification for access to a holy God is the goal of salvation as perfection, atonement, purification and sanctification in Hebrews. It is striking that the exhortation that follows the long central section of exposition about Christ's sacrificial death urges the hearers to approach in worship with full assurance of faith, since the blood of Jesus has opened access to the heavenly sanctuary of God's presence (10.19-22). It is also no accident that the peroratio sounds the same note. Believers have approached in worship the heavenly Zion, where they are in the presence of God the judge and Jesus the mediator (12.22-24), and they are now able to offer worship or service that is pleasing to God (12.28).

This discussion of Christ's death as an unrepeatable, once for all sacrifice should not be taken to mean that salvation in Hebrews is a backward-looking phenomenon. The use of the sacrificial metaphor within an eschatological framework provides an emphatic reminder that until the consummation sin remains a problem to be dealt with even within the new order that has been inaugurated. For Hebrews the exalted Christ makes his once for all sacrifice continually available and effective through his living presence before God as high priest. In Christ's role as both sacrificial victim and high priest for ever his death and resurrection are both presupposed. His death entails the restoration of relationship with a holy God and his resurrection and exaltation mean that the restored relationship is also something radically new, a new and better covenant based on the power of Christ's indestructible life and introducing a better hope (7.15-22).

4. Eschatology

Talk of hope leads into this letter's vision for the future. The issues that have

dominated discussion of eschatology in Hebrews are how its temporal and spatial aspects are to be related and whether its writer's particular mix of these categories remains within the frame of thought found in apocalyptic writings or needs to be explained in relation to the worldview of Philo or of middle Platonism. These broad issues entail a variety of more specific questions. Is the emphasis in Hebrews' perspective on the future simply on the permanence and unchangeableness of the heavenly world? What has happened to the eschatological notion of a new heaven and new earth in Hebrews? Does final salvation remain in the permanent heavenly sphere or do expressions such as the age to come and the city to come retain both temporal and spatial connotations? Does a temporal or a spatial dualism, whatever the origin of the latter, predominate, or are the two held together in a coherent fashion, or is there simply an unresolved tension in the writer's thought?

What are the data that provoke such questions? The exordium of 1.1-4 is imbued with an eschatological perspective and it is one that conforms fully to what would be expected of an early Christian adaptation of Jewish hopes. God's speaking in the Son is said to have taken place 'in these last days' (literally, 'at the end of these days'), thereby decisively inaugurating the final stage of history and ushering in the age to come. But the Son is also the one through whom God originally created 'the ages' (NRSV – 'the universe'; cf. also 11.3). The term 'age' (aiōn) had both temporal and spatial connotations. The LXX frequently used this term to translate the Hebrew 'olam', which had a dual reference either to 'age' or 'world,' and so this Greek equivalent also became pressed into double service. In its sense of 'time or duration of the world' it could easily serve as a reference to the world itself and so became a synonym for kosmos. In 1 Cor. 1.20; 2.6; 3.18,19 Paul employs these two Greek terms virtually interchangeably. 'Age' could stand, therefore, for a period of the world seen in its cosmic scope of heaven and earth, and in apocalyptic literature both 'this

age' and 'the age to come' included the two strands of the created universe - heaven and earth. Here in Hebrews Christ is not only said to be the one through whom these came into being but also the one who is the heir of 'all things', a further way of designating the total cosmos. His eschatological inheritance will include the whole created universe. The exordium also follows other early Christian thinking in holding that in the time between the inauguration of the last days and the consummation of all things the centre of gravity for believers is where Christ now is in the heavenly realm – 'he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high'. This traditional Christian modification of Jewish eschatological expectations at the outset of Hebrews would lead one to expect that any emphasis on heaven in the rest of the argument would primarily serve this framework, in which a focus on the 'already' aspect of eschatological salvation frequently came to expression through reference to heaven, to Christ's present rule from there and to believers' links to Christ in that realm.

Jewish and early Christian usage of the terms 'heaven' and 'the heavens' was a fluid one with a variety of references. These terms could refer to either the upper part of the created universe or to the uncreated realm of God, because this upper part was seen as pointing beyond itself to the divine transcendence. Even within its usage for the created heavens there was a dual function, first to refer to the sky or cosmic heavens and then to speak of the created but invisible spiritual world inhabited by angelic powers, which the upper limits of the cosmos were held to conceal. To complicate matters further, sometimes one of these references is in view but at other times two of them are combined, whether in regard to both parts of the created heavens, visible and invisible, or to both the invisible spiritual realm and the divine abode to which it points. Hebrews also follows this pattern of usage. In 1.10-12 the earth and the heavens are the created universe. They are perishable,

will be rolled up and changed, and this in contrast to Christ who created them and remains the same. Similarly, according to 12.26,27, there will be a future final shaking of earth and heaven, both parts of the created realm, in order that what cannot be shaken - God's kingdom - will remain. What is not explicit here, however, is what the relation of that kingdom to the created world will be after the final shake-up. In the meantime Christ can be said to have passed through the created heavens (4.14), to be exalted above these heavens (7.26) and to have entered into the inner shrine of the divine sanctuary (6.19), where he is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens (8.1). In the words of 9.24 – ‘he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf’.

Because of Christ's work and through their relation to Christ, believers on earth already have access to the realm of heaven and to God's presence (4.16; 10.19,20). In a reference that combines the created spiritual realm and the abode of God, they can be said to have come to the heavenly Jerusalem, to innumerable angels, to the assembly of the firstborn enrolled in heaven, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to God, the judge of all, and Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant (12.22-24). Here both creatures and Creator inhabit the heavenly world to which believers have access in the present. This access to heaven through Christ as high priest is part of their enjoyment of the good things that have come (9.11), their experience ahead of time of the salvation of ‘the world to come’ (2.5), of the powers of the age to come (6.4). The patriarchs looked for a promised inheritance, God's city (11.8-10). They were seeking a heavenly country, the city God had prepared (11.13-16), yet they did not receive what was promised and Christian believers are in a better position, because they already have access to this heavenly Jerusalem (cf. 11.39,40; 12.22). At the same time believers do not yet have their full share of the promised inheritance (cf. 2.8b; 9.15; 10.34,35). They too ‘are looking for the city that is to come’

(13.14).

This eschatological pattern of an experience of salvation in the present, with a focus on heaven, to be followed by the consummation of salvation at the end is exemplified in Hebrews' treatment of the concept of rest in 3.7-4.13. This takes its lead from the citation of Ps. 95.7-11, which recalls that the Israelites about to enter the promised land were refused entry to God's rest because of their rebellion. The term for 'rest' could denote either a state of rest or a resting place. In LXX Ps. 94.11 the primary meaning from the context is local one, indicating God's resting place in the land of Canaan but also having possible associations with the sanctuary as God's resting place. But by the time Hebrews takes up this citation, the notion of God's resting place had undergone further development and had been given an eschatological interpretation in which it was associated with the heavenly Jerusalem and heavenly sanctuary. Hebrews gives the notion of rest an even broader eschatological interpretation through linking Ps. 95.11 with Gen. 2.2 (cf. 4.3,4). The heavenly resting place awaiting the people of God is now treated as part of God's sabbath rest, which is viewed as the consummation of the divine purposes for the creation. The creation rest that God intended for humanity to share is still available. Joshua's entry into Canaan was only a type of this divine rest (cf. 4.7-9), which has been with God in heaven since the foundation of the world. In the same way that the heavenly city to which Abraham looked forward (11.10) is still to come (13.14) and yet believers already have access to it (12.22), the heavenly rest is both still to be realized and yet already accessible. Those who believe are in the process of entering the rest (4.3) but at the same time, in the tension Hebrews shares with other strands of early Christian eschatology, the consummation of the rest remains future and believers can be exhorted to 'make every effort to enter that rest' (4.11).

The relation of the horizontal and vertical dualisms in Hebrews is also raised by the

way the terminology of 'to come' is employed in comparison with that of 'heavenly'. The former is used with reference to the world to come (2.5), the powers of the age to come (6.5), good things to come (10.1, cf. also 9.11) and the city to come (13.14). The latter is employed to refer to a heavenly call (3.1), the heavenly gift (6.4), the heavenly sanctuary (8.5), the heavenly things (9.23), a heavenly country (11.16) and the heavenly Jerusalem (12.22). The heavenly Jerusalem is also the city to come, as has been noted, but there is also a parallel between the heavenly gift and the powers of the age to come, since believers have already tasted both (cf. 6.4,5). There is a further looser correlation between the heavenly things and the things to come and between the heavenly country and the world to come. Again, therefore, it becomes clear that what is at present heavenly is also what is to come. More generally in Hebrews, the emphasis on heaven is in the sections of theological exposition, especially 8.1-10.18, while the emphasis on the future comes in the exhortation sections. Since the exposition serves the paraenesis, the vertical dualism can also be said to serve the temporal. In each case the former lays stress on what has already been achieved in Christ, while the latter sees the consummation of that salvation as still future. As a consequence, Hebrews' message is that what believers already have through partaking in Christ (and this is at present secured with him in heaven), they need to hold on to as they persevere in history and endure to the end.

Hebrews develops in two main ways the treatment of heaven and earth that it has in common with the eschatology of Jewish apocalypses and of early Christianity. The first is its stress on heaven as the realm of the permanent and eternal in contrast to earth as the realm of the changing and transient. The second is its associated depiction of earthly phenomena as copies or shadows of heavenly ones. Again these emphases are primarily means of expressing the significance of Christ's work in its decisive, once for all and lasting

quality. His sacrifice partakes of the quality of the end-times (9.26), the salvation he achieves is eternal (5.9; 9.12,14; 13.20; cf. also 7.25), his priesthood is for ever (6.20; 7.17,21,24,28) and his offering is for all time (10.12,14). Christ's entry into heaven with his own blood and his session in heaven at God's right hand underline the permanent qualities of his achievement. In this light the tabernacle regulations, the sacrificial arrangements and the Levitical priesthood have to be seen as provisional, changing and transient, that is, as having the qualities that belong to the earthly. Their validity was only anticipatory. They served, in other words, as copies, sketches, symbols, shadows of the true permanent heavenly order (8.5; 9.9,23,24; 10.1).

Hebrews does not set out in any detail its expectations about the future. There are aspects of Christian eschatological belief that the writer has as his presuppositions and so does not need to spell out, just as he also mentions, but does not develop, the role of the Spirit or sacramental practices. There will be a final judgment (4.12; 6.2; 9.27; 10.27-31). But it is not clear how the consummation that follows such a judgment is conceived. In regard to 'the city that is to come', the English phrase, 'that is to come', might suggest a coming from one place to another, but in fact the Greek participle (mellousan) has a purely future reference. One is therefore left to ask the question raised earlier. Does Hebrews share the early Christian perspective that is explicit elsewhere, notably in Revelation, in which a heavenly Jerusalem comes down to earth so that the life of heaven transforms that of earth, resulting in a new heaven and earth, a new creation (cf. Rev. 21.1-8) or does it conceive the future of salvation as existing in some purely heavenly eternal realm? Readers are left to fill in the gaps. How they are to do so remains disputed, but there are enough clues that may tell against the view that in Hebrews the consummation of salvation is an immaterial heavenly phenomenon. (i) Hebrews shares the mainstream Jewish eschatological belief in

the resurrection of the dead, which it mentions in passing (6.2; 11.19,35). It would appear then that, when it lists among the inhabitants of the heavenly Jerusalem at present 'the spirits of the righteous made perfect' (12.23), these still await a future resurrection of their bodies, and the notion of bodily resurrection would have suggested a transformed spatial as well as temporal realm. (ii) The Christological emphases of the document, particularly their incarnational aspects, reinforce this observation. The Son shared flesh and blood, became like his brothers and sisters in every respect (2.14,17; 4.15), suffered and died (2.9,10,18; 5.7,8). As high priest, he does not leave this creaturely humanity behind. The resurrection of Jesus himself is mentioned only once - in the benediction (13.20) - , but it is mentioned and in a way that suggests also the resurrection of believers, since Jesus was brought back from the dead as the great shepherd of the sheep who will follow him in their own resurrection. So Jesus is exalted to heaven via the resurrection of his body from the dead. If the perfecting of Christ did not entail a mere release of the soul from the body and a purely spiritual return to the invisible world of eternal reality, then eschatological salvation for Hebrews also does not. (iii) Elsewhere in the New Testament the coming of heaven to earth in such a way as to produce a transformed cosmos is linked with the future coming of Christ (cf. e. g. 1 Thess. 1.10; 4.14-17; Phil. 3.20,21; Matt. 24.29-31; 25.31-46; Rev. 22.1-7,20). Hebrews too emphasizes a second coming of Christ. The one who appeared 'at the end of the ages' to remove sin once for all will appear a second time to complete the salvation of those who eagerly await him (9.26-28). That day is approaching (10.25), and in connection with believers' full reception of what God has promised, it is asserted that 'the one who is coming will come and will not delay' (10.36,37). This is a coming from heaven that will be the realization of Christ's cosmic inheritance (cf. 1.2), the completion of salvation through the subjection to him of the world to come (cf. 2.5-8). All this suggests that Hebrews has not

abandoned the major strand of Jewish and early Christian eschatology that expected not simply a spiritual heavenly salvation but one that included transformed bodies and a transformed cosmos.

But the discussion to this point could be accused of oversimplifying and of downplaying the view that sees a far more dualistic and platonic element in the eschatology of this document. In particular, the language in which the eschatology of 12.26-29 is expressed does appear to complicate this picture and to open up the possibility that Hebrews' eschatology should be interpreted differently as the basis for a later more platonic version of eschatology in the Christian tradition, in which the goal of salvation is existence in a spiritual and immaterial heaven. Some commentators (e. g. Attridge 1989, Ellingworth 1993) see in these verses the complete destruction, rather than the renewal, of the existing creation and its replacement by an immaterial eternal realm. The matter is important enough to justify a more detailed examination of the text. At its heart is the citation and interpretation of an earlier text from the Jewish Scriptures. This scriptural text is Hag. 2.6 – 'Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven'. The notion of an eschatological shaking was frequently employed in apocalyptic writings (cf. 2 Bar. 59.3; 4 Ezra 6.11-17; 10.25-28) but in such writings there was the expectation of a new heaven and new earth, a transformation of the cosmos, after the shaking or after a final conflagration (cf. 4 Ezra 7.75; 10.27; 1 Enoch 45.4). Hebrews does not mention this. Instead it says that the text 'indicates the removal of what is shaken - that is, created things - so that what cannot be shaken may remain'. The Greek term translated here as 'removal' (metathesis) can in some contexts mean transformation, and if this were the case here, then the force of the passage would remain in line with Jewish eschatological notions about the transformation of the creation. But, as nearly all translations agree, in this context the term

must mean removal, because there are some things from the shaken created heaven and earth that remain. That observation, however, also entails that the text cannot be saying that all the created order will be annihilated and only a sphere that is not part of the created order will remain. What then is the force of 'created things' (pepoiêmena)? It is here that some have found echoes of a cosmological dualism and see the term as the equivalent of another term, ta genomena, 'that which has come into being or been made', which appears in Platonic literature. Their next move is to point out that Plato himself (Timaeus 37D) distinguishes this category from the eternal and that Philo (Post. 19-29) uses the same verb as is found in Heb. 12.26-28 - 'to shake' - to speak of the mutability of the earthly sphere or the created order in a cosmology where only God and the intelligible world remain unshakable or immutable. From there it is only one further step to claim that the writer of Hebrews has read Hag. 2.6 with similar assumptions. 'For him, that which is shakable belongs to the world of sense perceptions; and that which is perceptible to the senses is by nature transitory. ... he knows two worlds already possessing full reality, one of which is material, and therefore, shakable; the other is not material, and is unshakable' (Thompson 1982: 50). On this view, that which remains is the presently invisible heavenly world, a sphere unaffected by the end-time catastrophe. The main problem with such a reading, however, is that it tends to base its reconstruction of Hebrews' eschatology and cosmology and therefore the writer's whole worldview on a few similarities in vocabulary. It does not do enough justice to the axioms that words take on a particular force from their most immediate context and that therefore the vocabulary employed here should primarily be interpreted within the other major assumptions that are clearly operative in Hebrews.

It has already been noted above that the text cannot be saying that all the created order will be annihilated and only a sphere that is not part of the created order will remain.

Not only would that not make sense of the wording but it would also be in conflict with central aspects of Hebrews' message. Christ shares created human existence and has entered with it into the heavenly sphere and yet he remains for ever, and the thrust of the exhortation, of which 12.26-28 is a part, is that the human creatures who are readers of Hebrews should persevere in order to be part of the final unshakable kingdom. Two further observations about the language of this text are worth making. A number of English translations, including NRSV, are somewhat misleading in their rendering of part of v. 27 by 'the removal of what is shaken - that is, created things'. The original does not have 'that is' but a comparative particle (hōs) that can also function elliptically. A more literal translation is therefore not as specific and would be 'the removal of what is shaken, as of created things' or 'the removal of what is shaken, as created things are shaken', making it clearer that this is not a simple assertion that all creation will be removed. The second point involves recalling the multivalent force of the term 'heaven' in Hebrews. Presumably, not only the visible but also the invisible heaven, with its human and angelic inhabitants (cf. 12.22-24), is envisaged as being shaken, just as elsewhere 'the heavenly things' can be said to be in need of purging through Christ's sacrifice (9.23). All creation, including the heavenly realm, is therefore capable of being shaken in a final judgment, but those created things that have been purified must be part of what remains and take their place in the unshakable kingdom. This interpretation would be in line with the way the phrases 'not made with hands' and 'not of this creation' are employed in 9.11. Their opposites, 'made with hands' and 'of this creation' (9.24), are viewed negatively, not because they refer to the material rather than the spiritual but because they refer to what is merely created, what is subjected to transience, decay and death. Yet there is a creation that is permanent, immortal and eternal, and that is because it has been redeemed and perfected. At present it is in heaven,

where Christ has been exalted, and is therefore invisible, and that is why the heavenly realm can be the focus for readers' attention in Hebrews. Such a perspective is not essentially different from that of Paul or John or Revelation. The sprinkling of vocabulary that has some similarities with that of middle Platonism simply adds to this the emphasis on permanence. Given that there will be a coming of Christ, that there will be resurrection and that the cosmos is Christ's inheritance, as is evident elsewhere in Hebrews, there is no reason to think that the unshakable kingdom that remains will be incompatible with the redeemed and transformed materiality of bodies and cosmos.

It perhaps should not need to be stated, but this reading is not driven by any conscious concern to preserve a so-called 'pure' Jewish eschatology from contamination by 'foreign' elements. Instead, it attempts to set the passage within other major strands of Hebrews' thought. It might, of course, still be the case that the writer has incorporated into his message elements of a worldview that are in tension with other parts of that message and has not noticed the incoherence. That does not, however, appear to be the most likely option in interpreting a thinker as profound as this writer. The more plausible explanation of his use of the formulations found here is that they serve a particular emphasis, not that they introduce a type of cosmological dualism that is in conflict with his other major presuppositions. The writer develops the notion of the heavenly realm as a permanent one because he wants to depict previous revelation as provisional and the sacrificial system as based on transient phenomena in contrast to the final and unchanging revelation that has taken place in Christ. This emphasis relates also to the unsettled, transient, impermanent factors in the readers' situation, to which attention has been drawn previously. An emphasis on the heavenly dimension within Hebrews' spatial dualism, then, is a way of making clear the realized element of the eschatological drama that is so important for the writer's

pastoral exhortation. It underscores the finished work of Christ, the resulting permanent benefits for believers and the dangers of rejecting what has been accomplished. For Hebrews the regulations associated with the earthly tabernacle were symbolic of 'the present time', which carries some of the negative connotations of 'this present age' in Jewish eschatological thought (9.9). They were in place only until the 'time of correction', that of the new age and its order (9.10). Christ's permanent achievement in establishing the new order is seen in terms of his exaltation to and location in heaven as high priest, and so the 'already' of salvation is associated with heaven in its connotation of the uncreated realm of God. But that does not entail that this heaven is completely separated from humans and the temporal-spatial world that they inhabit. If their heavenly high priest completely identified himself with their humanity and if believers have links to heaven in the present, then the consummation of their salvation will fully embrace their created existence and its environment. That which lasts for ever and is at present realized primarily in heaven is the salvation of God's kingdom or rule (12.28), which includes the subjection of all things to Christ (2.8) as he inherits the cosmos created through him (1.2).

5. Christian Existence

Through a midrashic exposition of Ps. 110.1,4 Hebrews exhorts a community of primarily Jewish Christians to draw near to God with confidence and to persevere in hope, because Christ's heavenly high priesthood is the new covenant promise, guaranteed by oath, of the world to come. This one sentence summary of the overall thrust of Hebrews incorporates its major themes and highlights its exhortation to a particular way of life. In it Christian existence is summarized in two main ways - drawing near to God with confidence and persevering in hope. These are intimately linked to the two poles of the eschatological

framework discussed above. The summarizing statement talks of Christ's heavenly high priesthood - the vertical pole - and the promise of the world to come - the horizontal pole. The former expresses what has already been achieved by Christ, which also functions as a guarantee of the latter, its future aspect - the fulfilment of the promise of the world's salvation. Drawing near to God relates to the vertical pole; it is the upward movement of worship. Persevering in hope relates to the horizontal pole; it is the forward movement of pilgrimage. So one way of formulating Christian existence as portrayed in Hebrews is to depict it in terms of the life of a worshipping community on the move. It is already in a relationship with God and heaven through Christ but needs to progress towards its future salvation. It is possible to organize much of the data about Christian existence in Hebrews around these two communal movements.

(i) Worship and Cult

Hebrews pays little attention to formal aspects of the Christian cult. Baptism is mentioned; the Lord's Supper is not. Perhaps the silence about the latter is because of the preoccupation of some hearers with Jewish meals and food regulations and because, in response, the author wanted to emphasize the direct benefits of Christ's death not their mediation through a meal. His references to the confession (3.1; 4.14; 10.23) and use of confessional formulations presuppose that these constitute part of the cultic life. But the dominant focus of Hebrews is instead on what is most essential to the movement upwards in worship. This should not be surprising, since, as indicated at the beginning of this chapter, the symbolic world of Leviticus, which forms the backdrop for much of Hebrews' argument, already focuses especially on worship as the heart of God's relationship with Israel and as affecting the whole of life and therefore lays stress on access to the presence of the holy God being properly managed.

For Hebrews too, it is paramount for the rest of Christian living in the world that this matter of access to God be properly appreciated and appropriated. As has been seen in the discussion of the work of Christ in salvation, Hebrews stresses in a variety of ways that it is Christ's sacrificial death that is the decisive factor in any authentic transition from the sphere of the unholy to that of the holy. In this connection the language of 'drawing near' or 'approaching' in worship is employed frequently (cf. 4.16; 7.19,25; 10.1,22; 11.6; 12.18,22). Believers can have direct access to God, the throne of grace or the heavenly city, because Christ's death has dealt with impurity once for all and enabled them to experience forgiveness and cleansing (8.12; 9.14,22; 10.17,18,22). Christ's entry as high priest into the heavenly sanctuary is not an act for himself alone but constitutes an invitation for believers to do the same. They can now offer acceptable worship, thanksgiving and praise (9.14; 12.28; 13.15). What is more, there need be no lingering sense of guilt, producing a hesitant, half-hearted approach to God, but they are to worship with the boldness and confidence that manifest themselves in an internal assurance before God and an external expression of honest prayer and clear and articulate confession and praise (4.16; 10.19).

(ii) Endurance and Pilgrimage

The movement forwards in history towards the consummation of salvation (cf. 6.1 – 'let us go on towards perfection') will be, as has been underlined earlier in the chapter on Occasion and Purposes, in the midst of trials, marginalization, suffering and death. For this reason Hebrews consistently characterizes it in terms of the need for endurance (*hupomonê*). The Greek term can also be translated as 'patience,' but this is no passive quality and is instead closely associated with the notion of persevering, the active striving to remain true to the initial confession in the face of considerable obstacles and over the long haul between the giving of the divine promise and its fulfilment (cf. 6.12,15; 10.32,36;

12,2,3,7). Also closely associated with endurance is faith (cf. 6.12; 10.36-39). On the one hand, faith is the essential initial and continuing underlying attitude of receptivity to and appropriation of the Christian gospel. Unlike Paul and John, Hebrews does not explicitly speak of faith in Christ. It does, however, speak of faith in God (6.1; 11.6) and in this sense the stance of faith is also closely linked to the upward movement in Christian existence, as it entails perceiving the realities of the unseen heavenly world (cf. 11.1,2). Yet there is clearly an implicit Christological dimension to faith, since it is a response to God's initiative in Christ and to the benefits Christ bestows (cf. 3.12,4,19; 4.2,3) and since Christ can be depicted as not only the pioneer but also the perfecter of faith (12.2). On the other hand, and more characteristic of Hebrews' use of the term, faith shades over into faithfulness, a virtue operative in Christian living and representing the pattern of existence that remains steadfast to its Christians confession. Here the writer sees that believers need not only exhortations to faithfulness (cf. e. g. 3.6b,12-14; 6.11,12; 10.23; 10.36-39; 12.1,7) but also models to follow. Christ's own faith or faithfulness is the supreme example (2.13,17; 3.2,6; 12.2) and this faith is, of course, viewed as also anticipated in the lives of the heroes and heroines of faith (11.4-40) and in those of the leaders the addressees have known (13.7). All were prepared to endure suffering in the present because of their conviction that there would be a future reward.

The other dominant way of depicting this essential conviction in Hebrews is through the language of 'hope.' Hope is not an attenuated vague wish for something better but a confident assurance about the future based on God's faithfulness to the promise and oath God has given in Christ (cf. 3.6; 6.11,18-20; 7.19; 10.23; 11.1). For Hebrews, only such an assured expectation about the goal of the movement forward is able to sustain the endurance necessary and enable it to be characterized by joy rather than merely stoical

gritting of the teeth.

The movement forward in history can be viewed as a race (cf. 12.1,12,13), but it should not be surprising that many have held that the various ways it is treated within Hebrews are best summed up in the metaphor of pilgrimage. The letter depicts those who live by faith as 'sojourners' who are on a journey to a better country, to the city God has prepared for them (11.13-16). Indeed, key elements of a phenomenology of religious pilgrimage – separation from one place, transition or journey to a sacred place, accompanied by difficulties and the threat of failure en route, and incorporation rites on arrival at the goal – have been taken up and transformed in its exhortation to Christian living (Johnsson 1978: 244-7). Believers are on their way to glory and Jesus as pioneer has blazed the trail ahead for his followers (2.10). The goal of end-time salvation, as noted earlier, can be symbolized by the resting place in the land of Canaan, also linked to God's own rest, and believers are viewed both as already in the process of entering it and, like the wilderness generation, as still needing to make every effort to enter it (3.7-4.13). The city, to which the patriarchs looked forward, is also future and yet already prepared by God and therefore existent in heaven (11.8-16). In fulfilment of the pilgrimage motif, whereby the people of God moved from Sinai through the wilderness to Zion (cf. Ps. 68), the readers can be said to have left behind Mount Sinai and drawn near to the, at present, heavenly and invisible Mount Zion (12.18-24). Again, despite the celebration of their anticipatory arrival, they are reminded that they have not finally arrived. But their perspective on the overall pilgrimage will shape their commitment and decision-making in the present - 'Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city to come' (13.13,14). Knowing that the present order is not lasting and that they are on their way to the permanent city to come, to which they already have

access, should enable believers to take the risks and costs involved in identifying with Jesus, who was himself marginalized and rejected by the present order.

(iii) The Life of a Community on the Move

Both the movement upwards and the movement forwards are those of a community. The notion of fictive kinship with its familial imagery that was common within the early Christian movement is found here in Hebrews. The writer addresses his readers as 'brothers and sisters' (3.1,12; 10.19; 13.22) and explains that they are children of God and therefore not only brothers and sisters to one another but siblings of Jesus (2.10-17). The community has leaders who are to be obeyed and whose lives are to be imitated (13.7,17), but equally essential to its thriving is the regular meeting together of its members for mutual exhortation (10.25). Only in this way will the practical solidarity that should characterize the community be nurtured (cf. 10.33,34; 13.3).

What also becomes clear, however, is that, while it is on the way to its goal, this community is a mixed one, in which it is possible that some of its members may not in fact reach the final goal of the journey; hence the exhortations to endure and the warnings against apostasy. Whether one has genuine faith or is an authentic brother or sister of Jesus will prove itself through perseverance. Hebrews' eschatological framework is important here. Only at the end of the journey will it become clear which members of the community have been authentic in their commitment to the Christian confession. In the present there is therefore a tension and Hebrews emphasizes both sides of it. In 2.5-3.6 the dominant tone is one of assurance and confidence because of the inseparable relationship between Jesus and his brothers and sisters, while in the following passage, 3.7-4.13, the mood shifts to one of fear lest there be exclusion from the consummation of salvation through disobedience. In fact 3.6b, which acts as a bridge between the two passages, highlights both elements.

Believers constitute God's house and belong to God's people, but this is only the case if they 'hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope'. In regard to the severe warnings against apostasy (cf. 6.4-8; 10.26-23; 12.15-17), interpreters have frequently either minimized their force by holding that they are treating only a hypothetical case or, like Tertullian (Pud. 20), exaggerated their force by stating that they allow for no repentance or forgiveness for any post-baptismal sins. The solemnity of these warnings derives from the writer's perspective on the finality and once for all nature of Christ's sacrifice. As Attridge (1989: 169) says of Christ's sacrifice, 'Those who reject this necessary presupposition of repentance simply, and virtually by definition, cannot repent'.

While they are on the journey, the community's members will be those who by right reasoning are trained to distinguish good from evil (5.13,14). Their lives will be characterized not only by faith or faithfulness and hope, but also by love and good deeds (6.10; 10.24; 13.1). They will be free from the love of money or possessions (10.34; 13.5), practise hospitality (13.2), honour marriage (13.4), and, despite the treatment they may receive from others in society, will seek peace with all (12.14).

Both the community's movement upwards and its movement forwards have a Christological dimension. For the former, the major problem to be overcome is sin and a guilty conscience, the solution lies in cleansing and confident access to God, and this is supplied through Christ as high priest. For the latter, the main obstacle is disobedience and falling away, the solution is endurance in hope, and the enabling model is Christ as pioneer (2.10; 12.2).

(iv) Contrasting Paradigms

The stark alternatives for living faced by the addressees are also strikingly modelled in two cameo appearances of Scriptural figures. Esau provides a negative example or

warning (12.15-17). In trading his birthright for a meal, he exchanged the long-term benefits of status and security for immediate and temporary satisfaction and is judged as immoral and unholy, lacking the holiness without which no one will see God (cf. 12.14). Some of the hearers of this sermon are in danger of becoming defiled by relinquishing their inheritance of the promises as firstborn (cf. 1.14; 6.12,17; 9.15; 12.23) in order to alleviate temporarily their physical and social hardships. It may be no accident that the term used for Esau's meal or food is a cognate of the term used for the Jewish foods or meals referred to in 9.10 and 13.9, which, as discussed in Chapter 5, appear to have remained an attraction for some of the audience. In returning to a preoccupation with such matters, they would be following Esau in finding a transient rather than permanent resolution to their problems. What is more, just as Esau later regretted bitterly his rejection of the birthright but was given no opportunity to repent, so too they might find there was no chance to be restored to repentance (cf. 6.4; 10.26-29).

On the positive side, among the Scriptural heroes listed in Hebrews 11, Moses stands out for the way in which his depiction in 11.24-27 is so explicitly adapted to speak to the situation of the readers. He refused the worldly honour and security he could have claimed as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. Instead of transient pleasures and treasures he chose marginalization in solidarity with the ill-treated people of God, thereby suffering abuse and shaming for Christ, while being unafraid of the Egyptian Pharaoh's hostility and persecution. Not only is his choice of a way of living exemplary for the hearers of Hebrews but so also are the convictions that sustained him in it. Unlike Esau, he kept his eyes fixed on God's long-term reward (cf. 10.35; 11.6; 13.14), he persevered as if seeing 'him who is invisible' (cf. 11.1) and he believed in the efficacy of the sprinkling of blood for salvation (cf. 9.14; 12.24). In all these ways Moses remains a paradigm for the Jewish addressees of Hebrews, a

paradigm of Christian existence in faith and endurance.

Further Reading

On some of the theological presuppositions from the Jewish Scriptures that inform the writer, see W. Brueggemann, Theology of the Old Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), pp. 192-93; 288-93; 650-79.

For overall discussions of the major theological themes of Hebrews, see Lindars 1991; Isaacs 1992; and I. H. Marshall, New Testament Theology (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity, 2004), pp. 605-27; 682-90.

On eschatology, see the contrasting views of C. K. Barrett, 'The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews' in W. D. Davies and D. Daube (eds.), The Background of the New Testament and Its Eschatology (Cambridge: C. U. P., 1956), pp. 363-93 and Thompson 1982: 41-52.

On various aspects of Christian existence in Hebrews, see W. G. Johnsson, 'The Pilgrimage Motif in the Book of Hebrews' JBL 97 (1978), pp. 239-51; M. N. A. Bockmuehl, 'The Church in Hebrews' in M. N. A. Bockmuehl and M. B. Thompson (eds.), A Vision for the Church: Studies in Early Christian Ecclesiology in Honour of J. P. M. Sweet (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997), pp. 133-51; and the monographs of Peterson 1982, Croy 1998, and Rhee 2001.