Notes for Hebrews Preparation on Chapters 2 and 3

Although we divide Hebrews into discrete chapters for the sake of manageable lessons, most interpreters try to find some organization according to content. For example:

A. B. Bruce’s approach in 1899 reads:

I. Christ and the Prophets (1:1-4)
II. Christ and the Angels (1:5-14, 2:1-4)
III. The Humiliation of Christ and Its Rationale (2:5-18)
IV. Christ and Moses (3:1-19)

[Bruce, A. B. *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The First Apology for Christianity: An Exegetical Study* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1899), p. xi.]

F. F. Bruce’s approach in 1964 reads:

I. The Reality of Christianity (1:1-2:18)
 1. God’s Final Revelation in His Son (1:1-4)
 2. Christ Better Than Angels (1:5-14)
 3. First Admonition: The Gospel and the Law (2:1-4)
 4. The Humiliation and the Glory of the Son of Man (2:5-9)
 5. The Son of Man: Savior and High Priest of His People (2:10-18)

II. The True Home of the People of God (3:1-4:13)
 1. Jesus Greater Than Moses (3:1-6)
 2. Second Admonition: The Rejection of Jesus More Serious
 Than the Rejection of Moses (3:7-19)
 3. The True Rest of God May be Forfeited (4:1-10)
 4. Exhortation to Attain God’s Rest (4:11-13)

[Bruce, F. F. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1964), p. lxiii.]

David A. DeSilva’s content structure from 2000 reads as follows:

1:1-2:18 First Appeal to Heed Properly the Word of God in the Son
 1:1-4 Thesis: God’s final and complete Word has been spoken
 in His Son, who has even greater honor than the angels
 1:5-14 Confirmation of Final Element of Thesis: (Jesus is greater
 than the angels).
 2:1-4 Inferential conclusion based on “lesser to greater” argument
 presented in the form of an exhortation
 2:5-18 Argument in support of the exhortation: Attachment to Jesus
 is a path to a share in His honor as well as the path to
 gratitude for past benefits and his ongoing meditation

3:1-4:13 Second Appeal to Honor God’s Word Through Trust and Perseverance
 3:1-6 Jesus as Son over God’s House, has greater honor than Moses,
 the servant in God’s House.
 3:7-13 Do not imitate those who rejected God’s patronage under the
 servant Moses, for we would find ourselves similarly under
 God’s judgment; rather, let us strive to enter the rest that
 remains open to us.

[DeSilva, David A. *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle “to the Hebrews”* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), p. 71.]

Norman L. Geisler’s approach in 2007 was a two-fold division between Doctrinal (Chapters 1-10) and Practical (Chapters 11-13):

I. Doctrinal—Christ is Better than Anything Else (Chapters 1-10)
 A. Prophets (1:1-3)
 B. Angels (1:4-2:18) with peril of drifting (2:1-4)
 C. Moses (3:1-19) with peril of doubting (3:7-19)

[Geisler, Norman L. *A Popular Survey of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), p. 256.]

Pheme Perkins’ 2012 offering shares similarities with the others, but it is helpful:

Prologue: God has spoken through His Son (1:1-4)
The Son’s superiority to the angels (1:5-14)
Exhortation: Do not drift away from such a salvation (2:1-4)
By suffering, the Son brings many to salvation (2:5-18)
Jesus is greater than Moses (3:1-6)
Exhortation: Do not fall away like Israel in the wilderness (3:7-4:13)

[Perkins, Pheme. *Reading the New Testament: An Introduction: Third Edition* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2012), p. 250.]

 Now, because I believe Hebrews is probably a sermon written down and sent to churches all over the Roman Empire, I notice that the author presents something to make a point and then, circles back around to repeat the point for emphasis. So, I like to examine where he circles back and see if an emphasis jumps out at me. These other outlines or schemes are useful, but so is approaching the passage as I’m suggesting. [See the activity sheet entitled Echoed Ideas in Chapters 1-2.]



The Old Testament quotations are from the second half of Psalm 8 as it was translated into the Greek version known as the Septuagint. The Hebrew Bible says that humans were made a little lower than
God, or at least the “false gods,” while the Septuagint and Hebrews 2:7 says lower than the “angels.”

Another term for angels in the Bible is “sons of God,” only used in two books of the Hebrew Old Testament (though an additional time below). Looking at this term, we see the “sons of god” as supernatural, powerful, and able to exist in the heavenly dimension. The power is demonstrated in Numbers 6 when these heavenly beings ravage the daughters of humanity and monsters result, the “Nephilim,” literally “fallen ones” and often described in biblical and extra-biblical material as “giants.” The ability to enter the heavenly dimension (even if only for a brief time) can be seen in both Job 1 and Job 2 when the “sons of god” came to the heavenly throne to report to God and Satan came along with them.

Another use of “sons of God” in Dt. 32:8? Yes, but sons of humanity in Heb. Sons of God in LXX.

Explains idolatry in Dt. 29:26 –“gods” whom the Lord had not assigned to Israel were having an impact on God’s people and causing them to go astray. So, from this, we get the idea that carries over into the intertestamental period and early New Testament period where many people believed that there were angels in charge of various cities and countries as their guides and protectors.

“In the intertestamental period, particularly as illustrated by the apocalyptic writings, there is a remarkable development in Jewish thought regarding the world of spirits and angelic beings generally. Certain factors may help to explain why this development came about. One is the growing transcendence of God….The belief in angels—already familiar and well-established in the Hebrew tradition—formed a vital bridge between God and his universe which otherwise would have been difficult to construct.” [Russell, D. S. *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964), p. 237.]

Also, used to deal with the problem of suffering and the existence of moral evil. “There gradually grew up, no doubt under the influence of foreign though, the notion that the angels to whom God had given authority over the nations and over the physical universe itself, had outstripped their rightful authority and had taken the power into their own hands.” [Russell, pp. 237-238]

Testament of Judah 20:1 – two spirits wait upon humanity – the spirit of truth and the spirit of deceit

“The angelic mythology of Judaism is a naïve way of imagining the mediation of God’s word and will in the universe by personal agents.” [Moore, G. F. *Judaism in the 1st Centuries of the Christian Era: Volume I* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927), p. 404.]

For example, in the apocrypha (not the canonical Bible), The Book of Jubilees 2:2 reads: *For on the first day He created the heavens which are above and the earth and the waters and all the spirits which serve before him -the angels of the presence, and the angels of sanctification, and the angels [of the spirit of fire and the angels] of the spirit of the winds, and the angels of the spirit of the clouds, and of darkness, and of snow and of hail and of hoar frost, and the angels of the voices and of the thunder and of the lightning, and the angels of the spirits of cold and of heat, and of winter and of spring and of autumn and of summer and of all the spirits of his creatures which are in the heavens and on the earth, (He created) the abysses and the darkness, eventide <and night>, and the light, dawn and day, which He hath prepared in the knowledge of his heart.*

As you can see, the belief that the angels were in charge of all sorts of things and very powerful was very prevalent during the period immediately before Jesus’ time and both during and after Jesus’ time. That’s why it was very important to note that even though Jesus was made “lower than the angels” as a human being, He was superior to, greater than the angels. It was a matter of avoiding idolatry.

The basic teaching in Psalm 8 is something I call “Feeling Little, Feeling Big.” The first half deals with God’s majesty and how insignificant humans are compared to that majesty and power. The second half deals with how privileged humanity is to be God’s creation. Humanity is, in the Hebrew, just a little less than God. In the Greek text quoted in Hebrews, humanity is slightly below the angels in the hierarchy because the angels have access to God and can see God in His fullest glory.

In Psalm 8, those who are obedient to God are crowned with glory and honor. As Franz Delitzsch wrote in his 1868 commentary: “The [glory] of the original designates the manifestation of glory, regarded in the aspect of gravity and fulness, [honor] in that of splendor, sublimity, and beauty.” And he goes on to write that God putting all things under humanity’s feet (or under humanity’s authority) meant: “Man, all but a divine being, like the angels, and royally crowned, is no landless King; the world is given him to rule over; the creature far and near is his dominion.” [Delitzsch, Franz. *Epistle to the Hebrews: Volume I* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1868), p. 106.]

Of course, the purpose of showing what humanity was intended to be under God’s guidance is shown in the person of Jesus in verse 9 after the author of Hebrews tells us that even though we aren’t reaching our full potential yet, Jesus has been crowned with that promised potential because of His suffering and death.

And that brings us to the theological problem suggested in verses 10 and 17. Verses 10 and 17-18 form an envelope structure with [see PowerPoint slides] with verses 14-16 being the emphasized message wrapped in the envelope.

On the theological problem, please see the activity sheet Made Perfect Questions.docx. It is a very difficult concept for us to understand how Jesus can be perfect and One with the Father and yet be subject to the same temptations, weaknesses, and limitations that we face without sinning. I suggest a two-fold answer. One is that Jesus is Totally Perfect as God, but that Jesus undergoes growth as Totally Human because He has limited Himself. I like to use a game analogy. When we are playing a board game like Monopoly and have one piece that represents us, we ourselves are beyond the game, but we submit ourselves to the rules of the game and allow our “virtual” existence as the hat, the race car, the shoe, or the boat to be subjected to taxes, rents, fines, even jail and/or bankruptcy. At any point, we could pull out of the magic circle of the game but it would be cheating those who wanted to keep playing and it would not be honoring our commitment to play the game. Jesus willingly submitted to the rules of humanity so that He could both overcome them Himself but show us how to overcome.

The second answer is that we miss understand the Greek word, τελειόω, from which the idea of “making perfect” comes. That word means reaching fulfillment or attaining the goal. What was Jesus’ goal in becoming human? Our redemption! What did Jesus need to do to reach that goal? Suffer and die! As F. F. Bruce wrote: “The answer is this: the perfect Son of God has become His people’s perfect Savior, opening up their way to God; and in order to become that, He must endure suffering and death.” [Bruce, F. F. The New International Commentary on the Greek New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1964), p. 43.]

One last thing I want to point out this word which could be translated as champion, founder, guardian, guide, hero, originator, or pioneer of salvation in verse 10. Ernst Kasemann writes: “…this phrase is an essential aid to the understanding of its immediate context as well as of Hebrews as a whole. …In such usage, ἀρχηγός, describes the hero and guardian of a city, or the originator and leader of a fellowship.” [Kasemann, Ernst. *The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Letter to the Hebrews* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing, 1984), p. 129.] Of course, by His suffering, death, and resurrection, Jesus made it possible for you and me to participate in partnership with Him in the church as the body of Christ or, as we will note in Chapter 3, God’s “house.”

Notes on Chapter 3

David DeSilva did a fabulous job of introducing the first verses of Chapter 3. “’Holy sisters and brothers’ combines two key terms of 2:11-13: the hearers are both made holy and made kin through Jesus’ sacrifice and Jesus’ confession of them as his family. The author had already introduced kinship language by calling the hearers heirs and ‘sons and daughters’ (1:14, 2:10), and he will further enhance this image through the designation of the audience as God’s ‘household’ (οἶκός, cf. 3:6, 10:21), a term that will dominate 3:2-6 (five occurrences).” [DeSilva, David. *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle ‘to the Hebrews’* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), p. 132.]

This first section has Jesus faithful in God’s house and Moses faithful in God’s house (v. 2), but Jesus is as much greater than Moses as the builder of the house would be over the house itself (v. 3). After all the architect and/or contract can build another house, but a house can’t rebuild itself. Moses was faithful in his duties toward God’s house in the sense of being a servant (v. 5), but Jesus was faithful in the house as an owner (v. 6) and what He did makes it possible for you and me to share in His inheritance.

Regarding the house, I liked the summary from Charles A Trentham, as follows. “God’s house is often used as a figure of the church (cf. 1 Peter 4:17; 1 Timothy 3:15). But the church is not the house of God unless it meets the conditions. We are the house, the dwelling place of the Eternal if we hold fast our confidence and hope.” He continues on the same page: “We are God’s house when, as a church, we hold fast our confidence in God, and when the hope we have in God holds us fast till the end.” [Trentham, Charles A. *Broadman Bible Commentary: Volume 12: Hebrews-Revelation, General Articles* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1972), p. 33.]

As a result, the author of Hebrews immediately followed up with the last half of Psalm 95. You might want your students to look at Psalm 95 in its entirety and try to figure out why only the last half of the Psalm is quoted here. In fact, you might point out that most churches only use Psalm 95:1-7 as a Call to Worship because it is an upbeat celebration of the power and glory of God, as well as a specific call to worship in verse 7. But, the rest of the psalm is a warning to those hearing it NOT to be like Israel in the wilderness. So, why does Hebrews use this last part? It’s because the author wanted to warn his or her (remember, some think that Priscilla might have written it due to her association with Paul’s ministry) readers of the danger of negating the promise of their relationship with God as God’s household.

TEACHING PROCEDURE: Write “Meribah” on the white board. Read v. 8 from the text and then, Psalm 95:8 from the Psalm. Ask what happened at “Meribah.” [Hint: Read Exodus 17:1-7.) Then, ask them to list as many things on the white board as they can remember of Israel rebelling in the wilderness.

Here are some of the ways: complaining of lack of water, lack of food, variety of food, Moses’ absence (when he was at the Tent of Meeting), Moses’ leadership, lack of credit for their work (Miriam and Aaron), the size of the defenders of the land of promise, etc. Of course, they also rebelled at Baal-Peor when they had an orgy to worship the golden calf.

Then, ask the students to identify ways these rebellions are like rebellions in the modern church.

Don’t forget to ask why 40 years? [In Hebrew gematria, the number for human is two and humans have five digits on each hand. So, if you had your hands full of plenty, you’d have ten (2 times 5). The number for nature or creation is four (four directions, four types of living creatures around God’s throne, four winds, four seasons, etc.). So, the natural order times plenty = 40. It’s also close to the amount of time to shift generations. So, it means that God gave them a naturally plenteous amount of time to repent, but they really didn’t. So, God let one generation die off.

Now, the practical aspect here is that we are supposed to exhort each other to hang in there, to persevere, to stick with it. All of those phrases mean to be faithful. And we are to exhort each other to be faithful so that they and we don’t miss out on God’s rest. In the Old Testament, many references to rest refer to the land of promise where God grants peace and where God’s presence in Zion will be. A sampling of such references would be: Deuteronomy 25:19, Joshua 23:1, 2 Chronicles 15:15, Psalm 95:11 (quoted here), Psalm 132:14, Isaiah 11:10 (somewhat indirectly), Isaiah 28:12, and Isaiah 66:1.

We will deal with this idea of rest more on the last Wednesday of the month when we cover Chapter 4.