

Hebrews: The Structural Function of the Major Quotations

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I. Preliminary Observations

Notice two key words in our title: structural and function.

A. Structural

Our first goal is to help you get an over view of the epistle.

To get a glimpse of this look at the four Roman numerals in the outline. These are the four major blocks of text in the epistle. As a subpoint here notice that each of these includes not only doctrinal material but also includes sections of warning, of encouragement, or of both warning and encouragement. These are so much an integral part of the structure of the epistle that at the end in Hebrews 13:22 the writer says "I exhort [παρακαλῶ] for I have written to you briefly." He calls his whole letter "a word of exhortation." He uses doctrine but he is writing an exhortation. And from a structural perspective the interesting thing is that the two are woven together. He doesn't write like the apostle Paul who stylistically is more prone to divide an epistle in more discreet parts (cf. Gal 5:1; Romans 12:1; Eph 4:1).

Our second key word:

B. Function

Here I am raising the question of the theological method of the author. I have already made the point that the author is a pastor - he is writing an exhortation - shepherding his people. But he is a pastor who is a theologian. He believes that theology and life go together. The method of his exhortation is a theological method (cf. 3:13; 6:18; 10:25; 12:5; 13:19,22).

So often the source of his exhortation is the O.T. Remember, these Jewish Christians didn't have a New Testament. The O.T. quotations are not just illustrations. They are not the stories you tell in a sermon. They are the authoritative text from which he draws conclusions. Look at Hebrews 3:7. Listen to how he introduces the quotation of Ps 95. "Therefore just as the Holy Spirit says." This is God's word he is quoting (see also Heb 10:15,16). Or in Hebrews 2:6 in an apparently almost uncaring fashion he writes, "But someone has testified somewhere...." The important thing isn't to identify the human agency. The important point is that the O.T. is God's Word and its teaching is important for the daily lives of this pastor's flock who are facing persecution.

So at a first level, the Pastor/Theologian wrote using a theological method which was committed to an authoritative O.T. This is true of the dozens of O.T. quotations in Hebrews.

But now I want to narrow the field a little and begin to talk about four particular O.T. quotations.

Ps	8:5-7	Heb	2:6-8
	95:7-11		3:7-11,15; 4:3,5,7
	110:4		7:17,21
Jer	31:31-34		8:8-12; 10:16,17

These quotations like all the others function as authority. But these four major quotations function in two additional ways.

First, notice that one of them occurs in each of the four major sections of Hebrews. (I through IV in your outline.) Each of them controls the thought of the section of the epistle in which it occurs. There are many other quotations in each section but these are the main ones and the others are all related to these four.

Second, the Pastor is going to argue on the basis of each of these that the O.T. itself indicates that the old order was only provisional. Notice, this is different from the Pastor saying, "In light of new revelation in Jesus Christ I declare to you that the old order was only temporary, only provisional." No, he says. "The OT itself says it will be superseded."

Audience →

II. The major quotations

A. The major quotations imply that the old order was only provisional.

1. Ps 8:5-7 quoted in (Heb 2:6-8) ← [Read]

Remember now, we are under "I" in the outline "Jesus is better than the law's heavenly mediators, the angels." Hebrews 2:5 is the verse that introduces the quotation, "For he did not subject to angels the world to come." "The world to come," is "the eschatological age of salvation." Its presence is already being testified to according to 2:4 and 6:5 by the signs and wonders accompanying the gift of the Holy Spirit. This age to come which is already present is not subjected to the rule of angels. Two points are worth mentioning here. First, the present world may be subjected to angels (Daniel 10:13,20,21; Eph 6:12; Deut 32:8 [LXX] Eccles 17:17), but second, not the final days which begin with the coming of the Messiah (1:1,2).

Psalm 8:5-7 asserts the first of these. It holds the second of them in seed form and the Pastor in writing chapter 2 of Hebrews brings it to full bloom.

Listen first to the quotation: [Read Hebrews 2:6-8] "Thou madest him a little lower than the angels." In the present world order man is under the rule of angels. That is man's place in creation. Of course man also has a place of glory and honor. In the last clause that is quoted we read that "all things" have been subjected to man. That word "all" is the word the Pastor focuses his attention on. Apparently that word is the main reason he even quoted this text. The pastor went on, "For in subjecting

all things to him he left nothing that is not subjected to him" (2:8). It is the destiny of man to rule this world. He is God's vice-regent. The Pastor makes this explicit because it is crucial to his case. The Old Testament itself teaches that everything must be ruled by man. But this just is not the way things are. As the last clause of 2:8 says, "But now we do not yet see all things subjected to him." If the OT is correct (and it must be) then there must be a change. Man who was made a little lower than the angels must have even those angels subjected to him. According to the Pastor, in this way the OT itself declares that the old order must pass away, it must be superseded. How? When? Verse 9 "But we see the one who has been made a little lower than the angels, Jesus, because of the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honor."

The OT hinted at the provisional character of the old order. The end of that old order came with God's final revelation in Jesus. According to 2:9 Jesus has been crowned and in 2:14 he has destroyed the power of death and the devil. No longer do spiritual powers rule over his brothers keeping them in bondage. The new age of salvation has dawned (1:14; 2:3). Not only does the Pastor believe this. He believes Ps 8:5-7 anticipated it.

2. Psalm 95:7-11 is quoted in Hebrews 3:7-11,13,15; 4:3,5,7.

This text is quoted in whole or in part six times in Hebrews 3 and 4. The first six verses of the Psalm are a series of appeals to worship God. The verses quoted in Hebrews are a warning to beware of failing to worship. The warning is driven home hard by an allusion to Israel's wandering in the wilderness as punishment for their failure to enter God's rest -- that is, failure to enter his presence. The Pastor picks up this theme of Israel's failure under Moses. He says in 4:7 that God "again fixes a certain day 'Today' saying in David after so long a time, even as it had been said before, 'Today if you will hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.'" Notice the two points that the Pastor chooses to emphasize. 1) The period of time between David and the wilderness events of Moses' day was a long time; and 2) David in the Psalm says "Today." The combination of these two facts means that David applied to the Israelites of his own day, who were already in the Land of Canaan, long after Moses, the challenge to enter into God's rest. For the Pastor this is indisputable proof that Joshua did not lead Israel into God's rest. This is the conclusion he draws in 4:8. "For if Joshua had given them rest, He [that is, David in the Psalm] would not have spoken of another day after that" [contrary-to-fact condition]. The Old Testament itself proves that the rest land of Canaan and by implication the order of life for living in Canaan is not God's final rest. And the Pastor in Heb 4:11 exhorts his own sheep to enter God's rest and in 3:13 calls the present day of opportunity, "Today." The old order could given Canaan. It couldn't

really, fully, give God's rest. And the OT knew it! The Old Covenant declared its own limitations.

3. Psalm 110:4 is quoted in Hebrews 7:17,21.

This whole chapter in Hebrews is one long argument that the priesthood of Melchizedek is superior to the priesthood of Aaron. This is demonstrated in a variety of ways. In a sense this is the heart of the epistle. To put it another way: In your outline I and II are just laying the foundation for III.

But a good Jew could grant the superiority of Melchizedek in certain ways and still argue that that does not prove that the entire Aaronic priesthood, the entire Aaronic order, had been overturned. The good Jew might even point out that the meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek took place a long time before Aaron came on the scene and even if there are ways in which Melchizedek was superior to Aaron the fact of the matter is that Aaron superseded Melchizedek!

In fact this is the argument of one rabbi (Rabbi Zechariah in TB, Nedarim, 32B). The fact that this kind of argument has a surface plausibility is why Hebrew 7:11-14 are so important.

Psalm 110 was widely recognized as Messianic in the early church (for example, Matt 22:44; Acts 2:34,35; Rom 8:34). Not only the early church in general, but specifically the writer of Hebrews saw it as a messianic Psalm (see Heb 1:3,13; 8:1; 10:12,13; 12:2).

In Ps 110:1 God tells the messianic king to ascend his royal throne. Then in verse 4 God took an oath, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."

In Hebrews 7:14 the Pastor reminds his flock that "our Lord" was not from the tribe of Levi, but from Judah. (As a parenthesis, unlike Paul, the Book of Hebrews does not often use "Lord" as a title for Jesus. Probably the reason it does here is to draw a tight connection with the first verse of Psalm 110, "The Lord says to my Lord..." end parenthesis). The main point is that obviously our Lord being a Messiah from Judah could not be a priest in the Levitical order. This is the problem. Notice how the Pastor handles it.

He says that Psalm 110, was spoken long after the institution of the Levitical order. And there in Psalm 110 is the promise of a priest from Judah, a kingly priest according to the order of Melchizedek. This is his key. Using it he reasons in Hebrews 7:11, "If there was perfection through the Levitical priesthood....what need was there yet that another priest should arise according to the order of Melchizedek?" Notice how closely 7:11 parallels 4:8 [read both].

In both instances the Pastor suggests that the OT implies that a new order is necessary.

4. Jeremiah 31:31-34 is quoted in Heb 8:8-12 and 10:16,17.

The preceding section (III) argued that Jesus is better than the law's priesthood.

That point is reiterated in the first clause of 8:6, "Now He has obtained a more excellent ministry." Then in the rest of 8:6 the Pastor goes on to relate the superiority of Jesus' high priestly ministry to the idea of the covenant. This isn't surprising because priesthood and covenant were so closely tied together in the OT. But although it isn't surprising, it is significant because "the covenant" is such an important and overarching theme in the history of redemption. In Heb 10:6 the Pastor claims that Jesus' priestly ministry is superior because it is a part of a better covenant and Jesus is the mediator of that better covenant. Catch this point: if the Pastor can prove he is right here then he has proven not only that Jesus is superior to angels, to Moses, and to Aaron, like he has done in the three preceding sections. If he establishes this point he has proven the systemic superiority of the new order; the overall superiority of the new way of life in the new age which has come in these last days since God has spoken in the Son (Heb 1:1ff).

The last clause of Hebrews 8:6 identifies the basis of the superiority of this "better covenant." It was enacted upon "better promises." What are these promises that are better? The Pastor doesn't leave his people in the dark. He goes on in Heb 8:7-12 to quote them -- Jeremiah 31:31-34. But before he does that he introduces them with the striking first sentence of 8:7, "For if that first covenant had been faultless, then a place would not have been sought for a second." Notice the word "for" or "because" (γάρ) which introduces this powerful claim. This is given as the reason for the superiority of the new covenant. The Pastor looks back at the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah was living under the old covenant, but under divine inspiration he declared the need for a new and better covenant. For the Pastor, this is proof that the OT declared its own provisional character. The conditional sentence in 8:7 functions exactly like those in 4:8 and 7:11. To tie all three of them together, according to 7:11 the old order failed to accomplish its ultimate goal (its τελείωσις) of doing what 4:8 calls bringing the people of God into the rest of God and so according to 8:6,7 it is worthy of blame. All three insist that the OT in these ways confessed its own inadequacy.

Getting back to the Jeremiah quotation that we are working on now. Notice how the Pastor stresses this point. Not only does he introduce the quotation with the striking words of 8:7,8 but notice how he interprets Jeremiah immediately after he finishes the quotation. 8:13 is his "exegesis" of the quotation.

"By saying 'new,' he [that is Jeremiah] has made the first old. And that which is becoming old [or "obsolete" as NASB and NIV translate it] and aged is near to disappearing."

One more piece of evidence: Look at the second time this passage from Jeremiah is quoted. It's at the end of the theological part of this section in 10:16-18. In that instance the Pastor quotes it to stress the superiority of Jesus' sacrifice in dealing with sin. Notice the lead into the quotation in Hebrews 10:14. "For by one offering he has perfected (τετελείωκεν, he has brought to their destined goal) for all time those who are being sanctified." That word one is emphatic in the Greek text. It was moved forward for emphasis. Because of his one sacrifice their sins and lawlessness (v.17) will no longer be remembered. This "perfect" sacrifice brings perfect forgiveness and results in the end of sacrifice for sin. This is the explicit conclusion drawn in verse 18. Jeremiah prophesied that sins would no longer be remembered in the new covenant. The Pastor gives us his inspired exegesis of that text and says that means no more sacrifice and no more old covenant order of which the sacrifice was an integral part.

Jeremiah, in the OT, implied that the old order would be superseded.

- B. Each major quotation provides the focus of the section in which it occurs.

Well, now we have completed the shorter of our two parts of this lecture. Actually, an adequate job on this second part would involve the study of Hebrews 1:1 - 12:29 in detail. Obviously we will not be doing that in the time we have left today. I do, however, want to illustrate how this job can be carried out by using the first quotation as an example. Ps 8:5-7. The choice of this quotation is not because it is first but in fact because it is the most difficult in this regard. Each of the other three are much more obviously at the heart of all of the details of their sections. That is not so much on the surface of the text in this case.

In fact some commentators have concluded that in Hebrews 1:5-13 the author is quoting a string of OT passages which had already been pulled together in a document - a collection of testimonia to Jesus.

For example Hugh Montefiore in his Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews pp.43,44 claims, If our author had done his own research into the Old Testament, some explanation of his selection would have been likely. These testimonia seem to have been taken from an existing catena of OT proof texts....The primary purpose of this collection was originally to prove from the OT scriptures the eternal existence and divine nature of God the Son, his incarnation, baptism, resurrection and ascension. The author of Hebrews, however, utilizes them here to prove that the Son is superior to the angels.

I'm sure that the comments I have made already make it clear that I do not accept this analysis. Nor do I accept a second position which some commentators take ^{that} would see most of the quotations as fitting the context and only one or two of these quotations to be out of place.

A third group of commentators like F. F. Bruce come closer to my view. He thinks all the quotations fit in their immediate context in the Book of Hebrews

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and even say that those in chapter two are a development of the thoughts found in Psalm 8:5-7. But he does not tie the chapter one quotations in to the Psalm quotation (F. F. Bruce, Commentary, p.li.).

Taking yet another step, writers such as Donald Miller, "Why God became man: From text to sermon on Hebrews 2:5-18," Interpretation 23 (October 1969):410 and George B. Caird, "The Exegetical Method of the Epistle to the Hebrews," Canadian Journal of Theology 5 (January 1959):49 both suggest that Ps 8:5-7 controls the quotations in chapter one and two; but neither goes on to spell out how it works or what that means in any detail. That's the task we have in our remaining time.

I want to approach the question in two steps. First treating the verses which come after the quotation and then the verses which precede it.

First then, 2:9-18. According to 2:9 and 15 Jesus' ministry was intended to free man from the bondage of death. In order to accomplish that he had to identify himself with man (2:14,17). This identification with mankind is the subject of these verses (2:9-18). And it is the explanation of the clause from the OT quotation "made a little lower than the angels." This occurs in 2:7 in the quotation and then is singled out in 2:9 as the subject of the following verses. Remember, this one who is so closely identified with his people has already been identified as the Son of God (1:1 cf. also 5:6). He is God himself (1:8). It is almost inconceivable that this glorious one would be so closely identified with his people. So the Pastor buttresses his argument with OT proof. His first source is Psalm 22 which was clearly regarded as messianic in first century Christianity. F. F. Bruce in his Commentary p.45 goes so far as to say that it is "a psalm in which no Christian of the first century would have failed to recognize Christ as the speaker." The focus of the quotation here in verse 12 is two-fold. First it says Jesus has brothers. The second half identifies Jesus' brothers as the "church" in whose midst Jesus stands.

The first half of Ps 22 is the cry of the righteous man who is suffering but still trusts in God. In fact it is because he trusts in God that he is persecuted. (Notice how all 4 Gospels apply this to Jesus in their crucifixion accounts: Matt 26:24; 27:39,43; Mk 15:29,34; Lk 23:35,36; Jn 19:24,28).

The point of the second half of Psalm 22 is that he continues to trust in God. As the Pastor is reflecting on the suffering messiah his mind moves to the great suffering prophet Isaiah and in Heb 2:13 he quotes Isaiah 8:17 "I will put my trust in Him." The Psalmist (the representative of God's people) the prophet Isaiah (God's messenger), and the Son of God (who became a little lower than angels) all were rejected by men but trusted in God.

But they didn't stand alone. That is the point of the next verse in Isaiah - Isaiah 8:18 which the Pastor went right on to quote in the second half of verse 13. With a shift in imagery from brothers to sons he affirms that God's messiah does not stand alone. He has identified himself with the people of God.

Don't miss the main point here. All of this is the Pastor's explanation of the description from Ps 8 of Jesus being made "lower than angels." He has

become identified with us.

Now to the second half of our task. We have just seen that the quotation of Ps 8 controls the flow of thought in 2:9-18. Now we must do the same for the verses which precede the quotation 1:5-2:3. (1:1-4 is the introduction to the book as a whole). These verses are not like 2:9-18 in the sense that they do not focus on the humiliation of Jesus. This difference has kept commentators from picking up on the line of continuity between the sections. 1:5-2:3 focus on the exaltation of Jesus. The point of contact for the two sections is the quotation of Psalm 8 which separates them and mentions both Jesus humiliation and exaltation. This is the underlying unity which binds them together.

Everyone recognizes that 1:5-2:3 argues that Jesus is superior to angels. Many, however, miss the particular nuance of the Pastor's argument. Specifically he argues that Jesus' superiority is to be seen in his exaltation, his crowning as king, his assumption of rule. This is the particular point of the clause quoted from Psalm 8. "You crowned him with glory and honor" (Heb 2:7). Two observations on this superiority: 1) Of course this does not deny that Jesus is superior to angels in other ways, it merely says that those other ways, some of which are hinted at here are not the focus of the passage as a whole. 2) It is implied but nowhere explicitly stated that this enthronement of Christ took place at his resurrection. (Overall the absence of references to the resurrection in Hebrews is a clear difference in emphasis from Paul.)

In 1:5-2:3 there are three groups of OT quotations. Each group is introduced by a reference to angels (1:5,7,13). The theme of the first group (1:5,6) is the introduction of the Son as the King whom angels worship. Almost all commentators agree that the quotation of Psalm 2:7 in Heb 1:5 pictures Jesus as the Messianic king. (For example, Westcott, Epistle to the Hebrews p. 19 and A.R. Johnson, Sacral Kingship in Israel p.118ff). Particularly what is in view is Jesus' entrance into reign by virtue of being raised as Heb 1:3 says to "the right hand of majesty on high. From the Pastor's perspective, the "today" of the Psalm is the day of resurrection.

This quotation of Psalm 2 and the promise of the enthronement of the Davidic Messiah leads the Pastor's mind back to the historical books of the OT - - to David's death bed where God promised in 2 Sam 7:18 concerning the future king, "I will be his father and he will be my son." (This is the second quotation in Heb 1:5.) Then in verse 6 the Pastor puts the role of angels in striking contrast to this inauguration of the rule of the Son. When Jesus is introduced to the world as King at his resurrection the angels worship him. (As a parenthesis, the word "again [πάλιν] is not a reference to the second coming. It simply introduces another quotation as it does in 1:5; 2:13; 4:5 and 10:30. Thus Bruce, p.15, Moffat, p.10, Contra Westcott, p.22.) The second group of quotations in 1:7-12 don't deal so much with the introduction of the Son as king as it does with the eternality of his royal rule. Verse seven stands in contrast to verses eight and nine. The contrast is made explicitly by the μὲν ... δὲ grammatical construction ("on the one hand ... on the other"). The content of the verses bears out the

intent of the grammatical indicators. In verse seven the Pastor quotes Ps 104:4. God makes "his angels winds" and "his servants flames of fire." Notice the imagery: wind and flame. The service of angels is changeable. It is always dependent on God who made them (see Delitzsch, Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews, 1:73-75). Verses 8,9 with their quotation of Ps 45:6-7 give a completely contrasting picture. To the Son, he says, "Your throne, O God, is forever." The kingdom of the son, his sovereign rule, his rule as king, is everlasting.

At first glance the quotation of Ps 102:25-27 in Heb 1:10-12 might not appear to fit this pattern. Instead of referring to Jesus kingly reign, they might appear to be introducing a new theme. Jesus is superior to angels because he is the creator. That is not the case and the fact that it is not can be shown by four observations. First notice if you have an NASB the first word of verse 10, "and," (καὶ) (The NIV translates this one word "He also says.") Nowhere else in the first chapter does the Pastor introduce a new line of thought with simply the word "and." Everywhere else (5,7,13) he uses a reference to angels to mark his transition to a new argument. Going beyond chapter one -- every time in the Book of Hebrews καὶ is used to coordinate two quotations -- the two are being used to make the same point. (This is true whether καὶ occurs alone [1:10;10:38; 12:12,13] or with πάλιν [1:5; 1:13; 10:30]). This implies that 1:10-12 do not introduce a new theme such as the superiority of Jesus in creation. Instead this is another window, another perspective, on the eternity of the throne and rule of the Son.

The second reason for seeing this quotation from Ps 102 as an explanation of Christ's eternal rule is that in the Psalms, the OT, and the ancient Near East in general there is a close relationship between creation and kingship. It would not be surprising at all in the Semitic framework for someone like the Pastor to use a creation motif to establish the eternity of a god's rule. (See the standard OT theologies such as W. Eichrodt, Theology of the OT 2:120ff; Meredith G. Kline, Kingdom Prologue.)

Thirdly, it was the use of κύριε in the LXX that made it simple to apply this quotation to Jesus. Jesus is Lord and "Lord" (κύριος) was the name most characteristically associated with the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 2:36; also Heb 13:20 κύριος and shepherd king). The presence of the word "Lord" (κύριος) in this quotation made it particularly useful as a proof of the eternity of the Lord's rule. The one who was exalted at his resurrection (1:3) was the same as the one through whom the worlds had been made (1:2).

The fourth reason (and maybe the most important) this quotation is not introducing a new theme, but is extending the thought of Jesus' superiority to angels by virtue of his eternal kingly rule is the content of the quotation itself. In these verses the emphasis is not on creation in general. The focus is on the temporary character of created things in contrast to the unending rule of the creator. That is, out of the many possible OT texts that deal with creation and

which the Pastor could have quoted, under the inspiration of the HS, he chose this one which focuses on the eternity of the creator. That is precisely the same point made in verse 8 about the rule of the Son.

For all of these reasons 1:10-12 just as much as all the other quotations in the second section (7-12) must be seen as contributing to the central argument. The Son is superior to angels by virtue of his eternal rule.

Verse 13 introduces a third paragraph. Remember it has one of these 3 explicit mentions of angels that mark the paragraph breaks. The first paragraph focused on the Son's enthronement and installation as king; the second focused on the eternity of the king's reign.

This third unit directs our attention to the consummation of his victorious rule. Verse 13 envisions the Son sitting upon the throne and the ultimate subjection of all his enemies. Look at the contrast. On the one hand the striking picture of the king with his foot on the throat of his enemies; on the other hand the description in verse 14 of angels as "ministering spirits." Not only are they servants but they serve men (not just king Jesus). This is a striking conclusion of chapter one. Not only has the Pastor proclaimed that Jesus is superior to angels but he has also affirmed that in some sense those people who are united to Jesus their brother (2:9ff) are also superior to angels.

That leaves us only 2:1-4 to comment on. It also is a part of the groundwork being laid by the Pastor leading up to his quotation of Ps 8 in Heb 2:6-8. It is a warning. In a sense it is the opposite side of the coin from 6-8. If 2:6-8 points toward the magnificent benefits of the rule of the king for his brothers which are pictured in the rest of chapter two, then 2:1-4 pictures in harsh terms the doom of those who neglect their royal family ties. If those who rejected God's revelation through his mere servants were punished, the end of those who reject the salvation provided by the royal son will be that much worse.