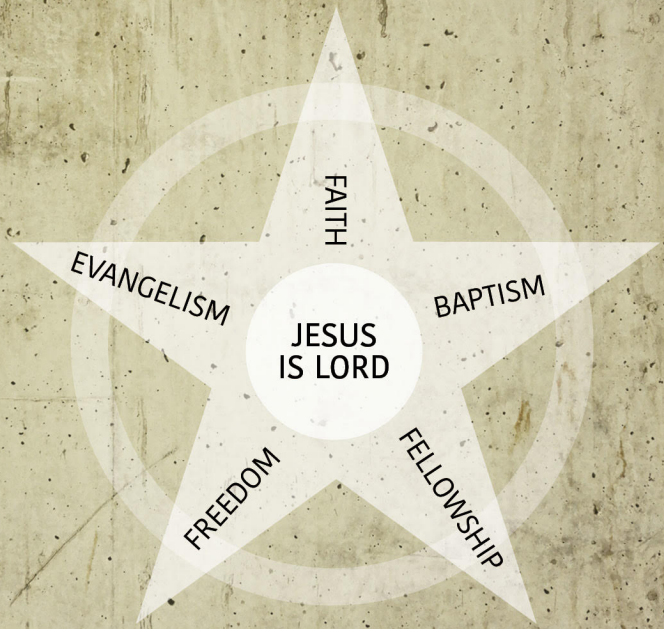


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‘Not Without Us’: Perfection as a Hermeneutic in the Letter to the Hebrews¹

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Introduction

This particular work of biblical studies finds us in The Letter to the Hebrews, a comparatively neglected text of the New Testament corpus which, at 13 chapters, dwarfs its canonical neighbours Philemon and James. We do not know who wrote Hebrews.² While it was tentatively claimed by some in the early church that it was by Paul, we have no evidence to back up this claim, and doubt about its authorship starts very early.

We should not be deterred, however, by the author’s anonymity. It offers us an opportunity to approach their text on its own terms, without preconceptions. Personally, I love to imagine that Hebrews is a sermon by that Priscilla whom we hear of as one of Paul’s fellow workers, accompanied by her husband Aquila, in Romans and Acts.³ Perhaps the text remained anonymous because of prejudice against her gender? Reserving judgement, however, I will be referring to the author using the singular ‘they’ throughout this paper.

In my studies, I have found Hebrews to be one of the most fascinating texts of the New Testament. Although we are used to calling it ‘The Letter to the Hebrews’, ΠΡΟΣ ΕΒΡΑΙΟΥΣ is closer in style and form to a sermon or homily than a letter or epistle. The logic of the homily is profoundly Jewish, drawing on shared traditions of Hebrew Scripture, Temple cult, and Israelite cultural identity with a level of assumed

¹ This article was presented first as a paper at Theology Live in January 2022.

² Harold Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: a commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 1-6.

³ Romans 16:3; Acts 18.

literacy that is fitting for a Christ-following congregation with a strong Jewish heritage.⁴

Other than that, however, we don't know much about the community who first heard Hebrews. Historical criticism and contextualisation can only take us so far before we return to engaging this text as we have received it, and encountering the author on their own terms and through their own words.

Perfection

Let us turn, then, to perfection: 'the quality of being as good as it is possible for something of a particular kind to be.'⁵ In modern English, we think of perfection as a qualitative descriptor: something perfect is without error or flaw, without capacity for improvement. Of human beings, therefore, perfection is an ethical or moral virtue, the achievement of the highest standards of human behaviour in the eyes of God and of humankind. The language has this significance when, in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew's Jesus instructs those who hear, 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.'⁶ As I shall go on to show, however, this modern definition does not account for Hebrews' multifaceted use of both the concept and vocabulary of perfection.

There can be no doubt in our minds that the concept of perfection is deeply important for the author of the Letter to the Hebrews: a frequency analysis shows us that the verb *teleioō*, meaning 'I make perfect', and its cognates are used 23 times in the text, from its first appearance in 2:10, 'It was fitting that God... should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings' through to 12:23, '[you have come] to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect.'

⁴ Attridge, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 9-21.

⁵ Collins Dictionary; online.

⁶ Matthew 5:48.

That is the exhaustive figure, which includes multiple words which use the *tel-* root without being directly derived from *teleiōsis*: *telos*, *sumteleia*, and *epitelein*, meaning ‘end’, ‘culmination’, and ‘to carry out’ respectively. If we only count forms of *teleiō* and *teleiōsis*, they appear 13 times, but that’s still overwhelmingly common compared to the frequency in other books of the New Testament – in Matthew, for example, they appear only twice. This analysis is superficial, but it immediately tells us that Hebrews is talking a lot about perfection.

Furthermore, it is important to note that there is no single section which accounts for Hebrews’ use of *teleiōsis* language, but that it occurs throughout the text: *teleiōsis*, *teleiō* and their cognates are used in exhortation passages, in doctrine, and in Christology. Not being reserved for ethical material, therefore, we begin to get the impression that perfection is a fundamental principle for Hebrews’ thought, in the same way that we know there is a mat of mycelium just underground by the mushrooms which pop up all over the place.

Hebrews cares deeply about perfection, and we might therefore expect that it therefore cares as deeply as, for example, Matthew’s Gospel about the ethical and moral virtue of its audience. As previously noted, it is generally agreed by scholars that Hebrews is not a letter at all but a sermon or homily.⁷ Its Greek title *Pros Hebraiōus*, ‘to the Hebrews’, only tells us about the text’s first audience; and even then, the title was not part of the original text, so in fact it only indicates what the first readers *thought* about the text’s original audience. Hebrews lacks all the usual elements of a letter, except for the sign-off at the end of chapter 13. It is crafted like a homily, exegeting key Scriptural texts such as Jeremiah 31, Psalm 110, and perhaps Exodus 31, and the author is acutely aware of their audience whom they address frequently: ‘let *us* hold fast’, ‘let *us* take care’, ‘let *us* approach’⁸ et cetera. It might make sense, therefore, to assume that Hebrews makes the same exhortation

⁷ See for example, Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews* (Westminster John Knox, 1997), D. Stephen Long, *Hebrews* (Westminster John Knox, 2011), 1.

⁸ Respectively Hebrews 4:14; 4:1; 4:16, italics added.

to perfection as the first evangelist writes in The Sermon on the Mount.

However, I have become convinced that this would be an overly simplistic summary of perfection in Hebrews. Perfection pervades Hebrews' reasoning as they discuss not only exhortation, but also doctrine, and Christology. Plenty of scholars have published on perfection in Hebrews; significantly in 1982, David Peterson published a book entitled *Hebrews and Perfection: An Examination of the Concept of Perfection in the "Epistle to the Hebrews"*;⁹ from its title, one might expect that to be an exhaustive treatment of the subject. However what Peterson does, as do many others, is to write primarily about the perfection of Christ through sufferings and then follow up with the perfection of the believer in imitation of Christ, suggesting that the perfection motif in Hebrews is exhausted by this ethical or moral interpretation. I have discovered, however, that perfection, in Greek *teleiōsis*, has a more significant function in Hebrews than merely ethical or moral virtue, and that it is a governing principle for Hebrews' interpretation of Jewish Scriptures and traditions.

Challenging the Standard Interpretation

In order to demonstrate this, let me turn to the passage which first inspired this project, and from which the title 'Not Without Us' is taken. These verses conclude Hebrews chapter 11, possibly the most famous passage from the text (except for every pastor's favourite quotation, 'And let us not neglect meeting together, as is the habit of some').¹⁰ Chapter 11 is the catalogue of faithful witnesses, a list of those who 'by faith' pursued the promises of God without seeing their fulfilment, whose lives illustrate the opening verse of chapter 11, 'Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.' Our focus, however, is not on the first verses of chapter 11 but on the last:

⁹ David Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection: An Examination of the Concept of Perfection in the "Epistle to the Hebrews"* (SNTS Monograph Series 47; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

¹⁰ Hebrews 10:25.

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect. (Heb.11:39-40)

The catalogue of the faithful, which includes Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and others, is the referent for the verb *teleiōthōsin*, 'be made perfect', such that 11:40 tells us 'that the heroes of the Scriptures might not be made perfect without us, the present community of Christ.'

If 'perfection' here meant merely ethical or moral progress, then Hebrews would be accusing the faithful witnesses of the Hebrew Bible of being morally deficient. On the contrary, these 'faithful' characters are presented as exemplars to the text's listeners for their persistent pursuit of God's promises even without seeing their fulfilment. The perfection which they lack, therefore, is the fulfilment of those promises, the future culmination which they failed to achieve through no fault of their own, but rather because *God* had prepared something greater that could only be achieved in the time of the text's audience, after the coming of Christ.

Perfection performs this same function throughout Hebrews, as an ultimate future principle which is the fulfilment of God's plans. In 7:19, for example, Hebrews abruptly comments, *ouden gar eteleiosen ho nomos* – 'for the law made nothing perfect'. But did the Law intend to make anything perfect? I would suggest not, because as Hebrews observes the Law provides for a constant annual cycle of offerings, prayers, and rituals, for which priests serve day after day, offering again and again the same sacrifices (cf. 10.11-15). These sacrifices can only cease now that Jesus has made the perfect offering of his own blood *ephapax* – once and for all – a favourite phrase of the author's (7.27; 9.12, 26; 10.10). By offering a single sacrifice, Jesus fulfils the divine plan which the sacrificial rituals of the Law could follow only well, not perfectly.

The semantic root of perfection in Greek, the *tel-* root of *teleiōsis*, is fundamentally eschatological: oriented towards the end-times and the

ultimate purpose of God's creation. Its most simple incarnation, *telos*, simply means 'end'. That Hebrews is aware of this is demonstrated very nicely by 12:2, which describes Jesus as 'the pioneer and perfecter of faith', in Greek, *ton tēs pisteōs archēgon kai teleiotēn Iēsoun*. 'Beginning and end' in Greek would be *archē kai telos*, and those semantic roots echo here in *archēgon kai teleiotēn*; Jesus the beginning and the end, the forerunner and the completer. 11:39-40 prepare the audience for this Christological revelation in 12:2, which presents Jesus as the culmination of the hopes which the Old Testament faithful never saw fulfilled. These verses stand at the fulcrum of the author's thought, putting perfection at the centre of the trajectory from past, exemplary faithful, through the present community, onward to the perfection exemplified by Christ. The faithful of old could not be perfected, but Jesus is the perfecter who has been perfected, and the present community strives towards perfection.

As the end of chapter 11 shows, therefore, Hebrews' understanding of Christ as the perfecter has shaped their understanding of the faithful heroes of their Jewish heritage. Rather than understanding them as the exemplars *par excellence*, models of all righteousness, Hebrews understands them through no fault of their own as falling short of the ultimate standard of God's perfection. This is only possible because the author sees this perfection achieved in Christ, the pioneer and perfecter.

The Wandering Motif

This future-oriented understanding of perfection is exemplified by the motif of wandering which permeates Hebrews, as the author develops an allegorical motif from Israel's 40 years in the wilderness as they moved towards the promised land. In 1939, Ernst Käsemann published 'Das wandernde Gottesvolk', *The Wandering People of God*.¹¹ This book, published in English in 1984, examines the imagery of

¹¹ Ernst Käsemann, *The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Letter to the Hebrews*. Translated by Roy A. Harrisville and Irving L. Sandberg (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

wilderness wandering which begins in Hebrews chapter 3, where the author develops themes from Psalm 95, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, as on the day of testing in the wilderness.’

According to Käsemann, the language which Hebrews uses of *epangelia*, meaning ‘promise’, and *katapausis*, meaning ‘rest’, represents the future goal of the wandering period, reinterpreting Israel’s geographical arrival in the Promised Land as a metaphor for striving towards God’s true, eschatological rest. The language of *pistis*, ‘faith’, and *parrēsia*, ‘boldness’, describes the text’s exhortation to its audience to persevere in their wandering, to pursue that divine promise and ultimate rest despite present hardships.

Käsemann’s text highlights the way wandering language permeates the entirety of Hebrews, being introduced in chapter 3 but recurring throughout the text. Chapter 11 is no exception, as Hebrews emphasises Abraham’s leaving his homeland and living a nomadic life in tents, and Moses’ decision to leave Egyptian luxury to follow God’s call into the wilderness. In fact, Hebrews fits *all* the characters of chapter 11 into the pattern of wandering; they comment:

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland... they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them (Heb.11:13-16).

Their not receiving the promises and their not being perfected are identical in Hebrews’ understanding, so that the perfection they sought was a ‘better country’, the Promised Land which Israel achieved geographically but which still awaits God’s people eschatologically.

As we have seen, the statistics for Hebrews’ use of the words *teleioō* and *teleiōsis*, are an indicator of how important perfection is for the

author. It would be a mistake, however, to presume that Hebrews' treatment of perfection is limited to their use of this vocabulary, and the persistent use of the motif of wilderness wandering clearly demonstrates this. Without once using the words *teleioō* or *teleiōsis*, the author presents a vision of progress towards an ultimate goal, using the Israelite's journey towards the Promised Land as a pattern for the church's endurance towards the perfection exemplified by Jesus. The language used is promise, *katapausis* rest, and *sabbatismos* sabbath rest, but the fundamental view is the same.

Teleological Interpretation

What Hebrews offers us, therefore, is a model of biblical interpretation where perfection, specifically perfection as it has been achieved by Christ, is their key hermeneutical principle. Their concern is not what the original authors of Scripture thought, nor how those texts are illuminated by their original context, but rather how these texts and traditions have reached their ultimate fulfilment in the life and work of Jesus Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. Hebrews makes constant reference to Hebrew Scriptures and traditions, including but not limited to Jeremiah 31, Psalm 95, Psalm 110, and the Sinai narrative. Whenever they quote from these texts, the historical author of the text is irrelevant; Hebrews usually introduces citations with the formula 'he said', referring to these words of Scripture as words from the mouth of God. This is known as prosopological exegesis, reimagining the speaker of the text.¹² Psalm 110, for example, is a royal psalm for the coronation of a king and praise of his role as the chosen one of God; but for Hebrews, however, the psalm is a word spoken by God that can speak about Jesus, the perfect priest-king chosen by God (Heb.1:13).

¹² For more on this see Madison N. Pierce, *Divine Discourse in the Epistle to the Hebrews: The Recontextualization of Spoken Quotations in Scripture* (SNTS Monograph Series 178. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

A number of those who have written about perfection in Hebrews, notably Christopher Richardson and Richard Ounsworth,¹³ have described the text's use of what they call 'typological interpretation.' Richardson points to Hebrews' use of the words *typos* and *antitypos* in 8:5 and 9:24 respectively, as well as to the phrase borrowed from Psalm 110:4, 'according to the order of Melchizedek'; this phraseology suggests a typological pattern of thinking where the author discerns figures and themes from the Scriptures as foreshadowing for Christ. Ounsworth, meanwhile, describes how Joshua in particular is used as a typological foreshadowing of Jesus, who cosmologically leads believers into the heavenly realm just as Joshua geographically led believers into the Promised Land. Both of these commentators suggest typological interpretation is particularly evident in chapter 11, where the figures described in the body of the chapter prepare for Jesus at the head of the list, in the beginning of chapter 12.

To develop an example, chapter 11 presents Abraham as a typological allegory of Jesus when it says, '[Abraham] considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back' (Heb.11:19). That phrase 'figuratively speaking' is in Greek *en parabolē* – 'as a model', or 'as a figurative type' – suggesting that Hebrews interprets Abraham's act as an allegorical model of a future resurrection from the dead: Christ's.

I would like to alter Richardson and Ounsworth's idea, however, and describe this not as typological interpretation but as *teleological* interpretation. By this I still mean that Hebrews orientates their reading of the Hebrew Bible towards a future ideal form of the present pattern, but suggest that this is part and parcel with their use of *teleiōsis* language, as their interpretation looks forward to a future, perfect form. Thus, it is not so much that the figures of chapter 11

¹³ Christopher Richardson, *Pioneer and Perfector of Faith: Jesus' Faith as the Climax of Israel's History in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (WUNT 2.338. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012); Richard Joseph Ounsworth, *Joshua Typology in the New Testament* (WUNT 2.328. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012).

foreshadow Christ as that their lack of perfection has been remedied *by* Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

Teleological interpretation, ‘perfection as a hermeneutic,’ consistently underpins Hebrews’ approach to Jewish Scripture and traditions throughout the text. The figures of chapter 11 are not made perfect without us. Going back to the text’s introduction, what was spoken to our ancestors through the prophets is now told to us by the one son;¹⁴ in chapter 4, the Sabbath rest that Israel could not enter still remains for the people of God;¹⁵ chapters 5-6 describe Melchizedek the priest-king as a model of a higher kind of priesthood embodied by Jesus. We are told in chapter 7 that the Law could not make anything perfect,¹⁶ but Jesus’ blood does, and in chapters 9-10 that the Levitical priesthood repeated their ordinances day after day and year after year but now Jesus has made his offering once and for all.¹⁷ Perfection is even a controlling principle in Hebrews’ encouragement to their audience to delve deeper into their faith, ‘Therefore let us go on toward perfection, leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ, and not laying the foundation again.’¹⁸

Consequences for the Modern, Baptist Reader

Hebrews offers us an example of the Bible reading itself, as the many authors that wrote the many texts that make up the canon of Scripture critically and insightfully reflected upon each other. Hebrews’ exegesis is creative, imaginative, and Christ-focussed, always looking eschatologically towards the coming perfection that Christ has exemplified by his ministry, death, and heavenly enthronement.

¹⁴ Hebrews 1:1-2.

¹⁵ Hebrews 4:9.

¹⁶ Hebrews 7:19.

¹⁷ Hebrews 10:11-13.

¹⁸ Hebrews 6:1.

This is not only a work of biblical interpretation but of identity formation, as the community of Hebrews, who are both Christ-following and of Jewish heritage, negotiate their identity as believers in the first century after Christ. We learn in chapter 10 that the community has suffered some form of persecution, although it is uncertain what provoked this or to what extent their sufferings have been emphasised for rhetorical effect. This work of interpretation is, therefore, also a work of survival, as the author of Hebrews seeks to show their audience that they can hold on to both the Scriptures of their tradition and their faith in Christ. They do not need to abandon the texts they know, because those texts are the spoken word of God and continue to speak in the present tense about Christ. Nor do they need to abandon their faith in Christ and return to the safety of their tradition, because Christ is the perfection of that tradition, the fulfilment of everything it anticipated.

At the end of the catalogue of faithful witnesses, Hebrews brings everything together with perfection as the fulcrum:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (Heb.12:1-2)

Christ is the epitome, Christ is the perfecter.

As biblical interpreters, in all the different ways we have been called to, I present the Letter to the Hebrews as an example for us all.

Notes on Contributor

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